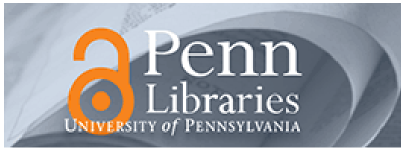

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Reading Penelope

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Abstract
One consequence of the recent infusion of newer critical approaches into the study of classical literature has been a boom in studies devoted to the figure of Penelope in the Odyssey. While certain problems concerning Penelope's portrayal have always been part of the agenda for Homeric scholarship, the emergence of feminist criticism and an intensified concern with the act of interpretation have focused more and more attention on a female character who occupies a surprisingly central role in the largely male dominated genre of heroic epic and whose presentation is marked by contradictions and uncertainties that demand interpretive intervention. The question of how to read the character of Penelope has become a focal point for a series of larger issues: In what ways is a female character who comes to us mediated through the poetry of a distant and patriarchal era to be seen as representative of female experience? How should we account for textual mysteries such as those surrounding Penelope, and how can we incorporate them into our understanding of the work?

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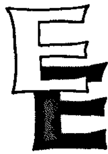

Reading Penelope

Sheila Murnaghan

One consequence of the recent infusion of newer critical approaches into the study of classical literature has been a boom in studies devoted to the figure of Penelope in the *Odyssey*.[1] While certain problems concerning Penelope's portrayal have always been part of the agenda for Homeric scholarship, the emergence of feminist criticism and an intensified concern with the act of interpretation have focused more and more attention on a female character who occupies a surprisingly central role in the largely male dominated genre of heroic epic and whose presentation is marked by contradictions and uncertainties that demand interpretive intervention. The question of how to read the character of Penelope has become a focal point for a series of larger issues: In what ways is a female character who comes to us mediated through the poetry of a distant and patriarchal era to be seen as representative of female experience? How should we account for textual mysteries such as those surrounding Penelope, and how can we incorporate them into our understanding of the work?

Both older and newer discussions of Penelope have tended to crystallize around the question of her intentions during the period of time that Odysseus is in their house in disguise, in other words during the stretch of narrative that runs from book 17 to book 21. In that time, Penelope takes several key actions that further Odysseus' interests, in particular, eliciting gifts from her suitors in book 18 and

deciding to set the contest of the bow during their conversation in book 19; yet it remains unclear whether she knows that she is furthering Odysseus' interests, because it is unclear whether or not she is aware that he is there to benefit from her actions. Thus the central question about Penelope has tended to be: When does she recognize Odysseus? Does she recognize him only in book 23 when he identifies himself to her? Or does she perceive, or at least suspect, his identity before that, and is she acting on the basis of that quasi-knowledge?

In my own previous work on this topic (Murnaghan 1987a, 118-47; 1987b), I have taken the position that Penelope does not recognize Odysseus until book 23 and that until then she plays her role in the plot without knowing where her actions are leading. I have argued that it is important to recognize the power of Odysseus' gesture in disguising himself from her to constrict Penelope's scope for action. Odysseus' disguise limits what Penelope is able to know and thus how fully she can exercise the *metis*, or cleverness, she shares with Odysseus, and how fully she controls the meaning of her action. However much it may conflict with our admiration for the *Odyssey*, we must come to terms with the misogyny of a poem in which a husband deliberately excludes his wife from his plot to recover a position that is largely defined by their marriage, in which he allows her to help him by taking a step—setting the contest of the bow—that she believes will bring her the fate she has dreaded and attempted to resist, marriage to one of her suitors. Returning to this question in the light of more recent discussions, in particular that of John J. Winkler in *The Constraints of Desire*, which is framed in part as a correction of mine, I am struck again by the force of the problem as a problem. Winkler's essay is a compelling reading of Penelope according to which Penelope suspects the identity of the disguised Odysseus on the basis of various hints that he gives and sets the contest, not as a means of capitulating to the suitors, but as a way of testing her suspicion and helping Odysseus on the chance that she is right.

What seems unmistakeable is the way the text of the *Odyssey* helpfully provides a warrant for both readings. My own reading is grounded in the absence from the text of any explicit sign of recognition, in the way everything that Penelope says is consistent with ignorance of the stranger's identity. Winkler's reading and those of others who favor his view are grounded in the fact that Penelope is known to be a duplicitous character whose words cannot be taken at face value, as evidenced particularly by her trick of weaving and unweaving a shroud for Laertes; in the fact that she is bombarded with

signs and hints of the stranger's identity; and in the fact that the poem presents her and Odysseus together only in situations in which an acknowledgement of recognition would be dangerous—thus, for example, Winkler stresses the presence of the disloyal maidservants during the conversation between Odysseus and Penelope in book 19. The poem creates this puzzle by providing evidence for both positions, or, to put it another way, by telling two stories at once: one a story in which Penelope is unable to recognize Odysseus and thus is his unwitting accomplice and one in which she does recognize him and knowingly cooperates in his success. It now seems appropriate to reformulate the question of when Penelope recognizes Odysseus as how best to account for, or to talk about, the simultaneous presence of these two stories within the text, and how to identify the forces and interests operating there that produce and support this doubleness.

The presence of these two stories in the *Odyssey*'s text is more easily explained in terms external rather than internal to the poem. For example, it can be explained in traditional analyst terms as the conflation of two sources, as literally the product of two distinct stories imperfectly blended in a single text. Indeed, there is a tradition of analyst discussions of this problem which fix on the suitor Amphimedon's statement in the underworld scene of book 24, in which he asserts that Odysseus told Penelope to set the contest, as evidence for a different version, one involving early disclosure and therefore early recognition, that our *Odyssey* is still partly telling.[2]

The presence of two stories in the text can also be explained, again in external terms, as the product of two distinct critical approaches, corresponding to two agendas for contemporary feminist criticism. One is the project of identifying and describing the ways in which women are oppressed, tracking patriarchical structures and revealing their workings, showing how female characters in literature are delimited by the male-generated terms in which they are drawn. This I would claim as the purpose served by my own reading, which stresses Penelope's inability to recognize Odysseus as a function of his decision to disguise himself from her. The other approach is the project of identifying and celebrating the ways in which women resist patriarchal structures, manipulating their oppressed positions to gain what they want, claiming a voice with which to articulate their own concerns even under conditions of domination. This latter is the project of Winkler and of others who see Penelope as recognizing Odysseus before he discloses himself. That early, spontaneous awareness of Odysseus' identity becomes, for such critics, a key sign

of female autonomy: if Penelope is acting with knowledge of what she is doing, then she has some control over her situation. Winkler's reading is presented as an attempt to rescue Penelope from a state of victimage in which she is imprisoned by interpretations such as mine: "Instead of viewing her as a pawn in the games of the male characters and of the poet, I will show how active she is in coping with the forces arrayed against her" (1990, 142). This statement reveals how much is at stake in this reading, how it involves not just the solution of a series of textual questions but also the validation of contemporary feminist notions of women as capable of empowering themselves no matter what their circumstances.

Winkler's reading involves not only a different, more congenial image of Penelope but a different, more congenial image of Homer as well. The actively coping Penelope testifies not only to indirection as a source of female empowerment, through which the character Penelope claims a measure of autonomy and control, but also to indirection as a literary device, through which the poet Homer claims a measure of narrative complexity, communicating with his audience through subtle hints. This equation, and the implication it bears of a close and easy alliance between the male poet and his female character, are clear from Winkler's title, "Penelope's Cunning and Homer's." Penelope's control over her circumstances, despite her seeming helplessness, is matched by Homer's control over the surface unclarity of his narrative, despite its apparent incoherence.

The discovery of a more fully aware Penelope is linked to the discovery of a more admirable Homer in another way, because the concomitant depiction of her secrecy in concealing her awareness, her indirection, necessarily involves a greater stress on her subjectivity, on her possession of a private, autonomous consciousness. This approach makes the poet both more interesting as a story-teller and less misogynistic, and enlists Homer in the depiction of women as subjects in an active sense, as creators of their own ideas, plans, and purposes, rather than as subjects in a passive sense, as the objects of domination.[3] This idea that the *Odyssey* represents the autonomous perspective of Penelope is particularly stressed by Nancy Felson-Rubin in her essay, "Penelope's Perspective: Character from Plot"; using an approach inspired by narratology, Felson-Rubin argues that the text allows us to recover Penelope's distinctly female-centered outlook on the poem's events.

In contrast, the interpretation that presents Penelope as limited by her position in a patriarchal system can appear itself limited and

defeatist. It can seem blind to what we should be particularly attuned to—the resourcefulness with which people resist their oppression by dominant power structures—and, for that reason, politically unappealing. Such an interpretation may clash with the belief that systems of domination are not so monolithic and invulnerable that they cannot be challenged and subverted from within, and in this respect the debate about Penelope encapsulates a larger debate in literary studies generally, one between the so-called new historicists, who tend to see works of literature as including marginal or oppositional voices only to contain them, and their critics, who feel more attention should be paid to the ways in which genuinely subversive forces do make their way into literature. Furthermore, a position that involves portraying Homer and the culture he represents as fundamentally uncongenial to one's own outlook and goals may be an especially uncomfortable one for contemporary classicists, who, for purposes of survival in an atmosphere of healthily growing attention to a wide range of cultures and texts, must engage in active advocacy of the works that they study and teach.

Yet, while it may seem defeatist and unprogresssive to adopt an interpretation that appears to disempower Penelope and, by extension, does little to encourage the empowerment of modern readers who identify with her, there is a danger in the other approach of ignoring the context in which Penelope is found, both the social context portrayed within the poem and the fictional context of the poem itself. There is a danger of treating her as simply a character without a setting, indeed, not as a literary character at all but as a real person, to whom the modern reader is free to attribute whatever qualities he or she believes real people possess. This inclination to treat Penelope as a real person is evident in the sentence from Winkler's essay quoted above: "Instead of viewing her as a pawn in the games of the male characters and of the poet, I will show how active she is in coping with the forces arrayed against her." The phrase "how active she is" suggests that there is an essential Penelope, independent of the male characters who surround her and independent of the presumably male poet who has composed the poem. That essential Penelope is held to embody an essential characteristic of women, namely that women have inner resources and a capacity for action that protects them against manipulation and oppression by men.

In interpreting Penelope, we have to remember that she is not a real person, but the creation of that presumably male poet, and that the male characters in the poem do not merely surround her but also

control the society in which she must operate, thereby dictating the terms under which she must act. Without turning either that poet or those male characters into misogynistic caricatures, one has to acknowledge that the society portrayed in the poem is designed primarily to promote the interests of the men who control it, and that the poet's primary interest is in celebrating the achievements of his male hero. The poet signals as much in his opening call to the Muse to sing of the *andra polutropon*, "man of many twists and turns." An appreciation of the role of Penelope has to take those notably gendered interests into account.

Recognizing Penelope's location in male-dominated social and literary structures does not oblige us to deny that she is depicted as an important, intriguing, often resourceful character, whose actions have significant consequences. But Penelope's interest and centrality have to be correlated with the male-controlled character of her circumstances, both social and literary; her prominence in the poem cannot be interpreted simply as a licence to underrate or gloss over the shaping influence of those circumstances. If we are going to find in the *Odyssey*'s presentation of Penelope evidence of sensitivity to female values, confirmation of a vision of women as inherently powerful, or even the expression of an authentic female subjectivity, we must be prepared to explain how such features make their way into what is predominantly a male-centered poem. It is not enough to assert, as Winkler does, that Homer somehow identifies with his heroine—a position that comes close to making Homer a woman, as Winkler's attraction to the argument of Samuel Butler makes clear. Rather, a study of Penelope must participate in that strain of feminist criticism that is concerned, not with the separate achievements of women, but with the mechanisms by which women's voices come to be heard in the songs of men like Homer.[4]

One way to approach this project is to pinpoint aspects of the poet's personal or social circumstances that would motivate a sensitivity on his part to women's perspectives. A particularly promising version of this approach is represented by Lillian Doherty's work on the possible role of women in the *Odyssey*'s original audience, as suggested by the prominence of women in the internal audiences depicted within the poem (Doherty 1991, 1992). In the context of oral poetry, that is to say of poetry composed during performance, the tastes and interests of the audience would be especially influential on the poet as he generated the poem. If the audience included a significant number of women, that would account for the poet's attunement to women's concerns.[5]

In what follows, I will take a different and complementary tack, looking instead for ways in which Penelope's importance and interest may be a consequence—in some ways an unintended or complicating consequence—of attention to male rather than female concerns. I will also attempt to correlate the historical project of situating Penelope in her Homeric context with the literary critical project of seeing her as a character situated within a literary plot. These endeavors are linked by the function of the *Odyssey*'s plot, which serves as a mechanism primarily for furthering the interests of those male characters, imagined and real, who control both Homeric society and its representation in poetry.[6] First, I will show how the most obvious forms of independence and autonomy accorded to Penelope are circumscribed through the construction of the plot; then I will suggest that we should look elsewhere for ways in which the demands of the plot also limit its capacity to control female power and give Penelope a kind of voice to which we should be paying more attention than we so far have.

In making the first of these points, I will also return to the question posed earlier, the question of how to understand a poem that tells two stories at once, that incorporates two conflicting variants and answers to both of two conflicting critical programs, exploring that question in relation to the poem's own internal, male-oriented values. The possible external explanations noted earlier for the the inconclusiveness surrounding Penelope make that ambiguity an accidental by-product of either the text's composition or its reception, arising either from the weaving together of two versions of the same story or from the contending viewpoints of the *Odyssey*'s modern interpreters. It is also possible to see that uncertainty as an effect that the poem creates for its own sake, as a means of affirming and examining the very phenomenon of inconclusiveness itself. This is, in fact, the argument of a recent book about Penelope, Marylin A. Katz' *Penelope's Renown*, whose subtitle is *Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (and whose argument is partly represented in this volume). Katz argues that the presence of two stories about Penelope is not a critical problem to be solved by choosing one of those stories over another, but a sign of the poem's awareness of, interest in, and highlighting of the phenomenon of indeterminacy, of the fact that words, stories, behaviors, and gestures do not yield themselves to single unitary interpretations, that they do not have determinate meanings that can be pinned down by acts of interpretation. The poem's preoccupation with indeterminacy is signalled not only by its telling of two contradictory stories about

Penelope, but also by its stress on disguise, a device that calls into question the possibility of a fixed, determined relation between seeming and being.

This vision of the *Odyssey* as concerned with indeterminacy in and of itself is clearly poststructuralist, emerging from late twentieth-century schools of thought that hold that indeterminacy haunts all attempts at meaning, and the poem Katz describes is especially appealing to a certain late twentieth-century aesthetic that prizes works for acknowledging, foregrounding, and accepting this inevitable fact.[7] But by assimilating the poem to a contemporary aesthetic, much as Winkler assimilates it to a contemporary view of sexual politics, Katz praises the *Odyssey* at the risk of reading it anachronistically. By making the poem's message the identification of a phenomenon that is universal, at least according to the theories on which she draws, Katz underplays its enagagement with issues generated by its historical context. Her insight that the *Odyssey* is concerned with indeterminacy as an issue is powerful and valid, but that concern also has to be correlated with the poem's own apparent purposes, values, and poetics.

While the *Odyssey* presents a playfulness about the issue of truth as one feature of narrative, it also sees narration as a highly pointed activity, designed to achieve some determinate end, whether the self-advancement of the internal narrator Odysseus, who tells stories for such purposes as eliciting extra gifts from the Phaeacians or a warm cloak from the swineherd Eumaeus, or the poem's own program of celebrating and commemorating him. In the aims the *Odyssey* claims both for itself and for its characters, indeterminacy appears as something to be mastered: if indeterminacy is what in the end the poem inevitably promotes, it does so in spite of itself—in spite of telling a story whose plot moves, in a classic quest for closure, towards overcoming various forms of uncertainty, openness, and doubt.

Furthermore, indeterminacy comes in several distinct and specific forms in the *Odyssey* and is, in fact, a gendered phenomenon, taking different forms in relation to men and to women. For the male characters of the poem, especially Odysseus and Telemachus, indeterminacy arises in connection with identity, and in particular heroic identity; what is at issue is whether the character will succeed in personifying the achievements and social status associated with his name. This question is raised in the plot through the device of disguise and its various analogues, to be settled in a series of episodes of recognition.

For the female characters in the poem, indeterminacy arises in connection, not with identity, but with sexual fidelity. The question that is raised about them is not whether they are really who they are reputed to be, but whether they are faithful to their husbands. While the duplicity embodied in the figure of Odysseus raises the question of whether or not he is really Odysseus, the duplicity embodied in the figure of Penelope raises the question of whether or not her sexual desires are directed exclusively towards her husband. Thus the indeterminacy of women is cast in terms of what they are thinking, of their possible double-mindedness, and conceived of in terms that bear on male goals and male anxieties. These concerns have a particular urgency in the heroic world where complete success requires joining *kleos* and *nostos*, journeying away from home to win glory, and also returning to a place at home that has to be kept open through the fidelity of the hero's wife. The significance of female fidelity emerges most pointedly at the climax of the *Odyssey*'s plot, Penelope's trick with the marriage bed. The revelation that her suggestion of infidelity, through the implication that the bed has been moved, is only a trick, coincides with her recognition of Odysseus and thus with the validation of his identity and fame. By making the settling of this uncertainty about Penelope the seal of Odysseus' achievement, the *Odyssey* stresses that the kind of uncertainty associated with women is an urgent matter precisely because it affects the aspirations of men.

All of the doubt surrounding Penelope in the *Odyssey*, all of the ways in which she is presented as ambivalent, divided, or duplicitous are subsumed under the issue of her loyalty to Odysseus, which is defined in terms of an opposition between fidelity and betrayal. As a number of critics have pointed out, the choice that she must entertain between holding out for Odysseus' return and agreeing to marriage with one of the suitors is reconceived as a choice between loyalty to her husband and Clytemnestra-like betrayal. This conception is expressed in the response of the passers-by to the illusion of such a marriage staged by Odysseus in book 23 as a cover for their reunion:

> *ἦ μάλα δή τις ἔγημε πολυμνήστην βασίλειαν·*
> *σχετλίη, οὐδ' ἔτλη πόσιος οὗ κουριδίοιο*
> *εἴρυσθαι μέγα δῶμα διαμπερές, ἧος ἵκοιτο.*
>
> Surely someone has married the much-wooed queen
> wretch, she could not endure to keep the great house
> of her own husband, unceasingly until he should come back.
> (23.149-51)

The issue of whether or not Penelope spontaneously recognizes Odysseus, which has been the focus of so much critical debate, is similarly reduced to a question of fidelity: the question of whether she recognizes him becomes the question of whether, when she sets the contest of the bow, she means to help Odysseus or to marry one of the suitors.

This tendency to imagine Penelope's consciousness solely in terms of the issue of sexual fidelity is depicted within the poem in the reading of her character given relatively early on by one of the male characters, the suitor Antinous, during the council scene in book 2. Far from being discredited by its source, this interpretation beautifully illustrates the way the *Odyssey*, in presenting Penelope through the lens of male concerns, narrows its focus in representing her consciousness.

> εἰ δ' ἔτ' ἀνιήσει γε πολὺν χρόνον υἷας 'Αχαιῶν,
> τὰ φρονέουσ' ἀνὰ θυμὸν, ἅ οἱ πέρι δῶκεν 'Αθήνη
> ἔργα τ' ἐπίστασθαι περικαλλέα καὶ φρένας ἐσθλὰς
> κέρδεά θ', οἷ' οὔ πώ τιν' ἀκούομεν οὐδὲ παλαιῶν,
> τάων αἳ πάρος ἦσαν ἐυπλοκαμῖδες 'Αχαιαί,
> Τυρώ τ' 'Αλκμήνη τε ἐυστέφανός τε Μυκήνη·
> τάων οὔ τις ὁμοῖα νοήματα Πηνελοπείῃ
> ᾔδη· ἀτὰρ μὲν τοῦτό γ' ἐναίσιμον οὐκ ἐνόησε.
> τόφρα γὰρ οὖν βίοτόν τε τεὸν καὶ κτήματ' ἔδονται,
> ὄφρα κε κείνη τοῦτον ἔχῃ νόον, ὅν τινά οἱ νῦν
> ἐν στήθεσσι τιθεῖσι θεοί. μέγα μὲν κλέος αὐτῇ
> ποιεῖτ', αὐτὰρ σοί γε ποθὴν πολέος βιότοιο·
> ἡμεῖς δ' οὔτ' ἐπὶ ἔργα πάρος γ' ἴμεν οὔτε πῃ ἄλλῃ,
> πρίν γ' αὐτὴν γήμασθαι 'Αχαιῶν ᾧ κ' ἐθέλῃσι.

> But if she goes on for a long time tormenting the sons of the
> Achaeans,
> possessing as she does the ideas that Athena has given her,
> so that she knows beautiful handiwork and fine understanding
> and designs, such as we never hear of, even in the women of long
> ago,
> the Achaean women with lovely hair who used to be:
> Tyro and Alcmene and beautifully-crowned Mycene,
> none of whom ever had thoughts such as Penelope
> has—yet that one thing she did not think of rightly—
> for so long your livelihood and cattle will be eaten up,
> as long as she has this purpose, which now
> the gods are planting in her heart. She is creating
> great glory for herself, but for you the loss of much livelihood.
> We will not go back to our own estates, or anywhere else,
> before she marries whichever one of the Achaeans she wishes to.
> (2.115-28)

Antinous attributes to Penelope a plenitude of thoughts, which might seem to suggest the range of feelings and ideas that make up the consciousness of a real woman, but when he actually specifies what those thoughts are, they take only two forms: a bad thought, revealed with the disclosing of the shroud trick, consisting of not really wanting to marry one of the suitors; and a wishfully projected thought, consisting of a desire to marry one of the suitors. Antinous praises Penelope to Telemachus for her handiwork and her unspecified thoughts: Athena has given her "fine understanding" (*phrenas esthlas*) and "designs" (*kerdea*) and none of the heroines of the past had "thoughts" (*noêmata*) such as Penelope's. But he adds "that one thing she did not think of rightly," meaning the business of the shroud, and he promises that the suitors will not leave until Penelope marries "whichever one of the Achaeans she wishes to."

As far as Antinous is concerned, Penelope's thoughts are reduced to a desire either to marry one of the suitors or not to marry one of them. However much we may be encouraged to see Antinous' weighting of these alternatives as discreditable, his speech accurately reproduces the restricted terms in which the *Odyssey* enters into Penelope's state of mind. This suitor's vision of Penelope correctly delimits the alternatives made available to us as readers of a character whose role is defined by her much-wooed condition, by her status as the object of her suitors' attentions. This restriction applies even to a modern feminist critic like Nancy Felson-Rubin, who sees Penelope as the autonomous weaver of multiple female-centered plots. When these plots are given names, thay all turn out to be variations on marital fidelity and infidelity: "Courtship and Marriage," "Dalliance and Infidelity," "Disdain and Bride of Death," "Patience."[8]

Not only are all the questions surrounding the figure of Penelope channeled into an opposition between infidelity and fidelity and thus between the fulfillment and non-fulfillment of male fears, between the subversion and promotion of Odysseus' cause, but that doubt, that indeterminacy, is only raised in circumstances under which it is effectively already mastered. As noted above, the last of Penelope's duplicitous gestures, the trick with the bed, exorcises the fear of her infidelity. It exposes the notion that she has been unfaithful as a ruse, as a deliberate falsehood which, because it springs from her determination to be sure that it really is Odysseus whom she is accepting into her bed, signals her fidelity. The duplicitous gesture that, from the point of view of the *Odyssey*'s narrative lies in the past—the trick surrounding her weaving of a shroud for Laertes—is

drained of any threatening uncertainty because its meaning is transparent: the seeming willingness to marry one of the suitors implied by the gesture of weaving the shroud is clearly cancelled by the gesture of unweaving, which is, by the time the story opens, a matter of public knowledge. Furthermore, the text takes pains to include direct declarations of fidelity on Penelope's part under circumstances that can be considered particularly conducive to sincerity: in her response to Phemius' song (*Od.* 1.343-44);[9] in her private prayer to Artemis (*Od.* 20.80-82); in her first words of open recognition to Odysseus (*Od.* 23.209-30).

It is only in the middle part of her story, in the stretch of narrative leading to the contest of the bow, that Penelope is presented as genuinely indeterminate, as truly impossible to pin down. It is only there that the poem entertains the possibility of an unknowable Penelope, possessed of a private, autonomous subjectivity. By opening up this possibility only at this juncture in the narrative, the poem raises the issue of dangerous female duplicity in a context in which that duplicity is already under control. It seems to matter a great deal to us as readers of the poem whether or not Penelope recognizes Odysseus at the point when she sets the contest but, from the point of view of the *Odyssey*'s plot, it makes no difference. Whether Penelope knows it or not, the contest she sets serves the ends of Odysseus, who is present to capitalize on her gesture, and thus the question of her state of mind is effectively neutralized. Notably, the question with which modern criticism has been so much concerned, the question of when Penelope recognizes Odysseus, is never acknowledged within the poem as an issue; certainly the poet feels no need to clarify it retrospectively. The *Odyssey* allows the question to be raised, and so acknowledges that it *is* a question, but ultimately treats it as a matter of indifference, contriving a plot that allies Penelope with Odysseus' purposes no matter what her state of mind.[10]

Here, again, it is important to stress that Penelope is not a real person. While the bow contest is presented as her idea, we must remember that it is ultimately the creation of the poet or the poetic tradition that invents and depicts her. By associating Penelope's indeterminate consciousness with the contest—a seemingly open question that actually has only one answer, since only Odysseus can string the bow—the *Odyssey* achieves more subtly what Odysseus is seen to do when he bypasses the issue of Penelope's intention in appearing seductively before the suitors in book 18 by simply concluding without any evidence that "her mind had other intentions"

(*Od.* 18.283), by assuming that she is cooperating with his own secret plot. The contest is conceived as automatically a form of cooperation with Odysseus without the poet or the hero having to decide one way or another about what intentions are held by Penelope's mind. At this crucial moment in its plot, the *Odyssey* risks the incoherence of telling two stories about Penelope at once and opens up a space for indeterminate female subjectivity, because, from the perspective of the plot, both stories have the same conclusion and the content of Penelope's unread mind is without consequence. Even beyond that, the association of Penelope with the contest masters the possible threat of a wife's secret purposes by reversing the normal relations between open and hidden thoughts: if Penelope turns out to have a secret, it is that she is purposely helping her husband. The autonomous, self-sufficient Penelope hailed by some recent critics is a wife who helps her husband voluntarily rather than involuntarily.

This strategy of representing female duplicity only when already mastered is anticipated in the scene in *Odyssey* 4 in which Helen and Menelaus tell conflicting stories about Helen's behavior during the Trojan war, a scene which Katz identifies as prototypical of the poem's later depiction of Penelope as indeterminate. There too the *Odyssey* creates uncertainty about whether or not a female figure is faithful to her husband, and further clouds the issue by acknowledging that the answer to this question may depend on who is telling the story. But there too the issue is raised only when it is moot. These two possibilities arise in retrospective narratives; by the time they are evoked, Helen has been forcibly recovered by Menelaus and reinstalled in her role as his wife; the ambiguity of Helen's position, so evident in the *Iliad*, has been mastered now that the plot of male heroic action has been carried out. As Penelope suggestively points out, this plot is not one that Helen herself could be expected to know (*Od.* 23.220-21).[11]

If, however, the question of Penelope's character is neutralized in terms of its practical effect on the outcome of events, that does not mean that the *Odyssey* fails to examine her character in subjective terms. The poem devotes considerable attention to exploring what it feels like to be Penelope, in ways that make her both a moving and an instructive figure, and that also reflect the particular ways in which character becomes an object of interest in the Homeric epics.

It is often claimed that the Homeric conception of character differs from conceptions found at subsequent moments in cultural history because Homeric characters have less inwardness: their sense of self

is defined less by an inner conviction of individuality than by their relations with other people and by the socially defined roles they adopt.[12] This claim is well founded, although it has to be divorced from the notion, which sometimes goes with it, that Homer and the characters in Homer's epics are more primitive than later figures. Indeed, this feature arguably makes the Homeric epics expositions of an insight that has only recently been fully evident to theoretical discourse: the realization, associated especially with Foucault, that an inner sense of an essential self is an illusion, at once created by and itself masking a process of social construction.

The Homeric epics do not, however, simply present a world in which people are comfortably equated with their social roles. Because of the demands of their plots, which require complications to get them started as well as resolutions to conclude them, the epics center on moments of crisis in which that equation breaks down. The plots of both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are generated out of difficult situations in which characters are deprived of the external gestures through which they have habitually known themselves. The quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon that sets the *Iliad*'s plot in motion originates as each character finds himself deprived of a war prize, the outer mark of status through which his position in the Achaean camp has been defined. At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is cut off from every sign of his identity as king of Ithaca, and particularly from the relations with members of his family and community that secure his position. Because of Odysseus' absence from Ithaca, Telemachus is deprived of the father and Penelope is deprived of the husband through which their respective identities in the Ithacan community are defined.

All of these situations are experienced by the characters involved as painful and disorienting, constituting intolerable conditions that the poems' plots must eventually resolve. In the meantime, until those resolutions are found, the epics are drawn into an exploration of character per se, of whether and how people can sustain and validate a sense of self once its outer source is removed. All of the characters mentioned respond to this deprivation of status with erratic behavior and/or paralysis, but the male characters all, in some way or another, find their way back to a position of equilibrium. The story of Achilles is clearly the most complicated of these instances and the one in which the poem works most fully towards a vision of character as inherently distinct from social role. Right through to the end of the *Iliad*, Achilles remains in a permanent state of detachment from the

other members of his community, and he finds motivations for action that are independent of their responses. In the case of Odysseus, the hero's loss of the outward marks of his position is reconceived as a disguise and therefore treated as temporary and inessential (Murnaghan 1987a, esp. 9-11). In the course of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus overcomes his state of paralysis and seeks a series of encounters in which he finds himself identified as the son of Odysseus without needing to meet Odysseus in person.

It is in connection with Penelope that Homeric epic shows the problem of finding a sense of identity, of defining an irreducible core of character, in the absence of outward validation to be most painful and most intractable, and this is undoubtedly related to her gender; it is related, in particular, to the fact, discussed above, that in the Homeric epics broader questions of identity are, in the case of women, reduced to questions of sexual fidelity. As a woman, Penelope is defined exclusively by her relationships with men, in particular by her roles as wife of Odysseus and mother of Telemachus. When the story of the *Odyssey* opens, Odysseus' long absence has deprived her of the husband she needs in order to define herself as a wife. Furthermore, the nature of Telemachus' needs has shifted with his maturing so that Penelope no longer best fulfills her role as his mother by continuing to see herself as Odysseus' wife; there are suggestions at several points in the text that she would be furthering Telemachus' interests if she were to marry one of the suitors (*Od.* 2.125-26; 19.532-34). The obvious solution, that she help Telemachus and regain an identity for herself by becoming the wife of another man, conflicts with her allegiance to Odysseus. For reasons outlined above, the poem takes great pains to present that allegiance as her intrinsic and intensely admirable characteristic, an essential fact of her character, rather than as simply a product of the circumstance of being Odysseus' wife when he is there to be her husband. Thus the *Odyssey*, in depicting the unsettled conditions that generate its plot, inevitably draws our attention to a conflict between the virtue that it demands of its heroine as an inalienable aspect of her character and the social world in which it situates her and in which her character must be negotiated. In a world where a marriageable woman has to be defined as the wife of somebody, the faithful wife of someone who no longer exists, who is widely believed to be dead, is an impossibility. Yet that is the figure Penelope is called upon to be.

As the *Odyssey*'s plot unfolds, Penelope gives voice to the experience of embodying this contradiction, allowing us a perspective

on her situation as a subjective state of mind. The subjective state to which she repeatedly bears witness is one of acute suffering: she is recurrently depicted as mourning, weeping, and crying out in pain. Unlike Achilles who asserts that he is still Achilles in the absence of Briseis, Penelope does not experience her loyalty to Odysseus when he is absent as the clarification and fortification of her unchanging character, but as social powerlessness, debility, and dissolution of the self. This is expressed in her repeated claim that she is no longer the same physical person that she was when Odysseus left:

> *. . . ἦ τοι ἐμὴν ἀρετὴν εἶδός τε δέμας τε*
> *ὤλεσαν ἀθάνατοι, ὅτε Ἴλιον εἰσανέβαινον*
> *Ἀργεῖοι, μετὰ τοῖσι δ' ἐμὸς πόσις ἦεν Ὀδυσσεύς.*
>
> . . . all my excellence, my form and appearance,
> were destroyed by the immortals, when the Argives
> embarked for Ilium, and my husband Odysseus went with them.
> (18.251-53 = 19.124-26)

Her constant mourning for Odysseus is understood as a kind of physical erosion. Thus Athena tells Odysseus in book 13, "always bitter nights / and bitter days waste her away (*phthinousin*) with weeping" (*Od.* 13.337-38). When Odysseus as the stranger awakens that mourning in her in book 19, the effect is compared in a simile to the melting away of snow (*Od.* 19.205-09).

Penelope's dissolution expresses itself subjectively as a recurrent wish to die, as when she prays to Artemis to snatch her away in a whirlwind (*Od.* 20.58-83; cf. 18.202-05), or as an unending state of grief, as in her comparison of herself to the nightingale when she describes herself to the stranger during their conversation in book 19:

> *ὡς δ' ὅτε Πανδαρέου κούρη, χλωρηῒς ἀηδών,*
> *καλὸν ἀείδησιν ἔαρος νέον ἱσταμένοιο,*
> *δενδρέων ἐν πετάλοισι καθεζομένη πυκινοῖσιν,*
> *ἥ τε θαμὰ τρωπῶσα χέει πολυηχέα φωνήν,*
> *παῖδ' ὀλοφυρομένη Ἴτυλον φίλον, ὅν ποτε χαλκῷ*
> *κτεῖνε δι' ἀφραδίας, κοῦρον Ζήθοιο ἄνακτος,*
> *ὣς καὶ ἐμοὶ δίχα θυμὸς ὀρώρεται ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα,*
> *ἠὲ μένω παρὰ παιδὶ καὶ ἔμπεδα πάντα φυλάσσω,*
> *κτῆσιν ἐμήν, δμῳάς τε καὶ ὑψερεφὲς μέγα δῶμα,*
> *εὐνήν τ' αἰδομένη πόσιος δήμοιό τε φῆμιν,*
> *ἦ ἤδη ἅμ' ἕπωμαι Ἀχαιῶν ὅς τις ἄριστος*
> *μνᾶται ἐνὶ μεγάροισι, πορὼν ἀπερείσια ἕδνα.*
> *παῖς δ' ἐμὸς ἧος ἔην ἔτι νήπιος ἠδὲ χαλίφρων,*
> *γήμασθ' οὔ μ' εἴα πόσιος κατὰ δῶμα λιποῦσαν·*
> *νῦν δ' ὅτε δὴ μέγας ἐστὶ καὶ ἥβης μέτρον ἱκάνει,*

καὶ δή μ' ἀρᾶται πάλιν ἐλθέμεν ἐκ μεγάροιο,
κτήσιος ἀσχαλόων, τήν οἱ κατέδουσιν 'Αχαιοί.

As when the daughter of Pandareus, the greenwood nightingale,
beautifully sings, at the very beginning of spring,
sitting in the thick leaves of the trees,
and ever varying her song, she sends forth her resonant voice,
mourning her dear child Itylus, whom once, with bronze,
she killed in mad blindness, the son of Lord Zethus,
so also my own heart, divided, is pulled this way and that way—
whether I should stay by my child and keep everything safe,
my property, my serving women, and the great, high-roofed house,
honoring the bed of my husband and the voice of the people,
or should I finally go away with whoever is best of the Achaeans,
wooing me in the house and offering endless gifts?
My son, as long as he was still a child and unable to think for himself,
kept me from marrying and leaving the house of my husband.
Now that he is big and has arrived at the point of young manhood,
even he is praying that I leave the house,
since he worries about the possessions, which the Achaeans are devouring. (19.518-34)

Penelope here characterizes the impossibility of her position through the crisis that has emerged in her relationship to Telemachus.[13] She first articulates the choice she faces in terms that equate her ongoing responsibilities to Telemachus with her loyalty to Odysseus: staying by her child is identified with honoring the bed of her husband and opposed to going off with one of the suitors. But she then proceeds to add that the situation with Telemachus has changed since he now would prefer that she no longer stay by his side. Telemachus, who provides her with an identity that links her permanently to Odysseus, has assumed an additional, conflicting role as the source of further pressure to sever her unbreakable tie to her husband. Through this contradiction, Penelope defines the situation that makes her loyalty to Odysseus no longer a socially tenable position.

What it feels like for Penelope to be in this situation is conveyed through the analogy, with which she introduces it, between herself and the nightingale. Penelope identifies herself with a figure who is locked in a state of ceaseless suffering from which she will never be delivered, who has been permanently changed by her grief into something other than the woman she once was, and whose relation to her son remains perpetually unresolved: she is at once his murderer and his chief mourner, the one who has brought about his death and the one who suffers most from it.

Through this and other such passages, in which the troubled conditions on Ithaca that Odysseus must return to set right are exposed, the *Odyssey* allows us to observe that the glorious fidelity with which it endows its heroine becomes for her a form of torment. As a result, we can see how difficult a situation women are placed in by the glorified vision of female fidelity in which the *Odyssey* itself participates. This vision, generated in ways already discussed by male concerns, demands that fidelity be internalized as an absolute state and not simply as a condition contingent on an ongoing relationship with someone who is actually present. The *Odyssey* thus testifies through Penelope's voice to the wrenchingly difficult situation in which she is placed by her possession of an approved female character, but it cannot imagine any real solution to this difficulty. The only solution the poem provides is a magical one, the miraculous return of Odysseus against every expectation and against all odds. Odysseus' eventual reappearance gives Penelope the external confirmation of her identity as his wife that allows her once again comfortably to inhabit that identity, and so restores her to happiness.

In texts like the *Odyssey*, which are shaped by interests from which we might wish to detach ourselves and even to resist, the crises that initiate their plots are both more interesting and more convincing than the solutions that bring those plots to an end. We need to pay as least as much attention to the acutely suffering Penelope who is present in the *Odyssey* as we do to the resourceful Penelope who is also certainly there. We need to take account of those points at which Penelope's mind seems suggestively inaccessible but in fact generates a plan that helps Odysseus no matter what she thinks; but we also need to take account of those points when she is unambiguous about her pain and thus shows us how much harder it is to be an heroic woman than an heroic man. The suffering Penelope has tended to be an embarrassment to readers of the *Odyssey* and particularly to feminist readers because she seems to embody weakness and despair, indeed because she seems to be a victim. But, remembering that Penelope is not a real woman but a literary character shaped by dominant male interests, we can make more progress towards detaching ourselves from those interests by observing her suffering than by seeing her only as the active promoter of those interests that she becomes as the complications of the plot melt away. We can continue to stress the ways in which Penelope is an embarrassment to the male poet and the male hero who ostensibly solve all her problems.

Despite itself, the *Odyssey* gives us an insight into the crippling effects of its own definition of female excellence, by showing how much Penelope suffers for her incarnation of that ideal. Paying attention to this feature of the poem can help us to question a definition of the appropriate character for a woman that forecloses the possibility of any tolerable life for Penelope if Odysseus were not to return. We can best find in Penelope both a realistic reflection of her Homeric context and a rallying point for our attempts to rethink issues of gender, if we do not let her role in furthering the plot's neat conclusion efface the messy and painful situation in which she is earlier placed. And if we do not allow our appreciation of the *Odyssey*'s masterful narrative control to distract us from the way the complications of its plot expose problems in its system of values, which the resolution of those complications cannot wholly dispel.

Notes

Versions of this paper were delivered at the conference on "Epic and Epoch" at Texas A&M University in November 1990 and as part of a lecture series in honor of Prof. Rolf O. Hubbe on character in the Homeric epics at the University of Maryland in April 1991. For helpful comments, I thank those present on both occasions, and especially Lillian Doherty, Marylin Katz, and Victoria Pedrick.

1. Some of the most recent manifestations of this increased interest in Penelope, with which this discussion will be especially concerned, include: Katz (1991); Felson-Rubin (1987), part of a larger argument to be developed in her book, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics in Homer's Odyssey*, forthcoming from Princeton University Press; the chapter on the *Odyssey* in Suzuki (1989), 57-91; the chapter on "Penelope's Cunning and Homer's" in Winkler (1990), 129-61; Lillian Doherty's book on the *Odyssey*'s internal and external audiences, which includes a metacritical study of different ways of reading Penelope and their implications, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audience, and Narrators in the Odyssey*, forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press.

2. For a statement of this view, see Kirk (1962), 245-47.

3. On this issue, see Suzuki (1989), 89.

4. On this kind of criticism, see Homans (1987), 173.

5. Much of the work in this vein that has been done with products of modern culture has a psychoanalytic dimension, and one important task for feminist classicists is to work out the necessary adaptations in order to apply this approach to the ancient world. See, for example, Tania Modleski's discussion of how female perspectives are incorporated into the films of Hitchcock (1988, 1-15).

6. Thus I would distinguish my position from that of Nancy Felson-Rubin (1987), who sees plot as an element that opens up the possibilites of character rather than delimiting them. In order to do so, she gives as much weight to unrealized potential plots, which might exist in the mind of Penelope, as to the plot that actually unfolds,

which Penelope does not control or, as Felson-Rubin herself notes (62-63), even know about. Even more emphatically than Winkler, Felson-Rubin treats Penelope as a real person who transcends her role in this version of her story: " . . . the bride has her own story, even when it is not presented in full" (63), and "We must treat her as if she were a character in real life, with a world of her own" (64).

7. For another recent, theoretically oriented study that appreciates the *Odyssey* in much the same terms, see Peradotto (1990).

8. Felson-Rubin (1987), 63. Similarly, Felson-Rubin distinguishes Agamemnon's male-dominated and male-oriented view of Penelope from the fuller portrait offered by the poem as a whole, but describes that fuller portrait in the following terms: "a complex, problematic figure who ultimately remains faithful to her absent husband but comes dangerously close . . . to an unintentional betrayal" (65).

9. In the *Odyssey,* song is generally seen as capable of eliciting strong, involuntary expressions of emotion. Cf. *Od.* 8.521-30. At 1.343 Penelope's fidelity is underscored by her use of *aiei* ("always"); cf. similar uses of this adverb by Athena at 13.337, 379, and by Penelope herself at 17.103, 19.596, etc.

10. This helps to explain the paradox identified by Suzuki, who notes that in his treatment of Penelope "the poet, while according her subjectivity, does not seek to represent it" (1989, 91).

11. The *Odyssey*'s association in this fashion of a female figure with a certain plot that is activated no matter what her own feelings or loyalties may be, can also be compared to the working of certain plots in Greek tragedy, where women are shown setting in motion tragic chains of events no matter what their specific characters may be. The loyal, loving Deianeira of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* becomes the destroyer of her husband no less than, and in ways that are reminiscent of, the treacherously-minded Clytemnestra of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon.* Similarly, the chaste, modest, reputation-conscious Phaedra of Euripides' second *Hippolytus* becomes just as much the vehicle of destructive sexuality as the bold, openly desirous Phaedra of the first *Hippolytus.* While tragedy places these women in plots of inevitable female destructiveness, the *Odyssey* places its heroine in a plot of inevitable female cooperation.

12. See, for example, Fränkel (1973); 75-85, MacIntyre (1981), 114-22; Redfield (1981), 20-23.

13. On Penelope's use in this passage of a *topos* of maternal grief to express the pain of a wife separated from her husband, see Loraux (1990), 91.

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