

Book 19

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I. Plot Summary

The core of *Odyssey* 19 is the conversation between Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, and Penelope—their first conversation since Odysseus left for Troy. The book begins with Odysseus and Telemachus putting the armor out of the suitors' reach while Athena holds up a lamp for them (see [Cook 1995](#): 128–70; [Bierl 2004](#) on the lamp). Penelope comes in accompanied by female servants and sits down by the fire. One of the servants, Melanthe, attempts to chase the beggar away and receives an aggressive reprimand from Penelope (see [Minchin 2007](#): 168). Eurynome and Eurycleia are also in the room. Odysseus sits down across from Penelope, and the conversation begins.

Penelope asks the beggar who he is and where he is from (see [Arft 2022](#) on the stranger's interrogation). Instead of answering, he compares Penelope's fame to that of a perfect king, a figure he describes in near divine terms: such a king brings justice, peace, and fertility. Penelope, for her part, describes her famous ruse—telling the suitors that she needs to finish the shroud for Laertes and then, for three years, weaving it by day and unweaving by night until the servants betray her and she is forced to finish the fabric. This story is told three times in the poem, twice by the suitors (in books 2 and 24) and once here by Penelope.

Compelled finally to tell his name, the beggar Odysseus says that he is Aithon, son of the Cretan king Deucalion. He does not explain how he came to be a beggar, the focus is instead on Odysseus, whom (in this tale) Aithon met and hosted on Crete—Odysseus was carried there by wind on his way to Troy. Penelope cries in response to the tale, while Odysseus “hides tears,” his eyes like horn or iron. Penelope tests her guest by asking him about Odysseus's clothes and his companions, both of which Odysseus describes in detail. Prompted by Penelope's “I will never welcome him back again” (257), he then tells her that Odysseus is near, in Thesprotia, and swears an oath that Odysseus will return very soon.

Penelope offers him a bath along with warm clothes and promises that tomorrow he can dine by Telemachus's side, but Odysseus accepts only a footbath, if there is an old woman who would do it. Penelope calls on Eurycleia, who agrees, remarking that she has never seen anyone so like Odysseus. The beggar comically replies, “That is what everyone said when they saw us together” (19.383–4). As she begins to wash Odysseus's feet, Eurycleia comes upon the scar above his knee and recognizes him. Between the moment she touches the scar and the moment when she lets the leg drop comes a long flashback to the story of how Odysseus got his name from his maternal grandfather, Autolycus—who derives it via paronomasia (wordplay) from *odussomai*, “to hate,” because he is hated by many (see [Stanford 1952](#); [Clay 1983](#): 59–65; [Peradotto 1990](#); [Bader 2009](#))—and how he got

his scar from a boar he killed hunting with Autolycus and his sons on Parnassus. Eurycleia attempts to catch Penelope's eye, but Odysseus grabs her by the throat and threatens her with death if she tells anyone. She assures Odysseus that she is steadfast and offers to tell which of the women he should punish.

The conversation resumes, with Penelope comparing herself to the nightingale Aedon, who kills her own son by mistake and now, as a nightingale, forever laments him. She then asks her guest to interpret a dream in which an eagle kills geese. The dream contains its own interpretation, which the beggar confirms: Odysseus will kill the suitors. Penelope responds that dreams are uncertain and says that she will set up a bow contest for her hand the next day. They will use Odysseus's bow, and the task will be what Odysseus used to do. The beggar urges Penelope not to postpone the contest and promises that Odysseus will be here tomorrow. Saying that mortals must sleep, Penelope goes upstairs to her quarters, accompanied by the servants, and cries for Odysseus until Athena sends her to sleep.

II. Themes

The *Odyssey* is a self-conscious epic, and its concern with the telling of tales is front and center in book 19: it is almost a study of communication, with the interlocutors picking up each other's clues and prompting responses (see Beck 2005). It is the only occasion when Odysseus is in dialogue with a female counterpart of matching craft and cunning. Many female characters in the *Odyssey* exhibit unusual powers (Nagler 1996; Atchity and Barber 1987; Arft 2022), and book 19 showcases those of Penelope.

Odysseus begins the conversation by describing a perfect king, one who upholds justice and brings well-being, an important theme in the *Odyssey* (Watkins 1979: 182). In speaking like a king, he identifies himself as one (Martin 1984; Levaniouk 2011: 26–8). Odysseus's praise of Penelope also acknowledges that she has preserved the household, his "kingdom," while he forsook it, and is worthy of equal fame. Penelope lets her guest know that the status she wants is that of Odysseus's wife. The pair negotiate their identities and roles through subtle clues of their mutual estimation and mindset. Odysseus addresses Penelope as "respected wife of Odysseus, son of Laertes" (e.g. 19.165), in contrast to "daughter of Icarus" (e.g. 18.285) used by the suitors. Penelope mentions Odysseus by name three times in the story of the ruse, a sign of her hopefulness (Nünlist 2015; Bonifazi 2012).

By assuming the name Aithon, "Burning," Odysseus signals his hunger for return and vengeance (Levaniouk 2011: 36–49), and with his Cretan origins he introduces the notion of renewal (Levaniouk 2011: 93–108). One of the Odyssean themes played out in book 19 is the return of the sun, the theme of spring, and the coming of light. The weather gets warmer, Athena is compared to a swallow, the festival of Apollo points to spring, and Penelope mentions spring (19.519). This theme is picked up in Penelope's reaction to Odysseus's Cretan tale as she dissolves in tears like snow in the mountains, "which the East wind melts after the West wind piles it up, and as it melts the rivers run full" (19.204–5). This is a moment of emotional release and most likely the moment when Penelope knows that the beggar is Odysseus.

When Penelope asks about Odysseus's clothes, in one of the winking moments plentiful in this book, the beggar responds, "It is hard to remember someone's clothes after so many years" (19.221–2), before describing exquisite fabrics and a decorative pin, thus

paying another compliment to his wife. She gave him these pieces of clothing, fine as the skin of an onion and shining like the sun (19.233–4), the work of her own hands, just as she gave him the pin “to be an ornament for him” (19.257). Penelope cries even more as she recognizes these “sure signs” (19.250).

Odysseus’s next story is comically unlikely at face value. After giving Penelope some truthful information about her husband, the beggar says that he saw the stores of Odysseus’s wealth kept by king Pheidon and, counterintuitively, swears an oath that Odysseus will come back in the next day or two (19.270–90). One might wonder why Pheidon should show Odysseus’s wealth to a beggar, or how the beggar could know when Odysseus would arrive, but these details make sense as part of a coded conversation between Penelope and Odysseus. The theme of prosperity and the economy of life is important in the poem (Bakker 2013), and it is important for Penelope that Odysseus come back with wealth to restore the household (19.580–1). Through his false story, Odysseus assures his wife that he is bringing wealth and even specifies how much (19.294). The oath, meaningless from a beggar, makes sense coming from Odysseus himself.

After the footbath Penelope tells two tales which convey to Odysseus the conclusions she has drawn and her plan of action (discussed below). The last part of her extraordinary performance, the narrative of her dream, fits into a larger narrative arc of the poem in its evocation of wedding themes, which will resurface in the following books.

The flashback to Odysseus’s hunt on Mount Parnassus fits into the same narrative arc: the adolescent Odysseus comes home a man, acknowledged by his maternal family and marked with a scar. The boar hunt is a rite of passage (Detienne 1973: 303; Bremmer 1983b), and there is an interesting equation between Odysseus and the boar, whose lair is described in the same language as the hiding spot where Odysseus spends his first night on Scheria (5.476–83) (Russo 1993; Levaniouk 2011: 166–90). Both episodes are marked by the language of fire and light: Odysseus is compared to a “seed of fire”; the boar emerges with the dawn’s rays (5.490; 19.433–4, 446). Now, in book 19, Odysseus—calling himself Aithon, “Burning”—is about to emerge from the shadows, reclaim his name, and win Penelope.

III. Special Topics

Problem I: Recognition

Book 19 of the *Odyssey* is home to an inveterate controversy, referred to as the “Penelope question” or the “recognition question,” namely the question of whether Penelope recognizes Odysseus here or only in book 23. The term “recognition” may be inappropriate, since it is used to mean anything from a suspicion to complete social integration, but it is impossible to avoid some form of the question. It makes all the difference whether Penelope understands the hints and signs dropped by the beggar or misses them, whether she suspects that her guest is Odysseus strongly enough to act or does not. Two aspects of book 19 change drastically depending on one’s answer: the coherence of the narrative and Penelope’s character.

It has long been acknowledged that under the assumption that Penelope does not recognize Odysseus, *Odyssey* 19 becomes illogical in a way that is unparalleled in the poem

(Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1884: 62; Page 1955: 126, 124; Murnaghan 1987: 118; and many others). Perhaps the most striking among many ruptures is Penelope's decision to hold the bow contest the next day. The beggar, who has proven his trustworthiness, tells her that Odysseus will soon arrive from Thesprotia, yet Penelope suddenly decides not to wait even a few more days. The beggar, for his part, does not sustain verisimilitude by, for example, suggesting that Penelope wait for Odysseus to arrive.

Penelope's character is also drastically affected by the question of recognition. She is called *periphrōn*, "of excellent mind," and *ekhephrōn*, "keeping her mind"; the suitors say that another such tricky woman never existed (2.115–20), Athena assures Odysseus that she is stringing the suitors along (13.379–81), and we are reminded of her endurance by forms of the verb *tlāō*, "to endure," so characteristic of Odysseus (11.181, 16.37). Yet if we are to assume delayed recognition, this version of Penelope is absent from book 19. Clues to the beggar's identity come at her thick and fast, but she does not see them and makes her most momentous decision uninformed. Here we have the clever Penelope being dull, the cautious and circumspect Penelope being impulsive, and the proper Penelope, the one who always observes decorum and hides her true thoughts, confiding her intimate worries to a stranger she has just met.

Those who reject early recognition must either believe, with Allen, that "plot is more important than character" (1939: 119) or explain Penelope's decision in some other way (see Doherty 1995: 31–63, and Katz 1991: 77–113). Some see the timing of Penelope's decision as an accident—she makes the decision out of despair and fortuitously traps the suitors (Murnaghan 1987:133–4). A similar argument is that it was simply too dangerous to wait any longer (Foley 2009: 133–5). The danger, however, is higher earlier in the poem when the suitors plan to murder Telemachus. Alternatively, it has been suggested that Penelope chances upon the idea of the bow contest as a way of eliminating the suitors herself, since none of them will be able string the bow (Marquardt 1985). This entertaining scenario presupposes very compliant suitors and deprives Odysseus of his chance at revenge.

A different route is to suggest a subconscious recognition or instinctive timing, whereby Penelope is drawn to make her decision without fully knowing why (Amory 1963; Allione 1963; Finley 1978: 2–15; Russo 1982). There is no evidence to support this idea but it is a compromise option—if one believes that recognition is unacceptable, but the book makes little sense otherwise, then subconscious recognition presents a way out.

It is also possible to find meaning and beauty in the problem itself. The ruptures in Penelope's character can then be seen as an indication of her impossible situation. Her inability to accept the signs is a measure of her despair (Van der Valk 1966; Thornton 1970) or the pressures upon her (Fenik 1974: 46). Penelope's resulting "indeterminacy" has been seen as an artful narrative strategy or the result of ideological pressures in depicting subjugated groups (Katz 1991: 112–13).

The problems disappear if one assumes that Penelope has recognized Odysseus. In that case, we have a Penelope who is observant but self-controlled, who "from the start and in all ways knows her place" (Ferrari 2002: 55), and who also knows her worth. She makes "the stranger" understand what she has accomplished and what she wants to be—the wife of Odysseus, the best of the Achaeans (Nagy 1979/1999: 35–41). She dissolves in tears but will neither compromise Odysseus's disguise nor affirm him as her

husband until he kills the suitors and re-establishes his relationship with her. She communicates in complex, emotional, and informative ways without betraying them both. She tells her guest that he is dear to and respected by her. She conveys to him that she has been risking Telemachus's life by waiting for him and what she expects him to do now—kill all the suitors. In making her decision, she demonstrates that she is, as Felson and Slatkin put it, “in charge of herself” and, for the moment, not subject to a male guardian (2004: 110). She lives up to her epithets. Her character does not rupture and neither does the plot.

The *Odyssey* does not endorse either early or delayed recognition explicitly and it has been argued that by doing so the poem “practices on its audiences the same *metis* (‘cunning’) it ascribes to its leading characters” (Felson and Slatkin 2004: 110 n. 63; Bergren 2008: 215–233). Delayed recognition remains the mainstream interpretation, while early recognition is often seen as a controversial opinion (Christensen 2020: 191). Harsh's (1950) detailed argument in its favor is often seen as “brilliant and subtle” but without “a secure foundation in the text” (Allione 1963: 82 n. 32; Katz 1991: 111), even though the objection applies equally to both theories: we are not told that Penelope recognizes Odysseus—nor that she fails to recognize him. More often than being countered, the arguments for early recognition are dismissed as “unconvincing” (e.g. Scodel 2001: 320 n. 19).

It is hard to account for this situation. One often cited point that supposedly rules out early recognition is the fact that Athena “turns away” Penelope's attention when Eurycleia tries to show her Odysseus's scar (19.478–9) (Russo 1992: 99; Louden 2011b: 88). Yet this problem pales in comparison with the havoc of “delayed recognition”—and besides, solutions have been proposed. Brief words between the beggar and the old woman might not attract attention, but if Penelope looks at the scar, then all the servants will know and Odysseus's game will be up. There are also psychological reasons (Harsh 1950: 15–16; Ahl and Roisman 1996: 234). As far as Penelope is concerned, her affirmation of Odysseus will not be based on mere words or body marks (Haller 2009). For his part, Odysseus avoids claiming any advantages from Penelope until he proves himself in action (19.336–40, 20.1). The presence of the suitors is an insult to Odysseus, and it is his place to deal with them in his ruthless way. Trying to prove to Penelope that he is Odysseus by showing her the scar would be deflating and demeaning.

It is probably something external to the poem that sways modern audiences, and perhaps swayed the ancient ones, on the recognition question. The notion that Penelope takes her momentous decision in ignorance and out of unalloyed grief just as Odysseus is sitting before her is often seen as deeply ironic and tragic (Van der Valk 1966: 37–40; Fenik 1974: 46–7; Beck 2005: 103–4; Louden 2011b: 80). Some might find such a Penelope more comic than tragic (Katz 1991: 112), but that is a subjective judgement, just as the presence or absence of suspense, subtlety, and emotion under either scenario (e.g. Beck 2005: 106). It is impossible to know how the ancient audiences understood book 19 since we lack external evidence, but it seems likely that then, as now, there would have been differences. Since our text offers it, we can surmise that some ancient audiences arrived at the notion of early recognition and the corresponding version of Penelope. We should also imagine that many declined to do so for any number of reasons—because they knew and liked a different version of Penelope, because narrative logic was relatively unimportant for them, or perhaps because of their attitudes to women in general.

Problem II: Women in *Odyssey* 19.

Penelope

It is often suggested that Odysseus does not disclose his identity to Penelope because, regardless of her individual qualities, women are seen as unreliable in the *Odyssey* and he treats her accordingly (Murnaghan 1987: 125–6; Gresseth 1979: 83; Christensen 2020: 176; Loudon 2011b: 86; de Jong 2001: 459). There is evidence for such attitudes in the poem, and indeed there is an internal audience who does see Penelope in that way. This internal audience is Agamemnon. In book 24, Agamemnon in the underworld hears the story of Odysseus's return. "Blessed son of Laertes, much-devising Odysseus, indeed you acquired a wife of great excellence!" (24.192–3), he exclaims and says that the gods will make a beautiful song celebrating her. Not such was his own wife: she will have a hateful song "and give harsh repute to women, even those who act well" (24.199–202). Agamemnon's view of women as disreputable as a category likely expresses a broad current of ancient thought. It also resonates in interesting ways with modern scholarship on the women in Homer. Two approaches seem especially relevant to the dialogue.

One approach is to take Agamemnon's view as an indication of how women are seen within the epic. It is a "cultural given" that their character is volatile and undefined (Peradotto 2002: 9). Penelope might be the most complexly drawn, capable, and intelligent woman in Homer, but she is still a woman and therefore unreliable—and consequently mistrusted by Odysseus. This approach does not help to explain the illogicalities caused by delayed recognition, but it does create a plausible explanation for why it could be delayed. It also creates a picture of a Penelope who is confused and paralyzed, capable of missing all the signs in front of her and making a momentous decision in the sway of womanly emotion (Christensen 2020: 175–202).

Another approach is to ascribe an Agamemnon-like philosophy to Odysseus but not the epic itself. On this view, Penelope is depicted in Homer as an exception, yet this sympathetic depiction is "placed in a wider context of misogyny," which explains her treatment by Odysseus (Murnaghan 1987: 123.) Penelope is *depicted* as exceptional but not treated as such by her husband. Odysseus's success is only possible because of Penelope's steadfastness, yet he does not trust her enough to reveal himself, thus depriving himself of her assistance and needlessly prolonging her suffering (Murnaghan 1987: 118).

By contrast, those who accept early recognition might argue that Penelope is both depicted as exceptional and recognized as such by Odysseus, who trusts her in book 19. Penelope's exceptionality does not eliminate misogyny in Homer. The *Odyssey* depicts an idealized patriarchal and paternalistic world in which women's agency is circumscribed in comparison with men's, and instrumentalization of women and enslaved persons is idealized. There is no question of any social equality, regardless of skills and abilities. Women have no independent standing—they can play a social role and self-actualize only as someone's daughter, wife, or mother (see Jamison 1999: 123). Within this world, however, Penelope is depicted as knowing her worth and exercising her agency. She traps the suitors by sending them messages yet delaying the marriage (2.91–2). She unsentimentally wants them all killed (17.546–7), but first she extracts wealth from them (18.274–83). She excels above others and wants people to know that (19.326). She longs for Odysseus's power and status—his many achievements, his fame (4.274–6), his ability to entertain

guests and defend his household (19.314–16). She is the wife of Odysseus, the best of the Achaeans, and she resents the prospect of a lesser marriage (20.82). Her vision of herself depends on being part of Odysseus's household with its material wealth (19.525) and respect from the people (19.526). The house is central to what [Mueller](#) calls [Penelope's "mnemonic fidelity to Odysseus," the tenacious memory that marks her as "different from the female norm."](#) (2007: 344–5). It is the same with her reputation. Penelope's reference to the "talk of the people" suggests that, if she remarries, her reputation will no longer be exceptional ([Jamison 1999](#)), and that is not good enough for Penelope. Her constant tears serve, in part, to preserve her status: they are a source of protection from suspicion or censure, even if they are also tears of grief.

Agamemnon is a foil for "the best of the Achaeans" both in *Odyssey* and in the *Iliad*, and Odysseus never endorses his opinions about women (11.436). Even in book 24, the *Odyssey* is arguably engaging in a bit of gloating over Agamemnon himself, who is not blessed like Odysseus and very much dead. In the *Odyssey* as we have it, Odysseus sees Penelope as Penelope and not merely as a representative of the category "woman" ([Mendelson 2017](#)). Those inclined to draw lessons from the epic could reasonably conclude that such an attitude is conducive to survival.

Penelope's power in the *Odyssey* has not gone entirely unnoticed. It usually emerges in studies that focus on language, prehistory of the epic, and myth rather than psychology. [Atchity and Barber](#), for example, compare her power to Helen's and argue that both reflect an older Aegean social organization, now mythologized (1987). Penelope can be seen as near divine in her power, trapping the suitors while at her loom as surely as Circe traps Odysseus's men and manipulating time with her weaving and unweaving ([Nagler 1996](#); [O'Higgins 2016](#); [Papadopoulou-Belmehdi 1994](#)). She is not confined to the (narrowly defined) qualities of a stereotypical good wife but has abilities that go beyond that role, notably cunning ([Bergren 2008](#)), enduring memory ([Mueller 2007](#)), and the ability to tell tales in a way a poet might, to match Odysseus in that craft. Her skill as a singer of tales is on full display in book 19 ([Levaniouk 2011](#)).

The *Odyssey* is a multiform of the returning husband tale; it also follows a mythic pattern of decline and restoration, death and rebirth ([Frame 1978](#): 1–33; [Burkert 1983](#): 130–4; [Newton 1984](#); [Nagy 1990b](#): 223–62; [Hansen 2002](#): 201–11; [Ready 2014](#)). Odysseus returns, bringing light after a period of gloom. His circular journey is impossible without his female counterpart, just as it is impossible without female helpers at its cardinal points ([Nagy 1990](#): 223–62; [Marinatos 2001](#); [Bergren 2008](#): 58–72). Odysseus's very identity is to some extent dependent on Penelope—he would not be "blessed" (24.192) were he not the husband of Penelope and the father of Telemachus ([Dova 2001](#)).

The cosmic and the human are woven together in the meeting of Odysseus and Penelope in book 19, just as they are in these characters themselves. In some allomorphs of the homecoming husband story, the husband reveals himself by singing a song or engaging, while disguised, in a song contest (often riddling) with his wife. It is usually assumed that in our *Odyssey* this is not the case ([Ready 2014](#)), but it has been suggested ([Levaniouk 2018](#): 194–7; [Levaniouk 2011](#): 229–46) that the whole conversation in *Odyssey* 19 is an expanded multiform of precisely such a song contest—an extended engagement in riddling communication through tales between Odysseus, who relies on his wife, and Penelope, who recognizes her husband.

Eurycleia and Melantho

Book 19 contains complex representations of enslaved women in the *Odyssey*, including first and foremost Odysseus's nurse, Eurycleia. Enslaved people in the *Odyssey* are depicted as good or bad, and the criterion for the distinction is their allegiance to the master's interests. The distinction is stark, literally black and white in the sense that some of the slaves have names derived from "black," including the female house servant Melantho. She appears in book 19 to accuse Odysseus of ogling the women (19.65–9, a hint of her own sexual transgressions) and to threaten him with physical violence (which she herself will experience in a ghastly fashion in book 22). Penelope calls Melantho "arrogant" (*tharsaleē*) and a "shameless dog" (19.91).

The paternalistic relationship of master and slave in the *Odyssey* is figured as pseudo-kinship (18.321–5), but only until it breaks down, in which case the slaves' position as property emerges clearly. From this point of view, Melantho's relationship with Eurymachus (18.305) is essentially theft and trespassing on his part. As [Thalmann puts it](#), "[The suitors' sexual appropriation of these slaves is an assault on his property.... Because it is on this property that his household's standing on Ithaca is based, the threat to Odysseus's social being is grave and is met with a correspondingly fierce reaction](#)" (1998b: 30). Nevertheless, Melantho's actions seem to be presented as a moral choice (contra Thalmann) and blamed on her, since she, like Eumaeus, was "brought up" in the household by Penelope herself (18.321–5). She is expected to be loyal, perhaps even grateful. In an almost burlesque contrast to Eurycleia, Melantho does not internalize her position and possibly even exercises some degree of "stolen agency" over her body ([Christensen 2020](#): 169–72).

The complexities of Melantho's depiction pale in comparison to those of Eurycleia, who plays a large role in book 19 ([Karydas 1998](#)). Like other "good" slaves in the poem, Eurycleia is infantilized and internalizes her social position ([Christensen 2020](#): 164–5). In depicting such characters, the *Odyssey* represents paternalistic relationships as benevolent and paints a picture of an ideal king and master who is "like a father" to his dependents (2.47, 234). The *Odyssey* also depicts good slaves, paradoxically, as former aristocrats, and in the case of Eurycleia we are given her father's name and his patronymic (1.429), suggesting that she comes from a noble family.

The bond between Odysseus and the good slaves such as Eumaeus and Eurycleia is depicted as strong, deeply emotional, and all-encompassing. Since Eurycleia is a wet nurse of Odysseus (19.483), we can conclude that she has children, yet we hear nothing about them, nor their father. Eurycleia's thoughts are focused on Telemachus and Odysseus: she calls both of them "child" and is bound to both with bonds of familiarity and physical, tactile, proximity. If Penelope protects Telemachus's status and inheritance, it is Eurycleia who tucks him into bed (1.434–41). In book 19, Eurycleia recognizes Odysseus by touch, and says that she did not know him until she "felt all around" (19.475, [Mueller 2016](#)). Summing up her contradictory position in the household, Eurycleia calls Odysseus both "dear child" and "master" in the same breath (19.474–5). Odysseus grasps Eurycleia by the throat before she can utter his name out loud, responding to touch with touch even if the action itself is necessitated by the plot. Eurycleia gives in to emotion and is about to spoil Odysseus's plan. In this, she is distinctly different from Penelope, and it is possible that we see here a distinction not just between two individuals but between an enslaved woman who needs to be controlled and an elite one who can take care of herself.

Odysseus's relationship with Eurycleia is complex. He reminds her that she nursed him (19.482–3) but also says that this will not protect her if she betrays him (19.489). In Eurycleia's response she affiliates herself with Odysseus's family by claiming the family quality of endurance (19.493) and dissociates herself from other women by offering to tell Odysseus which of them he should kill (19.497–8). Eurycleia shows no allegiance with (or pity for) the servants she supervises. Perhaps the most telling part of the conversation is Odysseus's reaction to this offer. For now, he keeps Eurycleia's status in question by telling her that he does not need her to inform on other women. In book 22 Odysseus will, in fact, let Eurycleia select the women for execution, but only after restraining her ululation at the sight of the slaughtered suitors (22.411). Eurycleia's spontaneous emotion is again curtailed, yet she is allowed to make an important decision. She is trusted and even allowed, up to a point, to be part of the family, yet also controlled and kept in her place.

Eurycleia is self-assured in her interactions with Penelope. In book 4, when Penelope discovers that Eurycleia aided Telemachus's departure in secret, the nurse says defensively, "Kill me with pitiless bronze or let me be," but then immediately goes on to give Penelope advice and instructions (4.743–57). She even contradicts Penelope's suggestion to send for Laertes and assures her mistress that the gods will not abandon the "descendants of Arcesius," claiming some insight into the fortune of this male line. As [Thalmann points out](#), "By the nature of virilocal marriage, in which the wife comes as an outsider to her husband's home, there is a tension between male and female interests within the household" (1998b: 27). This tension exists between Eurycleia and Penelope, just as there is a certain overlap of function and qualities between the two women. Like Penelope, Eurycleia is said to guard Odysseus's stores day and night (2.345–6). She has a "much-knowing" mind (2.346), she knows *kédna*, "reliable" things (19.346), and her intelligence is repeatedly emphasized: she has "tight" plans (19.353), is cautious or shrewd (1.438), and shares with Penelope the epithet *periphron*, "of excellent mind" (19.358). In book 19 she agrees to wash Odysseus's feet but says that she will obey Penelope "not unwillingly" not only for Penelope's sake but also for the sake of the beggar, since she feels moved looking at him (19.374–8).

The two women seem to be in a subdued competition over their proximity to Odysseus's household. Penelope is Odysseus's wife, but Eurycleia was part of his household before Penelope arrived and might be part of it after Penelope leaves. In contrast to Odysseus, who calls Penelope "respected wife of Odysseus son of Laertes," Eurycleia never seems to forget that Penelope came from outside, since she sometimes calls Penelope "dear bride" (4.743) or "daughter of Icarus" (19.375), like the suitors. Eurycleia underestimates the mutual understanding between Penelope and Odysseus. She does not, for example, know about the secret of their bed (23.228–9). The two women also have different views on Telemachus's maturity. Penelope worries that growing up is dangerous for her son since it attracts the suitors' hostility, and Telemachus himself recognizes the danger (1.251). Eurycleia disapproves of Telemachus's extended adolescence and wishes that he would finally become a man in his house (19.22–3). Whether Eurycleia underestimates the danger, fails to guess the suitors' plans, or has more trust than Penelope in the "descendants of Arcesius," the two women do not see eye to eye.

Odysseus seems to be affected by emotion in his interactions with Eurycleia. When he rejects the bath and asks for an old woman who has endured (*tetlēke*, 19.347) in her heart

as much as he has, he is in effect asking for Eurycleia. This is how Penelope seems to understand him, since she says, “Dear stranger, no man as intelligent as you has ever come to my house, the way you say all these intelligent things in well-chosen words” (19.350–2). What is so remarkably clever about having an old woman wash one’s feet? Presumably Penelope deduces that Odysseus is planning to secretly reveal himself to Eurycleia and secure her assistance. Odysseus, however, hasn’t thought it all through and only now realizes that Eurycleia will notice the scar and recognize him. He quickly turns away from the light to minimize the danger. It happens “suddenly” (19.389) and “at once” (19.390), conveying the impression that Odysseus is improvising.

Instrumentalized though she is, Eurycleia nevertheless has both agency and some power. The way she attempts to communicate with Penelope through her gaze, for example, is not typical of enslaved people, since sight is associated with elites in contrast to the “lower” senses of taste and smell (Mueller 2016: 1–2). The “even” in Odysseus’s threat (“I will not spare you *even* though you are my nurse,” 19.489) suggests that Eurycleia’s status is real but always provisional. Her power is formalized by the title of *tamiē*, “housekeeper” (2.345), but also based on an emotional bond and long proximity to the family of Odysseus. This proximity is powerfully expressed by the “interlude” of the boar hunt, which De Jong sees as a flashback in Eurycleia’s mind (1985). It is framed by Eurycleia’s recognition, and she holds Odysseus’s foot in her hands as the Parnassus story unfolds. She also plays a surprisingly large role in the story: she places the baby Odysseus in the lap of his grandfather, Autolycus, and asks him to name his grandson. Autolycus responds to his “son-in-law and daughter” (19.406), so they are in the room, yet they never get a speaking part in this tale, while Eurycleia does.

The story of Odysseus’s scar is told, then, at least in some sense, by his enslaved nurse, and it is through her that we hear some of the cardinal themes resonating in the epic: birth and rebirth, the name of Odysseus, his Autolycus-like inheritance, his qualities as a hunter, warrior, and a man who journeys away from home and comes back with wealth. Some of these themes also resonate with Penelope’s two tales that follow (see below), but if Eurycleia’s flashback is focused exclusively on Odysseus and his growing up, Penelope’s tales have a distinctly marital character.

IV. Notable Passages

The Nightingale Simile (19.515–34)

When she resumes the conversation, Penelope begins by comparing herself to a nightingale: just like the nightingale pours out her song, turning it this way and that, so Penelope hesitates whether she should stay or go. The simile includes a narrative about Aedon, the woman who became a nightingale. The analogy between Penelope and Aedon has been variously interpreted, in part because the myth survives in two versions (Levaniouk 2011: 213–28). In the more familiar one of Procne and Philomela (or Aedon and Chelidon), Procne’s husband, Tereus, rapes her sister Philomela, and in revenge Procne murders her own son Itys and serves his flesh to her husband. In the second version of the myth, Aedon and Zethus have one son, Itylus, while Zethus’s brother Amphion and his wife, Niobe, have many children. Aedon becomes jealous and attempts to kill Niobe’s eldest son, but

the boys sleep in the same room and, in the darkness, she kills her own son by mistake. In both versions, Aedon is turned into a nightingale and forever laments her child. Because we are in the rare position of possessing two very different, but also in some respects equivalent, versions of the myth, Penelope's telling of it is a good test case for analyzing multiformity and variation in oral poetry (Levaniouk 2011: 213–28).

Penelope's words would have been comprehensible at some level to those familiar with any version of the story. The central event is the destruction of a family in a ghastly and paradoxical way—a mother causes the death of her child. The death of Telemachus is also the danger that looms over the family of Odysseus. On a different level, Burkert (1983: 179–84) connected these tales to a ritual period of dissolution that precedes a new beginning, a context that fits the *Odyssey*.

At the same time, the myth of Aedon shows how the phenomenon of multiformity allows for fine-tuning by selection of one version and exclusion of another. Penelope signals her specific version of the myth by the names of the father (Pandareus, not Pandion), the husband (Zethus, not Tereus), and the son (Itylus, not Itys). Unlike Procne, who wants to destroy her husband's lineage, Aedon, the wife of Zethus, wants to further her husband's and son's interests by eliminating a rival. Like her, Penelope wishes death upon her son's rivals, the suitors, who attempt to displace him and desire to occupy, instead of him, Odysseus's position in the world (Scodel 2001). Penelope is plotting their death but fears that, like Aedon, she might miscalculate and cause Telemachus's death instead.

The simile itself, the comparison with the bird, also fits Penelope on many levels. The nightingale sings at night, and that is also the time when Penelope often laments. Her description of the bird's song has a metapoetic quality to it. In verse 521, the song of the nightingale is described as both *poluekhea*, “of many sounds,” and *poludeukea*, “patterning in many ways,” two epithets that likely stem from variation in oral poetry and also express it (Nagy 1996b: 7–58). The song is “turning,” variable but continuous, reminiscent of Penelope's going back and forth in her weaving and her thinking (Nagy 1996b: 55–8; Levaniouk 2011: 224–5). The epithet may also refer to the quality of Penelope's performance for Odysseus. The simile involves a semantic play on the derivation of Penelope's name, which comes from a bird's name, *penelops*, a bird similar to the halcyon. The halcyon is known for its lamenting song, but not for murdering its offspring. Rather, the female halcyon laments for her lost mate, to whom she remains ever faithful; when he disappears, she brings up their child alone. In comparing herself to Aedon, Penelope the *penelops* could be expressing her fear of becoming the nightingale (Levaniouk 2011: 287–318).

The Dream (19.535–53)

Right after the nightingale simile Penelope asks her guest to interpret a dream and goes on to tell it. In her dream she has twenty geese; they are eating grain and she delights in looking at them, but suddenly an eagle from the mountains swoops in and breaks their necks, and they lie dead in a pile (19.535–40). Still in her dream, Penelope mourns and Achaean women gather to mourn with her, but then the eagle comes back, sits on her roof, and announces in a human voice that the geese are actually the suitors and he is Odysseus and he will bring ugly death upon all of them. Then, Penelope concludes, she wakes up and sees her geese eating grain by the trough, as before (19.540–53). There is no way,

responds Odysseus, to bend the dream towards a different meaning: “Odysseus himself revealed how it will end—death for the suitors, all of them, not one of them will escape death and doom” (19.556–8).

In contrast to actual dreams in Homer, which are introduced by the voice of the poet and take the form of a figure appearing and speaking to the sleeper, Penelope’s dream is introduced only in her voice, just like the only other fabricated dream in Homer, that of Odysseus in *Odyssey* 14 (459–506). Penelope’s dream is also uniquely allegorical in its content (Kotwick 2020). As Winkler puts it, “Penelope is here inventing a dream as a way of further safe communication with this fascinating stranger” (1990: 154). She does not, however, simply invent it (nor is she communicating with a stranger). Rather, she performs a creative variation on a traditional song and presses it into serving her purpose. Penelope’s narrative follows a pattern that is attested only in other times and places but must have existed in Greece prior to the composition of our *Odyssey*, in the same way as the tale of the one-eyed Ogre must have pre-existed the Homeric Cyclops, even if the Cyclops is (so far) its earliest attestation (Hansen 2002: 289–301). The pattern Penelope follows is present in the Turkic epic *Alpamiš*, which also has many other points of contact with the *Odyssey* (see Levaniuk 2023a). The pattern is this: on the eve of the hero’s arrival from afar, his betrothed sees a dream in which something dear to her is violently attacked by some predatory force. She initially perceives the dream as terrible, but she is surrounded by women, one of whom interprets the dream as a good omen. The predator is equated with the hero, the treasured possessions are reinterpreted as his competitors, her suitors—and their destruction becomes a source of joy rather than grief.¹

The dream-tale Penelope performs for Odysseus follows the same pattern. Penelope’s treasure, her geese, is destroyed by a predator and she is distressed, but then it turns out the eagle is actually Odysseus and the geese are not her treasure but the suitors. The number of geese, twenty, corresponds to the much-mentioned number of the years of Odysseus’s absence, so that the geese initially stand for Penelope’s household, which she has maintained and guarded all this time (Finley 1978: 247; Pratt 1994). Because Penelope is not on the verge of marriage, did not in fact see a dream, and is not going to receive a reversing interpretation from a nearby woman, she incorporates these elements into the dream itself, mentioning the Achaean women and giving the eagle the role of her interpreter friend. This daring modification of a traditional pattern accounts for several details of Penelope’s dream: for example, the fact that the eagle first flies off but then returns to speak in a human voice and says “I am now Odysseus” while sitting, as an eagle, on Penelope’s roof. The traditional contrast between the initial terrible appearance of the dream and its positive reinterpretation is preserved in Penelope’s tale but it is expressed in unusual terms. The eagle says, “This is not a dream but a waking vision that will be fulfilled” (19.547). This may be seen as Penelope’s adaptation of the pattern to fit her peculiar context, where Odysseus is sitting before her but his return is not yet accomplished.

Even though she asks the beggar for an interpretation, Penelope incorporates the interpretation into her tale, leaving the beggar only to confirm it. This suggests that she is not asking for advice but, rather, telling her guest what should happen next. She turns the moment of her performance into the eve of Odysseus’s arrival by the very fact that she

¹ For a different discussion of Penelope’s dream and the *Alpamiš*, see Grossardt (2006).

performs the eve-of-arrival type of dream-tale. If Odysseus can be said to “co-author” his adventures with the poetic voice of the poem, here it is Penelope who both co-authors and co-plots the narrative. When Odysseus says, “Odysseus himself said how it will end,” he affirms Penelope’s plan. Does he also attempt to reclaim the narrative? Is this a moment of Odyssean humor, Odysseus acknowledging that he has become a character in Penelope’s tale?²

Penelope then produces another brief but famous performance (imitated by Vergil in *Aeneid* 6.893–6): dreams come through different gates, she says—some through the gates of horn and they come true, and some through the gates of ivory and they are deceptive. She expresses doubt that her dream came through the gates of horn, much though she and her son may desire it (19.569).

The gates of dreams have entertained commentators already in antiquity and were interpreted allegorically, often as referring either to teeth (ivory), and therefore deceitful words, or the firm part of the eye (the “horn-like” cornea), and therefore the truthfulness of sight (Haller 2009: 405). Alternatively, horn could stand for the bow rather than sight (Vlahos 2007; Haller 2009; DeSmidt 2006). In either case, arguments have been made for interpreting the dream as a call for action rather than words (Haller 2009). The *Odyssey* itself offers a punning interpretation of Penelope’s gates, reminiscent of the punning interpretations of dreams common in antiquity in the Mediterranean and the Near East (Noegel 2007). Paronomasia establishes a relationship between *elephairomai*, “to deceive,” and *elephás*. “ivory,” on one hand, and *kraainō*, “to accomplish,” and *kéras*, “horn,” on the other. Penelope’s professed disbelief in the dream indicates that nothing is accomplished yet. “If in truth you are my long-lost husband... prove your identity to me by slaying the suitors,” as Haller (2009: 398) paraphrases.

Penelope continues her authorial activity by setting up the contest. Her plan for killing the suitors puts Odysseus’s favorite weapon in his hands and legitimizes his power on Ithaca in an almost ritual way (Jamison 1999). As Haller suggests, Penelope also “negotiates a secure role for herself in post-restoration Ithaca” (2009: 415). Before she can have that role, the trial looms. The suspense is only heightened and prolonged by the covert recognition in book 19. What will open recognition be like? What will it take for these two to embrace? Will the murder of the suitors suffice to restore the marriage? In the event, it does not. Above all, will Odysseus and Telemachus survive? The triumphant slaughter of the next day is often seen as a foregone conclusion. But it is not so for Penelope, and the mood is tense. The wiles are woven, the trap will be set on the morrow—and life and death hang in the balance.

V. Internal Cross-References and Further Reading

For disguise and recognition, see Murray (Chapter 13); Rankine (Chapter 14); and Muellner (Chapter 15). For more on Telemachus, see Gainsford (Chapter 1); Murnaghan (Chapter 3);

² On “Penelopean” and feminine poetics in the *Odyssey*, see Clayton (2004); for fuller discussion of the dream, see Levaniouk (2023a); for a number of different takes on the dream, see Devereux (1957: 382); Rankin (1962: 622); Austin (1975: 229–31); Russo (1982: 8–10), (1992: 102); Murnaghan (1987:130); Felson-Rubin (1987: 71–4); Katz (1991:146–7); Felson (1994: 32); Ahl and Roisman (1996: 235–6); McDonald (1997:16); Amory (1963 :106); Allione (1963: 90–1); Rozokoki (2001).

Barker ([Chapter 2](#)); and Muellner ([Chapter 15](#)). For themes of justice and revenge, see Gainsford ([Chapter 1](#)); Haller ([Chapter 10](#)); Lesser ([Chapter 17](#)); and Loney ([Chapter 22](#)). For Penelope, see also Gainsford ([Chapter 1](#)); Lesser ([Chapter 17](#)); and Slatkin ([Chapter 23](#)). For Odysseus's storytelling and lies, see Kelly ([Chapter 8](#)); Hernández ([Chapter 9](#)); Haller ([Chapter 10](#)); Rankine ([Chapter 14](#)); and Warwick ([Chapter 18](#)).

On Penelope, also see [Winkler \(1990\)](#); [Katz \(1991\)](#); [Felson-Rubin \(1994\)](#); [Foley \(1995\)](#); [Murnaghan \(1986, 1994, 1995, and 2011\)](#); [Alden \(2017: ch. 4\)](#); [Christensen \(2020, ch. 7\)](#). For politics in the *Odyssey*, see [Christensen \(2020\)](#) and [Thalmann \(2004\)](#).

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