

## IMPLIED VENGEANCE IN THE SIMILE OF GRIEVING VULTURES (*ODYSSEY* 16.216–19)

A puzzling simile inverts the reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus in the *Odyssey*: father and son weep like birds grieving for children taken away rather than restored.

κλαῖον δὲ λιγέως, ἀδινώτερον ἢ τ' οἰωνοί,  
φῆναι ἢ αἰγυπιοὶ γαμφώνυχες, οἷσί τε τέκνα  
ἀγρόται ἐξείλοντο πάρος πετεηνὰ γενέσθαι·  
ὥς ἄρα τοί γ' ἐλεεινὸν ὕπ' ὀφρύσι δάκρυον εἴβον. (16.216–19)

They wept loudly, more copiously than birds,  
bearded vultures or vultures with hooked talons, whose young  
country men took before they became able to fly;  
thus pitifully they shed a tear beneath their brows.

The occurrence of a simile *per se* at such a critical moment in the poem should come as no surprise. Odysseus' reunion with Penelope similarly gives rise to one of the poem's most memorable similes (23.233–40).<sup>1</sup> But whereas the simile describing Penelope's embrace of Odysseus enhances that moment of restoration and salvation by conjuring up the sight of land to shipwrecked men, the simile in the reunion of father and son seems to unsettle what should be the gratifying recovery of child to parent. Although this latter simile for Odysseus and Telemachus was admired enough in antiquity to be imitated by Aeschylus (*Agamemnon* 48–59) and Virgil (*Georgics* 4.511–15), its presence in the *Odyssey* has never been satisfactorily explained. Analytic critics dismiss it as the work of a *Bearbeiter*; Stanford calls it 'curiously inept'.<sup>2</sup> Some readers have rightly connected it to a later simile of avenging vultures (22.302–8), but said little more about it.<sup>3</sup> This paper aims to explain the simile of the grieving vultures by reading it in its context among the poem's other bird similes and bird imagery. In so doing I will show a consistent association among birds, gods, and vengeance in the poem. I will then argue that the simile of the grieving vultures specifies Telemachus' role in the last quarter of the *Odyssey*: he will be Odysseus' fellow avenger in the central business of reclaiming their house through divinely sanctioned vengeance.

Recent scholarship on Homeric metaphor aims to interpret similes from the point of view of an ancient audience.<sup>4</sup> Leonard Muellner has brought new life to the

<sup>1</sup> On this simile see H. P. Foley, '“Reverse similes” and sex roles in the *Odyssey*', in J. Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan (edd.), *Women in the Ancient World* (Albany, 1984), 59–78.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, P. von der Mühl, 'Odyssee', *RE Suppl.* 7 (1940), 740–1, noted in A. Heubeck and A. Hoekstra, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey* 2 (Oxford, 1989), 275; W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer* 2 (London, 1948), 271.

<sup>3</sup> A. Podlecki, 'Omens in the *Odyssey*', *G&R* 14 (1967), 12–23, at 14; C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems*, Hypomnemata 49 (Göttingen, 1977), 137; F. Ahl and H. M. Roisman, *The Odyssey Re-Formed* (Ithaca, 1996), 195–6. See also Foley (n. 1), who does the most with the simile by including it in her network of 'reverse similes', which 'can be interpreted as a significant part of a larger pattern of social disruption and restoration in the epic' (60).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Richard P. Martin urges us to 'imagine the similes as they would come to the ear of an audience during the performance of Homeric epic' (R. P. Martin, 'Similes and performance', in E. Bakker and A. Kahane [edd.], *Written Voices, Spoken Signs. Tradition,*

thematic method of interpreting similes established by Hermann Fränkel, which groups similes by content as an expression of a larger theme.<sup>5</sup> Considering a bird simile from the *Iliad* (Il. 3.1–9), Muellner reconstructs the network of implicit associations an ancient singer and audience would understand in even a brief allusion. That is, he considers even the longer similes condensed versions of an elaborate system of conventional poetry, which comprises a ‘tacit conspiracy of thought and expression entered into by poet and society’ (98). A modern reader of epic simile may be able to reconstitute the lost significance of its details by placing it in its traditional frame of reference: ‘[W]e need to begin by establishing the relation, whatever it may be, not between this vehicle and its tenor, but between it and others like it or joined to like tenors. Such parallels would have constituted a primary frame of reference for an epic audience and poet’ (61–2). Practising this methodology, Muellner develops an insightful reading of the simile of cranes and Pygmies at the start of Book 3 of the *Iliad* by comparing it with other similes of cranes and related similes in the poem. While Muellner focuses on the *Iliad* for the material of his study, he includes the *Odyssey* in his conclusions about the production of Homeric metaphor.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I will extend Muellner’s approach to an Iliadic bird simile to analyse an Odyssean one. I aim to show that in the *Odyssey*, birds evoked a coherent social memory of the gods and vengeance. I will do this by considering the several configurations which contain the poem’s fifteen named birds: omens (2.146–55, 15.160–78, 15.525–34, 20.242–6); a dream (19.535–53); divine epiphanies (1.320, 3.372, 5.51, 5.337 and 353, 22.240); and similes (12.418–19, 14.308–9, 15.479, 16.216–19, 19.518–29, 21.411, 22.302–8, 22.468–72, 24.538).<sup>7</sup> Once we have reconstructed the conventional association between birds and divinely ordained vengeance, the meaning of the curious simile of the grieving vultures becomes manifest.

### BIRDS IN OMENS, DREAM, AND DIVINE EPIPHANIES

As stated above, birds appear in omens, a dream, divine epiphanies, and similes. The presence of the divine is apparent in the first three of these categories: gods communicate with men through omens, dreams, and epiphanies.<sup>8</sup> A quick look at the poem’s four bird omens and one dream of birds makes clear that through these media the gods are sending messages about Odysseus’ revenge. In the first omen,

*Performance, and the Epic Text* [Cambridge, MA 1997], 144). Cf. C. R. Beye, *Ancient Epic Poetry: Homer, Apollonius, Virgil* (Ithaca, NY, 1993), 1–41; and S. Mills, ‘Achilles, Patroclus and parental care in some Homeric similes’, *G&R* 47 (2000), 3–18, at 3–7.

<sup>5</sup> L. Muellner, ‘The simile of the cranes and pygmies, a study of Homeric metaphor’, *HSCP* 93 (1990), 59–101. For a review of the previous scholarship on the interpretation of Homeric simile, see Martin (n. 4), 138–44.

<sup>6</sup> Muellner (n. 5) acknowledges the different implications of related similes in the contexts of the different poems (70).

<sup>7</sup> Note that birds are also named in the description of Calypso’s island, the home of a goddess (5.65–7). We will have occasion to return to this passage (see below pp. 4–5). Birds are also generically named in other places, often in the phrase of a dead man becoming booty for birds (3.259, 3.271, 14.133, 24.292). When the suitors threaten the disguised Odysseus that this will be his fate, they name the birds as vultures—*γῶπες*—here a generic designation of birds that feast on carrion (22.30). Finally, the swiftness of the Phoenician ship is compared to the speed of a hawk (13.86–7), which, as we will see (pp. 3–4), contributes to its aggressive nature.

<sup>8</sup> See R. W. Bushnell, ‘Reading “winged words”: Homeric bird signs, similes, and epiphanies’, *Helios* 9 (1982), 1–14, at 10. Cf. E. K. Anhalt, ‘Barrier and transcendence: the door and the eagle in *Iliad* 24.314–21’, *CQ* 45 (1995), 280–95, at 281; A. Schnapp-Gourbeillon, *Lions, héros, masques: les représentations de l’animal chez Homère* (Paris, 1981), 185–90.

Halitherses interprets two eagles tearing at each other as a sign of Odysseus' imminent return and his revenge on the suitors (2.147–76). Next, Helen interprets the omen of an eagle from the mountains carrying a goose as portending Odysseus' impending or accomplished return. In either case, vengeance will follow (15.160–78). The poem's two other bird omens indicate vengeance implicitly. First, Theoclymenus reads the omen of a hawk plucking at a dove as a sign that the house of Odysseus is the most royal in Ithaca and will always be in power (15.525–34). Then Amphinomus persuades the other suitors to abandon their conspiracy to ambush Telemachus when he sees an eagle clutching a dove (20.242–6). Both of these omens show the weaker bird at the mercy of the stronger, an image of Odysseus' power over the suitors. In the poem's one dream with birds, Penelope dreams of an eagle from the mountains killing twenty geese (19.535–53)—reminiscent of the bird omen Helen interprets at Sparta (15.160–78). Her dream includes its own interpretation: Odysseus will return to take vengeance on the suitors (19.535–58). Thus the bird omens as well as the ominous bird dream consistently portend the vengeance Odysseus will wreak upon the suitors.

Significantly, all but one of the bird omens and the bird dream occur toward the end of the poem when Odysseus has arrived home and is about to exact vengeance. Gods embodied as birds, on the other hand, occur mostly toward the beginning (1.320, 3.372, 5.51, 5.337 and 353, 22.240). They include Athena in the likeness of an unspecified bird when she departs from the side of Telemachus on Ithaca; Athena as a vulture (φῆνη 3.372) when she leaves Telemachus at Pylos; and Athena as a swallow (χελιδόνη 22.240) when she flies up to the roof beam of Odysseus' house to witness the slaughter of the suitors; Hermes as a kind of sea gull (λάρῳ 5.51) when he flies over the sea to Ogygia; and finally Ino as a sea mew or pelican (αἰθυίη 5.337, 353) when she appears to the shipwrecked Odysseus.<sup>9</sup> The presence of the divine in these bird epiphanies is self-evident; their association with vengeance, however, is hard to find.<sup>10</sup> One may note Athena's sharp tongue when she scolds Nestor for his long-windedness (3.332–6), as she does Telemachus for his paltry faith a bit earlier (3.230–8). Or one may consider Hermes' report to Calypso of the threat of Zeus' anger lest his injunction go unheeded (5.146–7). But these instances barely constitute vengeance. Instead it seems more likely that the lack of a clear connection between the bird-form gods and vengeance arises from their early appearance in the poem. At this stage they serve the different function of helpers and messengers, agents in the maturation of Telemachus and return of Odysseus. Only the bird epiphany that appears toward the end of the poem—when Athena retires to the rafters to watch Odysseus and Telemachus take the revenge she has helped co-ordinate—implies vengeance.<sup>11</sup> Thus we conclude that gods in bird form make clear the divinity implicit in bird signs while reserving a connection to vengeance only for the appropriate context. When birds are present in the context of revenge, they signal the presence of the divine in that vengeance. It falls to the bird omens, dream, and, as we will now see, similes to utilize

<sup>9</sup> There is no consensus on the identification of these sea birds. See J. M. Boraston, 'The birds of Homer', *JHS* 31 (1911), 216–50, at 220–4; D. W. Thompson, *A Glossary of Greek Birds* (Oxford, 1936), 27–9, 192–3.

<sup>10</sup> Bushnell (n. 8) notes the divine presence implicit in birds in bird omens and bird form epiphanies: 'Like an omen, every epiphany establishes communication between mortal and immortal; the bird is a signifier incorporating divine content' (10).

<sup>11</sup> On Athena as a swallow, see N. Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1975), 247–51; L. A. Losada, 'Odyssey 21:411: the swallow's call', *CP* 80 (1985), 33–4; E. K. Borthwick, 'Odysseus and the return of the swallow', *G&R* 1 (1988), 14–22.

the birds' connection to the divine to signify the gods, particularly in their capacity for revenge.

### BIRDS IN SIMILES

We have seen how the poem's bird omens and dream communicate messages of vengeance. The bird similes, I shall now show, are likewise concerned with revenge. Of the poem's nine bird similes, the last four—which occur in the thick of Odysseus' revenge—refer directly to acts of vengeance or its prelude: Odysseus' bow sings like a swallow before he turns it upon the suitors (21.411); Odysseus and Telemachus swoop on the suitors like vultures (*αἰγυπιοῖ*) on smaller birds (22.302–8); Telemachus kills the unfaithful household women like thrushes (*κίχλαι*) or doves (*πέλειαι*) caught in a snare (22.468–72); and Odysseus attacks the Ithacans like an eagle (*αἰετός* 24.538).<sup>12</sup> All of these images of birds, in the roles of avenger (vultures and eagles) and victim (thrushes and doves), enliven the narrative of Odysseus' revenge. For they adhere to the strict symbolic pattern evident in the simile of Odysseus and Telemachus attacking the suitors like vultures pursuing smaller birds: strong, predatory birds stand in for the avengers, whose victims are the smaller, weaker birds such as thrushes or doves.<sup>13</sup> The omens mentioned above affirm this pattern: they announce the revenge of Odysseus upon the suitors as an eagle or hawk harming a goose (*χῆνα* 15.161) or dove (*πέλειαν* 15.527; 20.243). Thus whether birds appear as aggressor or victim, they signal the structure of revenge.

The other four bird similes in the poem, not counting the one of the grieving vultures in the reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus which we will consider subsequently, feature birds as the victims of revenge. Three of these similes contain sea birds of uncertain identity: 'sea crows'—shearwaters or cormorants (*κορώνησιν* 12.418; 14.308); and a tern (*κήξ* 15.479).<sup>14</sup> In order to gain a better understanding of these sea birds, we look to their one appearance beyond the similes. Sea crows are found on the island of Calypso: 'Round about the cave grew a luxuriant wood, / alder and poplar and fragrant cypress, / wherein birds with long wings nested / owls and falcons and noisy crows (*σκῶπές τ' ἱρηκές τε τανύγλωσσοί τε κορώναι*) / of the sea, who are concerned with affairs of the sea' (5.63–7). Calypso's island, with its meadow and four springs (5.68–73), has been thought of in terms of a paradise.<sup>15</sup> In its Iranian roots, a *paradeisos* comprised a gathering together of all the good species of flora and fauna in an attempt to restore the original unity, which the primordial spirit of evil had dispersed.<sup>16</sup> The triplet of birds on Calypso's island reflects a paradise's aim of inclusiveness. Unlike the sets of essentially synonymous birds that we have seen in the

<sup>12</sup> Anhalt (n. 8) notes that at least one type of bird, eagles, in the *Odyssey* 'have a consistent function, relating to Odysseus' return and vengeance and the justice of his ultimate triumph' (283).

<sup>13</sup> See Muellner (n. 5), 70–1; and below p. 9. Cf. n. 7 above for the predatory hawk's characteristic swiftness (13.86–7).

<sup>14</sup> On the identity of the sea crow, Boraston (n. 9) argues for a cormorant (219–20); Thompson (n. 9) for shearwater (172–3).

<sup>15</sup> See A. Heubeck, S. West, and J. B. Hainsworth, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey* 1 (Oxford, 1988), 262. See also H. Güntert, *Kalypso* (Halle, 1919), who develops the argument of Calypso as an underworld deity. The underworld, as the *Odyssey* shows with its meadows of asphodel (11.539), can also contain features of a paradise. I thank Bruce Lincoln for this latter reference.

<sup>16</sup> B. Lincoln, 'À la recherche du paradis perdu', *History of Religions* 43 (2003), 139–54. See especially 141, n. 5.

similes and omens—for example, thrushes and doves—the trio of owls, falcons, and sea crows on Calypso's island constitutes a study in contrasts.<sup>17</sup> For example, the solar falcon perfectly opposes the nocturnal owl. Taken together, the threesome circumscribes a basic division of matter: the falcon, symbol of the sun, suggests the sky; the insect-eating Scops owls (σκῶπες) that feed close to the earth imply the land; and the sea crows naturally designate the sea.<sup>18</sup> A paradise's purpose of bringing various plants and animals together into one place explains the three disparate birds found on Calypso's island: joining different elements of time and space, these birds represent an earthly unity. The appearance of the sea crow among owls and falcons, unlike other sets of synonymous birds, does not offer a definition through parallel. Instead this triplet emphasizes the sea crow's difference from non-sea birds and its intimacy with the sea (cf. 5.67). Calypso's sea crows suggest that we can learn more about them by considering them alongside other sea birds as a group with a shared nature.<sup>19</sup>

Hermes and Ino, we have seen, make appearances as sea birds. As noted above, Hermes, in his flight to Ogygia, rushes over the waves like a sea gull (λάρῳ 5.51), wetting his wings in the water; and Ino, taking pity on Odysseus, comes to his aid in the form of a sea mew or pelican (αἰθυλίῃ 5.337, 353). These images of playful and peaceful birds suggest the symbolic significance of the sea birds as benign, non-threatening creatures.<sup>20</sup> Such birds, appropriately for our purposes, suffer rather than inflict vengeance. Although Homeric epic does not name their predators, as it does when depicting similar waterfowl (for example, geese, swans, or cranes), it consistently shows the sea birds as victims of revenge.

Sea crows suffer vengeance twice, albeit the second time is a variation of the first. In the first of this pair, the involvement of divine vengeance is explicit and anticipated since the proem (1.8–9). After Odysseus' remaining men eat the forbidden cattle of Helios, the god demands retribution from Zeus. Helios, according to Odysseus, twice cites just vengeance: 'take vengeance on the companions of Odysseus son of Laertes' (τίσαι δὲ ἐτάρους Λαερτιάδew Ὀδυσῆος 12.378); 'If they do not pay me fitting compensation for my cows' (εἰ δέ μοι οὐ τίσουσι βοῶν ἐπιεικέ' ἀμοιβήν 12.382).<sup>21</sup> Zeus yields to Helios' threat (to shine in Hades) by promising to shatter the men's ship with his thunderbolt. Significantly, a bird simile describes Zeus' destruction of the men. Pronouncements of divine vengeance enclose the simile:

Ζεὺς δ' ἄμυδις βρόντησε καὶ ἔμβαλε νηὶ κεραυνόν·  
ἣ δ' ἐλελίχθη πᾶσα Διὸς πληγείσα κεραυνῶ,  
ἐν δέ θεοῖου πλήτο, πέσον δ' ἐκ νηὸς ἐταῖροι.  
οἱ δέ κορώνησιν ἔκειοι περὶ νῆα μέλαιναν  
κύμασιν ἐμφορέοντο, θεὸς δ' ἀποαίνυτο νόστον.  
(12.415–19)

<sup>17</sup> Muellner (n. 5) uses this idea of synonyms: 'In a way, we can even treat the three-subject simile as though it were about cranes only since in this context at least geese, cranes, and swans are true synonyms' (64).

<sup>18</sup> Thompson (n. 9), 114–8, 144–6, 262–4.

<sup>19</sup> Hesychius glosses αἰθῦναι with κορώναι εἰνάλιαι; Arrian mentions it along with λάροι and κορώναι αἱ θαλάσσιοι (see Thompson [n. 9], 28).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. the mystical halcyon symbolic of calm (see Thompson [n. 9], 46–51). For more on Ino, see J. Fontenrose, 'The sorrows of Ino and Procne', *TAPA* 79 (1948), 125–67, at 130. On the complexity of the symbolic significance of a mortal transformed into a bird, see below pp. 7–8.

<sup>21</sup> On *isis* see C. Segal, 'Divine justice in the *Odyssey*: Poseidon, Cyclops, and Helios', *AJP* 113 (1992), 489–518, at 494. See also R. Friedrich, 'The hybris of Odysseus', *JHS* 111 (1991), 16–28, at 23.

At the same time Zeus thundered and threw his thunderbolt upon the ship;  
 she shook completely from the blow of Zeus' thunderbolt,  
 and was filled with a sulphurous smell, and the companions fell from the ship.  
 They like crows around the black ship  
 were carried about on the waves, and the god took away their return.

Odysseus' men—compared in their plight to crows bobbing on the waves—suffer a clearly marked act of divine just vengeance. When Odysseus incorporates this experience into a lying tale told to Eumaeus, he again describes the ship's destruction as an act of Zeus' retribution. Odysseus tells Eumaeus that a greedy Phoenician put him aboard a ship with the intention of selling him for profit. Although the voyage began smoothly, as it did for the men off Trinacria (12.400), Zeus had devised destruction for the men (*Ζεὺς δέ σφισι μῆδετ' ἄλεθρον* 14.300). Odysseus then repeats verbatim his account of the shipwreck as an act of divine justice: he includes Zeus' thunderbolt, the crew bobbing like crows on the waves, and their return taken away by Zeus (14.305–9 = 12.415–19).<sup>22</sup>

Eumaeus also names a sea bird as the victim of vengeance in a simile that in some ways matches Odysseus' story of a greedy Phoenician punished at sea.<sup>23</sup> In his tale, Eumaeus recounts his entry into slavery at the hands of his Phoenician nurse. In exchange for passage back home on a Phoenician merchant ship, Eumaeus' nurse promises the traders whatever wealth she can steal from her owners, as well as their young son. Although she partially succeeds in enacting her plan, an arrow of Artemis kills her on the voyage's seventh day. Eumaeus describes her falling dead with a somewhat strange, perhaps clumsy simile: 'into the hold she fell with a thud like a sea bird' (*ἄντλῳ δ' ἐνδούπησε πεσοῦσ' ὥς εἰναλίη κήξ* 15.479). Unless Eumaeus is imagining a sea bird unwittingly flying into a ship, the simile at the end of the line comes as a surprise. The nurse does not fall into the water gracefully (cf. Hermes as a diving gull, 5.51–3), but into the hold of the ship with a thud. Eumaeus' words, furthermore, evoke the resounding fall of a warrior, although the nurse's death is anything but heroic.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it is almost anti-heroic on account of the nurse's deceit and her subsequent demise from sickness. Eumaeus' image of the bird is hard to understand as other than a token of the presence of divine retribution in the nurse's merited destruction. The bird image implies the hand of the gods at work: Artemis strikes the nurse not arbitrarily but in revenge for her wrongful acts. Eumaeus may have become a slave, but because of the nurse's own folly the god took away her return

<sup>22</sup> Zeus' setting a black cloud above the ship is also repeated (12.405–6 = 14.303–4). Since Odysseus controls the narration of both these events, his attribution of the destruction of his companions to divine justice may well appear as his claim of complete innocence in the deaths of his men. Yet the proem's attention to the crew's folly regarding the forbidden cattle (1.8–9) combined with Odysseus' several reports of divine warnings about them (11.105–15; 12.127–41) underscores, regardless of Odysseus' denial of responsibility, the importance of divine justice. Segal (n. 21) sees Odysseus' warning to his men not to eat the cattle (12.298–302) as an echo of the poet's words in the proem, and so his moving closer to truthful knowledge about divine justice. Overall he reads this episode as a development in the poem's presentation of divine justice: the men are wholly responsible for transgressing a divine command, whereas in the Cyclops episode, Odysseus does not yet fully understand the will of Zeus. Segal ignores Odysseus' control of the narrative (506–10).

<sup>23</sup> On how Odysseus and Eumaeus say more to each other than the surface of their words suggest, see Ahl and Roisman (n. 3), 167–88.

<sup>24</sup> Muellner (n. 5) notes the standard use of this phrase (*δούπησεν δὲ πεσών*) for the 'echoing thud of a falling warrior' (65). The phrase appears two other times in the *Odyssey*, twice of men falling in battle (22.92–4, 24.523–7).

home. Thus Odysseus and Eumaeus tell similar stories of divine retribution enacted upon victims compared to sea birds.

The significance of vengeance in the poem's final bird simile, before we turn to the one of grieving vultures, is obscure. Penelope speaks this simile in her first conversation with the stranger in her house (19.518–29). In order to convey her predicament, she compares herself to the 'nightingale of the greenwood', the daughter of Pandareus who recklessly killed her own son and sits singing in lament for him. In her simile, Penelope exploits the nightingale's association with endless lament.<sup>25</sup> She begins talking to the stranger about her grief: she has, she tells the stranger, 'immeasurable sadness' (πένθος ἀμέτρητον 512); she takes her pleasure in grieving and lamenting (τέρπομι' ὀδυρομένη, γοόουσα 513); cares trouble her in her grief (ὀδυρομένην 517). Thus when Penelope invokes the nightingale lamenting her beloved son (ὀλοφυρομένη 522), one readily hears the simile as a reference to her own weeping.<sup>26</sup> But Penelope completes the image with an unexpected twist. She compares, not her grieving to the song of the nightingale, but her divided emotions: 'thus my spirit is stirred up in two ways here and here' (ὥς καὶ ἐμοὶ δίχα θυμὸς ὀρώρεται ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα 524)—whether she should remain at home caring for her son and house or whether she should follow the best of the suitors (524–9). Penelope associates her troubled spirit—rather than her lament—with the situation and sound of the bird. 'Sitting in the thick foliage of trees / she often trilling pours out her much echoing voice' (δενδρέων ἐν πετάλοισι καθεζομένη πυκνοῖσιν, / ἣ τε θαμὰ τρωπῶσα χέει πολυηχέα φωνήν 520–1). These lines evoke the image of a creature hidden by leaves—just a modulated voice resounding through the foliage. The way the nightingale sings by frequent trilling (θαμὰ τρωπῶσα) articulates the incessant back and forth quality of Penelope's thoughts (ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα).<sup>27</sup> The thickness of the leaves (πετάλοισι καθεζομένη πυκνοῖσιν) gives an image to the thickness of the cares surrounding Penelope's mind (πυκναὶ δέ μοι ἄμφ' ἀδινὸν κῆρ / ὅξεϊαι μελεδῶνες ὀδυρομένην ἐρέθουσιν 516–17). The quavering voice of the nightingale in the thick brush thus stands for Penelope's divided spirit amidst thick cares, alternating between her two choices. While Penelope begins the simile on the note of lament, she ends with the tones of indecision.

Through this bird simile Penelope cleverly communicates two messages to the stranger whose sagacity she has come to admire (19.350–2).<sup>28</sup> The first message is one of her sorrow, which she then overlays with that of her deliberation. As Penelope likens herself to the daughter of Pandareus, she simultaneously draws an important distinction. The daughter of Pandareus became a bird of lament after killing her son recklessly (δι' ἀφραδίας 523). Penelope, on the other hand, ceaselessly deliberating over her care for her son (525), profoundly differs from the reckless daughter of Pandareus.<sup>29</sup> Thus in this subtle but charged conversation with the trusted stranger,

<sup>25</sup> See Thompson (n. 9), 22.

<sup>26</sup> So one reader notes how the simile likens 'Penelope's comparison of her grief for Odysseus' loss to that of a nightingale' (Borthwick [n. 11], 14). The Oxford commentary also assimilates Penelope to the nightingale based on her constant weeping (J. Russo, M. Fernandez-Galiano, and A. Heubeck, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey* 3 [Oxford, 1992], 100).

<sup>27</sup> The verb 'to trill,' τρωπάω, is based on the root 'to turn,' τρέπω. The verb thus describes a sound that turns one way and then another in a variation of cadence.

<sup>28</sup> On theories of Penelope's semi-recognition of her husband at this point, see S. Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1987), 136–9. See also Russo, Fernandez-Galiano, and Heubeck (n. 26), 7–14.

<sup>29</sup> The *Odyssey* depicts many other instances of recklessness (e.g. the suitors 2.281–2, 22.287–8; Odysseus in a lying tale 14.480–2; Polyphemus 9.360–1; Odysseus' crew 10.27; Melanthios 17.233), most of which give rise to vengeance.

Penelope highlights her thoughtfulness and solicitude by contrasting herself with the daughter of Pandareus. In her forethought about her son, Penelope is not—and will not be—like the sorrowing nightingale at all. Her simile thus works in an unusual way, ending at a point opposite from where it seemed to begin. In a sense then, the parallel entails its denial.

Penelope's bird simile involves vengeance in a manner as subtle as the working of the simile. The particulars of the myth that Penelope invokes are uncertain. Fontenrose enumerates several versions of the story of the daughter of Pandareus and selects one as the probable story line for the citation in the *Odyssey*.<sup>30</sup> According to the myth Fontenrose associates with the story, the twin brothers Amphion and Zethus married Niobe and Aëdon (that is, Nightingale) respectively. Aëdon became jealous of Niobe's many children and plotted to kill one but mistakenly killed her own instead. Zethus in fury sought to kill Aëdon, who prayed to become a bird, and Zeus turned her into a nightingale (129–30). Aëdon's metamorphosis into a nightingale in this tale appears as an escape from vengeance. To elucidate further Penelope's associations between the daughter of Pandareus and vengeance, her second mention of the daughters of Pandareus (20.66–82) bears mention. In a litany of ways she might die before becoming the wife of a lesser man than Odysseus, she invokes the fate of the daughters of Pandareus who were swept off by a storm wind before they could be married. Let us add that in the related story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, the nightingale becomes associated with the hawk. In the anecdote of Hesiod, the nightingale is shown at the mercy of the hawk (*Op.* 203–11). From these various strands, one deduces an intimation of guilt and/or vulnerability on the part of Penelope in her evocations of herself as the daughter of Pandareus. The thought of remarriage that informs the contexts for both of her evocations of the daughter(s) of Pandareus seems to raise for Penelope the spectre of vengeance—as though she may be doing something wrong and will suffer for it. Her image of herself as a nightingale thus tacitly signals crime and retribution, the prospect of which Penelope dreads and seeks to avoid and so invokes obliquely in her simile.

The vengeance implicit in Penelope's bird simile becomes explicit in her dream of birds, which she tells to the stranger directly after her simile. She invites the stranger to interpret her dream of the geese killed by a great eagle (19.535–50), although the dream already contains its own articulation of Odysseus' vengeance to come. The vengeance understated in Penelope's simile but overt in her dream foretells her role in the actual revenge: she recognizes the imminence of vengeance about her but sleeps through all the vengeful slaughter in her house (21.357–8, 22.428–9, 23.5). Just as the poem shields her from any direct involvement with the vengeance taken on the suitors in her house, so in her speech she speaks overtly of vengeance only while she sleeps—in her dream, but not in her simile. In the same way that the poem keeps Penelope near but separate from the vengeance that occurs around her in her house, so her use of bird imagery reflects that proximity and distance.

### THE SIMILE OF THE GRIEVING VULTURES

Having established the relationship between bird similes and vengeance, we may now clearly read the simile of the grieving vultures in the reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus. This last simile features vultures or eagles (*φῆναι ἢ αἰγυπιοί* 16.217).

<sup>30</sup> Gantz and the Oxford commentary view Penelope's citation of the daughter of Pandareus as *sui generis* (T. Gantz, *Early Greek Myth* [Baltimore, 1993], 239–40, 488; Russo, Fernandez-Galiano, and Heubeck [n. 26], 100–1). Fontenrose (n. 20), 130 shows more certainty.



These birds, we recall, appear in other similes as aggressive avengers: when Odysseus and his allies attack the suitors, they are compared to vultures swooping on smaller birds (*αἰγυπιοί* 22.302–8); when Odysseus pursues the families of the suitors, he becomes like an eagle of lofty flight (*αἰετός* 24.538).<sup>31</sup> Consistent with these latter images, Muellner articulates the conventional association of eagle, vulture, and falcon: 'As always in Homeric epic, the eagle (*αἰετός*), vulture (*φῆνη*, *αἰγυπιός*), or falcon (*κίρκος*, *ἴρηξ*)—another group of three—like the lion or boar, stands in analogy to an aggressive, individualized hero distinct from his own host of fighting men'.<sup>32</sup> Muellner's description of the aggressive eagle and vulture suits the images of them we have already encountered in the similes (22.302, 24.538). When these same birds appear as they grieve for their stolen offspring in the reunion of Odysseus and Telemachus (*αἰγυπιοὶ γαμφώνυχες* 16.217 = 22.302), that aggressiveness is implicit. Pictured as provoked vultures—strong, aggressive birds—the simile makes clear that Odysseus and Telemachus will soon exact a just retribution.

The simile of the grieving birds becomes transparent when understood in the context of revenge. In its depiction of powerful creatures acknowledging the terrible injury done to them, we can sense the seeds of vengeance taking root.<sup>33</sup> The pre-occupation with vengeance becomes conspicuous right after the simile. As soon as Odysseus informs Telemachus about what ship brought him home, their conversation turns to the topic of revenge and stays there (16.235–320). Their detailed discussion articulates the vengeance that constitutes Odysseus' thoughts and the poem's immediate plot. Once attuned to the idea of vengeance implicit in the bird simile, we hear how through it the poem prepares us for the business at hand in the reunion of father and son.

The business of vengeance in the *Odyssey*, regardless of our present day associations with the idea of revenge, is 'fundamentally positive and promising'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, in the poem's exemplary relationship of Agamemnon and Orestes, such authoritative figures as Athena (1.298–302) and Nestor (3.195–200) uphold vengeance as appropriate for a son to exact on behalf of his father.<sup>35</sup> As Odysseus' vengeance unfolds, the poem dramatizes the martial relationship shared between father and son. By the end

<sup>31</sup> On the overlap between these types of vultures and eagles in antiquity, see Thompson (n. 9), 25–7, 303.

<sup>32</sup> Muellner (n. 5), 70. Cf. M. Detienne, *The Gardens of Adonis*, trans. J. Lloyd (Princeton, 1994), 20–9.

<sup>33</sup> *Od.* 22.302–8 constitutes the second phase of revenge. A simile from the *Iliad* (*Il.* 18.318–22) combines these two moments of the discovery of the lost young and the seeking of vengeance. On this latter simile see Mills (n. 4), 9; Moulton (n. 3), 105–6; S. Lonsdale, *Creatures of Speech. Lion, Herding, and Hunting Similes in the Iliad* (Stuttgart, 1990), 89–90, 93–4. When Aeschylus adapts this simile into the beginning of his *Agamemnon* (48–59), he makes explicit its connection to vengeance: *ὑστερόποιον / πέμπει παραβάσιν Ἐρινύν* (58–9).

In the light of the divine vengeance implicit in the simile of the grieving birds, Odysseus' theoxenic appearance to Telemachus takes on clearer significance: the two devices are part and parcel of the same concern with discovering and punishing the impious suitors. On Odysseus' return as theoxeny, see E. Kearns, 'The return of Odysseus: a Homeric theoxeny,' *CQ* 32 (1982), 2–8.

<sup>34</sup> A. P. Burnett, *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998), 35. Burnett notes some modern interpretations of stories of ancient vengeance that try to read a negative moral into them (xv, n. 7).

<sup>35</sup> Nestor states in these lines (3.195–200) that it is good for a man at his death to leave behind a son since the son can take vengeance (*ἐτίσαστο*) on the father's slayer (cf. *Il.* 14.482–5, where the one good to leave behind is a less specific relative [*γνωτόν*]). On Nestor's moral authority, see M. Gagarin, 'Morality in Homer,' *CP* 82 (1987), 285–303. On Nestor's poetic authority, see R. P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes* (Ithaca, NY, 1989), 22–6, 60–2, 106–9.

of the poem, in the presence of Athena, Laertes celebrates the competitive heroism between Odysseus and Telemachus, evident as they do battle side by side: 'What a day this is for me, dear gods; I am exceedingly glad; / My son and my grandson are competing in excellence' (24.514–15). Thus there is great pride in Odysseus and Telemachus finding union under the aegis of revenge. Congruent with the idea expressed in several Greek myths that 'all order was founded on vengeance', Odysseus and Telemachus together reclaim their house with all that that entails – property, continuity, status, identity. Through vengeance they recreate order and peace: 'In the *Odyssey*, vengeance completes and confirms a return from war to peace'.<sup>36</sup> Although readers continue to consider the quality of their revenge, the poem's sensibility of vengeance *per se* is principled and on the side of order.<sup>37</sup> The simile of the grieving vultures that casts Telemachus as his father's fellow avenger confers great honour upon him. This simile upholds the critical part Telemachus will play in the central plot of vengeance. Accordingly, Telemachus eagerly accedes to his responsibility as a man and warrior (16.309–10).

The birds of the *Odyssey* underscore the rightness of Odysseus' revenge by imbuing it with the presence of the divine. The bird omens and similes that anticipate the revenge contribute to the building of an ominous atmosphere along with other portents: Athena arouses hysterical laughter among the suitors, which to them seems like lament (20.345–9); Theoclymenus sees the walls of the house sprinkled with blood (20.350–7); Zeus thunders as Odysseus prepares to slaughter the suitors (21.413). Through bird omens, bird similes, and other divine signs, the poem develops a sense of divine participation in and approval of the vengeance, which comes to seem, as a result, cosmic and inexorable. The bird similes that describe moments of Odysseus' revenge involve the coming together of god and man in this co-operative action: Odysseus strings his swallow-sounding bow and then Zeus flashes his sign of thunder (21.411–13); Athena holds up the aegis and then Odysseus and Telemachus swoop like vultures on the suitors (22.297–308). The birds of the *Odyssey* thus affirm Odysseus' revenge as divinely ordained. For us modern readers, a proper understanding of the significance of the poem's birds can help guide our response to the revenge.

Yet beside the familial and cosmic rightness of the revenge to come, the simile has one more truth to tell. The way it inverts the facts of the reunion—a parent's young taken away rather than restored—brings to light a lack that confronts father and son. If we return to the poem's exemplar of revenge, Agamemnon and Orestes, we note a significant difference. Unlike Orestes, the son left behind who must step up to avenge his dead father, Telemachus, through shared vengeance, becomes an ally alongside his father. The bird simile in their reunion shows the parity between them: both grieve like parent birds for their lost young. The verticality of their relationship has been erased,

<sup>36</sup> Burnett (n. 34), 40, 33, 42. Murnaghan (n. 28) discusses the hero's lineage and house as the chief sources of his identity (5–7). On the meaning of the *oikos*, see M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (London, 1979), 74–107.

<sup>37</sup> On its cruelty and injustice, see S. Benardete, *The Bow and the Lyre* (Lanham, MD, 1997), 1–16, 123–4, 132–3. On the increasing humiliation in the revenge killings, see M. Davies, 'Odyssey 22.274–7: murder or mutilation', *CQ* 44 (1994), 534–6. Among those who defend its justice are Segal (n. 21); L. A. Post, 'The moral pattern in Homer', *TAPA* 70 (1939), 158–90; S. Said, 'Les crimes des prétendants, la maison d'Ulysse et les festins de l'Odysée', *Cahiers de l'Ecole Normale Supérieure* (1977), 9–49; H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983); R. B. Rutherford, 'The Philosophy of the *Odyssey*', *JHS* 106 (1986), 145–62; Burnett (n. 34), 33–42. On the *Odyssey* overall as an ethical poem concerned with divine justice, see W. Kullman, 'Gods and men in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*', *HSCP* 89 (1985), 1–23.

replaced by a level stance. The word the simile uses for the birds' offspring—τέκνα—refers in the *Odyssey* specifically to human children, most frequently to Telemachus.<sup>38</sup> In this simile the word evokes the child Telemachus only to declare his absence. While the simile sheds hopeful light on the future as it casts father and son as provoked avengers, it also brings to light the past—the impressionable time of youth—that is forever lost. In its detail of the vultures' unfledged children stolen away, the simile acknowledges that at this moment when the child is restored to his parent, the unfledged Telemachus has indeed disappeared. Telemachus has become a full-fledged adult, able to feel alongside his father the grief of an unshared, irrecoverable past.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> In addition to generic uses of the word and to children named just once, τέκνα (and its forms) refers four times to Penelope (18.170, 23.5, 23.26, 23.70), six to Athena (1.64, 4.762, 5.22, 6.324, 7.22, 24.478), seven to Odysseus (11.155, 11.216, 19.363, 19.474, 19.492, 22.420, 22.486), and twelve to Telemachus (2.363, 3.184, 3.254, 4.78, 4.611, 15.125, 15.509, 16.25, 16.61, 16.226, 19.22, 23.105, 20.135). In other similes that concern animals and their young, for example 4.335–40 = 17.126–31; 20.14–16, τέκνα does not appear. The first of these similes—of the suitors being like fawns lain down in the den of a lion—offers an interesting point of comparison with that of the grieving vultures.

<sup>39</sup> So Louise Glück says in a poem called 'Nostos', in *Meadowlands* (Hopewell, NJ, 1996), 43: 'We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory'.

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