

WHAT PENELOPE KNEW: DOUBT AND SCEPTICISM IN THE *ODYSSEY*

I

There was a tradition in antiquity, recorded by Diogenes Laertius, that Homer was the founder of philosophical scepticism, for ‘regarding the same questions, he sets forth different answers at different times and is not at all dogmatic in what he says’ (ἐπεὶ περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν πραγμάτων παρ’ ὄντινούν ἄλλοτ’ ἄλλως ἀποφαίνεται καὶ οὐδὲν ὀρικῶς δογματίζει περὶ τὴν ἀπόφασιν, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 9.71). By way of evidence, Diogenes notes that Philo of Athens used to say of Pyrrho that he had great admiration for Homer (9.67) and was fond of repeating two passages from the *Iliad*: 1) the line from Glaucus’ battlefield dialogue with Diomedes, ‘as leaves on trees, such is the life of man’ (οἷη περ φύλλων γενεή, τοίη δὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν, *Il.* 6.146), and 2) the verses spoken by Achilles in his taunt to the hapless Lycaon when he tells the Trojan, staring death in the face, that his appeal for mercy is empty since ‘Patroclus, much your better, has also died’ (κάτθανε καὶ Πάτροκλος, ὃ περ σέο πολλὸν ἀμείνων, *Il.* 21.107). In addition to such passages, which concern the instability and folly of human endeavours, Diogenes quotes from Aeneas’ speech to Achilles in *Iliad* 20.248–50 as an illustration of a Homeric character speaking of the equal value (ἰσοσθένεια, 9.73) of contradictory sayings, a major topic of ancient scepticism: ‘Twisted is the tongue of mortals, many the stories in it | of all kinds, and great is the range of words scattered hither and yon. | Whatever word you say, one like it will you hear’ (στρεπτή δὲ γλῶσσ’ ἐστὶ βροτῶν, πολέες δ’ ἐνὶ μῦθοι | παντοιοί, ἐπέων δὲ πολλὸς νομὸς ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα. | ὅπποῖόν κ’ εἴπησθα ἔπος, τοῖόν κ’ ἐπακούσαιο, *Il.* 20.248–50). Sextus Empiricus confirms Pyrrho’s love of Homer (*Against the Grammarians*, 272, 281) and observes that Timon of Phlius, a follower of Pyrrho, identified Xenophanes as a dogmatist for asserting that ‘the all is one’ and for deriding the deception found in Homer, which reveals the illusoriness of what reaches us through the senses (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 1.224). One thinks, in this connection, of Agamemnon’s dream in *Iliad* 2, though Sextus does not mention it.

As these examples suggest, the Homeric epics adumbrate sceptical ways of thinking that are thematized in later philosophical discussion, though evidence in the texts of Diogenes and Sextus supportive of the view is sporadic, unelaborated and drawn mostly from the *Iliad*.¹ The topic, however, has not been studied in any depth.

¹ The Greek texts used are as follows: *Homeri Opera*, edd. D.B. Monro and T.W. Allen, vols. 1–4 (Oxford, 1920); *Sexti Empirici Opera*, ed. H. Mutschmann, vols. 1–4 (Leipzig, 1958–62); *Diogenis Laertii Vitae Philosophorum*, ed. H.S. Long (Oxford, 1964). The Latin text of Cicero’s *Academica* is that of O. Plasberg, *Academicorum Reliquiae cum Lucullo* (Leipzig, 1922). *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is abbreviated *PH* and *Lives of the Philosophers* is abbreviated *DL*. All translations are my own.

The texts on which I have depended for the treatment of scepticism in this essay are as follows. Sextus Empiricus in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* offers the fullest ancient treatment of Pyrrhonism, followed by Diogenes Laertius’ discussion in *Lives of the Philosophers*. Cicero in his *Academica* performs the same function for the scepticism of the Academy. For purposes of the present essay, there is no need to engage the thorny historical issues regarding the development of Pyrrhonism and Academic scepticism, though I occasionally note discussions of key points. Whether or not Pyrrho held a basically metaphysical or epistemological thesis about the world

Those who have addressed it have done so obliquely through a consideration of epistemological issues related to Homeric concepts of perceiving and knowing. Here, the critical focus has been upon a refinement of or opposition to the influential thesis of Bruno Snell that the early Greeks had no general concept of knowledge, but only one of knowledge-by-personal-experience, which relies on the close connection between visual and auditory perception and recognition or understanding.² Some have regarded the gap in Homer between the senses and the corresponding powers of intelligence as the source of a 'Lockean scepticism' endemic to the Greek mind, the *locus classicus* of which is the introduction to the catalogue of ships in *Iliad* 2.484–7 where the poet seeks help from the Muse,³ while others find the gap important to the action of the *Odyssey* as a whole, though not to the *Iliad*.⁴ In neither case has the thesis been argued fully enough, and the result is that an opening has been left for recent critics to question the viability of any claim that the Homeric poems show sceptical leanings.⁵ We begin, then, with the proposition that a fuller examination of the epics is warranted, and especially of the *Odyssey*, since it reveals more than superficial evidence of scepticism and brings us deep into the mindset of the world Homer creates. Consideration of this evidence will not only enhance our appreciation of the poem, but also help frame the broader dynamics that give shape to one of the most influential and resilient of ancient Greek philosophical ways of thinking.

One of the first things to observe about the subject is that doubt does not, *tout court*, amount to scepticism, and understanding this provides a useful orientation to our study. Though we are not sure when the term *σκεπτικοί* was first used to describe the disciples of Pyrrho or Academic philosophers, we do know that the tradition began in antiquity and probably with the Sceptics themselves who used the verb *σκέπτεσθαι*, which means 'to examine, to inquire', to describe the activity in which

and what role Timon of Phlius, Arcesilaus and Aenesidemus had in the development of Pyrrhonism are questions recently explored by R. Bett, *Pyrrho: His Antecedents and His Legacy* (Oxford, 2000). See also Bett's edition of Sextus Empiricus' *Against the Ethicists* (Oxford, 2000) as well as the editions of J. Annas and J. Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations* (Cambridge, 1985) and *Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge, 2000). Among the modern studies of ancient scepticism on which I have drawn, in addition to these, are works by J. Barnes, 'The beliefs of a Pyrrhonist', *PCPhS* 28 (1982), 1–29, and *The Toils of Scepticism* (Cambridge, 1990); M. Burnyeat, 'Can the Skeptic live his Skepticism?', in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. M. Burnyeat (Berkeley, 1983), 117–48; D. Sedley, 'The motivation of Greek Skepticism', in *The Skeptical Tradition*, 9–29; M. Frede, 'Stoics and Sceptics on clear and distinct impressions', in *The Skeptical Tradition*, 65–93; A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, 1986); L. Groarke, *Greek Scepticism: Anti-Realist Trends in Ancient Thought* (Montreal, 1990); R.W. Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics: An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* (London, 1996); M. Burnyeat and M. Frede, *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy* (Indianapolis, 1997); and C. Landesman, *Scepticism: The Central Issues* (Oxford, 2002).

² See B. Snell, *Die Ausdrücke für den Begriff des Wissens in der vorplatonischen Philosophie* (Berlin, 1924), 24–6; also K. von Fritz, 'NOOS and NOEIN in the Homeric poems', *CPh* 38 (1943), 79–93. For a critique of the position, see E. Heitsch, 'Das Wissen des Xenophanes', *RhM* 109 (1966): 12–13.

³ J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London, 1979), 137. E. Hussey in 'The beginnings of epistemology: from Homer to Philolaus' in *Epistemology*, ed. S. Everson (Cambridge, 1990), 11–38, argues for a limited scepticism in Homer in cases where the subject matter lies beyond the boundaries of personal or collective verifiability (17).

⁴ J.H. Lesher, 'Perceiving and knowing in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*', *Phronesis* 26.1 (1981), 1–24.

⁵ See H.M. Zellner, 'Scepticism in Homer', *CQ* 44.2 (1994), 308–15, who focusses on the introduction to the catalogue of ships in *Iliad* 2, arguing that 'the epistemic reading is groundless'.

they thought they were engaged.⁶ From the outset, the term had about it the sense of a practice, a strategy, or a way of life that is efficacious in producing happiness (*eudaimonia*). This is particularly clear in the case of Pyrrho who, like Socrates, wrote nothing and is remembered above all for the kind of life he lived, which was marked by extraordinary impassivity and calm (*ataraxia*). It is not, therefore, the experience of doubt per se that scepticism names, but rather a manner of handling doubt that develops into a method, particularly that of suspending judgement in the absence of certain knowledge. As such, it is involved with ethical as well as epistemological matters.

While we certainly do not find anything like a systematically developed view of doubt and its uses in the Homeric poems, we do encounter, notably in the *Odyssey*, patterns of thought and action that anticipate the *epochê* of the later sceptical tradition. These patterns form a complex that has significant explanatory power in the epic, though they do not exist at the level of the consciousness of the agent, nor even at the level of what the bard makes explicit to an audience. They function more like parts of an implicit *mentalité* that is available to scrutiny and interpretation despite being unspoken. As such, they lend themselves to the kind of revisionist study that has evolved recently in Bernard Williams's *Shame and Necessity* and Christopher Gill's *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy*. Building upon the insights of Alastair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* as well as those of Jean-Pierre Vernant and others, these critics differentiate between a modern 'subjective-individualist' model of the self oriented toward internality, self-consciousness and moral autonomy and an ancient 'objective-participant' model oriented toward the formation of moral identity within shared forms of social life, particularly roles governed by rule-based practices that yield publicly agreed-upon standards of excellence.⁷ Within this conceptual schema, Homeric scepticism emerges as a psycho-ethical response to a highly mutable world inhabited by multiple communities with disparate values, one in which the most successful characters are those, like Odysseus and Penelope, who have learned to adopt provisional outlooks and shifting identities. Considered from this angle, scepticism has a strong correlation both with the comic shape of the *Odyssey* plot, whose chief characters emerge from conflict and crisis into resolution and social reintegration, as well as with the rhetorical uses of language so typical of a poem whose agents must conduct themselves with a much higher awareness of the conditional and circumstantial aspects of existence than do their counterparts in the *Iliad*. If these correlations have been largely overlooked in scholarship, that is because Homeric scepticism itself has not been given the attention it deserves.

The case we are making, however, should not be overstated. Gods, despite their disguise in human form, are often recognized by mortals in the epic; Helen understands the young man who has arrived in the court of Sparta is the son of Odysseus before he identifies himself to her; Odysseus has knowledge of a past that the bard Demodocus in the house of King Alcinous does not; prophets like

⁶ Pyrrho's follower, Timon (c. 320–230 B.C.E.), is said to have referred to Arcesilaus the Academic (315–240 B.C.E.) as *σκεπτικός* (Diels, *Poetarum Philosophorum Fragmenta*, fr. 55).

⁷ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, 1984), 121–30; J.-P. Vernant, 'L'individu dans la cité', in *Sur l'individu*, edd. P. Veyne et al. (Paris, 1987), 20–37; S. Goldhill, 'Character and action, representation and reading: Greek tragedy and its critics', in *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature*, ed. C.B.R. Pelling (Oxford, 1990), 100–27; B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 1993), 1–49; and C. Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy* (Oxford, 1996), 1–28.

Theoclymenus on Ithaca and Tiresias in the underworld see ahead to events that will in fact transpire. There is no dearth of examples in the epic of characters acknowledging, acting upon or in some way responding to what they know. Nonetheless, the principals are marked by the often calculating cognitive detachment with which they confront the uncertainty of the world and the proliferation of opposing views in it. The traits associated with this detachment take on a distinct shape and force when we put the *Odyssey* into dialogue with later texts in philosophical scepticism to whose basic materials it is remarkably responsive.

From the outset, the *Odyssey* presents itself as a story that is itself awash with stories – of the Trojan War, of the *nostoi* of the Greek warriors who fought in it, and of its hero's adventures, to name only the most prominent. Many contradict each other, and a fair number are 'lies resembling truths' (*ψεύδεα ... ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοία*, 19.203). They often arise through *skepsis*, a search for knowledge that is implicated in the problem of deceptive appearances and of an environment characterized by what Sextus Empiricus calls *diaphonia* (*PH* 1.165, 178), that is, disagreement about a question that has not been decided, cannot be decided or awaits decision.⁸ Among the many questions that circulate in the epic, the two most pressing are these: is Odysseus dead or alive, and is Penelope faithful or not, the former focalized in the poem from the wife's point of view on Ithaca, a place of passage on whose shores many reports arrive, the latter from the husband's in his long journey homeward, including a trip to Hades in which the hortatory tale he hears of Agamemnon's murder at the hands of Clytemnestra coalesces with the negative example of Helen to shape a general male suspicion of women as treacherous. Both questions are urgent, bearing consequences not only for the agents themselves but also for the social world of which they are a part. Both involve, as well, a state of ignorance, which is depicted as a specifically human predicament and set off against the god's-eye view of the action from Olympus.

By situating the pursuit of knowledge in a milieu that fosters merely opinion and by rendering claims to truth as inherently unstable, Homer distinguishes broadly between two groups of characters: those like Odysseus' crew and the suitors who come to ruin because of their credulous, appetitive or naïve way of approaching people and situations and those like the hero and his spouse who remain alert, self-controlled and questioning through to the very end.⁹ Within this configuration, scepticism appears as an instrument of survival for those who have been alienated from the ones they love and exposed to the ebb and flow of rumour. It arises when humans, at a loss for knowledge and in the throes of doubt, continue both to inquire and to withdraw from conclusions about the conflicting reports they receive of those to whom they are most closely attached. As such, it becomes a way of navigating a world that is deeply contingent and fraught with competing views that do not admit of easy resolution. In the cognitive capacity for forming opposing alternatives from the objects of sense perception and thought, we find an anticipation of the *dunamis antithetikê* (*PH* 1.8–9) that is linked in Pyrronism with the *ou mallon* stipulation, a

⁸ Barnes (1990, n. 1), 1–35, examines the various ways of reading the adjective *ἀνεπίκριτος*, especially in Sextus, and concludes that its sense, depending on the context, may be modal or non-modal, as is the case with adjectives that end in *-τος*, more generally (17–18).

⁹ For two different readings of the *Odyssey* that emphasize these qualities see J. Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1983), 9–53, and D. Olson, *Blood and Iron: Stories and Storytelling in Homer's Odyssey* (Leiden, 1995), 47–63.

phrase expressing the relation, 'no more this than that' (*PH* 1.188–91):¹⁰ that he is dead is no more likely than that he is alive; that she is faithful is no more likely than that she is not. Such antitheses in the epic are not always, or even often, equally balanced in the form of what the Sceptics call *isostheneia* (*PH* 1.8–10; see above, p. 295), nor are they stated so clearly as this or in propositional form. Instead, we find them in dramatic contexts of some complexity, usually shaped around a point of tension or agonistic sparring between parties that is then caught up and recapitulated from the perspective of one of them: someone says the lord of Ithaca will return, someone else says he will not, and then one of the sceptics in the poem – typically a *philos* of Odysseus who has taken one side in the bilateral *diaphonia* – absorbs both possibilities and either withdraws into uncertainty or proceeds as if the question is in fact undecided.

This brings us to a fuller consideration of *epochê*. Through its vivid renderings of a world pervaded by disagreement, the *Odyssey* portrays the circumstances in which the *dunamis antithetikê* leads to the practice of suspending judgement (*PH* 1.7–10; *Academica* 2.59), of meeting experience with the attitude, 'I am not able to say which of the objects presented I should believe or which not believe' (οὐκ ἔχω εἰπεῖν τίνι χρὴ τῶν προκειμένων πιστεῦσαι ἢ τίνι ἀπιστῆσαι, *PH* 1.196; see also 1.203), the result being that the mind is 'held up' (ἐπέχεσθαι) rather than committed.¹¹ Resorting to a criterion of truth, or what Cicero calls a *iudicium*, is problematic in these situations, since all criteria are caught in the *diaphonia* they would seek to silence (*DL* 9.90; *Academica* 2.18). Though in Homer the abstention from judgement produced by *epochê* does not bring *ataraxia* in the face of feared loss (*PH* 1.12), nor the detachment from worldly matters, or *apragmosunê*, for which Diogenes credits Pyrrho (9.64), it does bring a sense of strategy to the challenge of how to live when fundamental matters that secure existence cannot be ascertained and the ground for action constantly shifts. As such it partially overcomes the sense of powerlessness that can afflict humans in the grip of mortality and its multiple limitations.

These advantages mutate, however, with the seriatim recognitions in the second half of the poem, for through them Homer reveals how the sceptical stand-offishness of his two main characters governs the deferral of what each desires and impedes a resolution that requires *anagnôrisis*. Much of this hinges upon the status of signs and how to interpret them – a topic considered at length by Sextus who argues that the grounds we may adduce for believing in signs are, like criteria and standards of proof generally, no less mired in conflicting opinions than signs themselves (2.97–133). Though numerous critical studies have brought us within range of such issues in the *Odyssey*, none have framed the case as we have here, nor have any brought a specific-

¹⁰ *Ou mallon* is used as a philosophical term in the Pyrrhonists, Plutarch and the Aristotelian commentators, though it appears earlier in Heraclitus and Democritus. For a discussion, see P. DeLacy, 'Οὐ μᾶλλον and the antecedents of ancient Scepticism', in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, edd. J. Anton and G. Kustas (Albany, 1971), 593–606.

¹¹ Sedley (n. 1) argues that Arcesilaus, who became the head of the Academy in 273 B.C.E. and was the founder of Academic scepticism, probably first championed *epochê*, developing the concept from the *aporia* of Plato's early Socratic dialogues. For a discussion that distinguishes between Pyrrho's and Arcesilaus' *epochê*, which is the difference between a mental attitude that neither assents nor denies, in the first case, and that withholds assent, in the latter, see P. Couissin, 'The Stoicism of the New Academy', in *The Sceptical Tradition* (n. 1), 35. In the *Odyssey*, we are confronted most often the withholding of assent, though 'suspension' takes numerous other interesting forms that are imaginatively richer than what we find in the mainstream philosophical tradition.

ally sceptical approach to bear upon the notorious crux of what Penelope knows and why she conducts herself as she does when the disguised beggar arrives in the court of Ithaca.

Ultimately, by bringing the hero and his wife together in a final reunion and by allowing the recovery of a depleted *oikos* through the exercise of sceptical attitudes, the poem, as I have suggested, provides us with a scenario for the 'comic' uses of doubt that stands in sharp contrast to Achilles' corrosive interrogation of traditional values in the *Iliad* and his refusal to be reassimilated into a community that in any case can no longer contain him. If the *Iliad* is a poem that models tragic doubt and the destruction inherent in gestures of transcendence, then the *Odyssey* is a dialectically constructed work that adopts its own revisionary stance toward the heroic tradition as a point of departure for the scepticism with which it imbues its central characters. One of its conditions of possibility is a poet who takes seriously that assertions about the nature of human excellence generate opposite assertions, equally defensible or, in poetic terms, equally enchanting and compelling.

II

The sceptical rhythm of the *Odyssey* is established early in Book 1, chiefly through the hearsay that has gathered in response to questions about whether Odysseus is alive or dead as well as through questions about the reliability of sight as a conveyor of knowledge. Its movement takes shape around Telemachus. Breaking out of a daydream about his father's return and the vengeance he would take upon the suitors were he to have a successful homecoming, the son receives into his house a stranger who happens to be Athena disguised as Mentès, ruler of seafaring Taphos, self-proclaimed guest-friend of Odysseus, and teller of the epic's first lying tale. In the process of directing the usual inquires to the *xeinos* about who he is and where he comes from, Telemachus clarifies his own situation, indicating that his long-gone father has perished and lost his day of homecoming (1.166–8). Hearing this, the stranger contradicts him saying, 'Not yet on this earth has godlike Odysseus died, | but he is delayed somewhere on the wide sea, still alive, | on a sea-girt island, and violent men hold him, | savages, who restrain him against his will' (οὐ γάρ πο τέθνηκεν ἐπὶ χθονὶ δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς, | ἀλλ' ἔτι που ζωὸς κατερύκεται εὐρέϊ πόντῳ | νήσῳ ἐν ἀμφιρύτῃ, χαλεποὶ δέ μιν ἄνδρες ἔχουσιν, | ἄγριοι, οἳ που κείνον ἐρυκανόωσ' ἀέκοντα, 1.196–9). This assertion and counter-assertion constitute the first example of *diaphonia* in the poem, and its occurrence within a more general context of deception and disguise provides a significant indicator of the kind of world we enter in the *Odyssey*. Though neither speaker can here be said to suspend judgement on the question of Odysseus, Telemachus withholds assent from the optimistic reading since it derives from a report he cannot corroborate and flies in the face of a twenty-year absence. There is, however, a striking expression of the sceptical turn of mind immediately after this exchange. It comes in the form of Telemachus' observation about the remark of the stranger that he resembles his father:

My mother keeps saying I am his son, but I
don't know for certain, for no one really knows his own begetting.
I wish that I were the blessed son
of a father whom old age overcame among his own possessions.
But now he who is the most wretched of human beings
is the one from whom they say I was born, since you ask me this.

μήτηρ μὲν τ' ἐμέ φησι τοῦ ἔμμεναι, αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γε
οὐκ οἶδ'. οὐ γάρ πώ τις ἔδν γόνον αὐτὸς ἀνέγνω.
ὥς δὴ ἐγὼ γ' ὄφελον μάκαρός νύ τευ ἔμμεναι υἱὸς
ἀνέρος, δν κτεάτεσσιν ἐοῖς ἐπι γῆρας ἔτετμε.
νῦν δ' ὃς ἀποτμότατος γένετο θνητῶν ἀνθρώπων,
τοῦ μ' ἔκ φασι γενέσθαι, ἐπεὶ σύ με τοῦτ' ἑρεεῖνεις. (1.215–20)

The point is not that Penelope is lying. It is rather that Telemachus does not *know* (οὐκ οἶδα, οὐ ... ἀνέγνω, 1.216) his father from having seen him or having had personal experience of him, but has only *heard* of him from what others say – Mentēs, for example (φησί, 215; φασί, 220). Hearsay motivates uncertainty, and uncertainty gives way to a suspension of judgement about biological origin: this man you say I resemble, claiming to have seen him yourself, may or may not be my father, but I cannot be sure one way or another since positive evidence is lacking. There is a twofold doubt here: first, Mentēs who asserts that the man he entertained in his house was Odysseus may have been mistaken about his guest's identity, and second, the tale he is telling may be either skewed or deliberately deceptive. Telemachus' non-committal response suggests both possibilities. Though the link between seeing and knowing is deeply ingrained in the Greek language, which borrows its verb *oída*, 'I know', from the perfect tense of *eidō*, 'I see', and though a 'pneumatic theory of meaning' is implicit in the Homeric conception of words as physically bearing the qualities they designate and thus capable of 'breathing' the wisdom, shame, harshness or admiration they name into listeners, these associations are far more stable in the *Iliad* than in the *Odyssey*.¹² As we have observed already, the younger epic demonstrates a pervasive interest in the gaps between seeing and knowing, on the one hand, and hearing and understanding or being informed, on the other. These gaps emerge early in the epic and are foregrounded in the episode between Telemachus and Athena–Mentēs in Book 1.

We may connect the doubt associated with visual and auditory perception to the later sceptical rejection of what the Stoics call *phantasia katalēptikē* and what Cicero translates as *visum comprehendibile* (*Academica* 1.40–1; see also 2.18), trying to convey in Latin the physicality of Zeno's vocabulary of manual grasping to describe the mental process of infallible cognitive impressions, which leads to Stoic *epistēmē* or *scientia*. For the sceptic, there is no 'kataleptic perception', no impression derived from sensation that is so intrinsically and firmly graspable that it cannot be plucked up and torn apart by reason (*ut convelli ratione non posset*), as Cicero puts it. Elsewhere in *Academica* 2.77, he summarizes the position of Arcesilaus, the third-century B.C.E. leader of the Academy who, in turning the school in a sceptical direction, says that 'no impression deriving from what is true is such that an impression deriving from what is false might not also be of the very same form' (*nullum tale esse visum a vero ut non eiusdem modi etiam a falso possit esse*). This is a crucial point in the *Odyssey*, which is filled with uses of disguise and frequently depicts gods in the figure of humans whom they exactly resemble with the end of directing action in a certain way. It is toward an *epochē peri pantōn* or *akatalēpsia* that the sceptic seeks to guide us.¹³

¹² See Leshner (n. 2), 16.

¹³ *DL* 9.61 notes that a certain Ascanius of Abdera credited Pyrrho with the introduction not only of *epochē*, but also of *akatalēpsia*. Couissin (n. 5), 59, notes that the term *akatalēpsia* is particularly appropriate for the Academics, who were adversaries of the Stoic *phantasia katalēptikē*. For a fuller discussion of the sceptical critique of cataleptic impressions, see Long, 88–96; Frede (1983); and Sedley (n. 1).

We need not press this point in a technical way in our discussion of the *Odyssey*, though it is worth noting Homer's adumbration of a philosophical theme that would come to dominate the dialogue between Stoics and Sceptics on the question of knowledge and specifically on the question of whether there is a criterion for determining the difference between true and false impressions. To come back to the epic, Telemachus will later accept the beggar as his father in the recognition scene of Book 16, but only after expressing incredulity at the sight of a man who has been transformed before him from a pauper in rags into someone who resembles a god. 'A spirit is charming me' (με δαίμων | θέλγει, 16.194–5), he declares as the figure upon whom he gazes claims to be Odysseus, and he is right; Athena has worked her magic by making what he sees into a vision designed to compel assent. Eventually it does, though at first the bard observes that the beholder 'was not persuaded' and thus 'did not believe' (οὐ ... ἐπείθετο, 16.192) what he saw. The scepticism that shapes the poem's first *anagnōrisis* extends the distrust of opinion we find at the opening of the epic and of the sensory impressions by which opinion comes to us. It also anticipates the need for divine intervention in a situation where resistance to the truth of appearances impedes belief. Yet even divine intervention in such cases can be problematic.

This becomes clear in the construction of the scene in Book 1. Not only does it involve disguise, but the god incognito who *does* have knowledge of Odysseus' situation reports it correctly only in part: while the hero is indeed alive and being restrained on a sea-girt island, he is not being held by savages, but by another god in sexual captivity. Thus Athena–Mentes provides information to Telemachus even as she adds to the false tales that circulate about Odysseus. By doing so, she foregrounds the character of the Odyssean world as an enigmatic one in which facts and falsehoods intermingle and divine epiphanies simultaneously reveal and conceal. This condition necessitates wariness and detachment – precisely what we later see in the meeting of father and son in 16.172–99 and even more so in the reunion of husband and wife in Book 23.

The pattern of assertion, counter-assertion, and sceptical *epochē* is repeated once again in the episode in Book 1. Telemachus laments the evil days the gods have brought upon his house, and unmoved by the stranger's assurance that Odysseus is not far from Ithaca, declares again that his father has perished, 'unseen, unheard from' (ἄϊστος, ἄπυστος, 1.242). To this Athena–Mentes responds if not with a prediction, then with a wish that Odysseus will appear at the door of his palace fully armed just as he was when he passed through the door of Mentes' father's house once upon a time (255–66). These are the conditions in which Telemachus takes up the injunction of the *xeinos* to go abroad for news of his father. 'If you hear he is alive and coming home', the disguised god advises him, 'then you may hold out another year under duress; | but if you hear he is dead and gone, | then returning to your dear fatherland, you may raise up a funeral mound for him and bury him with great honours, | as many as seem fitting, and give your mother to a husband' (εἰ μὲν κεν πατὴρ βίοντα καὶ νόστον ἀκούσῃς, | ἢ τ' ἂν τρυχόμενός περ ἔτι τλαίης ἐνιαυτόν· | εἰ δέ κε τεθνηῶτος ἀκούσῃς μηδ' ἔτ' ἔόντος, | ροστήσας δὴ ἔπειτα φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαίαν | σῆμά τέ οἱ χεῖναι καὶ ἐπὶ κτέρεα κτερεῖξαι | πολλὰ μάλ', ὅσσα ἔοικε, καὶ ἀνέρι μητέρα δοῦναι, 1.287–92). The balancing of two conditional clauses ('if you hear he is alive ... if you hear he is dead'), which express antithetical views about the fate of Odysseus and opposing options for action, reflects a strategy for confronting the doubt that is wearing the son down and keeps open a space for hope. Yet hope is itself rendered problematic by the fact that what one hears falls in the

category of *kleos*, of report and rumour, which are not reliable conveyers of knowledge.¹⁴ Still, Telemachus is heartened by the advice, though he remains cautious after Athena–Mentes disappears, as we see in his response to one of the suitors who asks him if the *xeinos* has brought any news: ‘Eurymachus’, he says, ‘my father’s homecoming is lost. | I would not trust a message, should one come from somewhere, | nor would I take heed of a prophecy, one my mother might seek out, having called a prophet into our hall’ (*Εὐρύμαχ’, ἥ τοι νόστος ἀπώλετο πατρὸς ἐμοίο· | οὐτ’ οὖν ἀγγελὴ ἐτι πείθομαι, εἴ ποθεν ἔλθοι, | οὔτε θεοπροπίης ἐμπάζομαι, ἣν τινα μήτηρ | ἐς μέγαρον καλέσασα θεοπρόπον ἐξερέγεται*, 1.413–16). It is a sentiment that echoes time and again in the second half of the epic. Significantly, Telemachus says this even though ‘in his mind he recognized [it was] an immortal god’ who had appeared to him (*φρεσὶ δ’ ἀθανάτην θεὸν ἔγνω*, 420). This comment by the narrator cuts in two directions. Like his father and mother, Telemachus is capable of dissimulation in the interest of effective plotting, a quality both Eurymachus and the suitors lack, as the bungled attempt on Telemachus’ life bears out. But he also remains suspicious of divinity, since the gods, too, dissimulate, especially when they have marked someone for destruction.

III

If the sceptical rhythm in the poem is set in motion in Book 1, it is developed more fully in Book 2 with a character who comes to embody more than any other, including Odysseus, both the strategic possibilities as well as the tragic potential inherent in the *ou mallon* posture that stimulates *epochê*, and that is Penelope. In recent years, she has formed the subject of numerous scholarly works that have developed a fuller understanding of her complex role in the plot and her qualities as a female character. All of these studies have emphasized in one fashion or another her enigmatic presence in the epic. She has been regarded as a figure whose exclusion from Odysseus’ plot of revenge against the suitors brings her to perform actions (notably, setting the contest of the bow) that seem to represent an abandonment of her loyalty to Odysseus, but that in fact, contradictorily, promote his return, thereby advancing a male-centred heroic narrative in which her motives ultimately do not matter;¹⁵ as the site of a radical and unmediated narrative indeterminacy in a text that is poised between two plot structures, one involving her wish to remain by the side of Telemachus where she can keep her *oikos* safe, the other in which she follows the best of the Achaeans in remarriage;¹⁶ as a master ruse by means of which Homer keeps his audience guessing and engaged, a weaver of multiple plots who exercises impressive control of herself and her environment;¹⁷ and as a tragic figure implicated in a web of contingencies from which she neither can nor wishes to extricate herself, but which render her moral

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of the range of *kleos* in the *Odyssey* and its ambiguities, see A. Ford, *Homer and the Poetry of the Past* (Ithaca, 1992), 57–67; C. Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey* (Ithaca, 1994), 85–109; and Olson (n. 3), 1–17 and 43–7. In his argument against scepticism in Homer, Zellner (n. 5) oversimplifies the workings of *kleos* (310–15).

¹⁵ S. Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1987), 118–47, and ‘Reading Penelope’, in *Epic and Epoch: Essays on the Interpretation and History of a Genre*, ed. Steve Oberhelman (Lubbock, Tex., 1994), 76–96.

¹⁶ M. Katz, *Penelope’s Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1991), 3–19, and ‘Homecoming and hospitality: recognition and the construction of identity in the *Odyssey*’, in *Epic and Epoch* (n. 15), 49–75.

¹⁷ N. Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics* (Princeton, 1994), 3–14.

choices deeply problematic.¹⁸ While these approaches have illuminated important aspects of Penelope's situation and emphasized her capacity to act with cunning in the midst of uncertainty, none of them has treated her scepticism as a strategic position for negotiating her way in a world of appearances rife with competing claims to truth. To be sure, her doubt carries with it an affective propensity toward grief and even despair, and there are tragic dimensions to its expression – a point to which we will return. But what keeps her from succumbing to these emotions and allows her to manage them is a suspension of judgement about the question of whether Odysseus will return. We can appreciate this in two related actions that present us with our first images of her.

When Telemachus calls an assembly in Book 2 to address the crisis he faces in the occupation of his *oikos* – the first that has been called since Odysseus' departure – he blames the suitors for squandering his property with no sense of propriety or shame. Antinous responds to him saying that the suitors are not to blame; rather, Telemachus' own mother, 'who is surpassingly clever' (ἡ τοι περὶ κέρδεα οἶδεν, 2.88), has for nearly four years been holding out hope to all and sending promises to each man privately, 'while her mind intends other things' (νόος δέ οἱ ἄλλα μενοινᾷ, 92). The latter phrase and its implications have drawn substantial commentary.¹⁹ Penelope's conduct, which involves both a giving and taking away, a promise and a deferral of promise, frustrates the suitors, but it allows her to continue waiting, on the possibility that Odysseus is still alive and may return home, and also to maintain her options for remarriage to the best of the Achaeans, should her husband be gone forever. Antinous criticizes her for her actions and blames the depredation of Odysseus' property on her miscalculated cunning (2.85–128). Yet by remaining in the house unattached and placing herself on the threshold of being and not being a wife, she also maintains her connection to a *geras*, if only a reduced one, that will be hers either as Odysseus' spouse or the spouse of a suitor – a situation that may indeed have driven a wedge between her and a coming-of-age Telemachus as revealed in his abrupt and barbed treatment of her at several points in the story (1.356–8; 15.516–17; 21.350–2).²⁰ Without being programmatic, we can say that in Penelope's situation, which her son mirrors less intensely, we find a poetically rendered form of the conditions that would lead later philosophers to delineate the existential context and cognitive state from which scepticism emerges. We cannot call Penelope happy for managing to refrain from conclusions about opposed possibilities, but that she is able to endure without being entirely passive, as some have taken her to be, is no mean achievement. From this perspective, the *Odyssey* may be said to present a rich and imaginative treatment of the affective turmoil – what Cicero in the *Academica* refers

¹⁸ H. Foley, 'Penelope as Moral Agent', in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. B. Cohen (New York, 1995), 93–115.

¹⁹ Katz (1991, n. 16), 10 and 89–93, reviews critical positions in terms of which she situates her own claim that the phrase and the action of which it is a part represent an indeterminacy in the narrative 'without permitting us access to any truth of ultimate intention' (93). C. Emlyn-Jones in 'The reunion of Penelope and Odysseus', *G&R* 31.1 (1984), 1–18, discusses the phrase (11) and revives the interpretation of U. Hölscher in *Untersuchungen zur Form der Odyssee. Szenenwechsel und gleichzeitige Handlungen. Hermes Einzelschriften* 6 (Berlin, 1939) that 'the other things' Penelope wishes pertain to the return of her husband. F. Zeitlin, 'Figuring fidelity in Homer's *Odyssey*', in *The Distaff Side* (n. 18), 117–52, reads the scene more generally as 'a classic instantiation of triangular or "mimetic" desire' (141).

²⁰ See P. Marquardt, 'Penelope "*Polutropos*,"' *AJPh* 106.1 (1985), 38–9.

to as 'the fierce and wild beast' (*feram et immanem beluam*, 2.108) within us – that scepticism can at least partially overcome.

This brings us to the shroud of Laertes. The affinities between weaving and guile have long been remarked in the *Odyssey*, and the metaphorical use of *huphainō* in the sense of scheming occurs with some frequency (4.739; 5.356; 13.303, 386; 9.422).²¹ But the case of Penelope's web is the most paradigmatic of these instances, and the fact that the tale is told three times in the poem – first by the suitor Antinous in the assembly scene we have discussed, then by Penelope in the *homilia* with the disguised beggar, and finally by the ghost of the suitor Amphimedon to the ghost of Agamemnon in the *Second Nekyia* (2.94–107; 19.139; 24.128–50) – contributes to its exemplary status.²² The act of Penelope weaving by day and unweaving by night has particular significance for our argument. For in it we have an archetypal instance of sceptical *epochē*, a 'standing still of thought', as Sextus describes it, 'because of which we neither reject nor accept something' (στάσις διανοίας δι' ἣν οὔτε αἰρομέν τι οὔτε τιθέμεν, *PH* 1.10). So it is with Penelope in the cognitive state of *ou mallon*, poised between mutually exclusive views: no more is my husband dead than alive, no more am I a widow than not, no more shall I remarry than remain faithful and single. As Amphimedon summarizes it in the *Second Nekyia*, 'She would neither refuse the hateful marriage, nor would she bring it about' (ἣ δ' οὔτ' ἤρνεϊτο στυγερὸν γάμον οὔτ' ἐτελεύτα, 24.126). The strategic aspect of her scepticism resides in temporizing, though having been caught out in her ploy, she now finds herself facing a circumstance she has spent years avoiding. She must choose – or must she? The poem, in fact, shows that she has other *doloi* to manipulate. But the structure underlying all of them is the one we have sketched here. If it is the case, as Antinous says, that Penelope will win *kleos* on the merits of her *mētis* (2.125–6), that *kleos* is shaped, at least in part, by the uses of scepticism, the capacity to exercise the *dunamis antithetikē* in formulating responses to a world that lacks a reliable criterion for discerning the truth. It is this, at least in part, that lies behind her famous wiliness.

The connection of the sceptical posture with *diaphonia*, which we have analysed in the context of Book 1 and seen as a motivating factor in Penelope's treatment of the suitors, is given vivid formulation in a speech by Eumaeus at a crucial juncture in the narrative (14.121–47) when Odysseus in the persona of the herdsman's disguised guest is preparing for his descent from the hills of Ithaca into the town. As a characterization of the plight of Penelope, in particular, the speech sets the scene within which the wife has situated herself in regard to the question of her husband's return. It is a scene inscribed by both desire, or *πόθος* (144), which Eumaeus confesses he also feels for his master as all Odysseus' *philoī* do, and disciplined detachment, or the resistance to being persuaded and thus made to believe a story that could just as well be as not be true (122–3). Wanderers coming through Ithaca have never been able to convince the wife and son of Odysseus that they know of his whereabouts, Eumaeus says. The reason stories cannot be trusted is that people tell them in their own self-interest, with a view to getting something they want – a cloak, a tunic, a meal. Since the stranger asks precisely for clothing should his prediction of Odysseus' imminent return come to fulfilment (152–7, 395–6), the narrative provides a ready reason for such scepticism. We, the audience, know he is lying, albeit in a manner that closely resembles truth, and

²¹ See C. Moulton, 'Homeric metaphor', *CPh* 74 (1979), 289–90; J. Snyder, 'The web of song: weaving imagery in Homer and the lyric poets', *CJ* (1981), 193–6; and M. Pantelia, 'Spinning and weaving: ideas of domestic order in Homer', *AJPh* (1993), 493–501.

²² See I. de Jong, *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey* (Cambridge, 2001), 50–1.

the swineherd suspects it, while manifesting, none the less, the appropriate conduct of a host to a guest. The world according to Eumaeus is an intensely interest-driven place where people struggle constantly to meet basic needs: we see, 'know', and propagate our stories in accordance with what we lack or desire. Motivated by want, physical wandering is metaphorically akin to both the wandering of truth and to narrative wandering, that is, rhetorically crafted tales that meet the demands of the moment. It is a testament to Penelope's strength of character – and Eumaeus admires her – that she both understands this, and yet questions every *xeinos* who comes into her house for news of Odysseus. The tension inherent in her doing so reflects both a receptivity and resistance to *kleos*, both a longing and a denial of longing. This is another manifestation of the sceptical rhythm, and it has been operative, Eumaeus makes clear, long before it reaches the extreme forms we find in Books 18 and 19 when Penelope withholds assent from the many signs that point in the direction of Odysseus' proximity to or presence on Ithaca.

As *doloi*-weaving sceptics, of course, the husband and wife are alike; they exhibit what the poem calls *homophrosunê*. And both, in this, resemble Athena. The god makes the association herself in Book 13, when she meets Odysseus after the Phaeacians have delivered him, along with his treasure trove, on the shores of Ithaca and confronts his customary suspicion about where he is, who lives there, and whether the inhabitants are civilized. Disguised as a shepherd boy, Athena listens to the canny but disoriented hero tell the first of his Cretan tales, in which he takes on the role of a father who protected the plunder he won in Troy for his own sons against the son of Idomeneus of Crete who tried to steal it. As a speech designed for a specific addressee at a specific moment in time, the *muthos* bears a complex relationship to the facts about Odysseus as we know them. Most immediately, it acts as a warning to a potential thief of how he would treat someone who tried to deprive him of his possessions; at the same time, it shows sympathy toward a young man who is assumed to be a son himself and thus responsive to the attempt by a father to protect one of his own. While identifying the tale as deceptive, the bard also invites us to admire it, in the way Athena does when she drops her disguise, as a piece of performance that marks the speaker as *ποικιλομήτης* (293) and skilled in all types of stratagems (*κερδαλέος ... καὶ ἐπίκλοπος ... ἐν πάντεσσι δόλοισι*, 291–2) – just as Antinous says Penelope is. Verbal deception, of the kind we meet in this episode, always has strong rhetorical motives.²³ Odysseus' lies are the product of a sceptical mind engaged in a world where appearances should not be accepted at face value and nobody trusted too soon. Adopting hypothetical personae responds to the problem of epistemological doubt and the need to protect oneself in an environment of threat and hostility. The encounter in Book 13 between mortal and immortal, then, helps us appreciate the bond, later dramatized more fully in the encounter of the stranger with Eumaeus, between rhetoric and scepticism.

²³ The scholarly literature on the complex relationship between lies and truth, rhetoric and enchantment, in the *Odyssey* is considerable. See, for example, T. Cole, 'Archaic truth', *QUCC* 13 (1983), 7–28; G. Walsh, *The Varieties of Enchantment: Early Greek Views of the Nature and Function of Poetry* (Chapel Hill, 1984), 3–21; L. Pratt, *Lying and Poetry from Homer to Pindar: Falsehood and Deception in Archaic Greek Poetics* (Ann Arbor, 1993), 11–94; Segal (n. 14), 113–41; R. Scodel, 'Bardic performance and oral tradition in Homer', *AJPh* 119.2 (1998), 171–94; and M. Zerba, 'Odyssean charisma and the uses of persuasion', *AJPh* 130 (2009), 313–39.

It is a bond strengthened by the prominence in the dialogue of words for perceiving and knowing and the emphasis upon the difficulties of recognition (*γινῶναι*, 312), even for one who is very intelligent (*μάλ' ἐπισταμένῳ*, 313). Though Odysseus acknowledges that Athena was kind to him during the war ('I know this well by having seen it', *τούτο δ' ἐγὼν εὖ οἶδα*, 314), he observes that he never saw her (*οὐ σέ γ' ἔπειτα ἴδον*) after they set sail for home nor did he discern (*οὐδ' ἐνόησα*, 318) her presence again until his arrival among the Phaeacians.²⁴ It seems to Odysseus that Athena abandoned him, since she never appeared in the course of his wanderings, and under the circumstances, he is no more inclined to believe than not (*οὐ ... δῖω ... δῖω*, 324, 326) that he is now home and that she will assist him. He remains aloof, his senses and his intellect on the alert, for which she admits he endears himself to her, because the two of them alike 'know clever ways of plotting' (*εἰδότες ἄμφω | κέρδεα*, 296–7). Anyone else who arrived on his own shores after such a lengthy absence, she claims, would credulously rush back to home and family, but he has always 'the same design in [his] breast' (*αἰεὶ τοι τοιοῦτον ἐνὶ στήθεσσι νόημα*, 330). The formulation identifies his calculating doubt as an intrinsic feature of his character, which imparts to him the qualities of being 'courteous, shrewd, and prudent' (*ἐπητής ... καὶ ἀγχίνους καὶ ἐχέφρων*, 332), words that convey the practical aspects of a sceptical stance in the world. What makes this scepticism characteristically Odyssean is that it incorporates skill at deception, and rather than fostering *apragmosunê*, or disinterested contemplation, leads to *polupragmosunê*, a robust engagement with existence in the form of agonistic competition, motivated by the will to master circumstance and not be mastered by it. The concept of *aretê* in the *Odyssey* is strongly coloured by this complex of traits. Unlike the 'manliness' of Roman *virtus*, however, or Machiavellian *virtù*, both of which it partially informs, it maintains an affinity with feminine guile, which is elevated in the poem by the admiring narrative that gives it shape.

Penelope's status as a character who emblemizes the sceptical turn is borne out by an aspect of her situation closely related to the epistemological issues we have been exploring. Her active suspension of judgement, which demonstrates a certain power over her environment, has a passive side, for she is often depicted as a character from whom knowledge is withheld. The first instance of this withholding occurs when Telemachus – advised, as we have seen, by Athena–Mentes to visit the courts of Nestor and Menelaus for news of his father – prepares to leave with the help of Eurycleia whom he instructs to be discreet: 'Vow not to tell these things to my mother', he declares (*ὄμοσον μὴ μητρὶ φίλῃ τάδε μυθήσασθαι*, 2.373), and the nurse so vows. When in Book 4 Penelope learns of Telemachus' absence even as the suitors are plotting his murder, she breaks down in tears over what she fears will be a new loss and rebukes Eurycleia for not having informed her of the departure (4.742–847). Later, after she falls asleep and, with Athena's intervention, dreams, it is her sister Iphthime who appears to assure her that her son is under the care of a divine guardian. But can the dream be trusted? When Penelope hears her sister's words and asks her to confirm whether Odysseus still walks the earth, the 'dim phantom' (*εἴδωλον ἀμαυρόν*, 835) says only, 'I will not speak positively about him, whether he is alive or dead. It is bad to talk empty words' (*οὐ μὲν τοι κείνόν γε διηνεκέως ἀγορεύσω, | ζῶει ὃ γ' ἢ τέθνηκε· κακὸν δ' ἀνεμώλια βάλλειν*, 836–7). Though the

²⁴ For a discussion of *noêsis*, *noos*, and *noeô* as terms related to the faculty of recognition and interpretation, especially in connection with *sêmata*, see von Fritz (n. 2) and G. Nagy, 'Sêma and Noêsis: some illustrations', *Arethusa* 16.1 (1983), 35–55.

bard comments that Penelope awakens in better heart, her sceptical attitude toward night visions and omens is developed into an important element of her character and is especially evident in the famous lines she utters in Book 19 about the gates of horn and ivory (560–9). What passes through them bears no distinguishing feature that would allow us to tell the true dream from the false – an excellent example of the absence of a criterion, which Sextus describes as a standard of action ‘conforming to which in our conduct of life we do some things and not others’ (ὁ προσέχοντες κατὰ τὸν βίον τὰ μὲν πρᾶσσομεν τὰ δ’ οὐ, 1.21).

IV

If the withholding of knowledge from Penelope enters the narrative early, it assumes dominance by virtue of Odysseus’ prolonged abstention from revealing his plan to her, though everyone else dear to him in his house, with the exception of Laertes who lives in the country, is brought in on the plotting. This withholding of knowledge is integrally associated with the avoidance of recognition: Odysseus chooses not to reveal himself to Penelope until Book 23. Before that, he remains opaque to her even as they draw nearer to each other in an action that culminates with the *homilia* of Book 19.²⁵ There are reasons for this on both sides. From the perspective of the critical approach we have been developing, the complex movement of estrangement and approach they enact may be understood as a manifestation of the sceptical impulse that conditions nearly every instance of information-gathering in the poem. We turn first to Odysseus, deferring the more complex case of Penelope until later, and return to the episode in Book 13 that we have been examining – the meeting of hero and god upon the shores of Ithaca.

While warning Odysseus of danger in his house – something he has already learned from Tiresias in the underworld (11.115–18) – Athena also assures him that his wife has been faithful. She sits where he left her, grieving, the god says, and spends her days and nights weeping for her lost lord (335–8). A few lines later, Athena repeats the words that Antinous used in Book 2 at the assembly, on which we have already commented: while Penelope mourns, she also gives hope to the suitors and sends promises to each, ‘while her mind intends other things’ (13.381 = 2.92). Odysseus’ immediate and startled response is that if the god had not advised him, he would have

²⁵ Penelope’s state of mind as the plot unfolds its series of recognitions in the last books of the *Odyssey* is a notorious crux. Emlyn-Jones (n. 19) and Katz (1991, n. 16), 94–113, provide a useful critique of the analyst position as represented, for example, in the work of G.S. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, 1962), who regards the bride contest as a ‘serious illogicality’ (247), and D. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford, 1955), who believes it marks a ‘fault in construction [that is] very great and very obvious’ (126, 124); like other analysts, Kirk and Page attribute what they see as narrative inconsistencies to the use of different sources in the composition of the Homeric *Odyssey*. Both Emlyn-Jones and Katz also critique the ‘intuitive-Penelope’ positions, including those of P. Harsh, ‘Penelope and Odysseus in *Odyssey* XIX’, *AJPh* 71 (1950), 1–21; A. Amory, ‘The reunion of Odysseus and Penelope’, in *Essays on the Odyssey*, ed. C. Taylor (Bloomington, 1963), 100–21; and J. Russo, ‘Interview and aftermath: dream, fantasy, and intuition in *Odyssey* 19 and 20’, *AJPh* 103 (1982), 4–18. Murnaghan (1994; n. 15) and L. Doherty, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor, 1995), 32–54, cover some of the same ground by evaluating more recent variants of the ‘intuitive-Penelope’ model in the work of N. Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon: Poetic Problems in Homer’s Odyssey* (Berkeley, 1975) and J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York, 1990), 129–61. They also offer thoughtful assessments of the feminist readings of Katz (n. 16) and Felson-Rubin (n. 17), both of whom argue for different kinds of narrative indeterminacy in the text.

happened upon a fate like that of Agamemnon who was murdered in his own house upon his return (383–5). Here is the problem: though Penelope is loyal, she has nonetheless drawn the suitors to the house, and this fact alone aligns her with the treachery of Clytemnestra and Helen.²⁶ So powerful is the suspicion of female deception that has arisen in stories of the cause precipitating the Trojan War, as well as those about the homecoming of the war's general, that direct reports about Penelope's constancy become instantly suspect, mired in the context of cultural master narratives with strong gender biases. Numerous critics of the *Odyssey* have explored this matter. The approach we have adopted here leads us to see such competing views as tending toward an attenuated form of the *ou mallon* position: it is as likely as not that she is faithful, for though the shade of my own mother has told me my wife has remained loyal to me (11.178), there is reason to believe with Agamemnon that women cannot be trusted (11.440–3). Shaped by a *dunamis antithetikê*, the *diaphonia* regarding Penelope's *kleos* and the nature of women gets channelled into the sceptical outlook that defines Odysseus' *modus operandi*. From here to the end of the poem, he will express satisfaction with Penelope's devotion while treating her as a potential threat. But because he possesses more divinely conferred information about his wife than she does of him and can observe her unobserved, his scepticism is not as deeply entrenched as hers is. This is another reason why, as we have been arguing, Penelope constitutes the exemplary case for scepticism. As the narrative unfolds, we watch her doubt develop into an experience that is rooted in the social specificity of women in the Homeric world – mortal women, since gods or godlike women elude the characterization – as those from whom knowledge is withheld. To the extent that men as mortals share this ignorance, their status is symbolically feminized, something we can appreciate from Odysseus' situation on Ogygia where he lives under the constraints of the divine Calypso. In the *Odyssey*, then, scepticism takes on a female cast, and this can help us re-examine events in Books 18 and 19, where the critical problem is what Penelope knows.

That conduct, however, requires more contextualization. Though Odysseus withholds knowledge and avoids being recognized, we can reframe the point and say that Penelope also fails to recognize him. This emerges clearly if we consider the story Helen tells of Odysseus in Book 4, when she and Menelaus receive Telemachus, which contrasts strikingly with the situation of Penelope in the Ithacan books. The details of her tale are familiar. On a reconnaissance mission that took him into the heart of Troy during the war, Odysseus gave himself a beating, threw rags around his shoulders, and slipped into the streets of the city 'looking like a household slave' (*οἰκῆϊ ἐοικώς*, 245) – an act that anticipates his Ithacan disguise. That is, he avoids being recognized, and succeeds in all but one case. 'I alone recognized him just as he was' (*ἐγὼ δέ μιν οἷῃ ἀνέγνων τοῖον ἔοντα*, 250), Helen says. Seeing is, for her, knowing, an equation confirmed by her immediate recognition of Telemachus when she meets him at the beginning of the scene in which she tells this very story. Whether we choose to characterize her as intuitive or quick-witted, her keenness has consequences for the way in which the poem invites us to understand *anagnôrisis*. Helen's capacity to see transparently through disguise sets her apart as having quasi-divine powers, just as her beauty sets her apart as more than human (4.122).²⁷ Furthermore, her active recognition of Odysseus, which includes acknowledgement of his cunning, is complemented

²⁶ See Murnaghan (1987, n. 15), 118–28.

²⁷ See M. Suzuki, *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic* (Ithaca, 1989), 65–7.

by her willingness to be recognized by him, not physically, but psychologically, as one who repents the *atê* Aphrodite sent her on the day she left her homeland and her child, bridal bed and husband (259–64).²⁸ We are given a scenario in which recognizing and being recognized are integrally related, and in ways that exceed the simple identification of someone on the basis of bodily appearance. The failure of this reciprocal gesture is in part what defers the fulfilment of recognition between husband and wife in the latter part of the *Odyssey*.

There is another aspect of this scene that is important for our thesis. Helen's self-exculpation, based upon her claim that she took Odysseus in, bathed him and kept secret the plans he related to her about taking Troy – a series of actions that anticipates Eurycleia's recognition – is countered by Menelaus (4.265–89). Emphasizing his wife's treachery, he tells a story of her conduct in the plot of the wooden horse, in which she circles the contraption and mimics the voices of the wives of the Achaeans inside it, trying to draw them out. The paired tales have the implicit character of assertion and counter-assertion, and thus the situation they reflect is marked by *diaphonia*. But here we find a key difference between the courts of Sparta and Ithaca. The husband and wife who tell their stories in Sparta are ensconced in an *oikos* that has been restored in the aftermath of a violation. *Diaphonia* is not, for them, a condition with life or death consequences; they are not faced with survival in a world dense with contradictory rumours and reports, and they have no real future on which to stake their honour or their *kleos*. They appear to be defined in terms of the past, she a betraying woman, he a betrayed man, whose memories give them little pleasure and whose stories constitute a never-ending if oblique debate between them with little point except to emphasize the irremediable character of the harm they suffered or caused in the war.²⁹ No wonder they need drugs; drugs function as a kind of cognitive barrier that protects them from the highly consequential uncertainties that pervade the lives of Odysseus and Penelope and motivate the sceptical stance. Menelaus has already wrestled down Proteus, a divinity whose character is rich with connotations of the mutability of experience. On the edges of the world of the *Odyssey*, the court of Menelaus participates only marginally in the existential challenges that give rise to scepticism.

As one who knows by seeing or seeing through and who thereby defines the upper limit of being human in her godlike powers of recognition, Helen is both canny and impulsive. In this regard and others, as well, she is a foil to Penelope, the one who does not know by seeing or seeing through and who endures suffering under the most severe constraints upon knowledge and action. Hers is not the case of an agent whose *agnoia* in the Ithacan books is unmotivated or incompatible with the portrayal of her as intelligent; nor of a wife who consciously recognizes her husband and actively schemes on his behalf; nor of a highly intuitive woman who subconsciously recognizes him, but remains passive none the less; nor of a character in a palimpsestic text that bears signs of the imperfect adaptation of an earlier version of the tale in which she did indeed recognize her husband before the contest of the bow. Rather, Penelope's scepticism, which grows in the course of the many years she has heard conflicting tales, becomes most acute at the very point in the story when signs and omens portend most strongly that Odysseus has returned. This is the point at which her vulnerability to belief could be devastating, since if she acquiesces to the

²⁸ See de Jong (n. 22), 97.

²⁹ See W. Thalmann, *Conventions of Form and Thought in Early Greek Epic Poetry* (Baltimore, 1984), 165–7; and J. Clay, 'Sex, drugs, and ... poetry', in *Epic and Epoch* (n. 15), 42–4.

indicators around her with a comparably heightened sense of confidence in their capacity to offer knowledge, the drop from the precipice of hope, should she be misled, would be extreme. It is precisely this kind of emotional disturbance – this ‘fierce and wild beast’ that torments us within – from which philosophical scepticism would later promise to rescue us, if only we could learn how to suspend judgement. Thus the power of Penelope’s resistance is coincident with the power of the temptation to succumb to belief, and the form in which this resistance manifests itself is, above all, the refusal of recognition. If Odysseus does not disclose himself to his wife, neither does she penetrate through that non-disclosure as Helen does – Helen whose divine capacity to know places her outside the reaches of a life lived in sceptical self-discipline.

We should not flatten out the contours of this remarkable feat of abstinence, however, by treating it merely as a refusal, since it embraces more than nay-saying. What Penelope manages to do, or what the poet contrives that she does, is to enact a dramatic version of *epochê*. This is apparent in two episodes that have elicited extensive commentary about Penelope’s motivations in the epic – her erotically charged self-display before the suitors in Book 18 and her setting of the contest of the bow in Book 19. Significantly, both are prepared for in Book 17 by another instance of knowledge withheld: Telemachus defers reporting to his mother the information he has gleaned from Nestor and Menelaus, including the story of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, at the same time that he refrains from telling her of the recognition he has had of his father with whom he is now conspiring. The predicament that has all along fostered a sceptical outlook in the epic is here emphasized: Penelope is in the dark. But with the consolidation of male knowledge in the persons of father and son, we find that the comic movement of the plot toward resolution and enlightenment excludes the most important female figure in the poem. In the flow of narrative, these reinforced limits upon Penelope’s cognition, of which she is not specifically aware, but which the story evokes as part of the environment in which she exists, arise at the same time that Theoclymenus delivers a prophecy of Odysseus’ impending vengeance upon the suitors (152–61), Eumaeus tells of the arrival of a stranger who has said Odysseus is near (513–27) and Telemachus portentously sneezes in response to his mother’s declared wish for her husband’s return and his punishment of the suitors (541–2). All of this both accelerates and deepens the vacillation between hope and doubt, between ‘he is coming’ and ‘he will never come.’

It is Athena who in Book 18 places within Penelope the desire to appear before the suitors in her finery so that ‘she would be more esteemed than before in the eyes of her husband and son’ (τιμήεσσα γένοιτο | μάλλον πρὸς πόσιός τε καὶ νείεός ἢ πάρος ἦεν, 158–62). The purpose is stated from the god’s perspective, but the poet allows it to merge with Penelope’s own, as if she were imagining an audience for her performance in the act of conceiving it.³⁰ ‘I feel a longing such as I have never had before’ (θυμός μοι ἐέλδεται οὐ τι πάρος γε), she says laughingly to her nurse, Eurynome, in an instance of double motivation, ‘to show myself before the suitors, hateful though they are’ (μνηστήρεσσι φανῆναι, ἀπεχθόμενοισί περ ἔμπηγς, 164–5). This desire, which seems to her incongruous, as her laugh suggests, converges with a moment of reckoning: to acknowledge publicly the instructions of her husband before he departed that if he did not return before their son grew a beard, then she should marry whom she wished and leave the house (269–70). That time is at hand,

³⁰ Compare Emlyn-Jones (n. 19), 9–12.

and it produces a spike in the sceptical rhythm. Having repeated to the suitors the spousal injunction in accordance with which she has conducted herself, she chastises them for their failure to observe social custom by not bringing gifts to the woman they are courting and depleting her household instead. In speaking these words before the suitors, Penelope, the bard tells us, made the heart within Odysseus glad 'because she was drawing gifts from them and working a spell upon each heart | with her enticing words, while her mind intended other things' (οὐνεκα τῶν μὲν δῶρα παρέλκετο, θέλγε δὲ θυμὸν | μειλιχίους ἐπέεσσι, νόος δέ οἱ ἄλλα μενοίνα, 282–3). For the third time in the epic we encounter this adversative formula of 'intending otherwise'. But here it is spoken by a character who ostensibly does not know his wife's intentions and who has in fact gone to some lengths in protecting himself against them. Critics have seen various kinds of incoherence in Penelope's gesture of self-display and Odysseus' response. But we may consider her act a dramatization of suspended judgement in which she both is and is not luring the suitors, both is and is not affirming remarriage, again on the understanding that her husband may or may not return. While Odysseus maintains a sceptical stance, as well, by admiring his wife while not letting down his disguise, the uncertainty that guides him is depicted as less urgent than hers.

We see this as he moves toward the *homilia* of Book 19 in which he will 'test' (ἐρθίζω, 45) Penelope, an episode preceded by his tangle with one of the corrupt maids, Melantho, who reminds us of the treachery of women and motivates the need for the returned master to proceed cautiously. Again, *diaphonia* is struck by the juxtaposition of a generalized attitude about the untrustworthy character of females with praise for the *kleos* of Penelope whose reputation has reached the wide heaven (19.108). Yet the progress of the scene as a whole in so far as it involves him is toward the affirmation of his wife and their ultimate reunion. It is Penelope who continues to withhold assent from the belief that Odysseus is alive at the same time that she models her conduct as if he may be. She does so in an intimate exchange at the hearth, one-on-one with her guest, which develops as a heightened dramatization of the approach-and-estrangement posture embedded in rituals of *xenia*, here adapted to the complex relationship of the agents.³¹ The encounter has about it the quality of a culminating event, since it recapitulates the most important elements of scepticism in the poem as we have identified them.

First, we find the exchange of affirmation and denial as the disguised beggar, telling another of his lying tales that resembles truth, announces that Odysseus is alive in Thesprotia and will return soon, while Penelope responds with an upswing of alacrity suppressed by tears of loss and doubt about the announcement (268–307 and 309–16). Again, as before, the structure of the tale, which elaborately conflates facts with falsehoods, hearsay and alleged eyewitness report, presents the conditions of the sceptical outlook and justifies both her withdrawal of assent and his continuing dissimulation. Second, we have the narrative of a dream, Penelope's about the slaughtered geese, which the disguised beggar interprets as an omen of the impending return and vengeance of her husband, but which she refuses to accept as such, citing here the problem posed by the passage of dreams through the gates of ivory and horn of which we have already made mention. In so doing, she lays emphasis upon the deceptiveness of appearances and implies that omens, like other signs, are susceptible to opposing interpretations, a point that receives discussion, as we have noted, in Sextus' treatment of *sêmeia* (2.97–133). Finally, we are given yet another instance,

³¹ See Katz (1991, n. 16), 134–7.

perhaps the most vivid of all, of knowledge withheld, for Penelope, at the moment Eurycleia recognizes her master while bathing his feet, is put into a trance by Athena (478–9). The unconscious passivity into which she lapses is figured as an imposed state, and yet the scene is more complicated than this. We have noted in our examination of the differences between Helen and Penelope the force of scepticism as a cognitive state that stalls or impedes recognition. Here the contrast is extended. Even before laying eyes upon Odysseus' scar, Eurycleia remarks to the guest that 'many long-suffering strangers have come here, | but I declare that I have not seen one who | in body, voice and even feet is so like Odysseus as you' (πολλοὶ δὲ ξεῖνοι ταλαπείριοι ἐνθάδ' ἴκοντο, | ἀλλ' οὐ πώ τινά φημι ἑοικότα ὧδε ἰδέσθαι | ὥς σὺ δέμας φωνήν τε πόδας τ' Ὀδυσῆϊ ἑοικας, 379–81). Though this is not yet a positive identification, it comes very close to being one, and in this way casts into relief the part of Penelope's non-recognition that responds to the active suspension of belief. There is no ground in the poem for reading a subconscious motive in her, nor for crediting her with tacit knowledge about which neither she nor the poet says anything. To regard her as in some way knowing without admitting she knows that the beggar is her husband runs contrary to the scepticism that continues to draw her to Odysseus while also keeping them apart.

When she announces to the stranger, then, her intention to set the contest of the bow, it is in the context of another shudder in the sceptical register motivated by increasing indications that Odysseus will return. The act itself, as a trial, bears a doubleness: it allows Penelope to remain open to remarriage while anticipating that the challenge to the suitors will be successfully joined by none, since only Odysseus could string the bow and send it singing through twelve axe heads – maybe. Thus, like the weaving of Laertes' shroud and the self-display before the suitors, the contest gives evidence of a continuing attempt to forestall a conclusion to the question that defines Penelope's existence. As such, it is another act of temporizing that remains suspended between opposing possibilities, which is why her husband can take one horn of it and endorse it as he does, advising that there be no postponement to the trial. When that trial comes in Book 21, however, its outcome is interrupted by Telemachus who, before the beggar is given the chance to shoot the bow no one else has been able to handle, dismisses his mother to her room in the last and most dramatic instance in the epic of knowledge withheld (344–53). Banned from the space of action to tend her spindle and loom and then touched by Athena with the spell of sleep, Penelope is the only person in the household who does not experience the slaughter of the suitors.

When Eurycleia awakens her after the bloodbath with the news that Odysseus has returned, we are presented with an elaborately choreographed set of movements that gathers up the entire sceptical rhythm of the poem, including its heightening in the *homilia*, and replays it before allowing it to resolve into the final *anagnôrisis*, which brings reunion.³² In the first of these movements (23.1–84), the disclosure by the nurse that Odysseus has returned is met by the unbelieving response of Penelope that the old woman must have lost her mind. Eurycleia provides a first piece of evidence – Telemachus knew the beggar was his father all along – but it is met with more disbelief. So a second piece of evidence is adduced: the suitors are, to the last one, dead. Yet Penelope continues to doubt, insisting that a god must have performed the feat, nor does she accept Eurycleia's third piece of evidence that she herself

³² See the helpful and clearly schematized treatment of de Jong (n. 22), 546–8, on whose outline the discussion draws.

recognized him by the scar on his foot, to which the nurse responds with exasperation saying, ‘your heart is always suspicious’ (θυμὸς δέ τοι αἰὲν ἄπιστος, 23.72). With Penelope’s descent into the megaron, the second movement commences as husband and wife sit opposite each other in a posture of non-disclosure and non-recognition, wary, uncertain and silent, while Telemachus looks on (85–116).

Before passing, however, to the next phase of this most complex of all recognitions in the *Odyssey*, it is worth scrutinizing what it means that Homer makes the nurse call Penelope’s heart ἄπιστος, which we have translated as ‘suspicious’, but which means something closer to ‘unbelieving, untrusting because unpersuaded, not won over.’ What Diogenes says of *to peithon* (= *to pithanon*) is pertinent here to discerning Penelope’s state of mind: ‘We must not assume that what is persuasive is true. For the same thing does not persuade everyone, nor the same people all the time. Persuasiveness depends on external factors, on the reputation of the speaker, on thinking ability, on wiliness, on what is familiar, or on charm’ (τό τε πείθον οὐχ ὑποληπτέον ἀληθὲς ὑπάρχειν· οὐ γὰρ πάντας τὸ αὐτὸ πείθει οὐδὲ τοὺς αὐτοὺς συνεχές· γίνεται δὲ καὶ παρὰ τὰ ἐκτὸς ἢ πιθανότης, παρὰ τὸ ἐνδοξον τοῦ λέγοντος ἢ παρὰ τὸ φροντιστικὸν ἢ παρὰ τὸ αἰμύλον ἢ παρὰ τὸ σύνηθες ἢ παρὰ τὸ κεχαρισμένον, DL 9.94). It is the fallibility of *to peithon* that inspired Aenesidemus, a disgruntled Academic who was responsible for reviving Pyrrhonist scepticism in the first century B.C.E., to call into question beliefs derived from persuasion by submitting them to scrutiny under the ten modes. We are dealing, then, in the case of Penelope, not merely with a difficulty in making up her mind, but with a continuing unwillingness to concede the believability of what she is first being told and then sees. Her experience has conditioned her into the withholding of assent – a kind of resistance to the speciousness of the persuasive – and it is a cognitive posture from which she is only gradually, and partially, removed. Thus when she beholds the man who sits across the megaron from her, she still vacillates with doubt: ‘by sight at one time, face to face, she recognized him, | at another she couldn’t make him out in the beggars’ clothes he wore’ (ὄψει δ’ ἄλλοτε μὲν μιν ἐνωπαδίως ἐσίδεσκειν, | ἄλλοτε δ’ ἀγνώσασκε κακὰ χροῖ εἴματ’ ἔχοντα, 94–5). The son’s attempt to intervene by chiding his mother with the charge that she is cruel and ‘has a hard heart’ (ἀπηγέα θυμὸν ἔχουσα, 97) – an echo of Eurycleia’s characterization – expresses how the sceptical posture appears to one who already believes. Penelope responds by telling Telemachus that if this man is truly Odysseus, then they have tokens of their own by which they will know each other. And so Odysseus waits, his recognition of her as his faithful wife blocked by her continuing refusal to recognize him as the living husband for whom she has longed so deeply. There is no impression she has yet had to which she is willing to acquiesce, and until the recognition is reciprocal, it is no recognition at all. Scepticism enforces the necessity of this mutuality as it does the toil with which the agonizingly long disclosure unfolds. When it is at last achieved, the detachment that attends the act of suspending belief melts into the joy of acceptance.

It is then that Penelope, asking forgiveness for her hesitation, formulates again the reasons for her suspicion and reserve: ‘Always the heart in my breast | bristled with fear that some man would come along and deceive me with his words, | for many men plot evil schemes’ (αἰεὶ γάρ μοι θυμὸς ἐνὶ στήθεσσι φίλοισιν | ἐρρίγει μὴ τίς με βροτῶν ἀπάφοιτο ἐπεισιν | ἐλθὼν· πολλοὶ γὰρ κακὰ κέρδεα βουλευουσιν, 215–17). The sentiment confirms what Eumaeus says in 14.121–47 about the scepticism of mother and son. Then, in a notorious comparison, she likens her risk of being beguiled by some stranger to the example of Helen whom a god drove away from her

home in a state of *atê* and into the arms of another man. If the wife of Menelaus had known that she would be taken back home after a war fought over possession of her, she would never have gone. Penelope's characterization, as others have observed, is disjunctive. It sets a claim about the divine intervention that drove Helen to Troy alongside the view that she abandoned husband and home on account of a personal and self-directed desire. Combining contradictory motives, the statement presents two views of Helen, which the *dunamis antithetikê* could make into opposed arguments supporting sceptical *epochê*. This is, more or less, what Gorgias later does in his *Encomium on Helen*. As such, the formulation reveals a type of thinking that has consistently marked Penelope in the epic.

What is it, however, that makes the *sêma* of the bed persuasive in a way none of the other *sêmata* presented to Penelope are? To put it another way, does Penelope's acceptance of it as a confirmatory sign move beyond scepticism? In part, yes. The main qualities of the bed are its immovability, privacy and intricately wrought structure:³³ Odysseus built it around the trunk of a live olive tree as a pledge of his love for his wife, and Penelope confirms later, once the *anagnôrisis* has occurred, that no other mortal has seen it but her maid, Actoris (23.173–204). On the one hand, then, the bed is a visible emblem that participates in the tendency of the heroic world to translate qualities or states into concrete, material objects, and as such it functions as a sign of fidelity and permanence; on the other hand, this visible emblem must remain invisible, 'hidden' (110), for the whole of the recognition scene while Penelope tests Odysseus by pretending to ask that Eurycleia carry it outside the bedchamber (177–8). What the bed means can only be possible if it is not seen, that is, if it remains rooted in the private place where it has always been. And yet it must be described as if it were seen or had been by the only man who ought to have had access to it – precisely what Penelope casts into doubt by asking the nurse to move it. In the process of indignantly providing this description to a wife whose fidelity is suddenly in question once again, Odysseus-as-stranger undergoes a final de-alienation: he forges the link by which the bed, as a distinguished mark, a *mega sêma* whose chief characteristic is that it is rooted in the earth, or *empedon* (188, 206), emerges as a valid sign, or a *sêma empedon*, of his identity.³⁴ Paired with this movement is that of Penelope, not only from her own doubt to a belief that what she has been given in the account of the man sitting opposite her is a secure proof, but from Odysseus' lingering doubt of her as a wife who has 'severed and moved the bed', that is, violated the trust of the marital bond. Once the turn and counter-turn are effected, the poem permits a reconsideration of the scepticism that has brought the couple to the long-delayed point of recognition. That scepticism now emerges not as a life-affirming stance that liberates the individual from the servitude of rumour and uncertainty, but as a form of self-distancing that can impede human intimacy, which requires a lowering of the suspicion that appearances are deceptive and that one is being taken in by an imposter. The *anagnôrisis* of Penelope allows us to see the efficacy of scepticism from the vantage point of its necessary, if partial and temporary, dissolution. Still, the scene of disclosure remains so embedded in the circumstantial and conditional nature of the world of which it is a part that the faith of its protagonists continues to appear as an element of a scenario that could have been otherwise. In other words, the suspension of scepticism – the provisional withholding of withholding itself –

³³ This discussion is indebted to that of Zeitlin (n. 19).

³⁴ Zeitlin (n. 19), 137.

appears as one of two opposing alternatives that the narrative manages to keep open even as it moves toward closure.

V

Let us sum up. What is perhaps most striking about the trial of proof in Book 23 is how close it comes to a tragic outcome. The hypersceptical Penelope, having survived twenty years of her husband's absence by withholding judgement, is, in the end, at risk of dealing herself a metaphorical deathblow with the extenuation of doubt into an apprehensive mode that is beyond all belief. If scepticism has acted as a strategy of survival in the epic, its final manifestation in a Penelope who cannot be induced to render assent under any circumstances raises the spectre of *epochê* as a state of alienation engendered by a regress of signs that isolates characters and ends in loss. There are limits of scepticism in the *Odyssey*, and they take shape around the conviction that humans need to form provisional pacts of trust despite the destabilizing force of conflicting truth claims and the reign of rumour. A commitment to searching out the complexities of *kleos* and identity cannot guarantee us answers to our questions, but it can eliminate some of the hazards of such pacts and provide warrants for the reduction of doubt. Odysseus and Penelope both testify to the worthiness of the struggle intrinsic to *skepsis* and to the hard-won success of its toils. But it is Penelope, who actively searches for knowledge and endurance in a world where knowledge is so often withheld from her, who emerges as the most complex embodiment of scepticism. Her paradigmatic status, which vacillates between the exercise of craft and the experience of sometimes crippling uncertainty, takes us through various permutations of the affective scale associated with existence in a world where experts disagree, stories conflict and signs are equivocal. In so doing, it allows us to appreciate the emotional instability of a life lived in the flux of appearances even as that instability is submitted to the discipline of a cognitive balancing act that the philosophical Sceptics later sum up in the *ou mallon* posture that yields suspension of judgement. This move, as we suggested at the opening of our discussion, recapitulates what can fairly be said of the initiatory gesture of the *Odyssey* poet himself, whose response to the Achillean mode takes the form of an epic song that seeks to generate through *diaphonia* a sceptical view of the heroic ideal as no more Iliadic than it is Odyssean.

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