

PENELOPE AND NAUSICAA

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In Book 18 of the *Odyssey*, Penelope is suddenly visited with the desire to show herself to the suitors. Balking at her maid's suggestion that she adorn herself, she is put to sleep and beautified by Athena; she wakes and prays to Artemis to kill her painlessly and then, accompanied by two maids, proceeds downstairs where she engages in conversation with Telemachus and Eurymachus, solicits gifts from the suitors, and returns to her bed chamber (*Od.* 18.158–303). The passage has puzzled students of the *Odyssey* because its motivation has seemed confusing, and because it portrays qualities in Penelope which seem out of character.¹ Recent studies by Austin, Fenik, and Nagler have, however, provided fresh insights into the style and thematic content of the scene.² Austin in particular stresses

¹Analysts have seen the passage as an interpolation poorly connected with the rest of the book. See A. Kirchhoff, *Die homerische Odyssee* (Berlin 1879) 517–19; D. B. Monro, *Homer's Odyssey* II (Oxford 1901) 132–33; U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Homerische Untersuchungen* (Berlin 1884) 30–34 and *Die Heimkehr des Odysseus* (Berlin 1927) 19–26; P. Von der Mühl, *Odyssee* (*RE*, Supplement Band VII, 1940) 746; R. Merkelbach, *Untersuchungen zur Odyssee* (Munich 1951) 1–15; and D. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford 1955) 124–29. Others accept the scene as difficult but explainable within the context of Homer's unique narrative style. See W. J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford 1930) 201–02; U. Hölscher, *Untersuchungen zur Form der Odyssee* (Berlin 1939) 61–65; W. Büchner, "Die Penelopeszenen in der Odyssee," *Hermes* 75 (1940) 137–46; W. B. Stanford, *The Odyssey of Homer* II (London 1948) 308–09; C. Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA 1958) 303. Finally, the problem of Penelope's seemingly brazen behavior disappears if she is seen as simply Athena's puppet, e.g., A. Thornton, *People and Themes in Homer's Odyssey* (London 1970) 97–98; M. Müller, *Athene als göttliche Helfer in der Odyssee* (Heidelberg 1966) 118–23; and W. Schadewaldt, *Von Homers Welt und Werk* (Stuttgart 1959) 396–97.

²B. Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey* (Wiesbaden 1974) 73, 116–20; M. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition* (Berkeley 1974) 64–84; and N. Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* (Berkeley 1975) 208–10, 232–33. Both Fenik and Nagler have removed many false problems from the narrative of the *Odyssey* by their sympathetic analysis of repeated elements in Homeric style. Nagler's analysis of the function of repeated motifs in the portrayal of Penelope and Nausicaa is fundamental to the arguments advanced here. Austin's extended treatment of the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus is noteworthy not only for its many critical insights but also for the fact that it presents an interpretation of *Odyssey* 18 which integrates

two points which will contribute significantly to what follows here: that Nausicaa must be seen as a paradigm for Penelope and that the scene before the suitors in *Odyssey* 18 presents Penelope as a woman whose mind “. . . is quite clearly divided into two parts.”³ Taking these two premises as a starting point, the present essay will explore further the relationship between Nausicaa’s confused adolescent sexuality in *Odyssey* 6 and the divided mind of Penelope in *Odyssey* 18 and 19, as the basis for a further consideration of Penelope’s behavior before the suitors.

As Austin has noted, Nausicaa plays two somewhat disparate roles during her brief appearance in the *Odyssey*: she is, like Peisistratus, Athena (in disguise), and Telemachus, the young helper who leads a newcomer to the queen; at the same time she becomes an object of courtship by Odysseus.⁴ It is this latter role which of course makes Nausicaa a paradigm for Penelope in *Odyssey* 18 and 19. Both women are preoccupied with marriage, attracted to the stranger, and profess disdain for their local suitors. Yet in Nausicaa’s case at least, this disdain must be considered within the context of a brief but subtle characterization which portrays in her a certain ambivalence towards male companionship. By manipulating a few potent symbolic devices—the throwing off of a veil, a simile, a dream sent by Athena—the poet suggests the confusion attendant upon adolescent sexuality between innocent modesty and a certain forwardness which is only dimly recognized, if at all, by Nausicaa herself. This portrayal of confused emotions has important implications for Penelope’s behavior before the suitors, and requires closer attention here.

The use of external phenomena to objectify internal, subjective states, a common feature of Homeric style, is particularly prominent in the characterization of Nausicaa.⁵ Her status as virginal *parthenos*, charmingly dramatized in the brief exchange with Alcinous, is also suggested by her snugly-closed bedroom with two attendants (the normal emblem of a woman’s modesty in Homeric poetry⁶) right outside. At the same time, her ready acceptance of Athena’s suggestion during the dream betrays a growing interest in marriage which even her father recognizes but is too tactful to acknowledge. This mixture of curiosity and innocence continues and becomes more prominent at the washing party. The nature of the expedition itself is ambivalent, with the ideas of purity inherent in washing

the appearance before the suitors into the overall development of Penelope’s character.

³Austin (above, note 2) 233.

⁴*Ibid.* 201–02.

⁵For other examples of this technique see Whitman (above, note 1) 120–21, 221–22.

⁶Nagler (above, note 2) 64–76.

with clear spring water being balanced by the purpose of the washing, to provide Nausicaa with clothes suitable for marriage. Nausicaa goes attended by *amphipoloi*, and it has even been suggested that her wagon is a kind of portable bedchamber to protect her chastity further.⁷ Yet when the girls decide to have a game of catch they first throw off their veils, an action natural enough for the athlete, but one which can have ambiguous connotations since the veil itself is certainly an emblem of modesty. This gesture is in turn balanced by the description of the maidens as being like Artemis and her followers, models of chastity.⁸ The behavior of the young women, sometimes modest, sometimes potentially forward, dramatizes the confused emotions within Nausicaa which accompany her sexual awakening.

The equivocal symbolism in the scene is charged with still greater significance by the sudden appearance of Odysseus. His notion upon awakening that the girls sound like “nymphs” (potentially seductive creatures⁹) has a special appropriateness in this context. In fact, the first meeting between Nausicaa and the brine-encrusted stranger holds danger for both. Young maidens at play are traditionally prime targets for rape in early Greek literature,¹⁰ and it takes an extra dose of courage for Nausicaa to face alone a strange man who is reminiscent of a marauding lion.¹¹ For Odysseus, on the other hand, the stay on Scheria will be another test of his determination to reach home, and an eminently marriageable girl is potentially a detaining female like Circe or Calypso. The phrase *οἷη δ’ Ἀλκινόου θυγάτηρ μένε* (139) neatly sums up the ambiguity in the confrontation, suggesting by its departure from the normal attendance phrase (cf. 6.84) that Nausicaa’s gesture is at once hazardous to herself and potentially brazen.¹²

Odysseus must be cautious, then, with the girl. He cannot alienate her in his needy state; at the same time he must not encourage her too much or he risks entanglement. Characteristically, he sizes up Nausicaa immediately and plays on her weakness for his own advantage. Suggesting that she is beautiful, that she might even be a goddess, he wins her over with flattery, while at the same time implying his awareness of her youth and virginity by

⁷*Ibid.* 78.

⁸*Ibid.* 47.

⁹Cf. *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 97–99, 257–63.

¹⁰*Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 4–20; *Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 117–25; Hesiod, fr. 26.10–23 M-W.

¹¹See C. Moulton, *Similes in the Homeric Poems* (Göttingen 1977) 120–21.

¹²Penelope’s words at 18.184, *οἷη δ’ οὐκ εἶσαιμι μετ’ ἀνέρας· αἰδέομαι γάρ*, indicate that the description of Nausicaa in 6.139 as *οἷη* (these are the only two places in early Greek hexameter where a woman is so described) must have an appropriately ambivalent significance.

comparing her, as did the poet, to Artemis. More flattery follows, again tempered by the comparison of Nausicaa to a slender palm tree before which he felt *sebas*, not necessarily a promising reaction for the potential husband.

Nausicaa's reaction to this virtuoso performance is predictably ambivalent, combining a prim sense of propriety with coy suggestiveness. The gods may well favor such a man as this, but nevertheless one must not encourage the loose tongues of the inferior local suitors. The best plan is to lead the stranger to town, but at a distance.

The abortive courtship of *Odyssey* 6 and 7 is a rehearsal for the mysterious evolution of *homophrosynê* in *Odyssey* 18 and 19, and Nausicaa's confused emotions are a paradigm for Penelope's behavior before the suitors in *Odyssey* 18. New emotions are stimulated in both women by the intervention of Athena and lead to a meeting with the debased stranger; both are unable to acknowledge openly to others (or even to themselves) the feelings aroused in them and give other reasons for their behavior. The correspondence extends beyond thematic, structural elements to the actual method of characterization. The major vehicle for the portrayal of mental and emotional confusion in Penelope, as in Nausicaa, is the clustering of certain motifs which are contrary in their signification.

That Penelope's original urge to show herself to the suitors and her subsequent toilette are initiated by Athena need not imply that the feelings depicted are not a part of Penelope's own psyche, just as the feelings which Athena's dream visitation stirs up in Nausicaa are not simply inserted by the goddess. As Dodds has shown, psychic intervention like Athena's can be seen as a representation of impulses within a character for which he/she does not or cannot accept responsibility.¹³ What is suggested by both interventions is that the impulses they generate belong to a different kind of mental state from that indicated by the usual behavior of either woman. It is the struggle between these two mental states which is represented by the contradictory motifs surrounding Penelope's appearance before the suitors. Though she wants to make an appearance, she refuses to bathe or adorn herself; the sleeping toilette follows, with its explicit linking of Penelope and Aphrodite. Upon waking, Penelope prays to Artemis and then proceeds downstairs, accompanied by two maidens, who, along with her veil, will be the guardians of her modesty. The appearance predictably

¹³E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951) 1-18. See also Whitman (above, note 1) 168-69, 221-23; A. Amory, "The Reunion of Odysseus and Penelope," *Essays on the Odyssey*, ed. C. Taylor, Jr. (Bloomington 1963) 112, and P. Harsh, "Penelope and Odysseus in *Odyssey* XIX," *AJP* 71 (1950) 9, note 9.

generates lust in the suitors, specifically enunciated by Eurymachus, but Penelope denies any pretensions to attractiveness. She then recalls the instructions of Odysseus, implying that she intends to remarry soon, but calls the impending marriage "hateful." Finally, she coyly elicits marriage gifts from the suitors and re-ascends the stairs, her modesty affirmed by the attendance of *amphipoloi*.

Erratic behavior such as this is difficult to reconcile with the traditional picture of Penelope as the model of a chaste wife. Analyst critics saw it as evidence for multiple authorship. The idea that Penelope is a coquette who flirts with the suitors for her own amusement has also found some support, but those favoring such an interpretation tend to trivialize the importance of Penelope's actions before the suitors, implying that such behavior is simply in the nature of women.¹⁴ Nagler, while recognizing the potential ambivalence in the motifs which occur in the scene, dismisses the possibility of any unchaste thoughts in Penelope.¹⁵ For Austin, the scene shows Penelope's mind divided between her conscious, rational conclusion that her husband is dead, and an unconscious wish to believe in the prophecies about his imminent return, accompanied by some kind of intuition about the connection between Odysseus and the beggar. There is no question, in this view, of Penelope wanting to flirt with the suitors, because her mind is fixed on the beggar.¹⁶ If, however, the parallels between this scene and the portrayal of Nausicaa's emergent sexuality are valid, then there is another possible interpretation of the scene which would characterize the division in Penelope's mind in a slightly different way.

The first appearances before Odysseus of both Nausicaa and Penelope are engineered by Athena, and neither woman consciously decides to bring such a meeting to pass. In Nausicaa's case, the expedition is motivated by an increased interest on one level in marriage as a social institution, the proper step for a young girl in her situation to take, and in a more submerged, unrecognized way by an awakening of sexual interest in men.

¹⁴S. Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (London 1897) 130–31; F. M. Stawell, *Homer and the Iliad* (London 1909) 127; Woodhouse (above, note 1) 201; I. Nye, "When Homer Smiles," *CJ* 33 (1937) 33–34; L. A. MacKay, "The Person of Penelope," *G&R* 5 (1958) 123–27.

¹⁵Nagler (above, note 2) 83–84.

¹⁶Austin (above, note 2) 208–10. Austin's argument depends upon a clear distinction between *Athena's* idea, which involves flirting with the suitors, and Penelope's version of that idea, which censors it into something more acceptable. The argument offered here is based upon the assumption that to absolve Penelope of all responsibility for the original impulse is not consistent with the usual interpretation of such psychic interventions in Homeric poetry (see note 11). The idea originates with Athena, but is also a part of Penelope's own psyche. Thus an impulse emerges from one part of Penelope's mind which another part finds unacceptable and rejects.

The same kind of dual motivation is present in Penelope. The return of Telemachus and the instructions which Odysseus gave her impel her toward remarriage, hateful though it may seem. The preoccupation with marriage as a social (and political) necessity is accompanied by an unconscious resurgence of interest in men, which triggers the impulse to arouse the suitors. This impulse is upsetting to Penelope, and she disguises its real nature in her explanation to Eurynome. The latter, discerning rightly that her mistress is moving toward the final decision to remarry, suggests that she bathe and adorn herself. Penelope's refusal, and her explicit invocation of safeguards for her modesty, indicate again that she cannot consciously accept the new feelings. Athena's second intervention, like the first, is a further sign of Penelope's divided mind; her "nap" is the representation of the submerged mental state where the unacknowledged emotions are welling up.

Penelope's actual speech to Telemachus is different from the projected version she gave to Eurynome. Much has been made of the discrepancy, though it is not so very striking.¹⁷ Both versions contain the general notion that Telemachus dissociate himself from the suitors. The idea of speaking to Telemachus at all is in part a pretext, created to cover other motives for appearing before the suitors, and in any event a certain mental confusion has settled on Penelope at this point. Nevertheless, what she says is relevant to the real state of her emotions. The condemnation of the suitors implicit in the speech is consistent with her attempts to counter the upsetting desires she feels; at the same time, the speech shows her attention beginning to center on the beggar, and may indicate that the relatively undirected desires dramatized in the first part of the scene are beginning now to be directed toward Odysseus, as the process of recognition begins. This development is consistent with the rhythm of Nausicaa's growing attraction to Odysseus, and Austin is probably right in seeing the phrase *νόος δέ οἱ ἄλλα μενοίνα* (18.283) as an indication of Penelope's increasing preoccupation with the beggar.¹⁸ This is not to say that Penelope's mind is now made up, or that the solicitation of gifts is entirely insincere. Nothing is settled at this point, and the real courtship of Odysseus and Penelope begins in Book 19; the scene before the suitors shows the beginning of *homophrosynê*, but as the alternating symbolism shows, Penelope is still confused about the future.

Nausicaa's importance as a paradigm for Penelope extends to the latter's interview with the beggar, where like Nausicaa she plays two roles, the

¹⁷See Fenik (above, note 2) 116–20.

¹⁸Austin (above, note 2) 210.

queen whom Odysseus must win over, and the woman he must woo.¹⁹ These two roles have their antecedents in Arete and Nausicaa, and the characterization of Penelope in *Odyssey* 19 must be approached through them. After an initial postponement, Penelope meets Odysseus in the hall. The absence of any mention of the usual attendance motif is significant here: Penelope, like Nausicaa, initially faces the stranger alone. The rebuke which Penelope issues to the insolent Melantho also recalls Nausicaa's rebuke to her companions who are acting rudely around the stranger. The exchange which follows is strongly reminiscent of the first conversation between Odysseus and Nausicaa. In response to Penelope's initial question, Odysseus delivers an extremely flattering speech which emphasizes Penelope's regal qualities. The effect of the speech is much like that of his gallant address to Nausicaa; it wins for him some reciprocal warmth, but stops short of being forward. In both speeches, Odysseus tones down the romantic suggestiveness of his flattery by referring to the second, less sexual role which each woman is playing. But Penelope's response, which seems to deflect a reference to her physical beauty which Odysseus did not explicitly make, indicates that the romantic undertone in the speech was not without its effect.

Finally, overcome with her attraction to the beggar, Penelope offers him a bath and beautiful clothing, along with a homily on the hard fate of man and the rewards of a good reputation. Odysseus politely refuses the grand clothes, and asks specifically for an old woman to wash his feet. As Austin has noted, Penelope recognizes Odysseus' tact in not accepting treatment which might compromise her modesty.²⁰ All of this is clearly reminiscent of *Odyssey* 6, where Nausicaa orders the maidens to give the stranger a bath and clothes, ending her speech with some conventional-sounding phrases on the protection of strangers by Zeus, and Odysseus politely refuses to be bathed by young girls on the grounds that it would be improper.

As Odysseus wooed Nausicaa, so does he Penelope. She clearly responds, feeling closer and closer to her disguised husband as the conversation goes on. The emotional reawakening which began with her desire to appear before the suitors is now focussed on the beggar, and, after

¹⁹The scene is also prefigured in *Odyssey* 17.36–165, where Telemachus and Theoclymenus are surrogates for Odysseus. Penelope descends “like Artemis or golden Aphrodite,” and asks Telemachus for news of Odysseus. Telemachus refuses and sends Penelope away; she later returns to the hall and again asks for word of Odysseus, and this time Telemachus obliges. His speech is followed by a prophecy from Theoclymenus, which evokes a fervent promise from Penelope. This structure is duplicated in *Odyssey* 19.53–311, beginning with the same double simile, followed by two requests for information, one refused, one granted, and a prophecy followed by the same promise from Penelope. See Fenik (above, note 2) 166.

²⁰Austin (above, note 2) 217–18.

the footbath, the Nausicaa paradigm fades away. The delicate irony in this initial confrontation is a product of the interplay between Penelope's intense interest in the stranger as a man who knows something about, has even seen, Odysseus, and her growing attraction to him because, deep down under all those wrinkles, he *is* Odysseus. Thus the scene is and is not a recognition;²¹ like so much else in Books 1 through 22, it looks forward to the *telos* of Book 23, and the movement by Penelope into increasingly symbolic modes of expression after the footbath is the first in a series of rehearsals of the *homophrosynê* which is finally and fully confirmed in the ruse of the bed.²²

The characterization of Penelope in *Odyssey* 18 and 19 is thus firmly linked to the portrayal of Nausicaa; both are women who must be wooed but kept at a certain distance in order for the plans of the hero to be successfully carried out. In Penelope's case, these plans include the killing of the suitors, which requires that she be kept unaware of the beggar's true identity, and the eventual return to preeminence of Odysseus as king, father, and husband, which can only be achieved through the reestablishment of that *homophrosynê* which Odysseus described for Nausicaa. The working out of these two plans by Odysseus and his divine partner Athena creates the rich scale of ironies which informs the end of the poem: Penelope, in her divided mind, knows and does not know who the beggar is; she moves with instinctive rightness toward the choosing of a new husband who turns out to be her old one. The beginning of this slow process is the sudden resurgence of sexual interest in men which Penelope, like Nausicaa, finds herself unable to accept completely. The terrible confusion and doubt which these new desires arouse and Penelope's struggle with them are at the center of the brilliantly complex characterization of her in *Odyssey* 18–23.

²¹See Amory (above, note 13) 100–08 and Austin (above, note 2) 231–35.

²²Both Amory ([above, note 13]105–06) and Austin ([above, note 2] 228–29) have seen Penelope's description of her dream and Odysseus' interpretation of it as some kind of cryptic conversation between the two. The fact that in her dream Penelope is saddened by the loss of the pet geese may be another indication of her mixed feelings toward the suitors. See A. V. Rankin, "Penelope's dreams in books XIX and XX of the *Odyssey*," *Helikon* 2 (1962) 617–24.

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