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On the Agency of Penelope: Odyssey 18.158-163

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The mental world of Homer's Penelope stands at an impasse between two readings; on the one hand, she is the calculating matron who demurs her suitors with the shroud of Laertes, and on the other she is but the living embodiment of the will of Athena. This debate hinges on a small section of the text ranging from 18.158-163, at which point Athena suggests a confrontation with the suitors to the sub-conscious mind of Penelope, prompting Penelope to laughter. To some scholars, such as Paul Shorey and Calvin Byre,¹ this reaction confirms Penelope's lack of agency, for laughter almost always implies intellectual inferiority in Homer. This reading is unsatisfying, however, due to its failure both to attach significance to the atypical appearance of the laughter at 18.163 and to acknowledge aspects of the Homeric mental vocabulary. Instead, the language used to describe Athena's act of inspiration and the ensuing bout of laughter, along with the target of Athena, the _____ of Penelope, suggest that this intervention leaves Penelope in possession of her agency.

Before describing the mental organs of Penelope, it is imperative that we first assess what is at stake for Penelope, and for what reasons the passage chosen illuminates this. A particular focus on the *Odyssey's* eighteenth book is not an arbitrary place to begin an analysis of Penelope's agency but instead, as Heitman observes,² marks a moment of particular urgency in the plot. Penelope's narration of Odysseus' alleged speech to her prior to his departure for Troy makes clear these reasons at 18.267-70:³

μ μ ἦ ὀ ἰ μ ἐ μ
 ὦ ὦ , ἦ ἔ μ ἄ ἐ μ ὦ ἄ ἐ :
 ἄ ἄ ἐ ἦ ἦ ἦ ἦ ἦ ἦ ,
 μ ' ὤ ' ἐ ἦ , ὀ ἄ ὦ μ ὦ .

You must take thought for my father and mother here in our palace,

As you do now, or even more, since I shall be absent.

But when you see our son grown up and bearded, then you may

Marry whatever man you please, forsaking your household.

¹ Paul Shorey, "Homeric Laughter," *Classical Philology* 22 (University of Chicago Press: 1927): 222-223; Calvin S. Byre, "Penelope and the Suitors Before Odysseus: *Odyssey* 18.158-303." *The American Journal of Philology* 109 (John Hopkins University Press: 1988): 159-173.

² Richard Heitman, *Taking Her Seriously: Penelope & the Plot of Homer's Odyssey*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005): 105.

³ Homer, and Richard Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer* (Harper and Row: 1967): All English translations of the *Odyssey* in this essay are derived from this source unless stated otherwise; Homer and W. B. Stanford. *Odyssey I-XII* (Bristol Classical Press: 1996): Likewise, all Greek quotations from the *Odyssey* are from this source.

It seems that Penelope has arrived at a particular climax in her own struggle against the suitors due to the maturation of Telemachos, whom she regards as having reached manhood at 18.217. The suitors also have increased their onslaught against her son's estates, having recently unmasked Penelope's deception with the shroud of Laertes.⁴ If she wishes to preserve the future of her sole child, the time to act is at hand, and she duly presents herself to the suitors to entreat them for gifts.⁵ Does she have the ability to undertake this mission of her own will, or are her actions merely the inevitable result of Athena's inspiration?

To consider Penelope's agency, it is necessary to develop an understanding of cognition and the mind in Homer. For the Homeric character, this mental capacity is not a singular concept, but instead divides its tasks across a vast range of organs and abstract reflexes that collectively compose the self. As these elements of the mind differ in their individual capacities, the particular organ involved in any one incident is important in determining the impact of the event on the human host. The *θυμὸς* is one of two operative organs of the mind. It is the tapestry or field upon which ideas enter and leave the conscience, and in this role it is more emotional than intellectual, as Keary writes of the *θυμὸς*:⁶

...it means literally the breast or heart, and therefore, according to the usual fashion of the primitive psychology, it might be supposed rather the sense of primitive feeling than of thought.

This physicality further manifests itself through its common occurrence in the locative case,⁷ and the spatial relationship of the *θυμὸς* to the *καρδίη*, the occasional absence of which underlines the emotional characteristics of the *θυμὸς*.

The role of the *θυμὸς* in the Homeric mind is that of an emotionally-neutral arbitrator. Some scholars, such as Koziak,⁸ describe it instead as the "neutral-bearer of emotion," but this description is misleading to the extent that it inclines us to understand the *θυμὸς* as an emotional rather than intellectual organ. It is true that the *θυμὸς*, like its sibling the *νοῦς*, is concerned with emotion, but it does so in the sense of controlling that response as when Telemachos describes the *θυμὸς* of his mother struggling over whether to forsake the bed of Odysseus at 16.73:

⁴ *Od.* 19.155.

⁵ *Od.* 18.279.

⁶ C. F. Keary, "The Homeric Words for Soul," *Mind* 6 (Oxford University Press: 1881): 473.

⁷ Shirley M. Darcus, "A Person's Relation to *θυμὸς* in Homer, Hesiod, and the Greek Lyric Poets," *Glotta* 57 (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: 1979): 160. Darcus addresses examples occurring at *Od.* 14.337, *Il.* 19.88, and *Od.* 19.338.

⁸ Barbara Koziak, "Homeric Thumos: The Early History of Gender, Emotion, and Politics," *The Journal of Politics* 61 (University of Chicago Press: 1999): 1068.

μ ἰ ἔμῃ μὸ ἐὶ ἰ μ μ ...

And my mother's μὸ is divided in her and ponders two ways...

The dual nature of the μ with respect to emotion and intelligence becomes clear in this instance because of the word μ μ , which may mean both “to be anxious” and “to devise.”⁹ In this scene, the emotional turmoil of the decision has embroiled the μ as it wavers under the weight of its choice, but the discernment of this decision is its ultimate role.

The facility of the μ lies not only in its capacity to arbitrate emotional influences, but also in its ability to evaluate and plan for future action. These decision making patterns arise from the same emotional conflict described above, but culminate in forethought, just as the μ of Odysseus plans at 20.36-39:

ἦ ἄ μ μ μ Ὀ
 ἦ ὕ , , ἀ μ ἴ ἔ :
 ἄ μ μὸ ἐὶ ἰ μ μ ,
 ὄ ἦ μ ἦ ἄ ἴ ἐ ...

Then resourceful Odysseus spoke in turn and answered her:

‘Yes, O goddess, all you have said was fair and orderly;

Yet still, here is something the μ inside me is pondering,

How, when I am alone against many, I can lay hands on

The shameless suitors...

In this scene, Odysseus addresses the goddess Athena while lying awake in his hall at night in the guise of a beggar. He has had ample opportunity by this point to observe the discord and maltreatment of his household at the hands of the suitors, and describes to the goddess the will of his μ to seek vengeance. This explanation begins with a line, 20.38, which mirrors line 16.73 discussed above in its final four metrical feet. The μ engages in μ μ and is for a brief moment stuck in the ambiguity of this word between wavering and choice, but this conflict resolves itself in the next line, which defines the object of routing the suitors.

⁹ Richard John Cuncliff, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* (University of Oklahoma Press: 1963): 264.

The ability of the Homeric character to undertake this form of thought is contingent on the physical presence of the μ within the ψ , and it is those occasions where this absence does occur that allow us to identify the primarily emotional character of the ψ . The μ is a physical component of the ψ , and when, for a variety of reasons ranging from intoxication to moments of intense emotion, it ceases to function, characters are reduced to an emotional state. One such example occurs at the conclusion of book 24, immediately after Odysseus reveals his identity to his father at 24.347-50:

$\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\epsilon\iota\psi$: $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\psi$
 $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\psi$ $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\psi$
 $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\psi$ $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\psi$ $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\psi$ $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\psi$,
 $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\psi$ $\acute{\alpha}\mu\iota\psi$:

He threw his arms around his dear son, and much-enduring
 Great Odysseys held him close, for his spirit was fainting.
 But when he had got his breath back again, and the μ gathered
 Into his ψ , once more he said to him, answering:

At the beginning of this sequence, Odysseus is in a state of shock from his reunion with Laertes, and the μ lies external to the ψ . It is only after the return of the μ that Odysseus regains his wits and is able to engage in speech. This relationship between μ and ψ is a prerequisite for competent decision making, as Koziak reflects: "...the relationship of enclosure signals when thumos is acting properly; when *phrenes* [sic] encloses *thumos*, *thumos* acts appropriately."¹⁰ We may observe further from the example of Laertes that not only does this enclosure allow the intellectual function of the μ , but also that a character possessing only the ψ is characteristically emotional and incapable of intellectual action.

All of this develops a picture of the Homeric mind based around the reciprocating presence of autonomous organs. The most important elements of this mind, the μ and the ψ , differ principally in their respective focuses on the decision-making and emotional aspects of the self. Within that relationship, the μ functions as a sort of super ego through its control of impulses from the ψ . This leaves the latter organ as the inception of thought and feeling in the mind, though not always as its end. At 18.158, the goddess Athena places her inspiration in

¹⁰ Koziak, Homeric Thumos, 1074.

the μ of Penelope rather than the μ , which suggests that the burden of decision remains for the Achaean princess.

If Athena had intervened in the actual decision-making process of Penelope there is good reason to believe that she would have inspired the μ instead. This is because the commission of deterministic error, that brand where the subject lacks in will and merely serves to accomplish the outcomes of external influences, associates itself entirely with the μ in the guise of the word α . In sum, α describes the variety of error where characters are not responsible for their actions due to a lack of agency, as Finkelberg writes:¹¹

The characteristic features of [α] are a temporary lack of understanding; attribution of the act to some external factor, usually the gods; and the fact that the agent is not recognized either by himself or by others as an autonomous causer of what he has done.

This relationship becomes evident at 21.302, which describes the centaur Eurytion's acknowledgment of the "disaster," or α , having befallen him because of his "unstable spirit,"¹² or μ , and is likewise evident at 23.223, where Helen is complicit in placing α in her own μ . These instances underline a close tie between the μ and α that precedes action without the will of its author. It should be noted, therefore, that this conjunction does not occur at 18.158-163.

In Book 18, when Athena inspires the μ of Penelope, there is mention of neither the variety of error, α , that would indicate a lack of agency, nor does she enact her inspiration on the organ most associated with this, the μ , at 18.158-163:

η ' α ϵ ι ι η α ω Λ ,
 η Γ , η ,
 μ η , \omicron μ
 μ δ μ ι ϵ μ
 μ α δ ι ι η η .
 α ι ' ϵ ϵ ' ϵ ' ϵ ' δ μ

¹¹ Margalit Finkelberg, "Patterns of Human Error in Homer," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 115 (Cambridge University Press: 1995): 16.

¹² Homer, and Richard Lattimore. *The Odyssey of Homer* (Harper and Row: 1967): The translation of Lattimore mirrors well the sense of the word argued for here.

But now the goddess, gray-eyed Athene, put it in the
 Of the daughter of Ikarios, circumspect Penelope,
 To show herself to the suitors, so that she might all the more
 Open their hearts, and so that she might seem all the more precious
 In the eyes of her husband and son even than she had been before this.
 She laughed, in an idle way, and spoke to her nurse and named her:

Instead, Athena places this idea or feeling in Penelope's with the verb μ , which may hold a meaning closer to "inspire" than to "place in the sense of enforcement."¹³ Instead of the word η , the text describes Athena's action toward the suitors at 20.345-6 with the verb " ω ", which may be translated as "to rouse, or to stir up." This scene, and the distinction between η and ω , begs comparison because it is the only other instance where Athena provokes laughter, the nature of which we shall soon discuss. Where Athena inspires (η) Penelope, who subsequently laughs with no textual causation, she maliciously provokes (ω) the suitors in an action grammatically linked to their laughter via a coordinating conjunction (ϵ).¹⁴ Furthermore, the concept of ω is the precise opposite of agency and a free-acting μ ; the presence of one precludes that of the other, as is evident at 4.711-13:

η ' $\eta\mu$ ' ϵ μ i :
 υ τ ' η μ \omicron ω , η i υ υ
 $\mu\omicron$ ϵ μ $\eta\mu$ ϵ , \omicron

Medon then, a thoughtful man, spoke to her in answer:

I do not know whether some god ω him, or whether his own μ
 Had the impulse to go to Pylos, in order to find out...

At this juncture, Telemachos has just departed to visit the palaces of Nestor and Menelaus, and Medon is attempting to explain to Penelope the reasons for his departure. He provides two possibilities for this, either "some god compelled him", ω , or the μ of Telemachos decided on its own to journey to Pylos. Therefore, the word ω in its divine connotations

¹³ Richard Heitman, *Taking Her Seriously: Penelope and the Plot of Homer's Odyssey* (University of Michigan Press: 2005): 107.

¹⁴ 20.345 (ϵ) μ .

denotes a lack of agency on the part of its object. It is important to note that this is not the word used for Penelope, who is otherwise noted for her agency.

Moreover, throughout the course of the *Odyssey*, the text defines Penelope as possessing precisely the sort of intellectual capacity antithetical to a lack of agency through the use of a series of epithets of the mind for Penelope. One such epithet, *phronimē*, appears alongside the passage under consideration here at 18.159. This word is associated with one other character in the *Odyssey*, the Queen of the Phaeacians, Arete, at 11.344-5, after her inquiries toward Odysseus:

ῥῶν , ὁ μὰ ἦμ' ἄρ' ὅτι φρονίμη
 μ' ἴσθι : ἄρ' ἄρα .

‘Friends, our *phronimē* queen is not off the mark in her speaking,
 Nor short of what we expect of her. Do then as she tells us.

In this passage, the Queen’s epithet *phronimē* is associated with the concordance of her speech to the realities of the situation and acts preceding her utterance. The Queen, as with Penelope at 18.158, is aware of her surroundings and capable of making decisions in accordance with that reality. It is of further interest that the word *phronimē*, meaning “keep your head always” according to Heitman, while associated with Penelope in seven out of eight of its Homeric uses,¹⁵ explicitly denotes agency when used for Odysseus. When the word is used for Odysseus, it is on the beach of Ithaca at 13.332, where Athena admonishes him for being too quick and eager to spin a tale, and is followed quickly at 13.366 with Athena’s application of the same word to Penelope. Therefore, a reading of Penelope as possessing her wits at 18.158 would be entirely in keeping with her character.

From all this there are some compelling reasons to accept Penelope as a free agent: the nature of the *phronimē* and its non-correspondence to the deterministic error of *phronimē*. However, if we are to complete this argument, we must still resolve the issue of Penelope’s “idle laugh,” which would seem to suggest exactly the sort of suggestibility argued against here. In order to understand the laughter of Penelope, it is necessary therefore that we develop a concept of Homeric laughter writ large; for, if we understand the laughter of Penelope at 18.163 in the sense in which that act is generally understood, a contradiction arises that makes it impossible to consider Penelope a free agent. This is because within the Homeric corpus the word for laughter, *phronimē*, appears almost universally to indicate foolishness and to foreshadow the doom of hubristic characters such as the suitors. This understanding of laughter is clear when Homeric

¹⁵ Heitman, *Taking Her Seriously*, 107.

characters reflect on the nature of laughter, such as when Odysseus dismisses it as a mannerism of drunks while sharing cups with Eumaeus at 14.465-8:

ὦ , ὕμ ἰ ᾗ ἐ ἴ ,
 ὅ μ ἔ ἐ : ἴ ἄ ἄ
 ἦ , ὄ 'ἐ μ 'ἄ ἴ
 'ἄ ὀ , 'ὀ ἄ

Hear me now, Eumaeus and all you other companions,
 What I say will be a bit of boasting. The mad wine tells me
 To do it. Wine sets even a thoughtful man to singing,
 Or sets him into softly laughing, sets him to dancing.

Moreover, as scholars such as Colakis and Levine point out, laughter seems often to intonate a character's lack of awareness.¹⁶ If Penelope's laugh at 18.163 matched this template, it would no longer be tenable to argue for her agency in that scene; however, her laughter is distinguished from this trend through the use of the word ἄ ἴ .

ἄ ἴ 'ἐ ἔ 'ἔ 'ἔ 'ὀ μ

She laughed, in an idle way, and spoke to her nurse and named her...

Seen here, at 18.163, the direct object of ἐ , the phrase ἄ ἴ ... ἔ , is largely responsible for creating the impression that Penelope's laughter is vapid, per Colakis, who writes: "However we interpret [ἄ ἴ], it surely indicates some sort of confusion."¹⁷ The word ἄ ἴ itself is problematic because it appears at only one other point in the Homeric corpus (*Iliad* 2.269), where it denotes an empty helplessness:¹⁸

¹⁶ Marianthe Colakis, "The Laughter of the Suitors in 'Odyssey,'" *The Classical World* 73 (John Hopkins University Press: 1986): 137-141; Daniel B. Levine, "Penelope's Laugh: Odyssey 18.163," *The American Journal of Philology* 104 (John Hopkins University Press: 1983): 173. Examples include the suitors at 20.358 and the maids as they go to their lovers at 18.320.

¹⁷ Marianthe Colakis, "The Laughter of the Suitors in 'Odyssey,'" *The Classical World* 73 (John Hopkins University Press: 1986): 140 n10.

¹⁸ Homer, Robert Fagles, and Bernard Knox. *The Iliad*. (New York, NY, U.S.A.: Viking: 1990): All quotations from the *Iliad* in this essay are derived from this source.

ὦ ἄρ' ἔ , φέμ ἦ ἐ ἰώμ
 ἦ : ὀ ' ἰ , ὀ ἰ ἔ :
 μῶ ' ἰμ μ ἐ
 ὕ : ὀ ' ἄ ' ἔ ,
 ἄ ' ἄ ἦ ἰ ὠ ἄ μ .

And [Odysseus] cracked the scepter across his back and shoulders.
 The rascal doubled over, tears streaking his face
 And a bloody welt bulged up between his blades,
 Under the stroke of the golden scepters studs.
 [Thersites] squatted low, cringing, stunned with pain,
 Blinking like some idiot...

In this scene, the Achaean foot soldier Thersites has just insulted his commander, Odysseus, and the word ἄ ἦ seems to correspond to the same sense of uselessness that some scholars would ascribe to the word at 18.163.¹⁹ This seems insufficiently damning, however, because of the small size of this sample, and we must turn to other sources to develop further possibilities.

It seems prudent to begin with a return to the meaning of ἄ ἦ , as this term is the source of our problems and would seem to benefit from a reevaluation of its meaning. To expand this field, I will point now to the word ἄ ἦ , of which ἄ ἦ is the negated sibling. This word, in its Homeric usage, describes a sense of need or necessity, as Clay writes: "...the meaning of ἄ ἦ derives from the formulaic expression ὕ (or μ) ... which often must be translated as 'it does not befit you.'²⁰ This same formula occurs at *Iliad* 13.274-5:²¹

ὀ ' ὕ ' ἦ μ ὕ ὦ ἄ ὀ ἄ ὕ :
 " ἦ ' ἄ ἦ ἦ ἔ : ἦ ὕ ;"

And in return Idomeneus, Captain of the Cretans, answered:
 "I know what sort you are in virtue, there is no need for such to be said."

¹⁹ Daniel B. Levine, "Penelope's Laugh: Odyssey 18.163," *The American Journal of Philology* 104 (John Hopkins University Press: 1983).

²⁰ Jenny Strauss Clay, "Homeric Axreion," *The American Journal of Philology* 105 (John Hopkins University Press: 1984): 74.

²¹ The English translation is my own.

In this scene, the Cretan Idomeneus uses the word to denote not uselessness, but rather to question the basic necessity for the squire Meriones to defend his martial pride. The distinction between necessity and usefulness is not a narrow one, and the allowance of the prior meaning could refine our understanding of 18.158-63 in substantial ways. For if Penelope laughs a “not necessary laugh,” it suggests not her lack of wile, but could instead affirm Penelope as intellectually above the connotations of her own laughter. Furthermore, it removes a substantial obstruction to the view of Penelope as agent.

The Penelope of Homer is many things, but she is not a puppet. At the start of book 18, Athena inspires Penelope to appear before the suitors for the purpose of stiffening the resolve of her husband and son. Penelope accomplishes this objective for the goddess, as evidenced by the rejoicing of Odysseus at 18.281, but her successes are not limited to this. Penelope has a particular interest at this juncture of the *Odyssey* to combat the deprivation of her son’s household. This mission is narrowly separate from that of the goddess in that both seek the betterment of the household, but the goddess’ actions do not require gift procurement- Odysseus’s return supersedes this. Therefore, Penelope takes action distinct and contemporaneous with the will of Athena, and is successful in this undertaking, as the suitors do in fact provide her with a large variety of gifts. That Athena places her influence in the of Penelope confirms the intellectual independence of the latter, as has been ascertained through the examination of the relevant vocabulary in this essay. The status resulting from this marks Penelope as a character of particular significance in the *Odyssey*, for the world of Homer is one in which determinist influences proliferate and many characters, such as the suitors, live at the mercy of fate.

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