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, 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 φρήν 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, 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:

ε νήσθαι πατρὸ καὶ ητέρο ἐν εγάροισιν
ω νῦν, ἡ ἦτι ἄλλον ἐ ἐδ ἀπονόσφιν ἐόντο :
ἀνταρ ἐπὴν δὴ παιδα γενεῖσαντα ἰδηα,
γῇ ασθ ὅ κ’ ἐθέλησθα, τεόν κατὰ δῶ α λιποῦσα.

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.

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. 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. 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 φρήν 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 φρήν:

…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, and the spatial relationship of the φρήν to the θυμός, the occasional absence of which underlines the emotional characteristics of the φρήν.

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

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And my mother’s θυμός is divided in her and ponders two ways…

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

The facility of the θυμός 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 θυμός of Odysseus plans at 20.36-39:

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 θυμός 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 θυμός 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 θυμός engages in ἐρημίζειν 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.

The ability of the Homeric character to undertake this form of thought is contingent on the physical presence of the θυμός within the φρήν, and it is those occasions where this absence does occur that allow us to identify the primarily emotional character of the φρήν. The θυμός is a physical component of the φρήν, 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:

ἀμφὶδὲ παιδὶ φίλῳ βάλε πήχεε: τὸν δὲ ποτὶ οἶ
εἴλεν ἀποψύχοντα πολύτλα δίο Ὄδυσσεῦ.
ἀντὰρ ἐπεὶ ἰ ἂν πυντὸ καὶ ὦ φρένα θυμὸ ὦ ἀγέρθη,
ἐξαὖντι ὑθοιον ἂ εἰβό ενο προσεério:

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 θυμὸ gathered
Into his φρήν, 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 θυμὸ lies external to the φρήν. It is only after the return of the θυμὸ that Odysseus regains his wits and is able to engage in speech. This relationship between θυμὸ and φρήν 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 θυμὸ, but also that a character possessing only the φρήν 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 θυμὸ and the φρήν, differ principally in their respective focuses on the decision-making and emotional aspects of the self. Within that relationship, the θυμὸ functions as a sort of super ego through its control of impulses from the φρήν. 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 φρήν of Penelope rather than the θυμός, 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 θυμός 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 θυμός in the guise of the word ἄτη. In sum, ἄτη 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 [ἄτη] 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 ἄτη, having befallen him because of his “unstable spirit,”12 or θυμός, and is likewise evident at 23.223, where Helen is complicit in placing ἄτη in her own θυμός. These instances underline a close tie between the θυμός and ἄτη 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 φρήν of Penelope, there is mention of neither the variety of error, ἄτη, that would indicate a lack of agency, nor does she enact her inspiration on the organ most associated with this, the θυμός, at 18.158-163:

τῇ δ’ ἀρ ἐπὶ φρέσὶ θῆκε θεά γλαυκόπι Αθήνη, 
κούρη Ἰκαρίοιο, περίφρονι Πηνελοπείη, 
νηστήρεσι φανήγαι, δῶ πετάσειε ἄλιστα 
θῦν ὄν νηστήρων ἱδὲ τὶ ἱεσα γένοιτο
ἀλλὸν πρὸ πόσιο τε καὶ νίεο ἢ πάρο ἢν.
ἀχρεῖον δ’ ἐγέλλασεν ἔπο τ’ ἔφασ’ ἐκ τ’ ὄνο ἀζεν

But now the goddess, gray-eyed Athene, put it in the φρήν
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 laughèd, in an idle way, and spoke to her nurse and named her:

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

τὴν δ’ ἠμείβετ’ ἔπειτα Μέδων πεπνυ ἐνα εἰδὼ :
οὐκ οἶδ’ ἦ τι ἐν θεὸ ὦρορεν, ἣ καὶ αὐτοῦ
ὦ ὄ ἐφωρ ἡθῆ ἐν ἐ Πύλον, ὀφρα πόθηται

Medon then, a thoughtful man, spoke to her in answer:
I do not know whether some god ὦρσε him, or whether his own θυμός ὄ
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”, ὦρσε, or the θυμός ὄ of Telemachos
decided on its own to journey to Pylos. Therefore, the word ὦρσε in its divine connotations

14 20.345 παρέπλαξεν (δὲ) νόη ἀ.
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, περίφρων, 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:

> ὥ φίλοι, οὐ ἀν ἶν ἀπὸ σκοποῦ οὐδ᾽ ἀπὸ δόξη
> υθεῖται βασίλεια περίφρων: ἄλλα πίθεσθε.

> ‘Friends, our περίφρων 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 περίφρων 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 ἔχεφρων, meaning “keep your head always” according to Heitman, while associated with Penelope in seven out of eight of its Homeric uses, 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 φρήν and its non-correspondence to the deterministic error of ἄτη. 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, γέλαω, 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

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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:

κέκλυθι νῦν, Εὖ αἰει καὶ ἄλλοι πάντες ἑταῖροι, εὐξά ενὸ τὶ ἔπο ἔρεω: οἶνο γὰρ ἀνώγει ἧλεό, ὃ τ᾽ ἐφήκη πολύφρονά περ ἄλ᾽ ἀείσα καὶ θ᾽ ἀπαλῶν γελάσω, καὶ τ᾽ ὀρχήσασθαι ἀνήκε

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. 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 ἀχρείον.

ἀχρείον δ’ ἐγέλλασεν ἔπο τ’ ἔφατ’ ἐκ τ’ ὄνω ἀζεν

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

Seen here, at 18.163, the direct object of ἐγέλλασεν, the phrase ἀχρείον... ἔπο, is largely responsible for creating the impression that Penelope’s laughter is vapid, per Colakis, who writes: “However we interpret [ἀχρείον], it surely indicates some sort of confusion.” The word ἀχρείον 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 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.
In this scene, the Achaean foot soldier Thersites has just insulted his commander, Odysseus, and the word ἀχρείον seems to correspond to the same sense of uselessness that some scholars would ascribe to the word at 18.163. 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 ἀχρείον, 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 χρή, of which ἀχρείον is the negated sibling. This word, in its Homeric usage, describes a sense of need or necessity, as Clay writes: “...the meaning of ἀχρείον derives from the formulaic expression οὐδὲ πε (or ε) χρή... which often must be translated as ‘it does not befit you.’”

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.”

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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 ϕρήν 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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