

PENELOPE'S DREAM IN BOOK 19 OF THE *ODYSSEY*

I. THE CONTEXT

The second of the three dreams which Penelope sees in the *Odyssey* is to be found at 19.535ff.

Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, is in his house after an absence of twenty years. It is late. The suitors have finished their evening meal, during which they demonstrated all their insolence, cruelty, and impetuosity to the strange beggar (Books 17 and 18); they have already left the palace and gone to sleep (18.428). Telemachos has also retired to his bed (19.47–50), after having helped his father carry the weapons from the Great Hall and take them elsewhere (19.31–46). The serving women are clearing the left-overs of the meal from the tables in the Great Hall and are stoking the fire (19.60–4). Penelope now² has the opportunity to ask the stranger if he knows anything of her husband. Through a series of questions and scrutiny of the answers, she begins to respect and trust the stranger (19.253–4, 350–2). She therefore decides to confide her innermost thoughts to him. She considers him to be sensible and judicious (19.350–2), and so asks him for his thoughts on a dream she had which puzzles her.³

In contrast to other dreams (cf. *Od.* 4.795–841, 6.20–40), this one does not unfold *live* through the actual narrative of the poem. What interests the poet is the discussion which takes place about the dream, its impact on the stranger (that is, Odysseus; see p. 4) and Penelope's announcement—at the culmination of this discussion—that she is to stage the bow contest. Penelope must have had this dream recently, whilst caught in a great dilemma which torments her and keeps her awake at night: whether to stay in her husband's house near her son and safeguard their possessions, their slave women, and the palace, or to accept marriage to the best of the suitors (the one who will offer the most valuable gifts) so that Telemachos can take control of his estate.

Whilst, therefore, Penelope is being tormented by such thoughts she has a symbolic dream, the purpose of which is to inform her of Odysseus' arrival and the ensuing destruction of the suitors. She tells Odysseus of this dream: Penelope kept twenty geese in the palace, which she enjoyed watching. The geese were eating wheat somewhere far from water.⁴ Suddenly, an eagle swooped down from a mountain, killed them all, and took off again into the sky. The dead geese lay scattered around the palace. Penelope wept heartrendingly and other women came to her side. The eagle returned, sat on the central rafter of the roof and, in a human voice, told Penelope to have courage as this was not a dream but a real apparition which would be fulfilled. The geese symbolize

¹ The other two are at 4.795–841 and 20.87–90.

² See Odysseus' instructions at 17.569–72 (and 17.582).

³ 535 ὑπόκριναι (see 555 ὑποκρίνασθαι) with the meaning of 'interpret', 'explain'. The stranger is asked to elucidate the dream and to take a position on the interpretation given within it. A. H. M. Kessels, *Studies on the Dream in Greek Literature* (Utrecht, 1978), 97, 121, n. 44, claims that the stranger is asked only his opinion on whether the interpretation of the dream is correct or not.

⁴ According to J. Russo, in J. Russo, M. Fernández-Galiano, and A. Heubeck (edd.), *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey, vol. III: Books 17–24* (Oxford, 1992), 101–2 on 537, the phrase ἐξ ὕδατος can be governed either by the word πυρόν (the wheat was inside a trough of water) or by the word χῆνες (denoting place: far from the water). The latter seems to me the more likely.

the suitors, and the eagle represents her husband, who will deal out a wretched death to the suitors. Penelope awoke and, disturbed, looked around and saw the geese in the palace eating their food as before.

This is the only dream in the Homeric poems where we can observe profound changes in a character's emotional state. Penelope's emotions in the dream shift from joy to sorrow (537, 541, 543). She awoke disturbed and with a feeling of unease, and was relieved to see the geese unharmed (551–3). She is left puzzled as to the meaning of her dream (535) and if she ought to take it seriously (560–9).

II. COMMENTARY

The poet here has deliberately chosen the masculine form of the word *χήν* (540 *ἄθροοι*, 553 *ἐρεπτομένους*), since the geese symbolize the suitors.⁵ The figure *εἰκοσι* (536) is used to denote, as elsewhere in the *Odyssey* (14.98, 20.158, 22.57), a significant number. The poet did not want to give an exact figure (at 16.247–51 we are told there are 108 suitors); a flock of twenty geese is sufficiently large to signify the entirety of the suitors.⁶

536 *κατὰ οἶκον, πυρρὸν ἔδουσιν*: a metaphor for the suitors who hang around the palace and squander Odysseus' wealth.

536, 543 *μοι*: each of these datives has a double meaning as regards the emotions which it expresses, and the irony is thus profound. *μοι* (536): Penelope does not realize quite what the geese symbolize and is happy to watch them eat and grow; in reality, however, she should be sad. *μοι* (543): Penelope considers the destruction of the geese by the eagle as catastrophic and grieves; she should however be joyful.

The parallelism of Odysseus and an eagle is found elsewhere (15.160–78). The image of birds of prey who hound and annihilate frightened birds appears as a formula for the suitors' destruction (cf. also 22.302–6).

539 *πάσι*: none of the suitors is to be saved.

539 *ἐκέχυντο*: the same verb is used in a similar scene during the killing of the suitors (22.389).

537, 541, 543 Penelope's affection for the geese (that is, the suitors) has been misunderstood by some scholars. Vannan Rankin believes that Penelope reveals her true feelings here. The desire to retain the suitors is stronger than the desire for Odysseus' return. She secretly tilts towards the idea of marrying one of them. For this reason she

⁵ At 15.160–78, the word *χήν* is feminine (161 *ἀργήν*, 174 *ἀτιταλλομένην*). This is because here the female goose does not symbolize the suitors themselves but the situation of licentiousness which they have created in Odysseus' absence. Odysseus comes from another place (as did the eagle from the mountain) to correct this situation, punishing those culpable.

⁶ L. Pratt, 'Odyssey 19.535–50: on the interpretation of dreams and signs in Homer', *CPh* 89 (1994), 147–52, at 150–1, offers a different interpretation. She believes that the figure twenty refers to the number of years Penelope has waited. The destruction of the twenty geese symbolizes the end of this long wait. In reaching this conclusion, Pratt has been influenced by *Il.* 2.305–30 where, according to Calchas's interpretation, the number of birds symbolizes a number of years. I do not agree with this thesis, for, according to the interpretation provided within our dream itself (19.548–50), the geese symbolize the suitors and not a certain number of years. A. N. Athanassakis, 'Penelope's dream in the context of the eagle against serpent motif', *Hellenica* 38 (1987), 260–8, at 263, suggests that of the total number of Penelope's suitors, she is particularly affectionate towards twenty, hence the corresponding number of twenty geese. But this theory is not supported anywhere in the poem. Elsewhere, Athanassakis has argued that the figure of twenty contains an antagonistic undertone (!), if one considers 19.235 (see 'Ο ἀετὸς τοῦ ἐνείρου τῆς Πηνελόπης στήν τριαχιλιετή ἑλληνικὴ ποιητικὴ παράδοση', *Proceedings of the Seventh Conference on the Odyssey* [3–8 September 1993] [Ithaca, 1995], 199–217, at 202).

is anxious to stage the bow contest at a moment when many things appear to foretell the return of her husband.⁷ According to Russo, Penelope's grief, profoundly expressed in the poem, reveals that, subconsciously, her feelings towards the suitors are not so hostile.⁸ Felson-Rubin detects a flirtation in Penelope's attitude towards the suitors. Just as Odysseus enjoys his adventures, even when they delay his return to Ithaca, so Penelope enjoys gazing upon the geese.⁹ Katz argues that Penelope harbours feelings of affection towards the suitors.¹⁰ But such feelings of affection are not substantiated at all by the poem itself. Indeed, the opposite is true. At 17.530–47 Penelope appears indignant at the irresponsible behaviour of the suitors and is happy when her wish that they be punished is accompanied by a positive sign, such as that of Telemachos' loud sneeze. At 17.499 and 18.165 she expresses her disgust towards the suitors, at 17.494 wishes for the death of Antinous, and at 19.569 says that both she and her son would happily accept the frightful dream if it was likely to come true. Her emotional reactions at lines 537, 541, and 543 are completely natural, as Penelope is not aware of what really lies behind what she has dreamt.¹¹ The interpretation of the dream comes next (548–50).

544 ἐπὶ προὔχοντι μελάθρῳ: an eagle is worthy of a prominent position (and especially so when he has accomplished as great an achievement as the destruction of so many geese). Moreover, it adds authority to what he is about to announce.

547 The fulfilment of the dream is expressed in two ways in this line: (i) by the word ὕπαρ, and (ii) through the use of the future perfect (τετελεσμένον ἔσται). A contradistinction is made between ὕπαρ (a true apparition, reality) and ὄναρ (a deceptive dream fantasy). ἐσθλόν: it relates to something good. Therefore, it is unnecessary for her to grieve. It is at this point that she becomes puzzled and her thoughts and feelings are confused.

It is worth noting the use of tenses in this dream: ἔδουσιν (536) in the present tense, as the suitors continue to squander Odysseus' wealth. ἐλθών (538), ἔαξε (539), and ἔκτανεν (539) are in the aorist: the undertaking of the destruction appears as quick as lightning. ἐκέχυντο (539) in the past perfect; the destruction is complete. τετελεσμένον ἔσται (547) in the future perfect; what Penelope has dreamt and the eagle describes will surely be fulfilled. εἰλήλουθα (549) in the perfect since Odysseus is already in the palace. ἐφήσω (550) in the future tense, as the slaughter of the suitors will follow (cf. 557 τελέει, 558 ἀλύξει).

550 πᾶσι (cf. also 539, 558): the reference is deliberate each time. Odysseus is anxious as to whether he will manage to destroy all the suitors (cf. 22.381–2 where he looks carefully and anxiously around the Great Hall so that none of the suitors will escape him).

568 αἰνὸν ὄνειρον: both the content and impact of the dream on Penelope's psychological state (she is disturbed, bewildered) justify the term terrible.

581 ἐν περ ὀνειρώ: with this phrase, Penelope ends the discussion of the symbolic

⁷ A. Vannan Rankin, 'Penelope's dreams in Books XIX and XX of the Odyssey', *Helikon* 2 (1962), 617–24.

⁸ J. Russo, 'Interview and aftermath: dream, fantasy and intuition in *Odyssey* 19 and 20', *AJPh* 103 (1982), 4–18, at 9. See also id. (n. 4), 102 on 541.

⁹ N. Felson-Rubin, 'Penelope's perspective: character from plot', in J. M. Bremer, I. J. F. De Jong, and J. Kallf (edd.), *Homer: Beyond Oral Poetry. Recent Trends in Homeric Interpretation* (Amsterdam, 1987), 61–83, at 73–4.

¹⁰ M. A. Katz, *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (Princeton, 1991), 146–7.

¹¹ See Kessels (n. 3), 94; R. B. Rutherford, *Homer: Odyssey, Books 19 and 20* (Cambridge, 1992), 194–5; Pratt (n. 6), 149.

dream (see 535 ἀλλ' ἄγε μοι τὸν ὄνειρον . . .). In her confusion, she believes the dream which she saw and which will come true to be deceptive. By contrast, she considers as possible another dream which will not be fulfilled: in the house of her new husband she will dream of the life she had in Odysseus' palace.

III. CONCLUSIONS

This is the only dream in the Homeric poems that contains its own explanation. In all the other examples (appearances of gods: *Il.* 2.20–34, *Od.* 6.20–40, appearances of the dead: *Il.* 23.65–101, images made by gods: *Od.* 4.795–841, etc.) the meaning is clear and interpretation unnecessary.

As in the dream, then so in reality, it is Odysseus who clarifies; on one occasion transformed into an eagle, on another transformed into a beggar.¹² Penelope's reaction in lines 552–3 is completely spontaneous. She has not yet sensed the meaning of the dream. The Odysseus of reality confirms the interpretation offered by the Odysseus of the dream (555–8). No one can dispute his words, which are distinguished by the weight of authority (556–7).

For Penelope, the dream informs her of something that she has wished for a long time: the return of Odysseus and the destruction of the suitors.¹³ For Odysseus, the dream is part of the series of omens (18.112–17, 20.102–21) and promises (cf. 13.392–6, 16.170–1, 20.47–51) the purpose of which is to embolden him in his decision to slaughter the suitors. As for the reader, Duckworth's observation that the dream aims to remind us of the inescapability of the slaughter of the suitors seems to me correct.¹⁴ Latacz argues that Penelope's dream in Book 19 functions as a mechanism used by the poet so as to bring about the reunion of Penelope and Odysseus. Through the dream, Odysseus is for the first time assured beyond doubt that his wife wishes for nothing more than the destruction of the suitors at the hands of her husband. Moreover, the dream clarifies exactly how this is to be achieved. The answer lies in the bow contest.¹⁵

IV. THE GATES OF HORN AND IVORY

After the description of the dream and the interpretation offered by Odysseus/the beggar, Penelope tells of her own thoughts on the subject of dreams (560–7). She characterizes them as inexplicable (560 ὄνειροι ἀμήχανοι), incoherent (560 ἀκριτόμυθοι), and in parts unrealizable (561).¹⁶ Dreams lack flesh and bones, they

¹² On the basis of *Il.* 1.63, Kessels (n. 3), 152–3, correctly observes: 'it is really remarkable that in the *Odyssey*, in the only instance where a dream seems to need interpretation (19.535ff.), this "interpretation" is not asked from a professional dream-interpreter, but from a beggar who happens to be in the palace'.

¹³ The purpose of Penelope's first dream (4.795–841) was to calm and reassure her of Telemachos' safe return. The third dream (20.87–90) prepares her for the reunion with Odysseus. In the first dream, the poet deliberately leaves open the question of Odysseus' return, as he wants to keep his heroine in a condition of uncertainty and doubt until the last possible moment (23.205–30 where Penelope finally fully recognizes Odysseus).

¹⁴ G. E. Duckworth, *Foreshadowing and Suspense in the Epics of Homer, Apollonius and Vergil* (repr. New York, 1966), 52.

¹⁵ J. Latacz, 'Lesersteuerung durch Traüme. Der Traum Penelopes im 19. Gesang der *Odyssee*', in *Kotinos: Festschrift für E. Simon* (Mainz/Rhein, 1992), 76–89, at 83–5.

¹⁶ 561 οὐδέ τι πάντα τελεῖται ἀνθρώποις: some dreams come true, others do not. Here, πάντες (sc. ὄνειροι) is more appropriate than πάντα. The interpretation 'not all that dreams

are feeble (562 ἀμενηνῶν . . . ὀνείρων). All dreams, she says, derive from one of two gates: one gate is made of horn, the other of ivory (562–3). The dreams derived from the ivory gate are deceptive, whereas the dreams that derive from the gate of horn turn out to be true (564–7). Penelope does not believe that her dream comes from the gate of horn, otherwise she would gladly accept it (568–9). In other words, Penelope does not believe that Odysseus will return and destroy the suitors. For this reason, she decides to marry the one who prevails in the bow contest which she will stage in the morning (570–81). He who excels in a contest in which her husband excelled is worthy to take his place. Penelope seems determined to clear up the situation. The period of postponement and waiting which she prolonged through weaving and then unravelling Laertes' shroud is over. She herself is pessimistic (571–2). One of the suitors will win, and she must follow him, abandoning Odysseus' house, which she will remember in her dreams (579–81).

The gates of ivory and of horn, the association of the first with deceptive and the second with true dreams (562–7), have preoccupied scholars. Kessels,¹⁷ Rutherford,¹⁸ and Pollmann¹⁹ consider them to be an *ad hoc* invention of the poet, a play upon the etymology of the words ἐλέφας–ἐλεφαίρομαι (to deceive), and κέρας–κραίνω (to fulfil). Wilamowitz²⁰ and Hundt²¹ also seek in the etymology the relation between ivory = deceit and horn = truth. The former, however, attributes lines 564–7 to the compiler of the poem, whilst the latter to the poet. By contrast, Rank argues that the two gates of dreams are not an *ad hoc* invention on the part of Homer, as mention has already been made of them at 4.809.²² Highbarger locates the origin of this belief in the mythologies of Egypt and Mesopotamia.²³ Russo believes that the etymological coupling of ἐλέφας–ἐλεφαίρομαι, κέρας–κραίνω is probably a creation of the poet. He cannot, however, explain the origin of the symbolism horn = truth, ivory = deceit.²⁴ Amory, on the basis of certain passages such as 19.211 (Odysseus' eyes remain motionless, as though they were made of horn) and 19.55–6 (Penelope sits on a chair made of ivory and silver), argues that in the poem horn is associated with Odysseus, who knows the whole truth, whilst ivory is associated with Penelope, who is ignorant of the truth.²⁵ Some of the ancient scholars interpreted the difference between the ivory and horn gates on the basis of associations such as horn–cornea, ivory–tooth and the belief that one should have more faith in what one sees than in what is said. Others explain the truth/deceit of the horn and ivory gates respectively on the basis of the transparency/lack of transparency of the material from which they are made.

foretell comes true' (see R. Hampe, *Homer. Odyssee. Neue Übersetzung, Nachwort und Register*, [Stuttgart, 1979], ad loc.) does not fit in with what comes next. According to the poem (564–7), every dream which comes from the ivory gate proves to be false, whereas the dream which comes from the gate of horn comes true.

¹⁷ See Kessels (n. 3), 106–9.

¹⁸ See Rutherford (n. 11), 196 on 564–5.

¹⁹ K. Pollman, 'Etymologie, Allegorese und epische Struktur. Zu den Toren der Träume bei Homer und Vergil', *Philologus* 137 (1993), 232–51, at 233.

²⁰ U. v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Die Heimkehr des Odysseus. Neue homerische Untersuchungen* (Berlin, 1927), 87.

²¹ J. Hundt, *Der Traumglaube bei Homer* (Greifswald, 1935), 78–81.

²² L. Rh. Rank, *Etymologiseering en verwante verschijnselen bij Homerus* (Assen, 1951), 105.

²³ E. L. Highbarger, *The Gates of Dreams: An Archaeological Examination of Vergil, Aeneid VI.893–9* (Baltimore, 1940).

²⁴ See Russo (n. 4), 103 on 562–3.

²⁵ See A. Amory, 'The gates of horn and ivory', *YCS* 20 (1966), 1–57, at 50–7.

Anyone can see through horn (!), but no one can see through ivory (*Schol. in Od.* 19.562, 563, Eust. *Comm. in Od.* 19.562).

In my judgement, the difference between the two gates can be explained thus: in contrast with horn, ivory is a material which can be striking and impressive. A gleaming appearance is often deceptive, whereas truth (represented by horn) frequently goes unnoticed. Dreams which derive from the gate of horn make less of an impression, but are likely to be fulfilled (see also Servius, *Comm. in Verg. Aen.* VI. 893 [122ff. Thilo-Hagen]).

It is not easy to clarify to what extent the gates of dreams are an invention of the poet or contain within them some popular belief of which we are unaware. The distinction between two things, where one is positive and the other negative, appears elsewhere in the Homeric poems (e.g. *Il.* 24.527–8: Zeus' jars with good and bad gifts). This is, then, a favoured mode of thought of the poet.

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