

The Rainbow Connection: The Lovers, The Dreamers, and Penelope

Homer's timeless epic, The Odyssey, is a work widely open for interpretation, and book 19 is no exception. In that book, one finds odd, illogical, and sometimes startling interaction between two key characters, the beggar Odysseus and circumspect Penelope. The following paper will examine the possibility that the traditional view of Penelope as unaware of her husband's return to Ithaka is not borne out by her dialogue throughout the book. Though well-respected as a strong feminine figure in the classical epics, scholars have repeatedly fallen short of crediting Penelope with full awareness. This examination will focus on her account of a bizarre dream of a portent.

Penelope's dream is not typical of Homeric portents. Dreams and the divining of the future can be seen throughout Homer's epic: Teiresias reveals Odysseus's way home, Athene sends Penelope a dream in the form of her sister, Theoclymenus reads an augury. However, Penelope's dream in book 19, as told to Odysseus, is unique in several aspects. These unique aspects lead to the consideration of the possibility that the dream is, in fact, a fabrication.

Penelope's dream is not experienced firsthand by the reader, but is related to the beggar Odysseus in conversation by the queen. As she says, "Come, listen to a dream of mine" (19.535). Previous examples of dreams, in both the Iliad and the Odyssey, are seen as they occur: in book 4, the audience is told by Homer (without the use of a medium such as Penelope) that Athene sends the queen of Ithaka a dream. Quite cleverly, by choosing to have it told secondhand, Homer leaves it up to his audience to decide whether the dream is true, altered, or completely contrived.

The nature of the dream augury is unnecessarily crude and brutal. Penelope states that "the great eagle...broke the necks of [the geese] and killed them" (19.538-39). Previous bird signs in the epic do not present the actual killing. For example, a great eagle is seen carrying a goose in its talons in book 15; however, no details of the actual slaying of the goose are seen or conveyed. Even more compelling may be the eagle's treatment of the dead geese. The great bird of prey destroys the twenty geese and leaves their bodies where they once stood "so the whole twenty lay dead about the house" (19.540). The eagle does not proceed to consume the geese. Instead, it lays wanton destruction upon them and leaves them for

dead, a wholly unnatural event. Auguries are read from birds acting in a natural way, whether they be flying in formation or capturing an animal for food. This eagle brutalizes twenty geese and leaves every last one for dead.

Penelope's dream is not a true augury, though it presents itself as such. Auguries are present throughout the epic, but previously have always been real-life portents. Auguries do not typically come in the form of dreams; instead, prophets such as the famous Tiresias divine the future from the actions that birds take in nature. This can be seen twice in book 15. First, Helen interprets an eagle, carrying a goose, flying into the distance (15.172-78); later, Theoclymenus reads a falcon grasping a dove (15.535-40). Book 19 is the first time one finds an augury within a dream and the first time a prophet is not present to interpret an augury. One must consider whether this augury can even be considered an augury at all, since it does not hold true to what an augury is at its most basic: a natural event interpreted by prophets.

Penelope's dream is not open for interpretation, though she asks the beggar Odysseus to "interpret it for me" (19.535). After the eagle slaughters the geese, it returns and tells Penelope that she should not fear: "The geese are suitors, and I, the eagle, have been a bird of portent, but now I am your own husband come home" (19.546-49). It is unusual that the dream would contain not only symbolism, but also a succinct explanation for that symbolism. Auguries or metaphors present symbols from which men are meant to divine their own answers. Conversely, dreams present messages and orders from the mouth of a god where interpretation is generally unnecessary. To contain both a symbol and its meaning within a dream is oddly puzzling, considering that this combination is not seen anywhere else in Homer's epic. Even more puzzling is that, after the beggar Odysseus responds to Penelope's query, Penelope continues to act bewildered by the dream: "Dreams are things hard to interpret, hopeless to puzzle out" (19.560-61). Considering that she is repeatedly referred to as "circumspect" and has shown her own Odyssean cunning on more than one occasion throughout the epic, it is more logical to assume that Penelope is not completely truthful in her bewilderment than to assume that this blatant prophecy has baffled her.

If one reasons that the dream, due to its inconsistencies with other Homeric dreams, is indeed a fabrication, then one must consider that Penelope might have an ulterior motive for telling it. Certainly, she has no reason to lie maliciously to the beggar. When questioned about Odysseus by the circumspect Penelope, he gives her perfect answers. The beggar is able to relate every detail of his ‘encounter’ with Odysseus, and Penelope has “aroused in her the passion for weeping, as she recognized the certain proof Odysseus had given” (19.249-50). Clearly, she appreciates his answer as truth by stating, “You now shall be my friend and respected here in the palace” (19.253-54). She then goes even further, offering Odysseus guest gifts in quantity far greater than deserved by any beggar. Penelope’s actions here conflict with the idea of a fabricated dream meant to either mislead or further test the beggar. However, this conflict may be resolved by assuming that Penelope has recognized Odysseus through his actions and words, and that the dream is, in reality, a clever way of communicating between the two wily Ithakans. Realizing this possible interpretation, one may relatively easily break down and reevaluate the true meaning of her “dream.”

Penelope is well aware of the traitorous actions of her maidservants. This is made clear when Melantho, a maidservant and traitor, scolds the beggar Odysseus and tries to throw him out of the house: “Take yourself out of the door, you wretch...or you may be forced out” (19.68-69). Hearing Melantho, Penelope responds in anger, scolding, “Always I know well that monstrous thing you are doing you bold and shameless bitch... You understood all this very well, because you had heard it from me, how in my halls I intended to question the stranger” (19.91-95). Melantho clearly knows that Penelope wishes to speak with the stranger; attempting to throw him out is obvious sabotage of the queen’s wishes. In the face of such treachery, although Penelope may wish to converse with Odysseus over his plans for the suitors, she realizes that to speak openly of such a thing would most certainly perk the ears of the maidservants. They would then relate their plans to the suitors and ruin the element of surprise. Instead, I suggest that Penelope is speaking in code, knowing that while Odysseus, the wiliest of men, will be able to comprehend her meaning, the foolish maidservants will not.

Penelope tells Odysseus to “listen to a dream of mine and interpret it” (19.535). However, as was discussed, her dream with its augury requires no interpretation; its meaning is plainly conveyed by the eagle. This blatancy is further supported when the beggar Odysseus replies that “It is impossible to read this dream...another way...The suitors’ doom is evident for one and all. Not one will avoid his death and destruction” (19.555-58). Odysseus, the most cunning of the Achaians, does not even attempt to interpret the dream; instead, he simply reaffirms what has already been stated. Penelope may not truly be seeking interpretation but rather an answer to whether he will destroy the suitors and end his twenty year absence (just as the eagle ends the lives of the twenty geese). In this way, by confirming the eagle’s explanation, Odysseus is able to tell Penelope that the suitors are doomed, without arousing suspicion that he is more than a common beggar.

Penelope reacts unexpectedly by disregarding him, replying that “dreams are hard things to interpret, hopeless to puzzle out, and people find that not all of them end in anything” (19.560-61). If she truly believes that interpretation is hopeless and is not willing to consider his answer, why would she have asked for his interpretation in the first place? Immediately casting off his “interpretation” seems far too nonchalant. It seems more likely that, having received her answer, Penelope is minimizing the dream’s implications so as to further dissolve the suspicions of her treacherous maidservants.

In disregarding the dream, Penelope may be communicating another aspect of the suitors’ demise. She tells Odysseus that there are two gates from which dreams come, one of ivory and the other of horn. She goes on to state that those dreams that come “through the gates of the polished horn accomplish the truth” (19.566-67). These gates are peculiarly absent from Greek mythology and are not brought up elsewhere in Homer’s epic. It seems as though the gates may be both a fabrication of Penelope’s, and Homer’s, meant to imply that “truth” or righteousness (such as the eradication of the immoral and abusive suitors from the oikos or household) may be achieved through polished horn. Penelope’s statements about the gates may seem rather arbitrary until one reads book 21. There, one finds that Odysseus’s bow is both “well-polished” (21.281) and made of “horn” (21.395). Coupled with the imminent contest of the bow, it

is possible that the 'gate of polished horn' is, in actuality, another coded message: a message meant to tell Odysseus that he may achieve their "truth" through the use of his bow.

Until this point Penelope has constantly recalled how she wishes to "keep faith with [her] husband's bed and regard the voice of the people" (19.527). Now, in the face of the beggar's promises that he has "heard of the present homecoming of Odysseus" (19.269-70) and the interpretation of her dream foretelling the return of her husband, she has suddenly given up hope. Penelope shows no wish to carry on the conversation which she began and abruptly announces that she will soon marry; she will choose the suitor who is able to string and fire Odysseus's "well-polished" bow through twelve axes. This new revelation seems ill-advised and rash if it is to be taken at face value.

In addition, moments prior to the interview, Telemachus and Odysseus stripped the great hall's walls of armor and weaponry; the entire interview goes on in the great hall, yet not once does Penelope question the change in decor. This obliviousness seems totally inconsistent with the "circumspect" Penelope that has been seen throughout the *Odyssey*. For instance, a far better interpretation may be that she is helping Odysseus set up the piggish suitors for their own destruction. She is well aware that only Odysseus will be able to string his great bow, and so he will ultimately be the only one armed. Other interpretations for her change of heart are ultimately paradoxical. If Penelope truly wishes to marry again, then why would she choose a contest that no one but Odysseus can win? If she is simply looking to delay marriage further, why would she lie to a man to whom she has already revealed so much?

The beggar Odysseus's last words to Penelope in book 19 imply a mutual understanding: "do not put this contest off any longer. Before these people can handle the well-wrought bow...Odysseus of the many designs will be here with you" (19.584-587). To this, Penelope has no offer of protest, except to announce that she is returning to bed. However, considering the points brought up here, one could almost imagine Penelope walking away, with an almost imperceptible grin upon her face, and the knowledge that after more than two decades, her husband has returned.

Book 19 of Homer's *Odyssey* most certainly shows off the complexity of Homer's epic. The conversation between the beggar Odysseus and Penelope alone can be interpreted in several, equally

feasible, fashions. The possibility that Penelope is cunning enough to recognize her husband and communicate with him in a cryptic fashion is in no way a certain thing. However, considering the intricacy of the book and the bizarre nature of Penelope's dream, it is, most certainly, a viable possibility.