UNRAVELLING PENELOPE: THE CONSTRUCTION
OF THE FAITHFUL WIFE IN HOMER'S HEROINES

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We know when we read the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that we are given a view not of thirteenth-century B.C.E. Mycenaean culture as it was, but of that world as Homer reconstructed it at some later point, probably in the eighth century B.C.E. The poems provide a fictionalized account of events in an early stage of Greek culture through the eyes of a poet of a succeeding stage of that culture. The Mycenaean setting and the characters' basis in what are presumably historical figures create an impression of historical accuracy. But rather than clearly describing either the thirteenth-century or the eighth-century period of Greek history, the poems layer the two, giving us a palimpsestic account of the culture's development. For instance, the heroic code Sarpedon describes to Glaukos in which glory is the preponderant virtue is appropriate to a warrior culture like that of Mycenae, whereas a motive more appropriate to a culture centered in a polis animates Hektor, who fights to preserve his wife and child. Likewise, the extended family structure of Priam's court is associated with the Mycenaean age, while the nuclear families of Hektor and Andromache and of Odysseus and Penelope represent later stages of social organization.[1]

The story the poems together tell may itself be understood to represent the process of cultural transformation as it occurred at an even earlier period. The story of the Trojan War recounts a battle between what may be seen as two stages of a cultural continuum, with the Trojans representing the earlier Eastern stage, though the movement from the earlier stage to the later Greek stage has been refigured since then as a distinct cultural break. Comparative study of Greek and earlier cultures (I continue to use this term for lack of a better) supplies multiple examples of Greek revisions of materials from earlier Eastern cultures. For instance, the Greek gods revise earlier gods, who are then read back in the poem in their Greek versions onto the Eastern cultures out of which they developed, figured as Troy, when we see both Trojans and Greeks worshipping the same pantheon. Helen herself (semidivine in her familiar incarnation) may derive from and be a revision of a vegetation goddess from an earlier culture.[2] The victory of

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1. Arthur 1973, 10-12. Morris 1986 offers an interesting variation on this palimpsestic view, seeing the text as a layering of values and institutions accepted without question by the eighth-century audience as a whole with propaganda for values and institutions preferred by the elite. This propaganda, he argues, is afforded authority through its association in the poems with the heroic past.

2. Although it has antecedent versions in other cultures (for instance, Helen as vegetation goddess carried off may be a version of the Persephone story explaining the change of seasons), when this story is revised for its new audience it speaks to this new audience's concerns. For a detailed treatment of Helen's evolution from divinity to heroic human across time, see Clader 1976, 47-83; Skutsch 1987; and Austin 1994, 76-77, 85-89. Austin and Suzuki 1989 deal principally with later rather than earlier versions of Helen, but their discussions of the metamorphic nature of the post-Iliadic Helen segue neatly out of an earlier history of transformations within the mythological background of Helen as nature goddess.

the Greeks over the Trojans, while it may also have a specific historic referent, depicts the process of cultural upheaval in metaphor, *post hoc*. Homer's poems serve then as the foundation myth for the "new" culture. And the transformational process continues beyond the time of Homer's composition at a semantic level as succeeding generations constitute new interpretive communities and find new meanings in the texts.

Though the poems tell a tale of cultural revision, a process that implicitly involves a recognition that the culture they describe is not the first or original culture, they also attempt to mute awareness of the derivative status implicit in non-originality. Awareness of the existence of earlier cultures links Homer to all his successor poets within the Western tradition, who also work with a consciousness of belatedness. In fact, Homer's poems can be helpfully read as protomodernist, and viewed through the filter of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (which, like many texts, clarifies aspects of its ancestor texts retroactively). Joyce specifically entitles his comment on the epic tradition *Ulysses* (choosing the Roman name) rather than *Odysseus* in order to mark the impossibility of return to any origin and the incongruity of all accounts with one another. But the *Odyssey* claims that the possibility of such return does exist through its tale of Odysseus' successful *nostos* and thus makes a claim for the existence of a stable, basic Truth, setting itself up as ground zero, from which later poets must depart. This claim's construction is one of the poem's plots: the manufacture of a "truth" out of multiple versions of reality. This manufacture, I will argue, is accomplished through Penelope's confirmation of Odysseus' story.[3]

But the poems do not mute the awareness of non-originality entirely, apparently because they need some awareness of the relativity of cultures to create meaning. As these poems demonstrate, the possibility of alternative interpretations is an essential constituent of meaning (an awareness Joyce reemphasizes, centuries later). For example, Greek culture takes on its special identity through comparison with other cultures—it *means* in its distinctness from its predecessors (represented in

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3. Katz 1991 holds relatedly that the "truth" of Odysseus' and Penelope's happy reunion is constructed in the course of the poem out of a number of other possible scenarios. As will become clear, however, her discussion differs from mine in being principally structural—she regards Penelope's ambiguous position up to the point of the reunion as emblematic of the text's basic investment in indeterminacy, rather than as specific to her situation (192-95).

Peradotto 1990 argues, differently, that the poem's ground-zero is the potential for multiple narratives. Following Bakhtin, he holds that the poem is heteroglossic, embodying a dialogue between unifying ("centripetal") and diverging ("centrifugal") forces. The centripetal force "exert[s] a unifying, centralizing, homogenizing and hierarchizing influence [and] tend[s] to be closely associated with dominant political power, with the official and heroic." The centrifugal force, on the other hand, "exert[s] a disunifying, decentralizing, stratifying, denormatizing influence [and] tend[s] to be associated with the disempowered [and] the popular . . . " (53). I am in accord with his argument (63) that in the text as a whole neither force is allowed to dominate. Thus we get the refusal of an ending in Book 24, to balance the series of standard climaxes (vengeance upon the enemy and reunions of fathers and sons and of husband and wife) that mark Odysseus' return to Ithaka and culminate in Book 23. I suggest, however, that the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope does represent the culminating assertion of the centripetal force, through the suppression of divergent views with respect to the female will, an issue under debate through both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Of the two final books, Book 23 with its satisfactions of closure has tended to receive the greater attention from most readers.

these poems as the Trojans); and new stages of Greek culture take on distinct identity through their difference from earlier stages. It would seem that cultural texts (and thus the cultures they represent) must be continually remade in order to continue to be meaningful—either to the culture that constructs them in the first place or to later readers of the texts. And one might say that the palimpsest that is the Homeric poems has continued to accrete across the centuries in the Western epics that respond to and revise Homer.

In what follows I shall argue that across the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* another revision occurs: over the course of the twenty-year plot related in the two poems together, Homer transforms Helen into Penelope in a two-stage process. First Helen is herself revised, and then she is made over into Penelope. Though Helen and Penelope operate at the level of plot as two characters, at another level they represent competing versions of an ideal female heroine and so work as variations on one character. The poems tell the story of the erasure from possibility of one kind of heroine, the initial Helen character—a self-willed woman who may choose her own fate and her lovers without censure from the community. This Helen does not appear in the poem directly, but haunts it nonetheless—an early version of Stesichorus' phantom Helen. In her place we get a set of false alternatives, defined in terms of their relations to their husbands: Penelope, the faithful (and therefore good) wife, and Helen, the unfaithful (and therefore bad) wife. These "alternatives" turn out finally to involve only one option. The revised Helen proves not to be an actual possibility—for heroine status within the text or, arguably, as a model for female behavior in the world at large. This Helen plays an untenable role that operates by negative example to enforce the acceptance of the Penelopean role. Through this transformation, I will argue, the poem makes a case for the naturalness of patriarchy.[4]

This dynamic works to support a related dynamic within the poems' narrative structure. Though a Helen-Penelope revision would seem to imply recognition of multiple possibilities of interpretation of the female role, it is put to work, paradoxically, as part of an argument for the existence of a stable Truth. The general case for Truth and the particular case for the naturalness of patriarchy are made at once, proving to be mutually supportive. The linking factor is hierarchy: of male over female, and of one version of events over another. The connection emerges in the movement from one poem's heroine to the next.[5]

In essential ways both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are stories about their leading women, though the smallness of the speaking parts given Helen and Penelope sometimes makes them seem to serve as little more than pretexts for the adventure stories that unfold around them. This smallness of role has a story of its own

4. Wohl 1993 likewise reads Penelope as a model of exemplary female behavior within patriarchy. She too understands the example to operate through contrast with dangerously unsubmissive females, though she locates the points of contrast within the *Odyssey* per se in Kirke, Kalypso, Arete, Nausikaa, and Klytaimestra, as well as in Helen as she appears in Book 4.

5. The use of the term "heroine" is perhaps arguable, both at a technical level and because I have just held that Helen is a type of heroine specifically under revision here. I use it to hold in mind the possibility that such a woman might be understood to be heroic, though precisely on terms under debate in these poems.

behind it, which the poems tell along with the tales of travel and of war, though necessarily less explicitly. And the story of the repression of the women's stories, a quiet but urgent force within the poem, does as much toward creating our still strong interest in these texts as either of the more overtly developed tales.[6]

I do not mean, in framing this argument, to make claims for a pre-Hellenic moment when women were free to choose against patriarchy, nor do I mean to argue against such claims, since convincing evidence for either argument is lacking. Instead, I mean simply to describe what seems to me to be an essential dynamic within these poems. After all, either reading of history might account for this dynamic (as presumably might others). A scenario of early matriarchy would certainly provide a plausible background. On the other hand, as Joan Bamberger has demonstrated, cautionary stories of failed matriarchies (which prove by negative example that women are not fit to rule) do not mean that the matriarchies actually ever existed. Instead their characters may work as straw women, held up as arguments against change and for the continuation of the patriarchal status quo.[7] Along like lines, we need not assume that Homer's poems tell of a historical transformation of an earlier world in which women had greater freedom to express their will. Nonetheless, some female expression of will outside patriarchal constraints is recognized as a possibility here, and the poems portray that possibility's repression.

I. Helen

The revision of Helen into Penelope begins with a more local revision, that of the story of Helen per se within the layers of the *Iliad* and then in the *Odyssey*. The metamorphic quality of Helen has been remarked upon by several critics, though the specific transformations they point to differ from the one treated here. For instance, Norman Austin in his 1994 study notes that the Helen of epic evolves out of earlier cult figures, and he goes on to trace post-Homeric changes in her myth introduced by Stesichorus, Herodotus, and Euripides. Noting that the Helen of the *Odyssey* differs immensely from the Helen of the *Iliad*, he suggests that the *Odyssey*'s Helen be read as the first transformation of the shameless Helen he describes in the *Iliad* into an honorable character. In remarking this change he echoes Mihoko Suzuki, though the terms of the change he notes in Helen differ from those

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6. Our continued cultural attraction to this story line was suggested recently by resonances with my thesis in a popular film, an Arnold Schwarzenegger thriller called *True Lies*. Therein, a warrior hero suspects his wife Helen of unfaithfulness. After some testing, however, she proves not only to have been faithful but to be a true helpmeet: "Helen" becomes "Penelope" in the course of the tale. Harry, the hero, combines elements of Menelaos, Odysseus, and Hektor. Once Helen proves worthy, a character called Juno takes over the role of female antagonist. Even the title *True Lies*, which has little apparent relation to the film, resonates with Homer's poems.

7. Bamberger 1974. Alternatively, one might read Helen's story psychoanalytically—as a tale of the revision of woman's position in the male child's view, out of the role of phallic mother (a patriarchal term for the pre-patriarchal) and into the role of obedient wife; see Austin 1994.

she suggests.[8] Suzuki, who understands Helen to represent male fear of the female Other, goes on to argue that in a succession of epics Helen is further transformed into a series of surrogates.

Homer's recounting of the battle fought over Helen's actions in the *Iliad* involves Helen in very small degree, a state of affairs which often surprises first readers but which second readers barely notice. This is because the poem records the story of the revision of the character Helen from active to passive part. The poem embodies this same revision in its creation of an initial expectation that Helen will play an active part in the poem (since her activities led to the war at Troy), and in its subsequent suppression of that expectation, which is so effective that the failure to fulfill it generally goes unquestioned.

The premise of the battle is a runaway wife, whose right to choose a new mate at will is disputed by her husband. The pursuit of Helen tells of a battle for the control of women's will, and not just control of women per se but of the fruit of their wombs, and through their children of property—in other words, at issue here is the foundation of patriarchy. Though we readers know well that by the rules of romance she has no such right to choose, Helen herself has evidently not learned these rules. The daughter of Zeus and the inheritor of property that her husband now holds, she apparently feels personally powerful enough to make her own decisions. Looking at the situation materialistically, and apart from our sense of what is appropriate to romance,[9] we can suspect that Menelaos pursues his runaway wife not least because his holdings at Sparta came to him through marriage. Her departure raises the possibility that she might reclaim her property as well.[10] By the time Homer tells the story, however, the war has been won and this possibility is so remote that it need not even be mentioned.[11]

Though this might have been the story of whether or not Helen has the right to choose to leave, that is not the story we get, because she has already lost that right by the time the story is told. Instead, the *Iliad* begins with the story of Briseis, as

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8. Suzuki 1989. Suzuki, who considers the poets of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* distinct, argues that the poet of the *Iliad* points to the ways in which Helen is scapegoated by the male figures around her, while allowing her a subjectivity, and that the poet refuses to scapegoat her within the frame of the poem as a whole. On the other hand, the poet of the *Odyssey*, she argues, denies Helen subjectivity and participates in her scapegoating. Subjectivity is granted to Penelope instead, who exercises it in a chaste manner, unthreatening to patriarchy.

9. This text does work toward *founding* our modern sense of romance, and so the evolutionary tale the text tells cannot properly be understood via the assumptions appropriate to the romantic plot. Arthur (1973, 14-15) points toward the poem's role in the evolution of the modern concept of romance and notes the linkage of the coming to prominence of romance with the idealization of domestic life and of the nuclear family in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

10. Hektor, in suggesting that Menelaos and Paris ought to spare the lives of their soldiers and fight one-on-one, speaks of their fighting "for Helen and all her possessions" (3.91). This does not *seem* to refer to land but might suggest that possibility.

Throughout this essay English translations of passages from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are taken from Lattimore 1951 and 1965, respectively.

11. For a traditional patriarchal reading of Helen, cf. Ryan 1965, who blames her for the war and characterizes her as "wanton, self-centered, deceitful, bewitching and beguiling" as well as "beautiful and charming" (117).

confirmation of Helen's loss of autonomy.[12] Briseis is faithful,[13] and the story of her being first given to Akhilleus and then redistributed to Agamemnon, and the consequences of this redistribution, together demonstrate not only that women have no choice of lovers but that men operate under rather different constraints: they may be unfaithful to their wives but they may not be untrue to each other. Though the battle over Briseis may seem simply a necessary pretext for the story of Akhilleus' wrath, I suggest it plays a more fundamental role as well, namely, as sign of the completeness of the victory over Helen.

The image of the character Helen that the *Iliad* gives us includes no firm sense of the circumstances under which she left home; the poem works with a double understanding of her motivation. On the one hand, it is indicated that Helen left willingly with Paris. This view of Helen as willing deserter, generally taken to be operative throughout the *Iliad*, does not derive from any clear statement within the poem; it comes instead from a combination of tenuous sources. Foremost among these is Priam's remark to Helen: "I am not blaming you: to me the gods are blameworthy / who drove upon me this sorrowful war against the Akhaians" (3.164-65); we may surmise that some basis for assuming that she was to blame elicited this reassurance. In addition, Helen suggests that she did choose to break away ("when I came hither / following your son, forsaking my chamber, my kinsman, / my grown child, and the loveliness of girls my own age," 3.174-75) and calls herself a "slut" (κυνώπιδος) upon noting that she can call Agamemnon kinsman no longer (3.180). This evidence is hardly conclusive, however, as the word may also reflect the judgment of society against any unfaithfulness, even one that is involuntary. Likewise, in Book 6 she calls herself a "nasty bitch evil-intriguer," suggesting a generalized agency and a negative judgment of that agency, within a context (here she seems to attempt to seduce Hektor) that supports a generally negative view of her on the part of readers. From outside the *Iliad*, Menelaos' ironic revision of Helen's claim (*Odyssey* 4) that she had switched her sympathies back to the Achaian camp early on also points to a view of Helen as a willing participant in her move.

In Helen's scenes at the end of Book 3 and in Book 24, we get even more ambiguous evidence that might support either reading. In the scene with Aphrodite (3.383-448), Helen asks: "Why are you still so stubborn to beguile me?" (399). Her use of "still" suggests that the goddess exercised a similar agency in Helen's departure with Paris from Sparta. The question is readable either as an admission of a kind of responsibility (when Aphrodite is understood as a personification of Helen's desire) or an opposite claim of non-responsibility. In Book 24 Helen employs verbs to describe her history which simply describe the sequence of her habitations, without any suggestion of her motive for moving (Alexandros "brought me here to Troy," and "I came with him," 763-64).

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12. Suzuki (1989, 21-29) notes that Agamemnon's usurpation of Akhilleus' prize, Briseis, ironically parallels Paris' taking of Menelaos' wife, Helen. This parallel operates only insofar as Helen is understood to have exercised no choice in her departure from Sparta, a view possible, I argue, only in a tale told after the war has ended.

13. That is, she expresses a desire to remain with Akhilleus (1.348), the man with whom she has been told she will be joined as "wedded lawful wife" (19.298).

At the same time, the *Iliad* also suggests that Helen was a victim, stolen against her will. Thus in Book 2 we read:

> Now among them spoke the Gerenian horseman, Nestor . . .
> "Therefore let no man be urgent to take the way homeward
> until after he has lain in bed with the wife of a Trojan
> to avenge Helen's longing to escape and her lamentations." (336, 354-56)

> [Menelaos] himself went among them in the confidence of his valour,
> driving them battleward, since above all his heart was eager
> to avenge Helen's longing to escape and her lamentations. (588-90)

These passages, spoken, respectively, by Nestor to his troops and by the narrator about Menelaos, have been variously rendered by different translators. The grammar of the Greek in the repeated line is ambiguous: τίσασθαι δ᾽ Ἑλένης ὁρμήματά τε στοναχάς τε. The line can be read equally plausibly as "the longing to escape and lamentations *of* Helen" or as "the longing to escape and lamentations undergone *because of* Helen." (In fact, there is no direct mention of "escape" in the Greek here: "ardent struggles" gives the sense of ὁρμήματα more literally.) The parallel implicit in Nestor's use of the phrase suggests the rightness of reading it here as Lattimore does,[14] in a way that assumes that Helen did not choose to go with Paris: the Trojan wives are to be made to "long to escape" or to struggle *as Helen did* from an attacker or kidnapper. The second of the two passages in which this phrase occurs gives extra weight to this reading, suggesting as it does that Menelaos would have an especially strong desire to avenge Helen's longing/struggle and lamentations over her unwelcome plight.

The ambiguity of the Greek per se may also be understood to be meaningful, however. Some interpreters adopt the abduction scenario and argue that two distinct traditions of the circumstances of Helen's departure from Mycenae must intersect in the poem. Those critics and translators who choose the reading of Helen as agent of her own fate do so because they cannot support the incoherence that the abduction reading seems to involve.[15] But references to an abduction need not be understood to be either incoherent or the product of a failure to integrate an alternate, competitive version of the story. Nestor's version of Helen's story might be better read as a rhetorical manipulation, meant to stir the men to fight by holding out before them the revised image of Helen which they are fighting to realize, an image of a Helen who does not, who cannot, choose to leave her husband's side. If Nestor's description of the circumstances of Helen's leaving home does not describe reality as he and his hearers understand it at the point in the story at which he utters it, it does describe the version of reality that the Greeks' triumph at Troy introduces into possibility—if not for Helen herself, then for those women who come after her. The Helen we know is a character in the process of revision, from self-willed woman to obedient wife—from one who causes others to lament to one who laments (to return to the ambiguity in the Greek). Helen is

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14. Fitzgerald 1974, Chapman 1611, and Pope 1720 also read it thus.
15. E.g., Murray 1946 and Lang, Leaf, and Myers 1883.

even made to participate in this revisionary process, when looking back on herself she employs the language of patriarchal judgment and calls herself a "slut" and a "nasty bitch." The revision occurs not within the linear plot development of the *Iliad*, but palimpsestically. As we have seen, various views of her motives and situation appear at different points rendered ambiguously. Thus throughout the *Iliad*, Helen is maintained in an enigmatic position, her motives hovering between two possible interpretations: either she chose to go (and is therefore judged negatively), or she was forced to go (and is therefore judged positively, or at least less negatively). The possibility that she might have chosen to go *and* might remain worthy does not arise, but it is present in the poem nonetheless as an actively suppressed subtext.

We can read the battle at Troy as specifically a battle, not over Helen herself, but over how Helen's flight will be interpreted: Did she jump or was she pushed? Through the contradictory explanations of the circumstances of Helen's departure for Troy, the *Iliad* portrays palimpsestically the process of a woman's transformation from self-willed agent to victim of the will of her seducer—a victim who, given the chance, would have remained true to her husband and the laws of civilization in the *Iliad*. The move from Helen toward Penelope tells a story of transformation very like that told in the change of the Furies into the Eumenides in Aischylos' *Oresteia*.

In the *Odyssey*, Helen appears in two versions: a Helen who retains the name and general history (though the specifics continue open to dispute), and a second, fully revised Helen who appears with a new name and a new setting in which to demonstrate her altered character: this is Penelope, stalwart against her suitors, and possible as a character specifically because of the transformation of Helen that the *Iliad* recounts and demonstrates.

While the possibilities for women's action are revised through Helen's example across the *Iliad*, Helen as character is only half rehabilitated. In the *Odyssey* she is made to recognize her fault and to attempt to disclaim it. During Telemakhos' visit to Sparta, Helen tells how Odysseus slipped into Troy, disguised as a beggar. She admits to having chosen to leave with Paris, but claims as well a change of heart before the war's end—a change that might mitigate the censure of her in the terms of romance (4.233-64). Menelaos, however, then quietly denies Helen's claims to an early return to the fold of legal desire, holding her responsible for her flight and linking her with yet another lover, Deïphobus, thus demonstrating her continued lasciviousness (4.265-89). Again the choice is reduced to one between good (faithful) and bad (unfaithful) women. While no option to change one's mind about whom one loves and yet be worthy remains for women, this option stays open to the men (in spite of the lip service paid their fidelity at points).

Helen's decision to leave is not recognized as one that can possibly be respected, because the romantic narrative guarantees negative judgment of any infidelity on the part of a woman. Indeed, even the fact of her recognition of her loss and of her attempt to make the best of it by adopting the patriarchal scale of judgment is here turned against her: Menelaos' irony makes her look sneaky as well. Her example serves within the poems to give warning of the ineffectiveness of women's attempts

to choose for themselves and of the way all those who make such attempts will wish they had not. Though Penelope's story is presented as exceptional and Klytaimestra's as the norm by Agamemnon in Books 11 and 24 of the *Odyssey*, Penelope's example is not offered as one of two available models of conduct between which women may choose. Instead, over the course of the poems, Penelope's comes to be understood as the only acceptable model of female behavior. Helen's story is retained along with Klytaimestra's to assist through contrast in promoting the Penelopean model.[16] The dislike that Helen arouses in readers invested in the pleasures of romantic endings works as further dissuasion from similar behavior by those same readers.

II. Penelope

In Book 23 of the *Odyssey*, Eurykleia presents Penelope with evidence that Odysseus has at last returned, after twenty years of absence. But though Eurykleia attests to having recognized on his thigh "another proof that is very clear . . . / that scar, which once the boar with his white teeth inflicted" (23.73-74), and though Penelope herself sees some similarity to Odysseus in the stranger before her, she does not run to welcome him. Instead she reminds Eurykleia that "it would be hard for you to baffle the purposes / of the everlasting gods, although you are very clever" (23.81-82), apparently believing it perfectly possible that a pseudo-Odysseus could have been fabricated by the gods to trick her. Her initial response to the revealed Odysseus is hardly enthusiastic:

> She sat a long time in silence, and her heart was wondering.
> Sometimes she would look at him, with her eyes full upon him,
> and again would fail to know him in the foul clothing he wore. (23.93-95)

Telemakhos finds this reaction cruel and tells her that

> No other woman, with spirit as stubborn as yours, would keep back
> as you are doing from her husband who, after much suffering,
> came at last in the twentieth year back to his own country. (23.100-02)

Like Telemakhos, some readers have wondered at Penelope's slowness to welcome in the face of such evidence. This response would seem to have everything to do with these readers' insider status: they know that this is Odysseus, and they do not see why Penelope should not as well. But there are good reasons for Penelope's slowness, both those that she cites (her stunned state and her awareness of the gods' trickiness[17]) and one that readers know well but may choose to forget at this point: the fact that the character we know as Odysseus has presented himself as a liar throughout the narrative. While Penelope would not know this specifically, she could well be generally wary of the trickiness of strangers (indeed, further on, she speaks of having armed herself against imposters).

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16. Wohl 1993; Katz 1991, 80, 185-86; and Felson-Rubin 1994, 67, 81-82, 106-07.

17. This awareness itself is a sign of Penelope's canniness—the *mētis* that makes her a worthy mate to Odysseus in most readings. Cf. Murnaghan 1986 and Winkler 1990, 129-61.

Every other time that Odysseus has told a story, it has involved some degree of obfuscation. And just days before he meets up with Penelope, we readers witness the consummate display of his mendacious powers in the stories he tells to the disguised Athene (Book 13) and to Eumaios (Book 14). The stories he tells are plausible and detailed. But Athene, in on the secret, knows the account that he gives her of his arrival is untrue and tells him so:

"It would be a sharp one, and a stealthy one, who would ever get past you
in any contriving; even if it were a god against you.
You wretch, so devious, never weary of tricks, then you would not
even in your own country give over your ways of deceiving
and your thievish tales. They are near to you in your very nature.
But come, let us talk no more of this, for you and I both know
sharp practice, since you are far the best of all mortal
men for counsel and stories, and I among all the divinities
am famous for wit and sharpness . . . " (13.291-99)

As listeners also "in the know," we are flattered into thinking of ourselves in Athene's omniscient position. But as we listen to the next story, we may wonder what differentiates the "lie" Odysseus tells the swineherd from the "truth" he tells us, given that we are similarly constituted audiences—i.e., we both enjoy a good story and we both count ourselves as canny auditors.[18] Eumaios accepts the story of the traveller's life, but doubts the story about his recent encounters with Odysseus:

"O sorrowful stranger, truly you troubled the spirit in me,
by telling me all these details, how you suffered and wandered;
yet I think some part is in no true order, and you will not persuade me
in your talk about Odysseus. Why should such a man as you are
lie recklessly to me? But I myself know the whole truth
of what my lord's homecoming is, how all the gods hated him
so much that they did not make him go down in the land of the Trojans,
nor in the arms of his friends, after he had wound up the fighting.
So all the Achaians would have heaped a grave mound over him,
and he would have won great fame for himself and his son hereafter.
But now ingloriously the stormwinds have caught and carried him." (14.361-71)

Eumaios accepts those aspects of the story that readers "know" to be lies—the tales of this visitor's birth in Krete and subsequent adventures. On the other hand, he doubts the story of Odysseus' imminent return—what we "know" to be true. This he does, not because he has any solid evidence against the possibility of return, but because he has fabricated a narrative of his own to explain his master's absence. His acceptance of the lie and his rejection of the truth are part of what makes

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18. I ride the line here between understanding Odysseus as the narrator and recognizing that officially he is not. But the poem rides that line too, both because Odysseus, though spoken of in the third person in the framing narratives, is portrayed retelling his own adventures in Books 9-12, and because in Book 13, although Odysseus is not purported to be the narrator here, the narratorial voice at several points addresses Eumaios directly (προσέφης Εὔμαιε συβῶτα; where Lattimore renders as "O swineherd Eumaios," Fitzgerald gives "O my swineherd"), a comment which would seem to identify him with Odysseus. Relatedly, Katz (1991, 189) points to the blurring of levels of representation—i.e., narrative action and the stories told within the action.

Odysseus and us readers so fond of Eumaios; by comparison, his outsider status makes us more aware of and pleased with our insider knowledge. But his gullibility puts the status of the whole narrative into question, when we recognize that we readers have no greater assurance of the truth of what we "know" to be so than he does. We too are listening to a narrative told by Odysseus, well-known liar, and we too tend to put our faith in some narratives rather than others simply because they appeal to us. Could this not also be the case with the narrative of Odysseus' return to Ithaka? And what view of the text would such an understanding involve?

At a basic level such a view would require seeing the text as self-subverting—as bringing into question the usual terms of fiction, which generally allow the author to name his characters and to attribute stable identities to them without questions from the audience. Pucci 1987, Peradotto 1990, and Katz 1991 all examine ways in which this text draws attention to its own fictedness and to its ambiguities. Katz, for instance, understands that the *Odyssey* as a whole concerns itself integrally with demonstrating the interplay of indeterminacy and determinacy in the construction of meaning in narrative. Where determinate meanings have long held critical attention, she is most interested in the dynamics of indeterminacy within the *Odyssey* and argues that of all the poem's characters Penelope embodies the principle of indeterminacy most sustainedly. Pucci and Peradotto, working with similar views of the poem's balance of forces, make cases for Odysseus as the central figure of instability.[19] Though we share premises, these arguments differ from mine in that they speak generally of the interaction of indeterminacy and determinacy in the narrative, giving less weight to the purposes to which it might be put or to the ways in which particular readings are specified while others are excluded by the interaction of the text and by those interpretive communities from which the text springs and to which it speaks.

The series of tales which Odysseus tells across the poem and the emphasis on how his story-telling abilities shape what happens to him make this story a meta-story—a story about story-telling and its role in the construction of reality.[20] (This issue of the interpenetration of story and reality is particularly relevant when one deals, as we do here, with narratives that have likewise integrally shaped the culture to which they speak.) Odysseus' multiple identity narratives as well as his many adventures (which might be viewed as travels through a series of alternative worlds) suggest the multiplicity and contingency of reality, especially since the tales he tells have actual effects. Paradoxically his "false" claim to be Nobody, a man without a name or identity, in his confrontation with Polyphemos may represent his protean role within the poem most "truly."[21] Odysseus' own identification of himself as a Kretan in the stories he tells to Athene and Eumaios brings Zeno's paradox to mind: if all Kretans are liars and I say I am a Kretan, how can you know whether to believe me? The text asks that the same question be asked of it.

For Odysseus narratives are battle stratagems, and likewise this pair of poems may be understood themselves as stratagems in the battle against Helen. The

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19. Relatedly, Felson-Rubin (1994, 144) characterizes both Penelope and Odysseus as "polytropes."

20. And Penelope too is a skilled fabricator, though of duplicitous textiles rather than duplicitous texts.

21. Peradotto suggests something similar when he points specifically to the capacity of narrative to evolve in multiple directions and notes that Οὖτις ("Nobody") is "the only *proper* name for the emptiness that in reality all narrative persons share" (1990, 154; emphasis in original).

understanding that there are multiple realities is also implicitly at work behind the battle at Troy, a battle specifically between two versions of how women's social role will be defined. In order that one version of events be established as "true," its proponent has to get others to agree with him. Historically, force has offered the most effective means of accomplishing this. The process by which Odysseus gets Penelope to agree that he is her husband and to welcome him back (an implicit tautology, when the term "husband" is understood in romantic terms to mean "beloved") is the example of the Trojan War. Odysseus need not recite the example explicitly, for Penelope has heard it over and over in the ten years intervening since the war's end and it was implicit even in the moment ten years before that when Menelaos rallied his friends in pursuit of his renegade wife.

Responding to Odysseus' demonstration of familiarity with the construction of her bed, Penelope says:

> "Do not be angry with me, Odysseus, since, beyond other men,
> you have the most understanding. The gods granted us misery,
> in jealousy over the thought that we two, always together,
> should enjoy our youth, and then come to the threshold of old age.
> Then do not now be angry with me nor blame me, because
> I did not greet you, as I do now, at first when I saw you.
> For always the spirit deep in my very heart was fearful
> that some one of mortal men would come my way and deceive me
> with words. For there are many who scheme for wicked advantage.
> For neither would the daughter born to Zeus, Helen of Argos,
> have lain in love with an outlander from another country,
> if she had known that the warlike sons of the Achaians would bring her
> home again to the beloved land of her fathers.
> It was a god who stirred her to do the shameful thing she
> did, and never before had she had in her heart this terrible
> wildness, out of which came suffering to us also.
> But now, since you have given me accurate proof describing
> our bed, which no other mortal man beside has ever seen,
> but only you and I, and there is one serving woman,
> Aktor's daughter, whom my father gave me when I came here,
> who used to guard the doors for us in our well-built chamber;
> so you persuade my heart, though it has been very stubborn." (23.209-30)

Knowing the fate of Helen as she indicates she does here, Penelope effectively has read the *Iliad*, and perhaps Book 4 of the *Odyssey* as well.[22]

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22. I say *read* here and not *heard* because I feel that the story as we receive it is informed by the fact that it is written down—that its transformation into letters has no less an effect on its meaning than all the transformations the poem had gone through to that point. That is, in speaking to a literate culture it necessarily says different things than it would to an illiterate one, and the status of a written text can at least make claims to a greater narrative stability than can a spoken text. In such claims, the written text furthers Odysseus' claims for the "truth" of his final tale.

For a related discussion, cf. Morris 1986, who argues that writing was invented on purpose to record Homer's poems so that they would maintain their elitist cast and continue as effective propaganda without risk of their message being altered by a succeeding oral poet with differing views. Morris understands writing to create a hierarchy of versions of the story (appropriate to texts concerned with the establishment of hierarchies), with the written version holding authority over all others.

Many critics have found it odd that Penelope would invoke Helen sympathetically at this pivotal moment of recognition, when she would seem to demonstrate and to want to stress precisely her difference from Helen.[23] There occurs as well a second *non sequitur* here, within Penelope's reference to Helen. Her first suggestion—that knowledge of the outcome would have kept Helen from running off with Paris—implies that she understands Helen to have chosen to go. Immediately after that, however, she mitigates her description of Helen's agency, with her remark that a goddess must have moved her to it. The implication is still that Helen chose to go, but her responsibility is qualified in the second formulation, and even this mitigated desire is restricted to the single occasion of her encounter with Paris ("Never before had she had in her heart this terrible wildness"). But both the appearance of Helen in Penelope's speech and the conflicting accounts of her motivation make sense when understood in the terms I have argued for here: Penelope invokes Helen because Helen's experience offers a lesson directly applicable in Penelope's current circumstances. Helen's example demonstrates that refusal of the patriarchal paradigm will be punished, and Penelope here takes the lesson to heart, welcoming her husband home. Penelope's conflicting accounts of Helen's desire (from "she did" to "she didn't, really") overtly repeat the revision of Helen toward Penelope (active desirer toward passive victim) that I have argued occurs palimpsestically in the poems' treatments of Helen. This revision achieves its fulfillment in this very scene, in which Penelope proves herself a different sort of heroine. Penelope invokes Helen in the moment of her metamorphosis, as she renounces Helen's example and the possibility of self-willed agency and takes instead the role of faithful wife, with which her name has become synonymous.[24]

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23. Cf. Katz's response as well as her summary of earlier such responses at 1991, 183-87. Others who have addressed this issue more recently include Wohl 1993, 43-44 and Felson-Rubin 1994, 39-40.

24. Katz (1991, 182-87) also recognizes an important element of ambiguity in this passage. But rather than reading its relation to the explicit plot, she views this scene from a narratological perspective. She understands the invocation as emblematic "of the indeterminacy of meaning that has characterized her throughout the poem," noting that "[w]hen Penelope instances Helen's betrayal of Menelaus as the story that might have been her own, she both consolidates her own *kleos* by differentiating herself from Helen and undermines the fixity of its meaning at the same time" (187).

In some respects, my argument seconds that of Roisman who also points out that Helen's example serves as a lesson to Penelope—a lesson that choosing another has "consequences" (1987, 62). Roisman does not see these consequences as problematic, however—only as inevitable (she would have to "face the returned Odysseus" and her new marriage would be invalid). By rephrasing the lesson Penelope learns as "infidelity is punished," as I have here, the emphasis shifts to make the problem more clear (women are not allowed to assert will or choice even within what seem to be fairly clear cut situations [e.g., Odysseus seems unlikely to return . . .]), and to suggest the grounds, through the comparison with the innocent Penelope, on which Helen might be judged less harshly as well. In support of her more benign reading of the dynamic at work here, Roisman assumes that Penelope is slow to welcome because she is angry with Odysseus for not telling her who he was from the start (62, 68).

Felson-Rubin (1994, 39-40) makes a related argument, holding that Penelope invokes Helen because she herself has been contemplating remarriage. The arrival of Odysseus just in time to prevent such an occurrence reminds her both that she came close to bigamy and, accordingly, of Helen's story. Had she remarried, Penelope recognizes, she would have won ill repute like Helen's, even though where Helen left Menelaos in full knowledge that she was still alive, Penelope has no such knowledge about Odysseus nor any intent to abandon him.

Immediately on the heels of her qualification of Helen's adulterous impulse, Penelope returns to the subject of her own bed. Her acknowledgment that the stranger is her husband upon his display of familiarity with the construction of the bed seems finally to be as much a giving up in the face of a persistent adversary as an accession to an undisputable truth. For why should this knowledge be any less open to manipulation by the gods than any of the other signs she doubted? Another explanation for her giving over might be that the bed is the proof of her fidelity at the same time that it works as the proof of Odysseus' identity. If Penelope knows from Helen's example—as Helen did not know according to Penelope's version of events—that infidelity will be punished, then she cannot admit or even allow it to seem that any other man has seen her bed. She would have to acknowledge as her husband any man who claimed to know her secret, and so she must acknowledge this man as Odysseus.

In insisting up to the point of Odysseus' return that she need not remarry, Penelope has stood on the threshold of a repudiation of patriarchy. Without acknowledging it as such, she has effectively established herself in positions of both individual self-rule and control of property, positions denied women in her contemporary society. (This is acknowledged in the reverse gender simile with which Odysseus greets Penelope: "Lady . . . / your fame goes up into the wide heaven, / as of some king who . . . upholds the way of good government . . . ," 19.107-14[25]). The hunger of the suitors limits her real control over how that property is spent, but, nonetheless, it effectively has remained her household that the suitors plunder, not her absent husband's. Paradoxically she makes it hers by claiming that she acts as the agent of the missing man, and not of her son who would inherit if his father were acknowledged dead. She cannily turns to her own purposes the rules intended to deny her privilege and so effectively subverts patriarchy, though briefly.

Penelope protects herself from the consequences of this stance with her claims to continued connection with Odysseus, but these claims become more and more tenuous and less acceptable to the community as the years pass. Recognition of the tenuousness of her claims contributes to our suspense in reading. Odysseus' return and Penelope's acceptance of him as her husband end the suspense with reassurance, thereby defusing the threat to patriarchy (in which readers, drawn to the romance plot, are also invested) that her solitary position posed, not only in that moment but retroactively as well. Her (apparently) uncoerced acceptance of Odysseus tells us that her claims were genuine, and we can now look back and understand that no threat to patriarchy was ever intended.[26] The whole story pivots

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25. Foley 1978 points out that the simile marks the risk of "dangerous potential sexual inversion" (68) felt at this point in the story, a risk that is then reassuringly allayed.

26. The allusion to patriarchal concerns implicit in the high value the poems place on marital fidelity is echoed in the *Odyssey* in reiterated attempts to assert the surety of Telemakhos' relation to Odysseus through affirmation of their likeness. For example, at 1.207-09, the disguised Athene addresses Telemakhos: "Are you, big as you are, the very child of Odysseus? / Indeed, you are strangely like about the head, the fine eyes, / as I remember . . . " The two poems share a concern with whether a man may trust his wife to bear only his children and thus to ensure that his property will continue in his family after his death. Telemakhos points up the uncertainty inherent in paternity in his response to Athene in Book 1:

around the possibility that the construct of a "faithful" Penelope which Odysseus and this narrative fabricate in the first 22 books might unravel (like Laertes' shroud) in the scene in Book 23 where Odysseus presents himself to Penelope. The risk that Penelope may deny that he is her husband—like Klytaimestra and, effectively, Helen—is palpable, and her slowness to acknowledge him as her lord is arguably the most suspenseful section of the poem. The long time Penelope takes may be ascribed to her sagacity and canniness. But we can read it too as a figuring of angles on her part.[27]

Like Helen, Penelope up to the point of her acceptance of Odysseus might be construed as an image of a self-willed woman, or potentially so. But in this version of the story, she abandons the management of her own affairs, recognizing that this is not a choice open to her, and "chooses" instead to be her husband's helpmeet, denying that she might have wanted it any other way.[28] Penelope's example operates as a reassuring correction of Helen's. Where Helen's domesticity in Book 4 may be understood to be coerced, and so not an effective demonstration of the best handling of feminine will,[29] the portrait of Penelope as a woman touched by no taint of inharmonious desire relieves anxiety about power battles on the home front. Penelope never wanted to rule, the example suggests; she was only doing so until her beloved lord returned. It is in the moment of Penelope's submission to Odysseus' version of things (her acquiescence to his claim to be the beloved husband) that we get the "proof" that this time he is telling the truth, that the narrative

> Then the thoughtful Telemachos said to her in answer:
> "See, I will accurately answer all that you ask me.
> My mother says indeed I am his. I for my part
> do not know. Nobody really knows his own father.
> But how I wish I could have been rather son to some fortunate
> man, whom old age overtook among his possessions.
> But of mortal men, that man has proved the most ill-fated
> whose son they say I am: since you question me on this matter." (213-20)

27. In viewing this moment thusly, I join Winkler 1990 in his view of Penelope as a woman of active mind, no simple victim of circumstances. But while he does acknowledge that patriarchy constrains Penelope in some degree, Winkler urges a reading of Penelope as Odysseus' equal partner, and to this conclusion I cannot follow him. Murnaghan 1994, summarizing current trends in Penelope scholarship, points to two basic approaches: one that understands Penelope to exercise very little control over the course of events (generally characterized by the view that she does not recognize Odysseus until he reveals himself in Book 23) and another (in which Winkler joins) that understands her to exercise substantial control (generally characterized by the view that at some level she recognizes Odysseus upon his appearance in Ithaka in disguise and works to assist him from that point on). Noting that "the text of the *Odyssey* helpfully provides a warrant for both readings" (77), Murnaghan argues for a mitigated version of the first approach, viewing Penelope's position as that of an able woman making the best of a limited set of choices, an understanding in which I join.

28. The problem with Penelope's decision in this reading lies not, of course, in the fact that she endorses fidelity per se but in the way pressures are brought to bear to bring that endorsement about.

29. Clader (1976, 37) points out that Helen behaves much more assertively in Book 4 than would be considered suitable in a wife: she interrupts her husband and takes control of the after-dinner storytelling. Thus her domestication may also be understood to be not entirely successful.

does have a ground zero after all and this is it.[30] Because Penelope proves to have been "true" (i.e., submissive), we know that this story is "true." Her "yes" justi-fies the Trojan War, by making the case that patriarchal marriage is what women want. On this evidence, the behavior of Helen and her sister Klytaimestra is marked as aberrant and deserving of punishment.

The indeterminate effect of Odysseus' multiple self-descriptions and of the poem's narrative as a whole functions at least in part as an analogue for the multiple possibilities of interpretation of the female role implicit in the plot of the *Iliad*. These include both the various models demonstrated there and by extension the enormous range of possibilities introduced by the idea that women might make choices according to their own wills rather than according to their husbands'. These alternative narratives are refused legitimacy when Penelope welcomes Odysseus back, in the same moment that the "truth" of his identity and so of the poem's tale are established. I suggest that the construction of this point of stable meaning in the *Odyssey* functions not merely to offer readers (or the characters) either a necessary reassurance that there is something we can count on in the universe or the pleasures of a unified narrative (though these do have their attractions), but that it also operates to abrogate both the possibility of choosing certain narratives and the possibility of protest against the lack of choice.

Without arguing specifically that the man who comes to Ithaka as Odysseus is not he, I do submit that the poem gives us reason to doubt that, and that this doubt resituates the poem as a very different kind of narrative from the straightforward romance we have tended to understand it to be. Even if we choose to go along with the hero's claim that he is the same individual who left Ithaka as Odysseus twenty years before, Penelope's hesitation gives us reason to question the depth of her yearning for her husband's return. Instead we may understand her response to be much more complex, as she segues quickly from one world of possibilities into another. The strength of Odysseus' desire to return can be explained then as desire to arrive where he can found Western civilization on the myth of the consent of the oppressed. The faithful swineherd and Penelope are similar here, both indentured and both grateful to the system that positions them so. "Truth" and patriarchy go hand in hand in the *Odyssey*, bonded through their shared hierarchic structure. One narrative of Odysseus' identity is determined to have authority over the others, and this is replicated at the level of personal relations in the assumption that the male narrative will have authority over the female. Through the naturalization of gender

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30. In his discussion of the meeting of Penelope and Odysseus, Peradotto remarks similarly that the terms in which the poem has presented Odysseus make sense of Penelope's hesitation in recognizing him: "His need to test and her reluctance to recognize him turn out to be more compatible with the philosophical and semiotic problem of individuation than with an unreflective, conventional notion of a permanent individuality, the underlying subject of attributes and actions, the stable referent of the proper name" (1990, 155). He then goes on to read her acceptance of him rather differently, as a firm recognition based on their shared memory of the bed (157). This may be the only firm signifier that Peradotto admits into his reading of the text.

hierarchy the argument for an absolute truth or reality is made, and vice versa.[31] At the same time, the poems' own structures demonstrate the constructedness of these views. Homer's poems tell a tale of the abolition of a woman's claims to opinions, different from those of her husband, about what her future will be and the abolition of her ability to decide that future. By the end of the epic, Menelaos' view is revealed to be the "truth" about Helen's place. By the time the story comes down to us, the assumption that women have no right to question the workings of romance is deeply ingrained, and only recently have we developed the capacity to even notice that feminine self-determination is at issue here. That such a capacity has developed demonstrates, however, the uncompromisability of the poems' relativity of meaning, which reasserts itself in the continued emergence of revisionary readings as the cultures the poems address move on to new configurations.[32]

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31. Marriage plots in general, of which the *Odyssey* is a principal precursor, operate to reassure us that the realms of love, law, and nature coincide and that there is a right road (usually figured in the right mate) for each of us. The hegemony of West over East portrayed in the poems (particularly in the *Iliad*) similarly buttresses the argument for a fixable truth through a social example.

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