The Name of Penelope

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THE TALE OF ODYSSEUS' RETURN would have been very different if his wife had not been known as Penelope. For the Homeric poems came from an age of aural etymologizing,[1] the minstrels who perfected the poems throughout centuries of storytelling found proper nouns as meaningful as common nouns, and certain phonetic associations at first fortuitous became inevitable. Shakespeare's Juliet by any other name than Capulet would have had greater fortune in love, but Penelope's name is even more vitally related to her biography.

Now it is an obvious fact that a language built upon a rather small number of phonemes is almost necessarily going to include homonyms, and correspondence of sound alone is insufficient to indicate words as cognate. In present-day Norwegian, for example, the word for the duck, *Anda* (where the dental stop is no longer pronounced), does not compel any kind of dark reminiscence of the girl named Anna, and likewise the duck πηνέλοψ need not be thought germane to Penelope,[2] unless in the similarity there is a remnant from the dawn of time, when in a beast epic Penelope might actually have been a duck, Athene an owl, Hera a heifer, and Apollo a wolf. In the Homeric poems we possess, the πηνέλοψ and Penelope have no semantic relationship, and the coincidence of identical syllables is unimportant. Another word, however, has been commonly observed as apparently akin to the name of Penelope, and may have had a crucial bearing upon her career: this

[1]Most notably in *Od.* 1.62 and 19.407-9, which are discussed in a stimulating manner by G. E. Dimock, Jr., "The Name of Odysseus," *The Hudson Review* 9 (1956) 52-70. Many provocative examples are listed by L. Ph. Rank, *Etymologiseering en verwante verschijnselen bij Homerus* (Assen 1951).

[2]Weighty evidence that "Penelope is derived from penelops" was assembled by J. A. K. Thomson, *Studies in the Odyssey* (Oxford 1914) 48. Granting the thesis, one still cannot find the *pênelops* in the *Odyssey*.

word is *πήνη*, the woof of the web. Penelope may have gained her name from her manufacture of cloth; more probably her name suggested the suitable métier.

There are other clothiers in the *Odyssey*: Helen spins, Arete spins, the Naiads weave at looms of stone, and Hephaestus (who is a bigamist himself with Charis and Aphrodite) forges a web to ensnare his laughter-loving wife and her adulterer. But Penelope is the Arachne of the poem, the clothier *par excellence,* the one whose epic role is most dominated by the occupation. It may be true that there was little a woman of her class could do besides weave, yet it is also true that her work constantly prompts observance of the secondary import of several words that refer to the textile craft, and thus the lines that explain the origin of the *Iliad* apply even more to the origin of the *Odyssey* (*Od.* 8.579-80):

> *τὸν δὲ θεοὶ μὲν τεῦξαν, ἐπεκλώσαντο δ' ὄλεθρον*
> *ἀνθρώποις, ἵνα ἦισι καὶ ἐσσομένοισιν ἀοιδή.*

A recurring passage tells how Penelope put off remarriage by urging that she should first weave a *φᾶρος* to be a shroud for Laertes, and by undoing at night all her labor of the day. Antinous pronounces the passage in placing before Telemachus the charge that Penelope is wily and has not kept to the terms of the arrangement by which she had asked the suitors to wait only so long (*Od.* 2.96-102):

> *Κοῦροι, ἐμοὶ μνηστῆρες, ἐπεὶ φάνε δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,*
> *μίμνετ' ἐπειγόμενοι τὸν ἐμὸν γάμον, εἰς ὅ κε φᾶρος*
> *ἐκτελέσω, μή μοι μεταμώνια νήματ' ὄληται,*
> *Λαέρτηι ἥρωι ταφήιον, εἰς ὅτε κέν μιν*
> *μοῖρ' ὀλοὴ καθέλησι τανηλεγέος θανάτοιο,*
> *μή τίς μοι κατὰ δῆμον Ἀχαιιάδων νεμεσήσηι,*
> *αἴ κεν ἄτερ σπείρου κῆται πολλὰ κτεατίσσας.*

Now, at the beginning of the *Odyssey,* the moral obligation of Penelope is clear enough to Antinous, whether or not it is of concern to her. The suitors do not apply coercion on the sole argument that the *φᾶρος* is completed; yet it is precisely because of Penelope's failure to continue her weaving indefinitely that little further delay appears possible.

When Penelope much later tells the beggarly stranger who is

actually Odysseus how she contrived to remain faithful to her husband, she uses the actual speech Antinous had recounted earlier. And in a few words of exceptional significance she prefaces the long stereotype with an ascription of her plot to the divinity who inspired her (*Od.* 19.137-40):

> οἱ δὲ γάμον σπεύδουσιν· ἐγὼ δὲ δόλους τολυπεύω.
> φᾶρος μέν μοι πρῶτον ἐνέπνευσε φρεσὶ δαίμων,
> στησαμένηι μέγαν ἱστόν, ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ὑφαίνειν,
> λεπτὸν καὶ περίμετρον·

There is no doubt who the divinity was: Antinous (*Od.* 2.116-8) saw clearly that it was the goddess of both handiwork and mental adroitness. Thus advised, Penelope is fittingly described as wise; like Chaucer's "hende Nicholas" and directly contrary to Shakespeare's "honest Iago," the familiar formula *περίφρων Πηνελόπεια* contains an accurate guide to the character of the person denominated.[3] Penelope is a weaver, a weaver of wiles; she is a Clotho who spins many destinies; and her phrase *ἐγὼ δὲ δόλους τολυπεύω* is a specimen of an exceedingly rare kind of expression, for the literal meaning is equivalent to the metaphor. The word *τολυπεύω* in a further sense bears reference to Odysseus, who is beyond all other men the *πολύτλας*, and Odysseus selects *τολυπεύω* for the vocabulary of his remonstrance to continue the siege at Troy (*Il.* 14.86). While he endures, the distaff side of his family winds off her scheme and creates a *φᾶρος* which becomes the tangible evidence of her continence.

The whole process of weaving seems handled by Athene with perfect timing, since exactly when the work is completed, as the shade of Amphimedon relates (*Od.* 24.149), Odysseus is brought to Ithaca. The narrative of Antinous had fixed the completion of the shroud at a month or more earlier, but in the retrospect of Amphimedon the comparatively brief additional time of indecision may appear insignificant.[4] The disparity between the two accounts is not crucial: Odysseus returns just when the shroud is finished or

[3]Such formulas are not necessarily meaningless merely because they provide for metrical needs, since the evolution in an oral tradition permitted the shaping and adapting of the epic language: see George M. Calhoun, *Homeric Repetitions, CPCP* 12 (1933) 25.

[4]For an important discussion of Odysseus' return when the shroud was completed, see W. J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford 1930) 70-1.

just when, because it is finished, Penelope is under the greatest duress. The long-awaited remarriage is then the reunion consummated after Odysseus has proved his right to his bed. When this thoroughgoing alteration is effected, the φᾶρος ταφήιον for Laertes has outlasted its intended need and passes from attention.

But immediately prior to the trial of the bed, another φᾶρος has come to dominate the *mise en scène*: it is the robe of the investiture that accompanies Odysseus' transformation by Athene (*Od.* 23.153-62). The metamorphosis would have been incomplete if he had been left ragged, since there is much to indicate that Penelope, unlike Argus, recognizes him largely from his apparel. When she wishes to authenticate a report that he was seen on the way to Troy, she asks first of the raiment he wore (*Od.* 19.218), and even after the trial of the bow and its sequel he finds it difficult to make himself known to her because he is filthy and stands in tatters (*Od.* 23.115). The core of the *Odyssey* is the execution of the suitors; although the other labors may be as hazardous, none is so integral or so indispensable to the poem; and one of the most crucial aspects of the execution is that it is accomplished by Odysseus in disguise. True, his feeling of ascendancy compels him to reveal himself before slaying more than a single suitor (just as it compels him to reveal himself before parting from the blinded Polyphemus). Yet disguise is his chief weapon in surmounting this final obstacle that impedes him from the rule in his house (as it is in laying the preparations for the assault of the hollow horse upon Troy [*Od.* 4.244-58]), and the task is finally completed when he receives the φᾶρος that is the proper accoutrement for the trial of the bed.

In the course of the travails that repeatedly strip him and render him destitute, Odysseus gains respites with Circe, Calypso and Nausicaa, and each sojourn may partially preview his return to Penelope. Thus the lines that describe his transformation by Athene in Ithaca carry striking associative power when they describe his transformation in Scheria (*Od.* 6.230-5), and the final investiture itself is to a degree prefigured when Circe, Calypso or Nausicaa causes him to be provided with clothing, although it admittedly seems excessive that the subjects of Alcinous should give

him φάρεα each and every one. Telemachus receives a φᾶρος from Polycaste when he visits Nestor (*Od.* 3.467), and Laertes receives a cloak when his rightful position is restored (*Od.* 24.367), but it is the epic hero himself who is clothed ceremoniously in a garment that represents the completion of the trial of the bow and prepares him for his ultimate test.

Mystery, ambiguity and symbolism belong to the literature of implication, which depends upon obscurity rather than upon perspicuity and rigorous demonstrability. The *psyche* rather than the *nous* is the judge of its truth. Among others Dante has given his commentators much trouble by saying less than he means, by presenting possibilities rather than conclusions. From the ninth circle of Hell, for example, Ugolino de' Gherardeschi describes how he was starved in a Pisan tower with his children, who marked his suffering and offered him their own flesh, until one by one the children died, and his hunger overmastered his grief (*Inferno* 33.75): *piú che il dolor potè il digiuno.* The simple sense of these last words is that soon the count died of starvation himself, but there is a grisly and terrifying second sense, which Hugo in the celebrated preface to "Cromwell" thought the main one. Such a style as this belonged to Aeschylus foremost among the authors of classical antiquity. It is almost precisely opposed to the usual Homeric style. Yet there are undeniable elements of a mysterious suggestiveness that surround the web woven by Penelope and the robe in which Odysseus is clothed.

Throughout Ibsen's "Rosmersholm" Rebekka West knits a white shawl. It is just finished when she goes to drown herself, and to the perceptive eye it has become a shroud.[5] Such visual effects are the property of drama and beyond the scope of epic, but the attentive and perceptive ear of the Homeric auditor makes analogous identifications. In the *Odyssey* the two chief φάρεα coalesce. The shroud becomes the robe cast about the man of an unparalleled hold on life. The epithet ταφήιον then stands as the crown of the poem's duplicity, for the φᾶρος could not be put to a use less funereal. Hector's donning of the armor of Achilles must be made explicit to be grasped at all, because it is unprepared for and appears the

[5]John Northam, *Ibsen's Dramatic Method* (London 1953) 126.

result of momentary temerity. But the transvestitism of the *Odyssey* is palpable although implicit, and even seems to have been accomplished with perfect premeditation by Athene. Odysseus' return just when or not long after the weaving was completed thus has its point. He could not have come much later, lest Penelope should have been compelled to choose among the suitors; and he could not have come earlier, either, lest the robe should have been unfinished. In a poem governed not by chance or fate but by one infallibly successful divinity, who has planned not only Penelope's delaying stratagem but also Odysseus' vengeance (*Od.* 5.23-4), simple coincidence is not to be regarded. There is, of course, no reason to suppose that Penelope foresaw the transvestitism from the onset of the suitors' importunity; clearly enough she brought her work to a close unwillingly. And it cannot be gainsaid that considerable orderliness derives from Odysseus' arrival in the nick of time. But the Homeric method does not clutter the stage with unused properties, or leave a pocket of gold unmined.

The epic audience heard the poems many times and knew them, could recall the entire corpus of lays when hearing but a single episode, and could carp at inconsistencies and applaud resolved complexities. As the *Odyssey* gained its final shape, no object was likely to spur the imagination more than the φᾶρος woven by Penelope. That it should serve merely to pass the time would be idle; that it should economically achieve a splendid end would seemingly be requisite. Once the minstrel found that end, he could fashion his material to make it all of a piece and could even provide the delectation of presentiment. Telemachus' assertion that Penelope ought to tend to her loom and leave the mastery of affairs to him (*Od.* 1.356-9 and 21.350-3), in lines that with neat modifications appear in the *Iliad* but were possibly created for the special situation in the *Odyssey,* may conceivably therefore have appeared to the audience something besides a reproof that might contain the desire for Penelope to end her three-years' chore and accept a husband. Athene's brief loan of a φᾶρος to Odysseus when she chose to reveal him to Telemachus could also have had a special appropriateness. But there is much more that prepares for the salient closing investiture.

In the guise of an unkempt wayfarer Odysseus genially deceives Eumaeus by making a pact from which he can expect to gain a cloak and a tunic (*Od.* 14.395-7). Penelope promises to clothe the stranger in a cloak and a tunic if he speaks truly (*Od.* 17.549-50) or if he strings the bow (*Od.* 21.338-9). With gratuitous but affectionate concern Eurycleia wishes to bring a cloak and a tunic for her master after he has slain the suitors (*Od.* 22.487). And the striking thing about these three situations is that the cloak which is strongly anticipated lies neglected and does not appear. Borrowed cloaks warm Odysseus' sleep (*Od.* 14.520 and 20.143), but they clearly do not satisfy the expectation that he will receive a cloak when he is attired amid the music of the dance and the wedding-feast.

The Homeric poems are formulaic to a degree seldom approached in world literature[6] but not to the degree we have been led to believe. The body of Patroclus is not preserved (*Il.* 19.38-9) in the same way as the body of Hector is preserved (*Il.* 23.186-7). The gathering of wood to consume the body of Patroclus (*Il.* 23.110ff.) has little in common with the gathering of wood to consume the body of Hector (*Il.* 24.782-7), although the two pyres are quenched in the same manner (*Il.* 23.250 and 24.791). The transformation of Odysseus before Nausicaa is the same as the transformation just prior to the trial of the bed, but differs from the transformation of Odysseus before Telemachus (*Od.* 16.173-6). The poems show a remarkable economy of language, but could show more, and the selection of a word or a phrase in preference to established competitors may be significant. Trained to sing in the traditional idiom of his guild, the minstrel shaped his matter to fit what the limited number of possible expressions before him permitted, but his choice among the possibilities was entirely one

[6]Milman Parry's collaborator in collecting the formulaic Jugoslav epic lays is currently engaged in publishing and discussing them, and in an early article leads from the blind poet of one oral tradition to the blind poet of another: Albert B. Lord, "Homer, Parry, and Huso," *AJA* 69 (1948) 34-44. Passages from the earliest documents in our own mother-tongue have in addition been studied through the use of one of Parry's schemata with interesting results: see Francis P. Magoun, Jr., "Oral-Formulaic Character of Anglo-Saxon Narrative Poetry," *Speculum* 28 (1953) 446-67. A wide and valuable account of formulas in several languages is given by Sir Maurice Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (London 1952) 215-53.

of free will. The regular formula to be expected for the investiture of Odysseus preceding the trial of the bed is

ἀμφὶ δέ μιν χλαῖναν καλὰν βάλεν ἠδὲ χιτῶνα.

Here are provided the cloak and the tunic that Eurycleia seemed anxious to fetch. But instead of the cloak he receives a robe, in a slightly different formula (*Od.* 23.155):

ἀμφὶ δέ μιν φᾶρος καλὸν βάλεν ἠδὲ χιτῶνα.

Why did the minstrel reject χλαῖναν for φᾶρος, the cloak for the robe? Because consciously or unconsciously, his mind dwelt on the φᾶρος woven by Penelope. By design or fortunate accident, a crucial part of the *Odyssey* was made to consist of a noble travesty.

That the robe was more precious than the cloak is not an important consideration, because Eurycleia would not have suggested an unsuitable garment for the man who had been her care since the day of his birth. That φᾶρος is the word of greater metrical utility or the more usual word cannot be urged, because it is of indifferent convenience and greater rarity. That the robes worn by Calypso and Telemachus have nothing to do with Penelope or Odysseus hardly diminshes an effect of singular impressiveness. In spite of the suitors' insolent prodigality, the ancestral mansion almost beyond question held robes in abundance, and there is no entirely logical method for describing the one Eurynome placed about the shoulders of Odysseus. Yet only a single robe is in any way familiar, only a single one indeed has the sheen of the sun or the moon (*Od.* 24.148), and this is the one the imagination immediately apprehends. Since it was but recently finished, it may well have lain at the top of the stack.

Once the shroud for Laertes is identified with the robe of Odysseus, the *Odyssey* stands in a curious and handsome contrast to the *Iliad*. For the ransom given by Priam contains a store of fine garments, and from them Achilles separates two robes and a tunic to enshroud the body of Hector. The difference between the tragic solemnity of the *Iliad* and the eudaemonistic optimism of the *Odyssey* is well epitomized by this difference between the alterations of purpose to which the φάρεα are turned.

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