

The Sign of the Bed:

Odyssey 23.173ff

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For Prof. Dr Eva-Maria Voigt
on her retirement

THE SUITORS are dead. Odysseus, freshly bathed and marvelously beautified by Athena, returns to the hall and takes his seat opposite Penelope. He complains of her hardheartedness in still remaining aloof from him after all the years of absence and adversity and, in at least temporary acceptance of the situation, tells Eurycleia to make a bed for him. This gives Penelope the opening she needs to test the possible stranger's knowledge of the bed Odysseus had made, one of its legs the still-rooted trunk of an olive-tree around which he had built the bed-chamber. Her words recognise, implicitly, that the stranger is indeed Odysseus, putting him off his guard against deception and also fulfilling a necessary preliminary to offering him her husband's bed without laying herself open to a charge of impropriety. She repeats the stranger's instruction to Eurycleia and the servant women, at the same time setting the test for him (23.173ff):

- τὸν δ' αὖτε προσέειπε περίφρων Πηνελόπεια·
“δαιμόνι’, οὐτ’ ἄρ τι μεγαλίζομαι οὐτ’ ἀθερίζω
175 οὔτε λίην ἄγαμαι, μάλα δ’ εὖ οἶδ’ οἷος ἔησθα
ἐξ Ἴθάκης ἐπὶ νηὸς ἰὼν δολιχηρέτμοιο.
ἀλλ’ ἄγε οἱ στόρεσον πυκινὸν λέχος, Εὐρύκλεια,
ἐκτὸς εὐσταθέος θαλάμου, τὸν ῥ’ αὐτὸς ἐποίει·
ἔνθα οἱ ἐκθῆσαι πυκινὸν λέχος ἐμβάλετ’ εὐνήν,
180 κῶεα καὶ χλαίνας καὶ ῥήγεα σιγαλόεντα.”
ὡς ἄρ’ ἔφη πόσιος πειρωμένη· αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
ὀχθήσας ἄλοχον προσεφώνεε κεδνὰ ἰδυῖαν·
“ὦ γύναι, ἦ μάλα τοῦτο ἔπος θυμαλγές ἔειπες.
τίς δέ μοι ἄλλοσε θῆκε λέχος; χαλεπὸν δέ κεν εἶη
185 καὶ μάλ’ ἐπισταμένω, ὅτε μὴ θεὸς αὐτὸς ἐπελθὼν
ῥηιδίως ἐθέλων θείῃ ἄλλῃ ἐνὶ χώρῃ.
ἀνδρῶν δ’ οὐ κέν τις ζωὸς βροτός, οὐδὲ μάλ’ ἠβῶν,

ῥεῖα μετοχλίσσειεν, ἐπεὶ μέγα σῆμα τέτυκται
ἐν λέχει ἀσκητῶ· τὸ δ' ἐγὼ κάμον οὐδέ τις ἄλλος . . .

202 οὕτω τοι τόδε σῆμα πιφάνσκομαι· οὐδέ τι οἶδα,
ἢ μοι ἔτ' ἔμπεδόν ἐστι, γύναι, λέχος, ἢέ τις ἤδη
ἀνδρῶν ἄλλοσε θῆκε, ταμῶν ὑπο πυθμέν' ἐλαίης.”

178–79 ἐκτός . . . ἐκθῆσαι *vulgo*: ἐντός . . . ἐκθῆσαι *ed.* Flor., van der Valk, Pocock, Camps: ἐντός . . . ἐνθῆσαι van Leeuwen, Bérard, Merkelbach: 178–79 *om.* *Venetus* 613: 179–80 *pro interpol.* hab. Quincey

Penelope's instructions to Eurycleia and to the handmaids clearly needed to help her move a bed have received much, in my judgement misdirected, attention.¹ The bed of Penelope's instructions has been in and out so often—and sometimes indeed simultaneously both in and out—that it would be a mercy to decide where, or whither, it really belongs.

First of all the combination of readings ἐντός . . . ἐκθῆσαι (178–79), found in the *ed. prin.*² and favoured by van der Valk (who saw ἐκτός as evidence for error in the Alexandrian vulgate), Pocock, and Camps, can be discounted. In this version of the text (as indeed in any version with ἐντός), it should be noted from the start, the test would have to reside in the participle alone, since στόρεσον . . . ἐντός εἰσταθείος θαλάμον contains nothing to surprise Odysseus: no notion of movement and nothing to suggest that his bed was anywhere other than where he had left it, in the chamber. Van der Valk expressed himself unintelligibly, so that it is quite unclear how he would interpret ἐκθῆσαι so as to reconcile it with ἐντός and make it adequately fulfil its testing function.³ Pocock, provoked by the difficulty he had in understanding van der Valk's remarks, set out to understand what he could have meant and concluded that λέχος

¹ The following will be cited by author's name alone: M. H. A. L. H. VAN DER VALK, *Textual Criticism of the Odyssey* (Leiden 1949) 37f; R. MERKELBACH, *Untersuchungen zur Odyssee* (Zetemata 2 [1951]) 133f; W. A. CAMPS, *PCPhS* n.s. 5 (1958–59) 22, and more fully *An Introduction to Homer* (Oxford 1980) 85f n.26 (used here); L. G. POCOCK, *Philologus* 107 (1963) 309–11; J. H. QUINCEY, *Philologus* 108 (1964) 288–90.

² Van der Valk 37 n.2 is probably right in regarding ἐντός of the *ed. prin.* as a conjecture; see, however, *LCM* 2 (1977) 89–91 on ἐκτ-/ἐντ- variants in general.

³ Van der Valk 38 writes, “The ruse of Penelope is concealed in the words ἐνθα οἱ ἐκθῆσαι λέχος. For by its special construction the bed could not be placed outside (ἐκτίθεσθαι). It appears from the reading of the mss. that the ancients failed to notice the subtlety of the ruse. By the reading ἐκτός the whole context was misunderstood and coarsened,” adding in n.3, “The Scholium only knows the incorrect reading, as it says ἐκθῆσαι ἔξω ἀποθέμεναι.” In spite of Pocock, this still remains for me unintelligible.

ἐκτιθέναι was to be taken as “a conventional household expression for getting out a bedstead from the storeroom, or from some one place, at any rate, and putting it up or ‘putting it out’ in another.” Camps, who cites no secondary literature, believes that an original *ἐντός* was changed to *ἐκτός* “in the process of transmission by someone who thought that ‘put the bed out’ (179) meant outside the bedchamber, whereas it can equally well refer to taking a bed outside the house to the bedchamber which (as we discover, 190) was built outside its main building, in the courtyard.” Against Camps it is enough to point out that it is nowhere said—and is indeed an improbability in itself—that the *θάλαμος* was separate from, outside, the rest of the house in such a way as to justify his interpretation of *ἐκθεισαι*; and in any case, without further clarification the poet’s hearers, whatever about the Odysseus of his story, could not be expected to understand the word in this way here, where they have not even yet come to Camps’ doubtful evidence (190) for a peculiar location of the *θάλαμος*. We must not complicate things unrealistically and put unnecessary obstacles in the way of the test’s ready intelligibility to Odysseus or anyone else. And that is the main point made tellingly by Quincey⁴ against Pocock: “Odysseus is being required to infer from this word [*ἐκθεισαι*], and this word alone, that during his absence his own bed has been removed from the chamber to the storeroom and must now be moved back again. How difficult it would be for him to make any such inference will be apparent from a glance at LSJ⁹ *s.v.* *ἐκτιθέναι*; the pregnant sense which Pocock postulates for this verb and which he alleges must have been ‘a conventional household expression’ has no support in Greek usage of any period, let alone in the epic.” To read *ἐντός* . . . *ἐκθεισαι* is to force ourselves into strained, improbable interpretations in order to make *ἐκθεισαι* compatible with *ἐντός* and to make it a suitable vehicle of the test on its own. The choice lies, then, so that the readings will be suitably consistent with each other, between *ἐκτός* . . . *ἐκθεισαι*, the vulgate, and the conjectural *ἐντός* . . . *ἐνθεισαι*.

The main argument of those who favour *ἐντός* . . . *ἐνθεισαι*, and indeed of all who disapprove of *ἐκτός*, runs like this: Odysseus’ reaction, “Who put my bed in another place?” (184; *cf.* 203–04, also 186), means that one could infer from Penelope’s words that the bed

⁴ Quincey’s own suggestion (sidetracked as he was by the in/out logic, for which see below) that 179–80 are interpolated has no acceptable basis; nor is he supported (see his 290 n.1) by the omission of a different set of verses (178–79) from one MS., an omission that leaves a quite inadequate text (minus the test, as Quincey himself realised).

had been moved out of the chamber, in which Odysseus had left it, and so Penelope must have told the servants to put the bed *into* the chamber, thus suggesting that it had already been moved out. This argument against the text of the MSS. seems, at first acquaintance, inescapable, and in itself it has indeed an impeccable logic. It is, however, misdirected, being based on a misconception of the essence of the test. It concentrates on the direction in which the bed is supposed to be moved, out or in, whereas the basically alarming thing for Odysseus about Penelope's words is their unmistakable implication that the bed that he left literally rooted to the spot is mobile at all, that these weak women⁵ can be casually instructed to shift it about. It is this, without any attention to direction, that suggests to him that someone else must already have shifted his bed from the spot in which it was rooted. Odysseus, reacting to Penelope's provocation, says nothing about 'in or out', 'inside or outside'; he is anxious to hear whether someone has put his bed ἄλλοσε⁶ (184, 204), ἄλλη ἐνὶ χώρῃ (186), has put it in a spot other than that in which he left it. There is nothing to suggest that this other spot must be thought of as outside the chamber: in 203–04 ἄλλοσε stands in contrast with ἔτ' ἔμπεδον, which means not 'still in the chamber' but 'still in place in the ground',⁷ as described in 190ff; similarly in 186 ἄλλη ἐνὶ χώρῃ does not imply removal of the bed from the chamber but only from the 'spot' where Odysseus had left it rooted: with the sense of χώρῃ, the usual one in Homer, cf. especially *Od.* 21.366 αὐτὰρ ὁ (Eumaeus) θῆκε (*sc.* τόξα) φέρων αὐτῇ ἐνὶ χώρῃ. The main argument of those who reject the manuscript text has, then, no validity.

Their further point, that to make the stranger sleep outside the bed-chamber would fit badly with Penelope's pretended acknowledgement of him as her husband, is no more than a supplementary argument, which, even if it were unquestionable, few⁸ would regard as being a sufficient basis on its own—and it is now on its own⁹—for changing the text; it would merely present a slight oddity. And it is in

⁵ This notion may well be behind the false variant οὐδὲ γυναικῶν in 187.

⁶ The word-division ἄλλος ἔθηκε is not a possibility, *pace LexFrgrEp* I 564 s.v. ἄλλοσε: without the adverb the sense is incomplete.

⁷ With the sense 'standing firmly in/on the ground (as before)' cf. esp. *Il.* 12.9, 12; so adv. ἔμπεδον *Il.* 17.434, *Od.* 17.464.

⁸ Only van der Valk attaches prime importance to it.

⁹ The argument (Merkelbach 134 n.2) that ἐκτός . . . θαλάμον (178) does not provide a sufficiently specific point of reference for ἐνθα (179) seems to me to have no substance. The meaning is clearly 'just outside', not 'somewhere in the house/world outside'.

any case in itself subjective and open to disagreement. The purpose of Penelope's words is to discover whether the person before her is Odysseus or not, and offering him herself—*ἐντὸς θαλάμου*—as well as the bed is in no way necessary to the test; and it would indeed be indecorous and inappropriate at this stage, especially since the stranger has just indicated his preparedness to sleep alone.¹⁰ If the slayer of the suitors shows himself to be Odysseus by passing the test, that will be time enough to show her willingness to be fully reunited with him in marriage (so, in fact, 207ff); and in case he is someone else, without special knowledge of the bed, why should she make her situation more difficult by a gratuitous and less than seemly offer to sleep with him? Penelope is not *περίφρων Πηνελόπεια* just for the alliteration. But in case anyone still feels uneasy and regards the instruction to put the bed out as odd in this context he may explain it to himself, as many an oddity in Homer is explained, in terms of the usual epic practice, in this case the practice of leaving the guest to sleep outside, while the host retires to the *θάλαμος*: *Od.* 3.397ff, 4.296ff, 7.335ff.

Finally there is an important positive argument in favour of *ἐκτός*. Though 177–78 contain no verb of motion, the suspicions of Odysseus, if it is Odysseus, will straightway be aroused by the mention of a bed “outside the chamber that he himself made.” What bed can this be but the one he left rooted inside that same chamber? So, with *ἐκτός*, the test is introduced already in 178 and suitably reinforced by *ἐκθῆσαι* in the following verse. If the stranger fails the test, it will not be because it was not clearly enough put. And this clarity will also have been an advantage at the level of performance, between the poet and his hearers. With *ἐντός*, as we have seen, 177–78 would be lame, playing no part in the setting of the test, and that despite so prominently containing a local expression of the ‘inside/outside’ variety in this context.

Properly considered, the manuscript text of 178–79 is not open to any telling objection and is much to be preferred to the alternatives suggested.

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¹⁰ 171–72. See Ameis-Hentze *ad loc.*; also E.-M. Voigt, *LexFrgrEp* I 1661.14ff *s.v.* *αὐτός*.