

---

"REVERSE SIMILES" AND SEX ROLES IN THE ODYSSEY

Author(s): Helene P. Foley

Source: *Arethusa*, Spring and Fall 1978, Vol. 11, No. 1/2, WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT WORLD (Spring and Fall 1978), pp. 7-26

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26308152>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Arethusa*

JSTOR

## “REVERSE SIMILES” AND SEX ROLES IN THE ODYSSEY

HELENE P. FOLEY

**T**WO SURPRISINGLY SIMILAR similes mark the first meeting of Penelope and Odysseus and their hard-won reunion. In the first (19.108-14) Odysseus compares the reputation (*kleos*) of Penelope to that of a good and just king whose land and people prosper under him. Penelope replies that the gods destroyed her beauty on the day of Odysseus' departure for Troy; if he were to return her life and *kleos* would be fairer and greater. In the second (23.233-40) Odysseus is as welcome to Penelope as land to a shipwrecked sailor worn down by his battle with the surf. This simile at once recalls the situation of Odysseus before he struggles to land on Phaeacia (5.394-8). Thus both similes equate Penelope with a figure like Odysseus himself, as he has been and will be.

These two similes comparing a woman to a man form part of a group of similes of family or social relationship clustering almost exclusively around the incident in Phaeacia and the family of Odysseus as it struggles to recover peace and unity on Ithaca.<sup>1</sup> Many of these similes, like the two mentioned above, also evoke in the comparison an inversion of social role or a social theme with an equivalent difference of focus or point of view. Men are compared to women. In Book 8 (523-31) the weeping Odysseus is compared to a woman weeping over the body of her husband lost in war. As she mourns him enemy soldiers strike her shoulders and lead her off to slavery. The conqueror of Troy is identified with the most helpless of his former victims. Fathers are equated with children; Odysseus finds the land of Phaeacia as welcome as the life of a father recovered from sickness is to his children (5.394-8). Telemachus in his reunion with the swineherd Eumaeus is greeted as a loving father greets a son returned from ten years of travel; yet it is Odysseus, the real father who is present to observe this embrace, who has returned from travels of considerable length (16.17-20). Telemachus and Odysseus lament at their reunion more intensely than sea-eagles robbed of their unfledged young (16.216-18). Odysseus has just regained his son; yet Homer marks the moment with an image of bereavement, of parents deprived of their young.

These “reverse similes,” as I shall call them, seem to suggest both a sense of identity between people in different social and sexual roles and a loss of stability, an inversion of the normal. The comparison of the joy of Penelope to that of a shipwrecked sailor has been interpreted, for example, as Homer’s deliberate identification of Odysseus and his like-minded wife, or as one of a series of images of safety from the sea.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, however, I am interested in the larger pattern: why are these so many similes with this consistent change of perspective or reversal of social role in the comparison, and in particular, what is the meaning of the elaborate images of sexual inversion? How do these reverse-sex similes clarify the overall structure and meaning of the relations between man and wife?<sup>3</sup>

The history of festival and comedy provide numerous examples of a world disrupted or inverted, then restored or renewed. Symbolic inversion of the sexes is frequently part of the process. From Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* to Shakespeare’s *Rosalind* women in literature have assumed men’s roles to restore and redefine the institutions of peace – marriage and the family – and to provide an avenue for corrective criticism of the status quo. In festival and comedy the marriage relation, in which the female is subordinate to the male, is used to express, reinforce or criticize a far larger range of hierarchical social and economic relations.<sup>4</sup> In the *Odyssey* direct symbolic inversion of the sexes is delicately reserved for a few prominently-placed similes. Yet these similes can be interpreted as a significant part of a larger pattern of social disruption and restoration in the epic. Throughout his journey Odysseus experiences many cultures whose social order is an incomplete or inverted version of his own Ithaca, including variations on the place of women and the limits on their sexual, social and political roles. In a similar way, voluntarily (through disguise) or involuntarily, Odysseus adopts or experiences a wide range of social roles other than his own. Penelope does not take inappropriate advantage of her opportunity to wield power in Odysseus’ absence; yet to maintain his kingship she must come close as a woman can to doing so.<sup>5</sup>

Odysseus regains home in the wake of a disruption of normal economic, social and ethical relations on Ithaca. Yet neither the characteristic form of social reproduction on Ithaca, nor its particular hierarchical social and sexual relations are fully resumed until, through the events of the poem, they have been re-argued, reclarified

and voluntarily reaffirmed by all parties concerned. The continual play with social and sexual categories in the poem results not in social change but in a more flexible interpretation of social roles, and in a new understanding of what form of social and economic relations makes possible the continuity of culture on Ithaca. In the elaborate negotiations leading up to the recognition of Penelope and Odysseus, Homer, like Shakespeare in his middle comedies, manipulates the potential threat of social inversion which underlies the travels and the reverse-sex similes.<sup>6</sup> The power which Penelope has legitimately and skillfully wielded is not transferred by her to Odysseus until she has – albeit unconsciously – regained both his complete trust and power in her own domestic sphere. Homer’s extensive treatment of Penelope’s role in maintaining the kingship for Odysseus’ return, and the length and elaboration of the recognition process between men and women throughout the poem reveal the mutual interdependence of husband and wife in the structure of Homeric society.<sup>7</sup>

The poem begins with a family and society barely maintaining order in the absence of its father and king Odysseus. The suitors continually waste Odysseus’ economic resources in direct violation of the fundamental principles of “Odyssean” society, the mutual obligations of host and guest. The young men of the island insist on wooing a woman of an older generation instead of reproducing their households with women of the appropriate age. The Ithacan assembly has not met in years, and public opinion no longer effectively protects the household of its king. Telemachus, having no room to grow into into his patrimony, finds his relations with his mother becoming difficult. Odysseus’ mother has died longing for her son; his father still pines for him in lonely squalor.

In this situation Penelope plays a critical role. She alone engages in an active struggle to maintain the cultural norm. She, not Odysseus’ *dēmos*, dares to reprove the suitors’ violation of the social order. Despite her difficult situation she periodically attempts to renew Odysseus’ wealth by extracting bridal gifts from the suitors. The Homeric king makes such gift-getting a primary object. She distracts the suitors from quarreling by exciting their hopes of gaining her hand. The dissolution of such quarrels of the young is a kingly function, as is confirmed by both Alcinous’ role in Phaeacia and the simile at 12.439-441, where Odysseus clings to a fig tree over Charybdis until the time when a man leaves the assembly for supper, a man who de-

cides the many quarrels of litigious young men. Penelope receives and cross-examines visitors, and tries to maintain standards of hospitality and a network of communication in Odysseus' disrupted family. She keeps Laertes informed with messages; her deceiving web was an act of familial piety, a shroud for her father-in-law. With the exception of the weaving, these are all social functions which Penelope ultimately transfers to the male members of her family, first to Telemachus, then to Odysseus. At 4.791-3 Penelope is compared to a beleaguered lion.<sup>6</sup> Lion images are typically reserved for heroic men. In the disrupted Ithaca of the early books of the *Odyssey* Penelope, far from being the passive figure of most Homeric criticism, has come remarkably close to enacting the role of a besieged warrior.<sup>9</sup>

Penelope achieves this uneasy victory by a woman's weapons: her Athena-like intelligence, her weaving, and her power to order the household. Circe, Calypso, the Sirens, Helen and Penelope all have a special power to stop or transcend change in the sphere under their control. In the pursuit of Helen and immortality in war, Helen's former suitors give up ten years of their lives at Troy. The Sirens offer immortal knowledge to those who surround them, but at the sacrifice of natural life. Circe maintains an unchanging existence on her island by transforming her guests from threatening humans to tame animals. At Sparta, Helen relieves her guests from painful memories with a drug which numbs the effects of time. Like Circe, Penelope has turned her guests into swine, into unmanly banqueters, lovers of dance and song rather than war, who are shown, in their failure to string the bow, to be no match for Odysseus.<sup>10</sup> To keep open a place for Odysseus she has symbolically stopped change on Ithaca. All the young men of the kingdom woo Penelope; they are thus prevented from maturing into husbands and warriors, potential rivals to Telemachus or Odysseus. Whatever the true social status of Penelope – and it has aroused much controversy – the poet suggests that she has the power to bring the kingship with her; the suitors explicitly compete not merely for her beauty but to achieve this political ambition.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, she controls the sexual feelings which might lead her to a new marriage by deliberately maintaining a state of frozen grief. In Book 19 Penelope compares herself to the nightingale, daughter of Pandareus, who eternally bewails the loss of her child (518-23). The image expresses Penelope's suspension of time on Ithaca, as does another image, continually evoked, of the youthful Odysseus before his departure for Troy.<sup>12</sup> In a

comparable position Penelope uses on the men surrounding her the weapons of Helen and Circe not to destroy but to maintain the cultural order. Yet in her effort to preserve Ithaca for Odysseus she cannot stop change entirely; thus the maturing of Telemachus creates increasing tensions for Penelope at the opening of the poem. The unnatural situation on Ithaca comes playfully close to an unintended solution; Telemachus emerges as the only man aside from Odysseus who can win his mother in the contest of the bow.

For all her feminine intelligence in maintaining the material conditions for the survival of Odysseus’ household, and thus for his kingship, and even in performing such kingly functions as mediating the quarrels of the restless young, Penelope, because she lacks physical force, can only stop change on Ithaca. She cannot restore it to full social growth. From this perspective we can begin to understand Odysseus’ compliment in comparing her fame to that of a just and pious king (19.107-14), following a teasing – or hinting – refusal to discuss his own identity:<sup>13</sup>

Lady, no mortal man on the endless earth would have cause  
to find fault with you; your fame goes up into the wide heaven,  
as of some king who, as a blameless man and god-fearing,  
and ruling as lord over many powerful people,  
upholds the way of good government, and the black earth yields him  
barley and wheat, his trees are heavy with fruit, his sheepflocks  
continue to bear young, the sea gives him fish, because of  
his good leadership, and his people prosper under him.

These are Odysseus’ first words to Penelope. The moment is full of dramatic tension. In the wake of the dangerous and tricky women of Odysseus’ journey, of Agamemnon’s warnings about faithless wives, of the song of Aphrodite’s adultery with Ares, and of Penelope’s own possibly ambiguous act in soliciting bridal gifts (Book 18) before she knows of Odysseus’ return, the simile poses a question to Penelope. Her reply shows a clear perception of and assent to the model of kingship suggested by Odysseus, if she does not yet recognize her husband. We have seen the suitors awed by her beauty, and heard them paying tribute to her remarkable skill and cleverness.<sup>14</sup> Yet Penelope now repeats her disclaimer that her fame, beauty, and excellence have been lost in the absence of Odysseus and goes on later in their conversation to describe how through chastity and care for Odysseus’

goods and family she has circumspectly attempted to preserve his place (19.124-7 and 524-529):

Stranger, all of my excellence, my beauty and my figure,  
 were ruined by the immortals at that time when the Argives took ship  
 for Ilion, and with them went my husband, Odysseus.  
 If he were to come back and take care of my life, then  
 my reputation would be more great and splendid.

. . . . .  
 so my mind is divided and starts one way, then another.  
 Shall I stay here by my son and keep all in order,  
 my property, my serving maids, and my high-roofed house,  
 keep faith with my husband's bed and regard the voice of the people,  
 or go away at last with the best of all those Achaians  
 who court me here in the palace, with endless gifts to woo me?

She accepts Odysseus' compliment to her abilities by taking pride in her own exemplary – almost, she suggests in her elaboration on her theme, masculine – treatment of strangers; yet in the same speech she denies that she is capable of offering full hospitality – gifts, transportation to another place – without Odysseus (19.309-16, 325-334):

If only this word, stranger and guest, were brought to fulfillment,  
 soon you would be aware of my love and many gifts given  
 by me so that any man who met you would call you blessed.  
 But here is the way I think in my mind, and the way it will happen.  
 Odysseus will never come home again, nor will you be given  
 conveyance, for there are none to give orders left in the household  
 such as Odysseus was among men – if he ever existed –  
 for receiving strangers and sending them off on their journeys.

. . . . .  
 . . . for how, my friend, will you learn if I in any way  
 surpass the rest of women, in mind and good sense,  
 if you must attend, badly dressed and unwashed, the feasting  
 in the palace? Human beings live only for a short time,  
 and when a man is harsh himself, and his mind knows harsh thoughts,  
 all men pray that sufferings will befall him hereafter  
 while he lives; and when he is dead all men make fun of him.  
 But when a man is blameless himself, and his thoughts are blameless,

the friends he has entertained carry his fame widely  
to all mankind, and many are they who call him excellent.

Her response to the stranger tacitly reaffirms the traditional relation of subordination between husband and wife, reaffirms the limits of her own power and the particular forms necessary for social reproduction on Ithaca.

The vision of kingship in the simile implies a complex symbolic connection between government, agriculture, the worship of the gods and human fertility, as well as a special relation of mutual consent between the sexes.<sup>15</sup> Social reproduction in Ithaca involves dealing creatively with change, exchange and conflict. War, the advent of strangers, the quarrels between families, the need for cooperative organization of agriculture to produce food, the succession of father by son in a kingship all demand a particular control over nature and time. Thus the long process of restoration for Odysseus is appropriate to the challenge of reproducing a continuous culture on Ithaca, not a function of Homer’s desire to create suspense. Society in Ithaca is more complex than others we encounter in the poem and its restoration must be correspondingly delicate and complex. As P. Vidal-Naquet has pointed out, the world of the travels is radically simplified in the areas most significant to Ithacan culture: agriculture, marriage and social relationships within the family.<sup>16</sup> There is a correspondingly diminished need for kingship, marriage and social hierarchy. Without war or the necessity to organize labor to reproduce agriculture, the attenuated social structures that we find on some of the islands without hierarchy and with a female on top appear perfectly viable. Life in Ithaca is uniquely characterized by a range of mediating structures organized and unified by a male leader. Through Odysseus’ travels we recomprehend the complexity of Ithacan culture and the particular form of male-female relations within it.

On Circe’s island or Calypso’s, for example, economic production in the household alone is sufficient to sustain her limited social world. It is of parenthetical interest to an evaluation of women’s role in Greek literature that their work – weaving, cooking and the guardianship of the household – is present even on Olympus and in utopia. Household economics does not require men or the establishment of a sexual hierarchy and women’s control over this sphere is seen as natural, unproblematic. The absence of male agricultural work defines



the golden age, just as its presence defines the break into culture, into a world ruled by men. Cooking and weaving on Ithaca are activities dependent on prior agricultural production. The household, as in the analysis in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, processes and makes useful and permanent goods produced by men through agriculture and herding.<sup>17</sup> Because both cooking and weaving retard or conquer change they logically have a more primary association with the divine and eternal than male-controlled agriculture. Thus the products of weaving are in Homer sometimes forms of art comparable to poems.<sup>18</sup>

As an example, we may contrast the Homeric *oikos* with the cave of the nymphs (13.102 ff. and 345 ff.) where Odysseus stores his treasures on Ithaca. In this cave the nymphs perform in perpetuity the female functions of an Homeric household. The cave is filled with stone looms, bowls and jars; it protects Odysseus' goods. Here the divine and human intersect; gods and men through separate entrances communicate indirectly through sacrifice. But this cave world of Circe, Calypso and the nymphs with its endless weaving and banqueting admits neither social change nor exchange. This is both its value and its limitation. The female protects what is permanent and unchanging in the Homeric *oikos*, the male its changing place in historical time.<sup>19</sup> Penelope uses powers natural to her sphere when she temporarily transforms Ithaca to a domestic island in which the minimum of change and exchange takes place.

In a similar vein the islands, with the exception of Phaeacia, are too remote to need a foreign policy, to conduct war or to maintain the complex exchanges of favor between host and guest. Yet it is significant that the arrival of the stranger Odysseus, and the experience of the Trojan war he brings with him, radically disrupt the cultural balance of every world which does not reject him with instant hostility. In Ithaca, by contrast, the continual necessity to recognize boundaries, make economic exchange and declare new areas of influence demands the presence of an authoritative male.

Last and most important for our purposes, the islands of Odysseus' travels organize sexual reproduction on a different basis. If Odysseus had accepted Calypso's belated offer of immortality, he would have avoided the necessity of sexual reproduction altogether. Hesiod's Odysseus has offspring by Circe and Calypso. Homer's has none. The gods of the *Odyssey* disapprove of goddesses mating with mortals (5.118 ff.). In a similar vein Hesiod's goddesses mate rarely

with men. Their offspring are obscure or short-lived. Yet Zeus and the other male gods sire innumerable culture heroes on mortal women. Where culture, as in Ithaca, cannot be reproduced without the male, there is a corresponding emphasis on sexual reproduction through the male.<sup>20</sup> In Hesiod’s *Works and Days* agriculture and mortality come to men simultaneously. In a fallen world men reproduce property (through agriculture) and sons to inherit their property. Similarly, Zeus’ achievements are more social than biological, although without females he cannot give birth to Athena, or father other children whose names indicate the development of sophisticated social structures (such as *Dike*). In the island worlds of Circe or Calypso, Homer appears to abstract an incomplete “domestic” world from a larger social reality. Insofar as we accept that these worlds fully represent the domestic sphere, the absence of sexual reproduction suggests that in the larger reality women do not culturally reproduce children. Telemachus cannot attain maturity without the support of other men, nor his full inheritance without Odysseus. Apollo in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* makes a similar point when he argues that the father is the only real parent.

Alternatively, in the stable societies of Aeolus and Phaeacia marriages are between familiars (incestuous or endogamous), not between strangers (exogamous). Without war they need not create a complex network of external alliances to protect and reproduce the social order. In Ithaca relations between strangers are of primary importance; marriages are on the same pattern, between strangers. The success of the marriage depends on the consent of the wife to count her husband’s interests as her own, and Penelope’s creative fidelity is viewed as remarkable. Thus Homer’s selection of the contrasting marriage pattern, marriage between familiars, for his utopian society seems appropriate to its isolation from the external world. Similarly, Odysseus’ recovery of his natural relations with Telemachus and even with Laertes are relatively brief, while the redevelopment of his relationship with Eumaeus, and more particularly with Penelope, are long delayed and elaborate.<sup>21</sup> Through Eumaeus, Odysseus symbolically recovers an understanding with those men, often originally strangers, who maintain the external economics of his household. In Ithaca kings play an active role in agriculture. In contrast the other Homeric warriors live off the economic surplus of their society in exchange for offering protection; outside Ithaca we thus find little mention of the peasant classes in Homeric society. In sum, by presenting in isolation

these aspects of the more complex Ithacan culture, the islands of the travels clarify the nature and range of female power over the inner sphere of household production, and of the male power over the external world of agriculture, diplomacy and exchange.

The two tokens by which Odysseus is united with wife and father demonstrate clearly the special quality of social relationships on Ithaca. Odysseus identifies himself to Laertes by means of an orchard. There he finds unchanged the trees his father planted for him in youth. Odysseus depends on others to accomplish the laborious and deliberate ordering of nature over time necessary to economic reproduction on Ithaca. Yet only Odysseus can assure economic reproduction; without him the products of agriculture and herding are dissipated, not accumulated as wealth. Laertes lives in poverty and isolation; Eumaeus cannot marry; Penelope cannot give gifts.

The secret of Penelope's life with Odysseus is symbolized in their bed. Odysseus built the bed around a living tree trunk. One post is immovable, rooted in nature. Yet the resulting creation is more lasting than nature. Odysseus depends on Penelope to protect this symbol of the internal continuity of the family. Through this power over their bed we see her out-manuever the ever-crafty Odysseus. While she accepts her renewed sexual subordination to Odysseus, she is not forced to capitulate to him on his own terms. In contrast, Circe fails to trick Odysseus when she uses her power over bed (10.333-5) and food for treacherous purposes.

The long recourting of Penelope by Odysseus, beginning with the simile of the just king and ending with the simile of the sailor, arises in part, as A. Amory has sensitively suggested, from Penelope's psychological reluctance to recognize Odysseus – a reluctance born of her twenty year vigilance against deception and the protective freezing of her own sexuality.<sup>22</sup> Yet the recourting is primarily a mature renegotiation between two potential strangers, two established powers, which ends in a recreation of trust and a mutual establishment of the limits within which their future relationship will take place. The process begins with Odysseus' tacit recognition of Penelope's role in preserving his kingship, and his testing of her apparent unwillingness – unlike Clytemnestra – to misuse her power. This hint of dangerous potential sexual inversion shapes our reading of the rewooing of Penelope by Odysseus. Shakespeare's *Rosalind* also ends by consenting to her marital subordination to Orlando at the close of *As You Like*

*It.* Yet what has passed between them in the period of disguise is surely not irrelevant to our sense of the outcome. Rosalind has won for herself no ordinary wifehood, however it may appear, as the couple joins a throng of other newly-weds at the end of the play. Similarly, by the time Penelope recognizes Odysseus they have, even if sub-consciously, recreated the ideal marriage which Odysseus describes to Nausicaa in Book 6.180-185:

and then may the gods give you every thing that your heart longs for;  
may they grant you a husband and a house and sweet agreement  
in all things, for nothing is better than this, more steadfast  
than when two people, a man and his wife, keep a harmonious  
household; a thing that brings much distress to the people who hate them  
and pleasure to their well-wishers, and for them the best reputation.

Despite his initial caution Odysseus comes to rely completely on Penelope’s stratagems to set the stage for his revenge. Their final reunion takes place not on his terms but hers: she accepts not the bloody man of force but the verbal and orderly man of peace; she controls the token of the bed. Her feelings about her dream in which the eagle destroys her pet geese (19.536-550), her winning of gifts from the suitors, and her establishment of the contest with the bow before she knows of Odysseus’ return are not consciously intended as hostile to her husband.<sup>23</sup> Yet she weeps at the slaughter of the geese and feels frightened and angry at the eagle. Again, while Odysseus dreams of a mature Penelope supporting him with full recognition of his identity, Penelope dreams of the young Odysseus before he went to Troy.<sup>24</sup> They dream together; yet the two images still separate man and wife. The images converge only in their final reunion. In the simile of the shipwrecked sailor Penelope takes on the mature Odysseus’ experiences as her own. They meet again in a new present as she finally breaks her almost enchanted attachment to the past, to the stopping of change which was her central weapon. Penelope’s dreams and dream-like decisions reflect simultaneously her emerging acceptance of Odysseus’ return and her instinctive reluctance to relinquish full control over the household. By eschewing her opportunity for usurping or misusing power Penelope secures from her husband a different kind of power and a marriage clarified by their mutual recognition of like-mindedness.

Odysseus' experiences with Nausicaa and Arete on Phaeacia prepare us to understand the importance of the form of negotiation between husband and wife and the nature of the outcome. In Phaeacia the figure of Arete is mysteriously central. Alcinous hold the power (*kratos*). Arete, relying on her husband's reverence for her, and accepting her subordination to him, is allowed the limited public role of resolving disputes between the husbands of wives who are in her favor (7.73-74). Yet Odysseus is twice advised to make his pleas to her alone. Bernard Fenik has gone far in exploring this question.<sup>25</sup> He suggests that Arete's importance emerges in one particular scene, the scene where she tests Odysseus with questions about his clothing. Phaeacians are reportedly suspicious of strangers. We are thus prepared dramatically for Odysseus' fate to depend on his answer to this awkward question. Odysseus shows himself, as he did earlier with Nausicaa, to be the ideally tactful man, and Arete is presumably satisfied. Yet Odysseus woos her again in his tale of the underworld by featuring his reunion with his mother and the stories of famous wives. Silence follows the ensuing pause in his story. Then Arete proposes that more gifts be given to Odysseus. The disguised Odysseus makes a comparable indirect compliment to Penelope when he describes the cloak worn by Odysseus in a fictional encounter on Crete. There he emphasizes how impressed the other women were at the workmanship of the cloak (19.234-235).

Alcinous – like Menelaus at Sparta – is more satisfied by appearances than his wife. But even in the most civilized contexts the basis for agreement and understanding between men and women remains problematic. The complexity of these negotiations of the inner domestic world – later perfected in the novel – seem to strain Homer's stylistic repertoire.<sup>26</sup> Interpreters of the scenes between Odysseus and Arete, Odysseus and Penelope, or Helen and Menelaus have turned to an analysis of a variety of stylistic devices such as type-scenes or patterns of repetition for clarification of their unspoken logic. Homer uses and may even have further developed the reverse simile and the dream to express more precisely the ambiguity of Penelope's position and her inner life. Similarly, the obliquely uncomplimentary tales of Helen and Menelaus, and the presence of drugs at their court subtly express uneasy relations in the domestic realm at Sparta.<sup>27</sup> In contrast Odysseus' tact and skill with words neutralizes the potential uneasiness of his relation with Arete and her daughter.

At Ithaca the like-mindedness of Odysseus and Penelope is continually recreated through the long recognition process. Through this like-mindedness women like Arete and Penelope win from their husbands influence even in the external world of their society. The woman’s consent is in both cases shown to be essential to the male’s success in ruling, and it must be won with a special form of gentle, uncoercive negotiation. Odysseus, contrary to Agamemnon’s advice in the underworld or Telemachus’ rough manners with his mother, is consistently kind (*ēpios*), not forceful to Penelope.<sup>28</sup> In both Phaeacia and Ithaca Homer gives the central place to Odysseus’ ability to be indirect and graceful in his dealings with women. If this is not fully borne out in the case of Arete, it is with Penelope. Arete’s role probably also pre-figures Penelope’s in a restored Ithaca. I see no reason to assume, from Telemachus’ adolescent attempts to break out from his mother’s influence, that Penelope is to live the rest of her life isolated in the women’s quarters.<sup>29</sup> Rather she will take her turn at giving gifts (see 19.309-11) and receiving visitors publicly at Odysseus’ side. Like Arete she has won her husband’s trust and shown her ability to settle disputes even among men.

This mode of complex and indirect negotiation for male-female relations in the poem becomes in Ithaca symbolic of an important dimension of Odysseus’ kingship. Ithacan culture requires a comparable subtly established like-mindedness between the king and his domestic and agricultural subordinates like Eumaeus, Eurycleia, the bard and the herald. The apparent lack of contradiction in the poem between recovering *oikos* and state (the second mysteriously and abruptly accomplished by Athena-ex-machina) suggests that we can interpret Odysseus’ elaborate recovery of his marriage and family as symbolic of a wider restoration of his kingdom on the same pattern.<sup>30</sup> Because the marriage is, as here, apparently used to express a larger range of hierarchical relations between “strangers” in the society, women have, not surprisingly, a correspondingly powerful and highly-valued social and ideological position in the poem.<sup>31</sup>

In order to evaluate fully the reverse-sex similes we must briefly return to an examination of the role of inversion in the structure of Odysseus’ journey as a whole. Odysseus gains understanding of Ithaca, an ever-increasing desire for home and Penelope, and a renewed social flexibility through his experience of the incompletely human. Odysseus tests all the limits of his culture. He rejects the

choice of becoming a god. He enters and returns from the world of the dead. At one moment he is nameless, without identity; at another he is already the hero of undying fame (Phaeacia). With Nausicaa he has the opportunity to relive a youthful marriage. On Ithaca he experiences before his time the indignity of poverty and old age. He explores the full range of nuances in the host-guest relationship. He visits cultures which, because of their isolation from war or their lack of need for agricultural or sexual reproduction offer him no social function he can recognize and accept. Odysseus never experiences the ultimate reversal from male to female. Yet numerous critics have commented on Odysseus' special ability to comprehend and respond to the female consciousness, on his "non-masculine" heroism and on his and Penelope's special affinity with the androgenous Athena.<sup>32</sup> The simile comparing Odysseus to a woman weeping over her dead husband in war (8.523-31) perhaps suggests how close Odysseus has come in the course of his travels, and in particular on Calypso's island, to the complete loss of normal social and emotional function which is the due of women enslaved in war. The earlier comparison of Penelope to an entrapped lion suggests her beleaguered position in Ithaca, and thus resonates with this simile as well.<sup>33</sup> Once conqueror of Troy, Odysseus now understands the position of its victims; and it is as such a victim, aged, a beggar, and no longer a leader of men, that he reenters Ithaca.

On Circe's island his men flock around Odysseus like calves about their mother (10.410-415), and in recovering Odysseus they feel they have symbolically recovered Ithaca (10.416-17). Yet Odysseus is not Ithaca; and in his journey to the underworld he rediscovers how much of his identity depends not only on his own heroic and warlike powers but on mothers, fathers, sons, and wives. Ithaca, too, cannot fully reproduce itself without Odysseus. The cluster of reverse similes surrounding the return of Odysseus reinforce and clarify the nature of this interdependence of identity in his own culture. Odysseus regains his son and father by sharing action and work. Yet the key to his return is and has been Penelope. With Penelope he recreates mutual trust both verbally and through a gradual and delicate re-awakening of sexual feeling. The characteristics associated with both the male sphere – with its special relation to war as well as agriculture – and with the female sphere – weaving and maintaining the domestic environment – are each shown to be potentially unstable in one dimen-

sion. Odysseus’ warlike virtues did not provide a safe return for his men, and sometimes, as with the Cyclops, they are directly responsible for their deaths; his armed presence violates the cultural balance of many peaceful islands on his journey. In contrast, he recovers Ithaca not merely through carefully meditated violence, but also through indirection and gentle persuasion. Conversely, uncontrolled female sexuality or irresponsible guardianship of the domestic environment are directly destructive to the cultural order of Ithaca. Yet I would emphasize here that Homer is not criticizing these “male” or “female” powers per se. Purely warlike qualities are appropriate at Troy. Circe’s behavior is not inappropriate to a world where agriculture is automatic and foreign policy can be conducted by magic. After all, without the weapon of her sexuality Penelope could not have preserved Ithaca for Odysseus. Instead the poem argues the necessary limitation of each for a stable Ithacan culture.

Thus the *Odyssey* argues for a particular pattern of male-female relations within Ithaca. The reverse similes which frame the return of Odysseus reinforce and explore these interdependent relationships. The two famous similes comparing Penelope to an Odysseus-figure accomplish this purpose with particular subtlety. In contrast to the *Iliad*, where such reverse-sex similes cluster randomly around the relation of Patroclus and Achilles, the Odyssean similes are integral to the structural development of the poem.<sup>34</sup> Penelope’s restraint in preserving Odysseus’ kingship without usurping his power reveals the nature of her own important guardianship of the domestic sphere. During the period of tacit negotiation which takes place before their final recognition, Odysseus and Penelope recreate a mature marriage with well-defined spheres of power and a dynamic tension between two like-minded members of their sex.

*Stanford University*

#### NOTES

A draft of this paper was originally presented at the December, 1976 meeting of the First Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies Conference at Briarcliff College, New York.

I wish to thank Carolyn Dewald, Mark Edwards, Rick Griffiths, Duncan Foley, Michael Jameson, and Michelle Rosaldo for their helpful comments and criticisms, and John Peradotto for his editorial suggestions.



- <sup>1</sup> Hermann Fraenkel, *Die Homerischen Gleichnisse* (Göttingen 1921), A. J. Podlecki, "Some Odyssean Similes," *Greece and Rome* 18 (1971) 82, and W. C. Scott, *The Oral Nature of the Homeric Simile*, *Mnemosyne* Suppl. 28 (1974) 123, all notice the structural position of these similes of family relation. Carroll Moulton, "Similes in the Iliad," *Hermes* 102 (1974) 390 and Podlecki note the inversion technique in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* respectively. "Here we have the merest hint of a unique feature of Odyssean similes . . . by which the poet reminds us of an important theme in the poem, but with a slight difference of focus or point of view" (Podlecki, 82). I was first introduced to the notion of a "reverse simile" by John Finley, Jr. in 1970. None of the above interpretations attempt to explain these similes in the light of the social and sexual logic of the poem as a whole.
- <sup>2</sup> The first interpretation is common: for example, Podlecki (above, note 1) 90, and Marilyn B. Arthur, "Early Greece: The Origins of the Western Attitude Towards Women," *Arethusa* 6.1 (1973) 15. The second occurs in C. P. Segal, "The Phaeacians and the Symbolism of Odysseus' Return," *Arion*, 1.4 (1962) 43. Anne Amory, "The Reunion of Odysseus and Penelope," in Charles H. Taylor (ed.), *Essays on the Odyssey* (Bloomington, Indiana 1963, rep. 1969) 100-1 and Podlecki, 87, comment on how the king simile identifies Penelope and Odysseus.
- <sup>3</sup> In this paper I shall treat the *Odyssey* as a coherent text (including, for example, the disputed books 11 and 24), whether its coherence arises from its being the product in its final form of a single artistic consciousness or in some other way (for example, from its being the product of a coherent oral or cultural tradition).
- Other recent work on Odyssean similes has tended to emphasize that the similes are few and carefully positioned. The content of many is unique, and thus, some argue, more probably composed for the place in which they appear although in conformity with an oral tradition. Among those works not included above are C. M. Bowra, *Tradition and Design in the Iliad* (Oxford 1930, rep. 1950), D. J. N. Lee, *The Similes of the Iliad and Odyssey Compared* (Melbourne 1964), and C. R. Beye, "Male and Female in the Homeric Poems," *Ramus*, 3.2 (1974) 87-101. G. P. Shipp, *Studies in the Language of Homer* (Cambridge 1953, 2nd ed. 1972) argues for the late date of the language of the similes.
- <sup>4</sup> The bibliography on this topic is extensive. I found particularly suggestive Natalie Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford 1975) 311, note 12 and her chapter "Women on Top," 124-151.
- <sup>5</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mythe et Société en Grèce Ancienne* (Paris 1974) 57-81 and especially 77-81 emphasizes how real and important the power of a royal wife was in the absence of her husband. One has only to compare Clytemnestra's role in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus.
- <sup>6</sup> Many critics have treated the *Odyssey* as high comedy. Interestingly, women in Greek comedy (for example, in Aristophanes) are allowed to overstep domestic boundaries in a limited manner without incurring the

disasters met by their counterparts in tragedy. In part this is because women in comedy act creatively to restore the damaged status quo. Even more important they remain chaste.

Penelope’s suspension of time on Ithaca, to be discussed shortly, is also characteristic of the suspension or inversion of natural and social reality in festival and comedy.

- <sup>7</sup> Bernard Fenik, *Studies in the Odyssey* (*Hermes Einzelschr.* 30, Wiesbaden 1974) in his otherwise excellent book does not fully bring out the important implications of this repeated type scene in the *Odyssey* for an interpretation of Penelope. See pp. 18-19 of this paper. Anne Amory (above, note 2) 116 comments that any recognition based only on an external sign would be anticlimactic for Penelope and Odysseus. Thus the recognition is delayed even though we might expect, based what happens in the cases of Helen and Arete (in my interpretation of the type scene), some earlier response.
- <sup>8</sup> Podlecki (above, note 1) 84 thinks this simile also identifies Penelope with Odysseus. Lion similes are used elsewhere only of Odysseus with one exception (of the Cyclops, 9.292-3).
- <sup>9</sup> Both Amory and Beye (above, note 2) have recently reinterpreted Penelope’s passivity as being a form of activity, of deliberate passivity. I think all critics put too much emphasis on Penelope’s constant weeping. Odysseus, Menelaus and Telemachus weep frequently also, but weeping prevents none of them, or Penelope, from acting wherever possible.
- <sup>10</sup> Helen, like the other archetypal female figures in the poem, also tries to delay Telemachus on his journey of maturation. It is amusing – and psychologically apt – that Telemachus’ fears about his mother’s fidelity reach their peak in his warning dream at Sparta. In a similar vein Odysseus is compared to a bat above Charbydis. The powerful female figure surrounded by tamed beasts is drawn from the archetypal goddess figure, the mistress of animals.
- Beye (above, note 2) 97 notes that both Penelope and Circe are surrounded by suitors dependent on them for food. He sees a common threat of sexual dominance, however benign in most cases, in all the women of the poem.
- <sup>11</sup> See among others, M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York 1954, rep. 1965) 92 ff., Vernant (above, note 5), and M. P. Nilson, *Homer and Mycenae* (London 1933) 225 ff. Space does not permit a discussion of this complex question.
- <sup>12</sup> Penelope’s discussion of Helen’s misjudgment after her recognition of Odysseus (23.215 ff.) shows how much this freezing of her own sexuality to avoid deception by strangers was an act of imagination and an achievement. In contrast, Penelope melts at Odysseus’ return like snow on the mountains (19.205-209). For an excellent discussion of Penelope’s virtues in this respect see Amory (above, note 2) 120-1.

- <sup>13</sup> All the translations in this essay are from Richmond Lattimore's *The Odyssey of Homer*.
- <sup>14</sup> See 2.115 ff., 18.212-13, and 245-49. Odysseus thus offers in part a tacit recognition of the exceptional tact and self-restraint with which she has executed a role abnormal to her sex.
- <sup>15</sup> Finley (above, note 11) 102 wants to see this simile as anachronistic. Yet its imagery is entirely in keeping with other parts of the poem.
- <sup>16</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Valeurs Religieuses et Mythique de la Terre et du Sacrifice en Grèce Ancienne," in M. I. Finley (ed.), *Problèmes de la Terre en Grèce Ancienne* (Paris 1973) 269-292. This excellent article differs from my analysis here mainly in emphasis. I agree that sacrifice, marriage and agriculture are the defining features of human culture in the poem and that the world of the islands with their golden-age environment and different social structures should be categorized as supra- or infra-human. I simply wish to apply this analysis to the problem of women's role; thus I am led to analyze the "incompletely human" female-dominated environments in terms of the female sphere of the Ithacan household. Vidal-Naquet's article emphasizes instead that the islands have no need to maintain a pious – or limiting – relation to the gods. Thus they do not sacrifice.
- <sup>17</sup> Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* VII, 17 ff. In this model the male produces the goods in the external sphere, the female ("the queen bee") processes and orders goods in the internal sphere. The separation of the two spheres is natural and efficient.
- <sup>18</sup> Like the poet, Helen in the *Iliad* (3, 125-128) records on her web the battles fought for her at Troy.

In Lévi-Strauss' structural analysis cooking marks the special quality of human culture by mediating, through the use of fire, between the categories of perishable goods, the raw and the rotten. Goddesses like Circe cook; on Olympus the gods eat uncooked but imperishable ambrosia, although they apparently savor the smoke of cooked sacrifices.

- <sup>19</sup> I do not mean to assert that males in the *Odyssey* are primarily associated with change – especially change in the sense of "progress" – but simply that the male is uniquely qualified to handle or neutralize sources of instability external to the domestic world and thus to assure its continuity. Men's work – agriculture, war – is special to the fragile world of human culture. Any complete treatment of the role of the civilized male in the poem would also have to contend with Odysseus' contemporaries Nestor and Menelaus, and is beyond the scope of this paper.

Homer does not make as rigid a differentiation between the female domestic sphere and the male political sphere as the poets of the fifth century. In the fifth century the female sphere continues to be associated with the continuity of the household (the family cult is also located within the *oikos*): the Furies are older gods; Antigone argues for the timeless unwritten laws, etc. In contrast the exclusively male political world of

fifth-century Athens was continually in danger of falling prey to extreme innovation, whether internally or in the realm of foreign policy.

- <sup>20</sup> Hesiodic and Homeric fathers ideally expect sons in their own image. Again, the emphasis falls on the male parent.
- <sup>21</sup> Odysseus’ relationships with Telemachus and Laertes are, of course, extremely important. Yet throughout the poem Odysseus’ blood relations pose no serious threat to his return. Telemachus does not even require a token to be convinced of his father’s identity. The recognition with Laertes is complex, and for many, disturbing. Yet its late appearance in the poem makes clear that the success of Odysseus’ homecoming does not depend on his father. Odysseus renegotiates his social not his natural relationships.
- <sup>22</sup> See note 2 above, especially page 106.
- <sup>23</sup> Both the dream about the geese (19.536 ff.) and her dream about Odysseus as a young man at Troy (20.86-9) are not explicitly sent by gods, so that we can associate them even more directly with Penelope’s own inner feelings.
- <sup>24</sup> 20.86-89 and 93-94. I do not share Amory’s feeling that this dream is simply an image of like-mindedness between husband and wife.
- <sup>25</sup> See note 7 above, especially pp. 105-132.
- <sup>26</sup> See G. Germain, *Homer*, trans. R. Howard (London 1960) 126 ff. on the novelistic qualities of the *Odyssey*.
- <sup>27</sup> See Robert Schmiel, “Telemachus in Sparta,” *TAPA* 103 (1972) 463-72 on the uneasy atmosphere at Sparta. Women dream more often than men in the *Odyssey*, and Penelope more than any other character.
- <sup>28</sup> Agamemnon at 11.441 counsels Odysseus not to be *ēpios* to Penelope.
- <sup>29</sup> Most students of the poem assume that the chaste Penelope will play a different role from that of Arete or Helen in the future. See, for example, M. Arthur (above, note 2) 18-19.
- <sup>30</sup> See Natalie Davis (above, note 4) for the widespread use of the marriage relation to symbolize other social relations. Homer’s audience would perhaps have found Athena’s role startling if this were not the case. Given the very limited role of the Homeric king in ordinary community affairs as opposed to war problems this does not seem as surprising as it would in another context.
- <sup>31</sup> Arthur (above, note 2) 13-14 and Finley both comment on the relation between a positive evaluation of women and the development of the nuclear family. Recent anthropological literature finds a similar positive evaluation of women in cultures, like that on Ithaca, where there is a relatively limited separation between the domestic and public spheres. See, for example, Louise Lamphere, “Strategies, Cooperation and Conflict Among Women in Domestic Groups,” in Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (edd.), *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford 1974) 97-112. Finley does not, in my view, go far enough in examining the almost complete isolation of

the ruling family on Ithaca. Odysseus apparently – perhaps simply for dramatic reasons – has no close kin.

<sup>32</sup> See especially W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme* (Ann Arbor, Michigan 1963) on Odysseus' untypical heroism. The positive attitude towards women in the *Odyssey* has been made famous by Samuel Butler's classic *The Authoress of the Odyssey* and Robert Graves' novel *Homer's Daughter*.

<sup>33</sup> See Podlecki (above, note 1) 86 on the possible reference to Penelope here. Segal (above, note 2) 28 interprets the Book 8 simile in terms of the contrast between Odysseus' real suffering and the Phaeacians' aesthetic distance from it.

<sup>34</sup> Moulton (above, note 1) 391 ff.