



Penelope with Suitors. Pinturicchio. 1509. National Gallery, London.

Penelope's *Nostos*: Weaving Wor[ld]ds

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For Ruth, Paul, John, and Mary on their anniversaries

ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἄν ἀσπάσιος γῆ νηχομένοισι φανήη,
ὣν τε Ποσειδάων εὐεργέα νῆ' ἐνὶ πόντῳ
ῥαΐσῃ, ἐπειγομένην ἀνέμῳ καὶ κύματι πηγῶ·
παῦροι δ' ἐξέφυγον πολιῆς ἀλὸς ἡπειρόνδε
νηχόμενοι, πολλή δὲ περὶ χροὶ τέτροφεν ἄλμη,
ἀσπάσιοι δ' ἐπέβαν γαίης, κακότητα φυγόντες. . .

As when land appears joyfully to swimmers
Whose sturdy ship Poseidon has shattered
In the sea, their ship buffeted by the wind and the dark waves;
Few remain who have escaped from the grey sea onto the land
With their swimming, and their skin is thoroughly caked with brine,
Over-joyed they step on the dry land, having escaped disaster. . .
(*Odyssey* 23.233–38)

AT THIS CLIMACTIC moment, Penelope has tested and tricked her husband through her ploy with the bed; he has been caught off guard, angrily revealing himself and the secret of the bed known only to the two of them—how he constructed it from a living olive tree rooted in the earth and built their marital chamber around it. The moment is punctuated by our simile,¹ which is introduced by two lines:

ὥς φάτο, τῷ δ' ἔτι μᾶλλον ὑφ' ἡμερον ὥρσε γόοιο·
κλαῖε δ' ἔχων ἄλοχον θυμαρέα, κεδνὰ ἰδυῖαν.

She spoke, and roused in him a longing for wailing;
He wept, embracing his wife, wise beyond measure, his
heart clasped to hers. . .

(23.231–32)

We expect that the lines immediately following will convey Odysseus's joy at finally holding his wife in his arms. But we are in for a surprise as the simile ends:

ὥς ἄρα τῇ ἀσπαστὸς ἦν πόσις εἰσοροώσῃ,
δειρῆς δ' οὐ πω πάμπαν ἀφίετο πήχεε λευκῶ.

Just so was she overjoyed gazing at her husband,
And her white arms could not stop embracing him.

(23.339–40)

These last two lines reveal that it is *Penelope's* joy and survival that are being described. Here, Penelope, whose standard epithet throughout the *Odyssey* is *periphon* (“she who keeps her wits about her”), finally lets down her guard and knows it really is her husband Odysseus. This breath-taking simile first likens her emotion to the joy of shipwrecked sailors as they catch sight of land, and then their joy at having barely managed to escape drowning and made it to land. It is, of course, Odysseus who has suffered shipwreck more than once on his return journey from Troy, his *nostos*. Before reaching Scheria, his last stopping point before reaching Ithaca, he almost drowns, but spies land from afar—and makes it to shore (5.388–93):

ἔνθα δύο νύκτας δύο τ' ἡμέατα κύματι πηγῶ
 πλάζετο, πολλὰ δέ οἱ κραδίη προτιόσσετ' ὄλεθρον.
 ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ τρίτον ἡμαρ ἐϋπλόκαμος τέλεσ' Ἡώς,
 καὶ τότ' ἔπειτ' ἄνεμος μὲν ἐπαύσατο ἡδὲ γαλήνη
 ἔπλετο νηνεμίη· ὁ δ' ἄρα σχεδὸν εἴσιδε γαῖαν
 ὁζὺ μάλα προῖδών, μεγάλου ὑπὸ κύματος ἀρθεῖς.

Then for two nights and two days he was driven
 By a mighty wave, and often in his heart he foresaw his
 destruction.

But when Dawn brought about the third day
 Then the wind died down and became calm
 Windlessly; and, lo! he saw land nearby
 Peering very hard ahead, raised up by a giant swell.

This moment is also punctuated with a simile (5.394–99):

ὥς δ' ὅτ' ἂν ἀσπᾶσιος βίσιος παῖδεσσι φανήη
 πατρός, ὃς ἐν νόσῳ κεῖται κρατέρ' ἄλγεα πάσχων,
 δηρὸν τηκόμενος, στυγερός δέ οἱ ἔχραε δαίμων,
 ἀσπᾶσιον δ' ἄρα τὸν γε θεοὶ κακότητος ἔλυσαν,
 ὥς Ὀδυσῆ' ἀσπαστὸν εἰείατο γαῖα καὶ ὕλη,
 νῆχε δ' ἐπειγόμενος ποσὶν ἠπείρου ἐπιβῆναι.

As when a sign of life appears joyfully to the children
 Of their father, who lies in illness, suffering strong pains,
 Long and lingering, and some hateful Power has
 possessed him,
 But lo! the gods released him from his suffering;
 So did land and woods appear joyfully to Odysseus,
 As he swam, eager to set foot on dry land.

The words ἀσπᾶσιος/ἀσπαστός link the two passages, inverting shipwreck and domestic scene.² Penelope, to be sure, has not budged from Ithaca—she has not even left the palace—but the simile suggests that she too has made a *nostos*, even if she has not encountered one-eyed monsters, cannibals, or seductive nymphs.³

In fact, there are a number of parallels throughout the epic, both structural and verbal, that underscore the strong identification of the spouses as fellow survivors of their respective *nostoi*.⁴ Like Odysseus, Penelope has had many adventures, endured many trials. The palace itself resembles a cave besieged by young hoodlums who devour Odysseus's goods, guzzle his wine, and sleep with the servants; the brazen Suitors sometimes threaten, sometimes attempt to seduce her with flattering words. But like her husband, Penelope has her wiles, adept at concocting lying tales and buying time. Like her husband too, she can exercise her charm to elicit gifts: he, from the Phaeacians, she, from the Suitors.

Her main ruse, as we know, is her weaving, and here, too, she resembles her husband. For in Greek you “weave” a plan, a cunning plot: ὑφαίνειν μῆτιν: the expression occurs four times in the *Odyssey* (4.678, 9.422, 13.303, 13.386). Odysseus's metaphorical weaving, plotting his return, mirrors Penelope's literal weaving, itself a cunning plan that puts off the Suitors for four years before it is finally discovered.

But there are even further verbal resonances that bind this couple together and define their returns and reunions. ἰστός is the word for both loom and mast, linking Odysseus's travels with Penelope's weaving.⁵ In fact, ἰστόν ἰστήμι is the expression both for raising the mast

of a ship and preparing a loom for weaving.⁶ This symbolic parallel also emerges from an often-cited passage in Artemidorus who equates a dream of weaving with a sea voyage.⁷ And it turns out that, just as Penelope's loom averts, at least for a while, a domestic disaster, Odysseus is twice saved from death by a mast. For it is the mast to which Odysseus is bound that prevents his succumbing to the seductive songs of the Sirens, and again, with the shipwreck of his companions after Thrinacia, the mast of his ship saves Odysseus from drowning and brings him all the way to Ogygia.⁸ The sails for the boat he fabricates there are presumably the cloaks woven by Calypso.⁹ The verb ἀναλύω, as Nosch notes, is used both of loosening the cables of a ship and Penelope's nocturnal unraveling of her weaving.¹⁰ A rare word, σπεῖρον, is twice used of the sail of Odysseus's ship (5.318, 6.269), but also of the shroud Penelope weaves for Laertes (2.102=19.147=24.137).¹¹ If we are allowed to push the equation a bit further, Penelope's alternating movements going to and fro before her loom, ἱστὸν ἐποικομένη,¹² by day and by night, may, in terms of the mileage covered, be analogous to the wandering zig-zag route of Odysseus's return.

Finally, another expression that links Penelope's domestic activity to Odysseus's far-flung adventures: *τολυπεύω*, "to roll up a ball of wool," metaphorically "to finish off, complete." It occurs four times in the formula *πόλεμον τολύπευσε*, "when he had done with the war" to describe Odysseus's travels after he left Troy, i.e. his *nostos*. But it is also used of Penelope being forced by the Suitors to finish off her weaving, her crafty ploy to keep them at bay, as she recounts to her still disguised husband:

ἐγὼ δὲ δόλους τολυπεύω,
 φᾶρος μὲν μοι πρῶτον ἐνέπνευσε φρεσὶ δαίμων
 στησαμένη μέγαν ἴσθον ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ὑφαίνειν. . .

I have wound up my bag of tricks;
 Some divine power first inspired my heart
 To set up a great loom in the palace to weave. . . (19.137–39)

Through this crafty inter-play of words and expressions, then, the epic poet reveals Penelope's *nostos* to be a mirror image of her husband's. She, too, has her *odyssey*.

NOTES

1. See now Beck 2023, 50–53 for a discussion of this simile. Foley 1978 focuses on this simile as one of the *Odyssey*'s "reverse similes" that invert the role of the sexes. My emphasis, however, is on the parallels between husband and wife. See also Murnaghan 1987, 45–46; de Jong 2001, 559. It is striking that, despite their focus on Penelope, neither Katz 1991 nor Felson 1994 discuss the passage.

2. Beck 2023, 26–29 has recently given a fine analysis of this simile, contrasting the emphasis on seeing in the tenor (the shipwreck) as contrasted with the emotional register of the simile. She also notes that ἀσπάσιος has no English equivalent; it signifies joy, relief, and a welcome sense of relief. Both Beck 2023 and Friedrich 1981, 133–37 connect the two similes.

3. *Od.* 23.233–40 is only one of the many "reverse similes" describing Penelope; she is also likened to a lion, a king. See Foley 1987 for the masculine character of these images.

4. See Beck 2023, 52: "Both the structure and the content of the simile unify the superficially distinct experiences of Odysseus and Penelope during Odysseus' long absence."

5. See Christopoulos 1995, Bertolín 2008, and Nosch 2015 who have explored the parallels between loom and mast.

6. Mast: 2.424–25=15.289–90, 9.77=12.402, 10.506; loom: 2.94=24.129, 19.139. The *Odyssey* presents sailing and weaving as belonging to the mas-

culine and feminine spheres, respectively: ὅσον Φαίηκες περὶ πάντων ἴδριες ἀνδρῶν / νῆα θοὴν ἐνὶ πόντῳ ἐλαυνέμεν, ὥς δὲ γυναῖκες / ἰστὸν τεχνῆσαι (7.109–10). See Christopoulos 1995; Bertolín 2008. Nosch 2015 explores in detail the technical vocabulary used both of weaving and sailing in later sources and notes the similarities between the pyramidal shapes of anchors and loom weights, and even the movement of rowing and weaving. She further argues that it was the terms for weaving that were adapted to sailing rather than the other way around.

7. *Oneirocr.* 3.36.11–20: εἰ <δέ> τις πλέων ἰστὸν ἴδοι, ἡγείσθω τὴν κατάρτιον ὄραν. ὅτι ἂν οὖν περὶ τὸν ἰστὸν ἀποβαίνει, τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ περὶ τὴν κατάρτιον ἔσται. (“If while sailing, someone should see [in his dream] a loom, let him realize that he sees a ship’s mast. Whatever should happen to the loom, the same will transpire with the mast.”)

8. Christopoulos 1995.

9. *Od.* 5.258–59. See Christopoulos 1995, 129.

10. Nosch 2015.

11. Oddly not mentioned in Nosch 2015 who lists later expressions for sails and clothing. The term is also used of εἴλωμα σπείρων (6.179) that the naked Odysseus requests of Nausicaa, σπείρα κακά which the disguised Odysseus wore on his foray into Troy (4.246), and then only by Euphorion 107.

12. *Od.* 5.62, 10.222, 10.226, 10.254. Her weaving by day and unraveling at night (2.104=24.139, 2.109=24.145, 19.149) would, to be sure, double Penelope’s mileage. At 17.227 and 18.363 the Suitors complain that Odysseus (still disguised as a beggar) is too lazy to ἐργον ἐποιχεσθαι; the same expression is used of the servant girls to attend to their chores. In the *Iliad*, the verb is frequently used of someone going around and mustering the troops. Nosch 2015 draws a parallel between the movement of oars in rowing and the shuttle in weaving.

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