THE DISTAFF SIDE

Representing the Female in Homer's *Odyssey*

Edited by
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New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1995

Oxford University Press

Oxford New York
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Calcutta Cape Town Dar es Salaam Delhi
Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madras Madrid Melbourne
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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.,
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The Distaff side : representing the female in Homer's Odyssey /
edited by Beth Cohen.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-19-508682-1; ISBN 0-19-508683-X (pbk.)
1. Homer. Odyssey. 2. Epic poetry, Greek—History and criticism.
3. Women and literature—Greece—History. 4. Goddesses, Greek, in literature.
5. Art and literature—Greece. 6. Homer—Characters—
Women. 7. Women in literature. 8. Women in art.
9. Art, Greek.
I. Cohen, Beth.
PA4167.D57 1995
883'.01—dc20 94-6749

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To the memory of my mother

32. See, e.g., Beloch, 1924, 231–32; Schaefer, 1960, 77–78.
33. Cf. Beloch, 1924, 231–32; Bremmer, 1986.
34. See, e.g., Rougé, 1970; Compernolle, 1983; Coldstream, 1993.
35. Graham, 1984.
36. Cf., e.g., Dalby, 1992, 19–20 n. 29, who shows no proper understanding of the poverty of our source material and rejects my thesis without specific criticisms, except the phrase "a paper of patchy logic," for which an author would welcome precise justification.
37. Graham, 1984, 293–94.
38. E.g. 1.27.1 (Epidamnos); 1.100.3, 4.102.2–3 (Amphipolis); 3.92.5 (Herakleia in Trakhis).
39. Diodorus Siculus 12.10–11, esp. 11.1. Cf. Graham, 1984, 302.
40. Diodorus Siculus 20.41.1. Cf. Meister, 1984, 396–97.
41. Pausanias 10.28.3; Strabo 4.1.4 (C 179). Cf. Graham, 1984, 302–4.
42. Schaps, 1979, 73.
43. Cf. Graham, 1984, 304–10.
44. Ibid., 311–12.
45. Ibid., 304–6.
46. Coldstream, 1977, 78–80.

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Female Representations and Interpreting the *Odyssey*

Seth L. Schein

The representation and description of a variety of females—human women, goddesses, and monsters—are among the most striking features of the *Odyssey*. For the most part, women and the goddess Athena are described or represented by the voice of the poem's (implied) narrator; other goddesses and nonhuman females occur mainly in the stories told in the first person by Odysseus, sometimes in secondary narrative by characters whom Odysseus quotes and whose accounts, as in the case of Kirke's description of the Sirens, he seems to accept. Only Kalypso figures in both authorial and embedded narrative.

The *Odyssey* gives relatively few descriptions of its female characters' physical appearances and characteristics, such as Athena's gray eyes (*passim*), Penelope's "thick hand" (21.6), and the white arms of Arete (7.233,335; 11.335), Nausikaa (6.101, 186, 251; 7.12), Helen (22.227), and servants in both Scheria and Ithaka (7.239; 18.198; 19.60). Nevertheless, it offers quite a lot of what might be called the phenomenology of appearance: accounts of specific characters' appearances that are grounded in the effects they have on other characters or on themselves. Odysseus, for example, refers to several of his companions meeting the wife of the Laistrygonian Antiphates, "as large as a mountain top, and they loathed her" (10.113); quoting Kirke, he gives an extended description of the monstrous Skylla

(12.85–100). Perhaps it is no accident that these two females are man-eaters, like the Kyklops Polyphemos, whom Odysseus calls a "monstrous marvel, and he didn't resemble / a man who eats bread but a wooded pinnacle / in the high mountains" (9.190–93). Presumably the appearance of these dangerous figures was correlative in Odysseus' mind with their hideous actions, which motivated his descriptions of them.

Penelope is a poetically more important example of the phenomenology of appearance. We do not learn what she actually looks like, but we hear that Odysseus prefers her to Kalypso, even though she is "slighter in form and stature to look at face-to-face" than the goddess (5.217); that Athena enhanced Penelope's "beautiful face" with ambrosial beauty of the kind Aphrodite uses, and "made her taller and fuller to see and whiter than sawn ivory" (18.192–96), so that the Suitors desired her all the more and "prayed to lie beside her" (18.212–13); that she herself did not even want to wash the tears off her face when she was leaving her bedroom for the main hall of the palace, and felt the immortals "destroyed [her] excellence in both form and build," when Odysseus went with the Greeks to Troy (18.178–81, 251–53 = 19.124–26). This emphasis on the effects of Penelope's physical appearance makes sense, given the importance in the poem of the themes of appearance and disguise, mutability and subjectivity.[1]

Each depiction or description of a female in the *Odyssey* is aimed either at the external audience of the poem or at some internal audience of one or more characters as well as the external audience. Each appeals to, or plays against, audiences' conceptions of females generally as well as the expectations shaped by representations of particular females in the mythology and oral poetic tradition behind the poem. None of these descriptions or representations within the *Odyssey* is totally authoritative; taken together, they contribute greatly to the poem's narratological, dramatic, and moral complexity. In particular, the multiplicity and complexity of females represented as making decisions, taking actions, and telling stories challenge listeners and readers to shape views of Odysseus' distinctive heroic identity, evaluate his authority as a narrator, and consider how his interactions with females help constitute both his identity and his authority, even while these representations make problematic any particular interpretation of the hero, the females, and the poem.[2]

For many readers, the most memorable section of the *Odyssey* is Odysseus' narrative to the Phaeacians in Books 9–12 of his adventures since leaving Troy. The traditional story patterns and folktales on which this narrative draws are carefully adapted to the distinctive themes, ethical concerns, and symbolic patterns of the *Odyssey* as a whole, but this is not what makes them so memorable. Rather, they constitute a series of diverse, wide-ranging stories about the pleasures and dangers of human existence, stories that tend to represent what is "human" as male and most of the "pleasures" and "dangers"—or what a male imagination fantasizes as such—as female.

I say "male imagination" precisely because these stories are narrated in the first person by Odysseus and constitute *his,* not the poem's, versions of heroic experience. Many of them involve nonhuman female figures who threaten the hero or his return homeward. These females, to hear Odysseus tell of them, are often monstrous, and their menace is literally or symbolically sexual—specific instances of the general danger of being swallowed, engulfed, concealed, or obliterated, against which he constantly struggles. In this respect they are vividly imagined versions of the sea itself in which Odysseus is lost, through which he struggles to return home, and with which, according to Teiresias' prophecy (11.121–37), he must make his ultimate peace by bringing knowledge of ships and the worship of the sea god Poseidon to inland agriculturists among whom they are yet unknown. Odysseus represents his experiences with sea dangers as encounters with the feminine and repeatedly tells of escaping these dangers when the threatening females eventually befriend him, after he survives or overcomes them.[3]

The power of these dangerous, nonhuman females is sometimes signaled by the prototypically female activities of weaving (Kirke, Kalypso) and singing (Kirke, Kalypso, the Sirens).[4] In other instances the threat to Odysseus is that of being swallowed, literally eaten alive (Skylla, Charybdis). Polyphemos, the Kyklops, though apparently a male figure, might well be included in this list of dangerous females in that he seems to be symbolically feminized by the cave-womb in which he dwells, within which the hero is Nobody and from which the hero is, so to speak, (re)born, conspicuously insisting on his identity as Odysseus.[5]

Kalypso and her island offer a suggestive example of how the encounters with females that Odysseus narrates work and how each constitutes a coherent episode, thematically and ethically relevant to the entire poem. As I have said, this is the only one of the adventures that is told both by the poem's narrator and, more briefly, by Odysseus in his first person narratives to the Phaeacians (7.244–66; 12.447–50) and to Penelope (23.333–37). Kalypso is referred to emphatically in the opening of the poem (1.13, 15, 49–57), and Odysseus' departure from Ogygia is the first adventure narrated after the Telemachy. These features make the episode especially prominent and give it a paradigmatic status in relation to the other adventures.

Kalypso, whose name means "concealer," is a good instance of the poem's characteristic punning and etymological wordplay on the names and attributes of its characters—punning and wordplay that reflect these characters' essential natures and functions. Kalypso "conceals" Odysseus on her island at the "navel of the sea" (1.50), which means, in effect, that as long as he is with her he is lost at sea and not himself—not able to function as Odysseus. All he "does," until the intervention of Hermes in Book 5, is sit passively weeping, gazing out over the sea that should be the medium of his heroic achievement but now is merely a barrier to it, "longing to see even the smoke / rising from his native land" (1.58–59). He does, however, resist Kalypso's invitation to become her immortal consort, which would mean permanently "concealing" his mortality and his return homeward, as well as abandoning his distinctive heroic pattern of suffering, endurance, and ultimate triumph for the life of ease that characterizes the gods' existence. Despite temptation, Odysseus keeps his mind on "thoughtful Penelope," though "she is slighter than you [Kalypso] in form and stature to look at; / for she is mortal, but you are immortal and unaging" (5.216–18); he keeps longing "to go homeward and see the day of returning home" (5.220). In effect he chooses to be remembered as the hero of the *Odyssey* over the oblivion among mortals that would accompany an existence as Kalypso's husband.[6] This choice is every bit as significant as Achilles' decision to die at Troy and achieve "imperishable glory" rather than to return home to a long life with no glory (*Iliad* 9.412–16). In each epic the hero chooses, in a different way, to be a hero, and so chooses life (in heroic song) over death (through being forgotten).[7]

The Sirens apparently constitute a danger for Odysseus different in kind from that of Kalypso and the other threatening, nonhuman females he tells of in his first-person narrative of his adventures. They neither invite him into a sexual relationship nor threaten to engulf or swallow him. Rather, they sing a song in a "honey-sweet voice" (12.187) and claim,

> when anyone has delighted in it, he will go on his way knowing
>   more;
> for we know all things, as many as, in broad Troy,
> the Trojans and Argives toiled at by the will of the gods,
> and we know as many things as happen on the earth that feeds
>   many. (12.188–91)

The song with which the Sirens tempt Odysseus suggests by its content and diction the kind of heroism associated with the *Iliad* and the Iliadic poetic tradition.[8] If Odysseus were to give way to their temptation and relapse, as it were, into that poetic genre, he would be destroyed and his bones would join those of other men rotting, as Kirke tells him, on the Sirens' meadow, for no warrior heroism can resist the power of the Sirens' song. Only the heroism of *nostos* poetry—poetry celebrating a hero's "return home"—grounded in Odysseus' characteristic cunning intelligence and mental toughness, is sufficient to withstand the Sirens' temptation. It is noteworthy that whereas the diction and content of the Sirens' song are Iliadic, the dangerous pleasure it offers is distinctively Odyssean because it is fundamentally sexual. This is shown by *terpsamenos* ("has delighted in," 12.189), a participial form of the verb *terpō*, which is frequently used of sexual delight, and by the sexually connotative *thelgousin,* Kirke's word in 12.44 for the "enchanting" effect of the Sirens' singing (and a word also used by Odysseus at 10.318 and by Kirke at 10.326 for the "enchanting" effect of her own metamorphosing drugs). In addition, the "flowery meadow" (*leimōn' anthemoenta,* 12.159), in which, Kirke says, the Sirens sit and sing and the bones of their victims rot (12.44–46), also suggests a scene of sexual activity, given the erotic associations of meadows (and grass and gardens) in early Greek poetry.[9] Thus, through their singing and their landscape, the Sirens menace Odysseus sexually, even though they do not explicitly invite him into a sexual relationship like Kirke and Kalypso and seem to tempt him with knowledge rather than with sexuality.

By contrast, the human females whom the poem describes Odysseus as meeting—Nausikaa, Arete, and especially Penelope—are invariably helpful. Penelope might well be considered a beneficent version of the seductive and dangerous nonhuman females Odysseus encounters. When she weaves a plan or a garment, she helps preserve Odysseus' home and kingdom. When he goes to bed with her in Book 23, he is neither threatened with destruction nor deflected from his journey homeward. Rather, their sexual union marks the end of his wanderings, at least in this poem,[10] and his restoration to his full identity as husband and king.

But how should a listener or reader of the *Odyssey,* as opposed to its hero, understand Penelope's loyalty and resourcefulness? The poem not only represents these qualities as existing for the sake of Odysseus and as an adjunct to his heroic identity, but it also characterizes them and her in such a way as to call into question this representation and even to raise doubts about the possibility of any single, straightforward interpretation of the epic.

Looked at in one way, Penelope, throughout the *Odyssey,* protects the *oikos* ("house" and "household") of Odysseus and Telemachos. Like Arete, she spends her time supervising servants and working wool, but *her* weaving of a shroud for Laertes is absolutely unique in kind and so important that it is described at length three times (2.94–110, 19.138–56, 24.129–46). Undoing by night what she accomplishes during the day, she uses this typically female activity to deceive the Suitors, delay her remarriage, and preserve the *oikos.*

In this salutary deception, Penelope shows the same cunning intelligence that is characteristic of Odysseus. The poem even shows hers to be superior to his when, at 23.176–80, she tests the stranger who claims to be Odysseus by ordering Eurykleia to prepare his bed—the one, we hear, Odysseus himself had made—outside their bedroom. Odysseus rises to the bait: By suspecting that another man has entered their bedroom and cut the rooted olive trunk that formed one leg of the bed, he in effect acknowledges the power of Penelope over him—the possibility that she has been or could be unfaithful. By describing the construction of the bed, he provides her with the certain sign that he really is Odysseus and gives her the opportunity to assert clearly her actual faithfulness and her resourcefulness in preserving their marriage and household.[11]

The mental similarity between Odysseus and Penelope is obvious both at 18.281–83, where he enjoys the way she trickily charms gifts from the Suitors while "her own mind is eager for other things," and in the continuation of the recognition scene in Book 23, when Penelope wishes to learn about the future trial imposed on Odysseus by Teiresias before going to bed with her husband, controlling her desire as so often in the poem he controls his (23.257–62). This mental likeness, or mutuality, is the poem's main example of the kind of harmony in marriage that Odysseus wishes for Nausikaa at 6.181–85:

> may the gods provide a husband and a house and unity of mind
> that is good; for nothing is better and stronger than *this,*
> than when the two of them, man and wife, keep house,
> being of one mind in their thoughts; with many pains for their enemies
> and joy for their well-wishers, and they themselves are especially glorious.

The verb translated as "are . . . glorious"—*ekluon,* a form of *kluō* ("hear")—is linguistically cognate with *kleos,* the Iliadic word for "heroic glory." It is characteristic of the *Odyssey* and its genre that having a harmonious marriage and an *oikos* can generate the kind of glory that in the *Iliad* and the Iliadic poetic tradition comes only from heroic warfare. It is equally characteristic that a woman, Penelope, can win such *kleos* for her "excellence" (*aretē,* 24.197) in "remembering" (*memnet',* 24.195) her husband—*kleos* that Odysseus himself, in a striking "reverse simile," compares to that of a good king who righteously upholds justice and under whose rule the land is fruitful, the herds are safe and strong, the fish in the sea plentiful, and the people well off (19.108–114).[12] As Agamemnon's shade says to that of Achilles at 24.194–98,

> How good was the mind of blameless Penelope,
> daughter of Ikarios; how well she remembered Odysseus,
> her wedded husband; therefore, for her the glory of her excellence
> will never perish, and for those living on the earth the immortals will make
> a song of grace for sensible Penelope.

In the *Iliad* "imperishable glory" is attained by warriors through celebration in poetry when they have performed heroic deeds. Here in the *Odyssey,* the "excellence" (*aretē*) that leads to such glory is redefined to refer not to supremacy in battle but to the mental toughness and faithfulness illustrated by Penelope "remembering" Odysseus. This makes sense because, elsewhere in the poem, remembering is the activity of mind that most distinguishes Odysseus from his Companions; enables him to return home to Ithaka, his *oikos,* and his wife; and makes him the hero of the epic. For her "remembering," the shade of Agamemnon says, Penelope earns a "song of grace" in the future—a kind of reward that in the *Iliad* is limited to warriors and to Helen (6.358) considered as the "cause" of warfare. In the *Odyssey* Helen, with her drug Nepenthe that "banishes grief and allays wrath, causing forgetfulness of all evils" (4.221), seems morally trivial in large part because she is more concerned with forgetting than with remembering; Penelope, by contrast, becomes a virtually equal, second hero of the poem, along with Odysseus.[13]

Penelope's "song of grace" is contrasted by Agamemnon's shade to the "song of hate" (24.200) he prophesies for Klytaimestra and to the "harsh reputation" Klytaimestra "will cause to attend/ on female women, even on one who does well" (24.201–2). In the world of the *Odyssey,* it seems, a woman who preserves or betrays her husband and *oikos* is as much the object of praise or blame as a man in the *Iliad* who acts heroically or like a coward, just as a return homeward, which in the *Iliad* is incompatible with heroic glory, is in the *Odyssey* itself the source of such glory.

In the kind of traditional poetry exemplified by the *Odyssey,* the *oikos* is a suitable object of song; the poetic world is divided into those loyal to the *oikos* and those who would destroy it; the hero is permitted to kill in defense of his *oikos* and to escape the reprisals that usually would follow such killing. Furthermore, because women's place is in the *oikos,* their role and importance in the *Odyssey* is far greater than in the *Iliad.* This has even led some readers, notably S. Butler, to suppose that the poem was composed by a woman.[14] However unlikely this may seem, such a view reflects not only the prominence of women in the *Odyssey* but also the sympathy with which they are portrayed. For example, Eurykleia, who for several generations has been part of Ithaka's royal *oikos* and nursed its rulers, is conspicuous for her fierce loyalty to it and to Laertes, Odysseus, and Telemachos. Throughout the poem, the role of the wife—in the persons of Helen, Arete, and Penelope and in contrast to the poem's threatening, nonhuman females—is given special honor, and women's intelligence—especially Penelope's—is equated with men's.

All this seems clear and convincing. Nevertheless, I think it would be naive to equate the interpretations by Agamemnon and other male characters in the poem, even Odysseus, of the proper relations between husbands and wives with that of the *Odyssey* itself. For Penelope's plans and behavior can be seen to have their own motivation, quite apart from her loyalty to Odysseus and his *oikos.*[15] For example, although the contest of the bow and the axes *results* in the death of the Suitors and the restoration of Odysseus to the kingship, when Penelope declares her intention to hold the contest (19.570–81), she must be understood to do so fully prepared for imminent marriage to one of her wooers. Similarly, when she solicits gifts from the Suitors at 18.274–80, we have only Odysseus' reported understanding that she is merely leading them on, "enchanting their feeling / with pleasing words, though her mind was eager for other things" (18.282–83). Why, however, should we accept Odysseus' reading of the situation, which obviously is self-serving? By the same token, should we accept the statement by the shade of the Suitor Amphimedon to the shades of Achilles and Agamemnon that Penelope set up the contest at the bidding of Odysseus (24.167)? This directly contradicts what happens in Book 19, where, as the poem makes explicitly clear, Penelope and Odysseus do *not* recognize one another, and she sets up the contest for her own reasons.[16] If we cannot trust Amphimedon's statement, why should we accept, and how are we to evaluate, the praise of Penelope by Agamemnon, to which that statement gives rise?

Finally, what are we to make of Penelope's implicit comparison of herself to Helen (23.218–24), immediately after she recognizes Odysseus by his knowledge of their bed and tells him of her continual fear during his absence that "someone of mortal men might come and deceive me / with words. For many men plan evil profits" (23.216–17)? Is it that she distrusts herself and therefore tests Odysseus, who clearly fits the description of the kind of man against whom she says she was on guard? Penelope asserts:

> Argive Helen, born from Zeus,
> would not have mingled in the bed of love with a foreigner
> if she knew that the warlike sons of the Achaeans
> were going to bring her back again homeward to her dear fatherland.
> Surely a god drove her to do an unseemly deed;
> earlier she had not put in her own heart the disastrous
> moral blindness, from which, to begin with, sorrow came to us
> also. (23.218–24)

This is the most sympathetic thing anyone in the *Odyssey* says about Helen. Penelope refuses to join in the otherwise universal condemnation of her by the poem's male characters, a condemnation that usually is considered by readers to be that of the poem itself. Yet Penelope's independence of judgment should caution readers not to assume too readily that the poem, as opposed to certain of its characters, even makes such a straightforward, uncomplicated condemnation. In light of Penelope's comment, it might be more accurate to say that in the end the poem leaves the question of Helen's moral responsibility and even the moral status of adultery open and in doubt, however it may tempt a listener or reader to share in the majority judgment against her and her behavior.

The poem similarly tempts its audience to accept as its own the judgments of various male characters, including Odysseus, about Penelope. According to these judgments, her glory lies in loyalty to her husband and *oikos* and in the resourcefulness with which she expresses this loyalty. But the poem also shows a Penelope with a mind of her own, not merely one in harmony with her husband's. It would be simplistic to adopt the standard, patriarchal reading of Penelope and of the roles of women and other females in the *Odyssey* generally without recognizing how the poem partly undoes this reading.

In the case of Penelope, as elsewhere, the *Odyssey* implies that its own main values and most frequently expressed viewpoints are neither unproblematic nor the only ones possible. Rather, they are to some extent open to criticism and negative evaluation, and the poem itself is correspondingly open-ended, interpretively ambivalent or indeterminate, and irreducible to a single, straightforward, one-dimensional reading.[17]

Notes

I would like to thank Beth Cohen for inviting me to contribute to the present volume and for her constructive criticism and editorial advice. I also wish to thank Laura Slatkin for criticism and suggestions that improved this essay.

1. As might be expected, there are far more, and more varied, accounts of Odysseus' appearance than of any female character's. Cf. Griffith, 1985, 310. For perceptive interpretations of the poem's descriptions of Odysseus' physical appearances, see Bell, 1991 and Bassi, 1994.

2. On the "threat posed by female narrators," especially the Sirens and Helen, to Odysseus' "privileges as narrator and focalizer of his own story" and the ways in which "the epic narrator contains this threat," see Doherty, Chapter 5, this volume.

3. Cf. Nagler, 1977.

4. Male bards (*aoidoi*) such as Phemios and Demodokos sing epic poetry about heroes and gods; the subject matter of the songs sung by nonhuman female singers, apart from the Sirens, is not specified. This is the kind of singing I call "prototypically female."

5. Cf. Dimock, 1956, 56–57.

6. Cf. Vernant, 1982.

7. Güntert, 1919, argues that Ogygia is symbolically a Land of the Dead, Kalypso a goddess of the dead, and "concealment" the equivalent of death. Cf. Anderson, 1958; Vernant, 1982; Powell, 1977, 5, n. 13, who refers to the interpretation of Kalypso and "concealment" by Hölscher, 1939, 67; Porter, 1962, 3–5, who terms Ogygia "an Eden-like Hell, or a hellish Eden." For a recent discussion of Kalypso with a summary of relevant scholarship, see Crane, 1988, 15–29.

8. See Pucci, 1979; Segal, 1983.

9. The "soft meadows" (*leimōnes malakoi*) of Kalypso's Ogygia (5.72) have a similar connotation. Cf. Motte, 1973, 50–56, cited by Vernant, 1982, 15, n. 10.

10. In the later epic sequel to the *Odyssey* entitled the *Telegony*, Odysseus' further adventures included journeys, wars, a second marriage to Kallidike, Queen of the Thesprotians, and death at the hands of Telegonos, his son by Kirke. In the *Odyssey* itself, Odysseus tells Penelope of the "immeasurable toil there will still be in the future, / [toil] abundant and difficult that it is necessary for me to finish completely" (23.249–50), according to Teiresias' prophecy (23.251, 267–84), and he says he will go raiding to replenish the herds destroyed by the Suitors (23.357).

11. On the specific poetic significance of "the sign of the bed," see Zeitlin, Chapter 7, this volume.

12. Cf. Foley, 1978.

13. For recent discussions of Penelope, see Murnaghan, 1986, reworked and expanded in Murnaghan, 1987, 118–47; Felson-Rubin, 1987 and 1993; Winkler, 1990; Doherty, 1990; and Katz, 1991, who is especially instructive on Penelope and *kleos*.

14. Butler, 1967.

15. Cf. Felson-Rubin, 1987 and 1993. On Penelope as an independent "moral agent," see Foley, Chapter 6, this volume.

16. Nevertheless, several scholars have argued that Penelope unconsciously or intuitively recognizes Odysseus in Book 19. See, for example, Harsh, 1950; Amory, 1963; Russo, 1982. Cf. Winkler, 1990, 150–61, who describes Penelope as "only 99% certain" that the stranger "was really Odysseus" (160).

17. On the poem's open-endedness and "indeterminacy," especially in regard to Penelope, see Katz, 1991, esp. 3–19, 155–95.