

Penelope's Lion

After the dream-scene her lion-figure at *Odyssey* 4.787-794 introduces, Penelope does not reappear until 16.335. The figure and dream-scene therefore serve as a primary touchstone for assessing all explicit and implicit references to her for half the epic. Yet, despite its importance, the figure has received almost no academic attention. All existing readings are either limited or unsustainable under closer scrutiny. A focused reading based on its use of formulaic language, echoes of other passages, and contrast with *Odyssey* 20.1-55 reveals that it synthesizes the psychological effects Penelope suffers from hearing about the suitors' assassination plans in her preceding scene. Namely, it encapsulates the disruption of qualities that define Penelope's character and "like-mindedness" with Odysseus. Because these qualities enable Penelope to persevere until Odysseus returns and explicitly distinguish her from Clytemnestra and Helen, their destabilization casts her character and future actions into doubt right before her extended disappearance from the narrative.

Scholarship has treated the figure as though its comparative ground were unspecified, but ὅσσα...τόσσα limit its explicit function to equating the magnitude of Penelope's and the lion's "deliberations." Broader similarities are implicit and relegated to secondary importance. This prioritization accords with the fact that the verbs governing both "deliberations" are couched with respect to their normal formulaic behavior and semantic ranges so as to preclude rationality and emphasize the debilitating effects of Penelope's anxieties and the lion's fear. Penelope is thus deprived of her familiar "trickiness"; in the vehicle, δόλιος modifies the hunters' trap, not the lion. Surrounded, without evident prospects for escape or victory, and with whatever guile it might have had belonging to the hunters, Penelope's lion, like Penelope herself, does nothing

except suffer a paralyzing emotional turbulence that eclipses other potentialities. Comparing the scene to *Odyssey* 20.1-55 confirms this reading.

The lion is usually thought to anticipate Penelope's victory by underscoring the heroic virtues that assimilate her to Odysseus. But Homeric lions are often defeated, and studies of them conclude that they quintessentially lack the trickiness and self-control she would need. The relation of Penelope's lion to the larger tradition is filtered through her calling Odysseus θυμολέων twice in the immediate vicinity (4.724-726 = 4.814-816), both times while expressing her misery: the greater θυμολέων Odysseus's virtues, the greater her deprivation now that he is gone. Other instances of θυμολέων reveal that it signifies aggressiveness, fortitude, power, courage, etc.. Penelope's lion-analogy therefore evokes her lament to corroborate it. θυμολέων Odysseus's virtues are absent from Ithaca both because he himself is gone and because Penelope, who might substitute for him at other times, at this moment resembles a lion whose leonine θυμός has been incapacitated by emotional turmoil.

While the lion's story ends *in medias res*, the resumptive verses encode the ensuing events. Any hope that the lion, and so Penelope, might recover ends when sleep "comes upon" (ἐπέρχεσθαι) Penelope. ἐπέρχεσθαι almost always describes physical attacks in Homeric poetry. Both other times sleep is its subject (*Od.* 5.472 and 12.311), sleep is tantamount to a savage creature killing its prey. The second instance, which is the only other attestation of the phrase in Penelope's passage, describes Scylla killing Odysseus's crewmen. So just before the hunters attack the lion, sleep replaces them and launches a vicious assault that inverts the normal characterizations of fierce lions and civilized hunters. The resulting alignment makes oncoming sleep a threat in its own right, causing Penelope's anxiety to self-propagate in an escalating cycle until it would overwhelm even a lion. Exhaustion "kills" her with the same verse that elsewhere

(18.189) describes her succumbing to what she calls a κῶμα (i.e., a deathlike catalepsy) and then compares to death.

Penelope's preceding scene depicts the catalysis of her despair in the ἄχος θυμοφθόρον (4.716) that pours over her when Medon completes his report about Telemachus. By destroying her θυμός, this pain inhibits associated virtues in her that her θυμολέων husband possesses: she suffers aphasia, her endurance fails her (4.716), she abdicates to Laertes the responsibility of concocting a plan by sending him her slave "Tricky" (Δόλιος), and she displays numerous signs of a hopelessness that causes her to feel as though she were already dead. These are precisely the symptoms her lion-figure conveys. These symptoms also target her particular descriptors (ἐχέφρων, περίφρων, τετληότι θυμῷ, etc.) and the virtues that she and Agamemnon identify as distinguishing her from Helen and Clytemnestra near the epic's end.

Penelope's dream does restore her by lifting her spirits, but divine inspirations are notoriously temporary. Once its effects dissipate, Penelope will not be able to withstand her ordeals much longer. She has already lost her quintessential attributes once. In this way, the *Odyssey* simultaneously casts her as noble and leaves her future behavior uncertain when it shifts to Odysseus, whose return becomes all the more urgent and precarious.