

## Penelope Polutropos and the Bow of Odysseus

Penelope's cleverness, as seen through the three tricks, or *doloi*, played on her suitors, is commonly understood to establish her as a suitable wife for the cunning Odysseus. The third of these *doloi* is the bow contest, described in Books 19 and 21, which has spurred scholars to examine Penelope's reasons for selecting this specific type of contest. Scholarly opinion has generally revolved around whether Penelope thought the suitors would be able to complete the challenge, or, specifically, whether anyone would be strong enough to operate the bow. At several points during the contest, descriptions of the suitors seem to confirm this latter reading by alluding to the weakness of their hands or the fact that their bodies were unused to such labors. On the other hand, several scholars such as Balfour (1921, 291) and Sutherland (2001, 113) have emphasized another aspect of the contest: that it was a test of knowledge rather than strength. This aspect has focused on the fact that Odysseus' bow is described as being made of horn—an imported design from the Near East and Egypt—and so the suitors are presumably unfamiliar with the process of how to string this foreign bow.

We propose that the bow contest should indeed be read as a test of knowledge, but specifically within the context of Penelope Polutropos as discussed by Marquardt (1985). Penelope's *doloi* rely on a pragmatic understanding of her circumstances, and they represent a cunning manipulation of gendered skills that effectively emasculate the suitors. Penelope did not devise the contest on the simple premise that Odysseus' bow is difficult to string and shoot, but rather with the clear understanding that the suitors lacked the practical experience that would enable them to operate a man's bow. Having spent years living off the hospitality of Odysseus' household, the suitors had neglected the pursuits that proper noblemen would have been

expected to practice, such as hunting. Odysseus, in contrast, crucially relies on hunting (in the form of a scar) to establish his identity upon his return. We further suggest that an understanding of the social role of archery in Iron Age and Archaic Greek society, as demonstrated by artistic representations and archaeological discoveries, supports the idea that a basic knowledge of archery could reasonably be expected among members of an elite class. Penelope's trick takes advantage of this flaw in the suitors' characters, while simultaneously emphasizing their lack of masculinity.

### Bibliography

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