

Richard ARMSTRONG
Penelope's Agency as a Problem of Reception

Considerable work has been done over the last fifteen years on Penelope's agency, and it is safe to say that this character, who had simply dwindled into a "type" of the virtuous wife, has regained certain ambiguous contours that make her more interesting. This paper discusses two particular avenues of research in relation to a very specific feature of her agency and its ambiguous import: the contest of the bow. This is perhaps the most complex moment in her self-presentation, and the one fraught with the most disturbing questions. There are three main avenues in which to explore the reception of this moment: commentary, translation, and illustration. Although I touch upon commentary, my main focus in this project has been on the latter two. The results will be summarized as the main part of this presentation.

From a survey of 89 translations into nine languages, I first point out some important observations on the translational strategies deployed to render Penelope's challenge to the suitors. A chief point of tension, it emerges, are the words: *epei tode phainet' aethlon* (*Od.* 21.73). Elsewhere I argue that this clearly is a reference she makes to her own body as the prize, but a majority of the translations prior to the twentieth century studiously avoid this unladylike assertion, in favor of other readings. Another issue is the question of her intentions with the bow contest in the first place (i.e., is she looking for a husband or is this another ruse to delay the matter of her second marriage?), which many translators have addressed by inserting indications that would clarify her agency on this point. As for illustrations, there really are not any of the actual moment of the challenge--though I discuss those which depict her *approach* to the suitors, especially that by John Flaxman. The question here is why the scene, so visually rich and suggestive as it is, remains invisible in the long tradition of *Odyssey* illustration.

The conclusion is that the very invisibility of this action and its deft dilution in translation are symptomatic of the ambivalences her agency arouses. Once the reader has decided that Penelope is a paragon of wifely virtue, all evidence to the contrary is left "hidden in plain view," or, as in the case of illustration, simply left unactualized.