

J. C. GEISSMANN

Penelope's Laugh and the Suitors' Gifts (Odyssey 18.158–303)

Penelope's ostensible offer of marriage and her solicitation of gifts constitute a *dolos* with a double aim: to keep the suitors off guard and to reassure Odysseus of her loyalty, in the well-founded belief that he has today returned in the guise of the stranger.

The suitors' plot against Telemachos disqualifies them categorically, and Penelope must hope that her son will elude assassination and return from his voyage with positive news. When he does so, her outlook is transformed, for the testimony of Menelaos carries more weight than travellers' tales, and Odysseus is now declared, by a seer under Telemachos' protection, to be present on the island. Theoklymenos thus puts the queen on alert, and the same day an unknown vagrant calls on the Furies to punish Antinoös, a prayer no outsider has the standing to make.

Through Eumaios, Penelope summons the stranger to her quarters, and as the queen names Odysseus, they hear Telemachos sneeze resoundingly in the hall. Penelope laughs, for this is the first good omen witnessed by herself, and she pronounces her definitive condemnation of the suitors. But the stranger declines her summons and insists on his own terms for meeting her.

Since the stranger is acting as if he were master of the house, it is only prudent for Penelope to act accordingly. Her first laugh is a foretaste of joy; but joy is at once tempered by alarm, since the suitors may try to kill the stranger if he provokes them excessively, and embarrassment, since the *megaron* is full of loutish men, and Penelope does not know that her husband has been forewarned by Teiresias. So it is urgent for Penelope to question the stranger but also to make him understand the situation: how, despite appearances, she remains loyal to her husband. To prove this, it will be expedient for her to demonstrate that the suitors, for all their disorderly conduct, are subject to her control.

Penelope is now preoccupied with the man who refused her invitation: it is thus hardly credible that she would negotiate with the suitors, except as a device to put them off guard. The time-scale alone would make this dubious, for it cannot be more than an hour since she had the *kledon* from Telemachos and declared her wish that the suitors would perish to the last man: if her tone is now different, we can be sure that she has a tactical reason.

Athena's role is to provide good ideas, but she does not diminish the queen's autonomy and would not waste time on someone incapable of using her own intelligence. The beautifying nap signifies not a change in Penelope's plan, but Athena's contribution to its effectiveness. The queen wants to put the suitors in her power but not forego the dignity of a mourning wife. To achieve the first, Athena sees that she will look her best, knowing that Penelope can achieve the second through her own arts of persuasion. So Athena's involvement signals the importance of Penelope's action, for both are working to restore Odysseus. Penelope aims to keep the suitors in their normal state of complacent self-

indulgence, from which the stranger's boldness might awaken them. Her second laugh marks the point where she sees a way to put the suitors in her hand and improve Odysseus' chances of taking them by surprise.

As her speech to Eurymachos shows, Penelope has maintained her loyalty to Odysseus by both obeying and disobeying his instructions: she began the remarriage process but delayed its consummation as long as possible. No wonder that Odysseus is pleased, even before Penelope elicits the suitors' material tribute.