

PENELOPE'S 'STOUT HAND' AND ODYSSEAN HUMOUR

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Abstract: Penelope's 'stout hand' (χειρὶ παχείῃ) in *Odyssey* 21.6 has troubled readers with its implication that the 20 years Penelope has spent waiting, worrying and weaving have sapped her beauty. Attempts to redeem the verse have only been partially successful at best. By applying semi-linguistic models for jokes to both *Odyssey* 21.6 and Penelope's increase in stoutness at *Odyssey* 18.195, this paper pursues the possibility that both passages are humorous. Rather than deride Penelope, the humour celebrates her quintessentially human susceptibility to age and suffering, as well as the virtues she develops in parallel with her husband therefrom. The *Odyssey* regularly uses humour to similar effect by applying traditional epic formulaic structures to a broader range of subjects than they normally accommodate and thus redefining the heroic virtues that those structures encode so that they exalt mundane human experience.

Keywords: Homer, Penelope, *Odyssey*, Humour, Homeric formulas

Perhaps no Homeric verse is as infamously infelicitous as *Odyssey* 21.6, which describes Penelope grabbing a key 'with her stout hand' (χειρὶ παχείῃ). The application of this relatively common formula to Penelope seems to contradict her well-attested beauty by implying that the 20 years she has spent anxiously waiting and weaving have adversely affected her appearance.¹ For this reason, scholars since antiquity have tried to excise, emend or justify the verse,² but the most cogent approach, that the formula connotes Penelope's masculine heroic virtues, still leaves its literal meaning incongruous. The problem, I suggest, is that for numerous reasons scholars treat the *Odyssey*'s manipulations of formulaic conventions and meta-poetic engagements as utterly solemn, especially when they concern Penelope. Taking seriously the familiar ancient view that the *Odyssey* poet composed with a smile rather than a scowl, I suggest resurrecting the idea that Penelope's stout hand and increased stoutness at 18.195 might be humorous.³ Homeric laughter is always derisive to some extent,⁴ and it would be strange if the laughter depicted in the epics differed entirely from their audience's. Yet the humour here neither targets Penelope nor diminishes the seriousness of the issues at stake. Rather, it enhances the rich portrayal of Penelope's virtues in a distinctly Odyssean fashion that seduces the audience into embracing how the poet recalibrates the orthodox ideals which epic language encodes.⁵

The *Iliad* redeploys formulas in humorous ways too,⁶ but it does so differently. Though the subject warrants more thorough treatment, one brief example from each poem can illustrate the most salient distinctions. The generic epithet φαίδιμος (resplendent) regularly modifies Telemonian Ajax, but it modifies Oilean Ajax only once. After losing the footrace because he slips in cow-

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¹ Stanford (1965) 357 on 21.6; Roller and Roller (1994); cf. Treu (1955) 43–44.

² Lowenstam (1993) 13–17 discusses early treatments.

³ Lowenstam (1993) 16–17 raises the possibility

without pursuing it. On misunderstood epithets, see Amory (1973); Lowenstam (1981); (1993).

⁴ See Rapp (1948); Mitchell (2009) 14–15. On Homeric laughter, see Halliwell (2008) 51–109; also Hewitt (1928); Levine (1982) 203–04; (1983a); (1983b); Colakis (1986); Brennan (1987); Brown (1989) 286–91; Fernández-Galiano (1992) 195; Russo (1992) 59, 70; de Jong (2001) 440; O'Higgins (2003) 45–51. On 'superiority theories' of humour, see Gruner (1997).

⁵ Cf. Burrows (1965); Newton (1998). On epic language encoding heroic values, see Nagy (1979) 2–3 and *passim*.

⁶ See Loudon (2006) 80–111.

manure, φαίδιμος Ajax (*Il.* 23.779) accepts his second-place prize – a cow, of course – while still spitting out dung. Humour here arises from the events themselves, whose ridiculousness the formula accentuates by enhancing the contrast between what befalls Ajax and the expectations of sublimity set by the overarching heroic context.⁷ Largely farcical, Iliadic humour is mostly segregated to burlesque scenes and particular characters, such as Paris, who are largely insensitive to the ambient suffering. They and their comic scenes may be important to the war but rarely influence the plot of Achilles' wrath, instead forming a counterpoint to the epic's tragic melody that enhances its gravity.⁸

Conversely, the bald pate of Odysseus's disguise in the *Odyssey* only becomes funny when Eurymachus jokes that the light it reflects proves the beggar has divine help (18.353–55). What makes Eurymachus' quip funny for the audience is the irony that his ignorance and arrogance pinpoint the truth that will destroy him: the beggar's baldness and light do indeed signify divine assistance, and, as Eurymachus himself indicates, what makes this irony humorous is bathos, by which I mean the shocking plunge of something sublime, here the radiance of κῦδος (glory),⁹ to the utterly, even grotesquely mundane. Odyssean humour often arises from formulaic structures or tropes employed in bathetically incongruous ways rather than from the events themselves. Humour targeting the audience is therefore regularly distinct from humour between characters and often directly affects the main plotline.¹⁰ Where humorous bathos in the *Iliad* deepens the poem's tragedy, in the *Odyssey* it elevates the mundane. Because Odysseus' subterfuge requires that the κῦδος anticipating his triumph be reduced to a level fitting his disguise, the humour's mechanics help him defeat the suitors. What might otherwise debase κῦδος instead raises Odysseus' humble disguise – and so a 'realistic' vision of how someone his age might look after his travails¹¹ – to heroic status. In this way, the *Odyssey* can explore more complex, less idealized notions of heroism than the epic trope normally allows. Penelope's stoutness functions similarly.

I. Penelope's stout hand

Current approaches to Penelope's 'stout hand' fall into four groups.

(1) *'Hard' Parryist readings.* Milman Parry argues that the audience would not have noticed the admittedly 'odd' application of χειρὶ παχείηι to Penelope because παχείηι is an 'ornamental epithet'.¹² However foundational Parry's work may be, several more recent studies have demonstrated that epithets' literal meanings were more active than this reading allows.¹³

(2) *Connotative readings.* Some scholars deduce from its general usage that χειρὶ παχείηι carries heroic connotations. For Norman Austin, Penelope's 'stout hand' expresses her heroic resolve in conceding to the suitors' marital demands.¹⁴ For Michael Nagler, its masculinity subverts the 'feminine' role she wants to play as pacifier.¹⁵ Duane and Letitia Roller add that it implies a physical dexterity acquired from weaving that reflects her heroic mental dexterity.¹⁶ These excellent insights will be essential to the reading I propose, but, because such connotations supplement rather than supplant the literal meanings of formulas,¹⁷ they leave Penelope's physical stoutness problematic. Only the Rollers account for it, and they do not address its aesthetic difficulties.

⁷ Cf. Zervou (1990) 13–15.

⁸ Sikes (1940); Hawley (1968); Clarke (1969); Golden (1990); Meltzer (1990); Zervou (1990) 15–97. On laughing characters functioning similarly, see Halliwell (2008) 51–99.

⁹ Sowa (1984) 242–50; Steiner (2010) 209–10; Murnaghan (2011) 62–63 on 18.354–55 construe the light as epiphanic; the theoxeny-pattern of Odysseus' return elides any effective difference between the readings.

¹⁰ Zervou (1990) 169, 179–80 also notes this difference between the two epics.

¹¹ Murnaghan (2011) 10–11.

¹² Parry (1971) 159–52; also Combellack (1959) 204–08; Stanford (1965) xviii; Fenik (1974) 51 n.63; Reece (1993) 118–19 (without absolving the passage of difficulty).

¹³ Amory (1973) 1–5; Austin (1975) 11–80; Richardson (1987); Visser (1987); (1988); Lowenstam (1981) 45–47; (1993) 32–53.

¹⁴ Austin (1975) 73–74.

¹⁵ Nagler (1993) 255–56.

¹⁶ Roller and Roller (1994).

¹⁷ Foley (1991) 23–24; 46–48.

(3) *Closed hand readings*. Alfred Schlesinger argues that grasping the key balls Penelope's hand into a 'thick' fist.¹⁸ But of the 19 Homeric 'stout hands', only 11 are definitely closed,¹⁹ while five are clearly open.²⁰ The open hands prove that *παχύς* does not in and of itself indicate that a hand is closed.

(4) *Beauty readings*. Steven Lowenstam and William Wyatt argue that Penelope's 'stout hand' provides evidence of her beauty because 'plumpness' (Wyatt) or 'strength' and 'size' (Lowenstam) were considered attractive in women.²¹ This notion is appealing. It accords with other references to Penelope's beauty and applies an aesthetic familiar from other cultures. It also appears to fit the fact that Homeric women are esteemed for their *μέγεθος* (height/size), *δέμας* (frame) and *φύη* (stature).²² But confusing these terms with *παχύς* blurs a crucial distinction between height and girth that Homer consistently maintains.²³ Odysseus compliments Nausicaa by comparing her to a young palm (6.163), that is, something tall and slender.²⁴ Beautiful women are regularly likened to Aphrodite or Artemis,²⁵ who may be tall, but Aphrodite has a 'slender hand' (*χεῖρα ἀραιήν*, *Il.* 5.425) and Artemis is so slight that both of her hands fit into one of Hera's (*Il.* 21.489–90). Even if we postulate that older women's appearances were assessed by different standards, the narrator nonetheless indicates that Penelope's appearance is to be assessed by the standards for younger women when he describes her as 'resembling Artemis or golden Aphrodite' (*Ἀρτέμιδι ικέλη ἤε χρυσῇ Ἀφροδίτῃ*, 17.37, 19.54).

Wyatt's only evidence for 'pleasant plumpness' is that Athena makes Penelope appear 'taller and stouter' (*μακροτέρεην καὶ πάσσονα*, 18.195) in the second scene we will examine. For now, the H scholiast's idea that Athena increases Penelope's stoutness only 'in proportion to her height' (*πρὸς ἀναλογίαν τοῦ μήκους*) suffices and moreover suggests that he did not know any relevant instances where girth *per se* was considered attractive.

¹⁸ Schlesinger (1969); also Stanford (1965) 357 on 21.6–7; Vivante (1982) 113–14 and de Jong (2001) 506 on 21.6. For Eide (1980), *παχύς* expresses the tension of Penelope's entire arm.

¹⁹ Grabbing: *Il.* 10.31; *Od.* 21.6, 22.326. Holding: *Il.* 8.221, 14.385, 17.296, 20.261; *Od.* 19.448. Dragging: *Il.* 3.376, 21.175. Plucking: *Od.* 6.128.

²⁰ Grabbing 'huge' (*μέγαν*) rocks: *Il.* 7.264, 21.403. Throwing: *Od.* 20.299. Touching a cheek in supplication: *Il.* 10.454. Striking the ground with the palm (*χεῖρι καταπρηνεῖ*): *h.Hom.* 3.331. *Il.* 5.309, 11.355, 21.424 are unclear.

²¹ Wyatt (1978), Lowenstam (1993) 26–32; also Jax (1933) 9–10; Stanford (1965) 357 on *Od.* 21.6–7; Amory (1973) 23 n.1, 60–61; Edwards (1988) 31–32. Treu (1955) 48 concurs but considers the overtones inappropriate. Wyatt (1983), noting that Karkavitsas' heroine has a *παχουλὸ χεράκι* ('plump little hand', *Ἀρχαιολόγος* 3.1305), ignores allusion and asserts that 'a cultural attitude will remain constant unless there is some good reason to change it'. Roughly 2,700 years of radical cultural, ethnic and economic changes are apparently insufficient.

²² *Il.* 1.115, 8.305; *Od.* 5.212, 5.217, 6.16, 6.152, 13.289, 15.418, 16.158, 18.195, 18.248–49, 18.251, 19.124.

²³ Jax (1933) 6–9; Verdenius (1949); Amory (1973) 60–61 maintain the distinction. Treu (1955) 47–52 argues (illogically) that since height and stoutness were beautiful

in men, and height beautiful in women, stoutness must have been too. Yet Xenophon (*Oec.* 10.2) mentions 'platform shoes', which would have made women appear more slender relative to their height. Pasquali (1940) 23, relying on *Od.* 18.195, is more reserved than Treu: height and 'un certo grado di grossezza o grassezza' were esteemed in both sexes. Proportionality was esteemed from the Geometric period onward and, beginning in the Classical period, was explicitly discussed in treatises on art. See Pollitt (1972) 105–08.

²⁴ Thus EBPQ scholia; Gross (1976) 312; van Nortwick (1979) 271–72; Hainsworth (1988) 304 on 6.163; de Jong (2001) 161 on 6.163–67. Young palms are short and squat, however. Hainsworth argues that Homer botched his botany. The PQ scholiast and Harder (1988) offer intriguing alternatives. But might the accident be Odysseus'? If so, it could be funny: Odysseus would accidentally insult Nausicaa's physique while tailoring the 'young-person-like-a-sapling' motif (*Il.* 17.53, 18.56, 18.437; *Od.* 14.175) to fit his comparison of Nausicaa to Artemis. Because palms were vehicles of pathetic fallacy (Hurwit (1982) 197–99), Odysseus' comparison encourages Nausicaa to pity him (Hague (1983) 143 n.26).

²⁵ Aphrodite: *Il.* 9.388, 19.282, 24.699; *Od.* 4.14. Artemis: *Od.* 4.122, 6.102, 6.151, 17.37, 19.54. Athena only at *h.Hom.* 5.94, among a list of goddesses including Artemis and Aphrodite; on which, see Turkeltaub (2003) 102–07.

Lowenstam's strength argument relies on three premises: that in Homeric poetry (1) the complimentary term ἰφθίμη had not yet diverged from ἰφθίμος in meaning, (2) ἰφθίμος only meant 'physically strong' and (3) παχεῖα and ἰφθίμη were identical in meaning and tone. The first two are reasonable, but Lowenstam offers no supporting evidence. The phrase ἰφθίμους ψυχάς ('strong souls') in *Iliad* 1.3 raises some doubt. Incorporeal ψυχαί cannot be physically strong, and the use of the masculine rather than feminine form might indicate that the two already differed somewhat in meaning.²⁶ Lowenstam's first two premises may still be correct, but his third and most important premise is deeply problematic. People can be 'strong' without being 'stout', since words often overlap semantically without being identical. Nobody would interchange 'pudgy' for 'curvaceous' or 'tubby' for 'buxom', for instance, even though these words potentially describe the same figure. So what matters is not whether 'plumpness' or 'strength' was beautifying, but only whether the word παχύς could express female pulchritude.

The evidence indicates that it could not. Thirty-one of its 33 other occurrences in Homeric epic are patently 'masculine': 26 modify male bodies while five describe objects of virile power.²⁷ The two 'exceptions' describe Athena's 'stout hand' (χειρὶ παχείη, *Il.* 21.403, 21.424) in the *Theomachia*. As a burlesque of human warfare, the *Theomachia* is derivative.²⁸ Because Athena's 'stout hand' travesties a male template – the verses that first mention it previously describe Hector (*Il.* 21.403–04 = *Il.* 7.264–65) – it seems to manifest somatically the 'masculine' aspects of her godhead.²⁹ With it, she defeats Ares and Aphrodite, who personify the very gender norms she defies. Before the combat (*Il.* 21.396–98) Ares reminds the audience of their previous fight, which led Zeus to distinguish his two daughters along traditional gender-lines (*Il.* 5.420–30) that are then figured in the contrast between Aphrodite's 'slender hand' (χεῖρα ἀραιήν, *Il.* 5.425) and Athena's bulk (*Il.* 5.839–40). What book 5 presents neutrally, the *Theomachia* caricatures.

All other archaic attestations of παχύς corroborate what the Iliadic and Odyssean evidence indicates. Archilochus personifies 'very large and stout penises' ravaging lovers as Homeric warriors (*fr.* 328.10–13 West),³⁰ *Margites* has a male character with a 'stout hand' (*fr.* 7.16 West) and Hesiod has Boreas display his strength by uprooting 'stout' trees (*Op.* 509). Hesiod also attests to a non-gendered, medical usage when he warns against contracting a 'swollen foot' (*Op.* 497). The *Scutum* similarly calls Murk 'thick-kneed' (γυνοπαχής, 266); her affliction exacerbates her terrifyingly hideous appearance. The two remaining instances also modify females. One is probably pejorative, the other clearly so. In the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, Hera strikes the ground 'with her stout hand' (340) while imploring the primeval forces to help her conceive parthenogenically a son stronger than Zeus. Because the poem vilifies Hera throughout, because her hand is only called 'stout' when she uses it to try to overthrow Zeus by copying his (masculine) ability to produce children asexually (322–30) and because Hera's resulting pregnancy with Typhaon perverts its masculine model so egregiously, her 'stout hand' seems far more likely to be derogatory than complimentary and may even imply a distorted masculinity. In the clearest case, Archilochus calls a 'prostitute/hateful' (μισήτη/μισητή) woman – doubtless intentionally punning – 'stout around the ankle' (*fr.* 206 West). Not only do all 40 relevant instances of παχύς oppose with varying degrees of intensity the possibility that simply calling Penelope's hand παχύς could indicate her beauty, they suggest that doing so would if anything insult her appearance.

²⁶ Cf. *Il.* 11.55. See Jax (1933) 24 n.57. Penelope is twice ἰφθίμη (16.332, 23.92), both times in contexts highlighting her psychological fortitude.

²⁷ χεῖρὶ παχείη: *Il.* 3.376, 5.309, 7.264, 8.221, 10.31, 10.454, 11.355, 14.385, 17.296, 20.261, 21.175, 21.403, 21.424; *Od.* 6.128, 19.448, 20.299, 21.6, 22.326. Other body parts: *Il.* 16.314, 16.473, 23.697; *Od.* 6.230, 8.20, 9.372, 10.439, 11.231, 18.195, 22.18, 23.157, 24.369. Other objects: *Il.* 12.446 (a huge rock), 18.416

(Agamemnon's sceptre); *Od.* 8.187 (a discus), 9.324 (the pole Odysseus uses to blind Polyphemus), 23.191 (the trunk from which Odysseus fashioned his bed).

²⁸ On the *Theomachia* as parody, see Zervou (1990) 46–68 (on Athena, 54–57).

²⁹ Nagler (1993) 255.

³⁰ μειζόνων καὶ πασσόνων νεύρων, σύν τε δηιούντων βαθὺ δεινοῦ βερέθρου χάσμα. Cf. *Od.* 6.230 = *Od.* 23.157, 24.369.

A reading of *Odyssey* 21.6 should account for its combination of heroic connotations and uncomplimentary literal meaning, wherein the beautiful Penelope usually portrayed collides with a more 'realistic' one whose appearance has deteriorated over 20 years of age, anxiety and weaving. The resulting incongruities – youthful/(middle-)aged, 'feminine'/'masculine', domestic/military, erotic/unsexual, superhuman/human, idealized/realistic, sublime/mundane – have long been recognized as fundamental to humour,³¹ including ancient Greek humour. We may think of Aristophanes' works (for example, *Lysistrata*) and padded comedic costumes, Hephaestus lampooning Hebe and Ganymede in *Iliad* 1³² or the late Archaic and Classical figurines and vases whose depictions of unsexual, portlier, older women parody conventional images of eroticized, slender, young women. One particularly relevant vase (Princeton Painter, R279) presents a rotund, middle-aged house-mistress with what might be 'a hint of facial hair'.³³ So perhaps *Odyssey* 21.6 is humorous.

Yet because not all instances of incongruity are risible, some means of determining that Penelope's 'stout hand' is not simply a clumsily deployed formula must be found. Most studies of Homeric humour either use character-laughter to detect comic moments or study character-laughter's broader thematic importance;³⁴ scholars investigating humour that targets only the audience tend to rely on their own subjective responses.³⁵ But shifts in presentational medium, cultural and personal differences in senses of humour and the deliberate thought non-native audiences need to 'get' the implicit references and nuances upon which jokes depend all interfere with humour's psychological processes.³⁶ Since we may never find many foreign jokes funny even after 'understanding' them, our own laughter cannot be our gauge.

Two of the four other Odyssean instances of *χειρὶ παχείῃ* are suggestive. At 6.128 Odysseus uses his heroic 'stout hand' – which slew so many Trojans, wielded a hunting-spear (19.448) and will later grab a sword (22.326) – for the rather undignified purpose of plucking a branch to hide his genitals from some girls whose play he is about to interrupt. Later, Ctesippus contributes to the suitors' mock-heroic characterization when he, like a distortion of Odysseus, uses his 'stout hand' to hurl not a spear to kill an enemy combatant but a cow-hoof to demean a beggar (20.299). Both scenes generate potentially humorous incongruity between the sublime formula and the bathetic contexts in which it is used. Yet even if we accept a subjective reaction that these moments are funny, they can do nothing more than encourage us to be open to the idea that *Odyssey* 21.6 may be funny too.

Semiolinguistic humour analysis can perhaps offer more help.³⁷ By outlining the rhetorical principles of indubitably humorous texts, such analyses postulate structural models for jokes. Humour's subjective and protean nature makes certainty impossible, but if *Odyssey* 21.6 operates like a joke, it seems reasonable to pursue the possibility that it might be one. Victor Raskin's 'script-based' model serves particularly well.³⁸ A 'script' is 'a large chunk of semantic information surrounding the word or evoked by it' that is 'internalized by the native speaker' (81) so that it can be processed without deliberate thought.³⁹ Whereas the scripts of the words in non-joking texts combine to disambiguate each word until only one interpretation remains viable, jokes also maintain a latent interpretation that is incongruous with the dominant one. One must be 'real' and the

³¹ Hutcheson first articulated incongruity's importance in three 1725 essays responding to Hobbes' 'sudden glory' theory. Schopenhauer popularized it in *The World as Will and Representation* 1.13. See Ritchie (2004) 46–68.

³² Zervou (1990) 73–74; Halliwell (2008) 63.

³³ Mitchell (2009) 68–69 on this vase, 75–78 on others. On figurines, see O'Higgins (2003) 27–30.

³⁴ Hunt (1890); Hewitt (1929a); (1929b); Sikes (1940); Rapp (1948); Hawley (1968); Seidensticker (1982) 50–64; Williams (1986); Brennan (1987); Thal-

mann (1988) 16–26; Newton (1998). See n.4 on character-laughter.

³⁵ Hart (1943); Burrows (1965); Clarke (1969); Lévy (1982) 34, 37; Pucci (1987) 41, 70, 161–62; Williams (1986); Meltzer (1990); Golden (1990); Zervou (1990); Newton (1998).

³⁶ Raskin (1985) 80–92; cf. Koestler (1964).

³⁷ Mitchell (2009) 29 notes that Greek humour obeys the same principles as ours.

³⁸ Raskin (1985) 45–147.

³⁹ Cf. Koestler (1964) on 'matrices'.

other ‘unreal’, ‘abnormal’ and/or ‘implausible’. Words that contribute only to the latent interpretation will enhance the eventual effect of the joke but are initially disregarded because they seem to provide only superfluous detail. At or near a joke’s end, a ‘trigger’ surprises the audience with the hitherto unperceived incongruous interpretation.⁴⁰

Let us now consider how *Odyssey* 21.6 compares to the model Raskin outlines. *Odyssey* 21.6–7 read:

εἴλετο δὲ κληῖδ’ εὐκαμπέα χειρὶ παχείηι,
καλὴν χαλκείην · κόπη δ’ ἐλέφαντος ἐπήεν.

She seized a well-bent key with her stout hand,
a beautiful bronze one; a handle of ivory was on it.

Elsewhere in the Homeric epics, the elements of *Odyssey* 21.6 behave as follows.

(1) Whenever εἴλετο begins a verse-opening clause, the remainder of the verse only contains δέ and the direct object modified with:

- (a) an adjective (except in *Il.* 24.343 = *Od.* 5.47) and
- (b) an adjectival phrase.

(2) The object of verse-initial εἴλετο is always an instrument of power, usually a weapon.⁴¹

(3) αἰρεῖσθαι with one hand only occurs as:

- (a) εἴλετο δ’ ἄλκιμον ἔγχος, ὃ οἱ παλάμηφιν ἀρήρει (‘he took a strong spear, which fitted his hand’, *Il.* 3.338 = *Od.* 17.4; two spears in *Il.* 16.139) or
- (b) εἴλετο χειρὶ παχείηι.⁴²

(4) εἴλετο χειρὶ παχείηι is never interrupted.

(5) εἴλετο χειρὶ παχείηι always takes a disyllabic weapon as its object.⁴³

(6) χειρὶ παχείηι only occurs at verse-end.

Verse-initial εἴλετο in 21.6 thus initiates a heroic air. Some instrument of power surely follows, undoubtedly the bow (τόξα, 21.3) Penelope is retrieving. She grabs a key instead, but no matter. It grants power in the form of privileged access to the house’s secured recesses and anticipates the bow. εὐκαμπής evokes the common epithet κάμπυλος, the only other καμπ- adjective in Homeric poetry. κάμπυλος occurs most frequently in the formula κάμπυλα τόξα (bent bow),⁴⁴ which elongates once to εὐκαμπέα τόξα (well-bent bow, *h.Hom.* 27.12). So the Homeric repertoire contains a phrase in which the epithet modifying the key modifies the very weapon the key anticipates. Yet the verse also maintains a more mundane tenor as a latent potentiality. Homeric keys are just keys,⁴⁵ ‘well-bent’ describes keys suitably and εὐκαμπής modifies mere sickles in its only other epic occurrence (18.368). The verse is primed for a ‘trigger’.

⁴⁰ On surprise, see Hobbes’ *Treatise on Human Nature* (11.13) and Kant’s *The Critique of Judgment*. More recently, see Koestler (1964) 51–63; Morreall (1983) 38–59.

⁴¹ Weapons: *Il.* 3.338, 10.135, 11.43, 14.12, 15.482, 16.139; *Od.* 1.99, 14.531, 15.551, 17.4, 20.127, 21.416, 22.125. Hermes’ wand (*Il.* 24.343; *Od.* 5.47), Agamemnon’s sceptre (*Il.* 2.46), a shield (*Il.* 19.374), livestock won from an enemy (*Il.* 11.697).

⁴² *Il.* 7.264, 10.31, 21.403; *Od.* 22.326.

⁴³ Ten of the 13 objects manipulated by other stout hands are also weapons or armour (*Il.* 3.376, 7.264,

10.31, 14.386, 17.296, 20.621, 21.175, 21.403; *Od.* 19.448, 22.326). *Od.* 6.128, 20.299 play on this convention. One ‘stout hand’ is itself a weapon (*Il.* 21.424). In the only exception, Agamemnon holds his cloak (*Il.* 8.221) while going to marshal his troops.

⁴⁴ *Il.* 3.17, 5.97, 10.333, 12.372, 21.502; *Od.* 9.156, 21.359, 21.362. Also a chariot (*Il.* 5.97) and wheels (*Il.* 5.733).

⁴⁵ I found no instances of keys with clear symbolic value in Greek literature earlier than A. *fr.* 316 Radt and Pi. *P.* 8.1–5, 9.39–41.

The heroic connotations of *χειρὶ παχείηι* further elevate the verse's tenor. The formula evokes Odysseus most immediately, since three of its four other Odyssean occurrences modify him. Two mark critical revelations of his identity: when he receives his tell-tale scar (20.448) and when he grabs the sword during the *Mnēsterophonia* (22.326) in the only Odyssean recurrence of *εἴλετο χειρὶ παχείηι*. From this perspective, the use of *χειρὶ παχείηι* in *Odyssey* 21.6 almost fits the behaviours outlined above, albeit uneasily. The phrase is positioned in accordance with conventions 3 and 6, and it suits the key's heroic colouring if we fudge a bit with convention 5. We could even excuse its separation from *εἴλετο*, which violates convention 4, since contextual pressures can cause words that are normally contiguous in a formula to disperse throughout the verse or sentence.⁴⁶

Yet *χειρὶ παχείηι* is surprising nonetheless. Its violation of convention 4 is unique, and it violates convention 1b by displacing the key's auxiliary descriptor until the next verse. This postponement initially undercuts the key's heroic colouring by implying that the key is too banal to warrant the elaboration objects of verse-initial *εἴλετο* always receive elsewhere. Its banality then violates conventions 2 and 5. The resulting deflated environment harmonizes with the phrase's literal depiction of Penelope to charge the echo of Odysseus with a second significance that is seemingly at odds with the first: *χειρὶ παχείηι* both aggrandizes Penelope's heroic virtues as similar to her husband's and simultaneously generates the jarring, incongruous impression that the similarity encompasses their physical forms, that Penelope's body, or at least her hand, is literally 'stout' or 'thick' just like her husband's. The verse thus fits the model Raskin outlines, with *χειρὶ παχείηι* as its 'trigger'.

The subsequent descriptions of the key and Penelope's use of it maintain the sublime/mundane incongruity. The large, bar-like form of Archaic keys⁴⁷ helps the unique bronze shaft⁴⁸ and ivory 'hilt'⁴⁹ mentioned in *Odyssey* 21.7 recast Penelope's key as a sword resembling the one Euryalus gives Odysseus. Yet alongside its luxuriousness ivory also had cross-cultural associations with deceptive appearances, especially the artificial value placed on ornate goods, which it exhibits more or less patently in its other Homeric appearances.⁵⁰ Because it is usually the ivory object itself whose initial impression is deceptive, the key's ivory hilt may, like Menelaus' treasure (or Penelope's hand), both enhance the key's heroic colouring and simultaneously reveal that its colouring overlies a more mundane, and in a literal sense more real, nature.

When Penelope then unlocks the door with the key, she resembles a Homeric warrior attacking an enemy.⁵¹ She 'cast in' (*ἐν ... ἤκε*) the key and 'aiming ... smote' (*ἀνέκοπτεν ... τιτυσκομένη*) the door's bar, which 'clanged' (*(ἀν-)ἔβραχε*) like a bull 'when it was struck with the key' (*πληγέντα κληῖδι*, *Od.* 21.46–50). *βραχεῖν* commonly describes battle-din or weapons striking armour, and bulls in Homeric similes usually serve as vehicles for warriors slain by superior foes; their bellows as they are killed by lions or dragged to an altar for sacrifice correspond to dying warriors' groans.⁵² The simile that is most comparable to the one in *Odyssey* 21.48–49 describes

⁴⁶ Hainsworth (1968) 90–109.

⁴⁷ Eide (1980).

⁴⁸ Embellished household items are usually golden in Homer. *καλὴν χρυσεῖην* is a textual variant, whose authenticity van der Valk (1949) 40 supports against the *lexio difficilior*. *καλὸς χρύσεος* is common; *καλὸς χάλκεος* recurs only at *Il.* 12.295 (*cf. Il.* 22.322).

⁴⁹ V scholiast on *Od.* 21.6. Singular *κώπη* always means 'sword-hilt' elsewhere in Homer.

⁵⁰ See Hundt (1935) 78–81; Amory (1966) 32–35; Ahl (1985) 263–64; Rozokoki (2001); Haller (2009); Anghelina (2010). On ivory's association with Penelope, see Amory (1966) 50–56. Elsewhere: *Il.* 5.583 and *Od.* 4.73–99 (emptiness of riches), *Il.* 4.141 (Menelaus' seem-

ingly grievous superficial wound), *Od.* 8.404 (the sword Euryalus gives Odysseus, on which, see Ahl and Roisman (1996) 77–81). DeSchmidt (2006) and Haller (2009) connect the ivory Gate of False Dreams to crucial objects in the *Odyssey*'s last books, including the key.

⁵¹ Especially Odysseus shooting the bow (21.420–21). See Amory (1966) 53–54.

⁵² *ταῦρος*: *Il.* 16.487–91, 17.540–42, 20.401–06; *cf. Il.* 18.580–83. Unambiguously male 'cattle' (*βοῦς*) function similarly: *Il.* 13.570–72, 17.520–23. In *Il.* 2.480–81, a comparison to an outstanding bull (*ταῦρος*) conveys Agamemnon's excellence. In *Il.* 20.495–97 Achilles' horses trample corpses like male cattle (*βόας ἄρσενας*) grinding barley.

the Scamander roaring ‘like a bull’ (ἦύτε ταῦρος, *Il.* 21.237) when it attacks Achilles. Yet the bull in Penelope’s scene is not involved in any such glorious action. To the minimal simile that modifies the Scamander, the *Odyssey* appends ‘grazing in a meadow’ (βοσκόμενος λιμῶνι, *Od.* 21.48) in enjambment in the next verse. The addition functions as a paraprosdokian, a surprising resolution which reveals that the bull in Penelope’s scene does not roar in pain, terror or rage like its Iliadic counterparts, but simply moos while peacefully munching grass. The unexpected image’s banality (humorously?) reminds the audience that, despite the vocabulary’s heroic connotations, the passage still literally depicts a middle-aged woman banging open a disused store-room’s stuck bolt.

Because 21.6 functions like a joke to generate an image of Penelope whose incongruities resemble those of other, unambiguously humorous images in Greek tradition, it seems reasonable to propose that it may be humorous. A look at the other time *παχύς* modifies Penelope will better equip us to pursue this reading and to see how it pertains to the epic as a whole.

II. Penelope’s ‘beautification’

When Penelope refuses to wash before presenting herself to her suitors, Athena puts her to sleep and beautifies her. The beautification concludes (18.195–96):

καί μιν μακροτέρην καὶ πάσσονα θῆκεν ιδέσθαι,
λευκοτέρην δ’ ἄρα μιν θῆκε πιστοῦ ἑλέφαντος.

[Athena] made Penelope both taller and stouter to see,
and then made her whiter than sawn ivory.

Beautification regularly conduces to humour.⁵³ Here, the poet plays the same game as in 21.6 on the scale of a type-scene.

Female and male Homeric beautification scenes differ in their contexts, elements and emphases. Leaving aside Penelope’s for the moment, the three other female beautification scenes (*Il.* 14.166–223; *Od.* 8.362–66; *h.Hom.* 5.58–67, 84–93) all depict goddesses preparing to seduce a single individual in seclusion or recovering from public ridicule after such a tryst. Deception figures prominently in all three affairs. The beautifications focus on clothing and accessories, which are compared to the sun, moon and fire as they shine with gold, silver and beauty (*κάλλος*). Other than their hair and skin, the goddesses’ bodies are mentioned only very generally as the frameworks on which their adornments hang, though they are implied when the goddesses anoint themselves with ambrosia (*Il.* 14.170) or ‘ambrosial/immortal’ olive oil (*Il.* 14.172; *Od.* 8.365; *h.Hom.* 5.62). None of these beautifications includes an increase in size.⁵⁴

Conversely, male beautifications⁵⁵ always have human subjects (predominantly Odysseus, but also Telemachus and Laertes), are augmented or performed entirely by Athena and occur when their subjects integrate or reintegrate themselves into society after a period of literal or metaphorical exile. Because bathing and/or donning fresh clothes removes all signs of exile (brine, ragged clothing, dirt, etc.) from the subjects, their enhanced appearances, which can include physical restorations, symbolize their social reinstatements. Masculine scenes focus on the subjects’ bodies, not their clothing. Those involving baths include anointment with olive oil (tallow in *Od.* 6.227), but the oil is never ‘ambrosial’. Instead, Athena usually pours ‘grace’ (*χάρις*, *Od.* 2.12, 6.235, 8.19, 23.162) or ‘beauty’ (*κάλλος*, *Od.* 23.156) on the subjects as an unguent (*Od.* 6.237). When the

⁵³ Clarke (1969) 251.

⁵⁴ Demeter (*h.Hom.* 2.188–89, 245) and Aphrodite (*h.Hom.* 5.173–74) grow taller without becoming stouter during epiphanies.

⁵⁵ *Od.* 2.12–13, 6.224–45, 8.17–23, 16.172–76, 23.153–63, 24.365–74. On closely related (often overlapping) ‘bath scenes’, see Arend (1933) 124–26.

subjects present themselves, multiple onlookers marvel (θεάεσθαι or ἄγασθαι)⁵⁶ and sometimes compare them to gods.⁵⁷ Finally, Athena makes the subjects of the four scenes developed beyond two verses appear 'stouter' (πάσσονα) and either 'larger' (μείζονα, *Od.* 6.230, 23.157, 24.369) or 'taller' (μακρότερον, *Od.* 8.20). Increased size enhances the subjects' manliness for the ensuing events, in which their excellence as husbands or athletes/warriors plays a central role.

Penelope's beautification has elements of both sub-types. As in female beautifications, she receives 'ambrosial gifts' (ἄμβροτα δῶρα, 18.189), is cleaned with 'ambrosial ... beauty' (κάλλει ... ἄμβροσίωι, 191–92) that is compared to Aphrodite's and becomes whiter than ivory, which reflects the goddesses' radiance on a human scale.⁵⁸ Penelope later introduces an element of deception by requisitioning gifts from her suitors with the promise that she will finally choose a new husband.⁵⁹ In all other aspects Penelope's scene follows the masculine pattern: Athena beautifies her when the time appointed for her to re-enter society by remarrying has arrived (18.175–76, 269–271); the narrative focuses on Penelope's face, which Athena washes using beauty (κάλλος, 18.190) as an unguent to remove the marks of her 'exile' (18.173–74); the suitors are supposed to marvel at Penelope's appearance (18.191); when they do, she uses their reaction to establish a new phase in her relationship with them more in line with proper courtship; and, of course, Athena makes Penelope appear taller and stouter.

It seems that the poet solves the problem of creating a beautification scene for a mortal woman by incorporating elements from goddesses' beautifications into a masculine framework. His plan seems sound until it leads to 18.195. This specific variant of the typical 'enlargement' appears elsewhere only in Odysseus' beautification for Alcinous' court (8.20). The choice to echo that scene seems apt.⁶⁰ Both beautifications prepare their subjects to enter a hall containing one potential spouse amidst many regional nobles, Athena beautifies both subjects to garner their observers' respect and both subjects consequently receive gifts; and, initially, 18.195 suits Penelope too, since height is also attractive in women. But its beginning leads 'inevitably' to its conclusion. While it is appropriate that Odysseus becomes stouter at 8.20 because he must prove his masculine excellence over the ensuing scenes, it is utterly inappropriate for Penelope. Even if the scholiast is correct that her increased stoutness simply maintains her proportions, πάσσονα still has the wrong tenor,⁶¹ as the element's *verbatim* duplication of 8.20 and inclusion elsewhere only in male beautification scenes attest. So, like χειρὶ παχείηι in 21.6, καὶ πάσσονα ἠῆκεν ἰδέσθαι is a 'trigger' that reveals the previously latent masculinity of Penelope's beautification; also like 21.6, it is immediately followed by a reference to ivory that might hint at the deceptiveness with which Penelope's beautification initially generates a 'feminine' impression that masks its 'masculinizing' aspects until the end.⁶²

⁵⁶ Penelope's maids see Odysseus after his beautification in 23.153–63. Contextual needs postpone Penelope's reaction.

⁵⁷ See Murnaghan (2011) 76–86; Sowa (1984) 250–61; Steiner (2010) 18–19.

⁵⁸ Steiner (2010) 186–87 connects the beautifications of Penelope, Hera and Aphrodite.

⁵⁹ Amory (1966) 52. In assessing this fraught episode, I follow Steiner (2010) 27–28 and Katz (1991) 77–120. Penelope's actions should be understood in terms of narrative strategy rather than psychological coherence; cf. Emlyn-Jones (1984) 9–12 and Murnaghan (2011) 94–102 with Hölscher's (1967) view (Penelope believes Odysseus will not return) and Byre's (1988) addendum (Athena shows Odysseus the suitors' brutality) in mind.

⁶⁰ Steiner (2010) 185 on 18.187–96, 186 on 18.191. The echo also enhances the closer parallel between

Odysseus' adventures on Scheria and Ithaca, on which, see Levine (1983b); Lowenstam (1993) 207–28; Steiner (2010) 18.

⁶¹ Wilamowitz (1884) 32 n.1; opposed by Treu (1955) 51.

⁶² Amory (1966) 52 argues that Penelope's ivory-white skin anticipates her tricking the suitors into giving gifts, but that seems too distant and may not be a deliberate deception. The fraud associated with ivory is usually intrinsic to the ivory object. See n. 50.

⁶³ Büchner (1940) 145; cf. Hart (1943) 255–56; Pucci (1987) 62–63; Zervou (1990) 170–76; Loudon (1995) 32; Thalmann (1998) 101–07. Pace Halliwell (2008) 91, the suitors' laughter invites the audience to ponder their own laughter without precluding it. Levine (1982) argues that the Irus episode is metonymic for the suitors' abuses and fate. Nagy (1979) 228–32 considers it an allegorical rejection of blame-poetry. Steiner (2009)

This humorous incongruity reverberates throughout its context too. Wilhelm Büchner observes that Odysseus' mock-epic duel against Irus in the preceding scene establishes a humorous atmosphere⁶³ that persists until the book's end.⁶⁴ Several parallels between that scene and Penelope's help maintain the atmosphere.⁶⁵ Two are crucial to our concerns. First, Athena increases Odysseus' stoutness (18.70)⁶⁶ as she will Penelope's. During Penelope's scene Telemachus then reinforces this parallel and points out the second when he hopes that the suitors suffer a 'limb-loosening' beating just like Irus received (18.238–40, *cf.* 18.96–99). But unbeknownst to Telemachus, who cannot hear the narrator, the knees of Penelope's suitors were just loosened by seeing her (18.212). Through its (humorous?) irony, Telemachus' comment recasts Penelope's knee-loosening effect on her suitors as a refraction of Odysseus' violent beating of Irus⁶⁷ and, by extension, induces the audience to view Odysseus' preparatory increase in stoutness as a proximate, emphatically masculine and humorous precedent for Penelope's.

Eurymachus then extends the scene's humour with his ludicrously obtuse fawning over Penelope, during which he unwittingly clarifies how her beautification pertains to Odysseus. More men, he claims, would woo Penelope if only they 'saw' (ἴδοιεν, 18.246) her because she excels in 'appearance and stature and also equal mind inside' (εἶδος τε μέγεθος τε ἰδὲ φρένας ἔνδον ἔϊσας, 18.249). This verse duplicates *Odyssey* 11.337, where Arete praises Odysseus in response to his catalogue of women and ultimately the long series of events for which his beautification in book 8 prepared him. Though the verse does not occur again, Eumaeus echoes it when he says that Telemachus 'will be no worse than his dear father at all, revered in body and form (δέμας καὶ εἶδος), but one of the immortals hurt him with respect to his equal mind inside (φρένας ἔνδον ἔϊσας)' (14.176–78). His phraseology presupposes that the audience already identifies this language with Odysseus specifically, especially the expression 'equal mind' (ἴση φρήν), which only appears outside these three passages in Homeric scholarship and centos. By applying this language to Penelope, Eurymachus therefore inadvertently likens her to Odysseus.

The assimilation is bivalent. Its psychological valence underscores Odysseus and Penelope's 'like-mindedness', which Penelope displays at the scene's end. Yet Eurymachus clearly has something else in mind. Because his hypothetical scenario simply reproduces the current situation with more suitors, by specifying that the people he imagines react to seeing Penelope, Eurymachus reveals that he himself is stimulated purely by what he sees. Her 'appearance and stature' dazzle him; his praises for her φρήν is perfunctory. In complimenting Penelope's beauty with the same verse Arete uses for Odysseus, Eurymachus therefore unwittingly insinuates that Penelope's appearance now warrants language that has already been established as distinctive to Odysseus. In other words, the diction with which Eurymachus praises Penelope's beauty produces for the audience the contradictory and incongruous impression that her beautification has actually made her look more like her husband. We might already have expected as much from the fact that her beautification's masculine elements culminate in the same verse (18.195 = 8.20) as ultimately earns Odysseus the same praise (18.249 = 11.337).

argues that a 'pharmakos complex' shapes it. For further scholarship, see Steiner (2010) 153–55.

⁶⁴ Penelope begins her scene with a befuddling ἀχρεῖον laugh (18.163). Clay (1984) and Byre (1988) 163 favour readings that are contextually preferable but atypical of Homeric laughter. Büchner (1940) 139–45 and Levine (1983b) construe it more typically, but their readings are difficult to reconcile with Penelope's refusal to beautify herself.

⁶⁵ Ahl and Roisman (1996) 217–20; Thalmann (1998) 110.

⁶⁶ Though παχύς is absent, 18.70 and its verb ἀλδαίνειν only recur at *Od.* 24.368, which is glossed 'for she made [Laertes] larger than before and stouter to see' (μεῖζονα δ' ἤε πάρος καὶ πάσσονα θῆκεν ιδέσθαι, 24.369). ποιμένι λαῶν (shepherd of the people) in 18.70 might playfully 'one-up' *Il.* 3.192–98, where Priam compares Odysseus to a ram after marvelling at his stoutness.

⁶⁷ Cook (2012) 103: 'her beauty figuratively kills the suitors'. Though limb-loosening love is a lyric topos, its absence from Homeric poetry elsewhere (Steiner (2010) 190 on 18.212) prevents familiarity from confusing or mitigating the parallel.

Nor does it elude Penelope that something is amiss with her appearance. She refuses to beautify herself at the episode's beginning (18.180–81) and undercuts Eurymachus' flattery near the episode's end (18.251–53) because, she claims, the gods ruined her beauty. Framed by Penelope's antipathy towards beautifying herself and her accusations that the gods have disfigured her, Athena's act of putting Penelope to sleep in order to beautify her seems a disturbing, almost violent perversion of the restorative function sleep normally plays in beautification scenes. When Penelope awakens, she immediately calls her sleep a κῶμα (18.201), that is, an enveloping (καλύπτειν), deathlike catalepsy imposed by an outside force to render somebody insensate.⁶⁸ She then reveals that her beautification exacerbates rather than ameliorates her sense of disfigurement when she laments her youth's erosion in contrast with the rejuvenations sometimes found in beautifications: 'grieving in my heart I am wearing my youthful vitality away' (ὄδυρομένη κατὰ θυμὸν αἰῶνα φθινύθω, 18.204).⁶⁹

A game with her subsequent descent into the hall (18.207–11) then substantiates the link between Penelope's complaint and beautification. Penelope always enters the hall using the full form of the 'woman descends into the hall accompanied by servants' type-scene, in which the subject covers her face with a veil.⁷⁰ Here, Penelope provokes the scene by requesting attendants (18.182–84). Yet because Penelope's beautification focuses on her face – it is the only beautification that does so – following the scene's typology entails obscuring most of the beautification's effects. Penelope leaves only her 'masculinizing' augmented height and stoutness clearly visible, the sight of which loosens the suitors' knees in a refraction of Odysseus beating Irus and causes Eurymachus to imply unwittingly that she now looks like her husband. As with Penelope's 'stout hand', here too conflicts between what the poetry states literally and what it connotes prolong and reassert the incongruities of her beautification in what I propose is a humorous way.

III. Conclusions

Penelope's distress in these passages may seem poor fodder for humour, particularly given her emotional breakdown when she seizes the bow (21.55–56). But that occurs some 50 lines after 21.6. Even then, Odysseus' predicted triumph creates a plot that Aristotle identifies as comedic (*Po.* 1453a), while discussing which plot-structures best induce fear and pity. Foreknowing the *Odyssey's* happy ending cushions the audience's pity, enabling them to enjoy a more dispassionate though still sympathetic pleasure in observing a pain that will soon yield to joy. Zeus responds to Artemis' similar pain at *Iliad* 21.508 by 'laughing sweetly/pleasurably' (*cf. Il.* 5.426). His tender sympathy suggests that such laughter is an appropriate response to transient pain.⁷¹ Laughter is, after all, too complex to be neatly divided from pain. Bakhtin famously observed that it can arise from embracing and celebrating the most mundane depths of our shared human condition, including (or especially) the painful aspects.⁷² Homeric laughter often displays such emotional complexities,⁷³ nowhere more poignantly than when Andromache 'cries after laughing' (δακρῦόεν γελάσασα, *Il.* 6.484) at her family's plight, Astyanax' fear and Hector's prayer. When Penelope breaks down in tears after seizing the bow, she models the audience's experience through the

⁶⁸ *Cf. Il.* 14.359; *Od.* 18.201; *Hes. Th.* 798. The image of a nubile girl dancing with friends in 18.193–94 evokes 'the theme of Rape' (Sowa (1984) 76–77).

⁶⁹ *Cf. Od.* 5.152, 160–61. In Homer, αἰών is 'youthful vigour' or 'vitality' pertaining to lifespan. See Benveniste (1937) 103; Festugière (1949) 188–89; Theunissen (2002) 8. Scholars normally construe from the verse an indication that Penelope is unaware of her beautification.

⁷⁰ 18.207–11 = 1.331–35; *cf. Il.* 3.143, *Od.* 6.84,

16.414–16, 21.63–66. See Nagler (1974) 64–86. Athena directs 18.158–303 towards being a 'seduction scene' (on which, see Levine (1983b); Sowa (1984) 67–94; Thalmann (1998) 184 n.25), while Penelope's actions would redirect it into a 'chastisement scene' (*cf. Od.* 1.328–64, 16.409–51). Only the latter includes 'descent' scenes.

⁷¹ Halliwell (2008) 67–68. Artemis' divinity only pertains in that it makes her pain transient.

⁷² Bakhtin (1984) 11–12, 18–21, 24–28, 315–19.

⁷³ Halliwell (2008) 51–99.

pleasure her weeping gives her (21.57). We shall see that, far from precluding laughter, Penelope's suffering is betokened on the most basic corporeal level by her stoutness and elevated to the sublime through a dynamic that is both Odyssean and comic.

Others have already discussed how the psychological implications of Penelope's stoutness reinforce the numerous other signs of her heroic 'masculine' virtues.⁷⁴ Her stoutness thus cooperates with the 'reverse-sex similes', which Helene Foley argues invert Odysseus' and Penelope's sexes in a manner typical of 'festival and comedy' to map out the couple's developing 'like-mindedness' and ultimately facilitate the delineation of gender roles needed for restoring proper order on Ithaca.⁷⁵

Penelope's literal stoutness adds another dimension. Throughout the poem, her 'realistic' persona as a middle-aged woman whose youthful beauty has deteriorated coexists with her 'idealized' persona as a subtle doppelgänger or semi-latent reinterpretation. Telemachus' instructions to keep his expedition secret from Penelope 'lest she damage her lovely skin by weeping' (2.376, cf. 4.749) invite the audience to contemplate how much damage her years of weeping for Odysseus must have already caused. Odysseus' more prominent duality as both an unalterably robust warrior and worn vagabond, visions that sometimes coincide in a single passage (for example, 8.180–84), colour his counterpart Penelope during her long absence from the central books. His disguise's transparency and Penelope noting that the decrepit beggar and Odysseus are the same age (ὁμῆλιξ, 19.358) continue the effect. Penelope's beautification scene and complaints about her appearance, which she repeats later without any fawning to prompt her (19.124–28 = 18.251–55), then reconstitute her 'realistic' persona more directly. How the audience envisions Penelope is therefore largely a matter of focalization.⁷⁶ She perceives herself as eroded by time, worry and toil – Telemachus and Eurynome do too – yet the suitors always perceive her as ravishing. The poet's preference for conveying her appearance through the suitors' reactions to her⁷⁷ and focalizing his narration accordingly causes their view to dominate while leaving room for alternate perspectives and potentials.

These two Penelopes evoke (without being reducible to) broad cultural stereotypes. As Amphimedon declaims in hindsight (24.121–90), the suitors see Penelope as the familiar seductress-type whose manipulations and unrestrained sexuality bring ruin to everybody around her. Penelope recognizes and exploits their eroticized conception of her but perceives herself in terms of the seductress' antitype, that is, as the mature, matronly house-mistress seasoned by (mis)fortune. Because the matron-type typically neither revels in nor inspires sexual desire,⁷⁸ by helping to identify her with that type Penelope's physical condition manifests her fidelity and associated virtues somatically. Her physical resemblance to Odysseus (and Athena) therefore reflects certain psychological assets that they share, especially their 'self-control' as denoted by, for instance, Penelope's epithet ἐχέφρων, which Athena once applies to Odysseus (13.332) shortly after exclaiming how much his mental excellence resembles her own (13.297–99).

Penelope's physical condition manifests her mental virtues because they are cognate products of a single causal process. As we have seen, many of the passages that construct the 'realistic' Penelope blame her physical decline on her ordeals. So when *παχύς* correlates her physical stoutness with her 'masculine' virtues by signifying them both simultaneously, it identifies her stoutness

⁷⁴ Austin (1975) 73–74; Nagler (1993) 255–56; Roller and Roller (1994).

⁷⁵ Foley (1984).

⁷⁶ See Felson-Rubin (1994).

⁷⁷ Steiner (2010) 190 on 18.212.

⁷⁸ For example, *h.Hom.* 2.98–104. See Mitchell (2009) 69; O'Higgins (2003) 44–45, 79–82, 98–99, 113,

et al., who also argues that Penelope's frequent descriptor, *κέδν' εἰδυῖα*, designates 'older, experienced women' and 'sexual restraint'. Praxiteles sculpted a weeping matron and laughing prostitute as a pair (Pliny *NH* 34.70). Semonides' 'bee-woman' combines the assets of both: she is lovely, industrious and grows old with her husband avoiding sexual gossip (7.86–91).

and virtues as conjoint products of the same ordeals.⁷⁹ One result of this causal connection is that Penelope's stoutness manifests her fortitude precisely because it is physical and detractive; the degree to which it mars her beauty reflects the degree to which she has suffered and, hence, the magnitude of the virtues she has developed through her suffering. In serving this function, Penelope's stoutness and self-deprecation overlap with Odysseus' own physical deterioration and self-assurance that he can endure the suitors' abuses because he has already suffered worse (20.18–21); they indicate the self-control (and other virtues) that both husband and wife have developed in parallel through their parallel human experiences.

The *Odyssey* establishes the value of their shared human condition by having the audience's very first glimpse at Odysseus be of him choosing it over divine immortality. He is sitting on the Ogygian shore leaving tears unwiped on his face, mourning (ὄδυροόμενος) his return home while his 'youthful vitality' (αἰών, 5.152) ebbs away, a mirror of Penelope lamenting her own mourning-induced (ὄδυρομένη) loss of αἰών (18.203–04). Saturating himself in his human frailty, Odysseus symbolically and literally rejects Calypso and the immortality she offers; her appellation νύμφη (maiden/goddess, 5.153), which designates her divine youth, contrasts with Odysseus' transitory αἰών through their parallel terminal positions in consecutive verses. Odysseus soon articulates the subtle implications of his posture when Calypso asks why he wants to return to Penelope when her own immortality makes her superior in form (δέμας), stature (φύη) and appearance (εἶδος, 5.212–13). Odysseus not only agrees with Calypso's assessment, he adds that Calypso is also more beautiful than Penelope because she is 'ageless' (ἀγήρωσ, 5.218). His choice programmatically deprioritizes idealized beauty,⁸⁰ while his addition designates Penelope's susceptibility to time and decay, which parallels his own, as metonymic for the 'realistic' human condition he prefers.

The rich intimacy of Odysseus and Penelope's reunion then frames his *nostos* with a celebration of that value-system. Penelope's wariness and self-control initially induce Odysseus to smile (23.111). After learning that she became so guarded from hearing innumerable lies during their separation, he weeps with the realization that she is θυμαρής (23.232): 'pleasing' because she 'fits his θυμός'. The subsequent simile comparing Penelope's joy to a sailor's who spies land after Poseidon shipwrecks him clarifies that their psychological harmony comes from their parallel experiences. Unlike Paris and Zeus, whose 'longing' (ἔμερος, *Il.* 3.446, 14.328) for sex when they reunite with their wives preempts conversation, Odysseus first 'longs' to weep (23.231) and only suggests intercourse after informing Penelope about Tiresias' prophecy. Even then, the couple postpone and follow their lovemaking with conversations about what they have experienced. The pleasure they derive from talking to each other rivals their sexual pleasure (23.300–01). This is the reunion of a mature couple who reached 'the threshold of old age' (γῆρας οὐδὸν, 23.212) apart, as Penelope explains, and now enjoy a psychological reinvigoration through the joys of emotional, intellectual and physical human intercourse. Odysseus' beautification beforehand (23.153–63) restores his vigorous appearance by duplicating his beautification on Phaeacia (23.157–62 = 6.230–35) without actually restoring his youth, as his transformation for Telemachus does (16.173–76). A truly young Odysseus would be inappropriate for this Penelope, and an 'idealized' Penelope would ill-befit this Odysseus.⁸¹

The mechanics of the 'stout Penelope' humour, like those of Odysseus' bald pate, thus elevate Penelope's mundane human condition to heroic status as defined by the value-system that the *Odyssey* programmatically establishes, that underpins the couple's virtues and that their reunion celebrates. In so doing, Penelope's 'stout hand' also assimilates her to Athena's ridiculous caricature in the *Theomachia*, which similarly follows a human male template. As the echo attributes

⁷⁹ Cf. Roller and Roller (1994).

⁸⁰ Treu (1955) 43–47.

⁸¹ Murnaghan (2011) argues in contrast that Odysseus transcends 'the fluctuations of fortune and of mortality' by shedding his disguise (11).

Athena's 'masculine' virtues to Penelope, it also reappropriates and inverts the Iliadic scene's humorous bathos so that the humour derides not Penelope's 'masculinized' physique but the suitors' immature, self-destructive and deluded adherence to their 'idealized' vision of her and, with it, the more stereotypically epic value-system that Odysseus and the *Odyssey* reject.

By redefining a sign of masculine military excellence in this way, Penelope's stoutness contributes to the *Odyssey*'s use of structures that characterize festival and comedy, such as the reverse-sex similes Foley discusses, to redistribute orthodox aristocratic virtues among a broader range of subjects and experiences.⁸² The epic recounts domestic exploits, which are far less conventionally glorious than martial ones, and prominently features men and women from all socio-economic levels acting independently. Unlike Iliadic characters, Odyssean characters suffer from cold, hunger and darkness.⁸³ For the Greeks, such 'realism' naturally conduced to humour.⁸⁴ The author of *On the Sublime*, for instance, distinguishes the *Odyssey* from the *Iliad* as 'composed with realistic characters as if a comedy' (οἰονεὶ κωμῳδία τίς ἐστὶν ἠθολογουμένη, 9.15). Its most basic plot-elements – the reconstitution of order from disorder through transformations and subterfuges in which a down-on-his-luck outsider, a young man and tricky slaves rescue a potential bride from boorish sham-warriors, leading to the boors' punishment, a marriage and psychological rejuvenations – anticipate later comedies (for example, *Miles Gloriosus* and *Peace*). The similarity would be even more pronounced if Penelope recognizes and deliberately helps Odysseus, as many scholars believe.⁸⁵ In accomplishing their objectives, many of the *Odyssey*'s characters display heroic attributes they would not traditionally possess. We may think of the concluding *Geron-tomachia* or Eumaeus' heroization, on which Rick Newton writes: 'humor may be the means to the ultimate end of presenting a novel idea to an audience steeped in the conservative values and diction of epic tradition. The light tone and parodic flavor of the "heroization" of Eumaeus reflect a wily and "Odyssean" approach to the new heroics espoused by this poem'.⁸⁶

Humour such as Penelope's hand is more than simply charming, however. Regardless of whether its mechanisms are intentional or an inherent product of applying traditional heroic idioms to traditionally less heroic subjects⁸⁷ – and regardless of whether we ourselves find them funny – they challenge engrained epic tenets on a formulaic level. Traditional phrases such as χειρὶ παχείη facilitate poetic composition because they fit a variety of typical epic contexts.⁸⁸ Any warrior could be said to have a 'stout hand' at any time without disrupting the story. Applying this phrase to Penelope, however, produces an incongruous image that does disrupt the *Odyssey*'s story, and disrupts it in a way that exposes the fact that the need for such conventional elements to be context-neutral imposes artificial limits on the subjects traditional epic can discuss and, hence, the values it can explore.

Such linguistic games are inherently agonistic.⁸⁹ They constitute one way in which the *Odyssey* poet seeks to surpass his predecessors and rivals. Simply parodying what has been done before is not enough to 'win'. Through formulaic humour, the *Odyssey* poet exposes epic language's tradi-

⁸² Cook (2012) argues that the *Odyssey* engages 'in dialogue with the [*Homeric*] *Hymn [to Demeter]*: the story of a king whose absence precipitates an agricultural crisis and whose return brings increase to the wider community thus emerges as the political counterpart to fertility cult' (55). Class-equalization and humour were distinctive features of Demeter cults, on which, see O'Higgins (2003) 15–85. So too was the 'barren virgin'/ 'pregnant crone' dichotomy that Penelope reproduces in a reduced form.

⁸³ Fränkel (1975) 51, 85–93. Stanford (1963) 43–80 holds that Odysseus' nature shapes his poem's world.

⁸⁴ Russell (1964) 99 on 9.15; Arieti and Crosset (1985) 62–63.

⁸⁵ Levaniouk (2008) offers a recent exposition of this theory and up-to-date bibliography. On Eumaeus recognizing Odysseus, see Roisman (1990).

⁸⁶ Newton (1998) 153–54.

⁸⁷ Fränkel (1975) 93 notes that the *Odyssey*'s realism often causes formulas to appear in traditionally unsuitable contexts.

⁸⁸ Visser (1987); (1988); Bakker (2005) 1–21.

⁸⁹ Gruner (1997) 131–46; on the *Odyssey*, see Loudon (1995).

tional limitations, reappropriates its formulaic conventions and reconstructs those conventions so that they can accommodate his more 'realistic' and diverse world. At 18.195 and 21.6, stoutness acquires a new, essentially Odyssean valence, while humour's proven effectiveness helps persuade the audience by fostering a social cohesion that seduces them to his side.⁹⁰ Penelope serves as a sort of *eirôn* whose 'realism' inspires the audience to join the poet in laughing at the idealistic pretensions of an authoritative structure that they all reform together as they share the quintessentially comic exaltation of her all too mundane and human stoutness.

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⁹⁰ As demonstrated by psychological studies (for example, O'Quin and Aronoff (1981); Lefcourt (2001) 127–40).

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