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The Symbolism of Penelope's Geese (*Odyssey* 19.535-69)

The scholiasts have little to say about Penelope's geese, perhaps thinking that no interpretation is needed after the devouring eagle has spoken. Moderns, too, mostly call the dream self-explanatory; but a problem at once arises, for if the geese represent the suitors, why should Penelope mourn them? There is no evidence that she is friendly to the suitors, whose plot against Telemachos has cancelled their guest-rights and moved the queen to pray for their death. How then does the poet intend us to read Penelope's feelings and the purpose of her speech? The problem can be solved if one attends to what the geese represent to Penelope *before* the oneiric Odysseus makes his proclamation. Her dream, it turns out, belongs to a coded conversation with her husband, who has returned in prompt fulfillment of Theoklymenos' prophecy and whose conduct in the house has made his identity apparent to his intimates.

No doubt there are real geese in the yard, but in a dream their number will have been symbolic, and that number is not one hundred eight but twenty: *not* the suitors, therefore, but the years of Odysseus' absence. The geese, Penelope says, have lifted her spirits, and when, in the dream, the eagle kills them, she goes into *full mourning*, consoled by other women of her class. The rituals of grief are disproportionate unless the geese represent something more than themselves, but protocol, too, rules out the suitors, who are not *philoï*, and for whom it would be impolitic for the queen to disclose a liking, even if she felt it. For the ancient audience, the number will have been the principal clue, and that plainly refers to the time of waiting for Odysseus. Penelope says, in effect, *I dreamt that Zeus had brought your life to an end, and brought to nothing my years of keeping faith*. Moreover, in the omens of Odysseus' vengeance on the suitors, the raptor kills the prey but is not seen to eat it; and the monogamous habits of geese have made them folkloric symbols of marital fidelity (Pratt, *CP* 1994, 151-2).

On the premise that Penelope already associates the geese with the suitors, the eagle's speech of reassurance opens with a non sequitur (for why would Penelope imagine her husband consoling her for the suitors' death?). But if the twenty geese symbolize Penelope's loyalty to Odysseus, and their death his death, then *tharsei* makes perfect sense: Take heart: there is no cause for mourning. I am alive and the suitors are doomed. The 'pure' dream would be natural for the queen at any time after Odysseus' departure, but the eagle's part is her response to Odysseus' return, for what she has imagined is not a different interpretation of her dream, but replacement of the dream with a new reality: *ouk onar, all' hupar esthlon, hoti tetelesmenon estai*: 'not a dream but an auspicious vision of the mind in full alertness, which will be for you an accomplished fact' (v. 547). An actual dream lends consequence to the two-gates metaphor, but it serves the dramatic purpose just as well if Penelope has invented the dream as a way to ask her husband, *Do you intend to kill the suitors?*

"But when I looked, I perceived the geese in the hall, gobbling their grain by the trough, just where they were before" (vv. 552-3): The innocence of this picture returns us to the symbolism of the *onar* as if to say, *I awoke to find that my time of waiting had not ended*.

Though bravely couched in the indicative (“I have come back . . . I shall send”), the *hupar* remains potential, and Odysseus has not said how the ‘accomplished fact’ is to be accomplished. He restates the promise (vv. 554-8) but says nothing about tactics, and the queen is wary of false dreams.

The resistance to hope reflects Penelope’s loneliness (emblematic geese are no substitute for the living husband) and anxiety about Odysseus’ survival (in the absence of a plan, it is too early to celebrate). She cannot make up for the lost years, but the tactical problem can be addressed, if only Odysseus remembers his trick-archery.