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“Like Artemis or golden Aphrodite”: a closer look at a brief Homeric simile

Twice in the *Odyssey* the poet describes Penelope as “like Artemis or golden Aphrodite” (17.37 and 19.54). This double comparison has been described as “especially felicitous” and particularly meaningful in terms of Penelope’s own state of mind, “uncertain of her divine affinities.” But the deeper function of this unusual double comparison has gone unremarked.

This comparison is unusual in two respects, both of which raise interesting questions. First, it compares Penelope with two very different goddesses. Are these two comparanda meant to be equivalent (for instance, referring merely to divine beauty), overlapping, or mutually exclusive? Other women in the Homeric poems are compared to one goddess or the other, but only Penelope is compared to them both at once. Second, this comparison occurs twice—but only t—in the poem. What links these two occasions together and sets them apart from other scenes where Penelope makes an appearance without being described in this way?

A closer look at the ways in which Artemis and Aphrodite are mentioned throughout the poem reveals that they ordinarily represent quite separate realms of behavior. Helen and Penelope are the only main characters associated with both goddesses; but only Penelope is associated with them both at once. The reason for this emerges along with the answer to the second question, concerning the context of the two double comparisons of Penelope. On both occasions, Penelope is appearing for a first face-to-face conversation with a man who has returned from an absence and is extremely concerned to ascertain whether or not she has preserved her marital fidelity: Telemachus in book 17, Odysseus in book 19.

I contend that the double comparison is meant to present mutually exclusive alternatives, and that the poet thus conveys the essential question in the mind of her son and her husband: is Penelope like Artemis, or like golden Aphrodite? In narratological terms, Telemachus and Odysseus serve as the focalizers of the poet’s narrative at the moment of this comparison.