

PENELOPE'S GATES OF HORN(S) AND IVORY

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In the nineteenth book of the *Odyssey* Penelope tells her disguised husband her dream of the eagle who killed her geese, and he gives this dream the obvious interpretation: it is a portent of Odysseus's imminent return and slaughter of the suitors. Penelope seems very reluctant to accept the obvious, and denies the dream's validity by resorting to a description of two gates, one made of horns and one of ivory, through which pass true and false dreams. What she says is the following (*Od.* 19. 560-569):

'Stranger, dreams are indeed hard to deal with, confused
in meaning; and not everything comes true for mortals.
For double are the gates of strengthless dreams:
one set is made of horns, and one of ivory.
Whichever of dreams come through the sawn ivory,
these deceive, carrying words that are not to come true.
But those that come out from between the polished horns,
these accomplish true things, when some mortal sees them.
But I do not think my own dread dream came from that place.
It would have been welcome to me and my son if it had.

I note specifically that the text does not say «horn,» as most translators and commentators have it, but the pl. «horns,» κεράεσσι and κεράων at 563 and 566 (I shall return to this important point below). We have already learned earlier in the poem that mortals may encounter dreams in a passageway marked by gates: at *Od.* 4. 809, the dream sent by Athena found Penelope «slumbering in the Gates of Dreams,» κνώσσοις ἐν ὄνειρείησι πύλῃσιν. But in this earlier passage there is no contrast between *two kinds* of gates for *two different kinds* of dreams; no oppositional categories are implied. And so we are not prepared for the anti-thetical distinction Penelope makes with such clarity and emphasis in Book 19.

Penelope's description raises questions still to be satisfactorily answered by Homerists, concerning both the identity of the two gates she

describes and her reason for characterizing them as she does¹. Foremost among these are:

(1) From what source does Penelope get this piece of lore about gates of horn(s) and ivory? She cites it matter-of-factly, as if such knowledge is traditional and beyond question. Is it in fact so?

(2) Why are horns related to truth and ivory to falsity?

(3) Does Penelope really believe, as absolutely as her rhetoric suggests, that the dream she narrated to the stranger is false, of the kind sent to deceive mortals? This vivid dream, which the stranger interpreted so positively and which in fact carried within itself its own unambiguous interpretation – this dream whose meaning is so very welcome to the queen, as she herself says at 19.569 (with an optative of wish)

ἦ κ' ἀπαστὸν ἐμοὶ καὶ παιδὶ γένοιτο

– why does she insist it is false, when what she most yearns for is *the exact opposite*, that this dream be true, a reliable forecast of events to come?

Let me begin with 1), where does this belief in two gates of dreams come from?

Greek eschatological tradition offers many examples of a passageway between this world and a world which is invisible and adjacent; a pas-

¹ Commentators ancient and modern are remarkably unilluminating. The scholia go off into allegorical readings connecting horn with the eyes and ivory with the teeth, meaning that things seen are more reliable than things heard – a proverbial truth known from Herodotus and Heraclitus, but having nothing to do with Homeric thought. Monro ad loc. says nothing. Stanford ad loc. says nothing about the contrast of gates or materials, only that ivory in Homer is ornamental and the elephant unmentioned. Ameis-Hentze attempt to deal with the pl. *ker-aessi* at 563 by interpreting it to mean «plated with horn.» In the *Anhang* they suggest that Homer uses allegory drawn from current folk-belief, and note that *Od.* 24. 12 refers to the *demos oneiron* (it is not clear what this has to do with double gates). Rutherford notes that the Gates of Sleep (but not Dreams) were proverbial before Vergil's elaboration in *Aen.* 6.893ff. More interestingly, he believes that Penelope's detailed elaboration suggests that this is her personal invention for this context, going beyond the simpler, traditional idea of Gates of Dreams seen at 4.809. He is on the right track. But why she needs to invent at this point, and why she chooses to invent antithetical gates made of these particular substances, seem questions not yet posed by critics. My earlier treatment (Oxford Commentary at 562-3) emphasizes that the symbolism needs to be seriously probed, and has a likely ancient pre-Hellenic source in gateways of mystical passage to a higher spiritual reality. My present discussion is an attempt to follow out that idea more fully, and connect it to Penelope's strategizing at this point in the plot.

sageway characterized by *two* paths, to allow for two antithetical kinds of «travellers.» Plato's Myth of Er (*Rep.* 614c) describes «two openings alongside one another on earth, and another two opposite them above in heaven.» The just souls go through the right and upwards, the unjust to the left and downwards². Similar descriptions appear in Plato's *Gorgias* (523a-524a) and *Phaedo* (108c), which offer essentially the same eschatological mythic vision. In *Gorgias* 523a-524a Socrates gives an account which he has heard from an unnamed informant, which he calls a *logos* while acknowledging that Kallikles will consider it merely a *mythos*. He speaks of a certain meadow where Minos, Rhadamanthus and Aiaikos pass judgement on the souls of the dead. There is a point here from which two roads lead, one to the Isles of the Blessed and one to Tartaros, for the just and the unjust souls. A similar tradition may be discerned in Pindar, *Ol.* 2.57-80, describing the contrasting afterlife existence of just and the unjust. The former travel a specific «road of Zeus to the tower of Kronos» (70). An alternative road (for the unjust) is not mentioned, but the pattern familiar from Plato is clearly implied.

We may see the same pattern of thought – this paradigm of the two roads complementary but antithetical – preserved in the philosophical tradition used by Parmenides. In his fr.1 he frames his philosophical journey symbolically in terms of a journey through «gates of the passageways of Day and Night, πύλαι Νυκτός τε καὶ Ἡματός εἰσι κελεύθωv. This passage apparently gives access to two paths of enquiry described in fr. 2 as two antithetical roads, one of Seeming and one of Being³. These will be the paths followed by the philosophical as contrasted with the unphilosophical, in essence the same distinction as religious thought makes between the just or «saved» and the unjust or «damned.» An originally religious conception has here been transferred to the realm of philosophical thought, so that Parmenides' vision carries the suggestion that philosophy is a kind of spiritual salvation.

We seem to have here an ancient eschatological conception concerning special Gates that divide this world from the next; and there is good reason to believe that the most ancient conception of such gates imagined

² There seems to be a gap in Plato's (or rather, the myth's) logic here, since two of the four pathways go unused. The picture of four rather than the necessary two would seem to be due to a formal desire to bifurcate the already existing pattern of the double passage.

³ It is not apparent whether the initial duality of paths of Day and Night is meant to represent the same contrast that is more emphatically stated and philosophically critical in the second duality between paths of Being and of Seeming; i.e., whether Day turns into Being and Night into Seeming. Deciding this point, however, has no bearing on my argument.

them as marked by or consisting of a pair of horns⁴. The well-known importance of sacral horns in Minoan iconography and cult suggest at least a pre-Hellenic source for this image; but it may be still older, even Palaeolithic. In her classic study *The Gate of Horn*, Gertrude Levy notes the frequency, beginning in Old Stone Age cave carvings and continuing into Near Eastern and pre-Hellenic Minoan culture, of the image of the horns of a ram, bull, or bison – either a pair of horns or a single horn – which she and other scholars believe symbolize sources of creative energy. She connects these horns with the concept of the Horned Gate that links and separates Day and Night, Life and Death, Human and Divine⁵. It seems that an ancient conception, originally created to describe the passage from this life to the afterlife, was adaptable, by analogy, to other points of boundary or transition between the world of ordinary life and appearances and the world that lies beyond, a world invisible to ordinary vision and normally inaccessible, but offering either greater reality or the ultimate reality. Such analogical thinking allows a philosopher to apply this paradigm to describe the separation of the realm of true Being from that of mere Seeming. It also explains why Homer could picture the boundary point between the waking world and that of sleep in terms similar to that between the realms of the Living and the Dead. Homer's analogical thinking is based on the oft-stated kinship between Sleep and Death. In *Iliad* 14.231 and 16.682 they are called, respectively, brothers and twins, *kasignetoι* and *didumoi*. Hesiod in *Theog.* 212 states that Night, in immediate sequence, begets Death, Sleep and the tribe of Dreams, and in 756 calls Sleep the brother of Death, Ὕπνον ... κασίγνητον Θανάτοιο. In *Works and Days* 116 he gives a rationale explaining the resemblance that suggests this kinship: when the first race of mortals, the Golden Race, dies, «they died as if subdued by sleep», θνησκον δ' ὡς τ' ὕπνω δεδμημένοι.

⁴ The fullest argument that I know for this symbolism is that of H. L. Highbarger, *The Gates of Dreams: an Archaeological Examination of Vergil, Aeneid vi 893-9*, Baltimore, 1940. The author notes the frequent appearance of a Gate of Horns in the art (and so presumably in the religious thought) of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Crete, evidence which strongly supports our understanding the plural «horns» as what Homer intended. Much of his argument, however, is seriously flawed: e.g. his interpretation (p. 40) of the clouds of Olympus as «gates of ivory,» and his interpretation (pp. 33-6) of Penelope's dream as obviously coming from the gods and therefore (!) false. Useful observations about Gates of Horns in early Mediterranean and Near Eastern symbolism are also made by R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*, Cambridge, 1951, pp. 236-7.

⁵ G. R. Levy, *The Gate of Horn*, London, 1948, is an intense investigation of religious conceptions of Stone Age in Europe and the Near East. See esp. pp. 67, 101, 129, 131.

Thus Penelope, describing a passageway consisting of a horned gate between this world and that of dreams, is indeed alluding to traditional patterns of thought concerning what we might call «spiritual gateways» between the world in which we wake and live, and the world of the «beyond.» And she is also using traditional belief when she makes this passageway double. What is significant and in fact highly original in her formulation, is that she is combining two familiar paradigms into one: the Horned Gate and the Twofold Road become the Twofold Gates. What still needs to be explained is why it is essential for Penelope to have *two* gates; and why she describes the second gate as made of ivory.

Penelope needs a second, contrasting gate, because here she is giving the ancient paradigm a very particular inflection, bending it to suit her immediate psychological and strategic needs. These needs have to do with her position at this moment in the long-developing drama in which she has continually been balancing three desires: to stall the suitors, to wait for her husband's return, and to protect her son. Penelope's situation in book 19 and her personal psychology combine to require that she *not* immediately accept the beggar's validation of the dream's prophetic message, but do the opposite, that she warily back away and protect herself from the risk of disappointment. Thus, to answer question 3) asked above – Does Penelope really believe that her dream was false? – we might say «yes and no,» that Penelope's response to the dream is double, it exists simultaneously on two levels. The intuitive, more submerged part of her mind instantly recognizes the truth of the dream's prediction. Yet the self-conscious, self-protective part of her mind wants to «play it safe» and not accept it. For if she accepted the stranger's prediction of Odysseus' imminent return, that would require the kind of thoroughgoing transformation of her emotional state – what a psychologist would call «abandonment of her defenses» – for which she is not yet prepared. And so she (or rather, the poet who is fashioning the persona of «thoughtful Penelope») creatively adapts the traditional beliefs in the Two Passageways and the Horned Gate, combining them into a single new construct, the Two Gates of Dreams. Thus she can cleverly deny the convincing interpretation that the stranger has just offered of her dream, and allow herself to maintain her emotional defenses until a time when it will be safe to discard them⁶.

⁶ Such denial of what you really want to be true is a common psychological phenomenon, identified in the folk culture of many people by proverbial expressions. Cf. the Latin *absit omen*; and among modern cultures the much-used Yiddish phrase «keyn ahura» («no evil eye») and the attitude it conveys: «let there be no evil eye observing (which could take away my wish).»

But we still need to know why she chooses ivory as the material of the second gate, and why horn is associated with truth and ivory with falsehood or deception.

The American Homerist Anne Amory – much lamented for her early demise – devoted an essay to these questions, but did not arrive, in my judgement, at a plausible solution⁷. She associated horn with Odysseus and ivory with Penelope as very explicit symbols for each character's way of looking at reality: he steadily and directly and she obliquely and intermittently. There may be some truth in such a contrast, but it may have less to do with intrinsic character as with plot necessity (Odysseus deliberately keeping Penelope in the dark about this identity and plans) and the inevitable social restrictions placed upon women in the male-dominated heroic world⁸. There is no good reason for connecting the substances horn and ivory with this way of seeing or dealing with the world (moreover, such an association is less likely with the pl. «horns» than the sg. «horn.»). Homer's punning connection of *keraa*, «horns» with *kraino*, «accomplish,» and *elephas*, «ivory,» with *elephairomai*, «deceive,» is clever, and reinforces the antithesis between validity and deception; but it is likely to be a by-product of the already chosen terms *keraa* and *elephas*, and sheds no light on the reason for selecting these two substances in the first place. While there is no mention in the Hellenic «two passageways» tradition of any material substance of which the pathways are made, we have seen that horn or a pair of horns was already an ancient symbol associated with spiritual gates. Since the «two passages» tradition requires an antithetical element, and horn is already present, it is a small step for the Greek poetic imagination (possibly Homer's or one of his predecessors') to come up with ivory as a substance close enough to the material horn to serve as a «false twin» – a similar hard material that also grows from the head of an animal – but different enough in essentials to serve as an opposite. What gives the combination horn/ivory its power as an imaginative compounded sym-

I note that a similar understanding of Penelope's divided mind was expressed in simpler, non-psychological language by J. H. Finley, *Homer's Odyssey*, Cambridge, Mass. 1978, p. 184.: «though she doubts the beggar's prediction, she acts on it... It is her inspired compromise between doubt and hope.»

⁷ «The Gates of Horn and Ivory,» *Yale Classical Studies* 20 (1966) 3-57.

⁸ Here I follow the critique of Amory offered by S. Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey*, Princeton 1987, 138-9. I must disagree, however, with Murnaghan's judgement (138 with n.37) that my characterization (*American Journal of Philology* 103 (1982) 4-18) of Penelope as highly intuitive is complicit with the sexist tendency to see women as passive. In my article I in fact emphasize Penelope's boldness and willingness to risk her future in a «leap into the unknown.»

bol, I suggest, is precisely this unusual tension between pseudo-identity and significant opposition.

There is a complex basis for the mixture of similarity and opposition in the pairing of ivory and horn. Both are commonly used to make handles for knives, swords and other basic implements; but horn is practical while ivory is ornamental. Horn is common, hard, and inexpensive, while ivory is rare, soft, and costly. One may speculate further that horns came from animals whose existence was a reality to the early Greeks, whereas ivory represented an analogous «horn» from a beast in the realm of the fantastic, the elephant. This cluster of attributes and associations lends itself easily to a symbolic opposition where horn represents practicality, durability and reliability whereas ivory represents vanity, (mere) appearance, and transience.

Having dealt with questions 1) and 2) concerning the sources and significance of horn(s) and ivory, I would like to return to question 3): does Penelope really believe her own dismissal of the dream's obvious message? I believe that the interpretation suggested above – in essence, «yes and no» – offers one major advantage. It allows us to answer the perennially difficult question, Why does Penelope propose the bow-contest *now*; why is she willing to risk the loss of her independence and a «hated marriage» to one of the suitors at the very moment when she has been given increasing signs and promises that Odysseus' return is truly imminent? Note that her proposal of the bow contest follows *immediately* upon her denial of the dream's validity. It appears in the text almost as a non-sequitur: it is a sudden change to a new topic, introduced by the formula for acknowledging an abrupt transition, ἄλλο δέ τοι ἔρέω, σὺ δ' ἐνὶ φρεσὶ βάλλεο σῆσι. Yet this proposal of a bow-contest must be closely connected to the discussion of the dream and the effect of that discussion upon Penelope. If we can divide Penelope's mind (like all human minds) into a calculating part and an intuitive part, we understand how her response to the stranger's affirmation of the dream-message can be both «no» and «yes.» It is the intuitive part that has understood the dream's obvious truth, and her sudden decision to set up the contest tomorrow shows that the initial «no» of the cautious, calculating mind is now yielding to the underlying «yes» of her deeper, more intuitive understanding.

To sum up: I believe that Penelope immediately understands intuitively that the stranger is right and her dream was clearly prophetic; but the more calculating and cautious part of her mind, the rational part in control of the deliberate, strategic decisions that have continually characterized⁹ her embattled position vis-à-vis the suitors, says «no,» the

⁹ Hence her characteristic traditional epithet περίφρων – if indeed it does mean «prudent» or «careful,» as most often translated. Much as this meaning would

risk of acceptance is too high, it would make her vulnerable to painful disappointment still one more time. (Note that in 14.124ff. Eumaios refers to the queen having been deceived several times by visitors who raised false hopes; and Penelope's own fears about deception by a god disguised as a mortal expressed vividly at 23.215-7). Thus to explain her rejection of the obvious, Penelope fabricates a hybrid image of twin gates of dreams made of contrasting substances, which allows her to place this dream in the category of the illusory. Yet her deeper belief in the prophecy's likely truth prompts her to propose the bow contest for tomorrow. In so doing, she permits intuition to prevail over reasoned caution, and this is Penelope's true wisdom.

suit the actions I am describing, I must admit I find the translation «surpassing in intelligence» equally plausible. This can be argued not only linguistically (*peri*=«over, beyond») but perhaps from the language Penelope uses to characterize herself speaking to her disguised husband at *Od.* 19. 325ff: «How will you know, stranger, how I surpass all women in planning and wise intelligence...?» The language of verse 326 may indeed suggest that Penelope is indulging in a paraphrase of her own epithet *periphron*: ἀλλάων περίειμι νόον καὶ ἐπίφρονα μῆτιν. Not only does this make an excellent gloss on *periphron*, it does so by ingeniously re-distributing its etyma among *perieimi* and *epiphrona*!