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Winter 2016

### Mourning Lions and Penelope's Revenge

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#### Repository Citation

Pache, C. (2016). Mourning lions and Penelope's revenge. *Arethusa*, 49(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2016.0003>

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## Mourning Lions And Penelope's Revenge

Corinne Pache

### Abstract:

This article examines the simile that compares Penelope to a lion in *Odyssey* 4.791-794. Because of its perceived incongruity, the simile has often been passed over even by scholars who study lion similes in Homer. Looking sideways to Iliadic lions and backwards to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, I argue that the simile of *Odyssey* 4 plays a central role in the narrative. Penelope the lion evokes war and its consequences and suggests a kind of mourning that gives rise to the thirst for revenge, which, within the context of the *Odyssey*, creates the impetus for Odysseus' *nostos* and Penelope's revenge.

## Mourning Lions And Penelope's Revenge<sup>1</sup>

Corinne Pache

This paper focuses on the simile comparing Penelope to a lion encircled by men in *Odyssey* 4.791-794. Lion similes in Homeric poetry typically depict warriors in combat situations, and so the description of Penelope as a trapped predator facing battle is surprising. The encircled beast of the simile is in a dangerous situation, but the lion's plight is left unresolved as Penelope falls asleep. Many critics have noted the connection between Penelope the lion and Odysseus, who is compared to the same animal on five occasions in the poem, most notably twice after he slaughters the suitors in Books 22 and 23. Yet most have dismissed the simile concerning Penelope as atypical, or, as Stephanie West summarizes its scholarly reception in her commentary on *Odyssey* 1-4, "inept."<sup>2</sup> While the lion simile plays an important part in connecting Penelope with Odysseus and the theme of revenge, its significance extends past this basic function. Looking backward to the epic of *Gilgamesh* and sideways to Iliadic lions, I argue that the lion simile of *Odyssey* 4 simultaneously evokes war and its consequences by suggesting a kind of mourning that gives rise to wrathfulness and the thirst for revenge, which, within the context of the *Odyssey*, creates the impetus for return.

Penelope is compared to a lion just after she learns of the suitors' plot to ambush and kill Telemachos. Overcome by fear for her son's life, she stops eating and drinking, "pondering" alternative outcomes:

ἢ δ' ὑπερωϊῶ αὖθι περίφρων Πηνελόπεια

κεῖτ' ἄρ' ἄσιτος, ἄπαστος ἐδητύος ἠδὲ ποτῆτος,  
ὀρμαίνουσι, ἢ οἱ θάνατον φύγοι υἱὸς ἀμύμων,  
ἢ ὃ γ' ὑπὸ μνηστῆρσιν ὑπερφιάλοισι δαμείη.  
ὅσσα δὲ μερμήριξε λέων ἀνδρῶν ἐν ὀμίλῳ  
δείσας, ὁππότε μιν δόλιον περὶ κύκλον ἄγωσι,  
τόσσα μιν ὀρμαίνουσιν ἐπήλυθε νήδυμος ὕπνος·  
εὔδε δ' ἀνακλινθεῖσα, λύθεν δέ οἱ ἄψευα πάντα.

But she in the upper chamber, circumspect Penelope,  
lay there fasting, she had tasted no food nor drink, only  
pondering whether her stately son would escape from dying  
or have to go down under the hands of the insolent suitors;  
and as much as a lion caught in a crowd of men turns about  
in fear, when they have made a treacherous circle about him,  
so she was pondering, when the painless sleep came upon her  
and all her joints were relaxed so that she slept there reclining.

Hom. *Od.* 4.787-794<sup>3</sup>

Many aspects of the simile are striking, including the incongruence of a sleepy Penelope likened to a trapped predator, which may partly explain why it has generally been passed over even by scholars writing on lion similes in Homeric poetry. What scholarly attention the Odyssean lion similes have received has tended to disparage them through invidious comparison to those of the *Iliad*. Schnapp-Gourbeillon, for instance, claims that the lion comparisons in the *Odyssey* are

“abnormal in comparison to the Iliadic paradigm,” and represent “the final dying off of a once flourishing theme, accompanied by a substantial decline of its ideological significance” (1981.59 and 62).<sup>4</sup> In this assessment she agrees with Fränkel (1921.69-70), who already saw the difference between the lion similes in the two Homeric poems as a reflection of the decline of the theme from the epic lion of the *Iliad* to the degenerate lions of the *Odyssey*.

Where Fränkel and Schnapp-Gourbeillon see the withering of a once flourishing literary motif, others, myself included, observe the workings of an oral tradition that deliberately uses similes in different ways in the two poems. Scott (1974.122-123) and Moulton (1977.140-141), for example, emphasize the *Odyssey*'s tendency to use similes as a way of punctuating the narrative, and they both understand the lion similes describing Odysseus as a thematic sequence that foreshadows and leads to the hero's vengeance on the suitors. Magrath sees another progression in the lion imagery that portrays Odysseus as “the hero both of harmony and of violence,” “the complete Greek hero because he represents in his character simultaneously beauty (*kosmos*) and the beast” (1982.212). In another essay focusing on the intertextual connections between the lion similes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Donna Wilson (2002) beautifully analyzes the ways in which lion similes portray the two poems' respective heroes as mirror images of one another.

Yet even in close analyses of the role of the seven lion similes of the *Odyssey*, Penelope the lion often remains an afterthought, and the simile at the end of *Odyssey* 4 is usually interpreted in one of two ways. Either it is subsumed to the larger thematic function of the lion similes describing Odysseus, which culminates in his vengeful stance among the corpses of the suitors “spattered over with gore and battle filth, like a lion” (*Od.* 22.402 and 23.48). For Magrath (1982.207), for

example, Penelope the lion is simply “the passive mate for Odysseus as the active lion.” Saïd (2012.365-366) agrees with Magrath and similarly sees the lion simile describing Penelope as reflecting “the opposition between a passive female heroism and a male active heroism.” Or the simile is dismissed as being atypical and out of place, and therefore in need of no further explanation. Wilson mentions only briefly the passage from *Odyssey* 4 in a footnote, as a way of setting it aside as irrelevant to her discussion of lions in Homeric epic.<sup>5</sup>

The simile of Penelope the lion has thus received relatively little attention. While its undeniable oddness has often been invoked as a reason for dismissing it, the simile’s very strangeness is itself a justification for further investigation. As Leonard Mueller has observed, because similes are “traditional and conventional, they can rely upon a tacit conspiracy of meaning between poet and audience” (1990.92). Some scholars differentiate between short and “extended” similes and argue that extended similes represent a later development (e.g. Shipp 1972). But because both short and long similes result from the same composition process, I make no distinction of kind between shorter and “extended” Homeric similes. While the longer similes offer “greater explicitness” about the relationship between the simile and the narrative (Minchin 2001.38-42), both short and long similes can be thought of as “condensed” because they can omit—to a greater or smaller degree—traditional elements that would have been obvious to the the singer and his audience steeped in the traditional language of epic (Mueller 1990.66). Like Mueller and others, I understand Homeric epic to be a traditional form of poetry that was composed and transmitted orally and the simile to be a central and traditional component of this medium that must be understood in terms of their connections with other Homeric similes and Homeric poetry as a whole (Mueller 1990 and Dué 2010).

Since their implicit meaning may not be as immediately accessible to us as to the poem's ancient audience, this very conventionality can become an obstacle to our interpretation of similes. In the case of Penelope the lion, both the familiarity of the Iliadic predator and the incongruity of the juxtaposition of this martial image with a woman in her bedroom make it difficult for us to recognize the "tacit conspiracy of meaning" at play here. To make sense of the comparison of Penelope to a lion, we need to consider the simile's immediate context in *Odyssey* 4 and the narrative of the *Odyssey*, and more broadly lion similes in Homeric epic.

In the immediate context of *Odyssey* 4, the simile is in some ways strikingly apt. Penelope's circumstances are in fact analogous to the lion's situation since she is metaphorically surrounded by the suitors. As Foley (1978.10) notes, the lion simile, which is "typically reserved for heroic men," depicts Penelope as coming close "to reenacting the role of a besieged warrior." Because the reverse similes of the *Odyssey* often bring together the disparate experiences of men and women in the *Odyssey*, the lion of *Odyssey* 4 also bring to mind the plights of Telemachos and Odysseus:<sup>6</sup> Penelope fears for Telemachos who is threatened by the suitors' plot to ambush and kill him; and, by extension, the trapped lion also evokes Penelope's hope that her husband is not dead, but attempting to find his way home to Ithaka.

Many have connected the lion simile at the end of Book 4 to the first extended simile in the *Odyssey*, earlier in the same book, where Menelaos imagines Odysseus' eventual return home:

ὦ πόποι, ἦ μάλα δὴ κρατερόφρονος ἀνδρὸς ἐν εὐνῇ

ἤθελον εὐνηθῆναι ἀνάλκιδες αὐτοὶ ἔόντες,  
ὡς δ' ὀπότη' ἐν ξυλόχῳ ἔλαφος κρατεροῖο λέοντος  
νεβροὺς κοιμήσασα νεηγενέας γαλαθηνούς  
κνημοὺς ἐξερέησι καὶ ἄγκεα ποιήεντα  
βοσκομένη, ὃ δ' ἔπειτα ἐὴν εἰσήλυθεν εὐνήν,  
ἀμφοτέροισι δὲ τοῖσιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐφῆκεν,  
ὡς Ὀδυσσεὺς κείνοισιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐφήσει.

“Oh, for shame, it was in the bed of a bold and strong man  
they wished to lie, they themselves being all unwarlike.

As when a doe has brought her fawns to the lair of a lion  
and put them there to sleep, they are newborn and still suckling,  
then wanders out into the foothills and the grassy corners,  
grazing there, but now the lion comes back to his own lair  
and visits a shameful destruction on both mother and children.

So Odysseus will visit shameful destruction on these men.”

Hom. *Od.* 4.333-340 (= 17.124-131)

In Menelaos' simile, the figure of the maternal doe plays a strange part. The image of a mother and her offspring could evoke Penelope and Telemachos, but the lion indiscriminately kills both mother and children. This passage is problematic for scholars who want to claim that similes reflect the poet's own observations of the natural world:<sup>7</sup> deer have a keen sense of scent that keeps them away from any territory inhabited by lions, and it is difficult to imagine any reason



for a doe to place her young in the lair of a predator. What realistic aspects the similes may have are the result not of their source in daily life, whether through direct observation or “hearsay,” but a reflection of the similes’ nature as “a transformation of traditional lore that has, over time, developed into a coherent, generative, poetic system with formal aspects that are typical of folklore genre” (Muellner 1990.73).<sup>8</sup> This is, in fact, a large part of what makes Homeric similes so interesting and worth thinking about.

The poet is not interested in documenting animal behavior but uses this generative poetic system to highlight and develop themes. As others have noted, the simile closely resembles an Iliadic simile comparing Agamemnon pursuing two Trojans to a lion invading the lair of a doe and devouring its offspring (*Il.* 11.113-121). But whereas the Iliadic simile emphasizes the savageness of the lion and the doe’s “ghastly shivers of fear” (*tromos ainos*, *Il.* 11.117), the Odyssean comparison firmly puts the blame on the doe who puts her offspring into the lion’s bed.<sup>9</sup> The scent-challenged doe may thus be an appropriate stand-in for the clueless suitors who thoughtlessly install themselves in Odysseus’ house. Yet there is some ambivalence to Menelaos’ likening of the lion’s killing the deer and Odysseus’ killing of the suitors as “shameful” or “unseemly destruction” (*aeikea potmon*). While the *Iliad* routinely describes warriors inflicting “unseemly” destruction on their lesser adversaries, the *Odyssey* always uses *aeikea potmon* to describe the death of the suitors, with one exception at 2.250 where the suitor Leokritos imagines the “unseemly destiny” of Odysseus if he were to come back and fight against the suitors (see Saïd 2012.103). The word does not seem to imply moral judgment in the *Iliad* (see Richardson 1993.147), but the *Odyssey* often uses the adjective to describe behavior the poem clearly condemns: adultery, and planning or committing murder.<sup>10</sup> While Menelaos

clearly sees Odysseus' vengeance in a positive light, the negative use of *aeikês* elsewhere in the *Odyssey* point to another possible interpretation of the killing of the suitors as a brutal act brought upon helpless creatures.<sup>11</sup>

When the narrator compares Penelope to a lion later in Book 4, the audience must recall Menelaos' description and thus the leonine Odysseus and Penelope are placed in a dialogue with each other. And, as we will see below, Odysseus is in addition compared to a lion in three other similes, culminating in the simile of Book 22, which describes Eurykleia finding him covered with blood, standing among the suitors like a lion, "a terrible thing to look in the face" (*Od.* 22.405, repeated at 23.48). The proximity of the lion similes concerning Odysseus and Penelope in Book 4 emphasizes at the outset the resemblance of husband and wife and the connection they share even as they are physically apart. As Odysseus says to Nausikaa, a good marriage is one in which husband and wife think alike (*homophroneonte*, *Od.* 6.183); if Odysseus is like a lion, so is Penelope.<sup>12</sup> The connection between Penelope the lion and her lion-like husband is also made stronger by Penelope's own description of her husband twice in Book 4 as "lion-hearted" (*thumoleonta*).<sup>13</sup> It is thus clear that the simile of Penelope as a lion associates her to the theme of Odysseus' vengeance, but there is something more to the trapped predator at the end of *Odyssey* 4 and Penelope's role is not simply that of "the passive mate" to Odysseus' lion.

Despite the connection established by the simile between Odysseus and Penelope, there is something unique about the fearful lion of *Odyssey* 4 and its predicament. The emotion of fear and two verbs describing mental processes connect Penelope and the lion, and fear, *deisas*, leads to pondering, *mermêrixê*. When Lattimore translates the verb *mermêrizô* as "turn about," he

transforms a mental activity into a physical one. While *hormainô*, which describes Penelope in the frame of the simile, can have a physical connotation, *mermêrizô* in Homer is never used to describe physical movement, and so the verb used here to describe the lion explicitly refers to a mental process. As an intransitive verb, *mermêrizô* means “to be full of cares, to be anxious or thoughtful, to be in doubt.” As a transitive verb, it can also mean “to devise, contrive,” and in the *Odyssey* *mermêrizô* is typically paired with objects such as *phonos* or *dolos*.<sup>14</sup> The suitors accuse Telemachos of devising for them the same fate they are in fact planning for him (*phonos*, 2.325), while Aigisthos devises “shameful thoughts” (*aeikea*, 4.533) as he plans Agamemnon’s murder, and Odysseus ponders killing the suitors (*phonos*, 19.52). The verb has thus a strong association with murder and ambush in the *Odyssey*, and it perhaps also evokes the Iliadic phrase *mermera erga*, “grim deeds,” used to describe combat, and more specifically the kind of fighting in which one individual overcomes many, either in conventional battle or after being ambushed.<sup>15</sup>

In Book 2 Antinoos describes Penelope devising the *dolos* of the loom:

ἡ δὲ δόλον τόνδ' ἄλλον ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μερμήριξε·  
στησαμένη μέγαν ἰστὸν ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ὕφαινε,  
λεπτὸν καὶ περίμετρον·

And here is another stratagem of her heart’s devising.

She set up a great loom in her palace, and set to weaving  
a web of threads long and fine.

Hom. *Od.* 2.93-95

The juxtaposition at the end of subsequent lines of *mermêrizô* with *huphainô* stresses the link between Penelope's mind and her deceitful weaving. The connection between *mermêrizô* and *dolos* in Antinoos' description of the trick of the web also alerts us to the contrast between Penelope's cunning and the suitors' lack of understanding of *dolos*. The *dolion kuklon* which the men make around the lion thus brings to mind the suitors' plan to ambush Telemachos (4.670), but the use of *mermêrizô* to describe the mental activity of the lion also reminds us that Penelope is a master of deceit, especially in situations where she seems helpless to others, while the suitors are typically not very good at either detecting or performing deception. The treacherous circle made by the men in the simile may be about to ensnare them rather than the lion.

In Book 16, when Telemachos explains to Eumaios why he cannot properly welcome the beggar in the palace, he describes Penelope with the same verb:

μητρὶ δ' ἐμῆ δίχα θυμὸς ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μερμηρίζει,  
ἢ αὐτοῦ παρ' ἐμοί τε μένη καὶ δῶμα κομίζη,  
εὐνήν τ' αἰδομένη πόσιος δήμοιό τε φῆμιν,  
ἧ ἤδη ἄμ' ἔπεται, Ἀχαιῶν ὅς τις ἄριστος  
μνᾶται ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ἀνὴρ καὶ πλεῖστα πόρησιν.

and my mother's heart is divided in her, and ponders two ways,  
whether to remain here with me, and look after the household,  
keep faith with her husband's bed, and regard the voice of the people,

or go away at last with the best man of the Achaians

who pays her court in her palace, and brings her the most presents.

Hom. *Od.* 16.73-77

Whether the verb refers to hesitation or deception, it always implies a kind of doubleness and division of possible outcomes.<sup>16</sup> Penelope herself reveals, when she talks to the beggar, how her mind has been divided between staying faithful to Odysseus and getting remarried:

ὥς καὶ ἐμοὶ δίχα θυμὸς ὀρώρεται ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα

so my mind is divided and starts one way, then another.

Hom. *Od.* 19.524

Penelope's language echoes Telemachos' (*dicha thumos*) and the verb (*ornumi*) used here connects her back to the lion of the simile in Book 4.<sup>17</sup> In Telemachos' formulation and elsewhere in the *Odyssey* pondering precedes decision and action, and *mermêrizô* entails contrasting outcomes. Achilles also famously "ponders" whether to kill Agamemnon or check his anger (*Il.* 1.189). The lion of *Odyssey* 4 is thus poised at the moment just before choosing a course of action that can lead to two possible opposite outcomes: his survival or death. This readiness to face adversaries, ready to kill or being killed, also connects Penelope with Achilles, who is compared to a wounded lion attacking hunters as he faces Aineias in *Iliad* 20, about which I will have more to say below.

To fully understand the meaning of Penelope the lion we need to take into consideration not only the language of the comparison itself, but also its placement in the context of the poem as a whole and the simile's function as a transition between different components of the narrative. It is striking and significant that Penelope the lion is the first extended simile in the *Odyssey* made in the narrator's voice. Such similes help structure the poem and belong to a different poetic register. Richard Martin, using a comparative approach, argues that similes develop out of lyric traditions and play a vital function in both marking emotional peaks and important transitions by drawing attention to the beginning or end of an action (Martin 1997.146).<sup>18</sup> Similes can mark transitions either by slowing them down or speeding them up. But while similes often function as transitions, they do so in a different way in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In a study comparing the similes in the two poems Lee suggests that similes in the *Iliad* function "like red lights, holding one up between one point of the narrative and the next," while in the *Odyssey* the narrative passes "through" similes "as through green lights" (his emphasis, 1964.10). As the first simile spoken by the narrator of the poem, Penelope the lion thus provides the first extended transition, and the first green light, of the *Odyssey*.

Three lion similes are made by the narrator: besides the passage describing Penelope in *Odyssey* 4, Odysseus is compared to a lion during his encounter with Nausikaa (6.127-137), and finally again in *Odyssey* 22 standing among the dead suitors (22.401-406, with 22.402=23.48), two important turning points in the narrative.<sup>19</sup> Four other lion similes are made by characters in speeches: by Menelaos, discussed above, subsequently quoted by Telemachos (4.333-340 = 17.124-131); by Odysseus comparing Polyphemos eating his men to a lion (9.292-293); and by Eurykleia describing Odysseus after the slaughter of the suitors (23.48=22.402).

While both characters and the narrator use lion similes, they differ in their emphasis.<sup>20</sup>

Characters such as Menelaos, Telemachos, and Eurykleia typically have a more limited understanding of the simile and present the lion as an unproblematic figure of revenge. Odysseus himself uses a lion simile to describe Polyphemos's violent nature: the cyclops is "like a lion reared in the hills" who eats flesh, entrails and bones without discrimination (11.292-3). When the narrator compares characters to lions, the focus is on the lion as a figure of ambiguity.

A case in point is the narrator's lion simile describing Odysseus just as he is about to meet Nausikaa:

βῆ δ' ἴμεν ὥς τε λέων ὄρεσίτροφος ἀλκι πεποιθώς,  
ὅς τ' εἶς ὑόμενος καὶ ἀήμενος, ἐν δέ οἱ ὄσσε  
δαίεται· αὐτὰρ ὁ βουσι μετέρχεται ἢ οἴεσσιν  
ἠὲ μετ' ἀγροτέρας ἐλάφους· κέλεται δέ ἐ γαστήρ  
μήλων πειρήσοντα καὶ ἐς πυκινὸν δόμον ἐλθεῖν·

and went in the confidence of his strength, like some hill-kept lion,  
who advances, though he is rained on and blown by the wind, and both eyes  
kindle; he goes out after cattle or sheep, or it may be  
deer in the wilderness, and his belly is urgent upon him  
to get inside of a close steading and go for the sheepflocks.

Homer, *Odyssey* 6.130-134

Fränkel saw the rain-drenched lion urged on by his belly as a symbol of the decadence of the motif in the *Odyssey* (1921.70), but the complexity of this simile has been well teased out by readers more open to its ambiguities. Combining martial and erotic imagery, the lion simile in *Odyssey* 6 presents Odysseus as both potential aggressor and victim: instead of the brave Iliadic lion who follows his *thumos* in order to find food, we find a ragged beast who follows his stomach; Odysseus' nakedness, his flaming eyes, and the use of the verb *mixesthai* all have erotic undertones. The simile thus parodies the formula *keletai de he thumos* that describe Iliadic lions, and pokes fun at Odysseus' predicament by drawing attention to the hero's paradoxical vulnerability. But while the simile is in the narrator's voice, it is also partially focalized by Nausikaa, for whom Odysseus the lion is a source of terror (*smerdaleos*, 6.137), a ravenous creature keen to satiate his appetite who might inflict sexual violence on her and her companions.<sup>21</sup> As Friedrich notes, the simile also occurs at a key turning point in the narrative, which "marks the end of the hero's wanderings—the final escape from a non-human world (Friedrich 1981.132)."

The third lion simile in the narrator's voice occurs when Eurykleia finds Odysseus among the dead suitors:

εὔρεν ἔπειτ' Ὀδυσῆα μετὰ κταμένοισι νέκυσσι  
αἵματι καὶ λύθρῳ πεπαλαγμένον ὥς τε λέοντα,  
ὃς ῥά τε βεβρωκῶς βοῶς ἔρχεται ἀγραύλοιο·  
πᾶν δ' ἄρα οἱ στήθος τε παρήϊά τ' ἀμφοτέρωθεν



αἱματόεντα πέλει, δεινὸς δ' εἰς ὄψα ιδέσθαι·

There she found Odysseus among the slaughtered dead men,  
spattered over with gore and battle filth, like a lion  
who has been feeding on an ox of the fields, and goes off  
covered with blood, all his chest and his flanks on either  
side bloody, a terrible thing to look in the face;  
Homer, *Odyssey* 22.401-405 (22.402 = 23.48)

Here we find the narrator's typical ambiguity in describing lions blended with Eurykleia's focalization (as is made clear at 23.45-48). Odysseus is "spattered with gore and battle filth," a war image (cf. *Iliad* 6.268 when Hektor comes back from the battlefield) that does not quite fit the domestic context. Similarly, the asymmetry between the lion and the tame ox recalls Menelaos' simile of the lion and the doe and puts into question the nature of Odysseus' victory and victims. The lion simile also marks another key turning point in Odysseus' homecoming.<sup>22</sup> Yet Odysseus' return cannot be fulfilled without his wife, and the last lion simile of the *Odyssey*, spoken by Eurykleia, reenacts the scene just discussed for Penelope:

εὖρον ἔπειτ' Ὀδυσῆα μετὰ κταμένοισι νέκυσιν  
ἔσταόθ'· οἱ δέ μιν ἀμφί, κραταίπεδον οὐδας ἔχοντες,  
κεῖατ' ἐπ' ἀλλήλοισιν· ἰδοῦσά κε θυμὸν ἰάνθης  
αἵματι καὶ λύθρῳ πεπαλαγμένον ὥς τε λέοντα.

There I found Odysseus standing among the dead men  
he had killed, and they covered the hardened earth, lying  
piled on each other around him. You would have been cheered to see him,  
spattered over with gore and battle filth, like a lion.

Homer, *Odyssey* 23.45-48

This version only includes the beginning of the comparison. Gone is the tame victim of the lion, and only signs of martial victory remain. But Eurykleia is wrong in her prediction of Penelope's reaction. She expects that Penelope, if she could have seen Odysseus bloodied by battle, would have cheered and melted in her heart (ἰδοῦσά κε θυμὸν ἰάνθης, 47). But, far from rejoicing, Penelope refuses to believe Eurykleia's assertion or to recognize Odysseus, and only acknowledges her husband's return after he washes the gore off and they exchange their own private signs. For Eurykleia, as for Menelaos and Telemachos, the figure of the lion is an instrument of revenge and justice. But for the narrator of the *Odyssey*, the lion is a more complicated figure whose force is by nature ambiguous, and so too Penelope the lion has to be understood as a potential figure of violence.

Before examining further the function of the lion simile describing Penelope in *Odyssey* 4, it is necessary to further explore its thematic connections with other lion similes in Homeric poetry. When we look to the trapped and surrounded lions describing warriors in the *Iliad*, we find two typical outcomes: the lion either withdraws, reluctantly, or stays and fights, ready to die. Lion similes foreshadow the deaths of Patroklos and Hektor, who are both likened to lions about to be

destroyed by their own courage.<sup>23</sup> At the beginning of *Iliad* 20, Achilles is compared to a hunted lion whose predicament recalls that of Penelope in *Odyssey* 4:

Πηλεΐδης δ' ἐτέρωθεν ἐναντίον ὄρτο λέων ὧς  
σίντης, ὄν τε καὶ ἄνδρες ἀποκτάμεναι μεμάσιν  
ἀγρόμενοι πᾶς δῆμος· ὃ δὲ πρῶτον μὲν ἀτίζων  
ἔρχεται, ἀλλ' ὅτε κέν τις ἀρηϊθῶν αἰζηῶν  
δουρὶ βάλῃ ἐάλῃ τε χανῶν, περὶ τ' ἀφρὸς ὀδόντας  
γίγνεται, ἐν δέ τέ οἱ κραδίη στένει ἄλκιμον ἦτορ,  
οὐρῇ δὲ πλευράς τε καὶ ἰσχία ἀμφοτέρωθεν  
μαστίεται, ἐὲ δ' αὐτὸν ἐποτρύνει μαχέσασθαι,  
γλαυκιδῶν δ' ἰθὺς φέρεται μένει, ἦν τινα πέφνη  
ἀνδρῶν, ἢ αὐτὸς φθίεται πρώτῳ ἐν ὀμίλῳ·  
ὧς Ἀχιλῆϊ ὄτρυνε μένος καὶ θυμὸς ἀγήνωρ  
ἀντίον ἐλθέμεναι μεγαλήτορος Αἰνεΐαο.

From the other

side the son of Peleus rose like a lion against him,  
the baleful beast, when men have been straining to kill him, the county  
all in the hunt, and he at the first pays them no attention  
but goes his way, only when some of the impetuous young men  
has hit him with the spear he whirls, jaws open, over his teeth foam  
breaks out, and in the depth of his chest the powerful heart groans;

he lashes his own ribs with his tail and the flanks on both sides  
as he rouses himself to fury for the fight, eyes glaring,  
and hurls himself straight onward on the chance of killing some one  
of the men, or else being killed himself in the first onrush.  
So the proud heart and fighting fury stirred on Achilleus  
to go forward in the face of great-hearted Aineias.

Hom. *Il.* 20.164-75

In encounters between men and beasts, nothing is more dangerous for men than a surrounded lion who decides, heedless of all consequences, to face his opponents. Aineias emerges alive from this confrontation with Achilleus only because of the divine intervention of Poseidon (*Il.* 20.164-75).

Lion similes thus connect Penelope and Achilleus as cornered, yet unpredictable and potentially lethal lions. The other point of connection between Penelope and Achilleus is that they are both described as trapped lions as a direct consequence of mourning.<sup>24</sup> And in both cases, the embattled lion simile is preceded by a lament. In the *Iliad*, the lament and the embattled lion simile are separated by several hundred lines, but the image of the lion connects the two scenes:

τοῖσι δὲ Πηλεΐδης ἀδινού̃ ἐξῆρχε γόοιο  
χεῖρας ἐπ' ἀνδροφόνους θέμενος στήθεσσιν ἑταίρου  
πυκνὰ μάλα στενάχων ὥς τε λῖς ἠϋγένειος,  
ὧ̃ ρά θ' ὑπὸ σκύμνους ἐλαφηβόλος ἀρπάσῃ ἀνήρ

ὔλης ἐκ πυκινῆς· ὃ δέ τ' ἄγνυται ὕστερος ἐλθών,  
πολλὰ δέ τ' ἄγκε ἐπῆλθε μετ' ἀνέρος ἵχνι' ἐρευνῶν  
εἶ ποθεν ἐξεύροι· μάλα γὰρ δριμύς χόλος αἰρεῖ·

Peleus' son led the thronging chant of their lamentation,  
and laid his manslaughtering hands over the chest of his dear friend  
with outbursts of incessant grief. As some great bearded lion  
when some man, a deer hunter, has stolen his cubs away from him  
out of the close wood; the lion comes back too late, and is anguished  
and turns into many valleys quartering after the man's trail  
on the chance of finding him, and taken with bitter anger;

Hom. *Il.* 18.316-322

The simile elaborating on Achilles' grief points to his subsequent return to battle to avenge his friend's death. Mourning thus lead to revenge. While the simile of Penelope the lion at the end of *Odyssey* 4 does not explicitly include mourning, the context in which the simile is used makes the connection clear. Penelope is compared to a lion at the end of an extended section describing her lamenting her lost husband and soon after Medon tells her that Telemachos has left Ithaka. The section begins with a description of Penelope's speechlessness and tears:

δὴν δέ μιν ἀφασίη ἐπέων λάβε, τὼ δέ οἱ ὄσσε  
δακρυόφιν πλῆσθεν, θαλερὴ δέ οἱ ἔσχετο φωνή.  
ὄψε δὲ δὴ μιν ἔπεσιν ἀμειβομένη προσέειπε·

“κῆρυξ, τίπτε δέ μοι πάϊς οἴχεται; οὐδέ τί μιν χρεῶ  
νηῶν ὠκυπόρων ἐπιβαινέμεν, αἶ θ' ἀλὸς ἵπποι  
ἀνδράσι γίνονται, περόωσι δὲ πουλὺν ἐφ' ὑγρήν.  
ἦ ἴνα μηδ' ὄνομ' αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀνθρώποισι λίπηται;”

She stayed a long time without a word, speechless, and her eyes  
filled with tears, the springing voice was held still within her.

At long last she found words to speak to him and answer:

“Herald, why is my child gone from me? There was no reason  
for him to board fast-running ships, which serve as horses  
for men on the salt sea, and they cross the expanses of water.

Must it be so that even his name shall be gone from men’s minds?”

Hom. *Od.* 4.704-710

After the herald Medon leaves the house, the mourning extends to Penelope’s maids who  
respond to their mistress’ sorrow with tears of their own:

τὴν δ' ἄχος ἀμφεχύθη θυμοφόρον, οὐδ' ἄρ' ἔτ' ἔτλη  
δίφρω ἐφέζεσθαι πολλῶν κατὰ οἶκον ἐόντων,  
ἀλλ' ἄρ' ἐπ' οὐδοῦ ἴζε πολυκμήτου θαλάμοιο  
οἴκτρ' ὀλοφυρομένη· περὶ δὲ δμῶαί μινύριζον  
πᾶσαι, ὅσαι κατὰ δώματ' ἔσαν νέαι ἠδὲ παλαιαί.  
τῆς δ' ἀδινὸν γοῶσα μετηύδα Πηνελόπεια·

“κλῦτε, φίλαι· περὶ γάρ μοι Ὀλύμπιος ἄλγε' ἔδωκεν  
ἐκ πασέων, ὅσσαι μοι ὁμοῦ τράφον ἠδ' ἐγένοντο,  
ἢ πρὶν μὲν πόσιν ἐσθλὸν ἀπώλεσα θυμολέοντα,  
παντοίησ' ἀρετῆσι κεκασμένον ἐν Δαναοῖσιν,  
ἐσθλόν, τοῦ κλέος εὐρὺ καθ' Ἑλλάδα καὶ μέσον Ἄργος.  
νῦν αὖ παῖδ' ἀγαπητὸν ἀνηρέψαντο θύελλαι  
ἀκλέα ἐκ μεγάρων, οὐδ' ὀρμηθέντος ἄκουσα.

a cloud of heart-wasting sorrow was on her, she had no strength left  
to sit down in a chair, though there were many there in the palace,  
but sat down on the floor of her own well-wrought bedchamber  
weeping pitifully, and about her her maids were wailing  
all, who were there in the house with her, both young and old ones.

To them weeping constantly Penelope spoke now:

‘Hear me, dear friends. The Olympian has given me sorrows  
beyond all others who were born and brought up together  
with me, for first I lost a husband with the heart of a lion  
and who among the Danaans surpassed in all virtues,  
and great, whose fame goes wide through Hellas and midmost Argos;  
and now again the stormwinds have caught away my beloved  
son, without trace, from the halls, and I never heard when he left me.

Hom. *Od.* 4.716-728

For Penelope, the fates of her absent son and husband are entangled in the same web of loss. She performs a lament (*gooôsa*) for both, and follows her song of mourning with a prayer to Athena to protect her son, to which the goddess listens. The scene switches briefly to the suitors laying their ambush for Telemachos, only to return to Penelope fasting in her bedroom, just before she is likened to a lion. At line 4.680, Medon crossed over the threshold that marks the separation between the public space occupied by the suitors from the private room occupied by Penelope and her female attendants. When Penelope sits on the threshold (*ep' oudou*, 4.718), she adopts a ritual position and places herself in between the two realms, highlighting her vulnerability to the suitors, and by extension her mortality, just as she her lament for her husband and son.<sup>25</sup>

Penelope's abstention from food and drink is another point of connection with Achilles and the theme of mourning. The hero famously refuses the food and drink urged on him by Odysseus in *Iliad* 19.213-214. Fasting is of course a typical aspect of mourning ritual, the first step of a long process that culminates, after burial, in the funeral feast.<sup>26</sup> While the lion of the simile is not explicitly grieving in the *Odyssey*, the proximity of Penelope's lament and the connection with Achilles the mournful lion deprived of his cubs, together point to the lion as a figure associated with loss and mourning.

The connection of lions to not merely the violent death they might experience or bring about, but also to the mourning that occurs in the aftermath of that act, is clearly established on the basis of the passage in *Iliad* 18. That a traditional poetic connection between lion similes and lament exists is also attested as early as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*:



But, as for him, he did not raise his head.  
He touched his heart but it was not beating.  
Then he covered his friend's face, like a bride's.  
He hovered round him like an eagle,  
Like a lioness whose cubs are in a pitfall,  
He paced to and fro, back and forth,  
Tearing out and hurling away the locks of his hair,  
Ripping off and throwing away his fine clothes like something foul.  
*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet VIII.56–63 (Foster 2001)

In this scene we find echoes of two Iliadic passages in which Achilles mourns Patroklos: Achilles tears his hair out when he first hears of his friend's death in *Iliad* 18.2; and, as M.L. West has noted, Achilles' touches Patroklos' chest in a gesture reminiscent of Gilgamesh's when he leads the lament in 18.316-22, just before he is also compared to a lion deprived of his cubs and fearing for their lives (1997.342-3)

Another suggestive parallel between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Homeric poems that depicts mourning as a kind of new beginning occurs when, just after announcing that he will give Enkidu an appropriate funeral, Gilgamesh describes how he will seek to turn himself into a wild beast by putting on a lion skin:

And, as for me, now that you are dead, I will let my hair grow matted,

I will put on a lion skin and roam the steppe!

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet VIII.78-79 (Foster 2001)

Gilgamesh's mourning, and association with a lion, thus provides a transition to the next stage of the story and to Gilgamesh's journey to Utanapishtim and back to his home of Uruk, which resembles an initiation. It is also tempting to see the moment of Gilgamesh's mourning and his desire to turn himself into a wild animal as marking the lowest point at the beginning of a narrative of *nostos* in the sense explored by Douglas Frame as a journey from and through darkness back to light and life, a definition that perfectly fits Gilgamesh' journey through the tunnel of the sun that is the prelude to his quest to understand his mortality (Frame 1978.6-33).<sup>27</sup>

While Homeric lions are grammatically male, they share the maternal inclinations of the lioness grieving for her cubs in a pitfall in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Another important example of the same pattern can be found in another Iliadic passage describing Ajax protecting the body of Patroklos as a maternal lion:<sup>28</sup>

Αἴας δ' ἀμφὶ Μενoitιάδῃ σάκος εὐρὸν καλύψας  
ἐστήκει ὡς τίς τε λέων περὶ οἴσι τέκεσσιν,  
ὣ ῥά τε νήπι' ἄγοντι συναντήσονται ἐν ὕλῃ  
ἄνδρες ἐπακτῆρες· ὁ δέ τε σθένει βλεμαίνει,  
πᾶν δέ τ' ἐπισκύνιον κάτω ἔλκεται ὅσσε καλύπτων·

Now Aias covering the son of Menoitios under his broad shield

stood fast, like a lion over his young, when the lion  
is leading his little ones along, and men who are hunting  
come upon them in the forest. He stands in the pride of his great strength  
hooding his eyes under the cover of down-drawn eyelids.

Hom. *Il.* 17.132-37

Maternal animals provide an apt symbol for friends and soldiers who see themselves as mothers to one another.<sup>29</sup> In all these examples, lions (and lioness) are depicted in the act of attempting to protect or lamenting their own blood relatives, and more particularly their own children.

Mourning lions can be understood to mark the starting point of a narrative that may include a kind of return, in the case of *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey*, or vengeance in the case of the *Iliad* and, again, the *Odyssey*. Penelope the lion thus sets in motion a narrative that starts with mourning and culminates with vengeance.<sup>30</sup>

Before turning to my conclusion, I want to bring in briefly one other set of evidence that connect lions, women, and mourning. In a recent article, Eleni Drakaki discusses seals found in late Bronze Age female burials at Mycenae. Three burials in Grave Circle A contained the bodies of three women covered with hundreds of gold discs, precious stones, and other gold ornaments sewn on their clothing. Each burial also contained two seals: burial 1 contained a carnelian amygdaloid depicting a duel between two warriors (CMS I 12) and a gold cushion with a man fighting a lion (CMS I 9); burial 2 contained an amethyst lentoid showing a doe nursing her fawn (CMS I 13) and a gold cushion showing a wounded lion (CMS I 10).<sup>31</sup> It is striking how these animal and human scenes all closely recall Homeric motifs, but even more surprising is the

presence of motifs usually associated with the battlefield inside women's graves. The fighting or wounded lion, as shown by both the Odyssean simile and the Mycenaean seals, thus points to the lion as a symbol embracing experiences common to both men at war and to women waiting and mourning at home.

Looking back at the simile of Penelope the lion in its context, and at the various threads that connect it to the narrative of the *Odyssey* and to Homeric epic, I conclude by returning to the question of the simile's function at this particular stage of the story at the end of Book 4. As we have seen above, the simile is preceded with a scene of mourning, which connects it with two other mournful epic lions, Achilles and Gilgamesh. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are punctuated with mourning, but just as the *Odyssey* redefines the concept of epic *kleos*, it also radically transforms mourning into a beginning rather than an end. In the *Iliad*, scenes of mourning and lament culminate in the joint weeping of Achilles and Priam. Although the narrative does not include the death of Achilles, the poem can be construed as an extended lament for its hero, whose name, "grief of the fighting men," encapsulates the narrative (Nagy 1979:69-71). In the *Odyssey*, mourning is also intricately connected with its central character, but instead of lamenting his death, it has the opposite effect of progressively bringing Odysseus back to life.

Penelope the lion, the first extended simile by the narrator in the poem not only marks an emotional peak in Richard Martin's formulation but also begins the "transition shot" that takes the audience to Kalypso's island and Odysseus lamenting his *nostos* at the beginning of *Odyssey* 5. From Penelope's lament to Telemachos's weeping and Laertes' tears, every reunion scene

between Odysseus and his kin includes crying, culminating in the tears of joys shared by Penelope and Odysseus in *Odyssey* 23. The simile describing Penelope as a lion thus sets Odysseus' *nostos* in motion, and the return of Odysseus the lion answers the plight of the trapped and encircled Penelope, who, finally, gets her revenge.

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<sup>1</sup> For their insightful questions and suggestions, I thank Deborah Beck and the participants at the conference “Homer on the Range.” For reading and commenting on early drafts of this paper, I am grateful to Erwin Cook, Gregory Nagy, Lenny Muellner, and Ineke Sluiter.

<sup>2</sup> See Heubeck, West and Hainsworth 1998.242. For lion and animal similes in Homer, see Schnapp-Gourbeillon 1981, Lonsdale 1990, Clarke 1995, and Scott 1974 and 2009. For the ways in which the lion similes connect Penelope and Odysseus, see, e.g., Moulton 1977.123; Podlecki 1971.84; see also Magrath 1982.

<sup>3</sup> All translation from Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are from Lattimore 1965 and 1951.

<sup>4</sup> My translation from the original French: “aberrantes par rapport au schéma iliadique,” and “dépèrissement définitif d’un thème jusque-là florissant, qui s’accompagne d’un amoindrissement considérable de la portée idéologique.”

<sup>5</sup> Wilson 2002.232, note 13. From a different perspective, Stephanie West dismisses the two lion similes in *Odyssey* 4 as having been taken over “ready made” without regard for their immediate context, Heubeck, West and Hainsworth 1998.242, *ad* 4.791ff.

<sup>6</sup> See also Felson 1997.21, for Penelope as a “ferocious potential victim, besieged but strong and resourceful.”

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Edwards 1991.35, on the relationship between Homeric similes and “everyday life,” and Janko 1994.291 on *II.* 15.586-8 reflecting “the realities of life in Ionia.

<sup>8</sup> “Hearsay” is West’s solution to the problem of the scent-challenged doe in Heubeck, West, and Hainsworth 1998.213.

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<sup>9</sup> See West in Heubeck, West and Hainsworth 1998, *ad Od.* 4.335-340; see also Magrath 1982.206; Saïd 2012.361-362, also observes that the lion is “anthropomorphized by the transformation of his lair into a bed” (*eunē*, *Od.* 4.338 = 17.129).

<sup>10</sup> E.g., Klytaimestra’s adultery and murder of Agamemnon (3.265 and 11.429) and Helen’s going away with Paris (23.222). See Zeitlin 1995.128 for a discussion of infidelity as an *ergon aeikes*. The scholia to *Iliad* 22.395 shows that the connotations of *aeikea* were disputed early on.

<sup>11</sup> Odysseus himself uses the adjective *aeikês* to describe his own killing of the suitors at *Od.* 22.416, which he presents as unproblematic since driven by the suitors’ own recklessness, *atasthalia*. While Odysseus uses *aeikês* in the same way as Menelaos does, his condemnation of the suitors’ *atasthalia* also evokes the poem’s wholesale condemnation of the recklessness of Odysseus’ companions (1.7), which does not find justification in the rest of the poem. Both groups of men, the suitors and the companions, are thus presented as reckless and deserving of punishment, but in both cases, the poem present their punishment as less unproblematic than it may first appear, though the suitors’ recklessness is better established than that of many of Odysseus’ companions who die through not fault of their own.

<sup>12</sup> On the complex ways in which the poem depicts Odysseus’ and Penelope’s complementarity (and their similar duplicity), see Katz 1991.159-191.

<sup>13</sup> On the role of this adjective in connecting both Achilleus and Odysseus with Herakles, see Wilson 2002.

<sup>14</sup> On the portrayal of thinking and decision-making in Homeric poetry involving *mermêrizô*, see, e.g., Pucci 1987.66-75, and Russo 2012.18-21. On animals exhibiting human emotions in similes, see Lonsdale 1990.133-135.

<sup>15</sup> On this phrase and its connection with ambush, see Dué and Ebbot 2010.77, and 310-311.

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<sup>16</sup> On episodes involving *mermêrizô* between two different outcomes, see Arend 1933.106-115.

<sup>17</sup> See Levaniouk 2011.227, who notes the connection between the lion of *Odyssey* 4 and the nightingale of *Odyssey* 19 in terms of the repetition of the motif of Penelope's indecision between two opposite outcomes.

<sup>18</sup> See also Bakker, 2005.135, who focuses on the idiosyncratic combination of tense and augment at work in Homeric similes to argue that the simile can become, for the poet, a way of communicating "more directly with the audience."

<sup>19</sup> On the affinities between the descriptions of both Odysseus and Polyphemos as bloody lions, see Magrath 1982.210-11. Cook 1999.166-7, takes this further in distinguishing between omophagy and cannibalism, and showing how both are independent markers in the *Odyssey*.

<sup>20</sup> Ready 2011 has recently argued that similes in the *Iliad* can be seen as "mechanisms and sites of competition" where characters compete with one another and with the narrator; see especially 150-210, where Ready provides a survey of other scholars' approaches and a close analysis of how the interactions between similes made by the narrator and those made by characters function in the *Iliad*; see also 10 and 99-101 for "reuse and recharacterization" of similes; cf. De Jong 2004.136, for similes as "*interpretations of events*" (her emphasis).

<sup>21</sup> For the hungry lion urged on by his *thumos*, see *Iliad* 12.299-300. See also Glenn 1998 for a detailed discussion of the *Odyssey* simile and its scholarly reception. Cook 1999.157-8 examines the ambiguities of the comparison between Odysseus and the lion. See also De Jong 2001.158 who argues that the simile is a parody and that the lion is focalized through Nausikaa and her companions.

<sup>22</sup> For discussion of this simile and other lion similes as a sequence focusing on Odysseus' victory over the suitors, see Scott 1974.122-23, and Moulton, 1977.141. Wilson 2002 shows how

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both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* develop sequences involving lion similes that each “culminates with a lion in the house” (248). On the ways in which this and other similes reinforce the savagery of Odysseus’ vengeance in *Odyssey* 22, see Magrath 1982.211. On Eurykleia’s focalization, see de Jong 2001, 541. See also Saïd 2012.357 on how both animal similes and omens function in the same way in the *Odyssey* by announcing the coming revenge.

<sup>23</sup> See *Il.* 12.50 (Hektor) and 16.753 (Patroklos). On the latter passage and the connection between omens and similes, see Lonsdale 1990.112-115. For lions (and warriors) withdrawing reluctantly from the fight, see *Il.* 11.547-54, 17.109-112, and 17.656-65.

<sup>24</sup> Dué 2010.289-291 notices another parallel between the grief of Achilles with that of Penelope in *Odyssey* 19, where both passages elaborate on the meaning of the word *puknos*.

<sup>25</sup> For sitting on the threshold as a ritual and for Penelope’s mourning as a special kind of lament for someone who has left his country, see Alexiou 2002.118-119.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., Alexiou, 2002.58 for ritual fasting in the festival in honor of the dead Hyakinthos.

<sup>27</sup> On the structural connections between *Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey*, see Louden 1999.69-103, where he argues that both poems are examples of “apocalyptic narrative” involving divine wrath and retribution.

<sup>28</sup> The connection between lionesses and maternal love and vengeance is perhaps linked to the strange belief about real lionesses giving birth to only one cub recorded by Herodotus 3.108.4.

<sup>29</sup> Menelaos protecting the body of Patroklos is compared to a heifer protecting her calf, Hom. *Il.* 17.4-5. On soldiers who see themselves as mothers to one another, see Dué and Ebbott 2012.

<sup>30</sup> On the connection between lion similes and the theme of vengeance, see Rood 2006.9, who connects the comparison of Achilles to a lion deprived of his offspring to the mourning birds in the simile at *Od.* 16.216-219 to describe the reunion of Odysseus and Telemachos, and a

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prefiguration of Odysseus' vengeance. Penelope's importance as a narrator decreases as soon as Odysseus accomplishes his homecoming; see Nieto 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Drakaki 2009.52-54. The sex of the bodies is inferred from the grave goods associated with them and the absence of weapons. The third grave was decorated with a seal depicting a "spiral-rosette" (CMS I 14) and a duel (CMS I 11).