WEAVING HER MUTHOS: HELEN IN BOOK 4 OF THE *ODYSSEY*

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Abstract: In Homer, weaving, and muthos are both gendered actions. This essay examines Helen and the two stories concerning her in Book 4 of the Odyssey. The author starts with an outline of the stories and the interpretative difficulties. The author then discusses the connotations of weaving and muthos in Homer and examines major episodes where Helen and Penelope are intricately related to these two actions. The discussion shows that the two female figures are related through weaving and muthos. Moreover, Helen and the stories about her in Book 4 anticipate the actions of Penelope in the second half of the epic.

Female characters play important roles in the *Odyssey*. How to interpret episodes about women and incorporate the female component into a world of heroes is thus necessary and important to our understanding of the epic. The present essay examines Helen and the stories concerning her in Book 4. The author will start with an introduction of the stories and the interpretative difficulties, then proceed to examine the activities of weaving and *muthos* in the epic in the hope of reaching a further interpretation of these episodes in the context and structure of the epic.

I. Helen and Two Stories in *Odyssey* 4

In Book 4 of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus visits Sparta for information about his father, Odysseus. When the young man is conversing with Menelaus, Helen comes out of her bedchamber accompanied by three maids: one sets the chair for her, a second carries the coverlet, and a third one brings a silver basket:

> . . . a silver basket, which Alcandre had given her, the wife of Polybus, who dwelt in Thebes of Egypt, where greatest store of wealth is laid up in men's houses. He gave to Menelaus two silver baths and two tripods and ten talents of gold. And besides these, his wife gave to Helen also beautiful gifts—a gold distaff and a basket with wheels did she give, a basket of silver, and its rims were gilded with gold. This then the handmaid Phylo brought and placed beside her, filled with finely spun yarn, and across it was laid the distaff laden with violet-dark wool. (4.125-35)[1]

Shortly afterwards, when memories of Troy reduce everyone to tears, Helen suggests that they take joy in storytelling (μύθοις τέρπεσθε, 4.239). She then tells a story of how, towards the end of the war, Odysseus entered Troy disguised as a beggar. Helen was the only one to see through the disguise. She bathed and anointed him, put clothes to him, and after swearing a mighty oath not to reveal his identity, Odysseus told her all about the Greeks' plan. After Odysseus' safe

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[1] All translations of Homer in this article are by A. T. Murray.

return, Helen was glad because she already regretted leaving Sparta for Troy (4.238-64). It is followed up by Menelaus' story, which is also about Odysseus and Helen. When the Greek warriors were hidden in the wooden horse, Helen circled the hollow horse three times, touched it, and named the Greek chieftains aloud in the voice of their wives. The other Greeks were almost taken in by Helen's trick, had it not been for Odysseus who held back the Greeks from going out and answering her (268-90).

It is obvious that the image of Helen in these two stories are far from consistent. In the story told by Helen, she kept the secret of the Greeks, and was no longer supporting the Trojans: "already my heart was turned to go back to my home, and I groaned for the blindness that Aphrodite gave me, when she led me there from my dear native land" (260-62). But in the story told by Menelaus, she imitated the voices of the Greek warriors' wives; and her enchanting imitation almost sabotaged the plan of the Trojan Horse. Many critics believe that Helen's story is replaced and implicitly commented by Menelaus' story, and the poet is revealing Helen's hypocrisy. For example, a 1965 article in *the Classical Journal* believes that the above mentioned two stories, like many other stories in Homer, shows Helen to be a shameless and faithless person (Ryan 117).

We can perhaps thus interpret the two stories if we look at them separately and out of the epic context. For a long time, the conflicting images of Helen are explained off by the possibility that the epic includes different mythic traditions of Helen.[2] In recent decades, however, there are more substantiate studies on the stories told by Homeric characters within the epic.[3] Though these studies have different focuses and are mostly about stories in the *Iliad*, they contribute to our discussion of the Helen episodes since their discussions are not limited to the stories themselves, but pay more attention to their relation to the whole epic. In particular, Edmunds points out that stories told by epic characters are related to the epic on two levels—one explicit and one implicit. The implicit connections between the story and the situation are the real ones, of which the speaker himself might not be aware (Edmunds, 1997, 419-20). Edmunds gives an example from Book 21: when all the suitors fail to bend the bow, Odysseus, still disguised as a beggar, asks for permission to give it a try. One of the suitors, Antinous, rebukes him and tells the story of how a centaur named Eurytion did outrageous deeds in the wedding of Peirithous, and was punished (1.287-304). On the obvious level, the point of contact is wine, and Antinous intends to warn Odysseus of the serious consequences of getting drunk. On the implicit level, it is just the suitors who outrageously violate the laws of hospitality, and are to be punished.

Let us turn to the two stories in Book 4. The theme of the *Odyssey* is the hero's *nostos*. However, Odysseus is to make his first appearance in Book 5, and in the first four books, Telemachus journeys for news about his father, and hears many stories about Odysseus and the other Trojan war heroes.[4] Like those stories, the two stories in Book 4 are also told to Telemachus. On the explicit level, they are eulogizing Odysseus in front of his son; on the implicit level, they anticipate Odysseus' arduous homecoming and the dangers in Ithaca. Awareness of the implicit connection to the epic theme yields some more illuminating interpretations. For example, Olson thinks that the two stories provide two directions for Odysseus in Books 17 to 21, when he is back in Ithaca. According to the story told by Helen, he can choose to ally with his wife and reveal his identity and plans to her; and according to Menelaus' story, he should hide his identity from women and make allies with men. Olson thinks that in Homer, male bonds of trust are more important and secure than those between husband and wife, and the security of the male society and its values depend upon the suppression of the husband's instinctive desire to share secrets with his wife (393). His interpretation builds a connection between the two stories and the epic theme of *nostos*. Indeed, the male heroes in the *Odyssey* form a community who communicate, imitate and echo each other to resist the possible dangers brought by women. In Books 11 and 24, the ghost of Agamemnon parallels his own experience with Odysseus' homecoming, and directly advises him no to reveal his identity to Penelope: "in secret, and not openly, bring your ship to the shore of your own native land; for no longer is there faith in women." (11.455-6) According to this line of argument, Odysseus' nostos depends on learning from other heroes' homecoming and forming alliance with the male.

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[2] About the different traditions of Helen, see Kakridis (1971) p. 49.

[3] Willcock (1964) describes these stories by "paradeigma", and says that while the poet maintains the outline from the mythic tradition, they can make up certain details (147), so as to create a connection between the story and the occasion when it is being told (p. 152). Nagy (1993) uses exemplum to denote the stories told by the characters, and thinks that observation of tradition and the poetic innovation are compatible (pp. 113-116). Alden (2000) describes stories in Homer that are unrelated to the main plot as para-narratives, and thinks that they are valuable for the interpretation of the main plot of the epic (Alden 1).

For the author of this paper, if the story of the *Odyssey* ends with the killing of the suitors, Olson's reading is adequate. However, the epic does not end there. In Book 23, when the suitors are killed and unfaithful servants executed, Odysseus reveals his identity to the household, washes off the blood, and changes into clean clothes. Only now is Penelope told to come downstairs and meet her husband. To everyone's surprise, Penelope does not immediately accept the stranger's claimed identity (23.10-14, 58-68, 80-82). Even though she's reproached by Telemachus and Odysseus (23.93-5, 165-172), she holds her ground and unexpectedly tests Odysseus (23.177-80). The test is about a secret only known to her and Odysseus (23.109-110), and her apparently careless words make Odysseus lose his composure and tell the secret of their marriage bed (23.181-204). It is only till now that Penelope recognizes Odysseus as her husband (23.205-230). This episode is crucial to the theme of the epic. We realize that, though the fighting men in the *Iliad* form a stronger bond, in the *Odyssey*, things are quite different. Odysseus returns to Ithaca only after losing all his companions, alone, and marriage turns out to be core to the epic (Felson and Slatkin 101, 104). Thus, the ultimate marker of Odysseus' *nostos* is not the killing of the suitors but the recognition by his wife. The first half of the epic has repeatedly prepared us for the significance of Penelope. In the *prooimion* of the epic, the poet tells us that Odysseus is "filled with longing for his return and for his wife" (νόστου κεχρημένον ἤδὲ γυναικός, 1.13); here, the poet puts *nostos* and "wife" in juxtaposition. In Book 5, Kalypso has to let Odysseus go at the command of Zeus. Before parting with her lover, she asks Odysseus about Penelope. Odysseus politely replies: "Mighty goddess. . . wise Penelope is less impressive to look upon than you in looks and stature, for she is a mortal, whle you are immortal and ageless. But even so I wish and long day in and day out to reach my home, and to see the day of my return.” (5.215-220) The real significance of Odysseus *nostos* lies not in his physically reaching Ithaca or the killing of suitors but in the reunion with his wife. Ultimately, it is Penelope’s test and recognition that confirm and complete his *nostos* and give Odysseus his due *kleos*. For me, though Olson acknowledges that the tales in Book 4 are a part of the epic’s larger discussion of the proper relationship between man and women (388) and touch on the problems and dangers in the relationship between husband and wife (391), his reading is centered upon the male characters and does not fully represent the implications of Odysseus *nostos*.

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[4] See Minchin (2017) pp. 23ff. for a summary of how the poet tells the nostoi of other heroes including Nestor, Diomedes, Idomeneus, Agamemnon, Ajax and Menelaus.

II. Weaving and *Muthos* in Homer

Now let us return to Book 4 and examine two crucial details. When Helen enters the scene, the poet gives an elaborate account of her weaving utensils (4.125-35); soon afterward, Helen initiates storytelling about Odysseus (4.239). It reminds us of another passage in Book 1, which also combines weaving and *muthos*. When Phemius, the singer at Odysseus’ house, entertains the suitors with a song about the Achaeans’ bitter homecoming, Penelope cannot bear listening. She descends from her upper chamber and asks the singer to change another song, but her son Telemachus tells her to bear it and go back weaving:

> ἀλλ᾽ εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ᾽ αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε,
> ἱστόν τ᾽ ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε
> ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι: μῦθος δ᾽ ἄνδρεσσι μελήσει
> πᾶσι, μάλιστα δ᾽ ἐμοί: τοῦ γὰρ κράτος ἔστ᾽ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ.
>
> Now go to your chamber, and busy yourself with your own tasks, the loom and the distaff, and bid your handmaids be about their tasks; but speech shall be men’s care, for all, but most of all for me; since mine is the authority in this house. (1. 356-9, emphases are mine.)

The passage could be read as the young man’s eager attempt to assert his authority in the household after being encouraged by the disguised Athena (1.319-24). This passage is explicitly modeled on Hector’s words to Andromache in *Iliad* 490-3 and is repeated with a minor change in *Odyssey* 21. 350-3 can also be taken as one of the formulaic passages in Homer. However, these lines are absent from some ancient editions and *athetized* by Aristarchus (Heubeck 120). The problem is that, while in the two other passages, war (πόλεμος) and the bow (τόξον) are said to be men’s affairs, which is indisputable in the Homeric world, here *muthos* (μῦθος) is said to be exclusively for men, despite the fact that within the epic we are soon to see female characters fully engaged in court conversation (Helen in 4.121ff and Arete in 7.141ff), and that μῦθος is indeed used to tag some of the women’s speeches in both epics.[5] For the author of this paper, the passage is of interest in that it polarizes weaving and *muthos* as typical activities exclusively for women and men. Even if the passage is an interpolation, it shows an early awareness of the gendered feature of weaving and *muthos*. Next, the author will proceed with a discussion of these two actions in Homer.

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[5] Hecuba in *Il*. 24.200, Helen in *Il*. 3.427 and 6.343, and Penelope in *Od*. 21.67。

Spinning and weaving are particularly women's occupations, and in Homer, women participate in these jobs regardless of their social rank. Of the 27 passages where references to weaving occur, the majority have women working at the loom.[6] In both epics, it is used to define women's sphere: in the three passages mentioned above, when Andromache and Penelope are told not to interfere in male activities, they are told to attend to the loom and distaff, that is, to weaving. However, weaving is also much more than a women's daily job. For one thing, linguistic evidence shows that, for ancient Greeks, weaving and singing are long since connected in the Greek mind (Nagy 86, Snyder 193-4). Lyric poets would use the metaphor of weaving to describe their craft and see song-making similar to the process of weaving a patterned tapestry. [7] In the *Odyssey*, both Circe and Kalypso are described as singing while weaving (5.61-61, 10.221-222). Moreover, the verb for weaving (ὑφαίνω) is also used in a metaphorical sense to indicate a patching up, a construing, or the gradual formation of some mental product. Thus, the verb ὑφαίνω can be used with male heroes who "weave" words, plans, counsels, or wiles.[8]

Muthos is also a special term. After Homer, the word, as the root for myth in most European languages, gradually becomes the opposite of words that denote truth. For example, Pindar contrasts *muthos* with ἀληθής and ἀλήθεια, to refer to unreliable speech in contrast to true speech; Plato uses *muthos* to mean fictional or fake stories. Aristotle employs *muthos* in a narrower sense to mean the plot of the tragedy. [9] However, in Homer, *muthos* does not indicate any abstract idea but is a kind of action and practice. The Homeric *muthos* is always related to words and conversation. Used in the singular or plural form and depending on its context, the word may point to a rich array of connotations which includes threat, advice, plan, and so on. [10] Richard Martin's 1989 study divides Homeric speeches marked as *muthoi* into three categories: commands, boast-and-insult contest ('flyting'), and recitation of remembered events. Martin shows that *muthos* is the word to designate any speech act "indicating authority, performed at length, usually in public, with a focus on full attention to every detail" (Martin 12). Furthermore, the word marks a gendered sphere. While *muthos* is public speech and performance before an audience, *epos* refers to private and reciprocal speech, and *epea* is often spoken by women. Since *muthos* is a powerful self-representation, there is a normally social taboo for women to employ in such kind of speech (Martin 87). The few exceptional usages of *muthos* for women's speeches in the *Iliad* are the formal laments (24. 725-45, 748-59, 762-75), which are also performative for a special occasion.

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[6] Examples of this women's occupation include *Od.* 7.103-111, 13.107-09; *Il.* 1.29-32, 22.437-50, and so on. For further discussion of spinning and weaving in Homer, see Alan J.B. Wace and Frank H. Stubbings, ed., *A Companion to Homer* (London 1962) pp. 531-32. Also see Pantelia (1993) for a discussion of the different occasions of weaving and spinning in the *Odyssey*.

[7] For example, a fragment of Pindar thus describes his singing: ὑφαίνω δ᾽ Ἀμυθαονίδαισιν ποικίλον ἄνδημα (I weave for the Amythaonidai a patterned headband). Pindar, F 179 (Schmitt 1967:300. qtd. in Nagy p.86).

[8] See the *Il.* 6.187, 7.324, 9.93; *Od.* 4.678, 739, 5.356, 9.422, 13.303, 386, etc. in *Il.* 3.212, μῦθος is the object of ὑφαίνω.

[9] *Olympian* 1.29–30, ἀλαθῆ λόγον and μῦθοι; *Nemean* 7.23-25, μύθοις and ἀλάθειαν; *Republic* 330d, Laws 636c; Poetics 1450a 4, 1459a 18. See also μῦθος in *Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon* (*LSJ*) and Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* (Brill, 2015)。

[10] See μῦθος in Cuncliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).

To sum up, weaving and muthos in Homer are both gendered actions. Weaving is the typical occupation for female characters, though the idea of weaving is connected with the composition of songs, and the verb is frequently applied to male heroes in the metaphorical sense. *Muthos*, on the other hand, is a marker of public and performative speech, which is only rarely used to tag the speech of a female character. Thus, when weaving and *muthos* converge in the character of Helen, it yields rich connotations. Plus, in the *Odyssey* both Helen and Penelope have peculiar relationships with weaving and *muthos*, which the author of this paper will discuss next.

III. Weaving and *Muthos* with Helen and Penelope

Of all Homeric female characters in Homer, Helen is given the most number of speeches; and of the eleven speeches in both epics, five are explicitly marked as *muthos*.[11] Helen in *Odyssey* 4, with her weaving utensils and *muthos*, undoubtedly reminds us of Helen's earlier image in the *Iliad* as a weaver and a story-teller. In Book 3 of the *Iliad*, Helen makes her first appearance in western literature and a remarkably great one. We are told that the divine messenger, Iris, in disguise of Laodike, found Helen in her chamber, and she is weaving:

> … she was weaving a great purple web of double fold on which she was embroidering many battles of the horse-taming Trojans and the bronze-clad Achaeans, which for her sake they had endured at the hands of Ares. (3.125-128)

Helen is not just performing a woman's task here. While we know nothing about the content of weaving with other Homeric women such as Andromache, Penelope, Circe, and so on, the content of Helen's weaving is clearly depicted. She is weaving a narrative, a story of the Trojan war, and a war that has been waged and is still going on because of her. As a lot of scholars have pointed out, by weaving a narrative of the ongoing Trojan war, Helen puts herself into the position of a poet.[12] Moreover, Helen is self-referencing, forming a narrative in which she herself is involved. Just like Helen in *Iliad* 3, Helen in *Odyssey* 4 is both the storyteller and the story being told, both the artist and the artifact. Helen's special and intimate relationship with weaving and story-telling suggests that we should pay more attention to the female characters when interpreting the two tales in Book 4.

However, the epic does not stop here. The poet emphasizes that the golden distaff and silver basket—Helen's weaving utensils are gifts from Alcandre, given separately to Helen (4. 125-35). Mueller thinks that these gifts from Egypt introduce to us the *xenia* networks through which aristocratic women in the *Odyssey* build social alliances independent of, yet complementary to those of their husbands, and these distinctively feminine gifts within the context of an all-female exchange network secure the *kleos* of women (7-8). In the *Odyssey*, here is another instance of this gift exchange among women independent of their husbands, which is initiated by Helen. In Book 15, when Telemachus is leaving Sparta, Helen gives a gift of her own, a *peplos* she made for Telemachus' future bride as "something to remember from Helen's hands" (15.126). She also specifies that it be kept by Penelope till the wedding (15. 127-28, Mueller 11). Thus, the *peplos* is a gift made by a woman, given to a woman, and to be kept by a woman. Like the golden distaff and silver basket, this gift, the product of weaving, again connects women. By weaving and giving gifts of woven textiles, a woman can communicate their names to other women. Thus, the action and product of Helen's weaving in the *Odyssey* points to a wider community of women and is particularly connected with Penelope.

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[11] Edmunds (2019): 59.

[12] An ancient scholia thus comments this passage: ἀξιόχρεων ἀρχέτυπον ἀνέπλασεν ὁ ποιητὴς τῆς ἰδίας ποιήσεως ("the poet has crafted a worthy model for his own poetic enterprise"), from Erbse (1969) on *Iliad* 3.126–127. See also Blondell (2010) for a discussion of Helen as the weaver of the Trojan war, which compares her position to the poet and even Zeus (pp. 19-20), and related discussions in Roisman (2006).

Penelope is also intimately connected with weaving. Unlike Helen, she is not weaving a narrative. But for three times the epic describes her weaving as a trick to delay her remarriage: on the pretext of weaving a shroud for Laertes, she works at the loom during the day and unweaves during the night (2.94-110, 19.138-56, 24.129-46). The trick works for three years, but in the fourth year, a maid betrays her trick to the suitors, so she has to finish the shroud. If in the *Iliad* Helen weaves (ὑφαίνειν) a *muthos* (μῦθος), in the *Odyssey* Penelope weaves wiles (δόλος, 2.93, 106; 19.137; 24.141). In addition, her trick, though eventually fails, is of important significance to Odysseus' homecoming: it is just through weaving and unweaving that Penelope takes control of time and delays the actions of the suitors, thus makes it possible for Odysseus to regain control when he is finally back in Ithaca. Penelope's weaving not only makes her a figure of *metis* on par with Odysseus, but also allows her to participate in the action of the epic plot.[13] To some extent, Penelope's weaving resembles the narrative of the epic and Odysseus' journey home, with its halting, winding, and crisscrossing in space and time (Bergren 2). In this sense, Penelope is also weaving a *muthos* in the Aristotelian sense—the plot (Felson-Rubin 168). By participating in the action of the story, she determines the outcome of the epic.

The above discussion shows that, in interpreting the tales in *Odyssey* 4, there is good reason to shift the emphasis from male to female characters, from Odysseus to Helen, and to pay special attention to the contrast and connection between Helen and Penelope.

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[13] Some critics consider Penelope as a passive figure who wins her reputation by being cautious and keeping the status quo (Lesser 198), or someone who is always clueless and does not decide the development of the plot (Said 280-284). The author of this paper agrees with the contrary view that, under her circumstances, inactivity is also an active choice, and many details in the text show her power to act (Rutherford 137). Some scholars even believe that she is the heroine of the epic, who has recognized Odysseus at least by Book 23. See Reece (2011) for a summary of this view and Levaniouk p. 29.

IV. Further Reading of the Two Stories

For the author of this paper, the interactions between Helen and Odysseus in the two stories in *Odyssey* 4 anticipate the possible modes of actions between Penelope and Odysseus. The various elements of Helen's actions in these two stories are to be echoed in Penelope. For example, in the first story, Helen bathed Odysseus, put clothes on him, and conversed with him. In Book 19, Penelope is to have an interview with Odysseus and order the old nurse to wash his feet. In Menelaus' story, Helen mocks the voices of the heroes' wives, and this enchanting imitation reminds us of Helen's sexual charm and the fact that she used to be a bride courted by heroes all over Greece. Penelope, in the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, is also a woman surrounded by suitors, another bride that men fight over.

Two aspects feature most prominently in these echoing elements. For one, both stories demonstrate the mental contest between Helen and Odysseus. In Helen's story, she won the contest because not only does she recognize Odysseus, but she also makes him reveal a secret. In the story told by Menelaus, Odysseus gets the upper hand because, with his efforts, the Greeks do not expose themselves (Austin 82). This mental contest, and the tension about hiding or revealing one's identity, also appear in Penelope's interactions with Odysseus. After returning to Ithaca, Odysseus has total control of his identity and chooses to hide or reveal it as he wishes. However, in the recognition scene in Book 23, Penelope overturns the situation and makes Odysseus speak out the secret of their marriage bed, just like Helen makes Odysseus speak; some scholar even thinks that this is Penelope's mocking revenge on Odysseus' continued concealment of his identity (Felson and Slatkin 111).

For another, both Helen and Menelaus mention the interference of gods in their storytelling. "I groaned for the blindness that Aphrodite gave me" (4.261), says Helen; "it must be that you were bidden by some god who wished to grant glory to the Trojans" (4.274-5), so says Menelaus. Boyd compares them with multiple episodes in the *Iliad* and reminds us that in both epics, mortals often act under the influence of gods. In Menelaus' story, it should be noted that Helen does not directly tell the Trojans that there are warriors hidden in the horse, but circles the wooden horse three times, touches it and utters enchanting voices (4.277-79). For Boyd, these intriguing actions of Helen resemble some kind of magic and are comparable to Circe's magic in Book 10 (Boyd 9). Helen is probably acting under the manipulation of a deity, which is reminiscent of the scene in the *Iliad* when she was forced by Aphrodite to go back home and comfort Paris (3.389-420). Thus, Boyd thinks that Helen's attempt to expose the Greeks is probably arranged by Aphrodite. Thus, Odysseus can only temporarily resist her influence, and it is Athena who eventually solves the crisis (15-16).

Penelope also acts under the influence of Athena (18.158-69, 187-99), and according to a passage in Book 23, she has a unique insight into the fate of mortals. After Penelope recognizes Odysseus, she says, "the most sympathetic thing anyone in the Odyssey says about Helen" (Schein 29):

> No, even Argive Helen, daughter of Zeus, would not have lain in love with a foreigner, had she known that the warlike sons of the Achaeans were to bring her home again to her native land. Yet the truth is that in her case a god

> prompted her to commit a shameful act; not until then did she put before her mind the horror of that folly from which sorrow first came upon us as well. (23.218-224)

It is the last time Helen is mentioned in the epic; Penelope apologizes for her previous caution in delaying the recognition. Here, she implicitly compares her own actions with Helen's, but though she mentions the suffering brought by Helen, she is not blaming her but shows great sympathy and understanding. Had Helen known the consequence of her actions, she would have resisted the temptation; but Helen could not have done so because the gods just arranged her actions. Thus only when the consequences are there can she realize what she has done and repent (Heubeck, 337). "Yet the truth is that in her case, a god prompted her to commit a shameful act," Penelope thus comments since she knows well that she can resist the suitors not only by her own will but also by gods' permission. Here, the chaste and loyal wife knows her luck, and her sympathy for Helen is built upon the understanding of divine will.

In this passage, Penelope refers to Helen as "Argive Helen" (Ἀργείη Ἑλένη, 23.218). It is an epithet used many times in the *Odyssey* to describe Helen. Immediately afterward, Penelope uses another epithet, "daughter of Zeus" (Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα), to describe her. Of all the epithets of Helen, this one is almost exclusively applied to her and is used five times.[14] It is noticeable that, in Book 4, right before Helen tells her story, the epithet is used twice (4. 184, 219); and 23. 218 is the only time it is used after Book 4 (Edmunds, 2019, 127). This epithet reminds us of the omniscience of Zeus' (and gods') will and once again stresses the connection between Helen and Penelope in the *Odyssey*. In a sense, Penelope in Book 23 looks back and summarizes the Trojan war, which started with Helen and whose homecoming will be completed with Penelope.

To sum up, the author thinks the two stories told by Helen and Menelaus are not competitive, nor are they implicit criticisms of Helen by the Homeric poet. Helen is a female character in Homer who is specially connected with weaving and story-telling. Seen from the rich array of connotations connected with weaving and *muthos*, Helen and the stories initiated by her point to other female characters and anticipate the actions of Penelope in the latter half of the epic. In this way, these stories are significant for the main plot and open rich interpretative possibilities for the female characters in the epic.

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[14] Apart from Helen, it is only used on Athena for once. See Edmunds (2019) p. 119 and p. 121.

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