

PENELOPE'S DREAM IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EAGLE AGAINST SERPENT MOTIF

The eagle is the beloved bird of Zeus and the symbol of his supremacy; the eagle is the mightiest bird which flies higher than all other birds, and Zeus is the mightiest god, who dwells on the highest peak of Olympus. Both are kings of the sky. The appearance of an eagle is a definite omen from Zeus, a good one if the bird comes flying to the right of the onlooker, and a bad one if it comes flying to the left¹.

Possessed of the sharpest eyesight and of unsurpassed power and swiftness, the eagle acts as Zeus' messenger². Menelaos, Hektor, Achilles, and Odysseus are likened to this ferocious and regal bird³, which swoops down from the sky to attack stags, lambs, hares, snakes, geese, cranes, and swans⁴. The eagle as Zeus' bird of omen gives mortals unmistakable signs about the future, despite Hektor's defiant boasting to Polydamas:

You ask me to pay heed to long-winged birds,
but I pay no attention to them and I do not care
whether they fly to the right, toward the rising sun,
or to the left toward misty darkness.

(*Iliad* 12.238-240)

There is an obvious antithesis between the eagle and the snake. The one is a noble bird that soars into the heavenly vault, whereas the other is a creeping creature that crawls on its belly, and its poison can be deadly. The snake did have some positive attributes for the Greeks of historical times. Its skin and flesh, and even its poison, were used for healing and for sympathetic magic⁵. It was closely associated with the worship of the healing god Asklepios, and was even kept in houses as a hypostasis of this god⁶. It, too, like the eagle, can be a good as well as a

1. Cf. *Iliad* 12.200-209, 13.821 ff., 24.315 ff.; *Odyssey* 15.160, 20.240 ff.

2. Cf. *Iliad* 24.315: οὗ κράτος ἐστὶ μέγιστον, and 21.251 ff.

3. Cf. *Iliad* 17.675, 22.306 ff., 21.251 ff., *Odyssey* 24.537-538.

4. Cf. *Iliad* 8.245 ff., 22.306 ff., 21.251 ff., 12.200-229, 15.690 ff.

5. Cf. Hippokrates *Περὶ Γυν.* 2 C 8, 371 in the Littré edition; Dioskourides 2.16; Galen 14.2 ff., 10.995; Pliny 30.148; Pallad. 4, 3, and 12, 7, 4.

6. Cf. *Der Kleine Pauly* 5, s. Schlange.

bad omen⁷. Mostly, however, the snake was considered by the historical Greeks as representing malevolent forces, demonic chthonic powers and negative elements in life. In Herodotos the Telmessian seers declare *ὄφιν εἶναι γῆς παῖδα, ἔππον δὲ πολέμιόν τε καὶ ἐπήλυδα*⁸.

From what archaeology has taught us in the last hundred years, it is obvious that the snake as symbol of a dead man's soul and as attribute of the snake-goddess was most prominent in Minoan Crete. Idols holding entwining snakes and barebreasted snake goddesses, if found on the Greek mainland, are certain to have been introduced from Crete or to have been made by Minoan artists and their pupils. Crete is the land of the snake-goddess, a goddess who evolved from a domestic divinity into the dominant goddess of Creto-Minoan palaces⁹. Nilsson has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the snake and snake-goddess cult in Crete was originally a domestic one, that the snake is closely connected with the dead, and that it was worshipped as a benign *genius loci*¹⁰.

In the twelfth book of the *Iliad* the Trojans are urged by Hektor to cross the protective ditch and set the Achaean ships on fire. Suddenly, an eagle flying from the inauspicious left side appears, carrying a giant snake (*δράκοντα πέλωρον*) in its talons. The snake still writhes powerfully and strikes the eagle, which drops it in the midst of the Trojan host and then flies away. Polydamas interprets this as a bad omen for the success of the contemplated assault: as the eagle was unable to carry the snake away victoriously and had to flee, so too the Trojans will not achieve their goal and will have to retreat. His interpretation of the omen is sensible, but more important is the fact that the eagle dropped its adversary in the midst of the Trojans, thereby linking them symbolically with the wounded snake¹¹. In the second book of the *Iliad* another portent is interpreted, by Calchas this time, as showing how the Achaeans will have to fight for nine years before they sack Troy in the tenth. The Achaeans are sacrificing hecatombs beside a spring at Aulis. Then, all of a sudden, a dreadful snake (*δράκων ἐπὶ νῶτα ἀαφοινός, σμερδαλέος*) sprang up from under the altar and made straight for the

7. Ter. *Phorm.* 707; Ovid, *Fasti* 2, 711; Pliny 29, 4 and 22; Valerius Max. 1, 6, 9.

8. Herodotos 1.78.

9. Cf. M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griech. Religion*, München 1962, 1.285-290.

10. M. P. Nilsson, *Minoan-Mycenaean Religion*, Lund 1968, p. 321-329. In these pages Nilsson also mentions that the Dioskouroi in house cult were represented as snakes and that Zeus as Ktesios, Philios, and Meilichios took on the same form (p. 327). He also points out that the Minoan snake deity was female, in contrast to the later Greek one, which was male. For Zeus Ktesios see also A. B. Cook, *Zeus, A Study in Ancient Religion*, New York 1965, 1.422-28. For an extensive review of the sources for Zeus Ktesios, Meilichios, etc. see Hans Schwabl in *RE* s.v. Zeus.

11. Cf. *Iliad* 12.200-229.

nestlings of a sparrow which kept on shrieking and circling over the nest helplessly. The snake devoured eight nestlings and the mother before Zeus turned it to stone¹².

According to Kalchas the nine birds represented the nine years of war at Troy, and Zeus's action stood for the defeat of the Trojans and the destruction of their city. The birds and the mother stand for the nine years of war, but they also stand for the Achaeans and their sufferings during these nine years:

ὡς οὗτος κατὰ τέκνα φάγε στρουθοῖο καὶ αὐτήν,
ὀκτώ, ἀτὰρ μήτηρ ἐνάτη ἦν, ἥ τέκε τέκνα,
ὡς ἡμεῖς τοσσαῦτ' ἔτεα πτολεμίξομεν αὔθι,
τῷ δεκάτῳ δὲ πόλιν αἰρήσομεν εὐρυάγυιαν

(*Iliad* 2.326-329)

In this omen the snake is the enemy of the Achaeans, and Zeus, their protector, punishes it by turning it to stone. In a way the nestlings and their mother stand for the many young Achaean warriors who are destined to die at the hands of the Trojans for whom the dreadful snake is the symbolic analogue.

Zeus and the Achaeans are linked with the eagle and the hapless birds (note how the death of the many Achaeans corresponds to the death of the birds, while Zeus' eagle flies away alive), while their hated enemies, the Trojans, are associated with the snake. Incidentally, it is clear that the δράκων of these Homeric passages is not a dragon but a snake (αἰόλος ὄφις, *Iliad* 12.208).

In the *Odyssey* δράκων occurs only once and refers to Proteus, who has the ability to transform himself into a dragon (4.457), and although αἰετός occurs several times, ὄφις is not to be found even once. However, Penelope's dream, even though in it an eagle attacks geese and not a snake, is relevant to our topic. The story is told in *Odyssey* 19.529-559. Penelope is speaking to the stranger, who is Odysseus not yet recognized by her, and after she describes her plight, she tells him of a dream she had: a hook-beaked eagle swooped down on her pet geese, twenty in number, broke their necks, and then soared up skywards. While the palace ladies were trying to console the frightened queen, the eagle returned, spoke to her with a human voice, and told her that the geese of her dream were the suitors and the eagle none other than Odysseus come home to bring hideous death upon all of them. There are some intriguing problems with the interpretation of this dream. The number of the geese is definitely conventional¹³. The number of the suitors who are killed and mentioned by name in book 22 seems to be equally conventional. We know from *Odyssey* 16.240-257 that the number of

12. Cf. *Iliad* 2.278-332.

13. Cf. *Odyssey* 1.280; 2.212, 355, 699; 4.778; 5.244; 9.209; 20.158.

the suitors carousing in the palace of Odysseus is 108 and from *Odyssey* 19.555-558 that no suitor was spared by Odysseus:

..... μνηστῆρσι δὲ φαίνεται ὄλεθρος
πᾶσι μάλ', οὐδὲ κέ τις θάνατον καὶ κῆρας ἀλύξει

(19.557-558)¹⁴

Eupeithes, father of Antinoos, the most insolent of the suitors, charges Odysseus with having returned to Ithaca and killed Κεφαλλήνων ὄκ' ἀρίστους, the best of Kephallenians; this would include suitors from all places mentioned in 16.240-257. The phrase then means 'the best men in the land'. However, it is clear that Homer, who begins the description of the carnage with the death of Antinoos, mentions τοὺς ἀρίστους τῶν ἀρίστων, the best of the best. Whether men who are guilty of the crimes committed by the suitors can still be called ἄριστοι is another question. They have occupied the king's place (13.377), they have been courting his wife (13.378), and they are consuming his property (13.396, 319, 428 etc.). They may have been ἄριστοι, but have disgraced themselves through wanton recklessness (3.204). Why are they then likened to geese and especially to Penelope's pet geese?

It is clear throughout the *Odyssey* that Penelope is tempted to put an end to her own distress and to the social scandal in the palace of Odysseus which the suitors have turned into a bedlam of infamy and marry the best of the suitors and the one who will make the highest bid. She makes her dilemma clear to the stranger before she talks about her strange dream, and she even blames Telemachos for having stopped her from marrying the suitor of her choice (19.524-34).

It seems that, despite any scruples Penelope may have about her loyalty to her absent husband, she was not unwilling to make a virtue of necessity by marrying the best of the suitors. To paraphrase George Orwell's famous phrase, all the scoundrels at Odysseus' palace were equal, but some of these scoundrels were more equal than others. Penelope had her favorites among them and they numbered twenty, that is, exactly as many as the geese:

I have twenty geese in the house that eat grain
from water, and their sight warms my heart.

(19.536-537)

14. Cf. also *Odyssey* 22.384, 24.415 ff. From *Odyssey* 16.240-257 we know that the suitors' origin was as follows: Doulichion (Akarnania): 52; Kephallenia (or same): 24; Zakynthos: 20; Ithaca: 12. From *Iliad* 2.631-637 we know that Odysseus' comrades, who came from the same area, were collectively called Kephallenians.

The pet geese of the dream are the twenty lusty young suitors. After all, the best of them might make a fine mate and he would certainly rid her of her miseries. But why should the suitors be likened to geese?

Penelope's dream is foreshadowed by an omen which is recounted in *Odyssey* 15.160-178. As Telemachos is about to leave the palace of Menelaos and Helen, an eagle snatches a goose from the yard and carries it away. Helen explains the omen by saying that the eagle is Odysseus, who will return to take revenge by killing all the suitors. Odysseus as avenger is likened to an eagle at the end of the *Odyssey*. 'Zeus has decided to restore order in Ithaca and put an end to the vendetta which the suitors' relatives were determined to carry on (24.473-486). Before the fray is over, Odysseus, kills, Eupheithes, the most ardent advocate of revenge, but Athena carries the behest of Zeus to the warring factions and puts an end to the conflict. The victorious Odysseus is likened to αἰετὸς ὑψιπετής, and Zeus hurls an auspicious and confirmatory thunderbolt which strikes the ground in front of Athena (24.533-544). So the slayer of the geese is represented as an eagle favored by the chief of the gods. His dead opponents, the suitors, are ὑβρισταὶ καὶ ἀτάσθαλοι (22.36), ὑπερφίαλοι (23.346; 2.310), ἀγήνορες (2.299), ὑπερηγορέοντες (2.331). They ἔρδουσι ἔργα βίαια, they have no fear of the judgement of the gods (20.215), and, worst of all, they have no sense of shame: οὐδ' αἰδοῦς μοῖραν ἔχουσι (20.171). In other words, the suitors are shameless offenders and perpetrators of violent deeds. They also squander and devour Odysseus' property by ravaging everything which belong to him. This aspect of their crime is described by several verbs and expressions which mean 'to devour', 'to cut down', 'to eat', etc¹⁵. Thus they are not harmless geese, and certainly not innocent chickens¹⁶. In fact, if anything, they act more like outlaws and bandits, and they are characterized by epithets and phrases which elsewhere are applied to the Titans, to the evil King Pelias, and to the insolent Menoitios whom Zeus smote with his thunderbolt and cast into nether darkness¹⁷. Because of their injustice and foolishness, like Hesiod's δωροφάγοι βασιλῆες, they are enemies of Justice (Dike)¹⁸, and resemble both the inferior men of the silver age, who are guilty of ὕβρις ἀτάσθαλος, and Hesiod's men of the iron age, who honor wrong-doers and have no αἰδῶς either¹⁹. The evil traits link them even with

15. Cf. 2.203, 236-238; 18.144; 23.346; 22.36; 24.459; 2.140; 13.396 (and 419, 428), 14.92.

16. Cf. 22.302-303 where Odysseus and Telemachos fighting the suitors are likened to hook-taloned eagles who swoop down from the mountains upon ordinary and helpless birds.

17. *Theogony* 209, 514, 996.

18. *Works and Days* 256-266.

19. *Works and Days* 126-142; 174-201.

ravaging serpents, such as Typhon, the she-dragon of Delphi, and the Lernaean Hydra as well as ogres such as the Cyclopes and Phorkys²⁰. Here one might recall that the predatory and savage Dryopes are descended from Dryope and that Apollon raped the nymph after transforming himself into a snake²¹. Thus, in a way they are partly descended from a snake.

In view of the above, it is all the more remarkable that the suitors in Penelope's dream are represented as geese rather than snakes attacked by an eagle. Further, it is certain that the symbolic dream is a purposeful and extremely subtle variant of the eagle and snake motif. The reasons for which the geese stand for the select suitors in Penelope's dream seem to me to be the following:

- a. They are mindless fools²².
- b. They are Penelope's pets, since she feeds them with Odysseus' cattle and grain²³.

Additional reasons for choosing to liken the suitors to geese might be the insatiate appetite of these rather dumb birds, which spend most of their time with their mouths gaping wide open in anticipation of having it filled with almost anything²⁴. Indeed, it is quite likely that Homer, in choosing to represent the suitors as χῆνες in the dream, had in mind the verb χάσκω, χαίνω and such derivatives as χανών, "with gaping mouth" (*Odyssey* 12.35; *Iliad* 16.350 and 20.368) and κεχηνώς used in the *Iliad* of a warrior who just died and whose

20. Cf. *Theogony* 304 ff. where Typhon is called ὕβριστής and ἄνομος, and 237, which describes Phorkys, brother of the monstrous Keto and father of Medousa, as ἀγῆνωρ. Also note that the Cyclopes are ὑπερφιάλοι (*Odyssey* 9.106) and that their ξργα βίαια parallel the κακά πολλά perpetrated by Typhon and the she-dragon of Delphi (*Homeric Hymn to Apollon* 3.302, 355).

21. The myth is told in Pausanias 2.7.7. Cf. also Ovid. For the real or presumed foolishness of geese cf. English (silly) goose and German *dumme Gans*, a silly girl. However, it should be noted that the Romans held this bird sacred to Juno and held it in high esteem, especially after the Sacred Geese saved the Capitol. Furthermore, in India the goose, sometimes indistinguishable from the swan, was identified with several deities, and notably with Vishnu and Krishna.

22. Cf. *Odyssey* 22.32-33 τοὶ δὲ νῆπιοι οὐκ ἐνόησαν, / ὡς δὴ σφιν καὶ πᾶσιν ὀλέθρου πείρατ' ἐφήπτο; also 2.281-282 τῶν νῦν μνηστήρων μὲν ἕα βουλῆν τε νόον τε / ἀφραδέων, ἐπεὶ οὐ τι νοήμονες οὐδὲ δίκαιοι. It is interesting to compare these lines with 3.130-136 in which Nestor calls some of the foolish Achaeans who perished οὐ τι νοήμονες οὐδὲ δίκαιοι (133).

23. Even if most of the time she does this against her will and better judgment, it is clear that she must begrudge their wanton feasting less when she is tempted to choose one of them as her husband.

24. Cf. Varro, *De Re Rustica* 3, 10, 5; Pliny, *Historia Animalium* 10.163; Dionysius in 'Ορνιθιακά, ed. by F. S. Lehrs *Poetae Bucolici et Didactici* (1851), *passim* on geese. There are parallels in other languages. Thus the cognate ON *gana* means "to gape after greedily".

mouth is gaping wide open (*Iliad* 16.409)²⁵. This last form may be Homer's subtle way of suggesting through assonance that the suitors who are foolish (ἀφραδεῖς, νήπιοι, οὐ νοήμονες) will pay for gaping after another man's wife and property by ending up dead, and, as it were, changing from χῆνες, 'geese', to κεχρηγότες, 'gaping corpses'²⁶. It may be objected that this suggestion is far-fetched and that Homer was not capable of such subtlety or that he was altogether innocent of putting etymology, as he knew it, to good advantage. The following famous passage suffices to demonstrate that this was not the case:

..... οὐδέ νυ σοί περ
 ἐντρέπεται φίλον ἦτορ, 'Ολύμπιε. οὐ νύ τ' 'Οδυσσεὺς
 Ἄργείων παρὰ νηυσὶ χαρίζετ' ἱερὰ ῥέζων
 Τροίη ἐν εὐρείῃ; τί νύ οἱ τόσον ὠδύσασο, Ζεῦ;
 (Athena addressing Zeus in *Odyssey* 1.60-62)

The passage which describes Penelope's dream contains additional etymological and metaphorical subtleties. If we take Artemidorus as our guide, we may equate πυρὸς (536) with 'male seed' or son (Artem. I, 51 and V, 8) and πύελος (553) with λεκάνη and thus with 'woman' (Artem. III, 30). Indeed, even though πύελος belongs to what is seen immediately after the dream, it is clear that the grain and the water of lines 536-37 are contained in the 'trough' of line 553. In fact, it might not be too daring to suggest that the correspondence of ἐξ ὕδατος with παρὰ πύελον binds dream and reality together. Further, we may observe that, according to Artemidorus, τὸ πίνειν ἐκ λεκάνης stands for τὸ ἐρασθῆναι θεραπαίνης (Artem. III, 30). The allegorical dreams in Homer and in other literary masterpieces became sources for the oneirocritic tradition to which Artemidorus is heir. However, the fact that dream interpreters might see in an allegorical dream things that we, too, are tempted to see does not vitiate the allegory.

Speaking of her pet geese, Penelope says καί τε σφὶν λαίνομαι εἰσορώωσα. The warmth to which she refers is obviously the sublimated sexual attraction she feels for the very men that threaten Odysseus' seed with extinction²⁷. The eagle of the dream breaks the necks of the geese. It is precisely the kind of imagination of which allegory is born that makes it likely that the long and curved neck of a

25. In Aristophanes' *Frogs* κεχρηγότες is used to mean "gaping fools".

26. Even if, strictly speaking, χάσκω, "to gape in eager expectation" (cf. *LSJ* s.v.) is post-Homeric, the possibility of such a semantic connection in Homer's time is very strong. Indeed, the poet who invented the beautiful alliteration of πολυσφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης was not a linguist but he knew how to exploit sound, form, and meaning well.

27. For the range of meanings of λαίνω in Homer, Cf. *Odyssey* 8.426; 10.359; 12.175; *Iliad* 24.119.

goose suggests the idea of the male sexual organ or of a snake²⁸. The eagle descends from the sky and crushes that part of the body of the geese that most closely resembles a snake. In view of this, the allegory of the eagle attacking geese may be a variant of the motif of the eagle attacking a serpent of any kind.

It is true that the Chorus in the *Choephoroi* of Aeschylus tries to console the matricidal Orestes by telling him that by killing his mother and her lover he has lopped off the heads of two snakes (1047). However, it is more remarkable that in Clytemnestra's horrible dream the avenging son is likened to a snake born of Clytemnestra, a snake that draws blood from his mother's breast (526-550). When Orestes hears the dream he sees himself as the snake that will kill her: ἐκδρακοντωθεις δ' ἐγὼ / κτείνω νιν (549-550). He may have killed two snakes, but he must turn into snake to kill his mother. The act of revenge which is necessary represents no celestial power but rather primordial impulses which spring from the earth and from the dead it conceals. Indeed, it is to the earth and to his father's grave that Orestes prays for the dream to come true with himself as agent (540-541).

In the first ode of the *Antigone* of Sophocles, Polyneikes and the Argive army he leads against his native Thebes are likened to a white eagle that soared over the city while the army led by his brother Eteokles is collectively referred to as a giant snake, a dragon (126-127). We clearly have here the eagle pitted in battle against the snake. Sophocles inherited from myth the metaphorical representation of the Theban army as the dragon seed, but the introduction of the eagle, partly borrowed from epic, is in this case his own invention. In the simile of the ode the eagle is routed by the snake with the aid of Zeus who smites the invaders with his thunderbolt. Inasmuch as the eagle is the bird of Zeus, there is an inherent conflict in the simile, a conflict which must be intentional. It should be remembered that Polyneikes was ousted by his brother and that in attacking his own city he was laying claim to what was his by birthright. The feelings of the Theban elders toward him are ambivalent, since his act was not a clear case of treason. Be this as it may, it is possible to suggest that in performing the burial rites for him Antigone buries a dead eagle who fell in fratricidal combat.

The departure from the traditional motif in which the eagle snatches away the snake and kills it is calculated to mirror both the horror of the Theban elders

28. There is no Homeric evidence for this. Ἀύχλιν is used for phallus in Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 680 ff. For ὄφις with the meaning suggested above, cf. *Lysistrata* 759 ff., schol. on *Ekklesiazousai* 908 ὄφιν ἢ τὸ ζῶον ἢ ἐπὶ τοῦ αἰδοίου; also *L. anguis* in *Priap.* 83.33. For details see Henderson, *The Maculate Muse*, Yale University Press 1975, p. 114, 127.

toward the fratricidal act as well as their conflicting feelings as to which of the brothers was right.

There is little doubt that the Greeks looked upon the snake with fear and revulsion. Thus Clytemnestra calls Orestes, who is about to kill her, a snake (A. *Ch.* 928) and Apollo refers to his murderous arrow as a "flying and blazing snake" (A. *Su.* 181). In Aeschylus *Suppliants* one of the Danaids calls the messenger a two-footed snake (895), while in the *Orestes* of Euripides, Orestes is called ὁ μητροφόντης ὄδε πρὸ δωμαίων δράκων (479).

In Norse Mythology an eagle is perched at the top of the cosmic tree Yggdrasil, while a giant serpent gnaws at its roots, obviously working for the destruction of the world. In Indic mythology Garuda, the divine bird that represents the magic power of the words of the Vedas, nurses a hatred of serpents. When Krishna defeats the primeval serpent Kaliya and decides to spare its life and exile it to the Ocean, he has to promise immunity from the fabulous bird Garuda.

The motif of the eagle fighting a snake is found in non-Indo-European cultures as well and appears to be akin to the motif of a god battling and defeating a dragon. Thus we are told that among the Aztecs «the eagle was a representation of the sun god, Huitzilopochtli, and the scene with the eagle fighting the snake is in motif identical to a myth known throughout North America: the combat between a celestial bird, the eagle, the thunderbird, and the monster of the underworld or of water, often a doubleheaded or horned serpent»²⁹. We are, therefore, dealing with a widespread motif. The antithesis between eagle and serpent is nowhere as clear and as symbolically illustrated as in the Norse tradition, since the Yggdrasil is after all an *axis mundi*. However, the Greek tradition certainly shows the eagle and the snake as mortal enemies and as symbols of the opposition which exists between celestial and chthonic elements.

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29. Åke Hultkrantz, *The Religions of the American Indians*, University of California Press, 1979, p. 244.