

Odysseus' Shield and "Penelope"

Daniel E. Gershenson

According to Stesichorus, and Euphorion some 350 years after him,¹ the likeness of a dolphin adorned the shield of Odysseus. Lycophron,² Euphorion's contemporary, no doubt relying, like him, on Stesichorus, called Odysseus δελφινόσημον κλῶπα φοινίκης Θεᾶς, "the thief, whose sign is the dolphin, of the Phoenician goddess."³ Plutarch,⁴ who cites Stesichorus for the device on Odysseus' shield, goes on to explain why this shield bore such a device with a story told by the people of Zacynthus, to the effect that dolphins saved Telemachus when he tumbled into the sea as a baby, so that, out of gratitude, Odysseus had the dolphin's image engraved on his shield (and on his signet ring, as well).

The ancients connected the story of Telemachus' rescue from drowning, and hence of Odysseus' shield, with a similar tale told of Penelope.⁵ According to Eust. *Od.* 1.347,⁶ Penelope threw herself into the sea when she heard the false report of Odysseus' death spread by Nauplius, Palamedes' father, and was saved from death by fen-ducks or wigeons (πηνέλοπες).⁷ That report is cited from

¹ Stesichorus fr. 48P. and Euphorion fr. 98 (Cf. L.A. de Cuenca, *Euforion de Calcis, Fragmentos y Epigramas*, [Madrid 1976], 213), both from Σ *Lyc. Alex.* 658.

² *Lyc. Alex.* 657B.

³ No story of the theft of a Phoenician goddess by Odysseus is known; he is identified in this passage of Lycophron only by the adjective δελφινόσημος, referring to the device on his shield. Such a device is termed ἐπίσημον in Greek.

⁴ *Sollert. Anim.* 36, 985b.

⁵ Carl Robert, *Die griechische Heldensage*, 3.2², (Zurich 1926), 1398 n. 1. The story of the meeting of Telemachus and Penelope, upon his return from his travels, seems to be related in Stes. fr. 32P., whereas the fen-duck (or wigeon) is mentioned in fr. 85P., and, as we have seen, Odysseus' shield in fr. 48P. All these may come from the *Nostoi* of Stesichorus.

⁶ P. 1422, 7ff.

⁷ The conjecture that this duck is the fen-duck is made by Olck, s.v. Ente, *PWRE* 5 col. 2644 (Stuttgart 1905). The fen-duck's scientific name is *Athya nyroca*. It is a merganser, and hence accords with the point of view presented in this paper. The wigeon, whose scientific name is *Anas penelope*, is quite similar to the fen-duck,

Didymus Chalcenterus of Alexandria (first century BCE),⁸ and is surely earlier, because most of his reports are taken from earlier sources. He tells us that Penelope's name before the rescue was Ameirake or Arnakia. A similar, related report from ancient or Byzantine commentaries on Pindar and on Lycophron⁹ has it that when Penelope's mother Periboia was pregnant with her, her parents inquired and were told by the oracle αἴσχος ἔχει Περίβοια κλέος τ' ἐν γαστρὶ γυναικῶν, "Women's shame and fame does Periboia hold in her belly," for which reason they cast her into the sea upon her birth. She was saved by ducks (πηνέλοπες) from drowning. Here her name before the rescue is given as Arnaia, from her father's refusal (ἀρνεῖσθαι) to bring her up. In these stories, she was named Penelope after her rescuers, the ducks, only after her rescue.

The duck, her savior, as it were, appears on two vase paintings of Penelope as well: one where it stands between her, seated on a chair and throwing a ball, or a ball of yarn, from one hand to the other, and a young man, Hermes or Telemachos, dressed in a long tunic and leaning on a staff; the other where Penelope, marked as such by a basket of wool, holds a comely duck under her arm.¹⁰

It is fortunate for us that the story of Odysseus' shield is associated with Penelope's near-drowning, because the dolphin is such a common device on shields in Greek antiquity¹¹ that we would be hard put to discover its meaning otherwise. Carl Robert¹² surmised that the story of Telemachus' rescue by a dolphin is an imitation of the report of Penelope's rescue by ducks, but that is hardly likely; for the difficulty with the aetiological stories of Penelope's rescue lies in the fact that it is impossible for ducks to save a drowning human being. The case is different with the dolphin; for many rescues of floundering humans by dolphins are attested.¹³ Thus if any story is original it would seem to be that of Telemachus' rescue rather than Penelope's. In fact both stories are likely to be

despite the fact that it is a freshwater duck; it is also one of the most widely distributed of ducks, and thus accords well with the πανέλοπες of Alc. Z21 P., who come from the ends of Ocean.

⁸ See also Σ HPQ to *Od.* 4.797.

⁹ Σ Pind. *Ol.* 9.85 and Tz. ad Lyc. 792.

¹⁰ One, a red-figured vase painting on a vase from Nola, discussed in Panofka, *Ann. d. I.* (1841), 261f.; the other, a vase-painting in F.G. Welcker, *Götterlehre* II (Göttingen 1859), 658, 15 (see also his *Alte Denkmäler* V [1864], 231f.).

¹¹ G.H. Chase, "The Shield Devices of the Greeks," *HSCP* 13 (1902), 61-127 lists examples of the dolphin, or dolphins, set as a device upon shields in his listings XCVI - XCIX.

¹² *Loc. cit.* (above, n. 5).

¹³ For this reason, Plutarch, *op. cit.* (above, n. 4) 984c, calls the dolphin the only animal that likes man and is fond of him. He says its singing makes it dear to Apollo. For historical cases of people saved from drowning by dolphins, cf. e.g. R. Stenuit, *Delfine meine Freunde* (Munich--Basel--Vienna 1970).

rationalizations of the ancient meaning of the name "Penelope" and the appearance of the dolphin on the shield of Odysseus.

Hence, it is inherently unlikely that the rescue should have given Penelope her name or Odysseus his shield's device. Shields' devices are often masks of terror, aimed at frightening the enemy, but they can also be many other things, including representations of the bearer's mission, as he conceives it.¹⁴ Neither the duck as the namesake of Penelope or the dolphin as the device on Odysseus's shield can be due to a rescue of the sort the ancient sources picture, but the theme of nearly drowning may provide a clue to their meaning; for the drowning person disappears beneath the waves and reappears once again, like the dolphin and the duck, who dive beneath the waters and rise to the surface anew.

Wilamowitz concluded that the story of Penelope's near-drowning was no explanation for her name; he thought rather that the soul-bird was the origin of "the custom of giving girls bird-names,"¹⁵ and he was sure that the nymph Penelope,¹⁶ who had the form of a duck, and was not identical with the heroine of Ithaca, was the mother of the god Pan.¹⁷ He thought the soul-bird had been discredited by modern exaggeration,¹⁸ but, in fact, there is some meager evidence for a soul-bird in Greece and much evidence for it elsewhere. In the Greek cultural area the sisters of Meleager, or the female mourners for him (Meleagrides), and the companions of Diomedes are heroic figures who assumed the shape of birds;¹⁹ the temple of Achilleus on the isle of Leuce was tended by

¹⁴ Cf. H.H. Bacon, "The Shield of Eteocles", *Arion* (1964), 27-38.

¹⁵ Such women's names as Akalanthis, "goldfinch", Peristera, "dove", and Chelidon, "swallow", in addition to Penelope., appear in W. Pape and G. Benseler, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen* (Braunschweig 1911).

¹⁶ The god Pan is called the son of Penelope and Apollo (Paus. 8.38.8; Pindar fr. 15 [Tury] cited in Serv. *ad Verg. Geor.* 1.17; Σ Eur. *Rhes.* 36; Σ Lucan 3.402), but Tz. *ad Lyc.* 772 (whence Duris of Samos, *FGrH* 76F21) identifies this Penelope as a nymph, not the wife of Odysseus.

¹⁷ *Der Glaube der Hellenen* I³ (Darmstadt 1959), 147 and 243 n. 3. In the first of these places he writes "the custom of giving girls bird-names hardly has been traced back far enough: the soul-bird has been discredited by modern exaggeration, but it was a valid corporeal manifestation of the soul of the dead before the little winged person or, later, the butterfly took over that function."

¹⁸ That is surely a reference to Richard Holland, *Heroenvögel in dem griechischen Mythos* (Leipzig 1896), 7ff. Holland was an archaeologist who found soul-birds everywhere.

¹⁹ S. Eitrem, *s.v.* Heros in *RE VIII* (Stuttgart 1912), col. 1119. The story of the Meleagrides (a kind of bird, Pliny *NH* 10.38, probably the guinea hen), is found in Pliny, *NH* 77.11, who quotes Sophocles (Nauck p. 219), to the effect that amber is the tears of these birds shed for Meleager; the metamorphosis of the female mourners for Meleager into these birds is chronicled in Ps.-Apoll. 1.72f., Ael. *HA* 4.42,

sea gulls and cormorants.²⁰ Elsewhere, in the ancient Near East, the Egyptian Book of the Dead has the soul of the departed leave the body in the shape of a falcon; in Mesopotamia the dead were thought of as having turned into birds; among shamanists, too, birds function as psychopomps, and “becoming a bird oneself, or being accompanied by a bird, indicates the capacity, while still alive, to undertake the ecstatic journey to the sky and beyond”.²¹ Thus, it is likely that the concept of the soul-bird was known to the Greeks from the ancient Near East, with which they were in contact from an early period. Hence, according to Wilamowitz, the explanation of the duck associated with Penelope will derive from the ancient Near East and the Northern Eurasian and North American cultural area.

The fact that the duck dives is the attribute that makes it the shaman’s costume among the Northern Tungus, in one of the same areas where it is the soul-bird.²² Diving allows it to be reborn, as it reappears above the waves, and this is precisely the symbolism, found in shamanic séances among the Inuit (Eskimos), of the seals’ breathing-hole in the winter sea-ice as the connection between this world and the nether and upper worlds.²³ The same symbolism makes the duck also the primeval creator of the world; the duck or some other diving bird appears in that role in tales from Northern Eurasia and Arctic North America collected by M. Eliade.²⁴

The duck, and other sea-birds, function on the land, in the sea and in the air, that is they waddle, dive and fly, and for that reason they served as the inspira-

and elsewhere, while the companions of Diomedes metamorphosed into snowy swans appear in Ovid *Met.* 14.491-509, and also in Juba (Pliny *NH* 10.61). These cases have been singled out for identification with soul-birds, unlike the myths concerning Procne, Philomela, Aedon and Itys, although their stories seem to be of the same type as these last.

²⁰ The description in Arr. *Peripl. M. Eux.* (ed. A.G. Roos, Leipzig 1967), 21.3 of the isle of Leuce, or Achilleos nesos, or Dromos Achilleos, tells of innumerable gulls, great cormorants and lesser cormorants that tend the temple of Achilles on the island. Richard Holland, *op. cit.* thought Achilles was a “divinity of light” whose servingmaids these birds were, but the story of their service to the temple by wetting it with sea-water are rather to be connected with the temple birds of Eur. *Ion* 106-107 and 1196-1205, as well as of Ps. 84:3, “Yea, the sparrow hath found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O Lord of hosts.”

²¹ M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Bollingen Series 76 (Princeton 1964), 98, 477-482, esp. 480.

²² *Ibid.* 149.

²³ Jarich Oosten, “Theoretical Problems in the Study of Inuit Shamanism”, in Mihály Hoppál and Otto von Sadovszky, edd., *Shamanism Past and Present Part 2* (Budapest 1989), 336.

²⁴ *Zalmoxis, the Vanishing God*, tr. W. Trask (Chicago 1972), 95-106.

tion for the ornithomorphic creator who makes the cosmogonic dive far and wide over Eurasia and North America. The story, that must be extremely ancient, goes that when the surface of the land was covered with water only the duck was there, and she dived down to the bottom and brought up earth until she built the dry land.²⁵ Thus her chief function is that of disappearing and coming into sight again.

The same thing is precisely one of the most striking characteristics of the dolphin that is the device on the shield of Odysseus. Dolphins and whales regularly break the surface of the sea in order to breathe and go under again. This activity of theirs is called "perpetual motion" by the Stoics.²⁶ Aristotle was the first to give a scientific explanation of the dolphin's behavior. He assigns it to the fact that they breathe air and mentions they had been seen sleeping with their noses out of the water.²⁷ The Stoics could not accept most of the Peripatetics' explanations; their "scientific" explanation, preserved for us by Aelian,²⁸ has them disappearing and coming into sight again when they fall asleep and fall to the bottom of the sea, where the contact with the ground wakes them up and sends them up to the surface again. Before Aristotle, when dolphins were awake and plunged down into the water and emerged again, they must have appeared, to those ignorant of the fact that they are mammals who must breathe air or of any "scientific" explanation of these activities, as if they were relaying messages from a hidden world.

Now this function of the dolphin is all-important in its role as part of the complex of symbols that surround Apollo.²⁹ The dolphin, however, in two of its other aspects, is associated with Poseidon, called *δελφίνων μεδέων*, "ruler over the dolphins," in *Ar. Eq.* 563, and also with Aphrodite,³⁰ who was borne by

²⁵ Karl Jettmar, "Die Aussage der Archäologie zur Religionsgeschichte Nordeurasiens", in Ivar Paulson *et al.*, *Die Religionen Nordeurasiens und der amerikanischen Arktis* (Stuttgart 1962), 313, writes "the dive by an ornithomorphic god appears to be documented in the rock paintings and the ceramics of the Bronze Age in northern Europe and Western Siberia", basing himself on Efimenko, "K voprosu ob istokah kul'turi pozdnei bronzi na territorii Volgo-Kami" ("On issues of late bronze culture on Volgo-Kam territory), *Arkheologia* 2 (Kiev 1948), 3-43 (in Ukrainian), and on Gurina, "Drevnaya istoriya severo-zapadnoi evropeiskoi chasti SSSR" ("Ancient history of the North-West European part of USSR"), *MIA* 87 (1946), 228-246, and "Oleneostrovski mogilnik" ("The burial-ground in Oleneostrov"), *MIA* 47 (1961), 144-151.

²⁶ Aelian *N.A.* 11.22.

²⁷ *Ar. HA* 566B 14-15.

²⁸ Aelian *N.A.* 11.22.

²⁹ Daniel E. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-god*, *JIES Monograph No. 8* (McLean, VA 1991).

³⁰ Otto Keller, *Thiere des classischen Alterthums in culturgeschichtlicher Beziehung* (Innsbruck 1887), 211-235 and 416-430.

dolphins to land at Paphos after she was born from the waves.³¹ The first of these deities is associated with the marine nature of the dolphin, and the second with its playfulness, which is appropriate to the erotic activity Aphrodite represents.

The chief theme of Odysseus' story, on the other hand, is that of one who has disappeared on the waves and who reappears once again, so that the dolphin in its first significance, as the animal of Apollo Delphinios, is indisputably the appropriate symbol of his "odyssey".

Penelope's name must derive from the diving duck with its similar significance, so that here again we have a feature shared by Odysseus and Penelope. In fact, disappearing and coming into sight again is a kind of deceit of the type practiced by both Odysseus and Penelope, so that the qualities of the animals with which they are associated are consistent with their casts of mind.³² In addition, as we have seen, the duck's dive can be a cosmogonic activity. As the creative force that pervades the three realms of air, land and sea, the duck is a fitting symbol of the centrality of the home and of Penelope's sometimes enigmatic role in the home in the *Odyssey*.

Tel Aviv University

³¹ Nonn. *D.* 13.439-443.

³² I wish to refer in this context to a talk given at the Classical Association of the Atlantic States Spring Meeting at Princeton University on April 23, 1993, by Mark Molloy of Hamilton College, titled "A Marriage of True Minds: Penelope as Trickster", which demonstrated that every trickster motif associated with Odysseus away from home is paralleled by a similar one of Penelope in the domestic sphere.