



PENELOPE THE *HETAIRA*: ODYSSEAN INNUENDO IN STRABO'S ACCOUNT OF CORINTH (*GEOGRAPHY* 8.6.20)

ABSTRACT

Following Janko's suggestion that two trimeters cited at Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20 form a couplet from an unknown, possibly Aristophanic comedy, this note explores the resonance and meaning of the third citation contained in the same chapter of the geographer's work. It proposes that this third citation, which relates to a Corinthian hetaira's work at the loom and is possibly from either the same or a different comedy, contains a joke hinting at the *Odyssey* and alternative traditions regarding Penelope's chastity. This *Odyssean echo* thematically connects this citation to the comic trimeters, which also contain clear allusions to the *Odyssey*.

Keywords: Penelope; *Odyssey*; comedy; Aristophanes; Strabo; Corinth

In Strabo's description of Corinth (*Geography* 8.6.20–3) we find three anonymous citations about the city's famed prosperity. The first relates to Corinth's appeal to merchants as a means of avoiding travelling around Cape Malea, a treacherous sailing route (8.6.20):

ὁ δὲ Κόρινθος 'ἀφνειός' μὲν λέγεται διὰ τὸ ἐμπόριον. ἐπὶ <γάρ> τῷ Ἴσθμῳ κείμενος καὶ δυεῖν λιμένων κύριος, ὃν ὁ μὲν τῆς Ἀσίας, ὁ δὲ τῆς Ἰταλίας ἐγγύς ἐστι, ῥαδίας ποιεῖ τὰς ἐκατέρωθεν ἀμοιβὰς τῶν φορτίων πρὸς ἀλλήλους τοῖς τοσοῦτον ἀφεστῶσιν. ἦν δ' ὥσπερ ὁ πορθμὸς οὐκ εὐπλοῦς ὁ κατὰ τὴν Σικελίαν τὸ παλαιόν, οὕτω καὶ τὰ πελάγη, καὶ μάλιστα τὸ ὑπὲρ Μαλεῶν διὰ τὰς ἀντιπνοίας ἀφ' οὗ καὶ παροιμιάζονται:

Μαλέας δὲ κόμψας ἐπιλάθου τῶν οἴκαδε.

ἀγαπητὸν οὖν ἐκατέροις ἦν, τοῖς τε ἐκ τῆς Ἰταλίας καὶ τοῖς ἐκ τῆς Ἀσίας ἐμπόροις, ἀφείσι τὸν περὶ Μαλέας πλοῦν εἰς Κόρινθον κατάγεσθαι <καὶ διατίθεσθαι> τὸν φόρτον αὐτόθι.¹

Corinth is said to be 'wealthy' because of its trading-places. For it is situated on the Isthmus and has power over two harbours, one for Asia, and the other near Italy, making the transfer of goods from each one to the other easy for places at such a great distance. And just as the Strait of Sicily was not easily navigable in the past, similarly the open sea was not easily navigable, especially beyond Malea, because of the adverse winds. As a result, this saying arose:

After going round Malea, forget your home.

And so it was desirable for the traders from both Italy and Asia to avoid the voyage around Malea and to put in at Corinth and unload their goods there.²

¹ Text from S.L. Radt, *Strabons Geographika, Band 2. Buch V–VIII* (Göttingen, 2003).

² All translations are my own.

The second and third citations come a little later in the same chapter when Strabo describes the famous Corinthian *hetairai* who inhabited the city's sanctuary of Aphrodite:

τό τε τῆς Ἀφροδίτης ἱερὸν οὕτω πλούσιον ὑπῆρξεν ὥστε πλείους ἢ χιλίας ἱεροδούλους ἐκέκτετο ἑτάϊρας, ἃς ἀνετίθεσαν τῇ θεῷ καὶ ἄνδρες καὶ γυναῖκες. καὶ διὰ ταύτας οὖν πολυωχλεῖτο ἡ πόλις καὶ ἐπλουτίζετο· οἱ γὰρ ναύκληροὶ ῥαδίως ἐξανηλίσκοντο, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἡ παρομία φησὶν

οὐ παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἐς Κόρινθον ἐσθ' ὁ πλοῦς.

(καὶ δὴ καὶ μνημονεύεται τις ἑτάϊρα πρὸς τὴν ὀνειδίζουσαν ὅτι οὐ φιλεργὸς εἶη οὐδ' ἐρίων ἄπαιτο εἰπεῖν 'ἐγὼ μέντοι ἡ τοιαύτη τρεῖς ἤδη καθεῖλον ἰστός ἐν βραχεῖ χρόνῳ τούτῳ').

Aphrodite's sanctuary was so wealthy that it possessed more than a thousand temple-slave *hetairai* who had been dedicated by men and women. And because of them the city filled up and was enriched. The merchants spent their wealth readily, from which this saying arose:

Not for every man is the voyage to Corinth.

(And it is said that a certain *hetaira* replied to a woman reproaching her for not being industrious and for not touching wool: 'But I have already taken down three webs in this short time').

As Janko has pointed out, the first two citations are comic trimeters, and although they are not explicitly connected together in the passage, it seems likely that they are both from the same work and form a couplet about the difficulties of navigating around the Peloponnese for both poor and rich travellers alike.³ This couplet may be Aristophanic, since Hesychius attributes the words οὐ παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἐς Κόρινθον ἐσθ' ὁ πλοῦς to the playwright.⁴

The chapter's closing citation concerning the words of a Corinthian *hetaira* has also attracted limited attention. Both Gilhuly and Roller have pointed out that her words depend on wordplay relating to the word ἰστός.⁵ Not only does this word refer to the upright beam of a loom, the warp fixed upon the loom, and the web created on the loom, it also refers to the mast of a ship, and—by extension—becomes a euphemism for the erect penis.⁶ The *hetaira* thus responds to the criticism that she does not spend enough time on wool-working, the respectable occupation of women, with the

³ R. Janko, 'Pity the poor traveller: a new comic trimeter (Aristophanes?)', *CQ* 57 (2007), 296–7; cf. D. Dueck, "'Bird's milk in Samos": Strabo's use of geographical proverbs and proverbial expressions', *SCI* 23 (2004), 41–56, at 46 for the suggestion that the line οὐ παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἐς Κόρινθον ἐσθ' ὁ πλοῦς derives from a comedy.

⁴ Hsch. ο 1799 Latte–Cunningham = Ar. fr. 928 K.–A.: see Janko (n. 3), 297. For the Aristophanic attribution see A. Bagordo, *Aristophanes fr. 821–976* (Göttingen, 2018), 124–7.

⁵ See K. Gilhuly, 'Corinth, courtesans, and the politics of place', in K. Gilhuly and N. Worman (edd.), *Space, Place, and Landscape in Ancient Greek Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, 2014), 171–99, at 184–5 and D.W. Roller, *A Historical and Topographical Guide to the Geography of Strabo* (Cambridge, 2018), 478–9. I am grateful to the reviewer for alerting me to a variation of this joke at Eust. in *Od.* 2.72.12 (on *Od.* 14.311), which confirms this interpretation: λέγεται γὰρ ἐν Κορίνθῳ ἑτάϊρας τινὸς ἐπαινουμένης ὡς ἐργατικῆς εἰπεῖν τὸν ἀκούοντα ὅτι καὶ πᾶς οὐκ ἂν εἶη ἐργατικῆ, ἥτις ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ δύο ἰστός καθεῖλε; καὶ δοκεῖ μὲν ὁ λόγος δηλοῦν δύο ἰσάτια. τὸ δ' ἦν ἄλλως, ὅτι ταχὺ δύο ναυκλήρους ἀπήγαγεν ἐκείνη τοῦ εὐπορεῖν, φοιτῶντας ἐπ' αὐτήν.

⁶ For this latter meaning see the *hapax* ἰστοτρίβης at Aesch. *Ag.* 1443 (with discussion at G.L. Koniaris, 'An obscene word in Aeschylus', *AJPh* 101 [1980], 42–3; W.B. Tyrrell, 'An obscene

retort that she does in fact work phenomenally hard at the *ιστός* multiple times a day. The Corinthian context lends a further resonance to this *double entendre*, since those engaging with *hetairai* in the famous-port city tended to be sailors and wealthy ναύκληροι, as Strabo had already pointed out at 8.6.20. Furthermore, it is likely that the phrase καθεῖλον ἰστός has an inherently nautical flavour as this combination is later found in contexts relating to the disassembly of a ship's mast.⁷ Nautical masts, erect penises and wool-working thus coalesce in the *hetaira's* witty response.

But in addition to a clever play on words, this reply also contains a literary joke. On hearing the *hetaira's* claim that she spends her time industriously 'taking down webs', the reader may be reminded of the only figure in the Greek tradition renowned for the frequent erection and deconstruction of webs: Penelope. In the *Odyssey* Penelope famously 'set up a great web in her halls' (στησαμένη μέγαν ἰστόν ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν, 2.94; cf. 19.139, 24.129) and then deceived the suitors in Ithaca for three years by weaving this web by day before taking it down at night (ἔνθα καὶ ἡματιή μὲν ὑφαίνεσκεν μέγαν ἰστόν, | νύκτας δ' ἀλλύεσκεν, ἐπεὶ δαΐδας παραθεῖτο. | ὧς τρίετες μὲν ἔληθε δόλω καὶ ἔπειθεν Ἀχαιοῦς, 2.104–6; cf. 19.149–50, 24.139–41). Moreover, the fact that the force of the *hetaira's* words depends partly on the connection between *ιστός* as a term related to both wool-working and seafaring is also uniquely redolent of the *Odyssey*, since in that poem the word is one that links Penelope, who toils with the loom at home, to Odysseus, who frequently erects and eventually even lashes himself to a mast during his troubles at sea: this parallelism emphasizes the marital bond between them.⁸ The echo of Penelope's 'taking-down' of her *ιστός* in the Corinthian *hetaira's* response is ironized by the fact that Odysseus' wife famously undertook her repetitive work at the loom as a means of remaining faithful to her husband by deceiving the suitors; the *hetaira's* work at the *ιστός*, however, has precisely the opposite effect.

This ironic reversal is complicated further by the fact that it hints at a certain aspect of Penelopean reception that was familiar to ancient readers. Though Penelope remains faithful to her husband in the *Odyssey* itself, the later literary tradition was not so sure of her chastity. For example, Herodotus claimed (2.145) that the Greeks said that the god Pan was the son of Penelope by Hermes, a genealogy that was also found in Pindar's *Hymn to Pan* (fr. 100 Snell).⁹ In the third century B.C.E. this slur against Penelope's chastity became even harsher: Duris of Samos, for example, plays on etymological explanations for Pan's name and goes so far as to claim that Penelope gave birth to the god after sleeping with *all* of the suitors (καὶ Δοῦρις δὲ ἐν τῷ Περὶ Ἀγαθοκλέους μάχλον φησὶ τὴν Πηνελόπην καὶ συνελθοῦσαν πᾶσι τοῖς μνηστῆρσι

word in Aeschylus', *AJPh* 101 [1980], 44–6; E.K. Borthwick, 'ἸΣΤΟΤΡΙΒΗ: An addendum', *AJPh* 102 [1981], 1–2; A.H. Sommerstein, 'Comic elements in tragic language: the case of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*', in A. Willi [ed.], *The Language of Greek Comedy* [Oxford, 2002], 151–68, at 155–6; E. Medda, *Eschilo: Agamennone* [Pisa, 2017], 3.354–6), and Lucian, *VH* 2.45: ὕπτιοι κείμενοι ἐπὶ τοῦ ὕδατος ὀρθώσαντες τὰ αἰδοῖα—μεγάλα δὲ φέρουσιν—ἐξ αὐτῶν ὀθόνην πετάσαντες. On the sexual overtones of τρίβειν see J. Henderson, *The Maculate Muse* (Oxford, 1991), 176.

⁷ E.g. Polyb. 1.61.1, 14.10.11. I am grateful to the reviewer for drawing my attention to these examples.

⁸ On this connection see R. Bertolin, 'The mast and the loom: signifiers of separation and authority', *Phoenix* 62 (2008), 92–108.

⁹ On Penelope and Pan in Pindar see e.g. J.A. Haldane, 'Pindar and Pan, frs. 95–100 Snell', *Phoenix* 22 (1968), 18–31, at 23–5; L. Lehnus, *L'inno a Pan di Pindaro* (Milan, 1979), 142–9; M. Jost, 'À propos des généalogies de Pan', in L. Bodiou et al. (edd.), *Chemin faisant: mythes, cultes et société en Grèce ancienne* (Rennes, 2009), 173–80.

γεννήσαι τὸν τραγοσκελῆ Πάνα, ὃν εἰς θεοὺς ἔχουσιν, *BNJ* 76 F 21).¹⁰ The *hetaira*'s words therefore take on a further ironic aspect for the reader who knows these stories, since in this tradition Penelope's openness to all suitors makes her seem like a sort of archetypal proto-Corinthian *hetaira*.

Furthermore, if we read the *hetaira*'s words in conjunction with the other citations in this passage, there seems to be another Odyssean connection in play here. In the first trimeter, 'after going round Malea, forget your home' (Μαλέας δὲ κόμψας ἐπιλάθου τῶν οἴκαδε), there is a clear allusion to the *Odyssey*, since it was precisely at the point when Odysseus rounded Cape Malea that the previously geographically-plausible route of his course home to Ithaca was derailed by the intervention of Boreas (9.67–81).¹¹ After being swept away from Malea Odysseus' encounters with fantastical people and places begin, starting with the Lotus-Eaters (9.82–104)—a people who literally encourage those they encounter to eat lotus fruit and 'forget their home' (λωτὸν ἐρεπτόμενοι μενέμεν νόστου τε λαθέσθαι, *Od.* 9.97; cf. οὐκέτ' ἀπαγγεῖλαι πάλιν ἦθελεν οὐδὲ νέεσθαι, 9.95). If it is correct, as Janko suggests, to link this trimeter about Malea with the following trimeter, οὐ παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἐς Κόρινθόν ἐσθ' ὁ πλοῦς, then this allusion relating to the dangers faced by Odysseus on his travels is also linked to the idea of Corinth's *hetairai* and the equally impossible obstacles—and temptations—that they offer to male seafarers. Moreover, if the Corinthian *hetaira*'s salacious reply about her ἰστός humorously hints at the figure of Penelope, as argued above, then we can see that all three citations in this passage are related to the *Odyssey*.

This thematic use of related textual references accords with Strabo's practice elsewhere in the *Geography*, where multiple citations, either from the same work or different literary sources, are often quoted, summarized or paraphrased.¹² Though the *hetaira*'s words do not form a trimeter, it is possible that they constitute a paraphrase of a comedic joke found either in the comedy to which the other two trimeters in this chapter very probably belong, or to a different comedy. This former suggestion is particularly attractive because of the thematic connections to the *Odyssey* which the citations in the chapter share, and because of Strabo's tendency to include multiple examples from the same work to support his arguments. If the *hetaira*'s words at the close of this chapter also hint at the *Odyssey* and relate to the same, possibly Aristophanic comedy from which the two trimeters most probably originate, then the idea that this play contained an Odyssean joke relating to seafaring, Corinthian *hetairai* and sexual availability and exclusivity becomes attractive.¹³ In this case, the line οὐ παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἐς Κόρινθόν ἐσθ' ὁ πλοῦς would also possibly relate to both Penelope and the Corinthian *hetaira* as women who both paradoxically hold themselves

¹⁰ See Jost (n. 9) on how attitudes towards Penelope's infidelity become harsher over the course of the fifth to third centuries. Later negative sources alluding to Penelope's extra-marital appetites include Ach. Tat. 1.8.6; Palladas, *Anth. Pal.* 9.166; Σ on Oppian, *Hal.* 3.15 (where Penelope is explicitly labelled as a πόρνη).

¹¹ The use of Μαλέας, the Homeric plural form of the toponym, also hints at the *Odyssey*: on this form see Janko (n. 3), 296.

¹² On Strabo's citation practice see D. Dueck, 'Strabo's use of poetry', in D. Dueck, H. Lindsay and S. Potheary (edd.), *Strabo's Cultural Geography: The Making of a Kolossourgia* (Cambridge, 2005), 86–117.

¹³ Though elsewhere in Aristophanes at *Thesm.* 547–50 Penelope is held up as a supposed model of female chastity (cf. Eubulus, fr. 115 K.–A.; see R.L. Hunter, *Eubulus* [Cambridge, 1985], ad loc.), in contrast to mythical women such as Melanippe and Phaedra—though this passage can be read ironically if we consider that ancient audiences may have been aware of alternate theories regarding Penelope's chastity.

aloof—or pretend to—from every man, while simultaneously being known as figures with potentially unlimited sexual availability for the right kind of suitor.

Though we cannot attribute the Corinthian *hetaira*'s paraepic joke to the possibly Aristophanic play from which the trimeters seemingly originate with absolute certainty, the idea that the *hetaira*'s words may ultimately derive from a comedy is further supported by the particular significance of the *Odyssey* in paraepic passages in that genre, which drew predominantly on that poem for material.¹⁴ The ultimate derivation of the Corinthian *hetaira*'s joke from a comedy is thus a distinct possibility. But regardless of whether Strabo's citation originates from a comedy or not, one thing we can certainly say is that much of the force of the *hetaira*'s innuendo-laden quip results from its connection to the *Odyssey*, and specifically to Penelope. As such, Strabo's account of Corinth at *Geography* 8.6.20 is an intriguing addition to our knowledge of the ancient reception of Odysseus' supposedly ever-faithful wife.

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¹⁴ M. Revermann, 'Paraepic comedy: point(s) and practices', in E. Bakola, L. Prauscello and M. Telò (edd.), *Greek Comedy and the Discourse of Genres* (Cambridge, 2013), 101–28 at 112–24 suggests that the inversion of Odyssean character types as a means of transforming and potentially deflating the grandeur of Homer's poetry is a key element of comedy's use of the *Odyssey*—a model which the transformation of the faithful Penelope into a Corinthian *hetaira* would certainly fit. The *Odyssey* was also a particular influence on the fifth-century comedian Theopompus, who wrote a *Penelope*: see M.C. Farmer, 'Theopompus' Homer: paraepic in Old and Middle Comedy', *CPhil* 115 (2020), 339–64; cf. M.C. Farmer, *Theopompos* (Göttingen, 2022), 151–5.