Penelopean Simaetha: A Flawed Paradigm of Femininity in Theocritus’ Second Idyll

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**Abstract:** Scholars have long noted the deeply intertextual features of Simaetha’s monologue in *Idyll 2*, including its Homeric, Sapphic and tragic resonances. In this contribution, however, I focus on an underexplored connection between Theocritus’ speaker and the Odyssean Penelope. I first highlight the *Idyll*’s pervasive engagement with heroic epic, dwelling especially on parallels with Callimachus’ *Hecale* and Homer’s *Odyssey*, before turning to investigate Simaetha’s attempts to fashion herself on the paradigm of Odysseus’ faithful wife. Through a series of verbal and situational parallels, I argue that she articulates an idealised vision of herself as the perfect match for the Odyssean Delphis. But as her narrative goes on to show, both she and her lover ultimately fail to live up to this Homeric model. In reality, she is merely one stop-off on Delphis’ merry rounds of love, more like the Odyssean witch Circe than Odysseus’ loyal and loving spouse.

Theocritus’ second *Idyll* is one of his most celebrated non-bucolic poems, a mimetic monologue by the young woman Simaetha, who has not seen her lover Delphis for eleven days and has since heard rumours that his attentions have wandered elsewhere.¹ As a last resort to regain his love, she turns to magic and performs an elaborate ritual in which she recounts the origins of her love affair to the Moon.

In recent years, discussion of this poem has been marred by a controversy surrounding the nature of its female speaker Simaetha. Some scholars regard her as a simple, naïve girl, whose unconscious evocation of literary models, mistaken mythological analogies and bungled attempts at magic are designed to provoke a reaction of amused irony from Theocritus’ learned audience.² Others, by contrast, regard her as a manipulative narrator, who skilfully exploits a panoply of narratological techniques to cast herself in the role of pathetic victim and maximise her chances of

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¹ δωδεκαταῖος (*Idl.* 2. 4, 157). This is often translated ‘twelve days’, but given the Greeks’ inclusive counting, ‘eleven’ is more strictly correct (as e.g. Hopkinson (1988: 157); Verity (2002: 7, 11)).


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successfully accomplishing her magical rite. These interpretations are often directly opposed, but they are not in fact incompatible. However knowing and rhetorically refined Simaetha’s words may be, we readers still encounter her tale at a further remove and can sense the distance between her own version of events and the reality that lies beyond them. However good a narrator she is, she is not an omniscient mouthpiece of the Muses and nor can she retain full control of her narrative or its reception. Much of the pathos and irony of the poem in fact derives from her vain efforts to control her version of events: however hard she tries, the intertexts that she introduces spiral off in a host of different directions, complicating, undermining and ultimately puncturing the grand pretensions of her narrative.

In this paper, I wish to explore this gap between girl and reader in specifically gendered terms by focusing on Theocritus’ and Simaetha’s manipulation of their epic literary heritage. More precisely, I intend to explore a succession of underexplored allusions in the poem through which Simaetha attempts to fashion herself on the paradigm of the Odyssean Penelope, aligning herself with one of the most respected and prized women of the literary tradition. Through a series of verbal and situational parallels, I contend, she articulates an idealised vision of herself as the perfect match for Delphis, who – in her mind – ultimately fails to live up to the model of the Homeric Odysseus. In the end, however, I will argue that Simaetha’s appropriation of this female literary model is critically flawed, and that our appreciation of its failings only serves to accentuate the pathos and irony of her situation.

In what follows, I will first establish *Idyll 2*’s deep and pervasive engagement with heroic epic as a larger background for my argument, before turning specifically to Simaetha’s Penelopean pretensions.

**1: Epic in a Humble Key**

*Idyll 2* exhibits a well-known cocktail of lyric, tragic and epic flavours. As scholars often note, the symptoms Simaetha exhibits at the sight of Delphis are extremely Sapphic in nature; her abandoned, desperate situation resembles that of many tragic heroines, such as Euripides’ Medea;  

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4 Cf. Breed (1997), reviewing Andrews (1996): ‘But to read Delphis negatively through Simaitha’s focalization is it necessary to free her from the grip of authorial irony? Some other Theocritean lovers telling of their affairs -- the herdsman of 3, Polyphemus in 11, the speaker of 30 -- seem clearly to be humorously ironized; perhaps the focalized reporting of speech by Simaitha simply adds a further level of irony.’ Cf. too Duncan (2001) 44: ‘It is the delicate combination of distancing and identification, objectification and focalization, which produces these poems’ enchanting effects.’


and her unfaithful lover Delphis appears, in many ways, to be an Odysseus reincarnate. Even at a brief glance, this is a densely intertextual poem.

What I would like to stress at the outset, however, is the *Idyll’s* underlying epic stratigraphy, especially in its second half. From the very start of Simaetha’s account, her liaison is framed in pointedly epic terms, elevating her mundane everyday existence onto a grand and heroic plane (*Id. 2. 64-68*):

> Νῦν δὴ μόνα ἐοίσα πόθεν τὸν ἔρωτα δακρύσω; ἐκ τίνος ἄρξομαι; τίς μοι κακὸν ἄγαγε τοῦτο; ἣνθ’ ἄ τοὐβούλου λαδο καναφόρος ἄμμιν Ἀναξίδο ἄλσος ἔς Αρτέμιδος, τά δή τόκα πολλὰ μὲν ἄλλα θηρία πομπεύεσκε περισταδόν, ἐν δὲ λέαινα.

And now that I am alone, *from what point* shall I lament my love? *Where* should I start? *Who* brought me this trouble? Our Anaxo, daughter of Eubulus, went as a basket bearer to the grove of Artemis, in whose honor at that time many animals were paraded, and among them a lioness.

As scholars have often noted, these verses exploit common tropes of epic beginnings. The tricolon of rhetorical questions casts Simaetha as an epic rhapsode, asking not just where, but also with whom she should begin. We can readily compare the proems of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as the opening words of the latter’s internal narrators, such as Phemius and Odysseus: all display a similar concern with beginnings. Like these eminent forebears, Simaetha signals the mass of material at her disposal, while self-consciously acknowledging her key role in structuring and ordering her narrative: she is a rhapsode at work. What has been less clearly acknowledged, however, is the fact that this epic substratum continues into the narrative proper, with the arrival of Anaxo. She is introduced not only with a patronymic that exhibits the typically Homeric genitive ending -οιο, evoking the genealogical pretensions of Homeric heroes, but also with a verse-initial verb of motion (ἠνθ’, 66), which is a recurrent feature of Homeric style, especially at points of

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8 Note too the numerous intratextual connections with *Idyll 1*: ἐτάκετο (*Id. 1. 66*), τάκεαι (*Id. 1. 82, 1. 91*), τάκεται (*Id. 1. 88* ~ τάκοιθ’ (*Id. 2. 29*), ἐτάκετο (*Id. 2. 83*); ἐλχρύσιο (*Id. 1. 30* ~ ἐλχρύσιον (*Id. 2. 78*); ἄδω τί τό ψιθύρισμα (*Id. 1. 1* ~ ἐψιθυρίσδομες ἁδύ (*Id. 2. 141*). I thank Hamidou Richer for drawing these to my attention. He promises to treat such relationships between Theocritus’ urban and pastoral *Idylls* at greater length in the future, but see already Krevans (2006) on the ‘significant cluster of pastoral traits’ in the urban *Idyll* 15.


10 Notably, ἐκ τίνος hovers ambiguously between these two senses: if neuter, it is akin to πόθεν (‘from what point shall I begin?’); if masculine, it is akin to τίς (‘from whom shall I begin?’): see Acosta-Hughes (2010: 18).

11 Cf. εὔ αὐ, *Il. 1. 6*; τίς τ’ ἄρ σφωε θεῶν ἔριδι ξυνέηκε μάχεσθαι, *Il. 1. 8*; ἄμοθεν, *Od. 1. 10*; ἔνθεν, *Od. 8. 500* (Phemius, reported speech); τί πρῶτον τοι ἐπέτα, τί δ’ ὑστάτιον καταλέξω, *Od. 9. 14* (Odysseus). See Andrews (1996: 24-25); Hunter (2014: 141-144). Dover (1971: 95) also compares *Hom. Hymn Ap. 207*, but this is less close since it is concerned with ‘how’ to hymn the god (πῶς) rather than ‘where’ or ‘who’. For a later Roman imitation, see e.g. *Prop. 1. 18. 5-6: unde tuos primum repetam, mea Cynthia, fastus? | quod mihi das flendi, Cynthia, principium?*
transition or beginning, and particularly in the *Odyssey*. Simaetha’s narrative thus opens in a pointedly epic mode, elevating these everyday events into the heroic realm, a potentially incongruous juxtaposition.

This epic flavour recurs repeatedly throughout the account, with its constant array of Homeric morphology and verbal echoes, but it is particularly visible again a short while later, when Simaetha first glimpses Delphis at the festival (*Id.* 2. 76-80):

> ἠδὴ δ’ εὖσα μέσαν κατ’ ἀμαξιτόν, ἃ τὰ Λύκωνος,
> εἶδον Δέλφιν ὁμοῦ τε καὶ Εὐδάμιππον ἰόντας·
> τοῖς δ’ ἢς ξανθοτέρα μὲν ἐλιχρύσσοι γενειάς,
> στήθεα δὲ στίλβοντα πολὺ πλέον ἦ τῷ, Σελάνα,
> ὡς ἀπὸ γυμνασίου καλὸν πόνον ἄρτι λιπόνων.

And when I was already halfway along the road, where Lycon’s place is, I saw Delphis and Eudamippus going along together. Their beards were blonder than the gold flower and their chests gleamed much more than you, Moon, because they had just left the fair exercise of the gymnasium.

Like Helen atop the walls of Troy, Simaetha catches sight of Delphis alongside his companion Eudamippus and presents the pair in heroic terms: their chests are gleaming and their hair blond (ξανθός), a typical epithet of heroes from early Greek hexameter poetry onwards. Here, however, their beards are even blonder than golden helichryse (τοῖς δ’ ἢς ξανθοτέρα μὲν ἐλιχρύσσοι γενειάς, *Id.* 2. 78). The use of a flower simile is part and parcel of erotic literature, but here it also evokes the grand world of epic, echoing a number of other cases in which the luxuriant locks of young men and women are compared with flowers, including the hyacinth (οὔλας ἧκε κόμας, ὑακινθίνῳ ἄνθει ὁμοίας, *Od.* 6. 231, 23. 158) and the saffron crocus (χαῖται...κροκήθῳ ἄνθει ὁμοίαι, *Hom. Hymn Dem.* 177-178). Simaetha’s use of such a flower simile here, therefore, adorns her account with a further epic veneer.

Particularly close to Theocritus’ simile, however, is a fragment from Callimachus’ *Hecale*, in which an unknown man similarly has a beard like helichryse (ἄνθει ἐλιχρύσῳ ἐναλίγκιος, fr. 45. 2 *Ho.* ~ ἐλιχρύσσοι, *Id.* 2. 78), perhaps the very same man described in another fragment as having very blond hair (ὁς τε φόβησι | ξανθοτάταις ἐκόμα, fr. 44 *Ho.* ~ ξανθοτέρα, *Id.* 2. 78).  

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12 E.g. *Od.* 8. 322 (Ἡλθε Ποσειδάων), *Od.* 18. 1 (Ἠλθε δ’ ἐπὶ πτχωός πανδήμιος), *Od.* 23. 7 (Ἥλθ’ Ὅδυσεύς), *Od.* 24. 387 (Ἥλθ’ ὁ γέρων Δολίος). For the *Iliad*, see e.g. *Il.* 23. 65 (Ἠλθε δ’ ἐπὶ ψυχὴ Πατροκλῆος).
13 Cf. Fabiano (1971: 535) on *Idyll* 2’s ‘frequent epicisms,’ especially in comparison to the two other urban *Idylls*, 14 and 15.
14 ξανθός is used especially of Menelaus (ξανθὸς Μενέλαος, e.g. *Il.* 3. 284), but also of Meleager (ξανθὸς Μελέαγρος, *Il.* 2. 642), Rhadamantus (ξανθὸς Ῥαδάμανθος, *Od.* 4. 364, cf. *Od.* 7. 323), Polynices (ξανθὸς Πολυνικῆς, *Thebais* fr. 2. 1 *EGF/PEG*), Achilles (ξανθῆς...κόμης, *Il.* 1. 197; ξανθήν...χαίτην, *Il.* 23. 141), and Odysseus (ξανθὰς...τρίχας, *Od.* 13. 399, 13. 431). Cf. too *flavus* in Latin poetry: e.g. Cat. 68. 130 *flavo...viro* (of Protesilaus).
15 For the association of hair and flowers in erotic contexts in Hellenistic and later Greek epigram, cf. Tarán (1985).
16 Cf. Hollis (2009: 184), who suggests that frs. 44 and 45 describe the same individual.
Given the rarity of the noun ἑλίχρυσος in earlier Greek literature and the fact that it never appears elsewhere in the context of a hair simile, this parallel transcends the generic norms of epic and suggests a close and meaningful relationship between these two episodes. Although tradition has not preserved enough details of the Callimachean fragments to allow us to place them securely within Callimachus’ poem, Adrian Hollis has plausibly suggested that they both belong to Hecale’s description of her first sighting of the man from Aphidnae, her future husband. If correct, that would render this Callimachean episode a very close parallel for Theocritus’ *Idyll*: in each poem, a woman recalls the occasion on which she first spotted her future lover and admired his blond, flower-like hair. Of course, it is impossible to determine who has imitated whom in this parallel, given the uncertainties over Hellenistic relative chronology and the likelihood that both poets continuously responded to each other’s works in an ongoing process of composition. But whichever way we read it, the echo does not convey the most promising of associations: if we take Callimachus first, the early death of Hecale’s husband and her children (following Hollis’ reconstruction) would presage the impermanence of Simaetha’s own relationship with Delphis; while if we start with Theocritus, Simaetha’s failed affair would hint at the ultimately short-lived nature of Hecale’s own marriage. In either instance, however, this parallel highlights once more the extent to which Simaetha presents her story within the contours of an epic frame: she employs the same flower simile as we find in Callimachus’ near-contemporary epic, in another narrative of love, loss and unfulfilled hopes.

In addition, both of these passages look back to earlier literary precedent in the form of Nausicaa’s first encounter with Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. There, too, Odysseus – after being beautified by Athena – gleams with beauty and grace (κάλλεϊ καὶ χάρισι στίλβον, *Od*. 6. 237 ~ στίλβοντα, *Id*. 2. 79), and is endowed with thick locks that flow from his head like the hyacinth

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17 The only earlier extant appearances of ἑλίχρυσος are in catalogues of flowers and garlands: see Alcman 60 *PMGF*, Ibycus 315 *PMGF*, Cratinus Μαλδικοί (‘Softies’) fr. 105. 4 *PCG* (all quoted by Athenaeus, 15. 680f-681b), and Theophr. *Hist. pl.* 6. 8. 1, 9. 19. 3.
19 Some scholars argue for a strictly linear relative chronology between Theocritus, Callimachus and Apollonius (e.g. Köhnken (2008)), but such arguments of priority are invariably subjective and ignore the likelihood of an ongoing series of reciprocal interactions between these near contemporaries: see e.g. Hopkinson (1988: 7); Heerink (2015: 31, 172 n. 43, 181 n. 26).
20 For these events in the *Hecale*, see Hollis (2009: 176-177, 188-189, 198): Hecale reared (her own?) two boys (fr. 48 Ho.) who both appear to have died young (fr. 49 Ho.), while her husband, the man from Aphidnae (fr. 42 Ho.), appears to have drowned at sea while planning to bring back horses from Sparta (fr. 47 Ho.).
21 It would also be tempting to see Callimachus responding to Theocritus lexically, his superlative ξανθοτάταις outdoing Theocritus’ comparative ξανθοτέρα. However, as Hollis (2009: 184) notes, the *Hecale*’s version also seems to allude to Pherecrates fr. 202 *PCG*: ὃ ξανθοτάτοις βοτρύχοισι κομῶσα. Cf. too Eur. *Bacch*. 235: ξανθοῖσι βοστρύχοισιν...κομῶσα.
22 This use of στίλβω is an Odyssean *hapax legomenon*, which reinforces the connection, although the verb also occurs twice in the *Iliad* (II. 3. 392 of Paris; II. 18. 596 of the dancing Cretan young men’s chitons on Achilles’ shield). Gleaming bodies are a typical feature of richly anointed, youthful athletes, cf. Achaeus Λάθα (‘Contests’) *TrGF* I 20 fr. 4*: γυμνοὶ γὰρ ἔκοψαν φαιδίμους βραχίωνας | ἡμῖν σφριγῶντες ἐμπορεύονται, νέοι | στίλβοντες ἄνθει καρτερὰς ἐπωμίδας | ἅδην δ’ ἐλαιοῦ στέρνα καὶ ποδῶν κύτος | χρίουσιν ὡς ἔχοντες οἴκοθεν τρυφήν (‘For they † go about naked, their splendid arms bursting with the prime of life, their powerful shoulders gleaming, their youth in full flower; they anoint their chests and† feet with oil in abundance, as if they were used to luxury at home’, tr. Wright

flower (κὰδ δὲ κάρητος | οὐλὰς ἢκε κόμας, ύακινθίνῳ ἄνθει ὁμοίας, Od. 6. 230-231). By looking back to this Homeric precedent, Simaetha further augments the epic flavour of her narrative, while also evoking an episode which was itself loaded with significant erotic overtones. Once again, she fashions her affair in a distinctly Homeric mould, elevating her encounter with Delphis to the realm of heroic epic.

Nancy Andrews has exploited these parallels with Odyssey 6 as the centrepiece for her argument that Simaetha skilfully compares Delphis with Odysseus and marks her lover’s inferiority to that Homeric hero. As she argues, when Delphis and Simaetha actually meet (Id. 2. 111-143), his actions are diametrically opposed to those of Odysseus before Nausicaa. In comparison to Odysseus’ caution, Delphis displays a hasty directness: he immediately sits on Simaetha’s bed (Id. 2. 113) and expresses his passion in extreme and violent terms (Id. 2. 127-138). Moreover, he closes his speech by dwelling on the power of love’s madness to drive girls from their chambers and wives from their husband’s beds (Id. 2. 136-138) – a description which Andrews takes as ‘both wryly reminiscent and subversive’ of Odysseus’ final words on marital harmony in his supplication of Nausicaa (Od. 6. 182-185). For Andrews, these unflattering comparisons with the Homeric hero are part of Simaetha’s post eventum character assassination of Delphis, coloured by her more recent emotions and knowledge – a reading that is certainly plausible and attractive. However, we should acknowledge that these connections with Odyssey 6 seem to focus only on one side of the relationship. They tell us more about Delphis than they do about Simaetha, who does not actively encourage us to associate her with the Phaeacian princess. By contrast, I will argue, she rather fashions herself on the image of the Homeric Penelope. Even if Delphis does not live up to Odysseus’ image, she nevertheless implies that she is the equal of that hero’s loyal spouse.

2: Penelopean Simaetha

This connection with Penelope has been little discussed by modern scholars, but it is a recurring part of Simaetha’s self-fashioning. At the most basic level, her very situation parallels that of Penelope – she is patiently waiting at home for the return of her lover, of whom she has received little news and only indirect rumour. And like the Ithacan queen, her relationship with the absent
lover has caused her both physical and mental anguish. But besides these general parallels, the
association between the two women is reinforced further by a series of verbal echoes.

Foremost amongst these are the Penelopean traces present in the two descriptions of Simaetha’s
physical reactions at the sight of Delphis. The first occurs when she catches sight of her
future lover for the first time (Id. 2. 82-90):

χῶς ἴδον, ὃς ἐμάνην, ὃς μοι πυρὶ θυμὸς ἱάφθη
deiλαίας, τὸ δὲ κάλλος ἐτάκετο. οὐκέτι πομᾶς
τήνας ἑφρασάμαν, οὐδ’ ὃς πάλιν οίκαδ’ ἀπῆνθον
ἔγνον, ἀλλὰ μὲ τις κατυρά νόσος ἐξεσάλαξεν,
κείμαν δ’ ἐν κλιντῇ δέκ’ ἀματά καὶ δέκα νύκτας.

And when I saw them I was seized with madness, and my wretched heart was caught with
fire, and my beauty wasted away. I no longer took notice of that procession, and I had no
idea how I got home again, but a burning fever shook me, and I lay on my bed ten days and
ten nights. Note, lady Moon, whence came my love. Often my skin would become as pale as
fustic, and all the hair began to fall from my head, and only my skin and bones were left.

And the second when she sees him crossing her threshold (Id. 2. 106-110):

πάσα μὲν ἐψύχθην χιόνος πλέον, ἐκ δὲ μετώπῳ
ιδρώς μευ κοχύδεσκεν ἴσον νοτίαισιν ἑέρσαις,
οὐδὲ τι φονῆσαι δυνάμαι, οὐδ’ ὅσσον ἐν ὅπως
κνυζεύναι φωνεῦναι φίλαν ποτὶ ματέρα τέκνα·

the whole of me became much colder than snow, and sweat like damp dews ran from my
forehead, and I could say nothing, not even as much as children whimper in their sleep,
crying to their own dear mother: my fair body became stiff, just like a doll.

Besides the considerable Sapphic echoes in these verses, scholars have noted how both
passages recall a simile from Odyssey 19 which describes Penelope’s reactions to Odysseus’
words (Od. 19. 203-209):

ἴσκε ψεύδεα πολλά λέγον ἑτύμοισιν ὁμοία·
tῆς δ’ ἄψ’ ἀκουούσης ἰᾶς δάκρυα, τηκέτο δὲ χρώς·
ὡς δὲ χιὼν κατατήκετ’ ἐν ἀκροπόλοισιν ὄρεσσιν,
ήν τ’ Ἑὑρος κατέτηξεν, ἐπίθεν Ζέφυρος καταχεύη·
τηκομένης δ’ ἄρα τῆς ποταμοι πλήθουσι ρέοντες·
ὡς τῆς τήκετο καλὰ παρήμα δάκρυ χεούσης,
κλαιούσης εὖν ἀνδρά παρήμενον.

So he made the many falsehoods of his tale seem like the truth, and as she listened her tears flowed and her face melted. As the snow melts on the lofty mountains, the snow which the East Wind thaws when the West Wind has poured it down, and as it melts the streams of the rivers flow full: so her lovely cheeks melted as she wept and mourned for her husband, who even then was sitting by her side.

In response to the disguised Odysseus’ explicitly fictional lies (ψεύδεα) about the time he once hosted ‘Odysseus’ on Crete, Penelope here bursts into tears: her face and cheeks melt like snow. At first glance, the situation may seem rather different to that in Idyll 2 – Penelope is struck by grief for her absent husband, while Simaetha is seized by a debilitating passion. But in both, a woman longs for an apparently unobtainable man and suffers physical deterioration as a result. Simaetha vividly exhibits a whole host of physiological symptoms and is even – she claims – reduced to mere skin and bones (esp. Id. 2. 89-90), while Penelope too is worn away in longing for Odysseus: in two earlier passages before this Odyssey 19 simile, she has already lamented the fact that the gods have destroyed all her beauty since the time of Odysseus’ departure (ἀγλαΐην γὰρ ἐμοὶ γε θεοί … ὤλεσαν, Od. 18. 180-181; ἐμὴν ἀρετὴν εἶδός τε δέμας τε | ὤλεσαν ἀθάνατοι, Od. 19. 124-125). And she has even expressed hopes of dying to put an end to the gradual wasting away of her life (Od. 18. 202-205):

αἴθε μοι ὣς μαλακὸν θάνατον πόροι Ἀρτεμίς ἁγνή
αὔτικα νῦν, ἵνα μηκέτ’ ὀδυρομένη κατὰ θυμόν
αἰώνα φθινύθοι, πόσιος ποθέουσα φίλοιο
παντοτικὴν ἀρετὴν, ἔπει δέξοχος ἤν Ἀχαιῶν.

How I wish that chaste Artemis would grant me so soft a death at this very moment, so that I might no longer waste my life away with sorrow at heart, longing for the manifold virtue of my dear husband, since he was unmatched among the Achaeans.

Penelope’s melting face and cheeks in the Odyssey 19 simile are thus part of a larger Odyssean motif of the physical deterioration of her beauty and body, the direct result of her intense longing (ποθέουσα) for her absent lover, a close parallel for Theocritus’ love-struck Simaetha.28

28 Cf. Pace (2009: 362-364). Simaetha’s language of melting (ἐτάκετο, Id. 2. 83) also echoes Simaetha’s earlier rites (τάκεται, Id. 2. 18; τάκοι, τάκοιθ’, Id. 2. 28-29); she wishes to inflict on Delphis the very same emotions that she experienced on first seeing him.
The precise verbal connection which Simaetha establishes with this Odyssean simile is especially clear in the first description of her symptoms, in the phrase τὸ δὲ κάλλος ἐτάκετο (Id. 2. 83, cf. the Homeric τήκετο, κατατήκετ’, κατέτηξεν, τηκομένης, τήκετο). As Cristina Pace has highlighted, this Odyssean passage is in fact the only precedent for the Theocritean image of melting beauty. Elsewhere, beauty usually causes an onlooker to melt, rather than itself melting as it does in Simaetha’s and Penelope’s cases. The phrase thus introduces Penelope as another model alongside Sappho for Simaetha’s situation, a model which continues to linger in the background until the second description of her symptoms, which begins by comparing her state to snow, rekindling our memory of the Odyssean simile (χίονος, Id. 2. 106 ~ χιών, Od. 19. 205). In both Theocritean passages, the Penelopean verbal echo features at the start of each set of Sapphic symptoms – as if in a programmatic position to flag the significance of the intertext for a reader.

The parallels do not stop there, however. Cristina Pace has recently highlighted a series of further connections that reinforce the link between Simaetha’s account of her ensuing meeting with Delphis and this specific scene from Odyssey 19. In both cases, the woman has summoned the man to their meeting in advance via an intermediary (Eumaeus in the Odyssey, Thestylis in Idyll 2), and the scene that ensues is a private meeting between man and woman, with variously strong hints of a potential romance. In the Odyssey, Odysseus sits beside his unwitting wife (καθέζετ’, Od. 19. 102; παρήμενον, Od. 19. 209), and Penelope even wishes that the ‘stranger’ would like to sit beside her all night – a wish that could certainly be misconstrued as inappropriate for a married woman (παρήμενος, Od. 19. 589-590). In Theocritus, meanwhile, we have already noted how Delphis has the effrontery to sit on Simaetha’s bed, even before addressing her – an effrontery that is emphasised through the repeated verbs of sitting in a single line (both ἕζετ’ and
In more general terms, Odysseus’ preceding lying tale (ψεύδεα, Od. 19. 203) offers an apt parallel for Delphis’ own dissembling words, whose vacuity Simaetha implicitly contrasts with the ‘truth’ of the other speeches in her account.\(^{35}\) Taken together, these connections establish the scene between husband and wife in *Odyssey* 19 as a significant intertext for Simaetha’s encounter with Delphis. But though Cristina Pace was right to highlight these parallels, she has not gone on to consider their larger implications for Simaetha’s narrative situation and self-presentation.

Nor, indeed, has she exhausted every connection. For there is one additional detail which reinforces this Homeric allusion: namely, Simaetha’s bed, which echoes that of Penelope in the *Odyssey*. Twice in the *Idyll*, Theocritus refers to it as a κλιντήρ, first at the moment when Simaetha spends ten days and nights lying on it with a burning fever (κείμαν δ’ ἐν κλιντῆρι δέκ’ ἄματα καὶ δέκα νύκτας, Id. 2. 86) and again when Delphis provocatively sits on it before addressing her (ἕζετ’ ἐπὶ κλιντῆρι καὶ ἑζόμενος φάτο μῦθον, Id. 2. 113). At first glance, this might seem a rather unremarkable word, connected to the common verb κλίνω (‘I cause to lean/recline’) and unable to carry any significant allusive weight. But as Delphis himself has shown, appearances can be deceiving, and so too here: κλιντήρ is in fact a very rare noun which occurs only once before in extant Greek poetry, nowhere other than in *Odyssey* 18, when Penelope lies asleep on her bed shortly before uttering her death-wish to Artemis (Od. 18. 187-191):

Then the goddess, flashing-eyed Athena, had another thought. On the daughter of Icarius she shed sweet sleep, and she leaned back and slept there on her **couch**, and all her joints were relaxed. And meanwhile the beautiful goddess was giving her immortal gifts, so that the Achaeans might marvel at her.

**Homeric hapax legomena** are a common target of Hellenistic allusion, and this noun is no different. Besides its double use here, it recurs pointedly in a number of other Hellenistic poets’ works, including Callimachus’ *Iambi*, Bion’s *Lament for Adonis*, and Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, where it is notably used of Medea after her encounter with Jason, an episode which displays a number of other similarities to Simaetha’s Theocritean narrative.\(^{36}\) But the allusion to this Homeric **hapax** is

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\(^{35}\) The bland introduction to Delphis’ speech (φάτο μῦθον, Id. 2. 113) contrasts with the emphasis on the ‘truth’ of the accounts by Simaetha (τὸν ἀλαθέα μῦθον ἔλεξα, Id. 2. 94) and Philista’s mother (ταῦτα μοι ἁ ξείνα μυθήσατο, ἔστι δ’ ἀλαθής, Id. 2. 154): cf. Andrews (1996: 51).

\(^{36}\) Ap. Rh. *Argon*. 3. 1159: as her thoughts oscillate, Medea sits on a stool at the foot of her bed (κλιντήρος). For the connections between Medea and Simaetha, see e.g. Bonanno (1990: 147-181). Other Hellenistic instances of κλιντήρ
particularly strong in *Idyll* 2, since on both occasions the noun appears in the very same metrical *sedes* as in the *Odyssey*. For a learned and astute Hellenistic reader, trained to detect precise and subtle verbal echoes, the connection would be clear. But even if a reader misses the metrical identity, the Odyssean resonance is further reinforced by the proximity of both lines (*Id.* 2. 86, 113) to the two echoes of the Penelopean snow simile (*Id.* 2. 83, 106). The allusions to the bed and the simile cluster together to form a densely Penelopean framework.

What, then, should we make of these various Penelopean connections? The natural conclusion, and the one which Simaetha herself would perhaps like us to draw, is that she is just like the patient, loyal and loving wife of epic. Like Penelope, she is steadfastly waiting for her lover’s return, even though he has been away far longer than expected. Yet in addition, the parallel allows her to articulate an idealised vision of herself as the perfect match for Delphis, who – as we have already noted – exhibits a number of Odyssean traits. The immediate context of Penelope’s κλινήρ in *Odyssey* 18 reinforces such an idea: in that scene, Penelope is supernaturally beautified by Athena before she faces the suitors, just as Odysseus had been by the same goddess before facing Nausicaa (an episode to which we have already seen Delphis connected) and before his final reunion with Penelope (*Od*. 6. 230-234 = *Od*. 23. 157-161). By evoking the similar moment when Penelope’s beauty is divinely enhanced, Simaetha thus not only offers a flattering comparison of herself to the epic heroine, but also sets herself on a par with an idealised image of the Odyssean Delphis. More generally, however, there must also be a note of wistful pathos in the comparison, evoking the harmonious relationship of Odysseus and Penelope that Simaetha so longs for but has failed to obtain.37 As we have already seen, Delphis fails to live up to the image of the virtuous Odyssean hero. He has already gone elsewhere, however foolish Simaetha implies such actions are: Penelope had a constant throng of suitors in her home, hoping for her hand in marriage, so Delphis is a fool not to take up the opportunity of a relationship with somebody just like her. In many ways, therefore, the model of Penelope offers Simaetha a flattering point of self-promotion, another means of elevating her own status, while further denigrating Delphis.

However, there are a number of other elements in the *Idyll* that do not allow us to maintain this positive picture of ‘Penelopean Simaetha’ unchallenged. For a start, the timescale of her situation is radically different from that of Penelope: she has only been waiting for eleven days, rather than twenty years, a disparity which marks the difference between the grandeur of epic and

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37 The echoes of *Odyssey* 19 may also imply Simeatha’s slim hope that Delphis will still eventually return. In the Odyssean lying tale that provokes Penelope’s snow-melting reaction, the hero claims that ‘Odysseus’ and his men had stayed with him for ‘eleven days’ because of unfavourable winds from an angry god (δυώδεκα…ήματα, *Od*. 19. 199), and that they only departed on the following day (τῇ τρισκαιδεκάτῃ, *Od*. 19. 202). Given that Simaetha has also been waiting for ‘eleven days’ (δωδεκαταῖος, *Id*. 2. 4, 157), the allusion could express hope that Delphis too will set out to return to her tomorrow. However, one must acknowledge that δωδεκα is a ‘conventional figure’ in epic (Rutherford (1992: 164) on *Od*. 19. 199) and often signals a decisive and critical turning point (Serrao (1971)), so we should perhaps we wary of reading too much into it here.
her own humble situation.\textsuperscript{38} Moreover, several other epic intertexts complicate any positive reading of her Penelopean aspirations. It has long been noted, for example, that her sudden reaction to Delphis’ appearance (\textit{Id.} 2. 82), immediately before the description of her melting beauty (\textit{Id.} 2. 83), mirrors the response of Zeus to the beautified Hera in \textit{Iliad} 14, at the very moment that he is tricked and deceived by his wife.\textsuperscript{39} Like Zeus, her reaction is instantaneous, marked by the swift repetition of ὥς (ὥς δ᾿ ἴδεν, ὥς μιν ἔρως πυκνάς φρένας ἀμφεκάλυψεν, ‘And when he saw her, then love engulfed his shrewd mind’, \textit{Il.} 14. 294 ~ χῶς ἴδον, ὥς ἐμάνην, \textit{Id.} 2. 82). And like Zeus, she too appears to have been cheated by a crafty lover.\textsuperscript{40} This epic model of marital conflict and false words is not a happy portent for her relationship with Delphis.

In a similar manner, Simaetha’s narrative contains a number of echoes that graft her affair onto the dysfunctional relationship of Paris and Helen, especially as it is depicted at the end of \textit{Iliad} 3 (a scene which itself bears many resemblances to the \textit{Dios Ape}\textit{t} of \textit{Iliad} 14). Not only does Thestylis summon Delphis just as Aphrodite had there called Helen to Paris (Ἀλέξανδρός σε καλεῖ, \textit{Il.} 3. 390 ~ Σιμαίθα τυ καλεῖ, \textit{Id.} 2. 101), but Paris’ shining beauty also offers a close model for Delphis’ shining chest (στίλβων, \textit{Il.} 3. 392 ~ στιλβόντα, \textit{Id.} 2. 79).\textsuperscript{41} In the couple’s ensuing encounter, moreover, they converse seated before retiring to bed, just like Delphis and Simaetha (ἔνθα κάθιζ’ Ἑλένη, \textit{Il.} 3. 426 ~ ἑζέτ’ and ἑζόμενος, \textit{Id.} 2. 113). The adulterous affair of the Spartan queen and Trojan prince is thus established as an alternative model for Simaetha’s situation, a more realistic paradigm than the idealised loving marriage of Penelope and Odysseus. After all, the \textit{Iliadic} episode hardly suggests the potential of a happy or lasting relationship: Helen resents her lot and the ‘measureless griefs’ in her heart (ἄχε’ ἄκριτα θυμῷ, \textit{Il.} 3. 412) and even wishes that Paris had died in battle against her former husband Menelaus (\textit{Il.} 3. 428-429). Just as in \textit{Iliad} 14, moreover, the scene is shrouded by deception and trickery: Helen accuses Aphrodite of eagerly cheating her (ἀρπαγεῖται θυμῷ, \textit{Il.} 3. 412) and even wishes that Paris had died in battle against her former husband Menelaus (\textit{Il.} 3. 428-429). Just as in \textit{Iliad} 14, moreover, the scene is shrouded by deception and trickery: Helen accuses Aphrodite of eagerly cheating her (ἀρπαγεῖται θυμῷ, \textit{Il.} 3. 412) and even wishes that Paris had died in battle against her former husband Menelaus (\textit{Il.} 3. 428-429).\textsuperscript{42} The fateful adultery of Helen and Paris, therefore, just like the marital intrigue of Zeus and Hera, hangs as a shadow over Simaetha’s Penelopean pretensions, hinting at the unhappy reality of her true situation.

As a final example of these problematising intertexts, however, we should also cite Delphis’ faux modesty in his initial meeting with Simaetha. After her snow-like shivers (\textit{Id.} 2. 106) and just before he sits on her bed (\textit{Id.} 2. 113), Delphis looks to the ground in a manner that directly recalls Antenor’s description of Odysseus in \textit{Iliad} 3 (ὑπαὶ δὲ ἴδεσκε κατὰ χθονὸς ὄμματα πήξας, ‘he would look down with eyes fixed on the ground’, \textit{Il.} 3. 217 ~ ἐπὶ χθονὸς ὀμματα πάξας, \textit{Id.} 2. 113).
Id. 2. 112). There, the hero feigned a timid and insignificant exterior, but once he opened his mouth, the Trojans realised that his appearance had proved deceptive (Il. 3. 219-223):

ἀϊδρεῖ φωτὶ ἐοικώς·
φαίης κε ζάκοτόν τέ τιν᾽ ἔμμεναι ἄφρονά τ᾽ αὔτως,
ἀλλ᾽ ὅτε δὴ ὄπα τε μεγάλην ἐκ στήθεος εἵη
καὶ ἔπεα νιφάδεσσιν ἕοικότα χειμερίησιν,
οὐκ ἂν ἐπεὶ Ὀδυσῆΐ γ’ ἐρίσσει βροτὸς ἄλλος·

... like a man of no understanding; you would have thought him some sort of a churl and nothing but a fool. But when he projected his great voice from his chest, and words like snowflakes on a winter’s day, then could no other mortal man rival Odysseus.

Here too the further epic allusion aligns Simaetha’s lover with a man of false pretences and deceptive appearances, hardly an auspicious association for her affair.

These additional epic echoes, therefore, centre around scenes of deceit and dysfunctional love, undermining the simplicity of Simaetha’s Penelopean paradigm. The recurring emphasis on deception is all too apt for Delphis, whose ardent expressions of love and adulation have proved hollow and meaningless. In fact, this final Iliadic intertext highlights how – at least in some respects – Odysseus is all too perfect a match for Delphis, a parallel trickster figure, whose pretensions of loyalty are undermined by his actions: Odysseus too was a seductive smooth-talker and enjoyed affairs with other women on his travels, including the goddesses Circe and Calypso. Like those women, Simaetha is merely one stop-off on a serial womaniser’s merry rounds of love. There is considerable irony, therefore, when we recall how Simaetha had adopted Circe as a model near the very start of the poem, praying that Hecate would make her drugs ‘no less powerful than those of Circe’ (χαῖρ’, Ἑκάτα δασπλῆτι, καὶ ἐς τέλο ς ἄμμιν ὀπάδει, | φάρμακα ταῦτ’ ἔρδοσα χερείονα μῆτε τι Κίρκας, Id. 2. 14-15). In the end, the Homeric witch proves all too close a parallel for Simaetha, not ultimately in the potency of her drugs, but rather in her erotic situation: she too has been abandoned by a man of Odyssean wiles.

To conclude, therefore, Idyll 2, mediated through the voice of its female speaker, offers us competing perspectives on Simaetha’s and Delphis’ relationship through a series of literary paradigms. Simaetha may attempt to cast her affair in generally epic and heroic terms, to denigrate Delphis as no match for Odysseus and to elevate herself as equal to Penelope, but Theocritus’ readers can see through her narrative and spot its weaknesses. In the end, her attempts to mimic Penelope fail: she lacks the allegedly loyal partner on whom she can rely, and her situation is no match for the years of suffering that the epic heroine had once endured. Although she strives to

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42 See e.g. Fabiano (1971: 535); Segal (1984: 203); Goldhill (1991: 262-263). Segal (1984: 203-204; 1985: 112) further notes the pointed juxtaposition of Delphis’ active πάξας (Id. 2. 112) and Simaetha’s passive ἐπάγη (Id. 2. 110).
43 The same could be said of the comparison with Medea in the following line (Id. 2. 16), especially given the close relationship of Theocritus’ poem with the third book of Apollonius’ Argonautica (cf. n. 36 above).
fashion the narrative in a certain light, Simaetha cannot retain full control of its meaning, and the ultimate result for a reader who witnesses this flawed appropriation of a pre-eminent female model is both pathos and irony. In many ways, this offers a stark contrast to Metriche in Herodas’ first *Mimiambos*, a woman who is similarly compared to Penelope, but remains faithful to her absent husband despite the best efforts of the procuress Gyllis. Simaetha’s situation, by contrast, more closely resembles that of Medea in Apollonius’ *Argonautica*, another girl whose life balances precariously between the model of Penelope and that of Helen. Yet it also foreshadows the later interest that Roman poets show in the relationship of Odysseus and his wife, especially as a foil to the heartbeat and infidelity of the elegiac world. In Theocritus’ poem, however, this epic analogy gains an even greater poignancy by being expressed directly through the words of Simaetha herself, accentuating the woes of her all too sorry state. Ultimately – and unfortunately – her attempts to model herself on the image of Penelope only serve to highlight the vast discrepancy that exists between them.

References

Abbreviations


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45 Cf. Hunter (1989: 29). This similar situation offers yet another parallel between Apollonius’ Medea and Theocritus’ Simaetha (cf. nn. 36, 43 above).
46 Cf. e.g. Harrison (1988) on Horace *Odes* 3. 7, with examples from elegy on p. 187 n. 11.
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