

Women in the poems of Homer

Many of the mythological images of women created by the Greeks were based on characters from the poems of Homer, which by the Classical Age had attained a hallowed place in the canon of Greek literature. Even in that period there was considerable uncertainty about when the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had actually lived. Most modern commentators assign him to the late eighth century BC, but some would put him rather later, in the seventh or even the early sixth century BC. What seems almost certain is that the poems as we know them were composed at some time in the Archaic Age, at least five hundred years after the Trojan War and its aftermath, the events which they purport to depict.¹ Few people nowadays doubt that they were the end-product of a long process of oral composition and transmission, and that for several centuries wandering bards had been taking up and embroidering the themes that eventually came down to us in the work of Homer. As a result, the poems contain descriptions of material and social items which derive from a wide range of periods, so that they cannot be assumed to represent a single well-defined historical era. This begins to cause difficulties when we try to use Homer as a source of evidence for the social history of early Greece (see p. 65). In this section, which is concerned with the cultural representation of women rather than their social reality, this lack of historical definition is not a major problem.

In what follows, I shall be examining Homer's treatment of a variety of females — mortals, monsters, and goddesses. But one group of women who play a significant part in both narratives will not be considered: Homer's characterisation of the Olympian goddesses, some of whom have a very high profile in the Trojan War, has already been discussed in the previous chapter.

WOMEN IN THE *ILIAD*

On one level, the women represented in the *Iliad* are peripheral. The *Iliad* is a poem about the Trojan War, and about the heroes who fight in it; and, in the words of the

Trojan prince Hector, 'war is men's business' (6.492). Women make very few appearances in the work, and as far as the action is concerned they are insignificant. They are, however, crucial to the poem's plot. The abduction of Helen by the Trojan prince Paris has caused the war as a whole; and the theft of another woman – the captive Briseis – forms the basis of the specific events of the *Iliad*, since the wrath of the Greek hero Achilles when Briseis is taken from him is its principal theme. When the Greek commander Agamemnon is forced to liberate his own slave-girl Chryseis, awarded to him from the booty captured in the fighting, he seizes Briseis from Achilles by way of compensation. Achilles then withdraws his services from the Greek army, and as a result disaster threatens the Greeks.

Although a woman helps in this way to determine the course of events in the poem, she features in this respect as a piece of property – as stolen goods – rather than as a human being. Briseis has been awarded to Achilles as a 'prize of honour' (9.344), and it is as a status symbol that she is valued both by him and by Agamemnon. For these two, passing Briseis backwards and forwards between them is a way of defining their relationship. 'What do you want? To keep your own prize and have me sitting here/ lacking one?' (*Iliad* 1.133–4)² are the words with which Agamemnon announces his intention of appropriating the slave-girl of one of his allies. When the commander later tries to come to terms with Achilles, he offers as a mark of his goodwill to return Briseis, with whom he swears he has not slept, and to send in addition 'gifts in abundance' – tripods, cauldrons, gold, horses, and seven women of Lesbos, skilled in weaving (9.119–35). This is one of a number of instances in the poem where women are ticked off as one item in a list of valuables. For example, when Achilles is organising funeral games in honour of his beloved friend Patroclus, he sets out as prizes for the wrestling match:

... a great tripod, to set over fire, for the winner.
The Achaians among themselves valued it at the worth of twelve oxen.
But for the beaten man he set in their midst a woman
skilled in much work of her hands, and they rated her at four oxen.

(23.702–5)

Like Briseis, the woman who is being offered here as a prize would have been a slave, and as such might be expected to be the object of proprietorial attitudes. But women given in marriage are also seen as gifts (see pp. 23–4, 67–8), and like slaves they can serve as the instruments of men's political relationships. This practice tends to invest women with a symbolic worth, over and above the value which they possess as workers, as sexual partners and as bearers of children. For this reason, the women who feature in poetry can easily become the vehicles of meaning: the symbolism ascribed to them in real life converts them into figures that are well suited to the literary function of commenting on the activities of men. In the *Iliad*, this is particularly apparent in the case of Briseis, whose transfers stand in the narrative as a token for the initial disaffection and subsequent re-assimilation of Achilles into the Greek army.

Throughout these transactions Briseis remains by and large a shadowy figure, whose own responses to her treatment at the hands of her male masters are not recorded by the poet. But it would be unfair to Homer not to mention that there is one occasion when he allows us to see her, not as a commodity, but as a human being with a personal history and powerful feelings. When Briseis is eventually returned to Achilles, she immediately catches sight of the mangled corpse of the hero's beloved friend Patroclus, slain in the fighting. She takes him up in her arms, and in the impromptu lament that follows she

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exclaims on the misery of her life. When her husband and three brothers had all been killed in battle (the former by Achilles himself), Patroclus comforted her and promised to persuade Achilles to marry her. 'Therefore I weep your death without ceasing. You were kind always' (19.300).

Helen, like Briseis, seems to bear only a token relationship to the masculine encounters related in the *Iliad*. She makes only three appearances in the work, a fact which seems in itself to be indicative of her true status in the general hostilities. But Helen is a princess and not a slave, and as such is represented in the poem as a more interesting and complex personality than Briseis. When she does appear, the question of her responsibility for the war is inevitably raised, although in this respect the role attributed to her is notable for its ambiguity. Her arrival on the high tower in Troy is greeted by the old men gathered there with whispered comments on her beauty: 'still, though she be such, let her go away in the ships, lest/ she be left behind, a grief to us and our children' (3.159-60). Helen herself, when speaking to Priam (Book 3) and to Hector (Book 6), refers to herself as a 'slut' (3.180) and a 'nasty bitch' (6.344), and wishes that she had died (3.173) or been swept away by a storm (6.345-48), before becoming the cause of so much unhappiness.

But Helen is seen as a victim as well as a cause. Priam, when he meets her on the tower, speaks gently to her and assures her that he does not blame her: 'to me the gods are blameworthy/ who drove upon me this sorrowful war against the Achaians' (3.164-5). Later, when Aphrodite has rescued Paris from the battlefield and is bullying Helen into paying him a visit, it is Helen herself who bitterly expresses her sense of victimisation. Go to Paris yourself, she says; comfort him; stay with him forever: 'I am not going to him. It would be too shameful' (3.410). But in the end the goddess prevails, and Helen departs, subdued and frightened by Aphrodite's threats. This is Helen at her most sympathetic, viewed as a mere plaything of powerful deities. But at the same time her intimacy with the goddess of love makes her appear a somewhat mysterious and dangerous character.

Helen, then, is both blameless and blameworthy. Her treatment in the *Iliad* provides us with an example of what some modern critics refer to as 'double motivation', a device whereby two contradictory explanations of the course of events - divine control *and* human agency - are juxtaposed. In this case, the double motivation is made all the more conspicuous by the fact that at one point it is expressed by a single character: Helen refers to herself as 'a nasty bitch evil-intriguing' (6.344), and then five lines later asserts that 'the gods had brought it about that these vile things must be' (6.349). As readers, we are left to decide between these two different interpretations of causality. We are not, however, invited to see the war as something that the fighting parties have brought upon themselves. The responsibility lies either with the gods, or with a woman.

Apart from the women who are seen as both the causes and the rewards of strife among men, mortal females feature in the *Iliad* largely as wives and mothers. Again, their appearances are few and far between. The outstanding wife - the only wife apart from the dubious Helen to receive any significant individual treatment - is Andromache, who is married to the Trojan prince Hector. When her husband returns from the battlefield and she runs to meet him at the city gates, she begs him not to go back to the fighting. Her parents and her seven brothers are dead, Andromache says. 'Hector thus you are father to me, and my honoured mother,/ you are my brother, and you it is who are my young husband./ Please take pity on me then, stay here on the rampart,/ that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow . . .' (6.429-32). Here is a woman whose place in the world is defined by her relationship with men, and who will be helpless once those men are no longer there to protect her.

Hector's reply to his wife shows genuine concern about the treatment she will receive once Troy falls and she is enslaved. But in spite of this he is not prepared to stay out of the battle, although he knows that one day he is bound to be killed. Andromache, demonstrating a rather surprising insight into military matters, has advised him to remain in the city and look to the defence of a vulnerable section of walling; but Hector rejects the suggestion with a pronouncement which reaffirms the fundamental division between masculine and feminine spheres of activity:

Go therefore back to our house, and take up your own work,
the loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens
ply their work also; but the men must see to the fighting,
all men who are the people of Ilion, but I beyond others.

(6.490-3)

The scene between Andromache and Hector is nevertheless an intimate and moving one. By allowing the reader this brief glimpse of their affectionate marriage, the poet skilfully introduces into the narrative a contrasting perspective, one which temporarily locates the hero in the normal society which exists beyond the exceptional events of the battlefield. At the same time, the death of the hero, the end of the marriage and the collapse of the society are foreshadowed with the utmost pathos. Later, when Hector is slain by Achilles and Priam finally brings his body back to Troy, the laments of the women serve to remind us once more of the personal relationships binding the warrior to the city whose continued existence is now under threat. The words of Andromache in particular also recreate the personal pain of a woman bereaved by warfare:

... but for me passing all others is left the bitterness
and the pain, for you did not die in bed, and stretch your arms to me,
nor tell me some last intimate word that I could remember
always, all the nights and days of my weeping for you.

(24.742-5)

The earlier interview between Andromache and Hector at the gates has suggested to some critics that one of the important functions assigned to female characters in the *Iliad* is the exertion, or attempted exertion, of a restraining influence over the men: the heroes' refusal to be restrained then underlines their courage and nobility.³ This could be called the 'man's gotta do what a man's gotta do' syndrome. It comes to the fore on a number of other occasions, most notably when Hector's mother Hecabe, just before her son's final, fatal encounter with Achilles, stands on the walls above the battlefield and, holding out one of her breasts to Hector, pleads with him not to accept the challenge to single combat (22.79-92).

But there are also a few instances where women take on the opposite role, of inciting men to fight. When Helen joins Paris in his bedchamber, she taunts him with cowardice and tells him to go back to the battlefield, then immediately adds, 'No, better not, you will probably get killed' (3.432-6). Helen's contradictory character is certainly on display here; but she is also fulfilling the 'white feather' function of attempting to shame men into action. A story told to Achilles by his old tutor Phoenix describes how, when the hero Meleager had withdrawn from a war, he eventually gave in to his wife's tearful entreaties not to allow his city to be captured (9.529-99). Achilles himself has a mother, the sea-goddess Thetis, who may not exactly urge her son on to fight, but who accepts that it is his glorious destiny to beat back disaster from the Greek forces. When Achilles

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determines to return to the fighting, Thetis volunteers to fly off to Mount Olympus to commission a new set of armour for him, even though she knows that his death will soon follow the slaying of Hector (18.65-137).

In all their roles the female characters of the *Iliad* are being used by the poet to comment on the world of war and the values of the fighting men. The function assigned to them in both the narrative and the society which it represents is not necessarily downgraded, but they are nevertheless seen as peripheral to the real business of life: Women provide causes and rewards, encouragement or restraint; they reflect the sufferings of warfare and represent the social ties which form the background to the battle scenes. Always, they exist only in relation to their menfolk. Although they are implicated in life's most serious transactions, they do not take an active part in them.

WOMEN IN THE ODYSSEY

In passing from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey*, we encounter women who, instead of standing in the wings, occupy very often the centre of the stage. Far from being passive, most of them are represented as powerful and vigorous personalities. This indeed is one of the most striking and refreshing aspects of the *Odyssey*. The power of these women is often seen in a negative light, however. On his return voyage from Troy the hero Odysseus, who has incurred the enmity of the marine god Poseidon, is forced to spend nine years roaming the seas in his attempt to reach his native island of Ithaca. Many obstacles are placed in the way of his homecoming, and it is significant that the great majority of these are female (the most notable exception being the one-eyed giant Polyphemus). On the more positive side, marriage gradually emerges as one of the central themes of the poem, and its importance for both women and men is often brought home to us. As Odysseus says to the princess Nausicaa, 'for nothing is better than this, more steadfast/ than when two people, a man and his wife, keep a harmonious household' (6.182-4).⁴

Of the female obstructions encountered by Odysseus on his epic journey, some of them present obvious physical dangers. The hero and his men have to negotiate their way between the whirlpool Charybdis, who sucks down water and then vomits it up again, and the dreadful Scylla, who reaches down from her cavern high above the straits, and with her six heads and eighteen rows of teeth snatches up and devours six of Odysseus's companions (12.73-126, 222-59, 426-46). These monsters are unmistakably female, and their significance probably extends beyond that of the natural hazards faced by sailors on the high seas. The imagery associated with them suggests that women are to be seen as having the power to engulf and obliterate men if they become too closely involved with them: that this engulfment is of a sexual nature is an impression evoked by the symbols of the yawning chasm and the man-eating monster. The Sirens, whose seductive songs lure sailors to a lingering death on their beach (12.39-54), are associated not just with physical obliteration, but with the temptations of a godlike but debilitating omniscience. 'Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens' (12.191) are the words with which they advertise their attractions. Odysseus, who has plugged his sailors' ears with wax, is himself, with unblocked ears, lashed to the mast of his ship so that he can hear but not follow their magical music.

The nymph Calypso poses a similar threat, in that she too can offer Odysseus a superhuman but ultimately paralysing existence. The first time that we meet the hero he is sitting on the beach of Calypso's island, 'breaking his heart in tears, lamentation, and sorrow' (5.83). Calypso has been detaining him for the last seven years, hoping to make

him her husband; and now the restless sailor is longing to return home. Modern readers may feel little sympathy for a man who protests continually that he is desperate to see his family once more, but who for seven years has apparently made little attempt to tear himself away from the arms of his lover. To many women, this will seem like a piece of very familiar male hypocrisy. But there is no doubt that Homer wants us to see Odysseus's residence with the nymph as an enforced one and his grief as perfectly genuine. Calypso has not, however, been a cruel mistress. She rescued Odysseus from the sea after all his companions had been killed, and since then has cherished him fondly, in a golden-age environment of trees, flowers and fountains. As she confesses to the god Hermes who instructs her to release the hero, 'I had hopes also/ that I could make him immortal and all his days to be endless' (5.135-6). But Odysseus prefers the norm of a painful but vigorous humanity to the blissful transcendence represented by the female figure.

At an earlier stage in his journey the hero enters another female-dominated environment while visiting the island of the immortal enchantress Circe.⁵ Here too Odysseus finds himself in a kind of paradise, where the meat and fine wine are unlimited and there is incessant feasting at silver tables. Like Calypso, Circe when first encountered in the poem is seated at a magnificent loom, singing in a sweet voice. The fantastic islands ruled over by both of these goddesses are wild and uncultivated: agriculture, the quintessential economic activity of the male, is nowhere to be seen. But women's work, in the form of spinning and weaving, is ever-present, a fact which helps to underline the upside-down nature of these magical countries. Wool-working and music establish the predominance on the islands of female domestic values, and speak of women's ability to entice and entrap men with their beautiful designs.

Initially, Circe appears to be far more sinister than Calypso. Conversely, once she is disarmed she becomes much more positively helpful. When a detachment of Odysseus' men first approaches her dwelling, they come across a group of lions and wolves who mysteriously haunt the glade. The audience soon learns why there are so many animals about the place, for Circe puts a drug into the men's drink to make them 'forgetful of their own country' (10.236), then touches them with her wand and turns them all into pigs. Odysseus, setting out to investigate his men's disappearance, is supplied by the god Hermes with an antidote to the drug. Once inside the house, having failed in spite of his hostess's ministrations to turn into a pig, he rushes at the mystified Circe with his drawn sword. She at once invites him to join her 'in the bed of love' (10.335), but Odysseus refuses to oblige until she has sworn a solemn oath that she will not devise any evil against him: without this, 'when I am naked you can make me a weakling, unmanned' (10.341). After the oath and the love-making, Circe turns the 'nine-year-old porkers' in her pen back into men (10.390), and for a whole year entertains Odysseus and his restored companions lavishly in her home. When Odysseus finally asks her to help him on his way home, she immediately agrees, and provides him with a detailed itinerary and much useful advice.

In this episode, the sexual imagery seems fairly explicit. The reduction of men to animals – animals who are disturbingly submissive and fawning – suggests the mindless bestiality which is seen as the consequence of sexual domination by a woman. This notion is amplified in the 'Delilah-type' characterisation of Circe, who is a woman capable of reducing men to impotence once they are naked. The answer to this, in Odysseus's case, is a forcible assertion of masculinity – and here we can surely be confident that the drawn sword has the phallic connotations which Freudianism would

attribute to it. As so often in control, then sex is a woman's love, which

Like Circe, though the role of female help in Scheria, the land ruled by a young woman who offers assistance which he craves by the stranger's hand. 'I would be like this one . . . ' tentatively put to the daughter and be called a house and property. I will not pursue this offer to abandon his home for a woman who provides still full of admiration. I will pray to you, as (8.467-8).

Unequivocal female behind the scenes pops up in one of Athena on one of Calypso, whose success that the lure presents a contrast helps to reveal threatening to a man whose commitment

The poem also in Odysseus' journey heroes who fought Odysseus' son Telemachus. His visit to the palace enjoyed by Menelaus warfare. Not surprised with an unbristle with an unbristle his father's exploit aid from Helen re was happy, my husband (4.259-61). But the describes how Odysseus Helen walked through men's wives. Menelaus 'you will have brought Trojans', but he is you came' (4.277) repentant Helen the reader even

attribute to it. As soon as he has demonstrated by word and deed that he is the one who is in control, then sex can be safely enjoyed by the hero; and in these circumstances the woman's love, which is otherwise so damaging, becomes positively beneficent.

Like Circe, though in a far more subtle fashion, the princess Nausicaa fulfils the dual role of female helper and hindrance. When Odysseus is shipwrecked on the coast of Scheria, the land ruled by Nausicaa's father, he is apparently charmed by the plucky young woman whom he encounters on the beach and who directs him towards the assistance which he so badly needs. Nausicaa herself, as she admits to her maids, is smitten by the stranger's handsome appearance: 'if only the man to be called my husband could be like this one . . .' (6.244). Later on in the palace, the idea of a marriage with Nausicaa is tentatively put to Odysseus by her father: 'how I wish that . . . / you could have my daughter and be called my son-in-law, staying/ here with me. I would dower you with a house and properties,/ if you stayed by your own good will' (7.311-15). Odysseus does not pursue this offer, and one does not feel that in this instance he is seriously tempted to abandon his homecoming. Nevertheless, the temptation is there, and once again it is a woman who provides it. When Nausicaa bids goodbye to the handsome wayfarer, she is still full of admiration; and Odysseus' reply to her suggests, perhaps, a little regret: ' . . . I will pray to you, as to a goddess,/ all the days of my life. For maiden, my life was your gift' (8.467-8).

Unequivocal female aid is provided by the goddess Athena, who works continuously behind the scenes to bring her favourite hero back to his native land, and time and again pops up in one disguise or another in order to supply assistance or encouragement. Athena on one level can be understood as the benign counterpart of the goddess Calypso, whose succour is stifling and ultimately destructive; and here one remembers that the lure presented by Calypso is a sexual one, while Athena is a virgin goddess. The contrast helps to reinforce the notion that it is a woman's sexuality which is potentially so threatening to a man's independence. The asexual Athena is the only female in the poem whose commitment to Odysseus' return is totally unambiguous.

The poem also includes representations of women who, though not directly involved in Odysseus' journey, serve to illustrate the varieties of homecoming experienced by the heroes who fought at Troy. Notable among these is the beautiful Helen, whom Odysseus' son Telemachus encounters when he goes off in quest of news of his father. His visit to the palace at Lacedaemon provides an intriguing glimpse of the domestic life enjoyed by Menelaus and his celebrated wife, reunited after so many years of bitter warfare. Not surprisingly, their relationship, though smooth on the surface, seems to bristle with an undercurrent of tension. Helen treats Telemachus to a story about one of his father's exploits, when he went on a spying mission to Troy, and on receiving some aid from Helen revealed to her all the secrets of the Greek war strategy: ' . . . my heart/ was happy, my heart had changed by now and was for going back/ home again . . .' (4.259-61). But this tale of remorse is immediately capped by one from Menelaus, who describes how Odysseus restrained the Greeks crouching inside the wooden horse when Helen walked three times around the animal impersonating the voices of the concealed men's wives. Menelaus courteously prefaces this account with the placatory comment, 'you will have been moved by/ some divine spirit who wished to grant glory to the Trojans', but he immediately adds, 'and Deiphobos, a godlike man, was with you when you came' (4.274-6), mentioning the name of the Trojan whom the supposedly repentant Helen had married after the death of Paris. This needling exchange instils in the reader even more forcibly than the scenes in the *Iliad* a notion of Helen's highly

ambivalent allegiance in the war fought to regain her.

One of the functions which the representation of Helen fulfils in the poem is to throw into relief the remarkable fidelity of Odysseus's long-suffering wife Penelope. There are two other portraits of adulterous wives in the poem – both created in stories-within-the-story – which produce the same effect. One of them involves the goddess Aphrodite, whose affair with the god Ares is unmasked by her husband Hephaestus, the blacksmith god, when he rigs up an invisible steel net above the marital bed and during a pretended absence succeeds in entangling the lovers in its meshes. This cautionary tale, the subject of a song sung by a bard at the court of Scheria, is recounted in a singularly light-hearted fashion. The gods who in the story gather round to witness the discomfiture of the unhappy couple are doubled up with laughter; and when Apollo, in a nudge-nudge aside to Hermes, asks whether he would mind being trapped in bed with Aphrodite, Hermes replies that he would not object if there were 'thrice this number of endless fastenings' (8.340).

No such levity accompanies the story of the adulterous Clytemnestra, whose exploits exemplify the bad homecoming. When Odysseus visits the Underworld, one of the departed heroes whom he interviews is Agamemnon, who gives a bitter account of his murder at the hands of his wife's lover Aegisthus. At the thought of the 'sluttish woman' (11.424) who was Aegisthus's accomplice in this act of butchery, Agamemnon exclaims:

So there is nothing more deadly or more vile than a woman
who stores her mind with acts that are of such sort . . .
. . . she with thoughts surpassingly grisly
splashed the shame on herself and the rest of her sex, on women
still to come, even on the one whose acts are virtuous.

(11.427–34).

Although Odysseus will never suffer such a fate at the hands of the 'circumspect Penelope' (11.445), he must nevertheless be careful on his return not to tell her everything, for 'there is no trusting in women' (11.456). Odysseus certainly seems to take this warning from Agamemnon to heart, for when he eventually arrives in Ithaca the secret of his identity is kept from his wife for many a long day.⁶ In the end, of course, her loyalty to her husband is affirmed and celebrated. But Penelope is perhaps to be seen as an exception: in the last book of the poem, when Agamemnon down in the Underworld hears the news of Odysseus' successful homecoming, he enlarges on the comparison between Penelope and his own wicked wife (daughter of Tyndareos):

' . . . Thereby the fame of her virtue shall never
die away, but the immortals will make for the people
of earth a thing of grace in the song for prudent Penelope.
Not so did the daughter of Tyndareos fashion her evil
deeds, when she killed her wedded lord, and a song of loathing
will be hers among men, to make evil the reputation
of womankind, even for one whose acts are virtuous.'

(24.196–202)

There are two notable instances in the *Odyssey* of women whose political impact is viewed in a far more positive fashion. Queen Arete, wife of the king of Scheria, is said to be a woman of great intelligence, who is regarded as a god by all her people, and who 'dissolves quarrels, even among men' (7.74). Both the princess Nausicaa and the goddess

Athena advise Odysseus to bypass the king in order to reach the hearth: 'for I have hope that you can be credited with a pride of place as here that the land is always mild, the minds, and the soil inhabited by Calypso while in a place can be accorded

Odysseus' wife's husband's absence through the curfew succeeded in stringing the exposure of hope to each man of this information is quite capable of family (19.158–) associated with behaviour ascribed ambiguous character

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That a woman's power attributed to Odysseus before However, this the return of Penelope himself. When the return of the instructions: she must see to discussion (1.358–9). Penelope to obey him.

Athena advise Odysseus that if he wants to make a good impression at the palace he must bypass the king in his chair of state and make straight for the queen as she sits spinning by the hearth: 'for if she has thoughts in her mind that are friendly to you, / then there is hope that you can see your own people, and come back . . . to the land of your fathers' (6.313-15; 7.75-7). Arete is not a woman who rules in her own right, but she does seem to be credited with a degree of recognised political authority. In this, however, she is seen to be an exceptional case: in the words of Athena, her husband has given her 'such pride of place as no other woman on earth is given' (7.67). It is worth bearing in mind here that the land of Scheria possesses some of the features of a Utopia. Its climate is always mild, the fruit never fails on the trees (7.117-21), the ships understand men's minds, and the sailors never come to grief (8.557-63). In the utterly magical countries inhabited by Calypso and Circe, it is possible for women to be in complete control; while in a place like Scheria, midway between the everyday and the fantastic, a female can be accorded a measure of power.

Odysseus' wife Penelope, who belongs more obviously to the real world, seems in her husband's absence to come close to wielding power in the palace at Ithaca. It was through the cunning device of unravelling her weaving at night that Penelope succeeded in stringing her suitors along for over three years (2.94-110, 19.138-56). Since the exposure of this fraud, she has played for time by more subtle methods, holding out hope to each man, but offering definite acceptance to none of them (2.91-2). In the light of this information, Penelope certainly emerges as a clever and determined woman, who is quite capable of evading the pressures placed on her both by the suitors and by her own family (19.158-61). But in order to achieve this she employs the weapons traditionally associated with females; the deceptive use of weaving and of words is typical of the behaviour ascribed to women in the *Odyssey*, and it lends Penelope a shady and ambiguous character not unlike the one accorded to Helen.

In some respects, however, Penelope exerts authority in a more direct fashion. She roundly rebukes the suitors for their violent behaviour and their schemes against the life of Telemachus (16.409-47); she reproves her son for allowing a guest in the palace to be insulted (18.215-25); and she receives and cross-examines this same guest, the disguised Odysseus (19.96-599). In this interview she reveals her sense of personal responsibility for the maintenance of order in the household - 'my property, my serving-maids, and my great high-roofed house' (19.526) - and her painful awareness of the damage which her failure to remarry is causing. It is to make good some of the depredations brought about by the prolonged stay of the suitors that she has skilfully extracted courtship presents from them (18.274-303), a move which meets with considerable secret approval from her husband.

That a woman whose lord was absent at the wars might have exercised the kind of power attributed to Penelope is easily imaginable: Penelope herself confirms that Odysseus before departing for Troy had placed everything in her charge (18.266). However, this period of dominance seems to have been drawing to a close even before the return of Penelope's husband. Her son is now grown up and is beginning to assert himself. When his mother attempts to cut short the performance of a song about the return of the Greeks from Troy, Telemachus immediately countermands her instructions: she must go back into the house and resume her spinning, 'but the men must see to discussion, / all men, but I most of all. For mine is the power in this household' (1.358-9). Penelope is amazed by her young son's assertiveness, but she does not hesitate to obey him.

The issue of Penelope's powerfulness is open therefore to diverse interpretations. Her own awareness of the limits of her authority is revealed in her conversation with the disguised Odysseus. Without a husband to take care of her, she tells him, she cannot resist the injuries inflicted on her home by her powerful suitors (19.127-61). As for assistance to strangers, this is impossible, since 'there are none to give orders left in the household/ such as Odysseus was among men' (19.314-15). Penelope's inability to deal satisfactorily with guests, one of the main social obligations in the Homeric world, is later confirmed by her son Telemachus, who attributes this failing to his mother's shortcomings as a judge of character. She is all too ready, he says, to honour bad men, and to send the good ones packing (20.131-3).

Penelope's power, then, can be seen to be restricted. It is also peculiar, in that it has arisen out of the unusual circumstances of Odysseus' extraordinarily long absence. The topsy-turvy nature of the situation which has developed on Ithaca is underlined in the poem by the use of what one critic has referred to as 'reverse similes', an image involving a comparison with someone of the opposite sex.⁷ When, for example, Odysseus first greets Penelope, he tells her that her fame is like that of 'some king who ... / ... ruling as lord over many powerful people, / upholds the way of good government ...' (19.109-11). Her relief when she is eventually reunited with her husband is compared with that felt by a shipwrecked sailor who has finally made it to dry land (23.233-40). Such similes suggest both the authority of Penelope and her close identification with her husband, a genuine king and a man who has been shipwrecked on numerous occasions. But they also serve to make the point that what has occurred on Ithaca during Odysseus' absence is an inversion of the normal order of things. A woman has been playing a man's role, and though she has shown great bravery, resolution and cunning - great heroism, in fact - she has not been able to prevent the disruption of the established social and economic structures.

With the slaying of the suitors and Odysseus' revelation of his true identity, normality can at last be restored. But both the hero's and the audience's uncertainty about Penelope's intentions is maintained even now.⁸ The need for some renegotiation of the respective roles of Odysseus and Penelope is indicated by the latter's remarkable reluctance to recognise her husband, in spite of his decisive action and his acceptance by the rest of the household. After a splendid scene in which the reader encounters the two of them sitting in silence on either side of the fire, eyeing each other warily, Penelope finally responds to her husband's accusation of stubbornness by giving orders that a particular bed, one which Odysseus himself had constructed, should be made up for him in the hall. Odysseus reminds her that this bed cannot be moved, since one of its posts was carved out of a live olive tree; and it is through this ultimate token of his identity that Penelope's recognition is finally secured. The bed which the couple shared long ago stands as a symbol of their marriage, and it is only when its permanence and stability have been acknowledged by Odysseus that Penelope is willing to renew their relationship.

In this way, the conclusion of the *Odyssey* demonstrates the centrality of marriage in the lives of both women and men. It is through this institution that their separate but complementary roles are defined and regulated. Penelope and Odysseus may operate in different spheres, but their close affinity is brought home to the reader time and time again, not least by the similarity of their characters, for both are remarkable for their cunning and perseverance. This model of gender relations is in some ways quite different from anything which can be derived from the later literature of the Classical Age, in which the spheres of activity of male and female are seen as fundamentally distinct. In the

Homeric world, where politics is defined by the relationship between the domestic and the public, is so rigid. The roles of men and women do not come close - in the absence of a husband.

That said, the story of Penelope and Odysseus, their relationship, though complex, is not so different in status. A woman is ultimately defined by her relations within society at large, and anything other than subordinate duties are anchored firmly in the domestic and unchanging, while the male world, has a part to play in the public sphere. Odysseus the wanderer and Penelope the homemaker are potent symbols of gender relations in the peoples of many subsequent

Homeric world, where political power is rooted in the royal household, the boundary between the domestic and the political, between the private and the public, is not nearly so rigid. The roles of men and women overlap, and it is for this reason that a woman can come close – in the absence of her husband – to the exercise of political power.

That said, the story of Penelope and Odysseus nevertheless makes it clear to us that their relationship, though complementary, is also asymmetrical in terms of power and status. A woman is ultimately dependent on her husband for the maintenance of orderly relations within society at large, and when he is present her position can never be anything other than subordinate. In Homeric as in later Classical society, a woman's duties are anchored firmly in the household. It is her job to protect what is permanent and unchanging, while the male, through his involvement in the wider concerns of the world, has a part to play in the movements of history and time. These two characters – Odysseus the wanderer and Penelope the guardian of the home – were to survive as potent symbols of gender difference, not just for later generations of Greeks but for peoples of many subsequent ages.

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