

Women in Homer

THE *ILLAD* and *Odyssey* may be dominated by the theme of male heroism, but in both poems women play a central role as objects of desire, affection, and prestige. Most obviously, the Trojan War begins with an attempt by Menelaos and his brother Agamemnon to recover Menelaos's wife Helen, who has been abducted by the Trojan prince Paris. The wrath of Achilles, the stated subject of the *Iliad*, is caused by Agamemnon's taking of his captive concubine Briseis, and his resulting withdrawal from battle nearly dooms the Greeks' chances of victory. It is hard to separate outraged masculine honor from desire to recover the women, but in both cases they are clearly seen as worthy of being fought over (as the old men of Troy acknowledge about Helen at *Il.* 3.156–8). She especially must be made to seem a worthy object, or the heroism of the entire enterprise is called into question (Blondell 2013). The *Odyssey* tells of its hero's protracted journey home to his wife Penelope. His struggle is mirrored by the struggle of Penelope to fend off the suitors who have besieged her palace, refusing to leave until she agrees to marry one of them. In both epics, the "traffic in women" is central to the plot, whether that traffic is brought about by abduction and raiding, or through marriage (see Crielaard, HOMERIC COMMUNITIES and FAMILY AND MARRIAGE IN HOMER).

The world of the *Iliad* is divided between the Greek camp, where women appear exclusively as captive sex slaves, and the city of Troy, where noble women like Hekabe, Cassandra, and Andromache are honored and respected. (The battlefield that separates these two worlds is exclusively the territory of men, and the occasional god or goddess.) The situation of the Trojan women is made poignant by the looming threat of defeat and the knowledge that if Troy falls, their position will become that of the spear captives in the Greek camp (Gottschall 2008).

When Hektor returns briefly to Troy, a series of encounters provides a clear picture of his relationships with women. Each one – his mother, his sister-in-law Helen, and his wife Andromache – attempts but fails to detain him safely within the walls of Troy. In the third encounter, he finds Andromache at the wall with their infant son (*Il.* 6.399–495). Although she stresses her need for him, and her wish that he not die in battle, Hektor accepts this as his fate. Her offer of military advice is quickly dismissed with a command to return to her

weaving. This rebuke, together with Hektor's acknowledgement that she is destined for enslavement by the enemy, and his wish that he not live to see it, suggest both his love for her and the constraints of gender roles (Arthur 1981). The gendered division of labor is made clear again during the funeral of Hektor. His wife Andromache leads the mourning, followed by his mother. Finally (and surprisingly) Helen is given the last word. Fighting is men's work; women's work is to bear warriors, to weave, and to mourn.

The peacetime world of the *Odyssey* gives women a larger role than they have in the *Iliad*, and indeed much of the action revolves around Penelope's attempts to manage the suitors who have besieged her home in hopes of marrying her. The narrative alternates between the events on Ithaka and Odysseus's adventures during his ten-year voyage home, much of which is spent in female company. Although his dramatic encounters with Cyclopes and other monsters loom large in the imagination, many of the dangers he encounters are female: Skylla, Charybdis, and the Sirens. Less deadly but just as distracting are the goddesses Kirke (with whom he spends a year) and Kalypso (with whom he stays for seven years, much of that time unwillingly). Although Kalypso impedes his homecoming, when ordered by the gods she helps him on his way. He is then helped by a series of female figures; the goddess Ino rescues him from drowning, the princess Nausikaa clothes him (Block 1985), and her mother Arete's reception helps him to return home (Pedrick 1988). In a reversal of the situation in the *Iliad*, it could be said that Odysseus circulates among women (Lyons 2012). At the same time, it is important to recognize that many of these "women" are in fact immortal goddesses, whom Homeric epic treats very differently from mortal women (Loraux 1992). They have much larger scope of action, as well as a much greater degree of sexual freedom. The limits of this freedom are however indicated by Kalypso, who, when asked to give up Odysseus, bitterly enumerates the mortals who have fared badly after dalliances with goddesses (*Od.* 5.118–20).

It is only during Odysseus's last stop before Ithaka that he encounters temptation in the form of a mortal woman, the Phaeacian princess Nausikaa. The episode in which Athena inspires the young woman to go to the shore to wash the family's clothing gives us a glimpse of the carefree world of young women, while foreshadowing the marriage that will end this light-hearted existence. The theme of marriage is brought to the fore in the harmonious union of her parents Arete and Alkinoös as well as in the eligibility for marriage of Nausikaa herself. Thanking her for rescuing him, Odysseus says:

And for yourself, may the gods grant you all your heart desires, a husband and a home, and may they bestow on you as well oneness of heart (*homophrosyne*) in all its excellence. For nothing is greater or better than this, than when a man and a woman keep house together sharing one heart and mind, a great grief to their foes and a joy to their friends, while their own fame is unsurpassed. (*Odyssey* 6.180–5, trans. Murray and Dimock)

This speech is Odysseus's tactful way of declining an implicit invitation, and looks forward to his reunion with Penelope, the wife to whom he has chosen to return.

The *Odyssey* calls attention to the work of women as anonymous servers of food and providers of sexual companionship, but also as creators of textiles. Penelope is famous for her weaving, but the goddesses Kirke and Kalypso are also shown at the loom. (On weaving, see Papadopoulou-Belmehdi 1994a and 1994b.) While Penelope holds the key to Odysseus's reintegration into his former life, the aged servant Eurykleia plays a

critical role when she recognizes him but protects his identity (Karydas 1998). The palace is divided into public (male) space and private (female) space, which Penelope shares with her serving women. The reintegration of Odysseus into his old life and the renewal of his marriage requires him to achieve acceptance into that female space, on which it turns out he has left his own mark by the making of the immoveable wedding bed, a symbol of the solidity of his marriage to Penelope (Zeitlin 1995).

In the *Iliad*, women are the cause of strife among men, and are often made to seem like intruders into the male world of the Greek camp in the *Iliad*, despite the fact that they have been brought there against their will. At the same time, the doomed domestic world of Troy allows us to see women in a setting in which they are accorded affection and respect. The *Odyssey* in some ways reverses this polarity: women, goddesses, and female monsters people the world that Odysseus must navigate to return home. His reintegration into his home, which has been invaded by suitors, and his reassertion of his control over this home, requires that the male world of war intrude upon the domestic world of women. He is able to vanquish the suitors in part due to the *homophrosyne* between himself and his wife Penelope, who without consulting him has set up the perfect situation in the form of the contest to string Odysseus's bow.

Throughout the *Odyssey*, the figures of Helen and Klytemnestra loom as foils to the virtuous Penelope. This is especially marked in Agamemnon's warning to Odysseus in the Underworld (*Od.* II.441–56). His bitter reproaches of his unfaithful and murderous wife spill over into a misogynistic condemnation of all women, one that he grudgingly and partially retracts when he learns of Penelope's steadfastness (*Od.* 24:192–202). The misogynistic discourse of Agamemnon, although it is echoed elsewhere in Greek literature, is tacitly but emphatically rejected in Homeric epic. While there are notable exceptions (the callous treatment of the “disloyal” serving maids by Telemachos), the Homeric treatment of women is surprisingly respectful, whether they are concubines like Briseis or wives like Penelope.

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