

Susan Florek

Professor Polina Kroik

HUMN510 The Ancient World

31 December 2023

Trepidation of Women Revealed in Homer's *Odyssey*

Homer's epic work, *The Odyssey* (800 BCE), is a man's tale told by a man for men. At the time of its writing, it was one of the first written poems after centuries of oral traditions. Greek women of the time were rarely literate, nor were they permitted to attend the theater or readings, and yet women in the roles of goddesses, demi-goddesses, wives, and slaves figured prominently throughout the adventurous hero's journey. As much as the epic poem conveys the trials of men on an arduous, death-defying journey, the constant anxiety triggered in these heroes by the several female characters demonstrated throughout the poem may reflect the real-life trepidation experienced by Greek men toward women in Greek culture. Unlike prior epic poems like *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 2100–1200 BC), in which women are depicted as something to be used, abused, and dismissed, *The Odyssey* depicts some of the female characters as something to be revered, and many as feared. This change in the portrayal of women in literature may have opened the door to poems like the ultra-violent *Medea* (c. 431 BCE), in which the fear of women features prominently. This paper will focus on the causes that may have contributed to the representation of women in *The Odyssey* as something to be feared and whether or not this depiction reflected and subsequently influenced men's attitudes toward women in ancient Greece.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Several centuries before Homer created his epic legend, women depicted in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* were consigned to the roles of goddesses, slaves, harlots, and wives, who were so

abused that their cry for help directed to the goddesses was the catalyst for the creation of Enkidu, and ultimately led to the hero's journey presented in the poem (Gilgamesh Tablet I). While most women were mistreated, they were also sought out for advice; for example, Gilgamesh seeks advice from his mother (Tablet VI), and Enkidu seeks advice from the harlot Shamhat on how to become more human (Tablet VIII); however, the female characters are dismissed and forgotten as soon as their usefulness expires. Although the wives in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* were abused to the extent that they desperately cried for help, it can be understood that the behavior of treating married women in such a way would have been considered offensive, or else the goddesses would have ignored their cries for help instead of finding a solution (Tablet I). The goddess offered a solution to prevent further abuse: not to punish Gilgamesh but to create a distraction by creating a friend who "had a full head of hair like a woman" (Gilgamesh Tablet I). Since most, if not all, surviving texts before and during the classical period were written by men, it is difficult to know if the depictions of women in other existing literature were accurate (Scott 17), like the Code of Hammurabi or the flood story Atrahasis.

By the time Homer wrote his epic poem, married women were protected from the kind of treatment depicted in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, only because married women in ancient Greece were secluded and uneducated, restricted to the home. Any training received by girls was delegated to their mothers, who educated them mainly in the domestic arts (Katz 74), including cooking, cleaning, weaving, and childrearing. Some scholars have claimed that some wealthy girls may have been taught to read and write because several pieces of pottery depict "women using book rolls for the reciting of poetry" (Pritchard 47). Research has revealed that Greek women knew mythological tales that they recited to the children and each other while weaving

and conducting domestic duties (Heath 86). Unfortunately, many other scholars have described women as despicable in the opinion of men, who view their existence "as a species of slavery and the women's quarters as a place of confinement" (Katz 76). The confinement of girls and women to the home may have contributed to a sense of mystery among most men in their attempt to understand the needs and desires of women. Epic poetry became one source that men could consult to help them untangle the mystery of women.

FEMALE ARCHETYPES IN HOMER'S ODYSSEY

The female characters in Homer's *Odyssey* comprise several archetypes, both mortal and immortal, and may represent how Greek men viewed women in general. Good or helpful women or goddesses are countered by evil or harmful ones. Considering women's limited role in ancient Greek society, strong female characters are still depicted in Greek poetry and mythology (Seitkasimova 51). However, even though most of the female characters in *The Odyssey* are either helpful or harmful to Ulysses and his men, they are still restricted to specific locations, usually islands. While the men can sail to and from the isolated locations, the women remain (Lesser 220). Even formidable female deities with magical powers cannot leave the place they are doomed to endure for eternity. Lesser states, "Men's survival is associated not only with female immobility but also male mobility" (Lesser 220). Ulysses' mobility allows him to escape the traps set upon him by dangerous immortals, who are trapped themselves. Unable to chase after him, the danger remains, and Ulysses is able to continue on his journey. Homer's female characters in *The Odyssey* cover a broad range of personality types.

Positive Female Archetypes. The most helpful female characters in the poem include the loyal wife Penelope, the mighty goddess Athena, and the loyal house servant Euryclea. Ulysses' wife Penelope represents the dedicated, loyal wife and mother, whose cleverness is revealed in her

attempts to use her dedication to domestic responsibilities, such as weaving, as a way to postpone marriage to another man, allowing her detained husband Ulysses enough time to return home, "which is connected to that epic's alternative story of survival and homecoming" (Lesser 220).

The most helpful woman to Ulysses outside the home is Athena, the goddess of war, metallurgy, and weaving, who prevents the god Zeus from destroying Ulysses by aiding the hero and his men on their journey. In the poem, the goddess Athena, daughter of Zeus, takes the form of Mentor to employ the necessary aid to both Ulysses and his son Telemachus, "having assumed the voice and form of Mentor (Homer Book XXII), Athena is the only female character not confined, but to accomplish any travel, she must take on the appearance of a man in the form of Mentor. When Ulysses sees her as Mentor, he replies, "Mentor, lend me your help, and forget not your old comrade, nor the many good turns he has done you. Besides, you are my age-mate" (Book XXII).

The faithful elderly house servant Euryclea, who was "in charge of everything both night and day" (Homer Book II), is trusted with secrets throughout the poem and discloses significant information to the hero as she reveals the misdeeds of the maids, informing Ulysses that "twelve in all have misbehaved, and have been wanting in respect to me, and also to Penelope" (Book XXII). Another elderly female character provides assistance to Ulysses in his quest to return home by supplying him with the information needed to exact revenge on his enemies, including his mother, whom Ulysses encounters during his journey to the underworld. In Hades, his mother, now a ghost, informs her son of the circumstances unfolding in his home, revealing that his "wife still remains in your house, but she is in great distress of mind and spends her whole time in tears both night and day. No one as yet has got possession of your fine property, and

Telemachus still holds your lands undisturbed...your father remains at his old place in the country and never goes near the town" (Homer Book XI).

Negative Female Archetypes. Ulysses' attempt to return home is impeded many harmful female characters in the form of murderous deities. Circe a "great and cunning goddess," resides on and is confined to the Aeaeon island, where she uses magic to turn Ulysses' shipmates into pigs. Circe then asks Ulysses to go to bed with her, which will, according to him, "unman me and make me fit for nothing" (Homer Book X). Although Athena sends help to Ulysses in the form of a messenger to avoid the same fate, he will be delayed another year before receiving additional instructions from Circe herself on how to avoid further danger on his journey.

Circe warns Ulysses and his men about the Sirens "who enchant all who come near them" but will "warble him to death with the sweetness of their song" (Homer Book XII). Circe describes a chilling scenario of a "heap of dead men's bones lying all around, with the flesh still rotting off them" (Book XII) but also advises the men to put wax in their ears to prevent this. From happening to them, while Ulysses agrees to being tied tightly to the mast of the ship so that he can survive the Siren's song.

After escaping death in a shipwreck, Ulysses is further detained by the goddess Calypso, the lonely, isolated nymph, who decides that she wants to marry him. However, after ten years trapped on the island with the nymph, he announces, "I am quite aware that my wife Penelope is nothing like so tall or so beautiful as yourself. She is only a woman, whereas you are an immortal" (Homer Book V). He continues to inform Calypso of his desire to go home and be reunited with his wife, who previously stated is "only a woman," while the gods compel the lonely nymph to allow Ulysses to go back to Ithaca" (Book V).

Other negative female characters interfering with Penelope's plans at home in Ithaca. Melantho, a member of the servant class whom Penelope brought up, "showed no consideration for the sorrows of her mistress, and used to misconduct herself with Eurymachus, with whom she was in love" (Homer Book XVIII). Melantho is accused of helping the suitors by tipping off her lover, Eurymachus, and is later punished, along with the suitors, during Ulysses' act of revenge (Haller 266).

Myths that illuminated the gods and epic heroes were much more than stories told for amusement because they supported specific aspects of Greek society by helping to explain why rituals are performed while advising on the use of icons (O'Grady 239). Another significant duty performed by women was the ritual of praying to the goddesses who represented fertility and death. While it is clear that *The Odyssey* is addressed to males and primarily to them, its portrayal of females as listeners anticipates some features of the romance tradition" (Doherty 172).

STATUS OF WOMEN IN ANCIENT GREECE

In ancient Greece, the primary duties of married women included bringing up the children and managing the family home. Married women spent most of their time occupied with domestic activities such as cleaning, cooking, caring for the children, making clothes, and weaving. In wealthy households, they were aided in these responsibilities by domestic slaves. Women could go out and visit the homes of friends and were able to participate in public religious ceremonies and festivals. Since any contact with non-family males was disapproved of in ancient Greece, married women were not allowed to attend public gatherings, hold public office, or vote, and even mentioning a woman's name in public was prohibited (Seitkasimova 52).

Women who were not wealthy had more freedom to perform activities outside the home due to their inability to afford and maintain slaves. Therefore, poor women had to go outside to fetch water or go on trips to the market. Many also had to work and sought employment in shops, bakeries, or working as servants for wealthier families. Just as slave girls were treated as property, girls in general were treated as commodities as they were "married in exchange for property measured in heads of cattle handed over to their families" (Zieliński 145).

Of the non-citizen classes, slave prostitutes are the group of Ancient Greek women that we know a lot about. It has been discovered that higher-class prostitutes could participate in the symposium, the private drinking party for male guests only. These women, also known as hetairai, could attend school to learn philosophy, literature, and how to play music and were "released into the world to provide special pleasures for men" (Seitkasimova 54).

According to sources in Athenian popular literature, women could not control their bodily appetites and desires because they were incapable of moderation and quickly "became gluttons and heavy drinkers of alcohol who were much too fond of sex" (Pritchard 56). Also, because women were thought to be much less intelligent than males and lacked the ability to reason, "they were considered cowardly by nature" (Pritchard 57). Despite this belief, the wives were tasked with performing significant rituals that were fundamental for maintaining families and the continuing fruitfulness of agriculture. In this way, wealthy, married women could exert some form of liberation and even distinction in society as they attended the required festivals and funerals necessary to perform these special religious duties. Implementing services and rituals for the dead was also entrusted to women (Pritchard 59).

FEAR OF WOMEN AND CATHARSIS

In ancient Greece, it was commonly presented in Greek mythology that women were incapable of controlling their sexual charms, resulting in misfortune, whether deliberately or not. In this case, Greek wives were obligated to be faithful, while husbands could find pleasure outside the marriage. The same rules of morality applied in mythology, and so the pattern of human behavior was validated and sanctioned by the actions of the deities. However, the myths, like dreams, allow for the manifestation of fears and anxieties which are otherwise inhibited (Walcot 39). The act of catharsis, or cleansing by assimilating emotion through the arts, could contribute to preserving goodness in men. By cleansing passions by confronting fear, such passions can be purified and refined by means of the tragic poem (Euron 16).

The emotional experience of art can be beneficial for the viewer as they experience the feeling of pleasure from the creative display of terror. Because art can possess some moral value, it can be considered a kind of education of feeling (Euron 17), which can be helpful in understanding the mysterious. In considering Greek culture and the restraints it forces on proper women, Greek men, through art and poetry, can experience their fears of the unknown while being educated through the content that epic stories provide. Through catharsis, men can gain an emotional education regarding how women live and work behind closed doors without having to open those doors in real life. Some negative representations of women in epic poetry could have the opposite effect, causing unintended anxieties. While many of the mortal women represented in Homer's *Odyssey* are reasonable, even honorable, the goddesses cause much trouble for the hero Ulysses. Many men die as a result of this trouble, but Ulysses is still able to complete his quest to return home and even negotiate with the worst of the female antagonists.

The horrid portrayal of a negative female archetype can be seen in the Greek myth Medea and the play *Medea*, written by Euripides in 431 BCE. Medea, the niece of Circe and daughter of

the sun god Helios, is a mortal woman with divine ancestry adept at using magical potion powers. In the Greek myth, Medea uses her magic potions to help Jason, the man she has fallen in love with, obtain the golden fleece. The love story quickly turns terrifying when, in order to help her lover escape, she kidnaps her brother and dismembers him by throwing pieces of his body into the sea in an effort to slow down her father, who is chasing the couple. In the play, Medea commits more murder after Jason, whom she is now married to, leaves her for another. Medea's revenge consists of killing Jason's new wife, the father of the bride, and her own children (Euripides). Although just a story or myth, the scenario could induce more fear than pity in any man. The latter is an excellent example of Euron's claim that while "art can educate and refine our feelings, bad examples, behaviors, and circumstances can damage them" (Euron 17).

CONCLUSION

During Ulysses' great adventure, women played a significant role in interfering with his desire to be reunited with his loving, loyal wife and his property in numerous ways. Not long after trying to return home, following the brutal and exhausting ten-year Trojan War, which was started because Helen betrayed her marriage vows, Ulysses' efforts are impeded by a series of dangerous women. These negative archetypes then act as the few examples available to men unfamiliar with women and their needs and desires, possibly producing an underlying fear of women in general. It has been noted that the only women who were allowed to venture out of the home were primarily poor women, slaves, and prostitutes, which left men with no reliable way to understand or even meet decent women. Epic poems written by men for men seem to be the only education available to young men to understand young women, who were hidden within the household, away from them.

Whether women could attend theatre performances or not is still being determined amongst scholars since it is known that women could not attend public assemblies (Seitkasimova 52). If women were familiar with the poems, they could offer more insight; however, as O'Grady points out, "the desire to shelter and protect is closely related to the desire to domineer and exploit" (O'Grady 305). Men in the audience or present at the symposium could become educated as to what a proper woman might be expected to act like by watching Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*.

Penelope, waiting loyally in Ithaca, provides an aspiration and a happy ending for the epic poem and Ulysses' quest to return home (Lesser 220). Other female characters portrayed may also give the audience of men insight into what proper virtues are compared to less admirable ones. By observing the actions of the many servants, a man could get an interesting education on what is acceptable behavior and what is unacceptable. On the other hand, the terror exhibited by the more negative female archetypes could have either a positive influence on the emotions through catharsis or fill the audience of men with fear and dread. Those men who experience too much fear may acquire a disturbing attitude towards their future wives, filled with suspicion, leading to abuse or stricter seclusion.

Works Cited

- Doherty, Lillian Eileen. "Gender and Internal Audiences in the Odyssey." *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 113, no. 2, 1992, pp. 161–77. <https://doi.org/10.2307/295555>.
- The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Translated by M. Jastrow. Project Gutenberg, 1973.
- Euripides. *Medea*. Translated by E. P. Coleridge. The Internet Classics Archive, 1910.
- Euron, Paolo. *Aesthetics, Theory, and Interpretation of the Literary Work*. Brill/Sense, 2019.
- Fletcher, Judith. "Women's Space and Wingless Words in the Odyssey." *Phoenix*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2008, pp. 77-91, 240. ProQuest, <http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fwomens-space-wingless-words-odyssey%2Fdocview%2F232017804%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289>.
- Haller, Benjamin S. "Dolios in Odyssey 4 and 24: Penelope's Plotting and Alternative Narratives of Odysseus's." *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. 143, no. 2, 2013, pp. 263-292. ProQuest, <http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fdolios-odyssey-4-24-penelopes-plotting%2Fdocview%2F1466022931%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289>.
- Heath, John. "Women's Work: Female Transmission of Mythical Narrative*." *American Philological Association. Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. 141, no. 1, 2011, pp. 69-104. ProQuest, <http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fwomens-work-female-transmission-mythical%2Fdocview%2F871355987%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289>.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by S. Butler. The Internet Classics Archive, 2009.

Katz, Marilyn. "Ideology and 'The Status of Women' in Ancient Greece." *History and Theory*, vol. 31, no. 4, 1992, pp. 70–97. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505416>.

Lesser, Rachel H. "Female Ethics and Epic Rivalry: Helen in the Iliad and Penelope in the Odyssey." *American Journal of Philology*, vol. 140, no. 2, 2019, pp. 189-226.
<https://doi.org/10.1353/ajp.2019.0013>.

O'Grady, et al., eds. *The Critical Path and Other Writings on Critical Theory, 1963-1975*. University of Toronto Press, 2009.

Pritchard, David M. "The Position of Attic Women in Democratic Athens." *Ancient History*, vol. 41-44, 2014, pp. 43-67. ProQuest,
<http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fposition-attic-women-democratic-athens%2Fdocview%2F1690235620%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289>.

Scott, Michael. "The Rise of Women in Ancient Greece." *History Today*, vol. 59, no. 11, 11, 2009, pp. 36-40. ProQuest,
<http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Frise-women-ancient-greece%2Fdocview%2F202817295%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289>.

Seitkasimova, Zh. A. "Status of Women in Ancient Greece." *Open Journal for Anthropological Studies*, 2020, pp. 49-54. <https://doi.org/10.32591/coas.ojas.0302.03049s>.

Walcot, P. "Greek Attitudes towards Women: The Mythological Evidence." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1984, pp. 37–47. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/642368>.

Zieliński, Karol. "Women as Victims of War in Homer's Oral Poetics." *Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2019, pp. 141-157. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h8030141>.