

## Depictions of women in the *Odyssey*

Kübra Baysal\*

**Abstract:** Following Homer's first great work, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* is the second oldest epic work forming the background of the Western literature. It recounts the adventures and misfortunes of Odysseus, the king of Ithaca, after the Trojan War, which lasted for ten years. Although the focus of the epic poem is on Odysseus himself, several female characters, including Penelope, leave an impact on him, add different shades to his story and mature him. Through various female characters, Homer indeed reflects admirable qualities of women in the patriarchal Greek tradition. There is also the depiction of women as unfaithful seductresses by male characters like Odysseus, Agamemnon, and Menelaus in the same tradition. Thus, this study aims to point out the two different approaches towards women in the *Odyssey* as a patriarchal work and analyse Homer's attitude through the depiction of women.

**Keywords:** Homer, *the Odyssey*, women, patriarchy

### Introduction

Fighting in the Trojan War for ten years and taking the wrath of the gods on himself just like other Greeks during the war, Odysseus the hero is unable to return to his home and family, Penelope, and Telemachus. His journey takes another ten years, during which he comes across a myriad of men and women characters on the way back. Significantly, the women characters Odysseus meets are depicted to be so powerful and capable that they efficiently manage to keep him by their side for a long time despite his reluctance. In other words, these women stop Odysseus from setting sail while on the other hand, Penelope, his wife, faces all difficulties alone back home and cleverly controls the household and people in Ithaca. However, regardless of their integrity and individuality, women of the *Odyssey* are depicted from the patriarchal perspective: either as virtuous and obedient or

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\* Kübra Baysal (✉)

School of Foreign Languages, Ankara Yildirim Beyazit University, Ankara, Turkey  
e-mail: kbaysal@aybu.edu.tr; kubrabaysal17@gmail.com

transgressive, unfaithful, and dangerous. On the one side, Penelope is set as the epitome of the virtuous and clever woman idealised in the patriarchal tradition while other women characters such as Circe, Calypso, Clytemnestra, and Helen, who bend the patriarchal rules are pictured as dangerous for unfitting the norms, which clearly turns Homer's the *Odyssey* into a colourful parade of female characters portrayed through the patriarchal tradition.

Although depicted in variety, women characters are not given the same amount of power or agency as men in the *Odyssey*, which is written in the male-oriented epic tradition praising the unyielding power of the hero, Odysseus overcoming challenges and difficulties throughout his quest. In this respect, the descriptions of women clearly display how the image of the ideal woman is set in the Greek tradition. Thus, two types of women are pictured in the *Odyssey*: the obedient and faithful and the disobedient and dangerous. Innocence, purity, and loyalty are emphasised in the characters of Penelope, Pallas Athena, Nausicaa and Arete while disloyalty and/or magical power are associated with the characters of Helen, Clytemnestra, the servant maids in Ithaca, Calypso, and Circe. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the representations of women in the *Odyssey* as a patriarchal text.

### **State of women in the *Odyssey***

In the *Odyssey*, certain women characters are praised for their virtue and good qualities which presents them as the exemplary women while they are contrasted with the bad examples of women in narration. From this perspective, the poem is a “panorama of womanhood” with an array of mortal women, semidivine women and goddesses (Graham 2001, 349). Idealised mortal women in the *Odyssey* are Penelope, Arete and Nausicaa whereas Helen, Clytemnestra, Melantho, and the maids are condemned as the unfaithful and transgressive ones. The semidivine women are depicted through Circe, Calypso, Scylla, Charybdis, and the Sirens, all of whom are pictured as dangerous magical creatures luring men with their voice and feminine power. In fact, “while some of these [semidivine] characters had definite attractions, they were all, if in different degrees, sinister and destructive [to men]” (Cohen 1995, 13-14). Even more importantly, the women characters that are depicted perilous are indulged in “the prototypically female activities of weaving (Kirke, Kalypso), and singing (Kirke, Kalypso, the Sirens)” (Schein 1995, 19) emphasising

their danger as empowered women with agency. As for the goddesses, Pallas Athena is the most important one as the perfect combination of male qualities with the feminine virtue. She sets the whole chain of action when she asks her father, Zeus for Odysseus's release from Calypso's Island. Lacking a mother and born to Zeus, Athena is the warfare goddess due to her patriarchal lineage. However, she similarly embodies the feminine qualities of chastity as she is also the goddess of weaving. Therefore, displaying the perfect unification of both sexes, Athena can be considered the most independent and idealised woman character in the *Odyssey* by underlining her virtue since she is not completely bound by the human customs restricting female agency.

Noting that women were in a comparably better condition in the Heroic Age than the following periods that were revolutionised with the emergence of the city-states which elevated men above women as citizens (Carroll 1907, 161), the somewhat positive depiction of the idealised women in the poem seems likely. To begin with, Odysseus's wife, Penelope, is the most significant and exemplary woman character in this epic as she remains loyal to her husband despite his twenty years of absence. Cleverness and extraordinary cunning are only the two of her strong qualities that place her above most of the other women. Despite her wisdom and cunning which make her Odysseus's equal in mind, she is elevated among other women characters in the poem through her loyalty and the display of how she tricks the suitors to remain loyal to her husband. In other words, her agency is undermined and as an idealised woman, her loyalty is foregrounded. In the poem, her loyalty is at times compared to her maid Melanthe, her cousins Helen and Clytemnestra, and Aphrodite, all of whom are reflected as the bad examples for women. These are the women who betrayed their husbands and lords. Therefore, they are represented as the lewd women. Penelope is compared to Helen both by Athena and Agamemnon, who remains in the underworld. As Agamemnon counsels Odysseus about women, he praises Penelope with her favourable personality while at the same time warns Odysseus to beware of her because she is a woman in general as follows:

“Yes,” replied Agamemnon. “Never be too trustful even of your wife, nor show her all that is in your mind. Reveal a little of your plans to her, but keep the rest to yourself. Not that *your*, wife, Odysseus, will ever murder you. Icarus' daughter is far too loyal in her thoughts and feelings. The wise Penelope! She was a young woman when we said goodbye to her on our way to the war. She had a baby son at her breast. And now, I suppose, he

has begun to take his seat among the men. Fortunate young (450) man! His loving father will come home and see him, and he will kiss his father. That is how things should be. Whereas that wife of mine refused me even the satisfaction of setting eyes on my son – she killed me before I could. And now I will give you a piece of advice; take it to heart. Do not sail openly into port when you reach your home-country. Make a secret approach. Women, I tell you, are no longer to be trusted. (Homer 2003, 126)

Comparing his unfaithful wife, Helen, to Penelope, Agamemnon values Penelope's loyalty and devotion as a wife and mother underlining the patriarchal idealisation of women as faithful wives and devout mothers. As for Melanthe, she is considered Penelope's opposite double because even though Penelope raised her well, she starts a relationship with Eurymachos, one of the leading suitors who is most likely to marry Penelope (Homer 2003, 184). In terms of their similarity, Penelope's fidelity is "almost entirely displaced onto her servants," especially on Melanthe (Fulkerson 2002, 343-344). Besides, Penelope has similar qualities with Arete, the loyal, intelligent, confident, and powerful Phaeacian queen, who has the will to control and direct men through her idealised status as a faithful woman. Therefore, Penelope and Arete are the ones who are awarded with happiness and prosperity in the narrative, as seen in Odysseus's final wish to Arete blessing her family and their household in the hope of a reunion with his own wife. Penelope is similar to Arete, and thus, Penelope might possibly be called her "double" in virtue (Doherty 1992, 173-174).

Furthermore, in his speech to beautiful Nausicaa, the daughter of King Alcinoos in the Phaeacians' land, Odysseus gives counsel about the crucial points of a good marriage by referring to his wife, Penelope. As he expresses, a good marriage must be blessed both by gods and the people (Homer 2003, 82). This notion not only sanctifies the husband as well as the wife and the people since they are the king and the queen but also ensures them dignity and good reputation in public life. In this respect, Odysseus has experienced the unique happiness of marriage with Penelope, which was denied to Menelaos and Agamemnon by their wives, Helen, and Clytemnestra (Bolmarcich 2001, 206). Contrasted with Penelope's silence and obedience, Helen and Clytemnestra's female voice and agency result in betrayal and/or murder of their husbands portraying these characters as dangerous women (Wilson 2017). Likewise, Penelope is the one who is rewarded with a dream foreshadowing the upcoming incidents in her household.

As she tells her rather symbolical vision to Odysseus, who is now disguised as a beggar, he makes her dream come true when he kills the suitors as well as the unfaithful maids and restores peace in his household. Thus, Penelope's dream encourages Odysseus to take immediate action to expose his real identity (Rozokoki 2001, 1-2). Finally, Penelope has managed the running of her household and kept the suitors at bay for almost ten years so successfully that Odysseus acknowledges her power as a woman when he is disguised as a beggar:

'My lady,' answered the resourceful Odysseus, 'there is not a man in the wide world who could find fault with you. For your fame has reached broad heaven itself, like that of some illustrious king, ruling a populous and mighty country with the fear of the gods in his heart, and upholding justice. As a result of his good leadership the dark soil yields its wheat and barley, the trees are laden with ripe fruit, the sheep never fail to bear their lambs, nor the sea to provide its fish; and his people prosper under him. (Homer 2003, 187)

Clearly, Penelope is treated like a king by Odysseus himself, which tells about the authority she has established in the nation after Odysseus's departure. Indeed, Penelope has the matrilineal power, which is transferred to her husband Odysseus, through marriage. It is her who made kingship possible for Odysseus in the first place as she has the royal lineage, which also explains the suitors' insistence on wooing and marrying her and plotting to kill her heir, Telemachus in Odysseus's years long absence. He admits the talent of his wife as the manager of their household among his people when he calls her "a just king," attaching her a male quality for her power (Bolmarcich 2001, 212). Therefore, Penelope and few other women characters like Arete are depicted with unusual and respectable characteristics as virtuous women. However, when reading the *Odyssey* from a contemporary perspective, it is obvious that Penelope's agency is missing despite her upstanding status in her society due to her idealised feminine qualities combined with her masculine qualities such as cunning and leadership. As Emily Wilson, a contemporary translator of the *Odyssey* asserts,

She's canny, she's strong-willed, she has grit, she has a vivid imagination, she's loyal, she's a competent, mostly single mother who shows deep love for her difficult, moody son, and she keeps a big and complex household running for two decades. You have to love her for all these things, and I do. [...] But many students, scholars, and general readers want even more from this literary character: they want her to fit the ideal of an empowered woman. (Wilson 2017)

Homer also presents male-centred ideas of the Heroic Age through another depiction of women labelling them as wicked and untrustworthy, thus required to be controlled by men. Although the *Odyssey* seems to focus on the male audience, the romance plot within this epic reveals the unjust manner of presenting women and their fears in a male-dominated world (Doherty 1992, 172). There is a double standard between men and women in their roles and freedom in society. As seen in Odysseus and Penelope's marriage and the issue of fidelity, Odysseus does not remain loyal to his wife. On the other hand, Penelope does not wish to remarry and performs full commitment in his twenty years of absence. He lives and sleeps with Calypso, the beautiful goddess for seven years, although he expresses his reluctance in the relationship: "the Nymph Calypso who longed for him to marry her and kept him in her vaulted cave" (Homer 2003, 36). No sooner he escapes from Calypso than he is taken by Circe, the enchanting witch-goddess as his lover and lives with her for one year (Ibid., 117). Hence, he does not remain faithful to Penelope and sleeps with other women during his ten-year journey. However, after he reaches Ithaca, he disguises himself as a beggar to test Penelope's fidelity and evaluate the situation in his household although Penelope has cleverly kept the suitors away from herself all this time. Patriarchal values are so dominant in the community that clever Penelope manages to control both the people and her household indirectly. She performs her duty as a widow to Odysseus by remaining faithful to him and a devoted mother to Telemachus by raising him alone and preserving the *oikos* in the household. Moreover, she consents to Telemachus's decisions as he grows up to be the master of the house (Chaston 2002, 4). In a likewise manner, Calypso, who has kept Odysseus on her island for seven years, cannot do anything else when she receives the order of Zeus to release Odysseus. Although she complains about the double standard between men and women in their preferences and love relationships, she has no other choice but to let Odysseus go his way (Richards 2014).

In addition to the inequality between men and women, the text of the *Odyssey* exposes men's fear about their wives' betrayal and dangerous acts. In his speech to Nausicaa, Odysseus recalls the examples of bad marriages caused by the wives' infidelity to their husbands illustrating Helen of Troy, who betrays Menelaus, and Clytemnestra, who murders Agamemnon. Also, Calypso is a woman who tricks Odysseus and betrays his trust by spellbinding him to the

island (Bolmarcich 2001, 211). In the same vein, women are identified with weaving which is a daily chore for many women and a symbol of femininity in the *Odyssey*. However, it has different connotations like plotting and tricking planned by women. To illustrate, Penelope tricks the suitors by weaving a burial shroud and undoing it constantly whereas Calypso and Circe also spend time at the loom. Nevertheless, it is definitive female labour (Whittaker 1995, 38).

Furthermore, female language is another issue problematised by the patriarchal mindset in the text. For many women characters, the use of language presents power, and is interpreted by men as something to be avoided. For instance, when Odysseus lands on the island of Ogygia, he hears Calypso's magical words and remains on the island after that. Likewise, Circe sings a song and enchants Odysseus's crew. Similarly, Telemachus is profoundly affected by the mysterious story of Helen, who is said to imitate the voices of the Greek wives whose husbands were getting ready to attack Troy in the Trojan horse. Also, the Sirens pose a threat to men with their luring song and language as they kill the ones who are attracted to them (Fletcher 2008, 78). Besides, as women cannot freely utter their words in the *Odyssey*, birds are regarded as "ultimate symbol of speech and freedom" which can be similarly seen in Athena's constant transformation into a bird (Wilson 2017). Since women's voice puts the male authority in danger, it can be argued that "[f]eminine silence is idealized, if not realized, in Greek thought, while the unrestrained speech of women is frequently equated with a lack of sexual restraint. Women's voices pose a variety of threats to men" (Fletcher 2008, 77).

From a similar perspective, it is evident that the *Odyssey* exhibits a variety of mortal, semidivine and divine women, and they are on several occasions displayed as dangerous beings and threats to the patriarchal system. Among these females are Calypso, Circe, Skylla, Charybdis, and the Sirens. As for the nobles' wives, the epic presents Helen and Clytemnestra. As a final word, some women, the maids, are punished in this epic since they try to bend the gender roles. Therefore, they form another threat to the male-centred society of the *Odyssey*, especially in Odysseus's household when they go outside the house and meet with the suitors. In other words, the maids perform male behaviours in their carefree and transgressive attitudes, and they are killed by the patriarchy anonymously depriving them of any voice or identity. After he returns to Ithaca, Odysseus orders the death of the unfaithful maids including Melanthe who slept with the suitors (Homer

2003, 443). So, the immoral maids become the casualties while Odysseus restores order, peace and the patriarchal authority in his house and Ithaca (Fulkerson 2002, 346-347).

## Conclusion

In short, Homer presents two different types of women in the *Odyssey*. On the one hand, faithful, confident, and virtuous women type is put forth with Penelope, Arete, Nausicaa and Athena. On the other hand, dangerous and mischievous type of women is strikingly presented with Helen, Clytemnestra, Calypso, and Circe. Thus, in his attitude towards women in general, Homer's depiction is the display of the patriarchal Greek tradition. The *Odyssey* recounts the patriarchal fear about women's power and agency. As Penelope is made almost a heroine when it is indeed Odysseus, her husband, is the hero of this epic, she is still restricted by the authority of her husband and the patriarchal system. Thus, it can be discussed that the poem likewise carves out compelling women with magical power and/or female agency who influence the hero, Odysseus and change his fate but are labelled as dangerous and transgressive. In this sense, Homer's attitude to women is traditional and reflects the general patriarchal attitude towards women elevating and condemning them based on their virtue, silence, and chastity.

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