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# Feminine Narrative and Subjectivity in Homer's Odyssey: Structuring Dichotomies and Alternative Discourses

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Feminine Narrative and Subjectivity in Homer's *Odyssey*: Structuring Dichotomies and  
Alternative Discourses

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## I. Introduction

Homer's *Odyssey*, believed to have been orally composed in the late eighth or early seventh century B.C., is one of those rare literary masterpieces which, despite well over a thousand years of analysis, has endless ambiguity that can never fully be exhausted by critical interpretation.<sup>1</sup> To some degree, this potential can be attributed to our limited knowledge of the values, economics, and culture of the Archaic Greek world, which predates literary tradition. For years, historians have drawn from Homeric epic as a useful, albeit sometimes specious, source from which to extrapolate historical and cultural insight of what is known as the Greek Dark Age.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it's difficult to objectively analyze Homer by considering it within its historical context when our knowledge of that time period is construed so extensively by Homeric epic itself.

Another source of the uncertainty clouding the *Odyssey* is the inherently ambiguous nature of the epic itself. The *Odyssey* stands in stark contrast to the *Iliad*, which depicts and glorifies Achilles, the Greek demigod on whom the outcome of the Trojan War depends. The layout of the *Iliad* mimics the nature of the hero Achilles, who excludes himself from the collective and makes the premise of his actions individual glory, favoring the traditional and honorable weapon of blunt violence over that of deceit. His abhorrence of deceit extends to his dislike of Odysseus, to whom he says "I hate that man like the very Gates of Death who says one thing but hides another in his heart" (Il. 9.378-9).<sup>3</sup> The straightforward nature of Achilles' character is reflected in the relatively chronological progression of the text, which narrates the events leading to the end of the Trojan War. While the *Iliad* is very richly composed, it lacks the textual openings and ambiguities of

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my advisor Kate Gilhuly for her invaluable help and many insightful comments as I've worked on this project over the course of this year.

<sup>2</sup> John Marincola, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, Calum Maciver, *Greek Notions of the Past in the Archaic and Classical Eras: History Without Historians* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Fagles, trans., *The Iliad* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 262.

Homer's second epic.<sup>4</sup> The *Odyssey* narrates Odysseus' ten-year-long wayward voyage home from Troy, which moves back and forth through time and space as Odysseus nears his fatherland of Ithaca time and time again, only to be blown off course by yet another obstacle. His perils don't end when he reaches Ithaca, however, because he must contend with the some two-hundred suitors who court his wife, Penelope. The achronological timeline of the epic, which begins during year seven of Odysseus' voyage, then cycles back to the beginning when Odysseus departed Troy, and picks up at year seven again, reflects the "twists and turns" of Odysseus' character (*Od.* 1.1).<sup>5</sup> The parallel story of Telemachus' exploits woven into the main fabric of the text exacerbates its temporal and spatial complexity as Homer shifts back and forth between narrating the respective journeys of father and son.

Another feature distinguishing the *Odyssey* from the *Iliad* is the number of female characters who play a significant role in the text. The abundance of female characters coupled with the epic's narrative complexity even led the 19<sup>th</sup> century British author Samuel Butler to conclude famously that the author of the *Odyssey* was actually a Sicilian woman who lived roughly around 1050 and 1000 B.C.E.<sup>6</sup> Apart from this claim, scholarship on the women of the *Odyssey* actually remained largely limited and cursory until recently when the cultivation of feminist ideology has helped inspire a deeper examination of the role and subjectivity of these women in the text.<sup>7</sup> Many readers of the *Odyssey* are familiar with the character of Penelope and her ruse of weaving by day and unweaving by night to deceive the arrogant suitors and stall her impending marriage. However,

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<sup>4</sup> Lillian Doherty explains the idea of "textual openings" in her book *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey*. Textual openings in the *Odyssey* are opportunities for the audience to "take an active role in interpretation" and question the predominant gender ideology (51).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Fagles, trans., *The Odyssey* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 77.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (London: Longmans, Green, 1897), 6.

<sup>7</sup> Lillian Doherty. *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 23.

fewer of those recall the important role the goddess Athena plays in the epic, initiating the action of the plot in Book 1 and guiding Odysseus on his journey after he is stranded on the island of Phaeacia, and even fewer remember Helen's role in Book 4 and how she uses her *pharmakon* during Telemachus' stay to facilitate discourse about the Trojan War. After reading some of this scholarship on how the roles of these women fit into the overall scope of the epic, particularly that written by Virginia Wohl, Ann Bergren, and Melissa Mueller, I was inspired to examine the role of feminine subjectivity in facilitating the plot of the epic and, furthermore, how the female characters in the *Odyssey* interact with each other on a thematic level. Through the process of working on this thesis, I have come to the conclusion that the feminine characters in the *Odyssey* are highly integrated and their roles richly interwoven so that it's impossible to effectively analyze one apart the others. I have chosen to focus on three female characters, Helen, Athena, and Penelope, whose subjectivity is particularly important to the plot because of the role they play in either supporting or contesting masculine authority.

In Chapter II I focus on Helen, the infamous seductress whose affair with Paris helped launch the Trojan War. In the *Iliad*, Helen plays a small but meaningful role in which her subjectivity becomes central, albeit only fleetingly. Homer introduces Helen in Book 3 when he describes her weaving the events of the Trojan War into an enormous web (*Il.* 3.121-8). Shortly afterwards, King Priam calls her over to help him identify some of the Greek soldiers fighting below and she verbally weaves her subjectivity into the war by describing the warriors within the context of her relationship to them (*Il.* 3.220-8). Immediately, Homer reveals Helen's tendency to appropriate masculine discourse by framing it in terms of her own subjectivity, suggesting the danger she could pose to the text. Moreover, the question of Helen's responsibility for her betrayal of her husband, Menelaus, is frequently alluded to but never answered, suspending Helen

uncertainly in the balance between good and bad. Helen blames herself more than once for her transgression, and yet Aphrodite forcibly coerces Helen to sleep with Paris in Book 3, suggesting that Helen wasn't entirely at fault for initiating the affair (Il. 3.442-489). The open-ended nature of this question persists when Helen appears again in the *Odyssey*.

The *Odyssey* depicts Helen and Menelaus ten years after the events of the *Iliad* and reexamines the question of Helen's responsibility for her infidelity. When Telemachus arrives at Sparta seeking news of his long-lost father, Menelaus invites him in to dine and they are soon joined by Helen, who secretly slips a *pharmakon*, a drug that is a mixture of good and bad components, into the mixing bowl of wine. As a result, drug-induced forgetfulness enables the party to recall the Trojan War without grief, alleviating the tension and sorrow that had gripped the room before. Subsequently, both Helen and Menelaus tell stories of Odysseus' exploits in the Trojan War, yet both of these tales are implicitly about Helen. Both tales are provocative in their depiction of Helen's sexuality, which is used to the advantage of the Greeks in Helen's story but to the advantage of the Trojans in Menelaus' (4.240-90). Though at first glance, these two tales construct a dichotomous model of Helen's character, in which she is either good (supportive of the Greeks) or bad (supportive the Trojans), the consistency of Helen's sexuality in both of these stories bridges, and thus debunks, this dichotomy.<sup>8</sup> Similar to the combination of good and bad in Helen's drug, her personality is a perfect amalgamation of the two so that a dichotomous representation of Helen is limiting and misleading.

An extension of this dichotomy is the way in which Helen is perceived in Greek society versus how she presents herself. Considered to be the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen

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<sup>8</sup> Ann Bergren uses the rhetoric of bridged dichotomies in her essay "Helen's 'Good Drug'" in *Weaving Truth: Essays on Language and the Female in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). She argues that when Helen's drugs permit Menelaus to tell a story that recoils upon her, the dichotomies in the text collapse.

is objectified as a *geras* that surpasses in value all other possessions and thus lacks any standard of exchange that can be used in recompense for taking her. This objectification is constantly challenged by Helen's articulation of her subjectivity in public spaces, which transgresses gendered boundaries and threatens to encroach upon her husband's sphere of control. Ultimately, it is impossible to define Helen as "good" or "bad" (in other words, whether she benefits the androcentric Greek society or endangers it) because of the many contrasting features of her personality that never resolve into one coherent portrait of her.

This model of a bridged dichotomy can also be applied to Athena, whom I address in Chapter III. Athena is a notable exception to the rule posed by Agamemnon that women ought to be excluded from masculine affairs on account of their inherent untrustworthiness (*Od.* 11.440-56). In fact, Athena is the one who initiates the action of the *Odyssey* in the first place by pleading to Zeus that Odysseus be released from Calypso's island, where he has languished for seven years (1.80-95). After Odysseus is freed from the grip of stasis and winds up on Phaeacia, Athena plants the seeds for his return to Ithaca by prompting his son, Telemachus, to go on his own journey in search of news of his father. By nature of her femininity, Athena's appropriation of the narrative should threaten Odysseus' return by imposing a temporal stasis, which is what the goddesses Circe and Calypso temporarily succeed in achieving.<sup>9</sup> However, unlike these goddesses, whose unconstrained sexualities render them as dangers to the normative masculine discourse, Athena actually enforces and even strengthens this discourse because of her commitment to chastity. Athena is unique because of her dichotomous role that comprises both masculine and feminine characteristics: in myth, Athena is the goddess of both weaving and warfare and, despite being

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Van Nortwick explains the threat that feminine stasis imposes on Odysseus' return in his book *The Unknown Odysseus: Alternate Worlds in Homer's Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009). In order to free himself from the centripetal force of feminine stasis, Odysseus must exert masculine authority (99).

female, consistently supports the masculine order. Her masculinity originates from her single parentage (i.e., Zeus) and lack of a mother who could compromise her allegiance to the patriarchy. Because of her chastity, Athena additionally has no children and thus does not contribute to a new generation of deities that could threaten to destabilize Zeus's cosmic order.

However, as in the case of Helen, the dichotomy that seems to define Athena collapses under the consistency of her asexuality. As Helen is neither completely seductress nor completely wife, Athena is neither completely masculine nor completely feminine but a combination of both. Athena's femininity creates some dramatic tension regarding whether she could potentially seek to replace Penelope and thus destabilize the *oikos*, following the examples set by Calypso and Circe. However, because of Athena's unwavering chastity, she is able to direct the plot and participate in the masculine sphere while simultaneously advancing Odysseus' interests, rendering her subjectivity essential to the resolution of the plot.

Chapter IV turns to Penelope, Odysseus' wife and arguably the most intriguing character of the *Odyssey*. As with most other female characters in the epic (Athena being a notable exception), Penelope's sexuality posits her as a threat to Odysseus' homecoming because it accords her potential to subvert the gender hierarchy. Similar to what we saw regarding Helen and Athena, Homer also frames Penelope's character within the dichotomy of "good" versus "bad" and cultivates a climate of suspicion as to whether Penelope will use her sexuality to enable or prevent Odysseus' return by almost completely silencing her subjectivity and thereby obscuring her intentions. Marilyn Katz argues that Helen is presented early on in the epic as a potential paradigm that Penelope could follow, and the painting of Penelope as a possible Helen is underscored by Homer's comparison of her to either "Artemis or Aphrodite" (*Od.* 17.37, 19.34).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 54.

Therefore, it seems that Penelope could choose either to follow the path of Helen and betray Odysseus or to create a new path for herself as the only truly faithful woman in the *Odyssey*, exemplified by Artemis' chastity.

Unlike Helen and Athena, Penelope can't be described as a mixture of dichotomous elements because all of her actions in the epic preface her decision of whether or not to formally recognize Odysseus and welcome him back as her husband. Penelope can either be 'good' or 'bad' because the nature of the choice of whether to welcome Odysseus is one that can only be responded to with an absolute "yes" or "no." While the finality of this answer may seem to generate even more tension regarding the path Penelope will choose, I argue that the glimpses of Penelope's subjectivity that Homer chooses to reveal to the reader, in addition to the momentary insights of Odysseus, prove Penelope's fidelity undoubtedly and thus render the dichotomy of her character as a false one. Penelope is the only woman in the *Odyssey* whose sexuality is an asset to the strengthening of the *oikos* and thus proves to be an exception to the general rule of feminine treachery posed by Agamemnon when he narrates to Odysseus the betrayal of his own wife Clytemnestra.

The equal power dynamic of Penelope's and Odysseus' relationship, in which each presides over their respective sphere of authority, enables Penelope to actively test Odysseus upon his return to determine if he is truly her husband after twenty years. Penelope's jurisdiction over the *oikos* is a necessary key to her fidelity: her *dolos* of weaving and unweaving allows her to suspend the *oikos* in temporal stasis for three years, delaying the suitors' courtship, and when she encounters Odysseus disguised as a beggar, her superior *mētis* in her household sphere leads her to pose the trial of the bed and prove that the beggar is undoubtedly her husband. This balanced division of power in Odysseus' and Penelope's marriage is rooted in their *homophrosunē*, a

likemindedness that is founded by their mutual love of, and skill in, *mētis*. Essentially, the coupling of Penelope's *mētis* with her sexuality is potentially explosive in the destruction it can cause to the masculine order, situating Penelope in an uncommon and tenuous position of power. However, Penelope uses this combination in a way that is beneficial for maintaining the *oikos* and the conditions suited to Odysseus' return which renders her unique among all other female characters in Homeric epic.

When analyzing Homeric epic, it is often tempting to classify feminine characters as either 'good' or 'bad' based on their degree of support for the masculine narrative. I discuss in my conclusion that this classification severely curtails the complexity of the characters, who play important roles in the epic even though Homer grants us only limited access to their subjectivity. Individually bracketing each of these women also ignores the intricate ways in which they play off of each other (for example, in the case of Calypso, Circe, and Athena, which I discuss in Chapter III). Even by focusing just on Helen, Athena, and Penelope, I will attempt to demonstrate the importance of regarding each of these female characters not as dichotomous beings but as people, who are never either completely good or completely bad but exist in an intricate web of relationships, cultural norms, and beliefs that influences their everyday decision-making and their agency.

## II. Helen

In Homer's *Iliad*, Helen of Troy is perceived as the ultimate *geras* of war, objectified by the Greek and Trojan soldiers as a prize taken in violation of *xenia*. However, almost immediately in the epic, this notion is challenged when we witness the exposure of Helen's subjectivity as she revolts against her role as passive object of exchange and positions herself as subject. According to Victoria Wohl, a woman's inherent subjectivity, or the possession of moral agency and self-awareness, renders her objectification unstable and thereby threatens to dismantle the masculine systems that govern society.<sup>11</sup> Throughout Homeric epic, Helen revolts against this order by weaving her life into the masculine realm and exerting her agency through speech and craft.<sup>12</sup> For example, she intertwines her life with those of Greek soldiers when she identifies them to Priam from the walls of Troy, and hers is the last voice to resonate at the end of the epic when the Trojans lament Hector's death (*Il.* 3.220-3.288; 24.893-912). Therefore, examining the *Iliad* through the lens of Helen's objectivity provides only a skewed and narrow view of the epic's scope.

Eurpides' *Helen* also grapples with the topic of Helen's subjectivity by presenting an alternative version of the Homeric tale in which Helen never went to Troy with Paris but resided in Egypt during the entire war. The play subverts the perceptions of Helen as seductress and object by portraying a Helen who loyally awaits her husband and then, upon his arrival, must plot a way for them to return safely to Sparta. However, in neither the *Iliad* nor in *Helen* does Helen's agency resound so forcefully as in the *Odyssey*, in which Helen's unabashed confidence renders her a constant threat to the gendered structure of *oikos*.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in order to understand the concept

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<sup>11</sup> Victoria Wohl. *Intimate Commerce: Exchange, Gender, and Subjectivity in Greek Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), xv.

<sup>12</sup> Victoria Wohl. "Standing by the Stathmos: Sexual Ideology in the *Odyssey*," *Arethusa* 26 (1993): 34. Nancy Worman. "This Voice Which is Not One: Helen's Verbal Guises in Homeric Epic", in *Making Silence Speak*, ed. Andre Lardinois and Laura McClure (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 30.

<sup>13</sup> Ruby Blondell, *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 75.

of feminine subjectivity in the *Odyssey*, it is necessary to critically examine Helen and the ways in which she inserts her voice into the epic to reveal the multiple facets of her personality. Ultimately, Helen's vagaries can be understood only by examining the nature of her subjectivity, which exists as a construction of mixed oppositions that pose as dichotomies, such as the good and baneful components of her drug (*Od.* 4.230). Therefore, in order to understand the extent of Helen's complexity one must view her character through the lens of 3-D glasses: only when the contradictory red and blue elements are combined can her subjectivity be brought into focus.

In the *Odyssey*, narrative is an essential tool that Helen utilizes to bring her subjectivity to light. This use of narrative occurs most prominently in Book 4 when Telemachus travels to Sparta seeking news of his father. He and Nestor's son, Pisastratus, whom Telemachus met previously when he visited Pylos, arrive at Menelaus' palace to find themselves unexpectedly as guests at the wedding of Menelaus' illegitimate son, Megapenthes. Menelaus readily welcomes the two men into his home where he invites them to bathe and eat, and as they all enjoy a luxurious feast conversation inevitably turns to the Trojan War. Menelaus imparts to his guests that all the wealth he accumulated on his journey home from Troy holds only an empty joy for him because of the grief he feels for his fallen war comrades, namely Odysseus, who perished on his journey home and left behind a surviving wife and son. Noticing the tears streaming down Telemachus' face, Menelaus internally debates whether to prod him to reveal his identity or wait for him to disclose it on his own terms when Helen swoops in, accompanied by droves of serving women. She joins the men in the hall and immediately identifies Telemachus as Odysseus' son (and is commended obligingly by Menelaus), after which all, now Helen included, resume their reminiscing and lamenting over the Trojan War.

At this point, Helen “thinks of another thing” and slips into the mixing bowl a drug so potent it would prevent a man from weeping even if his brother or son should be stabbed to death in front of him:

ἔνθ' αὖτ' ἄλλ' ἐνόησ' Ἑλένη Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα:  
αὐτίκ' ἄρ' εἰς οἶνον βάλε φάρμακον, ἔνθεν ἔπινον,  
νηπενθές τ' ἄχολόν τε, κακῶν ἐπίληθον ἀπάντων.  
ὃς τὸ καταβρόξειεν, ἐπὴν κρητῆρι μιγείη,  
οὐ κεν ἐφημέριός γε βάλοι κατὰ δάκρυ παρειῶν,  
οὐδ' εἴ οἱ κατατεθναίῃ μήτηρ τε πατήρ τε,  
οὐδ' εἴ οἱ προπάροιθεν ἀδελφεὸν ἢ φίλον υἱὸν  
χαλκῷ δηιόφεν, ὃ δ' ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ὄρῳτο.  
τοῖα Διὸς θυγάτηρ ἔχε φάρμακα μητιόεντα,  
ἔσθλά, τὰ οἱ Πολύδαμνα πόρην, Θῶνος παράκοιτις  
Αἴγυπτίῃ, τῇ πλεῖστα φέρει ζεῖδωρος ἄρουρα  
φάρμακα, πολλὰ μὲν ἔσθλα μεμιγμένα πολλὰ δὲ λυγρά.<sup>14</sup>

Then again, Helen, born from Zeus, thought of another thing.  
At once she threw a drug into the wine from which they were drinking,  
Both banishing pain and alleviating anger, causing forgetfulness of all things,  
He who should gulp it down, after it was mixed in the bowl,  
During the day would not, at least, even cast a tear down his cheek,  
Not if both his mother and his father should die,  
Not if, in front of him, his brother or dear son  
Was slayed with bronze, and he saw it with his eyes.  
Such relief-bringing drugs the daughter of Zeus had,  
Good ones that Polydamna, the wife of Thon, gave,  
A woman from Egypt, where the grain-giving earth bears the most drugs,  
Many, on the one hand, good, having been mixed,  
And many, on the other hand, baneful.

4.219-230

Helen’s drug “mimics the destructive effect upon the rational mind of *eros*” by inducing an emotional forgetfulness that has a dehumanizing effect.<sup>15</sup> The drug prevents its drinker from grieving, even if his mother, father, or son should die, and therefore relieves suffering and degrades conjugal bonds in a way that is similar to Helen’s own unique powers of seduction.<sup>16</sup> In this way,

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<sup>14</sup> A.T. Murray, *The Odyssey with an English Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1919).

<sup>15</sup> Blondell, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Wohl, Victoria. “Standing by the Stathmos: Sexual Ideology in the *Odyssey*,” 33.

the *pharmakon* seems to augment the effect of heaven-sent blindness from Aphrodite (see *Od.* 4.262 below) that Helen herself has on others, consequently enabling her to direct the conversation without obstruction. After the drug has been administered, Helen reverts back to the subject of Odysseus and prefaces her monologue with the claim that she has a story about his exploits that is “perfect for the occasion”:

πάντα μὲν οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ’ ὀνομήνω,  
 ὅσσοι Ὀδυσσῆος ταλασίφρονός εἰσιν ἄεθλοι·  
 ἀλλ’ οἷον τόδ’ ἔρεξε καὶ ἔτλη καρτερὸς ἀνὴρ  
 δήμῳ ἔνι Τρώων, ὅθι πάσχετε πῆματ’ Ἀχαιοί.  
 αὐτόν μιν πληγῆσιν ἀεικελίησι δαμάσσας,  
 σπεῖρα κάκ’ ἀμφ’ ὤμοισι βαλὼν, οἰκῆι ἐοικώς,  
 ἀνδρῶν δυσμενέων κατέδου πόλιν εὐρυάγυιαν·  
 ἄλλω δ’ αὐτὸν φωτὶ κατακρύπτων ἦσκε,  
 δέκτη, ὃς οὐδὲν τοῖος ἔην ἐπὶ νηυσὶν Ἀχαιῶν.  
 τῷ ἴκελος κατέδου Τρώων πόλιν, οἱ δ’ ἀβάκησαν  
 πάντες· ἐγὼ δέ μιν οἴη ἀνέγνων τοῖον ἐόντα,  
 καὶ μιν ἀνηρώτων· ὁ δὲ κερδοσύνη ἀλέεινεν.  
 ἀλλ’ ὅτε δὴ μιν ἐγὼ λόμεον καὶ χρίον ἐλαίῳ,  
 ἀμφὶ δὲ εἵματα ἔσσα καὶ ὤμοσα καρτερὸν ὄρκον  
 μὴ μὲν πρὶν Ὀδυσῆα μετὰ Τρώεσσ’ ἀναφῆναι,  
 πρὶν γε τὸν ἐς νῆάς τε θοὰς κλισίας τ’ ἀφικέσθαι,  
 καὶ τότε δὴ μοι πάντα νόον κατέλεξεν Ἀχαιῶν.  
 πολλοὺς δὲ Τρώων κτείνας ταναήκει χαλκῷ  
 ἦλθε μετ’ Ἀργείους, κατὰ δὲ φρόνιν ἤγαγε πολλήν.  
 ἔνθ’ ἄλλαι Τρωαὶ λίγ’ ἐκώκυον· αὐτὰρ ἐμὸν κῆρ  
 χαῖρ’, ἐπεὶ ἤδη μοι κραδίη τέτραπτο νέεσθαι  
 ἄψ οἰκόνδ’, ἄτην δὲ μετέστενον, ἣν Ἀφροδίτη  
 δῶχ’, ὅτε μ’ ἤγαγε κείσε φίλης ἀπὸ πατρίδος αἴης,  
 παῖδά τ’ ἐμὴν νοσφισσαμένην θάλαμόν τε πόσιν τε  
 οὐ τευ δευόμενον, οὐτ’ ἄρ φρένας οὔτε τι εἶδος.

“I will not describe or name all things,  
 As many struggles there are of stout-hearted Odysseus,  
 But such a thing the strong man accomplished and underwent  
 In the land of the Trojans, where the Achaeans suffered miseries.  
 Having subjected himself to unseemly blows,  
 Throwing ugly clothes around his shoulders, as a slave,  
 He went down to the city of hostile men with wide streets.  
 Concealing himself he made like another man,  
 Not the sort of man he was upon the Achaean ships, but a beggar.  
 Resembling such a man, he went down to the city of the Trojans,

And all failed in recognition.  
 I alone knew well the sort of man he was and questioned him.  
 And he avoided me with cunning.  
 But after I bathed him and anointed him with olive oil,  
 Having put clothes around him and sworn a strong oath  
 Not to reveal him as Odysseus to the Trojans  
 Before he arrived at the swift ships and outbuildings,  
 Then indeed he told me all things concerning the intention of the Achaeans.  
 Having killed many of the Trojan men with long-pointed bronze  
 He went to the Argives and brought back much information.  
 There other Trojan women wailed with a loud tone. However, my spirit rejoiced,  
 Since already my heart was turned toward returning back home,  
 And I lamented the heaven-sent blindness of the mind, which Aphrodite gave,  
 When she led me there from my fatherland,  
 Having turned me away from my child and my inner chamber and my husband  
 Who lacks nothing, neither anything of mind nor of form.”  
 4.240-264

In the story, Odysseus sneaks into Troy dressed as a beggar and Helen alone recognizes his true identity. He at first avoids her questioning, but she softens his resolve by bathing and clothing him, after which he consents to reveal the plans of the Achaeans so long as she swears not to reveal his identity to the Trojans until after he has gone. She stands idly by as Odysseus murders a troop of Trojan soldiers and rejoices as her heart “was turned toward returning back home.”

Though Helen supposedly tells her story in order to celebrate the valiant Odysseus’ exploits, in reality she utilizes it as an opportunity to mitigate the blame for her role in the Trojan War. Helen distances herself from responsibility by attributing her actions to *atē*, translated in LSJ as “blindness of the mind sent by the god,” bestowed upon her by Aphrodite (4.261). *Atē* is a theme that is more common in the *Iliad*; for example, after Patroclus’ death, Agamemnon blames *atē* for driving him to seize Achilles’ war-prize Briseis and compares this to Zeus’s succumbing to *atē* when he was deceived by Hera to bestow Argive rule unto Sthenelus’ son, Eurystheus, instead of his own son, Heracles (*Il.* 19.87-157). Just as how *atē* resulted in the pivotal conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles that fed the plot of the *Iliad*, the same blind ruin prompted Helen to

undertake the action that initiated the war: her abandonment of Menelaus for Paris. Helen appropriates this word from the *Iliad* to emphasize her role as a blameless victim of war succumbing to the ordinance of the gods.

Helen's story of her encounter with Odysseus prompts Menelaus to tell his own story about Odysseus in the Trojan War, resulting in coexisting masculine and feminine narratives. After Helen finishes her story, Menelaus commends her for speaking "in accordance with her part" and begins to relate his own story about Odysseus' accomplishments, which takes place at the end of the war when the Greeks infiltrate Troy by hiding in the Trojan horse:

τὴν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη ξανθὸς Μενέλαος:  
ἄναι δὴ ταῦτά γε πάντα, γύναι, κατὰ μοῖραν ἔειπες.  
ἤδη μὲν πολέων ἐδάην βουλὴν τε νόον τε  
ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων, πολλὴν δ' ἐπελήλυθα γαῖαν:  
ἀλλ' οὐ πῶ τοιοῦτον ἐγὼν ἴδον ὀφθαλμοῖσιν,  
οἷν Ὀδυσσεύος ταλασίφρονος ἔσκε φίλον κῆρ.  
οἷον καὶ τόδ' ἔρεξε καὶ ἔτλη καρτερὸς ἀνὴρ  
ἵππῳ ἐνὶ ξεστῷ, ἵν' ἐνήμεθα πάντες ἄριστοι  
Ἀργείων Τρώεσσι φόνον καὶ κῆρα φέροντες.  
ἤλθες ἔπειτα σὺ κεῖσε: κελευσέμεναι δέ σ' ἔμελλε  
δαίμων, ὃς Τρώεσσι βούλετο κῦδος ὀρέξαι:  
καὶ τοι Διὶ φοβὸς θεοεἰκελὸς ἔσπετ' ἰούση.  
τρὶς δὲ περιστρεφάσασα κοῖλον λόχον ἀμφαφώσα,  
ἐκ δ' ὀνομακλήδην Δαναῶν ὀνόμαζες ἀρίστους,  
πάντων Ἀργείων φωνὴν ἴσκουσ' ἀλόχοισιν.  
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ καὶ Τυδείδης καὶ Διὸς Ὀδυσσεύς  
ἤμενοι ἐν μέσσοισιν ἀκούσαμεν ὡς ἐβόησας.  
νῶϊ μὲν ἀμφοτέρω μενεήναμεν ὀρμηθέντες  
ἢ ἐξελθέμεναι, ἢ ἐνδοθεν αἶψ' ὑπακοῦσαι:  
ἀλλ' Ὀδυσσεὺς κατέρυκε καὶ ἔσχεθεν ἰεμένω περ.  
ἐνθ' ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες ἀκὴν ἔσαν υἱὲς Ἀχαιῶν,  
Ἄντικλος δὲ σέ γ' οἷος ἀμείψασθαι ἐπέεσσιν  
ἤθελεν. ἀλλ' Ὀδυσσεὺς ἐπὶ μάστακα χερσὶ πίεζεν  
νωλεμέως κρατερῆσι, σάωσε δὲ πάντας Ἀχαιοὺς:  
τόφρα δ' ἔχ', ὄφρα σε νόσφιν ἀπήγαγε Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.

Fair-haired Menelaus spoke, answering her:

"Truly, oh wife, you spoke all these things in accordance with your part.

Indeed, I learned both the will and mind of many warriors,

And I came upon much land.

But not up to that point had I seen such a sort with my eyes  
The sort which the dear heart of stout-hearted Odysseus was.  
Such a thing he accomplished and underwent, strong man,  
In the wrought horse, where all the most excellent of Argives had been seated in,  
Bearing death and destined fate for the Trojans.  
Then you came there. And it was destined that you were urged  
By a divine spirit, which desired to give glory to the Troy.  
And godlike Deiphobus followed you as you went.  
And you walked around three times, touching the hollow ambush,  
Calling the names of the most excellent of the Danaans,  
Likening your voice to the wives of all the Argives.  
Moreover, I and Diomedes, sitting in the middle with divine Odysseus,  
Heard you call. We both desired earnestly, being set in motion,  
Either to come out or to answer from inside.  
But Odysseus held us back and stopped us from going.  
Then all the other sons of the Achaeans were silent,  
Anticlus alone at any rate wished to exchange words.  
But Odysseus unceasingly grasped his mouth with strong hands,  
And he saved all the Achaeans:  
Up until that time when Pallas Athena led you away.”  
4.265-290

Similar to Helen’s story in which she attributes her misdeeds to *atē*, Menelaus also skirts the subject of the degree of Helen’s responsibility for her actions. Helen, escorted by her third husband, Deiphobus, approaches the horse and circles it three times, touching it and calling to the Greeks concealed inside with the voices of each of their wives. The men become bewitched and long to jump out of their hollow ambush but Odysseus, ever so keen, restrains them until she departs. Menelaus vaguely accuses a *daimon* of urging Helen to threaten to reveal the Achaeans in this way (4.275).

A closer look at this passage reveals the unsettling and unstable post-war relationship between Helen and Menelaus, rebuilt on a foundation of forgetfulness and delusion. Both are careful to avoid overtly addressing Helen’s infidelity, but they insert subtle reminders of her transgression that threaten to destabilize their fragile marriage. Though neither Helen nor Menelaus claims that Helen’s betrayal was intentional, both implicitly suggest that perhaps it was,

at least partially. Helen says that when she first encountered Odysseus he avoided her, but after she “bathed him and anointed him with olive oil,” he divulged the plans of the Achaeans to her (4.252), a scene with tacit sexual overtones. Why would Helen disclose such an intimate encounter to her husband, and moreover, to Odysseus’ son? Perhaps the *pharmaka* dulled Helen’s sense of restraint or perhaps she included the scene to purposefully assert her dominance over her husband and guests, knowing well that the drugs would prevent her from experiencing any repercussions.<sup>17</sup> Either way, by attending to Odysseus Helen places herself in Penelope’s position, undermining the social order and challenging Odysseus’ marriage as well as her own. Moreover, in his story Menelaus implies Helen’s infidelity by mentioning her third husband, Deiphobus, who follows her around (4.276). Deiphobus’ presence entertains the question: if Helen was so intent on returning to her husband who “lacks nothing,” why would she have married again? And does Menelaus truly forgive Helen for her actions? His mentioning of Deiphobus seems superfluous since he plays no active role in the story, and so perhaps Menelaus includes him as a subtle reminder that the matter of Helen’s responsibility isn’t fully resolved.

Another interesting detail that comes to light when examining the two stories juxtaposed is Helen’s similarity to Odysseus. Helen describes how Odysseus “made like” a beggar by disfiguring his body and dressing in shabby clothes, using the verb ἔϊσκω (4.247). Menelaus uses this same verb in his story when he recounts Helen “likening” her voice to those of the Achaean wives (4.279). Both Helen and Odysseus don a disguise: Odysseus a physical one and Helen a verbal one, and in both cases one fails to deceive the other. Once again, Helen becomes Penelope-like, but this time with regard to her superior *mētis* and its comparability to Odysseus’. This pattern of contest between feminine (verbal) and masculine (physical) *mētis* recurs during the scenes of

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<sup>17</sup> Ann Bergren, “Helen’s ‘Good Drug,’” in *Weaving Truth: Essays on Language and the Female in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 121.

Odysseus' *nostos* in Books 19-23 in which Penelope is initially fooled by Odysseus' disguise but later deceives him by ordering Eurycleia to move the bed from the bridal chamber (23.177-180).<sup>18</sup> In Helen's case, however, neither she nor Odysseus is successful in their guile. Unlike Penelope, Helen doesn't channel her craftiness into helping Odysseus but uses it in order to demonstrate her power over him. Helen's attempted finessing of Odysseus reinforces the perception of her as a threat to domesticity and toxic to marriage—the opposite of Penelope's role in the *Odyssey*.<sup>19</sup>

Some scholars interpret the two stories of Helen and Menelaus as posing alternative paradigms of fidelity versus betrayal that Penelope could initiate upon Odysseus' return.<sup>20</sup> These stories imply that Penelope could either help the disguised Odysseus (as in Helen's story) or betray him (as in Menelaus') and the juxtaposition of these scenarios later becomes important in structuring the scenes following Odysseus' return.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Helen and Menelaus themselves become alternative models for Penelope and Odysseus “which [mediate] between the paradigm of Odysseus and Penelope on the one hand and Agamemnon and Clytemnestra on the other.”<sup>22</sup> Helen lies uneasily on the spectrum between Penelope and Clytemnestra and thus “comprises both versions of the wife's story poised in tense competition,” resulting in her becoming an emblem for dysfunctional marriage which neither resolves nor dissolves, but remains tenuously in balance.<sup>23</sup> Though Helen's role in the *Odyssey* is contextualized by examining her in relation to Penelope and

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<sup>18</sup> See Part IV. Penelope for a more in-depth analysis of this scene.

<sup>19</sup> Blondell, 75. Penelope's role in the *Odyssey* and the nature of her fidelity will be explored further in Part IV.

<sup>20</sup> Hardy C. Fredricksmeyer, “Penelope Polutropos: The Crux at *Odyssey* 23.218-24,” *AJP* 118 (1997): 491.

<sup>21</sup> Marilyn A Katz, *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 55.

<sup>22</sup> A. Doyle. ““Unhappily Ever After?": The Problem of Helen in *Odyssey* 4”, *Akroterion* 55 (2012): 17.

<sup>23</sup> Nancy Worman, “This Voice Which is Not One: Helen's Verbal Guises in Homeric Epic,” 20.

Clytemnestra, Helen is an important character in isolation because her individual narrative gives the reader valuable insight into feminine subjectivity.<sup>24</sup>

The coexistence of these two stories upsets the traditional masculine-feminine hierarchy as Helen oversteps her bounds as *gunē* and her subjectivity is inserted into the narrative. Generally, Greek women are forbidden to speak in public spaces such as the *megaron*.<sup>25</sup> For example, in Book 1 of the *Odyssey* Penelope descends from her inner chamber as Phemius, the household bard, sings of the Achaeans' journey home from Troy. Distraught by her longing for Odysseus, Penelope interrupts and tearfully implores him to sing a different song, at which Telemachus reprimands her and asserts that men hold the power at home, ordering her to return upstairs (*Od.* 1.346-359). Unlike Telemachus, Menelaus doesn't attempt to assert his authority by dismissing or discrediting Helen's story but instead commends her for speaking properly "in accordance with her part" (*Od.* 4.268). According to Ann Bergren, this scene in Sparta establishes a series of dichotomies, such as the double wedding in the beginning of Book 4 and the funeral dirge that follows when Menelaus, Helen, Telemachus, and Pisistratus lament their losses from the Trojan War.<sup>26</sup> The drug that Helen administers numbs grief, which allows her to tell her story. However, it immediately recoils upon her when Menelaus subsequently tells his story, throwing Helen's reputation into dispute by questioning her loyalty to the Greeks.<sup>27</sup> Helen's and Menelaus' stories stand in opposition to each other and so the masculine-feminine polarity is bridged and the dichotomies collapse; everything is mixed just like Helen's good and baneful drug.

Once the masculine-feminine polarity is bridged, the question of whether the gender hierarchy is ever reestablished lingers. Does Menelaus' story override Helen's and affirm his role

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<sup>24</sup> Victoria Wohl, "Standing by the Stathmos: Sexual Ideology in the *Odyssey*," 20.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Fletcher, "Women's Space and Wingless Words in the *Odyssey*," *Phoenix* 62 (2008): 77.

<sup>26</sup> Bergren, "Helen's 'Good Drug,'" 113.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

as head of the household? According to Lillian Doherty, these two tales “represent contradictory claims that are never confirmed from without and whose alternation reflects a certain ‘balance of credibility’—and hence of power—between the male and the female narrator.”<sup>28</sup> Many scholars view the scales of credibility as being tipped in Menelaus’ favor with the successful disproving of Helen’s story: though Homer never overtly comments on the superiority of one story to the other, he places the “disloyal Helen in the second, stronger narrative position,” and so Helen’s betrayal of the Greeks in Menelaus’ story overrides her benevolence to Odysseus in hers.<sup>29</sup> Mihoko Suzuki asserts that Helen’s attempt to restructure her reputation fails and her notoriety as the adulterous wife persists; thereby Homer “[regulates] her to the margins of his narrative.”<sup>30</sup> Nancy Worman brings the opposite point of view into play by arguing that Helen’s storytelling actually promotes her narrative authority: “She implicitly associates herself with Zeus, the Muses, and the epic poet, while Menelaus approves her story openly and imitates the structure of her narrative frame.”<sup>31</sup> Menelaus never outwardly betrays a hint of bitterness at Helen’s account and he even validates it by repeating certain elements of it in his story; for example he reproduces the phrase “such a thing the strong man accomplished and underwent” (4.271) that Helen originally says as she begins her story (4.242).<sup>32</sup> Though structurally Menelaus seems to emulate his wife’s story, the content of his story is jarring in succession to Helen’s.

In spite of these arguments that attempt to position one story above the other, I believe that the gender hierarchy between Helen and Menelaus is never quite reestablished because of the

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<sup>28</sup> Lillian Eileen Doherty, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 59.

<sup>29</sup> Linda Lee Clader, *Helen: The Evolution from Divine to Heroic in Greek Epic Tradition* (Leiden: Lugduni Batavorum, 1976), 35.

<sup>30</sup> Mihoko Suzuki, *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 67.

<sup>31</sup> Worman, 31.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

lingering ambiguity of the two stories. Neither tale necessarily discredits the other so instead of one gender proving to be superior, male and female compound equally, once again mimicking the mixing of good and bad in Helen's drug. In fact, Menelaus' tale is elucidated by Helen's because the two stories occur in chronological order. In Helen's story, Odysseus reveals to her all the plans of the Greeks and extracts from her an oath only to refrain from alerting the Trojans to his presence until he's back safely in the Greek camp. Menelaus describes how Helen called to the men in the Trojan horse but doesn't give any explanation as to how she could possibly have known which men are in the horse, or how she could even know that the horse is a ruse at all. Helen's inexplicable knowledge of Odysseus' plan only seems plausible when preceded by her story in which Odysseus divulges this information to her in advance. In contrast, Linda Clader speculates how Helen could know this information and ultimately attributes her shrewdness to "special powers of insight and expression" that she alone has.<sup>33</sup> However, this explanation seems vague and the best way to examine these stories is side-by-side instead of assuming that one supersedes the other.

Though Helen's and Menelaus' stories are compatible chronologically, Menelaus' story does cast doubt on Helen's veracity. As I mentioned before, although Menelaus attributes Helen's misdeeds to a *daimon* and not to herself, absolving her of responsibility, he also includes her third husband, Deiphobus, whose presence seems to refute Helen's earlier claim that she longed to return home after Aphrodite led her to Troy. Homer never resolves the question of Helen's credibility, elaborating on her subjectivity and obfuscating her intentions. The audience is left pondering Helen's purpose in telling the story and if, in her story, she was striving to help the Greeks win the war or instead she was acting upon an ulterior motive. The only consistency we see in these two portrayals of Helen is her infidelity, evident in her interaction with Odysseus and

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<sup>33</sup> Clader, 34.

the presence of Deiphobus. This unifying thread that links the two accounts provides a channel through which Helen can strategically utilize her beauty and skill in order to exert her influence, serving as the platform of her subjectivity. Therefore, Helen's and Menelaus' stories are not as paradoxical as they may first appear. Instead of viewing one story as overriding the other, I see the two accounts as tenuously parallel, held in alignment by Helen's subjectivity. Helen's infidelity consistently renders her actions unconventional and erratic. Her unpredictability is predictable, and so if Helen was represented as completely steadfast and invariable in her actions then this scene could seem less consistent with her character. The two stories are a testament to the dichotomous identities her infidelity allows her to assume: she is both a Trojan and a Greek, both a victim and a perpetrator, both an object and an agent, and, as I will argue, she occupies both masculine and feminine roles in the *oikos*.

Furthermore, Helen uses her *pharmaka* as a narrative tool to advance her reputation and attain *kleos*. According to Ann Bergren, Helen only gains *kleos* momentarily until it dissipates with the telling of Menelaus' story.<sup>34</sup> However, since Menelaus' story does not disprove Helen's, I believe that her *kleos* stays intact. In both cases Helen is not a bystander but a central actor who has the power within her grasp to alter the course of the war. Helen is not successful in subverting the gender hierarchy but she does succeed in spreading her reputation as an unusually authoritative woman.

In addition to her *pharmaka*, Helen engages in narration and thereby unveils her subjectivity through weaving. In the *Iliad*, Helen weaves the events of the Trojan War, adopting the position of a poet by immortalizing the war through her own parallel narrative mode.

Ἴρις δ' αὖθ' Ἑλένη λευκωλένω ἄγγελος ἦλθεν  
εἰδομένη γαλόφῳ Ἄντηγορίδαο δάμαρτι,

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<sup>34</sup> Bergren, 121.

τὴν Ἄντηγορίδης εἶχε κρείων Ἑλικάων  
Λαοδίκην Πριάμοιο θυγατρῶν εἶδος ἀρίστην.  
τὴν δ' εὖρ' ἐν μεγάρω: ἦ δὲ μέγαν ἴστον ὕφαινε  
δίπλακα πορφυρέην, πολέας δ' ἐνέπασσεν ἀέθλους  
Τρώων θ' ἵπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,  
οὓς ἔθεν εἵνεκ' ἔπασχον ὑπ' Ἄρης παλαμάων.

And Iris again came as a messenger to white-armed Helen  
Appearing like her sister-in-law, wife of the son of Antenor,  
Whom the son of Antenor, lord Helicaon, took in marriage,  
Laodice, the most excellent of Priam's daughter's with respect to form.  
She found her in the hall where she was weaving a great web,  
Purple, in double folds, and she weaved in the many struggles  
Of both the Trojans, tamers of horses, and bronze-clad Achaeans,  
Who were suffering on account of her at the hands of Ares.

3.121-128

By weaving the events of the Trojan War, Helen “participates in the reproduction of her own reputation through a distinctively female mode of storytelling.”<sup>35</sup> Men, on the other hand, propagate *kleos* through poetry by singing as bards; for example, in the *Odyssey*, a bard glorifies the Greek soldiers by singing to the suitors about the “baneful return home of the Achaeans from Troy, which Pallas Athena prescribed” (1.324-5). By narrating the Trojan War, Helen renders herself analogous to Homer as a poet: “Her weaving gives her consolation, but it also makes her an interpreter of history and a maker of meaning.”<sup>36</sup>

Helen also uses her weaving as an instrument of *kleos* in the *Odyssey*, but instead of weaving a scene to commemorate war heroes as she does in the *Iliad*, she uses the robes she wove as a testament to her handiwork and therefore as a way to spread her own *kleos*. In Book 15, as Telemachus prepares to leave Sparta and return to Ithaca to guard his belongings, Helen and Menelaus each choose a guest gift in accordance with the rules of *xenia*. Menelaus grabs a two-

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<sup>35</sup> Blondell, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Hanna M. Roisman, “Helen in the *Iliad*; Causa Bella and Victim of War: From Silent Weaver to Public Speaker,” *AJPh* 127 (2006): 10.

handled cup and mixing bowl while Helen selects the most beautifully designed robe among those that she wove herself:

Ἑλένη δὲ παρίστατο φοριαμοῖσιν,  
ἔνθ' ἔσαν οἱ πέπλοι παμποΐκιλοι, οὓς κάμεν αὐτή.  
τῶν ἔν' ἀειραμένη Ἑλένη φέρε, δῖα γυναικῶν,  
ὃς κάλλιστος ἔην ποικίλμασιν ἠδὲ μέγιστος,  
ἀστὴρ δ' ὧς ἀπέλαμπεν.

And Helen stood beside the chests,  
Where there were woven robes of rich and varied work that she herself made.  
Taking one of these, Helen, divine of women, carried it,  
The most beautiful one, indeed the greatest, with embroidery,  
And as a star it shone.

15.104-108

By presenting this robe to Telemachus, Helen utilizes her weaving to act as an “agent of memory” in order to be remembered as both a gift-giver and artisan.<sup>37</sup> In this way, a purely feminine form of production becomes integrated into the masculine realm of glory, enabling Helen to overstep the boundaries of her gender and become a significant contender for power in the *oikos*.

In the *Odyssey*, Helen utilizes *xenia* to acquire her *pharmaka* and to make known her skill in weaving. By enabling women to distribute their weaving and other goods, *xenia* can facilitate feminine narrative. According to Melissa Mueller, the *Odyssey* suggests the existence of feminine networks of *xenia* in which women are agents of trade; for example, the existence of these networks is implied when Homer mentions that Helen’s *pharmakon* was a gift from Polydamna in Egypt (*Od.* 4.228). Moreover, Helen gives one of her robes to Telemachus with instructions to give it to Penelope for safekeeping until his wedding day:

Ἑλένη δὲ παρίστατο καλλιπάρηος  
πέπλον ἔχουσ' ἐν χερσίν, ἔπος τ' ἔφατ' ἔκ τ' ὀνόμαζε:  
δῶρόν τοι καὶ ἐγώ, τέκνον φίλε, τοῦτο δίδωμι,  
μνήμ' Ἑλένης χειρῶν, πολυηράτου ἐς γάμου ὄρην,  
σὴ ἀλόχῳ φορέειν: τῆος δὲ φίλη παρὰ μητρὶ

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<sup>37</sup> Melissa Mueller, “Helen’s Hands: Weaving for *Kleos* in the *Odyssey*,” *Helios* 37 (2010): 8.

κείσθω ἐνὶ μεγάρῳ. σὺ δέ μοι χαίρων ἀφίκου  
οἶκον εὐκτίμενον καὶ σὴν ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν.

And beautiful-cheeked Helen stood beside him  
Holding the woven robe in her hands, said this speech and called him:  
Dear child, I also give this gift to you,  
A keepsake of the hands of Helen, for the time of your very lovely wedding,  
For your wife to wear: in the meantime, by the side of your dear mother  
Let it lie in the hall. And may you arrive, rejoicing,  
At your well-built home and your dear fatherland.

15.123-129

By bidding Telemachus to give the robe to Penelope, Helen relegates Telemachus to the role of “the medium of exchange between her and another woman.”<sup>38</sup> As both Helen and Menelaus participate in the gift-giving, both masculine and feminine *xenia* coexist simultaneously, similar to the coexistence of masculine and feminine speech when Helen and Menelaus reminisce earlier about the Trojan War. However, on this occasion Helen is successful in subverting masculine authority because she asserts the superior hierarchical position of Penelope to Telemachus, which throughout the *Odyssey*, is portrayed as unstable and uncertain. According to Lillian Doherty, the isolation of aristocratic women in the *Odyssey* is concomitant to the establishment of the patriarchal household as a normative structural unit.<sup>39</sup> Helen does not operate individually, but thrives in a network of *xenia* in which women are agents of trade, and therefore challenges this patriarchal norm.

On the other hand, the *Iliad* demonstrates how *xenia* can also strip women of their narrative authority by rendering them as objects of trade. In a violation of *xenia*, Paris ‘stole’ Helen and the story of the *Iliad* arises from the measures taken to return her to her lawful owner. Victoria Wohl argues that objectifying women in exchange is inherently problematic because the object of trade

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<sup>38</sup> Mueller, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Doherty, 176.

is a person who will inevitably “attempt to position herself as subject.”<sup>40</sup> This exchange of women first occurs in the *Iliad* when Briseis, a princess captured from Troy, is given to Achilles as a war prize. When Agamemon is compelled by Apollo to return his own war prize, Chryseis, he demands that Achilles compensate him for his loss by giving him Briseis, referred to as “*to geras*,” a neuter noun (*Il.* 1.121-1.173). Briseis is a passive character whose status as an object is never questioned until Book 19 when she laments Patroclus’s death in an emotional speech that allows us to glimpse her as a person with full moral status (19.333-355).

Helen is similarly objectified, but her exchange is complicated by the fact that she is the “standard of value” and therefore invaluable.<sup>41</sup> There is no limit to her worth because “invested with value by those who fight for her, she becomes a mirror of the desires they project onto her.”<sup>42</sup> Marcel Mauss explains that the system of gift exchange is important for establishing partnerships among traditional tribes. For example, the tribes of the Trobriand Islands engage in *kula*, a system of inter-tribal commerce, which is initiated when one tribe gives a gift to another tribe which must repay the gift with interest the following year, and so the exchange continues with the gifts gradually increasing in worth.<sup>43</sup> But what happens when a gift has immeasurable value and is therefore impossible to pay back? By refusing to return Helen and being unable to provide recompense for her, the Trojans breach the system of gift-exchange so essential to Greek culture and pay for their transgression in the destruction of their city and the loss of countless lives. Though we’ve seen in the *Odyssey* that the subjectification of Helen is unsettling because it disrupts the masculine-feminine hierarchy, the objectification of her is disastrous because no number of lives

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<sup>40</sup> Wohl, xv.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 85-86.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 85-86.

<sup>43</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967), 18-20.

can account for her. Therefore, in literature Helen alternatively is regarded as an object and a person, resulting in her often being perceived as double-natured.

Helen's double nature is especially apparent in Euripides's *Helen*, in which she uses the language of objectification in order to exert her agency and achieve her desires. The play is based on an alternative version of the Homeric myth in which Helen was never in Troy during the war, but was transported to Proteus's palace in Egypt by Hermes. Meanwhile, Hera replaced her with a likeness conjured from air in order to pay back Aphrodite for winning the contest of the golden apple. Throughout the Trojan War Helen is pursued by Proteus's son, Theoklymenos, but rebuffs his advances and remains faithful to her husband. After learning from Ajax's brother that Menelaus is dead, she is urged by the chorus to confirm this with Theoklymenos's sister, the prophet Theonoe, who assures her that Menelaus is actually still alive and in Egypt. Helen and Menelaus reunite and Helen must devise a way for them to return home without Theoklymenos finding out.

Helen first supplicates Theonoe and begs her not to reveal Menelaus to her brother, saying "Consider the contract between man and god: wouldn't both Hermes and the dead king wish what's rightfully one man's to be given back?" (982-984).<sup>44</sup> In order to persuade Theonoe, Helen invokes the language of ownership and situates herself as an object belonging to her husband. Furthermore, she devises a plan to escape Egypt in which she pretends that Menelaus is dead and convinces Theoklymenos to allow her to honor his memory by taking gifts out to him at sea. She has Theoklymenos tell the rowers that Menelaus (disguised as a sailor) is in charge of the procession and all should concede authority to him. This play deviates from the *Odyssey* by depicting a chaste Helen whose loyalty is beyond dispute and who willingly accepts her role as object in accordance with Greek societal standards. She has superior *mētis*, similar to the Homeric Helen, but employs

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<sup>44</sup> Euripides, *Helen*, trans. James Michie and Colin Leach (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 56.

it with the purpose of saving both herself and her husband so that she can remain a faithful wife. Therefore, Euripides's *Helen* introduces an alternative Helen that is Penelope-like in her fidelity and cunning. This play reinforces the perception of Helen as double-natured with the coexistence of two Helens, the 'real' and the 'likeness,' leaving us with two opposing characterizations of Helen that seem impossible to resolve.

Similar to Euripides's play, the opposing masculine and feminine narratives in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have presented contrasting depictions of Helen. In the *Iliad*, Helen is presented as blameless and chaste: when Priam calls her over to name some of the Greek soldiers, he reassures her that he blames the gods for causing the war and doesn't hold her accountable (Il. 3.194-201). However, in the *Odyssey* Helen openly blames herself for her actions, saying that the Achaeans fought at Troy "for the sake of dog-faced me" (Od. 4.145). Only at the end of the *Odyssey* are both aspects of Helen's dichotomous identity acknowledged without indicating the superiority of one over the other, which occurs in Penelope's speech to Odysseus immediately following her recognition of him:

οὐδέ κεν Ἀργεῖη Ἑλένη, Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα,  
ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀλλοδαπῷ ἐμίγη φιλότητι καὶ εὐνήϊ,  
εἰ ἤδη ὅ μιν αὖτις ἀρήϊοι νῆες Ἀχαιῶν  
ἀξέμεναι οἰκόνδε φίλην ἐς πατρίδ' ἔμελλον.  
τὴν δ' ἦ τοι ῥέξαι θεὸς ὄρορεν ἔργον ἀεικές:  
τὴν δ' ἄτην οὐ πρόσθεν ἐῶ ἐγκάτθετο θυμῷ  
λυγρὴν, ἐξ ἧς πρῶτα καὶ ἡμέας ἵκετο πένθος.

Not even Argive Helen, born from Zeus,  
Would have mixed in love in the bed of a foreign man  
If she had known that the braver sons of the Achaeans  
Were destined to lead her back home to her fatherland.  
But a god incited her to accomplish this shameful deed  
And not before that did she put in her heart her baneful infatuation,  
From which our grief first came.

23.218-224

In this passage, Penelope suggests that both Helen and a divinity were responsible for her infidelity. Saying that Helen never would have eloped with Paris if she had known the consequences implies that she could have refused to leave Sparta, accrediting her a portion of the blame. However, Helen never would have realized her infatuation for Paris in the first place if a god hadn't incited her. Ultimately, the dichotomous nature of Helen's identity is false: she is neither wholly blameless nor wholly at fault, but a combination of both. We have seen this trope of Helen's 'bridged dichotomy' before in the double stories told by Helen and Menelaus in the Telemachy, which reveal that Helen is neither inferior nor superior to Menelaus but a mix of the two, rendering her as Menelaus' equal.<sup>45</sup> Helen's personality is mixed just as her drug: she constantly occupies a realm of in-betweens without ever completely resolving the two sides of her character so that one prevails over the other. Penelope reveals that the nature of Helen's subjectivity is undefinable through simplistic, one-sided terms such as "seductress" and "object." Helen's identity is constructed as a web of tangled threads that are impossible to unravel because Homer never reveals the loose ends.

In conclusion, Helen is an essential key for examining the concept of feminine subjectivity in the *Odyssey*. Though she is often rendered as an object because of her passive role in the Trojan War, she inserts her narrative in various ways throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that allow the readers to glimpse her agency and personhood. Helen's narrative is arguably the most authoritative in the *Odyssey*, which she exerts by means of her drug and her weaving in order to attain *kleos*. Her narrative reveals the complexity of her character and its construction as a series of dichotomies: Greek versus Trojan, creator versus destroyer, wife versus seductress, to name a few. The question of which dichotomous element in these pairs trumps the other is one that continues

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<sup>45</sup> Bergren, 122.

to be debated, rooted in the notion that Helen must be Greek *or* Trojan, creator *or* destroyer, wife *or* seductress. However, I believe that neither component of each dichotomy necessarily prevails but that Helen's character is a mixing of the two, analogous to her drug. Homer's intent is not to give us pieces of a puzzle that we must fit together to form a cohesive picture of Helen, but to accept all these different, sometimes contradictory components as various elements of her subjectivity.

### III. Athena

In the beginning of the *Odyssey*, one of the first female voices we hear is that of Penelope, who wanders into the *megaron* from her upstairs chamber to hear the bard's song. When she hears him sing of the Achaeans' journey home from Troy, she bursts into tears and orders him to stop, as the song reminds her of her beloved husband Odysseus who has been missing for ten years and is assumed dead. Before we see whether the bard Phemius will heed her tearful exhortation, Telemachus cuts Penelope off and scolds her for speaking so openly in a space where that privilege is reserved only for men (1.325-60). Telemachus's interjection to silence his mother's voice reflects an underlying motif in the *Odyssey* in which the masculine voice is constantly promoted at the expense of the feminine. The implicit fear of what might occur if the feminine voice cannot be curtailed hangs over the *Odyssey* like a mass of dark clouds that could suddenly break into a storm. This fear is almost actualized when Odysseus' plan to return home is complicated by his encounters with goddesses, namely Circe and Calypso, who wield considerably more power than mortals like Penelope, and therefore, assert their subjectivity in a way that threatens to derail the masculine narrative altogether.

The goddess Athena serves as an interesting foil to Circe and Calypso because, while she also oversteps the boundaries of feminine speech, she directs the plot of the *Odyssey* in a way that elevates the masculine narrative and limits the feminine to within the constraints of social propriety. Her subjectivity becomes integral to the narrative because she reinforces the patriarchal values that govern Homeric Greek society instead of attempting to subvert them. Athena's chastity allows her to assume such an active role in the epic whereas the sexuality of Circe and Calypso render them as threats who could have detained Odysseus on their islands indefinitely if not for the interventions of Odysseus' crewmates and the god Hermes. Therefore, Athena weaves the plot

of the *Odyssey* with all the intricacy associated with the feminine but at the same time serves the masculine interest by freeing Odysseus from Calypso and propelling forward the action of the plot. Contrasting the functions of these dread goddesses with that of Athena in the epic suggests how sexuality can elevate feminine narrative in the text, but also can result in it being shut down.

Calypso and Circe attempt to establish their narratives at the expense of the masculine by delaying Odysseus' return home, exercising their agency to marginalize Odysseus' voice. The two goddesses threaten to detain Odysseus in feminine stasis, from which he must free himself in order to regain masculine authority or risk becoming unmanned and surrender his return home.<sup>46</sup> By trapping Odysseus on their islands, Circe and Calypso, in essence, trap the plot, holding it hostage in a climate impervious to change. According to Victoria Wohl, untamed feminine sexuality is the destructive force that creates the static environment so successful in subordinating men.<sup>47</sup> The goddesses' sexuality is reflected in the topography of their islands, in which the copiousness and fertility of the land hasn't yet been exposed to agriculture (or culture as a whole).<sup>48</sup> In particular, Calypso's island is described as bursting with ripeness that is sure to spoil if unharvested:

ὔλη δὲ σπέος ἀμφὶ πεφύκει τηλεθόωσα,  
κλήρη τ' αἴγειρός τε καὶ εὐώδης κυπάρισσος.  
ἔνθα δέ τ' ὄρνιθες τανυσίπτεροι εὐνάζοντο,  
σκῶπές τ' ἴρηκές τε τανύγλωσσοί τε κορῶναι  
εἰνάλιαι, τῆσιν τε θαλάσσια ἔργα μέμηλεν.  
ἦ δ' αὐτοῦ τετάνυστο περὶ σπείους γλαφυροῖο  
ἡμερὶς ἠβῶωσα, τεθήλει δὲ σταφυλῆσι.  
κρῆναι δ' ἐξείης πίσυρες ῥέον ὕδατι λευκῶ,  
πλησίαι ἀλλήλων τετραμμέναι ἄλλυδις ἄλλη.  
ἀμφὶ δὲ λειμῶνες μαλακοὶ ἴου ἠδὲ σελίνου  
θήλεον. ἔνθα κ' ἔπειτα καὶ ἀθάνατός περ ἐπελθὼν  
θηήσαιτο ἰδὼν καὶ τερφθεῖη φρεσὶν ἦσιν.

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<sup>46</sup> Thomas Van Nortwick, *The Unknown Odysseus: Alternate Worlds in Homer's Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 99.

<sup>47</sup> Victoria Wohl, "Standing by the Stathmos: The Creation of Sexual Ideology in the *Odyssey*," *Arethusa* 26 (1993): 25.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

A flourishing forest had grown around the cave,  
Alder and black poplar and also fragrant cypress  
Where long-winged birds used to roost  
Owls and hawks and chattering shearwaters  
Of the sea, for whom fishing is a care.  
And around the hollow cave  
A young, luxuriant vine had stretched,  
And had sprouted with bunches of grapes.  
And four springs in a row flowed with clean water,  
Near each other turned one way and another.  
And around them soft meadows of violets and celery  
Abounded. There even an immortal, coming upon it and  
Seeing it, would gaze and would be delighted in his heart.

5.63-74

These islands, as well as the goddesses who inhabit them, represent the anti-culture which “without men to direct their fertility into socially productive channels...can create nothing more civilized than overgrown jungles.”<sup>49</sup> The islands are practically devoid of civilization (except for the huts of the goddesses) and the force of attraction they exude is so strong, it would compel even a god to stop and gaze in wonder. The combined effect of the goddesses and their environments produces a stasis that is difficult to counteract. Although Circe and Calypso both generate this reaction, they use different means to attempt to trap Odysseus and seize control of the narrative.

Circe physically demonstrates feminine dominance through her use of drugs and a wand. In Book 10, Odysseus and his men arrive on Circe’s island after narrowly escaping the Cyclops, and for a few days remain by their ship beached on the shore. Meanwhile, Odysseus wanders the island and notices smoke drifting from a fireplace in the distance. Ever turning his mind towards profit, he decides to assemble a band of men to investigate in the hopes of attaining guest-gifts, which are customary for a foreigner to receive. He returns to the ship and divides his men into two platoons, one led by him and the other by Eurylochus, who is chosen by a game of lots to venture

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<sup>49</sup> Wohl, 24.

out first. When Eurylochus’s platoon arrives at Circe’s hut, she invites them in and the men enter eagerly but Eurylochus, sensing a trap, remains behind. This turns out to be a wise move, as he watches Circe through the window slipping a drug into the men’s wine and turning them into pigs. Previously, I discussed the scene in Book 4 when Telemachus and Pisistratus visit Menelaus in Sparta, and as they dine, Helen underhandedly mixes her “good and baneful” drug into the wine at dinner, which has the effect of numbing grief (4.219-30).<sup>50</sup> Similar to the “good” and “baneful” components of Helen’s drug, administering it produces a sequence of “good” and “baneful” narratives that seek to enforce and undermine the patriarchal order, respectively. Helen’s story is “baneful” because the act of a woman alluding to her sexuality in a masculine-dominated space upsets this order, whereas Menelaus’ story is “good” because it reintroduces the masculine perspective. Circe similarly uses *pharmaka* to alter the narrative pattern, which the men drink unsuspectingly and turn into swine:

ἔσταν δ’ ἐν προθύροισι θεᾶς καλλιπλοκάμοιο,  
Κίρκης δ’ ἔνδον ἄκουον ἀειδούσης ὀπι καλῆ,  
ἰστὸν ἐποικομένης μέγαν ἄμβροτον, οἷα θεᾶων  
λεπτά τε καὶ χαρίεντα καὶ ἀγλαὰ ἔργα πέλονται.  
τοῖσι δὲ μύθων ἦρχε Πολίτης ὄρχαμος ἀνδρῶν,  
ὅς μοι κήδιστος ἐτάρων ἦν κεδνότατός τε:  
‘ὦ φίλοι, ἔνδον γάρ τις ἐποικομένη μέγαν ἰστὸν  
καλὸν ἀοιδιάει, δάπεδον δ’ ἅπαν ἀμφιμέμυκεν,  
ἢ θεὸς ἢ ἐ γυνή: ἀλλὰ φθεγγώμεθα θᾶσσον.’  
ὥς ἄρ’ ἐφώνησεν, τοὶ δὲ φθέγγοντο καλεῦντες.  
ἢ δ’ αἶψ’ ἐξελθοῦσα θύρας ὤϊξε φαεινὰς  
καὶ κάλει: οἱ δ’ ἅμα πάντες ἀιδρεΐησιν ἔποντο:  
Εὐρύλοχος δ’ ὑπέμεινεν, οἰσάμενος δόλον εἶναι.  
εἶσεν δ’ εἰσαγαγοῦσα κατὰ κλισμούς τε θρόνους τε,  
ἐν δὲ σφιν τυρόν τε καὶ ἄλφιστα καὶ μέλι χλωρόν  
οἴνω Πραμνεῖω ἐκύκα: ἀνέμισγε δὲ σίτω  
φάρμακα λύγρ’, ἵνα πάγχυ λαθοῖατο πατρίδος αἴης.  
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ δῶκέν τε καὶ ἔκπιον, αὐτίκ’ ἔπειτα  
ράβδω πεπληγυῖα κατὰ συφροῖσιν ἐέργνυ.  
οἱ δὲ συῶν μὲν ἔχον κεφαλὰς φωνήν τε τρίχας τε

<sup>50</sup> See Chapter II: Helen for a more extensive analysis of this scene.

καὶ δέμας, αὐτὰρ νοῦς ἦν ἔμπεδος, ὡς τὸ πάρος περ.  
ὥς οἱ μὲν κλαίοντες ἐέρχατο, τοῖσι δὲ Κίρκη  
πάρ ῥ' ἄκυλον βάλανόν τε βάλεν καρπὸν τε κρανείης  
ἔδμεναι, οἷα σύες χαμαιευνάδες αἰὲν ἔδουσιν.

They stood in the doorway of the goddess with beautiful locks,  
And inside they heard Circe singing with a beautiful voice  
Approaching her great, immortal web, the sort which belongs to a goddess,  
Delicate and also beautiful and shining works that come into existence.  
Polites, leader of men, was the first to speak,  
Who was the worthiest of care to me out of my companions,  
And the most diligent, saying to them:  
“Oh friends, someone approaching a great beautiful web sings,  
And the entire floor echoes, either a goddess or a woman:  
But let us quickly make a sound.”  
So they spoke loudly, and made a sound, calling.  
And immediately going towards the radiant doors, she opened them  
And called, and together all the men followed with ignorance:  
Eurylochus remained behind, fearing it was a trick.  
Leading them in, she sat them down on couches and chairs,  
And mixed up for them cheese and barley and yellow honey  
With Pramnian wine: and she stirred into the food  
Baneful drugs, in order that all might completely forget  
Their fatherland. Nevertheless, after she gave them this  
And they drank, immediately then, striking them with her wand,  
She shut them into the pigsty.  
They had the head, voice, bristles, and skin of swine;  
However, they had steadfast minds, as before.  
So lamenting, they were confined, to whom Circe threw  
Acorns and dates and the fruit of cornelian cherries  
To eat, the sort which swine sleeping on the ground always eat.

10.220-43

In the passage above, Circe also uses *pharmaka* as a means to create an opening for feminine narration. However, unlike Helen’s drug, Circe’s is described only as “baneful:” it does not result in the coalescing of masculine and feminine perspectives, but abolishes the masculine voice altogether by transforming Odysseus’ men into pigs. While the men’s minds remain human, their voices are those of pigs, preventing them from speaking out against this treachery. Furthermore, the subversion of the gendered hierarchy is physically manifest in Circe wielding her wand, which she uses to prod the pigs into the sty after their transformation. This *rhabdos*, when wielded by

Circe, becomes a phallic symbol, symbolizing the feminine appropriation of masculine authority and thus “female dominance over the male.”<sup>51</sup>

However, although Circe is temporarily successful in asserting feminine dominance, access to her subjectivity is denied to the reader because the account of her turning Odysseus’ men into pigs is distilled through the masculine perspective. The story of Circe is embedded in the lengthy account of Odysseus’ journey that he narrates to the Phaeacians years after it occurs; therefore, insight into Circe’s thoughts are lost and we are left only with the perspective of Odysseus. However, an opening for the reader to glimpse Circe’s point of view presents itself as Circe warns Odysseus about the Sirens after his return from the Underworld:

Σειρήνας μὲν πρῶτον ἀφίξεαι, αἶ ρά τε πάντας  
ἀνθρώπους θέλγουσιν, ὅτις σφεας εἰσαφίκηται.  
ὅς τις ἀιδρεΐη πελάση καὶ φθόγγον ἀκούσῃ  
Σειρήνων, τῷ δ’ οὐ τι γυνὴ καὶ νήπια τέκνα  
οἴκαδε νοστήσαντι παρίσταται οὐδὲ γάνυνται,  
ἀλλὰ τε Σειρήνες λιγυρῇ θέλγουσιν ἀοιδῇ  
ἤμεναι ἐν λειμῶνι, πολὺς δ’ ἀμφ’ ὀστεόφιν θῖς  
ἀνδρῶν πυθομένων, περὶ δὲ ῥινοὶ μινύθουσι.

First you will come to the Sirens, who  
Charm all men, whoever comes to them.  
He who approaches in ignorance and hears the sound  
Of the Sirens, to that man returning home there is no wife  
And young children standing beside him and beaming,  
But the Sirens charm him with clear song  
Sitting idle in the meadow, around them a huge  
Heap of bones of rotting men with decaying skin.  
12.39-46

Circe’s admonition regarding the Sirens emphasizes the destruction that results from men hearing their song, whereas Odysseus mentions none of this when he describes his encounter with the Sirens later on:

ἀλλ’ ὅτε τόσσον ἀπῆμεν ὅσον τε γέγωνε βοήσας,

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<sup>51</sup> Judith Yarnall, *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 12.

ῥίμφα διώκοντες, τὰς δ' οὐ λάθην ὠκύαλος νηῖς  
 ἐγγύθεν ὀρνυμένη, λιγυρὴν δ' ἔντυνον ἀοιδίην:  
 'δεῦρ' ἄγ' ἰὼν, πολύαιν' Ὀδυσσεῦ, μέγα κῦδος Ἀχαιῶν,  
 νῆα κατάστησον, ἵνα νωιτέρην ὅπ' ἀκούσῃς.  
 οὐ γάρ πώ τις τῆδε παρήλασε νηὶ μελαίνῃ,  
 πρὶν γ' ἡμέων μελίγηρυν ἀπὸ στομάτων ὅπ' ἀκούσῃ,  
 ἀλλ' ὅ γε τερψάμενος νεῖται καὶ πλείονα εἰδώς.  
 ἴδμεν γάρ τοι πάνθ' ὅσ' ἐνὶ Τροίῃ εὐρείῃ  
 Ἀργεῖοι Τρῳῆς τε θεῶν ἰότητι μόγησαν,  
 ἴδμεν δ', ὅσσα γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ.'

But when we went so far away, as far as someone shouting  
 Could be heard, skimming lightly, the sea-swift ship did not  
 Escape their notice, being urged near, and they prepared their clear song:  
 “Come on, come here, much-praised Odysseus, great renown of the Achaeans,  
 Station your ship, in order that you may hear from us.  
 For not yet has someone driven by us in his dark ship,  
 Before he hears from our sweet-voiced mouths,  
 But having been delighted he goes, knowing more.  
 For we know all things which the Achaeans and Trojans suffered  
 In broad Troy by the will of the gods,  
 We know so many things that come about on the all-nourishing earth.”

12.181-91

None of the horrors Circe mentions is noticed by Odysseus as he passes by—he describes only his longing to hear the rest of the song, which celebrates the *kleos* he won in Troy.<sup>52</sup> According to Lillian Doherty, the discrepancy between masculine and feminine accounts of the Sirens creates dramatic tension in the relationship between female and male narrators.<sup>53</sup> Similar to the parallel narratives constructed by Helen and Menelaus in Book 4, Odysseus and Circe present opposite perspectives in which the masculine threatens to discredit the feminine.<sup>54</sup> However, as with Helen and Menelaus, ones of the opposing perspectives is not necessarily superior to the other, but both effectively illuminate Circe’s subjectivity in contrast to Odysseus’, if only fleetingly.

<sup>52</sup> Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polutropos: Intertextual Readings in the Odyssey and the Iliad* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 210.

<sup>53</sup> Lillian Eileen Doherty, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 134.

<sup>54</sup> For further analysis of Helen and Menelaus and their parallel stories, see Chapter II: Helen.

On the other hand, the goddess Calypso has no particular devices that she uses to strip Odysseus of his masculinity, employing her sexuality instead. In this way, Calypso differs from Circe and Helen and ultimately proves more effective in unmanning Odysseus because she detains him on her island for seven years. Though in Homeric literature sex is often used as a tool to affirm masculine authority, Calypso frequently has sex with Odysseus against his will and thus robs him of his agency (5.170-2). By habitually forcing Odysseus to sleep with her, Calypso “not only hides the hero but threatens to conceal the plot as well,” as the name Calypso, which derives from the Greek word *kalupto* (“to hide”), suggests.<sup>55</sup> In addition, the story of Calypso isn’t spoken by a male character but exists in real time (unlike Circe’s story which is absorbed into the larger narrative of Odysseus). Calypso is even briefly placed in the role as narrator when she describes to Hermes how she met Odysseus:

τὸν μὲν ἐγὼν ἐσάωσα περὶ τρόπιος βεβαῶτα  
οἶον, ἐπεὶ οἱ νῆα θοὴν ἀργῆτι κεραυνῷ  
Ζεὺς ἔλσας ἐκέασσε μέσῳ ἐνὶ οἴνοπι πόντῳ.  
ἐνθ’ ἄλλοι μὲν πάντες ἀπέφθιθεν ἐσθλοὶ ἐταῖροι,  
τὸν δ’ ἄρα δεῦρ’ ἄνεμός τε φέρων καὶ κῦμα πέλασσε.  
τὸν μὲν ἐγὼ φίλεόν τε καὶ ἔτρεφον, ἠδὲ ἔφασκον  
θήσειν ἀθάνατον καὶ ἀγήραον ἡμᾶτα πάντα.

I saved him standing around the ship’s keel alone,  
Since Zeus cleaved his swift ship with a bright thunderbolt,  
Striking it in the middle of the wine-dark sea.  
There all the other good companions perished,  
But the wind and the waves, bearing him, drew him near.  
I both loved him and tended to him, and already said  
That I would make him immortal and ageless for all time.

5.130-136

In this scene, Calypso’s voice becomes an integral part of the narrative by recounting a part of the plot that isn’t later supplemented by the masculine perspective (Odysseus later mentions that

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<sup>55</sup> Bruce Loudon, *The Odyssey: Structure, Narration, and Meaning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 106.

Calypso offered to make him immortal but doesn't describe her saving him). Therefore, Calypso is given exceptional narrative authority in the *Odyssey* that few other female characters share. This brief spotlight on Calypso's subjectivity, which Circe is deprived of, reinforces the notion that unrestrained feminine narrative is particularly dangerous to the plot.

Through these devices, Calypso and Circe are both successful in bringing about a temporary reversal of gender roles. Their status as goddesses allows them to subvert the gendered hierarchy, which Helen attempts and fails to achieve by slipping her drug into the wine (4.219-30). In essence, Helen accomplishes as much as she can within her capacity as a demigoddess, which is positioning herself as her husband's equal, because she is incapable of proving herself superior (at least, until her participation in *xenia* in Book 15). If Circe's and Calypso's subjugation of men were allowed to continue unchecked, they would be able to imprison Odysseus on their respective islands and suspend the plot indefinitely. Therefore, only the intervention of the gods is capable of reestablishing masculine control and thus freeing Odysseus from the feminine stasis that potentially would, or actually does, imprison him. In Circe's case, Hermes intervenes as Odysseus is approaching Circe's hut and arms him with the tools he needs to counteract Circe's *pharmaka*, *rhabdos*, and sexuality. He also directs Odysseus on what he should do when he arrives at Circe's hut:

τῆ, τόδε φάρμακον ἐσθλὸν ἔχων ἐς δώματα Κίρκης  
ἔρχευ, ὃ κέν τοι κρατὸς ἀλάλκησιν κακὸν ἦμαρ.  
πάντα δέ τοι ἐρέω ὀλοφώια δήνεα Κίρκης.  
τεύξει τοι κυκεῶ, βαλέει δ' ἐν φάρμακα σίτω.  
ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὡς θέλξαι σε δυνήσεται: οὐ γὰρ ἔασει  
φάρμακον ἐσθλόν, ὃ τοι δώσω, ἐρέω δέ ἕκαστα.  
ὀππότε κεν Κίρκη σ' ἐλάση περιμήκει ῥάβδῳ,  
δὴ τότε σὺ ξίφος ὀξὺ ἐρυσσάμενος παρὰ μηροῦ  
Κίρκη ἐπαῖξαι, ὡς τε κτάμεναι μενεαίνων.  
ἢ δέ σ' ὑποδείσσα κελήσεται εὐνηθῆναι:  
ἔνθα σὺ μηκέτ' ἔπειτ' ἀπανήνασθαι θεοῦ εὐνήν,  
ὄφρα κέ τοι λύση θ' ἐτάρους αὐτόν τε κομίση:

ἀλλὰ κέλεσθαί μιν μακάρων μέγαν ὄρκον ὁμόσσαι,  
μή τί τοι αὐτῷ πῆμα κακὸν βουλευσέμεν ἄλλο,  
μή σ' ἀπογυμνωθέντα κακὸν καὶ ἀνήνορα θήῃ.

“Go into Circe’s house holding this drug,  
Which will ward off the evil day from your head.  
And I will say all the deadly plans of Circe.  
She will stir a potion for you, and will throw drugs into the food.  
But it will not be able to charm you: for this  
Good drug will not allow it, which I will give to you, and  
I will tell each thing that will occur. When Circe drives you away  
With her very long wand, indeed then drawing your sharp sword  
From your thigh, rush at Circe, as if you desire to kill her.  
Shrinking in fear, she will urge you to lie with her:  
Then you do not ever reject the bed of a goddess there,  
In order that she may free your companions and provide for you:  
But order her to swear a great oath by the blessed gods  
Lest she plan another evil misery for you, and lest,  
Having stripped you naked, she makes you worthless and unmanly.”

10.287-301

Hermes gives Odysseus a “good” *pharmakon* that can be used against Circe’s “baneful” one, tells him to draw his sword to counteract Circe’s wand, and advises him to have Circe swear an oath to mitigate the destructive effect of her sexuality. Equipping Odysseus with the masculine counterparts to Circe’s weapons elevates Odysseus to Circe’s status, enabling him to retain control of his sexuality and use it as a bargaining chip to free his friends.<sup>56</sup> Circe is thereafter enlisted as a helper to Odysseus, and when he and his men prepare to depart Aeaea, she shares with him her cosmic knowledge that allows him to escape “three of the most primal mythical hypostases of destructive female sexuality: the Sirens, who lure men to doom with their seductive signing, Scylla with her yapping dog-loins, and Charybdis, a black a devouring hole.”<sup>57</sup> Hermes’s intervention provides Odysseus with the ability to direct Circe’s power of narration in a constructive way that obliges her to betray the other feminine threats (namely, the Sirens, Scylla, and Charibdis) for his

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<sup>56</sup> Yarnall, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Wohl, 25.

benefit. Circe's agency isn't broken, only bent to suit the patriarchal order of society. Even with this divine aid and Circe's subsequent benevolence, Odysseus still risks immobility imposed by feminine stasis; having won Circe's respect he remains on the island for a year until his shipmates urge him to resume his journey home (10.466-74).

In contrast, without this masculine intervention Odysseus is trapped on the island of Ogygia for seven years; only when Hermes, at Zeus's behest, commands Calypso to free Odysseus can masculine order be restored. When Hermes delivers the message that Calypso must send Odysseus on his way, she complains about the double standard that prohibits goddesses from taking mortal lovers before grudgingly yielding to Zeus's command:

‘σχέτλιοι ἐστε, θεοί, ζηλήμονες ἔξοχον ἄλλων,  
οἳ τε θεαῖς ἀγάσθε παρ’ ἀνδράσιν εὐνάζεσθαι  
ἀμφοδίην, ἣν τίς τε φίλον ποιήσεται ἀκοίτην.  
ὥς μὲν ὅτ’ Ὀρίων’ ἔλετο ῥοδοδάκτυλος Ἥως,  
τόφρα οἱ ἠγάσθε θεοὶ ῥεῖα ζῶοντες,  
ἧος ἐν Ὀρτυγίῃ χρυσόθρονος Ἄρτεμις ἀγνή  
οἷς ἀγανοῖς βελέεσσιν ἐποιομένη κατέπεφνε.  
ὥς δ’ ὅπότε Ἰασίῳ ἐνπλόκαμος Δημήτηρ,  
ᾧ θυμῷ εἴξασα, μίγη φιλότητι καὶ εὐνῇ  
νειῶ ἐνὶ τριπόλῳ: οὐδὲ δὴν ἦεν ἄπυστος  
Ζεὺς, ὅς μιν κατέπεφνε βαλὼν ἀργῆτι κεραυνῷ.  
ὥς δ’ αὖ νῦν μοι ἀγάσθε, θεοί, βροτὸν ἄνδρα παρεῖναι.

You are unflinching, gods, and stand out above others  
In jealousy, you who bear a grudge against goddesses laying  
By the side of men openly, as when golden-fingered Dawn  
Seized Orion, meanwhile you gods, living lightly, were jealous,  
Until in Ortygia pure golden-throned Artemis, approaching him  
With gentle arrows, slayed him. Or as when fair-tressed Demeter,  
Giving way to her heart, mixed in love with Iasion and laid in the  
Thrice-plowed field: Zeus was not ignorant for long, but he  
Killed him hurling a bright thunderbolt. As once again now  
You bear a grudge against me, gods, being with a mortal man.

5.116-29

Calypso's speech is the only scene in which a female character explicitly points out the inequitable power structure guiding masculine-feminine relations, which is often merely alluded to, but

ultimately is responsible for directing much of the action of the *Odyssey*. In such a structure where women are consistently objectified, Calypso exposes a fundamental flaw: that women are not objects, but people. By revealing the injustice of a system that prohibits goddesses from enjoying a relationship in which they are dominant, Calypso manages to cast herself as a sympathetic character even as she keeps the protagonist hostage. Therefore, Calypso's narration is a candid reflection of her subjectivity, which doesn't quite occur in Circe's scene because her role in the *Odyssey* is narrated by Odysseus instead of occurring in real time. Thus, Calypso's voice has an emasculating effect that Hermes counteracts as he frees Odysseus from the island. According to Ann Bergren, as Odysseus departs Ogygia, he undergoes a metaphorical "birth of the soul" conducted by Hermes that results in him regaining his masculinity and arriving at Phaeacia as an independent man.<sup>58</sup> The necessity of masculine authority to free Odysseus from goddess-imposed stasis suggests how powerful feminine narration can be in overturning the plot, exerting a gravitational field that threatens to pull everything into its orbit unless an opposing force is applied.

According to Bruce Loudon, the events that occur on Circe's and Calypso's islands are almost identical but sequentially reversed, which underscores the significant differences between the goddesses.<sup>59</sup> In other words, the phases that occur when Odysseus arrives on Circe's island unfold in almost reverse order with Calypso: the goddess threatens the hero, Hermes intervenes on the hero's behalf, hero and goddess make love, and the goddess helps the hero. Odysseus makes love with Calypso without Hermes's assistance and therefore, enters into the sexual relationship as an inferior which allows Calypso to direct the action. Overall, Circe and Calypso briefly control the narrative at the expense of Odysseus' return, so the intervention of the gods is necessary for

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<sup>58</sup> "Helen's 'Good Drug,'" in *Weaving Truth: Essays on Language and the Female in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 64-71.

<sup>59</sup> Loudon, 105.

the continuation of the epic. The point at which the intervention occurs is crucial for determining whether Odysseus is a willing participant or victim of coercion in fulfilling the whims of the goddesses.

The goddess Athena is one significant exception to the feminine threat: unlike Circe and Calypso, Athena is not only able to speak unimpeded in the text, but she becomes essential to the plot advancement of the *Odyssey*. In the first four books, Athena singlehandedly weaves into the *Odyssey* the Telemachy, in which she prompts Telemachus to leave Ithaca and seek news of his father. She advises Telemachus to first visit King Nestor in Pylos and King Menelaus in Sparta, and if he hears Odysseus is dead, to devise a way to kill the suitors and take control of the *oikos* (1.271-300). These scenes with Telemachus might seem superfluous to the plot, but once Odysseus returns to Ithaca it becomes apparent that in order to enlist Telemachus' help in defeating the suitors in Book 22, it's necessary for his son to be educated on how to emulate his father.<sup>60</sup> In the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Telemachus is described as *pepnumenos*, of which "artless" is one possible definition, which suggests that at that time he lacks the maturity and skill to take over Odysseus' household (3.20).<sup>61</sup> Telemachus's experience not only enables him to help his father, but also allows him to relate to him on a more intimate level.<sup>62</sup> A defining characteristic of Odysseus is his itinerancy; therefore, the mini-odyssey that Telemachus undergoes provides a foundation on which the two can build a relationship.

Athena further complicates the plot through weaving stories within the Telemachy—specifically telling Telemachus accounts of his father that are tailored to incite Telemachus to

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<sup>60</sup> Jessica Wissman, "Athena's Unreasonable Advice: The Education of Telemachus in Ancient Interpretations of Homer," *GRBS* 49 (2009): 421.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Heitman, *Taking Her Seriously: Penelope and the Plot of Homer's Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 55.

<sup>62</sup> Van Nortwick, 103.

action and advance her agenda.<sup>63</sup> For example, when she first appears to Telemachus in the guise of Mentis, she tells him that Odysseus is held by savage men instead of telling him the truth, that he is held prisoner by Calypso:

νῦν δ' ἦλθον: δὴ γάρ μιν ἔφαντ' ἐπιδήμιον εἶναι,  
σὸν πατέρ': ἀλλὰ νῦ τόν γε θεοὶ βλάπτουσι κελεύθου.  
οὐ γάρ πο τέθνηκεν ἐπὶ χθονὶ δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,  
ἀλλ' ἔτι που ζῶς κατερύκεται εὐρεί πόντῳ  
νήσῳ ἐν ἀμφιρύτῃ, χαλεποὶ δέ μιν ἄνδρες ἔχουσιν  
ἄγριοι, οἳ που κεῖνον ἐρυκανόωσ' ἀέκοντα.

And now I came: for indeed they told me your father is  
At home: but now at any rate the gods hinder his path.  
For not yet has godlike Odysseus died upon the earth,  
But he is still alive, detained somewhere in the broad sea  
On a wave-washed island, and difficult, savage men  
Hold him, who restrain that man against his will.

1.194-9

This story draws an implicit comparison between Telemachus's situation and his father's, since Telemachus is also suffering injustice at the hands of the suitors who court his mother.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, hearing that his father is facing similar obstacles inspires him to follow Athena-Mentis's advice, however much he disbelieves that his father is still alive.

In addition to the Telemachy, Athena initiates the action of the *Odyssey* by urging Zeus to send Hermes to Ogygia in order to free Odysseus from Calypso (1.80-95). After Zeus agrees and Odysseus embarks once again on his journey, Athena continues to control the plot by adjusting the actions and appearance of the characters at will. For instance, she occasionally directs the actions of Penelope; such as when Odysseus returns home and is disguised as a beggar in the halls, Athena first lulls Penelope to sleep and enhances her beauty, then inspires her to appear before the suitors

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<sup>63</sup> Douglas Olsen, *Blood and Iron: Stories and Storytelling in Homer's Odyssey* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 69.

<sup>64</sup>Olsen, 70.

and elicit gifts from them (18.158-96).<sup>65</sup> Athena also constantly changes Odysseus' appearance to suit his devices. After Odysseus is washed up on the island of Phaeacia, his hunger pangs drive him to seek help from the young princess Nausicaa, whom he sees washing her clothes by the river (6.1.30-5). Athena orchestrates this whole encounter between Odysseus and Nausicaa by inspiring Nausicaa to wash her clothes near Odysseus' hiding place and plants the idea of marriage in her mind (6.20-40). After Nausicaa agrees to help Odysseus and has her handmaids bathe him, Athena interferes again to make Odysseus appear more handsome so that Nausicaa is attracted to him and the rest of the Phaeacians are more inclined to help him (6.229-35).

According to Van Nortwick, Athena's ability to weave the plot of the *Odyssey* places her in the role of poetic artist. This especially applies to her manipulations of Odysseus: "since artists are the propagators of heroic *kleos*, the guarantee of identity in the poem, we might see in Athena's manipulations the suggestion that she is not only Odysseus' protector but his creator."<sup>66</sup> Throughout the epic, Odysseus grapples with the tension between his insatiable need for movement and his path towards restoration in Ithaca.<sup>67</sup> Although Athena initially serves Odysseus' need for travel by facilitating his departure from Ogygia, ultimately she leads him home to Ithaca to serve a role that defies his instincts. During this process she "creates the hero Odysseus to reflect her divinity," projecting her desires and characteristics onto the main character.<sup>68</sup> In this way, Odysseus becomes an instrument of Athena's particular type of feminine subjectivity, one that is technically feminine but emphasizes masculine values. Overall, Odysseus reflects the goddess who controls the narrative and thus manifests these contrasting gendered ideologies in his journey both away and towards stasis.

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<sup>65</sup> I analyze this scene in terms of Penelope's subjectivity in Chapter IV.

<sup>66</sup> Van Nortwick, 35.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

As I explained before, if Circe and Calypso were able to influence Odysseus in this way, the plot of the *Odyssey* would be compromised as the protagonist would be trapped indefinitely in stasis. On the other hand, Athena is able to assume such an integral role in the narrative without derailing it because her asexuality prevents her from threatening the patriarchal order. Athena's character can best be explained by comparing her to Helen of Troy, whom I analyzed in the last chapter. I proposed that Helen's character is constructed as a series of dichotomies that ultimately mix because the consistency of her sexuality unifies each pair of dichotomous elements. Therefore, these dichotomies are actually 'false' and Helen can't be sorted into categories that are either/or—instead, she is a mixture of both contrasting components of her identity. The nature of Athena's character is also dichotomous because she occupies both masculine and feminine roles generally in myth and specifically in the *Odyssey*. Traditionally, Athena is praised as the goddess of wisdom and an armed warrior goddess, both of which are considered by the Greeks to be masculine traits.<sup>69</sup> In the *Odyssey*, Athena frequently appears to humans in the form of a man; for example, she assumes the identity of an old family friend Mentos when she interacts with Telemachus (1.180). However, Athena is also skilled in feminine crafts like weaving (both cloths and plots) and helps Odysseus contrive a plan to defeat the suitors (13.372-3).

This masculine-feminine dichotomy exists in Athena's mentee, Odysseus, as well, which is evident in the tension between his competing "centrifugal" and "centripetal" interests.<sup>70</sup> Throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus repeatedly struggles to resist the powers of stasis imposed by feminine divinities, driven by his constant need for movement (centrifugal). However, in order for the epic to reach resolution Odysseus must return home to Ithaca and resume his role as head of

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<sup>69</sup> Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 4.

<sup>70</sup> Van Nortwick, 40.

the *oikos* (centripetal).<sup>71</sup> Athena engages with both of these traits, encouraging his centrifugal streak by launching his journey from Ogygia, but ultimately seeking to establish his centrality by helping him return home. The dissonance between these masculine and feminine elements of Odysseus' character reinforces this interpretation of Athena's character as well.

According to Lillian Doherty, Athena "presides over two spheres that are otherwise strictly confined to opposite genders: weaving and warfare. In combining them, the figure of Athena suggests a continuity between them, which consists precisely in the intelligence which both demand."<sup>72</sup> While Athena's intelligence does bridge her gendered roles, her asexuality is the characteristic that allows her to occupy these two spheres seamlessly as well as to assert her subjectivity without posing a threat to Odysseus and, more generally, to masculine authority. However, there are moments in the text when Athena seems to jeopardize Odysseus' household order by surreptitiously encouraging distrust of Penelope, which could result in the unravelling of the epic into a meaningless jumble of threads. When Athena approaches Odysseus immediately after he has arrived in Ithaca, he asks her if he has truly come home and in response, she says out-of-the-blue that his *mētis* compels him to test his wife's loyalty rather than hurry home at once.

τὸν δ' ἠμείβετ' ἔπειτα θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη:  
'αἰεὶ τοι τοιοῦτον ἐνὶ στήθεσσι νόημα.  
τῷ σε καὶ οὐ δύναμαι προλιπεῖν δύστηνον ἔοντα,  
οὔνεκ' ἐπιτητής ἐσσι καὶ ἀγχίνοος καὶ ἐχέφρων.  
ἀσπασίως γάρ κ' ἄλλος ἀνὴρ ἀλαλήμενος ἐλθὼν  
ἴετ' ἐνὶ μεγάροις ιδέειν παιδᾶς τ' ἄλοχόν τε:  
σοὶ δ' οὐ πῶ φίλον ἐστὶ δαήμεναι οὐδὲ πυθέσθαι,  
πρὶν γ' ἔτι σῆς ἀλόχου πειρήσῃαι, ἣ τέ τοι αὐτῶς  
ἦσται ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν, οἷζυραὶ δέ οἱ αἰεὶ  
φθίνουσιν νύκτες τε καὶ ἡμέματα δάκρυ χεοῦση.

And then the gleaming-eyed goddess Athena replied:  
"Always such thoughts are in your breast:

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>72</sup> Lillian E. Doherty, "Athena and Penelope as Foils for Odysseus in the "Odyssey," *QUCC* 39 (1991): 33.

Because of this I am not able to forsake you, being wretched,  
Wherefore you are gentle and shrewd and sensible.  
For another man, having wandered, gladly he would hasten,  
Going into his halls to see his children and wife:  
But for you it is not yet dear to learn or inquire about them,  
At any rate, not before you test your wife, who  
Sits in the halls, and always wastes away  
Miserable nights and also pours tears during the days.

13.329-38

Since Athena knows that Penelope has remained loyal to Odysseus (as she says herself), it seems unsettling and even jarring that she mentions Odysseus' decision to test her (when he hadn't even mentioned Penelope before). Athena commending Odysseus for his caution towards Penelope implies that perhaps she is purposefully sowing the seeds of distrust between them in order to displace Penelope as Odysseus' partner herself. Athena also insinuates to Telemachus that Penelope is untrustworthy, even in Book 1 when she compares Telemachus to Orestes, which axiomatically draws a comparison between Penelope and Clytemnestra (1.298). Jenny Strauss Clay argues against any romantic interest guiding Athena's actions, instead explaining that Athena brings up Penelope so abruptly as a means to 'deflect [Odysseus'] distrust of her onto another object.'<sup>73</sup> This deflection occurs after Odysseus questions Athena's assertion that she had always stood by him, saying that he didn't see her aboard his ships after he left Troy (13.290-328).<sup>74</sup> At risk of losing a contest of *mētis* against a mortal, Athena quickly changes the subject to one that she has insider knowledge of, Penelope, in order to reaffirm her position as Odysseus' mentor. Perhaps if Athena wasn't a virgin she would pose a threat to the rehabilitation of Odysseus' *oikos* as Circe and Calypso do and displace Penelope as Odysseus' wife; however, because of her

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<sup>73</sup> Jenny Strauss Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 203.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 202.

chastity, she actually encourages the reunion between Odysseus and Penelope and serves as ally during the course of the *Odyssey* (from the point when she intervenes to free him from Calypso).

Athena's willingness to help Odysseus return home is rooted in her support of the patriarchal unit of the *oikos*. This support stems from Athena's birth, which occurred when Zeus swallowed the pregnant Metis and then delivered Athena himself from his head (*Theog.* 886-929).<sup>75</sup> This unconventional birth renders Athena unique in that she was born from a man and thus has no 'true' mother—her father is the only real parent. The result of Zeus's appropriation of the feminine phenomenon of childbirth is "a deity who confounds gendered norms, but who, with the close bond established with her father by birth, safeguards the patriarchal system that comes into place at the time when she was born."<sup>76</sup> Therefore, when Athena seizes control of the plot of the *Odyssey*, she facilitates the reestablishment of patriarchal order. From the point when Odysseus leaves Calypso's island, "the female figures whom Odysseus encounters are enlisted as willing helpers in his Return," as Athena prevents the usurpation of the plot by any female characters whose sexualities could potentially cause harm.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Athena endorses the structure of the *oikos* one final time when she unites Telemachus, Odysseus, and Laertes to fight against the families of the suitors before quickly intervening to resolve the conflict (24.502-end).<sup>78</sup> Athena's birth and asexuality are integral to Odysseus' homecoming because Athena's adherence to the patriarchal structure of society aligns her interests with those of Odysseus. Therefore, Athena stands out as the only female in the *Odyssey* who can shape the narrative in a way that is constructive to the restoration of Odysseus' kingship.

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<sup>75</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Robert Lamberton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 29.

<sup>76</sup> Susan Deacy, *Athena* (London: Routledge, 2008), 31.

<sup>77</sup> Sheila Murnaghan, "The Plan of Athena," in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press), 65.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

In conclusion, the theme of destruction versus restoration plays out in the *Odyssey* through the agency and subjectivity of goddesses. The dread goddesses Circe and Calypso attempt to, and temporarily succeed in, halting the forward motion of the plot by asserting their own feminine narratives through the erasure of the masculine, using their powers of sexuality (which in Circe's case, is supplemented by *pharmakon* and her *rhabdos*) to marginalize the male protagonist. Athena differs from these goddesses because of her dichotomous nature, defined by her occupation of both masculine and feminine realms. Her chastity, however, resolves the tension between these contrasting roles and enables her to manipulate the action of the plot without posing a threat to the structure of the *oikos*, the restoration of which is necessary for Odysseus' full return to Ithaca. Therefore, Athena's subjectivity is reflected in the pattern of the narrative itself, as she initiates Odysseus' journey from Ogygia with the goal of achieving a 'good' feminine stasis marked by her protégée's resumption of his patriarchal household role. In the next chapter, I will consider Penelope negotiating the complexities of being a sexual woman who aligns with the patriarchal order and Odysseus' homecoming. Although the *Odyssey* constantly promotes the masculine narrative at the expense of the feminine, the fabric of its plot relies on the goddesses promoting their feminine narratives to weave in the intricate pattern that makes the work a masterpiece.

#### IV. Penelope

After Odysseus has killed the suitors, the bodies have been cleared, and the traitorous women hanged, Penelope emerges from her chamber at Eurycleia's prodding and sees Odysseus propped against the central pillar, his face aglow in the firelight (23.85-95). Penelope asks herself—should she run up and embrace him? Or restrain herself and test him first? Penelope, always *periphron*, pragmatically chooses the latter for the meantime until she can confirm two distinct questions: whether this man is Odysseus and whether he is her husband. According to Sheila Murnaghan, “Odysseus can pass a series of social tests of his eligibility to be Penelope’s husband, showing himself to be a worthy guest and winning the contest of the bow, but he is still not her husband if she is not willing to acknowledge him.”<sup>79</sup> At this moment, when Penelope confronts who appears to be her husband for the first time in twenty years, an unprecedented reversal of perspective occurs. Penelope, who previously occupied a liminal position in the *Odyssey* and was excluded from Odysseus’ plotting, is now centralized as the protector of the *oikos* and the pivot upon whom its future depends. Odysseus, for the first time, is an outsider and no longer the central agent of the plot, relying on Penelope’s recognition in order to achieve the *telos* of his return.

How Penelope chooses to respond to this situation determines whether Odysseus’ return is a success and his slaughter of the suitors justified. Homer previously demonstrates the disastrous consequences when a wife unscrupulously denies her husband’s return (as in the house of Atreus story) or when her memory proves fallible (as in the case of Helen of Troy), presenting the alternative paradigms that Penelope’s decision-making could precipitously follow. However, unlike in the cases of Clytemnestra and Helen, we are able to access in fleeting moments

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<sup>79</sup> Sheila Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 123.

Penelope's subjectivity before and as she charts her course of action in response to the beggar's arrival. This insight into her character has resulted in her denomination as the only truly "good" woman of the *Odyssey*, who proves her virtue by harnessing her ability to suspend temporality and to devise contrivances that aid Odysseus in his homecoming. There is much speculation among scholars as to the moment when Penelope decisively realizes that the beggar is Odysseus (whether immediately, or after the trial of the bed, or sometime in between). However, I do not intend to prove at what moment this recognition occurs, but instead will explore how Penelope's subjectivity defines how we understand her character. I will examine Penelope's actions under the assumption that she strongly suspects the beggar is Odysseus prior to the trial of the bed (for lack of textual clues that she doesn't). Penelope's unwavering fidelity facilitates her agency within the text as she strives to operate both at the margins and at the core of the epic.

As a woman, Penelope is denied a central role in the text and must therefore construct her own modality of narrative in order to exert her authority. Penelope relies on her ingenuity to achieve this influence from the beginning of the epic when she creates a different temporality in the *oikos* through her weaving. In order to stall her marriage to one of the suitors competing for her hand, Penelope announces that she will wait to choose a husband until she finishes weaving a great funeral shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes. She successfully prolongs her marriage for three years by weaving the shroud by day and clandestinely unweaving it by night, maintaining Odysseus' position as head of the household vacant for his return. Though the account of Penelope's deception is repeated several times throughout the epic, the suitor Antinous is the first to describe it when he speaks at the assembly that Telemachus calls:

‘ή δὲ δόλον τόνδ’ ἄλλον ἐνὶ φρεσὶ μερμήριξε:  
στησαμένη μέγαν ἴστον ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ὕφαινε,  
λεπτόν καὶ περίμετρον: ἄφαρ δ’ ἡμῖν μετέειπε:  
‘κοῦροι ἐμοὶ μνηστῆρες, ἐπεὶ θάνε δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,

μίμνεντ' ἐπειγόμενοι τὸν ἐμὸν γάμον, εἰς ὃ κε φᾶρος  
ἐκτελέσω, μή μοι μεταμόνια νήματ' ὀληται,  
Λαέρτη ἥρωι ταφήιον, εἰς ὅτε κέν μιν  
μοῖρ' ὀλοῆ καθέλῃσι τανηλεγέος θανάτοιο,  
μή τίς μοι κατὰ δῆμον Ἀχαιϊάδων νεμεσῆση.  
αἶ κεν ἄτερ σπείρου κεῖται πολλὰ κτεατίσσας.  
ὥς ἔφαθ', ἡμῖν δ' αὖτ' ἐπεπείθετο θυμὸς ἀγῆνωρ.  
ἔνθα καὶ ἡματίη μὲν ὑφαίνεσκεν μέγαν ἰστόν,  
νύκτας δ' ἀλλύεσκεν, ἐπεὶ δαΐδας παραθεῖτο.  
ὥς τριετες μὲν ἔληθε δόλῳ καὶ ἔπειθεν Ἀχαιοὺς.'

“But she devised another contrivance in her mind:  
Having stood a great loom in the hall she weaved  
A delicate and very large web; straightaway she addressed us:  
“Oh young men, my suitors, since godlike Odysseus has died,  
Stand fast, although being eager for my marriage, until  
I finish this web; lest the product of my spinning,  
A burial shroud for the hero Laertes, be ruined  
In vain, when deadly fate of death bringing long woe takes him down,  
Lest some woman in the land of the Achaeans resents me,  
Should this man lie without a shroud, having gained many things in life.”  
So she spoke, and our manly hearts were again persuaded.  
Inside she wove at her great loom by day,  
But by night, she undid her work as she placed a firebrand  
Beside her. Thus she escaped the notice of the Achaeans  
And persuaded them with her contrivance for three years.”

2.93-106

Antinous refers to Penelope’s trick as a “*dolos*” twice, a word which is used again in the epic by Demodocus to describe Hephaestus’ net (8.276). After Odysseus arrives in Phaeacia, the bard Demodocus entertains the guest with a song about Ares’ and Aphrodite’s affair, and how Hephaestus learns of the couple’s relationship and devises a plan to catch them in the act. He ensnares the couple by forging a net of chains so fine they are invisible and casting them around the bed. Just as Hephaestus’ web traps Ares and Aphrodite and suspends their movement, Penelope’s web suspends the suitors’ courtship, disrupting the continuum of time in the *oikos*. The suitors, then, unable to marry Penelope or anyone else, “persist as unmarried ‘youths,’ effectively halting time and change of biological and sociological progression (masculine constructs), as long

as Penelope continues to weave and unweave.”<sup>80</sup> The cyclical progression of time in Penelope’s domain, structured by the processes of weaving and unweaving, creates a unique dynamic in which the interruption of action is similar to the effect that Hephaestus’s web has on Ares and Aphrodite, except that Penelope, the contriver of the *dolos*, is standing at the center of this temporal dynamic instead of outside as a witness to the scene.

Despite the structural significance of the weaving of the shroud, Homer never reveals its pattern and thus conceals Penelope’s subjectivity from the audience. According to Elizabeth Barber, the shroud “was almost certainly a story cloth” because only by weaving such a non-repetitious pattern (in order to create a series of images) could a piece of cloth reasonably take such a long time to make.<sup>81</sup> The idea of the story cloth invokes the moment in the *Iliad* when Helen weaves the story of the Trojan War into a great web, thus subsuming the masculine discourse of violence into a feminine medium (Il. 3.151-4).<sup>82</sup> Although Homer denies us the insight we would otherwise gain through knowing what Penelope has chosen to portray in her weaving, the act of weaving and unweaving itself teaches us something instrumental about her nature. From a masculine perspective, Penelope weaves a nothingness but “when viewed in terms of difference, represents a creative process in its own right.”<sup>83</sup> Through the continual process of weaving and unweaving, Penelope assumes the role of poet both through the story she weaves (unbeknownst to us) and through her temporal control over the *oikos*.

In addition to weaving, Penelope also relies on metaphor to insert her voice, namely by communicating with Odysseus (then disguised as a beggar) through a concealed message in the

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<sup>80</sup> Barbara Clayton, *A Penelopean Poetics: Reweaving the Feminine in Homer’s Odyssey* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 40.

<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Wayland Barber. *Women’s Work: The First 20,000 Years: Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times* (New York: Norton, 1994), 153-4.

<sup>82</sup> See Chapter II for an analysis of Helen’s weaving.

<sup>83</sup> Clayton, 94.

description of her dream. After questioning the beggar concerning his identity and whereabouts, Penelope asks him to interpret her dream of an eagle swooping down and snapping the necks of her twenty geese:

‘άλλ’ ἄγε μοι τὸν ὄνειρον ὑπόκριναι καὶ ἄκουσον.  
χῆνες μοι κατὰ οἶκον ἐείκοσι πυρὸν ἔδουσιν  
ἐξ ὕδατος, καὶ τέ σφιν ἰαίνομαι εἰσορόωσα:  
ἐλθὼν δ’ ἐξ ὄρεος μέγας αἰετὸς ἀγκυλοχεΐλης  
πᾶσι κατ’ ἀνχένας ἤξε καὶ ἔκτανεν: οἱ δ’ ἐκέχυντο  
ἄθροοι ἐν μεγάροις, ὁ δ’ ἐς αἰθέρα διὰν ἀέρθη.  
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ κλαῖον καὶ ἐκώκυον ἐν περ ὄνειρῳ,  
ἀμφὶ δ’ ἔμ’ ἠγερέθοντο ἐϋπλοκαμίδες Ἀχαιαί,  
οἴκτρ’ ὀλοφυρομένην ὃ μοι αἰετὸς ἔκτανε χῆνας.’  
ἄψ δ’ ἐλθὼν κατ’ ἄρ’ ἔζ’ ἐπὶ προὔχοντι μελάθρῳ,  
φωνῆ δὲ βροτῆ κατερήτυε φώνησέν τε:  
θάρσει, Ἰκαρίου κούρη τηλεκλειτοῖο:  
οὐκ ὄναρ, ἀλλ’ ὕπαρ ἐσθλόν, ὃ τοι τετελεσμένον ἔσται.  
χῆνες μὲν μνηστῆρες, ἐγὼ δέ τοι αἰετὸς ὄρνις  
ἦα πάρος, νῦν αὖτε τεὸς πόσις εἰλήλουθα,  
ὃς πᾶσι μνηστῆρσιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐφήσω.’  
ὣς ἔφατ’, αὐτὰρ ἐμὲ μελιηδῆς ὕπνος ἀνήκε:  
παπτήνασα δὲ χῆνας ἐνὶ μεγάροισι νόησα  
πυρὸν ἐρεπτομένους παρὰ πύελον, ἧχι πάρος περ.’

“But come, listen and explain this dream to me,  
My twenty geese, coming from the water, eat wheat  
Throughout the house, and my heart warms looking  
Upon them: But coming from a great mountain,  
A hooked-beaked eagle broke the necks of all and  
Killed them; and they lay in heaps in the hall,  
And he took off towards the heavenly sky.  
Nevertheless, I cried and wailed although it was in a dream,  
And the fair-haired Achaean women gathered around me  
Pitiable, lamenting that the eagle killed the geese.  
But coming down again, the eagle perched on a  
Projecting beam, and he spoke with a human voice  
That held me back: Have courage, daughter of far-famed  
Icarius; this is not a dream but a good waking vision, that  
Which will be fulfilled. The geese are the suitors and I formerly  
Was the eagle, but now I am your husband having returned, who  
Will send an unseemly destiny upon all the suitors.  
So he spoke, meanwhile, the honey-sweet sleep released me.  
Having looked around, I observed the geese in the hall,  
Feeding on wheat at the side of their trough where they were before.

Penelope's request that the beggar interpret her dream might seem superfluous initially because, as the beggar himself points out, its meaning is promptly explained by the eagle before the dream is even over. Winkler argues that the presence of Penelope's handmaids prevents her from speaking freely and her distrust of them prompts her to conceal her message as she relays it to the beggar.<sup>84</sup> In other words, Penelope doesn't tell the beggar the dream seeking his input on its meaning, but instead the dream "can be better seen in its context of covert and guarded negotiation as her attempt to convey a message to the beggar, whom she now has good reason to think may very well be Odysseus himself."<sup>85</sup> Modulating her message through the eagle's voice, Penelope discloses that she would welcome the slaughter of the suitors by the beggar (who may be her husband). Upon waking from the dream, Penelope describes seeing the geese in the hall, pecking at the same trough that they were at before, which has the effect of "blurring the boundary between dream and waking reality."<sup>86</sup> Merging dream into reality further deemphasizes the dream's symbolic meaning and thus effectively obfuscates the message Penelope is attempting to convey to the stranger from any outside listeners. Penelope's actions may seem strange in isolation, but applying Winkler's analysis reveals their practicality and underscores Penelope's *mētis*.

Furthermore, Penelope embellishes on her dream-message to the stranger through her subsequent description of the gates of horn and ivory. Following the narration of the dream, Penelope tells the beggar that there are two gates for dreams: one is of ivory (through which senseless dreams pass) and another of horn (through which truthful dreams pass) and that her

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<sup>84</sup> John J. Winkler, "Penelope's Cunning and Homer's," in *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 147.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Heitman, *Taking Her Seriously: Penelope and the Plot of Homer's Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 71.

dream of the geese passes through the former (19.562-7). According to Benjamin Haller, Penelope is concealing yet another message to the beggar through this description, in which the gates of ivory refers to speech and the gates of horn refers to the bow of Odysseus, which she then proposes to use in a contest with twelve axes to determine which suitor she will marry.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, Penelope hints that the key to winning the trial of the axes is in the bending of the horn-reinforced bow, which “maximizes the chances that only Odysseus (whom she suspects the beggar to be) will be able to win the contest and claim her as his bride.”<sup>88</sup> Despite Penelope’s exclusion by Odysseus and Athena from plotting the suitors’ demise, she ultimately holds the key (literally in her possession of the bow) to Odysseus’ return. Penelope’s subjectivity thus becomes essential to the resolution of the plot as her covert communication with the beggar reveals the missing piece for Odysseus’ plan.

Moreover, even if the beggar is not Odysseus, Penelope’s proposal of the contest is still advantageous for the preservation of the *oikos*. Nancy Felson-Rubin argues that Penelope devises the contest while uncertain about Odysseus’ return and thus with multiple outcomes in mind in order to optimize her chance for happiness: “Uncertain over her marital status and pressed to take some action, Penelope imagines various strands of the plot, projecting what could happen and examining, as it were, the possible lives she could lead.”<sup>89</sup> In the event that none of the suitors (including the beggar) is capable of stringing Odysseus’ bow, Penelope could be successful in further postponing her marriage and prolonging the window of opportunity for her husband’s return. In her argument, Felson-Rubin extrapolates from the *Odyssey* an interiority of Penelope

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<sup>87</sup> Benjamin Haller, “The Gates of Horn and Ivory in *Odyssey* 19: Penelope’s Call for Deeds, Not Words,” *CPh* 104 (2009): 398.

<sup>88</sup> Haller, 414-5.

<sup>89</sup> Nancy Felson-Rubin, *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 18.

that isn't actually grounded in the text, which projects Penelope's discourse only on the levels of spoken word and materiality. Homer does not at any point create a psychoanalytical medium of Penelope's subjectivity, so that the complexity of Penelope's role in the text lies only in the action itself which could potentially be undertaken to achieve the opposing end-goals of either remarriage or faithfulness.

Penelope, limited by her status as a woman, can't directly influence the plot's direction but can maintain favorable conditions for Odysseus' return through the utilization of her *mētis*. Penelope's empowerment through her skill in deception is a trope that also occurs in Book 4 when Helen slips her *pharmakon* into the wine of her husband and guests and is thus able to participate in masculine discourse, which she does by speaking publicly in the *megaron*. She tells a story that suggests extramarital intimacy, challenging Menelaus' position of power as her husband and head of the *oikos*. Penelope, on the other hand, develops indirect means of communication that enable her to construct a feminine narrative that doesn't interfere with Odysseus'.<sup>90</sup> This narrative quietly assumes control of the plot, serving as an instrument of Penelope's agency without threatening the authority of masculine discourse.

Despite Penelope's creation of different modalities of narrative in order to facilitate Odysseus' homecoming, her sexuality casts her as a potential threat to the resolution of the plot. Tension steadily builds concerning Penelope's loyalty throughout the epic, particularly when Odysseus encounters Agamemnon in the Underworld and is warned that all women (Penelope included) are inherently untrustworthy:

ὥς ἐφάμην, ὁ δέ μ' ἀντίκ' ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπε:  
ἄτῳ νῦν μή ποτε καὶ σὺ γυναικί περ ἦπιος εἶναι:  
μή οἱ μῦθον ἅπαντα πιφασκέμεν, ὄν κ' ἐν εἰδῆς,  
ἀλλὰ τὸ μὲν φάσθαι, τὸ δὲ καὶ κεκρυμμένον εἶναι.

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<sup>90</sup> In Chapter II, I explore in more depth the implications of Helen's and Menelaus' competing stories.

ἄλλ' οὐ σοί γ', Ὀδυσσεῦ, φόνος ἔσσεται ἔκ γε γυναικός:  
λίην γὰρ πινυτή τε καὶ εὖ φρεσὶ μήδεα οἶδε  
κούρη Ἰκαρίοιο, περίφρων Πηνελόπεια.  
ἧ μὲν μιν νύμφην γε νέην κατελείπομεν ἡμεῖς  
ἐρχόμενοι πόλεμόνδε: πάϊς δέ οἱ ἦν ἐπὶ μαζῶ  
νήπιος, ὅς που νῦν γε μετ' ἀνδρῶν ἴζει ἀριθμῶ,  
ὄλβιος: ἧ γὰρ τόν γε πατὴρ φίλος ὄψεται ἐλθών,  
καὶ κεῖνος πατέρα προσπύξεται, ἧ θέμις ἐστίν.  
ἧ δ' ἐμὴ οὐδέ περ υἱὸς ἐνιπλησθῆναι ἄκοιτις  
ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἔασε: πάρος δέ με πέφνε καὶ αὐτόν.  
ἄλλο δέ τοι ἐρέω, σὺ δ' ἐνὶ φρεσὶ βάλλεο σῆσιν:  
κρύβδην, μηδ' ἀναφανδά, φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν  
νῆα κατισχέμεναι: ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι πιστὰ γυναιξίν.'

So I spoke, and he, immediately answering, said:  
“You don’t ever be gentle to your wife now.  
Don’t tell her of all things with respect to speech,  
Whatever you may know well; but tell her something,  
On the one hand, and conceal something else, on the other hand.  
But, Odysseus, your death will not come  
From your wife at any rate: for she is very prudent and knows  
Counsels well in her heart, that daughter of Icarus, very thoughtful  
Penelope. We left her behind as a young bride when we went off to war.  
For an infant child was upon her breast, who now, I suppose, sits  
Among men and is happy. For his dear father will see him upon  
Coming home, and he will embrace his father, which is customary.  
But my wife did not allow me to have my fill looking upon my son—  
She struck me first. I will say this other thing to you and cast it  
In your heart: secretly, not openly, moor your ship in your dear  
Fatherland, since your wife is no longer to be trusted.”

11.440-456

Agamemnon’s story of Clytemnestra exemplifies the destructive effect of combining *mētis* with sexuality, on account of which his wife’s betrayal becomes by far the worst of the paradigms that Penelope could potentially follow. Despite Penelope’s unmatched virtue (attested to even by Agamemnon), her position as a woman justifies her being scrutinized and excluded, as all women are essentially “bad” and must be treated with caution. Interestingly, Aegisthus, Agamemnon’s actual killer, is condemned “only implicitly” in Agamemnon’s description of the murder, as

Clytemnestra (or more specifically, her unchecked sexuality) is ultimately at fault.<sup>91</sup> Athena further spreads this distrust of women when she encourages Telemachus to also be wary of Penelope and urges him to return home from Sparta before she remarries and begins draining his inheritance:

ἀλλ' ὄτρυνε τάχιστα βοῆν ἀγαθὸν Μενέλαον  
πεμπέμεν, ὄφρ' ἔτι οἴκοι ἀμύμονα μητέρα τέτμης.  
ἤδη γάρ ῥα πατήρ τε κασίγνητοί τε κέλονται  
Εὐρυμάχῳ γήμασθαι: ὁ γὰρ περιβάλλει ἅπαντας  
μνηστῆρας δώροισι καὶ ἐξώφελλεν ἔεδνα:  
μῆ νύ τι σεῦ ἀέκητι δόμων ἐκ κτῆμα φέρηται.  
οἴσθα γὰρ οἷος θυμὸς ἐνὶ στήθεσσι γυναικός:  
κείνου βούλεται οἶκον ὀφέλλειν ὅς κεν ὀπυίη,  
παίδων δὲ προτέρων καὶ κουριδίῳ φίλοιον  
οὐκέτι μέμνηται τεθνηκότος οὐδὲ μεταλλᾶ.

But encourage Menelaus of the good war-cry  
To send you off, in order that you may find your  
Blameless mother still at home. For already her  
Father and brothers summon her to marry Eurymachus:  
For he surpasses the others in gifts and increases  
Exceedingly the bride-price. Go home, lest she carries  
Your possessions from the house against your will.  
For know that the heart of a woman in her chest is  
Of such a sort: she wishes to strengthen the home  
Of that man whom she marries, but she no longer  
Remembers nor inquires diligently about her former children  
And dear wedded husband who has died.

15.14-23

Like Agamemnon, Athena also attests to Penelope's irreproachable character, but nonetheless warns Telemachus of the nature of all women to forget their families in favor of serving the interests of a new bridegroom. In both passages, a sort of pseudo-dichotomy is established regarding Penelope in which she is described as "very thoughtful" (11.446) and "blameless" (15.15), yet, by nature of her gender, she must automatically be regarded as untrustworthy. Athena attributes this untrustworthiness to Penelope's forgetfulness, which indicates the importance of a

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<sup>91</sup> Lillian Eileen Doherty, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 100.

wife's memory to the preservation of the *oikos*. The theme of memory, which is particularly applicable to Penelope, is one that I will explore later in this chapter.

In addition to the warnings of Agamemnon and Athena, Homer further cultivates suspicion regarding Penelope's character by comparing her to both Artemis and Aphrodite twice: first when she greets Telemachus after he returns from his travels (17.37) and second when she descends from her chamber to speak to the beggar (19.34). In both cases, Homer describes Penelope as looking like "Artemis or Aphrodite," narrowing Penelope's role in the epic to the confines of an either/or scenario in which she is either chaste like Artemis or promiscuous like Aphrodite.<sup>92</sup> Homer intentionally simplifies the nebulous question of fidelity into one of whether Penelope will remain faithful or not, a dichotomy that is applied to all women. This model differs from the one laid out by Agamemnon and Athena before because it does not assume that Penelope will fall into the paradigm of infidelity generated by Clytemnestra or Helen but proposes two plausible scenarios, either of which Penelope could potentially choose.

Through this comparison to Artemis or Aphrodite, Penelope becomes subsumed into the dichotomous model of fidelity in which she is either treacherous, like Clytemnestra and Helen, or loyal. Particularly the story of Clytemnestra functions as an "alternative plot" that represents the outcome if Penelope chooses treachery; on the other hand, there is no precedent set for a loyal woman in the text.<sup>93</sup> Without this standard of comparison for Penelope, it remains unclear whether or not she will prove an exception to the general rule of women presented by Agamemnon and Athena. However, these two characterizations of faithful and unfaithful, when applied to Penelope, are not entirely antagonistic but instead are bridged by the consistency of Penelope's sexuality. In

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<sup>92</sup> Felson-Rubin, 37.

<sup>93</sup> Marilyn Katz, *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 8.

Odysseus' absence, Penelope's sexuality creates the potential for remarriage to a suitor but also enables her to maintain the stasis that is favorable for her husband's return. Penelope even uses her sexuality to augment Odysseus' wealth, as when she appears before the suitors and elicits gifts. When she descends from her chamber the suitors are overcome by lust, and when Eurymachus compliments her beauty and intelligence she replies that her *kleos* would only grow with her husband's return. She says that Odysseus advised her on the day of his departure to remarry when Telemachus grows a beard (18.269), and now that her son has matured the time has come for her to choose a husband. Penelope ends her speech by conveying her distress that none of the suitors is respecting tradition, devouring her own resources instead of presenting her with bride gifts:

‘κεῖνος τὼς ἀγόρευε: τὰ δὴ νῦν πάντα τελεῖται.  
νύξ δ’ ἔσται ὅτε δὴ στυγερὸς γάμος ἀντιβολήσῃ  
οὐλομένης ἐμέθεν, τῆς τε Ζεὺς ὄλβον ἀπηύρα.  
ἀλλὰ τόδ’ αἰνὸν ἄχος κραδίην καὶ θυμὸν ἰκάνει:  
μνηστήρων οὐχ ἦδε δίκη τὸ πάροιθε τέτυκτο:  
οἳ τ’ ἀγαθὴν τε γυναῖκα καὶ ἀφνειοῖο θύγατρα  
μνηστεύειν ἐθέλωσι καὶ ἀλλήλοις ἐρίσωσιν,  
αὐτοὶ τοί γ’ ἀπάγουσι βόας καὶ ἴφια μῆλα,  
κούρης δαῖτα φίλοισι, καὶ ἀγλαὰ δῶρα διδοῦσιν:  
ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἀλλότριον βίον νήποιον ἔδουσιν.’  
ὥς φάτο, γήθησεν δὲ πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,  
οὔνεκα τῶν μὲν δῶρα παρέλκετο, θέλγε δὲ θυμὸν  
μειλιχίῳς ἐπέεσσι, νόος δὲ οἱ ἄλλα μενοίνα.’

“So that man spoke: now all is being fulfilled.  
And there will be a night when hated marriage  
Will fall to my accursed lot, and already Zeus took away  
My happiness. But there is another horrible pain that  
Comes to my heart and soul: the justice of suitors before  
Does not exist now; those who were willing to court a good wife  
And the daughter of a wealthy man, who contested with  
Each other, who themselves led an ox and fat sheep,  
A feast for the friends of the girl, and gave splendid gifts.  
They didn't eat another's livelihood without compensation.”  
So she spoke, and godlike, much-enduring, Odysseus rejoiced,  
On account of the gifts she drew aside to herself, and she  
Enchanted their hearts with gentle words, but her mind  
Meanwhile desiring eagerly other things.

In this passage, we see that Penelope's sexuality, in conjunction with her *mētis*, can have the result of enhancing her husband's power instead of threatening it. Without insight into Penelope's thoughts, we are unable to divine her intentions and her actions generate suspense through their potential to fit in with either scenario of unfaithfulness or betrayal. Whether Penelope demands gifts to trick the suitors into strengthening her husband's household or whether she is initiating the process of courtship would be completely ambiguous if not for this glimpse into Odysseus' perspective. The importance of sexuality as an instrument of feminine agency belies its condemnation as inherently bad; instead, its helpfulness or destructiveness depends on the intentions of the woman who wields it.

Regardless of the question of fidelity, we see that Penelope's sexuality is an integral part of her character that plays a role in whatever decision she makes regarding her husband. The consistency of Penelope's sexuality is similar to the consistency of Helen's in the parallel stories that she and Menelaus tell in Book 4.<sup>94</sup> Because these two stories are told in sequence, the two possibilities of Helen's loyalty play out one at a time (in the first story she sides with the Greeks; in the second with the Trojans). When Penelope appears before the suitors, her two options of faithfulness and betrayal play out simultaneously instead of sequentially, "without permitting us access to any truth of the ultimate intention."<sup>95</sup> We are not explicitly granted this access until the scene of Penelope's recognition of Odysseus in Book 23.

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<sup>94</sup> After Helen administers her *pharmakon* in Book 4, she and Menelaus each tell a story about Odysseus' exploits at Troy. Helen's story affirms and Menelaus' story questions her faithfulness to the Greeks, but both attest to her sexuality. In Helen's story, she aids the Greeks by allowing Odysseus to escape unnoticed from Troy (after an uncomfortably intimate scene in which she recognizes and bathes Odysseus); in Menelaus' story, Helen almost reveals the Greek's ruse of the Trojan horse by circling it three times and calling to each of the Greek soldiers in his wife's voice. I go into a more detailed analysis of this scene in Part II.

<sup>95</sup> Katz, 93.

In the second chapter of my thesis I discussed Helen's character as being a mixture of both elements of every dichotomy that defines her character; for example, seductress and wife, Greek and Trojan, creator and destroyer. Whereas the two stories concerning Helen are chronological and temporally distinct, the continuous potentiality of both of Penelope's scenarios of faithfulness and unfaithfulness throughout the *Odyssey* renders them mutually exclusive. In other words, Helen can alternate between faithfulness and unfaithfulness over a period of time, choosing one over the other at different points throughout the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. But for Penelope, the action of the *Odyssey* is centered on one final decision in which she ultimately chooses to enable Odysseus' return or to remarry. Although at times Penelope's intentions seem so convoluted that she could end up choosing either of these paths, the brief moments in which Homer exposes her subjectivity reveal her enduring loyalty towards her husband.

In one of these moments of subjectivity, Penelope's allusion to her memory provides strong evidence of her fidelity and, ultimately, is the key feature that differentiates her from Helen. After Penelope describes her dream and its passage through the gates of ivory, she tells the beggar that even after remarrying, she will remember the house of Odysseus in her dreams:

‘νῦν δὲ μνηστήρεσσιν ἄεθλον τοῦτον ἐφήσω:  
ὄς δέ κε ῥήϊτατ' ἐντανύσῃ βιὸν ἐν παλάμῃσι  
καὶ διοῖστεύσῃ πελέκεων δυοκαίδεκα πάντων,  
τῷ κεν ἅμ' ἐσποίμην, νοσφισσαμένη τόδε δῶμα  
κουρίδιον, μάλα καλόν, ἐνίπλειον βιότιοι:  
τοῦ ποτὲ μεμνήσεσθαι ὄϊομαι ἔν περ ὄνειρῳ.’

Now I will propose this trial for the suitors:  
Whoever most easily will stretch tight this bow in his palms  
And shoot an arrow through all twelve axes,  
He is the one I will follow, turning my back  
On my wedded house, very beautiful and quite full of life:  
Which I intend to remember, even in a dream.

19.576-581

According to Melissa Mueller, a wife's memory is an “indispensable instrument” in fulfilling her

role as overseer of the *oikos* and her obligation of fidelity to her husband.<sup>96</sup> Although Penelope's proposal of the contest may seem like an initiation of her path to remarriage, this assurance of her memory promises that Odysseus will have a physical and social space to return to and there will be a "tale of *nostos* for the bard to sing."<sup>97</sup> The immortalization of Odysseus' *kleos* depends on his successful return home and, therefore, on the strength of Penelope's memory. Penelope's ability to remember contrasts with the drug of "forgetfulness" (4.221) that Helen slips into the wine in Book 4, which was so potent it could prevent a man from grieving at the death of his own son (4.225-6).<sup>98</sup> The case of Helen conflates infidelity with forgetfulness, suggesting the destructive effects the absence of memory can have on a household.

Moreover, Penelope's skill in weaving metaphorically represents the steadfastness of her memory. According to Barbara Clayton, the "temporal limbo" created by Penelope's weaving and unweaving, discussed at the start of this chapter, "becomes the equivalent of memory," in that the repetition involved in the act of weaving, as well as the alternations in the weaving pattern required to create a story cloth, invokes the repetitious, yet not always reliable, nature of memory.<sup>99</sup> Penelope's memory is not only a representation of her fidelity but also an agent of it: remembering Odysseus motivates her to preserve that stasis of the *oikos* that is so vital to his return.

In addition to Penelope's memory, Odysseus' subjectivity also forms a crucial window through which the audience can witness his wife's fidelity. The like-mindedness between Odysseus and Penelope and the close relationship they share is most fittingly described as *homophrosunē*, which Odysseus explains to Nausicaa when he encounters her after being shipwrecked in Phaeacia:

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<sup>96</sup> Melissa Mueller, "Penelope and the Poetics of Remembering," *Arethusa* 40 (2007): 358.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>98</sup> For analysis of this scene, see Chapter II: Helen.

<sup>99</sup> Clayton, 44.

σοὶ δὲ θεοὶ τόσα δοῖεν ὅσα φρεσὶ σῆσι μενοινᾶς,  
ἄνδρα τε καὶ οἶκον, καὶ ὁμοφροσύνην ὀπάσειαν  
ἔσθλῆν: οὐ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ γε κρεῖττον καὶ ἄρειον,  
ἢ ὅθ' ὁμοφρονέοντε νοήμασιν οἶκον ἔχητον  
ἄνῆρ ἠδὲ γυνή: πόλλ' ἄλγεα δυσμενέεσσι,  
χάρματα δ' εὐμενέτησι, μάλιστα δέ τ' ἔκλυον αὐτοί.

May the gods give you so many things as you are desiring  
Eagerly in your heart: a husband and a home,  
And may they grant you unity of feeling, a good thing:  
For nothing at any rate is greater and better than this,  
When those two of the same mind, husband and wife,  
Have a home: many pains for their enemies and sources of joy  
For their well-wishers, they themselves know this the most.

6.180-185

In this explanation, Odysseus describes *homōphrusunē* as a source of power capable of harming enemies and helping friends, dependent on the unification of husband and wife in the *oikos*. The concept of *homōphrusunē*, as defined by Odysseus, is situated in an equitable distribution of power among husband and wife, instead of in a gendered hierarchy that promotes masculine authority. Nancy Felson-Rubin describes the nature of such a marriage: “Neither domination, with the male holding supremacy over the female, nor static equality characterizes the Penelope/Odysseus relationship. Rather, they alternate between subordinating and dominating each other.”<sup>100</sup>

Odysseus and Penelope exercise their agency through the deployment of *mētis*, which both excel at, but avoid directly competing for power by operating within separate spheres of influence. Within the *oikos*, for instance, Penelope is dominant, which she proves by successfully testing Odysseus through the trick of the bed, reversing the roles in their courtship.<sup>101</sup> After Odysseus has killed the suitors and Athena restores his appearance, Penelope emerges from her chamber (after much impassioned urging by Eurycleia) but chooses to hold back her embrace and probe this man who may be Odysseus first (23.85-87). Before she definitively recognizes him, she seeks one final

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<sup>100</sup> Felson-Rubin, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 64.

validation of his identity by asking Eurycleia to move their bed from the bridal chamber (23.177-80). However, this task is impossible as the bedstead was fashioned by Odysseus out of the trunk of an olive tree, a *sēma* known only to them (23.190-1). According to Richard Heitman, Odysseus' angry response to Penelope's trick isn't provoked by the threat of adultery implicit in the moving of the bed, but anger that Penelope had forgotten such an important secret between them.<sup>102</sup> Their equal aptitudes for *mētis* and the special *sēma* they share provide the foundation for Penelope's and Odysseus' partnership and *homophrosunē*.

Furthermore, Odysseus himself attests to Penelope's authority within the *oikos* when, disguised as a beggar, he compares her to a renowned king:

τὴν δ' ἀπαμειβόμενος προσέφη πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς:  
 ὦ γύναι, οὐκ ἄν τις σε βροτῶν ἐπ' ἀπίρονα γαῖαν  
 νεικέοι· ἦ γάρ σευ κλέος οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἰκάνει,  
 ὥς τέ τευ ἦ βασιλῆος ἀμύμονος, ὅς τε θεουδῆς  
 ἀνδράσιν ἐν πολλοῖσι καὶ ἰφθίμοισιν ἀνάσσω  
 εὐδικίας ἀνέχησι, φέρησι δὲ γαῖα μέλαινα  
 πυροὺς καὶ κριθάς, βρίθησι δὲ δένδρεα καρπῶ,  
 τίκτη δ' ἔμπεδα μῆλα, θάλασσα δὲ παρέχη ἰχθῦς  
 ἐξ εὐηγεσίης, ἀρετῶσι δὲ λαοὶ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ.'

Odysseus of many counsels, responding, said:  
 “Oh woman, no one of mortals upon the boundless earth  
 Could quarrel with you: for your renown has reached  
 The broad heavens, just as that of a noble king, who is  
 God-fearing, lording over all men, even strong ones, and  
 Who lifts up righteousness, and the dark earth bears  
 Wheat and barley, and the trees bear heavy fruit,  
 And the sheep continually give birth, and the sea delivers  
 Fish from his good leadership, and men prosper under him.”

19.107-115

Odysseus conveys a distinctly feminine explanation of kingship by associating a traditionally masculine position with fecundity and reproduction. By lauding Penelope's power within a

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<sup>102</sup> Heitman, 99.

gendered context, Odysseus suggests that both husband and wife are essential to effective leadership in the *oikos*. The gendered spheres of responsibility in the *oikos* prevent Penelope from usurping Odysseus' role as King of Ithaca; however, she operates within her jurisdiction as a woman to manage the household until her husband's return. This comparison illustrates the "mutual interdependence of husband and wife in the structure of Homeric society" because Odysseus appreciates Penelope's success in preventing the dissolution of the *oikos* by keeping the kingship intact.<sup>103</sup> As a wife, Penelope may seem to play only a passive role in her maintenance of the household's stasis, but she actively plots to enable Odysseus' return and is thus imperative to the text. Even when Odysseus is present and is in possession of the *oikos*, Penelope is essential to the kingship's tenability because of her role in sustaining reproduction and thereby increasing the *oikos*' wealth. Collaboration between husband and wife is necessary for the forward progression of the *oikos* and the riddance of the suitors.

Additionally, Homer emphasizes the strong connection between Penelope and Odysseus through the use of reverse similes. The most memorable of these is when, following the couple's reunion, Homer compares Penelope to a shipwrecked sailor finally planting feet on solid land:

ὥς φάτο, τῷ δ' ἔτι μᾶλλον ὑφ' ἴμερον ὤρσε γόοιο:  
 κλαῖε δ' ἔχων ἄλοχον θυμαρέα, κεδνὰ ἰδυῖαν.  
 ὥς δ' ὄτ' ἂν ἀσπάσιος γῆ νηχομένοισι φανήη,  
 ὣν τε Ποσειδάων εὐεργέα νῆ' ἐνὶ πόντῳ  
 ραΐση, ἐπειγομένην ἀνέμῳ καὶ κύματι πηγῶ:  
 παῦροι δ' ἐξέφυγον πολιῆς ἀλὸς ἠπειρόνδε  
 νηχόμενοι, πολλὴ δὲ περὶ χροῖ τέτροφεν ἄλμη,  
 ἀσπάσιοι δ' ἐπέβαν γαίης, κακότητα φυγόντες:  
 ὥς ἄρα τῇ ἀσπαστὸς ἔην πόσις εἰσοροώση,  
 δειρῆς δ' οὐ πῶ πάμπαν ἀφίετο πήγεε λευκῶ.

So she spoke, and yet stirred more longing for weeping in him:  
 And he cried, holding his well-pleasing wife, knowing diligence.  
 As welcome the earth is when it appears to men swimming,

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<sup>103</sup> Helene Foley, "'Reverse Similes' and Sex Roles in the *Odyssey*," *Arethusa* 11 (1978): 9.

Whose well-made ship Poseidon shatters in the sea,  
Being pressed upon by the wind and strong waves:  
Few men fleeing from the gray sea to the mainland,  
And much brine thickening around their skin,  
When they set foot on welcome land, fleeing misery.  
So welcome was looking upon her husband for her,  
And not yet did she release her white forearms from his neck.  
23.231-40

This poetic bridging of Penelope's and Odysseus' separate experiences stresses the similarities between them. Homer recasts one of Odysseus' experiences from Penelope's perspective, suggesting a fluidity of subjectivity between the two. Odysseus and Penelope are so tightly connected they merge into a single person, one of them being an extension of the other.

Therefore, we can reapply this understanding of Penelope's and Odysseus' *homophrosunē* to the scene where Penelope appears before the suitors and demands gifts. After Penelope finishes admonishing the suitors for their lack of respect for tradition, Odysseus (disguised as a beggar) doesn't feel any of the jealousy that one would expect from a man overhearing his wife discussing remarriage, but is inwardly delighted by his wife's talent for *kerdos*. In fact, Odysseus may appreciate his wife's "faithful duplicity" so much because it reminds him of his own elicitation of gifts from the Phaeacians.<sup>104</sup> Marilyn Katz argues that Odysseus' joy is misguided because he jumps to conclusions as he interprets Penelope's apparent preparation for remarriage. He doesn't consider Penelope's thoughts but "interprets her actions in the light of his own," which reinforces the patriarchal values of the epic by silencing the feminine perspective and replacing it with the masculine.<sup>105</sup> However, I believe that the nature of *homophrosunē* between Penelope and Odysseus, underscored by the reverse similes, renders this point irrelevant: insight into Odysseus' subjectivity is essentially insight into Penelope's, and therefore, Odysseus' joy extinguishes all

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<sup>104</sup> Winkler, 147.

<sup>105</sup> Katz, 118-119.

doubt of his wife's infidelity.

Despite Odysseus' conviction of his wife's fidelity, after he and Penelope reunite at least, she seems to raise the possibility of her betrayal one final time. After embracing Odysseus, Penelope contrasts herself with the infamously perfidious Helen of Troy:

οὐδέ κεν Ἀργεῖη Ἑλένη, Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα,  
ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀλλοδαπῷ ἐμίγη φιλότητι καὶ εὐνή,  
εἰ ἤδη ὅ μιν αὖτις ἀρήϊοι υἴες Ἀχαιῶν  
ἀξέμεναι οἰκόνδε φίλην ἐς πατρίδ' ἔμελλον.  
τὴν δ' ἦ τοι ῥέξαι θεὸς ὄρορεν ἔργον ἀεικές:  
τὴν δ' ἄτην οὐ πρόσθεν ἐῷ ἐγκάτθετο θυμῷ  
λυγρὴν, ἐξ ἧς πρῶτα καὶ ἡμέας ἵκετο πένθος.

Not even Argive Helen, born from Zeus,  
Would have mixed in love in the bed of a foreign man  
If she had known that the braver sons of the Achaeans  
Were destined to lead her back home to her fatherland.  
But a god incited her to accomplish this shameful deed  
And not before that did she put in her heart her baneful infatuation,  
From which our grief first came.

23.218-224

I analyzed this scene focusing specifically on Helen's character in Chapter II, in which I explored the dichotomous model of Helen's identity that establishes her as either supportive of the *oikos* or a threat to it. In this scene, Penelope destabilizes the dichotomous model of Helen by attributing her abandonment of her husband both to a god's providence and to her own free will. In other words, Penelope implies that Helen had the power to resist *atē* (and would have, had she known the horrible destruction that the Trojan War would cause), so that she shares some of the responsibility for her actions. Overall, Penelope presents a model for Helen in which these two sources of her behavior, *atē* and her own free will, both spurred her to leave Sparta, influencing her behavior synchronously.

In terms of Penelope, some scholars interpret this passage as one final opportunity that Homer seizes to reexamine the question of her fidelity. Fredricksmeier explains that the mention

of Helen underscores Penelope's potential to betray Odysseus by serving "Homer's rhetorical goal of drawing Penelope into the 'Helen paradigm,'" in which Helen is inherently unfaithful.<sup>106</sup> Nancy Felson-Rubin does not go as far as to suggest that Penelope could have been unfaithful, but argues that Penelope was admitting to Odysseus how close she had come to adultery and was attempting to "exonerate herself from blame."<sup>107</sup> However, I think it is limiting to interpret this scene as a rehashing of Penelope's potential to betray her husband. Instead, Penelope may be contrasting herself to Helen in order to express her wariness of another's (most likely a god's) interference and to clarify the agency she possesses in her own decision-making. According to Penelope, Helen's decision was the product of both a god's agency and her own, which exemplifies the damage that divine interference can cause. The always-prudent Penelope, however, wanting to ensure that she was not being used as a pawn in some god's deception, tests Odysseus with a *sēma* that only the 'true' Odysseus could recognize. In essence, the contrast between Penelope and Helen is that Penelope's decision to explicitly recognize Odysseus was hers alone, free from divine interference, and the lengths Penelope goes to ensure that she isn't the victim of deceit is proof of her fidelity and a testament to her *mētis*. Ultimately Penelope's character is not a mixture of good and bad, the product of a bridged dichotomy, but she is wholly and unprecedentedly good, demonstrated by the like-mindedness she shares with her husband.

In conclusion, Penelope, despite her liminal position of exclusion from masculine discourse, is fundamental to the poetic fabric of the *Odyssey* in her position as "master-weaver" of the text.<sup>108</sup> Her subjectivity, though often obscured, is an essential key in grasping the plot's

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<sup>106</sup> Hardy C Fredricksmeyer, "Penelope Polutropos: The Crux at *Odyssey* 23.218-24," *AJPh* 118 (1997): 491.

<sup>107</sup> Nancy Felson-Rubin, "Penelope's Perspective: Character from Plot," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: The Odyssey, Updated Edition*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 66-67.

<sup>108</sup> Clayton, 156.

narrative complexity because of the textual significance of her weaving/unweaving *dolos* and her process of recognizing Odysseus. From the beginning, Homer entangles Penelope in a web of doubt and suspicion regarding her fidelity by frequently alluding to the alternative paradigms of Helen and Clytemnestra, both of whom demonstrate the destructive effects of sexuality on the *oikos*, and also by intentionally leaving out much of Penelope's introspection that helps us understand the motives of her actions. Whether Penelope's character is ultimately 'good' or 'bad' depends on whether she is capable of harnessing her sexuality for the benefit of her husband or whether she succumbs to the pressure to remarry imposed by the suitors. Unlike Helen, who I argue is a perfectly amalgamated mixture of good and bad, Penelope can only be good or bad because her decision whether or not to formally recognize Odysseus is paramount to her role in the *Odyssey*.

The suspense building up to the recognition scene in Book 23 is tenuous because, in a way, the question of Penelope's fidelity has already been answered. The flashes of subjectivity Homer divulges from both Penelope's and Odysseus' perspectives reveal that Penelope's actions are consistently motivated by her will to preserve the state of the *oikos* she shares with Odysseus and enable his return. The interchangeability of Penelope's and Odysseus' perspectives resides in the nature of their *homophrosunē*, which is never explicitly mentioned regarding Odysseus and Penelope but which Homer develops and reinforces through the reverse similes. Penelope's character is not the result of a bridged dichotomy as we see with Helen and Athena, but she can be defined by concrete terms, such as "wife," "feminine," and "loyal." Although this lack of ambiguity in her character may make Penelope seem more straightforward in comparison to the other women of the *Odyssey*, her complexity lies not in her intentions but her actions, which weave themselves into intricate patterns of deception and guile that guide the poetic fabric of the text.

Penelope both operates within, and transcends, the limits imposed by her gender because of her ever-immutable, *periphron* nature.

## V. Conclusion

The polyvalent nature of the *Odyssey* has been celebrated since antiquity, its complexity attributed to such factors as its intricate and winding chronology, its enigmatic hero, and its sophisticated use of literary devices. However, not nearly enough attention has been focused on the female characters of the *Odyssey* and their subjectivity, which Homer reveals sparingly and briefly but which still play an essential role in the text. Although at first the women of the *Odyssey* seem to have a secondary role in the advancement of the plot, looking beyond the dominant masculine perspective reveals an internal array of actors who weave into the narrative the ambiguity and intrigue that make it so famously complex. The patriarchal structure of Homeric society imposes limitations on the female characters, excluding them from public spheres and thus silencing them from directly participating in the narrative. Therefore, they must employ different modalities of communication to indirectly impose their authority and influence the plot. In chapters II, III, and IV, I specifically examined the roles of Helen, Athena, and Penelope, respectively, and the ways in which they use alternative discourse in order to weave their narratives into the text.

In order to establish a platform for their subjectivity, the female characters of the *Odyssey* develop different modalities of narrative that sidestep or transcend social boundaries. In the *Iliad*, Helen weaves the events of the Trojan War into a giant web that enables her to rework masculine discourse from her perspective and use it as a means to gain *kleos*. In the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, Helen doesn't rearticulate the masculine narrative but directly participates in it through the use of her *pharmakon*, a mixture of good and bad components that induce forgetfulness. After the drug is consumed, Helen can speak openly in a public space without restraint, enabling her to compete directly with her husband Menelaus for authority in the *oikos*. Similar to Helen, Penelope also uses weaving and speech to influence the plot, but she does so in a way that supports the

gender order of the *oikos* and the return of her husband. Penelope's weaving and unweaving of the funeral shroud for Laertes allows her to assume an important role in shaping the plot by suspending the *oikos* in temporal stasis and thereby enabling Odysseus' return. Once Odysseus returns to Ithaca and infiltrates the house disguised as a beggar, Penelope chooses not to speak to him candidly, cautious of the eavesdropping maids and conflicted as to whether or not the stranger is actually her husband. Instead, she discloses a message urging him to kill the suitors and alluding to the weapon with which to carry out the task, Odysseus' bow, by concealing it in a description of a dream and the dream's passage through the gates of ivory. Lastly, the goddess Athena not only initiates the action of the *Odyssey* by urging Zeus to free Odysseus from Calypso's island, but also initiates Telemachus' journey to seek word of his father, which becomes necessary in his path to adulthood and his welcoming of Odysseus.

When examining these characters and how Homer shapes their subjectivity, one common theme that emerges is the duality present in the structuring of their identities. Throughout the text, Homer cultivates a dichotomous model regarding female characters in which they are either 'good' or 'bad,' and the tension between these two contrasting personas generates ambiguity and suspense in the text. The two parallel stories concerning Odysseus that Helen and Menelaus tell after consuming Helen's forgetfulness-inducing *pharmakon* depict Helen alternatively as faithful and unfaithful and leave the question of her true nature unresolved. The duality of Helen's character is reinforced by her constant objectification as a *geras* of immeasurable worth, a perception that Helen herself challenges by boldly asserting her subjectivity in a way that threatens to subvert the gender hierarchy. However, the contrasting elements of these dichotomies of faithful versus unfaithful and object versus subject are bridged by Helen's sexuality and ultimately collapse.

Whether Helen is depicted as unfaithful or faithful, object or subject, her sexuality consistently defines her character and thus the dichotomies prove false.

This dichotomous model extends to Athena, who in myth occupies both masculine and feminine realms as the patron goddess of weaving and warfare. In the *Odyssey* Athena's androgyny is reinforced by her seamless adaptation of both masculine and feminine identities, appearing before Telemachus as Mentos, Odysseus' old friend, and appearing before Odysseus in a variety of forms, both male and female. At times throughout the epic Athena casts doubt on Penelope's fidelity, drawing implicit connections between Penelope and Clytemnestra and suggesting that Penelope is naturally inclined to remarry, which justifies her exclusion from the main action of the plot. Athena's admonitions regarding Penelope are concerning because they suggest that she may attempt to displace Penelope as Odysseus' wife and thus damage the structure of the *oikos* beyond repair. However, whether occupying the masculine or feminine sphere, Athena is known for the consistency of her chastity similar to the way in which Helen is known for the consistency of her sexuality, which causes again the bridging and destabilizing of the dichotomy structuring her character. Unlike the dread goddesses, whose sexualities impose temporal stasis on their islands and thus have the potential to detain Odysseus indefinitely, Athena's commitment to her chastity situates her as an ally to Odysseus, enabling his forward movement until he returns to Ithaca.

Penelope differs from Helen and Athena in that there is no internal dichotomous element of her character. Instead, her actions are situated in an external duality of faithfulness versus unfaithfulness, either of which seems possible due to our limited access to her subjectivity and thus our limited knowledge of her intentions. The alternative paradigms of Clytemnestra and Helen that appear early in the text and the comparison of Penelope twice to "Artemis or Aphrodite" suggest that she could choose either to welcome Odysseus home or to betray him. For example,

when Penelope appears before the suitors and elicits gifts, her actions fall into either of the two possible scenarios in which she is finally initiating the courtship process to remarry or she deceives the suitors in order to augment Odysseus' wealth in anticipation of his return. Although these two conflicting paths are simultaneously at play, Penelope cannot be acting with both options of faithfulness and betrayal in mind because all her actions form a stepwise path that leads her to her final decision of whether or not to recognize Odysseus. Since Penelope cannot possibly choose to both accept and turn away her husband, any semblance of a dichotomy regarding her character quickly falls apart. Penelope is either bad, as Clytemnestra and Helen are, or good, for which there is no precedent, and thus proves to be an exception to the general rule of feminine duality exhibited by Helen and Athena. Although the moments of Penelope's and Odysseus' subjectivity indicate that Penelope undoubtedly remains faithful to her husband, her loyalty is not confirmed until the very end when Odysseus' knowledge of the *sēma* of the bed extinguishes all doubts of his identity and prompts her to embrace him at last.

Despite the relative isolation of the female characters in their domestic spheres, they nonetheless interact with each other beyond the surface of the text in complex ways. The ambiguity surrounding Penelope is exacerbated by the paradigms of infidelity generated by Helen and Clytemnestra. The unease regarding Athena's flirtatious interactions with Odysseus is provoked by the prior examples set by Circe and Calypso, who exemplify the potential dangers that goddesses can pose to the masculine narrative. Overall, the female characters, in particular Helen, Athena, and Penelope, weave intricate designs into the fabric of the narrative that often juxtapose and intertwine, generating much of the richness of the text. The false dichotomies that characterize the women of the *Odyssey* and the potential that surrounds their actions render them as full of twists and turns as the poetics of the epic itself.

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