The Legacy of Clytemnestra in Homer's Odyssey

In Greek myth many of the mortal wives violate the patriarchal structures imposed on them to some degree of success or disaster. Clytemnestra, the wife of King Agamemnon, cheated on her husband and killed him upon his return from the Trojan war; an action that placed her in the category of a 'bad wife.' In Homer epic, *The Odyssey*, the author places Clytemnestra in stark opposition to Penelope, the wife of the epic's hero, Odysseus. Penelope uses her autonomy to stay within the traditional social roles of a good greek wife. Penelope remains faithful to Odysseus while he is away for 20 years, despite pressure from a group of suitors' intent on replacing Odysseus. Penelope is compared with Clytemnestra and found equal to her, yet above her in morality – for she never betrays Odysseus.[1] Even though Penelope does not act like Clytemnestra, the consequences of Clytemnestra's action damage the reputation of not only Penelope but of all women. If Clytemnestra represents the 'bad wife' who attempts to destroy the greek patriarchal culture, then Penelope stands as the good wife who upholds it. By the end of the epic, Odysseus and Penelope are re-united and Odysseus rules his homeland again. Despite his trust in Penelope, Odysseus treats her with suspicion until the end of the epic – as if she too may betray him. This paper will explain how the legacy of Clytemnestra's actions impacted Penelope throughout the rest of the epic. In order to fully contextualize the power of Clytemnestra's actions, this paper will analyze how the literary representation of women in classical works expressed the belief that women by nature behaved like Clytemnestra. Regardless of the faithfulness of Penelope, she remains under the cloud of a bad wife because all women – even good ones – cannot be trusted. So then, let us examine the "bad wife."

In book eleven of the Odyssey, the hero Odysseus has a conversation with the shade of Agamemnon in Hades. During this conversation Agamemnon tells Odysseus of his wife's adultery and his murder:

> As I lay dying, struck through by the sword,
> I tried to lift my arms up from the ground.
> That she-dog turned away. I went to Hades.
> She did not shut my eyes or close my mouth.
>
> There is no more disgusting act than when
> a wife betrays a man like that.
> That woman formed a plot to murder me!
> Her husband![2]
>
> **She has such an evil mind**
> **that she has poured shame on her own head**
> **and all other women, *even good ones*.**[3]

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1 Douglas S. Olson. "The Stories of Agamemnon on Homer's Odyssey." *Transaction of the American Philological Association (1974-2014)*. Vol. 120. (1990), pp. 70.

2 Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson. New York: Norton. 2018. 11. 425-430.

3 Homer, *The Odyssey*, 11. 425-426.

According to Agamemnon, an act this heinous[4] brings condemnation upon the entire female gender, so he therefore warns Odysseus:

> So you must never treat your wife too well.
> Do not let her know everything you know.
> Tell her some things, hid others. But your wife
> will not kill you, Odysseus. The wise
> Penelope is much too sensible to do such things.[5]

Agamemnon's solution for Odysseus, so that Odysseus may avoid the fate Agamemnon experienced, is to treat Penelope as if she will act the same way as Clytemnestra. Agamemnon acknowledged that Penelope is too wise a woman to act like Clytemnestra, but still cautions Odysseus to treat her with suspicion. This dichotomy is frankly puzzling because it is a recognition that the two women have differences in honour, while also hinting that Penelope's faithfulness alone may not be sufficient to save Odysseus from being murdered. The question is why, if Penelope is "too sensible" to repeat Clytemnestra's actions, is it still the prudent choice to treat her as a suspect? The answer is found in the literary and social tradition of mistrust towards women simply because they are woman. Before we can understand why the actions of Clytemnestra are so heinous to the greek mind that it overshadows even the honourable actions of Penelope, we have to discuss what it means to be a woman and a wife in Greek thought.

Women, in early Greek society were inherently untrustworthy. One of the earliest works, Hesiod's *Theogony*, describes the first created woman, Pandora, as a herald of "the race of womankind;" a race that only causes mankind harm.[6] Later in the work, Hesiod recounts that Pandora (and all who come from her) was created is to be a punishment on mankind for their acquisition of fire.[7] Hesiod, living in a time of 'social and economic injustice' felt that women were a necessary evil,[8] and that one should be especially cautious when choosing a wife. Hesiod, in his *Works and Days*, gives specific advice wise men would follow in choosing a wife and cautions men:

> Do not let a woman with a sexy rump deceive you
> with wheedling and coaxing; she is after your barn.[9]

This open 'hostility' towards the female race found in Hesiod is reflected in the poet-philosopher Semonides in the 7th century.[10] His work, *On Women*, functions as a 'catalogue of women's

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4 Zeitlin, Froma I. "Playing the Other: Theatre, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama." *Representation*, No. 11 (Summer, 1985), pp. 63-94.

5 Homer, *The Odyssey*,11. 440-445.

6 Hesiod, *Theogony*. Translated by Dorothea Wender. London: Penguin Books. 1973. lines 588-89.

7 Hesiod, *Works and Days*. Translated by Dorothea Wender. London: Penguin Books. 1973. lines. 86-88.

8 Sarah B. Pomeroy. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Antiquity."* New York: Schocken Books Inc. 1995. pp 48.

9 Sarah B. Pomeroy. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Antiquity."* Quoting Hesiod, *Op*. 373-375, Translated by. Judith Peller Hallet. pp. 48.

10 Ibid., 49.

vices,' where each type of wife is represented by certain animals and all, save the bee wife, is evil and depraved in some way. For example, the wife most like the monkey;

> In this case Zeus has outdone himself
> In giving men the worst kind of evil.
> She has the ugliest face imaginable.[11]

Another particularity heinous wife is the ferret, who is miserable and too eager for sex.[12] The last wife Semonides mentions is the bee wife. The wife most like the bee "causes property to grow and increase, and she grows old with the husband whom she loves."[13] Bee wives are industrious, bear their husbands offspring, and refrain from gossiping about sex. Despite the seeming praise the bee wife receives for being the only "good kind of wife," Semonides ends his analysis of wives by lamenting that all women, even the bee wife, is considered a plague upon mankind;

> Zeus has contrived that all these tribes
> of women are with men and remain with them.
> Yes, this is the worst plague Zeus has made – women.[14]

If women are inherently deceitful, then all women – even good ones like Penelope – cannot be trusted. In general Athenian men were 'mistrustful of women' and 'always prepared to think the very worst of them.'[15] Clytemnestra, in bringing about the death of her husband, exemplifies this belief; women are simply not good for their husbands.

One of the primary motivating factors in classical Greek men's mistrust towards women, and one that directly relates to the text we are analyzing, is the belief that women are incapable of controlling their sexuality. The literary evidence presented clearly in both Hesiod's advice and Semonides poem illustrates the beliefs that the type of woman a man should avoid is one that wields her sexuality. Greek society viewed women's sexuality as dangerous because it had the power[16] to subvert cultural order. A woman's enjoyment of sex therefore is a dangerous thing to a greek male because sexual desire has the strength to dominate even the best women. The faithful swine herd of Odysseus warns the hero of this very fact, "sex sways all women's minds, even the best of them."[17] All women are at risk of succumbing to their sexual desires regardless to their faithfulness to their husbands. In fact, greek myth suggested that because women were incapable of controlling this desire, most women could not practice true *sōphrosunē (*greek term

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11 Sarah B. Pomeroy. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Antiquity."* Quoting Semonides: Diehl Fragment 7. Translated by Marylin Arthur. pp. 51.

12 Sarah B. Pomeroy. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Antiquity,"* 49.

13 Hugh Lloyd-Jones. *Females of the Species: Semonides on Women.* London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. 1975. pp. 52

14 Ibid., 54.

15 P. Walcot. "Greek Attitudes towards Women: The Mythological Evidence." *Greece & Rome.* Vol. 31. No. 1. (April 1984), pp 39.

16 Walcot 39.

17 Homer, *The Odyssey,* 15. 421-422.

for sexual moderation).[18] With this term comes the idea that women were generally seen as sexually veracious, and unable to control their sexual appetites. A woman who does display *sōphrosunē* therefore, was one who could control her nature by controlling her sexuality. The adultery of Clytemnestra exhibits her lack of *sōphrosunē* and therefore "failed in her duties as a wife…"[19] Ironically, men expected women to remain faithful in marriage while being constantly worried that their nature as a female (and therefore innately sexual) will get the better of them. Clytemnestra embodied in the greek mind the epitome of the female gender – unable to control her sexual appetites she brought about the eventual disaster of her husband. Both of these actions speak to the very essential fear that greek men had towards women – the fear that they are created to be destructive. Clytemnestra is therefore condemned, "simply by virtue of being a woman."[20] The inherent inability for women to control themselves is what some scholars purpose to be the reason Clytemnestra's action reflect on all women, not just herself. The long literary tradition speaks to the power that Clytemnestra had as the, "universal model of the "bad woman" in greek society."[21] If the notion that women themselves were incapable of bringing good to their husbands, or remaining faithful, our question of this text then changes to – how does Penelope remain faithful when it antithetical to the greek definition of the female nature?

As noted in the introduction of this paper – Penelope faithfully preserves Odysseus household for twenty years while he was away. Because of the actions she takes to remain faithful, she stands as an outlier to the societal expectation of women's behaviour so typified in Clytemnestra. When Odysseus finally returns to his homeland Ithaca, the goddess Athena warns Odysseus to be careful with Penelope; men who are too quick to trust their wives may be betrayed – as we saw with Agamemnon. This strikes as a paradoxical reaction from Athena because the epic gives Athena, Odysseus, and Penelope a shared trait - metis. Defined, "the possessor of metis is able to say one thing while thinking another and to overcome his enemies through deceit…"[22] The epic is filled with scenes of Penelope using the trait of metis to stall and trick the suitors because she does not have the power to send them away. An example of her metis is when Penelope has told the suitors she will choose a new husband when she finished weaving a burial shroud for her father in law. She works on it all day only to undo was she does during the night. Throughout the epic, Penelope is considered to be the equal of Odysseus in cunning intelligence.[23] Despite this equivocation, Odysseus purposefully includes his son Telemachus in the plot to kill the suitors, but intentionally excluded his Penelope.[24] One could argue that because Odysseus does not know know if Penelope has remained faithful; she could still use her cunning to trick him and therefore he should be cautious. This still does not account for the fact that Athena knows the character and faithfulness of Penelope and still cautions

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18 Blondell, Ruby. *Helen of Troy: Myth, Beauty, Devastation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013. pp. 10-11.

19 Rachel M. E. Wolfe. "Women, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess: An Exploration of the Mythic Character of Clytemnestra in all Her Forms." *Women's Studies,* (Sep2009) Vol. 38 Issue 6. pp. 696.

20 Rachel M. E. Wolfe. "Women, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess: An Exploration of the Mythic Character of Clytemnestra in all Her Forms." pp. 697.

21 Ibid., 692.

22 Sheila Murnaghan. "Penelope's Agnoia: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in the Odyssey." In Lillian E. Doherty (Ed.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Homer's Odyssey*, pp. 231-244. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. pp. 233.

23 Ibid., 235.

24 Ibid., 235.

Odysseus against trusting his wife. Why then is the character trait metis found reliably in Odysseus and Athena prove insufficient in vouching for the trustworthiness of Penelope? Simply put, it is because she is a woman. To quote the scholar Sheila Murnaghan;

> Wives in general are not to be trusted, and most men are too incautious to remember this. Odysseus' procedure of disguising himself from Penelope should therefore be understood as an expression of the general treacherousness of wives that does not reflect on the character of Penelope, whose fidelity is not in doubt."[25]

Odysseus, in hiding his identity from Penelope, is treating her as if she will repeat the same actions as Clytemnestra – even though he knows she will not. Despite Penelope exemplifying faithfulness in comparison to Clytemnestra's betrayal, they are treated as the same because the nature 'of marriage makes women systematically unreliable to their husbands so that any woman, no matter her character, should be regarded as treacherous."[26] The individual trustworthy character of Penelope proves then insufficient to overcome the characterization of the female gender, validated by Clytemnestra. Odysseus himself must "rely on Penelope's willingness to consider him her husband and thus on the continuity of such volatile qualities as desire, affection, and loyalty"[27] in order to return to ruling Ithaca safely. The tone, therefore, that the epics takes in placing ambivalence on the character Penelope may start with this assessment of gender but warrants further research.

Here we reach the last book of the Odyssey, and the shade of Agamemnon congratulates Odysseus being safely restored to Ithaca.

> "Lucky you,
> Cunning Odysseus: you got yourself
> a wife of virtue – great Penelope.
> How principled she was, that she remembered
> her husband all those years! Her fame will live
> forever, and the deathless gods will make
> a poem to delight all those on earth
> about intelligent Penelope.
> Not like my wife – who murdered her own Husband!
> **Her story will be hateful; she will bring**
> **bad reputation to all other women, *even good ones*.**[28]

Penelope's individual faithfulness earns her individual renowned while Clytemnestra's transgression is universal in nature. Penelope became the example of an exception while Clytemnestra becomes the architype of the believed condition of women. Agamemnon congratulates Odysseus on having a good wife but remains firm that his wife's crimes hover over all women. The good wife is commended for her actions, but regardless of her faithfulness she was unable to overcome the consequences of the bad wife's actions.

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25 Sheila Murnaghan. "Penelope's Agnoia: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in the Odyssey." pp. 236.
26 Ibid., 238-9.
27 Ibid., 237.
28 Homer, *The Odyssey*, 24. 193-204.

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