Gender in the Odyssey

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1. Historical differences:

Let's distinguish the following:

a. actual gender relations in Homer's time (as reconstructed by modern historians)
b. actual gender relations in Mycenaean times (as reconstructed by modern historians)
c. gender relations as Homer portrays them in *Odyssey* (his version of Mycenaean times)

[NB: like any great artist, Homer not only reflects a social norm, but also criticizes and prescribes an ideal, so we can't just read off him to actual relations]

d. gender relations in Greek myth

[NB: here we can I think be a little more confident these were reflective {of normative relations among the aristocrats and between aristocrats and commoners}, though we can't minimize the prescriptive element of myth either]

e. the use of gender in Homer and myth to produce actual Greek gender relations later on

[NB: this is part of the "technology of gender" of the Greeks: but only part--also including diet, exercise, parental and other models, moralists, politicians, etc.]

2. Class differences:

It's vitally important to specify the class of the women one is talking about, along with the above historical differences. Expectations about reproduction (and fidelity), political alliance, domestic labor, emotional support, sexual pleasure were all different for noble, commoner and slave.

A. Reproduction: the noble wife was to provide a male heir. (Compare Penelope and Helen.) Children of slave women could be raised by magnanimous nobles, but there was no absolute obligation. (See Menelaus and his bastard son.)

Fidelity can be subsumed here: the noble wife needed to be faithful to ensure the husband was the father, or in other words that the social and biological roles coincided. (Compare Penelope and Klytaimenstra.) Fidelity was of no concern for servants, or more precisely, chastity wasn't an issue: they were expected to sleep with nobles, but only under the blessing of the master. (Compare the "bathing" of Telemachos on his travels w/ the "unfaithful maids.")

B. Political alliance. The noble wife was the token of exchange binding males together: husband and her father formed political alliances sealed by her travel to the husband. (Symbolized by the sacrifice of Iphigenia: the politics of men demand she "die" to her old life and go away.) The slave girl was the token of the breakdown of politics, as she was the prize in war when her father or husband was defeated (Briseus).

C. Domestic labor: The noble wife was expected more to supervise the labor of the female servants than to provide it herself. If she were incompetent here, stewards could do the supervising. The slaves did the work.

D. Emotional support. Penelope shows that for Homer, the ideal noble wife and husband should become emotionally involved and be able to support each other. Contrast Menelaus and Helen or more dramatically, Agamemnon and Klytaimnestra. For the later Greeks, there was often such an age difference (30-35 vs 14-18) that emotional attachments for the husband came from other males. We see this in Homer w/ Achilles and Patroklos.

E. Sexual pleasure. Should the noble wife be able to provide sexual pleasure along with her other duties, all the better, but it wasn't necessary, as slave girls had sex labor as one of their chores too. They might even be elevated to concubine status: a slave whose only job was providing sexual pleasure. This was a good job back then for a slave, especially compared to washing pots and pans and THEN doing sex work for drunken nobles!
Penelope was ideal in that she combined all these roles: reproduction (and fidelity), political alliance, (supervision of) domestic labor, emotional support, sexual pleasure. Often they were split up among different people: concubines for sex, servants for domestic labor, lover/beloved for emotion, wives for reproduction and political alliance. Paradoxically, the poorer the man, the more the wife had to do all duties. This is also the current middle-class ideal: everything wrapped up in the self-sufficient couple. Another way in which the *Odyssey* is "the first bourgeois epic."

3. Dangerous females:

Powerful and dangerous females are everywhere in the *Odyssey*: in the adventures: Calypso, Circe, Skylla and Kharbdis, the Sirens; among the other nobles' wives: Helen, Klytaimenstra (although one should note the difference between Homer and Aeschylus in their treatments of Klytaimenstra: in Homer, Aigisthos gets most of the blame for the murder of Agammenon upon his homecoming, but in Aeschylus, it's Klytaimenstra, as we will see when we read the *Oresteia*. Some have seen this as indicative of a demonization of court women, a necessity in the move from an aristocratic to a democratic Athens: if the political class was to expand to include the urban masses, then the class difference between noble and commoner could no longer be politically crucial, and so noble women needed to be downgraded relative to commoner men. Some scholars have seen a similar structure in the demonization of *ancien régime* noble women [e.g., Marie Antoinette] by French Republicans); in Phaiaka: Nausikaa and Arete; even at home: the "unfaithful maids," Eurykleia, Penelope; among the gods: even Athena could be trouble. A pattern develops: Odysseus meets them in some need, negotiates their danger, and eliminates them or wins them over to his side.
A particularly interesting case is the Sirens: they pose a danger to Odysseus of superceding his version of the Troy story (notice how many competing versions there are: Nestor, Menelaus, Helen, Demodokos, Odysseus himself--even Homer in the *Iliad*!) because of their superior vision: they are goddesses after all (12.189ff). This might be a clue to the dangerous female: given the way Greeks separated human roles across genders, the idea of the female poet was strange and troubling: men did the singing, they controlled the stories. Letting women tell their own stories (feminist revisionist history!): that would be really dangerous: they'd bewitch us and kill us! Or worse, they'd take over and boss us around! In other words, the Sirens represent the fear that the Greeks had of women: not a universal psychological fate all of us are condemned to, but the predictable result of their social system's relegation of women to the home. The free, loose, powerful woman (notice the emotional ring of those words for us today), the one who didn't play by the rules: this haunts the Greeks in the figures of the Sirens, and also Antigone, Medea, the Amazons. We'll meet those three later.

4. False homes:

One of Odysseus' problems with women is that they all want to sleep with him and keep him with them. Part of this is obviously male fantasy of the James Bond type. But part of it is also the anxiety of travel in the ancient world. Travel was so risky that whenever a man would find a decent place he would be very tempted to stay there. Thus Odysseus stays with Circe for an entire year, and his men have to remind him about home. Or again, the Sirens want to trap him and keep him. Calypso does succeed in keeping him for 7 years. And he has to negotiate the implicit marriage contract with Alkinoos for the hand of Nausikaa, an offer that had to have been quite tempting. But the pull of Penelope and home is too strong. What is the appeal of Penelope? Odysseus explicitly says to Calypso that it's not beauty. What then is it?

5. Likemindedness:

One of the markers of Homer's greatness is his refusal to give in to a simple fear of women and the misogyny it reflects and in turn breeds. We see this in the relationship of Odysseus and Penelope. It's very often remarked that Penelope and Odysseus are equals, or at least that their relationship is recognizable by modern middle-class standards as a "good" one. Their relationship is modeled by that of Alkinoos and Arete, and negatively modeled

by Menelaus and Helen (or Agamemnon and Klytaimenstra). Its hallmark is "likemindedness," being on the same wavelength, as we will see in a bit when we examine the famous interrogations in the latter part of the *Odyssey*.

Their equality is signaled throughout by a series of "reverse similes." (A simile is an explicit comparison.) These are "reverse" because they go against gender expectations. Among them we see the helpless, naked Odysseus, washed up on the island of Phaiakians: a child, even a woman refugee of war, a suppliant like the ones he's created his whole career as a pirate and "sacker of cities." Later in court listening to the poet sing of Troy Odysseus weeps: "As a woman weeps, lying over the body of her dear husband, who fell fighting for her city and people as he tried to beat off the pitiless day from city and children; she sees him dying and gasping for breath, and winding her body about him she cries high and shrill, while the men behind her, hitting them with their spear butts on the back and shoulders, force her up and lead her away into slavery, to have hard work and sorrow, and her cheeks are wracked with pitiful weeping. Such were the pitiful tears Odysseus shed ... " 8.23ff Here we see Odysseus not only as a woman, but precisely as a Trojan woman! (A prime quote for those that think the *Odyssey* is Homer's way of showing Odysseus' maturation from the youthful heroism won in war to the political life of peace and rule which is cognizant of the high price the hero imposes on those around him.)

On the other hand, we see Penelope compared to a lion (4.791) and to a good and just king (19.108: by Odysseus himself!). Here the parallel with Arete is instructive: Nausikaa claims her mother "dissolves quarrels, even among men, when she favors them" (7.74); this is just what Penelope has been doing on Ithaka by playing one suitor off against the other. Penelope even uses tricks to rule, like Odysseus would: the famous weaving and unweaving is a brilliant strategem. Equally famous is the tricky interrogation about the marriage bed: after the man of war is transformed into the man of peace by washing off the blood of the suitors, Penelope still insists on quizzing Odysseus: her final trick is to ask Eurykleia to move the wedding bed. His reserve broken, Odysseus erupts with anger: no one can move the bed without destroying the integrity of the house, since it is carved from the tree that upholds the house. A famous and beautiful symbol of rootedness and home, the bed then accepts Odysseus and Penelope "and their old ritual."

6. Further reading:

Sarah Pomeroy: *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (Schocken Books, 1995).

------. *Families in Classical and Hellenistic Greece: Representations and Realities* (Oxford, 1998).

----- et al., eds. *Women in the Classical World* (Oxford University Press, 1994).