EPIC WOMEN: GREEK MYTH AND FEMINISM

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It is no secret that women did not typically receive the best treatment in ancient Greece. At this time, women were subjected to forced marriages, second-class citizenship, and even unimpeded rape. Indeed, sex in ancient Greece had significantly less to do with enjoyment and much more to do with power and subjugation. As the feminist scholar Kathy Rudy points out, "[s]ex was not about an intimate relationship between these two people but rather functioned as a way of marking individuals in a political order."[1] Women, who were only ever recipients of this "marking," could not help but be made victims of the patriarchy's desire for power and control. Despite, however, this blatant and unapologetic misogyny, some women in mythology rose up through the ranks of male heroes and other lauded figures, eventually attaining everlasting recognition. Two of such women were Penelope, wife of Odysseus, and Helen of Troy, the woman whose face was said to launch a thousand ships. In taking a feminist approach to the epics these two women showcase most prominently in (Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*), readers today can come to a new understanding of women in epic, especially through texts such as Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*, Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, and Ovid's *Heroides*.

Before addressing any of these texts, however, a clear idea of feminism and its key tenets should be established, as these definitions and boundaries will help create a clear guideline for the rest of the essay, especially in figuring out how each of these texts converses with feminism. The most straightforward and uncomplicated definition of feminism is simply the advocacy for equal rights among sexes, typically with the connotation of women upending patriarchal society.[2] Bearing this in mind, some of feminist theory's core beliefs become quite forthright; it is the desire for equal treatment between men and women in all aspects of life. This equal treatment, as

1. Kathy Rudy, "Queer Theory and Feminism," *Women's Studies* 29 (March 2000): 199.
2. Martha Easton, "FEMINISM," *Studies in Iconography* 33 (2012): 99.

was mentioned previously, was noticeably absent in ancient Greece. Real women rarely held power. Curiously, power was instead bestowed upon various women in myth and tale, such as the aforementioned Penelope and Helen of Troy.

Penelope is a fascinating figure in myth because of how much strength she is given as a woman. This strength is not physical, per se, but is instead displayed as a strength of character and integrity. Although far-off Odysseus fights battles of mettle and might, Penelope fights her own battles with her rude and impatient suitors, battles which come to require the utmost patience and endurance. In her novel *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood describes several events from Homer's *Odyssey* from the perspective of Penelope, the titular character's wife. She also utilizes the perspective of Penelope's maids, whom Atwood felt were wronged when punished for fraternizing with (but not assisting) the suitors. Atwood seems to take particular notice of Penelope's most 'desirable' qualities which make her such a good wife; those qualities of faithfulness and patience, which, in Penelope's words within the novel, are "a stick used to beat other women with."[3] Although *The Penelopiad* is not a strictly feminist novel, it frequently takes notice of Penelope's effects on other women throughout history, as Penelope's patience and faithfulness is used as a sort of 'gold standard' by which all other wives must adhere to lest they be considered unfaithful and therefore irredeemable, as women in ancient Greece rarely played any other role than that of the wife. If the wife was unfaithful, then what could she possibly be good for? Atwood, of course, vehemently disagrees with this perspective, as Penelope herself in the novel begs the reader, "*Don't follow my example*, I want to scream in your ears – yes,

3. Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 22.

yours!"[4] According to Atwood, stalwart faith held up solely by the damning pillars of societal expectation is something to be avoided, or at least questioned.

Penelope's maids, as mentioned previously, are viewed as particularly tragic figures in *The Penelopiad*, as their deaths felt unwarranted to Atwood. This tragedy is a sharp contrast to the maids' appearance in Homer's *Odyssey*, as they are given less than a second thought after being hanged for sleeping with the suitors, despite their service to Penelope.[5] The scholar Mihoko Suzuki states this about Atwood's perspective on the maids' treatment in the *Odyssey*:

> …Atwood endows the maids, though outsiders, with a privileged perspective and voice as satirists who eloquently critique the ideology of the dominant order that normalized their slaughter by condemning them as unchaste and disloyal. They debunk the gender privilege that Odysseus holds over them, complaining about the sexual double standard that condones his adultery while finding their liaisons deserving of deadly punishment, and his possession of "the spear" and "the word" as the means by which he enforces patriarchal prerogative.[6]

There is a painful amount of irony present in the relationship between Odysseus and his wife, which is reflected in the maids' deaths. Penelope's entire arc in the *Odyssey* revolves around remaining faithful to Odysseus despite the tribulations she is constantly put through due to the suitors' constant harassment. Conversely, Odysseus sleeps with several women on his way back to Ithaca, all the while fully expecting his wife to have abstained from sex entirely during his leave. The maids' fates are the consequence of attempting to break the double standard; in behaving the same way as the patriarchy, the women are punished, for the women are not men and therefore cannot possibly hope to be like men.

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4. Atwood, *Penelopiad*, 22.
5. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York and London: Norton, 2018), 492.
6. Mihoko Suzuki, "Rewriting the *Odyssey* in the Twenty-First Century: Mary Zimmerman's *Odyssey* and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*," *College Literature* 34 (Spring 2007): 272.

Helen of Troy is an interesting figure in this analysis because she is often portrayed as being in opposition to Penelope's traits and beliefs. Penelope is faithful, patient, and loving: the model wife. Helen, meanwhile, is shown to be vain, meanspirited, and, above all else, whorish. This portrayal, of course, is not entirely concrete, as scholars debate whether or not Helen was compliant with her kidnapping. Interestingly enough, even when Helen is said to have resisted her captor, she is still treated like a tramp. Indeed, her crime of having a pretty face seems to steep her into more trouble than she would ever want. In Natalie Hayne's novel *A Thousand Ships*, Helen is painted in a more sympathetic (albeit complex) light. This is likely because *A Thousand Ships* is unapologetically feminist in its tone, choosing to provide Helen a platform on which to speak rather than blatantly admonishing her for her position in the Trojan War. For example, Haynes writes, "Helen shrugged. 'Which of us can refuse Aphrodite?' she asked. 'A god's power is far greater than mine. When she urged me to accompany him to Troy, I tried to resist. But she gave me no choice."[7] Although Helen is looked down upon a multitude of times even by other characters in *A Thousand Ships*, Haynes gives Helen the benefit of the doubt, complicating Helen's typical role as the spark that set off the Trojan War. Helen, even in the versions where she willfully follows Paris back to Troy, is always under Aphrodite's yoke, and therefore cannot be fully held responsible for her actions. Remember: "Paris was a married man."[8]

The playwright Euripides also wrote about Helen of Troy, specifically in his aptly named play *Helen*. In this play, Helen is given something that both she and Penelope never attain in

7. Natalie Haynes, *A Thousand Ships: A Novel* (London: Mantle, 2019), 137.
8. Haynes, *A Thousand Ships*, 135.

Homer's writings: resolution.[9] Specifically, Helen is provided "the completion of her plans," which supports "the implication that women can plan and bring to fruition a plan of action which the Homeric Helen and Penelope never achieve."[10] This is important because it allows Helen to escape her seemingly eternal position as something to be fought over. Perhaps a good example would be substituting Helen for a marble bust. This objectively spectacular-looking bust is sought after by countless collectors who seek to have this prize. The bust, being nothing more than an object, has no choice but to be in the ownership of whoever wins the bust from its previous owner. Of course, being inanimate, the bust lacks the capability to care whether or not it is taken one place or another; it is an object and nothing more. This is largely how Helen is written in Homer's epics: a lovely face to be claimed by one man or another. Euripides, however, alters a key property of this back-and-forth relationship. Subjectivity, defined as "a character's position within a narrative: that is, as either active subject or passive object," is what differentiates the Homeric Helen from Euripides' interpretation of Helen.[11] Helen the marble bust is a passive object, whereas Helen in Euripides' play of the same name is an active subject. While it would be hasty to say that any ancient Greek play fully commits to pushing forward feminist ideals, realizing that women have the same capacity to play active roles in their own lives as men do is one step closer toward reaching those ideals.

Ovid's writing in his collection of poetic letters dubbed *The Heroides* casts a curious light on Penelope and Helen, as it both complies with and complicates the two aforementioned contemporary texts. For example, the lines "It's all right for him to rebuke me continually! I'm

9. Ingrid E. Holberg, "Euripides' *Helen*: Most Noble and Most Chaste," *The American Journal of Philology* 116 (Spring 1995): 21.
10. Holberg, "Euripides' *Helen*," 21.
11. Holberg, "Euripides' *Helen*," 21.

yours, I should / be spoken of as yours: I'll be Penelope, wife to Ulysses, always" do not tonally resonate with *The Penelopiad*'s cynicism and bitterness.[12] Conversely, *The Heroides* includes a rare account of Helen in a somewhat active role, as she writes an emotionally-conflicted letter to Paris in an attempt to dissuade him from making any further advances.[13] Problematically, however, both Penelope and Helen are written in a similar voice, as both women, despite their unique circumstances, sound like damsels in distress. This is not a necessarily inaccurate approach when considering the source texts, as Penelope in *The Odyssey* also pined sorrowfully for her husband's return. Because Helen plays so few active roles in both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, it is difficult to say whether Helen's mixed feelings toward Paris in her letter for him are accurate to the source material. Curiously enough, such feelings are echoed in *A Thousand Ships* when Helen regales the Trojan women with her side of the story concerning her involvement in causing the Trojan War, perhaps as a way of establishing the character's complexity.[14] In this transaction, Helen tells the Trojan women that she willingly left for Troy with Paris, though this was not done without some intense coercion on Aphrodite's part. As such, Helen shows Paris far less affection in *A Thousand Ships* than she does in *The Heroides*, further complicating Helen's relationship with Paris.

One unlikely quirk that Penelope and Helen do share is their potential for power in the positions they find themselves in. Penelope could easily remarry and be rid of the suitors, whereas Helen, though possessing considerably less agency than Penelope, could utilize her enchanting beauty for all manner for deeds. The book *Feminizing Chaucer* by Jill Mann investigates this quirk through examining Ovid's *Heroides*, pointing out how women in ancient

12. Ovid, *The Heroides*, trans. A. S. Kline (Poetry in Translation, September 2001): 1.83-84.
13. Ovid, *Heroides*, 17.
14. Haynes, *A Thousand Ships*, 137.

Greece were portrayed as both the betrayed and the betrayers.[15] Interestingly enough, when women were subjected to betrayal (from men) and were viewed as passive objects, men were to pity and sympathize with them. Contrarily, when women took an active role (something typically reserved for men in Greek myth) and were the ones perpetrating the betrayal, men were to revile and hate them, as such aggressive action was unfit for persons whose purpose it was to maintain the household and produce offspring. Mann also makes this remark about Ovid's work:

> What is more, [Ovid] continues, men deceive women more often than women deceive men; he instances four of the women from his own *Heroides* – Medea, Ariadne, Phyllis and Dido – to make the point. So he urges women to make the most of their youth and beauty while they can… He therefore sets about teaching them the arts by which they can manipulate men to their own ends.[16]

Ovid, then, in recognizing the disparity between men and women, encourages women to strike back in their own way. Although they may not necessarily have the sheer strength or societal power to attain what they want, Ovid advises women to be active within their own lives however they are able to do so, making the most of any advantage they may have along the way.

Epics can be challenging material to analyze due to the sheer volume of content alone. Unfortunately, this often means that certain events, characters, and themes are overlooked, as the primary plot and main characters take center stage. Although Penelope and Helen of Troy are not marginalized characters in the physical sense (Penelope and Helen make important contributions to *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*), their status as women in ancient Greek society challenges their value to the texts they exist within. However, modern day feminist theory has breathed new life into these, and other, mythological women of epic; where there were once lifeless statues and

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15. Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, NED-New ed. (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2002): 5.
16. Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 6.

cruel expectations, there are now living, breathing literary beings and the shattering of weighty restraints and suffocating societal bonds.

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