

# Divine Femininity or Femme Fatale: Exploring the Roles of Women in *The Odyssey*

*Pei Xuan (Kelly) Chia, Simon Fraser University*

## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Professor Alessandra Capperdoni for Humanities 102, titled: Classical Mythology. The assignment asked students to structure a critical essay on Homer's *The Odyssey*. The paper uses MLA citation style.

This paper explores and compares the representation of Circe and Penelope — Circe as an obstacle to Odysseus' journey and Penelope as the “appropriate” Homeric wife. Odysseus' journey in *The Odyssey* is a literal and metaphorical journey to reclaim his patriarchal title as King of Ithaca. He reinforces these roles across his journey, especially toward “wayward” or nonconforming women like Circe. By analyzing the portrayals of Circe and Penelope, I hope to reveal the ways Homer presents dissenting, feminine voices in patriarchal Homeric society.

In *The Odyssey*, there are two roles women fulfil: those who assist Odysseus in his journey home to reconquer his place as king, and those who do not. In Odysseus' narrative of his wanderings, Homer features numerous feminine voices, some of whom delay Odysseus on his journey home. These dissenting feminine characters often present alternative lifestyles to the dominant, patriarchal lifestyle that Odysseus and Telemachus represent and reinforce in their travels. For example, in his narrative, Odysseus becomes instrumental in transforming Circe from a powerful sorceress to an ideal hostess, inducting her into her role as a “proper” Homeric woman in the patriarchal society. By presenting femininity untethered to social conventions as an obstacle to be conquered, Homer, too, maintains the patriarchal structure in this narrative. However, by additionally revealing the ways

women must navigate society to be considered “appropriate,” Homer also quietly presents critical voices within patriarchal society. In Calypso’s indignant monologue in Book 5, for example, she exclaims: “You unrivaled lords of jealousy— scandalized when goddesses sleep with mortals“ (5.130-131, *Odyssey*.) Herein, Homer implies that there are some discrepancies that women experience in this society: men are not criticised for acting on their sensuality, but if women assert their sensuality, there is a tendency for the narrative to subjugate these desires through the patriarchal order so that they are submissive to the men in their lives. He neither promotes nor overtly criticizes the society he presents — any dissenting voices, are after all, incidental obstacles to be conquered by Odysseus. But it is notable that Homer defines the moral responsibilities of men and women within *The Odyssey*. By doing so, Homer challenges readers to consider the nuances of what it means for men and women to participate equally in society. In this essay, I will explore the representation of Circe as an obstacle to Odysseus’ journey, specifically analysing how Odysseus frames her in his narrative. I will also briefly compare Odysseus’ representation of Circe to Homer’s representations of Penelope as a cunning and “appropriate” Homeric wife, revealing the ways Homer shows how the womanhood constructed by patriarchal Homeric society challenges the social agency of women, and how they must maintain their social positions despite these challenges.

By the time we meet Circe, Odysseus is the narrator mediating his journey to King Alcinous and his court. This means as readers, we must consider that Odysseus’ descriptions could be skewed for his benefit. For example, he assures the court: “Calypso, the lustrous goddess, tried to hold me back, deep in her arching caverns, craving me for a husband. So did Circe, holding me just as warmly in her halls, the bewitching queen of Aeaea keen to have me too.” (9.34-37, *Odyssey*) Every line in this speech is inundated with Odysseus positioning the women’s sexualities as obstacles to his journey home, and he argues there is no sweeter temptation than his own home. Later, Circe’s hospitality nearly moves Odysseus to forget about his home for a year. Though he implies Circe manipulated him and his men (10.514, *Odyssey*), it is his crew members that remind him he must go home rather than his own initiative. Circe and Odysseus’ ensuing conversation is the first time in his narrative that Odysseus expresses his wishes to go home, and Circe immediately sets Odysseus straight on his journey, telling him he need not stay against his will (10.538, *Odyssey*.) This implies he never vocalised this desire to her in the year they spent together, a contrast to his appeal of loyalty towards his home earlier in his narrative.

Although discrepancies like these are relatively minute in Odysseus' retelling of his journey, they call into question Odysseus' reliability as an objective narrator of the story. Odysseus presents himself in his journey as heroic and witty, often enforcing his masculinity and Achaean civilised traits. When it comes to the women he meets, there are two threats he ascribes to them: their physicality and mysticism, like when he describes the Sirens as ravishing and heartrending (12.207-209, *Odyssey*.) But it is their autonomy, which presents uncomfortable threats not only to him, but his narrative as a hero in Homeric society. In his encounters with them, Odysseus always presents himself as the dominant, masculine figure overcoming them. If, then, Odysseus' journey is a metaphor to reclaim his patriarchal title, then the obstacles he overcomes along the way surely present threats to patriarchal conventions, and must be contained within patriarchal order. Nowhere is this clearer than in the transformation of Circe.

Circe, after all, is the lone inhabitant of her island, living unbound by Homeric societal conventions and patriarchy. This is reflected in her introduction, where Odysseus describes his men being transfixed by Circe's presence, as well as being stunned with fear at the unnaturally tame mountain wolves and lions she has bewitched (10.228-231, *Odyssey*.) Enthralled, Odysseus' men enter Circe's chambers, only to be transformed into pigs. In this scene, Circe presents the illusions of domestic bliss by presenting the crewmen with food, warm shelter, and hospitality, but subverts expectations by turning that hospitality into a trap wherein she continues to maintain power and control over the animals on the island, who are perhaps also men who have been transformed. Odysseus approaches Circe with the intent to free his men but is approached by Hermes with a secondary task. Hermes advises Odysseus to make Circe swear an oath, and to "never [let her] unman [him]" (10.334, *Odyssey*.) Hermes' sentiment here implies men's fears of having women usurp them, particularly in conventionally male-dominated spaces like the bedroom. Hermes also implicates Odysseus in the task of subduing her as no man has ever withstood her potions (10.362-363, *Odyssey*.) Almost immediately, Circe becomes a cooperative host, at least in Odysseus' point-of-view: she restores the men and they appear "younger than ever, taller by far, more handsome to the eye" (10.436-437, *Odyssey*), reunites Odysseus and his crewmen, and invites the men to eat and drink. Circe and her maidens bathe the men in oil as proper, domestic women have so far been depicted to do as an act of *xenia* in Homeric households. In other words, from Odysseus' perspective, Circe has been subsumed into proper patriarchal order, and their power dynamics no longer feel as threatening because she has been contained.

Circe's transformation magnifies a pattern with the women Odysseus encounters, wherein the evil women are marginalized characters that offer conflicting perspectives interfering with the main narrative of Odysseus' journey. Scholar Lillian Eileen Doherty writes, "The narrative structure, which uses the figure of Odysseus as primary focalizer of the action, seduction figures in the epic plot primarily as a threat to the hero that must be deflected and manipulated by him" (Doherty 85.) In other words, she argues that the marginalized femininity depicted by Odysseus can never be rationalized as valid in his narrative, as they are inherently obstructive to his journey. In the case of the Sirens, Doherty argues that they also literally threaten to usurp narrative power, or *kleos* to Odysseus (Doherty 87.) Odysseus representing marginalized feminine voices as threats in his story allow him to model to the Phaeacians what proper behaviour for women looks like within the patriarchy.

Additionally, Odysseus tends to distinguish these women by their physicality. This helps give a visual distinction between what is considered a "good" woman and who is considered evil, which scholar Jenifer Neils elaborates on below:

The main trait that provides an immediate visual distinction between the good female characters of the *Odyssey* from the evil is degree of dress. The women and female monsters who would prevent the long-sought homecoming of Odysseus are routinely shown nude or bare-breasted. The Sirens are uncivilized and hence unclothed. [. . .] Most interesting are depictions of Kirke, who is never described thus in the *Odyssey* but appears nude in the earliest Greek representations. [. . .] Conversely, the best of women, namely, Penelope, is always fully draped and characteristically seated, to show that she is securely at home. (Neils 182)

Indeed, Penelope exhibits remarkable restraint over her suitors, mediating their desires for her and protecting her son. Telemachus and Odysseus both make judgments on Penelope's character, and from those judgments, we learn what societal expectations she must ascribe to. For example, Odysseus exclaims before he leaves the Phaeacians, "May I find an unswerving wife when I reach home," (13.48, *Odyssey*) speaking to his hopes that Penelope has not remarried in his long absence. While Penelope has not outright declared to the suitors that she does not wish to remarry, she cleverly delays them by "unweaving her gorgeous web" (2.180, *Odyssey*) claiming she will choose a suitor when her work is completed. Penelope has to be poised even in the face of her husband's disappearance,

knowing whoever she marries will rule Ithaca, and so she must be coy and chaste. These qualities are reinforced by Homer, who describes Penelope upon each appearance using adjectives like “thoughtful” and “cautious” (16.364, *Odyssey*) to characterize her restraint. He even elevates her by likening her to the virginal goddess Artemis simultaneously with the goddess of beauty Aphrodite (17.36, *Odyssey*). Unlike Odysseus’ earlier interactions with divine women, Homer comparing Penelope to Artemis and Aphrodite helps imbue Penelope with some wifely qualities. It draws significance to Penelope’s patience and loyalty toward her husband, but also suggestively paints her as a desirable figure to be claimed by a husband. While Penelope is a desirable figure, Homer also makes sure to imbue her with the same cunning and wits we have observed from her husband throughout his journey towards the end of the Epic. For example, Penelope proudly claims responsibility for deceiving the suitors for three years (19.169, *Odyssey*), and reprimands her son for disrespecting Odysseus, disguised as a beggar (18.257, *Odyssey*). In doing so, Homer shows that Penelope is not simply a beautiful, helpless maiden distressed by the disappearance of her husband, but a calculating woman well-adept to courtly behaviour. In all respects, Penelope seems to be depicted as the perfect wife: loyal, clever, and when she uses her authority, she does so in a way that enforces polite guest-host behavior.

Penelope’s stark understanding of domestic duty derives from an understanding that Ithaca is a patriarchal society. She can only exercise her power to a certain extent, which is entirely defined by her marital status, putting other men in control of her life. She keeps her son safe for two decades with remarkable wit, but neither Telemachus or Odysseus praise Penelope for her cleverness. In fact, in the first lines Telemachus has with his mother, he reminds her he “hold[s] the reins of power in this household” (1.413-414, *Odyssey*) as her son. Penelope is shocked, but does not reprimand her son — she is capable of reprimanding him, but only does so in the context of proper social conduct. Telemachus easily silences Penelope, restoring himself to the patriarchal order of the household, and restricting Penelope’s agency all at once.

What Homer reveals consistently in the process of showing two different kinds of women in *The Odyssey* is that those who are autonomous, or empowered in their intelligence and power, present threats to the patriarchy. I drew attention to how Odysseus constructs a narrative where dissenting women must be subdued. But nevertheless, Homer records their dissent in the narrative of the *Odyssey*, teasing and invoking marginalised voices that are, in the end, silenced by the overarching patriarchal society, and the role it assigns women. With all the

intelligence, wit, and power Penelope has, she does not (and perhaps can not) try to escape or exceed her position as Odysseus' wife. Nor does Penelope attempt to protect the women of lower statuses in her household by exercising her privilege as Odysseus' wife, and remains silent as Telemachus commands them to carry the suitors' corpses and die by painful hanging (23.498-500, *Odyssey*.) As a narrator ultimately responsible for constructing both a mythos and, in *The Odyssey*, a story that reflects peaceful Greek society, Homer may perhaps also be socially constrained to tell a story that favours the dominant patriarchal society. He does not advocate for a liberated woman, in the way modern readers would understand them, instead dehumanizing or vilifying them as sexual creatures in Odysseus' narrative. However, in those dissenting feminine voices, Homer offers room for readers to tease at their untold narratives. By doing so, he implores readers to consider the agency women could have by presenting what they do not, and perhaps, to imagine a different kind of society.

### Works Cited

- Duherty, Lillian Eileen. "Sirens, Muses, and Female Narrators in The Odyssey." *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, edited by Beth Cohen, Oxford University Press, 1995. Accessed 27 November 2022.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. R. Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1996. Print.
- Neils, Jenifer. "Les Femmes Fatales: Skylla and the Sirens in Greek Art." *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, edited by Beth Cohen, Oxford University Press, 1995. Accessed 27 November 2022.

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. I also give permission for the Student Learning Commons to publish all or part of my essay as an example of good writing in a particular course or discipline, or to provide models of specific writing techniques for use in teaching. This permission applies whether or not I win a prize, and includes publication on the Simon Fraser University website or in the SLC Writing Contest Open Journal.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Pei Xuan Chia, 2022

Available from: <https://journals.lib.sfu.ca/index.php/slc-uwv>