

**TE000381 2020-21**



**Ancient Culture Lab:  
Homer's Experience and the Greek  
Language**

**Team Project, Part A. Collective  
Output**

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## Exploring Female Virtue and Stature in Homeric Poetry

### *Introduction*

In antiquity, ideas of beauty, stature, and virtue were starkly different from our own. This contrast is especially evident in the Homeric epics with regards to how women are depicted and treated. Thus, we shall focus on the desirable characteristics of women such as form and stature with a concentration on virtue, considering Aristotle's characterization.

A phrase which we thought may be used to represent this was “οὐ δέμας οὐδὲ φυήν” [IL.1.115]. This translates roughly to ‘neither in form nor stature’. The phrase is used often by men, discussing their wives, mistresses, or prizes. The use of the phrase often demonstrates the lack of respect men in this period had for women, especially women who had lost their youthful looks and abilities.

Agamemnon sets especially low standards to begin the Iliad. When asked to give up his ‘prize’, Chriseïs, Agamemnon responds aggressively. “καὶ γὰρ ῥα Κλυταιμνήστρης προβέβουλα κουριδίης ἀλόχου, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἔθεν ἔστι χερσίων, οὐ δέμας οὐδὲ φυήν, οὔτ' ἄρ φρένας οὔτε τι ἔργα” [IL.1.113-115]. Here Agamemnon compares this new prize to his wife, Klytaimnestra. Even having only known Chriseïs for a brief period, he states that ‘she is no way inferior, neither in build nor stature nor wit, not in accomplishment.’ However, it is not with the treatment of the women that anyone takes issue, but the discarding of social expectations, to return the prize for a ransom. It truly illustrates the lack of equality, or humanity, with which women in the period were viewed.

The idea of the female form is discussed in Aristotle's ‘Rhetoric’. “Female bodily excellences are beauty and stature” (Arist. Rhet. 1.5.6. trans. Freese)<sup>1</sup>. While physical beauty is undoubtedly important, regardless of a women's moral virtue, women were seen as inferior to men. In the same passage, Aristotle speaks of male children as being good for the community, and female children being good for the individual. This implies that a woman's value is in the riches for which she can be bartered. “Their moral excellences self-control and industrious habits, free from servility.” (Rhet. 1.5.6. trans. Freese). Many celebrated habits of men, polygamy, courage, and skill in battle, are seen as undesirable in women, it was thought that they should be constrained to the confines of the home<sup>2</sup>. We hope that the reader will gain a better understanding of different thematic concepts like virtue and moral excellence. The reader should also think about modern comparisons in today's media and how similar ideas are present in the Homeric epics.

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1 Aristotle. trans. J.H. Freese. (1926). Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 22. Cambridge and London. Harvard University Press; William Heinemann Ltd. 1926.

2 Monsacré, Hélène (2018). The Tears of Achilles. Trans. Nicholas J. Snead. Introduction by Richard P. Martin. Hellenic Studies Series 75. Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies.

## ***Moral Virtue***

The worth held by women in Homeric society is heavily based on what the family can gain from her suitors. Daughters in Homer's poems are often represented as a monetary bargaining tool for their families, with the exchange of 'ἔδνα'. This exchange, that works similarly to a dowry, is a form of competition between the men. It can be surmised that the true victory in this marital gift exchange is not so much the beautiful woman that is obtained, but the many other male suitors that were 'defeated'. This ritual is not restricted to only mortal beings as the immortal Gods also follow suit<sup>3</sup>. This highlights the importance placed in Ancient Greek society, even to the extension of the gods, on the importance of fidelity as a virtuous female trait.

Despite the rampant promiscuity amongst the Gods in Homeric literature, the same social or marital values apply in an equivalent manner to the mortal realm. Where the God's immortality and divinity has generated a predisposition to act on desire propulsion, and stimulus, they are immune to the consequences of their selfish actions. Seeing the social or marital value of a Goddess be held to the same social standard as the mortal man substantiates a theme of Homeric poetry that women are viewed as objects of desire. Whether a mortal woman or a deity, the image of a woman as a prize has the potential to be shattered through the violation of the very values they are held to. One of these values being virtue or moral excellence is dishonoured by Aphrodite who sleeps with Ares while married to Hephaestus. The passage highlights not only the value Aphrodite held in marital exchange, but the erosion of this value at the hands of her own infidelity. Her act is dishonourable, undermining the image of moral excellence and patience from which her value as a wife is derived. This causes Hephaestus to demand his bride price back from her father Zeus.

“εἰς ὃ κέ μοι<sup>31</sup> μάλα πάντα πατήρ ἀποδῶσιν ἔδνα,  
ὅσσα οἱ ἐγγυάλιξα κυνώπιδος εἵνεκα κόυρης”

*“Until her father pays back to me fully the whole bride price,*

*all I put in his palm for his dog-eyed girl” [OD 8.318-319].*

This not only highlights the consequences imposed on the Goddess, but the transactional nature between two Gods of which the situation is dealt. This passage is hugely important as within a wider context of the intrusive, manipulative, self-serving behaviours of the Homeric Gods, the

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<sup>3</sup> Van Wees, Hans (2003) *The Invention of the Female Mind: Women, Property and Gender Ideology in Archaic Greece*, Women and Property (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies) pp.5-6.

emphasis placed on the wrongdoing of Aphrodite as a wife elucidates to the reader that the depiction of women, their virtue, and their worth is of higher rank than any other perceived offence committed.

### ***Patience & Self Control***

Women in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are seen as responsible for their own patience and self-control. However, they are not granted the same space for moral autonomy and self-interested virtue like the men in the story<sup>4</sup>. There are some women like Penelope and Circe who have autonomy over themselves and their lives. There are other women like Chryses and Briseis that do not have this luxury. In the Homeric poems, a wife's virtue is her intelligence and ability to have self-control/loyalty when her husband is not there<sup>5</sup>. Penelope is seen as the ideal wife and as virtuous because of her loyalty to her husband, Odysseus, even when he is away. Women like Penelope still have limits to what they can achieve. One way of women being able to attain moral excellence is the way that Penelope deals with the suitors.

Firstly, the emphasis on being “taller and thicker” in stature is highlighted as being more desirable, in terms of beauty standards [OD.18.1.195]. However furtherly, Penelope is appraised by her husband Odysseus for using her wits alongside her beauty to cheat the suitors out of the marital gifts ‘ἔεδνα’ they provided to her and her family.

“ὥς φάτο, γήθησεν δὲ πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς,

οὐνεκα τῶν μὲν δῶρα παρέλκετο, θέλγε δὲ θυμὸν”,

“long suffering divine Odysseus was glad

because she wheedled gifts from them” [OD 18.281-282].

This presents Penelope as even more valuable and virtuous to Odysseus and demonstrates the significance that physical beauty combined with a balanced mindset and morals has in Homer's

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Beth, (1995). “*The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*,” Oxford Academic, pp. 94-108.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen, Beth, (1995). “*The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*,” Oxford Academic, pp. 94-108.

poems<sup>6</sup>. However contrary to this, women are still expected to wait on the whims of men regardless, as men are the ones who decide what occurs in all aspects of their lives<sup>7</sup>.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the depiction of women in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* demands them to be virtuous characters, with patience, self-control, and an obedience to the social order. The disposition of a Homeric woman is often stripped into ranked and categorized criteria of which men can use to make judgement of their value. While beauty and form remain desirable traits of a woman, it is the expected virtuousness and wit which holds a stronger presence in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Women such as Penelope display virtuous characteristics for resisting the suitors in Odysseus' absence. Ironically, it is such virtue which contributes to her desirability and the subsequent incessant pursuit of her suitors. This is also seen in the divine realm, where the god's and goddesses who operate above mortal law and without moral guidance, adopt and enforce these same societal norms surrounding mortal women, signifying the weight given to these values in Ancient Greek society. The cultural significance of celebrated or "prized" female characteristics stretches far beyond the Homeric epics. Understanding the role of women in ancient society helps shed light on the origins and structure of societal norms revolving around gender, the impact of which is still relevant today.

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<sup>6</sup> Van Wees, Hans (2003) '*The Invention of the Female Mind: Women, Property and Gender Ideology in Archaic Greece*', *Women and Property* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies) pp. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Farron, S, 'The portrayal of women in the *Iliad*', *Acta Classica*, 22 (1979) pp.21.

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