

**TE000381 2020-21**



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

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

<b>TEAM No.</b>  <b>11</b>	<b>Individual Reflection by (Name, Student Number)</b> <b>David Lawton 22337087</b>
<b>Collective Output Title:</b>  <b>Discussion of the Virtue of Married Women in the Homeric Epics</b>	<b>Wordcount (excluding bibliography):</b>  <b>750</b>

## **Discussion of the Virtue of Married Women in the Homeric Epics**

Our group project focused on the stature and virtue of women in the Homeric epics, with extensions to general culture in ancient Greece. In particular we chose the phrase, “οὐ δέμας οὐδὲ φύγῃ” (IL.1.115), to highlight the objectification that women fall victim to throughout. We explored the value of moral virtue in mortal women and gods.

The chosen phrase translates to ‘neither in form nor stature’, as explained in the collaborative work. It is evident from its use in the comparison of woman, often by heroes, while discussing their wives, ‘prizes’ and potential mistresses, that women are seen as physical objects to be used for pleasure and financial gain. Both Odysseus and Agamemnon compare their wives with other women, although in wildly different circumstances, in the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* respectively.

In my individual reflection, I will be specify on the devaluation of married women and their achievements, including their virtue and stature, by comparison and objectification in the Homeric epics, with reference to the extension of this subject to ancient Greek culture as a whole, as well as some comparison to the subject in the modern day.

The first relevant instance comes about one hundred lines into the first book of the *Iliad*, with Agamemnon’s selfish behaviour and his quarrel with Achilles. Here Agamemnon compares his wife Klytaimnestra with Chriseïs. He states that Chriseïs ‘is no way inferior, neither in build nor stature nor wit, not in accomplishment’ (Il.1.113-5). Agamemnon, while upset about having to give up his ‘prize’ (Il.1.118), is quick to devalue his wife so that he may gain more from the loss of Chriseïs. This is a clear illustration of the lack of worth with which many married women and women of ignoble status are regarded, as both are seen as impure in a way, and objects which have been, and will be, traded for riches, respectively.

As mentioned in the collaborative work, Aristotle’s Rhetoric discusses the ideas of a person’s worth, as it pertains to their gender, “their moral excellences self-control and industrious habits, free from servility” (Arist. Rhet. 1.5.6. trans. Freese)<sup>1</sup>. While it is often through their looks that women are objectified, it seems more that their ‘moral excellences’ are what differentiates them truly. For example, in book five of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is offered immortality and companionship with the goddess, Calypso. Yet while Odysseus admits that Penelope does not compare in beauty to the goddess, he states “εἰ δ' αὖ τις ῥαίησι θεῶν ἐνὶ οἴνοπι πόντῳ, τλήσομαι ἐν στήθεσσιν ἔχων ταλαπενθέα θυμόν” (Od.5.221-2). Despite the treacherous conditions in his return, he will endure it, and gives up the offered immortality so that he may return home to Penelope.

The two cases mentioned are quite comparable, Agamemnon and Odysseus were both considered honourable Greek men, who were away from their wives for considerable periods. Yet, both given opportunities to betray their marriage, one sacrifices much to retain it, while the other throws it to the wayside. The main difference in the scenarios, from an outside perspective, is the perception of their wives. Penelope, as discussed in the collaborative project, is seen as the pinnacle of virtue, while Klytaimnestra is seen famously as a scheming woman<sup>2</sup>. It is their self-control that differentiates the two married women in the eyes of the world.

It is for this reason that I would disagree somewhat with the idea of the gods following the exact same moral code as mortals, as discussed in depth in the collaborative work. This is

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

2 Natalie Haynes. 2022. Is Clytemnestra an Archetypically Bad Wife or a Heroically Avenging Mother?. Literary Hub [Article](#).

because, the true differentiator between the goddesses would appear not to appear be their virtue like mortal women, but power and birthright. Hera is seen often as scheming, and I would draw parallels between her and Klytaimnestra, yet she is not considered with the same lack of respect by the gods as Klytaimnestra is the mortal men.

To conclude, I believe that a married woman's perceived moral virtue, or excellence by Aristotle's definition, is what truly decides the respect with which she is regarded, both in the Homeric epics and ancient Greek society as a whole. I would draw similarities between this and most societies in recent history, including many more traditional ones existing today. It is likely an element which has influenced western societies significantly up until the twentieth century. In modern western culture however, likely with the relative normalcy of divorce, and the great increase in women's rights in the last century, a married woman is valued not just for her moral virtue, but her beauty, her income, and her intellect.

## ***Bibliography***

1. Aristotle. trans. J.H. Freese. 1926. Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 22. Cambridge and London. Harvard University Press; William Heinemann Ltd. 1926.
2. Natalie Haynes. 2022. Is Clytemnestra an Archetypically Bad Wife or a Heroically Avenging Mother?. Literary Hub. [Article](#).
3. Liddell, H.G. and Scott, Robert. 1889. An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon. Oxford. Clarendon Press.