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Human Condition 1
Paper 3

The Self-Contained Construction and Subversion of the Feminine Narrative Role through the Women of *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *The Aeneid*

Prescriptive ideas of identity within a community can produce paradoxical expectations for individual members of a socially constructed group, and narratives that are not specifically invested in defining roles outside of these expectations construct characters that validate or otherwise repeat these roles. In *The Iliad, The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid*, this appears as the construction of roles for women within the community that are challenged by individual characters but not ultimately overturned within the narrative progression. To demonstrate this, I will first examine passages from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* which illustrate the prescriptive narratives of womanhood present in the texts, and the community narratives of womanhood within. Then, I will compare the actual behavior of specific women to the abstract ideas of women in general. From the examination of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, I will extract an understanding of how the role of "wife" expected from individual women functions in relationship to men. I will explore why these texts are unable to define new roles for women within the community, and how instead it constructs women who live up to the expectations placed upon them, even as those expectations are paradoxical and require women to behave illogically. Next, I will look at the challenges specific characters within *The Aeneid* presents to the framework of women's roles constructed by *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey.* I will consider how women who break the roles defined within previous texts function within the overarching narrative of *The Aeneid*, and what this offers to contemporary inquiry. This analysis reveals complex and sometimes contradictory relationships between women as prescribed and women as

described. These complexities both serve to give women depth in the narratives of *The Iliad, The Odyssey* and *The Aeneid,* and indicate that the texts are ill-equipped to depict women as agents within their narratives.

In Book One of T*he Iliad*, the language surrounding Chryseis and Briseis throughout this chapter demonstrates how women are treated as the property of men during war (Homer [trans. Fagles], Iliad 1: 129-136, 156-164). This is best exemplified in lines 215-221, where Agamemnon says to Achilles:

> "...since Apollo insists on taking my Chryseis,
> I'll send her back in my own ships with my crew.
> But I, I will be there in person at your tents
> to take Briseis in all her beauty, your own prize-
> so you can learn just how much greater I am than you
> and the next man up may shrink from matching words with me,
> from hoping to rival Agamemnon strength for strength!"

In this excerpt, the men argue about the women the same way they argue about money and other plundered items (Homer [trans. Fagles], Iliad 1:140-201). The question of what man a woman is attached to is implicit in how they are referred to by Agamemnon, as "my Chryseis," and "[Achilles'] own prize. In Book 9, Agamemnon attempts to repair the argument with Achilles by returning Briseis along with "[s]even women… flawless, skilled in crafts." (Homer [trans. Fagles], Iliad 9: 327). In this example, seven women are completely stripped of individual identity when they are first presented to Achilles. These examples in which women are referred to in the third person by male characters share a construction of women as objects that lack individual agency. Chryseis and Briseis are not treated with individual regard against each other or against other women. Instead, all women captured at war are treated as interchangeable objects. In this instance, women are solely capable of being owned, traded, and commandeered

by men– and men decide the purpose of each woman. The question of moral agency is absent from this consideration because women's ability to take action as an individual is absent.

However, the individual woman who is arguably most focal to the overarching conflict *The Iliad* takes place within is Helen. When the Achaean men talk about Helen, the language they use is ambiguous between active participation and passivity. One such example occurs in Book 2, when Nestor says:

> "So now let no man hurry to sail for home, not yet. . .
> not till he beds down with a faithful Trojan wife,
> payment in full for the groans and shocks of war
> we have all borne for Helen."

One possible interpretation of this excerpt reads "for Helen," as, "in order to retrieve Helen and restore her to Menelaus." If this is true, it is punctuated by the fact that the Achaean men are trying to capture her back from the people who had captured her in the first place. This interpretation affirms Helen's role as a woman in this situation as passive, with little ability to influence the situation she is in via her actions. She is captured by men before and being captured by men again without regard to what she desires. Another possible interpretation of this excerpt is to read Nestor saying they have endured the pains of war "for Helen," here, as "Helen is making us go to war by being unfaithful to her husband." This would subtly construct a narrative that Helen is a willing participant in her infidelity, by placing blame for the Trojan war on Helen and not Hector who captured her. In this interpretation, there is a contrast between Helen's infidelity which causes the pain of war, and the prize of pleasure within "bed[ding] down a faithful Trojan wife." This interpretation contains the very paradox by which women are defined: Helen was kidnapped and married to Paris as a prize, but she is responsible for her infidelity, while the "faithful Trojan wives," the men plan to capture as prizes exist with no agency or individuality in their own kidnapping. I acknowledge both of these interpretations because the

vagueness could be a result of translation from Ancient Greek to English, or a true dual-meaning which contains paradoxical definitions of Helen as a non-agent, and Helen as morally responsible.

When Helen is actually given time to speak regarding her situation in Book 3 of *The Iliad*, she wishes death upon herself and refers to herself as a "whore:"

> And Helen the radiance of women answered Priam.
> "I revere you so, dear father, dread you too
> if only death had pleased me then, grim death.
> that day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking
> my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child.
> my favorite, now full-grown.
> and the lovely comradeship of women my own age.
> Death never came, so now I can only waste away in tears.
> But about your question-yes. I have the answer.
> That man is Atreus' son Agamemnon, lord of empires.
> both a mighty king and a strong spearman too.
> and he used to be my kinsman, whore that I am!
> There was a world ... or was it all a dream?"

Helen says, "I followed your son to Troy, forsaking my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child." Her apparent guilt and repentance in this excerpt would rely upon her having had some choice in her present situation. But that perception of Helen's actions is complicated by Helen's relationship to the gods. Later in Book Three, she addresses Aphrodite in a way that indicates she actually does not want to continue her marriage to Paris:

> "Maddening one, my Goddess, oh what now?
> Lusting to lure me to my ruin yet again?
> Where will you drive me next?
> …
> I'll never go back again. It would be wrong,
> disgraceful to share that coward's bed once more.
> The women of Troy would scorn me down the years.
> Oh the torment-never-ending heartbreak!"

The phrasing of this excerpt, addressing Aphrodite by the epithet "[m]addening one," saying "you drive me," removes Helen's agency once again, and places it in the hands of

Aphrodite. Even after Helen proclaims in this excerpt she will never go back to Paris again, later she submits to the threats of Aphrodite and makes love to him.

The conflicted words and actions from Helen demonstrate her conflicting obligations to 1) be a faithful wife to Menelaus, 2) be faithful to the outcome of Paris and Menelaus' duel for her hand (which Menelaus won), and 3) to be obedient to the will of the goddess Aphrodite which compels her to return to Paris. The first two obligations Helen must contend with arise from her role as a woman in her community, which assigns her primary concern as remaining faithful to her Achaean husband Menelaus. Despite the Achaean and Trojan communities being at war, this is a shared standard, as her duty to Menelaus has been affirmed by the duel for her hand. Helen shows anxiety about the perception of her character in the Trojan community when she says, "The women of Troy would scorn me down the years [if I went back to Paris now that he has lost]." Her husband being decided by a duel between the two men places her in a passive role in the decision of to whom she is married, to which she must respond without having had a voice in the decision. The third obligation, to be obedient to the will of Aphrodite, is decided by her role as a human in relation to the gods. This is unlike the first two, which were decided by her role as a woman in her community.

Helen suffers when she considers her position and the judgements being rendered upon her, while at the same having little ability to influence her situation through her actions– when she attempts to refuse to sleep with Paris, Aphrodite forces her to. She is left waiting for the Achaeans to recapture her, having no hand in their ability to do so, and having been put in this position by her role as a woman that allows her to be stolen and kept like property. When all three of these expectations are placed on one individual, they create a paradoxical course of action where no decision she can make is correct. Her obligations as a woman and her

obligations as a human are at odds. These dual roles are paradoxical but necessarily created by *The Iliad* attempting to explore its themes of fate vs. agency. Ultimately, Helen herself does not have the full power to choose her own path in this situation– her next action is the one Aphrodite defines for her.

The Odyssey moves out of the war of *The Iliad*, affording the audience more time spent with women and further developing the expectations for women in their role as a wife. In *The Iliad* the role of women as wives was completely passive, and thus fails to give insight into women's internal world, or provide a process of decision making that one could apply to one's own life through women in *The Iliad*. However, the insight *The Odyssey* provides into women's minds, via more time spent with them and the household in which marriage plays out, expands upon passivity within marriage as an exercise of human agency. This is different from The *Iliad,* in that women are not being made to submit as wives through wartime capture, after the destruction of one's previous life, a situation where expecting them to exercise agency doesn't make sense. But in *The Odyssey* women are expected to exercise individual agency in their relationships to men, despite their role in the community stripping them of agency. In essence, a wife is expected to exercise agency in her submission to her husband, which is questionable as the text does not define a role in the community for a woman who is not married. This creates a paradox in which women are expected to choose to submit to their husband's will, but not given a choice other than submission.

Book 6 of the Odyssey introduces the character Nausicaa, who highlights this paradoxical expectation. She is in a unique position as a girl on the cusp of being a woman and highly aware of the new expectations she will be facing. Here, Athena addresses Nausicaa and spells out the role of wife she will soon be in:

> “You’ll have to dress yourself and your party well,
> If you want the people to speak highly of you
> And make your father and mother glad…
> You’re not going to be a virgin for long, you know!
> All the best young men in Phaeacia are eager
> To marry you– as well they should be…”

In the lines, “You’re not going to be a virgin for long, you know! All the best young men in Phaeacia are eager To marry you…” the prediction of her future is dependent upon the will and actions of men. She will not be a virgin for long because men desire her, and her own desire is absent from Athena’s words. Nausicaa’s role as a woman in her community is to respond to the desires of men, specifically the future husband to whom she will be a wife, rather than to her own desire.

Later Nausicaa says to Odysseus that the reason she is not married is that she “turns her nose up At the many fine Phaeachians who woo her…” In doing so, she exercises agency in saying no, either to put off getting married or to choose a husband who is best fit for her. But, Athena’s words make it clear that this exercise of agency that prevents her from getting married is temporary. Nausicaa cannot use her agency to change the fact that she will be married, she can only use it to delay it in the near future while she is young. In the rest of her speech, she demonstrates an awareness of how she must behave in line with the expectation placed upon her by the community that she will be married, saying, “It's [the Phaeacians’] rude remarks I would rather avoid… I myself would blame anyone who acted like this/A girl who, with her father and mother to tell her better/Kept the company of men before her wedding day.” (Homer [trans. Lombardo], Odyssey 6: 281, 294-296). This reinforces the necessity of performing to the standards of one’s community (present within Helen’s dilemma in the Iliad, as well as in the line, “You’ll have to dress yourself and your party well, If you want the people to speak highly of

you…" in the previous excerpt), as well as the necessity of keeping faithful to one's future husband throughout one's life.

However, exercising one's own agency to be passively faithful to one's husband is a logic which breaks down for Penelope's character when she believes Odysseus is dead. The text is not able to construct a woman that has agency in remaining faithful to her husband who she believes to be dead, when her obligation to the community would mean she must remarry. Moments after naming her as "wise Penelope, far too prudent," Agamemnon warns Odysseus to return home in secret because "[w]omen just can't be trusted anymore." (Homer [trans. Lombardo], Odyssey 11: 463-474) This interaction shows a conflict between the idea of women as a whole versus individual women. This contradiction with regards to Penelope is also shown later in the text, when Athena says to Odysseus:

> "...I can't leave you when you're down and out
> Because you're so intelligent and self-possessed.
> Any other man come home from hard travels
> Would rush to his house to see his children and wife.
> But you don't even want to hear how they are
> Until you test your wife, who,
> As a matter of fact, just sits in the house,
> Weeping away the lonely days and nights."

Athena has been able to watch Penelope in the years Odysseus has been absent and knows she has been faithful. Yet here, Athena praises Odysseus for sustaining a "self-possessed" mistrust of his wife, even though Athena knows Penelope can be trusted to remain faithful as an individual woman.

In Books 16-23 Odysseus performs the "test" on Penelope by hiding his identity while watching her interactions with the suitors. In these books, Penelope is being tested for her faithfulness to Odysseus, but she herself is facing contradictory expectations for her next course of action. She is expected to be faithful to Odysseus, but is obligated to remarry and give Ithaca a

new king. However, all evidence suggests that her husband is truly dead. We see her ongoing pain at her husband's absence several times throughout the text (Homer [trans. Lombardo], Odyssey 1: 360-364, 16: 483-486, 18: 216-220, 19: 220-225).

Book 18 of *Odyssey,* lines 272-331, shows how Penelope navigates the position she is in with regard to the dual expectations placed upon her. She appears to the suitors to announce that she intends to remarry, although she makes it clear this is against her will. She says heart breaks that the suitors are not acting properly, because suitors of a widowed queen would usually act very respectfully of her house, and bring her lavish gifts to persuade her heart. Ostensibly, Penelope does not know that Odysseus is alive to watch her in this moment, and she just happens to say the exact thing that both appeases the suitors and shows her faithfulness to Odysseus. Odysseus interprets this as Penelope "extracting gifts" from the suitors "while her mind [is] set elsewhere." In deceiving the suitors, she fulfills her obligation to be faithful to Odysseus, but fails to be faithful to her community and future husband. Furthermore, she is not behaving logically in respect to the information suggesting Odysseus is dead, which would place her obligation to provide a new king to her community over her obligation to Odysseus. Ostensibly, this is a scenario in which she should use reason to determine her obligation is to remarry for the sake of her community, but she does not. The intratextual justification for this failure to use reason on Penelope's behalf is her remaining emotional connection to Odysseus. Why is Penelope characterized positively for remaining faithful to Odysseus in this moment, if it is reasonable to believe he is dead? Why is her deception of other men praised at this moment if she does herself not know Odysseus is alive?

The questions above raise an important consideration about the characterization of women in *The Odyssey.* Due to the text's investment in reflecting and validating the roles

available to women in the community, it will prioritize this validation over the creation of characters who might take issue with the restrictions their role places upon them. For Nausicaa, this means the text does not have to reckon with what will happen if she continues to refuse to marry. In the case of Penelope, it means she behaves in a way that navigates between the social nuances of her position so deftly that it potentially lacks realism. Metatextually, her character has been perfectly constructed (even the glimpses into her "true" emotional state the audience receives are fictional constructions) to behave perfectly within the paradoxical expectations she faces. The text does not try to create women who refuse or fail their role, because the text is not trying to challenge the roles that women are given.

However, examining the reason the text gives Penelope for succeeding as an archetype of a "good woman," reveals another issue with her construction. For Penelope to behave according to reason would be to remarry, thus contradicting the expectations of faithfulness to one's husband, breaking the logic of the text. What it offers is a woman who does not "make the right decision," (which, if Odysseus is dead as she believes, would be to remarry) but still "does the right thing," (remains faithful to Odysseus, whom she cannot know is alive) because she is responding to her own emotions. Ultimately, attributing the way she behaves to her emotions removes her control over her own actions– the actions by which she is judged as a "good woman."

Furthermore, Penelope's use of deception to enact her faithfulness maintains her passive stance within the community. Deception itself is a passive way of exerting influence over one's own situation, by manipulating others to action on your own behalf. Even as the text offers Penelope an opportunity to influence her situation, she is only allowed to do so as an exercise of faithfulness to her husband– women who deceive their husbands have been condemned

previously throughout the text. If Odysseus was actually dead, as all the practical evidence available to Penelope suggests, her actions might be considered condemnable for the ways they break the standards outlined within *Odyssey.* In this way, her actions presuppose the end, Odysseus' return, which her character has no real evidence of. If she had acted any other way, despite having good reason to do so, she would break the logic of the text which must validate a woman's role as faithful to her husband beyond all other considerations. Thus, *The Odyssey* fails to depict women who are capable of using reason or exercising agency beyond the scope of their marriage to a husband.

The Aeneid presents two women who seem to challenge the framework set up by *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the first of which is in a similar situation to Penelope in *The Odyssey*. Dido, The Queen of Carthage, is first depicted in Book 1 as feeling conflicted between her faithfulness to her deceased husband and her romantic feelings towards Aeneas. She has "set [herself] against the ties of marriage," since her husband died, but Cupid has pierced her with a love for Aeneas. (Vergil [trans. Ruden], Aeneid 1: 660-722, 4: 16-17) Ultimately, her feelings for Aeneas win over in Book 4, at which point the two engage in sex without being married first. Aeneas abandons her, having been called to fulfill his fate to establish Rome, and Dido commits suicide as she is faced with the destruction of Carthage in the wake of their union. At first, this does not appear promising– Dido's emotions win over her faithfulness to her deceased husband, and she is punished in the narrative by her death and the destruction of her kingdom. Aeneas leaving Dido is also an interaction where Aeneas has the power to take action and influence his situation, not Dido. Aeneas, out of his need to use agency to obey the will of the gods, victimizes helpless Dido. Where in this does *The Aeneid* present a challenge to depictions of women as controlled by their emotion and unable to exercise agency?

In Book 4, lines 304-340, as Aeneas is leaving Carthage, Dido deploys an argument that follows the standards of classical rhetoric in an attempt to prevent his departure. In lines 316-318, “Our union, and the wedding we embarked on– If ever I have earned it through my kindness, Have pity on my tottering house and me,” she asks Aeneas to have pity on her, forming an appeal to his emotions or pathos. She evokes his responsibility to her as a husband, and her right to make these requests as his wife, forming an appeal to ethos. However, the ambiguous circumstances under which they have had sex form a shaky foundation for this appeal in terms of logos. Although their union was partially orchestrated by the goddess of marriage (Vergil [trans. Ruden], Aeneid 4: 92-128), this happened unbeknownst to Aeneas, and it was never formally or legally enshrined. Ultimately, he refutes this part of her argument by stating, “... as for spouse, I never made a pact of marriage with you.” However, he is unable to refute her appeal to pathos, as seen by his “struggling to force his feelings from his heart.” (Vergil [trans. Ruden], Aeneid 4: 331-361).

Although Dido has found herself in this situation due to her emotions winning over, and cannot ultimately influence her situation by reasoning with Aeneas, *The Aeneid* gives her credit in the narrative for her ability to use reason. The challenge this presents to the framework of *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* is by showing Dido attempting to exert influence over Aeneas outright. She presents evidenced claims in a manner that has been previously employed by men, notably by Odysseus in Book 9 of *The Iliad,* to reason with one another. However, this is not without limitations. In relation to *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad,* Dido is not representative of an archetype of a “good woman,” as an individual, nor is she a reflection of a woman in the culture of Rome, the community which *The Aeneid* follows.

The Aeneid's large geographical plane, as well as its metatextual interest in depicting Rome's dominance over other cultures, allows for it to depict individual women in varied lights without needing to validate their roles within the Roman community itself. The second woman who presents a substantial challenge to the framework of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* is Camilla of the Volsci, who is an opponent in the war that the second half of *The Aeneid* follows. She is introduced in Book 7, lines 802-817:

> "Last came Camilla of the Volsci,
> Leading a cavalry that bloomed with bronze
> A female warrior, stranger to Minerva's
> Tasks and the distaff, though she was a girl,
> She endured combat and outran the wind…
> …Men poured from fields and and matrons out of houses
> To gaze on her in wonder as she rode.
> They gaps, astonished at the royal splendor
> Of purple on smooth shoulders, the gold hair clasp–
> The Lycian quiver hanging at her back,
> The shepherd's staff of myrtle, tipped with iron."

In her introduction, she is described in a way that venerates her ability in combat. The text also shows the men and women of the surrounding areas alike admiring her. Her presence on the battlefield itself is an incredibly notable departure from the depiction of women in *The Iliad, The Odyssey,* and the previous parts of *The Aeneid.* In Book 11, she goes on a fearsome rampage, killing several of her opponents in a portion from lines 664-830 that follows the structure of an aristea, but which ends in her death. Including a woman who achieves success on the battlefield and strikes fear into the people she is battling negates an essentialist interpretation of the roles of women. Camilla's inclusion within *The Aeneid* proves that women are not being painted as inherently docile or passive when compared to men. Inversely, this also shows that the role they are given within the community is restrictive of the capability for strength and domination that is

already present within women. Camilla is called out as a virgin warrior who has remained unmarried (Vergil [trans. Ruden], Aeneid 11: 583-584, 4: 16-17), which forms a link between marriage and subjugation or removal of a woman's capability for agency. This further negates an essentialist interpretation of women that could be read into *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* via their only depicting married women, or women who will be married among mortals. In the excerpted portion above, the image of Camilla riding through the surrounding areas is contrasted with the matrons leaving their households to watch her in amazement. *The Aeneid* is not saying that the essence of women is passive, and therefore they must be married to men who are active. Rather, through Camilla, *The Aeneid* shows a woman whose unmarried status allows her to take action and thrive– to the astonishment of married men and women.

However, considering the larger narrative calls into question the function of including this character in the text. Camilla is shown succeeding on the battlefield, but is also a member of the opposing side which the Trojans defeat. In the narrative of *The Aeneid,* the Trojans were destined to win this war and found Rome. Returning to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*'s investment in validating the values of the community in which they were written, *The Aeneid* potentially has a more explicit way of expressing this investment. By depicting Camilla as a foreigner, her role is not necessarily posing a threat to the role of Roman women; furthermore, depicting her defeat prompts a reading in which Rome, including the gender roles which it lays out for its citizens, is destined to dominate other communities with differently structured gender roles. In this reading, the agency *The Aeneid* affords Camilla is constructed in service of showing how women with agency must not be included within the roles for women in the community, rather than a neutral depiction of a woman from another culture with a different kind of community identity informing her being. For all the ways *The Aeneid* succeeds in depicting women with forms of

agency not otherwise allowed within *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, there is another limitation which these depictions do not break free from. Both Dido and Camilla exercise their agency outright by means that have been associated with masculinity: through reason and battle. This is not satisfactory for a contemporary inquiry that seeks a definition of womanhood and humanity that does not glorify masculinity. It is similarly unsatisfactory for the way a woman who breaks out of her gender role does not create something new, but follows a path that is already available in the gender role for men.

Upon further consideration, extracting the community roles from essentialist notions of men and women and considering the means by which these connections have informed our perception of what it means to be "human," brings about another interpretation. If "agency" is the ability to influence one's own situation with one's own actions, Penelope, Dido and Camilla all exert influence over their situations. Penelope does so through deception, maintaining the appearance of passivity that has been associated with women's roles in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Camilla and Dido both clearly show their attempts to exert influence over their situation, but do so in ways associated with men. With this information at hand, we can break down the relationships to agency present within each of these texts as "feminine" and "masculine," with the former maintaining passivity by looking to others to act on your behalf, and the latter acting on one's own behalf and on the behalf of others. However, as demonstrated in the texts, it cannot be said that these relationships are essential to men or women. Rather, they have become associated with men and women via the roles each gender has been given in their communities, from there transformed into expectations which are brought upon individuals, and eventually sublimated into the "essence" of masculinity and femininity. This is an immaterial connection, a trace association to the original roles of men and women from which they were

born; demonstrated earliest within *The Iliad* in which women's agency was forcibly ignored and negated in favor of men as agents during war. But throughout the narrative progression, agency is demonstrated in women both passively or actively, for as long as a text has the time to spend with a woman's own thoughts.

The problem within these texts is that they are ill equipped to give women space as characters to exercise agency free of the roles within their community which restrict them. Even in depicting women who break out of these roles, *The Aeneid* is unable to present an environment in which these women can simply live. These texts are unable to overturn the binary of masculinity/femininity that has been created with them and offer something new. However, one might consider what the text has to offer in a contemporary light. These texts explore agency as inherent to the human condition regardless of sex or gender, but we form a relationship by our role in the community that has become gendered. As our communities change and expand, may there be opportunities to define new roles that expand with it.