

GENDER ROLES IN THE ODYSSEY

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I

In any discussion concerning roles of male and female in the *Odyssey* it seems natural to concentrate mainly on the evidence having to do with the situation on Ithaka, both because Ithaka is the most complex and the most fully described society in the *Odyssey* and because, along with the more sketchily portrayed Sparta and Pylos, Ithaka represents normality against which the other environments encountered in the poem are contrasted, implicitly or explicitly, in various ways. In this connection, it is important to note that there is a fundamental antithesis between the real world represented in the main by Ithaka, Pylos and Sparta and the otherness of the literary, mythical landscapes visited by Odysseus between the time of his departure from Troy and his arrival on Ithaka. Characteristic of most of the places visited by Odysseus is their isolation, inwardness, and lack of social context.

In the *Iliad*, men are defined almost exclusively as warriors and this aspect is still prominent in the *Odyssey*. The exploits of the heroes in the Trojan War forms the background to the *Odyssey* and are constantly referred to. Warfare in general is a recurring theme. To prove oneself in war or warlike situations is an intrinsic part of being a man. The main purpose of the cattle raids and hostile incursions into neighbouring territories which are often alluded to seems to be to allow men to prove themselves as warriors in times of peace. The normality and relative frequency of such raids can be deduced from several passages of the *Odyssey*. When the suitors, killed by Odysseus and Telemakhos, are led by Hermes down into the Underworld, they encounter a number of noble souls, among them Agamemnon, who asks them whether the reason for their untimely death is that they were killed while raiding livestock or attacking a town (24.111-113). Agamemnon is himself asked the same question

by Odysseus when they meet during Odysseus's visit among the dead (11.401-408).

War is seen as ennobling and it brings men glory and renown. It gives them the opportunity to exhibit their strength, physical courage, and prowess. Success as a warrior adds to a man's status. The warlike qualities of Odysseus are emphasised by Athena when, disguised as Mentor, she first comes to Ithaca in order to take Telemakhos in hand (1.252-267) and they are often referred to elsewhere in the poem, for example, in the conversations about Odysseus which Telemakhos has with Nestor and Menelaos. Odysseus himself boasts of his achievements in war when talking to the Phaiakians (8.216-220; 9.19-20; 9.40). The story of the Wooden Horse and Odysseus' part in the conquest and destruction of Troy forms the subject of one of Demodokos' songs at the court of the Phaeakians (8.487-520). A recurring epithet of Odysseus is sacker of cities referring to the prominent part he played in the destruction of Troy and perhaps secondarily to acts of piracy such as his raid on the Kikones with which he starts off his account of his adventures to the Phaiakians, at the beginning of book nine. As well one can mention the comparisons between Odysseus and lions which occur several times in the *Odyssey*. For instance, when Odysseus is washed ashore on Skherie and first meets Nausikaa, he is compared to a mountain lion in search of food (6.130-134). Although the simile is in itself appropriate to Odysseus' actual condition, starving after having been at sea for days, it is of the same type as the lion similes which occur in the *Iliad* where lions are described as hunting, prowling, and attacking. In the *Iliad*, lion similes occur almost exclusively in battle scenes and are used to describe warriors fighting or getting ready to fight. Part of the function of this lion simile is to indicate that although Odysseus has been reduced to his lowest point having lost everything, he is still a warrior and a sacker of cities. The purpose of lion similes in connection with Odysseus is made more explicit in another passage where Menelaos compares Odysseus' homecoming and the killing of the suitors to a lion among deer (4.335-340). One of the features which characterise Skherie, and confirms its position as a borderland between reality and irreality is the lack of strife and the distaste of its inhabitants against war (6.6; 6.270).

The *Odyssey*, however, is not primarily a poem about war or piracy and a much wider range of human activities and relationships are described than in the *Iliad* so that the *Odyssey* gives a much more detailed picture of society. Also of relevance is the fact that while the *Iliad* does contain some notable female characters, in the *Iliad* women are seen fairly infrequently and are not as a rule the focus of interest, in the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, they are everywhere and have

major roles in the action; this allows for a clearer conception of gender roles to be developed than would have been possible from the *Iliad*.

II

It is generally recognised that the society of Ithaka as portrayed in the *Odyssey* is a stratified society. As was pointed out by Moses Finley in *The World of Odysseus*, the social order was fixed and hierarchical and social mobility was non-existent. It is reasonable to suppose that gender roles are to a certain extent determined by social condition. Given the nature of epic poetry, however, the social class most fully depicted is the ruling aristocracy. Although the *Odyssey* does show more interest in the lower classes, also as individuals, than does the *Iliad*, there is, on the whole, relatively little information about their situation. In addition it has been observed that Epic poetry is oriented towards the aristocracy to such an extent that the slaves who are individually portrayed constitute special cases and cannot rightly be taken as typical representatives. The swineherd Eumaios, for instance, with whom Odysseus stays when he first arrives in Ithaka, is in reality nobly born but has been reduced to servitude through the disloyalty of a servant-girl.

The central institution of Ithakan society is the *oikos* or the aristocratic household. In addition to the family itself, the *oikos* also included dependents such as servants and slaves. The term also refers to the buildings, land, livestock, and other material possessions belonging to the household. As far as possible, the household was economically self-sustaining.

In the first book of the *Odyssey*, the suitors are feasting in the hall of Odysseus' palace and listening to the bard, Phemios, who is singing about the return of the heroes from Troy. Penelope comes down from her room and asks Phemios to choose another song, since hearing about Troy and the suffering brought about by the war causes her too much sorrow in reminding her of Odysseus. Telemakhos then makes the following reply to his mother Penelope: "go to your room and occupy yourself with your own affairs, weaving and spinning and tell your maids to get busy. Poetry is the concern of men, particularly of me since I hold authority in the house" (1.356-359). In the twenty-first book there is a similar situation. Penelope has arranged a contest with Odysseus' bow in order to test the suitors. Telemakhos, however, prevents Penelope from being present at and watching the contest by again telling her that she should attend to her weaving and spinning since weaponry is the concern of men only (21.350-353). Telemakhos' replies on these two occasions are modelled on Hektor's reply to Andromakhe in the sixth book of the *Iliad* (490-493), where he tells

her that war concerns men only and she should attend to her weaving and spinning. The contexts both of Hektor's words to Andromakhe in the *Iliad* and Telemakhos' to Penelope in the *Odyssey* are closely comparable. Andromakhe and Penelope have stepped outside the boundaries of their female roles. The most significant conclusion that can be drawn from these passages is perhaps the recognition that male and female roles were sharply defined and clearly distinguished so that certain activities were properly considered to be the business of men only, while others concerned only women. In both instances in the *Odyssey*, Penelope accepts Telemakhos' rebuke which indicates that there was an absolute respect for the division of roles. It is also seen that the proper sphere of activity of men can vary according to context, being here concerned with song, weaponry, and war, while a woman's sphere of activity is limited to weaving and spinning.

The head of the household was the man to whom the rest of the household was totally subordinate. In his replies to Penelope, referred to above, Telemakhos emphasises that he is the head of the household and that he makes the decisions. In the first instance, there is a certain amount of pathos in Telemakhos' words, since he very clearly is not in control of his household. The house has been occupied by a horde of suitors who with very little regard to Telemakhos' position are wasting his inheritance. The situation in Odysseus' household illustrates the chaos that can occur in the vacuum created by the departure of the head of the household. Telemakhos cannot establish himself in a position of authority because he is too young and lacks experience, and Penelope cannot do so because she is a woman. She is reduced to stratagems and subterfuge in order to maintain her position. She doesn't want to remarry but she is powerless to throw the suitors out and to establish control over the household. Inherent in the position as head of the household were certain responsibilities. Most importantly, the honour of the oikos had to be maintained. Orestes who killed Aigisthos, the murderer of his father, Agamemnon, and the usurper of his throne, is put forward by Athena and Nestor as a role model for Telemakhos (1.298-300; 3.199). A man's status is to a great extent defined by his wealth, wealth in cattle and material possessions, and it was part of the man's role to maintain and if possible increase the wealth of the household. As an illustration of the importance of material possessions one can mention that Penelope is not expected to see anything surprising in the fact that Odysseus although having been away for close on twenty years should yet spend another year travelling around and collecting gifts in Thesprotia in order to add to the wealth of his household (19.272-284). Odysseus is prepared to stay on for a year in Skherie provided the Phaiakians give him plenty of gifts. For, as he says, nothing is more advantageous than to arrive home with full hands since one will then win greater respect

(11.355-361). Menelaos who spent seven years travelling around and collecting wealth before returning home, is contrasted with Aigisthos who destroyed Agamemnon's household (3.301-303; 4.81-82). Piracy and brigandage were considered legitimate ways of adding to a household's material wealth. Odysseus plans to compensate himself for the destruction of his property at the hands of the suitors by raids (23.357).

Related to this is absolute respect for the property of other men. The suitors have offended against the social norms of Ithaca because they have not respected the property of Odysseus. This is clearly stated by Athena (13.377-428), when she and Odysseus meet after he has been put ashore on Ithaca and from the very beginning of the poem, their guilt in regard to Odysseus' property is relentlessly underscored, so that when we come to the bloodbath near the end of the poem, we do not question whether their punishment might not be somewhat excessive.

Throughout the *Odyssey*, the problem with the suitors is considered to be a purely private problem concerning only the household of Odysseus; for instance, when Telemakhos calls the assembly in Ithaca, he says outright that it concerns a private matter (2.44-45). On the other hand, no clear distinction is made between Odysseus's *oikos* and the kingdom of Ithaca. Political dominance was entirely in the hands of men. The form of rule was monarchical and royal power was to a great extent based on personal power. The ruling aristocratic class was subject to internal strife and power struggles. Achilles in the Underworld asks Odysseus whether his father still is king in Thessaly or whether he has been dishonoured because of old age and therefore no longer capable of maintaining his position (11.495-505). Similarly, Odysseus on meeting the ghost of his mother, enquires whether his wife and son have been able to keep his *gevra* intact, *gevra* referring both to his property and to his status as king of Ithaca (11.174-176).

The political dimensions of the actions of the suitors, however, come out clearly in the repeated comparisons between the suitors and Aigisthos. While Agamemnon was fighting at Troy, Aigisthos seduced his wife, Klytaimnestra and took over royal power at Mycenae. When Agamemnon returns, he is murdered. The references to the events at Mycenae function in the poem as a reflection of what could happen on Ithaca. Throughout the poem, close parallels are implied between the case of Aigisthos and that of the suitors and the fate of Aigisthos foreshadows that of the suitors. It is obvious that whatever the charms of Penelope, the main object in marrying her is to gain control over the kingdom of Ithaca. Although Penelope herself does not have the right to bestow royal power in Ithaca, as the wife of the previous king, she would provide a spurious legitimacy to the man who married her.

One of the suitors, Antinous, makes this quite clear when in a reply to Telemakhos he states that Telemakhos will never be king in Ithaka although kingship is his patrimony (1.386-387). Telemakhos also complains on several occasions that the suitors want to both marry his mother and to obtain his father's status (1.386-387).

In Skherie, Arete seems to enjoy exceptional power and influence. Nausikaa advises Odysseus that when he comes into the palace, he should first approach the queen, Arete, in supplication (6.304-315). Later, when he is going into the town, Odysseus meets Athena disguised as a young Phaiakian girl and she gives him the same advice and adds that Arete is honoured as no other woman. By securing her favour, he will have good chances of having the Phaiakians help him return home. Arete's position has sometimes been taken as a survival of matriarchy which is supposed to have existed at some unspecified time in Greek prehistory. This is rather far-fetched. The prominence of Arete is more likely part of the otherness of Skherie. Skherie is not yet reality, although it comes close, being an organised community and therefore comparable to Pylos or Sparta. In fact, Nausikaa's words tell Odysseus and the listeners of the poem that Skherie is not yet normality. In any case, the prominence of Arete is not consistently maintained: throughout the Phaiakian section of the poem, the king, Alkinous repeatedly exercises unmistakable and unchallenged royal authority, and it is explicitly stated that word and deed in Skherie depend on Alkinous.

All social relationships outside the oikos are conducted by men. The institution of guest-friendship and gift-exchange made much of by Finley concerns men only, and the social sphere of women was limited. The normal sphere of women was the house which, as far as we know, they could leave freely, but probably did so only in exceptional cases. In the *Odyssey*, both Arete and Helen are shown as mixing freely with men in the main hall and this has been taken to indicate that it was not irregular for women to take part in the social events of the household. However, neither Helen nor Arete can be considered typical. Helen is the daughter of Zeus, and Arete does not belong to the real world. In most instances, it seems, women were expected to keep to themselves and to occupy themselves at the loom, while men feasted. Nestor's wife, although mentioned (3.404) does not participate in the social life of the palace, and Penelope shows herself only occasionally.

III

One of the crucial factors which distinguish men from the gods is the necessity to work in order to subsist. In the *Odyssey*, both men and

women are shown working. The Homeric household can be described as a segregated rather than joint household; that is to say men and women have separate spheres of activity and responsibility. The activities and responsibilities of the man were centred on the land while those of the woman were based on the house. Women keep house for their husbands the *Odyssey* states (7.68). The term *deuspoina* the etymological meaning of which is mistress of the house, is on several occasions used to describe aristocratic women. Women of the upper classes are most often described as being busy at the loom or occupied with some other form of textile work. This is a reflection of the fact that all the linen and clothing used by the members of the *oikos* was produced in the home, mainly it seems by the mistress of the house herself with the help of her maids. The wool produced on the estate had to be carded, spun, and woven. References are often made to purple-coloured yarn and while nothing is said about the dyeing of wool in the *Odyssey*, presumably this was also done by the women in the house. The preparation of food was done by the female servants and slaves. On the whole not much is said about the actual management of the house in the *Odyssey*; although it is clearly stated that the woman in regard to her position in the *oikos* is subordinate to her husband, it is also evident that she did have a position of some responsibility. An impression of the importance of the woman to the household and of the actual authority she could wield can be gained from Hesiodos. In the *Works and Days*, on two occasions he advises his brother concerning marriage. Concern for the efficient management of the house lies behind his worries about bad wives. Nothing is worse for a man than a bad wife, while a good wife who keeps an orderly house, will make the household prosper.

The activities of men within the house seem to be in the main connected with leisure activities. In general, men are usually identified with work associated with the cultivation of the soil or with the herding of animals. This obviously follows from the fact that the economic base of the *oikos* was its land. Trade is almost universally despised and is in the hands of the Phoenicians while certain very specialised activities are in the hands of particular craftsmen whose social status is uncertain but who seem to have been highly respected in virtue of their skill. While a man's activities can take place both inside and outside the house, women are normally confined to activities which take place inside the house. That this is true for all women regardless of social class can be determined from a passage in the *Odyssey*. Telemakhos and Odysseus have been reunited and are discussing tactics for dealing with the suitors. Odysseus suggests that all the slaves belonging to the household should be tested for loyalty, but Telemakhos counters this by objecting that it is only practical to find out which of the women slaves are guilty of disloyalty since they

can easily be located working around the house. It would be much more difficult to test the loyalty of the men slaves since many of them would be spread out in various places working in the fields and vineyards or herding animals (16.316-320). On the other hand, there must have been some exceptions. Fetching water, for instance, was regarded as woman's work, and water may have had to be gotten from a spring some distance away (7.19; 20.153).

As a general rule, one can say that the distinction between the types of work performed by men and women would seem to be absolute and to be of greater importance than any distinction between social classes in the kinds of work done. There are very few activities which are performed by both men and women and they are rarely seen working together. The exception is in the preparation and serving of meals, and even here there seems to be a division of roles; male servants were responsible for bringing in the meat and wine while the bread was provided by female servants. Only men are described as taking part in agricultural activities or the herding of animals, nor are men ever seen to be occupying themselves with activities considered to be typically female. There is no sense that the type of work performed by women is regarded as inferior to that performed by men. Skill in all types of work is praised.

In the world of the *Odyssey*, physical labour is not looked down upon or regarded with contempt. Odysseus boasts of his skills with the plough and of his ability to work hard. When disguised as the nameless beggar, he has returned to his home and is offered work by one of the suitors, his reply demonstrates that he is very familiar with all aspects of agricultural work and that he is as proud of excelling at it (18.366-375) as he is of excelling in war. Earlier, he has shown himself capable of building a raft in order to take himself away from Calypso's island; the building of the raft is described in great detail (5.228-261). He is proud of the skill with which he constructed his bedroom in his palace on Ithaka (23.189-201).

On the other hand, work is not idealised in any way and considered to be a good in itself. Physical labour is part of the human condition and accepted as such. On the other hand, there is no doubt that life would not be more pleasant without the necessity to work. The absence of male agricultural work defines idealised societies and landscapes. The gods on Olympus, when not meddling in human affairs seemingly spend most of their time feasting. On the island of Aiolos there is non-stop banqueting, and the pleasure the Phaiakians have in feasting and song is a constant of the Phaiakian episode. Similarly, in the *Works and Days* of Hesiod, the life of the Golden Race who lived like gods is characterised by lack of toil and endless feasting (109-115). The man who is solely dependent for his livelihood on the work of his hands is regarded with pity. When Akhilles is complaining

about his situation in the Underworld, he mentions as an example of one of the lowliest states on earth, the man who owns no land and is forced to hire out his labour in order to survive (Akhilles' words have often been taken to indicate that in Homeric society the lowliest state imaginable was not that of the slave, but of the man who although free does not possess any land of his own and is thereby forced to work for others in order to survive (e.g. Finley, 1977, 57). This conclusion does not seem warranted. It seems more reasonable to assume that Akhilles mentions the situation of the landless labourer rather than that of the slave because the idea of identifying himself with a slave, even in unrealistic, would never occur to him. (On the lot of the slave cf 4.244-245. See also M. M. Austin, P. Vidal-Nacquet: *Economic and Social History of Ancient Greece: An Introduction*; London, 1977, 44-45).

It is not to be supposed that in reality, Odysseus and other men of his social class spent much of their time working. It was considered important to be capable of hard labour if necessary, but, apart from doing what was necessary in order to supervise the running of the estate, they did so only in exceptional cases. It is significant that when Telemakhos arrives in Pylos, Nestor is sacrificing and when he comes to Sparta Menelaos is celebrating a wedding feast. Telemakhos himself, before setting out on his journey in search of news of his father, spends his days brooding and lamenting over his position and the insolence of the suitors. Among the upper class, only Odysseus' father, Laertes, is shown regularly working in the fields; he has withdrawn from society and spends his time on a lonely farmstead tending his vineyards and orchards, but this is not because of necessity but as a visible expression of his sorrows. Concerning the suitors, the objection is not to their lounging about, passing their time feasting, listening to music, playing games of chance, and in general leading what we might consider to be a reprehensibly idle life; that would be no more than expected behaviour for men of their status and social class. What is blameworthy is that their way of life is parasitical and they are wasting another man's property.

The attitude to work found in the *Odyssey* is basically the same as that found in Hesiodos. Work is ordained by the gods and a necessity since if one does not work one's barns will be empty in winter and the neighbours might not be too ready with the handouts. But work is not a good in itself. Hesiodos, however, writing from a different social perspective condemns idleness and he is far more aware of the actual toil and hardship involved in agricultural work. This attitude towards work is fundamentally different from that put forward by Virgil in the *Georgics* where the necessity to work is considered to be valuable in itself because it forces man to develop and make use of his capacities and powers of invention.

In contrast to men, most women are depicted as working whatever their social status. Weaving and textile-work in general is identified with women to such a degree that not even goddesses are usually idle. Both Kirke and Kalypso, who are goddesses are busy at the loom. In the cave of the Nymphs on Ithaka, one can see the stone looms used by the nymphs to weave their wondrous fabrics. Artemis receives the epithet of the golden distaff. The absence of female labour is not a feature of any ideal world. This follows from the ascertainment that men's work is principally concerned with primary production, while women's work is associated with the processing of agricultural products. Even though, the earth might freely bring forward grain and fruit without the need to plough or harvest, and sheep be always thick-fleeced, the grain still has to be ground and made into bread, and the wool has to be carded, spun, and woven.

It has been observed that, concerning types of work, as far as can be seen, there does not seem to be major distinctions between the different social classes and both free and unfree can be seen engaged in the same activities. Social class does not necessarily or primarily define the type of work done. This is true generally speaking and more so in the case of men than of women, keeping in mind that men don't work if they can help it and this in turn is dependent on status. On Odysseus' estate, the animals were taken care of by slaves such as Melanthios the goatherd or Eumaios the swineherd; when Athena meets Odysseus on Ithaka after he has been put ashore by the Phaiakians, she has disguised herself as a nobly-born shepherd indicating that there was nothing unusual in such a combination. In the case of women, however, social status probably does count. Heavy work such as grinding grain or fetching water would have been done only by slaves. Grinding grain is arduous work and would consequently be left to the cheapest labour, namely female slaves. Odysseus' household has a number of female slaves occupied with grinding the barley and wheat for the household. On occasion, they were forced to work into the night in order to finish their work (20.105-110).

IV

Religious ritual as described in the *Odyssey* is ceremonial and communal. Both men and women are present as can be seen from the description of the sacrifice at Pylos which is the most detailed description of ritual in the poem (3.404-463). Only men, however, take an active part in the proceedings and share in the sacrificial meal. The women remain in the background and only participate by raising a ritual cry when the bull is killed. Respect for the gods is a virtue

often praised in men and lack of it is greatly condemned. That worship of the gods is connected with male spheres of activity, politics, and agriculture, is indicated by a simile in the *Odyssey* (19.109-114) where it is stated that a god-fearing ruler makes his land prosper. The same thought is also found in Hesiod. The *Odyssey* says little about women and religious activity. It could therefore be suggested that the religious activity of women was limited to the private domestic sphere. In the *Iliad*, however, the women of Troy are described as making an offering to the goddess Athena for the salvation of their city, which shows that women could play a significant role in public religion.

V

All the women met with in the *Odyssey* are individuals and not stereotypes. Most of them are portrayed with sympathy. On the whole, emphasis is on their positive qualities. The wisdom and good sense of Penelope, for instance, is often remarked upon. Even in the case of Helen, although her adultery and ambiguous loyalties are not overlooked, the main impression of her that one gets is of intelligence and perceptiveness. Apart from Penelope's faithless maids, who have no redeeming qualities, the only wicked woman in the *Odyssey* is Klytaimnestra who has no part in the action itself, but is mentioned several times and functions in the poem as a reverse mirror image to Penelope. But even she is at one point praised for her good sense (3.266), and on the whole, the main weight of guilt for Agamemnon's murder is placed on Aigisthos rather than on Klytaimnestra. Yet there is a perceptible although weak current of misogyny running through the *Odyssey* which can be compared with the very overt distrust of women found in Hesiodos and Semonides. In several passages of the *Odyssey*, derogatory remarks are made about women in general; they are referred to as fickle, lying, and not to be trusted as well as vicious (e.g. 15.20-23; 11.427-428). To what extent this reflects views current in society in general is impossible to know, but it does represent a definite strain within early Greek poetry. The occurrence of misogynistic views in the Homeric poems may perhaps be considered the result of a conflict between the view of women in the Epic tradition and that of the poet's own time.

VI

The society depicted in the *Odyssey* is one where male values were dominant and where all socially relevant transactions took place between the male members of the community. Such a society

obviously places severe restrictions on the position of women and what is considered to be acceptable behaviour for women, and it is fair to say that the lives of most women were narrow and circumscribed.

There were also clear limitations inherent in the male role. In a world where identity was largely defined through the esteem of others, it was necessary to conform to the socially prescribed pattern of behaviour and derivations were not easily tolerated. Both men and women were expected to live up to clear-cut conceptions of gender roles and there was very little choice involved. Women were in general confined to the house and in their behaviour not allowed to overstep clearly defined domestic boundaries. Men were expected to distinguish themselves as warriors and to preserve the honour and wealth of the *oikos*. The expectations and limitations of the male and female roles in the *Odyssey* are accepted and never questioned. Penelope finds herself in a situation where she is forced to overstep the boundaries of the female role. In terms of the plot, the initiative lies with her since she is expected to come to a definite decision regarding her remarriage. This she cannot do, however, because women did not arrange their own marriages. Penelope's use of the weaving ruse can be seen as symbolic of her acceptance of the limitations of the female role.

To conclude, concerning the question of gender roles in the *Odyssey*, it is not inappropriate to speak of a divided world where male and female spheres of activity are separate and that this division is operative within most areas of life. The position of women was inferior and subordinate but women were not considered inferior beings.

VII

Gender transgressions in the *Odyssey* occur only in similes. Penelope is compared once to a king and once to a ship-wrecked sailor, and Odysseus is once compared to a woman being led off to slavery (19.108-114; 23.233-240; 8.523-531). These similes have been interpreted by Helene P. Foley as indicating a deliberate reversal of sexual roles and therefore having a deeper significance showing identity between men and women. The symbolic weight given to these similes seems over-subtle and over-elaborate. The comparison between Penelope and a good king is not a comment on how Penelope has managed the kingdom of Ithaca during Odysseus' absence. Penelope's good reputation is due to her fidelity and domesticity, and not to the way she has ruled in Ithaca; at this she very obviously was not very successful. The comparison with the sailor belongs with a series of images of safety from the sea which is a well-known theme in early Greek poetry. The point of the simile comparing Odysseus to

a slave woman is to illustrate Odysseus' despair and the utter pitifulness of his plight. The most pitiful fate imaginable was that of a woman about to be led away into slavery. There is no reason to suggest that the simile is meant to signify Odysseus' identity with his former victims. The gender reversal in these similes is coincidental to which no particular symbolic meaning should be ascribed.

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