

The Women of Homer

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The Greek text we know in English as the *Odyssey* famously begins with the word *andra* (ἄνδρα). From George Chapman's 1615 translation up to Emily Wilson's 2017 version, this word has commonly been translated into English as *man*. It announces that the *Odyssey* is the story of a man, and encourages us to anticipate a biographical narrative of *his* journey. But if this is the story of a man and his personal journey, why does the narrative spend so much time away from Odysseus in Ithaca with his wife and son?

An answer can be found by returning to the first word of the epic, *andra*, which in both ancient and modern Greek can mean either *man* or *husband*:

A husband, a versatile man with many plots and schemes,
relate to me, Muse, of him who very much
Was made to wander, after sacking the sacred citadel of Troy.

The word's dual meaning signifies that Odysseus' identity as *andra* is shaped by his relationship with a woman, his wife Penelope. When we restore the dual meaning of *andra*, we restore the essentially social nature of Odysseus' subjectivity: He is not an 'I' but a 'we.' The story of Odysseus, then, is not the story of a man, but the story of a marriage, a family, and a community.

Our first glimpse of Penelope comes three-quarters of the way into the *Odyssey*'s first book. From the women's quarters, she hears the bard, Phemius, singing about the failed homecomings of the Achaeans. Troubled by the song's content, she descends to confront Phemius and, in a much-discussed passage, is told by Telemachus to return to her own rooms and her own work:

But going into the house, take care of your own works,
The loom and the distaff, and urge your handmaidens
To go to their work. For speech is the concern of men
Alone, and me most of all. For might in the house is mine.

Read in modern English, Telemachus' imperative can sound uncomfortably like a scolding, but in ancient Greek, the terminology of weaving and the terminology of shipbuilding flow from a related lexical network that is invisible in English. The word for *loom* (*bistos*) shares a root with those for *mast* (*histon*) and *sail* (*bistion*). In Book Five, when we finally meet Odysseus on Calypso's island, he crafts a raft with which to escape, and this raft is fitted with an *histon* (*mast*) and an *bistion* (*sail*). In Book Eight, Odysseus is tied to the mast's feet, *histopedes*, also the word for the feet of a loom. Both nouns are related to the verb *histemi*, meaning 'to make something stand upright' or 'to set up', the verb used to describe Penelope when she arrives in the hall and stations herself beside one of the posts that hold up the roof.

These complex associations, which are woven tightly together in the Greek language in ways that cannot be reproduced in English, suggest that the loom and the ship coexist as complementary spheres of authority, equally essential for the productive functioning of an island-dwelling family and community. Telemachus' instruction to his mother to "take care of your own works, / The loom and the distaff" urge her to shape the song of the hero's homecoming herself by returning to the media of her authority and cunning, her loom and her distaff.

In Book Nineteen, Penelope describes to a disguised Odysseus the ruse she had used to hold off the suitors:

While *the suitors* urge for a wedding feast, I spin schemes to trap them.
My first, which a superhuman force breathed into my consciousness,

was a large cloth,
Setting it up on a great loom, to weave in the large room,
A subtle and well-fitted thing. Straightaway, I spoke among *the suitors*.

The ‘web’ Penelope spun is not metaphoric. Her ruse was the funeral shroud that she claimed she needed to weave for Laertes, her father-in-law. As long as the shroud was in progress, she could forestall choosing a future husband from among the suitors besieging her. In this way, she prevents events at Ithaca from moving forward, holding Odysseus’ place and buying him time to return.

Women are described weaving in the *Iliad* twice, and at equidistant points. The first instance comes three books into the epic, the second three books from the end. Both occur at pivotal moments in the narrative when events are in the midst of a cosmic turn. Identical phrases, which appear only in these two places, describe the object of each woman’s labor: *diplaka porphyrein*, a dark, gleaming, double-folded mantle.

The first weaver described is Helen, the daughter of Zeus, whose removal from Sparta brought the Achaeans to the gates of Troy. When the bard turns his attention to Helen, the war over possession of her has been halted. Instead, a duel will be held between her first husband, Menelaos of Sparta, and her current one, Trojan prince Paris. Both sides have agreed to abide by the results of the duel, whose winner will claim Helen and her treasure.

The messenger goddess Iris has been sent to fetch Helen and bring her to the Trojan walls to watch the contest between her past and current (and hence future) husbands:

Iris found *Helen* in a large room weaving on a great loom,
A dark, gleaming, double-folded mantle. She was sprinkling into it the many contests
Of the Trojans, tamers of horses, and the Achaeans, clad in bronze,
Who on account of her were suffering at the hands of Ares.

The vision of Helen here portrays her telling the story of the Trojan war. As a bard does with song and a potter with clay, Helen instantiates the story. Her medium is thread and cloth. In this way, women could record events, convey messages to each other, and express entreaties to superhuman forces. In one sense, then, Helen is the passive object of the contest; simultaneously, her weaving the war story suggests her agency to participate in the creation of that story, as Penelope uses her weaving to shape the story at Ithaca.

Andromache, wife of the Trojan prince Hector, is the second weaver described in the *Iliad*. Her husband has been killed, but no messenger has yet arrived to bring her the news. She continues at her work, unaware that the best defender of Troy has fallen, sealing the fate of the city and with it the fate of her son and herself:

But in an inner room of the high house, she was weaving at her loom
A dark, gleaming, double-folded mantle. She was sprinkling into it
patterns of dappled flowers.

Unlike Helen, Andromache is not weaving a story but creating flower patterns, which may have been connected to weaving prayers for protection.

English translations vary in their renderings of the phrase *diplaka porphyrein*. Some translators opt to retain the repetition, using identical language in both Books Three and Twenty-Two. Others choose to vary the phrase according to their own metrical needs. Noticing the repetition within the variation, however, invites us to perceive a textual relationship between these women, both hoping to survive in a city under siege.

Both women have husbands on the field of battle. Both are weaving a large, gleaming double-folded mantle. Both are communicating with superhuman forces, Helen with Iris and Andromache (potentially) through prayer. Where Helen weaves in a large room, Andromache weaves in an inner room. Where Helen tells the story of the war, in which she herself lies at the center, Andromache is at the fringes praying for deliverance. Where

Helen is the cause of the war and will survive the fall of Troy, returning to her former role as queen of Sparta, Andromache will experience a reversal of fortune, from being the wife of the most revered Trojan prince to being enslaved by the Achaeans. When she is depicted weaving, this reversal has already occurred, with the death of Hector sealing her fate and rendering her woven prayers futile.

Both women echo in Penelope. Though far from the field of battle, Penelope feels its effects. Like Andromache, she prays for the protection and safe return home of her husband, whose fate at times remains hidden from her. Like Helen, Penelope is both an agent who weaves a story with a great loom in a large room and an object who the suitors fight to possess. And like both women, Penelope's fate emerges in communion with the gods with whom she communicates.

The challenge of interpreting Homer is entangled with the challenge of translating Homer, and it is here that Homer's women have gotten lost.