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Female Character's Portrayal in Greek Mythology

The Odyssey by Homer

Medea by Euripides

Agamemnon by Aeschylus

What defines a good woman? If you asked a popular Greek poet, they would probably answer with things such as: demure, faithful, silent, and above all else, loyal to their husband. All traits that are expected of women but not of men. This outdated view of gender roles not only impacts how we perceive the characters of the poems, but also what roles they possess in the story. A woman fueled by revenge was meant to be the antagonist, but in present day society, we can understand her motives. Likewise, a loyal wife in Greek life is seen as a role model for other women to aspire to be, and yet nowadays they are seen as weak.

To start, one must look at the prime definition of a good wife in Greek poetry: Penelope from Homer's *The Odyssey*. Penelope is viewed as the role model for all women in that time period. Her husband was gone for 20 years and yet she remained loyal the entire time, fighting off the suitors' advances and never giving up hope for his

return. When discussing her current state she states she's "wasted with longing for Odysseus, while here they press for marriage." (Homer 523). Even after 20 years, she remains faithful to her absent husband, refusing marriage from multiple suitors in favor of her beloved.

In Greek society, this was seen as incredible admirable; Penelope held all the characteristics of an ideal wife. While Odysseus does yearn for home during his 20 years away, during this time, he sleeps with other women and does not remain entirely faithful to his faithful wife. These double standards cannot be ignored in the 21st century, as we have different standards and expectations for gender roles. Penelope is admirably loyal for remaining faithful for those long years, but she's also weak, with her lack of direct action against the suitors advances. Crafting a tapestry and then undoing the progress at night cannot be seen as direct action; rather she appears to avoid decisions. Likewise, Odysseus left his family, seeking adventure elsewhere, resulting in his absence and multiple affairs. This couple appears to be the perfect example of *homophrosune*— a harmonious relationship in marriage—in Greek times but with today's current standards, this glorified couple has a plethora of flaws, mainly the issue with double standards, unequal expectations for gender roles, and different definitions of loyalty.

If we move along to Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, we see an example of what the Greeks would define as a terrible wife. In this tale Clytemnestra, the wife of Agamemnon, plans to kill her husband for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia in order to obtain a favorable wind to carry the Greek fleet to Troy. She is motivated by revenge, a

trait that is discouraged in women but glorified in men. For example, in *The Iliad* by Homer, the character Achilles seeks revenge against Hector for killing his best mate Patrocles. In that story, the male protagonist is praised for his course of action by other characters, the gods, and even the reader. Why is this revenge justified, but a mother avenging her daughter's death is scorned?

Due to this difference in gender, Achilles is portrayed as the hero while Clytemnestra is seen to be the villain. Agamemnon killed her child and then left her to rule Argos alone in his absence while he fought in the Trojan War. In all sense of the word, she is justified in her chosen course of vengeful action. In this era, if someone killed someone you loved, you had every right to kill them in this never ending cycle. This cycle is mentioned in *The Odyssey* when Athena puts a stop to it saying, "now hold...break off this bitter skirmish; end your bloodshed Ithakans, and make peace." (Homer 594). Odysseus slayed his wife's suitors, and with their deaths, the families were seeking revenge. The only reason this search for vengeance was put to an end was due to an intervention of the gods. The families could have killed Odysseus and then Telemakhos could have killed them and so on and so forth. The only thing that stopped that viscous cycle was Athena's intervention. Yet when it comes to Clytemnestra, her revenge was sought out and fulfilled, but she was scorned for such actions. If she were a man, the tale would have portrayed her as the hero, for slaying the one who killed her beloved daughter.

Not only was Clytemnestra disgraced in her own story, but she was even talked down to in other tales as well. In Homer's *The Odyssey* Agamemnon's story is mentioned several times to show a disgraceful homecoming with a murderous unfaithful wife versus Odysseus' return home with a loving faithful wife. Clytemnestra harbored her true feelings for her murderous husband until "came the fated hour when she gave in" and killed him for the sake of revenge. (Homer 303). It wasn't enough to speak badly of her in her own story, so naturally they had to mention her in other tales.

While Clytemnestra was scorned for murdering her husband who killed her child, this next character is disgraced for killing her children to get back at her unfaithful husband. Euripides' *Medea* depicts the story of a woman driven to murder by an unloyal and unloving husband who seeks to banish her from the lands and marry a new wife. Medea gave up everything she had and everything she knew to be with her husband Jason. Once he tosses her to the side, it only makes sense for her to take back what she gave him: her children. She brought them into this world, and in a sick sense of irony, she's the one to take them out of it. This does seem incredibly far fetched as far as rational responses go, but these were the times they lived in. Agamemnon killed his daughter, Clytemnestra killed her husband, Odysseus killed the suitors, Hector killed Patrocles, Achilles killed Hector; the answer to to any wrongdoing was violence.

Medea killed her own children, but that was not an uncommon occurrence— even the great Agamemnon killed his child. Yet the difference between the two, was that Agamemnon was never scorned for this murderous act; Medea was. Different

circumstances certainly came into play, but we must ask ourselves– would Medea’s act be celebrated if she were a man? She sought revenge against her husband’s dismissal of her existence. Should she have brought her children into this ordeal? Absolutely not. Yet she acknowledges her own grievances at losing her children but truly believes that it was the only way to get back at Jason. With their final encounter she states “but my pain’s a fair price, to take away your smile.” (Euripides 873). She was willing to give up everything just to hurt her husband in the way that he hurt her. Such qualities would be honored in a man, but as a woman, she is disgraced for such cruel actions.

All of these Greek women were expected to have traits that men did not even have a trace of. Faithfulness, loyalty, devout companionship: all qualities Penelope possessed in order to be viewed as a good wife. Yet her husband Odysseus was anything but faithful and he was never scorned for it. When looking at Clytemnestra and Medea, we see what a proper wife shouldn’t be: vengeful. Yet their male counterparts are fueled by this anger towards revenge, and are often congratulated for it. These Greek tales have amazing storylines, but it’s important for current readers to keep in mind how the gender roles have changed since these tales were written.

Works Cited

Wilkie, B., & Hurt, J. (2001). *Literature of the western world*. Prentice Hall.