

Two

Origins of Western Misogyny

The Homeric Poems

THE HOMERIC WOMAN

THE first documents that describe in detail the life conditions of Greek women are the Homeric poems. Here we will consider them as "historical" documents, whether or not the events narrated really happened or the characters really lived, or whether or not the Trojan War was really fought. Their historicity, of course, has proponents on both sides; some have even attempted to pinpoint the war in time and space, and others (such as M. I. Finley) maintain that the events are poetic invention. But for our purposes, the question is irrelevant—the poems do not interest us as a record of events, but as a document that transmits the memory of a culture.

At least until the eighth century B.C., Greek culture was preliterary, which is to say it was transmitted orally, not by written documents. The Mycenaeans had a form of writing (Linear B) but they used it only for administrative purposes—registering the operations of their complex bureaucratic organization, troop movements, organization of labor on public utilities, concession of land to private citizens, and so forth—not for the transmission of the society's cultural heritage, history, and values. Mycenaean civilization, then, was essentially an oral civilization, and because Mycenaean script disappeared with the collapse of the palaces, the civilization

that emerged from their ruins and solidified in the centuries to follow was also oral. At least until the eighth century, when the Greeks began to use a new alphabetic script borrowed from the Phoenicians, the memory of the Greeks, the record of the deeds of their ancestors, the spread and transmission across the generations of models of behavior and of social and religious rules, was entrusted to poetry.

For all the centuries of the so-called Hellenic Middle Ages, the *aidoi* and *rhapsodoi*, singing the deeds of their ancestors, fulfilled not only a recreational function but an important pedagogical one as well. They taught the Greeks what to feel and think, what they should be, and how they should behave. As men learned from the *epos* to adapt themselves to the model of the hero, so women listening to the poets learned what sort of behavior they should adopt and what they should avoid.² It is in this sense that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are considered historical documents.

Even if the situations described are not true, they must be realistic. The characters surely behave according to the rules of real society; the ethic that inspired their deeds must be that which the poetry, almost institutionally, taught and transmitted. The society described in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is, in other words, a mirror of Greek society in the centuries between the end of Mycenaean civilization and the eighth century—and the female condition which they suggest is the true condition of the women who lived in those centuries.

According to current thinking, the Homeric woman enjoyed a respect and freedom that the Greek woman of the classical period (segregated, disparaged, and without rights) did not. At the end of the last century, Samuel Butler, an English translator of Homer, proposed that the attention paid to feminine themes and the depth of psychological analysis of the characters in the *Odyssey* was such as to suggest that it had been written by a woman. He went so far as to identify the author as a noblewoman of Trapani, Sicily, who would have been autobiographically described in the character of Nausicaa.³ One need not go quite that far to notice the periodic reappearance in literature of the notion of an *Odyssey* dominated by female figures in high relief, who might be taken as indicative of the

consideration in which the Homeric woman was held. One is tempted to compare, for example, Athena, the goddess who protects Odysseus and Telemachus in their plan to regain power, to the figure of Beatrice in the *Divine Comedy*,⁴ or to suggest that in the Bronze Age communities existed in which regal power was entrusted to a woman, in which marriage was matrilineal and descent matrilineal.⁵ To examine this hypothesis we will compare the situations described in the poems and the "values" they transmit, with reflections, on the one hand, of the virtues or qualities women ought to have, and on the other, of the rules of behavior that the members of the Homeric family, and in particular the women, ought to follow.

THE MODEL AND THE SUPPOSED REALITY

First of all, a woman had to be beautiful. Homer lingers over this attribute when he presents a female character: her beauty makes her like a goddess.⁶ When she is as beautiful as Helen, she can be forgiven anything. Speaking of Helen, the old Trojans seated by the Scian Gates watching the battle say the following lines:

No one could find fault with the Trojans or well-greaved Achaeans
for enduring sorrow for so long a time for the sake of a woman like
Helen
—she looks dreadfully like the immortal goddesses. (Il. 3.156–58)

Moreover, women had to take care of their looks and worry about their clothes; these are the qualities with which a woman conquered "glorious fame" (*Od.* 6.25–30). She had also to excel in domestic jobs, and above all be obedient.

"Mother . . . , go inside the house and tend to your own work,
the loom and the distaff, and order your women to attend
to their work; the bow is the concern of men, and to me
most of all, since the authority in the house belongs to me."
(*Od.* 21.350–53)

So says Telemachus to his mother Penelope, and Penelope obeys. Even Andromache, one of the characters frequently cited to illustrate ancient female power, is no less under the thumb of her

husband than Penelope is under that of her son in the absence of Odysseus.⁷ It is true that in the relations between Hector and Andromache, the relationship between spouses that emerges differs from the normal relationship of a hero and his woman. Their more human relationship is certainly unusual in the poems.⁸ But, as Hector reminds his wife with the same words Telemachus uses to his mother, Andromache's place is still the house, her work is only domestic work, and it is unseemly for her even to think about things that are reserved for men, such as war (*Il.* 6.490–93).

Rigorous respect for the division of roles and obedience, then, are the virtues one expects from a woman, together with modesty and fidelity—all the typical virtues of a subordinate woman. Perhaps we can go further. The Homeric woman is not only subordinate but also victim of a fundamentally misogynist ideology. Behind the screen of paternal affection, already fragile enough, the Homeric hero mistrusts women, even the most devoted and submissive of them.

Odysseus waits till he has killed the suitors before he reveals himself to his wife, although he had made himself known to Telemachus, Euryyclea, and Eumaeus.

For this reason do not ever be too kind to your wife
or tell her the whole of your plan, however well you know it,
but tell her part of it, and leave the rest hidden.

(*Od.* 11.441–43)

This is what Agamemnon had advised Odysseus in the underworld. Agamemnon (having been killed by his wife Clytemnestra) had good reason to think that way, but was now generalizing from his personal experience:

But I shall tell you something else, and you take it to heart
Bring your ship back to your homeland secretly,
not openly, since women can never be trusted.

(*Od.* 11.454–56)

Not even Penelope, whom even Agamemnon praises for her fidelity, is above suspicion. Athena counsels Telemachus, who is at Sparta seeking news of his father, to go home at once. Penelope's father and the suitors insist, in fact, that she choose a husband. But

the reason for the haste is not, as one might think, that his mother needs help in averting a marriage. The danger is something else.

Do not let her take treasure from your house against your wishes
 Since you know what sort of instincts lie in the hearts of women.
 A woman wishes to increase the household of the man who wins her,
 and no longer remembers the children of her old marriage
 or her first husband, now dead, nor does she ask about them.
 But go yourself, and entrust everything
 to the maidservant who seems to you most trustworthy,
 until the gods show you a noble bride of your own.
 (Od. 15.19–26)

Weak, fickle, opportunistic, perhaps even incapable of lasting feelings, she was destined for marriage. Her interests, her emotions, are bound up in this destiny. That is what woman is, and it should not be surprising as she was taught to put marriage above everything else. But women, of course, have no sense of proportion. Even the best of them, even those who make good use of their training, can be dangerous. It is likely that they will go overboard and, if married more than once, they forget the dead husband, the children of the first bed, everything of their previous life. In any case, they need to be kept under control.

The admired, respected, powerful female figures often mentioned are, in fact, quite difficult to pin down. The virtues women were supposed to have were not ones that would make protagonists of them. Quite the reverse: their qualities had to be utilized exclusively within the limited circles of their attributions and their role, never venturing into the world outside. Only one female figure has a different role—Athena, the goddess who advises Odysseus and Telemachus in typically masculine matters, which are those related to power. It is significant that Athena is the goddess born from the head of Zeus, the *parthenos*, the virgin who by refusing marriage never assumes a female role. The only woman who has a constant influence and who is recognized as a counselor and protector is a nonwoman.

The other female characters are either mythical (in this case insidious and dangerous, like Circe and the Sirens) or socially and intellectually pallid, subordinate images, shut out from and in most

cases ignorant of the male world. Neither counselor nor counselor, the Homeric woman was only the instrument of reproduction and preservation of the family group.

Though both men and women in Homer were quick to tears, women's tears were quite different from men's. Women's are not violent manifestations of a strong, energetic, heroic character. They are drawn-out, consuming sobs, moans, and useless laments—yet another proof of their impotence.¹⁰ Ideologically relegated to the inside of the *oikos* (despite some freedom of movement), outside of the *oikos* the Homeric woman does not exist. In this light certain very unusual features of Penelope's personality can be explained.

The bride of Odysseus has entered history by virtue of her fidelity, but her behavior casts doubt on her legendary virtue. Exaggerated fidelity, in fact, is only one of her cloaks: more than once she appears quite eager to marry, and above all she behaves with reproachable coquetry. She deceives the suitors for a good four years, making promises to each one (of the 108!) and sending them notes.¹¹ If she does not decide to remarry, it is because she is afraid of being criticized by the people, who have remained loyal to the memory of Odysseus. Furthermore, doubts about the paternity of Telemachus are expressed more than once and by more than one person. Even Athena, Nestor, and Odysseus are not sure—and Telemachus himself shows some perplexity when interrogated about his parentage. My mother says I am the son of Odysseus, he answers, but "I don't know. No one by himself can know his own seed."¹²

Mater certa, in other words, *pater semper incertus*. But that this principle should be repeated so often, and always with regard to Penelope, is very odd indeed. Perhaps this is simply what men thought of women and not only strangers but also their fathers, husbands, and sons. Penelope's ambiguities are perhaps due to two contradictory facts. On the one hand, there was the need for epic poetry, given its function of cultural training, to propose a model of woman that was the symbol of all the virtues that a woman could have. On the other, there was a misogynist ideology that mistrusted women profoundly.¹³ Penelope can be read as the product of these

two opposing needs; she is an image of both the "should be" and the "is" (in the eyes of men, of course) of the Homeric woman.

WIFELY DUTIES

That the first duty of a woman was to be faithful to her husband will not be surprising, and *epos* lets us know what happens to adulteresses. First, of course, there was Clytemnestra, the adulteress by antonomasia, but another wife, a goddess this time, also breaks the conjugal bond. This was Aphrodite, as beautiful as her husband Hephaestus was ugly and lame. Zeus, Hephaestus' father, one day lost his temper with him because, during one of the countless fights between himself and Hera, Hephaestus had tried to defend his mother, attempting to pull her away from her husband's blows. And so Zeus grabbed his son by the foot and hurled him down from Olympus. Hephaestus fell all day and finally landed on Lemnos, where he was rescued by the Sintii.

It is no wonder that Aphrodite, so beautiful and adored that all the gods desired her, had an affair with Ares, the god of war. Hephaestus knew of it because the Sun had played the spy. Hephaestus prepared an invisible net as thin as a spider's web and stretched it over the bed where it would trap the lovers. When the lovers were successfully entangled, Hephaestus, the "glorious cripple," called all the gods to witness the adultery. He did not let the adulterers go, but said:

My trap and chains will hold them there, until
her father gives me back the whole of the bride-price (*eedna*),
which I entrusted to him for the sake of his wanton ("dog-faced")
daughter.

because his daughter is beautiful, but not faithful in heart

(*Od.* 8.317-20)

The punishment of the unfaithful wife was repudiation, accompanied by restitution to the husband of the *eedna*, the price he had paid to the wife's guardian, a tangible sign of the woman's new status (socially determined according to the value of the *eedna*), and signal of the husband's power over her.¹⁴ The corporal punishment with which the husband kept the members of his *oikos* in line, including the wife, for offenses other than adultery, does not appear

for unfaithful wives. Zeus, for example, was always striking Hera, sometimes even with a whip; he even punished her much more severely, as when he chained and hung her with two weights tied to her feet (*Il.* 15.16-21).

Obviously, this does not mean that Greek husbands made a habit of hanging their wives. The Zeus-Hera relationship is one of particular conflict and violence, which certainly cannot be taken as a model marriage. Yet their marriage presents a picture of conjugal relationships that the public somehow accepted. Evidently the public was used to considering such punishments as a non-pathological aspect of the relationship—in other words, they could laugh at Zeus' excesses, but they were not shocked.

The Homeric wife had to accept more than physical punishment. She had to tolerate her husband's relations with a concubine and other women, such as prisoners of war (who were awarded to heroes as part of their booty) and household slaves. The man's children by these women, though illegitimate (*nothoi*), were not treated differently than the legitimate ones (*gnesioi*), as in the classical law of succession. The *nothoi*, in fact, often lived at the father's house, and at his death shared in the inheritance along with the legitimate children, although their status was lower. Instead of a share of the inheritance (which was divided equally among the legitimate offspring) they received goods of substantial value, such as a house or a female slave; they had, in other words, rights that were different from and less than those of the legitimate children but they were rights nonetheless.

The wife, with all her many duties, did not even have the privilege of ensuring that her children would have exclusive rights to their father's estate. This did not mean that the husband had no duty to them. The hierarchy of women, with the wife in the top position and concubine below, had to be both fully visible from outside and perceptible by the wife in the context of conjugal relations. Nevertheless, the concubine enjoyed a certain prestige, or at least a certain social position. Although it is not technically precise to speak, as has been done, about the Homeric male's polygamy, given that there was only one wife, concubinage was still a recognized bond. But the hierarchy had to be respected. Only his

wife could appear socially at the side of the Homeric man, and he could not neglect her for the concubine.¹³

Failure to observe these marital duties, moreover, was not dealt with by concrete and physical punishments like those that guaranteed the wife's observance of her duties. Offenses by the husband against the wife were sanctioned only at the social level. Finally, if the man had duties toward his wife, albeit only social and moral ones, he had none toward his concubine or any of his other women. The prisoners of war, loved and respected in words, in reality were neither more nor less than slaves. And the household slaves, the maidservants, had to be obedient, and perhaps were even expected to show sexual fidelity to the master, who had not only the authority to inflict corporal punishment but also the right of life and death over them. Odysseus, on his return to Ithaca, had twelve maidservants who had been unfaithful to him put to death by hanging.

CONCLUSIONS

Attempts to demonstrate that the poems contain traces of matriarchal organization (such as the statement that the Homeric woman enjoyed certain privileges and a greater social dignity than that enjoyed by the woman of the classical period) seems to be in contrast with the values and rules of heroic behavior.

The fact that there are some references in the poems to female characters endowed with some power does not mean anything. These isolated references are absolutely unreconcilable with the general picture of both family and political organization. The position of women in the Bronze Age was far from privileged; it was a position of immutable subservience to a family head whose powers as husband were limited only by the competing power of the father. In examining the condition of Penelope (the woman who should transmit regal power)¹⁴ we see how fantastic is the image of a Homeric woman who was, if not powerful, at least free. In the first place, Penelope cannot refuse to marry the suitors—it is not for her to decide whether to remarry. It is not really clear to whom this privilege belonged, given that certain passages attribute it to her father, Icarius, and others to her son, Telemachus. But one thing is

certain: the decision did not rest with Penelope, who could only, after others had decided that she should marry, choose the suitor she liked best. Telemachus went so far as to say that he did not dare turn his mother out of the house, forcing her to remarry. This shows that he had the power to do so. This is the only consideration he shows for his mother, whom he is constantly reminding that he and he alone is in charge of the house while Odysseus is away.

This, then, is the domestic place of the Homeric women—not only of Penelope but of all the women who appear in the context of a family group.¹⁵

The situation is different with respect to such figures as Circe and Calypso, "independent" witches and nymphs with magic powers. These characters (the Sirens and malicious fairies) from tales perhaps told for centuries by sailors and eventually collected in the great Homeric poem have been said to embody a memory of vanished female powers.¹⁶ In the poems, however, they are mythical figures for whom it is impossible to construct a historical account. The status of the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the Homeric heroes is, in fact, quite different from that of the nymphs and fairies. The true female condition in Homer was this: total exclusion from political power and participation in public life; subordination to the head of the family and submission to his punishment; and finally, ideological segregation. Forbidden to think about anything but domestic matters, the woman cannot even talk about male matters. Faithless, weak, fickle, she was regarded with suspicion. The roots of Western misogyny go back to a more remote epoch than is usually thought—they are already well fixed in the oldest document in European literature.¹⁷ Nor is it possible that the poems express an individual position, the misogyny of a single poet (or two).

Although the epics represent the confluence of songs that were handed down and reworked for centuries, and the didactic and socializing function of epic poetry requires that the tales both express and, at the same time, contribute to forming public opinion, the distrust of women that the poems express is matched in the literature of the period immediately following. The most important example is the poetry of Hesiod.

Hesiod and Semonides

PANDORA

In both the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* Hesiod (ca. 700 B.C.) tells the story of the creation of the first woman.²² Angry because Prometheus had stolen fire from the gods, Zeus decided to punish men by sending them misfortune: Pandora, the first woman. Her name meant that every god had given her a gift—beauty, charm, grace, skill in women's work, but also "a bitch's mind and a thieving heart" and "lies and tricky speeches." When Pandora reached earth, everything changed. Before she arrived men lived happily, untouched by troubles and diseases, but from that moment on:

The other thousand miseries fly around among men. The earth is full of evils and the sea is full of them. Diseases come to men in the day, and at night uninvited, bringing evils for mortals in silence, since Deviser Zeus took away their voices. So there is no way to escape the mind of Zeus (WD 100–114)

But what is more interesting in the story of Pandora is the description of her nature. Created from "earth and water," Pandora was a product of Hephaestus' craftsmanship. She was made "like a chaste virgin," and Athena gave her the ability to seduce:

Thus, Pandora was constructed, this "evil so beautiful" from whom descends the "cursed race, the tribe of women."²³ To bring evil to men, she uses her ability to seduce, which is no small thing. Seduction and beauty constitute enormous power, as described with indisputable grace in a fragment of the *Anacreontica*:

Her beauty gives her a power to equal any shield or any weapon. A beautiful woman can conquer iron and fire. (*Anac.* 24.9–13)²⁴

But the gallantry of this unknown poet is certainly not the norm. Hesiod saw the power of beauty quite differently:

Don't let a woman with an alluring behind deceive you with her charming lies, while she pokes into your granary. A man who believes women believes cheats. (WD 373–75)

For Hesiod beauty and charm can only be dangerous. The use women make of them (given the reason they were created) is

inevitably to do harm to men. To Pandora Aphrodite gave "grace," "cruel passion," and "worries that gnaw at the limbs" (*charis, pothos, ergaleos*, and *gukhoroi meledonai*), but Hermes gave her "a thieving heart" (*kuneos noos*) and in her heart put "lies" (*pseudea*) and "tricky speeches" (*logoi aimulioi*) (WD 59 ff.). Furnished with these gifts, Pandora is inevitably a "terrible scourge" (*pemna mega*), a "steep trap from which there is no escape" (Th. 592 and WD 83).

WOMEN AND ANIMALS

Like Hesiod, Semonides (seventh century B.C.) holds that women (or at least some women) were made from earth and water.

Another [woman] the Olympians moulded out of earth, a stunted creature, you see, a woman like her knows nothing, bad or good. The only work she understands is eating; and not even when the god makes cruel winter weather does she feel the cold and draw a stool near to the fire.

Another he made from the sea: she has two characters. One day she smiles and is happy; a stranger who sees her in the house will praise her, and say, "There is no woman better than this among all mankind, nor more beautiful." But on another day she is unbearable to look at or come near to; then she raves so that you can't approach her, like a bitch over her pups; and she shows herself ungentle and contrary to enemies and friends alike: just so the sea often stands without a tremor, harmless, a great delight to sailors, in the summer season; but often it raves, tossed about by thundering waves. It is the sea that such a woman most resembles in her temper; like the ocean, she has a changeful nature. (fr. 7.21–42)²⁵

But if women made of earth or born from the sea are a misfortune, still worse are the other women who, according to their nature, derive from animals, the characteristics of which they retain:

One he made from a long-bristled sow. In her house everything lies in disorder, smeared with mud, and rolls about the floor; and she herself unwashed, in clothes unlaundered, sits by the dungheap and grows fat. Another he made from a wicked vixen: a woman who knows everything. No bad thing and no better kind of thing is lost on her; for she often calls a good thing bad and a bad thing good. Her attitude is never the same. . . .

Another he made from a bitch, own daughter of her mother, who

wants to hear everything and know everything. She peers everywhere and strays everywhere, always yapping, even if she sees no human being. A man cannot stop her by threatening, nor by losing his temper and knocking out her teeth with a stone, nor with honeyed words, nor even if she is sitting with friends, but ceaselessly she keeps up a barking you can do nothing with. . . .

Another he made from an ash-grey ass that has suffered many blows: when compelled and scolded she puts up with everything, much against her will, and does her work to satisfaction. But meanwhile she munches in the back room all night and all day; and she munches by the hearth, and likewise when she comes to the act of love, she accepts any partner.

Another he made from a ferret, a miserable, wretched creature, nothing about her is beautiful or desirable, pleasing or lovable: she is mad for the bed of love, but she makes any man she has with her sick. She does great damage to her neighbours by her thieving, and often eats up sacrifices left unburned.

Another was the offspring of a proud mare with a long mane. She pushes servile work and trouble on to others; she would never set her hand to a mill, nor pick up a sieve nor throw the dung out of the house, nor sit over the oven dodging the soot: she makes her husband acquainted with Necessity. She washes the dirt off herself twice, sometimes three times, every day: she rubs herself with scents, and always has her thick hair combed and garlanded with flowers. A woman like her is a fine sight for others, but for the man she belongs to she proves a plague, unless he is some tyrant or king (who takes pride in such objects).

Another is from a monkey: this is the biggest plague of all that Zeus has given to men. Her face is hideous, when a woman like her goes through the town, everyone laughs at her. She is short in the neck: she moves awkwardly; she has no bottom, and is all legs. Hard luck on the poor man who holds such a misery in his arms! she knows every trick and twist, just like a monkey; she does not mind being laughed at, and will do no one a good turn but considers, and spends the whole day planning, how she can do someone the worst possible harm. (fr. 7.2-20, 43-82)

Sow, vixen, bitch, ass, ferret, mare, monkey: each worse than the last. Only one woman escapes:

Another is from a bee; the man who gets her is fortunate: for on her alone blame does not settle. She causes his property to grow and increase, and she grows old with a husband whom she loves and who loves her, the mother of a handsome and reputable family. She stands

out among all women, and a godlike beauty plays about her. She takes no pleasure in sitting among women in places where they tell stories about love. Women like her are the best and most sensible whom Zeus bestows on men. (83-93)

Does the bee-woman really exist? If she does, she is very rare and one suspects that Semonides does not believe in her at all.²⁶ This explains how he can calmly and without fear of inconsistency conclude his catalogue by asserting that

Zeus has contrived that all these tribes of women are with men and remain with them. Yes, this is the worst plague Zeus has made—women, if they seem to be some use to him who has them, it is to him especially that they prove a plague. The man who lives with a woman never goes through all his day in cheerfulness; he will not be quick to push out of his house Starvation, a housemate who is an enemy, a god who is against us. Just when a man most wishes to enjoy himself at home; through the dispensation of a god or the kindness of a man, she finds a way of finding fault with him and lifts her crest for battle. Yes, where there is a woman, men cannot even give hearty entertainment to a guest who has come to the house; and the very woman who seems most respectable is the one who turns out guilty of the worst atrocity; because while her husband is not looking . . . and the neighbours get pleasure in seeing how he too is mistaken. Each man will take care to realise that the fate of all of us is alike. Yes, this is the greatest plague that Zeus has made, and he has bound us to them with a fetter that cannot be broken. Because of this some have gone to Hades fighting for a woman. (96-118)