Perception of Femininity in Ancient Greek Literature

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Abstract
The majority of Ancient Greek works focus on male characters; yet, a literary examination and analysis of Homeric works revealed a toadyish depiction of feminism. The Homeric poets developed a spectrum of ideal and unideal femininity in the epic, The Iliad and her sequel The Odyssey, with tarnished Helen on one end and faithful Penelope on the other. The usage of motifs, or the repeating of a theme across a tale, reveals a study into this spectrum of femininity when each epic is dissected. To depict the ways in which each of the heroines represented femininity, the poets used the motifs of storytelling and weaving, two key characteristics of Ancient Greek womanhood. The Homeric epics offer hidden but powerful depictions of women in Ancient Greece through these characters and concepts. It also ends up giving real hints and clue about motherhood and how was the scenario to be a woman in Ancient Greece. Each epic analyzes this tincture of feminism through the use of divisive motifs or the restatement of a theme all over the narrative. Through Helen and Penelope, Homeric creation accommodates the classified and keen depiction of femininity in obsolete and ancient Greece.

Keywords: spectrum, femininity, perception, weaving

Introduction:
Not surprisingly, the Homeric epics put the sharpest focal point entirely on the miseries and exultation of men and shine back on the priority of the age in which it was composed and Greek poetry is no anomaly - all over the composition the leaves of Greek veneration, majesty, reverence for the deities, and male superiority and supremacy are conveyed. Nonetheless, the female characters, Helen and Penelope, stick out across this male dominance. In spite of their absence from the limelight, we recognize the epics can't survive without them - "it is Helen “for whose sake, by the will of the gods / the Greeks and Trojans suffered through the [Trojan] War”[1], and it is Penelope who “[kept] her husband’s house safe till he [returned]”[2]. These women were the core point of Homeric poets and they displayed the ancient Greek spectrum of femininity, including "ideal versus Unideal ". The epics, in particular, presented the ideal female through Penelope and the reverse through Helen, using the elements of storytelling and weaving.

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To comprehend how the two women's behaviors in these literary devices embody ideal or unideal femininity, one must first create a concept of femininity in Ancient Greece. Visualize a spectrum or a straight line with a pole on each end to help build this understanding. Basic femininity, the vital criteria to which Ancient Greek society expected women to conform, is in the center of this spectrum. This level comprises of beauty, weaving at the loom, and submission -- counting sexual submission -- as established in the first book of the *Iliad*, in which Agamemnon converses his apprehension of Chryseis, his “prize,”3 specifying that he desires for her to “[go] up and down by the loom and [be] in bed as my companion”4. Moving outwards, ideal femininity exists at one end of the continuum, incorporating fundamental femininity with knowledge, matrimonial fidelity, and childrearing. On the other hand, unideal femininity is made of unfaithfulness and the feminine practice of agency in a male-controlled culture. Circe's transformation of Odysseus' men into pigs, exerting her agency while depriving the men of theirs, is an example of unideal femininity 5. To comprehend the fundamental discrepancy between the two poles on this spectrum, one should remember that ideal femininity promotes male supremacy, whereas unideal femininity challenges it.

The loom and narrative motifs were used by Homeric poets to portray ideal and unideal femininity. Helen primarily used storytelling to exercise agency and challenge the patriarchal narrative in the *Odyssey*. Helen wanted to share a tale while in the company of the men in her court, but she recognized that giving a speech in front of the men would imply her to be sociably inappropriate; consequently, she decided to “mix the wine with drugs” in order for the men to enable her to speak6. Though this act itself illustrates Helen's reluctance to welcome the patriarchal society's limits, the story she recounts also challenges male supremacy by refuting the narrative. She recounts that she was the only one who recognized Odysseus when he arrived in Troy, and that she “washed and scrubbed him with oil and dressed him,”7 a sexually suggestive detail. She also held responsible the goddess Aphrodite for making her “go crazy” to seek Paris, attempting to absolve herself of any responsibility for her conduct 8. Helen exercised agency by narrating this tale in front of men, including her husband, King Menelaus, and even divulging an explicit minutia that could be indicative of adultery, disrupting men's authority as well as her husband's dominance over her.

Menelaus, on the other hand, immediately followed Helen's account with his own, insinuating Helen was not as devoted to the Achaeans as she was to the opposing Trojans. “Some spirit who desired to glorify the Trojans urged you on,”9 he added, implying that Helen had betrayed both the Achaeans and him. While he agreed with Helen before beginning this story, the story he recounted painted a different picture of her. As a result of the storytelling motif, Helen might be seen undermining male power while yet being oppressed by it.
Penelope, on the other hand, used storytelling to reinforce male domination. Her stories were filled with mentions to Odysseus, fastened with her love for him, and seasoned with her devotion to him. Penelope, for example, “replied with caution”10 when one of her suitors showered her with compliments, seizing the chance to tell the suitors about the moments she shared with her significant other before he embarked to battle in the Trojan War. She said the gods "destroyed [her] looks that day the Greeks embarked for Troy," and that Odysseus arriving home was the one and only way for her to restore her "good name" and "beauty," closing her story by regretting the absence of bridal gifts the suitors had given her11. Penelope accredited her beauty and rank to her spouse, chastised the deities for letting her suffer, and asked suitors for presents, demonstrating her wish to add to her spouse's supremacy and strive to increase his riches, while also underlining her devotion to him. Indeed, the veiled Odysseus was “happy she was secretly procuring presents, and enchanting them with attractive words” while he listened to her speak 12. Her story allowed her to build on her husband's reputation and reign, which aided masculine supremacy.

When she voiced the cloaked Odysseus about her menacing dream, Penelope combined her storytelling ability with her wit. She told him that while she was sleeping, she had seen "a huge eagle with a pointed beak" kill "twenty geese," and that the eagle then addressed her "in human language," telling her that it was her husband returning in the form of an eagle "to put a cruel end to [the suitors represented by the geese]"13. As a result, the hero, disguised as a beggar, consoled her by admitting that her dream signified “ruin for the suitors” at the hands of “Odysseus himself”14. Although the epic does not reveal whether Penelope deduced that the beggar to whom she spoke was her husband in disguise, it is evident that she told him this dream to imply that she wished for the suitors to be expelled as well as her husband's return. Hence, Penelope exhibited ideal femininity by combining storytelling and intelligence to discuss her loyalty and subservience to her husband; Helen, on the other hand, embodied unideal femininity by utilizing storytelling to achieve agency in a patriarchal culture.

The second theme chosen by Homeric epics to depict the spectrum of femininity was weaving on a loom. Helen's exertion at the loom was a continuation of her wish to practice agency, while Penelope's work was a continuation of her allegiance to her significant other. Even though weaving was a basic part of femininity which females were projected to conform, Helen and Penelope, both used it to express their personalities and femininities. In the Iliad, Helen was found “weaving a great web,” integrating within it the “struggles that the [Trojans and Achaeans] endured for her sake at the hands of the war god”15. Helen exercised agency by telling her version of events inside the threads she wove, a distinctly feminine media. Even though the precise specifics of the “red folding robe”16 she sewed are unknown, the crux can be gleaned by her subsequent chat with her father-in-law, King Priam. Helen alluded to herself as a “helper in war”17 and hinted that she wanted to "follow [Priam's] son"18 as she described the Achaean men to Priam and his court. Helen exercised agency in these brief sentences by declining to
belittle her part in the Trojan War's reason and seeking to recount her version of events, features that were inclined to be incorporated into the pattern of the robe she wove. Helen defied male dominance and practiced agency while weaving at the loom, rejecting masculine accounts and creating her very own.

Penelope, in contrast, used weaving on the loom to supplementarily display her devotion to her significant other. According to the exhausted queen, she informed her suitors that she would wed one of them once she finished weaving a memorial shroud for Odysseus' father, Laertes19. However, her promise was intertwined with deception -- “by day I wove the web, and in the night by torchlight, I unwove it,” she unveiled to him20. Penelope continued to be devoted to her spouse and preserved his domain as long as she could by weaving and scheming until her wooers figured out her ploy and compelled her to complete the shroud. Penelope had also sewn her spouse a "purple robe, of double-folded wool, held fastened by a golden brooch"21, objects with complexity and texture that "astonished many women"22, as Odysseus stated in his answer. Both articles indicate Penelope's support for her husband and his supremacy, as well as her wish to preserve his kingdom while he was abroad, while the funeral shroud was woven out of cleverness and the garments out of love.

**Conclusion:**

In short, The Iliad and The Odyssey, two Homeric legendary stories, use the monogram of recitation and narration to signify the ideal and unideal poles on the earliest Greek spectrum of femininity and delicacy. On the same board, Ladies of the aeon were interpreted by the men and circumambient them, ideal and unideal womanhood were enclosed by their connection to male ascendancy. Helen’s storytelling and chronicles evinced her inclination to procure power and abort the narrative enforced upon her, consequently fragmenting the masculine supremacy; meantime Penelope’s tales and weaving elucidated her Integrity to her life partner, propping up for masculine superiority. Whatever, Helen and Penelope were heavily different, nor did they pop up as the flag of femininity -- solely their tasks did. While sagacious and sapient Penelope personify the faultless femininity nearly in a unique way. “pretty haired” yet damned Helen exposition of both clean and dirty femininity. The complexity that the Homeric poets intended for each character, despite their status as inferior to men in the Ancient Greek world, is reflected in their construction. Despite the fact that female characters were rarely the center of attention in either epic, the poets' subtle references to their roles in the advancement of the plots indicated that epics simply would not exist without women’s acts.
References:


Endnotes
1.) Homer, *Od*. 17.120
2.) Homer, *Od*. 23.151
3.) Homer, *Il*. 1.120
4.) Homer, *Il*. 1.30-31
5.) Homer, *Od*. 10.240
6.) Homer, *Od*. 4.220
7.) Homer, *Od*. 4.249-253
8.) Homer, *Od*. 4.261
9.) Homer, *Od*. 4.273
10.) Homer, *Od*. 18.249
11.) Homer, *Od*. 18.252-281
12.) Homer, *Od*. 18.282
13.) Homer, *Od*. 19.540-550
14.) Homer, *Od*. 19.560
15.) Homer, *Il*. 3.125-128
16.) Homer, *Il*. 3.126
17.) Homer, *Il*. 3.188
18.) Homer, *Il*. 3.174
19.) Homer, *Od*. 19.144-145
20.) Homer, *Od*. 19.148-149
22.) Homer, *Od*. 19.233
23.) Homer, *Od*. 18.243
24.) Homer, *Il*. 11.505