

Women as the Honor-Currency: An Anthropological Understanding of Female Sexual Virtue in the Homeric Epic

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of female sexual virtue in the Homeric epics through the concept of “honor-currency.” It argues that women’s chastity and marital loyalty attain social value through reputation. The preservation, contestation, and violation of this reputation can affect male prestige and authority and shape the longer-term stability of households and kinship relations. Based on close readings of key scenes from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, including marriage negotiations, war-prize disputes, Penelope’s strategies of delay, Nausicaa’s careful self-presentation, and the contrasting figures of Helen and Clytemnestra, the analysis shows that Homeric women are consequential yet constrained agents within systems of honor and exchange. Drawing on anthropological frameworks of honor and shame alongside classical scholarship on gender and marriage, the paper explains how female sexual virtue shapes public transactions, household continuity, and collective memory.

INTRODUCTION

Although the Homeric epics focus primarily on male figures, warfare, and the pursuit of *kleos*, they also provide significant representations of gender roles and the social valuation of women’s sexual conduct. Much scholarly research has treated Homeric women as subordinate figures whose roles are largely domestic and tied to kinship structures. Scholars such as Cristiana Franco and Lilah Grace Canevaro¹ have shown that female virtue in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is typically portrayed through expectations centered on the male perspective. In both epics, women appear primarily as daughters and wives whose chastity, loyalty, and household labor contribute to the integrity and stability of the *oikos* and, further, to the social standing of the men connected to it.

This view has not gone unchallenged. Most recent work has emphasized female agency, intelligence, and narrative centrality, particularly in the figure of Penelope. However, much of the debate still organizes

¹ Lilah Grace Canevaro, *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic: Objects, Gender, Agency* (Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198826309.001.0001>.

itself around a binary between women as objects for exchange and women as agents who exercise constrained but meaningful forms of control. What remains insufficiently examined is how women's sexual virtue operates within Homeric systems of male honor and relations between households.

This paper offers an anthropologically grounded account of female sexual virtue through what I call "honor-currency." By this, I mean the socially recognized value of a woman's sexual reputation, whose preservation or violation can affect the prestige and authority of men and households connected to her. The concept overlaps partially with Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital,² but is more specific: in the honor-based social world depicted by Homer, the public recognition of female sexual virtue can shape the establishment, maintenance, contestation, or diminution of male status. Drawing on Pitt-Rivers' honor-and-shame framework alongside close textual analysis of Homeric scenes of marriage, war-prize allocation, and domestic conflict, I argue that in the Homeric epics, the public recognition of female sexual virtue can either stabilize households and political alliances or contribute to their disruption.

For this analysis, "female sexual virtue" refers to a set of expectations surrounding chastity, marital and family loyalty, modest speech and conduct, and the avoidance of illicit sexual activity, particularly adultery. Husbands, fathers, public communities, and the wider social world assess these qualities. These expectations are closely linked to honor, household stability, legitimate inheritance, and the formation of marital and political alliances. Lévi-Strauss' alliance theory offers a framework for describing these social transactions, particularly women's mobility between households through marriage. The concept of honor-currency further clarifies how reputation derived from female sexual virtue shapes the social consequences of such exchanges.

After reviewing the existing literature on women in the Homeric epic, I outline the paper's methodological approach. I will then illustrate the duality of honor-currency through two complementary perspectives. The first examines women as bearers of honor within the public sphere, focusing on marriage bargaining, war prizes, and major disputes. The second turns to the domestic sphere, exploring women's virtue as a significant means of sustaining the household by evaluating figures such as Penelope, Nausicaa, and Helen in their maintenance or disruption of kinship, inheritance, and domestic order over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Classical scholarship on women in the Homeric epics has long emphasized their subordinate position within male-centered social structures. Cristiana Franco³ argues that the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* present women primarily as daughters and wives whose social roles are defined through their contribution to the *oikos*, including marriage, childbirth, and household management. In this framework, male expectations

² Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989): 14–25, <https://doi.org/10.2307/202060>.

³ Cristiana Franco, "Women in Homer," in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, ed. Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 54–65, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444355024.ch4>.

define female virtue and tie it closely to preserving the household and male status. Canevaro⁴ likewise argues that Homeric women are repeatedly commodified as marriage goods and spoils of war, with their bodies and labor functioning as “objects” through which men negotiate status and prestige. Even when women speak or act, Canevaro suggests, their agency often remains embedded within systems that continue to objectify them.

This object-centered reading has also been productively challenged and complicated. Emily Hauser, for example, highlights Penelope’s intelligence, resourcefulness, and ambivalence, illustrating that Homer presents her as a heroine in her own right rather than merely a trophy. In *Penelope’s Bones*,⁵ Hauser further contrasts Homeric representations with archaeological and historical evidence suggesting that Bronze Age women held more complex and influential social roles than the epics sometimes imply. Such work usefully unsettles the image of Homeric women as merely subordinate. Nevertheless, the debate has largely remained organized around the binary of women as objects of exchange versus women as agents within those systems. Less fully examined is how the social recognition of female sexual virtue translates into consequences for male honor and household stability. The concept of “honor-currency” addresses this gap. It shifts the focus from the issue of women as agents and objects to how their sexual reputation affects the status of the individuals and households associated with them.

A third strand of scholarship focuses on the logic of marital and gift exchange. Lyons argues that Greek marriage exchange is ideologically structured as a risky transfer between households, in which women can be understood as “dangerous gifts”. Alliance depends on the transfer’s social legitimacy. If that legitimacy is questioned, the act of transfer itself can become a source of disruption.⁶ This perspective is valuable because it shifts attention from women’s intrinsic qualities to the conditions under which their circulation produces either social cohesion or conflict. It thereby opens space to analyze female sexual virtue not simply as a moral expectation, but as one factor in the social consequences of marriage exchange for relations between households and among men.

To analyze how sexual virtue acquires social consequences, the present study draws on Julian Pitt-Rivers’ account of honor and shame in Mediterranean societies.⁷ Pitt-Rivers treats honor as a relational form of status that people publicly claim and others recognize. He argues that honor and shame form a sex-related pair of values in which men are judged by their courage and autonomy, while women are judged by sexual purity. Family honor therefore depends on meeting these gender expectations. Pitt-Rivers’ framework is especially useful for Homeric analysis because it treats honor as dependent on public recognition. As he puts it, honor is “the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his

⁴ Canevaro, *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic*.

⁵ Ruth Scodel, review of *Penelope’s Bones: A New History of Homer’s World through the Women Written Out of It*, by Emily Hauser, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2025.11.07, <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2025/2025.11.07/>.

⁶ Deborah Lyons, *Dangerous Gifts: Gender and Exchange in Ancient Greece* (University of Texas Press, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.7560/729674>.

⁷ Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 19–78, https://home.iscte-iul.pt/~fgvs/Pitt-Rivers_Honour.pdf.

society.”⁸ Within this framework, a woman’s sexual conduct becomes a publicly legible measure through which the standing of men tied to her may be affirmed or diminished.

Three themes emerge from this scholarship. First, Homeric women are persistently represented as objects of exchange whose circulation structures relations among men. Second, this object status does not exhaust their narrative significance, since women may also exercise constrained but consequential forms of intelligence and agency. Third, transferring women between households is socially and ideologically fraught, since the exchange’s success depends on its social legitimacy. In summary, these academic studies offer important insights into the role of women’s sexual reputation as honor-currency in the functioning of honor, kinship, and exchange systems.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, this paper relies on close readings of selected passages from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in which women are exchanged, displayed, or judged. Key scenes include Agamemnon’s bargaining over daughters and captives in *Iliad* 1 and 9, Helen’s self-blaming speeches in *Iliad* 3, Nausicaa’s encounter with Odysseus in *Odyssey* 6, and Penelope’s loom stratagem and bow contest in *Odyssey* 18–21. These passages are read alongside anthropological works on the Mediterranean honor-and-shame system, especially Pitt-Rivers’ framework, and classical studies on Homeric gender and marriage. The close readings analyze passages regarding women’s conduct, reputation, and public judgment. The anthropological frameworks then interpret the broader social implications of these representations.

The analysis therefore focuses not only on how the poems characterize women, but also on how they connect women’s conduct and reputation to household stability, male status, and political order. This literary-anthropological approach allows the paper to examine how ideals of female sexual virtue become meaningful within the Homeric epic world.

WOMEN AS HONOR-CURRENCY IN PUBLIC POWER AND CONFLICT

In the Homeric epic, marriage exchange and wartime politics reveal how women’s sexual reputation serves as honor-currency that interweaves with public negotiations of honor and status. Chastity, marital loyalty, modest behavior, and sexual reputation reflect the public’s understanding of women transferred through marriage or wartime allocations. Such transfers can become opportunities for men to assert or challenge their honor, status, and legitimacy. This section begins with the *Odyssey*, examining how female sexual virtue operates as honor-currency within everyday social norms, before turning to the war-prize scenes in the *Iliad* to examine how the same logic operates in public conflict and political exchange.

⁸ Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” 21.

The *Odyssey* first presents Nausicaa, the unmarried daughter of King Alcinous and Queen Arete of Phaeacia, whose future marriage is carefully groomed as a source of honor for her natal household. Her mother's remark that Nausicaa is "going to be married almost immediately" and that proper presentation is "the way to get yourself a good name, and to make your father and mother proud of you"⁹ directly links impending marriage to reputation and familial honor. In Book 6, Nausicaa meets the shipwrecked Odysseus while washing clothes with her attendants outside the city. She offers him clothing and guidance, then secretly arranges safe housing for him at her natal home. When they prepare to return to the city, she aids him generously but also instructs him not to walk with her publicly, warning that gossip might assume she is involved in an affair with a stranger. Instead, she directs him to follow separately and supplicate her mother, Arete.¹⁰

Nausicaa's concern about being seen with Odysseus reflects that her reputation depends not only on her actions, but also on how the public interprets them. Her request that Odysseus enter the city alone shows that Nausicaa takes proactive steps to protect herself from gossip, minimizing the possibility that others might question her sexual propriety. This scene highlights the importance of an unmarried woman safeguarding her sexual reputation before marriage. Through the anthropological theoretical framework of this paper, this emphasis on reputation can also be read as preserving the social value of her future marriage for her natal family. Therefore, Nausicaa's sexual virtue conditions the reputational value of her future marriage; if her reputation were tarnished, it might diminish the honor this marriage brings to her natal *oikos*. Her case thus shows how honor-currency can operate through careful reputation management before marriage. Although she is not traded through marriage in the narrative, her concerns with marriage prospects and how others might perceive her continue to inform her conduct. Thus, Nausicaa stands in stark contrast to Helen, who will be discussed below: she carefully protects her reputation before marriage, while Helen's departure from her husband Menelaus for Paris illustrates a breach of marital loyalty with far-reaching effects.

Hector's reproach of Paris and his reference to Helen as "beauteous prize" from Sparta¹¹ frame this marriage as the source of conflict and dishonor. The Trojan elders observe that "for nine long years ... celestial charms have set the world in arms," and pray that Heaven will "...convey that fatal face, and from destruction save the Trojan race."¹² These elders' words frame Helen's sexuality and marriage as matters of collective concern. Read through the honor-currency framework, Helen's case shows how a woman's sexual reputation can become implicated in the wider social and political landscape. Helen's own self-condemnation reinforces the point. Speaking "with conscious shame," she laments that she has been "false to my country, and my nuptial bed... false to them all, to Paris only kind."¹³ Helen's speech reveals that she saw herself as the one responsible for the marital betrayal and its subsequent broader

⁹ Hom. *Od.* 6.69.

¹⁰ Hom. *Od.* 6.73.

¹¹ Hom. *Il.* 3.88.

¹² Hom. *Il.* 3.9.

¹³ Hom. *Il.* 3.94.

events, aligning women's sexuality with collective judgment. Helen's unfaithful sexuality thus shows how the same honor-currency can become a source of conflict and dishonor.

The *Odyssey* then evaluates wives' sexual conduct more explicitly by contrasting Penelope and Clytemnestra. Agamemnon's ghost praises Penelope as "endowed with such rare excellence of understanding, and so faithful to her wedded lord," predicting that "the fame... of her virtue shall never die," while condemning Clytemnestra for having "brought disgrace all womankind."¹⁴ The contrast between these two presents female sexual virtue and its inversion as moral examples: Penelope's loyalty supports household order, while Clytemnestra symbolizes the extreme of female wrongdoing that taints the very idea of "woman." Through this contrast, the poem ranks women morally by how their sexual conduct affects household continuity; fidelity and betrayal become the two poles of a value spectrum that arranges women's reputations in this hierarchy. Because Penelope's fidelity is promised "immortal song," her virtue becomes lasting fame that, across generations, is expected to be remembered and learned from as collective memory. Conversely, Clytemnestra's infidelity and murder demonstrate the opposite effect: when sexual virtue is inverted, the disgrace is not confined to her specifically but extends to "all womankind." This contrast points to the fact that sexual virtue is not merely a private ideal but a public criterion by which women are praised or condemned based on their reputation. It also preserves the idea that Penelope's remarriage becomes a visible stake in the reordering of social and political power.

The epics make women's marital relationships one stake in the public contest over power and status. Penelope's bow contest in the *Odyssey* is a notable example. After delaying remarriage through the loom stratagem, Penelope announces that she will set up Odysseus' axes and marry the suitor who can string his bow and shoot through them.¹⁵ The contest links male physical prowess to the right to claim Penelope in marriage and to have a place in Odysseus' household. Penelope's remarriage thus becomes a crucial factor in determining who had the right to enter Odysseus' *oikos* and potentially assume power in this contest. By tying remarriage to Odysseus' bow rather than to wealth, Penelope specifies the conditions under which remarriage can legitimately occur. In the honor-currency framework, this contest goes beyond a test; Penelope regulates the terms under which her marital status, and the honor attached to it, may be transferred. Her remarriage becomes the prize in a public test of masculinity, and the contest marks the point at which household succession and legitimate authority are reconfigured.

The continued presence of the suitors in Odysseus' household further exemplifies this dynamic. Telemachus complains that "the chiefs from all our islands... are eating up my house under the pretext of paying their court to my mother," while one suitor notes that she keeps them "on the tiptoe of expectation, each vying with the other in his suit for a prize of such rare perfection."¹⁶ The suitors' attempt to win Penelope also demonstrates their effort to buy a claim to her remarriage and, by extension, to a position in Odysseus' household. Telemachus' complaint that they are "eating up my house" shows that the suitors' consumption of the *oikos* precedes any legitimate transfer of rightful access through remarriage. Penelope's limited exposure, her veiled appearance, her accompaniment only by her handmaids, and her

¹⁴ Hom. *Od.*, 24.292.

¹⁵ Hom. *Od.* 19.237–38.

¹⁶ Hom. *Od.* 1–2.

scolding the suitors for squandering Odysseus' goods and violating the norm of hospitality provide evidence that she is both an object available for their competition and a moral authority for judging their behavior. When Odysseus strings the bow and slaughters the suitors, he converts their attempted display of power into spectacular shame. Their plan to gain status through Penelope fails, and Odysseus thereby reestablishes and solidifies his position as the rightful husband and head of the household. This confirms that control over a woman's sexual and marital future remains decisive for the legitimacy of male authority.

In the *Iliad*, the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles in Book 1 centers on women as spoils. Chryseis is presented as a "heavenly prize" led "by vote selected, to the general's bed." When Agamemnon is forced to return her, he compensates himself by seizing Briseis, whom Achilles describes as the "prize of my valour."¹⁷ Achilles complains that Agamemnon "defrauds my [his] arms" of the woman who marks his excellence, and that "service, faith, and justice plead in vain,"¹⁸ showing that redistributing a female prize is also understood as redistributing honor among men. Achilles's reaction to the loss of Briseis suggests that, in this culture, female war prizes can become the markers by which recognition is given or withheld. When Agamemnon later offers additional women in compensation, the narrative implies that male honor can be renegotiated through the redistribution of female prizes. This logic aligns with the honor-currency framework: In terms of male status, female prizes have gained some relative value.

Book 9 further explains that sexual purity is one source of that value. In his reconciliation offer, Agamemnon repeatedly stresses female sexual purity; his attempt to win Achilles back centers on women as compensatory goods. He offers "seven lovely captives of the Lesbian line... skill'd in each art, unmatch'd in form divine" and the "long-contested maid" Briseis, swearing that she remained "untouch'd... pure from my arms, and guiltless of my loves."¹⁹ He then offers three daughters: Laodice, Iphigenia, and Chrysothemis, allowing Achilles to choose any of them as a wife, and promising a dowry "so vast a store... As never father gave a child before."²⁰ These women's reputational value is based in part on the recognition of the legitimacy of their sexual status, and Agamemnon's emphasis on sexual purity further underscores this point. By promising daughters at no cost and with unprecedented dowries, Agamemnon treats them as tokens in the honor economy; their marriages would not only bind Achilles into the coalition but also elevate his political status in the eyes of other leaders. Claude Lévi-Strauss' alliance theory of kinship helps explain this scene as an instance in which the exchange of women founds and maintains relations between groups: because women's fertility and sexual exclusivity secure alliance, they function as what he calls the "supreme gift" in intergroup transactions. Agamemnon's emphasis that Briseis was "untouch'd" shows that her sexual reputation became part of the value of the exchange. The dialogues offer significant insights into how women can function as marriage goods and political chips, with their sexual reputation recognized by the public as proof of value.

¹⁷ Hom. *Il.* 1.24–25.

¹⁸ Hom. *Il.* 1.25.

¹⁹ Hom. *Il.* 9.267.

²⁰ Hom. *Il.* 9.268.

In conclusion, these cases demonstrate how female sexual virtue functions as honor-currency in scenes of public power and conflict. Women's bodies and reputations are mobilized as marriage goods and war prizes; their circulation between households articulates and repairs political relationships; and their perceived virtue or transgression triggers collective efforts to restore honor.

WOMEN'S VIRTUE AS QUIET GOVERNANCE OF HOUSEHOLDS AND FUTURES

While the previous section highlights how honor-currency operates in public power and conflict, this section shifts to a more subtle role within the household. Here, female sexual virtue supports households, alliances, inheritance, and the *oikos*'s future. In this context, female sexual virtue serves less as a public reward and more as a stored value within a household. In the Homeric epic, female sexual virtue is not only something men compete for in public; it also affects marriage, household legitimacy, and household continuity. Even when women are not exchanged directly, their reputation can still be consequential, shaping how households endure, reproduce, and gain public recognition.

Penelope exemplifies this quiet form of power. In the *Odyssey*, her weaving strategy not only delays remarriage but also preserves Odysseus' household honor during his absence. As Deborah Lyons has argued²¹, Greek marriage exchange is ideologically concerned with linking households, not just matching individuals. This offers further insight into how female sexual virtue matters in the Homeric Epic: it is not just a private moral quality but also substantially shapes marriage and family relationships. This means Penelope's delay in remarrying can be read as preventing a premature transfer of allegiance between two houses, rather than merely waiting for Odysseus to return. Her delay prevents her from committing to one of her suitors too soon through remarriage.

Telemachus's complaint that the suitors are "eating up" his house while courting his mother makes the stakes clear: "...as also all the principal men of Ithaca itself, are eating up my house under the pretext of paying their court to my mother, who will neither point blank say that she will not marry, nor yet bring matters to an end; so they are making havoc of my estate, and before long will do so also with myself."²² The issue goes beyond the suitors' greed; Penelope's indecision regarding remarriage places the stability of her *oikos* under increasing pressure. Their courtship is not just about desire; it is also a contest over status, as each suitor seeks to secure Penelope and the position related to her.

When Penelope vows to weave a pall for Laertes while secretly unweaving it at night,²³ she demonstrates that female skill can manage time itself. By delaying the moment of remarriage, she protects her son's inheritance and prevents the household from being rebuilt under another authority. Her strategy is proactive but limited: she can postpone the reconstruction of the *oikos*, but cannot do anything to alleviate the ever-increasing pressure to choose a new husband.

²¹ Lyons, *Dangerous Gifts*.

²² Hom. *Od.* 1.9.

²³ Hom. *Od.* 2.15.

As Canevaro has shown,²⁴ Homeric women often exercise agency through domestic practices. The same quiet authority appears in the way Penelope presents herself publicly. When she comes down from her room veiled and accompanied by handmaids,²⁵ the scene emphasizes careful control of her exposure rather than public sexual availability. She can be seen but not exposed; she enters public space cautiously, controlling her image before her suitors. Later, when she confronts the suitors and asks for gifts,²⁶ she shows she can influence their behavior while staying within expectations of modest demeanor. Her intervention fuels the suitors' competitive desire, allowing her to exploit their resources without explicitly stating her intentions regarding remarriage.

Penelope's bow contest further illustrates this idea. By making stringing Odysseus's bow a condition for her remarriage, Penelope links the continuity of Odysseus's household to her choice of future husband. The bow, retrieved later in Book 21,²⁷ also symbolizes fidelity, memory, and rightful possession, acknowledged in public space. By framing remarriage this way, Penelope gains limited control over the conditions under which Odysseus' household can be reconstituted. Lyons' framework further helps interpret the contest as more than a marriage test: the timing of Penelope's remarriage and its legitimacy were crucial to Odysseus' household; the contest should not be viewed merely as a process for transferring her to a new husband.²⁸

Nausicaa demonstrates a related but earlier stage of the same principle. Lyons' logic clarifies Nausicaa's role, as her concern for her reputation is significant enough to affect her marriage prospects and, in turn, her family. Her mother warns her that she is about to be married and must dress well, because this is how she gains "a good name" and makes her parents proud.²⁹ This reveals that her reputation is not just personal; it is tied to her natal family's status and public perceptions of her future marriage. Lyons' account of dangerous gifts helps explain why Nausicaa's reputation matters. Her premarital reputation is carefully protected as the social consequences of this marriage may be based in part on the public's perception of the woman herself and of the marriage.

When she meets Odysseus, she offers help but also carefully manages how that assistance is perceived publicly: she advises him not to walk openly into town with her and to approach Arete instead.³⁰ In Pitt-Rivers' logic, a woman's public conduct is judged as part of the family's collective honor, so Nausicaa's caution protects both her own chastity and her natal family's standing. This shows that honor-currency depends not only on chastity but also on how others publicly perceive a maiden's actions. By carefully managing her public conduct, she preserves her premarital reputation and her household's reputation. This connects to earlier scenes where Agamemnon offers daughters and captives as

²⁴ Canevaro, *Women of Substance*.

²⁵ Hom. *Od.* 1.11.

²⁶ Hom. *Od.* 18.217–22.

²⁷ Hom. *Od.* 21.257–59.

²⁸ Lyons, *Dangerous Gifts*.

²⁹ Hom. *Od.* 6.69.

³⁰ Hom. *Od.* 6.73.

compensatory goods because their sexual purity makes part of their exchange valuable. In this respect, Nausicaa illustrates the preparatory stage of honor-currency, where preserving sexual and social standing precedes any marital transfer.

Helen and Clytemnestra illustrate that women's actions continue to influence households' futures even after the immediate events have passed. In the *Iliad*, Helen's self-blame in Book 3³¹ is not just personal guilt; it also frames the war through questions of marriage, fidelity, and household legitimacy. In Pitt-Rivers' terms,³² Helen's behavior represents a violation of the sexual purity expected of wives, and that violation damages the honor of men. When Helen declares that she has been "false to my country, and my nuptial bed,"³³ she acknowledges that her sexuality has reached into the political realm and affected the fate of cities. Her self-condemnation reads more like a moral judgment, framing the catastrophe as the consequence of female betrayal. This represents another type of honor-currency: Helen's self-blame does not undo the damage but redefines the conflict's meaning, turning a potentially dishonorable loss into a narrative centered on female wrongdoing.

Clytemnestra plays a similar role in reverse. Her infidelity and murder show how the violation of marital norms can turn honor-currency into a source of internal destruction. In the *Odyssey*, Agamemnon's praise of Penelope is paired with his condemnation of Clytemnestra,³⁴ indicating that women's sexual behavior remains present in memory and judgment long after the misconduct itself. Clytemnestra's affair and murder do not merely destroy a marriage; they continue to shape memories, judgments, and legacies long after the events.

Taken together, these examples reveal that the virtue of Homeric women does more than represent a public stake in conflict. It also bears on the future of households, succession, and public memory. Penelope's avoidance, Nausicaa's caution, Helen's self-blame, and Clytemnestra's condemnation show how misconduct can continue to affect public perception and kinship long after the event. In each case, women's virtue must be preserved over time, not merely in a single moment of exchange. In this constrained context, women do not simply symbolize order; they actively become part of it. These cases show that honor-currency is not exchanged only in moments of conflict, but managed over time as a condition for household continuity and future legitimacy.

BEYOND SIMPLE COMMODIFICATION

A common scholarly opinion treats Homeric women primarily as commodities rather than agents. As Canevaro identifies in *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic*³⁵: "Women in Greek epic are treated as objects, as commodities to be exchanged in marriage or as the spoils of warfare." Thus, according to this

³¹ Hom. *Od.* 3.

³² Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status."

³³ Hom. *Il.* 3.94.

³⁴ Hom. *Od.* 24.292.

³⁵ Canevaro, *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic*.

reading, women in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* appear primarily as objects of exchange within a male-controlled, honor-based economy, their value tied to purity, loyalty, and modest conduct. While this reading accurately reflects many of Homer's depictions of women, it fails to capture the constrained forms of agency they also exercise.

Homeric women are definitely commodified, but they are never reducible to commodities alone. Even though Homer depicts women as objects for male use, Homeric women can use the roles and practices as tools to effectuate their limited agency. Canevaro's study is especially valuable here because she shows that the same social and material forms that mark women as exchangeable can also become means through which they exercise a limited but real agency. Penelope is clearly the best example. Although the suitors treat her as the central object of their competition, she controls when, how, and on what terms it occurs through her loom-stratagem. She manages her public image in a way that ultimately lets her authorize the bow contest, framing Odysseus' actions as legitimate rather than arbitrary. In short, Penelope is treated as an exchange object, yet she retains significant influence over when and how that exchange may be claimed.

Similarly, Nausicaa exemplifies this duality. As her purity and prospective marriage place her within the system of marriage exchange, her encounter with Odysseus demonstrates considerable control over speech, physical distance, and reputation. Through these means, she protects both her own standing and that of her family, while also enabling Odysseus to approach her household in a socially acceptable way. Helen, often seen as the main object of exchange in the Trojan War narrative, likewise does not appear as a purely passive symbol of male desire. Instead, her self-presentations, constrained as they are, help shape the moral interpretation of her story.

Therefore, while women in the Homeric world are undoubtedly commodified, the epics continually depict them as possessing thought, strategic capabilities, and the ability to affect outcomes from within systems. This is why Penelope, Nausicaa, and Helen are all so significant. Each exemplifies how female agency in Homer is nearly always expressed indirectly and socially limited, yet still consequential within the constraints society imposes.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that in the Homeric epics, female sexual virtue functions as honor-currency through the socially recognized value attached to sexual reputation, while redistributing prestige and authority among men and also shaping the longer-term continuity of household and kinship relations. Building on Lyons' analysis of marriage as a risky form of exchange,³⁶ Pitt-Rivers' model of honor and shame³⁷, and more selectively, Bourdieu's symbolic capital,³⁸ the study has sought to show why women's reputations matter so much in the Homeric world. The concept of honor-currency moves beyond the duality that runs

³⁶ Lyons, *Dangerous Gifts*.

³⁷ Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status."

³⁸ Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power."

through Homeric representations of women: they are treated as exchangeable goods, yet they also participate, within clear constraints, in determining the terms and consequences of that exchange.

The analysis of public scenes, marriage negotiations, war-prize disputes, and contests over remarriage demonstrates how women's sexual standing interweaves with politics and status transactions. By contrast, examining more domestic dynamics shows how the same virtue affects household stability, succession, and collective memory. Figures such as Penelope, Nausicaa, Helen, and Clytemnestra illustrate different positions within this system: the strategic preservation of reputation, the careful preparation of a future marriage, the catastrophic redirection of sexual loyalty, and the long afterlife of betrayal in reputation and judgment. In each case, women appear neither as purely passive objects nor as autonomous agents, but as constrained yet consequential participants in the honor economy that organizes their world.

For further studies, comparative work with other early Greek texts could test the broader applicability of the honor-currency model. Modern receptions of Homer offer another productive avenue. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, for instance, rewrites the aftermath of Odysseus' return from Penelope's perspective and from that of the hanged maids, raising questions about whose reputation is preserved, whose is sacrificed, and how the Homeric economy of female virtue continues to be renegotiated in later retellings.

Reading the epics in this way illuminates broader anthropological questions about gender, honor exchange, and the exchange of women within kinship-based societies. The poems show with unusual clarity how social value can be attached to women's sexual reputations, and how that value can organize alliances, inheritance, and memory far beyond the immediate moment of exchange. For scholars of early Greek literature, this suggests that Homeric gender is most productively approached not only through the binary of object and agent, but through the mechanisms that make women's sexual standing socially consequential. In this light, Homeric women appear as both precarious and necessary participants through which families attempt to secure standing and their future legitimacy.

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