

From Biē to Mētis: Reconfiguring Heroism through Female Agency in the Homeric Epics

Brooke (Euhyun) Jahng
euhyunjahng@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Traditional interpretations of Homeric heroism have glorified manly ideals of physical force (*biē*), military skill, and the odyssey towards *kleos*, while women's images remained on the sidelines. This paper reexamines female agency in the Iliad and the Odyssey. It argues that female figures occupy a central role within the patriarchal system, exercising strategic intelligence (*mētis*) that shapes, preserves, and redefines the heroic paradigm. Through a comparative analysis of divine (Hera, Thetis) and mortal characters (Andromache, Helen, Penelope, Circe, Calypso, Athena), the literary analysis proves that female authority carries out its operation via persuasion, entreaty, trickery, grieving, housework, and political advising, in a different aspect than that of the males on the battlefield. Homer ultimately reconceives heroism as the integration of both principles. By foregrounding the intellectual and institutional functions of female agency, this paper offers a reinterpretation of Homeric heroism that challenges exclusively martial models of power and demonstrates that enduring political order depends upon negotiation, foresight, and strategic collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

In the foundational epics of Western literature, "what defines a hero" is traditionally equated with physical dominance, martial prowess, and battlefield glory (*kleos*) that makes a lasting impact.¹ This rigid architecture of martial heroism inherently clashes with female modes of authority, framing the gendered divide not merely as a social hierarchy of dominance and submission, but as a profound ideological conflict between competing forms of intelligence.² Within this structural tension, female figures are rarely static or passive bystanders; instead, their strategic interventions systematically expose the internal vulnerabilities, emotional myopia, and self-destructive limits of the masculine heroic code.³ Although

¹ Michael Clarke, "Manhood and Heroism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. Robert Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 74–76.

² Sheila Murnaghan, "The Plan of Athena," in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 203–204.

³ Helene P. Foley, "Penelope as Moral Agent," in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 93–96.

both epics are structured within a patriarchal social and divine order, they present female agency through a remarkably diverse range of strategies, including seduction, supplication, rhetorical persuasion, domestic labor, and political counsel. Examining these strategies across both the divine and mortal spheres allows for a closer investigation of how female authority operates within—and occasionally reshapes—the structures of Homeric heroism.

The Homeric world establishes an asymmetrical power structure by reserving supreme political governance, official lawmaking, and recognized military authority around male power. While female figures exercise significant influence, their authority remains structurally subordinate due to men retaining the ultimate right to enforce decisions through institutionalized physical force and public rule. Male characters freely navigate both the public arena of war and the private domain of the household, whereas female power is largely confined to indirect negotiation or specific, localized spheres of power. Consequently, the division of societal roles ingrained in the Homeric epic favors inherent male sovereignty, positioning female agency as a vital yet fundamentally constrained element within a male-dominated hierarchy.

This literary analysis will demonstrate that the *Odyssey* develops forms of female authority that extend beyond the more localized interventions characteristic of the *Iliad*, inviting a reconsideration of how heroic identity is constructed across the two epics. This paper argues that although the Homeric patriarchal order remains structurally dominant, female authority increasingly functions as an essential intellectual framework through which masculine heroism is negotiated, preserved, and ultimately realized. By comparing divine and mortal women across both epics, this literary analysis argues that heroic identity emerges not as an autonomous masculine achievement but as a relational construct shaped by female intelligence, strategy, and memory.

HERA, APHRODITE, AND THETIS: THE STRATEGIC MANIPULATION OF THE DIVINE BODY AND RITUAL

While it is widely accepted in classical scholarship that the power of female characters in the *Iliad* is systematically constrained, regulated, and ultimately subordinate to male authority, exploring figures like Hera, Aphrodite, and Thetis reveals how female power operates through highly strategic mechanisms such as seduction and supplication.^{4,5} These survival mechanisms highlight their critical, active roles despite the limitations evident in Samuel Butler's translation.^{6,7} This systemic limitation is made clear

⁴ Murnaghan, "The Plan of Athena," 203–205.

⁵ Foley, "Penelope as Moral Agent," 93–96.

⁶ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Samuel Butler, The Internet Classics Archive, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, <https://classics.mit.edu/Homer/iliad.html>.

⁷ The primary limitation of Samuel Butler's late nineteenth-century translation lies in its tendency to modernize and domesticate Homer's highly specific vocabulary of gendered intelligence. By translating nuanced terms for female cunning, wiles, or strategic deception (*metis*) into Victorian-era moralisms or passive domestic traits, Butler frequently flattens the raw political calculations of figures like Hera and Penelope, casting their strategic survival maneuvers as mere "tricks" or passive emotional reactions rather than active, systemic resistance. Nevertheless,

throughout the text: while female figures wield immense local influence, their agency remains fundamentally tethered to male appetites or dependent upon moving a male authority figure. For example, when the goddess Aphrodite attempts to intervene on the battlefield of Troy, she is wounded and quickly driven back to Olympus, where Zeus explicitly restricts her authority to the domestic and physical sphere, instructing her, "My child, war is not your province; go mind your own proper duties of the marriage-bed, and leave these matters to swift Ares and Minerva" (*Iliad*, Book 3).

Consequently, these strategic maneuvers—such as Hera's elaborate seduction of Zeus (*Dios Apate*) or Thetis's desperate, maternal intercessions—do not confer true, self-sustained institutional sovereignty. Instead, they function as weapons of the politically disenfranchised that ultimately validate and reinforce the nature of the patriarchal structure they seek to navigate. This is vividly illustrated when Thetis secures her son Achilles's honor; rather than exercising her own divine agency, she is forced to assume a physically subservient posture before the supreme patriarch, where she "crouched before him, took hold of his knees with her left hand, and her right hand she laid under his chin" to beg for his favor (*Iliad*, Book 1). By relying on a submissive ritual that requires touching the physical markers of Zeus's definitive power, Thetis's supplication suggests that the most influential female deities can only operate by flattering and reinforcing the very patriarchal hierarchy that restricts them.

Hera's deployment of the *Dios Apate* in Book 14 of the *Iliad* shows that **Zeus's absolute authority relies on his active awareness, which Hera temporarily disrupts through strategic deception.** As Emily Kearns observes,⁸ the epic conceptualizes its divine collective as a functional society treated 'in the manner of human beings'. Therefore, this seduction is not a trivial domestic ruse, but a calculated political manipulation that weaponizes the social rules of the Olympian family. By borrowing Aphrodite's embroidered girdle, Hera employs aesthetic and erotic deception (*apate*) to paralyze the supreme intellect temporarily. This maneuver shifts the analytical focus away from simple domestic subversion toward a critique of political architecture: Zeus's absolute power (*bie*) is structurally flawed because it is contingent upon his conscious observation. Even though her subsequent capitulation in Book 15, where she swears by the river Styx to placate his violent rage, restores the hierarchy, the episode leaves a permanent ideological scar on the epic. The episode suggests that sovereign order is not inherently stable; rather, it is a fragile, reactive framework that relies on the constant threat of physical coercion to correct its own systemic vulnerabilities.

The seduction achieves its immediate political purpose: Zeus is incapacitated by desire and sleep, allowing Poseidon to intervene on behalf of the Achaeans and temporarily turn the tide of the war. However, Hera's triumph is short-lived and strictly bounded. When Zeus awakens and discovers the deception, his fury re-establishes patriarchal dominance through explicit threats of physical violence. He reminds Hera of past punishments, recalling the brutal physical reality of his supreme authority: "Do you

Butler's translation is employed here because its linguistic choices make especially visible how assumptions about gender shape the interpretation of female agency, providing a useful point of comparison with the Greek text.

⁸ Emily Kearns, "The Gods in the Homeric Epics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, ed. Robert Fowler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60–62.

not remember how once upon a time I had you hanged? I fastened two anvils onto your feet, and bound your hands in a chain of gold which none might break, and you hung in mid-air among the clouds" (*Iliad*, Book 15). Hera is forced to yield, using submissive language to pacify him. Terrified by his violent threats of physical violence, she immediately attempts to disarm his anger by swearing a binding cosmic oath. In Butler's translation, she appeals to the most sacred elemental and personal structures available to her, pleading, "May heaven above and earth below be my witnesses, with the waters of the river Styx- and this is the most solemn oath that a blessed god can take- nay, I swear also by your own almighty head and by our bridal bed- things over which I could never possibly perjure myself" (*Iliad*, Book 15). This capitulation placates his fury, as the sire of gods and men 'smiled' at her obedience, yet it does not erase the ideological crisis that her strategy introduced. By forcing the supreme monarch of Olympus to resort to primitive, physical terror to re-establish his rule, Hera's intellectual coup indicates that masculine sovereignty is fundamentally fragile. Her submission is not an erasure of agency, but a tactical retreat that exposes a profound systemic truth: masculine *biē* fails to out-think female *metis*; it can only violently interrupt it. This episode therefore raises a broader question than simply how Hera succeeds in deceiving Zeus. His susceptibility to persuasion suggests that even divine kingship depends upon negotiation rather than unilateral command, revealing that authority within the Olympian hierarchy is sustained through relationships rather than absolute sovereignty.

Conversely, Aphrodite's disastrous intervention on the battlefield in Book 5 illustrates the strict limits of domain-specific authority within the Homeric cosmos. As the deity of erotic attraction and psychological compulsion, Aphrodite wields power over human and divine minds that operates independently of physical strength. However, her wounding by the mortal Diomedes illustrates that metaphysical authority is non-transferable to environments governed by brute *bie*. This exceptional episode serves as a narrative boundary marker rather than a general statement about physical vulnerability. When Zeus instructs her to 'leave war to Mars and Minerva' (*Iliad*, Book 5), the text is not merely enforcing a social gender role, but mapping out a rigid taxonomy of divine jurisdictions. This paper argues that Homer uses such comedic failure to show that female power in the *Iliad* is highly specialized; its efficacy relies entirely on its contextual placement. The moment it attempts a martial transgression into the war, it's exposed by the incompatibility between the fluid dynamics of desire and the uncompromising mechanics of battlefield violence.

Furthermore, Aphrodite's authority over mortal women ultimately serves to enforce patriarchal arrangements. In Book 3, after rescuing Paris from his duel with Menelaus, Aphrodite commands Helen to return to Paris' bedchamber. Helen does not comply immediately. Instead, she openly criticizes Aphrodite, accusing the goddess of continually deceiving her and bitterly suggesting that Aphrodite should remain with Paris herself if she cares for him so deeply: "Go and sit by him yourself. Forget the way to Olympus, and never let your feet feel it again! Fuss about the man, take good care of him, and perhaps he will make you his wife one day, or his slave at least" (*Iliad*, Book 3). Helen's response is unusually confrontational, reflecting the independence and self-awareness that characterize her throughout the *Iliad*. She recognizes Paris' failure as a warrior and refuses to celebrate his survival simply because Aphrodite has intervened, declaring that returning to him under these circumstances "would be a

shame" (*Iliad*, Book 3). Her resistance invites the reader to understand that she retains the capacity to question both divine authority and the expectations placed upon her as Paris' wife.

Aphrodite responds by abandoning persuasion in favor of coercion. The goddess flies into a rage, warning Helen, "Dog me not, unhappy woman, lest I be wroth and leave you... and lest I grow to hate you as much as I have loved you" (*Iliad*, Book 3). She threatens to withdraw her protection and warns Helen that she will be hated by both Greeks and Trojans if she refuses to obey. Faced with the overwhelming authority of an immortal goddess, Helen yields and returns to Paris. The significance of this episode lies in the relationship between the two female figures. Rather than a male character forcing Helen back into the marriage, a female deity compels a female mortal to preserve it. Aphrodite's authority, therefore, extends beyond her influence over desire; she actively regulates female behavior in order to maintain the domestic order surrounding Paris and Helen. At the same time, the scene constructs a reality where female authority exists within its own hierarchy. Aphrodite exercises substantial power over Helen, but her authority remains confined to the domestic and erotic sphere that Zeus later distinguishes from warfare. Her power over Helen is therefore substantial, yet it operates within the broader patriarchal structure of the epic.

While Aphrodite's failure establishes the boundaries of domain-specific female vulnerability, Athena's prominent role in the epic represents a radical synthesis of gender, intellect, and political authority. Athena deserves distinct theoretical attention as she seamlessly performs traditionally masculine martial roles without ever divesting herself of her female identity. Rather than acting as a fractured or transgressive figure, she embodies the supreme integration of strategic wisdom (*metis*) and physical dominance (*bie*) on behalf of the patriarchal order. When she dons Zeus's *aegis* or directly redirects the spears of mortal heroes, she does not become 'manly'. Instead, she presents how indisputable cosmic and political power is not inherently sexed. Athena establishes a unique space within the Olympian hierarchy: she is a female figure who wields institutional sovereignty precisely because her authority is verified, rather than threatened, by her alignment with assertive male power. Her presence suggests that the structural limitations placed on other female characters are not a result of their biological sex, but rather their proximity to the institutional mechanisms of sovereign violence.

Thetis's supplication in Book 1 further deepens this critique by exposing the underlying power dynamics that enable heroic achievement. When Thetis kneels before Zeus, she uses a specific historical debt to persuade him, though her success ultimately remains dependent on his sovereign approval. This ritualized negotiation reveals a profound structural irony at the heart of the *Iliad*: Achilles's *kleos* relies as much on divine negotiation as it does on his own martial skill. Instead, he negotiates through a maternal intermediary who forces the supreme deity to sabotage his own political interests. Thetis serves as a primary marker indicating that the entire system of masculine honor is largely dependent on an underlying reserve of divine female leverage. As a result, the heroic code is unmasked as an artificial meritocracy that requires exploiting cosmic maternal debt to validate its own existence.

To understand how this structural dependency operates, it is first necessary to reconsider what Bruce Loudon describes as the "divine economy" of Homeric epic—the system through which the Olympian gods intervene in mortal affairs, distribute favor, and direct the course of human events to sustain the narrative and its political order.⁹ This model emphasizes that divine intervention is indispensable to the progression of the epics, but it tends to treat the gods as a unified external mechanism that advances human destiny or mirrors developments on the battlefield. Such a framework overlooks the unequal distribution of authority within that system, particularly the distinct functions performed by female deities. The divine machinery functions as the literal regulatory matrix that saves masculine achievement from its own self-destructive nearsightedness. When Athena physically restrains Achilles from murdering his king in Book 1, or when Thetis calls in an ancient political debt to force Zeus into sabotaging the Achaean army, the narrative exposes an institutional truth: the male warrior elite is incapable of sustaining its own heroic order without continual female intervention. The "divine economy," therefore, is not simply a network of divine participation but an intercessory system repeatedly activated through female strategy, presenting that masculine *kleos* depends upon the political leverage, mediation, and foresight of divine women. While Loudon's framework demonstrates the indispensability of divine intervention, the episodes examined here suggest that authority within this divine economy is itself unevenly distributed. Female deities repeatedly perform the acts of mediation, negotiation, and political intervention that enable heroic action, indicating that the operation of the divine economy is not only hierarchical but also distinctly gendered.

Overall, Thetis's appeal operates as a calculated form of emotional and political leverage, **using past favors to create a strong sense of obligation in the supreme deity**. She aggressively manipulates Zeus's sense of obligation by reminding him of her unique position among the immortals as the one who saved him from a humiliating divine rebellion, immediately following this reminder with a sharp demand for recompense: "Father Jove, if I have ever served you in word or deed among the immortals, hear my prayer, and do honour to my son, who of all others is doomed to an early death" (*Iliad*, Book 1). By forcing Zeus to confront his own past vulnerability and his systemic debt to her, Thetis leaves him with no honorable escape. Her intervention is highly successful, compelling the patriarch to offer a silent nod that seals the fate of the entire Achaean army. However, this display of power simultaneously highlights the fundamental dependency of female agency in the *Iliad*. Thetis is restricted from enacting justice herself; therefore, she translates her son's mortal grievances into a cosmic decree that only a male monarch can execute. By serving as the indispensable broker of her son's *kleos*, Thetis unmasks the foundational vulnerability of the masculine warrior elite. Achilles' battlefield glory is exposed as a parasite—an artificial prestige that requires a maternal intermediary to manipulate and blackmail the supreme deity.

⁹ Bruce Loudon, "The Gods in Epic, or the Divine Economy," in *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 91–93.

ANDROMACHE AND HECUBA: MATERNAL RHETORIC AND FAILED STRATEGY AGAINST THE HEROIC CODE

Moving from the divine to the mortal plane, Andromache's interactions with Hector in Book 6 offer a profound exploration of rational female argument and its structural incompatibility with the masculine heroic code. In their famous meeting at the Scaean Gates, Andromache does not merely weep; she presents a cogent, multi-layered strategic argument that reframes the stakes of the Trojan War. By outlining Achilles' destruction of her paternal family—establishing that Hector now embodies her entire social reality as father, mother, brother, and husband—she strips the war of its abstract political grandiosity. **By listing her lost family members, Andromache shows that the hero's relentless focus on battlefield renown ultimately dismantles the core family relationships stabilizing his community.**

This analytical acumen shifts from emotional defense to tactical counsel as Andromache advises Hector to draw his army up by the wild fig tree, explicitly identifying the city wall's structural vulnerabilities and where the Achaeans have already mounted three concentrated assaults. Rather than revealing passive domestic anxiety, her advice highlights a sophisticated military awareness of Troy's architectural vulnerabilities. However, Hector's rejection of this defensive strategy—predicated on his claim that he would die of shame before the Trojans if he shrank from battle—exposes the internal blindness of the warrior elite. By dismissing her rational, structural plan and telling her to return to her loom and spindle, Hector exposes the profound emotional and intellectual myopia of the warrior ethos. By commanding her to return to the loom, **Hector chooses his personal honor and fear of public shame over a practical defensive strategy that could save his city.** Andromache's tactical acumen effectively reverses the traditional gender dynamic: the mortal wife possesses superior, clear-eyed military intelligence, while the tragic hero is revealed to be trapped in intellectual stasis born of his own hyper-masculine pride.

This maternal warning introduces a broader, deeply institutionalized socio-political tool available to Homeric females: the ritual power of lamentation (*goos*). Far from being a passive expression of domestic grief, *goos* represents a distinct female authority over the transition from life to death, granting mortal women a specialized jurisdiction that men struggle to claim. In the final movement of the epic, the professional dirge-singers are pushed to the background as Andromache, Hecuba, and Helen seize control of the narrative, directly addressing the fallen hero to define his memory. For instance, Andromache dictates how Hector's loss will devastate the domestic and political future of Troy, crying, "You have died young, husband, and left me a widow in your house... and our city will be sacked and overthrown from its foundation, for you its defender are no more" (*Iliad*, Book 24). By transforming raw grief into political critique, this female-led ritual acts as an authoritative, public counter-narrative to the glorification of war.¹⁰ In Book 24 of the *Iliad*, this power culminates as the narrative focus shifts away from the martial exploits of men to the rhetorical arena of the funeral pyre. Here, Andromache, Hecuba, and Helen seize unconditional control of the epic's final movement, transforming into the ultimate narrator-judges of Hector's legacy. Through structured, competitive laments, each female recontextualizes his masculine

¹⁰ Foley, "Penelope as Moral Agent," 93–96betrayingbetraying.

achievements through the lens of communal loss, domestic ruin, and displacement. While Achilles and the Greek war machine dictate how a hero dies, the female lamenting voice dictates how that hero is remembered. By commanding the ritual space of mourning, these figures wield a profound cultural authority that destabilizes the supremacy of masculine *kleos*, exposing the stark human cost of the heroic code and forcing the mortal community to judge the war not by its glorious victories, but by its catastrophic absences.

Hecuba's maternal rhetoric in Book 22 mirrors this tension, illustrating the limits of biological authority when confronted with the fatal momentum of the warrior ethos. Standing on the walls of Troy alongside Priam, Hecuba appeals to Hector as he prepares to face Achilles alone outside the gates. In a deeply dramatic deployment of physical rhetoric, she loosens her robes, bares her breast, and leverages the ultimate biological bond by crying out: "Hector, my child, take pity on me here and remember who I am. If I ever gave you this breast to soothe your sorrows, remember it now" (*Iliad*, Book 22). This gesture is not merely a desperate domestic plea; **it forces Hector to weigh the demands of martial honor against his obligation to his mother.** By reminding the hero that his physical existence is a product of maternal labor, Hecuba asserts an older, foundational authority over his life, attempting to break the psychological hold of the competitive heroic code.

Hecuba reinforces this physical appeal with a stark, rational assessment of post-mortem consequences, warning Hector that his defeat will ensure his corpse is denied ritual mourning and abandoned to scavenger dogs by the Greek ships. As Ann L. T. Bergren notes, female speech and lamentation in the epics function as a direct challenge to masculine *kelos* by shifting the narrative focus heavily onto human suffering, displacement, and biological loss.¹¹ This warning exposes the ultimate paradox of the warrior code: the pursuit of individual glory requires a **betrayal** of the communal networks that preserve that glory. Hector's decision to remain rooted to his spot, driven by a complex mixture of internalized shame and pride, allows the reader to perceive that the masculine death-drive is considerably deaf to maternal reason. This fatal deafness is rooted in the hero's systemic delusion of autonomous glory. Earlier in the epic, Hector's pursuit of *kleos* culminates in a hubristic boast of self-deification, wishing that he were 'immortal and never growing old, and of being worshipped like Athene and Apollo,' as he is sure that the day will bring destruction upon the Greeks (*Iliad*, Book 8). While traditional heroic readings might view this as the peak of independent confidence, this paper contends that the narrative frames Hector's glory as a profound structural delusion.

The warrior's agency is hollow, as his temporary momentum serves as a disposable instrument funded by the divine transaction negotiated between Zeus and Thetis behind closed doors. Thus, when Hecuba appeals to him from the walls, she is not merely fighting her son's stubbornness, but a divinely orchestrated blindness that keeps him trapped in a hypermasculine theater of triumph that is already slated for destruction.¹² The supreme symbol of life-giving power is rendered politically impotent in the face of the momentum of epic tragedy, setting the stage for a shift in narrative focus toward the ritualized arena of

¹¹ Ann L. T. Bergren, "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought," *Arethusa* 16, no. 1/2 (1983): 69–95.

¹² Clarke, "Manhood and Heroism," 84–85.

the funeral pyre.¹³ Collectively, Andromache and Hecuba demonstrate that the tragedy of female intelligence in the *Iliad* lies not in its absence but in its repeated inability to alter the values of the heroic code. Their counsel is consistently perceptive, yet the epic repeatedly privileges the pursuit of *kleos* over strategies of preservation, exposing a system in which wisdom is acknowledged but ultimately subordinated to martial honor.

HELEN AND PENELOPE: WEAVING AS TEXT, SELF-AWARENESS, AND TEMPORAL DELAY

Helen serves as a bridge between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by using storytelling and her domestic environment to reclaim narrative autonomy, as we shall see. This transition is illuminated through E. V. Rieu's translation of the *Odyssey*, which emphasizes how female linguistic and symbolic strategies rival masculine martial authority.¹⁴

Let us start with Helen. In Book 3 of the *Iliad*, this authorial capacity is first visualized as she weaves a great purple tapestry of the Trojan War. Homer notes that she is weaving "the battles of the Trojans and Achaeans, which they had suffered at the hands of Mars on her account" (*Iliad*, Book 3). This action shows that Helen is actively writing the very story she is a character in. As Bergren argues in her analysis of the text, Helen's weaving serves as a form of poetic composition in which she becomes a commentator on the war itself. By turning the violence of the battlefield into art, she takes control of the narrative. The narrative indicates how she is not just a self-aware center of the entire event.¹⁵ Bergren's reading convincingly establishes weaving as a form of female language, yet Penelope's deception also extends beyond symbolic communication. By delaying remarriage, she preserves the political stability of Ithaca and safeguards Odysseus' claim to kingship, suggesting that domestic labor functions simultaneously as rhetorical expression and political action.

However, this reading of whole female authorship via textile production is not without scholarly debate. Critics such as Mihoko Suzuki complicate Bergren's optimistic framework, arguing that Helen's weaving represents a confined subjectivity rather than true narrative autonomy.¹⁶ From this perspective, because Helen is weaving a history dictated by masculine violence ("suffered at the hands of Mars"), her art remains tethered to the very patriarchal structures that commodify her; she can record her tragedy, but she cannot alter its trajectory. Yet this counterargument actually broadens the scope of Helen's agency by highlighting its deeply pragmatic nature. Helen does not need to physically halt the war to claim sovereignty over it. By transforming her domestic confinement into a historical archive, she effectively strips the warriors of their interpretive power. She recognizes that while men control the immediate,

¹³ Ann L. T. Bergren, "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought," 72.

¹⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1946), digitized by the Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.462610>.

¹⁵ Bergren, "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought," 85–89.

¹⁶ Mihoko Suzuki, *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 17–19.

mortal field of battle, the figure who controls the transmission of memory wields the ultimate, immortal authority.

Helen's textual authority extends far beyond the loom; she effectively functions as an internal narrator who challenges, and nearly rivals, the singular authorship of Homer himself.¹⁷ Within the *Iliad*, she shows a clear awareness that her actions and suffering will become the subject of the future songs. In Book 6, when speaking to Hector, she explicitly declares that Zeus has brought an evil fate upon her and Paris so that 'hereafter we shall be making things of song for men of future generations.' By framing her current suffering not as an accidental tragedy but as raw material designed specifically for future poetic consumption, Helen positions herself as a conscious co-author of the Trojan *mythos*. She understands that the physical architecture of the war will crumble, but the narrative acceptance of *kleos* will endure—and she positions herself at its center.

Her speech matches this narrative detachment. When she speaks to Priam on the walls during the *Teichoscopy*, she displays a commanding, authoritative knowledge of the Greek commanders, identifying Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Ajax with precision (*Iliad*, Book 3). This scene positions Helen as the primary lens through which the audience is introduced to the epic's major players, effectively usurping the role of the traditional epic catalog. Yet her speech is also marked by intense self-loathing, as she frequently refers to herself as a "vile female" or a "dog." This self-deprecation can be read as a survival strategy—a calculated adoption of the patriarchal blame assigned to her to disarm resentment, manipulate her observers, and maintain her protected status within the Trojan court. By weaponizing the very language meant to condemn her, Helen ensures her political survival while retaining control over how her personal story is staged.

When Helen reappears in Book 4 of the *Odyssey*, safely restored to her domestic position in Sparta, her agency takes on a more sophisticated, pharmaceutical form. As Menelaus and Telemachus weep over the trauma of the Trojan War, Helen intervenes by slipping a drug, *nepenthe*, into their wine—a substance that can "rob speech of all its bitterness" (*Odyssey*, Book 4) and induce forgetfulness. This domestic chemistry allows her to control the palace's emotional atmosphere, literally drugging the masculine memory of war to facilitate social harmony.

Following this chemical intervention, Helen asserts her narrative dominance by telling a highly curated story about Odysseus infiltrating Troy in disguise. She claims that she alone recognized him, killed many Trojans to protect his secret, and rejoiced because her heart "had already turned back toward home." This story is a brilliant piece of revisionist history, designed to showcase her loyalty to the Greek cause and erase her decades of complicity with Troy. Menelaus immediately follows with his own story of the Trojan Horse, recalling how Helen walked around the structure, calling out the names of the hidden Greek commanders in the voices of their own wives, nearly causing their destruction. This tension between their competing narratives reveals that while Helen's agency is contained within the patriarchal household, she

¹⁷ Bergren, "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought," 69–95.

remains a dangerous, self-aware manipulator of memory and story, capable of rewriting her own history to ensure her survival.

Like Helen, Penelope is a master weaver who transforms a traditional household chore into a calculated political strategy. By telling the suitors she will remarry only after completing a burial shroud for Laertes' son, her husband Odysseus, she exploits a cultural loophole they **cannot** openly reject, **demonstrating a form of heroism based on patience and endurance rather than combat itself.** While masculine epic excellence (*aristeia*) demands rapid, decisive battlefield execution that accelerates the hero toward a glorious death, Penelope's heroism operates through the deliberate imposition of narrative delay. **By weaving during the day and unweaving her work at night, she stalls the suitors and protects her family's political standing.** This cyclical unweaving is a profound exercise in strategic containment (*metis*). Through it, Penelope seizes narrative control over Ithaca's political vacuum, proving that female heroism need not mimic the terminal, violent trajectory of masculine *kleos* to achieve epic monumentality.

When analyzing Penelope's tactical delays, critical scholarship frequently relies on Ann Bergren's framework, which treats textile production as a meta-narrative substitute for female language and a localized vehicle for truth-telling.¹⁸ While the book rightly identifies weaving as an alternative mode of female expression that exploits patriarchal blind spots, this interpretive lens ultimately understates the structural scale of Penelope's strategy. By framing the loom primarily as a defensive, psychological survival mechanism used to preserve a domestic boundary, previous scholarship fails to account for its broader political and dynastic consequences. To fully grasp the stakes of this deception, Bergren's linguistic focus aligns with Seth L. Schein's analysis of structural motivation.^{19,20} As Schein's work implies, this trick is a dynamic expression of Penelope's *metis* rather than a passive act of waiting, creating a literal loop of temporal resistance that freezes time and holds the suitors' entire masculine world at bay for over three years. By stalling the suitors, she achieves two critical goals: she protects her son Telemachus' diminishing inheritance from being thoroughly consumed, and she keeps the *oikos* open for Odysseus to eventually return and reclaim his throne.

Eventually, by marrying Bergren's insights on female cunning with Schein's emphasis on structural preservation, it becomes clear that Penelope converts her loom from a traditional site of feminine subjugation into an offensive political weapon—one that preserves the political vacancy of Ithaca and delays a patriarchal crisis of succession by indefinitely suspending the final political blow.

This strategic expansion of female authority in the *Odyssey* stands in opposition to the structural limitations governing martial heroism in the *Iliad*. In the tragic architecture of the Trojan War, masculine self-validation is notoriously bound to an existential short-sightedness and inescapable human misery,

¹⁸ Bergren, "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought," 72–75.

¹⁹ S. L. Schein, "Female Representations and Interpreting the *Odyssey*," in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 25.

²⁰ Helene P. Foley, "Penelope as Moral Agent," in *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 93–115.

leaving alpha-male warriors too emotionally short-sighted to secure their own enduring legacies.²¹ This paper contends that the *Odyssey* explicitly resolves this tragic impasse by shifting the preservation of the hero's legacy from the erratic hands of the dying warrior to the calculated, systemic intellect of the domestic female agent. While the masculine pursuit of glory under a bleak cosmic backdrop inevitably leads to self-destruction and political paralysis, Penelope's prolonged domestic resistance necessitates female *metis* as an architecture that stabilizes the hero's identity over time. Thus, the text moves beyond a fatalistic worldview of immediate mortal tragedy to prompt the reader to recognize that masculine survival, both physical and historical, repeatedly proves insufficient as an autonomous achievement. It is preferred to be actively curated and structurally supported by the enduring intellectual patience of the female universe.

Penelope's agency is further explained in her caution and intellectual independence towards Odysseus' eventual return. Even after the slaughter of the suitors and Eurycleia's frantic assurances, Penelope refuses to accept the stranger's identity unquestioningly. She designs the ultimate test of the marriage bed, commanding Eurycleia to move their bridal bed out of their bedchamber. (*Odyssey*, Book 23)

Odysseus' immediate, furious response—explaining that the bed is immovable because he carved it himself from the stump of a living olive tree built into the very foundations of the palace—provides Penelope with the infallible proof she required. This scene underscores that Penelope's intelligence matches, if not exceeds, her husband's. She does not yield to sentimentality or divine assertion; instead, she uses her intimate knowledge of domestic architecture to compel the hero to reveal himself. Her strategy preserves the integrity of the *oikos*, proving that her endurance and cunning are the essential counterparts to Odysseus' own *metis*, and validating her role as an active architect of the epic's resolution.

The bed recognition scene therefore confirms that Penelope's authority extends beyond delaying remarriage or preserving the household. Her insistence on testing Odysseus establishes that legitimate kingship depends not merely on physical return but on intellectual recognition and mutual trust. Domestic intelligence thus becomes a means of validating political authority rather than simply protecting it.

CIRCE AND CALYPSO: MAGICAL AUTONOMY AND THE EXISTENTIAL THREAT TO MASCULINE IDENTITY

In the magical geography of Odysseus' wanderings, Circe represents a radical manifestation of female autonomy that operates outside the boundaries of human patriarchal structures. Residing on her isolated island of Aeaea, Circe possesses a form of existential power to transform men into beasts and strip away their heroic status. When Odysseus' men arrive at her palace, they find her weaving a great web and singing with a beautiful voice, a domestic image that masks her dangerous power. She invites them in, feeds them a mixture of Pramnian wine, barley, cheese, and honey, infused with her own magical drugs,

²¹ Clarke, "Manhood and Heroism," 88–89.

and then strikes them with her wand, instantly transforming them into swine while leaving their human minds intact.

This transformation is a profound inversion of gender roles and natural hierarchies. Circe takes elite warriors, defined by their physical dominance and martial pride, and reduces them to base, submissive beasts, stripping them of their masculine agency and *kleos*. Her power threatens everything it means to be a hero. Instead of just killing her victims, she strips away their humanity and traps them in her home. Odysseus can only defeat this threat because Hermes gives him a magical herb called moly to neutralize her drugs. When he draws his sword against her, Circe immediately shifts her strategy, collapsing to her knees, supplicating him, and inviting him to her bed.

In the magical landscape of the *Odyssey*, independent, nonhuman females represent a radical form of autonomy that directly threatens masculine *nostos* (homecoming) and heroic identity. As Seth L. Schein argues, these divine women rule their isolated spaces altogether, using prototypically female acts such as weaving and singing to capture the hero. This environmental control poses a terrifying psychological danger for Odysseus: the menace is fundamentally existential, threatening to be swallowed, concealed, or permanently obliterated by the feminine. Accepting their authority or staying in their domestic spheres would mean erasing his history, suffering, and mortal achievement, causing him to choose a death-like oblivion over the enduring song of heroic glory.²²

However, the text shows that once a hero subdues this dangerous female power, it can be repurposed to serve his journey. In the case of Circe, her initial submission is a tactical transition; once Odysseus' sword neutralizes her destructive drugs, she shifts from an enemy into an indispensable strategic ally. She provides his crew with hospitality for a full year and gives Odysseus the vital geographical and ritual instructions needed to safely navigate the dangers of the Underworld, the Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis. This narrative scene intimates how threatening female intelligence, once successfully conquered and bound to the hero's goals, transitions from a chaotic danger into a structured asset that actively enables his homecoming.^{23,24}

This trajectory of formidable female autonomy reaches its most radical, adversarial peak in the figures of the Sirens, Scylla, and Charybdis, who weaponize intellectual, linguistic, and environmental spheres against the advancing male hero. Rather than merely passive obstacles, these female entities present one of the epic's most fundamental challenges to the mortal heroic code. The Sirens, much like Helen or Penelope, command narrative and authorial control; they do not threaten Odysseus with physical violence, but with a totalizing, seductive omniscience, offering a competing epic memory that promises to trap the masculine traveler in permanent stasis through the sheer power of female song. In contrast, Scylla and Charybdis embody the lethal, uncontrollable autonomy of the natural world, operating outside the bounds

²² Schein, "Female Representations and Interpreting the Odyssey," 19–20.

²³ S. L. Schein, "Female Representations and Interpreting the Odyssey," 19.

²⁴ D. Buitron-Oliver and B. Cohen, "Between Scylla and Penelope: Female Characters of the Odyssey in Archaic and Classical Greek Art," 38.

of human socio-political negotiation. When Scylla snatches six of Odysseus' companions from the deck, the scene exposes the limits of conventional martial heroism by presenting an enemy against whom courage, physical strength, and battlefield prowess are ineffective. Although Odysseus instinctively arms himself and searches for an opportunity to strike, Circe has already warned him that resistance is impossible and that attempting to fight Scylla would only cost him more men. His warrior instincts become a liability rather than a source of salvation. Homer constructs the encounter so that survival depends not on defeating the enemy through *biē* but on accepting the strategic necessity of retreat, endurance, and adaptation. Odysseus' success lies not in overcoming Scylla through force, but in recognizing the limits of force itself. By juxtaposing Circe's calculated domestic sovereignty with the existential threat of these monstrous female forces, Homer presents a world in which the *Odyssey's* landscape is fundamentally governed by a diverse spectrum of female strategies—ranging from divine hospitality to cosmic annihilation—all of which demand that the male hero abandon brute force (*bie*) in favor of an adaptive, survival-oriented intelligence (*metis*).

Calypso offers a contrasting model of immortal female authority, where agency takes the form of sexual enclosure and a direct rhetorical challenge to divine patriarchal double standards. Inhabiting the idyllic, isolated island of Ogygia, Calypso holds Odysseus captive for seven years, offering him a radical bargain: she will grant him immortality and agelessness if he remains with her as her husband, abandoning his mortal life and his desire for Ithaca.

This offer poses an existential threat to Odysseus, distinct from Circe's magic. Calypso threatens to erase Odysseus' narrative identity by offering him a timeless, static existence of luxury. To accept, she would offer to die to the human world of achievement, memory, and *kleos*; he would become a forgotten object in an immortal domestic cage.

When Hermes arrives with Zeus' decisive command to release Odysseus, Calypso responds with a fierce, articulate denunciation of the patriarchal cosmic order. She reacts with immediate anger, declaring, "You gods are a cruel and jealous company... you are outraged if a goddess sleeps openly with a man even if she has chosen him as her husband" (*Odyssey*, Book 5). She systematically lists historical precedents—Demeter and Iasion, Orion and Dawn—where the male gods violently destroyed mortal men loved by goddesses, highlighting the systemic hypocrisy of a pantheon where male gods freely indulge their sexual appetites while penalizing female deities for the same behavior.

Calypso's speech is a rare and powerful articulation of institutional injustice within the Homeric corpus. Yet, despite the moral clarity of her complaint, her agency is strictly bound by Olympus's unconditional hierarchy. She lacks the power to oppose Zeus' will and concludes her speech with bitter resignation: "Since no god can evade or undo the will of almighty Zeus, let him go." She complies with the decree, providing Odysseus with the tools and provisions to construct a raft. Calypso's forced compliance does not diminish the lethal accuracy of her rhetoric; instead, her speech functions as an unsparing ideological deconstruction of the cosmic order. By dragging the systemic double standards of the Olympian gods into the open light, her intellect shatters the illusion of divine justice. Calypso's compliance does not invalidate

the force of her critique. Instead, a contradiction is exposed within the divine order without being fully resolved. The episode therefore distinguishes between granting a marginalized perspective narrative legitimacy and endorsing it as the poem's final moral position, preserving an ambiguity that resists simple ideological resolution.

ATHENA: THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF FEMALE STRATEGY AND PATRIARCHAL RESTORATION

Athena represents the supreme, most successful manifestation of female power in the *Odyssey*, precisely because her immense strategic intelligence (*metis*) is institutionalized and aligned with the restoration of patriarchal stability. Unlike mortal women whose strategies are defensive or localized, Athena operates with administrative and physical freedom across both divine and human planes. In Book 1, she takes advantage of Poseidon's absence to lobby Zeus for Odysseus' release, framing her appeal in terms of the hero's cosmic piety and suffering.

Athena's power lies in her capacity for disguise and persuasion, serving as Odysseus' divine double and mentor. She continually transforms her appearance into Mentēs to guide Telemachus and Odysseus through their political crises. Her calculated, pedagogical force used in her strategies is designed to educate Telemachus into his proper aristocratic inheritance and to engineer the violent elimination of the suitors who threaten the social order of Ithaca.

Athena represents the most successful expression of female power in the *Odyssey* because her strategic intelligence (*metis*) operates within the bounds of patriarchal restoration. Unlike mortal women, whose actions are structurally constrained by domestic vulnerabilities, Athena is a virgin goddess born directly from Zeus' head, leaving her free from the traditional constraints of motherhood, marriage, or children. When she unmask herself to Odysseus on the shores of Ithaca in Book 13, their famous exchange establishes an ideological alignment between her divine wisdom and his mortal capacity for deception. Rather than posing a threat to masculine authority, Athena uses her vast power exclusively to guide Telemachus into his noble inheritance and orchestrate the violent destruction of the suitors. As analyzed by Murnaghan, *The Plan of Athena* precisely celebrates Athena's agency because her overarching political objective is the re-establishment of Odysseus as the undisputed monarch of Ithaca and the head of his *oikos* (household). Her divine intervention is deemed legitimate by the narrative framework because it functions as the very machinery that enforces and safeguards the patriarchal hierarchy. Thus, the poem crafts a social fabric in which female intelligence and authority are fully validated in the Homeric universe, provided they are deployed as instruments to rebuild and uphold traditional male supremacy.²⁵

However, this alignment does not mean Athena is merely a servant to male supremacy. Instead, the *Odyssey's* divine-mortal partnership reveals masculine heroism no longer achieving its *nostos* (homecoming) through isolated, physical violence alone. By explicitly mirroring her divine *metis* with

²⁵ Murnaghan, "The Plan of Athena," 61–62.

Odysseus's mortal cunning, the poem elevates intellectual strategy to the supreme heroic virtue. Athena intervenes to restore the social order, as it is fundamentally dependent upon a female intellectual architecture; without her strategic planning and advice, Odysseus would remain a stranded traveler unable to continue his journey back home.

At first glance, the *Odyssey*'s restoration of order through Odysseus' slaughter of the suitors appears to challenge the argument that strategic intelligence supersedes martial force. Yet the massacre is only possible because it is preceded by careful planning, disguise, alliance-building, and Athena's continual guidance. Homer therefore presents *biē* not as an alternative to *metis*, but as a force whose success depends upon strategic intelligence. The restoration of Ithaca is achieved through the integration of both rather than the triumph of either alone.

CONCLUSION

A comparative reading of female agency across the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* reveals a significant evolution in the relationship between gender, intelligence, and heroic authority. Rather than presenting women through the binary of fundamental subordination or victimization, the epics depict female power as a continual negotiation of authority within a structurally dominant patriarchal order. By shifting the analytical focus from physical battlefield performance to intellectual, psychological, and domestic forms of influence, the poems trace a clear developmental arc. While the *Iliad* privileges direct, emotional, and maternal interventions only to repeatedly contain them within the demands of war, the *Odyssey* increasingly elevates strategic intelligence as an indispensable force in preserving households, kingdoms, and political stability. Female authority thus develops from localized acts of seduction, supplication, and lament into an intellectual framework that supports and enables masculine success.

The trajectory of female authority also reshapes how heroic achievement is understood. Throughout the epics, women repeatedly preserve the conditions under which masculine glory can endure, whether through divine intervention, political mediation, domestic resistance, or the preservation of memory. Figures such as Thetis, Penelope, and Athena demonstrate that martial excellence alone cannot secure lasting authority; it relies on foresight, negotiation, and strategic intelligence. At the same time, Homer does not replace masculine *biē* with female *metis*. The *Odyssey* ultimately restores order through Odysseus' violence, while Athena herself embodies the union of martial strength and strategic wisdom. Rather than displacing one heroic ideal with another, the poem reconceives heroism as the successful integration of *biē* and *metis*, most fully realized through the partnership between Athena and Odysseus.

Viewed in this light, the women of the Homeric epics are not merely secondary figures operating within a fixed patriarchal framework. Their diverse forms of intelligence continually expose the limitations of heroic ideals founded exclusively upon battlefield glory and invite a broader understanding of how power is established, preserved, and remembered. Homer ultimately suggests that while warriors may determine

the outcome of battles, enduring political order depends upon intellectual collaboration, strategic restraint, and the continual negotiation between force and wisdom.

REFERENCES

- Bergren, Ann L. T. "Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought." *Arethusa* 16, no. 1/2 (1983): 69–95.
- Buitron-Oliver, Diana, and Beth Cohen. "Between Scylla and Penelope: Female Characters of the Odyssey in Archaic and Classical Greek Art." In *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, edited by Beth Cohen, 29–58. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Clarke, Michael. "Manhood and Heroism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, edited by Robert Fowler, 74–90. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Foley, Helene P. "Penelope as Moral Agent." In *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, edited by Beth Cohen, 93–115. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Samuel Butler. The Internet Classics Archive, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. <https://classics.mit.edu/Homer/iliad.html>.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by E. V. Rieu. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1946. Digitized by the Internet Archive. <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.462610>.
- Kearns, Emily. "The Gods in the Homeric Epics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, edited by Robert Fowler, 59–73. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Louden, Bruce. "The Gods in Epic, or the Divine Economy." In *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, edited by John Miles Foley, 90–104. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Murnaghan, Sheila. "The Plan of Athena." In *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, edited by Beth Cohen, 61–80. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Schein, S. L. "Female Representations and Interpreting the Odyssey." In *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, edited by Beth Cohen, 17–27. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Suzuki, Mihoko. *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989.