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A Love Letter to the Women of Ancient Greek Literature

By

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Abstract:

This thesis takes up an investigation of women in ancient Greek literature, focusing on how literary works, in contrast to ancient Greek Philosophy, Medicine, and History, portray women as active, powerful, and virtuous figures. Through careful reading and analysis of the primary texts, this thesis' literary investigation demonstrates the ways in which Euripides' *Medea* and Homer's *Odyssey*, in comparison to the thought of various ancient Greek philosophers and physicians, show their prominent female characters as challenging the bounds of their expected gender roles.

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I will investigate some of the most influential presentations of women in ancient Greek literature:[1] namely, those given in Homer's *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Medea*. I am taking up this project with the intention of drawing out the significance of canonical literary presentations of gender and the sociopolitical realm in ancient Greece. Scholarly discussion on the topic, which was most vibrant in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has since largely become quiet. Insofar as more current scholarship does engage with works of ancient Greek literature, it seems that much of it uses that literature merely as a forum for the discussion of subjects like contemporary issues in political theory, rather than focusing on the texts for the texts' sake (Honig 2013, 2021; Slupek 2024).[2] Scholarship that engages with the works of ancient Greek literature more for their own sake, while it exists,[3] is less prominent now than it once was.

One of the aims of this thesis, then, is to fill what has been a gap in the scholarly discussion by showing the ways in which ancient Greek literature (rather than philosophy or law) addresses women, and explicitly draw connections between these literary presentations of women and the ways they challenge the other fields of Greek thought on the matter. Additionally, I aim to reinvigorate scholarly engagement with these texts for their own sake.

This discussion will be informed, first (I), by a brief investigation into the theoretical background of the most prominent ancient Greek thoughts on the category of 'woman.' This theoretical background will be given in light of Marguerite Deslauriers' 2022 work, *Aristotle on*

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[1] I am using the term 'literature' broadly, including both ancient Greek poetry and drama, especially tragedy, within the category. My inquiry will be focused primarily on literature from the Archaic to Classical periods of ancient Greece (approximately 750 B.C. to 400 B.C.).

[2] I do not mean to suggest that there is anything wrong with such scholarly work, only that this work has a different way of engaging with the ancient Greek literary texts than the works of those scholars (primarily classicists) from the specified time of prominence. My own work in this thesis is more in line with this latter group.

[3] For one example, see Kasimis 2020.

Sexual Difference: Metaphysics, Biology, Politics. This book details much of the surrounding philosophic and medical discourse — from Archaic and pre-Socratic thinkers up to Aristotle — which constituted much of the long-term theoretical background for Classical Athens' perception of women. This section will help provide us with a general understanding of the kinds of ideas about 'woman' that were prevalent within traditions of ancient Greek thought; these ideas also, due to their prevalence, might have had an influence on the historical, legal, and customary positions of women in Classical Athens, the focus of the following section.

In section II, I will take up a brief discussion of the historical realities of women in ancient Greece, specifically women of Athens during the Classical period (approximately 490 B.C. to 323 B.C.). I acknowledge that the presentation of the historical realities of Athenian women from the specified time period will in no way be exhaustive in describing the historical realities of all women in ancient Greece. I have selected Classical Athens as the reference point, though, because it is considered to be largely representative of many of the customs and practices related to women across the different ancient Greek cities (Gomme 1925; Jacobs 1830; Katz 1992). This investigation of the historical realities of women's lives will focus, then, on looking at documented legal, economic, and historical descriptions of women's place(s) in classical Athens in order to achieve a better grasp of the realities of such women's lives and *a* basis upon which to further think about and discuss women's positions in ancient Greek literature.[4]

Both of these introductory sections are meant to serve primarily as referential information. That is, to understand how the literary writers are challenging the theoretical and historical conventions, we must first understand these conventions themselves. As such, these opening sections are meant only as foils for the primary work of this thesis investigation, wherein I take up a literary investigation of significant female characters in Homer's *Odyssey*

[4] On the relatedness of Homeric culture in these introductory sections, see pp. 12.

and Euripides' *Medea* to see how these literary characters challenge the conventions addressed in these introductory sections.

In this literary section (III), I will argue that the selected texts place their female characters in prominent positions, as agents responsible for much of the motion of the plot in each work; this challenges the conventional norms of women's role in ancient Greek society. Homer, I will argue, does this through a presentation that demonstrates the power and excellence of women, in contrast to their conventional perceptions as morally weak and wicked. Euripides, on the other hand, proceeds in a more radical mode: his female characters are presented in ways that more explicitly challenge conventional ideas about women's character and directly call into question the validity of those conventions.

Before I begin addressing the theoretical and historical backgrounds, however, it is necessary to first describe, in brief, why I have chosen Homer's *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Medea* for this project. I have selected these works because, among the various works of ancient Greek literature, these texts both have particularly notable presentations of women acting beyond conventional expectations (Critchley 2019; Loraux 1987; Zeitlin 1985). More specifically, though, these works present these female actors in different manners, and the difference in their presentation is especially revealing for this project. Let us begin our investigation, then, with an examination of ancient Greek thoughts on the category of 'woman' or 'woman-as-such.'

I. 'WOMEN-AS-SUCH' IN ANCIENT GREEK THOUGHT

In this first section, I will offer a brief view into the theoretical background for the category of 'woman' in ancient Greek thought, focusing on the philosophical and medical distinctions made about the nature of woman. Again, I will be drawing the information for the majority of this discussion from the introductory sections of Marguerite Deslauriers' book

Aristotle on Sexual Difference, as she details the most prominent ancient Greek ideas on sexual difference; within her work she addresses the thought of Archaic thinkers such as Hesiod, pre-Socratic philosophers such as Empedocles, the Hippocratic authors, and the Pythagoreans, as well as classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. With this breadth of thought in our source material, we will be able to better establish, for the purpose of this paper, general thoughts on sexual difference in classical Greece, as it is historically attested.[5]

Deslauriers opens the introductory chapters of her book by reminding us that, prior to Aristotle, examinations of sexual difference were not categorized systematically: instead, these examinations focused on questions of why there was sexual difference at all, the purpose of these differences, and their consequences (Deslauriers 2022, 9). Before Aristotle, she argues, thinkers speculated that women were created, a race distinct from men, neither because they are necessary nor because they are good; instead, women were thought to be the result of some misfortune imposed upon men, whether as a direct punishment (as in Hesiod's story of Pandora and the origin of womankind) or to make reproduction possible when the gods disengaged themselves from the world and gave humans the task of creating their offspring (as told in the myth of Plato's *Symposium*) (12-14; Katz 1992). So what we see in ancient thought is an association between the characterization of women, or the existence of sexual difference, and some sort of punishment on humankind (Deslauriers 2022, 18-21).

When it comes to the physical differences between male and female, there were a few prominent ideas, many of which related to temperature and levels of moisture. Ancient medical writers, such as the Hippocratic authors, differentiated the male from the female according to differences between the hot and cold, and the wet and dry (27). Deslauriers tells us how the

[5] For the sake of simplicity, and to match the general character of the authors themselves, I will here often collapse the distinction between sex and gender, such that male/man and female/woman fall into the same category and the terms can be used interchangeably, as best fitting the demands of language.

Hippocratic authors associated the female with flourishing in wet environments, which were also associated with cooler and softer things (food, drink, activity, etc.); men were thought to thrive in the opposite conditions (27).[6]

The Hippocratic authors also understood the sexual differences between males and females in three key ways. The first way was by the presence of two structures in the female body. The first structure is a path (*hodos*) which extends from the orifices of the head to the vagina; an obstruction at either point, they thought, would lead to problems at the other end. The other distinct structure is the uterus (34). Additionally, as we have already discussed, the Hippocratic authors thought that the female body was characterized by its texture, as being more moist than men (35). The last way that they distinguished females from males was by the presence of menstruation. Menstruation, they thought, is a process necessary to the female body to get rid of the excess blood that accumulates from food when a girl is going, or has gone, through puberty; a healthy female body will be marked by the presence of menstruation (35).

This last marker of menstruation reminds us also, Deslauriers emphasizes, that the primary sex differences in humans that were of scientific interest were not merely the morphological features, but the physiological processes that differed between male and female humans: the particular processes of interest were menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation (35). These differences were, again, attributed to differences in temperature and levels of moisture in the bodies of males and females, both by ancient philosophers and physicians. And, it was this mode of pitting certain qualities of men and women against each other that served an important role in distinguishing the moral character of men and women; i.e., these physical qualities were not thought of as mere physical differences, but were also thought to explain in some way

[6] Among other thinkers, though, there were disagreements regarding whether males had a higher temperature than females, or if it was the other way around, but the basic idea that males and females differed in temperature, and that this affected their development was fairly widely held (Deslauriers 2022, 35).

important psychological or moral differences. That is, these thinkers sought to validate their thoughts on women's moral status through these scientifically-observed physical and physiological, not merely through opinions.

Pythagorean sources on the worth of women are some of the earliest and most important, Deslauriers says, as these influence much later thought on the general character of women; the Pythagoreans' attempts to ground the supposed moral differences between men and women were supported by certain metaphysical claims (24). These claims, though, were mainly negative. For example, among the Pythagoreans, women are put in opposition to men as their bad (or, worse) counterpart; women are also aligned with the even, the unlimited, movement, curves, darkness, and the bad (simply) (24). While Deslauriers herself goes into a detailed discussion of the different ways that women were thought to be connected with each of these characteristics, I will not go into such detail here, as it does not serve the aims of this essay. The part of her discussion that is most important for our purposes, though, has to do with the connection between these metaphysical claims of the Pythagoreans and the vices generally thought characteristic of women.

Deslauriers brings to our attention the two vices women were most frequently accused of: passivity and lasciviousness. The former, she says, is associated with being timid, cowardly, disloyal, and unstable. The latter has to do with having an unlimited appetite and ungoverned desires, both of which were thought to be characteristic of women, as a result of their nature (32). Deslauriers connects this latter vice to the thought of the Pythagoreans in the following way: "women are subject to unregulated desires and emotions with the idea that they are unbounded; if women are susceptible to being buffeted by emotion and desire, and less able to control those

affects, they will be more malleable by outside forces, less definite in their own judgments and actions" (33).

'Females' or 'women,' then, were widely understood in ancient Greek theoretical and medical discourse to be a category of human beings distinct from 'males' or 'men' that reflected the observed existence of sexual difference. The sexual differences were thought to be ascribed to certain biological, morphological, and physiological differences, and these differences were thought of as the sources of the above-described moral characteristics (namely, vices). Given this (however flawed) understanding of how women's sexual difference was responsible for their moral character, we can now turn to examine the laws and customs governing women's behavior in light of this background.

II. HISTORICAL REALITIES OF WOMEN IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

This second section will focus on the lived realities of Athenian women in the Classical period, in order to establish a baseline understanding of the boundaries that defined 'standard' practice or behavior for a woman. In the brief discussion here, I will be focusing on both written laws and customary norms which governed the lives of Athenian women. When especially relevant, I will connect the ways in which the theoretical background seems to have informed the ways in which the practice of law and custom proceeded.

Before moving into the main discussion, though, I want to address a few of the difficulties that come with discussing this topic. The first, as I have already briefly addressed, is the fact that the lives of women of Classical Athens are not exhaustively representative of the lives of all women in ancient Greece across time periods and cities. Nonetheless, for the reasons spoken of prior, this group of women will be a sufficient model for the work being done in this essay (Gomme 1925, Jacobs 1830, Katz 1992).

The second difficulty with this discussion is that the majority of information that we have regarding the lives of ancient Greek women comes to us from almost exclusively male sources. That is, we do not have discourse on the lives of women from the women's perspectives, but primarily from men's, and we must be careful about taking such information at face value (Richter 1971). Additionally, while written laws and customs give us *a* view to the kinds of lives women lived in Classical Athens, we cannot know what private life was like between individual men and women, or between women themselves (Deslauriers 2022; Katz 1992). That is, these laws and customs, while they offer an outline of 'acceptable' activities, do not exhaust the possible activities for women. If, however, we are trying to get a general, approximate picture for what was expected of Athenian women and what they were allowed to do in public, having a view to established laws and practiced customs will be sufficient for our purposes here (Deslauriers 2022; Katz 1992). With these things in mind, then, let us move to the exploration of the lives of Athenian women in Classical Athens.

In most aspects of life, Athenian women were subject to the control of their male legal guardian; depending on whether or not the woman was married, this guardian was either her husband, father, or another close male relative (Critchley 2019; Deslauriers 2022; Gould 2013; Noreña 1998). A woman's property was not hers alone and was almost always managed by this guardian; relatedly, women on their own were only allowed to manage *at most* a sum of money that was enough to provide for a household for a week (Deslauriers 2022). Within married couples, many obligations existed with the intent of exerting control over women, in particular the reproductive capacity of women, "in order to ensure the birth of legitimate offspring, even when [these restrictions] imposed an obligation on men" (46). Here, we see the interest in

women's role in reproduction — as discussed in the previous section — having an important effect on the way women's lives were governed in Classical Athens.

Regarding legal citizenship, some women, but not many, had citizenship in Athens; this citizenship, however, was necessary for enjoying certain economic and civil rights, as well as for being able to practice certain religious rites proper for women (46). Even given these permissions, though, Athenian women were not given the same citizenship privileges as men. Notably, they were prohibited from participating in the political sphere. Even women of high status were not able to appear or participate in public on their own, and always had to be accompanied by their guardian (46-47). And, perhaps most importantly, women's citizenship did not allow them to participate in public assemblies or law-making: as Deslauriers says, a "woman could be an ἀστή (female citizen) but could not be a πολίτης" (46).

This restriction of women's public appearance — while it was to some degree set down in written statutes — was largely a more customary practice (Jacobs 1830; Katz 1992). Marilyn Katz, in her article "Ideology and the 'Status of Women' in Ancient Greece," tells us how the Athenians adopted this practice of confining women to the home, and excluding them from the public sphere, from the Ionians (Katz 1992, 72). This practice of confining women to the home (or *oikos*) was one aspect which led to the distinctly separate lives of men and women in Classical Athens (Critchley 2019; Walcot 1984). Upper-class Athenian women — upper-class wives in particular — were expected to remain at home and take up appropriate household tasks like weaving (Antonaccio 2000, 521).

There were, however, exceptions to this picture of the secluded Athenian woman. While these upper-class women were kept to the home — with their interactions limited to ones between members of the same sex and close family members — women who were less-well-off

were given a bit more license when it came to appearing in public. The servants of these women, for example, might have been seen in the *agora* running errands for their mistresses and other less-well-off women might have been in the market selling products of their own (Antonaccio 2000, 521). There were also the *hetaerae* (female concubines) who would have come into contact with men of all kinds, an experience entirely unlike that of the upper-class Athenian women (Valdez 2014). Knowing how the conditions of women varied based on their social standing helps us paint an even more nuanced picture of the lives of Athenian women. Given our theoretical background of ancient Greek understandings of the category 'woman,' however, we might be able to start piecing together why upper-class Athenian women might have been restricted in this way.

One reason, as I have briefly touched on already, has to do with an interest in women's reproductive capacities. Given the importance of having legitimate children (i.e., children who could be Athenian citizens), Athenian men wanted to restrict the possibility of their wives becoming pregnant by another man; restricting women from appearing in public unaccompanied — and sending the servants out to the public instead of the mistress herself — was one way that they could do this (Antonnacio 2000; Deslauriers 2022; Noreña 1998).

We might also be reminded, though, of Deslauriers' discussion of the vices which were thought to be characteristic of women: foremost, lasciviousness. If, as was thought, women characteristically had these wide, nearly insatiable appetites, we might also understand women's seclusion as a method for combating the expression of such appetites. Carla Antonaccio's article also tells of Athenian men's deep concern for reputation hinging on fears of how a woman would behave if she was not supervised by a man; if unsupervised women were thought to be so great a risk, it is unsurprising that men went to such measures to limit that risk (Antonaccio 2000;

Critchley 2019). We have seen, then, that women's economic, legal, and even social opportunities were limited and have suggested how the theoretical category 'woman' might have influenced the conventions that enforced those limitations.

Before we move to the discussion of literature, however, we must first make clear how Homeric culture fits into this discussion. Of course, simply projecting Athenian culture back onto Homeric poetry would be anachronistic, if not otherwise wrong. And, as many of the thinkers we discussed in section one are from times following Homer's, it would be wrong to say that such thinkers influenced the presentations of women given in the *Odyssey*.

The relation is, of course, the inverse: although rooted in a different time and stage of social development, the Homeric poems were a basis of Athenian education and likely had roles instilling certain views on the status and behaviors appropriate to men and women (Thornton 1976). Thus, the practices that governed women's lives in Classical Athens are not so much reflected as they are stipulated by the Homeric corpus; that is, similar kinds of sentiments and practices that are seen existing in Classical Athens parallel those seen in Homeric poetry (Antonaccio 2000; Critchley 2019; Walcot 1984). For example, human women in the *Odyssey* are almost always confined to the women's quarters of the *oikos* and explicit distinctions are made between the activities proper for men and those proper for women (Redfield 1983, 1994; cf. e.g., Homer *Odyssey* XXI.388[7] ff.). And the "essentially contemporary" works of Homer and Hesiod present similar attitudes about women which were likely transmitted through common knowledge into the conventional attitudes about women in Classical Athens (Redfield 1983, 219).

[7] All quotations and line numbers given for the *Odyssey* in this essay come from Fitzgerald's 1998 translation unless otherwise indicated.

With all this in mind, we can now finally move to our discussion of the women of ancient Greek literature, with the goal of seeing how these fictional women act beyond the conventional limits and poor characteristics attributed to them by canonical thinkers and conventional society.

III. WOMEN OF ANCIENT GREEK LITERATURE

Though the female[8] characters we are focusing on in this section are all assumed to fall within the physical categories for a human 'woman,' these characters have characteristics and demonstrate levels of agency that, as we have seen in the first two sections, were thought uncharacteristic or improper for women. In doing so, these characters challenge these conventional ideas about women's capacities and moral worth. Homer's *Odyssey* does this in a subtle, more demonstrative mode, while Euripides' *Medea* takes up a more explicit method. Let us begin our discussion with the women of Homer's *Odyssey*.

Speaking Women in Homer's Odyssey

In the *Odyssey*, women and feminine figures are utterly indispensable to Odysseus' return to Ithaka. In this section, I will be specifically investigating the roles of Nausikaa, her mother Aretê, and Penelope in Odysseus' homecoming. I have selected these three women because they are given significant speaking roles and have some of the greatest influence on Odysseus' final journey home, with Penelope as the person whom he is drawn to be reunited with, and Nausikaa and Aretê as the people who ensure Odysseus' being granted safe passage home from the land of the Phaiakians (Skheria). While other feminine figures like Kalypso, Kirke, Ino, and Athena also have crucial roles in Odysseus' homecoming, they do not fit so simply into the category of 'woman' as discussed in section I of this essay, being goddesses rather than human. Therefore, for the sake of time and space, I will be limiting my discussion in this essay to the *Odyssey*'s

[8] Again, the distinction between 'females' and 'women' is often collapsed here to fit linguistic needs (e.g., I will use 'female characters' instead of 'women characters'), but I mean merely to speak of human female characters.

prominent human women, and will leave the complicated discussion of the goddesses and female monsters of the *Odyssey* for another time.

In this analysis, I will draw out the significance of Nausikaa, Aretê, and Penelope having such prominent roles, while also being women, thus showing how the poem challenges the bounds identified by the theoretical and conventional background we saw in sections I and II of this essay. That is, I will show how Homer's careful construction of these characters in the *Odyssey* grants women agency, power, and praise in such a way that prompts further consideration of what might be possible for women. Let us now turn, then, to the discussion of these women of the *Odyssey*, beginning with Nausikaa.

Having heard much about Telemakhos' journeys and Odysseus' trials leaving Kalypso's island, we arrive in Skheria by the end of Book V. At the start of Book VI, Athena visits Nausikaa in a dream, as the first phase in Athena's plan to have the Phaiakians aid Odysseus' journey home. In this dream, Athena appeals to Nausikaa by turning Nausikaa's interests toward her presentation of herself as a worthy potential bride, as that would have been a primary concern for a young woman of nobility at the time (Homer *Odyssey* VI.3 ff.; West 2010). By having Athena work in this way, the poem gives nods to conventional actions and modes of thought — namely, that a young, marriageable woman would, and perhaps even should, be concerned about finding a husband — but the poem does not keep us here. That is, we are not given Nausikaa's character as merely one who is concerned with what is conventionally 'proper' for women and only acting in accord with that; as the poem progresses, we will see the ways in which Nausikaa's character is extended beyond these bounds of convention, and the ways that

she is given individual strength and personhood, without disregarding or violating her conventional womanhood.[9]

We can see this work in the characterization of Nausikaa when we are given our first true description of her, wherein she is likened to the divine: "so fine in mould and feature that she seemed a goddess—the daughter of Alkínoös, Nausikaa" (Homer *Odyssey*, VI.20-21). In fact, within the first one hundred and twenty lines of Book VI, Nausikaa is compared to multiple goddesses (e.g., the Graces, Artemis); when such comparisons are made about a mortal, someone who is indeed not divine, we ought consider the quality of such a person, such that these kinds of comparisons can rightly be made and that a god would choose to work her plan through this person. These considerations of Nausikaa's character, as related to her being worthy enough to be compared to the gods and selected for the fulfillment of a god's plan, are seen in even greater clarity when Nausikaa and her maids meet the sea-battered Odysseus while going to do the laundry.

The young women meet Odysseus after he is woken up by their ball landing in the stream near where he has been sleeping (VI.124 ff.). When he moves to ask the princess and her maids for help, he (and his sea-battered appearance) frightens them, causing the maids to run away, with only Nausikaa remaining for him to speak to. While the poem does say that Athena is the one who gives Nausikaa "a bold heart" and "steady knees," such that she is able to remain in this strange man's presence, we are again prompted to consider the kind of person Nausikaa must be, such that Athena insists on having Nausikaa be the person she is working through to get Odysseus home (VI.149-151).

[9] I make this comment as a counter to the point in Aristotle's *Poetics* where he says that women in tragedies that exhibit virtues like courage are more 'manly' (Aristotle *Poetics* 1454a23-24; Critchley 2019).

Odysseus' first question to Nausikaa reminds us of how she has already been aligned with the divine, as his first question is asking her whether she is human or divine; her appearance is such that the distinction is unclear (VI.161). In response to Odysseus, Nausikaa speaks strongly and assuredly; it is important to note that, here, the poem does not say that Athena has any role in aiding Nauskiaa's speech (VI.200 ff.). And Nausikaa is characterized in a way that exhibits strong moral and social virtues: she expresses knowledge of the gods and proper behavior toward them, shows proper guest-friendship, honors her father as is properly due (as both her father and as king), and encourages courage and right action from her fearful maids (VI.200-224). Nausikaa herself is also responsible for coming up with the plan of how to get Odysseus to her father's castle in a way that will not result in any inappropriate and unjust comments about herself and her behavior (comments that might be thrown at her for traveling through town with a man that is not her husband) (VI.266-340). There is an additional significant moment of Nausikaa's plan that should be noted here: Nausikaa advises Odysseus that, once he reaches her father's castle, Odysseus should go straight to the knees of her mother Aretê, asking for her help before that of Alkínoös (VI.329-330). The significance of this will be more fully outlined shortly, within the discussion of Aretê herself.

What we have seen in our introduction to Nausikaa, then, is a young woman whose character is able to move beyond typical theoretical, social, and historical gender conventions as they have been discussed, without completely disregarding them. Moreover, Nausikaa is shown to transcend her conventional role without violating it; that is, she acts beyond it, without disregarding it entirely. In this, we see that the poem acknowledges the existence of these conventions, but encourages the reader[10] to think beyond their bounds, with Nausikaa as an

[10] I have chosen to primarily use the term 'reader' as a familiar term to describe Homer's audience, whether oral or written.

example of what this might look like. The poem shows us how Nausikaa is let out of the house without supervision for appropriate activities and, beyond that, is shown to be courageous, strong, and stable; i.e., Nausikaa demonstrates characteristics opposite to those conventionally thought true of women's nature (Deslauriers 2022). And, as the descriptions of Nausikaa continue, this characterization remains consistent as well, further emphasizing her strength and further impressing us.

The final lines given to Nausikaa are meant to emphasize the significance of her role in the poem and in Odysseus' homecoming. These lines are best given in full: "Fare well stranger; in your land remember me / who met and saved you. It is worth your thought" (Homer *Odyssey*, VIII.492-493).[11] These impactful words have no real need for interpretation, as they clearly and explicitly illustrate Nausikaa as essential to Odysseus' homecoming; that is, her involvement in Odysseus' return to Ithaka is not only worth Odysseus' extended thought, but ours as well. This young woman saved our hero's life and secured his safe passage home. The poem is sure to emphasize this point further in Odysseus' thanks to the princess as he says, "all my days until I die / may I invoke you as I would a goddess, / princess, to whom I owe my life" (VIII.498-500). With Nausikaa, then, we are shown the subtle (as well as the more explicit) ways in which the *Odyssey* works to characterize its prominent female characters, such that their presentations challenge conventional ideas of what was thought right or possible for women: Nausikaa is shown to be a strong, courageous, powerful actor, who is not subject to the moral weaknesses discussed in the earlier sections of this essay. And we can see how the poem operates in a similar manner with the characterization of Aretê, Nausikaa's mother.

[11] These lines are even stronger in the Lattimore translation: "Goodbye, stranger, and think of me sometimes when you are / back at home, how I was the first *you owed your life to*" (VIII.461-462, italics mine).

Though her time in the poem is small, the characterization of Aretê, queen of the Phaiakians, is crucial to the investigation at hand. Our first introductions to Aretê come from Nausikaa, as has already been mentioned, but also from Athena herself; both Athena and Nausikaa encourage Odysseus to go to Aretê as a suppliant rather than go to her husband Alkínoös, the king. Ordinarily, one would be inclined to think that it would be disrespectful for a guest to go into a household and seek out the wife over the husband, especially in a circumstance where the husband is the king (cf. III.25 ff., IV.32 ff., X.14 ff.). Yet, with Aretê, both her daughter and the goddess recommend that Odysseus should appeal to Aretê before the king; it seems reasonable to assume, then, that this suggestion is meant to function as a testament to Aretê's character.

The poem affirms this assumption as the characterization of Aretê continues. We are told of the ways that Aretê is lauded for being one of the best, most honored women *in the world* (that is, not just in Skheria). She too, like her daughter, is likened to a goddess; it is said that "[n]o grace or wisdom fails in her" and that, within Skheria, "just men in quarrels come to her for equity" (VII.70-80). This is made all the more significant given the fact that the role of judge is typically fulfilled by a man (cf. II.240 ff., XI.677-680, XII.561-563). It seems, then, that this honoring of Aretê and the suggestion for Odysseus to approach her first for aid is motivated by far more than any idea that 'the wife, as a woman, is softer and weaker, so she will be more sympathetic than her husband.' Rather, it seems that this speech of Athena's — in which we get the first full characterization of Aretê — is meant to serve as a genuine evaluation and affirmation of Aretê's objective goodness and honorable character.[12] And this advice to Odysseus

[12] Relatedly, the work of the Phaiakian women is put on a similar standing to that of the men's work, and the land of the Phaiakians is not some place in shambles, where praise of it should be taken as comic; rather, the city is particularly blessed (VII.86-141).

works: having approached Aretê's knees in supplication, he is met with the kindness and good judgement he was told to expect, and Aretê ensures Odysseus' return to Ithaka.

The cherry on top of this characterization and praise of this woman's character might be that the poem is written such that, when Odysseus is finally leaving Skheria, his final formal goodbye is given to Aretê (XIII.79-78).[13] Odysseus offers up blessings to her and her well-being, encouraging her to continue making Skheria lovely for all of her family, its inhabitants, and her king, showing again the ways in which Skheria's happiness and well-being depends greatly on Aretê herself; that is, the poem shows that the well-functioning of the city is the result of women's influence, not in spite of it. Indeed, the Phaiakian men are characterized as competitive, envious, and rude toward strangers (VI.291-304, VIII.166-194). It seems then, that smooth functioning of Skheria is indeed *due to* its women and in spite of its men, rather than the other way around.

With Aretê, then, as with Nausikaa, we continue to see how the poem challenges thoughts of women's abilities as limited to what might have been thought right or possible in the theoretical or customary conceptions of women's capacities; we have seen this, here, through the ways that Skheria and Odysseus depend on Aretê and Nausikaa. And, to see more completely how this work is continuously done in the poem, we will now turn to the character that Friedrich Jacobs says the *Odyssey* is a love song for: Penelope (Jacobs 1830; Katz 1992).

We are given our first, more-detailed view of Penelope in the second book of the *Odyssey*. Here, the suitors are, in their anger, trying to hold Penelope responsible for their depletion of Telemakhos' patrimony; how they do this, though, is not by saying that she has been giving them gifts freely or smothering them in affection. Instead, they blame her for being

[13] This act of extending a final goodbye to the queen, instead of the king, is seen again later in Book 15, when Telemakhos gives his formal goodbye to Helen, not Menelaos, as he is leaving Sparta (XV.221-228).

"incomparably cunning" with her weaving plot, which kept at bay their attempts to marry her for almost four years, out of respect for her father-in-law (Homer *Odyssey*, II.92 ff.). That is, even in their attempts to unjustly blame Penelope for their own behavior and turn her son against her, the suitors are forced to recognize Penelope's wits and the fact that she is far more intelligent than they (II.123-128). In so doing, the poem also forces the reader to recognize Penelope's intelligence early on, and not discount the role that she will have in the unfolding story.

Penelope's later reintroduction to the story comes in an equally impactful way, reminding the reader of her importance to the plot as something far beyond merely some object to be fought over. Having learned of the suitors' plot to kill her son, Penelope leaves her room and goes down to confront them (XVI.499 ff.). She approaches Antínoös (who is something like the ringleader of the suitors) first, and forcefully rebukes him and his actions; she says that he is "steeped in evil" and remarks against his reputation of being the best of his generation (XVI.507-510). By reintroducing Penelope's character in this way, the poem acts to remind us of her strength, courage, and general virtue. And, these actions from Penelope also push the bounds of the 'acceptable behavior' for women which we have already touched on. Here, Penelope leaves her part of the home (the women's quarters) and appears before these men unaccompanied by a male guardian, though she does not appear frantic or uncontrolled. Instead, she speaks to them calmly, yet directly and forcefully, chastising the one in charge. Through this, the reader's attention is again directed toward Penelope as a significant character whose role in the poem should be taken seriously.

Once Odysseus arrives at the palace, though disguised as a beggar, Penelope is especially kind to him, offering him food, a place to sleep, clothes to wear, as well as an audience with her (XVII.720 ff.). In this, we see her exhibit proper guest-friendship to a stranger, which the poem

has already demonstrated to be a good, praiseworthy quality in a person. The poem, however, remains ambiguous regarding when exactly Penelope recognizes Odysseus as himself in the last books of the *Odyssey*; that is, it could be the case that Penelope might have recognized Odysseus at this point, and is so kind to him for this reason (Katz 1991; Zeitlin 1996). It seems to me, though, that whether or not Penelope has yet recognized Odysseus, this passage reflects well on her character. If she has not recognized Odysseus and only sees a strange beggar before her, her behavior is commendable because she appropriately upholds standards of hospitality; if she has recognized Odysseus as himself, she shows a great amount of cleverness and self-restraint which allows the poem's plot to unfold properly.

As the events of the poem's final books transpire, we are given more details to fill out our picture of Penelope's character. Though we have already been told of Penelope's unending faithfulness to Odysseus throughout the poem, her fidelity is further emphasized by her response to Athena's placing desire in her heart to present herself to the suitors: her response is laughter (Homer *Odyssey*, XVIII.200-207). That is, the desire to present herself in front of these men who are not her husband is so foreign to her that it brings her to laughter and questioning (XVIII.200 ff.). And, when her maid suggests that Penelope beautify herself before making such an appearance, Penelope says seriously that she has no interest in such a thing; *if* she goes before the suitors, it is not to do anything like seek attention from them (XVIII.225-233).

The point here is that these passages aim to show that this woman who has been left without her husband (and out of the watch of a man in general) has not — as the thinkers of our theoretical background might have supposed — gone wild, giving and seeking attention to and from these many men. Rather, in order to get her to appear with anything except her tear-stained visage, Penelope must be knocked out (with sleep) by Athena, and have her face beautified while

she is unconscious (XVIII.234-250). Though a bit silly, this episode seems to illustrate well how genuinely faithful we should take Penelope to be; that is, the episode shows the poem's taking seriously the reality of a genuinely good, self-controlled woman.

And this characterization continues with the poem's events, as Penelope is given increasingly privileged and crucial roles. She is, for example, the one who initiates the first discussion between herself and the disguised Odysseus (XVIII.665-670). She does not get caught up in his compliments (she repeats the same phrase from earlier about her looks having left with Odysseus' departure to Troy), but instead expresses concern for the way that the suitors have been eating through Odysseus' property and Telemakhos' inheritance (XIX.123 ff.). In this conversation, we are reminded of her weaving plot and the extent to which she has tried to ward off a remarriage; we are told explicitly that Penelope has exhausted every effort possible for her (toward this end of avoiding remarriage), given the limits that society places on her as a woman (XIX.182-190). That is, the poem does show the conventional limits which Penelope is forced adhere to in some way — a woman could not pick her own husband — but shows more strongly Penelope acting (as much as possible) beyond these limits to hold off a potential remarriage by every means available to her (XIX.160-190). As the poem's movements draw us toward its action-packed conclusion, Penelope's strength and importance show up even more significantly.

Penelope's character is an essential enabling condition for the final reveal of Odysseus to the suitors, and the suitors' resulting slaughter (XIX.650 ff.). In setting up a contest that, to her knowledge, *only Odysseus* could win, Penelope ensures the opportunity for Odysseus' return (as our other characters of focus have), though now it is not merely a return to Ithaka the land, but an opportunity to return to his rightful place as king and husband (XXI.72-400). So again, as we see the poem give Penelope, a woman, a privileged role in the poem's plot, we are shown in turn the

ways that the poem demands our recognition of the significance of its prominent female characters.

When we finally reach the formal reunion of Penelope and Odysseus in Book XXIII, much of the interaction proceeds contrary to how one might expect. After receiving from Eurykleia the news that Odysseus is home, Penelope, somewhat surprisingly, does not drop everything and immediately run to where Odysseus is said to be. Instead, she approaches the circumstance carefully, wanting to make sure that she is not running into the arms of anyone other than her true husband (XXIII.63-108). Upon approaching Odysseus, Penelope is the one who is careful and insists on further 'tests' of Odysseus' identity; Odysseus is the one who submits to her requests (XIII.118-139).

With this, one might assume that, as king (nearly) reinstated, Odysseus would simply reveal himself to Penelope explicitly and demand that she accept his identity as truly that of Odysseus. Instead, the poem makes us take Penelope's concerns regarding Odysseus' identity seriously, and has us watch as the king submits to the discretion of the queen (XXIII.206 ff.). We see the way that Penelope is able to keep her composure as she tests Odysseus. Her feigned assertion that she had moved their bed is what drives Odysseus to break down and reveal the secret of their bed and its construction: the secret that only the two of them are aware of.

It is only after this confirmation and the emotional outburst of Odysseus that Penelope lets down her guard and finally runs to be reunited with her returned love (XIII.228-235). Once reunited, they weep together, as everything they have longed for has finally come to be. And it is through Penelope's careful work that Odysseus' final return can happen: once she accepts Odysseus as truly her husband, Odysseus can then be welcomed back into the home and can finally take back his place as king of Ithaka (XIII.236 ff.). In these several ways, then, Odysseus'

becoming king depends on Penelope. That is, the poem gives this substantial, concluding role to a woman — Penelope — and, in doing so, demonstrates the capabilities of women as beyond conventional expectations and forces a final recognition and acceptance of Penelope's necessity to the poem and to the success of the characters within.

What we have seen, then, are the ways that Homer's *Odyssey* works to characterize its prominent female characters as having capacities and excellences beyond what might have been thought historically possible or right for women. We have seen the poem making these claims through the characterizations of Nausikaa, Aretê, and Penelope, and thereby challenging the validity of standard historical values assigned to femininity.

A qualification, however, should be made: it is not the case simply that the *Odyssey* only portrays positive characterizations of women. Indeed, such women as Klytaimnestra and Penelope's traitorous maids are mentioned, and their actions are explicitly condemned (XI.470 ff., XVIII.395-415). More importantly, though, the focus should remain on the fact that the poem's most prominent human women — those with significant speaking roles — are characterized in almost exclusively strong, positive ways, prompting us to consider what purpose this characterization serves. With this discussion of Homer complete, let us turn to a work of literature from Classical Athens — namely, Euripides' *Medea* — and see how it fits into our examination.

Thus far, we have seen Homer's more subtle method of encouraging further thought about women in ancient Greece. The characterizations of the discussed women in the *Odyssey* are such that the women have more agency, significance, and value than was historically thought correct or possible. What these characterizations do not do, however, is present these figures as explicitly or purposefully going against established conventions, for the sake of going against

those conventions: that is where Euripides comes in. Euripides' presentations of women demonstrate women surpassing conventional limits, while also directly and more radically calling into question the validity of such limits and societal values.

Euripides' Medea

In this discussion, then, I will show the ways that Euripides — in a mode more explicit than Homer, though to a similar end — presents female characters as both moving beyond and explicitly commenting on the conventions of ancient Greek society (those of Classical Athens and others more broadly). To best illustrate this work of Euripides, and to do so without beating the point to death, I will take up a discussion of this work only within the context of his tragedy *Medea*, as it represents well the subject at hand, though it is not the only work of his which does so (Zeitlin 1985). Before beginning this discussion, however, it is necessary to address Medea's status as a figure of myth and the importance of fictionality or the tragic form in this discussion.

Medea is a figure from ancient Greek mythic or legendary times, and this sets her apart from the norm. By using a figure from legendary times, Euripides gains more latitude in what kind of actions he is able to show; his characters can be a bit more exceptional, as long as they do not take too much away from the plausibility of the plot (Aristotle *Poetics* 1452a ff.). Even with this, though, the actions of figures in ancient Greek poetry, and tragedy in specific, are notable not because of things beyond their humanness, but for the ways they act as humans (Redfield 1994). And, the play's fictionality and nature as a tragic work makes it particularly apt for commenting on social conventions and causing the reader's or audience's reflection on the validity of such conventions (Critchley 2019; Robinson 2024).

So, when Euripides uses Medea — this more exceptional figure from legendary times to comment on or act against conventional society — there are a few things we should keep in

mind. The first is that her more exceptional stature as a tragic character does not in itself push her actions beyond the realm of human possibility. The second is that we should not take any social commentary by Medea or the other tragic characters to be merely addressed to the conventions of Corinth in ancient, mythic times. Rather, via the tragic form, Euripides uses the characters of the *Medea* to comment on and critique his own Athenian society (Critchley 2019). With all this in mind, then, let us now investigate the play itself, seeing the ways in which the female characters of the *Medea* push the bounds of gender conventions while commenting on their validity.

The *Medea* opens with a speech from the Nurse. Within her first 10 lines that open the play, the suggestion is made that a woman's proper position is one of domesticity and simplicity; a related and seemingly important aspect of this position involves properly respecting one's husband. We learn immediately, though, that Medea — our leading lady — is doing precisely the opposite of these things. Jason, Medea's husband, has left her for another woman — a princess, the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth — and, because of this, Medea is taking care of neither home nor husband. She mocks Jason's wedding vows, her domestic duties, and even care for herself. From the beginning, then, we are shown the way that Euripides chooses to make explicit conventional modes of thought, only to immediately show these conventions being moved against (Euripides *Medea*, 20[14]).

In these opening lines, the nurse seems as though she might be a mere mouthpiece that Euripides uses to present the conventional views of women and their proper place (33-40). The Nurse's comments about Medea's hatred of her children would have been shocking to Athenian society, given that women were expected to have their children (and household more broadly) be

[14] All citation numbers for *Medea* correspond to the English line numbers in Collier and Machemer's translation of the play, the full citation for which is given in the bibliography. The English quotations use Collier and Machemer's translation as well; any Greek has been taken from the Loeb edition listed in the bibliography.

their whole lives. And, her description of Medea's inward turn and plotting would have also been something which caused suspicion for the Athenian audience, as some of ancient Greek society's worries about women stemmed from their being commonly thought to be secretive and unpredictable[15] (Zeitlin 1985). Oddly, though, when the *male* Tutor character becomes involved in the conversation, critiquing Medea's continued lament, the nurse begins *defending* Medea's lamentation, saying that "her pain has just begun" (Euripides *Medea*, 50).

The Tutor's speech affirms the Nurse's evaluation of Medea's pain as only beginning when he recounts that he overheard a plot to expel Medea and her children from Corinth, which will rid both the city and Jason of any commitment to them (60-65). Hearing this plot, the Nurse goes so far as to express her hatred for Jason. She acknowledges that Jason is her master and, as such, deserves a certain level of respect, but she finds his actions exceedingly awful and claims his level of faithlessness "unheard of" (75). The Tutor, though, quickly checks the supposed ridiculousness of such a thing being unheard of: as a matter of fact, Jason's actions are precisely the kind of actions that are characteristic of men of the time. Men — 'heroes' specifically — would go away, find new 'loves,' and leave their wives and families to make new ones, all while being able to maintain their same respect and status (75-78).

This kind of behavior is something which was not available for women, not even in the slightest. In presenting these conflicting ideas so close together, Euripides is encouraging his audience to consider the validity of the double standard offered to those considered heroes in ancient Greece. Men were able to turn against their wives and children and still be called a hero, while it was unlikely that a woman could even whisper the idea of thinking of a divorce; at the very least, it was quite practically quite difficult for a woman to bring about a divorce (Noreña 1998). What we see, then, is Euripides bringing to light, via the tragic form, an improper

[15] Or, in the language of our discussion from section one, 'lascivious' or 'unbounded' (Deslauriers 2022).

conventional double standard for fidelity between men and women; said otherwise, he calls into question the unfair distribution of expectations and values between the genders.

As the play's events continue, the Nurse again emphasizes Medea's disaffection with her children, encouraging the Tutor to keep the children away from Medea (Euripides *Medea*, 80-87). The Nurse's doing so is interesting, first, because such comments foreshadow the children's eventual destruction by Medea's hand. It is additionally interesting because Medea's disaffection reflects the difficult position that Jason has put her in. Say we take for granted that Medea does love her children and that, prior to Jason's 'indiscretion,' she has had no problems with them. Once Jason has left, their children become corporeal reminders of Medea's relationship with Jason and of the fact that she is now a 'used' or 'defiled' woman in the eyes of most of the public. As has just been discussed, Jason is not the one who is shamed or disgraced for turning back on his marriage vows. Medea, instead, is blamed for not being able to keep her husband; her children serve to remind her of this. Jason's actions transform the children from objects of love into objects of hatred. In this, it seems that it would not be her children that she hates, but what they represent that triggers such emotion in her. Related to the above are Medea's first lines that echo a similar sentiment: that her hatred for her children and home (the desire to destroy them) stems from her upset with the position she has been put in. Because of Jason's actions, she is now husband-less, city-less, prospect-less, honor-less, etc. (106-109).

When we reach the end of the Nurse's speech, we are offered a more nuanced look at the kind of expression that might have been possible for people of different social status (113 ff.). While it would have been notable for Medea, as a woman, to express her anger so outrightly, the Nurse is sure to tell us that Medea's upper-class status grants her more license in her actions than someone of lower status: "If she / were more like me [the Nurse], more like others, / that would

tame her" (116-118). In this, we are reminded of the different standards of appropriate action which existed not only between genders, but also between social classes, and are offered the suggestion that those of higher class might have been more able to push those boundaries of appropriate action. Now we must remember, of course, that Euripides is choosing to have this expressed through a female servant, and her action of free, open speech to the audience would have also been notable for the way it defied expectations of appropriate action. So we see Euripides continuing to usurp conventional expectations by having his female characters — upper and lower class alike — act against these conventions while commenting on their validity or lack thereof.

Following the Nurse's speech, we are given the first choral ode. The Chorus' being made of 'Corinthian women' is especially significant because they, as women, can understand and sympathetically feel the pain of Medea's situation in a way that no man of the time could[16] (129-135, cf. 177-180). And, in giving the role of the Chorus to a group of women, Euripides heightens the importance of women in the play, extending it beyond Medea and the Nurse alone. The women of the Chorus try to encourage Medea to turn away from her desires for death, as Medea first thinks death (her own death) to be the only escape from her misfortune (127-135, 150-158). Instead, though, ignoring the words of the Chorus, Medea continues to strongly express her grief, lamenting particular instance after particular instance as related to her circumstance (144-147, 160-170).

In Medea's first onstage speech, where she is an unaccompanied woman (other than the women of the Chorus), she mentions explicitly how she will neither hide the fact that she is in pain, nor the degree to which she is suffering; such public displays of emotion, as well as her

[16] Their foreignness still provides some distance between Medea and themselves, but their gender does not impede their ability to understand her circumstances.

appearing in public without a male guardian, would have been behavior that was conventionally inappropriate (222-240; Jacobs 1830; Katz 1992). We see, through this, more work being done by Euripides to bring up a given social convention, only to immediately bring his character(s) to act against this, prompting further reflection on the correctness of such a convention (Critchley 2019). And, if he is not encouraging outright reformative action of his own Classical Athenian customs and modes of thought, we see the ways in which his tragedy calls into question the correctness of conventional treatments of women and considerations of their abilities.

As her speech proceeds, Medea says that she will not stay in her home, such that she is thought to be "cold and implacable" (Euripides *Medea* 222-223). She continues with a more explicit and passionate commentary on the treatment of women in ancient Greek society: she says, "What other creatures are bred so exquisitely and purposefully for mistreatment as women are?" (241-242). The power behind this line is meant to grab the reader's or listener's attention, as Medea recounts the ways in which women are bought by their husbands, forced to live according to whatever lifestyle he may have, and bear his children along with his resentment (250-270).

And Medea is not limited to mere commentary on the society which has put her in this unfortunate position: she is able to move to action as well. She asks the Chorus to keep her secret, such that she can right the wrong that was committed against her, breaking the cycle of accepting suffering by the hands of one's husband, and the Chorus members pledge their secrecy (279-286). The Chorus' commitment to her secret offers an acknowledgement that a wrong has been committed against her and that she should be given the opportunity to avenge her honor. Relatedly, it seems that, thus far, the other female characters have been sympathetic to Medea,

while the male characters have remained largely indifferent to her situation, taking up an attitude in the realm of, 'that's just the way things happen.'

Creon certainly falls into this category as he tells Medea that he is exiling her and the reasons for her exile (290-303). Medea's rebuttal to Creon, though, brings up a number of questions regarding the difference between men and women and why clever people (here, clever women in specific) are feared, thus continuing her practice of commenting on the social conventions through the tragic form. But, because she does not want to be exiled from Corinth, she tries to convince Creon that he should not be worried about her, giving her feigned approval for his act of marrying off his daughter to Jason as 'the best thing he could have done' for himself and his daughter (326-334). We know, though, that this is heavily ironic, given that she was just saying the opposite when speaking with the Chorus (312-343, cf. 383-393). Creon, however, remains unconvinced and unsympathetic to Medea's pleas, and gives her only a day to prepare for her exile, thinking she would not be able "work the wicked plans [he] fears" (377).

A day, however, is all the time Medea needs to take up her plot against Jason, Creon, and Creon's daughter. While she acknowledges in her plot the damage she will be doing to these three, Euripides is sure to remind us that Medea herself was the original victim in these circumstances and will still suffer in her search for revenge (418-421). This is far from absolving her of the crimes she will commit, but this expression prompts a bit more sympathy from the reader, and prompts further reflection on what kind of societal circumstances might be in place, such that they could drive a person to such action. That is, the lack of conventional or legal defenses for such a situation seems to drive Medea to her extreme actions. In these actions, Euripides also shows Medea as acting against the idea that only men can commit grotesque

crimes and be honored for them and, with this, continues to challenge conventional ways of thinking about women and their capacities (428-431; cf. Critchley 2019, 55-58).[17]

As the play continues and we are finally introduced to Jason, it is important to note again that Medea, throughout the play, is allowed to express her rage and upset with her husband openly, in a way that might not have been allowed or accepted in ordinary life. Beyond this, Medea lists all the ways in which she has directly benefited Jason — which includes having saved his life — and yet he is still given license to abandon her and his oaths to her (Euripides *Medea* 467 ff.). She has even given him sons, and with them, the chance to legitimately continue his bloodline.[18] In her speech to Jason, then, Medea tells of how she, as a wife, has done everything that was expected of her, and then some. Jason, on the other hand, has tossed aside his commitment to Medea like a dirty sock, and has moved on, himself unmarred. By bringing up this fact, we are reminded again of the point we discussed earlier: that there is an apparent and improper double standard in the way men and women's fidelity is assessed in ancient Greek society.

In the extended dialogue, we see Euripides use the conversation between Medea and Jason as a mode for questioning and commenting on not only gender roles, but also on the culture of heroism more generally (528-533, 549-550; cf. Critchley 2019, 55-58). And, though Jason tries to attribute all of Medea's upsets to matters of sex and jealousy, we the reader know that these concerns are not any of the ones which Medea has explicitly addressed: the objective disgrace of the defiled marriage oath and the destruction of her own honor have been the biggest identified concerns (Euripides *Medea*, 560-582).

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[17] One might think of the Trojan War and how (at least one of) its primary motivations was the retrieval of Helen, honoring her marriage to Menelaus. Similarly, Medea is taking up her plot to defend the honor of her marriage, the violence being instrumental to this.

[18] This serves as an appeal to what would have been characteristically hoped for from a wife, and *maybe* a reason why a man might have been permitted to have a child with a woman other than his wife (cf. Noreña 1998).

Upon Jason's exit, Aegeus (king of Athens and friend of Medea), enters the scene and, hearing Medea's situation, is the first male character to express concern for her and shame the actions of Jason and Creon (684-700). In their conversation, Medea gets Aegeus to pledge an oath to her, offering her safety in Athens for all his life. To have Medea as the originator of such a strong oath, especially with a king, shows Medea exhibiting notable levels of agency and influence, levels beyond what would have been thought proper (or even possible) for women (Euripides *Medea*, 730-750; Fletcher 2003). Through this, the reader is forced to recognize the significance of such actions and agency coming from a female character (Critchley 2019, 54-55).

With Aegeus' oath sworn, Medea can now move forward with her plot to kill Creon, the princess, and her sons. But why kill her sons? If it were true that Medea truly hated her children, it seems that she would have simply left Corinth and gone to seek sanctuary in Athens by herself. In reality, though, she cannot bear the thought of leaving them alone in Corinth and risk having them be ridiculed or more greatly harmed. Medea cares deeply for her children, but her love for them is a hurdle in her own plan to ruin Jason and escape (Euripides *Medea*, 771-772). And, as has been previously mentioned, Medea's sons are not only her own: they bear Jason's blood as much as hers. The children would forever remind her of the life she had lost and the way she had been betrayed. She recognizes the "ungodly" nature of such an act as a mother killing her own children, but she does not think herself strong enough to bear their life as a constant reminder of what she has lost (786-789). She has already been ruined, but the ruin of Jason will also require the destruction of his and her sons (773-800). In doing so, she will no longer be thought of as a mere "weak or timid" woman; instead, she will be "so much more like a hero destined for glory" (800, 802).

With this, we continue to see the way that Euripides uses Medea to explicitly go against conventional expectations of women's behavior and take up behavior that, here, was thought only proper for male heroes. That is, contra thinkers like the Pythagoreans mentioned earlier, Medea is able to act courageously and definitively, and is not left to flighty, fearful musings or mere lamentations. In doing so, Medea's character forces the reader to recognize the possibility of great strength and action from a woman and, accordingly, challenges the correctness of conventions which disregard these kinds of action as impossible for women.

And Euripides pushes Medea to act in a radical way — again, that it is okay to kill one's own child is not the suggestion being advertised — but the more dramatic the circumstance, the better the chance for catching the audience's attention in the way desired. So we watch Medea's plot continue, as she feigns a resolution with Jason; but she is moved to tears as she has to pretend that there is any kind of duration to her sons' lives (855-883). Her attachment to her sons makes this scene a very emotional read. We know the exact reason behind Medea's continued tears; her statement of "I'm their mother!" serves only to heighten the tragic nature of the events to follow (907). She does, though, continue her practice of making fun of conventional thoughts on women, saying "my nature is to cry," as an ironic way to explain to Jason why she is crying; the irony, of course, is lost on Jason (909, cf. 1207-1226).

As we read, or the Classical Athenian audience may have watched, Euripides uses Medea's extreme action to force us to reflect on what kind of a society this must have been, such that this woman felt that the only way she could possibly have the retribution she was seeking was by killing her own sons (and several others). With every step toward the play's conclusion, then, we see more and more clearly the ways in which Euripides uses the characterization of his

female characters as a method of explicitly commenting on his own Athenian society and showing the possibilities of women acting beyond the limits set for them by convention.

Despite the pity that we feel for Medea, we are not supposed to pardon her completely; that is, Medea is certainly not a suggestion for a 'model woman.' The Chorus tells us not only that she is wrong, but that she is also the saddest of all (971-976). We are, however, given a greater chance to understand her and her driving motivations and passions (970-976). As we move toward the fulfillment of her plot, we are shown her suffering. She battles with whether or not to go through with her plan, pained equally (at least at first) by the thought of having to live without her children and by the prospect of living unavenged, with her enemies not suffering. She says, "Angry passions / have mastered me—emotions of misrule / that destroy men" (1055-1057). Here, Medea is exhibiting the kind of rage and passion that leads to the violent destruction of enemies and the kind of action that was emblematic and praiseworthy of men in heroic culture; when exhibiting these passions as a woman, however, they are suddenly viewed as horrifying and shameful. Thus, Medea's taking up the kind of passions 'proper for men' challenges the correctness of these passions, especially if the response to them differs when the action or passion remains the same.

And this particular theme is continued once Medea's plot against Creon and the princess has taken place, when Medea asks for the agonizing details of their deaths (1103-1004). We, and the Classical Athenian audience, might first be inclined to grimace at such a gruesome statement. What it seems Euripides is doing here, though, is prompting reflection on why we are struck by such a statement. If it is because the sentiment of reveling in an enemy's gruesome death is wrong, there ought to be further reflection on why the brutal descriptions of and boasts over Trojan killings in Homer might have roused cries of patriotic pleasure in a crowd of listening

Greeks, and why this would have been acceptable (encouraged, even). Yet, this woman's action to defend her own honor, and wanting to relish in the details of the work, is thought of as shameful or horrifying (the details, though, are indeed horrifying). Relatedly, there is only one other woman in Greek mythology (Ino) who is said to have killed her own children: how many Greek men, or male figures of Greek mythology, though, have killed or attempted to kill their own children, and were the motivations behind such actions always good?[19] Through this final extreme action of killing her own children, we see Euripides' work with Medea as a method for challenging gender conventions, as well as a method for challenging the fairness of the relative honors and expectations given to each gender.

So, within the characterizations of the female characters of Euripides' *Medea*, especially with Medea herself, we see the ways that Euripides gives these women significant roles, and we can surmise that the development of these roles is meant to explicitly challenge many of the gender conventions of Classical Athens and established Athenian conventions more broadly. Now, with our two literary investigations complete, let us turn to concluding remarks.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has shown the ways that Homer's *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Medea* use their characterizations of women to challenge the conventions given in the theoretical and historical backgrounds regarding women in ancient Greece. This investigation was taken up by first establishing these backgrounds, through an examination of theoretical understandings of the category of 'woman,' as well as an examination of women's historical positions, and the interrelatedness of the two. Once this background was established, we had the proper view for seeing the ways that significant women in Homer's *Odyssey* — namely, Penelope, Nausikaa, and

[19] A primary cosmological myth is that of Kronos eating his children to prevent them from coming to power over him; for another example in ancient Greek tragedy, see Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*.

Aretê — and Euripides' *Medea* challenge these gender conventions and encourage further considerations of these conventions' validity.

In the discussion of the *Odyssey* we were shown the work of this characterization as subtly demonstrating an acknowledgement of conventional attitudes regarding women's position, while also demonstrating the addressed female characters acting beyond such conventions, and thereby showing that the conventional limits failed to realize women's potential excellences. This method was shown to be more radical in the case of Euripides' *Medea* in which the female characters do not only act beyond conventional limits, but they explicitly speak out against them and challenge their validity. Though it would not serve this essay further to recount all the different ways in which these characterizations have shown themselves as challenging the relevant conventions, the impressive nuance and sheer number of these characterizations show how significant this theme was for the authors. Additionally, it shows the strength with which the authors' work entered into discussion with the historical and philosophic accounts, whether explicitly or implicitly.

This thesis, however, is not the final word on the subject at hand. Future investigations, which would serve to both broaden and deepen the discussion at hand, could come most immediately in two ways. The first would be to simply include more discussion of the other speaking, human women in the *Odyssey* (and even the *Iliad*), and to investigate more detailedly the ways in which the Euripidean plays featuring strong women remain consistent with or change from the above discussion of *Medea*. This investigation would proceed in a manner similar to that of this essay, but would provide more nuance to the discussion of these authors' construction of their human, female characters. The second (though not directly related) point of further research would be to address the goddesses and feminine monsters of the *Odyssey*, and, roughly

speaking, would investigate the ways in which their identification with the female or the feminine is significant to their role in the poem. Such an investigation would need an approach proper to divine and monstrous figures and could not simply be assumed to follow the same patterns or conditions as an investigation of human women.

For now, though, we have sufficiently achieved our aims of seeing the ways in which the speaking women of Homer's *Odyssey* and Euripides' *Medea* challenge the theoretical and historical conventions about women and their abilities, showing these women as active and excellent. In this, we have seen that these presentations of women in ancient Greek literature are extremely powerful and, as such, are worth taking notice of in order to reinvigorate scholarly discussions surrounding the strong women of ancient Greek literature.

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