

2 Odyssean Liberations

3 1) Considering both sides of the question, make an argument about whether
4 Odysseus survives and prevails against all odds by using methods more
5 characteristic of the *Odyssey's* females (women and goddesses) than of the men.

6 or

7 2) Make an argument about the degree to which the *Odyssey* affirms the dignity and
8 ability of enslaved people.

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10 **Gender:**

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12 *This topic posed the difficulty of accounting for both Odysseus' male-typical and female-typical*
13 *methods and for the variations in how he mixes the two, ending up firmly in the male camp by the end.*
14 *Since we've discussed at length his use of indirection, deceit, disguise, and other forms of metis (cunning*
15 *intelligence), coming up with original textual readings on this side of the question was a particular*
16 *challenge.*

17 *Emphasizing Odysseus' use of female strategies does show how he is distinctive among*
18 *heroes of the Trojan War but does not do justice to the amount of violence he must use,*
19 *especially at the end. To say "both female and male" is so obvious as to need the further step of*
20 *asking "how?", "when?", "under what circumstances and with what results?" In his course*
21 *through the epic, Odysseus does not show a poised yin/yang balance of genders, but various*
22 *progressions, ending up as father, husband, warrior, and authoritarian king by the end. Note*
23 *that in book 24 he does not use guile to put down the insurrection on the island and must be*
24 *stopped from lunging at the end by Zeus's thunderbolt.*

25 *One could provide fresh readings without getting over all of these obstacles. The*
26 *following two essays have considerable success in going the distance. --RG*

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29 #1 Athena & Odysseus: She's Armed, He's Dangerous

30 It is a match made in heaven—or rather, on Mount Olympus. When Athena, goddess of
31 war and strategy, finds the cunning Odysseus, king of Ithaca, he quickly becomes her favorite
32 mortal. In Odysseus, Athena sees much of herself: her intelligent craftiness combined with
33 strength and leadership in battle. Athena is in a sense the perfect balance of female and male
34 qualities, and she sees this balance reflected in Odysseus, the man known not merely for his
35 exploits at war but most of all for his cunning. The pair is truly exceptional: mortal man and
36 divine goddess, brains and brawn, smarts and strength.

38 Sadly, this seemingly ideal pairing is not equal in every respect—they come from
39 separate worlds. Unaffected by restrictions of human gender roles as the immortal daughter of
40 Zeus, Athena is free to exercise her powers in every situation, whenever she pleases, be it female
41 deceit or male strength. Even within her female method of disguise she may appear as female
42 (e.g. a young girl [7.19-20]) or as male (e.g. Mentor [2.267-68]). Odysseus, on the contrary, is
43 bound by mortal rules of gender roles: when he is at war, he must wield a sword; when he is
44 home, he must be king of Ithaca, husband to Penelope and father to Telemachos, and all the
45 duties that come with these roles. Therefore, because of the limitations of mortality upon him,
46 Odysseus employs both female and male methods of liberation throughout the epic: he
47 transitions from male to female at Troy; on his adventures, he uses female trickery and finds that
48 male strategies fail; and then transitions from female to male upon his return to Ithaca.

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50 Odysseus employs male strength and war at Troy, but transitions to female with
51 moments of deceit that culminate in the Trojan Horse. Odysseus is clearly a great warrior—he
52 survives Troy and is well-trained in battle. Menelaos states that if Odysseus comes back, the
53 suitors “would find death was quick and marriage a painful matter” (4.346). Helen tells stories
54 about Odysseus to Telemachos, describing him “striking many Trojans down with the thin
55 bronze edge” (4.257-8). However, Odysseus uses physical force because Helen has bathed him,
56 essentially destroying the beggar disguise he used to enter the city (4.245-253). Odysseus thus
57 begins to make use of female deceit by disguising himself, but once he is revealed, uses male
58 strength. Menelaos later mentions himself and Odysseus in the Trojan Horse (4.272). The Trojan
59 Horse, an invention of Odysseus, famously showcases his trickery and disguise; yet while in the
60 horse, Odysseus employs strength to ensure its success, “brutally squeezing [Antiklos’s] mouth
61 in the clutch of his powerful hands” (4.287-8) before Antinoos blows their cover. The diction of
62 “brutally,” “clutch,” and “powerful” clearly show that Odysseus’s strength is still intact, but his
63 Trojan Horse represents the transition from his male methods to female ones.

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65 Once he has left Troy and faces all types of dangers, Odysseus finds that male methods
66 fail, and uses female trickery to liberate himself. In his encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemos,
67 Odysseus disguises his identity by claiming that his name is “Nobody” (9.363-414). This deceit
68 ensures that when Polyphemos calls for help, the other Cyclops will not heed him, enabling
69 Odysseus to escape the cave with his remaining men. Odysseus realizes that masculine physical
70 strength will not be enough to escape, as he cannot open the door. Once he has escaped, his
71 masculine pride causes him to call out his name to Polyphemos and incur the wrath of Poseidon
72 (9.502-505), showing that female trickery liberates while male methods fail. Likewise, when
73 Odysseus resists Circe by using a potion given to him by Hermes (10.287-301) and then
74 demands that she make an oath, he exercises female deceit, and his physical “attack” on her is
75 merely for show; however, his male sexual desires cause him to remain with Circe for a year
76 (10.467-470), delaying his journey instead of advancing it. Later, Odysseus stops the ears of his
77 men when passing the sirens so they will not be tempted by their deadly song (12.177-179),
78 cleverly avoiding the danger. Odysseus also has his men tie him to the mast (12.178-9), literally
79 restraining his masculine strength. Similarly, Circe assures him that there is no way to escape
80 Skylla, as “there is no fighting against her, or any force of defense” (12.199-20). Odysseus uses
81 the female method of trickery when he journeys from Troy to Ithaca, and male methods are
82 rendered useless.

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In Ithaca, Odysseus is once more bound to mortal gender roles: he must be a king, father, and husband again, and with these male roles come male methods. When he first arrives in Ithaca, Odysseus is disguised as a beggar (compliments of Athena) (17.337); his female methods are still in place, but they recall Troy, where he experienced his first transition, foreshadowing a stripping of his disguise. When he is reunited with Telemachos, he must reveal himself to prove his paternal role (16.172-212) and plan the suitor’s death with his son. Athena herself removes the disguise, stating her “eagerness for the fighting” (14.171). Later, with the suitors, Odysseus is once again disguised as a beggar, but it is only when he strings his bow and shoots the arrow through the axes (21.404-23) as a sign of masculine skill that he reveals himself to the suitors as the man of the household and king of Ithaca (22.1-41). Consequently, the battle with the suitors is all-out physical, and no trickery is involved—Odysseus must forcefully claim his throne through male methods. Finally, when he encounters Penelope, he does not trick her—as her husband he cannot disguise himself if he wishes to gain her trust. As he says, she does not believe it is him because he looks like a beggar, and “she dislikes me for that, and says I am not her husband” (23.115-6); thus his disguise is rendered useless in the role of husband. Furthermore, Penelope tricks Odysseus into proving his own identity by mentioning the bed he built himself (23.177-204), using a female method that Odysseus can no longer use, and thus finally establishing the gender roles Odysseus must comply with as a husband, father, and king. Odysseus lastly transitions from female methods to male methods when he arrives in Ithaca to resume his role.

Therefore, while Odysseus displays Athena’s balance of female and male characteristics, he is limited by his mortality and the implications that come with mortal gender roles. Due to these implications, Odysseus progresses from male methods at Troy, to female methods in his travels, and back to male methods when he resumes his role of father, husband, and king in Ithaca. Despite these limitations, there is no love lost between Athena and Odysseus: the epic poem ends with Athena and Odysseus agreeing to a peaceful resolution of the conflict, and Athena still the powerful goddess overseeing it all. Perhaps these limitations even benefit Athena: she obviously has a soft spot for Odysseus, but she probably enjoys admiring and helping him along like a highly realistic counterpart in a video game more than she would enjoy having him as an immortal equal. The gods like their power after all. As for Odysseus, he can have pride knowing his cunning is truly his own, and not a gift from his biggest fan (she wouldn’t be his biggest fan if it was), but the security that comes from having a god on one’s side. This unique relationship ultimately reflects the uniqueness of both characters as individuals: an immortal female and a mortal man that separately manage to effectively utilize female cunning and male skill is incredible to find—put them together, and this dynamic duo is nearly unstoppable, like the original version of Castle and Beckett in the TV show series *Castle*: Athena’s divinity is her NYPD badge, and Odysseus is the star of his own novel—or rather, epic.

[End of essay #1]

#2 Odyssean Dialectics of Gender

Odysseus becomes masculine by “doing” feminine: his homecoming can be seen as a dialectical rite of passage, in which he uses feminine *metis*, namely trickery and deceit, and reclaims a heroic *kleos*, which he achieves by the gendered evidence -- his male body. And this dialectical nature of his establishing identity as a male has a subversive implication on gender.

0. Gender Dialectics as a Rite of Passage

While he employs feminine stratagems, he cannot be seen as androgynous: his femininity is rather a *transitional* term, which is to be passed by, to realize masculinity. This gender dialectic can be viewed as a rite of passage. It is notable that he is destined to come back (13.339-340, 12.139): a rite of passage can be legitimate only when the reincorporation, namely becoming king, is ensured. Just as in the end of the rite, he eventually *reaffirms his identity* (*sameness**) as king and male by posing and undergoing the *difference* of others -- of women, of beggars, or even of “Nobody” (9.360) when asked to *identify* himself.

*(1560–70; < LL identitās, equiv. to L ident (idem) repeatedly, again and again, earlier *idem et idem (idem neut. of īdem the same + et and) + -itās -ity, Dictionary.com)

1. Feminine Metis as a Driving Force of the Gender Dialectics

His stratagem during the homecoming is mainly feminine, involving *metis* characterized by females in the *Odyssey*, as opposed to masculine one: his great physical strength, or masculinity, has no use to his opponents’ insurmountable power, from which neither any force of defense (10.120) nor the god Earthshaker can rescue him (12.107), or against which not suspecting, innocent (10.257) men cannot resist. His physical figure has no use either in fighting back: rather, he is a weakling, unmanned when he is naked.(10.341) Therefore, he has to use counter-tricks: he uses moly against Circe so that no magic will work on him(10.329); he uses wine to make Polyphemos drunk, just as Circe and Helen used magical potion to enchant men to deprive them of proper *metis*.

The role that feminine *metis* plays in the dialectic can also be seen from the men who lack sufficient *metis*: Odysseus’ crewmen and the suitors. The crewmen fail to secure their *kleos* - if they do not have the *kleos* of falling bravely in war, their *kleos* depends on getting home and being well received there (p.154, Questions). However, they become drunk and enchanted by Circe’s wine and potion and become swine, stuck in the middle of their homecoming (10.234-241); they show bad judgment when they ignore the warning about Helios’ cattle, making themselves cursed to fail to return (12.415-419).

The suitors also do not show adequate *metis*: they are unsuccessful in their plans, though they are still treacherous. They do not even have *kleos* won in war; that is, they lack masculinity

170 as a preliminary term for the gender dialectic. Rather, they always “loiter in [Odysseus’] house,
171 make a holiday feast and drink the wine recklessly.(2.55-58)”. In other words, they can be
172 regarded more as childlike rather than as masculine. In their endless feast, they do not change
173 nor grow up; the suitors drink as much as they want and go home to go to bed(18.418-426),
174 which would impair their *metis*, as is in the case of Polyphenos and the crewmen.
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176 Meanwhile, after he survives hazards by his counter-trickery, Odysseus has to reclaim
177 his heroic, masculine *kleos* in the end. This is illustrated when he shouts (in his bad judgment) to
178 Polyphemos that he is *shamefully* blinded by Odysseus, *sacker of cities*(9.503-504); he shows his
179 strength, rushing with his *sword* forward against Circe to surrender her (10.320-324). In terms of
180 the rite, it is notable that such victories are destined: Polyphemos refers to a prophecy that he
181 should lose the sight of his eye at the hands of Odysseus (9.509-512); Circe has been “forever”
182 told that he would come (10.330-333). Such deterministic prophecies bring an end to the
183 transitional war of *metis* has and ensure the reincorporation of his identity as heroic Odysseus.
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185 Still, the dialectical rite ultimately remains incomplete even when Odysseus reaches
186 Ithaka. The final stage of the rite becomes explicit when Athene in disguise tells him where he
187 is: he never forgets to be deceitful, “checking [his] word from the outset, forever using to every
188 advantage the mind” (13.254-255). His victory in the exchange of *metis* with the goddess Athene
189 marks a turning point: Athene, admitting that “even a god against [him]” could not surpass his
190 tricks, or his *metis*, promises him to “be at [his] side”(13.386-396), which ensures the successful
191 end of the rite.
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193 194 3. The End of the Dialectic/Rite, the Male Body 195

196 Yet a paradox arises at the end of the dialectic: ceasing to be deceitful does not mark the
197 end of the rite. Instead, revealing his identity in a direct way brings an impasse into the
198 dialectic, as can be seen from Penelope doubting Odysseus (23.85-95). Therefore, the key lies not
199 in his *metis*, which causes infinite suspicion, nor in his *kleos*, which can be established *after*
200 Odysseus proves himself, but in his private male *body*. His dog Argos, regardless of his
201 apparent and social identity, recognizes him by smelling his body (17.301-302); Eurykleia
202 recognizes him by the unique scar on his body(19.474-475); Penelope stops doubting him when
203 he proves to know the most private facts about their bed, the symbol of their heterosexual
204 relationship.
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206 207 4. The Implications and Questions 208

209 In the *Odyssey*, masculinity is the negation of femininity, and therefore femininity must
210 be established and affirmed *before* masculinity. (This dialectic also applies to *kleos*: *kleos* cannot
211 be achieved alone. Odysseus wanted to listen to Sirens celebrating his *kleos*; he and Penelope

212 listen to each others' story of their *kleos*, etc.) That is, if the identity(sameness) is to be affirmed,
213 there must be the difference.

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215 Thus, even if the heroic *kleos* is attributed to Odysseus in the end, his masculinity, being
216 dependent on femininity, cannot be claimed to be ultimately superior. On the other hand, this
217 formula can be reversed: if masculinity and femininity are interdependent and interwoven, how
218 can we say that Odysseus is masculine? He can finish the rite of passage to become a "man"
219 again only by showing his male body; then is it legitimate to call him masculine, despite the
220 many transitional but important feminine stratagems he used, just because he has a male body?
221 Maybe he is a counterpart of the monsters -- Skylla and Charybdis -- who have insurmountable
222 power (masculine) but is called female, the only reason he deserves *kleos* is that he has a male
223 body. [End of essay #2]

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226 Slavery

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228 *This topic had the "bottomless pit" problem of having so much evidence, much of it seemingly*
229 *contradictory, that I couldn't expect a fully successful argument. Accordingly I gave much credit for*
230 *intelligent progress toward that goal. I looked for an intelligent acknowledgement both of the moments of*
231 *affirmation (most clearly of Eumaios and Eurykleia) and, on the other hand, of the depiction of the*
232 *disloyal slaves' acting abusively and in turn receiving atrocious punishments. The Odyssey stands out*
233 *among the Iliad and other heroic epics by showing higher levels of respect for enslaved people (loyal ones)*
234 *and higher levels of abuse (for disloyal ones). The epic ducks the question of slaves' ability in some crucial*
235 *aspects; e.g., the illustrious Eumaios and Eurykleia are both of noble or at least free birth. Some glaring*
236 *gender-linked inequities remain: Eumaios and Philoitus will be adopted into Odysseus' family since they*
237 *have fought beside him; Eurykleia does not get any reward that we know of.*

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239 *Some good issues emerged: The slaves' labor is respected. The punishments, though harsh, enforce*
240 *known codes and come after warnings, rather than being random and used for intimidation, as we saw in*
241 *the modern slave narratives.*

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243 Here is an excerpt from an essay that provides a theory of agency to account for both the
244 loyal and disloyal servants.

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246 [Excerpt from essay #3]
247 In the descriptions of Penelope's maidservants Homer goes on to affirm the dignity and
248 ability of maidservants, specifically. One maidservant in particular, Eurykleia, represents the
249 ideal maidservant and so it follows that she is given first priority. She is Odysseus's nursemaid,
250 meaning that she helped to raise Odysseus from birth, therefore her loyalty to the family and
251 their house is very strong. Her dignity and ability are affirmed in her unflinching loyalty to
252 Odysseus's family. On several occasions, she kept secrets that were necessary to the family's
253 happiness. When Telemachos decides to go off and find information about his father's
254 whereabouts and condition, the son of Odysseus visits the nursemaid and informs her of his

255 departure. Though she is unhappy that he should leave, as his father did, and cause his mother
256 further unhappiness, she agrees to swear an oath of silence to the gods because she acknowledges
257 that the journey is necessary to the family's happiness overall (2.348-380). It is apparent in this
258 example that Eurykleia derives pleasure from helping Odysseus's family to be happy. It is in
259 knowing that they are happy that she feels dignified and it is only through working towards that
260 end that her dignity is affirmed. Eurykleia's ability is affirmed in her belief of her own capacity
261 for self control; she affirms her own ability. When Odysseus returns to his house as a beggar,
262 Penelope instructs the nursemaid to bathe him and, upon noticing his foot scar, she is seized by
263 pain and joy. As eager as Eurykleia is to tell Penelope, Odysseus stops her and threatens to take
264 her life if she were to tell Penelope of his presence before the suitors were dead and gone. Upon
265 hearing this, the nursemaid responds: "My child, what sort of word escaped your teeth's barrier?
266 You know what strength is in me, and it will not give way at all, but I shall hold as stubborn as
267 stone or iron" (19.357-494). It is in making Odysseus's family happy that Eurykleia's dignity is
268 affirmed and it is in her belief of self-control that her ability is affirmed.

269 Though all of these examples demonstrate Homer's positive affirmation of maidservants,
270 there are instances in which their ability and dignity are negatively affirmed. Towards the end of
271 the epic, nursemaid Eurykleia confirms that twelve of Odysseus's fifty maidservants have "taken
272 to immorality" (22.420-424). This 'immorality' that she speaks of is the crime of having
273 relations with some of Penelope's suitors. Their decision to be immoral is still an affirmation in
274 as much as it establishes the maidservants' agency and therefore their ability to work in their
275 own interest. In regards to dignity, this depravity may affirm that as well. The twelve may very
276 well feel dignified in their frivolous behavior in as much as it oversteps the implied boundaries
277 of their slave titles and crosses into free territory: the ability to decide your own fate. Just before
278 this in the epic, Odysseus the beggar is ill received by one of Penelope's immoral maidservants
279 who reproaches him and tells him to leave (19.64-69). This incident only further establishes the
280 maidservants' misconduct as an affirmation because it is in this maid's misconduct that she
281 derives so much haughtiness. All in all, there is still positive affirmation in these examples,
282 because the fact of the matter is that the minority seek a less favorable means of affirmation, not
283 the majority. For the most part, the maidservants seek to affirm their dignity and ability through
284 positive means- that is, while honoring Odysseus's house and family. [End of excerpt from essay
285 #3]