Patterns of Femininity in the Heroic Epic. Homer: The Iliad and the Odyssey

Florica Bodiştean

"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Romania

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to point out that Homer's epics create a feminine typology that is approached in different life situations, in times of peace or war, a typology that will begin, in pure or hybrid forms, a real tradition in the heroic literature: the Demeter-type woman, the Aphrodite-type woman and the Amazon-type woman. If in The Odyssey women act as epic agents and are present in large numbers, in Homer's first epic they are backstage characters, but still relevant at the fictional level, because they play a great variety of roles. The Odyssey reveals femininity from the point of view of man, who compares and assimilates or differentiates various types of women. The Iliad offers a heroic perspective on femininity: a woman who stirs the warrior attitude, a woman who accompanies the hero, a woman who engages herself in a competition against the hero.

Keywords*: heroic epic, epic function, Demeter-type woman, Aphrodite-type woman, Amazon-type woman*

The Odyssey and *The Iliad* or under the sign of Yin and Yang

In Homer's world, both men and women represent Force under its multiple manifestations: the force of beauty, the physical force or the moral force. They embody a Force that, without losing its essence, transcends itself and reaches the reality of the human values, a reality that only great convulsions can disclose. This is what purifies that Force from any destructive element.

The Odyssey is a complex, metaphysical and contradictory "web" based on human inner values, since it is woven by women. They delay and hurry the events or extend the action mostly by complicating it; whenever women are involved, things become complicated. *The Iliad* is the world in black and white, plain and austere, but also gigantic, extroverted, active and full of energy. It is, above all, a world of men. Symbolically and generically, the two epic poems are under the sign of Yin and Yang.

In matters of women, Odysseus gains absolute experience. In *The Odyssey*, the list of the women who have touched his life includes all feminine types seen in relation to a man who is nothing else but a man. The perspective of integrating and differentiating the feminine is, therefore, fundamentally erotic; *The Iliad*, however, offers a heroic perspective, that of a man who fights to win the great ten-year war in which women have to participate as well.

On the surface, the story in *The Iliad* rarely deals with women and provides few comments on them. They are always mentioned when speaking about a famous man's genealogy, that he was born to… and to…, but only if his mother was a goddess or of noble descent. *The Iliad* is an encyclopaedia of proper names; a hero's identification when he first appears in the narrative is a method that Homer applies consistently. Women have a completely different situation in *The Odyssey*, maybe because the need to compensate was also meant to complete the image of the

Greek world by disclosing its private elements after its public dimension: *one man and several women* against *one woman, Helen of Sparta or Helen of Troy, and two armies of men*. *The Odyssey* insists upon women; they are no longer transient characters appearing only before or after key battle scenes, they are also seen in their own time, doing what they usually do: talking, combing their hair, getting dressed, spinning, casting spells, conspiring, waiting, calculating… Odysseus runs in circles in the world of water, among fantastic and real creatures, but mostly among women. Mortals or fairies, teenagers or more experienced, all of them are monopolizing and it becomes apparent that man's hardest task will be to choose among them. Regarding the presence of the feminine, *The Odyssey* clearly recovers epic prestige. *The Iliad* is simpler, rudimentary; it is an age of wars, of nondifferentiation, of categorical alternatives. Here the woman is a backstage presence, her life goes on only behind the scenes. She is not allowed on the battlefield, so is can be seen only in the winner's tent, as a slave; on battlements, as a mother, wife or sister waiting for the end of a battle; in the temple, where she prays for her dear ones to win; in her bedroom, where she weaves surrounded by friends or grieves for her dearly departed. Only one woman is seen in her alcove and she is, of course, Helen.

The Odyssey: Eros and wisdom

On analysing men's experience with women, one will see that in *The Odyssey*, the four women in Odysseus' life comprise all ages and statuses – social, ontological and civil – in order to satisfy this unique man's curiosity and erotic readiness. They symbolize two archetypes: the *Demeter-type woman* and the *Aphrodite-type woman*, i.e. the woman as a mother/wife and the woman as a lover (Evola, 1983: 125-132). For the former, the key word is *fecundity* under all its aspects; she identifies herself as a woman primarily through her force to create, to procreate, to be a founder; she is *Magna Mater Genitrix*, life and its source, the life-giving energy itself. Maybe from the same need of complementarity, the Demeter femininity has a double representation: the conjugal-maternal woman and the virginal, innocent woman. The former is the fulfilment of a destiny, while the latter is the woman seen as a promise – two stages of one destiny. Both Penelope, the lawfully wedded wife, and Nausicaa, the fragile adolescent ready to be married, who charms Odysseus with her blooming femininity, offer themselves to the protagonist as alternatives for the rest of their lives. The former he has already married, the latter would be gladly given away by her father, the king of Phaeacia, if he decided to stay in his country. Modern interpretations demonstrate that the myth of marital faithfulness, which Penelope has come to symbolize, is not pure, but impregnated with the pragmatism of the Homeric world: "Penelope sees only two ways of putting an end to her waiting: either Odysseus returns or she is forced to marry one of her suitors. It never crosses her mind that a third solution, one that a woman devoted to a great and only love would prefer, is also available: to choose solitude, to give up erotic life, to resign to failure […] Seen from this angle, the myth is shaken and the image of the queen in Ithaca gets darker. She is more a *good-thinking* woman than a *good* wife [author's emphasis]" (Simion, 1985: 92). Notwithstanding Penelope's types of attitude that make her more realistic than mythical, the First Lady of the epic poem captivates Homer's entire admiration, as he opposes her countless times to the other heroes' senseless wives. In fact, what Penelope represents and what the myth has turned her into is not so much devotion to a man until death, as absolute dedication to family values, to her condition as a married woman, irrespective of the man she is married to. She is part of a complex of values called *home*. The maternal-conjugal feminine type that Penelope represents is identified, here more than anywhere else, with the motherland, the extended home (Dărăbuş, 2004: 29).

Nausicaa also prepares herself to become a good wife. She is extremely careful to keep her chastity and behave impeccably before marriage. Having seen Odysseus made younger by Athena, she asks the gods: "Would a man like that could be my husband,/ living here and happy to remain"; at the same time, she tells him to go to the city by himself, for fear that if people saw her with a "tall and handsome" stranger, they might make injuring comments. A marital model to follow is the couple Alcinous – Arete, the wise king and queen of a utopian country, Scheria, where they rule in justice, live in harmony with their subjects and have turned life into a continuous celebration.

These examples of couple stability – stability that spreads quickly throughout the whole family, city and even the world itself – are like a screen on which the representations of the other type of woman, the Aphrodite feminine, imagined as "the dissolving, overwhelming, ecstatic and immeasurable force of sex" (Evola, 1983: 128), are projected. This is what Odysseus wishes for the female child who finds him on the shore of Phaeacia, as a reward for her kindness: "As for you, may gods grant/ all your heart desires—may they give you/ a husband, home, and mutual harmony,/ a noble gift—for there is nothing better/ or a stronger bond than when man and wife/ live in a home sharing each other's thoughts./ That brings such pain upon their enemies/ and such delight to those who wish them well./ They know that themselves, more so than anyone."

In *The Odyssey*, the Aphrodite feminine, a generic symbol of the woman born to love – seductive, sensual, highly sexual, tempting, a woman who charms, captures and enchains both in the proper and the figurative sense of the word – is as strong as its Demeterian equivalent. The positive version, with a passionate temperament, is Calypso, daughter of Atlas who holds the Earth/heavens on his shoulders. In her island, Ogygia, the ancients saw the navel of the world, the place crossed by *axis mundi*. In Ogygia, we are right within myth boundaries and in a mythical time that has escaped evolution. Calypso keeps Odysseus captive for seven years, promising him a status that would make him compatible with her, with her place and time. She promises him immortality and eternal youth provided he, a wanderer, stays with her and forgets about Ithaca. Memory is, as Anton Dumitriu proves in his study *Odysseus or the Circle of Destiny* (1981: 130-166), the main obstacle in overcoming human condition.

Naturally, the Aphrodite feminine expresses excellence in everything that is connected with physical charms and pleasure. The adolescent female stirs respect, man shakes in front of her unsullied femininity yet to be transformed by Eros; it stirs awe, for she represents the beauty of a troubled age "on the razor's edge", therefore all the more precious. The married woman is also beautiful, but her beauty is steady and comes from her inner self. She impresses us above all with her virtues that time has established: moderation, wisdom, kindness, devotion and responsibility. She is described generically as "queen" Arete or "wise" Penelope. Everything in the Aphrodite-type woman is erotic vocation and her beauty – eternal and never changing – is not beauty in itself, but a means of captivating. It seems, however, that static beauty does not mean too much, since for human nature what matters is dynamic beauty that is always confronting time and characterises each age and stage in one's life. In the same way, Odysseus shows us how little exterior beauty, be it perfect like Calypso's, weighs compared to beauty accompanied by other values, in this case the *kalokagatheea* complex: "Mighty goddess,/ do not be angry with me over this./ I myself know very well Penelope,/ although intelligent, is not your match/ to look at, not in stature or in beauty./ But she's a human being and you're a god./ You'll never die or age. But still I wish,/ each and every day to get back home,/ to see the day when I return." One needs serious grounds to turn immortality down and Homer's critics see his choosing Penelope as an indication of how much he cherishes wisdom (Buffière, 1987: 298). This is symptomatic of the vision of ancient Greeks, for whom Beauty never enjoyed an independent status.

The other daughter of Aphrodite, diabolical in nature, is Circe, the terrible witch who through her spells (the magic drug in which she mixes the substance of oblivion and then gives to her visitors) changes men into pigs. Allegorically, Circe, whose name contains the root of the word *circle*, was interpreted as a symbol of the wheel of reincarnations; however, on the erotic plan that we are dealing with, she can be the illustration of a moral precept: love as mere sexual intercourse, without involving conscience, degrades man to an animal stage or, as Homer says, "to an unmanned weakling". Odysseus escapes the spell thanks to the antidote from Hermes, the herb called *moly*, i.e. thanks to reason and memory, the only things that can help him keep his human condition. Calypso wants to conquer him over with sweet talk and caresses, Circe wants to gain control over him through her powers. The former has a charming nature, the latter uses artificial charms that cloud the mind and stir the senses. Calypso and Circe are two opposing natures: love out of time and the degrading passions, the bright and the dark side of erotic experience, devotion and subjugation. On an occult, initiatic level, the denial of these representations of femininity is based on the ontological demonic nature of the feminine that J. Evola speaks about, on the belief that the woman, Dyonisiac in her manifestation, leads to "harming and breaking the transcendental manhood" (1983: 142), each sexual intercourse being like a small death. Both Calypso and Circe, both the fairy and the witch "involve a 'cosmic' limit", they "tend to shut off access to that which is beyond life" (Evola, 1983: 142). The situation is the same in heroic myths and legends, where "the love of a woman with more or less supernatural features was often presented as more of a hindrance and peril than as a help for the protagonist" (Evola, 1983: 142).

All women in Homer's works form a network of oppositions that proves their demonstrative and allegorical force: honest Penelope against murderer Clytaemnestra; sensible Penelope against senseless Helen, the benevolent woman against the malefic one, magic against reason, the virgin and the sexually experienced woman. Calypso and Nausicaa, for instance, reflect each other based on the relation between immaturity and maturity, the flower-woman and the fruit-woman, the natural and the elaborate*, the love for the close one* (physical love) and the *love from a distance* (spiritualized love) (Ortega Y Gasset, 1995: 157-161).

In short, this is how things are dealt with in *The Odyssey*, a poem of faithful love, of matrimonial love, a hymn to the Demeter woman who also supports related values – motherland, family, parents, youth, and stability. She is above any "errancy", any erotic "slip" that the Eros does not avoid; however, once such "aberrations" occur, she sees them strictly as experiences and never turns them into a way of life.

The Iliad: Eros, vanity and responsibility

The Odyssey speaks about a threshold, a point in life when a man begins his tortuous journey towards his inner self, and about the role women choose to play in his journey. This threshold determines the importance, the role, the place, the function and the types of women in an epic poem of a different style that seems to ignore them completely. It is a classical epic about war, an example of historical realism, dealing with man's passions and deeds and leaving allegories and symbols aside. As far as the presence of the feminine is concerned, the relation between *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* is one between text and subtext; the "web" that the women in *The Iliad* are "weaving" precedes the epic discourse that includes them. Their roles start long before the story itself which is set during the ninth year of the war: winning the war seems to depend on which man marries Briseis, Helen is the cause of the war, Aphrodite is too ambitious and Eris shakes the whole world with her apple. Thus the woman is merely an epic pretext, since she is almost absent in the

narrative. The war is coming to an end and despair has overtaken both sides, the initial passions have cooled down a little and people fight out of inertia or vanity or for their honour. One must not forget that, in times of war, not only women, but also the Muses are silent, and the differences on sexes are never more obvious than under such circumstances.

In war, the Aphrodite woman and ardent love come on the second place and the Demeter woman moves to the background, where her role, to help the hero from a distance and by praying the gods to watch over him, is not as significant as before. Only one female category can stay in the foreground: *the Amazon woman*, the third archetype that Evola identifies (1983: 126-135). She lives under the sign of virgin goddesses like Artemis and Athena, the goddesses of armed confrontations, ladies of arms, hunting, war and victory, who possess unleashed powers and at the same time and the power of death. The Amazon, man's rival, represents female strength, the independent woman (who needs man only for reproduction purposes), for she is not deprived of grace or female attributes in general. The heroes of *The Iliad* speak highly of the Amazons several times: for instance, in *Book Three*, when Priam recalls the help given to the Phrygians in their fight against "men's peers in war", or in *Book Six*, when Glaucus retells the "labours" of Bellerophon, who "massacred the Amazons, women who rival men". The Amazons help Priam after Hector's death – say the Trojan legends, but also Quintus Smyrnaeus in the *Fall of Troy* (or *Posthomerica*), Ovid in the *Heroides* and Virgil in the *Aeneid* – and even push the Greeks back to their ships; their queen Penthesilea, daughter of Ares, challenges Achilles, who kills her eventually. Legends also say that having removed her helmet, Achilles is struck by her beauty and falls in love with her, while the Atreids, overwhelmed with admiration and grieving her cruel fate, allow the Trojans to take her body and weapons behind their walls.

From the very first pages of *The Iliad*, the woman is seen as an object to be traded. This is the fate of Briseis, the slave Agamemnon takes from Achilles to compensate the loss of another slave, or Chryseis, who was much more important, since she was the daughter of Chryses, Apollo's priest. Apollo can always take his revenge on the Achaeans, and he will certainly do so. *The Iliad* introduces a constant feature of the genre, i.e. *the woman matters only to the extent in which she can influence, more directly than indirectly, the evolution of a war*. Otherwise she is just an auxiliary tool of the winner, although she has her own individuality, personality and will. She is a nameless source of delights and pleasures, she has only age (young by all means!) and an attractive body and face. Small wonder, since the epic deals with war, not with stories about whims of love, rude passions or losing one's head over a woman – all this the Greeks disapprove of, knowing for sure that they will end in a disaster, and the more disastrous the ending, the more exemplary the story. An essential distinction has been made between the military world of *The Iliad* and the civil world of *The Odyssey*. This distinction operates on the level of psychological analysis, which corresponds to a more accurate description of senses and feelings: "*The Odyssey*, written after *The Iliad*, confirms the discovery of what we may call a global personality that endows man with inner feelings" (Defradas, 1968: 30).

Briseis and Chryseis represent the *slave*. Her destiny is to accompany the leader whom she will serve far from her own country, as vainglorious Agamemnon reminds Chryses: "I'll not release the girl to you, no, not before/ she's grown old with me in Argos, far from home,/ working the loom, sharing my bed."

But here comes Helen, another traded object, the most important in the chronology of the story. Her case is, however, special: she comes to Troy as a prize given to Paris, who did not waste time judging which goddess deserves the apple, but chose what he had been asked to, so that he can have Helen, the most beautiful woman on earth, only for himself. Helen has no say, gods make

her lose her mind (therefore she is absolved of any guilt!), she becomes an adulterer, a renegade, an outcast, a woman left without a country or family, carrying the huge responsibility of all the misfortunes she has caused unintentionally. Priam realises this and forgives her: "As far as I'm concerned,/ it's not your fault. For I blame the gods."

Apparently, beauty is a burden, since by highlighting an individual it makes him/her the toy of gods, an ordinary object to stir egoism, an object that can be disputed, grabbed for oneself, shown as temptation and reward. Beauty is also a great risk for those who have it. Too much beauty leads to utter desolation. This is what the old people of Troy, who should be immune to charms and objective in their reason, think about Helen and her beauty: "There's nothing shameful about the fact/ that Trojans and well-armed Achaeans/ have endured great suffering a long time/ over such a woman—just like a goddess/, immortal, awe-inspiring. She's beautiful./ But nonetheless let her go back with the ships/ Let her not stay here, a blight on us, our children."

Helen is identified with beauty in excess and any excess may lead to imbalances. *The Iliad*, as well as its literary posterity that praises Helen of Troy, speaks about ill-fated beauty, beauty as a curse, beauty that does not bring joy to oneself, but deep sadness (Creţia, 1981: 42-51). Helen will eventually curse her destiny and her protector, Aphrodite, whom she accuses of having misled her in order use her in her own interest. In turn, the goddess threatens Helen (in *Book III*) that if she does not obey her, if she does not hurry to the bedroom where Paris lies waiting for her to comfort him because he has disgraced himself by running from Menelaus, she will make both the Trojans and the Achaeans hate her. Terrified, Helen does as she is told and, after she reprimands her husband, follows him into his bed. This is what Buffière (1987: 265) says about this scene, especially about Paris: "This coward who flies from the battlefield into Helen's arms does not even wait for the night to come so that he can surrender himself to sexual delights. No other hero in Homer's epic is described sleeping with his wife or concubine during the day. Only Paris behaves in such an unabashed manner." Compared to his behaviour, the self-control the Greek heroes display – Agamemnon respects Briseis as long as he keeps her and Achilles does not think of love when he takes her back, because he grieves the death of Patroclus – is a great example to follow. Consumed by remorse, Helen misses her home, her daughter, her friends, and her first husband. She is a penitent from the beginning to the end of *The Iliad*, carrying the burden of ill-fated beauty on her shoulders. Her appearance on the parapets of Troy, from where she watches breathlessly the deeds of the Greeks, is that of a condemned, unhappy and disgraced woman, not a proud woman who is aware of her charm.

Through Helen and especially through Aphrodite, *The Iliad* speaks about the disaster that beauty and the vain desire to be acknowledged as the fairest can cause. Beauty does not make the world a better place. On the contrary, it makes it greedier. Helen experiences the effects of escaping the archetype she belongs to as a result of exterior interventions that she cannot control: as a child, she is abducted by Theseus and recovered by her brothers, Castor and Pollux; when she is ripe for marriage, she is allowed to choose her husband, so she chooses Menelaus, and her other suitors vow to respect their union. She is taken away from Sparta and forced to give up her life as a wife and mother, then Paris takes her to Troy as his trophy. When she finally settles in her new family (after Paris dies, she marries his brother Deïphobus), Menelaus, the winner, wins her back, then wants to kill her, but Aphrodite stops him. The goddess reveals his wife's charm and beauty to him, which instantly erases his memory of her long unfaithfulness. Typologically, Helen is a Demeterian beauty forced to exchange her initial protector Hera, the goddess of marriage, for Aphrodite. Above all, her life is a toy with whom gods never cease to play. Consequently, she is always torn apart

between the Trojans and the Greeks. Had she been in a position to decide which of the two camps should win the war, she wouldn't have known which one to choose.

It becomes apparent that the Aphrodite woman, i.e. the woman as attraction, in her position as a stolen wife or slave, is, in *The Iliad,* the foundation of history. She stirs war, she sows discord among leaders, she is, in the end, war loot. Her role remains purely decorative – an adornment of the man who owns her – as long as she does not exceed the limits of her Aphrodite archetype, as long as she does not inspire deeper feelings. For in this space where both men and gods make exchanges that help them recover important things, like protection in battle, a life, the body of a son, there is still room for feelings. Feelings have no price. They become apparent when Priam comes to Achilles to ask for Hector's body without promising anything in exchange, only reminding him of any father's sorrow at his son's death. And they surface again when Achilles returns to battle to revenge Patroclus's death, after turning down Agamemnon's generous offer. This is what the greatest transaction in *The Iliad* would have consisted of: gold, twelve race horses, the fairest seven women in Lesbos, Briseis, many other gifts that Achilles was to receive when sharing the loot stolen from the conquered Troy, one of Atreus' daughters as a wife and "a dowry bigger than any man so far has ever handed over with his daughter" – all this in exchange for the greatest of all stakes: Achilles must "abate his anger", return to fighting and help the Greeks to beat off the Trojans' attack. Hurt pride, friendship and a father's love for his children are the factors that influence Achilles' attitude in fighting. Love should be added to them if the heroes' image is to be complete. What part does love play in the heroic epic? What is the relation between love and pride? On the one hand, there is the pride of having the fairest woman as your wife and being indispensable to the multinational army led by Agamemnon; on the other, the pride of being glorified, even if this means a shorter life. Achilles says the same thing to Agamemnon's embassy: "Why did Atreus' son collect an army/ and lead it here if not for fair-haired Helen?/ Are Atreus' sons the only mortal men/ who love their wives? Every good and prudent man/ loves his wife and cares for her, as my heart/ loved that girl, though captured with my spear." When Agamemnon takes Briseis for him, both Achilles' pride and his feelings are hurt, but his declaration of love for Briseis is unconvincing. His words reveal that he is hurt more because his property is not respected, while others' is. A woman's life means nothing compared to the higher stakes of war, victory, eternal fame and loot and every time Achilles condemns war, he condemns the misfortunes a woman can bring. When he grieves for Patroclus, he admits that his friend's death is the greatest loss in his life, greater than the possible death of his father, Peleus, or his son, Neoptolemus, and this only because of "Helen, whom I detest". When he makes peace with Agamemnon, he blames women again: "Son of Atreus, has it been good for us,/ for you and me, to continue squabbling/ in a heart-rending quarrel full of grief/ for both of us, over some girl? I wish/ she'd been killed by Artemis' arrow/ right beside my ships, the day I got her/ as my prize, after we destroyed Lyrnessus./ Fewer Achaeans would have sunk their teeth/ into this wide earth at enemy hands,/ if I'd not been so angry." Many centuries will separate his misogynistic speech from the speech of a mediaeval knight who places his weapons at his Lady's feet. Achilles's profile, the Greek hero's profile in general is, in relation to love, that of a gladiator who despises the weaker sex. Only an anti-hero like Paris is subjected to women's influence. Maybe this is why the Trojan legends speak about how fascinated he was by the Artemis archetype illustrated by Penthesilea.

Passionate love, pure Eros, is not part of the hero's moral portrait. What he feels is only responsible love for his wife, children and parents, but this kind of love characterises the Trojans, especially Hector. The woman involved in the few domestic scenes that take place in the Trojan camp is Demeterian and performs her specific function during a war: she sees herself only in

connection with the hero, since her life and others' lives depend on him. Her representations are the mother (Hecuba), the wife (Andromache), the sister (Cassandra) and, last but not least, the sister-in-law and the daughter-in-law (Helen).

Helen gains her place in Priam's large family and sees in him a wise and kind father. At the same time, Hector is the understanding and generous brother who is always on her side. Her wail at the dead hero's head, near Hecuba and Andromache, is a compensation for the lost moral dignity, an episode very similar to Briseis' lament when she sees the body of Patroclus, her dear friend who encouraged her to hope that Achilles would take her to Phthya and marry her.

Andromache is Hector's female equivalent. He is the complex hero, she is the complex heroine. She is described with generic epithets of excellence such as "fair wife" and "white-armed Andromache". She is not only the image of the wife, but also is the symbol of the woman with a cruel fate, left without family and depending on the man beside her, who means everything to her: "So, Hector, you are now/ my father, noble mother, brother,/ and my protecting husband. So pity me./ Stay here in this tower. Don't orphan your child/ and make me a widow. Place men by the fig tree,/ for there the city is most vulnerable,/ the wall most easily scaled." Andromache, like Priam or Hecuba, cry because they believe that if Hector dies, the city will remain unprotected, the wives will be slaves, the children will be orphans, the fathers will die an undignified death, and the mothers will cry because they can't grieve for them or honour their bodies. This weeping choir asks Hector not to confront Achilles. Besides the above-mentioned reasons, the women weep because they, as life-givers, as *Genitrices*, can only protect life. This is the only way to explain Hecuba's desperate gesture. As supreme argument, "she undid her robe,/ and with her hands pushed out her breasts, shedding tears./ She cried out, calling him – her words had wings:/ 'Hector, my child, respect and pity me./ If I ever gave these breasts to soothe you,/ remember that, dear child. Protect yourself/ against your enemy inside these walls./ Don't stand out there to face him. Stubborn man,/ if he kills you, I'll never lay you out/ on your death bed or mourn for you, my child,/ my dearest offspring nor will your fair wife./ Far away from us, beside Achaean ships,/ their swift dogs will eat you". Hecuba represents maternity, as her impressive fertility proves: she has fifty sons and fifty daughters. Fifty is a recurrent number in mythical-heroic structures (Ilos, the founder of Troy, wanders through Anatolia with fifty boys and fifty girls; Hercules impregnated the fifty daughters of Thespius; there are fifty Danaids and their husbands are fifty as well), which has generated the hypothesis that "in the Greek heroic tradition, fifty was the number of plenitude" (Borbély, 2001: 158).

The Iliad without women

Nevertheless, Hector chooses honour and dies ("I'd be disgraced,/ dreadfully shamed among Trojan men/ and Trojan women in their trailing gowns,/ if I should, like a coward, slink away from war"), and the women's words and action, be they rational or declamatory, have no echo in his heart. The whole heroic epic speaks, though in whispers, about women's strength and limitations, about their power to generate evil and their inability to stop it. Although Homer does not use psychological analysis, he proves he has solid knowledge on male psychology. The men in his epic could have made many different choices whenever they reached various crossroads in the story, any of which could have reduced the disaster: Priam could have given Helen back and then the war wouldn't have started; Paris could have been defeated by Menelaus and leave Helen to him; Agamemnon could have chosen not to take Achilles's slave; Patroclus could have decided not to fight, but to return home with his friend; the Greeks could have been forced to withdraw... The women generate a huge force that they do not seem aware of. They stir man's pride and then are unable to control it.

The heroes deceive themselves and lay a lot at the gods' and fate's door. But if we regard *The Iliad* from a strictly realistic perspective, if we remove all divine intervention, the stake of the confrontation appears too low when compared to the length of the epic. The war in *The Iliad* is also a war between the sexes. *The Odyssey*, the anti-war epic, the poem of an anti-Helen-type heroine, of the feminine acting not as a destructive, but as a catalyst force, will be the mediator between men and women.

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