Bloom's Literature

**The Authority of Women**

Who are the women in the "Odyssey"? There is Minerva, omnipresent at the elbows of Ulysses and Telemachus to keep them straight and alternately scold and flatter them. In the "Iliad" she is a great warrior but she is no woman: in the "Odyssey" she is a great woman but no warrior; we have, of course, Penelope—masterful nearly to the last and tossed off to the wings almost from the moment that she has ceased to be so; Euryclea, the old servant, is quite a match for Telemachus, "do not find fault, child," she says to him, "when there is no one to find fault with." Who can doubt that Helen is master in the house of Menelaus—of whom all she can say in praise is that he is "not deficient either in person or understanding"? Idothea in Book IV. treats Menelaus *de haut en bas*, all through the Proteus episode. She is good to him and his men, but they must do exactly what she tells them, and she evidently enjoys "running" them—for I can think of no apter word. Calypso is the master mind, not Ulysses.

Take Nausicaa again, delightful as she is, it would not be wise to contradict her; she knows what is good for Ulysses, and all will go well with him so long as he obeys her, but she must be master and he man. I see I have passed over Ino in Book V. She is Idothea over again, just as Circe is Calypso, with very little variation. Who again is master—Queen Arēte or King Alcinous? Nausicaa knows well enough how to answer this question. When giving her instructions to Ulysses she says:—

"Never mind my father, but go up to my mother and embrace her knees; if she is well disposed towards you there is some chance of your getting home to see your friends again."

The moral in every case seems to be that man knows very little, and cannot be trusted not to make a fool of himself even about the little that he does know, unless he has a woman at hand to tell him what he ought to do. There is not a single case in which a man comes to the rescue of female beauty in distress; it is invariably the other way about.

The only males who give Ulysses any help while he is on his wanderings are Æolus, who does him no real service and refuses to help him a second time, and Mercury, who gives him the herb Moly (X. 305) to protect him against the spells of Circe. In this last case, however, I do not doubt that the writer was tempted by the lovely passage in the *Iliad*, Book XXIV where Mercury meets Priam to conduct him to the AchÆan camp; one pretty line, indeed (and rather more), of the Iliadic passage above referred to is taken bodily by the writer of the "Odyssey" to describe the youth and beauty of the god. With these exceptions, throughout the poem Andromeda rescues Perseus, not Perseus Andromeda—Christiana is guide and guardian to Mr. Greatheart, not Mr. Greatheart to Christiana.

A woman if she attempts an Epic is almost compelled to have a man for her central figure, but she will minimise him, and will maximise his wife and daughters, drawing them with subtler hand. That the writer of the "Odyssey" has done this is obvious; and this fact alone should make us incline strongly towards thinking that we are in the hands not of a man but of a woman.

** Citation Information**

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