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ESSAYS

ODYSSEUS AGAINST THE MATRIARCHY

A Homeric battle of the sexes.

by Jacob Howland

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PRIMEVAL FORCES OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE, MYSTERIOUSLY inflected by sexual differentiation and far too deep to be tamed by any projects of social constructivism, have once more erupted from their underground vaults and are struggling for domination of our public spaces

and institutions. Many women are gleeful at the prospect that men, now widely understood to be agents of sexual violence and cultural patriarchy, may soon be subjected to an ultimate “reckoning.” For one who knows the Greeks, this language is as revealing as it is ominous.

Homer’s epic poems explore fundamental tensions inherent in civilization: the conflicting claims of family and polity, individual freedom and social necessity; the tragically tangled struggle of love and aggression. The *Iliad* explores these contradictions in the context of war. Few passages in literature are as moving as Andromache’s desperate plea, child in arms, for her doomed husband, Hector, to remain within the safety of Troy’s walls; or Achilles’ pitiable lament—having learned too late that his friendship with Patroclus was infinitely more precious than King Agamemnon’s respect—that he is but “a useless burden on the earth.”

The *Odyssey* unfolds in the chaotic aftermath of the Trojan War, a long and bloody conflict that traumatized and destabilized the whole Mycenaean world. The situation in Ithaca is typical: the prolonged absence of the king and his followers has produced a crisis of moral and political authority. Inevitably, women have stepped (or been pulled) into the power vacuums left by their men. It is not for nothing that Agamemnon’s murder by his wife Clytemnestra and cousin Aegisthus haunts the epic from start to finish. The *Odyssey* is another kind of war story, one in which a collapsing civilization’s internal contradictions take the form of a pitched battle of the sexes.

The *Odyssey* focuses on a solitary man who must find his way in the new post-war reality. The verb *odyssasthai*, George Dimock argues in his essay “The Name of Odysseus,” means “to cause pain [to oneself and others]...and

to be willing to do so.” Odysseus earned his name—“Trouble,” Dimock suggests—when gored while hunting a wild boar. The charging boar is a Homeric image of reality. It is a hard and wounding reality that Odysseus rushes to confront in the *Odyssey*, taking its measure through suffering, and deepening and expanding internally in the accumulated memory of suffering. He himself inflicts pain or death on virtually everyone he associates with, friend and foe alike. He fails to bring one generation back from war, personally dispatches the next (Penelope’s 108 suitors are all young noblemen from Ithaca and the surrounding islands), and would gladly have killed their aggrieved fathers, too, had the gods not stopped the slaughter. But he also must fight for his *psychē*—his soul, and sometimes his very life—against smothering, bewitching, and homicidal females. The funeral shroud Penelope weaves for Odysseus’s father Laertes signifies the burial of an entire epoch, a past and future slain by violent passions no longer constrained by ancestral ways. The *Odyssey* is a drama of cultural and political suicide that plays out between vicious extremes of masculinity *and* femininity—jagged shards of a broken human wholeness.

Femmes Fatales

Early in the poem, the goddess Athena claims she saw the eponymous hero hunting “a man-slaying poison” to smear on his arrowheads. (All translations from the Greek in this essay are my own.) Such craftiness is barely a match for feminine charms and potions as lethal to the soul as any poison is to the body. On his homeward voyage Odysseus encounters the Sirens, vaguely female creatures—a red-figure vase in the British Museum depicts them as birds with women’s heads—surrounded by the rotting

cadavers of men unable to resist their “honeyed voices.” This is a fair image of Odysseus himself, notorious both for his deceptive sweet-talk (he is punished in Dante’s *Inferno* for his guileful abuse of trust) and for the multitudes he directly or indirectly sends to Hades. Nor is this the only way in which the Sirens—who sense rather than see approaching sailors, and adjust their song to the sailors’ deepest desires—imitate Odysseus’ nature. Their seductions of Odysseus are specifically intellectual; they offer the hero, who in his wanderings “saw the towns and knew the mind of many human beings,” the knowledge that he craves above all. “We know all that the Argives and Trojans suffered in broad Troy by the will of the gods,” they sing, “and we know all that comes to pass on the much-nourishing earth.” (H.J. Draper’s 1909 painting *Ulysses and the Sirens* got it just right: naked maidens besiege his ship from the sea as Odysseus, transfixed by some inner vision, rolls his eyes wildly toward the heavens.) Douglas Frame observes that *nostos*—homecoming—is philologically related to *nous*, mind; both words derive from the Indo-European root *nes*, meaning something like “return to light and life.” Little wonder that Odysseus narrates his encounter with the Sirens at the center of the *Odyssey*, for here everything he hazards to become who he is—memory and identity, homecoming and intellect, life and light—hangs in the balance.

Odysseus survives the Sirens because he is counseled by the divine Circe, who marvels at his “unenchantable” *nous*. She should know. Attracted by her song, his men had found her working a great loom (females weave many a web in the *Odyssey*). She’d served them drug-laden wine that washed away all memory of their fatherland, and then she’d turned them into swine. Odysseus drains the same cup, yet Circe’s “baneful drugs”—reminiscent of

the memory-laundering *pharmakon* ingested by the Lotus-eaters Odysseus encounters elsewhere—have no effect on him. For Hermes had previously equipped him with a mysterious prophylactic: moly, a plant the god had pulled from the ground—something “hard for mortal men” to do—so as to show him its nature. Jenny Strauss Clay points out that this is the only occurrence of the word “nature” (*physis*) in Homer. Odysseus’s mind is unenchantable because he knows the roots of things, the hidden nature from which they grow. But coming to know nature, including one’s own, involves a certain Socratic hardness, a willingness to tear things (even if only in speech) from the soil that nourishes them. As Plato makes clear through his famous image of the cave, the return to light and life from confusion and darkness is painful for all involved. This necessary suffering is a major source of hostility to the full development of the individual self in the *Odyssey*.

Nostalgia

Females in the *Odyssey* are an oedipally overdetermined group, sexually alluring as well as maternally controlling. Circe is not the only one who resists the suffering associated with spiritual and intellectual rebirth. The nymph Calypso, loathe to give up Odysseus, the mortal plaything she has subjected to seven years of sexual servitude on Ogygia—an island surrounded by vast stretches of ocean—is another such. *Kaluptein* means “to eclipse”; Calypso’s love cave is a kind of black hole, one of several into which Odysseus vanishes only to emerge again after difficult labor. The hero arrives on Ogygia having already visited the dank pit of Hades, in which wretched shades swarm and gibber like bats. Yet when Calypso offers him

the seemingly safe harbor of ageless immortality and unstinting comfort and pleasure, he chooses to return to his wife, Penelope. Unlike his unfocused and irresolute crew, Odysseus never loses sight of his goal—even if, as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, suggests in his poem “Ulysses,” it is only because he always wants to be somewhere else. His mindfulness protects him in another way. Binding himself to a goddess is a bad bargain: what if the nymph should tire of his company?

Helen, a daughter of Zeus and mortal Leda, is a particularly significant contrast to Odysseus. Her story in the *Odyssey* shows that she who controls memory controls men. When Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, visits the Spartan King Menelaus seeking news of his father, the old warrior’s recollections of Odysseus bring everyone to tears. But his wife, Helen, has a remedy for this sadness: she secretly slips into the wine a drug that “banishes pain and sorrow and allays anger, causing forgetfulness of all ills.” Here is history’s first deliberately constructed safe space, an analgesic realm where words lose their sting and suffering is wiped from memory. In blocking access to the deep feeling of the past, Helen’s ploy is self-serving as well as emotionally manipulative. For the story Menelaus goes on to tell about how Helen (then “of Troy”) tried to sound out the Greek warriors hidden inside the Trojan Horse by ventriloquizing the individual voices of their long-lost wives contradicts her claim to have been longing for home by this point in the war. On that occasion, she attempts to produce rather than to allay nostalgia, the pain associated with the recollection of home. When a soldier tries to cry out in response, Odysseus brutally silences him; had he not done so, the Greeks would have been burned alive, aborted before they could issue from the great wooden womb. Helen’s witchy pharmacopeia kills more than pain.

Leaving the Cave

The temporary realm of oblivion Helen fashions in her home at Sparta is a prelude and microcosm of the great island safe space of the Phaeacians, who of all of Homer's peoples most resemble us late moderns. (Names incorporating the Greek *aei*, "forever," abound in the fantastic middle books of the *Odyssey*; Circe's island is Aeaea, Ever-Ever Land, and Odysseus visits the Aeolian island of Aeolus.) The Phaeacians, "close kin of the gods," once lived in the vicinity of the Cyclopes but fled from their brutal neighbors. They found refuge on a blessed isle, where they dwell untouched by the wasting effects of time and history. Scheria, Cut-Off Land, is a paradise "out of nature" (as William Butler Yeats says of Byzantium) where fruits are always in season, feasts and entertainments flow on without end, and gold and silver dogs "immortal and ageless all their days" guard the royal palace. Yet though the Phaeacians live in many ways like Freudian infants in obedience to the pleasure principle, they are not wholly ignorant of the reality principle. They long for reality, but only in the virtual form of aestheticized experience: their bard sings of the Trojan War, and Odysseus' tales of terror and misery reduce them to a spellbound silence. The wounding boar, too, gives them pleasure, but it must be cooked; they cannot take it raw.

The Phaeacians' tragedy is that their attempt to hold reality at a safe distance ultimately collapses in contradiction. Their life embraces two opposing principles, reflected in the two activities in which they excel. "As much as the Phaeacian men are skilled above all others in driving a swift ship across the sea, so are the women cunning at the loom": the men risk

their lives on the watery waste, an image of chaos in the Greek tradition (as in the Hebrew), while the women weave coverings that protect the body from the world's harshness. This gendered division is replicated in the names of the Phaeacian rulers, King Alcinous (Mighty-Mind) and Queen Arētē (Prayed-For): the mind seeks out reality, while prayers—like those the Phaeacians desperately raise to Poseidon, just before he rings their island in mountains as retribution for their kindness to the man who put out his Cyclops son Polyphemus's single eye—aim at salvation from its depredations. Alcinous probes Odysseus, attempting to learn his true identity; in the end, however, the Phaeacians don't need to go looking for trouble. Trouble comes directly to them, a salt-streaked stranger rising naked from the turbulent waters. That's the way of reality: you can run from it, but you can't hide.

Cut off from the outside world by a vengeful god, it's as if the Phaeacians have been swallowed up by the sea. Joseph Conrad's Stein echoes a piece of ancient wisdom in *Lord Jim*: "The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up." Those who will not risk destruction are doomed to drown. Born into trouble, we purchase a false security in refusing to see that the warm anonymity of the womb is just another deadly seduction. As Dimock observes of the Cyclops' promise to Odysseus, "Nobody [the name Odysseus gives himself] will be devoured in the end, though last of all."

Polyphemus's words are prophetic but, being monocular, he cannot gauge their depth. When Odysseus tells him to respect the god of strangers,

Polyphemus replies that the Cyclopes “take no heed of aegis-bearing Zeus, nor of the blessed gods, for we are better [or ‘stronger’] than them by far.” Euripides’ play *Cyclops* sheds light on this boast: Zeus can thunder and pour all he likes, but Polyphemus keeps dry and warm in his cave. Caves in the *Odyssey* are strongly associated with females; Polyphemus’s is a distinctly maternal space. Full of lambs, kids, and sucklings pulling at swollen udders, it is packed with brimming buckets of milk and whey and racks of fresh cheese. But this nurturing lactarian is also a man-eater. More than one Greek vase depicts as a massive phallus the sharpened, fire-hardened stake that Odysseus and his men grind into the Cyclops’ eye. The hero engenders himself in an act of virtual rape; Polyphemus’s cave is a birth-canal from which Nobody (*mē tis*) issues by the strength of his cunning intelligence (*mētis*) to assert his identity as Odysseus and lay claim to a world of suffering.

The tale of the Cyclops takes the infantilizing and manipulative tendencies of females in the *Odyssey* to an especially malignant (but not unimaginable) extreme. Man is a political animal, but, Aristotle observed, Homer’s Cyclopes are pre-political: their existence reflects the primitive stage of isolated, self-sufficient families. Only when politicized males leave home and hearth to meet and debate on the middle ground of public life—one thinks of the men Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn saw walking to a cantonal election at Appenzell “all carrying swords, a sign of the right to vote”—does the household reveal itself to be a special domain kept and protected by women. A beast who thinks he is a god, Polyphemus cares lovingly for domesticated animals but cannot abide independent men. His homicidal misandry is a nightmarish figuration of the total disappearance of political

life—the life of free individuals who dare to declare themselves publicly, to stand up and speak their minds—into the maw of matriarchal tyranny: the heterozygous twin of the blood-lusting patriarchy that haled young men to Troy and sent them back to their mothers as ashes, packed tight in ceramic urns.

The Levelling Calculus

The metopes of the Parthenon memorialized legendary scenes of violence: Greeks battling barbarians, Athenians clashing with Amazons, Lapiths (Greeks from Thessaly) assaulted by drunken centaurs they'd invited to a wedding feast. The common theme of these sculptures—the struggle of civilization against chaos—reflects a deep understanding of the moral and political order's fragility. One of the Elgin Marbles depicts a muscled centaur rearing triumphantly over a supine man. A velvety lion skin is draped over the centaur's arm, its suppleness perfectly captured in folds of smooth marble. The lion's extended claws and the gaping jaws of its spatchcocked head loom over the felled Lapith, whose garments have fallen open to reveal his naked body. The sculpture is a peculiarly refined and moving expression of the sudden collapse of civility and culture when law, custom, and conscience—weakened, in this instance, by an excess of wine—cease to constrain the wild impulses of the human soul.

The prospect of a revenge of the primitive was never far from the minds of the ancient worshippers of Athena, who is said to have tamed the Furies that hounded the matricide Orestes. That prospect still ought to weigh heavily on our minds. Sexual violence, which is mostly (but not exclusively) perpetrated by males, and which is found in every social institution and

across the political spectrum, is politically destructive as well as morally deplorable. In *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (2017), Angela Nagle notes that internet chat rooms of the so-called “manosphere” have spawned a vicious “anti-feminist masculinist politics.” Carried to its logical conclusion, this radical misogyny would terminate in a sterile, doomed patriarchy: the tragic fulfillment of the dream of Euripides’ Hippolytus and Jason, who longed for a world without women. But Nagle also observes that this online hatefulness “developed in the context of evermore radical liberal gender politics and increasingly common anti-male rhetoric that went from obscure feminist online spaces to the mainstream.” Extremism breeds extremism, and it becomes increasingly difficult to hew to the middle line.

With respect to today’s surging “gender politics,” it is insufficient to observe that the equation of speech with violence and the insistence on safe spaces and trigger warnings are particularly infantilizing extensions of the overprotective impulses of what for at least 50 years has been called the “nanny state.” Mature adults with even a trace of spirited individuality must find that relatively benign locution laughably inadequate to the scolding, smothering matriarchy our present-day Furies seem hell-bent on establishing. The chthonic forces harnessed by #MeToo, and electronically volatilized into outraged mobs, fly the banners of social justice and progressivism. But so, too, did the Bolsheviks, from whom today’s feminist militants, schooled in “intersectionality,” have borrowed the nihilistic habit of thinking in crude and divisive categories forged in the smithy of cultural and historical forgetfulness. They are in fact *more* oblivious than their ideological forebears, whose catastrophic record in the 20th century lies in

the plain view of anyone not blinded by extreme indignation.

Today's fiery ideologists, male and female alike, have forgotten that human life is a whole greater than the sum of its parts—one that is rounded, sustained, and protected by the natural union of these parts. Lear's clown compares the two crowns of his divided kingdom to the halves of an eggshell that once encased a golden yolk. That is a good image of the thin calcification of humanity, devoid of life and growth, that is all that remains when the vital, complementary strengths of males and females are sundered from one another.

Plato was fond of comparing individual human souls to irrational numbers, whose expression in the modern notation of a decimal series is unrepeating and interminable. Yevgeny Zamyatin borrows this image in his great dystopian anti-Soviet novel *We* (1924), set in a dystopian future after a world war has killed 80% of all human beings. The ideological calculus of the One State aims forcefully to rationalize all individual spiritual infinities and integrate them into a closed and finite social totality, one in which violence and suffering have been eliminated along with individual freedom. Like the One State, the matriarchal social reckoning now afoot in the United States springs from a sense of historical trauma. It also employs a similar leveling calculus for a similar purpose. It aims to produce a society composed essentially of domesticated children: mild and unthreatening men and women whose cautious sensitivity to the feelings of others will in fact be rooted in fear and psychological dependency. To this end, it considers human beings strictly in aggregate, as interchangeable members of a certain group (like the indistinguishable mathematical units that make up any given

number when summed), singling out particular individuals when it is thought that targeting them—which it does by a variety of malicious methods, including public shaming, “doxing,” slander, libel, and physical confrontation—will help suppress nonconforming speech and action. And it seeks to rationalize collective memory by anathematizing past words and deeds (and sometimes relocating or destroying monuments thereof) that are judged to be incommensurable with the desired social totality.

All of this evokes revulsion in my male friends—those who retain a vital connection with the past, and a sense that thinking and speaking for oneself and standing surety for one’s own judgments and deeds are non-negotiable elements of a dignified human existence. Of course, this revulsion is almost never voiced in public. The age of Homeric heroes—of men in full, so much better than us and so much worse—is dead and gone. But we know that a society that punishes those who attempt to articulate reality as they see it will eventually go insane. We know that human life will never again be whole and healthy if men and women are unable to recognize and respect their natural differences. Burdened with this knowledge we make shift as we can, like people condemned to witness a riotous crowd slaughtering their livestock and pillaging their homes.

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