6-19-2018

Homeric Studies, Feminism, and Queer Theory: Interpreting Helen and Penelope

Rachel H. Lesser

Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/classfac

Part of the Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons, and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Homeric Studies, Feminism, and Queer Theory: Interpreting Helen and Penelope

Abstract

Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin's *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (1993) and Barbara F. McManus' *Classics and Feminism: Gendering the Classics* (1997) provided ground-breaking surveys of the feminist revolution in classical studies, and their work leads us to the question of the feminist impact on the study of Homer. In this essay, I review the contributions of feminist scholarship on Homer and explore queer theory as a new heuristic avenue for advancing the feminist interpretation of the Homeric epics. With this approach, I follow upon and revise McManus' use of the concept of "dual-gendering" (a term that I employ instead of her original "transgendered," as I explain below) for her feminist analysis of Virgil's Latin epic, the *Aeneid*. Her interpretive lens encourages us to look for complexity in epic gender representation and to investigate the ideological functions of this representation; my deployment of queer theory reframes her line of inquiry in terms of the gender normative and deviant and includes in its purview the additional categories of sexuality and power relations. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Homer, Helen, Penelope, queer theory, Trojan War, feminist theory

Disciplines

Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classics | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies

Homeric Studies, Feminism, and Queer Theory: Interpreting Helen and Penelope

Fiona McHardy

Jun 19 · 14 min read

by Rachel H. Lesser

Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin's *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (1993) and Barbara F. McManus' *Classics and Feminism: Gendering the Classics* (1997) provided ground-breaking surveys of the feminist revolution in classical studies, and their work leads us to the question of the feminist impact on the study of Homer. In this essay, I review the contributions of feminist scholarship on Homer and explore queer theory as a new heuristic avenue for advancing the feminist interpretation of the Homeric epics. With this approach, I follow upon and revise McManus' use of the concept of "dual-gendering" (a term that I employ instead of her original "transgendered," as I explain below) for her feminist analysis of Virgil's Latin epic, the *Aeneid*. Her interpretive lens encourages us to look for complexity in epic gender representation and to investigate the ideological functions of this representation; my deployment of queer theory reframes her line of inquiry in terms of the gender normative and deviant and includes in its purview the additional categories of sexuality and power relations.

Feminist readings have represented perhaps the most important recent advances in the understanding of the Homeric epics; they have certainly greatly informed my interpretation of the poems and shaped the direction and methodology of my research. I begin with a selective survey of (Anglophone) feminist scholarship on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, with special focus on the treatment of Helen and Penelope.

Feminist scholarship on the *Iliad*, starting especially with Marilyn Arthur's landmark article (1981), has shown how this epic presents war and conflict as a masculine realm predicated on the trafficking of women and incompatible with the feminine world of home and family (see also Felson and Slatkin 2004). While nearly all women in the epic appear as powerless and often dehumanized victims of the masculine pursuit of honor and glory, Helen has attracted special attention as a

more complex figure, who is not only an object of male desire, but also a powerful subject in her role as cause of war. Mihoko Suzuki (1989), in her book-length study of Helen, compared Helen and Briseis as female Others whom men scapegoat as sources of conflict in an attempt to reaffirm their fractured male communities. Yet, drawing on Linda Clader's (1976) study of Helen's divine traits and power, Suzuki also recognized Helen's uniqueness as an exceptionally beautiful creator of poetry; she is therefore a "perfect ambiguous sign" (Suzuki 1989, 19). Clader and Suzuki both argue that Helen, as *casus belli*, represents men's ambivalent attitude towards war as a source of death and glory.

More recent feminist scholarship has attempted to understand and interpret the rhetoric and psychology that Homer gives to Helen, particularly her claim of adulterous agency and accompanying self-abuse. Building on the earlier work of Leslie Collins (1988) and Suzuki, Mary Ebbot (1999) observed that Helen repeatedly blames herself, while no one else does so because such speech would undermine her worth as cause of war. According to Ebbot, Helen's self-blame gives voice in the epic to the *nemesis* that she has inspired in her responsibility for death and suffering. Nancy Worman (2001), Hanna Roisman (2006), and Ruby Blondell (2010 and 2013) have all recognized that Helen's self-blame also endows her with a sense of shame and morality that actually recuperates her character and makes her even more worthy, attractive, and sympathetic to men. Roisman sees Helen as a regretful woman nobly struggling to assert her moral subjectivity in the face of her objectification by men and unwilling subjection to Aphrodite. Where Roisman reads Helen's sexual encounter with Paris in Book 3 as forced, Worman and Blondell both understand Helen as a conscious and free agent struggling with and ultimately succumbing to the sexual desires represented by Aphrodite; Helen therefore appears as an archetype of the female desiring subject. In this role, she represents the uncertainty of female marital fidelity and thus the wife's threat to the integrity of the patriliny, as well as the woman's potential to cause conflict between men.

The rich feminist scholarship on the *Odyssey*—which reached its peak in the mid-1990s—has pursued similar questions regarding the subjectivity, agency, and narrative and symbolic roles of Penelope. Readers of the *Odyssey* have long observed how this epic gives more narrative attention, space, voice, importance, and respect to female characters than the *Iliad*. Penelope, especially, performs the vital

function of preserving Odysseus' family and kingship intact for his return, and the epic awards her *kleos* for her excellence (*Od*. 24.196–198), which is usually understood to encompass both her cleverness and fidelity. Some feminist critics, such as Helene Foley (1978), Patricia Marquardt (1985), John J. Winkler (1990), and Nancy Felson (1994), indeed identify in Penelope a like-mindedly devious female heroic counterpart to Odysseus, a powerful agent who manipulates the suitors and plots her own course; in Winkler's reading, Penelope suspects her husband's true identity and subtly collaborates with him to destroy the suitors. More recently, Barbara Clayton (2004) has suggested that Penelope's resistant weaving and unweaving is the *Odyssey*'s primary metaphor for its own polytropic poetics.

Other feminist scholars have queried to what extent the *Odyssey* truly centers, empowers, or praises women. Lillian Doherty (1995) has argued that the epic's compelling female characters function as lures to entice female audiences, but have little real agency within a narrative that is patriarchal and androcentric. Sheila Murnaghan, in a series of studies from 1986 to 1995, which are supplemented by Ingrid Holmberg (1995), has contended that Penelope is essentially a powerless figure, whose knowledge is circumscribed and whose actions are directed by Odysseus and the masculine-identified Athena for Odysseus' benefit. These scholars and others, including Marilyn Katz (1991), Victoria Wohl (1993), Seth Schein (1995), and Froma Zeitlin (1995), have recognized that the *Odyssey* repeatedly calls into question the possibility of female excellence and fidelity through Penelope's potentially ambiguous behavior toward the suitors and Odysseus, and through other sexually dangerous or unfaithful female characters, such as Clytemnestra and Helen, who represent either analogues or foils to the heroine.

Most agree that Penelope is ultimately revealed to be the faithful exception who proves the rule of Woman as a threat to be neutralized through male dominance and political marginalization. Foley (1995) argues against the idea that Penelope's own behavior is ethically suspect; her Penelope is a "moral agent" who, though constrained by circumstances, takes coherent actions that are consistent with fidelity to Odysseus. In my own recent article (Lesser 2017), which examines Penelope's invocation of the mythical Pandareids and her positioning as a Pandora-figure in the last third of the epic, I contend that the queen's circumstances *and* actions are largely controlled by external forces, but

that Homer nevertheless gives her an independent will—one that is defined by loyalty to Odysseus and Telemachus. In my view, this combination of Penelope's disempowerment with her autonomous, yet faithful subjectivity doubly affirms the *Odyssey*'s patriarchal ideology.

Where do we go next? In *Classics and Feminism*, McManus (1997, 91–118) introduced and performed a new feminist reading of dual-gendering in Virgil's *Aeneid*. McManus identifies places where characters clearly portrayed as one particular gender are, at the same time, positively represented taking on roles or traits associated with the opposite gender, thus becoming simultaneously identified with two genders. For example, in *Aeneid* 1 Dido is distinctly gendered feminine as the devoted widow of Sychaeus, but she also appears as a competent, respected ruler of Carthage—a role that is coded masculine. This dual-gendering, which has positive valence, is distinguished from negatively valued "sex-role crossovers"—"inappropriatedly taking on a role considered to belong to the opposite sex and hence seeking to 'become' that sex" (McManus 1997, 95).

McManus employs the idea of dual-gendering to complicate the *Aeneid*'s seemingly univocal and pervasive vilification of the feminine and celebration of the masculine on the figurative level. She tracks how dual-gendering presents select female characters, such as Dido, in a more positive light on the narrative level and therefore, in fact, rehabilitates the feminine—which then makes more palatable Aeneas' own dual-gendered portrayal as *both* a male warrior prince *and* a feminized victim of Juno and fate, as well as an exemplar of the passive virtue of *pietas*. McManus' attention to dual-gendering enables a more subtle examination of how gender is constructed, valued, and associated with certain tropes in the *Aeneid*.

The phenomenon that I have referred to here as "dual-gendering" McManus calls "transgendered," adopting the theoretical use of this term by Georgia Duerst-Lahti and Rita Mae Kelly (1995, cited in McManus 1997, 94–95). Although McManus' approach is illuminating for the project of apprehending gender meanings in epic, her use of this terminology is problematic and her framework has certain limitations. For McManus, "transgendered" is a heuristic concept, not a lived personal identity. However, real people have used and continue to use "transgendered" (now "transgender") to describe themselves and others in ways that depart from McManus' academic deployment of this

term. Currently, "transgender" signifies a personal identity defined by some variety of nonconformity to assigned gender, often transcending a gender binary. McManus' use of "transgendered" to describe dual-gendering—unlike "transgender" today—assumes and even helps to reify essentialist binary genders of "male" and "female" as categories and focuses of analysis. In addition, McManus' lens does not take into account how sexuality intersects with gender, nor does it directly address the relationship between gender and power.

I would like to introduce queer theory as another, more expansive way of approaching gender and also sexuality that focuses on how dominant power structures shape and are shaped by these categories. Queer theory may be particularly helpful in approaching the Homeric epics, since, unlike the *Aeneid*, they do not categorically assign positive and negative values to the symbolic masculine and feminine in an obvious way. Instead of thinking in terms of "male" and "female," queer theorists interrogate the way that systems of power construct certain gendered subjectivities and sexual actors as normative and therefore worthy, and others as deviant, or "queer," and thus morally suspect and less deserving. Individuals labeled as "queer" challenge normative social structures, they threaten to undermine systems of power through their gender and sexual difference. For defenders of the status quo, demarcation and policing of these subversive subjects is necessary to maintain existing social orders; but from the opposite perspective, queer actors carry a positive potential to be movers of radical change, of revolutionary politics (for more on queer theory and its applications, see Hall 2003 and Eng, Halberstam, and Munoz 2005).

The term "queer" is generally associated with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender subjectivities, but some theorists have also used it to describe heterosexual subjects that are not "heteronormative," that is, are viewed as sexual or gender-deviant and are marginalized on this basis. For example, Cathy Cohen (1997) has argued that poor people of color in the United States, who have been demonized for "nonnormative sexual behavior and family structures" (458), such as having sex and children out of wedlock, should be considered "queer" and included in queer politics.

I suggest that it is useful to view Helen and Penelope within the framework of queerness and heteronormativity as a way of understanding their ethical positionalities and ideological functions

within Homeric epic poetry. First, I believe that the poet presents Helen as a queer subject in the *Iliad* (and also, for that matter, in the *Odyssey*) based on her destructive departure from normative gendered and sexual behavior. In *Iliad* 1, through Chryseis and Briseis, Homer establishes the normative female as silent, powerless, and victimized, with her sexuality controlled by men. In Book 3, Helen appears, by contrast, as a speaking subject who determines her own sexual liaisons on the basis of a labile desire that shifts from Paris to Menelaus and back again—and later in Book 6 she even flirts with Hector. When Helen confronts Aphrodite with angry words, suggests that the goddess is her competitor for Paris as sexual object, and worries about her reputation among the Trojan women (*Il.* 3.399–412), this heroine takes on an aggressive and status-conscious subjectivity previously associated with Homeric male heroes, such as Achilles, and even dares to contend with a divinity.

Moreover, Andromache's entrance in Book 6 confirms and elaborates the female norm in opposition to Helen. On the one hand, the mortal Andromache is exclusively faithful to Hector, solicitous for her child Astyanax, tries to keep her husband from battle, and lacks agency to prevent her future fate as a war captive. On the other hand, Helen, who is descended from the gods, has more than one husband, abandons her daughter, urges Paris into battle, and asserts her agency as cause of war and epic song.

Queer subjects are generally disparaged, and the *Iliad* critiques Helen's "queer" adultery, which is presented as the cause of suffering and death, through her self-blame and remorse. Yet, as I have discussed, no one else blames her, and Helen is not poetically or socially marginalized—she appears prominently in the epic as a member of the Trojan royal family, her beauty and desirability are emphasized, and she is even the final character to speak in Book 24. The *Iliad* presents her queerness as ambivalent, rather than purely negative, because of its importance to the production of martial epic. Queerness undermines existing social structures, and that fracture is what the *Iliad* is about; the conflict Helen causes is the very basis of the *Iliad*'s narrative—its *raison d'être*. In a reflexive poetic repression or mitigation of her dangerous female sexual autonomy, male characters attempt to deny or elide Helen's queerness by removing her responsibility, by constructing her as a stolen rape victim (2.356) or a pawn of the gods (3.164). But Homer nevertheless thematizes Helen's queerness in her own speech

and actions, presenting this deviant subjectivity as key to his poem of war. Indeed, this analysis suggests that the *Iliad* itself may, perhaps, be described as a "queer" epic in its—albeit conflicted—memorialization of social upheaval and the deviant heroine who has played a part in initiating it.

I interpret Penelope, in contrast to Helen, as a heteronormative woman, and I believe that her character functions importantly to differentiate Odyssean from Iliadic epic. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope is celebrated for and indeed defined by her fidelity to her husband, which is manifest through her preservation—to the best of her ability—of Odysseus' family (in the persons of herself and her son Telemachus), his household, and his social position in Ithaca. She is positively distinguished from other negative "queer" females in the epic, who endanger (Calypso, Circe, the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis), erode (Odysseus' slave-women), or destroy (Clytemnestra, Helen) the existing social order, and especially Odysseus' masculine autonomy and ruling authority. Penelope is heteronormative in that she endeavors to uphold the status quo, enabling an epic about the sustenance or reconstitution of normative power structures—the opposite of the *Iliad*'s "queer" plot of social dissolution.

The lens of queer theory helps to reveal Penelope's normative social function and the *Odyssey*'s normative plot and gender ideology despite the epic's rounded and captivating presentation of Penelope as an extremely clever, capable, and independent woman, who is even dual-gendered herself. Penelope astutely manages the difficult situation in the Ithacan palace during Odysseus' long absence, and on his return the disguised Odysseus compares her to a good king whose rule brings abundance and excellence to his realm (*Od.* 19.109–114). Yet Foley (1978) has shown how this and other "reverse-sex" similes help to figure the "like-minded" Penelope and Odysseus exploring opposite gender roles while still ultimately remaining grounded in their socially prescribed gendered spheres of power, with Odysseus firmly on top. Penelope may take on masculine responsibilities while her husband is away, but she does not arrogate power to herself or truly occupy Odysseus' place, sustaining, rather than subverting, a pre-existing patriarchal social order.

Applying queer theory to the interpretation of the Homeric epics advances the feminist project to which Barbara McManus contributed

throughout her career, and which she recorded and championed in *Classics and Feminism*. Queer theory redirects our feminist inquiry to analysis of the normative and the deviant, and asks how these categories are constructed and to what ideological or generic end, providing a new way of considering gender, sexuality, and power together. In this paper, I have begun to use queer theory to perform what Doherty (1995) has called an "open, affirmative" feminist reading of the *Iliad* as an epic that privileges a "queer" heroine and thematizes the breakdown of normative social order, and also a "closed, oppositional" reading of the *Odyssey* as a poem that celebrates the reconstitution of a heteronormative and patriarchal society. I hope to have shown that queer theory has the potential to join a rich and productive variety of feminist approaches to Homer, all of which contribute importantly to our understanding of Homeric poetics and the gender and sexual ideologies of the two epics.

Works Cited

Arthur, Marilyn B. 1981. "The Divided World of *Iliad* VI." In *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, edited by Helene P. Foley. USA: Gordon and Breach.

Blondell, Ruby. 2010. "'Bitch That I Am': Self-Blame and Self-Assertion in the Iliad." *TAPA* 140 (1):1–32.

— . 2013. *Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Clader, Linda L. 1976. *Helen: The Evolution from Divine to Heroic in Greek Epic Tradition*. Leiden: Brill Archive.

Clayton, Barbara. 2004. *A Penelopean Poetics*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Cohen, Beth. 1995. *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cohen, Cathy. 1997. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (4): 437–465.

Collins, Leslie. 1988. *Studies in Characterization in the Iliad*. Athenäum Monografien. Altertumswissenschaft Bd. 189. Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum.

Doherty, Lillian Eileen. 1995. *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Ebbot, Mary. 1999. "The Wrath of Helen: Self-Blame and Nemesis in the *Iliad*." In *Nine Essays on Homer*, edited by Miriam Carlisle and Olga Levaniouk. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Eng, David L., J. Halberstam, and José Estaban-Munos. 2005. "Introduction: What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text* 84–85, vol. 23:3–4: 1–17.

Felson, Nancy. 1994. *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Felson, Nancy and Laura M. Slatkin. 2004. "Gender and Homeric epic." In *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, edited by Robert Fowler, 91–116. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Foley, Helene. P. 1978. "'Reverse Similes' and Sex Roles in the *Odyssey*." *Arethusa* 11: 7–26.

— .1995. "Penelope as Moral Agent." In Cohen 1995, 93–115.

Hall, Donald E. 2003. *Queer Theories*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Holmberg, Ingrid E. 1995. "The *Odyssey* and Female Subjectivity." *Helios* 22 (2): 103–22.

Katz, Marylin A. 1991. *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Indeterminacy in the* Odyssey. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lesser, Rachel. 2017. "The Pandareids and Pandora: Defining Penelope's Subjectivity in the *Odyssey*." *Helios* 44 (2): 101–132.

McManus, Barbara F. 1997. *Classics and Feminism: Gendering the Classics*. New York: Twayne Publishers.

Murnaghan, Sheila. 1986. "Penelope's Agnoia: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in the *Odyssey*." *Helios* 13: 103–15.

— . 1987. *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

— . 1994. "Reading Penelope." In *Epic and Epoch: Essays on the Interpretation and History of a Genre*, ed. Steven M. Oberhelman, Van Kelly, and Richard J. Golsan, 76–96. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press.

— . 1995. "The Plan of Athena." In Cohen 1995, 61–80.

Rabinowitz, Nancy Sorkin and Amy Richlin. eds. 1993. *Feminist Theory and the Classics*. New York: Routledge.

Roisman, Hanna M. 2006. "Helen in the 'Iliad' 'Causa Belli' and Victim of War: From Silent Weaver to Public Speaker." *AJP* 127 (1): 1–36.

Schein, Seth L. 1995. "Female Representations and Interpreting the *Odyssey*." In Cohen 1995, 17–27.

Suzuki, Mihoko. 1989. *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Winkler, John. 1990. "Penelope's Cunning and Homer's." In *The Constraints of Desire*, 129–61. New York: Routledge.

Wohl, Victoria. 1993. "Standing by the Stathmos: The Creation of Sexual Ideology in the *Odyssey*." *Arethusa* 26: 19–50.

Worman, Nancy. 2001. "This Voice Which Is Not One: Helen's Verbal Guises in Homeric Epic." In *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society*, edited by André Lardinois and Laura McClure, 19–37. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Zeitlin, Froma. 1995. "Figuring Fidelity in Homer's Odyssey." In Cohen 1995, 117–52.