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FEMINISM IN GREEK LITERATURE FROM HOMER TO ARISTOTLE

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Introduction

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There is a question sometimes put to scholars, a doubt often latent in scholars' minds—How was it that Greek civilisation, with all its high ideals and achievements, fell so easily before what seems at first sight an altogether inferior culture? The difficulty is not solved by a reference to military resources or administrative skill, for moral strength is the only thing that matters in history, and a nation has never yet succeeded merely by pure intellect or by brute force. The fact is—and it is as well to state it plainly—that the Greek world perished from one main cause, a low ideal of womanhood and a degradation of women which found expression both in literature and in social life. The position of women and the position of slaves—for the two classes went together—were the canker-spots which, left unhealed, brought about the decay first of Athens and then of Greece.

For many centuries in Ionia and Athens there was an almost open state of sex-war. At Miletus a woman never sat at table with her husband, for he was the enemy with whom bread must not be broken; at Athens, while all the men went free, women were kept as slaves, and a stranger in the harem might be killed at sight. The sexes were sharply separated: men and women had but few opportunities for mutual esteem and affection, and domestic life—the life of the home, the wife and the children—was poisoned at its source.

The causes and results of this war, far worse than any faction or civil strife, are lamentable enough: its

manifestations in ancient literature are perhaps even more important, for it is hard to say how far current opinions of feminine disabilities are not unconsciously due to the long line of writers, Greek and Latin, from Simonides of Amorgos, in the seventh century before Christ, to Juvenal in the second century of our era, who used all their powers of rhetoric and literary skill to disparage and depreciate womankind. In the whole deplorable business men were in the wrong, and they therefore took the aggressive. They applied to women the comforting doctrine of Aristotle, that some people were slaves because they were made by nature to be slaves: women were men's moral inferiors, and therefore it was men's duty to keep them down.

At Sparta certainly, and perhaps in North Greece, women occupied a very different place. Spartan women were regarded as free human beings, and the relations between the sexes were inestimably better than at Athens. But Sparta, Thessaly, Macedonia, have no direct representation in Greek literature; we get their point of view only in the writings of some Athenians, such as Plato and Xenophon, who rebelled against the current institutions of their state, and in the Alexandrian poets, Apollonius and Theocritus, who, even in the midst of the luxurious city, kept some of the freshness of their native hills. Most of the great writers came from Ionia or from Athens: the Ionians are nearly all misogynists, and have succeeded in colouring many parts of the Homeric poems with their perverse immorality: the typical Athenian, and those foreigners who found their ideal in Athens—Herodotus, Sophocles, Thucydides, the Orators—usually treat women as a negligible quantity.

Æschylus was an original thinker, and in this, as in many ways, took a different view from most of his countrymen. But it is not until we come to Euripides that we get the woman's side of the case definitely stated. Euripides ventured to doubt man's infallibility: he put the doctrine of the nobility of man, as he put the other doctrines of the nobility of race and the nobility of war, to the touchstone of a really critical intelligence, and he came to a conclusion very different from that which is expressed by the great majority of his predecessors.

Upon his own generation Euripides had a profound effect. Socrates, Aristophanes, Plato, and Xenophon are all feminists in varying degrees, and a fairly full statement of feminist doctrine may be found in their works. But the idealist did not win the day. It is true that women were never so degraded—in European civilisation at least—after Euripides' time as they had been before; but his teaching did not bear its full fruit. Aristotle—the supreme type of the practical mind—threw all the weight of his unexampled influence into the other scale, and the Aristotelian view of the natural inferiority of women prevailed: so that the poets of Ionia, libertines and profligates as most of them were, find their work completed by the philosopher of Stagirus.

Greek is the source from which most Roman writers drew their inspiration, and although the position of the Roman matron, honoured as the mother of the household, was infinitely higher than that of the too-often childless Athenian wife, there is still an undercurrent of misogyny which permeates Latin literature, and finds its fullest expression in Juvenal. All the venom of earlier writers is collected by the

satirist, who adds the bitterness of his own bile, seasoned with the highly-coloured rhetoric which the Romans loved, and finally, with infinite zest, disgorges the mixture in the six hundred lines of the Sixth Satire. But, even as Aristotle sums up the final tendencies of Greek literature, so Juvenal represents almost the last effort of the anti-feminist school at Rome. The Christianity of the East and the romance of the North were already beginning to modify the grosser realism of the Mediterranean world, and towards the end of the second century the reaction came, when the Greek genius gave to the world the last, and perhaps the most fruitful, of all its gifts in literature—the romantic novel. Longus, in the *Daphnis and Chloe*, strikes a new note, and his hero is, perhaps, the first gentleman in matters of the affections that we find in ancient literature. The barbarian invasions soon came to devastate the land, but Longus had sown the seed, and he is the true father of all the love romances of mediæval chivalry. As Nausicaa is the first, so Chloe is almost the last of ancient heroines; and Greek literature, by a curious turn of fate, ironical enough considering its general tendency, ends as it begins, with the praise of the perfect maiden.

I.—The Early Epic

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Any discussion of Greek literature must begin with Homer, although as regards women and the social position the Epic in its first form stands somewhat aloof from the general current of ancient thought. The Homeric poems are

in a very real sense the Greek Bible, for they represent a standard of morality which in many respects is far higher than that which prevailed at Athens in the great era of Greek history, and they picture a state of society very different from the complex civilisation of the city-state.

It must be remembered that the Homeric poems were not written to suit the taste of the old Mediterranean people, who, if we may trust the evidence of archæology and certain signs in their language, had but a low code of sexual morality, and were inclined to regard women as mere instruments of pleasure. The Epic, in its original shape, was composed for the Achæan chiefs who came down into Greece from Central Europe, and in sexual matters were rather of the Scandinavian type. But the Achæans were only a small ruling class, and were soon assimilated by the conquered peoples, whose language they adopted. A second tide of invasion by the northern tribes called Dorian led to somewhat more permanent results, but the original Mediterranean race was always far superior in numbers, and unless inter-marriage was prohibited by law it was only a matter of time for the primary racial type to reappear. Hence the interest of Greek history, which is one long process of inter-blending and change: the renascence of the conquered and the gradual disappearance of the conquerors. Hence also the difference of view in all feminist matters between Homer and much of the later Greek literature.

The Odyssey especially, which, though perhaps later in composition than the original Iliad, has been less worked over and received fewer additions, is based on an entirely

different idea of woman's position from that which was held after the seventh century B.C. Samuel Butler's theory that the Odyssey was composed by a woman, perhaps Nausicaa herself, is hardly capable of exact proof, but at any rate women in the Odyssey are never degraded as they are in many of the later passages of the Iliad, and the one lewd passage, the first lay of Demodocus (in Book 8), 'the loves of Ares and Aphrodite,' is a plain interpolation, and a clumsy one at that. Women indeed pull the strings in the Odyssey: the goddess Athena, the nymphs, Calypso and Circe, and the mortals, Penelope and Nausicaa, are the principal actors in the drama. With both these latter there are traces of the old German custom of Mutterrecht: the kingship of the tribe seems to go on the woman's side. The claimants to Odysseus' chieftainship seek it through his wife; Nausicaa is the only daughter, and her marriage is of importance to all the tribe. So Calypso and Circe are represented as island-queens, living in independent sovereignty, and normally unconcerned with male companionship. Odysseus is to both very much in the position of a prince consort, and, being an active man, suffers severely from lack of occupation and lack of power. Athena is the guiding spirit of the whole action, and takes a motherly interest in the hero, but otherwise she is pure intelligence superior to man and quite free from any desire for man's society.

The women of the Odyssey follow her lead, and have little trace of that over-sexuality which is ascribed by later writers to all women as a natural trait. It cannot be said that the wise Penelope shows any womanish weakness in her constant love: she bears her husband's absence with

resignation, and maintains his authority intact during a period of twenty years. On his return she is by no means over-anxious to recognise him. When the nurse tells her of the slaughter of the suitors by Odysseus she calls her a fool, and threatens her with punishment for disturbing a busy woman with idle tales. Telemachus chides her for her wilful stubbornness: Odysseus dresses himself in royal raiment, but fails to make any impression, and finally, in disgust, calls to the nurse to make him up a bed so that he may go off and sleep by himself, for, says he, this woman has a heart of iron in her breast. When at last she is convinced, she explains that her hesitation has been due to a well-founded distrust of men and their wiles, and she is content to let her husband go off the very next morning to visit the old Laertes.

Again, Nausicaa has no traces of the timid shyness which is counted a virtue among harem women. She faces the half-naked Odysseus boldly, as he comes from the bush where he has been hiding ‘like a lion of the hills, rained upon and buffeted by the wind, and his eyes are ablaze,’ and in all her dealings with him she is a charming mixture of generosity and caution.

Moreover, the morality of the Odyssey in all sexual matters is very high, and, if it is not offensive to say so, it is women’s morality. There is very little appeal to the sensual man, and although Calypso and Circe were by later writers taken as types of the voluptuous female, their fascination in the Odyssey is left entirely to the imagination, and they are pictured as industrious housewives. The description is the same for both—‘singing in a sweet voice within doors as she

walked to and fro before the loom.’ Little or nothing is said of any physical attraction they may have possessed.

So with the punishment meted out at the end of the story to the maid-servants who had accepted the embraces of the suitors. First, they carry out the corpses of their dead lovers, then they wash and cleanse the bloody floor, and finally they are hanged—twelve of them together—‘like thrushes or doves caught in a snare; and they struggled with their feet for a little while, but not for long.’ It is one of the few ruthless passages in the poem: there is no tendency here to err on the side of indulgence to the sins of the flesh, and for such sins harsher measure is dealt out to the woman than to the man.

But as significant as anything of the gulf between the Odyssey and later Greek literature is the treatment of the two famous sisters, Helen and Clytemnestra.

Helen, to the later Greeks the type of the wanton, appears in the Odyssey as the faithful wife, respected and self-respecting, of King Menelaus. She lives in his palace, busy with domestic duties, and when she thinks of the past it is to rejoice over her return home and escape from Troy, ‘where,’ she says, ‘I used to mourn over the cruel fate which Aphrodite sent upon me, when she led me from my beloved country, leaving behind me my daughter, my home, and my husband dear, who lacked nothing of perfection in mind or in body.’ It is a very different picture from that of Paris’ mistress, as we have her in later stories, flying with a foreign youth from her lawful lord, and betraying her too fond master.

So Clytemnestra—after the lyric poets of the seventh and sixth centuries had worked up her story—is that most dreadful figure to King Man, the regicide, the woman who dares, by craft and guile, to kill the man set over her as ruler. In all the later stories it is Clytemnestra who arranges the details of Agamemnon's death—the bath, the enveloping robe, and the axe; it is she who deals the fatal blow, while her lover, Ægisthus, is a cowardly nonentity, entirely under the dominion of the woman.

But in the Odyssey the story is very different. It is told twice—by Agamemnon to Odysseus in Hades, and by Nestor to Telemachus at Pylos, and this last version is significant enough to be given word for word:

We Greeks (says Nestor) were lingering over there at Troy, and many a task did we fulfil. But he—Ægisthus—at his ease in the quiet valleys of Argos, where the horses feed, tried to beguile the wife of Agamemnon with soft words. At first, of course, fair Clytemnestra refused to do the shameful thing, for she was a woman of honest heart. Moreover, there was with her a minstrel, whom Agamemnon, when he went to Troy, had bidden to protect his wife. But soon the fate of heaven encompassed the minstrel, and brought him to his death, for Ægisthus took him to a desert island and left him there, a prey for the birds to tear asunder. As for the queen—he willing and she willing—he led her to his house. And many a sacrifice did he offer to the gods when he had done that great deed, which never in his heart had he expected to accomplish.

Such is the passage, and the last two sentences are a literal translation of the lines which appear thus in Pope's

version:

Then virtue was no more: her guard away,
She fell, to lust a voluntary prey.
Even to the temple stalked the adulterous spouse
With impious thanks and mockery of vows.

For these are the dangers of poetical translation.

But more important than any single character or episode is the general impression given by the whole poem, and it may fairly be said that the entire framework of the Odyssey presupposes a condition of society in which women are regarded as not in the least, *quâ* women, inferior to men.

In the Iliad things are different, and the poem, as we have it now, gives us three distinct pictures of women's position in life. The original epic, the 'Wrath of Achilles' has hardly any place for women at all. It is true that Achilles' anger has for its cause the woman Briseis; but Achilles is angry, not at the loss of a woman whom he loves, but at the loss of a piece of property which he knows by experience to be of considerable value and service. Briseis is a slave—a thing, not a person. In the whole Iliad she is only mentioned ten times, and nine times out of those ten she is merely catalogued as an article of value, with the slave-dealer's epithet, 'fair-cheeked,' attached.

But this is hardly surprising. All the earlier portions of the Iliad are primarily lays of battle. They are anti-social, and woman has no part or lot in them.

The Iliad however, is built up of many different strata, and one stratum—by no means the least important—was contributed by a poet who understood and sympathised

with women. In thought and language he has many affinities with the author of the Odyssey, and he is probably responsible for the one passage in the poem where Briseis appears as a human being, and makes lament over the dead body of Patroclus: a speech which served Ovid as the groundwork wherefrom—with many embellishments—he expands the letter in ‘the Heroines.’ From the same hand as Briseis’ speech comes the supreme scene of the parting between Hector and Andromache, and all the closing passages of the Iliad: the ransoming of Hector, and the lamentation of the women—his wife, his mother, and Helen—over the corpse.

No one can read the Iliad without feeling that the moral spirit of all these passages is of a very different and of a very much higher quality than the brutality of the earliest lays, and the loose cynicism of the last additions to the poem, which we shall have next to consider.

II.—The Ionians and Hesiod

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Between the Homeric poems in their first shape and the next stage of Greek literature there is a gap of centuries, and when the curtain goes up again on Greek history at the end of the eighth century, the centre of civilisation is in Asia Minor, the coast towns and their adjacent islands.

The period of fighting, invasions, and tribal migrations is over: there has been a revival of the old Minoan culture, the Greeks have become a nation of traders living in luxurious cities, such as Miletus and Mytilene. Politically they are

dependent on the great Eastern land empires, and from the East they have taken ideas which vitally affect the position of women.

The first of these may be stated thus: a woman, even a free-born woman, is the property of the man who is her husband. The second, which follows from this, is that, love between man and his property being absurd, romantic affection is only conceivable between men; between man and woman it is impossible. Of these two ideas, the first, which involved the seclusion of women and the harem system, was only partially applied in ancient Greece. It flourished in Ionia and at Athens during the great period of her history, but it never took root in Sparta, or in the chief cities of Hellenistic civilisation. Its corollary, however, spread fatally from Asia to Greece, and from Greece to Italy. It lasted for many centuries, and tended to destroy all romantic love between the two sexes, and very often all the ordinary comfortable affection which may exist without romance between husband and wife. The sexes drew apart: the man, immersed in war and politics and absent from his home most of his life, had little experience of woman as a thinking animal, and unfamiliarity bred contempt. As happened again later in the world's history under the very different conditions of monastic life, the natural social intercourse between men and women was artificially hampered, and the inevitable crop of errors and perversions followed. But the monks, in their dislike of women, were at least ostensibly inspired by a strict code of sexual morality: a good deal of Ionian literature has for one of its objects a desire to defend the perverted sexual instinct which was the

curse of ancient life. Of this sort are the stories of Ganymede, the young Asiatic, taken up to heaven by the ruler of the sky and displacing the maiden Hebe, and of Hylas, the minion of Heracles, whose beauty brought him to his death.

Narcissus and Hyacinthus are persons of the same type, while the heroes of this kind of literature, Jason, Heracles, and Theseus, reserve all their finer chivalrous feelings for men, and regard women as a kind of booty, to be won, if possible, by fraud; if fraud is ineffective, by the judicious use of force. Jason deserts Medea in favour of a younger and richer woman. Heracles leaves his wife, to roam abroad, capturing by force any woman that pleases him. Theseus spends his life in betraying women, and in his old age marries Phædra, the young sister of Ariadne. But their exploits do not at all detract from the heroic character of the three worthies, for it is now recognised that women are vile creatures who deserve vile treatment, and so we have a second class of tale invented to illustrate the innate viciousness of the female sex. There is the story of Pasiphaë and the Minotaur, Myrrha and Adonis, Leda and the swan, Europa and the bull—and so on, and so on.

The same frame of mind that invented these tales ascribed to Sappho all kinds of unnatural vice, degraded Helen into a wanton, and Penelope into a shrew, and made it seem only logical that women, being the creatures they were, should be kept prisoners in a harem and confined to child-bearing—that indispensable function being, indeed, the main reason for their being allowed to exist at all.

The tales of Pasiphaë, Leda, and Europa, however, though useful enough in their way, are a little crude, and we have a more artistic method employed in the passages which about this time were incorporated into the Iliad by Ionian poets, with the idea of degrading the whole conception of the two divinities who represent womanly love, Hera and Aphrodite. Hera, the goddess of married life, the wife in her divine aspect, is represented by these decadents as an interfering termagant, spying upon her husband and seeking always to thwart him in the enjoyment of his legitimate lusts and caprices; Aphrodite, the goddess of unrestrained physical passion, becomes a calculating courtesan.

The method pursued is that same kind of false realism which has supplied our comic stage with the well-worn themes of the old maid and the mother-in-law, and it need hardly be said that it harmonises very badly with the romantic splendour of the epic lays. The heroic hexameter gives for our ears an air of nobility even to this stuff, but in its essence it is colloquial style of a rather tawdry sort, and one or two passages will illustrate its character; for example, the last hundred lines of Book 1 of the Iliad, an episode altogether out of harmony with the rest of the book. Thetis has come to ask Zeus to avenge her son: Hera knows of her visit, and this is the language she uses to her husband:

You crafty one—you know it’s true; who of the gods, pray, has been plotting with you again? You know that is what you like, to get away from me and to make up your mind without

me, keeping your plans secret: never yet have you had the decency to tell me outright what you mean to do.

Her husband, being a male, is far more reasonable in his tone: ‘You must not expect to know all my business, my dear: it would be too hard for you, you know, though you are my wife,’ and so on, gently putting her in her inferior place. But Hera refuses to listen to reason: ‘What do you mean by that?’ she cries. ‘I have been only too ready in the past not to ask questions, I have left you at your ease, you have done what you liked,’ and she proceeds to disclose her well-founded suspicions, until Zeus, giving up any further appeals to her better feelings, tells her bluntly to sit still and do what she is told. If not, ‘All the gods in heaven, you know, won’t be of any use to you when I come close and lay my irresistible hands upon you.’ A further edifying touch is given by the well-meant intervention of Hera’s lame son, Hephaestus, and the scene closes with the unquenchable laughter of the blessed gods.

Another similar episode is the passage in Book 14, known as ‘the beguiling of Zeus,’ or, as we might say, ‘the tricked husband.’ Hera, it begins, saw her husband sitting on Mount Ida, and abhorred the sight of him. The story can be condensed by omitting all the ornamental epithets and turns of phrase which are used to give a very un-epic passage an epic colouring, and it runs somewhat like this.

Though she detests her lord, she still has to consider how to get the better of him, and she decides to dress herself in her finest. She goes accordingly to her bower, with its close-shut doors and its secret key, fastens the bolt, and begins an elaborate toilet. It is a sure sign of the odalisque that