

Women in the Odyssey.

Homer in his book- the Odyssey classifies women according to the archetypical conventions of his time. Mortal women have to fit into the two categories ordained by society for their sex, which consist of the virtuous and the non-virtuous. The qualities of beauty, fidelity, obedience and servility place the deserving woman into the ranks of the morally upright and the honorable, while vile, deceitful, scheming and infidel woman are best left to bear the wrath of the gods and men alike and burn in the fires of hell. It is a fact well worth mentioning that mortal men do not have to adhere to these moral codes of conduct. The only quality, which separates them in stature, is their valor in battle and their ability to acquire riches from generous guests.

The goddesses in the Odyssey however are recognized to be above the moral conventions set for mortal women and do not have to adhere to them in order to be classified as being virtuous. Goddesses being the daughters of divine beings do not have to prove their incorruptibility over and over again. Their divine births establish them as being pure and upright for eternity. This contrast in the stature of mortal and immortal women is clear from two instances described in the book. Clytaemnestra who murders her husband with the aid of her lover is described to be “a disgrace to womankind,” while the goddess Aphrodite indulging in adultery with her immortal lover Ares behind her husband’s back, does not have to encounter any of the blame or disgrace experienced by her mortal counterpart.

However even some of the goddesses with their elevated status, cannot escape being classified as mere sex symbols by men--mortal and immortal alike. It is only sexual attraction, which lures Odysseus to Calypso, and that attraction too lasts for a very brief length of time. This is evident from the following lines--“ life with its sweetness was ebbing away in the tears he shed for his lost home, for the nymph had long since ceased to please.” Circe also plays a similar role in Odysseus’s life. These goddesses appear to be created for the sake of providing pleasure to Odysseus after his many travel worries and cares. Their primary function is to provide diversion and entertainment while Odysseus exhorts valuable information out of them, which will help him find his way home when he has had enough of their sexual prowess.

Mortal women also have a similar function. The ordinary ones among them provide sexual pleasure to men while the more glorious and famous ones delight the hearts of gods and bear their illustrious children. That is their only responsibility in life. All the noble women whom Odysseus encountered in Hades’ Halls had slept with illustrious personages and they were remembered by time immemorial for this achievement. This is evident from the following lines--“and when the god had made love to her, he took her hand in his and said: lady be happy in this love of ours- a god’s embrace is never fruitless.”

An important distinction between mortal women and goddesses, which is evident in the Odyssey, is the level of subservience and dependency. A mortal woman in Homeric times was very often incapable of being independent and taking her decisions

for herself. Penelope the most honored and illustrious of all mortal women was incapable of driving her suitors from the house. She was left with little choice but to see them devour her home and property. Socially it was unthinkable for her to take action against men. Her only hope was to wait for her husband to arrive to fight them off or for her son to rid the house of them. Telemachus could also technically drive her out of her home in order to save his property from ruin. His refusal to commit this act illustrates his remarkably good nature, and not the laws of the land, which would have completely supported him and even sympathized with him had he decided to drive his mother out.

Goddesses however on the other hand, display a much greater sense of independence. Athene can do anything in the world she has set her heart on doing because she is Zeus's daughter and no body dares interfere with her decision. The extent of her power and authority is evident when she overrides her uncle the great god Poseidon, to bring Odysseus back home from his exile. She also shattered the boats of many an Achaean on his return home from the city of Troy merely because she was annoyed at him. Even Zeus acknowledges her power for as he himself says: "My child, what are you saying? Didn't you plan all this yourself? As for Telemachus use your own skill-you have the power." Athene's authority is indeed tremendous and is really unmatched anywhere in the mortal or immortal world alike.

Hence the status of women in the Odyssey leaves much to be desired. All the mortal and even some of the immortal women serve the job of sexual play things. The mortal women without exception form the lowest rung of the social ladder with demi goddesses like Calypso at a slightly higher footing. Strong goddesses like Athene dominate the highest rung of the social ladder. They have the most independence and nobody even the gods dare trifle with them. Mortal women are all subordinate to their corresponding males and so to an extent are the demi-goddesses. However at the top of the rung these distinctions become less clear. But generally it can be said that the most powerful gods in heaven enjoy a more powerful status than even their female counterparts at the top of the social rung. (Even Athene has to ask Zeus for approval before venturing to do anything and is occasionally careful not to trifle with Poseidon too much.)