



Butler's *Authoress of the Odyssey*: gendered readings of Homer, then and now

Mary Ebbott

How have considerations of gender affected our interpretation of Homeric poetry, and how should they? I will explore these questions here by examining first Samuel Butler's 1897 book *The Authoress of the Odyssey* and then various interpretations of the *Odyssey* from the past fifteen years that also focus on gender. I begin with Butler for two reasons: (1) for historical perspective, which also provides critical distance on the subject, and (2) because his conclusions have been considered so extreme and have provoked strong reactions that run the gamut from complete acceptance to utter ridicule—not unlike reactions that feminist criticism can also provoke.

In his book Butler makes several claims about the author of the *Odyssey* that could be controversial. He claims that the author of the *Odyssey* is a different person from the author of the *Iliad* (a position he portrays as gaining acceptance) and also that the author was a single person, as he argues against what he calls the popular “Wolfian heresy” that would give each poem multiple authors (Butler 1897:2–3). He argues based on the landscape descriptions in the poem that the author of the *Odyssey* lived in Sicily (Trapani, specifically), and that its date of composition was between 1050 and 1000 BC. Butler spends several chapters developing and defending those conclusions. But surely the most controversial of his claims is that the author of the *Odyssey* was a woman, an “authoress” in his terms, and moreover, that she was “a woman—young, headstrong, and unmarried” (as the title to his chapter VII phrases it). It is this part of his argument that he must defend in a detailed argument, and the part that seems, based on Butler's own account and that of Benjamin Farrington in 1929, to have elicited the greatest response from other readers of Homer. Butler's book seems to have sold well and been widely read in his time, but the idea of female authorship of the *Odyssey* did not gain acceptance. Today the book is mainly a curiosity. My use of it is not to revive or refute his conclusions, but rather to examine how assumptions about gender, authorship, and texts are

used in his arguments. These assumptions, once uncovered, are what I compare to the more recent gender-focused scholarship on the *Odyssey*.

Butler's argument for a woman author, as he himself describes it, comes out of the text, and so my focus is to ask what kind of reading Butler was doing that put gender at its core. What made the *Odyssey* seem so "feminine" to him? In answering this question, we will see the assumptions not only about men and women, but also about authors and texts that inform Butler's methods and his conclusions. When I turn to more recent scholarship on the *Odyssey* that also puts gender in the forefront I will focus on areas of overlap with Butler—similar assumptions about how gender affects the creation and interpretation of literature and of the *Odyssey* in particular. For the *Odyssey* in some of these studies is also considered "feminine."

As I start with Butler I want to point out that I will tend to quote him frequently because his own words are revealing and at times extraordinary. Butler defines his approach to the *Odyssey* as that of an interested and educated reader with no predetermined investment in what he would find there. Butler makes no claim to be a Homeric scholar; in fact, he positions himself frequently in opposition to the professional scholars of Homeric poetry. He expects scholars to be the most vehement in rejecting his conclusions, because if he is right, his work will nullify theirs (Butler 1897:3–6). Butler presents himself as the learned amateur, who took up the *Odyssey* in conjunction with writing a libretto and the music "for a secular oratorio, *Ulysses*" and then decided to go back to the original when he could not find a satisfactory translation (Butler 1897:6). It was in that reading that his discovery process began:

The Greek being easy, I had little difficulty in understanding what I read, and I had the great advantage of coming to the poem with fresh eyes. Also, I read it all through from end to end, as I have since many times done (Butler 1897:6).

Butler feels himself to be superior to the scholars who oppose him and in opposition to whom he positions himself because, unlike them, he sees the simplicity of the *Odyssey* in dealing with the Greek text and because he came to the text without any preconceived notions, with his "fresh eyes."

Both at the beginning and again toward the end of his book Butler emphasizes that it was his lack of assumptions that allowed him to make his discovery, and conversely that it is the baggage of scholarly assumptions that prevents those who reject his findings from seeing the truth of his conclusions. He speaks of the "nightmares of Homeric extravagance which German professors have evolved out of their own inner consciousness" (Butler 1897:3), imputing to them a willful and reckless treatment of Homeric poetry. According to Butler, scholars misunderstand the *Odyssey* by trying to do too much with it, but that this complication of simple matters is the inclination of scholars, even with more difficult texts such as the *Iliad*:

The “Odyssey” is far too easy, simple, and straightforward for the understanding of scholars—as I said in the *Life of Dr. Butler of Shrewsbury*, if it had been harder to understand, it would have been sooner understood—and yet I do not know; the “Iliad” is indeed much harder to understand, but scholars seem to have been very sufficiently able to misunderstand it (Butler 1897:209).

Although Butler displays some self-awareness about his disdain for professional Homeric scholars, he nevertheless insists that it is the straightforward and uncomplicated nature of his approach to the text that both allows for the best interpretation and for his conclusions in particular to shine through. Immersing oneself in the text as he has done is the only useful approach, according to Butler, and he has not met a scholar in England (although he has in Sicily) who has “saturated themselves with the poem, and that, too, unhampered by a single preconceived idea in connection with it. Nothing short of this is of the smallest use” (Butler 1897:209).

Thus Butler sees the need for readers of the *Odyssey* to come to the text with eyes as fresh as he considers his own to be, and if they do know anything of the scholarship about the text that they must purge it from their minds. His evidence for this judgment is what he sees to be the biggest obstacle to the acceptance of his results: the long-held opinion that the author of the *Iliad* is also the author of the *Odyssey*. Even if that can be overcome, he says, the conclusion will naturally be that the author of the *Odyssey* is a different man: the realization that it was a woman is too large a leap for scholars’ minds. But a careful, unhampered reading with an open mind is all it takes to reach Butler’s same conclusion: “A certain invincible scholasticism prevents us from being able to see what we should see at once if we would only read the poem slowly and without considering anything that critics have said concerning it” (Butler 1897: 268–269). Of course, it is just such a reading that Butler says he has done himself.

I start with Butler’s definition of his approach as that of a educated amateur because his twin claims both that the *Odyssey* is simple and that his reading of it was close, open-minded, and without preconceptions lay the groundwork for his readings having to do with gender. For matters of gender, and the way in which the gender of the author shapes the text that he or she composes, are also described by Butler as clear and uncomplicated. In making his case Butler can thus, consciously or not, connect his method of reading with his assumptions about gender (and the assumptions he makes about gender were likely far less controversial than the conclusions they led him to). At the heart of Butler’s interpretive strategies and his ultimate conclusions from them are his assumptions both about gender and about the relationship between authors and texts: how authors create their works and how texts reveal their authors. All of these assumptions he presents as universal “givens,” beyond dispute, and it is with that confidence that he builds his argument upon them.

Even if we think that Butler may be exaggerating his claims about gender differences or even deliberately parodying arguments about women-authored texts (mocking, as it were, those serious literary scholars whom he rebukes at the beginning of his book), his arguments are nevertheless revelatory for how such an approach works. As I mentioned in my introduction, my intent is not to evaluate the success or, indeed, the seriousness of Butler's arguments, but rather to use the critical distance his work provides (precisely because we need not take it seriously, whether he was serious or not) to see how assumptions about gender can influence literary analysis. In my descriptions of Butler's arguments, therefore, I will use the convenience of describing them straightforwardly (just as his contemporaries seemed to assume they were) without constantly qualifying those descriptions with the possibility that they may be parody or otherwise in jest.

One of Butler's basic assumptions about authors and texts is that the text reveals certain characteristics of the author, foremost among them gender. Further, he sees this discovery of the author through the text to be a central goal of literary criticism. In his description of his encounter with the *Odyssey*, Butler found the Greek easy (as we have already seen) but was nevertheless bothered by "an ever-present sense of a something wrong, of a something that was eluding me, and of a riddle which I could not read" (Butler 1897:6). He continues to wonder what is obscured in the clear words of the poetry, and describes his aim of discovering the author:

The more I reflected upon the words, so luminous and so transparent, the more I felt a darkness behind them that I must pierce before I could see the heart of the writer—and this is what I wanted; for art is only interesting in so far as it reveals an artist (Butler 1897:6).

Butler thus presents his analysis as beginning from a sense that he was missing something as he read the *Odyssey* while working on his translation of it. The feeling that there was something different about the *Odyssey*, Butler says, urged him to consider what could be the cause. Once he discovered and accepted the idea that the author was a woman, he felt that the riddle was solved (Butler 1897:8). The gender difference, according to Butler, accounts for the peculiarities of the *Odyssey*, and, in turn, calls for a distinct understanding of the poetry. But his search for the answer to this riddle began with what he considers the most basic and central question of literary analysis: who authored it?

That question for Butler, however, immediately leads to what he considers the next fundamental question: What is the sex of the author? In this immediate next step in Butler's approach we see how closely questions about authorship are intertwined for Butler with questions about gender. In his sequence of inquiry about the author, Butler argues that if one accepts the premise the author of the *Odyssey* is different from the author of the *Iliad* (more on him in a moment), then the *Odyssey* becomes an anonymous work, "and the first thing that a

critic will set himself to do when he considers an anonymous work is to determine the sex of the writer” (Butler 1897:8). The sex of the writer is paramount to understanding the work: that seems to be one reason why it is the first thing to ask, in addition to general curiosity about the author when reading literature. As we continue, we will see how the critical evaluation of the text in Butler’s argument also rests primarily on the sex of the author. But, determining the sex of the author is not difficult, according to Butler. In fact he later asserts that if he could show Book 6 of the *Odyssey* to a *Times* critic as an anonymous work, “and he was told to determine the sex of the writer he would ascribe it to a young unmarried woman without a moment’s hesitation” (Butler 1897:145). And for any anonymous work, Butler argues, even when a woman attempts to pose as a man, the sex of the author is determined quite easily, but with a text that has the “frankness and spontaneity” that the *Odyssey* displays, it is “exceedingly easy” to determine the sex of the author (Butler 1897:8–9).

Thus for Butler, the sex of the author is a key for interpreting a text, but the text itself exposes the sex of the author quite readily. (The obstacle for recognizing the sex of the author of the *Odyssey* according to Butler is, as already noted, the weight from the long history of attributing it to a man.) As women, according to Butler’s assumptions, are profoundly different from men, so they will write differently from men.¹ He adds that the difference does not make literature authored by women “any the less charming when it is good of its kind; on the contrary, it makes it more so” (Butler 1897:11). Texts written by women must be judged as women’s literature if they are to be appreciated properly. The same differences that readily expose the sex of the author must also be taken into consideration, as Butler claims he has done with the *Odyssey*, when interpreting and evaluating the text. Otherwise wrong judgments will result.

Butler’s comments in his first chapter reveal a web of assumptions and interpretive strategies about gender and texts. The gender of the author will be embedded in the text and will reflect the innate differences between men and women. It is only right to judge literature produced by women with these differences in mind: what women write will not be like what men write, and therefore must be critiqued differently.² After summarizing the whole of the *Odyssey* for any of his readers who do not know it, Butler then lays out precisely what

¹ In support of this argument, which to Butler’s mind obviously does not need much support, but needs merely to be stated, he quotes an unnamed author from the *Times* of Feb. 4, 1897, who asserts: “The sex difference is the profoundest and most far-reaching that exists among human beings. ... Women may or may not be the equals of men in intelligence; ... but women in the mass will act after the manner of women, which is not and never can be the manner of men” (Butler 1897:11). Since Butler agrees that the “sex difference” is profound and fixed, it will naturally extend to literature composed by men and that by women. Such an assumption also becomes apparent when Butler lays out the differences to be seen in a woman-authored text, as he again states that the sex difference cannot be overcome: “... do what we may the barriers can never be broken down completely, and each sex will dwell mainly, though not, of course, exclusively, within its own separate world” (Butler 1897:105).

² As Butler (1897:11) puts it: “It should go, however, without saying that much which is charming in a woman’s work would be ridiculous in a man’s, and this is eminently exemplified in the ‘*Odyssey*.’ ... What is a right manner for a woman is a wrong one for a man, and *vice versa*.”

differences are reflected in women's literature, which in turn will provide the basis for evaluating it. Again I quote Butler's words at length because they demonstrate his integrated assumptions about gender, authors, and texts:

What, let me ask, is the most unerring test of female authorship? Surely a preponderance of female interest, and a fuller knowledge of those things which a woman generally has to deal with, than those that fall more commonly within the province of man. People always write by preference of what they know best, and they know best what they most are, and have most to do with. This extends to ways of thought and to character, even more than to action. If man thinks the noblest study for mankind to be man, woman not less certainly believes it to be woman.

Hence, if in any work the women are found to be well and sympathetically drawn, while the men are mechanical and by comparison perfunctorily treated, it is, I imagine, safe to infer that the writer is a woman; and the converse holds good with man (Butler 1897:105).

In other words, women will write what they know, and what they know is different because their life experience and perspective as women will necessarily be different from those of men. In particular, and this is one of Butler's main points in favor of female authorship of the *Odyssey*, women's literature will naturally portray female characters favorably while exhibiting relative disregard for male characters. This rule of the author favoring his or her own sex works both ways according to Butler. In several of his points a contrast between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* serves as a prime example of the rule, for to Butler's mind "there can be no doubt about the sex of the writer of the 'Iliad'" (Butler 1897:6). Thus the "preponderance of woman in the *Odyssey*," as Butler calls his third chapter, is the defining attribute of a female-authored work.

Butler recounts that he is not the first to see something feminine about the *Odyssey*. He cites Bentley as providing his *prima facie* case for female authorship when Bentley said that Homer wrote the *Odyssey* for women—the understanding being that only a woman writes for women (Butler 1897:4). But can the *Odyssey* truly be described as being about women? Anticipating an objection that the hero of *Odyssey* is, after all, a man and not a woman, Butler responds that Odysseus as hero is due to the constraints of genre, but continues to argue that the authoress has modified these constraints according to her own gender interests:³

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 a subtler hand. That the writer of the "Odyssey" has done this is obvious; and this fact alone

³ See Schein 1995:24 for a different way of explaining the preponderance of women through genre: in his argument, the *Odyssey* as a song of homecoming will generically include more women than a war epic like the *Iliad*.

should make us incline strongly towards thinking that we are in the hands not of a man but of a woman (Butler 1897:114).

The portrayals of Minerva (as he calls her), Penelope, Eurycleia, Helen, Calypso, Circe, and most especially Arete and Nausicaa expose the gender and gender interests of the author. Women are in charge in the *Odyssey* (Butler 1897:107). According to Butler, Odysseus and the other male characters (namely, Alcinous, Nestor, and Menelaus) are made ridiculous and are basically all the same character (Butler 1897:115). In his argument, favor is shown to women throughout the *Odyssey*, from being depicted as the “sensible” characters, to the author’s passion for putting women first, such as in the description of the shades Odysseus saw in the Underworld (Butler 1897:109–113). But Butler also argues that the authoress knew the *Iliad* well. She borrows from it often (not directly, he says, but from “unconscious cerebration”) and so her epic displays a “veneer of virility” that can conceal at times the sex differences between her and the author of the *Iliad* from whom she was borrowing (Butler 1897:247).

In addition to her modification of the genre by highlighting women, the authoress in Butler’s view has also exposed her female perspective and interests by changing the mythological tradition. Butler charges the authoress, in her desire to promote Penelope, with changing the traditional story about Penelope so that she is a paragon of womanly virtue as well as a woman with over a hundred men at her beck and call (Butler 1897:125–136). He uses the *Telegony* as evidence of a tradition in which Penelope was not faithful to Odysseus, since in that poem Odysseus has killed the suitors yet does not remain with Penelope: he concludes that if Penelope had indeed been faithful, this sequel would make no sense (Butler 1897:125). He also argues from the portrayal of the suitors (that is, no man would draw “men in love” in such a way, and it also shows the authoress’s youth and inexperience with men) and from the doubts he sees other characters express about Penelope to argue that the traditional Penelope enjoyed the suitors’ attentions and encouraged them, at the very least. But the traditional story would not appeal to a female author, and she instead has a revisionist agenda that a careful reading like Butler’s reveals.

Only a woman would attempt such a revision, according to Butler, but she is not fully able to whitewash the story completely because of her motivations to make Penelope seductively attractive while maintaining her purity.⁴ Butler betrays some of his own biases in

⁴ Farrington (1929:53) in his support for Butler’s conclusions reiterates and supports Butler’s framing of Penelope’s story: “What is this epic of the *Odyssey* about? It is about a supposed widow of forty wooed by one hundred and eight young men, whom she fools mercilessly, encouraging them and putting them off for four years, and finally, getting bride-presents out of them on the eve of their planned destruction. And this extraordinary figure is so equivocally conceived that at times she is represented in the light of flirt, at times as the world’s model of wifely fidelity. The writer cannot sacrifice either conception. Over a hundred young men at the feet of one woman, and fooled to the top of their bent—that is a situation too good to forego. And the chaste and faithful wife remaining true to her lord in spite of all temptations to despair of his safety and take a new husband—that is also felt to be necessary.” For Farrington as well as Butler this portrayal of Penelope could only be conceived by a woman.

this discussion, as he scoffs at the notion that a forty-year-old supposed widow could attract so much attention.⁵ He also employs what I consider stereotypes of women, but what he might consider truths about them, to describe what Penelope could have done to get rid of the suitors had she really wanted to (including sending them on errands for her, making them go to church, or boring them to death with talking, Butler 1897:130).

In addition to her so-called whitewashing of Penelope, Butler infers that the authoress was “exceedingly jealous for the honour of her sex, and by consequence inexorable in her severity against those women who have disgraced it” (Butler 1897:115). Her depictions of Clytemnestra, Helen, and the slavewomen who sleep with the suitors are described as the harsh treatment of women by another woman. Butler thinks that “her desire to remove as much of the blame as possible from Clytemnestra’s shoulders, convinces me that she actually feels the disgrace which Clytemnestra’s treachery has inflicted upon all women ‘even the good ones’” (Butler 1897:116). Thus the authoress rehabilitates Penelope as best she can, but her emphasis on what a good woman Clytemnestra used to be (*Odyssey* 3.265–270) shows on the other hand her own shame at such behavior by a woman. The authoress also enforces her own sense of woman’s honor by punishing the disloyal and debauched slavewomen. Butler’s belief that a woman would be more judgmental about the adultery of women is an interesting correlation to the sympathetic representations of women that he also cites as evidence for female authorship. He seems to exhibit himself a trait he attributes to female authorship: “a determination to have things both ways whenever it suits her purpose” (Butler 1897:119).

But if her portrayal of Penelope betrays her motives on behalf of her own sex, the authoress’s portrayals of domestic life, Phaeacia, and Nausicaa (whom he will later name as the author, Butler 1897:200–208) show her great skill, according to Butler. Here again we see his inextricable assumptions about gender and authorship: the authoress succeeds when she stays closest to what she knows and what is appropriate to her gender. But at times her perspective on what she would most be preoccupied with in life shines through in scenes which are removed from it. Two examples about the killing of the suitors, which Butler gives at different points in his argument, disclose Butler’s and perhaps common attitudes about women’s concerns when it comes to domestic business in Butler’s own society. One example is when he is able to rebuff the objection of an acquaintance to his theory when the man contended that “the first thing a woman would have thought of after the suitors had been killed was the dining room carpet. I said that *mutatis mutandis* this was the very thing she did think of” and Butler quotes *Od.* 22.437–443 about cleaning the hall of corpses as his illustration of her

⁵ For another example of personal opinion about women informing literary criticism but with the opposite result, Mackail thinks Penelope would be about thirty-five or thirty-six, what he calls the “dangerous age” (the full meaning of that phrase, which is in quotation marks in Mackail’s article, seems to have been lost with time—at least, it is lost on me, and I am a woman of that “dangerous age”). She “is still in mature and unimpaired beauty” (Mackail 1916:8). Both men use their own feelings about women of a certain age to interpret the suitors’ desire for and reactions to Penelope.

concern with tidying up the mess (Butler 1897:118). Similarly, Butler considers that “the instinctive house-wifely thrift of the writer is nowhere more marked than near the beginning of Book xxii., where amid the death-throes of Antinous and Eurymachus she cannot forget the good meat and wine that were spoiled by the upsetting of the tables at which the suitors had been sitting” (Butler 1897:154). These rather extreme, and humorous, examples may again raise the question of whether Butler is serious: but my point is that these “clues” to the author’s gender, even in the extreme, are on the same continuum with an understanding of an author’s interests and perspectives that arguments focused on gender assume are necessarily different in those texts authored by a woman from those by a man.

There are many other elements of the *Odyssey* that in Butler’s opinion reveal that its author was a woman. He supports his arguments with page after page of details (including a whole chapter of them that he could not fit in elsewhere), and I could not name them all without repeating everything he wrote. But to cite just a few more examples, Butler points out what he considers mistakes a woman would make about all kinds of “manly” pursuits because of her lack of experience with them: fighting, sailing, animal husbandry, even the relationship between a man and his hunting dog. He seems to read into the *Odyssey* his own opinions about what is important to women in his own time when he sums up the subject matter of the poem: “Women, religion, and money are the three dominant ideas in the mind of the writer of the ‘*Odyssey*’” (Butler 1897:122). And the overall tone, he says, is a feminine one as well: “Strength is felt everywhere, even in the tenderest passages of the “*Iliad*,” but it is sweetness rather than strength that fascinates us throughout the “*Odyssey*.” It is the charm of a woman not of a man” (Butler 1897:106). In matters large and small, then, Butler sees the mark of the author’s gender everywhere in the *Odyssey*, even in the way she borrows that virile veneer in her quotations from the *Iliad*. The answer to the question of what Butler found so “feminine” about the *Odyssey* seems to be that the more he read it, the more he found that everything about it was feminine.

Butler seems to have found opposition to his conclusions because of other assumptions about gender: namely, that a woman could not have composed the *Odyssey*, one of the foundational texts of Western literature.⁶ Butler (and Farrington after him) thus must argue that a woman is capable of authoring the *Odyssey*, even though it is a “seeming paradox” (Butler 1897:3). He cites the existence of many women poets in ancient Greece as evidence that

⁶ For one example, J.W. Mackail alludes to Butler in his own discussion of Penelope: “One of the foolish things said in antiquity about the *Odyssey* was that Homer composed it for women after composing the *Iliad* for men. One of the foolish things said about it by a brilliant but eccentric modern writer was that it was written by a woman. What originated views like these is the large part played in it by women” (Mackail 1916:6). See also Henry Festing Jones’s preface to the second edition of Butler’s *Authoress* and Farrington 1929:43 for reactions to Butler’s work. Jones notes that the second edition is required because the first edition has sold out (Butler 2nd ed. 1921:xix).

the talent for composition among women existed then (Butler 1897:11-13).⁷ He concedes that she would have to be a “phenomenal” woman, but “though there is much in the ‘Iliad’ which no woman, however phenomenal, can be supposed at all likely to have written, there is not a line in the ‘Odyssey’ which a woman might not perfectly well write, and there is much beauty which a man would be almost certain to neglect” (Butler 1897:9). As Butler reinforces certain ideas about women through his reasoning, he finds himself contravening a common one that doubts the abilities of female authors.

I have dwelled at some length on the details of Butler’s account to demonstrate how ideas about gender are deeply embedded in his conclusion that a woman composed the *Odyssey*. It is easy, I think, to get lost in the myriad individual instances of Butler’s assumptions about women and what they are interested in and ignorant of. But more than these individual points that can attract our attention because of their egregious nature (from my own point of view, of course), gender is the pervasive method for understanding the text in Butler’s argument, and it is this pervasiveness which leads me to call Butler’s reading a gendered one, even though in some ways it seems cross-gendered. The fundamental role gender plays in his interpretation is displayed in Butler’s description of how, once he had the idea that a woman was the author, the whole of the *Odyssey* then made sense to him: “as soon as the idea that the writer was a woman—and a young one—presented itself to me, I felt that here was the reading of the riddle that had so long baffled me” (Butler 1897:8). Once Butler feels justified reading the *Odyssey* as the work of a woman, all can be explained.

Similarly, Benjamin Farrington, writing 30 years later, finds that Butler’s conclusion solves the problems of interpretation for him. He insists that Butler’s theory of the gender of the author “gave the first plausible account of the peculiar weaknesses of the *Odyssey*” (Farrington 1929:45). As a particular example of the type of conundrum that is explained Farrington cites the story that Menelaus tells Telemachus in *Odyssey* 4.265–289 about Odysseus’s behavior inside the Trojan Horse. The men’s longing to cry out in response to hearing Helen call them in the voices of their wives, the description of Helen “patting” the horse as she walked around it, and other such details seem to have caused critics and translators great consternation. Farrington passionately writes that these long-standing questions are thus answered:

But indeed no one can make anything of this passage, nor of a dozen others, nor for the matter of that of the whole *Odyssey*, if the initial assumption is that it is the work of Homer. Longinus is as polite about it as he could possibly be, but his verdict is that Homer was in his dotage when he wrote it. Ah, but if Butler is right, how true the passage rings,

⁷ Butler continues this argument by citing the representation of the Muses as female, and argues that in an age when men are occupied by hunting and warfare, that literature, as one of the “arts of peace,” might more naturally be a feminine pursuit (1897:14).

how just is every touch, how exquisite is the art, how whole-heartedly one can praise and enjoy it! (Farrington 1929:61).

Gender is their key to understanding the poetry, and for both Butler and Farrington, attributing mistakes or otherwise bothersome passages to a woman author provides a kind of critical relief and explains what they see as the riddle or the strangeness of the *Odyssey*. Moreover, the change in the gender of the author leads to a greater appreciation of the poetry, since the evaluation of the poetry will differ accordingly.

It is in this notion of how the gender of the author is central both to the creation of texts and subsequently to its reception, interpretation, and evaluation that we find a strategy of interpreting texts common to both Butler's gendered reading and more recent scholarship on the *Odyssey* that focuses on gender. As I make my transition to the late 20th and early 21st centuries, let me state for the record that there are enormous differences between Butler's approach and those of recent feminist or gender-focused critics. But I am going to concentrate on what I see as a few areas of overlap, for it is in that overlap where I find the most "conceptual irritation" a guiding principle for this conference. So let me recapitulate what we have seen in Butler's reading of the *Odyssey*:

1. Men and women write differently because of gender differences. The gender of the author directly and intrinsically affects his or her text in predictable and set ways.
2. A text authored by a woman must be judged by different standards because of these inherent gender differences. In Butler's words, "What is a right manner for a woman is wrong for a man, and *vice versa*" (Butler 1897:11).
3. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* differ greatly from one another; they are so different, in Butler's argument, that they cannot be by the same author. The two poems exhibit these kinds of gender differences, including the overall tone of each. There is no doubt that the author of the *Iliad* is a man.
4. The portrayal of women within the poem (Butler 1897:115–116 emphasizes mortal female characters over goddesses) is a key to understanding the gender of the author. The depiction of Penelope is especially important in this regard (Butler 1897:134).

Similar assumptions are at work in some feminist criticism and in more recent interpretations of the *Odyssey* that focus on gender: in these studies, too, there is an interpretive interaction between the gender of the author, the gender of characters within the narrative, and the gender of the audience. Butler explicitly focuses on the first two, and sees them as inextricably linked: the gender of the author will shape the portrayal of the characters according to gender, and the portrayal of gender within the text reveals the gender of the author. But as a male reader of a what he now considers a female text, a gendered response is also part of his interpretation.

For Butler, as we have seen, the gender of the author is paramount. It is the first question he asks about the author of an anonymous work; it is his guiding principle for reading, understanding, and evaluating this work of literature; and it is his final conclusion in his reading of the *Odyssey*. For some feminist critics of the past few decades, the gender of the author is also a primary factor in their approach to a text. Male-authored texts require a reading that resists what it says about women, while “feminist readings of female texts are motivated by the need ‘to connect,’ to recuperate, or to formulate—they come to the same thing—the context, the tradition, that would link women writers to one another, to women readers and critics and to the large community of women” (Schweickart 1994: 276). This importance of the gender of the author also involves the gender of the reader (which I will treat in more detail in considering the gender of the audience below): even though one does not have to be a woman to be a feminist, the implication of connecting is made explicit in naming women readers and critics as part of the connection that happens in this kind of reading. The impulse and objectives behind this distinction of approaches are unlike Butler’s desire to discover the gender of the *Odyssey*’s author, but they each define a difference in texts based on the gender of the author. One major objective in a feminist approach is a valorization of literature authored by women.

This difference in approach based on the author’s gender has been applied to Greek and Latin literature by some feminist Classicists. Both Barbara Gold and Marilyn Skinner in the volume *Feminist Theory and the Classics* cite as a starting point in their articles Elaine Showalter’s distinction between “feminist critique,” a feminist approach to male-authored texts, and “gynocritics,” which is concerned with women as authors and the genres, history, themes and structures of literature produced by women (Gold 1993:75; Skinner 1993:128; see Showalter 1985:128–129 for her articulation of this approach). In this kind of feminist reading, Homeric poetry is one of the “master narratives” of antiquity, a “male-authored text that has received, transmitted, and influenced the traditional male-centered system of representation.” These master narratives have “naturalized and normalized all of our most fundamental concepts (the good, the true, the natural) according to a particular masculine and aristocratic ideology, and they have created and subsequently reinforced all of the stereotypes of women” still found in twentieth-century literature (Gold 1993:84). Although Gold explicitly names Homer as an example of this kind of male-authored text, her focus in the article is on Propertius, so she does not go into detail about exactly how Homeric poetry accomplishes all of these outcomes. But she does cite “Sappho’s explicit rereadings of Homer” as an example of “voices speaking against the text” (Gold 1993:84). In Gold’s reading, then, Homeric poetry is partly defined by the (male) gender of its author.

In her article that also invokes Showalter’s distinction, Skinner examines Sappho’s poetry in detail. She argues for an approach in which women authors do present a different perspective, and can speak with a different voice from that of male-authored literature (she is arguing against a particular challenge by French feminist critics to this approach to female-

authored texts). She considers the focus on women's writing that marks it as different within its own culture and that discovers in it a "female perspective" to be "common-sense propositions" (Skinner 1993:128). She further argues (making her argument specific to the aims and methods of Classics as a discipline) that if no "female voice" can be found in women's texts from Greco-Roman antiquity, "work on the female literary tradition might as well be abandoned as useless, insofar as women's texts could no longer claim to reflect a separate gender-specific sensibility" (Skinner 1993:129–130). The stakes involved when it comes to the importance of the gender of the author are very high according to Skinner's argument. Female-authored texts, in her view, are significant for the different perspective, the different experience that they convey. Skinner proceeds to examine Sappho's poetry as a woman speaking among women, and reads in her poetry a distinct and challenging perspective on her own (male-dominated) society (Skinner 1993:130–137).⁸

Skinner's account of Sappho is reminiscent of Butler's interpretation of Homer in the sense that in both arguments there is an assumption that women authors will have different experiences because of their gender and that those difference will be reflected in their texts. There is also in Skinner's argument a valorization of the female perspective due to its difference. This valorization is one of the aims of feminist criticism (and an important difference between their work and Butler's approach), but that valorization depends on defining women and their work as essentially different.

Yet the difference inherent in women's texts according to some feminist approaches is sometimes expressed in terms even closer to Butler's own. Annette Kolodny emphasizes that "we appropriate meaning from a text ... according to the critical assumptions or predispositions (conscious or not) that we bring to it" (Kolodny 1994:280) and applies this principle specifically to male readers of female-authored texts when explaining how those texts have been neglected or undervalued because of "an incapacity of predominantly male readers to properly interpret and appreciate women's texts—due, in large part, to a lack of prior acquaintance" (Kolodny 1994:282). Because women's texts are centered on their own experiences, which again are defined as necessarily different from those of men, men will not be able to immediately identify with what goes on in the narrative, but, it is tacitly assumed, women will, even across differences of time, location, and culture.⁹

In this line of thinking, men will also be unfamiliar with traditions in women's literature, and thus some conventions will seem alien to them as well. When Kolodny specifies what kinds of experiences, what "sex-related contexts out of which women write" (1994:282)

⁸ For a study of how Sappho's poetry was received in a gendered way in the 19th century (as a comparison to Butler's reception of Homer), see Prins 1999.

⁹ See also Showalter 1985:6 for a suggestion that feminist criticism joins women across such boundaries, when she describes how it has recovered and reread "literature by women from all nations and historical periods."

will be unfamiliar to male readers, the examples she cites seem very much like what Butler expects in women's literature:

The (usually male) reader who, both by experience and by reading, has never made acquaintance with those contexts—historically, the lying-in room, the parlor, the nursery, the kitchen, the laundry, and so on—will necessarily lack the capacity to fully interpret the dialogue or action embedded therein; for, as every good novelist knows, the meaning of any character's action or statement is inescapably a function of the specific situation in which it is embedded (Kolodny 1994:282).

Kolodny is arguing that the historical circumstances of women must be properly understood to interpret correctly the literature that portrays it, but she is also reinforcing an idea that you can recognize women's literature by the places and activities included in the narrative (similar to the way Butler argues that the *Odyssey's* emphasis on the "domestic" indicates a female author) and asserting that women's literature must be evaluated differently as a result (also similar to Butler's distinction that the much of the *Odyssey* is "charming" if written by a woman but ridiculous if by a man). Kolodny also argues that male readers will misinterpret "women's 'values' or conceptions of the world," which are also necessarily different (Kolodny 1994:282). With all of these inherent and stark differences, should we, then, along with Butler, assume that we can tell the gender of the author by the content and style of the text?

As I mentioned above, a chief motivation in the feminist emphasis on the importance of the author's gender is the promotion of literature composed by women. The process of rehabilitation for texts that have been previously neglected or undervalued underlies the emphasis on the differences between these texts and those that have long been part of the canon: it makes sense that if you are arguing for a re-evaluation of this literature that you will also want to change the terms of evaluation. From another perspective, we have seen Butler also advocate different terms of evaluation for literature written by women from that by men. That in order to be appreciated, he maintained, the *Odyssey* must be understood on gendered terms, because then the passages that caused critics to devalue or misinterpret the *Odyssey* (in Butler's view) can be properly understood. But Barbara Clayton (2004:2) argues that although Butler's argument may seem feminist on the surface, his proposal of female authorship is intended "to account for the inferiority of the *Odyssey*." By Clayton's account, Butler's gendered reading is aimed at the opposite of what the feminist critics are trying to achieve with their approach: on the surface he may show appreciation for the text as female-authored, but the implications of his argument about its strangeness or difference ends up devaluing it in another way. If that is the case, an approach to literature based on the gender of the author can work either way, to define the difference as good or as bad.

Let me begin now a discussion I will return to at the end. I find troubling the notion that the gender of the author defines the text in a specific, gender-based way—that women

will write in a certain way about predictable subjects, and that women inherently have a perspective that stands outside the prevailing culture. It is one thing, to my mind, to put literature in its historical context including whatever gender differences that may entail, as Skinner advocates and as Butler's concept of gender as unchanging and unchangeable ignores. But the belief that women necessarily have a different perspective from men of their own culture or that they only can write (well) about their own daily experiences seem to me to reinforce gender roles in a way that can exclude or degrade women and the texts they author instead of elevate them. As Linda Kauffman, herself a feminist critic, points out, "the argument that women can only write about themselves has been the cornerstone of sexist criticism of women writers since Sappho" (Kauffman 1993:137). One concern, therefore, is that this recent criticism leaves itself vulnerable to being discredited on the basis of the gender differences it promotes and relies on. In other words, arguing from the idea that women as authors are different in a good way leaves the door open to defining such difference as inferiority, however charming.

That unease I feel about defining a literary approach based on the gender of the author makes me wonder how the *Odyssey* would be interpreted today if Butler had succeeded in convincing the professional scholars that it was composed by a young, unmarried woman. Would it have been subsequently neglected, only to be rehabilitated? Would it, as Butler himself implied, be viewed as an answer or an alternative to the *Iliad*?¹⁰ Would it define a new genre, "women's epic"? If that had happened, I can imagine that the epic and its genre would be identified with Penelope. Even as it is, many gender-based approaches to the *Odyssey* have been defined around the portrayal of female characters in the poem. (And all too often, the *Iliad* is explicitly or implicitly omitted from such discussions as not having much to offer for understanding gender in Homeric poetry.) In some approaches, the *Odyssey* is used as historical evidence for women's lives, although this use of the epic has also been strongly criticized.¹¹ In others the women within the narrative are considered as female types, and the arguments explain how these female characters shape Odysseus's journey and therefore his story.¹² In these readings, the female characters are defined only in relation to Odysseus, and therefore defined as subordinate to him. A recent study by Richard Heitman centered on

¹⁰ Butler once again expresses what he sees in the text in terms of his authoress herself, when he senses that "she was angry with him [Homer], and perhaps jealous ... she treats Homer, as it seems to me, not without a certain hardness; and this is the only serious fault I have to find with her" (Butler 1897:247). The tensions between the two epics are defined as the jealousy of the woman author toward the man whose footsteps she is following in.

¹¹ The criticism has not prevented further arguments for such a use (out of admitted desperation for evidence for whatever time period the Homeric epics are deemed to be). Culham 1987 presented strong objections to using Homer as well as other poetry as historical evidence. As she puts it quite plainly (1987:15): "The study of women in ancient literature is the study of men's views of women and cannot become anything else." Yet A. J. Graham 1995, who does not cite Culham, does want to use the *Odyssey* as historical evidence for his argument that Greek colonists would bring women with them in establishing a new Greek community (1995:14). His use of the *Odyssey* contrasts the Greek women with non-Greek women in the epic to understand the mindset of Greek colonists, so perhaps that falls under the rubric of men's views of women.

¹² For two examples, see Marquardt 1989 and Schein 1995.

Penelope insists on her “centrality to the plot” in its argument to “take her seriously,” both as a major figure in the action and as a woman who knows her own mind.¹³ His argument seems to be one of sympathy for Penelope, and he positions it against those generally considered to be feminist (which we will look at shortly), saying that an inconsistent Penelope is “too trivial or too passive” for his interpretation.¹⁴

This positive, even exalting view of Penelope is not uncommon, and it can be coupled with an implicitly positive understanding of the portrayal of women in the *Odyssey*. But Sheila Murnaghan has pointed out that critics who attempt such a reading of Penelope have found it difficult to sustain. She notes that the *Odyssey* “occupies a special place” in Greek literature because of its portrayal of Penelope, but also points out that even readers who have admired Penelope “have had to struggle to give a coherent account of her motives and behavior during the decisive stretch of narrative from Odysseus’ return to his house in disguise in Book 17 to his self-revelation and defeat of the suitors in Books 21 and 22” (1987b.103). Murnaghan suggests that the interpretive struggles of critics “represent the poem’s indirect testimony to problems inherent in the social world it portrays, problems involving issues of power and gender” (1987b.104). In her study of the *Odyssey*’s themes of disguise and recognition, Murnaghan also argues that the portrait of Penelope participates in the poem’s overall misogyny even as it offers her as a counterexample (Murnaghan 1987a.124). Penelope does not participate in Odysseus’ plans, because the epic makes clear that women cannot be trusted, and so her depiction, although certainly sympathetic, cannot negate the misogyny that is so prevalent in the poem (Murnaghan 1987a.118–146). Such an argument, showing the limited and perhaps negative portrayal of Penelope, may be considered a feminist critique of the *Odyssey* as it emphasizes the underlying and ultimately inescapable misogyny of the male-authored epic.

Other studies, however, have looked at Penelope as a guiding principle for understanding the text, and promote her character as defining the poem’s structure. In two such studies we can see how the interpretation of Penelope involves an interesting shift in considering gender within the text. Marilyn Katz focuses on Penelope’s “indeterminacy” within the narrative, and argues that it reflects not the author (or her attempt to rehabilitate Penelope, as Butler argued), but the text itself. It is in the character of Penelope that “there exists a dissonance in the text between the denotative and connotative levels of meaning, or between what is said and what is implied. This indeterminacy is peculiar to the *Odyssey*, and it is incorporated into its narrative structure as its defining quality” (Katz 1991:10–11). Penelope’s character is better examined, according to Katz, in terms of narrative function, and indeterminacy is encoded in the text through Penelope (Katz 1991:11, 18–19). In Katz’s argument, then, what is “feminine” about Penelope is also a characteristic of the poem as a

¹³ Heitman 2005.1–2.

¹⁴ Heitman 2005.7.

whole, making it “feminine” as well. Barbara Clayton’s recent book also makes a connection between Penelope and what she calls the poetics of the *Odyssey*. In her examination of the metaphor of weaving for poetic composition, she argues that there is a gendered difference between the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, seen primarily through Penelope as weaver (Clayton 2004:5–6) that reveals “an implicit awareness of a connection between an Odyssean poetics and the feminine. Penelope holds the key to this connection” (Clayton 2004:18–19).

A feminine text by a male author? Katz does not address the gender of the author as she contends that the characterization of Penelope within the text defines the text’s own narrative strategies, and Clayton explicitly contrasts her approach to the gender of the text from Butler’s approach to the gender of the author (Clayton 2004:18–19). But Nancy Felson-Rubin’s approach to gender within the story, and Penelope in particular, credits Homer with challenging the prevailing gender ideology with his portrayals of women:

The Penelope who emerges by the end of the poem is a forceful figure who operates imaginatively within the constraints of her situation and succeeds in keeping her options open until she reaches safety in her husband’s embrace.

By presenting her triumph as the analogue of Odysseus’s return, Homer challenges traditional views of a woman’s place expressed within the poem by such characters as the suitors, Agamemnon, and Telemakhos. These views depict a wife as inferior and subservient to her husband, confined to certain activities in the household and excluded unquestionably from others. By contrast, Homer presents Arete, queen of Skheria, as a settler of men’s quarrels and as the figure whom Odysseus must win over, if he wants safe convey home (cf. 6.310–315 and 7.74–77). This allocation of power to Arete ... directly challenges Homer’s listeners to reassess the role of wife and queen, and thus, of Penelope (Felson-Rubin 1994:vii).

In Felson-Rubin’s reading, there are multiple interpretations of gender roles within the narrative, but it is through that multiplicity that the prevailing cultural norms are challenged. She ascribes this challenge to Homer, whom she later defines as an “inseparable whole” of the poet both as creator and as performer, who then takes on the role as narrator (Felson-Rubin 1994:11). This poet/performer/narrator seems to be male in her description, and yet his challenge to gender roles is similar to what Skinner described as Sappho’s different-because-feminine voice. In these three examinations of gender within the narrative, the *Odyssey* is figured as feminine in its narrative techniques but also in its portrayal of women.

Part of Felson-Rubin’s reasoning as to how Homer can present this gender challenge is how she sees the possibilities for cross-gender identification in the poem, both in its performance in an ancient context and for a modern reader. This possibility brings us to the consideration of the gender of the audience or reader, and we have seen already several ways in which it is connected to the gender of the author and gender within the text in its role in

interpretation. Felson-Rubin, whose argument gives a male Homer a feminine voice in challenging gender roles, also sees the possibility for audience members of both genders to identify with characters of either gender:

Female listeners are as free as their male counterparts to occupy the subject position of the suitors, if they so wish, or of Odysseus or Telemakhos or Agamemnon. That is, they, like Athena, can cross-dress, as it were, and the division between the genders is not necessarily so restrictive as scholars commonly imagine. If women attended ancient epic performances, perhaps they too stepped into gender identifications that differed markedly from what was available to them in their daily lives (Felson-Rubin 1994:xi).

Felson-Rubin uses an example from within the narrative, that of Athena taking on the appearance and roles of men, to explain how the audience can respond in a cross-gendered way to the narrative. Skinner argues for a similar cross-gender appeal or ability in the poetry of Sappho. She notes that Sappho's poems (or songs, as she calls them) "would not have gained fame in the wider world, or eventually circulated as written texts, had they not offered something to men as well as to women" (Skinner 1993:136). What the poetry offered to men, according to Skinner, was an emotionally accessible articulation of female desire, which allowed male listeners and readers "a socially permissible escape from the strict constraints of masculinity" (Skinner 1993:137). In these views, gender is fluid in the interaction between author, text, and audience. A listener/reader is able through literature to try on other gender roles, regardless of the gender of the author.

But other scholars have raised problems for a reader's cross-gender identification. As we have already seen, Kolodny doubts the abilities of male readers to understand and interpret female-authored literature. She asserts that interpreting language cannot be sexually neutral and that there is a "crucial linkage between our gender and our interpretive, or reading, strategies" (Kolodny 1994:283). For female readers of male texts (as Homeric poetry would be understood) there is, according to some scholars, an added danger in the kind of cross-gender identification that Felson-Rubin celebrates. Schweickart describes how such male texts are differently received by male and female readers, since "androcentric literature structures the reading experience differently depending on the gender of the reader" (Schweickart 1994:270). Men are "invited to validate the equation of maleness with humanity" while "women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose cultural principles is misogyny" (Schweickart 1994:270-271). This second quotation is itself a quotation from Judith Fetterley (1978:xx), who describes this process as *immascultation*, through which a woman becomes "intellectually male, sexually female, ... in effect, no one, nowhere, immasculated" (Fetterley 1978:xxii). Barbara Gold reminds us that women in the field of Classics in particular have learned to read like men, to see women through the eyes of men, and advises feminist Classicists to examine their own "complicity with these inherited ideas" about women (Gold 1993:92, 87). These

women readers are defined, like women authors, as inherently different from men, as it becomes possible to be “intellectually male” in a woman’s body, and in these arguments, as in those of Kolodny we saw earlier, there is such a thing as “female values” that are defined as a whole in opposition to another whole called “male values.” Women readers, according to these views, may or may not have the special insight they are credited with elsewhere, but they run the risk of reading in a way that denies their gender.

Lillian Eileen Doherty applies such a view to her reading of the *Odyssey* in particular. She looks at gender in terms of both narrators and audiences within the narrative, and connects these internal audiences to the gender of audiences outside the narrative. The process of listening to or reading the epic allows audiences to go through processes of identification, but Doherty emphasizes how a female audience member can be “seduced” into identifying against herself.¹⁵ She does not see the same freedom in cross-gender identification that Felson-Rubin argued for: “Thus, while readers may identify with characters of the opposite gender, they do not have full access to the gender-specific subject position associated with such characters. ... [T]he female reader, qua female, is offered subject positions that are at least implicitly subordinate to those available to males” (Doherty 1995:26–27). The connection between gender within the story and the gender of the reader recreates the gender dynamics of the story and can therefore leave the female reader in a precarious situation while reading the *Odyssey*.¹⁶ Carolyn Porter sees such a risk as part of attempts to challenge gender definitions generally, as she recalls what feminist critics themselves experienced: “Certainly the more we struggled against the limits imposed on women by the gender system, the more clearly we saw that we were still well within it, and further, that it was within us” (Porter 1993:169). A recognition of the presence of our own culture’s gender ideology within our literary interpretation should be a necessary part of gender-based approaches.¹⁷ And an explicit understanding, as Doherty similarly says, that “We cannot live outside the prevailing ideology of our times, even if we contest it” (Doherty 1995:7) should also inform our reading of texts from the past in trying to understand how (or if) they contest or reinforce gender ideology.

¹⁵ Fetterley 1978:xii describes such a process in slightly different terms for female readers of American literature, with specific reference to the story of Rip van Winkle and to Norman Mailer’s *An American Dream*: “In such fictions, the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; she is required to identify against herself.” Fetterley’s language seems to me to describe a more forced experience, while Doherty’s language of seduction implies also the rewards available to women readers and scholars in particular who go along with the system.

¹⁶ Butler himself demonstrates a similar gendered response as reader and critic, although he does not describe it as such himself. His repeated statements that the male characters are made ridiculous and are all the same negligently drawn character (Butler 1897: 7, 106, 115, 200) could be read as him disliking the identifications offered to him based on his own gender.

¹⁷ See also Doherty 1995:6–8 for her discussion of the difficulty in resisting ideology, and the possibility of reinforcing the same ideology you are attempting to challenge or change.

That gendered approaches can find Penelope a feminist heroine or unable to escape the misogyny inherent in the epic, and can claim that women readers are able to enjoy cross-gendered identification or that to do so only recreates the gender biases within the narrative, demonstrates that such approaches are indeed multiple, and not monolithic.¹⁸ There is much to be learned about the *Odyssey* from these studies, but the overlap that exists with the assumptions behind Butler's argument for an "authoress" should alert us to the problems in certain gender distinctions made when interpreting the *Odyssey*. Feminist criticism cannot, to my mind, continue to define women authors or readers as essentially different (in a superior way), because we can see in Butler's work how that definition easily works the other way. Our own culture's gender ideology that says women, defined all too often as an undifferentiated group, are superior in certain qualities or at certain activities, with particular values and interests exclusive to the feminine gender, are the same kinds of assumptions that Butler uses when he praises his authoress for her beautiful poetry in describing the domestic scene at Phaeacia and when he pokes fun at her for worrying about the mess on the floor and the food gone to waste when Odysseus kills the suitors during dinner. Shouldn't we disagree with Butler's notion that a positively portrayed female character is evidence that the text was written by a woman? If not, we reinforce the notion that men and women remain inscrutable to each other, even in the realm of imagination and identification through reading.

Hand in hand with those assumptions is the argument in favor of evaluating with different criteria women-authored texts, or perhaps in the case of the *Odyssey*, a "feminine" text by a male author or from male song tradition. As long as the terms of evaluation are framed differently according to gender, different can also be inferior. The same is true of the strict distinction made between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* when it comes to consideration of gender. The *Odyssey* is different from the *Iliad* in some ways, of course, but it seems that defining that difference exclusively or mainly with regard to gender makes any conclusions from that approach too easy to discount. The terms need to be changed so they can be applied to both epics. Nancy Felson and Laura Slatkin's recent study does so in considering gender first in the *Iliad*, and then in the *Odyssey*, arguing after these separate examinations that with respect to gender "the *Odyssey* has a dialectical relation to the *Iliad* in terms of the sex-gender system in which they both participate, the system that permeates the tradition to which they both belong. Where the *Iliad* celebrates the beautiful death of the warrior and the bonds between men that emerge in the face of war, with all its casualties, the *Odyssey* highlights the efficacy (along with the subjectivity) of the stalwart and non-adulterous wife left behind" (Felson and Slatkin 2004:112). Their brief introduction to the subject of gender in the Homeric epics is suggestive as to how fruitful considering gender in both epics together can be: the dialectical relationship they see could be investigated further or even challenged in studies willing to examine gender in both epics.

¹⁸ See also Showalter 1985:127 on the "absence of a clearly articulated theory" in feminist criticism.

Similarly, feminist criticism cannot afford to separate male- and female-authored texts when analyzing Greek literature. Laurel Bowman in her recent (2004) article on the possibilities of a women's tradition in Greek poetry argues that such a tradition, if it existed, could not have been fully separate or segregated from male poetic traditions, and that no woman poet had only female poets as influences or models. She concludes that the women poets whose work survives "were participants first and foremost in the predominantly male-authored public poetic tradition that preserved their work for posterity" (Bowman 2004:22–23). Although this conclusion could be considered discouraging (recall Skinner's remarks quoted above about the nullifying effects of the possibility that Sappho's poetry does not speak in a different voice), Bowman sees possibilities for further work on the nature of the relationship between female poets and this male tradition, and what conditions female-authored poetry had to fulfill in order to survive (Bowman 2004:23). In other words, the interaction within rather than the separation between poetic traditions is a fruitful avenue for studying ancient Greek poetry. Such an approach is similar to the cross-gender appeal of both Sappho and Homer that I mentioned above. Approaches that imply or start from a notion that the *Iliad* is appealing only to men (in a vein similar to Butler's assertion that there can be no doubt that the author of the *Iliad* was a man) and the *Odyssey* will appeal to women, or that we can separate out the female characters from the epic to be studied by women and the male characters by men, because that is what each group will naturally understand and be attracted to, create artificial divisions that reinforce gender stereotypes, much as Butler's arguments do.

In working on this project I had to confront by my own assumptions about gender and approaches to Homeric poetry. As I read these several studies of the *Odyssey*, I found myself desiring a genderless Homer—wouldn't that be easier? It is all too safe and easy to ignore gender in Homeric studies even today, so I could continue on with a subconscious but wrongheaded notion of a genderless Homer, but instead I hope to capitalize on that realization with a greater awareness and articulation of my own gender assumptions. Although the notion of the cross-gender appeal of the Homeric epics has the inherent danger of naive complicity in the old gender ideology, it also holds the possibility for the expansion of boundaries or limitations defined by gender. Some feminist critics have themselves been calling for such an expansion for twenty years now. Elaine Showalter saw as feminist criticism's goal "a new universal literary history and criticism that combines the literary experiences of both women and men, a complete revolution in the understanding of our literary heritage" (Showalter 1985:10), and Linda Kauffman has called for criticism to move beyond the conventional: "As a feminist literary critic I want texts to challenge the boundaries of realism, of genre, or narrative, not to subordinate the (anti-representational, anti-bourgeois, anti-narrative) other into the same—the same old story" (Kauffman 1993:136).

Butler's argument for a female author drew strong reactions in his own day for bucking tradition: even in a scholarly milieu that was rethinking the composition and textual history of the Homeric epics, the idea that a woman would be the author of the *Odyssey* was just plain

ridiculous. That challenge to tradition is also evident in feminist or other gender-based approaches to the *Odyssey*, and rejection or derision can also be the reaction of those who would guard Homer from this criticism. We can see the condescension along with the praise in Butler's account, but we need to be just as insightful in not allowing our own unexamined gender ideology to reinforce gender stereotypes. Examining Butler carefully allows us to see how assumptions about gender and texts that can be used to promote women's literature can also be used to deride it or make it ridiculous even while praising its differences as "charming." A new method using what we know about gender is needed for Homeric poetry in particular. An approach that does not divide the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into "masculine" and "feminine," as Butler and Homeric scholars such as Bentley before him also did, may allow gender-focused and feminist approaches to illuminate all of Homeric poetry. I think we can build on these recent studies of the *Odyssey* to make considerations of gender less segregated, but future studies must be steadfast in identifying, examining, and articulating our own ideas and motives when it comes to gendered studies. By doing so we can avoid Homeric scholars a hundred years from now asking, "Was she joking?"

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