



CENTER FOR  
HELLENIC  
STUDIES  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

## Women and Property

conference organized by and  
collection edited by:

Deborah Lyons  
Raymond Westbrook

### **The Invention of the Female Mind: Women, Property and Gender Ideology in Archaic Greece**

Hans van Wees

University College, London

Women in early Greek poetry appear to be appreciated for a full range of qualities, by comparison to classical Greek women, whose main virtue in the eyes of men was, it might be said with some exaggeration, their ability to produce legitimate heirs. Agamemnon, for example, rated his favorite slave woman more highly than his wife in “stature and physique,” in skill, and in her qualities of mind (*Iliad* 1.113-15). “The whole rhetorical list of female qualities could be worse,” notes a modern commentator, “but it has a suggestion of the cattle-market all the same. That suits Agamemnon’s temperament” (Kirk 1985, 65-6). Modern sensibilities may prefer a generic declaration of love to an itemized list of admirable qualities, but Agamemnon’s attitude was in fact widely shared. Homer, Hesiod and their heroes routinely evaluate women by one or more of the three criteria of beauty, skill and mind. Aeneas’ sister is described as supreme in her age group on all three counts (*Iliad* 13.427-33). Bellerophon’s mother is praised for her skill, wisdom, and the “charming beauty” which “radiated from her skin and silvery garments” (Hesiod F 43a.70-4 M-W). Given a habit of openly measuring and discussing personal qualities – of men no less than women<sup>1</sup> – one must agree that Agamemnon’s list of criteria could have been “worse.” Indeed it is hard to see how it might have been “better”: looks, skill, and intellectual and emotional qualities of mind surely cover all the major criteria by which any person might care to be assessed.

It will be argued in what follows that the portrayal of women in the earliest Greek poets – Homer, Hesiod and Semonides – reflects a society in which women were valued for all these qualities because these actively contributed to the status of a household. Subsequently, social change brought about a devaluation of female beauty and weaving skills and created the need for a new ideology of gender, which replaced a sense of intellectual equality with the notion of the innate inferiority of the female mind. The result was a society which strictly circumscribed the roles of women and diminished their contribution to, and control over, household property.

#### **Beauty**

##### *The cost of a wife*

The trophy wife stands out among the ten caricatures of women created by the poet Semonides of Amorgos in the mid-seventh century BCE:

Another kind of woman springs from the long-maned mare. She passes on all slavish toil and trouble: she will not touch a millstone or pick up a sieve; she will not clear the house of dung and to avoid the soot she will not sit by the oven. Yet she compels a man to love her. Every day she washes off the dirt, two or three times, and anoints herself with scents; she always wears her hair combed out long, shaded with flowers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Men’s main skills – fighting, public speaking – are of course different from those of women but both sexes are assessed by the same three criteria of looks (*eidōs*), skills (*erga*) and mind (*noos, phrenes*).

A beautiful sight is such a woman – for others. For the man who has her she is bad, unless he is some *tyrannos* or scepter-bearer who shows off his spirit by such means.<sup>2</sup>

A beautiful wife who did not engage in domestic labor but spent all day grooming herself thus counted as a status symbol among the early Greek elite of “scepter-bearing” aristocrats, who alone could afford to keep such a woman.<sup>3</sup> The stories in Homer and other early poets about heroes energetically competing for beautiful wives were therefore probably more than fairy-tales: they reflected attitudes, and perhaps practices, familiar to contemporary audiences.

Whatever other attractions women may have, it is their looks which are most heavily stressed by the poets. Emblematic of the general appreciation of female beauty are the Trojan elders, moved by the sight of the divinely beautiful Helen to whisper that no one can blame them for waging a ten-year war over “such a woman” (*Iliad* 3.153-60). The importance of good looks in a wife is repeatedly stressed. The *Odyssey* tells us that Neleus married the “outstandingly beautiful” Chloris “on account of her beauty” (11.281-2). Their “stout” daughter Pero was “a marvel among mortals, courted by all the men of the region” (11.287-8). Nausikaa was courted by “many” of the Phaeacians, and her Artemis-like looks were clearly a prominent reason.<sup>4</sup> One hundred and eight noblemen court Penelope, and leave no doubt about their motivation: there is uproar when she leaves the room, as “each man prayed that he might lie beside her in bed” (1.365-6). To her face, they express the sentiment more politely: “If all Greeks ... could see you, there would be even more suitors dining in your house tomorrow, because you surpass womankind in looks, stature and brains” (18.244-9).<sup>5</sup>

In the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, we meet Atalanta, “sparkling like the Graces” (F 73.3 M-W; cf. FF 72-6), and Hippodameia (F 259 M-W), both objects of keen competition; Demodike, “whom most strong *basileis* in the world courted ... on account of her infinite beauty” (F 22 M-W); and the daughters of Proteus, “courted by the whole Greek world” (*panhellenes*, F 130 M-W). Most famously, Helen was courted for her beauty by princes from all over Greece: the poet praises her looks (F 196.5-6 M-W) and stresses that one suitor sent an agent to court her on his behalf “although he had never seen what she looked like, but had only heard others speak of it” (F 199.1-3), while another suitor made a point of visiting in person so that he could see for himself instead of relying on stories alone (F 204.17-22).<sup>6</sup>

The competitive nature of courtship meant that the successful suitor gained not only a sexually attractive partner but the prestige of having won the woman as a “prize” (*aethlon*)<sup>7</sup> in open rivalry with his peers. By winning her hand he had by definition proven himself “the best man” among them: Penelope and Helen were destined for the “best” of the Greeks,<sup>8</sup> and a woman like Aeneas’ sister Hippodameia, supreme in her age group in “beauty, skill and brains,” was bound to marry “the best man in the land of Troy” (*Iliad* 13.427-33).

Both Homer and Hesiod show a curious ambivalence about the criteria by which the “best” suitor is selected. Penelope’s suitors are ultimately set a test of strength and skill in archery, the suitors of Atalanta and Hippodameia compete in foot- and chariot-races, and in the *Iliad* Othryoneus courts “the most beautiful of Priam’s daughters” by offering her father his

---

<sup>2</sup> *hostis toioutois thumon aglaizetai*, F 7.57-70.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Scepter-bearing *basileis*’ in Homer and Hesiod include not only ruling kings but a much wider hereditary elite, and this is presumably the meaning of the term here as well.

<sup>4</sup> *Odyssey* 6.34-5, 283-4, with 6.15-16, 102-9, 149-69, and 8.457 for Nausikaa’s beauty.

<sup>5</sup> Most of Penelope’s suitors have ulterior motives for conducting their courtship as aggressively as they do, but their main reason for wanting to marry Penelope is that she is beautiful, not that she, as is often supposed, has the power to make her husband king: see further van Wees 1992, 285-92. Contra Westbrook, this volume.?

<sup>6</sup> Cf. F 23a.13-14 (restored) and F 180.8-10 M-W for women courted primarily for their beauty.

<sup>7</sup> *Odyssey* 21.106-9 (Penelope); Hesiod F 37.7 M-W (Pero).

<sup>8</sup> Helen: Hesiod F 198.6 M-W; Penelope: *Odyssey* 11.179; 16.76; 18.289; 19.528; 20.335.

services as an ally against the Greek invaders (13.3659). When the *Catalogue of Women* comments that, if only Achilles had been old enough to court Helen, “no man on earth” could have defeated him in competition for her hand (F 204.49-55 M-W), the poet again implies that a man’s personal strength, courage and skills would be decisive.

Yet everywhere else it is assumed that the successful suitor will be, not the strongest, fastest, or bravest man, but the one who gives the greatest gifts to the bride and above all to her family. According to the *Catalogue*, Odysseus knew from the start that among Helen’s suitors Menelaus “would win because he was the best of the Greeks in possessions” (F 198.6), and Menelaus did indeed win simply “because he provided most” (F 204.47-9), in the process defeating Menestheus of Athens, who also “provided very many things, because he did not think that any of the heroes would be superior to him in property or gifts” (F 200.3-9).<sup>9</sup> At least one of Penelope’s suitors feels exactly same, “relying on the wealth of his father” to win her hand (*Odyssey* 20.289-90), and not without reason, since right up to the moment that Penelope proposes an archery contest for her suitors everyone assumes that she will marry “whoever is the best man and offers most.” Indeed, “her father and brothers urge her to marry Eurymachus, for he outdoes all the other suitors in making presents and keeps raising his offer of marriage-gifts.”<sup>10</sup> In the same way, Nausicaa will marry the man who “brings to bear the greatest weight in marriage-gifts” (*Odyssey* 6.159).

In a few stories, suitors offer as marriage-gifts herds of livestock which are not their own property but acquired by cattle-raiding. Aias, for instance, bids for Helen’s hand by promising the “amazing feat” of rustling the livestock of eight neighboring cities and making a gift of them (Hesiod F 204.4-11).<sup>11</sup> Such gifts would kill two birds with one stone, since they constituted both great wealth and proof of personal excellence. Perhaps this was once a Greek custom, but more probably it was merely a conceit which allowed the tension between wealth and excellence, always awkward in real life, to be neatly resolved in legend.

The *Odyssey* certainly makes it perfectly clear that a man’s personal quality will count for nothing unless he is rich as well: in the event of a poor man winning the archery contest for Penelope, his reward will be a couple of gifts at best, since everyone is agreed that it would be “not at all appropriate,” not to say inconceivable, that she should marry him (21.314-22). Almost equally telling is the fact that suitors need not conduct the courtship in person, but can convey their offers through messengers or indeed leave the negotiations entirely to their fathers or older brothers, who control the family fortune which will pay for the bride.<sup>12</sup>

Outside the world of legend, the value of a suitor’s gifts were evidently the decisive factor in early Greek courtship, and insofar as a beautiful wife was a status symbol among the upper classes, she was therefore primarily a symbol of wealth. If, like Semonides’ mare-woman, she did no cooking or cleaning but devoted herself to personal grooming, she would only reinforce her effectiveness as a show of conspicuous consumption on the part of the husband.

Men at lower social levels were under the same pressure to win and keep a beautiful, non-productive wife, and the economic strain this placed on the less rich led to resentment of women as parasites. Hesiod’s portrayal of women is entirely focused on the tension between the sexual appeal of women and the drain on resources which they represent. In his descriptions of the first and archetypal woman, Pandora, Hesiod harps on her “desirable, beautiful appearance,” on the “yearning” and “limb-devouring obsession” which she inspires,

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. F 204.1-3 (‘most gifts after Menelaus’). Other gifts: F 197.1-5; 198.9-12; 199.9-11; 204.14.

<sup>10</sup> *Odyssey* 20.335, 15.16-18 (also 16.76-7, 392; 19.528-9). If none of the contenders succeed Penelope will, after all, marry ‘whoever may offer most’ (21.162). Cf. 11.117; 13.378; 15.18; 16.391.

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Bellerophon’s mother has a suitor ‘intending to drive cattle’ for her (Hesiod F 43a.75-7), and Pero’s suitors are set the task of stealing the cattle of Iphicles (*Odyssey* 11.287-97; 15.225-40).

<sup>12</sup> Messengers: Hesiod FF 198.8, 199.7. Older brothers acting for siblings: Hesiod F 197.4-5; *Odyssey* 11.287-97. Fathers acting for sons: *Iliad* 9.393; *Odyssey* 4.10; Hesiod F 43a.75-7 (probably).

on the irony that a man will “passionately embrace” a being created to harm him.<sup>13</sup> As for the harm done by women, the poet says only that they consume the wealth gathered by men, like drones “scraping together into their bellies the fruits of others’ toil” (*Theogony* 599). A woman will take her share in times of abundance, but will not tolerate poverty (593). A man can only safeguard his livelihood by refusing to marry (605-6). Hesiod does not need to explain why Pandora opened her “box,” which was actually a storage jar (*pithos*; *Works & Days* 94, 97, 98): she was evidently hunting for food. Hence his marital advice: do not marry a “woman who lies around waiting for dinner” (*deipnolochē*), and “do not be deceived by a sweet-talking woman in a bottom-hugging outfit snooping around in your granary.”<sup>14</sup>

The same concerns are at the root of many of Semonides’ caricatures. The drain on resources which women constitute is represented not only by the mare-woman, but by the “sow” and the “earth,” both of whom do no work but simply sit and eat (F 7.2-6, 21-6), and by the “donkey” who will work under duress, but otherwise sits and eats everywhere, all the time (43-7).<sup>15</sup> Semonides echoes Hesiod’s sentiments: whoever lives with a woman “will not drive Hunger from his house any time soon” (100-1). The major form of compensation for the cost of keeping a woman is again her beauty. The ideal female type, the “bee,” stands out among women for her “divine charm” (88-9), while the only type described as ugly, the “monkey” (“a very ugly face ... short neck, clumsy movements, no bottom, all limb,” 73-6), is not coincidentally called “by far the worst.” The “weasel” woman is not positively ugly, but utterly lacking in attractive physical features (50-4), while the “sea” woman, the only one other than the bee and the mare to be credited with a good side, is again very beautiful (31).

The husband’s interest in conspicuously displaying his wife’s good looks is strongly hinted at: just as the mare-woman is “a beautiful sight to *others*” (F.7.67-8), the good thing about the sea-woman is that, on a good day, a *visitor* to the house will praise her as the best and most beautiful woman in the world (29-31). Conversely, the monkey-woman’s lack of sexual appeal to her “long-suffering” husband (76-7) is mentioned only after the fact that her looks are ridiculed by *everyone in town* (73-4). The poet complains that bad wives make it difficult to receive guests at all (19, 106-7). Semonides’ repeated references to the impression women make on guests (*xeinoi*) imply that the mistress of the household is present when her husband entertains visitors, just as in Homer, but unlike in classical Greece.<sup>16</sup>

Women may be shown off, not only to visitors at home, but to a much wider audience. Early Greek women, again unlike their classical Athenian counterparts, are able to move around town and even beyond the city walls quite freely. It is when Helen visits the city wall, as many other Trojan women do, and sits down among the elders that she attracts their whispered praise. “When she walks around town” Arete receives the polite greetings and admiring glances of all the people (*Odyssey* 7.71-2) while the monkey-woman meets with general mockery “as she goes through the town” (Semonides F 7.73-4). Odysseus on his travels keeps bumping into girls who have left town in order to fetch water or do the laundry in remote places, unaccompanied by men (*Odyssey* 6.56-211; 7.18-20; 10.105-8).

“Every man will be mindful to praise his own wife,” says Semonides, “but to find fault with the wife of another” (F 7.112-13). One might have expected the opposite sentiment, in conclusion to a catalogue of the troubles that women inflict on their husbands. The poet’s

---

<sup>13</sup> *Works & Days* 57-8, 62-3, 65-6; her appearance itself is only briefly described (72-6). The *Theogony* has only a brief explicit allusion to Pandora’s beauty (‘a beautiful evil’, 585), but a lengthy description of her appearance (573-84). In both poems, her looks are described wholly in terms of her clothes and jewellery, which in Homer, too, are treated as a vital ingredient of beauty (see below).

<sup>14</sup> *Works & Days* 373-5, 704. The implication that women used their sexual appeal to deceive their husbands and trick them out of property is discussed in the section on the female ‘mind’, below.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. weasel-woman who steals from the neighbours and snatches food from sacrifices (F 7.55-6).

<sup>16</sup> For women at Homeric feasts, see van Wees 1995, 154-63.

summary makes sense, however, in a world where women are seen as “prizes” to be won and displayed. Husbands keen to show off their trophy wives are bound to talk up the virtues of their own spouses and denigrate the virtues of others’, regardless of how they really behave.

### *The value of a daughter*

While a woman might serve her husband as a means of displaying wealth, she served her father and brothers as a means of *gaining* wealth. Odysseus’ parents “received countless things” in exchange for the hand of their youngest daughter and even Zeus received marriage-gifts in exchange for his daughter Aphrodite (*Odyssey* 8.318-19; 15.367). Penelope’s family were obviously looking forward to the same result when they urged her to marry the highest bidder. The gifts of livestock which women attracted from their suitors were so important to their families that nubile girls were described as “cattle-fetching maidens” (*alphesiboiai*). According to Hesiod, the mother of Adonis was actually *called* Cattlefetcher.<sup>17</sup>

Marriage arrangements in early Greece, as in so many societies, involved various forms of gift-giving between the families of bride and groom. First, as part of the courtship, a suitor or his agent visits the prospective bride’s parental home with gifts for the woman and her family:

Those who wish to court a good woman, the daughter of a rich man, and compete with one another, will bring their own cattle and fat sheep, a feast for the girl’s people, and they will give splendid gifts. (*Odyssey* 18.276-9)

Penelope’s suitors break the rules about bringing livestock for a feast, but with some prompting do give her precious gifts – items of personal apparel, mostly golden jewelry – and make gifts to her father and brothers as well.<sup>18</sup> One of Helen’s suitors appears to have offered such spectacular courting-gifts, including a number of female slaves carrying golden drinking cups, that her brothers were *almost* tempted away from Menelaus.<sup>19</sup> The purpose of such gifts was clearly to win the favor of the bride and her family, in much the same manner as Ares’ seduction of Aphrodite: “he gave her many gifts” (*Odyssey* 8.269). Courting-gifts were unconditional and unsuccessful suitors would simply have to accept the loss; hence Odysseus, knowing that Menelaus was bound to win Helen, kept his hat in the ring by sending frequent messages to Helen’s brothers, but calculatingly “never sent any gifts.”<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, suitors or their families promise to give the bride’s family “(very) many,” “countless,” even “infinite,” marriage-gifts (*hedna* or *eedna*) if their suit is successful. Apart from large numbers of livestock, such as the 100 head of cattle and 1,000 sheep and goats offered for the daughter of Kisses (*Iliad* 11.244-5) or the herds of horses and cattle and flocks of sheep offered for the daughter of Dardanos (Hesiod F 180.8-9), marriage-gifts might include items of “treasure”: gold and bronze vessels are repeatedly mentioned.<sup>21</sup> Unlike courting-gifts, *hedna* are offered conditionally and actually given only by the chosen suitor.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> *Iliad* 18.593; *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (5) 119; Hesiod F 139 M-W.

<sup>18</sup> Gifts to family: 15.17-18 (‘gifts’ distinguished from *eedna*: see below). To Penelope: 18.284-303.

<sup>19</sup> Hesiod F 197.1-5 M-W: the fragmentary reference to ‘women carrying golden cups’ suggests gifts immediately presented, as opposed to promised for the future as bridewealth (see below).

<sup>20</sup> Hesiod F 198.2-8 M-W: the messages presumably included token offers of bridewealth (see below).

<sup>21</sup> *Polla*: *Iliad* 11.243; Hesiod F 199.9, 200.4, 204.14. *Pleista*: Hesiod F 200.8. *Myria*: *Iliad* 16.190; 22.472; *Odyssey* 11.282, 15.367; Hesiod F 26.37, 43a21. *Apeiresia*: *Iliad* 16.178; *Odyssey* 19.529; Hesiod F 198.10. Livestock: also Hesiod F 43a.23-4, 198.11-12, and, of course, in the case of the cattle-rustlers, cited in n.11, above. Gold and bronze: Hesiod FF 199.10-11, 200.4-5 (cauldrons).

<sup>22</sup> The verb most often used in relation to bridewealth, *didōmi*, is ambiguous since it can mean both ‘give’ and ‘offer’. Taking it to mean ‘give’, Finley once suggested that offers of bridewealth, like courting gifts, were unconditional, and were simply lost to unsuccessful suitors (1955/1981, 238). One suitor, however, explicitly ‘promises’, rather than gives, gifts (*Iliad* 11.243-5); military aid and cattle-rustling (see above) are clearly presented as conditional; Penelope’s family would have no reason to urge her to marry the highest bidder (see

In return, the family of the bride “will organize the wedding and assemble the very many marriage-gifts which ought to accompany one’s own daughter” (*Odyssey* 1.277-8, 2.196-7). Marriage-gifts from the bride’s family are called by the same name as gifts from the groom’s family: *hedna* or *eedna*.<sup>23</sup> These gifts are “assembled” insofar as not only the father and brothers of the bride but also other relatives and friends contribute presents to go “with” the woman on her wedding day. Among the gifts from the bride’s father, we find clothes, slaves, gold and bronze. The elaborate headdress given by Aphrodite to Andromache, the armour and chariot given by the gods to Peleus at his wedding to Thetis, and the “ineffable gifts” promised by Telemachus for his mother’s remarriage are best understood as presents contributed by friends and relatives, some for the bride personally, some for her husband, others for the common use of the new household.<sup>24</sup> Gifts contributed by the bride’s relatives are known to have been customary in Lesbos, c. 600 BC, where they went by the technical name *athrēmata*. These were no doubt the inspiration for Sappho’s portrait of the arrival of Hector and Andromache at Troy, bringing “many golden bracelets, scented purple garments, intricate trinkets, countless silver drinking cups, and ivory” (FF 44 and 169a L-P).

Trying to pin modern or anthropological labels on any of these gifts has proved difficult. Scholars argue about whether the gifts accompanying the bride constitute a “dowry” or rather a “trousseau,” and although most agree that the groom’s gifts constitute a form of “brideprice” or “bridewealth,” some deny that dowry and bridewealth could ever have coexisted. It seems better simply to adopt a native perspective, as it were, and to accept that in early Greece marriages entailed neither dowry, nor bridewealth, but an anthropologically quite common *exchange* of gifts between the families involved, called *hedna* in Greek.<sup>25</sup> Livestock and other gifts pass from the groom and his family to the bride’s family, while in return a wide variety of other gifts presented by the bride and her relatives pass into the hands of the groom’s father while the couple live in the husband’s parental home – one of the slaves brought by Penelope is still working in her father-in-law’s orchard twenty years later (*Odyssey* 4.736-7) – and eventually into the groom’s own hands when he inherits or establishes his own household.

This is not to say that the exchange of gifts was necessarily balanced. Homer and Hesiod put great emphasis on the value of the grooms’ gifts but say little about the gifts from the brides’ families. Moreover, the groom’s *hedna* are negotiated in advance by a process of

---

above) unless his offer of bridewealth were conditional upon marriage; and a cuckolded husband could hardly demand his bridewealth back from his father-in-law if it had been given unconditionally (*Odyssey* 8.317-19). In short, bridewealth negotiations were conducted like an ‘auction’, as Finley himself put it elsewhere (1954/1977, 66; cf. Lacey 1966, 57), not like a game of poker. There is no evidence for bridewealth going to the bride herself rather than her family (contra Finsler 1912, 416-18; cf. Snodgrass 1974, 115-16).

<sup>23</sup> Not only in the passage cited, but also at *Odyssey* 2.52 (Icarius himself *eednōsaito thugatra*, ‘would provide his daughter with *hedna*’: Hesiod F 200.7 shows that the verb means ‘to give *hedna*’, not ‘to receive *hedna*’, contra e.g. Morris 1986, 109) and *Iliad* 13.381-2 (the Greeks jokingly promise to be good *eednōtai*, ‘*hedna*-givers’ to a Trojan ally: this translation, provided by Hesychius, s.v. *eednōtēs*, ‘dowry-giver’, makes sense in the context, unlike ‘*hedna*-receivers’, suggested by e.g. Finley 1955/1981, 293 n.44). That it was normal practice for fathers to give away their daughters with gifts is also clear from *Iliad* 9.147-8 and 289-90, and the passages cited below.

<sup>24</sup> Father’s/brothers’ gifts: *Odyssey* 4.736-7 (slave, employed in orchard, see below), 6.27-30 (clothes for ‘those who will lead [Nausicaa] away’), 23.227-9 (slave, Penelope’s personal attendant); *Iliad* 22.51 (gold and bronze for Laothoe, used by husband to pay ransom); *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (5), 137-40 (father and mother send gold and clothing). Andromache’s headdress: *Iliad* 22.468-72. Peleus’ weapons: *Iliad* 17.443, 18.82-5 (cf. Plato *Laws* 944a, where they are described as Thetis’ dowry). Telemachus’ gifts: *Odyssey* 20.342-3.

<sup>25</sup> So Finley 1955/1981, 241 (needlessly distinguishing between a trousseau and *hedna* given to the groom, 239-40); Lacey 1966, 56-8; Seaford 1994, 16. Some scholars play down or try to explain away gifts from the bride’s family (‘dowry’): Scheid 1979, 65-73; Morris 1986, 106-10. Snodgrass 1974, 115-18, argued for the historical incompatibility of dowry and bridewealth, but too hastily dismissed as irrelevant the anthropological evidence for gift-exchange at marriage (ibid. 117).

competitive bidding while the value of the bride's *hedna* is apparently not subject to negotiation but determined by the generosity of her family. One gets a strong impression that the groom's family gives more than they receive, and that the bride's family can expect to make a gain in the exchange of marriage-gifts for a "cattle-fetching" daughter or sister. Such an attitude to gift-giving is typical of the Homeric world: in the exchange of gifts of guest-friendship (*xenia*), too, guests hope to make a profit at the expense of their hosts.<sup>26</sup>

A woman's beauty is not merely a passive asset, but may – at least in the context of formal courtship – be actively exploited to generate wealth for her family. The *Catalogue of Women* told the tale of Aithon, cursed with an insatiable hunger but blessed with a daughter, Mestra, who could take any shape she wanted and fed her ever-hungry father with the huge numbers of livestock she brought in as *hedna* by marrying herself off to one suitor after another, each time in a different guise (Hesiod F 43 M-W).<sup>27</sup> Slightly less fantastic is the story in the *Odyssey* of Penelope's manipulation of her suitors. After a supernatural transformation which makes her "taller and stouter," turns her skin as white as ivory, and cleanses her cheeks (18.192-6), her suitors are stunned by her appearance: "they stood rooted to the spot, unable to move, their spirit spell-bound with desire. Every man prayed that he might lie beside her in bed" (212-13). Cleverly exploiting their weakened state of mind, she hints that she may agree to marry soon, but in the meantime feels entitled to courting-gifts (274-80). They respond by presenting her with spectacularly rich presents (284-303). The whole episode was set up by Athena to make Penelope "even more respected [or "valued," *timēessa*] than she already was" by her menfolk (161-2) and succeeds perfectly: her husband, presumed dead but present in disguise, is delighted to see her cash in on her sexual appeal: "he rejoiced *because she extracted gifts from them* and bewitched their spirit with gentle words" (281-3).<sup>28</sup>

To modern, and indeed classical Greek tastes, the behavior of Penelope seems *risqué* and the schemes of Mestra dangerously close to prostitution. Later authors so far misunderstood Mestra's story as to claim that she "sold herself every day."<sup>29</sup> For the early poets, however, it was evidently admirable for a woman to be able to exploit her looks – within the boundaries of the legitimate customs of courtship, of course – in order to profit her family. She would win the respect of men, rather than a reputation for loose sexual morals.

Beauty, then, was regarded by the early Greek aristocracy as a material asset to be actively exploited where possible. In this respect, there was little difference between the beauty of women and the beauty of men. Upper-class women had some say in whom they married, and demanded good-looking husbands as much as upper-class men demanded good-looking wives, as Helen and Nausicaa make very clear.<sup>30</sup> Even some of the basic criteria of beauty were the same for men and women: to be "taller and stouter" was desirable for both sexes.<sup>31</sup> Above all, Odysseus, like his wife, extracted gifts with the aid of divinely enhanced good looks and charm. He was endowed with these qualities during his visit to the Phaeacians and they are presented by the poet as vital to his success in overcoming his hosts' initial hostility to the point where they are seduced into offering him an array of precious gifts. This is not just a literary conceit, but has a close parallel in the ethnographic record: an important part of the famous *kula*-ring exchanges are the Trobrianders' efforts to make themselves attractive by magical and cosmetic means (including anointing the body with coconut oil, to much the

---

<sup>26</sup> See van Wees 2002 and 1992, 228-37.

<sup>27</sup> The significance of Mestra's story was pointed out to me by Elizabeth Irwin.

<sup>28</sup> The intended effect on the suitors is explicitly "to make the spirit of the suitors flutter as much as possible" (*malista petaseie*, 18. 160-1), "so that the Achaeans might be astounded" (191).

<sup>29</sup> So the scholiast on Lycophron 1393 and Philodemus, *On Piety* p. 49 (= Hesiod FF 43bc M-W).

<sup>30</sup> *Odyssey* 4.264; 6.242-5.

<sup>31</sup> *Odyssey* 6.230; 8.20; or 'bigger and more beautiful': 10.395-6; cf. 1.301; 3.199.

same effect as the olive oil applied by Greeks), in order to weaken their hosts' resistance and coax more, and more valuable, gifts out of them.<sup>32</sup>

### *The devaluation of beauty*

"Ancient customs were too simple and barbarian: the Greeks used to carry arms and buy their wives from one another," said Aristotle (*Politics* 1268b40-1), thinking of the *hedna* offered to the bride's family in epic poetry. This custom had long fallen out of use: no surviving law mentions it, which suggests that it had disappeared by the early sixth century at the latest.

This is a symptom of fundamental changes in attitudes towards women and marriage, best illustrated by the story of the wooing of Agariste, around 570 BC (Herodotus 6.126-30). At first glance the story suggests epic-style competitive courtship, as thirteen suitors gather from all over Greece to vie for Agariste's hand. There are crucial differences, however. First, it is not Agariste's beauty, but the prestige of her father, Cleisthenes, tyrant of Sicyon, which attracts the suitors: after sealing his reputation with an Olympic chariot-victory, Cleisthenes issues an invitation to "any Greek who deems himself *worthy of becoming Cleisthenes' son-in-law*" (6.126.2). Secondly, the suitors offer no gifts, but are "lavishly" wined, dined and housed for a year at the expense of the bride's father (6.128.1); the unsuccessful candidates are in addition presented with a talent of silver by way of compensation for their disappointment and wasted time (6.130.2). Thirdly, the suitors are not primarily judged by their wealth or their warlike prowess (both surely taken for granted), but by the athletic and social skills which they display in the gymnasium and at the symposium respectively (6.128.1).

Historical or not, the story reflects the essential aspects of marriage as it was conceived of in the classical period. The bride is treated as little more than the glue which holds together an alliance between men; her personal qualities matter much less than the personal qualities of fathers-, brothers- and sons-in-law. Moreover, marriage-related gift-giving is all one-way: the bride's family is expected to display generosity and above all to present a substantial "dowry," for which they receive no return and which is therefore called *proix*, "free gift." One archaic poem speaks of such free gifts to the groom as "large and splendid compensation" (*apoina*), which suggests that they could be thought of as the groom's reward for taking on the cost of maintaining the woman (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* [5] 139-40). The size of the dowry is another factor which takes precedence over a woman's personal qualities: another anecdote from Herodotus, set in the late sixth century, relates how the Athenian Callias did his three daughters an exceptional favor by allowing them to choose their own husbands, and how, in order to enable them to do so, he gave them each "an extremely lavish free gift" (6.122.2). The implication is that a large enough dowry could "buy" any man in Athens.

Generosity in the provision of dowries reached a point where governments felt it necessary to impose limits: in Athens, a law attributed to Solon allowed a bride to carry only three items of clothing and a mortar for crushing barley in her wedding procession, and in Gortyn, too, legislators were apparently concerned to limit the amount a father could give to his daughter.<sup>33</sup>

This mode of marriage did not appear out of thin air, but has antecedents in the Homeric world. Agamemnon offers Achilles the hand of his daughter, accompanied by rich gifts, explicitly without expecting any *hedna* in return (*Iliad* 9.144-8, 286-90); he makes this offer, not because Achilles has any interest in his daughter, but because he wants to restore good

---

<sup>32</sup> The Homeric and comparative evidence is discussed in van Wees 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Solon: Plutarch, *Solon* 20; the term used here is *phermē*, not *proix*, and is perhaps best explained as referring to the things which were openly displayed in the wedding procession (cf. Sappho on the wealth of 'trinkets' displayed in the procession of Andromache and Hector, F 44, cited above); if it was meant to include the whole dowry, the law was clearly never upheld. Gortyn: see Stefan Link's paper.



relations between himself and his strongest military ally.<sup>34</sup> Alcinoos tells Odysseus that he would like to keep him in the land of the Phaeacians, because he admires him (“being the kind of man you are, having the same thoughts as I do,” *Odyssey* 7.311-15); the king’s offer of his daughter in marriage – implicitly without gifts from Odysseus, who was washed ashore shipwrecked and has nothing to give – is evidently meant to consolidate the ties between them. The same is true of the king of Lycia who marries off his daughter to the exiled Bellerophon once this hero has impressed him with a series of great deeds (*Iliad* 6.191-5), and probably of Tydeus who is in much the same position (*Iliad* 14.119-25). In each case, the bride is secondary to the relationship between the men involved, and the gifts, if any, pass exclusively from the bride’s family to the groom’s.<sup>35</sup>

This type of marriage arrangement thus had a long history, but whereas in the world of Homer and Hesiod it was the exception, granted in unusual circumstances or as a special favor,<sup>36</sup> by the sixth century at the latest it had become the norm.

A clue to the explanation of the change in balance may lie in the different perception of social relations which these two types of marriage custom imply. The Homeric norm pitched the families involved against one another in antagonistic relationships. Occasional rivalry between two suitors for the hand of the same woman could spark off fierce feuds in later Greece,<sup>37</sup> so one can imagine how much potential for resentment and outright conflict was inherent in regular, overt and public competitions between many suitors for a single bride in early Greece. Even the ties forged between the families of bride and groom were relatively precarious when the bride’s family extracted as many gifts as possible from the groom’s and tended to make a profit in the exchange of *hedna*. The families of the epic world thus behave in matters of marriage as if they are in open competition with one another, in an essentially hostile relation only partly resolved through the exchange of gifts. This is a perception of social structure characteristic of pre-state societies. Later archaic and classical Greek families, by contrast, arranged their marriages in such a way as to emphasize the generosity of the wife-givers, the obligation owed by the wife-takers, and the closeness of relations between all men concerned. The emphasis on social and marital ties as stable and harmonious is associated with societies which have a more developed central governing power, an early form of state.<sup>38</sup> A seventh-century process of state-formation may thus help explain the change in marriage customs.

The implications for the status of women were dramatic. From objects of keen competition, “cattle-fetching” assets to their families, and trophy wives to be proudly displayed by their husbands, they became near-anonymous pawns in alliance-building games, whose dowries imposed a heavy burden on their native households, and whose personal qualities came

---

<sup>34</sup> A military alliance substitutes for *hedna* also at *Iliad* 13.365-9, but here the offer is made explicitly for the sake of the woman involved, ‘the most beautiful of Priam’s daughters’.

<sup>35</sup> Achilles is expected to lead his bride, with her gifts, to the house of his father (*Iliad* 9.147, 289); the other three men are exiles abroad and any gifts will therefore go to new household that they will establish with the help of their fathers-in-law, who also provide them with a house and land. Some scholars have seen here a form of marriage connected with ‘uxorilocal residence’, where the husband moves in with the wife’s family, as opposed to the normal Greek practice of wives moving in with the husband and/or his family (virilocal and patrilocal residence; Lacey 1968, 59-60; Morris 1986, 107-9, Finkelberg 1991<sup>35</sup>), but there is no basis for this. Achilles’ bride will move in with her husband, as is normal, and although it is true that in the other cases the husband stays in his wife’s home *country*, he does so because he is in exile and has no paternal home to which to return; the whole point of their fathers-in-law granting them an estate is to enable them to set up their own households into which to receive their wives, as is normal.

<sup>36</sup> The same arrangement may be implied by the story of the ‘son of Castor’, who had only a poor inheritance, but married ‘a woman from a family rich in land, on account of my excellence’, which restored his fortunes (*Odyssey* 14.210-12): presumably he gave no *hedna* but did receive large gifts.

<sup>37</sup> E.g. Herodotus 6.65.

<sup>38</sup> See van Wees 1998a for the anthropological literature on this aspect of reciprocity.

distinctly second-best to their family connections as far as their husbands were concerned. The physical appearance and sexual attractiveness of wives is rarely mentioned in classical sources – although it is famously played up for comic purposes in Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* – and a man who “fell in love with his own wife, and, being in love, believed her to be by far the most beautiful woman of all,” as Herodotus said of king Gyges (1.8.1) was evidently regarded as an aberration. Greek men, of course, continued to value physical beauty highly, but those whose beauty mattered were lovers – boys, youths, courtesans and prostitutes – rather than spouses.<sup>39</sup>

Some of the earliest scenes of symposia on Greek vases, c. 600 BC, include a female figure who may plausibly be interpreted as the host’s wife; around the same time Alcman’s *Partheneia* offered exuberant praise of the beauty of the daughters of prominent Spartan citizens, and Alcaeus dreamt of the beauty contests organized for the women of Lesbos (F 130B.17-18 L-P). Soon afterwards, wives disappear from the vases to be replaced by youths and female entertainers.<sup>40</sup> The change may mark a turning point in the history of Greek women: the point at which attitudes to marriage had changed far enough to make the personal qualities of wives and daughters matter less than the status of their families, and at which the beauty of one’s wife was no longer something to be shown off to guests and in public places.

## Skill

Heavy domestic labor – grinding corn, kneading and baking bread, and cleaning the house, an especially unpleasant job when it involves clearing up the droppings of livestock left to wander in the courtyard – was “slavish toil” for the aristocrat’s wife in Semonides, and it was indeed always left to slave women in the upper-class households described by Homer.<sup>41</sup> Fetching water and washing clothes, by contrast, were jobs which “the wives and beautiful daughters” of men at all social levels shared with their slaves.<sup>42</sup> But the task to which many women devoted themselves almost full-time was spinning and weaving. These are the “works” to which Homer alludes when he praises women’s skills. The ability to “weave intricate cloth” is the only skill with which Hesiod credits Pandora, and weaving is the only female activity – other than giving birth – for which he bothers to specify an auspicious day (*Works and Days* 63-4, 779).

The prominence of textile work in women’s lives throughout antiquity has tended to obscure a highly significant difference between the roles of cloth in the world of the epics and in later Greece. To Homer, an abundance of high-quality home-produced cloth and clothing was a major status symbol, and women’s weaving was essential to the prestige of their families. By the end of the archaic period, upper-class women wove primarily to keep themselves busy.

Dress, of course, is always an expression of the wearer’s identity and status, but in Homer’s world clothes seem to make the man to an exceptionally high degree. Reunited with her husband after twenty years, Penelope finds it hard to decide whether he really is Odysseus, and not because he has aged: “one moment she knew him by his face, but the next moment

---

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Xenophon, *Oikonomikos* 7.10 where a husband tells his wife that he did not marry her for her sexual appeal, or [Demosthenes] *Against Neaira* 59.113 (men will marry plain women so long as they are of citizen descent) and 122 (courtesans and concubines for pleasure, wives for procreation).

<sup>40</sup> For symposia scenes, see the studies by Fehr 1971 and Dentzer 1982, esp. 123-5.

<sup>41</sup> Semonides F7.58, as cited above; 7.3-6, however, shows that among non-aristocrats cleaning was part of the wife’s duties, rather than a slave’s job. In the *Odyssey*, a large proportion of slave women employed in wealthy houses are dedicated to grinding corn, which they do during a night-shift (7.104; 20.105-10); slave women do the cleaning as well (e.g. 20.147-53).

<sup>42</sup> *Iliad* 22.155 for wives and daughters doing the laundry at Troy; for elite women washing and fetching water, see *Odyssey* 6.56-211; 7.18-20; 10.105-8, discussed above, p. 6).

she failed to recognize him *because of the poor clothes he was wearing.*” He understands exactly what the problem is: “she shows me no respect and does not yet admit that I am the one because I am dirty and wearing poor clothes” (*Odyssey* 23.94-5, 115-16). Elsewhere, too, Odysseus’ appearance is described entirely in terms of what he wears, just as Hesiod ignores Pandora’s physical appearance and conveys her beauty by describing her dress and jewelry.<sup>43</sup>

Early Greek dress consisted of only a few items. Men wore a tunic (*chiton*) directly on the skin, and on top of this either a cloak (*chlaina*), attached with a pin at one shoulder, or a wrap (*pharos*) draped around both shoulders. Tunic and cloak were worn by everyone, from Homeric aristocrat to Hesiodic farmer to slave; it is the mark of a beggar that he has no cloak but makes do with an old deerskin. The *pharos* may have been a more exclusive garment. Women wore a robe usually described as *peplos*, but also known as *he(i)anos* or *othone*, directly on the skin, and on top of this a loose wrap much like the *pharos*, but known as *kredemnon*, “head-binding,” *kalyptra* or *kalymma*, “covering,” because it was generally worn draped over the head as well as the shoulders, and used as a veil. These two garments were again worn by everyone from aristocrats’ wives and daughters to slaves.<sup>44</sup>

The basic uniformity of dress meant that differentiation of status was achieved primarily through quality, size, and number of garments, rather than through different kinds of clothing. The quality of the wool or linen, the fineness and pattern of the weave, and the application of dye all conveyed messages about the wearer’s status. The great size of garments is repeatedly emphasized: the wraps worn by men and women could be very large and yet wearable by elaborately draping them around the body; large men’s cloaks could be worn folded double; the very long and wide *peplos* was worn with many folds, overhanging flaps, and trails; even the *chiton* was long and could be worn trailing.<sup>45</sup> Large garments were prestigious not only because they were obviously costly to produce, but also because they hampered movement and thus signaled the wearer’s exemption from strenuous labor and ability to live a life of leisure.

The number of items of cloth and clothing that a household could use was almost infinite. For one thing, frequent “changes of clothing” were a feature of the elite lifestyle, along with feasts, dances, and hot baths (*Odyssey* 8.248-9; cf. 6.64-5), and to have no changes of clothing at all was a feature of the life of a slave (14.513-14). More importantly, clothes were a staple of gift-giving, not only on the occasion of a marriage, but whenever a household entertained visitors. Guests were given clean clothes to wear after bathing, and even the least honored guest could expect to receive a tunic and cloak as a parting-gift. More lavish gifts might include dozens of tunics, cloaks and wraps.<sup>46</sup> Cloaks doubled as blankets and were complemented by an array of woven sheets, wraps, rugs, and cushions used as covers for beds and chairs. An abundance of soft furnishings was another integral part of the elite lifestyle. Nestor insisted that he could not allow his guests to spend the night elsewhere,

“as if you were visiting a pauper who has no clothes at all, who does not have many blankets and sheets in his house, nothing for himself and his guests to sleep in comfortably – but *I* do have a store of beautiful blankets and sheets” (*Odyssey* 3.345-51).

---

<sup>43</sup> *Odyssey* 19.218-35: the question ‘what clothes did he wear, and what was he himself like?’ is answered with a mere description of his cloak, brooch and tunic. For Hesiod’s Pandora, see n.13 above.

<sup>44</sup> The only exceptions are ‘nymphs’ (*Odyssey* 5.230-3; 10.543-5) and female personifications (Hesiod *Works & Days* 198-200), who wear a *pharos* instead of a *peplos*. See further van Wees, forthcoming.

<sup>45</sup> For details, see again van Wees, forthcoming.

<sup>46</sup> Tunic and *pharos* after bathing: *Odyssey* 3.467; 6.214. Tunic and cloak or *pharos* on departure: e.g. 13.67; 14.516. Lavish gifts of cloth: 8.392-3; 24.275-7; *Iliad* 24.229-31.

In addition to plenty of bed- and chair covers to accommodate guests, a rich household needed a further surplus of such items for gift-giving purposes: a dozen “rugs” (*tapetas*) each featured in gifts of hospitality to Odysseus (*Odyssey* 24.276) and the ransom for Hector (*Iliad* 24.230).

Finally, a good deal of cloth was burned and buried to honor the dead. The funeral of “a man who has much property” absolutely required a large, specially woven shroud in which his body was to be cremated (*Odyssey* 2.97-102, 24.132-7). When it looks as if Hector’s body will remain unburied, his wife Andromache laments the fact that he will be

“naked – and yet clothes are laid up in store for you at home, fine and elegant, made by the hands of women. Well, then, I shall incinerate them all in a burning fire, not for your benefit because you will not lie in them, but to be a source of fame among the men and women of Troy” (*Iliad* 22.510-14)

In short, any self-respecting Homeric household needed large quantities of cloth of the highest possible quality, and not surprisingly the storerooms of the rich were packed with boxes full of cloth, as in Menelaus’ house, where we see Helen standing “beside the clothes-chests in which she kept the highly decorated *peploi* which she made herself.”<sup>47</sup> These vital supplies of cloth were produced entirely by domestic labor, rather than bought or bartered. Even the *peploi* in Priam’s storeroom described as “the work of Sidonian women” (*Iliad* 6.289-92) were not imports from Phoenicia, but woven by Phoenician women brought to Troy by Paris and put to work as slaves in his parental home.<sup>48</sup> Men were thus wholly dependent on the labor of their wives, daughters and slave women for the abundance of fine clothes and furnishings they needed to play a part in community life commensurate with their status.

Spinning and weaving skills were a source of personal reputation for a woman, not just among men, but also, and especially, among women. It is above all the censure of other women which sanctions a failure to live up to standards: Penelope worries that “some Greek woman in this community might be indignant with me” if she failed to weave a suitable shroud for her father-in-law (*Odyssey* 2.101-2; 19.146-7; 24.136-7). Conversely, it is above all the praise of other women which confirms superior weaving skills. “I noticed the shiny tunic he wore: it was as soft as the skin of a dried onion and bright as the sun,” says a man describing Odysseus’ outfit to Penelope, adding: “I tell you, *many women admired it*.”<sup>49</sup>

The greatest efforts and the greatest prestige were reserved for the women’s own robes. In Homer, *peploi* and *heanoi* are frequently said to be decorated with intricate woven patterns (*poikilia* or *daidala*), once specifically a flower-pattern and once, spectacularly, narrative scenes from the Trojan War. Other items of clothing, male and female, may be dyed in a single colour, but none are described as decorated in this way. Moreover, almost every single *peplos* in Homer has a named weaver, while the weavers of other clothes are never mentioned.<sup>50</sup> The *peplos* was thus the garment to which women applied their greatest skills,

<sup>47</sup> *Odyssey* 15.104-5; cf. 2.339; 21.51-2; *Iliad* 6.288-90.

<sup>48</sup> *Odyssey* 7.234-5, with 6.74 and 7.105-11, implies that the clothes kept in Alcinoos’s storeroom were all made by his wife and slaves; it is perhaps notable that his daughter appears to do no weaving. Otherwise, the constant emphasis on wives and slave women spinning and weaving and the absence of any reference to cloth acquired by barter confirms that domestic production is the norm.

<sup>49</sup> *Odyssey* 19.232-5. It is possible to translate the last words ‘admired *him*’ (*auton*), but a reference to ‘it’, the *chiton*, makes much better sense in the context: it is in fact covert praise for Penelope, who may be presumed to be the weaver of this fine tunic (although she claims no more than that she selected the outfit for her husband from their storeroom, 19.255-7).

<sup>50</sup> *Poikilia*: *Odyssey* 15.105-8 (made by Helen); 18.292-4; *Iliad* 5.734-6 and 8.385-7 (made by Athena); 6.289-95 (made by Sidonian women). *Daidala*: *Iliad* 14.178-80 (made by Athena). Flower patterns (*throna*) feature on a cloth woven by Andromache (*Iliad* 22.440-1) and battle-scenes on a cloth woven by Helen (*Iliad* 3.125-8): in neither case does the poet explicitly say that these two pieces of ‘cloth’ are female robes, but since the only

and which above all made the reputation of its maker, whose name was remembered. When Helen presents her favorite peplos as a gift, she calls it “a memento from Helen’s hands” (*Odyssey* 15.130).

The *peplos* adorned with scenes from the Trojan War is also Helen’s handiwork, and the images are said to represent “the struggles which Greeks and Trojans suffered on her behalf” (*Iliad* 3. 125-8). For some, this is “a pathetic symbol of the omnipresence of war” (Kirk 1985, ad loc), but perhaps we should see it in a more positive light. Helen weaving scenes from the Trojan War might be seen as a form of both self-expression and self-glorification, since she is simultaneously consumed with guilt for helping to bring about the conflict, and keenly aware that the war will be the main source of her fame (*Iliad* 6.357-8). It is tempting to see a parallel for such a self-reflexive design in a scene of lamentation on a Middle Protoattic mug from Athens, dating to c. 660 BC.<sup>51</sup> Here, the robes of at least two of the mourning women are decorated with images related to death: one has a sphinx and the other a picture of a mourning woman lamenting who is drawn, not in the Protoattic style of the rest of the painting, but in the old Geometric style, perhaps in deliberate imitation of what woven patterns still looked like. The scope for creativity in women’s work, it seems, extended to tailoring designs to particular occasions, to personal interests, and indeed to personal experiences.

Just as early Greek husbands and wives jointly presided as hosts over feasts held in their houses, so did they jointly engage in gift-giving to visitors. Women’s gifts, however, remained distinct from those of their husbands: they appear to be presented only to other women, and to consist of a limited range of items, either the tools of woolworking or finished pieces of cloth. When a rich Egyptian gives his guest Menelaus two silver bath tubs, two tripods and ten talents of gold, “his wife separately presented very beautiful gifts to Helen: a golden spindle and a woolbasket on wheels, made of silver with a golden rim” (*Odyssey* 4.125-35). In turn, when Menelaus presents Telemachus with a golden cup and silver mixing-bowl, Helen gives him a *peplos*, but specifies that her gift is not really for him: it is destined for his future wife, and until his wedding day he should leave it in the care of his mother (15.126-8). Aphrodite’s wedding-present of a headdress for Andromache, mentioned earlier, is surely modeled on a type of gift common between women. Dedications of cloth made by women to goddesses, such as Hecabe’s presentation of a *peplos* to Athena (*Iliad* 6.286-311) were clearly also common. The existence of a female sphere of gift-exchange, almost entirely separate from the male sphere, afforded women a degree of independent control over the products of their own labor.<sup>52</sup> It is yet further testimony to the high respect accorded to their skills in early Greece.

This situation had begun to change by 600 BC. Rich clothes and soft furnishings did remain status symbols, but ever higher standards of quality were demanded. Complex decoration was extended to male dress: Sappho pictured Jason in an amazing technicolor cloak (F 152 L-P), and archaic vase-paintings show many men dressed in tunics with figured decoration. The

---

other decorated garments are all *peploi*, it seems most economical to assume that these are too. Aphrodite’s robe is the only individual *peplos* (as opposed to *peploi* featuring in stock epithets or in bulk) which is not explicitly said to be decorated, but it does have named weavers: the Graces (*Iliad* 5.337-9). The only garments other than *peploi* for which the weavers are specified are a tunic and *pharos* worn by Odysseus: here the plot requires that Arete and her maids are identified as the makers (*Odyssey* 7.234-5).

<sup>51</sup> Kerameikos 80; for a photo, see e.g. van Wees 1998b, fig. 1.11.

<sup>52</sup> The only woman who proposes to give a gift to a man is Penelope, who is evidently acting as *de facto* head of household: at *Odyssey* 17.530 she offers a beggar a tunic and cloak; when at 21.339-41 she offers him as a special reward not only clothes, but also a pair of sandals, spear and sword, Telemachos feels bound to assume his place as head of household and immediately tells her to leave such matters to men and go back to her spinning and weaving (21.350-2). Conversely, the only time *peploi* are part of a gift made between men is when Priam hands Achilles a ransom for Hector (*Iliad* 24.229).

use of extremely fine “see-through” cloth is first attested in Sappho’s reference to the *beudos*, “a short diaphanous tunic” (F 177). Clothes became more varied as well: alongside the basic types of garment known from Homer and Hesiod, archaic poetry features such obscure items of female dress as the *cherromaktra* (a headdress) and the *lados* (a “summer dress”), the first mentions of the short tunic (*kypassis*) and short cloak (*chlamys*) for men, and a range of other cloth items, including *hemitubia* (napkins), *lasioi* (linens), and *tula* (cushions).<sup>53</sup>

Another sign of increasing sophistication in dress is the emergence of a notion of “rustic” attire. Whereas in Homer and Hesiod the dress code is essentially the same for everyone from aristocrat to slave, Sappho mocks a “rustic girl” in a “rustic outfit” (*agroitin stolan*), “who does not know how to pull her rags down to her ankles” (F 57) and the huge “five-oxhide sandals” of an attendant at a rural wedding (F110). Hesiod’s farmer had no qualms about wearing a goatskin on top of his high-quality clothes, a “soft cloak and ankle-length tunic” (*Works & Days* 537-46; cf. *Odyssey* 14.529-30), and Homer’s heroes happily covered their chairs with a combination of simple fleeces and ornamental woven rugs,<sup>54</sup> but by the sixth century the use of fleeces and goatskins was associated with extreme rusticity, poverty, and indeed slavery.<sup>55</sup>

While demand for cloth of high quality rose, the demand for large quantities may have declined. Clothes and cloth appear to have played a much reduced role in gift-giving in archaic and classical Greece, and the burning of large amounts of cloth at funerals may have been curbed. A law attributed to Solon forbade anyone to be buried with more than three items of clothing – presumably the two garments normally worn, plus a shroud.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps as a result of, and certainly in line with, these developments, the more prestigious textiles were increasingly bought from professional weavers and imported from abroad, rather than produced by domestic labor. Milesian cloaks, for instance, were imported in large quantities by the Greek cities of southern Italy well before the end of the sixth century. The Sybarites, a byword for luxurious living until the destruction of their city in 510 BC, are said to have imported these cloaks on such a scale that they formed a close friendship with the Milesians. In Syracuse a drive to limit conspicuous consumption led to a ban on the wearing of “Milesian-style cloaks” by men.<sup>57</sup> Cloaks made of Scythian wool, Scythian dye, and Scythian shoes, all mentioned by archaic poets, indicate substantial imports from the Black Sea area.<sup>58</sup>

Above all, the dress style of the famously wealthy Lydians was adopted, as we know from Sappho’s reference to Lydian sandals (F 39) and, more interestingly, from the contrast which she drew between an ornate headband (*mitra*) imported from the Lydian capital Sardis and a plain headband made in her home town of Mytilene (F 98). In Sappho’s day, this foreign piece of headgear appears to have been the height of fashion across Greece, since her contemporary Alcman had a girl’s chorus in Sparta sing of luxuries which included “a Lydian headband, show-piece (*agalma*) for violet-eyed young women” (F 1.67-9 Page). Another

---

<sup>53</sup> Sappho FF 46, 54, 100, 101, 119 L-P; Alcaeus F 140 L-P; Alcman F 117 Page.

<sup>54</sup> Fleeces as seat-covers: e.g. *Odyssey* 17.32; 19.58; 20.95-6; *Homeric Hymn* 2.196 (contrast the ornate woven covers of e.g. *Odyssey* 1.130-1, 20.150-1); as bedding: *Odyssey* 23.180; *Iliad* 9.661.

<sup>55</sup> Theognis 55-6; Anacreon F 388 Page. Theopompus *FGrH* 115 FF 176, 311 says that the tyrant Cleisthenes, c. 570 BC, forced the rural population of Sicyon to wear a leather cloak with sheepskin trim which was regarded as slave dress in classical Athens (Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 1150-6); cf. van Wees 2003. We cannot determine the status of the *sisyrna*, a fur wrap, in Semonides F 31b and Alcaeus F 379 L-P.

<sup>56</sup> Plutarch *Solon* 21.5. The story of Periander of Corinth, c. 600 BC, burning large numbers of female garments in honour of his dead wife (Herodotus 5.92η) may reflect both the existence of this funerary custom and, given the hostile twist in the tale, changing attitudes towards it.

<sup>57</sup> Sybaris: Timaeus *FGrH* 566 F 50 (cited by Athenaeus 519b); Syracuse: Diodorus 12.21.1.

<sup>58</sup> Cloaks: Hipponax F 2 West. Dye: Sappho F 210 L-P. Shoes: Alcaeus F 318 L-P. On the archaic trade in luxuries and ‘semi-luxuries’, see especially Foxhall 1998.

poem of Sappho's reminisced about the simplicity of her mother's generation, when girls wore simple wreaths of flowers in their hair (F 125). Such nostalgic sentiments need have little historical foundation, but it is conceivable that the adoption of more elaborate and exotic attire was indeed a new phenomenon around 600 BC, part of the creation of a new, "luxurious" elite lifestyle which Anacreon was soon to label "The Lydian Experience."<sup>59</sup>

By definition the new fashions could not be created by women at home. The fact that Milesian cloaks and Lydian headbands needed to be imported was a major part of their prestige value. As a result, where men had once depended on women to provide them with enough high-quality cloth to keep up with the neighbors, women now became dependent upon their husbands and fathers to provide them with the high-status outfits they wanted. Where clothes and furnishings had once served to advertise women's weaving skills, and men's control over skilled female labor, they now primarily displayed wealth pure and simple. Women continued to weave, but their skills became less significant and accordingly less appreciated.

## Mind

Heracles' mother, Alcmene, was not only very beautiful, but her mind (*noos*) was unrivalled by that of any mortal woman, according to Hesiod (F 195.10-13 = *Shield of Heracles* 3-6). Yet she was surpassed in the next generation by the "supremely wise" (*periphrōn*) Penelope, whose "fine mind and clever schemes" were

such as we have never heard tell even of any woman of old, of any of the Greek women with well-plaited hair who lived earlier – Tyro, Alcmene, and well-garlanded Mycene. Not one of these women could lay plans on a par with Penelope (*Odyssey* 2.117-22).

The great fame (*kleos*) of Penelope's mind is grudgingly conceded even by her deceived suitors (2.125-6), while her admirers claim that her fame is comparable to that of an ideal king (19.107-9) and worthy of a song composed by the gods themselves (24.193-8). She herself is keenly aware that she has a reputation to live up to. "How else," as she puts it to a guest, "will you find out whether I am really superior to other women in my mind and thoughtful intelligence?" (*epiphrona mētin*, 19.325-8). Epic heroines thus can be, and strive to be, famous for their minds no less than for their skill or beauty.

For a woman to have a "fine mind" (*phrenes esthlai* or *noos esthlos*) was partly a matter of morality. She should know right from wrong and behave accordingly. An important moral quality for a woman was of course loyalty to her husband, and both Alcmene and Penelope stand out for their unswerving faithfulness in the most trying circumstances.<sup>60</sup> But a woman with a "fine mind" also needed to display practical intelligence, a grasp of the "advantageous" (*kerdion*). Penelope is famous not only for her loyal disposition, but for her clever handling of difficult situations, for her judgment and intelligence. Exactly like her husband, she "excels in understanding how to win an advantage" (*peri kerdea oiden*, *Odyssey* 2.88, 19.285-6).<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Anacreon F 481 Page: *lydopatheis*. For the new, 'oriental' luxury lifestyle, see esp. Morris 1996.

<sup>60</sup> Hesiod (F 195.16-25 = *Shield of Heracles* 9-19) stresses that Alcmene 'honoured' her husband more than any other woman: she remained loyal to Amphitryon even when he killed her father and subsequently went abroad without her, to expiate his crime.

<sup>61</sup> The Homeric concept of mind is hard to define with any precision. Our colloquial distinction between the brain as the source of thought and the heart as the source of emotions, for instance, did not apply. Moral, intellectual and emotional attributes almost indiscriminately shared a variety of bodily locations, occurring in variety of organs – *phrenes*, *noos*, *thumos*, *kēr*, *psychē*, *prapides* – which cannot be identified too closely with our mind, spirit, heart, or soul.

The intelligence of women is much in evidence in Homer's world. Women are not slow to express their opinions or give advice to men. At her first appearance in the *Odyssey* and again in her last scene, Helen says what needs to be said when her husband hesitates and remains silent (4.117-46; 15.169-81). Arete pre-empts her husband and the rest of the male company, first by acutely questioning the veracity of Odysseus' story and later by hailing his good looks and "balanced mind" (7.233-9; 11.335-41). Two young women – Nausicaa and Athena in disguise and in character as an anonymous "maiden" – spontaneously offer Odysseus detailed and sound advice on how to handle the potentially hostile Phaeacians; both girls leave without waiting for a reaction (6.251-317; 7.19-81). Examples could easily be multiplied.

Women's opinions and advice are not always welcomed by men. When Andromache, who has observed the day's events on the battlefield from the city-wall,<sup>62</sup> advises her husband to stage a tactical withdrawal, his answer begins "Yes, woman, I too am concerned with all these things" and ends with "Go home and attend to your own works, loom and spindle ... War will be the concern of all the men, and especially me" (*Iliad* 6.441, 490-3). Telemachus cuts short his mother's interventions in the feasting with almost the same words (*Odyssey* 1.356-9; 21.350-3). Odysseus finds it necessary to decline even his old nurse's offer to tell him which of the maid-servants have been disloyal: "Why would you tell me that? You don't need to. I can perfectly well see for myself" (19.495-501). A modern reader may feel that these are harsh put-downs, but the poet clearly did not mean them to sound severe at all. This is simply how heads of household were supposed to assert their authority over women, however close and loving their mutual relationship might be.<sup>63</sup> The important point is that if and when women's advice is rejected the reason given is either that it is simply not needed, or that it is misplaced because it concerns things which are meant to be men's business. There is rarely any suggestion that a woman's stated opinion or suggestion is unsound, and never a hint that women are less capable than men at forming opinions or formulating advice.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, men sometimes actively solicit a woman's views. One day after telling his nurse that he does not need her help in finding out which slaves have been disloyal, Odysseus after all asks her to tell him (*Odyssey* 22.417-25). Priam, under divine orders to travel to the enemy camp with a ransom for his son, thinks it advisable to check with his wife first: "Tell me, what do you think about that?" (*Iliad* 24.193-7). Most remarkably, it is suggested that "even men" might bring their disputes to Arete and that she would be able to arbitrate between them, "for her own mind in no respect falls short" (*Odyssey* 7.73-4).

Notable by their absence are such statements as "I may be a woman, but I do have a brain" (*noos*, Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 1124) or "You are treating me like a senseless woman" (*aphrasmon*, Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 1401), or any of the other dismissive remarks about female intelligence common in classical literature, or even the backhanded compliments which praise the mind of a woman as almost as good as a man's, or quite impressive "for a woman."<sup>65</sup>

The main moral characteristic of women in early Greek poetry is deceptiveness – the dark side of their intelligence, one might say. What makes the monkey-woman the worst kind of wife in Semonides' book is her deviousness as well as her ugliness: she is "capable of every

---

<sup>62</sup> Her comment that the Greeks have attacked the city three times 'near the fig tree' does not refer to earlier episodes in the war, as is often supposed, but is a summary of the day's fighting. The three attempts are the Greek advance (*Iliad* 3.1-14) and the two later Greek breakthroughs (5.37-94; 6.5-74); each time the Greek advance is halted and alternates with a Trojan counterattack. The Greek line of advance passes by the fig tree towards the Scaean Gate (11.166-70), where Andromache is watching.

<sup>63</sup> Telemachus' words to Penelope, sometimes regarded as rude (West 1988 ad loc.), are surely meant to show that he is, at last, assuming his rightful role as head of household: see van Wees 1997.

<sup>64</sup> See also e.g. *Odyssey* 11.342-49, where Arete's proposals are welcomed by the men, but it is pointed out that her husband should have the last word.

<sup>65</sup> See Dover 1974, 99-100; Just 1989, 164-5.



type of thought and behavior ... What she looks out for and plans all day long is how to do the greatest possible harm” (78-82). Hesiod complains of women’s “tricky habits,” their “lies and wheedling words,” and concludes that “a man who trusts a woman is a man who trusts cheaters” (*Works & Days* 68, 78, 375). His warning against “a sweet-talking woman in a bottom-hugging outfit” shows that his chief worry is about men allowing themselves to be blinded by their wives’ sexual allure to the mischief that they are up to.<sup>66</sup> In the *Iliad*, the supreme goddess herself resorts to such tactics. Hera puts on her scent, finest clothes and jewelry, borrows from Aphrodite “love and desire and persuasive sweet-talk, which robs even intelligent people of their minds” (14.170-87, 216-17), and makes herself so attractive to Zeus that “the moment he saw her, desire shrouded his intricate mind” (14.294). Her plausible lies and false show of submissiveness and modesty completely take him in (14.300-11, 330-51), and while his attention is diverted, she makes sure that world events develop according to *her* wishes. When found out, she even perjures herself in swearing her innocence (15.34-46).

The murder of Agamemnon is described as a “trick” devised by his “cunning” wife in the *Odyssey* (11.422, 439). The same poem alludes to two women who cause the deaths of their husbands when, bribed with gifts, they persuade these men to go to war against their better judgment. Perhaps the most remarkable trick is Helen’s attempt to lure the Greeks out of their ambush in the Trojan Horse by mimicking their wives’ voices: the only man she did not fool was the cleverest of heroes, Odysseus, who saved the day. Agamemnon is made to exclaim that his wife’s misdeeds taint all women, and that “women can no longer be trusted.”<sup>67</sup>

However much husbands might resent their wives’ cunning when it was directed against them, they admired female cleverness when it was directed against outsiders, to the benefit of the household. We have already seen how Penelope’s seductive and profitable manipulation of her suitors brought her respect and Odysseus joy. Whether women used their cleverness to good or bad ends, no one questioned that they were intelligent and indeed able to outwit men. As is said of yet another occasion when Zeus was duped by his wife: “Hera, being female, with her cunning mind deceived Zeus, who is best among gods and men” (*Iliad* 19.95-7).

A rather obscure characteristic attributed to women is a “dog-like mind” (*kuneos noos*, *Works & Days* 67-8). The best clue to its meaning is Semonides’ sketch of the dog-woman:

She wants to hear and know everything, and as she snoops and roams around everywhere, she barks – even if she cannot see a single soul. A man cannot silence her by making threats, not even if he gets angry and smashes her teeth with a stone, nor by talking to her in a friendly manner, not even if she happens to be sitting among guests. No, he has to put up with her unrelenting, unstoppable noise (7.13-20).

The central characteristic here is self-assertion beyond all restraint. The dog-woman will make comments and ask questions even in the most extreme circumstances: she knows no embarrassment, however delicate the social situation (“among guests”); she knows no fear, even in the face of severe physical abuse. She cannot even stop asserting herself when she is quite alone. Similar traits are attributed to the changeable sea-woman on one of her bad days:

---

<sup>66</sup> *Works & Days* 373-5, cited above. Note the description of Pandora as a ‘trick’ (*dolos*; *Theogony* 589; *Works & Days* 83); elsewhere in Hesiod women are simply ‘bad’ and ‘a bane’ (*Theogony* 570, 592, 595, 601-2, 603, 610-12; *Works & Days* 57-8, 82).

<sup>67</sup> *Odyssey* 11.432-4. Allusions to the stories of ‘bribed’ women: 11.326-7, 521; 15.247 (told more fully in later sources). Helen’s trick: 4.265-89 (not explicitly described as such). Note also Anteia’s deception of her husband at Bellerophon’s expense: *Iliad* 6.160-5.

She is unbearable to look at or to be near; on a day like that, she is unapproachable in her mad rage, like a bitch protecting her puppies, and she becomes implacable towards everyone, as hostile to her friends as to her enemies (32-6).

The fox-woman “who knows everything” but who will often fail to distinguish between bad and good, depending on her mood, may be another example of the type (7-11).

In Homer, Hera is an exact match for Semonides’ dog-woman. She keeps a close eye on the actions of her husband, who remarks to her that “You are always alert and nothing I do escapes you” (*Iliad* 1.561). She constantly asserts and defends her own interests, which throughout the *Iliad* are in conflict with those of Zeus, who, like the dog-woman’s husband tries to silence her with threats of violence – hitting her, throwing her to the floor, dragging her out of the house, throwing her into a pit, and blasting her with his thunderbolt – and reminding her of previous violent episodes – when he strung her up with weights attached to her feet – but she remains irrepressible.<sup>68</sup> Zeus has resigned himself to her opposition, admitting that his threats have become a matter of habit rather than an expression of genuine anger, “for she is always in the habit of undermining whatever I say” (8.407-8). On one occasion when despite his menaces and taunts she cannot contain her anger and again talks back to him (8.457-68), he simply resolves to ignore her fury, “because there is nothing more dog-like than you” (477-83).

Imperviousness to threats and violence is also a quality attributed to Athena and Artemis who are both called “fearless dog” for defying an opponent against whom they do not stand a chance (*Iliad* 8.423; 21.481). Again, Athena and Aphrodite are called “dog-fly” (*kunamuia*) for their persistence in a course of action which has previously got them into trouble.<sup>69</sup> Elsewhere, the main characteristic of women behaving like dogs is apparently aggressive, violent behavior. Odysseus’ maids are scolded as “dogs” for threatening and mocking a beggar (*Odyssey* 18.338; 19.91, 372). “Dog-faced” (*kunōpis*) is an epithet applied to Hera for trying to kill her own son because he was lame (*Iliad* 18.395-7) and to Clytaemnestra for conspiring in the murder of her husband and refusing even to close the eyes and mouth of his corpse. “There is nothing more terrible and dog-like than a woman who conceives of such deeds in her mind” (*Odyssey* 11.424-30). There is clearly more to the concept of the dog-like mind than the element of shamelessness which commentators and translators often highlight:<sup>70</sup> it represents both a lack of regard for norms and an utter lack of fear of the consequences.

The cunning seductiveness and lack of regard for norms attributed to women might lead one to expect that in early Greek poetry, as in classical literature, women were seen as inclined to sexually promiscuous behavior. Semonides’ image of women sitting together “telling stories about sex” (F 7.90-1), the notorious claim in the *Melampodia* that a woman “in her mind” (*noēma*) derives nine times more pleasure from sexual intercourse than a man (Hesiod F 275), and Homer’s assertion that “the bed of love seduces the mind of the female sex, even of a woman who is well-behaved” (*Odyssey* 15.420-2), all seem to point in the same direction. Yet there is no explicit reference to adultery in Hesiod’s portrait of women, and in Semonides promiscuity features only as a secondary characteristic of *one* of the ten types of women: of the donkey-woman, whose main trait is that she eats constantly unless and until she is forced to work, it is said rather cryptically that “similarly, she also accepts from anyone [or “in exchange for anything”] a mate who comes for the labors of love” (F 7.48-9).

---

<sup>68</sup> Beating: 15.136-7. Throwing down: 1.577-81; 14.256-7. Throwing or dragging out: 1.591; 15.23; 19.126-31 (cf. *Odyssey* 18.10-12; 21.299-300). Throwing into a pit (Tartarus): 5.897-8; 8.14-17. Thunderbolt: e.g. 8.402-5. Stringing up: 15.18-24. See van Wees 1992, 121, 139.

<sup>69</sup> *Iliad* 21.394 and 421 (Aphrodite venturing onto the battlefield, despite earlier warnings: 5.311-430).

<sup>70</sup> E.g. West 1978, ad *Works & Days* 67; Kirk 1985, ad *Iliad* 1.225; 1990, ad 6.344. Shamelessness is an issue when adulterous women are called dog-faced (*Iliad* 3.180; 6.344, 356; *Odyssey* 4.145; 8.319).

Homer, who would have had ample opportunity to expound on female promiscuity, given that the stories of Helen's and Clytaemnestra's adultery are prominent in his poems, in fact insists on absolving both women from blame. While Clytaemnestra's complicity in the murder of her husband is denounced as the height of dog-like behavior, the adulterous affair which precedes the murder is blamed on her lover and on the gods. She tried to resist Aegisthus' many attempts to "charm" her "for she had a good mind" (*Odyssey* 3.264-71). Helen is portrayed as bitterly regretting her adultery, denouncing herself as "dog-faced," but everyone else makes excuses for her, insisting that she would never have dreamt of doing such a "shameful" thing if the gods had not made her do it (*Odyssey* 23.218-24; *Iliad* 3.162-5). In a remarkable scene, Aphrodite tries but fails to tempt Helen into sleeping with Paris; in the end the goddess resorts to threats to make her obey (*Iliad* 3.383-436). The idea that women were particularly interested in sex thus did not lead men in early Greece to conclude, as classical Greek men did, that women were driven by, and unable to control, their sexual desires: even the most notorious adulteresses exercised notable self-control and yielded only under duress.<sup>71</sup>

Another female weakness constantly mocked in classical sources, their fondness of wine, is entirely unknown to Homer and other early poets. This again is remarkable, in view of the obsession of Hesiod and Semonides with the food consumed by drone-like wives.

Two passages in the *Iliad* hint that women (and children) are rather more emotional than men. Odysseus mildly rebukes the Greek soldiers at Troy for "crying to one another about going home, like little children or widowed women," but adds that he cannot really blame them (2.289-97). Achilles, although sympathetic to the tears of Patroclus, teases him with looking "like a little girl running along after her mother, asking to be carried, pulling at her dress" (16.2-11). The mildness of these remarks shows that men and women were seen as only marginally, not fundamentally, different where the expression of emotions was concerned. The poet could compare Odysseus' own tears to those of a woman whose husband has fallen in battle (*Odyssey* 8.523-30), without conveying any suggestion of effeminacy. Only at funerals do women display more emotion than men, as they utter lamentations while the men in charge of the funerary arrangements remain relatively composed. Otherwise, throughout the epics both men and women express their emotions in highly extrovert ways: both sexes wail and tear out their hair; women beat their chests and – once – lacerate their cheeks; men throw themselves on the ground and roll around in dust and dung. Expressions of emotion are thus gendered, but neither sex is characterized as significantly more emotional than the other.<sup>72</sup>

Hesiod's complaints about women make no reference to their emotionality, but there is a sign of change in Semonides, who pictures two types of women as changeable in temperament (*orgē*), suggesting that they are not entirely in control of their emotions (F 7.11, 42). More explicit is the evidence of Semonides' contemporary Archilochus, who exhorts his friends to endure their sorrows and "as quickly as possible dispel *effeminate* grief" (*gynaikeion penthos*, F 13 West). Not only are these two poets the first to associate emotional behavior with femininity, but they are also the first to exhort men to keep their emotions in check.<sup>73</sup> It can hardly be a coincidence that during the generation of Semonides and

---

<sup>71</sup> Neither the story of Anteia's attempted adultery with Bellerophon (*Iliad* 6.160-5) nor the song about Aphrodite's adultery with Ares features any hint at a general female disposition towards promiscuity, only a remark that Aphrodite herself is 'beautiful, but not self-controlled' (*echethumos*, *Odyssey* 8.320).

<sup>72</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Homeric evidence, see van Wees 1998b, 11-16.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Semonides F 1.22-4 ('we should not be so in love with misery, and torment ourselves by dwelling upon what is bad and painful') and F 2 ('if we had any sense, we would not think of him, now that he is dead, for more than a single day')

Archilochus (c. 680-640 BC), Greek vase-painters first begin to show mourning women lacerating their cheeks: there is an evident trend at this time towards representing women as more emotional than men.<sup>74</sup>

In sum, the female mind, according to Homer and Hesiod, has its peculiarities but is not fundamentally different from the male mind. They may complain about women's "dog-like" nature, but men may be called "dog" and "dog-eyed," too.<sup>75</sup> Hesiod may think of most women as "deceivers," but he acknowledges that there are also men who "love deceptive talk and lies and sweet-talk and secret assignations" (*Works & Days* 788-9). In these respects, men and women apparently differ only in degree; in other respects they appear not to differ at all.

The picture in Semonides is generally the same, but moves closer to the classical conception of the female mind on one significant point: this poet and his contemporaries began to make a distinction between self-controlled men and emotional women. In doing so, they took the first step in a gradual devaluation of the female mind which by the classical period led to the notion that intellectually and morally women were not only different from, but inferior to, men.

### Household, property and the ideology of gender

The early Greek perception of the female mind, like the perception of women's beauty and skill, is related to the organization of early Greek households and communities, and subsequent changes in the structure of communities bring about changes in attitudes towards gender.

Husband and wife in the Homeric world have their own, complementary, spheres of control and are jointly in charge of the household. The keys to the various parts of the house, above all the storerooms, are kept by the wife or by a slave housekeeper in her stead, and men cannot enter the stores without consulting either of these women. When Telemachus requires supplies for a secret mission, he is forced to take into his confidence "the female housekeeper who was in charge [of the storeroom] day and night, and protected everything with all the knowledge in her mind"; he can only keep his departure hidden from his mother by swearing the housekeeper to silence (*Odyssey* 2.344-80).<sup>76</sup> Similarly, the priest Maron tries to keep his potent wine a secret from everyone, but must share the knowledge with "his wife and a single housekeeper" (9.205-7). Hecabe can enter the storeroom and select a *peplos* to dedicate to Athena without consulting her husband Priam, but Priam cannot pick supplies from his stores without involving Hecabe, whose advice he is forced to ask.<sup>77</sup> Their control over access to household resources, combined with their responsibility for "keeping everything intact," gave wives such influence over the management of the household that Penelope could think of herself as "keeping everything intact, the slaves and the big, tall house, *my property* [*ktēsin emēn*]."<sup>78</sup>

The prominent role of the wife within the household is reflected, as we have seen, in her dealings with outsiders: she will normally sit beside her husband when they entertain visitors – to whom she may refer as *her* guests (*Odyssey* 11.338) – and take an active part in the conversation; she can also take part in gift-giving alongside her husband, presenting in her

---

<sup>74</sup> For a discussion of the vase-paintings, see van Wees 1998b, 19-41.

<sup>75</sup> *Iliad* 1.159, 225 (Agamemnon); 8.299; 11.362; 20.449; 22.345 (Hector).

<sup>76</sup> Telemachus later takes her into his confidence when secretly removing the weapons from the dining hall: she has the key to the women's quarters and needs to lock them up (*Odyssey* 19.14-30; 21.380-7).

<sup>77</sup> *Iliad* 6.288-95; 24.191-237. Arete fetches supplies from the stores for her husband (*Odyssey* 8.423-48); Menelaus visits the storeroom in person, but is accompanied by his wife (and son, 15.99-130).

<sup>78</sup> *Odyssey* 19.525-6; cf. 11.177-8; 23.150-1.

own name and on her own initiative gifts to (or for) the wives of their guests. Even if the final word on dealings with property and guests is reserved for the husbands and other male heads of household,<sup>79</sup> the influence of wives is considerable and openly acknowledged.

Ideally, this joint stewardship of the household is marked by “unity of mind” (*homophrosyne*), “for there is nothing stronger or better than when husband and wife manage the house with the same ideas in mind” (*Odyssey* 6.181-4). The relationship between spouses can be very close, as the famous expressions of love exchanged between Hector and Andromache show. No less noteworthy are Laertes’ faithfulness to his wife and his deep sorrow at her death (*Odyssey* 1.433; 15.356-7), or the story that Meleager ignored the pleas of the elders, his family and his friends, but listened to his wife (*Iliad* 9.574-95). Hesiod and Semonides agree that “a man can acquire no greater asset than a good wife,”<sup>80</sup> even if they believe that few are lucky enough to marry a woman “of sound mind” (Hesiod *Theogony* 608), “the best and the most thoughtful [*polyphradestate*] kind of woman with which Zeus favors men” (Semonides F 7.92-3).

The other side of the coin are relationships in which husband and wife are not of the same mind, forever fighting over the management of the household. Complaints in Hesiod and Semonides about women spending all their time eating probably reflect not only resentment at the fact that women did not engage in food production, but also a suspicion that women were liable to abuse their position as keepers of the household stores. According to Semonides, conflict-ridden marital relationships are the norm: “whenever a man feels that he can be really pleased with the state of his household, his wife will find fault and arm herself for battle” (F 7.103-5). This must be the sort of tension against which Hesiod warned when he said that a bad wife will “scorch without a torch” “even a stout man” (*Works & Days* 703-5).

In Homer, the fraught relationship between Zeus and Hera vividly illustrates this kind of marriage. When their interests clash, the wife argues that she is entitled to have things her way occasionally and tries to negotiate with her husband (*Iliad* 4.24-9, 57-63); when argument fails, she plots behind her husband’s back and resorts to deception (14.153-65). The husband, meanwhile, tries to forestall confrontation by insisting that he is entitled to keep his plans secret, though his wife will be the first to know when he decides to divulge them (1.540-59); when this fails, he resorts to threats (1.562-9). Zeus and Hera are not untypical of married couples in the Homeric world, as evident from Agamemnon’s unsolicited advice to Odysseus:

You must never be gentle with your wife and never reveal to her the whole story of what you know. No, tell her some things and let the rest remain secret... And another thing which I will tell you and you should keep in mind: go home in secret, because women can no longer be trusted (*Odyssey* 11.441-56).

The picture of marital relations in Homer, Hesiod and Semonides thus covers the same range from a harmonious meeting of minds to a constant battle of wills and wits. There is a superficial contrast between Homer and the other two poets insofar as harmonious relations and praise for women are more common in Homer while Hesiod and Semonides vilify most women and allege that strained relations are the norm. The contrast is neatly illustrated by the husband in the *Odyssey* who suffers “a raw old age” as a result of the death of his beloved wife (15.357) and the husband in *Works & Days* who suffers “a raw old age” as a result of his wife’s constant bickering (705). The different emphases are partly accounted for by the

---

<sup>79</sup> Property: the poet in his own voice describes the household stores as belonging to Odysseus, not Penelope (1.337; 21.9). Guests: see discussion above, with nn. 63 and 64.

<sup>80</sup> Hesiod, *Works & Days* 702-3 (at *Theogony* 608-10 he says that even the best wife brings only a mixture of good and bad); Semonides F 6 (cf. the bee-woman of F 7.83-93).

different genres: heroic epic idealizes, while Hesiod's didactic poetry takes a pessimistic view of life, and Semonides' iambic verses offer a caricature of reality. Class differences are another factor. The economic strain of freeing women from agricultural labor was felt least in upper-class households, which at the same time most sought the prestige to be gained from the physical beauty and weaving skills of women. The reverse was true of less prosperous households, where the position of women was therefore a source of greater stress and resentment.

Yet in essence all three poets depict the same situation: a form of household organization in which the husband is ultimately in charge, but is not supposed to make unilateral decisions for the household. His wife's wishes need to be taken into account and household interests are a matter of negotiation between the spouses ("let us make concessions to one another in these matters, I to you and you to me," Hera says to Zeus, *Iliad* 4.62-3). This concept of joint stewardship underlies both the ideal of conjugal harmony and the threat of conjugal strife.

Early Greek gender ideology represents a male perspective on the rough equality between husbands and wives. The intelligence of women is acknowledged – alongside their looks and skills – as essential to the proper functioning and status of households, given that wives take an active part in their management. At the same time, the negative qualities of mind attributed to women – deceitfulness and excessive, irrepressible "dog-like" self-assertion – are precisely those which one would expect a man to attribute to a woman who will regularly oppose him as a near-equal with distinct opinions and interests of her own when it comes to decision-making.

The position of a man as head of household is therefore rather precarious: it is open to challenge, and not legitimated by claims of natural superiority over women in any respect – except in physical prowess. Superior strength is invoked as the quality which enables men to defend the women, children and elderly members of the household against aggressive outsiders and at the same time allows men to enforce obedience within the household.

Although community and political life are quite well-developed in Homer, his heroes see the world as a competitive place, in which not only neighboring cities but neighbors within the same city pose a constant threat. The general assumption is that in the absence of a strong adult male head of household, the family is at immediate risk of being maltreated and robbed of their property by neighbors and even by former friends. "The son of an absent father, who has no other supporters, suffers much at home," Telemachus' friend points out sagely (*Odyssey* 164-5). Andromache imagines that her son will be bullied by his former playmates when his father is dead: "A boy with living parents will even push him away from the meal, hitting and scolding him: 'Get out! Now! Your father does not dine with us.'" (*Iliad* 22.492-9). In view of what we are told about the structure of Homeric society, such fears seem exaggerated, but that is beside the point: what matters is the perception that male physical prowess is vital to the survival and status of the household, and thus legitimates the power of men over women.<sup>81</sup>

The greater physical strength of men may also be turned against the other members of the household. Semonides' brutal remark that a man may try to silence his wife by "smashing her teeth in with a stone" (F 7.17-18) does not stand alone. The power and respect which Zeus enjoys among the other gods – his wife and family – depend largely on the fear he inspires by means of the many forms of violence with which he threatens them, as noted above. Priam resorts to bullying his sons (and any of the townsfolk who get in his way, *Iliad* 24.237-65). Telemachus relies on fierce threats and extremely violent punishments to establish his authority over the household slaves. Telemachus explicitly reminds the servants of his greater prowess ("take care that I do not start throwing stones at you ... for in strength I am the better

---

<sup>81</sup> For further evidence and discussion, see van Wees 1992, 61-2, 101-5, 135-52.

man,” *Odyssey* 21.369-71), just as Zeus boasts that he is stronger than all the other gods combined and could single-handedly defeat them (and gravity) in a vertical tug-of-war (*Iliad* 8.18-27). What is striking is not the references to the superior strength of men as such, but rather the sheer brutality of the threats and violence, and the openness with which force is asserted as a basis for male power. Coercion was thus almost a legitimate form of exercising power within the household in early Greece. I would suggest that this was part and parcel of an ideology which saw husbands and wives near-equals and treated superior strength as the only real difference between men and women and the only justification for the superior status of males.

Traces of the gender ideology of early Greece may still be found in the classical period, when women were still seen as deceptive and men could still be seen as protectors of the household. Demosthenes once referred to wives and daughters as “those for whose sake we fight our enemies to save them from indignity” (23.55-6) and Xenophon jokingly compared the head of the household to a sheepdog guarding a flock of wool-working women (*Memorabilia* 2.7.7). But this concept has become much less prominent and it is significant that there is barely a hint in classical literature at men using force to assert their power within the household.<sup>82</sup> Instead, a gender ideology of which we see the first inklings in Semonides, Archilochus and mid-seventh-century art becomes dominant. This posits that the power of men rests on their innate *mental* superiority: they are capable of rational, self-controlled judgment and planning, whereas women are driven by emotions and appetites and cannot govern themselves. This ideology of gender does not allow women a position of near-equality, but makes them clearly inferior and subordinate to men: they must always be under male guardianship, their freedom of action and movement is restricted, and their rights to dispose of property are strictly limited by law.<sup>83</sup>

Behind this transformation of gender relations lay a broader transformation of Greek society. The greater integration of communities and development of more formal and powerful organs of government meant that the claim that male physical strength was vital to the survival of the household, already a questionable proposition in the context of the Homeric world, became almost impossible to maintain seriously. Threats to family and property were increasingly dealt with by courts rather than private force. A tangible sign of these developments is the fact that, whereas men in the Homeric world had carried swords at all times, they abandoned this custom of “bearing iron” in the mid-seventh century, in favor of an ever more luxurious style of dress.<sup>84</sup> This surely represented a first move away from the idea that physical prowess, the ability and willingness to fight, was the essence of male identity, and it is surely no coincidence that this move occurred at the very time that we find the first hints at a distinction between emotional women and self-controlled men. As the ideology of male physical superiority lost ground, it was replaced by an ideology of male intellectual and moral superiority, which served to provide a new legitimation for male power over women.

At about the same time, or within a generation or two at the latest, the position of women began to decline as a result of the developments sketched earlier. Social stratification began to rely less on access to home-produced resources and more on the ability to import “exotic” goods at great expense, resulting in a devaluation of what had been women’s main, and highly appreciated, skill. The greater integration of communities and closer ties of alliance between households across community boundaries meant less overt competition over women, who as a result lost much of their prestige as “cattle-fetching” assets to their natal families and “prizes” for their husbands. A drastic shrinking of women’s contribution to the prestige and resources

---

<sup>82</sup> For the very limited evidence, see Fisher 1998, 77 and 94 n.32.

<sup>83</sup> See e.g. Just 1989, 153-93, and the developments in Gortyn outlined in Stephan Link’s paper.

<sup>84</sup> See the archaeological and iconographical evidence discussed in van Wees 1998c.

of the household will have encouraged a further extension of male power, accompanied by the spread and elaboration of the idea that male authority was legitimated by male intellectual superiority – in other words, by the invention of the female mind.



## Bibliography

Dentzer, Jean-Marie. 1982. *Le motif du banquet couché*. Rome.

Dover, Kenneth J. 1974. *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford.

Fehr, B. 1971. *Orientalische und griechische Gelage*. Bonn.

Finley, Moses 1955. "Marriage, sale and gift in the Homeric world," *RIDA* 2: 167-94 = 1981. *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece* Harmondsworth: 233-45.

Finsler, Georg 1912. "ΕΔΝΑ," *Hermes* 47: 414-21.

Foxhall, Lin 1998. "Cargoes of the heart's desire: the character of trade in the Mediterranean world," in N. Fisher and H. van Wees (eds.), *Archaic Greece: New Approaches and New Evidence* London: 295-309.

Finkelberg, Margalit 1991. "Royal Succession in Homeric Greece." *CQ* 39: 22-44.

Fisher, Nick 1998. "Violence, masculinity and the law in classical Athens," in L. Foxhall and J. Salmon (eds.), *When Men Were Men. Masculinity, power and identity in classical antiquity* London and New York: 68-97.

Just, Roger 1989. *Women in Athenian Law and Life* London and New York.

Kirk, G.S. 1985. *The Iliad: A Commentary. Vol. I* Cambridge.

Lacey, W.K. 1966. "Homeric ΕΔΝΑ and Penelope's ΚΥΠΙΟΣ," *JHS* 86: 55-68.

Lacey, W.K. 1968. *The Family in Classical Greece* London and New York.

Morris, Ian, 1986. "The use and abuse of Homer," *Classical Antiquity* 5: 81-138.

Morris, Ian 1996. "The strong principle of equality and the archaic origins of Greek democracy," in J. Ober and C. Hedrick (eds.), *Demokratia*. Princeton: 19-48.

Scheid, Evelyne 1979. "Il matrimonio omerico," *Dialogi di Archeologia* 1: 60-73.

Seaford, Richard 1994. *Reciprocity and Ritual. Homer and tragedy in the developing city-state* Oxford.

Snodgrass, Anthony M. 1974. "An historical Homeric society?" *JHS* 94: 114-25.

Van Wees, Hans 1992. *Status Warriors. War, violence and society in Homer and history* Amsterdam.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1995. "Princes at dinner. Social event and social structure in Homer," in J.-P. Crielaard (ed.), *Homeric Questions*, Amsterdam: 147-82.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1997. "Growing up in early Greece," in A. Sommerstein and C. Atherton (eds.), *Education in Greek Fiction*, Bari: 1-20. In Christopher Gill, Norman Postlethwaite and Richard Seaford (eds.), *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece*, Oxford: 13-49.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1998b. "A brief history of tears. Gender differentiation in archaic Greece," in L. Foxhall and J. Salmon (eds.), *When Men Were Men. Masculinity, power and identity in classical antiquity*, London and New York: 10-53.

\_\_\_\_\_. 'The law of gratitude: reciprocity in anthropological theory', in C. Gill et al. (eds.) *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece* (Oxford 1998a), 13-49.

\_\_\_\_\_. 'Greeks bearing arms: the state, the leisure class, and the display of weapons in early Greece', in N. Fisher and H. van Wees (eds.), *Archaic Greece: New Approaches and New Evidence* (London 1998c), 333-78.

\_\_\_\_\_. 'Greed, generosity and gift-exchange in early Greece and the western Pacific', in W. Jongman and M. Kleijwegt (eds.), *After The Past. Essays in Ancient History in Honour of H.W. Pleket* (Leiden, Boston, Cologne 2002), 341-78.

\_\_\_\_\_. 'Conquerors and serfs. Forced labour and wars of conquest in archaic Greece' in S. Alcock and N. Luraghi (eds.), *Helots and Their Masters* (Stuttgart 2003).

\_\_\_\_\_. 'Clothes, class and gender in Homer', in D. Cairns (ed.) *Body Language in the Ancient World* (Swansea, forthcoming)..

West, M. *Hesiod Works and Days* (Oxford 1978).

West, S. *A Commentary on Homers Odyssey, Vol I* (Cambridge 1988).