

## Introduction

*Homer's epics are considered the basis of Western literature. In addition, those epics provide a template for many aspects of later Greek and classical writing. The following chapters will discuss one particular example of Homer's influence over Greek literature. I will compare three major female characters from Greek tragedy to three major Homeric females. Through an understanding of the importance and influence of Homeric literature, and a comparison of Homeric characters with tragic roles, I will show that Homeric women provided the basis for the characterization of the female heroes of Greek tragedy. Themes of fidelity, intelligence and power of women are developed by Homer and imitated by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.*

Before there can be a discussion of Homer's influence on Greek tragedy, Homer's influence on Greek literature must be established. The Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are the first examples of Greek literature. There is even speculation that the Greek alphabet was invented as a means of preserving the Homeric epics.<sup>1</sup> Classicist Barry Powell states that "we cannot separate the invention of the alphabet from the recording of early hexameter poetry, [and] we cannot separate the recording of early hexameter poetry from Homer."<sup>2</sup> Powell argues that, Greek writing may not have been invented for the exclusive purpose of writing down the epics, and the evolution of the alphabet from Linear A and B writing may not have evolved by the stimulus of these epics alone, but the coincidence of their simultaneous emergence is too much to be ignored. Powell's argument stresses the importance of Homer's epic to classical literature, and specifically, to the Greek language. Because of Homer's influence on the formulation of Greek writing, his basic influence on Greek literature is established.

In addition to his position as the “father” of Greek literature, Homer also served as the epitome of Greek life and literature to other Greeks. Plato articulates the influence of Homer’s epics on Greek life in *The Republic*. The philosopher makes many references to Homer and Homer’s influence throughout the dialogue. For example, in Book 1, sections 334a through 334b, Socrates accuses Polemarchus of learning a particular aspect of Justice from Homer. Socrates states: “ ‘I’m afraid you [Polemarchus] learned this from Homer.’ ”<sup>3</sup> Such an obvious reference to having learned something from Homer indicates that Homeric literature was something with which most Greeks were familiar. In addition, it is important to note that this reference to Homer illustrates that Homeric texts were a valid source of knowledge. These epics were not just literature but tools for teaching the philosophy and mythology of Greek life. Later in Book 1 (363b and 364d), characters quote Homeric verse.<sup>4</sup> The inclusion of Homeric verse in dialogue suggests the intricate knowledge of Homer possessed by literate Greeks. In addition, because they knew significant sections of the text itself, indicates that the Greeks looked to Homer as a model of literary style. In addition, because Plato chose the dialogue as his vehicle to express Socratic philosophy, and managed to convincingly incorporate Homeric verse, suggests the Greeks’ extensive knowledge of Homeric texts. Because of Homer’s importance to Greek education, it follows that he should also serve as a literary example to later Greek writing.

In addition to Greek authors referencing the importance of Homeric literature, many classicists have sought to illustrate Homeric influence on Greek literature. Scholars such as Gregory Nagy, etc. illustrate Homeric influence by illustrating the bard’s authority over Greek myth and religion. Nagy asserts:

Whatever Homeric passages seem at first to be inconsistent in the short range may in the long range be the key to various central themes of the overall *Iliad* or *Odyssey* – central messages that are hidden away from [those of us, such as we are], who have not been raised by Hellenic Society as the appreciative audience of Epos.<sup>5</sup>

He argues that the Greeks were the intended audience for the epics. He contends that, for the Greeks, the themes of the two epics are more clear, and therefore, less of a contradiction or anomaly than they might be for a modern audience. Although it is an important point that the Greeks were the intended audience, this fact does not adequately demonstrate Homer's extensive influence. However, the fact for the Greeks, the themes and myths of the epics were truth, does demonstrate the influence of Homer over the Greeks. Nagy emphasizes Homer's influence as a teacher of true mythology by stating:

We recall the words of Leach<sup>6</sup>: "Myth is 'true' for those who use it, but we cannot infer the nature of that truth simply from reading the text; we have to know the context to which the text refers." Still, if Homeric narrative itself gives us "texts" within its own "text" with appropriate contexts to which these "texts" refer then the outer context, out there in the "real world," is at least indirectly recoverable.<sup>7</sup>

Nagy lends credence to Leach's proposal, that the Homeric myth was 'true' for the Greeks. Inasmuch as the Greeks believed Homer's myths, they also gave Homer an authoritative place in their ideas of religion and history. Since Homer was such an influence over religion and mythology, it follows that his epics were an important influence on later Greeks. And, as Plato illustrated, the Greeks were knowledgeable of the text, and therefore, Homer was a literary example each time the actual text was used – even as an educational or religious material.

Therefore, with Homer's general influence in mind, I will look at one instance of Homer's authority – his impact on Greek tragedy.<sup>8</sup> Three major tragedians' works survive. Selected plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are extant. All three authors employ

major female characters who are developed according to the motifs of womanhood established by the female characters in the Homeric epics. In examining Homer's influence over Greek tragedy, I will examine similarities between Homeric characters and tragic characters. By comparing these roles, I will show how themes of power, fidelity and intelligence are developed by Homer and imitated by the tragedians in their development of heroines. This similar treatment of character indicates Homer's influence on the formation of tragic characters. Considering Homer's influence, as discussed previously, it follows that all three playwrights were knowledgeable of Homeric texts. In addition, it follows that, if these men were all educated in Homeric literature, similarities between their plays and Homer's epics would indicate the epic poet's influence on the work of the dramatist. Therefore, in the following chapters, I will explore similarities in character between Homeric characters and tragic characters in each of the three tragedians.

Finally, I choose to examine female characters. Since the men in Homer are more prominently considered than the women because they are the main characters and the heroes of the story, I chose not to focus on them. Instead I wished to look at the females, Penelope, Helen and Andromache. Even though they are not the main characters, these three women all figure prominently into the two epics. In addition, these women are considered by Classicists to be important characters and are widely considered in scholarship. Therefore, I am still discussing something formidable and important. In addition, the female characters of the epic provide a unique opportunity – they can be discussed as female characters not as heroes. I am able to focus on the themes and motifs surrounding their characters and avoid irrelevant discussions of hero cults and hero worship that are necessary to understanding the male characters. Likewise, so that I might

focus on themes and motifs surrounding female characterization, I do not include any discussion of goddesses so that I might avoid any talk of religious portrayals of women. I chose those three particular women because they are all important, mortal women who occupy major roles in one or both of the epics. I wish to discuss the most typical examples of Homeric women so that I might develop the case that Homeric women, in general, provide a prototype for the female roles in Greek tragedy. In order to develop such a thesis, it is also necessary to consider typical examples of Homeric women. For tragic characters, I chose Clytemnestra, Medea and Antigone for the same reasons I chose the Homeric women – they are typical, important, and represent all three authors. For example, Medea was chosen based on Aristide Tessitore statement: “The *Medea* is Euripides’ most famous play and perhaps his most enigmatic.”<sup>9</sup> Each of these women was chosen because she exemplified the typical or best female character portrayed by the author as found in their extent works. Finally, by evaluating themes of fidelity, intelligence and power with regard to the female characters, I am able to contribute to modern scholarship that seeks to stress the importance of the role of women in literature. All three of these themes are important to the evaluation of female characters in modern feminist literary theory. “Messar-Davidow’s [suggest] that the subject of feminist literary criticism is ‘not literature but the feminist study of ideas about sex and gender that people express in literary and critical media.’”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, by finding these themes and showing the development of female characters, I am able to contribute to an understanding of how Homer dealt with the female sex in an ancient literature, and also how his ideas about women carried over into tragic literature. Although I will look at the literature, I will

illustrate how a specific portrayal of the female sex is developed and ingrained into specific forms of Greek literature.

The following chapters will each analyze the similarities between one Homeric female and one tragic female. I will illustrate that similarities exist between these women in the treatment of their characters. Since these similarities exist, it follows that Homer influenced the tragedians in their portrayal of female characters.

### **Penelope and Clytemnestra**

The first example of Homer's influence on Greek tragedy is the comparison of Homer's Penelope and Aeschylus's Clytemnestra. Penelope exhibits themes of infidelity, power and intelligence so that she is viewed by the audience as dangerous to the hero (who is also her husband). Clytemnestra shows the same themes which elicits a similar reaction from the audience. Penelope is the prototype for the "dangerous-wife" inasmuch as she is potentially treacherous to her husband; her character embodies themes that do not offer security to the role of the hero. Likewise, Clytemnestra's character embodies the same themes, thereby endangering the life of her husband, the hero of the drama. Therefore, Clytemnestra's character is molded under the precepts of the "dangerous-wife" prototype. The use of infidelity, power and intelligence to develop the complex personalities of their characters are similar, important and apparent. Through examination of their characters, the similarities of the two women are established – Penelope creates the prototype of the "dangerous-wife" and Clytemnestra is built out of this mold. Using Homer's Penelope and Aeschylus's Clytemnestra, I will show that Homer provided the themes by which the characterization of tragic women was developed.

First, Penelope and Clytemnestra share a number of apparent characteristics that make them compatible for further examination. These “facts” include, first that both women are married to the title characters of the work of literature in which their stories are found. Second, both of their husbands are important Greek heroes who are forced to leave behind kingdoms so that they can fight in Troy. Finally, both queens are left in charge of the kingdoms in their husband’s absence because their male children are too young to take on the responsibilities of their missing fathers. These women share similar details about their characters which only serve to strengthen their thematic comparison

When investigating the portrayal of Penelope and Clytemnestra, I will look at their infidelity and their use of power and intelligence. As I have already stated, each of these women is responsible for her husband’s kingdom during his absence. Therefore, it follows that infidelity to their absent husbands is an important (and potentially dangerous) character trait. The degree to which the author portrays the women as faithful determines whether or not they will be seen as sympathetic or despicable. In both of the stories in question, the authors portray the women as unfaithful and (as a result) dangerous to their absent husbands.

Both women’s faithfulness to their husbands is highly suspect. In addition, the way in which each author develops his character’s infidelity is very similar. This similarity, with respect to the development of character, illustrates Homer’s importance as a template for Aeschylus’s Clytemnestra. Penelope was fraught with suitors in her husband’s absence. Many men, taking advantage of the king’s absence, began to seek his wife and his kingdom. On the surface, Penelope seems like a faithful wife. After all, she purposefully deceives the suitors so that she will not have to actually marry any of them. However,

while Penelope might not have wanted to marry any of the suitors, she was still not entirely unhappy with their presence. That is, Penelope did not exactly throw her suitors out of the house. Classicist, Calvin Byre states,

many critics have argued that Penelope ‘must be up to something,’ and attribute to her a covert intention quite different from what she expresses in her speeches .... She is, it is argued, deceiving the suitors with her talk of marriage to them in order to get rich gifts to recoup the losses to her estate and/or to effect a further delay in the marriage that they are ever more insistently demanding that she make.<sup>11</sup>

Even though Penelope actually wishes to be faithful to her husband, in his absence, she is willing to court these suitors so that she can maintain the kingdom. According to this argument, Penelope was not “technically” unfaithful; however, her loyalty to her husband is definitely questionable. Therefore, she presents a danger to Odysseus’ safe return to power.

Homer develops Penelope’s character by employing themes of infidelity. The best example of her twofold nature is the tapestry story. On the one hand, this story seems to be an example of her faithfulness to her husband; on the other hand, it seems to be seen as a clever ploy to keep the suitors near. Penelope tells her suitors that she will marry one of them when her tapestry is finished. So she weaves the tapestry by day and unweaves it by night so that she will never be finished. Therefore, she will never have to marry any of the suitors. It is true that her plan keeps her from marriage; however, it also keeps the suitors near. That is, in the weaving and unweaving of the tapestry, she is able to be both faithful and unfaithful to her husband – she is able to say “yes” and “no” to the suitors’ presence at the same time. L. A. MacKay addresses this duality in character by stating: Penelope “is in fact presented as a rather emotional woman; [she] cries herself to sleep almost every night” for want of her husband.<sup>12</sup> However, MacKay simultaneously admits that Penelope

continues to weave and unweave her tapestry, thereby cleverly employing a means to ensure the suitors' presence.<sup>13</sup> Her duplicity implies that she is untrustworthy. Inasmuch as she cannot be trusted, she presents a potential danger to Odysseus' safe return to the throne.

Penelope's infidelity does not go unnoticed by her husband either. He refuses to reveal himself to his wife until after the suitors are gone and she verbally professes her loyalty to him. When Odysseus returns to Ithaca, he only reveals his identity to his son Telemachus. He and his son rid the palace of the suitors, and after this task is done, he reveals himself to his wife slowly;

The sequence of scenes which lead finally to recognition begins at 17.508, when Penelope asks the swineherd Eumaios to summon the disguised Odysseus so that she may question him about her husband. But it is only at 23.205, after many diversions, that she breaks down in tears at the final realization that Odysseus is really home.<sup>14</sup>

First, Odysseus hints and suggests that he, himself, is still alive. Finally, Odysseus reveals himself to his wife by relating intimate details about their wedding bed. Penelope is skeptical of the stranger until he tells her this information. The sexual nature of the information that she requests of her husband illustrates her intelligence in sexual matters.

She refuses to be deceived by men:

Penelope is very conscious of the shame before family, peers and countrymen that is the inevitable lot of a married woman whose adultery becomes common knowledge. ... Had she allowed herself to be deceived and had she admitted an imposter Odysseus to her bed, she ... would have committed an *'εργον 'αιχιες*, an act whose shamefulness is by no means reduced even if the gods or deception, not the woman herself, are ultimately responsible."<sup>15</sup>

As a result of Penelope's intelligence, the suspense surrounding her potential infidelity is almost shattered. Her actions both generate and allay the suspicion of her character's

infidelity. She displays her wiles concerning the adulterous act; she is too smart to be taken in by any man; however, she still does not address other actions, such as the tapestry scheme, which throws an ambiguous light upon her faithfulness. All the audience learns is that Penelope is too smart to get caught. She is a complex character whose actions are not controlled by her husband. Therefore, she retains her potentiality for harm through her intellect.

Clytemnestra is openly unfaithful to her husband; during Agamemnon's absence, she cheats on him with Aegisthus. Aeschylus leaves no question that the queen of Mycenae sought the company of Aegisthus in her husband's absence. However, with regard to the development of infidelity in the character of Clytemnestra, both Penelope and the Queen of Mycenae share similar "*mêtis*."<sup>16</sup> Homer, himself, "blames Clytemnestra for using her *mêtis* ... to 'dys-locate' the place of her husband," while ostensibly, he must praise Penelope for using her *mêtis* to preserve the place of her husband.<sup>17</sup> However, regardless of the outcome, both women employ their *mêtis* with regard to expressing their fidelity to their absent husbands. Bergren even suggests that "to divide female *mêtis* into exclusive praise and blame ... 'dys-locates' the division. For [Homer] claims that the blame of Clytemnestra 'will forever bestow a harsh word upon female women, even if there is one who does good' – even, that is, on Penelope herself."<sup>18</sup> Therefore, regardless of outcome of the story (that is, whether or not they use their *mêtis* to ultimately reinforce or destroy their husband's rule), both women's *mêtis* reflects negatively upon their character. They are necessarily linked by their similar means. In addition, not only because Homer's Penelope is prior to Aeschylus's Clytemnestra chronologically, but also because the formulation of Aeschylus's Clytemnestra's *mêtis* is dependent upon that of Penelope, it is

clear that Homer's Penelope provides the prototype for the characterization of Aeschylus's tragic heroine.

Each author uses children to display characteristics of infidelity in both Penelope and Clytemnestra. Penelope's fidelity is addressed by the character of Telemachus, who in Book 1, line 215-216, states " 'My mother says that I am Odysseus's son, but how should I know?' " <sup>19</sup> Telemachus' statement suggests that Penelope's fidelity is questionable enough even to draw suspicion on his paternity. About this quotation, L. A. MacKay states, "The manner of its formulation suggests forcibly to the listener that Penelope is the kind of person about whose conduct serious suspicions would not be *prima facie* unthinkable." <sup>20</sup> Penelope, although she does ultimately prove herself faithful, is wily – perhaps even more so than her husband. Therefore, Penelope is an untrustworthy character – her infidelity casts doubt upon her character and presents danger to Odysseus.

Like Homer, Aeschylus uses the children of the heroine to display her infidelities. Just as Telemachus illustrated Penelope's ambiguous fidelity, Iphigenia is the catalyst that both motivates and explains Clytemnestra's infidelity. Like Penelope, Clytemnestra does not have a good relationship with her children. In addition, her ambiguity is displayed through her relationship with them. She kills for the sake of her dead daughter only to be killed by her surviving children. <sup>21</sup>

In terms of infidelity, there is one "fatal" distinction between the two female characters. In the end, Penelope proves herself faithful to her husband. Homer's epic ends with Odysseus and his son killing all the suitors and the royal family resuming life as it must have been before the war. However, Clytemnestra, with the help of her suitor, murders the returning hero. As a result, they set in motion the repercussions of the curse of the house

of Atreus, which will result in her own and Aegisthus' death. However, despite this difference in outcome, the similarity in the authors' development of Penelope and Clytemnestra's ambiguous nature, as displayed by their *metis* and the portrayal of their children, cannot be denied.

Finally, the similarity in nature between Penelope and Clytemnestra suggests that Clytemnestra was developed with Penelope in mind. That is, despite Aeschylus's intentions in creating Clytemnestra and other influences, Homer's influence remains distinguishable as a result of the similarities between Clytemnestra and Penelope. Clearly, Homer's Penelope does provide a prototype for the character of Clytemnestra.

### **Helen and Medea**

The second example of Homer's influence on Greek tragedy is seen in the comparison of Homer's Helen and Euripides' Medea. Each woman deals with infidelity by destroying the lives of men (gender exclusive). Both Helen and Medea employ their intelligence as a means of manipulation. Helen is the prototype of the cunning-wife in that she employs her sexual prowess and her intellect to the destruction of men. Like Helen, Medea uses her strong personality and intellect to destroy men. Therefore, inasmuch as Helen's character is revealed through themes of infidelity, intelligence and violence, she is the prototype for Medea, whose character is revealed through the same themes.

The comparison of Helen and Medea is first seen through the following apparent similarities of character. First of all, both Helen and Medea are unhappily married to important Greek heroes. Helen is married to Menelaus, a famous Greek hero of the Trojan War. Helen is guilty of infidelity; however, she is not to blame. Greek legend states that Helen was awarded to Paris according to a bribe associated with a dispute between the

goddesses Juno, Aphrodite and Athena.<sup>22</sup> Although this myth is not included in Homer's telling of the events of the Trojan War, this myth was well known by the Greek populace; therefore, this information retains importance and relevance to Helen's portrayal in Homer's texts. Evidence of its popularity is seen in art: "the judgment of Paris has recurred as a favorite subject of artists since antiquity."<sup>23</sup> Medea is married to Jason (of Argonaut fame). Jason leaves her for the princess of Corinth. Like Helen, Medea is a victim of infidelity which ruins her marriage. Regardless of whether they are leaving or being left, adultery victimizes both women. Next, both women are highly sexualized. Homer claims that Helen is the most beautiful woman in the world. She is "the face that launched a thousand ships." She holds a certain amount of blame for the most famous war of all time – the war which produced some of the greatest heroes of all time, e.g. Achilles and Hector. Medea was believed to be a minor goddess of sorts. According to legend, she was considered the granddaughter of the sun god, Helios, and a great sorceress. In addition, "Medea's association of Hecate with the inmost centre of her house" is considered an "exotic religious feature" of her character.<sup>24</sup> These similarities provide the basis for the thematic comparison of character.

Looking at the degree to which the author blames Helen and Medea for dissolution of their marriages will determine whether or not the characters were being portrayed sympathetically. Although neither character is actually at fault, both authors place blame on the women for the disillusion of their marriages. Homer concedes that Paris did kidnap Helen because he, physically, takes her out of her husband's home and places her in a sexual relationship with him. In book 3 of the Iliad, lines 171-180, Homer addresses Helen's culpability surrounding her departure from Greece, when he writes:

Helen the shining among women, answered and spoke to him: ‘Always to me, beloved father [Priam], you are feared and respected; and I wish bitter death had been what I wanted, when I came hither following your son, forsaking my chamber, my kinsmen, my grown child, and the loveliness of girls my own age. It did not happen that way: and now I am worn with weeping. ... That man is Atreus’ son Agamemnon, widely powerful at the same time a good king and a strong spearfighter, once my kinsman, slut that I am.’<sup>25</sup>

But, despite Homer’s concession regarding Helen’s choice in leaving her husband, he still portrays her partly guilty for her own situation. For example, he portrays Helen as sorry for all the harm she has caused. Homer has the girl refer to herself as a “slut” and even wish for her own death. Her admittance of guilt shows how Homer judges Helen’s infidelity. She is viewed negatively for committing adultery; however, Paris is not viewed as harshly – Homer’s biggest criticism of Paris is his “aversion to the fight,” which “offers subtle commentary” on the fact that Paris is only moved to fight the war for which he is to blame by the “exemplum provided by his more heroic brother.”<sup>26</sup> According to Homer, a woman’s infidelity is a much more serious crime than a male’s infidelity.

Euripides’ Medea is the jilted lover of Jason (of Argonaut fame). She falls in love with this hero and leaves her family to marry him. Medea and Jason seem happily married - she even bears him children – only to have him leave her for the young daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. Out of despair, jealousy, and a crazed desire for revenge, she murders not only her husband’s future bride and father-in-law, but also the children she bore him. Euripides’ play ends with her, screaming among the corpses of her children. In Euripides’ play, Medea is a woman who cannot win: she is actively victimized by her husband; however, she has clearly gone too far by murdering so many in the wake of her anger. Like Helen, Medea possesses a passion that is only socially accepted when found in a male character. Her passion causes her portrayal to be unsympathetic. On the contrary,

Achilles' rage, at the beginning of the Iliad is not viewed with the same visceral distaste. In fact, when Achilles reenters the battle, his vigor and passion is portrayed very positively. First his rage and refusal to fight because of the dishonor Agamemnon has caused him is viewed positively; he is "[valorized] as a champion of essential value."<sup>27</sup> Likewise his devotion to Patroklos is viewed positively. Medea's passion is not viewed positively. She is portrayed as a madwoman who "persistently elicits an ambivalent reaction on the part of audiences. Medea is hardly a character whom one could love [because of the] ... heinousness of her crime; [however she is] ... an object of fascination."<sup>28</sup>

Homer and Euripides portray Helen and Medea, respectively, as wily and crafty. One of the best examples of Helen's deceit occurs in the Odyssey. In book 4 of the Odyssey, lines 290-790, Helen gives Menelaus and Telemachus drugs before they begin their after dinner conversation.<sup>29</sup> By manipulating Menelaus's mind with drugs, she alters his ability to accurately recount to Telemachus stories of the war and his father, Odysseus. Helen wishes to manipulate the memory of the violence for which she was a major cause. Medea also uses drugs in accordance with violence. She lines the garments of the princess and the king with poison, so that, when they don the clothes, they will be tainted and die. Like Helen, Medea's character is revealed by trickery linked to violence. Both Homer and Euripides depict their women unsympathetically due to their wiles.

Helen is sexually powerful and very cunning; she is aware of her beauty and her power over men. In addition to being conscious of it, she is also willing to utilize her power. For example, despite her adultery, Menelaus bears her no ill will. He even takes her back home to Greece. Helen's ability to skew her husband's memory of the war is an

illustration of her power over him. In this episode, Helen elicits from her husband a positive depiction of her role in the war. Olson states, “At the same time, and in implicit response to his wife’s claim that she had long been on the Greek side of the war, Menelaus depicts a Helen who worked actively against the Argives even on night Troy was sacked. [However], the blame for this is naturally placed once again on a malevolent deity.”<sup>30</sup> Although Helen is portrayed as guilty for the violence her infidelity has caused (even though the situation was not her fault), her husband is convinced of her innocence. He blames malevolent gods for his wife’s indiscretions during the war. Even though Menelaus admits that Helen was at odds with the Greeks, he still places no blame on her. Something about Helen makes Menelaus discredit the idea that she must bear some blame in the war. Her ability to evade the blame of her husband, when she is incapable of evading the blame of the author or the audience, illustrates her power over him. In addition, Helen exhibits power over men, in general, in this book when she provides drugs for her husband and their guests. Likewise, her beauty is to blame for the violence of the Trojan War. She is so stunning that Paris is willing to turn down the bribes of Athena and Juno. His decision causes the war and the subsequent alliances of the gods. She takes the epithet “the face that launched a thousand ships.” Inasmuch as she is able to manipulate the minds of the men around her, she is wily and dangerous.

Medea’s craftiness is apparent in her rage. As the jilted lover of Jason, she plots successfully to ruin the life for which he has abandoned her. Her power over Jason is severe and clearly dangerous. She murders his future wife, father-in-law and all of his children. These murders ruin the life he sought. In addition, by killing his children, she also ruins the life which he had. Her power of revenge is expansive and clearly

treacherous. On an obvious level, she is dangerous because she is guilty of murder. “With the revenge plan thus split into two components, Medea ... will complete her revenge ... [destroying Jason] spiritually.”<sup>31</sup> Like Helen, she uses drugs to accomplish this feat. Medea cleverly gives the princess a “fine robe and golden crown which will destroy her when she puts them on.”<sup>32</sup> Her treachery is destructive and repulsive; therefore, as a result, she is an unsympathetic character.

There are two notable differences between Helen and Medea. The first difference is that Helen is not a tragic hero. In fact, Helen’s story ends on a fairly positive note. In the *Odyssey*, she is back home with Menelaus living a life that must have resembled her life before the war. In addition, the resolution of her character is not as important as Medea’s because she is not the main character of either epic. However, Medea is not so lucky. Euripides’ play ends with Medea surrounded by her dead children. She has exacted revenge on her husband, but at what price? Her home is even more destroyed than it might have been, if Jason’s new marriage had actually occurred. There is no question that Medea’s fate is far worse than Helen’s, though Medea’s fate still demonstrates similarities in character to Helen. Like the comparison between Clytemnestra and Penelope, just because the outcome of the stories is different does not detract from the importance of the thematic revelations of character. It is through that revelation that the prototypes emerge. Just because Helen’s life turned out much less tragically than Medea’s, does not imply that Helen’s character was any less cunning or destructive. Therefore, because Medea displays similar characteristics to Helen and considering the influence of Homer’s epics (as discussed in the introduction), it follows that Homer’s Helen provides the prototype into which Euripides’ Medea falls.

## **Andromache and Antigone**

The last example of Homer's influence over Greek tragedy occurs in the comparison of Andromache and Sophocles' *Antigone*. These two characters are portrayed very differently from Penelope and Clytemnestra or Helen and Medea. Andromache and Antigone, unlike the other pairs of characters, are both portrayed in a positive light. Therefore, the themes that apply to these characters are slightly different because they are eliciting the opposite reaction from the reader than the previous themes discussed. Andromache and Antigone are defined by their devotion to male family members. Because of their devotion, any strong opinions and actions are portrayed positively. Andromache was chosen because she was one of the few major female characters in Homer's epics who was never portrayed negatively. I chose *Antigone* because it is an important example of Sophocles' surviving canon, and as such, it is an important example of Sophocles' style of writing. Thus in the following chapter, by illustrating the similarities in family preservation as demonstrated by the characters of Andromache and Sophocles' *Antigone*, I show that Homer provided the prototype for the development of positively portrayed female characters.

First, the apparent similarities, which justify the thematic comparison of Andromache and Antigone, will be established. The most notable similarity is that the women are royalty, and more specifically princesses. Next, their kingdoms are both "past their prime." Andromache is a princess of Troy. She is married to Hector, son of King Priam. Her story centers around the Trojan War – obviously her part is intertwined with the collapse of her family's kingdom. Antigone is princess of Thebes. She is the progeny of the doomed king, Oedipus. In addition, Antigone's tale occurs after the death of her

brothers. Both women's kingdoms are in disarray. In addition, both are at odds with the prevailing politics of the day. Finally, and most important, these women's stories center around their devotion to male family members. Their role of support to the men in their lives justifies their positive portrayal. Therefore, Antigone need not be married to have her role in the family compared to Andromache, the wife of Hector. Antigone's devotion to a male, in this case, her brother, is enough to appropriately label her a family preservationist in as much as she and Andromache work as support to their male family members. Therefore, in discussing the similarities between Andromache and Antigone, I will show that, inasmuch as the authors show the women to be faithful to their families, they also treat the female characters sympathetically.

Both women are the champions of the male hero in their lives; they stand by their men even at great cost. Even though they do not share the same specific relation to the male hero-figure, they both do share a familial tie with him. In addition, each of these women, while supporting their male family member, stands at odds with the family at large.

Andromache is the wife of Hector, the greatest Trojan hero of the Trojan War. She is openly supportive and encouraging of her husband throughout the war. However, she does state on more than one occasion that she is uneasy about his participation in the fighting.

In book 6 of the Iliad, lines 431-434, she cries to her husband telling him:

Please take pity upon me then, stay here on the rampart, that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow, but draw your people up by the fig tree, there where the city is openest to attack, and where the wall may be mounted.

Andromache tells her husband here that he is all she has. Explicitly, she feels that her husband should take into account his paternal duty to their young son. However, in the end, Andromache must suffer the death of her beloved husband. Andromache becomes the

prototype for the family preservationist in that she is empowered only by her open devotion to her husband. As long as her character reinforces the dignity and health of her male family members, Andromache affords a positive portrayal.

Sophocles' *Antigone* begins after the death of the heroine's brother. She believes that it is her duty to her family and to her brother to provide her deceased sibling with a proper burial. Her belief is in direct conflict with the laws of her society. In addition, Antigone's struggle seems to extend beyond her own family – she is at odds with city elders who are not necessarily related to her; however, it is likely that those elders retained a bond with the royal family that was either familial or closely resembled it. However, since both women are openly in conflict with the governmental structure of the time, the comparison is still valid. It is important to note that it is difficult to distinguish for Antigone or Andromache, how much of their conflict (if any at all) is truly devoid of familial ties because, as royalty, their family was the government – in which case they would both stand at odds with their larger family.

Both of the women are fiercely faithful and sympathetic characters. Andromache is ever faithful to her husband. Her desire for her husband's well-being as he leaves to go into battle is one of the *Iliad's* most touching scenes. In addition, her grief at his death is also treated very tenderly by the poet: "Andromache's recognition of Hector's fate at the end of *Iliad* 22 ... '[causes] the poet is not using his material in the most typical way' "<sup>33</sup> Andromache's outspoken and manipulative means of trying to keep her husband out of battle are portrayed far differently than the other prominent women of the poem; therefore, it follows that there is a notable shift in the poet's "material." Antigone is very faithful to her brother. In fact she is the only character in Sophocles' version, whose faithfulness to

the dead prince is never questioned. For example, even Ismene, Antigone's sister, is uneasy about defying the law to provide her brother with a proper burial. However, Antigone is unwavering – her unflinching faithfulness stands in stark contrast to her sister's wavering. As a result of her genuine feelings for her brother, Antigone's faithful love shines throughout the play. A. W. Simpson and C. M. H. Millar support this argument by stating that

Antigone loves Ismene just as much she loves Polyneices. In fact, Antigone typifies, amongst other things, Family Love, and even the so called, stormy interview with Ismene towards the end of the first scene, if carefully examined, can be found to express resignation no less, if not more, than anger.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Antigone is treated very sympathetically by Sophocles. The playwright allows Antigone's grief and love for her brother to stand out devoid of any ulterior motives. In other words, the audience does not feel that Antigone is trying to be deliberately rebellious or anti-establishment by defy the elders – rather she is acting out of love. Inasmuch as her love for her brother is her only/primary motivation, the reader is free to feel sympathy for the heroine. In the end, the similarities in character suggest that Antigone was characterized with regard to the prototype that Andromache's character created.

## **Conclusion**

The comparison of these three characters in Homer to three major characters in Greek tragedy illustrates Homer's influence on the writers of Greek tragedy. I illustrated how Penelope embodied the prototype of the dangerous wife, and how Aeschylus's Clytemnestra's character embodies similar themes to create a similar character. In addition, Helen became the prototype for the destructive wife – engaged in infidelity which causes the destruction of many lives. Likewise, Euripides's Medea embodies the same

prototype – she is also involved in a dysfunctional marriage which causes the destruction of many lives. Finally, Andromache provides the prototype for the positively portrayed female character. Because her actions are motivated by her devotion to male family members, they are portrayed positively. The same is true for Antigone – because her actions are motivated by devotion to the memory and honor of her dead brother, she is a positive character.

By choosing characters who represented the stereotypical women of these two “genres,” I provided a basis for the statement that Homer was an influence on women found in Greek tragedy, and I provided a basis for the statement that Homer developed a view of women that was carried over into tragic literature. The emergence of themes and prototypes in Homer which are discovered again in tragic literature suggests a specific view of how women should behave. Penelope, Helen and Andromache provide the prototype for how tragic authors could develop females to create a certain perception of their characters. For example, if an author wanted a women to be portrayed positively, she might follow Andromache’s prototype and be devoted to her male family members.

Finally, I am not trying to prove that Homer was the only or the most important influence on these tragedians. On the contrary, I chose characters who easily illustrated Homer’s influence. Considering both the evidence about Homer’s influence and the evidence presented in the comparison, it is clear that Homer was an important influence. However, these comparisons are by no means the end of Homer’s influence. For example, Penelope may not have been the only influence on Clytemnestra – in fact even the other Homeric women discussed in the paper may have influenced how Aeschylus chose to characterize Agamemnon’s wife. Certainly there were other influences, such as other

works of literatures which the author may have read and the popular mythology surrounding his story; however, Clytemnestra's comparison with Penelope does provide evidence to show that Homer was an important influence on her characterization.

Likewise, concerning the other three characters – these comparisons do not exclude or downgrade the existence of other influences; however, they do illustrate the influence of Homer as a literary example to later Greek tragedians.

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<sup>1</sup> Davis, 22 – The Greek alphabet originated from Phoenician writings. These early written “languages” were known as Linear A and Linear B. Classicist, S. Davis, explains the function and the context of the writing. Concerning the function, he states, “the Linear B tablets... seem to record rations issued to individuals or places, or tribute received from them” In addition, with regard to relationship between the written and the spoken languages of the Phoenicians, Davis explains that “the Linear B script was derived from the Linear A, with innovations to make it usable for the Greek language.” Therefore, the Linear A and B languages were mainly written scripts that did not necessarily represent the spoken language, namely Greek. He explains further that, “Both the Greek language and the Linear B script in which it was written existed in the second half of the fifteenth century B.C. at Knossos.” Therefore, the Linear B script existed simultaneously with the Greek language, and the script was beginning to be more representative of the spoken, Greek, language.

<sup>2</sup> Powell, 237

<sup>3</sup> Plato,

<sup>4</sup> Plato,

<sup>5</sup> Nagy, 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Leach is a classicist previously mentioned in Nagy's text – provide here the citation for this particular quote in Leach's work.

<sup>7</sup> Nagy, 137

<sup>8</sup> See P. E. Easterling's book, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* for more information about the history of Greek tragedy – (Easterling, P. E., ed. 1997. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Tessitore, 587

<sup>10</sup> Graff, 135 – also cited is Messer-Davidow's quotation.

<sup>11</sup> Byre, 160

<sup>12</sup> MacKay, 125

<sup>13</sup> MacKay, 125-126

<sup>14</sup> Jones, 1

<sup>15</sup> Morgan, 3

<sup>16</sup> Bergren, 10

<sup>17</sup> Bergren, 10

<sup>18</sup> Bergen, 10

<sup>19</sup> L. A. MacKay, 123

<sup>20</sup> L. A. MacKay, 123

<sup>21</sup> Note: these actions are not limited to the *Agamemnon*. The death of Iphigenia is implied in the *Agamemnon* – knowledge of this act would have been present in the mythology of the characters for the Greek audience. Also, Clytemnestra is not killed until the following play of the trilogy, the *Libation Bearers*.

<sup>22</sup> Rodney, 57 – At the marriage of Peleus and Thetis, the goddess, Discord, hurls an apple “marked ‘to the fairest’ ” into the court. The goddesses Juno, Aphrodite and Athena find a golden apple, and each of them believes they are worthy of the prize. To settle the dispute, Paris is told by Zeus to award the apple to

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whichever goddess he deems worthy of the title. Aphrodite bribes the price, offering him the most beautiful women in the world if he chooses her. Paris takes the bribe and is given Helen, wife of Menelaus.

<sup>23</sup> Rodney, 57

<sup>24</sup> ed. Mastronarde, 24

<sup>25</sup> trans. Lattimore, 104-105

<sup>26</sup> Rabel, 77

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, 4

<sup>28</sup> Tessitore, 587

<sup>29</sup> Homer, 67

<sup>30</sup> Olson, 390

<sup>31</sup> Mills, 290

<sup>32</sup> Mills, 290

<sup>33</sup> Segal, 34 – also cited within is Hainsworth’s “Structure and Content.”

<sup>34</sup> Simpson, 78

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