

MYTHICA

A NEW HISTORY OF HOMER'S WORLD,
THROUGH THE WOMEN WRITTEN OUT OF IT



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thrilling.'
TOM HOLLAND

'Breathtaking . . .
you HAVE to read it.'
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MYTHICA

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How Women Became Poets

Ancient Love Stories

MYTHICA

*A New History of Homer's World,
Through the Women Written Out of It*

EMILY HAUSER



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In loving memory of my grandmother, Mama,
who always knew what to say.

For Eliza and Theo, who are finding their voices.
And for Oliver, always.

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‘Muse: tell me about a woman.’

HOMER, *ODYSSEY*, 1.1, A VARIATION

TIMELINE

IRON AGE

1050



Amazons

1000

Fall of Troy

1100



Linear B
Tablets



Bronze Age
Collapse

1200



AhT 20



Peristeria
Penelope



Uluburun

Puduhepa

Petsas
House

1300

Griffin
Warrior

1400

Snake
Goddess



Chania
Baby



1500

LATE BRONZE AGE

1700



Pefka

1600

Hammurabi
Law Code



Mycenae Grave
Circle B

1700

MYCENAEANS

1800



Knossos

1900

MIDDLE BRONZE AGE

2100

2000

2100



Jewels of Helen

2500

EARLY BRONZE AGE

3100



Troy

MINOANS 3000

Note on chronology: all dates are based on the 'high' chronology for the Aegean Bronze Age and Sturt Manning et al's radiocarbon-based dates for the eruption of Thera (Santorini).

HISTORICA

Historical Map of the Bronze Age Aegean





MYTHICA

Mythical Map of the World
of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*





AUTHOR'S NOTE

I remember the moment I realized Homer was going to be a big part of my life. I was around fifteen, and grinding through hours of revision for my GCSEs: not a time in which many people expect to find inspiration. Over the summer I spent the sun-bleached days at my grandparents' house, living for the tea breaks that my grandmother rattled on brass trays down the corridor. I was taking ancient Greek (and acutely aware of how lucky I was: I'd travel three hours a day to get to the nearest boys' grammar where they could teach me). We'd been set a passage from the *Odyssey*: the climactic scene, near the end of the poem, where Odysseus steps up to the contest of the bow masterminded by Penelope, and announces himself at last as her husband and king of Ithaca. That morning, notes all over the ink-blotter, dictionaries propped open like white-winged seagulls in mid-flight, I'd been wading through a mire of grammar – participles, conditionals, subjunctives – in an effort to coax the enigmatic symbols into some sort of sense.

And then, like a sailor coming home, the words coming together, and the sudden thought like a swallow flying free: *I can read this*. Reading the lines out loud, wrapping my breath around the archaic Greek. Sitting on the edge of my grandmother's armchair with poems thousands of years old.

That was the beginning of a journey that, *Odyssey*-like, has taken over the last twenty years of my life. It took me, first, to Cambridge to read the *Iliad* in the shadow of King's College Chapel – where I first found, hidden in the pages of my sage-green edition of Homer, the women waiting voiceless and ignored behind the walls of Troy and in the Greek camp. It led me across the ocean to Harvard and Yale, where – in 2011 – I had the idea of opening up the world of the women of the *Iliad*, and telling *their* story, in their voices and their words, in fiction. In my novel *For the Most Beautiful* (2016), I got to step into their world. I found Briseis and Chryseis, the two Trojan women enslaved and raped by Achilles

and Agamemnon, the so-called ‘heroes’ of the epic – the women who stood behind the entire story of the *Iliad*: and I told their tale. In the process, I discovered just how many more silenced women there were, weaving through both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* like an invisible thread, whose voices needed to be heard – without whom there wouldn’t be any story at all. And so I decided to write this book, to uncover the real women behind the myth – women from history, the mothers and slaves and warriors and queens, who made the stories what they are.

The ancient Greeks knew, just as much as we do, that any history is subject to its own concerns in the story it’s trying to tell – as well as the inevitable simplifications and reductions that come with parcelling up the messy events of the past into a coherent package that fits within the covers of a book. In traversing a huge chronological and geographical span, moving between archaeology, literature, history and myth, this book covers people and places known by different names at different periods, names that often either restrict the diversity of the many cultures in which those people or places featured, or are fraught with centuries of cultural baggage. For instance, I refer to ‘ancient south-west Asia’ rather than ‘the ancient Near East’ (a Western colonial construct). I also use ‘Greeks’ (a later term derived from the Latin *Graeci*) rather than Homer’s Argives/Danaans/Achaeans, and ‘Mycenaeans’ (a modern label), but in neither case do I use these terms to suggest a national identity. Rather, I try to acknowledge complexity wherever possible, while keeping naming recognizable and consistent for ease of reading. So, for example, the ancient city we now know as ‘Troy’ seems in actual fact to have been called by two names – *Wilusa* and *Taruisa* – by the Hittites, the city’s closest contemporary neighbours; later Greeks called it *Ilios*, *Ilion* and *Troia*; the Romans named it *Ilium* or *Troia*. ‘Troy’ stuck in English, and I use it throughout the book – at the same time as I explore the ancient history in which ‘Troy’ had many different names, in many different languages. Similarly, I call the (imaginary) home of the Phaeacians ‘the island of the Phaeacians’, to avoid confusion, even though it is known in Homer as Scherië. In general, transliterations are Latinized for ease of recognition (so ‘Hecuba’ and ‘Achilles’, not ‘Hekabē’ and ‘Akhilleus’).

Quotations from the Homeric epics are for the most part from Emily

Wilson's translations; some are my own, and are indicated as such in the Notes. (Note that the epigraphs on pp. ix, 25 and 213 are my translations.) Emily Wilson's acclaimed and inspirational *Odyssey* (2018) was, unbelievably, the first time Homer's epic was translated into English by a woman. This points to a much bigger question – that this is a recovery not just *of* Homer's women, but *by* women as well; a story about the women who have studied and continue to trailblaze the study of Homer, the women classicists, historians, scientists, translators, archaeologists who have contributed so much to our knowledge about the past. I wanted to make sure that I tell their stories, too. So you will find, in these pages, not just Penelope and Helen of Troy, but also the pioneering women intellectuals – their names often lost to the record, or not recognized as they should be – who have dedicated their lives to uncovering the lost worlds of Bronze Age Greece, and of Homer.

INTRODUCTION

Muse: A New Invocation

August 2017, and it's a hot summer's day in Boston, Massachusetts, but the stacks of Harvard's Widener Library are as cold as catacombs. I'm sitting in the Smyth Classics Library up in the gods of Widener, thumbing through a Greek text of Homer's *Odyssey*. Walnut desks and mismatched chairs are overseen by white plaster busts of bearded poets. There's the overwhelming, musty scent of old books, the air thick with the hush of minds at work, broken only by the tapping of laptop keys and the wind through the yellowwood trees out in the Yard. I'm searching for a particular passage in the *Odyssey*'s first book – following the invocation where the poet calls on the Muse to strike up and tell the story of 'a man' – where, I hope, I can find evidence that women in Homer's world might have been more important than we've been led to believe. Greek letters crowd the page, black ink pressing on the paper margins, and I feel myself thrill with excitement to be deciphering this ancient language – the same excitement I felt when I first started learning Greek and got gripped by the sensation of being able to unravel these Morse-code messages from the past.

As we dive into Homer's story, we're dropped into a world from over three thousand years back, an ancient land burnished to a sheen by legend and filled with a character cast of capricious gods, power-hungry kings and swaggering heroes. Greek citadels perch like crowns on rocky outcrops, each ruled by an overweening lord who spends his time doling out favours in his throne room or sallying abroad to loot gold and capture women, while wives and daughters crowd faceless in the palace

shadows. What Homer is describing seems to look back (at least in part) to a real civilization of historical ancient Greeks who lived in the Late Bronze Age, called the Mycenaeans – named (by the archaeologists who discovered them) after the kingdom of Mycenae, one of the most overweening and gold-filled of them all. The ancient Greeks believed that Troy, the Trojan War, as well as the swarming Greek forces who invaded from Mycenae, Pylos and Sparta, were all certifiably, tangibly real: one ancient chronicler even gave the sack of Troy a specific date – 1184 BCE. This is (or at least, so the ancients imagined) the stamping ground of Odysseus, king of Ithaca, sacker of cities, master of disguise. And it's also the world of Penelope.

Odysseus, so the tale goes, has been gone from Ithaca for nearly twenty years, swashbuckling away in the Trojan War of legend. He'd sworn to Menelaus – king of Sparta, according to Homer, and brother of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae – to protect Helen, Menelaus' wife, the most beautiful woman in the world and so (naturally, to the loot-minded men) a prize ripe for the taking. When Helen had run off with Paris, prince of Troy, Odysseus and the other Greek kings duly banded together to get her back. The legend tells us it took ten years and a siege against Troy, a protracted war of sufficient horror and greatness for one epic poem, centuries later, to be born: Homer's *Iliad*. And then there were the exploits of the heroes' years-long voyage back to Greece – enough to fill another epic, the *Odyssey*, charting Odysseus' stunts and scrapes on his way home.

In all this, Odysseus' wife Penelope lingers in the background, waiting (so the Homeric epics tell us) on rocky Ithaca and fending off her many suitors while Odysseus has all the adventures. At the very beginning of the *Odyssey*, we meet her coming downstairs from her bedroom to find a bard singing in the palace's hall about the trials and tribulations of the Greeks on their return from Troy. Not surprisingly, Penelope, who has been spending ten years trying to forget the setbacks Odysseus must be facing, finds this a rather tactless choice of subject. In front of the suitors thronging the palace, all waiting until she finally gives up on Odysseus, she interrupts the bard, who has already struck up his tune, and tells him to sing something else. But it's not going to be that easy. Penelope's teenage son, Telemachus, who feels like flexing his authority in front of

the other males, stands up and puts his mother in her place: 'Go in and do your work. Stick to the loom and distaff. Tell your slaves to do their chores as well. It is for men to talk, especially me. I am the master.'¹ And off Penelope goes.

To all intents and purposes, then, one of the most famous of all the ancient texts, telling one of the most famous ancient legends, begins with something of a mission statement: that women aren't meant to talk. Nor are they allowed to tell their own stories, their *own* myths, in their own words. The Greek term Telemachus uses for 'talking' is *mythos* – 'word' (it's where the English 'myth' comes from). He essentially says not just 'words are for men', but '*myths* are for men'. Both the myths that get told, and the words employed to tell them, are – in this manifesto – a men's-only zone.

It's a statement that has, until recently, always been taken at face value – and it's easy to see why. You can't read many of the ancient Greek myths, let alone epics like Homer's, without being told in one way or another that women are meant to be silent – seen and not heard (even better if they're not seen). In Homer's war epic, the *Iliad*, one particularly important woman – a trafficked and raped sex slave called Briseis, who is the reason the whole story exists (but we'll get to that later) – speaks only once, and gets to say about as much as Achilles' magical (male) talking horse. When women do try to have their say, then men will quickly close them down: Telemachus' refusal to hear Penelope out, and to get the poet to tell the story that *she's* asked for, is what Mary Beard calls 'the first recorded example of a man telling a woman to "shut up"' in Western literature.² And it's not just the mortals, either. In the first book of the *Iliad*, Hera – queen of the gods – gets slapped back (almost literally) by Zeus: when she tries to challenge him, he snaps at her to 'sit down, be quiet, and do as I say' (along with the threat of a beating if she doesn't obey him).³ If the role of women is to shut up, it's made abundantly clear, meanwhile, that great stories are only meant to be told about the adventures of men like Odysseus. The *Odyssey's* opening line makes the instruction to the female Muse (goddess of song and poetry) quite clear: she's only meant to inspire stories about *men*. 'Muse: tell me about a man', the story begins – where 'man' (*andra*) is the epic's first word in Greek.⁴ In these legends of the Greek past, women are put

firmly, and ever-so-silently, in the background, and the mythical world is made resolutely male.

But as I sit in my twenty-first-century library with the text of the *Odyssey* resting against the blinking screen of my open laptop, I wonder if there aren't different questions to be asked. Is it possible that we might be able to read past Penelope's shutting up? Can we, as modern historians, instead make space for her to speak for herself? Can we dig deeper into the past to begin to invoke the voices of Homer's women – beyond, or behind, the tale that we've always been told?

Only a few months earlier, I'd completed my PhD dissertation at Yale, based on a hunch that there was more to be discovered about the silenced women of Homer's world. The year before, in 2016, I'd published my debut novel, *For the Most Beautiful*, a rewriting of the *Iliad* that tells the untold story of Briseis and Chryseis, two Trojan women enslaved by Achilles and Agamemnon in the Greek camp. These women, like Penelope, like Helen of Troy, Cassandra, Circe and Calypso, have had to stand at the sidelines for thousands of years – both in the stories that handed them down to us, and in the scholarship that curated and interpreted them – as mere accessories to the greater theatre of epics that are, supposedly, all about men. But then, at the same time, there was the central paradox to Homer's epics that no one, to my mind, had yet satisfactorily addressed: the fundamental incompatibility between the claim the epics make that women don't matter, and the fact that in every case they are essential to the story and the myth. There wouldn't be an epic without a Muse. There wouldn't be a Trojan War without a Helen. The *Iliad* wouldn't begin without a Briseis. The *Odyssey* wouldn't end without a Penelope. I knew, deep down, that there had to be more to Homer's women than the traditional viewpoint suggested.

And then, on that August day in 2017, a magazine lands on my desk. It's a copy of *Nature*, one of the leading science journals. The glossy cover is black with a brightly coloured illustration of some recent scientific discovery, all twisting yellow helix and pink spirals. And a word I'm not expecting catches my eye: *Mycenaeans*.

I rifle through to the appropriate page, fingers sliding on the sleek magazine (I'm used to dog-eared classical texts): 'Genetic Origins of the Minoans and Mycenaeans'. It's a study published by a lab just over the

river at the Harvard Medical School. The text is dense as I scan through it, full of jitter plots and complex DNA sampling methods, but what catches my eye at once are the individuals being sampled: ‘Four Mycenaean were included from mainland Greece (approximately 1700–1200 BC; from the western coast of the Peloponnese, from Argolis, and the island of Salamis).’ Working through the appendix, I discover what I’m looking for: a successful DNA sample taken from the teeth of a Mycenaean Greek woman found buried in a royal cemetery adjacent to the ancient citadel of Peristeria in the western Peloponnese (north-east of modern-day Kyparissia), and dating to between 1416 and 1280 BCE.⁵

There are several reasons why this is so exciting. Our ability to extract and study ancient DNA (known as aDNA) from thousands-of-years-old biological tissue is thanks to recent scientific advances, which have had to face (and overcome) serious challenges and complications. Ancient DNA fragments are typically extremely short and subject to high levels of chemical damage in the years after death (and that’s especially true when we’re looking back several millennia into history). Another major issue is the problem of modern-day contamination: how can we separate the ancient DNA from the DNA of the archaeologists and researchers who have handled the sample? And not all samples provide enough endogenous DNA for analysis: from the site of Peristeria alone, twenty-six different samples were taken, but only one actually provided enough workable aDNA for the researchers to gather data. Nor does DNA tell us anything about the cultural layering of gender (as we’ll see, archaeologists can look elsewhere for those kinds of clues). But when aDNA *can* be recovered, when it can be isolated from contamination and analysed in the lab, there is a wealth of secrets to uncover – like a message sealed in a bottle from the past. Biological sex can be determined with only a few thousand random sequences (compared to the three billion in a complete human genome). Family relationships between individuals can be traced through analysis of mitochondrial DNA (or mtDNA), which passes down through the maternal line and gives us a family tree wrapped up in a parcel of chromosomes. Phenotypes – observable traits like eye, skin or hair colour – can be predicted from carefully selected DNA markers. Being able to unravel aDNA from a Mycenaean grave from the Late Bronze Age world of the fourteenth and early thirteenth

centuries BCE – in the decades before the ancients said that the siege and fall of Troy took place, when Odysseus was imagined to have sailed from Ithaca with his ships and Penelope waited for him to come home – is like opening up a time capsule from the world of the Trojan War.

As I look over the data on this woman – known to the researchers, somewhat unromantically, as I9033 – the numbers from the DNA analysis, crossed with the archaeology of the context in which she was found, begin to project a vivid picture. The archaeological evidence shows that she was clearly a member of the ruling house: she was buried in what is known as a tholos tomb, a beehive-like structure cut into the hillside outside the main ancient settlement of Peristeria and reinforced with giant masonry slabs, commonly used by the Mycenaeans for burying their royal dead. The tomb chamber was filled with artefacts that were intended to proclaim the occupant's high status on her journey into the afterlife: gold leaf, beads of gold and semi-precious stones – the paraphernalia of a queen. Meanwhile, the Harvard researchers' DNA analysis revealed that her mtDNA haplotype – her ancestral signature – was consistent with types you would expect to see in other Mycenaean burials, showing that she, and her ancestors, were locals from the Greek mainland. Radiocarbon dating (analysis of the decay of the organic radiocarbon in her teeth) placed her death at around the fourteenth century BCE. They were even able to ascertain from her genetic data that, when she was alive, she would have had brown hair and brown eyes – just like many of the women we see pictured in Mycenaean paintings from the same period.

All this is incredibly tantalizing, and – it would seem – a world away from the black-and-white, two-dimensional Greek text of Homer, replete with its careful editorial apparatus and neatly numbered lines, that's propped in front of me. But I can't help but think that it's not – and that there might be another lesson here, too. The archaeological site of Peristeria – first excavated by the Greek archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos in the 1960s – is about twenty-five miles north of Pylos, a real ancient Mycenaean site with a deep Homeric pedigree, said by Homer to be the seat of Nestor, another Greek king and an adviser to Agamemnon. And Pylos can claim a link to the passage I'm reading in the *Odyssey*: because, in the epic, Penelope's adolescent son, Telemachus has just decided to

go on a trip across the Ionian Sea from Ithaca to Pylos, in search of his missing father, a few short lines before Penelope bursts in on the scene and orders the bard to change his tune.

Which means that this royal woman of Mycenaean Greece lived around the same time that Homer's epic imagined Penelope, not long before the time the Trojan War could have feasibly happened, and not far away. And she's been brought back to life, from thousands of years in the past, by the debates we're having, the tools we're developing and the work we're doing now.

So the question I'm left thinking, as I look from the gleaming DNA data in *Nature* to the curling ancient script of the Greek text, is this. What if we could use modern methods – the latest advances in critiquing classical texts, the most recent archaeological discoveries and cutting-edge DNA analysis – to resurrect the real women behind Homer and return them to their rightful place, centre stage? What if we didn't just listen to the myths that men made – but paid attention to the stories encoded in the bones of the real women of history?

What if now is the time to unsilence Penelope at last?

Best Kept Silent

Over three thousand years ago, in an ancient Greece where men spoke and wrote and women went unheard, some of the world's first epics were born.⁶ These epics were part of a prehistoric boxset of sung poems that were handed down over generations, passed on from one male bard to the next and rolled out at banquets for the rich and famous, where each singer would perform and re-perform his own version of a tale about the great and the good of Greece's past. And the poems were mostly focused on that most legendary of battles: the Trojan War. They were vast in length: thousands of lines of poetry (over fifteen thousand for the *Iliad* as we have it, and over twelve thousand for the *Odyssey*), recalled in performance by master singers, who would sing their tales around the fires night after night. (Comparative work in Serbo-Croatia by Milman Parry and Albert Lord demonstrated how one particularly virtuosic singer could perform, from memory, songs that reached fifteen or sixteen

thousand lines – the same length as the Homeric epics.) Such epics, telling the stories of the legend of Troy, were defined in the most basic sense by their metrical form: hexameter, a metre made up of six ‘feet’ or rhythmic units. These units of rhythm were particularly helpful to oral poets, who, over the centuries, developed an armoury of descriptions for all the characters likely to crop up in an epic tale – stock epithets and ready-made phrases like ‘white-armed’ or ‘ox-eyed’ (for women), ‘swift-footed’ and ‘master of the war cry’ (for men), to be slotted into lines at will, that would have been an essential prop to a prehistoric bard expected to recite hundreds of lines of verse from memory. Stock scenes had a similar function: narrative sequences that were common to the worlds of epic (like getting ready for battle and having an all-out war rampage, if you’re a man; being told to shut up and sent back upstairs to weave, if you’re a woman) were regularly repeated, and embellished upon, to keep the plot moving.

But beyond their form and poetic technique, epics were marked out, above all, by their thirst for celebrating and commemorating the exploits of heroes. In them, powerful men could see themselves reflected, and bask in the chronicles of the bold warriors and kings of Greece’s glory days – what historians now call the Mycenaean (or Late Bronze Age) period, characterized above all by the flourishing of palatial hubs like Mycenae all over mainland Greece between about 1700 and 1050 BCE. But when, around 1200 BCE, a devastating wave of destruction started to sweep across the Aegean, the great Mycenaean palaces – along with their writing systems – tottered and fell. Greece slid into what used to be referred to as a Dark Age (c.1050–800 BCE) – which we’re now discovering was anything but, and simply means that we don’t have written accounts to tell us what was going on.⁷ As far as records went, the songs about the glory days were all there was left.

When writing re-entered the scene somewhere between the mid ninth and early eighth centuries BCE (with the ‘alphabet’, or *aleph beth*, an import from cosmopolitan Phoenicia in the eastern Mediterranean), among the first to be consolidated and written down in the new Greek alphabet was one particular version of two of these stories: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Their alleged poet, Homer – whoever ‘he’ was, whenever he ‘wrote’ (more on this later) – became an instant celebrity in the ancient

world: and, for better or worse, what he told his audiences about being a man (and a woman) stuck. These epic tales of men's valour and men's virtue would rise to become some of the most popular literature ever written – but more than that: for millennia, they played a central part in shaping who Westerners thought they were. For the classical Greeks, Homer's epics were – quite literally – their 'bible' (*biblos* means 'book' in ancient Greek). Generals would take military advice from their pages (Alexander the Great notoriously slept with a copy of the *Iliad* beneath his pillow). Philosophers like Plato and Socrates turned to Homer to understand everything from the history of war to the meaning of courage. And male writers across the centuries, from the stately Roman poet Virgil to soldiers like the English poet Rupert Brooke mired in the trenches of the First World War, recast great figures like the hero Achilles to reflect on who they were and what they did; while British public schoolboys were made to copy suitably masculine passages out of their Homer textbooks in the hope that they might turn into proper gentlemen. Western ideas and modern myths about what it meant to be a man, what it meant to rule and fight and judge, rested on the way that Homer was being read.

Meanwhile, women were shaded away into silence in the male-centric culture of classical Athens – and that mattered, because the way the Athenians thought about women, and about Homer, would have a lasting impact on the West. The Athenian historian Thucydides, writing in the late fifth century BCE and deeply engaged in the Athenian project of commingled democracy and empire, put it perhaps most clearly. Placing words in the mouth of Athens' most prominent statesman, Pericles, he proclaims that 'a woman will have the greatest glory if she's least talked about among the men – whether for good or bad'. The tragic poet Euripides, in a play written not long before Thucydides' history, has one of his characters pontificate that 'for a woman, being silent and modest is best, and staying quietly inside the house'. Another tragedian, Sophocles (author of *Oedipus Rex*), a decade or so earlier, phrased it even more simply: 'silence is a woman's best ornament'.⁸ And if a woman doesn't opt in to the policy of silence, one particularly abusive poet of the seventh or sixth century BCE – who's comparing all the 'bad' types of women to different animals, including pigs rolling in filth, sex-crazed weasels and

yapping dogs – complains that ‘a man can’t stop her barking; not with threats, not (when he’s had enough) by knocking out her teeth with a stone.’⁹ Any woman who wanted to tell her own tale, who wanted to write her own story, simply didn’t get listened to, and women’s songs, women’s myths, were lost. (The numbers give the best idea of the stark reality: we know the names of at least 3,200 male authors writing in Greek – and those of fewer than a hundred women.) And the ‘best kept silent’ dictum tallied so conveniently with the paradigmatic scene of Penelope’s silencing at the beginning of the *Odyssey*, that this way of reading Homer’s (and other) women – as best kept silent – trickled into other Western cultures, which chose to adopt classical Athens as a symbolic forbear to tie in with their imperial and patriarchal values.

And so women and women’s voices slid out of the record, having run through the unforgiving sieve of history (as Dame Hilary Mantel memorably put it).¹⁰ Manuscripts of the Homeric texts copied out by medieval monks – including the most famous manuscript of all, a tenth-century codex known as the Venetus A and one of the earliest complete versions of the *Iliad* to survive – contained symbolic doodles of Helen of Troy, trapped voiceless and bemused in the margins, that speak volumes about where women and women’s voices were thought to belong. The nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (whose theories were later, famously, repackaged into Nazi German nationalist ideologies) could assert that the ancient Greeks, ‘from Homer to the age of Pericles’, understood how ‘necessary’ and ‘logical’ it was to be ‘more strict with women’. Meanwhile, the first-ever article devoted to women in Homer (written by a man, and published in 1956) spent all its time detailing how Homer’s women get in the way of the hero, whose job is ‘as a man [to] triumph over the trial and . . . come out of it free’.¹¹

And right now, a dangerous undercurrent in online communities sees Alt-Right men’s groups using ancient epic to justify misogyny and a return to anti-feminist masculinity. One thread on a forum called r/TheRedPill (part of what’s known as the online ‘manosphere’ that embraces the so-called ‘Red Pill’ anti-feminist, anti-liberal ethic), for instance, uses a Greek epic poet contemporary with Homer to argue that women are always going to be more trouble than they’re worth: ‘the



Helen of Troy looks ambivalent about her representation in the earliest complete manuscript of Homer's Iliad, nearly a thousand years ago.

Greeks and Romans,' the post claims, 'were Red Pill in the extreme'.¹² This sense of Homer's place in justifying a conservative agenda has surfaced in higher education, too: at New College, Florida – where right-wing Republican Governor Ron DeSantis has been focusing his attempts to battle the liberal-ness of the liberal arts college – a new core undergraduate course on the *Odyssey* was introduced in autumn 2023 as a flagship of the redesigned curriculum, just days after trustees decided to shut down the college's programme in gender studies. A conservative activist made the connection clear, just in case anyone had missed it: 'Homer's *Odyssey* is in. Gender Studies is out.'¹³ The rewriting of history to suit the needs of the present is both urgently contemporary and a centuries-old tale, and Homer's epics – so often touted as the origin story of the West, seen as a high-stakes repository of cultural values, and the ultimate and authoritatively male works that pushed out almost every woman from the canon – have been, perhaps, more susceptible to it than any other

ancient texts. And so Penelope, and Homer's women, have continued to lie silent for thousands of years.

Penelope's Bones

Over the last few decades, however, the way we study the ancient world – the discipline of Classics – has undergone something of an overhaul. The recognition that the stories of the invisible actors of history – women, enslaved people, black and indigenous peoples, queer and trans individuals, those with disabilities, and all other marginal communities – deserve and need to be recovered (and often intersect with one another) has shaken up the field. Archaeologists and geneticists are sifting through material evidence and reconstructing DNA from ancient remains to get back to the bones (and beyond) of long-gone cultures. Historians are putting together clues from documents deep in the archives, previously deemed not important enough to make it into the history books, to find out more about the lost lives of the millions who were sifted out of the official historical record. Classicists like me are rereading canonical texts – such as Homer's epics – that were always seen as 'all about men', and, by virtue of the different perspective they bring, are coming up with very different conclusions that allow us to peer into a new and unfamiliar world. This is a world where we can acknowledge that, without enslaved women like Briseis who sparks the story of the *Iliad*, there would have been no story at all. A world where we find formidable gender-fluid goddesses like Athena slipping in and out of a woman's body without conforming to the female–male binary. A world where we acknowledge that the multiple powerful women in the *Odyssey* – Calypso, Arete, Circe, Penelope and many others – are the protagonists of their own stories, not just someone else's. When we look for them – when we read the Homeric texts in a way that tries to tell their story – women and women's experiences are, in fact, ever-present: from the Muses who open the epics to Helen who starts the Trojan War, from Briseis who begins the *Iliad* to Athena who helps to engineer the sack of Troy, from Calypso and Circe and Arete who rule the teeming fantastical lands of the *Odyssey*'s voyage home, all the way to Penelope who marks the journey's end.

All these silenced women populate the tales of Greek myth and the pages of ancient Greece's most famous epics, lingering in the background with walk-on roles and barely there dialogue. But, when we read them again, we are able to 'break open the stories' (as Saidiya Hartman puts it) and let their silences speak.¹⁴ Combined with breakthrough scientific advances that give us an unparalleled insight into the experiences of women in the ancient world – like the DNA analysis that brought us the Peristeria Penelope – and the latest archaeological technologies and approaches such as bioarchaeology and radiocarbon dating, it's now possible to put texts and objects alongside each other in new ways, and piece together at last the puzzle of the silenced women of Greek legend.

Which means that what this book is attempting to do is different in several important respects from how Homer has typically been approached. In looking at the women of the past, I am setting out to dig deeper, to keep challenging and refining the way we think, acknowledging that, in exploring the variety and complexity of women's experiences, there will always be more to learn. In arguing that Homer's women matter, I'm not saying that the epics are somehow 'better', that 'we' are all derived from the Greeks, that Greece has shaped 'our' world, or any of these kinds of damaging, reductive narratives that have been used to justify the use (and abuse) of Classics – and that have frequently underpinned misogyny and patriarchal structures. In fact, much of what this book is doing is trying to push beyond the narrow confines that have tended to define Homer – moving out from textual analysis, to incorporate the latest discoveries from science and archaeology; drawing on a vein of evidence pulsing through ancient cultures from Mesopotamia and Egypt to the empire of the Hittites, in the search for ancient women. It's about recognizing that the past – any past, all pasts – are part of the ideas that make up the collective and rich collage of cultures; but equally, that it's up to us now to challenge these ideas and not be limited by them – to be critical of where we've come from, and where we're going.¹⁵

Above all, as we go on the journey to discover the real women behind Homer's myths, we're looking with open eyes for women in all their diversity – not some boxed-up, neatly packaged form of gender (neither hypermasculine heroes like Alexander the Great's ideal of Achilles, nor Nietzsche's silent stay-at-home wives). It's a fine line to tread, and

history – as so often – provides a cautionary tale. The Victorian archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans started excavating the palace of Knossos on Crete in 1900, and – with it – discovered the so-called Minoan civilization, predecessor of the Mycenaeans. Uncovering a number of paintings of high-status women with gorgeous hairdos and sumptuous robes on the walls of the Knossos palace, and flush with the thrill of his new-found discovery, he used them to conjure up an image of an early peaceful and nature-loving society, overseen by benevolent mother goddesses and presided over by prominent females. It's clear now that (like some of his other, highly controversial, speculations on the Minoans) this was, to a large extent, a colourful fantasy of Sir Arthur's, born of a desire for a better world than the one that had produced the horrors of the First World War. But it's a salutary reminder that our ideas around recovering gender from the Homeric past can convey as much about what we *want* to see and find, the positive – whether it's heroized men or mother-goddess women – as well as the negative.

While Homer's epics were interpreted in the past as 'all about men', then, and Sir Arthur Evans tried to argue the opposite for Minoan Crete, I'm not here to push us to one side of the fence or the other. I am bringing women to the foreground, but neither am I idealizing or generalizing them, pretending that they were always powerful or always extraordinary or always the same. Instead, I'm arguing, above all, that women's experiences deserve to be examined in all their diversity, that every voice deserves to be heard. But I'm also suggesting that we can find interesting moments at the boundaries, where at some points ancient women were more powerful or more complex than we thought, and others where they came up against constraints – all the while exploring how the conversation around gender, the ebb and flow of power and the accounts that make it into the history books have echoed down the ages. In other words, what I'm arguing is that Homer's women are the jumping-off point to investigate a bigger picture, that they're 'good to think with' – that they can push us to reflect on gender, on ourselves, on how we've interpreted the past, in new ways.

Neither am I engaged in making blanket statements about what it means to *be* a woman. Identities – impossible to recover in the hard facts of genetic sex that DNA serves up to us in a PCR tube – inevitably

change and shift with ideas about who individuals believe they are: and that's where texts, and art, and artefacts, and the entire cultural production that helps shape ideas around gender can help historians of women. At the same time, a revolution in new understandings about gender has pointed out that the lived experiences and identities of women and men aren't pinned to female or male bodies (or 'sex'). Gender is, rather, the product of millennia of cultural shaping, a repeated story that has imposed the narrative of the gender binary along the lines of male/female sex. The ancient Greeks, their myths, and Homer's epics, played a central part in writing this script: and it explains why so many novelists, artists and playwrights are now turning back to the ancient world to rework these old tales into different kinds of gender stories. In this book, I use 'women' to refer to people who identify as (or who are identified as, in the historical/mythic record) women, searching for the experience of being, becoming, defining oneself as female – across multiple ancient cultures and languages, across history, literature and myth. In this sense, the gender binary will often be operationally at play. But I'm also challenging the kinds of questions we ask of the ancient sources, bringing new methods and debates to the table to critique what we thought we knew – about gender, about women and about the past.

In so doing, I freely acknowledge the anachronism of this approach, the fact that I'm presenting the voices we're interested in now as a new lens through which to understand the past. In fact, in a sense, I'm arguing that anachronism is a central part of the story. It has to be. Not only have the Homeric epics always been anachronistic in and of themselves, as part of a tradition that has continually reinvented mythic stories of the Trojan War for a new audience and a new time. The search for women's voices is only happening now because of shifts in the way we're thinking and the kinds of stories we're telling about ourselves. Novelists and poets have begun in recent years to reclaim the voices and stories of Homer's women, from where they have languished for the past three millennia in the footnotes and the margins, to fill in the gaps in the all-male tale, prising apart through the tool of fiction the story we've always been told: from Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) to Guisela López's 'Anti Penélope' (2006) to the Penelope-esque *Celestial* in Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018); from the Sirens and Circe

in M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008) to Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018); from Rhina Espaillat's Helen 'On the Walls' (2001) to Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *The Women of Troy* (2021), Nikita Gill's 'Briseis Remembers' (2019), Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019) and my own *For the Most Beautiful* (2016).¹⁶ Female classicists like Emily Wilson and Caroline Alexander have recently turned to translate Homer – Wilson's 2018 *Odyssey* was, incredibly, the first translation of the work into English by a woman – to show that women, too, have a stake in these epic texts. Meanwhile, as contemporary movements like #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and the transgender rights movement make the headlines today, it's become ever more imperative that the ways in which we narrate the past should be critically re-examined – because, as we've seen from Thucydides to Nietzsche to the Red Pill, history has *always* been made with an agenda. Bringing the stories we've been told to the table, examining historical narratives through the lens of the ideas and values we believe in, enables us to unsilence the past, to speak up for the kind of world we want to live in now – and so to write a story for the future, where all voices can be heard.

The World of Penelope

Taking a back-to-front view of history might seem unconventional: but this way of looking back at the past has actually always been the case when it comes to Homer. The Greek historian Herodotus placed Homer, the poet, at the end of the so-called Dark (or Iron) Age, around 820 BCE; while Herodotus dated the Trojan War (which he, like most of the ancients, believed was a historical conflict) at around 1220 BCE, right at the end of the Bronze Age. Later chroniclers agreed: a marble fragment recording important events in Greek history gives between 1218 and 1209 BCE as the date of the Trojan War, and the polymath Eratosthenes located the sack of Troy even more precisely at 1184 BCE. The Greek tradition suggested that – around the moment of the advent of the alphabet – Homer became the author of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; and that these epics, in turn, preserved a memory that looked back into the past of some four hundred years earlier. Nowadays, after centuries of

heated scholarly debate and comparative work like Parry's and Lord's, looking at singers of tales in other modern cultures, this model has gradually been refined. The general consensus (founded on decades of research by my mentor at Harvard, Gregory Nagy) points, not to a single moment of transcription by a single man called Homer, but to a long evolution over hundreds of years, in which oral songs were gradually transformed, standardized and finally transcribed (from the mid sixth century BCE). They were then scripted into the Homeric texts and divided by ancient scholars into chapters (known as 'books') that give us the form in which they sit on bookshelves today – two written poems of twenty-four books each.¹⁷ (The most unmistakable indication that these poems were originally oral comes from those stock epithets we saw above – like 'white-armed Helen' or 'swift-footed Achilles' – that are repeated to aid memorization and composition in performance.) In this view, 'Homer' – and this is the way the name will be used in this book – represents a historical tradition, a long process of evolution from the oral songs of the Late Bronze Age all the way to the written scripts that formed the basis of our modern texts. It's also a historical tradition that's resolutely male, which is why I call Homer 'he'. In this sense, the Homeric epics don't just represent a slice of history in and of themselves. The poems have, at the core of their narrative, the founding tenet that they *look back into the past*, that they preserve a memory of a time that has been and gone. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were, from the very beginning, 'a poetry of the past' – a historical fiction, telling sweeping tales of mythic gods and bronze-clad heroes, gorgeous demi-goddesses and long-gone queens, imagined back on to the stage of a long-lost Bronze Age.¹⁸ In other words, the Homeric epics began – themselves – as an anachronism.

This raises a number of questions that have vexed historians for centuries. If the Homeric epics consolidated in the Iron Age, but were set in the period of the Late Bronze Age, then what kind of world picture do they show – a Bronze Age one, an Iron Age one, or a mixture of the two? If the Homeric epics are poems, set in the realm of fiction, then did the Trojan War actually happen at all – and if so, how much of what Homer represents can be taken as definitive, historical fact? The eminent twentieth-century Cambridge historian Moses Finley put it

perhaps most forcibly, when he stated that there was – in fact – nothing at all to be learned about the historical, Bronze Age Trojan War from the poetry of Homer. His view was that the Trojan War should be summarily removed from the realm of history and returned to the sphere of myth and poetry, until we have more evidence.¹⁹ In Finley's eyes – summed up in his influential book *The World of Odysseus* – all Homer's epic poems could do for us was give evidence for the Iron Age of the tenth or ninth centuries BCE.

It's certainly the case that we can show plenty of evidence in the poems of the Iron Age – most obviously the presence of iron, which didn't start to be used until after the Bronze Age (the clue's in the name). But then there are also elements that unquestionably look back to the Bronze Age – like the detailed description of a Cretan boar's-tusk helmet gifted to Odysseus in the *Iliad*, which we find buried with actual Bronze Age warriors in Crete (as well as mainland Greece) and depicted in Mycenaean wall paintings. Even the use of an archaic language-scape points back to the Bronze Age past: such as the personal names 'Achilles' and 'Hector' that we find listed on Bronze Age tablets, or the word *wanax* for 'ruler' that's attested in Mycenaean records – frequently used in Homer for kings like Agamemnon, even though the term had fallen out of use hundreds of years before the epics could have been written down. It's been shown that some of the lilting phrases that sound so typically Homeric to us, like 'man-circling shield' (*aspidos amphibrotēs*), actually have an ancient Mycenaean pedigree, preserving a version of language spoken even earlier than the fourteenth century BCE. It's a time capsule, passed down like an oral message-in-a-bottle, from a much older stage of Greek – and pointing back to the long-lost body shields that we know, from archaeology, were all the rage in the Bronze Age.²⁰

It's been argued that these kinds of details may have been added to give a flavour of archaism, as a way to underline the pastness of this long-gone heroic age; and that may be partly what they're doing. But we can't forget that they're also a crucial testament to what epic poems, originally orally sung, did and were *meant* to do – to preserve a memory of tradition, of the past, to hand down remembrances of

genealogies and customs and long-lost places. The singers, or bards, who composed these tales of ancient heroes and passed on their craft to the next generation (and then the next – ultimately, to Homer, or someone like him), were not just storytellers or entertainers: they were custodians of the past, memory keepers who kept alive the heroic tales of a real and tangible history. We see this function of epic poetry layered into Homer's poems again and again: whether it's a description of the ancestry of a hero given as an aside during a battle, in campfire stories about the glorious men of old related among a band of warriors, or the reeled-off history of the generations of princely owners of a sceptre wielded by a king. Nor can we fail to remember that most, if not all, ancient Greeks (let alone Romans) believed that these were real events that really happened; a real Trojan War, during a real Age of Heroes, with real, redoubtable queens, superlative warriors and preternaturally gifted descendants of gods, who (so they thought) had founded the dynasties that made up their families, and built the cities they lived in. The audiences of epic would have known it as historical truth, learned at their mother's knee, that they were living in an Age of Iron – dull and blunted by comparison – following on from that last gleaming heroic age. The Trojan War was, to them, the watershed moment that sliced between the two: a world-shattering conflict that exploded into the decline and fall of an age. Epics like Homer's were a record, to the Greeks, of their own historical fabric, their sense of who they were, of the lost generations who preceded them in the shining – and tangibly real – era before their own.

So the Homeric epics are a mish-mash product of their history: both the long story of their formation over the centuries from songs into texts, and their historical stance in trying to preserve a distant, half-imagined yet remembered, past for an audience who held them as fact. There's no doubt that using the texts to look for facts about the Bronze Age is frustratingly difficult. There are certainly echoes of truth, however faint, and a historical memory that finds its foundation in the very fabric of sung oral poetry. Yet, at the same time, we have to remember that epic is, primarily, a fictional re-creation of the past for the concerns of the present – an 'ideological image of a historical society', as one critic neatly

put it. Or, as another expert on the Greek Bronze Age has written, ‘no epic is a realistic presentation of a society or age; rather, it is a fantasy, but a fantasy in which . . . reality keeps breaking through.’²¹ It’s a way of telling a story, a myth, *through* history – not a historical record itself.

But there’s a different way forward. Since Finley purported to close the debate on Homer as evidence for the world of Bronze Age Greece over half a century ago, we have seen advances in science and archaeology that have uncovered new kinds of evidence about the Late Bronze Age that he couldn’t have imagined. Not only that: since the 1960s we’ve seen a major shift in the stories we want to look for, the experiences we care about, and whose voices are allowed to speak – including the women who are the focus of this book. Finley (whose book, after all, was titled *The World of Odysseus*) pronounced, maddeningly and dogmatically, that ‘“hero” has no feminine gender in the age of heroes’ – as if half the population could be summarily dismissed because they didn’t fit into one code of values invented by and for men.²² If we start from *these* voices – the voices of women – and draw on new archaeological discoveries and scientific evidence for the Late Bronze Age to try to understand them and give the context for their stories, then we change the direction of the narrative. There might not have been – in fact there most likely wasn’t – a Helen of Troy as Homer imagined her; but we can work to reconstruct how the idea of her might have come about, the history behind the myth – because there’s real ancient documentary evidence for dynastic marriages in the Late Bronze Age between Mycenaean and Anatolian royals, just as in Homer’s fictional story of Helen and Paris.²³ There might not have been a Briseis; but Late Bronze Age tablets from the Mycenaean palaces, written in an early form of Greek, show that enslaved women from Troy and its environs really were shipped to Greece. There might not have been a Hecuba; but there are historical records of Anatolian queens wielding significant power – as well as intriguing archaeological clues that the real, historical city of Troy was attacked by invaders and razed to the ground, right around the time that the ancients assigned the date for the legendary Trojan War. In other words, this is not a search for the real Penelope or the real Helen. They’re male fictions, made up by a tradition of male poets telling stories about men; the two female characters are no more actual Greeks

than Wonder Woman is a real-life Amazon. Instead, it's something much more interesting: a tantalizing search through the latest scientific articles, scribbled excavation reports, museum back rooms, DNA tests and centuries-old manuscripts for the real daughters, mothers, sisters, the queens, warriors, weavers, brides and midwives, the real-life women who made up the history of the Late Bronze Age world – and whose stories came to be threaded into the myths and legends of women like Helen of Troy and Penelope that would be told for thousands of years.

In focusing on the period of the Late Bronze Age, as one layer in the accretions that make up the Homeric texts, I'm taking the lead from the ideological thrust of Homer's fiction of history – that sense of pastness that permeates the epics – as well as what ancient audiences believed Homer was doing: that is, re-creating the lost world of the Age of Heroes. But I'm also switching the focus, the origin point of the inquiry, to what we can uncover about the historical women of the Late Bronze Age through recent scientific advances, critical interpretations, fictional rewritings and the latest archaeological excavations – and using those, in turn, to point a lens back on the texts and the women of Homer.

New discoveries are changing the way we think about the Homeric epics all the time. To give just one example: in the *Iliad*, there's a fleeting mention at one point of 'a folded tablet . . . inscribed with many dangerous and deadly symbols' that's used to send a message from Greece to Lycia (modern-day south-western Turkey).²⁴ For decades, scholars on the lookout for historical clues took this as ultimate proof of the poems' anachronism: up until very recently, the earliest-known folding writing tablets dated to the late eighth century BCE – so (the argument went) this must have been an invention added later, and couldn't possibly tell us anything about the Bronze Age. But in the last few years, a sensationally well-preserved folding wooden writing tablet has been lifted from the seabed, just off the coast of ancient Lycia in south-west Turkey, during the excavation of a Mediterranean shipwreck from the fourteenth century BCE.²⁵ The same artefact Homer describes; the same place; Late Bronze Age in date. So it's quite possible that – in this case – the Homeric epics were preserving a memory of one fragment of the Bronze Age all along. We just hadn't known it before.

In this way, I'm not using the epics as a fact sheet for the past, trying

(for instance) to apply them to prove that the Trojan War took place, or to work out which kinds of weapons were current when (another bone of contention). I always ask, throughout the book, what new discoveries about the real women of history can do to help us understand Homer – *not* what Homer can tell us about the Late Bronze Age. Nor am I arguing that Homer presents a unified historical picture. Instead, I'm focusing in and starting from the latest discoveries we've been making about the women of the Late Bronze Age world – such as the DNA of the Peristeria Penelope – and using these to tell one story about the women of Homer and of myth, in a new way. And so, this book, too, like all books about Homer, is telling a story of Homer for our times – just like the Homeric epics did for theirs.

The Voyage Ahead to Mythica

In this book, it's the women who are going to take us on a journey through the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and across the splendid, tumultuous world of the Late Bronze Age. We're going to follow them as they chart a course for us through the Homeric epics: from the war-torn plain of the *Iliad* below Troy, skimming west around the fantastical emerald isles of the *Odyssey* and then homeward bound to Ithaca. Along the way, we will come across women who lead troops into battle beside (and against) men; women who rule kingdoms with wisdom and foresight and wield the same power as a man; women who take control of their voices to tell their own stories; as well as women who have been victimized, silenced and oppressed, fallen into the margins of history. Together with new archaeological discoveries and scientific evidence, as well as the rich tapestry of cultural reworkings that have reimagined these women's stories, the voices that we uncover can be woven together into a vibrant narrative that shows us a new way into the past Homer looked back to in his epics – the gleaming world of the Late Bronze Age. Along the journey, a sequence of finds – some only recently discovered and less well known, some of them era-defining moments of archaeology – act as a way into each woman, each part of the story, along the path of recovering mythic women. And the retellings of the Homeric epics that open every chapter

stand up for a new way of telling the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* – not as a man's tale, but through the stories of women.

By putting Homer's women first, we are able to read these ancient epics in new ways. We can open our eyes to the fact that Achilles enslaves and rapes his female prisoners of war as a fundamental tenet of what it is to be a hero, or that Odysseus ties the knot on his tale with the summary execution of twelve enslaved women for being raped by his enemies – and so can see these so-called 'heroes' anew. We can look into the lives of real women across thousands of years of history who have dealt with experiences that speak to those of many women today: mothers coping with the demands of childbirth, generals rallying their troops in war, victims subjected to the trauma of sexual assault, military wives left at home to bear the burden of battle unseen, female leaders shaping society. We can make a point of putting women's experiences to the fore, and show how important it is that we do so – questioning what the one-dimensional male myth looks like from the point of view of the enslaved women, the widows, the grieving mothers, the rape victims, the traumatized siege survivors who were made to bear the cost of war, and showing that there is always a different side to the tale. We can trace how their stories – reworked because of their association with the grand Homeric epics by men from Ovid to Shakespeare to Tolstoy to James Joyce – have directed fictions about women across millennia, from supposed paragons of virtue like Penelope (what women 'should' be) to tricky witches like Circe and power-grabbing killers like Clytemnestra (the deepest fears of male heroes). And we can ask what that means for how we think about ourselves and each other today.

But this is only the beginning. There are always more conversations to be had, more voices to uncover as the work of bringing to the fore all the individuals whom the myths, the texts and the historical records have forgotten continues to gain ground. This is just one part of that wider conversation. If we keep telling a story in which Penelope is always silent, then that's how she'll stay – silenced. It's time for her and all the others waiting in the wings to tell their stories.

So, Muse: tell me about a woman.

Iliad

WOMEN IN WAR

‘This is our destiny: to be
characters in the tales told by men for years to come’

HELEN – HOMER, *ILIAD*, 6.357–8

1

HELEN

The Face



MME. SCHLIEMANN, IN THE PARURE OF HELEN OF TROY

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SPARTA, GREECE

She has always been treated as an object of beauty, and so she, too, collects beautiful things. Her chamber is her kingdom, and in the half-light when they think she is sleeping she gets up and walks barefoot, lines up her jewels and appraises them as the men appraise her.

Dawn is about to break. The distant line of the Taygetus mountains beyond Sparta is a thread of gold. Her tapestry stands on its loom, half finished, a purple shadow. She looks at her treasure, laid out on her clothes chest. Three gold cups with slender handles. A crystal dish. A silver basket, a golden spindle – gifts for entertaining one of her husband's many visitors. Earrings heavy with globes of looted amber. Hairpins of ivory ripped from the bloodied tusk of a boar. Bracelets of clasped metal that chafe her skin. All the chains of beauty.

She smooths her thumb across a crown of bronze, slides a golden necklace through her hands, drops of metal hard as seawater.

Will she take them with her when she leaves?

Troy Discovered

Early morning, 31 May 1873. Poppies thrusting themselves like open mouths through the earth as the workmen dig and toss damp soil on to the rubble pile. It's been a long season – a long couple of years since the middle-aged entrepreneur and avid Homerist Heinrich Schliemann first struck his trowel into the hill at Hisarlik, an odd-shaped mound rising out of the flatlands in Ottoman Turkey near the Dardanelles. Beneath this lump of earth these past few years, following a tip-off from British expat (and fellow Homer-lover) Frank Calvert, Schliemann has made a truly extraordinary discovery: nothing more nor less than the Bronze Age site – the real, tangible remains – of Homer's legendary Troy.

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