SETTING BOUNDARIES, CROSSING BOUNDARIES

by Lillian E. Doherty, University of Maryland

The Greeks had a habit of mentally sorting things into contrasting pairs of categories, sometimes referred to as "polar oppositions." In the natural world, these included light and dark, hot and cold, left and right, wet and dry. In the human world, there were contrasts between Greek and non-Greek, slave and free, male and female, lover and beloved. The most crucial dichotomy of all was that between humans and gods, those glorified beings in human form. Although the Greek gods were *like* humans in most ways—their loves and hates as well as their bodies—they had one privilege that made all the difference: they got to live forever. The fourth-century Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose influence on later European thought was immense, argued that the differences between slave and free, male and female, were natural and immutable (*Politics* 1.5 and 11); but Greek poets drew a more complex picture.

As rigid as these oppositions sometimes appear, it was in fact possible to cross the boundaries between them, at least in the mythic imagination. Thus the prophet Tiresias was said to have spent several years of his life as a woman, while the hero Heracles ultimately became a god. Even without such transformations, the boundaries blur when examined more closely. As cases in point, I will take three of these: between slave and free, female and male, human and divine. As we shall see, these three dichotomies intersect in ways that sometimes strengthen but sometimes dissolve them. Mortals—even slaves—can be as beautiful as gods; men lament like women; female gods fight on the battlefield, not just with mortals but with male gods.

In *Iliad:* Book 1 there is a clear-cut example of how one can go from freedom to slavery—and back again in exceptional circumstances. Chryseis, daughter of the priest Chryses, has been taken captive when her town was looted by the Greeks. In the division of spoils, she was allotted to the Greek leader Agamemnon. As the *Iliad* opens, her father is attempting to ransom her, but although the Greeks urge it, Agamemnon refuses. Chryseis is in danger of remaining a slave for the rest of her life; as Agamemnon puts it,

> *The girl is mine, and she'll be*
> *an old woman in Argos*

Before I let her go, working the loom in my house
And coming to my bed, far from her homeland.
(Iliad 1.37-39, trans. by S. Lombardo)[1]

Chryseis is eventually freed because her father has "pull" with a higher power: the god Apollo. In response to Chryses' prayer, Apollo strikes the Greek army with a plague. When the *Greek* priest of Apollo, prompted by Achilles, reveals the cause of the plague, Agamemnon agrees to let Chryseis go but demands another girl in compensation. This demand sparks the famous quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles that sets in motion the plot of the *Iliad*. Agamemnon returns Chryseis to her father but seizes Briseis, a captive woman who has been allotted to Achilles. Although the plot of the epic focuses on Achilles' wrath and its effects on the Greek and Trojan armies, late in the poem Homer briefly gives voice to the slave woman Briseis as she laments the dead Patroclus:

"My poor Patroclus. You were so dear to me.
When I left this hut you were alive,
And now I find you, the army's leader, dead
When I come back. So it is for me always,
Evil upon evil. I have seen my husband,
The man my father and mother gave me to,
Mangled with the sharp bronze before my city,
And my three brothers, all from the same mother,
Brothers I loved—they all died that day.
But you wouldn't let me cry when Achilles
Killed my husband and destroyed Mynes' city,
Wouldn't let me cry. You told me you'd make me
Achilles' bride, told me you'd take me on a ship
To Phthia, for a wedding among the Myrmidons.
I will never stop grieving for you, forever sweet."
Thus Briseis, and the women mourned with her,
For Patroclus, yes, but each woman also
For her own private sorrows.
(Iliad 19.305-322)

Women were more likely than men to be taken as slaves;[2] in Euripides' play *The Trojan Women*, as in the speech of Briseis above, the shattering experience of enslavement is explored from the perspective of formerly privileged women, who had the most to lose. All the slaves whose personal histories are told in Homer, including the loyal swineherd Eumaeus and the nurse Eurycleia in the *Odyssey*, have this privileged background. Before Briseis' speech quoted above, she is even compared (twice) to a goddess for

her beauty (19.299 and 304), an acknowledgment that although a slave, she—like many of the epic's aristocratic characters—shares this divine attribute. From the privileged side of the slave/free boundary, Hector anticipates in vivid terms the enslavement of his wife Andromache:

And you will work some
other woman's loom
In Argos or carry water
from a Spartan spring,
All against your will,
under great duress.
And someone, seeing
you crying, will say,
"That is the wife of
Hector, the best of all
The Trojans when they
fought around Ilion."
Someday someone will say
that, renewing your pain
At having lost such a man
to fight off the day
Of your enslavement.
But may I be dead
And the earth heaped up above me
Before I hear your cry as
you are dragged away."
(Iliad 6.480-490)

Out of tact Hector does not mention, as Agamemnon does, the other role assigned to slaves: that of sexual prey to the master. It is a paradox of the heroic ethic that the warlike behavior the heroes see as protecting women and children ("to fight off the day of your enslavement") also makes their dependents vulnerable. The winning side sees no contradiction in enslaving the women of the vanquished. Thus the boundary between free and slave was all too easily crossed in practice. Although in principle ransom is always possible, when Troy has been destroyed there will be no one left to do the ransoming.

Later in the same scene, vividly aware of her vulnerability, Andromache pleads with Hector to fight a defensive war from behind the city walls. Hector refuses, saying he would feel shame before the Trojan men *and women* if he "hung back from battle like a coward" (6.466). Discounting Andromache's advice, he assumes that the women as a group will echo the men in placing the highest value on honor. A man's honor, Hector insists, is based on performance in battle. In closing, he uses a formula that famously encapsulates the roles normally assigned to men and women in Homeric society:[3]

Go back to the house now
and take care of your work,
The loom and the shuttle,
and tell the servants
To get on with their jobs.
War is the work of men,
Of all the Trojan men,
and mine especially.
(Iliad 6.515-518)

In the *Iliad*, the only character who actually crosses the gender

boundary is Athena, who disguises herself as a brother of Hector (22.253-274). She combines in her spheres of influence the distinctive jobs of both men and women, and indirectly shows the connection between them: cleverness or intelligence (Greek *mêtis*),[4] needed for strategy in war and for the demanding craft of weaving. While Homer portrays no human women as fighting in battle, the Greek epic tradition included tales of the Amazons, women who fought like, and with, men; in a lost poem of the epic cycle, the *Aethiopis*, Achilles himself fought the Amazon Penthesileia, who came to the aid of Troy after the death of Hector. Ironically, the name Andromache means "man-fighter" and is often assigned to one of the Amazons in Greek poetry and visual art.

Athena, of course, is one of the immortals; her ability to cross the gender barrier and to behave now as a man, now as a woman, is a privilege reserved for divinity. But the fact that the Greeks could imagine such a figure, and not only one such figure (for the goddess Artemis combined the female sphere of childbirth with the male sphere of hunting), implies that on some level they were aware that the boundary between male and female, as drawn by their culture, was arbitrary.

The boundary between humans and gods seems less permeable, even in myth. But there were always multiple versions of any given myth, and some of these versions—which must have been known to Homer—described a kind of immortality for the heroes. In the *Odyssey*, for example, Menelaus is told that because he is the husband of Helen and the son-in-law of Zeus, he will not die but go to the Elysian Fields,

> *Where. . . life is easiest.*
> *No snow, nor storm, nor heavy rain comes there,*
> *But a sighing wind from the West always blows*
> *Off the Ocean, a cooling breeze for men.*
> *(Odyssey 4.594-597)*

In some versions, Achilles too went to the Elysian Fields, since he was the son of a goddess. But the perspective of the *Iliad* is tragic, emphasizing the inevitability of death even for Achilles. The Homerist Laura Slatkin has pointed out that the original audience of the epic would have been aware of yet another myth which put Achilles' death in a cosmic framework.[5] Thetis, the mother of Achilles, was fated to bear a son who would be greater than his father. By consenting to marry a mortal and bear a mortal son, she protected the male gods who might have married her — including Zeus — from being overthrown. Although she herself cannot die, and Achilles is still alive at the end of the poem, Thetis is portrayed throughout

the *Iliad* as being deeply affected by her son's fate; like Andromache, she assumes the mortal woman's role of mourner.[6] At the same time, Achilles' wrath at being dishonored is intensified by his near-divine sense of entitlement; the word used for his wrath, *mênis*, is used elsewhere only for the anger of gods. Like Briseis, he is described as divinely beautiful, and his excellence in battle (*aretê*) is second to none. Yet at the death of Patroclus, his expressions of grief are more extreme even than those of the women.

One further paradox: the gods may have more power, but they spend their time watching the mortals, whose deeds are the real subject of the poem. Ironically, the supreme privilege of immortality makes the gods (as portrayed in Homer) somehow unserious: they never have to make the irrevocable choices that mortals do. In Book 1, for example, Zeus and Hera can have a furious quarrel and go to bed together at the end of the day. Meanwhile, the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon has set in motion a sequence of events that will lead to the deaths of many, including Achilles' best friend Patroclus, his enemy Hector, and—beyond the plot of the *Iliad*—Achilles himself.

The gods in the *Iliad* may lack the tragic dignity of mortals, but the mortals themselves long for immortality. The compromise at which they arrive is *kleos*, immortal fame, which the poets preserve for them. Achilles, close to the boundary between human and divine, is given the privilege of choosing a short life with *kleos* or a long life without it; he chooses the former. When he is insulted, he seeks to use his divine connections to hurt Agamemnon; he succeeds in this, but in addition hurts his own comrades, including his closest friend. The last book of the epic is about his realization and acceptance of his own mortality: his acknowledgment of kinship, as a mortal, even with his enemy. But the ultimate goal of the poem is to preserve his fame, and thus to render him immortal.

On the surface level of the story, the *Iliad* affirms the boundaries I have explored between slave and free, male and female, divine and human. I hope to have shown, however, that much of the interest lies in the permeability of these boundaries and in the ways they intersect. There are divine women in Homer, and divinely beautiful slave women. As females, they are often controlled by males, but a goddess can oppose a god or lead a charge on the battlefield. Mourning, a role of human women, is shared by goddesses and male heroes. Mortals may be doomed to die, but their brief lives are of more interest than the monotonous immortality of the gods. More vital than physical survival, the immortality of fame has kept the heroes and heroines alive into our own time.

1. All quotations and line references are from the Stanley Lombardo translations of the Iliad (Hackett, 1997) and Odyssey (Hackett, 2000). Note that the line numbers will differ in different translations. The translations by Richmond Lattimore (1951 and 1965) are line-for-line renditions of the Greek.

2. In myth, at least, men die fighting in defense of their homes, as in the sack of Troy as described by Vergil (Aeneid Book 2), while in some historical instances the adult men captured in war were killed rather than enslaved.

3. The same formula is used several times in the Odyssey, in situations where a man wishes to assert his authority over a woman (notably, Telemachus uses it twice to his mother Penelope).

4. In some versions of Athena's birth, Metis—a personification of Cleverness—is her mother, swallowed by Zeus so that he can give birth to Athena himself. In other versions, Metis is forgotten and Zeus alone is said to be her parent.

5. The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad (University of California Press, 1991).

6. See Sheila Murnaghan, "Maternity and Mortality in Homeric Poetry," Classical Antiquity 11 (1992) 242-264.

Lillian E. Doherty

Lillian E. Doherty is a Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park, where she has taught since 1984. Her home is in the Department of Classics but she is also a member of the affiliate faculties in Women's Studies and Comparative Literature. She specializes in archaic Greek poetry, with a special emphasis on the Odyssey and the Hesiodic Catalogue of Women. Her first book, Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey (1995), combined feminist, narratological, and audience-oriented criticism. It was followed in 2001 by Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth, an overview and critique of major twentieth-century interpretive approaches to Greek and Roman mythology. In 2009, her edited volume, Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Homer's Odyssey, will appear. Her most recent work seeks to uncover traces of a women's oral tradition in the stories that have come down to us in the Hesiodic Catalogue.

Professor Doherty teaches Greek at all levels from the introductory to the graduate, as well as courses in English translation on classical mythology, ancient comedy, the classical tradition, and women in classical antiquity. She is active in the Women's Classical Caucus and has served on the Education Committee of the American Philological Association. In 2009, she will begin a term as Associate Editor for Greek of the American Journal of Philology.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Douglas L. Cairns, ed., *Oxford Readings in Homer's Iliad* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Lillian E. Doherty, *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977; rpt. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992).

John Miles Foley, ed., *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005).

Robert Fowler, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

Nicole Loraux, *The Experiences of Tiresias: The Feminine and the Greek Man*, trans. by Paula Wissing (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960; 2nd edition 2000).

Sheila Murnaghan, "Maternity and Mortality in Homeric Poetry," *Classical Antiquity* 11 (1992) 242-264.

Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California Press, 1984).

Laura M. Slatkin, *The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London: University of California Press, 1991).

Hans van Wees, "A Brief History of Tears: Gender Differentiation in Archaic Greece," in L. Foxhall and J. Salmon, eds., *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power, and Identity in Classical Antiquity* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 10-53.

____ *Status Warriors: War, Violence, and Society in Homer and History* (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1992).

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

Page STAGE+

THE POWER OF THE ILIAD TODAY

THEATER, TRADITION, AND CULTURE IN AMERICA

An in-depth partnership between the library and the theater.

Page and Stage places live theatrical events, reading groups and lectures in public libraries to inspire people to come together and read, see, and think about classical literature and how it continues to influence and invigorate American cultural life.

LIVE AT YOUR LOCAL LIBRARY!

Join a reading group

Attend a public lecture

View a performance

Participate in a workshop

AQUILA THEATRE

WE the People

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:

www.pageandstage.org
www.aquilatheatre.com