

In the air

The invisible woman

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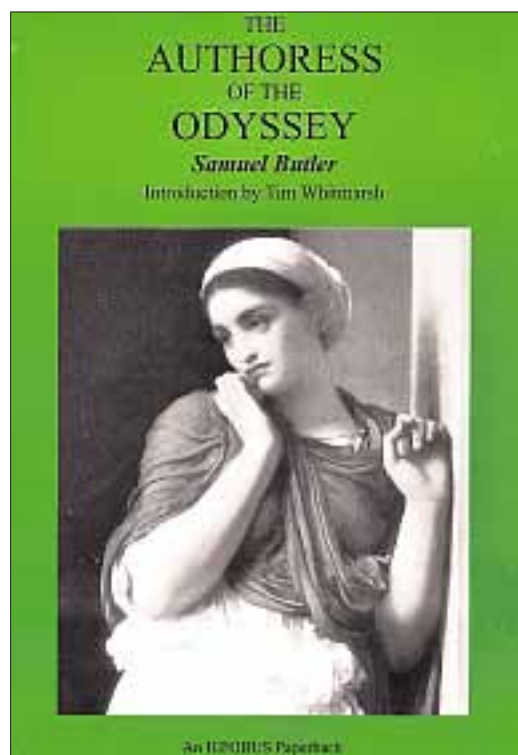
Traditionally in March, „Women’s Day“ oblige, this column is devoted to a rant about women’s rights.

It has become a wearying exercise, depressing and sedemingly futile, since equality seems *de facto* to be regressing on some fronts and hardly anyone reacts any more.

This month’s text was to have been entitled „WALOW“, short for „What A Lot Of Women!“ This is the expression I spit out with an ironical snort every time I see a *Gruppenbild mit Dame* – one of those posed group portraits of dark-suited heads of state and government, with a couple of splodges of colour which are the (scandalously few) female political leaders.

Sharpening our metaphorical pencil, we would have banged on for a bit about the invisibility of women (except when it comes to exploiting sexualised images of their bodies to sell things), or to be more precise, of traditionally female work (child raising, housework, caring, general organising, nurturing and listening ...). The conclusion would have been the usual grumble that the rights women have wrested for themselves remain largely confined to the paper they’re written on and worth less and that feminists might just as well have grown roses.

That article never got written – just contemplating it brought on thoughts of hemlock. So to cheer ourselves up instead, here is the story behind an inspiring idea:



The author of one of the founding texts of the Western literary tradition, *The Odyssey*, was a woman!

The authorship of *The Odyssey* – and *The Iliad* – has always been a source of dissent among Homeric scholars, some claiming the books were written by a single author of genius, others that they are a compilation of traditional narratives.

Then just over a century ago, the writer Samuel Butler lobbed a large stone into the academic pond by arguing not just that the two works had different authors but that the *Odyssey*’s was female. He gave definitive shape to his thesis in 1897, with his book *The Authoress of the Odyssey*.

The perception that the two works represented opposing values – the *Iliad* glorifying war and heroism and the *Odyssey*, the virtues of peace and civilisation – and were aimed at different readerships was not new. In the early 18th century, the classical scholar Richard Bentley declared the „*Iliad was written for men, and the Odyssey for women.*“ Butler pursued the idea to its logical conclusion: that men write for other men whereas women write for women.

The book became one of the puzzles of late Victorian scholarship. Was Butler being serious? He himself writes: „*When I began this work I was oppressed with a sense of the hopelessness of getting Homeric scholars to take it seriously.*“ Most of them did indeed take the book for a piece of whimsy from a man who had, after all, written the fantasy novel *Erewhon*, with its biting satire on scholarship. But later writers would be attracted by his ideas: James Joyce read Butler’s demotic translation of the *Odyssey* before writing *Ulysses* and Robert Graves’ 1955 novel, *Homer’s Daughter*, was inspired by *The Authoress*.

Butler (1835-1902) had read Classics at Cambridge but only turned to Homeric studies at the end of his life. He was best known for his novels, his eccentric output as an artist and photographer and his rejection of authoritarian dogma. *The Authoress* is probably to be understood in this subversive light: it cannot be taken totally at face value nor dismissed as a spoof. While the ageing author was clearly throwing down a gauntlet to his peers, some of his evidence is serious and seductive, despite the humorous undertones.

But what exactly is Butler saying?

That the *Odyssey* was written by a young Sicilian woman, most likely of noble birth, present in the book as Nausicaa, the princess who helps Odysseus when he is washed up on the island of Scheria.

The authoress most likely lived in Trapani, as the descriptions of the places visited by Odysseus correspond to the geogra-

phy of the Sicilian coast and the western part of the island. Butler’s archaeological „evidence“ for this is highly convincing – Graves even judges it „irrefutable“.

Then there is the presentation of the characters: Odysseus is portrayed as a passive figure, thrown on the mercies of one strong female (Calypso, Circe, Nausicaa, Penelope) after another – and who is dependant on the interventions of Athena to save him from Poseidon’s murderous onslaughts.

But Butler’s principal argument concerns the ardent defence – the whitewashing – of Odysseus’s wife. Whereas the underlying story suggests Penelope’s attitude to her suitors was at best ambivalent, the authoress goes out of her way to portray her as a blameless model of virtue, devoted and loyal during Odysseus’ long years of absence.

Butler was no proto-feminist – on the contrary, his defence of the authoress can be extremely patronising: the *Odyssey* reflects the limited concerns of a young girl – the details of domestic life, romantic love – and makes mistakes in „male“ matters, such as boats, tree-felling, lambing and the behaviour of birds. But his argument *a contrario* for an „authoress“ is attractively humanist.

He writes: „*It may be urged that it is extremely improbable that any woman in any age should write such a masterpiece as the Odyssey. But so it is also that any man should do so. In all the many hundreds of years since the Odyssey was written, no man has been able to write another that will compare with it.*“

Then comes the inspiring bit:

„*Phenomenal works imply a phenomenal workman, but there are phenomenal women as well as phenomenal men, and though there is much in the Iliad which no woman, however phenomenal, can be supposed at all likely to have written, there is not a line in the Odyssey which a woman might not perfectly well write, and there is much beauty which a man would be almost certain to neglect.*“

The stone that Butler popped so provocatively into the pond of Academe did not sink without trace but still continues to make ripples a century later.

Presenting a paper on Homer at a 1970 symposium in San Francisco, Prof. Louise Clubb made a suggestive observation: „*The Iliad is a story about what men do. The Odyssey is the sort of thing women think men do when they go away from home.*“

Homer, the ultimate invisible woman?

Why not?

→ „*The Authoress of the Odyssey*“ by Samuel Butler. Bristol Phoenix Press. Bristol, Reprinted 2003. ISBN 1-904675-01-8