Weaving a Way to *Nostos*: Odysseus and Feminine *Mêtis* in the *Odyssey*

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**Abstract.** My paper examines the gendered nature of Odysseus’ *mêtis*, a Greek word describing characteristics of cleverness and intelligence, in Homer’s *Odyssey*. While Odysseus’ *mêtis* has been discussed in terms of his storytelling, disguise, and craftsmanship, I contend that in order to fully understand his cleverness, we must place Odysseus’ *mêtis* in conversation with the *mêtis* of the crafty women who populate the epic. I discuss weaving as a stereotypically feminine manifestation of *mêtis*, arguing that Odysseus’ reintegration into his home serves as a metaphorical form of weaving—one that he adapts from the clever women he encounters on his journey home from Troy. Athena serves as the starting point for my discussion of *mêtis*, and I then turn to Calypso and Circe—two crafty weavers who attempt to ensnare Odysseus on their islands. I also examine Helen, whom Odysseus himself does not meet, but whose weaving is importantly witnessed by Odysseus’ son Telemachus, who later draws upon the craft of weaving in his efforts to help Odysseus restore order in his home. The last woman I present is Penelope, whose clever and prolonged weaving scheme helps her evade marriage as she awaits Odysseus’ return, and whose lead Odysseus follows in his own prolonged reentry into his home. I finally demonstrate the way that Odysseus reintegrates himself into his household through a calculated and metaphorical act of weaving, arguing that it is Odysseus’ willingness to embrace a more feminine model of *mêtis* embodied by the women he encounters that sets him apart from his fellow male warriors and enables his successful homecoming.

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the character Odysseus is closely associated with *mêtis*—a Greek word that translates to “cleverness” (Käppel, 2006) and describes the qualities of “intelligence, cunning, versatility, and a facility with words” (Murnaghan, 2000, p. xviii). While Odysseus’ *mêtis* has long been recognized in his propensity for disguise, his ability to craft elaborate stories, and his powers of manual craftsmanship (such as his construction of a raft to sail away from Calypso’s island) (Murnaghan, 2000, p. xviii), in order to fully understand the nature of Odysseus’ *mêtis*, we must place it into conversation with the *mêtis* of the women who populate the epic. For outside of Odysseus himself, *mêtis* in the *Odyssey* most notably appears in female figures; from the goddess Athena, to quasi-divine figures such as Calypso, Circe, and Helen, to mortals like Odysseus’ own wife Penelope, we witness women exercising *mêtis* through their adoption of disguises, their singing and storytelling, and, most importantly, their weaving. As a craft that requires great skill and serves as a form of visual storytelling, weaving exists as a powerful version of *mêtis* that is exercised by women. Penelope’s woven *mêtis* is particularly important in ensuring Odysseus’ successful homecoming, or *nostos*. In contrast to the infamous Clytemnestra, who uses her *mêtis* to weave a web that ensnares her husband Agamemnon and transforms his homecoming into a bloodbath, Penelope famously uses her *mêtis*—in the sense of both her cleverness and her manual craftsmanship—to weave and unweave a shroud, thereby staving off her suitors and preserving her chastity for her husband’s eventual return. The ghost of Agamemnon in fact directly attributes Odysseus’ successful homecoming to Penelope’s
virtue and loyalty (24.202-6). It is possible to push Agamemnon’s statement even further. Odysseus’ successful homecoming depends not only on Penelope’s fidelity, but also on Odysseus’ own willingness to transcend the typical masculine warrior mindset and embrace tactics more closely aligned with a feminine mode of métis. While métis defines Odysseus long before his laborious journey back to Ithaca (the well-known story of the Trojan horse, for instance, reveals that Odysseus was devising cunning schemes long before meeting clever women like Calypso and Circe), the women he encounters on his journey home from Troy provide him with an alternative, feminine model of métis most powerfully embodied by the art of weaving. It is this stereotypically feminine version of métis that Odysseus capitalizes upon when he strategically weaves his way back into his household at the end of the Odyssey.

Before turning to the text itself, it is useful to establish a broader historical context for the Odyssey. Likely recorded in written form for the first time around the eighth century BCE, the Odyssey is set in the earlier world of Bronze Age Greece (Murnaghan, 2000, pp. lii-lv). Thalmann (1998) describes Greece’s move toward a polis-based society in the “late eighth century BCE” (p. 23), and we might imagine that Odysseus’ ability to use not only strength, but intellectual savvy, would have served him well in a city-based civilization in which skill was becoming an increasingly important way to define one’s place. As Redfield (1983) notes, in contrast to the purely “retrospective” nature of Homer’s Iliad, the Odyssey simultaneously “looks back on an heroic age already ended” and “looks forward” to the “post-heroic” world (p. 220). It is Odysseus’ willingness to look beyond the warrior code of violence and personal glory exhibited in the Iliad and capitalize upon his cleverness and intelligence that powerfully links him to this post-heroic world. Bowers (2018) similarly recognizes Odysseus as a “new kind of hero endowed with a broader range of attributes than those prized in the Iliad,” but, consistent with scholarly consensus, concludes that upon his nostos, Odysseus reestablishes his masculine authority and identity as warrior through his assertion of violence (pp. 825-6). Following Saïd (2011), Bowers cites Odysseus’ order for Telemachus to kill the female slaves who dishonored him in his absence as an example of Odysseus’ warrior brutality (Bowers, 2018, p. 825). While Odysseus’ violence at the end of the epic is unequivocally brutal and excessive, it is not exclusively coded as masculine and does not wholly fit into traditional methods of warrior violence. Odysseus’ successful nostos depends upon his ability to capitalize upon both his traditional warrior skills and his métis. It also depends on his willingness to recognize when a version of métis coded as feminine (such as weaving) is more appropriate than a version of métis coded as masculine (such as shipbuilding). Odysseus’ métis sets him apart from his Bronze Age warrior contemporaries like Agamemnon, ultimately making him a hero better suited to Homer’s own audience living in a society that emphasized skill and the necessity for male and female collaboration in the service of the larger community.

Of all the characters in the Odyssey, métis is most powerfully associated with the goddess Athena—the epic’s preeminent deity. Athena’s mother (Zeus’ first wife) was in fact herself named Metis (Käppel, 2006). After hearing the prophecy that “a son born of Metis” would overthrow him, Zeus swallowed his wife, resulting in Athena’s birth from Zeus’ own head (Graf & Ley, 2006). Athena inherited her mother’s cleverness, resulting in her association with skilled crafts such as metalworking, shipbuilding, and weaving (Murnaghan, 2000, p. xxix). The figure of Athena thus highlights the powerful link between métis and weaving—a craft practiced extensively by ancient Greek women. Throughout the Odyssey, Athena exhibits her own métis through her frequent use of disguise as well as through the clever stratagems that she devises with Odysseus to help him defeat the suitors. Despite Athena’s apparent femininity, it is important to draw attention to the fundamental androgyny of the Olympian gods and goddesses. Neither male nor female, Athena possesses the ability to assume characteristics typically coded as feminine or masculine in order to serve her own needs and desires as well as those of her father, Zeus. As becomes clear later in the Odyssey, while Odysseus himself is not androgynous, he shares Athena’s ability to capitalize upon mindsets, attributes, and versions...
of métis associated with both genders. While this flexibility is one of Odysseus’ greatest strengths, Odysseus’ experimentation with gender roles and norms ultimately serves, much like Athena’s, to reinforce and reinstate the larger patriarchal system.

Beyond the divine Athena, Odysseus encounters several quasi-divine women on his journey whose cleverness and craftsmanship shape his own understanding of métis. Take, for example, Calypso and Circe—a nymph and an enchantress who live on magical islands set apart from both the human world and the rest of the gods and goddesses. The opening depictions of each of these women emphasize their métis in the form of skillful weaving. We first meet Calypso “seated inside, singing in a lovely voice/ As she wove at her loom with a golden shuttle” (5.65-6), and Circe too first appears “singing in a lovely voice/ As she moved about weaving a great tapestry” (10.237-8). Mueller (2010) draws attention to the fact that Circe’s name itself echoes the Greek word for shuttle, or kerkis (p. 5). She furthermore uses the figures of Calypso and Circe to propose an “analogy between song and textile,” specifically in the transmission of kleos, or glory (Mueller, 2010, p. 6). Just as weavers weave fabric, lyric poets weave stories; weaving serves as a material or visual form of storytelling. Storytelling is fittingly another central manifestation of métis in the Odyssey, and both Calypso and Circe emerge as expert weavers of words as well as cloth.

Despite the enchanting images of Calypso and Circe, both women also present significant threats to Odysseus, endangering his nostos by using their language and sexual power to tempt him to remain on their magical islands. Calypso, for example, spins an alluring story of the way that Odysseus could “stay here with [her], deathless” (5.207), rather than returning home to Penelope. Circe similarly invites Odysseus to stay with her, flattering him by calling him the “man of many wiles” and inviting him to her bed (10.352-56). Both women know how to tempt Odysseus with their language—with the siren-like songs that they sing and the enticing verbal fictions that they weave. After hearing Circe’s bewitching voice and witnessing her skillful weaving, one of Odysseus’ men fittingly describes Circe as “weaving a great web” (10.243)—a metaphor that reveals the potentially ensnaring nature of Circe’s métis. Dangerous web-like weaving also takes center stage in Aeschylus’ play Agamemnon, where the woven net that Clytemnestra devises to trap Agamemnon is similarly referred to as a “spider’s web” (l. 1491). These references suggest the extent to which female métis as exhibited through weaving and storytelling is often associated with clever plans invented by women to ensnare or entrap men. There is a fine line between cleverness and deceptiveness; métis is a double-edged sword.

While visiting Sparta, Odysseus’ son Telemachus meets another quasi-divine female weaver and storyteller—Menelaus’ infamous wife Helen. Though Odysseus himself does not encounter Helen, she remains relevant to my discussion both because she serves as a powerful example of how female métis manifests itself in both skillful weaving and storytelling, and because Telemachus’ actions at the end of the epic reveal that he, like his father, has been influenced by the feminine models of métis that he observes on his own miniature odyssey. As Telemachus and the Spartans feast, the narrator recounts that Helen weaves with a beautiful “golden spindle” (4.137). Once the celebration turns to tears and lamentation for Odysseus’ plight, Helen “thr[ows] a drug into the wine bowl” (4.232) to drive away the sadness before kicking off a round of storytelling. In this scene, Helen thus weaves with both her hands and her words. By lacing the wine with drugs, Helen furthermore controls the stories that are told and how they are received. Here again, her métis is ambiguous. Is her manipulation of stories and memory beneficial or harmful?

Menelaus follows Helen’s story with one of his own that affirms his wife’s métis. He recounts that once the wooden horse was brought into Troy, Helen circled it, “call[ing] out the names/ Of all the Argive leaders, making [her] voice/ Sound like each of [their] wives’ in turn” (4.297-9). If we have already witnessed Helen’s quality of métis exhibited through both her storytelling and manual craftsmanship, here we see her excelling in disguise as she manipulates the Greek soldiers with her deceptive voice. The complex connection between Helen, weaving, and storytelling also surfaces in the Iliad. In this epic, we first encounter Helen “weaving a folding mantle/ On a great loom” that
depicts “The trials that the Trojans and Greeks had suffered” (3.127-9). In both the Iliad and the Odyssey, Helen thus emerges as a master manipulator with the power to control and construct narratives, both spoken and woven. Drawing upon Nagy (2010), who argues that in Homer’s works, “the act of epic narration is figured metaphorically as an act of pattern-weaving” (p. 278), it becomes clear that Helen serves as a foil for the epic poet himself.

On the human level, métis also defines Odysseus’ own wife Penelope. We hear the famous story of Penelope’s manipulative weaving for the first time in Book 2 of the Odyssey where Antinous states that she tricked the suitors “for three years with her craft” (2.115). Antinous also enumerates the many “gifts” bestowed upon Penelope by Athena including “Her talent for handiwork, her good sense,” and, above all, her “cleverness” (2.127-9). In these lines, Antinous articulates some of the key characteristics of métis by emphasizing Penelope’s craftsmanship and her crafty mind, and by tying her cleverness back to Athena. It is worth noting that Penelope’s name itself means “weaveress” (Harder, 2006)—a word that signals both Penelope’s skill with the loom and her ability to weave intricate plans and tests. Penelope’s name thus powerfully solidifies the connection between métis as manifested through cleverness and métis as manifested through the craft of weaving. And like Calypso and Circe, Penelope also employs her weaving as a way to manipulate and exert power over men. Foley (1978) claims that “[l]ike Circe, Penelope has turned her guests into swine, into unmanly banqueters,” and suggests that just as Circe halts Odysseus and his men by keeping them on her island for a year, Penelope “symbolically stop[s] change on Ithaca” by holding the suitors captive in her house and “prevent[ing] [them] from maturing into husbands and warriors” (p. 10). In prolonging her weaving of Laertes’ robe, Penelope thus suspends time and keeps the suitors in a kind of limbo, just as Calypso and Circe tempt Odysseus to remain indefinitely upon their islands. All three of these women capitalize upon weaving as a distinctly female form of métis that allows them to exert agency. Penelope’s prolonged and clever weaving trick enables her evasion of the suitors, and Odysseus ultimately follows her lead in his own prolonged reentry into his home.

Having outlined some of the most prominent examples of female métis in the Odyssey, we must now turn to the character Odysseus himself, who similarly excels in the realms of disguise, storytelling, and craftsmanship. Given the plethora of feminine examples of métis that pervade the Odyssey, it may at first seem strange to find métis as one of the defining characteristics of this warrior hero. What does it mean that Odysseus is known more for his skill than for his strength, more for his mind than for his body? While illustrations of Odysseus’ métis proliferate in the Odyssey, it is in the second half of the epic that Odysseus’ use of feminine métis comes to the fore and where some potential answers to these questions lie.

Athena herself powerfully articulates Odysseus’ métis when he reaches Ithaca, establishing the centrality of this quality for Odysseus’ reintegration into his home. Upon meeting the disguised Athena, Odysseus protects his identity by fabricating an elaborate story of his past. Impressed by his quick thinking and storytelling skills, Athena reveals herself and praises Odysseus: “Here we are./ The two shrewdest minds in the universe,/ You far and away the best man on earth/ In plotting strategies, and I famed among gods/ For my clever schemes” (13.306-10). Métis unites Athena and Odysseus; she understands and appreciates his craftiness. After Athena celebrates Odysseus’ métis, she states her intent to “weave a plan” (13.314) with him—a sentiment echoed by Odysseus later in this same conversation when he beseeches Athena to “Weave a plan” (13.401) so he can pay back the suitors. In the original Greek, when Athena uses the verb “weave,” its subject is métis (Mueller, 2010, p. 3), linguistically establishing the connection between the art of weaving and the plan that Odysseus and Athena formulate.

It is this attention to weaving that distinguishes Odysseus’ métis upon reaching Ithaca from the métis that he demonstrates in earlier instances such as the Trojan War. On his journey home, Odysseus repeatedly encounters crafty weavers whose skills with words and cloth demonstrate the power of an alternative, feminine model of métis. Odysseus recognizes the potential of this woven métis and is willing to metaphorically
incorporate it into his own schemes. Odysseus’ *mêîs* is not constant or stagnant across the epic, and part of what makes him so clever is his ability to recognize which version of cleverness best suits him at any given moment. When leaving Calypso’s island, for instance, Odysseus employs a stereotypically masculine version of *mêîs* when he “skillfully” creates a raft—a piece of manual craftsmanship that transports him from the island (5.244). When Odysseus reaches Ithaca, however, he realizes that a different kind of cleverness is required of him. He thus draws upon the *mêîs* he has witnessed in figures like Circe and Calypso, whose weaving, according to Foley (1978), “retard[s] or conquer[s] change” (p. 14). Athena’s and Odysseus’ deliberate plan is similarly designed to be implemented slowly and carefully. As opposed to Agamemnon, who arrives home and immediately bursts through the front door, Odysseus uses his *mêîs* to collaborate with Athena, crafting a plan that allows him to methodically weave himself back into the fabric of his household. As a stereotypical male adhering to the warrior code of honor and glory, Agamemnon is unwilling to prolong his *kleos*. Odysseus, on the other hand, understands the merit of taking one’s time. He begins by testing slaves like Eumaeus and Eurycleia and slowly and carefully works his way to Penelope. He embraces and capitalizes upon a more feminine mode of *mêîs* embodied by weaving.

It might at first appear that after successfully and craftily weaving his way back into his home, the test of the bow and Odysseus’ subsequent violence against the suitors definitively reestablish male violence and authority. While the violence at the end of the *Odyssey* certainly restores Odysseus to his identity as a warrior, several details in the text reveal that he remains attuned to the enduring applicability of a more feminine version of *mêîs*. Firstly, the test of the bow is Penelope’s idea (19.628) and can thus be linked to her own distinctive *mêîs*. Secondly, it is Penelope who controls access to Odysseus’ bow, which she retrieves from a “remote storeroom” full of Odysseus’ “bronze, gold,/ And wrought iron,” as well as “chests/ Filled with fragrant clothes” (21.7-9, 50). Considering that Penelope possesses the key to this space, it is possible that this storeroom is the location that Mueller (2010) identifies as Penelope’s megaron—the room where she would also have stored the robe that Helen gave Telemachus to leave with Penelope for safekeeping (p. 14). In any event, Odysseus’ bow shares a symbolic space with woven robes tangibly tied to female *mêîs*.

Odysseus’ use of the bow furthermore suggests the extent to which he fights not only with sheer masculine force, but also with skill and calculation. When Odysseus strings his bow, Homer provides the reader with an extraordinary simile:

Like a musician stretching a string
Over a new peg on his lyre, and making
The twisted sheep-gut fast at either end,
Odysseus strung the great bow. Lifting it up,
He plucked the string, and it sang beautifully
Under his touch, with a note like a swallow’s. (21.432-7)

The reference to Odysseus’ bow singing like a swallow primes readers for the simile in Book 22 likening Athena to a swallow (22.255), thereby solidifying the connection between Odysseus’ *mêîs* and the goddess of *mêîs* herself. More importantly, however, in these lines Homer compares Odysseus’ bow to a lyre—a particularly resonant simile in light of the fact that the suitors’ current feast celebrates Apollo, the god of both archery and music. The presentation of Odysseus as a bard fits with his larger role as storyteller in the *Odyssey* (in addition to the various backstories that Odysseus fabricates for himself once he reaches Ithaca, Books 9-12 of the *Odyssey* are of course all an extended story narrated by Odysseus). The swineherd Eumaeus in fact describes that Odysseus’ powerful storytelling skills render him enrapt and spellbound, “just as when men gaze at a bard” (17.564).

It is possible to stretch this striking simile even further, drawing a connection between lyres, bows, and looms. Muller (2010) highlights that looms and lyres share mechanical similarities (p. 6)—both are constructed from wooden frames that hold strings. And in a metaphorical sense, both lyres and looms serve as instruments for the weaving of stories (think, for instance, of Ovid’s Philomela, who uses weaving to visually convey the story of her brutal rape [Mueller, 2010, p. 6]). It is productive here to place Odysseus’ bow into conversation with the loom and the lyre (compare Figures 1-4 below).
On a structural level, the bow shares with these two technologies important similarities in construction (i.e. wood frame and string). Additionally, the way that Odysseus sends his arrow “clean through the holes of all twelve axeheads” (21.449) (see Figure 4) parallels the way that weavers pass a shuttle through the threads of a loom in the creation of fabric (see Figure 1). Through the use of his bow, Odysseus metaphorically continues to weave—continues to employ feminine métis. Odysseus’ bow serves as a key element of his strategy to carefully and skillfully weave himself back into his household.

Even once Odysseus has successfully strung the bow and begun to exact revenge on the suitors, Homer continues to employ language that ties Odysseus’ violence to weaving. After Antinous falls to the ground, the suitors still do not realize that Odysseus had “shot to kill”; they have “no idea how tightly the net/ Ha[s] been drawn around them” (22.34-6). The image of a tightly drawn net recurs just a few lines later (22.44). Nets in the Odyssey have thus far been associated with Circe, who weaves a metaphorical web in which she traps Odysseus and his men, and Penelope, who weaves a literal shroud she uses to stymie the suitors. The image of Odysseus casting a net over the suitors symbolically aligns him with these clever and crafty women who lure their prey into woven traps. Odysseus thus demonstrates his willingness to marry warrior violence with cleverness and skill; even once he has successfully passed the bow test, we see the way that his fighting is filtered through his new understanding of a more feminine or woven version of métis.

Telemachus’ violence at the end of the Odyssey reveals the way that he too has learned the value of métis, particularly in its stereotypically feminine manifestation of weaving. Redfield (1983) notes that part of the way the Odyssey “looks forward” is by providing the audience with Odysseus’ heir (p. 220), and at the end of the Odyssey we see the way that Telemachus emerges as not just Odysseus’ biological heir, but also an heir to his métis. In one of the Odyssey’s most brutal episodes, Odysseus orders that Telemachus kill the twelve female slaves who slept with the suitors in his absence: “Slash them with swords/ Until they have forgotten their secret lovemaking/ With the suitors” (22.467-9). Odysseus invokes a stereotypically masculine method of killing when he tells Telemachus to murder the women with swords; it appears that we are about to witness the restoration of patriarchal order by way of masculine violence exacted upon female slaves. Telemachus, however, does not follow Odysseus’ orders. He deems the death that Odysseus orders too “clean,” instead “t[y]ing the cable of a dark-prowed ship/ To a great pillar and pull[ing] it about the round house” and hanging the women from this cable (22.485-90). In one of the most horrific similes in the Odyssey, the narrator describes that just as birds “fall into a snare set in a thicket,” “So too these women, their heads hanging in a row:/ The cable looped around each of their necks” (22.492-5). While this episode might at first appear to epitomize male violence exacted upon powerless females, the symbolic snare that Telemachus devises bears eerie similarities to the art of weaving.

Telemachus’ brutal method of murder, like Odysseus’ bow test, serves as a metaphorical act of weaving. Telemachus strings the twelve women onto one cable, just as Odysseus shoots his arrow through the holes of the twelve axeheads, both actions symbolically paralleling the movement of a shuttle through a loom. The cable that Telemachus uses furthermore ties his snare to both the craft of weaving and the craft of shipbuilding (the cable comes from a ship prow); recall that both of these crafts are associated with Athena and with métis. And just as the narrator describes the trap that Odysseus devises for the suitors as a “net,” Telemachus’ trap for the slave girls serves as its own kind of net that physically encircles the house. In this scene of sickening violence, Telemachus, like Odysseus, demonstrates his ability to appropriate feminine métis in his restoration of patriarchal order. Telemachus carries out his extreme, misogynist violence against the enslaved women in a way that shows his attention to the craft of weaving modeled by Penelope, Helen, and the way that his father metaphorically weaves his way back into his household. Telemachus’ actions, while unequivocally abhorrent, must be recognized as standing apart from typical warrior violence in the way that they draw upon the feminine craft of weaving.
becomes all the more brutal when we recognize that he perversely kills these women in a manner reminiscent of the very craft that they would have carried out on a daily basis. Thalmann (1998) discusses the “crucial division of social space in Homeric society” whereby “[m]en work outside [of the house] and compete for honor” and “[w]omen stay in the house and maintain their families’ honor,” participating in domestic crafts like weaving (p. 27). Telemachus complicates this binary or division both by bringing the women outside of the space of the home and by killing them not as a male warrior typically would, but in a way that recalls the craft that they practiced inside the home. There is no need for Telemachus to subject the women to a death this elaborate; he could have simply killed them with swords as his father suggested. His method of murder reveals his sadistic desire to further humiliate the enslaved women by killing them with their own craft, so to speak. It also highlights the lessons that he has learned from Odysseus. Like his father, Telemachus blurs the boundaries between typical gender roles and norms, employing whichever methods best serve his needs and desires in the restoration of masculine order.

At the end of the poem, Odysseus and his son Telemachus reestablish male order in the household, but they do so in a way that represents their understanding of the power and applicability of a more feminine mode of métis, as exhibited by the various women present in their lives and journeys. It is important to recognize, however, the way that they appropriate this feminine métis in the service of their restoration of a patriarchal household, just as Athena uses her own cleverness in the service of her father Zeus. Odysseus’ and Telemachus’ use of métis at the end of the Odyssey thus emerges as ambiguous: on the one hand, it affirms the power of feminine métis (specifically as manifested through weaving); but on the other hand, father and son appropriate this female form of agency in order to advance their own misogynist and patriarchal goals. Despite these complications, however, the fact Odysseus and Telemachus recognize the applicability of female cleverness and themselves implement modified versions of it is itself significant. Even if we understand Odysseus and Telemachus as employing feminine métis to serve their own ends, this appropriation implicitly and importantly recognizes the power of female words and weaving.

In the final books of the Odyssey, Odysseus’ identification with a feminine mode of métis as exemplified by weaving may raise questions about his masculinity. Is there something feminine about Odysseus? Is he perhaps androgyne like Athena? Foley (1978) discusses moments of gender fluidity or inversion in the Odyssey, drawing attention to a series of inverted gender similes describing Odysseus that she claims fit into a “larger pattern of social disruption and restoration in the epic” (p. 8). Foley concludes that the “continual play with social and sexual categories in the poem results not in social change but in a more flexible interpretation of social roles” (Foley, 1978, p. 9). The play with métis in the Odyssey serves a similar function; Odysseus’ and Telemachus’ use of feminine métis does not completely upend gender roles or norms, but it does offer readers a glimpse of a world where men fight not only with their swords, but with skillful stratagems. In adopting the feminine quality of métis, Odysseus ultimately embraces a more malleable understanding of gender roles.

What Odysseus shares with Athena is not androgyneity, but rather the willingness to capitalize upon whichever methods best serve one’s interests in the moment, regardless of whether these methods are coded as masculine or feminine. Athena is associated with both the masculine craft of shipbuilding and the feminine craft of weaving, for instance, and in the Odyssey, Odysseus engages in the former physically and in the latter metaphorically. In a larger sense, Odysseus’ capacity to embrace both feminine and masculine métis fits with what Dougherty (2015) identifies as his tendency to experiment with and improvise his identity in order to protect himself (p. 116). Just as he can efface his name and assume the disguise of a beggar (a “form of self-denial that most heroes could not tolerate” [Murnaghan, 2000, p. xix]), Odysseus can suppress his masculine warrior identity and experiment with feminine métis. But he also recognizes when masculine methods are appropriate; recall the image of the net that Odysseus tightly draws around the suitors. This woven trap, which we might code as feminine, provides Odysseus with the opportunity to exercise his masculine battle
skills. And after he runs out of arrows, which in the contest of the bow metaphorically tie him to the distinctly feminine practice of weaving, Odysseus begins to fight with spears (22.124-9)—the weapon of choice for Greek male warriors.

Odysseus’ successful homecoming is enabled not only by his wife Penelope, but also by his willingness to embrace Penelope’s version of métis. Unlike his fellow warrior, Agamemnon, who remains trapped within a rigid and masculine warrior mindset, Odysseus understands that there are other ways to be and to succeed in the world. The cunning female figures that he encounters along his journey present him with some of these alternatives; his interactions with these women teach him that if he wants to be successful, he must be able to grow, adapt, and embrace different versions of métis. By the time he arrives on Ithaca, Odysseus enters a space over which his wife has held control since he left for Troy. In his absence, Penelope has used the variations of métis accessible to her (primarily craftiness and trickery through weaving) in order to protect herself and her home. Odysseus realizes that his home has changed in his absence; he realizes that he cannot saunter through the front door and immediately resume his position as father, husband, and king. He must be wary. He must devise a plan consistent with the métis of the wife on whom his successful nostos depends. So, he weaves a plan with Athena, he slowly reintegrates himself into his household through clever disguises and tests, and he first asserts his authority with a bow rather than a spear. Odysseus’ heroism remains complicated and ambiguous, and we should certainly question the way that he uses métis to restore masculine order. His ultimate strength and success, however, lie in his unique ability to understand that the warrior code is not the only way. It can at times be supplemented, or even replaced, by alternate modes of thinking and acting—modes that may even be coded as feminine. In the character of Odysseus, Homer provides a hero for a new age—one that requires skill and the collaboration between men and women to ensure the success of society. In the Odyssey, Homer ultimately suggests that the greatest heroes are those who are willing to transcend societal and gender norms and weave their own way to kleos.

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Figure 2. This vase depicts two more women weaving. The woman on the right holds a hand loom that is closer in size and construction to a lyre than the large loom in the previous image.

Painter of the Louvre Centauromachy. (c. 460-440 BCE). Pyxis showing A seated Woman Holding a Spindle and a standing Woman Holding a Hand Loom (Women inside a house engaged in weaving and other household activities). [Ceramics]. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. Retrieved from https://library-artstor-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/asset/ARMNIG_10313261307.

Figure 3. The man on this vase plays a lyre. The strings on the lyre resemble those of a loom, and the lyre’s curved frame echoes that of a bow.

Attributed to Chairias Painter. (last quarter 6th Century BCE). Cup with Young Man at a Banquet Playing a Lyre. [Ceramics]. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. Retrieved from https://library-artstor-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/asset/ARMNIG_10313261762.
Figure 4. This image depicts Odysseus about to launch his arrow in the contest of the bow. The shape of the bow in this image recalls the shape of the lyre in the previous image.

Penelope Painter (active. c. 450-420 BCE). (c. 450-440 BCE). Skyphos (Cup) with Odysseus as Archer, detail. [Vessel]. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Antikensammlung, Berlin, Germany. Retrieved from https://library-artstor-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/asset/LESSING_ART_10310751363
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