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## Abstract

This paper will analyze the rhetorical and historiographical strategies by which Odysseus’ return to Ithaka after the Trojan War was narrated in Byzantium, with a particular emphasis on how these narratives limited the scope of agency and power available to the varied capable mortal women and goddesses of Homer’s Odyssey to their sexuality. Thus, for instance, in the chronicle of the sixth-century historian John Malalas, Kirke loses her magical power to turn men into animals (as in the Odyssey), and instead uses her sexual prowess to make them stay. In the twelfth-century Allegories of the Odyssey by the poet, scholar, and Homeric interpreter John Tzetzes re-imagines her as a madam who runs a brothel. For Tzetzes, reduction to prostitutes is an effective means of limiting the agency of other dangerous women; the sirens, too, are prostitutes. This process of rationalization and de-mythification of the often mythical/pagan/supernatural women appears also in the depiction of other women in Byzantine accounts of the events of the Odyssey. Thus, for instance, in Malalas’ account, the rewriting of the episode of the Cyclops transforms Polyphemos into a mortal and gives him a daughter, Elpe, in place of his eye. Instead of being blinded as in the Odyssey, Polyphemos’ daughter is captured by Odysseus’ crew. Thus, the mythological and supernatural is again rationalized in a way that reduces women’s agency to their sexuality.

The texts of the western medieval European tradition are explicitly misogynistic: in their re-tellings of the Trojan War, medieval writers such as Guido delle Colonne and John Lydgate add long authorial digressions denouncing the vices of women; the Byzantine writers (with some notable exceptions), by contrast, encode a more subtle but ultimately hardly less damaging misogyny into their texts, diminishing the powerful, thoughtful, cunning, wise, women of the Odyssey by writing them out of the narrative or transforming them into either victims or perpetrators of sexual aggression. While myth may have allowed for powerful women, the conventions of Byzantine historiography and Byzantines’ understanding of the drivers of historical causation (e.g. the imperial histories shaped by powerful men) resulted in a significant unwriting of women in narratives inherited from the Classical past.

In both Malalas and Tzetzes, strategies for rewriting the Homeric epics sought to remove the enchanted elements of the Homeric epics but, in domesticating the marvelous, they also domesticated the poems’ marvelous women, and thus offer insight into Byzantine conceptions what it meant to be a woman, and what a woman was allowed to be.