

January 2012

Circling Back Home: A Lifelong Odyssey into Feminism

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Circling Back Home: A Lifelong Odyssey into Feminism

by

Scott Neumeister

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:
November 16, 2012

Keywords: Homer, pedagogy, hooks, middle school, critical consciousness

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the University of South Florida professors who fostered my journey into feminism, all of whom graciously serve on this thesis's committee. Dr. Sara Munson Deats, as the interim Director of Graduate Studies, enthusiastically encouraged me to begin my master's program, despite my relatively late start in life, and as a professor gave me the first piece of feminist criticism I had ever read in my life. Dr. Larry Broer both provided me a backstage tour of the "theaters of masculinity" and maintained a relationship with me after his class that culminated in my assisting him on his latest book. Dr. Diane Price Herndl, as well as her husband Carl, assisted me in exploring the deepest critical theorists without losing touch with the real world, and reinforced the teacher-student relationship with a personal one.

Foremost, however, I am mostly deeply thankful to Dr. Gary Lemons for a mentorship and a kinship beyond any I have experienced in my life. Not without understanding the implications of the sobriquet do I call him "Brother of the Soul," since to name one of a different race as brother, as well as erasing the hierarchy of professor and student, breaks the tyranny of the visual and social constructions in which we live. He has never failed to keep me inspired, and in Spirit, since our first meeting in 2009. Just as in *The Odyssey* Athena took on the form and voice of a man, Mentor, from which we get the word, so I believe that, for me, Dr. Lemons embodies the wisdom of feminism and will continue to be my guide, whether present or apart, for the rest of my lifelong odyssey.

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Abstract

What happens when a classroom becomes more than just a site of intellectual growth and evolves into a locus of emotional, social, and spiritual transformation? What happens when a student in such a classroom also occupies the role of teacher and desires to reproduce such a transformative environment for his students? In brief, this thesis answers these questions by offering a narrative and critique of my personal “conscientization” via feminism and elucidates the theory behind, my approaches toward, and the results of my bringing graduate-level feminist theory and pedagogy to a middle school English classroom. I examine how my experiences as a student in both the past and the present have merged to shape my work as a teacher and have set me on the path to becoming a professor, not only in the sense of a college teacher as a *profession* but as a person who professes, who openly declares the truths of my past as both dehumanizer and dehumanized to help others come to critical consciousness.

First, I autobiographically critique my learning and assimilation of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in middle school, reflecting upon how these works occupied a major part of my indoctrination into the hyper-masculine, white, patriarchal, upper-class dogma of the culture, as well as bringing a feminist perspective to bear upon these personally influential epics. Next, I examine my studies in the University of South Florida’s master’s program in English literature and, in particular, my direct and life-changing encounter with feminism in a 2009 course in feminist theory, which facilitated a complete re-visioning of my life and led to a personal renaissance. The final part of this circular path leads me back to my teaching of the same classical texts that so greatly influenced me as a young man, and I explain how my transformative experiences with both feminist

theory and pedagogy motivated me to distill their critical approaches into a form and format that I have successfully implemented for my middle-school classroom.

Introduction

Tracing the Circle: Departure, Initiation, and Return

“...home, community, and identity all fit somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities, and friendships” – Chandra Talpade Mohanty (136)

“And even if *you* escape, you’ll come home late and come a broken man” –
Homer (*Odyssey* 11.129-30)

Like Odysseus in Homer’s epic *The Odyssey*, I have returned home after a long absence. Although my circular journey took a few years more than his, and I did not leave as a ruler nor fight a physical war, my odyssey also had conflicts and numerous obstacles. Just as Odysseus returns to his homeland, Ithaca, I have circled back to my native ground, the educational environment that occupied ten years of my youth and influenced me in innumerable ways. My life path has given me the opportunity to come home to a critical time and place, the single most momentous academic year of my life and the selfsame school where it happened: the seventh grade at St. John’s Episcopal School in South Tampa. I also have come home “a broken man,” but not the kind of “broken” that connotes ruined or inoperative. In fact, one aspect of my being broken (the sort that Hector, breaker of horses, practiced) began in the very school to which I return. I subjugated myself to the yoke of the white, male, middle/upper class values of my society. Conversely, I now have performed another version of breaking, a severing of

agreements with the tyranny of those “political choices,” in Chandra Mohanty’s terminology, which I made starting over three decades ago. Although I arrive back in the capacity of teacher of literature at St. John’s, I do not wish for the metaphor of me as Odysseus the king to apply too strongly to me in my classroom. I intend, in truth, for my teaching not only to deconstruct patriarchy, classism, and racism but also to construct a new “Ithaca” for those I teach, a point of origin for their odysseys that helps them explore, decry, and resist their own “breaking” while they still remain young.

When Odysseus lands in Ithaca after a twenty year absence, the goddess Athena transforms him into the guise of beggar, so that he may scout his own house undetected and gauge the strength of the suitors who plague his wife, Penelope. Indeed I might primarily link myself metaphorically to the regal Odysseus because I hold the position of a type of “beggar-king,” simultaneously occupying two, seemingly opposing roles – that of teacher and that of student. During my master’s studies in English literature at the University of South Florida, my pupillary encounter with feminism has radically altered my perspective on the world and caused a paradigm shift in my perceptions of the past, my actions in the present, and in my goals for the future. I specifically wish to use this thesis to examine how my experiences as a student, both past and present, have merged to shape me as a human and informed my work as a teacher, setting me on the path to becoming a professor, not only in the sense of a college teacher as a *profession* but as a person who professes, who openly declares my experiences as both dehumanizer and dehumanized. This thesis narrates and critiques my own transformation by the “goddess” of feminism (my “conscientization,” as Freire would term it) and to elucidate the theory behind, my methods of, and results from teaching feminism in a middle school English classroom. Well aware of a possible claim of Eurocentrism in equating modern feminism with the goddess Athena, I remind the reader of both Plato’s ancient declaration that Athena originated from the Libyan

goddess Neith (Zitman 192) and Martin Bernal's controversial yet influential modern "Black Athena" theory that much of Greek culture had Phoenician and Egyptian origins (Berlinerblau 4).

I will start and end my narrative with the seventh grade at St. John's as my classroom environment, with USF occupying the middle space between these loci. Additionally, I intend that the equal importance I place on the personal and professional will collapse the normal ranking for the latter above the former, and that the personal aspects of the narrative will replace the usual sole focus on intellectual scholarship. Thus, I intend my thesis to honor what Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs see in the writings of feminists' "radical forms – nonlinear, nonhierarchical, decentering – [which] are, in themselves, a way of writing the feminine" (3-4). In Chapter One, I will autobiographically and critically examine my learning and assimilation of literature in the past and reflect upon how what I read in the seventh grade, the point of departure for this journey, facilitated my indoctrination into the sexist, racist, and classist cultural dogma that I was expected to assimilate during my teen years. In Chapter Two, I will move chronologically into my adult years and my graduate work at USF, outlining my direct and life-changing initiation into feminism, most particularly in a feminist theory class with Dr. Gary Lemons that effected a personal renaissance, and how the spirit of feminism moved, in his words, from my college classroom to my living room, or from an external, educational space to an internal, personal one. The final part of this circular path, Chapters Three and Four, will chronicle my return, this time as a teacher, to the same literary texts which influenced me so greatly in my youth, but which now I investigate and instruct as a man coming to critical consciousness. My affective experiences with feminist theory and pedagogy have motivated me to distill the critical methods I have assimilated into a form and format appropriate for middle-schoolers and, extending the living room metaphor, to move them from my living room (inner beliefs) to

my middle-school classroom (outer actions). Having encountered the power of feminist criticism linked with feminist pedagogy, I will detail my steps toward incorporating both *what* and *how* of my USF curriculum into my middle school curriculum.

Chapter One

Patriarchal Training Grounds: Processing My World via Homer

“Ah, when I was a boy, I daydreamed
About the heroes of *The Iliad!*
Ajax was stronger than Diomedes
Hector was stronger than Ajax
And Achilles the strongest of all; because
He was the strongest!...Innocent boyhood ideas!
Ah, when I was a boy, I daydreamed
About the heroes of *The Iliad!*” – Antonio Machado (233)

During the 1970s, from 4-year-old kindergarten through eighth grade, I attended St. John's, a parochial institution which has its roots in the British private educational system. Although I lived ten miles from the school, its student demographics mirrored the neighborhood where I grew up: vast majority white and upper-middle class. I only had a few peers of Hispanic background and never had a black classmate or neighbor until I reached ninth grade. In terms of structure, St. John's offered a highly controlled and disciplined environment, with uniforms, daily chapel, and strict rules (enforced by corporal punishment) all as parts of its regulated organization. Aside from a heavy religious and liturgical emphasis, the school gave marked pedagogical prominence to Greek and Roman culture, and the curriculum included Latin as its only foreign language. Students received instruction in Greek mythology from the fifth grade level

onward and studied *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in the seventh. The first books of any great length that I had read, Homer's twin epics formed the backbone of the seventh grade English program at the school. I remember quite vividly the way in which the details of the Trojan War unfolded in Homer's unflinching-yet-poetic language, as well as the tribulations of the war-weary Odysseus as he faced obstacle after obstacle trying to reach home afterwards. These epics contained beauty and ugliness, bravery and cowardice, mercy and vengeance, fantasy and reality, all of which captured my young imagination and served, as I shall elaborate, as a kind of ideal to which many paradigms by which I saw myself and my world conformed.

While cultivating the spirit as well as the mind, the school followed the Greek ideal by simultaneously seeking to nurture the body through athletic participation as part of its curriculum. Besides daily recess, biweekly physical education classes ensured that students received some sports conditioning. Not athletic in the way that the majority of the males in my grade defined it, I did not excel in the typical P.E. games like dodgeball and kickball, nor did I pursue physical activity as much as my male peers during my free time at school. While after-lunch recess would find most of them participating in pickup games of basketball or football, I spent most of this time in the library or working on the school's latest acquisition, its first personal computer. Outside of school, I had chosen the sport of swimming at the age of five as my main athletic endeavor, one that (I later discovered) did not live up to the budding masculine code of my pre-adolescent friends. Swimming has no physical contact, does not require a strong sense of teamwork or close-knittedness as a strategy for victory, and (perhaps most importantly) has allowed female participation for many years. The sports that most of my peers played outside of school, primarily basketball, football, and soccer, met all of these requirements. Despite my choice of sport, I had encountered neither open, verbal

disparagement for being a swimmer nor any subtle shunning, probably because I at least appeared as “in shape” as all of my peers.

To increase the stakes of the physical fitness aspect of the curriculum, the school began participation in the Presidential Physical Fitness Challenge and required each student to perform each of the various activities that tested strength, flexibility, agility, and so on. The day arrived when testing began for the Challenge. Whereas I had done some of the activities used by the Challenge (e.g. curl-ups, sit and reach), I had never attempted a pull-up before in my life. The P.E. coach split the boys and girls into separate groups and had different tests running simultaneously. As my male peers approached and grabbed the pull-up bar, they handily executed two, three, or even more repetitions. When I walked up, placed my hands on the bar, and hung my body to begin, every eye watched. Exerting all my strength to perform the first pull-up, my arms barely moved. Again I applied as much force as I could to lift my body from the hanging position – no significant rise came. As I released the bar, I felt the blood rush to my face, both a physical reaction to the fruitless struggle I had just performed and an emotional one from the embarrassment and shame I now faced. The outer world quickly mirrored my inner self-flagellation. I immediately perceived a shift in the faces and postures of the boys surrounding me. No one actually frowned or turned all the way around, but their visages discernibly fell, and their bodies drooped. In the days and weeks following this event, I began to detect a form of shunning, ranging from team captains regularly calling upon me last in the P.E. team selection to silent treatments, especially around the topics of sports played or watched, at lunch or other social times. No one ever spoke to me directly about what had happened; no taunts or insults came my way. The social order simply shifted under me, leaving me feeling rejected and outcast. Family therapist Terrence Real relates the story of this same type of disapproval that his son Alexander received for dressing as Barbie: “Without a shred of

malevolence, the stare my son received transmitted a message. You are not to do this. And the medium that message was broadcast in was a potent emotion: shame...[in a] ten-second wordless transaction...I call such moments of induction the 'normal traumatization' of boys" (78). In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, bell hooks decries what happened to boys like Alexander and me as "the tyranny of patriarchal thinking, the power of patriarchal culture to hold us captive" (22).

For whatever reason, this pull-up challenge became a litmus test for masculinity in my class and thus a method of solidifying the male rankings. Even some girls in my grade, I reasoned, could perform more repetitions on the bar than I could. Now, no doubt remained: I was a wimp. Up to that time, I had remained unaware on a conscious level that a hierarchy even existed among my classmates. I surrounded myself with a small group of friends of similar personality and interests as myself, but only viewed those not in that circle as "different," not "positioned." In his milestone study of adolescent behavior "Dominance Hierarchies in Groups of Early Adolescents," Ritch Savin-Williams not only identifies the main variables for determining dominance in a group but also the possibility for rise and fall of individual members. According to Savin-Williams', "...only three variables – leadership, athletic ability, and pubertal maturation – significantly predicted status rank..." (933). In that one moment on the pull-up bar, neither my command capacity nor my advance into adulthood changed; however, the public knowledge of my (lack of) athletic ability created what Savin-Williams would label an example of the "shifts in relative status occurring between adjacently ranked group members" (933). I rapidly became aware of this social ranking (what I would later come to know as "alpha," "beta," and "omega") when the sudden shift in my position occurred.

I had never rated as anything near the standard definition of an alpha male, "a man tending to assume a dominant or domineering role in social or professional situations, or thought to possess the qualities and confidence for leadership" ("alpha, n.

and adj.”). Those most physically capable (whose pubescence enhanced their qualities), those participating in the contact sports, those budding into modern warriors – these peers inhabited the upper echelon. Not squarely in the omega group before that day, I had resided in the middle, beta class, with a blend of the upper and lower attributes. I did exhibit many of the lowest-rated male traits (social awkwardness, non-aggression), but I also possessed some of the other qualities that Savin-Williams identified as second-tier predictors of dominance (intelligence, creativity, and physical size/height). Additionally, Ellen Jordan in her essay “Fighting Boys and Fantasy Play” describes another behavior that separates alphas from the rest: rebellion against the school system. I had always comported myself in a very well-behaved manner and would have qualified as what Jordan calls one of the “good boys” in opposition to the rebellious “fighting boys.” Jordan posits, “This particular drama, I would suggest, is played out generation after generation in the classrooms and playgrounds of primary schools where the boys who conform to the school's demands face the school resisters in a contest over who shall claim the hero role in the 'warrior' definition of masculinity” (76). All of these factors had, before pull-up day, left my ranking in question. However, no doubt remained in my peers’ minds as I hung, “weak” and “helpless” on the bar: omega. Perhaps a high-ranking omega, but still omega.

OF HEART AND HEROES: HECTOR’S LOVING PATRIARCHY

While my external, public life was teaching me lessons in masculinity, so was my internal, literary one. James Garbarino summarizes the two-part influence of the social and the written/visual in the following way: “Where and how do boys learn what it means to be a man? They seem to learn it all too often from the mass media and from the most visible males in their community, particularly their peers” (169). Although I certainly had been exposed to mass media (television, film, advertising, music), at this juncture in my life Homer captivated my attention in a *massive* way. As my classmates and I began

progressing through the books of *The Iliad*, the Achilles-Hector conflict preoccupied my thoughts, even outside the classroom. Although the majority of my classmates (particularly male) viewed Achilles as the clear hero of the story, I found that Homer challenged my paradigm that stories and movies had established up to that point in my life – that a plot must have a clear “good guy” and “bad guy.” My male peers overwhelmingly rooted for and exalted Achilles for his sheer manliness, indicating that they had fallen under what Crystal Smith describes in her book *The Achilles Effect*, the notion reinforced by all kinds of media which “teaches boys to value traditionally masculine traits, like aggression, over any other characteristics boys might possess” (23). I did admire many of Achilles’s qualities, including his obvious physical prowess and his assertiveness; however, I grew to dislike him overall for his emotional instability (from sulkiness to burning rage) and, later in the story, what I perceived as his inhumane cruelty to Hector’s body. Hector, on the other hand, for me evolved into the true “good guy” of *The Iliad*, and the reasons whereby I justified my views as a seventh-grader bear closer inspection, for hidden within all of the key passages where I found laudable behavior lay the messages of masculinity that would seed my subconscious mind. Thus, using a variant of Smith’s verbiage, I might begin to describe “The Hector Effect” on me.

Whereas Achilles engages in what Smith classifies as “a touch of rebelliousness” and asserts his “independent streak” in his cold war against Agamemnon (23), Hector fights predominantly for a cause beyond himself, as he so poignantly reveals in his conversation with Andromache in Book VI: “No, no, let the earth come piling over my dead body before I hear your cries, I hear you dragged away!” (553-5). Although he certainly also battles to obtain the same *kleos* that Achilles seeks, his glory walks hand-in-hand with the protection of the Trojan people in general and the women and children specifically. Addressing his allies, Hector reveals, “What I needed was men to shield our helpless children, fighting men to defend our Trojan women – all-out – against these

savage Argives” (17.256-8). Hector’s noble aspiration to prevent the enslavement of Andromache and the other “helpless” of Troy spoke deeply to another evolving quality in me, the quality of love. To me, protecting another human from harm embodied an expression of love. Unfortunately, it also, as Garbarino posits, reinforced a belief that women remain “dependent upon masculine goodwill to keep the peace” (170).

Garabino’s encapsulates this aspect of patriarchy with the male mantra “I honor my woman” (169). In his 2004 screenplay for Wolfgang Petersen’s film *Troy*, David Benioff paraphrases this and captures Hector’s overall patriarchal stance in the Trojan prince’s pre-battle pep talk: “Honor the gods, love your woman, and defend your country.” Of course, with the majority of the immortals on his side, his woman taken, and his country thus offended, Menelaus could also have easily claimed these traditional values in his pursuit of war with Troy to retrieve Helen. So, my will to love and protect became channeled in the patriarchal way, ultimately one that does not truly empower those it seeks to safeguard. As bell hooks describes her literary inquiry into this phenomenon in *All About Love: New Visions*, “. . .I noticed how few writers, male or female, talk about the impact of patriarchy, the way in which male domination of women and children stands in the way of love” (xxiv).

Hector reveals another motivation for his battlefield bravery within his words to Andromache: “But I would die of shame to face the men of Troy and the Trojan women trailing their long robes if I would shrink from battle now, a coward. . .I’ve **learned** it all too well. To stand up bravely, always to fight in the front ranks of Trojan soldiers, winning my father great glory, glory for myself [emphasis added]” (6.522-29). So, while I identified with Hector’s protective impulse, I also assimilated that *not* fighting would bring him disgrace and ostracism in his society, a version of the shame I myself was feeling due to my new, lower male rating. I also absorbed the lesson that bravery could be learned or acted (what I would later, by way of Judith Butler, come to understand as *performed*),

and that such focal points as glory for oneself or one's people could serve as ambitions which could distract from the natural fear impulse. I keenly observed Hector's worry about disgrace (being ostracized) as a motivator for action and the chastening power of public humiliation. My internalized shame and externalized isolation simply manifested the truth of one of Butler's key assertions, that "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (522). However, instead of being impelled into battle like Hector, I was driven to the gym. In order to ensure "doing my gender right" the next time my class met at the pull-up bar, I initiated a weight training routine to strengthen those specific muscles needed for that endeavor. Doing the weights no doubt constituted a positive regimen for my body, but the harmful reasoning behind it undercut its value for my psyche. Even Homer, by way of the words of Apollo in *The Iliad*, recognizes the double bind of the power of shame, "shame that does great harm or drives men on to good" (24.53).

While Hector certainly performs capably as a warrior (whether driven by compassion or shame), I esteemed his management style as an equally praiseworthy attribute and admired his combination of athletic and leadership abilities (qualities Savin-Williams noted in his study) far more than that of the swift-runner Achilles. Pelides' influence mostly stems from his inspirational presence on the battlefield; in fact, part of the ploy of Patroclus' wearing Achilles's armor includes the "second wind" his appearance on the Trojan plain will provide, the Achaeans sensing their advantage by his renewed fighting. He only addresses his fellow Myrmidons twice in battle situations, and his rare words focus more on himself than on his men. When sending Patroclus into battle, Achilles enjoins his men to redirect toward the Trojans the anger they feel at him for keeping them from battle (an interesting, if not dubious, motivational technique). When eventually re-engaging the Trojans in person late in *The Iliad*, he compliments himself while grudgingly stating that he needs his men: "It's hard for me, strong as I am,

single-handed to make for such a force and fight them all” (20.406-7). One might argue that since Hector’s actual battle time far exceeds that of Achilles, the Trojan prince has more verbal leadership opportunities. The difference lies in the rhetorical methods of his speech: Hector repeatedly bolsters the Trojan warriors’ spirits, notably when he must exit the battle to ask the women to pray in Book VI, when he spies Diomedes in flight in Book VIII, and when Apollo turns the tide in favor of the Trojans in Book XV.

Furthermore, the Hector’s galvanizing, though brief, monologues portray a characteristically masculine ideal of bravery to set the standard of performance. Two of Hector’s Iliadic speeches include the line, “Now be men, my friends, call up your battle-fury!” (6.131, 8.198), and he exhorts his comrades to “...fight like men...” (15.567). Greek leaders, including Ajax, Agamemnon, Nestor, and Patroclus, also consistently employ this rhetoric, but Hector promotes this conformity to the masculine standard a total of five times, while Ajax uses this motivation twice, and the rest once. Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold offer another, more subtle observation pertaining to the “be men” injunction: “...all the passages of martial exhortation where men receive orders to be men suggest that masculinity or ‘being a man’ in this context entails belonging to a group of warriors. Proper men should think about one another and offer support” (69). The standoffish Achilles does not think about or offer support to his fellow Achaeans until it has “cost the Achaeans countless losses” (1.2); Hector, on the other hand, personifies esprit de corps. When I have mentally replayed my failed pull-up scenario, I have retrospectively wished for such solidarity, for encouragement not to take that single challenge so personally, and even for offers of assistance in training to improve (my eventual gym time was a solo effort). Of the two heroes, Hector embodies this team spirit, thus gaining more of my admiration because of my subtle longing for a supportive male peer group.

Besides directly associating masculinity with meeting his expectation of warrior behavior, Hector, as well as Achilles and other Iliadic warriors, also disparagingly ascribes feminine or child-like characteristics as taunts or insults, even to himself. Before his duel with Ajax, Hector berates, "...don't toy with me like a puny, weak-kneed boy or a woman never trained in the work of war!" (7.273-4). When Diomedes gives ground in battle, Hector mocks, "Now they [the Greeks] will disgrace you, a woman after all. Away with you, girl, glittering little puppet!" (8.185-6). In his first encounter with Achilles, Hector responds to the swift-runner's challenge, "Don't think for a moment, Achilles, son of Peleus, you can frighten me with words like a child..." (20.234-5). Finally, in his internal dialogue before his duel with Achilles, he doubts Pelides' honor if a negotiation took place: "He'll show no mercy, no respect for me, my rights – he'll cut me down straight off – stripped of defenses like a woman..." (22.147-9). Ellen Jordan elucidates this anti-feminine/anti-child stance. When a society's definition of masculinity includes "avoiding whatever is done by girls," not only do many boys grow into men who will perform in any way to act "not female," but the associated "scorn and rejection being redirected to **girls** as a group [emphasis added]" persists into adulthood, informing the language of humiliation that men use (69). I was already well-versed in the disparaging use of the feminine in language. One day in class, our teacher was discussing with us the roles of leader versus follower and the importance of hierarchy (Achilles, Thersites, and Patroclus as examples of characters who fought authority) when she offered the rhetorical question "If everyone's a chief, who will do the work?" Despite my reputation as a "good boy," I chauvinistically twisted the expected answer and shouted: "The squaws!" To use Jordan's analysis, my sexist stance conformed exactly to the desire of "good boys" "to redress insecurities and ambivalences about their ability to be male in terms of [the warrior discourse] by showing, through their contempt for and harassment of girls, that they are definitely male in terms of ['not female']" (76).

I esteemed Hector's sense of honor in *The Iliad* as his third most admirable quality, particularly in his promises of and requests for mutual respect of bodies before the duel with Ajax and his fatal one with Achilles. Particularly, however, I found his offer of proper treatment even more compelling in light of Achilles's negative response to him and later his brutalization of Hector's dead body. When Achilles retorts, "There are no binding oaths between men and lions – wolves and lambs can enjoy no meeting of the minds – they are bent on hating each other to the death. So with you and me," I regarded his hateful need for extreme vengeance as less than honorable (22.310-12). When that passion escalates into the dragging of Hector's ankle-pierced body back to the Greek ships and its daily towing around Patroclus' tomb, for me the stark contrast between the two warriors aggrandized Hector's honor and adulterated Achilles's dignity. In retrospect, I really was discerning Hector's ability to control his emotions, to inject decency and civility into an arena that often elicited the most brutal behavior, as his ennobling characteristic. Or, put on a more basic level, I found the "rage of Achilles" a repugnant alternative to the restraint of Hector, who understood the difference between "battle-fury" that one summons and controls and anger that does the controlling. His performance of emotional restraint relates to the stoic reaction which he displays in the scene with his wife where, though compassionate and protective, he meets Andromache's "live, warm tears" with a brave face. I, too, perceived a calling to equally suppress my emotion, both destructive (anger) and "weak" (tears), to try to live up to the masculine standard.

In the light of the overt and subtle messages that I received from my reading of the character of Hector, and with the emerging social stratification at a time when my male peers and I were transitioning to early adulthood, I made many unconscious decisions about the code of masculinity and how I was to perform it. First, I gleaned that being a man meant functioning as a protector and rescuer of those who could not do so

themselves, but not doing so (and indeed not meeting the masculine standard, period) would mean shame and disgrace since the code strictly required these roles. I next inferred that the leadership of males meant always holding their masculinity and status as a *man* as opposed to *boy* or a *girl* for ransom based on behavior, whether bearing the standard high (i.e. “Be a man!”) or shaming those who don’t conform (“What a girl!”). And finally, behaving as a *noble* man meant self-restraint and the repression of disabling emotions like anger, fear, and sadness. As Crystal Smith summarizes, “These masculine imperatives are reflected in popular culture, telling boys that they must be stoic and emotionally detached, they need to present themselves at all times as strong and independent, and they must avoid all things feminine” (64).

OF *METIS* AND MEN: ODYSSEUS’S CRAFTY HEGEMONY

The Odyssey provided a different sort of influence on me than did *The Iliad*. Odysseus, a capable Greek warrior but not a top-level contributor to the Greeks in the mode of Achilles, Ajax, or Diomedes, had not played a role of any import to me in *The Iliad*. Of course, though not in *The Iliad* proper, I had learned of Odysseus’s wily ruse of the horse and its use in the downfall of Troy, but again I did not pay much attention. In *The Odyssey*, however, the spotlight firmly rests on him, and his responses to the various situations in which he finds himself, as in the case of Hector, overtly and subtly worked into my perception of gender and class codes and how I would conform to them. Odysseus’s *metis*, the same clever mind that produced the post-Iliadic Trojan horse, impressed me as his most admirable quality. The majority of *The Odyssey* finds him encountering obstacles, both physical and situational, that he cannot meet and overcome merely with masculine might. For example, Odysseus cannot kill the Cyclops Polyphemus in straightforward combat; additionally, the physical reality that he cannot remove the boulder from Polyphemus’ cave entrance precludes his simply murdering the giant in its sleep and necessitates his trickery. Another case of intellect trumping brute

force may be found in Odysseus's infiltration of his own palace and the contrivance of events to exact his revenge on the suitors. Again, Odysseus cannot assault the suitors in straightforward combat; their sheer numbers thwart a direct frontal attack and encourage the tactics of disguised scouting and the archery contest distraction. When strength fails, I gleaned, intelligence has value; hope existed for a "weakling" and "geek" such as I! However, the dark underside of great intellect, identical to that of great physical prowess, is that it can lead to self-absorption and arrogance, the exact cause of Odysseus's vainglorious boasting to Polyphemus of his true identity. The same spirit of *hubris* that inhabited a character nearly 3000 years old had already begun to haunt me. Although my particular use of intelligence did not include lies and deception, I had already developed a sarcastic and rapier-sharp sense of humor by the seventh grade that often transformed into verbal bullying (recall my witty but sexist comment about squaws previously).

To supersede the archetype of Odysseus-as-intellectual, however, the conclusion of *The Odyssey* reinforced in me the notion that a man eventually (and rightly) will revert back to the masculine code of physicality and aggression, that (as hooks succinctly states) "...the hero is the good man who uses violence to win the fight with bad men..." (*Will* 55). Nowhere does Odysseus reveal his will to manly tendencies more than in the encounter with Scylla. Previously, Circe had warned Odysseus not to try to fight Scylla, an immortal creature, since doing so would pointlessly delay the safe bypassing of the beast. However, he would not comply with her instructions: "But now I cleared my mind of Circe's orders – cramping my style, urging me not to arm at all. I donned my heroic armor, seized long spears in both my hands and marched out on the half-deck..." (12.245-8). Of course, Odysseus's macho posturing does nothing to prevent Scylla's devouring of six crew members, but in his recollection of the story he justifies his behavior by saying that Circe "cramped his style" (his masculinity) by asking

for a different performance. The end of *The Odyssey* also portrays this unleashing of the “cramped style” when Odysseus savagely slays the suitors, so the inevitability of compliance with the masculine code and the right to revenge impressed itself in my mind. Accompanying this same burst of vengeance, however, Odysseus committed the first act of violence toward women I had ever seen in any media form: the slaughter of the twelve unfaithful serving women. Here, at the end of the story, after an epic’s worth of being “cramped” by women, his first act of re-assumed kingship lashes out against them, inscribing into my young mind what Michael Kaufman proposed in “The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men’s Violence” as “his denial of social powerlessness through an act of aggression” (4). The “good man,” as hooks calls him, must assert dominance by any means, and, as Kaufman continues, “Men’s violence against women is probably the clearest, most straightforward expression of relative male and female power” (8).

Moreover on the point of the slaughter of the maids, I gleaned another surreptitious subtext from *The Odyssey*, but not regarding gender: the social class boundary must remain inviolate, and faithfulness to the upper class must endure, no matter the conditions. Those below one in “rank” must never break with the hierarchy (really, the patriarchy), or they will face the wrath of those in power. Not only does Odysseus’s re-ascension in class to the throne of Ithaca (from beggar to king) provide a story arc of the epic, but Odysseus’s interactions with those in his kingdom socially below him reveals much about the role of the upper class in relation to the lower. In my seventh grade mind, I admired Eurycleia’s, Eumaeus’, and Philoetius’ unshakeable allegiance to Odysseus (akin, of course, to his wife, Penelope’s). Although I balked initially on the conscious level at his treatment of the perfidious serving women, I eventually justified it not only consciously in light of contrast between loyalty and disloyalty but also subconsciously in the “right” of upper versus lower class and man

versus women. I saw in Odysseus one mitigating factor in his stance over the lower class – an emotional gratitude for their allegiance. In both the moment when Odysseus reveals himself to the swineherd and cowherd and in the reunion scene with the *faithful* serving women, he lets his tears of thankfulness flow. I found Homer's words about their rapprochement particularly moving: "...and he [Odysseus], overcome by lovely longing, broke down and wept...deep in his heart he knew them one and all" (22.527-9). Thus the ostensible emotional connection Odysseus felt for the lower class extenuated his firm power stance over them and masked to my young mind the horrific gender and class implications of what he had done.

Similar to how these epics influenced my blooming paradigms of gender and class, my reading of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* completely lacked a notion of race and only barely touched upon ethnicity or nationality. True enough, I understood the contrast of Greek to Trojan, mostly focused on the antagonism caused by Paris's abduction of Helen, but I had no comprehension that both Greeks and Trojans were not white in the sense that I understood white, i.e. white Anglo-Saxons. To me, Hector and Achilles embodied the same whiteness that I saw as dominant in my culture. Achaeans and Danaans could have been fighting a civil war in northern Europe, for all I imagined, since they worshipped the same deities, could communicate with each other in a common tongue, and showed no blatant cultural difference to highlight their distinct backgrounds. The same homogenized effect of assumed whiteness occurred when I read of Odysseus's travels. No matter how far afield from the Hellenic center of the world the narrative took the man of twists and turns (including North Africa, the legendary home of the Lotus-Eaters), race or racial difference never informed my reading of the story, nor did my teacher ever interrogate possible ethnic or racial dissimilarities to deepen insight into the epic. I fell victim to the continuation of "the pernicious silence" that Lillian Polite and Elizabeth Baird Saenger describe in their article of the same title. They assert that

“...most authors fail to specify race when a character is white, assuming that to be white is to be ‘us,’ to be ‘normal.’ It is the default setting of much of children’s literature” (277-78).

Generally speaking, my seventh grade experiences with *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were shaped as much by what I consciously engaged as by what I subliminally absorbed, as much by text as subtext, as much by interest as by inattention. To be blunt, although I focused on Hector and Odysseus as the first real heroes of my adolescence, the framework of the epics solidified the normativity of rich, white, ruling class men killing each other, primarily concerning the property rights over women but additionally for money, glory, and continued patriarchal power. At a time when social structures and ranking began to matter, particularly in the area of masculinity, these epics served as training manuals for me, above all in the way of the warrior. Without a critical consciousness of my own or guidance from the hand of my teacher, I naïvely identified with these characters and their culture, and my sympathetic response contributed to my collusion with a hegemonic system that enervates the very men it supposedly empowers. No matter how positive one may objectively view the many qualities I admired in these heroes, my “alliances,” as Chandra Mohanty would indicate, with their messages of dominance and oppression led me to eventual, negative “political choices.” Many of my future paradigms of gender, class, and race had their seeds planted by my uncritically seeking solace and role models in these men.

A MAVERICK’S HEART: ROOTING FOR THE UNDERDOG

My development through the teen years occurred in the 1980s, a decade rife with hyper-masculine role models in the popular culture. Coming from my identification with Hector and Odysseus as well as my subconscious realization of my lower quartile rank in the masculine hierarchy, I found myself drawn repeatedly to an archetypal hero, what Risa Williams and Ezra Webb label the “Passionate Maverick.” Williams and Webb base

their book *Cinescopes* on this identification with the protagonist: “We all enjoy watching a hero struggle against an obstacle, but there are truths we can learn about ourselves as individuals based on the kinds of heroes we appreciate most” (7). This particular archetype embodies the underdog, fighting against overwhelming odds and usually against a monolithic system that would crush the spirit and any efforts to make a difference. Feeling rejected and lonely, but also knowing I had many virtuous qualities, I felt akin to such characters in their efforts. The seeds planted by Homer were growing: just as Hector battled Achilles (the enemy he acknowledges as superior from the outset) and the force of fate, and Odysseus faced a man-mountain Cyclops, irresistible female divinities, and 36-to-1 odds against the suitors, so my emerging favorite hero type would meet Herculean tasks.

In these years of my attending high school and college, I continued in my classical studies and in consuming other media. Upon reading the final of the big three classical epics, *The Aeneid*, I again found a character, like Odysseus, who had played a secondary role in *The Iliad* but comes to the forefront in his own epic and, like the Ithacan king, gained my respect and admiration. As classicist John William Spaeth, Jr., argues, and I concur, Aeneas becomes more of a second Hector than a second Achilles, as other scholars maintain. Spaeth finds evidence in Virgil that “he has gone beyond [Homeric tradition] to represent Aeneas as the duly appointed and entitled successor of Hector as leader of the Trojan cause...” (277). In the world of the novel, Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* emerged as the work that would influence (or, mostly reinscribe) the patterns of admirable heroic behavior in me. Santiago’s noble physical struggle against nature, the marlin, and the sharks captivated me in the same vein as Homer’s warriors, as did his social struggle as *salao*. Movies also began to hold a much greater sway of influence over me during this time period. In the film medium, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Die Hard*, and *Top Gun* all reflected similarly unbalanced odds weighing

against their heroes, and their plots captured my imagination and my gaze as subtly representing the hope of a rise in my own “oppressed” situation. These films’ white protagonists followed the same code of what I came to know as *pietas*, embodied by Aeneas and Hector and expressed by Benioff in *Troy*: honoring the gods (Indiana Jones saving a religious artifact from the Nazis), loving your woman/family (John McClane saving his wife from terrorists), and defending your country (Pete Mitchell saving the United States from a Soviet-backed power). But, as with Homer and Virgil, their insidious subtexts all reinscribed the supposed normativity of the gender, class, and racial structures in the hegemonic world around me.

After graduating from college with what equated to a minor in English, I embarked on a fifteen year career in the field of information technology, working for the telecommunications company GTE/Verizon. In retrospect, this path seems inevitable but also contradictory to my personal qualities. On the one hand, my hours spend *not* doing recess (and instead, learning computer programming), my intellect, and my social awkwardness and omega status classifying me as a “geek” all combined to make I.T. the obvious choice for me. On the other hand, I find it interesting that, despite my inner longings to be the passionate maverick, I chose to devote myself to a corporate giant and become a “cog in the machine.” By the end of thirteen years with the company, however, I began to feel a calling to teach, and no doubt part of that calling tied to both my maverick’s desire to make a difference and the same qualities of love, compassion, motivational leadership, and intelligence I had seen and admired in Hector and Odysseus so many years prior. Leaving the company in 2003, I searched for a school that might be friendly to a teacher with no classroom experience and one who knew of my attributes as a person, so I turned to my alma mater, St. John’s Episcopal. As divine providence would have it, I secured a job there within two months of my departure from Verizon, teaching (again, as if guided) the identical works which has shaped me so

significantly and in the grade where Chandra Mohanty's critical "alliances, solidarities, and friendships" had begun their personal and political chain of events in my life. Disembarking on my "Ithaca" in 2004, however, I still embodied the patriarchal type of Odysseus. I still lacked a personal encounter with an Athena, a female wisdom to help me reconnect with my inner feminine that I had denied in conformity with the "tyranny of patriarchal thinking," as hooks would phrase it (*Will* 22). Only my enrollment in the University of South Florida's English literature program would bring me into direct contact with this inspirational feminine "goddess," as I will term it...in the form of feminism.

Chapter Two

Encounter with the Goddess

“I believe that the meeting with feminism, as a criticism of a history and a dogmatic male way of thinking, opened the doors for me to think about my life differently. I dare to leave, not unafraid, the admirable perfection of the male philosophical and theological dogmatism I was raised in. I dare to leave behind the definitions to which I must adapt myself, because they make up, as they say, the order of the world, of the fair and correct world wished by God. I dare to doubt what was proclaimed as truth and freedom.” – Ivone Gebara (qtd. in Rago 10)

As a student entering the University of South Florida’s graduate English program in 2007, I had many expectations of the kinds of experiences that my coursework would bring me. I knew that delving into the deeper inquiries of scholarship would engage me at a more heightened intellectual level than I had previously encountered, challenging me to interrogate the literature I had and would read in new and more incisive ways. Additionally, I expected that I would experience emotional reactions to the literary material to which I would be exposed, but having received training in the common, patriarchal practices of academia, I understood that discussions of feelings would never be included in my written work and barely a part of any classroom discourse. Moreover, I anticipated that nothing of my personal experiences would ever be allowed to encroach into my scholarly writing; the personal is not professional, much less academic, I had

been trained. As far as spiritual or moral involvement, it would be subordinated even beneath emotions and autobiography. In summary: the academy would “cramp my style,” just as Odysseus felt himself limited in *The Odyssey*. The difference would lie in the uncramping: for him, it meant a reinscription of patriarchy; for me, it meant becoming a traitor to it. Little did I realize that intellect, emotions, experience, and spirituality – all of these of supposedly hierarchical areas of my being – would come to bear in my eventual academic work, and they would find their place into this thesis as the culmination of my master’s program.

Throughout my early USF coursework from 2007 through 2009, my professors assigned many scholarly articles addressing the literature that I was studying which were written from a feminist standpoint, examining primarily the ways in which the authors portrayed women in the stories and plays that I was reading. These essays seemed very vibrant and passionate to my novice mind, and when I communicated my interest in this mode of critical inquiry to my various professors, they all stressed to me the tremendous amount of energy that in the last half century has surrounded the work of feminism and its scholarship as it has related to literature. I understood from them in the strongest terms that a knowledge of feminism and its philosophies would constitute a substantial asset to me in my career in graduate school and beyond, and that my familiarity with feminism would put me at a significant advantage in both my reading of others’ works and the writing of my own.

Before studying feminist theory in its own course, I had my first significant encounters with the Goddess in two particular classes at USF. First, I took a seminar called *Revenge Tragedy* with Dr. Sara Munson Deats. Since the plays we studied abounded in bloody plots and overtly masculine behavior, they spoke to that patriarchally fostered need, by now firmly inscribed into my psyche, to consume violence, though I also felt some revulsion at the excesses of gore. Of all the dramas we

read, however, none affected me more than *Titus Andronicus*. In addition to its aforementioned bloodshed, the play struck all the right chords with me: the Roman setting, the classical allusions, and, most importantly, Shakespeare's figuring of Titus as a tragic turn on Aeneas. *Titus* also perturbed me, however, in that it unsettled my belief in the assurance of patriarchy, to "be a man of *pietas*, and you will be rewarded." The majority of the supplemental scholarly materials that Dr. Munson Deats assigned in that course employed, at least in part, a critical feminist approach, and not a class meeting would pass without some discussion of the plays' themes relating to matters of gender, class, race, sexuality, bodies, and other issues of importance to the feminist project. Left to my own interests, my literary gaze would have remained firmly fixed on the men of the play and their issues alone.

The assigned scholarly articles relating to *Titus*, particularly Cynthia Marshall's "I can interpret her martyr'd signs': *Titus Andronicus*, Feminism, and the Limits of Interpretation" and Marion Wynne-Davis's "The Swallowing Womb': Consumed and Consuming Women in *Titus Andronicus*," galvanized me and engendered my first inner reflection on my own predilections for ignoring the feminine. Both scholars theorize that, for his time, Shakespeare's positioning of Tamora and Lavinia in the play represents an advance in the conceptualization of women, as victims of misogyny in general as analyzed by Marshall, and as independent subjects in Wynne-Davis's work. In particular, I marked the latter's statement that "While using the audience's repugnance at, and fascination with, dominance and violence, *Titus* explores the idea of the [female] independent subject, both corporal and metaphoric, but it never entirely overthrows the patriarchal values of the political system" (142). She could have provided no truer insight into my own inner state. As I was simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by the violence I was reading, these feminist authors opened my awareness to consider women

in ways I had not before, but their viewpoints never forced me to completely replace my ingrained hegemonic style of thinking.

The other precursor to my direct encounter with feminism occurred in Dr. Lawrence Broer's class on Kurt Vonnegut and Ernest Hemingway. Continuing the trend started in *Revenge Tragedy*, I consumed prodigious amounts of scholarly material alongside of these two American writers' texts, much of it feminist criticism of Hemingway. Foremost, I did not even have an inkling that he was assailable; in my mind, he embodied iconic, American writing. But through the systematic analysis these scholars provided, I began to comprehend the hyper-masculine stance that so many of Hemingway's heroes struck, as well as some of the underlying reasons for and evolutions beyond the male code. In the same fashion as Marshall's and Wynne-Davis's deconstructions of *Titus* initiated a new inquiry into my past veneration of Aeneas, so Susan Beegel's article "Santiago and the Eternal Feminine: Gendering *La Mar* in *The Old Man and the Sea*" and Mark Spilka's book *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* opened new critical vistas to me on a novel I had idolized some twenty years prior.

Culminating years of research that included this course, Dr. Broer's 2011 work *Vonnegut and Hemingway: Writers at War* summarizes what he calls the "creative advance," the progress of Hemingway away from his misogynistic tendencies, shown in the protagonist of the novel, and he notes that Santiago's "willingness to acknowledge his capacity for irresponsible aggression and cruelty... indicates [Hemingway's] evolved moral sense, acknowledging personal sins against animals certainly but also women and children" (146). I, too, was advancing by means of these feminist inquiries, and in response to "the ascending feminine," as Broer terms it, I made my first attempt at a deconstructive technique in my paper for the course, "Changing Styles of the Duty Dance: Homer and Hemingway versus Vonnegut." My essay contained an analysis of the ideals of heroism in works by the three authors and a comparison of ancient,

modern, and postmodern constructions of masculinity, revealing my nascent desire to explore gender in the literature I was currently reading and in the works that deeply affected me from childhood. Both Dr. Broer's and Dr. Deats' classes provided me early encounters with feminism. In *The Odyssey*, Athena assists Odysseus twice in Phaeacia, but does so in disguise. Likewise, feminism assisted me in my coursework, but I had yet to encounter it in a direct and radical way. My face-to-face meeting with the Goddess, unmasked and manifest, remained yet to come.

THE INNER ODYSSEY: GODDESS-GUIDED SELF-REFLECTION

In the spring of 2009, I examined a course listing for an upcoming, stand-alone feminist theory class, to be taught in the fall by Dr. Gary Lemons. Driven by my desire to gain intellectually from such a course offering, I registered for it. In terms of text, Lemons employed the omnibus *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Robyn Warhol-Down and Diane Price Herndl. The readings in the course marked my first exposure to the work of bell hooks, Cordelia Chavez Candelaria, Barbara Christian, Elizabeth Meese, and others who would form the foundation of my understanding of contemporary feminism. Pedagogically, Lemons introduced me to a technique of writing called "autocritography." Although the term first originated from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to describe blending autobiographical narrative with critical analysis, Lemons employed it with a focus on the students' interrogating their own lives through the lens of feminist (particularly black feminist) thought. Weekly, I received encouragement to write not only at the highest scholarly, intellectual level possible but also in the most personal way I could, including inscribing my experiences, feelings, and personal belief systems onto paper. Lemons, not only through his emphasis on key feminist thinkers and writers (especially women of color) but also via his actual pedagogical techniques, both showed me the transformative nature of feminism and expedited my self-transformation.

To explain what happened in my Feminist Theory class proves difficult for me, but I can best summarize by stating that the course went far beyond simply an intellectual exercise of gaining knowledge and proficiency in a critical approach or a philosophical position. The course effected a *personal* change in me. I underwent what I have come to know as a liberatory experience, one that not only set free those buried longings to experience emotional, moral, and spiritual engagement with my literary scholarship but also loosed my hegemonically shackled mind from the weight of paralyzing and biased beliefs about gender, class, race, sexual orientation, and ability. Realizing my own personal and social collusion with oppression in these categories also unleashed many feelings of guilt and depression within me. All along the way, however, a classroom environment which encouraged unjudged freedom of expression, the nature of the course writings, and Lemons' personal interventions all created a milieu in which these titanic societal and personal forces could struggle. Feminist Theory so strongly blended components of intellect, emotion, and spirituality with personal narrative that I opined in one of my autocritographies, "This course represents a place where I can not only make intellectual strides in assimilating feminist theory; I can feel safe to feel the guilt I must feel about not having full sensitivity to every kind of human being around me...Again this week...the work of this course as both therapy and church continues." I had entered into a world which I previously had never known existed in academia, one where mind, soul, and spirit could coexist in harmony. I comprehended that my academic and professional career could not only fulfill my intellectual curiosities or gather and disperse *information*; it could actually make real and tangible differences in my life and those of others. I discovered that what I thought would simply impart another way of *thinking* could actually lead to different ways of *feeling* and *doing*. Since taking that course, I have found no other theory or technique of literary analysis that offers a philosophy that inspires such inner and outer revolutionary changes, nor has any figure

in my life so embodied the position of mentor (from *The Odyssey's* Mentor, the goddess of wisdom in male form) as Gary Lemons.

THE MENTOR'S MENTORS: KEY FIGURES IN THE PANTHEON

Of the four feminist scholars mentioned above with whom I felt the most affinity in this course, none impacted me more than bell hooks, most pointedly because she had personally mentored Lemons, and her influence suffused his person and his classroom. Her brief but insightful piece in *Feminisms* provided me with one of the many moments of enlightenment I experienced in the course and directly influenced my own teaching and writing in ways that permeate this thesis. Moreover, I found myself seeking her work as personal reading (a rare commodity in the leisure-starved life of a graduate student). Her book *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* elicited a strong response in me, for indeed the paradigm shift that the course itself was creating inspired within me a desire to evolve and advocate feminism. Of all the scholars I read, her blend of the personal and professional inspired me the most. Her words did not strike me as too "ivory tower" nor as simply common sense. In particular, her emphases on love (a concept I would have previously considered inappropriate in an academic setting) and her deep insight into the destructive nature of patriarchy *for men* spoke profoundly to me. In her conclusion to the book, she states, "The male journey to love will never be easy or simple in patriarchal culture. Like women who have navigated difficult terrain to open our hearts, to find love, men need consciousness raising, support groups, therapy, education" (185). Feminist Theory provided all of these necessary factors, as I revealed in my autocritography quote above. Moreover, my exploration of love and patriarchy led me to my initial examinations of that seventh grade encounter with maleness in both my social and literary worlds. Could I recover and redirect those inner portions of me who admired the loving qualities of Hector and the wisdom of Odysseus? hooks broadened

the scope of my vision to go in search of self-recovery from the wounding effects of patriarchy, and thus she planted the seeds of what would become this thesis.

The other three scholars I alluded to also provided perspective-enlarging revelations and insights that assisted my coming to critical consciousness. Candelaria's essay "The 'Wild Zone' Thesis as Gloss in Chicana Literary Studies" forcibly and permanently opened my mind to the concept (and merit) of an intersectional analysis of hegemony, revealing to me that although the project holds the name "feminism," the inquiry into oppression and inequality goes far beyond gender. Her words also spoke to me directly, as a person of multiple areas of privilege (white, middle class, heterosexual, male), about my collusion with hegemony. When hooks asserts that "the empowered statuses and valorized identities of dominant class members – that is, their power – both bind them to the hegemonic order and also bind them from either apprehending or comprehending the separate existence and values of the disempowered classes," she forewarned me of the difficult paradigm shift that lay ahead for me as a person desiring to interrogate such positions (250). "The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism," Barbara Christian's contribution to *Feminisms*, elucidated to me, for the first time in my life, the essential bias of academia in what it considers its canon. She illuminated how "the high" (the supposed "best" of the world of literature) originates essentially from one voice, "preferably dead and European" (55), and my eyes opened to the narrow, singular scholarly path I had tread as both a white, male student and a teacher. I appreciated Christian's clear advocacy of black feminism as a means of exploring the "many-voiced palaver" of the full spectrum of literature and that, both within and across difference, "dialogue *is* the kernel of what a black feminist literary critic tries to do" (53). Meese's essay, "When Virginia Looked at Vita, What Did She See; Or, Lesbian:Feminist:Woman-What's the Differ(e/a)n(ce)?" spurred in me a realization (which I later would understand as very Lacanian) how my construction of myself and others completely depends upon

words, and how once a person understands “the slip and slide of the signifying chain” (468), the barriers between self and Other disintegrate.

In reviewing the impact these three authors had upon me, I perceive a unifying theme: the critical deconstruction (and even destruction) of all the support systems that had created me and/or held me in place as an *I* in opposition to an *Other*. As stated, Candelaria helped me critique my own positions as not just male, but also as white, middle class, and heterosexual. Her words made me realize the power and advantage I held merely due to these factors. As Michael Kimmel posits, “The privilege of privilege is that the terms of privilege are rendered invisible. It is a luxury not to have to think about race, class, or gender” (363). For me, Candelaria took away that luxury, leading me to a state of mind where Christian could then expose how those with privilege had, over the years, narrowed my educational experience. This awareness initiated me into what has become a pursuit of the voice of the Other, an attempt to create a dialogue, as she opines, “that moves us to *move*—toward a world where...all of us can bloom” (53). Finally, Meese’s essay collapsed what I viewed as the rigid separators of identity that would prevent me from identification with all that I “am not,” and gave me insight that, at a deep level, dialogue with Other is dialogue with self. Candelaria’s “blooming,” to me, involves self-recovery stemming from acceptance of self and Other. Moreover, the essay’s dealings with gender and sexual identity inspired me to begin a deep inquiry into how I personally constructed gender and led me to ask the following question of myself in that week’s autocritography: If I listed five things about myself that my patriarchal, hegemonic society classified as “feminine” (overtly Other), could I be close enough to Meese’s “woman” to at least qualify as empathetic? Meese asserts, “Androgyny is a way out of the either/or trap through the substitution of a both/and relationship” (471). My exploration of androgyny led to my understanding the problem of essentialism. Correspondingly, Candelaria’s view of the Ardener’s ‘wild zone’ states, “The ‘wild zone’

schema acknowledges the legitimacy of questions regarding the idea of *an essential woman-ness* and the critique that dismantles such an idea, but it simultaneously recognizes that the persistent *and empowered* “perceiving” of “women” in essential(ist) terms” arises naturally from patriarchy (250). Christian asks, “Why is it that rather than acknowledge that we are both-and, we persist in seeking the either-or?” (55). All three of these scholars facilitated an ontological transformation in me wherein I realized that, despite histories and ideologies that would dichotomize me from “Other” and “Otherness,” I and Other cannot, and should not, separate, for separation engenders oppression.

In addition to encountering the self-transformative authors in *Feminisms*, I began investigating the theoretical underpinnings for a feminist classroom environment by delving into the work of one whom most consider a prime mover in the theory of critical conscientization, Paulo Freire. Coming to Freire’s work already in a self-reflexive habit from my autocritigraphical work in the class, I began attempting to connect his philosophies and analyses to my own position as a teacher and to contemplate how I might change. His words impressed upon me most pointedly the fact that I stand in my classroom as an oppressor (one of those who “oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power”) and teach to those who mostly could identify with being the same (44). Freire points out that although “certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation...they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations...” (60). True, my seventh grade female students could speak personally of their own encounters with dominating gender bias, but when examined cross-sectionally spanning the areas of class and race, the majority of my white, middle class students and I held privilege and carried the “deformations” of that position to our efforts. I reflected on the path that facilitated a person such as me arriving at a place of empathy with those who do not hold social

power. I discovered that I had linked my own “oppression,” my rating as an omega (the lowest social rank) in the patriarchal system of masculinity, with the oppression of others. Freire’s uses the terms *oppressor* and *oppressed* so distinctly, however, that he would never have labeled the oppressor as oppressed. He uses the term *dehumanize*: “As the oppressors **dehumanize** others and violate their rights, they themselves become dehumanized [emphasis added]” (56). I had felt dehumanized as a young man, not allowed to live in a manner that did no harm to others or to myself. I had also become a dehumanizer by locking step with my oppressors and reinscribing their dominance. Thus, I knew that part of my pedagogical philosophy would include helping my students understand both their own dehumanization as objects of the hegemonic system and their dehumanizing behaviors and attitudes as willing participants in that system.

One other concept from Freire struck me as crucial to my perspective on the classroom. Though Freire is speaking of the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy, I took the following statement to heart as relating to the teacher/student dichotomy: “Sooner or later, a true revolution must initiate a courageous dialogue with the people. Its very legitimacy lies in that dialogue. It cannot fear the people, their expression, their effective participation in power. It must be accountable to them, must speak frankly to them of its achievements, its mistakes, its miscalculations, and its difficulties” (128). Put more succinctly, Freire further states, “The oppressed must see examples of the vulnerability of the oppressors so that a contrary conviction can begin to grow within them” (62). I resolved that, at every juncture possible, I would courageously resist my own impulses to speak solo as the solitary constructor of knowledge as teacher in the classroom. I desire to hold a space of both personal and encouraged openness, one demonstrated and fostered by my own “examples of vulnerability,” i.e. my own stories of being a victim and (more importantly) perpetrator of oppression/dehumanization.

At the end of Feminist Theory and into the spring of 2010, Dr. Lemons asked me if I would like to co-author an article in which we would recount and critique my journey into feminism and chronicle the changes that trek had wrought within me during the time of my taking his course. Since my weekly autocritigraphical essays had documented my evolving state, our piece “Brothers of the Soul: Men Learning About and Teaching in the Spirit of Feminist Solidarity” reviewed and reflected on my writings during the semester, giving me the opportunity to examine my progressive opening to the feminist mindset and the kinds of inner and outer changes that I have previously mentioned. Energized by a sense of purpose in embodying social justice in the classroom, I wrote (quoting from one of the essays) that “my non-complicity with all forms of bias ‘will require rigorous attention to ensure the unfoldment of a paradigm that essentially must be embraced for our survival’” (116). Directing that attention to the application of feminist theory in both my scholarly analysis and pedagogical techniques, I contemplated a paradigm shift in the content and methods of my teaching. My self-reflection centered on how I represented myself in the classroom and my approaches to the major texts I taught: *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*. On the pedagogical side, I pondered whether I could reproduce something akin to Dr. Lemons’ classroom milieu and, with the ideas of Freire and hooks in mind, foster personal transformation in my students. On the textual side, I wondered how I could bring what I could glean from my own and others’ feminist readings of these works into a middle school environment. In my enthusiasm to begin these undertakings, I did not at that time even consider whether such a project had been attempted before or the advantages and disadvantages of doing so for such a group of learners. Only the potential of the same liberatory process that had transformed me resonated in my mind and impelled me to continue the work, but the tactical details of how to effect such a change lay ahead.

As I contemplated the upcoming return to my teaching in the fall, my position paralleled that of Odysseus, standing on the shore of his native Ithaca. Having met Athena undisguised, he strategizes with her on the method needed to enter the suitor-ridden halls of his home. Having encountered feminism face-to-face, I wondered: how could I reapproach my classroom home? How might I overcome the suitors of sexism, racism, and classism that daily enticed my seventh graders?

Chapter Three

The Beggar-King: Facing Hegemonic Suitors in the Classroom

“The work of all our progressive teachers [is] not to teach [students] solely the knowledge in books, but to teach an oppositional world view —different from that of our exploiters and oppressors, a world view that would enable us to see ourselves not through the lens of racism or racist stereotypes but one that would enable us to focus clearly and succinctly, to look at ourselves, at the world around us, critically — analytically — to see ourselves first and foremost as striving for wholeness, for unity of heart, mind, body and spirit” – bell hooks (*Talking Back* 49)

As the 2010–11 school year neared, I took beginning steps toward modifying my curriculum to incorporate feminist concepts into my approaches to *The Iliad*, which I always teach (along with showing Petersen’s *Troy*) in the fall. Because Feminist Theory had taught me well the intersectional perspective of examining multiple layers of hegemonic oppression, I decided to initially begin with gender and class primarily as areas of exploration. I also determined, at least in the first phase, not to read extensively from external feminist scholarship relating to the epic. In one way, my slow evolution reflected the caution I felt in seeing how these seventh graders would react to thinking along these lines. In Odyssean terms, I was sneaking back into my home rather than performing a full frontal assault. The temperate pace also allowed me to evolve organically into the feminist inquiry to the epic, testing my own abilities and seeing what insights I could attain without any external guidance. Additionally, I was taking to heart

what bell hooks in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* advises teachers in establishing feminist classroom, “to elect not to assume the posture of all-knowing professors” (52). Rather than fall into the trap of thinking I should gather information that I as “profess-er of knowledge” could disperse in the classroom, I purposely was leaving enough gaps (a luxury of the doing it for the first time) to allow co-exploration with my students in the general directions I knew we would take.

Teaching literature to three homerooms of twenty one students each that school year, I began an iterative process for developing the curriculum: I would examine the text for each *Iliad* lesson with a critical eye, formulate the inquiries that I deemed most apparent for the asking, and then solidify these into essential questions to guide my, and eventually my students’, thinking. Knowing the essential questions I would pose to them, I tailored my classroom discussions to include brief but meaningful portions that related to the questions. I began to devote more class time to speaking about the female and lower class characters, their personal and social situations, and their status relative to the men and the rich in the story. In a cyclic but evolving method, I observed how the students reacted to my discussion points and determined if they appeared overwhelmed by the extent of the analysis, satisfied with the given level, or ready for deeper inquiry. My measured integration then included replacing certain questions in my existing test sets, given every few weeks, with ones that examined at very introductory levels the role that gender and class played in the power structures and social constructs. Each test would include at least one question with a feminist bent to it. By reading their responses to these questions, I could further gauge the effectiveness of my pedagogical approach.

SNEAKING IN: A CAUTIOUS FEMINISM AND *THE ILIAD*

Some of the details follow as to what emerged from my scholarly inquiries into and my pedagogical techniques for teaching *The Iliad*. Foremost in my feminist critique

of the epic was the blatant fact that almost every woman I examined in the epic served as a focal point of the men's exercise of power. Menelaus' struggle to retrieve his wife/property Helen parallels Achilles's struggle to reclaim his fiancé/property, Briseis, whose seizure, in turn, was provoked by Chryses' struggle to buy back his daughter/property. Thinking intersectionally, I immediately grasped that I must help my students become cognizant, as I had in *Feminist Theory*, of the intertwined layers of gender and class oppression and particularly evoke the notion of hegemonic, patriarchal power tied to property ownership. I also recognized that (even to many so-called sophisticated graduate students, much less middle-school ones) the condition of male social and sexual dominance in society appears to have improved so much since ancient times as to seem, to the naïve, more historical artifact than current reality.

Applying hooks' theory that feminist teaching "makes the world more rather than less real" (*Talking Back* 72), I wanted a pedagogical angle to illustrate that patriarchal hegemony not only still exists today but also gets adulation. Realizing that I needed a relatable, modern frame of reference to show the currency of this oppression, I turned to a pop culture icon, singer Katy Perry. Her song "E.T.", featuring rapper Kanye West, had reached the top spot on Billboard's singles chart, so I knew its cultural saturation went deep enough for students to realize its significance (Trust). Playing the song in class with the lyrics projected overhead, I particularly highlighted Perry's urgent insistence in the chorus to "Take me, t-t-take me/want to be your victim, ready for abduction" and West's rape-tinged threats of "First, I'ma disrobe you, then, I'ma probe you/See, I abducted you, so I tell ya what to do." By the end of class, the students acknowledged, in substance, seeing a "more real world" in which, while perhaps those in power do not have sex slaves owned and traded for ransoms, still society reacts to a woman begging to be possessed and a man threatening sexual dominance not with disgust but with millions of dollars in record sales.

Moreover, interrogating the hegemonic structure which intermingles ownership and sexual power with sexual control, I designed my first essential question: “Although women hold no real power in ancient Greek culture, how do these women influence the action of men?” I purposed to focus my students’ attention on how desirability, the agency of invoking lust, became a force by which the oppressed female could gain a modicum of control. In my reading of Candelaria in *Feminist Theory*, I had comprehended the nature of hegemony as a system that controls both sides, how the oppressor becomes “bound” to his own rules and controlled by the very “wild zone” that he creates. Although *The Iliad* contains no direct references to women withholding sexual favors in order to exercise control over men, certainly Helen attempts to do so, expressing her disapproval of Paris in Book III and trying to refuse Aphrodite’s admonishment to sleep with him: “Not I, I’ll never go back again. It would be wrong, disgraceful to share that coward’s bed once more” (475-76). Helen fully realizes that sex with Paris means endorsement, and she recognizes the conflict with the patriarchal values in her approval of his retreat. Coerced by the threat of physical force (Aphrodite promises to throw her over the walls of Troy if she does not comply), Helen acquiesces, but not before the reader glimpses the power struggle’s involvement with sexual politics. More to the point, Hera’s sexual manipulation of Zeus later in the epic qualifies as an exercise of what little agency the female has over the male.

On the topic of male-as-bound, the scene atop the Scaean Gates in Book III where Helen reviews the heroes reveals the binding hegemonic trap. When the old chiefs say of Helen, “Ah, no wonder the men of Troy and Argives under arms have suffered agony all for her, for such a woman. Beauty, terrible beauty!” (187-90), they lament the very system that the patriarchy has established: desire to own and control women leads to desire owning the men, not only marshaling a thousand ships but invoking such conditions that “cost the Achaeans countless losses” (1.2). The unfettered

craving for beauty led, mythologically, to the war in the first place – Paris’s acceptance of Aphrodite’s offer of Helen. Repeatedly in *The Iliad*, desire leads to ruin for the men. Agamemnon’s stubborn refusal to free Chryseis (of whom he says, “...I want her mine in my own house! I rank her higher than Clytemnestra...”) leads to plague in the Greek camp (1.132-33). Achilles’s retreat from battling as a means to repossess Briseis (of whom he declares, “...I loved that woman with all my heart, though I won her like a trophy with my spear...”) leads to the Greek’s “countless losses,” including his own best friend (9.416-17). Finally, Paris’s “irresistible longing” for Helen prevents his return to the duel with Menelaus, obliterating any chance of their single combat ending the war and saving the lives of Trojans and Greeks alike. Aphrodite’s use of this male craving to entrap and control Paris, as highlighted above, parallels Agamemnon’s attempt to regain Achilles’s favor by offering back Briseis, seven women from Lesbos, and twenty Trojan women. I formulated the question “What role do women have in the “bribe” Agamemnon offers Achilles to return?” to assist in showing my students that, for both women and men alike, the use of the female-as-object completely depends on the desirability which the patriarchal hegemony creates.

In attempting to further introduce an intersectional view of oppression to the seventh-graders, I posed the following questions: “Why do you think that Hector is supposed to tell the ‘older, noble women’ to pray to Athena *instead of* some other age/class/gender of people?” and “How will Achilles’s impending marriage to Briseis change her status as a woman?” The second question sparked in-class discussions of how one might interpret Patroclus’s insistence on Achilles marrying Briseis as an attempt to work within a patriarchal class structure but allow her a rise in social status, from war prize to future queen. We reasoned that no benefit existed for Achilles in making Briseis his wife; he could possess her sexually, use her for manual labor, and keep her at a distance from his daily affairs. Therefore, Patroclus’s insistence on the marriage and

Achilles apparent acquiescence to it stand as anomalies in a system where such a union only benefits the woman, and I have found no scholarly research that has addressed this curiosity. When I posed my first question, not for classroom discussion at all, but on a test, I purposely wanted to see what answers the students could produce on their own, without dialogue and given their own backgrounds, perspectives, and ideas. The answers they generated showed amazing creativity and insight. Some students observed that, since Athena was the goddess of wisdom, those in the community who had gained deep understanding from a lifetime of experience would curry the most potential favor from her. Others posited that, for an immortal (read “very old”), Olympian (read “highest class”) female, those most similar to her would have the best chance of influencing her. Taking the social class reading even further, some students even suggested that the noble women would have the proper manners or social graces to properly address and appease Athena. All of these answers provided fodder for later discussions on gender and class: how the culture portrayed the Olympians as the social elite, how the immortals tended to favor humans of their own gender, and (most tellingly) how social ranking and manners interpenetrate the meaning of the word *class*.

These and other questions, discussions, and insights marked my introduction of feminism to my classroom. By the end of the fall semester and after concluding *The Iliad*, I wanted to re-evaluate and my students’ progress, as well as my own. Was I losing them or maintaining their comprehension? Were they taking things seriously or disengaging out of boredom? Were they resistant or receptive to these types of inquiries? From both the verbal participation and the written insights the students had offered, I felt heartened in my vision. Not only had the topics related to feminist inquiry sparked interest in classroom discussions, many students had submitted astute and imaginative answers to my questions that went beyond the possible responses I had imagined, observations that (as hooks would indicate) showed that I “do not know

everything” and that I certainly “do not have all the answers” (*Talking Back* 52). In general, I noted that the students’ attitude in examining these topics, though not completely free of societal influence about such issues as gender roles and societal class divisions, were nevertheless not so tainted or rigid as to dismiss open exploration. As for my own skills at reading *The Iliad* from a feminist viewpoint, I felt they had been adequate, but I no longer wished to isolate myself from scholarship. I determined that the spring semester would involve deeper involvement, for both me and my students. While continuing with the addition of feminist perspective into gender and class for *The Odyssey*, I would add race inquiry into the course. Additionally, I would take my boldest step yet: to create a stand-alone unit to be added into the curriculum at the end of the epic as a complete immersion into a feminist overview of both epics at once.

GAINING CONFIDENCE: TEACHING *THE ODYSSEY* AND FEELING BOLDNESS

Several revelations happened during the time when we were reading *The Odyssey* as I sought other inputs into my teaching and was preparing the final unit. First, I found more abundant feminist scholarship on this epic than had been written for *The Iliad*. The simple reason: the strength of the female characters heightens, particularly in Penelope, Circe, Arete, and so on. Having women that not only hold more influence but also occupy more narrative attention creates a more fascinating and insightful read into the gender relations of the stories. Second, I discovered modern novels that retold these epics from a feminine character’s standpoint, and, selecting one character from each epic, I chose to read *Helen of Troy* by Margaret George and *The Penelopiad* by Margaret Atwood. Reading these created an even more immersive perspective on female characters in these stories. Finally, I consulted with Lemons to establish several foundational texts that I could read that would inform my construction of the unit and my creation of a pedagogical approach for its implementation, most

notably *Twenty-First-Century Feminist Classrooms*, edited by Amie A. Macdonald and Susan Sanchez-Casal.

Whereas the subjects of male authority and women-as-objects predominated my pedagogical emphases in teaching *The Iliad*, I wanted to explore the exact opposite angle in *The Odyssey*. I particularly wished to draw my students' attention to the inversions of gender and class roles that Odysseus experiences in the epic. To wit: Odysseus becomes a "sex slave" and an object of desire, paralleling that status of numerous women in the prior epic; he must repeatedly rely on women in power: Circe, Calypso, Ino-Leucothea, Nausicaa, a common Phaeacian girl (one of Athena's guises), and Arete; and he himself must suffer the abuse of the upper class. During our reading of *The Iliad*, I had primed the students with a brief focus on the scene in which Odysseus treats the men of rank with respect but the commoners, and Thersites in particular, with abuse. Then, as the various situations arise in *The Odyssey* in which Odysseus finds himself the victim (or at the mercy) of those in power, I highlighted the nature of the role reversals and the emotional impact upon him of these humiliations. Possessionless, he must beseech the Phaeacians like one of the lowest class, and (under Athena's orders) he plays the beggar, endures the same living conditions as his swineherd, and finally gets treated by Antinous to the same physical abuse he once imposed on the commoner Thersites: being smacked in the back.

In my Feminist Theory class, three articles I read sparked pedagogical foundations and revelatory moments that I wanted to underlie my classroom *Odyssey* approaches. First, Valerie Smith's essay "Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the 'Other'" struck me in its explanation of what I would come to call "the *Tootsie* effect," the subtle (or not-so-subtle) reinscription of hegemonic values in works that, on the surface, seem to overturn them. Smith uses the films *Tootsie* and *Maid to Order* as examples to illustrate these inherent flaws in so-called "progressive" or

“bias-sensitive” stories (311-17). Debuting four years after my seventh grade capitulation to the patriarchal values in general, *Tootsie* had served as an early milestone in my discovering a sense of seeing “the other side,” a baby step on my path toward cross-gender empathy. In retrospect, of course, I understand that the film’s plot not only leaves in place the normativity of white/middle class/heterosexual identity but also, at the end, re-establishes the classic patriarchal order. But, to my young mind, perhaps not ready to deconstruct all of the hegemonic values surrounding me, *Tootsie* allowed me to imagine being a woman and gave me an early, perspective-shifting tool for my analytical toolbox, an evolved form of which most recently has led to empathetic readings of such books as Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. With “the *Tootsie* effect” in mind, and thinking about my methodology of teaching *The Odyssey*, I intended that my students could achieve their own baby step by interrogating how the vaunted protagonist, a rich, Greek king becomes (in various incarnations) a poor, foreign, exploited slave, despite the fact that, at the end (as in *Tootsie*), the heroic male restores normativity.

Equally important to my refining my vision for the classroom, both bell hooks’ piece “Male Heroes and Female Sex Objects: Sexism in Spike Lee’s *Malcolm X*” and Shirley Goek-Lin Lim’s “Feminist and Ethnic Literary Theories in Asian American Literature” illuminated my thinking about the reactions of those subjected to hegemonic control. Both of these essays point to the same truth: once people that have been marginalized and robbed of power begin to move away from the margin and gain agency, they often exhibit the same type of oppressive treatment, either toward the group that disenfranchised them or toward another, equally inhibited group. For hooks, the black man (Spike Lee), whom one would think sensitive to oppression as a person of color, in turn subjugates the black woman (555). For Lim, the early pioneers of the feminist movement (middle class/white/heterosexual/female) ignore those who do not

match their categories (807-08). These articles raised my consciousness of this pattern and helped bring me to two conclusions. First, and relating to the Smith article, although Odysseus shows some signs of a departure from his old hegemonic ways, his basic, dominant attitudes towards women and the lower class remain unchanged, and despite himself having been both “unfaithful” and a marginalized sex slave, Odysseus kills the twelve serving women for the same offense. Second, particularly in the characters of Circe and Calypso, I could see for myself, and offer to my students, prime literary examples of how women in power may disenfranchise men.

As with my experience in teaching *The Iliad*, I found the students’ agreeable reception of the feminist critique of *The Odyssey* very encouraging. Indeed, many of them would decry (in particular) hyper-masculine behavior in the story before I even called any attention to it. I could perceive a shift in their ability to detect the nature of power and its relation to gender, class, and race. I knew, however, that my ultimate challenge, just as in Book XXIII of *The Odyssey*, would not be confronting enemies; it would entail facing, unmasked, my traditionally disempowered companions, seventh graders, and letting them have a say in my life, like Penelope holding power over Odysseus’s fate after he defeats the suitors. Could I, as he does, create an environment and a discourse within it that put me in an equal or even disadvantaged position with them? Once the disguise of the beggar was removed, could the one(s) that I love, these students, and I speak in open and non-hierarchical ways in the dialogic?

Chapter Four

Putting It to the Proof: Unmasked (and Unmasking) Dialogue

“To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars and critical thinkers to cross boundaries, the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences.” – bell hooks (*Teaching to Transgress* 130)

Having merely intermingled feminist concepts and viewpoints into my standing curriculum during the first semester and a half, I wanted to provide a different pedagogical experience for my students, not only changing the classroom environment physically but also sustaining a continuous inquiry into gender, race, and class, one that lasted for multiple, sequential class periods. As the final quarter of the middle school year approached, I minted a special unit which I dubbed “Dominance and Oppression: Gender, Race, and Class in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*,” and its design in many ways mirrored the pedagogical techniques I had experienced firsthand in Lemons’ course. I also desired to physically decenter myself as the ostensibly sole authoritarian voice in the classroom and opted to organize the classroom seating in a dialogue-friendly arrangement. Just as Penelope finally faced the undisguised Odysseus (“putting her husband to the proof”), I, too, wanted a logistical arrangement to facilitate, as much as I could, a version of Christian’s “multi-voiced palaver.” I hoped that, mirroring how Penelope recognized their kinship in the dialogue, I could achieve what hooks describes later in *Teaching to Transgress* as “that moment of collective participation and dialogue

[in which] students and professors respect – and here I invoke the root meaning of the word, "to look at" – each other, engage in acts of *recognition* with one another, and do not just talk to the professor" (186). As much as I could, I wanted to model that aspect of feminism which emphasizes one's personal voice being heard and responded to in a community setting. In my usual classroom setup with desks and chairs all facing forward, although students can *hear* each other when they speak, it seems as though they only direct their words at the teacher. Since all eyes tend to rest on my singular, front-of-room figure, only I feel addressed. Arranging the chairs in a circle and labeling the discussion groups as "circle time," I wanted to promote direct engagement within the group. I did experience some trepidation, however, about maintaining decorum in a classroom setup to which the students were unaccustomed and where the encouragement to speak might easily lead to the impulse to speak out of turn.

In the weeks leading up to the actual start of the unit, I did not divulge much information about it to the students. I simply told them that we were about to do something new and different, and in a style that they probably had not experienced at the middle school level. Simply put, I wanted them to be surprised by what lay ahead, as surprised as I was when Lemons told the Feminist Theory class that the lecture hall we had appeared in that first evening of class would not do, and that we needed to find a space where we could face each other and be in circle mode. I desired that my own students feel the enthusiasm of embracing a classroom layout that allowed for more freedom, a freedom that I hoped would translate into open honesty in the conversations to follow.

I wanted to focus our "circle time" discussions on Iliadic and Odyssean characters and events but seen through interrogations of gender, class, and race. Not only would the discussion time break the ice of being able to truly have conversations about these topics but it would give me insights into how the students measured

performance of given attributes. Almost every question we discussed had expected and unexpected findings; students said things I thought they would and also created responses I myself did not imagine. I also found most interesting the portions of their conversations in which they disagreed with each other on what should be defined as, for example, stereotypical masculine or feminine behavior.

METHODS OF MASCULINITY: HOW MANLY ARE HOMER'S MEN?

From the first day of our circle discussions, I came to realize that my seventh graders have received thorough training on gender roles. My opening question to them, what some might consider a “soft ball” or easy starter, was “Can we come up with ten things Achilles is or does that you would call ‘masculine’?” Immediately, responses such as “warrior/killer/brave,” “angry,” “defiant/independent,” “likes women,” and “physically fit/swift runner” focused on the classic male stereotypes. Then secondary attributes came to the fore like “leader,” “strong posse,” “no negotiating,” and “looter/stealer” (having “dragged off piles of splendid plunder” from Trojan allies). At this point, however, the mass consensus stopped and the conversation/clarifications/disagreements began about gender roles. For example, when one male student posited “vengefulness” as a masculine trait, a female student countered that women can also be vindictive and spiteful. In the discourse that followed, a clarification arose that seemed to satisfy: men tend to take *physical* revenge, and women mostly take *emotional* or *social* revenge. When a female student offered “stubbornness” as one of Achilles’s male characteristics, many others of both genders countered that obstinacy can be found in men and women, but the kind that Achilles shows (what one student labeled “throwing the game,” i.e. not participating to hurt his own team) tends to show the scale to which male inflexibility can reach. After much discussion about another offered characteristic, “abusive,” the students could not reach a consensus. Of course, they all agreed that Achilles displayed brutality in battle (fighting still being viewed as a purely masculine

domain). But when focused on verbal abuse, students could with equal assurance point to an Aphrodite or Hera who browbeat others as an Agamemnon or (matching the verb to his name) Hector. Having remained a cohesive group for many years (most having shared the same class since four-year-old kindergarten), the students began reminding each other of various female teachers from their collective past who had repeatedly berated them.

I presented my class with the same basic question, except with Odysseus as the focus. None of the answers that overlapped with the ones for Achilles surprised me (“commander,” “skilled/strong,” “physically vengeful”), nor did the new ones offered (“persistent,” “physically competitive,” and “proud”). I was shocked by an answer that received consensus across genders: “intelligent.” Despite having the examples of Athena and Penelope in *The Odyssey*, few of my seventh graders characterized craft, cleverness, or *metis*-like qualities as feminine. When I probed further, I found that they equated Odysseus’s intelligence with “street smarts,” a kind of real world knowledge with a subversive twist. And in an amazing leap of association with intersectional overtones, “street” equated to ghetto, therefore black, therefore masculine. Asking them to shift their view of “smarts” to include being scholarly or book smart, I received little more than “Hermione Granger” from the *Harry Potter* series as a female example. I found quite eye-opening the fact that despite having encountered real world and literary examples of brilliant women, these students viewed female intelligence as either an anomaly or, upon my even deeper inquiry, a negative and manipulative trait associated with witches like Medea or abusers of power like Lady Macbeth (they read both *Medea* and *Macbeth* in sixth grade).

When I asked the more open-ended question “Can you name five males in either epic who do ‘masculine’ things,” I received examples with all the requisite qualities that had been previously offered: Hector’s courage and leadership, Diomedes’ strength,

Poseidon's vengefulness, and even (what I considered the deep insight of) Paris's looting/stealing of Helen. When I pressed the students to move beyond the attributes they had already addressed, they answered as quickly as before, but whereas the previous responses tended to be seen as positive aspects, they viewed these traits as liabilities. Students considered Patroclus's ignoring Achilles's advice not to assault Troy directly as a sign of either ego or battle-frenzy, and they characterized both the overestimation of one's own ability or being so enraptured in the physicality of war as to neglect higher faculties of reason or memory as masculine qualities. Broadsea's veiled bragging to Odysseus of superior athletic skills and Elpenor's irresponsibility in getting so drunk as to sleep on Circe's roof and fall to his death also garnered student criticism. While in that potentially teachable moment I failed to call attention to all of Achilles's, Hector's, and Odysseus's braggart moments, as well as Odysseus's irresponsibility in falling asleep at critical moments in the story, I can see in retrospect that heroes can get away with the same traits that sidekicks or villains cannot. For example, when Achilles defies Agamemnon's taking of Briseis, my readers viewed the swift runner with sympathy. When Eurylochus defies Odysseus's order to return to Circe's palace, my readers saw him as petulant and captious.

I asked the students to analyze Achilles, Odysseus, and any other characters they chose based on any actions that run counter to masculine norms. The immediate answer, but one that also sparked a lengthy discussion, emerged as "crying." Whether Achilles's weeping for the loss of Briseis and for Patroclus's death, or Odysseus's sobbing for comrades lost, from the heartbreak of war, or from homesickness, these supposedly manly heroes shed numerous tears. When I inquired of my students if these men ever could cry legitimately under their perception of the male code, they acquiesced on the occurrence of the death of a friend or family member, so they could accept and even embrace Achilles's mourning for Patroclus or Odysseus's for his dead mother,

Anticleia. One student even empathized with Odysseus's tearing up when his faithful dog, Argos, dies in front of him. The students defined the next level down on the acceptability scale as crying over traumatic events in the past, such as Odysseus's weeping when Demodocus sings about the Trojan War. Odysseus's shedding of tears over not being home fared less respectably, and at the absolute bottom of the rankings came Achilles's crying over the loss of his honor/Briseis in his dispute with Agamemnon. The students quickly added that his Achilles's bawling *to his mother* compounded their view of his acting in a clearly non-masculine fashion. However, Georgia Brown has indicated that Homer's unflinching narration of Achilles's moments of humanity, and in particular the ending of *The Iliad* not "in a description of victory but in sadness and pity," undercuts the common view of the epic as simply a celebration of heroism, since Homer never eschews "the repeated revelation of the cost of war" and continually "acknowledges the terrors of fighting" (43).

Encouraging the students to continue excavating the hidden femininities in the hypermasculine Achilles, I asked them to probe deeper into his actions. They highlighted two events that showed a compassionate side: Achilles's taking pity on Priam (during which, the students recalled, he had also wept) and Achilles's agreement to marry Briseis (completely unnecessary since he could use her any way he pleased as a slave). While the students found his leanings toward softheartedness admirable, they labeled much of how he handled the quarrel with Agamemnon non-masculine and unbecoming: his pouty attitude, his pettiness about getting an apology, his quitting the team and not "putting up and shutting up." Denied by Athena the physical revenge he desires, Achilles must turn to the social/emotional revenge that the students had identified earlier as feminine. When I asked them what they considered the paramount positive feminine quality Odysseus displays, my seventh graders offered "patience." Odysseus and Penelope mirror each other's perseverance, Anticleia describing her to

Odysseus as a "...poor woman, suffering so, her life an endless hardship like your own..." (11.207-08). The students also pinpointed Odysseus's forethought *not* simply to kill the sleeping Cyclops and trap himself in the cave, along with his patient scouting of the suitors, as evidence of his lacking masculine impulsiveness. For the primary feminine attribute that detracted from his heroic statue, my seventh graders offered his begging for assistance. They felt that his display of weakness, more specifically at the knees of women, diminished him as a man. So, in each case, a man's seeking a woman's help and his showing impotence in doing so cause an undercutting in perceived male stature.

Of all the other male characters in Homer, Paris received the most attention from my students for his non-masculine attributes. Whether in the shining of his armor, the wearing of fashionable leopard skin battle attire, or the defending of his looks, Paris's focus on *appearance* casts him in an effeminate light, at best. His initial backing down from fighting Menelaus, his penchant for archery (killing from a distance), and his inability to hold ground against his older brother's hectoring place him, in the students' eyes, squarely in the "wimp" category. Other characters that they identified as cowardly or weak (physically or emotionally) include: Euphorbus (backstabs Patroclus then runs away), Ajax (commits suicide out of shame outside *The Iliad*), Pandarus (another Trojan archer), Priam (kisses the hands of and begs Achilles), Patroclus (cooks for Achilles), Ares (non-stoically screams in pain when stabbed by Diomedes and whines to Zeus), and even mighty Zeus himself (fears Hera's shrewish complaints).

NOTIONS OF NOBILITY: THE CLASS DISCUSSES CLASS

Before we began discussing class considerations in Homer's epics, I initiated a dialogue with my seventh graders wherein we associated descriptions, items, concepts, and attitudes with the term *class*. I wanted the students to have a period of discovering that the connotations of the term extend far beyond the denotation of a division along a

spectrum of personal wealth. After starting with the normal connections of class with money, houses, cars, fashion, and the like, the students started to disclose their linking of class with things like quality, manners, cleanliness, intelligence, education, respect, and so on. They had started coming to a critical awareness of how class distinction joins with acceptability in culture. I indicated that even statements like “That was *classy* of you” and “They did a *first-class* job on that” show how the word itself can convey much more than simple wealth measurement. When I focused them specifically on “upper class,” the associated term “white” came out of the (vast majority white) students effortlessly, although without any sort of pomposity or self-importance (I will discuss this later). Other terms I found interesting that they equated with the upper class included “(benefiting from increased) protection,” “snobby,” “quick-thinking,” “no slang/cursing,” and “trustworthy.”

When I asked the students to free-associate with “low class” and not simply to give opposites of what they had already said (i.e. “poor,” “unclean,” “ill-mannered”), other generally negative terms arose: “immoral,” “minimum wage,” “manual labor,” and “working for others.” It surprised me when then several positive characteristics emerged, including “wisdom,” “community sense,” “working for each other (instead of selfishly),” and “freedom/independence.” Upon my questioning them on this last connection (especially when they had just agreed on “working for others”), they thoughtfully argued that the poor remain free of many expectations and restrictions that encumber the rich. Just as moments earlier I had taken pleasure in their critical awareness of the class/value association, here I celebrated their subtly probing the trap of hegemony: that those with privilege must lose out in the creation of the binary, and that they cannot “have it all.” Even with their age averaging twelve, these students could feel the restrictions of the upper class expectations affecting their parents already being put upon them: look perfect, behave just right, work to succeed, and all in certain ways.

They also intuited what values get left behind when following this certain way: in the drive for intelligence (education), wisdom; in the drive for self, other; in the drive for financial autonomy, slavery to a host of social, moral, and cultural rules.

Prompting the students to aim their newly-expanded lenses onto the epics, I asked them in an open-ended fashion to show how Homer and the main characters in his stories view and treat the lower class. They recalled with ease my indicating Thersites as a common soldier in *The Iliad*, and they quickly perceived how other associations surrounded him as they do the term “low class.” Thersites’ greedy focus on the wealth of Agamemnon, his obscenities (the “cursing” they had just identified as non-high class), and his lack of manners all indicated to the students his plebian position, and his grotesqueness (what one student characterized as being “defective”) also emblemized his commonality. Additionally, they interpreted the symbolism of Odysseus striking Thersites with a scepter as the rich and powerful imposing their might and will upon the poor. Finally, since Thersites cannot back his verbal assault on Agamemnon and Achilles with any physical threat, and because Thersites does not take his beating “like a man” (he sheds tears), the students made an intersectional leap between the rank and file’s lack of power (physical and social) and a feminine weakness, such that being lower class implied a negative femininity. Regarding actual femininity intersecting with class, students quickly acknowledged Chryseis, Briseis, Eurycleia, and the unnamed “tramping dozen” as slaves, women dominated physically and socially by men.

Moving beyond the Iliadic focus on slaves (and women) as property, students acknowledged the greater emphasis on class in *The Odyssey*. Although we had already spoken about some aspects of Homer’s portrayal of Odysseus’s crew as low class, they improved upon the concept of Odysseus simply having to clean up the crew’s mess. Odysseus *warns* the crew not to linger in the Cicones’ land, and he had makes them *swear* not to touch Helios’ cattle. Disobeying (being disloyal to) the wiser Odysseus

(emblematic of the elite), the students agreed, leads to the crews' deaths, and their greediness in trying to steal from him (Aeolus' bag of winds) prevents their speedy return to Ithaca. Several in the classroom submitted that the slaves in *The Odyssey* whom Homer portrays as "noble" (Eurycleia, Eumaeus, Philoetius) simply conform to what the lower class should do: obey the upper class, be trustworthy and loyal, behave appropriately (as defined by superiors), and trust that the upper class knows what it is doing. Odysseus meets loyalty and obedience with approval; disloyalty, however, merits death.

SUSPICIONS OF STRANGERS: INTERROGATING RACISM IN THE XENOPHOBE

When it came time to focus on racial issues from the literature of Homer, I desired to interrogate what my own seventh grade teacher had not, i.e. possible ethnic or racial tensions to deepen insight into the epics. I found the meeting of races the most difficult topic to extract from the epics. Since neither story ever directly mentions difference in appearance (skin color, specifically) or language in scenes with major characters, I knew that the students could not draw on the typically overt markers of difference. Changing my tack from my previous method of asking for examples of gender and class issues in what we had read, I chose for them what I found to be the most workable instance of ethnic difference: Odysseus's Phaeacian experience. While on the surface Odysseus receives outstanding hospitality on Scheria (the Homeric theme of *xenia*), he must overcome the inhabitants' resistance to "strangers," and I interpret that as foreigners, since Homer goes out of his way to indicate the island's isolationist policies. The Phaeacian Broadsea embodies the closest the story comes to a "racist" character (as well as classist and possibly sexist). Wanting to see if any of Broadsea's attitudes surfaced in my modern classroom, I asked the students not to limit their word associations with racial difference (as I had done with gender and class); I also requested that they characterize some of their personal stories of encounters with

“strangers”/foreigners, and I intended this change of approach as a transition between their simply speaking in general terms about their experiences of gender, class, and race and their writing specific personal narratives and reflections.

The students most commonly described their interactions with other races as occurring in their homes with domestic help. I asked them the various countries or backgrounds from which their helpers came, and most of the seventh graders indicated various Hispanic countries (Mexico, Peru, Cuba), but several spoke of European countries (especially eastern) and even Russia. When I polled them as usual for words relating to their household assistants, the most conspicuous affinities came quickly: “immigrant,” “language barrier,” “different hair,” and so on. The students, getting accustomed by now to my seeking intersections of gender, class, and race, began by submitting associations that displayed their budding awareness: “projects/ghetto,” “no education,” “no special skills,” “only female.” Interposing a review of some of the associations they had offered with “class,” I reminded them about “immoral,” “minimum wage,” “manual labor,” and “working for others.” Obviously, they connected the last three easily with how they viewed their house workers. One student finally broke into a personal story to address the morality association: she related how a particular piece of jewelry had gone missing from her mother’s collection, and her mother had openly accused the South American woman who cleaned the house of stealing it. The woman denied any wrongdoing, but a cloud of doubt over her trustworthiness and loyalty (two words we had recently discussed over class issues) remained. Eventually citing laziness and lack of quality work, the family dismissed the worker. When I directly asked the student if this incident had impacted her view of Latinas, she answered, “Probably.” Although she described what she witnessed her mother doing as “most likely racist,” she admitted her mother’s ideological influence on her in ascribing so many negative attributes to domestic helpers.

Another student described attending the birthday party for the sister of her Mexican nanny named Tita. Accepting the kind invitation, this young female and her two brothers arrived at Tita's home and felt overwhelmed by an awareness of difference. The student (an English-only speaker) described Tita's family and friends as all speaking Spanish, as well as wearing garb that did not match that of her family and eating food she had never seen before. Tita's relatives showed great hospitality toward them, treating them like part of the family, engaging them in (thickly-accented) English, trying to make them feel welcome, and even describing the ingredients of the unfamiliar dishes. Still, she related that within the first five minutes of attending her brothers remarked, "I think we might be the only white people here" (a correct observation, as it turned out), and the brothers intensified their comments about Tita's family into borderline racism after they had left. As with the reaction to the previous student's Hispanic housekeeper, I read this student's reaction to her encounter with racial difference as ambivalent. While she berated others for more overt racist attitudes and behaviors, she herself did not show a great distance between her own and her brother's reaction to Otherness.

I found strong parallels between the Broadsea incident in *The Odyssey*, the two students' stories, and the class's collective associations with race and class. First, Broadsea castigates Odysseus for not participating in the games, in *Phaeacian* culture. Similarly, the young party attendees' attention to the language, dress, and food differences of their hosts indicated their feelings of superiority about white culture and ridiculed their hosts' lack of assimilation (the "immigrant" association). Next, Broadsea says, "I never took you for someone skilled in games..." (8.184), mirroring the previously-mentioned family's reaction to the alleged theft – we never thought you did a good job, anyway (the "no special skills" lower class meme). Finally, Broadsea continues, "You're some skipper of profiteers...grabbing the gold he can!" (8.186-89).

The hasty judgment concerning the house workers' guilt unites with the dual assumption of the lower class as both "immoral" and looking to boost their "minimum wage."

In assessing the discussion about race with the students, I found several aspects of the interaction fascinating. First, the depth of their linking of race to class and gender astounded me, confirming the absolute necessity of an intersectional approach that could make them aware of such associations. Surprisingly, however, I also found their racist attitudes not to have tinges of deep emotional resonance; no one seemed to arrogantly and defiantly pronounce whites as superior, and none seemed to hate people of color with a passion. Moreover, I saw little shame-induced hesitation to discuss the topics; their openness on the issues proved refreshing. All of these observations reconfirmed my belief that, for this demographic slice in particular, the middle school time frame holds the most promise of an early intervention to foster conscientization. The students have enough cognitive skills to think critically yet not so much emotional investment to have cultivated deep resistance to the analysis.

TELLING TALES: INTERWEAVING PERSONAL NARRATIVE WITH CRITIQUE

Since my students did not have the depth of theoretical inquiry that I had experienced in Feminist Theory, I knew that I could not give them an autocritigographical experience identical to the one I had received in my classes with Lemons. Still, I wanted to create a basic structure in which they could examine scenes from their lives with a view toward (if not the deep tools to excavate) the social implications of the events. I asked students a variety of probing questions about their experiences of gender, class, and race roles. I urged them to reveal and criticize themselves as much as possible and to expose their involvement with the various systems that oppress. In cases where they could admit their own attitudes of superiority over others, I appealed for them to delve further, to see if they could point to individual or environmental sources which engendered these beliefs. For those students who could not remember acting in

collusion with hegemonic expectations, I asked that they recall experiences when others near them did so and analyze their reactions to the situations. In turn, I took their experiences and related them back to similar events in Homer, trying to connect the literary world, ancient as it may seem, to the modern one.

In both epics, men who appear relatively sensitive still reinscribe the prevailing gender roles onto ones they love. After Andromache exhorts Hector to battle from a strategically important part of the Trojan walls in *The Iliad*, Hector kindly but firmly rejects her foray into the masculine area of battle tactics, saying, “So please go home and tend to your own tasks, the distaff and the loom...As for the fighting, men will see to that” (6.585-88). Duplicating Hector’s designation of “the distaff and the loom” as sites of female roles, Telemachus tells his mother to stop giving orders in Books I and XXI of *The Odyssey*. By far, my seventh grade females focused most on what they viewed as these types of prescriptive and oppressive female gender roles. These students’ grievances fell into two categories: being forced to follow historically feminine roles which did not synch with their natural inclinations, and being told not to do things that the patriarchy would categorize as masculine. One student lamented, “As a girl, I am expected to like flowers, jewelry, make up, and shopping. Well, I hate these things...” For others, the repugnant trappings of socialized femininity ranged from hair bows to dresses, from dolls to the color pink. Another young female deplored her father and brother’s sudden insistence that she should cook one Mothers’ Day, and that “the whole time my dad expected me to know how to cook and know where everything is.” On the intrusion into male categories, the students wrote about how playing war-based video games, getting muddy at camp, and playing Power Rangers all met with scorn from parents, peers, and teachers. One student, who hated the negative reactions to her unfeminine lack of being “gentle, careful and emotional,” summed up her feelings succinctly: “Femininity is kind of stupid.” Unlike Andromache, who passively accepts

Hector's words, and Penelope, who "took to heart the clear good sense in what her son had said" (1.415-16), these students railed against the distaff and the loom mentality of the patriarchal hegemony.

More to the point of patriarchal control, I found one female student's words most disturbing. She describes how, if ever she tries to counter the wishes of her older brother, "he tells me that I'm a stupid girl and that he owns me and I have to do whatever he says." Actually knowing the older brother, I am sure that a modicum of teasing is occurring, but this young female deploras hearing, "I'm a girl, I have no power, he has complete control over me." Interestingly, this family originates from Greek ethnicity (both sets of grandparents hail from Greece). How little, I thought upon reading this, the frame of mind has changed for the Greek male from the time of the supreme Greek god's words to a willful Hera at the end of *The Iliad's* Book I: "Ah, but tell me, Hera, just what can you do about this? Nothing...Now go sit down. Be quiet now. Obey my orders...'" She sat in silence. She wrenched her will to his" (675-85). In her closing words, this student's deepest feelings reveal the same fulminations that the other young females vented: "One day I hope that I have more power than him, so I can say those exact same words to him."

Further pursuing the links between my student's gender oppression and the epics they read, I gathered stories from male students who either received abuse for lack of manliness or themselves participated in gender taunting. Several students related to the position of Odysseus, being taunted by Broadsea for avoiding the physical contests in Phaeacia in *The Odyssey*: "I never took you for someone skilled in games, the kind that **real men** play throughout the world...You're no athlete, I see that [emphasis added]" (8.184-89). Repeatedly, these male students "felt pretty embarrassed and weak," as one wrote, in situations where their athletic prowess did not meet the masculine standard. Another male described a situation that recreated Paris's

being double-teamed in gender oppression by his own family, Helen and Hector, in Book VI of *The Iliad*. Once, after a day of physically intense water recreation with his younger sister, the student felt exhausted, but his mother insisted he continue playing with his sibling, both females taunting him to “man up” and not be a “wimp.” One female student expressed astonishment when, upon defeating a male classmate in a foot race, she witnessed that “his friends made fun of him for a long time because a girl beat him.” I particularly empathized with one young man who, after being shamed on his team by his lack of a football throwing arm, “went out and practiced a lot. Now...only one person can throw the football farther than me.” How much this paralleled my experience in the seventh grade when, after feeling humiliated, I devoted myself to training in pull ups! On the opposite side of the taunting, one male student’s story easily correlated with a scene in *The Iliad*. When another boy on his football team began to cry about the heat and difficulty of their training program, this student admits he yelled, “Oh, my God, Alex, shut up, and stop being a girl!” One could write no more fitting paraphrase of Achilles’s words to Patroclus in Book XVI: “Why in tears, Patroclus? Like a girl...that’s how you look...” (7-12).

In the relatively homogenous demographics of South Tampa, the opportunity for my students to encounter differences in social class does not occur as frequently as the obviously common gender distinction. For most, stopping next to a person begging on a street corner might be the closest they get to a meeting with someone of another social stratum. Several mentioned feelings of fear and/or superiority to these sidewalk mendicants, spurred by reactions such as “my dad always locks the doors and windows” or “my dad got mad at me for having my window rolled down while we drove past...” Trained in the ways of class dominance and passing these teachings to their children, the parents’ attitude conforms with the paradigm of *The Odyssey*’s Antinous, who accosts the disguised and begging Odysseus in Book XVII: “Good god almighty!...What

spirit brought this pest to plague our feast? Back off! Into the open, clear of my table...What a brazen, shameless beggar!" (492-96). Another student complained of a derelict that would go through his family's trash can and that "it gets annoying...we have to clean up the mess he made." I was reminded of Odysseus's relationship with his crew in the flashback portion of *The Odyssey*. Whether losing men to the Cicones because the crew mutinously chooses to linger after battle, dragging the lazing crew who eat the lotus flowers, failing to arrive in Ithaca because the scavenging crew prematurely opens Aeolus' bag of wind, or suffering a seven year interment on Calypso's island because the ravenous crew eats Helios' cattle, Odysseus repeatedly must "clean up the mess" his (by imputation) lower class crew makes. Leaping to our modern times, society continues teaching these young folks that mutinying against "the rules" (e.g. not getting a job), being lazy, scavenging for money, and being hungry all impart lower class assignation.

Several students related their experiences of assisting needy individuals, whether in organized charity situations or one-on-one. Observing that only females wrote about helping the poor, I noted in passing an overlap of gender roles with expectations of class interactions. One wrote how her time spent with a young man of different class generated compassion: "When the kid asked me if I was rich, I didn't feel better than him, I just felt bad for him." Another recounted how she convinced her family to bring a cooler and blanket to a homeless man who had watched her eating in her car when she was stopped at a traffic light. These South Tampa "princesses" resembled the young Nausicaa, who (unlike her peers who ran away) has pity on the naked, homeless, and starving Odysseus in *The Odyssey's* Book VI. Two other students, however, encountered a class-based backlash when in the midst of charity work. In one, more subtle case, the young female met with stares of contempt from those she was serving, "like I didn't belong there." In the other, more overt example, a young South African man

swore at the missionary student and told her “he didn’t need [her] help [just] because he was a lower class than [her].” Although not a true parallel (Achilles, after all, is a prince), class conflict and charity indignation occupies part of the Achilles-Agamemnon conflict. In *The Iliad’s* Book IX, when Agamemnon asserts, “Let him submit to me!...Let him bow down to me! I am the greater king...I claim-the greater man” (189-93), and Achilles declares, “That high and mighty King Agamemnon...I loathe his gifts” (449-62), we see handouts as subtle representations of subservience. It pleased me to know that these sheltered young people had now consciously faced the same, hegemony-induced resentment of those with power, identical to the indignation expressed by the gender-stifled young women mentioned earlier.

If encountering class difference proves a rare occurrence for my students, so does racial distinction. Mirroring my 1970s experience, St. John’s has a majority white student population, with a few Latino/Latina children and even fewer with Asian ethnic roots. This separatism, however, does have the effect of underscoring encounters in which racial difference creates tension. The encounter with the Phaeacians again serves as a creatable example of tension with “the stranger.” Because the aforementioned subtle Phaeacian xenophobia in *The Odyssey*, Nausicaa remains hypervigilant to even being seen with Odysseus after her initial hospitality toward him, observing, “We have our share of insolent types in town and one of the coarser sort, spying us, might say, ‘Now who’s that tall handsome stranger Nausicaa has in tow?...some alien from abroad?’...So they’ll scoff...just think of the scandal that would face me then” (6.301-13). The “scandal” of a transethnic romance resonates with one student whose sister is dating an Iranian. Not only did her friends simply call the “alien from abroad” only “that Persian boy,” but he was insolently and coarsely subjected to a full body check in an airport by TSA agents.

In a similar vein, other students regretted this same type of collateral negativity they received for even casual associations with persons of different racial backgrounds. One young female described merely sitting in an airport adjacent to two men ostensibly of Middle Eastern heritage (whom she simply categorized as “Muslims”), when TSA agents accosted all of them and checked their bags and laptops. Another student wrote that he and a black male friend played with a single pellet gun, when an older, white gentleman threatened to call the police for their “smoking and having guns” (neither were smoking). The older man’s exaggeration, no doubt, stemmed from his racist attitude. Yet another student discussed how in sixth grade he learned that he had some Jewish familial heritage, though he bears none of the stereotyped physical markers associated with it. When he informed his supposed closest friends of this discovery, “...you know what they did? They started laughing...they went on and on about it.” In a more direct parallel to the stranger-in-a-strange-land scenario, a female student related how several youths approached her in the Cayman Islands and asked such questions as why she “was not fat like all Americans,” why she “did not talk like a cowboy,” and “what it is like to live on a farm.” Although the seriousness of any of these questions remains cloudy, the emotional tone of this student’s writing expressed her shock and amazement at what she viewed as these people’s nerve and ignorance. In fact, the overall tenor of all of these students’ responses to these “accusations,” while none spoke harsh words in the moment, echoes Odysseus’s recrimination to Broadsea’s charge of weakness: “Indecent talk, my friend. You, you’re a reckless fool – I see *that*” (8.191-2).

Conversely, numerous students’ attitudes revealed manifest racial prejudice exercised on others. For some, the stance came from a fear-based reaction, such as the male who fearfully interposed his father between himself and “about five black guys” as they walked, or the young female who made racist jokes about “the black bums all over the streets” yet conceded that if they had been white, she “probably would not have

been as scared.” Others revealed similar multi-layered biases against race and class, including one student who admitted loving a joke in which the only way a Mexican and an African American could have a driver would be if they rode in the back of a police cruiser. A young female who self-identifies as Jewish (at a highly Christian school) titled her paper “I Am Racist,” and she also proceeded to berate herself for her bigotry against Mexicans, confessing that she “made them out to be poor and unsophisticated” but simply had followed her peers’ and society’s lead. In this student’s recognition of one minority oppressing another, I heard echoes of bell hooks’ essay exposing Spike Lee (oppressed for his color) expressing dominating views of black women (oppressed for their color *and* gender). *The Odyssey* also contains messages of the protagonist’s collateral hatred (he indiscriminately attacks the Trojan allies, the Cicones), as well as examples of the hero himself reinscribing the same oppressive behaviors to which he himself was subjected (e.g. he, a “sex slave,” kills his own slaves who had sex with the suitors). Albeit ostensibly a paean to *xenia*, *The Odyssey* clearly communicates a message about “stranger danger” and xenophobia. A deeper, psychological reading of the epic easily converts the monsters that Odysseus encounters into what Stephen Asma describes as “the most extreme personified point of unfamiliarity” in his book *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears* (26). In the single story of his encounter with Polyphemus, Odysseus displays both the fear-based reaction and (upon blinding the Cyclops) the feelings of superiority to the “lawless brute” that my students confessed when encountering the “monstrous” Other.

THIS JOURNEY’S CLOSE: ENDING WITH A BOON

Concluding this unit and reviewing the school year at its end, I felt tremendous satisfaction at my first attempt at bringing a feminist consciousness to my middle school classroom. The class discussions, both in the traditional, teacher-in-the-front setting and in the circle setting, had elicited engagement from the students far beyond the “do we

have to know this for the test?” mentality that often greets me. Through their critical examination of literary characters that evoked both archetypes and stereotypes, my students not only bridged a 3000 year gap between the epics’ origins and the present day but engaged in the first steps of critiquing systems of oppression that hold as much sway today as they did in ancient times. Through their examination of their *own* character via self-reflexive inquiry, they realized their own complicity in these same systems. To use Chandra Mohanty’s terms from this thesis’ first epigraph, they explored their cultural “histories” via a literary approach and their personal “experiences” via an autocritigraphical one. Both in terms of responding to my pedagogical usage of modern touchstones like *Troy* and Katy Perry as well as their own narratives creating part of the classroom knowledge, these students connected their *lives* to what we did, not just their *grades*. Put in a broader perspective, my seventh graders felt that education could connect to more than just intellect; it could apply to making a difference in the external, social world while addressing the effects that sexism, classism, and racism are already working in their inner, psychological worlds. The students affirmed what Lemons posits as the values his educational practice promotes: “(1) a love for education as the practice of social justice; (2) faith that pedagogy founded upon it will transform students’ social consciousness: and (3) compassion for students’ self-recovery process” (23). Their suppressed but latent desire to apply what goes on in school to the “real” world can be summed up in bell hooks’ words as employed by Lemons in the same discussion in *Black Male Outsider*. “[Students] do want knowledge that is meaningful. They rightfully expect that my colleagues and I will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences” (qtd. In Lemons 23). From all indications, I feel that I accomplished this goal and that, from the outset, the students knew their experiences in my class embodied an outward expression of my inner passions, not a preparation for an exam. Did I reinscribe those

hegemonic values that I have now given my life to deconstructing? Well, it would be impossible not to in some degree because I still teach in “the master’s house,” as Audre Lorde would indicate; however, I know with certainty that not only will this group of students evolve into adulthood with seeds of conscientization planted within, waiting for further nourishment, but also my quest to augment, refine, and improve my class will see gains in my effectiveness in simply attempting to reproduce the liberatory experiences I have had since my own encounter with feminism.

Epilogue

The Ongoing Odyssey: Boundless Labor

“Yet now Odysseus, seasoned veteran, said to his wife, “Dear woman...we still have not reached the end of all our trials. One more labor lies in store – boundless, laden with danger, great and long, and I must brave it out from start to finish.” – Homer (*Odyssey* 23.281-85)

Just as the ending of *The Odyssey* anticipates a continuation of Odysseus’s struggles, so the close of one school year always foretells the looming start of another. Even before encountering feminism, I had always refined my pedagogical methods; I had constantly sought to learn lessons from what I had done and improve my teaching methods. Now, however, that same spirit of enhancement animates a project that for me bears greater import than just instructing reading and writing – the facilitation of my students’ awakening to the forms of oppression in which our society participates, and my willingness to grow and share with them in the process. I find myself in an English department at USF that actively seeks to foster in *its* students the same type of realizations via an emphasis on feminist criticism and the accompanying focus on texts that broaden the scope of the “many-voiced palaver” which Barbara Christian endorses. The members of this thesis’ committee have each contributed not just to the intellectual but also to the emotional and spiritual growth in feminism that has permeated my life, and most specifically my teaching, and I intend that my association with USF and these professors will extend into my pursuit of a Ph.D. and beyond. While researching and

writing this thesis, I have encountered scholarship that I foresee will inform my teaching, even within this very school year of 2012–13. In particular, two directions in scholarship have given me new insights and sparked fresh ideas and possible angles for conveying feminist concepts in the classroom.

First, I discovered two books by Jonathan Shay, a clinical psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of veterans, that discuss the parallels between the accounts of psychological battle wounds as found in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and ones that he has personally encountered in his practice. In *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Shay delves into the destructive mental aspects of war that have not changed in 3000 years, as well as all the thematic touchstones of feminism's critique of patriarchy, power structures, gender roles, and even racism. Moreover, in *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, Shay explores the return of the veteran and its psychological ramifications, both in classical and modern times. Reading these books reminded me of Lawrence Broer's work, culminating in his *Writers at War*, which links Hemingway's and Vonnegut's personal war experiences with the psychological states that pervaded their personal lives and created such works as *A Farewell to Arms* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. All of these links of the literary to the literal will aid my classroom efforts to deconstruct critically the masculine "warrior code" and its attendant ties to sexism, racism, and classism. I purpose that Shay's works will provide a foundation for me to accomplish and teach exactly what he exhorts his readers in *Achilles*: "Learn the psychological damage that war does, and work to prevent war" (xxiii).

Second, in my research into the interrogation of race in classical works, I uncovered an entire branch of scholarship heretofore unknown to me: black classicism. In her article "Re-rooting the classical tradition: new directions in black classicism," Yale classics professor Emily Greenwood discusses five works that explore not only the roles

that African Americans have played in intellectual work involving classical literature but also new inquiries into both the historical context of the Afro- versus Eurocentric views of the ancient world and the potential allegorical readings of classical works that illuminate the African American experience in the diaspora. Thus, black classicism finds its place alongside the feminist project of, first, uncovering the lives and work of the historically ignored (in this case, the black classical scholar), second, using new historicism to elucidate societal milieus that underlie ancient literary works, and, third, discovering how works traditionally viewed as white and patriarchal can belie the richness of their latent symbolic content. Eagerly absorbing this material, I ask the same question in relation to my work: how can I bring this scholarship into a middle school environment? And, more insistently: how can I also bring the voices of African Americans into a school that traditionally privileges white ones?

In conclusion, I realize that the literal geometric figure of the circle and the metaphorical one that evokes the hero's journey, the feminist style of narrative, and the cyclic academic calendar equate to an eternal iteration. Far from being simple repetition, the reappearance of thematic characteristics in our lives gives us the juncture, as Butler would indicate, to change our performative qualities. Simply put – if I get to do it over, how will I do it differently? The circular narrative really could be described more precisely as spiral, with no two recurrences exactly alike. But the question remains: will the spiral be downward or upward? Will my encounter with feminist wisdom help me to facilitate the “pacts of peace” that characterize the final book of *The Odyssey*? Can I, being a “broken man,” use my brokenness as motivation to continue to “brave out” both the career path to conscientizing scholarship and the life path to embodying non-oppression? What twists and turns lie ahead: more fighting off of hegemonic suitors or more dialogic encounters with the Other? All remains to be seen. But with the guidance of Athena, feminist wisdom in all its forms, and an intellectual nature and willingness to

proceed with self-reflexivity and performative flexibility, I foresee nothing but continued evolution on the journey that lies ahead of me.

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