JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

20/2025

www.thersites-journal.de

Imprint

Universitätsverlag Potsdam 2025
Email: verlag@uni-potsdam.de
https://www.thersites-journal.de/

Editors
Apl. Prof. Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

ISSN 2364-7612

Contact
Principal Contact
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink
Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de
Support Contact
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

Layout and Typesetting
text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:
Left: Jastrow (wikipedia.org)
Right: Sunny (stock.adobe.com)

Published online at:
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol20

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License:
Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).
This does not apply to quoted content from other authors.
To view a copy of this license visit
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

20/2025 | pp. 1 – 29

LILAH GRACE CANEVARO
(The University of Edinburgh)

You can’t keep the woman in the wallpaper

The agency of the woman and the house from Homer to modern feminist literature

Abstract This article uses new-materialist approaches to explore the dynamic and two-way interaction between the woman and the house under patriarchal constraints. It draws on case studies from Homeric epic to the works of Ismail Kadare, Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sue Townsend and Daisy Johnson to show the cross-cultural and cross-temporal persistence of this nexus. It shows the ethical import of the New Materialisms in terms of inclusivity, shifting our focus to underrepresented agents and questioning hierarchical approaches to both materiality and the female. Women are not only objectified, but also negotiate their agency through objects. If women are confined to the domestic domain, their agency will interact with that of the house: whether in collaboration, or antithesis.

Keywords New Materialism, Gender, Agency, Inclusivity, Homer.

Articles

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0).
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol20.296

INTRODUCTION: GO BACK TO THE HOUSE

ἀλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε,
ἱστόν τ' ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε
ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι· πόλεμος δ' ἄνδρεσσι μελήσει
πᾶσι, μάλιστα δ' ἐμοί, τοὶ Ἰλίῳ ἐγγεγάασιν.

But go back to the house and have a care for your own work,
the loom and the distaff, and see to it that your handmaidens
do their work too. War is the concern of all men
born in Ilion, but me in particular.
Iliad 6.490–3[1]

In book 6 of Homer's *Iliad,* Hector tells his wife Andromache, in no uncertain terms, how gender roles work in the wartime Iliadic world. The women should be in the house, contributing to it, spinning and weaving and leaving the war to the men. Telemachus makes his own gender statement in the first book of the *Odyssey* when he commands his mother Penelope:

ἀλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε,
ἱστόν τ' ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε
ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι. μῦθος δ' ἄνδρεσσι μελήσει
πᾶσι, μάλιστα δ' ἐμοί· τοῦ γὰρ κράτος ἔστ' ἐνὶ οἴκῳ.

But go back to the house and have a care for your own work,
the loom and the distaff, and see that your handmaidens
do their work too. Words are the concern of all men,
but me in particular: for mine is the power in this house.
Odyssey 1.356–9

The command comes close to paralleling that of Hector to Andromache. There is a change in the male role (words replacing warfare in the peacetime world of the *Odyssey*), but the female role stays the same. And again in *Odyssey* 21 Telemachus tells his mother:

1 The *Iliad* text used is the Teubner edition of M. L. West (vol. 1 1998, vol. 2 2000), and the *Odyssey* text is that of H. van Thiel (1991). All translations of the Greek are my own.

> ἀλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε,
> ἱστόν τ' ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀμφιπόλοισι κέλευε
> ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι· τόξον δ' ἄνδρεσσι μελήσει
> πᾶσι, μάλιστα δ' ἐμοί· τοῦ γὰρ κράτος ἔστ' ἐνὶ οἴκῳ.
>
> But go back to the house and have a care for your own work,
> the loom and the distaff, and see that your handmaidens
> do their work too. The bow is the concern of all men,
> but me in particular: for mine is the power in this house.
> *Odyssey* 21.350–3

The bow has been substituted for words, but still the female role remains unchanged. This is a patriarchal setting with clearly differentiated gender roles. In all three passages, across both poems, the woman's job is spatially demarcated. She is meant to be in the house. It is also marked out by the use of objects: the loom and the distaff. In this article I examine the interplay between women, objects, and the house, in patriarchal contexts that see women closely associated with and even confined to the home.

The relationship between woman and house in Homeric epic is a close and complex one. The house is the woman's domain, yet it might also be her prison. In a patriarchal society in which a bride moves to her husband's family home, the woman has to shift between houses. Her connection with the house is a constitutive symbol of family stability,[2] but it is not immutable: Hector in *Iliad* 6 fears that Andromache will be taken away to work at another loom.[3] In Homer, women are sent to the house to weave. But as Penelope epitomises, their weaving is not as innocuous as their men intend. And what about the house? Does a woman in the house have agency? Do the woman and the house have an entangled agency? Does the house have its *own* agency? In this article I argue that, if women are confined to the domestic domain, their agency will interact with that of the house: whether in collaboration, or antithesis.

---

2 The term 'constitutive symbol' comes from Colin Renfrew and Material Engagement Theory (Renfrew 2005, 2012). It takes us beyond models of symbolism and what objects stand in for, to what objects can do.

3 *Iliad* 6.456.

This article starts with the Homeric epics, but does not end with them. The interaction of woman and house in a patriarchal setting is not limited to Homer, to epic, to the ancient world. Through a comparative framework that brings together archaic epic and modern feminist literature, I show that the negotiation of agency between women and the house under patriarchal constraints pertains across cultures and time periods. The case studies I present are wide-ranging but have been chosen to make the cumulative point that this nexus is persistent and relevant. First, I consider the nexus in the male-authored works of Homer and Ismail Kadare (an Albanian novelist with classical connections), showing a sensitivity to the female viewpoint. Second, I move to Margaret Atwood and her feminist retelling of the *Odyssey,* arguing that female-authored 'herstories' can amplify this central nexus. Third, I focus on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's gothic short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* for its visceral evocation of the convergence between woman and house under intense gendered oppression. It is an extreme and haunting example which serves to bring out the negotiations of agency (or attempts at liberation) which are latent in the Homeric poems. Next, picking up on the prison elements of *The Yellow Wallpaper* I push the material connection between woman and house to its furthest point by exploring the practice of immurement and its manifestation in South Slavic song and, again, the novels of Kadare. In the final section it is the temporal dimension I push to its furthest, bringing the case studies up to date with Sue Townsend's novel *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* and Daisy Johnson's short story 'A Bruise the Size and Shape of a Door Handle'. In the former, a retreat gradually transforms into a prison of the mind's own making; in the latter, the agency of the house finally overwhelms its human rivals in a queering of our key nexus that dislodges a heteronormative narrative whilst also blurring boundaries between person and thing. These contemporary works are of pivotal importance to this study in that they explore the nexus of women and the house under patriarchal constraints in a cultural moment which is often said to be post-patriarchal. Crucially, they show the *persistence* of this nexus. Through this comparative study we can see that the triangulation presented in the Homeric poems still resonates today (and bears rereading, specifically from the female viewpoint); that our readings of modern feminist literature can highlight and amplify that nexus; and that, from a feminist perspective, the gender dynamics intrinsic to this nexus still need to be probed.

In its attuning to material agency – from walls to weaving – this article is informed by the New Materialisms, a body of theory that cuts across disciplinary boundaries and as such is ideally suited to this comparative literary study. New

Materialism contends that we interact with the nonhuman world in dynamic and reciprocal ways.[4] Agency is not something unique to human beings and it doesn't always operate outwards from us. Do we stub our toe on a stone, or does the stone stub our toe? Sometimes it's the point of interaction that matters. New Materialism offers us a series of heuristic methodologies. It also propagates shifts in our world view. These are philosophical, but more urgently and pragmatically they are ethical. By decentring the human, New Materialism shifts our attention to what we usually treat as the margins. This leads to a refocusing on underrepresented agents (women, the lower classes, nature), which has urgent importance in terms of inclusivity and diversity. Our readings of antiquity become more democratic as a more diverse cast of characters takes centre stage. When we turn to objects or nature we do not turn away from people, from labour, from class and gender dynamics – we actually refocus specifically on the subaltern by changing our perspective.[5] Take a stark idea like the objectification of women, for instance. What does this look like when we change how we think of objects? By probing and revisiting our conception of the object, and therefore of the equation of the female with the object, we can question starkly hierarchical approaches to both materiality and the female. It is not a simple equation between inert matter and passive woman: rather, *both* have to be argued for, as neither can be a given.[6]

Through a new-materialist lens we can see more clearly the interaction of women and objects in a patriarchal setting, as women enact their agency through the very form they are thought by men to represent. When women are treated as objects, as commodities, they also negotiate agency through objects. Similarly, when women are confined to the home, they also negotiate agency via the house itself.

4 For introductions to New Materialism see e.g. Coole/Frost 2010, Dolphijn/van der Tuin 2012.

5 Hall 2018 criticises New Materialism for 'downgrading' human subjects, but I would argue that this is to misrepresent the new-materialist approach. Proponents of this field by and large do *not* advocate downgrading humans, but rather support *up*grading the *non*human. New Materialism advocates adding the material into discussions of human labour.

6 This is to pick up on the argument of Canevaro 2018.

THE LOOM AND THE DISTAFF

Let's return to the spatial demarcation of gender roles by Hector and Telemachus. In the first instance, this suggests oppression and control within a patriarchal setting. However, the division is not as stark or arbitrary as it initially seems, but rather stems from women's attempts to exert or establish their agency. It is a patriarchal *reaction* to glimpses of female agency, and it is this dynamic that interests me here. In all the case studies treated in this article, we can see not a clear-cut spatial imposition of gender roles, but a negotiation of, vying for or manipulation of agency through spatial limitations and materiality.

When Hector tells Andromache that war is for the men, what he says is not just emblematic of a conceptual divide; it is a reaction to a real 'problem'. He is shoring up the gender boundaries after Andromache offers him tactical advice. She says:

> ἀλλ' ἄγε νῦν ἐλέαιρε καὶ αὐτοῦ μίμν' ἐπὶ πύργῳ,
> μὴ παῖδ' ὀρφανικὸν θήῃς χήρην τε γυναῖκα.
> λαὸν δὲ στῆσον παρ' ἐρινεόν, ἔνθα μάλιστα
> ἀμβατός ἐστι πόλις καὶ ἐπίδρομον ἔπλετο τεῖχος.
>
> Please take pity upon me then, stay here on the rampart,
> that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow.
> But draw your people up by the fig tree, there where the city
> is most open to attack, and where the wall may be mounted.
> *Iliad* 6.431–4

Telemachus, too, is reacting. When he tells Penelope that words are his domain, it is because she has spoken a μῦθος. In the *Iliad,* μῦθος as 'authoritative speech' refers to mortal female characters just 5 times; in the *Odyssey* that number goes up to 27. In the *Odyssey,* μῦθος becomes less and less a male-only speech act, partly because the world is not dominated by war, and women are accorded greater agency. With 10 of these 27 to her name, Penelope proves particularly difficult to accommodate. Then in book 21 Telemachus tries again, as we have seen. Telemachus reminds his mother to go and weave, and this time he focuses not on words, but on the bow. This shift ostensibly brings an element of warfare back into play. However, it does more than that: in the context, it suggests that the line between the male and female spheres is more blurred than ever, and that Penelope cannot be separated from the male action. *She* proposed the test

of the bow, and in so doing, delivered an authoritative speech act or μῦθος, says Homer. Telemachus is reacting to that μῦθος by trying to check his mother's agency. Yet it is not only through words that Penelope is exercising her authority. It is also through objects (namely the bow that has already fallen into her hands), and Telemachus has to react to that too.

It is of particular relevance to the collaborative agency between the woman and the house that Telemachus is not trying to assert dominance *outside* the home but inside it. Hector sends Andromache to weave whilst 'war is the concern of all men born in Ilion, but me in particular': an outward-facing concern marking out the dividing line between home and battlefield that is so essential to *Iliad* book 6. Telemachus, however, reiterates his claim about the οἶκος in both of his commands to his mother, asserting 'mine is the power in this house' (εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα ... ἐνὶ οἴκῳ). He is just coming of age and wants to take his mother's place (herself a stand-in for Odysseus) as head of the household;[7] but Penelope still has some tricks up her sleeve, from her weaving to the bow to the bed. Hector will walk out of the home in *Iliad* 6 and not come back, initiating the fragmentation of Andromache and her house. Telemachus' domestic power struggle is not quite so clear-cut.

Telemachus sends Penelope to weave, just as Hector sent Andromache. Weaving in Homer is not just something women did indoors; it is the quintessential female activity. Hector fears that after the fall of Troy, Andromache will be taken away to work at another woman's loom. It's the ultimate worry: the end of Hector's household. Andromache is treated both as an object herself, part of the spoils of war, and as a creator of objects, valuable and integral to the home. Andromache *is* the home. We can make the same argument about Penelope, who holds together the household of Odysseus by delaying her remarriage through her various ploys. It has been argued that this husband and household are constituted by the pillar against which she stands whenever she appears in the hall,[8] and the patriarchal connotations of this are brought out by Victoria Wohl when she comments:

7 See e.g. *Od.* 18.175–6 (Telemachus is growing a beard), 18.217 (he has reached the measure of youth).

8 'Whenever she appears in the great hall at Ithaca, Penelope stands against the pillar of the roof. The first time she does this, we may wonder whether she needs the support of the column, but by the end of the *Odyssey,* we understand that the column, the roof, and the whole house require her support' (Heitman 2005:102).

> In this picture of the woman next to the ithyphallic cosmic pillar is represented the entire world order: any movement on the woman's part represents the collapse of the cosmos on some level. The message of this *sēma* could not be clearer: the woman must revolve around the man; while he supports the universe, her cooperation is essential.[9]

Moreover, Penelope is not the only Homeric woman to be linked physically with the household. Arete in *Odyssey* 6 is to be found spinning whilst leaning against a pillar, *Od.* 6.307 κίονι κεκλιμένη. As the Phaeacian corollary to Penelope, the queen in harmony with her husband, her physical connection with her palace recalls that of Odysseus' own wife.

Women in Homeric epic are treated as commodities, lumped in with tripods, cauldrons, horses and cattle in lists of gifts and prizes. However, through their creation of objects and their restriction to the domestic domain where objects proliferate, women are also attuned to objects. They *use* objects to negotiate their own agency, to control (and tell) their own story. Helen in *Iliad* 3 weaves the battles being waged outside the walls for her sake, taking on the role of the rhapsode as she threads her story into the fabric. Penelope's weaving is not what it seems. Weaving and unweaving her father-in-law Laertes' shroud which – when it is finished – will necessitate that she choose and marry a suitor, she confuses object and process, exerting control over her own future and keeping her husband's memory alive as a perpetual present. Attentiveness to things can align with attentiveness to women, especially in a patriarchal setting in which women are associated with and even confined to the home. We do not need to argue for Homer as a protofeminist here. But Homeric poetry is alert to female agency, and a new-materialist lens can show that this agency is worked out through an interplay of women *as* objects and women *and* objects.

THE HOUSE IS EATING ME UP

I turn now to my first comparative case study: Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare's autobiographical work *The Doll: A Portrait of My Mother.* The relevance of Kadare's work to Classics is particularly clear in his novel *The File on H,* which

9 Wohl 1993:23.

presents a version of Parry and Lord's fieldwork, though transposes it to Albania.[10] There are classical references and allusions also in *The Doll.* First, Kadare and his friend Bardhyl B. discuss a novella by Mark Twain, in which another world 'honoured as its greatest poet not Homer, as we do, but a tailor who had never written a single line.'

> "And Homer?" I asked after a moment. "The real one, ours, did he exist there, or had they done away with him?" "He existed. In eleventh place, if I remember right." "The real Homer?" "None other. With the *Iliad* and all the rest, the Cyclops, Helen of Troy."[11]

The question of the 'real' Homer is of course a charged one. Helen of Troy too has a greater resonance in *The Doll.* Much of the story is about Kadare and his wife, Helena, and he clearly couldn't resist playing on the names. He writes of 'abducting' Helena, of their flight; and he describes the time before he met her as his 'pre-Hellenic' period.[12] The scene is set, then, for a comparison between the Homeric poems and *The Doll.* And yet, it is not these evident examples of classical reception that drew me to this comparandum but Kadare's use of the house as a focal point, a triangulation of all his relationships, a set of unsolved mysteries, a character itself. It is an active agent: 'For some time the house had been sending out signals, as if moved by a premonition of its abandonment.'[13] Kadare explores the close alignment between woman and house in a patriarchal context, especially over time:

> The custom of elderly women not leaving the house was one of the city's most puzzling traditions. Nobody knew the reason for it, or even its origin or the event that had prompted it. A certain lady would announce one day that she would leave the house no more, and nobody would ask why or wherefore.[14]

10 For discussion see Graziosi 2007.

11 Kadare 2020:141.

12 Kadare 2020:99.

13 Kadare 2020:74.

14 Kadare 2020:19.

> Each member of our family had a unique relationship to the house. My grandmother's was the most natural and obvious. One had the impression that long ago she had established a rapport with its archways, rafters and buttresses. The decision not to leave the house was evidently part of a process of becoming absorbed into it.[15]

Kadare also conveys the *weight* of the marital home on the woman, its threat to her:

> If I found it difficult to understand the cause of my mother's tears, this was not the case with her boredom. She told me the reason herself in a phrase that terrified me the first time I heard it, and it still makes my skin creep to recall it: 'The house is eating me up!'
>
> I soon realised that this was quite an ordinary way of saying that you're bored at home. But I had long been obsessed with working out the meaning of words, and I tormented myself with the most horrible visions. How dreadful it would be if the house you lived in ate you up.[16]

The house is active in the idiom, and Kadare amplifies its agency by dwelling on the meaning of the words. Classicists might follow his example (though hopefully with less torment). By focusing on the complex negotiations between the woman and the house in Homeric epic, for example, we can really bring both female and material agency to the fore.

The struggle Kadare's mother ('The Doll') has with her house comes from the circumstances of her arrival within it. These are traditional patriarchal circumstances of young married dislocation – and mothers-in-law.

> My mother, otherwise so hard to fathom, made no secret of her absolute dislike for our house. This was perhaps an understandable reaction for a seventeen-year-old bride entering this vast building.[17]
>
> Of the three great unknowns that awaited her – husband, house and mother-in-law – it was probably the last that inspired the greatest fear.[18]

15 Kadare 2020:40.

16 Kadare 2020:7.

17 Kadare 2020:8.

18 Kadare 2020:18.

This mother-in-law is the same grandmother who is soon to declare her intention not to leave the house again. The older woman has over time coalesced with the house, while the young bride has only just made its acquaintance. The balance of power not only between husband and wife but (and perhaps more importantly) between women is to be negotiated within these walls.

The same struggle is experienced by Penelope in Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad.* This novella is of course an even clearer example of classical reception, framed as a feminist reworking of the *Odyssey.* Atwood's *Penelopiad* was one of the first of a wave of female-authored 'herstory' novels based on the stories of Homeric women, and the list goes on (to give just a few examples) to Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls,* Emily Hauser's *For the Most Beautiful* and Judith Starkston's *Hand of Fire,* all elaborating on Briseis' role in the *Iliad,* or other Odyssean expansions such as Madeline Miller's *Circe* or Claire North's *The Songs of Penelope* trilogy. Recently married, Atwood's Penelope moves to Ithaca and the home of Odysseus, Laertes and Anticleia:

> After a time I became more accustomed to my new home, although I had little authority within it … All were agreed on one thing: it was not mine.[19]

Her mother-in-law treats her as less than part of the furniture:

> When I tried to speak to her she would never look at me while answering, but would address her remarks to a footstool or a table. As befitted conversation with the furniture, these remarks were wooden and stiff.[20]

As the recently commodified and displaced bride, young Penelope is a moveable exchange object. But she too will negotiate power within the house, despite a dismissive mother-in-law (a point on which Homer is silent), an absent husband, and a son trying to exert control. When she gets her feet under the table, it will not be so easy to disregard her agency. The material details here convey the perennially contentious relationship between new bride and mother-in-law: something that a reading of both *The Doll* and *The Penelopiad* can lead us to reflect on also in Homeric epic.

19 Atwood 2018:71.

20 Atwood 2018:71–2.

In its reorientation of the gendered viewpoint, *The Penelopiad* amplifies an *Odyssey* episode that is infamously played down in its Homeric context but that warrants renewed attention from a feminist viewpoint. It is of particular relevance to this article that it is an episode in which the link between Homeric women and the house turns dark.

> ὣς ἄρ ἔφη, καὶ πεῖσμα νεὸς κυανοπρῴροιο
> κίονος ἐξάψας μεγάλης περίβαλλε θόλοιο,
> ὑψόσ᾽ ἐπεντανύσας, μή τις ποσὶν οὖδας ἵκοιτο.
>
> So he said, and having tied the cable of a dark-prowed ship
> around a pillar he threw it around the great rotunda,
> binding it tightly up high, lest any should reach the ground with her feet.
> *Odyssey* 22.465–7

Telemachus has the treacherous handmaidens, the suitors' co-conspirators, hanged from a pillar with a ship's cable. Telemachus' choice of objects here is pertinent – and it is very much a choice, as this is not what Odysseus commanded him to do. The handmaidens were meant to have a quick end by the sword (*Od.* 22.443 θεινέμεναι ξίφεσιν τανυήκεσιν), but Telemachus does not want them to have a clean death (*Od.* 22.462–4). By tying the women to a pillar, Telemachus adds another material layer to the physical and symbolic connection of woman to house and household.[21] Through their treachery, the handmaidens have broken their ties to Odysseus' household; here Telemachus reinstates those ties literally and tangibly, and wields them as a deadly weapon.[22]

---

21 Fulkerson 2002:346 draws attention to the fact that this is an external pillar – because the maids left the house to sleep with the suitors. They were active in their liaisons, and they disrupted the division of gendered space. Conversely, the suitors are killed indoors. 'This gendered reversal of the normal loci of death further underscores the aberrant aspects of the maids' sexuality – figured as active – and the suitors' unmanliness'.

22 Telemachus chooses the cable of a dark-prowed ship, πεῖσμα νεὸς κυανοπρῴροιο, for the bonds. It is a natural choice as an object well suited to the task – but it is also an object of relevance to Odysseus' travels. The same phrase is used at *Od.* 10.127, when Odysseus cuts his ship free from the Laestrygonians, and Odysseus himself makes a πεῖσμα at *Od.* 10.167. An object of seafaring, it played a role in Odysseus' *nostos* – the homecoming that leads to this very episode. This is a scene of resolution, in which the decks are cleared of adversaries so that Odysseus can come home. In tying the ship's cable to the pillar, Telemachus is creating a ma-

In the introduction to *The Penelopiad,* Atwood claims to be 'haunted' by the hanged handmaidens – and her book makes Penelope and Odysseus haunted by them, too, as the maids chorus:

> We can see through all your disguises: the paths of day, the paths of darkness, whichever paths you take – we're right behind you, following you like a trail of smoke, like a long tail, a tail made of girls, heavy as memory, light as air: twelve accusations, toes skimming the ground, hands tied behind our backs, tongues sticking out, eyes bulging, songs choked in our throats.[23]

Atwood tells the servant girls' untold story – though their actions are pivotal to the unfolding of the *Odyssey*'s plot, they are not foregrounded as characters in Homer. She partially exonerates the handmaidens, and in making them into a chorus, she ostensibly gives them back the voice the *Odyssey* narrative took from them. And yet even the 'handmaids' tale' is heard only in snatches of song and rhyme, and the story emerges in the gaps between mythological and character-biased perspectives. The handmaidens may be a focus of the novella, and yet they become marginalised as Penelope's voice eclipses their own. The undercurrent of threat spills over into the relationship between Penelope and Odysseus as the elements of the handmaids' tale are redirected. If, Penelope says, the secret of Odysseus' bed were to get out, 'he would be very cross indeed, and he would have to chop me into little pieces with his sword or hang me from the roof beam.' The bed is a fixed *sēma,* the constitutive symbol and material manifestation of their marriage.[24] If Penelope were to share this secret (equivalent to sharing the bed), she would meet the same end as the handmaids: the ultimate and subverted material connection with the house.

Voice and gender are essential to this novella, in that it is written by a woman, as a reworking of Homeric epic which we (Samuel Butler excepted) assume to be male-authored.[25] This, crucially, separates it from Kadare's work which might

---

terial evocation of Odysseus' return home from the sea. And in hanging the women from that cable, he joins together ship and traitors in a kind of macabre closure, fixing both in space and time and consigning them to Odysseus' past.

23 Atwood 2018:192.

24 For more on Odysseus' bed as constitutive symbol see Canevaro 2018:84–96. For more on material agency in the bed episode see Grethlein 2019.

25 See Butler 1897.

depict women's experience but does not emerge from it, and aligns it more with the work of female authors Woolf, Gilman, Townsend and Johnson to which I turn in the following sections. This reflection on authorship and gender can help us to clarify the current article's feminist reading of the nexus between women, the home, and patriarchal constraints, and contribute a further rationale for the temporal jump in case studies, as the female viewpoint amplifies the female experience within the narratives examined. Homeric poetry is, as we have seen, alert to female agency, and we are not reading Homer against the grain if we track intricate negotiations of female agency through materiality in his epics. Taking this as a starting point, we can then use female-authored and feminist works to bring out these object-oriented negotiations more clearly.

THE ANGEL AND THE DODO

The Angel in the House. This is how Coventry Patmore famously epitomised the separate gendered domains in his serialised poem of 1854–62, and it is perhaps the most quintessential expression of the spatial demarcation of gender under patriarchal constraints that forms the core of this article. *The Angel in the House* offers an idealised narrative of a courtship, based on Patmore's experience with his first wife Emily Augusta Andrews (herself an author). It is known for its exemplification and propagation of the patriarchal ideology that women belong (submissively) in the home and men in the public sphere. It has been mined for what it can tell us about the day-to-day life of the middle-class Victorian woman, but more importantly for the expectations and prejudices of the male author. Feminist writers then played on this theme to overturn the associations. Virginia Woolf wrote that 'killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer'.[26] The bridge to Classics is made immediately prior to this statement: 'Though I flatter myself that I killed her in the end, the struggle was severe; it took much time that had better have been spent upon learning Greek grammar' (and more extensively, see Worman 2018 for a study of Woolf's classical reception).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her short essay of 1891 *An Extinct Angel* describes the angel in the house – what her 'owner' puts her through, her duties, the ex-

26 Talk 'Professions for women', 1931.

pectations of her – and links her qualities with her clothes: 'the angelic virtues above mentioned were supposed largely to inhere in the flowing robes' (an image reminiscent of the Trojan women with their trailing robes: *Il.* 6.442, 7.297, 22.105 Τρῳάδας ἑλκεσιπέπλους). The robes then join together the woman and the house, in this description with its prosaic conclusion: 'flow they must, and the ample garments waved unchecked over the weary limbs of the wearer, the contiguous furniture and the stairs. For the angels unfortunately had no wings, and their work was such as required a good deal of going up and down stairs.' Gilman's angel is a species in the past. They were 'not very bright', but eventually ate from the tree of knowledge. 'The species is now extinct. It is rumored that here and there in remote regions you can still find a solitary specimen – in places where no access is to be had to the deadly fruit; but the race as a race is extinct. Poor dodo!'

In Gilman's 1892 Gothic short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*, she picks up on the theme of gendered space and of female confinement. But this time the connection between woman and house is strong, intense and, ultimately, the realm of madness. The book is semi-autobiographical, stemming from Gilman's own experience of postnatal depression and written as a response to the 'rest cure' prescribed for 'hysterical' women. The woman would be confined to her room, fed a special diet of fat- and dairy-rich foods and deprived of contact with family and friends and all creative activities, from writing to reading to painting. In the story, the narrator has nothing to do but stare at the yellow wallpaper in her room, the upstairs nursery in an old mansion her husband has rented for the season. It has bars on the windows and rings on the walls. The dynamic interaction between narrator and wallpaper charts her descent into madness. The wallpaper is initially inert, if offensive. Then it is attributed intentionality: 'This paper looks to me as if it *knew* what a vicious influence it had!'[27] The narrator reflects on the power in inanimate things:

> I never saw so much expression in an inanimate thing before, and we all know how much expression they have! I used to lie awake as a child and get more entertainment and terror out of blank walls and plain furniture than most children could find in a toy-store.
>
> I remember what a kindly wink the knobs of our big old bureau used to have, and there was one chair that always seemed like a strong friend.

27 Gilman 2012:9.

> I used to feel that if any of the other things looked too fierce I could always hop into that chair and be safe.[28]

Gilman's furniture has a personality, a vitality: the potential to threaten or help. Gradually the patterns take on a life of their own. They seem to move, change, mutate. Vibrant materiality is palpable here as the wallpaper comes alive for the narrator and joins her as companion in her solitude.[29] She sees a figure in the design: 'I can see a strange, provoking, formless sort of figure, that seems to sulk about behind that silly and conspicuous front design.'[30] Eventually she sees the figure more clearly: a woman, creeping on all fours behind the pattern. A woman who interacts with the pattern: 'The front pattern *does* move – and no wonder! The woman behind shakes it!'[31] The assemblage then shifts, as the woman becomes separate from the wallpaper, multiplying the story's characters: 'I think that woman gets out in the daytime!'[32] The narrator now wants to *free* the woman from the wallpaper. Narrator and woman-in-the-pattern team up to rip the wallpaper off: 'I pulled and she shook, I shook and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper.'[33] Even with its figure separated out, the wallpaper retains its vitality, responding to the attack on it: 'I peeled off all the paper I could reach standing on the floor. It sticks horribly and the pattern just enjoys it!'[34] In the gothic story's final scene, the narrator is found creeping on all fours around the room, declaring 'I've got out at last … And I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back!'[35] The room not only confines but transforms or consumes her: she has become the woman in the wallpaper. And yet, the final sentences renegotiate the dynamic as confinement gives way to liberation. When the narrator's husband sees her, he faints, and she quite literally

28 Gilman 2012:10.

29 On Vibrant Materiality see Bennett 2010.

30 Gilman 2012:11.

31 Gilman 2012:25.

32 Gilman 2012:25.

33 Gilman 2012:28.

34 Gilman 2012:30.

35 Gilman 2012:32.

walks (or creeps) all over him. There is method in her madness and ultimately the message we are left with is: you can't keep the woman in the wallpaper.

The Yellow Wallpaper is a feminist work that exposes a medical 'cure' that by its very definition suppresses female agency. Gilman herself was told by her physician, proponent of the rest cure Dr Silas Weir Mitchell, to 'never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live'. Defying his edict, she subsequently sent him a copy of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The story covers the full spectrum of oppression and agency we have seen across the examples we have considered so far, in that it progresses from complete confinement, through a negotiation of agency within gender constraints, to (arguably) a kind of liberation. Moreover, this agency is curtailed or enacted through the spatial demarcation of gender, the imposition of and resistance to patriarchal constraints in physical, material form through the house. A new-materialist analysis asks important questions of this story: what is the wallpaper doing? How are the woman and the wallpaper interacting? The key to the story is in the dynamic relationship between woman and wallpaper, and the hybridity of person and thing. Moreover, the ever-closer alignment between woman and wallpaper is indicative of an affinity between two groups that lack agency within their social contexts: the woman, and the object. The story itself has a new-materialist impetus in that it propagates 'attentiveness to things'.[36] Just like the narrator, we can't help but be fascinated by the yellow wallpaper.

I have used the example of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in particular because it problematises the clear-cut schematic readings of the woman in the house that we already began to question in Homer. It brings out more clearly, forcefully, evocatively and hauntingly what is latent in the Homeric poems and ancient literature more generally. Women in Homeric epic are sent back to the house, they have their gendered domain fixed and enforced and shored up by their men. But just like the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, they are in collusion with the house, with the objects that proliferate in the domestic domain. And, furthermore, they enact their agency both through that which they are sent to use, *and* that which the men supposedly claim as their own. Penelope takes control of her fate through the weaving Telemachus sends her to do. She initiates the reinstitution of Odysseus through the bow Telemachus claims to be his domain. Both Penelope and Andromache use authoritative speech acts that are suppos-

36 Term from Bennett 2010.

edly reserved for the men. The narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* carves out her agency on the walls of her room (quite literally, as she wears a track in the walls with her creeping), whilst Gilman takes up the pen and paper that were forbidden her and writes the story.

HELLO WALLS

In *The Yellow Wallpaper,* gendered space is not just demarcated: it is policed. The doctor prescribes solitary confinement; the husband enforces it. The bars on the windows and rings on the walls make the room not a nursery or a bedroom but a prison, and this theme of imprisonment is the common denominator between the narrator and the woman in the wallpaper that allows one to merge with the other. In this section I trace the broader resonances of the prison elements of *The Yellow Wallpaper* in both history and legend, reconnecting with the ancient world but also fleshing out this particularly oppressive aspect of the woman and house connection. There are two practices that take the connection between woman and house to a grim extreme, just like Telemachus' punishment of Penelope's handmaidens. The first is live interment; the second is immurement. Of course there is a fundamental difference in purpose and agency in that the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper* is supposedly being 'helped' by a medical treatment and will ultimately get out. Yet I would argue that a recognition of these practices lurking in the background can give credence to the sinister undertones of *The Yellow Wallpaper,* and alert us to the real *risks* to female agency of crystallising that connection between woman and house. We have seen women negotiating their agency within the constraints placed on their gender, operating in collusion with the house. And yet, there is another side of the coin, when the oppressive forces (doctors, husbands, patriarchal constraints more generally) become overpowering and the house begins to *thwart* female agency, as Gilman's collusion with the house is tragically self-destructive.

Live interment is the sealing up of a person in a room. This was the punishment in Rome for unchaste Vestal Virgins, for instance. Celia Schultz argues that this practice was a form of ritual murder: that a special kind of execution needed to be devised for these polluted sacred women. Particularly relevant to our discussion of the objectification of women is the comparison Schultz draws between the interred Vestal Virgins and the burial of obsolete cult materials. Once an object was consecrated it came permanently under divine law, and so

it couldn't be disposed of in a regular way, even if it was no longer required or had been polluted. Such objects were often buried in sanctuary precincts. 'Like a broken statuette or bones left over from a burned sacrifice, an unchaste Vestal might be seen, in a sense, as a decommissioned sacred entity, as something polluted but still sacred: not profane, but not ritually perfect (and therefore not ritually usable) either.'[37] Live interment was also the punishment devised for Antigone in Sophocles' play. In defiance of king Creon's edict, Antigone covers the body of her brother Polyneices with earth and gives him funeral rites. In a macabre twist on the theme of burial, Creon sentences Antigone to live interment in a cave, where she then hangs herself.

The second practice, immurement, pushes the physical link between body and building even further, as the body is *incorporated into* a wall. Immurement or walling in is sometimes a punishment, sometimes a sacrifice, sometimes both, often with a strong link to the female. It features prominently in songs and stories from the Balkans, whose connections to Homer again we can trace through the comparative fieldwork of Parry, Lord and others – and, in turn, the novels of Kadare. The South Slavic song *The Building of Skadar* tells of the building of a fortress by the three Mrnjavčević brothers, Vukašin, Uglješa and Gojko. A vila (a nymph-like creature) demands a sacrifice to support the structure: one of the brothers' wives. Gojko, the youngest brother, is the only one not to warn his wife, and she goes to her fate. She requests that her breasts be left exposed, so that she might nurse her child even as she is walled in. We have surely arrived at the furthest reaches of the material connection between the woman and the house.

This Serbian story, recorded by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić in the 19th century, is thought to trace back to the Albanian legend of Rozafa Castle. Again we have the youngest brother unwittingly sacrificing his wife, who demands that her right eye, hand, foot and breast be left exposed (so that she might cheer, comfort, rock and feed her child). We return here to Ismail Kadare, who picks up this story in his novel *The Three-Arched Bridge.* This novel is particularly compelling in terms of material agency, as both bridge and river are depicted as strong central agents in ways that, as we shall see, recall Homer's agentic landscapes. It is also of particular relevance to our key nexus in this article because it *subverts* the gender dynamic, having a man rather than a woman immured. Kadare shows clear awareness of the implications of this shift, however, and as such can

---

37 Schultz 2012:133.

provide a counterpoint to or way to think through the gendered nexus we have seen so far.[38]

The Three-Arched Bridge is set in Albania in the 14th century as the Ottoman Empire advances. The narrator, a monk, recalls the legend and in telling it unwittingly sows the seed of an idea. Those who are building the bridge decide to wall someone up in it, to combat the repeated attempts at sabotage. The plan is often presented as the bridge's own, however: 'A wall demanding a sacrifice';[39] 'A wall that demanded a human being in a cavity … as it were, to acquire a soul'.[40] Kadare evokes many of the most poignant aspects of the old story: 'People told the most incredible stories about what he supposedly said at the moment when they walled him in, and his last wish for a space to be left for his eyes so that he could see his year-old child.'[41] To this Kadare adds 'Some substituted the bridge itself for the child':[42] another move towards the agency and vitality of the bridge. Indeed the bridge seems to assume not only a soul but also a body: 'The veins of the stone seemed both to absorb and emit light, like the pores of a living body.'[43] As the structure takes shape, so does an agentic character: 'The great mass of stone waited expectantly. The empty arches had about them a hungry look. The humped back of the bridge waited for someone to set foot on it'.[44] And when the bridge is damaged, it is a wounded body: 'From a distance, the mortar and fresh lime of the repaired patches resembled rags tied round a broken limb. In its injured state the bridge looked positively weird.'[45]

It is of particular relevance to our discussion here, however, that Kadare makes a crucial gendered change. In his novel it is not a woman but a *man* who is chosen. This can partly be explained in terms of blame and culpability: the victim Murrash Zenebisha is presented as unwillingly volunteering, implying that

---

38 We might compare this with the queering of the nexus instigated by Daisy Johnson, see section 6.

39 Kadare 2013:83.

40 Kadare 2013:83.

41 Kadare 2013:116.

42 Kadare 2013:116.

43 Kadare 2013:128.

44 Kadare 2013:132.

45 Kadare 2013:61.

he was involved in the sabotage and therefore making this part sacrifice, part punishment. Yet the link between wall and woman is not severed entirely, and this speaks to the strength and paradigmatic function of the connection. As the immured man's wife witnesses his fate, the focus on the baby at her breast again recalls the legends of Rozafa and Skadar:

> I heard sobbing close beside me. Then I saw his wife. Her face was swollen with tears and in her arms she carried a year-old baby, who was trying to nuzzle her breast. Paying no attention to the men standing around, she had uncovered one breast. The breast was swollen with milk and the nipple occasionally escaped from the baby's mouth. Her tears fell on her large white breast and when the nipple missed the child's mouth, her tears mixed with drops of milk.[46]

The act of immurement is described as 'a perversion of everything. It was perversity itself',[47] as the bulging caused by the body makes the wall look 'pregnant', 'But this was a perverse pregnancy ... No baby emerged from it, on the contrary, a human being was swallowed up'.[48] Kadare subverts the gendered model of the legend and in so doing emphasises the perversion constituted by the practice of immurement. The perverse material pregnancy is all the more striking in its attribution to a male body. As time passes, the stories merge, changing and conflating with each telling:

> Some traveller, coming late to the crowd, would ask: "They seemed to tell us that it was a woman who was walled up, but this is a man. They even told us that we would see the place where the milk from the poor woman's breast dripped." "Oh," two or three voices would reply simultaneously, "are you still thinking of the old legend?"[49]

An important question in terms of material agency is: who sabotaged the bridge in the first place? There is a suggestion that the immured man was involved. But the main suspect is the river itself. The river to be crossed is called Ujana e

46 Kadare 2013:106.

47 Kadare 2013:105.

48 Kadare 2013:105.

49 Kadare 2013:157–8.

Keqe, 'Wicked Waters'. The bridge is an 'injury', 'inflicted on the free spirit of the waters'.[50] The river is put 'in such horrible chains, as if it were a convict.'[51]

> Old Ajkuna wept to see it. "How could they kill the river?" she cried. "How could they flay it alive!" She wept for it as if it had been a living person. "Killed in its sleep, poor creature! Caught defenceless and hacked to pieces!"[52]

Yet it is not only the water that is an agent – but the stone too. 'The day will come when the river takes its revenge'.[53] Soon 'the confrontation between the river and the bridge builders was at hand';[54] 'the river would play with the bridge like a cat with a mouse'.[55] Sometimes the river fights the builders, sometimes it fights the bridge itself. There is much here to remind us of Achilles' pollution of and battle with the river Scamander in *Iliad* 21.[56] First the builders divert the river in order to build the bridge. They leave everything 'disfigured and bedraggled. Dead fish lay scattered in the mud. Turtles and diver-birds gave a final glimmer before perishing. Wandering bards, arriving from nobody knew where, looked glumly at the wretched spectacle of the river and muttered, "What if some naiad or river nymph has died? What will happen then?"'[57] Yet just like the farmer with his irrigation channels in the simile in *Iliad* 21 (lines 257–64), they cannot hold the river back. 'The water surged on, wilder than ever, and the Ujana e Keqe, coloured by the clay it carried, seemed stained with blood'[58] – just as Scamander is polluted by corpses. The fate of the immured man, too, resonates with Scamander's threat to Achilles, and Achilles' fear for himself – the possibil-

50 Kadare 2013:21.

51 Kadare 2013:22.

52 Kadare 2013:40.

53 Kadare 2013:40.

54 Kadare 2013:49.

55 Kadare 2013:49.

56 For a reading of the Scamander episode informed by posthumanist approaches see Holmes 2015.

57 Kadare 2013:39.

58 Kadare 2013:51.

ity of being left unburied (or given a perverse watery burial like that Scamander envisages on his sandy floor).

> Everybody realized what a great burden an unburied man was, not only on his family, but on the entire district. It was something that violated everything we knew about the borders between life and death. The man remained poised between the two, like a bridge, without moving in one direction or the other.[59]

This, of course, is the concern that pervades much of the second half of the *Iliad* in its gradually increasing focus on death and the treatment of the corpse. Burial is a concern for the family, the community – the deceased themselves. Both Homer and Kadare offer material evocations of this concern, as sand takes the place of a proper *sēma,* water threatens to wash away memory, and the body is subsumed by stone.

Kadare prompts us to note the agency of stone through the ubiquity of walls:

> His open eyes congealed under their film of whitewash seemed to stare from every wall around me. Walls terrified me, and I tried at all costs not to look at them. But they were almost impossible to avoid. I only then understood what an important and powerful part walls play in our lives. Like conscience, there is no getting away from them. I could leave the parish house, but even outside there were walls, close by or in the distance.[60]

The window you only see when it is dirty. The hammer that acts out when it is broken.[61] The walls you did not notice – until their agency began to loom large and Willie Nelson wrote a song about them.[62] This is a change of tuning, an attentiveness, an adjustment in perception and world-view, from Homer to modern literature – and the very walls around us.

---

59 Kadare 2013:117.

60 Kadare 2013:110.

61 For the broken hammer see essay 'The Thing' in Heidegger 1971. For the dirty window example see Brown 2004:4.

62 The title of this section refers to Willie Nelson's song 'Hello Walls', first recorded by Faron Young in 1961. 'Hello walls, how'd things go for you today? Don't you miss her since she up and walked away?'

WOULD BE MAD TO LEAVE THIS BED

Sue Townsend's novel *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* (2012) provides a contemporary twist on the Angel in the House, and recalls *The Yellow Wallpaper* in its themes of 'madness' and imprisonment. I bring this article 'up to date' by including this case study, because it reveals the very same nexus of women, house *and* patriarchal constraints even in a cultural moment which is often argued to be post-patriarchal. Husbands and sons might not be telling us to go home and weave; women of a certain age might not be expected to shut themselves away; rest cures might not be prescribed for supposedly hysterical women: but, as Townsend makes clear, there is still plenty of patriarchal oppression to resist. Further, *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* is a fantastic example of the role the house and materiality continue to play in the negotiation of female agency.

Eva Beaver, long-suffering and underappreciated wife and mother, takes to her bed when her twins go off to university. While events and characters swirl around her, she stays put. The bed begins as a mark of her liberation. She's on strike, her adulterous astronomer husband Brian will have to cook his own meals and buy the Christmas presents. She thinks in chapter 1: 'I would have to be *mad* to leave this bed.'[63] Word spreads across the internet and Eva is visited by people who think she is an angel. This raises the question: is she liberated by her confinement, or is she just reviving the Angel in the House?

The contents and aesthetics of Eva's room take on resonance as in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. She has Alexander the man-with-a-van paint the walls stark white and get rid of the inherited wardrobe so she can clear her thoughts, her cognitive processes entangled with her material surroundings. But her determination to stay in bed gradually morphs into an inability to leave it, as she fears her legs will go right through the floor if she stands up, woman merging with house. She visits the en suite only via the 'White Pathway': a bedsheet on the floor that extends the bed just as the bed has become an extension of her. Would she be mad to leave the bed; is she mad to stay in bed; did being in bed drive her mad? As her fears of the outside world intensify, Eva has the window and door boarded up, until the bed has really become a prison. The pressures of life and the mental load become too much for Eva, and she becomes trapped in a prison of her mind's own making. Again, we need to examine agency here: after all, Eva goes

63 Townsend 2012:4.

to bed for a year willingly. The constraints put on her are not as evident, tangible or explicitly patriarchal as in the cases of Andromache, Penelope or the narrator of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. However, I would argue that Townsend uses this material interaction between woman and house to shine a light on the oppressive forces at play in a society that expects so much of women and yet offers so little gender equality.

Daisy Johnson's short story 'A Bruise the Shape and Size of a Door Handle' in her 2016 collection *Fen* (winner of the Edge Hill short story prize in 2017) brings us even further up to date, and brings together the criss-crossing themes we have explored in this article. Johnson's debut story collection is all about blurred boundaries. Set in the English Fenlands, it explores the shifting borders between people and animals and landscape.[64] A girl who starves herself into becoming an eel. A boy who turns into the foxes he chases. Importantly it is the landscape that generates the stories. It is a wetland that is constantly changing, drained, flooded, remapped. A liminal space that spawns tales of metamorphosis and vital materialism. We might note that Johnson, too, engages with classical myth; her 2018 debut novel *Everything Under* (another tale of slippery landscapes and identities) is a reworking of the Oedipus story.

'A Bruise the Shape and Size of a Door Handle' tells of a house that falls in love with the girl, Salma, who lives in its attic. It is a very physical kind of love: 'It loved her darkly and greatly and with a huge, gut-swallowing want that killed the hive of wasps that were building hard in the wall and cut the electricity for odd, silent hours.'[65] We are urged to listen to the house: 'Give a house half a chance and it'll answer back.'[66] But when Salma falls in love not with the house but with a woman, the house is jealous:

> In the morning she would wake with bruises shaped like curtain hooks, half-blind from the detonation of a light bulb into a tiny, pained sun. She would find wall

---

64 March-Russell 2020 brings *Fen* into dialogue with Anthropocene feminism and Animal Theory, focusing on this blurring of boundaries. He notes (p. 40): 'humans are described as animals and vice versa. This is not pathetic fallacy or anthropomorphism: they are not likened to one another but described literally … What all these descriptions amount to is an intricate network of shared behaviours between the human, the animal and the non-organic'.

65 Johnson 2016:35.

66 Johnson 2016:28.

> chips in the lasagne, pick shards of glass from the soles of her feet, walk into suddenly closed doors, trip on the raised ridge of a step. It was a jealous answer.[67]

The house has emotions that manifest physically and structurally. It has agency in its ability to shift and change, throwing obstacles in its inhabitant's path, imprinting itself on her body. She touches the walls and finds them burning hot. Then the theme of immurement resurfaces, but with a horrifying agentic twist. It is not the humans that choose to wall someone up – but the walls that drag someone in. Ultimately the house takes its revenge, subsuming Margot the love rival into its walls. Now (to return to the words of Kadare's mother) the house really *is* eating its occupant up. This is a fascinating case study in terms of gender, agency and materiality. First, the male protagonist or oppressor has largely been replaced by female characters, heteronormativity dislodged. Second, this queering of the nexus between woman, house and patriarchy extends into the blurring of boundaries between person and thing, as the house – the agent that has been a participant throughout this study – finally takes centre stage.

CONCLUSION: HERSTORY AND ITSTORY

The Angel in the House vies with the Madwoman in the Attic, as exempla of female behaviour. In their 1979 feminist book *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar probe the idea that women writers of this period had to make their female characters either the 'angel' or the 'monster', because of male writers' tendencies to follow this dichotomy. Gilbert and Gubar resist the dichotomy, and urge feminist writers to push against it. In our new-materialist reading we have seen both the angel and the madwoman, but we have also seen that neither category is as clear-cut as it might seem. Both can be queried through an attentiveness to things, showing female agency within patriarchal gender constraints. The separate spheres that demarcate the Angel can be blurred by female speech *and* by women's use of objects. The 'madness' that defines the monster and confines the woman can be read as resistance, even liberation, if we look more deeply into the ways in which woman and house collude or coalesce.

---

67 Johnson 2016:34–5.

A shift in perception such as that propagated by the New Materialisms can shed light on codes of communication and negotiations of agency operating in the shadows or at the margins. If women are confined to the domestic domain, they will mobilise it, their agency and that of the house in collaboration. You can't send your wife or your mother to weave without consequences. You can't keep the woman in the wallpaper. Yet the story is not always one of female liberation. The assimilation of woman and walls in immurement or being eaten up by or absorbed into the house suggests an agency of the house itself that is essentially posthumanist in its evocation of hybridity. The women and the house become physically connected, their agencies at times competing, at times merging as a hybrid actant. When we focus in on material agency we see that the house may cooperate with the woman – but it might at times subsume or overpower her. The retuning that New Materialism offers can alert us to complex negotiations of agency that operate across not only gender but also ontological divides, and this is of the utmost relevance to the persistent triangulation of woman, house and patriarchal constraints that has brought together the diverse case studies in this article. We have offered here a 'herstory'. But we have equally offered an 'itstory', as the woman and the house are in it together.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atwood (2018). – Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books 2018).

Bennett (2010). – Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2010).

Bennett (2012). – Jane Bennett, 'Systems and things: A response to Graham Harman and Timothy Morton', *New Literary History* 43.2 (2012) 225–233.

Brown (2004). – Bill Brown (ed.), *Things* (Chicago, IL/London: University of Chicago Press 2004).

Butler (1897). – Samuel Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1897).

Canevaro (2018). – Lilah Grace Canevaro, *Women of Substance in Homeric Epic: Objects, Gender, Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018).

Coole & Frost (2010). – Diana Coole & Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2010).

Dolphijn & van der Tuin (2012). – Rick Dolphijn & Iris van der Tuin (eds.), *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press 2012).

Fulkerson (2002). – Laurel Fulkerson, 'Epic ways of killing a woman: Gender and transgression in *Odyssey* 22.465–72', *Classical Journal* 97.4 (2002) 335–350.

Gilbert & Gubar (1979). – Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1979).

Gilman (1891). – Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'An Extinct Angel', *Kate Field's Washington* (September 23, 1891) 199–200.

Gilman (2012). – Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (London: Virago Press 2012).

Graziosi (2007). – Barbara Graziosi, 'Homer in Albania: Oral epic and the geography of literature', in Barbara Graziosi & Emily Greenwood (eds.), *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007) 120–144.

Grethlein (2019). – Jonas Grethlein, 'Odysseus and his bed: From significant objects to thing theory in Homer', *Classical Quarterly* 69.2 (2019) 467–482.

Hall (2018). – Edith Hall, 'Materialisms old and new', in Mario Telò & Melissa Mueller (eds.), *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy: Objects and Affect in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides* (New York: Bloomsbury 2018) 203–217.

Heidegger (1971). – Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought,* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row 1971).

Heitman (2005). – Richard Heitman, *Taking Her Seriously* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press 2005).

Holmes (2015). – Brooke Holmes, 'Situating Scamander: "Natureculture" in the *Iliad*', *Ramus* 44.1–2 (2015) 29–51.

Johnson (2016). – Daisy Johnson, *Fen* (London: Vintage, Penguin Random House 2016).

Kadare (2020). – Ismail Kadare, *The Doll: A Portrait of My Mother,* trans. John Hodgson (London: Harvill Secker 2020).

Kadare (1997). – Ismail Kadare, *The File on H.,* trans. David Bellos (New York: Arcade Publishing 1997).

Kadare (2013). – Ismail Kadare, *The Three-Arched Bridge,* trans. John Hodgson (New York: Arcade Publishing 2013).

March-Russell (2020). – Paul March-Russell, 'Re-gendering the eerie: Border crossings in Daisy Johnson's *Fen*', *Journal of the Short Story in English* 75 (2020) 27–43.

Renfrew (2005). – Colin Renfrew, 'Archaeology and commodification: The role of things in societal transformation', in Wim van Binsbergen & Peter Geschiere (eds.), *Commodification: Things, Agency, and Identities ('The Social Life of Things' Revisited)* (Münster: Lit Verlag 2005) 85–98.

Renfrew (2012). – Colin Renfrew, 'Towards a cognitive archaeology: Material engagement and the early development of society', in Ian Hodder (ed.), *Archaeological Theory Today,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press 2012) 124–146.

Townsend (2012). – Sue Townsend, *The Woman Who Went to Bed for a Year* (London: Penguin Books 2012).

Wohl (1993). – Victoria Wohl, 'Standing by the *stathmos*: The creation of sexual ideology in the Odyssey', *Arethusa* 26.1 (1993) 19–50.

Worman (2018). – Nancy Worman, *Virginia Woolf's Greek Tragedy* (New York: Bloomsbury 2018).

Lilah Grace Canevaro
The University of Edinburgh
l.g.canevaro@ed.ac.uk

Suggested citation

Lilah Grace Canevaro: You can't keep the woman in the wallpaper. The agency of the woman and the house from Homer to modern feminist literature. In: thersites 20 (2025), pp. 1–29.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol20.296