

A Female Odysseus: Gender-flipping the *Odyssey* in Starz's *Outlander*

Spouses are reunited after war and become reacquainted. Spouses are separated when one is detained and must journey through strange lands, overcoming obstacles, to be reunited. Spouses are separated by war and, not knowing what has become of the other, enduring hardships, are reunited after 20 years. These simplistic and gender-neutral statements could refer to the earliest and most famous example, that of Odysseus and Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey*, but instead summarize the first three seasons of Starz's series *Outlander* (2014-), based on Diana Gabaldon's best-selling novels. The series opens with English army nurse Claire and her history professor husband Frank Randall celebrating the end of both World War II and their separation by vacationing in Scotland. By the end of episode 1, Claire mysteriously has travelled through a stone circle from 1945 to 1743 Scotland where she uses her wits and knowledge to adapt, survive, and attempt to return home to her time and Frank. Forced to marry, for her protection, Scotsman Jamie Fraser, Claire changes course two-thirds of the way through Season 1, deciding to remain with him. In Season 2, Jamie sends a pregnant Claire back to Frank, as the battle of Culloden and defeat of the Jacobite army by the British grow nearer. While in Season 3 Jamie and Claire lead separate lives in different centuries for 20 years, they finally reunite. After Frank's death and at the urging of her and Jamie's daughter, Claire discovers that Jamie survived Culloden and decides to go back through the stones to find him.

While Gabaldon's books often refer to classical literature, there is no indication she deliberately or unintentionally modeled the story after the *Odyssey*. Any story, however, of the separation of husband and wife, the journey home, homecoming, and reunion can be read against the *Odyssey*. Reading *Outlander* this way enriches one's response to the series but also, especially where it diverges, encourages one to read the *Odyssey* itself against this

adaptation and to interrogate it anew. Season 1 of *Outlander* offers a gender-flipped reworking of the *Odyssey*, presenting Claire Randall as an Odysseus figure in terms of her attributes, the people she encounters, and her drive to return home to her husband; yet Claire's decision to stay reverses the *Odyssey*, providing an alternative to the traditional narrative, and redefines homecoming and home.

The series' opening credits begin with the lyrics "Sing me a song of a lass that is gone". Based on a Robert Louis Stevenson poem, the words evoke the *Odyssey*'s opening "Sing, Muse, of the man of many ways" and connect Claire and Odysseus. Reunited after the war and reestablishing their relationship, Claire and Frank mirror Odysseus and Penelope. Although both participated in the war effort, the series prioritizes Claire's absence and experiences over Frank's, as the *Odyssey* does with Odysseus.

Claire shares Odysseus' characteristics of cunning and adaptability. As Odysseus remains anonymous or creates new identities, Claire hides her identity to survive, using her maiden name and inventing a backstory, since the first British soldier she encounters is Frank's ancestor. She uses her medical knowledge to find a place for herself as a healer and manipulates situations (such as getting her guards drunk) to achieve her goal of escaping, paralleling Odysseus' own devices, including with Polyphemus.

Claire encounters various alien people, places, and customs of 18th century Scotland and, like Odysseus, also suffers much and endures multiple obstacles on her journey home. She initially stays at Castle Leoch, home of the MacKenzies, where hospitality is ambiguous (is she guest or prisoner?). They distrust this foreigner, an Outlander, analogous with the Phaeacians' suspicious reception of the stranger Odysseus. Claire's confusion and experiences upon arrival rework Odysseus', the immediate possibility of pairing her with Jamie parallels Nausicaa

and Odysseus' potential match, and a bard's song, as if describing her journey, echoes Demodocus' about Odysseus. Witchy Geillis provides a Circe figure, while their trial for witchcraft a descent into the Underworld.

Her desire to return home and to her husband mirrors Odysseus' for Ithaca and Penelope and motivates her actions. She repeatedly attempts to return to her time, even if it lands her in greater danger, at one point captured by the British as she approaches the stones, thwarted like Odysseus blown off-course within sight of Ithaca. When Jamie tells her she can go home, as Calypso releases Odysseus, Claire's decision to stay raises the what if scenario of Odysseus marrying Nausicaa or remaining with Calypso. Claire's abandonment of her Odyssean mantle redefines homecoming and where or when is home. *Outlander* updates the *Odyssey* as a modern day, time-travelling romance with a woman playing Odysseus' role yet also challenges that identity, as Claire's choice transforms her into a Penelope figure and problematizes the issue of gender.