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ENGL 4024: Final Assignment

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Question 6: In what ways is *Ulysses* a feminist novel? In what ways isn't it?

Ulysses has a complicated relationship to feminism, and nowhere is this more evident than in "Penelope." Positively speaking, the episode's extensive treatment of menstruation is groundbreaking (719). Molly is vivacious, straining against societal constraints—"they're not going to be chaining me up"—and intelligent, as when she sees through Bloom's attempt to hide a suspicious letter (726, 691). There is characterization, nuance: Molly's dismissive attitude—"not that I care two straws what he does with it"—veils a deeper concern that Bloom is cheating on her: "I suppose it was meeting Josie Powell and the funeral and thinking about me and Boylan set him off well he can think what he likes now if that'll do him any good I know they were spooning a bit" (691, 694). This renders her complicated and sympathetic.

Nevertheless, I can't help discerning in "Penelope" a disheartening caricature of the emboldened woman. While the complete absence of punctuation is emancipatory, it often Molly gives the undeserved impression of a chatterbox, simply because Joyce won't let her stop talking. The ceaselessness of the text renders her *complaints* ceaseless, turning vast tracts of the episode into barrages of bitterness. These tend to be petty, vindictive: "of course he'd never find another woman like me to put up with him the way I do know me come sleep with me yes and he knows that too" (696); "I suppose he thinks I'm finished out and laid on the shelf well I'm not nor anything like it well see well see" (717). Molly even goes

so far as to blame Bloom for her adultery (730). It's possible that my own awareness of the author's personal views on women has skewed my reading of the episode. When Joyce writes that "of course a woman wants to be embraced 20 times a day almost to make her look young no matter by who," I just hear Joyce (727). Indeed, it's difficult to celebrate passages like these as radical, candid, because I know it's not a woman who wrote them but a man—and a possible misogynist at that. Toeing the line between imaginative skepticism and identity politics is treacherous. Nevertheless, *Ulysses* begs the question, How could Joyce possibly know what a woman's innermost thoughts really are? Notwithstanding its more humanizing moments, the overall effect of "Penelope" is to further stereotype what Molly represents: the woman who, sexually unfettered, thinks rampantly and unrelentingly about sex, cheats on her husband, and is assiduously vulgar—often to the point of callousness.

If anything, "Nausicaa" makes a better case for the novel's feminism. Admittedly, Joyce's construction of Gerty McDowell out of romantic clichés and magazine trifles—"It was Madame Vera Verity, directress of the Woman Beautiful page of the Princess novelette, who had first advised her to try eyebrowline" (334)—is at best condescending; and, as with Penelope, the female character is—excepting, in this case, a handful of words to her friends (346, 347)—fundamentally *silent*. Nevertheless, Gerty's deployment of her sexuality with an eye to securing economic stability in a man is survivalist, strategic. Not only does it suggest substantial sagacity, it also constitutes a subtle commentary on the socioeconomic obstacles facing Irish women at the time. Read attentively, "Nausicaa" offers a corrective on the sexist remarks made by the novel's men—whereas, alas, "Penelope" only embraces them. When Molly sexualizes herself—"I bet he never saw a better pair of thighs" (720); "the cheeks of my bottom [...] were so fattish and firm" (707)—she echoes Lenehan's lewd remarks about

her to M'Coy in "Wandering Rocks": "She has a fine pair, God bless her. Like that. / He held his hands a cubit from him / [...] His hands moulded ample curves of air" (225). Lenehan and others understand Molly in objectifying terms, and so does she.

Joyce's beliefs should give us pause; indeed, they make me skeptical of even the feminism implicit in "Nausicaa." Nevertheless, perhaps we ought to turn to *Ulysses* not for positive examples of female representation, but rather to trace in greater detail the limits of the imagination—to better understand, that is, where the author ends and the novel begins. While *Ulysses* may not be feminist per se, it can, viewed in this light, become a resource for feminist inquiry into the complicated relationship between politics and art. Perhaps, at least in this way, *Ulysses* can be said to further the cause.

Works Cited

Joyce, James. *Ulysses*, edited by Jeri Johnson, Oxford University Press, 2008.