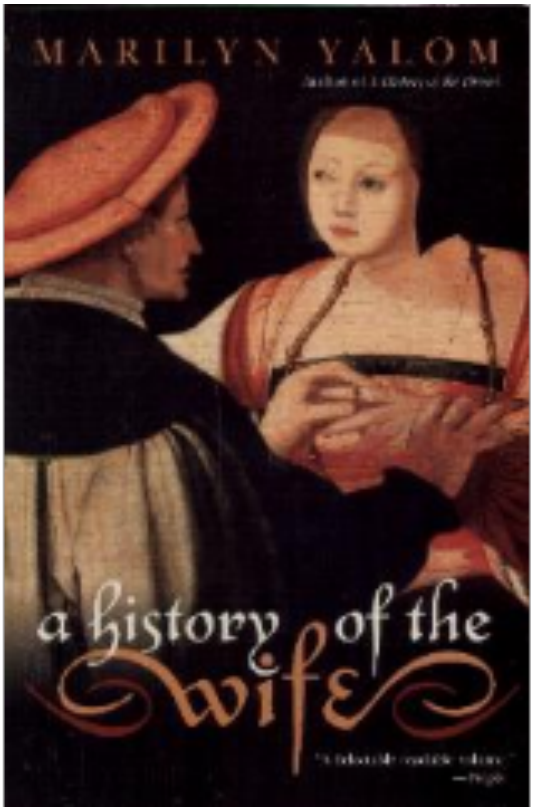
Yalom, M. (2001). *A history of the wife* (pp16-18). London : Rivers Oram.



there were also the examples of the Old Testament matriarchs—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah—and the "virtuous woman" of Proverb 31, who brought nothing but blessings to her husband. Throughout the ages Jewish women have been reminded of their industrious, fruitful foremothers.

And Christians could look to the supreme model of the Virgin Mary for virtues that were touted above all others: obedience and chastity. Although the marriage of Mary to Joseph was merely an artifact of her mission to produce the son of God, she was held up as the image of ideal wifehood. Christian women, for centuries to come, would sense the tension between Mary's miraculous purity and their own carnality.

WIVES IN ANCIENT GREECE

We know a great deal about wives in ancient Greece, and we know very little. All the great Greek literature, with the exception of Sappho's poetry, was authored by men and reflects a male view of women. The voices of the wives—and there are many in Greek literature—have emerged from the mouths of men. It's as if we could only know the lives of twentieth-century American women from the writings of Ernest Hemingway, John Updike, and Philip Roth. What we learn from Greek texts concerning the social and legal condition of married women tells us virtually nothing about *their* hopes, fears, and disappointments.

What did a Greek wife feel toward the goddess Hera, patron of marriage, protector of women, and sister-wife of Zeus? Did she pray to Hera as Christian women would later pray to the Virgin Mary? Dignified images of Hera adorned Greek shrines and temples, but oral and written tales depicted her as a fiercely jealous wife, given to plots against the other women Zeus favored and his illegitimate offspring. The disparity between these two images—the rancorous wife and the sacred matron—suggests that Greek wives may have felt both awe and empathy for Hera, as they called upon her for protection against their own husbands, whose license with other females was always a potential source of discord.

During the Homeric era (eighth century B.C.E.), the ideal wife was Penelope in *The Odyssey*—a mature, clever, and faithful woman. While Odysseus, the hero of the Trojan War, wandered for nineteen years,

Grave stela from Athens, circa 400 B.C.E., erected to honor a husband and wife. (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles)

Penelope managed their kingdom in Ithaca, raised their son Telemachus, and warded off the many suitors who vied to replace her husband. She procrastinated by saying she would make her choice only after she had completed weaving her father-in-law's shroud, which she did by day and then unraveled at night. By the time this strategy was discovered, Odysseus was already on his way home and arrived in time to recover his wife.

The scene of their reunion is surely one of the best loved in all literature. Penelope, having given up hope of ever seeing Odysseus alive, was reluctant to accept a disguised beggar as her husband. In receiving him coldly and putting him to an identity test, she proved to be as crafty as her proverbially wily husband. The test Penelope had devised centered around the marriage bed. When she instructed the old nurse to move the bed outside the bedroom, Odysseus flared up with exasperation and reminded Penelope that their marital bed—the one he had crafted as a young man—could not be moved, for its bedpost was made from an olive tree around which he had constructed their entire bedroom.

With this proof, Penelope "ran up to Odysseus, threw her arms round his neck and kissed his head. . . . Penelope's surrender melted Odysseus' heart, and he wept as he held his dear wife in his arms, so loyal and so true."[13] Loyal and true, prudent and faithful, these are the words that describe Penelope, the ideal wife. His was the wider world of war and wandering, adventure in distant lands and foreign beds, while she waited and wove and remained loyal to her spouse.

At the moment of their reunion, they do not forget that other woman—Helen—the source of all their woes. Helen of Argive, better known as Helen of Troy, was the antithesis of the faithful Penelope. The wife of Menelaus, she allowed herself to be carried off to Troy by Paris, thus causing the Trojan War. Helen the beautiful, Helen the frivolous, "the face that launch'd a thousand ships" in the stirring words of Christopher Marlowe, was the most famous femme fatale of antiquity, one of those dangerous women men fear for their voluptuous beauty. In the Greco-Roman world, Helen and Penelope represented the bad and the good wife, an opposition that Christians would later attribute to Eve and the Virgin Mary.

Yet it is hardly for their stereotypical qualities that Penelope and Odysseus have enchanted readers for generations. Even if she repre-