

The Removal of the Female Characters from the Plot of The Iliad

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“Helen in the chamber; she was weaving a great web...working into it the numerous struggles of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians, struggles they endured for her sake” (Homer, Iliad 3.125-28).

Across Homeric writing, female characters are passively presented to maintain their role as natural victims. Since they are focalizers within the narrative they often convey themes of loss and suffering. Their lack of agency renders them unable to derail or develop the plot, leaving them to suffer the consequences, and more importantly, the losses within the war. This is witnessed universally across the characterisation of the women and their familial status in the *Iliad*: Thetis and Hekabe suffer losses as mothers whilst Andromache suffers loss as a wife. As a result of being cast aside in their respective female territories, the female characters, most notably Helen, access their version of independence and agency by blurring the accepted hierarchical practices between the genders. As such, the female characters' level of complacency with their social treatment is instrumental in shaping their fate. This is most conspicuously demonstrated in the characterization of Helen and Andromache. Whilst Helen's attempt at inserting herself into the plot ensures her survival, Andromache's prioritisation of her husband's wishes secures her foreshadowed degradation.

Generally, there is a lack of anxiety that surrounds female characters in Homeric Epic, conditional to the fact that they are compliant with male desires (Franco, 202). In book six of the *Iliad*, Hektor's meetings with his mother, sister-in-law and wife, are particularly significant scenes that evidence this claim. The three women are equally unsuccessful in preventing Hektor's readmission into the battle after Hektor repeatedly regurgitates his heroic oath and honour in defending his land. Here, Homer demonstrates a universality that accompanies the gendered boundaries between the Iliadic male and female relationships: the male choice will always triumph and determine the female fate, fueling their roles as natural victims. Additionally, across Hektor's interactions with the female characters, there is a similar use of supplicating language and/or mournful tone, making the interactions almost identical or typical. As such, these scenes, often referred to as type scenes, are

multifunctional in that they also serve to emphasise specific themes. For instance, Hektor's emotional farewell with his wife, Andromache, is the poet's attempt at signalling the futility of war. By linking these interactions as type scenes, Homer also familiarises his audiences with an expectation of interaction before subverting them, both structurally and stylistically. For instance, Hektor's interactions with his mother and sister-in-law span approximately thirty lines, yet his interaction with Andromache spans approximately 100 lines. This is because unlike Hektor's meetings with his mother and sister-in-law, which take place in their respective domestic territories, Hektor meets his wife at the "Skaian gates, whereby he would issue into the plain", instead of their home (Homer, *Iliad* 6.394). Lattimore states that Homer's use of expansion tends to signal the importance of the scene as the poet's threatens, and undermines, the system of gendered domains and hierarchy in the *Iliad* by literally placing Andromache at the entrance gates of the battle instead of their shared home (Lattimore, 51).

Andromache's attempt at entering the male domain is stylistically important because it demonstrates the character's intentional overstepping of boundaries to supplicate her husband's stay. She pleads with Hektor begging him: "take pity upon me... that you may not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow" (Homer, *Iliad* 6.431-32). Here Homer devises a particularly evocative scene, filled with pathos, that harnesses the sympathy of his audience, matching their helplessness with that of Andromache. This is reinforced in Andromache and Hektor's addressal of one another by their name, "Andromache...clung to his hand and called him by name", "Hektor stroked her with his hand and called her by her name" (Homer, *Iliad* 6.406 and 6.485). Here, the couple's physical intimacy validates the sincerity of the speech exchanged between the two characters. Hektor responds that it "troubles me the thought of you, when some bronze-armoured Achaian leads you off, taking

away your day of liberty” (Homer, *Iliad* 6.454-55) and hopes that his wife is remembered as “the wife of Hektor, who was ever the bravest fighter of the Trojans” (Homer, *Iliad* 6.460). In this exchange, Hektor’s apprehension towards his wife’s status as a Greek slave is largely elicited by a fear of it threatening his heroic reputation, rather than exclusively protecting her honour. Given this, Homer foreshadows Andromache’s unfortunate fate since her status as a woman ensures her honour always ranks secondary to her husband’s. Hektor’s psychology of fear is clearly conditioned and regulated in accordance with the system of the heroic oath, whereby his value and the honour of his family, are dependent upon his “bravery” as a warrior. This is further exemplified in Hektor’s prayer to Zeus when he wishes that his son may be “better than his father... and bring home the blooded spoils and delight the heart of his mother” (Homer, *Iliad* 6.479-81). Here, Hektor essentially imparts the heroic code to his son, speaking to the extent to which this code is ingrained and inherited within the Iliadic societal culture. Hektor’s assumption that his and his son’s “blooded spoils” will bring joy to Andromache however is grossly misinterpreted as the poet and audience are aware that Andromache will be left widowed and subsequently motherless by Hektor’s choice to fight and die. It is this exclusive understanding between the poet and his audience that allows the poet to successfully speak to the futility of war as Andromache’s fate sustains her role as the natural victim.

Homer demonstrates how the female characters are unwittingly martyrs of war through the failure to achieve their own desires, as they are occupied to succumb to male desire. Despite her constant supplication, Andromache succumbs to her husband’s wishes and even offers a battle strategy, “draw your people up by the fig tree, there where the city is openest to attack and where the wall be may be mounted” (Homer, *Iliad* 6.433-34) to secure his triumph. Homer utilises Andromache’s response to Hektor’s choice to represent how the

female characters are complicit with the system of heroic conduct and male competition that maintains their lack of agency to derail the plot, or more importantly, their fate (Franco, 2002). Andromache's drastic shift from plea to support speaks to her character's complacency with a system of fighting that will essentially result in her death and degradation. This is also witnessed in the relationship shared between Thetis and Achilles, as Thetis arranges divine armour for her son to don whilst slaying Hektor even though this is fated to lead to Achilles' death. Franco states that the female characters in the *Iliad* perpetually occupy the role of mourners (Franco, 200) as both Andromache and Thetis mourn the losses of their husband and sons respectively before their fated deaths. This also suggests that the female characters, regardless of their divine or mortal status, suffer loss on the virtue of being female. Homer therefore emphasises expectations placed on women to subjugate themselves to the gendered-male practice of war.

Whilst Andromache is the symbol of the perfectly loyal and devoted wife, Helen is characterised as her foil. The interactions between Helen and Paris are drastically different from those between Andromache and Hektor as Helen seeks to subvert the very expectations Andromache meets as a wife. In her reproach of Paris, Helen reverses the accepted hierarchy between man and wife that Andromache constantly upholds. Homer narrates how Helen "spoke to her lord in derision: ...I advise you...fight no longer with fair haired Menelaos... you might very well go down before his spear" (Homer, *Iliad* 3.427, 3.433-36). Helen attacks her husband's masculinity, by inserting phallic notions in her admonition: "might very well go down before his spear" (Homer, *Iliad* 3.436). In this scene, Helen also fuels the system of male competition yet does so at the expense of her husband's pride rather than her security, further opposing Andromache's characterisation. Homer's acknowledgement of Helen's contempt or "derision" is a significant detail that speaks to his unconventional

characterisation of Helen as Franco claims Helen's representation is anomalous in that she is frequently endowed with agency and speech (Franco, 201).

Such instances of agency and speech are traceable across the course of the books in the *Iliad* as Helen's voice grows more palpable with every scene, indicative of her self-confidence (Roisman, 33). The audience's first exposure to Helen herself is in book three of the *Iliad*, who has thus far only been alluded to by her enchanting beauty. This means that the audience's predisposition renders them unable to perceive Helen beyond her physicality. Therefore, the audience's limited perception of Helen matches the limited perception of Helen by the characters in the *Iliad*. Constantly constrained by the pressure to limit her potential to that of a beautiful woman, Helen manages to raise her intellect above her physical beauty in her first appearance. Homer describes "Helen in the chamber; she was weaving a great web...working into it the numerous struggles of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armoured Achaians, struggles they endured for her sake" (Homer, *Iliad* 3.125-28). This scene does not feature any verbal communication from Helen yet she is able to find a mode of self expression that would otherwise be inaccessible through speech. In concurrence with this, Roisman claims that Helen's independence lies in her expression of feelings, thoughts and views (Roisman,10). More importantly Helen achieves a mode of self expression, hence independence, while residing within her female domain of "the chamber" (Homer, *Iliad* 3.125). The art of 'weaving' symbolises the respectable and domesticated wife in the *Iliad* and is, therefore, the archetypical association with femininity. Whilst characters like Andromache weave patterns of floral designs (Homer, *Iliad* 22.441), Helen weaves the sufferings of the soldiers, subverting the accepted feminine practices. In the description of Helen's weaving, Homer's use of the formulaic expressions for both the Trojans and Achaians, "breakers of horses" and "bronze-armoured" (Homer, *Iliad* 3.127), suggests that

Helen's sympathy is equally distributed to both competitors. Helen demonstrates guilt and shame, pushing her outside the identity as the woman for whom the war waged. Moreover, in immortalising the war Helen manages to raise herself to the stature of a historian or of a creator where she is equalled in action with Homer himself (Roisman, 10). Here, although Helen's agency does not develop the plot it does manage to trace it, suggesting that female agency in the *Iliad* differs from male agency in that it does not exist to solely serve the female character's agenda as Helen memorialises the war for future generations.

Franco states that wars are either fought in the defence or conquering of women (Franco, 198). However, in the Iliadic universe, the Trojan war's motive is less conspicuous as it can be argued that the war was waged to recover a man's honour (Achilleus'). This is a persistent theme across the Epic as the days covered in the *Iliad* also depict a dispute sparked by Agamemnon's claim over Achilleus' war prize, Briseis. This theme also designates all of the female characters belonging to the *Iliad*, as possessions, despite their societal status. Helen and Briseis, although unequal in status, are equalled in their identity as a woman belonging to another man. Often, the Iliadic objectification of the female characters is achieved through sexualising them, giving them another medium through which they can access control. The goddesses, for example, particularly realise control by accessing the sexuality within themselves and other women alike. In book fourteen of the *Iliad*, Aphrodite aids Hera in seducing Zeus to allow the other Olympians to aid the mortals in battle. Homer describes how Aphrodite's "breasts unbound the elaborate...zone and on it...passion of sex..." (Homer, *Iliad* 14.215-17). Homer's anatomical specificity of the "breast" is significant because it is not only the part of the body reputed with sex appeal but also the part of the body closest to the location of the "heart". Zeus states, "never before has love for any goddess or woman so melted about the heart inside me, broken it to submission, as now"

(Homer, *Iliad* 14.315-16). Homer suggests that a woman's "heart" is stronger than that of a man, as they are capable of "melting", "stealing" and "breaking" a man's "heart" and hence strength. The fact that Hera's seduction of Zeus, the mightiest of immortals, is successful, reiterates the power of female sexuality. Given this, it is important to note that it was Aphrodite who strengthened Helen's lust in the first place, causing Paris' abduction of her. Homer reveals this quite informally, near the end of his Epic, despite its obvious significance to the plot. Instead, the main plot of the *Iliad* surrounds the rage of the leading male character, Achilles, over the death of his companion Patroklos. Given the importance of the male performance to the plot of the *Iliad*, it can be argued that the plot of the epic would be fundamentally different had Patroklos been characterised as a woman as his influence on Achilles would vary greatly.

In conclusion, Homer's presentation of his female characters in the *Iliad* as natural victims serves to inspire pathos within his audience. Since the *Iliadic* plot is solely driven by the choices made by the male characters, the only power the female characters have over the plot lies in their ability to influence the men. Homer suggests this is rooted in their sexuality and complacency within the male system of heroic conduct. Whilst characters like Helen place themselves above the practice of heroic conduct, Andromache inserts herself within it, crossing the boundaries of her female domain, fueling her degradation. As I have mentioned, there is a similarity of experience among goddesses and mortals as the female characters all must comply with the male desire equally, despite their difference in capability. As such, Homer suggests that the fate of his female characters are intricately tied to their obedience of the gendered boundaries and domains in the *Iliad*.

Works Cited

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