

Does The Evidence Of The Plays You Have Read Suggest That Euripides Was A Misogynist?

Unlike his two major contemporaries, Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides acknowledges, if not exaggerates the role and power of women. To say that Euripides was a 'hater of women,' which misogynist implies, is one interpretation of this acknowledgement. As Homer did in his 'Odyssey,' Euripides explores the many facets of the female psyche in his plays. This is clearly sign-posted by his giving the title to so many of his works to women; Electra, Medea, Hecabe, The Bacchae. This all strongly suggests that Euripides was interested in women.

Again, like Homer, his intention with his theatre is not altogether clear. On one hand his treatment of female characters could be seen as a warning to the male majority (if not entirety) of the audience. In Electra he warns of neglect as the title role takes revenge on her mother and surrogate father, neither murder portrayed as heroic or merciful. In Medea he warns of the horrific cataclysm caused by attempting to treat a wife as an equal; Jason reasons, logically, with his wife – he acts purely by the heroic code, seeking to protect his lineage.

In the Bacchae he portrays the ferocity of women once loosened (or freed) from their oikos. Largely summarised, Euripides looks at women outside of their 'natural' surroundings. This is most clearly seen in Medea, as in Episode 1 Medea emerges from the oikos, causes tremendous sorrow and horror, then returns in the final Episode to murder her sons in time for the Epilogue. The Bacchae are freed by Dionysos and shown through his influence as the wild, infanticidal beasts, which they can be. Out of the city – symbolically out of the oikos; out of their 'man's' control. In Electra the freedom is less obvious. At a presumably early age, Electra is married off to the Peasant. This honourable man (undoubtedly the most honourable in the play) treats Electra, not as a wife, but as an equal – if not above him. This respect shows his honourable nature, but it allows the young Electra to mature in a 'man' free environment. Her father is dead, her surrogate a tyrannical bully, her brother is banished – the only manish character is Clytemnestra, being much more butch and brutal than Aegisthus. Unfortunately the mother and daughter hardly see each other, shown by Clytemnestra's readiness to believe that her daughter has had a baby, with no signs of pregnancy.

Here Euripides has shown how, left to her own devices, and with a grudge, a woman will mature into a matricidal lunatic. Therefore the male conclusion of Euripides' plays (at the time of performance) would have been to keep these murderous women locked up in the oikos, away from the world of men. On the other hand it is equally reasonable to suggest that Euripides was a feminist dramatist, who wished for women's rights to be altered. At this period women were considered as second class citizens, in fact they were not even referred to as citizens. Women were referred to as someone's sister, daughter or wife. Through someone like Euripides women had a lifeline. As they had no status or social prestige in politics or philosophy, they had no platform for social reform. In Euripides was a vehicle for expressing the viewpoint of their neglected minds.

To the extent that there is some doubt as to Euripides' sources of inspiration, there is a school of thinking who believe he was the front for another writer. Which could lead to the assumption that whoever wrote these plays would not, or could not, reveal their true identity – suggesting a female tragedian... Electra and Medea are both results of their environments. Euripides, like Sophocles, was interested in the human element. After the original sin of Aeschylus, whose characters were stereotypical embodiments of traditional stock Archetypes. Being goodness, evil, honour, divinity. These

characters were born evil and always would be evil, allowing their punishments to be justified. Euripides, however, created his characters as pure to begin with, and then their lineage, upbringing, environment and social pressures mould them into the very real characters with which we are familiar.

Electra would have probably been a typical female had her father survived, her mother been a better role model (being present would have helped) and having a brother who could control her. This is not simply a one-off as the same applies to Orestes, who is weak, hidden and cowering. The evidence for this is his slow entrance with hiding and trickery, along with his reliance for strategic advice on an old man!

Here again is a child of circumstance, if his father had been there as a good role model, if he had not been sent away he may have become an heroic character.

Medea is referred to as being the perfect wife (if a foreigner) – cleaning, bearing children, weaving – until Jason betrays her. She upholds the law of a strange country and pays homage to its ruler – until that ruler threatens to throw her and her children out of the city. In these two plays Euripides is trying to warn yet again. In this interpretation he is warning men of the ferocious, murderous, volatile side of women.

Yet instead of drawing the conclusion of tightening the reins on their women, Euripides hopes to persuade the men of the audience to loosen, if not let go. He is showing how if the pressure is not taken off these women the valve will explode, as in Medea – with bits of children flying everywhere.

In conclusion, like most theatre, the spectator decides Euripides' plays. You bring all your own personal baggage to the piece and that affects your interpretations. Whether a misogynist or a feminist I certainly believe Euripides was interested in women and their strife, and through him the population of Athens became interested as well. This was proved by Aristophanes' interest in women, as in *Lysistrata* and *Assembly Women*. Through comedy or tragedy the subject was and is intriguing. I think that like most males, Euripides simply was trying to figure women out.