



EURIPIDES WAS ACCUSED BY HIS CONTEMPORIES OF BEING A WOMAN HATER. WHY DO YOU THINK THIS SO, AND HOW JUSTIFIED DO YOU THINK THE ACCUSATION WAS?

CLASSICAL CIVILISATION ESSAY

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WITH SOME OF HIS PLAYS, EURIPIDES DID NOT PLEASE HIS MAINLY MALE, Athenian audience with the references made to Athenian hypocrisy and the challenges and questions he raised on some of the moral issues of the time and the questions that he asked in his plays were sometimes ill received such as the role of women etc. Despite this, Euripides did win the tragedy prize with 'Hippolytus' and is revered as a great playwright in present day drama.

From some of the female characters that Euripides develops in his plays, one could assume that Euripides was a misogynist. However, it is wrong to say that all of his female characters are wicked and evil; Euripides has created some wonderful and interesting female characters as well as the wicked ones. Perhaps 'The Assembly Women' actually had wrong motive for their revolt!

In 'Alcestis', the title character, the wife of Admetus (the King of Pherae) sacrifices herself for her husband's life. A most noble act and Euripides portrays her character, as the model of what a Greek wife should be: completely and utterly devoted to their husband to the extent of dying for the man that supports them. The Greek audience and modern alike will like Alcestis, as she is a sweet natured and noble woman. She most certainly would have won the hearts of the Greek audience. As she is such a noble character and the measure of her kindness toward her husband is so great, Euripides had to bring her back. So the heroic Heracles wends his way to Hades' kingdom and brings her back.

In 'Electra', again the title role, at the beginning of the play, comes across as a very sorrowful young woman. She has cut her hair out of mourning for her murdered father, Agamemnon. He was murdered by her mother, Clytemnestra, as he had to sacrifice their daughter and then brought home a concubine (Cassandra). When Agamemnon did get home, Clytemnestra had fallen in love with Aegisthus. Therefore, so far in the play, Electra comes across as a woman very much devoted to her father and hates her mother for murdering him. So far so justified. However, when she happens to meet her brother, Orestes, she convinces him to kill their mother. At this point she comes across as a very wicked conniving young lady. It seems as though she had been waiting for Orestes return to make him do this. When Orestes has doubts over killing Clytemnestra, she bullies him into doing it. She knew the result she wanted to get and she got it.

Clytemnestra, if you haven't read or seen Aeschylus' 'Agamemnon', comes across as a less conniving woman than her daughter. She comes across as a very powerful and domineering woman. She arrives in the play in a chariot and commands the slaves to help her down. She is very aware of her class and position and will not back down from her decision to murder Agamemnon and regards it as the right thing to do. In this sense we must respect her for sticking by her decision and understand that Agamemnon did kill their daughter and come back with a concubine. In a very slight way, she is justified.

Therefore, Euripides has created in Electra a very complicated character. We as the audience or readers assume that she had been planning her revenge on her mother for some time and was just waiting for Orestes return to enact it. Before this



point however, we can sympathise with her loss of a father and the pain that she must be going through to have the knowledge that it was her mother who murdered him.

Clytemnestra, from this play, comes across as a woman who sticks by her decision and who in speech has the capacity to justify and handle herself well. Euripides has created two complicated female characters and in his portrayal of them has shown no signs of his rumoured misogyny.

Euripides creates one of the greatest roles for any actress to play in 'Hecabe'. The title role is not the aforementioned feat of extraordinary characterisation. However, Hecabe as a character is very interesting. The audience comes away not knowing what to think of her. She begins the play as a woman who has endured such a lot of pain as the former Queen of the now sacked citadel of Troy. She has reached the limit of endurance and collapses in sorrow. She has lost her entire family to a war over one woman, the infamous Helen. At the end of the play, however, she literally snaps from a grief-stricken widow to a raving savage. She has Polymestor blinded and enjoys the gruesome description of the event and the sounds. According to legend, Hecabe turns into a dog due to her extreme torment that results in madness. This is what Polymestor tells her at the end of the play when his blind by her decision.

The character this section opened with by praising is Polyxena. She is Hecabe's daughter and Euripides develops her character beautifully. Odysseus informs Hecabe that her daughter must be sacrificed to the deceased Achilles. Without shedding a tear, Polyxena, heroically goes with Odysseus to accept her fate. As she is taken to the tomb of Peleus (Achilles' father), Greek soldiers hold her and Achilles' son gets ready with his sword to kill or to sacrifice her. She asks not to be held and the soldiers are taken away. She then tears her clothes off to the waist and bravely speaks and awaits the sword to be thrust into her chest.

Euripides in this play has created two memorable female characters. The brave and heroic Polyxena and the complicated Hecabe. Again, no sign of any misogyny on Euripides' part here, in fact the opposite in Polyxena's case. Creating a heroic woman is no mean feat in Ancient Greece and her character must have been received well as she is incredibly strong of character and of heart.

Another great female character in Euripidean literature is Heracles' wife Megara in the play 'Heracles'. The play tells of how Hera (Queen of the gods, married to Zeus, who's father to Heracles) turned Heracles mad and in his madness killed his three sons and his wife Megara. This then led him to go to the Delphic Oracle that told him to be a slave to Eurystheus thus leading to his infamous twelve labours. Anyhow, Megara, at the beginning of the play, thinks that she is a widow and is a vulnerable woman who has to be strong for her three young sons. However, Heracles actually is not dead and comes home to them in Thebes. He is then turned mad by Hera and shoots two of his sons with arrows in his madness. Megara takes the last son and locks herself in room but Heracles breaks in and shoots them both with one arrow.

Megara's sudden bout of courage during her husband's madness shows how this vulnerable woman could be a strong-hearted, quick-thinking and clever woman with her sons' interests and lives at heart.

Another play with memorable female characters is 'Hippolytus'. The two main female characters in this play are Phaedra, Hippolytus' stepmother, and her Nurse. It is strange to see that a servant is given quite a meaty role, as it is usually those persons of note and most importantly, wealth. However, Euripides creates a conniving personality on the nurse who disguises her genius by pretending to be simple. The nurse tells Hippolytus of her mistress' unorthodox love for him. Of



course, Phaedra's feelings of love aren't natural; they've been created by the goddess Aphrodite whom Hippolytus has shunned due to his committed vow of chastity and his adoration towards the goddess Artemis.

Phaedra's character goes on an emotional journey as it were. At the beginning of the play, she is physically weak and wants to escape her problems by either dreaming of going to the mountains or the forests or by killing herself that she is slowly doing by not eating. She then turns to panic as she hears the nurse tell Hippolytus everything. Then she turns strong and stops the nurse from offering her any more advice. She becomes a woman in control of her fate and in so doing decides and readies herself for suicide, as she believes it to be the only option. However she purposefully writes a note that will destroy Hippolytus' life as well as he is not her son but he son of Hippolyta. She is vindictive, evil and nasty just before she hangs herself in the palace of her husband, Theseus.

Euripides has created a very interesting role for an actress to play in Phaedra and her changes, gradual though they are, in emotion through her life in the play. The nurse is quite a wicked character as is Phaedra and it is characters like these that would spurn the rumour that Euripides was a misogynist.

However, Phaedra couldn't possibly compete with Medea. Medea is a sorceress who helps Jason retrieve the Golden Fleece. She is the title role of the play and she is probably the most evil woman in all of Greek tragedy. Out of revenge on the adulterous Jason, she murders his young lover, Glauce, which then leads to the death of her father Creon, King of Corinth; but the act that she is most famous for is the murder of hers and Jason's two children. Again, out of revenge she murders them then flees to Athens with the sun god's help. This really would have angered the ancient Greek male audience. Not only has this woman murdered and wiped out Jason's line, she is then helped by a god to go to Athens. The city revered above all others as the most pure.

What is interesting to note is that 'Medea', 'Electra' and 'Heracles' are set respectively in Corinth, Argos, and Thebes; but for the solution of their dilemmas, the cleansing of their guilt, they all look to Athens. This observation perhaps illumines one aspect of the unique greatness of Athens. The hypocrisy of neglected ideals has often been condemned as a major sin; but in the moral world as in the romantic, it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved. The Athenians in their actions were certainly as cruel, as dishonest, as greedy, as revengeful, as irreligious, as other Greeks; but in their thoughts and aspirations many of them loved and honoured justice, integrity, and generosity, and loved their city as the shining embodiment of those virtues – which it was not.

Medea is definitely a character that could have been written by a misogynist, however, Euripides develops her cunning, conniving and evil character too deeply to be considered one. Instead of a downright attack on womankind, he speaks of Glauce, the beautiful princess who has been groomed to be the perfect Greek wife. Although she appears in 'Medea' Euripides uses her as the comparison to Medea's violent and malicious character.

In 'Rhesos' – the only surviving Greek play set during the Troy war – Euripides portrays Athene as a very clever, quite nasty god. Rhesos, King of Thrace, has come to help Hektor win the war for Troy. However, when both armies are sleeping, Odysseus and Diomedes, from the Greek army naturally, come to kill Hektor. However, Athene tells them not to kill Hektor just yet but to kill Rhesos as with his army's help, the Trojans could win the war. So, Diomedes slays Rhesos and one his charioteers while he's at it. This godly intervention, something that Athene



does on a regular basis for Odysseus in 'The Odyssey' by Homer, shows that the gods weren't very 'godlike' at all.

The other woman in 'Rhesos' is the title character's mother, the Muse Terpsichore. She appears above the stage (deus ex machina) cradling her son's slain body and is beside herself with grief for her loss and blames Athene of betrayal as she and the other Muses and Phoebus trained Mousaios who was associated with Athene in some way.

In 'Rhesos' the female characters are not developed as fully as the male characters and the above written word probably add up to more words than both spoke in the play. However, the point is proved once again from this play that Euripides did not just create hateful women in some misogynistic way.

In the 'Children of Heracles', Euripides creates a minor form of Polyxena in the character of the Maiden – one of Heracles' daughters. In other texts she is referred to as Macaria, hereafter known as the latter. Macaria dies for the good of others. She dies as a voluntary virginal sacrifice. If she hadn't the Athenians will lose a battle. Heracles' family have come to Athens to seek sanctuary from the tyrannical Eurytheus that despite the fact that Heracles is dead at this point in time is still persecuting Heracles' family. Demophon was the King of Athens at the time. She is another noble female character that Euripides has created.

The other female character in 'The Children of Heracles' is Heracles' mother Alcmena. She is vengeful and wants the Athenians to kill Eurytheus. As a play, 'The Children of Heracles' is not at all memorable and the two female characters aforementioned are equally forgettable with the parts they play in the action of the play. Macaria's self sacrifice is not developed enough to have even a touch of the effect that Polyxena's had and Alcmena's character has too many weak lines for such a strong personality in all other texts she is mentioned. Still, Euripides handles their characters in the play very respectfully.

In conclusion, along with the positively vicious characters such as Medea and Phaedra, Euripides has created noble and wonderful female characters such as Polyxena and Megara. He has also created complicated female characters such as Hecabe and Electra and memorable female characters such as Alcestis and Phaedra's nurse. Euripides skills as a playwright are near perfect for getting an audience reaction whether it's tears, shock, hatred or love for a character. He can never be described as a misogynist but should be complimented on the fact that he has been accused as one. For a playwright to create such characters that cause their audience to either love or hate the playwright's characters is positive accomplishment enough.