

Question

Euripides was accused by his contemporaries of being a woman hater. Why do you think this was so, and how justified do you think the accusation was? In your answer you should consider not only how Euripides portrays his female characters, but also the sentiments expressed in the plays and the contemporary view of women.

Answer

Euripides definitely had an opinion on woman that was not shared by many other play writers. Whether it is hatred or not, women play a major role in a Euripian play. Their role in society of that time was a great contrast to that of the men. Compared to today, women were miles apart from men; they were not even considered citizens of their region.

This is obvious in the chorus where in the *Electra*, *Medea* and *Hippolytus* there is a chorus of women. This was unheard of in the time when the plays were written. A chorus is typically made up of wise men of Athens, therefore making it up of women would in that age, be very controversial. In *Medea* the chorus side with her and *Medea* makes the chorus swear to silence. Therefore she can confide in them without having to put a face on. The image put across here is that the woman team up against the man. The chorus being women, side with the feminist *Medea*. "*I heard her sobbing and wailing,*" the chorus talk about the true *Medea* that is hidden under her facade.

The same is true in the *Electra*. The chorus is made up of country-women of Mycenae, who also side with *Electra*. When *Electra* moans about not having a gown or riches to go out and enjoy herself, the chorus offer a way out. "*Borrow from me a lovely gown, closely woven, and a gold necklace.*" The women are on her side, they try to persuade her to be like all the other women and go out partying. *Electra* wants none of this and aims to gain more self-pity by forcing herself to stay at home, doing all the work. Euripides writes her to be an attention seeking noble woman, who has married the peasant to make a statement. Not the most likeable of characters.

In the *Hippolytus*, there are two choruses. One made up of huntsmen who follow *Hippolytus* and the other of women from Trozen. They support what they represent. This shows a contrast in opinions of women in comparison to huntsmen. The chorus of women worry about *Phaedra* and her illness, where as the huntsmen do not. They care more about the goddess *Artemis* and hunting, like *Hippolytus* himself. "*How she wastes away on a bed of sickness and keeps to the palace.*"

Clytemnestra in the *Electra* is the widow of *Agamemnon*, the national hero and adulterer. She killed her own husband claiming that it was out of revenge for *Agamemnon* sacrificing their daughter, *Iphigenia*. She is tough and not easily misled. In the *Electra* she comes over as a strong willed mother who cannot get on the same level with her daughter. *Electra* sarcastically mocks her mother and a quarrel arises from any conversational topic.

"Do; and you'll find he will stop persecuting you."

"He lives in my house; and that makes him arrogant."

"There you go, kindling the old quarrel once again."

Euripides shows the tension between the shallow *Electra* and single-minded *Clytemnestra*. Neither of them are heroines in any way and they are always shown in a

bad light in the play, neither of them are good characters; they both have serious flaws. Clytemnestra is loyal to Aegisthus even though they are not married.

Electra is shown to be a whiney girl who wants people to see her humility. She has gone from a life of nobility, the daughter of the heroic Agamemnon, to the wife of a peasant. All is not as it seems. Underneath her pitiful self, she has not consummated her marriage with the peasant and the audience have been made aware of this fact. As I have previously mentioned, the chorus are on her side, they are female. This shows an honour among the women that they side with her because of their sex. Electra craves attention, possibly a reason for her actions, and her only saving grace is that she has had a difficult childhood; a disloyal, dead father, murderous Mother and a murdered sister. This is not brought to the surface in Euripides' play therefore she appears as a pathetic little girl, craving attention.

Euripides shows that women dominate this play and fails to reflect upon the true reason why the female roles are characterised the way they are. Therefore the accusation of being a woman hater is valid.

In the Medea, the Nurse shows sympathy to Medea by siding with her. The play opens with an apprehensive speech by the Nurse. One of sympathy, but betrayal done to Medea. She worries as to what Medea might do to herself. *"But now her world has turned to enmity, and wounds her where her affection's deepest."* The Nurse is a figure for Medea to confide in. She potters about concerned about her mistress whilst fearing her. *"I am afraid some dreadful purpose is forming in her mind. She is a frightening woman."*

Medea shows no remorse over her actions. She is manipulative and cunning with Jason and Aegeus. She tries to make Jason feel guilty of his actions, but his misogynist face repels her whining now he is immune to it. *"Where now can I turn? Back to my country and my father's house, which I betrayed to come with you?"* Jason stands up to her, patronises her in saying, *"I admit you have intelligence.... Allow me, in the first place to point out that you left a barb arous land to become a resident of Hellas."* Do we feel sympathy for Medea or think she wants everything her way. After her speech to Jason his hatred of women emerges. *"If women didn't exist, human life would be rid of all its miseries."* Medea is backed up by the chorus, the audience's opinion of her is raised slightly and the good light shines over her. *"You are acting wrongly in thus abandoning your wife."* However Medea later changes and the feeling of pathos disappears when she kills her children. *"I will kill my sons. No one shall take my children from me."* Her insensitivity is shown to the audience and she becomes the evil character in the play.

Medea displays her superiority and pride when bargaining with the king Aegeus. She is a mere woman, a barbarian woman and he is the king of Athens. She speaks to him on an equal level, which is unheard of in these times. *"Swear by the earth under your feet, by the sun, my father's father, and the whole race of gods."* Her connection with the gods also elevates her. Medea is very proud; she believes inside her that she is elevated. This is proved by her reluctance to be laughed at. *"The laughter of my enemies I will not endure."* She is revengeful by doing what ever she can to get back at her husband Jason. She sees no limits her vengeance is her key priority. The audience would think that keeping her children alive and well would be a priority, but she ruthlessly uses them to get to Jason.

The Hippolytus also does not give Athenian women a good name. The core of the story involves Aphrodite envying Hippolytus' relationship with the goddess Artemis. Aphrodite wants everything her own way. Therefore she puts a curse on Hippolytus by making Phaedra, Hippolytus' stepmother, fall in love with him. *"He scorns the bed of love, rejecting wedlock, and pays tribute to Phoebus' sister, to Artemis, daughter of Zeus."* Euripides portrays Phaedra as a love hurt wife. She is starving herself to death instead of facing up to her love for Theseus' son. She would rather die than go against what is accepted in society. *"Close your mouth! I never want to hear such vile talk from you again!"* She is shown sympathy by the audience at the beginning of the play. But when she finally dies she leaves a note about why she dies. This was unnecessary; it caused Hippolytus to finally die. Phaedra keeps her problems bottled up until she finally dies and leaves a note. Theseus' reacts to this violently by sentencing his son to death.

The Nurse, as with most Euripidian nurses, is loyal to her mistress. She is not noble and in the case of the Nurse in Hippolytus, does not totally understand the system that works in Athenian society. The Nurse thinks she is doing the right thing to help her mistress, but in fact she causes more trouble. She tells Hippolytus the secret but only if he swears to keep it a secret. *"My boy, the oath you gave me, you'll never break that?"* The Nurse whines to Hippolytus hoping to get her own way. *"Oh, I clasp your knees and beg you,"* The Nurse's stubbornness to try and please ends up leading to Phaedra dying without honour.

Euripides begins his plays often with erratic women, ie Electra, Medea and Phaedra. They have serious issues and seek vengeance, with the exception of Phaedra who is the cause of a vengeful attack; Theseus killing his son, Hippolytus. There are never any heroic women or women that we feel sympathy for. The only woman who is in the slightest way victimised is Clytemnestra. Electra murders her in revenge for killing her father Agamemnon. This is made obvious in the play and Clytemnestra's bad relationship with her daughter Electra does not show her in a good light. We feel sympathy for the self-inflicted widow, when she describes what she has gone through. *"Then her father cut her soft white throat -My Iphigenia."* Out of all of Euripides' female characters, she contains the most sentiment and emotion. In summary, apart from Clytemnestra, the lady characters are mad psychopathic women, with hidden depths, morals and loyalties.