

Honors World Literature Essay:

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While the writer, Homer, was raised and taught in an extremely patriarchal time period, it is shown in his poem the *Iliad* that in his mind women could break those barriers. It is ironic that he allows for these types of female characters within his story, but also has a representation of women who were treated as property. This makes the role of women varied in the *Iliad*, but also shows that people had wide views of the way women should be treated and portrayed. The different types of women that are expressed within the characters of the *Iliad* are shown in the goddess's of Athena and Aphrodite, in Helen of Troy, and within Chryseis.

Most of ancient Greek writings included the gods. Within these stories gods were always interfering with human life, and even having children with humans. This normality of using the gods isn't unrepresented in the *Iliad*. While Zeus is still the King of the gods, certain goddesses content a large amount of power over humans. Both the goddesses Athena and Aphrodite arrive in the human world from Mount Olympus and effect the war in huge ways. It is ironic that the gods that Homer chooses to directly influence the war and the individuals fighting it, are women. It is even explained that, "Athena rose like a herald, ordering men to silence"(108). A women is bringing all the men soldiers to silence. Yes, Athena is a god and that allows her to be different than other ordinary human women, but it does show a certain mindset that women could come out of their roles. The goddess Aphrodite is another good example of this. Not only does she go onto the battle field and save Paris from death, but it is shown to be, "easy work for a god" (141).

The power that Helen of Troy has is un-matched and is also ironically not her own to wield. Men fight for her through the *Iliad* and the entire war is about this singular woman. In the patriarchal society giving a woman power or worth is rare. While death and beauty both are explanations to her worth, it is also shown that people respect her and look to her for knowledge. In the city of Troy, as the war is progressing, other people look to Helen to share her knowledge of the enemy. This represents the fact that it isn't just, "Helen and all her wealth," that gives her the power she's acquired (131). Homer also shows her having a very strong personality and mindset even in the face of the goddess Aphrodite, who calls her a, "wretched, headstrong girl" (142). This is an example of her being put down for having an opinion and expressing it; Homer creates a female character that goes against typical patriarchal roles, but also shows the negative effects of her having a certain personality. Throughout her role in the story Helen has a certain amount of power, but also is reprimanded in the end and used for sex because of that power.

Within the *Iliad* some stronger female characters are shown, but the opposite is represented in the character of Chryseis. She is basically described as property of Agamemnon, or as a prize. This is more of a traditional role that a woman would have to take on in this time period, unlike Helen who is a particular exception. Basically as a slave, Chryseis must serve Agamemnon in any way possible, which includes staying, "far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth at the loom," and even for sex (78). This character becomes an ironic part of the story. While she is property, Agamemnon still values her enough to refuse to give her back to her father. This value is more about spoils of war than Chryseis as a person, but her value is also shown in the decisions of her father. Not only does he beg Agamemnon for her back, but he then

prays to the god Apollo for her safe return. This shows not just value for her life, but it shows a fatherly love that one would not expect in this time period. The reaction of Apollo could also be an effect of her worth, because he starts a reign of terror and death upon the Greeks until they, “give back the girl with the sparkling eyes to her loving father” (80). Chryseis is a representation of the traditional women, and she personally does not try to break any of those roles. In the actual poem of the *Iliad* she is only discussed by other men, she is never part of the discussion. This also gives a feeling of unimportance, or that others do not care about what she wants or has to say.

The number of women in the *Iliad* is small, but they are varied in personality, worth, and position. This includes Helen who breaks through normal traditional roles and barriers, but it also included Chryseis who was treated like property and represents every part of that cultures rules for women. Breaking these stereotypical roles is also represented in the equality between the two sexes as gods. While these are all parts of the *Iliad*, Homer does not make these characters seem realistic. Not only are Homer’s characters historically inaccurate, but they also try to bring depth to a society who had one view of women. However, Homer does allow for women, in his poem, to break barriers and also conform to them.

I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.

Pledge: Jillian Wright

