# EURIPIDES' WOMEN

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## Introduction: Was Euripides a Misogynist?

Euripides has been considered a misogynist since the 5th century B.C., when he began writing his tragedies. He has been accused of hating women, denigrating and slandering them, and defending socio-political ideologies that keep women subordinate to men. However, these accusations are unfounded. The evidence brought forth to support these accusations are snippets of quotes taken out of context from the works of Aristophanes, a comic poet and contemporary of Euripides. When taken out of context these quotes are seen to criticize Euripides as an individual. However, a close reading of Aristophanes' works reveals that his goal was not to criticize Euripides as an individual. Rather, his aim was to criticize Euripides' works, specifically his characters and the behavior that they exhibited, especially the behavior of his female characters.

Euripides utilized what would have been considered deviant female characters from popular myths such as Medea, Phaedra, and Helen. These women were villains in myths and tragedies that preceded Euripides' treatments of them in *Medea, Hippolytus,* and *Helen*. Medea is well known from the myth of Jason and the Argonauts in which she killed her brother and betrayed her father to help Jason, her lover. Phaedra, the wife of Theseus, fell in love with her stepson. Helen is infamous for being the most beautiful woman in the world, wife of Menelaus, and for leaving him for the Trojan prince, Paris, consequently setting in motion the events that would begin the Trojan War. These women defied social norms and values in Athenian socio-political culture. However, Euripides, through his treatments of these women in

*Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *Helen*, reinvents them as women who resemble Athenian women. His female characters have common struggles and are in similar positions as Athenian women in 5th century B.C. Athenian society.

Women in 5th century B.C. Athens were subordinate to men. They were often denigrated in philosophical, medical, and political theory, written exclusively by males, in order to justify their subordination. They were restricted from playing a part politically and were kept in the shadows socially. Women's roles and struggles were not publically recognized and they were denied understanding and sympathy for what they faced and the constrictions that they were placed under.

Euripides through his works and characters was able to portray the struggles of the common Athenian woman by placing his female characters in similar positions. His female characters face struggles that any Athenian woman might encounter such as the loss of home and family, and lack or recognition for their capacities and strengths. These characters also bear the brunt of stigmas held against women in popular culture, such as in poetry, tragedies, and medical, philosophical, and political theories, in Euripides' works, just as women did in Athenian society.

In this paper I attempt to show that Euripides' misogynistic reputation is unfounded. Euripides recognized and understood the struggle of women in 5th century B.C. Athens and was aware of the tension concerning women within Athenian society. Through his work he was able to make his audience, made up of Athenian male citizens, aware of these issues and prompted them to question their own beliefs, values, and ideologies about women by projecting these views back at them through

his tragedies. Euripides did not furnish his audience with a solution, rather, he was attempting to facilitate debate in attempt to remedy issues in society that needed to be addressed, perhaps to make a social change and to facilitate understanding within Athenian society, particularly for women.

## Euripides' Misogynistic Reputation and Aristophanes

Many of the conceptions about who Euripides was, and what his motivations for writing may have been were collected by Satyrus the Peripatetic, a third century philosopher and biographer.[1] He acquired most of his sources from the works of Aristophanes, a comedic poet writing in the 5th century B.C. Aristophanes produced many plays that dealt with political and social issues during the time in which he wrote, mainly focusing on the side effects of war and politics. Public figures were often the butt of Aristophanes' jokes. These figures included Cleon, a well-known demagogue in Athens, Socrates, a popular philosopher, and Euripides.

Euripides is mentioned in many of Aristophanes' works including *Lysistrata*, *Women at the Thesmophoria, Acharnians,* and *Frogs*. It is from these works that Satyrus took quotes and interpreted them as factual details about Euripides and his life. In the *Vita of Euripides*, Satyrus stated that Euripides was the son of a storekeeper and vegetable seller, and that he had others write his plays. He also stated that, "he [Euripides] hated laughter and he hated women," and he made fun of women because he found his wife sleeping with his slave, Cephisophon.[2] These insights into Euripides' life are taken directly from Aristophanes' comedies and are not factual in the least; they were meant to be funny. Lefkowitz, addresses the problem of using these quotes to gain insight into the life of the poet; she states, "removed from the

[1] Satyrus wrote a collection of biographies of famous individuals in antiquity, these biographies or *Vitae* are mentioned by other authors such as Athenaeus and Diogenes Laertius. Euripides' *Vita* was found among the Oxyrhynchi papyri and was translated and published by A.S. Hunt in 1912. See Leftkowitz 1981, 163.
[2] Lefkowitz 1981, 163-168.

context and phrased in colorless language, summaries of comic verse and plot come to resemble information obtained from more factual sources, especially if the anecdotes are arranged together by topic, and no reference made to their original provenience."[3] This is even more dangerous when it applies to the comedies of Aristophanes since he was not criticizing Euripides' as a person, but rather the content of his works. In addition, Aristophanes' criticism was not meant to be scathing, as it is interpreted by modern scholars. Dover states, Euripides' tragedies are treated by Aristophanes "at times with patronizing affection, at times with 'criticism' which in substance is little more than a rude whistle."[4] Aristophanes was not criticizing Euripides himself, rather he was criticizing Euripides' characters and the morals and behavior that they exhibited, particularly those of his female characters.

The first comedy in which Aristophanes features Euripides and women is *Lysistrata*, in which women are called the enemies of the gods and Euripides (*Lys.* 283).[5] Much of Aristophanes' criticism rests in what sort of women Euripides wrote about; the great majority of which were infamous women. In *Women in the Thesmophoria*, there is a scene in which Euripides' associate, Θεραπων or "Relative," attempts to defend Euripides who has been accused of slandering women and is on trial. The "Relative" is dressed up as a woman to infiltrate the Thesmophoria,[6] and the women replied to him by saying, "You, the only woman with the effrontery to

[3] Lefkowitz 1981, ix.
[4] Dover 1972, 37.
[5] Translations for *Lysistrata* as well as *Women at the Thesmophoria* taken from Henderson 1998.
[6] Yearly festival exclusively for women, in which the Athenian women would gather to celebrate the festival of Demeter.

contradict us about a man who's abundantly wronged us by purposefully finding stories where a woman turns out bad, by creating Melanippes and Phaedras. But never has he created a Penelope, because she was a woman noted for her virtue" (*Thesm*. 544-548). However, Aristophanes does not mention the women from other works by Euripides such as Andromache, Alcestis, and Iphigenia who are very virtuous women. Aristophanes was focused on Euripides' characterization of "bad" women and how he made them similar to common Athenian women. The whole plot of the *Women in the Thesmophoria* revolves around this concept, and therefore intentionally overlooks these other examples.

In *Women at the Thesmophoria* Euripides is to be put on trial by the Athenian women gathered together for the Thesmophoria because he slandered them (*Thesm*. 85). The charges that the women brought forth against Euripides were that he depicted them as lover keepers (τὰς μοιχοτρόπους), man chasers (τὰς ἀνδρεραστίας καλῶν), wine oglers (τὰς οἰνοπότιδας), chatterboxes (τὰς λάλους), unclean (τὰς οὐδὲν ὑγιές), and the bane of men's lives (τὰς μέγ' ἀνδράσιν κακόν). They also included the problems created by the characterizations of them especially because they were no longer able to carry out their lives as they had before. They claim that after their men had seen Euripides' tragedies and been made aware of the schemes of the women, they came home and watched their women closely so they could not get away with their trickery (*Thesm*. 383-400). They could not get away with things they did previously like keeping lovers, going to get things out the store rooms like wine, flour, and other goodies (*Thesm*. 414-425). Aristophanes seems to be poking fun at Euripides for

creating a hindrance to women, or rather to the stereotypical version of women presented in Aristophanes' plays. Yet, these lines taken from Aristophanes' works have been interpreted incorrectly to make Euripides seem as if he hated women.

Aristophanes' portrays his women in a different manner than Euripides. He places women in positions of power and has them take on the duties and responsibilities of males in Athens, and then shows how they proceed to fail at these duties and responsibilities, consequently making fools of themselves. For example, in *Lysistrata* the Greek women join ranks and work together to boycott the Peloponnesian War, however, the women are hardly able to do this because they are so hungry for sex. In *Women at the Thesmophoria* they attempt to hold a formal trial as the Athenian men would carry out in the Assembly, but they are not able to do it properly.[7] It may seem as though Aristophanes is suggesting that women play a larger role in society, however, he is in fact reinforcing the stereotypical representation of women. He has made the same characterization of women as he accused Euripides of doing; he depicted them as drunkards, sex-fiends, gossips, and trouble for men.

Euripides does not portray women in this way. In his tragedies he may include many female characters who were often characterized in myth and tragedy, as morally depraved; however, while he still adheres to these women's portrayal in myth and previous tragedy, Euripides does not use the same characterization of women as Aristophanes and other contemporary tragedians. Euripides makes these "bad" women more sympathetic. Henderson comments on this innovation of Euripides stating:

[7] Adding to the hilarity, the Thesmophoria is held on the Pynx where the Athenian men would hold their assemblies.

> Euripides' reputation as a misogynist was evidently based not only on the predilection of so many of his female characters for misconduct but also on their unprecedented intensity and vividness, these characters were of course already present in the traditional myths, and other tragic poets had also dramatized them. But Euripides was distinct in having frequently embellished the myths, making wicked characters (male and female) even worse; inviting the audience to at least empathize with them; and making their speech and behavior seem closer to everyday experience than was customary in tragedy.[8]

Euripides depiction of women who were villainous in myth and his way of relating them to the common Athenian woman seems to have been interpreted as a hatred for women in Aristophanes' plays and by modern scholars. The way in which Euripides makes these deviant women closer to the everyday Athenian women could be seen as threatening since characters can be imitated by the audience. Aristophanes criticized Euripides' portrayal of adulterous women, such as Phaedra and Stheneboea, as well as other controversial characters who go against the morals and values of society because they could be viewed as role models or examples of how to live by his audience (*Frogs* 1043-73).[9] Dover comments on this idea saying:

> The idea that presentation of a coward or an adulteress in fiction increases the incidence of cowardice or adultery in real life is certainly widely held in our own time, especially by people whose perception of literary and theatrical technique is undeveloped and by people whose intellect and emotions are strongly engaged by aspects of life to which the arts have no obvious relevance. It is likely that the same belief was held in antiquity by the same categories of people.[10]

The influence tragedy and poetry has on the Athenian people and whether the poet is meant to teach the morals and value of society or how to question them is central to the debate between Aeschylus and Euripides in the *Frogs*. Euripides was a poet who

[8] Henderson (1998a, 448-449) states this in his introduction to *Women at the Thesmophoria*.
[9] Translation taken from Barrett, 1964.
[10] Dover 1972, 185. See also as well as in Dover 1993, 15.

taught his audience to question. In *Frogs* Euripides claimed that he taught the Athenian people to think and question, he introduced logic into drama, had his audience question why things were the way they were and what things meant (*Frogs* 971-979). He gave all his characters a voice (*Frogs* 947-949), and taught the people to take nothing at its face value (*Frogs* 957-958). It is quite true that Euripides' works did do all these things. He caused his audience to think and to question what they thought and felt about certain issues. One such issue that Euripides focused on was women.

## Women in Athens

To better understand the way in which Euripides uses women in his tragedies, it is important to be aware of the conceptions held by certain 5th century B.C. Athenian males about women and their roles in Athenian society. In 5th century B.C. Athens it was the males who contributed to material and literary culture, and it was only through males that women were given any sort of voice or representation in society.[11] The relationships and differences between men and women, not only physically but also mentally and socially, occupied a great deal of thought amongst poets, philosophers, and political thinkers in Athens. They attempted to make sense of those differences through literature, medical theory, philosophical theory, and politics. Often these views and theories were not flattering toward women and denigrated them. However, women did have a very important role in society particularly through religious rituals as wells as in the *οικος*, as wives, mothers, and daughters. It is through these roles and relationships that women gained recognition and retained a sense of pride and belonging despite their subordination to men.

A few poets, such as Hesiod and Semonides, as well as Aristophanes, denigrated women. These poets portrayed women as a bane to the existence of man, deceitful, and the subject of laughter and contempt.[12] In medical theory Hippocrates, a physician practicing in the 5th century B.C. who is considered the founder of modern

[11] The poet Sappho in 6th century Lesbos is the one of the only female literary voices that emerged from ancient Greece.
[12] Hesiod, *Works and Days* 42-105, 695-705, *Theogony* 590-612. Translation from Most 2006; Semonides 7: *Women*. Translation from Gerber 1999. See also Lefkowitz and Fant, 2005, 23-27.

medicine, developed and influenced the Hippocratic Corpus, a collection of medical works collected in the 4th century B.C. that included sections on women. In these texts women were viewed as incomplete males, who were fundamentally different from males, opposites even. Parker sums up this idea, he states, "Male and female are fundamental opposites, irreconcilable. One is bounded, self-contained, perfect, complete, unmoving. Female is open, lacking, imperfect, needing to be filled."[13] The diseases and medical problems that are usually associated with women according to the Hippocratic Corpus are cured by sex or getting married and bearing children, essentially backing up their fundamental roles as wives and mothers. Women were also thought to be lacking physically and mentally. Foxhall states, "Women were often portrayed as not being in control of their bodies (as witnessed by such 'uncontrollable' physical processes as menstruation and childbirth), nor by extension were they in control of their appetites."[14] Lack of physical and mental control means that one is not able to make sound decisions, which was an important faculty to possess in government.

Consequently, women were denied a role in politics in Athens. They were not given the right to vote, participate in deliberations in the assembly, or to represent themselves in the law courts. They were still called *αστα*ι *(astai)* or citizens, they received the benefits of citizenship such as the ownership of property and protection

[13] Parker (2012, 107-108) uses the Pythagorean table of opposites to highlight the opposites of men and women, saying that it is like ying and yang with women being on the wrong side. See also Foxhall 2013, 72-74.
[14] Foxhall 2013, 71.

under the law, but could not participate actively in politics.[15] Women were placed under the protection of a *κυριος (kyrios),* or male who had power over her, most likely her father, husband, or brother, who would represent them legally and financially.

Even though the ordinary Athenian women could not play a central role in politics and were considered subordinate to males, they played an important part in other facets of Athenian society. Many significant roles that women performed took place in the *οικος*, or household. The Athenian household was centered on the family which included not only the nuclear family but also extended family as well as slaves, animals and goods. It was maintained by the *κυριος* who acted as a mediator between the *οικος* and the *πολις (polis),* the *οικος* being the private sphere and the *πολις* the public.[16] Central to this scheme was marriage. It was the foundation on which this household was built and meant a great deal in Athenian society.

Marriage was viewed as a socio-political construct in the way that it linked two families together, transferred property, and made it possible for citizenship to be passed on, as referenced in Pericles' citizenship law of 451 B.C.[17] An Athenian woman's duties also focused around benefiting the πολις. A 4th century B.C. rhetorician, Demosthenes, tells of these duties in his speech *Against Neaira,* he states:

> For this is what living with a woman as one's wife means – to have children by her and to introduce the sons to the members of the clan and of the deme and to betroth the daughters to husbands. Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives to bear us legitimate children and to be faithful guardians of our household. (59.122)[18]

[15] Blundell 1995, 114-129.
[16] Foxhall 2013, 25.
[17] Foxhall 2013, 32-33.
[18] Murray 1936, 445-447.

Wives were essential to bear and care for legitimate children as well as to tend to the upkeep of the house. These sentiments are also highlighted in Xenophon's treatise, *Oeconomicus*, written in the 4th century B.C., in which a character, Ischomachos, tells Socrates how he had informed his young wife about the duties of the husband and the wife in the household. The woman, or the queen bee in his analogy, stays in the hive and weaves, rears children to be good citizens, and delegates tasks to slaves (presumably he was wealthy) (7.33-37).[19] Women had an important role to play in the household, to be a caretaker and to bear and raise children that would be citizens and take part in Athenian society. The identity of a woman also hinged on her marital status – *παρθενος/κορη* (maiden), *νυμφη* (marriageable maiden), or *γυνη* (matron) - which played a part in her status in Athenian society.[20]

Athenian women in addition to playing an important part in the οικος also played an important part in civic rituals. These rituals were centered on the πολις but subsequently influenced and had a close connection to the οικος. Sabetai states, "Although women were associated with the private sphere, their religious practices affected the public standing of the *οικος* and its relationship to society as a whole. Thus, theirs was a cultic citizenship."[21] Women had a public and civic role in the celebration of festivals and their participation in cults in classical Athens, such as the Thesmophoria, Panathenaia, and Brauronia, all of which required a woman to be in good standing and to be a citizen.[22] The majority of the rituals that women took part in

[19] Marchant and Todd 2013, 447.
[20] Sabetai 2008, 291
[21] Sabetai 2008, 289.
[22] Tiverios 2008, 125; Nevett 2012, 97.

dealt with birth, marriage, and funerals. These were communal but also had a close connection to the οικος, particularly to marriage. The ritual of marriage was communal and tied to society, it involved moving the woman from the home of her family to the home of her husband and preparing her for that transition into society and life as a married woman.

Love and trust surely played a role in Athenian marriage, as it does in marriage today. There is quite a bit of material evidence, specifically on grave stelai and pottery, which depicts men and women together in a domestic setting and as having a close relationship.[23] These stelai and pots emphasize civic and democratic family values in the *οικος*, and were targeted more toward intimate family groups.[24] As a result of being focused on the family and the *οικος,* they feature women prominently since women played such an important role within that sphere. Typically the stelai and vase paintings depict women in their natural roles as wives, and mothers, carrying out their duties about the house, as well as playing part in rituals and ceremonies.[25] These roles and duties would have been the primary function of women and were where most of their praise would arise from in society. The care of home and family would have been the basis for a woman's sense of belonging, honor, and esteem in Athenian society.

Though both men and women played an important role in Athenian society in both the πολις and the οικος they were not held to the same standards. Men had a great

[23] Kitto 2003, 51; Lewis 2002, 172; Foxhall 2013, 33; Sabetai 2008, 294.
[24] Kosmopoulou 2002, 101.
[25] Kosmopoulou 2002, pg. 95 fig. 78. See also Kaltsas and Shapiro 2008, 298-333, 342-349.

deal more autonomy and leeway in sexual matters than women. Women were expected to remain with one man, her husband, from the time she married until death. Adultery was a major worry in Athenian society since it undermined the capacity for the household to reproduce socially and politically.[26] Women were the ones who brought forth sons and if they were sleeping with others, possibly slaves or foreigners, there is no way to assure that the child would be a citizen or not without knowing who the father was. If a woman was caught committing adultery she would be divorced from her husband and denied participation in religious ceremonies, another large role women played in the *πολις*, and would be a figure of contempt.[27]

However, men had a great deal of sexual freedom. They were able to have relations with prostitutes and courtesans, and it was not looked down upon to have homosexual relationships with freedmen and slaves. Pericles himself had a relationship with the hetaera, Aspasia, who was rumored to be a big influence on him according to Plato as well as Plutarch, who states, "what a great art or power this woman had, that she managed as she pleased the foremost men of the state, and afforded the philosophers occasion to discuss her in exalted terms at great length" (*Plut*. 24.1).[28] It is important to realize that she was not an Athenian citizen, and that she could participate in areas in which the Athenian citizen woman could not, specifically in the public sphere.

[26] Foxhall 2013, 42; Blundell 1998, 56; Blundell 1995, 125-126.
[27] Foxhall 2013, 42; Blundell 1998, 56. See also Tiverios 2008, 125 and Stehle 2012, 192.
[28] Plato (*Men*. 235e-236b) see Perrin 1914, 69; Plutarch *Life of Pericles* see Bury 1952, 337-339.

Euripides recognized that women played important roles in the οικος as well as in the πολις, and were held to different standards than males by the socio-political values and beliefs of Athenian society. He also recognized that these roles and standards were restricting and that such restriction caused a great deal of emotional pain upon the women who were subjected to them. Women were not given a great deal of recognition and understanding for the struggle that they were facing and their importance in Athenian society.

Euripides, through his tragedies which feature women, was able to exhibit a new perspective on the struggle of women for recognition and understanding in a way in which his audience, made up of Athenian males, could understand. He wanted his audience to see the social and political constraints that women were placed under in Athenian society and to project their views back at them, making them see and feel what women were feeling. As a result, his audience would better understand the struggles, thoughts, feelings, and motivations of women in Athenian society.

## Euripides' Women

In this chapter I discuss Euripides' *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *Helen*. I focus specifically on Euripides female characters in these tragedies and how the positions they are placed in reflect positions of women in 5th century B.C. Athenian society. I begin by investigating the myths that include them as well as their depictions in previous tragedies by Euripides. Then, I look closely at the innovations Euripides made to these myths, characterizations, and plots, and how through these innovations these female characters, previously portrayed as deviant, are now viewed as more sympathetic, their actions and motivations understood, and their capacities and struggles recognized.

## Medea

The characterization of Medea prominently represented in myth is that of a diabolical and ruthless woman. The myth that prominently features Medea is the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, which dates back to Archaic Greece. It is a story Euripides' Athenian audience would have known and from which they would have drawn their assumptions about the character Medea.[29] In this myth Medea betrays her family to help Jason obtain the Golden Fleece. She marries Jason through an oath and then helps him flee from Colchis and later Iokolos, where she is responsible for the death of King Pelias, which causes them to find refuge in Corinth, where the plot of

[29] This myth is passed down by oral tradition and is first mentioned in Hesiod's *Theogony* which dates to the 8th century B.C.

*Medea* takes place.[30] After the events in Corinth, Medea fled to Athens where she resided with Aegeus, and, according to myth, where she continued to wreak-havoc.[31]

Before *Medea* was performed in 431 B.C. Euripides wrote two other tragedies that feature Medea as a ruthless and diabolical woman, both which reflect the mythic version of Medea. The first of these tragedies was *Peliades* or *Daughters of Pelias* performed 455 B.C. at the city Dionysia.[32] This tragedy is fragmentary, but essentially the plot centers on the death of Pelias, king of Iokolos. In this tragedy Medea persuades the daughters of Pelias that they can rejuvenate their father by chopping him up and boiling his body in a cauldron, which only serves to kill Pelias so Jason could take his place as king. The second play in which Euripides features Medea is in the tragedy *Aegeus* performed in the early 430's B.C.[33] In this tragedy Theseus returns to Athens where Aegeus is king and is living with Medea. Medea knows that Theseus is Aegeus' child, yet, she persuades him to believe Theseus has come to take his throne, and therefore he should be killed. She tries to kill him with a poisoned cup, but before Theseus drinks from it Aegeus realizes that Theseus is his son after he recognizes a sword he carries. Consequently, Aegeus saves Theseus, Medea's treachery is exposed, and she is forced to flee.[34] In both of these tragedies, the Medea that is characterized by Euripides is homicidal, ruthless, and willing to destroy those who stand in her way.

[30] Gantz 1993, 369; In mythology Medea is not responsible for killing her children. Mastronarde (2002, 50-52) points out that the death of the children at the hand of Medea, is not canonical until after the 5th century B.C. and was influenced by Euripides' tragedy. Kovacs (1994, 286) states that there is no certainty that Euripides was the first to do this.
[31] Gantz 1993, 359-370.
[32] Collard and Cropp, 2008, 62.
[33] Collard and Cropp, 2008, 4.
[34] Collard and Cropp, 2008, 3-4.

In *Medea* Euripides plays upon these previous characterizations of Medea and the assumptions that his Athenian audience would have about her from her representation in myth and past tragedies. Medea in this tragedy is still a very powerful, strong, willful, and proud woman. However, while the Medea in Euripides' previous tragedies, *Peliades* and *Aegeus*, is a fearsome and dangerous woman, the Medea of *Medea* is respected, honorable, loved by the people, and sympathetic. She is well respected by her Nurse and the Corinthian women. She is, as the Nurse states, "an exile loved by the citizens to whose land she had come" (1-11).[35] The Nurse, the Chorus, and the audience can sympathize with her and understand Medea's situation and her reaction to it.

Medea is facing the loss of her husband, family, and homeland, as well as the life that she has worked hard to create. For the time that she has been in Corinth, which would be about ten years depending on the age of her children, she has been living life as a typical Greek wife. She has raised children, formed a home, made friends with the Corinthian women, and settled herself into a happy life. When Jason chooses to remarry, everything that Medea had formed in Corinth is lost. She is left bereft of a home and family due to the fact that she cannot return to her homeland after betraying her father for the benefit of Jason. She states:

> Where am I now to turn? To my father's house, which like my country I betrayed for your sake when I came here? Or to the wretched daughters of Pelias? A fine reception they would give me in their house since I killed their father! This is how things stand: to my own kin I have become an enemy, and

[35] Translation taken from Kovacs 1994.

> by my services to you I have made foes of those I ought not to have harmed. (502-508)[36]

The loss of home, family, and respect is a significant loss for Medea, as it would be for any Athenian woman, since a woman's worth and reputation hinged upon her position as a wife and mother.

Euripides brings to the attention of his audience the troubles that women face as mothers and wives, and gives women their own voice. He has, in this tragedy, cast Medea as a typical woman who is faced with extraordinary circumstances brought on by the man she has tied herself to. This is especially prominent in Medea's speech in the first episode of the tragedy. Here she clearly describes the position of women in Athenian society, as well as the vulnerability of women in marriage in terms of their husband's power over them and the reliance that women had on their husbands. Medea begins by stating that, "Of all creatures that have breath and sensation, we women are the most unfortunate" (230-231). Then she goes on to state the troubles of women such as the dowry and control of the husband as *κυριος*, stating that women have to buy a husband and accept him as a master of her body (232-234). Whether or not her life is good or bad depends on the husband that she takes (241-243). He could be a good man, and they could have a loving and honorable relationship, or he could be the sort of man who goes and sleeps with other women. However, women are restricted to only their husbands, as Medea states, "But we [women] must fix our gaze on one person only" (247). She also highlights the nature of divorce and not being

[36] In this passage Medea is referring to her mythic past as she does also in lines 475-487, as does the Nurse (1-11).

married, stating that divorce is dishonorable and refusing marriage is hardly an option (236-237). This speech clearly would have been understood by Euripides' audience because it reflected marital practices in Athens. It also depicts the role of women as hard and unfair and illustrates prominently the double standard between men and women. This speech not only makes Medea sympathetic but all women.

However, some scholars state that this speech was premeditated and a ploy. According to their arguments Medea is manipulating the chorus and audience to have pity for her by imitating a typical woman and downplaying the fear that is often associated with her.[37] These arguments emphasize that Medea is not really a normal woman, and is actually the dangerous Medea that is known from myth, who is playing the part so she can gain support, sympathy, and the ability to justify her revenge. Granted, she might still be the Medea from myth; hot tempered, willful, and very powerful, however, in this tragedy she might be playing the part but for a different reason. The speech might be considered a ploy on the part of the character, but still it was written to be a very revealing look at the situation of the typical Athenian woman that might have made the audience question what was really happening in their society.

Medea is powerful in many more ways than the common Athenian woman, she is also clever, conniving, and semi-divine;[38] however, she is still a woman trying to fit into society and to keep an honorable reputation. Therefore, having a husband in the customary fashion would be important, especially for a woman like Medea who cares

[37] Mastronarde 2002, 11-12; Rabinowitz 1993, 128-132; Boedeker 1997, 133; Foley 2001, 258-259.
[38] Medea's grandfather is Helios.

deeply about appearances. She is really working hard to build a persona for herself as good wife and mother and to fulfill these roles properly, and in the process she has given up a large part of herself and formed herself into a conventional woman. Clauss and Johnston point out that Medea conforms to people around her, conforming to the labels of wife, Corinthian, and mother. However, she becomes disassociated from those things and begins to lose herself more and more as the play goes forward; she changes as does her role.[39] Despite her strength Medea is not able to get around social conventions, she must play the part of the common Greek woman. Yet, there is something intrinsically different about Medea.

Since she cares about her home, family, and her position, Medea does indeed have some things in common with a typical Greek woman. What is quite different about her, besides her powers, is her sense of honor and pride. It is these values that give her a heroic and masculine quality.[40] She follows the heroic code, do good to your friends and harm to your foes, and states this sentiment saying, "Let no one think me weak, contemptible, untroublesome. No, quite the opposite, hurtful to foes, to friends kindly. Such persons live a life of greatest glory" (807-810). She is very concerned with her reputation and the way that she appears to others. Medea refuses to suffer mockery or laughter, this too is a heroic quality and is a factor that motivates her. It motivates her to seek revenge on Jason and to kill her children; to ensure that no one will be able to mock her and call her weak. She would not be able to withstand the

[39] Johnston 1997, 11.
[40] Mastronarde 2002, 18-19. See also Foley 2001, 260.

mockery and will not allow it to happen to her, as she states, "The laughter of one's enemies is unendurable, my friends" (798).[41] She wants to be well respected, honorable, and viewed as such by all, but Jason does not seem to understand or acknowledge her heroic nature or her need for him to realize her capabilities.

Medea's love for Jason and his desertion of her has left Medea with nothing; she has sacrificed her life for him out of love. However, Jason states that this was not the case at all. He says that it was Aphrodite that saved him (526-528), and that he did more for Medea than she ever did for him. He states that he brought her to Greece and away from the barbarians, teaching her justice and law rather than force (534-538). He also states that he brought to Medea the renown that she possesses, saying, "If you lived at the world's edge, there would be no talk of you" (540-541). He takes all the credit for the life that he and Medea have. This would have been an outrage to Medea who is a very proud woman and who has put in a great deal of effort to reinvent herself. However, Jason does not see this in Medea. Foley comments on this saying, "Jason mistakenly fails to treat Medea as a hero, to value their mutual oaths and her favors to himself. He cannot hear the heroic language and values she adopts for herself in their first encounter."[42] Perhaps, Jason, who traditionally is supposed to be one of the great Greek heroes, does not realize the heroic code that Medea adheres to because he does not adhere to it himself.

Jason, being a hero, should exhibit heroic qualities or at least honorable ones as is traditional of heroes in Greek drama. However, Jason possess no such qualities in

[41] Sophocles' *Ajax* also focuses on the issue of mockery and the heroic nature.
[42] Foley 2001, 262.

Euripides' characterization of him in *Medea*, and it is hard to sympathize with him at all, even after the death of his future wife and children. He is misogynistic, uncaring, self-centered, and callous. He is marrying for his own self-interest and has no problem leaving Medea (86-87). He is not too fond of women; he states that, "Mortals ought to beget children from some other source, and there be no female sex. Then mankind would have no trouble" (573-575). He has strong feeling against women especially their sexual insatiability, he states, "You women are so far gone in folly that if all is well in bed you think you have everything, while if some misfortune in that domain occurs, you regard as hateful your best and truest interests" (569-573). Jason believes Medea's grievances are issues of sexual jealousy and does not actually see what he is having her give up.[43] Jason, rather than being the hero, is lacking when it comes to morals, and as a result Medea takes on the role of the hero in this tragedy.

Euripides has reversed the roles of men and women; the man would have been the more superior morally according to Athenian ideology and would have been the hero in traditional literary tradition. The Chorus emphasizes this reversal with their famous first stasimon:

> "Backward to their sources flow the streams of holy rivers, and the order of all things is reversed: men's thoughts have become deceitful and their oaths by the gods do not hold fast. The common talk will so alter that women's ways will enjoy good repute. Honor is coming to the female sex: no more will women be maligned by slanderous rumor. (410-420)

In giving Medea a voice and giving her the motivation to take action against her oppressor, Euripides is reversing traditional male ideology. He is calling attention to

[43] Mastronarde 2002, 7.

the deceit and lies of men rather than focusing on the terrible things that women are capable of as previous poets such as Hesiod and Semonides did. He is overturning the assumption of these poets who have slandered women, giving women a voice which was not given to them before, as the Chorus says:

> The poetry of ancient bards will cease to hymn our faithlessness.[44] Phoebus lord of song never endowed our minds with the glorious strains of the lyre. Else I could have sounded a hymn in reply to the male sex. Time in its long expanse can say many things of men's lot as well as of women's. (421-430)

In this tragedy Euripides is allowing women to possess a central and important role, giving them a voice, a moral compass, and the capacity to make plans and decisions.

Medea, even though she has adopted this heroic code, is still a woman and a mother; she has a feminine maternal nature and struggles to reconcile this nature with her heroic nature.[45] Medea decided to make her children a part of her plan for revenge by killing them, this action would utterly destroy Jason.[46] However, the decision destroys Medea as well. Medea's maternal nature struggles with her decision; they are her children and she bore and raised them, therefore naturally she feels love toward them. At one point she catches sight of her children and says:

> My courage is gone, women, ever since I saw the bright faces of the children. I cannot do it. Farewell my former designs! I shall take my children out of the land. Why should I wound their father with their pain and for myself pain twice as great? I shall not: farewell, my designs! (1042-1048)

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[44] This refers to a misogynistic tradition in Greek poetry. Mastronarde (2002, 243) offers such traditions in his commentary note on lines 419-421. He mentions the treatment of Clytemnestra in the *Odyssey*, Pandora in Hesiod, Helen, etc.

[45] Foley 2001, 244-46; Boedeker (1997,136) states, "Through such conflicting categories Euripides emphasizes the paradox of a character who aspires to male heroism within the confines of what are presented as inescapably female concerns."

[46] This is a means to utterly destroy Jason. After the death of his children he would no longer have a descent line putting him a great disadvantage. Easterling 2003, 196; Bouvrie 1990, 219, 223-224; Kovacs 1994, 287.

However, her heroic nature returns and spurs her on. She refuses to suffer mockery and let her enemies go unpunished. She puts the tender feelings aside, forgetting about her heart (1049-1064). When she decides on this plan she forfeits her feminine nature and fully adopts the heroic masculine nature. Boedoker states, "At this point, the protagonist presents herself clearly and not for the first time, in terms of male heroism, focused on achieving, honor, vengeance, and fame."[47] After this deed, Medea essentially losses the persona that she created for herself as ordinary Greek woman, and as a wife and mother. The Chorus can no longer sympathize or identify with her after she kills her children, she is no longer like them. They even reject calling her a woman (1280-1289). Jason goes so far as to call her a monster, he states, "you are a she lion, not a woman, with a nature more savage than Scylla the Tuscan monster" (1342-1343). She is no longer associated with who she was at the beginning of the tragedy, she has lost herself to her heroic nature, she is no longer a woman but a monster.

Medea was a diabolical and ruthless woman in myth and previous tragedy, but in *Medea* Euripides places her in the roles of a wife and mother, the typical roles of a common 5th century B.C. Athenian woman. Medea is faced with the loss of her husband, home, and family, things that would have been important to any Athenian woman because this was what her honor and reputation were built around. She is placed in a situation that would have been familiar to Euripides' audience, they would have understood and felt sympathy toward Medea's position, thoughts, and feelings.

[47] Boedeker 1997, 134.

Medea also struggles with her sense of honor and reputation, as well as heroic nature. She is strong and willful but put in a position in which she cannot express her full capabilities and they are not recognized by her husband, Jason. As Foley states:

> Medea exposes male suppression of women in marriage and the tragic results of a male refusal to recognize in women the capacities, feelings, and need that they accept for themselves; and it shows the corrupting effects of this mistreatment on a woman of tremendous feeling and intelligence.[48]

This lack of acknowledgement causes Medea great pain. In an attempt to seek revenge for the pain that Jason caused, prevent herself from losing her reputation and honor, and suffering mockery from others, she rejects her maternal feminine nature by adopting the masculine heroic nature. Consequently, by adopting this heroic nature so that she can preserve her honor she loses her femininity, her humanity, and the sympathy that the chorus had for her.

Euripides was attempting to show in his tragedy through the character Medea the struggles that many women in 5th century B.C. Athens faced. These struggles included the restrictions that women were placed under through marriage and the lack of acknowledgement of the capabilities and needs of women by men. Euripides takes Medea's struggle to extreme limits, making her actions and the consequences of those actions fearsome, essentially making Medea a monster in the end. However, by pointing out these issues and taking them to the extreme, Euripides causes his audience to question their own society. Through *Medea*, Euripides was prompting his audience to consider their own relationships with the women in their lives, the sense of

[48] Foley 2001, 268.

honor and capabilities that women possessed, and the restrictions that women faced in their lives and relationships.

## Phaedra

Phaedra is not present in many Greek myths. However, she has been dealt with often in tragedy and literature since 5th century B.C. Athens.[49] Euripides dealt with Phaedra twice, using the same myth and plot, which was uncommon for a tragedian to do.[50] The first time he featured Phaedra was in the 430's B.C. in a play called *Hippolytus Kalyptomenos*, and the second in 428 B.C. which is the more familiar *Hippolytus*. In regards to Euripides' *Hippolytus Kalyptomenos*, or *Hippolytus Veiled*, there are only fragments left of the play itself. However, a hypothesis written by Aristophanes of Byzantium to the extant *Hippolytus* exists, which states, "This *Hippolytus* is the second, and is also named the *Garland-bearer*; and it is clearly written later, for what was unseemly and reprehensible has been put right in this play."[51]

What seems to be "unseemly and reprehensible" in the first tragedy is Euripides' characterization of Phaedra. In *Hippolytus Kalyptomenos* Phaedra is portrayed as audacious; she directly confronts Hippolytus with propositions, sexual

[49] Sophocles wrote a play by the name of *Phaedra*, which is lost, the Latin playwright Seneca also wrote a play by the name of *Phaedra*, as well as the French playwright Racine. Snell 1964, 24.
[50] Barrett 1964, 13; see also Roisman 1998, 9.
[51] Henderson 2008, 473.

and possibly political,[52] in Theseus' absence.[53] It is called Kalyptomenos (καλυπτομενος) meaning veiled since it is believed that Hippolytus, in reaction to Phaedra's propositions, covered his head so that he would not be polluted with her shame.[54] The changes in the characterization of Phaedra from the first *Hippolytus* to the second *Hippolytus* are drastic. Phaedra is no longer the brazen and forward woman that she was in the first *Hippolytus*, rather she is chaste, matronly, virtuous, and honorable; traits that are reinforced throughout the play by Aphrodite, Hippolytus, and Artemis (47-48, 1034-1035, 1298 -1301).[55] This Phaedra is quite the opposite of the Phaedra from Euripides' previous treatment of her; rather than being the instigator, in this tragedy she is a victim who has no control over the situation in which she is placed.

Phaedra's fate and desires were brought about by Aphrodite who states in the prologue that Phaedra's love for Hippolytus was her devising and that Phaedra will die (27-28, 37-41, 48). Aphrodite has Phaedra's fate totally in her hands, there seems to be nothing that Phaedra can do to avoid what is to befall her, and one cannot help but feel sympathy for her. Phaedra is helpless and a victim. She is suffering from something

[52] Webster (1967, 67) offers Fragment 430 (possibly spoken by Phaedra) "I have a teacher of daring and audacity who is most inventive amid difficulties" to account for the brazenness of Phaedra. He also offers Fragment 432 "Do something now *yourself,* and then invoke the gods; for god adds his assistance to the man who strives" Fragment 433 (possibly spoken by Phaedra) "I myself say, do not give even law greater respect amid dangers than necessity" and Fragment 434 (also possibly spoken by Phaedra) "Mortal men's fortunes are not in accord with their piety, but everything falls captive when hunted down by acts of daring and superior force" to account for the political implications. See also Roisman 1998, 12-15.
[53] Theseus is always absent. In Sophocles' play it is because he was in Hades and in the 2nd *Hippolytus* he was going to an oracle. Webster 1967, 66. See also Barrett 1964, 31.
[54] Roisman 1998, 9.
[55] Translations taken from Kovacs 1995.

that she has no control over. She is fighting against a goddess, as well as her own physical desire. The Nurse attempts to do what she can to help, but Phaedra refuses to tell her because to do so would bring her dishonor, but much more importantly, dishonor to her family.

The honor of her husband and children is what Phaedra is concerned about throughout the play, and is what makes her decide to give up her own life. She says:

> My friends, it is this very purpose that is to bring about my death, that I may not be convicted of bringing shame to my husband or to the children I gave birth to but rather that they may live in glorious Athens as free men, free of speech and flourishing, enjoying good repute where their mother is concerned. For it enslaves even a bold-hearted man when he is conscious of sins committed by his mother or father. (419-425)

Later, she also states, "For I shall never disgrace my Cretan home nor shall I go to face Theseus with shameful deeds against my name, all to save a single life" (719-721). Phaedra is aware that if she goes through with what she desires, to sleep with Hippolytus, she will ruin the reputation of her family, Theseus and her children, by becoming an adulteress. She places the honor of her family before her own, yet, she still keeps her own honor in mind when she refuses to tell the nurse. The Nurse asks Phaedra why she will not tell her what is plaguing her, Phaedra replies, "It will be your death. To me the affair brings dishonor" (329), she is attempting to hide the shame that would be brought upon her if she mentions it. However, Phaedra eventually lets what has afflicted her slip.

The Nurse, when she eventually finds out the cause of Phaedra's suffering, is horrified. Phaedra in response to the outrage of the Nurse, states her intentions and her thoughts about what has befallen her, as well as her capacity to handle it. Phaedra

possesses reason, motivation, and endurance; things she believes that others who would surrender in the same situation lack. She states:

> I think that it is not owing to the nature of their wits that they fare badly, since many people possess good sense. Rather, one must look at it this way: what we know and understand to be noble we fail to carry out, some from laziness, others because they give precedence to some other pleasure than honor. (375-383)

Women were especially regarded by some men in 5th century B.C. Athens to lack these things. According to medical and philosophical theory held in Ancient Greece, women were especially considered not to be able to control their own bodies and desires, and to allow their emotions to cloud their judgment. Thus, Phaedra's position as a woman complicates her situation, which she expresses, saying, "I know both the deed and the longing for it brought disgrace, I knew besides that I was a woman, a thing all men hate," (405-407). Phaedra realizes that the actions of other women and their reputations affect her. She goes on to curse the woman who first besmirched her marriage bed (407-409), as well as the women who are able to hold a false sense of chastity and virtue while still going off and sleeping with men who are not their husbands, and still being able to look their husbands in the face without worrying about ruin (411-418). Rabinowitz views Phaedra's tirade against women as an expression of female hatred of women that is expressed not only by Phaedra but also the Nurse and the Chorus. She states that Phaedra inherits the suffering of the sex and she condemns others as she condemns herself.[56]

[56] Rabinowitz 1993, 160.

This might be so, but Phaedra does not identify with those women she describes. In her view of herself she would never be able to do such a thing to her husband, and that is why she has decided to kill herself rather than commit adultery. She condemns those women for their actions but she does not condemn herself for them because she refuses to take part in such actions. She is resolved to defend the virtues that she holds herself to through her death, and more importantly the virtue of her husband and children. Euripides has endowed her with the capability to restrain her desires and emotions, and to make decisions for her herself; thus, displaying that a woman can act with virtue and self-determination. These capabilities are reflected in her plan; at first she resolved herself to silence, then to self-control, and when neither of these things worked she decides on death (391-402). She knew that this was the only way that she could preserve her reputation as an honorable and loyal wife, and the honor of her family as well.[57]

Phaedra has a concept of honor that is tied into her position as a wife and mother; her responsibility and reputation were focused on the *οικος* and all those in it, as it would be for a typical Athenian woman. However, Phaedra's sense of honor is also tied to her status. Phaedra is an upper-class woman and the disadvantages to being an upper-class woman include more restrictions. She would be expected to spend more of her time indoors caring for her children and managing the household, and would have also had more pressure placed upon her to maintain the bloodline of her family, in order to carry on citizenship. If she were to sleep with another the bloodline would

[57] Rabinowitz (1993, 159) comments on the status of the wife in the home and how men's honor is tied to the women and can be tarnished through her. She states, "woman can make and unmake a culture."

be tarnished and her reputation as well as the reputation of her husband and children would diminish, which contributed to Phaedra's distress over her desire for Hippolytus. Phaedra's honor is an aspect that the Nurse criticizes, she says, "It is pride, nothing else, to try to best the gods" (475-476). The nurse, who would have been a slave, is not held to the same standards that Phaedra is. In terms of sexual intercourse she has no restrictions placed upon her, whereas Phaedra has many. Consequently, she does not really understand Phaedra's mindset and decisions. This can be seen as a social commentary reflecting the differences between the nobility and the common class of citizens and the different standards placed on both classes.

Phaedra's sense of honor and desire to be chaste and loyal to her husband and to preserve her own reputation as well as the reputation of her family would have been commendable in the eyes of Euripides' audience and would have made her sympathetic. It is her sense of honor that is wounded when Hippolytus rejects her and all women, and she worries about the reputation of her family and preserving it after her death. She chooses to destroy Hippolytus' honor, which looks more like arrogance, through her death. She states, "But my death will prove a bane to someone else so that he may learn not to exult over my misfortune; by sharing with me this malady he will learn moderation" (728-731). It is the pride of Hippolytus, or rather his haughtiness, that makes Phaedra even more sympathetic and places a woman's honor on the same level or even higher than that of a man in this tragedy.

Hippolytus, from the very beginning of the play, is concerned with his own appearance and virtue and flaunts these things publically. He feels that his chastity and

virtues match those of Artemis, the virgin goddess of the hunt, whom he devotes himself to. He refused to worship Aphrodite, the goddess of sex and love; he neglects her which leads her to hold a grudge against him (12-13). This haughtiness takes on a misogynistic tone when the Nurse eventually confronts him with Phaedra's desire. He launches into a tirade against women. In this tirade he calls women a bane to men's life (616). He also states that it would be better for men to propagate by making offerings to the altars of gods and in turn receiving children according to the value of the offering, thus, keeping men's houses free of women (617-624). He goes on to say that a woman are a waste of money and effort for both her father and her husband since the father has to pay to get rid of her and the husband has to pay for her to live and for finery to please the woman. In addition, the relationship between the husband and the in-laws is rough (628-637). Then he states that a stupid woman is the best woman because there is no need to worry about her because she has the inability to do any harm, it is the clever ones that are the most dangerous. He also states that there should be no contact between slaves and women so that they cannot hatch plans together to ruin the house of men (638-650). He finishes by stating, "I shall never take my fill of hating women, not even if someone says that I am always talking of it. For they too are always in some way evil. Let a man accordingly either teach them to be chaste or allow me to tread upon them forever!" (664-668).[58] These thoughts are not new for Euripides; they were present also in Jason's speech in *Medea*, and have been articulated before by philosophers and poets such as Hesiod and Semonides. As Zeitlin

[58] Being male of course he believed that women will never learn to be chaste because by nature women are insatiably lascivious. Gregory 1991, 66.

points out, by expressing the sentiments of Hesiod and Semonides, Hippolytus is a bearer of the golden age, he retains the views of poets admired for centuries.[59]

After this tirade it is difficult to be sympathetic towards Hippolytus, unlike the previous Hippolytus whose chastity was valiant in opposition to the previous Phaedra's lasciviousness. This Hippolytus is proud and misogynistic. This misogynistic thinking eventually plays a part in Hippolytus' death in addition to his self-righteousness. Theseus addresses Hippolytus, and before Hippolytus is able to blame anything on the thoughts and nature of women, Theseus states:

> You would make her a poor merchant of her own life, then, if she destroyed what was most precious to herself for enmity of you. But will you say that folly is not to be found in men but is native to women? I know young men who are no more stable than women when Cypris stirs their young hearts to confusion. But their standing as males serves them well. (964-970)

This seems to state that Hippolytus already thinks himself better than Phaedra because he is a male. However, even though this is not the case, Hippolytus never lets go of this feeling of being superior, even in the throes of death. When Artemis comes to him she says, "Yet it was the nobility of your mind that destroyed you" (1390).[60]

It was Phaedra's sense of honor that destroyed her as well, except her honor was more reserved because of her position as a wife and mother. Phaedra's honor and reputation were tied in to the reputation of her children, her husband, and her household and this is what motivated her to preserve her household against the things that might destroy it; Hippolytus and her own desire. Her role as a wife and mother obligated her to place the needs and honor of her children and husband before her

[59] Zeitlin 1996, 240. See also Gregory 1991, 66.
[60] Barrett 1964, 413.

own. It is not so much of a selfless act but an act that had to be taken. Adultery would not have been tolerated in the Greek world, particularly by the Athenians, and would have been a great hindrance to Phaedra in society; if she were to carry out her desires she would lose the freedom and reputation that she possessed. It was the preservation of her reputation as a good mother and the reputation of her family that motivated Phaedra to take the actions that she took.[61] Hippolytus' motivation was his own pride and honor, he never even cared about the fate of Phaedra, he never took her thoughts and feelings into consideration. As Gregory points out this was one of many miscalculations on Hippolytus' part. He had confidence in his invulnerability or innocence, and he did not realize the impression he had on other people especially his self-righteousness and chastity, which was excessive and hard to believe. It would have been hard to believe especially for the Athenian males, who did not rate chastity highly when considering virtues and morals.[62] This makes it very hard for the audience to sympathize with Hippolytus and easier to for them to sympathize with Phaedra. Phaedra's thoughts and feelings are understandable and expected; her sickness over love, and the love and preservation of the reputation of her husband and children before her own.

Euripides transformed Phaedra from the lascivious woman in *Hippolytus Kalyptomenos* to the Phaedra of *Hippolytus*, a woman who desires to be chaste and preserve the honor of her family by restraining her sexual desire she had no control over. Her thoughts and feelings would have been understood by Euripides' audience,

[61] Lattimore (1962) also shares this sentiment.
[62] Gregory 1991, 61.

especially by those who had ever experienced unrequited love or had been rejected. In addition, her desire to preserve the honor of her family would have been admired by Euripides' audience who admired women who put their families before themselves. In this way Euripides makes Phaedra's situation and mindset sympathetic and understandable to the audience. However, she does not receive sympathy and recognition for her capabilities by either the Nurse or Hippolytus. The Nurse, being from a different social class, does not understand the repercussions of what would happen if Phaedra gave into her desire for Hippolytus. Hippolytus, being a proud male with a misogynistic mindset, placed Phaedra in the same category of adulteresses and wanton women that Phaedra refuses to join, and goes so far as to curse her and all women. Phaedra takes rash actions against Hippolytus who she thinks might let the secret of her desire for him slip. These actions serve to show that she is willing to go to extreme measures to protect her family and to show him what she is capable of. Through Phaedra, Euripides is prompting his audience to question whether or not they understand the struggles and desires of women in their own society as well as the social restraints that cause women a great deal of anxiety and pain.

## **Helen**

Helen is one of the most renowned characters in Greek mythology; there were few Greeks who would not have known her name. She is notorious for being one of the most beautiful women that ever lived, an adulteress who left her husband to marry the Trojan prince, Paris, and the woman who caused the destruction of Troy and

thousands of deaths. Euripides' Athenian audience lived in a society where the ideal woman was least talked about and the least noticed. They would have thought of Helen as the worst sort of woman since she is one of the most talked about women in myth and tragedy and her notoriety comes from her beauty and the destruction that came of it. However, they were probably not the only ones who thought of her this way. This characterization of Helen began in mythology and dates back at least to the 8th century B.C. with the *Iliad*. In mythology she is widely known as the daughter of Zeus, wife of Menelaus, and the woman that Paris spirited away to Troy to be his princess, indirectly setting off the events that would lead to the Trojan War. [63]

The character Helen appears, or is mentioned, mainly in tragedies that focus on the Trojan War, such as Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Andromache, Hecuba, Electra, Trojan Woman,* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*.[64] Helen is depicted negatively in these tragedies, due to her culpability for the war that destroyed the lead characters' families and cities in these tragedies. It is no surprise that she is hated by the Trojans; however, she is also hated by the Greeks for the same reason. In *Electra* the chorus of Greek women say to Electra, "Greece and your house can blame your mother's sister, Helen, for many woes" (213-214). [65] She is also unforgiven in

[63]Gantz 1993, 564-566. There is a detailed account of the wooing of Helen that shows that it was somewhat unconventional in regards to the decision making process. In some accounts the Dioskouri chose Helen's suitor rather than Tyndareos and in other Helen makes her own decision. The presentation of suitors sometimes is accompanied with an oath that mandated that all Helen's suitors, either to prevent her being carried away by force or that the suitors would defend the one that becomes her husband and that the oath plays a large part in the beginnings of the Trojan war since many of Helen's suitor were heroes present in the *Iliad*.

[64] Wright (2005, 16) points out that Helen is an important figure in tragedy even though she is seldom seen, and that her influence is felt and frequently mentioned but hardly ever seen.

[65] Translations taken from Kovacs 1998.

*Iphigenia Among the Taurians* in which the chorus says, "Oh that my mistress' prayers Leda's beloved daughter Helen would come to this land leaving Troy's city behind and here with crimson dew encircling her head she would die by my lady's throat-cutting hand, paying the penalty she owes" (439-446).[66] In these tragedies Helen is always the cause of suffering, a whore, an adulteress, a villain, what every man should fear, and what every woman should avoid emulating. However, there is a tradition that runs contrary to this characterization of Helen.

In poetic tradition Helen's situation is understood, justified, or even changed making her the victim rather than the villain; this tradition includes the epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Cypria*,[67] and lyric poets from the 6th century B.C., Stesichorus and Sappho. In these poems Aphrodite or love seems to be the main culprit. In the *Iliad*, Priam does not blame Helen, he blames love (3.161-171).[68] According to the *Cypria*, which recounts the events before the Trojan War including the Judgment of Paris, the war was planned by Zeus to cleanse the earth and Helen seems to be just a scapegoat. Sappho, the famous female lyric poet, wrote a poem concerning Helen and Aphrodite's influence over her. In this poem, fragment 16, Sappho points out that Aphrodite was the true culprit and states that love led Helen astray.[69] She does not blame Helen for what she did, rather she justifies the actions of Helen and makes the reader feel sympathy for her rather than blame.[70] In her version Helen is a victim of

[66] Translations taken from Kovacs 1999.
[67] A lost epic that narrated the events before the *Iliad*.
[68] Translation taken from Murray 1999, 141.
[69] Sappho frag. 16 lines 5-14, see Campbell, 1982 67; Allan 2008, 13.
[70] Holmberg 1995, 25.

Eros. Stesichorus, a lyric poet in the 6th century B.C. who wrote in the epic genre focusing mainly on the Trojan War and its aftermath, wrote a palinode, fragment 192, in which he claimed that Helen never even went to Troy. This poem is lost, but is quoted in Plato's *Phaedrus* (243a), and is mentioned in Isocrates' *Helen* (64), and Plato's *Republic* (9.586c).[71] The palinode states that Helen was never in Troy, it was a phantom.[72] These stories would have been well known to Euripides' audience.

Euripides' audience might have expected to see the traditional version of Helen depicted in Euripides' previous tragedies in *Helen*. They would have expected the adulteress, whore, and city destroyer of *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women*; however, they are introduced to a completely different Helen. Once again Euripides took a mythic female who was stereotyped as a villain, and portrayed her within mitigating circumstances that make the audience think of her in a new, more sympathetic light. Euripides made use of all these traditions of Helen and combined them all in his tragedy, *Helen*, performed in 412 B.C. In *Helen*, Helen is no longer the adulteress, whore, and city destroyer; she is a virtuous woman, a loyal wife and mother, the embodiment of an ideal woman whose reputation was tarnished through the work of the gods.

[71] Three lines are quoted in the *Phaedrus* referring to Helen, "That story is not true./ You never sailed in the benched ships./ You never went to the city of Troy," translation from Fowler, 1914, 460-463. The same story is related in Isocrates' *Helen*, see Van Hook 1928, 95 for translation. These two instances do not mention the phantom. However, the phantom is mentioned in the *Republic*, "…just as Stesichorus describes the image of Helen being fought over by those at Troy, out of ignorance of the truth?" (9.586c), see Emlyn-Jones and Preddy 2013, 366-367 for translation.

[72] The palinode does not place Helen in Egypt; however, Herodotus in his *Histories* states that according to a priest in Memphis Helen was left by Paris in Troy (2.112-20) and Euripides' mentions that Helen was in Egypt in his Electra (1280-83). See Wright 2005, 87-110 and Kovacs 2002, 2.

In this tragedy Helen is remorseful, she blames herself for what has happened at Troy just as others blame her even though what happened was against her will. The destruction of Troy is attached to her name, she states, "many lives were lost by Scamander's stream because of me. And I, who have suffered everything, am cursed by men, and all think that I have abandoned my husband and brought a great war upon the Greeks" (52-55).[73] Helen's reputation has been tarnished, others view her as a monstrous woman, and she feels responsibility for the war despite the fact that she was never there.[74] However, it was the actions of the gods that brought her to Egypt and sent a phantom off to Troy with Paris. Helen recounts these actions which include the Judgment of Paris, Hera's anger at not being named the most beautiful goddess which caused her to create the phantom Helen, and Zeus' plan to launch a war and put forward Helen as a prize (23-43). Helen, in this tragedy, is a victim of the gods. She did not choose to go with Paris nor did she choose to be placed in Egypt, she was taken against her will (244-251). She is also reviled for her beauty, and struggles with it throughout the tragedy.

Helen is most famous for being the most beautiful woman in the world, yet she does not appreciate her beauty because it was the reason that she was offered to Paris, why she is desired and placed in the position that she is in, and because it is the source of her infamy. It has caused so much suffering, she says, "while other women are made happy by their beauty, mine is the very thing that has destroyed me" (304-305). Helen mourns her beauty often and goes so far as to reject it saying, "My life and

[73] Translations taken from Kovacs 2002.
[74] Wolff 1973, 300.

fortunes are a monstrosity, partly because of Hera, partly because of my beauty. I wish I had been wiped clean like painting and made plain instead of beautiful, and that the Greeks had forgotten the evil fate that I now have and remembered what is good, just as they now remember what is ill!" (260-266). Helen is willing to give up the reputation and fame that her beauty has brought her in order to be viewed in a different light. Helen would much rather be valued for her reputation as an honorable wife and mother, but this is difficult considering the circumstances.

It has already been established that Helen's reputation has been tarnished because of the gods and because of her beauty, but she also faces other problems including her status as a foreigner and her loss of home and family. Helen recounts these things beginning with the evil reputation placed upon her, saying that it is worse than if it were true (270-272). She is worried about her social well-being; how she would function in society. Allen states that this would have been vastly important in Greek society and ethics, and it is understandable why Helen would place this first; it would have determined her place and role in Greece.[75] Helen utilizes this as a means to persuade Theonoe to help her and Menelaus escape later in the tragedy, she says:

> I am in misery from the troubles that surround me: rescue me performing this as an extra to your deed of justice. All men hate Helen, every single one. It is reported throughout Hellas that I abandoned my husband and went to live in the Phyrgians' gilded halls. But if I reach Greece and walk once more in Sparta, men will hear and see that they were ruined by the god's contrivances and that I was not after all a traitor to my family. They will restore my virtue to me once more, and I shall betroth my unmarried daughter to a husband. Leaving behind life of beggary here I shall have the enjoyment of what belongs to me at home. (294-935)

[75] Allan 2008, 181.

Helen is very much concerned about her reputation and how she appears to others but only because it will benefit her family. She wants to be reunited with Menelaus to prove that she is not a whore, to marry her daughter, and restore her own reputation as well as the reputations of her husband and daughter.

Helen's motivation, morals, values, and strength lie in her sense of marital fidelity and role as a wife and mother rather than her reputation. She has fought to remain loyal to Menelaus; in the beginning she had thrown herself down on the tomb of Proteus, and said, "Hence honoring the husband I once had I have flung myself as a suppliant on this tomb of Proteus so that it may keep me inviolate for him: even if my name is reviled in Greece, my body shall not here be put to shame" (63-67). It is not solely her name that Helen is concerned about, even more so is her concern for the purity of her body for her husband and being a loyal wife. Even after she learned that Menelaus was reported dead she refused to remarry and decided that killing herself would be best. She says, "When a woman is married to a man she dislikes, even her own body becomes distasteful to her" (296-297). When she is reunited with Menelaus she once again is willing to sacrifice herself to save him, she says to him, "Yes, leave me: far worse to be killed because of your wife" (807). It is also on the basis of her marriage and fidelity that she persuades Theonoe (236-943) and deceives Theoclymenus (1399-1404) to escape Egypt. Euripides' audience would no longer see Helen as the adulterous whore but as the epitome of an ideal wife and Greek woman and would have had sympathy for her and the situation that she has been placed in.[76]

[76] Helen is compared to Alcestis and Penelope who are also women who fight to preserve their marriage beds and the survival of their husbands. See Foley 2001, 303-304; Holmberg 1995, 36; Allan 2008, 54.

Euripides in addition to changing his audience's view about Helen also gives her a central and active role in the tragedy, essentially making her the hero. Euripides' audience would have probably expected Menelaus, traditionally depicted as a Greek hero, to step in and to assume the role of the hero, yet Menelaus' heroics are lacking in this tragedy. He washes up on the Egyptian shore afraid to appear in front of anyone because he is embarrassed; he has lost his kingly clothing, his men, as well as anything that would mark him as a Greek king or Trojan War hero (415-423). In addition to the loss of these material objects he also faces a loss of identity. Being on a foreign shore no one knows who he is; his heroic self-image and past do not matter in Egypt.[77] He asks an old woman for help citing that he is a warrior and she says, "You were evidently a person of importance somewhere, but not here" (454). Menelaus had relied on his name to aid him, he assumed that everyone would know who he was because of his exploits (500-504), although the opposite is true. His name does not matter, it is able to do nothing to save him. He is in a situation similar to Helen, they are both facing disgrace and shame, although, they have different perceptions of their losses. Segal states that Menelaus' glory rested in his role in the Trojan War and his disgrace and shame are focused on his loss of men, kingly robes, and rank. Whereas Helen's glory is in her role as an honorable wife and mother and her disgrace and shame rests in the loss of her home and family and her "role" in the Trojan War due to the reputation that it brought her in society.[78] Helen's perception seems to be more tangible and useful outside of Greek society, whereas Menelaus' is useless.

[77] Segal, 1971, 576.
[78] Segal 1971, 577.

Both Helen and Menelaus attempt to regain their glory and honor; however, Helen is able to do so more effectively. Menelaus steps aside and allows her to play the active role and to make the plans; first in the persuasion of Theonoe (830) and then when she proposes her plan of escape. Helen comes up with the plan, albeit using deception, and essentially saves Menelaus and herself, but she is able to do so and to avoid condemnation for her deception because of her virtue. Helen has strong values, morals, will, and motivation to succeed, and is also clever and aware of her surroundings. She knows that killing the king would be impossible as she tells Menelaus, who proposes that he prove himself worthy of Troy (808-809), and comes up with the ruse to trick Theoclymenus, which Menelaus readily goes along with knowing that her deception will allow him to survive.[79]

Some scholars state that through these acts of deceit Helen is reverting back to the "old" Helen; the dangerous and destructive Helen.[80] However, Helen is deceiving Theoclymenus in order to save Menelaus and herself which would fall in line with the heroic code; doing good to your friends and punishing your enemies.[81] However, it is not just the heroic code that makes her action acceptable but her virtue and her fate, or destiny. In the final scene of the tragedy Theoclymenus is irate that Helen escaped through "womanish tricks" and is planning on going after the boat that she is traveling in with Menelaus and punishing his sister, Theonoe, who he felt betrayed him (1621-1626). However, the Dioskouri come and tell him that Helen was fated to return to

[79] Foley 2001, 319.
[80] Juffras 1993, 56-57; Allan 2008, 51; Holmberg 1995, 36.
[81] Bouvrie 1990, 297.

Sparta with Menelaus and proclaim that Helen will be worshiped as a goddess (1642-1679). Helen, even though she utilized deception and trickery, was just carrying out the will of the gods and her fate. These are heroic traits and methods that would have been acceptable in male heroes and are acceptable in Helen in this tragedy. They are not condemned, other than by Theoclymenus, but are praised. Theoclymenus on account of the words of the Dioskouri changes his tune, he says, "Know that you are brothers to a sister who is at once most brave and most virtuous. I wish you joy for the sake of Helen's most noble heart! Not many women have a heart like hers!" (1684-1687). He no longer sees Helen as a despicable woman with magnificent beauty, he now sees her as a good woman. In this tragedy Euripides enables Helen to effectively change her position and to be recognized for her virtue and honor.

*Helen* ends with a happy ending that seems out of place for tragedy, but as most tragedies do, it focuses on human morals, motivations, and relationships. *Helen* in particular focuses on Helen's virtue and the relationship between Helen and Menelaus. Her motives are honorable and virtuous, everything that she attempts to do is motivated towards making things right. It is also important to note that Helen and Menelaus' love is reciprocal and they have an equal relationship, something that was rather uncommon in tragedy. It might be due to the circumstances that Menelaus is placed in, but Euripides seems to have done it for a reason. Their marriage is exhibited throughout the tragedy as one full of love and blessed (639-641,722-723). Menelaus also seems to have a great amount of confidence in Helen's abilities, allows her to take the lead, and values her ideas.

Euripides, through his modification of the character of Helen from a woman who was renowned for being a city destroying whore and adulteress into the ideal wife and woman, and in addition portraying her relationship with Menelaus as one with love and equality, forces his audience to question their own perceptions of their wives and women's place in society. Helen in this tragedy is a loving wife and mother, attempting to remain chaste even though she is desired for her beauty and in a harsh situation in which she has been accused of instigating the Trojan War, as well as having been deprived of her family, home, and husband. Euripides' audience would have felt sympathetic toward her and understood her need to remain chaste and to restore her reputation and consequently the reputation of her husband and child. Her goal is admirable and so are the means in which she carries it out. She makes her own decisions and does so on the behalf of Menelaus, though she does use trickery, she uses it in a heroic manner, to save her friend and do harm to her enemy.

Euripides might have been prompting his audience to question the skills that women possess. Helen is able to think and to reason, to make decisions, and make them without letting her emotions cloud her judgment. In every decision she makes she always places her family first. Euripides might have also been provoking his audience to consider the importance of wives and mothers in Athenian society and to question their own recognition of women and wives, and whether they should have recognition or not. Helen and Menelaus are able to escape because Menelaus recognizes Helen's capabilities and desires. As Foley states, "It is curious to find tragedy publically celebrating the courage and ingenuity of married women before a

society that did not include the possibility of public reputation for virtue in its definition of the ideal wife."[82] Euripides' elevation of Helen, Allan points out, does not necessarily mean that Euripides was appealing for Athenian women to be given a higher status,[83] Euripides just wanted his audience to think about their wives, daughters, and mothers and their own virtues and capabilities and to question whether there was more to them than they originally thought.

[82] Foley 2001, 304, in addition to Helen Foley also mentions Alcestis another ideal wife that Euripides creates in his tragedy.
[83] Allan 2008, 54-55

## Conclusion

Euripides' misogynistic reputation is unfounded. A close examination of quotes taken from the works of Aristophanes, the female characters that Euripides utilized, and these women's actions in myth and tragedy shows that Euripides, rather than being a misogynist, was aware of the struggles of women. He was particularly aware of women's struggle for recognition and understanding in 5th century B.C. Athenian society and aimed to make their issues known. Euripides, was able to project the struggles of Athenian women and the ideas and assumptions held by 5th century B.C. Athenian males through his works.

In *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *Helen*, Euripides fashioned the leading women in these tragedies to resemble Athenian women. Women in 5th century B.C. Athenian socio-political culture were denigrated and subordinated by men. They did not have the same liberties and freedoms that Athenian male citizens possessed and were held to different standards. There was a lack of understanding by Athenian males in regards to the thoughts, emotions, and feelings of women. The women in Euripides' tragedies encounter the same struggles; to be understood and recognized just as women would in 5th century B.C. Athens. Each of these female characters also had a family and a home, and cared deeply about all matters that affected them. Home and family were very important to an Athenian woman because they were the center of her daily activities and were where her sense of belonging, esteem, and satisfaction generated.

In each of the tragedies, *Medea, Hippolytus*, and *Helen*, the central female character is faced with the loss or disruption of her family and home units and struggles for recognition. Medea is faced with the loss of her husband for another woman, which would tear apart her family and result in loss of esteem. Phaedra falls in love with her stepson, which, if she acted upon it, would lead to a charge of adultery which would bring shame upon her and her family. Helen, having been taken from her homeland and separated from her husband, faces the loss of home and family, and has a reputation as an adulteress. Each of these women is faced with a struggle that a 5th century B.C. Athenian woman would face; a struggle for understanding of their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and abilities by the men in their lives.

Euripides, through his works, is able to give his audience a new perspective. The Athenian male citizens that made up his audience could see the views and assumption that they held about women projected back at them and were able to see the struggle of women more clearly through Euripides' tragedies. He was able to show them that there were tensions, misconceptions, and issues concerning women that needed to be addressed in Athenian society. Euripides placed those issues before his audience and prompted them to question their own beliefs, conceptions, and ideologies, particularly those about women. However, he did not give them a solution, or tell them how to feel or view those issues. He wanted his audience to think for themselves, and to address the issues that they saw before them by talking about them, as Esch says, "the purpose is not to find a final solution, but to facilitate debate on

these matters."[84] Euripides felt that social change was in order, however, he did not take sides, rather, he aimed to facilitate understanding through his works, particularly through his female characters in *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *Helen*.

[84] Esch 2013, 228.

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