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Andromache: Denial and Despair

Gaia Cloutier

The majority of the *Iliad* focuses on the lives of men and the gods. Book Six, however, is set in the city of Troy itself. With this more domestic focus, Book Six depicts both what is expected of women in war and how the women in Troy conform to or subvert these expectations. Through Hector's interactions with his mother and sister-in-law, he reveals how he believes women should behave during wartime. He believes that the women in his life should either continue their domestic lives as usual or turn to prayer; both are roles that aid the war effort and city in some way. Hecuba and Helen do what is expected of them, but Andromache does not. Andromache fails to meet these expectations because she has no illusions about the reality of war and her own powerlessness to affect her fate, causing her to feel extreme grief and despair. The effects of her knowledge of reality are magnified by the other women's more practical responses to the siege. While Andromache's responses are more truthful to the reality of war, Hecuba and Helen's reactions are more necessary to the city.

Based on Book Six of the *Iliad*, Trojan women are expected to fall into two categories during war. The first, represented by Hecuba, is a woman engaged in prayer and ceremony. The purpose of Hector's return to Troy is to ask his mother and the other noble women to pray to Athena. Hector tells his mother "you are the one to pray" (6.318), implying that it is the duty of women to participate in the upcoming ceremony. The ceremony that Hector requests his mother to perform is one that the men are not able to perform because they are currently fighting a battle. Men do perform sacrifices and ceremonies throughout the *Iliad*, but they usually prioritize actual fighting over prayer. Men have a duty to fight the war, which prevents them from performing elaborate and lavish ceremonies. The women, however, are free to participate in elaborate rituals even in the middle of a battle. While men are able to pray to their patron gods and promise them future riches during the heat of battle, the gods can receive things that they "prize most" (6.323) immediately from the women inside the walls of Troy. For these selfish gods, immediate offerings are favored more than promised gifts, enabling women to offer something that men cannot. Hecuba and the other noblewomen gladly accept the order from soldiers to pray for them and devoutly make grand offerings to Athena. Hecuba goes to a "storeroom filled with scent" (6.341) and retrieves the "largest, loveliest, richly worked" (6.348-349) robe to offer to Athena. When they proceed to the temple, the noble women are described as filing behind Hecuba. These rich offerings and the ordered manner of the noblewomen implies a ceremony filled with the luxury, order, and formality normally featured in palace life. During the siege, Hecuba has transferred her usual way of life from the palace to religious matters.

The other female type that men expect in war is that of the housewife. When Hector sees Helen, she is "sitting with all the women of the house, directing the rich embroidered work they had in hand" (6.381-382). Fulfilling her domestic duties, Helen is seeing to the household work in the same way that she does during peacetime. She creates elaborate cloth and oversees the upkeep of her house. When she invites Hector to "come in, rest on this seat" (6.420), she is behaving like the hostess that she was raised to be. In this she behaves as if Troy is in a time of peace, not a nine year long war. During the siege, Helen and other women must maintain the

city while the men fight. Troy should not be ignored for nine years in favor of worrying about the outcome of the war.

Hecuba and Helen conform to the expected female roles of ceremonial leader and housewife, respectively. Both of these behaviors contribute to the war effort in some way. Hector's question concerning the location of Andromache demonstrates that he believes women should occupy only two realms during war. He believes that she has either gone to his "sisters' house...with their long flowing robes...or Athena's shrine" (6. 449-450). It does not even occur to Hector that his wife could be occupied by anything outside of her domestic or religious duties during the siege.

Andromache, unlike the other noble women, is unable to participate in either realm. This seems to be largely because of her inability to repress her emotions. Instead of praying for her husband's life, petitioning the gods, or overseeing daily life in Troy with the other noble women, Andromache is constantly weeping. The majority of the descriptions of Andromache throughout Book Six refer to her as "sobbing, grieving" (6.444), "in panic, like a madwoman" (6.460), "weeping freely" (6.481), "smiling through her tears" (6.578), "weeping live warm tears" (6.592), and raising "a high pitch of mourning" (6.596). Her grief overwhelms all other aspects of her character and becomes her primary descriptor. Unlike the other noble women, Andromache cannot control her emotions and act with dignity. When she does perform a religious ritual, such as mourning her husband prematurely, she does not act with the formality of the noble women praying to Athena. Overwhelmed by grief, she can only raise "a high pitch of mourning" (6.596) that bears no resemblance to the ordered and ritualized ceremony Homer describes earlier in Book Six.

Her grief and panic also prevent Andromache from fulfilling her domestic responsibilities. She does not nurture her child, who, as "only a baby" (6.472), is held by a nurse as his mother panics "like a madwoman" (6.460). When Hector asks her to "go home and tend to (her) own tasks...and keep the women working hard as well" (6.585-587), Andromache instead causes the entire household to abandon their work and participate in her madness. Because she cannot suppress her emotions, Andromache cannot control her actions. Where the other women are able to place their duty to their city and their homes above their own emotions, Andromache is obsessed with her fears and worries. Andromache's overwhelming grief alienates her from all sense of duty, preventing her from performing either domestic or religious duties.

Andromache is not unique in feeling fear and grief. Hecuba and Helen both display strong emotions within Book Six as well as the larger epic. Helen feels guilt for the war, longs to return home, and worries for her family. Hecuba displays her grief and fear in her encounter with Hector. Both women, however, are able to repress these emotions in order to perform needed duties. The women are both able to conform to what is expected of them because they can prioritize the war effort over their own emotions. Andromache cannot overcome her grief to act in the way Hector asks her. The contrast between the actions of Helen, Hecuba, and Andromache can be at least partially explained by the different backgrounds of the three women. Hecuba has lived the majority of her life in a city said to be impregnable and blessed by the gods, so she turns to prayer during the siege. Helen was married to the warrior king of Sparta. Because of his power, she never had to fear for her life or her city. Instead, she continues her life overseeing her home.

Andromache, however, has lived through an Achaean assault at Cilicia. She has no illusions about the reality of war. Her memories of the past and her fear for the future combine to create the grief and despair from which she cannot emerge. When Andromache begs Hector

to remain within the safety of the walls "before you orphan your son and make your wife a widow" (6.512), she expresses the fears of most women during war. Her fears are more intense, however, because she has seen war and its consequences. When Andromache recounts the destruction of Cilicia, she reveals everything that she has already lost due to war with the Achaeans. She has already seen one home destroyed and fears the same fate for Troy.

Andromache's account of her experience with war reveals what she believes will happen at Troy. Andromache recalls how "the brilliant Achilles laid [her father] low" (6.492), and all seven of her brothers "went down to the House of Death" (6.501) in the same day. She sees no alternative for her husband and brothers-in-law than the fate that befell her own brothers when they faced the Achaeans. Hector himself confirms her fears when he acknowledges that "Troy must die, Priam must die and all his people with him" (6.531-532). Hector, Andromache, and the reader all know that Andromache's fears are reasonable. She has no illusions about the consequences of war. This understanding of the realities facing her fuels and validates her fear. When Andromache tells Hector "you are my father now, my noble mother, a brother too, and you are my husband" (6.508-509), it is revealed how interwoven her fears and memories are. When she looks at her husband, she not only worries for his future, she also relives every loss from her past. Hector now represents every person she has lost. To Andromache, losing Hector would mean losing everyone again. With this mixture of intense grief and fear, Andromache can only panic on the walls of Troy.

Another dimension to Andromache's despair is her awareness of her own fate if Hector and Troy fall. When remembering the destruction of Cilicia, she mentions how Achilles took her "mother, who ruled" (6.504) and "haled her...with his other plunder" (6.505). The fact that she was a queen did not save Andromache's mother from becoming a slave, nor will it save Andromache. As soon as Troy falls, she will transform from royalty to a spoil of war. Following the destruction of Troy, all she can expect is "some brazen Argive...wrenching away (her) day of light and freedom!" (6.540-541). She will become the slave of the people who destroyed her city and her people. Instead of being killed, she will be forced to do hard labor and be raped often.

The horror and violence of Andromache's fate is emphasized by the violent phrases Homer uses to describe her future, such as "hale you off" (6.540), "the rough yoke of necessity" (6.546), "wrenching" (6.541), and "dragged away" (6.555). Based on this understanding of her fate, Andromache believes that it would be "better...to sink beneath the earth" (6.488) than to endure "nothing but torment!" (6.490) for the rest of her life. The only way for Andromache to escape her fate is through death. The fact that Andromache's choice is either slavery or death illustrates how powerless she is in influencing her future. When pleading with Hector, Andromache claims that "destiny weighs me down" (6.485). To her, fate is manifested as weight she cannot escape, like a chain binding her as a slave. Because it is associated with an image of slavery, the qualities of the men who will enslave Andromache are transferred to destiny. To Andromache, fate is violent, oppressive, and inescapable. Just as when she considered the fate of Troy, Andromache has no delusions of her control of the situation. She understands that she cannot affect her fate, making her despair even more severe. Knowing that she cannot control her fate through any means, Andromache has no reason to try to suppress her grief.

The contrast between Hecuba, Helen, and Andromache emphasizes how denial and despair can completely affect each woman's response to the war. The behaviors displayed by Hecuba and Helen in Book Six can only be achieved through denial. In praying to the gods, Hecuba acts as if she can actively change her fate and the outcome of the war. In reality, she can

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only passively wait for the whims of the gods to change or for the battles to end. Helen behaves as if it is peacetime and she has nothing to fear. Despite the fact that the two women are living in denial about reality, they do perform their duties as needed for the sake of Troy. When Andromache views war without illusion, she succumbs to despair and ignores her duties. She is the only woman that fully understands the truth about her fate, but that knowledge is detrimental to both herself and her city. Despair may be the truthful response to the horrors of the war, but Troy does not need the panic and disorder that this response causes. It needs order and hope. To continue functioning during the siege, Troy needs denial.

Bibliography

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