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The Rise of Ancient Greek Philosophy

Religion is a vital component of society. It is the thing that holds a community together on the grounds of common beliefs, regardless of personal disagreements. It offers explanations for the unexplainable and the unknown. Religion was the primary force that drove the formation of civilizations, and its significance persisted throughout ancient Greece and Rome. However, throughout time, there have been various groups of skeptics who believed that these religious ideas did not correctly explain most natural phenomena and that religion was made up mostly of mere superstitions. Instead, these skeptics, who came to be known as philosophers, thought that everything can be explained through logic or science. Some of the earliest philosophers were led by Socrates, the first man who actively publicized and spread philosophy. With pure logic, he was able to question many popular beliefs of the time very convincingly, which triggered an intellectual awakening, the impacts of which can be seen in many historical texts. The *Women of Troy*, a play written by Euripides in the 4th century B.C.E, is a prime example of this. It recounts the suffering of the Trojan women after the fall of Troy. This play's attitude towards the gods is completely different from anything written before the socratic movement, like the *Iliad*, an epic written down by Homer that describes the Trojan war in general. The shift in Ancient Greek literature from the glorifying descriptions of the gods to the disparaging depictions of the gods reflect the Greek philosophical movements of the time.

Written in 800 B.C.E. by Homer, the *Iliad* depicts the Gods in a higher-than-life fashion and makes them seem all-powerful and flawless, suggesting the Greeks' unconditional worship of the Gods. In Book Six, Helenos commands Hektor to assemble the honored women of the city to give offerings to Athene, believing that "she might hold back from sacred Ilion the son of Tydeus... the strongest of all the Achains" (73). Here, instead of rallying the Trojan soldiers to defeat Diomedes (the son of Tydeus), he urges Hektor to pray to a Goddess to do it for them, clearly demonstrating his confidence in the power of the Gods. He does not question Athene's ability; rather, he accepts that her 'divine' powers can accomplish anything. More importantly, Helenos does not question the authority or existence of the Gods even the slightest bit, revealing his complete faith in the Gods and the religion of Ancient Greeks. In turn this shows the unwavering religious piety of the Greeks, because the *Iliad* was passed down orally through many generations. For a story of this magnitude (nearly 16,000 lines divided amongst 24 books) to be passed down orally through even one generation, it must have been immensely popular amongst the people. The fact that the story still depicts the Gods in a perfect manner at the time it was finally written down demonstrates the religious devotion of the Greek population. Furthermore, the gods and goddesses are referred to with recurring epithets/adjectives, which imply a high level of respect. The god Zeus is referred to with the epithet "the powerful" (76), which acts as a constant reminder of Zeus' power and immortality. Athene is repeatedly referred to as "the lovely haired" (73), giving her a graceful status that is unmatched by any female mortal in the *Iliad*. Also, the presence of the word "the" in front of these epithets suggests that each god/goddess is the ultimate individual of their description (i.e. Zeus is *the* ultimate powerful entity, the most powerful entity). Epithets are used for mortal characters as well, but those

phrases are far less superior and impactful. Some examples include the “hard-working housekeeper” (77) and “blameless Boukolion” (71). Even the King of Troy, Laomedon, was only given the title of “haughty” (71). Besides from being inferior in importance to the epithets of the gods, it is also imperfect and flawed, separating him from the Gods. Only a few vital characters, like Hektor, hold aliases of similar degree to those of the gods. That was intentionally done as to give them a god-like status, emphasizing their Thus, the Gods are portrayed as perfect beings in the *Iliad*, demonstrating the strong piousness of the Greeks at the time.

In *The Trojan Women*, Euripides characterizes the Gods critically and exposes their flawed personalities. The play begins with a dialogue between two gods, Poseidon and Athene, after the fall of Troy. In this dialogue, both Poseidon and Athene are negatively depicted. Poseidon complains that Troy, the city that “[he] and Apollo built”, is “stripped, sacked and smouldering”. He goes on to say that “now [he] must leave Ilion the famous, leave [his] altars. When desolation falls like a blight, the day for the worship of gods is past” (129). This phrase is especially important because it is stated in a way that it seems as if Poseidon is feeling bad for himself rather than for Troy, even though Troy is in ashes. Poseidon concludes his opening monologue by blaming Athene for the sacking of Troy, claiming that “[Troy] would stand firm yet, were it not for Athene”. This whole monologue characterizes him as a naive child because he is essentially whining about an event that he did not even help to prevent and blaming others for it. To make it worse, he is less concerned about Troy as he is about himself in the end. Then, there’s Athene. She enters the scene right after Poseidon’s monologue and starts rambling about how she wants to punish the Greeks by making their “homeward voyage disastrous” (130). Now, Athene suddenly changes her opinion about the Greeks from love and support to hate and

contempt because the Greeks did not give her enough credit for the “decisive help [she] gave them in winning the war”. This reveals how arrogant and selfish Athene is, helping the Greeks slaughter the Trojans just to be worshipped. Not only that, she then wants to get revenge when they don’t honor her to the extent she expects by killing them on their voyage home. She does not care how many people die because of her selfishness, further emphasizing her undesirable personality. Poseidon, meanwhile, completely changes his facade. Within just a few lines, Poseidon’s contempt for Athene morphed into respect, to the degree that he acts almost like her servant, uttering phrases like “my powers await your wishes, Athene”. Both Athene and Poseidon change their ideals in short spans of time, demonstrating their extreme caprice. Euripides uses this dialogue in the opening to criticize the gods on a whole new level. He characterizes them as capricious, whiny, arrogant, and selfish, conveying his strong skepticism towards the gods. Not only does he criticize the gods openly in the opening lines, he also hints at it in the rest of the entire play through the Trojan women’s suffering. As tragic events happen one by one, the women plea to the gods, questioning how they could let it happen. But those are not the most notable examples; Helen’s ‘trial’ is definitely the most extreme. As the play approaches the end, Helen was brought out in front of Menelaos, where Hecabe convinces Menelaos to give her a chance to plead her case. Helen argues that she was completely innocent in the whole Trojan war and that the gods did it all. She persistently claims that the gods controlled her the whole time and that she had no choice, and yet suffered the consequences. Hecabe, meanwhile, argues that the gods played no role in Helen’s decisions and that she did everything out of lust/arrogance. According to Ancient Greek religion, it was perfectly plausible that the gods controlled everything. In fact, the gods were often used to explain human

interactions. However, the fact that Hecabe immediately rejected the explanation blaming the gods with a more logical explanation featuring Helen's personality is powerful, especially since Menelaos is more convinced by Hecabe. Also, note that Hecabe has been, more or less, the protagonist of the play, so she is unconsciously favored by the audience and in turn, her beliefs are too. Moreover, the play was also popular enough to survive until today, so it must have been representative of public opinion at the time. Through *The Trojan Women*, the gods are heavily criticized and not relied on as much to explain every human action, which suggests the increasing skepticism of the Greek population towards the gods.

The contrast between the perspective of the gods at the time the *Iliad* was written (800 B.C.E. and the perspective of the gods at the time *The Trojan Women* was written (400 B.C.E.) can be attributed to the rise of philosophy in Ancient Greece. The first greek philosophers came about in the 6th century B.C.E., and their ideas were developed until Socrates came into the picture at about 500 B.C.E. He helped spread those ideas to the Greek public, and taught the future generations of Greeks about philosophy. Socrates was one of the first to question the existence of the gods and argued that since nobody has ever seen them, they most likely do not exist. Moreover, he emphasized the use of logic and argued that logic is the key to understanding anything. His influence resonated deeply with the Greeks. Socrates led the next generation of philosophers, many of whom inspired Euripides himself. Euripides, who according to "Introduction to *Trojan Women*" was an "associate of philosophers and intellectuals" (1), wrote plays that "often depict characters who are skeptical about traditional beliefs" (1). Though he was often criticized for writing in this manner, his plays became wildly popular. This was the case in the *Trojan women*, where the gods were not portrayed as perfect beings, but rather as

flawed individuals. Criticizing the gods would have been treasonous before the philosophical movements of the 6th century. The *Iliad* is reflective of that time period, where the gods were showered unconditional honor and worship. The gods were glorified as perfect divinities, with sublime aliases that separated them from the mortals, who all had their flaws. The opposing opinions of the gods in the *Iliad* versus *The Trojan Women* displays the impact of the rise of Greek philosophy.

The *Iliad* and *The Trojan Women* are both infamous examples of ancient Greek literature that describe the Trojan war. Yet, their themes and content differ so greatly: the *Iliad* praises the gods while *The Trojan Women* criticizes them. The Greek philosophical movements of the 6th century B.C.E. had such a great influence on Greek culture that it affected every aspect of their society, from literature to politics. Its impact on Ancient Greek literature is undeniable, and its effect on society for the coming centuries and even millennia is profound. Ancient Greek philosophy is still discussed around the world. The religious situation is more similar to the Ancient Greek age than most people believe, and the debate of religion versus logic/science stands. Ancient Greek philosophy remains pertinent and is the source of many existing philosophies today.