

Alex Pepe

Professor Fiske

Greek

22 February 2016

### An Estate Of Women

*An Estate of Memory* by Ilona Karmel is a perfect analogue to *The Trojan Women* by Euripides because both depict the lives of women who have no control over their own destinies at the hands of the wars going on around them. Comparing the Greeks to the Nazis seems like a bit of a stretch, but in this case it works because both parties take hostages, and they are free to kill or mistreat them as they see fit. Those who resist will die, and those who choose the path of expediency may end up dying anyway on a whim. The future is never certain for captives under both regimes, and indeed horrible and dehumanizing atrocities occurred under both.

The settings of both works are man-made desolate products of war and needless violence, whether it is a concentration camp or a sacked and destroyed Troy. Some further similarities include the absolute necessity of survival, safety, and above all else staying alive. These women know that they cannot hope to revolt against their captors, and thus most of both works are all about trying to survive unscathed, hoping that they can survive long enough in order for the danger to pass. Their futures are constantly fretted about and uncertain, as things change very quickly in both works because the Greeks and the Nazis both are constantly changing the rules. For example in *The Trojan Women*, one moment it seems like Astyanax will live, and the next he must be tossed from the walls of Troy to his death (Euripides 70). Similarly in *An Estate of Memory*, one moment it seems like there will be a raid of the barracks and all those found hiding punished severely, and the next nothing happens (Karmel 33). It is a form of mental warfare that both Greeks and Nazis play on their captives in order to keep them guessing and uncertain about their futures in order to keep

them from organizing any semblance of rebellion.

Some differences however include the way in which each group of women operates. In *The Trojan Women* they are not shown to have any sort of interest in violating the patriarchal rules in place by the victorious Greeks, they simply have to comply. There is no choice in the matter despite how unsavory their demands are. The only thing they can do is voice their opinion on whatever fate has judged them and whatever the Greeks have decided. As long as they stay alive, this is what is important. In *An Estate of Memory* however, these women are extremely careful to push the envelope in order to survive. They are not technically allowed to hide but of course they do hide when they are being searched for. Babies are killed if they are discovered, but they simply must make sure that it is carried to term. Despite the looming threat of their overseers, they try their best to stay alive even if it goes against the rules. However, despite this, these women do not have a platform to voice their opinions on what is going on around them. This is more likely a difference in the genres of both works, but on the other hand it cannot be said that the Nazis were well known for allowing their prisoners to air their grievances.

This key difference between the two works that cannot be ignored however; *The Trojan Women* is a play, and thus the women have the generic platform with which to speak their opinions on what is happening to them just by nature of the genre determining that they must. The audience depends on their spoken word in order to acquire their feelings on their predicament. With *An Estate of Memory* however, a reader gets not only the visceral reactions of the characters as the events of the story take place, but their thoughts as well just on the basis of the omniscient narrator. The women's thoughts on the events of the story are not exactly rational at the time that they happen, because the emotions of their reactions are so visceral and human that the audience can sympathize with the characters on an emotional level. The very fact that the audience gets that internal view as well as the external view of

their reactions brings the characters and their peril to life.

Another key difference between *The Trojan Women* and *An Estate of Memory* is the constant theme of motion. The characters are never very still for very long in the latter, because they are always on the run from something or someone. It does not matter that they are confined in the camps most of the time, because even though they are not running away from the camps necessarily they are indeed running and hiding from the danger within the camps' walls. You do not strictly see this kind of peril in, so the women do not strictly move around as much. In *An Estate of Memory* however, the constant motion is the difference between life or death for the women because being in the wrong place at the wrong time is certain death. This constant peril and constant motion acts to increase the tension of the story and makes one wonder what the role of expediency is in this story if the women are constantly running.

Expediency in *The Trojan Women* is quite simple, for the women must either comply with their assigned fates or die in resistance. Expediency in *An Estate of Memory* however is a very different beast because if one complies with the Nazis then one is half the time likely to end up dead than if they had not complied. The women of the novel hide when they must despite the act of it being forbidden within the camp, for the prisoners were supposed to come when called. But sometimes the women feared that if they complied with this they would all summarily be killed or maimed, and most times they are not wrong. It makes the choice of compliance excruciatingly difficult for the women because if they guess the intentions of their captors wrong, they could very well wind up dead.

Survival in both works depends upon what age range that the captured fall into, for the young and the old are both less likely to survive than those in the middle. Considering Astyanax once more, he had no chance of survival because of his young age and the fear that he would grow up to avenge his father and his city. In *An Estate of Memory*, those who are

older live every day in fear that their lives will be taken from them because of their lack of perceived usefulness. Indeed as well, youths suffer the same fate within the walls of the camps because they are either too young to be of use or they are too weak. It takes a very specific person with a very specific age and a very specific intuition then to survive in the camps then, and this causes much distress amongst the captured women.

As previously discussed, expediency plays a big role in *The Trojan Women* as to self-preservation, but in *An Estate of Memory* self-preservation has a much greater value because of the intuition one must have in order to survive the conditions of the camp and the whims of the captors. Tola's self-preservation in remaining hidden while her friends leave the barracks and set off on their own haunts her because she feels as though she would be responsible if anything were to happen to them because of her not being there to protect them, but she chose to remain hidden out of self-preservation and thus made it through the entire incident unscathed. Similarly, Rubinfeldova hides in the pile of envelopes out of self-preservation because she is the oldest and if the Nazis had come into the workshop seeking to take someone away to kill them, she would be the likeliest one to be taken (Karmel 25). Nobody begrudges this to her however because it is a truth, and thus they accept it and let her hide.

In fact, every single one of the themes previously mentioned can be found in this single scene in *An Estate of Memory*. The Nazis are enacting a mental warfare in announcing a random selection of the camp, leading to rumors of someone escaping (Karmel 24), when no one actually escaped. This sows distrust and fear amongst the populace of the camp, keeping people divided against each other, with one of the women stating that the electrician who supposedly had escaped had "no right to do that" (Karmel 24). Rubinfeldova's hiding amongst the envelopes covers the points of survival and safety as well as age, and Tola briefly debates with herself over whether she or Rubinfeldova should be the person to hide in the envelopes, hinting at the idea of self-preservation. The news of the selection also inspires

a lot of random motion within the workshop, with Kohn “sweeping as never before” (Karmel 23), and Seidmanka “picked up a fan of envelopes, put them down, picked them up again” (Karmel 24). All of these little motions are very visceral reactions laden with anxiety and dread, allowing the reader to feel the tension in the air of the workshop.

All of these ideas combine into a contiguous sense of struggle and dread that *The Trojan Women* simply does not have. Compare the former scene to the opening scene of the latter; the women are all standing around Hecuba nervously, the sounds of Cassandra struggling inside of a nearby tent causing them much fear and trepidation (Euripides 44). This is a good example of the Greeks’ form of mental warfare against the women, though their lack of nervous motion is not believable. As well, they all are simply crowded around Hecuba, with no sense of self preservation so much as a sense of safety in groups. This is in a sense expedient in and of itself because they are standing in their own little circle, not resisting at all, while Cassandra is in the tent causing a commotion. It is a moment where the women announce their fear for the future, but the audience cannot quite identify with them. Their lack of nervous motion is unrealistic and not characteristic of those with an anxiety for their uncertain futures.

This failure to relate with *The Trojan Women* has a lot to do with its format once again. Through the play format, the women are on stage to crow and wail their miseries at the top of their lungs in order to establish where they stand on the events that unfold regarding themselves and their futures. The form lacks subtlety and description, and the aforementioned lack of nervous motion amongst the women betrays its insincerity. In *An Estate of Memory* however, with only three characters, Karmel can establish all of the aforementioned themes within the space of a few minutes in real time in the barracks, but what appears to be forever in the mind of Tola for time appears to slow down as all of the information passes through her mind and her situation fully saturates the reader, her terror and panic creating a

high amount of drama.

Tola, Rubinfeldova, and Seidmanka are hiding in the barracks after the scene in the envelope workshop. The mental warfare of the Nazis is working in its full effect here for the selection is taking place; the prisoners are being rounded up to be taken to the main parade ground of the camp, and nobody is sure whether they will kill them all, or just some will be killed, or some other horrid fate. In multiple places here, Tola mentions that one must never be late to even a normal gathering at the parade ground of the camp, but especially in this case they must not be late (Karmel 30).

In order to be safe and survive, Tola, Rubinfeldova, and Seidmanka hide in the middle bunks of the barracks, ignoring the possibility that those hiding would get shot (Karmel 30). The audience settles into the consciousness of Tola as one is assaulted by boards, dust, horsehair, and “like stones the shouts kept smashing” (Karmel 30). Despite Tola not being able to see, the scene is described with various onomatopoeia so that one can envision the tension of the moment. She describes the movement all around her of the marching of boots, the shouts of men all around, the sounds of the rain, and the slamming of the open door. The crack of the whip against the bedframe, the sound of a door screeching loud in the distance, “and here, right next to her, something dripped, on and on” (Karmel 30). These onomatopoeia offer a very visceral and in the moment visualization of the moment.

As well, Tola’s own thoughts are incredible visceral and even violent, as she “could almost see it – the gun catching the light, then the mouth opening as if to swallow what was to come from the gun” (Karmel 30). Her thoughts even suggest animalistic behavior and personification, as “Fear was like an animal; it pounced upon her, clawed, choked her breath, she pounced back, clutched at it, till she forced it under her body and pressed and pressed” (Karmel 30). All of these verbs gives an illusion of motion, because all of this motion is going on inside of Tola’s head, but to the audience this motion is just as real as if it was going

on in the room despite Tola simply laying under a mattress at this point of the story. As well, she describes her bodily state in stark detail as she fears that “someone was lurking, was waiting for her least move, but she even forbade herself to moisten her lips, to take a deeper breath” (Karmel 30).

Just as important as motion is to the heightening drama, so too is the lull in motion. Tola begins to get comfortable with the lack of sounds around her, and begins to experiment in miniscule ways, until “From far off came a bang – just one – showing that it was only the wind, slamming a door” (Karmel 31). This is a rationalization; Tola has no way of knowing if the singular bang was that of a slamming door or a gunshot. In order to keep herself sane, she chooses an innocuous option instead of leaping to the worst possible conclusion, but considering her situation this is understandable to the audience, however the audience knows better. It is with this bang that motion begins again with Seidmanka mistaking the bang for a gunshot, as she gets anxious enough to start hiccuping out of fear. Both Seidmanka and Rubinfeldova crack under the pressure and run out of the barracks, pausing for Tola to come with them, but she does not.

Thinking of expediency, Seidmanka and Rubinfeldova cracked under the pressure because of the singular bang. The bang, whatever it was, highlighted their own lack of expediency in their own current situation: those who were found hiding would be shot, and they all know this, especially Seidmanka who begins to hiccup at the thought of it, the anxiety overcoming her, causing her and Rubinfeldova both to succumb to expediency, racing down to the parade ground of the camp. Tola stays however, and this touches on the theme of self preservation. She opts for the outcome of hiding because she knows the two options that are possible: she will either stay hidden and avoid any consequences, or she will be found and shot. Seidmanka and Rubinfeldova do not know what awaits them at the parade ground, and neither does Tola, hence out of self preservation she stays behind and does not go with them,

despite Rubinfeldova's insistent "Together!" (Karmel 31).

The biggest theme comes from the aftermath of this scene; as the selection ends and the prisoners begin to return to the barracks, it is revealed that mostly older women had been flogged at this selection, and that sixty all told had been shot (36). Seidmanka was one of those who was flogged, only because of her age and the will of her captors to make an example of her for no reason whatsoever. The supposed escape of a prisoner was only a pretext for this whole event, but in reality there was no one who had escaped at all (37). The age factor comes into play once again as they discover that someone they had known and worked with in the workshop had been killed at the selection, the old historian Kohn, glaringly absent from his station in the workshop (39).

While *An Estate of Memory* is an excellent analogue to *The Trojan Women*, this does not necessarily mean that they behave in precisely the same way. *An Estate of Memory* uses the same themes that *The Trojan Women* does, but it adds a heightened sense of danger to the predicament of the women by placing the audience into the heads of the women amongst their turbulent thoughts and experiences. This is a fault of the medium of theater that *The Trojan Women* suffers from, for it is simply not possible for an audience to identify as much with the women as the novel form of *An Estate of Memory* allows.