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History at its Finest: Discovering Historical Beliefs through Ancient Texts

Before the Age of the Internet and Multimedia, telling stories was the way to go for entertainment. One popular story to tell in Ancient Greece was about the Trojan War. However, there were different renditions of the war. In the ninth century BC, Homer, through oral tradition, told the story of a legendary war fought between heroic and powerful Greek and Trojan figures. Four hundred years later, Euripides wrote a Greek tragedy, *The Women of Troy*, which was about the same war, but it was focused on those who suffered from the war's effects. These different interpretations of the war can be distinguished by the tone used. Through the use of a lofty tone in Homer's *Iliad* and a distressed tone in Euripides's *Women of Troy*, the two texts show a shift in the views of war over time.

In *The Iliad*, Homer's use of a lofty tone and the idea of gaining fame from war show that the Greeks glorified war. Right off the bat in Book VI, Homer describes, in a lofty tone, how powerful Greek figures killed their Trojan enemies: "First Telamonian Aias, that bastion of the Achaians, / broke the Trojan battalions and brought light to his own company, / striking down the man who was far the best of the Tharcians, / Akamas, the huge and mighty, the son of Eussoros" (5-8). In the first part of the sentence, the harsh "b" sound is utilized in the words "bastion," "broke," "battalions," "brought," and "best," making the sentence serious sounding. Homer also uses adjectives like "mighty" and "huge" to describe the characters, making them appear larger than life, and he puts the Greek figures in the subject position of his sentences,

which means that the focus is on the figures. With all of these three elements combined, a lofty tone is created, and it appears that Homer is describing large, powerful, and venerable figures who are not to be messed with. Furthermore, Homer focuses only on how these legendary Greek characters kill their Trojan counterparts, not how the Trojans felt about the slaughter, which deepens the glorification of war. Both sides of the battle also make war attractive by making it seem rewarding. As the Greeks are looting dead corpses and are about to enter a fight, Nestor, a Greek commander, encourages that they should "kill the men now, and afterwards at [their] leisure / all along the plain [they] can plunder the perished corpses. / So he spoke, and stirred the spirit and strength in each man" (70-72). With one short speech, Nestor seems to be able to easily persuade every single man to go into war rather than loot dead corpses, which suggests that the men think that fighting is a glorious job to have. Meanwhile, on the Trojan side, Hektor, a commander, has similar thoughts to Nestor about war. While he would like to stay with his wife and child, he "would feel deep shame / before the Trojans … / if like a coward [he] were to shrink aside from the fighting; / and the spirit will not let [him], since [he has] learned to be valiant / and to fight always among the foremost ranks of the Trojans, / winning for [his] own self great glory, and for [his] father" (441-446). Hektor has thought about the idea of dying in battle and having his family lose him, yet he seems to put fighting above family. True, it is selfless of him to try to defend his homeland rather than stay with his family and possibly run away, but the reason he gives for fighting is so that he can gain glory for himself and his father. It is interesting to note that both Nestor and Hektor seem to speak with a lofty tone. However, one must remember the plot is told through the lens of Homer. Even though the Trojans were losing the battle, Homer utilizes a lofty tone to focus on the Trojans thinking about winning and

glory, which suggests that both winning and glory were two ideas that were prevalent in Greek society during Homer's period.

In contrast, in *The Women of Troy*, Euripides use of a distressed tone suggests that Greek views of war shifted 400 years after Homer's time period. In the second scene of the play, Hecabe, the widow of the king of Troy, introduces the unfortunate outcome of her family and Troy after the Trojan War: "This is not Troy; the kings of Troy are dead: … / I mourn for my dead world, my burning town, / My sons, my husband, gone, all gone! … / Now shrunk to nothing, sunk in mean oblivion!" (130). The words "dead," "burning," "gone," "shrunk," and "nothing" have an overall negative connotation, which creates a saddened mood for the play. Looking at the quote from a sentence level, it is clear that her husband and sons have died in the war and that her town has been decimated. She clearly is in distress from all the trauma and shock that hit her at once, flipping her whole world upside down. Unlike how Homer portrayed the characters as war-loving figures, the ideas of glory and power and even hope are already gone at the beginning of this play, replaced by an overall feeling of distress, destruction, and demise. Later in the play, Hecabe continues to sound distressed as she discusses with Andromache the death of Hektor and the destruction of Troy:

HECABE	My noble children!	
ANDROMACHE		They are gone.
HECABE	Gone; and my home, my lovely city—	
ANDROMACHE		Gone! (136)

The exchange between these two women includes a series of short interjections, which when combined with their current situation, gives the sense that something terribly wrong has happened. With the sudden destruction of Hecabe's world, she remarks that "there is always

more; [her] suffering has no limit, none; / And each new misery outdoes what went before"
(136). Unfortunately for Hecabe, she has to deal with learning about the death of her loved ones
and her town, which all were alive only weeks if not days ago. Being brought news about the
death of one family member is already hard enough, much less having continual news brought
about the death of an entire family and town. The reason for the death, destruction, and Hecabe's
misery is the Trojan War. The distressing tone used in this play suggest that unlike Homer's time
where wars were seen by some as an honorable activity to participate in, some viewed war in
Euripides's time as a horror show and a possible reason for end of the world.

One reason for such contrasting views on war between Homer and Euripides could be
because of the shift in beliefs between the ninth and fifth century BC. In the ninth century BC,
Greece was exiting a Dark Age, and a new style of culture was developing. Despite the Dark
Age, legends of Greek life before the Dark Age were past on by oral tradition. In these legends,
Greeks were more heroic and stronger than they were in Homer's time, and with these stories,
the Greeks exiting the Dark Age would begin to rebuild society. The Greeks during Homer's
time period only knew about these legends, and it makes sense that beliefs would reflect what
they knew at the time, and texts like *The Iliad* would reflect what they believed. Between the
ninth and fifth centuries BC, philosophers began to question the old views as they tried to find
truth. Different groups such as the Pre-Socratics, the Sophists, and the Socratics began
appearing. *The Women of Troy* reflects the beliefs of the Sophists, which is not surprising as
Sophist ideas had begun to spread. The Sophists moved away from the physical world and were
more concerned with the mental world. Morals became a highly discussed topic, and *The Women
of Troy* reflects that.

It is quite interesting that two interpretations of the same story could be so different. Homer's *Iliad* uses a lofty tone to convey that war brings fame and glory to people, while Euripides's *Women of Troy* uses a distressed tone to describe how war can bring unimaginable horrors. Conclusions about the beliefs of Homer's and Euripides's times could also be drawn based on the different perspectives of the war from the two texts. Ancient texts should not be dismissed as just mythical legends as it is possible that other ancient stories could provide historical information about their time periods, which could provide useful insight about a civilization and its people.