

Iliad vs. Women of Troy: Hecabe and Helen

The Trojan War is arguably the most famous Greek event. Homer wrote about the event in the **Iliad**, and Euripides wrote about the aftermath of the war in his play, **Women of Troy**. The works share multiple characters, including Hecabe, queen of the fallen city of Troy, and Helen, the face that launched a thousand ships. Both characters discuss the gods at some point throughout both texts, with varying beliefs. Similarly, each woman displays her cleverness, or lack thereof, in both texts. In addition, the **Iliad** and **Women of Troy** both describe the two women manipulating other people, albeit in very different ways. The differences and similarities between Hecabe and Helen are apparent in both works, as evidenced by their religiousness, their manipulation of the people around them, and their cleverness.

In the 1200s BCE, when the Trojan War took place, religion was still a big part of the peoples' lives. However, everybody felt differently about the gods, as demonstrated by the difference between Hecabe and Helen's dialogues in both texts. For example, in the **Iliad**, when Hector returns home from the battle, Hecabe urges him to *"...stay while I bring you honey-sweet wine, to pour out a libation to father Zeus and the other immortals, ..."* (lines 257-268). This request suggests that Hecabe regards the gods as active entities in the world that are to be respected. She believes that offering the gods praise will allow Troy to survive the war. In contrast, Helen's remarks to Hector in the **Iliad** suggest that she blames the gods for the war. When Hector comes to visit his brother, and Helen's lover, Paris, Helen conveys her regret that she had been born and that Hector must now carry the brunt of the weight of the consequences: *"Yet since the gods had brought it about that these vile things must be, ..."* (Line

348). Helen's opinions indicate her lack of respect for the gods, greatly contradicting Hecabe's beliefs. The women's religious beliefs also differ from text to text. For example, in **Women of Troy**, Hecabe almost scorns the gods. After her daughter, Cassandra, speaks and is taken away, Hecabe says, *"O gods! – The gods, I know, are treacherous allies; yet, when misery drives to despair, it seems in some way suitable to call upon the gods,"* (line 135). This statement illustrates Hecabe's tolerance of the gods. She clearly doesn't idolize them anymore, but she knows that she still has to respect the gods. Helen, on the other hand, does not change her beliefs in **Women of Troy**. Similar to her thoughts in the **Iliad**, Helen blames the gods for the war, specifically Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. When trying to convince Menelaus, king of Sparta, to spare her life, Helen says, *"Show Aphrodite your indignation; me, pardon and sympathy,"* (page 140). By blaming Aphrodite and the rest of the gods, Helen shows her disrespect and dislike of the gods. The differences between Hecabe and Helen's perspectives of religion are evident in the **Iliad** and **Women of Troy**.

Hecabe and Helen both end up manipulating people throughout the course of both texts. The differences in the purpose and methods of manipulations between the two women are shown in both the **Iliad** and **Women of Troy**. The two former queens employ different manipulation strategies to accomplish their goal, however these tactics are not always successful. For instance, in the **Iliad**, when Hecabe is speaking to Hector, she tries to convince him to stay home, where he will be safe. She appeals to his exhaustion: *"In a tired man, wine will bring back his strength to its bigness, in a man tired as you are tired, defending your neighbours,"* (lines 260-262). Hecabe's statement attempts to persuade Hector to stay at home, for the sake of his safety. Her attempt failed, showing that she cannot manipulate her son.

Similarly, Hecabe manipulates Menelaus, king of Sparta, in **Women of Troy**. She ensures that he knows about Helen's plans of deceit and her false love for him. Before the guards bring Helen in, Hecabe warns Menelaus saying, *"I applaud you, Menelaus, if you will kill your wife; but avoid seeing her, or she will take prisoner your tender heart,"* (page 139). While Hecabe agrees with and advocates for Helen's death sentence, she is also cautious and relays her thoughts to Menelaus, effectively manipulating him to be careful around Helen. Helen uses different tactics to manipulate Hector when she speaks to him in the **Iliad**. When Hector comes to Paris to scold him for not joining in the battle he is responsible for, Helen attempts to remind Hector that the war is not Paris' fault. However, she also deflects the blame away from herself when she says, *"... how I wish that on that day when my mother first bore me the foul whirlwind of the storm had caught me away and swept me to the mountain..."* (lines 345-347). Helen's statement that she wishes she had never been born is her way of unsuccessfully manipulating Hector into feeling sorry for her. Helen also uses a similar tactic when manipulating Menelaus to spare her life in **Women of Troy**. However, when conversing with Menelaus, Helen deflects the blame from herself by directly blaming Hecabe for the war: *"Hecabe here produced the first cause of our troubles when she bore Paris,"* (page 140). By diverting Menelaus' attention to before Helen became a part of the conflict, she manipulates him into letting her live. In both texts, Hecabe manipulates the other character for their benefit, while Helen only manipulates for her own gain.

Hecabe and Helen are both very clever women, and they both are aware of their intelligence. However, they show their intelligence in different ways. Hecabe shows her cleverness and foresight in **Women of Troy** when she warns Menelaus of Helen's intention of

manipulating her. Hecabe advises Menelaus, *"She captures men's eyes, destroys cities, burns houses to the ground, so potent are her spells. I know her, so do you, and all who have suffered know,"* (page 139). Hecabe displays her intelligence and ability to foresee problematic situations when she discusses Helen's fate with Menelaus. Helen, on the other hand, shows her cleverness when she lets Hector feel sorry for her in the **Iliad**. She apologizes for causing the war and says, *"...for the sake of dishonoured me and the blind act of Alexandros, us two, on whom Zeus set a vile destiny..."* (lines 354-355). Helen knows that Hector is a good man, and that he will likely be sympathetic to her cause. Even in **Women of Troy**, Helen reveals her intelligence when she discusses her fate with Menelaus. Helen begins defending her actions with an acknowledgement of her prediction of Menelaus' reaction: *"Perhaps, since you regard me as your enemy, you will not answer, whether I speak well or ill. But I will guess what charges you would level at me,"* (page 140). By recognizing that she is viewed as an enemy, Helen demonstrates her brain power. Hecabe and Helen are both intelligent women, as shown in the **Iliad** and **Women of Troy**.

The characters, Hecabe and Helen, share many qualities such as their intelligence, and differ in their methods of manipulation and religious beliefs. The role of the gods in society diminished as time went on, and between the two texts, similar to the transition described by Hecabe's thoughts. A plausible explanation for the differences between the two works is the time period the pieces were written in; the **Iliad** was written about 300 years before **Women of Troy**, which might explain the differences between Hecabe's religious beliefs in the two works. The time difference not only affected the role of the gods in society, but also the role of women, causing many differences between the **Iliad** and **Women of Troy**.