

Varnika Sinha

Mr. Ludt

Humanities

14 November 2016

The Perfect Woman: The Embodiment of Female Roles in the Trojan War

Throughout history, women have always been expected to meet the standards of society's 'perfect' woman. These standards include being kind, caring, submissive, and devout. However, sometimes these expectations are far-fetched and unattainable. Although a woman may seem physically 'perfect,' she may display an internal conflict with societal expectations. In Homer's **Iliad** and Euripedes' **Women of Troy**, the idea of an ideal woman is displayed through the characterizations of all female characters. However, through further examination, the female characters Andromache and Helen reveal internal conflicts with embodying society's idea of the 'perfect' woman.

Andromache at first glance may seem to be the best representation of the 'perfect' woman. She is kind, caring, motherly, and thoughtful. She has fulfilled all societal expectations concerning the standards of the 'perfect' woman. She even acknowledges that "as Hector's wife [she] set [herself] to attain all womanly perfections." However, when she hears the Trojans are losing the war, she does not go with the other women to pray, but "to the great bastion of Ilion." She tries to convince Hector to leave the war. This plea reveals conflict with societal expectation. Women are expected to be submissive to their husbands. Yet, Andromache goes against this expectation when she rebuts, "please take pity upon me then, stay here" when Hector "must see to the fighting." She emotionally attacks him with images of his "child an orphan, [his] wife a widow" to convince him to stay for her own sake. According to societal norm, she is supposed to

listen to her husband and let him have his wishes, but due to her fear, she is unable to do so.

Andromache breaks her 'perfect' woman image for her own selfish desires.

Helen, however, is far from meeting the standards of society's 'perfect' woman. She has multiple negative traits that make the reader wonder if she is in fact an embodiment of the 'perfect' woman. She is manipulative and fickle, traits which society does not want in a woman. When she talks to Hector, Hector remarks "do not, Helen, make me sit with you... you will not persuade me" upon realizing she is trying to manipulate him with her sweet words. This trait is also highlighted by Paris when she tries to convince him "with soft words [which were] winning [him] over." Although societal expectations dictate men should be in control, Helen goes against the societal norm and tries to be in control. She goes far enough to also blame mistakes on the men. When discussing the war, Helen first blames herself for being born, but then proceeds to blame Paris as well. She insults Paris by wishing she "had been a wife of a better man." Societal norms dictate that women should be supportive of their husbands, but Helen offers no support to Paris and instead insults him to be a perfect husband. Helen is nowhere near the representation of a 'perfect' woman.

Although both women are in conflict with societal expectations of women, they are in varying degrees. Andromache can still be appreciated as a 'perfect' woman even with her few flaws. She was just worried about Hector during the war, so she retaliated to try to save her husband. Her feelings had gotten the better of her. She later becomes submissive again and returns to her image as the 'perfect' woman when Hector reassures her "no man [will hurl him] to Hades." However, Helen has very few qualities that represent her as the 'perfect' woman. Helen is indifferent toward the entire war. When Hector arrives to take Paris to battle, Helen is "sitting among her attendant women." She has no care to prepare her husband for battle. The

‘perfect’ woman is a support to her male counterpart, but Helen has no interest in doing that. She neglects her duty as a wife and does nothing to reprehend her mistakes. Both women have internal conflicts with their societal expectations, but Helen’s conflict is more prominent than Andromache’s.

Andromache and Helen are variations of the ideal image of a woman. They both reveal inner conflicts that prevent them from attaining that image society expects. Although they are characters from Homer’s **Iliad** and Euripedes’ **Women of Troy**, they also represent women in reality too. Society places high expectations for women to achieve to become their ideal self, but these standards are sometimes unreasonable and beyond reach. These standards often cause dissent among women about what they must accomplish to be deemed ‘perfect.’ As a result, women never attain the ‘perfect’ woman ideal. Instead, society should reevaluate these expectations and allow women to be themselves.