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Section P

Greek Literature Essay

Regardless of the period, one concept that has fascinated humanity is the concept of death. While some believe that death is the end of a human's journey, the notion of an afterlife is integral in many faiths and cultures. One faith in which death is signified is that of the Greeks; it is signified to such a degree that one of their three major gods, Hades, is the god of death. Consequently, it is not surprising that as the faith in the gods decreased over time, the perception of death by the Greeks shifted as well. Two works which represent the change in views are Homer's *the Iliad*, which was written in 800 BC, and Euripides's *The Women of Troy*, which was written in 415 BC. *The Iliad* depicts a time when the people of Greece were close to the gods, and believed in ideas such as divine-lineage and pre-determined fate. This contrasts from the time depicted in *The Women of Troy*, in which people had less faith in the gods and were reluctant to embrace death and fate. These contrasts stem from the differences in ideologies regarding lineage, embrace of death, and fate between the two time periods in which these texts are set.

In both these texts, the dialogues about lineage written by both authors reveal the perception of lineage in these time periods. In Greek mythology, the power of the gods directly emanates from the belief and hope that humanity has in them. Similarly, characters in both *the Iliad* and *The Women of Troy* emphasize the importance of lineage and its intertwined relation with death. In *the Iliad*, Homer introduces characters by referencing their relation to their ancestors, such as "Nestor's son Antiloch[us]" or "Priam's son Helenos," demonstrating the belief in the

importance of lineage which the warriors in the Trojan War held (Homer 32,75). Furthermore, the discussion of lineage illuminates one of the primary desires of these warriors: to become more famous than their ancestors and be remembered for their valiant deaths. Because of this desire, the warriors often wish to exhibit valor on the battlefield so that people will remember them with reverence after their death, which is evident as the warriors of Troy start fighting furiously when Hector calls on them to “remember [their] furious valor” even though many of them know that they will perish at the hands of the Achaeans. The Greeks did not only value the ancestry aspect of lineage, but they valued posterity as well, as evident when Helenos commands Hector to gather all the women of Troy and tell them to pray to Athena, begging her to “have pity / on the town of Troy, the Trojan wives, and their innocent children” (Homer 94-95). Even though Helenos and Hector both know that they will meet their end in the battle of Troy, they give more prominence to saving their families, highlighting the importance of posterity to ancient Greeks. The importance of lineage and remembrance is also illustrated in *The Women of Troy* primarily through the dialogue between Hecabe and Cassandra. As Cassandra and Hecabe recall the tragedies that befell them, they claim that all the suffering they are going through will be worth it because they will be remembered after their deaths. Moreover, warriors such as Hector fought with valor so that they would be remembered with pride, and this belief is confirmed in *The Women of Troy*, as Cassandra states how even “in Hector’s death, / [she] can see more than sorrow; for he did not die / Till he had made himself a hero’s name,” alluding to the fact that the people of Troy view Hector’s valiant death on the battlefield with pride (Euripides 134). The portrayal of death as a mode of remembrance and glory for posterity is uniform throughout both these stories, indicating that lineage was an integral factor in the perception of death for the Greeks.

While the characters in both *the Iliad* and *The Women of Troy* both viewed death as a mode of immortalization for their lineage, their views when it came to embracing death versus fighting death was contingent on their hope in posterity. The hope in posterity is displayed in *the Iliad* by Hector as he bodes farewell to his wife and son with the knowledge that he may never see them again. He holds up his son and asks of Zeus to ensure that his son will become as “great in strength, as [he] [is]” and one “day, let [people] say of [his son]: ‘He is better by far than his father,’” illustrating how warriors not only wish to surpass their parents, but they also wish for their children to surpass them (Homer 478-479). To fulfill this desire, Hector is ready to embrace death if it means that it will give his son a chance to live and surpass him, bringing pride to his family name and his city. However, *The Women of Troy* offers a different perspective on hope through the dialogue between Andromache and Hecabe. As Andromache mourns Hector’s death and wallows at the idea of having to “live [as] a slave / In the house of the very man who struck [her] husband dead,” Hecabe attempts to instill hope in her, consoling her that she “may yet bring up [their] Hector’s son / To light new hope for Troy” (Euripides 137). In contradistinction to her previous demeanor, once Talthibius returns with the body of Astyanax, Hecabe, who earlier attempted to convince Andromache to fight death and live to raise Astyanax, embraces death, exclaiming that “[a]ll end [is] in [the death of Astyanax]” and her despair is best represented as she states that “[h]appiness does not exist” (Euripides 143). The sudden shift in Hecabe from fighting death to embracing it can only be explained by the loss of hope due to Astyanax’s death, implying that once all hope is lost, people stop fighting death and choose to embrace it instead.

Perhaps one of the most intricate subjects discussed in both *the Iliad* and *The Women of Troy* is the topic of fate in relation to death. In Greek mythology, there is a belief that everybody’s fates are predetermined, including those of the gods. The strongest evidence of this is Hector’s

discussion with Andromache just before he is about to leave to continue fighting in the war. While Andromache is weeping with the belief that Hector will most likely die when he returns to war, Hector states that “no man is going to hurl [him] to Hades, unless it is fated,” showing Hector’s cool disposition in the face of death is caused by his belief that he has no control over his faith; it has already been predetermined (Homer 487). Hector also demonstrates Homer’s belief that fate is inescapable when he tells Andromache that “no man has yet escaped [fate] / once it has taken its first form, neither brave man nor coward” (Homer 488-489). In the phrase above, it can be implied that the “brave man” refers to Hector as he is brave and valiant, and the coward refers to Paris, who has taken refuge in Troy as his comrades fight for the city, an act which Cassandra in *The Women of Troy* describes as “infamy.” Just as Hector states, Paris is also killed in the Trojan War despite his cowardly disposition. In *The Women of Troy*, fate is given less importance as the belief in the gods has diminished due to all the horrendous events which have befallen the women. The women directly question Zeus, asking Zeus “[w]hat this mean[s] to Him” because of their belief that the gods were not answering their prayers and were not serving justice as they were supposed to do (Euripides 142). The loss of faith in the gods is what prompts Cassandra to hatch a plan to murder Agamemnon even though she knows that she will be killed, and what prompts Hecabe to argue against getting married to Odysseus even though she has no choice; they do not feel compelled to accept their fates as simply as Hector does because they do not believe in the gods as much.

The unique perspectives about death presented through the concepts of lineage, embrace of death, and fate in *the Iliad* and *The Women of Troy* give a glimpse into the beliefs of people living during the times of Homer and Euripides. The characters in both these texts value lineage and believe in the concept of immortality through remembrance. The characters also display the

authors' beliefs that the choice to embrace death versus fight it depends on one's hope in posterity. In addition, the differences in the acceptance of fate in these two stories illustrate the belief which the people of ancient Greece had in the gods during the two time periods. Through various similarities and differences on the portrayal of death, Homer and Euripides evince core facets of Greek culture while the subtle differences in their writings attest to the weakening belief in the gods. As the people of Greece living in the time of Euripides began to reject blind faith and abide by the principals of humanism, more of them started to question the gods as *The Women of Troy* did.