

The role of women in "the iliad" by homer essay sample

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The role of women in “ The Iliad” by Homer Essay Sample

Throughout the ages, many people feel they have a statement to make, and make this statement through literature. Although at first glance, Homer’s “ Iliad” may not seem to be a criticism of society, underneath all the violence and deep storylines there is a message dying to get out. In the culture of the Iliad, mortal women are treated as property rather than human beings. While the gods attempt to treat the goddesses the same way, the goddesses are quick to assert themselves and claim equal power. This is Homer’s way of saying that the attitude towards women in his time period is wrong and unjustified. While men worship goddesses, they still treat women as lesser beings.

Many times throughout the epic women are treated as property, and often talked about as “ prizes” of “ gifts.” This is shown from the beginning with Chryseis when Chryses, her father, brings “ a rich treasure to ransom his daughter” (11) because rather than viewing her simply as property, he loves her more than all his treasure and riches. Agamemnon however views her as his prize and will not let her go because to him she does not mean anything more than that he was able to take her. He doesn’t realize that to Chryses she is more than just property, she is his daughter and he has feelings for her.

This of course leads to the biggest show of looking down on women in the whole book, which is of course the argument over Briseis in book one. When Agamemnon finally decides that for the greater good he will give back

Chryseis he gets mad at those who tell him and takes Achilles' "prize" simply to disrespect him. He even states to Achilles that he is going to take Briseis himself "to show how much stronger I am than you are. Then others will take care not to stand up to me." (14) It is similar to a bully taking a little kid's toy on the playground, and the childishness of the men over the prizes is only continued when Achilles runs and cries to his Mother to get it back for him.

Later on in the book, there are more examples of women being used almost as currency, such as when Agamemnon offers the many gifts to Achilles to try and get him to fight again. He attempts to buy Achilles' loyalty with gifts rather than apologizing and coming to better terms with Achilles. He is saying that he is still more powerful than Achilles and is paying him with land, kingdoms, property, and women. Agamemnon offers many different objects, including "seven women skillful in women's work, the most beautiful women in the world" (107) to attempt to buy Achilles into the battle. Even the placement of the words is interesting because during the long tirade of treasure offered to Achilles, the women are mentioned not at the end as if they are different than all the other treasure, or at the beginning as if they are the most important, but right after Agamemnon mentions the horses, which are described as "grand creatures which have won prizes in the race." (107) This is Homer's attempt to show a similarity to the horses and the women, as a way to describe how women are treated by men of the age. Both the women and the horses are described as being magnificent looking, and excelling in what they do. This shows that the

Greeks did not respect women as people, but much like racehorses or tools; owned and there to serve a purpose.

In the epic, Homer even shows the gods attempting to treat the goddesses as if they are not as good, and can be bossed around and told what to do. Zeus himself treats Hera, his wife, and Athena, his daughter, as lesser beings whom he can control. He tells them not to interfere in the battle or to help either side, and they listen since they are afraid of him. He tells them to let fate decide and they are fooled into believing that they are not as good as he is for a short while. They simply stay out of the battle for fear of Zeus being displeased with them, and for this time, the Trojans run rampant on the Greek army. However later on in the story the goddesses realize that they are able to help and stand up to Zeus Cloudgatherer.

In book fourteen Hera decides she will take matters into her own hand during the battle by tricking Zeus, and " began at once to scheme how she might beguile him." (167) She decides to sneak him a love potion and seduce him, then wait for him to fall asleep. This book shows that Hera is not powerless at all, even though she is only a woman, and she is able to persuade both Aphrodite, and the god of sleep to help her trick Zeus. This is a very humorous and interesting book in which Hera is proven to be very cunning and smart, even though she is a woman.

This is showing that women should not be thought of as weak and unable to do things, much the same as the many times that Athena takes a part in the battle. She is not only shown as fierce and cunning, but often times is able to

overpower even other male gods, such as in book five when, together with Diomedes, she faces Ares, the god of war, and "Athena drove the spear straight into his belly where the kilt was girded." (73) This not only shows Athena, a female, to be greater than Ares, a male, but I believe is also Homer's way of showing the reader that the gods are more like mortals than is commonly believed. It is almost as if he is saying that if a female god can horribly wound a male god in combat, and prove him to be much less invincible than earlier believed, than perhaps mere mortal women can be equal to men.

"The Iliad" by Homer is one of the greatest epics of history, and every person who reads it, in no matter what language, can get their own message from the timeless text. One of the most prominent, while still being somewhat of an undercurrent, is the message that women are equal to men, and that society's attitude towards women of the time was neither right, nor acceptable, especially in a society with so many goddesses being worshipped. At the time "The Iliad" was written, conditions for women were nowhere near as good as they are now, and Homer would be very pleased to see today's societal attitude towards women