

The play "hekabe" by
euripides essay
(critical writing)



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The play *Hekabe* by Euripides presents a highly unflattering version of famous characters from the ancient Greek pantheon such as Odysseus, and largely dismisses the victorious Greeks as Machiavellian brutes and the Greek war machine as mindless and corrupt. In *Hekabe* the gods are largely uninvolved; rather, the former Queen of Troy is destroyed by the very human maneuverings of political expediency, power and avarice. The playwright's portrayal would have been heretical in his time, as it completely contradicted the Greek concepts of slavery and war; however the play was extremely popular in its day.

The Greeks such as Odysseus are career politicians who extol the virtues of the Greek system in theory yet regularly trounce those virtues in practice when it serves their political purpose. This essay will focus on the portrayal of slavery and war as it appears in the play, and asserts that the popularity of this play to an Athenian audience lay in its truthful representation of a corrupt system populated by power made leaders willing to take an action necessary to protect their power and influence.

At the beginning of the play, the Chorus delivers the terrible news that Hekabe's daughter is the latest casualty of the Trojan War, and more specifically, Odysseus's machinations. " They say that the Greeks, in a general assembly, decided to sacrifice for Achilles Polyxene, your daughter. You remember when he appeared at the top of his tomb, brandishing his golden arms and holding back the homeward ships. They had their sails wide with the wind and he shouted at them, Where are you off to, Danaans? Will you leave my tomb bare and without its prize of honour?" (Euripides 4).

Though born into royalty, Polyxene is now a slave, and as a slave her owners

can do as they see fit with her life. The same is true of Hekabe - the former Queen of Troy - now an old slave with no rights and no say.

Euripides makes it clear in this passage that what matters to the Greeks is the continuation of the war machine. Achilles, the greatest soldier the Greek warrior nation ever produced, demands Polyxene's blood, and even though he is dead, he still holds sway over the entire Greek army. The Chorus informs Hekabe that Odysseus is behind the decision to kill her daughter. "That rascal son of Laertes, Odysseus of the spinning wit and of the sweet, conquering word, convinces the army not to scorn the greatest among the Danaans for the sake of a slave's sacrifice. Nor should it be possible for a fallen Danaan, inhabiting the death-realm of Persephone, to stand before her and announce that the Greeks, homeward bound after their destruction of Troy, have forgotten to honour those who have fallen for their sake" (Euripides 4).

The reason behind this decision to sacrifice a young girl's life is wholly political. Ever the practical man, Odysseus reminds Hekabe that the sacrifice of her daughter is a politically expedient move necessary to ensure that future wars will still attract soldiers so that they may continue to be waged. Odysseus asks Hekabe, "let us suppose we do as you say. What would happen if, for some reason, we would need to raise up an army again against another enemy? What would others say? They will ask themselves, shall we fight or shall we not? Shall we be cowards and refuse, seeing that we pay no respect to the fallen soldiers?" (Euripides 7). What matters to Odysseus is the continuation of the machine, nothing more.

He sidesteps the kindness Hekabe paid to him when she saved his life before the Trojan War broke out, and reminds her of what is paramount: the survival of the war machine, and his own high station within that machine. " You have done me a good deed and so I speak sincerely when I say that I am happy to save your life. However, I will not take my word back when I supported the wish of the rest of the army, which is to sacrifice your daughter for the honour of the first among the fighters who had conquered Troy. The army demands it. Most nations suffer exactly because of this very same reason, that is they give no more honours to their brave as they do to their less so" (Euripides 7).

Odysseus remains completely unmoved by Hekabe's plight, as in his mind, Polyxene's death will secure the perpetuation of the Greek war machine, which is his only concern. Odysseus takes for granted that Hekabe will understand the necessity of Polyxene's death when he says, " of course you know what you must do now: Let us not use force to drag her away from you and don't try to do battle with me! You should know your weakness" (Euripides 6). For Odysseus, the very fact that the Greeks beat the Trojans proves that the political business of acquiring the next generation of Greek soldiers through sacrifice is sound. " As for us, if our custom of honouring the glorious dead is wrong then we shall suffer the accusation of being ignorant brutes. You barbarians may continue, if you wish, to refuse to regard your friends as friends and refuse also to honour those men who have fallen honourably. Greece will prosper because of this custom, while you will suffer due to your type of thinking!" (Euripides 8). In Odysseus's mind, since they won, they are right.

Euripides then employs Hekabe to voice what he and many members of his Athenian audience understood to be true: the Greek war machine was a wholly corrupt system that existed only to further the political ends of the powerful elite who ran it. The former queen says bitterly, " all of you lot who are jealous of the honours received by political leaders are an ungrateful lot, the whole generation of you! I wish I had never known any of you. You don't care how much you hurt your friends so long as you say something to pacify the masses...Those who are able to exercise power should not exercise it wrongfully and those who are fortunate should not believe that fortune will stay with them for ever" (Euripides 7).

The play Hekabe remains a bitter indictment of the Greek war machine that much of the Athenian audience would have had direct experience of, as evidenced by the popularity of the play in its own time. Specifically though the characters of Odysseus and Hekabe, Euripides shows that the Greek war machine used the virtues of slavery and war to protect itself and ensure its continuation at all costs.

Euripedes. Hekabe. George Theodoridis, trans. Poetry in Translation. 2007. Web.