

The role of women in the iliad essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Thesis Statement: Women play a major role in the Iliad. Examining the impact of female characters in an epic dominated by war and the men who fought it. Major female characters include Helen, Briseis, Athena, Aphrodite, Hera, Thetis and Chryseis. The Iliad is first and foremost an epic poem about a war waged by men.

Even though there are no female warriors, apart from the goddesses, women play a major role in defining the course of it. The roots of the war can be traced back to the beauty contest between Athena, Aphrodite and Hera which Paris is chosen to judge. Each Goddess offers Paris a bribe in return for favoring them, but in the end Paris chooses Aphrodite's gift of the most beautiful woman in the world; Helen. Throughout the epic Helen is rarely mentioned yet her return is the reason the Greeks invade Troy. Christopher Marlowe described it best when he used these words that describe her impact on the Trojan war: "Was this the face that launch'd a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium? Helen is aware of the misery she has caused to the Trojans, evident in her conversation with Hector when she says: "You are the one hit hardest by the fighting, Hector, / you more than all -and all for me, slut that I am, and this blind mad Paris"(VI: 287-289). Homer uses Helen to reveal the cowardly underside of Paris's character.

Women, especially young beautiful women, were considered nothing but spoils of war, to be distributed amongst the army once they have invaded a kingdom. Chryseis and Briseis were two such 'prizes' who were given to Agamemnon and Achilles respectively, but they too were the cause of heavy casualties suffered by the Greek army. Agamemnon's failure to return

Chryseis to her father caused them to incur the wrath of Apollo who reigned down his arrows from Mount Olympus and: " he cut them down in droves- / and the copse-fires burned on, night and day, no end in sight" (I: 59-60). Eventually Agamemnon yielded her but instead, to soothe his pride, took away Achilles' prize Briseis. This angered Achilles as he loved Briseis and so Achilles decides not to take further part in the battle. .

In his pain Achilles calls upon his mother Thetis , who is a goddess, to help him. He asks her to convince Zeus to help the Trojan cause so the Greeks, Agamemnon in particular, would realize the importance of Achilles. Zeus helps the Trojans and that is how , due to Briseis and Thetis , the Greeks suffer heavy casualties and pushed to the brink of defeat. Goddesses also have a prominent part to play in the Iliad. Apart from convincing Zeus , Thetis also brings new armor for Achilles: " and down she flashed like a hawk from snowy Mount Olympus / bearing the brilliant gear, the god of fire's gift" (XVIII: 717-718). She was the one who convinces Achilles to obey Zeus' orders and return Hector's body back to Priam.

Athena and Hera rank among the most powerful forces in the book. Even the other male gods cannot stand up to them, and Ares, supposedly the god of war, must cede to Athena's superior might on two occasions. Moreover, Athena and Hera are more than just assertive and forceful. They are cunning, quick-witted, and sharp-tongued. By using her womanly assets and a little trickery, Hera incapacitates Zeus, after Achilles rejoins the battle, which allows the Greeks to gain the upper hand. Athena was the one that tricked Hector into facing Achilles man-to-man: " Athena luring him on with all her immortal cunning-" (XXII-293) even though she knew Achilles would kill him.

Aphrodite on the other hand fought from the Trojan side and constantly meddled in the course of the war. She saved Paris from certain death at the hands of Menelaus, and also saved her son Aeneas. Apart from Helen however, the Iliad has very little to offer in terms of strong female figures among mortals. Even Helen's role in the overall scheme of things may be considered minor.

Andromache helps to make Hector a sympathetic character and provides the stimulus for his speech in Book VI about the fate of Troy. However, the significance of both women lies not in themselves but in the ways they help to portray the men around them.