

Female Agency in Homer's *Iliad*

An examination of Helen and Andromache's development of an emerging female voice within the confines of a patriarchal society, as expressed by their relationship to traditional female objects, the loom and the marriage bed in their social protests.

The figures of Helen and Andromache in Homer's *Iliad* provide an opportunity to track the evolution of female agency in Classical epic. Andromache has often been regarded as a foil to the character of Helen, since she is steadfastly devoted to her husband, and represents the virtues expected of a dutiful Greek wife. Helen, on the other hand, is a foreign temptress, unfaithful to her first husband and disinterested in her second. However, both Helen and Andromache subtly express themselves within the female domain and challenge their traditional roles in order to gain a sense of agency. They are rebellious, both in their wavering between male and female domains and in their admonishing speeches. These women are implicitly paralleled by means of linguistic echoes and items, symbolizing women's domestic obligation, namely, the loom and the marriage bed, which each character invokes.

In Book 3, Helen is found in her chambers, weaving depictions of battle scenes from the first nine years of the Trojan War (Hom., Il., 3.121-128). Helen uses the loom, a traditionally feminine object, to explore the primarily male realm of warfare, to demonstrate her active role in its causation, and to express her frustration and regret. Unable to take a more active role with the proceedings of the war, her only outlet for expressing her social protest is to covertly comment on it through her female craft.

Andromache's use of the loom implicitly connects her to Helen. In Book 6, she is notably absent from the women's halls (Hom., Il., 6.370 – 376) and is commanded by Hector to return to her work at the loom (Hom., Il., 6.486-493). In Book 22, Andromache works at the loom (Hom.,

Il., 22.440-441), until she hears the cries of her in-laws and realizes the fate of her husband. She then drops her shuttle to hasten to the walls (Hom., Il., 22.447-448), demonstrating her symbolic rejection of the loom and of woman's work. Her absence from the loom in Book 6 and her flight from it in Book 22 demonstrate her active social protest against her female duties. Thus, both for Helen and Andromache, the loom becomes a form of social protest.

Both Helen and Andromache also use the marriage bed as a platform for their social protest. Helen specifically regrets leaving her marriage bed with Menelaus (Hom., Il., 3.173-176) and refuses to share Paris' bed (Hom., Il., 3.407-413) in an audacious fight with Aphrodite. In this confrontation, Helen accepts blame for her role in the causation of the war and boldly protests her continued participation in the affair with Paris, and thus in the war itself. By protesting the marriage bed, she refuses to enter into the female domain and exercises her societal voice.

In Book 24, Hector is returned to Andromache's marriage bed as a corpse (Hom., Il., 24.719-724). The scene becomes the platform for Andromache's public invective (Hom., Il., 24.725-730), in which she forcefully accuses her husband of failing to protect her family and those of all other Trojans. Andromache carefully situates herself within the confines of the domestic sphere to create a socially acceptable platform for her speech of protest, just as Helen does in her confrontation with Aphrodite. For Helen, the marriage bed represents the causation of the Trojan War, and for Andromache the marriage bed becomes a platform to protest the war's continuation and ultimate consequence.

In conclusion, while the marriages of Helen and Andromache unmistakably represent opposing paradigms of marital relations, their use of the loom and marriage bed as a means of

social protest demonstrates a shared female consciousness and an attempt at agency within the domestic sphere.

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