

Pussy Politics: Women and Power in *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018)

The 2018 BBC/Netflix series *Troy: Fall of a City* has provoked considerable discussion for the political implications of its racially diverse casting decisions, but also worthy of examination is the series' depiction of women. In some ways, the creators seem intent on offering their audience examples of strong, brave, independent women in order to satisfy modern expectations about women's nature and place in society: Iphigenia insists on facing death with honor and nobility; Helen asserts her right to speak and to be treated as a woman, not an object; Briseis' courage in the face of Achilles' sword earns her both her life and his respect; Chryseis flatly refuses to indulge Agamemnon's attempts to assuage his guilt for sacrificing his daughter; and Penthesilea is Achillean in her rage, her leadership abilities, her lust for vengeance, and her prowess in battle. But we also see women in this series attempting to exert power more subtly, through cunning and deception, or by capitalizing on their sexuality or procreative functions – strategies that many classical scholars, informed by anthropological studies, have argued women in antiquity would have needed to draw on in these highly patriarchal societies if they wanted to exert influence. *Fall of a City*'s Penelope, for instance, is credited with the idea for her husband to feign madness in order to avoid recruitment; Helen presents contrasting attitudes towards motherhood in light of her audience and the outcome she wants to achieve; and Hecuba vacillates between prioritizing her role as wife and her role as mother depending on the needs of her situation. Each of these characterizations represents a deviation from ancient tradition while also nodding to it; each represents an attempt by these women to exert influence in a patriarchal world; and each offers a revealing glimpse into how the series' creators attempt to connect with the Trojan War cycle while simultaneously resonating with the experiences of women today.

Yet in most cases, the outward presentation of women as strong, brave, and independent is ultimately undercut by the patriarchal framework. Iphigenia and Penthesilea die as of course they must, and Briseis passed between men as a pawn, but less in line with ancient tradition, Chryseis is repeatedly raped, while the Greek army hears her screams and does nothing. Even the rather subtle attempts by women to exert influence prove ineffectual or fail entirely: Diomedes easily sees through the scheme Penelope is credited as author of; Helen's attempts to garner Andromache's sympathy and persuade Paris to flee with her fail; and Andromache herself shuts down Helen's attempts to take a portion of credit for her pregnancy by characterizing her as a vain and ineffectual dabbler in black magic. Most significantly, Helen's assertions of subjectivity and value are undermined when she offers herself up as a prize in order to end the war, effectively conceding to her status as symbol and commodity, while her attempts at influencing the direction of events backfires entirely, opening Paris and Troy up to their doom rather than saving them from it.

The narrative choices the series' creators make not only highlight some of the strategies women in disenfranchised positions in antiquity drew upon to affect the world around them, but also demonstrate the influence of more modern notions of female power and autonomy. Yet at the same time, the series seems to offer a glimpse of female empowerment only to snatch it away again. Like casting decisions, these choices represent political moves on the part of the series' creators, but while the intention seems to be to showcase a progressive stance on depictions of race and gender, in the latter case, it ultimately demonstrates how far we have yet to go.