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Professor Rachel Byrd

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The Treatment of Women by Achilles and Agamemnon

Women are not seen as very prominent figures throughout *The Iliad*. This is not surprising, considering the story is set in a time period where women did not have very many public roles, especially during a time of war. They were seen as possessions. In the book *Birth, Death, and Motherhood in Classical Greece*, Nancy Demand describes how girls were given names that “reflected their subordinate status.” In childhood, girls often were called by the possessive form of their father’s name and later in life by the possessive form of their husband’s name (Demand 2-9). This possessiveness and treatment of women is demonstrated in two slightly different ways by two of the prominent figures in the Iliad: Achilles and Agamemnon. Achilles and Agamemnon’s treatment of women differs in the extent of their possessiveness of women, and in their expectations of loyalty.

Agamemnon is very possessive of women, because they are prizes of war. He does not want to lose a woman who is his prize, nor the prestige associated with it. As Sue Blundell describes it in her book *Women in Ancient Greece*, two of the roles of women in *The Iliad* are to provide causes and rewards (Blundell 48-54). They are the cause for the Trojan War and for the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles. Women provide rewards throughout *The Iliad* by serving as prizes gained through war. Agamemnon views women simply as objects (a reward), and portrays this attitude by how he treats the women he has acquired through war. Chryseis, for example, is rewarded to Agamemnon for performing well in battle. He believes that she is

rightfully his, and she is now a possession he is free to do with as he pleases. When Chryseis' father tries to pay for her to be returned to his house, Agamemnon angrily refuses (Iliad 1.37-1.40). Agamemnon refuses not because he loves the girl, but because he loses a nice possession that gives him a status of honor among his men. This shows that Agamemnon was more worried about having his reputation hurt or losing something that was his, than he was about how Chryseis or her father may have felt.

When Agamemnon finally agrees to let Chryseis return to her father, it is only because his reputation would suffer from holding on to her. Apollo, displeased by Agamemnon's refusal, began killing part of Agamemnon's army (Iliad 1.52-1.60). If Agamemnon continued to keep Chryseis, more of his men would be killed, and he would lose his reputation as a strong leader. Not willing to lose more men, or his reputation and honor, Agamemnon finally relents and returns Chryseis, but not without expecting repayment for the prize he just gave up. He says, "Give the girl back, just like that? Now maybe [i]f the army, in a generous spirit, voted me [s]ome suitable prize of their own choice, something fair- But if it doesn't, I'll just go take something myself" (Iliad 1.125-1.128, 1.143-1.148). The way Agamemnon speaks about returning Chryseis, it is as though he is simply completing a business transaction; he will return Chryseis, and then get something of equal value. He ends up taking, by force, what he believes to be fair repayment--Briseis, Achilles' girl.

Achilles' reaction to Agamemnon taking Briseis from him demonstrates that Achilles treats his captive in a slightly different way. Like Agamemnon, Achilles is possessive of his prize. He believes he earned her fairly and no one should be able to take his prize from him. To take away a prize he has already been given would be overstepping the codes of honor among the men. Agamemnon, however, has no qualms about overstepping these boundaries and taking

Briseis from Achilles. The first difference between Chryseis being taken from Agamemnon, and Briseis being taken from Achilles, is the reaction of the women. Chryseis is very happy to be leaving Agamemnon, partly due to the fact that she is allowed to go home. Briseis, is not getting to return to her home, but the story says she left Achilles' house unwillingly (Iliad 1.359-1.361). This, along with a few other instances in the text, indicate that the relationship Achilles and Briseis had was not just one of ownership.

How the men felt for the women is the second difference between these two relationships. Agamemnon felt both women were objects for his pleasure that could be easily replaced if needed. Achilles feels more emotion for Briseis and makes some comments that refer to her as if she were his legal wife. He indicates that this is how he felt for Briseis when he says that any honorable and good husband has a duty to care for and love his wife (Iliad 9.348-9.354). He indicates that Agamemnon did the very act that caused the entire war. The taking of Helen, Menelaus' wife, by a Trojan caused war to break out over her possession. Agamemnon, while still fighting this war over a woman, now takes the woman of one of his own men. To Achilles this is outrageous because Agamemnon is not only disrespecting him by taking back a prize he had been given, but by also taking the woman Achilles refers to as his wife. However, to Agamemnon it was simply taking a piece of property, not some other man's wife.

The possession of women causes the majority of conflict in *The Iliad*. Agamemnon doesn't care who his woman is, as long as he has the status women bring and has a woman in his possession to do with as he pleases. Achilles wants to possess a woman, but he wants a specific one- Briseis. He may have gained her as he would have gained any other object, as a prize of war, but he actually forms a relationship with her and feels offended when Agamemnon steals

her away. As shown, women did not have a lot of control over their own lives. Along with this lack of control, women were expected to be loyal to the men who possessed them.

As stated above, both Agamemnon and Achilles had acquired a girl through the war. A difference between the two relationships is that Achilles was not married when he took Briseis. Agamemnon, however, already had a wife when he took Chryseis. Agamemnon and many other men who took captive women to bed with them were not looked down upon for not being loyal to their wives; if any woman, however, went to another man's bed besides her husband's it was a huge social disgrace and dishonor to the family. According to the book *Ancient Greece*, by Thomas Martin, keeping women inside the home was a way for men to not only limit a woman's chances to commit adultery, but also limit chances of uncertain paternity of any heirs (Martin 170-175). A loyal wife was what men wanted and expected. Beth Cohen states in her book, *The Distaff Side*, that a loyal wife could earn the type of heroic glory that a warrior received, kleos, if she was continually loyal to her husband and his household (Cohen 22-23). In *The Odyssey*, Penelope demonstrates this loyalty, for which she is praised by Agamemnon's soul in Hades. He praises Penelope for being "A woman beyond reproach!" and for keeping "in her heart her husband, Odysseus" (Odyssey 24.202-203). However, this same standard of loyalty does not seem to apply to the husband.

Agamemnon does not stay loyal to his wife, Clytemnestra. Consequently, she lets anger control her and she becomes the model of a bad wife. Thomas Martin indicates that the trouble began when Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter to appease a goddess who was hindering his army during the war. While Agamemnon was gone, Clytemnestra took a lover. Then, when Agamemnon returns home with a girl he plans to keep in the house for his own pleasure, Clytemnestra plots Agamemnon's death (Martin 170-175). *The Odyssey* describes how this event

further lowered Agamemnon's view of women. As a ruler, Agamemnon wanted loyalty and obedience from everyone under his command. The fact that his wife was the one to challenge this was very hard for Agamemnon to deal with. His un-honorable death at the hands of his traitorous wife grieved his soul, and caused him to lose trust in all women. In *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus visits Hades, Agamemnon's distrust of women is seen as he warns Odysseus to be wary of his wife (Odyssey 11.458-460). Nancy Felson-Rubin, in the book *Regarding Penelope*, describes the bitterness Agamemnon's soul feels towards women. Agamemnon moves from placing the blame on Clytemnestra's lover to only Clytemnestra, and then from there makes a generalization about all women. In his bitterness, Felson-Rubin says that Agamemnon recognizes his naiveté in expecting a warm welcome home. In the end, women, to Agamemnon, are the epitome of "treachery and infidelity" (Felson-Rubin 101-103).

Had Achilles already had a wife I would assume that he would expect loyalty from her, as all other men expected of their wives. However, the way Achilles mentions that a man should love his woman suggests that he would have been more respectful of his marriage than Agamemnon seems to be of his. Achilles had other women besides Briseis as prizes. The fact that he may have thought of Briseis as his wife didn't mean that he couldn't have other women as prizes. So, it seems he would not have been a loyal husband, but might have had more morals than Agamemnon and would not have driven his wife to infidelity as Agamemnon did. Briseis, when taken, did not want to leave Achilles' house. Later, as she mourns Patroclus' death, she mourns that he died before fulfilling his promise to get Achilles to make her his legal wife (Iliad 19.343-19.365). So, it seems that even though he had other women, she still wanted to become his legal wife.

Achilles appears to have built an actual relationship with his girl, which in the end could lead to the loyalty men wanted from women. Agamemnon, however, either viewed his women solely as objects, or disrespected the relationship he had with them to the extent that none of his women wanted to be loyal to him. No matter how much Agamemnon tried to control his women, in the end he could not escape the hate he had caused to form in his wife. From the background, women played an important role in each of his actions.

Even though women had a low status in society, they had a large impact on men from behind the scenes. Actions of the men in this story are often driven by their feelings for women. The first thing that sparked Achilles' wrath was Agamemnon's theft of Briseis. The whole conflict arose from their differing views of her. While Agamemnon saw her solely as an object, Achilles viewed her as a potential future wife. Thousands of Greek men spent ten years of their lives fighting against Troy for one man's woman, Helen. They were fighting for the honor and reputation of a marriage, expecting Helen to be returned and be a loyal wife again. The importance of loyalty is seen in Agamemnon's expectation to return home to a loyal wife. All of these actions were brought about because of a women, and yet the men continually treated women as insignificant people. As much as these men attempted to push women into the background of everything, they were actually creating a new space for women to influence and drive their actions. They were driven not from being madly in love, but rather by the relationship and loyalty they found, or hoped to find, in their women. However, when we look at Homer's plays, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, from a historical standpoint, we cannot be certain that they accurately represent the social attitudes of the time period. In her book *Greece in the Making 1200-479 BC*, Robin Osborne says that poems such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* cannot add information on historical topics brought up through archeological findings. They can only add

information on the ways people viewed the world. Osborne suggests that the works of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* emphasize competitive values, which explains why women are seen as something to be won (Osborne 149). The competitiveness seen in battle translates down to the social setting, and women become the object of men's competition.

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