

Women in the Context of Greek Literature

Though *The Odyssey*, *The Medea*, and *The Lysistrata* all contain elements which provoke thought towards the place of women and challenge traditional Greek ideas held about women, they do so hesitantly, and ultimately, do not follow through with the challenges they pose. The conclusions of these three pieces would not have furthered the audience's view of women when considered in their cultural contexts, nor would they raised questions which would have otherwise assisted in the emergence of more progressive ideas because of the unfavourable light in which women were being portrayed to a society which was already unwelcoming of women who strayed even slightly from conventional societal behavior. Additionally, these three pieces contributed to negative tropes attributed to women in literature at the time, such as "the witch and/as the goddess" and "the deadly female gaze" as seen in *Medusa's Daughters* by Theodore Goss.

Medea is an obvious portrayal of a "dangerously" emotional female character, and while Medea stands out in many ways because of her uncommonly headstrong nature and non-Greek heritage, by the conclusion of the play, she has taken on the "crazy woman" stereotype and the audience can no longer sympathize with her because of the drastic nature of her actions, if they ever did. Though Euripides begins with the makings of a strong female character, breaking away from the passive role of women and provoking question and discussion, he takes this idea to an extreme and, by the end of the play, has turned Medea into a monster in the eyes of the audience and of the other characters in the play. Jason says of Medea, "There is no Greek woman who would have dared such deeds,/Out of all those whom I passed over and chose you/To marry instead, a bitter destructive match,/A monster, not a woman." Jason feels slighted because he defied Greek normalities, and in doing so, married a "monster" and became the lead in an immense tragedy for which Medea can be blamed by

both the characters in the play and the audience, and becomes an example of why women should not be emotional.

Lysistrata “cops out” in a similar fashion, prodding at the idea that women can take a stance on issues in a way that pokes fun both at this idea and at the women. Though the play contains commentary that hold the men responsible for their actions; for instance, when Lysistrata says, “The world is full of foreigners you could fight,/but it’s Greek men and cities you destroy!/And that’s the first reproach I have for you” and the Spartan responds with, “My hard-on’s absolutely killing me!”, ultimately, it concludes by making a fool of the women and not following through on some of its more radical content. Furthermore, many of the passages that display male ignorance, such as the Spartan’s blatant disrespect towards Lysistrata, only serve to make the women look foolish for speaking in the first place, and enforce the idea that women should not speak intellectually.

Finally, *The Iliad* conforms to many of the conventions commonly used through Greek literature. Women, when portrayed at all, are portrayed as doting wives, grieving desperately for their husbands and revolving their lives around men who are not shown to return much of this affection. Homer illustrates Hektor’s “wife and honoured mother” as they “tore their hair and ran up beside the smooth-rolling wagon and touched his head”. “And the multitude, wailing, stood there about them./And now and there in front of the gates they would have lamented/all day till the sun went down.” Through *The Iliad*, in passages such as this, women are simply an outlet for the grief of male “heroes” and exist for their support only, and thus conform directly to stereotypes of passive women.