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Gender and the Reaction to Grief in Euripides’ *Hecuba* and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

By Nathan Weinbren

Classical Greek society did not fear much, yet a woman in mourning was enough to frighten many. A common theme throughout much of classical Greek literature, lamenting mothers were known to act without conscience against those who wronged them. However, this literature exhibits grief in mortal and immortal women differently. Hecuba and Demeter, both queens in their own right, are good representations of this difference. These powerful women are the primary focus of two classical works: mortal Hecuba in Euripides’ *Hecuba* and immortal Demeter in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Both *Hecuba* and the *Hymn* depict a mother who loses a daughter then a son: Hecuba will lose Polyxena and Polydoros while Demeter will lose Persephone and Demophoon. For Hecuba and Demeter, this gender difference influences the manifestation of grief.

The two women begin their stories at very different points in their lives. In *Hecuba*, the titular character is in slavery with her daughter, Polyxena. Her only living son is Polydoros, entrusted to a friend, Polymestor. Eventually, both children are killed—Polyxena at the behest of the ghost of Achilles and Polydoros by Polymestor (Euripides *Hecuba* 189-190, 24-25). In contrast, Demeter begins her tale happy with her daughter, Persephone. When Persephone is abducted by Hades, Demeter wanders the Earth grieving, disguised as an old mortal woman. She becomes nurse to the young boy Demophoon, raising him to be immortal and caring for him.
similar to a mother nurturing her son (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter* p. 8). Eventually, Demophoon’s mortal mother discovers Demeter’s intentions, and he too is separated from Demeter. Demophoon’s death, discussed by Nancy Felson Rubin and Harriet M. Deal, is not a literal death—the child does not lose his life—but a return to mortality, thus separating mortal son from immortal mother.51

The death of a daughter provokes different reactions in the two women. Initially, following her daughter’s death, each woman’s grief is similar. Both are passive and withdrawn in their grief. While retreating from the outside world, Hecuba moans, “Why do you disturb me in my grief?” (*Hecuba* 502). Nicole Loraux points out that Hecuba’s mourning symbolizes how mothers are “always wounded in their motherhood.”52 Likewise, Demeter initially mourns passively for her daughter, directing her grief inwards as she “for nine days...never tasted ambrosia and the sweet draught of nectar” (*Hymn to Demeter* 2). Each mother initially feels pain at the loss of her child, but each mother’s grief evolves differently. Hecuba chooses to moan aloud, announcing her grief in a long monologue to her fellow slaves (*Hecuba* 585). In contrast, Demeter chooses to remain silent—hiding her emotions and not involving the mortal or immortal worlds (*Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 5). Thus, while the mothers’ grief may have similar tones, the actions from this lamentation unfold differently.

The mothers manifest the grief over the losses of their sons very similarly. Each woman actively grieves through

52 Loraux does mention that this wound is most typically tied to a mother-son bond, possibly the reason here no physical pain is shown in Hecuba. Nicole Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*, trans. Corinne Pache, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998: 49.
revenge. Loraux points out that, while Hecuba suffered from Polyxena’s death, “it is the mutilated corpse of Polydoros that leads her to vengeance.”

When Polyxena dies, Hecuba is not spurred to avenge her death; following Polydoros’ death, she immediately goes to Agamemnon, beseeching him to “extend...a hand of vengeance” (Hecuba 842-843). Hecuba’s request to avenge her son’s death by the hands of Polymestor symbolizes a change: her grief is now directed outward. Demophoon’s death is similarly jarring to Demeter. Rubin and Deal argue that Demophoon’s death is symbolized by “Demeter’s rejection, los[es of] immortality and return to a mortal state.” In other words, when Demophoon regains mortality, his ties with Demeter are severed and she loses her “son.” It is only following this that Demeter’s anger is released on the mortal world as she withholds grain from the mortals (Hymn to Demeter 10). Thus, Loraux concludes that “vengeance does not follow the same course whether the mother has a son or daughter for a child.”

It may be argued that Hecuba seeks vengeance for her son because she has a tangible being against whom to vent her rage (Polymestor) while there is no being to avenge for her daughters’ death as her death was at the demand of a ghost. However, Hecuba shows no signs of anger following Polyxena’s death and, therefore, has no rage to vent. On the other hand, Demeter does show slight anger when she loses Persephone; however, her overwhelming emotion is sadness, and she does not project any anger to seek revenge. Additionally, Demeter’s loss of a son could be seen as her

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53 Loraux, Mothers in Mourning, p. 50.
54 Rubin and Deal, “Some Functions of the Demophoon Episode in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter,” p. 15.
55 Loraux, Mothers in Mourning, p. 52.
56 Demeter is shown to have “grief yet more and terrible.” Therefore, while there is the presence of anger, grief has overwhelmed her and is the manifestation of the anger. Homeric Hymn to Demeter 4.
own fault because she voluntarily throws him to the ground, cutting him off from immortality. But as Rubin and Deal note, the act is merely a symbol of her recognition that the boy will never be like her—immortal. This recognition is the true “death” of her son, and thus the root of her vengeance. Therefore her attack on the mortal world stands as an attack on those who symbolize her son’s difference and separate him from her.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, it may be argued that withholding grain is an attack against the gods as grain is an offering presented to the gods. The immortals, just like the mortals, symbolize the separation of Demeter and Demophoon and therefore both groups can be seen as the focus of Demeter’s anger as both represent her infinite separation from her son.

This inherent difference in gender-dependent grief lies in their sanctity: Hecuba is mortal while Demeter is immortal. While grieving for their daughters, the women’s initial conditions may seem similar, but their contrasting positions result in a different evolution of action for each mother. Loraux investigates the curious similarities in Hecuba’s and Demeter’s initial conditions following the loss of her daughters: they are both grieving mothers, portrayed as older, post-menopausal women, and treated with reverence and

\textsuperscript{57} For an investigation, such as this, into the validity of the \textit{Hymn} itself, both as evidence for the roles of the elderly in Greek society as well as simply an investigation into the actions of Demeter, see Louise Pratt, “The Old Women of Ancient Greece and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter,” \textit{Transactions of the American Philological Association} 130, 41-65: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000: 59ff.
respect. Society’s reverence allows both Hecuba and Demeter to grieve internally, while ultimately compelling Hecuba to present her grief to the community and accepting Demeter’s solidarity. Loraux speculates that these actions are due to stature. In the Greek world, a daughter is a symbol of odis, the mother’s anguish in childbirth, never fully separated. Therefore, when a mother loses a daughter, she loses a part of herself. Thus, the overwhelming emotion from grief is sadness at the loss of self, resulting in Hecuba and Demeter’s similar initial grief. However, Hecuba and Polyxena are mortal and cannot be reunited. Hecuba has indefinitely lost her odis. Demeter and Persephone, on the other hand, are immortal and thus do have the chance. Demeter’s immortality allows the possibility of regaining her daughter. Hecuba declares her sadness because it is definitive. Conversely, Demeter punishes herself quietly and does not allow others to see her grief as it is not yet in full bloom. Demeter can still hope. This hopeful self-control is not typical of a lamenting woman.

Rubin and Deal also argue that Demeter’s immortality

58 While it could be said that Hecuba is not treated with respect, Agamemnon is kind and reverent in his communication (Hecuba 726ff and 1240ff). Demeter, similarly, is treated with respect by her new household when she arrives (Hymn to Demeter 4-6).
59 Louise Pratt points out that the respect to older women is odd as they no longer have any worth to society. This respect, she claims, is because old women frequently disguised themselves as old crones and so old women were treated with respect in case they actually were goddesses. Pratt, “The Old Women of Ancient Greece and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter,” p. 42.
60 Jan Bremmer investigates the importance of older women in Greek society, concluding that while they are not as free as the Hymn suggests, their freedom is greatly increased due to the lack of worry about their safety. However, Bremmer also notes that religion is an arena where older women are prized above all else. Jan Bremmer, “The Old Women of Ancient Greece,” Sexual Asymmetry: Studies in Ancient Society, Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1987: 192ff.
61 Loraux, Mothers in Mourning, p. 52.
allows her to assimilate herself into a new community: she can turn to the mortal world and find “a substitute [mortal] child”\(^{62}\) by disguising herself. Hecuba does not have a lower community to disguise herself within. Both may distance themselves from their respective communities, but Demeter can turn to man and withhold her grief from the outside world while Hecuba remains lost in her own grief.

While a daughter is the symbol for \textit{odis}, Loraux explains that the son is the \textit{lókheuma}, the finished product of childbirth, and thus is separated from the mother.\(^{63}\) For a post-menopausal woman, the son is the last remaining tie to her fertile years. Louise Pratt notes that this tie is symbolized by “man’s origin to his mortal mother’s womb tie[ing] him firmly to the Earth and to mortality.”\(^{64}\) Thus the son is the mother’s connection to her own mortality and fertility. In killing the son, the murderer effectively cuts a mother’s tie with the Earth. This is the root for both the mortal and immortal mother’s revenge. Hecuba’s vengeance is derived from her no longer having ties to fertility; her life is just not important anymore as her womb can no longer create a new tie to the Earth. For Demeter, Demophoon’s separation symbolizes his mortality, so Demeter seeks to avenge the loss of her son by attacking the very things that took her son away. Rubin and Deal argue that by realizing Demophoon is mortal, Demeter recognizes her own immortality and no longer has ties to Earth; she is able to seek revenge on mortality because

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\(^{63}\) Loraux, \textit{Mothers in Mourning} p. 52.

\(^{64}\) Pratt, “The Old Women of Ancient Greece and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter,” p. 59.
she no longer belongs. Demeter’s own elderly disguise symbolizes her inability to reproduce again, and thus these children are both women’s last. While there are derivations for the specific reasons or targets of retribution, both manifestations of revenge are derived from the ties between postmenopausal mother and son, regardless of the mother’s mortality status.

Both Hecuba and Demeter separate their grief in lamenting their respective children. While both feel the pain of the loss of a daughter, the differences in mortality reflects different grieving patterns. However, for both, a daughter’s death incites a sort of longing sadness while vengeful anger comes from the loss of a connection between mother and son. Thus, when the classical Greeks feared a mother’s wrath, they were not fearful of a mother’s general grief, but a mother’s lamentation of a lost son.

References
Pratt, Louise, “The Old Women of Ancient Greece and the Homeric Hymn to Demeter.” Transactions of the

65 Rubin and Deal note that Demeter is not yet fully immortal because she will not regain immortality until she is reunited with her daughter. Rubin and Deal, “Some Functions of the Demophoon Episode in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter,” p. 18-9.


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