

The Figure of Niobe in Greek Mythology and Anna Fierling in Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to compare between the figure of Niobe, one of the most popular figures in Greek Mythology, and Anna Fierling, the main figure in Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children. The research has arrived at the fact that, despite the great difference between the two figures, yet, they are similar in many aspects. They both have committed a fatal mistake that they were punished for by losing all their children and becoming childless. Therefore, they have both become symbols of the 'suffering mother'. But, Anna has had the ability to go on with her business in spite of her grief, whereas, Niobe has surrendered to her sorrows.

Keywords: Niobe, Greek Mythology, Anna Fierling, Bertolt Brecht, Mother Courage and Her Children.

المستخلص

يهدف البحث الحالي الى المقارنة بين شخصية نايوبي، والتي تعتبر احد اشهر الشخصيات في الميثولوجيا الاغريقية، وانا فيرلينج احد ابرز الشخصيات في مسرحية بيرتولت بريخت "الام الشجاعة واولادها". لقد توصل البحث الى حقيقة انه بالرغم من وجود اختلاف كبير بين الشخصيتين الا انهما متشابهتان في عدة جوانب. فكلاهما قد اقترفتا خطأ مصيريا مما ادى الى معاقبتهما بفقدانهما لكل اولادهما، مما جعلهما رمزا للام "المغذبة"، لكن كان لانا القدرة على الاستمرار في عملها على الرغم من احزانها، بينما لم يكن لنايوبي القدرة على تحمل آلامها فاستسلمت لأحزانها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نايوبي، الميثولوجيا الاغريقية، انا فيرلينج، بيرتولت بريخت، "الام الشجاعة واولادها".

Introduction

Niobe is one of the most eminent figures in Greek Mythology, which is a collection of traditional stories concerning the gods, heroes, and religious rituals of the ancient Greeks.¹ Being a mother of many children, Niobe has boasted her fertility against the Titan goddess Leto, daughter of Coeus and Phoebe, who has had only two children, Apollo, god of the sun, and Artemis, goddess of the hunt and moon.² As a revenge for their mother's insult, Apollo and Artemis, mercilessly slaughter all of Niobe's children.³ Thus, overwhelmed with grief, Niobe turns into a stone.⁴ She becomes a symbol of 'maternal grief'.⁵ R.M. Cook believes that, her story is 'so moral' and 'so pathetic' that it remained popular throughout ancient literature and art.⁶

Traces of Niobe's story can also be found in modern literature, especially in the work of Bertolt Brecht (1898- 1956), who is regarded as one of the most influential playwrights during the twentieth century.⁷ In his Mother Courage and Her Children (1939), which is considered as his masterpiece, the protagonist, Anna Fierling is also an epitome of the 'suffering mother', who has lost all her three children during the twelve years (1624 to 1636) of the Thirty Years War (1618- 1648), that destroyed most of Europe as a result of a political and religious struggle between the Protestants and the Catholics.⁸

Thus, the aim of this research is to compare between the figure of Niobe in Greek Mythology and Anna Fierling in Brecht's Mother Courage and Her Children.

The first section displays the origin and family of each of the figures, Niobe and Anna Fierling.

The second section is an analytical study of the fatal mistakes of both Niobe and Anna Fierling.

Whereas, the third section is a revelation of the punishment that each of the two figures has had to undergo.

The conclusion sums up the findings of the research.

1- Origin and Family

Niobe is of noble birth. Her father is the Phrygian king Tantalus, the son of Zeus, who is admitted to the company of gods, and having eaten of their food, he becomes immortal.⁹ Her husband is Amphion, king of Thebes and an incomparable

musician.¹⁰ Niobe and Amphion have a splendid family. According to Apollodorus, the author of The Library, which is regarded as the first surviving Greek Mythology that dates around the first century A.D.,¹¹ Niobe has seven strong and handsome sons, "Sipylus, Eupinytus, Ismenus, Damasichton, Agenor, Phaedimus, Tantalus," and seven beautiful daughters, "Ethodia (or as some say, Neara), Cleodoxa, Astyoche, Phthia, Pelopia, Astycratia, and Ogygia."¹²

On the other hand, Anna Fierling is one of the common people. She runs a mobile canteen, selling food clothes, ammunition, and other items to weary soldiers amidst battle. She has three children of different fathers. Eilif Noyoki is her eldest son and the result of her union with an astute soldier. He is not only brave, but intelligent as well, as Anna says: "that man could whip the breeches off a farmer's back- side before he could turn around."¹³ While Swiss Cheese is her younger boy, and the son of a Swiss military engineer, who is also a drunkard. Swiss Cheese is sensitive and 'dangerously honest', as Meg Mumford describes him. In addition to her only daughter, Kattrin, who is the product of her relationship with a German man. Although, Kattrin is mute, due to an incident that has happened to her when she was young: a soldier stuck something in her mouth, yet, she is sensitive, simple and suicidally compassionate, according to Mumford.¹⁴

2- The Fatal Mistake

Niobe's fatal mistake is due to her hubris, which is a Greek term that denotes excessive pride.¹⁵ According to R.Wong in his article "Hubris and Nemesis: A Correlation Analysis," Niobe's hubris rises from her sense of excessive self- importance, regarding her royal birth, marriage, beauty, and especially, her fertility.¹⁶ Ovid (45 B.C.- 17 C.E.), the Roman poet, in his Metamorphoses (8 C.E.), which is regarded as the lengthiest and most ambitious epic poem, has mentioned Niobe's hubris. In addressing the people of Thebes, who have gathered to worship Leto, Niobe says:

Mine, whose immediate lineage stands confess'd

From Tantalus, the only mortal quest

That e'er the Gods admitted to their feast.

A sister of the Pleiads gave me birth;

And Atlas, mightiest mountain upon Earth,

Who bears the globe of all the stars above.

My grandsire was, and Atlas sprung from Jove,

The Theban towns my majesty adore:

And neighb'ring Phrygia trembles at my pow'r,
 Rais'd by my husband's lute, with turrets crown'd.
 Our lofty city stands secur'd around,
 Within my court, where-e'er I turn my eyes:
 Unbounded treasures to my prospect rise,
 With these my face I modestly may name;
 As not unworthy of so high a claim,
 Seven are my daughters, of a form divine
 With seven fair sons, an indefective line.¹⁷

Her material excess, as David Rofeldt assures, has given her a pretentious sense of being godlike.¹⁸ Therefore, she does not only reject worshipping Leto, but also demands to be idolized instead.¹⁹ Besides, she boasts her fertility against Leto's, inflicting by this, as N. R. E. Fisher believes, dishonor and shame upon Leto.²⁰ Thus, in the opinion of Helen North, Niobe has violated all mortal limits and provoked divine wrath.²¹ As Ovid, in the Metamorphoses confirms:

High on the top of Cynthus' shady mount;
 With grief the Goddess saw the base affront,
 And, the abuse revolving in her breast. (6, 295- 298)

As Niobe, Anna Fierling's fatal mistake is also due to her hubris, which emerges from her overweening pride in herself, as Ronfeldt confirms.²² In her song of "The Great Capitulation," she says:

Long ago when I was a green biginner
 I believed I was a special case.
 (None of your ordinary run of the mill girls, with my looks and my talent,
 and my love of the higher things in life!)
 And if I picked a hair out of my dinner
 I would put the cook right in his place.
 (All or nothing. Anyhow, never the second best. I am the master of my fate.
 I'll take no orders from no one.)²³

Besides, her hubris is evident from her response to the corporal's sarcastic remark that, hers is 'a nice family': "Aye, me cart and me have seen the whole

world."²⁴ According to Ronald Speirs, she believes that, she has a greater stature than most people, which is indicated by her name, Mother Courage.²⁵ As she says:

They call me Mother Courage 'cause I was afraid I'd be ruined.
So I drove through the bombardment of Riga like a madwoman,
With fifty loaves of bread in my cart. They were going moldy,
what else could I do?²⁶

But, her courage does not mean bravery in its conventional sense, as David Krasner comments, it rather refers to profiteering and business savvy. For,

Hungry soldiers longing for fresh bread will pay the higher price;
with death looming around every bullet and cannon, why should
soldiers save money or batter with Mother Courage? Her best market
strategy is to get the fresh bread to exhausted soldiers; bullets had to be
dodge across battle fields- hence she is courageous.²⁷

Her hubris is also due to her egotism, as Ronfeldt remarks.²⁸ In being obsessed with making money, as Karl H. Schoeps observes, she uses war as a means to gain profit.²⁹ She heartlessly declares that, " war is a business proposition: Not with cream cheese but steal and lead."³⁰ As Krasner remarks:

She drags her wares from battle to battle, because that is where
the market resides, she knows that when soldiers are wounded
and dying they will call for brandy to ease their pain, and she will
be there to sell it to them for maximum profit; and when they
need clean underwear because amidst combat- evoking fear they
pissed their pants- she will be there to sell that too.³¹

She is even called " the hyena of the battlefield!"³² Krasner describes her as 'a hustler' and 'a hawker' of her wares.³³

She tergiversates allegiances, as Krasner assures, from Catholic to Protestant and back again according to whichever side is hungry enough to purchase her species (food, clothes and other sundry matters related to war).³⁴ Business is business, she believes and "a peddler is not asked for his creed, but his price. Besides, Protestant pants keep one just as warm as others."³⁵

She denies the personal rights of others.³⁶ She calls to others to enlist but, not her own children.³⁷ She advises them not to go deep in this war. Taking a sheet of parchment and tearing it into two, she says: " Eilif, Swiss Cheese, Kattrin! May all of us be torn apart like this if we let ourselves get too mixed up in the war."³⁸

She refuses charity to those who are in need, as A. Petrusso remarks, for, she would rather sell shirts, which are made of linen, to officers than use them as bandages for peasants wounds.³⁹ "They have nothing and they pay nothing!" she says.⁴⁰

Although, She claims that her only goal is the safekeeping of her children, as Krasner assures, yet, she puts profit before their safety.⁴¹ In spite of her attempt to keep Eilif from being recruited to the Swedish army, he ends up joining when Anna's attention is distracted by the sergeant, who involves her in a business deal over the price of a belt buckle, while the recruiting officer takes Eilif aside and convinces him to sign up. Thus, Brecht makes sure that, if she has not been too preoccupied with profit, Eilif would not have been recruited.⁴² Besides, she haggles so long over the sale of her wagon that she fails to save Swiss Cheese from being executed. While Kattrin receives the mutilating injury that destroys any possibility of marriage and children of her own while away doing business for her mother.⁴³

Regardless of the destructive effect of war, however, Anna praises war: "I won't let you spoil my war for me. They say war destroys only the weak. But they are also destroyed in peace. The only difference is that war feeds its people better."⁴⁴ She dislikes peace, because according to Schoeps, it means material loss for her.⁴⁵ " Don't tell me," she says that, " peace has broken out. I've bought new supplies."⁴⁶ But according to George Steiner's opinion, Anna "refuses to grasp the plain truth that those who live by selling the sword shall perish by the sword."⁴⁷ She is a "foolish creature" who thinks she is advancing" but is "treading a mill of ruin."⁴⁸

3- The Punishment

As a consequence, for Niobe's insult, Leto seeks retribution. She addresses her children, asking them to avenge for her:

The mother her twin- offspring thus address
Lo I, my children, who with comfort knew;
Your God- like birth, and thence my glory drew
And thence have claim'd precedency of place,
From all but Juno of the heav'nly race.
Must now despair, and languish in disgrace,
My godhead question'd, and all rites divine.
Unless you succor, banish'd from my shrine
Nay more, the imp of Tantalus has flung;

Reflections with her vile paternal tongue,
Has dar'd prefer her mortal breed to mine
And call'd me childless; which, just fate, repine!

(*Metamorphoses*, 6, 297-303)

Outraged by their mother's insult, Apollo kills all of Niobe's sons while, Artemis kills all of her daughters. Seeing them with anguish too great for expression, Niobe sits down motionless in stony grief, dumb as a stone and her heart like a stone within her. Only her tears flow continuously. She is thus, transformed into a stone that is forever, night and day, wet with tears.⁴⁹ As Ovid describes her:

... among the dead she sate
Harden'd with woes, a statue of despair;
To ev'ry breath of wind unmov'd her hair,
Her cheek still red'ning, but its colour dead.
Faded her eyes, and set within her head,
No more her pliant tongue its motion keeps.
But stands congeal'd within her frozen lips,
Stagnate, and dull, within her purple veins.
Its current stop'd, the lifeless blood remains,
Her feet their usual offices refuse:
Her arms, and neck their graceful gestures lose,
Action, and life from ev'ry part are gone;
And even her entrails turn to solid stone,
Yet still she weeps, and whirl'd by stormy winds;
Born thro' the air, her native country finds,
There fix'd, she stands upon a bleaky hill.
There yet her marble cheeks eternal tears distil.

(*Metamorphoses*, 6, 436- 452)

Similarly, Anna suffers the consequences of her hubris by losing all her children as well. She first loses her younger son, Swiss Cheese, who has become a paymaster for the Swedish Second Regiment. During an attack by the Catholics, he tries to protect the cashbox by hiding it, first in the canteen and then in a mole hole by the river.⁵⁰ He is caught by two Catholic officers. When the officers bring him by, Swiss Cheese pretends like he does not know Anna, hoping to protect both himself and his family.⁵¹ He is later executed while his mother haggles over the price of his ransom. When his body is brought to her for identification, she denies knowing him.

The Sergeant: Here's a man we can't identify. But he has to be registered to keep the Records straight. He bought a meal from you. Look at him, see if you know him. (He pulls back the sheet.) Do you know him? (Mother Courage shakes her head.) What? You never saw him before he took that meal? (Mother Courage shakes her head.) lift him up. Throw him in the carrion pit. He has no one that knows him.⁵²

Later, she loses her eldest son, Eilif, who has turned into a brute after being recruited.⁵³ He attacks peasants, steals their cattle and slaughter them at the end. He is rewarded for such a cruel act during wartime, and is regarded as a hero, as Schoeps confirms.⁵⁴ But, repeating the same act during peacetime, he is considered as a criminal and is executed for it, as Eilif says: "It's no different. It's what I did before."⁵⁵

Finally, she loses Katrin, who, according to Schoeps, represents the decent qualities in man: compassion, love and goodness.⁵⁶ Katrin takes great personal risks to help others, as A. Petrusso observes.⁵⁷ When she hears that a family of peasants needs linen for bandages; she gives the Chaplain shirts behind her mother's back. She also runs into a burning house to save a child despite her mother's protests. Sometime later, she goes to a town on a business mission for her mother and comes back with a gash across her forehead.⁵⁸ At the end of the play, Katrin sacrifices her own life to save the people of the Protestant city of Halle from a sudden attack by the Catholic troops.⁵⁹ She climbs at the top of a farmer's house and starts beating on a drum in order to awake the sleeping people of Halle. In spite of the constant warnings to stop drumming, she continues beating until she is violently shot by the Catholic soldiers. Yet, with the last beat she succeeds in alarming the people of Halle, saving by this many innocent lives. Kenneth Tynan, an English Theatre critic says that, it is "the most tremendous scene to have enriched the drama for many years."⁶⁰

After losing all her children, Anna resumes her business. She straps herself to her wagon saying: "I hope I can pull the wagon by myself. Yes, I'll manage, there's not much in it now. I must get back into business."⁶¹ According to Tennessee Williams, her determination in pulling the wagon further on, is heroic.⁶² Likewise, Robert Brustein views her as an example of the limitless capacity of man's suffering.⁶³

Conclusion

Despite the remoteness in time, space and culture, between Niobe and Anna Fierling, yet, they are similar.

Both of them are victims of their hubris. Niobe's hubris has led her to brag about her fertility that, she has defied the goddess, Leto. On the other hand, Anna's hubris has caused her to believe that, she can defy war and, get both her business and children safe through it.

Therefore, both, Niobe and Anna, are punished by losing all their children and becoming childless. But, unlike Anna, Niobe surrenders to her grief that, she is turned into a stone, weeping forever. Whereas, Anna is courageous enough to move on with her life and resume her business, regardless of her grief.

Notes

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- ³ Bergen Evans, Dictionary of Mythology, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1970), pp. 186-187.
- ⁴ Anita Wolf (ed.), Britannica Concise Encyclopedia, (London: Encyclopedia Britannica, INC., 2006), p. 1365.
- ⁵ David Sacks, Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek World, (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2005), p. 225.
- ⁶ R. M. Cook, Niobe and Her Children, (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1964), p. 7.
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- ¹⁰ Edith Hamilton, Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes, (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1942), p. 349.
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- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Bertolt Brecht, Mother Courage and Her Children, (trans.) Eric Bentley (U. S. A.: New Directions, 1963), p. 17.
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- ¹⁵ James F. Childress and John Macquarrine (eds.), A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics, (London: SCM press Ltd., 1986), p. 287.
- ¹⁶ R. Wong, " Hubris and Nemesis: A Correlation Analysis", Parandium: The Journal of Historical Studies at U of T Mississauga, 1 (2012), 5-6.
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- ²⁰ N. R. E. Fisher, "Hybris and Dishonour", Greece and Rome, 26 vols, 1 (1979), 32-47.

- ²¹ Helen North, Sophrosyne: Self- Knowledge and Self- Restraint in Greek Literature, (New York: Cornell University press, 1966), p. 6.
- ²² Ronfeldt, p. 2.
- ²³ Brecht, p. 64.
- ²⁴ Ibid, p. 17.
- ²⁵ Ronald Speirs, Bertolt Brecht, (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 97.
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- ²⁸ Ronfeldt, p. 2.
- ²⁹ Karl H. Schoeps, Bertolt Brecht, (New York: Frederick Unger Publishing, 1977), p. 257.
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- ³¹ Krasner, p. 252.
- ³³ Krasner, p. 252.
- ³⁴ Ibid, p. 250.
- ³⁵ Schoeps, p. 254.
- ³⁶ Maynard Mack (ed.), The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces, 2 vols (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 1995), p. 1907.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Brecht, p. 20.
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- ⁴⁰ Brecht, p. 67.
- ⁴¹ Krasner, p. 250.
- ⁴² Schoeps, p. 262.
- ⁴³ Speirs, p. 99.
- ⁴⁴ Brecht, p. 81.
- ⁴⁵ Schoeps, p. 255.
- ⁴⁶ Brecht, p. 84.
- ⁴⁷ George Steiner, The Death of Tragedy, (New York: Oxford University press, 1961), p. 346.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Hamilton, p. 350.

⁵⁰ Galens, p. 185.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Brecht, p. 59.

⁵³ Galens, p. 185.

⁵⁴ Schoeps, p. 255.

⁵⁵ Brecht, p. 92.

⁵⁶ Schoeps, p. 258.

⁵⁷ Galens, p. 192.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 184.

⁵⁹ Mumford, p. 70.

⁶⁰ Schoeps, p. 258.

⁶¹ Brecht, p. 116.

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