

Taking on The Man: Female Rebellion Against Gender Roles in Classical Greek Drama

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Abstract

The portrayal of women in Ancient Greek drama seems at times opposed to the societal gender roles within Classical Athens. In the plays, women are strong and dynamic figures who enact change and upheaval in their world. Ancient dramas, like *Agamemnon*, *Medea*, *Antigone*, and *Lysistrata*, portrayed women with strong autonomy and minds which matched their male counterparts; whereas the women in Classical Athens found themselves in more limited circumstances. In analyzing the nature of these disparities, it seems that the constant factor is that the plays concern the violation of the household. The female characters respond in one of two ways: perpetuating the violation for the sake of vengeance or stepping into the masculine role to fill the need left by the men.

Taking on The Man: Female Rebellion Against Gender Roles in Classical Greek Drama

Strong female characters are a frequent presence in Ancient Greek plays. These women are dynamic figures who enact change and upheaval in their world. Women like Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, and the eponymous characters of Euripides' *Medea*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* capture the empathy and emotions of those who read or watch the plays, but remain powerful characters in the minds of viewers, lasting in imagination and thought even now. However, these portrayals of women in drama seem at times opposed to the societal gender roles within Classical Athens. The ancient dramas portrayed women with strong autonomy and minds which matched their male counterparts; whereas the women in Classical Athens found themselves in more limited circumstances, confined to the household and mostly separated from the male population.

A study of the disparities shows the constant factor in many of the plays which present women as strong figures is that they all concern the violation of the household (the women's domain), and, therefore, it is right that women should hold such an enormous sway in these stories. These women are either responding to a violation of their domain by first continuing in the destruction of the household and then violating the masculine roles for the sake of vengeance, or they are responding to the men's inability to fulfill their duties, and therefore step into the masculine role to fill the void.

Representative of the first situation are Clytemnestra and Medea. Clytemnestra's child was sacrificed for Agamemnon's war and she retaliates by destroying Agamemnon's home. Medea's marriage was thrown aside through the oath-breaking of Jason and she takes revenge by strategically removing everything dear to him. Representative of the

second category are Antigone and Lysistrata. Antigone must bury her brother against the laws of the state when her closest male kinsman refuses to perform the proper burial rites. Lysistrata seeks to save the home in her strike and actions against male warfare through applying her leadership over the home to the *polis*. These are women stepping into the male sphere either to avenge a prior violation of the female domain or to fill a gap left by the men. The first situation shows women driven to excess in their anger and betrayal, but the second reveals a laudable concern for the best working of society.

The Role of Women in Classical Greece

The women of classical Athens were relegated to a very specific role closely tied with their assigned domain. They were confined to the home or the *oikos* and were rarely, if ever, allowed to leave this space. Women were strictly segregated from any men that they were not related to after they were married, passing from their father or guardian's home to that of her future husband. The classical Athenians even went so far as to have the house itself segregated to make it even less feasible for women to interact with other men and therefore be tempted. There were distinct women's and men's quarters, often separated by the courtyard inside the home and excavations appear to show that women would have been able to go from their workroom to their sleeping area without ever having to leave the women's quarters. The men's quarters were often in the front of the house near the only entrance into the home allowing men to control who went in and out of the home (Blundell 139).

The women had total control of the household, however, and maintained their domain with prudence and industriousness. The men's domain was outside the home and therefore, while the women were subordinate and submissive to the men, they were in

control of the running of the household. A wife was considered to be an integral part to any home as it was she who managed the proper and efficient running of the household. She oversaw all of the slaves who worked in the house, the meals which were to be prepared, the cleaning of the home, the financial aspects of running a household, the rearing of children, and making sure that everything her husband provided for her was put to good use. While they lived a rather enclosed life, as respectable women did not leave their households except to visit female friends as it was seen as indecent, the women maintained control over their area (Carroll 171). It was the responsibility of the women to ensure that the *oikos* survived, and the *polis* as a whole was represented well. When a man, whose domain is the public sphere, infringed upon the women's responsibility for the household and the family, then the women struck back attempting to protect the most important aspect of their lives.

Athenian women were placed under strict restrictions within society primarily due to the male fears regarding the nature of the female. Athens was an extremely male-dominated culture which was frightened of the female nature and caused it to be suppressed. Men were considered naturally rational. Women on the other hand were considered to be emotional, passionate, and irrational. They were also supposed to have a stronger bond to nature and the old ways. This might be due to the fact that before the democratic times of Ancient Greece, women had a stronger social role and were not fully relegated to the household. In a stronger agricultural society, women had greater freedom, but with the advent of the democratic society and the designation of the public sphere as for the men, the women of Greece were further pushed back into the *oikos* and found themselves more secluded there (*Pandora's Box*). Respectable women were not to

be mentioned in public conversation out of respect for the modesty required of women within the Athenian society and as they secluded themselves further into the home, they were unable to have a say in the politics of the day. Unsurprisingly, this was a requirement mainly for the rich women of the city, as the poorer female residents of Athens simply could not afford to stay secluded in the home as they had to make money outside of the domestic sphere that upper class women were resigned to (Martin 137). Clytemnestra, Medea, Antigone, and Lysistrata separate themselves from this social rule by refusing to remain in the shadows of the home, and instead step out into the public sphere.

The plays chosen for this particular analysis all reflect the struggle of women whose domain and responsibilities have been violated or restricted by a male figure, specifically a male figure intimately related to them. The first of the plays to be represented is Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* whose eponymous character is not actually the most compelling of the characters within the play. Rather it is his wife, Clytemnestra, who acts as the protagonist of the piece as she carries out her murderous vengeance upon her husband for his violation of their home. Euripides' *Medea* shows the anger of a woman who has been betrayed by the man she sacrificed everything for and who has broken his vow to her and their family. Sophocles' *Antigone* reveals the plight of a woman who faces capital punishment for fulfilling her familial and religious duties in burying her brother. Finally, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* considers what would happen should women use their control of the house to stop a war that has taken away their husbands, by withholding sex, procreation, and funds for warfare. These works of literature reveal different responses to the various injustices and violations these women

suffered and show how men feared how a woman would react when her domain is attacked.

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

The first woman to consider is Clytemnestra, famous for her role in the *Oresteia* and as the wife of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra may be viewed as both the protagonist and the villain of the play as she seeks vengeance upon her husband for the murder of Iphigenia, their daughter. While her husband is away, she maintains a position of power among the men in her society that is greater than an historical understanding of Classical Athenian mores would suggest. She rejects the traditional role of the wife waiting for her husband's return, and instead, chooses to replace him with a consort while he is at Troy. While she is a brutal murderess as revealed at the end of the play, Clytemnestra is careful and clever, laying a trap for her husband in both word and deed. Through her machinations Clytemnestra rips apart the household in order to gain ultimate vengeance upon her husband who betrayed her by sacrificing their daughter for the war on Troy.

The initial violation within *Agamemnon* deals with one of the most important aspects of the woman's role within Greek society: progeny. Agamemnon greatly desires to set off for war, a wholly male pursuit according to the understanding of the Athenians; however, he is faced with a lack of favorable wind. In order to receive favorable wind, he must sacrifice his own child, Iphigenia, to the gods, which he promptly does in his quest to begin war upon Troy. This all takes place many years before the actual events of *Agamemnon*; however, Clytemnestra has clearly not forgotten this betrayal that her husband inflicted upon her by killing her daughter. It is this action that spurs Clytemnestra on in her anger and revenge. Agamemnon was the girl's father and

therefore guardian, it is true, but his sacrifice of the child overstepped into Clytemnestra's domain as it tore apart the family that she was responsible for maintaining and rearing. A secondary violation, though less of an issue within Ancient Greek times, is Agamemnon's later lauding of his concubine, Cassandra of Troy, as a beautiful and desirable prize as he keeps her in a place of honor and requires that she be taken care of. Clytemnestra has not been a faithful spouse either during the time that Agamemnon was away, but the heightened status that was given to Cassandra would be galling for a spouse to see, particularly after such a long absence. However, it is clear from the multiple times that she mentions it that Clytemnestra is truly taking her revenge in order to avenge the death of her child.

Clytemnestra, in retaliation for her husband's actions, violates her own household first by taking a lover while Agamemnon is away fighting at Troy. While it was considered perfectly lawful within Athenian society for men to take on concubines and associate with prostitutes, women were held to a very strict sexual standard. Men feared that their wives would be far too easily enticed by the charms of other men, leading to their seclusion within the household (Pritchard 56). However, there is a deeper and more insidious revenge and violation at the heart of Clytemnestra's taking a lover in her husband's absence. After observing the violation of her family, her domain, at the hands of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra retaliates by violating the male domain. She has become ruler in Agamemnon's stead, a role women were certainly not supposed to attain, and then proceeds to control the land with ruthlessness and tyranny as evidenced by comments made in the very beginning of the play by the watchman. Speaking of Clytemnestra and her actions, the watchman explains, "she commands, full of her high

hopes / That woman—she maneuvers like a man” (Aeschylus 12-13). Clytemnestra has taken upon herself a masculine role, which is a perversion of what is dearest to the Greeks the city and the *polis*. The phrasing of her commanding sets her up as almost warlike and tyrannical in her rulership, furthering her transition towards the masculine. She has ultimately attempted to replace her husband, not with her male lover, but with herself, going so far as to send her son, Agamemnon’s rightful heir, Orestes away from his home. Along with transgressing both political and gender boundaries, “[Clytemnestra] takes a lover, a lover who is weak and effeminate and rules illegally as her consort” (Doyle 201). Clytemnestra’s transgressions progress in extremity from initially taking over the land to taking a lover to the act of murder, which is her ultimate vengeance.

Clytemnestra’s ultimate goal in avenging her daughter’s death is the murder of her husband upon his return from war. As the play opens, the audience is greeted with the scene of the watchman looking for the beacon that will signal the fall of Troy and therefore the end of the war. As the beacon is lit, Clytemnestra begins to rush around in excitement ready to set her plan into action. According to the stage directions between lines 52-53, the queen “raises a cry of triumph” when she is given the news as to her husband’s imminent return. She shows no remorse or hesitation as she sets into motion her plot for her husband’s demise (*Women in Classical Greek Drama*). Instead she is shown as fierce and emotional, something that the chorus made up of the old men of the city begin to comment on as they watch her reaction and begin to doubt her words about the return of Agamemnon (Aeschylus 274-276). Clytemnestra reacts angrily against these comments due to their patronizing manner and continues to prepare for Agamemnon’s return. She is ready to achieve her final vengeance upon the husband who wounded her.

The nature of this murder is one of weakening the male power within her life.

Clytemnestra does not take the warrior's path and challenge Agamemnon outright; rather, she carefully ensnares him, both figuratively and literally, and strikes him at a moment of intense vulnerability as he bathes. The killing blow was not the beginning of her feminizing and lessening the power of Agamemnon. She begins her initial assault upon him as he arrives.

An extremely important scene within the play, the tapestry scene shows how Clytemnestra slowly and slyly begins to remove her husband's honor and masculinity by publicly arguing him into following her wishes. The deadly queen greets her returning husband with her handmaidens and her carrying red tapestries and laying them out from the hero's chariot to the door of the palace, for the proposed reason that Agamemnon should never "set the foot / that stamped out Troy on earth again" (Aeschylus 898-9). Agamemnon rejects her actions and states five arguments against it: he does not desire praise from Clytemnestra; he believes her actions to be overly feminine; he rejects the barbaric or contemptible nature of such praise; he feels that the tapestries will incite envy; and, finally, because he believes that such praise is sacrilegious. Clytemnestra is not so easily beaten in an argument however. She quickly breaks down his protestations with logic and cleverness in front of the receiving chorus of old men. Her first attack is to obliquely remind him of Iphigenia, an impious action he has already willingly taken, thereby showing him that his argument of impiety is not an acceptable one. If he can kill his daughter for his own gain, why can he not step on tapestries when his wife asks nicely? The second counter-argument to his objections regards his second and third reasons for rejecting her request. She asks if this sort of behavior (walking on tapestries)

was common of Priam, king of Troy and Agamemnon admits to seeing Priam walking upon tapestries like the ones that Clytemnestra laid out. Through this questioning, Clytemnestra is subtly pointing out to Agamemnon that to declare Priam's practice of walking upon such tapestries to be feminine and shameful, then he has diminished the greatness of Priam and therefore his own greatness for conquering the Trojan king. She then questions the importance that Agamemnon places upon the opinions of the common man (Konishi 216-220). He maintains that their view holds great power but Clytemnestra asserts, "Where's the glory without a little gall?" (Aeschylus 934). By quickly dispatching all of Agamemnon's arguments against her request, Clytemnestra has once again asserted her dominance over the male domain. With her audacity to argue with her husband in public as well as his acquiescence to her arguments, Clytemnestra cleverly and methodically begins to weaken her husband's strength and masculinity mentally before attacking him physically.

Clytemnestra is not a hero in the ancient Greek world. She is a villainess, perhaps even the villainess. She was viewed with hatred as the archetype for the bad woman within ancient Greek literature and mythology. An adulterous murderess who attempted to seize male power for her own while her husband was away, Clytemnestra acts as a nightmare for the primarily male audiences who viewed Aeschylus' play. She is a woman on a quest for power who weakens and feminizes all the male leaders in her way as she pursues her goals with fierce determination. This is a woman who feels irreparably wronged and will do whatever it takes to avenge this pain. Rachel Wolfe explains that in the *Odyssey*, Clytemnestra is not the mastermind of Agamemnon's murder; rather she acts under Aegisthus as he seeks his own revenge against the Greek king. Aeschylus, on

the other hand, reveals Clytemnestra to be a far more active participant and the leader of the murder plot. It is her pain and her wrong that is clearly the reason for Agamemnon's death and her lover is shown to be the weak puppet (Wolfe 698-700). Clytemnestra is a strong intelligent woman who don't need no man (though she apparently likes to keep one on the side) and that is perhaps her greatest fault among classical Greek audiences. She has thoroughly overstepped the gender roles that were prescribed within her time period, and in doing so, is now considered "one of the most detested villains in the canon of Greek myths and legends" (Wolfe 692).

Euripides' *Medea*

Medea represents a woman clearly outside the social norms, so it is interesting that she is the protagonist of a tragedy, although she acts more like an anti-heroine than a true heroine. Medea is a strong figure who does not accept the culturally and morally acceptable choice and rather chooses to take her future into her own hands. She is also a woman who is no longer under the protection of her husband or her father as her husband's betrayal is to leave her and her children in a foreign country for the sake of a younger woman and the power that such a relationship entails. The chorus of *Medea* presents a strong female presence within the play and serves to signify what the acceptable decision for Medea would be, showing female solidarity throughout the play until the final horrible decision Medea makes. Ultimately, Medea, like Clytemnestra, is a woman consumed with a desire for vengeance, who steps into the masculine role in order to accomplish her punishment of Jason.

Medea is not a fainting flower or the Athenian vision of a perfect woman. She is ruthless in her mission to support Jason, betraying her own family for the sake of her

husband. She obviously places an enormous importance upon the bond between man and wife and the strength of the family as they are all she has in the foreign Greek city. The chorus, made up entirely of Corinthian women, comments upon her behavior up until the incidents dramatized in the play:

Coming as an exile, she has earned

The citizen's welcome; while to Jason she is all

Obedience – and in marriage, that's the saving thing,

When a wife obediently accepts her husband's will. (Euripides 17)

She has also been the perfect wife in producing offspring for him and male offspring at that, the ultimate goal of a married woman. Medea is wholly devoted to Jason because he is her life: "Medea has no world other than Jason's world" (Shaw 259). Yet Jason betrays this woman who acts as she should in the marriage by deciding that for the sake of power and his own standing within their city that he should accept Creon's offer to marry his daughter, Glauce. A barbarian who has sacrificed everything for the sake of her Greek husband, Medea responds passionately to his act of betrayal against her as well she should. She tells her children, "Do I not suffer? Am I not wronged? Should I not weep? / Children, your mother is hated, and you are cursed: / Death take you, with your father, and perish his whole house!" (Euripides 20). There are three things which are considered great crimes among the gods, so great that Zeus himself was supposed to be the monitor of these crimes: refusing to convey hospitality, denying supplication, and breaking an oath (*Women in Classical Greek Drama*). Jason, in choosing to marry the young and rich Glauce, is not just abandoning Medea and their children, he is ultimately breaking his marriage oath to her. The marriage oath was one sworn before the gods and its violation

was therefore punishable by Zeus, and it would seem that in the case of Jason, Zeus utilizes Medea in punishing his crime (Fletcher 32).

Medea is not willing to allow this transgression to go on unchallenged or unpunished and after weeping and bemoaning her fate to the gods, she determines how she will exact her vengeance upon her husband and his new family for their crimes. *Medea* is mainly dominated by women, with even the chorus being fully formed of women, a difference between this play and *Agamemnon* and *Antigone*, both of which have male choruses. Not only that, but this play focuses in upon the strength of female camaraderie and the bond between women. Medea recognizes that it is in her best interests to maintain the sympathy and compassion of the chorus for they represent the women of Corinth. She utilizes the idea of female solidarity in order to convince the chorus that her actions are understandable and the chorus readily accepts her pleas to the common bond that all women share (Schaps 591). They understand her plight and are willing to help her to a certain extent, telling her, "I'll do as you ask. To punish Jason will be just. / I do not wonder you take such wrongs to heart" (Euripides 25). Unlike the Corinthian women who accept the oppression they face, Medea is not satisfied to sit by passively and allow this type of behavior to continue unchallenged. "She differs from them and by implication the general run of Greek women in that she will not acquiesce in her circumstances and she will not, therefore, stay in the labelled pigeon-hole into which society has put her" (Barlow 159). Jason has broken his promise with Medea and has attacked the most important thing to her: her family and her home. He made his decision based upon the more masculine values of power and fame within the *polis* and has put aside the more feminine response, which favors the home and family structure. In taking

vengeance upon Jason, Medea will co-opt the male role and take action for herself, her own power and her own fame (Shaw 261-2).

Medea's vengeance is laid out to attack at the things, which Jason most cares about. She first pretends to have accepted Jason's decision and begins to shower his new wife, Glauce, with gifts such as a new robe and coronet. However, the gifts are poisoned and bring about the death of not only Glauce but Creon too who chooses to die with his daughter and embraces her in the poisoned robe as well. Through this action Medea has destroyed not only her competition but also Jason's chance to achieve power and standing within Corinth.

This is not the end of Medea's revenge, however, as she will strike at something infinitely dearer to both Jason and the people of Athens: her children. Tying in with the masculine frame of mind that Jason portrayed earlier in the tragedy, Medea recognizes that in order for her to achieve the power and vengeance she wants, she must sacrifice her sons. She tells the chorus:

What makes me cry with pain

Is the next thing I have to do. I will kill my sons.

No one shall take my children from me.

...

Yes I can endure guilt, however horrible;

The laughter of my enemies I will not endure. (Euripides 41)

The chorus ends their support of her rebellion at this point; for in choosing to murder her children, Medea has wholly abandoned the feminine aspect that had previously ingratiated her among the Corinthian women. This is not something that she does lightly

however, as she is one of the few female characters who ventures into the masculine roles prescribed by society to actually show second thoughts as she moves forward toward her goals (*Women in Classical Greek Drama*). This conflict is to be expected as Medea is going completely against her previous value system, which placed family and Jason's needs above all else, and she is now considering destroying something that is immensely important to Jason. Medea has killed Jason's second wife and therefore ended any chance of continuing the family line through that spouse. By murdering her own children, Medea is ending Jason's chance for progeny and continuation of his line. This is fierce blow to Jason and to the Athenian audiences who would be watching this production who were extremely concerned with producing legitimate offspring, specifically male, to further both their line and more importantly the *polis*. Medea severs this opportunity for Jason, creating in him the vulnerability that he had left her to in the beginning of the play.

Sophocles' *Antigone*

Antigone marks a separation with the earlier two plays for the eponymous heroine is not stepping into the male role for the sake of her own vengeance but in order to do what is right in light of duty and her religious convictions. Antigone is extremely focused upon familial loyalty and piety with regards to her deceased brother and seeks to bury his body even against the demands of the state. In this play, female rebellion is portrayed positively, due to its devout nature as well as its perceived loyalty to the male family members. It is also shown in relation to Antigone's family members who have opposed her, namely Creon and Ismene. Antigone, the most theologically sound of the female characters discussed, acts against the state and stands for her beliefs, going so far as to step into the male role in order to complete the burial rituals demanded by the gods.

Antigone, the heroine of this play, is in a precarious position when the action begins. She is an unmarried young woman whose family has been disgraced and torn apart through various tragedies including the provoking incident of this work, namely the death of her two brothers Eteocles and Polynices in a battle for the city. Antigone is extremely aware of her duties to her family as she prepares to do the unthinkable: rebel against the decree of her guardian and the ruler of Thebes, Creon. Antigone's vulnerability based on her age and her gender must be considered in light of the brave decision that she makes to go against his decision for the sake of her duty and religious convictions. Antigone is obviously extremely concerned with her familial duty, which includes burial of the dead. This closely aligns with the view of women within Classical Athens. "Bearing and raising legitimate children, attending to the rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death, and overseeing the *oikos* within which these activities primarily took place constituted essential contributions to the *polis*" (Rehm 187). The family, as explained earlier, was one of the most important aspects of the role of women. Therefore, for Antigone to leave her brother, Polynices, unburied would be going against everything that she had been taught and trained in as she grew up. To Antigone the importance of the bonds of family are far more important than the creeds of a ruler, especially as she has lost most of her family and she can never replace them (189). She is wholly consumed with the idea of family loyalty and it is her strongest reasoning for why Polynices must be buried. She challenges Ismene, who is attempting to stop her from rebelling against the edict: "Now you can prove what you are: / A true sister or a traitor to your family" (Sophocles 190). This utter devotion to family helps to cement Antigone as a sympathetic figure within Greek drama particularly for the ancient Athenian viewers.

While Antigone is stepping outside of her gender roles in being blatantly against the male rule over her, she is doing so for the sake of some of her most sacred duties.

The other main reason that Antigone feels it is her duty to bury her brother is based on her religious convictions. Women, though less involved in the public sphere, were actually strongly involved in the religious ceremonies and rites of Ancient Greece. Women were specifically connected with the earth and with rituals that involved the nature of life as they were seen as having an instinctual understanding of the process of life. This meant that birth and death were under the domain of the female population of Classical Greece. Burial rites were extremely important religiously in ancient Greece as is shown in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in which men are unable to rest until that have been given a proper burial. Interestingly, the burying of dead family members did not actually fall upon the women in the family in Classical Athens. Within the family, it was actually the male members' responsibility to see that the body was given the proper rites for passing into the underworld (Hame 3). In *Antigone*, however, Creon, as the nearest family member has refused to give burial rites to his nephew, therefore it falls upon Antigone to complete the burial in her desire to remain loyal to her familial duties. Therefore as Creon refuses his responsibilities, Antigone is forced to take on the male roles, trespassing upon the masculine responsibilities in order to fill in the gaps left by her uncle.

The main conflict in this play centers upon the struggle between Creon and Antigone. Creon, the king of Thebes is in the inherently more privileged role and thus is the first person to infringe upon Antigone's domain and rites with regards to her familial duties. This is not Creon's initial intention however, for he is attempting to do what is

best in the face of a difficult situation. “Creon’s ruling at the beginning of the play appears devoid of any gender bias since he states categorically that he merely desires to honor the loyal and patriotic Eteocles and serve out punitive measures to the traitor (Polynices) though dead” (Owoeye 107). Antigone, on the other hand, sees it infringing upon her familial right as Polynices’ sister to perform burial rites for him to ensure that he may pass through the underworld. This bond fostered by her strong attachment to her family and her desire to help them as was discussed earlier sets Antigone into direct conflict with Creon’s wishes. However, she is not afraid to challenge him on this issue for she feels that what she is doing is a righteous act. When, during their confrontation, Creon questions her on why she chose to blatantly disobey his commands, Antigone explains, “It was not God’s proclamation. That final Justice / That rules the world below makes no such laws” (Sophocles 208). Though Antigone continues her argument with the religious reasoning she feels compels her to act against his decree, Creon begins to feel that she is attacking his authority, particularly as a man. He is the one that engenders the argument for the first time (*Women in Classical Greek Drama*):

This girl is guilty of a double insolence,

Breaking the given law and then boasting of it.

Who is the man here,

She or I, if this crime goes unpunished? (Sophocles 209)

Antigone has remained neutral in her protestations, arguing only from a familial and religious stance, not a gendered one. Creon shows his frustration and a level of insecurity in his turning the issue into one of gender relations as opposed to recognizing that Antigone would not be fighting so hard for her right to bury her brother if she did not

have such strong support. For Antigone this is not a case of women versus man or even citizen versus ruler. This is a case of the laws of man versus the laws of the gods and as she tells Creon, “Your edict, King, was strong / But all your strength is weakness itself against / The immortal unrecorded laws of God” (208).

Antigone’s responsibility to her dead family is in essence separating her from her still living relatives, particularly her sister, Ismene. Ismene represents a more submissive woman, one who wishes to follow authority and the decrees by which women should live. She, like Creon, brings gender into the arguments she has with Antigone, telling her, “We are only women, / we cannot fight with men” (Sophocles 191). Ismene is fully committed to staying within the boundaries that she has been given and by all accounts she should be shown as an admirable Greek woman for falling within the prescribed gender roles. However, she instead comes across as unbearably passive and indecisive. She wants to do what is right but not at the expense of challenging authority, particularly male authority. The discussions between Ismene and Antigone are particularly interesting, however, in the way that they reveal the struggles that women faced. There is an insight into women as characters or people rather than objects, which emphasizes the difficulty in choosing between the weaker, safer path and the stronger, more dangerous choice (Kirkpatrick 404). Ismene is not without courage for all her passivity as she gladly attempts to stand with Antigone before Creon for punishment. Antigone rejects this attempt for she does not believe that Ismene deserves to stand for this fight as she refused to help with the actual burial and did not wish to break the law. She therefore has no share in the honor that comes from sacrificing oneself for one’s beliefs. Antigone does recognize that her sister’s option was a viable one, but not one which deserves death:

“There are those who will praise you; I shall have honor too... You are alive but I belong to Death” (Sophocles 213). Antigone and Ismene represent the two options for a woman in their time: stick with the status quo at the expense of your conscience or fight for your beliefs and be prepared to deal with the consequences.

Perhaps one of the most interesting elements of *Antigone* is that Sophocles appears to be in support of Antigone’s argument. In the majority of plays in which women overstepped what was seen as their gender roles, they are portrayed as excessive and in the wrong within the context of the society. Sophocles, on the other hand, appears to be encouraging us to view Antigone’s view as the correct one, particularly because it is her piety and familial duty, which drive her. This is mostly revealed in the course of events which flow from Creon’s decision to ban Polynices’ funeral. Creon is not intentionally dismissive of the traditions and religious rites which dictate the burial of a body. Rather he is too sure of his own power as the ruler and patriarchal authority and believes that because he is the leader of Thebes, piety means obeying his commands. This belief however, assumes that Creon has an authority which is only held by the gods, and by claiming it, he has greatly overstepped his boundaries. He has taken divine judgement for himself “by presuming to give burial to one hero and deny to another the rites that are due to every mortal in the eyes of the gods” (Shapiro 120). Antigone, on the other hand, is shown as a martyr for the beliefs which she fought so valiantly for. Creon’s decisions result in the death of Antigone, his niece; Haemon, his son and Antigone’s betrothed; and his wife. Creon’s flaw of pride is also accompanied by a refusal to complete his own duties as a family member. Antigone, in her desire to please the gods, is shown as a

heroine for her desire to fulfill what must be done for dead family members, regardless of the gender roles which defined such actions.

Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*

Clearly at odds with the previous three tragedies, *Lysistrata* is not a play which lends itself to high language and delicate sensibilities; rather the comedy plays with slapstick scenarios and crude language to elicit laughs from the viewers. However, it deals closely with the desires and life of the women within Classical Athenian society as well as their ability to affect society. The women, under the leadership of the titular heroine, withhold sexual privileges and later take control of the city's finances in an attempt to end the Peloponnesian War. The women presented in the play are capable of taking power for themselves when they determine that they are unsatisfied with how the men are handling the war. Aristophanes favorably displays women's intelligence, capability in managing a household or city, and ability to work together cohesively as a unit with a common goal. He also appears to mock the utter ridiculousness and ineffectualness of the men who oppose the women of Athens. The comedy of this work does not disguise, however, that this play clearly analyzes the interplay of the male and female domains when one side determines that they are unsatisfied with how the other is handling their jobs.

Lysistrata begins well after the inciting issue has begun among the people of Athens. There is a war that has been raging for years now and the women are entirely tired of these battles removing their husbands and keeping the city in turmoil. Therefore the play opens with the eponymous heroine calling other Greek women, including women from Sparta, the opposing force in this war, to join her for a council where she

proposes an interesting idea: if the men cannot resolve this war, then the women will have to do it for them: “She recasts the war in terms of an unfair attack on the civic and sexual right of the women of Hellas” (Stroup 38). The women are exhausted of the war for it separates them from their husbands and keeps them from enjoying time with them. Though the play has often been used to support anti-war and pacifist agendas, these women are not determined to end the war for the sake of pacifist ideology: “What drove Lysistrata to initiate the sex strike, with the view that this would force the men to end the war, was her wish to bring her husband back home” (Loman 36). Because this is a promiscuous comedy and not a tragedy, the inciting scenario is not portrayed as a horrifying or desperate event and the women appear to have no issue with the nature of war itself. Instead the women appear to be most upset about the lack of men, specifically because they wish to have sex with their husbands. However, the issue these women are facing goes beyond merely missing their spouses. Like in the case of *Antigone*, the male members of the community are no longer fulfilling what are supposed to be their duties, namely winning and ending their war and this war is beginning to harm both the male and female realms of society. Therefore, the women must step up in order to end the long lasting fighting. Lysistrata, the leader of the women, compels the other women in the community and from the other cities in Greece to swear an oath that is sure to cause the men in all of Greece much grief and unhappiness: namely to prance around in their nicest, sexiest outfits and then refuse to have sex with their spouses until the war has ended.

The sexual aspect of *Lysistrata* is probably the most well-known element of the play, mainly because sex sells. The women’s initial plan to convince the men of Greece

to end the war involves denying them any sexual favors though the women are encouraged to tease and tantalize their husbands in order to make the punishment even worse. What makes this decision so interesting and funny within *Lysistrata* is that the women are as displeased about the idea as the men will be once they learn of the pact. The initial meeting between the eponymous heroine and the other women includes an absurd number of sexual euphemisms and crude jokes from all of the women. These are not dainty, demure females who will not discuss sex except when it relates to child-bearing. In fact when Lysistrata unveils her idea, the other women in the meeting begin to pack up and leave because they cannot stand to go without sex. One member of the group, Calonice, rather crudely puts it, "Anything else for me. I'd walk through fire / but do without a dick? Be serious! / There's nothing like a dick" (Aristophanes 133-5). This view actually falls in line with the Classical Greek conception of female sexuality. Women were considered to be more closely aligned with the natural world, and therefore, had to be controlled in order to prevent their baser nature and desires from taking over and endangering the continuation of the *polis*. The female desire for sex was apparently a recurring issue for the Classical Athenians. "As far as Athenian men were concerned, their wives enjoyed sex much more than they did and so found it hard to reject the advances of a handsome youth or man" (Pritchard 56). The female desire for sex was not viewed as bad, just excessive, which is the general rule of thumb for most female transgressions in classical Athens. This choice however is not merely subversive because the men will be left without sex, but that in refusing intercourse, the women are refusing the men the right to progeny and thereby endangering the continuation of the *polis*. While the focus of the play is the sexual frustration that the men face, the importance of progeny

is obviously a continued issue in the Greek world. By asserting this right, the women have effectively taken control of the *polis*' future and they intend to take control of its present too.

Knowing that just withholding sex from the men of Greece will not bring an end to the war, Lysistrata comes up with a second plan to force the men to acquiesce to the women's requests: she takes control of the *acropolis* and specifically the treasury. She then demands that the war be stopped for now that the women control the funds, they will no longer be financing this war. The men are obviously upset with this particular turn of events as they believe that the women have fully stepped outside of their domestic sphere and are attempting to take over the male role. The women argue, however, that the *polis* is an extension of the *oikos* and therefore the things that they have learned in managing and running the *oikos* will be as effective when applied to the *polis*. They are not necessarily invading the male space but rather assimilating what was considered the male domain as their own sphere (Foley 7). Lysistrata when arguing with the council of old men tells them, "With a modicum of smarts, / you'd copy the administration of our wool" (Aristophanes 572-3). Lysistrata argues that her understanding of the household and its finances have given her the knowledge necessary to run the *polis*'s treasury. Through the control of the funds Lysistrata effectively puts an end to the men's ability to continue the war for without the funds, there was nothing to finance the conflict. When the men have finally agreed to end the war and peacefully resolve their differences then Lysistrata lets go of the *Acropolis*. She only holds onto the treasury for as long as it takes to resolve the war, but once that is finished Lysistrata and the other women are as happy as the men to revert back to the original social dynamics of Athenian society. Lysistrata, as a comedy is

the only play that ends in happiness perhaps because it is the only play in which both the male and female factions were pleased to revert back to their initial gender roles after the conflicts had been resolved. Though there is excess on both sides, the women do not seek after masculine power except as a way to reassert the proper social situation and the men stop infringing upon the *oikos* and its interests. When both the men and women of Athens work together in their assigned positions then the people may find peace and revelry rather than death and despair.

Conclusion

Clytemnestra, Medea, Antigone, and Lysistrata all step outside of their prescribed domain as women within their plays. They do not remain in the shadows or keep out of the sight of the men or refrain from infringing upon the male roles in their society. Rather these women are responding to issues within their sphere, the *oikos*, caused primarily by the men in their life. Murder, adultery, desecration, and war have torn apart these women's homes, and they are not about to just stand by and let the destruction continue. How these women react to these infringements are very different and represent two ways in which a woman can respond to a man when he has neglected his duty to keep the family and the home safe. Clytemnestra and Medea act out of anger and vengeance for the men that have torn apart their homes. They act skillfully but with excessive feeling which dooms them to be remembered as bad examples of how a woman should act. Though their plays may induce sympathy for the characters at points, they are representative of Athenian men's fear of female excess and perhaps considered the villainess of their own stories. On the other hand are Antigone and Lysistrata, women who are not necessarily reacting to male intrusion into the *oikos* but to gaps the men have

left in fulfilling their own societal role. These women are portrayed favorably as they seek to recompense for where the men in their life have failed. Their minds are not on vengeance nor are they necessarily upon themselves, but on the good of the family and the good of the people. These women, while at odds with the male powers in their world, are shown to be heroes, fulfilling their roles as faithful residents of their homes rather than villainesses creating destruction in their wake. The difference between the two sets of women is in why they act. Are they striving for selfish gain or vengeance or do they ultimately seek to protect the element of greatest importance within the Classical Athenian world, the *polis*? Perhaps the representation of some strong women as villains and others as heroes is not so much a gender issue, as it is a representation of how even women should regard the state as the ultimate priority, standing against both their personal desires and even their prescribed roles to defend it.

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