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### Beyond the Binary: The Evolution of Gender in Greek Tragedy

The ancient Greeks fashioned the societal role of women in unique positions that consistently challenged prolific writers of their time. Although women were subject to an inferior status in the era, philosophers like Sophocles and Aeschylus curated feminine roles that insinuated that females could possess authority, power, and Heroism. Literature attempted to critique the imbalance of power between genders, although rigid dichotomy dictated women to an inferior status. Despite the strict rules that women adhered to in real life, Greek literature and mythological narratives retell women in contrary roles with similar restrictions. Crafted verses of plays reveal a more complex view of gender roles and how feminine and masculine characteristics could be discovered in women, providing evidence of the belief in gender fluidity and equality. Ancient Greek tragedies like Sophocles *Antigone*, crafted in 441 BC, and *Eumenides* in *Oresteia* by Aeschylus in 458 BCE, perform female roles such as the characters Antigone and Oresteia, who assimilate representations of both the antiquity of the era while promoting a binary view on gender.

Ancient Greek society, dating back to c. 300 to 1200 BCE, restricted women based on gender in political and social ways. It was common practice to confine women to domestic roles, including caretaking for children, preparing food, and tasks that did not require mental capabilities. High standing social roles, even citizenship and public standing, were reserved solely for men, permitting unquestioned leadership over women. Considering the lack of legal standing, women did not have rights over their property and essentially were needed for marriage and continuing a family bloodline. Sarah Pomeroy reiterates these dire circumstances in her book "*Goddesses*,

*Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*" and mentions the famous philosopher Aristotle's views of women as an unequal bearing between men, yet necessary for childbirth and performing slave tasks. These details starkly contrast with Spartan society, which allowed women citizenship and the right to property and financial matters.

Distinct from the concrete world, Greek mythology refocuses women in positions of power and authority. Although these advantageous qualities are implemented onto Goddesses as they rebel against agendas centered on gender, they still align to fit into the male perception of women. The mythological narrative of Athena is a profound example of male perception of strength as she embodies the rejection of feminine qualities while upholding asexuality and intellectualism. Pomeroy remarks on these gender biases found in their religious views when stating, "The goddesses are archetypal images of human females, as envisioned by males. The distribution of desirable characteristics among a number of females rather than their concentration in one being is appropriate to a patriarchal society." (8). Curiously enough, it is surprising that philosophers took the opportunity of these female archetypes in mythology to reimagine an earnest impression of the capabilities that the female character could dramatize in the theatrical world. Tragic playwrights metamorphosized into a frame of reference for female complexity, expanding their capabilities and using their emotional intelligence as a vantage point. The genre of tragedy enabled writers to recontextualize gender inversions that resonate with male qualities into their own rich identities. Within this scope, idealized tropes for gender biases proved challenging in adverse ways to the tangible world – implicating the future would implement a fluid spectrum of identity.

Examples of ancient Greek societal views are present in complex mythological narratives that play a significant role in their literature. The complexity lies in the ironic positioning of

female roles into positions of authority while still subjecting to the nuances of gender that are rooted in reality. In the article "The Character of Tragedy: Women and the Greek Imagination," Marilyn Katz informs readers on how male dominance was a significant pillar in Athenian society. The popular form of mythological reenactment was of stories called *epitaphios*, which focus on male heroes. In these heroic action stories, the lead character absolves injustice while cherishing cultural honor, whereas women remain sideline characters. The genre of tragedy adversely allowed poets like Sophocles to delve into more intricate characters, leading to an emphasis on contrasts in sexual differences. The depiction of a female lead character possessing masculine qualities is popularly introduced by Sophocles through the portal of tragedy, curating the part of Antigone. Katz explains how thematic tragedy opens a gateway to a humanitarian view of perceiving the main character that excludes their gender when remarking, "The heroines of each of these tragedies have been described as either 'masculine' or 'unfeminine' or both, and I propose to explore how this collapse of gender categories both inverts the sexual dichotomy of the *epitaphios* and provides the principal means for representing individuality" (88). Regarding Katz's ideologies, Antigone is mentioned in the text as confronting the injustice regarding her ethics, which figures in the play undermine. In Sophocles *Antigone*, the theatrical play shares a narrative of the main character, Antigone, who defies the king's orders not to bury her traitorous brother. When expressing defiance commonly found in a masculine voice, Antigone announces, "But I will bury him; and if I must die, I say that this crime is holy: I shall lie down. With him in death, and I shall be as dear to him as he to me" (54-58). Sophocles utilizes the voice of Antigone's character to reflect male responsibilities of serving familial bonds while including a bold and stoic tone in the text.

The play displays Antigone reveling in the tragic consequences of her actions. Antigone is noted for maintaining her nobility through upholding family ties and taking responsibility, although she combated authority by taking agency in a predicament. Keegan Martens' "Reimagining Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis Through Antigone and Medea" explains the ancient Greek concept of defining the 'hero' by their moral compass and actions that followed. Martens' highlights Antigone's bold acceptance of her actions and desired path of righteousness, despite rejecting the authority of divine gods. By noting each detail that amplifies the courageousness of Antigone's character, ancient Greek readers encounter a female heroine. Martens quotes another writer's opinion, noting the political figure that Antigone stood for in the play, "In fact, Antigone fits well into two psychological taxonomies of heroes. In Franco et al.'s (2011) taxonomy, Antigone stands as a martyr, whom they define as "Religious or political figures who knowingly (sometimes deliberately) put their lives in jeopardy in the service of a cause or to gain attention to injustice" (Martens 435). In this way, Sophocles curates Antigone's character to mirror the typical male traits of Greek Heroism and still experience the stereotypes inflicted on women from that era. Sophocles reimagines the feminine role, embodying a woman's piety while implementing a risk of death for motives based on morality, similar to the men in mythological scenes.

Unfortunately for Antigone, the taxonomy of martyrdom does not lead to the expected triumph akin to male theatrical counterparts. Sophocles purposefully molds Antigone with ferocious loyalty, yet it befalls the same outcome that happened to disobedient women in their society. Paradoxically, the play infuses Antigone with Greek values adhered to by men, and she still isn't qualified to be a political figure. In the illustrated text, Antigone must tell Creon the truth. Pomeroy analyzes the details in the original language and notes, "Thereupon forced to

confess to Creon that she has in fact buried her brother, Antigone refers to herself with a pronoun in the masculine gender (464). Creon, in turn, perceives her masculinity and refers to Antigone by a masculine pronoun and participle (479, 496)." (Pomeroy 100). Sophocles' altered pronouns are a distinctive touch that points to the frameworks of gender dismantling behavior and values. Within this perspective, poets were aware of stigmas surrounding gender roles and still recognized how the confrontation would be in real life. Heroic qualities, thus, are determined by the body rather than the values themselves. Antigone's ultimate death cements her status as a tragic figurehead while also uprooting ideas of masculine authority in the political realm.

Adversely, throughout Aeschylus' play *Eumenides*, he uses voices from the chorus of women referred to as the 'furies' to repeat the importance of oaths, commonly upheld with honor between men, while also using the Goddess Athena as a peacekeeper. The narrative encompasses the ruthless Goddesses seeking retribution for the character Oreste's crime of matricide. They are then rebranded into the kindly ones by Goddess Athena, who realigns order and justice.

Aeschylus articulates the voices of the furies and Goddess Athena to remodel the gender quota of men exclusively adhering to justice while providing a platform where women are heard, appeased, and can control communal issues. In the article "Oaths That (Un)Bind: Recovering the Furies' Political Voice in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*" by Agatha Slupek, readers are invited to a different perspective on the Fury's emphasis on transgression through matricide while also noting the overlooked injustice when their opinions are not listened to. The furies propel dominance through being an unrelenting ancient figure, proposing statements throughout the play, such as, "We claim we represent true justice. Our anger never works against a man whose hands are clean—all his life he stays unharmed. But those men guilty of some crime" (377-381). Through the claim, the furies impose the representation of older customs that sustain to keep the

community in order while showing no mercy. Aeschylus contorts the obtuse-like thinking of revenge with the character of Goddess Athena, who promotes a democratic and merciful stance in the play – giving a governing nature to a female heroine. Slupek refers to the text's intentional narrative development of contrasting female characters when noting, "Aeschylus's narrative positions both the oath-ritual and the female goddesses charged with its protection as uncontrollable forces of disorder in need of civilization. "Exploiting the gender stereotype of his culture, writes Fletcher, "Aeschylus suggests that female characters distort or misuse the oath to demonstrate how the oath needs to be fashioned into a tool of the democratic polis" (Slupek 138). The article expands on the enigma that Aeschylus presents through gender stereotypes clashing with cultural stances from the range of the roles of the furies and Goddess Athena. Seen from this angle, the ancient view of women falsifying something as sacred as an oath discrediting their authority by ignoring their opinions. At the same time, Aeschylus places a progressive view of women in his play by constructing Goddess Athena as a peacemaker to reflect wisdom and rationality.

The *Eumenides* simultaneously acknowledges the negligence that women's opinions receive while accumulating a consolation with a female political stance that bears peace. The contradiction of Greek anxieties over female power reflects itself through overlooked aspects of the text. Traditionally, the chorus in Greek theatrical performances is a centerpiece of the play, reiterating opinion and guiding decision-making. The play contested these traditions by depicting the furies as irrational and distorting justice, assigning them as the antagonists of the narrative. It was not a coincidence that the female lead counterpart, Athena, then aligned with the characteristics of the idealized Greek hero. Pomeroy analyzes Athena as a heroine deeply when mentioning, "Athena is the archetype of the masculine woman who finds success in what is

essentially a man's world by denying her own femininity and sexuality. Thus, Athena is a virgin—and what is more, a virgin born not of woman but of man." (4-5)" (8). Within this context, Athena's gender does not fit into the stereotypical female by rejecting her sexuality and having the defining characteristics of a man. To say Aeschylus did not plot the heroine based on her well-known traits would be dense, considering the furies symbolize women who embrace the matriarch.

Although plays like *Antigone* and *Eumenides* appear to be a critique of patriarchal values, some scholars contend that they ultimately reinforce traditional views on gender rather than challenge them. Despite acts of bravery that prove strength, women in both narratives receive punishment for defying patriarchal order. Antigone serves as a grandeur example of this notion, suffering death for disobeying the authority of Creon. When Creon gives a speech in the text about absolute authority to his son Haemon, he remarks, "But when a city takes a leader, you must obey, whether his commands are trivial, or right, or wrong" (666-67). Notably, Creon uses pronouns associated with men while insinuating that men should rule without question. Although it is not explicitly stated for the public, the verses serve as a metaphor for men in Greek theater. It is also a reflection of the societal norm of male power. Creon finished his speech by saying, "And there must be no surrender to a woman. No! If we fall, better a man should take us down. Never say that a woman bested us!" (678-80), fundamentally reaffirming that Antigone should not prevail because she is a woman. The issue with the idea that Sophocles was promoting a progressive point of view is that Antigone suffered dire consequences, resulting in death. The conflicting flaw in this theory is the details of Antigone's death, where she takes control of her fate by committing suicide rather than dying by starvation. Antigone's death is not the only halting point in the tragedy; it sets off a chain series of events where both Creon's wife and son

also commit suicide. In this manner, Sophocles underlines a subversive approach through the plot of tragedy. Although Antigone faces the consequences proposed by society, Creon suffers tremendous grief for not abiding by a gender-fluid approach to respecting Antigone's wishes to maintain her familial responsibilities.

Aeschylus used a similar method in the *Eumenides*, bending the frameworks of tragedy through vengeance, which is the conflict brought into the beginning of the play. The furies were acknowledged in Greek mythology as the pursuers of criminals and were deeply respected. To the Greek audience, it was a surprise to see them in a weaker role that is a mockery of its primal tendencies. Being transformed into the 'kindly ones' could be perceived as a taming process to subdue the furies into a male-dominated polis. In this hypothetical stance, the transformation by Athena, a woman who symbolizes male rationality, neutralizes female power. Regardless of the stereotypes associated with Goddess Athena's demeanor, her role elevates from the typical function of being the hero's aide to giving her supreme governance. Even more so, Athena does not erase the furies' crucial role but reforms them to modern justice. In the text, Athena affirms this when declaring, "You have discovered a great benefit for my citizens. In return, they will revere you with goodwill and honor, now and forever." (10005-6). The quote exalts the furies, making them a respectable and sustaining part of Athenian society. In this reinterpretation, Aeschylus' underlying intention with his literary creation was to preserve the power of women by a woman herself.

Together, both Sophocles and Aeschylus work around a male-centric framework, focusing on women's relations to men, Creon's authority, and Oreste's fate. In Antigone's case, her resilience is notable because she defies a king. In the *Eumenides*, Orestes is justified in his matricide, while Clytemnestra, his mother's murder of Agamemnon, is considered a



transgression. Incidentally, Orestes retains male succession over female rule when being pardoned by Athena. Adversely, this surface-level understanding discounts Antigone's values, which are rooted in the will of the Gods. The play unmistakably points to that when Antigone explains her volition when being questioned by Creon about violating laws, expressing, "What laws? I never heard it was Zeus who made that announcement. And it wasn't justice either. The God's below didn't lay down this lay down this law for human use. And I never thought your announcements could give you – a mere human being – power to trample the Gods' unfailing, unwritten laws." (450-57). Sophocles melded a female heroine with the motivation of a higher power rather than an urge to defy the patriarchal order. Pertaining to the *Eumenides*, Oreste's crime equates to his mother's crime in the Furies' eyes, through which justice should prevail despite exceptional circumstances that could inspire moderation. Concerning Goddess Athena passing succession to a male heir, she still modifies the Furies' position from an independent source to a role structure by male-dominated politics. These male-related boundaries emerge from molding a real-life comparison and altering the outcomes.

Within these in-depth analyses of ancient Greek texts that focus on female characters from the scope of the tragedy, readers from the ancient and present times can point out the female stereotypes intermingled with a subversive approach to impartial views on gender. Greek tragedy takes a literary approach to reimagine gender roles in the confines of realistic situations comparable to concrete societal events. Playwrights written by Aeschylus and Sophocles include profound dialogue that affirms a woman's capability to portray positive characteristics deemed fit for male characters. The writers took a new outlook on women considered inferior in social status, amplifying their moral authority and acknowledging that heroic qualities are fluid regarding gender. In this light, identity transcends the rigid confines of male or female

dichotomies. Antigone challenged gender expectations by devoting herself to divine law and familial priorities, while the Furies were no longer viewed as monstrous vengeance hunters but as the protectors of Athens. Some scholars may assume that the plays are cautionary tales, yet with a closer eye, these literary works reframe the potential of women in their era by giving them a spotlight in an underrepresented literary art. Through these implications by these influential writers, Greek society was aware of the disadvantages women faced while capable of possessing the role of a male counterpart. The fluidity of gender roles in Greek society is still relevant today as their core parts of the curriculum to get insight into ancient views and deserve to be inspected further for their attempts to negotiate power and identity through art.

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