

## Conflict between Freedom and Duty : A Study of Women in Greek Society as Represented in Sophocles' *Antigone*

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### ABSTRACT

Women since time immemorial have constantly stood in the shadows of men. Three characters from Sophocles' *Antigone* will be examined to show the portrayal of women in Greek society. Actually the status that men and women enjoy in the society is socially and culturally determined. The Greek society was also not an exception. Women in ancient Greece were not considered as primary citizens equal to men. They held no property, nor could they pursue administrative goals and indeed were not even allowed to move out of the house except under guard. The ideal of women being weak and inferior to men and kept segregated in Greek society is portrayed through the character of Ismene, Antigone's sister. Sophocles' play *Antigone* presents us with three different types of women : the strong-willed protagonist, Antigone, Ismene, her weak sister and Eurydice, the wife of king Creon. Through each of these characters' personalities, choices and their ways of life Sophocles' brings to the forefront the status and position of women in ancient Greece and also shows how women were fighting against the imposed social norms at that time.

Antigone, a heroine, icon, and role model has survived the test of time for over two thousand years, and with valid reason. Her actions depicted in the play *Antigone* by Sophocles are those of courage and fearlessness. She also conveys a sense of deep conviction in the pursuit of truth as she stared deep into the eyes of injustice by her oppressor. Valiance is a quality that Antigone has in abundance; she exhibits this with virtually every word she speaks as if she is possessed by the Gods on a righteous journey to lay her brother's body to rest in an act of defiance against the newly appointed king of Thebes, Creon. The problems of gender equality, democratic voice, and religious faith still resonate today. *Antigone* attempts to show the strength women have in the face of the patriarchal values. The Chorus recounts the events leading to Antigone's tragedy. Oedipus, Antigone and Ismene's father, had two sons, Eteocles and Polynices. Upon Oedipus' death, it was agreed that each would take the throne from one year to the next. After the first year, however, Eteocles, the elder, refused to step down. Polynices and six foreign princes marched on Thebes. All were defeated. The brothers killed each other in a duel, making Creon king. Creon ordered Eteocles to be buried in honour and left Polynices to rot on the pain of death. But Antigone vows to bury her brother's body defying Creon's decree, although her sister Ismene refuses to help her, fearing the death penalty.

It is here that the first feminist quality Antigone shows to the audience when she chooses to challenge Creon's authority. The challenge represents an act of rebellion towards Creon's laws. During Antigone's first interaction with Creon in the play she exhibits a very bold and firm tone in regards to her opinion. "I've been accused of a folly by a fool" (Sophocles 523). This specific line points towards Antigone's feminist attitude by implying that Creon is a fool. This is an

indication that Antigone has no respect for Creon's status as a king or, to a further extent, as a man. By portraying the strength of a man in the face of oppression, Sophocles plants the seed of admiration in the reader's mind as Antigone's reputation of being a strong and fearless woman begins to grow when she regards herself as equal to men and superior to Creon.

In the very beginning of the play the contrasting personalities between Antigone and Ismene, her sister are shown. Ismene's reluctance to participate in the burial of their brother shows her obedient and submissive nature towards authority and men. Ismene tells Antigone "Remember we are women, we're not born to contend with men" (Sophocles 75). Ismene would be regarded as a fitting model of what a woman should be in ancient Greece and the differences between her personality and that of Antigone's highlights the type of character Antigone portrays. Ismene believes there are rules imposed on women that basically deprived them of freedom. It is this feeling of inferiority that stops Ismene from doing what she knows is right just because it would mean challenging a man which according to her is against social norms. "I do not defy them; but I cannot act Against the State. I am not strong enough." (Sophocles' 93)

Ismene is continuously revealed as a lady in distress who is unable to stand suffering alone. Being secluded she is not aware of the political affairs of the state. In the beginning of the play when Antigone asks her if she has not heard anything regarding the news of the decree she shows her ignorance. She displays her weakness once again when she tries to take credit in burying Polynices with Antigone only for fear of remaining alone. Many people would define the term feminist as a person who supports and fights for women's

rights, but Antigone goes beyond this definition. She is not so much an advocate for feminism or women's rights; instead she is an example of the ideology that many feminists hold. Her actions were not committed for the sole purpose of fighting for equality between genders. Her actions were committed in the name of love, truth and justice. These are the reasons that make Antigone such an admirable character and role model for women and men alike.

The patriarchal attitudes in the Athenian society and that women were deprived of all political rights and kept under strict control is represented at best through Creon who is the ruler of Thebes and Antigone's uncle. Creon is portrayed as a leader who is a tyrant and an arrogant leader in the play. At first he thinks that there was some man behind the deed of burying Polyneices, but when he learns that Antigone had done it he is further infuriated because she is a woman. "I'm not the man-, not now: she is the man if this victory goes to her and she goes free." (Sophocles 541-542). He believes that as a king he has the right to say what goes and his laws must always be upheld. He says that if she is left unpunished then that would show that he's powerless. His arrogant nature and sexist attitude towards women is revealed when he says, "while I'm alive, no woman is going to lord it over me" (Sophocles' 593). Creon continues by saying, "Better to fall from power, if fall we must, never be rated inferior to a woman, never" (Sophocles' 758-760). Clearly demonstrating his lack of respect for women he says if he needs to fall than it is better to fall to the hands of a man than a woman. Therefore expressing his thoughts of how he does not feel women to be his equal. Creon's attitude towards women is one resembling any other individual in ancient Greece, regarding women as weak and 'worthless' individuals who serve nothing but a distraction to the more significant issues a man is preoccupied in. Sophocles exemplifies Creon's view of women as a distraction when he counsels his son Haemon to 'not be fooled by the lust and wiles' of a woman, suggesting that Creon holds the opinion that women are a distraction, as well as the view that women exist solely to pleasure the sexual desires of a man. Creon represents this view further when he attempts to exhort Haemon to 'plough' at other 'fields' for women – this portraying the little significance the role of a woman plays in the daily life of a man, suggesting that any bride is the same and can be found anywhere. The little significance attributed to a woman is further demonstrated when Creon reminds the chorus not to be 'seduced' by Antigone, and that the prospect of losing to her would be shameful. Additionally, Creon's rhetorical question posing whether 'women are stronger than [men]', highlights the weakness often associated with a woman. It is the active perspective of Creon that women are impotent individuals unable to serve any task of significance, and exist solely to entertain man.

In ancient Greece, a woman's job was solely to run the household and take care of her children. A woman held no power within the social and familial construct and she was essentially owned by her father or husband. The character Eurydice from the play *Antigone* fits this role. While she is not an integral part of the conflict, she fits the paradigm of a woman in Greece. Her only source of power stems from the fact that her husband Creon has just been named King, making her the newly appointed Queen of Thebes. Although her character may not seem influential, her actions prove powerful when it comes to her husband's stubborn pride and power hungry mindset. She appears briefly in the play as an archetypal grieving, saddened mother who kills herself after learning, from a messenger, that her son Haemon and his betrothed, Antigone, have both committed suicide. Being burdened and frustrated by emotional stress she died cursing upon the king accusing him that he killed her son, Haemon. "Yes, and the dead, the woman lying there, piles the guilt of all their deaths on you." (Sophocles' 1436-1437).

The analysis of these three women in Sophocles' play *Antigone* shows a wide range of contrasting characteristics common to ancient Greek society. Both Antigone and Eurydice, despite their uncommon backgrounds share certain similarities that Ismene, the sole survivor among them does not possess. Ismene serves as a contrast to Antigone's position, demonstrating common attitude and place of women in society of that time. Antigone too could have avoided trouble like her sister Ismene initially did. But she, who has seen her life crumble before her very eyes, a life of suffering has swallowed her soul and the final straw was the refusal to bury her beloved brother's body. Every human has a limit and Antigone's limit was reached. Laws, rules, and social doctrines no longer mattered to her if it meant that she would spend the rest of her life in regret. She was not limited by gender. "Who on earth, alive in the midst of so much grief as I, could fail to find his death a rich reward?" (Sophocles' 515-516)

Antigone never once considered herself to be inferior. She remained strong in the face of death. She was a true heroine. Through Antigone, it is justified to conclude that a woman occupies a low and insignificant position in the average Greek society, upholding no right to autonomy nor freedom. Sophocles reflects this dictate through the misogynistic and chauvinistic remarks of Creon, and highlights the limited power possessed by a woman by presenting the feminist voice of Antigone whom in the end reaps nothing for her adamant enterprises against the patriarchal society.

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