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# Athenian Women Through the Eyes of Sophocles (But Not Oedipus)

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Keldorf

Western Civilization: Period 1

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### Athenian Women Through the Eyes of Sophocles (But Not Oedipus)

Essential Question: To what extent are the gender roles placed upon Athenian women during Athens' Golden Age reflected in and impacted by the work of Sophocles?

During its Golden Age, Greece was at the cutting edge of new technologies and the historic height of the artistic expressions of music, painting, sculpture, and theater. To understand what life was really like in Athens, one of Greece's most prominent cities, during the 4th and 5th centuries BCE, one can look to the work of the poet and playwright, Sophocles. His theatrical pieces inform the way that women's roles were identified and determined, particularly when compared to the roles his female characters played in his tragedies. The physical performances of Sophocles' works, particularly *Oedipus The King* and *Antigone*, most accurately reflect the gender roles that dictated social life and status for women in Athens in the 5th century BCE.

The 5th century BCE was truly the Golden Age of Athens. The city "dominated the scene as it became the military, cultural, and intellectual center of the Greek world" (Baker 66). As Athens was developing its military strength and system of government, another aspect of society was thriving as well: its artistic culture. Theater played a large role in the culture of Athens; it not only reflected the ways of life of the Athenian people at the time, but was also used in a number of ceremonies to celebrate war victories or to honor the gods. One of the most

well-known festivals that featured Greek theater was the Great Dionysia. The Great Dionysia was an “ancient dramatic festival in which tragedy, comedy, and satyric drama originated; it was held in Athens in March in honour of Dionysus, the god of wine” (“Great Dionysia”). It was at one of these festivals that Sophocles first gained recognition.

Sophocles remains one of the best-known Greek tragedians. He is known for his belief in fate and the will of the gods, as well as the importance of selflessness and morality, which both manifest equally in his work. Sophocles had a comfortable childhood; his father was a businessman, and he himself never experienced poverty (Baker 66). At a young age he participated in a festival celebrating the Greek’s victory of the Persians. He was chosen for “his beauty of physique, his athletic prowess, and his skill in music” (Taplin, Woodard). Sophocles continued to study the theatrical arts and began writing plays. In 468 BCE, at the age of 27, he competed in his first Great Dionysia festival, presenting 3 tragedies and receiving the first place prize. As Sophocles grew as a writer, his plays developed a centralized theme of fate and morality, and usually “characters [with] a nobility about them, a sense of duty, and a determination to do what they believe is right” (Baker 67). He competed in 30 more competitions, winning as many as 24 of them. His plays were wildly popular and their themes appealed to the masses; he had the ability to involve the audience in his plays which “sets them thinking about the rightness and wrongness of each character’s actions” (Baker 69). Throughout his life, Sophocles witnessed Athens at its finest, and died just as the city began declining in power. He was able to capture the essence of the Athenian people in his 123 works, which have been influential in our understanding of Athenian life thousands of years later.

In order to interpret the gender roles of Athenian life reflected in Sophocles' works, one must first have an understanding of the lives of men and women during the 5th century BCE. In Athens, male citizens were undoubtedly on the top of the social hierarchy -- above slaves and other lower-class citizens, such as women. Male citizens could own property, hold public office, and vote. "Female citizens had few rights in comparison to male citizens. Unable to vote, own land, or inherit, a woman's place was in the home and her purpose in life was the rearing of children" (Cartwright). Women's lives were dictated, for the most part, by their father, or the *kurios*. The father would determine a woman's future by organizing her marriage and essentially selling her for a dowry, as was the common practice.

The Athenian head of a household was the *kurios* (master, lord). The *kurios* had absolute control over his household; the state had little to say regarding how he treated his wife and children, managed his slaves, or spent his free time. Thus the manly ideal in Athens included marriage, fatherhood, estate management, and mastery over slaves. (Rubarth 7)

Although women were already second class citizens, there was still a hierarchy within them, the lowest tier being prostitutes (Cartwright). In Ancient Greece, women's options were limited. They were relegated to marriage and childbearing, and could occasionally pursue an intellectual life of poetry, art, or science (but never be accepted by society or deemed acceptable to marry). There were also opportunities for women to prostitute themselves.

When connecting the work of Sophocles to the Athenian separation of genders, the idea that men feared femininity and avoided being seen as anything but strong, capable, and stoic pervaded. As an extent of this, men feared living in a world dominated by women. According to

Thomas Van Nortwick, a professor of Classics at Oberlin College, Greek males had a “fear of women; to be in a world of women is to risk loss of self” (164). In his work, Sophocles highlights this fear of femininity by portraying traditionally male characters with feminine traits, and traditionally female characters with masculine traits. Femininity was something “which the Greeks understood to be attuned to the rhythms of nature as opposed to culture” (Van Nortwick 164), while masculinity was attuned to culture. Masculinity was viewed as having the traits of logic, integrity, strength, and confidence, while femininity was associated with the traits of helplessness, passivity, sensitivity, and insecurity.

This is most prominently represented through Sophocles’ plays *Oedipus Rex* (also referred to as *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus The King*) and *Oedipus at Colonus*. In *Oedipus Rex*, the male lead, Oedipus, was destined to kill his father and marry his mother. While trying to avoid this awful fate, Oedipus’ father and his mother-turned-wife Jocasta, leave Oedipus in the wilderness to die. However, he is adopted by another family, grows up, and, after famously solving the riddle of the Sphinx, is awarded the title of King of Thebes. He marries the queen, not knowing she is his mother. After Oedipus discovers the disgusting truth, he gouges out his eyes, blinding himself. Creon, Oedipus’ brother-in-law, exiles him from the city for his shameful, incestuous marriage. However, Oedipus gladly accepts exile because he feels the gods do not wish death upon him at this time. Before he is exiled, Oedipus asks to see his daughters one last time. Oedipus and his daughters cry and embrace, and he says to them, “If you were older, children, and wiser, there’s much advice I’d give you. But as it is, let this be what you pray: give me a life wherever there is opportunity to live, and better than was my father’s (“Sophocles I: Oedipus the King” 22). It is clear that Oedipus wants his daughters to have a

successful future, regardless of their incestuous births, which is an accurate reflection of a father's concerns during that time period.

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus depends on his daughters to guide him, care for him, and help him function as a blind man. The play begins with his daughter Antigone leading him onto the stage and helping him walk, finding places to sit, and describing their surroundings. Later, when his daughter Ismene comes to see him, she says she has come to see him because she cared for him and yearned to see her father.

OEDIPUS. What brought thee, daughter?

ISMENE. Father, care for thee.

OEDIPUS. A daughter's yearning?

ISMENE. Yes, and I had news

I would myself deliver, so I came

With the one thrall who yet is true to me. (Sophocles and Storr)

Not only do Oedipus' daughters care for him, but he uses them for support, strength, and guidance. Although Oedipus has two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, he relies on his daughters to care for him when he is at his worst.

This dependence lead Oedipus to adopt more feminine qualities than masculine. Thomas Van Nortwick states that,

to move from active shaper to passive sufferer is to shift -- in the Greek view and (still) in ours -- from a masculine to a feminine mode of being; to embrace voluntarily the feminine... is in turn to imperil the boundaries of the autonomous self, the sources of meaning in a heroic masculine life. (164)

In *Oedipus at Colonus*, it is clear that Oedipus made this shift; he was once a "shaper," a king with authority and power, and now he has become a "sufferer," a blind man who cannot function without his daughters' support. As a tragic hero, Oedipus was destined for disaster and

judgement, and was eventually deemed a failure for his decisions. By adding in this loss of masculinity, Sophocles has truly created a perfect tragedy, at least in the eyes of Athenians at the time. To be feminine was to be weak, needy, and overly sensitive, and by placing himself so closely to his daughters, Oedipus has taken on their feminine qualities by association.

The Athenian readers and audience members observed Oedipus' shame for not only his incestuous marriage but also his transformation into a feminine, passive sufferer. In this way, Sophocles reflected men's fear of women he observed in Athenian life, as well as perpetuated it. As Scott Rubarth, a professor of Classical Philosophy at Rollins College, states, "Male authors and critics saw the female gender as problematic and in many cases dangerous. Masculinity, however, was not seen as problematic; instead it seemed to be intuitive and obvious" (Rubarth 2). Athenian males feared femininity not only because of its "problematic and dangerous" qualities, but also because it made them appear inferior.

A second aspect of Athenian life that can be seen in the theatrical performances from Athens' Golden Age, including those of Sophocles, is how women were viewed socially and how little control they had over their public image. Though Sophocles' plays, and others at the time, featured female roles predominantly, only men could be cast in productions. In festivals or ceremonies, when women were permitted to perform, it was through simple poetry readings or song and dance. This lack of female representation in Athenian theater denied women the opportunity to change or influence their public perception. As Dr. Eva Stehle, a professor of Classics at the University of Maryland, wrote, "Performers can stage their gender identity through performance: they present themselves visually while speaking about their sense of themselves" (Stehle 72). Women were almost never given this ability that Dr. Stehle details.

While at times, Greek tragedy presented women as autonomous and independent, the exclusively male casting and character development ultimately reinforced the traditional roles women were expected to play.

Women in Athens had no control over how they were portrayed in theater because men were cast in every role. In this way, it was normal for a man to represent, and therefore determine, a woman's sexuality. In the rare cases that women were allowed to perform, it could be argued that these women took their identity into their own hands. However, "One could respond that most public performance by women was based on traditional texts composed by men; that fact is very important" (Stehle 72-73). Even when women did perform, the material they were performing was still written by men, not women. According to Dr. Helene P. Foley, a professor of Classics at Barnard University, "Greek tragedy was written and performed by men and aimed—perhaps not exclusively if women were present in the theater—at a large, public male audience" (Foley 2). Not only were the writers and actors male, but the audience they were performing for was male as well. Women had almost no say in how their gender was portrayed and perceived.

In addition to this, when male characters in plays spoke of women, they had the opportunity to make a great impact on the public's opinion of femininity. For example, in Sophocles' play *Antigone*, the king of Thebes, named Creon, says,

CREON But this proud girl, in insolence well-schooled,  
 First overstepped the established law, and then--  
 A second and worse act of insolence--  
 She boasts and glories in her wickedness.  
 Now if she thus can flout authority  
 Unpunished, I am woman, she the man. (*Antigone*)



Here, Creon is speaking in reference to the female lead, Antigone, and makes it clear that it is almost worse for a woman to “boast and glory” (which are actions usually associated with men) than it is for her to break the law. He proclaims that if Antigone goes unpunished for this, she assumes the role of a man and he assumes the role of a woman; this implies that Antigone’s authoritative nature could be perceived as masculine, because women rarely engaged in authoritative behavior.

Although women were an integral part of Athenian society, they were viewed as second class citizens, and their portrayal in theater cemented the notion that they were inferior and inadequate. “As a category, women are a “tribe” apparently less differentiated as individuals than men; paradoxically, they are both more embedded in the social system and marginal to its central institutions” (Foley 4). Here, Foley states that women were viewed less as individuals and more as a group that all shared the same traits. Women were viewed not only as physically weak and incapable, but also as mentally deficient and inferior (Stehle 78). Even Antigone’s sister, Ismene, tells Antigone that they cannot break Creon’s laws because they are merely women,

ISMENE If in defiance of the law we cross  
 A monarch's will?--weak women, think of that,  
 Not framed by nature to contend with men. (*Antigone*)

Ismene believes that women are not “framed by nature” in the same way men are, and are therefore no match for them. Although the character of Ismene would be portrayed by a man, this still serves as proof that women, and not just men, believed in their own inferiority.

A third aspect of the relationships between Athenian men and women highlighted in Sophocles’ work is the fantastic but rare occurrence of women standing up to, questioning, and even disobeying men. While Sophocles is known to have written extraordinary male roles, such

as Oedipus, Ajax, or Agamemnon, he also wrote a number of female leads who were presented as strong and willful. “Masculinity is aligned not with the state so much as with patriarchy, tyranny and despotism. Femininity is a necessary part of its undoing—a democratic force that values the dignity and rights of the individual” (E.W.). It is curious that in the plays *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* Sophocles uses femininity to portray Oedipus’ weakness, but in other plays, such as *Antigone* and *Electra*, femininity is a crucial part of what makes the lead roles so strong and heroic.

In the play *Antigone*, the lead role is known as one of the strongest female roles Sophocles ever created, and possibly the strongest female role in all of ancient Greek theater. The play chronicles the story of Antigone, Oedipus’ daughter, and her struggle to achieve a proper burial for her brother, Polyneices, who was killed while fighting their other brother, Eteocles, for the control of the kingdom. Because Polyneices used his forces to attack Thebes, where Eteocles was in control, he was deemed an enemy of the state by Creon, Jocasta’s brother who took control of Thebes after the two brothers killed each other. Because of the disgraceful circumstance of Polyneices’ death, Creon states that he cannot be given the sacred burial rites (*Antigone*). Although Antigone’s sister Ismene urges her to follow Creon’s demands, Antigone buries Polyneices claiming she has the right, due to “the unwritten, unfaltering, unshakable ordinances of the gods that no human being can ever outrun” (E.W.). Antigone stands up to and directly disobeys Creon, a grown man of a much higher rank, in order to do what she believes is morally and ethically right.

Compared to Antigone, Electra’s feminine power is not as pronounced or exaggerated, but it is most likely a more realistic example of a strong female in 5th century Athens. Before

*Electra* begins, Electra's mother kills her husband and his mistress. Years later, Electra has still not come to terms with the death of her father, Agamemnon, and bitterly hates her mother for the murder she committed. At the end of the play, Electra helps her brother Orestes murder their mother and bring their father justice. "Electra as a person is very emotional and stubbornly devoted to the principles of justice, reverence and honour (even if sometimes her grasp on these principles seems questionable)" (Mastin). By portraying Electra with the qualities of honor, justice, and stubbornness, Sophocles gives her the opportunity to explore masculine qualities. By doing this, Sophocles presents to his audience (consisting mostly of males) that it is possible for females to possess these traits.

A final aspect of Sophocles work that should be noted is the fact that his plays focused on both the exceptions and the standard experiences for women in Athenian society. While the existence of Sophocles' female leads may suggest that women had power over men, this power was extremely limited and should not be confused with equality. "Although many female characters in tragedy do not violate popular norms for female behavior, those who take action, and especially those who speak and act publicly and in their own interest, represent the greatest and most puzzling deviation from the cultural norm" (Foley 4). In this respect, the characters Antigone and Electra serve as exceptions to the societal norm, which was that femininity was synonymous with weakness while masculinity was synonymous with power.

While the women in Sophocles' plays may have been strong-willed and independent, Athenian women at the time were rarely described as anything but inferior. "Women claimed the gender roles that the society assigned them and only those roles; any idealized identity they might adopt remained tied to the kind of character expected of them" (Stehle 72). This shows

that women hardly ever strayed from the roles that they were required to fulfill, and if they did stray, it wasn't permanent. At the end of *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus asks Creon to look after his daughters, but not his sons, saying,

OEDIPUS Creon, you need not care about my sons; they're men and so wherever they are, they will not lack a livelihood. But my two girls—so sad and pitiful— whose table never stood apart from mine, and everything I touched they always shared— O Creon, have a thought for them!  
 (“Sophocles I: Oedipus the King” 22)

Here, Sophocles is making a commentary on the expectations of men and women, stating that men will be more successful in life, when placed under the same circumstances as women, simply because they are men. Although both Antigone and Electra are examples of stubborn and determined heroines, they could never live up to their full heroic potential because of their gender.

The immediate consequence of Sophocles work was the impact it had on the way the people of ancient Athens thought about relationships between men and women. By only seeing women portrayed in theater written and performed by men, Greek audiences could not have been able to understand what life was truly like for women, if they were basing their understanding off theater alone. As Scott Rubarth says, “When studying the lives of ancient women, the greatest challenge comes from the scarcity of genuine female voices. Nearly all of the literary remains that have come down from antiquity were written by men” (2). It would be impossible for audiences to see women as anything but the idealized form that Sophocles, and other writers, portrayed them in. While the characters and plots of Sophocles' plays were significant in shaping how women were perceived by the public, it was ultimately the performances of his plays that had the strongest impact. The exclusively male writing and casting highlighted the fact that

women weren't even considered qualified enough to write about or portray themselves in theater.

By examining the way women were dealt with in theater in comparison to how women were dealt with in real Athenian life, we can provide a glimpse of what life was like for men and women and how their roles in society differed.

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