Notes on Quiz #6: Women in Athenian Literature

1. According to Pomeroy, Athenian tragedies often showed women as forceful and rebellious because the plays' female protagonists
   a. represented the needs of private life and family against the power of the state
   b. were there to be destroyed and put in their place at the end of the play
   c. accurately depicted Athenian women's agency and active public participation in real life
   d. were actually gods dressed as women

Athenian drama often shows women acting in rebellion against the established norms of society. This was because women's interests and responsibilities were private and family-oriented, putting them in conflict with the patriarchal state and reflecting concerns more primitive than the later Olympian support for the state. — In drama, this means heroines who act in a "masculine" way—not submissive or modest. This gives us insights into the conflicts within Athenian society, but also means that women in Greek drama are not to be taken at face value as representative of normal behavior or expectations. A good example is *Antigone*, in which the title heroine stands against the state in defense of older values related to family and private religious duties. Antigone herself is a heroine and so does not act like a normal woman, which she actually laments at the end of the play. Instead, she stands for the collective concern of women in Athenian society.

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2. In the play *Antigone*, Antigone's sister Ismene insists that Antigone must not
   a. delay in burying their brother
   b. disobey Creon's ban on burying their brother
   c. offer to fight Creon in single combat
   d. visit Egypt during the tourist season

Both sisters represent a woman's duty to her family. Ismene believes in what Antigone wants but fears to challenge Creon and the laws. Ismene's actions cast Antigone as the heroine, a larger-than-life character in an exaggerated pursuit of the ideal. Even though she survives in the end, her survival seems not to matter, so in a way both sisters are lost. — One way of seeing Ismene is that she is holding herself to how she thinks a woman is supposed to be seen, rather than acting on the burden or female moral responsibility that Antigone accepts.

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3. In the play *Medea*, the legendary hero Jason
   a. kills his own sons to spite Medea
   b. has sailed away and is not present in the play
   c. sets aside his foreign wife, Medea, and marries a princess to get ahead
   d. dies at the end

Jason wants a more socially impressive wife, and so sets aside Medea, whom he met and married on his travels.

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4. According to Pomeroy, all of the following are true about Plato's utopian exercise, Republic, EXCEPT:
    a. No private property meant there was no need for monogamous marriage
    b. Plato thought men and women were similar in nature apart from their roles in begetting children
    c. Prostitution was common, accounting for one-sixth of the female population
    d. Women were included in the ruling elite class, the guardians

Treatment of women in Plato's *Republic* is more egalitarian in some ways (though this is partly because male citizens don't have much public agency under the rule of the guardians and the philosopher-kings). Prostitution is not any more common in this utopia than in real life.

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5. The comedy *Lysistrata*, by Aristophanes, is about women ending a 20-year war by
    a. denying sex to the men until they declare peace
    b. taking over the fighting of the war and winning
    c. bribing the men to make peace by giving them fine new clothes and horses
    d. appealing to the gods to intervene and make the men more rational and less aggressive

Lysistrata is a comic account of a woman's extraordinary mission to end the Peloponnesian War between Greek city-states by denying all the men of the land any sex, which was the only thing they truly and deeply desired. Lysistrata persuades the women of the warring cities to withhold sexual privileges from their husbands and lovers as a means of forcing the men to negotiate peace—a strategy, however, that inflames the battle between the sexes.

Optional Extra Credit

EC. The play *Medea* ends with Medea escaping in a flying chariot. In terms of the play's message, what do you think this might mean?

The end of the play means that Medea escapes, rising up out of the scene in a manner normally associated with the gods. This suggests that a divine or mystical justice has been visited on Jason, and reinforces Medea's association with mystical power as a non-Greek woman (the exotic Other unbound by Greek rules, combined with the nature-driven life-creating power of the woman). This implicitly makes her a witch and suggestive of Hekate. That Medea escapes in the end casts Jason's actions as the evil, and her actions as a sacrifice to ensure justice and suffering on him and those around him, as noted above.