

Notes on Quiz #5: Women in Athenian Literature

1. For today you read excerpts from *Antigone* and *Medea*. What do you think these women have in common?

There are a number of ways to discuss this question. For one thing, both *Antigone* and *Medea* are subjected to an immoral act that is sanctioned by patriarchal society and an interest in personal status (Jason wants a more socially impressive wife; Creon denies a sacred burial rite out of a personal grudge against his family).

Antigone and *Medea* then respond with rebellion against patriarchy.

In both cases, the result of their actions is that they sacrifice everything in order to visit justice and suffering on their antagonists. That the suffering falls not only on the antagonists but those around them is suggestive of divine vengeance, meaning the play situates the evil with the male antagonists, Jason and Creon.

2. What argument does Pomeroy make regarding women in tragedy versus real 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.

EC1. 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, the guardian class

EC2. *Medea* ends with the title character flying away from Corinth into the sky (in a chariot pulled by dragons, traditionally). What do you think the author was trying to say?

Again there are a number of responses to this question. 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 reinforced *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.

EC3. *Antigone* seems to be a battle of the sexes (*Antigone* vs. *Creon*). What about *Antigone*'s sister, *Ismene*?

Both represent a woman's duty to 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 at 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.