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### Female Roles in Antiquity: The Dichotomy Between the Stage and the Page

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Female Roles in Antiquity: The  
Dichotomy Between the Stage  
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In ancient Greek culture, women were not to be seen or heard. They were to live in isolation within their households and accept the domestic mantle that was thrust upon them. As a result, they have remained somewhat of an enigma to the scholars who study the celebrated society. Yet, women were portrayed in both epic poetry and drama. Through these works of fiction, scholars are able to extrapolate the traits of the female characters to understand the women of ancient Greece. However, one must keep in mind that while life imitates art and vice versa, these stories can only explain what men, predominately the authors of these pieces, understood to be the female condition. It can definitively be said, however, that the women of the stage differed dramatically from those in epic poems. The women of poetry were flat characters who were meant to present the author's idea for how women should behave. In contrast, the women of drama were heroines of their own stories and serve to educate the audience on some aspect of a women's plight in Greece.

Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey* has been heralded as a remarkable, "poetic reflection of the evolving societies and cultures of Greece" (Pomeroy 17). Within this epic, three main female characters serve as representations of Greek women: Penelope, wife of Odysseus, Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, and Helen, wife of Menelaus. Each of these women were queens of their respective city-states and married "heroic" men, as per their society's rules. However, the differences among the three are more than just poetic creativity; they teach a lesson regarding what it means to be the ideal woman. Traditionally, Clytemnestra has been viewed as a foil to Queen Penelope. Penelope, who is plagued by suitor after suitor, is unwavering in her fidelity to Odysseus despite the fact that he has been gone for twenty years. She cries out to the suitors, "How I long for my husband- alive in memory, always, / that great man whose fame resounds through Hellas/ right to the depths of Argos!" (Hom. Od. 1.395-397 trans. Robert Fagles). After

all this time, she is devoted to her absent husband. Homer awards Penelope, “the highest admiration for her chastity” (Pomeroy 21). In contrast, when Agamemnon leaves to fight the Trojans, Clytemnestra takes up a lover, Aegisthus. Upon the war hero’s return, Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon in hopes of installing Aegisthus on the throne. In the end, both she and her consort meet a gruesome end as her son murders them as revenge for his father. Within the poem itself, Homer condemns Clytemnestra through the voice of the ghost of Agamemnon: “she -/ the queen hell-bent on outrage-bathes in shame/ not only herself but the whole breed on womankind, / even the honest ones to come, forever down the years!” (Hom. Od. 11.489-492 trans. Robert Fagles). While Penelope is lauded, Clytemnestra is condemned. She brings shame on all women and serves as a token of what abandoning the role of wife will bring to those who do so.

Helen, the woman whom the Trojan war was fought over, serves as another foil to the chaste and righteous Penelope. Helen leaves Sparta and her husband, Menelaus, to have an affair with Paris of Troy after Aphrodite gives her to him as a reward. However, the Greeks are successful in their conquest of Troy and Helen ends up returning to her post as queen of Sparta. Like her sister, Clytemnestra, Helen differs greatly from Penelope. She “freely chose to abandon...Menelaus”, committing adultery in violation of her marital vow. Yet, unlike her sister, Helen appears to be reformed from her ways. Helen regrets her foolish indiscretions saying, “[Menelaus] launch[ed] headlong battles just for *my* sake, shameless whore that I was” (Hom. Od. 4.161-162 trans. Robert Fagles).

Despite the vivid archetypes of Greek women set up by this narrative, the women themselves have precious few lines where they speak themselves. Most exposition comes through their husbands or sons speaking of them. They do not change or evolve through the course of the story. They are not like Odysseus, “the man of twists and turns” (Hom. Od. 1.1

trans. Robert Fagles). They serve as lessons to the listeners. Be like chaste and patient Penelope. Weave as she does; care for the home as she does; devote yourself to your husband as she does. Avoid temptation unless you want to end up like Clytemnestra. Repent from evil as Helen does. They are not the heroines, just the examples.

In stark contrast, the women portrayed in Greek drama were often strong, courageous, and integral to the storyline. They are bold, dynamic, intelligent and respected. They are meant to be seen and heard as individuals in their own right. The women of the stage are vibrant characters, differing greatly from their real-life and epic counterparts in this regard. Yet, it appears that this difference was part of the playwright's message. Euripides would name his plays after these strong women and uses their speeches as chances to educate the audience on the inner dialogue of women of this time. Whether they accurately depict women at this time remains to be seen, but it can be said that these depictions at least represent how men believed strong and righteous women would behave in this time.

Although the ending is tragic, *Medea* portrays a strong woman who takes her fate into her own hands. Medea's speech to the Corinthian women has been touted as a great insight into the minds and feelings of a typical wife of this time period. She criticizes the institution of marriage, asking the women to, "Think of how we buy ourselves husbands, / power and alliances for them, slavery/ and conquest over us. Bad enough/ to have no choice in servitude- / but to pay for it and then celebrate/ a wedding feast adds salt to the wound" (Euripides, *Medea* 243-248 trans. Michael Collier and Georgia Machermer). She compares the plight of women to those in bondage, a problematic analogy, but one that appears to have been on the mind of Athenian women at this time. In addition to selling herself into bondage, "a woman, Medea complains, must buy an unknown husband with a dowry; every bride lives the life of a foreigner in her new

home” (Fantham et al. 69). Later in her speech, Medea expresses her disgust with motherhood, saying, “If they like pain and danger let them take/ a turn at bearing children and for every birth/ I’ll fight three wars” (Euripides, *Medea* 268-270 trans. Michael Collier and Georgia Macheimer). Motherhood was the linchpin of womanhood. Yet, for Euripides, “women as mothers always arouse sympathy” (Pomroy 111). As a result, he captures the inner turmoil that many women feel when contemplating the gory reality of childbirth. He seems to have recognized the discomfort and depression that many women surely felt with their social and cultural status in Ancient Greece. Medea is portrayed as an evil, yet relatable and sympathetic character. She possesses vast intelligence and heroic qualities that Jason exploits to steal the Golden Fleece. After being scorned, she uses her once heroic attributes to achieve her goals, which just happen to be the murder of her children and innocent enemies. Medea may have served as a model of how cunning and smarts could corrupt and ruin a woman. However, she also encapsulates what it felt like to be a woman in Greece, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Euripides’ *Alcestis* tells quite a different tale of wives in Classical Greece. Alcestis, like Medea, shows great courage, strong will, and power before her untimely death. However, she is portrayed as a submissive wife. She is willing to die for her husband to live, not necessarily out of love, but out of duty. A wife, Euripides seems to be saying, should be willing to submit to her husband’s every need, even if it costs her life. Unlike Medea, Alcestis is openly regarded as a heroine in the drama for doing her wifely duty, especially by her father-in-law Pheres. He mourns her, saying that, “by her bravery in death, / she has been a credit-no a glory- to her sex” (Euripides, *Alcestis* 741-742 trans. William Arrowsmith). Yet Pheres also remarks that his son, Admetos, is a coward for, “let[ting] a woman outdo [him] in bravery” (Euripides, *Alcestis* 853 trans. William Arrowsmith). These lines indicate that, although a woman should do everything

she can for her husband, the man was to be the courageous and valiant one. Alcestis is an anomaly and, at the same time, an ideal that Athenian women should live up to. Euripides seems to acknowledge the trials of being a wife in Athens. Therefore, he offers up Alcestis as someone to emulate. If they did so, perhaps wives could find the courage to put their husbands before themselves. Alcestis also provides insight into the feelings of a dying woman in this time. She is worried about her children and concerned with whom her husband will, inevitably, replace her with. Alcestis challenges the submissiveness expected of a wife, even on her deathbed, by requesting that Admetos not take another wife. She displays considerable agency for a woman of this time, but all her choices are to benefit her husband, like any good wife would be expected to do. Although she is resurrected in the end, she is rendered mute for the time being. This silence demonstrates the completion of Alcestis' heroic journey. She has given herself entirely to her husband, even at the expense of her liveliness. She has transformed herself into a heroine for the sake of her husband.

Women of ancient Greece were wives, mothers, and subordinates. There is little to no literature describing how their lives were lived. Yet, through the stories of fictionalized women, perhaps scholars can gain some insight into what the roles and expectations for women were, as well as how women felt about them. The latter is more likely to be found in drama, where women are at the forefront of the action and taking an active role in their fate. The aforementioned expectations can be found in epic poetry, where models of women were described and distributed to the masses. In the end, both drama and poetry are problematic sources for describing the actual character of women in ancient Greece. However, the art provides a snapshot in time of the perceived role of women and their daily lives.

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