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Three Female Characters in Greek Tragedies

In the times of the ancient Greeks, women had an unpretentious role. They were expected to do take on the accepted role of a woman. In most cases, a woman's role is restricted to bearing young, raising children, and housework. In Sophocles' Oedipus the King, Antigone, and Medea, the dominant female characters impacted upon men with authority and political power. It is an inescapable fate that one of these characters will fall, and that the Gods have control over everyone's fate. Each dominant female character portrays her willpower and commitment to their beliefs. This is what leads to the inevitable tragedy.

In Oedipus the King, Jocasta, is Oedipus' wife and the sister of Creon. She became a part of doomed Theban dynasty when she married Laius, the King of Thebes. As a result, the marriage had brought together two branches of the family of Cadmus and seemed to guarantee political strength. She became disappointed because she was unable to produce an heir to the throne. Seeking a solution, Laius went to the oracle at Delphi and asked how the problem might be overcome. Instead, the oracle proclaimed that the son born to Jocasta would be his murderer. Upon hearing the prophecy, Laius rejected all women. This infuriated Jocasta and she had gotten Laius drunk, and slept with him. This proves that Jocasta refuses to be outdone, even by her husband. When Jocasta had given birth to a baby boy (Oedipus), Laius had it sent away by a messenger to die of exposure high in the mountains. A shepherd discovered the boy and gave it to his master King Polybus.

As years passed, Thebes was plagued by a Sphinx that sought the answer to a riddle. It asked for the answer and killed everyone who had guessed incorrectly. This had riddled Thebes' commerce and left its people disgruntled. To make matters worse, news reached the city that Laius had been killed by unknown assailants. Desperate and in need of help, Creon (now the regent of Thebes) had offered up the throne and Jocasta to anyone who could solve the Sphinx's riddle.

In the meantime, Oedipus came across the Sphinx and solved the riddle. He ended up in Thebes because he went to the oracle at Delphi just like his father Laius. Now Oedipus is King of Thebes and another problem arises, a plague. He searches far and wide for the solution to save his people. Prophets and wisemen were brought in to help Oedipus with the plague. It is discovered that the plague will be lifted when Laius' death is revenged. Tiresias, an old prophet reveals that Oedipus is the murderer. Creon too, accuses Oedipus of the murder. Jocasta stands by Oedipus' side.

A prophet? . . . free yourself of every charge! Listen to me and learn some peace I mind: no skill in the world, nothing human can penetrate the future. . . my son wasn't three days old and the boy's father fastened his ankles, had a henchman fling him away on a barren, trackless mountain. Apollo brought neither thing to pass. My baby no more murdered his father that Laius suffered- (201)

Here Jocasta questions the Gods and comforts Oedipus, her dear husband. They do not notice how blind they are because the Gods are always correct.

"Strange, hearing you just now . . . my mind wandered, my thought racing back and forth." (201) Oedipus finally begins to realize that his trip to Delphi begins to coincide with Jocasta's explanation of Laius' murder. He begins to question Jocasta frantically. Jocasta explains that a witness of the murder had been sent into hiding immediately after Oedipus's crowning. Oedipus demands his presence, but Jocasta begs him to stop his investigation. "Impossible. Trust me, he could never make the murder or Laius truly fit the prophecy." (208) Oedipus starts to realize he had put a curse upon himself when he had condemned the man who had slain Laius. The witness verifies the truth to Oedipus and their stories match. Jocasta prays to Apollo that Oedipus won't be so worrisome. "What should a man fear? . . .

Better to live at random, Live as if there's no tomorrow!" (215) She wants him to be calm, for she believes he did not do it.

Both Jocasta and Oedipus are excited to hear the news of Polybus' passing. This meant that Oedipus did not kill his father. The messenger also verifies that Oedipus' father was not Polybus' but Laïus. "Oh no, I beg you, don't do this . . . No, please, I want the best for you." (222-3) Oedipus' thirst for the truth is too strong and he discovers the truth. His mother is Jocasta and his father is Laïus.

As a result, Jocasta, horrified, runs to her chambers and hangs herself. Oedipus then follows after and gauges his eyes. He suffers from his own curse and banishes himself faraway.

In *Antigone*, a war is fought and the invading armies of Argos have been driven from Thebes. Creon, who is now king, orders that all the dead invaders are to be left unburied for the birds and beasts. Antigone, Oedipus' daughter, demands for her brother's proper burial, despite Creon's orders. Antigone's sister, Ismene, on the other hand, is a typical subservient woman. "He has no right to keep me from my own." (61) Despite the disagreement between the two sisters, Ismene and Antigone, Antigone will follow through with some burial rites for her brother. Ismene agrees to keep Antigone's intentions a secret, but that is all. Antigone replies, "Dear god, shout it from the roof tops. I'll hate you all the more for silence-tell the world!" (64)

The sentry guards report to Creon that someone has lightly dusted the body with dirt. Creon is infuriated and has Antigone captured and buried alive. Antigone is brave and accepts her punishment. "I chose to die . . . I gave myself to death," (88) The prophet Tiresias predicts more tragedy as a result of Creon's defiance of the Gods. By not giving a proper burial to the dead bodies, he is robbing the Gods of the underworld. Creon shakes off his warnings.

Haemon, Creon's son, pleads for Antigone's life because he is in love with her. Creon thinks of women in only one way, Never lose your sense of judgment over a woman. The warmth, the rush of pleasure, it all goes cold in your arms, I warn you . . . a worthless woman in your house, a misery in your bed. Spit her out like a mortal enemy-let the girl go. (93)

Antigone, in her tomb, faces her fate with grace. "Very well: if this is the pleasure of the gods, once I suffer I will know that I was wrong." (106) Haemon discovers Antigone who had strangled herself. He in turn thrusts himself upon his own sword. Creon had realized what the Gods demanded and attempted to dig Antigone out himself but was too late.

In *Medea*, Medea seeks revenge when her husband Jason falls for Creon's daughter and marries her. Medea devoted herself to Jason and he lusts for another woman. "When you were sent to the fire-breathing bulls, I saved your life; I willingly deceived my father and left my home with you." (31) Medea feels that she must exact revenge instead of forgiving and forgetting. "Trials are yet to come for this new-wedded pair;" (28) Creon fears that Medea will harm his daughter so he banishes her. She has all of one day to find a home elsewhere. Medea faces her exile with dignity, "Nothing would induce me to have dealings with your friends, nor to take any gift of yours." (35) Aegeus, King of Athens, offers her a home in his kingdom for an exchange for a cure for his sterility. Before leaving, Medea poisons a crown and a dress, presented by her two children to Jason's new wife. She bursts into flames and dies. For Medea's ultimate revenge, she kills her two children. Adding insult to injury, she does not let him bury the children, "I will convey them to the temple of Hera, I will bury them with my own hand." (60)

Jocasta, with her ignorance to the prophecies, and her devotion to Oedipus, act as her spotlight as she breaks the mold of typical women. Antigone's willpower and loyalty to the Gods' burial demands and her brother portray her as a strong person. Medea's drive and determination, although not with good intent, characterizes her as a strong woman. All three have shown their acceptance of their fate at one time. They stand out in a crowd of subservient women.

