

# The Tragic Heroics of Ancient Greek Extreme Women

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The ancient Greek view of women as expressed in many of their plays is both complex and structured. They appear fascinated by the woman who is taken beyond the boundaries of order to become an agent of ruination. These female prototypes cross the border into chaos in different ways but this action usually results in self-destruction. These women bear striking similarities to the tragic masculine heroes of Greek mythology; their motives and the situations that result are almost identical. But when a woman crosses the line into the extreme she also crosses gender boundaries. This is partially dictated by the fact that she must become an active (masculine), instead of a passive (feminine), agent. The following is an examination of five extreme women: Medea (Euripides's *Medea*), Phaedra (Euripides's *Hippolytus*), Clytaemnestra (Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*), Antigone (Sophocles's *Antigone*), and Electra (Euripides's *Electra*), and how their movement brings about destruction.

When a Greek woman in literature crosses the boundary of acceptable feminine behaviour she gains three things: an ability to take action, masculine personality characteristics, and often madness. These three things are also common traits of the male tragic hero.

In Greek literature the ideal woman is one who is static, frozen in time and space, like Penelope of *The Odyssey*. These women function, not as autonomous agents of their own thought and movement, but as ideals of stillness against which the masculine hero can take action. Such women like Jocaste, Helen, Penelope, and Iphigenia often suffer as a result of their men's conduct, but not as a result of their own. These women can be both strong and powerful, but not able to emotionally, intellectually, or even physically move on their own (although they may think about it). On the other hand, women who are dangerous are those who exit this well formed mold: women who cross the line into chaos. All women in Greek literature are coloured by an intimate connection to nature. Because of this association "good" women are

those who are under male societal and cultural control, static and civilized. While "bad" women are those who move on their own, outside of society and its boundaries, close to nature and all its uncertainties. This is curiously similar to the masculine hero who also crosses boundaries into the world of chaos, testing his own abilities and those of others. Both the hero and the extreme woman are dangerous to polite society and civilized life, and both risk self-destruction with their actions.

Probably the most ideal example of the extreme woman and the gender confusion she produces is Euripides's *Medea*. Already a suspect creature because she is not Greek, Medea lives up to the archetype of an extreme woman by murdering not only an innocent girl but her own two children. Medea, like many masculine tragic heroes, lets her passion for vengeance take over every other aspect of her being. She throws herself into the action her hatred of Jason produces, allowing it to destroy everything she holds dear, including her most valuable (to a patriarchal society) feminine achievement, her own sons. Her behaviour is strikingly similar to that of Achilles in *The Iliad*, and to that of another rejected woman, Phaedra. Medea is clearly an agent of chaos, particularly through her practice of supernatural magic, and her actions are tragically self destructive, for she destroys her own motherhood. She is a reactionary, and although her actions are motivated by Jason's rejection, they are her own movement, making her the most dangerous foe to any Greek man – a woman out of control. Like Achilles she commits herself to her passions and the events they produce, uncaring of the destruction and despair that results.

Euripides's *Phaedra* (*Hippolytus*) is similar to *Medea* in her lust for vengeance, and she also exhibits the third characteristic of a woman out of control – madness. When a woman crossed the line she changes not only her gender associations, but her mental health. Phaedra herself says, "How far did I stray from sanity?" (Vellacott 1953, line 240). In the beginning she is like Penelope; she doesn't want to bring

chaos. She has certain feelings but she doesn't want to give in to them. Then she changes and, urged by the goddess Aphrodite, crosses the boundary into the extreme. Suddenly she is like Clytaemnestra (Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*) – a traitorous wife, threatening home and civilized life. In the end she kills herself and in doing so implicates Hippolytus, a self-destructive masculine act of vengeance. The ability to stand back and not get involved is an exercise in restraint that characterizes the Greek feminine ideal. Phaedra does not have this restraint, so she seeks the masculine satisfaction of knowing that her death harms her enemies. Again this is similar to Achilles, because like him it is her reputation, her honour, which she seeks to protect. Although her actions are not as deliberately calculated or self-motivated as Medea's, they are still dangerous.

Masculine ideals become more important to a woman who has entered the extreme. Characters like Sophocles's *Antigone* and Euripides's *Electra* clearly show this. The importance of helping ones friends and harming ones enemies become paramount (this can also be seen in Phaedra and Medea). *Antigone* becomes single minded and entirely self-destructive in what she believes is her duty to the dead. *Electra* is exactly the same. Both women seek to honour the men of their family who they feel have been wrongfully dishonoured. *Electra* wished to avenge her father, even to the destruction of her own mother and her own sanity. *Antigone* wishes to avenge her brother, although she risks jeopardizing her possible marriage and her life. Each allies herself to the self-destruction of death, rather than to the static role offered to them in life. All of these women; Medea, Phaedra, *Electra* and *Antigone* become (like Achilles) determined to strike out at all costs, risking everything, to harm their enemies. They are the epitome of the Greek masculine hero in their wishes and desires, in their actions and their movement, and in the destructive results these yield.

Clytaemnestra also shows many masculine traits. She is often set up for us as a "male" by Aeschylus. The Leader of the chorus comments that her speech is, "Spoken like a man, my lady, loyal, full of self-command" (Fagles, 1975, *Agamemnon*, lines 349-350). When Orestes

arrives at the gates he yells for the ruler of the house (the man of the house), and Clytaemnestra appears (Fagles, 1975, *The Libation Bearers*, lines 644-650). When she hears the shouting that heralds the death of her lover, Aegisthus, she says, "Hand me the man-axe, someone, hurry!" (Fagles, 1975, *The Libation Bearers*, line 876). Clytaemnestra is the extreme version of the woman in action. Although she says she does what she does to avenge Iphigenia it is made clear that she lusts for power as any man might. Clytaemnestra is the exact opposite of Penelope, she is masculine, traitorous, and active. Penelope is feminine, loyal, and static. Clytaemnestra is masculine because she seeks another instead of her husband, because she risks everything for what she desires, and because she acts out her own vengeance with murder (just like Medea).

Each of the women mentioned above is different; each has her own motivations and reasons, her own personality and character traits. Yet all are examples of how a woman in Greek tragedy can become dangerous to her male counterparts. How women, like masculine heroes, have boundaries that they can cross and actions that they can take that yield self-destruction. Like the hero who pushes himself to the extreme, balancing on the edge of acceptable behaviour before returning to the world of civilization, the Greek extreme woman is much the same, but she is allowed no return. Her actions, from the very beginning, are suspect, simply because in the Greek world, women were not supposed to act. Like Penelope, their role is characterized by lack of movement. Women begin to cross the boundary the moment they to act on their own desires: the moment Phaedra contemplates illicit love, the moment Clytaemnestra strikes Agamemnon, or Medea kills. And when a woman becomes active she is dangerous. Her actions invariably result in the destruction of both herself, and others. Women who become vengeful, women who loose themselves in evil or madness, women who want something and actively pursue it are threatening to the ancient Greek male. Medea kills her children, Clytaemnestra is killed by her children, *Electra* kills her mother, *Antigone* kills herself – the extreme woman has no escape from her movement, no return to sanity. Unlike the masculine hero she has no way to make peace

with her actions, in many ways she is as trapped by her movement as the static Penelope-ideal is trapped by the movement of others. The extreme woman has entered chaos, brought about destruction, and she cannot change herself or her actions. In this manner the extreme women is merely another representation of the masculine tragic hero, unable to change or alter her actions even when faced with self-destruction.

### The Author

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