

A Plotting Princess:  
Female Roles in *The Odyssey* and *Antigonê*  
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The fairy tale *Snow White* is a story about two women. One, the evil stepmother, schemes against her stepdaughter in order to assuage her envy and increase her power. She, of course, is thwarted by the end of the story. The other, Snow White, is a pure, innocent damsel entirely devoid of will. Nevertheless, by the end her prince saves her and she lives happily ever after. While *Snow White* is a European fairy tale, its dichotomy of female roles is a common theme in literature. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the female characters are either powerful devils or passive angels. During the four hundred years of Greek civilization between *The Odyssey* and Sophocles' *Antigonê*, however, there is evidence of social progression beyond Homer's constraining archetypes. *Antigonê* is a strong-willed woman, committing civil disobedience against a male sovereign, yet uniquely she is portrayed as virtuous. *Antigonê*'s character represents a social leap forward from the time of *The Odyssey* as *Antigonê* breaks down Homer's dichotomy of female roles.

Homer's Klytaimnestra represents the scheming devil archetype. As is recapitulated in *The Odyssey*, Klytaimnestra's husband, Agamemnon, is gone for years fighting the Trojan War, while Klytaimnestra sits alone at home, bored. She is expected to be chaste and perfectly faithful to her husband for all those years, even though Agamemnon is socially permitted to take a mistress, Cassandra, without any sort of uproar. Klytaimnestra, however, has sexual needs which Agamemnon's absence has left unfulfilled. Thus, she breaks the social taboo on extramarital affairs and her lover, Aigisthos, "[takes] her home, as he and she desired" (43). When Agamemnon returns home, however, Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos are faced with a difficult problem. Klytaimnestra likes her new lover, and she is also inclined to punish Agamemnon for

sacrificing her daughter, Iphigenia, at the beginning of the war. Thus, she decides to murder her husband and all those in his company who were loyal to them. This action also breaks central social mores. Agamemnon's murder not simply breaks the taboo against killing people, but also further disregards the idea of woman's perfect loyalty to her husband. After Agamemnon describes his murder to Odysseus in the realms of the dead, he says,

There is no being more fell, more bestial than a wife in such an action, and what an action that one planned! ... [T]hat woman, plotting a thing so low, defiled herself and all her sex, all women yet to come, even those few who may yet be virtuous. (199)

Klytaimnestra's actions violate the most fundamental tenets of Greek society. This female willfulness is unmistakably portrayed as evil. While it is appropriate that adultery and murder be condemned, careful emphasis is given to the fact that Klytaimnestra, "that woman," schemed to commit adultery and murder, as opposed to committing an accidental wrong. Thus, Homer uses Klytaimnestra to draw the association between particularly female power and villainy.

Like Klytaimnestra, Antigone is willing to break social norms to get what she wants. As Creon argues in Sophocles' Antigone, Greek society sees anarchy as the ultimate sin. "Anarchy, anarchy! Show me a greater evil! This is why cities tumble and the great houses rain down... We keep the laws then, and the lawmakers..." (212). In Sophocles' Antigone, after Creon prohibits the burial of Polyneices (193), Antigone and Ismene argue about what to do:

Antigone: "Ismene, I am going to go bury him [Polyneices]. Will you help?"

Ismene: Bury him! You have just said the new law forbids it.

Antigone: He is my brother. And he is your brother too. (187)

Antigone decides to intentionally disobey the law, despite the taboo against disobedience to the sovereign, in order to achieve her goal of burying her brother. Another social norm fractured by Antigone is that women are supposed to be subordinate to men. Ismene advises Antigone against

burying Polyneices by saying, "We are only women, we cannot fight with men, Antigônê!" (187-8). Antigônê breaks this norm after she is apprehended and she argues with Creon.

Your edict, King, was strong, but all your strength is weakness itself against the immortal unrecorded laws of God. ... You smile at me. Ah Creon, think me a fool, if you like; but it may well be that a fool convicts me of folly. (203)

Not only does Antigônê break the law, she breaks the social norms for gender relations by talking back to a man. She is willing to do this because she wants to uphold the laws of the gods.

*The Odyssey's* Penelope, as the loyal, passive wife, represents the second half of Homer's dichotomy. From the beginning of the Trojan war to Odysseus' return home, Penelope has not seen her husband for twenty years. She has been under siege from a throng of men trying to marry her. Penelope does not particularly want to marry any of the suitors, so she delays them by unraveling by night her weaving, which represents the time she has left before she must choose a new husband. This trick is not the primary focus of praise of Penelope in *The Odyssey*, however. After Odysseus returns home, Agamemnon's response is not about what Penelope did; rather, he lauds her for what she did not do.

True to her husband's honor and her own, Penelope, Ikarios' faithful daughter!...Tyndareus' daughter waited, too - how differently! Klytaimnestra, the adulteress, waited to stab her lord and king. (451)

The comparison between Penelope and Klytaimnestra implies that the thing Agamemnon, as a representative of Greek society, finds the most praiseworthy about Penelope's story is that she was passive; she did not give in to her sexual urges and marry another man. Penelope's loyalty is thus portrayed as a natural result of her doing nothing.

Antigônê's willfulness is matched by the measure of loyalty she shares with Penelope. Antigônê is steadfast throughout the play in her devotion to the gods' laws. She bears her civil disobedience and her death sentence because of her piety. Her final words to the audience

indicate that she is going to die for her convictions, but she still will not relent. "You will remember what things I suffer, and at what men's hands, because I would not transgress the laws of heaven" (222). Antigone is clearly a loyal character, yet, unlike Penelope, Antigone's loyalty comes from direct, independent action. Antigone thus manages to retain Clytemnestra's willfulness but remain virtuous in the eyes of the reader.

Antigone is not an ideal feminist model. Few people, male or female, would be as quick as Antigone to choose martyrdom. Antigone's thorough distaste for life sets Antigone apart from most women, making it easy to dismiss her courage as an aberration. Furthermore, in the context of the play, Antigone is not the protagonist; she remains an object upon whom Creon, a man, passes judgment. Nevertheless, Antigone's strong yet virtuous character helps to deconstruct the scheming devil/passive angel dichotomy, a dichotomy which has constrained women since Homer's time.