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How do the characters of Antigone in Anouilh's play Antigone and Medea from Euripides's play Medea cope with the competition from other more beautiful and socially successful women?

Both of the plays Medea and Antigone have tragic themes and their main characters are women who find themselves unhappy and so decide to act on behalf of these feelings. In both cases the result is a climax at the end of the play in the form of several deaths. One of the main reasons they decide to act is because they find it difficult to cope with competition of other women. Both Jean Anouilh in his play Antigone and Euripides in his play Medea have based their tragic plots on the roles of jealousy and spite and the extremes they can make a person go to. In my analysis I will first look at the effects competition has on both Medea and Antigone, in particular jealousy. After this, I will discuss the aspirations both women have as a result of feeling jealous and how other characters in the play see them. Finally I will look at how the two characters act on impulse of their jealousy and compare what it leads to in each play.

When talking about the character's jealousy it is important to first determine who is the cause of these feelings. In both cases, we could say it is other, in the characters opinion 'rival', women. In Antigone's case, the jealousy is aimed mainly at her "radiant" and "beautiful" sister Ismene. Ismene is not only the more beautiful of the two sisters, but she is also more favoured and admired by the others.

*"Ismene surrounded by a group of young men..."*¹

Here we can see Ismene gets most attention. She is admired by young men and enjoys her life. Antigone on the other hand seems to be in her shadow. Therefore it is only natural for the author to have chosen for her to have feelings of resentment, as Ismene has all Antigone feels she hasn't: beauty, success, happiness and very importantly attention. Medea's jealousy is aimed at the new wife of her husband Jason. Medea's main concern is perhaps less centred around the idea of physical beauty, but a beauty the princess has for Jason in the form of her status, power and wealth.

*"Your marriage with a Barbarian was proving a source of no glory for you..."*²

We see Medea acknowledges she cannot compete with the princess in terms of status. She not only realizes she has lost her husband, but also her status and pride, as she has been abandoned and

¹ Antigone - p. 10

² Medea - p. 16

humiliated. Although the two characters, which cause the heroines jealousy, are very different, they are joined by several similarities. Both authors portray them as very elevated, noble women through their behaviour and use of language and also give them an image of beauty. Finally and perhaps most importantly for the effect of the tragedy, the two rival women are never mentioned as willingly wanting to hurt or anyhow threaten the main heroines.

Antigone and Medea have aspirations, which arise from their jealousy. Anouilh has chosen Antigone to care more about her physical beauty. This makes her appear as a more childish and vain character. At the beginning of the play Antigone curses being a girl.

*“Haven’t I spent my whole life cursing the fact that I was a girl?”*³

Antigone is clearly not happy with being who she is, however later on in the play the author contradicts this by having her try to be more like the other girls.

*“...I wore Ismene’s dress and rouge. It was because I was stupid. I wasn’t very sure that you loved me as a woman; and I did it because I wanted you to want me as a woman; and I did it - because I wanted to be like other girls.”*⁴

We can see her desperate aspiration to be more beautiful and desirable for Heamon, who could be seen as a device to represent male attention. Her character does this not for the feeling of satisfaction, but as a means of competition with her sister. Anouilh's choice to have Antigone wonder if Heamon finds her attractive as a woman creates a feeling of understanding for her and portrays the repeated idea of her envy, resentment and lack of self-belief. Antigone's lust for beauty could be a result of her hunger for attention and a more acknowledged position in the society she lives in.

On the other hand, Medea's aspirations seem to be more centred and thought through. The first impression she gives us is that her desires all tend towards revenge. From very early on in the play Euripides shows her as a determined woman who wants to turn her jealousy and pain into an act of revenge, which will hurt Jason. When she realizes Jason has chosen a woman who is better than her, especially in social ranking as well as is younger in age, she doesn't try to compete. Unlike Anouilh, Euripides bases Medea's jealousy on a more emotional side. She is given the feeling of failure, defeat and humiliation as well as loss of pride and love. She is jealous of Jason's new wife, however more than anything else, she envies the fact Jason desires and lusts for her.

³ Antigone - p. 21

⁴ Antigone - p. 28

“As you linger here away from home, desire for the girl you have just married overwhelms you.” ⁵

Here we can see more emphasis is given on the fact she hates the idea of Jason having another woman who has replaced her position. Perhaps Euripides has chosen his heroine to have a more emotionally based jealousy, as this has allowed him to lead the play to a more extreme climax with crueler deaths.

What both plays have in common is the fact both authors have chosen to include comments about the heroines coming from other characters. This is important as it gives the audience a lot of information about the impression others get from their personalities and actions. Once again there is a similarity, as in both plays the heroines are described as “unreasonable” and “impulsive” and at times give an image of being almost insane. Even the structure of the comments is very similar. Both plays have the comment of the Chorus, which represents the moral look on things. Furthermore there is the opinion of the two Creon’s, both of which symbolise the state and law. Heamon and Jason are the lovers. They are a device that shows male thoughts and opinions. Finally there is a contrast of opinion between two other types of character. One who doesn’t know the heroine very well, but still judges her and the judgement of a close person. In the case of Antigone this would be the difference in the opinions of the nurse and the guard. In Medea it is the opinion of the nurse and the tutor. To increase the image of Medea’s insanity and the danger she is to her surrounding, Euripides chooses to show feelings of fear in the nurse.

“...as far as possible keep these boys on their own and don’t bring them near their mother...”

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By having the nurse, someone who knows Medea well, worried about the safety of the children shows we can expect Medea to do something awful. In contrast to Antigone, Medea isn’t given much understanding. We feel less sympathy for her and acknowledge her as the main villain. Antigone on the other hand is seen as a childish girl. She radiates an almost ‘tom-boy’ personality and appearance and is hidden in the shadow of her beautiful and always well-behaved sister.

“...none of the boys will look at her while Ismene’s about, all curled and cute and tidy and trim.” ⁷

Here the nurse presents her opinion of Antigone’s appearance. Although it is evident from other parts of the text she cares for Antigone her description is very judgemental, however coming from her sounds very truthful. From the characters that know her only as the daughter of Oedipus we get opinions that point out her stubborn, impetuous mind and behaviour that differs from the good manners Ismene has.

⁵ Medea - p. 17

⁶ Medea - p. 3

⁷ Antigone - p. 15

*“...and there she is, clawing away like a hyena. Right out in broad daylight! And did she scratch and kick when I grabbed her!”*⁸

The guards description gives an image of her being almost like a child; misbehaving and resistant to authority.

Throughout the plays, the building up of feelings and emotions caused by jealousy leads to a climax. Antigone chooses the route of a martyr. Her actions are done as a result of her aspiration for recognition. She goes as far as to disrespect law and although given a chance to escape the consequences of her rash actions she refuses and so sentences her self to death. Medea wishes not to turn her suffering out on herself. Instead she decides to avenge herself on Jason and come out of their quarrel as the ‘winner’. Her jealousy leads to her decision to kill several people, including her own children! This contradicts with the consequences of Antigone’s actions. She doesn’t kill anyone, but dies from her own wish. Both plays share a common theme of jealousy, however there are different intentions of the authors in the way they choose to use jealousy to develop their play. Anouilh uses Antigone’s rather childish jealousy to lead the play to a climax of her death and so inflicts feelings of sympathy in the viewers, creating a sad atmosphere with a sense of unnecessary loss. On the other hand Euripides uses jealousy as a means to lead his character Medea to commit murder of four people and take the plot to a very dramatic finish. Both authors have succeeded to portray their heroines as in able to cope with the competition of other women in terms of beauty and social status, primarily through the impetuosity and impulsiveness that the heroines have been created to display. This has allowed the authors to use them in their aim to achieve powerful climaxes in their plays, where the heroine’s actions result in multiple deaths.

⁸ Antigone - p. 40

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