

## **The Attitudes of Euripides and Sophocles towards the power of the gods over men and their lives.**

Medea and Antigone are among the great classical literary pieces of all time, they are masterpieces of language and drama. They have lasted as marvels of the stage for over a millennia, and this gives us cause to ask: What is it that sets these plays apart from the multitudes of Greek tragedies produced during the time? What is it that makes these particular plays “classics”?

The only distinguishing feature in literature that one can judge an authors creation by is the effect that it has on the reader. And these two plays leave an irremovable mark on those that witness their performance, this in itself is remarkable, but more significant still is that these plays deal with issues so universal to humanity that they still have an effect on present day readers. Central to the purpose of both authors was the goal of changing how men of the day thought about the deities that ruled them.

The two playwrights were of differing eras and so took diametrically opposite stances when it came to their views of the gods and their place. Both playwrights wrote in a time when the people were changing. The gods were considered no longer what they once were, people were starting to reimagine their place in the world, it was at this point that Sophocles attempted to push the traditional value system on his audience. To do this, he shows the perils of disobeying the immutable laws of the gods, in the case of Antigone it is the honouring of the dead.

Sophocles was born into a rich and opulent family, he was happy with his place in the world and with the initial forays into democracy that the Athenian republic was making. This was a way of life and liberty that he wished to preserve, so when he saw that men were questioning their beliefs he sought to reinforce what was a more conservative stance on theocracy.

Sophocles' play Antigone is set in the days immediately after the battle for Corinth, attacked by one brother and defended by another. Creon, the King of Corinth orders that the corpse of Polynices be left unhonoured unburied and unmourned. Whilst his brother the defender be fully honoured for his part in protecting the city.

The heroine of the piece Antigone is sister to the two combatants, so she believes that her two brothers should both receive the rights due to the dead. When she tries to give Polynices a proper burial she is exiled to a sealed cave where she hangs herself. The play concludes with the death of Haemon and Eurydice in retribution for the Creon's sins.

Sophocles portrays Creon as stubborn and proud, and it is because of this that he suffers, the writers aim is to show that the gods are powerful and responsible for all in things, so it is not sufficient that Creon suffers for his error, the suffering must be directly associated with the will of the gods. Thus all the way through the text there are constant references to the power and vengefulness of the gods and constant implications that Creon's actions will bring retribution, as early as line 128 Antigone is hinting at what is to come:

“... Live then if you will,  
Live and defy the holiest laws of heaven”

And then again:

“The Father of Heaven abhors the proud tongues boasting;”

Sophocles attempts to associate the events of the play with the will of the gods go beyond simple hints however. Because all ancient Greek plays were written as a tribute to the gods the audience would expect frequent references to the inevitability of their will, hence if the author of a play intended to make a particular point regarding this it is necessary to spell it out to the audience. Sophocles arranges this through the introduction of the prophet. The prophet is a literary tool used by Sophocles to confirm in the audiences mind that the events at the conclusion of the play are as indeed a vengeance from the gods in response for Creon's actions. He comes to Creon with a warning, saying that if he does not make good his actions then he will be punished, Creon initially refuses to heed Teiresias' warning, and so the gods punish him for his pride and stubbornness.

Sophocles makes in his play a powerful impression on the audience of the power of the gods.

Conversely Euripides in his play portrays the opposite view. Euripides detested the culture that he lived in, born into a high ranking house in Greek society, he was loath to carry out the minimal duty's that his rank required, he instead turned his life to one of introspection and critique, he prided himself on being able to write of the world he lived in with an impartial and objective cynicism. He saw the Athenian life as hypocritical, petty and misguided, he so set about changing that. His radical and nihilistic views were unpopular and it was not until centuries after his death that his plays were given the due regard. He was a man who was dedicated his life to making men questions themselves. Within Medea and indeed his other tragedies he carefully deconstructs the presumptions that a member of Greek society makes about the culture that they live in. He was interested in destroying the preconceptions of the dramatic world, but unlike most playwrights he was not interested in replacing the values he destroys with others of his own, instead he is merely nihilistic in his manipulations, attempting to ruin the preconceived thoughts and values of his audience without imposing another view of the world in its place.

He first imagined a powerful crime, one of such heinous proportions that it could not go unpunished. He chose to write of the story of Medea, but added an unforeseen twist to the well known tale, instead of having Medea's enemies slay the children, he re-wrote the tale, this time having her kill her own children. Having constructed this sin, he proceeds to manipulate the audience a word at a time to see Medea's actions as something that could never go unpunished by the heavens. This might not be quite as confronting to the modern reader, but we must understand that the audience of the time would already have known the course of the legend, and would so have been expecting a very different tale to the one that was told on Euripides stage. When Medea's story changes its focus to the death of the children, Euripides makes it abundantly clear that the gods are in full support of her actions because of Jason's oath breaking. This would create for the audience a contradiction in the interests of the gods, they would have found that the idea that the gods should support Medea to be almost mutually contradictory to the idea of her killing her children.

Euripides and Sophocles hold diametrically opposing views of the place of the gods in Ancient Greek society, their differing views on theocracy are abundantly evident in their plays.

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