

## Source Analysis: Part Two D

The plays of Aristophanes, Sophocles and Euripides, can be categorised as some of the most important sources available to historians in the study of daily life in Fifth Century Athens.

Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, before taking these sources to confidence we must question their faithfulness. After all, they were written by individuals, and it is not unusual for writers to pass on their opinions and thoughts into their writings. These plays were designed to move and make people laugh, however often they contained underlying themes of political and moral bias. Therefore, we are unable to fully trust the factors expressed in these plays. However, taking these views into account, it is possible to conclude that these plays vividly portray views of attitudes and opinions in Greek Society. Women, for example, were given different roles in the plays.

In the plays of Medea and Lysistrata, women are portrayed in different ways. In Medea, women who are in the bounded roles of mothers, daughters and wives portray how normal women should behave – kind, loving, obedient.

As mothers, women are shown as loving. Even when Medea has decided that she must kill her children, she is still depicted as loving them. She laments the loss of *'darling hand. / And darling mouth; your noble, childlike face and body! / Dear sons, my blessing on you both'* (1069), and can almost not bring herself to carry out the task.

Women are also shown as being capable of being good wives. The Nurse at the opening of the play says that before Jason's betrayal, Medea was *'all obedience'* to him. This was seen as the essential quality of a wife - *'in marriage that's the saving thing / When a wife obediently accepts the husband's will'* (13). In the role of wife, women are shown as loving their husbands completely, and accepting their husband's will above their own.

Women are also portrayed in the role of loving daughter. Many of the events leading up to the play are recalled throughout the play, for example when Medea often reminds Jason of her love for her father by lamenting *'my country and my father's house, / Which I betrayed to come with you.'* (534). Thus, from this information, historians are able to piece together a vague idea of how women in Fifth Century Athens might have behaved in society.

Another major aspect of life, in Fifth Century Athens, which these plays displayed, was religion. They provide insight into how the gods were regarded and the functions of religion and the gods. This is shown most prominently in Oedipus. Here, we have a man whose whole life has been controlled by fate and the gods. This attribute is significant to show how important the gods were to the Greeks. They were all powerful and responsible for ruling the lives of men and women, and it was important to worship and venerate the gods in order to lead a happy life. These themes help historians to achieve an understanding of the function of religion and the role of the gods in Athenian life.

The plays also provide us with information on the different views of Athenians on other peoples. For example, in Euripides play, Medea is a foreigner, and expresses her loneliness and anger at her treatment by “*I am alone, I have no city*” (290) and “*An Asiatic wife was no longer respectable*” (591). This implies that foreigners, in Athens, were treated as strangers and regarded as uncivilised – people who most respectable citizens would not associate with. Lysistrata also provides a vivid description of ‘foreigners’. For example, the Corinthian women are regarded rather coldly by Lysistrata. Lysistrata, being an Athenian, reflects the general view of the predominant population of Athens. These excerpts and ideas help historians to understand how foreigners were treated and regarded in Athens.

Thus, in conclusion, we can see that the plays of Aristophanes, Euripides, and Sophocles help to reflect many ideals, opinions and concerns of Athenians. Although this information may be slightly biased and somewhat unreliable, it presents itself as a rather useful source for historians interested in position of women, gods, and foreigners in Fifth Century Athens.

### **Bibliography – Part One & Part Two**

#### **Sources**

Plays:

Sophocles	The Theban Plays
Euripides	Medea and other Plays
Aristophanes	Lysistrata

#### **Websites**

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