

THE UNEXPECTED POWER PRESENTED BY WOMEN IN GREEK LITERATURE

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CHAPTER ONE Introducing the Subject

Throughout history, women have often been considered the lesser of the two sexes no matter which era is being examined. Even from times of antiquity, women were not considered equal to the men in their society. Women have been seen as possessions for their husbands, fathers and male relatives. They were used for nothing more than reproductive purposes – to carry on the family name. Only within the last century have women begun to take on the same rights and political powers as their male counterparts.

In Greek society, women were relatively powerless – not just because of their inferiority. They modeled their society in a way that would eliminate the threat of the private life from infringing on the public life. To them, there was nothing more important than the state. Anything that would get in the way of the Greek citizens' loyalty to the state was removed. Women were part of the threat. If Greek men were attached to their women, they could not be completely loyal to the state. Because of this removal, women had even less power than they might have. They were unable to participate in political life, and their power over their men was minimized to the least possible. Historically, the Greek women had no power.

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Yet, in literary works, Greek women often managed to obtain their power and freedom from their world. Some managed to completely rewrite their path, but others only cut a few of their strings. In works like *Medea* and *Antigone*, the women obtain their power by fighting against the patriarchy with everything in their arsenals. They do not bow to the men dictating their lives, and they choose to do what they believe best. In other works – like *The Odyssey* and *Hippolytus* – the women's power is much less pronounced. In *Hippolytus*, it may seem like women have no power, but that is hardly the case. Phaedra is powerless to fight Aphrodite, but she is able to control her own desires and ensure her will is what wins. In *The Odyssey*, Penelope also seems powerless as she is besieged by suitors, but she uses her wits to hold out against them. However, she gives in to her husband when he arrives home, and all power she might have gained vanishes. Of course, those interpretations of the plays are merely a glancing view. Upon further inspection, each woman reveals her secrets; each one is more than they first seem, and their power over their own lives – imperceptible at first – becomes clear to the analyst.

For this project, I have examined these works of Greek Literature, and I have attempted to understand how and why the women were able to gain power in an otherwise powerless society. I have determined what led them to seek power and what form that power took. Some forms of power were good and admirable; others were dark and treacherous. Though each woman had her own course to follow, and each woman chose

her own methods, they were all searching for the same thing. Each one wanted honor, whether it was for themselves or their family.

CHAPTER TWO

Penelope

When the *Odyssey* begins, Odysseus has been away from home for twenty years. For the first ten of those years, Odysseus was fighting in the war against Troy. Once he left Troy, he attempted to sail home, but his trip was complicated by the efforts of the gods. For ten years, his family waited for him to come home. Other veterans from the Trojan War had long since returned to their respective homes and continued on with their fates, but Odysseus was still unseen. Penelope and Telemachus waited for him, but as the years passed, Odysseus's return became more and more uncertain. When Penelope asks travelers for information regarding Odysseus's travels, she does not seem optimistic about his survival. In fact, she seems to be searching for a confirmation of death instead of an assurance of life – almost as though she were certain Odysseus is no longer amongst the living. Yet, despite her apparent certainty, Penelope does not seem to be able to act on any impulses that would decide her future.

Penelope's assumption that Odysseus is dead is not unreasonable. He has been gone well over the appropriate amount of time, and she has not received any news from him or from travelers that would indicate either his whereabouts or his wellbeing. The news that she has received does not represent him as alive since Odysseus is almost always swept away in a catastrophic circumstance, such as a terrible storm that no one could possibly survive. Penelope could not be blamed if she were to give up hope that Odysseus might one day return. Indeed, it seems logical to believe Odysseus died at sea.

However, assuming Odysseus is deceased and not returning home opens new issues for Penelope. She must contend with Odysseus's orders to move on as well as her own desires and wishes. As Odysseus commanded Penelope to move on after a certain amount of time had passed, Penelope would be within her rights to choose a new husband – which would satisfy both the commandment and her own desires. Of course, the correctness of her actions would not eliminate the problems of such a decision. If she follows Odysseus's command and her own desires, not only is she admitting to herself that Odysseus is dead, but she would also be accepting a life with another man. That man could never compare to Odysseus and she could likely never love him in the same way. The man would simply be a companion in her life, someone to fill the hole left by Odysseus's demise. It would be hard for Penelope to subject herself to a life of simple companionship after she had experienced love with a man like Odysseus. She would need to prepare herself for such a lifestyle.

Furthermore, without proof, Penelope is simply assuming Odysseus is dead. While it is logical to believe Odysseus has been killed, it is not proven. Unless a body is found, or a traveler bears the news of Odysseus's last breaths, Penelope will always be uncertain in her assumption. It will always be in the back of her mind that Odysseus might return one day, that if she waited long enough her patience might be rewarded. If she moved on without that proof, she would feel guilt despite Odysseus's command. She would constantly worry that he might return and find her sleeping with some other man. If that were to happen, Odysseus's resulting actions would likely not be positive. Despite her apparent certainty, Penelope still needs proof in order to move on without guilt or fear.

Since travelers are unable to tell Penelope Odysseus is certainly dead, she is unable to move on. Without certainty, Penelope cannot choose what form her life will

take. While she desires to choose a new spouse and form a new relationship, she also desires Odysseus's return and a return to her old lifestyle as his wife. Without knowing what fate Odysseus has met, she is unable to commit to either option. If Odysseus is deceased, she does not want to live her life in loneliness, constantly pining after a man who will never return. However, if he is not, then she does not want to settle for another man. Even if Penelope is certain Odysseus has met a terrible end, she cannot rid herself of the nagging thought that he may not be dead, that he could have survived all of his trials.

Of course, because of her small doubts, Penelope is unwilling to act on either desire. She does not want to send the suitors away, but she does not want to choose one either. She keeps them near her, tending to them like a flock of geese. She allows their passions to go unchecked and their own egos to overrun their logic. Penelope allows them to believe they have a chance of being her chosen spouse, but she does not indicate which man she would choose. She allows the suitors to infest her home and pursue her, but she never chooses one of them or gives any indication of favoring one above the others. Yet, the suitors stay. Despite not being told whether they stand a chance with her, the suitors remain, each man confident in his own cause. Each man pursues Penelope, confident that they will be the chosen spouse. It is not necessary for Penelope to indicate a favorite in the suitors or to offer encouragement; their own egos accomplish that feat for her.

Yet, Penelope knows she cannot afford to be completely aloof from the suitors and their own needs. If she does not offer some form of encouragement, they will eventually grow tired of the pursuit and leave, dooming Penelope to a life of loneliness. Of course, Penelope's time is running out and the suitors are growing restless. If she does not choose a suitor at some point soon or if

she sends the suitors away, she will lose any chance of companionship she might have had. While Penelope does not want simple companionship for the rest of her life and she would prefer the love she shared with Odysseus, she is aware that living her life without any relationship with a man would be unbearable. Simple companionship would be better than nothing. While she is not ready to choose one of the suitors, Penelope is terrified of spending her life alone, which forces her to endure them and their advances for the sake of her future.

Of course, Penelope does *intend* to choose a man for her husband. She is not content with the lonely future that would be hers without a husband. Since she is certain Odysseus has long since met his death, she believes choosing a husband will be her only chance at male companionship in the future – the suitors are her only chance. For this reason, she endures the suitors' advances and presence in her home. She allows them to wreak havoc on Telemachus' future possessions and her home. She permits them to remain, because without them she has nothing to hope for. One of them will be the man she chooses for a husband. One of them will be her companion and her savior from loneliness. She cannot send them away without dooming herself.

However, Penelope also cannot choose one for herself and end the torment. Not only does she fear the slight possibility Odysseus has survived, but she is also reluctant to do so. Although she has been commanded by Odysseus to move on, and despite her own desire to do so, she is still reluctant to move on. Part of her reluctance can be considered from the standpoint of grief. Penelope has never properly grieved her husband's demise. Travelers are constantly bringing news of him, but they are never able to definitively say he is deceased. Each time Penelope is given hope for his life, but also an uncertainty. Since she has never been certain

Odysseus has been killed, she has never been able to grieve him properly. Without grieving him and accepting his death as fact, she is unable to move on. She remains stagnant in an extended period of grieving – certain Odysseus is dead but hopeful for his return. Naturally, Penelope is worn down by the constant fluctuation. She is constantly wondering about, hoping for, and dreading the news of Odysseus's death. She wants him to be alive – but she also wants him to have met his end so that she can finally move on in peace. She wants to grieve him properly, but she cannot do so without knowing he is certainly dead. Until then, she will remain in the cycle: grieving for him as though he is dead and hoping for news of his upcoming arrival.

Yet, despite her obvious grief, the suitors have still been welcomed into Penelope's home. Though she does not seem ready to move on, the men have been allowed into her domain and continue to press her to marry them. At some point, one man came knocking at Penelope's door. He arrived with honor – gifts in hand and a respectful manner. Penelope, impressed with his appearance and words, allowed him entry into her home. She allowed him access to her and permitted him to woo her. Overtime more men arrived. Some kind, like the first, with respect in their wake; others with arrogance and conceit. Yet, Penelope refused none of them; she allowed each Suitor into her home. From the moment she accepted the first inside, Penelope opened her home to the suitors. Once one was granted access, she could refuse none. By accepting the first man, Penelope declared herself free for the taking. When she allowed him in, she called to the other bachelors, "I am ready." She declared she was ready and willing to move on with a new husband. She sent a message into the world inviting the bachelors to come and attempt to win her. Penelope opens the door to one suitor, but in doing so she opens the door to every other man in search of a wife. She declares herself open to remarriage.

However, though Penelope opens the door and invites the suitors in, effectually declaring her willingness to remarry, she's not truly ready. She opens the door prematurely. She is still engulfed in grief for her husband's loss and uncertainty in his death. She allows the suitors access despite her unwillingness. She believed she could keep the suitors in a holding pattern, acquiescent to her will and whims. She hopes to keep them hidden in the eaves, waiting for her decision with patience. Penelope allows the suitors in, thinking she can control them, but she does not account for their assumptions concerning her readiness. She thinks she can control them and keep them at bay until she is actually ready. Until she has faced her grief and removed her uncertainty surround Odysseus's death, Penelope believes she will be able to control the suitors and their desires.

Of course, Penelope was wrong. After being allowed in, the suitors cease to be respectful. The respect may last for a few months, perhaps a year, but it soon ends. The men no longer act with honor; they become conceited and arrogant, confident in their assurance of being chosen and annoyed at Penelope's hesitancy. They cannot understand why she has not chosen one of them, why she keeps them both near and at bay. The suitors do not comprehend Penelope's attitude towards them and their suit. They are not able to understand her or her needs. As a result, the suitors become hostile and annoyed with impatience. They lose all pretense of respect for her and her station. They begin to take advantage of her. They stay in her home – a constant pressure on her and a reminder of her necessary decision. They do not leave to eat or sleep. They cease to bring gifts for the household and begin to take without return. They gorge themselves on Odysseus's fine wines and cured meats, and they steal his luxuries for their own benefits. They slaughter his best animals without mind to replacing or replenishing. The suitors are impatient, and it shows in their actions. They no longer

treat Penelope as a woman worthy of their attentions. They begin to see her as an obstacle in their supposedly deserved path. At this point, the suitors are no longer recognizable as the men who first arrived. There is no honor or respect in their mannerisms. They do not treat Penelope as a person with choices and options open to her. They see her as an object – something to be possessed and owned like a trophy – and they treat her like they would any other object. She is something to be won; she is no longer a person to them.

Yet, did Penelope mean anything to the suitors to begin with? Or was she always regarded as a trophy to be won? They certainly meant something to Penelope; they were to be her assurance for not living her life alone. They were meant to be a guarantee of potential companionship if Odysseus never came home – a safeguard against the loneliness that would otherwise be her life. As individuals they may not have meant much to her: each man held the same merits as the next one. Still, Penelope saw them as more than just objects or possessions; she saw them as people who could provide companionship for her remaining years.

However, the suitors did not have the same needs as Penelope. Companionship did not hold the same appeal for them; men were not restricted to the same rules as women. Men could – and often would – have relationships with whomever they wanted. Odysseus is a perfect example of this; he slept with both Circe and Calypso without fear of repercussions. Men did not need to fear repercussions for their actions, but a woman could not say the same. Penelope could not sleep with another man for the entirety of Odysseus's travels. If she had, not only would she have faced possible punishments from Odysseus upon his return, but she would also have faced society's judgement upon her. She would have been considered unfavorably by those around her. Harsh names would be

given to her, and scornful glances would be felt upon her back. Sleeping around was not within Penelope's abilities, which meant finding a husband was the only possibility for male companionship. The suitors did not fear a lack of companionship and would not have cared about that aspect. They might care about having an heir, but even that seems unlikely. Penelope has not borne a child in over twenty years and is likely past her prime in that respect. Bearing children for a new husband, while not impossible, would be unlikely and uncertain. The suitors are unlikely to be concerned with children and heirs; if they were, they would be wooing a younger woman who still had plenty of time for childbearing. The suitors are not concerned with such aspects, so why do they want Penelope? They want her to serve as a trophy, as an item that boosts their own egos and their perception of themselves.

From the beginning, Penelope was a trophy to the suitors. While some accepted they needed to woo and respect her as a person, Penelope was always something to be won by them. In one aspect, she was "arm candy" to them. She was beautiful in person and in reputation. Whoever could claim her as their own would hold her beauty in their own repertoire. Penelope's beauty would become an asset to whomever she married. He would be able to claim a beautiful wife, which would encourage the respect of lesser men – men who could not claim as beautiful a wife. At the same time, Penelope was a remnant from a great man. Odysseus was renowned for his strength and cunning. He was revered and loved. To have something that used to be his would be a great achievement. To call one of his possessions their own would bring prestige to their own names. As a person, Penelope meant relatively little to the suitors. Her needs were unimportant. Her wants were not necessary to the equation. Anything besides the reputation she could bring to them as an asset did not matter. The

suitors pursued Penelope for what she could bring to them. They did not care about her own characteristics. Her mind and emotions did not matter to them. Her intellect and cunning were not seen as benefits. In fact, any characteristics besides her beauty were not worthy of consideration. The suitors saw Penelope as a possession, a trophy to be won. Anything besides the potential benefits of her as a possession were unimportant.

Yet, if Penelope knows she is merely a possession to them, why does she allow them into her home? Why does she allow herself to be “courted” in such a harsh manner? It seems unlikely any woman in Penelope’s position would willingly submit themselves to such treatment without reason to do so. Penelope is a prestigious woman. She is queen of Ithaca and rules over it in Odysseus’s absence. She came from a well-known family, and her renown is extensive. If she had wanted the suitors to leave, she had the power to rid her home of their presence. She could have called the people of Ithaca to her aid or even just pointed out the injustices the suitors were committing for the public eye to see. She was not without recourse if she wanted the suitors gone, yet she never made that move. She never called for a rescue from their harsh pursuits. She never asked for anyone to remove them from her home. Quite the opposite. Penelope wanted the suitors to stay. She wanted the life they had the potential to offer her; she wanted the life of companionship they represented. While she was not ready to accept that life yet, Penelope knew they were the only chance she would have once she was ready. Any attempts to send them away would ruin her chance for future happiness and contentment.

Still, Penelope’s hesitation in choosing one of the suitors is not unseen by them. They notice her reluctance; they know something is holding her back from choosing one of them. It becomes even more obvious once her deception is discovered. After the suitors’ arrogance had become obvious to her, Penelope

crafted a ruse that would enable her to wait. She told them she would marry one of them upon completion of a burial shroud for Odysseus’s father. They agreed to be patient until then, but they had no idea of Penelope’s intended deception. Every day, Penelope would weave the shroud, but every night, she would unravel all of her day’s work, ensuring it would never be completed. With this ruse, she intended to have everything she wanted. She could keep the suitors complacent, and she could wait until she was ready to choose one of them. For a time, her plan worked. The suitors stayed. They were content to eat and steal the treasures Odysseus had gathered. Yet, Penelope was eventually betrayed by one of her maids. The ruse was discovered, and the suitors were angry. They were angry with Penelope for not choosing one of them, for not seeming to want to choose one of them. They were angry with her for her cunning deception, and they were angry with themselves for falling for her tricks.

However, the suitors could not understand Penelope. Since they see her as merely a trophy to be won, a possession to be had, they cannot see her reluctance for what it is – a cry for time and patience. They see her tricks and cunning as an insult. They perceive her reluctance as an obstacle to be overcome, something to bully past. Since they no longer see her as a person, they cannot comprehend her reasoning. Possessions do not have feelings, hopes, dreams or fears. Trophies are not withheld due to an unresolved past. They are not ripped from the winners’ hands for such reasons. Trophies and possessions are inanimate – incapable of feelings. Since Penelope is a possession to the suitors, they see her like any other possession. Her reluctance is just another obstacle in their way; it is something they must fight past in order to win her. Penelope’s unreadiness is not an important factor to them. They do not care about her feelings. They are only able to see what she can bring to their names if they are successful. Since they cannot understand Penelope,

they do not understand her trickery for what it was. They do not see the pressure she feels by their presence and persistence.

Ultimately, Penelope manages to survive the suitors without completely making a choice. Odysseus arrives home, and – in typical hero fashion – saves the day. The suitors are killed, and everything is back to how it should be. Or so it seems. Penelope is not yet convinced Odysseus is who he says he is, and she devises a plan for discovering the truth. It has been so long since she last saw her husband, and his looks have vastly changed. He is older and more careworn. His body is not the body she remembers; his face is not the visage she had been longing to see. In a last moment of cunning, she gives him a test only he could know the answer to: the nature of their marriage bed.

In essence, Penelope's power comes from her own intelligence and cunning. Though the suitors do not realize it for themselves, Penelope is more than just a pretty face or a handsome prize. If she had not been more, Odysseus might have stayed with other immortal women who could easily outmatch Penelope's mortal beauty like Calypso and Circe. He did not, because Penelope was more than that to him; she held something they did not. Penelope's intellect enabled her to convince the suitors of whatever she wanted. She managed to keep them near while she decided her fate, and she found ways of appeasing their impatience. At each turn, she found solutions to her problems. Penelope was smart, and the suitors were gullible. They believed her incapable of tricks and treachery, because they did not really know Penelope. They saw only the prize to be won, not the woman herself. Penelope served her own interests. She kept her options open, but she preserved her own integrity in the process. Through her smarts, she managed to become one of the most famous women in Greek Literature as the faithful wife to Odysseus. Even though she

wanted to move on, and believed her husband was dead, she is still considered faithful because of the manner of her cunning tricks.

CHAPTER THREE

Antigone

The story of Antigone is a troublesome one for readers. The automatic instinct for the reader is to like Antigone and her daring character. Yet, when the reader reflects on her story and her reasoning, it becomes more difficult to appreciate her. She is full of contradictions and she tends to be difficult to fully understand without a comprehensive study.

In the beginning, Antigone seems brave and courageous. Her plight is one that most readers will sympathize with: she wants to bury her brother, but her king has passed an edict declaring her brother will not be buried by anyone for any reason. Her brother had been involved in traitorous actions against their city; he had raised an army to fight against his own homeland, and most of his family had fought or supported the other side. He fought against his own brother, and both were killed in the fight. One brother was given all the honors his actions accorded and a proper burial, but the traitorous brother was left lying in the field of battle for nature to devour on its own accord. The king, Creon, as punishment for the brother's actions, decided he would not receive any burial ceremony by anyone. The body was left lying where it fell.

Naturally, Antigone loved her brother despite his faults. She loved him even if he had tried to overthrow their city. He was still her brother regardless of his actions in life. As such, she could not stand for such mistreatment of his body to occur. She could not allow his body to be picked at by carrion birds or torn through by wild animals. She could not allow his sacred burial rite to go

undone. As her brother and a person she cared for, she wanted him to have what was required by the gods for him to have. Without a proper burial, he would not travel into the afterlife; he would remain like a ghost, unable to find rest in the Land of the Dead. His soul would wander Thebes without a purpose. Antigone could not stand for such a fate to await her brother, even if he had committed terrible acts against their city. Against Creon's decree, she decided to bury her brother. Though it could not be a proper burial with the correct ceremonies given to the occasion, she needed to give him some sort of burial in order to ensure his soul would be at rest. Something was better than nothing. For his burial, she was willing to risk everything. By going against Creon's decree, she put her own life at risk. Her wellbeing, her rank, her future marriage – she put everything on the line. She knew her chances of success were minimal and her chance of being caught was extremely high. Creon had placed guards around her brother's body in order to ensure his edict was carried through and obeyed. Yet, she still chooses to put herself at risk in favor of her brother's burial rite.

However, Antigone does not want to break Creon's rule alone. She first attempts to involve her sister, Ismene. She asks Ismene to assist in her efforts, but Ismene argues against the attempt entirely. Antigone believes her chances of success would be better if both of them were working together, and she also believes Ismene has as much of a right to bury their brother as she does herself. The two are sisters to their brother, and therefore, they should feel the same on the matter – or so Antigone believes. Despite Antigone's persuasions, Ismene holds fast in her decision to not help. Ismene fears there is not chance for Antigone to succeed, and to attempt it knowing how low the chance of success is would be the equivalent of suicide. She tries to persuade Antigone in turn of the recklessness of her plan, but Antigone is set in her ways. She is convinced in her reason-

ing, and she cannot see the logic behind her sister's words. Her stubbornness does not allow her to consider Ismene's advice as logical; she is incapable of being talked out of her decision. Antigone has made up her mind, and to her, it is final and immovable. She perceives Ismene's words as cowardly and weak – something a typical woman of their time would exhibit. Ismene is obedient to Creon, and for that, Antigone looks upon her scathingly. Antigone is so convinced in her own way of thinking, she cannot understand Ismene's lack of dedication to the cause. How can her own sister – her own flesh and blood – not share her enthusiasm for burying their brother? It is beyond Antigone's understanding; her stubborn nature has made her incapable of looking upon any criticism for her plan without immediately dismissing it.

In a sense, the two sisters are foils to each other; where Antigone is strong and resolute, Ismene is weak and docile. Ismene is unwilling to go against Creon in defense of their brother. She does not feel it is worth the risk to their lives to defend their brother's rights to burial. After all, he was a traitor to the city. He is the one who decided to go against Creon and their other brother. He is the one responsible for his predicament, and he knew perfectly well what he was risking for himself. Ismene cannot justify going against Creon's orders and risking herself for someone like her brother – someone who has committed crimes against the city – even if he is her brother. To her, it is her responsibility to herself and her city to remain obedient to Creon and his wishes. It does not matter that her heart wants to see her brother buried with the proper honors; obedience must come first. Antigone cannot understand Ismene's choice. She can only see it as cowardice and disloyalty to their shared brother. She cannot justify leaving her brother to be devoured by carrion feeders – unburied as though he was unloved. Because of her love for her brother, she cannot allow

him to remain unburied as Creon decrees. Despite the threat upon her life, she feels she must attempt to honor her brother properly and give him the closest thing to a burial that she can. Even if it must cost her life, she feels it is her duty as his sister to ensure he receives the proper rites – even if he was a traitor to her city.

Despite Ismene's recommendation, Antigone still follows through with her plan. Her stubborn nature will not allow her to do any less. Somehow, she manages to sneak her way past the guards surrounding her brother and give him a small ceremony and cover him in a thin sheet of dirt. Something is still better than nothing. Antigone gave her brother enough of a burial to put her conscience at ease, and she manages to do so without being caught in the process. Everything is well, until Creon discovers what has been done. In his rage, he threatens one of the soldiers who had been on duty. The soldier in turn concocts a plan to discover the culprit behind the quasi-burial. The brother is unearthened from his shallow grave, and his ceremonial decorations are removed. He is left in the same condition he had been before Antigone's efforts. The trap works; Antigone returns to the scene of the crime in an attempt to redo what the soldiers had undone, and she is caught in the act. The soldiers bring her to face Creon and answer for her crimes, but throughout the scene she does not exhibit any signs of remorse for her actions. Instead, she argues the morality of her actions, which serves to enrage Creon even more. Her stubborn nature would not allow her to acquiesce to Creon – even if it would have saved her. Her conviction in her correctness ensured she would not show Creon any respect for his position. Her stubbornness guaranteed her fate.

Yet, Antigone was not the only one to pay the price for her actions. Believing her to be involved as well, Creon brought Ismene to account for her own part in the burial. He could not believe Antigone – a mere woman

– had managed the feat alone, nor could he discount Ismene's highly emotional state. Ismene, when questioned, confessed to everything. She claimed to have helped Antigone – to have been her accomplice the whole time, and therefore, she asserted that she should be punished in the same manner as Antigone: death. Ismene could not bear to live alone. Her entire family was deceased at this time – everyone except Antigone. Antigone was the last remaining sibling and the last person who shared her blood. Antigone was Ismene's last remaining tie. Without Antigone, there would be nothing for Ismene to live for. For that reason, Ismene was willing to throw her own life away, to admit to a crime she had no part in and was actually opposed to. She wanted to die with her sister, and confessing to the crime was the best way for her to do so.

At this point, Antigone's character goes through a change. Upon Ismene's falsified confession, Antigone vehemently refutes her words. She refuses to allow Ismene any credit in her actions. This seems admirable at first: she does not want her sister to be put to death for a crime she had no part in and cannot bear to see her die as well. Yet, Antigone is too outraged at the insinuation that Ismene may have helped her in any form. She refuses to allow Ismene any of the credit – even the idea cannot be accredited to her sister. Granted, Ismene did not have any part in the act, but the way Antigone is protesting against her possible involvement seems more than a mere protection of the truth or her sister's life. In a way, it seems like Antigone cannot stand for anyone else to take the credit for her actions. She cannot stand for someone else to receive the glory that ought rightfully to be hers. *She* was the one who was dedicated enough to her brother to risk everything for him. *She* was the one who did it not once, but twice. *She* was the one who loved her brother enough to ensure he received what was due to him, heedless of her own fate. Antigone's opposition to her sister's claim

stems not from a desire to protect her, but from a desire for greatness. She wants to be remembered for her actions, for standing up to Creon's tyrannical edict. She wants to be the only one who gains that title; Ismene can have no part in it.

Of course, Antigone's desire to bury her brother did not start off as a search for glory. In the beginning, her intentions were without any selfish thought. She was willing to include Ismene in the attempt. If it had been for the glory of standing up to Creon, why would she have offered Ismene a part? In the beginning, her intentions were pure: she wanted to bury her brother to ensure his soul could rest in peace, a fate most sisters would wish for their beloved brother. She did not care about anything else except honoring her brother. She was a simple sister attempting to simply bury her dead brother.

Yet, as soon as Ismene begins to question her motives, Antigone's story begins to change. She tells Ismene she must do the deed because the gods have dictated that is what must be done. In honoring the gods, she must bury her brother in the proper manner. Their sacred decrees have long been established on the subject. This is the same line she gives to Creon. At this point, she claims the gods are her reason why. Their edict must be followed, and it was her duty to ensure it was followed. Her own life was forfeit in the face of the edict. She claims loyalty to the gods should be more important to her and to others than their loyalty to Creon. After all, death is eternal, and life is temporary. She will meet her death eventually, whether it be by Creon's hand or by old age. She cannot live forever – no one can. She will face death one day, and then she will forever live amongst the dead and the gods. In her afterlife, Creon's punishment for her will not matter, but the gods' punishments will haunt her afterlife for eternity. Since her afterlife amongst the gods will be eternal, she feels it is her responsibility to obey their edicts. They are the superior force. They are

the ones that should determine her actions, not Creon. Creon is a mere king; they are gods. Creon's punishment can only last while she lives, but the gods' gratification will last for eternity. Of the two, Antigone believes the gods' decree bears more weight. They are more powerful; they can reach her no matter what state she is in, dead or alive.

However, as convinced as Antigone seems in believing her actions were for the gods' gratification, her story changes soon enough. When Creon has dictated her sentence, she states that she would not have committed the crime had she possessed another brother or the possibility of a brother being born. Her mother and father were both deceased, and both brothers had now joined them in death. There was no possibility of another brother being created, nor was there another family member who was worth such a threat to her life. Ismene still lived, but she was a mere sister, unimportant in Antigone's eyes. All of her family was dead to her, leaving her behind. Because he was her last remaining relative of importance, Antigone felt she must ensure he was properly tended. He was the very last. He was the only reason left for her to exist. To her, he was everything. He was the last thing worthwhile in her life that she would have been willing to risk her life for. Of course, even as she makes this claim, she still says it was for the gods. Their laws are inviolable, and their laws dictated her brother be buried against Creon's wishes.

As admirable as Antigone's love for her brother is, she seems to disregard others still living who are close to her. Ismene is cast off as soon as she advises Antigone against her course of action. Her only sister is immediately unimportant in her eyes, and everything Ismene says from that point on falls on stubbornly-deaf ears. Antigone cannot see her reason, so she disregards Ismene. Even Haemon – her future husband – is cast off. Antigone does not mention Haemon. He is not her first concern. He is not a consideration when she decides to bury her

brother. Her sister is; she offers her a part in the task, thinking Ismene would want to help in the internment of their remaining brother. Yet, when Ismene says no and advises Antigone against her intended task, that is the last consideration Antigone gives for her sister. She does not consider how her actions will affect Ismene; she writes Ismene off, almost seeming to think she is no longer a member of her family. However, Ismene still receives some consideration from her sister; she is entrusted with knowledge of the task itself. Haemon is not even given that. He is not trusted with the knowledge of her plans. He is not trusted to help her. She does not tell him anything, and she does not consider how her actions will impact his life. If she is caught, Creon will sentence her to death for treasonous actions – she knows as much. Haemon will be forced to watch her sentencing, and he will be powerless to help her. He will be unable to do anything for her except stand and watch as she is put to death. He won't be able to rescue her or do anything to affect the outcome. He will have no choice but to watch her death, and after her death he will have no recourse except to hate his father for his ruling, and to hate her for her actions. Their future will be severed, and she could not even give him the benefit of a warning. She could not be bothered to tell him her plans.

In a way, not telling him might be protecting him. Ismene was brought in for questioning simply because it was suspected she knew of Antigone's plan by virtue of being her sister. By not telling Haemon, she might have been protecting him from his father's wrath. However, it seems unlikely Creon would have sentenced his son to death; as many as Creon's faults are, he does care for his son. Even so, Antigone doesn't mention Haemon at all. He is not mentioned until her sentencing. Ismene protests against Creon's decision for Antigone's fate by asking him to consider his son's wishes. At

this point, Antigone cries out for Haemon. Before then, his name had not even crossed her lips. He was not a consideration for her until Ismene had brought him up. After the sentencing, she spends more time weeping over what could have been with Haemon, their marriage and their future together – but she does not seem to regret her choices. She does not surrender to Creon and beg his mercy. Her stubborn nature will not allow her to give in and admit she might have acted rashly – even to preserve her own life. As much as she weeps for what might have been in her lifetime, she still holds her brother's burial as more important. His burial takes precedence, even over her love for Haemon.

At the same time, Antigone admits she wishes to live. She wants to go on and have the life she had planned for herself. She wants to marry Haemon. She wants to live to a ripe age, and she wants to die at the time fated for her. She wants all of that for herself, but she is unwilling to do the one thing that might save her. If she would only ask Creon for forgiveness, she might be pardoned. To do so, she would merely have to renounce her previous stance. She would have to agree with his edict; she would have to declare her brother a traitor who is unworthy of burial. She would have to surrender everything she had stood for, which seems simple enough. She could live, and she could enjoy her life to its full potential. Yet, as tempting as that thought might have been for Antigone, she could not go through with it. She could not forsake her brother or her stance. She could not allow Creon to win – to see his smug face as her brother's body was being desecrated. Her stance was too important, and her mind was long since made up. As much as she regretted the life she was leaving, she did not and would not regret her choices that led her to this point. She felt she was in the right, and the gods were on her side.

In the end, Antigone won her battle with Creon. Creon eventually realized the

mistake he had made, and the cost his actions would wreck upon him. He gave in to pressure, and he was going to release Antigone from her sentence. He was going to surrender his will to hers; she would have been granted leniency without her having to pay any respect to him or his wishes. She would have won. Yet, before Creon could free her, Antigone had already committed an irreversible and often unforgivable act. She had committed suicide. She had killed herself to avoid the more painful death Creon had sentenced upon her. Joining her family in death, she had given the last thing she had left: her life. She had nothing else to live for anymore; only a painful death awaited her in life.

However, even Antigone's death was calculated on her part. Prior to killing herself, she was being tempted to give in. She was reminded of the life she could have been living – the life where she would grow old with Haemon and die at the age fate had decreed for her. She wanted that life, and she would have had it. She was tempted to give in, even if it meant her brother was not honored properly and Creon won. Submission was beginning to taint her thoughts. Her conviction was faltering, but her stubborn nature would not allow the possibility of failure. She could not allow herself to do the unforgivable, to give in to Creon and accept his rule as law. Antigone needed to have the final say on the matter, and the best way to ensure that was the case would be to guarantee she could not repent. She needed to maintain her stance. The only way to know for sure that she would not submit was to give herself to death. In death, she could say nothing. A dead woman does not pine for the life she might have had; a dead woman does not surrender for the sake of her future marriage. A dead woman has no life, no marriage, and nothing to give in to. Antigone kills herself to eliminate the one danger she posed to her purpose. She removed the possibility for her to let go of her brother and her conviction.

From the moment she first decided to go against Creon's order, Antigone had known death would come. She knew the consequences of her intended actions would come in being sentenced to death. Death was never a question to her, and she had always known it was going to happen. While she tried to accept death as the only fate available to her, she was still tempted by the possibilities her life held. She told herself death would come eventually – whether it was today or in fifty years was merely a question of time. The end would be the same regardless. Death was never something to be doubted. When her mind began to falter in its conviction, her decision was easy: confront the certainty head-on. Surrender herself to the gods for judgment. Live on in the afterlife with her family. Her final decision was the final test of her conviction. It was never a question of whether she would die. The question was in whether she would die on her own terms, or on Creon's terms. By killing herself, she ensured no one could dictate her death. Even Creon could not control her demise. He sentenced her, but his sentence was not the one she received. She took one last piece of power from Creon when she died. She took his power over her death and threw it away. He could not dictate her death to her. She would not surrender to him, and she would not allow his version to be the final word on the matter. She would not live to a ripe age for appeasing him, nor would she die at his command. She would die when she chose to die – no one could take that from her. Creon would not win, and she would forever be the woman who stood against him.

At first glance, Antigone is everything a heroine should be. She is brave enough to defy her king at the risk of her life – something no man would dare. Even Creon cannot believe a woman is capable of what she has accomplished. She is uncompromising in her conviction and certainty. She knows what is right, and she is willing to stand up for it. She does not follow the typical

feminine characteristics. She does not bow her head when men walk by, nor does she let them have whatever they want. She knows kings and men are not the most powerful beings on earth, and she is not afraid to put them in their place. Between her strength, her daring, and her conviction, she has everything she needs to be a proper hero in her story.

Yet, she also has faults. She is unable to consider other arguments besides her own. She is unwilling give Creon the respect that might save her life. She cannot temper herself when speaking to him. She gives in to her stubborn nature, allowing it to rule her in every aspect. She casts aside the people who love her, and she ignores how her actions will affect them. Antigone is powerful in her convictions – she will do anything for what she believes is right. But she is weak in her obstinance. Because of her obstinance, she forsakes the characteristics that are not considered heroic. She forsakes everything besides her goal.

Even in the eyes of the text, Antigone is complicated. The text wants to view Antigone as a heroine, a sort of Joan of Arc in Greek times. It praises her for her outstanding courage and conviction. Repeatedly, it is pointed out that no “man” would ever dare to go against Creon in the way Antigone has. A “man” would have faltered at the first thought of going against Creon’s edict. No one else is willing to do as Antigone has – even though they know it is what is right. Though for different reasons, almost everyone wants the brother buried. They want him in the ground where his memory cannot haunt them anymore, where he can no longer create strife in their home. Yet, Antigone is the only person brave enough to risk her wellbeing. Everyone else bows their heads in submission. They might mumble a few words of caution outside of Creon’s hearing, but not one person openly tells Creon he is in the wrong. No one except Antigone risks his ire. Even Tiresias does not

openly tell Creon his opinion on the matter; he toes the line, trying to get Creon to see reason, but even he cannot openly condemn Creon’s edict. Everyone knows the brother ought, by rights, be buried. He cannot be left in the field for ravaging animals to feed on. However, they are unwilling to risk their lives for someone else’s burial rights. The right actions are not worth their lives. Only Antigone is brave enough to defy Creon.

From Antigone’s decision to bury her brother, she obtains a certain amount of glory to her name. She has chosen to defy Creon when no one else would, in order to do what was right in the eyes of the gods and society. In itself, that gives her glory. She accomplished something no man could or would do; she defied her king at the risk of her life. From that, she is bound to receive glory in the eyes of the city. She will be renowned for her actions; no one can subtract from her in this way. Since she receives this glory for burying her brother, the text does not condemn it. Burying her brother is good, therefore the receiving of glory for the burial is equally good.

Yet, once Antigone begins to actively pursue glory, she does things which cannot be agreed with. After Ismene turns down the offer to join Antigone’s plight, Antigone casts her off. She says it is all the better, since then she will be the only one who receives credit – who receives the awe of the city and the resultant glory. Antigone becomes fanatical in her hunt for glory. If Ismene will not join her in the burial, then who cares? Antigone will then be the only name to go down in history. Antigone will be the name associated with defying a king. Her name will be the one children whisper about and try to imitate. She will give little girls throughout the city incentive. She will be glorified; her name will be remembered forevermore. Ismene’s name will fade into history – unimportant and unremembered. Antigone ceases to consider Ismene after that point. She casts her off,

which is problematic to the text. The search for glory in itself is not problematic, but the fanatical way in which Antigone goes about it is. From the point Ismene goes against Antigone's reasoning, Antigone's search for glory turns into something else – something far less admirable. She becomes obsessed with the glory she will receive and begins to do whatever it will take to bring more glory to her name. She stands up against Creon, refusing to offer any form of obeisance to him. She takes risks in her speech and actions. At this point, the text can no longer look at her search for glory as a positive. It becomes reckless, and borderline greedy.

Of course, Ismene is not the only person Antigone leaves behind; she also abandons Haemon – an action equally condemned by the text. Antigone did not tell Haemon her plans; she did not include him in the slightest. She did not consider how her actions would affect him, nor did she consider what her actions would entail for their future together. She acted on impulse, without any consideration for her future husband. If she chose not to tell Haemon in order to protect him, then the text would understand; it would perhaps even agree with her decision. Yet, Antigone did not consider Haemon at all. It is not until after her actions and their consequences have been made clear that Antigone begins to consider Haemon. She neglected him in her thoughts; she prioritized her own search for glory above their relationship. She did not go to him; she allowed him to be blindsided by the accusations against her. She left him in the dark. He was a casualty of her actions, yet she gave no thought to him whatsoever. The text frowns upon Antigone's secretiveness.

At the same time, though Antigone's conviction in burying her brother is deemed good, the text cannot concur with each aspect of her reasoning. At first, it is because she loves her brother, and then she says she is burying her brother because the gods have decreed burials must take place. This is a

decent reasoning to the text. The gods' rules must be followed, and their rules should supersede Creon's edict – no one can argue with that. Yet, Antigone changes her reasoning multiple times, which seems to indicate even she is not sure why she has chosen to bury her brother. Ultimately, she settles on the glory of the action, but then she changes it again. She says she would not have done so if another family member had existed. For this reasoning, the text cannot agree with her. The text accepts the other reasons. It can appreciate the love of her brother. Likewise, it agrees with the argument for the gods and even the one for glory. Yet, by saying she would not have done so if circumstances had been different, Antigone has placed conditions on her actions – conditions the text cannot sanction. By giving this argument, Antigone is basically saying she did not want to bury her brother, but circumstances forced her into it. If the slightest circumstance had been different, she would not have done so. She would not have defied Creon at the risk of her life; she would have bowed down like the rest of the city, letting his tyrannical edict stand and letting her dead brother's body rot and feed the wildlife around the city. She would have allowed the wrong to persist. Granted, at the time she gives this argument, she has been sentenced to death, and her mind is wandering through the life she might have lived – the life she wanted to live. She is regretting her actions and their consequences, and she is trying to justify herself in a way that cannot be escaped from. While the text understands Antigone's feelings and her desire for life, it does not agree with her regret or her justification. Why should she regret something that was good? She did the right thing; that should be justification enough. Her desire for a life is understandable, but she should not be trying to get around the reasons she ultimately decided to do it. She should not feel the need to justify her actions in any other way than had already been done. The text approves of her initial reasoning, but it

cannot get behind the argument based on circumstances. Circumstances should not determine her actions; right and wrong should.

Finally, the issue of Antigone's suicide is difficult. Suicide is rarely ever looked upon as a good decision in present-day society; it tends to be a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Yet, in Antigone's situation, suicide seems to be a logical decision on her part. She had no reason to suspect she would escape the painful death she had been sentenced to. She could not have known Creon would repent of his harsh treatment. She did not know he was on his way to release her. She knew only what she had been sentenced to: a painful death from days of starvation.

In the end, Antigone is a powerful woman because of her unbending nature. She is convinced in her reasoning, and she will not be swayed by anything. The law, the king, her sister – none of it can convince her to go against her beliefs. Although she places conditions on her usage of her power, she is nonetheless powerful because of her bravery and conviction.

CHAPTER FOUR

Phaedra

Phaedra is a complicated woman to consider. She does not present strength in the same manner as Penelope or Antigone, but she also does not face the same challenges. Phaedra's challenge is not man-made. She is not fighting against a tyrannical king, nor is she trying to preserve her own desires in the oppressive face of men and their wants. Phaedra has been cursed by the gods themselves; she is challenged by the gods' own directives.

Phaedra's step-son, Hippolytus, had managed to personally annoy the goddess Aphrodite. He had sworn off love, declaring Aphrodite and her arts were useless to him.

He slighted her, and she did not take the offense well. Indeed, Aphrodite choose to exact revenge against Hippolytus; she made Phaedra – the woman married to his father – fall in love with him. Poor Phaedra is the victim in the situation, a mere innocent used for Aphrodite's personal vendetta. She was unwittingly used by Aphrodite to exact revenge against her step-son. She was used as a weapon to hurt Hippolytus, but Aphrodite did not care about Phaedra or how her actions would affect Phaedra's life. Phaedra was merely a tool in Aphrodite's arsenal, a means to an end.

Phaedra does not understand her predicament. She is unaware of why she has been made to feel an inappropriate love towards her step-son. She does not know it is a part of Aphrodite's revenge against Hippolytus. Phaedra does not know why, but that does not really concern her either. She knows her feelings are wrong, and she feels defeated by them. Her lust is too powerful for her, but she refuses to give in to it. Rather than follow her emotions, Phaedra decides it would be best for her to cease existing all together. She would rather die than commit such a wrong. It is at this point the reader first encounters her. She is weak from days of starvation and ill from days of weeping for her fate. She has begun to hallucinate like a madwoman as a result of the extreme fast she has chosen for her death. Her nurse and other women close to her are concerned for her wellbeing and pester her to understand what is wrong with her. Knowing these women only want what is best for her, Phaedra relents to their questions and gives them the answer: she is in love with Hippolytus, and therefore must die in order to preserve her dignity.

At first, the women respond with horror – the same horror Phaedra herself feels about the situation. After hearing her predicament, each woman utters her own desire to die, as though Phaedra's confession was so unbearable for them that they could not even

continue on with their own lives. Their love for Phaedra does not color their views. Her confession is terrible, and they cannot see a way around it. They cannot imagine a solution to such a problem, and they cannot blame her for her own decision. Even Phaedra's nurse – the woman who has been with her for years – cannot contain her feelings.

Of course, Phaedra does not blame them for their harsh words; she herself is thinking the same thoughts. She tells them how she has struggled with her curse, how she had fought it for as long as she could before finally deciding to end her life and preserve her virtuous nature rather than give in to the shameful lust. Phaedra explains to the nurse and chorus that, as a woman, she was even more susceptible to shame than a man and therefore must be extremely diligent in protecting her name from such accusations. She blames the first woman who ever slept outside her marriage bed – shaming herself in the process – for the susceptibility that future generations like Phaedra would face. Ever since that one woman gave in to her lust, forsaking her marriage vows and giving in to temptation, women have seen it as an acceptable thing to do. They toss aside their virtue for a passing fancy, a pretty face and muscular body, and they do it without a thought for what it means for their own name and honor. Phaedra blames such women for the harsh name they have foisted upon other women who are not as flagrant with their bodies. Because of these women, Phaedra cannot even give voice to her predicament. She would be labeled as just another young woman who could not remain faithful to her husband. She would be called those terrible names given to women who fall into bed with other men far too easily. Phaedra refuses to allow her name to be sullied by such accusations – especially when they are not true. She refuses to become the kind of woman she despises. It is for the sake of her virtue and her good name that she must kill herself. She must preserve the dignity of her husband and

children; her secret curse must never be known outside of the trusted circle of chorus and nurse.

However, given time, the nurse eventually reaches the decision that she judged too quickly. She says her initial shock made her thought processes too shallow, and upon second thought, she realized the situation was not as bad as it first seems. People fall in love all the time, and a person cannot be persecuted for having fallen in love. Being in love is nothing unusual, and it is definitely not worth killing oneself over. Loving is normal for humans – and gods as well. Aphrodite casts her spell on whomever she pleases without regard to their wishes. The nurse assures Phaedra that her husband will not judge her for her feelings. He will look the other way, choosing to love her in spite of her strange desires. The nurse assures Phaedra everything will turn out fine. She tells her that as long as she is mostly good, one wrong act will hardly impugn her precious reputation.

Yet, even though the nurse says she has had a change of heart, it does not seem quite true. Throughout her reasoning, the nurse does not mention the relationship already existing between Phaedra and Hippolytus. She looks at them as two separate entities who are completely unrelated. She does not consider the issue of Phaedra being Hippolytus's step-mother, or that the relationship might be considered wrong from a familial standpoint. Though the relationship would not be entirely incestuous since the two are not blood relatives, it is also not an accepted relationship according to society's dictates. The nurse ignores that issue altogether, choosing to follow the more easily argued path. In a way, it seems as though the nurse knows she could not win an argument against society's norm, so she chooses to ignore it as though it was not an issue at all. At the same time, the nurse's argument is tilted in Phaedra's favor. She does not want Phaedra to kill herself, and the only way to ensure she does not follow through with her

chosen path is to accept her feelings as normal and understandable. Phaedra wants to die because she believes her desires are evil and deserve to be condemned as such. If she were to believe otherwise – that her feelings are actually quite normal and no one can judge her for them – she might be persuaded to continue on with her life. Loving Phaedra, the nurse does not want her to die, so her only choice is to accept the relationship and convince Phaedra of its acceptability.

Unfortunately, Phaedra's trust in her nurse does not do her any favors. Phaedra knows her nurse cares for her and only wants what is best for her, but she does not comprehend how far the nurse's loyalty goes. The nurse has been Phaedra's companion for years. Her care for Phaedra extends further than the usual care between servant and mistress. She knows Phaedra – perhaps even better than Phaedra knows herself. The nurse tells Phaedra that she knows a cure for Phaedra's illness, and she promises to retrieve it for her. Phaedra finds relief in the nurse's promise, and she allows the nurse to leave, after obtaining a promise from her that she will not tell Hippolytus about her affliction. The nurse promises, but she never intends to follow her word.

Knowing full well there is no cure for Phaedra's affliction, the nurse has no intention of honoring the promise she made. She leaves Phaedra, fully intending to find Hippolytus and make him give in to Phaedra. She is convinced this is the best way to solve her mistress's suicidal tendencies. Besides, Phaedra is far from lucid; she cannot possibly know what it is she has asked the nurse to do. The nurse cannot allow her mistress to die, especially over something so trivial as lust for a man. Why should Phaedra not commit the act she so desperately wants? The nurse does not agree with Phaedra's decision that death is better than giving in. She believes Phaedra could not be faulted if she were to sleep with Hippolytus. Indeed, sleeping with Hippolytus

is the best solution; Phaedra would remain alive, and her lust would likely be sated. As to Hippolytus, surely he would understand the need for such actions. Surely he would not condemn his step-mother for feelings beyond her control.

In a way, the nurse was fooling herself even as she had fooled Phaedra. She had told Phaedra the relationship between Hippolytus and Phaedra would be no different than a relationship between a man and woman who had no ties to each other. Somehow, the nurse managed to convince herself of the same thing. She managed to tell herself the relationship would be seen as acceptable and understood as an act of the gods. She believed Hippolytus could be made to see it in the same way.

Of course, Hippolytus proves to be quite uncooperative with the nurse's plan. Once she has asked him to submit to his step-mother's wiles, he slings insults at the nurse and Phaedra. He calls the nurse a facilitator of sin and Phaedra an incestuous adulteress. He is none too kind in his words and quite adamant in his refusal. The mere suggestion of bedding his father's wife sends him into a sexist tirade against all women. He claims the only good woman to have as a wife is one who is too stupid for conniving tricks or too simple to engage in Aphrodite's games. A woman with intelligence is a curse upon whomever marries her, a constant burden with very little profit involved for the man.

Naturally, Hippolytus's opinion is not unexpected. Though the nurse and even Phaedra had fooled themselves into believing he might see "reason," the reader never anticipates Hippolytus being a willing participant in their scheme. From the very beginning Hippolytus has made his opinion on women and Aphrodite plain: he despises them. He sees no need for them. Even Aphrodite had said he would never give in to Phaedra's desires, which would only serve to further her end goal – his ultimate destruction. Of

course, even if he did not have his previous prejudices against women, he would still not have considered the act. They were asking him to betray his father, to spoil his father's marriage. He had no love for Phaedra; Phaedra was merely the woman who married his father. Phaedra was competition for his father's attention and love. She meant very little to Hippolytus otherwise. He did not need her as a mother figure, nor did he care to have a relationship with her as a person. His love for his father would trump any sympathy he might have had for Phaedra. The thought of betraying his father for Phaedra was inconceivable to him. He did not bear the same love for Phaedra that the nurse did, which is what had made her able to look past the unacceptable nature of Phaedra's desires.

Sadly, Phaedra did not anticipate Hippolytus's abject rejection of her advances – or rather, of the nurse's request. Though Phaedra asked the nurse not to tell Hippolytus, when she overheard the conversation between the two, she found herself feeling a strange sense of jealous rage. Hippolytus was effectually turning her down. He was refusing her advances – even though she was not the one making the advances. He basically said she was not good enough for him. Even though Phaedra had never intended Hippolytus to discover her feelings, and she had never intended to act on them, it still hurt her to be so completely dismissed – especially in such a harsh manner. Hippolytus had not merely said, “No, thank you.” He had torn into her, calling her horrible names and he had every intention of trying to destroy her. Though she never intended for him to know, once he did, she had not expected such a harsh rebuttal without the slightest bit of compassion. Hippolytus did not care in the slightest for her or for her sensitive feelings. Being so roundly dismissed hurt Phaedra's feelings.

Of course, Phaedra knew Hippolytus's stance on Aphrodite, and his favoritism of Artemis, the chaste goddess. She knew

he had sworn off love and vowed to serve only Artemis as his mistress; she knew he did not desire a mortal woman for his companion, let alone his wife. Yet, when the prospect of Phaedra's attentions was so cruelly rejected by him, Phaedra found herself in a fit of jealousy. Hippolytus was dismissing her because of his love for Artemis. She was being rejected in favor of another woman. Like the nurse, Phaedra did not consider her relationship with Hippolytus as his stepmother to be a barrier at this point. Though she had previously considered it the ultimate sin for her to have such feelings for her stepson, now she felt jealous because he did not feel the same way. She has completely reversed from her original stance. Instead of thinking the relationship unfathomable, it is now reasonable to her. Though Hippolytus's reaction is very similar to her own initial response, she still faults him for it. She is still jealous of his affection for Artemis and hurt by his rejection. The two feelings combine in a rather lethal manner, and Phaedra launches herself into the dark path of revenge.

Of course, Phaedra does not actively consider her chosen path as revenge. She believes her actions are designed to preserve what has been most important to her all along: her honor. She wants to protect her reputation as a virtuous woman who would never commit a wrong. Through protecting her own reputation, she protects her children. Hippolytus has sworn to go to his father with Phaedra's betrayal, in which case Phaedra would be disgraced. She might live, but she would have nothing to live for. Her children would be in disgrace with her, and they would be looked upon with disgust by their own household. Hippolytus could not be allowed to spread his story.

So, Phaedra devises a plan to ensure her own wishes are met. She will cast the shame on Hippolytus, preserving herself in the process. She decides to kill herself and leave a note for her husband to find. The note will explain for him how his own son had

stolen the virtue of his wife, betraying his father in the process. It will tell him how she could not go on with her virtue in such a tattered state, and how she must kill herself in order to preserve what little remains of her dignity. With that decided, Phaedra hangs herself from a noose, certain her plot will unravel as it should. When her husband, Theseus, arrives home, the house is bustling; Phaedra had just been found hanging from the rafters. What should have been a happy moment for the family instantly turned sour by the matriarch's death.

Naturally, Theseus is unaware of what he has walked into, and none of the people who know the situation at hand are able to tell him due to the promises they have made. Of course, he does not search for their answers; once he finds the note Phaedra left condemning his son, he knows it must be true. Why would Phaedra lie about such a thing? Why else would she throw away her life – the most precious thing she had to give? He did not question the validity of Phaedra's writing. Instead, he instantly casts his son off. He blames Hippolytus for Phaedra's death, condemning him for his alleged actions. Hippolytus has betrayed his own father. He claims to be so virtuous – above the earthly desires of man, and in full control of himself – yet he has committed a most heinous act against his father's wife, thereby soiling his entire family, as well as his supposed virtue. Hippolytus is not given a chance to explain himself; though he tried to pacify him, his father's rage was fueled by grief and would not have allowed him to be reasoned with. Hippolytus's words fell on deaf ears. Theseus was closed to his son as soon as the note was found and read. In fact, Theseus was so closed to his son that he cursed him with the harshest curse he could imagine; he banished him to wander for forevermore, a fate he imagined worse than death. Of course, Theseus does eventually discover the truth, but by then it is too late. His curse killed his

son; his fit of rage ensured his son would meet the end Aphrodite intended. Everything ends in the manner Aphrodite had planned from the beginning.

To the text, *Hippolytus* is quite confusing; the characters involved are full of contradictory tendencies, and none of them are truly good. In the beginning, Phaedra is an innocent victim trying to make the best of a bad situation. She has been cursed by Aphrodite, and nothing could be done to appease her predicament. Phaedra's decision to kill herself by starvation is perhaps not the best solution, but it is a solution nonetheless. Death would preserve Phaedra's virtue as well as Hippolytus's. It would ensure everything remained positive. However, Aphrodite is cunning, and her curse does not allow for Phaedra's death. Phaedra must play the part allotted to her, whether she wants to or not.

For the beginning portion of the play, Phaedra cannot be faulted. She is a victim, a mere toy in Aphrodite's game. She cannot control her feelings, and she does the best she can to hide them from view. She is trying to overcome her affliction, but knowing she cannot fight a goddess, she has chosen to die instead of submitting. Phaedra knows her affliction is fundamentally wrong; she knows she cannot have lustful feelings towards her step-son, and she especially cannot act on those feelings. There is too much at stake if she were to follow her desires and sleep with Hippolytus. She would lose her reputation as an honorable woman full of virtue, and her children would also suffer the consequences. She would become another lonely housewife whose desires were allowed to run rampant. She would become the worst kind of woman in her mind – the kind who does not care for their reputation and those of their family. Dying in silence would ensure she never warranted such a reputation.

However, Phaedra was surrounded by women who cared about her, particularly her nurse. Her nurse had been with her for years,

and naturally, carried a special kind of bond with Phaedra. To see her mistress wasting away into insanity was too much for the nurse to bear; she tried to intervene. Phaedra – in a fit of hallucinations – eventually spilled the beans to her nurse, telling her horrid secret and hoping the nurse would understand her need to die. Unfortunately, the moment Phaedra told her secret, Aphrodite's plan was put into motion. The nurse, initially horrified, found a solution for her mistress that did not involve death; she decided it was best for Phaedra to give in. Phaedra, of course, was not so fond of the new idea, and she blatantly told the nurse not to follow her new thoughts.

Again, the text does not fault the nurse or Phaedra in this respect. Though Phaedra's confession is the first domino to fall in her downward spiral, she cannot be blamed for doing so. She told someone close to her, and she did so in a fit of insanity brought on by her starvation. Her starvation was intended to keep the silence, and though it failed, her confession was still a part of that intention. The text understands Phaedra did not mean to tell the nurse, but her chosen method of death came with that consequence. It also understands the nurse is not the worst person for her to tell. The nurse loves and cares for her, and she would never do anything to harm Phaedra. Out of all the people Phaedra could have told, the nurse is by far the best option. As for the nurse's response, she cannot be faulted either. Her initial horror is the response anyone would have to Phaedra's confession; even the chorus expressed horror when they heard. Though she should have contained herself better and not let Phaedra see her feelings, she was in a state of shock at the time and that too can be excused.

Yet, the nurse's secondary thoughts are different. When she tells Phaedra to give in, she is doing so out of love for Phaedra, which cannot be considered negatively. However, the reasoning the nurse gives is flawed. She intentionally does not consider the preexisting relationship between Phaedra

and Hippolytus; she blocks it from her analysis of the situation, because she knows she could not convince Phaedra by arguing the point. Instead, she argues the easier point: love strikes whomever it pleases. The text understands why the nurse is arguing for Phaedra to give in; she loves Phaedra and wants to see her well, regardless of what that entails. Yet, understanding does not mean agreeing. The nurse may have been spurred on by love for Phaedra, but her method for saving Phaedra was not agreeable. She knew it was wrong. She knew it was not what Phaedra wanted, or even what was best for those involved. She knew the relationship should not be encouraged, but she still did it. She let her personal feelings get in the way of what was right. The nurse loved Phaedra, and she believed that would justify whatever means she took to ensure Phaedra's safety.

From there, the nurse committed another disagreeable act. She went to Hippolytus against Phaedra's express wishes. Again, the nurse had the best of intentions, but she was still in the wrong. Phaedra wanted her secret kept. She wanted to preserve her dignity, and she did not care what it would cost her to do so. The nurse disagreed with that assessment; life should not be second to dignity in her book. Of course, that was not her decision to make. Behind Phaedra's back, she went to Hippolytus and revealed the secret that was not hers to give. She betrayed Phaedra's trust, and that betrayal would cost Phaedra. Hippolytus responded with rage at the mere insinuation of the possibility of a relationship between him and his stepmother. He lashed out, and he made threats. Phaedra heard the threats, and they would spawn a new path for Phaedra's death. The nurse may have had good intentions, but she made it worse. The text understands her reasoning, but it does not believe she followed the right path. Because of the nurse's decision, the play's ending took a much darker turn than it might otherwise have done.

Until this point, Phaedra has been in the clear. The text sympathizes with her, and it cannot rightfully blame her for feelings she cannot control. She is not the one responsible for her feelings; Aphrodite is. She has resolved not to act on her impulses, which can be regarded as admirable and courageous. Her will has proven quite powerful.

However, once she hears Hippolytus's rejection, Phaedra turns. She is no longer innocent, and she chooses to go down a path of revenge. She takes Hippolytus's rejection badly – like a jealous lover whose found him cheating with another woman. Although she herself said the relationship between them would go against nature, she still held out a hope – brought on by her love for him – that he might be made to feel the same way and agree to the nurse's plan. She knew his response would not be positive, and she had fully expected him to turn her down. Yet, actually being turned down is something entirely different. It confirmed the worst: he did not love her. He loved another and would remain faithful to that one woman. Artemis was the only woman for him. Phaedra could not and would not compare. Phaedra knew his response before he gave it, but it still hurt her. She still felt betrayed and unloved. Knowing did not ease the pain when it happened. Even at this, the text can sympathize with her. She had been hurt; Hippolytus had been unnaturally cruel in his rejection.

Unfortunately, Phaedra's response to being hurt is what causes the text to reject her. She decides to kill herself and blame it on Hippolytus's misuse of her. She writes a suicide note, in which she accuses him of taking advantage of her. The plan is twofold. Hippolytus will be cast out and ostracized from his father; his threats will cease to bear fruit since no one will ever believe his tale. She will be avenged for the hurt he caused her, and her children will be safe from whatever harm he might have caused in ruining her reputation. Everything will work out. Ex-

cept, Phaedra's note does more than preserve herself. She creates a rift between Theseus and Hippolytus – father and son. She tears them apart with her lies, and she is ultimately the cause of Hippolytus's death. The text can no longer support Phaedra at this point. She has gone too far. She has sought revenge for her wounded pride, even though it had been hurt in exactly the manner she predicted it would. She has torn apart her family, severing father and son for forever. She has impugned Hippolytus's spotless record, merely because he did not desire her. The text wants Phaedra to be good, but even the text cannot blind itself to the truth. No one in this play comes out smelling like a rose. Each one makes mistakes—even Phaedra.

Phaedra's power comes from a sense of duty and her will. She has the willpower to do whatever is necessary to preserve her own virtue, which she regards as her duty to protect. Phaedra's virtue is everything to her. She despises women who are careless with their virtue and disrespect their husbands, and she is determined not to be one. By protecting her virtue from insult, she guarantees her children's futures. To ensure she never becomes one, when Aphrodite casts her curse, Phaedra fights it with everything she has. Her resolution will not bend; she will not give in to the impulses she is feeling. She believes it is necessary to die, so she decides to withstand the pain of starvation – the only way to end it without soiling her reputation with suicide or giving in. Once her secret is out, her duty remains the same: protect her family. To do so, she must discredit Hippolytus. Being resolute, she follows her suicide plan and blames her actions on Hippolytus, which protects her children from harmful rumors about their mother's infidelity. Duty and the will to do what is necessary is what enabled Phaedra to preserve her virtue and reputation.

CHAPTER FIVE

Medea

When the play first begins, Medea is lamenting her situation. After many happy years together, her husband Jason has decided to leave her for another woman. They had been quite content together, and they had shared several adventures in their relationship. They created two children and established a home that – while not extravagant – was enough to meet their humble needs. Everything had been going well, or so Medea thought. They were happy, had everything they could need, and their home was full of love. Yet, at the start of the play, Jason has come to Medea to inform her that he will be remarrying the local princess. He claims it is not for a lack of love, or any actual desire for this new woman, but from his wish to ensure Medea and their children's wellbeing and to better their lives.

Jason believes he is doing the right thing for his family. He believes that by marrying into the royal family he will ensure his children live the best life they could live. He wants to be able to give them a life full of luxurious delicacies, which he is currently unable to do. He wants them to be regarded as princes, to live amongst royals. They will be respected as the children of the future king, and he will be able to ensure they are taken care of to the fullest extent possible. While they were happy in their humble life, Jason does not want humbleness for his children. He wants them to have the finer things in life – the finest he can provide for them. The best way for him to do so is to raise his own station, thereby raising their stations as well. In marrying the princess, he is giving them the lives he believes they deserve.

Unfortunately, Jason did not foresee how his marriage would affect Medea. The first look readers are given of this infamous woman is that of a broken woman. She no longer goes out; she does not entertain guests or even her own children. Instead, she lies on

the sofa, bemoaning her state of being. She weeps for the relationship she believed she had and its unexpected end. Her depression is extreme; she feels so sad she is physically incapable of doing anything besides grieving her condition. Her will is gone. She cannot see the point in continuing to live. Her life is essentially finished from her perspective.

Medea is unable to understand why Jason has chosen to remarry. To her perspective, there was no reason for it. They were happy together. The children were happy with their parents and their station in life. Their home was filled with the sounds of joy and laughter, and their lives were fulfilled. Everything was how she wanted it to be. She had Jason and the children – that was all she needed in life. She had given Jason everything she had to give. She had forsaken her family and her homeland for him; she could not return to either due to actions she had committed in his interests. She had given the best years of her life to him, and she could never get those back. She had sacrificed her figure to bring his children into the world and to raise them. Everything she had done, she had done for him; everything she had, she had given to him unconditionally. She loved Jason. She loved their life together, and she would not have abandoned him the way he did her. She did not want glamour and wealth. A title would mean nothing to her without Jason and their children. She was complete so long as Jason was a part of her life, but once he left, she had nothing. Everything was his, and he was her everything.

For her troubles, Medea sees Jason as having given nothing in return. She believes he has declared her love was unreciprocated and their marriage invalid. Her wasted years and her disowned status made her worthless to him. He left her with two young children – too young to fully comprehend their beloved father's actions or how it would affect the course of their lives. Of course, Jason attempts to justify his actions, to redeem himself in some small way. He claims his is

marrying into the royal family to give Medea and their children a better life. He claims he is attempting to legitimize their offspring, to remove the whispers surrounding their unconventional family. He claims it is not for personal gain that he has forsaken Medea. Yet, if that were the case, why does Jason seem to be the only benefactor of his actions? *He* is the one who will be living in the palace amongst the royals and their servants. *He* will be a prince; they will be castoffs. *He* will be honored; *they* will be sneered at. He is the only one to benefit. Medea becomes a barbarian mistress, and he gets a young and beautiful wife in return. There is very little conceivable benefit for his forgotten family to be found within his actions – especially from Medea’s perspective. She cannot see the possible benefits of a royal alliance; she is blinded by the loss of Jason. Instead of legitimizing his family as he claims he will be doing, he does the exact opposite. He casts them into the shadows further than they were before. He opens them to worse than they previously faced in rumors and gossip. Instead of a barbarian family, Medea and her children are now unwanted barbarian trash in the eyes of their neighbors.

Regardless of Jason’s reasons, the result of his actions remains the same: Medea is irreparably broken. While it could never be said Medea was the nicest person, she was at least loving towards her little family. Despite having a rocky and barbaric past in which she murdered her brother, she did once care for her children and Jason. She devoted herself to them and their life. She looked upon them with love and affection, allowing their wants and needs to surpass her own. She was everything a caring mother should be, but after Jason left, that changed. She could no longer look upon her children. When she did, she saw Jason in their features. She saw him in their mannerisms, and she could not stand it. Instead of love and affection, Medea looked at her children with malice and hatred.

They were their father’s offspring – reminders of her inadequacy and his betrayal. The mere sight of them was enough to cause her pain and agony. They were the bane of her existence, a constant pain to her. She could no longer act the part of a loving mother, because she could not love them. Jason had ruined her ability to love. Even though she knew they were not at fault and did not deserve her wrath – that they were not the actual target of her anger – she could not restrain her distaste for them. They were her children too, but all she could see was Jason’s influences on them. He was in their eyes, the shape of their noses, and he was in the way they spoke. These two innocent children could do nothing to appease their mother; Medea could not stop herself from hating them. She could not return to the mothering role and let go of her hatred. She was broken. Her rage consumed her.

At the same time, while with Jason, Medea strove to be a good person for him. She played the part of a good housewife, a good mother, and neighbor. She restrained her barbaric tendencies. She did not follow the path she had traveled before her life with Jason. She tried to fit in with the society around them; she tried to give him everything he could possibly want. Yet, that was not the woman she was originally. Medea came from a land where she was respected and feared. She practiced unconventional arts and used them to her advantage. She was calculating and shrewd with an eye only to her own desires. Everyone else was mere tools in her arsenal. When she met Jason, she initially used those tendencies to help him in his quest, but eventually she tempered herself into the loving wife and mother. She allowed herself to be domesticated out of love for him. Once Jason has betrayed Medea, she no longer has a reason to remain domestic. In fact, reverting back to her original state as shrewd and calculating could be helpful to her quest for revenge.

Yet, Medea's troubles are far from over once Jason leaves her. Shortly after she has discovered the betrayal, Creon – the father of the bride-to-be – comes to her humble abode, demanding she and her children leave and never come back. His instincts tell him a woman scorned is a dangerous fiend to have nearby – especially when that woman is someone like Medea. He does not want her anywhere near his daughter for fear she might do something untoward. He fears what might happen if Medea is allowed to stay. He knows she must be made to leave, and his instincts are right. Yet, Medea pleads with him and manages to convince him to give her one day before she must leave. She soothes his worries, asking why he should fear retribution from her. He had done nothing to her besides ask her husband to marry his daughter. His decisions had been logical and made the most sense to him. She claims she understands his actions, and she says she cannot fault him for it. Then she appeals to him as a parent, asking for that one day for the sake of her children. She promises if she is granted that one measly day, she will leave willingly and without trouble. He will never have to see or hear from her again, so long as she is given that one day. As a father, he knows how important children are to their parents, and he feels he must give in – especially if it means he will get what he wants without trouble. Even so, Creon knows he is doing the wrong thing. His humanity tells him to give in and allow Medea's request, but he knows it is a bad decision. His instincts scream at him to get rid of her, to banish her immediately. He knows she is trouble, and he knows allowing her to stay will result in nothing good – even if she promises not to cause trouble. He gives in, but everything in him screams at him to banish her immediately.

Without a doubt, Creon's fears were right. No sooner than Creon leaves, Medea begins plotting the demise of Jason and his future wife. She is determined vengeance

must be wreaked against the two, but she is equally determined it should not backfire on herself. If it does, she is willing to risk her life for the cause, but she would far rather live to see their demise. Besides, if she dies, her enemies and targets will gloat over her corpse, which she cannot stand the thought of. Her blood curdles at the thought of their amusement. She is determined not to be caught, and she is quite rational in considering her actions. In the end, she settles on the path she knows will have the desired effect, the path she knows best: poison.

Until Creon comes to banish Medea, she is content with bemoaning her situation. Her plans at that point are unformed, but once Creon attempts to exile her, Medea begins to actually plan her revenge. Though she always wanted revenge, she was not actively planning before. By attempting to force Medea out, Creon has unwittingly accelerated the timeline for his daughter's death. Given a time limit for her actions to take place, Medea escalates the situation much quicker than she might have otherwise. She decides she cannot take anymore insults to her dignity. She has been insulted by Jason in taking another wife, and now by Creon in attempting to exile her. Though she accepts she must leave – and she is perfectly willing to do so – she does not want to leave without exacting her revenge. After all – if no vengeance is wreaked upon them, then they will not know with whom they have messed. Medea is not a woman to be shamed without some price being paid. In this case, the price must be death.

To an extent, Medea's revenge is fueled by her past experiences. In her father's country, if weakness was shown it would be exploited to the fullest extent. Medea was taught from a young age to defend against such weaknesses, and it is not something she takes lightly. To her, weakness is a big deal that must be dealt with quickly and effectively. She sees Jason leaving her as a weakness, one that her enemies will take full advantage of. The only way to ensure that her

enemies will not have the upper hand, is to make it clear to them that Jason's betrayal is not an actual weakness, but rather a temporary setback. She plans on telling her enemies – and the rest of the world – that she is still as strong as ever and Jason did not actually mean anything to her, even if that is not the truth. Rather, he was a means to an end, which has now served its purpose and been disposed of properly. She wants to show the world what happens when someone seeks to betray her, and to do that she must hurt Jason in the best way possible.

However, she also wants to do to him what she did to her. In a sense, Medea's revenge is fueled by a kind of equal retribution – a more extreme version of “eye for an eye.” To her, Jason is everything, Jason is her world and her life. Without him, she thinks she has nothing left. She has nothing left to live for, to fight for, or otherwise endeavor after. Her life is devoid of meaning without him. By leaving her and remarrying, Jason has – in effect – robbed her of everything important. She believes he has taken everything from her. So, she decides to take everything important to him. She takes his future, leaving his plans unfilled and his desires unmet. She kills his bride-to-be and her father, eliminating any possibility of his aspirations. He would not become king. He would not marry royalty. He would not be tied to the royal family in any way. Though he may not have loved them in the same way Medea loved him, the princess and her father were undoubtedly important to Jason's intentions. He aspired to greatness; greatness was important to him. Medea, in killing them, removed those aspirations from him, taking his future life in the process. She wants him to lose everything he has: his future bride and father-in-law, as well as his children. She wants him to know the pain he caused her. Medea wants Jason to know what she felt when he betrayed her. He took everything from her and then left her, so she will take

everything dear to him and then leave. She will follow his example in order to properly wound him.

At the same time, Medea takes it a step further. Her plan is to kill Jason's bride and father, but that would still leave him hope; he would still have his children. Medea does not want him to have that hope, so it is required she murder her own children. She wants to take everything from Jason, so she must also take his children. It is the “rational” thing to do in her eyes. Even though the children are also her flesh and blood, they must die in order for Medea's mission to be accomplished, in order for Jason to pay what she believes is due. If they do not die, her enemies might claim she has gone soft in her punishment, weak in her moment of motherly sentiment. She cannot let her emotions as a mother get in the way of eliminating her weakness.

Yet, the decision to kill her own children stems from more than just wanting to cause Jason pain. Medea is adamant she not be a laughable character to her enemies. Partially from her fear of weakness, Medea decides she must kill the children. First, they must die in order to properly ensure Jason is left with nothing and feels the exact pain Medea feels. They must be sacrificed so their father is left with the same hole in his heart as their mother currently has. If they are permitted mercy and their lives spared, then Jason will never truly be left with nothing in the world. He will never feel exactly what he has made Medea feel. The children must die for Medea's revenge to be complete, and the revenge cannot be left uncomplete under any circumstances. Medea fears that by leaving the children alive, she will become weak and laughable in the eyes of her enemies – both of which cannot be allowed. If she does not kill the children, her enemies will see it as a sign of weakness – a motherly tie that she is unwilling and incapable of severing. They will find it amusing that such a feared woman could ever be made weak by the simple feat

of childbirth. In essence, by leaving the children alive, she will be telling the world that something is more important to her than vengeance. She will give her enemies a way of hurting her. She cannot allow the children to live and her feminine sentiments to win. She must be cold and heartless in order to ensure Jason pays the price due, and to ensure her own future survival.

Of course, even though Medea knows the act of killing her offspring is necessary, she is not completely certain in her chosen path. At one point, she wavers in her choice and decides the children are too sweet for her to sacrifice for their father's misdeeds. She says it would cause her too much pain, which would go contrary to her entire plot. She wants to cause Jason pain, not herself. If she kills her own children, it may be a wound she could never recover from, and that is not her goal. She wants to wound Jason, but not at the cost of her own pain. For a brief moment, Medea considers the possibility that her children might not need to die. She considers the outlook for her own life without them, her own desolation and depression. She wonders whether hurting Jason is worth the pain it will cause to her own heart. She wonders whether it is completely necessary for them to die; will Jason not already have enough pain from the death of his bride and father-in-law – from the death of his future life? Medea considers her options for a brief moment. She allows her motherly instincts to enter her mind for a short minute, indulging them in their protests. She gives her feminine characteristics voice, but no sooner than she allows such thoughts into her mind than she casts them back out. The children must die for their own sakes, as well as for the sake of their mother and her revenge upon their father. There is no escape from their fate.

Once Medea has resolved to kill her children, she still struggles with the task. Internally, she knows her actions are wrong. She knows it is her duty and responsibility to love and care for them – to ensure they reach

adulthood and live happy lives. She knows filicide goes against everything she should believe in as a mother. When she sees the children's smiling faces, she weeps over them, professing her eternal love for them. She wavers in her decision, certain there must be a way around her reasoning.

Though she sees their father in their features, she also sees the two children she raised. She put so much time and effort into these two human beings. They are as much a part of her as they are of him. She gave them birth, and she imagined their futures. In her mind, she had given them lives to lead. They would grow into fine young men, and they would have extravagant adventures like their father. They would marry beautiful women, who would bear them beautiful children. Their lives would be happy in this imagined world. Like any mother would, Medea wanted her children to live long and prosperous lives. She wanted them to grow old before they died; she did not imagine they would meet their demise at their mother's hand.

Being reminded of her motherly duties and thoughts, Medea breaks. She looks into her children's faces, and she realizes she could not do it. She knows her actions do not make sense. No other mother would ever consider killing her own children to spite their father, even if their relationship with the father was worse than her own. Mothers should not consider the death of their children. Medea knows this, and looking into their faces, she realizes the pain she will cause her own heart. Though her intention is to hurt Jason beyond repair, why should she do so at the risk of hurting herself? How can she hurt him at the cost of her own pain? She resolves she cannot do it.

Yet, no sooner than she decides against, she immediately reverses her decision. She says she must kill them. The act of not killing them is cowardice in her mind – courtesy of her barbarian upbringing. Once more, she convinces herself it is necessary, but immediately her motherly instincts come

back – begging her not to do this horrible thing. At this point, she becomes quite harsh, with herself and with her children. She says the path is set; her actions are already in motion. Regardless of her qualms, it is too late to go back. With this argument, she convinces herself for the final time the necessity of her actions. Afraid of reversing once more, she rushes the children into the home – pushing them into their deaths. She refuses to relent again, and so she hurries to commit herself.

Throughout the play, the text wants to support Medea. Medea has been wronged, and her actions stem from that injustice. She feels she must wrong her wrongdoer. To do so, she must hurt him in the way she has been hurt. She must take everything from him and eliminate all hope for him. The text understands Medea's need for vengeance, and it is fully prepared to support her in achieving her vengeance. However, the text becomes queasy as soon as Medea's plan begins to take form. It balks at the extent to which Medea is willing to go – though it tries not to show its hesitation. It wants to support Medea, but it is not sure how to do so. She has jumped into the deep end of the vengeance pool, whereas the text was only prepared for the shallows. The text is perfectly fine with Jason paying the price for his actions, but Medea takes it a step further. She declares his bride-to-be and future father-in-law must also pay. They are guilty of enticing Jason away from her and therefore should pay as well. To this, the text is accepting of. It does not completely agree with her that they should face retribution, but it does agree that they have played a part in destroying her life and happiness. They are guilty – if only by association. While the text does not completely agree with Medea in this, it is unwilling to go against her. It wants to support her, and enacting vengeance upon Creon and his daughter is still in the grey area for Medea's vengeance.

However, Medea continues and takes her vengeance a step further – a step too far. She determines to murder her own children in her search for vengeance. The murder of her offspring is too far even for the text to accept. Medea's plan should not be regarded as a good thing, and most people would agree with that. The idea of a mother killing her own children goes against everything in nature. Nature designs offspring to outlast their parents, and when that does not happen it is always a terrible thing. Children are meant to outlive the parents, but accidents happen. Illness, injury, and fate can each cause a child to die before his parents, but those are natural causes. Murder from a parent, however, is far from natural. A parent's mindset tells them to protect their children from harm, not to cause the harm. A parent is meant to go out of the way in order to help their child. Once born, their lives are supposed to be devoted to their child. There is nothing more important to them, not even their own life. To go against this principle is practically unheard of, and it is regarded in a particularly negative light. Most people cringe at the mention of such a thing, but the text does not seem to condemn the action in the same manner as society typically would. People would normally forsake Medea at this point. They would call her a monster and say she needed to be locked in an insane asylum. The text, however, does not do so. Though the text pleads with Medea to reconsider her plan in this respect, it does not excommunicate her. It does not call her a demon or otherwise condemn her actions. Instead, it chooses to blind itself. After Medea murders her children, the text seems to go quiet on the matter. It gives a brief moment of silence for the children's lives, and then it moves on. Medea does not face condemnation or any other punishment from the text for her actions.

Throughout the play, Medea is quite sensitive to her position as a woman. She

knows being a woman can be advantageous, but she also knows it can work against her. Because of being a woman, men tend to think they can take advantage of her. They see her as weak, controlled by her emotions. They believe they can manipulate her, controlling the outcome and forcing it into what they want. At the same time, because they believe she is weak and easily controlled, they underestimate her capabilities. They do not prepare for the retribution she is capable of dishing out. Because she is a woman, her ruthless nature is able to hide behind her feminine charms until she needs to use it for her benefit.

Yet, because of her heritage, Medea is very guarded when it comes to being controlled. She is determined to never be powerless or subject to someone else's whims. Though she gives in to her emotions, and she allows them to control her actions, she is not being controlled by someone else. She allows her emotions to rule her. In the beginning, she is overwhelmed by grief and sadness. She allows herself to be sucked into misery and to wallow in it. Then, she recovers herself from the misery, but she once more allows her emotions to guide her actions, thrusting her into a revenge fueled rage.

Medea is strong, but not in a particularly acceptable way. She draws her strength from her barbarian heritage. She was taught to seek power in order to preserve herself, regardless of what the search for power might cost her. Nothing could compare to being feared and therefore respected. Because of the mindset her upbringing instilled within her, she is able to respond to threats in a ruthless manner. Jason's actions are one such threat. Being a woman, it is even more important for Medea to respond to threats than if she had been born a man. She is perfectly aware of her status, and she refuses to allow her female attributes to damage her in a way no man would ever be. She cannot allow being a woman to cost her. In order to prevent such a cost, Medea is forced to

respond to every threat – no matter how small – in order to protect herself and ensure her future successes. Medea draws strength in being ruthless from her heritage. Though she puts aside her own strength while she and Jason are living a happy life, that power is never really gone. It is always hidden within her. Jason may have thought he tamed the barbarian beast inside her, but it was merely hidden in a cage, always prepared for the moment it could escape. Medea's ruthlessness enables her to control her life, regardless of outside influences.

Of course, ruthlessness is not necessarily an admirable trait. Though it certainly protects Medea, and it definitely allows her to attain what she wants, it also forces her to give up other things she might want. It forces her to sink into a world of darkness, where nothing is too valuable to be sacrificed. Being ruthless requires her to be constantly alert and searching for anything that might signal future harm. When she falls into her emotions – as she does in the play – her ruthlessness takes on a demonic quality. Her emotions and her ruthlessness make her insane. The two combine and make her see answers that should not be possible. Her emotional state fuels her ruthless nature; rationality becomes something completely irrational. Logic is twisted into illogical answers. Answers appear in places no answer should be found. The combination is not positive for Medea – or the people close to her. It makes her lethal. Medea is quite powerful, but her strength does not arise from characteristics that should be emulated.

CHAPTER SIX

The Common Question

The question is how each of these four women managed to obtain some power in an otherwise powerless society. The answer can be found in their individual characteristics. Each one manages to gain what they want through the exercise of a certain characteristic. In Penelope's case, she used her intellect and cunning nature to trick the men into doing what she wanted them to do. She preserved herself and her family in the process. Antigone was brave and showed strength in her absolute conviction. She was uncowed in the face of danger and determined to do what was right, regardless of what it might entail for her fate. Phaedra had enormous willpower while attempting to resist Aphrodite's spell, but she also had a sense of duty in preserving herself and her family. Lastly, Medea possessed a ruthlessness like no other. It allowed her to sacrifice everything in her search for revenge.

Of course, though their methods are different, each woman sought the same goal: honor. Although they used different means, and their definitions of honor may have slight differences as well, each woman is searching for a certain kind of honor. The honor can be for their own sake, or it can be for their families' sakes.

In Penelope's case, she is caught in a difficult position. She wants to remarry and move on, but until Odysseus has been confirmed dead, she cannot. Her honor will not allow it. As long as there is a chance Odysseus might come home, Penelope must remain unwed. If she does not, and if she were to remarry, she would run the risk of being considered unfaithful if and when Odysseus returned home. Her reputation forces her to remain in a standoff with the suitors. At the same time, while she cannot actively court the suitors for fear of Odysseus's return, she also cannot allow them to leave her to a life

of loneliness. She wants the companionship they promise to give her if Odysseus is never to return. She cannot risk them leaving without knowing Odysseus's fate. If he is dead, they are her last chance at a physical relationship. A relationship with a man outside of the marriage covenant is not an option; she does not want to be considered an "easy" woman for men to have. Because her reputation – and thereby her honor – is important to her, Penelope must seem to be faithful to Odysseus even as she wants to move on with her life. She must seem faithful but also keep the suitors interested; she must utilize the full extent of her intelligence in order to preserve her honor.

Similarly, Antigone is concerned for honor and glory. Although she loves her brother and wants to bury him for that reason, she also wants to bury him for the glory it will bring to her name. She will be honored as the woman who was brave enough to stand up to Creon, the tyrannical king who tried to influence the realm of the gods. Her name will go down in history, partially because she is a woman, but mostly because she stood up for what was right and did not back down for anyone.

On the other hand, Phaedra is concerned for her reputation as a virtuous woman, which has laid a foundation of safety for her children. Her reputation is her honor; it is what gives her the respect of the people. Because of the nature of her curse, Phaedra is determined not to give in. To do so would be to destroy her reputation and thereby her children's future. Once the curse has evolved and threatens to destroy everything she worked so hard to preserve, Phaedra resolves to follow the only path that will allow her to ensure its safety – protecting her reputation and her children's reputation in the process. They will not be the children of the woman who disgraced her husband; they will be the children whose poor mother died of shame rather than live in a soiled state of being.

Phaedra's willpower enables her to go the extra length to protect her reputation and the honor she receives from it.

Lastly, Medea is also concerned for her reputation. Though her reputation is not exactly honorable, it brings her the respect of her enemies and therefore it gives her honor. Medea is centered on making sure her reputation remains intact as a ruthless woman, uncaring and unsympathetic to her enemies' sight. To do so, she must pursue some rather harsh measures – including killing her own children. Her enemies must not be allowed to see her grow soft in her feminine sentiments; they must believe she is uncaring and willing

to sacrifice everything. This will protect her. Her reputation and honor is the one thing that can preserve her from her enemies.

In some way, each woman pursues their own sense of honor. Though their definitions differ, and their methods of obtaining it are vastly diverse, their goal remains the same. They want honor. They want to preserve their reputations and earn the respect of those around them. In their search for honor, Penelope and Antigone are able to remain relatively unscathed. They do not follow the path of darkness like Medea and Phaedra.

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