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## Women's Marital Roles in Classical Athens: Male Understanding and Portrayal in Aeschylus' Agamemnon and Euripides' Medea

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# Women's Marital Role in Classical Period Athens: Portrayal in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Medea*

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## Abstract

The Classical Period of Athens (500-336 BCE) was an era of sociocultural growth and stability for the ancient Greeks, renowned for its development of tragic theatre. While Classical Athens nurtured the public sociocultural success of male citizens, women adopted a submissive role, confined to their responsibilities as wives and mothers. Women were forbidden from directly taking part in politics, philosophy, and above all, the theatrical scene of Athens. Due to these societal perceptions of traditional gender roles, the literature of the Classical Period was heavily influenced by a male bias. This study investigates the connections between women's role in Classical Athenian society and the portrayal of female literary characters in tragic theatre by male playwrights. The use of stage costumes, characterization, and narrative of female characters in two Classical tragic plays, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Medea*, were analyzed to determine if male societal perceptions of women in Greek society influenced the structure of female characters. Through these analyses, it was determined that male bias and traditional gender roles of women in Athenian society established four prominent stereotypes in female dramatic characters: the femme fatale, the conspirator, the villain, and the victim. Tragic theatre was a vital pillar of ancient Greek history, so contemporary understanding of the real roles of women in Classical society are undeniably warped through a male bias. The reality of women's roles in Classical Athenian society and literature remains a mystery to modern historians.

## Background

### Athenian Society

- Located on Attic Plain and coast of Mediterranean Sea
- Center for drama and the arts, over 300 plays written
- Male-dominated society
  - Women confined to marital responsibilities within the home

### Theatre

- Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*
  - Written in 458 BCE
  - Tragedy
- Euripides' *Medea*
  - Written in 431 BCE
  - Tragedy

"Maps of Athens." *Tourist Maps*, 2023. <https://santorinidave.com/athensmap>.



## Introduction

Theatre became an instrument of communication for the ancient Greeks, reflecting the reality of Greek opinion and society. Naturally, this art form began to convey the traditional perceptions of women.

The goal of this study was to analyze the roles of women in Classical Athenian society in comparison with the portrayal of female characters in Classical tragic theatre. It was hypothesized that the portrayal of female characters in tragic plays would reflect the misogynistic biases of their male playwrights.



Case, Sue-Ellen. "Classical Drag: The Creation of Female Parts." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 37, no. 3, Oct. 1985, pp. 317-327. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3206851>.

## Methods

My first step was to analyze the use of costume and stage presence to convey female drama characters. I divided this analysis into two sections: actor portrayal and costume characterization.

- All female tragic characters were portrayed by male actors in drag.
- Female characters' costumes were denoted by longer chitons, body stockings, progastreda, and prosterneda. Female tragic masks also emphasized the perceived dramatic nature of their gender.<sup>1</sup>

### Characterization and Narrative

Using the two designated tragic dramas, I analyzed the characterization of female literary characters. Four negative archetypes were found to be prevalent among the female characters' development and narrative:<sup>2</sup>

Archetype	Character
Femme Fatale Seductive, cunning women who manipulates men for her own personal gain	Helen of Troy, <i>Agamemnon</i>
Conspirator Intelligent, yet dangerous women involved in a secret scheme for destruction	Clytemnestra, <i>Agamemnon</i>
Villain Wicked, cold-blooded women who are often murderers and/or possess magical powers	Medea, <i>Medea</i>
Victim Woman who is sacrificed or suffers throughout the play	Iphigenia, <i>Agamemnon</i>

## Results

After comparing the portrayal of female tragic characters through stage costume, characterization, and narrative in two relevant tragic dramas, it was determined that the male perceptions of women's role in Classical Athenian society influenced their development. Women in tragic Greek theatre existed to serve one of two purposes: to serve as a reminder to real Greek women of their responsibility to marital duties, or to act as a warning to any woman who considered rebellion against Athenian traditional gender roles. The female characters who served as the latter, like Clytemnestra and Medea, were rejected and villainized in the public's eye. This suggests that any Greek woman who chose to follow in their literary footsteps, would face similar repercussions.

## Conclusions

As hypothesized, the role of women in Classical tragic theatre reflected the male biases of the male playwrights. The same misogyny and male-domination that confined real women to roles of submission within the home were reflected in the portrayal of female tragic characters. The costumes, narrative, and characterization of these female characters were designed to limit Classical women's opportunities for sociocultural success in the public world of Athens. Every aspect of women's limited influence in Classical tragic theatre was orchestrated to repress female power and voice in Athenian society.

Contemporary understanding of the reality of women's marital role and perception in Classical Athens remains under debate. The surviving records from this era were written solely by men, introducing the potential for male biases and warped perspective.

These sociocultural limitations for Greek women are still prevalent today. Recent studies conclude that in all cultural and artistic activities of contemporary Greek society, only 7% of participants are female.<sup>3</sup>

## Bibliography & Acknowledgments

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