

# [In within the context of power and](https://assignbuster.com/in-within-the-context-of-power-and/)

In both Sophocles Antigone and Aeschylus' The Oresteia,
masculinity is framed and defined within the context of power and the handler
of this power. Both Creon and Clytemnestra wield power over the
political/public realm respectively, and use this to define their own
construction of masculinity as a direct contrast to the feminine traits of
submissiveness and passivity.

To support this reading of
masculinity as the wielding of political power it is prudent to examine the
context in which Ancient Greek audiences would read this, and take note of the
authors of both Antigone and The Oresteia as being male. Laura McClure argues this in her book, Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama, that
" because adult male citizens were the exclusive possessors of political power
in the classical polis, fifth-century Athenian drama, produced by men and for
men, may be regarded in the words of Case, 'as allies in the project of
suppressing real women and replacing them with masks of patriarchal
production'" (5). To unpack this, because in large part the drama that has been
preserved from Classical Athens was mainly written by men, it is an essential
insight into the minds of Athenian men and the expectations that were attached
to notions of masculinity and maleness as operating largely in the
public/political sphere. To shed some more light on how power is gendered and
regarded as a masculine trait, we need only look at the separation of spheres so
evident in Antigone and to a lesser
extent The Oresteai: the oikos and the polis, or the domestic sphere and the political sphere. Josine Blok
argues in her article, " Toward a
Choreography of Women's Speech in Classical Athens," that " the separation
of the sexes ranked highest. It was sustained by a special and conceptual
distinction between public and private spheres" (115). This is important to
note as it gives weight to our understanding of masculinity as being
inexplicably aligned with power as Adriana Cavarero argues that the political structure " identifies itself with a limited
group of free men… that has definitively expelled women from its androcentric
sphere" (48). To understand Ancient Greek audience's definition of masculinity
is to be mindful of the way in which it is informed by its rejection of femininity
and female influence, as the power was held primarily by the men in the
political/public sphere and thus is definitively masculine.  Blok further supports our understanding of these
set distinctions between male and female by pointing out the extent of the
constraint present in the oikos as
she explains that in Classical Athens " women should not be seen, nor should
they speak or be spoken of" (97). To apply this to both The Oresteia and Antigone
is prudent as it provides a framework for us to understand why Clytemnestra
fluidly slides between her position as a female, and ultimately adopts a masculinised
identity in order to utilize the established power in Classical Athens that
masculinity affords her for her ends. Whilst also allowing us to recognise how
Creon is able to wield his power over the political/public sphere due to his
masculine identity.

In Sophocles Antigone, masculinity is positioned through a skewed power dynamic
that is defined by its subjugation over women. This is presented early on in
the play as Ismene tells Antigone, " we two are women, / so not to fight with men" (61-62), alluding to the
inferior position that women played in Theban Society and the re-affirmation of
the separate spheres of public and private. This is further cemented by Creon's
declaration that " I won't be called weaker than womankind" (680) which points
to his understanding of his masculinity and to him the intrinsic ties that
align masculinity with power and dominance, and femininity with subservience
and weakness. For Creon it is unfathomable that a woman could enter the
political sphere and challenge him as he proclaims, " no woman rules me while I
live" (525). Creon's use of the word 'woman' as opposed to specifically
highlighting Antigone indicates that he sees this feud not as a matter between
the state and the individual but rather as one between men and women. To shed
light on Creon's mindset, John Gould explains that in Classical Athens women
did not have the right to exercise free speech in the
assemblies, which was a hallmark of being a citizen. Neither did they have the
right to vote, to serve on juries, or to own property. And that the woman is
incapable of a self-determined act, as almost in law an un-person" (44). Thus
for Creon the very thought that a woman could dominate him in any sense of the
word is one that is unfathomable and a direct threat to his masculinity. His use
of the words " rule" and the finality in the line " while I live" also serves to
shed light on his belief that the political sphere is one that is firmly
designated as masculine and that women have no business transgressing the
boundaries laid out during his lifetime. This is perfectly exemplified by
Creon's reaction to the news of Polyneices' burial when he angrily exclaims, " What man has dared to do it?"
(248), he incorrectly assumes that this political transgression, could only
have been committed by a man. Thus assuming that all acts of political
disobedience and transgressions of power are inherently masculine.

Following
on there is no character perhaps other than Creon who embodies this masculinity
we are exploring through power, better than Clytemnestra in The Oresteia as she is forced to " adopt
characteristics of the dominant sex to achieve her goals" (Pomeroy 98). Clytemnestra
occupies a space in which she is the sole commander of control in her
interactions with Agamemnon, and thoroughly emasculates him in order to
exercise her power, dominance and adopted masculinity over him. One such
instance, is when Clytemnestra greets Agamemnon upon his return with clothes
for him to walk on and he rebukes her stating that it is " embroidered stuffs –
stuff for gossip," (Agamemnon 1012-3). " Do not by woman's methods make me
effeminate … nor strewing my path with cloths make it invidious … I tell
you honour me as a man." (1015-1020). After stating this, Agamemnon submits to
her desire and is lead into the palace to his slaughter. Agamemnon's easy
submission to Clytemnestra is inextricably linked to the fact that he views her
as feminine first and thus incapable of murdering or even emasculating him as
he states. Thus whilst Clytemnestra's feminine wiles serve to benefit her it is
ultimately her fluidity and complete command of her masculine identity which
allows her to triumph. This is explained by McClure who states that
" Clytemnestra plays the part of a faithful wife before the male chorus, the
messenger, and ultimately her husband, but abandons this disguise once she has
successfully carried out her plan" (27). This is best seen when she recounts
her murder of Agamemnon and states 'Twice I
struck him, and with two groans his limbs relaxed…here is Agamemnon, my
husband, now a corpse' (Agamemnon 1385-1405). Clytemnestra appears to
speak about Agamemnon as if he were an enemy whilst presenting the defence of
her actions, reiterating the justifications for the murder on a number of
occasions (Lefkowitz 175). Clytemnestra's complete detachment and cold
acceptance of the success of her revenge frame her ultimately as masculine as
she has achieved ultimate power and dominion over another human being by
murdering them and exacting this through revenge which the chorus state is the
duty and act of a man (1643-5). Thus rejecting any attachments of
submissiveness or femininity that could be attached to her because of her
gender, and ultimately embodying the masculine ideal of command and power which
even the chorus begrudgingly admit she has achieved through her revenge.

Moving on from Clytemnestra, it is important
that we focus our attention on the Chorus in both Antigone and The Oresteia,
as the chorus subtly reinforces our accepted definitions of masculinity by
aligning masculinity with power and strength and femininity as a direct
juxtaposition to this. In Antigone, the Chorus'
first appear in the play with a narration of " Sun's own radiance" (99) shining
on " the man who had come from Argos with all his armor / running now in
headlong fear as you shook his bridle free" (106-107). The animalistic imagery
used to compare the warrior coming from Argos with a horse shaking his " bridle
free", serves in aligning masculinity as a forceful, natural energy that's
power is entrenched within the natural world and thus timeless and unshakeable
in its position as a constant. The equation of " radiance" with the man from
Argos, also serve to make us as readers associate masculinity as something
which is light and good and thus not something which we should refute or deem
as a risk to us. It is important to note however, that the chorus would have
consisted entirely of Theban men and thus their vision and ideals of the world
would've aligned with the masculine and patriarchal ideal that we are arguing
in this essay as being a rejection of feminine traits among others. This is
easier to see when the chorus describe Ismene with traditionally female
characteristics of excessive emotion and beautified grief: " She loves her
sister and mourns, / with clouded brow and bloodied cheeks, / tears on her
lovely face" (40). There is no allusion to power or strength in the chorus'
description of Ismene but rather a sad fragile image of a young woman, a direct
juxtaposition to the strength and animalistic imagery that was used to describe
the man from Argos. This is further emphasised by the chorus' description of
the masculine warrior as " screaming shrill, / like an eagle over the land he
flew" (111-112). The use of similes to liken the man to a hunting bird only
serves in furthering the argument that masculinity for the chorus and for the
people in Classical Athens to whom this would have been performed would largely
align masculinity with power, virility and the very act of being and doing.

Where Ismene is described as passive and grief stricken, the chorus' cements
into the audience's head that the masculinity which runs the public sphere is
one which rejects these feminine traits and is deeply aligned with the natural
world and thus intrinsically linked as a result of that to power and strength
as the natural world is a constant.

Whilst the Chorus in Antigone immediately recognize and respond to any traits of
masculinity that are displayed by a man, they are not so quick to offer this
same description to Clytemnestra and only acquiesce as the play goes on and her
role as Agamemnon's successor in his absence is cemented. Yet despite this,
Clytemnestra manages to be recognized instantaneously as having a masculine
role by the watchmen who claims she is a, 'woman in passionate heart and man in
strength of purpose.' (32-35). This is
particularly interesting to note as Sarah Pomeroy states that 'womanly
behaviour was characterised then…by submissiveness and modesty' (98), yet
Clytemnestra's language is anything but modest as she uses her oratory power to
command men. Simon Goldhill supports this as he argues that " Clytemnestra
dominates the stage, recounts the most impressive speeches and skillfully
manipulates language in order to achieve power. (35)". The significance of
Clytemnestra's command of speech as a means of exercising power must not be
understated as McClure elaborates that " to be a citizen meant to participate
actively in the speech of the city, whether in the courts, the Council, the
Assembly, or the agora" (8). However, this was only reserved for men, making
Clytemnestra's command of language as a tool of power another way in which she
rejects her feminine traits in order to embrace the power and freedom
masculinity affords her to exact her revenge. In Agamemnon's absence
Clytemnestra cements her power among her people by adopting masculine traits
and infiltrating the public sphere that was reserved for men, yet the only way
she is able to do this is to shed her feminine traits and become masculinized
through her control of language and the success of this is displayed by the
chorus' recognition of her as a peer. McClure goes on to support this as she
states that " her control of public discursive practices contingent upon her
possession of masculine power reflects a profound inversion of gender roles"
(74). The chorus eventually succumb to Clytemnestra's oratory skills and
proclaim, " you have spoken like a man and our protector" (261). This validation
of Clytemnestra's oratory skills as being equal to a man cement just how much
she has embodied the masculine identity and just how far removed her
masculinity now is from the feminine traits which it is in direct juxtaposition
to. Clytemnestra goes on to sustain this relationship with the chorus as rather
than speaking with other women, McClure notes that she speaks to the male
chorus for the majority of the play and they act as her audience (72). Thus
reiterating the positioning of masculinity in The Oresteia as being a rejection of submissiveness and femininity,
and rather an embracing of the power that masculinity can afford within the
public realm as Clytemnestra uses for her own gain.

In much the same way that Clytemnestra sheds
her feminine identity in order to navigate the social realm of Classical Athens
through adopting a masculinized identity. Characters such as Aegisthus in The Oresteia and Haimon in Antigone are emasculated by Clytemnestra
and Creon respectively as they are deemed to not be masculine enough or reject
the definition of masculinity we have laid out. For Aegisthus, he is described
as tending to Clytemnestra's hearth (1435-1436), the ultimate gender reversal
as the hearth lands firmly within the domestic sphere yet Aegisthus is the one
who is commanding it. This only adds to the strength of the masculinity that
Clytemnestra has constructed around her and provides us with a measurement for
just how emasculated Aegisthus is that he as a Theban man is tending to a
hearth in which we have not seen Clytemnestra described as doing once in the
play. Aegisthus is then repeatedly baited by the chorus who refer to him as a
" woman" (1858-1872), due to his cowardly act in allowing Clytemnestra to strike
Agamemnon in his stead. This insult is not only repeated by the Chorus but also
by Orestes who calls Clytemnestra and Aegisthus " a pair of women – for he is a woman as
surely as she." (Libation Bearers 286-287). The fact that Aegisthus'
masculinity is being juxtaposed with Clytemnestra is a testament to how
emasculated he is as she possesses all the masculine traits which he has failed
to show, and the traits which he is left with reduce him to being described as
a " woman" as he is not discernible any longer. This cements our reading of
masculinity as being a rejection of feminine traits and submissiveness as if we
are to take Aegisthus as an example of failed masculinity. It would be fair for
our comparison to naturally leads us to Clytemnestra who possesses all the
masculine qualities of power, command and lack of submissiveness which
Aegisthus fails to show, ultimately placing her in control of the masculine
role in the relationship and play.

This
relationship is echoed in Antigone as
Creon questions Haemon's masculinity once he realises Haimon is a danger to the
political/public power he holds as a result of Haemon's love for Antigone.

Peter Miller argues that Creon's " tyranny has
undermined the ability of Haimon to claim a social and gendered identity
outside the bounds of his regime" (164). Creon's " regime" we can take to
understand here as being his inability to allow women to have any form of
control over a man, as he believes that power must be absolute and any form of
submissiveness is a sign of femininity. This is perfectly captured by Creon's
subsequent insults laid upon Haimon, in which he refers to him as being on the
" woman's side" (740), for being " weaker than a woman" (746) and a " woman's
salve" (756). It is interesting to note that each insult Creon attaches to Haemon
aligns Haimon with weakness and being submissive. To Creon his masculinity, is
defined by its juxtaposition to femininity and we can conclude that he does not
feel that there is any fluidity between masculinity and femininity. Yet if we
are to take Abrams definition of sex and gender to account then, " sex (a person's identification as male or female) is determined by
anatomy, gender (masculinity or femininity in personality traits and behavior)
can be largely independent of anatomy, and is a social construction that is
diverse, variable, and dependent on historical circumstances" (113). Creon's
definition of masculinity is firmly ensconced in what he feels a man in
Classical Athens would have been like and lends strength to Peter Miller's
argument that tyranny has produced in Creon a hyper masculinity which prevents
him from seeing anything beyond what he defines as masculine. To Creon this
would be his political power and the firmly set boundaries between femininity
and masculinity which he believes are there in order to sustain societal order.

Thus Haemon's flaunting of Creon's set definition of masculinity only serve to fuel
Creon's own hyper-masculinity which manifests itself as a direct rejection of
any and all feminine traits.

Summarily both Antigone and The Orestai
explore the representation of masculinity through the characters of Creon and
Clytemnestra and the ways in which masculinity for both of these characters are
undoubtedly tied with the power they derive from it. Within the context of
Classical Athens, the masculinity displayed by both Creon and Clytemnestra is
hyper masculine at times in order to respond to the shifting power dynamics
that occur throughout the plays. Yet ultimately, in both of these masculinity
is firmly defined as the rejection of female traits of passivity and submissiveness.