

The hero archetype: antigone and lysisistrata



**ASSIGN
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Through the many tales of heroic deeds that have been told over the centuries, a picture has been painted as to the appearance and interpretation of the archetypical character of the hero. This character has been portrayed as a masculine figure who conquers all monsters and challenges in his path through strength, will, and determination, usually having to call upon a super-human ability, be it physical or intellectual, to defeat an oppressor. However, this typical view of the hero does not suit all characters who still can be classified under this archetype. In fact, through many ancient Greek plays, women have taken on the roles of the hero, having a much different quality and approach to their problem-solving than their male counterparts. Two such women who show great heroic qualities through their respective plays are Antigone and Lysistrata, who serve as the heroines of their tales. Through an analysis and comparison of the actions of the characters of Antigone and Lysistrata in the plays *Antigone* by Sophocles and *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, respectively, clear conclusions can be drawn as to the stature of these female protagonists as heroic female characters.

Antigone follows the *Oedipus* trilogy, wherein *Oedipus* has already found out the seeds of his sins, and has put out his eyes and renounced his rule of Thebes. *Jocasta*, *Oedipus*' mother and wife, is dead, and her brother *Creon* claims the throne as his own. After the bloody mess that *Oedipus* left in his wake, his daughter *Antigone* is left to weigh the horrific aftermath, including preparing for the burial of her brother *Polynices*. However, in light of the conflict that emerges even after the death of *Oedipus*, *Antigone* by law is not allowed to bury her family member, thus starting her heroic quest for a proper humane burial for her brother: " I will As for me, I' will bury him; and

if I die for that, I am content. I shall rest like; a loved one with him whom I have loved, innocent in my guilt" (Sophocles 160-162). This statement by Antigone is truly what gives the heroic nature to her quest, for she wishes only to complete that which is right by humanitarian law, not by rule of the king, even if doing so means self-sacrifice.

Lysistrata has a much more straightforward battle to fight than Antigone did. Rather than having to battle against injustice emanating from her own family, Lysistrata is faced with injustice against her entire gender, wherein the women of Athens have become nothing more than meat-sacks for their men as they return from battle and leave and leave again as they please. Lysistrata sees this for what it is, the abuse of women through the patriarchal society in which she lives, and she addresses this with the other woman in Athens. Lysistrata is convinced that should she and the other women band together in a strike against sex, then they can gain control over the males in society, in an essential reversal of power. To accomplish her heroic goal, of improving the lives of women across Athens, she has them take Oath to her purpose, " I have nothing to do with husband or lover; Even when he approaches me upright and ready" (Aristophanes). Through this mantra, Lysistrata is able to rally the women of Athens to her cause as she pursues a better societal status for her gender.

Although the burial of a family member, or the beginning of a civil movement, may not seem like a heroic deed, the characters of Antigone and Lysistrata further their status through their inherent devotion to their cause. The mark of a truly devoted person, or a hero, is a willingness to sacrifice personal comfort to accomplish greater goals. This quality is shared by both

of these female characters, and indeed perhaps is their most heroic quality. In Antigone this is seen in in two simple lines, after being lectured by the King as to the illegality of her actions, “ I am ready; for there is no better way I could prepare for death than by giving burial to my brother” (Sophocles 402-403). These lines and indeed the entire speech from Antigone truly show her devotion to her brother, and thereby solidify her position as a hero; she is doing no wrong, but instead seeking to accomplish a moral and just act, to which ends she is willing to die to complete. Similarly Lysistrata is forced to take this same aggressive stance in front of the rule of Athens: “ LYSISTRATA You would kill me here in Athens—birthplace of discourse and reason? MAGISTRATE Athens is a city of laws. LYSISTRATA -The laws of a barbarian. MAGISTRATE Submit to me now or I use this. LYSISTRATA kneels” (Aristophanes). In the same way that Antigone is willing to sacrifice her life to be allowed to bury her brother, Lysistrata is willing to sacrifice her status to show that women should no longer be used as objects of sex. Although death for a cause such as Antigone’s classifies as textbook martyrdom, in these cases the possibility is much more.

To be a martyr is to die willingly for your cause; however, the cause which is being fought over becomes the defining principle. Martyrs can be of any faith, religion, or purpose; however, a hero will always fight for and advocate that which is just, moral, and right. In this way, a hero is more noble than a martyr, as a hero is both a leader and an example of how others should act, and how others should aspire to respond to social and civil injustices.

Although Antigone was not successful in completing her goal, and Lysistrata more so was, their results do not change their classification or level of

heroics; it is not the result that matters, but the purposes and means through which goals are accomplished that create and classify heroes.