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Well Behaved Women Rarely Make History

By: Cathryn Noel-Veatch

Throughout history women have constantly had to deal with oppression from society. This constant oppression has led women to rebel as they want to fight for their place in history and in our culture. This has led to many female role models in both fiction and real life. Strong women like Amelia Earhart or Susan B. Anthony have shown how women can fit into society while fictional role models like Leia from *Star Wars* or Xena from *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Throughout the play *Antigone* a lot of conflict is shown between the characters and in the basis of the story. Antigone as a character has to face a lot of discrimination because she is a woman in a predominantly male society. As she makes the conscious choice to bury her brother and by doing so breaks the new law from Creon she knows that this is a choice she will stick with. She believes that by burying her brother she is following the path that the Gods have set before her. Her act of burying her brother is a demonstration of her values and what she believes to be important, which is her family. Antigone is overlooked by Creon because in his eyes, she is just a simple woman who followed her heart and didn't think her plan through. Even her punishment is lessened due to her gender though Creon made it clear that whoever buried her brother Polyneices would receive a terrible punishment. She fights for her opinion to be heard and in the end

she dies for her cause. As Antigone is overlooked by her king, as her punishment is less than that of a man, and when she is imprisoned for her actions Antigone has faith in herself. Sophocles' feminist ideas explore how women have are often treated and see how they deal with the ideals of men that she is constantly surrounded by.

In many classical societies women were often looked over by men and this is true in *Antigone*. In the theology of ancient Greece, a polytheistic society, the female goddesses of the pantheon were often overlooked as they represented concepts that were traditionally viewed as ideas suited to women such as Aphrodite goddess of love. In his play *Antigone*, Sophocles shows the struggles of women as the main character of the tragedy, Antigone, is forced to deal with unfairness in her society. When we see the initial argument between Creon and Antigone about her decision to bury her brother Creon says that "But a woman will never rule me while I am alive" (489). This quote is a direct example of how Creon feels about women specifically Antigone. In this quote Antigone has just explained to Creon why she has chosen to bury her brother. She says that the gods have not made this law so why should she follow it. Antigone says to Creon that her choice was her own, and that she made it in full awareness of his punishment. She says "Nor did I think that you're human proclamation had sufficient power to override the unwritten, unassailable laws of the gods." (419). She knows that by her theology it was more important to follow the just rule of the Gods than to follow anything laid down by a human king. This, however, becomes an issue with Creon as his hubris makes himself to be more important than his gods. Antigone's defiance displays how

women were really treated, how they never had a say in their own destinies. Antigone is an example to all of women of how they have a choice when it comes to their future. This overlooking of Antigone because of her gender continues when she is discovered to have broken the law by burying her brother. Antigone has to deal with discrimination from men in a different way. She has a lessened punishment from Creon because she is a woman. As punishments go Creon's ruling of what should happen if any man bury Polyneices is intense. He decrees that "Whoever disobeys him in any respect will face death by public stoning" (30). However later, when Antigone faces Creon and she openly admits to burying her brother Creon changes his mind. Instead of his original punishment, he decided on to simply banish her to a cave to live out the rest of her days. Part of his decision might have had to do with the fact that she was a part of his bloodline, she was engaged to his son Haemon which might have swayed his decision. It is highly likely, however, that her punishment was lessened because she was female. When the Sentry first reports her actions to Creon and presents Antigone to him he says "You bring this woman...Where and in what circumstances did you arrest her?" (375-376). This line has a tone of surprise to it meaning that when the Sentry first brings Creon his prisoner he definitely was not expecting a woman. Creon later talks about Antigone with her sister Ismene, when asked what Ismene is to do without her Creon replies with the line "She...Don't speak of her. She no longer exists" (533). This line is explaining how Creon no longer wants to think of Antigone, he would rather know that he has spared her life and exiled her. Creon doesn't want to face the fact that he has had a minor rebellion in his kingdom, a rebellion led by a woman no

less. This could give his people a reason to think that he is weak and not fit for his newly claimed throne. He would rather her memory be erased so that he can ignore what has happened rather than face the growing change around him. His choice of lessening Antigone's punishment showing how in her life Antigone is treated as a lesser. How her gender makes her supposedly weaker than a man.

The punishment that Antigone has been sentenced to is different than what others would have been given. Her move into the cave displays how society would hide away their women almost as if they were ashamed of their wives, sisters, and daughters. When Antigone is banished to her cave she stays there for an unknown period of time and Creon debates what to do with her. He ultimately decides to free her but when he arrives at her prison he discovers that she has killed herself. In her small prison she has managed to, "Hanging by the neck suspended by the linen noose of a garment" this act of desperation shows how much Antigone cares about her opinion (1172). This is showing readers that she would rather lose her life defending her values than allow Creon to silence her. She has seen her sister fall to fear of what Creon will do to them if he finds out what they have done. She wants to be stronger than what she has seen, stronger so that when she dies she can face what she has done. It is shown that Antigone is proud of what she has done she says "There is nothing shameful in honoring my own flesh and blood" (470-471). In her mind it is better to follow the Gods than to follow anyone else. Antigone knows that Creon would never let her be truly free if she chooses to listen to his rule. Her sister Ismene also learns this lesson. That her destiny is her choice, she sees that it was not wrong to believe

in herself that a man's rule is not always correct. Antigone and Ismene want their people to know that now is not the time to stand by and be oppressed. She commits this act to prove her point, that her burial of her brother was the right thing to do.

Antigone faces a lot of criticism for how she buried her brother. Her actions that were unlawful according to Creon have led Antigone to realize what kind of society she lives in. She wants to show people especially Creon that she as a woman can make her own decisions. That she does not make frivolous decisions, not someone who can be deemed hysterical by the death of her brother. She proves to Creon that she is her own person that others do not control her actions. She is in charge of her own fate, she knows that what she has done is right in the eyes of her gods. She wants to be seen as an equal to all others so that they will hear what she has to say. Antigone provides this story with the classic protagonist; however, what makes this story special is that Antigone shows readers that in her story her beliefs are one of a kind. As the play continues Antigone gains followers like Haemon and her sister Ismene, but what she fought for in the beginning was her own cause. She fought for her beliefs which is something that had never been seen before. Her oppression within her society, Creon's misogynistic views against her, her oppression all show how Antigone has to live in her time. How she must fight for her actions to be seen, for her voice to be heard against a sea of people who don't want to listen. Her actions show who she is and how she will fight for herself.