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Classical Athenian Drama's Reaction to The Treatment of Women

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Throughout history and into the present day, women and men have been treated differently from one another. In Classical Athens, this was evident in the expectations of each gender and in the way they were treated sexually. Women were expected to take care of the household and family while men were expected to bring honor to their cities as soldiers or politicians. During the wars of this time period, widowed women from the defeated city were taken by the successful soldiers as prizes for their army's victory. They were used as slaves or for the soldiers' sexual pleasure. Additionally, the wives of the soldiers were forced to accept their husband's other sexual partner while they were expected to remain true to their husbands. Realizing this disparity, some playwrights responded with speculations about what would happen if the women took revenge on the men.

My piece, "Classical Athenian Drama's Reaction to The Treatment of Women," explores the different ways that women were portrayed in Greek Drama. Women were often depicted as violent individuals because the female characters were retaliating against their husbands for violating something that was essential to the typical fifth century Greek woman. Ordinarily, women were expected to be married to a man of their fathers' choosing and bear children to be the heirs of her husband. The most important aspects of a woman's life were dedication to family, home, and their husbands. Women were expected to take care of the household while their husbands fought in wars or made important political decisions. In the highest status, men were expected to bring honor to their respective cities.

Some fifth century Athenian dramas, such as Sophocles' *Ajax* and Euripides' *Alcestis*, portrayed women with the typical female characteristics of obedience and dedication to family. In *Ajax*, Ajax killed cattle and a shepherd and was so distraught with himself that he contemplated suicide. In an attempt to persuade him to continue living, his wife, Tecmessa, said that her entire life revolved around him, showing how dependent women of the time were on the men in their lives. However, other Classical Athenian literature, such as Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *Medea*, portrayed women as violent characters. For example, when Medea's husband, Jason, returned from war with a new wife, she felt as though her pride as a woman had been violated. In response, Medea murdered his new wife and killed her own two sons so Jason could not have any heirs. While this is highly contrasting from the typical way that women of this time carried themselves, the motives for their destructive behavior were rooted in core fifth century female values. Violations of family or sexuality are often the catalysts for the atypical behavior of female characters in Classical Athenian drama, thereby reinforcing fifth century female stereotypes.

While many Classical Athenian dramas point towards the disparity between the treatment of males and females, there is still much to be explored on this topic. My paper offers insight into how certain playwrights have implicated powerful female characters with typical fifth century female motivations.