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Free Lesson of the Month May, 2009

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This month's Free Lesson is taken from [Antigone Multiple Critical Perspectives Unit](#).

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Activity Two

Studying the Roles of Wife and Mother in Defining the Female Characters

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Antigone Feminist Activity Two: Pertinent Play Excerpts*
2. Have students, individually, in pairs, or small groups, review the quotations on the handout and consider the following questions:
 - What does Antigone lament the most about her situation?
 - What does this suggest about how she identifies herself and her role in society?
 - Why does Eurydice kill herself?
 - What does Eurydice's suicide suggest about how she identifies herself and her role in society?
3. Reconvene the class and discuss the apparent role and value of women in Greek society as portrayed in the play.

Antigone: Feminist Activity Two**Pertinent Play Excerpts**

ANTIGONE

I did. Zeus did not announce it to me. And Justice, who lives with the gods, did not send such a law. I did not think that any law which you proclaimed would have the authority to override the gods and their unwritten and unchanging laws. The laws of the gods are not just for today or yesterday, but forever. No one knows where they first appeared. So I did not intend to let a fear of any human bring about my punishment from the gods. I know all too well I'm going to die—we are all mortal—it makes no difference what you decree. And if I must die before my time, well, I count that a gain. When someone has to live the way I do, surrounded by so much evil, how can she fail to find relief in death? And so for me, meeting this fate will bring no pain. But to allow my own mother's dead son to just lie there, an unburied corpse, would cause me great distress. What happens here does not hurt me at all. If you think what I'm doing now is stupid, then perhaps I'm being charged with foolishness by a fool.

ANTIGONE

No—there's nothing shameful in honoring my mother's children.

ANTIGONE

Look at me, my native citizens, as I go on my final journey, as I gaze upon the sunlight one last time, which I'll never see again—for Hades, who brings all people to their final sleep, leads me on, while I'm still living, down to the shores of Acheron. I've not yet had my bridal chant, nor has any wedding song been sung—for my marriage is to Acheron.

ANTIGONE

Without lament, without a friend, and with no marriage song, I'm being led in this miserable state, along my final road. So wretched that I no longer have the right to look upon the sun, that sacred eye. But my fate prompts no tears, and no friend mourns.

ANTIGONE

Oh my tomb and bridal chamber—my eternal hollow dwelling place, where I go to join my people. Most of them have perished—Persephone has welcomed them among the dead. I'm the last one, dying here the most evil death by far, as I move down before the time allotted for my life is done. But I go nourishing the vital hope my father will be pleased to see me come, and you, too, my mother, will welcome me, as well as you, my own dear brother. When you died, with my own hands I washed you. I arranged your corpse and at the grave mound poured out libations. But now, Polynices, this is my reward for covering your corpse. However, for wise people I was right to honor you. I'd never have done it for children of my own, not as their mother, nor for a dead husband lying in decay—no, not in defiance of the citizens. What law do I appeal to, claiming this? If my husband died, there'd be another one, and if I were to lose a child of mine I'd have another with some other man. But since my father and my mother, too, are hidden away in Hades' house, I'll never have another living brother. That was the law I used to honor you. But Creon thought that I was in the wrong and acting recklessly for you, my brother. Now he seizes me by force and leads me here—no wedding and no bridal song, no share in married life or raising children. Instead I go in sorrow to my grave, without my friends, to die while still alive. What holy justice have I violated? In my wretchedness, why should I still look up to the gods? Which one can I invoke to bring me help, when for my reverence they charge me with impiety? Well, then, if this is something fine among the gods, I'll come to recognize that I've done wrong. But if these people here are being unjust may they endure no greater punishment than the injustices they're doing to me.

* * *

CHORUS LEADER

I see Creon's wife, poor Eurydice—she's coming from the house—either by chance, or else she's heard there's news about her son.

[Enter Eurydice from the palace with some attendants]

EURYDICE

Citizens of Thebes, I heard you talking, as I was walking out, going off to pray, to ask for help from goddess Pallas. While I was unfastening the gate, I heard someone speaking of bad news about my family. I was terrified. I collapsed, fainting back into the arms of my attendants. So tell the news again—I'll listen. I'm no stranger to misfortune.

MESSENGER

Dear lady, I'll speak of what I saw, omitting not one detail of the truth. Why should I ease your mind with a report which turns out later to be incorrect? The truth is always best. I went to the plain, accompanying your husband as his guide. Polynices' corpse, still unlamented, was lying there, the greatest distance off, torn apart by dogs. We prayed to Pluto and to Hecate, goddess of the road, for their good will and to restrain their rage. We gave the corpse a ritual wash, and burned what was left of it on fresh-cut branches. We piled up a high tomb of his native earth. Then we moved to the young girl's rocky cave, the hollow cavern of that bride of death. From far away one man heard a voice coming from the chamber where we'd put her without a funeral—a piercing cry. He went to tell our master Creon, who, as he approached the place, heard the sound, an unintelligible scream of sorrow. He groaned and then spoke out these bitter words, "Has misery made me a prophet now? And am I traveling along a road that takes me to the worst of all disasters? I've just heard the voice of my own son. You servants, go ahead—get up there fast. Remove the stones piled in the entrance way, then stand beside the tomb and look in there to see if that was Haemon's voice I heard, or if the gods have been deceiving me." Following what our desperate master asked, we looked. In the furthest corner of the tomb we saw Antigone hanging by the neck, held up in a noose—fine woven linen. Haemon had his arms around her waist—he was embracing her and crying out in sorrow for the loss of his own bride, now among the dead, his father's work, and for his horrifying marriage bed. Creon saw him, let out a fearful groan, then went inside and called out anxiously, "You unhappy boy, what have you done? What are you thinking? Have you lost your mind? Come out, my child—I'm begging you—please come." But the boy just stared at him with savage eyes, spat in his face and, without saying a word, drew his two-edged sword. Creon moved away, so the boy's blow failed to strike his father. Angry at himself, the ill-fated lad right then and there leaned into his own sword, driving half the blade between his ribs. While still conscious he embraced the girl in his weak arms, and, as he breathed his last, he coughed up streams of blood on her fair cheek. Now he lies there, corpse on corpse, his marriage has been fulfilled in chambers of the dead. The unfortunate boy has shown all men how, of all the evils which afflict mankind, the most disastrous one is thoughtlessness.

[Eurydice turns and slowly returns into the palace]

MESSENGER

Your wife is dead—blood mother of that corpse—slaughtered with a sword—her wounds are very new, poor lady.

MESSENGER

Stabbed with a sharp sword at the altar, she let her darkening eyesight fail, once she had cried out in sorrow for the glorious fate of Megareos, who died some time ago, and then again for Haemon, and then, with her last breath, she called out evil things against you, the killer of your sons.