

Antigone

by
Sophocles



Sophocles (496-406 B.C.) came from a wealthy family in Athens and took an active role in that city-state's political life. He wrote 123 plays, but only seven of them have survived to the present. *Antigone* was a huge success for him at the dramatic festivals held in Athens. Ancient texts reveal that he was elected a general in the Athenian military because of the popularity of this work.

Events in History at the Time the Play Takes Place

Legends of the Bronze Age. The story of Antigone is drawn from Greek mythology, a great body of oral tales that inspired later Greek painting, sculpture, poetry, and theater. Scholars have used ancient Greek writings that record these oral tales, as well as inscriptions found by modern archaeologists, to determine the genealogy, or family tree, of the legendary rulers of Thebes, the Greek city in which *Antigone* takes place.

According to legend, Thebes first came to prominence and power around 1380 B.C. under the rule of a man named Cadmus, who was said to have moved there from Phoenicia (present-day Syria). The people and events that Sophocles portrays in his play were thought to have occurred in the 1200s B.C., some eight hundred years before Sophocles lived. This earlier period of time is often referred to as the "Bronze Age" because the metal was commonly used by people of the era to fashion their weapons and household tools.

Ancient myths, contemporary conflicts. The Theban "cycle" of myths (about the legendary rulers of Thebes) is one of three that were cen-

THE LITERARY WORK

A play set in thirteenth-century B.C. Thebes; first performed in 442 B.C. in Athens.

SYNOPSIS

Antigone disobeys the laws of her ruler, Creon, in favor of the unwritten laws that she feels more properly govern society. She is condemned to a chilling fate.

tral to Greek mythology; the other two are the Trojan War cycle and the stories of Jason and the Argonauts. The events in these myths are imagined to have taken place in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C., although this need not imply the historical existence of these heroes at this time. Even the fifth century B.C. historian Thucydides, a contemporary of Sophocles, realized that it was unwise to regard tales from the past as being true:

In investigating past history ... it must be admitted that one cannot rely on every detail which has come down to us by way of tradition. People are inclined to accept all stories of ancient times in an uncritical way...

[P]oets ... exaggerate the importance of their themes, ... the prose chroniclers ... are less interested in telling the truth than in catching the attention of their public and [their] authorities cannot be checked and [their] subject matter, owing to the passage of time, is mostly lost in the unreliable streams of mythology.

(Thucydides, 1.20-1)



In practice, Athenian playwrights often used the traditional stories to make points about their own era, and they often used mythological conflicts to portray contemporary ones to an audience. Removing the action to the mythic past, and using heroic characters, a playwright was able to touch on the profound and significant issues of his day from a safe distance. In the *Antigone*, Sophocles focuses on the possible conflicts between one's religion and one's politics. His drama pits the laws of the gods against the laws of the state as reflected in one girl's decision to, contrary to city law, perform religious burial rites for her brother, a traitor. The *Antigone* may also be commenting on the conflict in fifth-century Athens between the ancient aristocracy (which supported worship of family gods, ostentatious burial and oral tradition) and the newborn democracy (which supported respect for city gods, modest burials, and written laws).

The Play in Focus

The plot. By the time Sophocles wrote his play, the tragic dynasty of Oedipus, King of Thebes, had already been the subject of many poems and plays. The most famous of these were four plays by Aeschylus, another playwright of the same era who was regarded as the first great writer of Athenian tragedy. Athenian audiences thus knew the tale of Oedipus intimately.

The story of Oedipus was used by Sophocles to set the scene for the events depicted in *Antigone*. King Oedipus discovered that he had by accident killed his father and married his mother. Horrified to discover the manner of his father's death and the identity of his wife, Oedipus blinded himself and went into exile. One source has Oedipus commending his children into the care of his mother's brother Creon; another of Sophocles' plays has Antigone faithfully accompanying Oedipus into exile, as his attendant. Oedipus later died, as did his wife and mother Jocasta, who hanged herself. Creon, who had subsequently assumed the throne of Thebes as regent until Oedipus's two sons should grow up, is now king in his own right.

These two sons, Eteocles and Polynices, had been cursed by their father because they had twice insulted him. The curse included a prophecy that the boys would grow up to kill each other. Upon reaching adulthood, Eteocles and Polynices fought over their inheritance; they had agreed to alternate the kingship, but, once

in power, Eteocles refused to give up the throne. Polynices left Thebes in anger and married into the royal family of Argos. In Argos he assembled an army and attacked the city of his birth. The seven gates of Thebes were assailed by seven heroes, one of whom was Polynices himself. All seven heroes died during the siege. Polynices died at the hands of his brother, who was mortally wounded during the struggle as well. Oedipus's prophecy was thus fulfilled.

Sophocles's play begins with Antigone and Ismene, who were sisters of the recently deceased Polynices and Eteocles. Antigone, obviously distressed, reveals to Ismene the latest news: because Polynices has been fighting against the city of his birth, King Creon has now forbidden anyone to touch the corpse or give it a decent burial. Antigone and Ismene argue about whether or not they should bury Polynices' body. Ismene refuses to help in the illegal act, but Antigone secretly performs a ritual burial, dusting the corpse with a light sprinkle of earth. Antigone's defiance of the king's wishes causes her to be arrested by Creon's guards and brought before him. Antigone admits and staunchly defends her crime. When she is taken away, Creon's son Haemon, who is engaged to Antigone, calmly attempts to convince Creon to yield his wrath. But Creon is unbending, and Haemon leaves in a rage. Creon then sentences Antigone to be entombed in a cave with barely enough food to live on, a punishment to which she surrenders with bravery and dignity. Shortly thereafter, the prophet Teiresias arrives to warn Creon that Polynices must be buried. Creon again refuses to listen to advice. A messenger arrives with the news that Antigone has hanged herself and that Haemon, upon discovering her, killed himself also.

Religion and civic pride. Creon's anger at Antigone's disobedience may seem totally unreasonable to modern readers. But her excuse for breaking his law might have seemed equally unreasonable to an ancient Athenian audience: Antigone claims that a law higher than Creon's—the law of Zeus—has directed her to act as she has. But the ancient Greeks did not live according to a single code of ethical behavior. No single god or organized church or particular way of living was singled out as the best. Religion was viewed more as a matter of civic identity and pride. Each city-state had its own special gods that it worshipped. Citizens were free to worship other gods if they so chose as long as they did not neglect the city's gods,

who were expected to watch over the city's interests.

Worship practices included making public sacrifices or gifts to the city's gods and participating in ceremonies with other city-dwellers. Every community cared for its own local rituals in much the same way that it cared for its public affairs. In fact, religious activity was a significant aspect of political life in Greek society. The reverse was also true—civic duty and pride became a sort of religious obligation. This association between civic duty and religious practice

was so strong in Athens in the years immediately after *Antigone* was first performed that worship of the goddess Athena had turned more or less into worship of the city itself.

This situation in fifth-century Athens is clearly reflected in the *Antigone*, despite the play's much earlier Theban setting. Here, Polynices's betrayal of his city and Antigone's rejection of the civic law that forbids her from burying her traitorous brother has serious, almost religious, implications. Although Sophocles does not mention any particular god of Thebes in the play, Antigone

refers to Zeus as the source of the law by which she acts. Sophocles may have included this reference to suggest that she has perhaps abandoned her local god in favor of a more universal deity.

Unwritten laws. Antigone claims that “unwritten and unfailing rules” led her to bury Polynices. Sophocles thus alludes to an issue that was a subject of much debate in fifth-century B.C. Greek society. How much power did such “unwritten” laws have when they came into conflict with civic laws?

Creon: Did you know that an edict had forbidden this action?

Antigone: I knew it, inevitably. It was no secret.

Creon: And still you dared to transgress these laws?

Antigone: Yes, for it was not Zeus who proclaimed that edict to me, nor did that Right who dwells with the gods below lay down such laws for mankind; and I did not suppose that your decrees had such power that you, a mortal, could outrun the gods’ unwritten and unfailing rules.

(Sophocles, *Antigone*, 446-57)

Pericles, the great Athenian general who dominated the social and political scene at the time the play was written, addressed the issue of unwritten laws, also known as laws of conscience. As one scholar notes, he seemed to suggest “that they are concerned with various matters outside the reach of ordinary laws. At least he claims that the Athenians respect them” (Bowra, p. 161).

These “various matters” are not clearly articulated. Even the Greek historian Thucydides, who recorded the general’s words, provides no additional information on specific unwritten laws. Nonetheless, Pericles held that “we [Athenians] give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break” (Pericles in Thucydides, 2.37). Pericles here recognizes the power of unwritten laws but does not specify what they are or whether or not they are supposed to take precedence over civic laws.

Yet Sophocles insists in *Antigone* that such unwritten laws are more important in regulating human actions than any formal legal code worked out by men. Perhaps this commentary is a reaction to events taking place in Athens at the time Sophocles lived. Athenians were so proud of their

city and its political and artistic achievements that a form of city-worship arose. “In an age when Athens was almost taking the place of her gods as an object of worship, the poet protested that the priorities were wrong and that if there is a conflict between divine and human law, there is no doubt which claims first obedience” (Bowra, p. 163). Sorting out which laws are human and which are divine could be difficult, however. The law of Zeus that Antigone claims has guided her action may actually be the law of her own conscience, as there were no universally applicable or “unfailing” laws attributable to Zeus or any other Greek deity.

Creon vs. Antigone. The conflict between Antigone and the king of Thebes exists on many different levels. Antigone is the daughter (and half-sister) of King Oedipus, to whose throne Creon has ascended. Her family history puts her in an uncertain social position in the court of the new king, who may be hostile to the relatives of his predecessor.

Furthermore, Antigone’s decision to bury her brother is not only a violation of Creon’s decree, but also an expression of disregard for the social constraints placed on young women of the era. Throughout ancient Greek history, women had no say in political affairs whatsoever. They could not vote or hold public office. They were rarely seen outside the home, except at such major events as festivals, marriages, and funerals. Antigone’s sister Ismene reminds her of this subordinate status when she says, “We must remember, first, that we were born women, who should not strive with men” (*Antigone*, 46-47). Creon’s thoughts regarding his battle of wills with Antigone are shaped in large part by her gender. When his son Haemon urges him to reconsider his terrible anger, the king responds, “While I am alive, no woman shall rule over me” (*Antigone*, 525). He seems to feel that his rule is threatened by the decision of one woman to act on her own authority. In his depiction of the tension between the willful Antigone and her uncle Creon, Sophocles suggests that the king’s actions stem partly from the prevailing philosophy about the appropriate status of women.

Sources. Sophocles took the characters for *Antigone* from a well-developed body of Greek stories about the tragic family of Oedipus. He must have been especially aware of the work of his fellow playwright Aeschylus, who had already written about the Theban dynasty in his play *Seven against Thebes*. In writing *Antigone*, Sophocles created a separate tragedy that centered on

one of the lesser characters in Aeschylus's play. Sophocles used the familiar characters of the royal family of Thebes but changed their actions to suit his own dramatic purposes. Antigone's defiance of Creon, for instance, is a plot element that other writers do not mention in relating the story of King Oedipus and his family.

Events in History at the Time the Play Was Written

Pericles, Creon, and Athenian democracy. According to some critics, the character of Creon was modeled at least in part on the great Athenian general Pericles, who dominated the Athenian political scene during much of Sophocles' public life. Sophocles was one of Pericles' fellow military leaders and possibly his friend. If the portrait of Creon as a power-hungry, autocratic, and harsh leader does resemble Pericles, however, the extent of that friendship is perhaps in question. In 442 B.C., when *Antigone* was first performed, Pericles' career was at its highest point. One school of thought argues that the figure of Creon, who abuses his power, may have been intended as a veiled warning to Pericles and

in the late sixth century B.C., after a long period of dictatorship. Concerned that dictatorship might return, the populace set up strong laws designed to protect against just such a possibility. Athenian males who were not slaves could vote on the city's political and economic business. A system was devised wherein the city was managed primarily by ten generals. Each of these ten generals came from one of the ten tribes into which democratic reformers had divided the Athenian people. To prevent power plays based on family or regional biases, each tribe included members from all over the state.

As one of the ten generals of Athens, Pericles was subject to regular electoral approval and thus could not establish a dictatorship through legislative means. Pericles did not need to establish a formal dictatorship, however; he was immensely popular and was, in essence, "the uncrowned king of Athens" (Wilcoxon, p. 207).

Other critics insist that Creon behaves as he does precisely because of the democratic ideal. He does not take into account his family ties to Antigone and Polynices when making his judgments. Instead, he treats them as though they are common citizens who have acted against the best interests of the city. In fact, when Ismene asks Creon to pardon Antigone because she is such a wonderful match for his son Haemon, the king retorts, "There are arable fields of others" (*Antigone*, 569), clearly reflecting Creon's view that Antigone is just another woman. As one scholar notes, "Creon, the political leader, categorizes and simplifies; one female equals another. . . . In a perverse way, Creon's refusal to distinguish, to particularize, to see differences, may make him more the democrat than the tyrant" (Saxonhouse, p. 74).

Burial rites. Funerals in Greece were largely the responsibility of women during Sophocles's time. They washed and dressed the body, adorned it with flowers, and then covered it up. Only close relatives participated in this ritual. After a death, the "prepared" corpse was laid out for two days in the home and then taken away for burial before the dawn of the third day. The funeral procession—led by men and followed by lamenting women—wound slowly outside the city gates to a cemetery, where the body would be laid to rest.

The Greeks practiced cremation as well as burial. If the former practice was chosen, the body was either burned in its grave or burned on a separate pyre, after which the ashes were buried. The dead person was typically buried with a variety of offerings, including pottery, stone vases, and

ANTIGONE HONORS THE DEAD A SECOND TIME



Guard: When we arrived there . . . we wiped away all the dust that covered the corpse, stripped the damp body well, and sat on top of a hill to windward, taking care that the smell from the body should not reach us. . . . After a long time . . . the girl was seen; and she uttered a piercing cry, the shrill note of a bird, as it cries when it sees, in its empty nest, the bed bereft of nestlings. So she, when she saw the corpse bare, broke out in lamentation, and called down curses on those who had carried out the deed. And at once she brought thirsty dust in her hands, and lifting up a fine bronze ewer she paid her respects to the corpse with a threefold libation.

(*Antigone*, 408-31)

the Athenian people about the dangers of dictatorship. In the play, Creon stubbornly insists that Antigone suffer an awful fate for her actions. His refusal to listen to any line of reasoning served to remind the Athenian audience of the terrors that tyranny could bring.

Democracy was a relatively new social development in Sophocles' Athens. It had been born



personal possessions. By some accounts, traitors and people who robbed temples were not entitled to be buried within Athenian territory, but the historical record is far from consistent on this. Thus, as Andrew Brown points out in his translation of *Antigone*, “whether [Creon] is justified in forbidding burial to Polynices is not clear. It was evidently normal practice, at Athens and elsewhere, to forbid burial on their native soil to men convicted of treason. . . . In such cases, however, the body would be cast outside the borders, rather than left in a place where it could cause pollution to the city” (Brown in Sophocles, p. 6). Left out in the sun for wild dogs to pick at, Polynices’s rotting body has just this effect. Creon’s refusal to let anyone touch the corpse thus seems poorly reasoned in this respect.

The sophists. Fifth-century B.C. Athens saw the rise of a revolutionary group of teachers and philosophers. Called the sophists, they turned their attention away from the gods and goddesses toward the study of mankind. The opening of *Antigone* features the famous “Ode to Man,” which echoes the ideas of this philosophical movement:

Wonders are many, and none more wonderful than man. . . . Subtle beyond hope is his power of skilled invention, and with it he comes now

to evil, now to good. Respecting the laws of the land and the right of oaths sworn by the gods, he is a man of a lofty city; cityless is he who recklessly devotes himself to evil.

(*Antigone*, 332-75)

The sophists were individual teachers who differed in their views as well as their standards but agreed that the main subject of their teaching should be human actions. A particular area of study and emphasis was mankind’s political views. Teachers of middle-class origin, the sophists educated the young sons of the wealthy about the practice of democracy. Pericles was closely acquainted with certain of the notable sophists in Athens and supported their influence on the city’s intellectual life.

Antigone, of course, features not only the “Ode to Man” but also several dramatic events that point out a number of the faults of mankind. The Greek word *deina*, which is sometimes translated as “wonderful,” can also mean “terrible.” Some readers contend that Sophocles seems to make use of this double meaning in his work, arguing that his use of the word signifies a veiled criticism of a world view focused too intently on man.

The Athenian theater. Sophocles’s plays were written to be performed in public at the great Theater of Dionysus. Located in the heart of

Athens, the theater sat with other important city buildings on the slope of the rocky hill of the Acropolis. Plays were usually staged during the festival of Dionysus, the god of growth and wine, which took place at planting time in March. Crowds of 15,000 people regularly attended the performances, and even criminals were released from prison in order to see the plays. Attendance at these dramas was perceived to be a civic duty, in part because the plays often addressed important social and political issues.

The dramatic part of the festival's program was presented as a competition between playwrights, each of whom put on four plays in the

or actually functioned as a character in the play. The chorus served as a link between the audience and the actors, often portraying a group of citizens not unlike the audience themselves. In *Antigone*, the chorus is a group of Theban elders who keep shifting their loyalty back and forth from Creon to Antigone; their indecision further confirms the complex nature of the issues under discussion.

In Greek drama, the chorus was assembled before the people involved even knew what play would be performed: "The making of plays started not with the playwright but with the Chorus. Five rich men were selected by the city authorities and each was required to select, train and produce a chorus for one of the five days [of dramatic competition]" (Taylor, p. xxi). The members of the chorus were young amateur male actors who had to be costumed, fed, and trained for their role. After the choruses were chosen, civic authorities chose the playwrights who would produce plays and matched each of them with one of the choruses and with professional actors. Choruses were thus matched with playwrights in fairly arbitrary fashion.

Reviews. When Sophocles's *Antigone* was first unveiled, the tough Athenian audience awarded it first place in the dramatic competition. But perhaps more interesting than the ancient Greek reaction to *Antigone* is the amazing "modern" history of the play. The drama has been praised over the years by a wide range of writers, including John Keats, William Butler Yeats, George Eliot, Frederick Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean Cocteau. "Between c. 1790 and c. 1905, it was widely held by European poets, philosophers, [and] scholars that Sophocles's *Antigone* was not only the finest of Greek tragedies, but a work of art nearer to perfection than any other produced by the human spirit" (Steiner, p. 1). *Antigone*'s depiction of the clash between individual conscience and governmental law has caused it to be an especially noteworthy play in times of war as well. It was immensely popular during the French Revolution and immediately after World War II, for example. The play has also been cited as an early attempt to explore the issue of equal rights between men and women.

For More Information

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THE CHORUS ADVISES CREON



Creon: To yield is terrible, but it is a terrible project to stand firm and so bring down the blows of ruin upon my spirit.

Chorus: Wise counsel is needed....

Creon: What should I do, then? Tell me and I will obey.

Chorus: Go and release the girl from the underground chamber, and furnish the unburied body with a tomb.

Creon: Is this really your advice? You think I should yield?

Chorus: Yes lord, and with all speed.

(*Antigone*, 1095-1104)

space of one day. The first three were tragedies, often related to each other. The last play was a "satyr" play that poked fun at the serious subjects and characters of the three earlier plays. The satyr play was followed by a comedy by another playwright, which was part of a separate competition for writers of comedy. "For five days the playwrights showed their productions . . . and the audience made their preferences clear [by booing or cheering].... The plays were then judged by ten judges, each one selected from one of the ten tribes of Athens. These ten then cast their votes into an urn and five of the votes were drawn out at random. From these five votes the result was announced" (Taylor, p. xxiii). This complex process may have been designed to discourage cheating, an illustration of how seriously the dramatic competitions were taken.

The Chorus. The Greek word *choros* (chorus) means "dance." An important part of fifth-century B.C. drama, the chorus was a group of singers and actors who either commented on what was occurring in the main part of the drama

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