

# Antigone

by Sophocles

Antigone is the third play in Sophocles' Theban Trilogy. That's a misleading statement: the three plays included under that title were not written to be staged together: their performance dates range from 438 B.C.E. to three years after Sophocles' death in 406 B.C.E.

But they are linked by tradition - and because when performed one after the other - "Oedipus Rex," "Oedipus at Colonus," and "Antigone" tell a coherent story: the full legend of the Theban hero who unknowingly committed patricide and incest. First, the discovery of his identity; next, his redemption; and, finally, the tragic fate of his children.

Antigone, the last of the three, was written first in 438 BCE. It was part of a trilogy that included three other plays which are lost to us. In fact all but seven of Sophocles' 123 plays have been lost over time. Antigone and the others have endured because people recognized their beauty and importance and had them copied a sufficient number of times to escape fires, pillage, and neglect.

This play is treasured because it deals with the struggle between state and religion; between individual conscience and the law. These are topics which never go out of date; we fight about them all the time. And Sophocles balances the argument so carefully that, without divine intervention at the end, we might have a hard time choosing sides.

After Oedipus has been caught up by the gods, his four children/siblings are left to play out the final resolution of the gods' cruel treatment of their father/brother. The two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, agree to rule Thebes alternately. But when it is time for Eteocles to step aside for his brother, Polyneices, he refuses. A battle ensues, during which the two brothers kill each other, fulfilling a curse Oedipus had laid on them.

Creon, uncle to Oedipus' children, is left in control of the city and after the messy situation brought about by his sister's marriage to her son, Oedipus, he sets out to establish firm and rational control. In the opening scene, we hear the two sisters, Ismene and Antigone, discussing his latest edict: that Eteocles, the son who was ruling Thebes, is to be buried with full military honors, but that his brother, who came back to fight for his share of the throne, is to be left to rot outside the city walls.

Antigone declares that this is against the laws of heaven and resolves to bury her brother in spite of Creon's decree. Ismene is afraid to help her, so Antigone prepares to go it alone.

The chorus of Theban citizens advances in procession and, in striking lines, describes the battle which has just taken place, Creon enters and states his edict in detail, forbidding anyone to touch Polyneices' corpse. Whoever defies his law will be

executed. He gives his reasons for this harsh judgment and the chorus agrees with him.

At this point, a sentry enters. Reluctantly and fearfully, he tells Creon that someone has buried Polyneices - actually, just heaped dust over his body. Creon is furious and orders the sentry to find the man who has done this and bring before him "or your death will be the least of your concerns." After Creon leaves, the sentry decides to run away, rather than face the king's fury.

The role of the sentry is worth some comment. He is a wholly recognizable human being, not a suggestion of one, which is what you find in earlier Greek tragedies. This was Sophocles' great accomplishment: shifting the audience's attention from the play's divine background to its human foreground. From this point on, we can trace the rapid development of theatre as we know it.

When the sentry leaves, the chorus delivers one of the most unforgettable odes in Greek literature. It is sometimes called an Ode to Man, celebrating the wondrous and terrible capabilities of humankind. This is the Fitts-Fitzgerald translation of the poem:

Numberless are the world's wonders, but none  
More wonderful than man; the stormgray sea  
Yields to his prows, the huge crests bear him high;  
Earth, holy and inexhaustible, is graven  
With shining furrows where his plows have gone,  
Year after year, the timeless labor of stallions.

The lightboned birds and beasts that cling to cover,  
The lithe fish lighting their reaches of dim water  
All are taken, tamed in the net of his mind.  
The lion on the hill, the wild horse windy-maned,  
Resign to him; and his blunt yoke has broken  
The sultry shoulders of the mountain bull.

Words also, and thought as rapid as air,  
He fashions to his good use; statecraft is his,  
And his the skill that deflects the arrows of snow,  
The spears of winter rain. From every wind  
He has made himself secure -- from all but one:  
In the late wind of death he cannot stand.

O clear intelligence, force beyond all measure!  
O fate of man, working both good and evil!  
When the laws are kept, how proudly his city stands!  
When the laws are broken, what of his city then?  
Never may the anarchic man find rest at my hearth;  
Never be it said that my thoughts are his thoughts.

Those lines are worth meditating. Sophocles speaks of humanity's amazing and violent ability to control the natural world. He then shifts to a consideration of human capacity to build a civilization. But he concludes with no assurance that humans will use their physical and intellectual gifts to live in a morally upright manner.

The sentry returns, bringing Antigone with him. After the guards had scraped the dust off Polyneices' body, Antigone returned and tried to bury him again. She was caught and the sentry is only too happy to bring her to Creon, who is summoned from the palace.

Creon questions Antigone and she denies nothing. She argues the morality of her act forcefully, infuriating Creon. He sends for Ismene, accusing her of assisting in the deed. Ismene claims she is guilty, too, but Antigone rejects her willingness to suffer with her. The crime is hers and hers alone. Creon orders both girls to prison, to await sentencing.

After another choral ode, Haimon, Creon's son enters. He is betrothed to Antigone and gently tries to persuade his father to spare his future bride. The argument soon spirals into a shouting match and Haimon leaves, vowing never to see his father again.

The chorus then speaks of Aphrodite's great power and how love has sparked bitter anger between father and son.

When questioned by the chorus, Creon says that he will spare Ismene, but Antigone is to be shut up in a tomb with some food and water and left to die. She is brought before the king and takes a sorrowful leave of her city and its people.

At this point, the blind prophet Teiresias enters, led by a small boy. He tells Creon that his offerings to the gods are futile; the birds of omen about him are fighting and dying in fury; the altars of the god are polluted by dogs and carrion birds that glut themselves with the thick blood of the dead. This is the first time we learn of the full enormity of Creon's decision: not only Polyneices, but his entire army, have been left to rot in the field.

Creon stubbornly argues with the prophet, accusing him of plotting against his throne; but Teiresias silences him with a warning:

Not many days,  
And your house will be full of men and women weeping,  
And curses will be hurled at you from far cities,  
Grieving for sons left unburied, left to rot  
Before the walls of Thebes.

These are my arrows, Creon; they are all for you.

[To boy] But come, child: lead me home.  
Let him waste his fine anger upon younger men.  
Maybe he will learn at last  
To control a wiser tongue in a better head.

Chastened by Teiresias' words, Creon decides to free Antigone and order that burial be given to all the dead men, with special rites for Polyneices. He rushes out and the chorus offers a prayer to Dionysus.

Violent acts are almost never depicted on stage in Greek tragedy. (The only example we have is the suicide of Ajax in Sophocles' play of that name and no one knows how that was managed.) The tragic messenger is charged with describing such offstage occurrences. The tragic messenger in *Antigone* enters to describe Creon's behavior. Eurydice, Creon's wife and Haimon's mother, enters to hear his account.

The messenger tells his story in dramatic detail. First, Creon buried Polyneices, then ran to Antigone's tomb. He heard his son's voice within, wailing Antigone's death: she had hanged herself.

Haimon rushed at his father with a sword. He aim went awry and, in desperation, he killed himself. Overcome with grief, Creon is returning with his son's body. The queen leaves without a word. At the urging of the chorus, the messenger follows her.

Creon then returns with Haimon in his arms. He has understood, at last, the consequence of his decisions. But the messenger returns to tell of further grief: his wife has committed suicide, cursing her husband with her dying breath.

The king asks his servants to help him into the palace. The strong rule of law he decreed went against divine laws and he has paid a terrible price for his arrogance. The chorus has the last word:

There is no happiness where there is no wisdom:  
No wisdom but in submission to the gods.  
Big words are always punished,  
And proud men, in old age, learn to be wise.

People sometimes ask why the play isn't entitled "*Creon*," since he is the one who travels the tragic path to understanding. The fact is that Creon and Antigone are opposite sides of the same coin. Both are stubborn, unyielding in their convictions. In fact, Antigone means something like "unbending."

That's an important aspect aspect of Sophocles' mastery. He gives both Creon and Antigone the full force of their arguments, causing the chorus to shift its sentiments back and forth between the two. Both suffer for their beliefs, but only Creon survives to understand. While he may be the tragic center of the play, it was Antigone whose action forced issues into the open.

Before leaving the play, here is an interesting aspect of it you may want to look into. Some have suggested that the story of Oedipus and his children may actually be a Greek retelling of the life and family of the heretic Egyptian pharaoh Anhkaton.

Oedipus means swollen foot or leg. Anhkaton's enlarged thighs would match that name well and incest was a common feature of Egyptian royal life. It is further suggested that the Eteocles who was given a lavish funeral might well have been the youthful Tutankhamun, whose undisturbed tomb has been the subject of study and speculation.

Those who pursue this line of reasoning can provide Egyptian equivalents for each of the characters in the Greek myth. There isn't a scrap of evidence that Oedipus and his family ever existed in Greece. Was the story exported from Egypt's "Thebes of the Hundred Gates" to "Thebes of the Seven Gates" in Greece? Archaeologists and scholars may have been looking for Oedipus and his family in the wrong place.