

SOPHOCLES, *Antigone* (441 B.C.E.)

A Clash of Loyalties

Sophocles's *Antigone* is an exploration of the tensions between one's duty to the gods, to the law, to the community, and to one's self. At its heart is a conflict between Antigone and Creon, the king of Thebes, who has ordered that the body of Polyneices, Antigone's brother, be left unburied and dishonored. Antigone defies Creon, buries Polyneices, and carries out the proper funeral rituals, knowing full well that in so doing she has signed her death warrant. Two passages from the play are included here. In the first, from the opening scene of the play, Antigone's sister Ismene makes a fruitless effort to convince Antigone to give up her plan to bury Polyneices. In the second, Antigone justifies her actions to Creon, who offers his response in an aside to the audience. As you read the passages, consider how these characters see their obligations to themselves, to the community, and to the gods. Pay particular attention to the way ideas about proper gender roles shape each character's perspective. [Ismene pleads with Antigone.]

ISMENE: Alas. Remember, sister, how our father¹
perished abhorred, ill-famed.
Himself with his own hand, through his own curse destroyed both eyes.
Remember next his mother and his wife
finishing life in the shame of the twisted strings,
And third two brothers on a single day,
Poor creatures, murdering, a common doom
each with his arm accomplished on the other.
And now look at the two of us alone.
We'll perish terribly if we force law
and try to cross the royal vote and power.
We must remember that we two are women
so not to fight with men.
And that since we are subject to strong power
we must hear these orders, or any that may be worse.
So I shall ask of them beneath the earth forgiveness, for in these things I am forced,
and shall obey the men in power. I know that wild and futile action makes no sense.

ANTIGONE: I wouldn't urge it. And if now you wished to act, you wouldn't please me as a partner.

Be what you want to; but that man shall I
bury. For me, the doer, death is best.
Friend shall I lie with him, yes friend with friend, when I have dared the crime of piety.
Longer the time in which to please the dead than that for those up here.
There shall I lie forever. You may see fit
to keep from honor what the gods have honored.

ISMENE: I shall do no dishonor. But to act against the citizens. I cannot.

ANTIGONE: That's your protection. Now I go, to pile the burial-mound for him, my
dearest brother.

[Creon confronts Antigone.]

CREON (to Antigone): You-tell me not at length but in a word. You knew the order not
to do this thing?

ANTIGONE: I knew, of course I knew. The word was plain.

CREON: And still you dared to overstep these laws?

ANTIGONE: For me it was not Zeus who made that order.

Nor did that Justice who lives with the gods below mark out such laws to hold among
mankind. Nor did I think your orders were so strong
that you, a mortal man, could over-run
the gods' unwritten and unfailing laws.

Not now, nor yesterday's, they always live,
and no one knows their origin in time.

So not through fear of any man's proud spirit would I be likely to neglect these laws,
draw on myself the gods' sure punishment.

I knew that I must die; how could I not?
even without your warning. If I die
before my time, I say it is a gain.

Who lives in sorrows many as are mine
how shall he not be glad to gain his death?

And so, for me to meet this fate, no grief.

But if I left that corpse, my mother's son,
dead and unburied I'd have cause to grieve
as now I grieve not.

And if you think my acts are foolishness the foolishness may be in a fool's eye.

CHORUS: The girl is bitter. She's her father's child. She cannot yield to trouble; nor could he.

CREON: These rigid spirits are the first to fall.

The strongest iron, hardened in the fire,
most often ends in scraps and shatterings. „ Small curbs bring raging horses back to terms.

Slave to his neighbor, who can think of pride?

This girl was expert in her insolence
when she broke bounds beyond established law.

Once she had done it, insolence the second,
to boast her doing, and to laugh in it.

I am no man and she the man instead
if she can have this conquest without pain.

She is my sister's child, but were she child
of closer kin than any at my hearth,

she and her sister should not so escape
their death and doom. I charge Ismene too.

She shared the planning of this burial.

Call her outside. I saw her in the house,
maddened, no longer mistress of herself.

The sly intent betrays itself sometimes
before the secret plotters work their wrong.

I hate it too when someone caught in crime
then wants to make it seem a lovely thing.

ANTIGONE: Do you want more than my arrest and death?

CREON: No more than that. For that is all I need.

ANTIGONE: Why are you waiting? Nothing that you say fits with my thought. I pray it never will.

Nor will you ever like to hear my words.

And yet what greater glory could I find
than giving my own brother funeral?

All these would say that they approved my act did fear not mute them.

(A king is fortunate in many ways,
and most, that he can act and speak at will.)

CREON: None of these others see the case this way.

ANTIGONE: They see, and do not say. You have them cowed.

CREON: And you are not ashamed to think alone?

ANTIGONE: No, I am not ashamed. When was it shame to serve the children of my mother's womb?

Studying Questions:

1. What arguments does Ismene use in her effort to convince Antigone to change her mind?
2. On what basis does Antigone justify her violation of Creon's decree?
3. How do ideas about proper roles for men and women shape both Creon's and Ismene's reactions to Antigone's decision? ,--
4. What light does Creon's mistaken assumption that Ismene shared in Antigone's crime shed on his character?
5. What lessons might an Athenian audience have drawn from this play? What par-allels might they have seen between their own history and the events portrayed in the play?

1 Our father: Antigone's and Ismene's father is Oedipus, a mythical king of Thebes. Antigone is the third play in a trilogy by Sophocles that includes Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus.