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Sophocles' Antigone: The Tragedy of the Separation of Greece's Competing Social Institutions

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Critical Essay

Research in progress for HUMA 1301: Introduction to Humanities I

Faculty Mentors: Carolyn Perry, Ph.D. and Rich DeRouen

The following essay by Austin Tate began in response to an assignment in the Introduction to Humanities course taught by Prof. DeRouen. The assignment asked students to analyze the influence of contending value systems—those of the *oikos* and those of the *polis*—as they reveal themselves in selected scenes from the Sophoclean play *Antigone*. A secondary objective of the task was to interrogate the attempts of Antigone and Creon—the central characters of the play—to navigate the mix of personal and social obligations they faced in the cultural context of their respective positions in the Theban city-state. Austin’s work showed a command of the material and a nuanced grasp of the complex issues of the play that seemed deserving of the kind of showcase provided by *Quest*.

In preparing the essay for publication, it seemed appropriate to deepen the exploration of the central characters’ relationships to the broader community of Thebes and the implications those relationships hold for the conflict between Antigone and Creon. Prof. Perry took on the task of guiding Austin through this evolution of the essay. In pursuing the revision, Austin took an idea found in the conclusion of his original draft—that Antigone might have found someone with more authority to argue on her behalf—and moved that idea into his thesis. This change led him to consider the possible actions Teiresias, the seer, and Eurydice, the queen, might have taken to resolve the dilemma at the heart of the play. Austin’s insightful final version of the essay shows how this seemingly small shift in perspective can lead to a conclusion about ancient Greece that has implications for twenty-first century culture and politics.

Sophocles' *Antigone*:**The Tragedy of the Separation of Greece's Competing Social Institutions**

Austin Tate

In his play *Antigone*, Sophocles explores the conflicting values of the *oikos* and the *polis*, two Greek social institutions that respectively encompass the private realm (the household) and the public realm (society). This essay will contrast the moral priorities of Antigone, who represents *oikos*, and her uncle, King Creon, who represents the *polis*. The main conflict of *Antigone* surrounds Antigone's choice to bury her dead brother in accordance with Greek tradition, and King Creon's decision to punish his niece in accordance with his previous public decree forbidding such a burial. Creon believes he must uphold the laws of the state he represents and therefore views Antigone's brother—Creon's nephew—simply as a traitor of the state. When Antigone is unremorseful for knowingly breaking the law, Creon coldly punishes her. Antigone dies by her own hand before her—and Creon's—family can intervene, leading Creon's son and then his wife to commit suicide in their own grief. The tragedy of *Antigone* reflects a real cultural conflict that Greece faced as its population grew. Sophocles uses this conflict to warn those who refuse to compromise their personal values for that of greater society, and vice versa. Both Antigone and Creon need and have access to a wider circle of trusted colleagues and loved ones who could have offered alternative solutions—through the means of debate and democratic decision—that appeal to and

accommodate the other's ideology. However, these social and political resources go untried and unheeded. The tragedy of *Antigone* derives from the audience's ability to see a potential solution to the central conflict that the characters themselves cannot conceive. Political community and discourse, central tenets of the Athenian society for whom this play was originally performed, could have prevented the demise of Antigone and of Creon's loved ones.

One main topic about which Antigone and Creon disagree has to do with where one's loyalties lie. Within the traditional Greek sphere of the *oikos*, each person owes "total allegiance" to one's family (Visser 194), especially in the realm of maintaining the family's honor. Honor, and by extension political power, is natural and inherited through one's connection to "heroic or divine ancestors" and must necessarily be defended by each member of the family (Knox 39). Antigone firmly aligns herself with this philosophy, as evidenced when she specifically refers to herself as having the "honor" of being Oedipus' daughter (Sophocles 6). Such familial ties are at the core of *oikos* morality. Her roles as a daughter and sister have informed her opinions and actions since women at the time did not have influence or power outside of the realm of the *oikos*. When Antigone's values conflict with civil law, she expresses the absurdity of not being allowed to bury her kin, one of the honors and duties of the surviving family. In her own words, she is being "forbid[den]... to love [her] brother" (Sophocles 6). She only accounts for the relationship between herself and her brothers, disregarding the context of their deaths. She believes her brothers are owed honorable burials by merit of their birth. This belief is in direct contrast to the viewpoint of Creon, who, despite his blood

relation to the deceased, enforces a cold and impartial law that offers no exception for his nephew or niece.

A key component of the *polis* state is that loyalty to the state takes precedence “over any private loyalty” (Knox 37). The law, the power of the *polis* state, is “total” and “unconditional” in this society (Curran 31-2), and in fact does not recognize “natural rights” for individuals in the same way as the *oikos* (31). King Creon, reflecting these values, upholds that which he believes to be in the community’s best interest at the cost of his relationship with his family. In Creon’s mind, he and the *polis* state are one and the same: “I am the law. And that responsibility / Is above kinship” (Sophocles 23). His relationships are meaningless to him within the context of greater society. Creon’s decisive and absolute interpretation of the law allows for no debate or compromise between the competing loyalties of family and state. It is clear to Creon that being a traitor to the state revokes any rights or honor that individuals might be granted by virtue of their bloodline. The context, not the person, must be judged. Only after seeing the consequences of his actions is he willing to listen to the opinions of the people. When the chorus expresses their initial consternation at Creon’s decree, he admonishes them to “shut [their] mouths” (15). By the time the chorus has made up its mind on how to reconcile the conflict and Creon tells the people to “give [their advice]... I’ll listen” (46), Antigone’s fate is already sealed. The chorus’s judgment takes time to evolve. If Creon had been in less haste to uphold his personal interpretation of the public’s interest, he would have avoided personal tragedy and better reflected the judgment of his constituents.

Judgment, according to the philosophy of the *polis* state, comes from civil laws—rules decided by the people. Creon sees the adherence to these rules as a compulsory component of existing within society. When he states that citizens “must necessarily obey” the law (Sophocles 24), Creon shows his devotion to upholding the laws of the state. His interpretation is absolute and strict. “Law is law” in Creon’s eyes, not merely a set of guidelines or suggestions but the code for society itself (Sophocles 24). The letter of the law is clear: traitors to the state must be condemned, whoever they may be.

But these laws and rules are fickle, short-sighted, and temporary, according to Antigone. The lives of mortal men are short, but the “approval of the dead is everlasting” (Sophocles 7). This means that the laws of the dead should be the moral code to which one should adhere, since they exist outside of the time frame of our brief existence. Greek religion largely influences this world view. Funeral rites and specific customs for honoring dead family members are prescribed by the gods in Greek mythology. Rules for a moral and just life come from a place more divine than the human mind, according to Antigone, who describes them as “a quality of Zeus” that transcends time and space (Sophocles 21). These laws are natural and known innately by each person, not voted on by a committee. Antigone upholds the laws of her religion by practicing burial rights on her brother, which conflicts with the laws of the state and subjects her to the state’s punishments. With her religious worldview, Antigone can easily endure what she sees as a temporary punishment to her corporeal body. She refuses to even attempt appealing to any authority, religious or otherwise. Antigone considers herself “dead” already and is fully committed to acting in spite of the law instead of changing the law to

make her actions legal (Sophocles 25). Her worldview allows her to consider her actions as a natural continuation of an unchanging path that exists independent of society, whereas Creon's worldview forces him to only consider her actions as being against the rules by which contemporary society has agreed to live.

Pride prevents Antigone from allowing others to act or speak on her behalf, even her own family, which forces Creon's hand as a matter of his own pride. Queen Eurydice, "whom [the people] all respect" (Sophocles 50), is in a uniquely powerful position as queen of state, wife of Creon, and aunt to Antigone. If Antigone had not been so stubborn, she could have easily appealed to Eurydice as a family member to influence the opinion of Creon. Eurydice's authority comes from her role as wife and mother, distinctly *oikos* relationships. However, those connections bestow her with legitimate authority within the *polis* state. Eurydice can speak to Creon—not as king, but as partner. Because of this more private connection, she can influence the king in ways that Antigone cannot while interacting with Creon as a citizen. While Antigone seeks the approval of the dead, she does not recognize how her living relationships have the ability to circumvent and influence the standards by which she is being judged. Instead of having her moralities exist independent of society, she could have argued for society to reflect those moralities.

In choosing to uphold divine law over civil law, Antigone demonstrates her adherence to another tenet of *oikos*, preserving tradition. Religion and tradition go hand in hand, as religious practices are handed down from generation to generation. These "ancient moralities" were cultivated by Antigone's and Creon's forebears (Sophocles

21). While it is common for Greek characters to consult a fortune-teller or oracle for religious counsel, Antigone's belief and understanding of divine laws is strong enough to act without hesitation. By adhering to the code passed down by her ancestors, she might honor and join them in the afterlife. The *polis* state, relatively new in the context of the narrative, challenges the traditional doctrines that Antigone was taught. However, since she believes her inherited culture extends through "today, yesterday, and all time" (Sophocles 22), the state has no legitimate authority to question that culture's practices. This is why she willfully disobeys her uncle's decree with full knowledge of the consequences. She will not simply obey a new rule because it is decreed. Those mandates will change, but tradition is something with which she can anchor herself morally and know she is doing her best by her family. This makes sense since the realm of *oikos* is centered around the world of "family relationships" (Blankenship 120).

Creon, on the other hand, has distanced himself from his familial obligations and is concerned only with preserving the order of society. In fact, because the conflict involves his own family, it is even more imperative that Creon appear impartial in his ruling. As ruler, he only has as much power as the *polis* state. Every citizen is a constituent of the state, even the king himself. If a single person is allowed to violate the agreed upon rules of society, it would undermine "all authority / In the State" (Sophocles 22-23). There is nothing special about Antigone or her brothers that would allow her to defy Creon's decree, so they receive "no special treatment" in his judgment (Sophocles 24). Since Creon, as ruler, must actively maintain his authority and the country he represents, he must necessarily be focused on the present. He maintains order that ties

each individual to the state, as opposed to the blood relation of families to each other. Creon's preoccupation with protecting his authority causes him to discredit the local religious authority, Teiresias, who only appears to give Creon counsel after Antigone has been condemned and buried. Teiresias' advice and prophecy, which reaffirms Antigone's point of view, is dismissed by Creon as "naked self-interest" and "greed" (44). He believes Antigone to have paid Teiresias to change Creon's mind using religious justification, refusing to believe the man could be offering him sincere advice. Only when it is too late, when Creon finally listens to the opinion of his council members, does he believe Teiresias and consider the religious perspective.

Antigone and Creon's stubborn refusal to consider how their respective value systems must interact and reconcile with each other ultimately leads to both their downfalls. The citizens of Thebes see that when the public state is at odds with the private sphere of the family, the result is the death of both. These Thebans are influenced by both their roles in society, as lawmakers and citizens, and their roles in their respective families, as husbands and fathers. When given information from multiple sources and allowed time to consider the nuance of the situation, the public's opinion is more moderate and accommodating than either Antigone's or Creon's extremism. However, the citizens were never given the opportunity to voice their opinion before tragedy befell. Queen Eurydice and Teiresias had the capacity to find legitimate authority in both the realms of the *oikos* and *polis*, but their voices had no influence on Antigone or Creon. Such figures could and should have convinced Creon and Antigone to reconsider on behalf of those around them. The tragedy of *Antigone* occurs because

the “will of the people,” invoked by both Creon and Antigone (and a central tenet of the democracy that would later characterize the Athens of Sophocles), is ignored.

Sophocles seems to suggest that if they had listened to the people, Antigone and Creon could have been reasoned with. This ideal, the practice of reasoned discourse, is at the heart of debate and would be familiar to the Athenians for whom Sophocles wrote this play.

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