

Antigone's Moral Courage

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The Greek playwright, Sophocles, is considered by many to be the greatest writer of tragedy ever. His *Oedipus* plays, in particular, are considered classics, and of them, *Antigone*, though written around 442 BCE, is one that seems especially pertinent now because of its theme of civil disobedience.

The plot is thick with the conflict that all plays require. Antigone (and her sister, Ismene) are the daughters of Oedipus. As the play opens, their two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, have died fighting each other in combat for the throne of Thebes. This occurred after Eteocles had refused to give up the crown to his brother as their father Oedipus had prescribed. Now their uncle, Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, has declared that Eteocles is to be honored in death with all the ritual and anointment that are traditional to ensure successful passage to the afterlife. But Polynices, the rightful heir, is to be disgraced by leaving his body unburied on the battlefield (a harsh and shameful punishment at the time).

Antigone cannot leave her brother to rot on the field, eaten by carrion, and determines that she will bury in him some fashion, in spite of Creon's edict to leave him unburied. Although she seeks her sister's help, Ismene says she must follow the laws of the king. And so, Antigone goes out herself, anoints the body of her brother with oil, prays and throws dust over him in an attempt at burying. She is seen by sentries and they turn her in to Creon, who is furious at this willful disobedience, questions Antigone in this excerpt, saying to her:

CREON:

And you, Antigone, You with your head hanging—do you confess this thing?

ANTIGONE:

I do. I deny nothing.

CREON:

Tell me, tell me briefly: Had you heard my proclamation touching this matter?

ANTIGONE:

It was public. Could I help hearing it?

CREON:

And yet you dared defy the law.

ANTIGONE:

I dared.

It was not the gods' proclamation. That final Justice That rules the world below makes no such laws.

Your edict, King, was strong,
But all your strength is weakness itself against
The immortal unrecorded laws of the gods.
They are not merely now: they were, and shall be,
Operative forever, beyond man utterly.
I knew I must die, even without your decree:
I am only mortal. And if I must die
Now, before it is my time to die,
Surely this is no hardship: can anyone
Living, as I live, with evil all about me,
Think Death less than a friend? This death of mine
Is of no importance; but if I had left my brother
Lying in death unburied, I should have suffered.
Now I do not.

You smile at me. Ah Creon, Think me a fool, if you like; but it may well be That a fool convicts me of folly.

The play poses many questions worth considering. How should we think about Antigone's defiance? If we consider her references to the laws of the gods as moral laws, or as ethical behavior, is she right or wrong when she disobeys Creon's edict?

Some scholars suggest Antigone is just immature and emotional and acts impetuously out of sisterly love. But others cite the rightness of her action and her understanding of "moral guilt", noting that blindly obeying orders has gotten humans into a lot of trouble over our history. I think it's worth noting that doing the harder right, instead of the easier wrong, takes moral courage.

At one point, Creon asks, "Should the city tell me how I am to rule them?" Why is this question important? Who does the city belong to? In earlier times, when kings (and their subjects) believed in the divine right to rule, kings believed the city, state or nation "belonged" to them. But now, in our democracy with elected leaders, we would do well to remember that our country is *OURS*.

One other interesting note: when Nelson Mandela was serving time in a South African prison, the prisoners received permission to put on a Christmas play and they chose to perform *Antigone*. It's interesting that they selected this play, given that they were all likely in prison for civil disobedience against state-sanctioned apartheid. Like all great literature, *Antigone* themes are universal, still speaking to us across thousands of years!

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