

ANTIGONE

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Antigone by Sophocles

Story

Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 B.C.E.) is set at the end of the Theban Civil War, and presents a classic moral dilemma. The new king of Thebes, Creon, has decreed that proper burials will be provided for all those killed on one side in the war—his victorious side, but no such burial will be available for the dead of the opposing side. This means that Eteocles will be given a proper burial, but not his brother Polyneices, who—because he fought on the opposite side—will be left as a corpse in no man's land, outside the city walls open to the depredations of worms and wolves. This state of affairs is intolerable for Antigone, one of the two sisters of the dead men. The two sisters meet at a late night rendez vous, outside the city walls, and in discussion learn that Ismene is afraid to perform the rebellious act of burying her brother, while Antigone is up for it.

In the following scene, Creon appears, reinforcing his edict, specifying that the Polyneices must not be given burial; but no sooner does he so proclaim than a sentry enters, announcing the forbidden act of burial has been performed—though no one has observing the act taking place. Not long after, the sentry returns with Antigone, and reports that she has been captured, in the act of burying her brother. Creon questions Antigone, to confirm the accuracy of this report, and having heard Antigone's fierce self-justification, Creon orders her to be imprisoned. Haemon, Creon's son, at first supports his father's decision, despite the fact that he, Haemon, is engaged to Antigone; but when Haemon urges his father to relent, Creon grows furious, and the son stalks out, determined never to see his father again. Creon decides to have Antigone buried alive in a cave, thus satisfying the displeasure of the gods, by not killing her directly; the girl is taken away, to the bitter laments of the chorus.

It is at this point that Teiresias—always sinister in Sophocles—enters the narrative with a warning to Creon—that he should see to the immediate burial of the rebel, Polyneices; the gods are displeased by the mistreatment of the corpse, and by the act of burying a living body under the earth—Creon's plan for Antigone. Teiresias adds, to Creon, that by insulting the gods he, Creon, will lose his son as well. (The doom awaiting Creon rapidly thickens!) Creon listens to this advice and to the terrified chorus, and starts to rescind his edicts and actions, but by now it is too late. A messenger enters to say that Antigone has killed herself, and not long after we learn that Haemon, discovering Antigone hanged, has stabbed himself to death. This dreadful event, further crushing Creon, is followed by the news that his wife, too has done away with herself. By this point Creon has given up entirely. He recognizes his own folly. He is still king, but in acting against the gods he has sacrificed everything, and infuriated the divine order. The Leader of the Chorus leaves us with the reflection that although pride, like Creon's, offends the gods, there is always room in the end for the wisdom that punishment brings.

Characters

Antigone is a high spirited and intrepid lover of justice and the gods who protect it. She refuses to play politics with the new king of Thebes, Creon, and though she must endure death by hanging herself, she remains true to her ideals.

Creon is the ruler of Thebes, a staunch defender of what he sees as law and order—that of the state, not of the gods. In the end he loses everything—Antigone, his own son, his wife. The folly of inflexibility wipes him out.

Ismene, the sister of Antigone, counsels against the forbidden burial of her brother, Polyneices. Once the burial has been performed, Ismene attempts to claim co-responsibility for it, but her sister refuses to let her.

Teiresias, the blind prophet Sophocles introduces also in *Oedipus Rex*, as a revealer of truths ordinary humans prefer to keep hidden.

Themes

Order in religion and state. Sophocles directs his attention in this play to the perennial Greek concern with the conflict between God's and men's laws. Performing the requisite rites is demanded by the gods, but not at the expense of human values.

Power filled pride, like that of Creon when he issues his initial edict about Polyneices, is in Greek tragedy a sure sign of readiness for a fall. Oedipus displays the same weakness in *Oedipus Rex*.