

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Sophocles

FAMILY.

PREFACE. The family is the dominant factor in the structure of ancient Greek society. When two Homeric warriors meet on the battleground at Troy, their first conversation is involved with identity establishment, figuring out how the two men and their families are interrelated. (They always are.) When Odysseus, on his return home from Troy, finds himself on the island of the Phaeacians, an unknown man who had crossed to that isolated spot from his years with Calypso, the first response of the islanders is to find out what family he belongs to. When Homer wants to inject pathos and human feeling into the hard steel war of the Iliad, he introduces us to the most touching family scene in his epic; the meeting of Hector, Andromache, and Astyanax, a truly nuclear family, on the battlements of Troy.

ANTIGONE. Antigone's anguish, outside the walls of Thebes, is prompted by her inability to bury her brother, a simple act of piety due to her closest kin, who has died fighting against his own brother for the control of the city of Thebes. Although Antigone's mandate is internal—she feels a moral obligation, rooted in her entire sense of identity—and presumably felt by all members of that society, it is nonetheless coercive that the ruler of Thebes, Creon, has forbidden any citizen moves to bury the body. He considers Polyneices a traitor, and unworthy of respectful treatment. One might say, therefore, that Antigone's present anguishing dilemma—whether or not and how to bury Polyneices—springs from a conflict over the power and values of the polis. It happens that the family bond is in this case of more importance to Antigone than any edicts Creon can issue. Transcendent laws take precedence over man-made social rules, which are what Creon is appealing to.

ELECTRA. The family is even more coercive in death than in life—Antigone's behavior illustrates this, for not only does she sneak out through the darkness and cover her brother's body with sheltering soil, to provide the respect this covering connotes, but she willingly accepts imprisonment and the loss of her upcoming marriage to Creon's son. Electra, the sister of Orestes, is equally involved in the demands made by family. She and her brother meet, in the play of her name, and agree to the murder of Clytemnestra, the mother of Electra and Orestes, and murderer of their father, Agamemnon. The obligations surrounding Electra's familial revenge take priority in her moral system, over the status quo in her troubled family. In the present case, however, and this illustrates the complexity of the Hellenic family-based mandate, Electra and Orestes have dual and conflicting responsibilities, both to take revenge on their *mother* and to take revenge on Agamemnon for having sacrificed their mutual sister, Iphigenia.

OEDIPUS THE KING. The commands of the family are more pragmatically exercised in *Oedipus the King* than in *Antigone* or *Electra*. Oedipus has an obligation toward his dead father, but that obligation does not involve an avenging murder, rather an expiating action. What that action is going to be, Oedipus learns from the prophet Teiresias, who is brought to the Palace, to shed light on the plague which has gripped the community of Thebes. Oedipus must bring up from inside himself the memory of a crossroads, two carriages meeting—his own and his father's—and an angry altercation in which he, one of the two men, kills the other, who turns out to have been his father. This impetuous act within the family lies at the base of the sure to follow calamitous events which will tear the family apart. Toxic events within families do not rest quietly, like old dogs, but stir by the fireside, and eventually manifest themselves in severe repercussions.