

Themes in Sophocles

Religion

Preface The 'official religion' of ancient Greece, from Homer through Hellenistic times, is polytheism, a belief in many gods who are united into one 'system' through their kinships, rivalries, and family squabbles (or kin interventions.) This broad and colorful panorama of deities lived itself 'down into' individual and social lives through places of worship—widely distributed temples, altars, shrines—and was officiated by a widespread corps of priests and acolytes—think of Iphigenia in the Euripidean play of her name, or of Ion in the *Ion* of Euripides. On a less structured level, the body of tales and implicit beliefs, which constituted the popular religion of Hellas, and which interpenetrated with the polytheistic system, was part of every Greek's inheritance and sustenance—the set of beliefs that shaped and gave interpretive meaning to the events of everyday life.

Antigone. The source of Antigone's 'religious' anxiety, to bury her brother, can be described in different languages. It is partly a product of the demand for justice. Polyneices and Eteocles are both rightful power sharers in the kingdom of Thebes—or so Antigone sees it. It is also a product of the language of respect—the kind of respect Ajax considered due to him, in the allocation of Achilles' armor, on account of his noble service to the Greek forces. Antigone's anxiety is also, and chiefly, the language of morality or of the religious setting in which the young woman is acting. Antigone's fidelity to her brother is not exactly the response to any specific religious 'command'—as when in an Abrahamic culture one may be enjoined to do or believe this or that, 'honor one's parents,' say, or 'praise one's creator'—but is rather the carrying through of a clan fidelity implicit in the entire culture—shaping of polytheism and its cults. Antigone is working out her life as a spiritual inheritance.

Oedipus the King. *Antigone*, therefore, prepares us to appreciate the power of Hellenic tribal loyalty and clan primacy in actions involving personal choice. Were those the drivers behind the precipitous actions of Oedipus' existence as King? We should say that the religious impulse leading Oedipus to rediscover his past was his desire to analyze the causes of plague in Thebes, but that that very 'rational' search was just what took him back to the impious, or tradition-hostile set of actions, that had penetrated his own existence. Without knowing the meanings of his own actions, Oedipus had recklessly killed his own father, and had had intercourse with his mother. He had committed serious infractions of that moral law which compelled Antigone. Oedipus found his way back into the meaning of the religious, through learning the depth of his own moral impiety.

Oedipus at Colonus. Both *Antigone* and *Oedipus the King* argue the feverish interplay of religion with public life in the imagination of Sophocles. (While Aeschylus may touch the archaic well springs of Hellenic religion, it is Sophocles who most deeply grasps the living texture of religion in the Greek mind). In *Oedipus at Colonus* we come upon a senior Oedipus who has seen it all. He has smashed through layers of his own defensive machinery and discovered the true history of his life, and he has blinded himself in self-revenge. (At the same time, as the ancient Greek view maintained, he was giving himself second or true sight, the sight of the prophet—indeed of such as Teiresias, the prophet in the palace of Thebes whose confessions most enabled Oedipus to see into his own past.) In this blinding, and gaining of a new sightedness, Oedipus has qualified himself for a kind of saintliness, in which—in *Oedipus at Colonus*—he finds himself into a condition worthy of competition and even of worship. Both Athens and Thebes—Theseus and Creon—compete for the privilege of housing the corpse of Oedipus, which has been sanctified by its depth of experience of the human condition. While the corpse remains on Athenian land, the spirit rises and disappears into a place that none but Oedipus knows, high above a grove in the deme of Colonus.