Sophocles' Antigone

Sophocles' *Antigone* comes alive in this new translation that will be useful for both academic study and stage production. Diane J. Rayor's accurate yet accessible translation reflects the play's inherent theatricality. She provides an analytical introduction and comprehensive notes, and the edition includes an essay by director Karen Libman.

Antigone begins after Oedipus and Jocasta's sons have killed each other in a battle over the kingship. The new king, Kreon, decrees that the brother who attacked with a foreign army remain unburied and promises death to anyone who defies him. The play centers on Antigone's refusal to obey Kreon's law and Kreon's refusal to allow her brother's burial. Each acts on principle colored by gender, personality, and family history. *Antigone* poses a conflict between passionate characters whose extreme stances leave no room for compromise. The highly charged struggle between the individual person and the state has powerful implications for ethical and political situations today.

Diane J. Rayor is Professor of Classics at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. She has published three book-length translations of ancient Greek poetry: *Homeric Hymns: A Translation, with Introduction and Notes* (2004); *Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece* (1991), winner of the Columbia University Translation Center Merit Award in 1992; and, with Stanley Lombardo, *Callimachus* (1988). She also co-edited *Latin Lyric and Elegiac Poetry* (1995), and her translations appear in numerous anthologies.

Sophocles' Antigone

A New Translation

Translated and Edited by
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With Director's Note by
Karen Libman

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For Connie and Harold Rayor,
and Adele and Malcolm Hast,
with love and gratitude.

Contents

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Introduction

Sophocles' *Antigone* is the most read and performed of all Greek tragedies. The play poses a conflict between passionate characters whose extreme stances leave no room for compromise or diplomacy. Antigone's character may also represent the rights of the individual, family, and women and the authority of traditional customs, in opposition to Kreon's representation of the law, the state, male authority, and political institutions. In addition, the important role and responsibility of the community (the chorus of elders) run as undercurrents throughout. The powerful conflict of principles in *Antigone* makes it highly adaptable to modern ethical dilemmas and political situations.[1]

Greek Tragedy

Festival to Dionysos

Greek tragedy was composed for performance at an annual Athenian festival honoring the god Dionysos. That festival, called the Great

[1] See Steiner (1986), Mackay (1989), and Nelli (2009).

Dionysia or City Dionysia, became fully integrated into the new Athenian democracy in the fifth century BCE. Athenian playwrights wrote and directed all of the plays for a primarily Athenian audience of 15,000–20,000 that gathered together for a six-day festival in an act of citizenship and community.[2]

In addition to being a political event celebrating Athenian democracy and imperial power, the City Dionysia was a religious ceremony dedicated to the worship of Dionysos, the god of theater, ecstasy, inspiration, vegetation, wine, and dithyrambic (cult) song. Dionysian dithyramb involved song, dance, masks, and costume – all major components of Greek theater.

Organization and Funding

The dramatic competition was state organized and supported, with plays designed for a single performance at the City Dionysia. Playwrights applied in mid-summer for inclusion in the festival to be held the following March. The annual state official selected three playwrights, each of whom entered three tragedies and one shorter satyr play that provided some comic relief after the tragedies.[3] The three tragedies could be a unified trilogy, like Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, followed by a thematically connected satyr play, or they could be entirely separate plays. For three days beginning at dawn the audiences watched plays, with one tragedian presenting each day.[4] At the

[2] In Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs*, Euripides claims that tragic poets should be respected because "we make people in cities better" (1009–10); that is, better citizens.

[3] Satyrs – bawdy male creatures depicted with pointy ears, horse tails, and erect phalluses – were associated with Dionysos in myth.

[4] Early on, a comedy was performed in the late afternoons; later, a separate day was added for comedy.

end of the competition, a panel of ten judges ranked tragedians for their four plays and awarded a prize for the best production.

To fund dramatic productions and other expensive projects considered vital to the state, a special "liturgy" tax was imposed on wealthy citizens. The liturgies could fund warships or various public works or support and costume a chorus during its six-month rehearsal period. The wealthy patrons, who could choose which projects to fund, covered all the expenses involving the chorus, whereas the state paid for the costs of at least one of the actors.[5]

Dramatists

The three playwrights of tragedy whose plays survive are Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BCE), Sophocles (c. 496–406 BCE), and Euripides (485–406 BCE). Each wrote 80–120 tragedies, yet only 32 survive. In the fourth century BCE, some of the plays were performed again, so copies must have been available then. Sophocles was said never to have come in third in the competitions, and even though we know of 118 titles of plays by Sophocles, only 7 of his plays survive.[6]

Theater Conventions

The plays were performed in the theater of Dionysos on the southern slope of the hill below the Akropolis and near the temple of Dionysos. The theater consisted of tiers of benches for the audience (viewing place/*theatron*) arranged in a semi-circle around the circular dancing place at ground level for the chorus (*orchestra*), two side paths (*parodoi*) leading into the orchestra, and the scene building

[5] Ley (2006) 9.

[6] Scodel (1984b) 8; an excellent introduction to Sophocles.

(*skenê*) with central double doors, which was located at the back of the orchestra.[7] The *skenê* allowed actors to make entrances and exits, provided room for costume changes, and could represent a house, palace, or any interior space. Actors and the chorus also entered or exited on the side paths; each *parodos* could represent a different destination. In *Antigone*, one path leads to the city (CP) and the other to the burial place or battlefield (BP). Although the scripts mention some properties, sets and props were minimal, and the visible spectacle of the chorus and the power of language carried the play. The all-male chorus and actors wore long, colorful robes and full head masks with wigs.

Choral performances, an ancient genre long predating drama, formed the initial core of dramas. Sophocles increased the chorus from twelve to fifteen members, who sang and danced to the accompaniment of an *aulos* (double-reed pipe) and percussion. At some point before the fifth century, the playwright became the first actor, speaking to the chorus and possibly the audience. Aeschylus was credited with adding a second actor, and Sophocles a third. Thereafter, the use of three speaking actors became standard practice, although there could be silent extras and children with limited or no lines. Because the three actors wore masks, they could play multiple characters. Eventually, perhaps with the increased complexity of directing more actors and of acting roles that included song, the playwright continued to direct but no longer acted in his own plays. Even though the acoustics in Greek theaters are excellent, the actors and chorus would need very strong voices to carry them through the four plays all performed in a single day. Masks and large audiences negated any effect of facial expressions or small gestures. Scripts were not circulated widely in the primarily oral society, so audiences would be attuned to remembering spoken or sung verse.

[7] Ley (2006) 17–20.

Meter

In the original Greek, the plays are entirely in verse, with spoken lines primarily in iambic, choral songs in complex lyric meters, and chanted portions in anapests. The chorus, with the force of communal authority, sings in unison the complex lyric songs between scenes. In general, actors speak and choruses sing. During highly emotional scenes, however, an actor may break out in song, directed to the chorus in a lament or *kommos*. *Antigone* contains two such episodes: Antigone's final march to her death and Kreon's final scene. In brief dialogue with actors within a scene, the chorus leader generally does not sing but speaks in the same meter as the actors.

The chorus leader also sometimes chants, either at the end of a choral ode or within a scene, because scripts record almost no stage directions, which are usually cued in the dialogue itself.[8] The chorus in *Antigone* announces most entrances and exits. The anapestic meter, probably chanted by the chorus leader, introduces a character's entrance in the last stanza of the first four choral odes and within a few scenes.

The Play Structure

Scenes alternate with choral odes, which provide a hinge[9] between two scenes. The chorus comments on the previous scene and introduces or sets the stage for the next one. During scenes, the chorus leader speaks briefly for the chorus, and his/their response can change the course of events. Although the chorus rarely takes action itself, they can question, advise, and urge characters to action. They tend to present the voice of the community within the play. Characters often deliver

[8] Taplin (2003).

[9] Goldhill (2007) 50.

lengthy, virtuoso speeches alternating with rapid, impassioned, primarily single-line dialogue (*stichomythia*). Messengers also give long speeches, which report offstage action, especially violent action.[10]

Play Topics

With one exception (Aeschylus' *Persians*), the tragedies drew from the mythological past rather than current events. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, other epics, and lyric poetry provided the tragedians with many versions of popular stories from which to choose. For instance, the late-seventh-century lyric poet Stesichoros is a source for Euripides' *Helen* in which Helen never goes to Troy;[11] the gods create a phantom Helen whom Paris kidnaps, while the real Helen remains chastely trapped in Egypt. Many dramatists used different versions of the same subject matter – witness the three extant Electra plays – and were free to create their own variants. Many works explored the Theban house of Laius, with events differing from Sophocles' extant versions (Jocasta does not hang herself, Haemon dies before Antigone's birth, Haemon and Antigone have a son, or Antigone and Ismene die in a fire). Although today editions of the three plays are often bundled as a trilogy, Sophocles wrote *Antigone* first (probably in the late 440s BCE), *Oedipus Tyrannos* perhaps twenty years later (420s?), and *Oedipus at Kolonos* was produced posthumously in 401 BCE. The two other extant versions of the Theban cycle are Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* and Euripides' *Phoenician Women*. The characters and details in each of these Theban plays should be considered separately rather than as fitting tidily into a single narrative.

[10] Goldhill (2007) 81ff. notes chorus, *stichomythia*, and messenger speeches as most problematic for modern performances.

[11] Rayor (1991) 39, Stesichoros PMG 192: "This story is not true, / you did not sail in full-decked ships / nor reach the towers of Troy."

The dramas concern royal houses mostly located outside of the Athenian territory of Attica. Athens is spared in most tragedies, and bad things, such as incest and murders within the family, tend to happen elsewhere, usually in rival states such as Thebes or Korinth. Locating the stories in other places and in a distant past provides a psychological distance that enables all the participants (audience and dramatists) to explore and question vital ethical issues. Greek tragedy serves a similar function for us today.[12]

Sophocles' *Antigone*

Sophocles of Kolonos (an Athenian district) won his first of eighteen to twenty-four victories at the Dionysia in 468 BCE. In addition to being a favored and prolific composer, he was associated with the Athenian worship of the healer god Asklepios and served in various religious and military positions, including as treasurer (443/2 BCE) and general in a war against Samos (441/40 BCE).[13]

Mythic Background

Laius, son of Labdacus, left his infant son Oedipus to die because of a prophecy that Oedipus was fated to kill him. After being raised

[12] Nelli (2009) 72: "It seems that when the dictatorship was finally over, writers and directors not only realized that the play [*Antigone*] had many things to say about the repression suffered by the people but also that, due to the remoteness of its plot in terms of time and place, it possessed a much more powerful way of expressing and effectively communicating them to an Argentine audience. It was easier to reflect on the recent events by 'showing' them as having occurred long ago and far away."

[13] Scodel (1984b) 6–7.

far from Thebes, Oedipus killed Laius, unaware that he was his father, in an act of road rage. Shortly after, he married the widowed queen Jocasta, his own mother. They had four children before they discovered the truth of their relationship. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* (King), Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself before leaving Thebes in exile. In *Oedipus at Kolonos*, Antigone, one of his four children, is her father's guide.

The *Antigone* play begins after the climactic battle in which Oedipus and Jocasta's sons, Eteokles and Polynices, kill each other while fighting over the kingship. According to other versions but not mentioned in *Antigone*, their deaths fulfill Oedipus' dying curse that his sons either destroy Thebes or each other. In some versions, Eteokles and Polynices were to alternate in ruling Thebes, but Eteokles refuses to step down after his turn. Polynices marries the king of Argos' daughter and returns with the Argive army to conquer Thebes. The night before *Antigone* begins, the brothers kill each other, the Argive army flees in defeat, and Thebes is saved. Jocasta's brother Kreon, a general in the battle, assumes the kingship as the nearest male relative left alive. For his first law as king, Kreon decrees that his nephew Polynices, as a traitor who attacked with a foreign army, must remain unburied and that anyone caught burying him be put to death. The play opens the same night, some time before dawn, with Antigone calling her sister Ismene out of the house.

The Duty of Burial

The play centers on the passionate conflict between Antigone and Kreon. Their standoff results in punishments for both: Antigone for refusing to obey Kreon's decree and Kreon for refusing to allow her brother Polynices' burial – and for burying the living Antigone

instead. Both Antigone and Kreon act on stated principles colored by their personalities, gender, and family history.

The Athenian audience would have approached the play with the understanding of the importance of a proper burial and that the family's duty is to bury its dead. A proper burial allows the dead to cross over into the underworld; it protects the state and citizens from the religious and physical pollution of an exposed corpse. The Greeks' deep-seated horror of animals mutilating the body is made clear in Homer's *Iliad*[14] and later sources.

Families had the sacred responsibility to bury their dead, with men and women having distinct roles. As the closest male kin, Kreon should be the one to arrange for Polynices' burial. Women were responsible for bathing, dressing, and anointing the body and for laying it out for viewing. The body would repose on view in the courtyard of the house, while women sang ritual lamentations.[15] Men performed the burial of either the whole body or of cremated bones and ashes.

By the fifth century, the Athenian state regulated funerals both through earlier laws on general burial practices and more recent laws governing state funerals for men killed in war. Although the earlier laws aimed to curb extravagant funerary displays by the aristocracy, they also resulted in restricting women's public lamentation in the funeral procession and at the gravesite. Funeral laments had the potential to incite political disorder. The funeral for war dead ensured equality in honoring the dead and promoted civic pride. It also allotted only limited time for women to mourn privately before the dead were buried in elaborate public funerals under state control.[16]

[14] Achilles' rage made men "prey for dogs and a feast for birds" (*Iliad* 1.4–5).

[15] Bacon (1994/5).

[16] Tyrrell and Bennett (1998) 8–11.

In general, burial of the dead was a sacred obligation, particularly of kin, but traitors might be forbidden burial within the boundaries of the *polis* or city-state, which included the urban center and the surrounding rural territory. For example, Athenian traitors could be denied burial within Attica; the law forbidding burial of traitors may have been in effect as early as the production of *Antigone*.[17] However, it would be unusual to forbid everyone from burying a man *outside* of the home territory of the deceased and to post guards to enforce that decree. Why could Polynices not be buried outside of Theban territory? Kreon takes an extreme position within his legitimate authority to prevent the burial of a traitor (who is also his nephew). Kreon rules Thebes as the nearest relative of Oedipus' family, yet he repudiates familial bonds with Oedipus' children. To an Athenian audience, however, it would also be considered shocking for a woman to defy male authority boldly, without hesitation. Unlike her sister Ismene, Antigone assumes the right to transgress traditional gender boundaries. Like other tragedies, *Antigone* "explores situations in which women's loyalties to their families conflict with their appropriate social roles."[18] Yet, in the context of the play and in the absence of proper male support, Antigone's determination to bury her brother and not allow his body to be mutilated must be seen as sympathetic.[19]

Women in Athenian Society

Women in Athens were lifelong legal minors, who exercised no political or financial rights. A woman was not a legally or morally responsible agent in Athens. Respectable citizen women left home only to

[17] Holt (1999) 663.
[18] Scodel (2005) 235.
[19] Holt (1999); an excellent article on interpreting *Antigone* in scene order.

attend religious rituals and funerals and to aid in childbirth. Fortunately, they had an active religious life and participated in the many Athenian festivals, including dramatic festivals. The woman's guardian (*kyrios*) – father, husband, son, or closest male relative – would be her representative for all legal and financial decisions. Kreon would be Antigone's *kyrios*, because her father and brothers are dead and she is unmarried.

Marriage and Death

The Athenian *polis* consisted of a collection of individual households, the *oikos*, which included the extended family, slaves, animals, and property. Each household needed a legitimate male heir for its continuity and strength. Therefore, a father or his representative *kyrios* would arrange the daughter's marriage for the purpose of "sowing legitimate children." To ensure the legitimacy of heirs, girls were married off right after puberty (13–15 years old), leaving their natal home to join their husbands' *oikos*. Although we assume Antigone's brother would have already arranged her marriage to her cousin and Kreon's son, in the play, Kreon is her *kyrios.* He arranges her marriage to death, and "Antigone sings for herself the very wedding hymn and funeral dirge that Kreon has denied her."[20]

We do not tend to associate marriage with death, yet Greek thought, literature, and ritual closely connects them. In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, an anonymous poem composed in the early seventh century BCE, Hades kidnaps Persephone to be his bride.[21] The story of Hades and Persephone, frequently retold and referenced, became a motif of marrying death. The connection in daily life was

[20] Rehm (1994) 64.
[21] Rayor (2004) 17.

also clear. Girls married in their young teens to men who were usually twice their age and had a high mortality rate in childbirth.[22] Infant mortality was high as well. A funeral could indeed follow swiftly after a wedding, transforming "the melody / of weddings to the sound of wailing dirges."[23] In addition, wedding and funeral rites, in which women played a crucial role, had many similarities. The bride and corpse were washed, dressed, anointed, and either veiled (bride) or shrouded (corpse). Both journeyed to a new home, led by a procession of family and friends carrying torches, with song and dance, blessings, gifts, and a feast.[24] *Antigone* makes those connections explicit in marrying Antigone to death in her last scene instead of to Kreon's son, her betrothed.

Language

Kreon and Antigone do not speak the same language, or rather they use the same words to mean very different things, with disastrous consequences. The Greek word *nomos* (the root of "economy," *oikos-nomos*) means custom and law. Although it was the traditional custom for family to bury their dead, Kreon's law forbids Polynices' burial. Antigone and Kreon both act according to their own understanding of *nomos*.

The word *philos* can refer to "kin" (family bound by kinship) or simply to a friend bound by ties of affection. These categories are particularly important in the traditional heroic ethic, which valorizes helping friends (*philoi*) and harming enemies.[25] Kreon uses one

[22] Demand (1994) 102: "women who give birth before the age of seventeen have a higher mortality rate than older women."

[23] Rayor (1991) 124: Erinna.

[24] Rehm (1994) 29.

[25] Blundell (1989).

meaning of *philos*, "friend," whereas Antigone uses the other, "close relative or loved one." Polynices attacked Thebes and so was no friend of the state; to Kreon, Polynices was not *philos.* Even so, Polynices was still Antigone's brother; to Antigone, Polynices remained irrevocably *philos*.

Translation

This introduction provides a background to the play, whereas the notes provide more detailed explanations of words, lines, and connections more apparent in the Greek. All the supplementary material is based on what students, teachers, directors, and casts needed or wanted to know. The bibliography lists a very small selection of the extensive fine resources available on ancient Greek drama and performance, and specifically on Antigone.

My goal for this *Antigone* was to produce an accurate translation that reads well and works well as a script for performance. I aimed for precision in meaning, and where I could not make it both precise and playable, I put an explanation in the notes. The experience of reading a translation of drama should be as close as possible to that of reading and hearing the Greek text. Rather than close down possibilities, it is the translator's responsibility to keep options of interpretation as open and rich as those available to readers of the original Greek. For performance, the language must be clear and work in speech. Can the actors say these lines and the audience understand them – in a single hearing and at the tempo in which they should be spoken or sung?

My translation was tempered in the fire of two productions, two courses in advanced Greek, and four courses in translation (mythology, classical world, and ancient religion). A week-long translation

workshop with poets on the island of Paros in Greece helped refine two choral odes. An outreach session on *Antigone* for local high school teachers led a year later to the second production and a few more adjustments. The translation process involved colleagues in classics and theater, students in a variety of courses, international poets, my family, and area teachers and audiences.

The premiere production of this translation was by far the most critical to its development. In winter 2009, GVSU theater director Karen Libman and I collaborated with twenty-one students enrolled in the Classical Theatre Workshop to study, rehearse, and stage *Antigone*. Working closely with director and actors, I fine-tuned the translation into an actable script. Some lines looked fine on paper, but did not sound right when spoken by actors. In Antigone's dirge, the words "Mt. Sipylos" sounded like "syphilis," completely destroying the mood![26] Hearing lines aloud and in action triggered most of the revisions. Many times, students' questions or suggestions led to further revisions. If participants had questions, I either adjusted the translation or added information to the introduction or notes. The rehearsals resulted in more than one hundred changes – some involving a single word, others whole passages. The rhythms of speech and interaction shaped the translation.

I use the more common Latinized spelling of some names for the sake of familiarity (Oedipus) and pronunciation (Haemon); otherwise, I use the Greek forms (Kreon). For the Greek text, I primarily followed Mark Griffith's *Sophocles: Antigone* (Cambridge, 1999).

[26] This is the only place name left out of the translation.

Scene List

Kreon
Haemon

Fourth Song of the Chorus 781–800

Scene Five 801–943
Chorus Leader
Antigone
Kreon

Fifth Song of the Chorus 944–87

Scene Six 988–1114
Tiresias
Kreon
Chorus Leader

Sixth Song of the Chorus 1115–54

Scene Seven 1155–1256
Messenger
Chorus
Eurydice

Scene Eight 1257–1353
Chorus Leader
Kreon
Messenger

Characters enter and exit through the doors into the palace (*skenê*) or on the wing side paths (*parodoi*). One path leads from the city (CP) and the other to the battlefield or burial grounds (BP). The chorus enters and exits on the *parodoi*.

Cast of Characters

ANTIGONE	*Daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta*
ISMENE	*Antigone's sister*
CHORUS	*Theban elders*
KREON	*Jocasta's brother, Antigone's uncle*
GUARD	
HAEMON	*Kreon's son*
TIRESIAS	*Seer*
MESSENGER	
EURYDICE	*Kreon's wife*

SILENT ATTENDANTS OF KREON, TIRESIAS, AND EURYDICE