

## Sophocles' *Antigone*

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Sophocles' *Antigone* is easily the most influential of all ancient Greek tragedies: its themes of familial and moral duty, individual defiance to the state, political leadership under duress, and adherence to the law have captivated countless artists, audiences, and thinkers across the globe for over two millennia<sup>1</sup>. Unlike other surviving plays by Sophocles, which are typically focused on a main character around whom the tragedy unfolds<sup>2</sup>, *Antigone* features two protagonists whose clash powers the drama. Modern receptions of *Antigone* tend to emphasize the stark Hegelian dichotomy between family (*oikos*) and state (*polis*) that is perceived to be embodied by the two protagonists: Antigone as a figure who utilizes the burial of her brother as a way of resisting civic authority, and Creon as an inflexible ruler whose very obstinacy leads to his and his family's downfall<sup>3</sup>. A closer look at the play, however, reveals that both protagonists were equally implicated in obligations concerning both family and state, as well as in private and public matters. Creon is not simply ruler, but he is also the *kyrios* of Antigone's household, a figure appointed to wield legal and financial power over her and her sister after the death of their father. Similarly, Antigone's persistence on performing funeral rites for her brother is more than a mere act of civil disobedience: by leaving the house she, a young unmarried woman, instead insists on intervening in the male public sphere, thereby refusing her proper place indoors.

In order to highlight these and other similar complexities, this chapter locates Sophocles' *Antigone* in its ancient context. We first consider the mythical background of the play in order to illuminate Sophocles' innovations in constructing a unique and subtle plot in one of the most familiar of Greek legends, centered around a novel confrontation between a niece and uncle, ruler and ruled. We then elaborate on a few key topics in the ancient play, which have proved to be especially influential in modernity, and particularly resonant in Portugal and Brazil: tyranny and opposition to power (and the gendered conflict implicit in

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Steiner (1984), Goff and Simpson (2007), Willmer and Zukauskaite (2010), Mee and Foley (2011), Honig (2013), Miola (2013).

<sup>2</sup> The *Trachiniae* is a striking exception, but it is important to note that Deianeira and Heracles never meet as characters on stage, which means that it is very likely that the protagonist of the play played both roles.

<sup>3</sup> See below Hardwick, p. .

this); death and isolation; and divine law and secular order. An examination of the wider framework in which these themes were situated in classical Athens demonstrates both the intricate nature and continuing relevance of this ancient play.

### 1.Sophocles' new *Antigone*

The popularity of Sophocles' *Antigone*, which has eclipsed all other ancient versions of the Theban saga of the house of Labdacus, often obscures the fact that in antiquity Antigone herself was a relative latecomer to a well-known saga about male dynastic possession. Before the fifth century BC, mythical narratives appear to have been centered on the men of the family: Laius, Oedipus, Eteocles, Polyneices and the Seven against Thebes, and their sons, who starred in the lost epics *Thebais*, *Oidipodeia* and *Epigonoï*, as well as in fragments by Hesiod and Stesichorus. Until Sophocles' version, Greek Tragedy seemed destined to continue in the same masculine fashion: Aeschylus' earlier trilogy consisted of the lost plays *Laius* and *Oedipus*, and *Seven Against Thebes*. If we are guided by the surviving final play, women appear to occupy traditional and almost stereotypical roles: the frightened chorus of women almost has no place in the larger male world of violence. Excluding the end of Aeschylus' *Seven*, where she emerges only to perform the traditionally female act of burial (a presence which is furthermore contested, as scholars believe it to be a later addition incorporated after the popularity of Sophocles' play)<sup>4</sup>, Antigone is barely present in the surviving literary remains of the myth<sup>5</sup>. Earlier mythical accounts tend to depict the fight over the burial of the enemy dead as a larger conflict between Creon, Adrastus, and the Argives, one that requires the intervention of Theseus and an Athenian army, and in which, furthermore, there is no place for a lone dissenting female voice.<sup>6</sup>

Given the larger context of this established Theban tradition, it is easy to see the manner in which Sophocles effectively transforms the nature of the conflict, exponentially lessening its scope, from a multi-city-state issue to a localized Theban affair involving a single family<sup>7</sup>. Instead of discussing the scores of Argive dead, the focus is now on the single body of Polyneices. Through this change Sophocles effectively removes from the myth all traces of

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<sup>4</sup> For a general sketch of the arguments, see Lloyd-Jones (1959), Dawe (1967), Taplin (1977) 169-91, and Sommerstein (2010) 90-3.

<sup>5</sup> For an overview, see Gantz (1993) 519-22 and Zimmermann (1993).

<sup>6</sup> Euripides' later play *Suppliant Women* crucially broadens the focus of the myth by introducing the perspective of the mothers of the fallen Argives.

<sup>7</sup> Griffith (1999) 8-10 provides a fuller discussion of Sophocles' innovations.

Athens, whose involvement helped resolve the conflict between Argos and Thebes in other narratives. Sophocles also creates new characters: Ismene, Eurydice, and Haemon, thus significantly expanding the role of women in the saga<sup>8</sup>, as well as escalating the implications of the burial for the whole family. Most notably, the playwright, who eschews the traditional subject of an inter-city dispute, crafts his Antigone, who seemingly appeared as a silent player, as a mighty opposite for her uncle Creon. Thus, in Sophocles' version, a young woman unexpectedly occupies the role that mythical accounts had previously given to the legendary kings Adrastus and Theseus. Though Antigone and Creon are shown in a direct confrontation only in the first third of the play (specifically in a climactic dispute at 441-525), the rest of the play stages the aftermath of their clash: Creon's subsequent altercations with Haemon (631-765) and Tiresias (988-1090) fundamentally hinge on his opposition to his niece. With Antigone, Sophocles effectively invents one of the most powerful and compelling antagonists in ancient literature. In his influential book *The Heroic Temper*, Bernard Knox locates Sophocles' uniqueness in the choice to focus his tragedies around an individual tragic hero, a figure who actively goes against mortals and gods in his actions and then 'blindly, ferociously, heroically' holds on to what he believes to the point of self-destruction<sup>9</sup>. That both Creon and Antigone equally fill this role is a testament to the playwright's ingenuity.

At the same time as locating the conflict within a single family, Sophocles significantly expands the role of the divine in the myth. The presence of the gods is felt throughout the play, though the dramatist never physically summons them to his stage, as he had with Athena in *Ajax*. Not only does Creon invoke them directly in his very first lines in the play, but Antigone explains her motivation to bury her brother by appealing to their 'unwritten laws' (*ἀγραπτα...νόμμοα*, 454-455)<sup>10</sup>, hinting that the refusal of burial will lead to divine anger. Throughout the play, the gods represent invisible but powerful presences. The guard's first and second speeches contain numerous hints at the gods' personal involvement in the burial of Polyneices. Tiresias confirms the displeasure of the divine at Creon's refusal by interpreting the extraordinary failure of his famed augury and sacrifice as a sign that the gods are no longer accepting human prayers. That the birds themselves (as well as stray dogs) pollute the altars of the city with bits of the decayed flesh of the unburied Polyneices (1017-

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<sup>8</sup> Griffith (2001) esp. 126-136.

<sup>9</sup> Knox (1964) 5.

<sup>10</sup> Harris (2004).

1022) makes the point quite clearly. Finally, the might of the divine permeates various choral songs, which constitute hymns to particular gods (*parodos*, the third and fifth *stasima*), thus accentuating a compelling vision of the might of the divine.

Other tragic Antigones followed, but none were able to dethrone Sophocles' heroine. Euripides' lost *Antigone*, whose plot is summarized in the hypothesis of Sophocles' version by Aristophanes of Byzantium, ascribes a larger role to Haemon, who is presented as her husband and accomplice, as well as the father to a son called Maeon<sup>11</sup>. The Latin author Hyginus (*Fabula* 72) recounts another version, similarly involving a more active Haemon, which scholars believe stemmed from another play, the *Antigone* by Astydamos the Younger produced in 341 BC<sup>12</sup>. In this version, Antigone and Polyneices' wife, Argeia, attempt to place his body on Eteocles' funeral pyre. When they are detected, Argeia escapes and Creon orders his son Haemon to kill his betrothed. Haemon pretends to do so, but instead conceals Antigone, who gives birth to their child. This son later returns to Thebes and is recognized. Once his plot has been discovered, Haemon decides to kill both his wife and himself. In Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (409 BC) and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 BC), Antigone similarly plays a supporting role to a male protagonist. Given the proliferation of Antigones after Sophocles, as well as the degree of variation in their accounts of the heroine, the revolutionary nature of Sophocles' version is clear. By significantly enlarging the role of Oedipus' daughter, who previously existed in the shadow of her brothers, Sophocles experiments with the myth in extraordinary ways, and in so doing, irrevocably alters the course of the reception of the Theban saga.

## 2. Tyranny and Opposition to Power

The confrontation between Creon and Antigone is not only ideological, as the Hegelian hermeneutic model recognizes, but also aligned with ancient protocols of gender<sup>13</sup>. The collision of the diametrically opposed positions that the play's two protagonists are crafted to represent — the protection of the interests of the city vs. one's duty to the family — is cast as a clash of the sexes on the Sophoclean stage: a male ruler-turned-tyrant is set against a female

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<sup>11</sup> Collard and Cropp (2008) 161. See also Kannicht (2004) 261-312.

<sup>12</sup> Inglese (1992), Huys (1997) 18-19, Zimmermann (1993) 270-4. Cf. Taplin (2007) 185-6 (no. 64).

<sup>13</sup> Hegel, as Lardinois (2012) 61 notes, was the first to read the play as a conflict between a man and a woman, but his analysis does not intersect with ancient attitudes to gender. On feminist approaches to *Antigone* inspired by Hegel, see the various essays in Söderbäck (2010).

transgressor. Honoring a dead brother in accordance with the custom of kinship is not just an act of filial devotion, as modern readers might be prompted to interpret it. The social and legal ramifications of Antigone's defiance of male authority cannot be properly understood unless her revolt is examined within the context of gender hierarchies in Greek antiquity. By the same token, Creon's violent subjugation of his niece's rebellion against masculine law makes full sense only if it is read in connection with the complex nexus of gender and power that informed Greek understandings of politics and management of the public sphere.

Creon's modern counterparts are typically portrayed as leaders of dictatorial regimes right from the beginning of their dramatic transplantation. In *Antigone*, Thebes' new king does not voice his tyrannical sentiments until the third episode, during his stichomythia with Haemon. In the inaugural speech (162-210) he delivers to the chorus of Theban elders on his first day in office, Creon declares his ruling principles so eloquently that he leaves no room for the play's original Athenian audience to question his patriotic intentions and commitment to the restoration of civic order in the aftermath of the internecine war between Oedipus' two sons<sup>14</sup>. As their nearest surviving male relative, Creon steps in and undertakes to steer the city — poetically compared to a ship that has survived a storm — into the harbor of peace and stability<sup>15</sup>. His decision to ban the burial of Polyneices on Theban soil, although extreme, is grounded on the logic of sovereignty. Polyneices was a traitor. He attacked his own country, his own family. As a punishment for his crime, his body is to be left to rot on the battlefield — a prey for birds and dogs. Creon defends his decree by arguing that loyalty to the state is paramount and takes priority over the interests of the individual. Friendship and kinship are subordinate to the welfare of the city.

In his first appearance on stage, Creon casts himself as a devoted champion of the *polis*, an institution regarded as an exclusively male domain in Greek antiquity. There is nothing in his speech (at least on the surface) that suggests an authoritarian attitude<sup>16</sup>. On the contrary, Creon's ruling receives the strong endorsement of the chorus, who represent the

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<sup>14</sup> Although audience responses are never uniform and with the exception of a few tragedies impossible to retrieve, Demosthenes, a century later, cites with approval Creon's words of unselfishness in his attack against his rival Aeschines in *De Falsa Legatione* 247. Aeschines, who had been an actor before his involvement in politics and often played the part of Creon, knew the lines well. See Knox (1964) 181, n. 52 and Hall (2011) 57-59.

<sup>15</sup> On Aeschylus' use of the city-ship theme with reference to Thebes, see Sommerstein (2010) 72, 82-83. On the undemocratic connotations of the metaphor, see Badger (2013) 82-87, Vardoulakis (2013) 52-69.

<sup>16</sup> In light of the play's tragic end, Creon's decree displays a lack of foresight, an important trait for a leader. On the dichotomy between 'real' good sense and 'apparent' good sense in the play, see Lauriola (2007).

citizens of Thebes. Their leader accepts, on their behalf, the injunction, affirming that, as the city's new ruler, Creon can pass any law concerning both the dead and the living (213-214). Although it is incompatible with the recovery of the corpses of eponymous warriors from the sphere of myth, such as Patroclus and Hector, from a historical perspective Creon's edict is in line with an Athenian law — referred to by Thucydides (1.138.6), Xenophon (*Hellenica* 1.7.22), and Plato (*Laws* 873b-c) *inter alios* — which forbade the burial of polluted bodies (such as those of traitors, temple robbers, and other types of criminals) within the borders of the community<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, Creon's thesis that the public interest takes precedence over personal interests is echoed in a speech that Sophocles' contemporary popular statesman Pericles delivered to the Athenian assembly in 430 BC, some years after the first performance of *Antigone*<sup>18</sup>. In that speech (Thuc. 2.60), Pericles argues that the state is the foundation for all the benefits that its citizens enjoy and therefore far more important than any individual<sup>19</sup>.

As the action unfolds, Creon changes progressively into an oppressive and obdurate dynast who lacks self-control and grows deaf to advice<sup>20</sup>. His gradual descent into despotism becomes evident in his stichomythia with Haemon (episode three) and then with Tiresias (episode five).<sup>21</sup> Creon's initial claim that a good patriot cannot remain silent when he sees destruction march against his country (185-186) is forgotten as soon as Haemon informs him that the citizens of Thebes, although they will not dare speak out, disapprove of their new monarch's edict and have started to see Antigone's desire to bury her brother with sympathy (683-723). Creon, not seeking to establish a polyphonic model of administration, responds to the reported criticism with a question that conveys his rage and marks his transformation into the very opposite of the Athenian democratic ideal: an autocrat: "So, will the city tell me how I must rule?" (Πόλις γὰρ ἡμῖν ἀμὲ χρῆ τάσσειν ἐρεῖ; - 734). For Creon, decision-making does not rest on a pluralistic basis, but is identified with the will of the man who holds the power. Creon views the state as an extension of the ruler. While he reserves the right of speech for himself, he denies it to his subjects, reducing them to voiceless bodies needed only to listen

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<sup>17</sup> For scholarly debates about the legality of Creon's decree, see Jebb (1900) xxiii, Höppener (1937) and more recently Griffith (1999) 29-32, Bennett and Tyrrell (1990), Foley (1995), Shapiro (2006). On the disposal of the corpse as a punitive measure taken against various types of wrongdoers in Athens, see Parker (1983) 43-47, Lindenlauf (2001).

<sup>18</sup> Antigone's reference to Creon as a 'general' (8) has led some scholars to draw parallels between Sophocles' character and Pericles. See esp. Ehrenberg (1954) 105-112, Meier (1993) 196-199.

<sup>19</sup> For other political *topoi* reproduced in Creon's speech, see Podlecki (1966) 361, Crane (1989) 112, nos. 41 and 42, Carter (2012) 118.

<sup>20</sup> On ancient philosophical responses to a leader's refusal to listen, see Hall (2010) 307.

<sup>21</sup> On the parallel structure of the two interactions, see Blundell (1989) 138.

to his commands. Not only does he regard himself the only voice in the city that matters. He also, rather hubristically, believes that the city belongs to him, as his next rhetorical question to his son demonstrates: "Isn't the city considered the possession of its ruler?" (οὐ τοῦ κρατοῦντος ἢ πόλις νομίζεται; - 738). Creon's tyrannical personality is fully unveiled at this point. He reveals his true self behind the mask of the loyal king he put on when he first entered the stage<sup>22</sup>. Creon emerges as a despot who seized power too hastily after the death of his two nephews, although he was not the legitimate heir to the throne of Thebes,<sup>23</sup> and is determined to retain it by intimidation and force<sup>24</sup>.

To be sure, Sophocles hints at Creon's autocratic side long before the reversal in the second half of the play. In the prologue, Ismene advises her sister against disobeying a "tyrant's vote or power" (ψηφον τυράννων ἢ κράτη, 60). When the chorus expresses the suspicion that the sprinkling of dirt onto Polyneices' dead body might have been the work of the gods, Creon dismisses their words as "intolerable" (οὐκ ἀνεκτὰ, 282). A few lines later, he tells the guard that he "speaks annoyingly" (ἀνιαρῶς λέγεις, 316). But it is the insubordination of his own niece that brings Creon's despotism to the fore. What makes Antigone's act so transgressive by ancient standards is the fact that of all the people of Thebes it is a woman (who has no legal status as a citizen and cannot hold office) that challenges the king's authority to pass a law<sup>25</sup>. This defiance of male power does not take place behind closed doors, but in front of the chorus. Women in antiquity did not speak in public or vote at the assembly; their proper domain was the *oikos*. When they had to appear outside of the house, in a context unrelated to a religious service, they were escorted by their *kyrios* — namely their husband, father, or (in the absence of a husband or father) another male kinsman<sup>26</sup>. Since both of Antigone's father and brothers are dead, Creon, as the nearest male relative, is her legal guardian and Antigone falls under his control. The play, however, reverses gender stereotypes, casting in the active role an unmarried daughter, the most

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<sup>22</sup> Ironically, in his opening speech (175-177) Creon argues that a man's true character, mind, and judgment cannot be known until he proves himself through the test of rule and law giving.

<sup>23</sup> Sophocles departs from the Boeotian legend according to which Eteocles and Polyneices had a son each, Laodamas and Thersander respectively (Herodotus 4.147, 5.61). Creon assumes power by reason of consanguinity (ἀγχιστεῖα, 174), a principle whereby inheritance rights were decided in Athenian law (Carter (2012) 122). As opposed to the chorus, Antigone does not acknowledge Creon as a king and even refuses to look at him (441-442).

<sup>24</sup> Antigone insinuates that the fear of the chorus for Creon's tyranny silences their opposition (504-509).

<sup>25</sup> See Creon's triple accusation he hurls against Haemon: that fights on the side of woman (740), that he has submitted to a woman (746), and that he is slave to a woman (756).

<sup>26</sup> Foley (2001) 179 provides evidence from tragedy to argue that in classical Athens, as in rural Greece, in the absence of all her supporting male relatives a surviving daughter could (at least symbolically) take on roles appropriate for men.

submissive member of the ancient family<sup>27</sup>. According to one scholar, the heroine's action "is thus a crime not only against civic law but also, ironically, against the family and the patriarchal authority vested within it"<sup>28</sup>. In this light, Antigone's punishment, to be immured in a cave with a small food supply to starve to death (773-780), can be read as an attempt by a man and king to restore the traditional gender and social order. But, as we will see in the last section, far from suggesting a victory of man over woman, the play's end complicates gender hierarchies and points to the dialectical relationship between the *polis* and the *oikos*, power and resistance.

### 3. Death and Isolation

In *Antigone*, the dead populate the stage. In a genre that only used three actors to play all speaking roles, the tragedy unusually features three deaths by suicide. If we add these to the corpses of Polyneices and Eteocles, the dead easily outnumber the living by the end of the drama, when only Ismene and Creon are the only family members left alive<sup>29</sup>. In a play that debates the right to perform burial rituals for the dead, the question of how to interpret these new deaths takes special urgency. Most modern adaptations assume that Antigone's death is a noble affair, and subsequently read her steadfastness in a positive light, akin to Christian self-sacrifice<sup>30</sup>. Set against the larger ancient Greek context, however, her radical nature emerges, and in particular her role as a figure who transgresses in terms of her politics and gender. Not only does she advocate to living without a *polis*, or at least unbound by its rules, but she also ignores her duty to produce an heir that will continue the nearly extinct Labdacid line, all while displaying an unfeminine concern with honor. In this section, we locate the suicides of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice as well as Antigone's self-imposed isolation within a fifth-century BC context, in order to reveal issues that may have particularly resonated for an original viewing audience.

The idea of self-sacrifice and of suicide in particular is complex in the ancient world. Greek literature, and tragedy especially, is full of examples of 'noble suicides', especially

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<sup>27</sup> Antigone's behaviour is in stark contrast to that of Haemon who expresses his obedience to his father's authority as soon as he comes on stage (635-638). On Haemon's filial devotion as a model for civic *philia*, see Wohl (2009) 123.

<sup>28</sup> Wohl (2009) 120.

<sup>29</sup> These are in addition to Oedipus and Jocasta, whom Antigone invokes repeatedly, e.g., 897-899 and 911.

<sup>30</sup> Jebb (1900) xxv was the first modern scholar to compare Antigone to a Christian martyr ready to accept death for a nobler cause.



young women such as Macaria in *Children of Heracles* and Iphigenia in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, who choose to sacrifice themselves for the larger good of their community<sup>31</sup>. Many other figures in tragedy offer to give up their lives for the sake of their families and children, such as Alcestis in her eponymous play, Andromache, who in *Trojan Women* offers her own life in exchange for that of her son, and even Helen in her eponymous play expresses that she is willing to die. In *Antigone*, however, the ethics of her self-sacrifice are not clear. In sacrificing her own life for her brother, Antigone explicitly rejects the last surviving members of her family, which include her sister Ismene and her uncle, who is also her appointed guardian<sup>32</sup>. That she repudiates her living sister for a sibling who is already dead is highly unusual, particularly as she speaks of pleasing the dead (ἀρέσκειν, 75), choosing death ([εἶλον] καθθανεῖν, 555) and serving the dead (ὥστε τοῖς θανοῦσιν ὠφελεῖν, 561), as well as the notion of marrying Acheron (Ἀχέροντι νυμφεύσω, 816)<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, she ignores her duty to replenish the line of Labdacus as one of a handful of surviving members<sup>34</sup>.

The play features two other suicides, which are no less thorny, given that both Haemon and Eurydice appear to have been summoned onto Sophocles' tragic stage exclusively to die, in order to deal a crushing blow at Creon. In earlier versions of the myth, Haemon had been killed by the Sphinx prior to Oedipus' arrival<sup>35</sup>. His resurrection and betrothal to Antigone seem to have been a unique Sophoclean invention that serves to link the heroine and Creon even further and more intimately<sup>36</sup>. On a superficial reading, Haemon's death might seem to have been motivated by his grief for Antigone, as suggested by the chorus upon his first entrance (627-630). The messenger's report of his death (1192-1243), and in particular the final confrontation between father and son, however, marks Creon as responsible<sup>37</sup>. Likewise, Eurydice appears to have been added to this particular version of the myth for the sole purpose of killing herself: not only is she brought unexpectedly on stage in the play's final movement to serve as the silent audience for the messenger's dramatic narration of her son's final moments<sup>38</sup>, but she has the shortest speaking role in the play, with

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<sup>31</sup> For these and other 'noble suicides' in tragedy see Garrison (1995) 129-167.

<sup>32</sup> Blundell (1989) 111-115.

<sup>33</sup> On the bride of Hades motif, see Seaford (1987). On the more general theme of marriage and death, see Segal (1981) 179-183 and Rehm (1994) 59-71.

<sup>34</sup> Murnaghan (1986).

<sup>35</sup> West (2003) 40-43. According to Apollodorus (*Bibl.* 3.5.8), Haemon's death at the hands of the Sphinx in turn prompted Creon to declare that he would give up his throne to whomever killed the beast.

<sup>36</sup> Griffith (1999) 9.

<sup>37</sup> See especially 1174 and 1117.

<sup>38</sup> Unexpected and unannounced entrances are more Euripides' forte; see Taplin (1977) 11 n. 3.

a mere nine verses (1183-1191)<sup>39</sup>. Though parts of her death operate in conventional terms (e.g., the manner in which she rushes off stage in ominous silence, 1244-1245, much like Jocasta in *OT* 1073-1075), the practicalities are not: she dies a particularly ‘virile’ death in the manner of a warrior by plunging a sword beneath her liver<sup>40</sup>. Furthermore, her death is the ultimate rejection of her husband, Creon, whom she repudiates in favor of joining her death son. Her death has a powerful effect on Creon: in the play’s final scene, upon learning of his wife’s death (a discovery which comes immediately after hearing about his son’s suicide), Creon, formerly the prominent voice of reason and the law, is now reduced to inarticulate mourning. The last image of the play is thus that of Thebes’ chief political male, who had previously objected to being ruled by a woman (e.g. 525, 740-756), performing the predominantly female act of lamentation over his dead family members. Given that suicide was seen as a form of pollution in the ancient world<sup>41</sup>, the overabundance of self-killing in the *Antigone* would have, for the original viewing audience, infused the play with an inescapable air of contamination.<sup>42</sup>

Antigone’s insistence on her brother’s burial, in express defiance of Creon’s decree forbidding the act, similarly reverberated beyond the tragic stage, as the rights of women to lament in public and to participate in funeral rites were being contested in many places throughout the ancient Greek world. In Ancient Greece, lament was categorically defined as a gendered art and voice<sup>43</sup>, and burial practices were typically assigned to women<sup>44</sup>. Starting in the sixth-century BC, Athens and other *poleis* began to legislate a series of funerary laws aiming to restrain any excessive manifestations of mourning confirms the perceived disruptive power of female lamentation for the dead<sup>45</sup>. In Athens, the laws of Solon above all changed the nature of funerals conducted in the city<sup>46</sup>. A main concern appears to have been women’s conduct at the funeral, in particular curbing women’s proclivity to excess grief in public, whether as hired or private mourners. According to Plutarch, Solon placed women’s

<sup>39</sup> She is beaten by Pylades for the title of shortest speaking role in extant Greek tragedy (*Choephoroi* 900-902).

<sup>40</sup> Loraux (1987) 54 note 23.

<sup>41</sup> Garrison (1995) 11-23. See also, the famous example in Aeschines’ *Against Ctesiphon* 244 where the hand of a man who committed suicide was buried apart from the rest of the body.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Meinel (2015) 84-113, who emphasizes the overabundance of pollution in the play, discussing in particular its larger role in the crisis of ‘civic space’.

<sup>43</sup> Alexiou (1974), Sultan (1993), McClure (1999), Lardinois and McClure (2001).

<sup>44</sup> For an overview of fifth-century burial politics, and a reading of the play in this context, see Honig (2013) 95-120.

<sup>45</sup> On Greek funerary legislation, see Alexiou (1974) ch. 1, Garland (1985) ch. 3 and 1989, Toher (1991), Seaford (1994) ch. 3, Foley (2001) 22-26.

<sup>46</sup> There are three sources for this law: Plutarch’s *Life of Solon*, Demosthenes 43.62, and Cicero *De Legibus* 2.59-66.

public excursions, mourning and festivals under a strict law that aimed to curb any disorder and licentiousness<sup>47</sup>. These laws may in part have to do with new anxieties about death and pollution, as Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood proposes<sup>48</sup>, given women's role in handling the dead body<sup>49</sup>, or perhaps they are more a result of a concern to diminish social instability produced by lavish and emotionally intense aristocratic funerals<sup>50</sup>. Nicole Loraux discusses another suggestive fifth century development, the emergence of the Athenian state-sponsored literary genre of the *epitaphios logos*, or public funeral oration; this specific male-centered discourse left no room for women's lament<sup>51</sup>. Despite any real restrictions in the city, the art of lamentation continued to be one of the predominant speech genres that male authors assigned to individual female characters in classical Greek literature, particularly in drama<sup>52</sup>. In this context, Antigone's insistence on carrying out these ancient female mourning traditions in the face of Creon's attempts to control the ritual take on added resonance<sup>53</sup>.

Though Antigone may in theory demand to perform rites which her gender made her right as the nearest kinswoman to the dead, throughout the play she is isolated as a female transgressor, who gives up marriage by actively defying her uncle and burying her brother. The play stages a slow but certain process of isolation for Antigone, one in which her otherness is emphasized. The opening dialogue with Ismene, who is equally implicated in the death of her brother, underline Antigone's activities as unfeminine (e.g. 61-62) from the outset. When Antigone first admits that she has buried her brother, she refers to herself with a masculine adjective (464)<sup>54</sup>. Elsewhere in the play, various masculine forms replace in order to describe Antigone (e.g. 479, 496, 579-580). Later Creon attempts to persuade his son to steer away from Antigone, describing her in terms of a "bad woman" (γυνή κακή, 650). In the end, however, Antigone dies a very feminine death, lamenting her death as a childless, unwed virgin, shut up in an enclosed space, and committing suicide, the classic tragic death for

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<sup>47</sup> Plutarch, *Solon* 21.5.

<sup>48</sup> Sourvinou-Inwood (1983).

<sup>49</sup> See Kurtz and Boardman (1971) 146 and Parker (1983) 35.

<sup>50</sup> This would explain the ban on 'set-piece laments' (τὸ θρηνεῖν πεποιημένα), in Plutarch, *Solon* 21.6.1. See also Seaford (1994) 79-86, esp. 83.

<sup>51</sup> Loraux (1986) 42-50.

<sup>52</sup> Holst-Warhaft (1992), McClure (1999), Foley (2001). McClure (1999) 93 considers it the characteristic speech act for female characters on the tragic stage.

<sup>53</sup> McClure (1999) 49 sees the play as an example of 'how female lamentation affords a means of resisting masculine civic authority.'

<sup>54</sup> Pomeroy (1975) 100-101.

women<sup>55</sup>. Ironically the heroine who pledged her life to bury her brother does not herself receive a burial or even a lament in her final scenes.

#### 4.Divine Law and Secular Order

Despite its construction on the binary opposition between human and divine law, *Antigone* does not allow its spectators to side fully either with its eponymous heroine or with Creon. Although the two laws are portrayed as mutually exclusive in Sophocles' autocratic Thebes, they can coexist harmoniously in the playwright's native democratic city, as Pericles' famous funeral speech attests. Praising the paradigmatic lawfulness of his co-patriots, the Athenian statesman notes: We "obey those who are currently in office and we obey the laws, especially those which are established for the benefit of the victims of injustice and those unwritten laws whose breach brings undisputed shame" (Thuc. 2.37.3)<sup>56</sup>. Similarly, Aristotle, in discussing the dialectical relationship between written and unwritten law in his *Rhetoric* (1.15.1375a-b), cites with seeming approval lines 456 and 458 — where Antigone defends her disobedience to Creon's *nomos*, although it is basically a proclamation — in an attempt to show that it is possible to circumvent the written law for the sake of the unwritten law.<sup>57</sup> The unwritten law, the ancient philosopher remarks, is constant and based on nature, whereas the written law is ephemeral and varies with time and place.

What complicates audience responses to the polarity upon which *Antigone* is framed is the character reversal that both protagonists undergo in the second half of the play, where the antithetical positions they so rigidly defend earlier collapse. When Antigone is brought to her tomb, assuming that no one in the city supports her, she acknowledges Creon's decree as a law (847) despite her original resistance<sup>58</sup> and admits that she acted "against the will of the citizens" (βία πολιτῶν, 907)<sup>59</sup>. Her admission of civil disobedience is part of a longer passage in the fourth episode (904-920), which some of Antigone's scholarly defenders consider as spurious<sup>60</sup>. Antigone there states that the law to which she adhered dictates the burial of the

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<sup>55</sup> Loraux (1987).

<sup>56</sup> Translation quoted from Wohl (2009) 122. The chorus affirms the compatibility of the two laws in 368-371.

<sup>57</sup> It should be clarified that Aristotle here provides an argument to prosecutors dealing with appeals based on unwritten law; he does not make the case for this type of law per se. The same passage from *Antigone*, including the omitted line 457, is quoted in 1.13.1373b, but the point Aristotle makes there is about the vagueness of the φύσει δίκαιον. See Ostwald (2009) 136, no. 35.

<sup>58</sup> In the *agôn* with Creon, Antigone refers to his law as proclamation (κηρύγματα, 454).

<sup>59</sup> Antigone describes her act using Ismene's own words in the prologue (79).

<sup>60</sup> For critical responses to the authenticity of the passage, see Lardinois (2012) 63-64.

brother, since he is irreplaceable, but does not apply to the burial of the husband or children who can be replaced through a new marriage. This eclectic application of interment rites, expressed during Antigone's last appearance on stage before she goes to her death, calls her ethical principles into question and has been the subject of considerable scholarly speculation about the ways in which it can be interpreted in order to be compatible with the heroine's overall depiction as a devotee to the chthonic gods who preside over the rites offered to all the dead without discrimination<sup>61</sup>.

At the play's close, Creon, too, reconsiders his original positions, albeit far more explicitly than Antigone. He, who earlier dismissed his niece's devotion to divine law stating impiously that "it is a useless labor to revere Hades" (πόνος περισσός ἐστι τὰν Ἄιδου σέβειν, 780), in the final scene is forced to admit his defeat to this very god (1284-1285). Seeing the corpses of Haemon and Eurydice, he regrets his inflexibility and failure to respect unwritten customs, and surprisingly does so in a sung mode, as he laments his wife and son. This theatrical gesture, as scholars have pointed out, wholly feminizes the Theban ruler, "since mature males in tragedy burst into lyrics only at moments of extreme suffering and self-destruction"<sup>62</sup>. In the play's closing lines, Creon witnesses the disaster that his hubristic pursuit of power has caused: he is left without family and with no respect from the people he chose to rule upon. He who was at the top of the city's hierarchy declares himself "no more than a mere nobody" (τὸν οὐκ ὄντα μᾶλλον ἢ μηδένα, 1325), as he asks his servants to take him away from the stage — and hence from the public sphere.

Before she meets her doom, Antigone prays to the gods to make Creon suffer if he is wrong (925-928), and the gods grant her wish. Although at the play's close Creon is punished for his arrogance, Antigone does not emerge as a victor. The gods she served so devotedly do not save her, nor does Tiresias, their spokesman, utter a word of praise for her self-sacrifice. The only one who supports her openly is the man who is in love with her. In attempting to convince his father to reconsider Antigone's condemnation to death, Haemon shares what the citizens of Thebes say behind Creon's back: a woman who has accomplished such a glorious deed does not deserve to die, but is worthy of golden honor (695-699). These lines, as Knox

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<sup>61</sup> Foley (2001) 175-180 provides an excellent summary of the various scholarly interpretations of the passage.

<sup>62</sup> Mee and Foley (2011) 41. Suter (2008, esp. 159), on the other hand, uses Creon, among other male characters in Greek tragedy, as an example to problematise scholarly assumptions about lament as a purely female activity in the genre.

notes, serve as a "timely reminder of Antigone's heroic status"<sup>63</sup>. Like most heroes in Greek myth, Antigone finds a tragic end, which problematises the statement she makes before she leaves the stage for good: if the gods do not approve her actions and she suffers death, then she will know that she was guilty (925-926). The play stages a conflict between divine law and secular order, but does not privilege one domain over the other. Rather, it establishes a complex dialectic between the *polis* and the *oikos*, the public and the private, showing that it is impossible to reduce justice to a specific law. It is because of this open-ended dialectic that *Antigone* has been rewritten and restaged so frequently, and perhaps more than any other Greek tragedy, especially at moments of national and political crisis.

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<sup>63</sup> Knox (1982) 53.

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