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## Introduction to *Antigone*

Sophocles' *Antigone* powerfully presents a painful choice that all human beings at all times and places can imagine facing. We all have families, and we all belong to political communities of one kind or another. What if they clash? What if we are forced to choose between our flesh and blood and our country?

Through his vivid portrayal of this dramatic conflict and its unforgettable characters—Antigone, Creon, Haemon, and Ismene—Sophocles raises a series of fundamental moral questions that all human beings must at some point confront and ponder. Does justice consist primarily of devotion to one's family or to one's country? Should one defy those who are powerful—even in a just cause—when there is no reasonable hope for success? Should one count on divinity to support the righteous, no matter how weak they may be, and to punish the wicked, no matter how strong? What is our duty to our loved ones who have died? Ought we to go so far as to imperil or to sacrifice our happiness for their sake? Should we choose happiness in an afterlife over happiness in this life?

Dramatic debates concerning these great questions dominate the action of the play. The two principal characters—Antigone and Creon—take part in one debate after another. Creon debates his niece and subject Antigone (441–525), his other niece Ismene (526–581), his son and heir Haemon (626–765), and the prophet Teiresias (988–1090). Antigone appears in three scenes in the course of the play, the first two of which consist of debates, first with her sister Ismene (1–99), then with Creon and again with her sister (441–560). In her last scene, Antigone gives voice to anguished doubts about the justice and piety of her actions and thereby engages in a kind of debate with herself (801–943). Sophocles' play calls its audience and readers to enter into these debates, and to wrestle with such questions as the central question of the play: Which should come first, kin or country?

At first glance, Sophocles' *Antigone* appears to answer that question clearly and unequivocally. Antigone chooses her family, and the case for her choice seems

overwhelming. As the play opens, we learn that the Thebans have just vanquished the Argive army that attempted to destroy Thebes, and have slain the Theban traitor Polyneices who led that army against his city. We hear that the new king, Creon, has decreed, on pain of death, that the corpse of Polyneices should be left unburied, as food for dogs and birds, in order to deter future treason. We then see a solitary girl—the grieving sister of Polyneices, Antigone—fearlessly challenge the mighty king and denounce his decree as unjust and impious. Eventually, all the characters in the play support her denunciation—including, finally, the king himself—the body of her brother is buried, and the king suffers terribly for his injustice and impiety, apparently at the hands of the gods.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, then, the unambiguous lesson of the play is that Antigone is right and Creon is wrong.

Yet Sophocles' text raises questions about this apparently obvious reading of the play. Most simply, if Antigone is right and if the gods support her, why does she come to such a miserable end? If Antigone is right, why does she herself come to doubt her righteousness, and why does she commit the seemingly despairing act of taking her own life?<sup>2</sup> In order to explore these questions, let us consider the character of Antigone more closely.

The characteristic of Antigone that strikes us most forcefully—most immediately in contrast to her sister Ismene—is her courage. While the cautious, prudent Ismene argues that the two sisters must bow to the might of Creon, Antigone insists on burying the corpse of their brother in fearless defiance of the king (1–99). Through this defiance of Creon, Antigone exhibits a courage that sets her apart from all the other heroines, and even all the heroes, of classical literature. In the first place, she defies King Creon all by herself, without any assistance from her countrymen or reasonable expectation of sympathy from them, since she is burying the corpse of a man who has just led an invading army against Thebes and who has killed the king of Thebes—his own brother and hers, Eteocles. Creon takes it for granted that whoever tried to bury Polyneices was part of a broad conspiracy with sufficient resources to bribe the soldiers guarding the corpse and even to bribe the prophet Teiresias as well (220–222, 289–326, 1033–1036). When Creon learns that it was Antigone who buried the corpse, he assumes that at least her sister must have helped her (484–496, 531–535, 561–562, 577–581, 769–771). But Antigone here stands alone—heroically alone—against her entire city. She is even more alone than such heroes as Sophocles' Ajax or Homer's Achilles when they defied the Achaian army, since, as commanders respectively of the Salaminian and Myrmidon forces, they could count on the support of a large body of warriors.

Antigone is also singularly proud in her defiance of Creon, as we may see by comparing her behavior with that of other classical heroes in comparable

<sup>1</sup> See 450–470, 692–700, 742–749, 940–943, 998–1032, 1064–1090, 1270, 1301–1321, 1349–1350.

<sup>2</sup> For Antigone's despair, see especially 916–926.

situations. Antigone refuses to beg the Theban king to let her bury the corpse out of pity for her—as Priam, for example, begs Achilles in the final book of the *Iliad* to let him bury the corpse of his beloved son Hector. Antigone makes no attempt to beseech Creon to be magnanimous toward his vanquished enemy, as do Odysseus and Ajax's brother Teucer when they try to persuade the Achaian kings Menelaus and Agamemnon to allow the burial of the corpse of Ajax in Sophocles' *Ajax* (1047–1162, 1223–1373). Antigone does not even try to persuade Creon by appealing to his piety, as Teiresias does later in the play (*Antigone* 992–1114). Instead, she passionately denounces Creon to his face for his injustice and impiety.

Perhaps most importantly, Antigone's defiance here is singularly courageous in classical literature because she is a girl, publicly challenging a very powerful older man in a world dominated by older men. Even the young, tactfully critical Haemon incurs the harsh wrath of his father on the grounds that the young must always defer to the old (726–727). But Antigone is a very young woman, about to be married: she is most widely referred to in the play as a “girl” or “child.”<sup>3</sup> Everyone in the play assumes that only a man would dare to challenge the king, since, it is presumed, only a man would have the physical and moral strength to confront Creon's soldiers or to face the torture with which Creon threatens those who oppose him (248, 332–375, especially 347; consider as well 218–222, 268–277, 304–314, 432–440, 931–932). Ismene suggests that since they are women and hence naturally weaker than men, they simply cannot win in an open, violent conflict with the mighty king (61–64). Yet Antigone does not use secrecy or deception, as Ismene advises, to overcome her natural debility (84–85). She does not use the indirect, subtle methods that other heroines of Greek drama use to outwit and to defeat their more powerful (but less astute) male adversaries. She does not conspire against Creon, as Clytemnestra conspires against Agamemnon, Electra against Aegisthus, Medea against Jason, or Praxagora against the democratic assembly of men in Athens. Alone in Greek literature, among mortal women, Antigone openly and publicly challenges her enemies. She is more

<sup>3</sup> Antigone is referred to in the play four times as “girl” or “maiden” (*kore*, 395, 769, 889, 1100) and seven times as “child” (*pais*, 378, 423, 561, 654, 693, 949, 987). It is true that she is also referred to eleven times as “woman” (*gune*), but nine of these references are made by Creon and may reflect his eagerness to dissuade the chorus and Haemon from pitying her (525, 579, 649, 651, 678, 680, 740, 746, 756; 62, 694). Consider, for example, Creon's remark to his son: “Do not ever, son, cast out prudent thoughts on account of pleasure for the sake of a *woman*—knowing that this turns out to be a cold embrace: an evil *woman* as one's bedmate in one's home” (648–651). The chorus and the guard refer to Antigone only as “girl” or “maiden” (395, 1100) or “child” (378, 423, 949, 987), never as “woman.” Haemon refers to Antigone once as “child” and once as “woman,” when he tells his father: “But for me it is possible to hear, undercover, these things: how the city laments for this *child*, as the least deserving of all *women* to perish miserably on account of deeds most glorious” (692–695). Even Creon refers to Antigone twice as “girl” (769, 889) and twice as “child” (561, 654). For Antigone's imminent marriage to Haemon, see, for example, 568, 627–630, 1223–1225.

defiant of Creon than is any man in the play, except for the aged prophet Teiresias (and, unlike Antigone, Teiresias knows he commands the respect of the Theban people—992–994, 1090–1095). The guards cower before the king, the venerable elders fear him, the common people of Thebes shrink from speaking their mind to him; even Haemon, at least initially, flatters his father. But Antigone is fearless (compare, for example, 218–244, 259–277, 329–331, 635–638, 683–686, 690–691 with 432–436, 441–448). Who must not be impressed and moved by such nobility?

Furthermore, notwithstanding her sister's argument that Antigone's noble defiance of King Creon will prove futile and destructive (49–99), Antigone's heroism is crowned with success. In the course of the play, her condemnation of the powerful king for injustice and impiety is taken up and reiterated by his son, by a prophet, by his wife, by the elders of his realm, and finally by the king himself.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the play, the corpse of her brother is buried, and King Creon suffers the terrible loss of his son, a loss foretold by the prophet Teiresias as a punishment from the gods. It therefore appears that it is the gods themselves who enable the seemingly helpless girl to triumph over the powerful king. In this way, Sophocles' play appears to vindicate the belief in just gods who reward the righteous, no matter how weak, and punish the wicked, no matter how powerful.

Through her heroic devotion to her family, Antigone even appears to redeem her accursed family in the eyes of the gods. The house of Oedipus has been a spectacularly impious one, guilty of terrible crimes against the family. Antigone is herself the offspring of an incestuous union; her father committed patricide; and her brothers have just killed one another. But through her noble willingness to defy her king, her sister, and her city in order to bury her brother—even at the price of her marriage to the king's son, and of all the happiness and power such a marriage might have brought to her, and even at the price of life itself—Antigone apparently wins the gods' favor both for herself and for her family. The gods send the prophet Teiresias, the ancient adversary of her father, to intervene on behalf of both Antigone and her brother; and they ultimately ensure the burial of Polyneices and avenge both Antigone and her brother by punishing Creon and his family. The unhappy history of the house of Oedipus ends with the glorious triumph of Antigone. Oedipus killed his father, Oedipus's mother killed herself, and his sons slew one another. Oedipus blinds himself and suffers the infamy of his crimes and exile from his city—even though he does find refuge and honor away from home, in Athens. But Antigone dies heroically, redeeming her family, avenged by the gods, and honored by her fellow Thebans.

<sup>4</sup> See 450–470, 692–700, 742–749, 940–943, 998–1032, 1064–1090, 1270, 1301–1321, 1349–1350.

Yet this reading of the play as a clear vindication of Antigone and her devotion to her family is called into question by the anguished self-doubt that she suffers at the end of her life, as well as by her subsequent suicide. In her last scene of the play, Antigone no longer consistently and defiantly condemns Creon for his injustice and impiety but rather voices doubt about her own justice and piety:

What justice of the divinities have I transgressed?  
 Why should I, miserable one, still look to the gods?  
 Who of allies is there to call upon—since indeed  
 I have acquired impiety by being pious?  
 But if now these things are noble in the eyes of the gods,  
 Then, having erred, we would come to understand  
 through suffering. (921–926)

Antigone then commits suicide, just before she is about to be rescued by her fiancé Haemon and to be spared by a contrite Creon. Why does she suddenly doubt herself here? Why does she kill herself, now, when she is on the verge of triumph? Does the fact that she takes her own life suggest that she feels forsaken by the gods, either because she believes them indifferent to her justice and piety or because she doubts that she is worthy of their assistance? If the play simply vindicates Antigone and her conviction that there are just gods who favor her, why does she wonder why she should still “look to the gods” (922)? Is her piety too weak? Is she less courageous—less heroic—than she first appears? Or are her doubts regarding her own justice reasonable?

Antigone identifies justice with devotion to one’s family. Even though she never denies that Polyneices was an enemy of Thebes, her city and his, she never even mentions his treason. For her, what is important about Polyneices is simply that he was her brother, her blood brother, offspring of her own mother and father (45–46; see also 466–468, 502–504, 511, 513, 517, 911–912). In her eyes, the most important human community is the community united by flesh and blood (36–38). Only members of her family are “loved ones” (9–10, 73; see also 461–464). By pleasing her family, she pleases “those whom I must especially please” (89). Yet, in the course of the play, Antigone repeatedly and bitterly quarrels with her family. Does she thereby contradict her own understanding of justice? The play opens with Antigone quarreling with her “very own dear sister” Ismene and twice declaring her hatred for her, for failing to join in the burial of their brother (1, 86–87, 93–94). In her next scene in the play, we see Antigone harshly denounce the disloyalty of her now-repentant sister and sarcastically congratulate her for having subordinated her duty to her family to her own survival: “Save yourself; I do not envy you your escape” (553). In this scene and throughout the play, Antigone vehemently attacks

Creon, who is her uncle as well as her king.<sup>5</sup> Finally, in the last scene, Antigone simply forgets her surviving sister when she proclaims herself to be “the sole woman remaining of the royal line” (941; see also 895). Now, one might argue that Antigone does not here contradict her understanding of justice as devotion to one’s family by denouncing her sister and her uncle, since she denounces them precisely for their disloyalty to and irreverence for the family. But, on the other hand, one might wonder—as she herself wonders in her final scene in the play (consider 897–913)—whether her devotion is not directed toward one family member *over* others rather than to her family *as such*, whether the family is clearly a natural whole or natural unity, and hence whether devotion to the family offers a clear principle of justice.

Insofar as Sophocles’ text prompts us to question the case for Antigone and her understanding of justice, does it not also prompt us to reconsider the case for her great antagonist, Creon, and his understanding of justice? There are, to be sure, a number of reasons for regarding Creon as the villain of the play. In the first place, Creon seems heartless. By forbidding the burial of Polyneices and exposing his corpse to dogs and birds, Creon acts pitilessly toward Polyneices’ already-grieving relatives by further inflaming their grief (see especially 407–431 and also 26–30, 198–206, 696–698). When a guard reports that someone has surreptitiously administered burial rites to Polyneices, Creon at once threatens to torture all the guards until they find the culprit (304–314, 324–326; see also 259–277, 327–331). When Antigone admits that she buried her brother, Creon unhesitatingly condemns both her and her sister—his nieces—to death (473–498, 577–581). When Haemon, Antigone’s fiancé and Creon’s own son, pleads for her life, Creon exclaims that he will execute her before his son’s eyes (760–761). When Creon begins to worry that the gods may punish him for shedding his niece’s blood, Creon decides to shut Antigone up in a cave, with a little food, with the apparent expectation and hope that she will starve to death (773–780, 883–890).

Furthermore, by the end of the play, Creon denounces his own wickedness and embraces Antigone’s belief that justice means devotion to the family over the city. Once he is ordered by Teiresias to bury Polyneices, Creon at first lashes out in anger but then quickly relents and laments that he has not followed established religious laws by allowing Antigone to bury her brother. In this way, Creon concedes that Antigone was right in her belief that the gods—including Justice herself—demand that families always be allowed to bury their dead, even if they are enemies of the city (1108–1114, 450–470).<sup>6</sup> Later, by accepting blame for the suicides of his son and his wife, he seems to condemn himself as an enemy of

<sup>5</sup> In contrast to Antigone, Creon portrays his conflict with her as a family conflict. See 486–490.

<sup>6</sup> For divine law, see also Sophocles, *Ajax* 1129–1132, 1342–1345; Homer, *Iliad* 16.453–457, 667–675; Euripides, *Suppliants* 18–19, 307–313, 524–563.

the family and hence of the gods, and he seems to accept the chorus's conclusion that by issuing the edict forbidding Polyneices' burial and by punishing Antigone for defying that edict he has clearly been guilty of both injustice and impiety (1261–1350).

It is important to keep in mind, however, that throughout most of the play, the chorus backs both Creon's edict against the corpse of Polyneices and his punishment of Antigone.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Antigone herself seems to take the argument Creon makes on behalf of his edict seriously. While Ismene's argument challenging the prudence of her burial of Polyneices does not shake her resolve, Creon's argument challenging her justice and piety seems to arouse in her far-reaching doubts concerning the justice and piety of her actions (consider 512–521, 891–926). It is only after her debate with Creon that Antigone's self-confidence begins to falter and even eventually collapses.

One might object to taking Creon's argument for his edict seriously on the grounds that the gods clearly punish Creon in the play for issuing and enforcing that edict. After all, doesn't the prophet Teiresias foretell the death of Haemon as a divine punishment, and doesn't Haemon die immediately thereafter? Yet the play's presentation of that prophecy and that death may not conclusively demonstrate that the gods punish Creon. In the first place, notwithstanding the claims of the chorus and of Creon himself that Teiresias is perfectly wise (1091–1097, 1059), Teiresias does fail to predict the death of either Antigone or Eurydice. Teiresias's prediction regarding the timing of Haemon's death might also seem rather open-ended:

But know well then that not many more  
 Courses of the racing Sun shall you complete,  
 Before you yourself will be giving one from your loins,  
 A corpse in exchange for dead ones. (1064–1067)

What is more, the prediction that Haemon will die before “many more” days have passed as a consequence of fighting with his father is not an entirely implausible prediction if, as would seem to be possible, Teiresias has heard of the very public quarrel that has just taken place between father and son, in which Haemon has threatened to commit either patricide or suicide (751–752, 760–765). Indeed, the account that the first messenger gives of Haemon's death suggests that this foretold death almost does not occur. When Haemon discovers that Antigone has committed suicide, he first tries to kill his father. It is only after he misses his father with his sword that he angrily kills himself (1220–1239). Does the play, then, depict the

<sup>7</sup> See 100–154, 211–214, 365–375, 471–472, 724–725, 801–805, 853–856.



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world as one ruled by just gods, who communicate their will through prophets, or as a world governed by chance, in which we humans are left on our own to fend for ourselves, as best as we can? The first messenger remarks when announcing the death of Haemon:

For Fortune sets up and Fortune casts down  
The fortunate one and the unfortunate at every time:  
And there is no prophet of the things established for  
mortals! (1158–1160)

If the gods do not clearly punish Creon in the play, we must consider for ourselves the case for Creon, and specifically his argument for the justice of his edict.

Creon's argument for punishing the corpse of Polyneices is based on his claim that this measure will benefit the city, and on his thesis that justice means devotion to the city rather than to the family. Creon apparently knows that this thesis is at odds with the traditional understanding of divine law, according to which justice demands that family members be permitted to bury their dead relatives whether or not they were loyal to the city (see 1113–1114). Accordingly, he does not consult with the prophet Teiresias before issuing his edict forbidding the burial of the traitor Polyneices, even though he has always consulted him in the past (992–995). But Creon evidently believes that since justice cannot consist of devotion to one's family over one's city, and since the gods must be just, the traditional understanding of divine law must somehow be mistaken (280–289, 511–522).

The beginning point for Creon's argument concerning justice is the nearly fatal political crisis that Thebes has just gone through, caused by the fratricidal struggle for power between Polyneices and Eteocles, Oedipus's sons and Antigone's brothers (162–174). This *civil* strife, that almost destroyed Thebes, Creon stresses, is rooted in *familial* strife. The Theban political community has hitherto based its political unity on devotion to one family, the royal house of Laius, on the assumption that the family is a natural unit, a natural whole. But the fratricidal strife that has torn that family apart indicates that the unity of Thebes must be based on something other than loyalty to a single family. Indeed, the whole history of the royal family from Laius to the present, which Creon alludes to here, would seem to demonstrate that the family as such can never be a reliable source of unity. The attempted infanticide of Laius, the patricide of Oedipus, and the fratricides of Eteocles and Polyneices seem to show that the family is not a simply natural community, and that it has no clearly shared common good, since members of that community will, for example, kill one another, their own flesh and blood, to attain or protect political power.

Accordingly, rather than argue that the Thebans should now be loyal to the new royal house of Creon, and that they should, for example, pledge their loyalty

to his son Haemon, Creon goes on to argue for loyalty to the entire city and for the importance of never favoring oneself or one's family over the city (182–190). Creon argues that, unlike the family, the city provides a clear, shared, and truly common good to all the citizens. He compares the city to a ship, a ship of state, on which all citizens clearly depend for their self-preservation. There is, then, a common good for all citizens, one that encompasses their individual good and the good of the families.

Creon acknowledges that, like the family, the city can be torn apart by greed or ambition (288–303, 672–676). But, unlike the family, the city can appeal to a natural human passion powerful enough to hold in check such greed or ambition: the desire for self-preservation. By providing security to the citizens, the city can satisfy their powerful desire to stay alive. And by demonstrating its awesome might to the greedy and ambitious, the city can arouse in them an overpowering and salutary fear of death.

The key to securing the city from danger is a firm ordering of both the city and the family. As Creon later explains to his son, “There is no greater evil than anarchy; this is the destruction of cities, this is what makes households overturned” (672–673). Therefore, to preserve the city that preserves us all, a fearsome order must be maintained both throughout the city and within the family. Accordingly, Creon stresses, citizens must obey rulers, sons must heed fathers, the young must respect the old, and women must be ruled by men (see 218–222, 289–314, 324–326, 473–489, 525, 578–579, 632–680, 726–748). If these conventional hierarchies are not strictly respected and maintained, chaos will ensue and ultimately sink the ship of state. The passion that the city should rely on for its stability is the fear of death. If citizens seek above all to preserve themselves, they will uphold order and thereby preserve the city. On the other hand, those who cherish some goal beyond mere survival, those who, for example, seek power and wealth and violate the laws to achieve such goals, threaten the whole city with destruction. We see, then, that while Creon may well be temperamentally a harsh man, there is an argument for his harshness in terms of the common good: by inspiring fear, Creon's rule avoids anarchy, maintains peace, and hence benefits the city.

Creon goes on to justify his edict forbidding the burial of Polyneices by claiming that it will strengthen the city by deterring potential traitors who may be tempted to challenge their king's rule and plunge Thebes into anarchy, and it will deter them by appealing to their fear of death (191, 194–210). Even though Polyneices is already dead, the effect of seeing his body torn and devoured by animals will impress on those who behold this spectacle that Polyneices truly has been annihilated, since he will be deprived of the burial that would confer a kind of immortality on him, either in the afterlife or through posthumous honor. By showing the potential enemies of the city that the city can thoroughly destroy them in this way, Creon hopes to teach them the importance of obeying the

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city that preserves them; and he thereby hopes to save Thebes from anarchy and destruction.

Antigone challenges this elevation of the city over the family, most eloquently and powerfully, by invoking an authority higher than the city: the gods. She explains her violation of Creon's edict to Creon and the chorus:

Yes, for it was not Zeus Who proclaimed these things to me,  
Nor was it She, Justice, Who dwells with the gods below,  
Who defined these laws for human beings;  
Nor did I think that such strength was in your  
Proclamations, you being mortal, as to be able to  
Prevail over the unwritten and steadfast lawful conventions of the gods!  
For not as something contemporary or of yesterday, but as everlasting  
Do these live, and no one knows from where they appeared. (450–457)

Antigone contends here that only the gods' laws are truly binding on human beings, for only the gods' laws are truly just, eternal, and enforced with the threat of divine punishment (458–470). Since the laws of political communities are devised and enforced by mere humans, they may be justly and reasonably violated if they conflict with divine law. And Antigone insists that Creon's edict conflicts with divine law in forbidding her to bury her brother. In her eyes, the city is simply a mortal entity, but the family is eternal. As Antigone has suggested to Ismene, the family continues to exist after death, forever, in an afterlife, and the gods reward those who are devoted to the family with an everlasting happiness in the company of their family (71–77, 80–81, 89, 93–97). Therefore, humans should devote themselves to what is, in the eyes of the gods, the true community, the eternal community, of kindred flesh and blood.

Antigone's invocation of the gods and the afterlife challenges Creon's whole argument for the importance of devoting oneself to the city. Indeed, in the light of eternity, in the light of divine rewards and punishments after death, how important is the self-preservation that the ship of state offers the loyal citizen and the death with which it threatens the disloyal one? Creon, however, is not shaken here by this challenge, for Antigone's belief that justice means devotion to the family over the city must, in his view, destroy the city—and neither justice nor the gods can support the destruction of the city (see 278–289).

The crux of Creon's challenge to Antigone is his argument that the family is not a genuine whole or unity, and therefore that it is simply impossible to be consistently devoted to the family (511–521). Creon challenges Antigone's belief that justice means devotion to the family by asking her a simple question: By honoring your brother Polyneices with burial, are you not honoring the murderer of your other brother, Eteocles? Antigone could argue that by burying Polyneices she is

not honoring one brother above the other but is simply making sure that each receives the minimal honor due to any brother. But Antigone herself believes that if justice means devotion to the family, justice demands the punishment of those who are disloyal to their family. Hence she affirms that the disloyal Ismene will be hated by the souls of their dead family and punished by the gods; and she fears that she herself will be punished if she is not loyal to her brother (93–94, 76–77, 83, 542–543, 553; 46, 450–460). Yet, Creon asks, has not Polyneices exhibited flagrant disloyalty to his family by killing his own brother? How, then, can she believe that it is just to honor him? And how can she believe that the souls of Eteocles and her other dead family members or the gods would approve of her honoring this fratricide with a burial? Antigone can reply only by asking: “Who knows if these things are free from pollution down below?” (521). She thereby leaves entirely open the question of whether or not the dead and the gods approve of her action. But if she is so uncertain, how can she be confident of the justice and piety of her actions?

Creon contends that Antigone’s own definition of justice self-destructs. If justice means devotion to the family, it is impossible for her to be just in this case, since each brother is guilty of a crime against the family. The premise of Antigone’s whole understanding of justice and piety is that the family constitutes a true unity, a natural, permanent, and sacred whole. But doesn’t the whole sad story of her family—culminating with the fratricidal struggle of her brothers—call that premise into question?

It would seem, then, that the case for Creon is a strong one. But if that is so, why does Creon ultimately renounce his whole understanding of justice as devotion to the city over the family and return to divine law, which commands devotion to the family? Creon begins to abandon his understanding of justice and to return to divine law even before Teiresias declares that he must bury Polyneices or suffer punishment from the gods. The first indication of his return to the belief that justice consists of devotion to one’s family is in the aftermath of his debate with a close member of his family—his son, Haemon. Before that debate, Creon had resolved to execute Antigone and also Ismene (473–498, 577–581). After that debate, Creon resolves to spare Ismene entirely and declines to execute Antigone directly because—he now suddenly believes—to shed the blood of his own niece would bring pollution (*miasma*, 775) upon him, just as Polyneices and Eteocles brought pollution (172) upon themselves by shedding their brother’s blood. In this way, Creon acknowledges that justice entails, at least, devotion even to those family members who have violated the laws of the city. He also expresses concern that the gods may punish him and his city for shedding the blood of his niece (773–780). Finally, he acknowledges the possibility that the gods will intervene to save Antigone from death as a reward for having buried her brother as required by divine law; hence, presumably, he acknowledges the possibility that the gods may punish him for having attempted to thwart her. Accordingly, when Teiresias

later demands that Creon bury Polyneices as required by divine law and free Antigone, it is not altogether surprising that Creon yields fairly quickly. Indeed, his dispute with Haemon has already prompted him to embrace the belief that justice and piety require devotion to family members who are disloyal to the city, and to wonder whether the gods may not deem Antigone's burial of her brother wholly just and pious.

How does the debate with Haemon undermine Creon's conviction that justice means devotion to the city over the family? On the one hand, it is possible that Haemon's argument is so compelling that it persuades Creon to begin to abandon his understanding of justice. Haemon contends that, unbeknownst to his fearsome father, the Theban people secretly side with Antigone. Indeed, he suggests, the people will rise up, sweep away Creon's rule, and plunge Thebes into anarchy if Creon does not yield to them (688–700, 712–718). Haemon concludes, then, that Creon should recognize that, rightly or wrongly, the Theban people believe that justice consists of devotion to the family over the city, and should therefore give in to Antigone for the sake of the city's well-being as well as for his own power.

On the other hand, it is possible that Haemon induces his father to abandon his understanding of justice, not through his argument—which his father may well dismiss as the unfounded claims of an impassioned lover (568–570, 626–630, 781–799, 1220–1225)—but rather through the simple fact that he is Creon's son, his last son (626–627), his flesh and blood, as his very name signifies in Greek. Indeed, as the debate between father and son over the fate of the son's beloved fiancée proceeds, Haemon's anger erupts, he publicly accuses Creon of injustice and impiety, and he appears to threaten to kill his own father and king, a threat that he later attempts to carry out (742–743, 745, 751, 1220–1239). Through his accusation and especially through his apparent threat of regicide, Haemon threatens the well-being of Thebes almost as much as Polyneices, who actually killed his brother the king, and certainly more than Antigone, who has simply tried to bury the corpse of her brother in defiance of the king. Must Creon, as king, not punish such lawlessness? Must he not punish his own son, even with death, in order to save the city from the evil of anarchy? Creon's own understanding of justice would seem to dictate that he execute his son—his last son<sup>8</sup>—for the sake of the city. But Creon evidently recoils from such a conclusion. Does Creon not thereby reveal that, however powerful his argument that justice means devotion to the city may be in the abstract, he himself is ultimately incapable of applying it to his own flesh and blood, and especially to his last remaining son?

<sup>8</sup> For Creon's other son, Megareus, who has already died, see 1301–1305.

Creon's quarrel with his son apparently reminds Creon of his deep-seated belief—one that has been overshadowed by the crisis provoked by Polyneices' attack on Thebes—that it is evil and impious to be insolent to one's father, and, more generally, that it is evil and impious to be disloyal to one's family (742, 746). Accordingly, in the aftermath of that quarrel, Creon yields fairly quickly to the demand of Teiresias that he bury Polyneices, resolves to release the imprisoned Antigone, and wholeheartedly condemns himself when his son tries to kill him and then kills himself, and his wife kills herself immediately thereafter. At the end of the play, Creon condemns his own actions against the family in the strongest possible terms while expressing no concern at all for the well-being of the city. After his quarrel with his son, then, Creon rapidly abandons his belief that justice means devotion to the city, and comes to embrace wholeheartedly the very thesis—that justice means devotion to the family—that he had challenged so powerfully.

In the course of the play, both Creon and Antigone come to question their understanding of justice. In this way, Sophocles seems to suggest that there is something fundamentally problematic and questionable about identifying justice either with devotion to the city or with devotion to the family. It is only Antigone, however, who truly comes to wrestle with the question of justice in the course of the play. By the end of the play, in her anguish, she begins, at least, to turn over in her mind the questions of whether her actions were just, pious, and wise, whether justice truly means devotion to the family, whether she was right to sacrifice earthly happiness for the sake of happiness in an afterlife, and whether it is wise or even possible to live primarily for others. She begins, in sum, to think truly and deeply for herself. Creon never exposes himself to such questioning or thinking. He is either adamantly confident that justice means devotion to the city or adamantly confident that justice means devotion to the family. The moment before he begins to yield to Haemon, Creon threatens to execute Haemon's fiancée before his eyes (758–761, 770–780). The moment before he completely yields to Teiresias, he bitterly denounces him as one who is “fond of doing injustice” (1059; see 1033–1063, 1091–1114). Creon evidently lacks the strength to face uncertainty and to wrestle with doubt. Just as he believes that “there is no greater evil than anarchy” (672) in the city or in the family, so he believes that there is no greater evil than anarchy within one's soul. But perhaps it is only if one is willing to experience such anarchy in one's soul, to wonder which beliefs are true and hence truly deserve to rule one's soul and one's life, that one has any hope of discovering the truth and of living a life based on the truth. Does Antigone not demonstrate her superiority to Creon by daring to expose herself to the anarchic experience of wonder? After all, rather than simply cling to, or jettison, her most cherished convictions about justice and about the possibility of happiness, as Creon does, she genuinely questions them. It is perhaps above all in her willingness to wonder about justice and piety that Antigone proves to be stronger, more courageous, more “manly,” than

## Introduction to *Antigone*

Creon. Indeed, in her courageous questioning, Antigone resembles especially the man who composed this drama so riddled with questions and so dominated by debates—Sophocles himself.

Sophocles seems more present in *Antigone* than in the other Theban plays, most notably because of the justly famous choral odes of this play. Generally speaking, the choruses in Sophocles' Theban plays represent the conventional, and fluctuating, perspective of the elders of Thebes or Athens. In *Oedipus the Tyrant*, the chorus of Theban elders first champions, and then condemns, Oedipus. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the chorus of Athenian elders first recoils before Oedipus in horror but then embraces him wholeheartedly. In *Antigone* the chorus of Theban elders strongly supports Creon—until it strongly condemns him. However, the second and fourth choral odes of *Antigone*—on human nature and on Eros, respectively—transcend that perspective and offer a more direct glimpse of the insight of the poet. With this magnificent poetry, Sophocles prompts the audience and readers to think more deeply not only about human nature and eros in the abstract, but about how the two manifest themselves in the drama of this play in particular—and ultimately how they might manifest themselves in ourselves. In the second ode, Sophocles suggests that daring and thoughtfulness are the defining characteristics of human beings; and in the fourth ode, he suggests that eros—perhaps especially eros for immortality—is a central feature of us humans, “who last but a day.” How are these human characteristics related? Does eros inspire daring? Do either eros or daring inspire thoughtfulness? Or do they rather inspire an ultimately “terrible” rejection of thoughtfulness? And what of Creon and Antigone? In what sense might each be understood to be erotic? In what sense might each be understood to be insufficiently erotic? Can the downfalls of these characters be understood as a reflection of their unwillingness to ponder and to examine their deepest longing—their eros for immortality? Is it a reflection of their unwillingness to question thoroughly their most cherished convictions and hopes? Finally, what of us? Is the longing for immortality a “terrible” passion that we should shun as a threat to our well-being? Or is it a passion that ennobles our lives by pointing us beyond mere survival and comfort and bringing us closer to genuine truth and well-being? Such are some of the questions—across the span of time that separates us—that Sophocles graciously bequeaths to us.