Approaching Sophocles’ Antigone
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Historical and Political Context
When the playwright Sophocles produced Antigone in 441 BCE, Athens was near the height of its power. Although recently forced to retreat from conquests in Boeotia, a region to the northwest of the city, Athens had nonetheless emerged as the hegemon of the Greek city-states on the mainland and on the islands of the Aegean. Its preeminence, however, was both precarious and short-lived. Less than fifty years earlier, a modest Athens had led the Greeks to victory over the Persians at Marathon and within ten years the city would find itself embroiled in the Peloponnesian War, a protracted struggle between Athens and Sparta that, by the end of the fifth century, resulted in the complete demise of an expansive Athenian empire. For the citizens of Athens, the mid-fifth century was, on one hand, a period of economic prosperity and artistic innovation, but it was also a period of ideological transformation as the city known for its radical democracy began to exert political and military control over other city-states, thereby depriving even allies of the sovereignty that had played such a central role in the construction of Athenian identity.

The word “democracy” derives from the Greek: dēmos – people, populace + kratos – power, and the particular type of democracy practiced at Athens represented a radical innovation in government. The Athenian citizen body enjoyed wide-ranging powers of self-government: citizen assemblies performed legislative functions; they elected military generals; citizens generally held judicial authority in criminal and civil matters; and even most chief executive officers of the government (archons) were chosen by lot and served only a one-year term. Women, however, were not citizens and enjoyed none of these rights; they were the wards of their husbands or nearest relative with no legal status of their own; they could not enter into binding contracts, own property, or inherit. What is more, reputable women were confined within certain areas of the house and would not be seen in public except on specified occasions or when accompanied by a guardian.

Literary Context
Drama enjoyed special popularity in the fifth century, and nearly all of the extant tragedies date to this period. Each year saw two major occasions for the performance of tragedies in Athens: the City or Great Dionysia in late March, a festival held in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine, license, and the patron saint of drama; and a later and less prestigious festival, the Lenaea, which took place in January. In the Great Dionysia, three tragedians competed against one another, each producing three tragedies and one satyr play, a comic drama featuring a chorus of half-horse or half-goat creatures known for their lusty and drunken behavior. Sophocles won first prize at the Dionysia eighteen times. More than mere entertainment, the festival served an important civic and religious function. Planning for the Dionysia consumed a large portion of the year and involved the city’s chief magistrate as well as its leading citizens; the festival itself was an occasion for formal processions, ritual sacrifices, and parades showcasing war tribute and the sons of fallen soldiers. The civic importance attributed to the festivals and to the
playwrights themselves is evident from Sophocles’ own life. For his success with the *Antigone* and despite his lack of military training or aptitude, Sophocles was elected as *strategos*, or commander, a position that he held during Athens’ expedition against the island of Samos.

**Narrative Context, Dramatic Setting and Reception**

Although some tragedies dealt with historical or near-contemporary events, most dramatized the traditional heroic and foundational myths of the Greek city-states. As such, these tragedies are neither historical accounts, nor are they purely the imaginative products of their authors. The oral tradition and epic literature of previous centuries (such as *The Odyssey*, which you read earlier this term) provided many of the background narratives that find their full expression in tragedy. For the Greeks, tragic narrative connected the distant past with the contemporary intellectual and political milieu and reflected the issues, values, and ideals that defined Athenian society in the fifth century.

The particular events dramatized in the *Antigone* originated from a series of connected Theban myths, perhaps familiar to you from Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex (Oedipus the King)*. At this point in the tale, Oedipus is dead and his children by Jocasta, his wife and mother, have grown to young adulthood. At the end of his life, Oedipus travelled to Colonus aided by his daughters Antigone and Ismene. Alone, the two had cared for the blind and crippled Oedipus while his sons Eteocles and Polynices struggled for control of the throne of Thebes. Because of their selfish ambition and neglect of their familial duties, Oedipus cursed his sons with his dying words as he foretold the battle that would claim their lives. Sophocles’ play *Oedipus at Colonus* relates this portion of the story, and the narrative of the *Antigone* begins shortly thereafter with the two brothers dead: Eteocles buried with honor, and Polynices lying in disgrace, unburied.

The order of the narrative in the Oedipus myths: *Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus,* and *Antigone* does not, however, reflect the order in which the plays were composed or produced. The composition and production of the plays spans almost forty years: *Antigone*, 441 BCE; *Oedipus the King*, ca. 427-425 BCE, and *Oedipus at Colonus*, 401 BCE, produced 4 years after Sophocles’ death. Thus, it is not correct to refer to these plays as a trilogy. The audience that viewed Antigone inhabited Athens in the zenith of its power; the audience of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, a city utterly ravaged by war and defeated.

The geographical setting in Thebes may also have had particular resonance for the Athenian audience. Although Thebes was one of the oldest and most distinguished cities in Greece, its relations with Athens had been strained, beginning in the late sixth century but most especially after the city allied itself with Xerxes against the other Greek cities during the second Persian War (480-479 BCE). To what extent would the contemporary hostility between the two cities have impacted the way in which Athenians viewed a play set in Thebes during the heroic era? Perhaps none. After all, the Thebes of myth and tragedy was a fictive place, far distant both in time and in space from contemporary Athens. Or perhaps, as some have suggested, the contemporary antipathy between Thebes and Athens led Sophocles to fashion Creon, with his decidedly undemocratic
style of leadership and impious disdain for religious custom, as the ultimate antithesis of Athenian values and ideals (Zeitlin 131, Bennett and Tyrrell 442). As we consider the contemporary political context of the play, we must also consider its social and cultural context, and here, gender is a central issue. To an Athenian audience, both Creon and Antigone would have seemed striking characters, utterly repellent for a variety of reasons. But would they have viewed Antigone’s insolence, treasonous behavior, and blatant repudiation of the proper female role more sympathetically than Creon’s hubris and cruel tyranny, or vice-versa? What can we hypothesize about the ancient audience and their probable reactions to the play (Sourvinou-Inwood 134-148; cf. Foley 132-136)?

**Interpretive Strategies**

*Antigone* can be read with any number of questions in mind. We might ask to what extent it explores the Athenians’ feelings about political dissent, rebellion, and war. We might ask how it problematizes the issue of gender and gender roles, as we understand them, in the Greek world. One historically popular way of reading the Antigone is to analyze it as a set of conflicts: city/state (*polis*) vs. the individual or the domestic (*oikos*); human law vs. divine law; sanctioned custom/law (*nomos*) vs. human nature (*physis*); male vs. female; friend (*philos*) vs. enemy (*ekthros*) (Hester 11-18, Goldhill 79-106). As you read the play, you might want to begin with these binary oppositions, but bear in mind, that such approaches are ultimately reductionistic and cannot fully inform the text.

Relate the text to our current topic in WHGC. How does *Antigone* explore the relationship between justice and the law? Is justice simply a function of the biases and conditioned experiences of those who hold the power to make and enforce the law? As the plot of *Antigone* unfolds, we begin to see that neither Creon nor Antigone have construed the relationship between justice and the law properly. Creon equates justice with human law, and in so doing, arbitrarily subjugates the prerogatives of tradition, family, and household (Greek, *oikos*) to the narrowly construed and immediate concerns of the (Greek, *polis*). Antigone, conversely, fails to recognize that her actions undermine not only the community (*polis*), but ultimately, even the filial bonds that she purports to uphold. In the end, through the death of his wife and son, Creon is made to realize the importance of the filial bonds he had despised, and in her death sentence and suicide, Antigone is forced to yield to the human laws she had deemed so inferior to her own. Further, she is defeated by the very gods of the Underworld for whom she had presumed to speak.

**Key Questions and Themes:**

1. The relationship between law and justice:
   - Is the law always just?
   - What responsibility does the individual have to obey the law if s/he perceives it as unjust, if a group perceives it as unjust?

2. The existence/non-existence of a universal or divine law:
   - Who or what defines “divine law”?
   - Does it exist?
• What are the implications for modern political issues: abortion? the death penalty? war? terrorism? gay rights?

3. Freedom of action, marginalized classes, proper limits of political power:
   • Where does political power come from?
   • Who has the right to govern, and who has the right to dissent?
   • How does the dissenter appropriate a voice in the debate?

4. Gendered spaces and spheres of influence: male space (public) vs. female space (private/domestic)
   • How are spaces still gendered today?
   • Does gender limit or define the ability to effect change in the political realm? Does it limit or define the power to speak?

5. Ritual, custom, and duty
   • What does duty to family entail? Ought it be formalized or legalized or legislated?
   • What does it mean to honor the dead and why must we do it? Why is honoring the dead a sacred responsibility?

Selected Bibliography and Suggestions for Further Reading:


