

MDC Literature Humanities
February 2020
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Antigone
By Sophocles



(A 19th century illustration of Antigone and Ismene)

Welcome to this Columbia University mini-course!

I am looking forward to getting to know you. Over the next three weeks, we will be studying the first play in your book, *Antigone*.

A few words about the author, Sophocles: He lived in Ancient Greece about 2,500 years ago and was one of the most famous playwrights in his time. The writing can be a little disorienting at first because it was written so long ago, but we will work through these ideas together. So be courageous and dive in.

The play is a requirement in Columbia's famous Core Curriculum, one of the most rigorous programs of study in the country.

Background

See the Introductory materials at the first of your book for information about the play, the context, and the staging of the play 2400 years ago!!!

Most of the plays in Greek literature are a bit like super hero franchises today: the audience at the time usually knew the backstory of the characters. Because we are no longer familiar with these Greek myths and characters, we have to do some extra work to get into the play and know the cast, but it is worth the effort.

Just to get you situated when you feel lost in the play (it's normal!), here is a summary:

The play begins with the two sons of Oedipus (the former king), Eteocles and Polyneices, who are fighting for the kingship of Thebes. Both men die in the battle. After their death, Creon becomes king and declares that while Eteocles will be buried, Polyneices will be left on the field of battle because he was leading a foreign army. Creon forbids anyone to give Polyneices a decent burial. Antigone, Polyneices's sister, buries him anyway although her sister, Ismene, is afraid to help her.

Antigone is caught burying Polyneices and is condemned to death. Her fiancé and Creon's son, Haemon, learns about this and tries to convince Creon to change his mind. It's only then that the wise seer Tiresias (a blind prophet) appears. After a long discussion, he finally persuades Creon that the gods want Polyneices buried. By then it's too late—Antigone has hung herself, Haemon kills himself when he finds her, and Creon's wife kills herself when she learns about the death of her son Haemon.

Main Characters

Antigone: daughter of the late king Oedipus. She has one sister, Ismene, and two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, who fought to replace their father and both died in their battle.

Creon: Antigone's uncle, and her nemesis. He has just become the king of Thebes after the death of Oedipus, Eteocles, and Polyneices.

Haemon: Antigone's fiancé and the son of Creon. He tries to confront his father about his decision but fails to make him change his mind.

Ismene: Antigone's sister.

Tereisias: A blind prophet who advises Creon wisely, but too late.

The Chorus: In ancient Greek plays, besides the main characters, you will always find a chorus of actors who speak together as a group: they represent the citizens. They often talk directly to the characters and their interventions help the audience understand the plot and ask bigger questions. Here, they are the old men of the city of Thebes.

Assignment

Try to read the entire play for our first class. If not, read at least until page 51.

Big Questions in the Play

- What is a "tragedy"?
- Each major character is driven by love for something. What? What would make the character happy? What happens to prevent their happiness?
- Most ancient Athenians believed in fate. How can you tell from the play?
- They also believed that some noble people faced tragedy because of bad luck or fortune. How can you tell from the play?
- What human capacities are most important in the play: Reason? Loyalty? Love? Commitment to family? How do they differ among characters?
- What does it mean to speak truth to power? How do power and truth conflict?
- The blind Tiresias is able to see into the future? Can anyone else "see"?
- How can people be certain that they are right or wrong?
- If people in power tell you what is right and you disagree, what options do you have?
- People have often said that there are two major themes in the play: civil disobedience and moral inflexibility. What do you think Sophocles thinks about these themes?
- What is the role of women in a world dominated by men?

Questions As You Read

1. What sort of character is Antigone and what does she represent? Pick passages that you find important and that support your opinion.
2. What sort of character is Ismene and what does she represent? Pick passages that you find important and that support your opinion.
3. What sort of character is Creon and what does he represent? Pick passages that you find important and that support your opinion.
4. Whose side is the Chorus on? Is it expected or unexpected and why?
5. What sort of character is Haemon and what does he represent? Pick passages that are especially important.
6. How would you characterize the role of fate and luck in the play?
7. Does the play offer any clear answers to our BIG questions? If so, what are they? If not, why do you think Sophocles chose not to do so. What is the benefit of grey zones?

8. Is it important that the play is called "Antigone"? What if the play were called "Creon"?
9. What do you most like or dislike about the play and its story?