



Reverence for the Gods in *Antigone*: Beyond Greek Humanism

“Give me glory! What greater glory could I win than to give my own brother decent burial? These citizens here would all agree, they would praise me too if their lips weren’t locked in fear.”¹ Sophocles’ *Antigone* boldly argues against her tyrant uncle, Creon, who, after assuming the throne of her father, Oedipus, proceeds to give a proper burial to only one of her brothers who fought in the war. Creon’s reasoning is that Eteocles died fighting for him, while Polynices fought on the opposite side, making him a traitor. Creon goes further and forbids anyone from burying the body of Polynices, but Antigone, bolder than her sister Ismene, proceeds to bury her brother despite the law. After disobeying Creon’s law, Antigone fearlessly faces her uncle’s anger and his threat of death.

Antigone’s boldness is certainly appealing to the modern reader, but it may be helpful to review the historical context of the play. Sophocles wrote *Antigone* around 441 BC during the period of Greek history J. J. Pollitt calls the “classical moment.”² The Greeks’ embrace of man and his humanity characterize this moment in their history, and it is perfectly epitomized by Protagoras’s statement that “man is the measure of all things.”³ The paragon of this period is characterized by the Parthenon, which is one of the greatest creations in Greek architecture, for it is a symbol of the Greeks’ power and progress, but also their complete devotion to the gods. Furthermore, as Pollitt continues, “The willingness of the Classical period to reverse this trend [of concern for the fallibility of the human condition] and bring the *kosmos* ‘down to earth’ seems to be a reflection of the humanistic confidence of the age.”⁴ Indeed,

Pollitt cites one of the chorus’s hymns in *Antigone*⁵ as a reflection of “the spirit of Periclean Athens in its hey-day, when man’s ability to create the society he wanted to live in must have seemed unquestionable.”⁶

Given the historical period when Sophocles was writing, many of today’s secular humanists deny any transcendental element in the play *Antigone*. Rather than applauding Antigone’s stand against Creon’s unjust laws, they assert that she was merely acting rashly or just being a shining example of human courage. As John H. Finley, Jr. writes, “In Sophocles the humanism that marks all Greek art and thought is most complete.”⁷ While Finley sees that the characters of Sophocles, such as Antigone, stand for ideas that are noble and good, these are merely “representative of permanent human stances toward self and society.”⁸ Although Finley sees these characters—true characters whom society can follow confidently—as representing universal ideas, they are not more than that; they do not represent more than their own humanity. As Bernard Knox further explains with regard to Antigone, “She is the embodiment of the only consolation tragedy can offer—that in certain heroic natures unmerited suffering and death can be met with a greatness of soul which, because it is *purely human*, brings honor to us all.”⁹ Antigone’s soul, despite the fact that she underwent many struggles and ultimately experienced death, is only human, which only brings honor to mankind. Indeed, Knox’s claim is even bolder than that: tragedy can *only* offer us the brave example of a human soul acting fearlessly in the midst of suffering.

Nevertheless, we see in Antigone’s own

words that she knows she is upholding something *beyond* the human by burying her brother and dying for him. Creon’s questions about her reasoning for breaking the law prompt her to say the following:

It wasn’t Zeus, not in the least,
Who made this proclamation [about
not burying Polynices]—not to me.
Nor did that Justice, dwelling with
the gods
Beneath the earth, ordain such laws
for men.
Nor did I think your edict had such
force
That you, a mere mortal, could
override the gods,
The great unwritten, unshakable
traditions.
They are alive, not just today or
yesterday:
They live forever, from the first of time,
And no one knows when they first saw
the light. . . .
If my present actions strike you as
foolish,
Let’s just say I’ve been accused of folly
By a fool.¹⁰

Thus, Antigone knows that Creon’s law about not burying Polynices was made by a mortal within time. The gods, however, made the laws about respectfully burying the dead, and these laws have been present forever, as long as anyone can remember. While Creon considers her to be foolish, Antigone recognizes that it is Creon himself who is the fool, for he is the one who is willing to transgress the divine laws out of his pride. Rather than submitting to the divine

laws, present from time immemorial, Creon wishes to assert his own human power. As Antigone attests, “Death longs for the same rites for all”,¹¹ and this is a universal law that Creon denies.

Thus, Creon’s attempt to override the divine laws is merely an assertion of his own temporal power as king. We see this fully exemplified when he is talking with his son, Haemon, the betrothed of Antigone, who asks his stubborn father to release Antigone from her prison. Haemon points out that the entire city of Thebes is against his father in this decision, saying that she does not deserve death but a “glowing crown of gold”.¹² Creon answers in reply, “And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule?”¹³ Haemon responds, “It’s no city at all, owned by one man alone.”¹⁴ We can almost imagine Creon snarling in his reply: “What? The city is the king’s—that’s the law!”¹⁵ Creon foolishly sees himself as the supreme ruler of the city, without the gods and without the people that comprise it. He cares very little about what the people want—all that he cares about is asserting his own rule, which, in the end, is mortal and bound to be superseded by another rule. Instead of Antigone being considered the strict human character, that label should instead be given to Creon, who denies the importance of any law besides his own.

Therefore, the struggle that is present in Sophocles’ play *Antigone* is not merely on the human level. Rather, it is the battle between

religion and the State, the divine and the human ruler—it is the perennial battle between God and Caesar. This battle is even recognized by Christ in the Gospels, who is asked whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Christ responds with a question: “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” (Matthew 22:20), referring to a coin he has been given. It is clearly the likeness of Caesar, and thus, Christ explains, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21). In other words, that which belongs to the human king should be given thusly, but everything that rightly belongs to God, the Supreme Ruler, the Eternal King, the one God (not the many gods of Antigone’s belief) should be given to him. Christ denies neither the temporal reality nor the need to give God what is properly owed to him as Creator and Lord.

While *Antigone* was written before the time of Christ, we can see it as a foreshadowing of Christ’s message. Antigone is willing to sacrifice her life for the sake of the divine laws—she willingly disobeyed the king’s law because the divine law was a higher one. Therefore, in commenting on this play, modern humanists do not go far enough: rather than recognizing in this work a perennial battle still pertinent today, they instead ascribe the actions to a reductionist humanism which pays no attention to the religious motivation for Antigone’s actions. The true greatness in Sophocles’

play, however, lies in the fact that he goes beyond mere humanism: he shows that the divine law is stronger, more powerful, and more enduring than any human law or achievement.

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References

1. Sophocles, *Antigone* in *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), lines 560–65.
2. J. J. Pollitt, *Art and Experience in Classical Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 64.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 68–69.
5. Cf. *Antigone*, lines 376–424.
6. *Ibid.*, line 70.
7. John H. Finley, Jr., *Four Stages of Greek Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), p. 48.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
9. Bernard Knox, introduction to *Antigone*, p. 53, emphasis added.
10. *Antigone*, lines 499–508; 522–24.
11. *Ibid.*, line 584.
12. *Ibid.*, line 782.
13. *Ibid.*, line 821.
14. *Ibid.*, line 824.
15. *Ibid.*, line 825.

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Jonah

poor beast
 for three days
 this undigested morsel
 lodged then tormented
 the inner sanctum of your stomach
 even as you swam the deep waters
 his was a deeper night
 one almost to despair
 then up he came
 coughed upon an unsuspecting shore
 a resurrected, humbled man