

Antigone's Moral Courage

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The Greek playwright, Sophocles, is considered by many to be the greatest writer of tragedy ever. His *Oedipus* plays, in particular, are considered classics, and of them, *Antigone*, though written around 442 BCE, is one that seems especially pertinent now because of its theme of civil disobedience.

The plot is thick with the conflict that all plays require. Antigone (and her sister, Ismene) are the daughters of Oedipus. As the play opens, their two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, have died fighting each other in combat for the throne of Thebes. This occurred after Eteocles had refused to give up the crown to his brother as their father Oedipus had prescribed. Now their uncle, Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, has declared that Eteocles is to be honored in death with all the ritual and anointment that are traditional to ensure successful passage to the afterlife. But Polynices, the rightful heir, is to be disgraced by leaving his body unburied on the battlefield (a harsh and shameful punishment at the time).

Antigone cannot leave her brother to rot on the field, eaten by carrion, and determines that she will bury in him some fashion, in spite of Creon's edict to leave him unburied. Although she seeks her sister's help, Ismene says she must follow the laws of the king. And so, Antigone goes out herself, anoints the body of her brother with oil, prays and throws dust over him in an attempt at burying. She is seen by sentries and they turn her in to Creon, who is furious at this willful disobedience, questions Antigone in this excerpt, saying to her:

CREON:

And you, Antigone,
You with your head hanging—do you confess this thing?

ANTIGONE:

I do. I deny nothing.

CREON:

Tell me, tell me briefly:
Had you heard my proclamation touching this matter?

ANTIGONE:

It was public. Could I help hearing it?

CREON:

And yet you dared defy the law.

ANTIGONE:

I dared.

It was not the gods' proclamation. That final Justice
That rules the world below makes no such laws.

