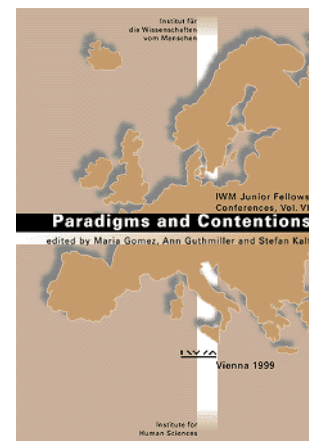


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## "Make Straight Your Own Path to Destiny"<sup>1</sup> A Reading of Sophocles' Antigone

Ann Guthmiller

### *Act I*

"Wisdom is far the chief element in happiness and, secondly, no irreverence towards the gods. But great words of haughty men exact in retribution blows as great and in old age teach wisdom."<sup>2</sup> This is the closing passage of the play, *Antigone*, spoken solemnly by the chorus as the defeated and weary Creon exits the stage. In their terse eloquence, these lines capture many of the crucial themes of the text: the intellectual struggle of reconciling religious and civic allegiances, the danger of human hubris<sup>3</sup> and the denial of limits, the inescapability of fate, the need for wisdom in order to achieve *eudiamonia* and the tendency for this wisdom to come in old age after years of errors and suffering. Each of the characters in *Antigone* presents a different manner of moral deliberation as the drama unfolds and each individual's mode of thinking is a statement about his or her relative

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<sup>1</sup> Sophocles. *Antigone: The Theban Plays*. trans. David Grene. (New York: Everyman's Library. 1994) l. 96

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. l. 1420-1424

<sup>3</sup> Note the quotation's particular emphasis on *male* hubris (or pride)

status in the political hierarchy of the city, his or her perceived position in the family structure, and his or her understanding of gender roles and the appropriate corresponding power relationship.

In this essay, I will engage in a close reading of Sophocles' tragic *Antigone* which is oriented around two interests. First, I want to examine the play's depictions of gender; more specifically, I am interested in how women's internal deliberative processes are represented and the ways in which the subservience of women contributes to the constitution of male political authority and power, as demonstrated by the manner in which the men in the play consider or dismiss Antigone's claims of moral right. In order to address the first point, I will begin by analyzing the reasoning behind Antigone's decision to bury her brother Polyneices, despite Creon's prohibition, and comparing her determination with the passivity and traditional female behavior displayed by her sister, Ismene. From this discussion, I will be able to focus on the ways in which Antigone transcends gendered stereotypes of women's deficient rational capacities and inability to take strong, principled action by challenging the legitimacy of the civic authority. Then, in order to address the second two points, I will reflect on Creon's efforts to reconsolidate his power when he is threatened by Antigone. How does the fact that Antigone is a woman change the significance and danger presented by her insubordination? The answer is revealed in the interaction between Creon and his son Haemon (who is Antigone's fiancé), when Haemon attempts to convince Creon to change his mind and give a more lenient sentence.

From these specific observations concerning how the genders are represented in their decision-making processes, I will move on to discuss how Sophocles portrayed the confines and limitations of human moral judgment, considered more generally. In particular, I want to focus on two moral problematics that Sophocles brought to the fore in his *Antigone*<sup>4</sup>. Briefly, these situations are: [1] the potential for situations to arise in which two equally valid moral goods or goals cannot be pursued or achieved at the same time (thus making them appear to be mutually exclusive of one another), and [2] the lack of control one has over, what Martha Nussbaum calls, external goods,<sup>5</sup> which include such things as the type of family one is born into, the actions of one's family members, and one's relationships with and the

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<sup>4</sup> Although I will only be discussing *Antigone*, the moral problematics discussed in the second half of my essay are recurrent themes in many tragedies and particularly resonant in the *Theban* trilogy

<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 65

behavior of one's friends and lovers. These are insights which illuminate the ambiguity of responsibility and the fallibility of human deliberation - quintessential elements of tragedy.

## *Act II*

The dramatic opening scene of *Antigone* presents the two sisters engrossed in a discussion about their tragic family legacy and the recent death of their two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, who killed one another in a classic *Bruderkrieg*.<sup>6</sup> It also serves to immediately introduce the discourse about gender that runs throughout the course of the play, therefore rendering hollow and void any charge that a feminist reading of the text is anachronistic or inappropriate. Antigone recounts the prohibition against burying Polyneices that Creon (the ruler of the city and the two women's uncle) has recently proclaimed. The justification behind Creon's decision lies in the fact that Polyneices was not only attacking his brother, but also threatening the city itself. Consequently, Creon determined that Polyneices should be dishonored in one of the severest ways practiced in the Greek city-states at this time: his body would not receive proper burial rites but, instead, be left outside to decay and be devoured by animals and birds. The significant social and religious consequences of this punishment should not be underestimated. "Ritual burial gives the dead spirit leave to pass on to the underworld; burial in the bowels of birds and dogs shames the dead and dishonors the family."<sup>7</sup> Thus, Creon's punishment condemns Polyneices' spirit to an eternity without peace or respite.

Antigone plans to disobey Creon's edict in order to honor what she perceives as a higher law and duty, namely to obey her religious beliefs and fulfill her familial obligations. She propositions Ismene to help her and the rationale behind Ismene's negative reply is very telling of existing gender roles and power relations. Ismene says to Antigone, "You ought to realize we are only women, not meant in nature to fight against men, and that we are ruled, by those who are stronger, to obedience in this and even more painful matters....Since force restrains me, I shall yield in this to the authorities."<sup>8</sup> Antigone scoffs at Ismene's assertion and tries to force her to recognize that everyone, regardless of gender, is accountable for his or her own character and actions; one cannot take refuge behind social barriers and use them as a

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<sup>6</sup> Civil war: I chose to use the German word here because Polyneices and Eteocles were actually brothers and the English word does not capture this association

<sup>7</sup> *Antigone*. p. 210

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 70-73, 76-77

rationalization for weakness or lack of principles. When Ismene again refers to male dominance as her justification for not acting, Antigone replies, "Let that be your excuse," and her attitude is powerfully and tersely expressed in the line, "Be as you choose to be, but for myself, *I myself*, will bury him."<sup>9</sup>

Ismene does not question or deny that the moral right is with Antigone, although she thinks Antigone is too "headstrong"<sup>10</sup> in her beliefs and too bold in her actions. Clearly, Ismene fears the reprisals that would come from transgressing Creon's pronouncement and feels she is too weak as a "mere" female to stand up for her beliefs. Thus, Ismene plays out a traditional, deferent woman's role: she is to be the silent bearer of suffering, who quietly resents the ruling authority and feels she has a moral claim against it, but will not act. She has internalized and appropriated her culture's image of women as powerless and unprincipled. This is certainly the reaction that Creon expected to generate in the two sisters; thus, he is entirely unprepared for Antigone's defiance. Several passages reveal that Antigone is not devoid of fear of her inevitable punishment; her character is not presented as some kind of super-human agent who faces death without hesitation.<sup>11</sup> Her strength and determination are deeply grounded in two sources: principled religious piety and familial love, and she is firmly convinced she has the moral right on her side. While both religion and family can be understood as traditional wellsprings of female strength, the thinking behind Antigone's decision to bury her brother reveals that her rationale cannot be reduced to simply a sense of sisterly duty or religious devotion (or fanaticism). "The time in which I must please those that are dead is longer than I must please those of this world."<sup>12</sup> Antigone has clearly reflected on the conflict between the claims and needs of the city versus the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., l. 93, 81-82

<sup>10</sup> *Antigone*, l. 54

<sup>11</sup> As Antigone is being taken to the cave where she will be sealed up and left to die, she laments and cries desperately, although never for a moment does she display any regret for her actions nor any desire to beg for mercy in order to get a lesser sentence. Upon her departure, she repeatedly mourns the fact that she will never marry or have children. This could be read as a moment in which Antigone displays values traditionally associated with women, thus weakening her status as a feminist heroine. However, I would strongly disagree with such an interpretation; the desire for love and family is certainly not limited to the female sex nor is it a sign of weakness of character. To the contrary, I find that her lamentations serve to intensify the strength of her character and better portray the complexity of her values. Particularly when one considers the fact that her family (since Oedipus, her father and Jocasta, her mother) has borne a heavy fate or curse, it seems to be a sign of Antigone's courage that she would desire children at all

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., l. 86-87

obligations of her faith and her family and has come to her own decision. Unlike her timid sister, Antigone displays an autonomous decision-making ability which was not expected of women in her time; "she is a maker of her own law and her defiance is self-invented passion."<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, the thought-process evident in Antigone's defiant speech upon her arrest and presentation to Creon foreshadows a very modern debate about moral responsibility that culminated in the Nuremberg trials following the Second World War. There it was determined that soldiers must follow the dictates of their conscience and do what they believe to be morally right and in accordance with international standards of human rights, even if this means disobeying the laws, orders, and practices of the army and society they are a part of. It is something akin to this logic that prompts Antigone, when asked why she dared to defy Creon's ultimatum, to retort that "it was not Zeus that made the proclamation; nor did Justice, which lives with those below, enact such laws as that, for mankind. I did not believe your proclamation had such power to enable one who will someday die to override God's ordinances, unwritten and secure. *They* are not of today and yesterday; they live forever...These are the laws whose penalties I would not incur from the gods, through fear of any man's temper."<sup>14</sup>

At issue is which authority one ultimately believes he or she is accountable to; in situations where a conflict arises between the laws of one's earthly community and the dictates of one's religious and/or moral beliefs, a choice between the two must be made. Fundamentally, this comes down to a question of judgment and faith: which is more fallible, one's moral and/or religious beliefs or the laws of the particular society one lives in? Or, in a slightly different formulation, when there is an irreducible conflict, is it more compelling to be pious and moral or to be a loyal and good citizen? Creon clearly prioritizes the latter, arguing that Polyneices does not deserve an honorable burial because he threatened the city, "for Creon the healthy mind just *is* the mind completely devoted to civic safety and civic well-being,"<sup>15</sup> whereas Antigone has more faith in the former, in the ancient, unwritten laws that state that "the god of death demands these rites [of burial] for both."<sup>16</sup> To Creon, Antigone's position makes absolutely no sense; he understands her attack on the civic authority as a indication of a mental deficiency, typical for a woman. In

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<sup>13</sup> Martha Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 65

<sup>14</sup> *Antigone*, l. 494-503

<sup>15</sup> *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 54

<sup>16</sup> *Antigone*, l. 569

his mind there can be no divergence between the good man, as determined by the laws of the city, and the good man, as seen in the evaluation of the divine.<sup>17</sup> Antigone's point is that one can never be absolutely certain that human law adheres to what the divine understands as just and right. Hubris, desire for revenge, or lust for power can distort human apprehension of divine will. In her estimation, there is a much greater chance that human law is flawed and in situations of conflicting evaluations, such as this one, the eternal authority must be obeyed at the sake of the temporal one.

The conflict between the two attitudes takes on a new dimension when one recalls that Creon is Polyneices' uncle and thus he is understood by Antigone and local custom to have a familial and religious duty to ensure the boy's proper burial. But as indicated above, Creon does not recognize any values or moral goods that come into conflict with what he has determined to be the needs of the polis. Implicit in his position is the idea that civic ties should be prioritized above blood relations; "civic-family conflicts cannot arise if the city *is* the family, if our family *is* the city."<sup>18</sup> Since Polyneices clearly rejected the city and chose to stand outside of it, Creon no longer feels a need to recognize him as a family member. Creon interprets all human relationships and identities through this civic lens. When this framework is applied to gender roles, females appear as essentially nothing more than fields to be harvested and "proper civic maleness [becomes] the exercise of power of submissive matter."<sup>19</sup> The good citizen chooses a wife according to how fruitfully she can be expected to produce new citizens. The actual Athenian marriage contract from this period (approximately 441 B.C.E.) mirrors this attitude; during the ceremony the father of the bride says, "I give you my daughter for the *plowing* of legitimate children."<sup>20</sup> Antigone was engaged to be married to Creon's son, Haemon, but because she has broken with the civic family, Creon callously commands Haemon to forget about her, telling him not to worry, "there are other fields for [you] to plough."<sup>21</sup>

Antigone's mode of reasoning challenges the expectations of women's deliberative capacities that were common in Greek culture at this time, although

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<sup>17</sup> This is similar to Plato's position about the character of the divine as expressed in the *Euthyphro*

<sup>18</sup> *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 57. This is again reminiscent of Plato, in this case, Creon's notion seems quite similar to Plato's idea of the family in *The Republic*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57. (emphasis added)

<sup>21</sup> *Antigone*, l. 626

prioritizing private (i.e., religious and familial) concerns over and against the public good could be interpreted as a typically female value system. Nevertheless, since Antigone does not react out of fear or brute emotion or censor herself in order to remain demure and in "her proper place" as a woman, her behavior disrupts the regular pattern of gender relations. All of this underscores the two-fold threat to Creon's political power that her actions generate and helps to explain his vehemently angry reaction to her defiance. It is not simply that his edict has been disobeyed which disturbs him; the fact that it was a woman who dared to do so exponentially raises the seriousness of the situation. "I swear I am no man if she can win this and not pay for it,"<sup>22</sup> is but one of many statements uttered by Creon that give evidence to my assertion. A few lines after the passage just quoted, Creon sentences Antigone to death for her insubordination and immediately following the sentence, Antigone further antagonizes him by suggesting that the population of the city actually supports her actions and would say so "if fear did not lock their tongues up."<sup>23</sup> Throughout the course of the play, the statements of the chorus give increasingly more credence to Antigone's claim. Unlike most tragedies, the chorus in *Antigone* is often tentative, cautious and noncommittal in their evaluations of the unfolding situation. Their ambiguity indicates that the population of Thebes is quite sympathetic to Antigone and this does nothing but infuriate Creon, who had certainly never expected such a reaction. Needless to say, all of this catalyzes Creon's deepest fears: not only is his judgment being called into question by the populace, but his authority is being threatened by nothing less than a woman! "When I am alive no woman shall rule," Creon yells out in anger as Antigone tries to explain the rationale behind her actions. Such statements by Creon demonstrate the extent to which his political power is grounded in and significantly constituted by the complete subservience of the female population of Thebes. Any exception to or lessening of this domination would be the first demonstration of a profound decline in his authority and control over the city, and that is why Creon believes he cannot compromise or lessen the punishment he has pronounced for Antigone's crime.

Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's fiancé, upon coming to his father to discuss the situation, has precisely this ill-fated goal in mind as his objective. Haemon's opening statements display not only his clever, diplomatic and flattering way of speaking, but they also reveal the character of the father and son's relationship.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., l. 528-529

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., l. 549-550

Creon increasingly shows himself to be an authoritarian ruler who demands absolute obedience from all his subjects and who will not tolerate the utterance of any opinion that contradicts his own, even if it is spoken sincerely in an effort to fortify and support his power and authority. Haemon argues to Creon that the population is indeed very sympathetic to Antigone's plight: "the city mourns for this girl; they think she is dying most wrongly and undeservedly...[This is] the dark rumor that spreads in secret."<sup>24</sup> Haemon eloquently pleads with his father to show mercy and flexibility in his judgment. Following is the lengthy passage in which he artfully attempts to reason with his father that it is not only in his best interest to show some moderation, but it is also a demonstration of wisdom to follow sound advice when it is given.

*Father, the natural sense that the gods breed in men is surely the best of their possessions ... For a man, though he be wise, it is no shame to learn many things and not maintain his views too rigidly. You notice how by streams in wintertime the trees that yield preserve their branches safely, but those that fight the tempest perish utterly ... Yield something of your anger, give way a little. If a much younger man, like me, may have a judgment, I would say it were far better to be one altogether wise by nature, but as things incline not to be so, then it is good also to learn from those who advise well.<sup>25</sup>*

Upon hearing this well-intended and gently spoken advise, Creon responds in a remarkably poor manner. He repeatedly scoffs at what he perceives to be the insolence and impertinence of Haemon's statements. Simply because Haemon is his son and therefore a much younger man, Creon believes he cannot possibly have anything of value to say. Furthermore, Creon aggressively returns to the theme of gender and repeats his earlier indignation at the prospects of having a woman catalyze a weakening of his authority. At this point, the gender issue has actually eclipsed the significance of the original transgression and has fully distorted Creon's ability to strategize and ascertain the best means for reconsolidating his power. "We must stand on the side of what is orderly, we cannot give victory to a woman. If we must accept defeat, let it be from a man; we must not let people say that a woman beat us,"<sup>26</sup> he bellows.

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<sup>24</sup> *Antigone*, l. 747-748, 754

<sup>25</sup> *Antigone*, l. 737-738, 765-770, 774-779

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 731-734



Haemon is noticeably disturbed by his father's fixation on Antigone's status as a female and his utter inability to be swayed by any advise; this sentiment is echoed in the increasingly critical comments voiced by the chorus. As well could be expected, when Haemon begins to express his disgust, Creon can only interpret this as an indication that his son has been corrupted by womanly weakness, thus calling Haemon's loyalty, intelligence and very manhood into question. Statements like, "It seems this boy is on the woman's side," or "You woman's slave, do not try to wheedle me,"<sup>27</sup> make this perfectly clear. Haemon persists for a time in his efforts to use practical political strategies, references to disgruntled public opinion, and even religious arguments to convince his father of his sincerity and insight, but all to no avail. The crescendo comes when Creon screams to Haemon, "Your nature is vile, in yielding to a woman,"<sup>28</sup> prompting Haemon to exit the stage. In retrospect, the reader can imagine that somewhere during the end of this futile argument with his father, Haemon decides to commit suicide.<sup>29</sup>

"Many are the wonders, none is more wonderful than what is man;"<sup>30</sup> so begins the longest and most rich in imagery and irony of all of the chorus' stasimons. The first strophe describes man's conquest of the physical environment, the first antistrophe addresses his triumph over the animals of the earth, and the second strophe turns to praising man's intellectual, political, and medical achievements. The Greek word *deinon*, that has been translated here as "wonder," has a much more complex meaning than this single English word is able to capture. It can refer to something that prompts awe and amazement, but it also speaks of something that is strange and out of sync with its environment. With the second antistrophe, the optimism of the earlier passages is tempered; all of man's achievements frequently lead to hubris, recklessness, and impiety. Man forgets his limitations and the confines of his knowledge. The human being is indeed a *deinon*; it tries to understand, simplify, and manipulate its own environment - it even goes so far to believe that it can control its own existence and make itself immune to contingency. "He has a way against everything and he faces nothing that is to come

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., l. 802, 820

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., l. 808

<sup>29</sup> It should be kept in mind that Antigone was Haemon's fiancé. For yet another of the many examples of Creon's insensitivity and misogyny, consider the comment he utters to Haemon when directly addressing the fact that his son and Antigone were engaged: "Spit on her, throw her out like an enemy, this girl will marry someone in Death's house." (l. 708-709)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., l. 369-370

without contrivance. Only against death can he call on no means of escape."<sup>31</sup> Ultimately it is death which reminds humans of their possibilities and their boundaries. It is with the death of two brothers that the tragic *Antigone* begins, and by the close of the play three more people have gone on to the underworld. Death is the ever-present condition of life which remains indifferently beyond the reach of human understanding and control: although we can watch others die, we have to wait till death greets us personally to know it.

### *Act III*

When one looks into a kaleidoscope and then adjusts the dial in the back, ever so slightly, suddenly a completely new picture comes into view. Many of the same pieces that were there in the image before are still present, but their rearrangement has brought something quite different into the field of vision. In a like manner, I now adjust my gaze from a focus on the gender discourse in *Antigone* and turn to the more general pictures of human judgment and deliberation that Sophocles portrays. As with the kaleidoscope, many of the same elements that were previously discussed remain in view; the turning of the gaze simply prompts the reconfiguration of these different fragments. For the last section of this essay, I will focus singularly on the character of Creon and his sorrowful fate in order to begin to flesh out this tragedy's statements concerning the confines and limitations of human judgment. Tragedy highlights the disasters that can occur from a two-fold error commonly made by humans: first, they believe too unquestioningly in the ordering picture of the world that their philosophical, moral, and religious beliefs generate, and this faith catalyzes the second fatal condition: namely, human hubris and inflexibility. Creon believed that he had the authority to determine who was deserving of an honorable burial. Fed by visions of his own power, he bred within himself an impious pride. "This pride blinds its victims. They fail to see what their divine duty is and have specious excuses for avoiding it. They may be convinced by these excuses but that does not make them valid."<sup>32</sup>

Images of eyes, perception, sight, and blindness serve to illuminate the different qualities and moments of human reflection and judgment. Sophocles is particularly sensitive to the circumstances and relations that affect one's ability to see clearly and he pays special attention to the ways in which the lens which one gazes through

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., l. 393-397

<sup>32</sup> C. M. Bowra. *Sophoclean Tragedy*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944.) 71

affects one's apprehension of the world. For example, at one point Haemon tells Creon that he has a "*omma deinon*, a strange and terrible eye - since he sees only what he wants to see."<sup>33</sup> *Antigone* is concerned with how one's vision, and thus one's judgment, is ever confronted with changing and unpredictable conditions, forcing one to recurrently question whether he saw what actually was there. "There is no condition of man's life that stands secure. As such, I would not praise it or blame. It is chance that brings down the lucky and the unlucky each in his turn. For men, that belong to death, there is no prophet of established things."<sup>34</sup> In the tragic play, those who appear to see most clearly at the beginning find themselves blinded by the closing scenes, while those who have no working eyes are the only ones who can truly see. Creon's sorrowful fate is a paradigmatic case. Because he believes so ardently in his vision of the world and does not heed the advise of the blind prophet, Teiresias, he fails to prevent the death of Antigone, his son Haemon, and his wife. Creon has maintained his position as the sovereign king of Thebes, but has lost everything else that was meaningful in his life. "Oh the awful blindness of those plans of mine,"<sup>35</sup> he cries out at the end.

Ordering pictures of the world (such as philosophical, moral, or religious beliefs) make sense of life's disparate events and experiences. However, the interpretation and meaning they offer only brings a portion of existence's total phenomena into focus, thus leaving other factors in obscurity. In this tragedy, both Creon and Antigone's ardent devotion to their beliefs prevents them from even considering the possibility that there could be a mutually satisfactory solution. For example, if Polyneices' body were buried outside the city limits, then Creon could have maintained his authority in Thebes and appeared to have held his ground, and Antigone could have ensured the safe passage of her brother's spirit to the afterworld. Without flexibility or creativity, the goals of Antigone and Creon appear to be mutually exclusive, and it is their stubbornness which seals their tragic fates. The lesson each failed to learn is summarized in the words of blind prophet, Teiresias: "All men can make mistakes, but once mistaken, a man is no longer stupid or accursed who, having fallen on ill, tries to cure that ill... it is obstinacy that convicts of folly."<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, by ascribing to Antigone and Creon the freedom and ability to moderate their views in order to achieve a mutually beneficial solution, we may

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<sup>33</sup> *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 70

<sup>34</sup> *Antigone*, l. 1227-1232

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 1343-1344

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 1080-1085

have applied an anachronistic reading to the tragedy. For such an interpretation underemphasizes the significant role that fate (*moira*) played in Greek religion, social life, and literature. As the chorus says, after the fatal consequences of Creon's actions have come to pass, "Pray no more at all. From what is destined for us, mortal men, there is no escape."<sup>37</sup> The fates that Antigone and Creon endured seem a tragic, but logical, outcome of their participation in a family legacy of suffering. One outcome of the Greek emphasis on fate is a renewed awareness (particularly for modern readers) of the limitations of human freedom and judgment that stem from the intricate familial relations one is born into and raised within. The point of reading a tragic play is not to try and "solve" its conflict. Instead, tragedy heightens our appreciation of the fact that our lives are bound up in a complex chain of events, stretching back before our birth and reaching forward beyond our exit to the grave. This suggests some profound questions about the everyday concept of personal responsibility, highlighting the ambiguity within a seemingly solid notion.

"There is some terrible power in destiny and neither wealth nor war nor tower nor black ships, beaten by the sea can give escape from it."<sup>38</sup> Antigone is the concluding play of the *Theban* trilogy. If we consider them together and take each play as an act in a larger drama (instead of viewing each text as a finite whole), the larger tragedy comes into view. One must remember that Creon is the brother-in-law of Oedipus and the brother of Jocasta who is Oedipus' mother and wife. Were it not for Oedipus' tragic demise, Creon would have never become king in the first place. Were it not for Oedipus' cursed fate, his two sons Eteocles and Polyneices would have never gone to war. If they had never started a civil war, Creon would never have had to condemn Polyneices, and Antigone would never have had to give up her life to bury him. "For those whose house has been shaken by God there is never cessation of ruin; it steals on generation after generation within a breed...No generation frees another, some god strikes them down; there is no deliverance."<sup>39</sup> All of this is meant to underscore the degree to which Creon is not wholly responsible for the conditions he finds himself in. His situation is partially the result of the family he was born into, partially a consequence of who his sister chose to marry, and of course, partially the outcome of his own hubris and inflexibility. This is obviously an extreme case on many levels. But the subtler point that Sophocles brings to the fore is the web of complex loyalties, influences and limitations our familial and per-

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<sup>37</sup> *Antigone*, l. 1410-1411

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 1008-1011

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 641-643, 650-651

sonal relations weave. This has an effect on our ability to make judgments. Taking the complex interconnections between people into account illuminates complexities in the concept of personal responsibility.

*Antigone* is about the wisdom of being able to see when one is mistaken and heed advise when sincerely given. Whether in the climatic scene between Creon and his son over Antigone's sentence or in the solemn words of the blind prophet, the play recurrently stresses the value of being flexible, humble, and creative enough to learn from others and change your opinions. It is "obstinacy that convicts of folly." Thus the play seems to advocate a strong sense of personal responsibility. On the other hand, none of the characters has a free range of action. Each one's choices and perspectives have been limited and constrained by his or her relationships with others, as discussed above. One could retort that in modern times, we do not believe in the idea that a family suffers an intergenerational fate or curse. But one need not believe in such things to still accept that identity and life conditions are deeply linked to the familial setting one was born into.

Tragedy reminds us of the ambiguity of personal responsibility and the fallibility of human judgment. *Antigone* is a "play about teaching and learning, about changing one's vision of the world, about losing one's grip on what looked like a secure truth and learning a more elusive kind of wisdom."<sup>40</sup> And as the closing lines of *Antigone* foretold, this elusive wisdom is a necessary component of human happiness.

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<sup>40</sup> *The Fragility of Goodness*, p. 52