

A gender bias approach to antigone

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A Gender Bias Approach to Antigone Just as one stone removed can break a bridge, one flaw can bring a man to ruins. The flaw of one man cannot bring down an entire kingdom, but rather one outlook of the king can lead to the demise of the whole. In Sophocles' epic tragedy, Antigone, a strong gender bias is present throughout the tragedy, and is partially responsible for the downfall of the king. To Sophocles the king is not always representative of the people, but acts on his own personal desires and judgments. Sophocles was born in 496 B. C. and from 490 B. C. until 442 B. C. when the first performance of Antigone at the Dionysian theater; there had been many wars in the Greek and Persian history. These ongoing battles would not involve women in combat nor negotiations in the political arena, but merely a person to remain at home, responsible for domestic affairs. There would always be the fear of war, seen on the faces of every adult, reflected in the eyes of every child. Kate Hamburger, the author of *From Sophocles to Sartre*, and essay on the tragedies of Sophocles with an emphasis on the heroic tragedy Antigone, claims that the effect of war in Sophocles' earlier youth is a contributing cause to his heroic tragedies. Sophocles saw the ideals of democracy early and practiced self-governing in the local market place. According to Siegfried Melchinger, a German dramatist who in his doctoral dissertation made a focus specifically on Sophocles, stated that Sophocles' character is one of an "overlapping discipline." Siegfried Melchinger published his book titled *Sophocles* in 1974, which David Scarse later translated from German to English. Sophocles composed his education to be "overlapping," in that he was well educated in all areas. Even before the performance of Antigone, Sophocles was acclaimed for his feminine roles; as

females were not allowed to act in theater. It was not until 442 B. C. that he wrote *Antigone*, with an even greater allusion to the role of women. Before *Antigone* begins, the two brothers of *Antigone* are engaged in a battle not only of land, but of power. Their deep desires to rule Thebes and male dominating ego, only lead to their deaths; a tragedy that would affect more than just themselves. The battle of glory for men would not be the same for their sisters, but in 442 B. C. as Sophocles illustrates, the living women would have to deal with the tragedies of the dead; a task not easy to be burdened with as woman. Their uncle, Creon, dominates *Antigone* and her sister *Ismene* to the extent of mourning their own brother's death. *Antigone* has chosen a fate without glory: " I'll suffer nothing as great as death without glory," (*Antigone* line 112). Only a male in this time could die with honor and glory, and just as her uncle has forced a death without glory for her brother, although a glorious death is honorable, she has decided it a better life to die without glory than dishonor her blood and the gods. *Ismene* does not wish to go against the laws of her uncle, for " women were not born to contend with men," but between the bond of her and *Antigone*, she will defy the king(line 75). *Ismene* is just as horrified about the edict as *Antigone* is, but asks what they--weak women--can do. During this era the women had a specific role, and to defy that role would be horrific enough, despite the edict which *Antigone* spoke so ill of. *Ismene* does not follow her sister, as *Antigone* is sure of her own fate and actions. To *Antigone*, there is nothing worse that she can face except death. Death is not a dilemma if she does as the gods' sacred commands require, but to leave the body uncovered after death is treason to the gods and the soul of the dead will wander the Earth forever.

Antigone sees no reason to hide what she considers to be perfectly just and a responsible act. The relationship between the two sisters in Antigone, but the male dominating King split the bond. The force that split the bond was not a physical power, but an underlying force that restricts women, even sisters, from expressing their true feelings. Sophocles sets the audience to wonder if the sisters will be able to combat and overcome the evil as a pair. Antigone comes across very clear and shockingly determined. She wants her sister's help in hopes of calming the gods. The fact that Antigone cannot convince Ismene begins the final separation of their family. After the suicide of their mother, death of their father, and the battle between their brothers, Ismene and Antigone are all that is left. The last family relationship has been broke and Antigone, the heroine of the tragedy comes into a sharper view. In his review of Sophocles, *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles*, David Seale makes a bold contrast in character between Ismene and Antigone. David Seale received his masters from Bishop's University, and as part of his doctorate, which was a continuation of his thesis, he published *Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles* through the University of Chicago. In David Seale's book, he makes a dedication to Sophocles' Antigone, and the concrete visualizations. Antigone, as correctly described by Seale is "fearless, self-reliant, and willing to die for her convictions," whereas Ismene is "cautious, obedient to male authority, and lacks the courage of her convictions." As Sophocles portrays, Antigone acts absolutely. She has accepts death with justification: 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. It will not be for the sake of any law made by man that Antigone will incur the punishments of the gods. She will do everything she can, even if it takes her to her death, to make things right between her brother and the gods. Sophocles makes the point that the male leaders entrusted with the peoples' power need to be viewed with caution. Sophocles, because of his youth, had a good understanding of democratic politics. Antigone is a visual representation for the people, so they can see the political corruption that is possible even in democracy. Since Antigone is a woman defying the traditional standards of a woman, the attention of the audience is focused on the outcome and the King's resolve. Sophocles does not explicitly state which gender has chosen the correct way to live, but represents the people voice in the chorus in contrast to Creon's oppressive nature towards woman and his kingdom. Creon in his opening speech as king represents the ideas of man and king for that time in history. Creon, a man, claims himself to be more powerful than the gods, he is the law, and he is the country: " whoever places a friend above the good of his own country, he is nothing," (Antigone line 203). As Sophocles sets up the play, he is setting the king up to fall. No man is greater than god is, and no man can rule over women without having rule over himself. The people, the poet's voice, represented by the chorus read the ode to the nature of man. The ode foreshadows what failures will come to man if the actions are not withdrawn, and that death cannot be defeated. The author Simon Goldhill is a professor at Cambridge University who wrote a review on literary works involving Greek tragedy. In his review that was published in 1986 by the Cambridge University Press, Goldhill depicts the daily routine of the once modern life. In his work, he describes

the minor role that women played, and in his review of the play *Antigone*, he alludes to the shut out role that women play and analyzes the Ode to Man. After Creon's threat to his own guards, mad with rage, the Chorus begins to chant. Siegfried Melchinger interprets this ode slightly different from Goldhill, stating that the ode reflects, "many are the wonders but nothing more wonderful than man," where Goldhill debates the interpretation. Goldhill writes that the ode implies that the "all-inventive man comes to the nothingness that is his future." The chant is an ode to the human spirit and power of man. Creon's eruption with rage is not because a citizen of his kingdom disobeyed his edict, but that it was a woman who stood up against his power, and there was nothing he can do. Creon's tone towards Antigone's actions is one that would be directed toward a slave during the early American revolutionary days of slave trade. *Antigone's Flaw* is a review of Sophocles' play *Antigone* and her role in the Greek tragedy. Patricia M. Lines, a dramatist who analyzes the positive aspects of *Antigone* and females, wrote the review. Lines does not state or imply that women during Sophocles' era were treated equally or with the same standards as men, but does write, "Antigone stands for all this is right and for the opposition to tyranny," contributing to her focus that represents the positive outlook of *Antigone*, (Lines 1495). *Antigone* represents the morality of the play, and helps give a didactic performance. Since only males were allowed to be in politics, it is understandable that a defiant woman would collect the attention of the audience and warn them of the possible danger that, not a woman poses, but the male politician. Sophocles shows that if a woman can stand up to the king, then any man is capable of doing the same. *Antigone's*

rebellion against the king, not only represents her love for her brother, but also contrasts the difference between men and women. Women at this time were not in place to challenge a man and Antigone's silenced opinion represents the flaw of man. The king's son is to marry the defiant woman, and in his flaw, he is to have her exiled. This flaw, as Creon will soon see, is to become his own tragedy. Even the son, Haemon, cannot speak out about his love, for the Creon will hear none of it. Creon waits until every respectable man in the kingdom has told him that he is doing wrong, that he considers it a fault on his part. Creon ignores the wishes of every woman, and every man. Pride is a fault in men, and the kingdom that follows the man is doomed to share a similar fate. Sophocles represents the power of men and insignificance of women in the epic tragedy. The women, even the ones dearest to him are considered to have little importance and can easily be removed. Ismene who did not violate a law, but coincided with her sister was treated with equal disdain. Women, according to Siegfried Melchinger, were misunderstood in Sophocles' era and Antigone is the epitome of this representation. Antigone in contrast to Creon "acted according to the divine justice of the unwritten law," where Creon is simply vulnerable because he is unsure of his grasp on power, (Melchinger 77). Antigone is defending a bond of kinship, which Sophocles portrays man to ignore. Sophocles poses the two powers of *philia* and *eros*: love or hate. Creon takes fault to *eros*, but with the death of those dear to him he will realize the absolute power. Creon continues to cover up his growing uncertainty through harsh and erratic measures. Haemon, who was to marry Antigone, is called a "woman's slave," by his father. Creon does not mean that he works for, nor is he

literally a slave to Antigone, but that he accepts a woman's opinion to be as right as his own. Creon cannot accept that his son would choose a woman's belief over his own or the gods' will over that of man's. Haemon has broken the bond between him and his father, and as Sophocles alludes, the bond between two men is weak if the interests are not the same. After Creon has spoken to the wisest man in the kingdom, he realizes his fault and attempts to make things right. Creon accepts the difficulty in having to swallow his pride, and though he does not believe that he is wrong, he understands that it is something that must be done to give relief to the other men in his life. Creon chooses to release Antigone, not for her life, but because of the repercussions that her death would have on the men in his kingdom. Antigone, the true Queen by birth is treated and pulled from power like a criminal. Though the play never explicitly states, Antigone's actions are pure. She is not disloyal to Creon out of fear, marriage, or motherhood, but entirely rational; she is the only person, a woman, who would do the right thing. Sophocles is asking the audience if they too, would allow such things to occur and defy the gods. Creon's epiphany came too late, and death too early. Antigone's suicide soon became Creon's wish. Antigone's death leads to the suicide of both Creon's son and wife. Although each of these deaths is tragic, it was not until Haemon killed himself in rage, that Creon was truly affected. The death of a woman was not significant, but his own son is what truly brought him to his knees for a final prayer. The essential moral of the tragedy is the warning to the people in power. Sophocles warns the leaders in power not to transgress the rules and limits of governing the people. Sophocles' epic tragedy represented man, woman, death, and the balance

between them. Works Cited Goldhill, Simon. Reading Greek Tragedy. London: Cambridge UP, 1986. Hamburger, Kate. " From Sophocles to Sarte." Sophocles the Classical Heritage. Ed. R D. Dawe. New York: Garland, Inc., 1996. 251-269. Lines, Patricia M. " Antigone's Flaw." Literature an Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Comp. X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia. New York: Pearson Longman, 2005. 1495-1497. Melchinger, Siegfried. Sophocles. Trans. David A. Scrase. New York: Frederick Ungar Co., 1974. 74-86. Seale, David. Vision and Atagecraft in Sophocles. London: University of Chicago P, 1982. 84-111.