

# Sophocles' antigone play: following the heart against the authority demands



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Sophocles presents us with a high standard of moral courage and character in his play *Antigone*. Among the many thematic questions raised, Sophocles pursues in depth the issue of whether it is best to obey the law or to follow one's conscience. *Antigone* displays the strength to follow her conscience against the demands and threats of authority, and therefore she proves herself to be a truly admirable and exemplary heroine. Such a moral choice is one that could drive a less brave individual to madness.

*Antigone* is forced to choose between love and life in her situation in the opening of the play. Her two choices are clear: she can either disobey Creon and bury her brother Polyneices, or she can yield to authority and leave Polyneices unburied. Yet *Antigone* lets us know that in her mind, there is no choice to be made, for she knows what she will do. She asserts: "I will not prove false to [my brother] [...] It is not for [Creon] to keep me from my own" (52-54). As she speaks to Ismene, we see that each sister represents either side of the debate and all the accompanying characteristics: Ismene is obedience, passivity, and subservience; *Antigone* is loyalty, honor, valor, and truth to one's self. In the dialogue between the two sisters, we see that yielding to the law certainly has its advantages, such as the avoidance of trouble with Creon, patriotism toward the state, and the salvaging of *Antigone's* own life. Yet for *Antigone*, these benefits are hardly worth consideration, because the motives for disobedience completely discount them. These reasons have their own rewards: family loyalty, sisterly love, mercy, truth to self, and personal as well as family honor. Thus, *Antigone's* course of action calls for virtue that few people possess and even fewer are able to stand up for in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, Antigone's resolve to do what she feels is right is unshakeable, even when she is surrounded by opposition. To begin with, as it has already been noted, we are presented with her sister Ismene as a foil for Antigone's courage. Ismene's weak effeminacy allows her to fulfill perfectly the stereotypical role and expectations for a woman in Creon's society. She tells Antigone: " You ought to realize that 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" (70-73). She does not want Antigone to get into trouble, which is both understandable and forgivable, but her cowardice makes her disgraceful and loathsome to Antigone and only confirms Antigone's determination to be true to her conscience and her honor. Of course, Creon is the chief rival of Antigone. Creon is staunch in the belief of his own power and authority, as well as in his disrespect of women. He tells his son Haemon: " There is nothing worse/ than disobedience to authority./ It destroys cities, it demolishes homes;/ it breaks and routs one's allies/ [...] 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" (726-734). Therefore, Antigone clearly represents everything that Creon most greatly fears. He wishes for all people not only to obey him, but also to cower to his power. He tells his son it " is vile [to yield] to a woman" (808) and refers to women most brutally as " fields [to be] plough[ed]" (627). From these characters' attitudes toward Antigone, we are able to understand and appreciate her independence and moral courage. We can see the fear that underlies the words of Ismene and Creon, whose disapproval of Antigone's decision and actions is motivated by their own personal intimidation at one so bold in love and integrity.

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Creon makes clear that he alone has the power to distinguish right from wrong, merely because he is the public authority, the only one able to enforce his own whims. Yet what justifies his power? What gives him or any other such government or influence the right to impose its beliefs and wants on anyone else? We all have the power of free will; we all have the ability to distinguish good from evil. Antigone knows this, and she asserts: “ Who knows/ if in that other world this is true piety? [...] My nature is to join in love, not hate” (573-576). It is most important for Antigone to respect and honor those to whom she owes love and gratitude, whereas Creon is motivated by self interest. Haemon notes this, telling his father: “ You want to talk but never to hear and listen” (821).

## **Works Cited**

Sophocles. *Antigone*. Ed. David Greene and Richard Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991.