

# Respect for family and elders: the moral lessons of antigone

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Sophocles's Theban plays tell the story of families afflicted by generations of personal tragedy. Unlike epics such as the Iliad, whose portrayals of whole-scale war, death, and destruction convey a sense of near-apocalyptic despair, Sophocles's plays achieve power by setting tragedy on a more intimate scale. Interpersonal relationships are highlighted, shedding light on the ideals that ancient Greeks valued in their family lives. In particular, *Antigone*, the final play in the saga, focuses on the interactions between family members and the ramifications those interactions sometimes incur. When examined, the events of *Antigone* reveal the esteem that was given to the practice of respecting family members and elders of the community. Relationships such as the ones between Ismene and her dead brothers, between Creon and Haemon, and between Creon and Teiresias, while each emphasizing different aspects of this theme, combine to paint a convincing picture about the value Greeks placed on familial respect. The rich history that *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* supply for *Antigone* is crucial to understanding character dynamics in the play. Even characters that never appear onstage provide strong evidence of family relationships. For example, the memories of her brothers Eteocles and Polyneices, and particularly the latter, motivate *Antigone*'s fateful decision at the play's opening. *Antigone* cannot in good conscience allow her brother Polyneices to go unburied, and so she disobeys Creon's orders. Loving and respectful of both of her brothers, she cannot stand that " Creon honored one, dishonored the other" (162, line 23). Thus, though *Antigone* knows what consequences may come of her decision to bury Polyneices, she feels secure in the righteousness of her actions. She asserts, " I shall be a criminal-but a religious one./ The time

in which I must please those that are dead/ is longer than I must please those of this world ...I know I am pleasing those I should please most" (164, lines 71-74, 89). This sentiment attests to the strong influence of the cultural ideal of honoring and respecting one's family members, especially because the gods themselves value this ideal. The history of Eteocles, Polyneices, and indeed Antigone's whole family can be seen as further influencing her morally-motivated decision to bury her brother. Her family is one whose honor is greatly in need of defense, given the socially unacceptable, incestuous union of Oedipus and Jocasta. Antigone likely views her family's situation with somewhat of an "us versus them" mentality, and thus the notion of her defending her team, or tribe, or sect, etc., is given even more credibility and esteem. Additionally, Antigone has cause to feel that Polyneices has received undue blame for his siege of Thebes; after all, he, as the elder son, was originally usurped by Eteocles. Thus Antigone's burial of Polyneices, implicitly condoned and even admired by Sophocles, reinforces the importance of respect in Greek society. The relationship between Antigone and Ismene raises questions about the nature of familial respect, yet it also emphasizes the value of familial bonds. Antigone feels very strongly about her duty to bury Polyneices, to pay him respect. When Ismene is opposed to the idea, Antigone responds harshly, even using language as strong as "I will hate you still worse for silence" (164, lines 86-87) when Ismene suggests keeping the burial a secret. In this instance, Antigone's sense of responsibility towards her brother overrides any respect she might feel for the choices of Ismene. Even when Antigone is apprehended, she refuses to accept Ismene's gesture of self-sacrifice, because Ismene was not

willing to take the initial risk. It can be inferred from this that those viewed as cowardly, like Ismene, are not deserving of the respect that is so lauded by Antigone and by Greek society. Ismene's attitude, though dismissed as cowardly by Antigone, is itself a model of love, devotion, and respect for her sister. Ismene insists that she does not wish to dishonor her brothers, but that her nature prevents her from defying the law. She is genuinely concerned for Antigone's well being, but in the end must resign from her protests, saying, " Well, if you will, go on/ Know this; that though you are wrong to go, your friends/ are right to love you" (165 lines 97-99). Because of Sophocles's portrayal of Ismene as a kindly and rather sympathetically timid character, her feelings are perceived as valuable and worthy of emulation. Her love for her sister is immensely deep, and when she asks to be executed alongside Antigone in honor of Polyneices, she cries, " What life is there for me, once I have lost you" (182, line 48)? This devotion to family, while different in nature from Antigone's bold actions, undoubtedly strengthens the case for family's importance in ancient Greece. The other set of family dynamics in Antigone involves Creon's relationship with his son Haemon. Haemon's opening lines suggest that he adheres completely to the code of respect for family and elders that society prefers. He is even willing to give up his bride as an act of total submission: " Father, I am yours; with your excellent judgment/ you lay the right before me, and I shall follow it./ No marriage will ever be so valued by me/ as to override the goodness of your leadership" (186 lines 635-638). However, subsequent dialogue between Haemon and Creon shows that the son is not nearly as submissive as he first seems. As their discussion progresses, Haemon raises objections

to Creon's sentencing of Antigone. The way he objects, however, is cleverly consistent with the accepted level of familial respect. Instead of stating his disagreement in personal terms, Haemon couches it in terms of the opinion of the common man of Thebes, because the general contentedness of the city is crucial to Creon's success, and, Haemon promises, " Nothing I own I value more highly, father, than your success" (188 line 700-701). Thus Haemon's first impulse is clearly one of deference to his father, despite the incompatible opinions of father and son. In considering Haemon's later actions, it must be remembered that Antigone was to be his wife, and that a certain familial bond had already been forged between the two young lovers. Parental respect can only be taken so far when issues of justice and secondary personal relationships are considered. For Haemon, to respect his father by agreeing with him would be to disrespect Antigone and the sacrifice she made for the honor of her family. Indeed, Creon's attitude towards his son shows very little sensitivity for his own family's well being. Sophocles uses this situation as a didactic tool; Creon's disregard for his family will, in the end, cause him the most misery of all the characters. The consequences of disrespecting one's family are thus made clear. Arguably akin to family in terms of deserving respect, the elders of the community play a crucial role in Antigone, both in terms of the plot and in terms of revealing the values of Sophocles's Greece. The chorus of the play consists of Theban elders who are in constant discussion with the main characters about their dilemmas. Though the chorus, comprised of common citizens, is clearly inferior in rank to Creon, the ruler nevertheless puts a great deal of stock into the views of these old men. This dynamic is displayed in the

exchange in which Creon asks if the chorus will agree to do his bidding (thus showing them a degree of deference), and the chorus responds, “ There is none so foolish as to love his own death” (196 line 220). Near the end of the play, Creon displays even more respect for the chorus by asking it what action to take in light of Teiresias’s prophecy, and then following its advice immediately. In this situation, the wise chorus obviously gives the correct advice, yet Creon’s action comes too late. There are several instances, however, in which both Creon and Antigone choose to ignore the advice or moral judgments of the chorus. For example, in a moment of warning, the chorus asks Creon, “ Will you rob your son of this girl?” (184 line 574), but Creon unflinchingly pursues his plan of death. In these situations, the chorus is inevitably proved to be correct, a fact which emphasizes the importance of obeying the elders in their wisdom. In *Antigone*, the ultimate elder to be respected and obeyed is the blind seer Teiresias. As an elder and a prophet, Teiresias is like a grandfather to the entire city of Thebes. His skills are well-respected, even by the headstrong Creon, who assures the old man that “ Never in the past have I turned from your advice” (189 line 993). Indeed, Teiresias delivers a sickeningly accurate prophecy about the ramifications of Creon’s decision not to bury Polyneices. Creon argues briefly with the seer, but eventually yields to his wisdom; tragically, those few short minutes spent in disagreement may make the difference between saving Antigone (and thus Haemon) and losing them both. Again, Creon’s disrespect for elders causes dire consequences. Through *Antigone*, Sophocles sends a clear message endorsing respect as a critical value in Greek society. From interpersonal relationships like that between Antigone and Ismene to more

generational relationships such as Creon's with the chorus, respect and love for family and elders emerges as a fate-determining factor. Antigone and Haemon may die, but it is Creon, the one who showed the least respect in his relationships, who ends up suffering most grievously. The play Antigone thus reflects the basic values of its society by providing a tragic exhortation to live life with honor and respect.