

Tragic shades of grey

Literature



Antigone's role as heroine of this tragedy seems rooted in the idea that she remains loyal to her slain brother, Polyneices, even in the face of imminent and most horrific execution by the way "Stoning to death in the public square" (Sophocles 186). However, her willingness to act ethically in her familial loyalties seems to fall short when it comes to those family members who are not Polyneices. In fact, one could even argue that, by her thoughtless and selfish actions, it is Antigone who is responsible for bringing about the carnage that ensues. She is no graceful heroine, as her behavior illustrates when she addresses her sister Ismene maliciously before the girl ever has the opportunity to agree or disagree with Antigone's plans to defy Creon's decree (though, of course, she does disagree). "And now you can prove what you are:/A true sister or a traitor to your family," Antigone says to Ismene, unprovoked (Sophocles 186).

Ismene makes no excuses for her unwillingness to go along with Antigone's plans. In fact, she is humble enough to ask for forgiveness, saying, "I beg the Dead/To forgive me" (Sophocles 188). However, it would seem that while Ismene (labeled a coward by many readers of the play) has seen enough sorrow and bloodshed in her lifetime, Antigone will not be satisfied until she has brought everyone to ruin. In her rash act of defiance, she causes the deaths of her two brothers to become a catalyst that will end the life of all but the one man she despises, Creon. In fact, it is only those who are without culpability that will suffer for her crime-Haimon, who cannot live with the grief of losing her, and Queen Eurydice, who cannot live with the grief of losing her only son. Can the same be said of Creon

The King of Thebes, after all, sheds no reckless blood on his actions. In fact, Creon does nothing more than what he said he would do. The harm he

inflicts directly is on no one but Antigone, who knew what the law decreed as punishment before she ever put her plans into motion. As king, Creon surely understands the importance of sticking to his word, seeing as how that word is quite literally the law of the land. Creon, it can be argued, is guilty of nothing more than obeying the word of the law. Antigone, one could say, leaves the king with no choice but to respond as he does, as he says, "Of all the people in this city, only she/Has had contempt for my law and broken it./Do you want me to show myself weak before the/people/Or to break my own sworn word No, I will not" (Sophocles 211). Creon is acting with his head, doing so in accordance with the duty of his station in life, while Antigone is acting with the thoughtless impulses of her heart, thinking of no one and nothing than her own emotions. By this rationale, which of the two is truly to blame Both are to blame. All are to blame.

The labels that are so conveniently (and quite commonly) slapped on these characters are often dictated by nothing more than the position in which the characters have been placed. All must face the hand they are dealt with, whether good or bad, the best way they know-how. Sadly, some know-how better than others do. These characters act hardly more or less "bad/evil" or "good/benevolent" in response to the situations in which they are placed than anyone else would be he or she to find him or herself in the same predicament. Extreme labels such as "good" or "bad" are not relevant to the characters of this final piece of the Oedipus Cycle (or any of the plays in it, for that matter). Trying to label them as such is as ridiculous as trying to label an entire forest with the color of black or white. They must be found in shades of grey.