

Gods and humans



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GODS AND HUMANS Part of the reason both Oedipus and Antigone are considered to be epic works is that they feature characters who are larger than life and whose deeds are truly remarkable. Even centuries and millennium later the human and divine figures featured in these stories astonish us with their extreme and powerful qualities. We can marvel at these classical figures but we can also examine the different ways they interact with one another and the sorts of relationships they have with one another, plus the different ways Sophocles portrays them. Surely this interplay is one of the reasons these figures continue to resonate in our modern days and continue to excite us so much. The conflict between the world and laws of humans and those of gods is one that is truly timeless.

In both quoted passages, the laws of the gods and the laws of human beings are examined and discussed. There are two clearly different principles at play. In both works the human heroes are at odds with the political system which is trying to subjugate them. In both cases, the heroes stand up for what they believe. They are willing to obey a higher law, a higher order which is in conflict with the human law before them. They do not recognize the arbitrarily exercised power of the regent. They operate under a different, more powerful law which they think is more objective, or more fair.

Oedipus, who is blind, makes a powerful statement when he says

You with your precious eyes,

You're blind to the corruption of your life,

To the house you live in, those you live with.

Oedipus serves Apollo. Although he is blind he is capable of seeing that real life, full of human laws, is corrupt and false. The higher world of gods and forms is truer and more just. His blindness is perhaps something of an asset

as it separates him somewhat from the human world and allows him to imagine or perceive of a more just world where the law of gods such as Apollo dominate.

In Antigone much the same idea is presented. Antigone also must deal with Creon and the law of the human system. “[M]y reverence only brands me for irreverence!” she exclaims, weeping at the injustice of it. She has obeyed the religious ritual of burying her dead brother at the expense of the human law forbidding her to do so. That is why she is being punished. For her, obeying the gods is more important than obeying the king. And that is why she is willing to endure her punishment even if it is unjust in the human world.

Both stories show the interplay of the human and divine worlds. Even as Sophocles tells the story of both Oedipus and Antigone, it is clear this story is more a tableaux about the interference of arbitrary judgement and action than a plain mortality tale. Never has the expression “the best laid plans of men...” been more relevant. It seems everything that humans try to do in both plays is undermined or ruined by the interference of petty, vindictive, and jealous gods. This is an important distinction between Sophocles gods and those of other poets who have more work-a-day gods. They may sit in judgement on humans and watch everything that happens but it can’t be said that they are as colourfully drawn as Sophocles or as central to the plot of the story. Every god in Sophocles is a *deus ex machina*, influencing the action by way of their system of rules and their expectations.

Sophocles portrayal of gods can be compared with other Greek philosophers and poets. Both gave the gods human qualities that made them appear very imperfect (if not downright unpleasant). For many other later Greeks such as

Socrates and Plato, the gods began to be seen as much more perfect. There was an ideal world which was inhabited by the gods and the idea that they could be motivated by jealousy or lust was to them absurd. So we can see that eventually the notions of Sophocles began to be replaced—but this is an important aspect of Greek theology well worth noting in passing.

The truth is that Sophocles understood that humans yearn for a perfect justice which will overrule the arbitrary justice of humans. People want to live by a high and consistent standard of rules and ideas which is so often not present in the world we live in. Even if it doesn't exist they will try to create it for themselves. In the contemporary world men like Nelson Mandela have refused to give in to unfair rules and have fought to create more equal or perfect systems of justice.