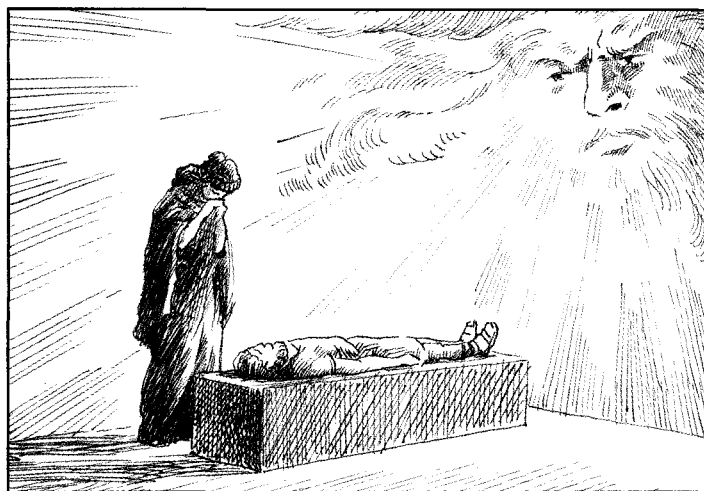


# Sophocles' *Antigone*

## Why the Gods Do Not Spare the Innocent

by Mary Lefkowitz



Sophocles' *Antigone* is a drama about a young woman who defies orders because she believes them to be wrong. Her uncle Creon, the ruler of Thebes, had proclaimed that no one was to give the rites of burial to Antigone's brother Polynices, because he besieged his own homeland. However, Greek religious custom unambiguously requires that the dead must be given a proper burial, and the next of kin had primary responsibility for the rites of burial. Antigone understands that ties of blood take precedence over temporary disputes and rivalries. She believes that she will see her family again, after she dies, when she will live in the lower world in a house with other members of her family, who will be united in death as they never were during their lifetimes.

Antigone's courage makes her appear to be a protofeminist, a woman who refuses to stay inside the house and do what is expected of her. In fact, however, it is not remarkable that the person who loses her life because of her piety toward the gods happens to be female and that the violator of the gods' laws happens to be male. Even though the ancient Greeks did not permit women to govern or to vote, they recognized that females often had a better sense of what is right and just than men do and that they were the survivors of the wars initiated and fought by men. Women preserved the family; they washed the bodies of the dead and performed the rituals of lamentation. Despite the restrictions imposed on ordinary women in private life, they played significant roles in epic and in Athenian theater.

When she disobeys her uncle, Antigone knows that she will

be sentenced to death. Nonetheless, with great courage and determination, she tries to bury her brother. She is prepared to do what is right rather than what is convenient or safe. Yet the gods allow her to die and let Creon live, although in disgrace and misery. In addition, the gods do nothing to prevent Creon's son Haemon and Creon's innocent wife from killing themselves. Neither they nor Antigone did anything wrong; Creon, however, remains alive, even though he defied established religious custom. How can this be justice?

We cannot look to Sophocles' biography or historical context to help us understand why he let Antigone die. We know very little about Sophocles' life: He probably was born in 497/6 B.C. and died in 406. The limited evidence that we have suggests that his contemporaries regarded his work highly. In the competitions among the three dramatists chosen every year to write and produce a set of plays, he often won first prize but never third. In fact, he appears to have been more popular than any other dramatist in his lifetime, including Euripides. He wrote at least 123 plays; only seven complete plays survive. We do not know exactly when *Antigone* was performed, or if it won first prize, or what its first audience thought of it.

How can we discover the original meaning of the drama without the reports of contemporary critics or the words of the author himself? One possible approach is through ancient Greek religion. In ancient Athens, dramas were performed at the festival of Dionysus. As such, they were quite literally religious events, meant to honor the god of the festival and all other gods with whom he was associated. Honoring the gods requires that one recognize their power: They live forever, never grow old; they have all the power and knowledge, but nothing that any man accomplishes endures. Mortals must learn to recognize their limitations; in reality, however, they rarely do so. Virtually every surviving ancient Athenian drama brings out this strong distinction.

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Antigone belongs to the last surviving generation of a family that suffered because they did not follow the instructions of the gods. Her grandfather Laius was warned not to beget a child; nonetheless, he did so. The child, as was the ancient custom, was taken to a remote place to die, either of malnutrition or as a victim of predators. Instead, however, he was given to a shepherd to be raised in another city. When the child, Oedipus, learned that he might have been adopted, he went to the oracle at Delphi to learn who his true parents were and was told that he would kill his father and marry his mother. He thought he could avoid fulfilling the oracle by staying away from Corinth. On his way north, however, he killed an older man without knowing who he was and then later married the widow of the king of Thebes, Jocasta, without realizing that she was his mother. They had two daughters, Antigone and Ismene, and two sons, Eteocles and Polynices.

Sophocles' drama *Oedipus the King* describes how Oedipus discovers his true identity and realizes that, despite his efforts, he has brought the oracle to fulfillment. He blinds himself and is sent into exile by the new ruler, his brother-in-law Creon. Sophocles' drama *Oedipus at Colonus* tells the story of his death: Antigone guides her father to Athens, where the gods will send him below the earth, so he can protect Athens in death as a hero. Before he dies, however, he puts a curse on his two sons, who are fighting with each other over the throne of Thebes. When Polynices brings an army from Argos to attack Eteocles in Thebes, the two brothers kill each other in battle. Now Creon becomes king. At this point, the action of *Antigone* begins. Even though *Antigone* deals with what is chronologically the last part of the story, it was performed in a different dramatic contest from that of the other two plays. Though often grouped in modern translations as a trilogy, none of the three plays about Oedipus and his family is directly connected to the others.

Creon's first action as king is to refuse to allow anyone to bury Polynices, whom he regards as an enemy of the city. Everyone else thinks he is wrong, but everyone except Antigone is afraid to do anything about it. Antigone insists that, as his closest relative, she is obliged to bury her brother. Her sister Ismene, an equally close relative, is too frightened to want to help. The old men of Thebes, who form the chorus of the drama, are also reluctant to get involved. All they are prepared to do is to decline to assist Creon in enforcing his edict. The sentry makes it clear that he and his fellow soldiers are equally uncomfortable with Creon's order. Like Ismene and the chorus, however, they are afraid of what Creon will do to them if they disobey. Meanwhile, Antigone has gone outside the city walls to cover the body with ceremonial dust. The soldiers, following Creon's orders, wash the corpse clean, but then there is a duststorm. When the air clears, the soldiers see Antigone, once again sprinkling dust and pouring libations on Polynices' corpse.

Even when captured, Antigone is resolute; she does not believe that an edict issued by a "mere mortal" should take precedence over "unwritten, unshakable traditions" that live forever. The old men of the chorus insist that she is "passionate and wild," like her father Oedipus. To Creon, she is a traitor to the state, disobedient to her uncle, and a woman who has behaved inappropriately, without proper deference to men. He believes (wrongly, as the action of the drama shows) that the welfare of the state should take precedence over family loyalty.

Creon's son Haemon was engaged to Antigone, but he decrees that Antigone and Ismene also must die because Antigone has disobeyed his edict. The chorus then sings a song about the nature of human existence. Ruin has attacked the house of Laius, generation after generation, like the sea beating down the shore: "some god will bring them crashing down, / the race finds no release." A knife from the gods is cutting down the last root of the family, "by a senseless word, a fury at the heart." Zeus' law prevails eternally: "no towering form of greatness / enters into the lives of mortals / free and clear of ruin." Sooner or later, the man whom the gods are determined to destroy will confuse good with evil: "he goes his way for a moment only / free of blinding ruin." This failure to distinguish good from evil may be what Aristotle meant by *hamartia*, which is better translated as "error in judgment" than as "tragic flaw."

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## Are the pious always rewarded and the innocent always spared?

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The remaining scenes show how each character is in turn destroyed by the madness described in this choral song. Creon will not listen to Haemon and drives him away, after his son has tried to persuade him that he has made a mistake and that all the people of the city support Antigone and her piety. Haemon, Creon insists, is disobedient to his father and also a slave to passion for his intended bride. Antigone, when she is brought in for the last time, now realizes that dying is terrible and that she has not received any benefit from the glory she expected to win for doing what was right. The chorus still imagines that she is paying for her father's crimes and tells her that her own "blind will" and passion have destroyed her. Antigone, however, cannot understand why no one mourns for her; her only comfort is that her family will treat her kindly when she arrives in the world of the dead.

No sooner has Creon sent Antigone off to be buried alive than the prophet Tiresias warns Creon that portents and omens show that the gods disapprove of what he has done. Creon decides to rescue Antigone, but now it is too late. Antigone, confined to her living tomb, has hanged herself; Haemon finds her dead and kills himself. When his mother, Eurydice, hears that Haemon is dead, she also commits suicide, blaming Creon and cursing him. At the end, Creon is left alone, to live with the realization that he has murdered not only Antigone but his own family.

In a Christian drama, perhaps, Antigone would somehow have been redeemed. In Sophocles' drama, however, she receives no last-minute reprieve. She does not even live long enough to see how much Haemon loves her or how the citizens of Thebes honor her. She dies too soon because, like her father, she is impulsive and headstrong, unwilling to negotiate or to try to persuade Creon with reasoned arguments, as her fiancé Haemon seeks to do. Haemon and Eurydice are also innocent victims of the inherited ruin that destroyed Antigone and her brothers. The gods exact justice for crimes committed in the past but without sparing the innocent. The action of the drama is cruel and uncompromising but devastatingly realistic: In the real world as we know it, are the pious always rewarded and the innocent always spared?

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# Only a Madman Laughs at the Culture of Others

## The Legacy of Herodotus

by Steven J. Willett



The opening sentence of Herodotus' *Histories*, which recount the wars fought between Greece and Persia in the early fifth century B.C., unrolls like a long musical phrase rising to its Homeric crescendo and then dying away into momentary quiet:

Herodotus of Halicarnassus here publishes the results of his research, in order that the actions performed by men may not fade over time, nor the great and wonderful deeds, which both the Greeks and barbarians have displayed, lack renown, and, along with all other relevant matters, the cause that drove them to wage war on each other.

We are so used to hearing Herodotus called "the father of history" after Cicero's clever formula (*On the Laws* 1.1.5) that it has become common to take him for a credulous old fuddy-duddy whose history is full of amusing and delightful stories spun from a kernel of dubious factual content. He certainly *is* the father of history, though his credulity has been vastly overstated. We have no evidence to suggest that any of his predecessors in eastern Mediterranean history, ethnography, or geography matched the enormous scope of his inquiries into the origins and course of the Greco-Persian wars. However, he is also the father of Western literary prose. The *Histories* are the first complete surviving work of artistic prose, one that exercised a profound influence on Greek historiography for over a thousand years down to the time of Procopius in the sixth century A.D. Herodotus raised the medium of prose to a prominence and sophistication it had never before enjoyed. He stands alongside Plato as its master.

Herodotus' style elicited a wide range of qualities from the ancient critics. He was, first of all, "most Homeric," in

pseudo-Longinus' words (*On the Sublime* 13.3), for the many words and phrases he borrowed from Homer. Longinus may also have had in mind the historian's Ionic dialect along with his descriptions of battle, narrative variety, mythological digressions, and dramatic dialogues between sharply etched personalities. Dionysius of Halicarnassus thought that Herodotus, as an emulator of Homer, strove to give his writing the sort of variety (*Letter to Pompeius* 3.11) suggested by these diverse traits. But the ancients also found other characteristics in Herodotus that may not seem entirely consistent with his Homeric bent. Dionysius of Halicarnassus again compared his prose style to the most powerful poetry for its persuasiveness, charm, and sweetness (*On Thucydides* 23). Even Plutarch, a vituperative critic of Herodotus for his supposed "anti-Greek bias," recognized the insinuating flow of his Greek. In *The Malice of Herodotus*, perhaps the world's first book review, he couples Homeric narrative with verbal fluency:

The man's an artist, his story pleasant, and grace and power and vivacity fill the narrative; he tells his tale like a Homer, not knowledgeably, but sweetly and fluently. That, quite simply, is what beguiles and attracts everyone, but just as we must watch for beetles in roses, we must watch for his slander and partisan abuse, which come masked under a smooth and soft appearance . . .

The Homeric tale that Herodotus told was not, as modern readers might expect, about war itself. His purpose in the *Histories* was, as he carefully articulated at the end of the first sentence, to explain the *cause* of war. The first five books and a good deal of the four subsequent ones explore the *nomoi*, or customs, of the two cultures that came into conflict: Hellas and Persia. From Book 1.170 to Book 5.17, a span that covers over a third of the text, Herodotus describes no regular warfare be-

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