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Transgression or Justice? Sophocles' *Antigone* in Classical Greece and  
Twentieth-Century France

Abstract

This essay deals with the problems of law, justice and transgression in Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* in the contexts of classical Greece and twentieth-century France, where the adaptation produced by French playwright Jean Anouilh in 1944 became a smash hit. The play tells the sad story of Oedipus's daughter, princess Antigone, who is condemned to death by her uncle King Creon for burying her rebel brother. Out of his love for Antigone, Haemon, Creon's son, urges his father to reconsider. Despite Haemon's urging, Creon remains uncompromising and refuses to back down. The play ends with the tragic double suicide of Antigone and Haemon and with Creon paying the ultimate price—the loss of his family and eventually his authority. At the core of the play is the confrontation between Antigone as the dutiful sister who willingly defies the state to attend to her family and religious conscience and Creon as the stubborn, uncompromising leader who represents the supreme legitimacy of the state. In her opposition to Creon, Antigone clearly is the failure whose cause is vindicated only by death. Her action, however, still ignites fierce debates. Is Antigone's burial of her brother an act of transgression or that of justice? Should she be viewed a traitor who crosses the line and therefore deserves what is coming to her or a martyr who is willing to die for an ideal and hence deserves our sympathy and praise?

In "Sophocles' Praise of Man and the Conflicts of *Antigone*," Charles Paul Segal

explains that the starting point of the conflict between Antigone and Creon is their opposing understandings of the problem of law and justice. In the close-knit fifth-century city-state, the word “law” (or “legality”) has a “far wider range of application than [it] would in the more compartmentalized ethics of modern civilization” (Segal 48). For Sophocles and his contemporaries, law “involve[s] the entire public and private life of the citizen, his relation to the gods and with his fellow-men, with all the responsibilities, moral, political, social, implied in those relations” (Segal 48). “Antigone,” writes Segal, “opposes the ‘decrees’ (*kerygmata*) of Creon to the ‘laws’ (*nomima*) of the gods” and appeals to “the Justice that dwells with the gods,” whereas Creon does not make the distinction between human law and divine decree and understands human justice only “in relation to the *polis*, the state” (47). Therefore, from the perspective of ancient Athenians, Antigone, in burying her rebel brother, is not transgressing but merely opposing Creon’s “narrowly rationalistic and materialistic view of human motivation” (Segal 48) and fulfilling the duty expected of a true Athenian citizen.

In Jean Anouilh’s 1944 adaptation, however, Antigone’s image as the heroine who willingly defies the state for her religious conscience may not have been so impressive to the twentieth-century audience, given the dramatic shift in public attitudes towards the problems of justice and law. Anouilh’s adaptation was premiered in France during the Second World War when the country was virtually under Nazi occupation. The majority of Anouilh’s audience would have understood law as Creon understands it—the “supreme guide of the state (*polis*)” (Hadas 96). As the result, Antigone’s action, in the twentieth-century context, would very well have been viewed as treason. Furthermore, as a young girl who willingly sacrifices herself for her belief, Antigone may have appeared, to the twentieth-century audience, as an irrational, foolhardy character both out of time and out of place.

The shift of public attitudes towards the problems of law and justice may have contributed to the popularity of Anouilh's adaptation, for despite being a play seemingly championing the cause of the Resistance, it was nevertheless permitted to perform and this alone suggests once more the ambiguity of the play itself. Anouilh's adaptation was seen by many as an attack on the occupying Vichy government in France. For the occupying force, however, it was a play that stressed the imposition of law and the fatal consequences for those who transgressed.

Key words: Antigone, Creon, justice, transgression, law, Sophocles, Jean Anouilh

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