

Symbol of Antigone: Selfless or Selfish?

By Neomi Chen

In Sophocles' play *Antigone*, the titular character ignores the legal and societal ramifications of burying her brother Polyneices in favor of upholding holy laws. At the start of the play, Antigone embodies self-confidence through her dialogue and actions when she confides in her sister Ismene about her plan to bury Polyneices. As King Creon suggests various forms of punishment for Antigone, Antigone endures his chastising and remains steadfast in her original belief about the importance of divine laws. However, as her potential public punishments morph into private isolation in a cave, Antigone begins employing self-pitying language in her final speech about her inevitable loss of human connection. Antigone didn't bury Polyneices just to honor the gods – she selfishly wanted to become a symbol of martyrdom by seeking external validation and attention from her peers before and after the burial.

To reveal Antigone's rationale behind disobeying Creon's law, Sophocles examines a complicated relationship between "purity" and "crime." As Antigone declares to Ismene how she is willing to accept any consequences – even death – for burying Polyneices, she labels her imminent action as a "pure crime" (l. 72). "Pure" refers to something that is "perfect" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, def. 1b) and "not mixed with

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anything that corrupts or impairs” (def. 1a). “Crime,” of course, references the “breaking of the law” (def. 2b), “an evil or injurious act,” and “a sin” (def. 1b). However, “crime” has another meaning that is less harsh: “a shameful or regrettable act; an unfortunate situation” (def. 1c). It is likely that Sophocles is using the latter definition of “crime” when associating that word with “pure”; at that moment, Antigone views the burial of her brother as flawless and righteous. By first categorizing her violation of a man-made law as “pure,” Antigone is showcasing one aspect of her self-confidence. The dramatic irony between Sophocles’ and Antigone’s understanding of a “pure crime” also foreshadows how much regret Antigone will experience in her final speech as she emotionally prepares herself for her impending death.

Antigone further demonstrates her self-assurance by condescendingly judging Ismene’s refusal to join her “pure crime” through the opposition of “dishonour” with the phrase “in honour.” Antigone disapprovingly proclaims to Ismene, “you may dishonour / The sacred laws that Heaven holds in honour” (ll. 76-77). “Dishonour” is when one “treats with... indignity” (def. 1) and “bring[s]... disgrace upon, by one’s conduct” (def. 3). “In honour” is associated with “moral principles” or a “moral responsibility” with typically “no legal obligation” that follows (def. P2). This scene is the first time Antigone tries to elevate herself to divinity by assuming holy reasoning: the burial of Polyneices will be done “in honour.” Even though Antigone emphasizes her superiority over Ismene through her holy decision, “dishonour” is spatially one line above “in honour.” Antigone labels Ismene’s logic as “dishonourable” and inferior, but had Antigone listened to Ismene, she would not have died so young and so soon. In

foresight, based on Antigone's pitiful remarks in her final moments, the higher placement of "dishonour" than "in honour" foreshadows the realization that escaping one's death is a far more desirable and superior choice.

Antigone securely holds onto the belief that she is analogous to the gods when she tries to claim prestige by associating her isolation and death with those of the goddess, Niobe. Even though Antigone is a short-lived "mortal," she wishes her actions will bring her "glory that long will outlive her" (l. 839), as if she were an eternal force like a goddess. The Chorus signals its refusal to console her through juxtaposition and parallelism. The Chorus first distinguishes between the identities of Niobe and Antigone by asserting that Niobe was "a goddess, and born of the / gods" (ll. 834-835) while Antigone is just a mere mortal "of mortals born" (l. 836). The two lines referencing "a goddess" and "gods" are placed above the line mentioning "mortals," literally showing how divinity is superior to mankind. However, immediately afterward, the Chorus not only brings the "gods" down so that they are in the same line as "mortals" but also chooses to place "mortal" before "god" within the line when they note how Antigone as "a mortal [is] to share in the doom of a god" (l. 837). Antigone believes that her punishment will make her a god-like martyr, but the Chorus is reminding Antigone that the only aspect of divinity that she will share with Niobe is her divine punishment.

Antigone's self-confidence is slightly weakened during her arrogant encouragement for Ismene to spread the news of her plans. In fact, Antigone excitedly begs Ismene, "Go and denounce me!" (l. 86). Believing that Antigone's behavior should stay concealed, Ismene is extremely skeptical and

hesitant to expose their familial affairs to which Antigone emotionally responds, “O stop, or I shall hate you!” (l. 93). Since Ismene isn’t offering Antigone praise for her decision, Antigone is threatening Ismene to participate in her scheme for public attention. Antigone mocks Ismene’s opposition to Antigone’s decision by declaring, “Let me be, / Me and my folly!” (l. 94-95). As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “folly” references “foolishness” and “unwise conduct” (def. 1). Considering how it’s still early in the play, it is likely that Antigone is just labeling her choice as a “folly” to conform to the thoughts that Ismene has about her. Another possible way to examine “folly” is that Antigone acknowledges that the act of burying Polyneices is “unwise,” so her word choice here reveals that she too agrees that she is silly and isn’t as confident as she first portrayed herself to be.

Antigone also tends to exclude Ismene and often only uses first-person pronouns to draw more focus onto herself. For instance, in an effort to stay as relevant as she can among the living with the remaining time she has left, Antigone asserts in Antistrophe 2 of Choral Ode 4 how “harsh fate has / held / Fast in its grip the whole renowned race of / Labdacus!” (ll. 857-860). Labdacus is Oedipus’ paternal grandfather, and with the passing of so many of Labdacus’ posterity, Antigone wants to continue being a part of the diminishing family tree. Directly calling out “O look upon me” (l. 940), Antigone claims that she is the “last that remain of a line of kings” (l. 941) and completely forgets about her sister. Antigone longs to carry forth the line of Labdacus’ race by *herself* with *her* marriage and *her* children – refusing to acknowledge that Ismene is and will be the only family member left who is capable of extending their tree.

When Creon confronts Antigone about her violation of his law, he recognizes her love of attention and weaponizes it to give her death an appropriate punishment. Meanwhile, Antigone is oblivious and eager to die as she questions Creon, “Would you do more than simply take and kill me?” (l. 496-497) to which he vaguely responds, “I will have nothing more, and nothing less” (l. 498). Provoking Creon even further, Antigone teasingly remarks, “Then why delay?” (l. 499). Antigone’s questioning highlights her eagerness to receive her punishment since she views it as a key part of her path to martyrdom. During this series of questioning, Creon notes Antigone’s positive and ideal outlook on the afterlife, specifically her continued desire for recognition. Antigone hypothetically wonders, “Who knows? In death [the good and the wicked] may be / reconciled” (ll. 521-522), and in death she’s still willing to “give both [an enemy and a friend] love, not share their / hatred” (ll. 524-525), showing her investment in the continued mortality in the afterlife. Death as an equalizer has enabled Antigone to make the boundaries between “good” and “wicked,” “enemy” and “friend,” and even “mortal” and “god” less definite as she seeks to become a symbol of martyrdom.

As Creon runs through three possible death scenarios for Antigone – two public and one private – he reflects on the extent to which Antigone will receive the attention she wants in her path to martyrdom. He initially wanted to stone Antigone and “have her killed / At once, before her bridegroom’s very eyes” to spite his son for loving and taking his fiancé’s side (ll. 760-761). Antigone would receive the attention she wants because Haemon’s “very eyes” would be watching her. Creon proposes to kill Antigone along with Ismene, but he quickly

changes his mind and sees no reason to harm Ismene because of her lack of involvement. He didn't want to implicate Ismene in Antigone's punishment because Ismene would accompany Antigone as they died together. After brainstorming, Creon cleverly settles on "find[ing] a cave in some deserted spot, / And there [he] will imprison her alive" – mocking and imagining Antigone's suffering during her isolation (ll. 773-774). In choosing to keep her isolated and "deserted," Creon has divorced Antigone from further public attention and the "eyes" of those close to her, which is what she would have desired in her final moments.

Creon accurately foresees Antigone's distress because, throughout her final speech, Creon realizes she will not have a wedding ceremony or celebration with friends. At the beginning of Strophe 1 of Choral Ode 4, Antigone claims, "No wedding day can be / Mine, no hymn will be raised to honour / Marriage of mine" (ll. 813-815). During the Epode, Antigone remarks how "[u]nwept, unwedded and unbefriended" (l. 876) she is with "no one [to] lament [her fate]; / No friend is here to mourn [her]" (ll. 881-882). Towards the end of the Epode, Antigone makes a final acknowledgment about how there will be "[n]o chanted wedding-hymn, no bridal-joy" (l. 917). Antigone's choice to reiterate "no" portrays the extent to which her newfound loneliness is affecting her, since marriage was considered a monumental achievement in ancient Greek life. Despite noting all the things Antigone knows she will lack, she makes sure to hold onto an element that she does have: her present moment. She sorrowfully cries out, "Now do I make my last journey; / Now do I see the last / Sun that ever I shall behold, / Never another!" (ll. 807-810). Antigone shows her desperation in cherishing her limited time by repeating "now"

to honor the mundane yet significant daily events she can still experience one last time.

Antigone is sharing with the Chorus that she wants to be “welcomed” in death because she has finally realized she won’t be a martyr in life. “Welcome” refers to when someone is “acceptable as a visitor” or “companion” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, def. 1a). Definition 2a also provides the meaning of an “evil welcome” as one that is “badly received.” Using the first definition of “welcome,” Antigone once again pities herself for being “banished from earth, nor / welcomed / Among the dead” (ll. 849-851). Knowing that she is no longer accepted in the living world, she implores to her dead family: “And yet I go / In the sure hope that you will welcome me, / Father, and you, my mother; you, my brother” (ll. 897-899). Based on Antigone’s forlorn begging, she does not wish to be associated with the latter definition of an “evil welcome,” since she is even seeking approval and attention from people in the afterlife. Antigone constantly seems to be attracted to receiving public observation throughout the play, so it is notable how she still craves recognition when she ceases to live. Other than Antigone not liking the idea that her private death will be hidden from the Theban people, she does not seem that scared of her punishment. However, because Antigone views death as something that she wishes will “welcome” and validate her, she’s fearful of the ambiguity of her reputation that follows her into the afterlife.

Antigone’s self-assuring language when conversing with Ismene and Creon illustrates the initial confidence she felt about her seemingly selfless motive to honor the gods and her brother through a proper burial. However, Antigone’s incentive in burying Polyneices is not as altruistic as one might think.

Antigone tries to receive the maximum amount of attention from her peers before and after the burial of her brother as a means to falsely claim religious martyrdom. As soon as Antigone finally registers that no one would be watching her ultimate demise, she suddenly pities her solitude. Her final moments mainly focus on her lost marriage and future among the living, not really on pleasing the gods. Yet, her last dying breath is spent alone and without the audience she had hoped to gain.