



كلية الآداب

حوليات آداب عين شمس المجلد 47 (عدد إبريل – يونيو 2019)

<http://www.aafu.journals.ekb.eg>

(دورية علمية محكمة)



جامعة عين شمس

Familial Relationships in Ancient Greek Society: An analytical Study of Sophocles' *Antigone*

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Abstract

This paper differs from the research of scholars who read Sophocles' *Antigone* as a conflict between Antigone and the male dominant structure, represented through Creon, while at the same time, overlook the importance of familial relationships in Greek society as presented in the play. Antigone sacrifices her life for her brother, Polyneices, whom Creon denies funeral rites and pronounces a traitor. While Creon stands for the civil law, through attempting to preserve his authority by the use of force, Antigone stands for the religious law and the cultural traditions of her people, through performing burial rites for her dead brother. This implies that Antigone refuses to appear as weak and cowardly through obeying the decree of Creon, and prefers to keep her religious and ethical duties for her family.

Keywords: Family, Greek, brother, religious law, civil law

Antigone was written by the ancient Greek tragedian, Sophocles, in the fifth century BCE, Athens, and recounts the story of the family of Oedipus. Most scholars focus on the character Antigone as one of the first female rebels in history who fights against male dominant structure, represented in the play through the character of Creon. Rosanna Lauriola (2007: 390) argues that “Antigone comes to be not simply a lonely martyr but ... a dangerous woman, whose initiative steps outside the borders of gender role and throws the *polis*’ order into confusion”. Francoise Meltzer (2011: 173-174) focuses on “the absolute contradiction and irreconcilability of Creon and Antigone”. As a defiant and rebellious woman, Antigone has drawn the attention of feminists because she defies the laws of the patriarchy. Jennet Kirkpatrick (2011: 404) says: “Sophocles imagines women as subjects not objects, which is one reason that feminist political theorists have been repeatedly drawn to the play”. This makes us agree that “[Antigone] has become a central trope of tragedy in philosophical, religious, aesthetic, ethical, and political discourses of occidental thought” (Robert, “Antigone’s Nature” 2010: 412). Many scholars attempt to study the character of Antigone who challenges the laws of civil society, while at the same time overlook the reasons behind this challenge. Antigone refuses to obey the edict of King Creon who pronounces her brother, Polyneices, a traitor and denies him funeral rites. This study focuses on the familial relationships within the play, represented through the family ties between the members of the house of King Oedipus.

The play opens with the invitation of Antigone to her sister, Ismene, to join her in the burial of their brother, Polyneices, against the law of Creon, who has already denied him funeral rites and mourning. Creon announces Polyneices a traitor, who must be left as flesh for dogs and birds, after leading an army against his brother, Eteocles, claiming the kingdom of Thebes for himself, and mutually killing each other. Antigone claims an obligation to bury her brother and asks Ismene to join her,

Our brother's burial. – Creon has ordained
Honour for one, dishonour for the other.
Eteocles, they say, has been entombed
With every solemn rite and ceremony
To do him honour in the world below;
But as for Polyneices, Creon has ordered
That none shall bury him or mourn for him;
He must be left to lie unwept, unburied,
For hungry birds of prey to swoop and feast
On his poor body. (21-30)¹

Ismene does not deny love to her brother, but she acts like any traditional Greek woman who was not expected to interfere in politics or violate the laws of men. William Robert (“Antigone’s Nature” 2010: 414) speaks of the Greek society as a “masculine world”, “the ancient Greek

polis was a masculine world, with only native men who owned property eligible for citizenship and political participation". Kirkpatrick (2011: 402) also explains that "concentrating on Ismene affirms the long-standing depiction of a guarded young woman who, in sharp contrast to Antigone, sees herself – and the women of Thebes – as disempowered and assailable". Therefore, Ismene conforms to the traditional role of her society that expected women to be weak and silent. Ismene responds to the request of Antigone,

Remember too that we
Are women, not made to fight with men.
Since they
Who rule us now are stronger far than we,
In this and worse than this we must obey
them. (61-64)

Unlike Ismene who appears to be weak and obedient, Sophocles introduces Antigone as a rebel who violates the law of the city-state and manifests devotion to her family, in action rather than in words, as Ismene does. Antigone announces that burying Polyneices is a "pure crime" (72) and that pleasing the dead is more important than pleasing the living, "I have to please/ The dead far longer than I need to please\ The living; with them, I have to dwell for ever" (74-76). This implies that the action of Antigone is protected by the law of the gods that gives the dead the right of burial.

The character of Ismene has received little attention from critics; however, Ismene plays a significant role in the play as a woman who prefers to share the blame with her sister, Antigone, after being caught in the act of burying Polyneices. Ismene addresses Antigone, "My sister, do not scorn me, nor refuse/ That I may die with you, honouring the dead" (544-545). This speech by Ismene presents her as a rebellious woman who challenges the unjust commands of men. Kirkpatrick (2011: 418) argues that Ismene "symbolically challenges Creon's power ... Appearing before Creon, Ismene uses what she has at hand: the long-standing role of women in mourning and burial". Historically speaking, "excessive female mourning' was outlawed in the sixth century BCE" (Taxidou 2004: 30), and therefore Ismene uses the act of mourning to express her grief and defy the law of the state that forbids mourning. Moreover, through mourning over her dead brother, Ismene remains loyal to the family and expresses her desire to share the death punishment with her sister. Kirkpatrick (2011: 404) comments, "Ismene's story directs our attention to the sisters' relationship with each other, to their interactions, and to the power dynamics between them". Moreover, the story of Ismene and Antigone draws attention to the male

dominant structure of the Greek society that oppressed women and treated them as inferior to men.

Sophocles emphasizes the religiosity and allegiance of Antigone to her dead brother. When Creon asks Antigone how dare she disobey the law, Antigone responds,

It was not Zeus who published this decree,
Nor have the Powers who rule among the
dead
Imposed such laws as this upon mankind;
Nor could I think that a decree of yours—
A man—could override the laws of Heaven
Unwritten and unchanging. Not of today
Or yesterday is their authority;

They are eternal; no man saw their birth. (450-457)

Antigone announces that the man-made law that Creon pronounces for not burying Polyneices cannot overrule the laws of religion that are “unwritten and unchanging”. She justifies her action through referring to the law of the gods that gives the dead the right of burial. Therefore, by challenging the human law, Antigone defends the religious law, that appears to be more important. According to Antigone, her filial fidelity corresponds with the divine law that supports her action. Bonnie Honig (2009: 14) states that “Antigone is normally thought of as speaking on behalf of the gods of the underworld when she argues that the dead are all radically equal and, regardless of their deeds in the human world, must be buried”. It would be important to note here that Antigone never justifies the action of Polyneices and his alliance with the Argive army against his city as lawful, at the same time, she refuses to see the corpse of her brother left unburied for dogs and birds. Antigone requests the burial of her brother to fulfill the demands of the gods of the netherworld because they are the only ones who have the right to judge the dead for their actions in life. When Creon attempts to justify his decree of not burying Polyneices because he was a traitor, Antigone replies, “Even so, the god of Death demands these rites” (519). She also adds when Creon says that Eteocles, who died defending the city, deserves more honor than Polyneices, “Who knows? In death they may be reconciled” (521). Therefore, Antigone maintains the love of both her brothers regardless of their actions, who according to the religious law, can be punished or rewarded in the underworld.

Sophocles introduces the institution of the family as sacred because of the irreplaceability of the family members who share love in life and death. Antigone defends her right to bury the body of Polyneices because he is irreplaceable and she will never be given the opportunity to bury another brother. She says:

Yet what I did, the wise will all approve.

For had I lost a son, or lost a husband,
Never would I have ventured such an act
Against the city's will. And wherefore so?
My husband dead, I might have found another;
Another son from him, if I had lost
A son. But since my mother and my father
Have both gone to the grave, there can be none
Henceforth that I can ever call my brother. (905-
913)

Antigone declares that she would only break Creon's law for her brother, but not for a husband or a son who can be replaced. Stefani Engelstein (2011: 40) claims, "In her elevation of the brother ... Antigone enacts the mother's desire for the son, repeating the 'criminal desire' of the mother at 'the origin of everything'". However, I would argue that Engelstein misinterprets the play when she claims that the relationship of Antigone and Polyneices is sexual. The love of Antigone for her brother appears to be pure and innocent, and there is no clear evidence in the whole play that supports the claim of Engelstein. Antigone justifies the love to her brother as necessary because she defends her family and divine law. Furthermore, Antigone remains in the words of Jacques Derrida (1986: 150) the "eternal sister" because she remains unmarried. Creon demands that his son, Haemon, the fiancé of Antigone, shall not marry Antigone because she violates his law. Jonathan Strauss (2013: 136) comments, "[Antigone] proved willing to die for the object of her love, but she chose that object ... because of his categorical identity". This means that Antigone sacrifices her life for Polyneices because he was the last brother to see in her life. Antigone laments her end when Creon sends her to death by placing her in a dungeon to die out of hunger and thirst,

And yet I go
In the sure hope that you will welcome me,
Father, and you, my mother; you, my brother.
For when you died it was my hands that washed
And dressed you, laid you in your graves, and
poured
The last libations. Now, because to you,
Polyneices, I have given burial,
To me they give a recompense like this! (897-904)

Antigone proves her love for family members, living and dead, even if this love defies the man-made law. By denying Polyneices the burial rites, Creon requests that Antigone abandons love for her brother, which she refuses to obey.

Sophocles presents Antigone as right and honorable though she opposes the civil law that leads in the end to legal reform. The burial of Polyneices against Creon's law allows Antigone to enter into the *polis*, the political domain that was exclusive for men during Greek times. Creon views Antigone as a threat who may undermine his authority when he says: "While I am living, no woman shall have rule" (525). He also speaks to Haemon, trying to convince him to abandon Antigone,

we must not be
Defeated by a woman. Better far
Be overthrown, if need be, by a man
Than to be called the victim of a woman.
(677-680)

This introduces Creon as a tyrant who uses force to preserve authority, rather than defend the city, as he claims. Creon makes it clear that it would be better for him to be defeated by a man, not by a woman. Susan Tiefenbrun (1999: 41) notes, "Creon stands for the principles of law and order and the superiority of men over women in a universe governed by gender difference". Therefore, it looks that Creon has a problem with being challenged by a woman more than burying Polyneices. Sophocles presents Creon as defender of the human law, which appears to be fissured, and Antigone as defender of the divine law that receives the public support. William Robert (*Trials* 2010: 40-41) comments, "In this way, his [Creon's] law depends on a quintessentially humanistic self-assertion of autonomous authority that excludes divine considerations and therefore any need (or use) for piety. Such self-imposition disregards and disposes of divine, immortal laws in favor of human laws that, like humans, are mortal". The violation of the divine law by Creon makes him neglect his duties toward the public and transform into a persecutor who attempts to show force. Lauriola (2007: 394) contrasts between Creon as a foolish king and Antigone as a wise citizen, "The issue of human folly, blindness of soul, can be regarded as possible real base of Antigone's and Creon's contrast in terms of contrast between 'false foolishness/ real wisdom' (Antigone) and 'real foolishness/ false wisdom (Creon), which, in turn, might be the backbone of the entire tragedy". Creon's foolishness arises from his unwillingness to see the truth that the gods of the netherworld demand the burial of the dead.

Sophocles emphasizes the blindness of Creon to draw attention to the story of Antigone who leads the legal reform in Thebes. Teiresias speaks to Creon as the cause of the sickness of the city and demands that he releases Antigone from her imprisonment and buries the corpse of Polyneices. He warns Creon,

Sickness has come upon us, and the cause
Is you: our altars and our sacred hearths
Are all polluted by the dogs and birds
That have been gorging on the fallen body

Of Polyneices. Therefore heaven will not
Accept from us our prayers, no fire will
burn
Our offerings, nor will birds give out clear sounds,
For they are glutted with the blood of men. (1015-1022)

Haemon also fails to make Creon see the truth,

I can listen freely, how
The city mourns this girl. 'No other woman',
So they are saying, so undeservedly
Has been condemned for such a glorious deed.

The fatal mistake of Creon is that he stands in opposition to religion that demands the burial of the dead, and sentences Antigone to the death punishment because she maintains fidelity to her dead brother. From the religious perspective, Antigone does not violate the law by keeping piety to her brother and attempting to transfer his soul to the underworld. Kirkpatrick (2011: 409) notes, "According to Athenian custom, two actions were required for the successful transition of the soul to the netherworld: the administration of burial rites and the fulfillment of the *eniausia*, the annual commemorative visits to the tomb". Accordingly, Antigone does not abandon her religious and ethical duties by keeping the Athenian custom through performing the funeral rites for Polyneices. It would be important to note here that Antigone buries the body of Polyneices twice (a guard exhumes the corpse the first time) and she was caught in the action of burial the second time when she was visiting the tomb trying to fulfill the Athenian custom of the *eniausia*.

Antigone never intentionally attempts to interfere in politics, nor to undermine the authority of Creon. Rather, she tries to keep her religious duties to her family. Kimberly Cowell-Meyers (2006: 349) criticizes Antigone for threatening the stability of Thebes, "Antigone is as much to blame as Creon; Antigone, after all, pursues (private) glory through her actions at the expense of the public wellbeing as much as does Creon". However, Antigone does not seem to be pursuing personal glory through sacrificing herself for her family. Nor does she appear to be afraid of death, since she maintains "eternal relationship with a brother" (Zellner 1997: 318) even after death. Antigone says to Creon,

Death is welcome.
For me to meet this doom is little grief;
But when my mother's son lay dead, had I
Neglected him and left him there unburied,
That would have caused me grief; this
causes none. (464-468)

Sophocles seems to be sympathizing with Antigone by introducing her as a religious woman who joins her brother in the underworld, and punishing Creon for defying the law of the gods by not burying Polyneices. Antigone asks that the house of Creon may suffer a doom worse than hers for their sin, "If theirs the sin, may they endure a doom/ No worse than mine, so wantonly inflicted!" (927-928). Creon realizes his blindness to the truth only when he suffers two deaths in his house; the death of his son, Haemon, who stabs himself and dies to the side of Antigone, and the death of his wife, Eurydice, who kills herself out of grief over her son. This shows the loyal commitment of the Greek society to the values of the family, viewed as a sacred institution supported by religion.

In conclusion, Antigone dies defending her family and the religious law that demands a burial for the dead. Antigone challenges the man-made law of Creon, who attempts to preserve his authority as a king by prohibiting burial rites for Polyneices, pronouncing him a traitor. The decree of Creon defies the law of the gods that the dead are judged for their actions in the underworld. At the same time, this edict requires Antigone to abandon her religious and ethical duties to her brother. Antigone proves that allegiance to her family is more important than obeying the civil law, and prefers to join her brother in the underworld.

المستخلص:
العلاقات العائلية في المجتمع الإغريقي القديم: دراسة تحليلية لمسرحية أنتيغون بقلم سوفوكليس
نوح إبراهيم صالح الغزو

يختلف هذا البحث عن دراسات الباحثين الذين يقرأوا مسرحية سوفوكليس أنتيغون كصراع بين شخصية أنتيغون والتركيبة الذكورية المهيمنة والمتمثلة بشخصية كريون والذين في نفس الوقت يغفلوا أهمية العلاقات العائلية في المجتمع الإغريقي كما هي مصورة في المسرحية. تضحي أنتيغون بحياتها من أجل أخوها بولينيكس الذي حرمه كريون الشعائر الجنائزية وأعلنه خائن. بينما يمثل كريون القانون المدني من خلال محاولته الاحتفاظ بالسلطة باستخدام القوة تمثل أنتيغون القانون الديني والتقاليد الثقافية لشعبها من خلال إقامة شعائر الدفن لأخوها الميت. يتضمن هذا أن أنتيغون ترفض الظهور كضعيفة وجبانة من خلال الإمتثال لقانون كريون وتفضل أن تحافظ على واجبها الديني والأخلاقي تجاه عائلتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عائلة، إغريقي، أخ، القانون الديني، القانون المدني

¹ All quotes from the primary text are from the same edition translated by H. D. F. Kitto. See full documentation in references.

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