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SOPHOCLES' ANTIGONE



Introduction, Translation and Essay
Ruby Blondell

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With Introduction, Translation and Essay

Ruby Blondell

University of Washington

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Contents

Preface	ix
Maps	
Mainland Greece	vi
Attica and Environs	viii
Introduction	1
Sophocles	1
Theater and Performance	6
Mythic Background	13
<i>Antigone</i>	19
<i>Antigone</i> : Interpretive Essay	76
Bibliography	105

Preface

Sophocles' *Antigone* has been translated countless times. This new translation is aimed at all those, especially students and teachers, who wish to work with an English version that closely follows the Greek original. I have tried to remain reasonably faithful to Greek idiom and metaphor, to translate words important for the meaning of the play consistently, and sometimes to retain the original word order, verse and sentence structure. The original meters have inevitably been sacrificed, but I have used a kind of six-beat iambic line for the iambic (spoken) portion of the drama, and tried to retain an approximately anapestic rhythm for Sophocles' anapests (which are printed in italics). I have not used any formal metrical scheme for the lyrics, which are simply rendered in short lines and indented. (In a few lyric passages the line numbers of the Greek are inconsistent with the number of lines in the text, for reasons of colometry; I have altered the number of lines in the translation in order to avoid confusing the reader.) Despite this attempt to retain some of the rhythmic sense of the original, my first priorities have usually been accuracy and consistency. This approach sometimes leads to awkward moments, but I hope they will be outweighed by its benefits. Though many aspects of the original have been lost, as they must be in any translation, I believe, and hope the reader will agree, that much of the poetry of meaning is best communicated in this way.

The spellings of Greek names attempt to retain some of the benefits of both comfort and defamiliarization. For the most part I have used traditional English spelling for the names of historical persons and places (e.g. Aeschylus, Athens), but transliterated mythological names in so far as this accords with modern English pronunciation (e.g. Kreon, Polyneices). The explanatory notes are aimed at those approaching this play, and perhaps ancient Greek culture, for the first time. They provide factual information on such matters as mythology, geography and unfamiliar cultural practices, together with clarification of obscure phrases and some interpretive pointers. There are no stage directions in ancient Greek texts. Those provided in the translation are based on indications in the dialogue, and are intended to clarify the stage action for the modern reader. A fuller discussion of important background material concerning the poet, his theater and the myth of Oedipus and his family is contained in the Introduction. The translation is followed by an Interpretive Essay, to be read after the play, together with some suggestions for further reading.

The first draft of this translation was based on the Greek of Hugh Lloyd-Jones and Nigel Wilson's Oxford Classical Text (Oxford 1990), but I have departed from their text on occasion. I am especially grateful to Mark Griffith for making available to me his forthcoming edition of *Antigone* for Cambridge University Press. In places I have followed his text, and his notes have been extremely valuable. My translation and notes are also indebted to Jebb's great work,¹ and to a lesser extent to Kamerbeek's more recent commentary.² This work was supported in part by sabbatical leave from the University of Washington. I am most grateful to my students, colleagues and friends who read the manuscript and made suggestions for improvement, especially the Focus editors Michael Halleran and James Clauss, my research assistant Pauline Ripat, John Kirby and his mythology students at Purdue, and David Guichard.

University of Washington

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- 1 R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles, the Plays and Fragments. Part III: The Antigone* (3rd edition Cambridge 1900).
 - 2 J.C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles. Commentaries Part III: The Antigone* (Leiden 1878).

Introduction¹

Sophocles

Of the hundreds of tragedies produced in fifth-century BCE Athens, only a few works by just three dramatists have survived to the present day. Seven of these surviving plays are by the poet Sophocles, who was born at Colonus, the rural village near Athens where his play *Oedipus at Colonus* is set, in about 495 BCE. This makes him a generation younger than his great predecessor Aeschylus (c. 525-456), and ten or fifteen years older than Euripides (c. 480-406). But the relationship between the three tragedians and their works is not strictly linear. The first dozen years of Sophocles' career overlapped with Aeschylus' final years, and for the rest of his long life Euripides was his rival. Aeschylus made use of Sophocles' theatrical innovations (discussed below), and Sophocles in turn was influenced by Euripides. It is said that when Euripides died in 406 BCE, Sophocles dressed his chorus in mourning at a public ceremony which preceded the dramatic festival (the *proagon*). He himself was to die later the same year, or early in 405. In the fourth century and beyond, these three men rapidly became canonized as the great figures of the Athenian tragic theater, which led to the survival of some of their works when the entire output of the other tragic playwrights was lost. As with all ancient texts, the survival of these particular plays depended not only on the vagaries of taste, but on the chancy process of the copying and recopying of manuscripts, until the advent of printing nearly two thousand years later.

Sophocles lived a long and active life, spanning almost the whole of the fifth century BCE, which saw a great many political and cultural achievements at Athens. We know almost nothing of his background (except that his father, Sophillus, is said to have owned a weapons factory), but the evidence of his career suggests a well-connected family. Like any Athenian boy whose father could afford it, he will have received the customary education in music, poetry and athletics. The mainstay of this education was

1 Much of this introduction is adapted from my Introduction to *Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus, Translated with Introduction, Notes and Interpretive Essay* (Focus Classical Library: Newburyport 1990).

Homer, especially the *Iliad*, which was thought to embody not just literary excellence but traditional cultural and moral values. As a boy, Sophocles will have learned to recite large chunks of the epic from memory. This must have been especially significant for the future playwright whom later writers were to describe as “most Homeric” of the tragedians.

The poet’s childhood coincided with the Persian Wars, in which the Greeks, largely under the leadership of Athens, repelled two Persian attempts to invade the Greek mainland. Sophocles was about five years old when the Athenians won their first great victory over the Persians at the battle of Marathon (490 BCE). When the Persians were defeated again, in a sea-battle off the island of Salamis in 480 BCE, the young Sophocles is said to have led the victory dance. If true, this was a significant honor, as well as a tribute to the youth’s good looks and physical grace. He grew to maturity in the years following the Persian Wars, when the power and influence of Athens were on the rise. After the war the city had founded the Delian League, an alliance of Greek states for mutual defense against the Persians. But as the fifth century progressed Athens took increasing control of the League, until it grew to resemble an Athenian empire rather than an alliance of free states. The subject allies were required to pay Athens large amounts of annual tribute in the form of ships or money. This period of Athenian history is marked by the leadership of Pericles, who was born around the same time as Sophocles and dominated public life from about 460 BCE until his death from the plague in 429. He both strengthened democracy at home and expanded Athenian influence abroad, in large part by exploiting Athenian leadership of the Delian League.

One of Pericles’ most ambitious enterprises was a public building program which culminated in the construction of the Parthenon—the great temple of Athena on the Acropolis at Athens. Like other such projects, this temple, with its magnificent architecture and sculptural decoration, was partly financed by taxes from members of the Delian League. Besides his support for the visual arts, Pericles was a patron of writers and thinkers, helping to promote the extraordinary artistic and intellectual accomplishments of fifth-century Athens. Literary excellence was also fostered by the generally open and tolerant nature of the Athenian democratic ideal, which placed a high value on artistic achievement and freedom of expression. (It is worth remembering that Socrates was active as a provocative “gadfly” throughout most of this period, and was not prosecuted until 399 BCE, after Athens had become demoralized by defeat and less tolerant of public criticism.) But the cultural achievements of Periclean Athens meant little to the oppressed members of its empire or to its rivals, headed by Sparta. In 431 BCE, when Sophocles was in his sixties, the resentment aroused by Athenian expansion culminated in the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, between Athens with its allies on one side and Sparta with its allies on the other. This long and draining war dominated the last twenty-five years

ANTIGONE

CHARACTERS

ANTIGONE, daughter of Oedipus (former king of Thebes)

ISMENE, daughter of Oedipus

CHORUS, fifteen aged noblemen of Thebes

KREON, king of Thebes, uncle and guardian of Antigone and Ismene

GUARD, an aged and lowly soldier under Kreon's command

HAIMON, son of Kreon

TEIRESIAS, an aged prophet

MESSENGER, an attendant of Kreon

EURYDIKE, wife of Kreon

Guards and attendants of Kreon, Teiresias and Eurydike

[Setting: Outside the royal palace of Thebes. The scene shows the façade of the palace, which has a large central door. The time is just before dawn, on the morning following the successful defeat of Polyneices and his allies in their assault on Thebes.]

[Enter Antigone and Ismene from the palace.]

ANTIGONE

Ismene, my own sister, sharing the self-same blood,
of all the evils that descend from Oedipus
do you know one that Zeus does not fulfill for us,
the two still living?¹ There is nothing—no!—no grief,
no doom, dishonor or disgrace that I've not seen
counted among the evils that are yours and mine.²
Now this! What is this proclamation that they say

5

1 The dead Oedipus belonged to a cursed family, and his children have inherited his misfortunes. (For the mythic background above, p. 13-18.) Zeus is mentioned as the king of the gods, who is concerned with crime and punishment from one generation to the next.

2 In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Antigone and Ismene are portrayed as suffering many hardships after their father's exile. Cf. also *Oedipus the King* 1486-1502.

the general has just made to all the city's people?¹
 Have you heard anything? Or are you unaware
 that evils due to enemies approach our friends?² 10

ISMENE

To me no word of friends has come, Antigone,
 sweet or distressing, since the time when you and I
 were both deprived, we two, of our two brothers, both
 struck dead by two-fold hand within a single day;
 and since the army of the Argives disappeared 15
 during the night just past, I have learned nothing new—
 whether my fortune has improved or I am doomed.

ANTIGONE

I knew it well. That's why I summoned you outside
 the courtyard gates, for you to hear me by yourself.

ISMENE

What is it? You are clearly brooding on some news. 20

ANTIGONE

What? Has not Kreon honored only one of our
 two brothers with a tomb, and dishonored the other?³
 Eteokles he has seen fit to treat with justice, so
 they say, and lawfully⁴ concealed beneath
 the ground, there to be honored by the dead below; 25
 but as for Polyneices' miserable corpse,
 they say the townfolk have received a proclamation,
 that none may shroud him in a tomb or wail for him;

1 The "general" is Kreon, who has been made commander-in-chief as well as king of Thebes by the death of Eteokles and Polyneices. He also displays a military outlook in his capacity as king and father (see especially 639-80 and cf. e.g. 241, 1033-4).

"City" translates the Greek word *polis*. The *polis* or city state was the largest political unit of classical Greece. It included not just the city proper, but the surrounding rural lands and villages.

2 This line could mean "the evils inflicted on our (recently-vanquished) enemies," or "the evils appropriate to enemies (generally)," or "evils coming from our enemies (i.e. Kreon)." But however it is interpreted, it accords with the Greek code of popular ethics that required one to help one's friends and harm one's enemies, to which all the characters in the play adhere (see Essay p. 76-7 and Blundell 1989).

3 The rituals of burial were enormously important in the Greek world. On the issue in this play see further Essay p. 77-8.

4 This is the first occurrence of a key word in the play, *nomos*. It has been translated throughout as "law," but unlike the English word, *nomos* covers not only the written laws of a society, but also custom and tradition, including the "unwritten laws" to which Antigone will later appeal (450-57).

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"In her new translation of *Antigone*, Ruby Blondell demonstrates an unswerving sense of what the general reader needs to know in order not only to understand Sophocles, but to relish him as well.... My own students have found that this edition not only makes the *Antigone* accessible, but also helps them understand why it continues to fascinate, to disturb, and to grip its readers century by century."

John T. Kirby, Comparative Literature
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