



June 2007

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Richardson, Nathan E. "Marriage and the Afterlife in Antigone." *Studia Antiqua* 5, no. 1 (2007). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol5/iss1/8>

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Marriage and the Afterlife in *Antigone*

Nathan E. Richardson

MOST writers who comment on *Antigone* remark that the major theme of Sophocles' play is the struggle between human law and divine law, or the laws of the gods.¹ The conflict of the play revolves around Creon and Antigone's difference of opinion over which law is superior. Creon emphasizes the need to obey earthly magistrates to maintain order: "Anarchy, anarchy! Show me a greater evil! \ This is why cities tumble and the great houses rain down, \ This is what scatters armies!"² Antigone insists that human law is preempted by divine law because the latter comes from a higher source: "All your [Creon's] strength is weakness itself against \ The immortal unrecorded laws of God. \ They are not merely now: they were, and shall be, \ Operative for ever, beyond man utterly."³

NATHAN RICHARDSON has a bachelor's degree in English with a minor in Spanish. He is currently working on a master's degree in communication disorders and hopes to work in speech pathology.

1. David Grene, ed., *Greek Tragedies*, vol. 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 178.

2. Sophocles, *Antigone* 3.42–44, in *Literature: An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, 7th ed., comp. X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia (New York: Longman, 1999), 1491–1520.

3. Sophocles, *Antigone* 2.60–3.

However, an observant reader may ask this question: if Creon and Antigone have the same religious beliefs, why do they disagree on such matters as justice and law, which are clearly of a religious nature? The answer lies in the nature of the Greek culture and religion. Several elements of the Greek religion show their influence in the events of the play, such as beliefs about the afterlife, burial rites, and marriage. Examining the historical background of *Antigone* reveals the fact that a commonly shared culture does not necessarily guarantee that its members will have the same values and beliefs, and therefore the members of a culture may have widely differing applications of their beliefs.

The Afterlife

Many of the customs mentioned in *Antigone* stem from the Greek concept of the afterlife. The Greeks had no real word for “sin.” The closest is *hamartia*, which means “an error of judgment.”⁴ There was little belief in divine intervention as a medium of correcting immoral behavior. Rather than humble submission to a long list of commandments to avoid spiritual impurity, Greek salvation was based more on the accumulation of *kleos*, or reputation and honor. If a person became well-known for excellence in this life, his *kleos* would allow him to pass through the gates of Hades to enter the Elysian fields, a paradise.⁵

That is why Antigone’s brothers Eteocles and Polyneices were so concerned with ruling Thebes—they were trying to gain *kleos* to insure good grazing in the Elysian fields. That is also why Creon appears to be so concerned with what the people of Thebes think about him. When Creon debates with his son the question of pardoning Antigone, Haemon appeals to his self-consciousness by mentioning public opinion:

4. Charles Seltman, *The Twelve Olympians* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1960), 27.

5. Nancy DeBloois, Classical Civilizations 241H: Introduction to Greek and Roman Mythology, Brigham Young University, fall 1999. Class notes in possession of author.

You are not in a position to know everything
 That people say or do, or what they feel:
 You temper terrifies them—everyone
 Will tell you only what you like to hear.
 But I, at any rate, can listen; and I have heard them
 Muttering and whispering in the dark about this girl . . .
 That is the way they talk out there in the city.⁶

While *kleos* was a major factor in determining one's place in the underworld, there were also some cases in which a mortal suffered eternal punishment for having offended the gods. For example, Tantalus was made to stand forever in water that was always just too low to sip, and under grapes that were perpetually just out of reach (hence the word "tantalizing")—all for having gotten Zeus' immortal dander up. So, while it was important for a Greek to gain fame and notoriety, he also had to avoid *hamartia*, or poor decisions which might irritate a god. Antigone apparently valued the latter more than the former, for she freely denounced a king in order to perform a sacred ritual.

Burial Rites

Although *kleos* determined a person's "degree of glory" in Hades, a deceased Greek could not enter Hades without receiving certain rituals (comparable to the LDS belief that a person is "saved by obedience to [both] the principles and ordinances of the gospel"). Speaking of her warring brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, Antigone reminds Creon that "there are honors due all the dead."⁷ This "honor" refers to the *trispoudai choai* (thrice-poured offering) of libations of wine poured on the body, as well as a burial, which consecrate the body to the gods of the underworld.⁸ Antigone's ritual sprinkling of dust is sufficient to meet the requirements by Greek standards.

If a Greek was buried without these rituals, he or she could not receive a place of glory in the Elysian fields. The oft-mentioned silver

6. Sophocles, *Antigone* 3.57–62, 68.

7. Sophocles, *Antigone* 2.113.

8. Robert Garland, *The Greek Way of Death* (New York: Cornell, 1985), 36, 46.

coin under the tongue was also needed to pay Chairon, the boatman who ferried dead souls across the river Styx to enter Hades. Without the requirements, a disembodied spirit was left to wander back and forth on the bank for eternity. Incidentally, this is why Greeks feared death at sea—such bodies were rarely found and thus were rarely prepared for burial.⁹

Another reason a Greek desired a proper burial was to secure a memorial or tomb. Such a monument would ensure that his name be remembered and honored, bringing exalting *kleos*. Without such a monument, his name would soon be forgotten. Antigone seeks such a memorial for Polyneices and herself when she said, “I should have praise and honor for what I have done. \ All these men here would praise me”¹⁰ Through this one act, she attempts to establish a memorable name for herself and her brother.

Marriage

The other way to create a personal legacy was by bearing sons. Perpetuating the family line meant perpetuating one’s memory. Without children, a Greek’s legacy stopped short. Antigone agonizes over this fact as Creon entombs her alive: “Now sleepy Death \ summons me . . . \ There is no bridesong there, nor any music. \ . . . My reward is death before my time.”¹¹

Some scholars think the Greeks believed unmarried maidens would be wed to Hades on entering the underworld.¹² Weddings and funerals involved the same ingredients of dressing and anointing, and unwed girls who died were buried in wedding robes.¹³ The lamenting funeral hymns (*threnos*) were even very similar to the bridal songs (*epithalamia*).¹⁴ Antigone anticipates this grim fate as she calls her

9. DeBloois, Class Notes, 11.

10. Sophocles, *Antigone* 2.98–99.

11. Sophocles, *Antigone* 4.8–10, 65.

12. Garland, *Way of Death*, 72.

13. Margaret Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Great Britain: Cambridge, 1974), 120.

14. DeBloois, Class Notes, 8.

prison “O tomb, vaulted bride-bed in eternal rock.”¹⁵ While all the Greeks were aware of this idea, not all may have taken it literally. “Such a travesty of true marriage can hardly have formed a part of belief, and it is surely a sense of outrage at the unfairness of early death.”¹⁶ Creon may have thought of a virgin death as a punishment, but Antigone may have made her statement about no bridesong only figuratively, for “scholars have alleged that the Greeks believed in the possibility of finding a marriage partner down in Hades.”¹⁷

Conclusion

The point of these various possible beliefs is that the Greek culture allowed for a great difference in opinion with respect to religion. The Greek religion was not organized or hierarchal; there was no professional clergy, for all priests were part-time and had to make a regular living.¹⁸ There was no official doctrine or dogma, and therefore no heresy.¹⁹ Such a culture left a lot of room for varying forms and degrees of faith.

Robert Garland points out that pagan religions focus more on this life rather than the one to come. They do not foster reliance on delayed rewards and punishments; the gods usually meted out justice in this life. He concludes that because it teaches people to seek immediate results, paganism produces no martyrs.²⁰ The nature of *kleos* illustrates this—eternal reward is an extension of what a man’s neighbors think of him on earth, even after he dies.

Saying this does not belittle Greek beliefs, for *kleos* rings with bits of truth—we should seek to establish a good name for ourselves. The point is that some Greeks chose to take a step beyond the commonly-

15. Sophocles, *Antigone* 4.58.

16. Garland, *Way of Death*, 72.

17. Garland, *Way of Death*, 72.

18. Charles Seltman, *The Twelve Olympians* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1960), 22.

19. Seltman, *The Twelve Olympians*, 23.

20. Garland, *Way of Death*, 48.

shared religion and relied on unseen rewards in the next life. To go against popular opinion, to tell off a king, to break the law, to abandon hopes of bearing children: these acts could seriously jeopardize one's *kleos*. So why does Antigone commit them? Because she is exercising faith that she will be rewarded in the next life. Her belief in the rightness of burying her brother to help him enter paradise transcends her fear of losing *kleos*. She raises her desires from avoiding *hamartia*, or misjudging and getting in someone's way, to doing what is right. Even if she could not explain what she hoped to gain from it, she felt she was doing good. As a sincere seeker for the truth, she learned to invest in the unforeseeable future—and such faith is eventually rewarded.