

How does the play Antigone give us an insight into politics, literature and society in both Ancient Athens and today?

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Introduction

Our research aims to investigate the political values and philosophies of Ancient Greek societies, and explore its relationship to politics, literature and society today. Through the play *Antigone* by Sophocles, we will analyse the themes in the tragedy which are autocracy and despotism, gender, and civil disobedience; and what it tells us about Ancient Greek society around the time of Sophocles and how it is still relevant today.

Antigone is an ancient Greek tragedy by Sophocles, written and performed in the 5th BC. The play depicts the myth of Antigone's journey against Creon, king of a fictional Thebes. After the two brothers of Antigone died fighting each other for the throne, Creon, the King and their uncle, allows the military honours for the funeral of the rightful heir, while he forbids the burial of the rebellious brother. Antigone decides to go against the King's orders, as she wishes to bury both her brothers according to their religious rites. In the end, Antigone dies for her defiance.

Autocracy and tyranny

“Creon: Am I to rule for them, not for myself?

Haemon: That is not government, but Tyranny.” (736-737 p26)

→ This happens during a confrontation between Creon the king and his son Haemon where the latter tries to convince his father to not sentence Antigone to death, saying that the “city with a single voice denies” (733 p26) that Antigone is a criminal. Haemon indirectly calls Creon a tyrant, for not listening to what the major says and to “rule” for himself instead of serving his country like he is supposed to as a king. Thus, Antigone is often seen as a symbol of defiance and especially for going against despotism. However, it is not as black and white as it seems. Although Creon is portrayed as a tyrant, in contemporary Athens, he would have been seen as supporting the new democracy. He is acting for the greater good of the state because he has no private reasons to not give her brother a proper burial. However, he is still acting on only his own opinion and doing what he personally thinks is the best for the country when the people disagree with him. Henceforth, although Creon is doing what he thinks is for the best, his act is still tyrannical and autocratic, the opposite of what democracy is.

→ The fictional Thebes depicted in *Antigone* is thus an autocracy. However, the play did not stray very far from reality. Ancient Greece was indeed organized around city-states where either one person or a small group detained power — namely, autocratic and oligarchic systems. In an autocracy, it is easy for the single leader to resort to cruelty and oppressive rule, as Creon did. In fact, historians refer to the period of 650- 500 BC as the Greek ‘Age of Tyranny’. Sophocles' own city, Athens, was but another unremarkable city-state until it started its transition to a form of government where all its citizens could participate. Although access to the status of citizenship was heavily restricted, this is thought to be an unprecedented manner of governing that would make Athens the Greek world's first democracy. Athenian democracy was overthrown in 404 BC after a military defeat to Sparta, just two years after Sophocles' death.

→ Autocracies have been a rather common instance through all of history. In spite of the increase of democratic systems since the 19th century, autocracies still exist. In a 2024 report, the V-Dem Institute reported around 88 autocracies in the world. Russia is a notable example, being the largest country in the world by land and having one of the largest populations. It is an elective autocracy, meaning that its elections lack transparency and fairness, resulting in the power remaining in the hands of one man only. There are countless changes between the society in which Sophocles wrote *Antigone* and ours and yet, over two millennia later, its critique of political systems of rule remains relevant: for instance, French writer Jean Anouilh rewrote the play in 1944 in an attempt to criticise Nazi occupation while evading censorship.

Gender and the role of women in society

“Ismene: Remember too that we are women, not made to fight men. Since they who rule us now are stronger far than we, in this and worse than this we must obey them.” (61-64 p5)

→ Ismene, Antigone's sister, is trying to convince her to not bury their brother, to not go against the law and especially not against their uncle, who is a male and the king of Thebes. Not only does Ismene warn Antigone that she is breaking a law, she specifically emphasizes that they are women, and therefore are inferior and weaker to men, thus they must “obey them”. This dialogue highlights the sexism in ancient Athen's society.

→ In Athens, women's rights were very limited: they were excluded from the public sphere. Some historians even qualify their lifestyles as 'secluded'. Although women were still treated with respect and could exercise roles in the highly respected sphere of religion, they were not considered as citizens, virtually stopping them from any involvement in politics. Thus, Antigone choosing to do a politicised act was not only an attempt at rebellion against autocracy but also an act of defiance against the highly patriarchal system in both fictional Thebes and ancient Athens.

→ Women enjoy more rights and freedoms today. However, they are still at a disadvantage in many areas. Although women might not be completely excluded from political life anymore, there are very few countries where gender equality in political positions has been reached. According to the UN Women, only 6 countries have reached parity in parliaments, and there were only 27 women Head of State/Government in June 2024, out of 193 countries. Women leadership in the political domain is improving, yet they still do not enjoy the same status as men. As women across the world continue to fight for political power and gender parity, this demonstrates that Antigone's fight in a male-centric system still echoes today.

Civil disobedience

“Antigone: How savagely impious men use me, for keeping a law that is holy.” (942-943 p32)

→ These are Antigone's last words, when she is lamenting about her own death as she is being taken away to a cave to be killed. In Antigone's eyes, the “law” she is referring to is her duty as a woman to bury her brother, it is within her rights, a divine “law” that no man-made law should override. Thus, this brings up the question of civil disobedience, Antigone is only trying to do what she thinks is morally right, yet she receives a death sentence because she consciously chooses to break a man-made law that she regards as immoral.

→ Although the concept itself did not exist at the time, Antigone's actions are an example of civil disobedience, i.e. the public, non-violent, and conscious action of breaking the law to protest an unjust law or policy. The dilemma faced by Antigone, morals versus law, has long been at the heart of philosophical debates. Plato reports in the *Apology* and *Crito* that Socrates, the founder of Western philosophy and contemporary of Sophocles, also valued one's conscience over blind obedience to laws. And yet, Socrates warned that one must be ready to face their punishment if they indeed choose to break the law for moral values. Strangely, Socrates had the opportunity to put his beliefs in practice, as he was sentenced to drink hemlock after it was concluded that his philosophical teachings had led to impiety and corruption of the youth. Given the opportunity to flee Athens, he chose instead – like Antigone – to face his death sentence.

→ Nowadays, it is still frequent to encounter acts of civil disobedience, whether performed by individuals or groups. A highly mediated example would be the one of the US citizen Edward Snowden, a National Security Agency employee who leaked thousands of confidential documents in June 2013. Although Snowden's actions have been interpreted in different manners, it is apparent that he deemed necessary to unveil the scope of NSA public surveillance to make sure it abides by constitutional limits. For this, he was willing to break the Espionage act, which resulted in charges of espionage and theft of government property being held against him. In addition to a prison sentence, the trial's verdict included the revocation of his American passport, leaving him stateless. From Rosa Parks to activists throwing soup at the Mona Lisa, we encounter acts of civil disobedience and protest against authority all the time, in our history, the media or even around us, showing that Antigone is not the first and will not be the last to act against the law to protest for what is right.

Conclusion

Although there has been more than 2000 years between Ancient Athens and today, there are still a lot of issues and problems to be improved and solved. Even though these political and gender issues have been acknowledged and some actions are being taken, the modern world is still far from perfect. This research has shown us how important literature is to politics – so that we could study and reflect back on older society through another lens- and that it has and will always be intertwined and cannot be separated from one another. Henceforth, *Antigone* is still relevant to this day and will forever remain a classic.



Sophocles:

- 5th BC (497/496 - 406-405 BC)
- Athenian citizen
- One of the big three of Hellenic tragedy playwrights
- Wrote over 120 plays; only 7 survived completely
- Most famous tragedies are Oedipus and Antigone
- Well recognised in his time; e.g. his plays mentioned in Aristotle's Poetics.
- Was involved in Athenian politics: was a treasurer and also elected into the city's elective offices.

