Attending the first *Antigone*

This talk was first given in the fall of 1984 in conjunction with a production of *Antigone* by the Monmouth College Crimson Masque. Directed by Jim DeYoung.

The talk was later given at the 1985 meeting of the Illinois Classical Conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Whenever we watch a play, we do so with a certain fixed set of dramatic expectations, conventions and vocabulary. We know, we do not have to be told, that the actress impersonating Antigone is actually not Antigone in real life. We readily grant, usually without being asked, the temporary suspension of belief which the action of the play demands. We accept, for the time being, that the setting is not Monmouth, Illinois, but Thebes in Greece, that the time is not "now" but "then", in the aftermath of the war of the Seven Against Thebes. All these dramatic pre-conceptions we share with the Greeks, with whom, to a certain extent, these conventions began five centuries before Christ.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume from these similarities that the experience of an actual fifth-century Greek drama, such as Sophocles' *Antigone*, fits all our modern dramatic expectations. In significant ways, the Greek theatre was an entirely different world from our own. While we initially respond to *Antigone* as 20th-century Americans, not as 5th-century Greeks, a play like *Antigone* forces us to develop some cultural and historical distance from ourselves, to understand the play in a more universal rather than culturally-specific context. Just as Sophocles himself could never have dreamed in the 5th-century B.C. how this play would be transformed and interpreted centuries later, so, too, is it difficult for us in the 20th-century to understand *Antigone* in 5th-century B.C. terms. The *Antigone* has been interpreted by the 19th-century German philosopher Hegel, analyzed by 20th-century Freudians, and adapted by the French resistance writer Jean Anouihl. Indeed, there has been so much reworking of Sophocles' original play that the 20th-century critic George Steiner has come to speak not of *Antigone* but of *Antigones*. Even as every production of the play adds to the universal understanding of *Antigone*, we in the 20th century, must also try to approach *Antigone* in the context of Sophocles' original performance.

The fact that we speak of performance, of live actors performing before an audience underscores the first problem. We are reading this play, not seeing it performed. Such a situation

was simply unfathomable to someone like Sophocles, who composed his play to be performed, not read. Only in later centuries did the concept of reading a play become common. Indeed, by the 1st century A.D., it was apparently possible to compose plays which were not meant for performance at all, but simply to be read. Such plays have come to be called "closet dramas". The plays of the Roman philosopher Seneca may, in fact, have been such closet dramas.

But *Antigone* was not a closet drama. It was meant to be experienced in performance. The fact that we are reading it means that we must work harder in our mind's eye to recreate the dramatic world of Sophocles and to reconstruct the experience of that first production of *Antigone*. There are limitations, of course. We have no video- or audio- tapes of that first performance and much of what we do know about the performance can only be pieced together from the play itself and from scanty circumstantial evidence. We must also remember that most of us approach the Greek play only through the often unreliable medium of translation, that is, we are experiencing the play in English, not in the ancient Greek of Sophocles. Furthermore, even the Greek text lacks for *Antigone*, as for all Greek tragedy, such critical material as the original musical score, choreography and stage directions. Recognizing these very real limitations, let us now go back about 2400 years, to reconstruct that very first performance of *Antigone*.

We have no playbill telling us the date of the performance. Our only date is determined from the ancient tradition that Sophocles was elected general by the Athenians shortly after and because of his *Antigone*. Since we possess independent evidence that Sophocles was indeed a general in 440 B.C. during the Samian War, the Antigone is usually dated to 441 or 442 B.C. at the earliest. It may seem odd to use that the Athenians may have chosen their generals in such an unprofessional manner, but, then, who are we to judge who have elected Presidents from Hollywood?

When Sophocles wrote *Antigone* in the 440's B.C., his native city Athens, was at the height of its political and cultural influence. The Athenians were still basking in the limelight of their naval victory over the Persian empire at Salamis, forty years earlier. The young Sophocles himself is said to have lad a boys' chorus in victory song after this battle, which was also celebrated in Aeschylus' great tragedy *Persians*. While all the other surviving Greek tragedies, including *Antigone*, were written on mythical rather than historical subjects, few lack, in some form, the patriotic and nationalistic tone exhibited in

the *Persians*, our earlies play, or Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus, one of the latest. Such patriotism can also be found in *Antigone*. The famous first choral ode of the play, often called the "Ode to Man" begins with the lines

> Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man.
> This thing crosses the sea in the winter's storm,
> making his path through the roaring waves.
> And she, the greatest of the gods, the earth--
> ageless she is, and unwearied--he wears her away
> as the ploughs go up and down from year to year
> and his mules turn up the soil.

This stirring ode on the self-sufficiency of mankind reflects the self-confidence of Sophocles and his contemporary Athenians, who, at that time, controlled a large portion of the Greek world through their naval confederation called the Delian League. Intensely proud of its institutions, of which tragedy was a jewel in its crown, Athens would be called the "school of Greece" by its great statesman Pericles, not many years after the production of *Antigone*.

Pericles' political program included extensive building projects. In these years the Parthenon and other buildings were being constructed on the Acropolis, the religious and historical center of the city, and playgoers in Athens in 442 would have been able to see these great monuments-in-process as they approached the Athenian theatre, located on the south slope of the Acropolis.

The theatre itself was not part of Pericles' building program. The structure was still relatively primitive in Sophocles' day. The great stone theatre one sees in Athens today is the product of the next century. The theatre Sophocles knew probably had three simple parts. First, the *theatron*, from a Greek verb meaning "to look at", was a semi-circular seating area built into the hill of the Acropolis and large enough to hold between 14,000 and 17,000 spectators. The theatre's huge size made the structure more like a modern sports arena than a modern theatre. The temporary wooden seats were probably bleacher-type and we have evidence that they collapsed at least once during a performance. In front of the *theatron* was a flat, circular area called the orchestra, where most of the action of the play took place. The term *orchestra* means “dancing-place” and suggests its original function. Here the chorus of *Antigone* would have danced each of its choral songs and it is a great loss that none of this music or this choreography survives. In

the orchestra, also, the actors performed. Behind the orchestra was a long, flat-roofed building called a skene, literally 'tent' in Greek. This permanent building served as an important exit and entry point for the actors. In *Antigone* the door of the skene would have represented the door of Creon's palace. At some point, perhaps by 442, it became the custom to depict the dramatic setting on the wall of the skene. Sophocles himself, in fact, is said to have been the inventor of such scene painting. The skene thus gives us our modern terms "scene" and "scenery". Note that the Greek theater had no curtain, probably no stage, and certainly no roof. The open air nature of the building was necessitated by the facts of the Greek climate and tragic performances always began in the early morning, so that the chorus of *Antigone* would probably have pointed to the rising sun as it sang its first lines in the play:

> Sun's own radiance, fairest light ever shone on
> the gates of Thebes.

Thus, no artificial lighting was used in the production, and the circular shape and contour of the theatre created a natural acoustical chamber. No artificial amplification was needed for the performers to be heard by even those spectators in the highest rank of seats.

Some theatrical props were available to Sophocles. While he does not, in *Antigone*, use the *mechane* or crane from which we derive the term *deus ex machina*, Sophocles does use, at the end of the play, a platform on rollers called the *eccyclema* to display the body of Creon's wife Eurydice. Such a device was needed because, by convention, no indoor scenes could be depicted in the Athenian theatre. Scene changes and on-stage deaths were also rare. Instead messengers usually described off-stage events--especially deaths--in elaborate messenger speeches. Sophocles uses this convention several times in *Antigone*--twice to describe the burials of Polyneices, and, later, to recount the deaths of Antigone, Haemon and Eurydice.

Another physical feature of the Athenian theatre building was a circular altar, called a *thymele*, located in the center of the orchestra. Sometimes used as a stage prop, but not in *Antigone*. this altar also served a religious function, to make sacrifices to Dionysus, Greek god of wine, in whose honor the plays were performed.

The chorus of *Antigone* prays to this god in the last choral ode sung as Creon departs to bury Polyneices and to free Antigone. Here the chorus sings:

God of the many names, Semele's golden child,
child of Olympian thunder, Italy's lord.
Lord of Eleusis, where all men come
to mother Demeter's plain.
Bacchus, who dwells in Thebes,
by Ismenus' running water,
where wild Bacchic women are at home,
on the soil of the dragon seed.

Dionysus, as a Theban by birth, has a special place in the plot of *Antigone*. The god was also the special patron of all Greek tragedies.

Indeed, tragedies were only produced at Athens during a festival of Dionysus called the Greater Dionysia, which was held annually in late March and early April. Thus, unlike us, an Athenian could not attend the theatre whenever he chose. Tragedy was part of a special, religious occasion, not an everyday affair.

The Greater Dionysia centered around a religious procession commemorating the arrival of the god's statue in Athens. It included drunken revel as well as competitions in tragedy, comedy and boys' and men's choruses. Especially in the 5th century, the festival also because an occasion to celebrate the greatness of Athens. The state-run festival gradually came to include a procession of Athenian war orphans and the proclamation of civic honors upon illustrious citizen--all taking place in the theatre of Dionysus. V.I.P.'s from all over Greece flocked to Athens for the festival, and special seats were reserved in the theatre for important dignitaries such as the priest of Dionysus. The huge audience was composed of most of the citizen population of Athens. There is some debate about whether women and boys were in the audience. Boys certainly were; the presence of women is more doubtful, but not impossible even in sexist Athens where women had few legal rights and personal freedoms. Spectators did have to pay for theatre tickets, although there is some evidence that the state subsidized seats for the poorer citizens. Spectators brought their own refreshments and one must imagine a holiday atmosphere with lots of noise with so many people present.

When and how tragedy came to be associated with the Greater Dionysia is uncertain, but it is clear that the origin and history of Greek drama is closely linked with that of the Festival, three days of which were almost entirely devoted to tragic performances. The religious and periodic nature of the performance makes Greek tragedy, in some ways, closer to the

Passion Play at Oberammergau than to a Broadway production. State control and the size of the audience created an environment more similar to that of a political convention hall than that of a modern theatre. The competitive nature of the plays creates a parallel with modern athletic events.

Preparations for the Greater Dionysia of 442 would have begun several months earlier, when the chief Athenian magistrate, called the year-archon, selected three tragic poets to compete at the Festival. Technically, poets applied to the archon for a chorus, that is, they asked the state to supply them with a chorus for the festival. Upon what basis the selection of poets was made is uncertain, but political relationships between archon and poets cannot be discounted, as at least secondary considerations. While Sophocles appears in this period to have had close political ties with several important Athenian politicians, including Cimon and Pericles, nothing can be determined about the circumstances surrounding the selection of Sophocles as a tragic competitor for the Dionysia of 442.

Sophocles was producer as well as author of the first *Antigone*. A generation earlier he would probably have also acted in the play, but by 442 this practice had fallen into disuse. Sophocles himself is said to have broken the Athenian tradition of the actor-playwright because of his weakening voice.

By 442 each of the three playwrights chosen by the archon was probably provided by the state with a chief actor, called the protagonist. Each protagonist, or first actor, worked with two additional actors, called the antagonist and tritagonist, that is the second and third actors respectively. All the speaking parts in *Antigone* had to be divided among these three actors, who would change costumes and masks in the skene to change their roles. The history of Athenian tragedy suggests that in early tragedies only two actors were permitted but by the second half of the fifth-century the three-actor rule was a dramatic fixture. It may surprise you to learn that the protagonist of Sophocles' production probably played the role of Creon, not Antigone. It is Creon, not Antigone, who dominates the dialogue of the entire play. Exclusive fascination with the character of Antigone is probably a modern rather than ancient trend. Sophocles himself would not have entitled his play *Antigone*, by the way. He would have referred to the work by its first line. Specific play titles were probably the invention of a later generation.

If Sophocles' protagonist played Creon, the antagonist would have been given two parts, that of Antigone and, in the

last scene, of the messenger. The tritagonist would have played all the other speaking roles, namely those of Ismene, the Guard, Haemon, Tiresias and Eurydice. The producer was permitted to add a number of non-speaking parts, such as additional soldiers who might have escorted prisoner Antigone in and out of the theatre.

There were no actresses. Men would have played all the dramatic roles. This, plus the actors' frequent multiple roles, made necessary elaborate disguise. So the actors wore stylized masks, as well as long-sleeved costumes and special pointed shoes called *kothornoi*. The actor's mask may have actually helped project the voice. It may also be a traditional feature which dates back to a ritualistic origin of Greek drama.

In addition to the three actors, there was a chorus between twelve and fifteen in number. Every Greek tragedy had to have a chorus, which played a more significant role in the ancient drama than the modern conception of the term implies. The chorus of Theban elders in Sophocles' *Antigone*, appropriately masked and costumed, sang and danced a series of five choral odes, totaling more than 10% of the play. By convention the chorus performed as a group, not as individuals, although the group usually spoke to individual characters through its chorus leader. The modern view is that the Greek chorus rarely gets directly involved in the action of the play and tends rather to serve as a somewhat detached commentator on the action. The chorus in *Antigone*, however, suggest a more typical role: This group of Theban elders instinctively wishes to heed the commands of Thebes' new leader, Creon, and only reluctantly comes to realize that he has erred in condemning Antigone. The Antigone chorus thus provides a dramatic, collective response to the events of the play.

While it was traditionally the chorus which sang while the actors recited their lines, by 442 sung parts for actors were not uncommon. In the original Antigone there were two actors' songs, one sung by Antigone together with the chorus in her farewell scene and another by Creon, again with the chorus, in the last, recessional scene. Such duets between chorus and actors were called *kommoi* by Aristotle. Both *kommoi* and the more traditional odes sung by the chorus alone were accompanied by a musician playing a two-reeded instrument called an *aulos*. The effect was surprisingly lyrical and was closer in tone to serious Italian opera than to the modern spoken theatre.

In addition to the designation of poets and actors, the Athenian archon also had to appoint a *choregus* or financier for each poet. These *choregoi* apparently paid all the expenses connected with the production except the actors' salaries.

Expenses included costumes, special effects, the training and salaries of the chorus and the musicians and even a post-performance feast for the cast. The *chroegus* looked upon these outlays as a civic duty. The Athenian state, which levied no income tax, regularly called upon its wealthier citizens to cover specific outlays. This obligation was called a liturgy. If the citizen chosen for this honor felt that someone else was better able financially to cover the expense, he could sue that person in court or even effect an exchange of property with him. Perhaps this is the answer to our current deficit problem!

A play's success depended, to a great degree, upon the generosity of its choregus, who alone determined the production budget. *Antigone's* choregus is unknown, but, whoever he was, he did not pay for a lot of extras, such as a second chorus or special effects. The *Antigone* was a relatively simple play to produce.

Sophocles did not present the *Antigone* by itself. Each playwright had to offer a group of three tragedies plus a fourth, more comic, creation called a satyr play. The other plays in Sophocles' tragic trilogy or tetralogy of 442 are not known. They certainly did not include either of the surviving Sophoclean plays about Antigone's father Oedipus. *Oedipus Rex* was produced about fifteen years after Antigone, c.427, and *Oedipus at Colonus* did not appear until after Sophocles' death in 404. Modern references to a Theban Trilogy by Sophocles, composed of Sophocles' *Antigone* and the two Oedipus plays, are thus technically inaccurate. There was no rule in Sophocles' day that the three tragedies in a group had to be connected in any way. Unified trilogies appear to have been the special domain not of Sophocles, but of his older contemporary Aeschylus, whose great connected trilogy, the *Oresteia*, survives.

The Greek word *tragoidia* appears to have had little in common semantically with its English derivative tragedy. A Greek tragedy did not have to have a sad or tragic ending, although *Antigone* does. The Athenian distinction between comedy and tragedy appears to have been based not on a happy or sad ending, but on tone and theme. Tragedies tended to be serious, and comedies humorous in tone. Comedies were about contemporary themes and individuals, tragedies about heroes of the mythic past. In *Antigone*, for example, Sophocles presented a serious theme of particular interest to his fellow Athenians--that of the conflict between civil and family duties, of state versus religious interests. The background to *Antigone* would have been well known to Sophocles' first audience. who would have been reared on stories about Oedipus' unfortunate family and about

the war of the Seven Against Thebes. The dramatist, however, was allowed a certain degree of latitude within the story. For example, in Euripides' lost version of Antigone, the heroine apparently escaped death and lived happily with Haemon. In contrast, the Sophoclean Antigone is resolved to die and shows little if any affection for Haemon.

The Greek word *tragoidia* means "goat-song", and one plausible interpretation of the term is that the prize which the best playwright received at the Dionysia was a goat--to be sacrificed immediately in the god's honor on the *thymele* or altar in the center of the orchestra. Judges for this competition were selected by lot from among the Athenian tribes. In his lifetime Sophocles won 24 first prizes, eight second prizes and never came in last. It is not known who competed against Sophocles in 442 and with what plays. Nor is it known what prize *Antigone* won in 442. Posterity has certainly awarded the play a first prize.