Est-ce que j’aime Antigone? Non, je n’aime pas Antigone. Car elle est terrible comme Thanatos, cruelle comme les Érinyes, inflexible comme le désespoir. Est-ce que j’aime Antigone? Oui, j’aime Antigone. Car elle est magnifique dans la passion qui l’excède et qui lui fait aborder la vie ... éternisée dans notre imaginaire dans ce mouvement de franchissement de l’Atè – de l’atroce - qui illustre magnifiquement la pulsion de mort.¹

So wrote Louise Grenier on Antigone’s characterization in her eponymous play by Sophocles. Antigone and her willingness to sacrifice her own life in order to bury her brother Polynices have captured readers’ imaginations for millennia. Yet despite centuries of Sophoclean scholarship, there has not been a wholly satisfactory explanation of Antigone’s course of action within the play. At first, she justifies her behaviour by claiming that she is upholding divine law, which supersedes the edict pronounced by Creon; however, a notorious speech made before she is led to her death by the guards seems to belie this earlier claim.² Moreover, in her rhetoric about kinship duties, one can detect the powerful love she feels for her brother, which goes beyond any lofty political opinions she might express. Furthermore, the chorus suggests that Antigone’s fate is caused by her share of Oedipus’ tainted blood and his crime of incest. Was Antigone’s defiance motivated by filial love, principle, or fate? A close reading of the play, as well as the voluminous scholarship it has spawned, indicates that these categorizations are too simplistic, and rather that a complex amalgam of familial love and divine predestination shapes Antigone’s personality and course of action.

A popular interpretation of the Antigone among scholars is that Antigone advocates divine law as opposed to Creon’s human law, family loyalty as opposed to obedience to the state. Caught by the guards while attempting a second burial of her brother’s remains, Antigone is brought to Creon, who asks her if she was aware of his edict. She replies,

It wasn’t Zeus, not in the least, who made this proclamation – not to me. Nor did that Justice … ordain such laws for men. Nor did I think your edict had such force that you, a mere mortal, could override the gods, the great unwritten, unshakable traditions … These laws – I was not about to break them, not out of fear of some man’s wounded pride, and face the retribution of the gods.³

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² Soph. Ant. 995-1005.
³ Soph. Ant. 500-510.
Antigone undermines Creon’s authority, reminding him that the gods are much more powerful and fearsome than he is, and that it is to them that they are both ultimately answerable. She points out that he is hubristic to dare make a decree that contradicts divine law, which dictates that without burial the dead can have no rest. In defying his edict and pointing out its contradiction of divine law, she confronts Creon with the choice between admitting and amending his wrong or insisting upon his righteousness and authority. This in turn leads him to exacerbate his own hubris and the divine retribution that awaits him. In this way, the Antigone recalls Aeschylus’ Agamemnon: “As Clytaemnestra drives Agamemnon to put himself on a level with the gods, so … Antigone drives Creon to put himself above them; as Clytaemnestra in dramatic appeal outweighs Agamemnon, so Antigone, until her part is played, outweighs Creon.”

His law, in fact, is no law at all: the edict was intended to apply to a single case because the circumstances on which it hinges (the non-burial of Polyneices’ corpse) are non-reproducible in any other context. Creon’s law is little more than a cruel and petty whim, especially in light of the fact that Athenian law denied traitors burial in Attica, but allowed their relatives to inter them elsewhere. This view of the law can also be found in Anouilh’s adaptation of the play, in which Creon tells his stricken niece: “J’ai fait ramasser un des corps … pour mes funérailles nationales, et j’ai donné l’ordre de laisser pourrir l’autre où il était. Je ne sais même pas lequel. Et je t’assure que cela m’est égal.” It can be considered Antigone’s duty, and not merely her right, to defy an autocrat who rules according to his own caprices instead of considering the good of the state.

The kinship ties between the two add a personal aspect to her struggle with her uncle. Family ties were extremely important in Greek society. Society, after all, is little more than an amalgamation of families sharing a geographical space, and in order for a society to be healthy it needs to be comprised of familial units which have healthy and strong relationships within themselves, with other families and with the state. Creon, as Polyneices’ sole surviving male relative, “actually has an obligation to bury him” and his edict denies his responsibilities toward his family – and by extension, his responsibilities toward Thebes: he is the head of his family and of the polis. It also deprives Antigone of the role she would have played had Polyneices been granted a proper sepulture, namely that of preparing his body and lamenting over it; in breaking the “law” and sprinkling dust over her brother, she not only underlines the injustice of Creon’s decree, but reaffirms her own rights over the body as Polyneices’ sister. This defiant act repeats her brother’s own rebellion and affirms the fact that Antigone’s loyalty is to her family, not to Thebes. It would appear, at first blush, that Antigone acted out of a sense of duty, first toward the gods and second toward

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5 Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, Greek Tragedy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 159.
7 Rabinowitz 2008, 159.
8 Rabinowitz 2008, 159.
her family. Flickinger even states that “the thesis of the play is that the rights of the individual may in certain cases rank higher than the rights of the state.” Nevertheless, this analysis is rejected by some scholars, notably D. A. Hester, who discredits the view of Sophocles as a philosopher: “Why should a single playwright in a single play so transcend the normal thought-processes of his age as to set a milestone in the history of thought?” Indeed, an important question to ask at this point is: would Antigone have given up her life to bury the corpse if the deceased were a complete stranger instead of her brother? The answer to this question must be yes if we are to accept the notion of an Antigone acting solely based on principle, on her need to right the divine law wronged by Creon’s proclamation. Yet it is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to imagine Antigone sacrificing herself for anyone other than kin. Her motivations must go far deeper than her desire to respect divine law.

The reader’s view of Antigone as a young woman who is ever mindful of family duties is shaken by the speech she gives before she is led to her tomb. “Never, I tell you, if I had been the mother of children, or if my husband died, exposed and rotting,” she says, “I’d never have taken this ordeal upon myself, never defied our people’s will.” Surely her duty would be the same toward her husband or her child; her reasoning that, their parents being dead, her brother is the only relative who is irreplaceable does not hold up to scrutiny. This speech is problematic enough that its authenticity has frequently been called into question because it appears to contradict Antigone’s numerous previous comments about family loyalty. Adams suggests that Antigone’s attempted burials of Polyneices were not rational defenses of divine law but acts of pure instinct; seeing her brother’s corpse rotting in the open plain, she was moved by atavistic intuition, “an instinctive certainty that her brother must be buried” and therefore strove to cover his body in dust despite the illegality of the act. This idea had previously been promoted by Flickinger, who noted that “[Antigone] feels instinctively that she must bury her brother, and it is not until much later that she proclaims … [a] reason.” Yet there are alternate explanations. Rabinowitz claims that Antigone makes her speech in order to gain the respect of the chorus before she dies. One must also keep in mind that when she makes this statement, Antigone is moments away from being walled into her tomb; she is inescapably faced with the knowledge that she will never marry and have children of her own. Perhaps her claim that she would not sacrifice her life for her husband or offspring is an attempt to lessen the pain of this terrible truth by telling herself that she could never care for a lover or a child as much as she cared for Polyneices.

Another problematic element of the play is the burial of Polyneices itself, or rather...

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12 Flickinger 1935, 24.
13 Adams 1955, 58.
15 Flickinger 1935, 21.
16 Rabinowitz 2008, 162.
the double burial, for Antigone is making a second attempt at covering her brother’s body with dust when she is caught by the guards. A single burial would have been enough to grant Polyneices’ soul rest; why risk discovery a second time?\textsuperscript{17} It seems plausible that Antigone wished for a more elaborate ritual. At the beginning of the play, when she asks Ismene for help, she says, “Will you lift up his body with these bare hands and lower it with me?”\textsuperscript{18} She thus suggests that she had intended to build Polyneices a funeral mound or dig him a grave. Her love does not allow her to settle for the bare minimum. Other early words of Antigone reinforce this impression and add decidedly incestuous undertones: “I will bury him myself … I will lie with the one I love and be loved by him.”\textsuperscript{19} Marie-Claire Lanctôt Bélanger argues that “l’amour pour le père se cache souvent sous l’amour frère-soeur … Chez Antigone, l’amour du frère Polynice s’adresse à Oedipe, son père-frère dont l’ombre nimbe toute la tragédie.”\textsuperscript{20} Family love in the Labdacid line is a complex affair, and it is important to remember that Antigone has three brothers: Polyneices, Eteocles and Oedipus himself, her mother’s son. Is the beloved brother that Antigone is referring to always Polyneices, or do shades of Oedipus colour her rhetoric? The second burial might well be a symbolic one for her brother/father. After all, Oedipus’s burial in the sacred grove at Colonus had no witnesses save Theseus.\textsuperscript{21} Antigone’s twofold performance of the ritual can be interpreted as two separate burials, one for Polyneices and one for Oedipus. Antigone refers to her tomb as her “bridal-bed”\textsuperscript{22} and her method of committing suicide echoes the way Jocasta, her mother and grandmother, took her own life after discovering her family’s incestuous nature.\textsuperscript{23}

That nature, the sinful and criminal truth of Antigone’s and her siblings’ birth, is inescapable. One of the lessons of \textit{Oedipus Tyrannos} is that it is impossible to escape fate; in a universe where one’s actions are inexorably preordained, it is plausible that Antigone’s actions were entirely fate-dictated. She is the fruit of an incestuous union, in the middle of a tangled knot of kinship ties: her father is her brother, her mother is her grandmother, and as their grandmother’s children, the siblings are aunt and uncle to each other. As such, it would have been impossible for Antigone and for any of the Labdacids to enjoy a long, happy life. Oedipus tells his daughters himself: “Such disgrace, and you must bear it all! Who will marry you then? Not a man on earth. Your doom is clear: you’ll wither away to nothing, single, without a child.”\textsuperscript{24} The cursed bloodline must be stamped out. Creon wishes to be an agent of its destruction, brazenly telling the chorus leader: “Sister’s child or closer in blood than all my family … she’ll never escape, she and her blood sister, the

\textsuperscript{17} Flickinger 1935, 56.
\textsuperscript{18} Soph. \textit{Ant.} 52.
\textsuperscript{19} Soph. \textit{Ant.} 85-88.
\textsuperscript{21} Soph. \textit{O.C.} 1879-1881: “By what doom Oedipus died, not a man alive can say, only Theseus.”
\textsuperscript{22} Soph. \textit{Ant.} 978.
\textsuperscript{23} Antigone is found “hanged by the neck in a fine linen noose, strangled in her veils” (Soph. \textit{Ant.} 1347-1348) and Jocasta “cradled high in a woven noose” (Soph. \textit{O.T.} 1396).
\textsuperscript{24} Soph. \textit{O.T.} 1641-1644.
most barbaric death.”25 Even innocent Ismene is intended for the slaughter; Creon intends to eliminate all of Oedipus’ descendants and establish his own side of the dynasty as the only remaining, pure line – the tragic irony here is that both his son and wife will commit suicide as a direct consequence of his actions (while Ismene’s fate at the end of the play is unclear). Antigone, a victim of fate like all her kin, could not but act as she did. The incestuous aspect of her temperament has been previously discussed; it is evident in the way she refers to her brother as “the one [she] loves” and to her tomb as her “bridal-bed,” and in her choosing Polyneices and death over Haimon, marriage and the possibility of a normal life, by which “she is in effect reproducing the incest that has shadowed her decision all along.”26 (If, in this fatalist analysis, it can be referred to as a choice – and if a marriage to a cousin could bring a sense of “normalcy” to a girl of Antigone’s lineage.) Antigone could not have married after the death of all her close male relatives because, being a daughter of Oedipus, there is nobody outside her immediate family that she could have loved: “La mort de Polynice marque la fin du désir de l’Autre pour Antigone. La fin de tout désir, la fin de toute attente. Dès lors, elle n’existe plus que pour incarner ce qu’elle a perdu. Reste le Rien … l’extase de son propre anéantissement.”27

Another one of Antigone’s Oedipal characteristics is her arrogance; her behaviour demonstrates considerable hubris. Creon’s edict is disseminated throughout the entire city of Thebes; Antigone claims that her uncle is “coming here to alert the uninformed in no uncertain terms,”28 but she herself wants her gesture to be advertised: “Shout it from the rooftops,” she tells Ismene. “I’ll hate you all the more for silence – tell the world!”29 Yet later on, when Ismene attempts to share in Antigone’s punishment by accepting equal guilt for Polyneices’ burial, Antigone violently rejects her: “Who did the work? I have no love for a friend who loves in words alone … Never share my dying, don’t lay claim to what you never touched.”30 According to Flickinger, this rebuke is motivated by Antigone’s desire for sole authorship over the act: “the deed would be so much more worthy of renown if she alone should carry it out. Consequently it occurred to her that she must take some measure to prevent Ismene from sharing any of the glory, even indirectly”31 – strangely reminiscent of her father-brother’s refusal to let the stranger on the road to Delphi have the right of way.32 In Anouilh’s adaptation of the play, Antigone’s resemblance to her father is even more strikingly described as Creon tells the young girl,

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26 Rabinowitz 2008, 162.
27 Grenier 2005, 58.
29 Soph. Ant. 100-101
30 Soph. Ant. 610-616.
31 Flickinger 1935, 46.
32 Soph. O.T. 885-896, especially “The old man himself … about to thrust me off the road … shouldering me aside … I strike him in anger! … with one blow of the staff in this right hand I knock him out of his high seat”
Tu es l’orgueil d’Oedipe … je l’ai retrouvé au fond de tes yeux … Tu as dû penser que je te ferais mourir. Et cela te paraissait un dénouement tout naturel pour toi, orgueilleuse! Pour ton père non plus – je ne dis pas le bonheur, il n’en est pas question – le malheur humain, c’était trop peu. L’humain vous gêne … dans la famille. Il vous faut un tête-à-tête avec le destin et la mort. Et tuer votre père et coucher avec votre mère et apprendre tout cela après, avidement, mot par mot. Quel breuvage, hein, les mots qui vous condamnent? Et comme on les boit goulûment quand on s’appelle Oedipe, ou Antigone.33

The Antigone described here is not only one for whom normal human happiness is unreachable because she is the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, but also one who disdains the idea of simple happiness because of her lineage. Yet even this Antigone, fiercely and defiantly proud of her genealogy, a daughter of kings, who has suffered every kind of pain, has not outlived her usefulness to the gods: is she not used in the play as an unknowing agent of Creon’s downfall, the catalyst that sets into motion the events that will end with Creon as a “wailing wreck of a man”?34 Antigone’s attitude toward her sister hints that she inherited her father-brother’s hubris, but Creon is veritably bloated with arrogance. Just as the gods punished Oedipus for his pride, so too did they punish Creon, using Antigone as their unwitting agent. “Antigone in her death is an instrument of the gods … Antigone alone is the instrument of Creon’s punishment. Antigone’s rebellion is … part of the mechanism of retribution.”35 Antigone, like her father before her, serves to remind the audience that fate and the will of the gods are inescapable.

In short, Antigone is an extremely complex character; she and her motives continue to evade a singular, straightforward analysis. The “divine law versus human law” interpretation is too simplistic if used on its own as a justification and explanation of Antigone’s actions. The argument that Antigone is defending the rights of the family against those of the state comes somewhat closer to the truth. Antigone’s real motivation is composed of a mix of fraternal and incestuous love for Polyneices as well as inescapable predestination.

33 Anouilh 1967, 72-73.
34 Soph. Ant. 1-12, especially “Do you know one … grief that Zeus will not perfect for the two of us while we still live and breathe? There’s nothing, no pain – our lives are pain – no private shame, no public disgrace, nothing I haven’t seen in your grief and mine;” Soph. Ant. 1462.
Ioana Tutu

The Motivation of Antigone

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