Sophokles' Lucky Day: *Antigone*

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Abstract – This article distinguishes five, and then three, mostly political issues raised in Sophokles' *Antigone*. (1) Can a traitor to his community be honorably buried? (2) Can a family member be valued ahead of the community? (3) Do underworld gods of the family come before public safety concerns? (4) Can civil authorities rightly be challenged by individual citizens? (5) Can «unwritten ordinances» of the gods supercede the city's laws? *Antigone* answers yes to these questions, chiefly because in the 440s Athens' democratic polity was strengthening at the expense of aristocratic families, but Sophokles was aristocratic, no friend of Perikles, and here sometimes candidly hostile to the masses. (6) What is the significance of Kreon's degeneration into tyrannical behavior? Sophokles always worried about too powerful magistrates. (7) Haimon's better behavior reflects Athens' «generation gap», contrasting older democrats with the more conservative young. Finally, (8) what is the proper public role of women? While Antigone herself is personally offensive, she proves to be right. As elsewhere, Sophokles rejects Kreon's and democratic Athens' harsh treatment of women. The play was successful because Athens' democratic society itself was changing, especially as regards the status of women.

Keywords – Antigone, Sophokles, democracy, women, tragedy, Athens, Perikles, tyranny.

With Freud in the shade for more than a generation, Sophokles' *Antigone* has resumed its place as one of the West's favorite plays, mainly because Antigone espouses three positions that most of us hold dear [1]. For modern audiences, Antigone is the lonely individual with the courage to stand against an oppressive state; she is willing to die defending her religion, the gods, and her family – «I was born to love», she says (523); and she is a woman strong enough to oppose the authority of men.

In fact I shall not challenge these interpretations as Sophokles' own. I shall however argue that Sophokles developed these themes for reasons

[1] Earlier versions of this text have been delivered at Columbia University, University College London, the University of Leiden, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle, Arcadia University Athens, the Universities of Torino, Florence, and Siena, and at a conference «Law and Drama in Ancient Athens» in Larnaka, Cyprus. Many thanks to all for helpful comments and discussion. Works listed in the bibliography will be cited by author's name and page numbers.

profoundly different from any modern conception. Instead, they reflect a particular configuration of developments in Athens during the later 440s, when this play was produced (442 BC). The contemporary popularity of *Antigone* is thus a historical accident, reflecting things that we cherish but that Sophokles knew nothing about, including liberalism, feminism, Christian love, and the Romantic ideal of a committed, passionate, and doomed individual. The play is complicated, in part deliberately – one can see Sophokles planting ambiguous information. For example, as commentators have noted, Ismene's statement (l. 44) that burying Polyneikes is *aporrhêton polei* can mean «forbidden» either «to the city» or «by the city». Following up that ambiguity, in line 79 Ismene says she will not act «with violence against the citizens», *bia politôn*, and at line 907 Antigone admits that in burying her brother she has acted «with violence against the citizens», using Ismene's same phrase. Twice elsewhere, however, Haimon says that the citizens support Antigone burying her brother (692-697, 732-733); at 502-503 Antigone says they silently do. And *is* Kreon's *kêrugma* (8, 27, 34, 161, 203, 447, 450, 454) either a city law (59-60, 191, 452) or the will of the citizens (79, 907)? The play vacillates in presenting Kreon as *stratêgos* (8), tyrant (59-60), magistrate (67, 670), or *basileus* (155).

Antigone is further difficult because of the complexities of especially pre-Euripidean drama, as the Athenians themselves came to recognize. In their debate in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, Euripides mentions a few verses of Aeschylus and concludes, «he could not say a single word that was clear» (927). Although Thucydides' antilogies and Plato's dialogues continued to exploit the ambiguities of debates and discussions spoken by others, the perception of drama's difficulty in communicating helped all serious fourth-century thinkers to abandon that genre in favor of written prose. As we shall see, the tragic poets took advantage of drama's ambiguities to present ideas without necessarily endorsing them. Aeschylus and Sophokles have eluded explanation for so long that many scholars now conclude this must have been the point. Helene Foley has called the plays «polysemic» [2], Pat Easterling says they offered «something for everyone» [3], Mark Griffith refers to *Antigone*'s «baffling open-endedness» [4]. As we shall see, this is all partly true. *Antigone* explores tensions and ambiguities in complex ways, tolerating a range of responses, not least to the title character.

Yet, I shall argue, on eight important themes *Antigone* consistently moves in directions reflecting a particular political and social orientation

[2] Foley 1995, 132.
[3] Easterling 1994, 24.
[4] Griffith 1999, 45.

in Athens during the 440s. Most of these themes recur in *Ajax*, produced earlier in the decade (I argue elsewhere: 444), and both plays share a plot: whether an aristocrat who attacked his own community deserves a proper burial. *Antigone* basically rewrites *Ajax*, with one key change in focus. The bad news is that within their historical contexts, we might judge the values of *Antigone* and *Ajax* rather critically, as elitist, anti-democratic, and retrograde. Some Athenian democrats will have shared these criticisms, although I shall also argue that the later 440s were marked by tension between progress and reaction. At the end, I return to the question of how Sophokles negotiated provocative issues before an audience with sometimes disparate political and cultural values.

I begin by paraphrasing Mark Griffith's short summation of the play in his excellent Cambridge edition. *Antigone*, he writes, is a well structured drama of a man of high standing and basically good intentions, who brings about the deaths of his son and his wife through a serious but not implausible (and perhaps forgivable) mistake, due partly to a kind of reprehensible but understandable ignorance, and thereby falls from prosperity to misery[5]. Most immediately this summary reveals how far recent work has turned away from Antigone. Not only does it neglect to mention that Kreon caused the death of his wife and son *and also Antigone*. In fact, it does not mention Antigone at all. *Antigone* is a drama on many levels: ethical, moral, psychological, religious, and of course political. Thebes has been at war, the traitor Polyneikes has been killed, the city's new *stratêgos* Kreon proclaims that he must not be buried. Antigone declares that she will defy Kreon and also the citizens to bury a *philos*, a family member: «I will not be found a traitor to him» (46), and she buries him, twice. Her sister Ismene demurs: «to act with violence against the citizens I cannot» (77-78). Kreon's first speech stresses the prior importance of the polis to any individual, including a *philos* (friend or kin). «I could never make that man a *philos* who threatens our country, knowing this, that our country *is* our safety. Only when it sails upright can we establish true friendships. By such *nomoi* (laws) I shall increase the polis» (187-191). Four times Kreon justifies his edict as protecting the city. However, in the course of the play he becomes tyrannical and abusive, he refuses to hear the voices of the people and calls the city his (734-738). *Antigone*'s political qualities are reinforced by echoes of Athens' democracy. Kreon is first identified as a *stratêgos* (8), Athens' principal elected office; he states that every citizen must obey the city's magistrates (663-669), good Athenian democratic doctrine as we shall

[5] Griffith 1999, 27, see also 35.

see; he also says that he has been put in power by the city, like a magistrate (666). Of the eight political and social problems in this play that I discuss, virtually everyone agrees that these elements feature in the play and agrees on the play's stance in regard to them. The question then is, why did Sophokles dramatize these particular issues in 442?

First, the play presents one – or I think two – persons who betray their city and their fellow citizens. Polyneikes attacked Thebes and the play never defends him, although Sophokles could have done so, as he later does in *Oedipus at Colonus* (1291-1346). In Euripides' *Phoenissae* (409 BC), Polyneikes had a deal with Eteokles each to rule Thebes in turn, year by year, and Eteokles broke that deal. However, *Antigone* never criticizes Eteokles. Polyneikes is presented simply as a traitor who tried to destroy his city and its temples (198-202). Are there circumstances in which a traitor to his city can be honored by burial? The play concludes, and the gods confirm, that there can be such circumstances.

The other person who acts with violence against the citizens is Antigone; but more on her later.

Second, as Helene Foley writes, «central to the *Antigone* – central to Attic democracy as well – is the tension between the interests of family (*oikos*) and *polis*» [6]. Kreon states that an enemy of the city can never be his *philos*. Antigone disagrees. Are there circumstances when one should put family ahead of community? The play concludes, there are. As Griffith says, the play «certainly asserts the inviolable claims of kinship and points up the oppressive potential of civic authority» [7]. Paradoxically, it may be that Antigone's own disaster comes because except for Polyneikes, she rejects her family: Ismene, Kreon, and in some sense also Eteokles.

Third, religious obligations to the dead. As scholars since Hegel have seen, piety itself is not the issue between Kreon and Antigone. Kreon enters thanking the gods, he refuses to think that the gods could have any kindly thoughts for Polyneikes «who came to burn their pillared temples and their wealth, even their land, and break apart their laws» (200-201); he insists that his method of killing Antigone, by interment, will keep the city pure (773-776): many lines indicate Kreon's respect for the gods. The religious issue is between Kreon's civic religion and the older, family gods, «the gods below» (75, 749, cf. 777-778) who are especially involved in matters of family burial.

The play shows that one must take these older family gods into account, even when the polis and its government are at stake. Divine support for Antigone is clear, even if the gods do not save her. As Teiresias

[6] Foley 1995, 131.
[7] Griffith 1999, 49.

says, the polis and its leader are openly in violation of the gods of the dead (998-1032). Sophokles could have written a much more provocative play if divine support was never made explicit, as in fact earlier in the drama it was not. At line 78, refusing to help Antigone bury their brother, Ismene says she does the gods no dishonor, and at line 922 Antigone is unsure of the gods' support. Although Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood dislikes Antigone and likes Kreon, she nonetheless concludes, «the play is saying that [Antigone's] cause was right, and the polis was in the wrong» [8]. Griffith remarks: «in so far as the play contains a clear religious 'message', it clearly validates the claims of the old familial cults: Kreon was wrong» [9].

Fourth, Antigone defies the community's leaders, the government. This issue is perhaps less familiar to students of Sophokles, but recurs often in his plays, as we shall see, as well as in other fifth-century texts. In *Antigone*, Ismene proclaims, «I shall obey *hoi in telei*», the civil authorities (67). Kreon proclaims, «whoever transgresses or violates the *nomoi*, or thinks to command those in power (*hoi kratountes*), this man shall get no praise from me. But the man whom the polis has put in place, him it is necessary to hear, even in small things, and whether right or wrong. There is no greater evil than anarchy» (663-672). Should people obey the government, right or wrong? The play would indicate, not always.

Fifth, the higher call of «unwritten ordinances», *agrapha nomima*, over the polis' laws, a concept first attested in this play [10]. Kreon stresses the importance of obeying the city's *nomoi* (177, 191), he says his proclamation against Polyneikes is in accordance with the *nomoi* (192, 449), he says, «whoever transgresses or violates the *nomoi*, this man shall get no praise from me». The chorus agrees with him (213). But Antigone responds, «I did not think your proclamation strong enough to have the power to overrule, mortal as it was, the unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods. For these have life […] forever» (453-457). Can *agrapha nomima* be superior to polis laws? The play concludes, they can.

A sixth theme is Kreon's personality. He seems fine at the start of the play, his early speeches include much religious and political wisdom. But he becomes tyrannical – with the guard, with his son, and with the prophet Teiresias. He comes to say that the polis is his, he is obsessed with his own authority, he issues harsh threats, like a tyrant he refuses to listen to others

[8] Sourvinou-Inwood 1989, 148.

[9] Griffith 1999, 47.

[10] Although Odysseus mentions the laws of the gods in attempting to convince Agamemnon to allow Ajax's burial in *Ajax* 1343-1344, these laws are not contrasted with city laws.

and harbors unreasonable suspicions of others. What does Kreon's deterioration mean?

Seventh, a minor but interesting theme of the play is young versus old. Traditionally, Greek elders are wise, and the young are rash. In this play, Haimon is a model of wisdom and restraint – it is his father who goes off the deep end. Kreon protests, «at my age I'm to school my mind by his? This boy instructor is my master?» (726-727). Generational tensions appear elsewhere in fifth-century Athens. How does *Antigone* fit?

Finally and above all, women. Should men yield to them? Ismene tells Antigone, «we must remember that we two are women / so not to fight with men; we are subject to them because they are stronger» (61-63). Kreon's first word is *andres* (162); again and again he says that he refuses to yield to a woman; «I am no man and she the man instead» if she prevails; «I won't be called weaker than a woman», etc. (740-755). And yet a woman prevails and is proved right. It is worth noting that Sophokles probably invented this element of the myth, and Kreon's killing of Antigone.

What do the spectators think about Antigone? This is perhaps the hardest question for modern audiences, who cheer for Antigone's uncompromising passion in defense of her brother and her religion, in the face of the increasingly piggish Kreon. However, most critics believe that the situation is more complicated. Antigone is proved right, and a case can certainly be made that she is a «Sophoclean hero»: firm-minded, obdurate, and unyielding. At the same time she is sometimes unattractive and also incoherent, as Mary Whitlock Blundell has argued [11]. Antigone claims to put family above all but immediately rejects her sister Ismene, saying she hates her (86, 93). Ismene responds that she will never stop loving Antigone. Antigone explains that if her child had died or her husband, «I would let them rot». She honors her brother because she cannot get another, as her parents are dead (905-914). To be sure, also here Antigone has been defended, as understandably bitter because she will never have a child or husband [12]. Nonetheless, the speech is put in so bizarre and offensive a way that some even recent editors cast it out as an interpolation – although Aristotle mentions these lines (*Rhet.* 1417a32-33). As Griffith says, Antigone's «rhetoric is personally antagonistic» and «heavily negative: she is more concerned to reject than to affirm» (43).

As I have noted, ambiguities such as those regarding Antigone are standard for Sophokles, perhaps to remove his plays from the level of position papers, and to provoke discussion. These are never black hat /

[11] Blundell 1989, 106-115.
[12] Knox 1964, 104-107.

white hat, Hollywood morality tales. The chorus often criticizes Antigone (*e.g.*, 853-855, 875), but in his first speech Kreon makes clear that they are his supporters (164 ff.). What then is the significance of their criticisms? Similarly, *Ajax* 1073-1084 includes a compelling denunciation of Athens' democratic ideal that people should be free to «live as they like» (see *e.g.* Arist. *Pol.* 1317b5, 12; Thuc. II 37, 2). But the speaker is Menelaus, a most unattractive Spartan who rules in an oligarchy. So, what is *Ajax*'s point about living as you like?

In any case, *Antigone* certainly values women. As Griffith says, «as we hear Kreon shrilly – and erroneously – berating his nieces and son, and insisting on the need for men always to 'be master' of women (*e.g.*, 482-485, 531-535, 677-680, 740-750), even the most misogynistic and paternalistic Athenian must have felt some qualms» [13]. Despite her negative personality, Antigone is right.

On these eight themes *Antigone*'s direction is clear. In defense of the family and its gods, one can rightly defy the community, its officials, and its laws; the young can be wiser than their elders; a ruler can deteriorate; and women should be heard.

Now: why in 442 did Sophokles present this cluster of ideas to the demos?

The 440s were an especially significant decade for Athens, as the old aristocratic order of the city's great families passed away. Among the last representatives of this conservative order, Kimon died in 450 and Thoukydides son of Melesias was ostracised in 443. Athens now firmly and consciously entered a period of «full» egalitarian democracy, rule by the polis and its officials, by the democracy's laws, and by the community of adult male citizens equal together, with little traditional input from the aristocracy. At the same time, Perikles' defeat of Thoukydides marked the beginning of his own fifteen year period of political ascendency.

Antigone opposes all of these developments.

First, Kreon's statement that the polis, the community, must come before everything, including family, was the public position of virtually every Greek. For several testimonia among many, in the conservative Xenophon, Euryptolemos calls it «disgraceful» to put the interests of his relatives over those of «the whole polis» (*Hell.* I 7, 21). In jail for sacrilege, the oligarchic Andokides says that his friends expected him to put his family ahead of his city, but he refused (I 49-59; see also II 2-3). In Thucydides, the democratic leader Perikles remarks, «When the whole polis is on the right course it is a better thing for each separate individual than when per-

[13] Griffith 1999, 51.

sonal interests are satisfied but the polis as a whole is going downhill» (II 60, 2). Bernard Knox and others have noted the similarity of these words with Sophokles' Kreon's [14]. In Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1427-1429), Euripides stresses the prior importance of the community to any individual. The earliest, canonical Greek text describes the myriad deaths that Agamemnon and Achilles caused when they put a private dispute ahead of community welfare (*Il.* I 1-2). To an Athenian Assembly in 330, Demosthenes quoted verbatim Kreon's first speech in *Antigone*, explaining that his opponent Aeschines had forgotten its wisdom (XIX 247-250).

Himself an aristocrat, Sophokles' *Antigone* and *Ajax* are the only public texts that challenge the fundamental Greek belief that community comes before individuals, whether aristocrats (*Ajax*) or family (*Antigone*). In the 440s the democratic community was strengthening, at the expense of powerful traditional families and the aristocracy. That Kreon's adversaries are his son and future daughter-in-law shows how easily he dismisses family concerns. Their and Jocasta's deaths are the disastrous consequences.

Obedience to the government and magistrates was another central ideology of democratic Athens [15]. Just like Kreon, the legendary founder of Athens' democracy Solon is reported to have said, «obey the magistrates right or wrong» (fr. 30 West). In Thucydides' Funeral Oration, Perikles says that the demos «listens to» the laws and the magistrates (II 37, 3). The ephebes, Athens' trainee soldiers, swear to *euêkouein*, «listen well» to the laws and magistrates (Tod 204, ll. 11-15). [Andokides] says, «Obeying the magistrates and the laws is safety for all […] the greatest protection of the city» (IV 19). Demosthenes stresses that the magistrates represented the administrative authority of the demos. The garland they wore did not honor individuals but was *ho humeteros koinos stephanos*, «your common garland». He observes that the penalties for insulting a magistrate were much more severe than for insulting a private citizen because the offender «is outraging your laws, your garland of office, and the name of the city» (XXI 31-33).

The aristocracy, however, did sometimes defy Athens' democratic magistrates, who held the power that they had lost. So for example, when Alkibiades carried his wife home from the magistrate's (she was seeking a divorce), Andokides protests that he was scorning the magistrates, the laws, and all citizens (IV 14).

Sophokles' *Ajax*, *Antigone*, and also *Philoktetes* all raise questions about the democratic notion of obeying the magistrates: this was appar-

[14] Knox 1957, 63-70, 202, n. 31.
[15] See Wallace 2005b, 147-158.

ently an on-going preoccupation of the poet. In Ajax's mistitled *Trugrede* or «deception speech» (in fact he does not deceive), Ajax says about Agamemenon and Menelaus, «they are the *archontes* (officials), one must yield; of course; for even what is terrible and very strong yields to the honors of office». But Ajax does not and cannot yield to them, instead he commits suicide cursing them, and his brother Teuker also defies them (1097-1102): «You say that *you* brought Ajax here to be an ally of the Achaeans? Did he not sail here himself, as in command of himself? How are you the *strategos* of this man? […] You came ruling Sparta, not *hêmôn kratôn* – in command of us». Along with the chorus and even Ajax's enemy Odysseus (1355), Teuker emphasizes that Ajax was a nobleman, an *esthlos anêr* (1352).

Similarly, many years later in *Philoktetes* 925-926, Neoptolemos refuses to restore Philoktetes' bow as he rightfully should, «for listening to those in authority» – *en telei*, Ismene's phrase – «is both just and expedient for me». Simon Goldhill writes, «Obedience toward 'the authorities' is a standard requirement for the maintenance of a democratic […] society. This value, however, […] is put at stake first by Neoptolemos' confession of pity for Philoktetes (965-966) and his anguished question 'alas, what am I to do?' (968) and then by the act of returning the bow». Odysseus forbids Neoptolemos to return it, «on behalf of the Atreidai and the whole army» – the community and its leaders (1294). Goldhill continues, «It is precisely his obligations to the Atreids, to the army at Troy […] that Neoptolemos is rejecting» [16]. In *Ajax*, *Antigone*, and *Philoktetes*, Sophokles' heroes all defy the magistrates. This is inconsistent with Athenian democratic sentiment.

The evidence just quoted also shows that obeying the polis' laws was a central tenet of Athens' democracy: ephebes, dikasts, and officials all swore to obey the law, the Solonian Areopagos' principal task was *nomophulakein*, guarding the laws. Until the mid-fifth century virtually all Greeks praised the laws without reservation. From then on, however, as Athens' democracy expanded, it began to enact legislation in its own interest, as the Old Oligarch (I 9, 18), Xenophon (*Mem.* I 2, 41-46), and Plato (*e.g.*, *Resp.* 338d-e) all bluntly complain. The earliest such measure was possibly Perikles' citizenship law of 451/0, which countered the aristocratic custom of marrying wealthy foreigners, as for example Kimon's mother Hegesipyle was the daughter of the Thracian king Oloros. Over the next century, opponents of democracy were driven to the extraordinary position of having to oppose the *nomoi*, for eight different reasons which I list in chronological order: that «unwritten laws» were superior, that *nomoi* were relative not absolute, that *phusis* (nature) was better than *nomos*, that

[16] Goldhill 1990, 120.

Athens' laws were bad, that democracies often changed their laws, that the demos itself often did not obey its laws, that laws were not so effective as training people's characters, and that the wise needed no laws [17].

What about Kreon's degeneration from a *stratêgos* who listens to the citizens, into an abusive tyrant? In Athens following Thoukydides' ostracism in 443, the charge of tyranny was pervasive and directed against Perikles. For one passage of many which Knox lists [18], Plutarch says that the comic poets «nicknamed Perikles and his friends 'the new Peisistratids'» – sons of Athens' tyrant Peisistratos – «and called upon him to swear that he would never set himself up as tyrant, as if his supremacy were too oppressive and incommensurate with democracy» (*Per.* 16). Probably in 442, Perikles' friend and teacher Damon was ostracized as *philoturannos*, Plutarch reports, again from contemporary comedies [19]. In his opening speech Kreon remarks, «you cannot learn of any man the soul, the mind and the intent until he shows his practice of the government and law». Many scholars including Knox and Christian Meier [20] have suggested that Perikles helped inspire Sophokles' portrait of Kreon. A *stratêgos* who dominates the government and descends into tyranny, is exactly what many feared of Perikles.

As for the theme of old versus young, George Forrest [21] and others have shown that Athens' fifth-century generation gap was opposite to that of modern societies. Like Philokleon in Aristophanes' *Wasps*, Athens' revolutionary democrats were the older generation. Younger Athenians like Bdelukleon, Alkibiades, and many other students of Sokrates, tended conservative, even hostile to democracy. Thrasymachos wrote (D/K B1), «I could wish, men of Athens, to have belonged to that long-past time when the young were content to remain silent unless events compelled them to speak, and while the older men were correctly managing the polis. But since fate has so far advanced us in time that we must listen to others governing (*archein*) the polis but ourselves suffer the consequences […]». In *Antigone*, the young are wiser than their elders.

Finally, Kreon despises women's voices, and the play shows that this is wrong. What was the situation of women in fifth-century Athens? The consensus view is that they were oppressed, kept indoors, and that this was a recent development. Before 480, seventeen dedications by women are preserved from the Akropolis; after 480 there is only one. Many black

[17] See Wallace 2007, 183-196.
[18] Knox 1957, 64.
[19] See Wallace 2004, 249-268.
[20] Meier 1993, 198-199.
[21] Forrest 1975, 38-48.

figure vases before 480 show women at the fountain; only one red figure vase does. The Ionian Herodotos mentions women some 375 times. The Athenian Thucydides hardly mentions them, and in his Funeral Oration Perikles – ostensibly a progressive democrat – remarks that the best thing for women is simply not to be talked about (II 46). Eva Keuls has drawn the «tentative, uneasy conclusion […] that in fifth-century Athens women were more repressed than in any other Greek polis, and, as I suspect, more than in any other Mediterranean society» [22]. If perhaps incautiously stated, this thesis is shared by many scholars.

What explains women's greater oppression in classical Athens than in other times and places? The standard view links women's oppression with the growth of democracy and the growth of freedom for men. As the early fifth-century democracy evolved as government by citizen men equally together, men consciously relegated to themselves powers and privileges which therefore were formally denied to all others: women, children, slaves, foreigners, and allies. Josiah Ober observes, «the political cohesiveness of the citizenry was partly a product of the oppression of non-citizen groups within the polis» [23]. According to Michael Rostovtzeff [24],

> women did not play that part in the life of fifth century Athens which they had played when Greece and Ionia were ruled by aristocracies […]. The time of their political influence, of their importance in public life, had gone by […]. Democracy banished women from the street to the house: the kitchen and the nursery, and the gynaeceum now became their sphere.

Sarah Pomeroy concludes, «[Men's] will to dominate was such that they then had to separate themselves as a group and claim to be superior to all nonmembers: foreigners, slaves, and women» [25].

Antigone opposes democracy's silencing and suppression of women or at any rate elite women such as Antigone.

Thus: *Antigone* champions women, the prudent young, the family, its gods, and elite individuals, over the polis, the polis' civil authorities, men, and Athens' democratic older generation. The play also condemns a powerful public official who degenerates into tyranny. This play thus questions or rejects virtually every Athenian democratic development since 508/7.

At the same time, we can see how cleverly Sophokles has presented his critique to the Athenian demos. On the one hand, he makes clear that the Theban demos sides with Antigone, that the people are right-thinking – it

[22] Keuls 1983, 25.
[23] Ober 1989, 5.
[24] Rostovtzeff 1930, 137.
[25] Pomeroy 1975, 78.

is the leaders who are wrong. On the other hand, he makes Antigone unattractive, but nonetheless, she is right. Haimon utters democratic speech, arguing against the tyrant (*e.g.*, 737). Not least, the aristocracy is itself bad: Polyneikes is never defended although a case could have been constructed for him; Antigone is deeply problematic; and Ajax is unsympathetic not least in his treatment of Tekmessa. In *Antigone* and *Ajax*, Sophokles does not represent the old aristocratic order as admirable or worthy, and he does not advocate that it be restored to power. Yet however problematic, they still must be given respect.

Sophokles' critique of Athenian democratic developments should not entirely surprise us, as it is consistent with what little we know about Sophokles. Ahead of Aeschylus, he was awarded his first dramatic victory in 468 by a board of generals dominated by Kimon; by contrast, Perikles had been *chorêgos* for Aeschylus's *Persians* a few years earlier. Perhaps in 444, going much further than *Antigone*, *Ajax* championed an insane aristocrat who despised and attempted to kill the demos. The chorus of Ajax's crew are Athenians (201), but without their leader they are frightened «like timorous doves» (140). They sing, «Great and little together is best. The great do well when the little are there to help them» (155). Despite his outrageous crimes against the community, Ajax receives an honorable burial. *Ajax* also raised criticisms about the progressive democratic ideology of «living as you wish», central to democracy as I have mentioned, and about Perikles' citizenship law of 451/0: in a long and bitter exchange, Teuker and Agamemnon each point out that the other has a foreign mother [26]. Sophokles' unhappy rapport with Perikles during their joint *stratêgia* in 441/0 is well documented by an eyewitness, Ion of Chios. Sophokles was reportedly deeply religious, welcoming the sacred snake of Asklepios into his house [27]. Finally, in 411, he was one of ten *probouloi*, councillors who handed Athens' democracy over to a group of oligarchs.

One last question. If *Antigone* questioned democratic developments since 508/7, how was it received in 442? Although Goldhill and others have advanced interesting arguments that Attic dramas often subverted polis norms, one well-known point suggests that *Antigone* should be consistent with the general mood of its time. That is, Sophokles was elected treasurer of the Athenian alliance in 443 and *stratêgos* in 442, we are told as a result of *Antigone*. Although some scholars condemn this last report as a *post hoc propter hoc*, I only point out that Sophokles had no known military or financial credentials: the demos will have elected him because

[26] See Wallace 2010, 137-154.
[27] However, cf. Connolly 1998, 1-21.

of his principal contribution to Athens. The parallel is striking that in 412, in another period of difficulty, Sophokles was elected councilor, a political official, to help his city. What was the Athenians' mood in the later 440s? These years are poorly documented, but what we have indicates an uncertain atmosphere of political and intellectual conservatism. Although Perikles prevailed against Thoukydides, their struggle and the resulting fears about Perikles indicate an uneasy ambivalence. Most likely in 442 Perikles' adviser the music theorist Damon was ostracised, as *philoturranos* and a great meddler, *megalopragmon* (see n. 27). In 441 a fellow general was Kimon's son Lakedaimonios. In 440 the Athenians voted *me komoidein*, which must mean to restrict comic freedoms on the stage, perhaps by limiting personal attacks; the restriction lasted three years [28]. For a shadowy half-decade this seems an impressive constellation of data, all of it consistent with the politics of *Antigone*.

Last but not least, in the 440s the early democracy's harsh attitude toward women was shifting, in directions that Sophokles' plays support. Written sources for Athens before the 430s are scarce. However, the archaeologist Robert Sutton has examined vase depictions of gender relations from archaic Athens down through the fifth century. He traces a development from «a strictly male-oriented, egocentric eroticism to one that was emotionally based, aimed in good part at a feminine audience that had previously been neglected» [29]. Between 510 and 470, many pots depict active hostility toward prostitutes and their abuse and degradation, ugly whores being beaten with slippers while satisfying two men. Sexually explicit scenes become less common after 480, and nearly disappear by 450. After 450, vases depict polite romantic scenes of courting, bathing, and weddings, which Sutton compares to the 1960s films of Doris Day and Rock Hudson.

Similarly, in a 1997 article Robin Osborne has considered Perikles' citizenship law of 451 in relation to white-figure *lekythoi* vases and funerary monuments. As many scholars have noted, Perikles' stipulation that a citizen's parents must both be Athenians will have elevated the status of Athenian women. Osborne links their enhanced status with the increasingly prominent appearance of women and children on *lekythoi* starting as early as 460, and on tomb monuments from the third quarter of the fifth century, the period of *Antigone*. As he remarks, a person entering an Attic cemetery in the late sixth century would see monuments almost entirely of men. A century later, he would see mostly women and children [30].

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[28] See Wallace 2005a, 362-364.
[29] Sutton 1992, 4.
[30] Osborne 1997, 30.

After 440, many texts document this shift in women's status, and men's protest against women's mistreatment. In our two earliest plays of Euripides, *Alcestis* and *Medea*, produced in 437 and 431, the men are piggish, while the women are oppressed and sympathetic. The same is true of Sophokles' *Ajax*, *Antigone*, and *Women of Trachis* (which I date *c.* 438). Although I have no room here for a detailed exposition of this theme, I will quote one other passage from *Frogs*. In his debate with Aeschylus, Euripides remarks, «right from my first plays I had women speak and slaves no less, and the master and the girl and the old lady». Aeschylus – the older generation – objects, «Ought you not to die for such audacity?» Euripides replies, «No, by Apollo, for it was democratic what I was doing» (948-952). As these plays and Perikles' citizenship law help show, Athens' democracy was shifting, from men alone to men and women together. In *Republic* 563b, Plato bitterly complains «how much equality (*isonomia*) and freedom there is among women toward men and among men toward women» in democracies.

Sophokles' *Antigone* was thus in harmony not only with the playwright's conservative politics, but also with the Athenians' more conservative moods in the later 440s, and their increasing objection to the older democracy's mistreatment of women. Unlike the earlier and in some ways less persuasive *Ajax* (Sophokles never again focuses on the aristocracy, except – in his later plays – to criticize them), Sophokles' decision to focus *Antigone* and *Trachiniai* on women may reflect an area where his own emotions and the public's most closely coincided.

As for modern audiences, if most see Antigone as a brave individual standing up against the state, Sophokles' Antigone defies her community's leaders. For us, Antigone dies defending religion, gods, and family, but Sophokles' Antigone defends an aristocratic traitor and family member who tried to kill his fellow citizens. For us, the promotion of women is a progressive cause, but Sophokles wants to return to the old aristocratic order. By coincidence, however, contemporary history has turned in Sophokles' favor. For *Antigone*, this has proved to be Sophokles' lucky day.

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