



# HEGEL IN THEBE

## Critical Notes on Antigone and Its Interpretations

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### Abstract

*This essay aims to examine a number of theoretical issues related to the philosophical and literary interpretations of the Sophoclean tragedy of Antigone. The main focus is Hegel's comments on the tragedy, as his comments have played a significant role in the discussions surrounding the drama and its interpretation during the twentieth century. Following the examination of Hegel's comments, and in order to elucidate the poetic structure of the play within a broader contemporary context, the essay, in its second and third sections, tries to uncover the limitations of interpretative efforts that concentrate on the juxtaposition of two main protagonists of the play, Creon and Antigone. Instead, the tragedy is argued to depict impassions that marked individual desires and citizenry life in the Greek polis.*

**Keywords:** Antigone, Psychoanalyst, Tragedy, Mortality, Poetic

*Antigone* by Sophocles has been an intellectual point of reference since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The interest in the tragedy has not been confined within literary and aesthetic studies. The play has been object of analysis and debates within philosophy and in more recent times, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the interpretations have reached into fields such as psychoanalysis and critical studies. Goethe, Hegel, Hölderlin, Kierkegaard and Heidegger are perhaps the most well-known classics who tried to interpret the drama. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Antigone* experienced a renewed interest both as a play for theatre with numerous adaptations and variations inspired by the play, most notably the play with the same name by Jean Anouilh and by Bertolt Brecht – both written in the 1940s.<sup>1</sup> The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan delivered an original analysis of the play as early as in the 1950's. In 1960s, we find the play as a source of inspiration, and this time, it was the artist and filmmaker Reiner Werner Fassbinder who revived the artistic interest in the play with his adaptation of the piece for his contribution to the collective work *Germany in Autumn*. In the 1980s and 90s, the tragedy experienced a renewed interest within human sciences, more specifically within comparative literature and gender studies, resulting in a considerable number of articles and books.<sup>2</sup> Among references in contemporary literature, Hegel's reading of *Antigone* has been exceptionally prominent. This article explores the limits of Hegel's reading of *Antigone*, brings in an analysis of the play based on the concept of mytheme in order to elucidate those limits, and concludes upon the broader historical context that is argued to shed some new light upon the dynamic structure of the play.

### I. The Play

Together with *Oedipus the King*, *The Seven Against Thebes* and *Oedipus at the Columns*, the *Antigone*, is part of the Theban plays, which depicts the tragic demise of the ruling Labdacid family in Thebes. Oedipus, Jocasta, Eteocles, Polyneices, Creon and Antigone, are members of the same family and the protagonists of these tragedies.

Honig, B. (2013). *Antigone, Interrupted*. Cambridge University Press.

The play *Antigone* begins where *Seven Against Thebes* had ended. After the war, the two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, sons of Oedipus, have fallen at one of the gates of Thebes. King Creon, who replaced Oedipus and is the uncle of Oedipus' children, allows Eteocles, who defended the city of Thebes, to be buried, but he orders a

<sup>1</sup> Brecht, Bertolt, (1945) *Die Antigone des Sophocles; Materialien zur "Antigone"*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. Anouilh, J., (1946). *Antigone: Tragédie*. Paris: La Table ronde.

<sup>2</sup> The probably most prominent study within gender studies is conducted by Judith Butler, see Butler, J. (2012). *Antigone's claim: Kinship between life & death*. Miller, Peter. (2014). *Destabilizing Haemon: Radically Reading Gender and Authority in Sophocles' Antigone*. Helios (Texas Tech University Press); and finally a number of essays collected in Žukauskaitė, A., Wilmer, S. E., & Oxford University Press. (2010). *Interrogating Antigone in postmodern philosophy and criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. One of the latest and more intriguing interpretations is provided by Bonnie Honig, who interprets the tragedy as a detective novel narrative, Honig, B. (2013). *Antigone, Interrupted*. Cambridge University Press.

herald to forbid any funeral rites or burial of the corpse of Polyneices, who had fought against Thebe. His corpse is left in the open outside the city walls. Antigone, Oedipus' daughter, living in King Creon's household, informs Ismene, her sister, of what she has resolved to do in the opening dialogue of the tragedy:

In spite of the orders, I shall give my brother burial, whether thou, Ismene, will join with me or not. (1-38)<sup>3</sup>

And she clarifies her position by these words:

Gladly will I meet death in my sacred duty to the dead. Longer time have I to spend with them than with those who live upon the earth. Seek not to argue with me; nothing so terrible can come to me but that an honoured death remains. (1-38)

In the following scene, a sentry, posted over the corpse by Creon's order, reports that someone has sprinkled the body with dirt in a symbolic burial. The chorus wonders if gods have interfered against Creon's decree (223-279). Creon argues that the gods hate someone who is disobedient in regard to the decree issued by the ruler of the city state. He orders the sentry to find the person responsible (280-331). The chorus sings an ode about the inventiveness of mankind, its accomplishments and its inevitable fate: mortality (332-372). The sentry returns with Antigone under guard. They caught her during the act of pouring libations over her brother's corpse. His description of a dust storm around the unburied Polynices suggests the displeasure of the gods (373-440). The exchange between Antigone and Creon in this scene (441-525) is a central and oft-cited parts of the play. We return to its details later on after following up the development of actions.

In the next scene, Creon's son, Haemon (526-581) enters He is also Antigone's fiancé. Creon explains to him about the importance of obedience and the rule of law, and about keeping women in their place (624-680). Haemon implies that public opinion is against Creon. He also cites the importance of being flexible, and asks Creon to change his mind. Father and son have a furious exchange and Creon threatens to kill Antigone before Haemon's eyes, whereupon Haemon leaves (681-763). Creon announces that he will spare Ismene, but will confine Antigone to a cave to starve to death (764-780). In the next scene, Teiresias, the oracle, meets up Creon, and warns Creon of the perilous consequences of his decision. Creon, at first in rage against the prophecy of Teiresias, finally changes his mind and run to the cave where Antigone is buried alive. But they only discover the corpse of Antigone, and next to her, Haemon's dead body. The play ends when an utterly devastated Creon, carrying the dead body of his son, arrives at the palace, only to learn that even his wife had committed suicide after having reached by the news about her son's death.

## II. Hegel's Antigone

The central part of the tragedy, commented by Hegel, is the exchange that takes place between Creon and Antigone upon her arrest. Antigone says:

Yes, for it was not Zeus who made this proclamation, nor was it Justice [*Dike*] who lives with the gods below that established such laws among men, nor did I think your proclamations strong enough to have power to overrule, mortal as they were, the unwritten and unailing ordinances [*nomima*] of the gods. For these have life, not simply today and yesterday, but forever, and no one knows how long ago they were revealed. For this I did not intend to pay the penalty among the gods for fear of any man's pride. I knew that I would die, of course I knew, even if you had made no proclamation. But if I die before my time, I account that a gain. For does not whoever lives among many troubles, as I do, gain by death? So, it is in no way painful for me to meet with death; if I had endured that the son of my own mother should die and remain unburied, that would have given me pain, but this gives me none. And if you think my actions foolish, that amounts of folly by a fool. (450-470)

Both Antigone and Creon refer to the Greek notion of *nomos* signifying customary law, a term that connotes a sense of honour linked to the proper name. Phrased in Hegelian terms, *nomos* is imbued by a sense of ethical obligation within the family domain (*Sittlichkeit*). This is seemingly what Antigone's argument is based on. She claims the superiority of "unwritten laws" over the laws of the city and thereby presents a juxtaposition of terms that runs through the tragedy. Hegel's analyses of the play are developed in *Phenomenology of Spirit* and in *Philosophy of right*. The Antigone for Hegel is essentially the expression of the transition between the domain of ethical obligations (*sittlichkeit*) and the higher level of public rights. He writes:

<sup>3</sup>All citations with verse numbers indicted are from Loeb's Classic Edition, Harvard University Press, 1994–1996.

family piety is expounded in Sophocles' *Antigone*—one of the most sublime presentations of this virtue—as principally the law of woman, and as the law of a substantiality at once subjective and on the plane of feeling, the law of the inward life, a life which has not yet attained its full actualization; as the law of ancient gods, 'the gods of the underworld' as 'an everlasting law, and no man knows at what time it was first put forth'. This law is there displayed as a law opposed to public law, the law of the land. This is the supreme opposition in ethics and therefore in tragedy; and it is individualized in the same play in the opposing natures of man and woman.<sup>4</sup>

*Antigone* stands for the outer limit that both separates and unites the unmediated ethical moment and the mediated state constitution, which is the highest instance of actualized substantiality in and for itself. Tragedy in Hegel's view is the expression of a natural right with obscure roots. This right remains obscure, insofar as it is an ephemeral, particular moment awaiting its accomplishment, by being contained and surpassed in the public right. Hence, the ethical right in its unmediated, direct reality common to all human beings precedes articulations of jurisprudence, according to Hegel. Furthermore, Hegel regards ethical obligations rather as a mythical force. The dialectical Hegelian moment presented in the quoted passage points out the self-grounding function of the unwritten laws, which means that it is not only devoid of any need for an external grounding instance but also that it actively determines its own ground. In other words, its foundation is self-referential and therefore ultimately tautological. The unwritten laws that *Antigone* refers to are such a system of rights or ethics in Hegel's interpretation.<sup>5</sup>

Based on this interpretation, Hegel proceeds to elaborate on guilt and crime as they are represented by the play. Both crime and guilt are rooted in the antithetical rapport between what is for Hegel "The divine right of essential Being" at one extreme end, namely *Antigone*, and the articulated, self-reflecting rights of the sovereign, represented by *Creon*, on the other. All actions in the play are susceptible to break at either end of such an ethical rapport. Subsequently, a Hegelian reading would find both antagonists of the play, *Creon* and *Antigone*, as violating the other part's rights. The first violates the divine and mythical natural right and the second violates the laws of the city. However, there is no equality in terms of guilt and crime between these two ends:

But the government, the restored unitary self of the community, will punish him who already proclaimed its devastation on the walls of the city, by depriving him of the last honour. He who wantonly attacked the Spirit's highest form of consciousness, the Spirit of the community, must be stripped of the honour of his entire and finished being...<sup>6</sup>

This passage contains an intriguing logic. Firstly, we do know that what Hegel calls the unitary self of the community is the outcome of a dialectical process: the unfolding of pure being. The corpse in the play lying outside the walls of Thebe, is the left-over of such a dialectical process. Secondly, this unitary moment of being, which is the achievement of self-reflecting societal form, seems inevitably urged to negate the finite being, represented in the tragedy by the corpse lying outside the walls of Thebe. Hegel does not develop this second moment or the reasons behind such a necessity of an active negation (*Creon's* decree). Instead, he proceeds by arguing that *Antigone*, by siding with this finite being that already has been surpassed by the society, commits a crime:

It can be that the right which lays in wait is not present in its own proper shape to the *consciousness* of the doer, but it is present *implicitly* in the inner guilt of the resolve and the action. But the ethical consciousness is more complete, its guilt more inexcusable, if it knows the law and the power which it opposes *beforehand*, if it takes them to be violence and wrong, to be ethical merely by accident, and, like *Antigone* knowingly commits the crime.<sup>7</sup>

Crime committed by *Antigone* is defined here as the intentional defiance against the unitary self of the state power. Such defiance is then doomed to fail since it expresses a pure particularity as opposed to the universal organization of societal rights: Being the law of weakness and darkness, it therefore succumbs at first to the powerful law of the upper world, for the power of the former is effective in the underworld, not on earth.<sup>8</sup>

In short, *Antigone's* action represents the confrontation between the state and its own mythical and surpassed substance. The tragic moment is subsequently a *mistake* committed by the higher unitary power to

<sup>4</sup>Hegel, G. W. F., & Knox, T. M. (1978). *Hegel's Philosophy of right*. London: Oxford University Press, § 166, 114.

<sup>5</sup>Hegel, G. W. F. (2000). *Phenomenology of spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, § 437, 261.

<sup>6</sup>*Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 473, 286.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid*, § 470, 284.

<sup>8</sup>§ 474, 286.

misrecognize its own ground: “But the outwardly actual which has taken away from the inner world its honour and power has in so doing consumed its own essence.”<sup>9</sup> The state exhausts its own foundation and that is the error committed by Creon. Hence, Hegel presents an intriguing definition of an Aristotelian term, namely *Hamartia*, the error, as a key component of the poetics of tragedy.<sup>10</sup> What Creon disavows and exposes is the irrational, self-referential, but substantial ground, which is both contained and surpassed (*Geaufheben*) by the constitution, but as such, as a surpassed moment, it is nevertheless the necessary guarantee of the social order, even at a higher moral stage.

The relation between the particular right (within family) and the articulated rights, represented by the sovereign, is the central theme in Hegel’s reading. This antagonism has served as the ultimate framework for numerous studies of the play – both those who are critical towards Hegel and those who do not mention Hegel’s comments. Hegel’s reading of the play is also in line with a general division of Greek tragedy into two types presented by Hegel in the second part of his *Aesthetik*: The first type concerns situations marked by a conflict between “ethical life in its social universality and the family as the natural ground of moral relations.” The second has to do with the individual who commits acts that have dire consequences but does not commit them consciously, acting “under the directing providence of the gods”.<sup>11</sup>

However, a subtle dialectical turn, centred around the underworld, *Hades*, is at work in Hegel’s arguments, which has not been sufficiently discussed in the literature. Hegel writes:

The publicly manifest Spirit has the root of its power in the nether world. The self-certainty and self-assurance of a nation possesses the truth of its oath, which binds all into one, solely in the mute unconscious substance of all, in the waters of forgetfulness. Thus, it is that the fulfilment of the Spirit of the upper world is transformed into its opposite, and it learns that its supreme right is a supreme wrong, that its victory is rather its own downfall.<sup>12</sup>

The direct reference for Hegel’s argument is these lines in the tragedy:

Creon: But he was trying to destroy this country, and the other stood against him to protect it.

Antigone: Nonetheless, Hades demands these laws.

Creon: But the noble man has not equal claim to honour with the evil.

Antigone: Who knows if this action is free from blame in the world below?

Creon: An enemy is never a friend, even when he is dead.

Antigone: I have no enemy by birth, but I have friends by birth.

Creon: Then go below and love those friends, if you must love them! But while I live a woman shall not rule. (520–525)

It is “the water of forgetfulness” out of which Antigone’s figure emerges, like a piece of substance that has overthrown its expression in the constitution. Antigone in such a reading is viewed as the extension of the reign of death in the underworld, a metonymy for the corpse of Polyneices: “The dead, whose right is denied, know therefore how to find instruments of vengeance, which are equally effective and powerful as the power which injured them.”<sup>13</sup> This dialectical play between the forces of the underworld and the public spirit of a society is a difficult moment in Hegel’s argument, as we will discuss in the next section.

### III. Hades and Dialectical movement

Even though Hegel’s reading of rights acclaimed by Antigone may be considered as a powerful and accurate interpretation, still, there is a difference between those rights being acclaimed as a conscious reason and her decision of defying Creon’s edict. She may be taking sides with the dead but if so, this is not the same thing as being the fatal hand of death, the identification with the corpse of her fallen brother, as Hegel seems to suggest.<sup>14</sup> In the first lines of the play, this point is made clear: “Gladly will I meet death in my sacred duty to the dead. Longer time have I to spend with them [dead members of her family] than with those who live upon the earth.” It is not her

<sup>9</sup>§ 474, 287.

<sup>10</sup>*Hamartia* means literally missing the mark in a reference to the art of archery.

<sup>11</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel on Tragedy: Selections from “The Phenomenology of Mind,” “Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion,” “The Philosophy of Fine Art,” and “Lectures on the History of Philosophy,”* trans. F. P. B. Osmaston et al., ed. Anne Paolucci and Henry Paolucci, Smyrna, Del., 2001, 68.

<sup>12</sup>Hegel, §474, 287.

<sup>13</sup>Hegel, §474.

<sup>14</sup>On Hegel’s theory about brother and sister relation as mutual recognition in the natural relation between sexes and its importance for Hegel’s reading of the Antigone, see Patricia Jagentowicz Mill’s essay, “Hegel’s Antigone” in *Feminist Interpretations of G.W.F. Hegel*, ed. Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, Pennsylvania University Press, 1996, p. 64–67.

ascending from the underworld that lends her character the fascinating beauty mentioned by a number of the commentators, but rather her tragic heroic decision. Hegel does seem to be aware of this crucial difference, but there is a difficulty to integrate this difference in his dialectical schema. Hegel speaks of the powerful and effective instruments of vengeance in the earlier quoted passage. The power that supports Antigone's decision, is identified by Hegel as emanating from the forces of the underworld. This is however and as I argue below is perhaps not a convincing argument.

Firstly, Antigone not only seems to be capable of grasping the opposition between two sets of rules, one grounded in *nomos* or ethical obligations and the other in public laws, she is even the protagonist who can articulate the dichotomy and also can defend the superiority of the former above and against the latter. She has also consciously assumed her own death regardless of the ideological grounds on which such a sacrifice is founded. This point causes a flaw in the Hegelian argument. Hegel's brief and parenthetical reference to "the mute unconscious substance of all, ... the waters of forgetfulness" neither corresponds to Antigone's decision and its articulation in the play nor it fits well into the arguments Hegel introduced concerning Antigone's guilt. How could Antigone, the representation of family ethics act in such an articulate and self-conscious manner, while Creon, the representation of the state and a higher degree of dialectical unfolding of the spirit, acts blindly and emotionally to the extent that his action brings forth the tragic end of his own ruling family? Within the Hegelian framework, it would be difficult to account for the self-conscious, active crime attributed to Antigone and Creon's fatefully contradictory acts.

Secondly and more importantly, if we neglect Creon's portrayal in the play where hubris, rage and hesitation and belated remorse are quite prevalent, and if we accept the Hegelian terms and see Creon as a representative for the unitary self of the society, then the question is which error has been committed by Creon from a Hegelian standpoint? Certainly, in the context of the *Philosophy of Rights* Hegel makes an example of Antigone as to illustrate the dire consequences of the conflation of the private sphere and the public law in Greek polis. However, the illustration itself is constructed according to a dialectical schema of antithetic positions of the two protagonists of the play: the particular versus the universal, underground against the supreme spirit expressed in the form of societal institutions. The question is whether such a schema has any significant bearing for an understanding of the tragic consequences produced by Antigone's. Creon exercises power according to the proposition "All enemies of state are exempted from being honoured by ceremonial burial.", in other words, the universality of law asserts that there may not be a single person who has insulted the state power and who at the same time would be allowed a last honour. Creon is neither questioning nor ignoring the power of gods. In fact, he is maintaining the separating line between Hades or forces of the underground and the affairs of the city. Hegel's "river of forgetfulness" is both respected and maintained at a distance that is the defining boundaries of the sovereign power.

At a closer examination, it becomes obvious that there is no error involved in the play itself compared with the classic instance of such a poetic turning point as in *Oedipus Rex*. Instead, there is a play of two poles of excess. In the following, I will discuss these excessive moments as fundamental for the narrative structure of the play.

#### IV. Unsurpassed Dualities

One of these two poles is the excess of patricide and incest committed by Oedipus which earlier shook the constitution of Thebes, and caused disarray and scandal in the elite of the society. It is the chorus in *Antigone* that ostensibly establishes the connection between Oedipus' fall, Polyneices assault and Antigone. The chorus, the ruling establishment of the city, has not forgotten the event:

Chorus: I see that the ancient sorrows of the house of the Labdacids are heaped upon the sorrows of the dead. Each generation does not set its race free, but some god hurls it down and the race has no release. For now, that dazzling ray of hope that had been spread over the last roots in the house of Oedipus — that hope, in its turn, the blood-stained dust of the gods infernal and mindlessness in speech and frenzy at the mind cuts down. (593–604)

From such a perspective, it seems doubtful if the moral of family and the constitution could be held apart in Thebe. On the contrary, Oedipus' so-called crime connected the public and the private. Its private nature was such that it could impossibly be separated from the state affairs. In the case of the play *Antigone*, the situation is more complex, as fate as an expression of Hades' mythical forces is not at work in Antigone's decision, but rather represented by the public opinion, the chorus, which Antigone employs in order to win over their consent. In this respect, it is rather the case that Antigone intentionally plays upon the conflation of private and public in her arguments delivered in the exchanges with Creon. By doing so, she shows a certain singularity that surpasses her historical allocated role as a female member of the ruling family.

In contemporary readings of the play, the main critique against Hegel's reading is its inability to allocate any conceptual operationality to singularity of Antigone's decision. The tragedy in Hegel's reading is encompassed within a conflict between the particular (Antigone) and the claim of universality in Creon's rule and such a framework is obviously prone to inconsistency when confronted with both Creon's decree and Antigone's uncompromising self-consciousness. The singularity of her act is underlined by Sophocles, as he from the beginning emphasises the contrast between Antigone and her sister Ismene's withdrawn and fearful conduct, which would have been a more typical and historically plausible option. Hegel's dialectical movement is supposed to unfold through the occurrence of incompatibility between the universal and one of the particular instances. In more theoretical terms, Hegel's logic in his analysis of the play falls short since it is unable to measure the incommensurability that determines the relation between the singular and the universal.

This critique, where Antigone is singled out as representing a singular position against both the particularity of citizens in Thebe and the universal claims of the ruler, has been directly or indirectly the backbone of a number of contemporary analysis of the drama.

However, the critique seems a reversal of positions while maintaining the Hegelian framework: Antigone is conceived of as the tragic heroine and Creon as the representative of the phallic or male position, in any case a dual opposition. In this case, such a critical reading of Hegel or the analysis of the play Antigone depends on the Hegelian dialectic in that it defines Antigone's role in the play as what Hegel would have called an undetermined negation, awaiting its moment of determination through the disintegration of the initial contradiction. This amendment to Hegel's reading does not really cancel the fundamental conflict identified in Hegel's reading.

The second and other pole of the duality involved, is the original excessive moment that is only qualified as Creon's 'error' by Hegel. The excessive moment is Creon's decree. Creon exercises the law unconditionally and for the best of all and everyone. The implication of this mode of the exercise of law is that the edict expresses a desire to punish Polyneices after his death. The cruelty of the edict aims not at Polyneices as a person, i.e. a subject in the network of historical relations, but at his corpse as a piece of pure being. Creon is not simply the representation of the social order, he becomes or pretends to be the voice of a law that crosses the border and aims at the realm of pure being, while such a punishment of a dead body can only be felt by the living members of the dead's family in a traditional society such as Thebes. Creon himself and all others are members of that family. This is a point of excess where absurdity and cruelty meet and brings up the real conflict at play in the tragedy. Hegel's terminology may be misleading, but his pointing out of the fact that Creon trespasses a certain limit and awakens the wrath of the underground forces in fact touches upon the main tension in the play, it only needs to be reformulated in more concrete and social terms of an excessive, cruel act caused by the inner contradictions of the Theban social order, which at the denouement of the play ushers into the collapse of the Theban city state.

The next and last section of this essay, examines the play viewed in the broader context of tragic dramatization of the fate of Thebes as a model of city state that preceded Athens.

## V. The Mytheme of Antigone

Antigone's public declaration of defiance is met by Creon's decision to sentence her to death. The passage that precedes the execution of her punishment contains a puzzling and oft-cited passage in the play. Antigone's words connect the idea of underground forces to the tragic fate of her entire family. First, it is Creon that explains the peculiar form of punishment.

Creon: Do you not know that dirges and wailing before death would never be given up, if it were allowed to make them freely? Take her away —now! And when you have enshrouded her, as I proclaimed, in her covered tomb, leave her alone, deserted—let her decide whether she wishes to die or to live entombed in such a home. (883-889)

Creon pursues in these lines the argument that Antigone already belongs to the world of beneath, the realm of the dead and therefore sending her to the tomb is merely an act of returning her to the place where she belongs.

Antigone: Tomb, bridal-chamber, deep-dug eternal prison where I go to find my own, whom Persephone has welcomed among the dead! Last of them all and in by far the most shameful circumstances, I will descend, even before the fated term of my life is spent. But I cherish strong hopes that I will arrive welcome to my father, and pleasant to you, Mother, and welcome, dear brother, to you. For, when each of you died, with my own hands I washed and dressed you and poured drink-offerings at your graves. But now, Polyneices, it is for tending your corpse that I win such reward as this. [And yet I honoured you rightly, as the wise understand. Never, if I had been a mother of children, or if a husband had been rotting after death, would I have taken that burden upon myself in violation of the citizens' will. For the

sake of what law, you ask, do I say that? A husband lost, another might have been found, and if bereft of a child, there could be a second from some other man. But when father and mother are hidden in Hades, no brother could ever bloom for me again. Such was the law whereby I held you first in honour, but for that Creon judged me guilty of wrongdoing and of dreadful outrage, dear brother! And now he leads me thus in his hands' strong grasp, when I have enjoyed no marriage bed or bridal song and have not received any portion of marriage or the nurture of children. But deserted by friends, in misery I go living to the hollow graves of the dead. What law of the gods have I transgressed? Why should I look to the gods anymore? What ally should I call out to, when by my reverence I have earned a name for irreverence? Well, then, if these events please the gods, once I have suffered my doom, I will come to know my guilt. But if the guilt lies with my judges, I could wish for them no greater evils than they inflict unjustly on me. (885–926)

Antigone's arguments as to why she is prepared to sacrifice her life for a brother but not for a child or husband has appeared to many as devoid of sense. Goethe finds this tragic figure, Antigone and her words, particularly her defence of her suicidal action, as shocking and nonsensical.<sup>15</sup> As late as in the 1940's, the editor of the play for *Les Belles lettres* edition of Sophocles tragedies, Paul Masqueray, while stressing upon the beauty of her character in the tragedy, felt obliged to give an apologetic explanation for Antigone's words.<sup>16</sup>

It is noticeable that there is a change of tone ever since the chorus addresses her with the word "child" in verse 855. The passage has been important to many contemporary commentators, perhaps not only because of its obvious connection to kinship structure and gender relations, but also because the passage connects to the central mytheme in *Oedipus Rex*. We have to return to Lévi-Strauss' analysis of mytheme (the term signifies the bare and fundamental structure of a given myth), in order to disentangle this connection.

The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous (see, for instance, Pausanias, VIII, xxix, 4: plants provide a model for humans), to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Although the problem obviously cannot be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problem—born from one or born from two? — to the derivative problem: born from different or born from same? By a correlation of this type, the overrating of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it. Although experience contradicts theory, social life validates cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence cosmology is true.<sup>17</sup>

Beyond the technical details of structuralist analysis per se, it is sufficient for our purpose to underline that the mytheme in *Oedipus the King*, still at work in *Antigone*, is organised around a constitutive dichotomy: *Autochthonic* versus *chthonic*, self-gendered or gendered from without (*chthonic* originally means stemming from underground and by association deities, but here in the framework of the mytheme as Lévi-Strauss argues, the current meaning is stemming from without as contrasted to autochthonic).

We find this dichotomy running through Sophoclean plays. The autochthonic phantasy, not being born, implies a disavowal of the female/mother position, like Oedipus who was raised by a herd and who later emerged from nowhere and stepped into a Thebes held in disarray by the Sphinx. In the *Oedipus The King*, the riddle of the origin ran through the play: The tautological, self-generating inner logic of *tyrannos*, the ruler in the Theban state form, rests upon the disavowal of significance of being born. The impossible position of the *tyrannos*, being father of himself and son of no mother but purely spirit of unity, is the mythemic conflict in the *Oedipus the King*. In the dialogue quoted, both Creon and Antigone play upon this dichotomy. Creon's sending her back to the underground is a direct reference to the Chthonic status of Antigone and Antigone's seemingly unsustainable or cruel argument about why she would sacrifice a husband or a child but not a brother, refers back to the same mytheme. Antigone's position can be grasped in its full implications considering that it is also a play upon the autochthonic position of the ruler, which is an impossibility that pertains to the constitution of the Theban polis, exposed in the tragic consequences of the disclosed incestuous desire in *Oedipus the King*. Hence, the exchange at once reveals the limits where kinship structure and politics in Thebe meets and separates.

<sup>15</sup> Goethe, J. W., Wood, W., Oxenford, J., & Eckermann, J. P. (2000). *Conversations with Eckermann*. Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger.

<sup>16</sup>In *Ajax: Antigone ; Œdipe-roi ; Électre*. Paris: edition Les Belles Lettres (1946), 75.

<sup>17</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth" in Lévi-Strauss, C. (1963). *Structural anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 202-212.

The guilt that Antigone carries on, on the other hand, does not stem from a different field than the autochthonic, tautological grounds of the law with which Creon identifies himself. The guilt and its eventually fatal consequence reveal the fundamental and unreconcilable contradiction that the conflation of the status of the ruler, tyrannos, and kinship relations brings about. From such a perspective, the main conflict in the narrative of the play may be referred to a broader context, which is beyond the simple juxtaposition of the protagonists of the play, Creon and Antigone as expressions of two sets of law, one divine and the second one secular. If there is anything in Hegel that can be criticised is that his reading is to a great extent determined by the juxtaposition of these two figures in the play, whereas we have already shown that the opposition is a secondary moment compared to the impossibility caused by the limitations of a certain historical and political structure.

## Conclusions

We may now be able to complete and conclude this analysis of *Antigone* by placing the play in its immediate historical and aesthetic context. The play was written for the religious, public Dionysian festival in the fifth century Athens. Sophocles also won the first prize during that festival for the play. The festival was sanctioned by the Athenian state and the amphitheatre was attended by the Athenian wealthy families and army commanders. The city state of Thebe in reality and prior to their re-inclusion in the Greek empire under Athenian hegemony, was an ally of Persians and considered as an enemy of the past. Hence, the tragic plays that depicted the demise of Thebe had a broader ideological function. This point should not however be exaggerated as it does not exhaust the dramatic and poetic impact of the play. On the contrary, the immediate task, beyond a Hegelian interpretation of the play, has to re-connect this ideological function to the narrative structure of the tragedy.

During the Dionysian festival, as one author, David Wiles, underlines, tragedy provided the Athenian audience with a dramatized opportunity to address its heroic values and religious representations.<sup>18</sup> This idea is not surprising as it is a prolongation of Aristoteles' term catharsis, in his *Poetics*, if we understand catharsis in a broader sense and as the desire for a discharge of underlying anxiety generated by living in the Greek polis.<sup>19</sup> In their major study of Greek myth and tragedy, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet stated that the fate of the hero in a tragedy was a matter of discussion for the Athenian audience, the hero was rather a problem for the audience and not a role model.<sup>20</sup> In sum, the Athenian audience, living in a Greek democracy, viewed the conflation of kinship relation and governance, the ruler's (*tyrannos*) limitless power and its problematic relation to the aristocracy and dependence on kinship relations, as clearly depicted in the *Antigone* and other Theban plays, both as a reminder of the possibility of political and individual collapse, but also as a proof of the superiority of the Athenian imperial system. The lasting popularity of the play may be situated at this conjuncture of existential riddle of a subject within a given social order and historical and political context that connects this riddle to death and fading away of the free subject before the establishment of *polis*.

In the light of the historical context, the narrative structure of the play displays a different conflict than the confrontation between Antigone, as a heroine or a martyr and Creon as a tyrannical ruler, even though the perceived confrontation between these two poles seems to have been the real cause of the popularity of the play in modern times. There is a profound dissimilarity between these two's respective positions. Creon's words and deeds show an unambiguity that runs its course to the inevitable end. Antigone is a more ambiguous figure. An unambiguous decision, openly assuming the family guilt and a number of justifications that barely live up to the implications of her defiance. In more than one passage during the exchanges between Creon and Antigone, it is clear that these two are not speaking with each other, but speak against the background of an implicit chain of past events before an audience.

In short, Creon's decree is an excess, a punishment beyond death, an aberration or flaw caused by the conflation of autochthonic mytheme about the king and the rule of law. Antigone brings this conflation to the front, she displays the riddle, the contradictions that are impossible to resolve in Thebe. But this revelation is not the motif of her own acts. She is not acting on behalf of gods or the law. By her fatal loyalty to the dead parents as being superior and prior to all future and possible loyalties of the subject, she is a victim of the guilt that passed down from one generation to another. Her act touches certainly upon the outer limits of the law, but insofar as her decision, as she expresses it in her conversation with her sister at the opening of the play clearly indicates, those same actions are supported by pure nothingness of death. As she later explains, she is portrayed in the tragedy as 'an alien still, never at home with the living nor the dead.' (850-51). Her justifications and deeds, contrary to the

<sup>18</sup> Wiles, David. *Tragedy in Athens*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 104.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Ingrid Bywater. From *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Edited by Richard McKeon. The Modern Library. New York, NY: 2001. 1453-1487.

<sup>20</sup> Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*. Translated by Janet Lloyd. New York: Zone Books, 1988, p. 24-25.  
1988, 24-25



appearance of things, only appease the social unrest caused in the wake of her defiance of sovereign power. On the same foot as the dead and yet among the citizens of the city, delivering explanations of blood ties with her parents, she becomes the effect of the law in its unmediated exercise: the inherited guilt. Hence, her transgression becomes ever more reassuring since it proves once again before the law that all defiance ultimately expresses a guilt for which there will not be any conceivable repentance other than death. If Oedipus insists upon knowing the truth, against which the whole social order had warned him, a knowledge about being born from the same womb as his children, to such a terrifying fantasy, both for the male position of the sovereign and for the order of the kinship relations, Antigone presents its counterpart, by affirming the maternal original void. This original void to which she desires to return is identified as Hades, as underground, from which her existence stems and to which she now as a very young woman should return. A different possibility of affirming life through rebellion, potentially by the support of social forces that are excluded from the representational diegesis of the play, does not exist in the Sophoclean tragedy. The horror lingers on, the guilt is transmitted to a young generation and the actions are brought before the ruler of Thebes.