

Preparing for A105: *Antigone*

From Book 3, *Cultural Encounters*, Chapter 6 Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), pp.193-94, and p.196

Introduction

Heaney's play is based on the ancient Greek tragedy *Antigone*, created by the Athenian dramatist Sophocles (c.496-406 BCE) in the fifth century BCE...Both Heaney's and Sophocles' plays are set in ancient Thebes (the Greek Thebes which is north-west of Athens, not the Egyptian Thebes, which is on the River Nile, near Luxor). The outline of the story, but not the details, is drawn from Greek myth...

The mythological story behind the play

Antigone's opening speech refers to her and Ismene's situation as daughters of Oedipus, and this theme gathers significance throughout the scene. Oedipus was the ruler of Thebes, the man who unwittingly killed his father and married his mother.

An ancient Greek audience would have been familiar with the mythical story of Oedipus and his family, so here Antigone only refers to it briefly... emphasising the continuity of suffering and catastrophe in the family.

...The formal conventions of Greek tragedy

The Chorus in Greek tragedy was a group of fifteen, which sang and danced and also linked episodes, rather like recitative in opera...In Greek drama the Chorus had a major part in the play. It usually combined a number of functions. As well as singing in elevated poetic language the Chorus interacted and discussed with the main characters and offered moral comment. It also usually represented a group affected by the main action of the play but not powerful enough to dominate it – in this case the Theban Elders.

Summary of the play

If you have not read either Sophocles play, or Heaney's version, you may find it helpful to read the following brief summary of the play's action.

The sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices, have killed each other in a battle over their inheritance. Since Eteocles died defending the city of Thebes, the new ruler Creon orders that he alone shall be accorded an honourable burial, while Polyneices' corpse is left to rot outside the walls of the city. Their mourning sisters Antigone and Ismene discuss this decree, Antigone resolving to defy Creon and bury Polyneices, while Ismene advises caution. Creon arrives with the chorus and justifies his decision. A guard comes with the news that Polyneices' body has been buried, and when he returns to the body, catches Antigone in the act of reburying her brother. Creon condemns her to death for disobeying the law, but she protests that she is obeying a higher law of religious observance and familial duty. Antigone is led away to be buried alive. Creon's son Haemon, who was to marry Antigone, threatens

that he will commit suicide if she should die. When the prophet Tiresias warns Creon that his tyranny will be punished, Creon rushes off to free Antigone. He arrives to find that Antigone has already hanged herself, and the desperate Haemon threatens his father then plunges his sword into himself. When Creon's wife hears the news of the death of her son, she too commits suicide. Creon remains mourning and alone, the chorus hoping only that one may become wiser with age.

“Antigone” *The Oxford Dictionary of Plays*. Ed. Michael Patterson. Oxford University Press, 2006.

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