

4-1-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Bobko, Courtney (2009) "Cultural Knowledge Provides Insight: The Correlation Between Kinship and Antigone's Decisions," *ESSAI*: Vol. 7, Article 10.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol7/iss1/10>

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Cultural Knowledge Provides Insight: The Correlation between Kinship and Antigone's Decisions

by Courtney Bobko

(Honors English 1101)

When Sophocles' *Antigone* was written and performed in 441 B.C., its popularity soared among the Athenians (Don Nardo 12). Although its central conflict concerning burial rites seem foreign and separated from most modern cultures today, the famous *Antigone* is still read, discussed, and written about because the themes delve into important issues that relate to modern times (12). The play's resilience is credited to Sophocles' ability to incorporate timeless and universal themes and issues in his work. One of the many enduring issues in this play deals with kinship. In order to understand the significance of kinship in the context of Ancient culture, the Ancient Greek family unit needs to first be understood. Applying this cultural knowledge to the kinship found between Antigone, Polynices, and Ismene allows one to support Antigone, rather than fault her, for the seemingly rash decisions she makes as she interacts with her siblings.

Since family dynamics, like many aspects of life, have changed since the era in which *Antigone* was written, it is significantly important to note how a normal ancient Grecian family unit functioned in order to validate Antigone's decisions as acceptable. The Greek household, or *oikos*, was the smallest unit of people found in Grecian culture (W.K. Lacey 15). The three simplest elements which created the *oikos* consisted of a male, a female, and a servant; children were the fourth element of the *oikos* which completed the family unit (15). Sons who married that bore sons fulfilled the main obligation: keeping the *oikos* alive for generations (15). Lacey continues that no family unit could be considered an *oikos* if it did not provide its members with food, and if the members did not properly observe the rituals pertaining to the dead, including burial (16). Achieving a healthy *oikos* gained great respect, therefore violating any of the requirements, including improper care for the deceased, not only lost respect for the living members, but also shamed all those involved in that particular *oikos* (16).

Each person in the household had a specific role to accomplish, and it was the man of the household's role, and only the man, to be its governor (Lacey 21). Lacey defines this Grecian term as *kyrios*, or governing position (21). The man was the provider for the family, the one whom had patriarchal rights to the children (Pomeroy, "By Acting" 85), and the only one allowed to participate in politics (Lacey 21). Pomeroy expresses that, if the *kyrios*, or father, of the household died, the eldest son stepped into his position and became the *kyrios* ("By Acting" 85). The responsibilities, important influential role, and patriarchal rights did not pass onto any other but the son.

Very different from the man's position in the *oikos* was the woman's role, which was an extremely private one (Pomeroy, *Families* 105). Findings show that the quarters for women were separated from that of the men's rooms, and typically were found in the upper level (30). Here, the females of the house spent most of their time interacting and likely creating strong relationships with each other (31). Both young boys and men were allowed to enter these areas (31); this gave the brothers and sisters a time to interact and perhaps a time to bond.

One of the main responsibilities of the female, if not the most important for the whole well being of the *oikos*, was to carry out her sacred task in the death of a family member and to handle it with great care. The mother, wife, sisters, daughters, and other close female kin including young girls of the dead relative were responsible to respectfully abide by the rituals and processes concerning the burial (Pomeroy, *Families* 106-107) which were vital in keeping the *oikos* alive, healthy, and honorable. Failure to carry out these duties was a disgrace to the dead, and the family

would be dishonored and shamed (Lacy 48-49). This piece of information alone can be used to correlate Antigone's views on kinship and her decisions.

The cultural knowledge of the *oikos* can first clarify Antigone's connection to her brother and the sacrificial decision she quickly made. Pomeroy explores the relationship which Polynices had in Antigone's life and assumes it to be a "precious bond" ("By Acting" 85). Not only is it plausible he became the important *kyrios* in Antigone's life because of Oedipus' fate, but it is also plausible that the two kin recognized their *oikos* disintegrating and tried to save it, even if it were only the smallest efforts. This is supported by the importance placed on the *oikos*. This kinship found between the two is further established in the opening scene.

Antigone's loyalties are revealed in the first lines of *Antigone* as Antigone announces that she will defy Creon's order and bury her brother. Although Antigone's first claim for defying Creon's order is because burying the dead is "the holiest laws of heaven" (Sophocles 128), more references to her brother's and her family's honor seem to be the genuine grounds for action (H.D.F. Kitto 105). This true cause is found in words spoken by Antigone like, "I shall never desert him, never" (Sophocles 128), "He has no right to keep me from my own" (128) and "I know my duty, where true duty lies" (129). Through these quotes, Sophocles communicates the factual Ancient Greek role which Antigone needs to practice as a sister, and therefore a woman. This "true duty" is none other than respecting the dead, Polynices, and trying to maintain what little honor her family has left. Some critics Gilbert Norwood describes may agree the Chorus' statement of Antigone: "She shows her father's stubborn spirit: foolish..." (61; 139). Antigone is not acting rashly or foolishly because of a character flaw as this line suggests. She is acting in an instinctive fashion which is directly linked to her culture (Norwood 60). One could claim Antigone was a fool if she did not take Creon's punishment seriously. However, Antigone says, "I will bury my brother; And if I die for it, what happiness!" (Sophocles 128). Antigone not only is aware of the fatal consequences her actions may bring, but she also knows for whom she is risking her life for. Her decision is not rash; it is a picture of what the culture, and thus Antigone, expected a kin to do.

Perhaps the culture's greatest impact on Antigone's view of kinship can be seen in her final speech as she reflects her actions. Sophocles deepens the audience's understanding of how seriously Antigone takes her role as a sister and how greatly she cares for the honor of her brother when she says, "I would not have done the forbidden thing for any husband or for any son. For why? I could have had another husband and by him other sons, if one were lost; but, father and mother lost, where would I get another brother?" (150). Although Antigone's rationale does seem disturbing at first, Sophocles necessarily uses this dramatic scene to emphasize the irreplaceable role a brother has in a sister's life. The certainty in Antigone's words challenges the reader to dig into the very nature of having a sibling. It goes far beyond the concern of the burial rituals of the day and family honor. William N. Bates concludes that this epiphany makes Antigone "not so very different from other people" (95). This familiar quality shining through can be recognized as love. The significance of her words exceeds all claims of foolish decisions Antigone is thought to make while interacting with the corpse of her brother. Love, not rashness, is the clear motivation behind Antigone's decision.

While assessing the bond between Antigone and Ismene, it is necessary, once again, to think in the cultural context of Ancient Greece. The relationship between the sisters seems to be a cherished by Antigone, seen through the loving way she addresses Ismene: "O sister! Ismene dear, dear sister Ismene!" (126). Love is present in the relationship. Not only do they share the same blood, but it should be considered that it is probable the two have shared many years in the women's quarters together, living a similar life. Antigone proclaims, "There is no pain, no sorrow, no suffering, no dishonor we have not shared together, you and I" (126). The sisters have held onto each other during the many trials they have faced. This is why Antigone assumes the present trial is no different. However, the foundation their kinship is laid upon breaks when Ismene declares that she cannot go against the orders of the state and bury her brother (128).

Antigone's reaction is filled with feelings of betrayal, and given the historical and cultural context, rightly so. Observing the dead was their duty to their *oikos*. Properly burying a loved one was their duty as kin. The loyalty to her kin, which Antigone values above her own life, has been betrayed by her dearest living relative. G.M. Kirkwood says that both Ismene and Antigone know Creon's declaration is wrong, yet Antigone reacts because the courage she finds in loyalty, and Ismene cowers in the fear of consequences (108). This cowardice not only leads Ismene to betray her sister, but also her brother. Through obeying Creon's decree, Ismene dishonors Polynices and her family, fails at her role in the *oikos*, and ultimately leaves Antigone to fight alone.

Kirkwood comments that Antigone's reaction to Ismene's betrayal is "hard, abrupt, [and] intolerant" (108). Such criticism, however, does not properly take into account Antigone's cultural reasons for such reactions. It is an unfair judgment because the concept of being betrayed by a loved one and its significance in Ancient Greece is not assessed. A foundation of Antigone's character is to be actively loyal to her role in the *oikos*. Not only was it devastating for Antigone to hear that Ismene would not participate in that duty, but also the fact that Ismene left Antigone alone in possibly the most important trial they could have gone through together. Such words as "intolerant" do not give room for Antigone to be a woman with valid feelings; it only allows her to be a heroine who is supposed to treat all with respect while succeeding in her cause. Such perspectives not only dismiss the necessary cultural background involved in correctly understanding Antigone as a sister, but also cheapen the beauty of her loyalty for her brother.

Sophocles' Antigone dies to honor her brother—firmly believing in her kinship with him, her duties as a sister and active member in her *oikos*, and also her beliefs on honor and loyalty. Her decisions are based on the principles of kinship and loyalty, which are seen through the sacrificial love for Polynices burial and the conflict she faces with Ismene. Gaining cultural knowledge of the Ancient Greek family unit not only offers insight to the way Sophocles addresses the issue of kinship, but proves that Antigone's decisions were not rash, but appropriate in the era *Antigone* was written in.

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