

A Will Unbroken

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Written by Sophocles in approximately 441 B.C., *Antigone* is arguably one of the oldest and most well-known tragedies in literature. While chronologically the third of the three Theban plays, the other two being *Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, it was the first to be written. Taking place after the tragic downfall of King Oedipus, former ruler of the plagued city of Thebes, *Antigone* follows the trials and tribulations of his daughter Antigone. King Creon, as the new ruler of Thebes, places an edict over the city, prohibiting the burial of Antigone's brother, Polyneices, a law which his sister is not willing to follow due to her religious beliefs. Throughout the play the actions of both Antigone and other characters reveal many underlying themes, including ones of religious faith, arrogance, and individualism, but all come together to portray one concept: the concept of the individual versus the state.

The conflict between individual and state in *Antigone* is first seen in Antigone's first defiance of Creon, the king who embodies the state in the play. Because Polyneices led a rebellion during the civil war in Thebes, Creon places an edict over the city preventing Polyneices' body from being buried and given the holy rites which all dead deserve. In this way Polyneices and his legacy are publicly shamed; he is branded a traitor undeserving of even proper burial, and his corpse is left to rot on the battlefield. Given her faith in the gods and their laws, not the laws of man, Antigone defies Creon by burying her brother and sanctifying his body with the holy rites. "Antigone considers the god's decrees and her own family duties towards her two brothers more important than any of man's laws or decrees, even if such rules come from not only the most powerful ruler of Thebes in her time, but from the man who is her own uncle" (Brandt). It is through her religious faith that Antigone finds the will and reason to defy Creon and his decree. When asked by Creon how she "had the gall to break this law" even after publically hearing his edict, Antigone replies, "It wasn't Zeus, not in the least, who made this proclamation—not to me." Be they the words of a beggar or the man in the highest position in the state, Antigone follows her beliefs as an individual and refuses to acknowledge anyone who challenges her.

Even after Antigone is revealed to have defied Creon's edict, she refuses to bend to his will. Faced with death, she does not deny her actions but rather accepts her fate with pride and dignity, believing that what she had done was truly the right thing. Brought before the king to face his justice, she speaks words that consistently only insult and defy Creon, and this interaction in my opinion is the prime, quite literal example of an individual versus the state. She challenges Creon's will directly to his face, while her own will remains unbroken. "Antigone,

who in her own way also refuses to 'yield,' images more fully the greatness of man" (Segal 74). Even the guard overhearing the dialogue between the two acknowledges her unbroken conviction, stating, "Like father like daughter, passionate, wild...she hasn't learned to bend before adversity." Between her defiance and her unwillingness to deny her will even in the face of death, Antigone embodies the heart and soul of an individual defying the state.

While Antigone's actions may be the main example of an individual standing up to Creon, one finds another case when a guard must face the exceedingly stubborn and arrogant king. Here we find one of the first literary examples of heavy consequences being brought upon the bringer of bad news, as the guard is faced with possible death for informing Creon of the defiance of his most recent edict. "Indeed, the play is the source of the modern cliché, 'shooting the messenger'" (O'Toole). Despite pleading for his life in a feeble attempt to prove his innocence, the guard is desperate as Creon sends him off in search of the true criminal. One may find it ironic that a guard of the state had found himself at the edge of his ruler's sword, but such is the will of the mad, arrogant King Creon, turning even his own men into enemies of the state without reason. As the guard himself says, "It's terrible when the one who does the judging judges things all wrong." Only after the guard had brought Antigone to face the king's justice had he been redeemed of the crimes he had not committed, and relinquished his status as an individual against the state in exchange for once again joining it. While the guard had never willingly chosen to turn against the state, his own king forcefully placed him in a situation which made it so.

The events in *Antigone* and the actions of the characters revolve around the concept of the individual versus the state. Whether we're considering the huge plot points like Antigone's burial of her brother and her direct defiance of the king, or seemingly minor events such as a guardsman being wrongly accused by an arrogant king, the characters in *Antigone* are all faced against the state, manifesting itself in the form of Creon. Through its plot, *Antigone* became one of the first examples of literature expressing the concepts of civil disobedience and individualism. *Antigone* is known as one of the finest examples of individual expression and defiance of power in literature.

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Cite as: Petras, D. (2013). A will unbroken. *City Tech Writer*, 8, 32-33 Online at <https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/city-tech-writer-sampler/>