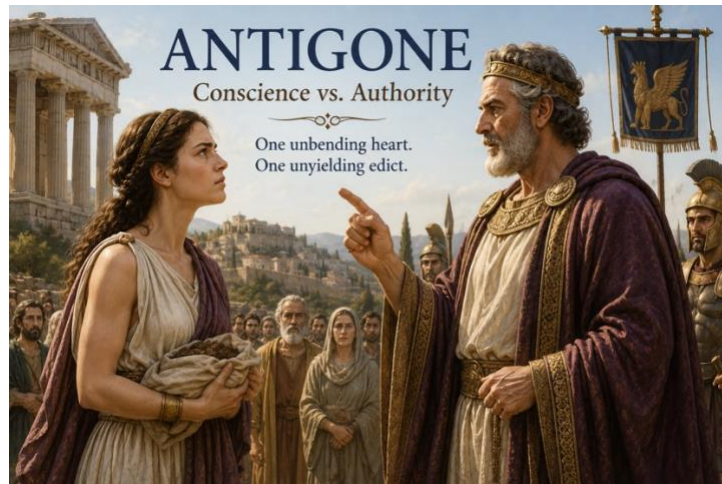




Antigone: When Conscience Says No

Oedipus Is Gone. The Trouble Isn't.

You might think the family of Oedipus had suffered enough. Oedipus discovered that he had killed his father and married his mother. Jocasta killed herself. Oedipus blinded himself and left Thebes in disgrace. Sophocles wasn't finished with the family.

In *Antigone*, the tragedy passes to Oedipus' children. His sons, Eteocles and Polynices, have fought on opposite sides in a civil war and killed each other. Creon, brother of Jocasta and now king of Thebes, honors Eteocles as a defender of the city but declares Polynices a traitor. His body is to remain unburied, and anyone who tries to bury him will be put to death. Oedipus' daughter Antigone has a very simple response: **No**.

One Young Woman Against the King

To Antigone, burying her brother isn't a political statement. It is a sacred obligation. Creon may be king, but she believes the laws of the gods stand above the decree of any ruler.

Her sister Ismene understands the danger and wants no part of the plan. Antigone goes ahead anyway, performs burial rites for Polynices, gets caught, and doesn't bother pretending she didn't do it. She openly defends her action before Creon.

That's one reason Antigone remains such a compelling character. She doesn't stumble unknowingly into disaster as her father did. **She knows exactly what Creon has ordered, knows exactly what the punishment will be, and defies him anyway.** The argument has suddenly become surprisingly modern: When does obedience to law become less important than obedience to conscience?

Creon Has a Point—At First

It would be easy to make Creon nothing more than the villain, but that would make the play less interesting. Thebes has just survived a civil war. Polynices attacked his own city, and Creon is the new ruler trying to restore order. From his point of view, honoring a traitor exactly as the man who defended the city would make a mockery of loyalty.

So Creon draws a line. His tragedy begins when he becomes incapable of moving it.

Antigone is stubborn, but so is Creon. The difference is that Creon has the power of the state behind his stubbornness. He becomes so determined to demonstrate his authority that disagreement itself begins to look like treason.

Everybody Tells Creon to Stop

Creon's own son Haemon, who is engaged to Antigone, tries to reason with him. Creon won't yield. Then Tiresias—the same blind prophet who played such an important role in *Oedipus Rex*—warns Creon that the gods reject what he has done and that Polynices must be buried. Creon finally listens.

Unfortunately, this is Greek tragedy. Listening five minutes too late can be considerably worse than not listening at all. By the time Creon changes course, Antigone has killed herself. Haemon, devastated by her death, kills himself. When Creon's wife Eurydice learns that her son is dead, she takes her own life as well.

Creon is left alive. For him, that may be the cruelest punishment Sophocles could devise.

Like Father, Like Uncle

There is an interesting connection between *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*. Oedipus relentlessly pursues the truth despite repeated warnings to stop. Creon relentlessly defends his own judgment despite repeated warnings that he is wrong. Both men are intelligent. Both are powerful. Both believe they are acting for the good of Thebes. And both possess enough pride and stubbornness to turn a bad situation into catastrophe.

But there is an important difference. Oedipus discovers that the terrible deeds in his past were committed unknowingly. Creon makes his disastrous decisions with his eyes open. He simply refuses to reconsider them until it is too late.

An Argument That Never Really Ended

That's what gives *Antigone* such staying power. Strip away the robes, temples, prophets, and Greek gods, and the argument is still with us.

What happens when the law commands something a person believes is morally wrong? Does loyalty to family come before loyalty to the state? When should conscience overrule authority? And perhaps most important for anyone holding power: **When does firmness become stubbornness?**

Sophocles doesn't make those questions particularly comfortable. Antigone's absolute certainty contributes to her destruction, while Creon's certainty destroys nearly everyone he loves.

Nobody really wins the argument. And nearly 2,500 years later, we're still having it.