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Antigone Yesterday, Antigone Today

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ANTIGONE YESTERDAY--ANTIGONE TODAY

Presented to

Mr. Dennis Holt

Ouachita Baptist University

In fulfillment of the
requirements for the course
Honors Special Studies 49D

by

Patsy Hill

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ANTIGONE YESTERDAY--ANTIGONE TODAY

Sophocles lives for us only in his works, as Shakespeare does; and very possibly it is for this very reason that both are to us the most faithful mirrors of all that was greatest and unique in their splendid epochs. Critics ancient and modern are agreed that the intermediate attitude of Sophocles--not only in his person, but in his art--attained that highest perfection, which lasts but a moment and is marred by the smallest change. To Sophocles belongs the Antigone of yesterday.

Sophocles' Antigone was not one of a trilogy or connected group of three plays; nor has the poet's treatment of the same personage in his subsequent plays (on Edipus) in which she appears. As soon as Sophocles adopted the practice of competing with isolated plays, he assumed the further liberty of handling the same personage quite differently in different plays. This apparent inconsistency was due to the fact that the ancients, unlike the moderns, had not unlimited field of subjects; but were restricted by the conditions of their art to a small number of legends, wherein the same heroes and heroines constantly reappeared. They therefore avoided the consequent monotony by varying the character

to suit the circumstances of each play. The plot is very simple, and was not in any sense novel. It is completely sketched in the last seventy lines of the Seven Against Thebes of Aeschylus. Polynices, slain in his unnatural invasion of his fatherland,--and what was worse, in single combat with his own brother,--is refused burial by the new head of the State, Creon. Aeschylus represents a herald as announcing this decision, at which Antigone at once rebels, while her weaker sister submits. The chorus, dividing, take sides with both; and show the conflict between the sacred claims of family affection and the social claims of the State, demanding obedience to a decree not unreasonable and issued by recognized authority. But Aeschylus gives no solution. This is thus the problem taken up by Sophocles, and treated with special reference to the character of Antigone. He greatly simplifies his problem, for he allows but little force to the arguments for punishing with posthumous disgrace the criminal Polynices,--the parricide, as the Greeks would call him, of his fatherland.

The tyrant Creon, indeed, talks well of obedience as the first condition of public safety. But Creon's rigid ordinance carries no weight with it; and obedience is only a matter of acquiescence in the minds of the vulgar and the mean, as the chorus is represented. Antigone is accordingly sustained throughout by a clear

consciousness that she is absolutely right: the whole sympathy of the spectator is with her, and the play is only of interest in bringing out her character in strong relief. This is splendidly expressed in her answer to Creon, when she is brought in prisoner by a craven guard, who has surprised her in performing the funeral rites over her brother. But as she consciously faces death for an idea, she may rather be enrolled in the noble army of martyrs who suffer in the broad daylight of clear conviction, than among the more deeply tried, like Orestes and Hamlet, who in doubt and darkness have striven to feel out a great mystery, and in their very failure have "purified the terror and the pity," as Aristotle puts it, of awe-struck humanity. A martyr for a great and recognized truth, for the laws of God against the laws of man, is not the most perfect central figure for a tragedy in the highest Greek sense. Therefore it is justifiable to call this famous play of yesterday rather an exquisite dramatic poem than a very great tragedy. The poet, Sophocles, makes Antigone a somewhat harsh character. She stands up before Creon; she answers his threats with bold courage and contumacy. She even despises and casts aside her more feminine sister Ismene, who at first counseled submission, but who stands nobly by Antigone when her trial before Creon comes, and is ready to go to death for a breach of the law which she

had not committed; but Antigone will have neither her companionship nor her sympathy. The fatal effects of the ancestral curse on the house of Oedipus are indeed often mentioned, and would be, to a Greek audience, a quite sufficient cause for the misfortunes of Antigone; but her character, together with that of the weak and misguided figures around her, make the plot quite independent of this deeper mystery, the hereditary nature not only of sin and crime, but of suffering.

Thus she stands alone, amid the weak and selfish. The very watchman who comes with the news of her capture as she was tending the outcast corpse is so cowardly in his views and so homely in his language as to afford a contrast to the high tragic vein such as we meet in Shakespeare, but what the more ceremonious tragedy of the French would avoid as unseemly.

The intention of Sophocles to isolate Antigone in her conflict with the ruler of the States is most strongly marked in his treatment of Haemon, Creon's son, who is betrothed to the princess. How can a heroine be isolated when she has the support of her lover? This is contrasted with any conceivable modern treatment of the subject; even, so far as we can tell from scanty allusions, contrasted with its treatment by younger rivals. Haemon does indeed come upon the

stage to plead for Antigone, but wholly upon public grounds: that her violation of Creon's edict has the sympathy of the public, and will bring the tyrant into disrepute and danger. But though his father taunts him with having personal interests behind his arguments, and though the chorus, when he rushes away to his suicide, indicate very plainly that love is the exciting cause of his suicide, interference,--not one word of personal pleading for his betrothed as such escapes from his lips.

Antigone, when she sings her long musical lament, as she goes to her death, does not call upon her lover to mourn her personal loss, but rather bewails her loss of the joys and dignities of the married state,--exactly what a modern heroine would have kept in the background. She quails however at the presence of death, which she had faced with much boldness as the opening of the piece; thus showing a human inconsistency very unlike that of past great heroines.

The whole play is but one instance of the subject Sophocles seems to have preferred to any other: the exhibition of a strong human will, based upon a moral conviction, dashing itself against the obstacles of fate, of human ordinance, of physical weakness, and showing its ineradicable dignity--"Though heated hot with burning fears,
And dipped in baths of hissing tears,
And battered with the shocks of doom."

The Antigone of today belongs to Mr. Dennis Holt. In his version which began as a Master of Arts thesis in drama at the University of Arkansas, he too attained the highest state of perfection. Immediately after he wrote the play, it was given its premiere production by the Ouachita Theater, under his direction, as a featured performance in the National Thespian Society's National Dramatic Arts Conference at Purdue University in June, 1958. The audience there consisted mainly of one thousand selected high school drama students from all over the country. After the performance, Alcone Company of New York published the script and since then the play has been produced numerous time in various educational theaters throughout the nation.

Mr. Holt's Antigone is a restatement of the "Antigone of Sophocles" which is as previously stated in this paper a story of a girl who defied civil law in order to preserve the freedom of her convictions and was probably the first important statement of civil disobedience. Sophocles play was written approximately 441 B.C.--Mr. Holt's play was written in the 20th century - 1958.

The restated script has been given obvious romantic flavor, and the order of the scenes has been changed to better accomodate the romantic style. Some characters

have been given more prominence, and the mode of death of Antigone and Haimon is different and more fitting to our day and time. The chorus passages are drastically changed making the girls (Mr. Holt's chorus consists of 3 to 7 girls) Antigone's friends rather than old men of the city.

Much emphasis is placed on love, but probably the most important element of the story and throughout the play is the clash of two laws, civil and spiritual. With an inability of the protagonists to compromise, this clash leads to disaster and death.

The modern version of Antigone has a very pertinent message for its audience which can easily become very meaningful to those who interpret it in its true light. It has a forthright approach and genuine presentation of things as they really are and can be. One has no trouble becoming involved in the story and identification is strong. What people try to avoid or hide from in many instances is brought boldly right out in the open with undue courage and fluency of the poet's words.

There is in Mr. Holt's play, as he so correctly states it, a final but perhaps far-off hope that "In some distant time in man's search for freedom, the prize will be won, the darkness made light, the spirit set free."

"Peace is a wild bird
Flying in the winds of the night,
Defying the storm and the darkness!

Man will find his freedom;

He will find his identity;

He will find the face of God!"