

Lecture #2 - Sophocles, *Antigone*

Ancient Greek drama took for its materials stories of a sacred character whose overall outline and outcome was already familiar to the audience. Each play, however, offered a version, inventing details of character and plot. The play was originally performed to music as part of an annual religious festival sacred to the worship of the god Dionysus. In this connection, we should note a feature that results from the conventions of representation and performance. The chorus sings and dances; the intervening moments of action in play consists of dialogue sung in *recitativo*, rather like grand opera today. Accordingly, set speeches have something of the character of arias in grand opera: we should not look to them for the realistic exchange that characterizes actual conversation but rather for the kind of exchange that characterizes performance of a ritual—the sort of speech, for example, that is exchanged when recipients for medals of honor are presented to the dignitary who has been authorized to award them. To take a representative instance: midway in the *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus turns to his wife Jocasta and tells her about the details of his history relevant to the present situation. (My father was the king of Corinth . . .) We should not suppose that it is important to worry why he has never told her these things during all their years of marriage. The speech is, of course, addressed to his wife, but its real target is the audience, who is completely familiar with the myth and knows how the story will come out overall, but needs to be informed about the play's take on the events preceding the action—the way in which the play understands the predicament of the hero and the details of the history leading up to it.

The subject of this play is represented in the text by the Greek word *philia*, whose root appears in such words as "philosophy" and "Philadelphia". Most texts translate it as "love", and so "love" figures prominently in your translation of the *Antigone*. (Thus "philosophy" is supposed to mean "love of wisdom", since "sophia" means wisdom; and Philadelphia was named in honor of "brotherly love".) But "philia" does not have a direct English equivalent; it means the deepest and most important bonds that tie you to another person or group of persons. The English word "loyal" derives from the Latin "ligare", which meant "to bond, to tie down", and Creon is talking about "philien" when he talks about loyalty (or allegiance).

The background of the play is this: Some time after Oedipus was banished from Thebes, his two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, quarreled over the rightful succession. The kingship went to Eteocles, rightfully; Polyneices fled to Argos, the traditional enemy of Thebes, and returned with seven armies, each of which attacked Thebes at one of its seven gates. The battle took place in darkness; the play begins with dawn, when it is discovered that at six gates, the enemy was defeated and the enemy general killed. At the seventh gate the enemy general, Polyneices, was also killed, but so was the Theban general, Eteocles. As the nearest male kin, their uncle, Creon, is now king of victorious Thebes.