

Sites of Disruption: Actions and Consequences in Greek Tragedy

Lecture I | Antigone

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The National Law School of India University, Bengaluru hosted an online lecture series on select texts from Greek tragedy by Amlan Das Gupta, retired Professor of English at Jadavpur University and noted scholar of classical studies and English renaissance literature. The series, titled 'Sites of Disruption: Actions and Consequences in Greek Tragedy', discussed Sophocles' Antigone, Aristotle's Poetics, and Euripides' Medea. The four-part series was transcribed and edited for The NLS Blog. Below is the first lecture in the series, which considers Sophocles' Antigone.

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The Archaic and Classical periods of ancient Greek history was between the eighth and fourth centuries BCE. This was the time of Homer and Hesiod and the tragic poets, of the historians Herodotus and Thucydides, and Plato and Aristotle. The great efflorescence of tragedy took place in the fifth century BCE, and critical responses to them in the fourth. The Greek insight into the world appears sharply and resolutely pessimistic. 'For truly there is nothing ... more miserable than man among all things that breathe and move on earth,' says Zeus in Book XVII Homer's *Iliad* (Homer, 261). The inevitability of suffering, misfortune, and disaster were seen to be pervasive in human life. The end of human life, the philosophers argued nevertheless, was to try to control it and to live a good life, to enjoy good fortune and avoid disastrous actions.

So, how was this possible? This could be achieved through scrutinising the ways in which we act and the consequences that they entail. Equally, it was done by looking at the past and considering carefully the deeds and the fates of those celebrated in myth and history. There was no other way of knowing how to organise our future, apart from studying the past. The historian Thucydides famously announced the past enabled us to understand the future:

that the absence of the fabulous from my narrative will seem less pleasing to the ear; but whoever shall wish to have a clear view both of the events which

have happened and of those which will some day, in all human probability, happen again in the same or a similar way – for these to adjudge my history profitable will be enough for me. (l. 22)

It is important to emphasise that the ancient Greeks did not distinguish between myth and history. Neither did myths exist in the form of discrete narratives: they were literally woven into the fabric of lived life, of rites and rituals, of the institutions of civic life, of pedagogic practice. It was the poets who gave the myths form and shape, and it was to these tellings by Homer and Hesiod, by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides that the Greeks constantly looked to for instruction and recreation alike.

In these talks, we shall briefly consider Greek tragedy as a distinctive institution. Tragedy in ancient Greece reached its height of greatness in the fifth century BCE. As a form, tragedy is associated with misfortune and calamity, but Greek tragedy shows a particular fascination with the stories of the calamities of the great heroes of mythical narratives. Tragedies drew their plot from myth—the *res sacra* (literally, ‘sacred thing’)—which were structured into cohesive entities by the poets. In chapter 13 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle comments:

at first the poets recounted any story that came to hand, but nowadays the best tragedies are about a few families only, for example, Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, *and others whose lot it was to suffer or commit fearful acts*. (Aristotle, *Poetics*1453a, emphases mine)¹

Let me draw attention to the three verbs used in the last part of this passage. The first, *sumbaino*, to befall or to happen; second, *paskho*, to suffer or to endure; and finally, *poieo*, to do or make. Together, they cover several ways in which human life encounters disaster. Calamity befalls them; they endure misfortune; they commit terrible acts. The phrase ‘fearful acts’ in the passage quoted here renders the Greek word ‘*deina*’, the plural of the adjective ‘*deinon*’. Greek tragedy typically focuses on the

¹ Alcmaeon killed his mother, Orestes killed his mother, Meleager was killed by his mother, Thyestes ate his children, and Telephus was wounded by Achilles.

moments when human life is fractured by the eruption of that which is truly fearful. Martha Nussbaum notes that no

unique English translation ... is available [for the Greek word *deinon*]. Most generally, it is used of that which inspires awe or wonder. But in different contexts it can be used of the dazzling brilliance of the human intellect, of the monstrosity of an evil, of the terrible power of fate ... *Deinon* frequently implies a disharmony. Because the word's connotations vary so much, it can be used by a character ostensibly to praise, while we are allowed to see in the remark an ironic disclosure of something horrible. (Nussbaum, 52)

But above all it is something profoundly human, as brilliantly expressed in the second choric ode in *Antigone*: 'There are many *deinon* things; but not one of them is more *deinon* than the human being.' (*Antigone* ll. 322-23, translation mine)

But even if misfortune, in the broadest sense, is essentially part of the human condition, it does not lessen our need to assign causes. Why do bad things happen to people? Is it because of the anger of the gods? Is it because of transgression or impiety? Is it ancestral fault? Is it because laws of the state are broken and punishment is delivered by human agents? Or is it, as Plato thought, because of *agnoia*, ignorance? Or is it entirely random, and can befall both the innocent and the guilty? Are the causes known only afterwards? Myths give events, not motives. Tragedy isolates these moments and holds them up to us for scrutiny.

Typically, as E.R. Dodds pointed out in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, the Homeric hero acts in hope of *timé* or honour. The greatest form of failure is represented by *aidos*, an alteration in public opinion or shame. In the 'archaic' (early classical) period in Greece, Dodds argues, this early shame culture was replaced by, or supplemented by, a guilt culture. Now the gods sit in judgement on the arrogance and other sins of humans and mete out justice or vengeance. Shame and guilt combine in tragic recounting of myth. Actions of the gods may be inscrutable and impervious to human understanding, but questions of blame and responsibility, inculpability (*athooteta*) and incontinence (*akrasia*) remain.

We look today at Sophocles' *Antigone*—part of the story of the house of Oedipus, or more properly the Labdacids, named after the grandfather of Oedipus. I apologise for leaving out many interesting things about this play, for instance, the philosophical responses the play has inspired or the many reenactments of the play, spanning centuries and cultures.

The story of the Labdacids, the family of Oedipus, was a popular one. Homer's *Odyssey* mentions the incestuous marriage of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta and the latter's subsequent suicide, and the *Iliad* alludes to the siege of Thebes by Polyneices, one of their sons. Hesiod refers to the assault on Thebes by the Sphinx and to the fraternal discord over Oedipus's inheritance. The fragmentary epics *Oidipodeia* and *Thebaid* clearly dealt with the family 'curse', as did the lyric 'Thebaid', attributed to Stesichorus, the extant fragments of which reveal the conflict between the two sons of Oedipus and Jocasta, Eteocles and Polyneices. In addition, there are allusions to the myth in fifth-century lyrics.

Of the tragedians, Aeschylus produced a trilogy that treated the family's unhappy history: the fragmentary *Laius* and *Oidipous* are generally accepted to have included the illicit conception of Oedipus in contravention of Apollo's oracle and the subsequent realisation of the god's prediction that Laius would die at the hands of any son he fathered. These plays are also likely to have contained the pronouncement by Oedipus of a curse on his sons and (possibly) the breakdown of the fraternal relationship. The sole surviving drama in the trilogy, *Seven against Thebes*, which was staged in 467 BCE, presents the fraternal battle over the city's leadership and the Argive assault on Thebes, events which were to be dramatised in *Phoinissai* [*The Phoenissae*, *The Phoenician Women*] by Euripides over half a century later. Sophocles staged his *Antigone* (circa 442–441 BCE) and *Oedipus Tyrannos* [*Oedipus Rex*] (circa 429 BCE), and would in later years revisit the myth in the posthumously produced *Oedipus at Colonus* (circa 401 BCE). Euripides had himself written an *Antigone* and an *Oedipus*, of which only a few fragments remain. Given the prominence of the Oedipus theme in the extant tragic corpus, one can only suppose that a number of the vast quantity of plays lost to us contained variations on the same subject. At least three

other fifth-century BCE authors who were younger than Sophocles wrote plays about Oedipus. These include Achaëus of Eretria, Nicomachus, and the elder Xenocles.

'The gods turn the faults of the parents upon the children'

I shall start with the ancestral curse on the house of Laius. Deeds have long afterlives, working disasters through generations. In the expanded form of the myth that we have, the curse is that of King Pelops on Laius for the rape of his son Chrysippus. Pelops curses Laius that he would never have children, and if he did, the son would kill him. This malediction is ratified by Hera the goddess of marriage and accepted by Zeus. But why then did Laius have a child? Aeschylus tells us that Laius (Oedipus's father):

overcome by the thoughtlessness of his longing, fathered
his own death, the parricide Oidipous, who
sowed his mother's sacred field (Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* ll. 750-53)

Sophocles in *Oedipus Rex* attributes the birth of the child to supernatural will:

An oracle
Once came to Laius (I will not say
'Twas from the Delphic god himself, but from
His ministers) declaring he was doomed
To perish by the hand of his own son (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* ll. 725)

Euripides specifically describes the manner in which Laius breaks the divine mandate not to have children by Jocasta. He, 'yielding to his lust in a drunken fit, begat a son'(Euripides, *The Phoenissae* ll. 17). The myth records an event; the literary artist looks for causes.

This may be a good time to introduce our first literary example, Sophocles' youthful play *Antigone* (441 BCE), so dearly loved of philosophers from Hegel to Heidegger and beyond. Discussion of this play is impossibly far-reaching and focuses among other things on questions of gender, civil disobedience, and the nature of law. Are they wrongdoers in this play? The plotline is simple and can be quickly summarised. The

play begins in the aftermath of war, the stench of unburied bodies, among them that of Polyneices, the disgraced son of Oedipus. But Polyneices is of royal blood and had the claim of being the rightful owner of the throne of Thebes (a point glossed over by Sophocles, but emphasised by Euripides in his *Phoinissai*).

Creon here is a *new prince*, 'Creon, son of Menoeceus, our new ruler by the new fortunes that the gods have given.' He brushes aside the fear of miasma and the demands of the chthonic gods—the shadowy and frightening gods of the underworld, like Hades and Persephone—claiming that polis requires a harsh legalism. For him, no exceptions can be made. He sees Polyneices' sister Antigone violating a civic ordinance for the sake of a beloved brother. But he himself has familial religious duties towards the exposed corpse. And yet he is determined to conceal from deliberative view the claims of both familial and affective ties, at least insofar as they clash with civic interest.

Thus, if the play begins on the one hand with the primitive terror of *miasma*—pollution—on the other, it records the emergent moment of law-making violence, the edict (*kerugma*) that withholds funerary benefits to the enemy and thus to Polyneices. Effectively, the inauguration of the new regime in the play is symbolised by this singular pronouncement, a line drawn, a practical and pragmatic decision. But the law-making violence immediately calls for a new kind of violence, that of the preservation of the law. The idea lies at the heart of Walter Benjamin's seminal essay titled 'Critique of Violence' (see Benjamin 236 ff). J.A. Kopin comments that 'law-preserving violence is the appearance of the law-making violence that initiated a legal system in that system's present, harnessed to ensure its continued existence' (see Kopin n.p.).

Antigone's desire to provide funeral honours to the body of her brother Polyneices, who has died in fratricidal conflict with his own brother Eteocles, leads her to contravene the edict issued by Creon, who has ordered the body of Polyneices to be thrown in dishonour to be consumed by wild animals, 'a clear reminder of his shameful fate':

Creon: I've announced to all citizens
my orders for the sons of Oedipus –

Eteocles, who perished in the fight
to save our city, the best and bravest
of our spearmen, will have his burial,
with all those purifying rituals
which accompany the noblest corpses,
as they move below. As for his brother—
that Polyneices, who returned from exile,
eager to wipe out in all-consuming fire
his ancestral city and its native gods,
keen to seize upon his family's blood

and lead men into slavery—for him,
the proclamation in the state declares
he'll have no burial mound, no funeral rites,
and no lament. He'll be left unburied,
his body there for birds and dogs to eat,
a clear reminder of his shameful fate.
That's my decision. For I'll never act
to respect an evil man with honours
in preference to a man who's acted well. (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 219–39 [193–
208]).²

Antigone quarrels with her sister Ismene, who advises moderation and obedience to the law.

Ismene: Now, the two of us are left here quite alone.
Think how we'll die far worse than all the rest,
if we defy the law and move against
the king's decree, against his royal power.
We must remember that by birth we're women,

² All references to Sophocles' *Antigone* (unless explicitly noted otherwise) are from the translation by Ian Johnston of Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. The text is available at <https://web.viu.ca/johnstoi/sophocles/antigone.htm>. Line numbers refer to the English text, those in square brackets to the Greek original.

and, as such, we shouldn't fight with men.
Since those who rule are much more powerful,
we must obey in this and in events
which bring us even harsher agonies.
So I'll ask those underground for pardon—
since I'm being compelled, I will obey
those in control. That's what I'm forced to do.
It makes no sense to try to do too much. (Sophocles, *Antigone* II. 73-85 [58-67])

But Antigone claims that the dead call for the same love that is due to the living:

I'll still bury him. It would be fine to die
while doing that. I'll lie there with him,
with a man I love, pure and innocent,
for all my crime. My honours for the dead
must last much longer than for those up here.
I'll lie down there forever. (Sophocles, *Antigone* II. 89-94 [71-76]).

Two burials, and claims to duty and love? The guard who first comes and informs Creon that someone has sprinkled the body with dust 'as if someone wanted to avert a curse' subsequently returns with the captive Antigone (Sophocles, *Antigone* II. 295 [256]). She has been taken in the act of repeating the act, as the body has been cleared of the traces of piety. This time the perpetrator is only too willing to show herself.

Guard: She was shrieking—
a distressing painful cry ...
That's how she was when she saw the naked corpse.
She screamed out a lament, and then she swore,
calling evil curses down upon the ones
who'd done this. Then right away her hands
threw on the thirsty dust. She lifted up

a finely made bronze jug and then three times
poured out her tributes to the dead (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 478–87 [422–31])

Antigone's rebellion may just be to sprinkle dust and pour water, but it satisfies the demands of the gods of the earth, the chthonic deities who oversee the care of the dead. Of course we are never told who performs the first burial, and answers have included Ismene and the gods.

Creon confronts her with the charge of defying the edict:

Creon: ... you dared to break those ... laws?

Antigone: Yes. Zeus did not announce those laws to me.

And Justice living with the gods below
sent no such laws for men. I did not think
anything which you proclaimed strong enough
to let a mortal override the gods
and their unwritten and unchanging laws

They're not just for today or yesterday,
but exist forever, and no one knows
where they first appeared. (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 508–16 [449–57])

Antigone thus claims that her actions are justified by fraternal love, familial law, and honour to the chthonic gods. '... my nature is to love. I cannot hate,' says Antigone, but notably, her love is focused on her dead brother, not on the living Ismene, nor on Eteocles (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 598 [524]). She argues that she would not have broken the law for a husband or a child, as she could have another spouse and another child: but as her parents are dead, she will never have another brother:

Antigone: I'd never have done it
for children of my own, not as their mother,
nor for a dead husband lying in decay—
no, not in defiance of the citizens.
What law do I appeal to, claiming this?
If my husband died, there'd be another one,

and if I were to lose a child of mine
I'd have another with some other man.
But since my father and my mother, too,
are hidden away in Hades' house,
I'll never have another living brother.
That was the law I used to honour you.
But Creon thought that I was in the wrong
and acting recklessly for you, my brother. (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 1014-27 [905-16])

She is arrested and sentenced to death—finally she is immured in a cave to die of hunger and thirst, where she commits suicide. Creon's son Haemon, betrothed to Antigone, protests against Creon's decision. He is overruled and finally commits suicide. Creon's wife too, kills herself, not being able to bear this sorrow.

The third stasimon (choral ode) of *Antigone* speaks about the power of love (*eros*).

O Eros, the conqueror in every fight,
Eros, who squanders all men's wealth,
who sleeps at night on girls' soft cheeks,
and roams across the ocean seas
and through the shepherd's hut—
no immortal god escapes from you,
nor any man, who lives but for a day.
And the one whom you possess goes mad.
Even in good men you twist their minds,
perverting them to their own ruin (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 894–903 [781–92]).

Love then in *Antigone* is a destructive force, experienced for the dead or the dying. '... the profanity of what I planned', cries Creon at the death of his son. He upbraids his actions as 'mistakes made by a foolish mind' (*phrenon dusphrenon hamartemata*) (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 1406-14 [1261-1269]).

In spite of Antigone's cruel and wasteful death, it must be said that the wrath of the gods is experienced to the highest degree by Creon. The sage Teiresias tells him that his wrongdoing is double: one that he has denied Polyneices the proper burial rites, and secondly, he has thrust 'a living soul into a grave', and this is violence done to the gods above (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 1198 [1069]). Yet Creon's actions have some kind of justification: dishonouring an enemy of the state, and even punishing one who breaks the established law may be expedient for a state, particularly one racked so long by misfortune. Antigone responds to what she sees as the demands of love, but denies the claim of the law of the state altogether. The gods may appear to speak decisively against Creon, but the will of the gods in this case cannot be foretold or anticipated. In the sense that he acts 'with reasonable expectation' (*paralogos*), he may be responsible for error (*hamartia*). Antigone, on the contrary, acts with full awareness of the dangers that lie in store for her. What the action of Antigone exemplifies is the dangers of unheeding rashness, with both Antigone and Creon willing to take risks in this respect and spurn counsel. Perhaps this is a good way of understanding the deeper implications of the word *hubris*, so often merely translated as pride or arrogance. In *Antigone* it points to Creon's movement from rational deliberation to rash ascriptions of blame: to the guard, to the chorus, to Tiresias.

Creon experiences the power of love when he loses Haemon, an emotion that he is unable to summon for his nieces. His love for his dead son, as Nussbaum points out, is one that can no longer be either denied or accommodated within the framework of the civic theory of the good and forces him to reject this theory. His remorse is specifically directed at the poverty of his mental processes, especially at their narrowness or impoverishment. This failing is now acknowledged to be his. The suicide of his wife Eurydice confirms and intensifies the bitterness of the lesson he learns. 'Alas for me,' Creon says,

the guilt for all of this is mine—

it can never be removed from me or passed

to any other mortal man. I, and I alone . . .

I murdered you . . . I speak the truth (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 1463–66 [1317–20]).

His harping on practical knowledge was unable to make room for the emotions of true loss, and his realisation 'is not simply regret at a failure, but a more fundamental reorientation' (Nussbaum, *Fragility* 62). '... it seems you've learned to see what's right— / but far too late,' the Chorus judges (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 1415-16 [1270]). What he sees, precisely, is how 'Everything I touch goes wrong,' the helmsman who once (or so he saw it) 'steered the city/ on its proper course' (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 1489; 1104-05 [1343; 994-95]).

Albrecht Dihle has pointed out the moral implications of the term *tolma*, rashness or audacity: *tolma* (*tolme*) not only means risk and the moral attitude required to take a risk (audacity) but also the very act of will by which an individual overcomes his own inhibitions, which might prevent him from acting in a given situation (Dihle, 22). *Tolma* recurs in the text of *Antigone*, and the points at which it appears are significant, and are rendered with different English equivalents by Jebb in his translation.³ Creon, learning of the burial of the dead warrior exclaims: 'what living man hath *dared* (*tolmesas*) to do this!' (ll. 248). At the end of their magnificent ode on man, the chorus speaks decisively against law-breakers. '... no city hath he who, for his *rashness* (*tolmas*), dwells with sin' (ll. 374-5). When face to face with Antigone, Creon charges her with infringing the law knowingly:

Creon: ... knewest thou that an edict had forbidden this?

Antigone: I knew it: could I help it? It was public.

Creon: And thou didst indeed *dare* (*etolmas*) to transgress that law? (ll. 447-49).

The final occurrence of the word is even more resonant with tragic implications. As Antigone is led away to her stony prison, she sings her last song of mourning: 'Creon deemed me guilty (*hamartanein*) of error therein, and of [dreadful] outrage (*deina toلمان*), ah brother mine!' (ll. 914-15).

³ The discussion on the use of the word 'tolma' and its cognate formulations is based on the translation of *Antigone* by R.C. Jebb. See Sophocles. *The Antigone of Sophocles in Greek and English: Printed for the Representation of the Play by the Students of University College, Toronto, February, 1894*. Translated by R. C. Jebb Boston: Ginn, 1894. The line numbers reference the Greek original.

The play *Antigone* presents to us a process that is familiar to us in tragedy: actions which are contemplated and performed with some degree of justification may involve the tragic personages becoming rash and impervious to counsel. *Tolma* in tragic plots is a line that is crossed, but is known only after it has been crossed, and it is at this point that the actors become guilty of impiety (*asebeia*). This is the breach that invites the greatest of punishments.

In the play, Creon, newly established as ruler of Thebes, asserts his authority through an edict that honours Eteocles with full burial rites but forbids the burial of his brother Polyneices, who fought against the Thebes. This decree is not merely administrative but an act of law-making violence, meant to found civic order and display the power of the state. Creon insists that political stability demands obedience to human law, even at the cost of suppressing traditional religious obligations toward the dead. Antigone, however, appeals to a higher and older order of unwritten divine law governing burial and familial piety. Her minimal act of sprinkling dust on Polyneices' corpse fulfils the essential religious requirement. When arrested, she asserts that Creon's edict cannot override the timeless statutes of the gods. Her devotion is absolute yet selective: she proclaims that she would not have disobeyed the law for a husband or child, both replaceable, but only for a brother, who is irreplaceable since both her parents are dead.

We briefly touched on three concepts to underscore the play's tragic dynamic. The first is *miasma* or pollution, which Tiresias identifies as the source of the disease in the polis:

In the city
our altars and our hearths have been defiled (*noseo*),
all of them, with rotting flesh brought there
by birds and dogs from Oedipus' son,
who lies there miserably dead (Sophocles, *Antigone* ll.1129-33 [1116-20]).

The second is the adjective *deinon*. The chorus' meditation on what constitutes *deinon* highlights the dual nature of humanity as both wondrous and terrifying, capable of brilliance yet prone to destructive excess. Finally, *tolma*—boldness or rash daring—

marks the point at which justified action becomes tragic transgression. Creon and Antigone each act with a kind of righteousness, yet both cross this boundary: Antigone through defiant devotion, Creon through excessive legalism. The chain of suicides—Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice—forces Creon into tragic recognition. His final insight arrives too late, revealing the tragic structure of human existence as the Greeks understood it: that clarity often comes only after irreparable harm. In witnessing such downfall, tragedy teaches the precariousness of human agency and the peril of exceeding the limits of wisdom. *

* **Note:** Please check the References document for a full reference list, along with suggestions for further reading.

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