

The unanswered question – how to get to the dark soul of Antigone

by Ivo van Hove

Antigone, by Sophokles, tells the ancient story of one of Oidipous's daughters, who refuses to follow the orders of her uncle Kreon, the new Head of State.

Kreon has ordained that Antigone's brother Polyneikes, who, along with their brother Eteokles has just died in a cruel civil war, should not be allowed a burial because he is a traitor.

A war of words begins with short but razor sharp scenes between Antigone and Kreon: an exhaustive, long, bitter but also passionate discourse of opposing views on how to treat the dead, especially when they are deemed an enemy of the state.

Antigone states: 'I am someone born to share in love not hatred.' Kreon counters: 'If a man puts family or friend ahead of fatherland I count him absolutely good for nothing.' Antigone is driven by an emotional urge to bury her brother. Kreon places good citizenship above all else.

To understand Antigone's deeds, we need to return to Sophokles's *Oidipous at Kolonos*, in which Antigone and her sister Ismene take care of their aging father, who has been exiled from Thebes. His sons are to alternately rule Thebes every other year but after his inaugural year Eteokles refuses to relinquish the throne to Polyneikes.

A brutal war between the brothers ensues. For the sisters the situation is desperate: their mother killed herself, their father is dying and their brothers kill each other. Antigone is in deep mourning. Caught in this cruel tragedy, she can't see or enjoy beauty and has no sense of a future. She follows her impulse to take care of her brother's body. For her, all human beings are equal and, even if Polyneikes was wrong, the dead should be respected.

The dilemma of dealing with Polyneikes's body became a terrifying reality recently when Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over a Ukrainian war zone.

The dead were left in an open field, rotting in the burning sun for over a week. The whole world saw this as an act of barbarity. Once the bodies were recovered and brought to the Netherlands for identification, the Dutch government arranged a convoy of hearses in a 100km burial procession. This was a civilized and humane response, a mark of respect to the victims.

Antigone goes on a long, solitary road towards death. Scene by scene she cuts herself loose: from her sister, who won't help with their brother's burial; from Polyneikes; from the love of her fiancé Haimon; from Kreon's policy; and, as an inevitable consequence, from society. 'I'm a strange new kind of "inbetween thing" aren't I/not at home with the dead nor with the living,' she concludes.

In a horrifying, magical scene she sees herself in her brother's tomb, which in her mind becomes a bridal chamber. She imagines an emotional reunion with her father, mother and brother. Kreon imprisons her in a cave, buried alive 'with a bit of food . . . no doubt if she prays hard the gods of death will save her life'. But Antigone has nothing and nobody to live for. She can't transform her grief into something positive. Her journey leads to self-destruction. There is nothing left other than to stage her own death, execute the ultimate control. Her life becomes meaningful by ending it.

And what about Kreon? The play starts the day after a cruel civil war with many casualties, provoked by Polyneikes and Eteokles. Also, Kreon's eldest son has just died. It is clear that the old city of Thebes, a society based on blood ties, has been disastrous and destabilizing. But instead of mourning, Kreon does something positive to stop the atrocities; he tries to create structure, a society based on clear laws, on citizenship. He wants the citizens of Thebes to live in safety.

Before becoming king, Kreon was involved in the military operations of Thebes. Now he wants to run the city as if it is an army. His strategic plan is based on the rule, 'you are with us or against us'. Those who disobey should be punished. He thinks purely in logical and hierarchical terms. As a politician he has a new vision but old methods, successful in an army but which fall short in governing a society.

Kreon is his own worst enemy. He sees the value of citizenship but not of individual citizens. He wants to be the enlightened king of Thebes but ends a broken man, alone in the world with no public position and no family.

Both Antigone and Kreon are unable to develop meaningful leadership. A leader must value the wellbeing of his city or country as well as religious laws. A real democracy should allow its citizens to fulfil religious duties towards family without colliding with the laws of society.

What makes *Antigone* a drama of epic scale is the Chorus, who comprise senior advisers to the king, while also representing the people of Thebes. They cover the whole intellectual and emotional scope of the main characters in the play. The Chorus listens to what Kreon, Antigone and others tell them and adapt their point of view accordingly. They are empathic, they don't hide when they are moved or horrified. They are the way people should be. They can be critical, neutral, mad or sad. But one thing they are not: hypocrites. Their journey starts with complete support for the new political views of Kreon. When Antigone enters, they immediately empathise, 'o you poor awful child of poor awful Oidipous'. After the intense discourse between Antigone and Kreon, and later Ismene, the Chorus starts to broaden their picture and awareness.

They tell Kreon the gods are responsible for this carnage. They judge Antigone harshly, claiming she disrespected the gods and the laws of Thebes. She is 'too extreme.' They turn their back on her. But, as they are only human, unrest lingers. They remind Kreon that he too is only human and the gods could turn against him.

When Teiresias, the prophet of Thebes, enters, they stay silent. They know he only comes when there is a real problem and that he always speaks the truth. And, what the Chorus daren't say or even think, he says to Kreon: 'The cause is you.' After the imprisonment of Antigone, and Teiresias's warning, they come to a new conclusion: 'take advice . . . set the girl free bury the boy.'

But the catastrophes are unstoppable and Kreon's efforts to turn around his punishments come too late. By the end of the play his wife, Eurydike, and two sons are dead. Like Antigone, Kreon is 'alone on his insides.' He has been driven by a sincere ambition to turn Thebes, his beloved city, into a better place and has failed. In every scene he is given the chance to adjust his law but he can't. His inflexibility leads to his downfall.

Antigone develops from a play about a brutal war into a play about politics and public policies and ends as a play about the helplessness of humans, lost in the cosmos. It is a play about survival: not the survival of an individual or a family, but of a whole society, perhaps even the world. The play is ambivalent and dark, modern and mythical, leaving one with more questions than answers.