

1 Tragedy.

Before I start, I would like to mention that the most thorough and accessible treatments of tragedy and Sophokles in more detail are still the works by A. Lesky, 1971, *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, Bern: Franke (pp. 311-344 for Sophokles) and P. Easterling & B. Knox, 1985, *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature. I. Greek Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (295-316 for Sophokles).

One of the most famous genres, if not the most famous, innovative and renowned, of Greek literature is the tragedy. Describing its origins and meaning would take at least two monographs, so I will be brief here. The general synopsis of a tragedy is that one protagonist at a certain moment makes a serious mistake. Often, but not always, he had been forewarned about this. After committing the error, the character is at several occasions advised or warned by others to correct his behaviour and change course, but as he is convinced that he is doing what is right, he will not change course thus perseverating in his madness and attacking those who are well disposed towards him. In other cases, he will change course but by assuming to have changed course he will only escalate his misdeeds. This way of acting eventually leads to the culmination of the error and the actor reaches a point of no return. He stubbornly continues his way, is then confronted with the fullness of his madness and only at that moment he becomes fully aware of what he has done. After that he learns what was wrong and what he should have done. This moment is called *kátharsis* (the Greek word for *purification*) and the term has as such survived in English. The same applies for the word *tragic* which now has a negative meaning, often related to pain and suffering, due to the fact that in almost all cases the protagonist died or survived with great suffering for him and his relatives. It is necessary to add that there is only one tragic hero and instances in which more than one character make the mistake and go through the same level of erring and subsequent *katharsis* are to my knowledge non-existent.

Three tragic playwrights have come to us, Aiskhylos (Aeschylus in English writing), Sophokles (Sophocles in English writing) and Euripides. I cannot discuss their individual value nor their most important contributions, but I would argue that Sophokles is the most “perfect” of them, as Euripides has too often a ridiculous, absurd and sometimes even grotesque element in it, an example of which is the in my opinion the tragedy the *Bakkhai* (Bacchae) with the Bacchants celebrating with king Pentheus’ head (this element in Euripidean tragedy certainly has its societal-critical value and tells us much more about Athens than is generally assumed, but it somewhat reduces the literary value). As to these three tragedians, there is the story already quoted in the ancient sources that Aiskhylos fought as a soldier in the Persian War, Sophokles participated in the victory parades as a young boy and Euripides was born on the day of Salamis (480 BC). Lesky (1971: 311) is undoubtedly right in stating that this is a myth but that it describes at the same time the relation between the different authors very well and is thus more than a simplified summary.

When one thinks about the most famous tragedies, three (in my opinion at least) come to mind, two by Sophokles, namely *Antigone* and *Oidipous Tyrannos* (OT - also known by the Latin title *Oedipus Rex*; the Greek word *týrannos* does not necessarily have the notion of our word *tyrant*, or at least, not always), and one by Euripides, namely *Medeia*. The latter one is one of the most chilling pieces of Greek literature (more shocking even than the Melian Dialogue in Thukydides, *Historiai* 5,84-119, especially 89 or than all the stories in Greek epic and historiography about unnecessary bloodshed and slaughter of innocent civilians), as it describes how a mother sees no other way out but to gruesomely kill her own children without hiding the effects and the suffering of the children. The two Sophoklean tragedies stand out for their absolute tragic thematic, which we discuss in the next section.

2 Sophokles.

As I mentioned before, there are three playwrights from whom we have full tragedies (besides fragments from others and the ancient sources state that there had been other playwrights as well and that the three famous one had written many more than those that survived). Space constraints prevent me from discussing Sophokles' life and literary value in detail here, so I will limit myself to the essentials. First of all, his exact year of birth is not known, but he was probably born in 496/5 BC and died in 406 BC. These dates have something almost symbolic with them, as they span almost the entire 5th century BC (the height of Athens as an Empire and the Athenian cultural life), while his death almost coincides with the end of the Peloponnesian War and Athens' defeat in it. As starting point and summary at the same time we can use the following description in Easterling & Knox (1985: 295): *He has often seemed to symbolize all that is Attic and classical: dignity, formal perfection, idealism. At the same time critics have found him in some ways the most elusive of the three great tragedians.* There can be no doubt about the first part of that statement. If there is one tragedy that perfectly incorporates the tragic evolution of a person who does not want to err but by trying to avoid this, "succeeds" in fulfilling his destiny, it is certainly *Oidipous Tyrannos*. The story is widely known, but I would like to reiterate that initially Oidipous tried everything to avoid his destiny and in that he acts as a real hero. Only after assuming power, he changes as a person and seems blinded (pun not intended) by his function and power and refuses the advice of those who wish him well. Only after having seen the light (pun intended), he becomes another person and accepts his responsibility for what he has done. In this respect, it is the most perfect of all tragedies. The successive tragedy is *Oidipous in Kolonos* is of a significantly different tone and displays an entirely different Oidipous, bitterer and more vindictive and, as it seems, more in line with what the Theban Cycle (sagas about the House of Thebes, fragments of some of those stories have survived in hexameters) tell us about him and the relation with his children (I have to add that it is not entirely certain that these two tragedies followed each other chronologically and some have even doubted they belonged together, what I personally find more difficult to sustain). It is often argued that Sophokles wrote the "perfect" tragedies, advocated to follow the divine order in his plays and that these plays served as illustration for what could happen if one did not act in this manner, but some doubts can be cast on that assumption (I believe that this might be part of the description as *the most elusive of the three great tragedians*, to which Easterling and Knox referred). When one looks at a tragedy such as *Philoktetes* the difference with Euripides already seems small, especially in light of the almost comical *deus ex machina* solution and also in the revolting by Neoptolemos against the mistreatment of Philoktetes. It is true that Philoktetes is eventually cured by Apollon and receives some rehabilitation but the tone of the play leaves the spectator with many questions as to the behaviour of the Greek leaders.

What is also remarkable is that in spite of the judgement about Sophokles as being the most perfect of tragic playwright, substantially more tragedies of Euripides have survived (7 of Sophokles against 19 of Euripides, although the exact number is debated because not all plays are accepted by all scholars as being genuinely Euripidean).

This brings us to the tragedy under discussion, *Antigone*.

3 Antigone.

3.1 The content of the play.

The content is relatively familiar but I will nevertheless summarise it here. After Oidipous cursed his sons Eteokles and Polyneikes, they fight each other in the siege of Thebes. After the siege is over and the assailants are defeated, both brothers remain dead on the battlefield. Kreon, the new ruler of Thebes, ordains that Eteokles, who fought on the right side, be given a proper hero's funeral whereas

the traitor Polyneikes is to remain unburied and to be subject to mutilation by dogs and birds. This is the ultimate humiliation for a warrior and is a topos in epic literature, but it is also the most severe punishment, as unburied souls cannot obtain eternal rest and cannot enter the Hades. In addition to his order, Kreon also ordains that anyone burying Eteokles will be punished with death. In spite of this ordinance, Antigone decides that she will bury her cursed and disenfranchised brother after all, as she considers it her solemn duty, sanctioned by the gods, to care for the wellbeing of her family even after death. The play starts with her having decided to do that and trying to convince her sister Ismene to join her in doing so, but she hesitates and incurs Antigone's wrath. The latter in the meantime proceeds to doing what she had announced and is arrested while doing so. Interrogated by Kreon, she defiantly admits what she has done. A discussion between the two ensues in which they both defend their actions referring to the law, divine in case of Antigone and the law of the land by Kreon. He sentences her to be buried alive, but spares Ismene who tried to confess alongside her sister. After Antigone is sent away and entombed, the seer Teiresias warns Kreon that Polyneikes should urgently be buried but he accuses the seer of having been bribed (this is also a topos in Greek literature, one can refer to the story between Agamemnon and the seer Kalkhas in Book 1 of the *Iliad*). Kreon perseveres and will pay dearly. He will first lose his son, Haimon. After hearing that Antigone has been buried alive, he rushes to the grave, finds her having hanged herself and laments her body. Kreon, who seems to have had a change of heart, enters the grave as well and is immediately attacked by Haimon who is unsuccessful in killing his father and decides to stab himself to death. After finding out that her son killed herself, queen Eurydike, Kreon's wife, silently leaves the palace and, as we are told, she herself also commits suicide. Kreon finally grasps what has occurred and how he has trespassed divine law. He eventually buries the body but has lost all the ones near and dear to him.

3.2 The characters and their names.

Although this is not a literary analysis nor a paper on the Greek language, I would nevertheless like to point out that the names in this tragedy (and by extension in the Theban Cycle) reveal much. *Nomen est omen*.

Antigone “the one who is born against it, the resisting one” (Greek *antí* “against” and *goné* “birth”).

Kreon “the ruler, the powerful one”, from a root meaning “shining, powerful”, that might be present in Sanskrit *śrī* “riches” and in the name *Sri Lanka*.

Polyneikes “the one with many quarrels” from *polýs* “much” and *neîkos* “envy, quarrel, insult”.

Eteokles “the one with the right fame, the one famous for this righteousness”, from *eteós* “true, genuine” and *kléos* “fame”.

Eurydike “the one with broad ruling, justice broadly spread”, from *eurýs* “broad” and *dikē* “justice”.

Ismene this name is linked by some to the root **weid/woid/wid* “to know, to see” (related to Greek *oída* “I know”, *eídon* “I saw”, English *wit*, Latin *vidēre* and German *wissen*), but this remains doubtful. If the link were to be correct, the meaning would be “the one who knows”, but it would be uncertain to what knowledge it would refer nor would it be clear when that knowledge was acquired.

Haimon “the one (related in) blood” from *haîma* “blood”.

Teiresias This name has, to my knowledge, no convincing etymology.

3.3 The value of the play.

The thematic of the play is relatively straightforward, as it opposes divine and human law. As such, one could be inclined to see this tragedy as an eventual victory of divine law over human blindness and arrogance, and of the diligent and virtuous Antigone, willing to forego her own life for the sake of the greater good, over the tyrannical Kreon, clinging to his power at any cost. A closer look at the play reveals that this is only partially true. Certainly, I am not denying that this is the thematic and that Antigone is defending the eternal law and the mores of the Greeks to bury their dead (relatives), regardless of what they have done. As such, there is indeed the discussion between mortal law and that of the tradition. It is equally true that Kreon seems blind for the divine interpretation and is too convinced about his own right for most of the play. Nevertheless, I would like to make two observations, one on each of the protagonists. The first one involves Antigone. She never doubts what she has to do and is aware what the consequences will be if she decides to bury Polyneikes. At the same time, however, she is afraid of dying and when facing imminent death, she laments her fate and regrets that she will never have a family of her own. Sophokles depicts her as a human being and not as an iron lady without emotions. In the end she chooses the same death as her mother, namely suicide by hanging rather than the even more painful death by hunger. The second observation is that one has to feel some understanding for Kreon after all. As he became the king of Thebes and the city faced a serious challenge to its existence, it is not so surprising altogether that he resorts to pronouncing the edict about not burying Polyneikes. From a human perspective, this is perfectly understandable and, in many cultures, treason was considered the worst crime of all and often the traitors were even punished by dishonour after death (I repeat myself, but the mutilation and the refusal of a proper burial to a deceased opponent were *topoi* in Greek epic already and were not confined to traitors alone, the most shocking example of this is undoubtedly Akhilleus' mistreatment of Hektor's dead body in *Iliad* 24). This human legal perspective obviously conflicts with what divine law prescribes, namely to bury the dead and to take care of one's own family. This brings me to my main point. Although the play is called *Antigone*, I would nevertheless venture to ask whether we are right in assuming that the real protagonist is Antigone. Should we not rather look for the most tragic person in Kreon? Easterling & Knox (1985: 311) mention that Kreon and, in *Philoktetes*, Neoptolemos *are also central figures* but they did not suggest that Kreon might have been the tragic hero, while Lesky (1971: 321) comes much closer to cataloguing him as tragic hero (*Denn dieser Kreon ist nicht einfach der Bösewicht, der wissentlich das Unrecht will. Er ist in dem Glauben an die schrankenlose Macht des Staates und seine eigene, die er damit gleichsetzt, so ausweglos verfangen, daß sein Weg über die Hybris in den Sturz nicht nur moralisches Exempel, sondern auch ein Stück echter Tragik ist*) Antigone knows what will happen and, while she is not a hardboiled and coldblooded person without doubts (as we stated above, she is fearsome and laments that she has to die without a family), she nevertheless does not seem to be making a tragic *error*. She not only remains convinced that she is doing what is right, but at the end everybody seems to have agreed with her. As to her character she changes little, if at all. Kreon is entirely different and he is the person who makes the unforgivable errors and suffers the most in spite of his final change of mind. The "normal" tragic sequence of events including the *katharsis* applies to him, not to Antigone. Easterling & Knox (1985: 308) state that *[f]or many modern critics Antigone is one of Sophocles' darkest plays*. While this assessment does not seem to be that of Easterling & Knox themselves, they nevertheless raise the question why the gods would let Antigone die if she were just defending and upholding their laws (1985: 308). They try to account for this by arguing that Sophokles was neither "romantic" (my wording) nor benevolent towards his heroes and wanted to display the divine omnipotence and the human helplessness. In this specific point I would disagree. If we assume that Antigone is the tragic heroine, her death is difficult to explain, though it is not impossible as tragic heroes sometimes do die (as is

the case with Aias). If we assume, on the other hand, that Kreon is the tragic protagonist, Antigone's death fits the schema much more, as it will be the starting point for the series of deaths in Kreon's inner circle: Haimon will find her body, will try to kill Kreon, will fail and kill himself; after Haimon's death, his mother Eurydike will leave the palace (and the stage) without saying a word and will also commit suicide. Rather than describing Antigone's death as unexplainable from the point of divine justice, we could interpret that moment as the point of no return. Once she has died, a set of events has been set in motion that will lead to Kreon's inevitable human tragedy (this time I use the term in its modern meaning).

The conflict between love for the family and one's country, between mortal and divine law, the hesitation and fears of Antigone and the tragic errors of Kreon (who in my opinion is the real actor of the tragedy, not Antigone) make this play one of the most suited examples of a tragedy.

SYNTHESIS: By using the tragedy *Antigone* by Sophokles, I discuss the Athenian society and culture, but expand this to personal freedom and personal responsibility, crime and punishment, society and war and peace, treason and patriotism, and the interaction and conflict between human law and divine law.

The author: Filip De Decker (born 1977) studied Classics at the Universiteit Gent (Belgium) and the University of Calgary (Canada) and obtained in his PhD in Linguistics at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München with a thesis *A morpho-syntactic analysis of speech introductions and conclusions in Homer*. After that, he has worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the Universiteit Gent, the University of Oxford, the Universität zu Köln and the Università degli Studi di Verona. His interests are the (history of the) Greek and Latin language, old-Indo-European languages and Classical culture and literature.