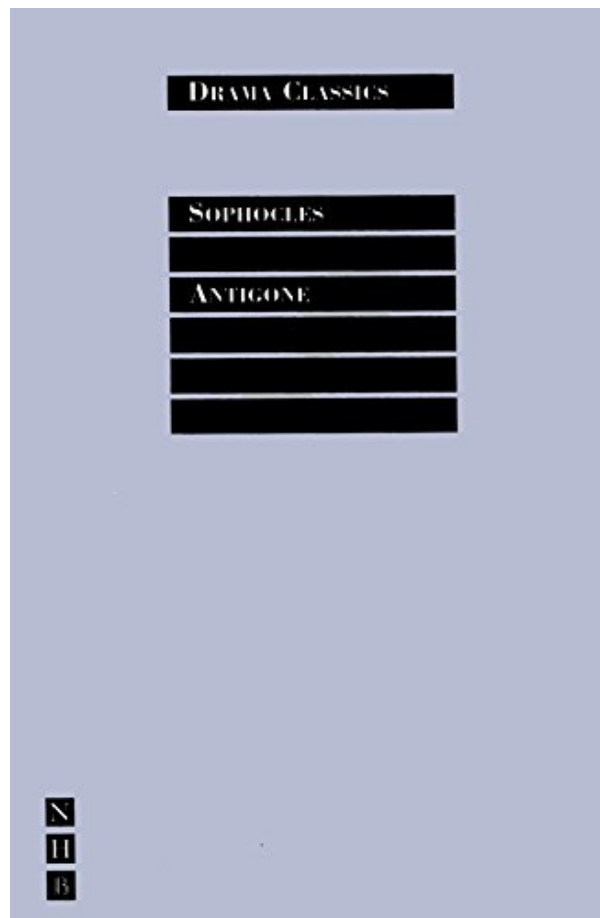
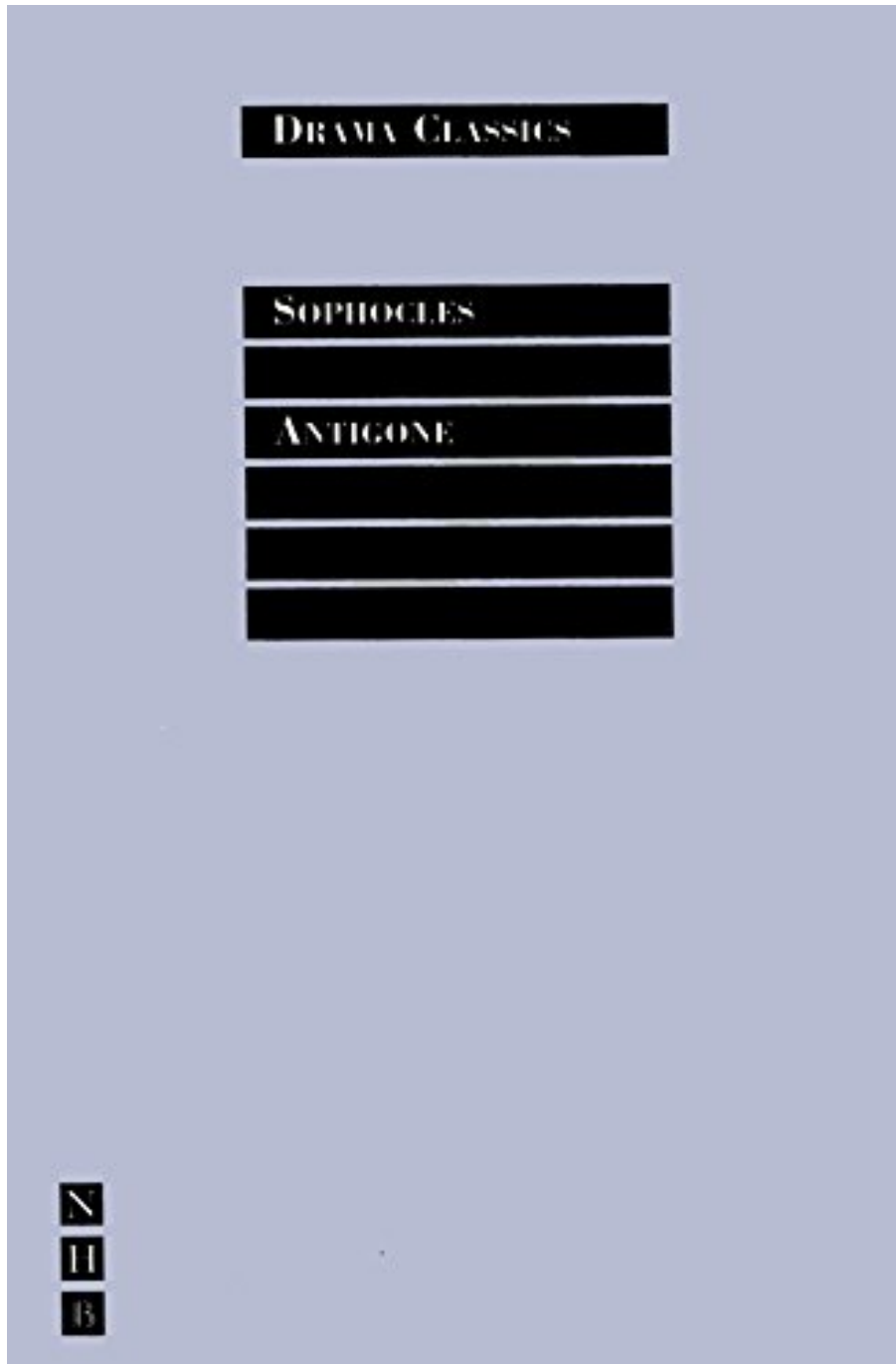


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About the Author

Sophocles was an ancient Greek playwright, the writer of "Oedipus Rex" and "Antigone", among other classic works.

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Antigone is the first great 'resistance' drama - and perhaps the definitive Greek tragedy.

Creon, the King of Thebes, has forbidden the burial of Antigone's brother because he was put to death as a traitor to the crown. Despite being engaged to Creon's son Haemon, Antigone disobeys the King and buries her brother. Enraged, Creon condemns Antigone to death and buries her alive in a cave. The prophet Teiresias warns Creon against such rash actions, and eventually Creon relents - but when he goes to release Antigone it is too late: she has already hanged herself.

Translated and introduced by Marianne McDonald.

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Antigone by Sophocles: A review

By PlantBirdWoman

It's interesting that Sophocles named his play Antigone. He might just as well have named it Creon, and, indeed, given the relative number of lines that he gives each of those characters, that might have made more sense.

The conflict which Sophocles gives us is between the political and the religious interests of ancient Greek society. Antigone represents the ethos of the old ruling families and their loyalty to the gods and to ancient tradition. Creon represents the modern state and the rule of law. Choosing sides in the conflict, it seems evident that Sophocles is more sympathetic to the arguments for a government that represents rule of law.

The background of this story is what one may term a typical Greek tragedy. Antigone is the daughter of Jocasta and Oedipus, who was himself the son of Jocasta, and if you don't know how all that came about, then go read Oedipus Rex. Antigone had two brothers and a sister. Now, she has only a sister left because her two brothers killed each other in a fight over who would rule Thebes. One brother defended the city and the status quo; the other brother was a leader of the revolution.

After both brothers were killed, their uncle, Creon, who is now ruler of Thebes, decreed that the one who defended the city would be buried with full honors, but the one who rebelled against authority would be left on the battlefield for the birds to devour. This puts his niece, Antigone, in conflict with him, because in Greek society of that day, it was the religious and cultural duty of the women of the family to bury deceased family members.

Antigone decides to remain true to the gods and perform the duties that her heritage demands. She will bury her brother. Creon decrees that if she does so, he will have her executed.

True to the tradition she honors, Antigone attempts to bury her brother's body, and true to his word, Creon has her taken and walled up in a cave outside of town with just enough food and water for a few days.

As it happens, not everyone in the family is happy with Creon's action. His son argues for Antigone to be saved and when it seems that his father is not listening, he goes to the cave, finds that Antigone has already hanged herself and commits suicide himself.

Meanwhile, Creon had had a change of heart and was ready to release Antigone. Too late.

So, yes, your typical Greek tragedy, but why does it have such staying power? Why do we still read it and why does it still keep us awake at night wondering who had right on his/her side? Who was the hero here?

I said that I think Sophocles favored Creon, but, in fact, he did give both of the characters full reign to argue their points of view. Antigone was not wrong to want to uphold tradition by obeying the gods' laws as she had been taught to understand them, but she was wrong to completely ignore the state's laws as decreed by the king. Creon was not wrong to insist on the rule of law and that the rights of the state can supersede individual wishes, but he was wrong to completely disregard the gods' laws and the long tradition of the culture from which he came.

What we have here are two extremists who insist upon their own extreme positions without any consideration of compromise. And that is why this play is still so current and why we still read it. It might be ripped from the front page of today's Times. Human nature has not changed one whit in 2500 years. Sophocles saw it all clearly. That is the mark of great art.

I first read Antigone in high school at a time when the conflict between individual conscience and the state's interest in rule of law was in daily confrontation on the streets. I remember the play that I read as being very poetic and it made a huge impression on me. I don't know who the translator was. This particular edition was not at all poetic. The language was very workaday. Easy to understand, but without the rhythm and passion that I remembered. That's why it gets four stars instead of five.

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