

Sophocles', *Antigone*

Sophocles, in his play *Antigone* (441 BCE), discusses the question of whether individual conscience is more important than the law of the land. In the play, based on a legend, *Antigone* defies the king's order and buries her brother who was killed while leading a rebellion.

CREON: You there, whose head is drooping to the ground, do you admit this, or deny you did it?

ANTIGONE: I say I did it and I don't deny it.

CREON: You tell me not at length but in a word. You knew the order not to do this thing?

ANTIGONE: I knew, of course I knew. The word was plain.

CREON: And still you dared to overstep these laws?

ANTIGONE: For me it was not Zeus [king of the gods] who made that order, nor did that Justice who lives with the gods below mark out such laws to hold among mankind. Nor did I think your orders were so strong that you, a mortal man, could over-run the gods' unwritten and unfailing laws... I knew that I must die; how could I not? Even without your warning. But if I left that corpse, my mother's son, dead and unburied I'd have cause to grieve as now I grieve not.

CHORUS: A stubborn daughter of a stubborn sire, this ill-starred maiden kicks against the thorns.

CREON: Well, let her know the most stubborn of wills are soonest bended, as the hardest iron, O'er-heated in the fire to brittleness, Flies soonest into fragments. But this proud girl, in insolence well-schooled, First overstepped the established law, and then-- A second and worse act of insolence-- She boasts and is proud of her wickedness. Now if she defy authority unpunished, I am woman, she the man...The utmost penalty, for her I hold. One of the more hateful still is the miscreant (criminal) who seeks when caught, to make a virtue of a crime.

ANTIGONE: Would you do more than slay your prisoner?

CREON: Not I, your life is mine, and that's enough.

ANTIGONE: Why dally then? To me no word of mine Is pleasant: God forbid it ever should please; Nor am I more acceptable to thee. And yet how otherwise had I achieved a name so glorious as by burying A brother? So my townsmen all would say, if they were not gagged by terror of their king and the notion That all his acts and all his words are law.

CREON: Of all these Thebans (Greeks from the State of Thebes) none thinks so but you.

ANTIGONE: They think as I, but are too frightened to say.

CREON: Have you no shame to say these lies?

ANTIGONE: To be loyal to one's family can bring no shame.

SOURCE: Sophocles, *Antigone*, translated by Elizabeth Wyckoff, in David Greene and Richard Lattimore, eds., *Complete Greek Tragedies*. University of Chicago, 1954. Modern American Library edition, 201-02.