

2. Hegel and Antigone's Unwritten Laws

In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is of course "Spirit" (*Geist*) that is the *Sache selbst*, the Thing Itself. Abstractly, the *Sache selbst* arrives on the scene as the implicit *standard* which the rational individual logically must have and use in order to make critical judgements about the rationality of her own activity. The *Sache selbst* is, in fact, the formally concrete (i.e., universal but subjective) *category* of practical activity. The transition from abstract, subjective Reason to concretely *objective* Spirit (the transition from Chapter V to Chapter VI in Hegel's text) takes place because the rational individual finds that (s)he cannot develop any objective standard of judgement by the employment of pure Reason alone. The "absolute" standard of rational behavior must in the first instance be immediately *given* as absolute. The actual shape of this "givenness," as it was experienced in the orderly appearing of the "Spirit" in our culture, was perfectly expressed by Sophokles in his *Antigone*. Hegel quotes two lines from Antigone's most famous speech in his own translation (which I therefore follow as closely as I can): "They [i.e. the 'distinctions' in the 'spiritual essence'] have for the Antigone of Sophokles the status of the *unwritten* and *securely certain Recht* of the Gods: 'For it is not today and yesterday, but evermore/ It lives, and no one knows from whence it appeared.'"¹

If, as we always ought to, we follow Hegel's hint, and look up the speech, we find that by his reference to *Antigone* Hegel has moved from his initial general characterization of the "distinctions in the essence" as "unsundered spirits, clear to themselves, immaculate heavenly

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Antigone, 454-5; *Phänomenologie*, G.W. IX, 236,7-11 (Miller, section 437). Sophokles makes Antigone speak of the *agrapta k'asphal* ☉ the ☿n/ *nomima* (plural). Hegel's "*Ungeschriebnes und untrügliches Recht*" is singular. Otherwise his translation is as near to being "word for word" as it can be. I have preserved the word *Recht* in my text because (quite apart from its virtual untranslatability in English) it is obviously Hegel's word for the "D ⚡ ☉ who shares home with the gods below."

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shapes” (which is a transparent reference to the Twelve Olympians) to the individuated, but internally sundered image that his concept of “spirit” (as “self-knowledge in absolute otherness”) requires. Antigone’s speech refers directly to only one of the Olympians — the Father and Just King of the Divine Family, Zeus. There is also an indirect reference to the last of the Twelve, the one who is not really a “*heavenly shape*” because he is Hades, the Lord of the Dead. He and his queen (whom Antigone elsewhere calls Persephassa) are “the gods below” with whom *D#k* ⑥ makes her home. Thus Hegel’s *Sache*, “the *unwritten* and *securely certain Recht* of the Gods” receives in Antigone’s defiance of Kreon the divided structure proper to spirit. In place of the unsundered, self-transparent, spirits who dwell in Heaven’s light we have *D#k* ⑥, the justice of Zeus (the sovereign Lord who dwells in the perpetual light of Heaven): but *D#k* ⑥ herself dwells with the Gods of the darkness into which we mortals must all go.

On this fundamental *internal* distinction Hegel builds his theory of “True Spirit” as a doubled community. As a united and individuated “self-consciousness” (i.e. as the self-transparent, unsundered, stainless shape of one of the Olympians) the community makes its own law, the Human Law of the City as a self-governing body; but as a “living thing,” this spiritual community is made up of many of the older natural communities: the City is a community of *families*. It is for the family that the *Recht* who dwells with the Gods below exists. And, in order for True Spirit to exist, *D#k* ⑥ must always remain there in the Underworld with her due meed of honor. The “true” spiritual self-consciousness of the community is the stainless Olympian shape; but it can only exist as long as every *natural* (i.e., singular) self-consciousness identifies with it *unto death*. Ordinary natural “self-consciousness,” or the singular being-for-self, must therefore receive its due recognition in the dark kingdom of Hades. The *Recht* that dwells with the Gods below — the just recognition of the dead — is the foundation of all justice in the daylight above.

This *natural* division of *Recht*, which makes the *Sache selbst* capable of that “self-recognition in absolute otherness” which is “True Spirit,” answers to the natural division of the sexes. To the male, as the natural principle of self-consciousness, or the *free* principle that affirms itself at the cost of *life*, there belongs the unifying piety of the self-clear and stainless Olympian who is the City’s “self-consciousness.” To the female belongs the unifying piety of *D#k* ⑥ dwelling with Hades and Persephassa. For the man there is the Law of the City; for the woman that of the Family. Each of them must acknowledge the kingship of Zeus; for in him is their identity. But Zeus, alas, is only the *invisible* spirit who unites them. His visibility comes in the lightning bolt that makes the darkness bright as day; but it infallibly destroys what it strikes. So the two Laws go asunder; the stainless beauty of the Olympian shape is stained by tragedy

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and guilt, and only the law of human self-will survives. The primitive natural self-consciousness of the aggressive male becomes a *visible* spirit, the imperial will of the *human* Zeus; and the life-reverencing consciousness of the female becomes the secret, serpent-spirit of cunning and intrigue. These two survivors are the “internal distinctions” in what was often (but wrongly, as Sophokles, Plato and Hegel all agree) thought of as the “oldest” law — the “law of the stronger.”

This, in a bare thumbnail outline, is the tragedy of “True Spirit.” All of it, as we shall shortly see, is marvelously embodied and displayed in Antigone’s story. But the character of Sophokles’ Antigone herself defeated Hegel, as it has defeated everyone so far. Hegel could see that the view that Goethe later expressed was wrong.² Anyone who wanted to see Antigone as a kind of proto-martyr for the Lutheran (or the Kantian) conscience, was bound to feel that her final long speech betrayed and disgraced the rational nobility of her great defense of the Unwritten Law. Hegel knew that the mistake lay in the anachronism of endowing Antigone with a Kantian conscience. He wanted to see her as the martyr of *natural ethics*. So he tried to read the peculiar claim in her last long speech — the claim that husband and child are not *ultimately* important to the piety of the Underworld because they are replaceable, while a brother is absolutely sacred because he is not replaceable — as part of the Unwritten Law.

In so doing Hegel certainly stained the “harmony” of the immaculate Olympian world of the “Greek ideal” which had come to him from Schiller. But that does not matter very much, since his “Greek ideal” was unhistorical anyway. As we shall see presently, the Schillerian ideal *is* present in Sophokles, but what Hegel says in the *Phenomenology* about the relations of the *ethical* family is much closer to the realities of family life in Sophoklean Athens. So Hegel’s objectively ethical interpretation of Antigone’s last long speech is a defensible strategy; but it is, nevertheless, historically mistaken.

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See *Conversations with Eckermann*, 21 March 1827 (also 1 April 1827). Goethe offers some valuable insights — e.g. about Ismene who is not generally appreciated. But he wants Antigone to be the spiritual twin of his Iphigeneia — and that she certainly is not. (It was actually Schiller who suggested this spiritual sisterhood in 1802 — see Steiner, *Antigones*, New York, OUP, 1984, p. 48).

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What matters more than any staining of Schiller's ideal is the fact that Hegel's reading of Antigone's speech produces its own historical nonsense. For the sister/brother relation has never been given special recognition and unique status by anyone except the Savior who proclaimed a Kingdom in which there is "neither marrying nor giving in marriage" (and consequently no begetting of children either). Hegel's distortion of the Unwritten Law reflects his logical desire to see the arrival of the *Christian* "Kingdom of God" as the "return of True Spirit into itself." But for the closing of *that* logical circle, the proper classical Gestalt is not in any tragedy, but in Aristophanic Comedy or in Plato's *Republic*. There can be no justification for destroying the Olympian ideal of Sophokles and Schiller in order to make that circle. The bending of Sophokles' play to that purpose involves the destruction of the tragedy of Antigone herself as Sophokles wanted us to see it. Hegel understood Sophokles far better than Goethe and Schiller. But he *misunderstood* him nevertheless.³

Having said this much about Hegel's undeniable mistake, let us turn to the interpretation of "true spirit" in Sophokles. According to his own recorded declaration, Sophokles achieved in his maturity "the kind of diction which is most expressive of character (*ἠθικὴ ἔκτατον*) and best."⁴ The first essential for the understanding of the *Antigone* (which exhibits this "best" diction at its best) is to distinguish the objective "ethics" of Antigone's social situation from her subjective "character." The mediating principle between them (from the Hegelian standpoint) is the fact that she is both objectively and subjectively a *woman*. This fact was certainly vital in the

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See *Phänomenologie*, G.W. IX, 247,11 - 48,10 (Miller, section 457). It should, in justice, be added that Hegel's misunderstanding of Sophokles' play is *nothing* in comparison with the misunderstandings that have been foisted upon the Hegelian paragraph that contains it, by supposedly expert scholars, who have not even bothered to study the speech of Antigone that created the problem. The idea that Hegel is talking about his relation with *his own* sister — or hers with him — is too childish to waste ink on.

4

Plutarch, *De profectibus in Virtute* 7. Hegel, who owned a complete Plutarch from his University years onwards, may have seen this autobiographical testimony (which is virtually unique for an ancient dramatist). But if he did, he mistook the subjective for the objective sense of *ἠθικὴ ἔκτατον*. (I myself depend on the interpretation given by C.M. Bowra — see "Sophocles on his own development" in *Problems in Greek Poetry*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1953, pp. 108-25).

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mind of Sophokles, since he opens his play with a discussion between the sisters in which Ismene defines the proper “ethical” stance of a *woman* in their situation very clearly.

But it is equally important to Sophokles (perhaps *more* important, because of his predominant concern with “character”) that the sisters are the daughters of King Oedipus and Queen Jokasta. He will not write the tragedy of the parents for some years yet,⁵ but their shadow looms over the *Antigone* continually. He could hardly have written the play that he presented in 441 B.C., if the main outlines of the interpretation of the myth that he dramatized later in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* were not already clear in his mind; and that means that he already had to have a fully developed view of the *characters* in the earlier story.

One might, perhaps, be somewhat skeptical about the “necessity” of what I say Sophokles “had to have.” But it is a fact that there are some remarkable resemblances between the character of “Antigone” and that of “Oedipus” in the *Tyrannus* play of Sophokles. There is also an obvious resemblance between Antigone and Jokasta — their resolute suicide as soon as the game is lost. Less obvious, but much deeper and more general, is the resemblance between Ismene and Jokasta. Moreover, the character of Polyneices in the *Oedipus at Colonus* clearly shows the traits which would have caused him to be rejected by the popular will; especially if we suppose that Eteocles escaped the heritage of his grandfather’s tyrannical temper, and inherited his mother’s moderate reasonableness instead. Finally, the character of Kreon — which is not quite *static*, since before he becomes King he exhibits a very sensible awareness that he is not really fit for the office — is portrayed with perfect consistency in all three plays. So there is

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The present scholarly consensus seems to favor ten or twelve years. But I cannot find any *basis* for it. It would make some of my arguments more plausible to some readers probably, if the interval were shorter. But it would not matter to me. It is incumbent upon me to confess, I think, that to my eye the *Oedipus Coloneus*, which was definitely written more than thirty-five years later, exhibits an almost perfect coherence and continuity with the *Antigone* — only the betrothal of Haimon to a girl who has risked violation as a wanderer is hard to credit (in the light of Kreon’s expressed views). We should reflect that even if the *death* of Oedipus was the last thing Sophokles wrote about, it was probably the first stage of the myth that he *thought* about, because he was himself born in Colonus. (There was a hero-cult of Oedipus at Colonus later on; but we cannot be certain that it existed in the time of Sophokles. It may have actually originated in his *Colonus* play; but as some of my later footnotes show, I do not believe that.)

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every reason to believe that Sophokles actually *had* thought hard about *all* the members of the house of Labdakos before he began to write about any of them. In his “ethical” phase he was bound to do this, because Aischylos — who was his acknowledged first model — had bequeathed to him the tragic concern with an ancestral curse; and when he transformed this Aeschylean concern into the more naturalistic tragedy of *inherited character*, he deliberately began at the end of the line (at least that is what he did in the Theban example that has come down to us).

After this almost telegraphic preamble about the nature of Sophokles’ general concern with “character,” let us go straight to the heart of the problem. Antigone states her basic “ethical” position in the passage from which Hegel quotes the two lines that I have already discussed. Her choice, as she saw it, was between obeying the proclamation of Kreon’s herald, and obeying the unwritten law which is immemorial and has no known origin. She proclaims proudly that she has preferred the latter.

But we have to remember that at the beginning of the play Ismene had invoked another part of the unwritten law. According to the immemorial custom of the *Volk* it is not the place of women — and certainly not the place of young, unmarried girls — to *choose* at all. Ismene asks her sister to consider the whole record of what has already come from the free choices of their family (including Jokasta’s choice, which no rational person could think was “blind,” when the very name of “Oedipus” tells us that his damaged feet were a recognition signal). Then Ismene says:

But it is needful, first, to keep this in mind: that we were born
 Woman, such as does not fight with men
 And then, too, because we are ruled by the stronger sex
 We must heed these [proclamations],

and even more painful ones than these.⁶

The “law of the stronger” was one of the most universally admitted parts of the unwritten law. But Ismene separates it (with her *mén* and *dé*) and gives it second place. She well knows that whether one should fight is not always determined by whether one can expect to win. The problem as she sees it is not a matter of courage. She would certainly have agreed with Aristotle that a woman ought not to develop and display active or aggressive courage; but she has already spoken of her mother’s suicide in a way that shows that she sees that suicide as very brave. When Antigone’s deed is once done (against her advice) Ismene will show herself her mother’s daughter, as brave as Antigone herself.

Both of the sisters are true daughters of their mother. But Antigone is her father’s daughter too. She has the curse (the *tyrannical* temper that her grandfather bequeathed); and she has her father’s resolute dedication to “the community.” But in her case it is directed with ethical appropriateness toward the natural community of blood-kinship (Hegel is right about that). Oedipus the riddle-guesser, however, also had a very strong drive for *self*-preservation. He was clearly a political genius (that is how Sophokles *naturalized* the encounter with the Sphinx, which was the only part of the myth that he could not treat *literally*). So when the Oracle spoke, Oedipus saw himself as obligated by his kingly office to drive the truth (half of which I think he already knew) into the open. That forced Jokasta to *tell* him the whole truth (in

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Antigone, lines 61-4. The translation is mine, and is as faithful as I can make it. The same is true for all following quotations. I have used the older Oxford Classical Text (of A.C. Pearson, Clarendon Press, 1924, reprinted 1953); and from here onwards I shall simply give the line references in my text.

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Impiety is what my pious act has earned.

But if indeed these things be fair among the gods

Then having suffered, may we acknowledge we have erred;

Or if these men here are in the wrong, may they suffer

No greater evils than they unjustly wreak on me. (891-928)

After this, Antigone speaks only once in a brief lyrical farewell to her city.⁷ She bids the Chorus (whom she calls “the *koiranidai*,” i.e. “princely rulers,” of Thebes) to look on what she “the last remaining royal princess” suffers at what hands, “for reverence to piety” (937-44). One can well understand Goethe’s bewilderment. For how can her still continued emphasis on her piety be reconciled with the admission that she would not have violated the duty of citizenship for a husband or a son? Either the Unwritten Law is the true piety, to be observed toward father, husband, brother and son equally; or else brothers are no more sacred than other male kin once they are adjudged traitors to the City.

Antigone’s proposed *nomos* is worthless, and no one has ever invoked it. She is deceiving herself. We know — and in reality she knows too — that she would never invoke this *nomos* as an excuse for letting husband or son lie unburied. She herself ignores the case of her *father* when she says to the dead shade of her brother “I have picked you out before all for honor” (913). As she says, she has already done everything appropriate for her parents (900-2).⁸

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According to the manuscripts she speaks *twice*; and I think they may be right, since the intervening two line speech both constitutes her last word to Kreon, and strengthens her impact upon the Chorus. (But if, as some editors including Pearson believe, the speech should be restored to the Chorus, then it *shows* the impact of her argument on them. So that point is not important. The disputed speech is: “Alas, this is the word of death that has come as close as can be” — 933-4.)

8

I do not think that Sophokles can ever have been unmindful of the fact that Oedipus was buried at Colonus (for that surely was the biographical root of his fascination with the myth?). So when he lets Antigone say “with my own hand I washed and decked you,” we can infer that his meditation on the myth has already reached the point where he sees Antigone as her blind father’s companion in his last days. But this line shows equally clearly that he has not yet worked out the form of Oedipus’ death, or the part in it that he eventually allotted to Theseus.

But everything that she has done, except the burial of Polyneices, is uncontroversially ethical; and a husband and child are just what she does not yet have. It appears at the moment of this speech that she never will have either; and she has several times lamented that. By saying that she would *not* have done her deed for these quite hypothetical kinfolk whom she will only have if her offence is pardoned, she is coming as close as she can to an apology. In effect, she is saying that if only her proper lot in life could be restored to her, she would never again make herself the *defiant* champion of the Unwritten Law. Of course, she is confident that the need for her to do that would never arise; but I think that she is also acknowledging the dawn of a new situation in which she would not have the old “royal” right to do it.

To whom does she speak? First of all, to herself (and I will come back to that later). But publicly to the Chorus. She claimed initially that public opinion and specifically the Chorus were on her side (504-5, 509). But, in fact, as Bowra has skillfully shown,⁹ the Chorus does not support her action. If he can see that, then *a fortiori* so can she. Moreover, her furious exchange with Kreon has made her see the force of the lesson that Ismene tried to teach her. She realizes that it is her place, according to the Law she has espoused, to be humble and obedient, to *beg and plead* for what she thinks is “right,” not to assert her *D^{nk} Ⓞ* categorically like a King. So she minimizes her unwomanly act of assertion as much as she can, and she *pleads* to receive the lot which by the Unwritten Law should rightfully be hers.

She already knows that her appeal to the Unwritten Law, and her bold declaration that everyone agrees with her although they dare not say so, has not been without its effect on Kreon. He is, above all, a *conventional* man, prejudiced but moderately intelligent, and not insensitive to conventional arguments that he can understand.¹⁰ Antigone’s invocation of Zeus — the god of

(We also have here a confirmation that he made up the story of Oedipus’ death himself, and did not hear it from a nurse or some local storyteller as a boy. If local tradition already said that it was *Theseus* who *buried* Oedipus, that would have counted for Sophokles, the local child with political aspirations, as what Aristotle calls an “unbreakable” element of the myth.)

9

Sophoclean Tragedy, Oxford, Clarendon, 1944, pp. 83-90. Antigone does not hear their first reaction, but their first address to her makes it plain (381-3).

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kingship — makes him realize, at least, that there would be a ritual pollution involved in his killing *her*, for her disobedience.

This reciprocal effect of each upon the other is typically Sophoklean.¹¹ But the effect is a gradual one. Others must intervene to bring it about. First the Chorus lets Antigone know that her act has a double aspect in its relation to the Unwritten Law. Then comes Haimon to tell Kreon that in private all of the citizens are on Antigone's side (693-700 — just as she said they were, 504-5). When the Chorus asks Kreon after this whether both girls are really going to die, Kreon says Ismene shall go free; and when they ask how he is going to kill Antigone, he admits that he is not going to kill her but *keep her alive in a cave with minimal supplies* in order to avoid pollution. Thus he reveals that Antigone — with Haimon's confirmation — has moved him.

Now Antigone's mind begins to move. Kreon has called the cave-existence that he proposes for her “praying to Hades to escape death” (777-8). Informed of her fate (and

His intelligence is more evident in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*; but as King he combines an absolute confidence in his own virtue, with the automatic assumption that every male critic of his policy is venal. It should be noted that he caught this infection of tyrannical suspicion from the master of political prudence, Oedipus himself; but since Oedipus applied the doctrine of universal venality to Kreon's own loyal service, Kreon ought to have learned even then how wrongheaded and unjust the suspicion can be.

11

What gets through to Kreon from Antigone's speech is the realization that he, as head of the family, *must bury her*. (How can he do that with her blood on his hands?) But the penny does not drop at once. At first, Antigone's defiance makes him resolved to have done with *both* of the dangerous Princesses who do not know their place. It is the fact that the Chorus is against him (which becomes evident when they query his decision about Ismene — 770) that begins his conversion.

Similarly, what gets through to Antigone is the remark “Well now I would be no man, but she the man” (484). Kreon repeats Ismene's lesson to Haimon too (679-80). But the point only gets through to Antigone when she is faced with the new sentence of a *living* death. Ironically it is Antigone's effect on Kreon that mediates his effect on her; and the result is that the mediation can produce no good outcome.

presumably of the reasons for it)¹² she begins (implicitly) to plead with the Chorus, by contrasting her *living death* with the proper life that the Unwritten Law appoints for her. The point is that she now *knows* that the Unwritten Law does have enough authority in the City to save her life at least. Being her father's daughter, she is from this point onwards a political pleader. Having sung the contrast between her living death and the proper life of a woman, she reminds the "citizens of the earth that fathered us" of the story of Niobe (deprived of her children). On being told that "Niobe was a goddess and we are but mortals," she repeats the contrast, this time between *their* lot as the prosperous land-owners of the city, and the fate decreed for her. This meets with the response that by going to the last limit of boldness she offended Justice — and that she must pay the ancestral debt as well.

This is the crux of Antigone's tragedy. Her father is *also* her brother; and it is because of *his* marriage bed that she cannot have one. Interestingly, it is when she stops arguing, and simply bewails the terrible irony of this, that the Chorus grants that there is some slight merit in her case. They begin to show now that they are indeed sorry for her. It is time for Kreon to put a stop to the argument — but not before Antigone has repeated her basic argument in the mode of a female lament for her friendless state.

This is the actual context of her final speech; and it ought by now to be evident that what I have claimed is true. Her argument is a politic apology for having transgressed the Unwritten Law herself, and a promise that she would never offend again if she could only be saved from the living death to which (in deference to the Unwritten Law) she has been condemned. Her final farewell drives home the point that the Chorus, as representatives of the people, are the real "princes of Thebes" now. The day of the old Royal House is over. Kreon is *the people's* executive, and Ismene has become (by Antigone's own firm decision) a private citizen. She herself is being unjustly sacrificed because she acted *royally*. She admits that what she did is a "crime" in the new *civil* context; but her "crime" was only piety if we grant that she was *royally*

12

It is not quite clear to me just *when* Antigone is on stage, and when not. It is not essential to my case that she should *hear* the Third Ode in which the Chorus take the humble side of the Unwritten Law against her. She certainly knows that ordinary citizens do not argue with Kreon. Nor does she need to hear the argument of Haimon with Kreon. But she does need to know *why* her sentence has been changed from simple death to a solitary life on the edge of it.

burdened with the heritage of the ancestral curse. The curse destroyed her House, and left her with the problem of reconciling the last fruits of Laios' violence and Oedipus' unwitting sins, with the piety of the pre-civil time when there was only the Unwritten Law. In that pre-civil world the Royal House was the divinely privileged representative of Zeus in giving Justice to the Community. Antigone's curious argument is a way of saying that her brother died under *one* Law, while her potential husband and son would die under another.

In other words, Antigone understands and speaks for the wisdom of Athena in the *Eumenides*. She does not *abandon* the Divine Law at all. But she admits that for the future it must be exercised and maintained by a *communally established* and authorized power. She claims that her own *unauthorized* act was necessary in fulfilment of the older Unwritten Law, and she promises that if the community will only execute and defend the Law now (as they should) in her own case, *she* will recognize for the future (like Ismene whom she has *royally commanded* to forget the prerogative and responsibility of royalty) that *they* have now become the only divinely authorized guardians of the Unwritten Law. She, too, the last of the Princesses, would be willing not to be a princess any more if they would only let her; and they *ought* to, because if they are *fit* to take over the responsibility of the Royal House, then they ought to recognize, even in the person of a woman, the royal fulfilment of true piety.

Thus Hegel did not need to distort the Unwritten Law in order to make Antigone's last great speech accord with it. The sophisticated argument, by which Antigone makes the final act of *royal* piety into a unique exception, actually presents (in the mode of Understanding) the transition to *Reason*. Hegel's doctrine of the sister-brother relation as unique in the logic of the ethical substance, can stand on its own logical feet without needing to project Antigone's sophistry back into the *D^{ark} 6* of Zeus itself. It is perfectly correct to say that the sister-brother relation is the *Vorstellung* in the world of Zeus of the Kingdom of God "in which there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage" because Reason is the only "Father" and the "Earth" (the universal individual who is the natural womb and home of the whole human community) is the only Mother. But that logical uniqueness of the sister-brother bond, with its implicit prophecy of the Spirit's final return into itself, has nothing to do with the universal operation of the Divine Law. Indeed, if the Divine Law is to produce the *universal* community into which the Spirit finally returns, then there logically *cannot* be anything special about the duty of sister to brother in it.

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Antigone: O Haemon dearest, how your father wrongs you.

Creon: You, and your bride-couch too, are causing too much grief.

Chorus: But will you really deprive your own boy of this girl
[of his]?

Creon: Hades it is, that will put a stop to this
wedding [not me]. (568-75)¹⁴

14

V. Ehrenberg's claim that Kreon seems to live "in a world where the gods have no say" (1954, 59) is mistaken. But he wants to make them into tools of Hegel's "Human Law" as far as he can. The intervention of the Chorus does not, of course, mean that a father cannot properly change his mind about a son's marriage. It only indicates that there is license to plead, even with the King, for a young lover. Thus, they confirm that everyone knows how it is with the emotional "carpentry" of this coupling. It is true that they speak only for *Haimon's* loss, but Antigone has just expressed *her*

feelings, and Kreon has indicated how little *they* matter. (The manuscripts attribute 572 to Ismene; but Kreon's comment makes no sense unless it is directed at Antigone. So I do not see how anyone can doubt that the Aldine emendation was correct. Pearson's acceptance of it has certainly nothing to do with any theory about Antigone's character — *pace* M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge, 1987, p.).

Ismene clearly asserts that this is a *love* match. Antigone's "*O philtat' Haimon*" is as close as the dignity of Sophoklean tragedy can come to the language of love; and Kreon's contemptuous comment shows that she, the haughty princess, has broken down in tears (like any woman, and not like a man). The Chorus reminds him that he ought to have some sympathy for his *son's* feelings; and we end with him taking refuge behind the formal *Sache selbst* as efficiently as any modern bourgeois (not the behavior of a king who speaks for Zeus at all).

So much for Hegel's mistakes, and for the proof that the *Antigone* justifies not only his concept of the Ethical Substance, but even the Hellenic ideal of his youth, far better than he realized. We have no more objective "ethical" points to make about the play. But we have not finished with Sophokles or with the *subjective* characterization of his Antigone yet. I said earlier that Antigone's last long speech was spoken more to herself than to anyone else. I may seem by now to have argued myself almost into admitting that that was an overstatement. But Antigone's farewell to the Chorus shows us why she did need to say something like this previous speech *to herself*, because the subjective aspect of it is quite different from its objective function in her political pleading. It is in her last farewell that she addresses the Chorus as *koiranidai*, and so makes the point that it is the Council of Elders who are *now* the authority responsible for maintaining the Unwritten Law. This is the last stroke in her political argument. But also she takes leave of them here as the last Princess of the old Royal House; and in that we can see that she accepts her birth-status, and the fate that it imposes on her.

In its relevance to the choice she makes about her own fate, her last major speech has a double significance. Objectively (as we have seen) she could and would now become a loyal citizen of Thebes. But subjectively she is saying to herself that since that lot cannot be hers, she must die royally, and set her royal resolution above that finite civil happiness.

She needs to tell herself this, because the effect of Kreon's compromise with the Unwritten Law has been to give Antigone the choice between her father's death and her mother's. Her father's devious "policy" in his fulfilment of the command of Delphi, left her mother with no choice at all. For Jokasta could never live to face the horrified incredulity of the Chorus: "How could thy father's furrows have borne thee in silence so long?"¹⁵ But for Oedipus

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Oedipus Tyrannus, lines 1211-12.

himself his maneuvers secured the possibility of a life of want and privation in the darkness. Antigone witnessed both deaths at close quarters — the resolute speed of her mother as Queen, and the resolute slowness of her father as a blind beggar.¹⁶ When she calls herself “the last remaining Princess” we should recognize that she is giving the first decisive index of her choice. No one must know that choice yet, because the final tragedy depends on the natural assumption supported by her previous argument, that like her father she will cling to life as long as she can. But her choice is now resolved; and so we can see, through hindsight, that she made nothing of the husband and the son she was never going to have, not because their death would really have been nothing to her, but because the life she might have had with them *must* now be nothing to her. Her dead are all she has; and what she has done for her dead brother must *be* in place of husband and child to her. As she puts it, she “comes down last with the worst death by far,” because even her mother had managed to wrest a husband and children for herself out of a first marriage blasted by the Oracle. But the very “Law” that Antigone obeyed, has forced her to give that up for the sake of her brother’s burial. It is no wonder, then, that Sophokles wants us to see her lost marriage as an ideal love-match, and not in the normal “ethical” light at all; and no wonder that Antigone almost takes leave of our common reason, in claiming that her duty to her brother was more sacred than any other tie could ever be.

I have several times called her argument “sophistic”; and there is the best of reasons for that. The most cunning stroke of tragic irony in Sophokles’ characterization of Antigone as the daughter of the man who defeated the Sphinx, only becomes apparent to us when we know where her argument actually came from. The story is in Herodotus; and it was a *Persian* tyrant and a Persian wife who indelibly besmirched the Unwritten Law with it — not that there were not wives as perverse and tyrants as cruel in *Greek* folklore, but I expect Herodotus was only the

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Anyone who thinks it is illegitimate to assume this background for the heroine of 441 B.C. (when the death of Oedipus was not written down till thirty-five years later, and was certainly *not clearly envisaged in its final shape* until after most of those years had passed) should study Ismene’s summary of the story in lines 49-54. The *wanderings* of Oedipus in his blindness are not mentioned. But that aspect of the myth is guaranteed as “unbreakable” for Sophokles by the fact that Oedipus died in Colonus, where the poet himself was born. (That Sophokles already conceived of Antigone as the witness of Oedipus’ death is guaranteed by Antigone’s own statement in her final long speech).

first of many Greeks to enjoy a sense of superiority to the barbarians and their despots on the strength of it.

The story says that Darius, being convinced that Intaphernes and his family were conspiring against him, had all the males of the family seized and condemned to death. The wife of Intaphernes came wailing at the doors of the palace, and the Great King “was moved to pity her,” says Herodotus (but was he?). The message the King sent her was that she could nominate *one* of her kinsmen, who would be spared. She chose her *brother*. The Great King was astonished and sent to ask her *why* she made that choice. She gave him Antigone’s argument almost word for word: “Oh king, I can get a husband again, if it is God’s pleasure, children if I lose these; but my father and mother being dead, in no way can I have another brother. This is why I have spoken as I did.” The King was pleased with her answer and spared her eldest son as well as her brother.¹⁷

The astonishment of Darius, and his insistence on twisting the knife a bit, suggests to me that he suspected the woman of loving her brother in a forbidden way; and her answer is, to my eye, the argument of someone with a guilty secret that needs to be concealed.¹⁸ At any rate, I am satisfied that Sophokles wanted his audience to see the contrast that way if they knew the story (or when they came across it). For an illicit love is what is directly excluded in the case of Antigone’s sacrifice of marriage and family for the burial of her *dead* brother. Sophokles has already shown us how deep the affection of both sisters for both of their brothers was; and he has shown us how spontaneously normal and genuine Antigone’s love for her betrothed was. Sophokles certainly regarded the idea that any incestuous feelings existed among these innocent children of incest, as too absurd to occur to any rational observer. I think he was quite delighted

17

Herodotus, *Histories* III, 119. I have quoted — with one small emendation — from the translation of David Grene (Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 261-2).

18

It must be admitted that the eventual release of the eldest son, also, might be taken to indicate that the King was satisfied in the end that the woman was only making “Sophie’s Choice” as best she could. No Greek would take her choice as natural however. It has nothing in common with the acts of Althaea or Medea, which everyone understood to be acts of blind passion (and bitterly regretted afterwards in the case of the Greek Althaea at least).

to find an argument which looks like a rationalization for incestuous passion, but which could be used as an apology for an innocent act of loving self-sacrifice.¹⁹

If we can assume that, by the time she was “dragged away” by the guards, the Chorus, and even Kreon, understood Antigone’s pleading better than Goethe did, then we can see why they expected her to follow her father’s example rather than her mother’s. The difference between the meaning of Antigone’s last speech for herself (as indicated by her farewell) and its meaning as the last step (and something very near to an apology) in her argument with the Chorus, is what the *actual* tragedy of Sophokles’ *Antigone* depends on. If Sophokles had wanted to write the tragedy that Goethe (and even Hegel) see Antigone as the heroine in, then her proud defiance and her challenge to proceed at once to execution would never have come so early. Matters like the reason for repeating the burial in daylight would have been gone into. Haimon would probably have been brought in to plead with his beloved (rather than with his father) before she made her defiance absolute, and so on (in ways that I cannot guess at). But as it is, Sophokles has left those *obvious* things for us to work out by ourselves; and, of course, we fall over ourselves looking for *subtle* solutions. We invent utterly *insane* hypotheses such as “It was really Ismene who performed the first burial by night” and “Antigone does not really care for the young man who chooses to die with her.”²⁰ What is obvious is that a rational person does not

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“In all antiquity there is not a purer-minded poet” (F. Storr, in the Loeb Classical Library *Sophocles*, I, x). Nothing could be more absurd, since a “pure-minded” poet, especially a tragedian, would be an appallingly bad one. The cult of “purity” has been the bane of *Antigone* interpreters in particular. On the contrary Sophokles knew as much about the impurity of human motives as anyone ever has known. It seems to me certain, for instance, that he had undistorted Oedipal dreams; but he also understood the flesh crawling horror that a sense of pollution by incest can produce. Mr. Storr’s view of Sophokles, like Goethe’s image of Antigone, is mildly ridiculous; but a view like that of Walter Agard can only be called *obscene* (*Classical Philology* XXXII, 1937, 263-5; compare Edmund Wilson in *The Wound and the Bow*, 1941). *Pure* the mind of Sophokles was not; *healthy*, in a preeminent degree, it was. (Perhaps he was fortunate to be an aspiring politician in Periklean Athens, and not a modern academic, or an advanced literary critic!)

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die with someone who does not love him; and that a Royal Princess will neither let her pious act be impiously undone, nor let a loyal commoner of the kind that Kreon miscalls a *doulos* (slave) suffer the proclaimed punishment for the act in her stead.²¹ So Antigone performs the burial a second time (her initial attempt to get away with it secretly in the dark shows her mother's daughter in this instance, just as her prompt recognition that Hegel's daylight law will have to be defied in the daylight shows her father's).

She, the last Royal Princess, goes resolutely to her death, rather than accept a half-life; and the stone that she has cast into the mind of the Commons becomes an avalanche. The Unwritten Law finds its proper masculine champion in the blind Teiresias.²² Kreon at first suspects that Teiresias has been bought. Sophokles will not write the tragedy of Oedipus himself for some years yet; but when he does we shall see that he makes Kreon learn this piece of tyrannical wisdom from Oedipus himself. Having already used it first here to characterize Kreon as an obstinate fool, it no doubt delighted Sophokles later to show how the fool got the rule of thumb, which is all that he knows of kingship, from watching the master of political prudence. In fact the scenes are so similar, in everything except their outcomes, that even if they were not conceived together (as they may have been)²³ it is clear at least that Sophokles used to the full,

For the Ismene hypothesis see J.E. Harry, *Greek Tragedy*, 1933, pp. 118-9. He *identifies* the author of this madness as W.H.D. Rouse — but he gives no reference. The Haimon hypothesis is Agard's — see note 19 above.

21

When Kreon says "It is not permitted for one who is *doulos* of his neighbors to think too big" (478-9) he is not speaking of Antigone (as Bowra quite absurdly supposes — *Sophoclean Tragedy*, p. 73). It is quite clear that he is contrasting proud princesses, who do not know their place, with humble minded men. (Not all such men are *douloi* — Bowra is right that *doulos* is a word which only a tyrant would use about free citizens at all.) Kreon has the haughtiness of the old Royal House in *his* own — not very admirable — way. But he is not Laios, who did indeed think that *everyone* was his *doulos*.

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By this time Teiresias must be far older than Homer's Nestor. The agelessness of the ever-aged Teiresias is one detail that Sophokles did not bother to be naturalistic about.

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the advantage of hindsight given him by the fact that he had started from the end. In other words when he came to write the scene between Oedipus and Teiresias, he knew that the spectacle of Oedipus *refusing* to accept Teiresias as a true prophet, and learning such a bitter lesson, would make the scene already written (with the opposite outcome) seem all the more credible.

But there is one important difference. What Teiresias reveals to Oedipus are primarily *memories* — the element of “prophecy” is only in the sentencing of the criminal.²⁴ What the prophet says to Kreon, on the other hand, is genuinely prophetic. But it is prophecy only of a very natural and rational kind. It involves only the understanding of Antigone’s character, and of Haimon’s feelings. Kreon has seen Haimon’s passion break out against himself, in spite of Haimon’s very evident determination to behave like a proper son; and he has commented copiously himself upon Antigone’s obstinate pride. What gets through to him in the prophecies of Teiresias, however, is the threat of what the *other cities* will do when *their* altars are polluted. About *Theban* altars he can affect indifference, and even avail himself (in his typically simple-minded way) of sophistry: “For I know well enough that none of us men has enough might to pollute the Gods” (1043-4). (This is *his* counterpart for the subtlety of Antigone’s argument that her brother’s burial was the one duty that she could in no way shirk). But he knows well enough that the other cities will not accept that view of pollution, even if he can make the Thebans swallow it without choking. Teiresias’ talk of omens at his sacrifices *might* have been purchased by Antigone’s friends. But *this* prophecy about the other cities is the simple horse-sense of

When the Chorus says to Kreon: “He has not *ever* prophesied falsely to the city” (1094) we might perhaps say this is no more than the sort of exaggeration that everyone still indulges in, when someone else supports their own point of view. But it seems to me quite likely that Sophokles already sees the whole story as involving a true prophecy of the fate of Oedipus.

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The question of why Oedipus feels able to dismiss the memories of Teiresias, although he knows that he has killed a man who was old enough to be his father (and probably knows that that man was the husband of his Queen, since I think that his choice of the road back to Thebes after the close conjunction of his visit to the Oracle with his astonishing exploit at the place where three ways met shows that he was looking for the widowed Queen) is one of the most interesting, and deepest, problems of *his* tragedy. For the explanation see my essay on “The True History of Oedipus.” The actual “prophecy” of Teiresias becomes *divine law*, of course, as soon as Oedipus discovers that it is based on true memories. *This* he learns soon afterwards from Jokasta herself.

political piety. Kreon does not understand “loyal opposition” at all. But he understands foreign hostility.

What he has understood at last is that it is urgently necessary to bury *all* of the dead.²⁵ He probably also takes seriously the forecast that Haimon will make a suicide pact with Antigone. But it is much harder for him to give in to the *woman* who first told him what his duty was, than to anyone else; and I have shown that the natural understanding of Antigone’s argument with the Chorus would lead one to think that her release was *not* urgent. So although the Chorus tells him to set Antigone free as quickly as possible, he leaves that till last. Some interpreters think he would have been too late in any case. But to me it appears that what Sophokles intended was for us to understand that it was literally the *third* (official) burial of Polyneices that cost Antigone her life. I do not mean to suggest that Antigone still had to struggle over the choice between her parental models. I think her mind was quite made up about that. But it is natural to suppose that her farewell to Haimon took quite a long time.

Haimon attacks his father, and so mimics the act of Oedipus in killing Laios. But this is only symbolic of his decision to follow Antigone. Eurydice goes silently into the palace (like Jokasta); but her death is on the model set by her own son (leaving the repetition of Jokasta’s death to Antigone). None of this is accidental. It shows us that behind Ismene’s opening summary there is already in Sophokles’ mind a vivid vision of the story he will dramatize years later. (The manner of Jokasta’s death is, in any case, an “unbreakable” that goes back to the *Odyssey*).

Kreon recognizes that he has lost his wife and child, because he deprived Antigone of husband and child. The *Dikē* of Zeus has shown everyone that the ties which Antigone never

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After Marathon, the Athenians even buried the *Persian* dead — who no doubt included some Ionian Greeks (Pausanias, I, 32, 5). For they believed that it was “in every way holy to cover a man’s corpse with earth.” (The passage is cited by Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy*, p. 92. I was not familiar with it myself until I embarked upon this essay; and I do not know if Hegel could actually have come across it. Hölderlin and his Bund of Poets in the Tübingen *Stift* had a special reverence for “those who fell at Marathon” — so if *anyone* among them read Pausanias this story would have spread — compare Magenau’s letters and reminiscences in *GSA* VII, 1, *LD* 125.)

had, are *not* less important than the brother whom she piously buried. The final verdict of the Chorus might make us think that the tragedy is Kreon's, since he is the one who learns in his old age the lesson that proud views (*megaloi logoi*) are avenged by heavy blows. But the title of the tragedy directs us to look at the final moral in a different way. The very thing that we moderns (for whom Goethe is a worthy spokesman) have always admired in Antigone is her *megaloi logoi*. But the play began with the stark contrast between Ismene's appropriately humble and human *logoi*, and the proud *logoi* of Antigone; and what Goethe found unacceptable in Antigone was precisely the fact that she was in the end ready to accept her human status humbly. What the Chorus is saying at the end is that if we would only accept our human status from the beginning, if we would act in accord with Apollo's precepts "Nothing too much" and "Know thyself [as a mere mortal]," then the heavy blows of divine vengeance would not fall upon us.

Ismene's humble posture was indeed *too* passive. She felt that it was not even her place to *plead* with the living authorities. She pleads only with her dead to forgive her (65-7). But if Antigone had proposed the pleading policy at the first, the approach to the Council, and to Teiresias (the approach that Kreon was so ready to believe in, even when it had not happened) Ismene would have supported it; and then the Unwritten Law would have triumphed — as soon as someone mentioned the other Cities — without anyone having to die for it. Kreon, who suffered from the lack of wisdom and reverence (as well as from the pride of *megaloi logoi*), actually survives to learn the lesson in old age. But in the matter of *megas logos* he is exactly on a par with Antigone (just as Hegel says they are); and the play shows that it is because of these *megaloi logoi* which we find so modern, that the Divine Law cannot be successfully integrated with the Human Law. It was the imperious "royalty" of Antigone that destroyed her — and with her the Law that she so royally proclaimed. The tragedy is rightfully hers; Kreon is only *pitiful*.²⁶

26

Bowra's attempt to treat Kreon as an Aristotelian tragic hero (1944, 102) is quite mistaken, even though it was anticipated by H.D.F. Kitto (1939, 125-31) and followed by R. Goheen (1951, 98). A.J.A. Waldock is close to the truth, in calling Kreon "commonplace in all but his obstinacy." C.H. Whitman (1951, 90) goes too far when he says that Kreon is "puny." Even B.M.W. Knox is wrong to say that he "collapses ignominiously" (1964, 68). But Sophokles does mean us to recognize that he is not *heroic*.

Notes