ANTIGONE - Curated Transcript of BBC In Our Time podcast
https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0015lwj
Last On 24 March 2022 BBC Radio 4

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In Our Time is hosted by Melvyn Bragg. Melvyn's guests on this podcast are:

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And

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Transcript:

[Melvyn Bragg] Hello, Antigone by Sophocles 496-406 BC, is reputedly the most performed of all Greek tragedies today, and perhaps the most powerfully ambiguous. Her uncle Creon, king of Thebes, decrees that nobody should bury Antigone's brother, a traitor. On pain of death, she defies him. And this conflict between generations, between the state and the individual, uncle and niece, autocracy and openness, releases an enormous tragic energy that brings sudden death, and for Creon, a living death of grief. With me to discuss Antigone are Lyndsay Coo, Senior Lecturer in Ancient Greek Language and Literature at the University of Bristol, Oliver Taplin, Emeritus Professor of Classics, University of Oxford and Edith Hall, Professor of Classics at Durham University.

[Melvyn Bragg] Edith Hall, what should we know about Sophocles at the time when he wrote this play?

[Edith Hall] Sophocles is a well-born Athenian. We don't know exactly when he wrote it, but his life was pretty much, from the Persian wars, in around 485, until his death just before the turn of the century. He probably wrote it in his prime, in middle age. He was the son of a wealthy and aristocratic family. They were urban, they lived just outside the city walls, a place called Colonus, and they also had substantial wealth from an arms factory. But the most important thing about Sophocles is that he's an Athenian citizen who served in public office at least four times. Alone amongst the three Greek tragedians, he had direct experience of the political life, of leadership, of decision making at the highest level. And for that reason his plays explore leadership in very great detail.

[Melvyn Bragg] He wrote, you've estimated, about 120 plays, which is extraordinary. Anyway, he died at the age of 90, still writing. We have seven remaining. What happened to the others?

[Edith Hall] The fate of all of ancient Greek literature that we haven't got was that at some point not enough people copied it out. So quite early on in antiquity, seven of Sophocles' plays got picked out as the ones that were the standard curriculum, like, you know, text for GCSE, and that an awful lot of the others stopped being copied out already in classical antiquity. But there was further damage in the thousand years where we're talking about by Byzantine monks copying them out and keeping them alive. By the time the manuscripts managed to be brought out of Constantinople before the Turkish assault, it appears that only seven made it across to Italy in to print.

[Melvyn Bragg] The setting is in the city of Thebes. What did that mean to the Athenians?

[3:06]
[Edith Hall] So we're just sitting on the southwest side of the Athenian acropolis in broad daylight, but with the scene that we're looking at is early dawn in Thebes, which is a city about 18 miles walk to the north of Athens over the or Kithairon Mountains. It's a deadly historic enemy of Athens. In some ways the worst historic enemy of Athens. Firstly, it always had oligarchy - it didn't like democracy. Secondly, it had sided with the Persians during the Persian wars and the other Greeks never forgave them. So the tragedians tended to set in Thebes stories where you'd got a very embattled ruling class because they wanted to make a sort of democratic point that "We're not like that". It was a good place to set dark emotions, dark politics and incestuous relationships, both metaphorically and literally.

[Melvyn Bragg] So the story, the back-story, would be known to most of the audience.

[Edith Hall] The back-story certainly was. There had been - we haven't got [it] sadly because of the loss of Greek literature - an epic poem on the whole, Theben war story. There'd also been some famous plays by Sophocles' predecessor, Aeschylus, on the theme. So they were coming into it with a great deal more knowledge than a modern audiences when they arrive at the theater to watch it.

[Melvyn Bragg] Yeah. Thank you. Oliver Taplin, you've translated the play recently, which I've read, thank-you very much. How can you summarize the plot?

[Oliver Taplin] As Edith says, the back story would be well known, and that is that Oedipus and his mother, Jocasta, from their incestuous marriage, had two sons who quarrelled over the throne of Thebes. And one of them, Polynices, went into exile, gathered a great army to come and attack Thebes. The Thebens are victorious. Creon takes over the power and decrees that the body of Polynices, the son who came from abroad, should not be buried.

[Melvyn Bragg] Creon is part of the central Oedipus-Jocasta family?

[Oliver Taplin] Creon is the maternal uncle. He is the brother of Jocasta.

[Melvyn Bragg] The uncle of these two men [Polynices and Eteocles], both of whom died in battle at each other's hands.

[Oliver Taplin] And then ... it's not the story that everybody knows already because Sophocles makes the most extraordinary innovation. He invents a sister, Antigone, who insists on burying her brother at all cost. And that's how the play begins. We meet her in the first scene.

[Melvyn Bragg] The one who is on the side of Thebes gets an honorable burial, but the other who attacked Thebes is to be left unburied, unhonored...

[Oliver Taplin] Exactly. Not to be buried on pain of death. And you meet Antigone right at the beginning and she is determined to do it. And she does, indeed, go out and twice, in fact, she covers his body with soil and she's arrested, and there is a great confrontation with Creon in which she maintains that he does not have the right to stop her from burying her brother. And he condemns her to death; he condemns her to be buried alive in an underground chamber. At this point in the play, Haemon, who is Creon's son and is betrothed to be married to Antigone, arrives and tries to persuade his father that he's doing the wrong thing, and that although he believes he's speaking for the whole city, he is not. Creon is furious. Haemon goes off in a fury with him. Next, the old, blind prophet, the celebrated prophet of Thebes Tiresias, arrives and tells Creon that he's polluting the city. Crone is then furious with him as well, and Tiresias is goaded into telling him that he will be punished for what he's done; he's being punished for polluting the city. And that's what makes Creon finally relent and decide to try and undo the things that he's done. But as a messenger tells, he's too late. He arrives at Antigone's underground chamber. She has already hung herself. Haemon is there and stabs himself in front of his father. In the final scene, Creon comes back carrying the body of his son, to find also that his wife, in sorrow and anger, has killed herself. So the final scene, he's there, lamentingm, admitting his mistake, devastated with a life that is worse than death, surrounded by the bodies of his family - the family that he had so underrated earlier in the play.

[Melvyn Bragg] How would it have been staged?

[Oliver Taplin] Right, we got a huge open air space on the slope beneath the Acropolis. As you said, it's the sanctuary of Dionysus. At the bottom of it there's a large flat performance area, and the audience sit up the hill, 6000, maybe even 10,000 - a huge proportion of all the "citizens" (which means the free-born males of the city). And the chorus and actors are down there in the large, flat space beneath, where the chorus can sing and dance. The actors play out their parts and the palace forms the background.

[Melvyn Bragg] So we have these individuals, about half a dozen of them, are taken ... and then we have the chorus, which consists of how many people?

[Oliver Taplin] All those individuals are actually acted by just three actors who the playwright [would] have recruited the previous autumn. This is on a spring day. It's a huge organization, takes a great deal of team collaboration. They recruit the three actors who play all the roles. They recruit the chorus, which is probably 15. They rehearse the whole way through the winter, so it's a highly rehearsed occasion. And then on one spring day, Sophocles puts on three tragedies, and a satyr play. We don't know what the other two tragedies of that year were. We don't know what the satyr play was.

[Melvyn Bragg] Lyndsay Coo, the play opens with Antigone and her sister Ismene meeting outside the palace so that they can be not be overheard. Can you tell us what happens there - which actually, in about ten lines, keys off the whole tragedy.?

[Lyndsay Coo] So this opening scene, which is between two young girls, Antigone and her sister Ismene, immediately plunges us into the action because Antigone informs Ismene of this proclamation by their uncle Creon of denying burial to their brother Polynices on pain of death. And she asks her sister to help her to bury the body...

[Melvyn Bragg] Which would be massively illegal. And ... everybody's heard in the city it's on pain of death.

[Lyndsay Coo] Exactly. It's to undertake an action on behalf of their family, but one which is absolutely fraught with danger and will almost certainly lead to their death. Ismene, who is fairly sensible in her approach to this, points out that as women they don't have the power to stand up to those in charge. And so she refuses to help Antigone at which point Antigone, who had opened the scene by being extremely friendly to her sister, calling on her as a sister remembering their familial closeness, Antigone turns on her and starts to use the language of hatred towards her and says "If you don't help me then I will hate you and our brother will hate you as well". So we get this very compressed scene which immediately introduces us to these two characters. It highlights the difference in approach that these two young girls are taking to the situation. So Antagone is going for this transgressive extreme action. She's going to do something dangerous. She rejects the approach of her sister, which is a much more pragmatic and conventionally feminine in terms of ancient expectations around gender - a much more conventional approach - because she is so determined to honour their brother by burying him.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can you tell the listeners about the age and circumstances of Antigone and her sister? Are they 16, ...from royal blood...what sort of education? Can you just fill that in a bit?

[Lyndsay Coo] So they are from the Theban royal family, so their father was Oedipus and their mother was Jocasta. So, in that sense, they are from the elite ruling family of Thebes. But in terms of status, they are unmarried girls; they don't have husbands yet; they're meeting outside the home of their family. So in the sense that they are young girls, unmarried, they are in a fairly vulnerable situation. Creon, who is their uncle, is also their legal guardian because he is the one remaining male member of their family ...

[Melvyn Bragg] ...And is now ruling Thebes.

[Lyndsay Coo] And is ruling thieves as well. So he [Creon] is the head of their family and he's the head of their city. So in both of those ways, they're in a very inferior and vulnerable position compared to him.

[Melvyn Bragg] Just to bring the listeners in again on the basic thing, she wants to bury Polynices, one of the two brothers, and he has led an army against Thebes. He has tried to conquer Thebes and he has been slaughtered by his brother, whom he has slaughtered. So it isn't as if they're talking about an innocent man. This man is up to his armpits in blood, isn't he?

[Lyndsay Coo] Yes, and Antigone's approach towards her own family members is complex in that way. So even though her two brothers patently hated each other, because they killed each other, for her they are both her friends. The word in Greek is "philoi" - her friends, her own ones, her family, and she sees no distinction between the two of them because they are her blood relations. So, as you say, even though one of them was attacking the city, was a danger to the very place in which the sisters are living. For her, that bond of blood is more important, but she doesn't actually extend that consideration to Ismene, who is also her blood relation, but whom she dismisses and rejects because she's not willing to help her.

[Melvyn Bragg] Edith Hall what's Antigone's status there at that time? Let's say she's 16 or 17, probably a little bit younger, but have to do for the moment, unless you've got an accurate fix on it.

[13:00]
[Edith Hall] I think she may well be younger. She's betrothed that is the sort of thing that tended to happen the minute, in Athens anyway, the minute that girls had their first periods at menarche, which is likely to be more like 13 or 14 than 15 or 16.

[Melvyn Bragg] What do you think her mistake was?

[Edith Hall] Well, I don't think she made a mistake because I think the play entirely vindicates her

[Melvyn Bragg] I mean, [what] mistake in the eyes of Creon the ruler, because he puts forward in his first long speech a very convincing, seems to me, argument for having a

stable society run by stable people, like him, who make good sound judgments, like he does, and so on and so forth. It seems to me that from the beginning, she's attacking the society as well as him.

[Edith Hall] Well, I don't think he does make such a good case. The aparent lack of any kind of written constitution or even functioning constitution in Thebes is very strange. He invites the chorus and says "You're just old friends of the family. I can rely on you to stand by me." It's not a formal senate, it's not a formal parliament, it's not a formal assembly. He says "I individually are making this proclamation ... without any consultation, without any kind of democratic input"
[something] which will absolutely have been heard very loud by Athenian ears - that nobody is going to do this bearing. He keeps talking about anarchy. "Anarchy is the great enemy", he says, and he's regarding this as anarchy now. In fact, burying your own dead is the exact opposite of anarchy. It's obeying the most ancient, common to all the Greeks, imperatives of piety and social order. It is exactly the opposite of anarchy.

[Melvyn Bragg] So what's his grounds for saying that this should be done?

[Edith Hall] Because he is a monomaniac. He's literally taking power that morning because until the two young men, the princes, were dead, they were the heirs to the throne. He is only there he is as the brother of the former queen, who wasn't even from a top aristocratic family, and he says, "I'm the boss now, and I'm going to tell it how it is".

[Melvyn Bragg] Would you agree with that, Oliver?

[Oliver Taplin] The thing about the play [is that] it promotes debate. I only half agree, I think, with what Edith says. I think in Creons's opening speech, ... he's much more plausible than Edith is allowing. But he is then exposed as being a mere autocrat as time goes on. So I think it's not black and white from the very beginning. The rights and wrongs are open. But Antigone is not opposing him, really, on political grounds. She's opposing him because blood [and] family comes above all and comes above power; it comes above all authority. She has such a strong bond with the dead and with the dead of her family, and that includes her brother, whatever he's done. She never expresses any affection for any living person. But there's also shading, because Creon's case, which seems so plausible at first, crumbles play goes on.

[Lyndsay Coo] I think, actually in that opening speech - sorry to disagree with you here - I think, actually, the principles he puts forward for getting a city which has just gone through a terrible shock, back on a stable footing, would have sounded, in some ways, fairly reasonable. But as Oliver says, as the play goes on and as characters interact with Creon and bring him to make some really quite outrageous and vile statements and threats, we've seen more of his paranoia, his propensity to see...

[Melvyn Bragg] ...as the play goes on I was talking about the first big speech he made.

[16:42]
[Lyndsay Coo] Yeah, I think the first speech is not too bad, actually. I don't think he puts forward anything there which would have been seen as completely outrageous.

[Melvyn Bragg] You've all spoken well about Antigone. She is determined to bury his brother against the law of the man now ruling the land and against the sort of law that has obtained. But she thinks [of] as a deeper, older law, which is to do with blood family and so on, and she is going to defy it for that reason. Can you start to tell us, starting with you, Edith, then going around, how that fires the entire plot?

[Edith Hall] The great debate scene between Antigoni and Creon, where these particular words, like "law" and "edict", are used by both of them, is the philosophical crux of the play. She uses the word "law" to mean the ancient imperatives of all the Greeks, right? They were called the unwritten laws. She says there's the unwritten laws. These were things like taboo's against incest. And the imperative that you are law to your family, that you don't break oaths... You know, these are beyond civic law, right? They're encoded in the psyche of the Greeks at the deepest level. He [Creon] uses the word "law" [to mean] a temporary emergency measure that one individual without taking any consultation... (and it is made very clear to a democratic audience that he's not taking advice; he's not asking what the chorus actually think.) Because of that, we get this idea of what is a law? Is it a man-made thing that one individual can set up? (The word is "nomus".) Or is it something that is so deeply imperative that it is an obscenity, an actual inhumane, atrocious obscenity to countermand it? And I think, I personally believe, whereas Lyndsay and Oliver are going to give Creon a bit more time before he's revealed as throwing his weight around in an undemocratic way, I don't really believe that. The trouble is, though, that it's all compounded by the generational conflict and the gender conflict.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we change to Oliver for a moment on that one?

[Oliver Taplin] Yes, but whether you think that Creon has some justification or not ... he is a man, he's in his prime, he has authority. And set against him is a girl, young, powerless. It's quite important, I think, in the play that Creon has command of the military, and there are soldiers. She's arrested by soldiers, taken to her death by soldiers. So this sets up this kind of antithesis which I think is deeply uncomfortable for the male in their prime, authoritative audience who are made to experience the other, the young, the female, the powerless. And this is part of what the tragedy does. It's not there to reinforce their values; it's there to make them think about them, to make them feel uncomfortable about them.

[Melvyn Bragg] Lyndsay, Antigone and Creon often use similar words, but with different meanings. Can you give us an example or a taste of that?

[Lyndsay Coo] I can. So this is partly going back to what Edith said about the way that they use the word for law to mean essentially different interpretations of that. We get other examples in the play, and most notably in the great scene between the two of them, after Antigone has given her speech about the unwritten laws and Creon has responded, Antigone responds again. And then they enter a form of dialogue called stichomythia, where they engage in line by line exchanges. So one character says one line and then the next one responds immediately. And what that allows is this playing backwards and forwards of the same vocabulary, the same words between the two characters, but with very different meanings. So when they're talking about who is a friend and who is an enemy, or who is good and who is evil or who is worthy of piety

and who is impious, they're using those same terms, but they're using them to mean two different world views. So, as we mentioned earlier, when Antigone talks about her brother, her ...[?], one of the same blood, she is using that kind of phraseology to talk about similarity, to talk about this unbreakable bond of blood. She's using friend to mean the people who are related to me. And when Creon uses that same word in the next line or the line previously, he's using it to draw attention to difference. So that when he talks about friends and enemies, for him, a friend is someone who supports the city and an enemy is someone who attacks it. So we can see in that exchange between the two of them that they're using the same terms but completely different systems behind them which mean that they don't actually communicate; they talk past each other.

[Melvyn Bragg] And also there's an element quite early on...[where] Creon [says] he's not going to listen to a woman ... He said this very straightforwardly, "A woman will not rule". I think he calls one of his sons a woman at a certain time because he's taken against [him] (Creon). So can we discuss that for a moment?

[Edith Hall] Creon's son is "Haemon", which actually interestingly means blood, which draws attention both to the war and to the theme of kin. But Haemon tells him that this whole city is actually on Antigone's side, that there are rumors running around. And Creon is incensed by this and says it seems that the man fights alongside the woman, "is an ally of the woman", as if that was something shocking to be - a very beautiful line. The gender issue appears, it seems to absolutely incense Creon that any woman would try to get one over ... This is his fundamental weakness more even than the age difference unto itself.

[Melvyn Bragg] He calls Haemon "talking like a woman"?

[Edith Hall] Yes, and in love with a woman. Creon clearly has a, even more than usual for an ancient Greek man, problem with women disagreeing with him. He is quite incensed by it and says so, and he is deeply provoked by the fact that it's his young ward. I mean he is recently... He's suddenly become her guardian; that he's being shown up in public as the legal father figure to a girl who was in public flouting his authority. Not only that it's in the background, but she is a child of incest and there's a sense that she's something not quite okay about her ...

[23:00]
[Melvyn Bragg] ... Oedipus and Jocasta...[?]

[Edith Hall] Yes, there's some dark, dark side to her that could be to do with inheriting her temperament from her father, which is raised once. It could be that she's born of a bad marriage; she's not quite right and he's deeply incensed by all of this but fails actually to get the chorus on side on that one. And that is really interesting because it shows that there is a sort of middle ground of men who are prepared to listen to a female opinion at [some? that?] time. So I think that Sophocles is quite aware that a certain category of man, especially one who wants power, is particularly concerned about being flouted by a woman, especially in public.

[Lyndsay Coo] Just to add to that, again with Creon's horror at the fact that it's a woman who has defied him, when he first learns that someone has attempted to bury

the body, he says "What man is it who did this?" So it simply doesn't even occur to him that it could be a woman or a girl who's carried out this act and then, as Edith's said, he lapses then into these extremely gendered insults. In the scene with Haemon, he calls him "the slave of a woman". So even worse than a woman, in a way. So we have very much his obsession with this difference between the two of them.

[Melvyn Bragg] So can you bring Haemon into the discussion a little bit more? We know Antigone, we know her sister, we know Creon. What about Haeman?

[Lyndsay Coo] So Haeman is the son of Creon and he is engaged to Antigone. But interestingly, we don't learn this from Antigone herself. We learn it from Izmene. In the scene between Ismene, Antigone and Creon, ... Ismene says, "Well, you can't kill Antigone because remember that your own son is engaged to her". And actually, they're very well matched. Antigones herself never mentions Haemon by name, so she's not put off the idea of death because of any attachment to this fiance. But Haemon then does turn up on stage and attempts to save Antigone's life. As we mentioned earlier, he says to his father, actually, everyone in the city thinks that what she's done is honorable and deserving of a golden honor. What that scene does then is, I think, to bring out the worst in Creon, because just as he can't abide being defied by a woman, the idea that his own son, his own flesh and blood, is going to stand up to him like this is also intolerable. So in the beginning of that scene, he says, "I'm your father. You should follow me in all things." And Haeman is initially quite respectful, but as soon as he tells his father that he should change his mind, he should be flexible, Creon absolutely flies into a rage, insults him, and ends by even threatening to bring Antigone on stage and kill her in front of Haemon, in front of her fiance. At which point Haeman leaves and says, "You're never going to see me again." So that character is used to bring out those autocratic tendencies in Creon. In that scene, he also declares that the city is his alone. I think this is when we see, as Edith mentioned, much more of that authoritarian side of Creon coming forward. Haeman brings that out of him. He also shows up the similarities between Creon and Antigone, because when he says to his father, you should be more flexible, you should know when to change your mind, that sounds suspiciously like what Creon has just said to Antigone. ("You need to know when to be less obstinate."

[Melvyn Bragg] Oliver?

[Oliver Taplin] I mean, I think it's politically pretty shrewd that the politician who claims that he speaks for the people claims that he is the personification of the people's will ...

[Melvyn Bragg] Creon?

[Oliver Taplin] Creon... and as that is gradually undermined, shown to be wrong, particularly by Haeman, the autocrat becomes more and more furious, more and more authoritative.

[Edith Hall] He digs himself into the biggest hole in Greek tragedy against serial advice to the contrary, including gently from the chorus, strongly from Antigone and with immense rhetorical precision and clarity from Haemon, who uses these beautiful similes from nature about about a tree that bends with the torrent, doesn't break...

[Melvyn Bragg] The ship sail when stretched...

[Edith Hall] Every chance he [Creon] gets to actually say well, actually, that's a reasonable argument I will reconsider (he gets three opportunities to do this), he doesn't. And he's absolutely determined that Antigone is going to die. And in fact, when Haimon leaves the stage, he actually says "There's going to be another death today" - Haemon says that; he doesn't say who; but he makes that threat. And you might have thought [that] most fathers, if their son said that there will be another death today, might say, "Well, wait a minute. Why don't you sit down and we'll have a reasonable discussion." So he [Creon] puts himself in the worst possible situation before Tiresias arrives.

[Melvyn Bragg] Did you want to go in, Oliver?

[Oliver Taplin] I wanted to bring in something. This is why it's such a wonderful debate play. It sets up so many issues. It's why it's the philosopher's favorite play. Something that we haven't brought in at all yet is if Creon is so wrong, if it's so clear, if it's so black and white, then what is the whole of the final scene doing there? Why is so much time spent on his regret, on his punishment? If he's being utterly deservedly punished, then the audience sit there and think, " Well, I've got no time for this. Serves him right." But I don't think that is the way that is the final scene is played.

[Edith Hall] But what he actually says over and over again is "I didn't deliberate properly and I didn't take counsel." This is the key word in the play. It's the word "boule", which is also the word for the Athenian senate where you deliberate together. People keep saying "Deliberate! Take advice." He doesn't. He does say in the last scene, over and over again, "I didn't deliberate and I didn't take advice." And that, to an Athenian audience is this loud, loud, loud symbol..."I didn't have the political constitution that meant that the danger of one man making decisions wasn't diluted by proper consultation." I think there is an overpowering political message to that. And that's why I believe even in his first speech where he says, "I'm doing this alone", that is setting off alarm bells in a city which has a political parliament called the boule.

[Lyndsay Coo] He repeatedly fails, as Edith says, to take advice. But there is one crucial moment in the play, as it's nearing the end, where he does take advice, and that's after Tiresias The Prophet has warned him that before the day is out, he is going to suffer a loss himself in revenge for this abomination that he's committed of committing someone who is alive to a tomb and leaving someone who is dead unburied. And at that point, Creon does turn to the chorus and says, "What shall I do?"" And they say, "You need to go and free Antigone, and you need to go and bury the body of Polynices."

[Melvyn Bragg] I think it's the first time the chorus makes a dramatic contribution. Is that right?

[Edith Hall] It's most unusual for a chorus in any Greek tragedy to be the ones who turn the plot around. That's the extraordinary thing, that it's not actually Tiresias. He [Sophocles] could have made him [Creon] accede to Tiresias [but] he doesn't. He [Creon] does finally listen to the collective of elders

[Melvyn Bragg] Tiresias has [been] mentioned too often to be neglected for any longer. Oliver can you tell the listeners who Tiresias is? Why is it important and what effect he has? Well, you can share it between you if you want...

[30:28]
[Oliver Taplin] He's a great figure of Theban myth, and there are a lot of stories around.

[Melvyn Bragg] He's blind

[Oliver Taplin] But he wasn't always blind, but he is blinded..[as a boy?]...and it's the same in the Oedipus in [Sophocles' play] Oedipus The King [Oedipus Rex] - his blindness gives him some kind of insight. But here he above all takes the omens, and the omens tell him that Thebes is being polluted. And it is as Lyndsey just said, I think the key ...

[Melvyn Bragg] What are the omens? I know what they are [say?], but what sort of omens ...?

[Oliver Taplin] He has birds, and these birds are making horrible cries instead of singing nicely. They're tearing each other apart. He tries to sacrifice and it all goes wrong. All the omens are wrong. And I think the key thing that he isolates as epitomizing the whole wrong is what Lyndsay just pointed out, that he's put the living beneath the earth where the dead should be. He's kept the dead above the earth where the living should be. It's almost a cosmic error.

[Melvyn Bragg] Meanwhile, while that is happening, Antigone is being taken to her tomb, a stone tomb; she's put inside and bound.

[Edith Hall] The crucial point in the play, I think, in terms of reversal, is that an extraordinary thing happens - that a messenger arrives. Creon has gone off. We know that things are going on at Polynices' now-grave at the cave. We don't know in what order. We do not know what's going on. And the queen appears, right? Eurydice. We never even heard that Creon had a wife. Nobody's mentioned that he had a wife because he's not the sort of person who goes around talking about having a wife. And she appears and hears from the messenger what has gone on. So Sophocles was very famous for being able to use actors to listen. So we're watching her as she listens to the messenger speech. It's one of the most beautiful messenger speeches in all of the Greek tragedies, though it's very horrific. We hear that the messenger had got there. Haemon finds that Antigone has already hanged herself rather than die of starvation. Haemon is there when Creon arrives, having prioritized burying the dead one rather than letting the living one out. They have a terrible row. Well, not even a row [but a] contretemps. Haemon at first is about to kill his father, but then turns the sword on himself. The messenger says this. Eurydice has heard this, that she's lost Haemon and she just turns around in complete silence and goes back into the house. It's chilling piece of theatre. It's an incredible use of silence. And this is what launches the very final turn of the screw. The final turn of the screw is the whole way that the presence of Eyridice as the mother of Haemon affects the very final episode. So we could easily have finished this tragedy with just the corpses of Haemon and Antigone. Easily. Oh, no. Sophocles is going to step it up one. And when Creon arrives back with the corpse of Haemon (we don't know what... he couldn't care less about Antigone) in

his arms, like Lear coming on with Cordelia. And then we have another messenger saying that Eyridice has stabbed herself. So he's lost his wife as well as his son, but she only stabbed herself after cursing him for causing the death of her other son. We suddenly, almost at the end of the play, have to rewind everything we've seen with the knowledge that he had lost a son in the war, somehow or other heroically the day before.

[Oliver Taplin] And how is the audience to feel for Crown in that final scene? I mean, are they drawn to feel some kind of understanding, some kind of pity?
Yes, he got it wrong, but he's human. He's he's left with a life worse than death. Or is it the politician who you always wanted to see humiliated? And there he is humiliated, trampled in the mud.

[Lyndsay Coo] And there's no mention of Antigone in that. No, the focus is all on Creon and on the loss of his family and the fact that in prioritizing the city and the concerns of the city, he's neglected his own family unit, his own household, and he's now lost it entirely.

[Melvyn Bragg] So when did Antigone begin to attract the attention of audiences, scholars, and that as such, a powerful vocal central point?

[Oliver Taplin] Immediately.

[Melvyn Bragg] Immediately?

[Oliver Taplin] Edith?

[Edith Hall] I've read that article...[laughter]

[Oliver Taplin] It starts immediately having impact on other playwrights being cited in comedy, being reperformed. There's quite a lot of evidence of its reperformance. It clearly was an absolute hit. Got straight onto the A-leval syllabus.

[Melvyn Bragg] Why do you think it was so powerful in its attraction, bringing the audiences in?

[Lyndsay Coo] I think it does something really remarkable. This goes back to what we said right at the start, which is that it takes this myth, which traditionally has been seen through the eyes of its male characters of Laius, of Oedipus, of his sons, of the Seven against Thebes of their sons in the next installment. And it completely refocuses it through the perspective of a teenage girl, which is a really striking way of thinking about this story - and such a change. It introduces a character who becomes instantly an embedded part of that myth. So I think the appeal of the characters that he's created - that central opposition between Antigone and Creon - and the way that they're able to stand for so many oppositions, male and female, young and old, city and family, the divine laws and the human laws. That gives it an enormous, wide-ranging appeal.

[Melvyn Bragg] Edith?

[Edith Hall] There's one other contrast, though, which is a consistent character against an inconsistent character because Antigone would never change her mind. I mean, she's incredibly sad as she goes off to die. She she's terribly sad about it all, but she will never change her mind. Creon actually does, right? He does. So the bully, if they're going to get any glory at all, have got to carry on being a bully, right? They don't suddenly stop being a bully when their own interests are gone. So there's a deep cut. She has principles. He doesn't. And I think that that's one of the things that everybody comes away from the play with. Even though you don't see her for the second half.

[Oliver Taplin] But she has had the most moving scene of the play and we're talking about the chorus earlier. The chorus is reduced to tears; let alone the audience.

[Melvyn Bragg] Can we just take a moment out of this tragedy to be on the second speech of this chorus, where it's almost like "What a piece of work is man!" except written 2000 years before Shakespeare and can you just tell us about that and why it's so important?

[Oliver Taplin] In between each of the scenes which promote the action, the chorus respond in a lyric meter with dance and music in a much more associative, less argumentative, way trying to make some kind of sense of what has happened. And when they learn that somebody, unknown who, has buried the body, they have this fourstands, a song which is quite wrongly, I think, called the "Ode to man" because it's it's an ode about the achievements of human beings, of mankind. And the whole point about it is that there are three stanzas of the amazing achievements technological achievements, political achievements and then the last stanza... but humans also have the capacity to go wrong, to do wrong, somebody's done wrong. And that's what it's all been leading up to.

[Melvyn Bragg] Edith, do you want to come in?

[Edith Hall] The Ode is very specific that it's the man who stops paying due attention to divine matters and the law of the gods who will fall and bring down all the great achievements of civilization with him. That, to me, is the moral of the whole play, [and it] is in the mouth of the chorus at that point.

[Lyndsay Coo] Another emphasis in the Ode is that even though mankind, humankind has been able to master all of these different areas, the one thing that humans cannot master is death, is Hades. So that as the ultimate obstacle to the progress, the achievements of mankind. And that is going to be demonstrated emphatically by the end of the play when Creon is facing the death of all of these members of his family.

[Melvyn Bragg] We are coming towards the end now. Can I go around the table and ask you how it has been reimagined in some ways ever since?

[Lyndsay Coo] Well, Antigone is one of the most reformed and readapted of the ancient Greek dramas and there are certainly a few particular versions that have become kind of landmark moments in that. One very famous instance would be the Antigone ...[Antigone in French]... of Jean Anouilh's which is particularly well known because of the circumstances of its production. So this is a version of the Antigone that was produced in Paris in 1944, so in occupied France. And because the play is so clearly

about resisting authority, about a figure who rebels, that production has been seen as having Antigone as a symbol of the resistance and the Creon figure as a symbol of the Vichi government. So in that particular case the historical resonances have given it a very have made those themes stand out even more that if you actually look at the text itself, once again we get slightly more of a an ambiguous drawing of both of those characters than than you might expect.

[Melvyn Bragg] Edith?

[Edith Hall] In the 1960s Nelson Mandela put on a production of this in prison on Robin Island and himself played Creon. In the 1970s, the early 1970s, an illegal biracial group of actors, Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona in South Africa wrote a play, "The Island", about the play being put on in Robin Island, right?, - as the ultimate civil rights play against apartheid. They could not do it in South Africa because it was completely illegal for them to act together. They took it all around the world and it was absolutely instrumental in raising awareness of the horrors of the apartheid regime. I think it was one of the few performances productions that have actually been part of a major international world change for the better and Sophocles would have loved that.

[Melvyn Bragg] And, finally, Oliver?

[Oliver Taplin] A production that sticks in my mind particularly was in the late 80s at the time of Solidarity in the docks of Gdansk which led eventually to Poland casting off the yoke, so to speak. And Andrzej Wajda who's best known for his films put on this wonderful production - Antigone of course in blue overalls and Creon and the Chorus [being] party bureaucrats in dark suits. But it was the most terrific hymn to freedom and made a big impact in Poland and elsewhere at that time.

[Edith Hall] And it will not be long before there is an Antigone set in Ukraine.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, Thanks Edith Hall, Lyndsey Coo and Oliver Taplin and to our studio engineer, Donald McDonald.

And the In Our Time podcast gets some extra time now with a few minutes of bonus material from Melvin and his guests.

[41:51]
[Melvyn Bragg] What would you like to have said that you didn't get time to say?

[Oliver Taplin] I wanted also to take up [the play] "The Island", partly because Mandela himself was in solitary confinement and didn't see the thing that sparked all, which was a quarter of an hour performance at the annual occasion where the prisoners were allowed to put on a show in front of the guards and their fellow prisoners and they put on a quarter of an hour Antigone scene. And that inspired Mandela later to put on this reading in which he took the part of Creon as if to explore what it was to have power.

[Lyndsay Coo] I know that the episode is about Sophocles' Antigone, but one thing I would have loved to talk about is some of the other ancient iterations of the character

as well. So Euripides' Antagone... presents a totally different version of the character. So we think of her as a tragic figure who dies, and indeed her death is part of her characterization. But in Euripides' tragedy Antigone, she actually marries Haemon and has a son with him. So she gets a happy ending in that version of it, which I think is such a nice counterpoint to the way that we think of her purely as this tragic doomed figure. And I really wish we had that play.

[Melvyn Bragg] Does it lose all meaning if she marries and lives happily ever after?

[Lyndsay Coo] Well, she still defies Creon. We think that it seems that in that text, Haemon joined her in burying the body of Polynices in some way. So there is still an act of defiance, but she has some help and she has eventually a happy ending.

[Oliver Taplin] It is a great shame [that's one of the plays that] doesn't survive.

[Melvyn Bragg] That's another one that doesn't survive?

[Oliver Taplin] The great majority don't survive.

[Lyndsay Coo] The fragments are not very informative, unfortunately.

[Melvyn Bragg] Edith?

[Edith Hall] One of the reasons this play is so important is because of its very particular reception since antiquity. Unlike many of the other plays like Oedipus and Medea, it wasn't really one that attracted any interest until the late 18th century. And it's almost exactly at the point of the French Revolution where the issue of individual rights in a big state came to the fore and it attracted the attention of German philosophers. Crucial to the entire popularity and ubiquity of Antigone in culture and theater subsequently are two works by Hegel. One is "The Phenomenology..." [of Spirit], the other is "The Philosophy of Right". And he [Hegel] was obsessed with Antigone. He used it to help him formulate his whole idea of history as a conflict, a dialectical conflict of ideas, state against the individual and so on. Matriarchy. It's patriarchy family against government. And through poets like Hoelderlin, there was a huge cult, really, of Antigone in late 18th, early 19th century Germany. This led to the great production of Antigone on the stages of Prussia, Paris, London and New York in the early 1840s in modern language translations. That changed everything. Nobody had put on these Greek plays in actual translation. They'd always been adapted. So once that had happened. And in London, at Covent Garden, it played for 48 nights (which actually was an enormous record in those days, in 1845) Queen Victoria demanded that the music, which was by Mendelssohn, was played at Buckingham Palace. Ever since then, it's been a favorite in terms of operas, different kinds of playscripts. And the one modern version that we haven't mentioned is absolutely crucial is ...[?]... in 1948 by Bertholt Brecht in neutral Switzerland, where he absolutely no-holds-barred [makes it] about Nazism, right? Creon, for the first time, was put directly into Nazi costume, as it were. And because of Brecht's version, that's the one that has really fired and lies behind most of the great subsequent, if you'd like, radical the name of Bertold Brecht helped it....So we should have put Brecht in the program.

[46:25]

[Oliver Taplin] Just something about translation - that this play enables so many different kinds of translation. And just within the last few years, there was the version by Seamus Heaney, "The Burial at Thebes", that I thought was a very fine production of that (by the Nottingham Playhouse) -- and a version ["Antigonick"] by Anne Carson. And I'm not comparing my translation with theirs, but there is room for so many different kinds of translation. And the idea that there's only one good translation or only one way to translate it, is just totally refuted by the richness of this play.

[Edith Hall] And it's very, very hard to translate. Sophocles was famous in antiquity, actually, for what were called his plain words, the plain words. He's quoted in quite a "plain bit" of the New Testament, actually the Antigone is, and it's the contrast between this very precise "lapidary Greek", the spoken Greek, which is astonishingly difficult to put into, sort-of easy, natural, idiomatic English. And the *beautiful* lyrics of the chorus - you've got these two registers sort of interpenetrating. And you can go either way. You can go high poetic, or you can go like Tom Paulin's "The Riot Act" - the great Northern Irish version of it, where it's practically in Belfast brogue. You can go anywhere you like.

[47:52]
[Lyndsay Coo] Well, another part of the afterlife of the play that really fascinates me is Antigone's role in the theory of politics, and particularly in feminist politics, where she has become an iconic figure. And there's been some really interesting work on the way in which she has been understood as a feminist icon. Also work on her sister Ismene who tends to get slightly written out of the picture, but is increasingly being put back in. So with scholars looking at the way that the sisterhood between those two figures is presented in the play and what kind of models that might provide for actions of resistance. So I think that whole other strand of Antigone and her importance to the modern world is something which is really evolving and is really fascinating.

[Edith Hall] And that has been fired by the other great strand in the reception which is psycho-analytical. And very many people encounter antigony. Now, through the works of Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler - so feminist, psychoanalytical critics who say that she [Antigone] is the answer to Freud's selection of Oedepus. They say, "What if Freud had selected Antigone, a strange girl born of a not heteronormative relationship between her parents who's never going to get married herself". She's been very much identified by LGBTQ+ plus communities as a helpful way into psychoanalysis, particularly through the work of Judith Butler. And the reason why Irigaray took on Antigone was because she felt that her master, Lacan, had written about Antigone in a deeply patriarchal way.

[Oliver Taplin] There is a constant debate going to and fro and people, critics, psychologists, theatricians all sort of bouncing off each other through... And it reflects the way that this play is so much a play of action, counteraction argument, counterargument. It lays out the two sides with such complexity

[Melvyn Bragg] And with such economy, and it sort of gets you by the throat from about the third line in a short, very short play and never lets you go.

[Oliver Taplin] Right there at the beginning when Antigen puts the emphasis on, "I" - I'm going to do this, nobody's going to stop me. An important complication in the theology,

if you like, of the play is there are the gods above, the Olympian gods, the gods who look after the city. There are also the gods below, the chthonic gods, the underworld gods, the gods of the dead. And it's those gods that Antigene feels a special loyalty to, a special affinity with.

[Melvyn Bragg] In what way does she justify that?

[Oliver Taplin] Because her family... because most of her family are dead. And for her, what matters is that she will join them, she will be with them. She says, "I'm going to bury my brother because I'm going to have to be with him for a long time and I will lie by him in death".

[Melvyn Bragg] One thing that I hope you can help me, I've read several times for this program. It's quite short, but even though it's quite short, quite a lot of the space is taken by the chorus. If you take a lot of the chorus away, it's very short. And how does he manage? How does Suffocates manage to put so much actions, so much arguments, so much philosophy into such a sort of space? I mean, do any of you know that? Because I thought it's almost like a miracle reading and you think this is happening and it seemed effortless. Another thing, another who's got the key to this? Oliver?

[Oliver Taplin] I don't think a key ... but the amazing thing is that here are all these enormous issues with their terrific ramification and they are somehow *distilled into the particular* - into the particularities of these people.

[Edith Hall] I think Aristotle can actually be helpful here. Aristotle wrote his "Poetics* about the art of tragedy in the next century - 150 years probably, after this play was produced. But he said that the core of an effective tragedy is plot. It's plotting. It's the organic evolution through probability, human probability of a total catastrophe, right in human terms, despite the presence of the gods. And although Aeschylus, who is the only predecessor of Sophocles' extant plays we've got, is a marvelous tragedian for all kinds of ways, plotting was not his forte. I think we can actually say that the one who really contributes most to tightness and economy of plotting was Sophocles and Sophocles' Oedepus and also Antigone that Aristotle talks about as ... the tight plotting in Greek tragedy. I've read the people who talk about him as a sort of great detective writer that you have to follow trails through to their end. And the Eurydice final turn of that screw seems to me the absolute masterstroke - that you've already been traumatized enough, but then you're going to get retraumatized because you've suddenly got to flash through everything that's happened again just before it ends with a different lens.

[Melvyn Bragg] Well, thank you all very much.

In our time with Melvin Bragg is produced by Simon Tillotson.