

Antigone (or What She Said)



What she said :
"How come someone
hasn't noticed
That I'm dead
And decided to bury me?
God knows, I'm ready!"
La-la-la.....

Alternate titles

- will never marry
- I just want to see the boy happy
- you have killed me
- life is a pigsty
- such a little thing makes such a big difference
- kill uncle
- I want the one I can't have
- there is a light that never goes out
- he knows I'd love to see him
- I am hated for loving
- now my heart is full
- I'm the end of the family line
- pretty girls make graves
- I don't owe you anything
- girl afraid (for Ismene)
- bigmouth strikes again (for Kreon)
- I started something I couldn't finish (also for Kreon)

Lecture Outline

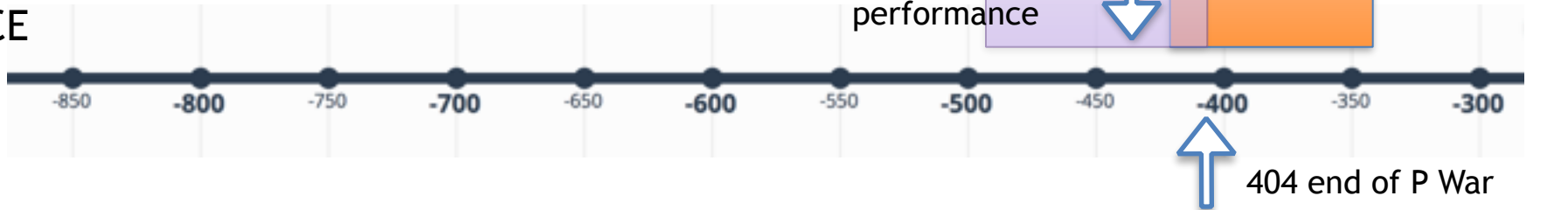
- timeline, historical context
- why do we still read it?
- does the play side with Kreon or Antigone?
- or both?
- why is the play set in Thebes?
- what sort of a ruler is Kreon?
- Kreon and the ship of state
- Is Sophocles a feminist?

Timeline

Circa 850 Polis established as basic political unit (replaces palace kingdoms of the mycenaean age)

Life of Homer

BCE



Classical Age (500-336 BC)
Greeks achieve new heights in art, architecture, theatre, & philosophy. Democracy in Athens refined under leadership of Pericles (495-421)

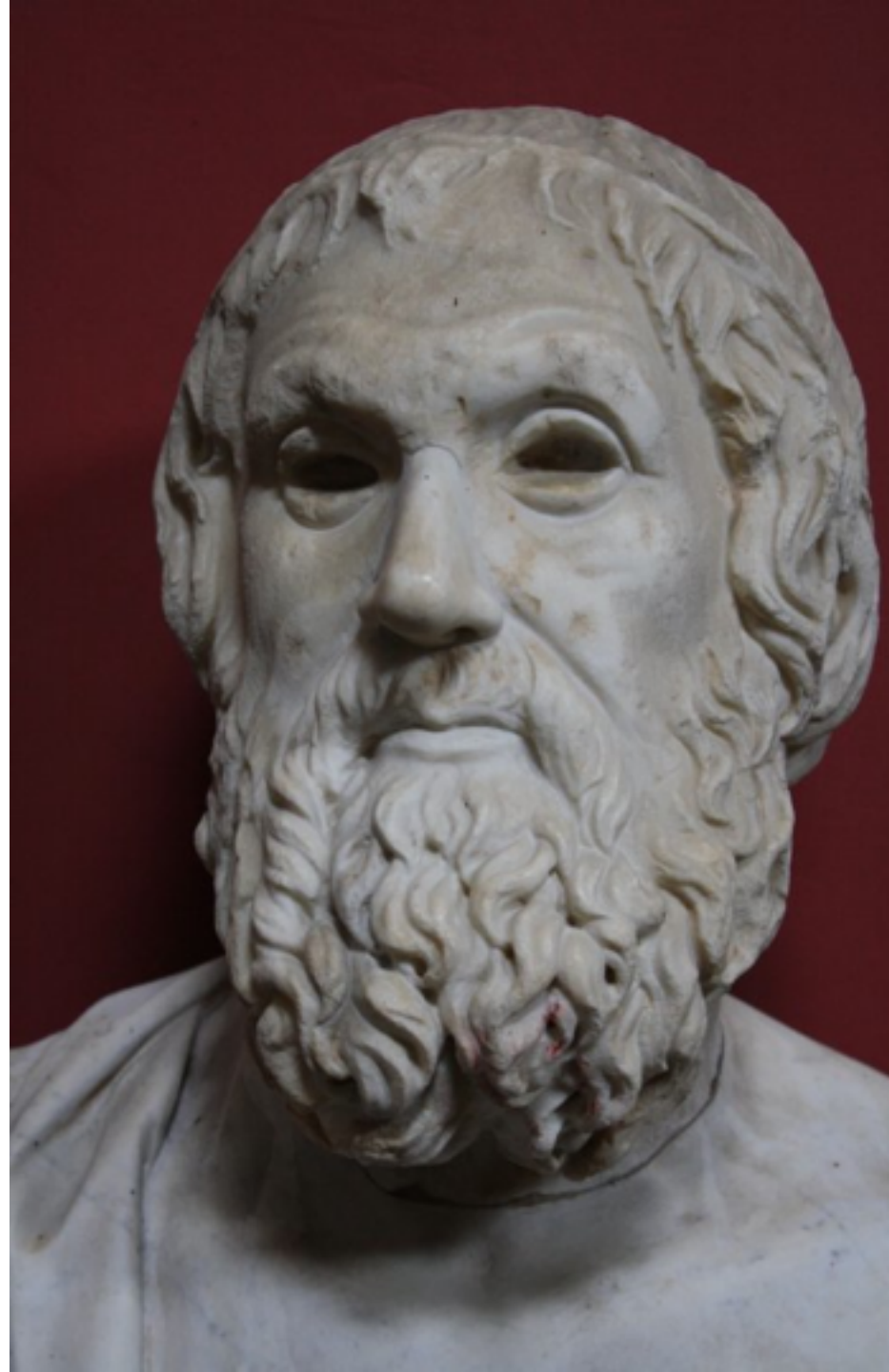
The playwright

Only 7 of the 120 plays of Sophocles survive

Antigone is first performed (c. 442 BCE) at the “City Dionysia”

State treasurer between (443 and 442 BCE)

One of Athenian generals involved in suppressing the revolt on the island of Samos (c. 441 BCE)



Why do we still read this play?

- Called the most commented upon play in the history of philosophy & political theory
- what accounts for this appeal?
- fundamental political conflict: established order (authority) vs. other values, especially individual aspiration (resistance)
- Kreon not obviously wrong & Antigone not obviously right (she is after all inconsistent in her stated motives)
- A compelling and “tragic stalemate between two equally justifiable views”
- chorus does little to clear this up as it literally and figuratively moves back and forth
- p. 45, lines 737-8) “madness made logic, principle turned frenzy”
- also goes to core of human condition: “...no greatness creeps down into the life destined to death without bringing disaster” (p. 46, line 748)

Kreon and Antigone express fundamentally different views about the basis for authority, the nature of the polis (state), and its laws



Legacy & continued relevance

- play hugely influential with 19th century German romantics/idealists
- especially the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) and the poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843)
- essentially humanistic readings: greatness of the human quest to know and suffer (huge interest for Nietzsche as well)
- Jean Aynouilh's *Antigone* (Paris, February 6, 1944)
- play currently popular all over the world (with a more overt interest in its political tragedy)

Why is the play set in Thebes?



Cadmus and the founding of Thebes
Situates action in the context of polis life

Antigone's family tree

Ares & Aphrodite

Harmonia & Cadmus 

 Laius & Jocasta

 Oedipus

Menoceus

 Creon & Eurydice

Eteokles Polyneices Ismene Antigone

Haimon

Megareus

War is over? Not quite!

Read: p 27 (lines 204-209) “Gentlemen, the state”

Thebes not yet stable

Sense of emergency

Dead enemy outside the gate (not yet buried)

“Enemies of the state” inside the gate? (also “dead”?)

Kreon a “new kind of man for new conditions” (p. 27, line 198)

Politics as a continuation of war

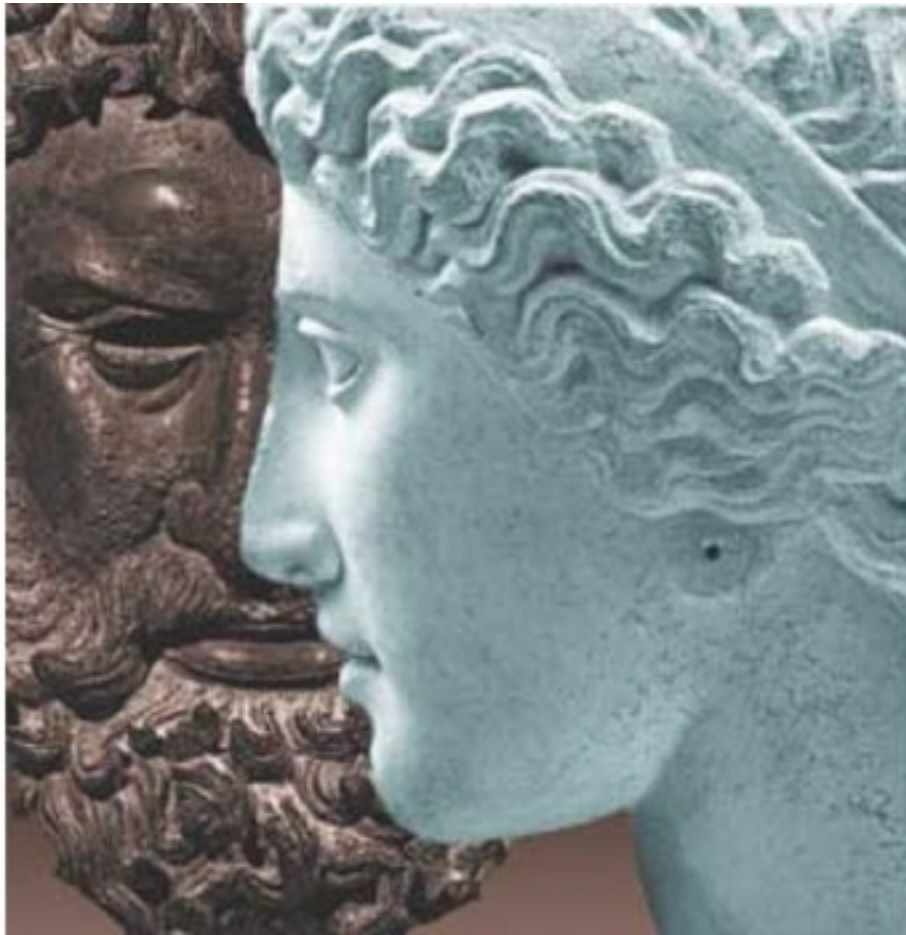


- Kreon and emergency powers
- security a fundamental value that “Trumps” all others?
- country before family
- but prone to paranoia?

The Politics of Urgency



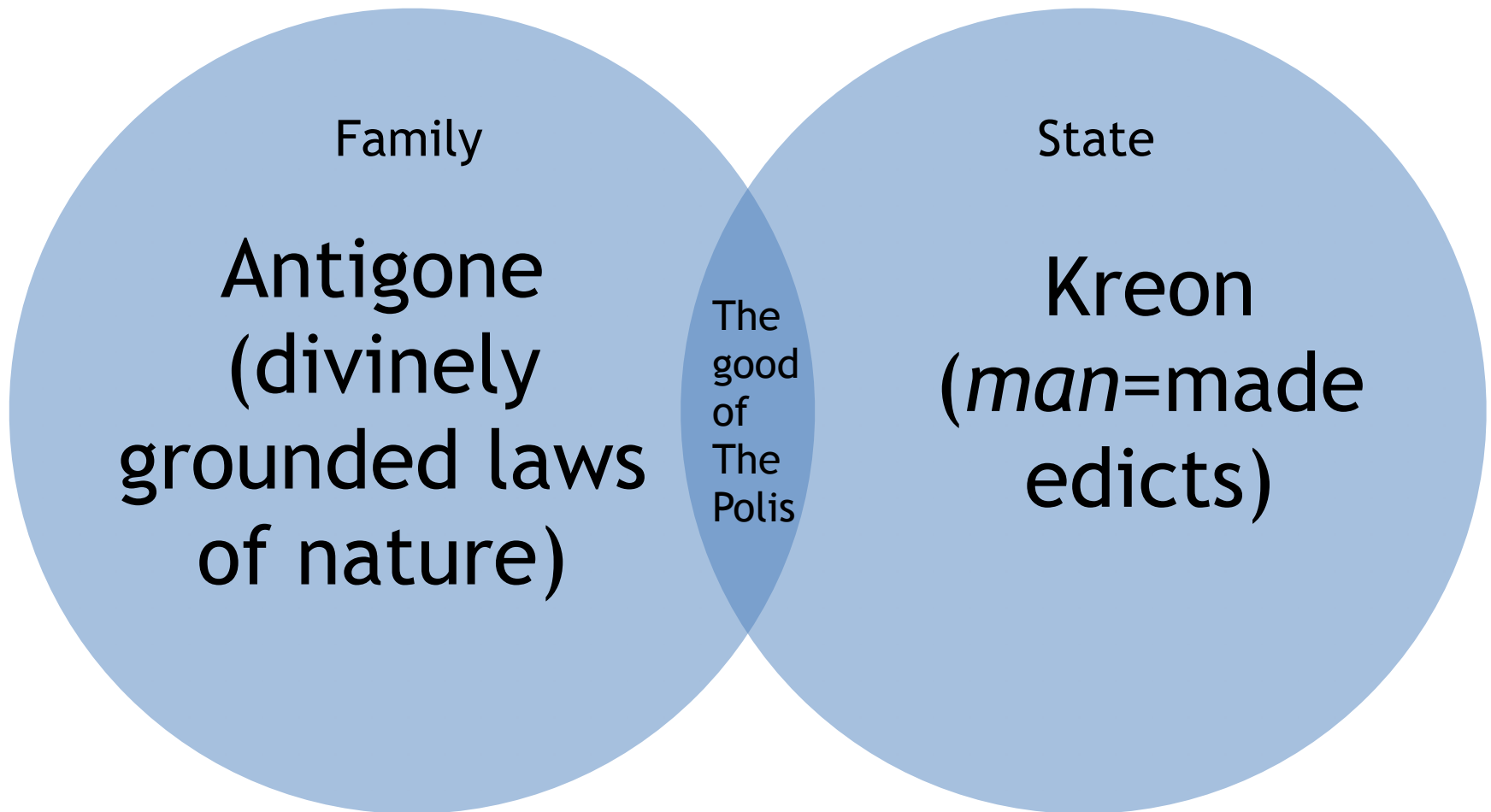
Nomoi vs. Physis



- Nomos (customary law) reflects human-made moral standards (Sophists like Protagoras push this line toward ethical relativism: mitmoat)
- But what if *some* laws are rooted in divine or natural forces?
- That would give them moral force regardless of human law
- Creates possibility of a higher law than that of a city
- A “good” law by a “good” ruler would approximate this law of nature
- A bad law might permit (even require) disobedience

Mutual Resistance

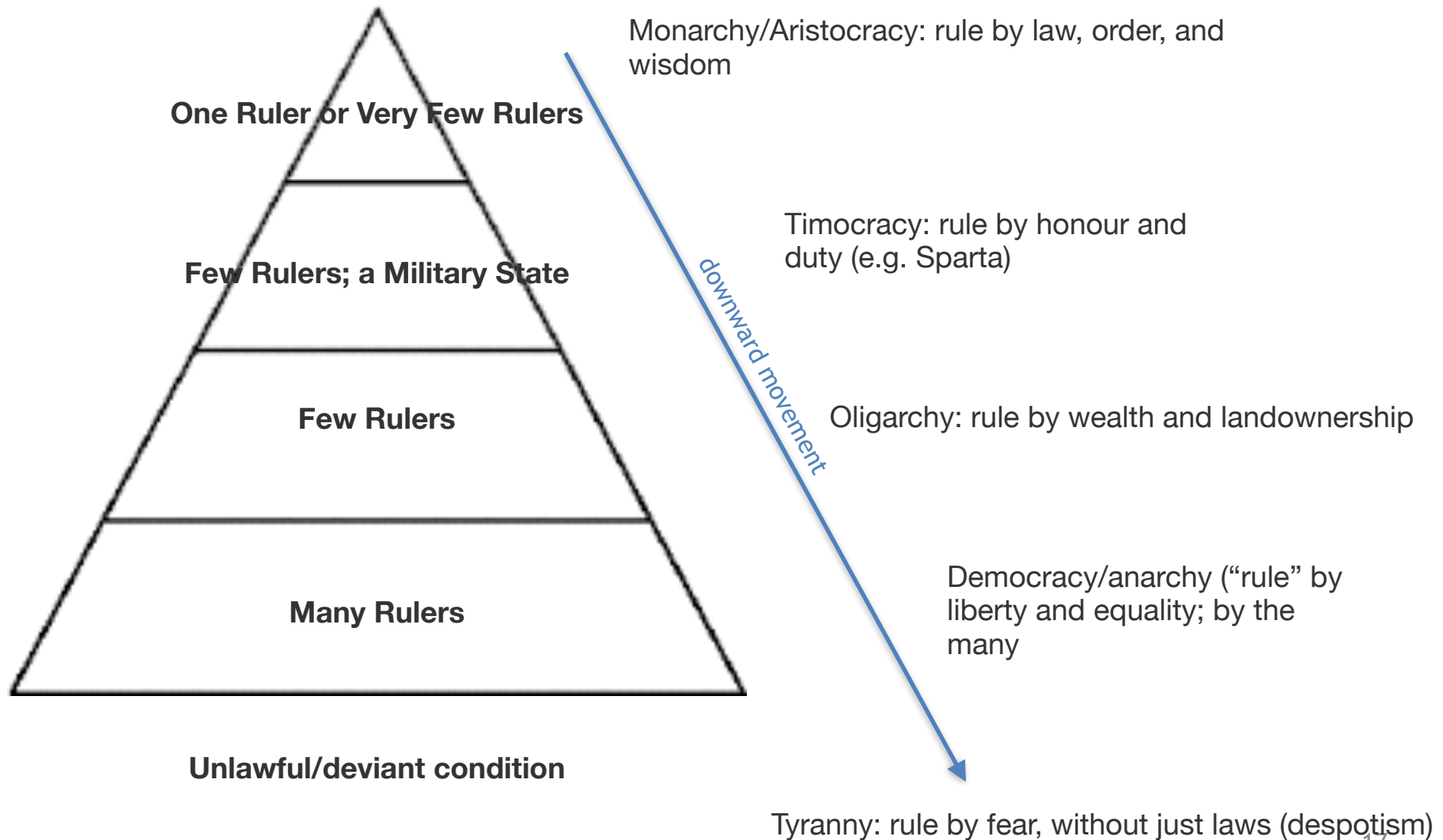
- each claims authority
- each claims to care about the public good



What sort of a ruler is Kreon?

Where does Kreon reside in Plato's typology of *existing* regime types?

“They that are discontented under monarchy, call it tyranny,” Hobbes



Kreon gives us his own standards to evaluate his rule

Read: p. 28


“It is impossible to know a man’s soul, both the wit and the will, until he writes laws and enforces them. I believe that he who rules in a state and fails to embrace the best men’s counsels, but stays locked in silence and vague fear, is the worst man there”

Does Kreon “embrace the best men’s counsels?”

Does he pass his own test?

The ship of state

- The state as a ship
- Haimon: “the man who tightens the halyard and doesn’t slacken it, is capsized” (p. 49)
- Teiresias: “...you’ve *been* a good captain for the state, and steered her right” (p.59)
- is Kreon just another Trump?
- Plato (Book 6, lines 487 c to 489 d)



Mob-rule is a rough sea for the ship of state to ride; every wind of oratory stirs up the waters and deflects the course. The upshot of such a democracy is tyranny or autocracy; the crowd so loves flattery, it is so "hungry for honey," that the wildest and most unscrupulous flatterer, calling himself "the protector of the people" rises to supreme power.

Antigone as a feminist archetype?

- looks promising at first
- but this is ancient Greek tragedy
- when a female character takes bold action on her own initiative it almost always ends in disaster!
- and what about Sophocles's claim that "for woman silence is an adornment"?
- Antigone (even in her name) threatens the male order
- Kreon: "she's the king if she gets away with this" (p. 40)
- she is also an *epikleros* (daughter of a very famous dead man with no male heirs and must marry nearest male relative in order to inherit)
- these constraints shed new light on Antigone's self destructive tendencies

Death as liberation?

“since I will die, and early, I call this profit. Anyone who lives the troubled life I do must benefit from death” (p. 39, line 368)

“my soul died long ago, to be useful among the dead” (p. 43, line 691)

“No wedding song has been sung for this bride” (p. 53, line 970)

“an alien only, among the living and the dead” (p. 54, line 1002)

Kreon: “she was only a stranger in our world, and her stay is over” (p. 55, line 1039)

A Tomb of One's Own?

- Antigone embraces death as a deliberate strategy: “where was there a way for me to win greater fame or glory than by simply taking my own brother to his grave”?
- death for Antigone = “life” for her family line
- projects her life into the world of the dead (read p. 55-6: “returning home... from an exile”)
- Haimon is a dead-end: only in “marrying” Polyneices can she live
- Antigone would be androgyne in a man's world (abandons home and hearth, marriage, child-bearing but only by dying)

All's well that ends badly?

- Sophocles worried about his powerful female character?
- Re-feminizes her as a “bride” in death (Chorus calls her tomb a “marriage chamber” (p. 57, lines 1102-3))
- Doesn't die unbedded & unmarried after all
- Order is restored
- Turns out that being led to her tomb and away from her father's city *was her marriage procession*: delivered into the arms of Hades
- Her groom follows her there as well
- Forced back into the closed interior of her house

Some final thoughts

- Are there any winners here?
- Kreon's family is decimated & his rulership a failure
- Wisdom comes too late
- Antigone: seems to get what she wants (i.e. death)
- But ends up entombed (re-domesticated) in the end
- Antigone and Kreon mirror each other again: she in her house of death, he in his empty (ish) palace
- “Eternal note of sadness”? (the “turbid ebb and flow of human misery”)