

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A COMPARISON OF THE HEROISM OF ANTIGONE IN THE PLAYS  
OF SOPHOCLES, JEAN COCTEAU, AND JEAN ANOUILH

	PAGE
Influence of Athenian society.....	4
.....	5
.....	6
The heroism of Antigone.....	10
.....	11
.....	12
.....	13
.....	14
.....	15
.....	16
.....	17
.....	18
.....	19
.....	20
.....	21
.....	22
.....	23
.....	24
.....	25
.....	26
.....	27
.....	28
.....	29
.....	30

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	PAGE	1
CHAPTER		
I. SOPHOCLES.....		4
Influence of Athenian society		
upon the drama.....		4
Dramatic composition.....		5
The heroism of Antigone.....		6
II. TRANSLATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS.....		12
The Renaissance.....		12
The Seventeenth Century.....		13
The Eighteenth to the		
Twentieth Century.....		14
III. JEAN COCTEAU.....		15
The effects of a new society		
upon the drama.....		15
Dramaturgy.....		16
<u>Antigone</u> .....		17
IV. JEAN ANOUILH.....		21
The changes in the new society.....		21
Philosophy.....		21
<u>Antigone</u> .....		22
V. CONCLUSION.....		30
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....		32

## INTRODUCTION

The Antigone of Sophocles has attracted French dramatists for centuries. From the Renaissance to the present, the translations and adaptations of this play have reflected many of the technical and theoretical changes in French drama. Two outstanding twentieth century playwrights, Jean Cocteau and Jean Anouilh, have borrowed Sophocles' plot for their plays.

The purpose of this study is (1) to analyze the heroic nature of Antigone in the plays of Sophocles, Cocteau, and Anouilh, with special emphasis upon the motives underlying her heroic deed; (2) to compare Sophocles' heroine with that of the two French dramatists; (3) to investigate the reasons for the selection of Sophocles' play by Cocteau and Anouilh; and (4) to present the changes which Cocteau and Anouilh have made in their adaptations of Sophocles' tragedy.

During the first half of the twentieth century, France experienced what seemed to be a Renaissance of French tragedy. To satisfy the tastes of a new society, disillusioned by the upheaval of two world wars, French dramatists made revolutionary changes in the theatre, just as the cubists, symbolists, and surrealists had already begun to make in the fields of art and music. As in the Renaissance of the sixteenth century, modern playwrights turned to the drama of ancient Greece for inspiration. The adaptations of Sophocles' Antigone by Jean Cocteau and Jean Anouilh have been successful in France as well as in other countries. One playwright has used Anouilh's

I Lewis Salantieri's adaptation of Anouilh's Antigone was presented with great success February 14, 1946 at the Cort Theatre in New York City.

play for further adaptation.<sup>1</sup>

Since the presentation of the Antigone of Cocteau and Anouilh, relatively little has been written to offer a comparison of these plays with that of Sophocles'. Most of the information concerning such a comparison is scattered throughout the criticisms of the works of Cocteau and Anouilh. It is primarily through the reading of the three plays that an attempt has been made in this study to offer an organized treatment of this comparison.

It is always wise to review the customs, manners, and beliefs of a people before attempting to study their drama. Since the beginning of drama, in the crude rituals of primitive man, society has been mirrored in the works of its dramatists. At the beginning of each chapter concerning the analysis of the Antigone of Sophocles, Cocteau, and Anouilh, there is a brief summary of the developments of the society and the drama during the periods in which the three dramatists wrote their plays. Following this, is a discussion of the dramaturgy of the three writers.

The section of this paper dealing with translations and adaptations is presented to offer a brief look at the changes which were made in the Antigone as a result of the changes made in the development of French tragedy. This is by no means a complete record of all the French dramatists who have chosen Sophocles' Antigone for adaptation. A

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Galantiere's adaptation of Anouilh's Antigone was presented with great success February 18, 1946 at the Cort Theatre in New York City.

compilation of such material presents a problem which would be worthy of investigation.

At the close of Athenian history mark the years. In the century separating the Persian War from the Peloponnesian Wars Athens enjoyed the prosperity of her Golden Age. She was the accepted inevitability of Spartan aggression, and she held peacefully over her vast empire. Under the leadership of Pericles (461-429 B.C.), Athenians were introduced to a new system of government, a system which lay the basis for the modern world. Rapid strides were made in trade and industry. New worlds of knowledge were opened. By clearing away the mystic veil of antiquity, architecture took on a classical perfection, blending the Ionian elegance and Doric strength. One of the greatest developments of this era was the founding of the Academy, which was to stand firm long after the collapse of the city's dreams.

In the theaters in which this drama flourished were the seeds of every national custom and idea. One fact, however, the reader seems to find so difficult to grasp, is that these plays were presented in stiff competition only at the great dramatic festivals under the auspices of the gods. It was everyone's religious duty to attend these plays. The plays were almost always based upon some established legend. Since the audience already knew the story, the exposition of the theme could be swiftly passed and concentration could center on profound

## CHAPTER I

### SOPHOCLES

Influence of Athenian society upon the drama. In the half century separating the Persian War from the Peloponnesian War, Athens enjoyed the prosperity of her Golden Age. Aside from the accepted inevitability of Spartan hostility, she reigned peaceably over her vast empire. Under the rule of Pericles (459-429 B.C.), Athenians were introduced to democratic government, a system whereby any citizen might take part in ruling through an Assembly. Rapid strides were being taken in trade and industry. New worlds of thought were being opened. By clearing away the mysteries of bronze and marble, architecture took on a classical perfection exemplified by Ionian elegance and Dorian strength. One of the greatest developments of this era was the founding of a drama, which was to stand firm long after the collapse of many of this city's dreams.

The theatres in which this drama flourished were influenced by many national customs and ideas. One fact, which the modern reader seems to find so difficult to grasp, is that plays were presented in stiff competition only at designated dramatic festivals under the auspices of the state. It was everyone's religious duty to attend these festivals. The plays were almost always based upon some well established legend. Since the audience already knew the story, the exposition of the theme could be swiftly brought out and concentration could center on profound

analysis instead of curiosity about events. This also gave the dramatist the powerful weapon of "dramatic irony".

"We are to imagine, then, an Athenian audience...listening to a tragedy somewhat in the attitude of a Christian audience at a Nativity or Passion play, familiar with the accepted version of the story and thus the more ready to grasp, and to criticise, the particular interpretation offered by the author, and to be struck by any out-of-the-way incident or novel emphasis in his treatment of his subject."<sup>1</sup>

It was during this momentous period that Sophocles wrote his more than one hundred tragedies, only seven of which are extant.<sup>2</sup> Throughout his career, he took the Theban legend as background for his plays. One play which was a favorite with the Athenian audience was his Antigone, written around 441 B.C. This is supposedly the first of the seven extant tragedies, and the one which won for him an appointment of general in the Samian War.

Dramatic composition. In the painting of human character the supremacy of Sophocles has been generally admitted by ancient as well as modern critics. Although he accepted the Greek gods, and often used them as a "Deus ex Machina" in his plays, human nature is the main subject of interest in his dramas. For example, in the case of Antigone, the gods do not appear in physical form before

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<sup>1</sup> E.F. Watling, Sophocles, The Theban Plays, p.12.

<sup>2</sup> The seven extant tragedies are: Oedipus Rex, Electra, Oedipus at Colonus, Ajax, Antigone, Philoctetes, and The Trachiniae.

the heroine and counsel her to uphold their unwritten laws. Rather, she acts of her own free will, prompted by her profound faith and convictions in the sacred justice of the gods.

In Aristotle's quotation:

"...Sophocles said that he drew men as they ought to be; Euripides, as they are,"<sup>3</sup>

is found one of Sophocles' own well-known criticisms. Sophocles' characters are mostly strong and immovable in courage; but with a softer side to their character, which brings them nearer the human level. Conspicuous in this class is the heroic maiden, Antigone. She is swayed by ordinary passions and emotions. Yet, a splendor (recalling Homer) from the heroic age hangs over her.

The heroism of Antigone. The Antigone offers an example of Sophocles' use of the legend of the house of Oedipus. When Eteocles and Polynices, brothers of Antigone and Ismene, became the rightful rulers of Thebes, strife broke out between them. Polynices was exiled, and to avenge himself enlisted seven Argive champions to help him storm his native city. Thebes withstood them, and the two brothers killed each other. Creon, uncle of the dead princes, became master of the city. He ordered that the body of Eteocles, defender of the city, receive honorable rites of burial,

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, with a critical text and translation of The Poetics by S.H. Butcher, p.101.



while that of Polynices should be left to ignominy, unwept and unburied, upon the plain. Penalty of death by stoning was promulgated against anyone who should defy this order. Here the tragedy of Antigone begins.

Antigone resolves to defy the edict by burying her brother. She is fully aware of the consequences, but she feels that to avoid the task would lead her to an ignoble death. Her heroic nature will not allow the breach of the omnipotent laws of the gods by any man-made laws of State. Her determination to perform the burial rites was a thing every Greek of that age recognized as a sacred duty. There was strong traditional belief in an unburied body's ghost wandering for a season, cut off from departed spirits, on this side of Styx. Thus, Sophocles' audience would not judge the edict as something severe yet legitimate, but as a breach of piety that even most barbarians of the day respected.

Antigone invites her sister, Ismene, to help her perform the burial. Ismene, thinking only of the punishment for the act, cannot join her sister. Overcome with disappointment by her sister's refusal to help her, Antigone is aroused to indignation, and displaying the qualities of a true Sophoclean heroine, she expresses little tolerance for a nature weaker than her own. She tells Ismene:

"Fear not for me: guide thine own fate  
aright."<sup>4</sup>

She feels pity for her sister, who seems to her a symbol

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<sup>4</sup> Sophocles, Antigone, with a translation in English prose by Sir Richard Jebb, p.25. All references to the Antigone are taken from this text.

of weakness; and with a clear conscience, she proceeds to her task alone.

"A modern critic, taking the view that Antigone was wrong, has observed that she ought to have left the gods to provide the burial. It would have been ill for the world if all who have done heroic deeds had preferred to await miracles."<sup>5</sup>

Another suggestion, that Antigone should have tried to persuade Creon to dissolve the edict,<sup>6</sup> may be rejected by a close look at the king's obstinacy of purpose.

When the task is before her, Antigone is sustained by the necessity for action. Before Creon, she cannot tremble at the embodiment of divine law's negation. There is a theory that Creon was animated by personal spite against Antigone, that his maxims of State and policy are pretexts. His statement:

"...one of these maidens (Ismene) hath newly shown herself foolish, as the other (Antigone) hath been since her life begun,"<sup>7</sup>

may suggest previous dissensions between them. But, Creon's strict interpretation of state law, his burning pride, and his narrow scope of reasoning place him in the position of a formidable protagonist, sincere in his beliefs. He is the State, and he feels that to provide civic order, the

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<sup>5</sup> Sir Richard Jebb, Sophocles, The Plays and Fragments, p.xxv.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Antigone, p.109.

State must control all. He views Antigone as anarchy personified. He is not able to get beyond his principle of State, thus, he can never comprehend Antigone's motive for breaking the law. The heroine realizes the futility of argument, but does not waver in her convictions, even when threatened by death. Only at one moment, when tension is at its height, does she seem to speak lightly of death:

"Why then dost thou delay?"<sup>8</sup>

Life is dear to her and she has chosen death because the only alternative was to neglect a sacred duty.

Sophocles left no written testimony regarding the specific moral intended in his drama. As Creon overstepped the due limit by infringing the divine law, so Antigone did by defying the edict. The conflict is between two persons, each defending a sound principle in a mistaken way; therefore, both are punished. This view, of which Boeckh<sup>9</sup> is the chief representative, has attracted several supporters. Among them is Hegel,<sup>10</sup> who sees Antigone as the feminine devotion to family right; and Creon as the masculine power of the State right. It should be noted, however, that two masculine characters of the play, Haemon and Teiresias, defend her conduct. While some critics find no conceptual antinomy at all, Whitman,<sup>11</sup> a critic of the twentieth century, feels

<sup>8</sup> Antigone, p.99.

<sup>9</sup> Jebb, op. cit., p.xxi.

<sup>10</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, Religionsphilosophie, p.114.

<sup>11</sup> Cedric Whitman, Sophocles, p.83.

that the play should not be considered merely as an "idea" play. It may have the contrast between true and false authority, between the ideal citizen and the lawless ruler.

In her last scene, before she is led to her death, Antigone seems to step out of character for a brief moment by doubting the rightness of her act. She exclaims:

"Why, hapless one, should I look to the gods any more - what ally should I invoke, - when by piety I have earned the name of impious?"<sup>12</sup>

Some critics erase these words as spurious; but if we remember Sophocles' art of humanizing his heroines, another explanation is in order. Antigone now feels the desire for some token of sympathy and human kindness. Instead, she receives only the consolation of posthumous fame from the chorus of Theban elders. It is interesting to note the pathos which Sophocles has added to this scene by providing a chorus of men instead of a woman's chorus, which was customary in tragedies in which the principal protagonist was a woman. A mind capable of heroism, such as Antigone's, is such that it can see duties in their true proportions, and can sacrifice everything for the holding of what she considers just or true beliefs. It is such a mind, too, which in looking back on a duty done, is most liable, through a largeness of vision and sense of human limitations, to misgivings like those which vex the last moments of Antigone.

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<sup>12</sup> Antigone, p.167.

Her doubt is not permanent, for her last thoughts are of the gods and their divine justice.

One point in the drama which critics frown upon is Antigone's frigid and specious reasoning in her statement:

"Never, had I been a mother of children,  
or if a husband had been mouldering in  
death, would I have taken this task  
upon me in the city's despite."<sup>13</sup>

Again, many feel that this passage is not part of the original tragedy, and some translators omit this altogether.

These two debatable issues, as well as differences of opinion about personal characteristics of the heroine, have been discussed and argued for generations. As society has evolved, new interpretations of these problems have been presented, but none has proven itself valid.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.165.

## CHAPTER II

### TRANSLATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

The Renaissance. The earliest translation of Sophocles into a modern language seems to have been an Italian version of the Antigone, made at Lyons under French influences by Luigi Alemanni in 1532. In 1502, the seven extant tragedies of Sophocles had been published by the famous Venetian printer, Aldus. In France, during the Renaissance, scholars became absorbed in the task of translating and editing these plays. Included in Sophocles' known repertoire was his Antigone. Etienne Jodelle translated this play into French, and in 1573, Jean-Antoine de Baif, a fellow-student of Ronsard, presented his translation.

In 1579, Robert Garnier wrote Antigone ou la Piété. Garnier was discontent with what he considered the scholarly and bookish plays which the translators were producing. Disregarding the unities which Jules-César Scaliger had supposedly extracted from Aristotle's Poetics in 1561, Garnier proceeded to a free interpretation of the translations, complicating the action of his play as much as possible. The play is divided into five acts, the first three of which lean heavily on Seneca. In the last two acts, Antigone comes forward to assume her role as Sophocles' heroine. The role of Teiresias has been taken out, and it is the chorus of elders which convinces Creon that Antigone was justified in defying his edict by burying her brother. In her last scene, Antigone is surrounded by a chorus of sympathetic maidens, and Haemon is by her side

ready to meet death with her. Observing the many themes within the play, des Granges says:

"Antigone n'a d'autre unité que la présence de la fille d'Oedipe à travers plusieurs épisodes dont chacun pouvait former une tragédie."<sup>1</sup>

The seventeenth century. During the seventeenth century, Antigone retained her popularity with French dramatists. Jean Rotrou presented his Antigone in 1638. The first half of the tragedy is based on Euripides' The Phoenician Women. In the middle of the third act, he begins the subject of the Antigone of Sophocles, which is carried to the end of the play. Rotrou writes:

"Le sujet de la première tragédie grecque peut plaire à des spectateurs françois et les attacher; mais la nécessité de donner la sépulture à un mort n'est pas, selon nos moeurs, assez puissante pour produire sur nous des émotions tragiques."<sup>2</sup>

The multitudes of incidents that filled the French stage at that time hardly complied with classical simplicity. Not content with two models, Rotrou added several traits of Seneca. The play was a great success and received praise from Jean Racine, who regarded Rotrou as the first interpreter of the Greek poets.

In 1664 Racine also used Sophocles' Antigone as one of his principal characters in La Thébaïde ou les Frères

<sup>1</sup> Ch.-M. des Granges, Histoire Illustrée de la Littérature Française, p. 262.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Rotrou, Antigone, p. 3.

Ennemis. This was Racine's first attempt at writing a tragedy, and the play retained much of the style of Corneille. Compared with Racine's other works, this play received very little acclaim and is omitted from the great tragedian's list of psychological dramas.<sup>3</sup>

The eighteenth to the twentieth century. Considering the so-called classical tradition which prevailed in France during the eighteenth century, one might have expected to find many French translations of Sophocles. During the eighteenth century, however, none seem to have been published but those of Brumoy in 1749, of Dupuy in 1762, and of Rochefort in 1788. From that time little seems to have been done, until in the nineteenth century, M. Leconte de Lisle translated the seven plays of Sophocles into elegant prose.

It was not until the twentieth century that Antigone again enjoyed full success in the French theatre. The play was no longer presented in an atmosphere of antiquity, romanticism, or realism; but in that of symbolism, surrealism, and despair.

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<sup>3</sup> In 1664 Molière played La Thébaïde of Racine at the Palais-Royal.



### CHAPTER III

#### JEAN COCTEAU

The effects of a new society upon the drama. The First World War brought many changes to the French drama. Gustave Lanson sketches this period:

"Au lendemain de la première guerre mondiale, le théâtre d'avant-guerre s'est trouvé brusquement déclassé. La violence du choc avait fait tomber en poussière tous les artifices, - préparations habiles, mots d'esprit, lyrisme décoratif, subtilités psychologiques, - dont la société mondaine faisait ses délices. Cette société même avait presque disparu. Une nouvelle bourgeoisie née des bénéfices de la guerre cherchait des plaisirs moins compliqués dans les spectacles du music-hall ou du cinéma. Quant à ceux que la guerre avait éprouvés pendant quatre ans, ils savaient maintenant, pour avoir vécu sous les bombardements ou dans la boue des tranchées, qu'il est d'autres drames que ceux de l'adultère élégant avec ses raffinements baudelairiens et sa psychologie torturée."<sup>1</sup>

During this period of unrest and bewilderment, the avant-garde theatre developed. Primarily through the efforts of Jacques Copeau, who had begun working on the development of this theatre before the war, the theatre opened the way for new investigations which might eventually lead to an understanding of drama as a pure form of art. The exponents of this new theatre gave little thought to public opinion. They worked diligently to perfect the art of the theatre in all its aspects. New dramatists were introduced, and were

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<sup>1</sup> G. Lanson and P. Tuffrau, Histoire de la Littérature Française, p. 857.

given the freedom and a challenge to aspire to perfection in their writings. Large audiences soon filled the Vieux-Colombier of Copeau, the Atelier of Dullin, and Jouvet's Athénée. The avant-garde theatre was ready to hold its position beside the long established and popular boulevard theatre. On December 20, 1922, Jean Cocteau, a student of Dullin, presented his Antigone at the Atelier. The stage setting was provided by Picasso and the music by Honegger.

Dramaturgy. Jean Cocteau is perhaps the most praised and at the same time the most ridiculed dramatist of the twentieth century. He regards himself principally as a poet.<sup>2</sup> He feels that since the poet, unlike the ordinary man, can comprehend the symbolic value of all creation, he may consider himself a sort of guardian of society. Many of the heroes of his dramas possess this lofty yet burdensome character - lofty, because they have risen above man's conventionality to an ideal world of their own creation; burdensome, because their acts and ideas may bolt tradition so that they are accused of intellectual anarchy. Cocteau's summation of this belief is best presented in his definition of his doctrine of angélisme:

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the best accounts of the events which influenced Cocteau's development as a poet may be found in his Portraits-Souvenir 1900-1914.

"Désintéressement, égoïsme, tendre pitié, cruauté, souffrance des contacts, pureté dans la débauche, mélange d'un goût violent pour les plaisirs de la terre et de mépris pour eux, amoralité naïve...cet état rend l'individu suspect à tout le monde."<sup>3</sup>

Living as far outside of the human realm of thought as possible and taking no interest in civic affairs, Cocteau feels that he can perceive justice without prejudice.

A reference to the Antigone of Cocteau embodies the law which is to govern his works:

"Antigone est une tragédie abrégée où la loi de la nécessité, qui devait régir toute l'oeuvre dramatique du poète, jouait pour la première fois."<sup>4</sup>

Antigone. Cocteau's translation and adaptation of the original text is believed generally to be exceptionally well done. He has made no additions to Sophocles' tragedy, but he has omitted several passages of the chorus. In a letter to his friend, Jacques Maritain, Cocteau explains:

"C'est une question de retendre de vieux chefs-d'oeuvre, les dérider, déblayer leurs matières mortes, enlever la patine qui donne le change à la longue sur les oeuvres médiocres, mais n'ajoute rien aux chefs-d'oeuvre."<sup>5</sup>

He extends his remarks in this letter by defining patina as "the makeup of daubs".

In Sophocles' play, it has been seen that Antigone's

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Lannes, Jean Cocteau, p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Dubourg, Dramaturgie de Jean Cocteau, p. 225.

<sup>5</sup> Jean Cocteau, Lettres à Jacques Maritain, p. 23.

motive for burying her brother was to obey the unwritten laws of the gods. Although Cocteau admits that religion has always been one of the things which he evades, he does not reject it, nor does he allow his heroine to do so. Instead, he covers the religious theme with his own ideology of anarchy, a fact which Maritain wishes to ignore since he has tried diligently to win Cocteau over to his religious beliefs. He cannot create a heroine who relies on a force other than her own poetic nature. Antigone knows that her duty is just. She also realizes that to perform this duty she must break Creon's edict, thereby branding herself an anarchist. Her heroic and poetic nature will not allow her to falter before the traditions, conventions, and dogmas of the State; so, she performs the sacred rites realizing that she must die for her act.

In his letters to Jacques Maritain, Cocteau offers his reason for translating the popular Theban legend. He says:

"Instinct pushes me persistently against law. My Antigone offers an obscure salute to an unforeseen force opposed to Creon, to the foreseen mechanism of the law... Rebellion is as essential as periodic vaccinations."<sup>6</sup>

Such an assertion is not startling when one recalls his statement:

"I consider the Russian Revolution as

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<sup>6</sup> Letters Between Jacques Maritain and Jean Cocteau, translated from the French by John Coleman, p. 51.

the only significant result of the World War, the only point in Europe where the vaccination took."<sup>7</sup>

Maritain answers this letter:

"You have an admirable jealous longing for freedom. How well I understand you love for Antigone! Yet she herself tells us, and that is why she is dear to you, that in breaking human law she was following a better commandment - the unwritten and unchangeable laws. The freedom of a virgin obeying the laws of the gods is more beautiful than that of the poet or philosopher."<sup>8</sup>

Both Sophocles and Cocteau have created heroines of almost superhuman will, and who are very much aware of their poetic sensitivity. Cocteau states that he chose this ancient heroine because:

"Il faut éviter les longs développements psychologiques...Il s'agit de ramasser en une étincelante figure verbale ce qui, avant d'avoir eu le temps de se reconnaître, se trouve ainsi pris sur le fait, atteint au coeur."<sup>9</sup>

The transcendent purity of both heroines is incomprehensible to Ismene, who represents for Cocteau the pacifistic conformist, content in her ideas of ready-made affirmations. Neither is Creon able to reach the boundless span of truth from which Antigone derives her authentic freedom. To him, she is a personification of anarchy.

"Antigone est ma sainte,"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> Lannes, op. cit., p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Cocteau, Théâtre, vol.1, preface to Antigone, p.36.

affirms Cocteau. She is the heroic personification of his doctrine of angélisme. Like Sophocles, he discloses her love for life, family, and home. He has surrounded his heroine with the powerful barriers of tradition. In both tragedies the heroines face these barriers with their refusal to break from their profound beliefs. They do not curse their persecutors; rather, they realize the impossibility of their position and succumb to it. Cocteau compares Antigone with another heroine whom he greatly admires. He says:

"Jeanne d'Arc est mon grand écrivain...  
Antigone est mon autre sainte. Ces deux  
anarchistes conviennent à la gravité que  
j'aime, que Gide me refuse, gravité qui  
m'est propre et qui ne cadre pas avec  
celle qu'on a coutume d'appeler par ce  
nom. C'est celle des poètes."<sup>11</sup>

As in the play of Sophocles, Cocteau allows his heroine to weaken in her last appearance before her death. From this twentieth century adaptation a new solution to this questionable blemish may be offered. While the pressures of civic law and public admonition are being hurled upon her, Antigone has only her own conscience to turn to. This adds greatly in heightening the heroic element of the tragedy. Antigone resumes her air of splendor and subjects herself to death.

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Cocteau, La Difficulté d'Être, p. 39.

## CHAPTER IV

JEAN ANOUILH

The changes in the new society. During World War II France again experienced changes in her political, economic, and social life. The last year of the German occupation brought the outgrowth of a new social taste. People had lost interest in the pure art theatres but, at the same time, were dissatisfied with the superficial gaiety of the boulevard theatres. Pillement describes the status of the drama during this time in these words:

"C'est que les moeurs ont encore plus profondément évolué qu'après la guerre de 1914. Une nouvelle société est en train de s'asseoir dans les fauteuils de tous les théâtres qu'ils soient du boulevard ou d'avant-garde. Ce n'est plus ici, une bourgeoisie qui ne cherche qu'un divertissement, un délassement, là, une élite en quête d'une nourriture spirituelle. Il est composé de nouvelles couches sociales, du peuple entier qui avait dû, jusqu'ici, se contenter d'abord du mélodrame, genre Ambigu, ou de la féerie, genre Châtelet, puis qui les avait remplacés par le cinéma et qui devait, s'il tenait absolument à aller au théâtre, voir du haut des secondes galeries, dans les salles où elles existaient, les spectacles destinés à la classe bourgeoise."<sup>1</sup>

Philosophy. Among the dramatists who have stepped forward to meet this need for change, is Jean Anouilh, known as "le sauvage" to many critics. Anouilh's philosophy may be found in the unique themes of his dramas. At the root of them is the continuous opposition between purity, or the

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Pillement, Anthologie du théâtre français contemporain, vol. II, p. 15.

aspiration of purity; and society, hypocritical and corrupt, which accepts the most degrading compromises as long as it is not directly hampered by them. The conflict of these two worlds constitutes the action of his plays. The pure being is not rejected by society; rather, he revolts against the mediocrity of social life.

Antigone. Following in the footsteps of other great playwrights of his age, Anouilh has turned back to Greek legend for some of his themes. Like his contemporaries, he is attracted no doubt by the obvious symbolic significance which the legends possess. The Antigone of Anouilh, which is considered his masterpiece, was presented February 4, 1944 at the Atelier. In his adaptation of Sophocles' tragedy, Anouilh has made many radical changes in the original play. The actors appear in modern dress, and their language, even in the most dramatic situations, is informal and unpolished. Some of Sophocles' characters have been replaced by more modern figures. Teiresias, who acts as the agent of the gods in the fifth century play, is taken out of the cast. In the twentieth century, Antigone is provided with a sympathetic nurse, an understanding lover, and a faithful dog, which adds an intimacy undreamed of in the classical tragedy of Athens.

Hubert Gignoux, who views the play as overwhelmed with human reality which is inconsistent to tragedy in its pure form, refuses to accept Anouilh's Antigone as a tragic character. He reasons:



"Il y a une certaine distance qu'il faut établir entre les personnages d'une tragédie et nous, une distance optima, unique: plus loin du héros nous ne le plaindrions pas assez, mais plus près de lui, nous le jugerions trop."<sup>2</sup>

Pucciani opposes this idea by declaring that the real tragedy of Anouilh's play is that of the human condition in a modern society; therefore, the style, informality, and intimacy is necessary for the portrayal of the central theme.<sup>3</sup> His attack on the play is aimed at Anouilh's omission of an ultimate solution for the problem which he presents. When presenting his criticisms, Gignoux does not use the term classical tragedy, although it is assumed that his objections arise from the implication of the title of the modern play, *Antigone*. It is true that fifth century Athens would probably not agree with Anouilh's conception of a heroine. One should also keep in mind that the dramatist is not trying to produce a translation, but an adaptation which at times strays far from historical legend. Perhaps the solution which Pucciani seeks could be found in reasoning that in the three thousand years since the first *Antigone*, someone has come forward to remind men that the sanctity of the human personality still exists.

The *Antigone* of Anouilh possesses a temperament

<sup>2</sup> Hubert Gignoux, *Jean Anouilh*, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> Oreste Pucciani, *The French Theater Since 1930*, p. 147.

unlike that of her Greek model. At the beginning of the play, the eager spirit, determination, and boldness are missing. Foreseeing her sister's refusal, Antigone has proceeded to bury her brother alone. The heroine of Sophocles had no such foresight. Ismene, not knowing that her sister has broken the king's law, tries to dissuade her. Seeing that her arguments are useless, she asks:

"Tu n'as donc pas envie de vivre, toi?"<sup>4</sup>

In Antigone's reply is embodied her idealistic love of life. She answers:

"Qui se levait la première, le matin, rien que pour sentir l'air froid sur sa peau nue? Qui se couchait la dernière seulement quand n'en pouvait plus de fatigue, pour vivre encore un peu de la nuit? Qui pleurait déjà toute petite, en pensant qu'il y avait tant de petites bêtes, tant de brins d'herbe dans le pré et qu'on ne pouvait pas tous les prendre."<sup>5</sup>

Realizing that she must die, Antigone turns to her nurse as her only source of comfort. Unlike Sophocles' Antigone, she has not acted upon religious faith, so she cannot turn her eyes to heaven for divine aid. She has acted through the dictates of her own human conscience.

Another part of the play in which Anouilh has strayed far from Sophocles is his treatment of the relationship of Antigone and Haemon. Sophocles shared to some extent the

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Anouilh, Antigone, in Four French Plays of the Twentieth Century, edited by Elliott M. Grant, p. 268. All references to the Antigone of Anouilh are taken from this text.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 268-9.

ordinary Attic feeling, which regarded the entire arrangements concerning marriage as a matter of business in which sentiment had little place. The building up of the romantic theme in Anouilh's play only augments the pathos of Antigone's inevitable death.

When Antigone is brought before Creon, one can see two powerful protagonists emerging to assert their affirmations. This is a new Creon, an anxious king, a worried uncle. He believes in his duty toward the State, yet he is willing to betray that duty by pardoning a criminal act. Through his realistic reasoning, Creon is not able to understand any motive strong enough to tempt Antigone to defy his edict. In his eyes, Polynices was a rebel, therefore, a traitor. To dishonor him was a necessary political gesture offering an example - an example of the theory that the end justifies the means. Antigone offers her motive simply and without defiance. She explains her positive duty and family devotion. In effect she ends:

"C'était mon frère."<sup>6</sup>

The true character of her brother, for whom she is about to die, is revealed to her by Creon. He describes Polynices as:

"...un petit fêtard imbécile, un petit carnassier dur et sans âme, une petite brute tout juste bonne

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 288.

à aller plus vite que les autres avec  
ses voitures."<sup>7</sup>

Now Antigone's faith in her mission seems to grudgingly abandon her, adding more tragedy to her fate. Creon, not satisfied with his apparent victory, advises Antigone to abandon her idealistic thoughts. He paints for her a canvas of happiness, the kind of happiness that he derives from his realistic spirit. His concepts are built around material objects, living beings, and social standards.

It is at this point in the play that the principal theme is disclosed. Sophocles' heroine disappears and in her place stands a new Antigone, who boldly asserts her will. She is firm in her belief that if she should abandon her pure and just cause, she would be succumbing to false tradition and dogma. She answers Creon's prescription for happiness by hurling:

"Vous me dégoûtez tous avec votre bonheur!  
Avec votre vie qu'il faut aimer coûte que  
coûte...Je ne veux pas être modeste, moi,  
et me contenter d'un petit morceau si j'ai  
été bien sage...Je veux être sûre de tout  
aujourd'hui - ou mourir."<sup>8</sup>

Antigone, aware of her transcendent idealism, refuses to listen to her uncle. To listen would mean to accept, and to accept would mean the rejection of her free spirit. Serge Radine explains:

"On se rappelle, en effet, qu'à la

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 303-4. *Antigone*, Leconte de Lisle, p. 28.

différence de l'Antigone de Sophocle, qui consommait son sacrifice pour faire prévaloir la loi non écrite de la Conscience sur celle de la Cité, si respectable que soit cependant celle-ci lorsqu'elle n'enfreint pas les commandements impérieux de celle-là, l'héroïne d'Anouilh, en fin de compte, rejette purement et simplement la Vie elle-même, puisqu'en dernière analyse vivre est, pour elle, nécessairement s'avilir et, par conséquent, trahir."<sup>9</sup>

It seems impossible that Antigone and Creon will ever be able to communicate. He is spiritually incapable of entering into her idealistic realm of thought. She remains firm in her refusal to lower her ideals. Unlike the Antigone of Sophocles, the heroine now assumes an entirely personal attitude. The conflict is concerned with two individuals' viewpoints. The inevitable futility of reconciling these particular beliefs is the note on which the episodes ends, and Antigone is left facing death.

In both plays there is a perplexing change of character in the heroines, much more noticeable in the Greek tragedy than in the modern one. This change occurs in the heroines' last scenes. Their staunch faith in their principles seems to crash before them, leaving them bare and useless. This moment arrives in Anouilh's play during the dictation of Antigone's letter to Haemon. As she dictates the letter to the guard, she suddenly falters then she says:

Antigone, p. 515.

II 131.

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<sup>9</sup> Serge Radine, Anouilh, Lenormand, Salacrou, p. 23.

"Je ne sais plus pourquoi je meurs..."<sup>10</sup>

Whereas the Antigone of Sophocles stops with this thought, the new Antigone becomes quite specific. She says:

"Créon avait raison...je le comprends seulement maintenant combien c'était simple de vivre..."<sup>11</sup>

Only now does she suffer in her realization that she is alone in her beliefs. She has heard her punishment and knows that this feeling must go on endlessly. Suddenly Creon's little material objects of happiness are magnified for her.

She longs for a word of comfort, but has only the guard, who is occupied with his own petty problems. It is the fact that she is with the guard that seems to enlighten her. Gignoux comments that either she saw in the guard a specimen of the humanity she was dying for, and saw the futility of the sacrifice; or she saw an example of the society from which she was fleeing, and recognized an error in her judgment.<sup>12</sup> Her indecision is brief. She retracts her statements, and perhaps her doubts with them, and assumes again her heroic character.

Elliott Grant speaks of the lasting interest of Anouilh's play by referring to its particular poignancy

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<sup>10</sup> Antigone, p. 313.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Gignoux, op. cit., p. 120.

in Paris in 1944. He says:

"To the French audience, Antigone symbolized the spirit of democratic freedom in conflict with the German invader."<sup>13</sup>

In the criticism of Galantiere's adaptation of Anouilh's Antigone, which appeared in Time magazine, is found the statement:

"In writing the play, Anouilh was plainly walking on eggs. Not only must his Antigone hearten the French, but his Creon must not offend the Germans."<sup>14</sup>

To other critics Antigone's decision represents more a nihilistic rejection of life than the affirmation of a positive faith.

Blanchart sums up Anouilh's aim very aptly in his comment:

"Car Créon, devenu légion et sur tant de postes de commandement juché, dicte partout par trop de raisons d'Etat, pour que ceux qui apprirent chez Molière, Beaumarchais, Musset, Ibsen et quelques autres à jamais divinisés d'avoir été tellement humains, l'ivresse salvatrice de la révolte et de l'individualisme, ne se sentent pas aujourd'hui les frères d'Antigone..."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Elliott M. Grant, Four French Plays of the Twentieth Century, p. 256.

<sup>14</sup> "The Theater," Time, 47:54, March 4, 1946.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Blanchart, Jean Anouilh, in Aspects du Théâtre Contemporain en France (1930-1945), p. 199.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

The heroine created by Sophocles in his Antigone represented for the Athenian audience the personification of courageous fidelity to the gods. An audience so devoutly religious could never question the justification of the upholding of the unwritten laws of sacred burial. When the play was introduced into France, attention was centered upon producing accurate translations rather than upon studying the heroine's heroic motivation. When dramatists finally did become interested in the actual staging of the play, they discovered that the motive which had fired Sophocles' heroine was not sufficient to create a tragic situation for Renaissance audiences. By combining the plots of several classical tragedies, dramatists were able to create plays filled with action and intrigue, which suited the tastes of the audiences.

Jean Cocteau recognized in Antigone the qualities necessary for the portrayal of his doctrine of angélisme. The heroine represented for him the ideal anarchy of the poet, and he presented her as such without changing one of her lines in the original play. In the adaptation by Anouilh, however, many radical changes were made in Sophocles' play. Religious motivation is scarcely perceived in the heroine, and her heroic nature is derived from her own human conscience without the aid of divine intervention.



In these three plays are reflected not only the changes which have evolved in tragedy, but also the changes of concepts, ideals, and customs in the development of French society during one of its controversial periods.

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