

The Ruth & Ted Braun Awards for Writing Excellence at Saginaw Valley State University

Antigone: The Death of an Innocent and the Birth of Justice

Kelly France

GENERAL EDUCATION

*Nominated by Dr. Erik K. Trump
Associate Professor of Political Science*



Kelly France, a Midland resident, has been married 21 years and is the mother of two teenagers (19 and 17). Her hobbies include scrapbooking, perennial gardening, reading historical fiction and walking her golden retriever. She returned to SVSU after 20 years to pursue a Bachelor of Social Work degree; her goal is to work with troubled youth.

CHARACTERS:

Mr. Citizen Justice
Antigone's defense attorney

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
Expert witness on just and unjust laws

Mr. John Locke
Expert witness on leadership styles

Mr. Jean-Jacques Rousseau
Expert witness on social contracts

Justice: Esteemed citizens and jurors, you are called to this court of public opinion to hear the case brought against Antigone of Thebes. She stands accused of treason. It is too late to spare her the fate of an agonizing death imposed by a cruel king. Instead, we are here today, in the name of all that is true and fair, to preserve her dignity and good name, and to protect the rights of all people who are subjected to unjust laws. The testimony of expert witnesses will prove that Antigone was not guilty of any crime! She was an innocent pawn, played by a tyrannical leader to satisfy his insatiable appetite for power. Antigone stood against an

unjust law created by an unfit ruler when she exercised her moral rights as a socially responsible citizen. Justice will prevail, and the civil rights of humankind will be protected, when as a juror in the court of public opinion, your conscience leads you to acquit Antigone of Thebes.

For my first witness, I call to the stand Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King, would you kindly explain the ideology of just and unjust laws as they pertain to this case?

King: Certainly. A just law would be defined as one that “squares with the moral law or the law of God” (King). In contrast, an unjust law is one that contradicts a higher moral law. Antigone believed that leaving a body, especially the body of her brother, unburied was “dishonoring the laws the gods hold in honor” (*Antigone*, Lines 91-92). This law was particularly unjust as it degraded the humanity of Polynices. Antigone defied the edict openly and respectfully, and accepted the consequences of her actions. By doing so, she “aroused the conscience of the community over its injustice, and was in reality expressing the very highest respect for law” (King).

Creon, as you know, proclaimed “it’s best to keep the established laws to the very day we die” (*Antigone*, Lines

1237-1238). This proclamation indicates that even **he** recognized that his own decree was unreasonable. The edict was by **all** measures an unjust law! The esteemed St. Augustine summed it up very well when he declared, “an unjust law is no law at all.” Antigone is not guilty of any wrongdoing! She should be honored for her personal fortitude and courage to live by high moral standards - standards that oppose that which was clearly unjust.

Justice: Thank you, Dr. King. You may step down. Next, I call to the witness stand John Locke. Mr. Locke, would you please educate our esteemed jury about differences between effective and ineffective leadership and how it pertains to this case?

Locke: First of all, an effective leader is one who uses his power for the good of his subjects. Secondly, he does not pursue his private advantage at the expense of the public good. Lastly, and most importantly, he does not use his authority beyond what is right. Creon lost sight of the fact that the gods were the absolute authority in the land. Creon incriminates himself with rhetorical questions such as “Am I to rule this land for others - or myself?” and states, “The city *is* the king’s” (Antigone, Lines 824-825). In reality, he indicts **himself** on the charge of tyranny. When talking with Haemon, he articulates the tremendous value of subordinate, obedient, respectful sons who are “dutiful and attentive” (Antigone, Line 716). He believes that those subject to him exist to **serve** him and **his** needs. I would argue that the leader exists to serve the needs of his people by letting them know that he “loves and takes care of them” (The Second Treatise of Civil Government, Sec. 209). The people of Thebes did not regard his sovereignty as legitimate. He put his “own ambition and other irregular passions” (The Second Treatise of Civil Government, Sec. 199) above the good of the commonwealth. This does not depict a leader who is concerned for the welfare of his people above all things!

Had King Creon asked my counsel, I would have advised him that a rebellion was easily avoidable. When, like Antigone, people are “persuaded in their consciences that their laws, and with them their estates, liberties, lives, and **religions** are in danger,” I don’t know how a people “can be hindered from using illegal force” (The Second Treatise of Civil Government, Sec. 209). Antigone could not submit herself to a king who would not submit himself to the gods. Furthermore, Antigone feared that the King was usurping her very rights and liberties. She was not guilty of a crime. It is Creon who should be on trial for his transgressions against his own people. He was and still is an unfit king.

Justice: Thank you, Mr. Locke, for that very insightful testimony. The defense now calls our last witness, Mr. Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Mr. Rousseau, could you please explain

how the social contract is pertinent to this case against Antigone of Thebes?

Rousseau: With pleasure. The social contract exists to protect an individual’s properties and civil freedoms. It is in the best interest of all when the parties engaged in the contract offer mutual aid and support to each other. This contract is to be considered null and void when one of the parties has a “particular will of its own” and “uses its power to carry out that will. At that moment, the social union will disappear and the body politic will be dissolved” (The Social Contract, Rousseau). Creon nullified the contract almost the moment he sat upon the throne. He did not attempt to protect individual civil liberties. He did not offer mutual aid and support to his fellow citizens. When he lashed out against Antigone, he injured the entire body of Thebes.

As this concept of social contract pertains to the case before us, I would argue that Antigone is guilty of no wrong! She was freed from the social contract and free to exercise her individual moral rights. As my other esteemed colleagues have pointed out, she was not about to submit herself to the law of a king that was based on “fear of some man’s wounded pride” (Antigone, Line 510). A king’s injured pride would most assuredly constitute a “particular will.” Furthermore, he nullified the contract when he used his official power to carry out his distorted will by ordering her banished to a cave.

The social contract places great importance on religion and the citizens’ “morality and duties, which each believer is required to perform for others” (The Social Contract, Rousseau). Antigone, as mandated by the civil religion portion of the social contract, was required to bury the body of her brother. It was her duty. The contract further states that when a citizen publicly states his religious beliefs and then conducts himself in a manner contrary to those beliefs, that citizen deserves the death penalty. For this, it is Creon who should have been banished to the cave. Antigone acted in a morally and socially responsible way.

Justice: Ladies and gentlemen of the jury of public opinion, you have heard the testimony of three highly esteemed experts. **All** have testified to the innocence of our defendant. Now you must search your consciences and decide, based on the evidence presented here today, if Antigone of Thebes is guilty of any crime.

I maintain, based on the preponderance of the proof heard today, that Antigone was faced with an unjust law. This law defied her moral beliefs and the long-held customs of the people of Thebes, a law that even defied the beliefs of the king who decreed it. I also maintain that her king was unfit and unable to rule his people fairly and effectively. He possessed no strength of character. He did not rule for the good of the people. He was not deserving

of Antigone's loyalty or submission. And lastly, I maintain that Antigone was not bound by a social contract. Creon negated the contract on many counts. Antigone was free to act in accordance with the higher moral call upon her life. As a result, she was condemned to a tortured death, a penalty she willingly accepted. But her courage and death gave birth to justice that would free yourselves and others to enjoy their civil liberties. She is no criminal. She should be remembered as a heroine.

Works Cited

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