A Sacrifice to Athena: Oikos *and* Polis *in Sophoclean Drama*

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ABSTRACT
In Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* (Oedipus the King), the chief characters, Antigone, Creon, and Oedipus, become entangled in a complex web of events relating in important ways to both *oikos* (οἶκος) and *polis* (πολις), and each character threatens the existence or stability of one of the other (or both) of these spheres, by neglecting or rejecting outright their respective claims, rules and duties. Each of the three protagonists presents a different case, but the resolution to the two plays is similar, and evoke, in majestic fashion, the tragic essence of Greek tragedy at its highest. The complex power system of the Greek world creates complications, some of which are never fully resolved by Sophocles, but the New Order of the *polis*, despite its weaknesses, reigns supreme at the end of the drama. The final resolution is not, however, unmixed, as the continuance of the polis order necessitates the sacrifice, as it were, of the plays' protagonists. In this essay, the interdependent but sometimes conflicting spheres of *oikos* and *polis* are examined with reference to the development of ancient Greek civilization and Greek tragedy, specifically the works of Sophocles and Aeschylus.

> [H]ow many griefs our father Oedipus handed down!
> … There's nothing, / no pain – our lives are pain –
> no private shame, / no public disgrace, nothing I
> haven't seen in your griefs and mine.
> – Antigone to Ismene, *Antigone* 2, ll. 5-8

Private shame and public disgrace—thus laments Antigone, daughter of the once glorious but now disgraced and exiled king of Thebes. In the Greek world of Sophocles, the now-commonplace distinction between a public and a private sphere was neither so distinct nor so easily recognizable as it is today. For the sake of analysis and exposition we may, however, utilize the Greek terms *oikos* (οἶκος) and *polis* (πολις) to discuss two primary realms of classical Greek life that loosely correspond to modern conceptions of public and private spheres, respectively.

In Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* (Oedipus the King), the chief characters, Antigone, Creon, and Oedipus, become entangled in a complex web of events relating in important ways to both *oikos* and *polis*, and each character threatens the existence or stability of one of the other (or both) of these spheres, by neglecting or rejecting outright their respective claims, rules and duties. Each of the three main protagonists presents a different case, but the resolution to the two plays is similar, and evoke, in majestic fashion, the tragic essence of Greek tragedy at its highest. The complex power system of the Greek world creates complications, some of which are never fully resolved by Sophocles, but the New Order of the *polis*, despite its weaknesses, reigns supreme at the end of the drama. The final resolution is not, however, unmixed, as the continuance of the polis order necessitates the sacrifice, as it were, of the plays' protagonists.

It may be expedient at this point to clarify the senses in which the Greek terms *oikos* and *polis* will be employed in this essay. *Oikos* is, generally, a name for the Greek household, along with the sphere or relations and activities directly attaches to such, which moderns might call the domestic or private sphere. A classical Greek household was, however, much larger than a modern nuclear family, usually including three generation as well as slaves, livestock, and a host of deceased ancestors. The *oikos* is associated with a number of unwritten rules or customs that may be loosely termed "*oikos* morality." The *oikos* is also in some sense tied up with the Heroic Code typical of the Homeric epics: honor and glory, for oneself and for one's family (i.e., household) are of primary importance. Loyalty to member's of one's *oikos*, and the principles of revenge justice (*lex talionis*) also emerge as important aspects of the *oikos* sphere. Homer's heroes appear to exist in a world of *oikos*-morality, in particular Achilles, the "sacker of cities." Halverston, for one, argues that in Homer there are in fact no states, only estates (i.e., no *poleis*, only *oikoi*). The issue may not be that simple, however, as certain prefigurations of the polis can be seen in the *Odyssey*.[1]

The *polis* was, of course, much more than just a form of political organization—it involved an entire cultural and spiritual system as well. In a narrower, political sense, however, the polis refers to the emergent city-state, with its rules, customs, and attending morality. The notion of the *polis* as a civic community involved, above all else, the voluntary subordination of the individual and his needs and interests to the community and the (to use Rousseauian terms) "common good."[2] The *polis* in some sense became the new individual, of which citizens were necessary but ultimately subordinate parts. *Polis* morality is based upon the citizens' unquestioning obedience to its laws, customs, and institutions, as well as its gods, while striving to uphold the four cardinal virtues of any *polis*: justice, piety, moderation, and courage.

Oikos and *polis* must not be seen as isolated, independent sphere, however; rather, the *oikos* is the biological, social and economic basis of the *polis*. The *oikos* produces generations of citizens via reproduction, and generates the wealth of citizens via production. Thus, the *oikos* is the sphere of biological and economic sustenance, forming the natural and material foundation for the *polis*, and is some sense acting as mediator between raw nature and pure culture. This rosy picture of harmony was not always in evidence, however, as the tragedies of Sophocles reveal.

The interdependent but sometimes conflicting spheres of *oikos* and *polis* can be examined historically with reference to the development of ancient Greek civilization. From the eighth century BCE, tribal Greece began a slow but steady transformation into the world of the city-state, ultimately reaching a peak in democratic Athens of the fifth century. The emergence of the *polis* was viewed by many Greeks, including Aristotle, as a progressive development by and for humankind—a civilizing force. Tribal Greece had been dominated by the *oikos* and *oikos* morality, in which the

collective (family/tribe) counted for much more than the individual, and the notion of a public good (in relation to city or states) was virtually nonexistent.

As we have seen, however, *oikos* and its attendant values did not disappear. Even during the so-called "age of the *polis*," the *oikos* remained as an important foundational sphere. Aeschylus's *Oresteia* is in effect a dramatization of the emergence of the new order of the *polis* and the corresponding new ethical universe that incorporated the old *oikos* sphere into the new overriding *polis* principles. In the *Oresteia* trilogy, we see a distinction between notions of justice in the old (tribal) and new (polis) domains, where the former is based on equitable revenge (an eye for an eye) and the latter a more "rational" and "efficient" understanding that avoids Hegel's "bad infinity" (of which *lex talionis* is suspect). The first two plays—*The Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*—are dominated by the tribal (*oikos*) principles of revenge justice and its attendant "blood logic." In the final play, *The Eumenides*, Aeschylus posits a resolution to the bad infinity of this type of justice in the emergence of a new, higher form of justice tied up with the dominion of the Olympian gods and the *polis*. Aeschylus turns the trial and acquittal of Orestes into the "charter myth" of the establishment of the new polis order, and resolves the principal contradictions inherent in *oikos* justice—i.e., the fact that justice, by its nature a *public* good, is sought by acts of *private* revenge.

Of primary importance here, however, is not the elimination of the old order and its witch-like protagonists, the Furies, but rather their incorporation into the new Olympian *polis* order. The Furies lose their case against Orestes, but Athena realizes their significance to the world of the *polis*, and with their transformation into the Eumenides, she allows them a place within the new order, as protectors who retain some of their old nature in order to keep citizens aware of certain laws and prohibitions retained from the older *oikos* morality. According to Peter Euben, "It is Athena who shows how the ancient traditions are salutary boundaries for the 'reckless pride' of mortals, how inheritance is a necessary limit on the striving for innovation, and how the dark instinctive passions of age old Furies invigorate dreams of ideality, equity, and balance" (77). Thus, in several important ways the new *polis* order relies upon the *oikos* for its very survival. Although it is now public courts that administer justice, there must be some order in the private realm as well, and it is the now domesticated Furies—the Eumenides—who provide that order.

Now that we have delineated our terms, we may trun directly to the question of *oikos* and *polis* within Sophoclean tragedy. Whereas Aeschylus's *Oresteia* deals with the conflicts in the emergence of the *polis* order, the plays of his younger contemporary dramatize conflicts *within* the newfound order. The world of the *polis* contains both the *oikos* and the *polis* spheres, each with separate claims on personal and public duties. What is essential for the stability of the *polis* world is some kind of harmony between the two spheres. In *Oedipus Rex* we see a crisis in the *polis* world as a whole (i.e., *oikos* and *polis*), while in *Antigone* we witness a direct conflict between the two spheres. Each play ends with a resolution—in both cases a tragic resolution.

In *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles deals with a complex and popular Greek myth, producing a drama with few equals to this day. The story begins with Oedipus as the ideal classical man: lord of a flourishing *oikos* and ruler or a great (though recently troubled) *polis*, he is known the world over as the "first of men" (41). The sordid past of the protagonist is of course well known to the audience, and Sophocles focuses on the gradual recognition process by which Oedipus "discovers" himself and in the process destroys himself (and those around him). At the play's beginning, however, Oedipus is ignorant of his true identity. A plague is scourging Thebes, placing the very existence of the *polis* in peril. Contact with the Oracle soon reveals the source of the pollution: the existence in the city-state of a regicide, the murderer of Oedipus's predecessor, King Laius. Utilizing the great powers of intellect that allowed him to defeat the Sphinx (and thus become king), Oedipus solves the riddle of the *polis*, but only by becoming the author of his own demise.

As a regicide, Oedipus has committed the ultimate crime against the *polis*, and his misdemeanors against his *oikos* are just as serious, and more numerous. Oedipus the parricide and committer of incest is, according to Girard, the "father of formless duplications, sinister repetitions, a dark mixture of unnameable things" (Euben 98). By violating natural boundaries, he destroys his *oikos*. Parricide and incest, prohibitions against which were considered the very delineation point between humanity and the beasts, are *both* committed by this wise, great and noble king. How did this happen? What does it mean?

Pride, or more correctly, intellectutal *hybris*, is Oedipus's *hamartia*, the character weakness that eventually leads him to destroy himself. *Hybris* involves the claims of human intelligence to aspire to complete and perfect knowledge, which only divinity can claim, and thus resembles the mistake of Icarus or the biblical Nimrod.2 Oedipus eventually comes to recognize his *hamartia*, but it comes to late—his *oikos* has been irrevocably defiled, and his *polis* is in danger of dissolution. The *oikos* transgressions of King Oedipus seem to block out the political crime off regicide, but his personal sins are seen in political terms, and it is the *polis* that has to this point suffered, not the sinner himself or his *oikos*. Oedipus comes to recognize the threat he now poses to his *polis* by his (past) transgressions of both *oikos* and *polis* morality—a realization with fateful consequences.

In *Antigone*, written earlier than *Oedipus Rex* but anteceding it in plot-chronology, Oedipus's daughter emerges into the spotlight. Provoked by the new ruler Creon's edict, Antigone instigates a bitter quarrel between the norms of *oikos* and *polis*. The actual situation is not, as moderns might first imagine, a simple black-and-white, good versus evil struggle of a free individual against a despotic state. For one thing, such an interpretation neglects (as modern interpretations are want to do) the important role of religion in the play, and obscures the possibility that Antigone, too, meets a tragic fate due to some weakness or *hamartia*.

By forbidding the burial of Antigone's brother, Polynices (the traitor), Creon issues a *polis*-decree, one that, to modern appearances (and doubtless to Sophocles's audiences) appears excessive, but is certainly legitimate considering the offence. Loyalty to the city must take precedence over any private loyalty, whether to friend or family. Yet Creon's decree itself violates a fundamental law of the *oikos*: the right, nay the *duty* to bury a deceased family member. Antigone is obliged to bury her brother due to her firm commitment to *oikos* principles. "Of I had allowed my own mother's son to rot, an

unburied corpse," she proclaims, "that would have been an agony!" (520-22). By burying her brother, Antigone openly and willingly violates the *polis* order, and is condemned by Creon for her own traitorous ways. The tragic conflict thus arises from both Antigone's and Creon's exclusive and obsessive devotion to the duties and obligations of one sphere to the neglect of the other. Thus, both contribute equally to a rift in the unity of the larger *polis* order, which requires a harmonious totality comprising both state (*polis*) and household (*oikos*).

Creon's decree is not in itself outrageous, but the king transgresses the boundaries of *polis* law on several fronts. The polis did not normally go so far as to prevent a traitor's relatives from burying the corpse, particularly when, as in the case of Polynices, the body lay outside the physical boundaries of the city. Thus, Creon extends the boundaries of the *polis* into the realm of the *oikos* (both in metaphor and in actual fact), throwing off the delicate balance between the two realms. The *polis* under Creon becomes a *polis tyrannos*,[3] as the ruler essentially repudiates, in word and deed, his previous stated claims of popular representation. "The city is the king's," he protests in fury—"that's the law!" (825). Antigone, as well, goes too far by openly disobeying the laws of the *polis*, and by holding to extremes her position like a stubborn (and self-righteous) infant. She is just as indifferent to Creon's principles of action as he is to hers. This is where religion comes into play, as both characters believe themselves to be supported by, and in line with, the gods. Antigone appeals not only to the *oikos* bond of kindred blood but also to the unwritten law of the gods that the dead must be give proper burial. Creon, in turn, finds it inconceivable that the gods would demand the burial of a traitor to the city.

The difference between the two, however, is made plain as the story unfolds, and our modern sympathies with Antigone are eventually justified. The main differences seems to be one of character strength; unlike Creon, who turns his back on the city's interests and his initial proclamations, Antigone remains steadfast to her own principles of family loyalty and oikos justice. In the end it is Antigone who is proved right (if not in means than in consequences), for Creon's edict, by diverging from true *polis* ideals, has polluted the *polis* instead of purging it. By forbidding the burial of Polynices and imprisoning (and essentially killing) Antigone, his edict reversed the natural/religious order by keeping the dead above the earth and the living below it. Creon has unwittingly threatened the order of the *polis* by purposely denying not only *oikos* principles but an even deeper, more fundamental standard of "nature."

Having reviews the position of each of the three central characters in *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, we many now summarize, in brief, their respective transgressions against *oikos* and *polis*. In *Antigone*, we moderns, especially, feel sympathy for the tragic heroine, and in the end our feelings are justified—yet Antigone's character and methods are not beyond reproach. She actively rejects the polis decree of Creon, and thus threatens the very stability of the city-state and its authority. It is only with the eventual tragic resolution that we see that the heroine has actually saved the *polis* from its real danger: Creon.[4] By overstepping and abusing *polis* principles, Creon has put both *oikos* and *polis* in peril. In *Oedipus Rex* the tragic hero, like Creon, threatens both realms by his very existence in Thebes. For Oedipus, however, the transgressions are in the past, beyond undoing, and are unknown to him, thereby increasing the tragic (or fatalistic?) effect of the drama. Thus: Antigone outwardly threatens the *polis* realm and upholds that of the *oikos*, but in actuality her actions benefit the *polis*; Creon outwardly threatens the world of the *oikos*, but in effect he does damage to both *oikos* and *polis*; finally, Oedipus outdoes both his daughter and brother-in-law by transgressing the principal prohibitions of each realm, though his tragedy is offset somewhat by the irony, if one can call it that, that it is precisely via that key classical virtue of self-knowledge that he brings the fruits of his tragedy to bear on both *oikos* and *polis*.

Let us expand upon the last point. Some have argued that Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* is not a true "tragedy" at all, at least in the Aristotelian sense; Oedipus is merely a victim of Fate, bound, as he seems to be, to the words of the Oracle regardless of anything he does. While there is something to this as a general point, the interpretation fails. There is *harmartia* in Oedipus, though one that is not easily recognizable at first. In his quest for knowledge and self-identity, Oedipus neglects to recognize the limitations of human knowledge. He had one freedom, the freedom to search for the truth, which he used (and abused) until it brought him to the realization of the horrible truth about himself. Thus, Sophocles avoids the centrality of fate, focusing instead upon the protagonist's dedication to search for truth—a dedication that, unfortunately, was soiled with *hybris*, and thus becomes Oedipus's *hamartia*. The resolution of the drama comes with Oedipus's recognition of his own true identity and his realization of the horrors of his transgressions against *oikos* and *polis*. "What grief," he wails, "can crown this grief? It is mine alone, my destiny—I am Oedipus" (1496-97). Keeping true to his words, the polluter of Thebes is cast out, and blinded as well. In order to save the *polis*, however, Oedipus must abandon his defiled *oikos*, and the later travails of his offspring attest to the curse on his house. In the end, the conflict is resolved by the ruin of Oedipus and his *oikos*, for the greater good of *polis* harmony. According to Euben, "For all the play's warnings about Athenian excess, the *polis* remains a vital realm of speech and action, mitigating the metaphysical homelessness that afflicts and distinguishes us from other species and from the gods" (128). Once Oedipus comes to realize the truth, there is little question about what he must do, for the *polis* reigns supreme. Unlike Creon and Antigone, Oedipus fully recognizes both *oikos* and *polis* in their unity in the new order.

The situation in *Antigone* is slightly different, with two characters involved in a battle of will, fighting (ostensibly) for *oikos* and *polis*, respectively. As previously mentioned, by the end of the play it becomes clear that Creon's decree is not only a violation of divine law, but also a distortion of *polis* law. The eventual resolution comes about only with the suicides of Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice, Creon's wife. Creon comes to realize his transgressions and recognizes the oikos gods that he has do rashly dismissed at an earlier stage. He is a ruined man and realizes such. Unlike Antigone, Creon lives, but it is a Coleridgean "life-in-death," for his neglect of *oikos*-morality has meant the destruction of his own family, who die cursing him, and his wrongful punishment of Antigone has defiled the polis, which he claimed to be protecting against his niece.

Thus, both Antigone and Creon, by choosing courses of action that absolutely negate the claims and principles of the opposing sphere, set the *oikos* against the *polis*, causing a split in the harmonious ethical universe of the new order. The rift, it seems, can only be healed by the demise of the perpetrators. The play has a practical effect as well: by witnessing the division, and the consequent healing through sacrifice, the spectators of the drama became conscious of the unity and harmony (and fragility?) of the civilized Greek world.

We see in *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* it is only through the ruin of the individuals whose actions have disturbed the harmony of the *polis* world that harmony be restored—here lies the tragedy of the two plays. The *polis* order as a whole is saved in both cases, but only through the victimization of certain individuals and their respective *oikoi*. New order justice ultimately prevails, but not always for the benefit of every individual, as Antigone, Creon and Oedipus would attest.

Invoking Aeschylus once again, the resolutions of *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* can be seen in light of the resolution of the *Oresteia* found in *The Eumenides*. The Furies chasing Orestes are representative of the old gods of the earth and the underworld, and are associated with tribal justice and *oikos* principles. Antigone seems to be a disciple of the Furies (or, as the become in the new order, the Eumenides). She neglects, however, Apollo, who is representative of the "civilized" *polis*, the Olympian gods, and the justice of the city-state. As we see in *The Eumenides*, however, Apollo is not without weakness, and Creon's apparent commitment to the *polis*/Apollo, even if absolute, would be lacking withing the new order of the Greek world. The resolution of the *Oresteia*, the realization of the new order, is brought about not by Apollo, who comes across as rather short-sighted, but by Athena, who, by incorporating the Furies-cum-Eumenides, manages to harmonize oikos and polis in a grand unity—a unity fully recognized by Oedipus upon his self-recognition. According to Euben:

"It is Athena who shows how the ancient traditions are salutary boundaries for the 'reckless pride' of mortals, how inheritance is a necessary limit on the striving for innovation, and how the dark instinctive passions of age old Furies invigorate dreams of ideality, equity, and balance" (77). Thus, it seems that Oedipus was, if anything, a disciple of the Oresteian Apollo, because of his "reckless pride" in the form of intellectual *hybris*, punishable by the Furies / Eumenides as a vital aspect of new order control.

The tragic demise of these three characters—Antigone, Creon, and Oedipus—is in fact a necessary sacrifice to Athena, in order to preserve the essential unity of the polis world under her direction. Ironically, it is almost a form of *oikos* revenge justice that befalls these three, as, for different reasons and in various ways, they were involved in actions that threatened the new ethical universe of the civilized Greek world, with its ideal unity of *oikos* and *polis*. At the highest level, the ending is a happy one—civilization has triumphed. Yet, at another, personal level, three figures are ruined, sacrificed to the goddess Athena.

> Let the torches blaze and begin,
> That this beautiful fellowship come to our plot
> Shine on the future with man-happy lot.
> – Athena, in *The Eumenides*

Notes

1. For instance, Odysseus condemns the Cyclops as a savage, evoking a contrast between ancient / uncivilized / *oikos* and new / civilized / *polis*.
2. The Greek *xynon esthlon* or later *koinon agathon*.
3. Knox's *anthropos tyrannos* correctly describes Oedipus's condition: "man the master of the universe, self-taught and self-made ruler who has the capacity to… 'conquer complete happiness and prosperity'" (Euben 102).
4. In Knox's words, Antigone has done the right thing for the wrong reasons.

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