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 (οἰκος) and polis (πόλις), 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 (οἰκος) and polis (πόλις) 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 attached 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*.

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.” 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 turn 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 dramatizes 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 scouring 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, intellectual 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 antecedent it in plot-chronology, Oedipus’s daughter enters into the spotlight. Provoked by the new ruler Creon’s edict, Antigone instigates a bitter quarrel between the norms of polis and oikos. 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 tyrannis,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 given 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 seem to be 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; 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 so 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 invogorate 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 x non 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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