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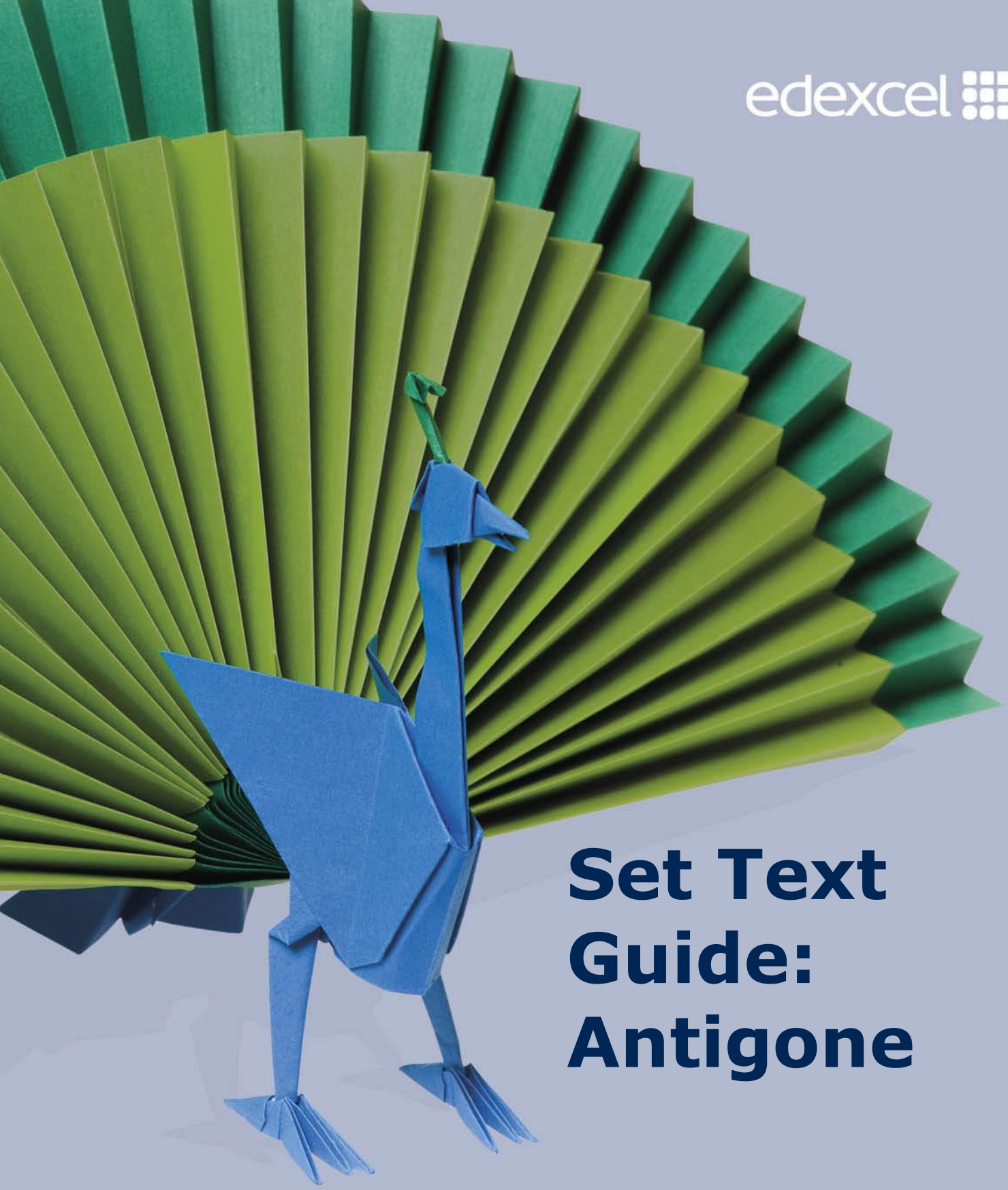

Set Text Guide: Antigone

AS and A Level Drama and Theatre

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

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GCE Drama 2016: Antigone

Contents

Summary

The context of the story of *Antigone*

Laius, king of Thebes, and his wife Jocasta receive a prophesy that their only son, Oedipus, will murder his father.

They try to avoid this, and leave the infant alone to perish.

However, Oedipus survives, and grows to murder Laius and marry Jocasta, his mother.

They have four children: Eteocles, Polynices, Ismene and Antigone.

When they discover the terrible truth, Oedipus blinds himself, curses his sons, pronouncing they will kill each other, and eventually dies in exile.

Eteocles and Polynices agree to rule Thebes as king in alternate years.

Eteocles refuses to abdicate after his year, and a bloody battle ensues between the brothers' armies.

They meet during the battle and slay each other at the seventh gate of Thebes.

Their uncle and Jocasta's brother, Creon, is the only male heir and so ascends to the throne.

This is where we pick up at the start of Antigone…

Opening scene

The steps outside the royal palace of Thebes

The sisters Antigone and Ismene are on the steps outside their old house, the royal palace, and are discussing the events of the last day. Yesterday, the Thebans defeated the Argive army in an attack which saw Eteocles and Polynices – the brothers of Antigone and Ismene – killed by one another. This was prophesied long before, as their father Oedipus at some point cursed his sons, after the discovery that they were born of incest. The new king, Creon, is their uncle. He has favoured Eteocles in death, and has given him a military burial already. He has decreed that Polynices must not be buried, and therefore will not gain access to the afterlife.

Antigone conspires to bury her brother out of love, despite the threat of death if she is discovered. She tries to enlist her sister to help in the act. Ismene lacks the courage of her sister, and does not wish to be involved, warning of the fate which has befallen their parents. She does not dare betray the new king and the power of the state. Antigone is headstrong and resolute in her plan, even without her sister's backing. She tells Ismene that she wouldn't let her help her now even if she changed her mind. She is not afraid of dying, if it is an honourable death.

First choral song

The Chorus is made up of elders of Thebes, representing the community. They are not all-knowing as a narrator might be, and are unaware of the king's decree. Their first song celebrates the city's victory in the previous day's battle. It uses a lot of imagery of light, and gives a dramatic description of the battle. When staging this, it may be that the director decides that the chorus sections are not sung, and there are various ways of choral speaking that can be explored to deliver these 'songs'. At the end of the song, they introduce the new king with great ceremony.

First scene

The king, Creon, sets out his policies and the importance of loyalty to the state. These are evidently tumultuous times, and he can be seen positioning himself to establish his authority. He announces his decree that Polynices' body must not be buried. The chorus bow down to his demands; they are his obedient subjects.

A soldier arrives. He is fumbling his words, clearly terrified to deliver the news he brings. He initially reveals that the body has 'vanished', though this isn't quite the full story. Finally, he comes out with it: 'the body's buried'. The king is livid. The soldier describes the body as being lightly covered by a layer of earth.

The chorus are worried that it may be a sign of unrest from the gods. However, King Creon disregards this as foolish, and lays the blame with politics and the virus that infects mankind: money. He charges the soldier to find the man who buried Polynices' body or face severe punishment.

The king leaves, and the soldier cannot believe his luck. He is amazed to have been released for now, and runs off. The character of the soldier can provide some comic relief for the audience, as he is thrown to the lions by his friends here, and must face the foolish tyrant. Some of his asides and quick retorts can be very funny.

Second choral song

This second chorus song praises the miracle of man and his ability to work creatively on his environment. However, it also warns that he must not indulge himself or his power. This could be a warning to Creon not to become arrogant.

Second scene

The soldier from the last scene returns triumphantly with Antigone, whom he accuses of burying Polynices. This can be a comical moment, as he returns in a completely different state from that in which he left. He is delighted to be here with this good news for the king. At first, Creon cannot believe it and demands to know how he is sure. The soldier explains that he and the other men exhumed the body and lay in wait nearby to observe the corpse. They soon after saw Antigone bury the body again. The king asks Antigone in a legal manner, 'Are you guilty?', to which she defiantly replies she is. Creon sends the soldier away to freedom.

The king is incredulous at the sheer nerve of Antigone. She proclaims that she was fully aware of his order not to bury him, because that is his law and not the law of the gods. She would rather face the punishment for doing wrong by a man than a god. The king naturally disagrees. He then orders that Ismene be brought in, as he saw her looking agitated outside and assumes this to be a sign of complicit guilt. Antigone looks to antagonise her uncle more and more, asking why he does not just kill her and be done with it. She says that the other Thebans all think like her behind his back, but are afraid to say it in front of him, as she is now doing. He eventually condemns her to death.

Ismene is brought in by guards. She has been crying and is tired. When questioned by the king, she confesses to the crime – which she hasn't committed – to stand by her sister. Antigone argues against her, telling Creon that she is lying and refused to help with Polynices' burial when asked. Ismene asks her sister to let her stand proud next to her and die with honour. Next, she reminds Creon of the intended marriage of his son, Haemon, with Antigone. The king is uninterested, and states that all lovers are parted by death eventually. Compassion does not appear to be the way to his cold heart. The chorus are even taken aback by his willingness to tear his son's love from his arms, but the scene ends as he orders the guards to drag them away, sentenced to be killed.

Third choral song

This next song, in contrast to the last, talks of the wrath of the gods towards humanity. It tells, through dramatic and epic imagery, of the suffering to be faced by one's family for generations should one offend the gods. We can understand from this that the current plight of Antigone and Ismene was caused by their ancestors' wrongdoings. However, it also serves as another warning to Creon that his behaviour is becoming more arrogant and his disregard for the law of the gods may be his downfall.

Third scene

The Chorus introduce the entrance of Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's betrothed lover. Creon assumes that Haemon is not angry at his father's decision, and that he will side with his father. Haemon confirms that he does not come in anger and would only marry with his father's blessing. The king then talks at length about the importance of obedience to the state – he is starting to show signs that power is going to his head. His son informs him that he has come to warn his father that the people of Thebes favour Antigone over himself. He is concerned for his father's well-being, and he says that Creon's political reputation is changing. Haemon urges Creon to spare the women for his own sake. The Chorus agree that the young man speaks sense. Creon is incensed, and asks whether he should take advice from a boy at his age. Haemon wisely argues that when a state becomes one man it is no longer a state. The king, however, believes that the state is the statesman who rules it, obviously. Haemon is powerless to change the destructive path of his father, and vows to leave and never return. As he leaves, he states that anyone who is foolish enough to stay and watch the destruction that will be caused by his madman of a father are welcome to do so.

After he has left, his anger must have affected Creon a little, as he gives in to pressure and informs the Chorus that he will let Ismene go free. Antigone, however, will face a brutal and harrowing death: she is to be buried alive in a cave, with enough food to sustain her so that it is not the state who has killed her, and that she will be in the hands of the gods.

Fourth choral song

The next song of the Chorus is about sexual attraction and how it cannot be avoided, either by man or by the gods. This is in reference to Haemon's love for Antigone, and his efforts in the previous scene to save her. It implies that Aphrodite – the goddess of love – can be just as powerful as Zeus – king of the gods – and that when she strikes it is to the heart, with frightening power.

Fourth scene

Antigone is brought in, guarded and dressed in a white gown. She is on her way to meet her death. The Chorus try to reassure her that it will all be worth it for the glory she will have in death. Here we see the relationship that Haemon spoke of between the public and Antigone, and how they look more favourably on her than on Creon. Antigone does not see things like this any more, and as she walks to her terrible fate she accuses the people of mocking her. She asks to go alone and in silence to her death, and that they spare her their sympathy.

Creon enters, ordering the guards to hurry about their business. He wants to be rid of Antigone as quickly as possible. Antigone begins a lament about death, and how she is going to meet her brother. Her words infuriate the king, who is aware that much of what she says is to affect the Chorus, who love her for her fire and defiance in the face of death. Finally, she is led away by the guards. This scene should be a moment of heightened drama, both in Antigone's address of to death, and in Creon's dawning realisation that the people are turning against him.

Fifth choral song

In this song, the Chorus give three historical examples of people who have suffered similar fates to that of Antigone: Danae, King Lycurgus and the sons of Phineus. These tales tell of the punishments of the gods, particularly to the lineage of those who have offended them. They conclude that 'The child Antigone pays for the parent's pride'.

Fifth scene

A blind man, Teiresias, is led in by his guide. He prophesies the future, and has travelled a long way to warn Creon that the gods are angry at his treatment of Polynices' body, and that he is balanced on a razor, and likely to fall and cut himself to pieces. He tells

Creon that any man can make a mistake, but the man who can recognise a mistake and put it right proves that it is never too late to become wise.

Creon does not take the advice well. He has become paranoid that anything said against him is evidence that he has become a target for everyone to shoot at. Teiresias argues that good advice cannot be bought and that Creon should heed it. Creon states that he does not wish to offend such a respected prophet of Thebes, but then goes on to insult Teiresias and all 'fortune-tellers'. He is obsessed with the corruption of money, and constantly believes that people to have been bribed to act against him.

Before leaving, Teiresias curses the king, promising that terrible horrors will befall him as punishment for his treatment of the body of Polynices and his sister Antigone. He leaves him with the hope that he will learn how a wise man can control his tongue.

The Chorus warns the king that his prophesies have always proven to be true. The king acknowledges this, and admits that his mind is like a tug of war. Because of this inner turmoil, he seems finally ready to listen to some good advice. They tell him to release Antigone quickly, as the wrath of the gods works quickly against men who have wronged them. Finally, Creon gives in with the same conviction with which he has stood strong so far. He hurries in a panic to the cave where she is buried, to dig her out with his own hands.

Sixth choral song

The final song is an address to the many gods. It asks that they help to clean the city of its pollution. It talks of the importance the city of Thebes has to the gods, but says that it is currently in anguish and needs help to be saved.

Final scene (Exodus)

A messenger hurries in to tell the Chorus of the tragic events that have occurred. He tells that although many people once envied Creon for his power, they will no longer envy him when they hear what has befallen him. He begins to explain, though his haste makes his description confusing.

He is interrupted by Eurydice, Creon's wife. She has overheard snippets of the conversation and fears the worst. The messenger declares that out of respect for her as the queen, he will tell the simple and painful truth, as she must hear it eventually. On the way to free Antigone, they first burned what was left the body of Polynices, in order to lay him to rest. On arrival at the cave, they heard screams, which the king took to be his son. When they uncovered the tomb, they discovered Antigone hanged, with Haemon by her feet sobbing, broken-hearted at the death of his wife. Haemon spat in his father's face and lunged for him with sword drawn. He missed, and in his grief and self-disgust at attempting to kill his own father, he stabbed himself, thus committing suicide.

On hearing this tragic news, Eurydice simply turns in eerie silence and leaves the room. The messenger seems unperturbed by this strange reaction and continues his story. The Chorus ask whether this was not a strange reaction to the death of a child. They find it unnerving, and persuade the messenger to go into the other room to check on her.

As he does this, the doors open and the body of Haemon is brought in, closely followed by his grieving father, Creon. He is in utter despair. He laments the pain he is feeling.

The messenger returns and gives the king more terrible news: Eurydice has killed herself behind the doors. Creon asks that Hades, king of the underworld, might kill him again, for he feels he has already died. He looks around for a knife to kill himself. He is going mad. He accepts the guilt and responsibility for all their deaths. Finally, after all this pain and suffering, he understands what is right. His final words as he exits are 'I should be dead', but he isn't.

The Chorus ends with what might be considered the moral of the tale: the key to human happiness is to find wisdom in the heart, and through his suffering, we have watched an old man become wise.

Characters

Antigone

The tragic heroine. From the first moment when we meet her she is kicking against the state. She is headstrong, driven and determined, and brave enough to die for what she believes in. As Greek theatre does not deal with the deeply psychological, characters are judged by their actions, and it is the job of the actors to discover the emotional and psychological complexities that lead them to their decisions. Antigone's actions are remarkable, so bold choices will be needed to find the truth behind such a fascinating heroine.

Ismene

Antigone's sister. She is timid and afraid to follow her sister's quest for justice, though she does have the courage to stand by Antigone when she is sentenced to death, and to preserve her honour she even admits guilt for a crime she did not commit.

Creon

The tragic king. He has just ascended to power as the play begins, and this power sends him hurtling towards his eventual despair. He does not heed the good advice he is offered throughout, and believes his word as king to be final, even overriding that of the gods. This proves to be his downfall, and his journey of pain and suffering eventually leaves him a desolate and wise man.

Haemon

Creon's son. He is in love with Antigone and is betrothed to marry her. He comes to his father to fight to save his bride, using the persuasive power of the wrath of the people to argue for her release, though this does not work. He vows to leave and never see his father again. He does see him however, in the moments before he tries to kill his father, and ultimately kill himself.

Teiresias

A blind prophet. He is well respected and renowned for his prophecies, which have never been known to be wrong. He brings good counsel, but it is ignored by the king. He had helped Creon ascend to the throne, and is hurt by his insults. He curses the king and his foolish actions, warning that a terrible fate will befall him.

Soldier

Brought in initially to account for the burial of Polynices, he is sent away to find the man responsible. He brings back Antigone, and is overjoyed at his escape from punishment for something he did not do. He has the potential to provide some light relief.

Messenger

He brings news of the terrible conclusion of the tragedy. He is straight-talking and is not shy of telling all the gory details.

Eurydice

Wife of Creon and mother to Haemon. She discovers the brutal truth of her son's death and takes her own life with little fuss.

Chorus

Elders of Thebes, representing the community. Their advice is sometimes heeded and sometimes not. Their opinion can change. They could be thought of as both a modern-day parliament, but also a think-tank of the common man. They sing songs between the scenes which are often prophetic or reflective. They are not all-knowing as a narrator might be, and they discover the events in real time with the other characters.

Social, cultural and historical context

Sophocles was born around 496 BC at Colonus, just outside Athens, though information about his life is understandably sketchy. His father was a wealthy weapons-maker and a high-ranking citizen. Sophocles was well educated; he studied poetry, dancing, music and gymnastics – all subjects that were considered to be the bedrock of a good education at the time in Athens.

The fifth century BC was a golden age for Greek theatre, and Sophocles emerged as the most popular playwright among his contemporaries. He wrote more than 120 plays, though only a handful of complete tragedies survive.

Antigone was first performed at a festival called the City Dionysia in the Theatre of Dionysus, around 440 BC. The festival was extremely important at the time, as it came just before the political and military elections, and theatre would have great influence in these results. In fact, it is claimed that Sophocles himself was elected general because of the success of *Antigone*.

Greek tragedies were always based on well known myths, and therefore the audience would be aware of basic outlines and back-stories. *Antigone* is part of the legend of the house of Laius. It could be considered the third in a trilogy, preceded by *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, though *Antigone* was likely written first.

Themes

Politics and power

The catalyst for the start of the play has been the battle over the kingdom of Thebes between the two brothers. The action of the play itself takes place outside the royal palace. Without the internal politics of the royal family, the tragedy would not occur. The Chorus act as observer to the political decisions made by King Creon, and though they occasionally offer advice, it is rarely heeded. Antigone rebels against the power and word of the state, believing the justice of the gods to be more important to the law of the state.

Gender

The two brothers are dead; the two sisters remain. Antigone's loyalty to her dead brother falls into line with the role of women in Greek society. Obedience would be expected first to a father, then to a brother, until marriage, at which point loyalty was expected to both old and new family. As her father is dead, Antigone is fiercely loyal to her brothers, and even says that she wouldn't do this for a son. It would have seemed perverse to the audience at the time that she forsakes the chance to marry Haemon and live happily, for the pursuit of justice for the soul of her dead brother. She challenges the status quo for women. It is a crucial factor in driving the narrative, and is one of the reasons she is such a complex and interesting character.

Death

As with all tragedies, death is a significant factor. It both begins and ends the narrative. Showing respect for the gods meant a safe passage to the underworld and to Hades, which was vital. Antigone is willing to go to her own death in the knowledge that she feels she is saving the soul of her brother. She is dressed in a white gown when sentenced to death, and this is symbolic of her marriage to death over a marriage to Haemon. Despite the multiple deaths at the end of the play, Creon's parting line is that he 'should be dead'. Though it has been his bad decisions and unjust actions that have caused the tragic deaths, he remains alive. It is almost as though this is a worse punishment, to be left alive amidst the devastation.

Justice

Creon appoints himself judge and jury. He makes a real point of emphasising the importance of the law of the state. Antigone represents the view that Creon's behaviour is in direct conflict with the laws of the gods. The history of myth itself should teach the characters that the wrath of the gods is to be feared, and that their justice will always be exacted. However, the corruption of power causes Creon to be blinded to this, and ultimately the law of the state has led to the death of all his loved ones. The driving force behind Antigone is a quest for justice, which she feels is wedded to family ties and kinship.

Resources

Recommended edition

Antigone: Sophocles (Translated by Don Taylor)

ISBN: 978-0-413-77604-4

Further reading

Sophocles: 'Antigone' by A.L. Brown (1987)

Sophocles' Political Tragedy: Antigone by W.M Calder (1971)

Online resources

https://homepage.usask.ca/~jrp638/skenotheke.html
http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/

Useful soundtracks to use in the classroom

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6E-pIKxIxZE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BIQ2D6AIys8

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9E6b3swbnWg

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ea2WoUtbzuw

Practical exploration activities

Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *Antigone*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

An important thing to remember when approaching a Greek tragedy is that unlike modern plays, the characters are not given a deep psychological life by the playwright. Don't be scared by this as actors, instead see it as a gift. You are free to interpret each character's drive, motives, and emotions the way you see them. Ultimately the character is only really defined by their actions, and it is your job and pleasure to discover how and why they behave as they do.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. You might explore moments from the play that are alluded to but not seen, for example:

- Antigone with Polynices before the battle
- Creon and Eurydice at the moment Creon becomes king
- The Chorus on their own out of earshot of the king
- Haemon and Antigone in the cave just before Antigone kills herself
- Creon giving a speech after the end of the play.

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow the actors to consider the voice, attitude, and physicality of the character they are exploring.

A more theatrical way to explore hot-seating might be to combine this exercise with an off-text improvisation. For example, following on from the examples above, after we have watched a scene play out, we could immediately interview the character and ask them probing questions to discover thoughts the actor may not have considered.

Exploring accent and dialect can also help actors to consider character choices. There is no way of knowing for certain how the Greek accent sounded two and a half millennia ago, so there is freedom in the choices one can make here. Try not to make accent and dialect decisions insular, as the way in which they differ from other characters can inform an audience's perception of their relationships and status.

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? For example, you might see how different characters behave when they are on their own. Does this differ from how they behave when they are around other characters? How?

Key scene work / alternative viewpoints

Another useful exercise to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus** and then trying it in an alternative style. For example, the actors might explore status in conjunction with the director. The director calls out numbers from 1 to 20 for the actors in the space: 1 is the lowest status, that of a slug, if you will; 20 is the highest status, the king perhaps. By playing this game we can begin to discover how bodies in space can signify status, and this might give us a good indication of how to stage certain pivotal moments in the play, where status plays a crucial role. This is particularly useful for exploring the power King Creon assumes. However, defiance of power can shift status, so try exploring to see how high Antigone can escalate her own status. There can be internal and external status, so although Antigone's external status might be low due to the fact that she is shackled and about to be executed, her internal status might be very high, as she believes that the power of the gods is on her side.

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *Antigone*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised and from 'page to stage'.

It might be useful to set up a **production meeting and pitch** for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer. Smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the production team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *Antigone* begins on the steps of the royal palace, and little more is given by way of stage directions. This should allow for plenty of freedom of creativity. How can the position of the Chorus change the space? Is there actually any need for the set to be lavish in order to achieve the impression of a palace?

Exploring different music and sound effects for key scenes is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. In the suggested soundtracks are some examples of epic classical music. These are just suggested stimuli for working with the huge emotions involved in a tragedy. As this music was written thousands of years later, there is nothing to stop a sound designer from using any genre of music that has been written since. When developing a sound design, don't just think in terms of music, you could work from the sounds of nature. Or think about how sound might indicate the unseen gods?

How can lighting help to create shadow and suspense? **Look at previous productions and lighting designs** to see how they have used lighting to create impact. If you don't have access to lighting, you might want to consider the effect of torches or candles. (Safety first!) Though the play is set in one place, consider how light might change the space, both literally in terms of the time of day, but also metaphorically as the climax of the play approaches. Remember, the play was initially performed in the open air, so you don't need incredible technology to achieve spectacular results.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is **sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and will help students who are initially daunted by the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic, representational, or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? Just because it is a Greek tragedy doesn't necessarily mean all characters must wear chitons. Though this is a reasonable option, don't feel trapped by stereotypes, and see if you can get more creative and show an audience something they haven't yet seen in a play which has been performed for over two thousand years!

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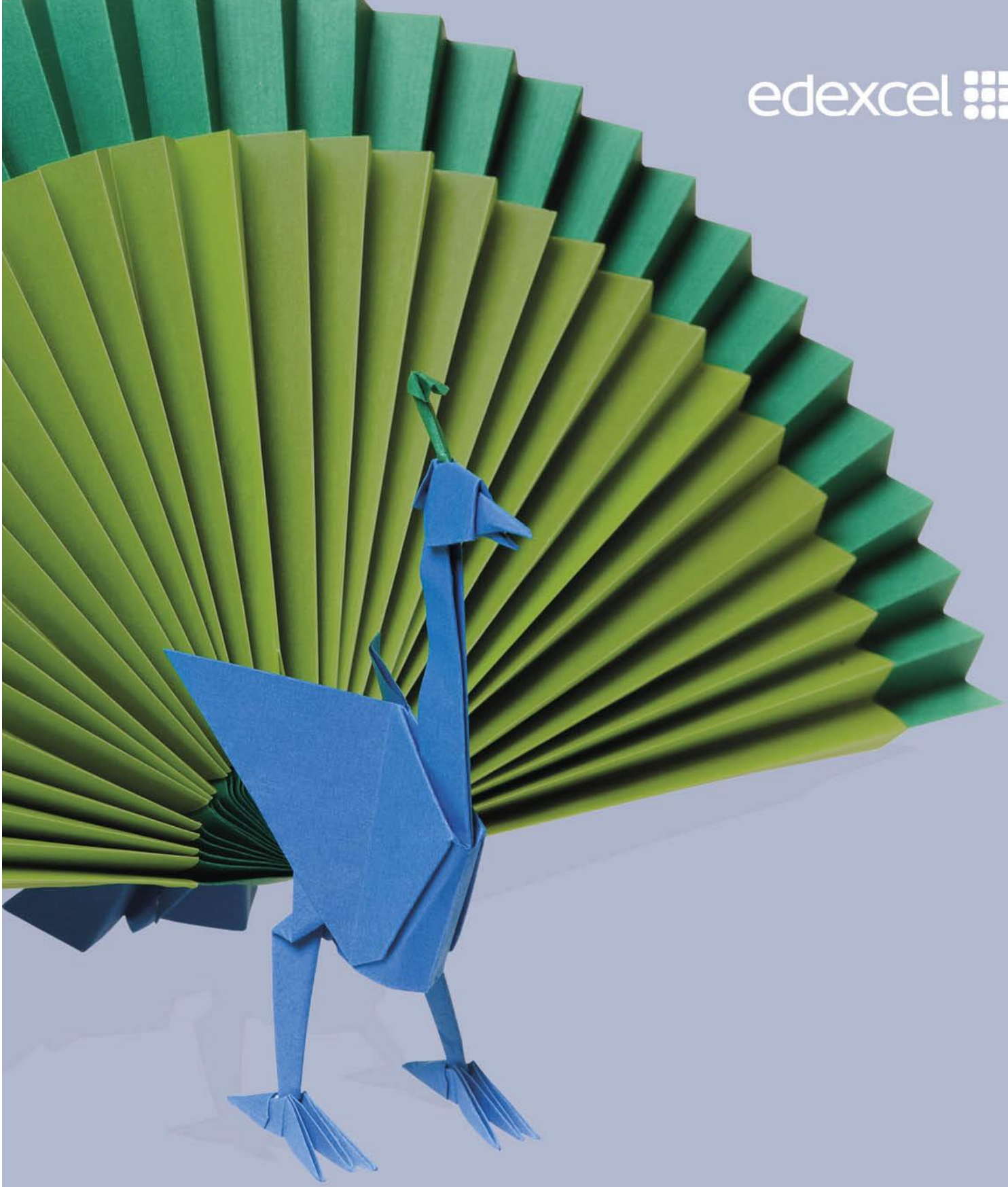

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