

day, October 16, 1963

Antigone



Preview

by Dr. Ann Greer

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE . . .

To whom? To what? What is loyalty? What is commitment? What and when is treason? Are answers to all these questions always and everywhere dependent on circumstances of time, place, beliefs; of expediency, fear, confidence, boldness conviction? The problem is old and always new.

The most basic and consuming questions of loyalty are surely those that set dichotomies because of fear for one's self as against faithfulness to loved ones; devotion to God when this is opposed by declarations of the State. What one believes and how deeply he believes must be a deciding factor. A sense of mission may intensify the decision; a stubborn will may maintain it; an assurance of eventual reward by the Immortals confirm or sanctify it.

In 476 B.C., as the sunshine of a Greek day poured into the Dionysus Theater at the base of the Acropolis in Athens, Aeschylus' tragedies on the house of Cadmus were exhibited. Of these, his **Seven Against Thebes** is extant. Perhaps this is not the concluding play of the trilogy, since the *exodos* leaves the loyalties divided: half the chorus, bearing the body of Polynices, leave in one direction behind Antigone; the other half, bearing the body of Eteocles, in the opposite direction behind Ismene. Perhaps, however, that great dramatist wished to leave hearts torn thus, as part of the heavy problem, because Eteocles, in the prologue, had declared that the final fulfillment of the curse on the house of Oedipus, the father of these four, is imminent — and the play that follows depicts the destruction of the brothers at each others' hands.

It is at this point that Soph-

ocles' **Antigone** begins. Since a part of his Theban trilogy is lost, we do not know how he had interpreted this part of the ancient folklore, or if he had followed Aeschylus in this; for **Antigone** was produced more than thirty years after **Seven Against Thebes**. Perhaps **Oedipus the King** had opened the trilogy; we do not have the date of this tragedy.

The prologue of **Antigone** poses the problem: the orphaned daughters of the accursed Oedipus are in Thebes where their uncle Creon is king, since the two sons of Oedipus have killed each other in the battle for the city, both cursed by their father because they had exiled him. Eteocles, denying the older Polynices his right to rule, had held the city when Polynices' forces, with six allied armies, fought to force his claim. Therefore, decrees Creon, Eteocles was a patriot defending Thebes; and Polynices was an enemy traitor, attacking the city. Eteocles has received honorable burial; Polynices has been left as carrion outside the gates. Ismene dreads the death penalty for disobedience. Her refusal to aid in secretly burying Polynices first determines Antigone to become a martyr, and to refuse any partner in this mission:

"I will not urge you — nor if you yet should have the mind, would you be welcome as a worker with me. Nay, be then what you will; but I will bury him. Well for me to die in doing that. I shall

rest, a loved one with him whom I have loved, sinless in my crime; for I owe a longer allegiance to the dead than to the living: in that world I shall abide forever. But if you will, be guilty of dishonoring laws which the gods have established in honor."

Creon, with growing stubbornness and rising anger, maintains that when a king has spoken, he weakens the State if he retracts. How far does this defiance go — defiance of burial laws well known to the audience? In the stirring last book of the *Iliad*, Apollo himself was the speaker of the lines against the god-like Achilles, beloved of Zeus, because of his mistreatment of dead Hector's body, and his refusal to grant it burial:

"It were better of him, and for him, that he did not do so; for brave though he be, we gods may take it ill that he should vent his fury upon dead clay."

The tragedy, of course, is not Antigone's, but Creon's; for he has defied piety. But like all real tragedy, the innocent must share in it.

To whom is the ultimate allegiance due, and do circumstances ever alter the requirement? The chorus of Theban elders, reminded through the terror and pity of Creon's self-wrought catastrophe, proclaim

the lesson before they exit:

“Wisdom is the supreme part of happiness; and reverence toward the gods must be inviolate. Great words of prideful men are ever punished with great blows, and, in old age, teach the chastened to be wise.”
