**Stage 2 Ancient Studies**

**Assessment Type 1: Skills and Applications**

**Topic 7: Drama — Antigone and Hippolytus**

**Please note: This task was designed against the assessment design criteria of 2017 and has been remarked against the criteria for 2018.**

*Sophocles’ Antigone and Euripides Phaedra are victims both to external powers and situations not of their making yet they are equally driven to their deaths by their own actions.” Discuss this statement.*

In the 440 and 428 B.C. Greek tragedies *Antigone* and *Hippolytus* by Sophocles and Euripides respectively, the characters Antigone and Phaedra are both victims to external powers and situations not of their making, yet both complete self-driven actions that lead them to their deaths. Antigone is victim to a decree made by Creon, her uncle and new king, which in the light of recent civil war denies traitor-brother Polynice’s the right of burial. Phaedra is a pawn in Aphrodite’s war against Pheadra’s step-son Hippolytus, cursed with unbearable lust for him. Both women are neither “completely guilty nor altogether innocent”[[1]](#footnote-1) in the cause and lead up to their deaths, but suffer from both external situations and powers and their own hunger for public *timè[[2]](#footnote-2)*.

Antigone’s character, her “own self-will”[[3]](#footnote-3) and her situation, create an avalanche of events that lead to her ultimate demise as the combination of Creon’s decree and Antigone’s egotistical nature clash head on. Initiated by the deaths of her brothers Eteocles and Polyneices during their fight defending and attacking the city respectively, King Creon decrees that the body of the traitor Polyneices will not be buried in an attempt to deter any other “parties of malcontents [or] shakers of heads in secret” from betraying the *polis*[[4]](#footnote-4). This political move is taken personally by Antigone, who believes it to have been decreed “against [her].”[[5]](#footnote-5)[[6]](#footnote-6) Here, un-controllable circumstance and Antigone’s own actions meet, as nothing in her circumstance was life-threatening until she responded. Antigone’s egocentric nature creates motive for her rebellion against the decree, whereby Antigone declares to her sister Ismene that she is going to “bury [her] brother”[[7]](#footnote-7), because she has a “duty to the dead” which Antigone believes she must fulfil as a part of the “unwritten, unalterable laws of the gods.” Despite Antigone’s attempt to do the right thing by the gods, she uses this opportunity to knowingly bring about her own demise, ensuring that her death is inevitable when she tells Ismene to “publish [her actions] to all the world.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This publication and hunger for public honour is what brings about her death, as she buries the body again when it is uncovered by the guards, but instead of doing it under the cover of night as was done the first time, Antigone instead buries the body in daylight, “when the flaming sun was high in the top of the sky”[[9]](#footnote-9). Once caught “setting [the] grave in order”[[10]](#footnote-10), she is confronted by Creon, but continues to “gloat over her deed” and even questions “why then [should they] delay [her death]?”[[11]](#footnote-11) Therefore, despite Antigone’s situation being out of her control, her own *time*-driven actions in response to the decree are what ultimately lead her to her death as she directly defied, and went “[her] way to the outermost limits of daring, and stumbled upon the law enthroned.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Phaedra, wife of Theseus and step-mother of the misogynistic Hippolytus, is similar to Antigone in that she too brings about her death through a culturally inappropriate (for a woman), honour-hungry ambition. Her initially appropriate desire to bring honour both to herself, and to her sons so that they can be successful in the poleis of Athens, drives her to attempt to persevere through Aphrodite’s curse. Out of protection for her own public image, and that of her sons, Phaedra restrains herself from lusting for Hippolytus, stating that she is “prepared to endure this madness… by mastering it with self-control”. Through the construction of a temple to Aphrodite, then through fasting, remaining indoors, and keeping silent, Phaedra attempts to keep herself chaste. These attempts assisted to protect her image as it gave no material for her name to be slandered with, therefore protecting her sons. Had Phaedra committed suicide at this point, given Theseus’ reaction in the text, it is possible that she indeed would have died with some *time.* However, her hunger for public *Kleos* pushes her to death, especially in her reaction to Hippolytus’ outburst. Phaedra’s first active mistake that led to her downfall occurs during her sexually suggestive conversation with the Nurse, where the Nurse suggests a solution to Phaedra to cure her lusting. Phaedra’s response, in asking “is it a draught or ointment” is ultimately suggestive of her asking if the Nurse knows of a possible way for her to engage in coitus with Hippolytus without anyone knowing. This first domino of considering the idea then leads to the Nurse telling Hippolytus the situation, to which he as his misogynistic and “chaste” self, is outraged and openly condemns Phaedra for such feelings. Phaedra’s response to this outburst is her second action leading to her death, as she releases her chastity, her “gentleness” and instead yields to the same anger and bitterness displayed by Hippolytus. In her desire for vengeance, she kills herself, leaving behind a letter that details how Hippolytus apparently raped her. While this brings about the fulfilment of Aphrodite’s wishes, in that Theseus wishes Hippolytus dead, when Athena reveals the truth to Theseus about Phaedra’s circumstance, she is viewed no longer as an honourable and chaste woman, but instead as a liar, thus ultimately dishonouring her name. Therefore, Phaedra’s hunger for public honour drove her to remain chaste, but was ultimately overcome but her desire for Hippolytus which resulted in a domino effect of events that Phaedra controlled before leading herself to her own death.

Ultimately, both Antigone and Phaedra fall victim to external powers and circumstances out of their control, but their reaction and response to those circumstances is responsible for their deaths. Both women’s ego-centric reactions to their circumstances lead to their deaths, as they demanded public recognition. Antigone’s prideful reaction resulted in her (to the *poleis)*, ‘rightfully’ deserved death, meanwhile although Phaedra’s initial attempts at abstaining are honourable, her recognition-hungry actions drove her to such drastic measures as the abandonment of her *sophron* for *timè* via suicide. Ultimately, both Sophocles and Euripides in their respective texts, although differing in opinions and views, prove that no matter the circumstance, if you let your pride get the better of you, your actions will be your downfall.

| *Assessment Design Criteria* | *Grade* | *Comment* |
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| KU1 | A | In-depth knowledge and critical understanding of both the texts and the societies within which the text sits. The student demonstrates knowledge of the socially acceptable behaviour of women and the atypical behaviour of the females under discussion. The student shows an understanding of the cultural notions of honour, loyalty, religious duty and vengeance. |
| RA1 | A | The student has researched comprehensively into both primary texts and critical analysis has enabled the student then to draw similarities and differenced between the two strengthening evidence for A2. The student has also researched into some secondary support material Though it is not extensive, it is used well to inform argument.  |
| A1 | A | The student has a commanding control of the source material, able to integrate it into the argument smoothly. The student is also able to hold both texts against each other and show similarities and differences. Footnoting is consistent. Bibliography however is lacking.  |
| A2 | A | Clear, precise and highly persuasive. The argument is laid out in the introduction. Clear idea driven topic sentences direct the reader’s attention to the argument. Each paragraph has disciplined material that addresses the question. Subject specific terminology aids to persuade the reader that the student is in control of their material.  |
| **Overall Grade** | **A** |

1. <http://englishoneoworst.blogspot.com.au/2010/07/impossible-choices-moral-tragedy-of.html>

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/classical-play/archive/2010-2019/2012Hippolytos-studyinfo> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. honour [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Antigone, pg. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. City/state [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Leibman, L. (1997). *Antigone: The Cultural Work Of Tragedy*. [PDF] 24. Available at: <http://www.reed.edu/humanities/Hum110/Leibman/AntigoneLecture.pdf>, [Accessed 14, June, 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Antigone, pg. 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Antigone, pg. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Antigone, pg. 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Antigone, pg. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Antigone, pg. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Antigone, pg. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The Antigone, pg. 149 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)