

## ***Sophocles' Antigone***

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C. Production and Politics: Hylomorphism and self-organization (tyranny and democracy)

D. Rigidity vs flexibility (Creon's fascist body politic)

E. Gender

I. Textual issues.

Sophocles' *Antigone* was produced @442 BCE. Thus it comes first, in order of composition, before *Oedipus the King* (@430) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (posthumous, 403). In the order of the Theban saga, though, it would be third, after the death of the father. You must remember it was NOT part of a "Theban trilogy," as contrasted with the *Oresteia*, which is a true "Mycenaean trilogy." This clears up an apparent conflict: in the *Antigone*, Ismene says her father died in disgrace, while in *OC*, he dies redeemed (an example of Greek playwright's latitude in reformulating myths).

II. Structure.

The play follows the traditional pattern of prologue (introduction of characters and plot); choral entry (*parados*); then alternating scene and choral song (*stasimon*). I see, w/in this outline, 20 separate interactions, as follows. NB: this outline is simply for help. The "official" structure is the Greek pattern.

*Antigone*: Plot Outline (line numbering in Lind, *Ten Greek Plays*)

1. Antigone and Ismene: intro plot: sentence of Creon/character of Antigone [1-99]
2. Chorus #1: backstory/hubris [100-161]
3. Creon: intro character of Creon: his political philosophy [162-222]
4. Sentry/Creon/Chorus leader: body of Polynices cared for/character of Creon [223-330]
5. Chorus #2: ode on man [331-370]
6. Sentry/Creon: report of capture of Antigone (described as whirlwind) [371-440]
7. Creon/Antigone: character of Antigone (interrogation/defiance) [441-525]
8. Antigone/Ismene: character of Antigone (rejection of Ismene/pride) [530-560]
9. Creon/Ismene: character of Creon (dismissal of Haemon/Antigone alliance) [561-581]
10. Chorus #3: house of Oedipus [582-630]
11. Haemon/Creon/Chorus leader: character of Creon (familial/political hubris) [631-780]
12. Chorus #4: ode on love [781-800]
13. Chorus/Antigone: mythic women/parallels w/ A; fate of house of Oedipus [801-880]
14. Creon/Antigone: Antigone's last words (singularity of brother; calls on gods) [881-942]
15. Chorus #5: past workings of fate/parallels w/ A [945-985]
16. Teiresias/Creon: Creon mocks prophecy [985-1090]
17. Chorus/Creon: Creon relents; accepts persuasion at last [1091-1113]
18. Chorus #6: Dionysus & Thebes [1115-1152]
19. Messenger/Chorus/Eurydice: report of deaths of Antigone and Haemon [1153-1254]
20. Creon/Messenger/Chorus: final recognition by Creon [1255-1352]

### III. Interpretive frameworks

As a great work of art--and it is universally regarded as a masterpiece, having captured in particular the German imagination--the *Antigone* offers itself to a variety of interpretive frameworks or contexts. As some of these only develop over time, the meaning of the play must be seen as open to the future, as indeterminate: we cannot foresee how the future will read it, what contexts it will develop. In this way, we have a democratic culture: we have to leave to our descendants the right to develop their own meanings, just as the Founding Fathers, in giving us an amendment procedure, gave to us the right to determine the meaning of America. This flexibility in interpretation is something, as we will see, that both Creon and Antigone lack, though Creon's failure is more dangerous, as he is invested with authoritarian political power and has a pattern of desire that is, strictly speaking, fascist.

I'll consider the following contexts:

- A. Conflict of Religion and Politics
- B. Conflict w/in politics of command vs persuasion (or tyranny vs democracy)
- C. Production and Politics: Hylomorphism and self-organization (tyranny and democracy)
- D. Rigidity vs flexibility (Creon's fascist body politic)
- E. Gender

A. Conflict of Religion and Politics:

The obvious framework w/ which to start is that of the conflict of religion and politics. Antigone wants to bury her brother Polynices, as Greek religion commands her to. Creon has forbidden the burial of Polynices as a traitor. Which law has precedence? This is the conflict. Antigone makes it explicit in her reply to Creon at 450:

C: And you had the boldness to transgress that law?

A: Yes, for it was not Zeus made such a law; such is not the Justice of the gods. Nor did I think that your decree had so much force, that a mortal could override the unwritten and unchanging statutes of heaven. For their authority is not of today nor yesterday, but from all time, and no man knows when they were first put forth.

Some Greek context is necessary to understand the issues involved. In general, the bodies of defeated warriors could be ransomed for proper burial by their survivors, as we saw w/ Priam and Achilles. The victors were under no real obligation to bury them, but they shouldn't stand in the way of their recovery. Positive mistreatment of the defeated's corpse was dangerous, as it could anger the gods. Traitors, however, like Polynices, were a special case. Not only were the victors under no obligation to bury them, it was forbidden that they be buried in the betrayed city. Thus had Creon simply put Polynices' body **outside** the city, and forbidden that he be buried **inside** the city, he would have been within tradition. He only overreaches by forbidding any burial whatsoever.

Many people have seen Antigone's reply as a paradigm of civil disobedience, the appeal to a higher law to justify breaking a civil law. As Antigone admits the facts and accepts her punishment, this does indeed seem like what we understand as civil disobedience. (We will see later that disobedience--that is, not being a soldier who obeys--is the thing that maddens Creon.)

We can make the formulation of the conflict more precise, however. Rather than a conflict of religion and politics, we can see a conflict of two types of religion within a political context. Antigone appeals to an ancient family-centered religion, while Creon appeals to a civic religion, the gods of Thebes (285). Civic religion is the

norm in urban ancient world; festivals such as the Panathenaea in Athens were a combination of the 4th of July and Christmas, religious and political at the same time.

The most important issue aroused by reading the *Antigone*, thus, it seems to me, is not religion and politics, but the type of politics. Sophocles makes it clear in the Ode on Man that "weaving" together (Fagles' translation, 409) of divine and human laws is the key to a flourishing city. As it's up to us humans to achieve this weaving, the real issue is the proper blend of convention and innovation, and the input process necessary to judge this proper blend. This is at least plausibly Sophocles' own view. For us, we can strengthen the case: since "divine laws" are human constructs, open to interpretation and context change (none of us here today, I venture, appeal to Zeus to justify our actions)--and of course since modern societies have people of many different religions in them--the relation of religion and politics is clearly a **political** issue. (It may of course be that our Founding Fathers were right and they must be separated!) This brings us to the next point:

#### B. Conflict w/in politics of command vs persuasion (or tyranny vs democracy)

One of the classic ways of interpreting the *Antigone* is to say that although Sophocles sets it in ancient, mythic, Thebes, the political issues are those of mid 5<sup>th</sup> C Athens. In this way the conflict is between the autocratic, tyrannical, Creon, and the democratic philosophy espoused by Haemon. (This approach, by the way, seems to me to correctly put the focus on Creon. If this is a tragedy, the protagonist must be Creon: he is the one destroyed by *hamartia*. Antigone, great as she is, is only the antagonist, the one who brings Creon to his fate.)

As you recall, the Greek--or more specifically, the Athenian--tyrants only got a bad name late in their run. Pisistratus was very popular in 6<sup>th</sup> C; only his son Hippias--and perhaps then only after his brother's assassination--turned bad: paranoid and unpredictable. In general, tyrants (themselves disaffected or ambitious aristocrats) broke the monopoly on power of the aristocrats, the big landowners, by building a coalition with small farmers (the hoplites), the urban *nouveaux riches* (the traders and manufacturers), and the urban masses (whose muscle power was tapped by Themistocles' navy). Once the 5<sup>th</sup> C turn to democracy was completed, though, tyranny was felt to have passed its time. We can clearly see this conflict in the Haemon/Creon exchange at 735ff:

C: Tell me--am I to rule by my own judgment or the views of others?

H: That is no city which belongs to one man.

C: Is not the city held to be the ruler's?

H: That kind of monarchy would do well in a desert.

(It's also often said that Sophocles is here pitting the ancient heroic individualist code personified by Creon against modern Athenian democracy. Hence the ancient mythic setting. I'm not so sure of the Creon as heroic warrior reading, as I'll point out below.)

Creon's problem is not so much that he simply misinterprets the proper blend of convention and innovation, of religion and politics (his judgment as to what's good for his city). Thus his fault is not simply bad judgment, but that it's a result of a bad **input process** to his judgment: he's wrapped up inside his own head and won't listen to anyone else, having once made up his mind. He expects immediate obedience to his commands, at home and in the city; obedience is the prime civic virtue for him, disobedience the prime vice (660ff). (Here is where Socratic ignorance will come in: Socrates actively **solicits** the conflicting opinions of others. Socrates refuses to stay inside his head. In a sense, he's "out of his mind"--and into the city!)

To turn the screw once more, Creon's problem is that he won't listen to reason (the persuasive speech of Haemon and the chorus), and that he only relents when scared by the prophecy [mumbo-jumbo] of Teiresias.

But by then it's too late. It's always too late by the time the priests get involved! Now, this very well might be a cheap shot by a modern anti-cleric: Teiresias only threatens Creon after he has impugned his motives by his typical seeing of money incentives behind everything [recall the episode w/ the sentry]. But then again, Sophocles was a priest himself, so you'd expect him to want to impress people with the foresight of a mystical seer. The real issue here is the status of T's speech: it's an oracular pronouncement, as opposed to the human dialogue Creon rejects w/ Haemon and the people. One might argue that had Creon "listened to reason," to the measured speech [*logos*] of Haemon, everything would have been okay. Thus the entry of the priest is the mark of Creon's having waited too long: democracy doesn't need priests, though they might be useful in scaring tyrants. (This isn't completely anachronistic. Whether or not this is a strained interpretation, whether or not Sophocles "intended" this meaning, this is something there in the text to support this, and it would have been picked up on by the anti-clerics in the audience: for there were Greek anti-clerics, even if prudence suggested discretion in this area. Any culture that could conceive of Plato's "noble lie"--religion as social control--could support suspicion of priestly motives, even if Creon's anti-clericism is punished.)

### C. Production and Politics:

Hylomorphism and self-organization (tyranny and democracy)

As an autocrat, C rules from above. He imposes an order on a recalcitrant people. His model for this is iron work or horse-taming (473ff). The Greeks, in turn, though, had previously and unconsciously understood these production processes on the basis of the relation of a free man (e.g., an architect: cf. *Metaphysics* 1.1-2) to his slaves: command. Thus matter is passive and needs the imposition of a transcendent form (this is a type of limitation of the unlimited), just as a slave is [supposedly] passive until he or she receives the order of the master. In other words, the Greeks unconsciously used the everyday relation of command between master and slave to model production as imposition of form on matter (so-called hylomorphism), and then turned around and used the hylomorphic production model to understand tyrannical rule, which Creon wants not only in the city, but in his erotic body and in his family. (This extension of command from the military--where even I will admit it is justified--throughout the entire body politic, including the family, is, as we will see, the mark of Creon's fascism.)

Democracy, then, cannot be hylomorphic. There must be another model of matter/form and of production. We can call this **self-organization**: at certain thresholds of temperature, pressure, etc., a material system can be coaxed into a different form, a different organization (e.g., baking clay to form bricks) that was implicit in the material all along. (For more detail on the contemporary revolution in science called "complexity theory," see Manuel DeLanda, "Non-Organic Life," in *Zone 6: Incorporations* [NY: Zone Books, 1992]). Production is thus not command, but coaxing. Political organization, the making of the body politic, thus cannot be command, but must be persuasion. (It's not too hard to see democracy as the body politic of equals organized by persuasion. The difficult thing to grasp is the unconscious formation of individuals, their body constitution--another type of "body politic"--by social forces that install triggers for different body states, as we discussed in the example of the berserker rage of Achilles. We may have given up "nature" as the model for politics, but we cling to the "natural" human body.) We won't get into it except by way of contrast, but the main ancient reference to material self-organization is to the atomist/materialist school, especially the *clinamen* or swerve of Epicurus and later  
Lucretius.

### D. Rigidity vs flexibility (Creon's fascist body politic)

To extend our examination of Creon's body politic we must focus on his rigidity. He wants to order the population, so he must be ordered himself. He must be himself a good subject, "one who in time of war will stand his ground where he is placed, loyal to his comrades and w/o fear, though the spears fall around him like rain in a storm" (669). [Here, by the way, is where the Creon as ancient warrior reading stumbles: C upholds explicitly here the hoplite creed as the model for a good ruler, not the self-aggrandizing warrior.] C wants order

and obedience, w/o bending, w/o wavering. This desire for identity and stability is why C hates money: it flows, it changes hands, and it changes those who handle it: it can change their "social standing." (And it's precisely social **standing** that C desires.) Instead of bending, of going with the flow, Creon wants to stand straight up, like a flagpole, like a bell tower, in the face of danger: enemy soldiers, or "evil women" (e.g., Antigone, as described by Creon at 649). For the self-rule of Creon extends to *eros*: he can't understand why Haemon would want to marry Antigone, can't understand why Haemon's obedience to his father and reasoned allegiance to the good of the city as proclaimed by the ruler won't overcome his erotic attraction to Antigone: "Do not then, my son, thinking of pleasures, put aside reason for a woman's sake" (648). Creon's erotic body has been tuned by his position as ruler: whatever is bad for the city is unerotic. He expects his son to react to *eros* as a soldier: stand fast w/ his comrades and resist what is bad for the city.

All in all, Creon has a **fascist** desire structure, in the technical sense of the term, as developed by Klaus Theweleit in his two-volume *Male Fantasies* (U Minnesota Press, 1987-8): stable, identical, unchanging, isolated rigidity joined together w/ comrades in formation, led from above, resisting all deviant *eros* in service of a state in which command saturates all social interactions.

## E. Gender

This brings us to gender. All the structures of the play (religion v politics; command v persuasion; rigidity v flexibility) are subtended by the opposition of masculine v feminine. Creon is explicit on more than one occasion. First, addressing the chorus when Antigone is first brought before him: "But I am no man, she is the man, if she can carry this off unpunished" (482). Later, in the dialogue with Haemon: "This is depravity, putting a woman foremost! ... Every word you speak is a plea for that girl ..." (745ff).

We must be careful here though not to sanctify Antigone, especially not as a feminist hero. In her own way she is just as rigid as Creon (compare her prideful rejection of Ismene, her unbending knowledge that she alone is right, her desire to stand alone). This is in fact, the source of Creon's horror: the rigid, isolated, unbendingly courageous woman, Antigone. What in fact differentiates him from her? If she were to win, then "I am no man, she is the man ..." If rigidity, isolation, unbendingness, etc. are the hallmarks of the phallus, then Antigone is a phallic woman, an Amazon figure like those who haunt the Greeks.

But let's not rush to adopt Antigone as our model woman, the feminist well before her time--for two reasons. One, her allegiance is to the divine laws that channel women's desire and women's work into the family, that is, the care of the bodies of the family men. From womb to tomb the woman cares for the body of the man: Antigone just wants to finish her chores. Were she to have succeeded in burying Polynices w/o being caught, there's no reason to believe she would have wanted to do anything other than marry Haemon, produce some kids, and get back to the weaving in the back room. She is the domestic woman par excellence; the city is left to the men.

Second, Antigone's rigidity is another reason to hesitate before anointing her. She happens to have been right given the logic of the play. But that rigidity is only a response to the rigidity of the patriarch Creon. She, as a character, prompts Creon's downfall, but that only because she sets off a series of events, not because she actively participates in persuading him, nor because she models a flexible, democratic, interweaving, a self-organizing body politic. No, it's not Antigone the character that points the way to another political and gender configuration, but *Antigone* the play. And that not in a Hegelian overcoming that reconciles women to domesticity and men to politics (the *Antigone* as a certain spiritual shape inscribed in an edifying parade of such shapes: in other words, what we can learn from the meaning of the play), but in the historical-libidinal materialist analysis of the rigid and hylomorphic, indeed the fascist, body politic of Creon.