

ANTIGONE

David Carter

1. *Two Heroes*

Stubbornness is the defining quality in the Sophoclean hero. So argued Knox (1964) with reference to six figures—Antigone, Ajax, Electra, Oedipus (twice), and Philoctetes—after whom each play is named. In most but not all cases we can tell that the hero is stubborn by the presence of an adviser figure, who tries—unsuccessfully—to persuade the hero to change his or her mind: Ajax has Tecmessa; Electra has Chrysothemis; Oedipus (in the first play) has first Teiresias and then Jocasta.¹

Antigone is intriguing, for here we have not one but two unyielding heroes. Antigone is stubbornly determined to bury her brother Polyneices against political opposition. Polyneices died trying to claim the rule of Thebes from his brother Eteocles. In order to do so he raised an army in Argos and attacked his own city. Both brothers died in the battle. Sister Ismene advises Antigone against this course of action since as women they are powerless (61–64), advice that Antigone bitterly rejects. Creon, brother-in-law of the dead Oedipus and regent following the collapse of the royal house, is stubbornly opposed to burial for the traitor Polyneices. His son Haemon and the prophet Teiresias advise him to leave Antigone alone, but he is determined to punish her by sealing her in a cave so that she will starve to death. However, once Teiresias has left the stage Creon does a curious thing (1091–1106):

¹ On adviser figures, see Easterling (1977) 124; Lardinois (2003), who distinguishes this kind of adviser as a ‘tragic warner’. These figures can be understood in terms of dramatic function as much as character: see Carter (2005) 164–165 with further bibliography. Sommerstein (this volume, p. 209) warns that there is no trace of the Knoxian hero in fragmentary Sophoclean tragedy.

I cannot hope in this chapter to have done justice to the full range of theoretical approaches that *Antigone* has attracted. My rather more modest aim is to discuss the form of the play and then to place it in some of its social and political context. I am grateful to the editor and to Barbara Goff for helpful advice.

CHORUS: The man is gone, king, after uttering a fearful prophecy; and I know that since this hair, once black, now white, has clothed my head, he has never spoken a falsehood to the city.

CREON: I know it myself, and my mind is disturbed! For to yield would be terrible, but if I resist, my will may run into the fowler's net of disaster.

CHORUS: You have need of good counsel, son of Menoeceus!

CREON: What must I do? Tell me, and I will obey!

CHORUS: Go and release the girl from the subterranean dwelling, and make a tomb for him who lies there!

CREON: Is that what you approve, and do you think I should give way?

CHORUS: As soon as possible, king! Swift avengers from the gods cut off those who think mistakenly.

CREON: Alack! It comes hard, but I renounce my heart's purpose, and shall act! One cannot fight against superior force.

And so he changes his mind. This Chorus is composed of Theban elders selected by Creon for their record of loyalty to previous kings (164–169). Some of their loyal remarks may have been a little circumspect (for example 210–214); and Antigone herself has said they keep their mouths shut through fear of Creon (509); but in Antigone's final scene, having tried to offer her some words of comfort, they have made it clear that they take the side of authority (872–875).² Throughout the play they have almost always failed to advise Creon one way or another. It is therefore striking that they offer advice now, still more striking that Creon agrees to follow their advice before he has even heard it.

'There is no other scene quite like this in all Sophoclean drama,' says Knox,³ and he is probably right, although further thought is needed on Creon's character. Knox's assessment is that 'in this play two characters assume the heroic attitude, but one of them is in the end exposed as unheroic.'⁴ For Knox, the most interesting thing about Creon is that he shows us how *not* to be a Sophoclean hero. The decision to 'yield' to advice, terrible as it is for Creon, would never have been taken by the genuine article. In the strictest terms Knox must be correct: if a hero's defining quality is stubbornness then a yielding hero is no longer a hero. However, the situation demands closer analysis in two respects.

First, we note with Knox that this is not Creon's first change of mind in the play. Earlier, he condemns both Antigone and Ismene (who claims to

² These last remarks may be conditioned by the presence of Creon onstage throughout the scene: see Griffith (1999) 255. Or he may have left the stage at line 780, to re-enter at 883.

³ Knox (1964) 75.

⁴ Knox (1964) 62.

have helped her sister) to death by stoning. As in the lines quoted above, the faintest of prompts from the elders (“Then you have a mind to kill both of them?”, 770) persuades Creon to drop charges against Ismene. He also changes Antigone’s penalty so that she will be imprisoned in a cave with only a little food: his purpose is to distance the city from immediate responsibility for her death (773–776).⁵ For Knox, ‘this change of plan is the first indication that Creon is not, after all, cast in the heroic mold’,⁶ but this may be an overstatement. The Homeric prototype to the Sophoclean hero, Achilles in the *Iliad*, is unyielding in his decision to withdraw from the fighting, returning only when his actions have reached their tragic conclusion in the death of Patroclus. But in *Iliad* 9 he gradually compromises on a point of detail: whether to go home in the morning.⁷ Creon’s earlier changes of mind are trivial ones of this type (compare Oedipus, who releases Creon at *Oedipus Tyrannus* 669–672).⁸ All this goes to show that the U-turn to come will be a complete surprise.

Second, Creon’s change of mind makes him a more tragic figure, on one definition, than Antigone.⁹ An admittedly schematic but certainly authentic model for tragic heroism comes from Aristotle and runs something like this: an admirable man (or woman), not perfect, but a character such as we might aspire to, makes a dreadful mistake, realizes this mistake too late, and suffers the consequences (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453a7–16). Aristotelian *anagnôrîsis* (‘recognition’) thus coincides with *peripeteia* (‘change of fortune’). In Aristotle’s view the paradigmatic tragic hero is Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. He relentlessly pursues the inquiry into Laius’ death against the advice of the prophet Teiresias, his wife Jocasta, and the Theban shepherd. He realizes not only this mistake but also his terrible past, but does so too late to prevent the suicide of Jocasta, and in this miserable state of recognition he blinds himself.

Antigone does not fit this Aristotelian template. There can be no moment of recognition because her actions are entirely deliberate: at no point is

⁵ Seaford (1990) explains this decision in terms of ‘the retention of a girl by her natal family at the expense of her sexual union with an outsider or marriage’. This allows him to explore the idea of Antigone as the ‘bride of Hades’ (on which, see below) but he neglects the point that imprisonment is Creon’s decision.

⁶ Knox (1964) 73.

⁷ Hom. *Il.* 9.427–429, 617–619, 650–655; Griffin (1995) 22.

⁸ Gibert (1995) 104–110. Knox himself gives ground on this at Knox (1966) 215n7.

⁹ On the following, cf. Torrance (1965) 298–299; Winnington-Ingram (1980) 117–118; Griffith (1999) 27. Knox (1964) 67–68 concedes that Creon is closer to this Aristotelian template, but insists that ‘he lacks the heroic temper’.

she unaware of their causes or consequences. Not only is she prepared to die but (as we shall see) she welcomes her fate. Creon is in fact closer to Oedipus inasmuch as he cannot foresee the terrible consequences of his actions for his own immediate family. He makes a mistake against the advice of Haemon and Teiresias. His recognition of this mistake ('I know it myself, in lines quoted above) may lead to a change of mind, but this comes too late to prevent the suicides of both his wife (Eurydice, whose speechless exit and reported death find similarities with Jocasta) and his son.

It has been suggested that Creon's change of mind might have reached a happier conclusion had he followed the Chorus' advice perfectly: this (see above) was to rescue Antigone and then bury Polyneices; by following these instructions in reverse, Creon reaches the cave too late.¹⁰ As a messenger reports (1206 ff.), he finds Haemon (who is love with Antigone) already there, clinging to Antigone's dead body. Wordlessly Haemon draws his sword on his father and swings it inconsequentially before turning it on himself. While Antigone reaches her tragedy with ruthless determination, Creon blunders towards his.

So there are two heroes here, and two tragedies, and this is reflected in the play's dramatic form: both Antigone and Creon engage with the Chorus in *kommoi* ('laments'), passages of heightened emotion in which the distraught hero does not speak but sing. The result of this double tragedy is one of the bloodiest of the seven extant plays: Polyneices and Eteocles die just before the action starts; Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice during the action. Of the named characters, only Ismene, Creon, and Teiresias are left alive by the end. (The only other extant Sophoclean tragedy to score a 50% death-rate among named, speaking characters is *Trachiniae*: Deianeira and the herald Lichas die during the action; Heracles also is in mortal agony at the end.)

The presence of two heroes leads to the old and possibly boring question of who the play is really about. On the basis of stage-time there should only be one winner. The Greek text of *Antigone* is 1,353 lines long. Of these, 216 lines are spoken by Antigone, and 350 by Creon. However, these raw figures mask the way in which Antigone dominates her scenes. She leaves the stage for good at line 943, just over two-thirds of the way through the drama. So her allotted lines are roughly in proportion to Creon's, given the available time to be filled. Her part is distributed across only three scenes: the prologue; an early confrontation with Creon; and her *kommos* followed by a final exchange with Creon. We see Antigone and Ismene in the

¹⁰ Kitto (1956) 174–175.

prologue, and these are the only females in the play (apart from Eurydice, who features very briefly later on). A Greek tragic prologue by definition ends with the entry of the Chorus, in this case a Chorus of Theban elders, and from this point on it is very much a male drama: Antigone has politicized herself by her actions, and it is the political world of Creon and his associates into which she ventures. The central scenes of the play revolve around the two *kommoi* and three great confrontations: with Antigone, Haemon, and Teiresias.¹¹ Creon is the interlocutor in each of these confrontations. Further, while Antigone exits at the end of each of her scenes, Creon remains at the end of some of his,¹² and is onstage as the play ends. Creon, therefore, is almost constantly present; Antigone's part in the play is briefer and more concentrated—although she still features after she has left the stage, not least in the messenger's speech about the discovery of her body.¹³

So the play begins with Antigone and ends with Creon: their two tragedies overlap. *Antigone* is in fact only the least obvious example of the so-called 'diptych' plays of Sophocles, presenting a double situation.¹⁴ The purest example is *Ajax*, in which the hero kills himself three-fifths of the way through the drama. At this point the Chorus has divided up and left the stage. When they re-enter it is as if the play begins all over again. There is a new, less grand hero, Ajax's bastard half-brother Teucer; and a new crisis, whether or not to give Ajax a burial. The next best example of a diptych play is *Trachiniae*: only 'next best' since the two parts are of unequal length. 'Part Two' consists only of the long *exodos* (final scene), in which Heracles appears for the first time (although his return has been anticipated from the beginning, and reported from not far away). His wife Deianeira, the principal figure until now, has already died by her own hand. The fresh crisis again concerns the death rites of the hero. *Antigone* does not contain such a neat division of parts; rather, as I have said, the panels overlap.¹⁵ The term 'diptych' was once used by scholars to criticize these plays, *Ajax*

¹¹ Griffith (1999) 16–17.

¹² Winnington-Ingram (1980) 118; Griffith (1999) 24; and see footnote 2 above.

¹³ In the play's original staging the protagonist (principal actor) would have taken the part of Creon and probably no other. One expects that the deuteragonist played Antigone, Haemon, and Teiresias, and probably Eurydice. That would leave the tritagonist playing Ismene, the guard, and the messenger(s). Cf. Pickard-Cambridge (1988³) 141; Griffith (1999) 23. Aeschines is described by Demosthenes in a speech (*On the False Embassy* 247) as playing Creon as tritagonist; Pickard-Cambridge suggests that Demosthenes is bending the truth. Brown (1987) assumes the protagonist took the part of Antigone.

¹⁴ The term was probably first used by Webster (1936) 103; for its history in Sophoclean scholarship, see Garvie (1998) 9.

¹⁵ Waldock (1951) 122; Kirkwood (1958) 43.

especially, which was seen as an immature work.¹⁶ Others, whose view now finds general acceptance, prefer to demonstrate thematic unity or dramatic effectiveness.¹⁷ In *Antigone*, likewise, we should not be overly troubled by the double nature of the tragedy.

2. *Two Agendas*

These two heroes, with two very different priorities, have inspired various readings of the play, including (influentially) that of G.W.F. Hegel. For Hegel, a good tragedy arises from the collision of different interests. His supreme example is *Antigone*: here we have a collision of two points of view, each of them correct in itself and yet incompatible with the other; whether you side with Antigone or Creon depends essentially on whether your priorities are with the family or the city, but each view has something to be said for it.¹⁸

Or does it? Creon's position seems flawed, and increasingly so as the drama progresses. Those three great confrontations bring successive challenges to his orders. Antigone's can be called a legal challenge: his own proclamation cannot override the more fundamental 'unwritten' laws of the gods (450 ff.).¹⁹ Haemon's is a political challenge: he does not have popular support (629 ff., 733). And Teiresias' is a religious challenge: carrion birds are polluting the altars of Thebes with parts of the dead Polyneices (1017–1022). In his change of mind Creon himself finds agreement with Antigone.

Can anything be said for Creon's policy? Two pieces of ancient evidence are worth considering. The first is a reference to an Athenian law that forbade the burial of traitors or temple robbers on Attic soil.²⁰ This gives us some idea of where popular moral priorities lay, although Creon's behaviour still emerges as extreme and unreasonable. He not only forbids the burial of the body on Theban soil, but decrees that it should stay there *unburied*.²¹ One wonders why he cannot simply allow the body to be buried abroad; however, this is perhaps to trivialize the importance and difficulty of recovering one's dead in Greek literary accounts of war. In the *Iliad* the recovery

¹⁶ Waldock (1951) 49–67, inspired by the scholion to Soph. *Aj.* 1123.

¹⁷ Themes in *Trachiniae*: Easterling (1982) 2–6, following Segal (1977). Dramatic unity in *Ajax*: Kitto (1961³) 118–123; Garvie (1998) 9–11.

¹⁸ Paolucci (1962) 325.

¹⁹ Harris (2004).

²⁰ Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.22; cf. Thuc. 1.138.6.

²¹ This is certainly not how we should understand the Athenian law: see Patterson (2006b) 33–34.

by the Greeks of the dead Patroclus occupies the whole of Book 17, and the poem only ends once a crisis over the body of Hector is resolved, Achilles returning it to the Trojans for burial.²²

The evidence of this law gives us some context for Creon's actions, assuming that Athenians in the original audience judged him as they did their own political leaders. However, the original audience—like any audience—will have held a broad variety of views. If anything, it was more natural to consider Creon as a Theban from the heroic age. These Thebans, we are reminded by Bennett and Tyrrell (1990), (1998), were best known at Athens for their refusal to surrender for burial the bodies of the seven heroes who died in the attack on Thebes (among them Polyneices). In Athenian folklore the role of Athens is to recover the bodies and secure their burial. This is encapsulated most obviously in so-called funeral orations (public speeches in honour of the war dead), and also in a number of tragedies, including Euripides' *Suppliants* and Aeschylus' lost *Eleusinians*. It is a stretch to consider the Sophoclean *Antigone* as an allegory for Athens, as Bennett and Tyrrell do: *Antigone* lacks the panhellenic perspective of (say) *Suppliants* (unusually for a Greek tragedy, all its characters are native to the city where the play is set); and in giving the role of burier to a Theban woman and disregarding the fates of the other six heroes, Sophocles makes no allusion to the role of Athens in the story. That said, Athenians in the audience of first performance ought to have been in no doubt who was right and who was wrong.

The second piece of evidence is more promising since it does not require us to guess the audience members' opinions on a particular law. Rather, it points more generally to Greek political values.²³ It comes from a speech attributed to the Athenian statesman Pericles (Thuc. 2.60):

My own opinion is that when the state is on the right course it is a better thing for each separate individual than when private interests are satisfied but the state as a whole is going downhill. However well off a man may be in his private life, he will still be involved in the general ruin if his country is destroyed; whereas, so long as the state itself is secure, individuals have a much greater chance of recovering from their private misfortunes.

(transl. R. Warner)

²² Thus Shapiro (2006) finds a Homeric precedent for Creon's extreme treatment of the corpse.

²³ We should remember that the original audience included a large minority of foreigners. For this reason the politics of a Greek tragedy may not always have been narrowly Athenian: see Carter (2004); cf. Rhodes (2003).

These words, if they were delivered in this form, were spoken to the Athenian assembly in 430 BC, almost certainly after the first performance of *Antigone*,²⁴ and in different circumstances from Creon's. However, a comparison with part of Creon's opening speech is inescapable (184–190):

I would never be silent, may Zeus who sees all things for ever know it, when I saw ruin coming upon the citizens instead of safety, nor would I make a friend of the enemy of my country, knowing that this is the ship that preserves us, and that this is the ship on which we sail and only while she prospers can we make our friends.

Neither Pericles nor Creon objects to the pursuit of private interests, it is just that they insist on the priority of the city, which in their view enables private life to flourish. Compare the introduction to Aristotle's *Politics* (1253a19 ff.), in which the members of a city are described like the feet or hands of the body politic: the whole can survive without the parts, but not the other way round. So the priority of the city made sense in an ancient Greek context. By contrast, it seems objectionable to modern, liberal thinking, which tends to prioritize the individual and keep the state out of things unless strictly necessary. (We should note in addition that one is less likely to celebrate the protecting arm of the state during peacetime: the context of both the passages quoted above is war or the aftermath of war.) The liberal idea of the state has certainly informed several modern productions of *Antigone*, in which the title figure comes across as far more heroic than the dull dictator Creon;²⁵ but this is a potential stumbling block in the interpretation of the play.

The rationale behind Creon's proclamation was therefore respectable enough on Greek terms (his opening speech appears to have been quoted with approval by Demosthenes, *On the False Embassy* 247), and his stubbornness very nearly matches that of Antigone: so much for Hegelian

²⁴ Likely to have been in the late 440s BC. Sophocles' ancient biographer was elected one of Athens' ten generals following the success of *Antigone*. Modern commentators tend to reject a causal link between the play and the generalship, but many accept that the one may have come soon after the other, tempting our ancient source to make this link the more easily: see Kamerbeek (1978) 36; Brown (1987) 1–2; Griffith (1999) 2; Tyrrell (this volume). We know Sophocles served as general in the year 441/0 BC, but that Euripides won first prize at the Dionysia of 441 BC. Logically this gives us a first performance of *Antigone* the year before: 442 BC. Criticism of this view has come from Lewis (1988), who suggests 438 BC; Scullion (2002) 85–86, who prefers a date in the late 450s BC. Nobody of whom I am aware thinks of *Antigone* as one of Sophocles' late plays, mainly because of a lack of *antilabê* (splitting lines between speakers), a technique which appears more frequently in later Sophoclean drama.

²⁵ Carter (2007) 146–155.

balance. But the equilibrium is upset in two respects. First, as we have seen, the implementation of Creon's 'city-first' policy is unsound. As Lauriola (2007) has recently demonstrated, Creon is frequently described in language that suggests he has poor sense while Antigone is associated with good sense; for this reason, and given the respective rights and wrongs of their actions, Antigone's inflexibility comes across as a virtue, Creon's as a flaw. That said, Antigone's good sense never takes the desirable form of *sôphrosynê* ('prudence', 'moderation').²⁶ In fact, as we shall see in the final section of this chapter, her inflexibility leads her to act inconsistently with respect to her own motivating rationale, honour for *philoî* ('close friends and relations').

Second, we should not infer from all this that there was an incompatibility between public and private interests in ancient Greece, or even in this play. Creon could and should have found a more reasonable solution to the crisis. The reason that he does not can be explained in terms of character: Knoxian intransigence again. If anything this is a particularly contrived piece of drama,²⁷ but it works because it is played out logically from the starting positions of its two principal figures.

This play of two points of view, with two heroes to champion them, has provided a handy base for structuralist critics, who ground their readings in the identification of pairs of opposites.²⁸ Structuralism is not as fashionable a school of thought as it once was, but it remains attractive to students of Greek literature, for the Greeks really do seem, to an extent, to have ordered their world in a bipolar way.²⁹ One authentic way of thinking about the Greek citizen is as mortal not god, man not woman, Greek not barbarian, free not enslaved.³⁰ Some (not all) structuralist readings of *Antigone* can appear suspiciously neat and tidy: a caricature pits Antigone (the woman, the champion of the family) against Creon (the man, the champion of the city). This is misleading. Creon's public policy turns out to be detrimental to

²⁶ Lauriola (2007) 396–397 with n37.

²⁷ The general absence of this story in earlier Greek literature has led some to believe that it was devised by Sophocles himself: see e.g. Baldry (1956) 34; cf. Müller (1967) 21. (The ending of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, in which Creon forbids the burial of Polyneices and Antigone resolves to defy him, is thought to have been added by a later author in response to Sophocles' play.) On Sophoclean invention in this play, see more recently Griffith (1999) 8 ff.

²⁸ For example Segal (1981a) 152–206; Oudemans/Lardinois (1987), which might be described as 'post-structuralist'.

²⁹ Lloyd (1966).

³⁰ Cartledge (2002²) with further bibliography.

the city, and the citizens themselves do not support him. As for Antigone, as I observe above, her actions bring her into public life. The woman who would prefer to remain indoors and uninvolved is Ismene, Antigone's foil in this respect.³¹ And, while Antigone's loyalties are with her family, most of this family is dead, as Antigone herself is at pains to point out. We shall see in the next section that she rejects the support she eventually gets from her only living blood relative, Ismene; and she makes no mention at all of Haemon, supposedly her future husband. The household to which the two daughters of Oedipus now legally belong is in fact Creon's; and it is the destruction of Creon's household that features strongly in the play, not that of Laius/Oedipus, which is complete before the play begins.

There are two helpful pairs of opposites, however, that I wish to explore here. The first, inside-outside, will help us to understand the politics of *Antigone*. The second, death-life, will lead me to a few remarks on religious aspects of the play.

3. *Inside and Outside*

Athenian public life took place predominantly in the open air: political meetings (except for those in the *Bouleuterion*, or council house) as well as what went on in the theatre and *agora* ('market place'). Sacrifices were conducted in the open air in front of temples and shrines, not under the roof. The citizen of a Greek city-state may have made a distinction between his life in public—interactions outdoors with other citizens in the assembly and law courts, in the *agora* or on the field of battle—and his private life, indoors with his family. Greek drama was played out in front of a stage building that represented some building, temple, tent or even cave—but most usually a royal house, as in *Antigone*. The audience never peered into this house (although a device called an *ekkyklêma* sometimes brought dead bodies from the inside out), but they could occasionally eavesdrop on the sort of scenes that ought to have taken place inside. One such scene is the prologue of *Antigone*, a whispered conversation between two female members of the same family. Antigone tells Ismene that she has

³¹ For this reason Antigone has been described as a 'bad woman' on ancient Greek terms, Ismene the more respectable model: see Sourvinou-Inwood (1989) and (1990), criticized in Foley (1995).

brought them outside so they will not be overheard (18–19); but what we are witnessing (in contrast to the public affairs later in the play) is essentially a domestic conversation.

In many tragedies it helps to consider the structural opposition of inside-outside in two respects: the first is the space inside the house and the space outside it; the second is the space inside the city and the space outside it. I have previously used the shorthand ‘at home, round here, out there’ to describe the three categories of dramatic space yielded by these two pairs of opposites.³² The middle category, which corresponds to the public spaces of the city in which a tragedy is set, is the one the audience can partially see, although it extends beyond the stage and into reported space. Therefore events reported in a tragedy, as opposed to seen onstage, might take place inside the house (‘at home’) or outside the walls of the city (‘out there’); or they might take place in off-stage parts of the public spaces of the city (‘round here’: consider in *Antigone* where Haemon and Teiresias have both just come from). What I hope to have shown elsewhere is that violent acts in tragedy take place either ‘at home’ or ‘out there’, but almost never ‘round here’. Thus the public spaces of the city are kept free from extremes of violence. This reflects an important, perhaps *the* important, political value in Greek tragedy: to keep the city safe.

Antigone provides a good demonstration of this model. The violent deaths in battle of Polyneices and Eteocles, killed at each other’s hands, took place ‘out there’, beyond the walls of the city. Polyneices’ body in this play remains ‘out there’ as a continuing source of unease. The three deaths that take place during the course of the play are where they ought to be: Antigone and Haemon ‘out there’ at the cave; Eurydice ‘at home’ within the house. This is not to say that the public spaces of Thebes remain free of trouble: the carrion deposited on Teiresias’ altars brings the troublesome presence of Polyneices’ body to threaten public space ‘round here’; and Creon brings Haemon’s body back onstage at the end of the play. (As in many or most tragedies, the presence of a dead body onstage adds to the drama’s spectacle and emotional impact.) But this is only to underline my point: the city in tragedy is often threatened but almost always survives. By the end of

³² Carter (2006), summarized in (2007) 73–78. It occurs to me now that all four of my city-set examples (Sophocles’ *Antigone* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Euripides’ *Phoenician Women* and *Bacchae*) are Theban plays. I think aspects of my model work elsewhere, but it is interesting that the most complete examples are Theban, since Thebes is the quintessentially vulnerable city in tragedy: see Easterling (1989), *contra* Zeitlin (1986).

Antigone the houses of Laius and Creon may be in ruins but the city itself has still survived a terrible war. The Chorus in their *parodos* (entry song) make it clear how near Thebes came to falling to the invaders; Creon at the beginning of his first speech reassures them that the city is now safe (162–163). The policy that Creon will go on to announce and justify, however muddled he will turn out to be in its implementation, must be considered against the background of the city's vulnerability.

So Creon's policy—if not his practice—is in tune with tragic political values. We can consider how these values are put at stake under two headings, which may be framed as questions. Constraints of space allow me merely to raise them here.

First, does Creon have any authority in the city? Related by marriage to two previous kings (Laius and Oedipus), he was not next in line to the throne of Thebes, but is simply the man left standing after the end of the war. He says himself that he holds the throne 'by reason of my kinship with the dead' (174). 'Kinship' here translates the Greek *anchisteia* ('proximity') a principle by which questions of inheritance were decided in Athenian law. Creon is first referred to by Antigone as *ton stratêgon* ('the general', line 8, which, depending on when the play was first produced, may have put its audience in mind of Pericles).³³ Although others refer to him as a king, Antigone fails to do so throughout: this calls his authority into question.³⁴

Creon's shaky claim to the throne puts one in mind of a Greek tyrant, best defined as king who has assumed power rather than inherited it. Successive commentators, additionally, have referred to Creon as a tyrant by virtue of his cruel and autocratic style of government.³⁵ This description owes a great deal to his apparently fearsome presence. The guard is notably anxious at the prospect of reporting Polyneices' burial (223–236), and Creon (cleverly, perhaps) holds him responsible on pain of death until he can produce a culprit (304–314). Antigone, as I have already observed, says that the Chorus members hold their tongues through fear (509). And, when Haemon reports that—unknown to Creon—the people all support Antigone, he begins by explaining how 'your countenance is alarming to a subject when he speaks words that give you no pleasure' (690–691). So Creon is a tyrant in the manner of his rule, with one exception: he has no bodyguard. Greek tyrants,

³³ Ehrenberg (1954) 105–112. Not even Ehrenberg suggests that Creon is a straight allegory for Pericles, but some parallels can be drawn: see e.g. Meier (1993) 196 ff.

³⁴ Griffith (1999) 122.

³⁵ See e.g. Bowra (1944) 72–78; Ehrenberg (1954) 57–58; Podlecki (1966c); Vickers (1973) 529–530; Winnington-Ingram (1980) 125–127.

typically, are guarded because their position is so insecure; Creon's problem, on the contrary, is that he takes popular support for granted.

Creon's authority, if he has any, ought to be synonymous with the authority of the city. In the prologue Ismene objects to burying Polyneices 'against the will of the people' (*bia politôn*, 79).³⁶ She has just heard that this was Creon's proclamation—no sense of democracy here—and she naturally associates Creon's authority with the authority of the city. This assumption is undermined by the emergence of the tyrannical qualities noted above; but it suffers especially from Haemon's news that the citizens do not support Creon after all.³⁷ It has been assumed so far that, since Creon is on the side of the people, the people are on the side of Creon. The king who claimed to do everything on the basis of what is best for the city is now reduced to saying that the city exists to serve him (736–738):

CREON: Must I rule this land for another and not myself?³⁸
 HAEMON: Yes, there is no city that belongs to a single man!
 CREON: Is not the city thought to belong to its ruler?

Thus Creon's proclamation rests on his own will and not on the rule of law. This again is close to the Greek idea of tyranny.³⁹

This brings us to my second question: should we obey the law, even if it is wrong? In the fourth century this was investigated by Plato in his *Crito*: an account of a conversation set in the year 399 BC, when Socrates had been condemned to death on arguably unjust grounds. In the dialogue Socrates is given the opportunity to escape from prison and flee abroad. Socrates refuses, and chief among his reasons is his respect for the rule of law. As far as Socrates is concerned, by living all his life in the same city he has entered into an unspoken contract with its laws; it would hardly be fair, having enjoyed their protection for so long, to break them at this late stage by leaving prison against their authority. In the final part of the dialogue Socrates imagines a conversation with the Laws themselves (Pl. *Cri.* 50a–b):

Look at it this way. Suppose that while we were preparing to run away from here (or however one would propose to describe it) the Laws and Constitution of Athens were to come and confront us and ask this question,

³⁶ Antigone echoes Ismene's words as late as line 907, but she cannot be expected to know that the citizens all support her: she was not onstage to hear from Haemon.

³⁷ Cf. Meier (1993) 196.

³⁸ There is an ambiguity in the Greek, where *ἄλλω ... ἢ ἴμοι* can either mean 'by someone else's judgement rather than my own', or 'for anyone else but me': see Griffith (1999) 248.

³⁹ See e.g. Eur. *Suppl.* 429–437; Aeschin. *Ctes.* 6; Arist. *Pol.* 1295a1–23.

'Now, Socrates, what are you proposing to do? Can you deny that by this act which you are contemplating you intend, so far as you have power, to destroy us, the Laws, and the whole State as well? Do you imagine that a city can continue to exist and not be turned upside down, if the legal judgements which are pronounced in it have no force but are nullified and destroyed by private persons?' (transl. H. Tredennick)

Antigone's response to civic law is equally principled but appears to argue the opposite way. She will not obey the law if it is wrong, and particularly if it goes against divine law (446–455):

CREON: But do you tell me, not at length, but briefly: did you know of the proclamation forbidding this?

ANTIGONE: I knew it; of course I knew it. It was known to all.

CREON: And yet you dared to transgress these laws?

ANTIGONE: Yes, for it was not Zeus who made this proclamation, nor was it Justice who lives with the gods below that established such laws among men, nor did I think your proclamations strong enough to have power to overrule, mortal as they were, the unwritten and unfailing ordinances of the gods.

The concept of 'unwritten laws' was a slippery piece of rhetoric in ancient Greece: it could be used to mean whatever the speaker wanted it to mean.⁴⁰ Consider the second most famous use of this idea in Greek literature, from the Periclean funeral oration (Thuc. 2.37):

We give our obedience to those whom we put in positions of authority, and we obey the laws themselves, especially those which are for the protection of the oppressed, and those unwritten laws which it is an acknowledged shame to break. (transl. R. Warner)

The idea of 'acknowledged shame' finds some resonance, but otherwise Pericles (as elsewhere in Thucydides) appears to be arguing in the opposite direction from Antigone, in favour of the authority of the city.⁴¹

However, we should be wary of seeing a competition between man's and god's law in Antigone's speech. For one thing, as Antigone implies, the instruction not to bury Polyneices is not a law but a proclamation; for another, it rests on the authority of one man whose constitutional position, we have seen, is shaky. It may be more helpful to treat Creon's proclamation

⁴⁰ Ostwald (1973); Craik (1993).

⁴¹ Unless we read the play as Bennett/Tyrrell (1990) do. On this reading (see above), Antigone's views echo a position familiar from Athenian funeral orations, which is that the Thebans were wrong not to allow the burial of the Seven.

as a measure that is ‘unconstitutional’ in the light of existing laws. These laws are not written down, to be sure—their only authority is Antigone herself—but the idea of a universal law that sits above civic law appears in a similar context elsewhere in Greek tragedy. When an Athenian herald in Euripides’ *Suppliants* proclaims to the Thebans that they must give up the Argive heroes for burial, this proclamation is made in terms of ‘the law of all the Greeks’ (671–672, echoing 526–527) and ‘that ancient law established by the gods’ (561–563). If there is a political ‘message’ in *Antigone* (a term with which I am uncomfortable) it does not go so far as ‘God’s law trumps man’s law’; but it might go as far as ‘rulers cannot act on their authority alone.’

4. *Death and Life*

Antigone is a morbid figure even by the standards of Greek tragedy, as well she might be. As she is at pains to tell the Chorus, her mother, father, and both brothers are all dead (897–899, quoted below, 911–912). Her wish to join them seems as strong an impulse as the one that leads her to bury Polyneices; and in any case the one act leads to the other. She may invite pity for her fate (806–816, 844–852, 866–871, 872–875, 895–896, 916–920) but she seems at the very least resigned to it, and even to welcome it. Creon taunts Antigone in her absence as someone in love with death, someone who worships the gods below (777–780). While her tragedy culminates in her death, Creon’s tragedy is to survive while others die around him.

Antigone herself invites interpretation in terms of death-life at line 555: ‘you choose life, and I choose death’, spoken to Ismene. In fact this morbidity helps to explain an inconsistent attitude towards her sister. In the very first line of the play Antigone addresses Ismene in affectionate terms (‘My own sister Ismene, linked to myself ...’) and goes on to ask her to join in burying Polyneices. When Ismene refuses, Antigone’s affection becomes hatred (86–89, 93–94). Her attitude does not change later, when Ismene attempts to claim part of the deed and so die with Antigone (536 ff.).⁴² It seems odd that someone so concerned to look after her own *philoï* should reject her only surviving blood relative so fiercely.⁴³ Antigone herself encapsulates, and half-explains, this paradox in line 543: ‘I do not tolerate a loved one who

⁴² There is some softening of her hatred in this later scene, but not much: see Carter (2005) 176–177.

⁴³ Cf. Blundell (1989a) 111–115.

shows her love only in words' (λόγοις δ' ἐγὼ φιλοῦσαν οὐ στέργω φίλην); in other words, Ismene's desire to share responsibility for the deed, when she had no part in the deed itself, is not good enough. One thing Antigone has in common with Creon is a tendency to make a stark division between friends and enemies: if Ismene is not with her, she is against her. Creon, likewise, reacts angrily to disagreement from his own son. Thebes is still on a war footing.

The inconsistency is further explained if we understand that dead *philo*i mean more to Antigone than living ones (71–75, also spoken to Ismene):

Do you be the kind of person you have decided to be, but I shall bury him! It is honourable for me to do this and die. I am his own and I shall lie with him who is my own (φίλη μετ' αὐτοῦ κείσομαι, φίλου μέτα), having committed a crime that is holy, for there will be a longer span of time for me to please those below than there will be to please those here.

Antigone prefers joining her family among the dead to building a family on earth. She dies unmarried (867) and childless: unfulfilled, one might say, as an ancient Greek woman. She even refers to the death she expects to meet in the cave as if it were some kind of perverse marriage ritual (891–899, cf. 810–816, 1204–1205):⁴⁴

O tomb, O bridal chamber, O deep-dug home, to be guarded forever, where I go to join those who are my own, of whom Persephassa has already received a great number, dead, among the shades! Of these I am the last and my descent will be the saddest of all, before the term of my life has come. But when I come there, I am confident that I shall come dear to my father, dear to you, my mother, and dear to you, my own brother (φίλη μὲν ἦξειν πατρί, προσφιλῆς δὲ σοί, / μῆτερ, φίλη δὲ σοί, κασίγνητον κάρα).

In this speech Antigone seems to forget that she is not 'the last', but leaves behind Ismene. (Compare her previous speech, in which she calls herself ἄφίλος, 'friendless', 876.) And in her acceptance of death as a substitute for marriage she ignores (as she does throughout the play) her planned marriage to Haemon. Unknowingly, however, she does look ahead to a kind of grim union with her betrothed, since Haemon will join her in the cave. The messenger who describes the scene says that Creon found Antigone already dead on a makeshift noose and Haemon hanging from her waist, himself on the point of suicide (1206 ff.). One other point, if I may be allowed to stretch my model of tragic space a little further: in the discussion above

⁴⁴ On the theme of marriage and death in *Antigone*, see Segal (1981a) 179–183; Rehm (1994) 59–71; Bennett/Tyrrell (1998) 97–121.

I described the double suicide of Antigone and Haemon as having taken place 'out there'; but in a grim sense the cave becomes the marital home of Antigone and Haemon.

We may here sketch a religious reading of *Antigone*, referring to the proper and improper application of ritual.⁴⁵ Antigone's approach to marriage ritual may be disturbed, but she is all for the proper disposal of the dead. She may be too weak to bury Polyneices herself and does not have Ismene to help her, but she scatters dust on her brother's body (429–431) and (as we have just seen) can claim to have performed the necessary rites. Teiresias also is worried about his ability to conduct sacrifices properly.

Antigone's attitude to marriage and burial is informed by her religious beliefs, and especially her respect for the gods of the underworld;⁴⁶ by contrast, Creon is in the habit of swearing by Olympian Zeus (184, 304–305, 758) and his loyalties are with the gods of the city (199). However, there is another contrast between Antigone's and Creon's religious views: the latter is a religious sceptic, who believes in little beyond the simple authority of Zeus. One can compare Jocasta in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, who becomes wrongly sceptical of oracles (946–949); or Ajax in his play, who thinks he can succeed in battle without divine help (764–777). Antigone's first attempt to bury Polyneices is unobserved, and it is when she goes back that she is caught. The Chorus concludes that this first burial is the work of the gods, a view to which Creon reacts angrily (278–283). When Teiresias offers his warnings, Creon accuses him of corruption (1033 ff.). He expresses disbelief in the concept of miasma, supposing it to be a human contrivance from which the gods are immune (1042–1044).

Perhaps Creon's scepticism can be read alongside his arrogance: like Ajax, he has a little bit too much faith in himself. If so, this helps to explain the presence in the play of one of Sophocles' most brilliant and celebrated choral odes.⁴⁷ This ode comes at the end of the scene we have just considered, when the burial of Polyneices has been reported but the burier not identified. It begins (332–333):

Many things are formidable, and none more formidable than man!

The Chorus goes on to celebrate the achievements of man, taming and exploiting the natural world, conquered only by death. But the ode concludes with a warning (368–375):

⁴⁵ On death ritual in *Antigone*, see essays in Patterson (2006a).

⁴⁶ MacKay (1962) 167 with n4.

⁴⁷ On the significance of the 'Ode to Man' within the play, see Segal (1981a) 152 ff.

When he applies the laws of the earth and the justice the gods have sworn to uphold he is high in the city; outcast from the city is he with whom the ignoble consorts for the sake of gain. May he who does such things never sit by my hearth or share my thoughts!

So much for human religious belief and practice; the place of the gods themselves is a little harder to identify. On one level, there is little or nothing in this drama that would not make sense to an atheist: everything occurs as a result of human, not divine will. Or very nearly everything: in the Chorus' account of the battle that preceded the action, Capaneus is struck by Zeus' thunderbolt (127–133); when Antigone is observed burying Polyneices for the second time, a freak (god-sent?) dust storm adds to the force of the guard's account (417–421); and the behaviour of the carrion birds around the altars is still more spooky. Thus the gods keep their distance from events, they do not motivate the action, but they do add to its meaning.⁴⁸

In other Sophoclean plays the role of the divine is often to create problems for mortals before receding from view: Athena drives Ajax mad in the prologue of his play; Apollo provides troublesome oracles before the start of *Oedipus Tyrannus*; and similarly distant, remembered prophecies inform the action of *Trachiniae*. If there is one character in *Antigone* who fills this divine role, creating problems for men before eventually receding from events, it is Antigone herself. The problem is as much of Creon's making as Antigone's; but his character is more fallible, and so more human. Creon may be the authentic tragic hero, but in *Antigone* we have one of the most compelling characters in the history of Western drama.

⁴⁸ This view comes straight from Kitto (1956) 73, on Sophocles' *Electra*: 'though Apollo does nothing to forward the action, he does as it were accompany it on his higher plane, enlarging its reference, certifying its universal truth'. His chapter on *Antigone* develops this kind of reading; see especially p. 156.