

SHORTER NOTES

THE DOUBLE TIME SCHEME IN *ANTIGONE*

In three articles published in *Blackwood's Magazine* (November 1849, April and May 1850), one Wilson, under the *nom de guerre* of Christopher North, propounded the view that Shakespeare's *Othello* operates on a double time scheme.¹ The represented time in Cyprus (Acts II to V) is some thirty-three hours, lasting from about 4 p.m. on Saturday till the early hours of Monday morning. If we take this time scheme at face value, there has been no opportunity for Desdemona and Cassio to commit adultery: Iago's insinuations and Othello's suspicions are manifestly absurd. However, another time scheme is in operation as well. By its clock, the protagonists have been in Cyprus for more than a week. For example, we find Bianca, a local courtesan, complaining that it has been 'seven days and nights, / Eight score eight hours' (III.iv.171–2) since she last saw Cassio, who by the first time scheme had arrived in Cyprus only the day before.

Shakespeare's use of 'long time' enables him to make Iago's gulling of Othello the more convincing, while his 'short time' heightens the claustrophobic intensity of the action as it proceeds so swiftly and remorselessly to its conclusion.

My purpose in this brief essay is to argue that Sophocles operates a similar double time scheme in *Antigone*. It is, of course, true that those Greek tragedies – the vast majority of them – whose represented time is less than a day² tend to be crowded with incident. But in *Antigone* it is not simply the case that a great deal happens. Like Shakespeare, Sophocles appears to be working with two clocks.

At the outset, the 'short time' of *Antigone* is established with great precision. The play opens before dawn at the end of the very night on which the Argive army has fled the land (15–16). The day before, that army had been crushingly defeated and the brothers Eteocles and Polyneices had killed each other. The chorus salute the rising sun at 100ff. The morning now moves quickly forward, with the guard speaking of the midday sun and its intense heat in 415–17. And 'short time' leads the action to its shattering conclusion without a break.

But there is another more leisurely time scheme at work. We may find ourselves wondering under what circumstances Antigone had heard the news of Creon's edict so early in the morning (7–8), though a plausible scenario could be imagined. More tellingly, when the Guard arrives, he emphasizes the fact that he has taken his time over his journey, stopping and starting and turning round on the way (225–32). We may also gain the impression that he and his fellows have been on duty for some time: the mention of 'the first day-watchman' (253) suggests a well-established rota.

Further evidence of 'long time' arrives when, in his tirade against the Guard, Creon talks as if men in the city have been objecting to his edict for some time (289–92 – *πάλα*), though he has only promulgated it at 193–205 and has, indeed, been king for only a few hours (155–7, 170–4). Later, when the Guard returns having arrested

¹ The scheme is magisterially expounded by M. R. Ridley in his Arden edition of *Othello* (Methuen, 1965), pp. lxxvii–lxx.

² The neo-classical rule limiting a play to twenty-four hours is, of course, not Aristotelian.

Antigone, he makes it clear that Polyneices' corpse had started to stink (412). Yet by 'short time' he has only been dead for a night and some of the morning.

In this same scene Creon, king (I say again) for less than a day, talks as if Antigone and Ismene have long been plotting to oust him from his throne (531–3), and soon Haemon observes that dark talk against Creon and high praise for Antigone are spreading around the city in secret (692–700). Would 'short time' have allowed a sufficient opportunity for this to happen?

After Antigone has gone off to her death, Tiresias describes the defilement of the city's altars by birds and dogs which have brought to them carrion flesh from the corpse (1016–18). It is certainly far later in the day by now, but even so, 'short time' would call for unconvincingly speedy action from the birds and beasts of prey.³

By now, I submit, the audience has become accustomed – below the level of consciousness, no doubt – to the play's double time scheme and will feel little or no surprise when some words of Tiresias draw clear attention to it. While Creon is in fact to lose his son later that very day, the prophet foretells that he will not accomplish 'many rapid cycles of the sun' before he does so (1064–5). Tiresias insists on 'long time';⁴ but the 'short time' scheme proceeds without remission.

What is the effect of the double time scheme? One result may be that Creon is denied a possible line of defence. In 'short time', he makes his very first edict, having taken over the throne at a time of great national emergency. Surely he cannot afford to let that decree be violated? Political stability demands that the new ruler enforce it to the full. But the play's 'long time' makes it seem as if he has ruled for a significant period. One particularly striking example comes in 1164, where we are assured that this king for a day – 'short time' – governed (imperfect *ἡθυνε*), the flourishing father of noble children – 'long time'. Sophocles does not, it appears, wish to claim for him the justification of a novice ruler asserting himself.

A decidedly more significant effect is that the play can maintain its unity of action and tragic intensity while at the same time giving its two protagonists room in which to breathe. In a single span, Sophocles is conveying the tragedies not only of Antigone but of Creon too. His juggling with clocks gives him time enough and space to allow both of these characters their due weight. As 'short time' works itself out relentlessly in a day, the dramatist's 'long time' allows full justice to the final destinies of not one, but two tragic figures. Viewed in this light, the debate over which of them the play is 'really about' may seem to stem from an inadequate response to the technical virtuosity with which Sophocles has composed his *Antigone*.

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³ If the puzzling lines 1080–3 are authentic, the news of Creon's impious behaviour, according to Tiresias, has by now reached all the cities which had sent forces against Thebes.

⁴ This prophecy of Tiresias may, as my colleague R. D. Rees suggests, mislead Creon into believing that he can take his time over his actions. In burying the corpse of Polyneices first when there is Antigone to be considered, Creon, like Othello, becomes the tragic victim of 'long time'.

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Tall tales abound in Ctesias' *Indica*, as scholars have not hesitated to emphasize, heaping ridicule on the author's enthusiasm for the fantastic and on his apparent lack

¹ An earlier version of this article received a number of very helpful criticisms from Professor W. G. Arnott, who notes among other things, 'this is a group of birds I'm very fond of (I've