

XIII. *Antigone, Coriolanus, and Hegel*

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Sophocles' *Antigone** presents a conflict between family loyalty and loyalty to the state, between the demands of the state and the will of the individual, between politics and piety. The relative importance of these themes has been variously estimated; but for the author and the first audience, it is probable that the play was primarily a dramatization of the two principles of political organization that were at that time competing for men's allegiance. This does not mean that the play can be pressed into a political tract or a political allegory; only that it is the outgrowth of a political situation, and takes the form it does because of that situation and the author's interest in the situation.

Some apology may be necessary for returning to a subject treated with such exhaustive, and, in all fairness, such ingeniously imaginative detail by German scholars of the nineteenth century; but this is not a simple return. The aim of those full-blooded enthusiasts was to display Sophocles as a fully committed partisan; our chastened generation may be satisfied with much less.

The question at issue between Creon and Antigone is not what constitutes piety, but what constitutes citizenship. Creon is no Pentheus; he has no quarrel with the gods.¹ He sincerely believes, until Tiresias remonstrates with him, that he is doing the gods an acceptable service. As soon as his error is pointed out,

* The text used is that of R. C. Jebb (Cambridge 1897). For recent critical opinion the chief sources used were: I. M. Linforth, *Antigone and Creon*, California Publications in Classical Philology, Vol. 15, No. 5, 1961; G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca 1958); G. Méautis, *Sophocle* (Paris 1957); V. Ehrenberg, *Sophocles and Pericles* (Oxford 1954); F. J. H. Letters, *Sophocles* (London & New York 1953); C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1951); A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1951); H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London 1939); G. Norwood, *Greek Tragedy* (London 1920); with some use of A. P. Dahl, *Sofokles* (Copenhagen 1959). For the older literature the chief source was S. Piazza, *La politica in Sofocle* (Padova 1896).

¹ See vss. 162-63, 282-88, 1043-44; he readily calls Zeus to witness on his side: 184, 304, 487 (758). Cf. Kirkwood 123.

he hastens to make reparation. It is almost a measure of his conventional piety that he discharges first the duty with whose neglect Tiresias had first and chiefly reproached him, the burial of Polynices; though perhaps for most Greeks a man, especially a warrior, even dead, took precedence of a woman, even alive. As Antigone is bitterly aware, the gods have not signified their approval of her action (admittedly, an action does not have to be rewarded to be heroic); indeed, the report of Tiresias makes her action appear either superfluous or inadequate in the eyes of the gods. The gods do not need her aid,² nor do they appreciate her act enough to save her from her hasty suicide, though this would have needed no miracle. Except for Sophocles' dramatic purposes, it cannot be said that she had to die. Versions of the story have survived in which she lived; in whatever form Sophocles found the tale, we cannot refuse him freedom to choose the mode of her deliverance from bondage.

The gods are not on Antigone's side. Is Antigone, except accidentally, on the gods' side?³ We subtly distort the issue if we speak of the unwritten, eternal laws of *heaven*. Antigone is not interested in heaven. As Creon unkindly but not unfairly remarks, it is the law of Hades that she feels bound to fulfil (777). She professes no allegiance to Zeus or any other Olympian; she mentions Zeus only twice: once as persecutor of her family (2-6), and once to say she is not defying his decree in defying Creon's (450). Justice she proceeds to identify as housemate of the gods below, and to Hades and those below she repeatedly and expressly professes allegiance. What troubles her is not so much that the decree of Creon does violence to private conscience or divine law, as that it does violence to family tradition. The gods whose approval she primarily seeks are the *di manes*; not the Olympians, but the spirits of her ancestors.⁴ For her, just as legitimacy is defined not by political decree but by ageless family tradition,

² Cf. Norwood 140.

³ Cf. Kitto 133.

⁴ The relevant passages are: Zeus: 2-6, 450; Hades: 519, 542, (811, 911); Persephassa: 894; the gods: 77, 454-55, 459-60, 921, 922, 925; the gods below: 451, 938; those below, the dead: 25, 74-75 (89) 521, 560. By long literary habit we have become accustomed to thinking automatically of the gods as "above." We know that for the Greeks they were also around and below, but the unqualified word "gods" automatically suggests to us "gods above." To Antigone it automatically suggested "gods below." Sophocles, whom tradition particularly connected with the worship of Asclepius, would doubtless find this emphasis more natural than we do.

so sanctity is defined not by divine decree, but by ageless family tradition.⁵

The point at issue between Creon and Antigone is the status of Polynices. It is a serious thing to deny burial to a dead citizen, or even to fail in providing burial—witness the trial of the Arginusae generals. Towards foreigners, duty is limited to granting permission to bury. What happened to the Persian dead at Marathon? They were apparently still unburied when the Spartans arrived (Hdt. 6.120). If they were buried later (Paus. 1.32.5) the reason may have been, as Rawlinson suggests in his note on the Herodotean passage, regard for sanitation rather than religion or humanitarianism, a matter of expediency rather than of right. At Plataea, we are told (Hdt. 9.85), the Greeks buried their own dead, each city separately. The implication of Herodotus' words "the flesh having all fallen away from the bodies of the dead, and their bones having been gathered together into one place" (9.83) is that the Persian dead had not been buried.

So the Thebans were under no duty to bury the Argive dead. Refusal to permit them to be buried may be implied in 1080–83, but it is not explicitly stated, even on this late occasion. Attention is concentrated on the refusal of rites to Polynices, who was no Argive, who indeed had come to Thebes precisely as a Theban. The decree of Creon was specifically addressed, naturally enough, to the citizens of Thebes (26–30, 203–6). So the action of Creon amounts to a declaration that Polynices was not a citizen but a foreigner.⁶ The dispute between Creon and Antigone is, in poetic and symbolic form, the dispute between citizenship as functional status and as inherited, inalienable family status. Cicero, though he did not deny the Catilinarian conspirators burial, was following in the footsteps of Creon when he declared them *hostes*; and not a few Romans held with the principles of Antigone.

⁵ Unwritten laws are the mark of an aristocratic state, as against the written constitutions of more democratic societies. The unwritten laws to which Antigone refers owe their sanctity not to any divine decree, but sheerly to ageless tradition, for no one knows whence they appeared (454–57).

⁶ Cf. Thuc. 1.138.6. With reference to the alleged burial of Themistocles, Thucydides states that one who had been outlawed for treason might not be buried in Attica. Had Creon merely forbidden Polynices burial on Theban soil, an Athenian audience might have thought he had a strong case.

In a common idiom of the time, Antigone is insisting that Polynices is "by nature" a citizen, Creon that he is "by law" no citizen. It is not a question of sacred against secular law, written or unwritten. Creon is quite as confident of the gods' approval as Antigone is, and offers more rationally plausible grounds for his confidence. When Tiresias points out his mistake, Creon, after a natural and dramatically useful resistance, capitulates completely and wholeheartedly. He is no vulgar tyrant, but a democratic leader, genuinely anxious to do what the people want, and what is good for them; like any democratic leader, he is quite sure he knows what they want and what is good for them. Against individual opposition he can be ruthless, but only in the name of the people, and in the interests of the people as he sees these interests. When the accuracy of his insight is authoritatively called in question, he submits his problem to the judgment of the chorus, the people's representatives, and accepts their verdict in good faith. This he does before he has had any evidence of personal disaster; Tiresias' threat of divine displeasure is enough. He has made a mistake, and he hastens to repair it. There is no reason to question the order of his measures of reparation. Antigone, so far as he knew, in his complete ignorance of her character, was safe enough; she could wait; first things first; and his first error had been the refusal to bury Polynices. In any case, Sophocles gives us no reason to suppose that any haste on Creon's part would have sufficed to save Antigone. Haemon had not waited, and he came too late. Creon is no monster; he is an over-earnest and over-wrought politician for whom *salus populi* is *suprema lex*, and special privilege must be mercilessly and, if possible, spectacularly quashed, whenever it raises its horrid head.

Antigone receives our sentimental allegiance, but Creon has perhaps on the whole been less misunderstood; he is a man of our times; Antigone was already becoming obsolete when Sophocles wrote. It is not difficult for us to feel Creon's measure of justification; in fact, I suspect that many of us, in our hearts, find it hard to believe that Creon was really wrong in his first decision, except in his disregard of sanitation. For Creon is in fact almost a precocious Marxist, a dedicated liberal at the least. His criterion of morality and of religion is the good of the community, as he sees it. Antigone's criterion is the traditions of the family,

as she has received them. It is a problem that we, perhaps, have outgrown, but it was of continuing importance in antiquity. L. Junius Brutus and M. Tullius Cicero decided it in one way; P. Cornelius Scipio and C. Iulius Caesar interpreted it otherwise.

It would be impossible to tie the play down to any particular contemporary situation. We have Sophocles' word for it that his characters were not realistic portraits but ideal constructions (Ar. *Poet.* 1460B, 33-34). Little attention is paid to detailed plausibility. Creon, for example, has been in power less than twenty-four hours, and already a formidable, though anonymous, opposition movement has sprung up, literally overnight. Even for Greeks, this is remarkably prompt action. Creon and Antigone represent pure types, he of the democratic, she of the aristocratic spirit. The problem of *Antigone* is essentially the problem of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* or, in later though still archaic terms, the antagonism between Whig and Tory. Creon is not Pericles, nor is he a precursor of Mr. Gladstone or of Mr. Roosevelt. Sophocles is not trying to teach; he is not showing what *must* happen but what in a certain imagined and extreme development of such an opposition, could happen.

Creon, if he foreshadows anyone, is an imaginative anticipation of a Cleon who at the time of the play's presentation was perhaps not even planning a political career. To say⁷ that he "cloaks himself in the oligarchic watchwords of 'good order' and 'obedience to law'" leaves a misleading impression. They are not purely oligarchic watchwords. Pericles in his Funeral Speech insisted on the importance, not only of obedience to the laws, but of fear as a safeguard of the laws (Thuc. 2.37.3). Cleon's attitude, in the Mytilenean debate, is quite uncompromising; "bad laws unchanged are better than good laws unenforced; discreet ignorance is more advantageous than undisciplined cleverness" (Thuc. 3.37.3). But nothing more clearly places Creon than his insistence on the motive of bribery⁸—a theme otherwise quite unnecessary, and one that Sophocles makes no attempt to tie into the action of the play. Theognis, perhaps, can tell us what manner of man it is that reduces all motives to

⁷ Whitman 90.

⁸ See vss. 221-22, 293-303, 310-12, 324-26, 1037-39, 1045-47, 1055, 1061 and cf. Méautis 184-87.

gain.⁹ But again Cleon offers a telling illustration in the repeated and unsubstantiated insinuations of bribery that he makes in the Mytilenean debate (Thuc. 3.38.2, 40.1). It cannot be supposed that in the *Antigone* this insistent, even obtrusive theme of bribery has no special significance, that it is just Sophocles blethering; Sophocles is normally remarkable for relevance and economy.

Antigone and Creon are not caricatures, but pure types, imaginatively realized, each with appropriate virtues and failings, appropriate hardness and frailty. Antigone's significance is indicated by her initial words to Ismene, the question whether or not Ismene intends to live up to the aristocratic code (37-38), and emphasized in her last defense by use of the Intaphernes theme (905-12). She is no sophist, and Sophocles is writing poetry, not rhetoric; we need not expect Euripidean cogency and lucidity in her presentation of her position. It is at least appropriate that Intaphernes had got into trouble through asserting an aristocratic privilege (Hdt. 3.118-19), but in any case Antigone's use of the argument is not weak or irrelevant. It makes perfectly good sense from the aristocratic point of view. Only reactionaries, perhaps, in the modern world, can quite appreciate her point; family, in her sense of the term, is disappearing precisely in the most aggressive and vocal sectors of modern society. But in a patrilineal aristocratic society, the important thing is that a woman and her brother belong to the same family, her father's family; her husband, even her children, belong to her husband's father's family. In England, for example, if she has a title by birth, she does not lose it by marriage to a commoner, but her children are commoners. We may, if we like, conjecture that if Antigone had borne children, her answer might have been different (though Intaphernes' wife had children), but so far as Sophocles' play is concerned, such conjectures are irrelevant. In Antigone's world it is simple and obvious fact that her brother is closer to her than imagined husband, or imagined children. We have become accustomed to thinking of Athens as a democratic city, and such indeed it became; but the oldest nobility of Sparta were *parvenus* compared with an old Athenian family, and the downgrading of

⁹ E.g. vss. 43-52. This, however, is somewhat ambiguous evidence for (a) Theognis is no more reluctant than Creon to ascribe to his enemies an undue interest in *kerdos*, and Theognis is thought to be oligarchic in his sympathies; (b) apart from this assumption of oligarchic prejudice, some of the social comment in the Theognidean corpus would be as appropriate in the mouth of a Marius as of a Metellus, e.g. 743-52.

the Eupatrids was not accomplished overnight.¹⁰ We must not overlook the importance of Thucydides' passing remark about Alcibiades, "a man young in years for any other city, but esteemed for the reputation of his ancestors" (5.43.2).

There is indeed a nice irony in Sophocles' use of Herodotus here, for the "Homeric" Sophocles can hardly have been unaware that Herodotus had written, or was writing, an anti-Homeric epic, an epic of peoples, not personalities. The Homeric virtues, the Achillean virtues, to ride well, to shoot straight, to tell the truth (Hdt. 1.136) the aristocratic virtues, courage, pride, boundless ambition and eagerness to dominate, unquestioning loyalty to a code, are all there, and receive their meed of admiration; but they are the qualities of the Persians, not of the Greeks. The qualities whereby the Greeks win are the bourgeois qualities. Even the exiled king Demaratus, when twitted by Xerxes (7.101-4) answers like a dogged and sensible Roundhead badgered by a Cavalier.

Herodotus shows the triumph of democracy over aristocracy; so does Sophocles, but he is less jubilant about it. That generation had political thinking in its bones, particularly thinking about the fundamentals of political organization. Thus Herodotus introduces (*mal à propos*, according to most critics) into his Persian history the celebrated debate on constitutional forms (3.80-82). In the face of Herodotus' explicit assertion, one may hesitate to be sure that such a debate did not take place when he said it did. He reported it in Greek terms, naturally; but it is difficult to believe that among the Persians, a proud and quick-witted people with a genius for organization, no one had ever formulated the question, "When Adam dived and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?". But our immediate purpose is at least as well served by the common assumption that such problems of political organization were so much in the front of men's minds when Herodotus and Sophocles were writing, that they intrude themselves where we think they have no business to be.

Sophocles' election to the generalship does not prove a political inspiration for the *Antigone*; but it does seem to imply that, about the time when the *Antigone* was being written, Sophocles was taking

¹⁰ H. T. Wade-Gery, *CQ* 25 (1931) 1-11, 77-89. It is perhaps a fair presumption that, before the citizenship law of 451 B.C. (enforced in 445-444), citizen status was based on recognition by the family.

an active interest in politics. Athens had no dearth of tragic poets, but the political career of Sophocles remains unique. There is no more need to suppose that he was elected to public office in recognition of his poetic quality than that Andrew Marvell or John Milton owed their public careers to their poetic achievement. An Athenian general might get along quite well with no military capacity—there was plenty to do without personally commanding troops—but some administrative capacity he was surely expected to have. Sophocles had been chairman of the Treasury Board two years before, and towards the end of his life, in a period of national emergency when not only patriotism and impartiality but demonstrated competence were required, he was perhaps called into service again.¹¹ There is certainly no need to suppose that, if the *Antigone* carries a political import, it must be in accordance with Periclean policy; the example of Nicias and Alcibiades is enough to show that the Athenians voted for the man, not the party—if there were “parties” in republican Athens any more than in republican Rome.

The view implied near the end of Pericles' Funeral Speech, that patriotism can justify anything, or almost anything (Thuc. 2.42.3) is powerfully presented in the *Septem* of Aeschylus. His Eteocles is a singularly unsympathetic character,¹² and Aeschylus carefully refrains from any indication that his cause was morally just, as against the claims of Polynices. In the play all that matters is that he is defending his city, Polynices is attacking it. Aeschylus has condemned Alcibiades in advance.

Sophocles is not so sure. His conflict is not put in the almost crude form of *Coriolanus*, pitting vulgar demagoguery against noble arrogance. He sees the conflict in terms of the experience of his generation; Athens had not yet experienced the meaner forms of democracy. Creon, however narrow-minded, is as sincere in his patriotism as Pericles; and like Pericles, he is no tanner or lamp-seller. He acts honestly in the public interest as he understands it; but he foreshadows the crude domination of the will of the majority, the cry that it's a terrible thing if anyone is to prevent the people doing anything it likes (Xen. *Hell.* 1.7.12).

¹¹ The Sophocles who was one of the *probouloi* of 413 might have been (a) one of the Thirty Tyrants (Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.2) or even (b) the general exiled in 424 (Thuc. 4.65.3), if he had received a ten-year term; Thucydides does not specify.

¹² A totally different interpretation is urged by T. Rosenmeyer in *Arion* 1 (1962) 48–78.

Creon is the voice of the future, Antigone the voice of the past. Sophocles, and Athens, are poised between them. The decision of Hegel, who lived in a society closer to that of Sophocles than is our own, was substantially right: "In the view of the Eternal Justice both (Antigone and Creon) were wrong because they were one-sided; but at the same time both were right."¹³ Sophocles' sympathies, we may believe, were chiefly with Antigone, though Creon is perhaps the more tragic, or at least the more pathetic figure, for he gives up his convictions, and still he is destroyed; Antigone dies with her convictions intact. But Sophocles' judgment did not take sides. Whether or how far those who hold to the paramount sanctity of tradition are right, matters less than that they believe they are right, and are willing to die, if necessary, for this belief. That is something that statesmen must bear in mind. Sophocles was a liberal in the old-fashioned permissive sense, not the modern compulsive sense. It is not surprising that Aristophanes in his *Frogs* did not consider bringing him back to deal with the problems of 405. But the Athens of 440 was a mellower and more assured society; and we may readily believe that moderate-minded men among the sharp-witted Athenians appreciated the implications of his play, and that Sophocles owed, and deservedly owed, his election as general to the success of the *Antigone*.

¹³ Quoted in Jebb's *Antigone* (Cambridge 1888) xxi. The passage to which Jebb refers may be found in G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion, Sämtliche Werke* (Leipzig 1927) 13.156, or in the Stuttgart edition (1928) 16.133-34. Cf. A. Boeckh, *Antigone* (Leipzig 1884) 127, 134 ff., for an ample development of the Hegelian antinomy. Sophocles seems to have had an ironic instinct for qualifying enthusiasm and insisting on balance by opposition. In the celebrated first stasimon, for example, the key word *δεινά* (332) often translated as "wondrous," "marvelous," etc., must surely retain much of the sense of "formidable," "terrifying" that it has in *Philoctetes* 502. And in the same stasimon is it possible that any normal Athenian audience, however indulgent towards poetic diction, could in this context have been unaware in the words *ἀστυνόμους ὄργας* (355) of the vulgar but obvious significance "police department tempers"?