

Antigone's Motives: A Suggested Interpretation

CHARLES S. LEVY

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Modern critics agree, in general, that Sophocles' *Antigone* concerns the essentially justifiable refusal of an individual to let society prevent her from fulfilling a highly solemn personal obligation.¹ The post-romantic reader is, after all, particularly responsive to the theme of embattled individualism. But because of his very interest in the individual, that reader faces another problem which he feels it no less crucial for him to solve than that of thematic interpretation if he is to satisfy himself that he understands the play: he must fathom the motives that impel Antigone to bury and bewail her brother² in the face of the danger in which this puts her. For Sophocles' heroine is no mere two-dimensional character; she is much too compelling a dramatic creation for the modern reader to dismiss her as being nothing

¹ The following critical studies were chiefly consulted: S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright* (Toronto 1957); C. M. Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford 1944); E. Eberlein, "Über die verschiedenen Deutungen des tragischen Konflikts in der Tragödie 'Antigone' des Sophokles," *Gymnasium* 68 (1961) 16-34; V. Ehrenberg, *Sophocles and Pericles* (Oxford 1954); R. Y. Hathorn, "Sophocles' *Antigone*: Eros in Politics," *CJ* 54 (1958) 109-15; G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama* (Ithaca 1958); H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London 1939), and *Form and Meaning in Drama* (London 1956); J. Lacarrière, *Sophocle dramaturge* (Paris 1960); F. J. H. Letters, *The Life and Work of Sophocles* (London and New York 1953); I. M. Linforth, *Antigone and Creon*, California Publications in Classical Philology, Vol. 15, No. 5 (1961); P. Mazon, trans., *Sophocle: Les Trachiniennes—Antigone*, ed. A. Dain (Budé edn., Paris 1955); G. Norwood, *Greek Tragedy*⁴ (London 1948)—Norwood maintains, however, that Antigone's personal intervention is not justified: "She should have left the gods to vindicate their own law." (140); K. Reinhardt, *Sophokles*³ (Frankfurt/M 1947); A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1951); T. B. L. Webster, *An Introduction to Sophocles* (Oxford 1936); C. H. Whitman, *Sophocles* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1951); R. E. Wycherley, "Sophocles *Antigone* 904-20," *CP* 42 (1947) 51-52. A survey of other, earlier studies may be found in M. K. Flickinger's *The 'Αμαρτία of Sophocles' Antigone* (Iowa City 1935) 19-42. The foregoing list will supply the necessary further information about works subsequently referred to by author's name and publication date alone.

² On the multiple nature of Antigone's obligation, see the recent discussion by A. T. von S. Bradshaw in "The Watchman Scenes in the *Antigone*," *CQ* 12, n.s., (1962) 207-9.

more than an allegorical representative of even so sympathetic a quality as uncompromising individualism. He insists upon being able to conceive of this heroic figure as a credible person, and he finds perhaps his best assurance that he does so conceive of her in thinking that he may well know why it is that she performs the deed about which the action of the play turns.

In trying to resolve the problem of Antigone's motives, modern critics frequently approach either of two extremes—again as a consequence, one suspects, of the compelling vigor of Antigone's character. Some conclude, like Goethe, that Antigone behaves in an eminently rational way;³ others find themselves more or less in agreement with Norwood that "Antigone *has* no reasons; she has only an instinct."⁴ But neither extreme interpretation is wholly satisfactory, because it emphasizes certain characteristics of Antigone's behavior at the expense of others. The present discussion constitutes an attempt to take more nearly into account the totality of Antigone's behavior; not unnaturally, then, it proposes something of a synthesis of the two extremes. I suggest that Sophocles portrays his heroine as being motivated, like most men and women, by a combination of reason and instinct, the term "instinct" being used as most participants in this critical debate appear to use it, namely, to refer to what is in a sense the antithesis of reason, the essentially unreflecting and impulsive response of a person to his circumstances. I would further suggest that the poet achieves a vivid portrayal of Antigone which is both heroic in its universality and at the same time realistically convincing, and that he does so much less by descriptive means than by a dramatic device: he presents the interaction of Antigone's reason and instinct as a principal element of his developing drama.

If this suggested interpretation is sound, Antigone's immediate reaction to Creon's edict should probably be expected to display a

³ In his conversation with Eckermann of 28 March, 1827, Goethe, questioning the genuineness of 904 ff, compares that passage with all of Antigone's other pronouncements: "... die Heldin im Laufe des Stückes die herrlichsten Gründe für ihre Handlung ausgesprochen und den Edelmut der reinsten Seele entwickelt hat..." Cf. Ehrenberg (1954) 28–33, 56–57; Hathorn (1958) esp. 111–12, and notes 9, 10; Linforth (1961) 203, 249–50; Waldock (1951) 138; Whitman (1951) 82–84.

⁴ *Op. cit.* (above, note 1) 139. Cf. Adams (1957) 44; Kitto (1939) 126–27, (1956) 149, 170–71; Lacarrière (1960) 73–77; Mazon (1955) 65–66; Wycherley (1947).

markedly instinctive quality—and the passionate denunciation of that edict with which Antigone abruptly makes her first entrance does in fact have such a quality: her opening speech is, as many critics have remarked,⁵ an impetuous outburst expressing her feeling of offense at the pain and the shame and the dishonor to which her family has been subjected, the burden of all of which the edict will now still further aggravate. Then, continuing in her next long speech (21–38) to dwell on her sense of family outrage, she also expresses similar offense at the outrage which the edict constitutes for her, personally: *legô gar kâme* (32). And, finally, she makes it clear that she, at any rate, will disobey the offensive edict.

This portion of the prologue, then, reveals the instinctive origin of Antigone's deed; and furthermore it provides a first example of the process of dramatic development by which Antigone is represented as evolving the moral attitudes implicit in her original reaction to Creon's edict into a more explicitly conceptual response—at this point, the germ of a plan of action. But later examples of this process have a closer bearing upon the present discussion, examples wherein Antigone evolves doctrinal and rational statements of her implicit ethical position. And yet just beneath the surface of these statements, it will be found, the poet almost invariably makes it possible for one to detect the persistent vitality of Antigone's original sense of outrage.

But why does she go beyond a plan of action to evolve such expressions of her instinctive feeling? Surely that feeling itself demands no more of her than that she carry out her plan. However, from the inevitable disclosure of this plan to others there results a new and ever more insistent demand upon her to defend herself by means of doctrine or reason: for her increasingly imminent danger, and the uncomprehending opposition, first of Ismene, then of the wholly unsympathetic Creon, and, as she feels, that of most other Thebans as well, all subject Antigone to increasingly great moral pressure in the face of which she no longer finds a protest of offense and of personal indignation sufficient either to assure herself that she is doing the right thing, or to rebut the arguments of the others. She therefore evolves

⁵ E.g. Kirkwood (1958) 119, and Kitto (1939) 126–27, (1956) 149, who refer at the same time to verses 21–38. Bowra ([1944] 91–92) makes a similar point, but confines himself to the second passage.

several variously satisfactory doctrinal formulations and reasoned accounts of her principles of action. But it should at once be made clear that to conceive of Antigone as behaving in this way is not at all to consider her a weak or unworthy character. It is rather to bear witness to Sophocles' remarkably perceptive portrayal of her as a credible person. For modern students of normal human behavior and of its artistic representation are well acquainted with the psychological process of responding to stress by transmuting instinctive predispositions into explicit statements of motive,⁶ a process which, as I suggest, Antigone's behavior exemplifies.

It must be shown, then, that as the drama of Antigone's conflict with her fellow Thebans develops, there also develops, in response to the increasing pressure of that conflict, the drama of her search for a way to express her motives. In 72-77, Antigone for the first time ventures a brief reasoned explanation of her intended act, after, and only after, Ismene's speech of 49-68 urging her not to overshoot her womanly role. She begins with a simple assertion of familial and religious piety; but then, as if she were perhaps not satisfied to assert it, she attempts, it would seem, to justify her piety by what one might describe as the cosmic balance sheet of 74-76, in which she weighs, against the eternity which she will spend among the shades, the comparatively short time she has left on earth. Because this arithmetical argument is likely to strike one, if he takes it literally, as being no more than the barest rationalization, he may well be tempted to construe it not as in fact representing an argument at all, but rather as conveying some figurative meaning. Yet even if Sophocles did mean Antigone to be understood as speaking figuratively here, he was hardly the poet to choose the vehicle of so striking a figure at random. The critic therefore must somehow take into account the argumentative form of Antigone's remark. Furthermore, good reasons exist, I feel, for rejecting the conceivable ironic interpretations of this passage (for example, that of verbal irony, like Hathorn's interpretation of a notably similar passage of the

⁶ I am indebted to Mr. Frederick L. Schepman of the University of Minnesota for referring me to several studies of this phenomenon: C. Wright Mills, "Situating Actions and Vocabularies of Motive," *American Sociological Review* 5 (1940) 904-13; Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York 1945), *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York 1950), and *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*² (Los Altos [Calif.] 1954).

play, the troublesome 905–12, in which Antigone seems also to justify her piety rationalistically⁷): the present passage figures too early in the dramatic development of Antigone's character for there already to have been established reliable criteria for judging it to be ironic, and indeed such an interpretation of either passage is inconsistent with the impression Antigone gives of having a singularly direct style of argumentation; to detect irony here is thus to concern oneself less with Sophocles' dramatic intent than with some preconceived idea about the play, such possibly as the Hegelian notion that it rigorously reflects the dialectical process. Consequently, I should conclude that Antigone's striking remark is intended perhaps to represent literally, or, if not to represent, certainly to suggest a first attempt on her part to defend herself by explicitly rational means.

After this first brief representation or suggestion of a reasoned account of her motives, Antigone makes no further attempt at such an account for the present; Ismene's opposition is, after all, neither immoderate nor entirely unsympathetic. In Creon, however, Antigone will soon confront an uncompromising opponent. For, as one quickly realizes at Creon's first appearance, he and his niece have virtually no common ground upon which to meet. Moreover, when Antigone confronts Creon, she is for the first time accused, in the eyewitness testimony of the guard, of having performed burial rites for Polynices. To this marked increase in the pressure upon her, and, in particular, to what she considers Creon's perverse hyperlegalism, she reacts with a longer, more vehement, and, one feels, much more satisfactory defense of her behavior. The cosmic balance sheet, if indeed there remain any traces of it at all in 456–57:

οὐ γάρ τι νῦν γε κᾶχθές, ἀλλ' αἰεί ποτε
ζῆ ταῦτα, κούδεις οἶδεν ἐξ ὅτου ῥάνη,

she splendidly transforms into an assertion of the eternal vitality

⁷ Hathorn ([1958] 114, note 9) writes of the later passage: "Antigone here . . . is deliberately lowering herself to the level of reasoning of the man who could console his son for the loss of his betrothed by reminding him that 'there are other fields to plough' (569), and she is showing that even so the reasoning will not work." Only Wycherley (1947), I believe, has heretofore commented on the similarity between the two passages, a similarity which, he argues, testifies to the genuineness of 904–20. His argument has the incidental effect of showing that this similarity strengthens the case for taking the cosmic balance sheet literally.

of the unwritten, unfailing divine laws by which she now justifies her disobedience to the species of law to which Creon is wholly committed. But although in this great speech Antigone succeeds memorably in evolving her instinctive protest into a thoughtfully and majestically articulated expression of the principles which motivate her, nevertheless the passionate mood of her original outburst denouncing Creon's edict is unmistakably recalled not only by the manifest emotion,⁸ but even by the diction itself, of the present speech. For the three words, *algos*, *êlgoun*, *algynomai*, which, accumulated in 466-68, serve of course to emphasize the idea of grievous offense which similarly pervades that first impetuous denunciation, in fact also echo the very word, *algeinon*, which stands first in the string of adjectives that Antigone uses in 4-5 to open her attack upon the edict. Thus, by means of a characteristic poetic device, Sophocles sharpens his audience's realization that a strong undercurrent of instinctive passion runs just beneath the surface of Antigone's finest statement of her motives. And finally, he makes this still clearer by means of the more explicit device of choral comment; for in its remarks immediately following this speech, the chorus calls attention not to the evident grandeur of the speech, but rather to Antigone's rawness, her primitiveness, so much like her father's (471-72).

As Creon presses his attack, Antigone defends herself with further explanations of her behavior: she answers his charges of insubordination (473-83) by frankly exulting in the glory of her deed (502-4), and she rejects his doctrine of eternal enmity with her celebrated assertion of belief in natural harmony (522-23). Then, in an almost equally tense stichomythic exchange with Ismene, she reacts with still greater vehemence than during their earlier encounter to what she regards as her sister's irremediable betrayal of her, scorning Ismene, and in 557 accusing her once again of impiety and now too of opportunism. Conversely, when she is not subjected to immediate pressure, as in the *kommos* which she chants with the uncomprehending but not unsympathetic chorus, Antigone laments, but she does not argue.

⁸ Cf. Linforth (1961) 203: "[Antigone's] thoughts follow one another in consequential order and are delivered with seeming calmness. But the emotion she feels at such a moment is not concealed." With regard to the substance of the speech, cf. Kirkwood (1958) 125: "This is the noble outcome of what was, in the prologue, still inchoate and instinctive feeling."

And, indeed, from this point her extraordinary intellectual stamina does seem to give some evidence of flagging, as is quite natural in view of the great strain to which she has been subjected.⁹ But when Creon reappears, harshly callous, she quickly turns again to arguing her case.

First, as so often before, she asserts the familial piety of her behavior. Then follow the perhaps spurious 904–20, which of course do not provide entirely reliable evidence of Antigone's motives, because canonic criticism appears to have found no criteria of their authenticity sufficiently independent of the critic's own construction of those motives.¹⁰ But it can at any rate be seen that these verses constitute neither the wholly unprecedented departure from rationality which so shocked Goethe that he preferred to reject them,¹¹ nor Antigone's first and only response to the necessity of defending herself, as Webster holds.¹² For, as has been remarked, the same pattern of argument appears very early in the play, when in 72–77 Antigone defends her behavior by first asserting and then rationalistically justifying her piety; and, in fact, if the cosmic balance sheet of the earlier passage were elaborated in as great detail as this Herodotean explanation, one might well find it equally contrived.

Finally, in the little time left to her before being led away, Antigone not only laments her fate and again asserts the piety of her act, but also recurs to the idea of family identity which from the very beginning has been so inextricably associated with her instinctive feeling of outrage and offense at Creon's edict; and

⁹ Kirkwood ([1958] 164) shows that the *kommos* represents Antigone as being demoralized in some degree by the strain of unsuccessfully defending herself.

¹⁰ For example, Whitman ([1951] 92–93, and note 31), who makes a brief critical survey of opposing arguments, does not find such arguments as the one based on Sophocles' demonstrable "spiritual affinity" (14; see also notes 28, 29) with Herodotus sufficiently convincing to prevail against the sophism and frigidity of the passage, and he therefore rejects it. Kirkwood ([1958] 163–65), on the other hand, asserts "the genuineness and the propriety of the passage in general," arguing, as of course the present writer would, that "It is neither surprising nor inappropriate that [Antigone's] logic is poor. She acted in the first place from instinctive feeling rather than reasoned principles." Several other critics also argue that this passage is not inconsistent with what the audience has already learned about Antigone: Kitto ([1939] 127, [1956] 170–71) and Bowra ([1944] 90–96) recognize a certain organic unity in her characterization; Wycherley (1947) does not carry his analysis beyond his valuable discussion of the similarity between 74–76 and 904–20.

¹¹ See above, note 3.

¹² *Op. cit.* (above, note 1) 99.

here again one finds the chorus commenting upon the passionate nature to which Antigone's speeches testify. Indeed, the rudimentary clues which such choral comments as this provide to Antigone's motivation appear to constitute the only evidence not afforded by Antigone herself of which the critic can at all safely avail himself. For these comments strike one as having something of the quality of stage directions. But the non-choral characters ought not be relied upon for revelations inappropriate to the nature of their roles: clearly Creon and Ismene do not understand Antigone; Tiresias hardly mentions her at all; and Haemon, to whose extraordinary harmony with her sister Ismene attests in 570, refrains for reasons of policy from explicitly stating his personal opinion of his fiancée's behavior. One is thus driven back upon Antigone herself for his insight into her motives. The effect of this, it may be suggested, is not only to emphasize by her isolation the theme of her embattled individualism, but also to arouse a lively curiosity about those motives on the part at any rate of the post-romantic reader, and at the same time to make it impossible for him to satisfy that curiosity except by closely following the interaction between Antigone's reason and instinct. This dramatic element of the play, as I have tried to show, embodies a study—a classic study—of the process by which men and women typically arrive at their statements of motive, and thus it serves to impart to Antigone's portrayal both the suggestion of universality which heroic characterization appears to require, and the sense of vital humanity which makes it so forceful and so convincing a portrayal.