

Beyond Hegel & Schlegel: An Ambiguous Reading of Sophocles' Antigone

Sophocles' *Antigone* has spoken more to the modern imagination than any other Greek tragedy except perhaps his *Oedipus the King*. Yet the question is often raised, rarely resolved: Who is right, Antigone or Creon? Who is wrong? The orthodox view of the 19th century German philosopher Schlegel makes Antigone right and Creon wrong, granting that Antigone disobeys the decree, but in obedience to a higher (divine) law. (See quotes #1-3; contra #4). The 18th century German philosopher Hegel maintained, however, that both were wrong and both right: Antigone stood for family, love, blood and the gods below, while Creon stood for the state and the sky gods; both are right in defending a principle, but both wrong in being 1-sided. (#6)

The orthodox, or Schlegelian, view is the standard modern view. Jebb equates Antigone with a Christian martyr (St. Perpetua) and Antigone is commonly seen as standing for the rights of the individual -- even for the rights of women. But further consideration of the political and social norms of 5th century BC Greece suggests that the notion that the non-burial of Polyneices was outrageous and unacceptable ignores the fact that traitors were often not buried. Bernard Knox disputes (*Heroic Temper*, 84-86) the idea that the Greeks would have considered private duties superior to duties to the polis (and that, therefore, Greeks would have accepted Antigone as right). We distrust the state and fear its encroachment on our personal lives, as seen in EM Forster's exclamation, "If I had to choose between betraying my friend or my country, I hope I'd have the guts to betray my country", a notion that no Greek would have supported. Antigone works with a different view of the state than ours. Demosthenes cited with approval Creon's speech on the duties owed to the polis.

Critics of the "Antigone is right" view say the play would not suit Aristotle's concept of tragedy: Antigone dies too soon and the tragedy should be over if she's the hero (she also has about half the number of lines that Creon does). Knox (and others) sees the Greek audience as viewing the conflict as that between two equals, with Creon having right on his side, but he eventually concludes that Antigone acts from love, Creon from hate. Vernant (#7) sees the conflict not as pure religious opposition but as a conflict between family gods and state gods, resolved in favor of family gods. But consider the price and the fact that the end of the play gives no guarantee that this will not be repeated.

The Orthodox point out that Creon may start out acceptably but he becomes a tyrant who sees the people as cattle and equates himself with the state. But Antigone's championship of the family is not borne out by her treatment of Ismene, her sister, Creon, her uncle, or Haemon, her betrothed, about whom she doesn't speak at all. (#9) This ambiguity goes deeper. Creon, defending the city, is destroying the city. Antigone, championing the dead, wrongs them because, by dying and not marrying, she is extinguishing the family.

Goethe considered Ismene "ordinary" - a typical prudent person. But, if Ismene = prudence (a valuable Greek concept, cf. *sophrosyne*), then Antigone must = its opposite. So, Ismene stands between the two extremes (Creon and Antigone; see #10); Ismene acknowledges both principles -- state and individual/family -- and thus can be seen as their reconciliation. Yet Ismene lacks Antigone's grandeur.

Neither tradition satisfactorily explains Creon and Antigone. How can two mutually opposite interpretations survive for two centuries? Probably both are wrong. Ismene shows the ambiguity of Antigone, who supports the family but rejects her living family, Creon and Ismene, and this is highlighted by the animal metaphors used about Antigone. Creon defends his principles so violently that he undermines them. We need to focus on the ambiguity of both Antigone and Creon, shown in the language: in the ode to man (#11), *deinos* can be both “wonderful” and “horrific” and Antigone’s words at 73-74 (#12) speak of a “holy crime”. Is this latter an oxymoron? The ambiguity extends to Ismene (#13): after Creon sets her free (771) we hear nothing more of her, so her choice of life was actually death, and #14 shows Ismene as a kinswoman only in words, contrasted with Antigone who sees herself as a kinswoman in deeds.

The ambiguity of this play is inherent in Greek tragedy; it is central to Greek tragedy and to Greek religion, just as in Dionysos worship, with its free wandering (the women in the hills) and eating raw food. These Dionysiac transgressions were strictly controlled, once a year at the festival. Tragic figures burst forth into the everyday life of the polis as well, but on a stage and only once a year. These tragic figures show us part of ourselves. The ambiguity of transgression is central to religion, as Sir James Frazier comments on the failure of early people to distinguish the dividing line in human action. Douglas’ quote on early society is a good description of the tragic hero attacked by forces but showing the foundation on which order is built. Tragic heroes show (more than Ismene does) that foundation.