

Heroic Action:  
The Gender of Justice and Nobility in Sophocles' *Antigone*

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July 31, 1996

Pericles' "Funeral Oration" indicates that the Athenian populace was disposed to accept distinctions between male and female actions and virtue:

Holding vengeance upon their enemies was more to be desired than any personal blessings, and reckoning this to be the most glorious of hazards, [the Athenian soldiers] joyfully determined to accept the risk, to make sure of their vengeance. . . . So died these men as became Athenians. . . . If I must say anything on the subject of female excellence to [widows], it will be comprised in this brief exhortation. Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among men...<sup>1</sup>

However, such acceptance was not found among all prominent writers, nor were alternatives hidden from public display. Indeed, Sophocles, in his play, *Antigone*, collapsed many of the gender distinctions illustrated by the passage above.

This essay argues that a radical egalitarianism is essential to the heroic actions of *Antigone*. Sophocles makes Antigone perform an admirable act which was masculinely gendered in Athenian society, Greek literature, and the Theban world of this play: Antigone

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1. Pericles, "The Funeral Oration." In Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley; rev. R. Feetham, *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica: 1952), 2: 42-43 and 45, pp. 398-399.

rescues Polynices' body from the disgrace of lying unburied on a battlefield outside Thebes. Then, after Theban retribution for this burial, Sophocles reverses Antigone's suffering through a final speech which, in its reliance on her expectations and experiences as a woman, makes her demand for justice admirably right.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Sophocles' egalitarianism takes the form of just and admirable action which, if done by a man, probably would have been thought just by many of the Greeks who witnessed the play's first performance. If this play is a tragedy and Antigone's actions are tragic, then the sense of Antigone's fortune, her deserts, are involved and the sense of justice would be invoked by the play for Athenians to feel through pity and fear for her.

Of course, the admiration, justice, and egalitarianism of Antigone's actions can all be questioned. The critical commentary on her last speech illustrates the problems. In various forms, critics have found Antigone's argument so narrow that some have been led to reject its Sophoclean authorship altogether, while others have found that only Antigone's passionate character, unconnected to reason, stands forth in this speech. Consequently, her claim to justice seems to have shrunk from a broad principle to a personal preference. In her demands she

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2. I am referring to the speech that in the 1990 Oxford Greek text in Sophocles, *Antigone*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), ll. 891-928; hereafter, "L-JA." This speech appears in Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays, Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Clonus*, trans. Robert Fables. (New York, Penguin Books, 1984), ll. 978-1021. Because of its widespread uses, all line references are to Fables' translations, unless another translation is designated; hereafter, Fables' *Oedipus the King* is abbreviated *O.T.* Alternative translations of individual words have been checked in L-JA or in Sir Richard Jeb, trans. of Sophocles, *The Plays and Fragments: Part III. Antigone*. (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1900; reprinted by St. Clair Shores, Scholarly Press, 1972); hereafter referred to as Jeb.

becomes extreme, not admirable, and such acts become matters of repulsion, indifference or, at best, sympathy but not pity and fear. However, this supposed narrowness, I will argue, has arisen from a failure to recognize the rhetorical form of this speech. Further, Antigone's enthymematic argument, that body of thought which depends on the hearer adding something which is so familiar that it need not be said, is gendered to her expectations and experiences as a woman. Since the enthymematic nature of the speech has been ignored, the feminine link between love and justice has been lost. With its thought so reduced by criticism, the nobility of the speech *as action* disappears.

To put the difficulty more generally: prior criticism has separated the thought of Antigone from her character.<sup>3</sup> We are left, then, with a woman who, having spent the whole play cogently arguing, is apparently stripped of everything except an irrational, personal love of her brother. Without justice and nobility, Antigone's love cannot command respect, and the emotional power and significance of the play shrink. As a result, we diminish a resource in Greek drama for thought about innovations in art and about diversity within Greek society. On the other hand, when the egalitarianism and thoughtfulness of Antigone's actions are considered,

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3. An alternative, "Hegelian," line of argument separates Antigone's character from her thought in the last speech while it retains admiration for her character. In *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Marsha Nussbaum argues that "the strange speech (891ff) . . . makes us suspect that [Antigone] is capable of a strangle ruthless simplification of duties," (p. 64) while, citing passages other than this speech, she praises Antigone's virtue which yields to the "power of contingent circumstances" (p. 67). In this argument, Antigone's love becomes impersonal in the sense that it is not attached to Polynices, but to the relationship of "brother" within the family (pp. 63 and 440 n. 44).

we see both that Sophocles drew people “as they ought to be,” and that, as Aristotle argued, tragedy was philosophic insofar as it imitated the “possible order of things” for fifth century Athenians.<sup>4</sup>

This essay assumes that Creon’s action is the maximum available force which can be brought against a family. While this description recognizes the practical power Creon wields and the political conditions which he brings to bear, it denies that Creon is the personification of city-state political structure or aims. Further, Creon’s attack, which begins as a self-defense and quickly deteriorates into an unjust, personal retribution, takes with it and unleashes the conventional enmity of Theban male elders (the Chorus) upon Antigone.

Antigone’s defense of Polynices’ body, in contrast, is just and honorable. It grows out of a recognition that we ought to defend the friends we love the most, our family. In the familial love of Antigone, Sophocles synthesizes actions usually reserved for women – mourning of the dead and, as we will see, a woman’s part in procreation through marriage – with actions usually reserved for men — the rescue of Polynices’ body, the obligations of sons, and the vengeance upon an enemy that Antigone calls down on Creon and the Thebans.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, a notion of

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4. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 25, 1460b34-35 and 9, 1153b28-30.

5. W.K. Lacey, in *The Family in Classical Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968), traces Athenian legal responsibility for burial and vengeance to the kinship-group, *anchisteia*, as early as the sixth century (p. 28-29). Bernard Knox in “Introduction to *Antigone*” in Fagles’ *Three Theban Plays* notes that the “funeral rites . . . were . . . the duty and privilege of women,” (p. 39); hereafter, “Knox, *TTP*.” For the explicit procreative purposes of marriage, see John H.

justice appears which most men in the play and Athenian society generally would swear to were they able to see its universal application beyond men to women.

### **I. Antigone's Act: Uniting Female and Male Roles through Choice**

The play opens with Antigone's revelation to her sister, Ismene, of Creon's decree forbidding the burial of their brother's, Polynices', body. Few playwrights are as concerned with the influence of thought upon character as is Sophocles. Thought is important in Antigone's case because she has been cut off from societally habituated guides that she might otherwise invoke. The one activity in which she seems to have had inordinate experience, a societally acknowledged domain of women, is the burial of her family dead, now closed to her through Creon's decree. She is not married and, except for Ismene, is shorn of family. In addition, unlike Oedipus, she has no oracle or messenger from the gods to inform her as what to do in this circumstance.

However, she is not cut off from memory nor from actions which affect her. At the play's opening, she sees herself as a patient in past sufferings – “griefs” – that Oedipus or Zeus handed down (ll. 1-5). Later scenes confirm that this opinion is not idiosyncratic or unfounded. At one point, the Chorus, too, shares her view, and Antigone and Ismene all specify the causes of the griefs, including: Oedipus' “criminal” conduct, self-blinding, and shattered reputation in

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Oakley and Rebecca H. Sinos, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press), p. 10 and Lacey, p. 110.

death; Jocasta's horrific coupling and suicide; and their brothers' mutual blood-letting (ll. 61-69; 946-958).<sup>6</sup> Nor does she think of her suffering as simply a painful memory. At her lowest fortunes before going to her tomb, she sees her family's past as actively destroying her; for example, "Oh dear brother [Polynices] . . . your dying drags me down" (ll. 956-958). So, too, as we will see below, she sees Creon's decree as still another imposed suffering.

This sense of imposed, past and present suffering combines with her character – her calculation and sense of honor, her courage and her love – to shape her purpose and determine her choices in opening scenes. Knowing Creon's decree, Antigone has already calculated what she is going to do: "Ismene: I know nothing more . . . Antigone: I thought so. That's why I brought you ought her, past the gates, so that you could hear in private" (ll. 21-23). She and her sister are to "share the work" of "lift[ing] up [Polynices'] body with these bare hands and lower[ing] it" (ll. 50-53).

After addressing her sister in the dearest terms of blood bonds, Antigone appeals to their common suffering. Their chief suffering is a heritage of shame and disgrace (or dishonor: *aischron out atimon*) imposed by male agents: "How many griefs (that is, evils: *kakon*) our father Oedipus handed down. Do you know one . . . grief / That Zeus will not perfect for the two of us?... There's nothing / no pain . . . no private shame, no public disgrace, nothing I haven't seen

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6. Of course, the details of Oedipus' death differ from *Oedipus Colonus*. In this play, not only has Oedipus died without honor, but Antigone has laid him out and buried him. This is not insignificant since to bury Oedipus would be to restore to him in death the honor he had lost in life.

in your griefs and mine . . . And now this: an emergency decree” (ll. 2-9). Generally, most characters in the play opine that humans may endure suffering about which they can do nothing (Sentry: l. 265; the Chorus: ll. 945 and 1458; Ismene: l. 77). Further, no character argues that Antigone is responsible for the griefs that arise from her past (as opposed to her later struggle with Creon). But, for Antigone, the decree presents an opportunity to do something about the disgrace it imposes. She has noticed that it actually contains an honorable alternative to Polynices’ disgrace: “Eteocles . . . has been given full military honors / rightly [that is, justly] so.”<sup>7</sup> Also, she has realized that Polynices’ humiliation can only continue if she cooperates by succumbing to a threat of painful, but momentary, suffering: “Such . . . is the martial law Creon / lays down for you and me. . . . Whoever disobeys in the least will die.” Therefore, Antigone sees what the honorable alternative and the threat to disobedience imply; as she says to Ismene: “You’ll soon show what you are, / worth your breeding . . . or a coward” (ll. 28-44). No less is true of herself.

In other words, the play opens at the moment when, on the very brink of adulthood, a young woman, who has suffered unremitting disgrace on account of her family, without any guidance other than her own thought, takes the first opportunity she has ever had to escape that suffering through her own action. At this opportunity, she seeks an ally, believing that if she and her sister refuse to be deterred, if they are courageous enough to endure one moment of painful,

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7. Jebb’s commentary on this passage indicates general scholarly agreement that Antigone contrasts a correct or just practice to the treatment of Polynices’ corpse, p. 13, l. 23f.

disgraceful punishment, they can *act* honorably and justly to stop the whole river of humiliation that has engulfed their family.

Antigone is not suicidal. She is calculating that a trade of her disgraceful stoning for the honorable burial of Polynices will stanch a much greater flow of disgrace. Further, the way Antigone speaks of Polynices' degradation could not fail to show Greek citizen-soldiers watching this play precisely how she conceives of her prospective trade, and why she thinks the stoning will be worth it.

She says to Ismene: "Don't you see? The doom reserved for enemies marches on the ones we love" (ll. 12-13). Such doom, as Kagan points out, was well known.<sup>8</sup> This humiliation was a most egregious demonstration of the powerlessness, subjugation, and defeat of the enemy. It consisted in stripping the warriors of their armor and, then, constructing a trophy out of it which stood over the dead in watchful silence, while the vanquished army sued for peace to recover the exposed corpses. Why friends would wish to recover the bodies is amply described by Antigone, Creon, the Sentry, and Tiresias. The body will be "unwept, unburied, a lovely / treasure for birds that scan the field and feast." "Carrion for the birds" who fight with "dogs to tear" it, left exposed the corpse "stinks" and grows "slimy" and "soft," while pieces, "torn from the corpse" are scattered around the city by vultures (ll. 35-36; 230-231; 444-445; 1125-1126).

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8. Donald Kagan, *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy: The Triumph of Leadership* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Touchstone, 1991), p. 83.

Further, how Polynices' body is treated, now, affects Antigone's future, not just present, pleasures and pains. She expects love from Polynices in Hades: "I will lie with the one I love and love by him (*phile . . . philou*)." She believes that she has "longer / to please the dead than [to] please the living [for] in the kingdom down below [she]'ll lie forever" (ll. 87-90). And she believes that the dead's love can be justly (*dikei*) turned into hatred if she refuses to bury the body: "Ismene. You're wrong from the start / you're off on a hopeless quest. Antigone: If you say so, you will make me hate you, / and the hatred of the dead, by all rights / Will haunt you night and day" (ll. 106-110). Since Creon's decree forbids a suit to recover the body, in addition to a permanent disgrace for Polynices, it threatens a permanent hatred of brother for sister and, thus, limitless suffering for Antigone. All of the foregoing is part of Antigone's calculated trade of a death of stoning for the honorable burying of her brother.

But there is more to this choice. In these additional considerations, she transforms and unites a female-gendered act, burying her brother, with an honorable male-gendered act, rescuing the body, thereby invoking greater honor for the act. Her response to the decree harks back to a past which any well-versed Greek would know. As Knox has shown, Sophocles' heroes and their general pattern of action – decision, refusal to yield, and self-destruction – are "modelled" after Homer's hero, Achilles.<sup>9</sup> We may push Knox's analysis further. In *Antigone*, not only Achilles shapes Sophocles' heroine. As her later use of Greek myths to appeal to the Chorus shows, Antigone has been well-educated in her culture's stories and expects her audience to

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9. Bernard M. Knox, *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), pp. 8, 27, and 50-51ff; hereafter abbreviated *HT*.

know those stories as well.<sup>10</sup> So, here, in her persuasion of Ismene. As a means to stave off Polynices' disgrace, Antigone (whether she mentions Homer or not) is emulating a very specific set of incidents which appear in the *Iliad*.

Patroklos, Achilles' best friend, is slain on the field of battle. For 760 lines, the Greeks and Trojans wage war over possession of the body. Hektor, who strips the armor, would dismember the body to give it to "the dogs of Troy" (17.125-127). The Achaians urge themselves to fight, for there will be "no glory for us if we go back" without the body (ll. 415-416). Athena reproaches Menelaos that "this will be a thing of shame / . . . if under the wall of the Trojans the dogs in their fury / can mutilate the staunch companion of haughty Achilles" (ll. 556-58). Aias admits to Menelaos the dilemma they face: "how at the same time to rescue the dead body, and also / win back ourselves" through the Trojan army (ll. 635-36). While the Aiantes defend them, Menelaos and Meriones catch "the body from the ground in their arms, lifting / him high," (ll. 721-722) and, together, they remove it. Finally, after the rescue, Achilles, in order to make Hektor "pay the price for stripping Patroklos . . . since [he, Achilles,] was not to stand by [his] companion when he was killed," accepts death "since it is decreed [his] death must come soon after Hektor's" (18.92-99).

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10. The tale of Niobe found in Fagles, ll. 915-924, appears in some of its particulars in Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, tr. Richard Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), bk. 24, ll. 602-617. Other references, as Knox points out, were known to the Athenian audience, *TTP*, p. 402, n. 1035-90. Just as clearly, they were known to the Theban characters, too.

As we have seen, Antigone knows what will happen to her brother's corpse if she does not act. Though she has no army behind her, Antigone, like the Greeks, seeks a partner's help to "lift up [the] body with these bare hands" (Fagles, l. 52). When Ismene refuses, like Athena, Antigone reproaches her sister for refusing to do an act "sacred to the gods." Like the Achaians, Antigone knows that she may "die in the act," but she also believes "that death will be a glory" (ll. 85-88), and, like Achilles, she accepts her own death as a pre-condition for her act. Even Achilles' feeling that he should have been there with his companion has its parallel in Antigone's action. From the moment that Antigone begins her appeal to Ismene, she is aware that her actions springs out of a love for her brother, *for she knows that to bury Polynices is to honor him as a friend – a philos, or loved one* (l. 12).

Finally, in a crucial way, her dedication to her *philos* expands upon the parallel in the *Iliad* to complete, in a feminine way, a larger project that she has been engaged in for some time, a project which is indicated by the list of shames and disgraces she and her sister have shared. Since she dressed, and, thereby, honored Eteocles' body for the state funeral which Creon decreed, and, as we later learn, she laid out and mourned all of her family members (ll. 989-992) – including within this play an incestuous father who had died in disgrace and a mother who had hanged herself (ll. 61-66) – Antigone, through her role as her family's mourner, has closed out each family member's disgrace or suffering with an honor. Thus, her ambition in burying Polynices is nothing less than a final reversal of the entire history of misery and disgrace which has plagued her and the whole Labdacid line.

Therefore, to say that Antigone is possessed by death or that her singular devotion to her family is fanatical truncates her character and underestimates Sophocles' radical conception of the contribution of thought to character in action. The power of Antigone's thought invents a deed inconceivable to Creon and the Thebans.<sup>11</sup> Out of love, Antigone undertakes a courageous act heretofore exclusively reserved in Greek society for a man; she trades her death for the burial of a *philos* fallen in battle; she directs that loving action toward the honor of herself, her brother, and her family; thus, she tries to complete a reversal of her entire family's fortune. Antigone is not simply calling upon family loyalties as a political alternative to state structures, nor is she simply asserting her female prerogative in burying the dead. Rather, she is taking all of the manly battlefield activities and virtues which were traditionally assigned glory and honor by Greek society and men, and as a woman she is turning them toward the family and adopting every single one of them in an attempt to admit her loved one with full honor to the community of the dead. This far outdoes the oppositional thought of Creon which merely seeks to reorient Thebes to his throne for the sake of his own, personal safety. Antigone's character and thought are collapsing the distinctions in action, virtue, and relationships which traditionally separated men from women in the Athenian society for which this play was written.

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11. Creon's first response to learning of the burial is, "what man alive would dare?" l. 281.

## The Dynamics of Resistance and Defense

Resistance to this attempt to defend, honor, and love a family is not long to follow. She is attacked successively by Ismene, Creon, the Chorus, and, apparently, abandoned by Haemon. It would hardly be surprising if, in countering these attacks, she were to seem fanatically determined or, conversely, contentious, since she has only herself and argument available for her defense. Yet, Antigone's defense is neither an extreme pursuit of purpose nor part of a dialectic, but, rather, testimony to her strength of character and acuity in deliberation in the pursuit of honor and justice.

It has been said that Antigone "does not condescend to answer Ismene's arguments" after her sister's refusal to act (Knox, *HT*, p. 64), but, in fact, she answers Ismene point for point. When Ismene objects that Antigone would "bury him when a law forbids," Antigone counters with her firmamentum, the point above all else that she cannot give up and upon which all else is structured. The point is universal as well as particular to the sisters: "He is my brother and . . . your brother, too . . . [Creon] has no right to keep me from my own" (55-59).<sup>12</sup> Her point is justice.

Ismene continues the argument in three ways: (1) the family deaths have been horrible; stoning would be worse because it is reserved for criminals; (2) women must submit to men, not

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12. Later, Tiresias draws the same line for Creon: "you have no business with the dead," l.

contend with them, since their nature is to be ruled; (3) since suffering and nature conspire, following the law is compulsory; pardon can be hoped for from the dead (ll. 60-80). Resolving to act alone, Antigone rejoins that she will be well regarded by the dead and will have honored the divine laws which the gods, themselves, honor. Thus, she will have received glory through committing the “criminal” burial which is, nevertheless, sacred to the gods. Love from the dead follows from having recognized the durational weight of their claims. Since these benefits outweigh Creon’s death sentence, she is (1) clearly substituting her confidence for Ismene’s fear, (2) countering the criminal humiliation through the rewards of glory and love, and, thus, (3) submitting, that is doing what she ought for whom she ought. Consequently, she can ignore Ismene’s objections and proceed without her help.

This retort is the first expansion of the web of reasons for her brother’s burial. If, as Plato later argued, justice is “possession of one’s own and the performance of one’s own task,”<sup>13</sup> then the heart of that web is Antigone’s sense of justice. For Antigone, rewards follow just acts, and she expects her suffering to be less than her reward: “. . . even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory. / I will lie with the one I love and loved by him” (ll. 86-87). *In a very important sense, then, Antigone’s pursuit of justice will not be complete until she has received her reward. And, if she suffers more from Creon’s retribution than she expects, this will simultaneously attack both her sense of justice and the thought that guided its pursuit.* Hence, it is of no small moment whether Antigone’s expanding deliberations adequately guide her now and henceforth,

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13. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube; rev. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1992), 4.434a.

for her struggle with Creon *after* the burial belongs to Antigone's pursuit of justice as much as does the burial itself.

If Ismene pushed Antigone to defend her act, Creon's initial questioning attacks her character on grounds that since she knew of the law, she is at fault for its violation: "Creon: were you aware a decree had forbidden this? Antigone. Well aware... Creon: And you still had the gall [or 'dared'] to break this law?" (ll. 496-498). According to Creon complete knowledge is supposed to direct her compliance with his law, so she defends her character by arguing from knowledge of two competing laws. Since Antigone admits culpability under his law and accepts her sentence, she shifts the speech's form from a judicial defense to an encomium in order to counter the imputation of defiant lawlessness. She shows that one can calculate the authority of divine and human laws and punishment to see which law compels action. Essentially, Creon's decree fails for two reasons. First, it lacks an appropriate author. Since Antigone thinks of Zeus as capable of directing human events (ll. 3-5), and since she also believes in justice (ll. 29 and 501), one reason for following divine law is that it is issued by an authority who, unlike Creon, commands respect.<sup>14</sup> Second, Antigone thinks Creon's decree lacks the "force" of divine ordinances (that is, it does not "have the power," *dunasthai*, l. 503). It is futile and ephemeral, since a human decree cannot change the divinely ordained, eternal, and therefore natural behavior of burying one's dead. Further, Creon's power of enforcement is infinitesimal

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14. There is a debate whether Antigone's reference is to Zeus or Zeus Chthonios, see Knox, TTP.

compared to the god's retribution. Therefore, she "was not about to break these" traditions (l. 509).

Her argument about authority and force might seem to contradict the whole notion of defending one's character as a cause of correct action, for if force or authority compels, what part does character play in a decision? But force and authority are discovered by her calculative process and, in effect, Antigone demonstrates her character by reducing her decision to a cost/benefit analysis which determines action. In considering her decision, she reaffirms that "to die before [her] time / [is] a gain" (ll. 515-16) relative to the agonizing humiliation of failing to bury her family's last son. Contemptuous and unafraid of Creon -- "So for me, at least, to meet this doom of yours / is precious little pain" (ll. 519-520) -- she finishes her demonstrations by contrasting Creon's rash character to her own calculative nature: "I've been accused of folly by a fool" (ll. 524-525).

All of the rhetorical conditions for arousing Creon's anger are in play. Having come into the throne through the strife of the Labdacids, he seeks to inherit the loyalty of the elders of Thebes. In publicly announcing his decree, Creon goes to some length to present his character through the making of this law: fearless, principled in defending the city, willing to act on its behalf, capable of rewarding friends (Eteocles) and punishing enemies (Polynices), honoring patriots and loyalty, such as the loyalty he says the elders gave to Laius, Oedipus, and his two sons, before the civil strife. Creon is in some pain, fear actually; this was a moment when he desired to secure himself. But with Antigone's defiance, her argument framed as it is, and her insult, the *impulse* to revenge for three conspicuous slights is obvious. He feels the pain of

thwarted expectations of obedience and a swift resolution, as well as her indifference to what he thinks.

But, it is “worse” than this. Most scholars hold that public activities of the Athenian polis and Greek society were the preserve of men.<sup>15</sup> Consider how Creon receives Antigone’s speech. He has just finished decreeing in a public setting that no one was to touch Polynices’ body, which we have seen was a gendered-male act to rescue; he has been shocked to learn that what he assumes was a “man” (l. 281) dared to rescue *and* bury the body; then, he quickly conceived a conspiracy theory where his own guardsmen are suborned by “citizens.” Including his early address to the elders, his entire cast of mind surrounding his succession, decree, and discovery of its violation has been in accord with the idea that males are the agents in state or public affairs. Now he discovers through a soldier witness and by self-admission that his antagonist is a solitary woman who buried her brother. Moreover, Antigone even tells him that it was her adoption of the male responsibility for rescuing the corpse (as well as the female responsibility for burying it) that was part of her act: “But if I had allowed / my own mother’s son to rot, an unburied corpse – / that would have been an agony” (ll. 520-522).

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15. e.g., see Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zissner, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), vol. 1., p. 31; Victor Ehrenberg, *From Solon to Socrates; Greek History and Civilization during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 75-76; Michael Grant, *The Rise of the Greeks* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), p. 30; Bernard Knox, *The Oldest Dead White European Males and Other Reflections on the Classics* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1993), p. 26.

Rhetorical *topoi* provided by Aristotle for the character of *young men* suggest a line of thought in Creon's reception of Antigone's speech: about young men it is said that "while they love honor, they love victory more; for youth is eager for superiority over others...They have exalted notions, because they have not yet been humbled...they think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it", and that the pleasure of insolence is almost the province of young men (Rhet. II, 12, 1389a12-1389b7, 11; 2. 1378b 28). This fits the way Creon speaks about and weighs his antagonist, whom he finds "stubborn," "rebellious," prone to "pride," "insolent," and "laughing, mocking us to our face." But added to this is the shock of *a young woman acting as a young man in the public sphere*. So, he moves into the list, at once treating her as battlefield opponent, "I am not the man, not now: she is the man / if this victory goes to her..." (ll. 541-542) Knowing the humiliation reserved for the powerless vanquished on the battlefield, the shock over his opponent moves him from his initial decree which promised stoning to a resolve that she (and, for the nonce, her sister) will face the "most barbaric death" (l. 546).

Since her speech is a self-encomium, she is asking the Thebans to see her as she sees herself through her own actions, to give her glory and praise, if but "their lips weren't locked in fear" (ll. 561-565). That depends very much on her synthesis of male and female gendered roles. As her speech builds, the 'male' aspect of her action becomes more and more apparent to Creon. That is what he hears from her. For her part, Antigone reinforces this perception. The power of her intellect – calculative and quick-witted -- proudly leads an inexperienced young woman to a tragic mistake in provoking Creon to more punishment than she deserves. Thus, to taunt him is

a mistake, Antigone's *harmartia*, for her boast invites a personal retribution that aims to disgrace utterly the woman who, in her boldness, seems to act like a man.

The mistake runs deeper than simply inviting retribution for, ultimately, it gives Creon the means to her destruction. Antigone's calculation has severed the connection between divine law and loving character. Though burying the dead may have been an eternal tradition demanded by the gods and the threat of divine punishment may compel, the statement of those causes is not a statement of *the reason in the law* for its practice. And while the punishment of Creon inflicts may pale in comparison to the agony she feels over her beloved brother's exposure, her particular love is not *the reason in the divine law* for its practice. Far from a noble or principled speech, if there is a passage where Antigone's thought becomes severed from her character and the noble reasons for her action's performance, this is it.

Precisely because she does not explain why "Justice...would ordain" her act (ll. 501-502), but instead relies on authority and power to warrant it, the speech puts at risk her whole pursuit of justice. For if her "calculative" character can be shown to be in error, she can then be forced to see herself as a failure in her own terms. If Creon can devise a suffering which changes her confident judgment, "who on earth / alive in the midst of so much grief as I / could fail to find his death a rich reward?" (ll, 516-518), then he will have shown that her (mis)calculative character, not divine ordinances, brought her own suffering here and now. In short, if suffering breaks the connection between Antigone's act and reward, he triumphs.

### **Antigone's Suffering**

The punishment he comes to devise is appropriate to her whole character, for it attacks her calculation through her sense of honor and need for love. Before the elders of the entire community who Antigone incorrectly believes would praise her, Creon moves to isolate and dishonor her. First he places a wedge between her and the Chorus by forcing Antigone into a dilemma; if she admits – as she must – that Eteocles was her brother, too, then Eteocles should be honored by his sister above his enemy (ll. 575-576). But if honors are the same for both Eteocles and Polynices, then she is ignoring the enmity which killed Eteocles. Apparently cut off from any compelling reason for her act, she is left to defend it before the elders by simply asserting the gods' sanction, "Death longs for the same rites for all" and her own nature, "I was born to join in love" (ll. 584 and 590).

Having moved to isolate Antigone from the Thebans, Creon cuts Antigone off from Haemon's love. The literature disputes the manuscript attribution that "Dearest Haemon, you father wrongs you so!" is Ismene's reaction, for what seems at stake in the argument is a statement of Antigone's love for Haemon. But regardless of assignment, it is clear from Ismene's "What? You'd kill your own son's bride?" that, whether Antigone breaks into the dialogue or not, Antigone discovers not only has she "forgotten" Haemon, but Creon has the power to break their prospective family bond through death: "Creon. There are other fields for him to plow... A worthless woman for my son? It repels me" (ll. 641-645).

Two things are going on here, at once. First, a characteristic dramatic technique is being employed by Sophocles. Second, Creon has decided to use traditional gender roles, i.e., his

conception of men and women, and the love between Haemon and his future bride to punish Antigone.

Antigone's failure to speak of Haemon is not an indication of a character who is incapable of personal feeling or one who is obsessed with only one family. It is to be remembered that a play is acted continuously on a stage. The omission of Haemon in her calculations is part of a combination of Sophoclean dramatic practices that he used more than once. As Aristotle points out, where Sophocles confronts an improbability in his plot, he moves the circumstances offstage, as he (later) does with the murder of Laius in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (*Poetics*, 24. 1460a27-30). Thus, the audience will not be reminded until Jocasta attempts to sooth Oedipus with evidence drawn from Laius' murder (*OT* ll.787-790) of how improbable it is that the sharp-witted Oedipus would fail to connect the death of Laius to the confrontation Oedipus had with the man in the chariot at the three crossroads. At Jocasta's intervention the incident of the chariot is used with great effect to produce Oedipus' first fearful discovery that he may be guilty. The same happens here. Sophocles keeps every character, not just Antigone, silent about the engagement until Ismene attempts to save Antigone with her appeal to Creon. Antigone's discovery that she will lose her future husband is the first fearful sign that her death will be as barbaric as Creon desires, much as Oedipus' discovery signals the degradation he may come to suffer (*OT* ll. 919-923). Improbably, Antigone's discovery has been made for a woman whose attachment to family ties are as characteristic of her as are Oedipus' wits of him. As we will see, Antigone shortly after begins to feel remorse over losing a betrothed into whose family she never moved.

Creon's attempt to thwart any feeling for Antigone by Haemon twists some of the commonplaces of "gender-thought" evident in the quotation drawn from Pericles' "Funeral Oration" towards fashioning Antigone's final punishment. "Good sons" are capable of "pay[ing a father's] enemy back with interest / and match the respect their father shows his friend." (ll. 717-718). But the enemy is Antigone and so Creon goes far beyond Pericles' exhortation to (widowed) women to remain modestly unremarkable in public. For Creon, women are a deceitful "pleasure," Antigone a "loved one turned against" Haemon. Enlisting Haemon's loyalty, claiming that Anarchy is a feminine god (in Fagels), threatening the city and house of Creon, he finally shapes his appeal to Haemon in the direct contest between men and women which he perceived in response to Antigone's insult: "never let some woman triumph over us. Better to fall from power, if fall we must, / at the hands of a man – never be rated inferior to a woman" (ll. 758-761).

After Creon spurns Haemon's appeal to save Antigone, Creon revises the punishment, once again, to shatter any tie between bride and groom by making Haemon look powerless to help: "she'll die now, here, / in front of his eyes, beside her groom" (ll. 853-854). And when Haemon thwarts this intention by leaving, furious and frustrated, Creon then vows to "take [Antigone] down some wild desolate path / never trod by men and wall her up alive" (ll. 870-871). In sum, the series of punishments move toward making distinctions between men and women that would be absent in his punishment of a man – including punishing his son who was to witness but not share Antigone's punishment for disloyalty. Conversely, Creon's progression of increasing punishments for the violation of his decree form the difference between what

Antigone thought she would face and what she has come to face: threatened stoning (l. 42), execution (l. 640), and execution in front of her bridegroom (ll. 853-854). Then Creon reaches the maximum force he can bring to the destruction of Antigone's character. After Haemon leaves, the decision to bury her alive (ll. 870), novel in his view, is then capped by a "two-for." Before the Thebans, he synthesizes a mockery of her love as woman with a regret for her own, lonely death. To feel pity and horror over this attack, just ask what is the color of Antigone's dress when she returns for her final journey? The answer is white, for Creon has dressed her as a bride.<sup>16</sup>

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16. The assertion that Antigone is dressed as a bride and that Creon ordered this are, of course, probable conclusions based on the progression of punishments that he seeks. A decision to dress her as a bride is not only wholly consistent with the progression of punishments, it is consistent with his attempt to transfer Antigone's marriage from Haemon to Hades, the underworld. When Antigone asserts that she "was born to join in love," Creon replies that she should "Go down below and love ... the dead" (loved ones, *phileteon, philei keinous*, ll. 591-592.) When Ismene argues the "close bond" of Antigone and Haemon should dissuade him from the execution, Creon replies that the thought of "a worthless woman (*kakas...gunaikas*) for my son...repels me," (l. 644). He, then, synthesizes this formula with the idea of a loved one as he tries to persuade Haemon to give up Antigone, "I warn you...a worthless woman (*gune kake*) / in your house, misery in your bed. / What wound cuts deeper than a loved one who is turned against you (*philos kakos*)?" Immediately, he offers the alternative that Antigone should marry among the dead: "Let her find a husband (marry: *numpheuein*) among the dead" (ll. 725-730.)

From that statement to the dress and *pompe* of a mock wedding ceremony is hardly a big leap, especially when Antigone says "Look at me...I go to wed the lord of the dark waters," (ll. 900-908), and, shortly after, identifies her tomb with a bridal chamber, "O tomb, my bridal bed," (l.978). The Chorus speaks, right as she appears, of "Antigone mak[ing] her way / to the bridal vault..." (ll. 898-899). The idea that an unmarried woman might be buried in bridal regalia was known to Greek art by 470 B.C.E., for Lacey describes a *loutrophoros*, a jar "used to

Antigone's death-wedding lament begins in the awareness that she has lost her proper groom and marriage ceremony, and it ends with the absence of what the ceremony ought to produce: a friend, a *philos* or loved-one, who would mourn her death. In the play the word applies to blood relatives, to husband and wife, and to a betrothed. Ismene calls Haemon *philtate*, most beloved of Antigone (l. 645). When Creon warns Haemon of the betrayal of wives, he says, "What wound cuts deeper than a loved one (*philos*) turned against you?" The assignment of the "Dearest Haemon" line to Ismene should not be taken to indicate Antigone does not speak of Haemon because, in fact, she almost certainly does refer to him as a "loved one," a *philos*. In the context of speaking of her lost future marriage and children in her final speech, Antigone says that she is "deserted by loved ones" (that is, *philon*, plural, l. 1011). Since she hopes to be received by her dead family who she describes in that speech as *philo*i (ll. 985-988), she cannot feel forsaken or deserted by them. But she did feel left alone by Ismene: "You chose to live, I chose to die" (l. 626). The only figure who, then, can change "loved one" into a

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mark the tombs of those who died unmarried," where "a girl, crowned as if for marriage...is mourned by a relative," caption, pl. 26.

Further, a wedding dress would be consistent with Sophocles' attention to visual detail; Aristotle credits him with inventing scene painting, *Poetics*, 4, 1449a19. Of course, the mask of Oedipus, after putting out his eyes, would be only one of innumerable costume effects that Sophocles calls for. Nor is it an accident that Sophocles has preceded Antigone's departure by the technical *komos* of tragedy. Oakley points out that the wedding procession was preceded by a *komos*, p. 27. The veil with which she, eventually, hangs herself was also a fixed part of the ceremonial *pompe* that led from the bride's home to her new home at the groom's: see, Numa Denis Fustel de Coulange, *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Ancient Greece and Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1864, 1980, p. 37; see also, Jebb, pp. 216-217, l. 1222 n., and Oakley and Sinos, p. 16.

plural is Haemon, the betrothed *philos* who, along with the children he could have given her, would have mourned her death. So, when in her death-wedding lament Antigone comes to cry that “no loved one mourns my death” (l. 969), Creon and the Thebans have forced her to despair over not only the absence of her Labdacid family, but over the loss of Haemon, too.<sup>17</sup>

However, she does not feel despair at the *beginning* of this onslaught for the Chorus speaks against the path of attack that Creon has chosen: “But now, even I would rebel against the king (that is, “am carried beyond [Creon’s] laws (*thesmon*)” see Lloyd-Jones, l. 801 and Jebb p. 148, n. 801)...I fill with tears... [as] I see Antigone make her way / to the bridal vault where all are laid to rest” (ll. 895-899). Evidently, Antigone hears the Chorus, for in Greek she uses two of their words and plays upon the spectacle that they see: “Look (*orate*) at me...the god of death who puts us all to bed (*pagkoites*) / takes me down to the banks of Acheron alive...no wedding song in the dusk has crowned my marriage – / I go to wed” (ll. 904-908). Commentators such as Loreaux have argued the resemblance of the wedding procession to a sacrifice, wherein Hades becomes the bridegroom “who ‘leads [the virgin] off’” and, thus, the bride, Antigone, resembles

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17. Jebb (p. 110 n. 572) and H.D.F. Kitto in *Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and Hamlet* (London: Methuen & Co., 1965), pp. 162-163 make the case for attribution of “Dearest Haemon...” to Antigone. Nussbaum presents the Hegelian case against attribution and a personal feeling on the part of Antigone for Haemon, pp. 64 and 440, n. 42. In “Author, Author” *Philosophy and Literature* 20, 1 (1996), pp. 76-88, Bernard Knox discusses Sophoclean practice as it affects attribution of the line and seems to support Antigone’s indifference to Haemon’s love, see pp. 78-80. He would separate the meaning of “friend” from “blood relation” in Antigone’s use of *philos* in *HT*, 80-82.

Persephone.<sup>18</sup> But Antigone is more directive in her metaphor than that. Dressed in her gown and veil, she charges Creon with acting like Hades, like a god, in the rape of Persephone, denying her the joy that a real wedding celebration would give. Indeed, her words echo the personal responsibility he assumes in using force to seize and remove her to her tomb: “I will take (*agon*) her down some wild, desolate path,” while she in reply says, “the god of death (Hades)...takes me down (*agei*)” (ll. 870 and 905).

As a continuation of her earlier appeal to the Chorus, Antigone’s words *seem* to have the desired effect of, at least, garnering pity for her and blame for Creon’s act. The charge of impiety is serious, but the Chorus seems to ignore it. Why would a group of elderly men who, a moment before, stated their disposition to “rebel” against the sentence of their ruler, who have been appealed to through the very sight they remarked on, who have been called to see this “wedding” as a rape of a daughter – why would a group of men reject the charge that Creon is responsible for all this? Just before Antigone’s appearance, the Chorus blames Aphrodite for the breach between father and son, while recognizing her power conjoined to divine law (*thesmon*).

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18. Nicole Loreaux, in *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, trans. Anthony Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), comes close, as far as I am aware, to pointing out this staged literal use of a wedding dress. She says, “By killing herself...[Antigone] found *something like a marriage*...Sacrifices in tragedy illuminate the customary ritual in marriage whereby the virgin passes on from a *kyrios* (guardian) to another... Hence the tragic irony of those funeral processions that *ought to have been wedding processions*—those of Iphigenia and Polxena, and also Antigone. They are weddings in reverse in that they lead toward a sacrificer...toward the home of the bridegroom calle Hades,” [my emphasis] pp. 31, 36-37. It would seem from the emphasized phrases that while Loreaux sees the likeness of the funeral and wedding procession, she is not discussing the *purposeful, literal substitution by a character, Creon, of the one for the other.*

When the Thebans say that “even I would rebel against the king, / I would break all bounds when I see this... (or, in Lloyd-Jones, “am carried beyond all the laws” (*thesmon*)) they mean that since Aphrodite had provoked Creon to an act which is pitiful, they would rebel against the *law*. The point is not that Creon is guilty of impiety, but that Aphrodite through her agent Eros “wrench[es] the minds of the righteous (just, *dikaion*) into outrage (*adikous*)” (l. 888). But now the chickens come home to roost. That their king should be guilty of a crime, that they will not accept and so they blame the victim. Searching for a cause of this suffering, the Chorus reverses its sympathy in a wink and blames Antigone’s present state on her own self-governance (*autonomous*, l. 912).<sup>19</sup>

The reversal from Theban pity to blame begins the last assault on Antigone’s character. The attack shows how thoroughly Theban injustice ties suffering to gender. Isolated from her lover, with the elders rejecting her characterization of Creon, she has finally lost the very thing which Creon had worked earlier to undermine: the Theban elders’ approval and support. Seeing this, Antigone tries to recover by emphasizing her suffering; she compares herself to Niobe: “But think of Niobe...the legends say the snows will never leave her.../ wasting away” (ll. 919-21). Where a moment ago the Chorus blamed Aphrodite for Creon’s and Haemon’s actions, Antigone’s parallel backfires, for now the Chorus charges *her* with acting like a god in

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19. Knox has pointed out that the Chorus is “long-standing upholders of the government of the *polis*” in contradistinction to Antigone who seems to him to have “a devotion to Hades [which] gives her a religious sanction which is independent of the *polis*,” *HT*, pp. 115 and 99. If Antigone were only blaming Hades, then the Chorus would continue to sympathize with her, since aside from the charge of impiety on Creon’s part, there is nothing which has changed in her appeals from theirs.

attempting the comparison to Niobe.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, Antigone recognizes she has not only failed to achieve glory with them, but suffers their mockery and enmity. Struggling to resist this blow, she creates a new audience out of the Theban landscape's spirits. But to create that audience means that she must also state what pains her, nearly, the most: "unmourned by friends and forced by such...laws...I have no home on earth and none below / not with the living, not with the breathless dead" (ll. 937-942).

The Thebans will not even give her sympathy for her utter isolation. So doing, they show their completely conventional sense of blame and guilt. First, they synthesize their king's view of her character with their view of her impiety: "You went too far, the last limits of daring / smashing against the high throne of Justice" (ll. 943-944). Then, apparently unable to reconcile what they see with justice, instead of assigning her situation to Creon's injustice, they speculate that she is suffering for her father's ordeal. In this speculation Antigone comes to the completion of the disastrous consequences of her inexperience in weighing character and power when she first accused Creon of foolishness and claimed the Chorus would side with her (ll. 524-525, 562).

For, this speculation cuts the ground out from under Antigone for a final time: "There—at last—you've touched it, the worst pain / the worst anguish" (ll. 947-948). For a moment of complete despair, Antigone comes to believe that marriage in the "house of Laius" only destroys lives. It appears that she made no exchange of her life to reverse Polynices' or Labdacid

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20. In *Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1951), Cedric Whitman argues that Niobe's and Antigone's superhuman steadfastness is a Sophoclean "ideal...in affliction" and the grounds for the Chorus's attribution of divinity, p. 94.

dishonor, but that Labdacid “doom” (*postmou*, l. 949) has only increased her suffering: “I go now, cursed, unwed, to share [my parents’] home— / I am a stranger! O dear brother, doomed in your marriage ... you dying drags me down to death alive” (ll. 955-959).

Finally, in response to this anguish, the Chorus justifies its lack of pity by resolving its assignment of guilt: “Reverence asks some reverence in return —/ but attacks on power (*kratos*, rule with might) never go unchecked, / not by the man who holds the reins of power. / Your own blind will, your passion has destroyed you” (ll. 959-962). Reverent action should deserve praise, but she had no reverence for Creon’s real power. Instead, she attacked it. Hence, passion, not reverence for Polynices, destroyed her. She, not the Chorus, not Creon, is responsible for what they see. No one could state Creon’s position better.

The Chorus’ statement shows how confused thought leads to deep injustice. Without even realizing it, the Chorus comes to Antigone’s position that Creon was acting like a god when he dressed her for a bridal funeral. For, though the elders mean that neither fate nor the gods produced Antigone’s destruction, they substitute Creon’s power for their assertion, a few lines earlier, that divine Justice was offended (l. 944, above). Thus, they arrive at the notion that Creon, who has power (but not justice), should have been treated with the reverence one would give to a god. With this conclusion they accomplish Creon’s aim to make her suffering so severe that not even the gods could protect her: “Sister’s child or closer in blood / than all my family clustered at my altar / worshipping Guardian Zeus—she’ll never escape ...the most barbaric death” (ll.543-546).

No one could be more cut off from family or friends. In her isolation, Antigone has apparently failed in her own terms. Blamed – not glorified – by the Chorus, scorned and degraded by Creon, apparently abandoned by Haemon, seemingly mocked by fruitless efforts to honor her family, Antigone’s final lament that “no one mourns my death” marks the greatest extent of her suffering and our pity and fear for her. If her own despair over her family’s doom and the Chorus’ judgment of guilt are to be accepted, then she has acted without the divine sanction she supposed. And with her recognition that neither her lover nor her family mourns her, she momentarily finds that her character is insufficient to protect her from her own suffering. Indeed, she seems to have disastrously miscalculated her actions and her own strength, Theban approval, and Creon’s character and power. Helpless and alone, Antigone suffers undeservedly, for the offense she committed has not changed but, through her *hamartia* in misjudging Creon’s power and anger, her punishment has become far worse than the stoning she expected: “I am agony!” (l. 967).

### **III. Antigone’s Justice**

Reversing her despair to hope and, then, to righteous anger, her final speech follows. Through it, Sophocles and Antigone move us with pity towards admiration, something no Theban grants her. Moreover she moves us as she always does: through her force of mind and, ultimately, the adoption of the male-gendered act she started with.

The speech and its reversal have been attacked or defended on grounds that she (that is, Sophocles or an interpolator) sweeps away much of her previous thought or motives. Since

Goethe asked for someone to show that the speech was interpolated, criticism has centered on Antigone's statement that if she had been a mother or wife of a dead family member,

I'd never have taken this ordeal upon myself, ... What law

you ask, do I satisfy with what I say?

A husband [or child] dead, there might have been another...

But mother and father both lost in the halls of Death,

No brother could ever spring to light again.

For this law alone I held you [Polyneices] first in honor

(Fagels, ll. 998-1005; L-J ll. 905-914)

Jebb attacks the speech and finds the disputed section spurious because Antigone “suddenly gives up that which throughout the drama has been the immovable basis of her action – the universal and unqualified validity of the divine law” (p. 259). Whitman agrees that “a more disillusioning passage could scarcely be imagined” because “she begins to reason, in cold-blooded terms, about the relative value...of husbands, brothers, and sons...” and rejects it (p. 92). Nussbaum accepts the speech's genuineness, but calls it a “strangely ruthless simplification of duties” (p. 64).

Open defenders seem to turn the supposed narrowing of thought into a virtuous fault. Calling the speech a “fine” borrowing from Herodotus but a “frigid sophism” Kitto is unconvincing (p. 134). Kirkwood, along with Kitto, begs us to remember that Antigone is no

logician and that this speech is for the sake of a strong “contrastive effect” of pathos.<sup>21</sup> Lloyd-Jones finds the speech is an example of someone who is “rash and impetuous.”<sup>22</sup> Knox adopts Jebb’s position that Antigone gives up much of her claims for grounds of action. But he transforms this shearing into the retention of her most essential motive: “fanatical devotion... to [her family’s] most unfortunate member” (*TTP*, p. 49), that is, “her love for her dead family, not the family as an institution, a principle...The source of her heroic spirit is revealed, in the last analysis, as purely personal,... a passionate, almost irrational impulse” (*HT*, pp. 107 and 110.) Discussions of the law that she refers to turn on whether her speech does actually rely on a divine law commanding burial. If this is argued, she is seen to be prevaricating with or, at least, retreating from the more universal compulsion she argued earlier (Jebb, p. 295ff). Alternatively, her reference is not to divine law, but rather, in Knox’s words, “a private, irrational imperative” (*TTP*, p. 49).

Would Antigone agree that something has been lost in her speech? Frankly, I doubt it. So if she would not, let us try to understand the speech from her point of view. Antigone’s impending death is a consequence of all she has been brought through. Just as Antigone cries, “I am agony!”, Creon charges her with hypocrisy, “Can’t you see / If a man could wail his own dirge before he dies / he’d never finish” (ll. 969-970). Precisely at her worst moment, the man

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21. G. M. Kirkwood, *A Study of Sophoclean Drama: With a New Preface and Enlarged Biographical Note* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1958, 1994, p. 165.

22. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 2d. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 117.

who is entirely responsible for that agony displays the contempt for suffering which has marked him since the first moment that he declared his decree. That contempt provokes in Antigone the same response she has shown all along – a fight. And she does so by the means she has used so often – argument.

But to whom is she arguing? To Polynices? Surely. But the speech is a whole and when she says that to bury Polynices would be admitted as an honorable and good act by the wise (“decent” *phronousin*, l. 994), clearly she has in mind a wider audience for this speech though, perhaps, there is no one wise enough before her to hear it. So, since her typical argumentative move expands the audience, who then is this speech’s proper audience? Look to the speech’s purpose, for the audience must be moved to that purpose. Her purpose would be consistent with her character, and her character is one which never, except at the deepest moment of despair which she has passed, never gives up. That despair came about through her defense of family, brother, and self which she hoped others would side in. And the kinds of speeches she gave in the defense were commensurate with the forms of audience assent that she expected. From Ismene she wanted active help; from the Chorus she wanted approval and honor. Here, she wants Justice: “Very well: if this is the pleasure of the gods, / once I suffer I will know that I was wrong. / But if these men are wrong, let them suffer / nothing worse than they mete out to me – / these masters of injustice” (ll. 1017-1021).

This is a judicial speech by a prosecutor asking for a judgment of guilt and punishment before the last body that she can appeal to – the gods. The people on trial are the Theban elders

and Creon – “these men.” And since all of them stand charged with injustice, the only possible minds that could listen wisely to her would be those to whom she now goes.

The speech, then, begins with the tomb and bridal-bed because that is Creon’s offense. Knowing where she is going, Antigone finds the strength and confidence for her attack in the love she can expect from her family and the wisdom that her auditors have in being able to recognize, as no one in Thebes has, that she has acted honorably:

But still I go, cherishing one good hope:

my arrival may be dear (*phile*) to father,

dear (*phile*) to you , my mother,

dear (*phile*) to you, my loving brother, Eteocles– (ll. 985-988)

Put differently, this speech re-unites, re-constitutes the link of her thought, character, and act to reward and justice that Creon worked so hard to sunder.

Her love and confidence, then, impel her refutation of the Theban elders who had no sympathy for her and took her degradation as a sign of her blameworthiness. This refutation is point for point. She knows Thebes’ attitude; she is “reviled” (l. 983), but she can hope for love and justice from the immortals (ll. 985-987 and 1019-1021). She knows that Thebans think her irreverent; she never gives up her faith in reverence (ll. 1015-1016). They thought her culpable and powerless; she asks the gods to find them culpable of injustice and to punish them.

Her central refutation and the turning point of her speech is the famous disputed passage because that is where justification resides, the missing *reason of law* in her earlier speech before Creon. Previously, the Chorus charged her with being a law to herself, *autonomous*, and with smashing against justice in her daring (ll. 912 and 944). She *rhetorically* responds, “what law, you ask, do I satisfy with what I say?” Then she answers.

She has learned since she started her rescue of Polynices’ body how lonely and daunting her single effort against an army of citizens can be: “Never, I tell you, ... I’d never taken this ordeal upon myself / never defied our people’s will.” But she did take it on, *before* she knew what she now knows. So, since there were alternatives of acting or not, what decided her then, and what confirms her thinking now? Supposing herself married, as her ordeal has made abundantly clear could have happened, she would not have put herself *in the position to die* for a husband or a son because in both cases, *if she did so she would lose the ability to reproduce a family*: “A husband dead there might have been another / A child by another too, if I had lost the first” 1001-1002). But, at the same time, she *wasn’t married*, she had not yet taken the *pompe* from her birth house to her groom’s house.<sup>23</sup> So, instead, she put herself in the position to die and *then* faced all the added retribution, because with her parents gone, the Labdacid family’s ability to reproduce was over. Therefore, “no brother could ever spring to life again” (l. 1004).

Why is this statement actually an answer? To start, her reasoning is characteristic of her and was to become characteristically Sophoclean, as well. Antigone’s father, in *Oedipus*

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23. “The procession to the groom’s house...effects the literal and symbolic passage that transforms the bride and groom into man and wife.” Oakley, p. 28.

*Tyrannus, assumes the position of a son* for a man he thinks had none, in the pursuit of justice when the state had failed: “I will fight for him as if he were my father” (Fagels, *OT*, l. 301). So here. Her brother disgraced, her parents dead, “no brother could ever come to light again.” Who was left to act? Herself. Further, as always, Antigone’s reasoning involves a trade. What she knows now is that *she traded her future capacity to reproduce as wife and mother, for her present capacity to reproduce, to become “a brother”* that could spring to light to justly reverse Polynices’ disgrace:

For this Creon, the king, judges me a criminal...

And now he leads me off, a captive in his hands,

with no part in the bridal-song, the bridal-bed,

denied all joy of marriage, raising children—

deserted by loved ones,...

I descend alive to the caverns of the dead (ll. 1006-1012).

Antigone comes full circle to her original egalitarian act – rescuing her brother’s body, that male-gendered act that would have been performed best by a brother, that everyone would have recognized had she been a male. So what law would she have satisfied if she had been married and, then, had another child or husband? What same law would she satisfy by becoming a “brother” that did not exist? The law she satisfied in becoming a “brother” was so familiar that the Theban audience should have been able to supply it for themselves. Even her worst enemy – in both his decree and his appeal to her fiancé – knew it and used it. He knew it when he

attacked her family and when he tried to defend his authority: “A man prays for ... good sons— / a household full of them, dutiful and attentive / *so they can pay his enemy back with interest / and match the respect their father shows his friend (philon)*” (ll. 715-719). It was to match the respect that divine law and her love calls for that she “held [Polynices] first in honor” (l. 1005), that she rescued his body. She rewarded her friend, her *philos*, and, now, she seeks to punish her enemies.

Creon did not know that simple law tying human love of family to respect and honor was something more than an argument to protect his person and enforce his power. And he did not realize it applied to every family, not just his own son when he wanted that man to do his bidding. And, finally, he did not understand that it applied to every person, male or female. But Antigone, through the felt suffering of her family, knew it from the first: “the doom reserved for enemies / marches on the ones we love the most” (ll. 12-13). So, when Creon brings the maximum destructive force of the city to bear on her family, Antigone dares to take seriously what all men in the society would expect their sons to do: to protect that family’s honor from its enemies because they love their own: “And even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory. / I will lie with the one I love and loved by him — / an outrage sacred to the gods” (ll. 86-88).

Consequently, when Antigone calls upon the gods to make Creon and the Thebans who supported him suffer justice, she is not asking that any sentence make the law clear to them. They already know it. Rather, she is asking that her reward be vindication, that the sentence be a sign that she is right and that its justice be equivalent to what she suffered: “Very well: if this is the pleasure of the gods / once I suffer I will know that I was wrong. / But if these men are

wrong, / *let them suffer / nothing worse than they mete out to me – / these masters of injustice.*”

It is. After the gods’ spokesman and vindicator (in *this* play), Tiresias, directly countrmands Creon’s decree and Creon refuses his last chance to rescind his own orders, the justice is precisely an attack upon the king’s family, his own: “you will have surrendered / one born of your own loins, you own flesh and blood / a corpse for corpses given in return” (1183-85). And the justification of such punishment is precisely what Antigone complained of: Creon buries her alive and refuses to bury the body of Polynices.

The gods are supposed to receive a dead body from a friend. That body is to be dressed and treated, not with mockery, but with care. Its loss is to be mourned; its buriers pour wine for it give it food – all so that it will live well. The body is not merely sent to the underworld. It is longed for by Hades and received by Persephone and the dead. Why is this? Because as anyone who has ever loved a family member knows, humans are so valuable. A human body is a gift to the gods, and they demand that humans be treated with respect, with honor, with love.

Antigone knew that and she thought others should have recognized it as well. In various forms, both Pericles and the Athenian citizens knew that. So did Sophocles – for both men and women.<sup>24</sup>

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24. Many thanks to Eva Brann, Allen Speight, Dan Tompkins, and Steve Zelnick for careful and constructive readings of earlier versions.

A 2020 postscript: Laura McClure in an introduction to the collection of essays *Making Silence Speak: Women's Voices in Greek Literature and Society*, (Princeton University Press, 2001) notes that “as a rich source of representation of women, Athenian tragedy provides perhaps the fullest fictional account of women as speaking subjects, albeit subjects impersonated by male actors before a predominantly, if not exclusively, male audience...” (13). Sophocles, as an artistic inventor, then, imitated, made possible a world, an egalitarianism, and a woman that the audience watching this play might have been both moved to pity and felt most uncomfortable about. We in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> Century can still feel both of those emotions while viewing this play.