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2017

Mar 31st, 9:45 AM - 10:15 AM

At Death's Door: Unsuccessful Political Entreaties in Antigone and The Apology

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Grabow, Zoe, "At Death's Door: Unsuccessful Political Entreaties in Antigone and The Apology" (2017).
Critical Reflections. 5.

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I compare the positions of two iconoclasts on the brink of death, Antigone in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Socrates in Plato's *Apology*, as well as their motivations for addressing the public while facing execution, examining controversial lines from both works. First I assay Antigone's final lament, focusing on her statement that she would not bestow the same burial honors on a husband or child as she did for her brother (lines 967-970). This is followed by an analysis of Socrates' defense speech, focusing on his claim to be the wisest human living (23b). I study the contexts of age, honor, political astuteness, and the direct conflict between interests of the State and those of the individual, and I inspect the type and level of impact these have on the aforementioned speeches. I speculate that the human fear of death causes both Antigone and Socrates to temporarily put aside personal motivations and assume the interests of the State in order to sway their respective audiences. Finally, I show that the unflattering portraits Antigone and Socrates create of themselves are not the result of personal flaws but rather their inexperience with public appeal and their ultimate inability, amidst fear, to move the common people.

At Death's Door: Unsuccessful Political Entreaties in *Antigone* and *The Apology*

The lead characters in Plato's *Apology* and Sophocles' *Antigone* both draw a good bit of controversy: Socrates with his self-effacement in regaling his jury with the story of his gradual discovery that none was wiser than he in 23b, and Antigone with her infamous admission that she would care more about the honor of a brother than a husband or son in lines 967-970. Both Socrates and Antigone face the injustices thrown at them head on, alone in their heroic rightness against others who misunderstand and fear them. However, few would deny that both characters come off as unsympathetic during the aforementioned portions of these respective works. Many scholars have been quick to criticize their conduct, taking their troublesome words at face value. This paper intends a different approach, asserting that Socrates' defense speech and Antigone's last lament 1) prioritize public acceptance over sincerity and 2) fail from poor understanding of public address; the characters' sudden unsympathetic demeanor stems from poor self-representation rather than actual flaw of character. I shall first compare their approaches, and then I will show

how fear contributed to their contentious word choices that have alienated audiences for centuries.

First, it should be noted that Socrates operates as a character in *The Apology* and will be discussed as such. While it is widely agreed that Socrates was an actual historical figure, modern readers know him solely through written accounts of his dialogues—most famously those of Plato, his student. Because this paper cites a depiction of Socrates in a single philosophical/literary work, Socrates will be referred to as a character hereinafter.

Next, the well-known terms *oikos* (family/domestic sphere) and *polis* (political/public sphere) are introduced to highlight Antigone's presence in both arenas. As a woman in Ancient Greece, she acts from the *oikos* and is mainly preoccupied with it (Segal 14), given her priority of proper family burial over obedience of the law. However, certain elements of Antigone's final lament mark her as an occupant of the *polis*, as well.

For all of their similarities, Antigone and Socrates bear several differences in Sophocles' and Plato's portrayals of them. The most striking difference is age. Antigone and Socrates come from very different stages of their lives, with Antigone being very young and Socrates being very old. "For me it's noble to do/This thing, then die" she states coolly to Ismene in lines 87-88 (Sophocles 56). The driving force for her actions is honor, which is generally perceived as a mature quality. It is Antigone who decides to take matters in her own hands to ensure that her brother Polyneikes is buried and family honor upheld—even over the protests of her sister Ismene.

Yet certain remnants of Antigone's youth cling to her despite overall maturity. Antigone is sixteen years old or around that age (Sophocles 52), and she is prideful. She demands that Ismene tell people that she is burying Polyneikes (illegally), disregarding the

risk that this poses to her. And as soon as Ismene fails to support her actions, Antigone is done with her. "If you say that [burying Polyneikes is impossible], you will be hated by me," she says in line 110 (57). When Ismene, much later in the play, comes to Antigone's side and claims partial responsibility for the burial, Antigone is not receptive. "I don't like a loved one who only loves with words," she says in line 594 (77). Later on she seems to warm up to her sister's presence, even telling her "Save yourself! I won't resent your escaping," in line 604 (78), but she still remains distant. In the most flattering reading, this is to protect Ismene from punishment at the hands of the law. There also remains the possibility that Antigone was trying to protect her the whole time, that she only pretended anger to try to convince Ismene to go away. However, the vehemence with which Antigone demanded her actions be known to the public can hardly be ignored. Most likely, Antigone's motives are mixed: As creator of the tragic persona (Knox 3) Sophocles produced protagonists who are inextricably human, showing great capacity for caring for the right and wrong kinds of things... often simultaneously. This is due in no small part to their intense isolation, forced to act "in a terrifying vacuum, a present which has no future to comfort and no past to guide, an isolation in time and space which imposes on the hero the full responsibility for his own actions and its consequences" (5).

This manifests just as clearly in *Antigone* as in Sophocles' other tragedies. Clearly Antigone is distant in this second scene with Ismene. Her aloofness could be attributed to her pride, it could be attributed to a desire to protect her sister, or it could be attributed to both. In any case, if Antigone is distant to a family member about whom she likely cares more than a mass of strangers, it follows that she might be as distant (if not more) so in her last lament. The truth of her words therein is ambiguous at best. When she says that she

would not do for her husband or son what she did for her brother. Here Antigone is facing certain execution, which gives her at least one extra reason for saying this (if, like most humans, she has an aversion to death). Therefore, lines 967-970 should not necessarily be read as a true reflection of her motives.

Age comprises the main tension between protagonist and antagonist in *Antigone*, with Creon's ageist refusal to listen to Antigone or even Haimon, his son, simply because they are young. Therefore, age plays a notable role in the way the characters view not only each other, but themselves, within the work—with particular scrutiny over youth. Antigone is mature enough to know the full weight of honor, but she is also youthful enough to make the decision to rebel against the law to uphold her brother's honor, despite having no problems with the law otherwise (Sophocles 73). Creon, despite being the eldest of himself, Haimon, and Antigone, is the most prideful and least reasonable character, even called childish by his own son (85).

Age also turns up in *The Apology* as a major theme, with Socrates on trial for corrupting the youth. Coincidentally enough, Antigone is the poster child of corrupted youth—albeit self-corrupted—at least in the eyes of her elders. Socrates, similarly derided by elders (his contemporaries), is on trial because his fellow citizens see him as being an enabler of rebels. This alarmist accusation, attributing the promotion of godlessness and myriad other “false” ideas to Socrates (Plato 25), is a manifestation of Creon's sentiment: “There is no greater evil than lack of rule./This is what brings cities to ruin, it's this/That tears the household from its roots, it's this/That routs the broken ranks of allied spears!” (Sophocles 83). Just as Creon fears that Antigone's actions will create chaos in the *polis*, the Athenians fear that Socrates' actions will create chaos in young people's minds that will

lead to turmoil in the *polis*. Socrates is not young himself at this point, but he, like Antigone, must deal with the common people's expectations regarding how the youth are to be treated—essentially, what they are allowed to do and what they should and shouldn't be told. In much the same way, Antigone is punished harshly in accordance to Creon's idea of how rebellious youth should be dealt with. His polarizing stubbornness is more in line with how a child would respond, as Haimon points out during their argument.

Yet Creon is not the only character in *Antigone* to act childishly. Haimon and Antigone are the most mature characters in the play, although this doesn't stop them from exhibiting flashes of teenage/young adult tendencies that closer reflect their ages. Haimon, although levelheaded enough to begin with, kills himself over Antigone in a fit of passion. Antigone, as mentioned, is prideful and stubborn and listens to herself at the exclusion of all others. Antigone's youth is apparent throughout the play, and it lends her character a vulnerability that is more pronounced than it would be in an older character. When her vulnerability is considered alongside her dire circumstances, it is entirely plausible for her to lose her composure and say something—anything—she feels could save her. For that reason, it seems reasonable for Antigone to waver at the moment when everything she prepared for comes to fruition. This could be expected from any human being. From one so young, it could be expected tenfold.

As Antigone is being led out to her death, she is not completely calm. She notes with despair "Ah, I am laughed at!" in line 897 (Sophocles 91). Her whole speech at that point lacks focus—she leaves the present to launch into a story about someone who died at Mount Sipylus in line 883-93 (90-91) and thence recalls "my mother's disaster/of a marriage bed" in lines 921-22 (93), then begins to lament "Oh tomb! Oh bridal

bedchamber!” in line 951 (94), and from there says, to many readers’ chagrin: “I would never have assumed this burden,/Defying the citizens, if it had been/My children or my husband who had died/And had been left to rot away out there” (95). Thereafter she wavers in her faith in her actions, wondering if she still has the support of the gods—“And why/Should I, in my misfortune, keep looking to/The gods for help? To whom should I call out/To fight as my ally, when my reverence has earned me charges of irreverence?” she asks herself in lines 987-91 (95), lonely in her fate and stance. This is not the same confident Antigone who said, at the very beginning, “For me it’s noble to do/This thing, then die.” The gravity of death has finally hit her, now that she is being led to it. Her fear and realization bleed from the page. And the meaning behind these final words has been debated for centuries.

Again, while Socrates doesn’t share Antigone’s youth, he does share the state of being othered by the elders in his community. He similarly puts forward some unpopular—and even disturbing, judging by the reactions they generate—notions in *The Apology*. After Socrates shares the self-aggrandizing story of the Delphi oracle in 21a-23b, he seems to notice that his defense speech is not very well received. He has already had to tell the jury several times not to cause a disturbance over his story in 20e-21a (Plato 20-21). Before he tried to appeal to logic; now he attempts an emotional approach. He states that he will not bring his family to the trial to evoke sympathy, but he does draw attention to the fact he has family simply by stating it in 34d (31), performing a variation of the act he insists he will not do by bringing the *idea* of his family to the trial. This is later in the dialogue, after Socrates is well aware of the jury’s opinion of him from their unfavorable reactions. Again he has to tell them not to make a disturbance in 30c (28). Although Socrates claims that he

does not fear death in 29b (27), his behavior here reeks of desperation, the plea of one being unjustly persecuted. Indeed, these entreaties come shortly before he is convicted. He is an old man, he notes after the jury votes to sentence him to death in 38 c-d, close to the end of his life. This may be another appeal to the emotions of his audience. It may also be a personal manifestation of bitterness or disappointment, since there is now nothing he can do to save himself from being sentenced. Likely it also factors in that his life's work, his elenchus, has failed to save him.

Yet in a more quietly devastating way, this outcome does not surprise him in 35e (Plato 32). Socrates' first statement is that he is no speechmaker in 17d-18 (18-19). As always, he aims to tell the truth to the jury. And in telling the truth (as he sees it), Socrates digs himself further into trouble. In particular, his truth of being the wisest alienates the jury members and enables them to read Socrates' words as being inspired by false modesty and arrogance. There is a sense of disconnect between him and the jury convicting him, the same sense of disconnect permeating the eyes of many modern readers of *The Apology* who also see arrogance. Although Socrates is sincere, he comes across as insincere to the outraged jury. More than anything else he manages to present himself in a very unflattering light because he does not know how to communicate with the jury in a manner with which they are familiar, by his own admission.

Both works read remarkably well under dual disciplines, given the tragic elements Plato wove into *The Apology* and the depth of societal study and rhetoric Sophocles offered in *Antigone*; philosophical and literary elements turn up often in both. For example, despite the shortcomings in his defense speech, Socrates is clearly the wronged figure in *The Apology* as one falsely put to death, "[resembling] a tragic hero on the model of Oedipus"

(Howland 520). Many tragedy elements are present in *The Apology*, making it read very naturally like a tragedy. In particular, the final choruses of Greek tragedies often mention the gods. Plato does so near the end of the dialogue, writing that “a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods” in 41d (Plato 36). Antigone, of course, stated something quite similar near her death, that if she was right, the gods would be on her side.

Antigone, too, is sentenced to death, and there is a very similar sense of disconnect between her and Creon and the law-abiding public. No one buried Polyneikes alongside her, after all. Only Haimon seemed to understand and support her, even though he didn't actually help her. (And, given his impassioned suicide later on, it could easily be argued that he cared blindly for Antigone without regard to her cause.) So Antigone, again, is completely alone in her fate. Her odd, callous-sounding admission in lines 967-970 runs parallel to Socrates' various blunders that resulted in him further alienating himself. One interpretation of the play by Martin Cropp quite astutely starts by pointing out that it's useful to think of Antigone's final lament as being to the people, since she is being led through throngs of people en route to her death. This obviously influences the way she is speaking and the purpose behind her words. As Cropp points out, “[...]the whole speech is shaped rhetorically as a public address. Antigone is stating a position, not merely pondering her fate” (Cropp 139), similar to Socrates' carefully-assembled defense speech. Her appeal, as with Socrates', mixes approaches. Her logical appeal lies in her claim: “Were my husband dead, there could be another,/And by that man, another child, if one/Were lost. But since my mother and my father/Are hidden now in Hades, no more brothers/Could

ever be born” in lines 972-6 (Sophocles 95). This statement is explored further in the following paragraph.

The inclusion of societal rhetoric is intrinsic to any public address as such, unless the speaker doesn't care about the outcome or make any attempt to identify with audiences. Since both Antigone and Socrates are facing death, it follows that they do care about the outcome and, therefore, do attempt to identify with audiences however much they bungle things in the process. For the whole play, Antigone has been fighting the “the public law of the State and the instinctive family-love and duty towards a brother” (Segal 3): in other words, the tendency of Greek law to value the individual citizen mostly insofar as (s)he contributed to society through the creation of a family, participating in wars, etc. Creon, and the *polis*, would have Antigone obey the law and forbear from burying Polyneikes because he was seen as a traitor to the State (7). Antigone, instead, follows her individual interests and the interests of family honor—a quality with which the *polis* is not all too concerned, except perhaps where that honor is of use to the *polis* through military valor or the like. This is what makes Antigone's deviance in 967-970 so jarring: by identifying a husband and son as replaceable, as she immediately proceeds to do in lines 972-6, she is reflecting the disposition of the *polis*. For her to limit her interest to a single type of family member and so clearly articulate *polis* interests is disturbing and inconsistent with her previous concerns.

However, there are many reasons for Antigone to do so. No doubt contributing is the fact that she has neither married nor given birth, relegating a husband and son to distant ideas rather than concrete identities such as Polyneikes (a brother she actually knew and loved) embodied. As a child herself, Antigone would find it difficult or impossible to

conceive of caring for figures who do not yet exist in her life—and anticipate doing the same for them as she did for Polyneikes. And because lines 972-6 stick out so sorely, they seems more “positional,” to borrow Cropp’s words, than anything else in the lament. Other interpretations have picked up on this and speculated that it is death, becoming the wife of Hades (Segal 28), that causes Antigone’s thoughts to turn from the family to the *polis*—and to husbands and sons as contributions to the *polis* (Papadopoulou 154). Antigone discusses death and marriage in her final lament. However, she returns to the present situation to note that she is laughed at and to wonder about her standing with the gods. Given this, and given the interpretation of this lament as a public address, it might seem also that *life* is her prime motivation for these words. This doesn’t necessarily indicate that Antigone wants to live, but at the very least she realizes finally that she is going to die. Perhaps she wishes for a few good things to improve the quality of the last few minutes of life she has: she wants sympathy or understanding, a bit of time wherein she is not alone before she is dead. And so when Antigone turns to the interests of the *polis*, it may sensibly read as an attempt to get sympathy from bystanders—who are still likely jittery from Polyneikes’ attempted invasion of Thebes (Sophocles 127). Again, Antigone is alone in her actions and fate, and her stoic faith in her actions wavers when she questions the utility in continuing to turn to the gods for help.

This wavering proves contagious, not limited to youth. Even as a seventy-year-old man (Plato 19), Socrates shows signs of weakness and fear in *The Apology*. To assume that Antigone never vacillates between self-assuredness and vulnerability as a teenage girl, after being twisted along a similar fate, is grossly unrealistic, especially with her more childish stubbornness and pride displayed so prominently in the narrative. Audiences

overwhelmingly find Antigone sympathetic, and therefore glossing over the problematic section of 967-970 becomes a palatable option for many. But this is not prudent, not when it can provide valuable insight about her character and humanity. Sophocles may well have created a martyr in Antigone, but even more than that he created a victim, a realistically scared teenage girl.

There are inherent similarities between the plights of Antigone and Socrates in *Antigone* and *The Apology*. Both are accused of breaking the law—Antigone for burying Polyneikes against the King's orders, which she did, and Socrates for corrupting the youth, which he didn't—and both are sentenced to death for it. Both otherwise sympathetic rebels come off as unsympathetic in portions of the literature. However, these are wise, stately heroes whose less sympathetic moments bring nuance to their characters. Socrates and Antigone, in facing some horrible odds, became apprehensive and employed ineffective communicative methods in their entreaties for help and sympathy. With this understanding, their humanity glimmers from the page. Such characters, even at the threshold of death, have never looked more alive.

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