

## ESSAI

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Volume 7

Article 25

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4-1-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Johnson, Graham (2009) "Sophocles' *Antigone*: Tragedy as Satire?," *ESSAI*: Vol. 7, Article 25.  
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol7/iss1/25>

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## Sophocles' *Antigone*: Tragedy as Satire?

by Graham Johnson

(Honors English 1101)

Is it possible for a tragedy to be satirical? Sophocles' play, *Antigone*, is considered a tragedy, and for good reason. It contains appalling actions and cataclysmic consequences. Lives are devastated, and many of the characters have expired by the end of the play. However, upon leafing through the story more carefully, you find a cynical view of the traditional and accepted ways of Greek life. If you are acquainted with Sophist/Aristotelian moral philosophy and you take a careful look at the play from a distance, the outline of a satire becomes apparent. It can then be concluded that Sophocles used a tragedy to make the case for his moral philosophy. I believe the play was not intended to be overtly satirical, but the elements of one are evident. By presenting the characters in the play at the extremes of emotion and action, Sophocles crafted *Antigone* as a tragic satire to make viewers of the play consider how moderately and virtuously they lived their lives.

In his great treatise, the *Poetics*, Aristotle outlines his definition of tragedy as it refers to the realm of literature and arts. He declares that:

Tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is heroic, complete, and of a certain size, in language embellished with all kinds of ornaments, each used separately in the different parts of the play, in dramatic, not narrative form, and accomplishing with pity and fear the catharsis of these emotions (Battin 294).

Sophocles was a close contemporary of Aristotle, and would have been intimately acquainted with this codification of tragedy. *Antigone* is a tragedy closely modeled after this definition promulgated by Aristotle. From this definition, we can infer that tragedy is designed to release (cleanse or purify) emotion from the audience in order to bring reason and rationality back into their minds. This dovetails nicely with satire, because satire is a tool of criticism, often used to alert people to corruption and foolish things. We will see next how this ties into Sophocles' intent for this play.

Both Sophocles and Aristotle held to the same moral philosophy of virtue ethics, which is underpinned by a rule commonly called the "golden mean" (Cunningham 6). The golden mean is in essence the idea of moderation - that virtue is found between two extremes. Stanley B. Cunningham states that:

Aristotle's moral philosophy is sometimes referred to as virtue ethics and is based on the theory of the golden mean. He believed that virtue lay between the extremes of excess and deficiency... For example, courage is the middle ground between cowardice and foolhardiness. Pride is the mean between vanity and humility. (6)

Sophocles was also the proponent of the philosophy that "man is the measure of all things." That is, man himself is adequate to determine what is good (virtue) and to be self-sufficient without exterior help (i.e. from the gods). The impact of his viewpoints is evident in the play that he crafted. He portrays negative consequences for those who live at the extremes, believe in the fickle gods, or adhere to forms of non-democratic government (tyranny, etc...). Those who stray from but return to the principles of reason and virtue are saved, but those who are steadfast in their passions and causes perish. Sophocles' intent with *Antigone* was to urge people think and challenge the old norms and traditions around them.

The antithesis of Sophocles' philosophy is the lead character that he created, Antigone. She is a child born into a cursed family and is a rebel by circumstance and choice. Her name literally means "born against," and she lives up to it (Woodruff xvi). The reason for her passion in the play is the

prohibition by Creon, her uncle and the ruler of Thebes, to bury her treasonous brother, Polyneices. She is a ardent believer in the old gods, and believes that the unwritten laws of the gods and of justice prevail over any rule that man can make:

What laws? [referring to Creon's edict not to bury Polyneices] I never heard it was Zeus who made that announcement. And it wasn't justice, either. The gods below didn't lay down this law for human use. And I never thought your announcements could give you-a mere human being-power to trample the gods' unfailing unwritten laws...they live for all time... (Sophocles 450-458)<sup>1</sup>.

One of the reasons for Antigone's demise in the play is that she constantly lives at the extremes of behavior. She believes that the gods have cursed her family, and as a result thinks she must pay the debt to Zeus for her father's missteps (Sophocles 2-3). This is why she throws all her being into this crusade for her dead brother; she thinks that she is destined to die, and in her mind, and it would be best to sacrifice herself for a worthy cause. Simply put, Sophocles mocks her as deluded. The Chorus in the play supports this interpretation, advising Antigone that "You've gone too far! You are extreme, impetuous. My child, you caught your foot and fell..." (Sophocles 853-854). Antigone has clearly not kept on the virtuous path, straying from the ideal of the golden mean, and living at the extremes of emotion and action. Sophocles satirically illustrates her unpredictability and volatility, and almost makes her seem unstable at times. However, is there something in her that we can admire? Indeed - her resolve in the face of death and despair is laudable. She is noble and passionate, making her characteristics almost covetable. In critiquing his own philosophy, Aristotle even said that some values and virtues are not conducive to the compromise required by his philosophy (Cunningham 6). And I think this is the case with Antigone. She portrays qualities that are rarely seen in one person, but in the end she is too much for herself and is overcome by her own emotional volatility, like a volcano, ending her life in cowardly fashion rather than suffering.

Creon, the ruler of Thebes, was a reasonable man, but has become tyrannical in recent times. His edict that prohibits the treasonous Polyneices from being buried ignites a family struggle that essentially pits everyone else against him. Before this situation arose, Creon had not been particularly headstrong. He had frequently listened to the wisdom of Tiresias, the blind prophet, when making decisions (Sophocles 993-995). He consulted with others and asked their advice. However, in an unwise move, he decrees that Polyneices should not be buried at all because he had committed treason, leading a foreign army against Thebes. In Athens, Sophocles' city, it was lawful to forbid the burial of traitors in Athenian territory. This provision then allowed for the burial of traitors outside of Athens. Similar laws existed in the other city-states, like Thebes, as well (Holt 663). The Athenians watching the performance of *Antigone*, then, would have been familiar with this law. Creon, however, orders that Polyneices cannot be buried anywhere, and that he should lie exposed where he fell, to be ravaged by the birds and dogs. This order goes far and above the limits of the law and of reason, and ignites the passion of Antigone. Creon has just taken his first step in becoming a tyrant - he believes that he is the absolute authority, and that people should blindly follow him, whether his commands are right or wrong (Sophocles 663-667). Sophocles ladles some of his most scathing criticism on Creon (and tyrants in general) throughout the play. He exaggerates their vices and shows their blatant stubbornness. Creon's inflexibility is illustrated when Haemon, his son, and the betrothed husband of Antigone, confronts him and tries to convince him that he must bend, and allow Polyneices to be buried:

Don't keep on saying that this, and nothing else, is right... You've seen trees tossed by a torrent in a flash flood: if they bend, they're saved, and every twig survives, but if they stiffen up, they're washed out from the roots (Sophocles 712-714).

Haemon appeals to Creon that he must come back toward the mean of wisdom from the extreme of power; otherwise he will fall, just like a tree. Before this conversation, Creon had decided to kill Antigone by sealing her in a cave, and even after this passionate plea by Haemon, carries

through on his plans, only to have a change of heart soon after giving the order. He hurries to the underground chamber, only to witness a grief stricken and raging Haemon end his life at the feet of Antigone, who had hung herself not moments before. These events, along with the grief-motivated suicide of his wife, break Creon, bringing him back to moderation of virtue. He finally bends, and is saved. He admits that these senseless deaths were the fault of his “bad judgment” and the “sins of a stubborn mind” (Sophocles 1269, 1261). He is humbled by his experiences and comes away better for it. For the majority of the story, Creon had not been a virtuous ruler, but Sophocles showed that it is possible to return to a virtuous life - all hope is not lost. Through the tragedy and satire, hope shines through.

The tragical aspects of *Antigone* are undeniable. Sophocles, however, did not just want the viewers of his play to walk away in tears – he wanted them to think about the views and choices of the characters. And that is where the satire enters. He used satire guised as tragedy to stir the audience to thought and awaken their minds to the benefits of his philosophy. Sophocles’ masterful playwriting makes it clear that if people continue to believe in and practice the old ways of life and do not live in moderation, dire consequences are inevitable. However, once the audience realizes their mistakes, he doesn’t leave them hanging. He shows them a way out, a life preserver. He demonstrates that no matter how far to the extremes you have gone, redemption is possible.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>As this play is not divided into distinct acts and scenes, the play will be referenced using line numbers.

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