

Tyranny and Legitimacy of Civil Disobedience in Sophocles' Antigone

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Abstract

Sophocles' Antigone warns the readers about the dangers of tyranny and the importance of heroic resistance to arbitrary and unrestrained exercise of power. In defending the citizens' right to dissent and protest against an unjust law, the protagonist Antigone upholds the basic democratic ideals of free speech, free association and open access and participation in public affairs in absence of which a democratic polity would regress into tyranny. The paper argues that in today's world, the need for such resistance and protest has become even greater since democratic ideals and principles have increasingly come under threat from autocratic and authoritarian regimes. The paper shows that the questions the play raises are as relevant today as they were in their own time: Is the citizen dutybound to uncritical obedience to an unjust and arbitrary law? Under what circumstances can one refuse to obey a government or a law? What makes an ideal citizen – one who acquiesces in and abides by everything the established power dictates or one who protests against whatever violates the principles of justice?

Keywords: Sophocles, Creon, Antigone, Ismene, tyranny, civil disobedience, rule of law

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INTRODUCTION

“Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God.” Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin had proposed it as a motto to be inscribed on the seal of the United States. This idea runs deep into the history of western political thought, but surprisingly enough the earliest reference to this idea occurs not in political treatises or debates but in a literary text. In some ways, it was the literary text which gave rise to the debate and subsequent

political formulations concerning this idea. The text in question is a fifth century BCE play Antigone by the famous Attic playwright Sophocles in which the eponymous heroine invokes the divine law to protest against the unjust decree of the tyrannical king Creon. Her act of protest leads to the reform of unjust law even as it results into her death. In her death Antigone emerges as a great heroine of resistance and ever since she is regarded as a prototype of civil disobedience.

Sophocles warns us about the dangers of tyranny or arbitrary and unrestrained exercise of power and the importance of heroic resistance to such exercise of power. The play brings into sharp focus the issue of rule of law, the conditions for its moral legitimacy and the right of a citizen to disobey and defy an unjust and arbitrary law. By pitting natural or divine laws against man-made laws Sophocles essentially makes a distinction between the Rule of Law and rule by law. In the case of the Rule of Law, law is product of public deliberation, subject to the test of public morality and rationality and is characterized by openness, generality, equity, fairness and justice. Whereas in the case of rule by law, law is the source of its own legitimacy and authority and is characterized by arbitrariness and lack of accountability. It can thus be easily turned into an instrument of power in the hands of authoritarian rulers to control their subjects. Most tyrannies resort to rule by law. According to John Finnis, “a tyranny devoted to pernicious ends has no self-sufficient reason to submit itself to the discipline of operating consistently through the demanding processes of law, granted that the rational point of such self-discipline is the very value of reciprocity, fairness, and respect for persons which the tyrant, ex hypothesi, holds in contempt” [1].

In the play, Antigone demands the restitution of the Rule of Law in place of rule by law. She claims that a law is binding only insofar as it satisfies the demands of public morality and ethics. In defending the citizens’ right to dissent and protest against an unjust law, she upholds the basic democratic ideals of free speech, free association and open access and participation in public affairs in absence of which a democratic polity would regress into tyranny. She undelines the need for public

scrutiny of institutions of governance to make them accountable.

In today’s world, the need for such vigilance and resistance has become even greater since democratic ideals and principles are under threat the world over. We are witness to the rise of right wing politics in different parts of the world which increasingly betray authoritarian and autocratic tendencies. More worrisome is the fact that even the so-called cradle and beacons of modern democracy, in which the democratic systems were believed to have been firmly rooted and entrenched, too have caved in to the onslaught of authoritarian forces. From Donald Trump to Boris Johnson to Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Narendra Modi, the story seems same everywhere. Declaring democracy and pluralism to be under assault, Freedom House, a nongovernmental and nonpartisan institution which conducts an annual survey on the health of global democracy in its latest report of 2020 claims, “Today, as authoritarians fortify themselves at home and extend their international reach, and as some elected leaders adopt a myopic, self-serving, and discriminatory view of their official responsibilities, the world is becoming less stable and secure, and the freedoms and interests of all open societies are endangered. The tide can be reversed, but delay makes the task more difficult and costly” [2].

Given the challenges, the need to stand up for one’s fundamental democratic rights has become even greater and more urgent. In times like this, it is always worthwhile to revisit past works like Antigone which hold important lesson for us and could prove to be a valuable resource in the fight against tyranny.

SOURCES OF ANTIGONE MYTH AND SOPHOCLES' CONTRIBUTION

The story of Oedipus and his children is thought to have originated in Mycenaean folklore. There is reference to Oedipus myth in Homer, Hesiod and Pindar but there is either no mention of Antigone or at best only a fleeting mention. The earliest source of this story seems to be now lost Theban cycle of post-Homeric epics written between 750-500 BCE. The most famous of them were Oedipodea and Thebaid whose stories later Greek playwrights drew on. Oedipodea attributed to Cinaethon probably deals with the story of Oedipus answering the riddle of the Sphinx and his incestuous marriage to his mother. Thebaid, which is of uncertain authorship, deals with the story of the feud between Oedipus' two sons Eteocles and Polynices and their killing each other. However, there is no mention of the denial of burial to the corpse of Polynices. According to R. C. Jebb, "The refusal of burial was evidently an Attic addition to the story.... If Creon's edict, then, was an Attic invention, it may be conjectured that Antigone's resolve to defy the edict was also the conception of an Attic poet" [3]. The earliest reference to the edict against burial and Antigone's resolve to defy the edict occurs in Aeschylus' play *Seven against the Thebes* (the last and only surviving play of his Oedipus trilogy, Laius and Oedipus being the other two) produced in 467 BCE for the annual Dionysian festival. At the end of the play a messenger appears and announces the edict by the Council of Thebes prohibiting burial of Polynices and Antigone declares her intention to defy the edict.¹ The play ends there.

¹However, some critics dispute this ending as later interpolation. They claim that the play originally ended with the chorus mourning the death of the two brothers and the present ending was added some fifty

Sophocles' *Antigone* takes off from where Aeschylus' *Seven Against the Thebes* ends and Antigone's story is fully developed for the first time by Sophocles. At least the incidents relating to Antigone's defiance, the confrontation between Creon and Antigone, and the subsequent tragedy leading to the death of Antigone, Haemon and Euridyce are Sophocles' addition to the existing myth. The play was composed and performed at the annual Dionysian festival in Athens around 442 BCE.² Later Euripides also wrote a play *Antigone* which is lost save a few fragments. His play is believed to have a happy ending. Euripides also wrote another play *Phoenissae* (*The Phoenician Women*) around 408 BCE in which he presents a different version of Antigone myth.

The story in Sophocles begins a day after Antigone's brothers Eteocles and Polynices were killed in a duel during the siege of Thebes. As per the custom, Creon, being the nearest male kin alive, has become the king. He declares Eteocles a patriot and Polynices a traitor, and accordingly orders the burial for Eteocles and forbids the same for Polynices with his corpse left exposed to prey to dogs and vultures. The punishment for defying his edict is stoning to death. Claiming a fundamental moral obligation to bury her brother, she resolves to defy Creon's edict and seeks the help of her sister Ismene. But when Ismene declines to help out of fear of punishment, Antigone does it alone and performs symbolic burial of the body. After a brief confrontation with Creon, she is

years after the death of Aeschylus in the wake of the popularity of Sophocles' play *Antigone*. Even if one accepts the present ending, the fact remains that Aeschylus' play ends with Antigone's declaration of her intent to defy the edict and it does not present her subsequent act of defiance, her punishment and the ensuing tragedy resulting into the death of Creon's wife and son as well as Antigone. √

² There is no consensus among the critics regarding the exact year of its composition and staging at the Dionysian festival in Athens.

condemned to death. Her fiancé and Creon's son, Haemon hears of the sentence and intercedes with his father but to no avail. Soon after the blind Tiresias appears and warns Creon about the displeasure of the gods due to denial of burial to Polynices. He leaves after prophesying that the adamant Creon will have to pay for this impiety to gods with the death of his own son. Fearing the prophesy of Tiresias, Creon relents on the advice of the Chorus and he decides to free Antigone and perform the burial rites of Polynices. But by that time it is too late. Antigone has hung herself, Haemon kills himself upon seeing Creon, and Euridyce, Creon's wife commits suicide when she hears of Haemon's death. Completely broken and in despair, Creon prays for his own death.

CREON'S TYRANNY

As per the earliest usage, the term tyrant did not mean a despotic or oppressive ruler but a usurper, someone who has illegitimately occupied or captured power. It did not imply just or unjust ruler, but an illegitimate ruler. Later on the term was used in a neutral sense for king or monarch. The term acquired its present meaning with Plato and Xenophon. For Plato, the tyrannical regime is unjust, in the service of the perceived interest of the ruler, and it is essentially violent. Of the six forms of government that Aristotle talks about, he considers tyranny as the worst. Calling it a perverse form of monarchy "which has in view the interest of the monarch only," he declares, "This tyranny is just that arbitrary power of an individual which is responsible to no one, and governs all alike, whether equals or better, with a view to its own advantage, not to that of its subjects, and therefore against their will. No freeman, if he can escape from it, will endure such a government" [4]. Hobbes's

political theory was implicitly a doctrine of tyranny. His account of the ideal Commonwealth, which is governed by an absolute authority with immense arbitrary power, is like a tyrannical or despotic state. His absolute sovereign, Leviathan, is answerable not to the citizens or subjects but rather to itself, that is above the rule of law and has almost unlimited controls over the lives and bodies of its subjects. In his classic *Two Treatises of Government* John Locke defines tyranny as "the exercise of power beyond right, which nobody can have a right to; and this is making use of the power any one has in his hands, not for the good of those who are under it, but for his own private, separate advantage" [5]. According to the *Encyclopedie*, "today by tyrant one understands, not only a usurper of sovereign power, but even a legitimate sovereign who abuses his power in order to violate the law, to oppress his people, and to make his subjects the victims of his passions and unjust desires, which he substitutes for laws" [6]. In other words, tyranny is an arbitrary rule or rule by mere ipse dixit to serve only the interest of the ruler; it is violent and oppressive; and it uses coercion and intimidation as instruments of power instilling fear in people.

Sophocles uses the word tyrant or tyranny in six of his tragedies. Mostly he uses the term in a neutral sense to mean an absolute monarch and only occasionally does he use it negatively. In *Antigone* he employs the word four times, and every time he uses it negatively and in the modern sense of a tyrant. Firstly, Ismene uses the word for Creon when she warns Antigone of the risk of defying the tyrant's decree: "Consider again how we, the sole surviving kin, how we shall both be ruined, yes, in misery, if we run counter to the vote and power of a king [tyrant]" [7; ll. 58-60]. A

second time, it is used by Antigone during her confrontation with Creon: "And all the people here would say this crime did please/ them too, if only terror did not lock their silent lips./ But the king [tyrant] is blessed with many fine advantages, not least/ of which is his capacity to speak and act just as he likes" (504-507).

In both instances, Creon's rule is associated with arbitrary exercise of power and fear that it instills in people. A third time, Tiresias uses the word when he accuses Creon that tyrants and their descendants love ill-gotten gains: "The spawn of tyrants always hankers for ill-gotten gains" (1056). In this instance tyranny is associated with power and wealth acquired fraudulently. And lastly, the messenger towards the end of the play delivers a homily that he does not wish for a pompous life like that of Creon since it leads to unhappiness: "...I cannot count his life worthwhile,/ but rather think of him as mere animate flesh, a corpse./ For a man may be as vastly rich at home as you like,/ and live the life and style of a king - but if a man's capacity/ for joy in these is lost, well, as for ceremony, I would/ not give the king a shadow of a price for all of that" (1166-1171). In this last instance, it is suggested that despite his wealth and power a tyrant leads a wretched life. Therefore, the life of the tyrant is undesirable.

Commenting on the Sophocles' portrayal of Creon, C.M.Bowra says, "he shows traits of tyrannical arrogance. These have led him to his wrong judgment in refusing burial to Polynices. As the plot develops, Creon's faults also develop. He becomes more tyrannical, more unreasonable, more convinced that he is right and that everyone else is wrong. The play gives a rich study of such a man" [8]. In fact, Creon betrays all the characteristics which one typically associates with a tyrant or tyrannical

rule: autocratic and willful, arrogant demanding absolute obedience, intolerant of criticism or opposition, paranoid and suspicious, violent, oppressive and cruel, and cunning and manipulative.

Creon's autocratic and willful temperament becomes evident immediately upon his becoming the king when he passes the edict denying burial to Polynices. This edict is arbitrary, unjust and devoid of morality and reason. A law in order to be fair and just has to be based on elements of reciprocity, not on mere command and obedience. Creon's edict is essentially self-serving, designed to consolidate and reinforce his power and authority. In the name of *raison d'état* Creon uses this edict as a measure to test the political loyalty of the citizens and to make them submit to his authority. This edict is not only in contravention of the bonds of kinship which the ancient Greeks held very dear and by virtue of which Creon had become the king in the first place but also of the civic life of the polis. Civic life requires active involvement and participation of citizens in the affairs of the political community. Decision-making is collective or at least based on wide consultation among the members of the community for the government belongs not to one or few, but to many. Everything is decided through reason and persuasion, and not through coercion and intimidation. In other words, there is a clear distinction between rule-by-force and rule-by-consent. But in the case of Creon, his word is law, imposed on an unsuspecting citizenry:

Accordingly, I have publicly pronounced my policy

regarding these two brothers, the sons of Oedipus:

.....
My mind is thus made up, and never shall the
men

of shame outstrip the just, so long as I hold
sway;

(192-208; emphasis added)

In this passage in which Creon proclaims his order regarding the burials, notice the use of the first person singular: “I have publicly pronounced my policy,” “My mind is thus made up,” and “so long as I hold sway.” It is his and his decision alone. The city elders have not been consulted nor their counsel sought; they are merely informed of his decision. This is contrary to his own professed principles that a good ruler pays heed to the best counsel and holds to the best plans of all:

For if a man, entrusted with the total guidance
of the state,
will take no heed of counsel from the best of
men,
but keeps a lock upon his tongue through some
anxiety,
why him I judge, have always judged the
worst of men; (178-181)

The Theban elders have their misgivings and reservations about Creon’s order though they do not speak up out of fear. Creon senses their moral reservation when they seek to excuse themselves from watching over the corpse pleading their old age, nonetheless he pushes on forcing their complicity in making them agree not to sympathize or side with anyone who disobeys the ban. We also come to know that there are already murmurings among people against his edict.

No wonder throughout the play Antigone refers to it as a decree (*kerygma*), imposition by fiat, rather than a law (*nomos*). The

arbitrary nature of Creon’s edict is also evident from the fact that it went against the contemporary burial practices. In ancient Greece, burial of the dead was an important, almost a sacred, rite. It was obligatory on the part of the kinsmen and also on the part of the polis to bury their dead. Not to bury the dead was considered an act of impiety and also affront to the gods. Even a traitor was to be buried though not within the city walls (bounds of the city). There was no complete prohibition on the burial of a traitor, let alone his corpse to be left as carrion to be preyed upon by dogs and vultures. According to Warren J. Lane and Ann M. Lane, “Though it might be argued that the obligation of giving burial to the war dead of even one’s bitterest enemies – as the Greeks did for the Persians at Marathon and the Persians for the Greeks at Thermopylae – did not apply in the case of the traitors, it must be recalled that to Sophocles even traitorous Ajax deserved burial, and the kings who wished to deny it and punish a dead man after death were censured for it” [9]. Even if we leave aside the question whether Polynices was a traitor or not (for that would require us to consider the nature of provocation by Etiocesto Polynices which does not form part of the play), he deserved burial at least outside the limits of Thebes. Creon’s decree is a display of power by a newly crowned king who seeks to establish his absolute authority. What makes this decree even worse is his prescription of penalty – of public stoning to death of those who dare to defy his edict. Public stoning to death was a punishment customarily meted out to a traitor. To equate defiance or disobedience with treachery is again a willful act which shows his tyrannical nature.

The tyrannical nature of Creon is revealed most clearly in his confrontation with Haemon

during which he once again spells out his notions of rule and governance. But unlike his inaugural speech before the Chorus in which he at least outwardly professes adherence to what can be called just and righteous ideals of state and governance, this time he sheds all pretensions of a just rule and his real intent and motive are now laid bare. As a ruler, he demands complete subservience and unquestioning obedience to his authority: “that man / the city places in authority, his orders must be obeyed, large and small, / right and wrong” (748-51; emphasis added). It does not matter whether he is right or wrong. Rather the presumption is that as a ruler he is always right and his word is law which must be obeyed. When Haemon suggests that no man can be infallible and that it is folly to believe that one man has monopoly on truth and and he alone is right and others are wrong and that one should pay heed to others’ advice, Creon dismisses his suggestions out of hand:

CREON: Am I to rule this land for others—
or myself?

HAEMON: It’s no city at all, owned by one
man alone.

CREON: What? The city is the king’s—
that’s the law! (823-25)

In what clearly amounts to inversion of principles of Attic democracy of a ruler serving the interests of the state and thereby those of the people, the state and people now exist for his sake, to serve his interests. State is no longer the sacred charge which the ruler holds in trust on behalf of its citizens; it becomes the private property of the ruler which he can now administer at will. His decisions are not subject to public scrutiny or to the test of public morality or rationality; he becomes law unto himself. This state of affairs

represents a break down of civic order of Thebes. The rotting corpse of Polynices becomes symbolic of the rot that has set in the body politic of Thebes.

Creon behaves more like an “Asian despot” than a ruler of a Greek polis, treating people as not free citizens but as slaves. According to the Encyclopedie, a tyrant “regards his subjects only as vile slaves, as beings of an inferior species, destined only to satisfy his caprices, and toward whom anything seems to him permissible” [6]. It is no accident that Creon calls Antigone a slave: “There’s no room for pride, not in a slave, / not with the lord and master standing by” (534-35). Surprising though it might seem as to how can he address Antigone, a close kin and also whose father had been erstwhile king, as a slave, this betrays the real attitude of Creon towards his people.

Creon’s rule is characterized by oppression, intimidation and paranoia. As is the wont of a tyrant, Creon is intolerant of any criticism or opposition to his views. Even a slight difference of opinion is frowned upon and swiftly suppressed. Upon hearing the news from the messenger of the burial of Polynices, the leader of the Chorus ventures to suggest that it might be the act of the gods. Creon is quick to snub him: “Stop— / before you make me choke with anger—the gods! / You, you’re senile, must you be insane?” (317-319). There is no room for dissent; any defiance to his command is seen as a direct challenge to his rule and authority which must be met with exemplary punishment so as to rule out in future any potential dissent or defiance. And this is what he does to Antigone. In her case, he is even more outraged since Antigone happens to be a woman. He sees in her a challenge not just to his political authority but

also to his masculinity: “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, never” (759-61). Instead of paying heed to the good counsel by his son Haemon, he perceives it as defiance by son against father under the influence of a woman and he does not hesitate to condemn and repudiate him. He would much rather prefer his son going into self-exile than to admit that he is wrong. He uses intimidation and coercion to create an atmosphere of fear and silence in Thebes. It is this fear which makes people submit to his will and command. For instance, take the case of Ismene. She refuses to help Antigone with the burial of Polynices not because she does not believe in the rightness of the cause but because she is mortally scared of Creon. Again, it is the fear of Creon which results in the Chorus’ frequent doublespeak and equivocation, and even makes them collude with him even if they do not approve of his actions.

If citizens of Thebes are afraid of Creon, Creon too fears them. Given the lack of mutual trust Creon has become paranoid and is suspicious of people. Everywhere he spies hands of conspiracy against him. Thus he accuses the guard, who brings the news of burial of Polynices, of having been bribed by his enemies and threatens him with torture and death if he does not reveal or find out the culprit: “No, from the first there were certain citizens / who could hardly stand the spirit of my regime, / grumbling against me in the dark,... / These are the instigators, I'm convinced— / they've perverted my own guard, bribed them / to do their work” (328-334). His judgment is so clouded by his megalomania that he even brings a similar accusation against venerable Tiresias who warns him of his impending doom: “Old

man—all of you! So, / you shoot your arrows at my head like archers at the target— / I even have him loosed on me, this fortune-teller. / Oh his ilk has tried to sell me short / and ship me off for years. Well, / drive your bargains, traffic—much as you like— / in the gold of India, silver-gold of Sardis” (1144-1150). Whoever seems to act or speak against his wishes is falsely accused of conspiracy and threatened with punishment. Again, he condemns Ismene to death without any trial merely on the suspicion that she too must have connived with Antigone even as Antigone protests that she had no role in the act.

ANTIGONE AS A CIVIL DISOBEDIENT

If Creon has been portrayed as a tyrant, then Antigone has been presented as an exponent of civil disobedience. Thoreau calls her a stirring example of civil disobedience [10]. According to Susan W. Tiefenbrun, “Antigone, one of the greatest heroines of civil disobedience and the inspiration of resistance movements against tyranny, is the prototype of alterity in her resistance to the law” [11]. An act of civil disobedience is, according to John Rawls, “public, nonviolent, conscientious yet political act contrary to law usually done with the aim of bringing about a change in the law or policies of government” [12].

In the light of this definition, Antigone’s act constitutes an act of civil disobedience. First of all, her act of defiance is public in nature. When Antigone first broaches this idea to Ismene, the latter suggests that it should be kept a closely guarded secret. To which Antigone responds by saying:

Proclaim it rather! Your silence will win my hatred more,

unless you broadcast, shout my crime aloud to all. (86-87)

Antigone's insistence on Ismene proclaiming it rather than concealing it reveals her true intention. Through such proclamation she wishes to draw public attention to the unjust and arbitrary nature of Creon's decree and thereby to seek political reform or change the political status quo. Unlike an ordinary offender or criminal who wishes to conceal her offence or crime since she wishes either to benefit from her wrongdoing or not to suffer the consequences of her unlawful action, a civil disobedient seeks to make her disobedience known to the community either before or after the fact to demonstrate both her condemnation of that law or policy and her sincere desire for policy change [13]. Moreover, like a civil disobedient, Antigone appeals to a higher conception of justice in order to make the society reassess its moral parameters but such an appeal cannot be made unless it is public. By the public nature of her act, she hopes to arouse the conscience of the people of Thebes who have abdicated their responsibility as citizens.

Her desire to publicly proclaim or avow her act of defiance explains what has come to be known as the problem of the second burial. This problem has continued to dog the critics of the play. Having performed the burial once, what was the need for Antigone to return to perform the burial a second time. If the purpose of the burial was to free the soul of Polynices from eternal wandering, this purpose was served with the first burial itself and uncovering of the body by the guards on the instruction of Creon did not undo the burial. Why then did she perform the burial a second time? This has led to all kinds of speculations and I say speculations because they are not based on any evidence from the play itself. John Fergusson claims that it was the gods and not Antigone who performed the

burial: "In fact no human was responsible, and the Chorus gives the right answer when they attribute it to the gods" [14]. Richard Jebb suggests that the only reason for Antigone's return to the burial site is that the first time she forgot the Choai (libations), and "perhaps the rite was considered completed only if the Choai were poured while the dust still covered the corpse"(see [3]; commentary on verse 429). Bonnie Honig goes even further and asserts that it was Ismene who performed the first burial and she acknowledged it through her confession before Creon [15]. According to Gilbert Norwood, it was Antigone's willfulness which brings tragedy upon everybody in a kind of vicious circle: "her obstinacy brings about the punishment of Creon's obstinacy for Eurydice's death is caused by Haemon's and Haemon's by Antigone's. Had she not intervened, all these lives would have been saved" [16]. For J. L. Rose it is Antigone's intense love for her dead brother and her obsession with the idea of paying due respect to him that constitutes her tragic flaw. "Impelled by her great love of him and urged on a strong sense of duty to do her utmost for him since she is nearest of kin to him, she rushes forth with no thought of herself or her safety... to speed the soul of Polynices to its last resting place in the House of Hades" [17].

These explanations are either speculative based on little textual evidence or at best incomplete. While it is true that Antigone is willful or obsessive by nature, that in itself does not adequately explain why she goes for the burial a second time. An adequate explanation, in my opinion, can be found only when we consider her act of defiance for what it is, i.e. an act of civil disobedience. Of course, it is important for her to bury her dead brother, but the burial is not an end in itself. More

important for her is the act of defiance. She has to challenge the authority of Creon and she must do it openly and publicly. In order for her defiance to be public, she must be seen to be doing the act; she must be caught in the act as it were. Since the first time the burial remains a secret, she has to do it a second time. I would even venture to suggest that Antigone would have gone on performing the act until such time that she was caught. As discussed above, had she been an ordinary offender, she would have probably tried to conceal her offence. But as a civil disobedient, she has to get caught on purpose.

One important corollary of the civil disobedient making her act public is willingness to accept punishment for her act or willing to face the consequences of one's action. Antigone too is willing to accept punishment for her act. When Ismene tries to dissuade Antigone from performing what she calls a hopeless and foolish act, Antigone calmly assures her, "Allow me, please, to suffer the dread results/ of foolishness..." (95-96). Again, when she is brought before Creon after having been caught by the guard, she confesses to her crime without demur: "I do declare I did these things, do not deny the fact" (443). She knows that the punishment for her offence is stoning to death and yet she shows no hesitation or remorse in accepting her crime. The readiness or alacrity with which she accepts her crime makes Creon even more enraged and accuse her of arrogance: "still compounds, a second time, her crime of pride, / indulging herself in laughter and boasting her guilt" (482-483).

The willing submission of a civil disobedient to punishment does often have a great strategic value, as Martin Luther King Jr observes: "If you confront a man who has been cruelly

misusing you, and say 'Punish me, if you will; I do not deserve it, but I will accept it, so that the world will know I am right and you are wrong,' then you wield a powerful and just weapon"[18]. This is precisely what we find happening in the case of Antigone. Her undeserved punishment turns the tide of public opinion against Creon, though the public opinion has, we must acknowledge, only limited value as far as Creon is concerned. Adverse public opinion makes him yield but only a little. He absolves Ismene of the charge of complicity and lets her go free, and also changes the penalty for Antigone from stoning to death to being immured in a cave with barely enough food to survive. His complete conversion, the reversal of his decision to bury Polynices and release Antigone, however, occurs only with the feared intervention of gods – out of his fear of incurring the wrath of gods – which comes in the form of warning by Tiresias.

The third feature of civil disobedience is that it is a conscientious and political act. Antigone's act of defiance too is a conscientious and political act. It is undertaken out of sincere moral conviction, a conviction born out of a sense of manifest injustice. For her, what is at stake is not just the fact of denial of burial to her dear brother, but the very principles underlying both kinship and civic life (see [9] at p.168). It is her unwavering commitment to these principles which she sees as the mainstay of the civic as well as domestic life of Thebes and the violation of these principles by Creon which make her defy his authority:

Since Zeus had not pronounced these laws,
nor yet does Justice, dweller with the gods
below,
prescribe such laws among the ranks of mortal

men.

I did not think that your decrees were of such weight

that they could countermand the laws unailing and

unwritten of the gods, and you a mortal only and a man.

The laws divine are not for the now, nor yet for yesterday,

but live forever and their origins are mysteries to men. (450-457)

For her, these unwritten, divine laws represent the objective moral standard of justice, and any man made law or decree has to be in conformity with these laws in order to be just. It is her firm conviction that Creon's decree is in contravention of the unwritten and divine laws and is therefore wrong and cannot be obeyed. In defying the edict of Creon, Antigone is posing a larger political issue: Creon has a right to issue an order or to proclaim a law, but it does not automatically mean that whatever order or law that Creon issues becomes rightful and just only because he has the right to do so. For her, legal and just are not always synonymous. The two are not always in harmony. There can be a gap between the two and in such an eventuality what is the duty of a citizen. Does a citizen have the obligation to follow an unjust law. Her answer is a clear no. Just because a legally or lawfully constituted authority issues an order or proclaims a law does not mean that a citizen must accept it. Justice is superior to the laws enacted by the ruling authority and the individual has a right to judge whether a particular law conforms to the principles of justice. In the case, it does not, the individual

has the duty to disobey such law. And this is what Antigone does.

In fact, in repudiating the authority of Creon, Antigone questions Creon's ability and fitness to rule. In his inaugural speech Creon asserts that "It is impossible to know and understand the heart /and soul and intellect of any man, until he is revealed, / submitting to the daily test of government and rule" (175-177). In Antigone's opinion, Creon has singularly failed this test. His unjust edict has exceeded the limits of morality and in enforcing this edict his regime has rendered itself morally illegitimate. Hence, citizens have no obligation to either obey or support it. According to Lane and Lane, "the spirit of the edict, his use of ban as a loyalty test, and the additional repugnant aspects of his inaugural speech furnish Antigone with abundant evidence of Creon's moral and political unworthiness to rule the city"(see [9]at p.173).To this one may also add Creon's arbitrary action in sentencing Ismene to death without even the formality of a trial. Antigone seeks not only to disavow and condemn just a particular law or policy but also repudiate the moral authority of Creon's regime itself.

SOPHOCLEAN AMBIGUITY

The character of Antigone has, however, been presented in such a manner that it is difficult to ascertain at first which side in the conflict between Creon and Antigone is really right despite the principled stand of Antigone. The ambiguity on this score is largely on account of the contrast between Creon's real arrogance and Antigone's apparent arrogance. If Creon is portrayed as self-willed and arrogant, Antigone appears to be equally so. Our impression of Antigone as being arrogant and self-willed is formed on the basis of the reactions and responses of other characters in

the play, most notably Ismene and the Chorus. For example, when Antigone broaches the subject of burying Polynices with Ismene at the beginning of the play, Ismene reacts by calling her “impetuous” (39), “rash fool” (47), “misguided” (82) and hot blooded (“Your blood runs hot in the face of chilling threats” (88)). Similarly at different points of time in the play, the Chorus too express their disapproval of her – of being a savage heart and incapable of compromise (“The child reveals her savage heart, itself a legacy / from Oedipus... and quite incapable of compromise” (471-472)), of being “bestirred by foolishness and obsessive self-destructive talk” (602), of transgressing the limit of audacity (“You have dared the very limit of audacity, / to fall headlong and heavily before / the pedestal of Justice, child. / You pay the continuing price of a father’s guilt” (853-856)), and of madness (“Your own madness has destroyed you” (872-875)).

The issue before us is: why is it that both Ismene and the Chorus mistake her moral conviction for willful autonomy and arrogance and sometimes even foolhardiness; why is it that they fail to comprehend the full civic import of her act. The reasons are not far to seek. First of all, it is their timidity and cowardice and consequently their abdication of responsibility as citizens. It is out of fear of Creon that they refuse to speak up or act. Secondly, it is their mistaken notion of law. They believe that whatever command an established authority issues has the force of law and it must be respected and obeyed. And therefore even if they have misgivings about Creon’s edict, they submit to it. They believe, and not wrongly either, that it is the laws which sustain and hold the polis together and breaking the laws would lead to anarchy and thus the ruin of the city as well as its citizens.

This is the essence of the famous chorus song on man: “should he follow the law, / and honour sworn justice of gods: / the city stands proud, but provides / no safe home for the rash, fixed on a life of crime” (368-372). One can very well understand the concern of the Chorus for the safety and order of their city especially as they have just emerged from a war which had plunged their city into turmoil and they would not like their city to slide back into that state which any breach of law such as Antigone’s act threatens to do.

For them, law is supreme and it has to be obeyed under all circumstances. What they fail to appreciate is that law does not always or necessarily embody justice. A law divorced from the principles of justice may be formally legal but it is devoid of the spirit of law. In such a case blind obedience to law would lead to anarchy and corruption than the other way round. In other words, the conflict between Creon and Antigone is conflict between what may be called “false” law versus “genuine” law. It is Antigone who stands for genuine law and Creon for false law. In fact, the comments of the Chorus in their song on man regarding his presumptuousness is ironical in the sense that it applies more to Creon than to Antigone. This becomes evident from the concluding remarks of the Chorus at the end of the play: “By far the greatest part of happiness / is wisdom. We must not ever act impiously / toward the gods. Proud words / of arrogant men receive harsh punishments... / old age learns at the last to be wise...” (1348-1352). These remarks refer to Creon who has been chastised by gods for his lack of wisdom and act of impiety.

A third reason for their myopia is their inability to see beyond gender roles. Women’s

role is restricted to domestic (private) sphere; public sphere is the exclusive prerogative of men. Antigone's actions are interpreted as transgressing the ideals of womanhood. She is seen as acting in an unwomanly manner. It is unimaginable for them to countenance Antigone, a mere woman, in a public role or as a political actress. Therefore, they are unable to appreciate her real motives or the importance of what she has done. It is only towards the end of the play with the revelation of gods' will through Tiresias and Creon having been punished that they are made to realize that Antigone has been right all along. One must add here that the homily that the chorus delivers at the end of the play applies as much to them as to Creon. If Creon "learns at last to be wise," they too have been made wise.

CONCLUSION

In Sophocles' play, Creon's rule is tyrannical and Antigone's act of defiance is a principled political stance against his tyranny leading finally to the reform of law and also reform of Creon but only after the tragic loss of the lives of Antigone, Haemon and Euridyce. According to Lane and Lane, "When the king presents his prohibition as a state strengthening measure and stifles criticism by wrapping himself in a mantle of civic loyalty, equating disagreement with treason, Antigone cannot countenance that arrogance" (see [9] at p.173). Antigone realizes that Creon's edict clearly violates the principles underlying kinship as well as civic life. Through her act of defiance against the unjust and arbitrary edict which, according to her, undermines the very moral values and principles which sustain the society, she asserts her autonomy as a citizen. John Rawls claims, "the right to make law doesn't guarantee that the decision is rightly

made"[19]. A law is not always or automatically just. It must be subjected to the test of justice, rationality and public morality. People have a right, in fact moral obligation, to disobey and defy an unjust law or government. As Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest exemplar of civil disobedience in modern times, declared, "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good" [20]. To obey an unjust law amounts to the abdication of one's ethical responsibility as a citizen.

To conclude, Sophocles' Antigone raises many questions: Is the citizen dutybound to uncritical obedience to an unjust and arbitrary law? Under what circumstances can one refuse to obey a government or a law? What makes an ideal citizen – one who acquiesces in and abides by everything the established power dictates or one who protests against whatever violates the principles of justice? These questions and the answers that the play provides are as relevant today as they were in their own time.

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