

The First Speech of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*

Interpreters of Sophocles' *Antigone* have gone to considerable effort to define exactly to what extent Creon's edict forbidding Polynices' burial is, in Athenian terms, normal (since traitors were denied burial within civic boundaries) and to what extent abnormal (since there is no parallel for guarding a body to make sure it was not carried elsewhere for burial). Much attention has gone to how Creon's actions in the play fail to uphold his principles and to his definition of *philia* (e.g. Knox 1964, 108-110, Blundell 1989, 115-20). However, scholars have not as often asked the basic question of why Creon takes such unusual measures. This question leads to Creon's opening address at *Antigone* 162-220, because, famous and familiar as it is, the speech is a little odd (Podlecki 1966, 360, speaks of "obscurity, and even confusion.") After summarizing the present situation at Thebes, he comments that it is impossible really to know a man's character until it is revealed by political power (176-77). He then stresses that he despises a ruler who is constrained by fear from saying what is best (178-86). He also insists that he despises someone who has a friend greater than his fatherland (183), and that he would never have as a friend someone who was hostile to the city, because it is the security of the city that makes friendship possible (187-90).

These precepts are patriotic, but they are not relevant to the immediate situation of Thebes. The city is no longer in danger, and Creon is not about to make friends with any of its enemies. Creon initially explains his principles by stating how much he loathes someone who behaves differently, not by presenting a general rule about how a ruler or citizen should act. Then he reiterates how he himself will behave. So I do not agree with Budelmann 2000, 77, that "The first-person language is rather inconspicuous. The emphasis is on *what* Creon believes, rather than *that* he believes it." For a speech of this kind, Creon's address is strongly personal. It is also limited and almost banal (would any ruler announce that he thinks it is acceptable to follow bad policies through personal fear?).

Creon calls his first actual policy decision, that Eteocles will have a state funeral and Polynices will be forbidden burial, the *brothers* of his general principles (192). The word is interesting not only because it is a kinship term, but also because it makes the edict and the principles parallel. The decision is not the offspring of the principles, but their sibling.

Creon's speech, and his decision, make better sense if we fully consider the first of his precepts, that a man's character cannot really be judged until he has had political power. Because Polynices was Creon's nephew, Creon has chosen to expose his body in order to demonstrate what kind of ruler Creon will be—one who will not defer to kinship ties. So Creon's decision is not so much explained by the principles as it is a further emphatic declaration of them, and both the principles and the following proclamation flow from his statement that a man can only be known from how he handles power. Creon's edict is primarily intended as self-presentation.

He goes further than ordinary practice in actively preventing Polynices' burial precisely because he is Polynices' relative, and the gesture demonstrates his willingness to put civic concerns above personal ones. He evidently expects his decision to shock the Thebans and to be, at least in some quarters, unpopular—that is the only plausible reason for him to talk about how not yielding to fear. He sets guards to make sure that the body

is disfigured because he expects opposition to the decree, though not the kind of opposition that has already arisen. The decree is a public demonstration of his own patriotic character and of his decisiveness and fearlessness. Once we realize that his speech defines the issue primarily as a test for himself and as an opportunity for self-presentation, edict and speech make excellent sense and cohere perfectly.

Finally, it is worth noting that although this interpretation of the edict and speech assumes that the original audience could have understood it this way, it is obviously prompted by how performative American politics have been in the past decade.

Works Cited

- Blundell, M. W. 1989. *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: a Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*. Cambridge.
- Knox, B. M. W. 1964. *The Heroic Temper*. Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- F. Budelmann. 2000. *The Language of Sophocles. Community, Communication and Involvement*. Cambridge.
- Podlecki, A. J. 1966. "Creon and Herodotus." *TAPA* 97: 359-71.