

The Theban General(s)

The figure of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* has often been assessed in one-dimensional terms, as tyrant or tragic hero, depending on how Antigone is viewed (e.g. Ringer 1999: 68-78, Burnett 2014, Levett 2018). A more complex and so more satisfying reading of Creon has been offered by Liapis 2013, who suggests that Creon should be understood as the latest in a series of "Labdacid" heroes. This paper builds on Liapis' reading by linking Creon to one particular Labdacid, Aeschylus' Eteocles.

The argument begins with line 8 of *Antigone*, where the title character mentions that "the general" has issued a decree against her loved ones. So early in the play the audience would have deduced that it is set in Thebes late in the saga of the Labdacids, but nothing more of the context has been laid out. Spectators may thus assume that the general in question is Eteocles, who was portrayed as a military commander in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*; his decree might be imagined to deal with the exile of Polyneices or something else concerning the war itself. Though the true identity of "the general" is revealed only a few lines later, the audience has been invited, as a matter of first impression, to think of Creon as a doublet of Aeschylus' Eteocles, and that association is strengthened by other parallels between the two characters, especially in their opening speeches. The *parodos* of *Antigone* echoes that of the *Seven* in several respects, suggesting that Sophocles' Creon has just fought the war described in the earlier play. Both Creon and Eteocles invoke the ship of state (Aesch. *Sept.* 1-3, with further naval language at 71, 208-10, 283-4; Soph. *Ant.* 162-3), and both use a great deal of military language throughout their respective plays. Eteocles intends to defend the altars of the gods and anticipates that they will do the same (*Sept.* 4, 8-9, 14-15; see also 69-77, 501-3, 550-2, 662-72), while Creon insists that

the gods have given Thebes victory in order to protect their own altars and temples (162-3, 282-8; cf. 198-201). Both men think of domination by women in terms of slavery (*Sept.* 253-4, *Ant.* 756) and are confronted by women who are somehow subversive or detrimental to civic unity. Both stress the importance of obedience in a crisis (*Sept.* 224-5, *Ant.* 675-6), pronouncing a sentence of stoning on those who disobey them (*Sept.* 196-9, *Ant.* 35-6).

Though it is difficult to be sure from the scant surviving evidence, it appears that Creon did not exist as a fully fleshed-out character prior to *Antigone* (for the earlier tradition, see Gantz 1993: 488-522, Davies 2014 *passim*). If so, the audience's expectations of Creon would have been informed significantly by his association with Aeschylus' Eteocles, and the *Seven against Thebes* provides extra context for some of Creon's more questionable behavior (e.g. his misogyny, his harsh treatment of his subjects). The parallels to Eteocles also allow the audience to see Creon as simultaneously sympathetic and abrasive: though Eteocles could be ruthless and stooped so low as to face his own brother on the battlefield, he was also a competent military commander who saved the city (at least temporarily) by his own death. With this character in mind, Sophocles' audience would have been able to perceive Creon as the same sort of figure and to ask questions about him using Eteocles as a baseline: is Creon as good a king and general? is he as respected by his people? does he have the same faults, and in the same degree?

More than simply serving as a model of complex characterization so that spectators can accept Creon as in some ways both villain and hero, the Aeschylean Eteocles also anticipates Creon's fundamental dilemma. Both plays put significant emphasis on these characters' status as general, and both men assume that the situation with which they are faced calls for talented generalship – a thing that they are prepared to provide. But both discover that military experience is insufficient for addressing the troubles that have arisen within their city and family.

Bibliography

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