

## Creon in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*: The Ancient Tyrant in Modern Dress – A Study

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### Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine Creon's character in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* and view how Anouilh through his subtle changes has made a powerful ruler out of the ancient tyrant. Since Sophocles presented *Antigone* at the festival of Dionysus in 441 B.C.<sup>1</sup>, Creon became an example of a tyrant ruler. He is known as a stone hearted ruler with a commonplace mind, and narrow sympathies (Winnington Igram, 1980: 127) The only motives he can understand are lust for power and greed for money. However, Jean Anouilh in the midst of World War II, surprisingly adapts Sophocles' *Antigone*, and presents a different picture of Creon. Jean Anouilh sympathizes with Creon, and many critics especially the German audience came to admire him and saw him as the real hero of the play (Robert Loppe de, 1968: 79).

In Sophocles' *Antigone* our first meeting with Creon is when he makes his declaration; he has just entered from the battleground, as the new king. He gathers the council of elders, in the civil sphere and pronounces his decree. At the beginning of his speech, he gives out a statement of principles. In the principles he states what would be acceptable to the fifth century Athenians. Part of his character is revealed through his statements. Winnington Ingam (1980: 128) explains that from his speech we come to understand that he knows that his own wellbeing was bound up with that of the polis, and he knows the difference between a patriot and a traitor. Winnington Ingam (1980: 128) adds that funeral rights are nothing to him except as a reward to be conferred upon the patriot and as for the traitors, they should not be given an honorable burial.

Through his speech, he presents himself as the man in authority, by virtue of which, and in the interests of the state, he demands absolute obedience. He preaches order and discipline, to the exclusion of all else. Discipline in the city, in the army, in the household: all the same thing, and anarchy equally fatal to all (1980: 129).

Creon speaks, mostly of his office, but actually he thinks of himself. His demands belong to an absoluter, his attitude those of a tyrant or well on the way to be a tyrant. But he is not the mere stereotype of a tyrant. He is a recognizable human being, stone hearted, with commonplace mind and narrow sympathies (1980: 128). He is a "realist", for whom only the visible is real. The only motives he can understand are lust for power and greed for money. He must accept death, but unable to understand the invisible realm of dead. He believes in the efficiency of the threat of death that is everyone should choose death not in deference of the state but in opposition to the state, not for money but for emotion and principle. But this matter is far outside his own experience. Winnington Ingam (1980: 129) concludes that his cruel heartiness is revealed once he takes no notice of other people's feelings, and especially in his attitude towards Haemon's marriage and feeling towards Antigone To him all women are much the same. He underestimates Haemon's feelings towards Antigone.

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<sup>1</sup> Some have said to be in 443 B.C

Consequently the price he pays is his son. Ahernsdorf (2009: 115) argues that for Creon nothing and nobody comes before the state, not even blood relationship. He has no feelings towards his family, he places importance towards the city and not his loved ones, and Creon also instructs that one should not favor oneself or one's family over the city (2009: 117). All citizens must encompass their individual good and the good of the family for the stability and survival of the city (2009: 117).

Sophocles presents Creon with a lot of ambiguities. He can never be judged by his words, because most of what he says are full of gnomic. Once Creon is turned the other way round, we find that he is nothing. He is empty of all the principles he has proclaimed. The strong man, who in his persistence and determination seemed to be a powerful antagonist to Antigone, collapses. The political man, who was full of wise saws and subordinated all the personal relationships to politics, breaks down by the loss of a son and a wife. The tyrant becomes the most ordinary and unhappy of men (1980: 129).

When the messenger enters, he notes the downfall of Creon. He points out that wealth and power, which had seemed to be the aim of Creon's ambitions, will be maintained, but he will lose joy and happiness, because he has lost his son and as it will be relived later on, he will also lose his wife. Creon, the political man, in his lust for power, has destroyed his real happiness. At the end of the play it is Creon and not Antigone who becomes as a "living corpse" longing for death but forced to remain in the visible world of life.

Creon in Jean Anouilh has the same characteristics, his demands are absolute and his attitude is like the German fascisms<sup>2</sup> that have subordinated and occupied France. He is a dictator, nationalist, elitist, and anti-liberal. He is a militarist, and he advocates imperialism and territorial expansion. He preserves his kingship through dictatorship, he wants absolute power and in order to obtain it he destroys the old order and places the new one. He has no respect for the traditional, moral and cultural values. Still the way Jean Anouilh presents the play makes us sympathize with Creon.

The classical text *Antigone* has been recognized as a controversial play for centuries and among different circles and nations. The actions and the measures the two most important characters of the play have bewildered audiences as well as critics. There has been a double edge to them. Here is an attempt to resolve this anomaly.

### **Creon has an advising tone**

Once the guard brings in Antigone Creon speaks delicately and with an advising tone. Although Creon has harshly announced that whoever disobeys his edict will be sentenced to death, Creon does not act as harshly as he had said. It would have been expected from such a powerful ruler to sentence her to death right away. Creon in Jean Anouilh is wise, and has high understanding.

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<sup>2</sup> Fascism meant various things to various people, and likewise, it attracted them for a variety of reasons. Looking back fifty years after the demise of fascism, the oldest explanation which is recommended is: Fascism was the manifestation of a moral and cultural crisis, in which traditional values, religious as well as humanist, no longer counted for much. See Laquer, Walter. (1996). *Fascism: Past, Present, Future*. New York: Oxford UP. Here Laquer explains historical fascism, its ideology, its specific features and the reason that it received the support of many millions and how it came into power.

First he orders the guards to open her cuffs and then sends them away. Once they are alone, the first question he asks Antigone is whether she has told anybody about her plan. It seems that the plan of setting her free came up in his mind in that very moment. Once he gets sure that Antigone has not told anyone about her plan, he says

All right, listen: you're going to go to your room, go to bed, say that you're sick, that you haven't been out since yesterday. Your nurse will say the same thing. I'll make those three men disappear (29).

Creon tries all his best in order to settle things out, in order to make Antigone change her mind. Creon has an advising tone; he speaks gently calling her "my little sparrow"(31), "my child"(31), and also "my dear" (35). He tries to convince her by telling her that she is young, too young to enter such troubles, "you're twenty years old, and not so long ago all this would've been settled with a good spanking and sending you to bed without supper"(31). He reminds her of Haemon's' love and the happy future that she is could have "My son loves you..." (37) "You're too thin. You need to fatten up a bit, so you can bear Haemon a big baby boy (31). Thebes needs that more than it needs your death, I assure you..."(31). "Get married quickly, Antigone, be happy..."(42). "Don't stay alone. Go see Haemon this morning. Have the wedding soon"(41).

He reminds her that he is her uncle and he loves her and will do anything in order to save her, you think I'm a monster, I understand that – you think I have no poetry in my soul. But I love you very much, even with your horrible stubbornness..."(35) "Don't forget that I gave you your very first doll as a present, not so long ago..." (31) "I want to save you, Antigone..."(33) "God knows I have other things to do today, but even so I'm going to spend whatever time it takes to save you...(35).

Creon here tells Antigone that it was not long ago that she was a child, playing with her dolls. Creon doesn't want her to be the victim of politics. He says: "I don't want you to die over a question of politics. You're worth more than that."(35). Creon tells Antigone, several times to keep quiet. He promises her that he will place things in order "You're going to go to your room right now, do what I told you, and keep quiet. I'll see to the silence of those men. Go on, go!"(31 and see also 43 and 44) He tries to make her understand that burial is an absurd act and that throwing little dirt on the body will not make any change.

The more Creon tries to persuade her to live, the more Antigone is tempted to die. It is Antigone who sentences her act on herself, while as Creon is trying his best to save her. She even mentions this fact to Creon, that even if she was not caught this time or even if he sets her free she will go back and bury her brother once again ( Robert Scott Hubbard, 2002: 14).

### **Creon makes a wise choice**

The Germans appreciated the character of Creon, the dilemma of a political and military leader who makes wise decisions and reinstate order in a chaotic situation (1968: 78). Creon was placed in a harsh situation. The brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, although they were part of the royal family but they were also two big enemies of Thebes. Creon explains and gives a different story from the traditional text, he says that Polynices was "a mindless party animal, a

vicious, soulless little carnivore who only knew how to drive his cars faster than the rest, and spend more money in the bars” (39).

Creon tells Antigone that once Oedipus just refused to pay off one of his huge gambling debts, Polynices had become angry and raised his fist, spitting foul words at him. Polynices punches Oedipus in the nose so hard that his nose started bleeding. Polynices did nothing about it. He just stood there leaning on the wall and lit his cigarette. After that fight he left and enlisted in the Argive army. And from the day he joined the Argives, the man hunt began against Oedipus. At that time Oedipus was an old man he could not make up his mind to die, to let go of his kingdom. One attack followed another and the assassins we caught always confessed, in the end, that they had been paid by him.

Eteocles, was not worth any more than Polynices. He also tried to have his father assassinated, the loyal prince also decided to sell Thebes to the highest bidder and was also preparing to commit. It was only by chance that Polynices plan succeeded first.

The two brothers were two petty thieves, who lied to each other as well as to them. They slaughtered each other like the cheap hoodlums, over a division of the lands. Their fight was so drastic that their bodies could not be identified. Within this devastating situation Creon made a wise discussion and made a hero out of one of them. He took one of the bodies and gave him a burial and left the other to be eaten by the beasts. If the people had found out about the real story behind the brothers, for sure a great division would have taken place within the society. So Creon through his wise decision was able to restore order and prevent more chaos.

### **Creon has feelings**

Creon in Jean Anouilh is not the cruel stone heated man who thinks of nothing except power. Creon has feelings. He sympathizes with Antigone and tells her that he is also unhappy about seeing Polynices body rotting in the sun, But this is politics, and he was forced into it. He asks Antigone to understand the situation he was in. If it was not for his job he would have never done such an act. He says:

You think it disgusts me any less than you, that meat out there rotting in the sun? In the evening, with the wind blowing in from the sea, you can already smell it in the palace. It turns my stomach. But even so, I will not close my window. It's revolting, and just between us, it's stupid, it's monstrously stupid, but all of Thebes needs to smell it for a while. You know that I would've buried your brother, just for the sake of sanitation! But to make the sheep I govern understand, the whole city needs to stink of Polynices' body for a month (35).

But this is part of his job. He is the king; He must punish the rebels and traitors, although he doesn't like it. He must do it because he has said "yes."

### **Creon is not interested in power**

Creon has accepted the throne unconditionally. Anouilh's Creon declares that he was not interested in power; he says that he was forced into being a king. "One morning, I woke up king of Thebes, rejecting the job would seem to him to be unjust" (35).

He said “yes” because there has to be someone who says “yes.” The state was confronting a storm; he had to save the people or it would have sunk. The crew and the officers in charge were only thinking of themselves. Creon explains:

There had to be someone to steer the ship. It was taking water from all sides; it was full of crime, poverty, misery... And the wheel was spinning with the wind. And the crew refused to work, they were busy pillaging the hold, and the officers were building a nice little raft, with enough fresh water just for themselves. And the mast was cracking, and the wind was howling, and the sails were starting to tear, and all these fools were going to die together, because they were only thinking about their own precious skins and their own little problems (37).

Within this devastating situation Creon did not have time to think, to make a decision whether he should say “yes” or “no”, or to think about the price he had to pay. He acted quickly and grabbed the wheel, stood strong against the storm. He could have said “no,” but that would be like neglecting everyone and everything. Creon believes saying “no” would have been easy, but saying “yes” he went to so much trouble and pain. He had said “yes” to a lot of suffering. Creon says:

To say yes, you have to sweat, roll up your sleeves, seize life with both hands and plunge into it up to the elbows. It’s easy to say no, even if it means you have to die. You only have to sit and wait. Wait to live, wait for them to kill you (38).

Creon is not interested in power of the throne. He accepted the position just because of the safety of the people and nothing else counts more than that.

### **Creon is strong**

Most importantly in Jean Anouilh, Antigone's resistance and the suicides of both his wife and son bring Creon face to face with the extent of his actions. Creon is strong and does not break down as he does in Sophocles. He decides to roll up his sleeves and stoically accept his role ( Lillian Tsappa, 1993: 72) He is the king, and there is nothing else to do but to act out his duty. He simply tells the boy “When the work is there in front of you, waiting to be done, you can’t just cross your arms and say no. They say it’s a dirty job, but if you don’t do it, who will?” (58). A work has to be done and he has no other choice. Once he hears the clock stroke at the long distance he murmurs and asks the boy, “Five o’clock. What do we have today at five o’clock?”( 59). the boy answers, “Council meeting, sir” (59). Creon simply goes off to his meeting without any care and looks at the events just as one rough day that has passed.

As noted above Creon has decided to continue playing his role and remains the king. He knows that he is guilty but that does not prevent him from carrying on. The feeling of guilt will be with him until the rest of his life causing him suffer and a slow death (1993: 72). But he stands firmly and carries on his role. Lillian Tsappa (1993: 72) explains that when faced with Antigone’s rebellion, Creon, the king, stoically accepts the heavy burden of the title. Creon the judge pronounces his own verdict “We all have to face the same moment, in the end” (56). Creon, the father, the husband witnesses the slow and methodical disintegration of his own family: “They’re all sleeping. That’s good. It’s been a rough day”(58). Creon, the man, stands naked and unprotected before his destiny “ the real trick is never

to know ”(58). Unlike Oedipus, however, Creon does not opt for physical self-punishment to make atonement with higher order he has violated. Robert Scott ( 2002: 79) argues that from that point on, he has two choices either to accept his human limitations and like Antigone and Haemon sacrifice political power in the quest for humanity, or preserve the status quo at all costs, if necessary, even resort to violence and the abuse of citizen's rights. Unlike Antigone, Creon's moment of ultimate realizations does not call for dramatic scenes, or drastic resolutions leading to outbursts of public admiration (1993: 72). On the contrary, like Antigone, Anouilh's Creon has made a choice and must now assume responsibility for his actions. His self centeredness being replaced by self doubt and eventually by self examination, Creon cannot help but acknowledge the limitations of his human existence (1993: 72). Yet, Creon chooses to remain faithful to his convictions. He accepts the turn of events without the need to repent through self sacrifice or rebellion. Stepping away from the tragic tradition, Creon does not seek reconciliation with the universe whose hierarchies of values and principles he so violently questioned. The king walks away supported by the young page, the last remaining link with his long lost humanity: remorseful, not for the life he denied others, but for the kind of existence he created for himself (1993: 73).

As the curtain falls, the words of the chorus send a chilling sentiment to the audience that, despite the authority of the sacrifice, “Only the guards are left... They go on playing cards” (59).

The end of Anouilh's *Antigone* finds Creon in a state of stotic acceptance of his condition (1993: 74). Although aware that he is but an empty symbol of authority, another government employee, he will continue the practice and implementation of state law (1993: 74). Stripped from his illusions, Creon realizes that power is not something that one has but something that one is. Unlike Antigone, he has never really possessed power, and his failure lies in the fact that his political practices has lacked the spiritual depth and guidance that come from adherence to a higher, ethical order ( 1993: 74). Creon's blind insistence in preserving a temporary order, and his misuses of power as *pharmakon*- poison back fired, bringing catastrophic results to the political ensemble that is affected by his choice of action. (1993: 74). Creon said “ yes “ to the kingship so he was forced to say “ yes” to not burying Polynices, and as we will later see “yes” to killing Antigone, “yes” to the death of his son, Haemon, and also “yes” to the death of his wife. As pointed out by the messenger at the end, more miseries will happen. It foreshadows that more disasters will take place and Creon will have no chose but to say “yes”. Nothing can stop him. Even the death of his own son and the death of his wife will not prevent him from carrying on. He has said yes, so he must accept everything that happens. So he moves on without a slight change.

Creon in the twentieth century is very different from the ancient Creon. Anouilh's sympathy towards Creon has been questioned by many critics and many have accused Anouilh for defending him. The reason that Jean Anouilh sympathizes with Creon is all because of the situation of France. During World War II, France was in a devastating situation. First of all it was defeated and even worse according to the armistice terms, between the Vichy government and the Germans, the Germans occupied two thirds of its nation, including the entire Atlantic coast, Paris, and the north.

This occupation has brought great disasters and destruction for France. Not only its land, but also its people were divided. It was a potpourri of resisters

and collaborators, anti- and philo-Semites (Thomas Christofferson et al, 2006: xiii). So within this conflicting situation, that insiders and outsiders were unknown, it was not clear who is on Frances's side, and who was with the Germans. No one dared to disobey; stand against the situation, and their only weapon was silence. They had to be silent to live.

France had lived under the mask of silence. Silence in the streets, silence in the home; silence because the German army parades at midday in the champs-Elysees, silence because an enemy officer is living in the next room, silence because the Gestapo has spies everywhere, silence because the child dares not say that he is hungry, because the execution of parties every evening makes each new morning another day of the national mourning. (Cited in Marwick)

The German occupiers had taken control of most of the French lives (2006: 89). The Germans controlled what Parisians read and watched<sup>3</sup>. There were many restrictions on the theater<sup>4</sup>. Within this devastating situation that German occupiers had taken France's land, caused division between its people and even worse had taken control of their lives, Jean Anouilh could not have criticized the Nazi dictatorship in a direct way, so he used Sophocles' *Antigone* as a camouflage and escaped the German restrictions.

Anouilh's *Antigone* is "an ambiguous work" (Robert Loppe de, 1968: 79). Anouilh does not give his final judgment to his audience; instead he places them in a situation to make judgment themselves. Anouilh explicitly informs the audience that man is a free agent in a hostile and alienated universe. He has a choice either to rebel, like *Antigone*, in order to reinvigorate his individuality or to conform like *Creon*, and in thus doing, to renounce a last chance to regain his lost consciousness (1993: 69).

## Conclusion

Compared to Jean Anouilh, *Creon* in *Sophocles* is a tyrant ruler whose only interests were the state, power and prosperity. He is willing to do anything even lose his own loved ones to preserve his place. He demands absolute obedience and will not let anything or anybody take away what he has. However, Jean

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<sup>3</sup> The "liste Otto" prohibited the publication or sale of works by prominent Jews, leftists and anti-Nazis. Newspapers were censored; only collaborationist papers could be published. Radio Paris and the cinema were both strictly regulated. The radio became a tool for German propaganda that virtually no one believed. American and British films were banished from the screen to the dismay of everyone; German films, such as the rabid anti-Semitic *The Jew Süss*, were promoted along with French collaborationist ones. The Nazis pillaged works of art—at least 20,000 were removed—and took over control of Jewish property. Christofferson, 89. See also Germaine Bre'e and George Bernauer, Eds., (1970). *Defeat and Beyond: An Anthology of French Wartime Writing, 1940–1945*. New York: Random House. pp147–58; Jean-Paul Cointet. (2001). Paris 40–44 .Paris: Perrin. pp.33, 49–53, 67, 70, 95.

<sup>4</sup> The Jews were excluded from the theater and there were censorship restrictions on what could be played, but still the theater flourished. It's noteworthy to point out that, prominent French playwrights such as Montherlant, Anouilh, Cocteau, and Giraudoux presented their works before audiences that were often one third or more German. Artists, such as Derain, Van Dongen, and Dunoyer de Segonzac, participated willingly in Nazi-sponsored artistic events, including a trip to Berlin organized by Goebbels. And some Parisians eagerly helped the Nazis confiscate Jewish property through the so-called Aryanization policy. See Christofferson, 90

Anouilh who could not have excluded himself from the situation of France during World War II, in his adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* presents a different picture of Creon. He is not just the dictator searching for power and wealth but the way that Jean Anouilh presents him we come to sympathize with Creon and view him as the real hero of the play.

Jean Anouilh's Creon is not as harsh as Sophocles' Creon; he speaks delicately with an advising tone. When he orders one brother to be buried and the other to be left out to be torn by the beasts, the twentieth century audience viewed him as a powerful political leader who makes a wise decision in a chaotic situation in order to restore order and cease the chaos. If he had not made such a wise decision for sure more chaos would have appeared.

Creon is no longer the stone hearted man; he has feeling for his family and his loved ones and he sympathizes with *Antigone*. He also comes to tell us that he has no interests in power and accepted the role of being the king unconditionally, only to save his people. He said "yes" to the throne only because there was no one else to take the place.

And finally and most importantly what distinguishes Creon's Anouilh from Sophocles' is that Creon in Jean Anouilh is strong. He does not break down as Sophocles' Creon does. He stands firmly and accepts the heavy burden of the title. So Jean Anouilh with either the changes he makes to Creon's actions or his words he makes Creon to be the hero of the twentieth century. This is also exactly what made Anouilh a unique playwright; no other modern dramatist is as prepared to give such an evil character such a human face, as Loppe de says this is a very Shakespearean quality (1968: 79).

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