MJC ENGLISH, SEM II

Sophocles: The Oedipus

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Night has fallen in Thebes. The preceding days have borne witness to the armed struggle between Eteocles and Polynices, sons of Oedipus and brothers to Antigone and Ismene. The brothers, who were fighting for control of Thebes, have now died at each other's hands. Polynices' invading army has retreated, and Creon now rules the city. Antigone approaches an altar in the palace, bemoaning the death of her brothers. Ismene follows close behind, echoing Antigone's sentiments.

Antigone laments Creon's recent decree that whoever tries to bury or mourn Polynices must be put to death. Although Ismene declares that the sisters lack any power in the situation, Antigone insists that she will bury Polynices, and asks for Ismene's help. Ismene contends that though she loves Polynices, she must follow the king's decree—she does not want to risk punishment by death. Antigone rejects Ismene's arguments, saying that she holds honor and love higher than law and death. Antigone exits, still resolved to bury Polynices. Ismene declares that she will always love Antigone, and then withdraws into the palace.

The Chorus, composed of the elders of Thebes, comes forward. It sings an ode praising the glory of Thebes and denouncing the proud Polynices, who nearly brought the city to ruin. Creon then enters, assuring the citizens that order and safety have returned to Thebes. He announces that Eteocles, who defended Thebes, will receive a hero's burial, unlike his brother, who shall rot in godless shame for having raised arms against the city. The Chorus says that it will obey Creon's edict.

A sentry enters with a message for the king, but he hesitates to speak for fear of the king's reaction. Creon orders him to tell his story, and he finally reports the scandalous news. Someone has given proper burial rites to Polynices' corpse, and no one knows who has done it. Unsure what to do, the sentries assigned to keep watch over the grave finally resolve to tell the king. The Chorus suggests that the gods themselves may have undertaken Polynices' burial, but Creon denounces this notion as absurd, arguing that the gods would never side with a traitor. He himself theorizes that dissidents in the city have bribed one of the sentries to defy his edict, and he accuses the present sentry of the crime. Refusing to listen to the sentry's desperate denials, Creon threatens the sentry with death if no other suspect is found,

and then enters the palace. The sentry declares his intention to leave Thebes forever, and flees.

The Chorus sings an ode about how man dominates the earth and how only death can master him. But it warns that man should use his powers only in accordance with the laws of the land and the justice of the gods; society cannot tolerate those who exert their will to reckless ends.

Analysis

The opening events of the play quickly establish the central conflict. Creon has decreed that the traitor Polynices must not be given proper burial, and Antigone is the only one who will speak against this decree and insist on the sacredness of family. Whereas Antigone sees no validity in a law that disregards the duty family members owe one another, Creon's point of view is exactly opposite. He has no use for anyone who places private ties above the common good, as he proclaims firmly to the Chorus and the audience as he revels in his victory over Polynices. Creon's first speech, which is dominated by words such as "principle," "law," "policy," and "decree," shows the extent to which Creon fixates on government and law as the supreme authority. Between Antigone and Creon there can be no compromise—they both find absolute validity in the respective loyalties they uphold.

In the struggle between Creon and Antigone, Sophocles' audience would have recognized a genuine conflict of duties and values. In their ethical philosophy, the ancient Athenians clearly recognized that conflicts can arise between two separate but valid principles, and that such situations call for practical judgment and deliberation. From the Greek point of view, both Creon's and Antigone's positions are flawed, because both oversimplify ethical life by recognizing only one kind of "good" or duty. By oversimplifying, each ignores the fact that a conflict exists at all, or that deliberation is necessary. Moreover, both Creon and Antigone display the dangerous flaw of pride in the way they justify and carry out their decisions. Antigone admits right from the beginning that she wants to carry out the burial because the action is "glorious." Creon's pride is that of a tyrant. He is inflexible and unyielding, unwilling throughout the play to listen to advice. The danger of pride is that it leads both these characters to overlook their own human finitude—the limitations of their own powers.

Summary

The Chorus sees the sentry who had resolved never to return approaching, now escorting Antigone. The sentry tells the Chorus that Antigone is the culprit in the illegal burial of Polynices and calls for Creon. When Creon enters, the sentry tells him that after he and the other sentries dug up the rotting body, a sudden dust storm blinded them. When the storm passed, they saw Antigone, who cursed them and began to bury the body again. The sentries seized her and interrogated her, and she denied nothing. When Creon asks her himself, Antigone again freely admits her culpability. Creon dismisses the sentry and asks Antigone if she knew of his edict forbidding her brother's burial. Antigone declares that she knew the edict but argues that in breaking it she defied neither the gods nor justice, only the decree of an unjust man.

The Leader of the Chorus likens Antigone's passionate wildness to her father's. Creon, calling for the guards to bring Ismene, condemns both sisters to death. Antigone tells Creon that his moralizing speeches repel her, and that to die for having buried her brother honorably will bring her great glory. She tells him that all of Thebes supports her but fears to speak out against the king. Creon asks Antigone if she didn't consider Polynices' burial an insult to her other brother, Eteocles, for the two fought as enemies. Antigone insists that both deserved proper burials, regardless of their political affiliations. She says that her nature compels her to act according to love and not to bear grudges. Creon rebuffs her, saying he will never allow a woman to tell him what to do.

Ismene emerges from the palace, weeping, and says that she will share the guilt with her sister. Antigone refuses to let her do this, arguing that she acted alone and insulting Ismene for her cowardice. Creon declares both sisters mad, and again condemns them to death. Ismene attempts to save Antigone by appealing to Creon's love for his son, Haemon, who is betrothed to Antigone. But Creon stands firm, as the idea of seeing his son married to a traitor repulses him. Creon orders his guards to bind the sisters and take them away.

The Chorus sings an ode lamenting the fortunes of the house of Oedipus, which once again stands mired in death and sorrow. The Chorus prays to Zeus, guardian of kinship ties, whose law prevails above all others.

Analysis

Antigone and Creon's direct confrontation further clarifies the nature of their disagreement. Antigone attacks Creon's edicts on the grounds that his interpretation of justice and the will of Zeus is invalid. She may be correct in her assessment, but in saying so she assumes the

power to independently interpret justice and the will of the gods, just as Creon did. Her accusations are wild and reckless, and she seems to be trying to seize glory like the bravados the chorus condemned in their first ode.

Nevertheless, our sympathies are most likely tipping toward Antigone in this encounter. Just before the argument between Antigone and Creon, the sentry gives a vivid and disgusting description of the disinterment of Polynices' corpse. Polynices' rotting body is the physical evidence, or perhaps a symbol, of the injustice of Creon's decree and of the ruin it will bring about in Thebes. The description of the degradation of the corpse prepares the audience to be sympathetic to Antigone's arguments, even as she flies in the face of law with a pride that easily matches Creon's. Antigone draws a distinction between divine law and human law, between the "great unwritten, unshakable traditions" and the edicts of individual rulers such as Creon (502–503).

When Creon responds to Antigone's recklessness, he speaks of breaking and taming her (528–548). His words echo those of the second choral ode. Although, according to the Chorus, breaking and taming is what humans do to nature, it's not clear that Creon is "weav[ing] in / the laws of the land and the justice of the god" into his goal of breaking Antigone, as the second choral ode dictates must occur. Blood ties seem to mean nothing to Creon, who commits sacrilege against Zeus when he dismisses his blood tie to Antigone by saying that he would reject his entire family if they were huddled together at Zeus's altar. He insists he would punish Antigone even if she were a closer blood relative (543–545), and he quite arbitrarily decides at that point to punish Ismene as well. Creon's rage at Antigone's "insolence" (536) entirely consumes him, and he acts with a rashness terrifying to all who have heard him claim to hold steady control of the "ship of state."

Creon's anger is notably directed toward the fact that he is being challenged by women. When he first meets with Antigone, he says that if she gets away with her actions, she will be "the man" rather than him (541). And after he has condemned the sisters to death, he tells his guards to keep them from running loose and tie them up, so that they will act like women (652–653). In Creon's view, Antigone has overstepped the bounds of her positions as a citizen and as a human being. Antigone, of course, has none of these worldly concerns. She is prepared to die for what she believes is the right action in the eyes of the gods.

The third choral ode is more pessimistic than those before it. The Chorus takes Antigone's trespass and capture as an occasion to lament the misfortunes of Oedipus's house. It goes on (famously) to conclude that once ruin strikes a family, it continues ceaselessly through generations—no person has the power to reverse the pattern of misery and devastation. Power, the Chorus tells us, really belongs in hands of the gods, of Zeus. This third ode clarifies the second by showing that for all his seeming marvels and wonders, man is not actually powerful at all, as the disastrous fate of Oedipus's family shows. The ode concludes with the warning that when disaster strikes, it may be in the form of a "fraud" that steals on one slowly. A human being can wander into a situation in which he's wrong about everything, courting disaster. The admonishing nature of this ode seems to be subtly directed toward Creon, although we may only pick up on this in hindsight.