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Had Antigone been a Man…….

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Abstract: Sophocles' classic, *Antigone* (placed around 441 BC) continues to intrigue contemporary readers, owing much of its appeal to the power of its courageous female protagonist (of the same name) who defies the ruling king for love of her brother. This paper argues that in burying her brother against Creon's orders, she acts out of love not rebellion; moreover, she remains well within the role assigned to the women of her times. If Creon, the king, is outraged at her act, it is because *he* can't see beyond the fact that she is a woman. In compelling her to choose between family and state, it is Creon who threatens the stability of Thebes not Antigone As such, *Antigone* illustrates how patriarchy first expects women to prioritise their familial roles and then penalises them for doing so. Had Antigone been a man, she would not have been trapped in this double bind, her act would not have been read as one of unwarranted rebellion, and despite operating within a patriarchal framework, she would not have invited death as just punishment for revering her dead brother.

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Sophocles (c. 496 - 406/5 BC) elected general, who is believed to have authored more than 120 plays, and was lauded as an innovator in tragedy by no less a scholar than Aristotle (Howatson: 2011, 532). Sophocles owes much of his fame and critical appreciation to *Antigone*, the play that had attained the status of a classic by the 4th century itself. And in spite of the fact that "Sophocles rarely introduces into the self-centred world of the play ideas which relate to contemporary affairs..." (532), *Antigone* continues to intrigue subsequent generations, with reputed playwrights like Jean Anouilh and Bertold Brecht having adapted the play, the former in 1944 when Paris was occupied by the German army, and the latter a year later in Switzerland.

Antigone is informed by three intersecting conflicts pertaining to politics, gender and morality, all of which are set in motion by its female protagonist at the very start of the play. Antigone's decision to bury her dead brother against Creon's express command not to do so has ignited debates on right and wrong, punishment and reward, retribution and vindication. The respective choices *Antigone's* protagonists, Antigone and Creon make, have been dissected minutely by several scholars. While some have insisted that the play must be read in its particular historical context, others have advised discretion in adopting an approach that diverts attention from formal considerations, particularly, the genre of tragedy to which the play belongs. Charles Shepherdson, for instance, attacks New Historical and Critical Studies that forget that literature is governed by its own laws, and that a literary text cannot always be inscribed in its wider socio-political context. He points out the danger of equating fictional characters that have their life in literature with real people who have a life outside the confines of a text or the stage. He argues that a playwright's thinking operates in its own imaginative space which is distinct from, often contradictory to, the laws and practices that govern life outside the text: The universe of tragedy cannot simply be inserted into the broader horizon of "Greek culture" or "Greek thought" without considerable difficulty." (2009:53) He also dismisses feminist readings that see *Antigone* as representative not only of the status of women in Sophocles' time, but of women in general. This paper argues, that for women of today like the Antigone of yesterday, women have always found themselves trapped both ways, whether they toe the line or attempt to cross the line. What was Antigone's crime after all? Refusing to turn her back on her familial duties to please the king? In *Feminist Readings of Antigone,* Soderback Fanny asks: "Can a feminist politics that turns to this ancient heroine be progressive or is it bound to romanticise the past?" (2010: 2) It *is* possible that (re) turning to Antigone might run the risk of romanticising the past, but exploring her story for the predicament

that patriarchy puts women in, to the extent of causing the collapse of the family and society itself, is a project that can only be considered progressive.

It is not difficult to understand why *Antigone* has attracted attention from feminist scholars as eminent as Judith Butler for instance: the power of a female character who defies the edict of the highest authority of the state in the face of imminent death makes for an irresistibly attractive subject for a feminist inquiry. While comparing Antigone with two other powerful female Greek protagonists, Clytemnestra and Medea, Schroor commends Antigone for achieving "...open recognition for her heroic action and social acceptance even though her behaviour lies outside the traditionally feminine role" (2004: 164). My argument, however, is that Antigone's behaviour is actually well *within* her female role. This paper explores the tragic events of the play to show how Antigone's gender becomes her nemesis, trapping her in a double bind because she foregrounds her duty as a sister in fulfilment of the duties expected of women in Greek society. Had Antigone been a man, the choice between brother and king would not have been as traumatic or its consequences so dire. As such, the play exposes an inherent contradiction in patriarchal societies that expect women to conform to predefined domestic, gender roles and yet, ironically, penalises them as rebels for doing so. The choice between family and state is not confined to its female citizens alone, and yet we see how the scale of events acquire the magnitude they do when a woman asserts her right to choose between the two, even if while making that choice she still operates within a patriarchal value system that expects women to place family above self, the private sphere above the public arena.

I would like to begin by proposing that Antigone's act simply *happens* to go against the king's orders. Her prime concern is to not cause grief to herself by betraying Polynices: "But if I had suffered my mother's son to lie in an unburied corpse, that would have grieved me" (Sophocles: 127) Her sole motive is her duty to her brother in deference to the laws of the gods, which she considers greater than the laws of the state. Creon is merely incidental to the scheme of things. That he takes it personally, and sees her symbolic burial of her brother as an act of rebellion directed at him, is a misreading of her motives. That love and duty puts Antigone in direct conflict with the king is an unhappy turn of events, even if it is a turn of events she willingly brings upon herself. This is a view that Robert Williams explains in terms of the Greek notion of *philia* – "a love involving a relationship of reciprocal responsibility or mutual obligation. *Philia* refers to the love that Antiogne exemplarily performs in adhering to her familial, ethical, and religious obligations of

respect and piety." (2010: 8) It is Antigone's decision to function within the concept of *philia* that necessitates burying her brother in accordance with her identity as a sister, and only sister "...for *philia* becomes the only kind of sanctioned love, since a sister relates to her family in and through *philia*, the love to which Antigone's nature joins her." (9)

Since Antigone perceives her identity as sister as more important than that of a citizen, her loyalty to her brother overrides her loyalty to the state. In her scheme of things, allegiance to the dead supersedes allegiance to the living. In ancient Greece, whether the dead were buried or cremated, "In all cases it was important that at least a token handful of earth should be sprinkled over the remains so that the shades of the dead would not remain in the upper world, but could go down into the underworld. Neglect of such rites constituted a terrible impiety…" (Harris, 2000:109) Seen thus, love and duty, not rebellion, become Antigone's defining traits, a fact she herself admits: "'Tis not my nature to join in hating, but in loving." (Sophocles: 129) Defiance and rebellion become secondary, but very natural traits of this kind of love, as history has repeatedly shown. The characters we revere as heroes, mythical or religious, have earned their place as legends because they were rebels who broke the rules for their convictions, and then joyously embraced death as the inevitable punishment for it. Some critics, like Robert Willaims for one, have taken exactly this line of thought in likening Antigone to Christ: "Through the trials that Antigone and Jesus suffer, they face and even touch their own mortalities, the borders and boundaries of their own finitudes. They suffer extreme affliction up to and into their deaths, whose hasty arrivals attest to the abiding, irrepressible differences that they incarnate – differences that bear grave and decisive implications for humanity and divinity." (2010:4) Unlike Antigone, Creon, acts out a worldview where love is a silly emotion that has no place in the larger scheme of things. Not just Antigone's love for her brother, but even Ismene's for her sister, Haemon's for his beloved, the queen's for her son, are dismissed without a second thought. Antigone must pass the test of obedience to Creon's rule as an adoptive father, prospective father-in-law and king if she must be allowed to live.

Is Antigone then a rebel without a cause? Is her act the result of a stubborn, young woman at the mercy of her emotions? It seems to me that her behaviour represents a well-thought out action framed by a very clear rationale: since life is temporary, and death permanent, and since Zeus' laws more important than Creon's, it follows that she must give her brother the burial he deserves. Incidentally, even her sister, Ismene, agrees with this rationale in principle, though in practice, she lacks the courage to carry out this conviction to its logical conclusion - death. In a much quoted

section, Antigone also explains that while one can have other husbands or beget more children to compensate for those lost, one cannot replace a lost brother (Sophocles: 137). Operating within a highly logical framework, Antigone believes that she has the approval of the gods; that what Creon will punish her for, the gods will reward her for. In Antigone's envisioning, the king is not a direct representative of the gods; he is just a man, a mere mortal like herself. So, in defying Creon, she has not defied the gods, only hurt his ego; after all the proclamation to deny Polynices a burial did not come from Zeus himself! Moreover, by burying Polynices, she has actually ensured a respectful place for both of them in the next world. If anything, it is Creon who has violated the laws of religion and of justice, and is "...guilty of dishonouring laws which the gods have established in honour." (129)

The real tragedy of *Antigone,* as I see it, is that not that the heroine finds herself trapped between the family and the state, but that she is pitted against a weak and inept adversary. Creon is no match for this spunky young woman who has defied his diktat. He may be older and more powerful but we see in him a king insecure and defensive from the very start, as these words clearly show: "No! From the first there were certain in the town that muttered against me, chafing at this edict, wagging their heads in secret" (123). In his opening speech, when he appeals to his people to extend him the same loyalty as they did to Oedipus, the former King with the words "I now possess the throne and all its powers, by nearness of kinship to the dead" (121), he seems to be reassuring himself more than anyone else of his right to the throne. Creon rules by fear alone, and his repeated threats belie his fragile hold over his people. As the chorus assures Creon: "No man is so foolish that he is enamoured of death." (122) The prospect of being put to death is palpable, and even a character as minor as the guard can see how undeserving Creon is to be the highest authority of the land: "Alas, it's truly sad that he who judges should misjudge." (124) Obviously, Creon has learnt nothing from the mistakes of Oedipus, his predecessor, for whom he has scant regard.

Creon rules by fear because he is himself ruled by it. Being older, he could have also been the wiser of the two; instead he displays a churlishness that does not become his age or status as king. His knee-jerk reactions stem from the wounded ego of an already insecure man, not from careful thought by a wise ruler. Incensed that a woman has defied him, he lets himself be consumed by the desire to make an example out of her, only to stand defeated at the end– not only as king, but also as father and husband, having lost both son and wife as a direct result of Antigone's death.

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Antigone and Creon operate from two antithetical worldviews. For Antigone, love above all else, even life and death. For Creon, loyalty to the state above all else. The difference, however, is that while Antigone is willing to sacrifice herself for her convictions, Creon is only willing to sacrifice others. His actions seem driven primarily by a desire to establish and defend his authority rather than to ensure a stable government for his people. What else could explain his harsh punishment for an act that has not endangered the state directly in any way? Instead of voicing concerns about the welfare of the state, we hear Creon speaking incessantly about his hurt ego. It is not the future of Thebes but his own future as king that is his primary concern. Perceiving a threat to his roles as king, father and prospective father-in-law, he lashes out at the woman who has challenged the rule of the father in the private sphere of the home as much as in the public arena of the polis. Looked at in this light, the conflict between Antigone and Creon appears to be not so much of antithetical worldviews, but a simple case of the age –old battle of the sexes, perhaps best revealed in these words uttered by Creon: " While I live, no woman shall rule me." (129) When he orders the guards to lead the sisters to their death, he gloats: "No more delay: servants, take them inside! Henceforth they must be women and not range at large; even the bold seek to fly when they see Death now closing on their life." (130). In Creon's worldview, anarchy itself is perceived as a feminine state, which is why keeping women under control becomes the necessary prerequisite for a stable family and the kingdom. Only women who are willing to defer to male authority may be allowed to live. Creon's response to Ismene's bewilderment at the idea that he may put to death his own son's bride is that Haemon has many other girls to choose from, obviously girls who will be suitably subservient. He even goes so far as to state that a real man is one who sires sons! In instances, such as these, we see how it is Creon, not Antigone, who 'genders' the conflict: "Now verily, I am no man, she is the man, if this victory shall rest with her and bring no penalty." (128) And these are his words to his son a little later: "Therefore we must support the cause of order and in no wise suffer a woman to worst us. Better to fall from power, if we must, by a man's hand; then we could not be called weaker than a woman." (132) Forgiving Antigone would not only mean a very public defeat, all the more humiliating when your adversary is a woman, but would amount to an erasure of his very manhood.

Antigone invites the wrath of the king because she refuses to be a mere instrument through which he can exercise agency and reinforce his power over his subjects. The problem is not that Antigone is a woman, but that Creon can't see beyond her womanhood. But if Creon foregrounds Antigone's womanhood in this context, then he must do so in another context as well, one where burying the

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dead was considered one of the sacred duties of women in ancient Greece, as he knew well enough. If one goes by the laws that were apparently laid down for women's participation in funerary rites in ancient Greece, we see how women were expected to follow stringent requirements. An excerpt from a book on ancient Greek laws on mourning specifies attire and behaviour to be followed by Greek women failing which dire consequences would ensue. The excerpt also warns that the *gynaikoinomoi (*officials concerned with compliance with the law) "...will pray for the well-being of those who obey the law and the opposite to those women who do not conform with the law; and these women shall not be considered clean, because they have committed impiety, and they shall not sacrifice to any of the gods for ten years." (Annaoutoglou, 1998: 143) Such being the case, should Antiogne have opted to be unclean and impious? If we applaud her burial of her brother as an act of duty, how can the same act be censured as an act of rebelliousness or betrayal?

Isn't it Creon rather than Antigone, who threatened the stability of Thebes by issuing an edict that forced Antigone and Ismene "...to choose between the obligations of obeying the dictates of tradition and divine law by burying their brother as well as the newly declared laws of the city that forbid his burial."? (Schroor, 2007: 163) By setting his newly created laws above the eternal laws of the gods and of the family, isn't it Creon who has transgressed, not only against the laws of divinity and of the family but also against the very state he professes to represent and protect? Can such a disregard for the family, the most crucial unit of society, ensure the stability or prosperity of any state? As Sjoholm Cecilia observes: "Since the origins of kinship are shown to be arbitrary, the family cannot be detached from the state and situated in a separate sphere of the prepolitical. Everything that has to do with the family is bound up with the state and vice-versa." (2004: 115) This reading of Creon, not Antigone, as the transgressor is borne out by the fact that Antigone's choice is supported by the people of the land**,** as Haemon reveals to Creon:

> "For the dread of your frown forbids the citizens to speak such words as would offend your ear; but I can hear these murmurs in the dark, these moanings in the city for this maiden. "No woman," they say, "ever merited her doom less, none ever was to die so shamefully for deeds so glorious as hers." (133)

Creon's outrage seems to be prompted not so much by the awareness that Antigone has transgressed against the state as because she has rebelled against the natural order of things by defying the male of the species. Her love for her brother, another male of the species, and her deference to Zeus, a man more powerful than the king, are effectively discounted. As Sjoholm

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Cecilia explains, "Antigone does something that patriarchy cannot tolerate: she transgresses paternal law and opposes the father's power to regulate the relation between women (2004: 112) However, it seems to me that Antigone upholds patriarchy rather than transgresses against it since she affirms her duty to a male member of her family in alignment with her familial duty as a sister. She herself admits that she has in no way set herself up for being branded a traitor: "And yet for glory – how could I have won a nobler than by giving burial to my own brother? All here would own that they thought it well, if their lips were not sealed by fear." (128) As Antigone sees it, her only fault was to revere the dead, and fulfil the duty that female members in Greece were expected to fulfil: "And what laws of heaven have I transgressed? Why, unhappy me, should I look to the gods anymore, what ally should I invoke, when by piety I have earned the name of impious." (138) Her argument bears thinking: when patriarchy actively discourages women's participation in the political sphere (that lies outside the domain of the home) and encourages them to put family above everything including self, then why should they be punished for doing so? Antigone's predicament exposes how patriarchy ties itself up in knots with its contrary expectations.

We see how Antigone's gender exacerbates the scale of events since it is by virtue of being a woman that she gets trapped in a deadly conundrum such that whatever she chooses, she gets labelled a rebel who must be taught a lesson. It is an interesting paradox indeed that in fulfilling her domestic role as outlined by a patriarchal society that encourages women to respect the men in the family (in this case, her brother), she ends up challenging the same patriarchal forces that expect her to defer to male authority outside the domestic sphere, in this case, the king. I would then agree with readings of the play that have extended the implications of Antigone's predicament to all women who fall between the cracks of patriarchal societies because *Antiogne* illustrates the inherent contradiction of patriarchy, that first labels women emotional beings, then uses that construction of femininity to prescribe gender roles that foreground love for the family as their primary duty, and then punishes them for taking those roles and relationships too seriously! Had Antigone been a man, she would have been outside the framework of this dilemma altogether.

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