Tiresias, their spokesman, does not say Antigone was right, he does not praise her—in fact he does not mention her. Antigone was ready to admit, if the gods did not save her and she suffered death, that she was wrong (975–76); these words suggest that she hanged herself not just to cut short the lingering agony of starvation and imprisonment but in a sort of existential despair. [...]

The gods do not praise Antigone, nor does anyone else in the play—except the young man who loves her so passionately that he cannot bear to live without her. Haemon tells his father what the Thebans are saying behind his back, the “murmurs in the dark” (754): that Antigone deserves not death but “a glowing crown of gold!” (751). Whether this is a true report (and the chorus does not praise Antigone even when they have been convinced that she was right) or just his own feelings attributed to others for the sake of his argument, it is a timely reminder of Antigone’s heroic status. In the somber world of the play, against the background of so many sudden deaths and the dark mystery of the divine dispensation, her courage and steadfastness are a gleam of light; she is the embodiment of the only consolation tragedy can offer—that in certain heroic natures unerring suffering and death can be met with a greatness of soul which, because it is purely human, brings honor to us all.

Martha C. Nussbaum

From Sophocles’ Antigone: Conflict, Vision, and Simplification (1986, 2001) 1

[... ] Most all interpreters of this play have agreed that the play shows Creon to be morally defective, though they might not agree about the particular nature of his defect. The situation of Antigone is more controversial. Hegel assimilated her defect to Creon’s; some more recent writers uncritically hold her up as a blameless heroine. Without entering into an exhaustive study of her role in the tragedy, I should like to claim (with the support of an increasing number of recent critics) that there is at least some justification for the Hegelian assimilation—though the criticism needs to be focused more clearly and specifically than it is in Hegel’s brief remarks. I want to suggest that Antigone, like Creon, has engaged in a ruthless simplification of the world of value which effectively eliminates conflicting obligations. Like Creon, she can be blamed for refusal of vision. But there are important differences, as well, between her project and Creon’s. When these are seen, it will also emerge that this criticism of Antigone is not incompatible with the judgment that she is morally superior to Creon.

There has been a war. On one side was an army led by Eteocles, brother of Antigone and Ismene. On the other side was an invading army, made up partly of foreigners, but led by a Theban brother, Polynices. This heterogeneity is denied,

in different ways, by both Creon and Antigone. Creon’s strategy is to draw, in thought, a line between the invading and defending forces. What falls to one side of this line is a foe, bad, unjust; what falls to the other (if loyal to the city’s cause) becomes, indiscriminately, friend or loved one. Antigone, on the other hand, denies the relevance of this distinction entirely. She draws, in imagination, a small circle around the members of her family: what is inside (with further restrictions which we shall mention) is family, therefore loved one and friend; what is outside is non-family, therefore, in any conflict with the family, enemy. If one listened only to Antigone, one would not know that a war had taken place or that anything called “city” was ever in danger. 2 To her it is a simple injustice that Polynices should not be treated like a friend.

“Friend” (philos) and “enemy,” then, are functions solely of family relationship. 3 When Antigone says, “It is my nature to join in loving (sumpheilein), not to join in hating,” she is expressing not a general attachment to love, but a devotion to the philia of the family. It is the nature of these philia bonds to make claims on one’s commitments and actions regardless of one’s current desires. This sort of love is not something one decides about; the relationships involved may have little to do with liking or fondness. We might say (to use terminology borrowed from Kant) 4 that Antigone, in speaking of love, means “practical,” not “pathological” love (a love that has its source in fondness or inclination). “He is my own brother,” she says to Ismene in explanation of her defiance of the city’s decree, “and yours too, even if you don’t want it. I certainly will never be found a traitor to him” (51–52). Relationship is itself a source of obligation, regardless of the feelings involved. When Antigone speaks of Polynices as “my dearest [ ] brother” (94), even when she proclaims, “I shall lie with him as a loved one with a loved one [ ]” (83–84), there is no sense of closeness, no personal memory, no particularity animating her speech. 5 Ismene, the one person who ought, historically, to be close to her, is treated from the beginning with remote coldness; she is even called enemy (110) when she takes the wrong stand on matters of pious obligation. It is Ismene whom we see weeping “sister-loving tears,” who acts out of commitment to a felt love. “What life is worth living for me, bereft of you?” (602) she asks with an intensity of feeling that never animates her sister’s

4. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), German philosopher who uses these terms in his Critique of Pure Reason.

piety. To Haemon, the man who passionately loves and desires her, Antigone never addresses a word throughout the entire play. It is Haemon, not Antigone, whom the Chorus views as inspired by éros (842–56). Antigone is as far from éros as Creon. For Antigone, the dead are "those whom it is most important to please" (103). "You have a warm heart for the cold" (102), observes her sister, failing to comprehend this impersonal and single-minded passion.

Duty to the family dead is the supreme law and the supreme passion. And Antigone structures her entire life and her vision of the world in accordance with this simple, self-contained system of duties. Even within this system, should a conflict ever arise, she is ready with a fixed priority ordering that will clearly dictate her choice. The strange speech (954–64) in which she ranks duties to different family dead, placing duty to brother above duties to husband and children, is in this sense (if genuine) highly revealing: it makes us suspect that she is capable of a strangely ruthless simplification of duties, corresponding not so much to any known religious law as to the exigencies of her own practical imagination.

Other values fall into place, confirming these suspicions. Her single-minded identification with duties to the dead (and only some of these) effects a strange reorganization of piety, as well as of honor and justice. She is truly, in her own words, hosia panourgësasa, one who will do anything for the sake of the pious, and her piety takes in only a part of conventional religion. She speaks of her allegiance to Zeus [. . .], but she refuses to recognize his role as guardian of the city and backer of Eteocles. The very expression of her devotion is suspect: "Zeus did not decree this, as far as I am concerned" ([. . .] 494). She sets herself up as the arbiter of what Zeus can and cannot have decreed, just as Creon took it upon himself to say whom the gods could and could not have covered: no other character bears out her view of Zeus as single-mindedly backing the rights of the dead. She speaks, too, of the goddess Dike, Justice; but Dike, for her, is simply, "the Justice who lives together with the gods below" (495). The Chorus recognizes another Dike. Later they will say to her, "Having advanced to the utmost limit of boldness, you struck hard against the altar of Dike on high, o child" (901–3). Justice is up here in the city, as well as below the earth. It is not as simple as she says it is. Antigone, accordingly, is seen by them not as a conventionally pious person, but as one who impoverished her piety, making her decisions about what to honor. She is a "maker of her own law [. . .]"; her defiance is "self-invented passion" ([. . .] 920). Finally they tell her unequivocally that her pious respect is incomplete: "[This] reverent action [. . .] is a part of piety [. . .]" (917). Antigone's rigid adherence to a single narrow set of duties has caused her to misinterpret the nature of piety itself, a virtue within which a more comprehensive understanding would see the possibility of conflict.

Creon's strategy of simplification led him to regard others as material for his aggressive exploitation. Antigone's dutiful subservience to the dead leads to an equally strange, though different (and certainly less hideous) result. Her relation to others in the world above is characterized by an odd coldness. "You are alive," she tells her sister, "but my life [. . .] is long since dead, to the end of serving the dead." The safely dutiful human life requires, or is, life's annihilation. Creon's attitude towards others is like necrophilia: he aspires to possess the inert and unresisting. Antigone's subservience to duty is, finally, the ambition to be a nekros, a corpse beloved of corpses. (Her apparent similarity to martyrs in our own tradition, who expect a fully active life after death, should not conceal from us the strangeness of this goal.) In the world below, there are no risks of failure or wrongdoing.

Neither Creon nor Antigone, then, is a loving or passionate being in anything like the usual sense. Not one of the gods, not one human being escapes the power of éros, see the Chorus (842–47); but these two oddly inhuman beings do, it appears, escape. Creon sees loved persons as functions of the civic good, replaceable producers of citizens. For Antigone, they are either dead, fellow servants of the dead, or objects of complete indifference. No living being is loved for his or her personal qualities, loved with the sort of love that Haemon feels and Ismene praises. By altering their beliefs about the nature and value of persons, they have, it seems, altered or restructured the human passions themselves. They achieve harmony in this way, but at a cost. The Chorus speaks of éros as a force as important and obligating as the ancient theôsmoi or laws of right, a force against which it is both foolish and, apparently, blameworthy to rebel [. . .].
Antigone learns too—like Creon, by being forced to recognize a problem that lies at the heart of her single-minded concern. Creon saw that the city itself is pious and loving; that he could not be its champion without valuing what it values, in all its complexity. Antigone comes to see that the service of the dead requires the city, that her own religious aims cannot be fulfilled without civic institutions. By being her own law, she has not only ignored a part of piety, she has also jeopardized the fulfillment of the very pious duties to which she is so attached. Cut off from friends, from the possibility of having children, she cannot keep herself alive in order to do further service to the dead; nor can she guarantee the pious treatment of her own corpse. In her last speeches she laments not so much the fact of imminent death as, repeatedly, her isolation from the continuity of offspring, from friends and mourners. She emphasizes the fact that she will never marry, she will remain childless. Acheron will be her husband, the tomb her bridal chamber. Unless she can successfully appeal to the citizens whose needs as citizens she had refused to consider, she will die without anyone to mourn her death or to replace her as guardian of her family religion. She turns therefore increasingly, in this final scene, to the citizens and the gods of the city [...], until her last words closely echo an earlier speech made by Creon [...] and blend his concerns with hers:

O city of my fathers in this land of Thebes. O gods, progenitors of our race. I am led away, and wait no longer. Look, leaders of Thebes, the last of your royal line. Look what I suffer, at whose hands, for having respect for piety. (987–93)

We have, then, two narrowly limited practical worlds, two strategies of avoidance and simplification. In one, a single human value has become the final end; in the other, a single set of duties has eclipsed all others. But we can now acknowledge that we admire Antigone, nonetheless, in a way that we do not admire Creon. It seems important to look for the basis of this difference.

First, in the world of the play, it seems clear that Antigone's actual choice is preferable to Creon's. The dishonour to civic values involved in giving pious burial to an enemy's corpse is far less radical than the violation of religion involved in Creon's act. Antigone shows a deeper understanding of the community and its values than Creon does when she argues that the obligation to bury the dead is an unwritten law, which cannot be set aside by the decree of a particular ruler. The belief that not all values are utility-relative, that there are certain claims whose neglect will prove deeply destructive of communal attunement and individual character, is a part of Antigone's position left untouched by the play's implicit criticism of her single-mindedness.

Furthermore, Antigone's pursuit of virtue is her own. It involves nobody else and commits her to abusing no other person. Rulership must be rulership of something; Antigone's pious actions are executed alone, out of a solitary commitment. She may be strangely remote from the world; but she does no violence to it.

Finally, and perhaps most important, Antigone remains ready to risk and to sacrifice her ends in a way that is not possible for Creon, given the singleness of his conception of value. There is a complexity in Antigone's virtue that permits genuine sacrifice within the defense of piety. She dies recanting nothing; but still she is torn by a conflict. Her virtue is, then, prepared to admit a contingent conflict, at least in the extreme case where its adequate exercise requires the cancellation of the conditions of its exercise. From within her single-minded devotion to the dead, she recognizes the power of these contingent circumstances and yields to them, comparing herself to Niobe wasted away by nature's snow and rain (878–84). (Earlier she had been compared, in her grief, to a mother bird crying out over an empty nest; so she is, while heroically acting, linked with the openness and vulnerability of the female.) The Chorus here briefly tries to console her with the suggestion that her bad luck does not really matter, in view of her future fame; she calls their rationalization a mockery of her loss. This vulnerability in virtue, this ability to acknowledge the world of nature by mourning the constraints that it imposes on virtue, surely contributes to making her the more humanly rational and the richer of the two protagonists: both active and receptive, neither exploiter nor simply victim.

Philip Holt

From Polis and Tragedy in the Antigone (1999)

1. INTRODUCTION

Sophokles's Antigone is an easy play for moderns, even modern classicists, to get wrong. We are likely to see Antigone as the champion of moral right, or conscience, or religion against the authority of the state, as represented by Creon. She is then a martyr for a cause, and our age is rather drawn to causes and martyrs. This does much to explain the scholarly predilection for what Hester called "the orthodox view" of the play: Antigone right and noble, Creon wrong and tyrannical. But these terms for describing the conflict—and even more the ethical weight and emotional coloring these terms carry—are relatively modern.

4. The importance of this link with the yielding world of nature is seen by Segal, Tragedy 154ff [Nussbaum's note, here abbreviated].