To What Extent is King Creon a Tragic Hero in Sophocles' *Antigone*[1]

1438 words

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[1] Heaney, Seamus. *Burial at Thebes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004)

In his works on dramatic theory, Aristotle distinguishes tragedy from other forms of literature through several criteria, one of which being through characters (*ethos*). Aristotle asserts that a tragedy's protagonist - the tragic hero - should constitute a virtuous character who suffers some undeserved misfortune. This misfortune should be caused not by the loss of the tragic hero's goodness, but rather by their *hamartia*- a flaw or error in judgement. The tragic hero's susceptibility to human error (despite their greatness) serves to evoke in the audience a sense of pity, and of fear that similar misfortune might befall *them*.

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon is the King of Thebes, who, by forbidding the burial of Polyneices, ultimately causes the deaths of not only of Antigone, but also of Haemon (Creon's son), Eurydice (Creon's wife). Clearly, the death of Creon's family constitutes misfortune, for which Creon suffers incalculably. Therefore, establishing whether Creon should be considered a tragic hero by the Aristotelian definition depends predominantly on whether his misfortune is undeserved. To this end, this essay will examine the virtue of Creon's actions throughout the play - considering what his *hamartia* might be - and will explore various manifestations of other distinctive features of tragic heroes.

In the first part of the play, when Creon addresses the Chorus, he is presented as an essentially virtuous character. However, Sophocles hints at potentially tragic flaws and gradually develops Creon's insecurity and paranoia, which lead to his downfall. He explains how the throne of Thebes

"has come to [him]"[2], emphasising the peaceful, legitimate nature of his acquisition of kingship. He repeatedly compares the city to a "ship of state"[3], with the Chorus the "loyal crew"[4] thereof. This extended metaphor, associates the city with a sense of grandeur: communicating Creon's respect for the city, and for the responsibility he now holds. Still, Creon's implementation of rhetoric might otherwise be interpreted as an attempt to manipulate the Chorus, distracting them from Creon's flagrant exertion of power. The aforementioned ship metaphor creates a sense of shared responsibility - the Chorus being the "crew" of the ship. This analogy, the repeated use of "friends"[5], and the anaphoric use of "you"[6] - both in addressing the Chorus - exaggerate the amount of influence and power that Creon will allow the Chorus to hold over his decisions.

During his speech to the Chorus, Creon's controlled, unspontaneous rhetorical tone also reflects his insecurity in becoming King[7]. He lectures the Chorus about leadership skills, and although this might convey him as wise in some respects, the anadiplosis, "fails, fails"[8], exposes an obsessive fear of failure as a King. In this light, Creon's lectures might be understood as attempts to convince *himself* (as well his citizens) of his authority as King. The forbidding of Polyneices' burial could thus be motivated by Creon's desire to establish himself as a powerful leader. Notably, however, an Ancient Greek audience

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[2] Heaney, 2004 p.9
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Perhaps fuelled by the guilt of superseding his brother-in-law, Oedipus
[8] Heaney, 2004 p.10

would be unlikely to read these malevolent intentions from Creon's proficient use of rhetoric - a skill which was highly valued in Greek society.

Creon forbids, on pain of death, the burial of Polyneices[9]: "he is adjudged a carcass for the dogs and birds to feed on"[10]. In doing so, he violates the unwritten laws of the gods (a person's spirit cannot continue to the underworld without the proper burial ceremony), and his personal obligation to honour a dead family member[11]. However, although Creon's description of animals "feeding on" Polyneices' "carcass" hints at a rather cruel disposition, this ostracising of a traitor of an Ancient Greek city was common practice. Indeed, an Ancient Greek audience would have sympathised with Creon's prioritisation of the safety of the city of his personal and religious duties - being familiar with the constant risk of foreign invasion with which Ancient Greek cities coexisted.

Further, the decision to sentence Antigone to death is presented as a logical consequence of Creon's strict adherence to the law. The stichomythic dialogue between him and Antigone[12] emphasises the inevitable yet impartial nature of Creon's progression towards the enforcement of the law. This demonstrates both his stubbornness, and his persistence in pursuing what he believes to be righteous, in spite of his familial obligation to Antigone (as her uncle). Creon debates Antigone, yet he ends their conversation with: "No

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[9] Polyneices was the son of King Oedipus, who summoned a foreign army and attacked the city with the intent to seize the throne from his brother.
[10] Heaney, 2004 p. 11
[11] Creon also contravenes the Greek practice of a city burying their own dead in the aftermath of war.
[12] Heaney, 2004 pp. 22-24

woman will dictate the law to me"[13], which is symptomatic of flaws (potential *hamartias*) in Creon's character on two accounts: pride, and hubris.

Creon's pride - his personal investment in his decisions - inhibits him from heeding the advice of other characters. In deriding Antigone (see above), and throughout the play, he interprets others' arguments as personal attacks; this perhaps comes from his insecurity in being King and his subsequent fear of being undermined. When confronted by Tiresias, Creon demands to know why he is being targeted: "Why is every arrow aimed at me? You, Tiresias [...] have bled me white"[14]. Additionally, during his argument with Haemon, Creon interprets his son's case as an act of insubordination: "So a man of my age [...] must take instruction from a man of his?"[15]. In both cases, Creon's adversary offered advice which might have averted later tragic events - but, in both cases, Creon refuses. Thus, the fragility of Creon's pride, and the vigor with which he defends it, could be considered Creon's tragic flaw - his *hamartia*.

Creon's stubbornness is reinforced by his intemperance; throughout the play, Creon's rage is directed towards Antigone, Ismene - even the Chorus: "Don't anger me"[16]. Further, although Creon's dispute with Haemon begins with sound arguments from both sides, it quickly deteriorates into the trading of insults: "Son, you're pathetic [...] You're a real know-nothing."[17] Perhaps a direct result of Creon's desperation to preserve his status as King, his

[13] Heaney, 2004 p. 24
[14] Heaney, 2004 p. 44
[15] Heaney, 2004 p. 32
[16] Heaney, 2004 p. 14
[17] Heaney, 2004 p. 34

intemperance ultimately leads to Creon insulting the prophet Tiresias - an act of hubris which has dire consequences.

Creon's hubris is another instance of *hamartia*, and also inhibits him from consulting other characters. Twice, he recieves warnings from the gods: the initial burial of Polyneices[18] and Tiresias' failed sacrifice. Tiresias even explains to Creon his error: "The rite had failed. Because of you Creon. You and your headstrongness."[19]. And yet, not only does he ignore these warnings, he insults the gods' prophet - accusing him of taking bribes: "[Even the wisest man] is prepared to deliver fake truths on demand, for bribes"[20]. Offending the gods is arguably Creon's worst transgression: in his arrogance he is prepared to not only defy the laws of the gods - refusing to believe that they could be against him for desecrating the body of a traitor - but to *insult* them.

Furthermore, throughout the latter parts of the play, Creon, by cause of his excessive pride and arrogance, contradicts the will of the people of his city. Creon is repeatedly informed that his actions (especially his condemning of Antigone) are quietly opposed by his citizens - for example by Haemon: "What, [the people] are asking, did she do so wrong? [...] She was heroic!"[21]. Again out of hubris, Creon refuses to believe that he does not retain the approval of the city. This defiance, as well as the controlled, monological

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[18] Many have speculated the gods were responsible for the initial burial, due to the lack of incentive for Antigone to return to the body, and to the guards description of the event: "There wasn't so much as as scrape left of the ground. [...] Whoever did it was a mystery man entirely." (Heaney, 2004 p. 13).

[19] Heaney, 2004 p. 44

[20] Heaney, 2004 p. 45

[21] Heaney, 2004 p. 31

nature of much of his speech, presents Creon as a leader operating with a despotic lack of democracy, which an Ancient Greek audience would consider inexcusable. Indeed, hubris is Creon's primary offence; even Creon's repudiation of Haemon and Antigone's advice (thus far put down to pride) can be explained in terms of his autocratic faith in the legal system.

Crucially though, Creon redeems his lack of democracy in consulting the Chorus as to what he should do: "What's to be done. Tell me and I'll do it."[22] (this could be considered Creon's anagnorisis). Ensuring that Creon readjusts his tyrannical behaviour into line with the Ancient Greeks' democratic standard, before the tragic conclusion of the play, ensures that Creon's prior lack of democracy does not overshadow the deeper *hamartia* that Sophocles is attempting to comment on. Further, this point of the play, at which not a single character has yet died, could be considered the *peripeteia* - the point of reversal of the tragic hero's fortune. In that the aforementioned *anagnorisis* does not occur after the *peripeteia* (as would be typical of a tragedy), Sophocles conveys the power of the gods and man's relative weakness, in that Creon is unable to prevent tragedy despite recognising his wrong-doing.

In conclusion, Creon is presented as fundamentally good, in that he pursues that which he *believes* to be righteous. In accordance with the typical tragic hero, his ill-fortune is caused by his *hamartia*: hubris, in disregarding the power of the gods - and is thus thoroughly *undeserved*. Sophocles' use of Creon's downfall to communicate a moral lesson to the audience further reinforces Creon's status as a tragic hero.

[22] Heaney, 2004 p. 37

Reflective Statement (378 words)

Prior to the interactive oral, I realised that the historical context within which *Antigone* was written would be extremely important in my understanding of the play. I found the interactive oral to be extremely useful in in this regard. Firstly, I learned that democracy was just 100 years old at the time, and (especially in Sophocles' native Athens) was already considered vital to the function of society. For this reason, an Ancient Greek audience would have looked down upon Creon's lack of democracy; they would most likely interpret it as part of his *hamartia*: hubris. Further, with the introduction of democracy, the rule of law was increasingly well respected by the Ancient Greeks. In *Antigone,* Sophocles warns his fellow Greeks of the dangers of arrogantly rejecting religious custom in favour of the laws of men, as Creon did. I realised that Sophocles (perhaps) believed that the Greek justice system was beginning to encroach on the authority of religion, and he communicates this through Creon's tragic downfall. Sophocles also asserts his central argument clearly in the epilogos: "Wise conduct is the key to happiness. Always rule by the gods and reverence them." (Heaney, 2004 p. 56).

However, throughout our discussions I also learned that religion was a significant part of Greek society. For example, it was believed that a person's spirit could not advance to the underworld after death, if the proper ceremonies were not performed. This explains Antigone's otherwise reckless actions (as it was considered the responsibility of a person's family to bury them) and lead me to think that an Ancient Greek audience would have sided with Antigone, and might have renounced Creon's decision to execute her.

I then discovered that war was a significant part of Ancient Greek society. As such, Greek cities were under were constantly in danger of foreign invasion; indeed, Thebes (in which *Antigone* is set) was occupied by the Persians during the Greco-Persian Wars, which occurred 100 years before *Antigone* was written. An Ancient Greek audience would therefore have appreciated Creon's prioritisation of the city's safety above his obligation to bury Polyneices, because Polyneices had betrayed the city. I realised that its especially important that an Ancient Greek audience sympathised with Creon, as they would have been the target of Sophocles' lesson.

Bibliography

- Heaney, Seamus. *Burial at Thebes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004)