

Renunciation of Tyranny – in Sophocles' Antigone

"Overlooked" contradictions as the key to understanding this parable-like plea for a democratically constituted society

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Introduction

About 2,500 years ago, Sophocles brought to the stage with “Antigone” how an authoritarian regime tries to completely undermine personal ties. The piece is in the greatest clarity one of the oldest pleas for the opposite social constitution: democracy. As in “King Oedipus”, the Greek poet has hidden subtle contradictions in it. To this day, these contradictions are generally not noticed, let alone resolved. It is worth taking a closer look at this text.

Prehistory

The already introduced king Oedipus¹ fathered four children with his mother Jocasta: two sons and two daughters. After he had to give up his royal office, Jocasta's brother Creon took over the scepter for the minor sons. When they now come to age, they shall take the throne themselves. They decide to take turns governing each year. Eteocles is allowed to begin. However, he likes ruling so much that he doesn't want to resign. With power in his hands – yes, power corrupts – he expels his brother Polynices from his homeland without further ado. Polynices makes his fortune abroad. He marries the daughter of a king. One day he appears before Thebes with his father-in-law's army and the troops of six allied chiefs to claim his rights from Eteocles².

After a bloody battle with no sign of victory for either side for a long time, the brothers determine to decide the matter in a duel. As they kill each other in the process, the slaughter flares up again, with the Thebans, who had not laid down their weapons during the duel, then triumph massively.

Question of Guilt

What is it like when someone leads an army against his old homeland to claim his rights? Was Polynices allowed to use military force here? Egon Flaig, Professor of Ancient History, firmly denies that³. However, he overlooks the fact that in a play by Euripides on the same brotherly dispute – “The Phoenicians” – three different people, including Antigone, independently state that Polynices is in the right⁴. A clear position is

1 <https://www.manova.news/artikel/schuldlos-unschuldig>

2 Euripides describes in the “Phoenicians” how Polynices begs his brother in a dialogue to the end – in vain – to keep to the agreement.

3 Egon Flaig: “Ödipus – tragischer Vatermord im klassischen Athen”, 1998, Verlag C.H. Beck, Munich, p. 37 f.

4 Klaus Schlagmann: „Ödipus – komplex betrachtet“, 2005, Selfpublishing, Saarbrücken, p. 274 ff.

therefore already taken on this dilemma in antiquity. In the piece "Antigone" itself^{5,6}, it is not difficult to read that Polynices deserves understanding.

Details of the play

In the opening scene Antigone meets her sister Ismene shortly after the end of the slaughter. Antigone is clearly aware of the innocence of her brother Polynices. Creon, however, who has risen to the throne again, has issued a burial ban for him. Ismene hasn't heard anything about it, but she doesn't want to oppose it either. Antigone is visibly appalled at how easily her sister – out of sheer fear of being punished by the ruler – gives up the most basic obligations of family ties.

The City Council of Elders

The Council of Elders in this Thebes has now been convened. He cheerfully sings about the victory over the attackers and thinks his city is in divine favor. He seems very naive and unreflected: The question of guilt is not addressed. Nor does the council show any sorrow at the deaths of the young kings. After he has been praised by Creon for his previous services to Laios, Oedipus and his sons, Creon – as successor – asks him the question of confidence.

It is significant that Creon, who is only now informing the council for the first time about the ban on Polynices burial, presents the Elders with a *fait accompli*. Apparently he is not interested in what the supposedly "well deserved" committee has to say about it. And the Senate does not dare to reflect with a single syllable on whether this action actually serves peace, justice or the well-being of the people.

In a snap, Creon has downgraded the Senate to a bunch of supernumeraries. The latter submissively approves the non-burial of Polynices – and is immediately obliged by the tyrant to cooperate. The Council may seem uncomfortable with this, but it does not resist. The former advisory staff quickly slips into the role of a compliant vicarious agent.

Creon

Creon emphasizes in his first words how much Thebes must be in the favor of the gods at the moment. So his reign is God's work. If he were to mention in this speech from the throne that his predecessor Eteocles had unfortunately betrayed his own brother and thus

5 Sophokles: "Antigone". Translated by Wilhelm Kuchenmüller. Reclam, Stuttgart, 1994.

6 Mario Leis, Nancy Hönsch (Ed.): "Sophokles – Antigone." Reclam XL Text und Kontext (2016). The play in the translation by Kurt Steinmann; on the contradictions especially p. 91 (quotation from Goethe) and p. 80 (taking over the quotation from 10).

given rise to this bloody war, then the celebratory mood at Creon's assumption of office would of course be ruined.

According to Kreon, he was determined to stick to his "best decisions" – of course only for the good of the fatherland. He still proclaims full-bodied: "I will never remain silent when instead of salvation I see disaster approaching my people (...)" – but the further course will expose this as a pure propaganda lie.

A Guard and the First Attempt Of a Burial

Now a soldier enters the stage who, with others, was supposed to keep watch over the body of Polynices so that no one would bury him. This ridiculous wretch is the typical henchman of an authoritarian regime, a timid talker who would prefer to avoid the whims of his ruler, but is also witty and brazenly self-serving. He squirms awkwardly before revealing that there was an attempt to bury Polynices. He calls the matter a "worrisome miracle": Suddenly a thin covering of sand had been found on the corpse, but no single trace. Since then there had been no further desecration of the corpse by animals.

The council of elders immediately raises the question "whether a god was actually doing this work". But that only arouses Creon's wrath: the gods would never have any sympathy for the attacker! Rather, he suspects bribery. And he shows his full potential of brutality: If the guards won't bring him the culprit soon, then he will have them tortured – "I'll let you hang alive until you confess the outrage." With this threat, the guard is sent away. A tried and tested means of authoritarian rule: you accuse someone who then has to prove his innocence. This will motivate the person concerned to denounce others.

"(...) Nothing More Monstrous Than Man"

Now follows a choral song: "Monster is much and nothing more monstrous than man." Human achievements are praised: sailing the seas against storm and waves, tilling and planting the earth, catching masses of fish and birds in nets, taming and subjugating horses and bulls, the development of language, thinking, state building, housing – as protection against bad weather. And: "He devised an escape from formerly insurmountable illnesses."

With regard to the course of the piece, the choral song can be understood as an analogy: what man does with nature, he also does with his own kind. Tyrants hold their course – even in headwinds and high waves, sow their thoughts and plans in the tilled multitude, which then take root there, ensnare masses of people in their nets and are able to bring even the strongest and noblest personalities under their yoke. But there are remedies for

this too – the language, the way of thinking, the democracy as a form of government. One of these special safeguards devised in Athens was the "ostracism" – see below.

The song ends with: "[Man] now goes to evil, now to good. Does he honor the laws of the land and the law sworn by the gods: Highly respected in the city! But if he is not a right citizen, if he combines with the evil for the sake of foolhardy action: Neither shall he sit at the hearth with me nor be a like-minded person who does such things." This full-bodied announcement of the elders turns out to be an empty phrase in the play: Creon will turn out to be the most disgusting villain – and the toothless council of elders will just stand by, gape stupidly and approve willingly the tyrant in all his crimes, while he has only stupid phrases for Antigone and Haimon, who openly contradict.

Antigone's Arrest

The well-known guardian now brings Antigone and reports how he seized her during a second attempt of a burial. Once again their actions were accompanied by supernatural signs – a suddenly rising hurricane. The guardian is freed from the original suspicion of bribery and complicity, since Antigone confesses outright. In a gripping dialogue, she courageously defies her authoritarian uncle and brother-in-law, who reveals all his small-mindedness. In this situation, the council of elders can think of nothing better than to criticize this courageous, self-confident young woman: "The father's defiant manner betrays the child, she does not know how to bow to misfortune."

Creon feels his masculinity attacked by Antigone: "If she can afford to do that with impunity, I'm no longer a man, then she's the man!" Again Creon arbitrarily and without any clue accuses an innocent woman: Antigone's sister Ismene. Her arrest is ordered. Antigone is apparently to be additionally punished for her courageous resistance through clan imprisonment. Antigone confesses to her action again in front of Creon and points out that the people around would also agree with her if they didn't keep their mouths shut out of sheer fear. Creon accuses her of stubbornness and sacrilege. When Ismene comes along, she half-heartedly – and obviously without a reason – also confesses to her brother's burial. However, her commitment is – and rightly so! – immediately rejected by Antigone: "You have no right to do that! You didn't want to, I did it alone. (...) I don't like love that only loves with words." A few sentences later, Creon has both sisters taken away with the intention of having the death sentence carried out on them indiscriminately.

Haimon – Creon's Son and Antigone's Fiancé

Now Haimon comes to Creon. Here Creon immediately tries to force a decision on his son: love for his father or love for his fiancée Antigone? Haimon skillfully replies that he loves his father more than anything – if he leads him on the "right path". Creon goes into great detail about obedient and disobedient children. For him, Antigone is a ruthless criminal. He sticks to the death sentence.

"Whoever the people chose, he has to be followed in the smallest detail – whether just or unjust." So Creon demands subordination at any price – even in the wrong! The council of elders submissively agrees: "If age does not deceive us, it seems to us that the word which you [Creon] spoke was wise."

Since this pathetic troupe has already served three generations of rulers, their age must have been enormous and therefore probably also very much deceptive. In any case, sovereignty sounds different.

Haimon points out to Creon that the people clearly sympathize with Antigone and that he actually only wants to do his father a favor by informing him of this mood – which he notices more directly than Creon. He sincerely and credibly protests that he has only his father's happiness in mind and gives examples where yielding is beneficial. Here, too, the Council of Elders, in its typical way, avoids a clear statement: "Lord! True to his word, it behooves you [Creon] to heed it – and you [Haimon] to him, for both spoke ye well."

Creon's Claim to Autarchy

This really enrages Creon. A dialogue ensues in which he reveals his authoritarian face, while Haimon proves to be an honest democrat:

Haimon: To honor treachery I do not ask!
Creon: Isn't she [Antigone] infected with this evil?
Haimon: The people of Thebes say unanimously: No!
Creon: So the people tell me what I should command?
Haimon: Look, now you're speaking too youthfully!
Creon: Shall I rule here for anyone other than myself?
Haimon: This is not a state that just belongs to one person.
Creon: Isn't the state the property of the Lord?
Haimon: Alone you rule best in the desert. (...)
Creon: Slave to a woman! Go me with the chatter!
Haimon: You just want to talk, not let people talk at all.

Creon's undemocratic demeanor is abundantly clear here: he is not interested in the thoughts of the majority of the people. He sees the state as his property, which he wants to decide freely about, and is completely impervious to arguments.

Since Creon now orders Antigone to be killed in front of Haimon, Haimon leaves the scene. He doesn't give himself up for such a degrading production.

As a small concession to the council of elders, Creon now distances himself from the death sentence against Ismene. However, he sticks to the verdict against Antigone. She is to be walled up alive in a cave. With disgusting sarcasm he leaves the scene: "There she may beseech Hades, her only god, perhaps he will exempt her from dying."

The Eros Song and the Preparation for Execution

The Council of Elders now sings of the power of Eros, which triumphs equally over men and gods. Apparently that means: In Haimon's conflict of loyalties, Eros alone decided in favor of Antigone and unfavorable to Creon. The spineless Council plays dumb and so as if he had not understood Haimon's very political arguments.

When Antigone is about to be taken away, the council – Creon is absent at the moment – burst into tears. With euphonious phrases he accompanies Antigone to the execution: "Blessed and full of glory you go away into the secret of the dead. (...) And yet you redeemed great things: You perish, glorified as a god already alive and in the future in death." Antigone feels this – rightly so! – as pure mockery, which she immediately rejects: "Woe! I am laughed at! Why, by the gods of the fathers, do you scorn me before I die?" The council of elders now is offended and in turn accuses Antigone: "Your defiance penetrated to the end, but at the high throne of justice you fell deep, o child." As if Creon's brutal arbitrariness had anything to do with justice! And – after another complaint by Antigone about their fate – the council even claims: "Pious service is worship. However, the imperative of power remains insurmountable. Your own urge drove you to ruin." What a sign of inadequacy for these "Wise Men of Thebes" who here uncomprehendingly accuse a victim.

The Irreplaceability of the Brother

After Creon explained his decision to have Antigone walled in alive with food supplies, Antigone again laments her fate and at this point utters strange sentences that have repeatedly caused irritation in the professional world for centuries: "And yet, whoever is wise, praise that I honored you [Polynices]. For if I had become a mother, for my child, for my dead husband, I would never have defied the city with such an act. For the sake

of what statute do I say this? If my husband died, I would find someone else, and a child by him if I lost one. But if mother and father are already resting in Hades, a brother can never blossom again."

That is indeed oddly illogical. Why should we feel a burial obligation towards siblings is more binding than towards children or partners?

This line of argument has a basis: Herodotus, a contemporary of Sophocles, reports from 6th century Persia that one day a loyal companion of King Darius behaved improperly towards him. As punishment, he and all male members of the family were to be killed. However, his wife begged the king for mercy so persuasively that he left her to choose a relative who would live. She then asked for her brother's life, for the reason given. The king, who had expected her to choose her husband, was so touched by her choice that he let her choose a son as well.

The Prophecy of Tiresias and the Turning Point

Tiresias appears and describes his observations during the sacrificial acts: Several signs indicate that the gods displeased the non-burial of Polynices. Creon immediately suspects betrayal – the seer was probably bribed. After Creon has further insulted the seer, Tiresias again names the reason for the annoyance of the gods and the impending punishment: "For the fact that you have thrown down one of those above, let a living being dwell dishonorably in the grave, but hold him up here, who belongs to the gods below, who do not share what belongs to him, unburied, unconsecrated: the dead!"

In leaving, he prophesies that Creon will soon be visited by the vengeful spirits. The Senate is frightened by these words. And Creon now seems ready to give in and specifically asks the council: "What should I do? I want to follow you, speak!"

The Supposed Conversion

The council recommends:

The Council: Go, free the maiden from the crypt
and give the unburied man his grave!

Creon: you mean? are you for it should I give in?

The Council: As soon as you can! The hordes of vengeful spirits
overtake the guilty with quick steps. (...)

Creon: I hasten as I am. Up, up, you people! Call the others,
take axes, and hurry to that place on the hill! I myself,

now that my decision has turned like this,
will go and loose what I myself bound.

A messenger – an eyewitness to what happened – reports in the Theban palace in front of Creon's wife Eurydice what happened on the hill: "As a guide, I gave your husband the escort. There lay dead Polynices, mercilessly torn to pieces by dogs. First we begged the goddess of the way and Pluton to stop their anger. Then we washed the leftovers in holy baths, burned them on freshly broken twigs, and heaped up a grave of native earth on the top. Then we hastened to the chamber of the bride of Hades in the rock-covered burrow."

Here we have before us a very central key scene of the drama.

Creon's Infamy!

Creon here acts as if he were following the advice of the elders, but behaves in the extreme opposite. He turns the order recommended by the Council upside down: First, a most elaborate burial of Polynices is set in motion. How many days might the high heaping up of the native earth have lasted? Only then do they take care of Antigone's liberation.

Though Creon feigns remorse in his words, he shows no honest insight in his actions. What an infamy it is to exclude from the burial of Polynices that very person who was the only one who had campaigned for it from the beginning! And the actors on stage join in without hesitation!? So far I have not found this crucial point mentioned at all – neither in specialist comments nor in interpretation aids for students and teachers. More on that at the end.

Self-Pity and Cowardice

After the protracted mourning ceremony for Polynices, one is now on the way to Antigone's dungeon. Wailing sounds from there can be identified as Haimon's voice. The messenger's report: "He [Creon] utters the lament: O poor me! Am I a seer? Is this path the most ominous that I have ever walked? The son's voice lures me! Come on, you people, come closer, quickly, to the tomb and squeeze through the broken wall gap, push your way to the door and see if I can hear Haimon's voice or if a god is deceiving me!"

In this highly dramatic situation, Creon can think of nothing better than to feel sorry for himself in the first place and then to pretend to be stupid: Who else but Haimon could have attempted to free Antigone? And he prefers to send the others ahead.

The hanged Antigone is found in the tomb. Haimon, who apparently wanted to save her, holds her in his arms and blames his father for this death. "He [Creon]," says the messenger, "when he sees Haimon, cries out terribly, reaches out to him and sobs, crying out: 'Oh poor thing, what have you done? Just what did you have in mind? What tragedy disturbed you?'" Haimon reacts consistently: He spits in his father's face and draws his sword. Creon, the miserable coward, flees from the tomb, so that the son is unable to carry out the intended patricide and tyrannicide. Haimon then thrusts his sword into his own side and, dying, embraces the corpse of Antigone.

Again Creon plays dumb here: he should have said: "Oh poor one! What have I done? What misfortune have I brought upon you, Haimon, and you both?" But no. Negative report. Creon takes no responsibility for his disastrous mistakes. Never. Instead he whines. And cowardly he flees from just punishment. No sign of insight or remorse.

Creon as a Victim of Fate?

Creon's wife Eurydice, to which the messenger mainly gives his report, withdraws without a word. The bystanders are worried, the messenger finally follows her. Creon enters the stage with his son's corpse. In theatrical misery he claims to have killed his son, but immediately blames an ominous fate: "A god seized me, hit me hard on the head, drove me along a wild path, the step of his foot ruined my happiness. Woe, woe!"

He poses again as the victim – completely free of any remorse. The whole disaster is said to have nothing to do with him, his stubbornness and his ruler's arbitrariness, but is the work of a god. Creon's reference to the gods always serves as justification, never genuine religiosity: sometimes they put him in office, sometimes they – on the contrary – plunged him into misfortune. It is quite practical to be able to refer to such instances in all vicissitudes.

We now learn that Creon's wife took her own life. While Creon now also – apparently – declares himself responsible for this death, not a single word escapes his lips about the main victims of his brutal madness: Antigone and Polynices. His last sentence reads: "Unbearable fate broke on my head." He is a nasty tyrant who, when he has brought great misery upon his people, takes no responsibility whatsoever. Not that he – deeply ashamed – gives up office and dignity. No. He will continue undeterred⁷.

⁷ As depicted in Euripides' "Suppliants".

An Undignified Council of Elders

The caricature of a senate comes now, after he has supported all of Creon's decisions, with cunning sayings: "Reflection is by far the highest of the goods of happiness: One does not offend against the commandments of the gods! The greater the pride of the presumptuous, the deeper the fall that atones for the crime and teaches them to reflect in old age."

Until the very end, the council of elders turned out to be a ridiculous bunch, but then they still waved the moral index finger. The self-portrayal of power and its accomplices works in exactly the same way.

Political Message

Denial of Tyranny – Praise of the Ostracism

The play "Antigone" shows the rule of a self-satisfied, godless, poor tyrant who carelessly leads his people to ruin. The crude henchmen – like the guard – make themselves look ridiculous in their cowardly diligence. In such a situation, an entire Senate becomes an undignified heap. Even if he – allegedly – never wanted to host anyone who would break the laws of the land or the gods, the Council does not implement this declaration of intent. Even in the greatest catastrophe, Creon's position is unchallenged. The Council has no means of defending itself against this authoritarian fellow.

The logical consequence is: A tyranny must be nipped in the bud! Once established, it is almost impossible to get rid of.

The society of Thebes, which Sophocles draws here, forms a stark contrast to the Attic people's rule – "democracy". At that time, there was still a set of instruments at its disposal that Sophocles indirectly expressed great praise for: the ostracism. A politician could be banned for ten years by means of this "referendum" if he suspected of wanting to establish authoritarian rule.

443 BC – about a year before the performance of "Antigone" – a representative of the noble party and opponent of the democrat Pericles, Thucydides, son of Melesias, is banished in this way. He had conducted propaganda against Pericles, especially against the expensive construction of the Acropolis. This building activity was intended as a redemption of old vows from the Persian war, and thus also as an expression of reverence for the gods.

With his play, Sophocles seems to expressly approve of the banishment of Thucydides and the renunciation of aristocratic autonomy. Fortunately, the Athenians are better off than the Thebans, who have to stand by and watch as a self-satisfied Creon drives his entire people to ruin through his godless actions.

Call for a Conciliatory Policy Towards Sparta

The two quarreling brothers probably stand as a symbol for Athens and Sparta. Both cities had suffered their heavy defeats before the performance of the play. A peace between Athens and Sparta was negotiated and signed in 446/45 BC, but was also controversial. Erich Bayer writes: "This reconciliation between Athens and Sparta seems so new, so surprising that we cannot help but attribute it to a superior statesmanlike conception, none other than that of Pericles"⁸.

As part of such a reconciliation, Pericles had proclaimed a Panhellenic Congress to encourage the unification of the cities of mainland Greece. With his "Antigone", Sophocles must have advocated this peace with Sparta – as an expression of democratic interaction between these two city-states.

Perceiving and Resolving Contradictions

The question of how we deal with contradictions arising from different needs, viewpoints or beliefs is a fundamental issue of democracy: How do we deal with being contradicted – in the literal sense? How can a social system mediate between such contradictions? From my point of view, it would be a sign of the highest quality of a democracy if a society was able to resolve contradictions in political decisions in such a way that all its members can expressly support the result. This would implement the principle that freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently.

An appropriate way of dealing with a contradiction is to first recognize it as such. In a second step, the question of a plausible solution then arises. At the time, the ancient pieces served to train political awareness, through which such ability to reflect could be trained. Over the centuries of authoritarian rule, this competence seems to have been properly trained out of us.

In the specialist comments and interpretation aids for school reading, ignoring and not resolving contradictions is demonstrated. In the following I want to show how this happens using two central contradictions in "Antigone". For centuries they have neither

⁸ Erich Bayer: „Griechische Geschichte“, 1987, p. 227.

been perceived nor plausibly resolved. For this I offer what I consider to be a new perspective that tries to do justice to the logic of the drama⁹.

Contradiction 1: Non-burial of Children and Spouses

Of course, it is striking that Antigone claims, as quoted above, that she would never have disobeyed an order not to bury a family member if it had involved a husband or a child of her own. This defies all logic. In interpretation aids and technical comments I find five variants of the resolution:

1. This point is not mentioned ^{10,11,12}.
2. The inconsistency is recognized. It is concluded that this passage is spurious – it does not come from Sophocles. Here Goethe is often quoted, who represented this view^{4, 5,13,14}.
3. Antigone finds in her loneliness – marriage and children are denied her – only consolation in brotherly love, which is therefore of higher value for her personally, in her situation^{15,16,17}.
4. In this situation, Antigone is so removed from the gods that divine commandments no longer count for her; She now feels a special bond with her brother, for very personal reasons¹⁸.
5. Love of brother is superior because there is "blood commitment" in it. It is perhaps significant that this argument dates back to 1937. It is nonsensical per se, because there would also be a "blood obligation" with children¹⁹.

9 Of course, my knowledge of classical philological literature is very limited. If a similar resolution of these contradictions should be worked out in any specialist comments, I would be happy to receive a corresponding notification.

10 Theodor Pelster: Sophokles – Antigone Reclam Lektüreschlüssel (2005/2014), Full text and p. 19.

11 Lutz Walther & Martina Hayo (Hg.): Mythos Antigone Texte von Sophokles bis Hochhuth (2004), Full text and p. 14.

12 Thomas Möbius: Königs Erläuterungen Sophokles – Antigone Analyse / Interpretation (2003/2015), Full text and p. 51.

13 Wilhelm Willige (Hg.): Sophokles – Tragödien und Fragmente (1966), p. 1009 f and p. 1011.

14 Achim Geisenhanslüke: Sophokles – Antigone. Oldenbourg-Interpretationen (1999), p. 67 and p. 73.

15 Alexandra Wölke: EinFach Deutsch Sophokles – Antigone ... verstehen (2011), p. 44 and p. 50 & p. 123.

16 Karl Reinhardt: Sophokles (1933), p. 92 f and p. 101.

17 Hellmut Flashar: Sophokles – Dichter im demokratischen Athen (2000), p. 73 and p. 74 f.

18 Peter Riemer: Sophokles, Antigone – Götterwille und menschliche Freiheit (1991), p. 46 f and p. 18 & p. 32.

19 Heinrich Weinstock: Sophokles (1937), p. 127 f and p. 138 f.

My Interpretation

I know from my psychotherapeutic practice that a statement obviously lacks any logic. Illogical stories make me suspicious and make me question the deeper meaning of this passage for the person concerned. And that's exactly what happens in the ancient theater: the audience's attention is particularly drawn to this passage. In my view, the emphasis on a sibling relationship can best be understood as a reference to the "sibling relationship" between Athens and Sparta.

In my opinion, Sophocles promotes – symbolically – a sustainable connection between Athens and a city from its own motherland – Sparta. You have higher obligations to this city. If there were conflicts with any colonies ("children") or allies ("partners"), loyalty would not have to be sought at all costs. But with a city like Sparta, which comes from the same motherland, you definitely have to do that. By the way: The fact that the "brothers' dispute" came about was something that the Athenians themselves had contributed to: Sparta (Polynices) had been increasingly pushed out of the Delian League (homeland) by the Athenians (Eteocles) some years ago.

Contradiction 2: Order of Burial and Deliverance

When Creon seemingly follows the advice of the elders and wants to lift the ban on Polynices burial on the one hand and Antigone's walling in on the other, three variants of completing these tasks are theoretically conceivable:

- A) First Antigone is freed and then Polynices is buried.
- B) First Polynices is buried and then Antigone is freed.
- C) Both actions are set in motion in parallel.

Already Tiresias put in order what displeased the gods: first the immuring of Antigone and then the non-burial of Polynices. The chorus recommends the withdrawal of the orders in the same series. That's logic. In the event of a bad car accident, no one would first recover and bury the dead before taking care of the survivors. Variant A) would also allow Antigone's participation in the burial. And the end of the piece underlines: It would have been good to stick to this recommendation. However, Creon acts according to variant B). Variant C) is not implemented according to a clear eyewitness report.

But how do interpretation aids and specialist comments deal with this passage? In the literature I quoted, there are different ways of resolving this contradiction between the Council's recommendations for action and Creon's implementation:

1. It is left rather vague as to what is at stake: "[Creon] is now terrified, recognizes his crimes and urges reparation and rescue: '(...) I bound them myself, and so' I set them free myself ""¹².

2. The contradiction is eliminated by simply omitting part of the commission: It only speaks of Antigone's liberation – "Creon allows himself to be persuaded and decides to liberate Antigone, but it is too late"^{5, 10}. Or it is only spoken of Polynices' burial: "After the chorus gave him the advice to bury Polynices, he makes clear that to give in is self-denial (...)"¹¹.

3. A synthesis of these two variants is that the liberation efforts and the burial are named completely separately from each other¹⁶: "The ban on burial proves to be a sacrilege against the gods." The fact that Tiresias also counted Antigone's walling in as part of the sacrilege is initially concealed at this point. After that, however, exactly this is suddenly brought into focus: The disapproval of Antigone's punishment (by Tiresias) scared Creon – without mentioning his ban on burials with a syllable: "That's why he's so hasty with which he wants to free Antigone personally." And then: "A messenger appears and describes the way to the burial chamber, to which Creon comes too late (...)". Flashar conceals the fact that the messenger first extensively describes the burial processes before he at all reports on the efforts to free Antigone. So Flashar doesn't put the liberation of prisoners and the burial of the dead in relation to each other. The tension that arises from the question of the optimal order in which to withdraw Creon's instructions is faded out.

4. Both tasks are named and it is claimed that Creon agreed to them: "Creon now accepts the advice"⁹. Creon decides to follow the choir's advice¹⁴. Creon gives in and is ready to accept the advice of the choir leader¹⁷ or Creon shows understanding¹⁷. The contradiction that results from the order of execution as recommended by the Council and how Creon implements it is also successfully hidden in this way.

5. The contradiction is resolved by the fact that – incorrectly – the chorus' recommendation is adapted to what the course of action proves: "the chorus (...) recommends that the burial be carried out as quickly as possible and that Antigone be freed"¹³.

6. Hints about how the course of action was, can also be adapted to the recommendation of the chorus: "The liberation of Antigone and the burial of Polynices now become a race against time, which Creon loses because (...)"¹⁴. Apart from the fact that the sequence of events is described in a different order by the messenger, a "race against time" can only be meaningfully spoken of in relation to the liberation of Antigone. With the burial of the dead Polynices no such "race against time" is required. In the only meaningful "race" for Antigone's life, however, Creon himself probably very consciously built

in a significant delay by burying Polynices earlier. It is no longer a "race" – although Creon verbosely pretends to be in a hurry. The sentence already quoted under point 3 points in a similar direction: “This is the reason for the haste with which he wants to free Antigone personally”¹⁶. The messenger's reliable account of the course of action proves that Creon had shown no haste in freeing Antigone. [I even could imagine that he tries to use this time to actively get rid of her.] This would have been the first priority, if only to guarantee her – as the most worthy of all – participation in the funeral ceremonies in the front row.

7. The two storylines – liberation and burial – are separated: “The scene ends with the decision to first liberate Antigone and leave the burial of the corpse to the servants”¹⁴. Or: "(...) so that in a hurry, which stumbles on excitedly at her own expressions, he orders a solemn burial for Polynices and himself hurries off to free Antigone, who is walled up alive in the rock cave”¹⁸. Even if Creon had formulated his intention in this way, it does not mean that he actually had put it into practice. For what actually happens, we have a completely credible witness: the messenger. And he was – like Creon – first present at the burial and then at the "liberation".

8. The meaning of this contradiction is denied: Creon goes first to the burial of Polynices, but that has nothing to do with the fact that he comes too late to free Antigone – a demon probably caused that¹⁵.

9. An interpretation from 1937, the time of the thousand-year German Reich, praises and confirms Creon's authoritarian approach. He actually wanted to free Antigone first, but then decided – out of sheer fear of God – to bury Polynices first. After all, the gods allegedly only disapproved of Polynices' non-burial¹⁸. Weinstock does not seem to notice the absurdity of his argument: How could the gods take offense at the non-burial of Polynices, but not object to the judicial murder of the one who was the only one who had committed her life to it from the beginning? In addition, Tiresias expressly explains the anger of the gods with Antigone's walling in in the first place. You can see how absurd the interpretations of experts can be when they adapt to existing political conditions.

My Interpretation

Creon's actions – against all logic and against the order expressly stated by Tiresias as well as by the council – proves that he remained without any insight up to the very last (!). Never in his life could he bear to stand side by side at a funeral ceremony with a warm, loyal, loving Antigone, beside whom all his pathetic, brutal, self-satisfied godlessness would be exposed to all citizens. Creon remains tyrannical and autocratic with

his decisions – even against the revealed will of the gods. He would like to use all available means to delay or even thwart Antigone's liberation. For me, it is easy to imagine that in the hectic pace of Polynices' funeral he would take a few of his bodyguards aside and whisper to them: "You go to Antigone's dungeon immediately and get rid of this bitch! But make it look like suicide!"

He wants to stay at the helm by hook or by crook. He doesn't even take the whole catastrophic end as an opportunity to resign from his post.

Call for Critical Citizen Awareness

Sophocles propagates a democratic form of society with courageous and critical citizens. Like Antigone, they are said to refuse to obey authoritarian, self-centered rulers. It is fitting that the wise Pericles is said to have once said on the occasion of a eulogy²⁰: "We live under a state constitution (...) [whose] name is democracy because it is not based on a minority but on the majority of citizens. (...) We are the only ones who consider a citizen who has no sense for the state not to be a quiet but a useless member of it. Our people themselves make decisions or try to get the right judgment about things, and we believe that words do not impair deeds, that it is rather a mistake if we do not let words teach and teach ourselves before we, if necessary, take action. Because it is also an advantage of our nature that we combine the greatest daring with the most careful consideration of what is to be undertaken (...)"

In all kinds of political crises, such an openness to instruction from a large number of critical scientists would significantly improve the quality of decisions. But that's completely different in current politics – like in Thebes under Creon. Contradiction is radically ignored in a lot of governments and is apparently undesirable. This is an extremely critical sign of states with formally existing "democracy".

Our modern society could possibly adopt a remedy from ancient Athens: the practice of ostracism. That would be one of many fundamental innovations to strengthen democratic principles.

20 Thukydides: „Der Peloponnesische Krieg“. Translated by August Horneffer. Phaidon Verlag, Essen (without year), 2. book, 37-40.

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