

Heaney's Asexual Antigone in the Age of a Modern Creon

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Much of what is at stake in Sophocles's *Antigone* has taken place before the play has even begun. Oedipus has already killed his father and married his mother; he and Jocasta have already given birth to the two sons who will eventually kill each other in disputes over their father's empty throne and the two daughters who will be left to mourn the loss of their entire family; Creon has already sent down the decree that Polynices's body be left unburied while Eteocles receives a proper military burial; and Antigone has already determined that she will disobey this edict. Questions of kinship, death, and honor have already been set forth before Antigone has even made her entrance. From the moment she appears on stage, however, Antigone becomes the embodiment of these three ideas and the vessel that carries them through the play.

Due to ambiguities within Sophocles's play as well as variances in subsequent critical evaluations of it, *Antigone* often seems to offer more questions than answers. Antigone buries her brother Polynices; as a result, Creon sentences her to death. These points alone seem indisputable. The questions that remain often center around the ultimate drive behind Antigone's action, particularly in view of the apparent inevitability of her punishment. Why, ultimately, does Antigone bury Polynices? Many theories offer some explanation for her actions. Some present Antigone as a messenger from the gods, carrying out the rituals they require in order for her brother to make his way to the afterlife. Others hold that Antigone represents the sphere of kinship in her conflict with Creon and the state.

However, none of these interpretations of Antigone's motivation deal – directly, at least – with the problem of her potentially incestuous attraction to and love for her dead brother. In their readings of the play, many critics and theorists have struggled to resolve the problem of Antigone's tendency towards incest. Seamus Heaney has found a way in which to put such questions about Antigone's motivations to rest: in his version of the play, *Burial at Thebes*, the issue of Antigone's sexuality has, for all intents

and purposes, been removed from the play. Using Robert Fagles's 1982 translation of the play as a comparison, it quickly becomes evident that Heaney wishes to erase the problem of Antigone's incestuous relationship with her brother by simply presenting Antigone as a more or less asexual creature.

Early in the Fagles's edition, Ismene provides the first reference to Antigone's passionate nature. Upon hearing of Antigone's plan to bury Polynices, Ismene declares, "You're in love with impossibility".¹ This sentiment is echoed later by the chorus; when Creon says, "See that you never side with those who break my orders," the leader responds, "Never. Only a fool could be in love with death".² In each case, Antigone – although not directly identified in the second example, the audience is fully aware that she has taken on the role of such a "fool" – is set forth as a creature infatuated with that which she should reasonably wish to avoid. The implication of other inappropriate desires, namely an incestuous attraction to her brother, becomes stronger with the chorus's assertion that Antigone takes after Oedipus: "Like father, like daughter, | passionate, wild [...]"³ Because Oedipus's identity has become so fully entwined with his incestuous marriage to his mother, such a description of Antigone – and even the adjectives "passionate, wild" – takes on the connotation that she resembles her father in more than just her failure to "bend before adversity".⁴ Indeed, Antigone has inherited from her father this infatuation for that which she should not desire.

However, all of these passages receive a sort of whitewashing in Heaney's version. Ismene's claim that Antigone is "in love with danger" is replaced by the much more pragmatic statement "You are mad. You don't have a chance".⁵ Likewise, where Fagles's chorus mused that "only a fool could be in love with death," Heaney's responds in a different manner. When informed by Creon that they are "not to lend the least support | To anyone who'd go against the order," the chorus wonders, "But who'd do that? | Who would choose to be dead?"⁶ In Heaney's version, then, Ismene and

CRITIQUE

Heaney's Asexual Antigone

the chorus do not appear to perceive Antigone as the passionate being of Fagles's translation. Even later, when the chorus compares Antigone to Oedipus, the suggestion of inappropriate infatuation has disappeared – the Antigone of Heaney's version is not “passionate, wild,” as she is in Fagles. Rather, the chorus notes, “this wildness comes from Oedipus. | She gets it from her father. She won't relent”.⁷ The issue of Oedipus's incest has been replaced by a focus on his insistence upon discovering the truth; rather than referring to his marriage to Jocasta, this reference alludes to Oedipus's relentless pursuit of information regarding his father's death, despite the danger that such knowledge presented him. Here, we see that Antigone has not been driven by the same incestuous passion that plays a role in Fagles's translation, but has instead followed her father's example by unfailingly pursuing her duty to bury her brother's burial despite the fact that doing so will lead directly to her own death.

Even Antigone's own perception of herself shifts from Fagles's translation to Heaney's. During their confrontation, Creon and Antigone discuss relations in the underworld. Creon claims – in both texts – that he will still know his enemy after death. Antigone's responses vary, however. In Fagles's translation, Antigone asserts, “I was born to join in love, not hate”.⁸ The use of the word “join” here carries on the sexual implications present in the earlier comments of Ismene and the chorus. In Heaney's version, Antigone's claim shifts, most noticeably in the use of a very different verb: “Where I assist | With love, you set at odds”.⁹ Heaney's Antigone does not denounce or deny love; she simply does not endow this love with the connotation of sexual desire. Her aim is not to “join” but to “assist”. Again, Antigone is presented not as a lover coming together with her dead brother, but is instead seen as one who steadfastly pursues the completion of her duty. In burying her brother, she would “assist” him in his movement to the underworld.

Heaney's removal of Antigone's sexuality comes into view perhaps most clearly in one of the play's central – and formerly most problematic – scenes. Fagles's translation presents the audience with the most clear implication yet of Antigone's incestuous love for her brother and

infatuation with death. When Ismene declares that Antigone's plan is mad and refuses to help bury Polynieces, Antigone responds:

I will bury him myself.

And even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory.

I will lie with the one I love and loved by him
an outrage sacred to the gods! I have longer
to please the dead than please the living here:
in the kingdom down below I'll lie forever.

Do as you like, dishonor the laws
the gods hold in honor.¹⁰

The words “I will lie with the one I love and loved by him” clearly suggest a sexual desire associated not only with Polynieces himself but with the idea of death. This idea is compounded by the words “an outrage sacred to the gods,” which could refer both to the burial of Polynieces – which stands as both disobedience of state law and observance of divine law – as well as to her incestuous relationship with him. These phrases lend an additional, sexual connotation to her assertion that “I have longer | to please the dead than to please the living here,” causing the word “please” to resonate beyond the most basic meaning of making others happy. It seems that Antigone's desire for her brother indeed extends beyond his person to the very idea of death and the underworld, as Antigone describes the brief time on earth as less important than the eternity spent below, where she will “lie forever”. Even this simple phrase now carries the extra weight of the sexual connotations granted by Antigone's stated desire to “lie with” her brother.

In Heaney's version, however, the passage takes on a very different meaning; Antigone remains convinced of the necessity of her actions, but her response to Ismene's refusal to take part here omits the language that creates the suggestion of incest in Fagles's translation:

I will bury him myself.

And if death comes, so be it.

There'll be a glory in it.

I'll go down to the underworld

Hand in hand with a brother.

And I'll go with my head held high.

The gods will be proud of me.¹¹

In the most obvious deviation, Heaney shifts Antigone's plans to “lie with her brother” into more innocuous territory: his Antigone wishes

CRITIQUE

Heaney's Asexual Antigone

to proceed into the underworld "hand in hand with a brother". This phrase not only removes any question of sexual attraction, since hand-holding seems a more innocent action for two siblings to enact, but it also marks another important point of departure from the Fagles's translation. Whereas Fagles presents a very specific scenario – one in which Antigone "will lie with *the one* I love and loved by him" (emphasis mine) – Heaney's use of the article "a" suggests that Polynieces does not hold a position of singular importance for Antigone. Indeed, she has lost two brothers. By saying that she will walk "with a brother," Heaney allows for the possibility that Antigone's action honors her brother's role in the family rather than his own individual person. This Antigone asserts that she will "go with her head held high" into the underworld and that "the gods will be proud of me;" her motivation seems to be purely derived from this strident belief, as Heaney has removed the possibility of the other, sexual drive.

In Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*, then, Antigone's actions and others' perceptions of her do not hinge on her evident sexual desire for her brother and the idea of death. The question, then, is this: what does Heaney accomplish in removing Antigone's sexuality from the play? How does the play change when the audience no longer questions Antigone's motives for burying Polynieces – more specifically, when the audience no longer wonders whether Antigone's actions were driven by sexual desire for her brother? Heaney indirectly addresses these questions in the note at the end of *A Burial at Thebes* when he points to certain actions of the Bush administration as inspiration for his version of the play. "Just as Creon forced the citizens of Thebes into an either/or situation in relation to Antigone," he says, "the Bush administration in the White House was using the same tactic to forward its argument for war on Iraq".¹² In other words, Bush acted as a modern-day Creon by creating and enforcing circumstances in which citizens had to support his "war on terrorism" or face being labeled a traitor or, worse, a terrorist.

Heaney makes this point almost in passing, as the majority of this note deals with an Irish lament from which he drew much of his inspiration for the more general tone of the play.

However, the modern-day political standoff is unquestionably relevant to Heaney's treatment of the play. When Heaney removes the question of incest which could easily taint Antigone's brave, defiant burial of her brother, he in turn presents an Antigone who more clearly understands the boundaries which Creon has set. She derives her motivations entirely from her duty to her brother and buries him not because she bears an inappropriate love for him – nor an inappropriate desire for death – but because she understands that Polynieces must be honored by this action. More than in any other version of the play, then, Heaney's Antigone truly finds herself in an "either/or situation" and accepts the consequences of opposing Creon.

By removing the complication of Antigone's possibly incestuous relationship with her brother, Heaney has refocused the play around a central conflict which remains unquestionably familiar to modern readers. In his "war on terrorism," Bush set forth circumstances which severely limit citizens' options: One must either support this war in all respects, or one has proven him or herself disloyal to the state. While this conflict does not remain strictly in the framework of kinship versus state exemplified in *Antigone*, it does retain the questions of death and honor embodied by the title character. Patriotic Americans should be willing to fight for the honor of their country, even – perhaps especially – to the death. To be an American under the Bush administration means to offer support without question or hesitation. Bush, like Creon, wants citizens to recognize that obedience is expected and defiance punished.

In the face of an "either/or situation" to which most modern audiences can perhaps uncomfortably relate, Antigone remains committed to what she believes is the honorable thing to do; even the promise of death cannot dissuade her. While opposition in the era of this Bush administration does not translate into an immediate death sentence, it does require a certain brave commitment to ideals and willingness to accept whatever consequences may occur. This brave commitment is in fact what Heaney's asexual Antigone is able, perhaps for the first time in any of her incarnations, to convey. Unsullied by the dishonorable suggestions of incest that have plagued earlier Antigones, Heaney's main

character sets out to defy the state with honor in the face of death; modern audiences can thus admire her noble act while contemplating the “either/or” they face themselves.

The Author

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Notes

1 Robert Fagles, trans., *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982): 104.

2 Fagles, 245-6.

3 Fagles, 525-6.

4 Fagles, 527

5 Seamus Heaney, *The Burial at Thebes: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004): 72.

6 Heaney, 18.

7 Heaney, 30.

8 Fagles, 590.

9 Heaney, 34.

10 Fagles, 85-92.

11 Heaney, 11.

12 Heaney, 76.

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