Order and Disorder in Sophocles’ Antigone

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In the kommos at the end of the play, Creon, in his last utterance, laments in dochmiacs, “Everything in my hands is aslant (πάντα γὰρ / λέχρια τῶν χεροῖν) and a fate that is hard to bear has leaped upon my head” (1344–46). The final words resemble the question asked by the chorus of Oedipus in Oedipus Tyrannus, when he enters from the palace: “What daimon has made so great a leap upon your unhappy fate?” (1300–02). These words too are in dochmiacs, and while I do not want to press the analogy unduly (the verbal similarities are not extensive), the parallels and contrasts between the passages are rather striking. Oedipus is an object of horror and pity combined (δεῖν ἰδεῖν πάθος 1297) as a result of what has happened to him and what he has done to himself; the chorus’s reproach of Creon is for what he has done to others and is unmixed with pity (whatever the audience may feel). But it is to the preceding phrase, πάντα . . . λέχρια τῶν χεροῖν, that I wish to call attention. Λέχριος, “aslant,” “leaning sideways,” is a striking word in this context, though it is not in itself remarkable. Its one other use in extant Sophocles is in Oedipus at Colonus, describing Oedipus’s uncomfortable sideways shift in obedience to the demand of the chorus that he remove himself from the forbidden area of the shrine of the Eumenides (195). Usually it merely suggests a “leaning” position and is fairly colorless. In Euripides, however, where it occurs twice, both occasions are sinister. One is the ominous moment, in Medea, when the young princess, as she walks daintily, enjoying her new finery and admiring herself, suddenly begins to feel the effects of Medea’s poison and tilts sideways and staggers back (λέχρια πάλιν / χορεῖ 1168–69). The other is in Hecuba (1026), in a metaphor of falling overboard; the text of the passage is not entirely certain (though the word λέχριος is), but there is no doubt that it, like the Medea passage, depicts a situation out of control.

At Antigone 1344–45, it is reasonable to think that as Creon utters these words he is holding the corpse of Haemon in his arms. As he enters, at line 1257, the words of the chorus can be taken to indicate that he has Haemon in his arms (μνήμ᾽ ἐπίσημον διὰ χειρὸς ἔχων 1258). It is doubtful whether the actor would continue to hold this load for the nearly
one hundred following lines,¹ but there is nothing to prevent our supposing that at both 1285 and 1345 the body is in Creon’s arms, whatever may have been its placement in between. So far as visual impact is concerned, it is unquestionably more effective for Creon to have the body in his arms as he enters. It is uncertain that the phrase διὰ χειρῶν, especially in the singular, can confidently be taken to mean “in his arms,” and διὰ χειρῶν at 916 has a different force.² But if we accept the tableau of the father with his son’s dead body aslant in his arms, the position of Haemon’s body is strikingly like that of the son in the traditional pietà of Christian art. The grouping, with the dead body aslant, occurs also in ancient Greek art, in the vase-painting by Douris that depicts Eos holding her dead son Tithonus.³ The scene at the end of Antigone gains in pathos by its simultaneous evocation and implicit parody of the maternal protectiveness portrayed by the pietà and the vase painting. Even without our assuming the physical enactment, the phrase alone suggests this irony.

From this last picture of Creon let us move back to his first appearance. The gods have set the city upright, he declares, after shaking it with a great shaking. The metaphor in πολλαὶ σάλῳ σείσαντες (163) is either of an earthquake or, more probably, in view of other Sophoclean usage (especially the metaphor later in this speech, at 190), of a ship in heavy seas. The language of regained stability continues: The city was formerly set upright by Oedipus (ἀρθροῦ 167). Creon goes on to say that the chorus gave their support to him, as they later did to the sons of Oedipus “with steadfast thoughts” (ἐμπέδος φρονήματι 169). This theme of stability appears in this speech once again (182–83), when Creon enunciates his belief that citizens must put the safety of the state before personal friendships, because “we make our friends when we are sailing in an upright . . . ,” where we can supply either “ship” or “city” to complete the picture in τῶν τις ὀρθῆς (189–90). Political stability is a precondition of friendship, and Creon will make the city flourish by laws that accord with

¹ Most critics, including Jebb (Sophocles. The Plays and Fragments III: The Antigone, 3rd ed. [Cambridge 1900] 223), take 1258 to mean that as Creon enters his attendants are carrying the body on a bier. Kamerbeek, however, in his note ad loc. (The Plays of Sophocles III: The Antigone [Leiden 1978] 201), holds that Creon is carrying the corpse, which he then sets down, to be carried by attendants at the end of the play. Rather confusingly, his note to 1345–47 mentions “the corpse in his arms.” G. Müller simply says that Creon enters “mit der Leiche seines Sohnes auf den Armen” (Sophokles. Antigone [Heidelberg 1967] 264) and makes no further mention of the matter, thus presumably supposing that Creon continues to hold the corpse. D. Seale (Vision and Stagecraft in Sophocles [Chicago 1982] 105) is ambivalent, first stating that Creon enters “actually bearing the ‘body’ of his own son in his hands,” but adding at once that “the other possibility” is that the body is on a bier.

² The very ambiguity of the phrase has an ironic effect. At 916 it clearly means “under his control”; at 1258 the same meaning can well apply, whether or not the literal meaning is assumed. The dead son is no longer in rebellion against his father.

³ Paris, Louvre, G115.
this principle (τοιούτος νόμωσι 191). It is on these practical grounds of civic safety and stability, he goes on to explain, that he has decreed honorable burial for Eteocles and the dishonoring of the body of Polyneices, who threatened the city and its gods with fiery, bloody ruin.

Creon has thus established himself as the very embodiment of order in the state, at least in his own eyes. But the ominous tone of the prologue must surely affect our reception of Creon, even though the parodos, with the choral song of rejoicing in the surcease from confusion and terror that the morning has brought, suggests restored order. The prologue puts before us both the audacious proposal of Antigone and Ismene’s response, which expresses the very soul of orderly female behavior (58–64): “Now that we two are left alone you must see that we shall bring utter ruin on ourselves if in spite of nomos we transgress the vote of rulers or their power. Moreover, we must remember, first, that by our very nature we are women, not meant to fight against men, and, secondly, that because we are ruled by those who are stronger we must give ear to these commands and worse.”

Following Creon’s opening speech the chorus, with what I suppose may be called ἔμπεδα φρονήματα, declare (211–14), in effect, “Anything you say, Creon; you can make any law you like, about the dead or about us who are still alive.” The chorus are stolidly for authority, no matter what; they will obey any law Creon imposes. Their subservience is understandable. The attack of the Seven is still a terrifying presence in their minds, as the parodos has shown, and Creon’s address is formidable. Yet there is in their immediately following words, when they misunderstand Creon’s order and demur at standing guard over the body (216), and perhaps also in the emphatic ooí (211), a suggestion of reserve, if not dissent.

Order apparently reigns, then, for everything and everybody, except, of course, Antigone. Though she has for now disappeared from the action, she is as a result of the prologue very much a presence. Her reference to the ills of foes coming upon friends (10) is especially relevant to my topic, introducing as it does a specific note of “disorder.” But so far as Creon and the chorus are concerned, the air of stability is first threatened by the arrival of the guard, with his shuffling, irresolute, sub-comic manner and his disturbing report. The façade of orderliness totters a little under the impact of the guard’s behavior, so strongly in contrast with Creon’s authoritarian manner, and the initial response of the chorus, who wonder if the reported burial of Polyneices might not have been “divinely impelled” (θείλατον 278), brings further disturbance. Θείλατον is a strong word and it shakes Creon, who has assumed and continues to assume, in his angry reply to the

4 While Ismene here accepts Creon’s kerugma as nomos, Antigone never so refers to it except in scorn (452, 847).

elders, that he is the protector of the gods as well as of the citizens of Thebes. He is the bulwark of Thebes against the danger of fire to the "pillared shrines" of the gods, and against the "scattering" of the laws of Thebes that Polyneices and his allies threatened (280–88). Later in the same speech Creon makes it clear, by his reference to dissenters within the city, that the order he has established is after all not very firm, even in his mind. Also, the fact that the guard, for all his shuffling manner, bests Creon in their verbal exchanges undermines the impression of firm decisiveness that Creon sought to project.

In the great scene of confrontation between Creon and Antigone, in the next episode, the contrast between Creon’s nomoi and the agrapta nomima that command Antigone’s loyalty finds its most decisive statement, and it is this scene above all, I believe, that has created the long-prevalent but difficult belief that these two positions represent two interpretations, both partially valid and both inadequate, of what is right in the apparent dilemma which the play presents. These are the two “fragile goodnesses” that Martha Nussbaum describes in her examination of the play in her study of Greek morality in the drama and philosophy of the fifth and fourth centuries.6 She regards the play as constituting a prime example of fifth-century discussions of human conduct, with both the principal characters seeking in vain to find moral safety in inadequate concepts of right conduct. Both are fragile goodnesses because both antagonists are intransigent, unable to bend to the exigencies of a complex situation. I shall return to Nussbaum’s analysis later, because I think that the persistent theme of order in the play suggests that this view does not adequately describe the behavior of Creon.

A brief exchange the interpretation of which is important for my argument occurs later in this episode. Antigone asserts (504–07) that “these men” (by which she can only mean the chorus) would agree that what she has done is properly a cause for kleos, not punishment, if they were not afraid to say what they think. Not so, Creon answers: σὺ τοῦτο μούνη τῶνδε Κοχμείων ὀρῶς (508). I take this to mean, “You alone have this view, differing from these Thebans present.” Creon cannot mean all the Thebans; the word τῶνδε indicates “those present,” and since we are told, in the first episode, that the meeting of Creon and the chorus is private (ἐκ πάντων δίχα 164) we are not to suppose that those present represent the general populace of Thebes. They are a group distinguished by their loyalty to the dynasty (165–74). Antigone’s rejoinder (509) is: “These men too have this view, but they keep their mouths shut for you.” Whereupon Creon answers, in what I think can be taken as genuine astonishment, “Are you not ashamed to judge differently from them?” The question is not a repetition of what he has said, namely that only Antigone, of those present, judges it glorious to have buried Polyneices. Creon is here concerned not

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about the morality of burial but about obedience. Antigone’s defiance contravenes the peitharchia Creon has earlier stressed and anticipates the emphasis on kosmos that is a feature of the encounter between Creon and Haemon. Creon is characterizing not the act of burial but Antigone’s disobedience; it is in this that he finds a lack of aids. This part of the episode ends with Creon’s angry declaration that “No woman shall rule as long as I am alive” (525), a resolve that is a part of Creon’s fear of disorder. Antigone’s unfeminine audacity, in such strong contrast with Ismene’s proper outlook, provokes Creon’s anger because it is an offense against his sense of order.

The first overt questioning of Creon’s order, apart from Antigone’s disobedience, comes in the next episode, the confrontation with Haemon. The pattern of the incident is like that involving Creon, the chorus, and the guard, in Episode One. In Episode Three, Haemon’s opening words (635-38) create, on the surface, an initial presumption of wisdom on Creon’s part, obedience on Haemon’s. Haemon tells Creon, σ我当时 γνώμαις ἔχων / χρηστάς ἀπορθοῖς. These words mean, literally, “having good counsels you set them out straight before me,” or, possibly, “you set me straight.” The verb ἀπορθῶ, “set straight,” is rare. Its infrequent other uses show that it can mean to “set” either “straight up” or “straight on.” There are no examples elsewhere in which the meaning is to set a person straight, and it seems more probable, therefore, that the implied object here is γνώμαις rather than με. “Straight up” is the commoner meaning, as it is with ὀρθῶ, and the noun ἀπόρθωμα, in its one appearance, in an inscription, refers to setting something up in a temple. Nevertheless, “straight on” seems to be the meaning here, in view of the following words, αἷς ἐφέσωμαι. In either case, Haemon is declaring that his father’s gnomai are “straight,” and that is doubtless what Creon wants to hear. A note of doubt is introduced by Haemon’s closing phrase in this opening speech, σῷ κακλῶς ἤγομενον (638). Jebb, among others, refuses to see this hint, insisting that Haemon’s “deference is unqualified,” but the suggestion is there, whether or not Haemon intends it, since we have some grounds for doubting the absoluteness of Creon’s wisdom, not only from Antigone’s contrary view but also from the uneasiness expressed by the chorus.

But Creon is satisfied with his son’s answer and proceeds to lecture him on the merits of obedience. His emphasis is on the need of order within the family, on the grounds that “If I nurture disorder within the genos, I shall certainly nurture it in those outside the genos” (659-60). From the family Creon’s lecture proceeds to the city, and his authoritarianism becomes ever more dominant, one might even say more obsessive: “Whomever the city

7 IG 9(1). 691. 2, a third century B.C. Corcyrean inscription.
8 Cf. ἔξορθω (83) and τῷ όρθῳ (1158).
9 In general, however, the concept of “straightness” in the language of the play is “straight up,” as in the ship in Episode One (162-63) and the ship that appears later in the present episode (715-17).
10 Jebb (above, note 1) note ad loc.
may appoint, he must be obeyed in all matters, be they small and just or the opposite” (666–67). Whether Creon is justified in calling himself appointed by the city may be doubted, in view of his statement (173–74) that he holds all power by virtue of his relationship to the dead brothers. (There is no suggestion in this passage of appointment other than by himself.) Creon continues his lecture (675 ff.), inveighing against the destructiveness of anarchy and extolling the virtues of peitharchia, to which most of those who enjoy stable lives (τῶν ὁμομένων) owe their safety.11 One more word of Creon’s speech is relevant to my topic; Creon draws the following conclusion: We must defend τὰ κοσμοσμενα, i.e. the orderliness of obedience to Creon. And, finally, says Creon, we must keep women in their place. This is an integral part of Creon’s κοσμοσμενα.

There is irony in the grave reply of the chorus, though they perhaps do not intend it, when they declare that Creon seems to them to have spoken φρονούντως, “unless we are being deceived by our old age.” We may recall that their first effort in judgment, when they suggest that the burial may have been θεηλατον, is greeted by Creon’s enraged taunt that their words are showing them to be foolish as well as old.

Haemon’s response begins mildly, as he takes up his father’s theme of uprightness, avowing that he can in no way find that Creon has not spoken ὅθεως; but the agreement does not last long. After declaring that the city as a whole supports Antigone, Haemon lectures his father: Do not keep within you one ethos alone, namely that what you say, and nothing else, ὅθεως ἔχει. The illustrative images that he proceeds to introduce, the unbending tree and the ship with sail unslackened, emphasize the danger of loss of stability: The tree is destroyed root and branch (αὐτῷ πρεμινα), and the ship’s captain ends his voyage capsized (712–17).

But Creon has not yet changed his sense of what is orderly. His reply to Haemon’s urging that he examine not his age but his erga, i.e. his action in defending Antigone as he has just done, is the rhetorical question (730), “Is it an ergon to revere those who are disorderly (τοὺς ἀκοσμούντας σέβειν)?” In other words, in Creon’s eyes Haemon is now guilty of supporting disorder, the very fault that in his preceding lecture to his son he said that he was determined not to nourish: τὰ ἔγγενη ἀκοσμα θρέψει (659–60). Creon has, after all, nourished disorder within the family.

The exchange between father and son leads next into the related imagery of disease, and the two images, of health and order, continue to be linked in Creon’s scene with Teiresias. To the stern warning of Teiresias that Creon had better listen to him, Creon dutifully answers that he has not in the past rejected the seer’s wisdom. The answer of Teiresias to this is in terms of the stable ship (994): “It is thus that you have steered the city on a straight

11 Jebb (ad loc.) translates τῶν ὁμομένων by “whose course is fair.” But the metaphor more probably suggests staying “upright” rather than “straight on,” and in Haemon’s rejoinder to this lesson in politics the opposite case is stated in the same language.
course (δι’ ὀρθής),” with its echo of Haemon’s metaphor of the capsized vessel.

After the initial exchange, Teiresias gives his report of the ill-omened behavior of the birds (999–1011) and the failure of his burnt offerings. He begins his interpretation of these signs with the declaration (1015–22), “The city is sick, because of your way of thought (phren 1015).” He goes on to describe how the altars and hearths of the city are filled with carrion, from the rotting corpse of Polyneices; the gods refuse sacrifices, no bird gives a clear call. All is in confusion; the whole of nature, it seems, is out of order. In short, Teiresias makes it inescapably clear that the law imposed by Creon, who thought that he was acting on behalf of the gods of Thebes by bringing just vengeance on one who meant to scatter (διασκεδάων 287) their laws, is an offense against the gods of Thebes.

After an angry exchange, in which Creon rejects the advice of Teiresias to bury the body, Teiresias utters what he has just described as τάξινητα δύνα ἐφευνόν (1060), “what is in my mind and ought not to be stirred,” i.e., what ought not to have to be said and would not have been said were Creon less intransigent. Some parts of Teiresias’s speech beginning at 1064 present incidental problems of interpretation, but the general meaning is clear. Creon has got matters out of order. He has cast down below what belongs above, by housing Antigone in a tomb, and has kept in this world a corpse that belongs to the nether gods. This is a matter, Teiresias continues, in which neither Creon nor the upper gods have any place; by his action (tade) Creon has violated them. Creon, the would-be man of law and order, has turned basic natural order upside down. Almost as devastating, for one who wants to bring order to his city, is what Teiresias goes on to say (1080–83), that all the cities around are hostile, because animals or birds have carried the unholy stench of carrion to their city hearths. There could be no more complete rejection of Creon’s sense of order.

12 Most of these problems have no specific relevance here, but the following points should be noted. Dawe’s text at the end of 1070 has his conjecture θών for the MSS’ θεών. His arguments for this reading (Studies in the Text of Sophocles III [Leiden 1978] 113–14) are, first, that “it is impossible that ἄμοιρον can stand for ταφής ἄμοιρον,” and, secondly, that 1068 and 1070 “were clearly designed to be” parallel; θεών, of course, interferes with the parallel. But ἄμοιρον does not create any real problem; the context is enough to suggest that the corpse is without a share of what is proper for the dead. The parallel would be appropriate, but Dawe’s way of achieving it is not. Θώος and the verb θέω are appropriate for sacrificial offerings to a god or, possibly, to a hero, but not for an ordinary mortal. The evidence presented in J. Casabona’s comprehensive Recherches sur le vocabulaire des sacrifices en grec (Aix 1966) 85, 110–11, 116–17, appears to rule out the use of θώος in this context. (I am indebted to Professor Kevin Clinton for advice on this point.) A. Brown, Sophocles. Antigone (Warminster 1987) proposes σχεθῶν, but while this has the merit of providing a parallel to βαλλόν in 1068, the combination ἐξετα... σχεθοῦν is too unattractive to attribute to Sophocles.

Dawe’s athetesis of 1072–73 is not necessary. The meaning of these lines seems clearly enough to be that οἱ κάτωθεν are properly assigned to the nether gods and are not the business of Creon or the gods above; the subject of βιοζονταῖ is easily supplied from ὄν.
The note of disorder continues. When Creon, cowed at last by Teiresias's ominous words, turns to the chorus for advice they tell him to go and release the girl and build a tomb for Polynices, and the episode ends as Creon charges off, fearing that he would have done better to preserve the established laws (τοὺς καθεστῶτας νόμους 1113-14) throughout his life. But he proceeds to put matters in reverse order, building the tomb for Polynices first and then moving to Antigone's place of entombment. Many critics defend this "order" of events, on the grounds that it is the non-burial of Polynices that angers the gods. But in fact Teiresias's words concerning the disorder that Creon has created condemn both sides of the disorder, and it is therefore not thematically insignificant that Creon proceeds to do the reverse of what the chorus advise.13

By the end of the play, the disorder of Creon's intended order is revealed in all its disastrous consequences. The picture that emerges is of course only one thread in the rich and complex web of this play's imagery, but it is a continuing presence, and the final picture of Creon with everything aslant in his hands is an appropriate seal for this theme.

I have mentioned Martha Nussbaum's analysis of the play in her book entitled The Fragility of Goodness. At the heart of her thesis about the play is the idea that both Creon and Antigone cling to too narrow a concept of what is right, and while both have a degree of rightness both are unwilling to compromise and hence both are shown to be wanting in practical morality. Their goodness is fragile. Nussbaum recognizes that Creon's stand is more open to criticism than Antigone's, but she allows him, as do most critics, a measure of genuine patriotism that commands respect. And there no doubt was, in Sophocles' audience, some tendency to regard Creon's decree as politically acceptable. There seems little doubt that non-burial as a punishment for certain heinous crimes was not unusual in fifth-century Athens, as Martin Ostwald has recently argued.14 We can readily agree with Robert Garland that "the degree of enlightenment shown by Sophocles was not necessarily shared by his contemporaries."15 Yet the

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13 While it is true, as critics have observed, that it is dramaturgically essential for the discovery of Antigone to come after the burial, this fact does not negate the significance of the order of these events. In a play in which the theme of order is prominent, it is hard to suppose that this instance of order is without meaning. The playwright was not obliged to have the chorus give the advice they do. At the same time, it would be wrong to think that if Creon had followed the advice of the chorus all would have been well. Teiresias's prophecy could not go unfulfilled. Kamerbeek (above, note 1) has good comments on this passage.

14 From Popular Sovereignty to the Sovereignty of Law (Berkeley 1986).

15 R. Garland, The Greek Way of Death (Ithaca 1985) 103. Nevertheless, I cannot agree with the view of D. Hester on this point, in "Sophocles the Unphilosophical," Mnemosyne 24 (1971) 11-59, an extensive and generally valuable analysis of the play and its criticism. Hester insists that Sophocles cannot have been so out of step with contemporary attitudes as to regard Creon's decree as unacceptable. The evidence of the play is overwhelmingly against this point of view.
severity of the punishment first proposed by Creon and the decision to leave all the enemy dead unburied seem excessive, even for a time of crisis. The assertion of Albin Lesky, that "Creon's decision is arrogant and evil," is perhaps too severe, but he is surely correct in stating that the laws for which Antigone fights are laws with which "the polis ought never to be in conflict." 16 Lesky's statement is brief and somewhat over-simplified. Antigone's motives are complex, and Creon is no doubt patriotic within his limited understanding. But his patriotism consists of a determination to maintain order in the city by a rigid requirement of obedience to himself. This is a matter not so much of goodness or evil as of comprehension. An ill-conceived decision is maintained stubbornly in the face of mounting proof that it is disastrous for all concerned. Creon's order proves to be disorder, not because Antigone challenges it but because it was only an illusion of civic order, imposed by Creon alone, acceded to in private by the elders, objectionable to the city at large, who approve of Antigone's action, and finally exposed by Teiresias as a prime example of disorder.

Throughout the play the theme of order and disorder is repeatedly expressed in metaphors having to do with spatial positions and forms. The prominence of this language suggests that παρειφων (368) may have more probability than it has usually been granted. The chorus, after singing the praises and the dangers of human ingenuity, declare that νόμος παρειφων χθονὸς / θεῶν τ' ἔνορκον δίκαιαν / ὑπίπολις. Most recent editors change the striking word παρειφων to γεραείφων, conjectured long ago by Reiske. The verb εἰρω means "string" or "weave" together; Pindar uses it for creating a wreath of song (N. 7. 77). Παρειφω is rare; Xenophon uses it meaning "insert" (Symp. 6. 2), and it occurs in an Aeschylean fragment (fr. 281 Radt), where the meaning appears to be similar. Γεραείφων certainly simplifies matters, but it does so by reducing the passage to a tameness that is no credit to Sophocles and by falsely stressing the doubleness of the obligation. 17 It is precisely the failure of Creon to see that the two obligations the chorus speak of here are not in conflict but must be woven together as a single tissue. The laws of the city and the justice of the gods are not divisible. 18

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17 Παρειφω is retained in the new OCT of Sophocles by H. Lloyd-Jones and N. G. Wilson (Oxford 1990), and is defended by them in Sophoclea (Oxford 1990) 124.
18 I am indebted to several University of Toronto classicists for helpful criticism offered when I gave an earlier version of this paper at a seminar of the University of Toronto Graduate Department of Classics. I am grateful also to Professor Philip Mitsis and to Patricia Kirkwood for their careful reading and their efforts (not entirely in vain, I hope) to correct flaws in my arguments and their presentation.