

Antigone and Politics of Plurality in the Postmodern Era

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Abstract

In Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, the heroine Antigone defies the state law, which Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, compels the citizens to comply with. Unlike numerous critics, Fanny Söderbäck regards Antigone as the public sphere and Creon as the private, reversing the old binary opposition of Hegel. By contrast, Söderbäck, drawing on Hannah Arendt's theory, emphasizes the importance of plurality in politics. In the postmodern era, plurality functions as a crucial factor in culture and politics, and, accordingly, I argue that plurality should be accepted in politics concerning *Antigone*.

Arendt draws attention to two aspects of Creon's paradoxical behavior. Firstly, Creon belongs to the private sphere, not the public. On the other hand, Antigone's action belongs to the public realm. Söderbäck (2010) mentions that "By transgressing the law she [Antigone] sets a new standard for lawmaking. She introduces a new model of the political, a model based on speech and action," unlike Creon (p. 70). Secondly, Creon reveals the disposition of a dictator. In this regard, Arendt claims that politics should include plurality, and Arendt's plurality is a crucial factor in postmodern times, in order to include minority groups in the community.

Antigone is, finally, sacrificed by Creon, and she is expelled to the underworld like an exile. From the postcolonial and postmodern viewpoint, Söderbäck and other critics emphasize politics of plurality, and it is meaningful that we should embrace the minority groups in our society because we live in times of diversity and fluidity.

Keywords: *Antigone*, Arendt, Plurality, Söderbäck

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***Antigone* and Politics of Plurality in the Postmodern Era**

Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*,¹ which was written in 442 BC, has been dealt with for centuries by critics and adapted for dramas, poetry, movies and various performances throughout the world. In *Antigone*, the heroine defies the state law, which the new ruler of Thebes, Creon, compels the citizens to comply with, and instead she obeys the divine law. Critics have been, especially, interested in the heroine Antigone who resists Creon, and they have analyzed *Antigone* through confrontation between Antigone and Creon. Most of all, critics focused on the two figures Antigone and Creon, and they discussed *Antigone* through the binary oppositions between the individual and the state or community, particularity and universality, divine law and human law, or female ethics and male authority.

However, German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and numerous feminists, such as Cecilia Sjöholm and Julia Kristeva, reveal different viewpoints on *Antigone*, and this Greek tragedy is ceaselessly re-evaluated from various perspectives. Among these critics, Fanny Söderbäck intends to reverse the old binary opposition of Hegel and others, according to which Creon represents the public, or the universal, and Antigone represents the private, or the particular. Söderbäck rather regards Antigone as public and Creon as private. Hence, Söderbäck emphasizes the importance of plurality in politics, and she asserts that Creon ignores this plurality in the *polis*. In the postmodern era, plurality is regarded as crucial factor in culture and politics and, therefore, I argue that in compliance with postmodern trait, plurality should be accepted in politics concerning *Antigone* like Söderbäck's claim.

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, Antigone complies with God's law, not the state law enforced by Creon. Consequently, Creon regards Antigone as a rebel. Antigone is the daughter of Thebes' ruler Oedipus and Jocasta, who committed a suicide, and her two brothers Eteocles and Polynices died fighting for each other in order to sit on the throne of Thebes. Afterwards, Creon, who is Jocasta's brother, becomes the new ruler of Thebes and determines that Eteocles should be interred with honor. However, Polynices² is regarded as an enemy because he attacked Thebes, and Creon commands his citizens to leave Polynices body unburied. Antigone, nevertheless, rejects Creon's order and tries burying her brother's body. For this reason, Creon sees Antigone as a traitor:

CREON: And now, thou answer me. Be brief and clear.
Didst know this burial was by law forbid?
ANTIGONE: I knew. How could I help it? 'Twas not hid.
CREON: And that law, knowing, thou didst dare to break?
ANTIGONE: I deemed it not the voice of Zeus that spake
That herald's word, not yet did Justice, she
Whose throne is beyond death, give such decree

¹ In his book *A commentary on the Plays of Sophocles*, James C. Hogan (1991) says, "*Antigone* was the first book of Sophocles' three Theban plays to be produced, probably in 442 B.C." (p. 126).

² Hogan (1991) mentions, in *A commentary on the Plays of Sophocles*, that "As the play [*Antigone*] begins, Antigone and Ismene, the only surviving children of Oedipus, discuss an edict prohibiting the burial of their brother Polyneices, who has been killed in battle while attacking Thebes, leading an Argive army against his brother Eteocles. Creon, their uncle, is the new ruler of Thebes and has determined to leave Polyneices' corps unburied as an admonition for anyone who would attack the state" (p. 126).

To hold among mankind. I did not rate
Thy proclamations for a thing so great
As by their human strength to have overtrod
The unwritten and undying laws of God . . . (445-55)

G.W.F. Hegel explains the conflict between Antigone and Creon through the binary opposition; that is, the critic defines Antigone as a woman, an individual and divine law, whereas he describes Creon as a man, the community and human law. From this viewpoint, Hegel argues that Antigone invades the public realm, the state law, and at the same time she tries to relocate the universality of the state to particularity of the individual. For Hegel (2003), Antigone is, therefore, the figure that attempts to privatize the public matter by infringing the state law:

Womankind—the everlasting irony in the life of the community—changes by intrigue the universal purpose of government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of this or that specific individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the family. (p. 276)

In contrast with Hegel’s argument, Arendt draws attention to two aspects of Creon’s paradoxical behavior; that is, on the one hand, Creon belongs to the private sphere, not the public; on the other, he is regarded as a tyrant. First, I will discuss why Creon reflects the traits of the private realm, not a public. Söderbäck (2010) asserts that from the viewpoint of Arendt, Creon should be defined as a representative of the private because “the whole concept of ruler and ruled” is seen as “prepolitical” and consequently the notion belongs to “the private realm” (p. 67). Therefore, Antigone does not refuse to conform to the state law, but rather Creon interrupts Antigone’s family rite, invades Antigone’s personal space and eventually privatizes politics like a household by using his authority as a ruler. In this respect, Söderbäck explains that in accordance with Arendt’s claim, Creon lacks “action” in his politics and instead abuses his “strength,” and, hence, he cannot be regarded as “public” (p. 67):

ANTIGONE: To thee is hateful all that I hold true.
Yet, to see true, what praise could I have won
More high than to have saved my mother’s son
From dogs and birds? — Aye, all these Elders here
Would praise me, were their lips not sealed by fear.
.....
CREON: Art not ashamed to be so unlike them?
ANTIGONE: To have done a sister’s duty brings no shame.
CREON: No brother, then, was he whom this man slew?
ANTIGONE: That was he; by both sides my brother true. (501-13)

In the conversation of Creon and Haemon, Creon continuously reveals that he intends to exercise authority over the citizen Antigone as if a father rules over his children in the patriarchal system of a household. Creon discloses his real purpose to Haemon regarding Antigone and, in this scene, he reveals that he tries to let his niece Antigone surrender to his patriarchal order, not to the state law. Therefore, Creon’s action portrays a paradoxical aspect as a ruler of the city because he applies the public authority to the family sphere:

CREON: She shall die. Oh let her rave
Of kith and kindred and their patron Zeus;
If my own kin must practise such abuse
As this unpunished, what will strangers do?
The man who keepeth his own household true
In loyalty, he only in the state
Is loyal, full-willed either to be great
And rule, or to be humble and obey: (658-65)

On the other hand, Antigone's action — mourning for her brother Polynices — belongs to the public realm, not the private. In fact, Antigone resists Creon since he intervenes in her personal matter when she performs the family rite for her brother's burial. For this reason, Söderbäck claims that Antigone intends to hinder Creon from ruling over the state "as a patriarchal household" (p. 70). Consequently, Söderbäck adds that "By transgressing the law she [Antigone] sets a new standard for lawmaking. She introduces a new model of the political, a model based on speech and action rather than tyrannical rule," unlike Creon (p. 70).

Moreover, Rush Rehm has a similar standpoint with Söderbäck and supports this claim. Rehm (2006) explains that Antigone's crying and her action, which is to bury her brother Polynices, are related to her family and her duty as a sister, and precede the state law, mentioning that "Antigone feels compelled to bury Polyneices precisely because *he is her brother* . . . Her compulsion to perform funeral rites for his corpse takes precedence over all her other duties and responsibilities, from obeying political authority to building a family of her own" (p. 189):

ANTIGONE: So runs his order. Now thou knowest all.
Now is the day to show thee nobly brave,
Or born a princess but at heart a slave.

ISMENE: Thou thinkst to bury, though the deed is banned. . . .

ANTIGONE: My flesh, and thine, whom thou deniest: Yes.

ISMENE: When Creon hath forbid? 'Tis lawlessness.

ANTIGONE: What right hath he to bar me from mine own? (36-47)

In this regard, Bonnie Honig also reveals the same stance with Arendt, Söderbäck and Rush Rehm's assertions in that Honig describes Antigone as public. For Honig, Antigone's behavior is not limited to the private sphere because her mourning for her brother Polynices can be regarded as a universal if it is considered as part of the tradition of tragedy. Honig (2013) states that in tragedy the protagonists endure "pain" and "suffering" before their heroic death, and therefore their lamenting and mourning are, in general, seen as universalized and humanized features:

Here tragedy's power is not that it redeems suffering, but that it exemplifies it in ways that highlight what many think to be the human's most basic common denominator — the capacity to feel pain and suffer. Of the various tragic heroes, Sophocles' Antigone is taken best to exemplify universal suffering and the ethical turn, both by those who favor the turn to ethics (Butler) and by those who oppose it (Rancière). (p. 18)

In addition to the characteristic as a private sphere instead of a public, Creon exhibits another paradoxical behavior; that is, the disposition as a dictator. He does not admit other citizen's opinion, and he speaks and behaves like a tyrant. In the scene where Creon communicates with his son Haemon, Creon mentions that "the king" owns the state, and he does not think that he needs to listen attentively to citizens' voices. On the other hand, Haemon resists against his father Creon's standpoint and, hence, Haemon depicts Creon as the king of the desert. With regard to this, through Arendt's argument, Söderbäck explains that "Power, for Arendt, is always 'a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength . . . power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse' (200)" (p. 67):

CREON: Does Thebes think to dictate our laws to us?

HAEMON: Only the very young would argue thus.

CREON: By whose will should I govern save mine own?

HAEMON: No City is that which is one man's alone.

CREON: The City is the King's. That law doth stand.

HAEMON: A king like thee would suit an empty land. (734-9)

Contrary to Creon's stance, Arendt claims that politics should include plurality. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958) defines plurality, stating that "Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech, has the twofold character of equality and distinction" (p. 175). Creon, however, governs Theban citizens with dictatorial power and hence Haemon depicts Creon as an isolated king in the "empty land" by using metaphor (739). Unfortunately, it is impossible nowadays that in a democratic state the ruler reigns over the people like a tyrant without accepting citizen's opinions. In this sense, Arendt's claim can be regarded as rational and suitable for postmodern politics, and Söderbäck supports Arendt's argument:

Being political, according to Arendt, is to act and speak in concert. Plurality is the ontological condition of politics. Action, as distinguished from both labor and work, 'is never possible in isolation; to be isolated is to be deprived of the capacity to act' (188). Action 'always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries' (190). (Söderbäck, p. 66)

With regard to Arendt's concept of plurality, Kristian Klockars (2008) summarized its characteristics with five elements, that is to say, "equality, diversity, active participation, the shared world as a central mediating factor and the interactive or communicative dimension-" (p. 64). Therefore, Arendt's plurality is linked to postmodern theories, which Lyotard and Hutcheon respectively state in their essays, on the one hand, and to postcoloniality, on the other hand. First, Hutcheon (1988) says, "Postmodern difference or rather differences, in the plural, are always multiple and provisional" (p. 6) as if Arendt stresses a "potential" and changeable aspects in "power." (qtd. in Söderbäck, 2010, p. 67). From this postmodernist viewpoint, Bhabha also asserts that we can render "truth" of politics "relative" when we embrace hybridity in politics:

He [Homi K. Bhabha] has seen the political as a hybrid and multipolar

space that incessantly qualifies meaning, thereby making ‘truth’ contingent and relative. He conceives of political positions as ever-evolving, always in a state of flux that allows for the fullest play of all the possibilities of representation. (Chakrabarti, p. 24)

In a similar manner, Lyotard emphasizes the social bond in postmodern era because modern people cannot live alone, that is to say, the critic asserts that in contemporary times people are all intertwined with each other in their social relationship. For this reason, according to Lyotard (1979), no matter what we are, today we are confronted with the situation when we are placed at the moment of interaction, “nodal points” (p.15). From this standpoint, Creon pretermits plurality in postmodernism and Lyotard supports Arendt’s plurality because she also regards mutuality as important in political plurality:

A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at “nodal points” of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. (p. 15)

Secondly, Arendt’s plurality concept functions as an important factor when we analyze the postcolonial texts. Although Sophocles’ *Antigone* is an ancient Greek play, from postcolonial perspective Antigone can be depicted as an exile or a refugee since she is placed in a miserable situation after her father Oedipus died and Creon occupied the throne. By violating the state law, she is finally locked in “the rock grave” and dies there (888). For this reason, she can be regarded as an exile when she is dragged to this tomb in accordance with Creon’s order:

CREON: Away with her; and in that vaulted tomb,
Alone and lost, obedient to my doom,
Let her go free whether she wish to die
Or live in that rock grave.

.....
ANTIGONE: O grave, O bridal chamber; O thou deep
Eternal prison house, wherein I keep
Tryst with my people, the great multitude
Below to Queen Persephone subdued.
To them I take my way, of all the last
And lowliest, ere my term of life is past; (885-96)

According to Söderbäck (2010), Arendt’s claim demonstrates that today “the distinction between private and public has collapsed,” and instead “the social realm” emerged and “modern nation-states” replaced old concept of nation or state (p. 66). For this reason, Arendt’s plurality is a crucial factor in postmodern times in order to include minorities, such as exiles. In this respect, Nicholas Harrison says, “minority groups are ‘unrepresented’ in a democracy, if by ‘minority group’ one understands a number of people with some significant attribute in common whose worldview and/or interests as a group are inevitably consistently ignored or rebuffed by the majority . . . ” (Harrison, 2003, p. 99). In addition, across the border, there is the

marginality for migrants, exiles and refugees like Antigone, and therefore hybridity³ intervenes in in-betweenness and various interpretations are applied to colonial texts. This hybridity, finally, incorporates the voice in the margin — their discourse and writing:

But today, nationalism and national liberation struggles are anathema to postcolonialists . . . a ‘cultural turn’ effectively replaced the revolutionary process in history with an endless process of ‘abrogation and appropriation’ of colonial texts and practices in quest of an identity that is ultimately and forever decentered, shifting, borderless, fluid, aleatory, ambivalent, and so on. (San Juan Jr., 2008, p. 158)

From the similar perspective, Gikandi (2010) explores the issue of postcoloniality concerning refugees’ identity in cosmopolitanism. He mentions that there are problems of “aggregating difference” and “the nature of journey” in transnationalism⁴ (p. 24). In aggregating problem, the conflict between the self and the Other occurs because of their difference. Accordingly, Gikandi and Bhabha focus on the diversity and complexity in postcoloniality. In this respect, Gikandi says, “cosmopolitanism, as Ulf Hannerz has reminded us, is also *a matter of varieties and levels*” (p. 24).

To conclude, Antigone resists the state law since Creon, the ruler of Thebes, abuses his strength like a tyrant by using his authority in a citizen’s household. Antigone is, finally, sacrificed by Creon’s arrogation and she is expelled to the underworld and locked in the rock grave although she is alive. She is, hence, depicted as an exile and excluded from her state Thebes. In this regard, Arendt criticizes Creon’s privatization concerning Antigone’s family rite. Therefore, from the postcolonial and postmodern viewpoint, Arendt and other critics, such as Söderbäck, Lyotard and Bhabha, emphasize politics of plurality in contemporary era, and it is meaningful that we should embrace the minority group in our society because we live in times of diversity and fluidity.

³ Ashcroft (2013) defines “hybridity” in *Postcolonial studies: the key concepts*. He states that “[t]he term ‘hybridity’ has been most recently associated with the work of Homi K. Bhabha, whose analysis of colonizer/colonized relations stresses their interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivities . . . For him, the recognition of this ambivalent space [Third Space of enunciation] of cultural identity may help us to overcome the exoticism of cultural diversity in favour of the recognition of an empowering hybridity within which cultural difference may operate” (p. 108)

⁴ Ashcroft (2010) defines ‘transnational’ in his article “Transnation.” He mentions that in postcolonial studies, transnational “might more properly be conceived as a relation between states, a crossing of borders or a cultural or political interplay between national cultures” (p. 73).

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