

Political accounts of justice  
Of Creon and the Athenians, how justice is viewed

This assignment will be comparing two accounts of justice from two classic ancient texts. Creon's account of justice in Sophocles' "Antigone" (as interpreted by E.F. Watling), will be explained and compared to the Athenian delegation's position in Thucydides' "The Peloponnesian War" (as interpreted by P. Woodruffe). An insight about what is tragic about these accounts will also be analysed.

Creon's account of justice is revealed to us through his handling of Polynices' body. Polynices loses his life storming the gates of Thebes, also killing his brother Eteocles, the defender of the city. Creon declares that Eteocles will be given all the rights of burial, while Polynices should be left unburied, where it lay.

Concerned about the threatening acts of the Athenians, the Spartans must consider their course of action against the Athenians. The Spartans become aware of the Athenians' position through their deliberations and we learn of their view on justice through their deliberations, war preparations and the mobilising of their army.

The reasons for Creon's actions are clear. Creon owes no loyalty to enemies of Thebes, and his interests are to protect his people, it is this duty that a king serves. "When I see any danger threatening my people...I shall declare it." (p.131) and in this belief he puts into law, *nomoi* that which he believes.

However it is Creon's belief that leads him to transgress the natural limits, *physis* of the land. By declaring that Polynices' body will not be buried, not fulfilling the natural cycle, he transgresses the limits, causing a rupture that forces his son Haemon and Antigone, Polynices' sister, to act and break from the natural cycle. Antigone breaks Creon's law to restore the natural cycle and bury her brother Polynices, and suffer the consequences.

Creon's act parallels the Athenian delegation at Sparta. The Athenian's actions force the Spartans and the Lacedaemonians to act. The Spartans must bring forth a decision to respond, causing events to break from the natural cycle. Through their actions, the Athenians force Sparta to respond, attempting to restore the justice of nature, or *kosmos*. Their actions are particularly important, because they not only transgress the limits, but also cause a rupture in *physis*, in the natural cycle. Thucydides points out that he "is confident that nothing great happened in or out of war before this" (Woodruffe, p.1) The rupture changes things in such a way as they can never return to how they once were, and people have to act to overcome it.

Creon's acts defines his character. He is committed to his belief "No man who is his country's enemy shall call himself my friend." (Watling, p.131) and as king he has the power to enforce this law. Creon does not let his policies be bounded by the "laws of the land" (Ibid., p.136), nor will he hear from those who think less of his laws, "(Haemon) The people of Thebes think not. (Creon) Since when do I take my orders from the people of Thebes?" (Ibid., p.146). Creon's character is focused on his view on justice, and he will take any measure to enforce his view.

Like Creon, the Athenians are committed to their belief of justice, and their view. The Athenians believe that because of their political regime and their strength, they are in the position to set the laws of the land and that others should be their allies, or be their enemies. They believe that the strong take over the weak, and that that is just. The Athenian ambassadors at Sparta point out that they earned this view because of all their work to create cities, and the Spartans owe credit to the Athenians for this. The Athenians will enforce their view, going to war with the Spartans if necessary, and with their own allies that do not support their view if necessary.

Both the Athenians and Creon use their position and status to enforce their view, bordering on tyranny with their threats. Creon announces that he will condemn anyone who withholds information about who attempted to bury Polynices, and the Athenians warn that it would be a wise decision for the Lacedaemonians not to make the "wrong decision".

Pericles, the King of the Athenians, is committed to fight against the Spartans, and speaks to his people with great speeches to mobilise his forces. This dedication to keep the Athenians fighting and motivated is similar to Antigone's dedication to bury her brother, willing to suffer the consequences of the limits of the land. As Creon says to the Chorus "There is always someone ready to be lured to ruin by hope of gain" (Ibid., p.132). These quotes typifies the Athenians, the hope of gaining the Spartans' land and subjugate them lures them into battle.

However not every comparison of the views on justice are similar. Creon is acting with the interests in Thebes' law in mind. Unfortunately he is so committed to this, that his view transgresses the limits of nature, he refuses to be bound by the laws that govern the land (Ibid., p.136), and this forms his fate and the crux of the play. This view on justice is not common with the Athenians, as *physis* holds less relevance to the limits that the Athenians transgress. The Athenians' view on justice conflicts with the Spartans (and their allies) view on justice, and the events that unfold are involved with those limits.

There is a tragic aspect of these two accounts of justice. The accounts of justice from the Athenian delegation and Creon bring about tragic consequences, events that transgress the limits resulting in suffering. The tragic events that result from Creon's actions are clear. Polynices' sister Antigone and Creon's sons Haemon both kill themselves, and Creon realises the fault of his judgement, transgressing the limits of nature. The Athenians view on justice results in war, as expected, but also the loss of many lives and eventually losing the battle. It is uncertain if the Athenian's view on justice can be blamed for them losing the war, as it is pointed out that a battle fought so long leaves chance to determine the winner. The tyranny that results of their rule may be a consequence of their pursuance of justice with their rule and transgressing limits of their natural purpose, *telos*.

When considering the parallels and differences when comparing the accounts of justice of Creon and the Athenians, one must think about limits. When Creon or the Athenians act, according to the Greeks they are defined by the actions they take, and their actions can respect or transgress the limits. As depicted in the literature involving both sides, when these acts transgress the limits, they can transgress the limits of the society or nature, to such a point that it can cause rupture that change the way other people will act.

## References

Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, (abridged) Woodruffe P. (Ed. and trans.) (year unknown, photocopied) Hackett

Sophocles, The Theban Plays, Watling, E.F. (trans.) 1974, Penguin Classics