

Marie Perlas

Professor Kerr

ENGL 1302.15

13 February 2015

*Sophocles' Antigone: A Paradigm of Civil Disobedience*

*Antigone* provides a conceptual touchstone of civil disobedience in classical literature. Civil disobedience is the abnegation of a person against the existing law and the exigencies of the state. The eponymous heroine, Antigone of Thebes, is an ideal figure of non-violent civil disobedience skirmishing against the tyrannical actions of Creon. Through *Antigone* delineates an ideal paradigm of civil disobedience because it illustrates the priority and triumph of personal morality over the influence of collective liability. Through his depiction of civil disobedience, Sophocles crafted formulaic elements in *Antigone* that demonstrate the limits of social obligation, the precedence of personal ethos over the state, the importance of nonconformity in society, and what establishes the legitimacy of an authority.

*Antigone* illustrates that there is a limit to social responsibility and a demarcation between “public and private loyalties” through thematic explorations “of the loyalties one owes to family” and “those one owes to the state” (Quill 29). Antigone’s burial of her disgraced brother despite the law to do otherwise highlights her belief in the precedence of personal ethos over the state. The act of burying her brother signifies the limit of her adherence to the state laws and regulations. Her actions against Creon’s law is “non-violent, public, and committed for the moral purpose of protesting [the] unjust law” which makes her a quintessential “true civil disobedient” (Tiefenbrun 40-41). Antigone’s defiance is “an act of rebellion” and “an attempt to subvert the foundations of an entire system of order which it is the business of the state to secure” (Spitz 392). Creon considers Antigone’s insubordination as a negligence of her social responsibility as

a citizen. When Creon confronts Antigone about the charges against her, Antigone steadfastly replies that “[she] [does] admit it” and that “[she] [does] not deny it”. She also mentions that the punishment “will not be any pain” and if she let her brother “lie there unburied, then [she] could not have borne it. This [punishment] [she] can bear” (Sophocles 137-138). Antigone believes that familial bonds and kinship occupy the moral high ground against Creon’s law.

Most modern day social movements progress through the emphasis of limited social responsibility. Henry David Thoreau stated in *Civil Disobedience* that all men has “the right to refuse allegiance to, and resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable” (Thoreau 4-5). A modern example of this notion was during India’s fight for independence from the British crown. The non-violent protest was led by Mahatma Gandhi, who was considered to be one of the most exemplary figures of modern day social activism. Gandhi pioneered the practice of peaceful protest and the willful acceptance of the penalty of disobedience. Gandhi’s philosophy of acceptance of punishment is essential to the concept of civil disobedience, which is “the violation of pernicious laws” (Taylor 99). Another example was American civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr., who similarly applied peaceful protest as a form of civil disobedience against the social obligation of following the laws of segregation.

*Antigone* demonstrates how nonconformity can progress into civil disobedience. Antigone proceeds to bury Polynices despite caution from Ismene, Antigone’s sister, who insists that it is not for women “to fight against men” (Sophocles 128). As a member of the royal family, Antigone is expected to follow the rules and laws. Her opposition to Creon’s order makes her a nonconforming character to social conventions. Her disposition fuels her ethical reasoning regarding her opposition to the law. Nonconformity is important in civil disobedience because it contributes to the development of the cause itself. Nonconformity allows an individual to

perceive ideas and events on their own accord. Thoreau wrote that “a wise man will only be useful as a man, and will not submit to be “clay”” (Thoreau 4), which means that one cannot just blindly submit to the rules. Antigone pushes her cause regardless of the repercussions, and this makes her a unique individual in a submissive environment where people conform to laws without attention to their own moral judgments.

Civil disobedience also questions a law’s legitimacy and moral foundations. Harkening to the philosophies of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther King Jr. addresses the “two types of laws” in his famous *Letter From Birmingham City Jail*: “[the] just laws and [the] unjust laws”. He added that “an unjust law is no law at all” and that “an unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law” or the law of God (King 77). In *Antigone*, the legitimacy of Creon’s law and authority comes into focus during his dialogues with Antigone, Haemon and Teiresias. Creon showcases tyranny by proclaiming that “he whom the State appoints must be obeyed to the smallest matter, be it right—or wrong” (Sophocles 144). Antigone’s insights differ from Creon. She claims that “the order[s]” from Creon “did not come from God” and that “[she] [does] not think that [his] edicts are strong enough to overrule the unwritten unalterable laws of God and heaven with [Creon] being only a man” (Sophocles 138). Haemon displays solidarity with Antigone’s cause and displays civil disobedience against his father’s verdict over Antigone. Haemon, after hearing all of his father’s justifications on the matter, tells Creon that he can “be an excellent king— on a desert island” (Sophocles 145) even though he previously declares to Creon that “ [he] is [his] son” and “by [Creon’s] wise decisions [his] life is ruled, and them [he] shall always obey” (Sophocles 143). Teiresias advises Creon “that only a fool is governed by self-will” (Sophocles 153), which means that constituents’ opinions matter in a legitimate governing body. Political Theorist Hannah Pitkin explained that social obligation is ought to be

given to legitimate authority. A legitimate authority is a law or a government “that [one] [must] consent to” and that an unjust, tyrannical government does not deserve consent (Pitkin 20).

People have a natural obligation to do what is ethical, and if a government is not just then they have the moral duty to refuse. Antigone feels like it is her just natural duty to bury Polynices due to the fact of “[having] a duty to the dead” (Sophocles 140) and tells Ismene that “[she] [knows] [her] duty” and “where true duty lies” (Sophocles 128).

Civil disobedience is a moral commitment to stand up against an unjust authority. It is an active social thought that buttresses, not just personal dignity, but national dignity unity as well. The criteria of civil disobedience in *Antigone* still emanate in modernity by shaping current trends in activism. Civil disobedience is a catalyst in modern democracy that brings to light social injustice and illegitimate power. *Antigone* exemplifies an abstract form of civil disobedience that provides a transcending archetype of determined commitment that still subserve modern social movements around the world.

## Works Cited

- King Jr., Martin Luther. "Letter From Birmingham City Jail." *Civil Disobedience: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Hugo Adam Bedau. New York: Pegasus, 1969. 72-89. Print.
- Pitkin, Hannah. "Obligation and Consent—II." *Obligation & Dissent: An Introduction to Politics*. Ed. Donald W. Hanson and Robert Booth Fowler. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971. 19-46. Print.
- Quill, Lawrence. *Civil Disobedience: (Un)common Sense in Mass Democracies*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan (UK), 2009. Print.
- Spitz, David. "Democracy and the Problem of Civil Disobedience." *The American Political Science Review* 48.2 (1954): 386-403. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 February 2015.
- Sophocles. *The Theban Plays*. Trans. E.F. Watling. London: Penguin Books (England) Ltd., 1974. Kindle file.
- Taylor, William L. "Civil Disobedience: Observations on the Strategies of Protest." *Civil Disobedience: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Hugo Adam Bedau. New York: Pegasus, 1969. 98-105. Print.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Civil Disobedience*. 2012. Amazon Digital Services, Inc., Kindle file.
- Tiefenbrun, Susan. "On Civil Disobedience, Jurisprudence and the Law in the Antigones of Sophocles and Anouilh." *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 11.1 (1999): 35-51. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 February 2015.