

he is more carefully drawn than some other tyrants in surviving tragedy (a different Kreon in Euripides' *Medeia*, for example, or Aigisthos in both Sophokles' *Elektra* and the *Oresteia* trilogy of Aischylos). Kreon's character is as significant and subtle as is that of Antigone, and although it may not be appropriate to call Kreon a 'hero' of the drama, a closer look at Kreon's part in the play will reveal that his character has its own complexities, shifts and developments: he grows from the ordinary citizen in to the tyrant, and then realizes his folly in doing so.

An appropriate point at which to begin such an examination would be Kreon's first appearance in the play. His opening words (162-3) are, 'Men, the gods have shaken the affairs of the city with a great tempest, but have set them securely right again'. These may be contrasted with words spoken by the tyrants mentioned above upon their appearances in those plays. In the *Medeia*, Kreon's first words to Medeia are (*Med.* 271-3)

You, sullen-faced, angry at your husband,  
Medeia, I have ordered you to leave this land  
as a fugitive, taking your two children with you.

Aigisthos, in both Aischylos' and Sophokles' plays, is in a similar temper. In the *Elektra* of Sophokles, he begins by asking where Orestes is, and then says to Elektra (*S. El.* 1445-6): 'You there, I mean you – yes, you, who have been so bold in the past ...'. And in the *Agamemnon*, Aigisthos appears rejoicing over the murder of the king of Argos; like Kreon in the *Antigone*, he refers to the gods, but where Kreon mentions the gods as saviours of the city as a whole, Aigisthos makes no attempt to hide the fact that it is his personal vendetta that has been helped by their work. He says that Agamemnon lies dead in the net 'pleasingly to me' (*Ag.* 1581), thus revealing his personal interest in the matter. Even considering the differences in situation, Kreon's entrance in the *Antigone* reflects rather less badly upon his character.

Kreon in the *Antigone*: A Closer Look by G.I.C. Robertson

The *Antigone* is one of Sophokles' most famous plays, and the clash between Antigone and Kreon has often been seen (particularly after Anouilh's re-working of the play) as a brilliant portrayal of the claims of justice against a typical tyrant, pitiless and villainous to the core; but such a judgment deserves closer examination. Kreon is not a simple character;

Kreon does not delight in the deaths of the city's enemies (contrast Aigisthos' 'O kindly light of the day that brings justice' at *Agamemnon* 1577, as well as line 1581 quoted above). Rather than gloating over the corpses of the enemies, he decides immediately to establish his position of power in the city and goes on to give a description of the duties of a ruler. Kreon's speech at lines 175-190 was quoted by the fourth-century orator

Demosthenes as an example of the proper conduct for a statesman. Kreon does decree that the body of Polyneikes is not to be buried, but this is what he thinks should be done in the city's interests, not his own. As is shown by the preservation of the speech in Demosthenes, the supreme importance of the safety of the *polis*, even above family interest, could be seen as a laudable principle. To forbid a traitor to be buried in his home soil was not unknown to the Greeks, but to decree that the body was to be left as booty for the birds and dogs would have been regarded as excessive. Though he takes a step too far at this point, Kreon is concerned with doing what he thinks is right for the city; he remarks that a man's character is shown by how he behaves when he is in power over others (175-7), and the audience will soon see what elements of Kreon's character are inappropriate for a ruler.

It should be borne in mind that the conflict between Antigone and Kreon is not simply a case of religion (proper funeral rites for a family member) against politics (power in the city). Antigone's refusal to accept the decree of the ruler of the *polis* is as much a political as it is a religious act, and Kreon's exposure of Polyneikes' body is as religious as it is political. Kreon, at this point in the play, cannot really be seen as what Virgil would have called a *contemptor divum* (of Mezentius at *Aeneid* 7.648). He is quite aware that the gods punish wrongdoers; he just does not see that his decision is the wrong one. When the Chorus suggests that the mysterious burial of the corpse might have been committed by one of the gods, he turns upon them angrily with the words (282-3) 'What you say is intolerable, that the gods have some care for this corpse'. And his point of view is not unjustifiable; that the gods should honour the good and not the bad was certainly an acceptable concept. Kreon's error here lies in the fact that he claims to know the gods' will, and that he refuses to listen to the Chorus when they suggest an alternative. He now identifies the will of the gods with his own decree, and cannot conceive of the gods seeing things differently.

At this point we are introduced to Kreon's 'paranoia'; it will recur at several points later in the play (lines 751-2, for example, when Haimon Antigone's death will bring about another, which Kreon takes to be a threat against himself). He says at lines 289-92:

... long ago [*palai*] in the city,  
men were muttering against my rule,  
shaking their heads in secret, and they have not  
borne the yoke as they should – by accepting me.

Even though the word *palai* can be used to refer to a fairly brief space of time (as indeed it was a few lines earlier, at line 279, referring only to the duration of the sentry's speech), here it seems odd, exaggerating, when used with the ideas expressed in the lines which follow it; Kreon has in fact been in power for less than a day. And what strikes us here is, of course, the use of the metaphor of the 'yoke': it is not one that would be used of a free state under a good ruler. Kreon misunderstands what it means to be in charge of the *polis*, and it is this misunderstanding of his role that creates problems in the scenes that follow.

In the next episode, the extent of Kreon's 'bad judgment' (for he belatedly recognizes it as such at line 1269) begins to be realized. Antigone has been caught in the act; we now see Kreon already furious at the news of the first burial and thus at the height of his anger (and hence more likely to act in an extreme fashion) when Antigone is brought before him. Kreon's reaction is revealing: rather than insisting on his duty to carry out a decree which he had already proclaimed (an argument which might have carried some validity), he lashes out in rage at Antigone, beginning (441-2) with a question phrased like the opening sentences of the tyrants mentioned at the beginning of this discussion: 'You there, bending your head towards the ground, do you confess, or do you deny having done this?' His longer speech a little later (473-96), with its references to restraining unruly horses and its invective against Antigone (and Ismene, who in fact tried to dissuade her sister, as the audience knows), shows a Kreon who equates his decree with 'established laws' (481), a phrase which suggests an accepted tradition rather than one prohibition imposed by one ruler in a particular case.

It is now no longer concern for the city that drives Kreon, but a fear of being worsted by a woman (525: 'as long as I live, no woman will rule') and of the humiliation of being challenged by a subject. In his anger, though, he does make a point that Antigone does not see (or does not wish to see): when Antigone suggests that the enmity between the brothers does not extend beyond the grave, and that their feud will be put to rest with their bodies, Kreon says 'an enemy, even when he dies, is never a friend'

(522). This is a valid point, and more in accordance with Greek beliefs than Antigone's suggestion; Antigone wants simply to erase the dispute in her family, put it to rest with Polyneikes' body, and declare peace, but in fact a feud cannot be so easily put to rest (Ajax in the Underworld scene in *Odyssey* 11 was still furious at his rival Odysseus). Having brought attention to a flaw in Antigone's case, however, at lines 524-25 Kreon ruins the point he has just made with his brutal 'go below [to the Underworld], then, and love them there, if you must'. In the next scene, this brutal streak reaches a peak at lines 760-61, when Kreon threatens to kill Antigone (to whom he refers as 'that hateful creature') before the eyes of Haimon, her promised husband.

In Kreon's argument with Haimon, he reveals the real reason for his determination to kill Antigone: 'I won't set myself up as a liar before the city' (657). He has painted himself into a corner and sees no way out; this is why, in the passage of stichomythia from line 730 to line 757, Kreon tends to answer Haimon's points with *ad hominem* attacks such as 'hateful character, beneath a woman' (746) and 'slave of a woman' (756) rather than reasoned arguments. He summarizes his own attitude toward rule in line 736: 'Should I be answerable to anyone else in my rule of the city?' Haimon replies: 'No city belongs to one man' (737) and 'You'd make a fine ruler of a desert' (739). Kreon's priorities in ruling have gone from a concern for the well-being of the *polis* to a fear of losing face by bowing to pressure to rescind his harsh command. (The audience may well remember Kreon's own words to Antigone at lines 473-74: 'know this: it is minds too rigidly set that suffer most').

When Teiresias enters and warns Kreon of the gravity of the situation, we are shown once more that Kreon is not a godless man. The prophet is the mouthpiece of the gods, and Kreon admits that he has listened to and obeyed him in the past (lines 993-5). The seer still has the power to terrify Kreon, who says at line 997, 'What is it? How I shiver at what you say'. Teiresias concludes his story with the admonition (1031-2) 'It is most pleasing to learn from one who speaks well, if one may profit from what he says', which is probably meant to strike a chord with Kreon's self-interest: it is for Kreon's own good that the seer says these things. It does, in fact, draw a very different reaction from Kreon: picking up the 'profit' theme, he reverts to his conspiracy theory, accusing all prophets of being out to ruin him for personal gain. He thus provokes Teiresias into revealing the future in detail (lines 1064-90) and only then does he concede (1096-7) that 'To

yield is a terrible thing, but to resist and have my spirit crushed – this is terrible too.' And so, although at the beginning of the play Kreon professed to have no interests but those of the *polis* at heart, it takes the knowledge of imminent *personal* loss to make him see his error.

After the deaths of Antigone, Haimon, and Eurydike, Kreon is left entirely alone; we may remember Haimon's words about his sole rulership of a desert at line 739. Kreon, in exercising principles that were accepted as proper behaviour for an individual (honouring friends and harming enemies), he has let his personal emotions interfere with his government of the *polis*; his embarrassment at being challenged in his authority, particularly by a woman, caused him to seek revenge and to categorize this vendetta as an action sanctioned by the gods and done for the benefit of the city as a whole. Anger and vindictiveness will cloud the judgment of a hot-headed man like Kreon, and this susceptibility is understandable in a private individual but inappropriate in a ruler. Kreon is essentially an ordinary man who has been elevated to extraordinary status; his quick temper and stubbornness have been magnified along with his position in the *polis*, and his respect for the gods, of which we catch glimpses at several points in the play, has been accordingly distorted. At lines 1023-28, Teiresias said that

To err is common to all humanity;  
but when someone errs, that man is no longer  
foolish or unfortunate if, once he has fallen into evil,  
he seeks a remedy and does not remain immovable.  
Stubbornness is what incurs the charge of stupidity.

We have seen that throughout the play Kreon has shown himself to be foolish, unfortunate, and which has been most destructive, immovable.