THE ANTIGONE OF SOPHOCLES AND ANOUILH
— A COMPARISON

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It has become quite a commonplace with classical scholars to say that the influence of Greek and Latin literature has not been confined to its own time but can still be perceived in modern literature. This is a very true statement, but thus far classical scholars, with a few exceptions, have done very little to amplify this statement by tracing this influence in modern literature. Two books which have been published recently — The Classical Tradition by G. Highet, and The Ulysses Theme by W. B. Stanford — have done something to supply this need, but it is an enormous field and much still remains to be done. This also applies to modern drama 1), especially French drama in which there has been a remarkable renewal of interest in Greek tragedy. In this article I want to make an attempt in this direction by discussing one of the best examples of a modern re-creation of an ancient Greek tragedy, namely the Antigone of Jean Anouilh. A comparison of this drama with the original tragedy by Sophocles can throw light on the essential differences between ancient and modern drama. I only crave forgiveness for any misinterpretations which may be due to an insufficient knowledge of modern French drama, and particularly of the work of Anouilh.

Although the central theme of Sophocles' tragedy, namely the refusal to allow the burial of a dead body, is strange and even repugnant to modern readers, Anouilh has adopted it without changing it in the least. On the other hand he has not hesitated to introduce anachronisms; his characters, in spite of their names, live in modern surroundings. Antigone is served with hot coffee and tartines, Creon talks to her in his shirt sleeves, Polynices and Eteocles smoke cigarettes etc. But this same Antigone talks of the soul which will wander eternally without finding rest unless the body is buried. But, strangely enough, this discrepancy has no jarring effect; on the contrary, it gives one a kind of pleasurable shock. What was Anouilh's purpose in introducing these anachronisms? I think that he meant to make the persons and the action on the stage more real and actual to the spectator and to avoid giving the impression that he is representing something which happened long ago and does not concern us to-day. And by this means too, he succeeds in giving a kind of timelessness to his drama; it is neither ancient nor modern but belongs equally to both periods, and to all time.

When one examines the general structure of Anouilh's drama, one is surprised to see how closely he has followed Sophocles in his choice of scenes. Sophocles begins his tragedy with a discussion between Antigone and Ismene; in Anouilh's drama we find a similar scene, although he has enlarged this part of the drama by adding two scenes between Antigone and the Nurse (the only completely new character which Anouilh has introduced), and one scene between Antigone and Haemon. Leaving the choral songs aside for the moment, we next find in Sophocles a speech of Creon in which he announces the decree

1 The only book I know which treats this subject is: Die tragische Gestalten der Griechen in der Weltliteratur, by K. Heinemann, but it does not go further than 1918, the year in which it was written.
forbidding the burial of Polynices, and explains his ideals of government. This scene is omitted by Anouilh since, in the long discussion between Creon and Antigone, Creon's idea of his task of government is one of the main themes. Sophocles now introduces the Guard who announces that the body has been buried, and in Anouilh we find the same scene. After an interval the Guard reappears with Antigone, and there follows a debate between Creon and Antigone in which the irreconcilability of their attitudes soon appears. We find the same debate in Anouilh but only much longer. At the end of the debate Ismene makes another appearance in both dramas. In Sophocles we now get a full-scale debate between Creon and Haemon in which Creon once more enunciates his ideas of government. Anouilh also gives a scene between Haemon and Creon but has made it a great deal shorter; we have already had enough of Creon's views in his long discussion with Antigone. In both dramas we now find a scene in which Antigone bewails her fate — although in very different company. The only scene of Sophocles' drama which Anouilh has dropped completely, is the Tiresias scene. Perhaps it was difficult to introduce the theme of divination in a modern drama, but there is also another reason. In Sophocles Creon finally repents after the departure of Tiresias but Anouilh's Creon does not — indeed, cannot — repent; thus a Tiresias scene would have served no purpose. The rest of the plot Anouilh has finished off very quickly. We get a short messenger speech in which the deaths of Antigone and Haemon are related, the Chorus tells Creon of the death of his wife, and then Creon leaves the stage to attend yet another Cabinet meeting.

I have not yet said anything about the Chorus, an element of ancient drama which a modern dramatist finds very difficult to use. Anouilh has not made this attempt, and has kept only one actor whom he still calls the Chorus. This actor in a kind of prologue introduces the characters to us and gives a few facts necessary for the understanding of the plot; at one stage he explains the author's views on the nature of tragedy. He also speaks a few times to Creon in the course of the drama.

But naturally the great difference between the two dramas does not lie in the general structure but in the contents of each separate scene, and a comparison of the scenes will show how differently Anouilh treats the same subject.

As has already been said, in the first "act", that is the part of the drama which precedes the entrance of Creon, Anouilh, like Sophocles, gives a discussion between Antigone and Ismene but also confronts the heroine with the Nurse and with Haemon. In Sophocles we are immediately plunged into the heart of things since Antigone right at the beginning tells her sister of Creon's decree and announces her decision to bury her brother's body. Anouilh begins his drama quite differently: Antigone is caught by the Nurse while stealing back into the house after having buried the body. The Nurse accuses her of having gone out to meet a lover, but she manages to soothe her without telling her the truth. Then Ismene enters and the two sisters discuss the advisability of burying the body. (Ismene naturally does not know that Antigone has already done it, and even the spectator can only guess at it.) After another conversation between Antigone and the Nurse Haemon appears. In a passionate scene Antigone first reassures herself that he really loves her, and then she tells him that she can never marry him.
What was Anouilh's purpose in introducing these scenes which are so charged with emotion? According to my opinion his main purpose was to give a fuller and more varied picture of Antigone's character. Sophocles lays all the stress on her unflinching determination to bury her brother; some critics have even felt that her attitude to Ismene is a little too harsh. But Anouilh pictures Antigone as a person who, in spite of her determination, sometimes feels the need for sympathy and protection. I think that the scenes with the Nurse are especially designed to show this aspect of her character: compare her words to the Nurse: “When you cry like that I become a little girl again; and I mustn’t be a little girl today.” 2) And in the scene with Haemoo she shows herself a passionate woman, who even wanted to entice Haemon to anticipate the marriage. We also see that Antigone has a sensitive perception of nature; she finds it a wonderful experience to get up so early that she, as it were, surprises the garden in its sleep “when it is not yet thinking of men.” And above all, as she tells Ismene, she is passionately fond of life; in her case there is no question of a morbid desire for death.

In spite of superficial differences, the discussion between Antigone and Ismene in Anouilh's drama is essentially the same as in Sophocles. It is true that Ismene says that she can understand Creon's attitude a little, but her main reason for not joining Antigone is that he is stronger than they, and that the masses support him — a point emphasized by the curiously elaborated description of the attitude of the masses on the day of execution 3). And that is precisely the case also with the Sophoclean Ismene. But perhaps there is a subtle difference in Antigone's motivation of her decision — or rather lack of motivation, for she remains rather vague on this point. Indeed, her most characteristic speech is her outburst when Ismene asks her to try and understand. From her childhood she always had to "understand" that she could not do what she liked to do. And then she utters a sentence which is repeated several times in the play, and indeed sums up one of the most important aspects of Antigone as Anouilh sees her: "Comprendre ... Moi je ne veux pas comprendre." "Understand! I don't want to understand." I shall touch again on this point when discussing the debate between Creon and Antigone.

As has already been pointed out, Anouilh omits the scene in which Creon announces his decree. In his drama Creon's appearance is immediately followed by that of the Guard. The Guard of Anouilh may be a modern soldier, of the Second Battalion, with seventeen years service and very concerned about his promotion, but essentially he is the same blustering character as in Sophocles' drama, terribly afraid of what Creon will do. Creon's reaction on hearing the news is much the same as in Sophocles; he immediately suspects that it is a great opposition party organizing the resistance against him, and perhaps even using a small child for this purpose. He also suspects the guards of complicity and orders them to stay on guard beside the body.

There is a small interval, in both dramas filled by the Chorus, and then the Guard reappears with Antigone. But in Anouilh his two companions accompany

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2 In this article I quote from the translation of L. Galantier (London, 1951).
3 I do not agree with the statement of W. M. Landers in his edition of the play (London, 1954) p. 101, that "Ismene's attitude here is quite different from that of her namesake in the original Antigone."
him, and before Creon appears they discuss what they were going to do with
the bonus they expected for this great feat. The contrast between their sordid-
ness and Antigone's deep distress is typically modern. Creon at first refuses to
believe that Antigone had done the deed, but when she herself admits it, he
has to face the fact. The debate between Creon and Antigone which now
follows is, in both tragedies, the central scene of the whole drama, the scene on
which everything turns. But here too, the differences between the ancient and
the modern are the most marked. In Sophocles both Antigone and Creon state
their point of view and after a little argument Creon decides that under the
circumstances nothing can be done, and that Antigone must die. But in Anouilh
the debate develops quite differently. In fact it really takes the form of an
attack of Creon on Antigone's point of view. For Anouilh's Creon differs from
his namesake in the original in that he does not want to kill Antigone and
tries his utmost to dissuade her from repeating her attempt to bury her brother.

In this attempt he uses every possible argument. He first accuses her of
trusting in her position as Oedipus' daughter to escape punishment. And when
she denies this, he rages against the pride of Oedipus and his family. Oedipus
never was satisfied with doing things by halves; he had to ferret out the whole
secret of his past and then he had to blind himself. But the city did not need
people who always went to extremes; it needed persons like himself who stood
with both feet firmly on the ground and who performed their duty, whether
they found it pleasant or not. When Antigone still persists in her attitude,
he tries to convince her of the senselessness of the burial ceremony and the
absurdity of the current beliefs about the dead. Antigone concedes all this but
does not change her resolve.

Then Creon tries to explain to her that he himself does not like to let
Polynices' body lie there but that he was forced to do it "if the feather-headed
rabble I govern are to understand." He has taken the task of governing on his
shoulders, and he must face the consequences. But Antigone thinks that he
ought to have refused the responsibility; now he is forced to act against his will.
In exasperation Creon tries to convince her that there must be men who accept
responsibility when everything is going to pieces, and that they cannot be
fastidious about what they do. Those who can only say no, are cowards. But
when Antigone remains adamant, Creon tries one final argument. In a desperate
attempt to prove to her the futility of her heroism, he reveals the whole sordid
history behind the civil war — that Polynices had assaulted his father when he
had refused him money, that he had sent assassins against his father and that
his brother, now regarded as a hero, had done the same.

At first it seems as if all Antigone's idealism is shattered by this shocking
revelation and she is going to submit. But when Creon proceeds to give her
some good advice and says that she must seize every small piece of happiness on
which she can lay her hands, Antigone rebels. She does not want to accept
humbly whatever little happiness life offers her; she does not want to make
numerous small concessions to preserve this happiness. If she cannot live
absolutely, she wants to die. Before this new outburst Creon is completely
helpless, and when Ismene too, enters and threatens to follow Antigone's
example, he is forced to call the guards to lead Antigone away.

The attitude of Antigone during the debate has puzzled many readers and
critics. In Sophocles, Antigone appeals to the eternal laws of the gods to justify her resistance to Creon. But in Anouilh's play it is not quite clear for what or whom she dies. In fact, at one stage, when Creon asks why she risked death, she answers: "Pour personne. Pour moi" ... "For nobody. For myself." Therefore critics have said that Anouilh has made Antigone die for nothing and deprived his play of the values and spiritual content of the Sophoclean tragedy 4). But in my opinion these critics have missed one of the most important aspects of the play, namely that the attitude of Antigone is a protest against the rationalism, the "reasonableness" of our time, which can cast suspicion on even the most noble cause and can show that it is completely impracticable, and on the other hand can advance plausible arguments in favour of the most barbarous measures. This is why Antigone does not answer argument with argument — in fact it would be difficult to refute some of Creon's arguments — but only repeats that she does not want to "understand". As she previously told Ismene, she does not "want to be right". She has an instinctive perception of what her duty is and for her that is enough.

It may be said that this Antigone is completely different from the original Antigone. Of course the differences are unmistakable but nevertheless I think that the germs of such a conception of Antigone are already to be found in the Sophoclean original. In the fourth chapter of his interesting book The Imagery of Sophocles' Antigone 5) R. F. Goheen points out how, even in Sophocles, Antigone's arguments are more emotional than rational, e.g. the famous words in her last speech that she dies for her brother because it was impossible that another brother should be born to her — a passage which some critics regard as spurious. Even in the expressions she uses there is an indication that emotion more than reason sways her, e.g. her words "My nature is to join, not in hating, but in loving." It is this aspect of her which Anouilh has so marvellously elaborated in his own drama.

When Antigone has left the stage, Haemon appears. In Sophocles we now find a long debate, but after the long discussion between Creon and Antigone Anouilh wisely avoids another protracted argument. The main purpose of this last meeting between father and son is to show how Creon has been caught so completely in the machine of government that he cannot act otherwise, though he really wants to save Antigone, and how Haemon, who had always regarded his father as a strong man to whom he could look for protection, is completely disillusioned.

Sophocles in his next scene shows Antigone bewailing her fate and the Chorus sympathising with her. This lamentation is, I think, intended to show that Antigone is not a superhuman heroine who dies without any feeling of regret for all that she is losing. It is difficult to think of a scene more different from this than the conversation between Antigone and the Guard just before she is led away. And still this scene has the same function, namely to emphasize again that Antigone is not dying because she has a morbid desire for death, but that it really costs her an effort. The modern dramatist, however, chooses to emphasize the pathos of her situation by contrasting it with the callousness of the Guard who has no thought for Antigone at all, but only talks of the

5 Princeton, 1951.
advantages and disadvantages of being a guard. And to this person Antigone is forced to dictate her last letter to Haemon!

The rest of the plot Anouilh dispatches very quickly. As has been said, he omits the Tiresias scene. Immediately after Antigone has left, a messenger appears and gives a shortened version of the deaths of Antigone and Haemon. Essentially it is the same story as that which Sophocles' messenger tells more fully, and there are many reminiscences of Sophocles. Then Creon enters and the Chorus immediately informs him of the death of Eurydice. But instead of breaking out in lamentation, as in Sophocles, Creon goes to attend another Cabinet meeting—a typically modern ending to the play.

In these pages I have tried to show some of the main differences between the two tragedies. There are many points which could still be discussed, e.g. the different conceptions Sophocles and Anouilh have of the nature of tragedy or their ideas about the freedom of the individual, but such a discussion would have to take the whole of Anouilh's and Sophocles' work into account. I only hope that I have shown it to be possible to admire both these dramas as the manifestation, in two very different ages, of the power which this myth has over the minds of men.
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