

Creon and the concepts of arete, hubris, ate, and nemesis in antigone

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When Creon finally becomes King, after having been one or two steps away from the throne all his life, he wants to begin his reign on the right foot. He wishes to project the picture of a ruler who takes the right decisions and is inflexible in implementing these decisions, even when they would affect those closest to him. Polynices was his nephew, but for the act of rising up against Thebes, his dead body was to be given the harshest of punishments. Again, when his order to leave the corpse of Polynices to the dogs and birds of Thebes is flouted by his niece (and soon to be daughter-in-law) Antigone, Creon decrees an even harsher punishment for her. He would go further and mete the same punishment to the innocent Ismene, were it not for the objections raised by the Chorus. Creon may have believed that people would attribute these decisions to his preponderance of *arête*, but any audience would have passed the judgment that these were merely the fruit of his insecurity and desire for power. Rather than a man of true *arête*, Creon proves a mere bully and the embodiment of petty vice.

There is no doubt that Creon's major flaw is an excess of hubris. His words to the soldiers, to Antigone, to Haemon, and even to Tiresias, all drip pride and arrogance. The punishment that he decrees to the corpse of Polynices and the punishment that he devises for Antigone are both instances of extreme hubris. In the first instance, he was flying in the face of established custom and the code of common decency and usurping the authority of the gods. In the other, he was being deliberately cruel to a person who had courageously stood for all the values that he had floated.

This hubris leads Creon into the depths of ate—the supreme folly of persisting in his mulish blindness to reason when arguing with his son and when replying to the requests of the blind seer, Tiresias. The taunts that he addresses to Tiresias are the occasion for the seer’s prophecy of the evil that would overtake him, his family, and his people. It is this that leads him into the clutches of his nemesis.

When Tiresias leaves and the Chorus articulates their unease and fear, Creon sheds his kingly veneer. He rushes out to try to make amends for his pride and folly, mumbling and bumbling and muddling into ever-widening circles of retribution. He arrives too late to save Antigone and leaves quickly to avoid his son’s sword, which quickly enough finds its rest in Haemon’s own breast. That was not all—Creon soon learns that his wife of many years, Eurydice, had also quietly taken her own life after hearing of the manner of her son’s death.

Where does that leave Creon in our estimation? As a ruler, he is shown up to be no more than a petty, selfish, imitation tyrant. As a man, he reveals himself as one who would stop at nothing to feed his pride—he would desecrate the corpse of his nephew, devise the cruelest of punishments for his nieces, make an enemy of his only surviving son, throw insults on a blind seer and swallow those words again—anything to attain and cling to power. His last words in the play area, “ My head/Is split, my back is broken. I should be dead”(188). Perhaps he realizes he should never have been born.