

Marechal's *Antígona*: More Greek than French

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The influence of classical Greek tragedy has been incalculable on universal literature. French dramatists have been especially receptive to the ancient tragedians and some writers, such as Gide, Cocteau, Giraudoux, Sartre and Anouilh, have in turn been a source of classical inspiration to dramatists of other nations. A comparative analysis of the *Antigone* theme in two contemporary versions—the well known play of Anouilh and the lesser known tragedy of the Argentine Leopoldo Marechal—will suffice to show why the Sophoclean myth has survived, and how it has been brought up to date in order to confront the perennial controversy over politics, religion and the dictates of man's conscience. Ravaged by two World Wars, the twentieth century has thus far offered a propitious medium for tragedy, similar to fifth century Periclean Athens, likewise plagued by warfare and injustice. The disorientation caused by accelerated social change with its new set of values, as well as anguish in the face of possible nuclear destruction, engender tragedy, the dramatic vehicle which in true Greek tradition performs a social and moral function. This ethical purpose is what distinguishes the present-day approach to tragedy from the attitude of the nineteenth century, for example, when despair of the present and future produced hundreds of French tragedies, designed merely to entertain the spirit with classical reminiscences of antiquity.¹

Sophocles' *Antigone* treats a problem of universal magnitude: divine law vs. human law.² Anouilh, in his pessimistic political satire, emphasizes fatalism by deliberately retelling the archetypal myth with its action already predetermined. The Argentine Leopoldo Marechal situates his *Antígona Vélez* in the era of Martín Fierro, thus imparting an epic quality to the heroine's role in the conquest of the Pampa Indians. Critical attention will be given to the role of *Antigone* and the respective traits attributed to this timeless female protagonist evoked by each author in order to illustrate his own particular theme.

The antecedents of the *Antigone* myth concern the progeny of Oedipus and the tragedy of brotherly hate which culminated in mutual fratricide.³ Uncle

Creon has ruled that the cadaver of Polynieces—the traitor who brought foreigners to Thebes to wrest the throne from his brother Eteocles—be deprived of burial. Defying punishment by death, Antigone proposes to bury her brother, despite her sister Ismene's conventional arguments: "Nay, we must remember, first, that we were born women, as who should not strive with men; next, that we are ruled of the stronger . . ."

Antigone.—. . . I will bury him: well for me to die in doing that. I shall rest, a loved one with whom I have loved, sinless in my crime; for I owe a longer allegiance to the dead than to the living: in that world I shall abide forever.⁴

The reference to the eternal abode of Hades and Antigone's cult of death is reflected in the Spanish American *Antígona's* sacrifice to the earth, which is a subordinate theme in the Marechal drama, as well as in the more recent Antigone version by the Puerto Rican Luis Rafael Sánchez.⁵

Creon's motives for punishing high treason are justifiable. Moreover, in public he flaunts the morality of an impartial statesman, for even though it is his own niece who has broken the law by sprinkling the cadaver with earth, he upholds the death penalty. But in private the uncle becomes a biased, vain male when he resorts to belittling Antigone as a female. No woman, he taunts, can tell him what to do. And let the prisoner be well guarded, "for valiant though they seem, women are prone to flee in the face of Death" (p. 147). And finally, in the father role, he intimates to Haemon that woman is but an instrument of sexual gratification: "Do not thou, my son, dethrone thy reason for a woman's sake; knowing that this is a joy that soon grows cold in clasping arms, —an evil woman to share thy bed . . ." Such prejudice is quite conceivable in a despot who demands blind obedience "in just things and unjust. . ." (p. 149) "Therefore we must support the cause of order, and in no wise suffer a woman to worst us. Better to fall from power, if we must, by a man's hand; then we should not be called weaker than a woman" (p. 150). And Antigone grows in feminine dignity as her oppressor stoops to call Haemon names: "woman's champion," "dastard nature yielding place to woman," "thou woman's slave" (p. 152). In short, Creon's folly occasions the ultimate tragedy. Hence the moral contained in the closing verses of the Coryphaeus:

Wisdom is the supreme part of happiness; and reverence towards the gods must be inviolate. (p. 172)

This idea of wisdom and happiness will reappear in the Anouilh play, but with no concern for the decisive religious implications of Sophocles; on the contrary, we shall presently see how the French version treats the concept of felicity from an ambiguous, mundane point of view.

It is evident, then, that from the initial scene of *Antigone* Sophocles is portraying a woman superior to her sex; he highlights her against the weak sister who pleads inferiority as a woman to elude her responsibility as a human being. Antigone's attributes are hardly compatible with the rearing of a Greek woman of that period.⁶ Sophocles' determination to endow his heroine with manliness is verified in the third play of this trilogy, *Oedipus at Colonus*. The exiled

Oedipus, now blind, recognizes that his guide Antigone bears the burden of a man, whereas his sons "keep the house at home like girls," as they do in Egypt. "For there the men sit weaving in the house, but the wives go forth to win the daily bread."⁷ In summary, the classical role of Antigone is more appropriate to a man than to a Greek woman, who was denied even the most elementary legal rights.⁸

Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944) reflects the totally demoralized state of France as a result of the attack of the Nazis in 1940. The feeble defense of the French forces and the suspicious manner in which they readily succumbed to the invasion of the Germans, aroused widespread rumors of treason. The Resistance movement brought to the fore the question of conscience. The national scene was indeed set for a tragedy like *Antigone*. Despite its topical allusions, the play has universal appeal. It throws a merciless spotlight on the shady state of human affairs in an "absurd" world. Even though Anouilh relies on traditional, discursive dialogue—as opposed to the polemic, irrational devices of the theatre of the absurd—he nevertheless shuns the responsible leadership characteristic of the ancient Greek tragedian. To be sure, his drama, like the tragic farces of Ionesco or Beckett, envisages no hope whatsoever.

While Anouilh employs essentially the same *dramatis personae* as Sophocles, he eliminates the prophet Teiresias, who would be superfluous in a play whose *denouement* is foretold from the start. Instead he creates the nurse, instrumental in characterizing the French Antigone's childlike innocence. He conceives her as a playful tomboy who passionately loves life and the living (not the dead). The night Antigone escapes to bury Polynice, she returns to find her tearful nurse convinced that she has misbehaved. The incident establishes the candidly human interrelationships which will prevail throughout:

Antigone.—Ne pleure plus, nounou. . . Je suis pure, je n'ai pas d'autre amoureux qu'Hémon. . . . Quand tu pleures comme cela, je redeviens petite. . . . Et il ne faut pas que je sois petite ce matin.⁹

Ismène echoes her prototype in reminding her younger sister that she is a mere female:

Ismène.—C'est bon pour les hommes de croire aux idées et de mourir pour elles. Toi tu es une fille.

Antigone.—Une fille oui. Ai-je assez pleuré d'être une fille. (p. 30)

Since childhood Antigone has had to "understand" pre-established patterns of behavior: "Toujours comprendre. Moi, je ne veux pas comprendre. Je comprendrai quand je serai vieille. Si je deviens vieille. . ." (p. 27). She obstinately clings to a primal, intuitive level of behavior in a complex, conventional society.

Unlike Sophocles, Anouilh leaves no doubt regarding the healthy sexual drives of his heroine. If the metaphysical anguish of the original Antigone compels her to die for the love of her brother, with no apparent concern for her betrothed, this modern Antigone is explicit about her sexual desires. If she laments her insignificance as a girl, she nevertheless longs to be a woman, to love "comme une femme." In the farewell scene with Hémon, she confesses that she

had intended to have premarital relations with him, because she loves him "that way" (p. 46).

Like the classical Antigone, she sprinkles the cadaver with earth, but with a toy shovel (*une petite pelle d'enfant*) which had belonged to the child Polynice when they used to build castles in the sand. She thus evokes the tender illusions of a Polynice untainted by adult ambitions. Créon is sentimental, paternal and pragmatic. He proposes to "erase" Antigone's crime in order to facilitate her marriage to Hémon, for a grandson will benefit Thebes far more than the useless death of his niece. As for the playboys Eteocles and Polynice, *both* were traitors. Only because he was the elder, Eteocles was destined to be the "hero." However, since both bodies were mutilated beyond recognition, it could well be that the "traitor" was the recipient of the honorable burial rites, which were, after all, mere formulas mumbled by hypocritical priests. Although Créon deplores the farce staged to bedazzle the masses, and loathes the stench of rotting cadavers—foul politics—, he must play the role allotted to him by Destiny: "Mon rôle n'est pas bon, mais c'est mon rôle. . ." (p. 90). If he too had been idealistic at age 20, he knows now that happiness is all that matters. And the question of happiness (resolved in Sophocles as a reward of the gods), obsessively treated in the Anouilh plays, precipitates the tragedy. Antigone refuses to bargain for her ration of happiness: "Moi, je veux tout, tout de suite—et que cela soit aussi beau que quand j'étais petite—ou mourir" (p. 101). Saying "no" at 20 years old—the end of adolescence—signifies her rejection of sordid adult life. Anouilh saw in the Sophoclean heroine a kindred spirit compatible with his own existential dilemma: she chose death.

It is, then, with compassion that Créon condemns her to die. Moreover, in sacrificing his personal integrity to shoulder the responsibility of a king, Créon achieves tragic stature. As for Antigone, her purity is tainted at the last moment by doubt.¹⁰ If life is not worth living, then it is not worth dying for. It is just as absurd to die as to live. Anouilh's quest for the absolute is fruitless.¹¹

It seems unlikely that Anouilh exerted any significant influence on Leopoldo Marechal—despite the fact that the Argentines are reputed to rely heavily on the French dramatists for classical themes.¹² A comparative analysis of *Antígona Vélez* (1968) will indeed reveal the affinity in tone and structure of this Argentine tragedy with the Greek prototype. Moreover, Marechal's commentaries on the classical sources of his outstanding novel *Adán Buenosayres* (1948) serve to confirm his vast, direct knowledge of classical literature.¹³

Following the collapse of the totalitarian dictatorship of Juan Perón (1946-1955), a series of ephemeral dictatorships ravaged the nation with political and moral chaos. The climate of patriotic apathy was ripe for a gaucho tragedy conceived in true Greek tradition, with an exemplary historical background. The early gaucho was the cowboy of mestizo extraction, for the most part. The mestizo was to become the prevailing racial element in Argentina by the end of the 18th century. However, subsequent waves of heterogeneous white immigrants of sundry national origins were soon to fragment the cultural profile of the modern Argentine Republic. Obviously the evocation of the disappearing gaucho in a country approximately 90% white, is a feeble claim to national

heritage, if one considers the vital Indian roots which generously bestow cultural identity on countries like Mexico or Peru, founded on the survival of positive autochthonous civilizations. While the significance of the gaucho is not profound, in sweeping horizontal breadth the herdsman is reminiscent of the vast Argentine plains where he once enjoyed a free, autonomous existence. In setting the gaucho in his decisive historic context, during the century of Indian wars (1810-1917), Marechal restores the authentic, heroic image which has been obscured by superficial, gauchoesque folklore.

The action of the Argentine drama *Antígona Vélez* occurs on the frontier between the barbaric nomads and the Christians who, despite relentless Indian raids, persist in occupying the lands to the south. In a duel, Martín defends the gaucho ranch against his brother Ignacio, who has launched an attack in conspiracy with the infidel foe. The name Martín evokes that of Martín Fierro, whose legendary vicissitudes moreover synthesize the duality of the good and bad gaucho, for first he lived peacefully on the family ranch and later, as an outlaw, crossed the frontier to live among the barbarians.¹⁴ The brothers slay each other. Martín dies of an Indian lance in his side, "like Jesus Christ," observes an old woman of the chorus. This allusion to the stabbing of Christ on the cross suggests that the recurring reference to "blood and tears" is inspired by the Passion of Christ. The blood and tears are analogous to the blood and water which flowed from the lance wound in Christ's side and which attest the ultimate suffering of Christ before He entered His Glory. The theme of *Antígona Vélez* is that of patriotic sacrifice, symbolized by the blood and tears shed by the pioneers who gave their lives for the future generations of the Argentine.

Martín's primitive lance wound inflicted by the Indians corresponds to the gaucho bullet which pierces the head of the traitorous brother, Ignacio. Curiously enough the fatal wound has traced the form of a star on his forehead. This brings to mind the Biblical reference to a certain mark which Cain bore after killing Abel. After God condemned Cain to exile, he granted the fratricide, as protection against wandering enemies, this mark of enigmatic shape. The star on the "bad" gaucho's forehead may, then, be interpreted as a sign of divine protection—a symbol of Christ, often referred to as the Star of stars. The fact that Christ is synonymous with mercy, not vengeance, implies a spiritual justification of the rebellious act of Antígona Vélez against the tyrant who has denied her brother burial rites. By naming the caudillo Don Facundo, instead of Creon, Marechal adds a unique regional flavor to the concept of gaucho tyranny.¹⁵ Notwithstanding, the basic conflict is Sophoclean: divine law vs. human law. The chaotic genesis of the Argentine Republic could hardly be more contrary to the established political order of ancient Thebes; and yet the South American author instills in his drama a gravity of tone akin to the classical model. As for the structure, the action unfolds in conventional chronological sequence, with the traditional intervention of the Greek chorus. On the other hand, Anouilh takes a retrospective approach and uses the Pirandellian play-within-a-play concept; he likewise uses a one man "chorus"-narrator and deliberate anachronisms, a Brechtian device.

The poetic quality of the Marechal drama which parallels the lyricism of the

Greek tragedy is, however, of a telluric strain reminiscent of the dramatic poet García Lorca. As occurs in the latter's *House of Bernarda Alba* or *Blood Wedding*, metaphoric speech embellishes even the most humble characters:

Moza 2a.—¡Ignacio Vélez está en la sombra de afuera y en el barro de nadie!

Moza 3a.—¡Dónde habrá quedado su risa!

Moza 2a.—En el oído y en la sangre de quien la recuerda.¹⁶

There are likewise repugnant descriptions evoking the cadaver shrouded in the black wings of the scavengers:

Antígona.—. . . Sus ojos reventados eran dos pozos llenos de luna: miraban las estrellas y no las veían, por más que se abriesen en toda su rotura. Pero la boca de Ignacio Vélez reía: ¿no le llamaban el Fiestero? Ahora que no tenían labios, aquellos dientes reían mejor. . . . (p. 39)

The poetic reference to "blood and tears" is reiterated by most of the characters. Don Facundo implores: "Este pedazo de tierra se ablanda con sangre y llanto. ¡Que las mujeres lloren! Nosotros ponemos la sangre." Antígona concurs: "Llorar es como regar; y donde se lloró algo debe florecer" (p. 51).

Specific ideas expressed in the Marechal drama mirror concepts of Sophocles. For instance, an old man of the chorus laments that a human being (Ignacio) should be abandoned like so much garbage. "Leyes hay que nadie ha escrito en el papel, y que sin embargo mandan" (p. 11). How closely this follows the speech in which the Sophoclean Antigone defies Creon: ". . . nor deemed I that thy decrees were of such force, that a mortal could override the unwritten . . . statutes of heaven" (p. 142). Another concept in which Marechal coincides with Sophocles concerns the right of the tyrant to punish a man *post mortem*. In the classical drama the chorus acknowledges Creon's power over both the living and the dead, while Antigone maintains that all men, once deceased, are equal. In like manner Marechal's Antígona claims that death is the ultimate punishment: "Ante la muerte habla Dios o nadie." Like her classical namesake she marks the distinction between the kingdom of the living and the dead: ". . . Dios ha puesto en la muerte su frontera. Y aunque los hombres montasen todos los caballos de su furia, no podrán cruzar esa frontera y llegarse hasta Ignacio Vélez para inferirle otra herida" (p. 24).

Like the Theban heroine, the South American *gaucha* is depicted in a religious attitude: she makes a primitive cross for Ignacio's grave. Unlike Anouilh, Marechal respects Christian sentiment as much as Sophocles reveres his gods.¹⁷ In both women the element of pride is dominant. But in the case of Antígona Vélez, shame—the reversible lining of pride—is what prompts her to hide her brother's defeat from God and man alike: "Los dos ojos vacíos de Ignacio no serán mañana una vergüenza del sol. . . ." "Ni la luz de Dios ni el ojo del hombre verán mañana esa derrota. . . ." "La tierra lo esconde todo. Por eso Dios manda enterrar a los muertos, para que la tierra cubra y disimule tanta pena" (p. 17).

Finally, the degree of maturity of both women is to be taken into account. The Greek Antigone was the sole provider for her blind father. Antígona Vélez

was like a mother to her younger brothers, just the opposite of the impetuous "kid sister" heroine of Anouilh. The virile qualities of the Sophoclean Antigone are reflected externally in the Argentine *gaucho*, who dons masculine attire on two crucial occasions: first, by her own volition when she goes to dig the grave—with a man's shovel, not a plaything—and at the end, by orders of Don Facundo when he condemns her to gallop away into the land of the Indians in a "race with Death."

The one major difference which sets this Argentine heroine apart from the other Antigones is that she willingly accepts her fate. Far from questioning the motives of the tyrant, she seeks to justify him: "El quiere ganar este desierto . . . para que el hombre y la mujer, un día, puedan dormir aquí sus noches enteras; para que los niños jueguen sin sobresalto en la llanura. . . . Ahora me viste de hombre . . . y me prepara esta muerte fácil" (p. 52). Don Facundo is idealized as the intuitively just *caudillo*. Marechal sacrifices the classical essence of his characters for the benefit of Argentine patriotism, a theme for which he has likewise shown concern in his poetry. The following verses from "Descubrimiento de la Patria" sum up the moral lesson of *Antígona Vélez*:

La Patria debe ser una provincia
de la tierra y del cielo.¹⁸

The fatherland, insists the poet, must be a realm of both the earth and heaven. But just as he mentions the earth first and then heaven, so the law of the land (Don Facundo) must take precedence over individual idealism of morality (*Antígona*), that is, in the event that the two can not be reconciled.

Marechal's tyrant closely parallels the Greek archetype in that he will stop at nothing to suppress rebellion, for indeed disorder and anarchy have been a great menace to Argentina in times of political turmoil. Disillusioned with the democratic system in his country, Marechal apparently regarded the fascist-oriented state as the most expedient in confronting widespread strikes and terrorism instigated by anarchists and communist agitators. It is, therefore, in view of the "cycle of coups and countercoups," resulting in the economic, social, scientific and cultural deterioration of Argentina,¹⁹ that Marechal has been receptive to the political ideology of Creon, the Theban autocrat. However, in assimilating this concept of government, the Argentine dramatist makes a serious objection: his *caudillo* hero does not arbitrarily demand blind obedience, whether he be in the right or wrong. To show that he is right, it is imperative that Marechal's *Antígona Vélez*—portrayed as a mature and responsible woman—defy and justify him at the same time.

This unique treatment of the mythical conflict, which leads to the justification of both protagonists, is suspiciously reminiscent of the conciliatory doctrine known in Argentina as "Justicialism" (*justicialismo*). Originally conceived by Juan Perón in 1949, it was his attempt to reconcile the antagonism between individualism and collectivism (free enterprise vs. the totalitarian State). The doctrine survived as a broad concept of social justice seeking a fair and just compromise between any opposing forces or extreme points of view.²⁰

Notes

1. Leo Aylen, *Greek Tragedy and the Modern World* (London: Methuen & Co., 1964), pp. 213-223.
2. Of the more than one hundred plays by Sophocles, only seven are available in their complete form. *Antigone*, one of the most perfect of all Greek tragedies, was probably written between 441 and 444 B.C.
3. The myth of *Antigone* was inspired by Aeschylus' drama *The Seven Against Thebes*, which deals precisely with the attack on the seven gates of Thebes and the last battle, in which *Antigone's* brothers kill each other.
4. *The Tragedies of Sophocles*. Tr. Richard C. Jebb (New York: Macmillan, 1940—American edition), p. 129. Subsequent page numbers referring to this edition will appear in the text.
5. Luis Rafael Sánchez, *La pasión según Antígona Pérez* (Hato Rey: Ediciones Lugar, 1968). This is a complex drama which treats several problems. Along with the Sophoclean conflict (freedom vs. imperialism), there coexists the theme of the spiritual death of Puerto Rico, with a promise of resurrection—as suggested by the parallel with the Passion of Christ. By coincidence, there is likewise reference to the ultimate suffering of Christ in the Marechal drama, as will be presently demonstrated. In the Sánchez drama, the cult of the earth is a profound, retrospective search for the authentic, autochthonous personality of Puerto Rico, whose indigenous roots are being destroyed by the venom of materialism.
6. C. M. Bowra—*Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford: University Press, 1952), p. 83—implies the audacity of one who exercises personal criterion against the law of a tyrant: "This is dangerous in anyone and especially in a woman."
7. *Oedipus at Colonus* in *The Tragedies of Sophocles*, op. cit., p. 73. Although written after *Antigone*, this drama treats the heroine's earlier life.
8. H. D. F. Kitto, in *The Greeks* (Middlesex, 1951), pp. 221-234, shows legal evidence of the repression of Greek women. They could not hold public office, own real estate or even enjoy legal rights as individuals. Kitto likewise presents literary evidence both to confirm and disprove the oriental seclusion of the ancient Greek woman. As for her exposure to politics, she could intervene in discussions with men, but mainly within the family circle. Of course the daughter of a king would probably be more informed on matters of state than other unmarried girls.
9. Jean Anouilh, *Antigone* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1965), p. 21. Subsequent page numbers referring to this edition will appear in the text.
10. According to John E. Harvey, Anouilh's *Antigone* is a tragic heroine because she dies for Purity. Créon is equally heroic because he fulfills his destiny in a tragic way, inacceptable though his role may be. *Anouilh* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 100.
11. For a comprehensive analysis in Spanish of Anouilh's entire production, see Juan Guerrero Zamora, *Historia del teatro contemporáneo*, 4 vols. (Barcelona: Juan Flors, ed., 1962), III, 217-255.
12. Angela Blanco Amores de Pagella, in evaluating the numerous variations on Greek classical themes in Argentine drama, claims that the majority of contemporary dramatists in Argentina, being well-versed as they are in French literature, have gotten their Hellenic inspiration indirectly by way of France. *Nuevos temas en el teatro argentino* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Huemul, 1965), pp. 137-152.
13. Leopoldo Marechal, *Claves de Adán Buenosayres* (Mendoza: Azor, 1966), pp. 1-22.
14. Martín Fierro: the epic hero of the gaucho poem by José Hernández (1834-1886). Marechal also may have been familiar with the historic account of fratricide and betrayal which occurred during the war with the Pampa Indians. General Cipriano Catriel, an Indian who fought beside the white man, was assassinated by a group of infidels, including his own brother, who subsequently became the chief of the dead general's tribe. Allegedly sympathetic with the Christians, he signed a pact to collaborate in civilizing the area. However, he suddenly joined forces with the hostile Indians, thus betraying the Christians, who were slaughtered in the so-called "great invasion" (1875), which resulted as well in the abduction of many women and children. Felix Best, *Historia de las guerras argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Peuser, 1960), pp. 377-378.
15. The reference is to Facundo Quiroga, historic figure immortalized in Argentine letters by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, whose book *Facundo o Civilización y barbarie* is not only a tribute to this sanguinary *caudillo*, but also to life on the pampas more than a century ago.
16. Leopoldo Marechal, *Antígona Vélez* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Citeira, 1965), p. 14. Subsequent page numbers referring to this edition will appear in the text. Generally regarded as the first Argentine tragedy, *Antígona Vélez* has for a number of years formed an integral part of the national repertory of plays, even though it remained unpublished until this edition.

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17. The importance of the religious element in the classical *Antigone* is established by Kitto. *Sophocles, Dramatist and Philosopher* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), pp. 35-41.
 18. Leopoldo Marechal, *Heptamerón* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1966), p. 64.
 19. Robert J. Alexander, *An Introduction to Argentina* (New York: Prager, 1969), p. 182.
 20. Arthur P. Whitaker, *Argentina* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 132-134.