

Creon vs. Gilgamesh:

Comparing and Contrasting Authority in [The Epic of Gilgamesh](#) and [Antigone](#).

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Two Kings Are Humbled

In our two stories, [The Epic of Gilgamesh](#) and [Antigone](#), the people are ruled by imposing monarchs: Gilgamesh and Creon, respectively, who each use their power in differing ways. While Gilgamesh has “arrogance [having] no bounds by day or night,” (62), Creon, king of Thebes and protagonist in [Antigone](#), admits that his worthiness in leadership will only be proven in action (140-42). Creon wants to be an ideal ruler, stating that as “supreme guardian of the State” he will always put the common welfare above friendship, and consider those who do not help the country prosper to be enemies. Gilgamesh, who “sounds the tocsin [alarm bell] for his amusement” and takes virgins from their lovers (62, 68), is uncaring and reckless in comparison.

Where Creon strives to be just, Gilgamesh is a man of action; he has built great walls to protect Uruk (61), and goes on a grand adventure, risking his life to gain prestige in the battle against Humbaba (70-84), who guards the cedar trees his people need. Creon seems attentive to detail: “Whoever the city shall appoint to rule, that man must be obeyed, in little things and great things, in just things and unjust” (541-43), but does not think that his whole argument may be wrong.

Antigone, Creon's niece, puts the divine law requiring burial of her traitorous brother,

Polynices, above the edict that none shall bury him. Despite Haemon, son of Creon, and the trusted advisor, Teiresias, imploring him not to, Creon goes ahead with the order to execute Antigone for her crime, with the steadfast rationalization that “disobedience is the worst of evils” (548) and “we must not let a woman defy us” (553).

We see much stubbornness in Gilgamesh too. Enkidu, trusted comrade to Gilgamesh, laments, “it is not an equal struggle when one fights with Humbaba,” and “What man would willingly walk into that country and explore its depths?” (71) yet our hero persists and eventually succeeds in defeating Humbaba with Enkidu by his side. In his quest for immortality, he is chided by Sidura, “you will never find that life for which you are looking,” (102), and Utnapishtim advises, “there is no permanence” (106), yet he remains relentless in his fear, inspired by Enkidu's death. Failure greets him, but he learns too: “You were given the kingship, such was your destiny, everlasting life was not your destiny,” Enlil decrees (118), showing us that immortality would give Gilgamesh more power, but not happiness.

Clearly, both kings are unwavering, and that can be a great trait or a folly. In the case of Gilgamesh, he is triumphant in his arguably foolhardy struggle against Humbaba, and while failing to gain eternal life, learns a valuable lesson: do not be haughty and unjust, but rather a shepherd to your people, smart, wise, and fair in your dealings with your servants and subjects (62, 118). Creon stays true to his decision too, but it instead results in disaster and tragedy. When protested by his friends and family, he resorts to personal attacks, accusing Teiresias of providing “shameful counsels in fair words to earn a bribe” (707-08), and Haemon of being the “slave of a woman” for supporting Antigone (628), despite his argument being on her cause's merits alone, and not even mentioning their engagement to be wed. It is only when Teiresias proclaims that the gods will strike him down for his actions (730-52) that Creon turns around, but it is too late as Antigone, Haemon, and Eurydice, Creon's wife, have all committed suicide

over the dreadful matter. Creon is distraught. Depressingly, there is no mercy sang by the chorus: “Too late, too late your eyes are opened!” (872) and “. . . proud men who speak great works come in the end to despair” (927-29) is all we hear. This means he got what he deserved, as immersed in his pride he was blind to the truth. The stories, combined, show us that wisdom is knowing the difference between rightful persistence and foolish obstinacy.

Gilgamesh's story covers many years; the events in Antigone occur within a single day. On one hand there is a sweeping epic, while on the other, a small, localized, and even trivial series of happenings. But where Gilgamesh awes, Antigone teaches. Surely we learn from Creon's judgment, as in holding strong to save face in one venue he angers the gods, loses the respect of his people, and must cope with the death of his family resulting from his actions.

Authority shows itself as an overpowering force—a king can make or break a nation. The subjects of the monarch have learned to tolerate injustice, for in Gilgamesh they appeal to the gods, “No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all; and is this the king, the shepherd of his people?” (62). In Antigone, Haemon reveals the true feelings of the people: “None was ever doomed to a shameful death for deeds so noble as hers” (567-68), but no one dares announce this in public for fear of being punished as a traitor.

Whereas the tale of Creon and Antigone ends tragically, Gilgamesh is not so gloomy. Yes, we do see the death of our heroes, Enkidu and Gilgamesh, but we are taught that death is not something to be afraid of but rather a natural function that teaches us to value the time we have and to live with respect for others. “When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things, . . . dance and be merry, feast and rejoice,” Sidura advises (102).

Creon poses a particularly deep dilemma in the latter part of Antigone: “Tell me—am I to rule by my own judgment or the views of others?” (602-03). This sums up the rationalization of

a lot of faulty kingship in both stories, as it is the ruler who is the moderator; to balance the views of the people, individual citizens, and his or her own ideas is principle to leadership, not to make decisions without counsel nor purely by democracy. Gilgamesh is guilty of this; a selfish ruler, he takes what he wants (62) and begins work for both men and women at the roll of a drum (68).

A once masterful king, “wise, [seeing] mysteries, and [knowing] secret things” (61), Gilgamesh, following the death of Enkidu, becomes haunted by his own mortality. “Because of my brother I am afraid of death, because of my brother I stray through the wilderness and cannot rest,” he pleads his case to Urshanabi (103). Similarly Creon is a confident and resolute king, but in the face of such hardship yields to being a follower; we read him asking of his subjects: “What shall I do then? Speak, and I will obey” (761). In both of our tales the great become humbled—there is a ruler who is taught a lesson. This was an appealing theme over 2000 years ago, and still is now, as we think of authority, such as police officers, presidents, and even the old-fashioned kings, to be unfaltering. It is nice to see that they have flaws and pay heavy consequences for them, as when much is given, much is expected.

Works Cited

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