

UIL Literary Criticism

Student Activities Conference

2009-2010

...

Antigone's Bridal Vault and Over the Range with Mr. Higgs: What's to Discover in Sophocles' *Antigonê* and in Butler's *Erewhon*

The sequence of reported events that carries us with Creon to the cave in which Antigônê dies and back to the palace where Creon realizes that "Fate has brought all [his] pride to a thought of dust" *and* the loosely packaged sequence of events that carries us with Higgs over the saddle, the very thought of which brings fear into Chowbok's heart, and then back to England make for good entertainment, each work reflective of its respective audience's expectations.

Both *Antigonê* and *Erewhon* have something to say; both works make political statements; one speaks to an individual hubris, the other to what is argued to be a collective hubris. One might suggest that they are, thematically, narratives of our own times. Sophocles knew how to put together a good play: it is easy to agree with Aristotle on this point; Butler is not the preeminent novelist of his time—not even close; however, the subject matter and the thematic concerns of their work remain essentially contemporaneous. Human nature is what it is.

So it is that the play and the novel serve to present context for human foibles. Sophocles' endeavor relies on dramatic irony to speak, perhaps allusively, to Alcibiades, as Michael Vickers has recently argued. Butler offers a first-person narrative that mitigates an inherently satiric look at the society in which he moved, one which was to elevate a relatively unpopular Queen Victoria to the unrivaled status of Empress of India within four years of the publication of *Erewhon*. The curtain was soon to fall on both the Periclean Age and Pax Britannia, and much might be discovered in Creon's last walk and in Higgs's lost manuscripts. And how we learn from what Sophocles has crafted and what Butler has cobbled together can be made to be interesting.

Dialogue conveys meaning in a drama, and it is through the dialogue that an understanding of the play can be tested. Characterization is developed through dialogue; complication and crisis are constructed through dialogue; thematic concerns are revealed through dialogue. In Greek drama the Chorus's commentary is not merely supplementary; much is to be gleaned from the words in the strophe and the antistrophe. All of the voices in Sophocles' tragedy rehearse the fatalistically Greek understanding that suffering is the best teacher.

Narrative description is the rhetorical mode upon which the novel relies. The narrator controls our understanding; the nature of the narrator interferes with our understanding. Higgs's first-person recounting of his interactions with a culture whose differences emphasize the argued manifest failings of his own culture, his recounting of his interactions with the rather undeveloped characters representing that culture (who command very little of our emotions), and his reporting of his interactions with his competitor-schemers, real and expected, somehow constitute a narrative structure that serves not so much as a pulpit or a lectern but as a podium. Gaining enough altitude to witness the questionable efficacy of the power of ideas and knowing when to drop ballast—perhaps Butler offers his readers something in the way of a *camera obscura* through which things familiar can be discussed in a removed context.