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### Democracy's Dilemma

Set in mythical Thebes, Sophocles' *Antigone* takes place in a time when democracy was an unknown idea, but it illustrates how the democratic process can be beneficial to society. When it was written, Sophocles' Athens was at the height of its power because of its democratic values. In order to win the annual Dionysia, which was a citywide celebration of the success over the past year, Sophocles' ultimate goal was to acknowledge the success of the city because the outcome of the competition was solely based on public popularity and opinion (Knox).

Two millennia later, Heinrich von Kleist, who, as a novelist, was not necessarily trying to attain immediate public popularity or fame, illustrated in *Michael Kohlhaas* how democratic values can actually destroy or be detrimental to the success of the state. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when this novella was written, Europe was in the middle of a continental war that began because of a failed attempt at democracy; Heinrich von Kleist watched as this failed attempt halved his country—the Prussian Empire, now Germany—and nearly destroyed the remainder of it. In response, although it was set in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, *Michael Kohlhaas* shows how a man nearly destroys the state because of his democratic values. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines democracy as “A state or community in which the government is vested in the people as a whole” (def. 1b), but the societies in which both stories took place were monarchical or aristocratic societies where the power of the government was vested in a sovereign or in a ruling class (“Monarchy,” def. 3). Because of the government types in the setting of both *Michael Kohlhaas*

and *Antigone*, the eponymous heroes would not have had the introduction to the democratic idea of authority in the community, yet they both rebel against the state's rule, which represents democracy. Both characters use the classical appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos to gain support from society, representing the rise of democracy, with Kleist illustrating how the paradoxical nature of democracy can nearly destroy a state, but Sophocles writing in support of democracy, shown by the perceived reaction from the audience.

Initially, Michael Kohlhaas's and Antigone's motives for rebelling are similar; they both campaign against the state when it interferes with their family. Kohlhaas begins his infamous career when his wife is killed by a castellan. After his wife had been buried and the funeral finished, "Kohlhaas flung himself down once more before his wife's bed, and then set about the business of revenge", based on "his own innate authority" (21). "Revenge" refers to Kohlhaas's idea that he was wronged by the individuals at the Squire Tronka's castle when he was passing through the territory and, since the man who initially harmed his wife also worked for the Elector of Saxony, who can be considered as a governor, the affront to Kohlhaas's family can be considered as an act from the state. Kleist illustrates that Kohlhaas represents the rise of democracy by telling the reader that Kohlhaas acts out of his own authority, but based on the government at the time, Kohlhaas would have not had any rights to act against the state. His idea of an "innate authority" (21) is the basis of democracy, which shows his allegiance to his ethics. This first conflict of the state versus the family initiates the primary conflict of the individual in the novella, which represents the rise of democracy in both works.

Similar to Kohlhaas's case, the rebellion against the state in *Antigone* only begun after it transgressed its limit of power, infringing on the traditional religious beliefs of Antigone's family. Even after she knew about the decree from the state explicitly stating the consequence was death

for disobedience, Antigone still decided to continue with her religious traditions and give her brother his last rites. After this point in the play, Antigone defends herself, citing religion and tradition, evolving into a conflict between the state and the individual. Although Sophocles does not explicitly say Antigone was acting based on her own authority as Kleist did in *Michael Kohlhaas*, the idea that she could rebel and expect change in the community is a democratic concept; Antigone was also acting out of her own innate authority.

Soon after the initial similarities are established between Antigone and Michael Kohlhaas, they quickly deviate from each other because of the authors' views on democracy. Where Sophocles represents Antigone as a positive influence, gaining the audience's support through sympathy and loyalty, Kleist portrays Kohlhaas's actions as not only destructive to the state, but also destructive to his countrymen, only gaining popularity because of infamy and fear.

Kohlhaas, after deciding to rebel against the state, marshals a force, which is initially made up of his employees, to attack the squire's castle, but, drawn to the violence and to the allure of plunder, his ranks quickly become saturated with thieves and crooks (Kleist 24). For those citizens who did not join his ranks and chose instead to help the man running from Kohlhaas, he ordered them to "surrender [to him] under penalty of death and the inevitable burning down of everything that might be called property" (24). To both individuals today and at that time, that decree would inspire fear and terror. With Kohlhaas sounding maniacal and like a despot, not dissimilar to Creon in *Antigone*, Kleist is showing how rebellion against the state, the rise of democracy, is not beneficial and actually causes more harm than good. Here, Kohlhaas uses ethos to gain support from society, although through negative means, because the citizens know that Kohlhaas will follow through with his word to complete his decree. Further exemplified later in the text when the Squire Tronka is being held in Wittenberg, the mob outside

his house “called [the Squire] a bloodsucker, a miserable public pest, and a tormenter of men, the curse of the city of Wittenberg, and the ruin of Saxony” (28), but these individuals were not part of Kohlhaas’s force; they did not know explicitly of the wrongs he had committed against Kohlhaas or any other individual, and they were solely motivated by fear of Kohlhaas’s wrath, which was engineered by his ethos; if the individuals had not believed in Kohlhaas’s threats, then they would not have mobbed in front of the Squire Tronka’s house. Kleist illustrates that all the destruction, fear, death, and mobbing in the city is due solely to Kohlhaas’s desire for democracy.

In stark contrast to Kohlhaas’s case, Antigone is portrayed as the victim, almost as the damsel in distress, but also as the hero because she successfully rebels against the state, eliminating the ruler from the throne and gaining the audience’s support, which is evident because of her use of pathos in her last scenes as well as because of the topic of the last choral ode in the play. Approaching death, Antigone thinks that “no one mourns my death” (968), which is particularly interesting because both Ismene and Haemon, her sister and future husband, are willing to die for her. When Antigone is initially punished, Ismene is also willing to be punished for her sister’s crime despite the fact that she did not assist Antigone at all. This is evident when Ismene tell Antigone “we are both guilty, both condemned to death” (629). Although Antigone rejects Ismene’s suggestion for them to die together, it is evident that Ismene cares about her sister, which is contradictory to Antigone’s statement. Antigone’s future husband, Haemon, is also willing to die for her when he says “then she will die.... but her death will kill another” (843). Antigone’s ode to loneliness also indicates that she is attempting to use pathos to make the audience sympathize with her, as seen similarly in the previous scene. When she laments being alone, she also implies that the audience does not mourn her death, which would also gain sympathy and pity from the audience. In addition, the last choral ode tells the audience

that “reverence towards the gods must be safeguarded” (1468), showing that Antigone was correct to adhere to her religious beliefs. By using pathos to elicit sympathy and pity, Sophocles shows that Antigone is wronged by the state and that she was correct to question the judgment of the monarchic figure, illustrating that democracy is a positive force because of the perceived reaction of the audience in the last choral ode.

Through *Antigone* and *Michael Kohlhaas*, Sophocles and Kleist show their differing assessments of how democracy can affect a society. Spurred by their individual experiences, neither Kleist nor Sophocles is necessarily incorrect in their conclusions of the effectiveness of democracy. Sophocles owed his success to the democratic process in both the theater and in his public life, whereas Kleist owed the downfall of his beloved Prussia to democracy gone wrong. Both predating Sophocles and continuing after Kleist, the argument about the efficacy of democracy still continues today. As Suanne Karstedt, a professor of criminology at the University of Leeds, argues, in modern times “trends of rising violence... have fuelled a deepening skepticism as to the capacity of democracy to deliver on its own promise of nonviolence” (53), whereas Robert Barro, an economics professor at Harvard University, argues that “democracy fosters economic rights and thereby tends to stimulate growth” (1), but, because of the unique conditions of each society, this argument can never be completely resolved. In order for democracy to be successful, the community must disagree, but to what extent can the individuals in the community dissent until it is torn apart?

## Works Cited

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