Antigone, Power and Diplomacy

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> *"War, it was said, was the extension of diplomacy by other means. Modern weapons make recourse to war suicidal. It is thus not a question of giving diplomacy a chance. Diplomacy is the only chance we have." - Drew Middleton (1955)*

Resumo

O presente artigo, de forma crítica e inovadora, vez que se utiliza da tragédia Antígona de Sófocles como elemento literário de reflexão, trata do papel da Diplomacia frente à questão das armas nucleares no mundo contemporâneo.

Abstract

This article deals with the role of Diplomacy in the nuclear weapons age in a critical and innovative perspective that utilizes the Sophocles' Antigone tragedy as a literary tool of reflection.

The question of nuclear weapons is back in the press front pages. Not surprisingly, there is much talk again about international community, whatever it is. Diplomacy will have a chance? We cannot tell right now and I do not intend to focus on the international situation as such, important as it is.[2] This is one of those moments when it is urgent to wait.

Meanwhile we may indulge ourselves, if you will, in remembering Sophocles' *Antigone*, not just because it is a classic but because it is quite relevant today. It provides many lessons and the best evidence is the reception of the play throughout almost 2,500 years, since its first presentation around 441 BC. It has proven rich enough to please different tastes and to offer in each case the message that is needed.[3]

There is a wide consensus that *Antigone* is a perfect tragedy, that unique humam creation which symbolizes Athens even more than philosophy, which started elsewhere. Perfect: out of six named characters, five die. It is a high rate. Fate, like a shadow, continues to haunt Thebes. The apple of discord, so to speak, is an untouchable corpse

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2 This paper was finished on 21st May, 2010.

3 *Antigones* , George Steiner (1987). The Spanish translation of the book carries a subtitle which is faithful to Steiner's *tour de force*: *La travessia de un mito universal por la historia de Occidente.*

– because of it uncontrolled energies are released in a dynamic of conflicts. The same situation often happens in the theater of international relations – the label changes but essentially it is the same corpse (*issue* sounds more aseptic in the case).

Misfortune is hardly a surprise in a tragedy, but the audience is rewarded by the *tragic pleasure*, an odd mixture of pity and awe, according to a great admirer of Sophocles, Aristotle.[4] Right as he was, he only started the argument: the glory of *Antigone* was to last for centuries with a parallel debate. Why? The play refuses to surrender its full meaning – it is still an open question. Which message we should pick right now? Well, let me share the one I care for most and which could apply to the present circumstances.

To be true, the above epigraph by the periodist Drew Midleton (the Cold War was then in full swing) has already stated the point I had in mind, plus the merit of brevity. I cannot do better. In any case I will try do develop the idea, heretic as it may be. It is rather simple: in *Antigone* no chance is given to diplomacy[5]; that is why the tragedy happened. Yes, the whole massacre could have been avoided if … If Antigone had just a small amount of political wisdom – of diplomacy, to be more specific about the wisdom in question. The same applies to Creon (presumably a more sophisticated therapy would be required for him, but nowadays we are used to difficult cases at very high level). Sophocles himself advances the possibility: if the insecure ruler had listened in time to his son's advices, he could have prevented the brutal lost of his beloved ones; perhaps he would have saved himself from disgrace. But, I reckon, this would be a story altogether different and the world literature would have been deprived of a masterpiece.

A reasonable Antigone and a tolerant Creon would not be "real". Human beings are human beings and it is not at all my intention to do an exercise (futile, of course) in *virtual* fiction, the pleonasm being excused. Nevertheless, for the sake of argument, the hypothesis of a less unhappy outcome is not excluded – throughout the drama there is a hope (slight as it may be) that reason will prevail and, if not reason, at least a certain caution, which we could translate by diplomatic prudence[6]. This is suggested by Ismene, then by Hemon (as just mentioned) and finally by Tiresias. The hints are unmistakable and the audience understands them. In fact the audience complies graciously with this sort of *positive thinking*: the assumption that the tragedy could have been shunned makes the *tragic pleasure* more enjoyable.

4 Aristotle praises *Antigone* in his *On Poetics*, "véritable phénoménology de l'oeuvre tragique". By contrast, "les dialogues de Platon n'affichent que dédain pour les poètes tragiques". – Jacques Taminiaux, "Antigone dans l'histoire de la philosophie" **in** *Antigone et la Résistance Civile* (2004) p. 9/10. .

5 I take diplomacy in the common sense of "skill and tact in dealing with people" (Oxford Dictionary), that is, the art of handling difficult situations by the way of good will. I believe that, rather than a technical concept, this is also the the meaning of "diplomacy" in the epigraph.

6 This concept is dealt with at the end.

The warnings and the wishful thinking are of no avail, we know beforehand: tragedy is a radical sport with no safety net.[7] It is made of conflict, not harmony. By definition this is not the field for restraint and/or negotiation. To be sure, the Chorus is entitled sometimes, as a sort of arbiter, to recommend *soprosyne*. Unfortunately, the Chorus speaks only to the audience, which is already convinced that moderation is a virtue; those who should listen (the characters) are too busy on the stage to pay attention to outside guests.

The established pattern[8] is that fate has to follow its course. All the same, for the sake of the argument, we may ponder that the very idea of destiny is made possible by its counterpart. It does not suffice to say that it was all *bound to happen.* On the contrary, destiny means exactly that what happened could have happened otherwise. The simple trouble is that the *otherwise* failed because (and here is the tragic predicament) the die of fortune is usually crooked. Stil, the die has six faces. What could be the other face of Antigones' destiny? Is there an alternative for the "war suicidal" feared by Middleton five decades ago and which is still a threat?

To answer this question we have to trespass the dominion of His Majesty, King Power, the one who rules over politics, like it or not. It happens that *Antigone* deals precisely with this matter. In a nutshell, it is a contest between conscience/freedom on one side and force/authority on the other. More precisely, it is a play about *power play*, that is, the exercise of power in a theatrical representation. According to Aristotle, the action (*muthos*, the plot) is even more important than the characters. This is in fact one of the features (certainly the most visible) of the general political content of *Antigone* and I assume that the political content of the play is not disputed. By the way, it does not preclude other interpretations.

Having said that, I am supposed to provide some evidences. For that purpose, I will have to go through the text (as faithfully as possible) to confirm that power is a recurrent – if not dominant – theme. If the exercise gets a little bit fastidious, I haste to beg for the patience of the readers. As an excuse, I anticipate here the main elements of the exercise: the word translated as *power* appears very often in the script of Antigone (naturally the connotations may vary); moreover we can trace political implications in almost every dialogue; practically all of the episodes are charged with a pervasive tension at different levels of intensity and started by a whole range of antinomies (man/woman, older/younger, state/individual, human/divine, love/hate, life/death).

7 In this regard see Professor Jean Hyppolite as he quotes Hegel: "La tragédie est la représentation de la position absolue"**.** – *Introduction à la Philosophie de l!Histoire de Hegel* (1948), p. 102/3.

8 We should not forget that the tragic works were selected (twice a year) in a contest with very straight rules. The presentation itself was a sort of public judgement and the audience acted as a jury. See on this point Otto Maria Carpeaux, *História da Literatura Ocidental*,(1944/5), vol. I, ps 83-85).

Power is just the functional element which puts into action all these contradictions; it was supposed to be neutral but has a sweet perfume.

A first example of ower-play: in the very opening scene, we can watch an "arm twisting" between Antigone and Ismene (lines 45 to 115).[9] The dialogue goes from endearment to hate, from persuasion to ultimatum. Not for chance, the two sisters make a strong contrast: "… we have to be sensible. Remember we are women, we're not born to contend with men" (74/75) – says Ismene in a desperate effort to bring Antigone to her senses. At least in this first round, Antigone ("wild" and "passionate" as she is) does not get the upper-hand of her tender and humble sister. It is a diplomatic failure on the part of Antigone – it will not be the only one and the Prologue sets the stage for rougher clashes.

Another example of point-counter point: the touch of comedy given by the clumsy sentry in his long dialogue with the king (223-331). "The culprit grates on your feelings, I just annoy your ears" (360), the guard dares to say to the king. In fact he represents the common people, simple but independent. Creon should have listened to this rather talkative messenger; instead, he becomes enraged and exhibits an aggressive temper.

The political content of Antigone is best illustrated by the "statement of the crown" (179-235) of Creon, as the king of Thebes. The comments thereon do not fail to compare this short piece with the famous "Funeral Speech" by Pericles a decade later, in Athens. Granted the obvious differences, the mood is very similar: the apology of the City, which provides opportunities for all. Therefore, to be at the service of the *Polis* is the first duty. This means, under an egalitarian rhetoric, that the old order of aristocracy is over.[10] Antigone, the faithful daughter of late king Oedipus, is a true representative of the out-dated order.[11] As for Creon, he climbed to power by chance, being the brother of late queen Jocasta.

The new king needs to affirm his authority: "I now possess the throne and all its powers" (193). The motto is introduced but Creon's authoritarianism is still disguised in the midst of a patriotic oratory. Later on the mask will fall: "Am I to rule this land for others – or myself?"(823).

The inaugural address of Creon corresponds very clearly to a historical context, one of transition.[12] Much attention has been paid to this point but perhaps not enough

9 I will quote the English translation of Prof. Robert Eagles, *Sophocles – Three Theban Plays*, 1982 (Penguin Classics). The numbers refer to the lines of the verses in the translation.

10 "... out of this archaic guilt-culture there arose some of the profoundest tragic poetry that man has ever produced. It was above all Sophocles, the last great exponent of the archaic world view, who expressed the full tragic significance of the old religious themes… the overwhelming sense of human helplessness in face of the divine mistery…" – E.R.Dodds, *The Greeks and the irrational* (1951/1971), p. 49.

11 "La famille s'oppose à l'État comme les pénates aux dieux de la Cite". – Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel* (1947), p.100.

12 See, for instance, Arnold Hauser: "Sophocles unhesitatingly chooses the ideals of the nobility in preference to those of the democratic state. In the struggle between the special ties of kinship and the unlimited equalitarian forces of the state, he uncompromisingly supports the ideals of kinship." – *The Social History of Art* – ed. Vintage Books, vol. I, p. 96 (1951).

to the very curious overtones of "modernity" which Sophocles introduces in Creon's delivery. Notice for instance:

> *[...] "Experience, there is the test" (197) – tradition is not anymore a value in itself, but how one knows what is "experience"?;*
>
> *[…] "the ship of state is safe" (180) – to govern is to steer the vessel of the state, in the language of the cybernetic model applied to politics;13*
>
> *[...] "our country is our safety"(211) – an innuendo which would be familiar today to any leader of the Great Powers.*

In the development of the plot, the thrust of this first speech is: "… whoever proves his loyalty to the state – I will prize that man in death as well as life" (234/5). On the contrary sense, Creon had just announced the proclamation against the "traitor" Polynices, to whom burial is denied. Eventually this decree will apply to Antigone – the audience already knows she is decided to defy the martial law and give her brother a sepulture. Otherwise, Polynices would not go "with glory among the dead" (31). That is the sacred rite but Antigone is the only one to uphold it: "I will bury him [Polynices] myself" (84). So she does, alone, protected by the dark of the night. She had already dismissed the help of Ismene at the first hesitation of her sister.

On his part, Creon states that any opposition to his rule could only be the work of "perverted instigators" (333/4) or due to corruption and bribery (335-336) – the usual pretexts of forceful regimes to crash their opponents. We may contrast this to Antigone's plea to Ismene at the very beginning: "… shout it from the rooftops ... tell the world!"(100). The princess knows the importance of public opinion and she eventually wins the support of the *vox populi*.

Rather conveniently, the Chorus (which represents the City) supports Creon, "the new man for the new day" (174). At this juncture, in all probability, the audience favors the king as well: isn't he on the side of the law? The "tragical irony" helps the author to keep his distance – Antigone does not receive any explicit support. At a critical moment, she gets some commiseration: the tears of the Leader (897). It seems that the brave princess has no chance at all. But is it possible to break the chain of history? Isn't that chain a fabrication of our own illusions?

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What about diplomacy? Sophocles draws the profile of a perfect diplomat in *Antigone*: that is Haemon, the son of Creon and Eurydice. He is in love with Antigone

13 See the whole school deriving from Karl Deutsch, *The nerves of Government* (1963). This model of political control coincides with a rather somber period of international politics. Robert McNamara, the new mandarin, was a typical outlet of that mood.

and has the difficult task of protecting her bride against his own father. In a long interview (705-855), half calm half nasty, the young man tries to bring a "good advice" to the impenitent ruler. Very carefully he informs his father about the talk of the town regarding Antigone: "No woman," they say, "ever deserved death less, and such a brutal death for such a glorious action" (777-778). He adds: "it's no disgrace for a man, even a wise man, to learn many things and not to be too rigid" (795). He is firm but gentle: "Oh give way. Relax your anger – change!" (804). Haemon turns around one central point: Creon is blind by his arrogance (*hybris)*, the usual vice that comes with power.

Creon is unable to understand because his quarrel with Antigone became out of control – it is no more a political issue. Now it is a matter of pride: " no woman is going to lord it over me" (593); "we must defend the men who live by law, never let some woman triumph over us" (755-8). In fact, he had already hinted at that point before: "I am not the man, not now: she is the man if this victory goes to her and she goes free" (541-2). Finally Creon rejects the approach of his son as sermons of "empty wisdom" (846). Diplomacy failed again.

The king refuses reason and denies the *vox populi*. He will bend only when he hears the *vox dei* , echoed by the seer Tiresias. Out of fear to the sacred wrath, he surrenders: "No more fighting a losing battle with necessity" (1230). Power understands the language of power.

To be true, Creon is still acting rather by calculation than by conviction. He realizes he has no more options. He makes a last revealing mistake. He fails to pay attention to the exact instructions of the Leader: "free the girl" first (1225). The ending disgrace is then unleashed at a fast pace – Creon looses his son and wife (Eurydice). Antigone had already commited suicide.

The Chorus had warned: "Sooner or later foul is fair, fair is foul to the man the gods will ruin" (697-7). Creon is punished by the gods of below, the ones he had defied. For his arrogance he assumes the guilt (1441).Through suffering, the magic of tragedy gives back a noble profile to "the bad man". The economy of the play requires that both Creon and Antigone remain strong characters. The plot favors the princess in the end with the prize of glory although she pays the penalty of death. The king becomes wise although too late: "I don't even exist – I'm no one. Nothing" (1146).

The whole cycle of power is thus performed: the loser becomes the victorious and vice-versa. For better or worse, balance prevails. If we skip the accidents, *Antigone* is worth a treaty on human conflicts and the intervening role of power. In short, Sophocles brings to the stage the drama of human finitude. The humble conclusion (and the *kátharsis* compensation) is that the "wonder that is man" will never be perfect, not because of nature, but because of man himself.

The posture of Antigone is the opposite of Creon: she is not at all concerned with power; she is committed to her conscience and to her beliefs. The king's

nefarious orders are a sort of absurd disturbance of the natural order.[14] She reacts to the situation with her whole self, with her "own flesh and blood" (1), so to speak. Significantly enough, those are her first words in the play (referring to her sister; later on [573] she will use the same expression referring to her dead brother). By the same token, "grief", "pain", "doom" punctuate the opening speech of the heroine. Melancholy follows her notwithstanding her courage and strength: "… death will be a glory" (86).

Antigone longs for the "kingdom down below"(90). More than once she will utter this inner feeling: "Who on earth, alive in the midst of so much grief as I, could fail to find his death a rich reward?"(516-8). For the sake of her cause, she is prepared to any sacrifice, even to give her life – today, most probably, she would be qualified as a suicidal terrorist. But she acts in the open: at a critical moment, she will state in front of Ismene and Creon: "I gave myself to death, long ago, so I might serve the dead." (630). At this point, Creon seems very confident – he is supposed to be on the side of good reason and he passes a judgment: "They are both mad and I tell you, the two of them" (632). The comment is colloquial and blunt, in order to stress the asymmetry between the matter-of-fact king and the anguished sisters. Somehow the enemy is always insane. If he lived in our days, it would be normal for Creon to consider the royal daughters of Oedipus as *rogue* citizens. The tragedy is inside the characters. The set is given: fate has only to wait.

The princess and the king meet three times: the confront goes in a crescendo. At first it seems a personal contest between sense (Creon) and sensibility (Antigone). Both are proud and determined. Very soon the stakes get higher: Antigone invokes "the great unwritten, unshakable traditions" (505) and Creon appeals to the "reason of state", nothing less.

One can guess that Antigone despises Creon as an upstart: he has done outrage to the gods and to the name of the royal house. She expresses her indignation freely but she does not underestimate her rival. Neither does the author: he remains neutral. This is a very important point.[15] Because of the strong "message" of the tragedy, we tend to overlook Sophocles mastery in the formal management of the play. *Antigone* is a fantastic *show*, to use modern language. And this is due, in a large measure, to the fact that the play interacts with the spectators. The audience will deliberate like an assembly: Creon is really a bad guy? And Antigone – isn't she too self-righteous?

There are mixed feelings. Very respectful "reviewers" took opposite sides and I will just mention the most famous polemic in this respect.[16] It is well known that "the celestial" Antigone was a source of inspiration for Hegels' *Fenomenoly of the Spirit.*

14 As a matter of fact Antigone is considered a front runner in terms of the tenets of Natural Law, as far as the defense of innate rights is concerned.

15 On this issue it seems to me that the great scholar Arnold Houser has missed the point: "Sophocles, in his *Antígone*, embraces the cause of the heroine against the democratic state…" –ibidem , p. 96.

16 See notes 3, 4 and 14.

He great Philosopher of history started a new wave of devotion to the heroine in the 19th century, but this did not prevent him from making the advocacy of Creon: "He is not a tyrant, but an ethical potencial". Like thesis and antithesis, Creon and Antigone are two energies bound to clash.

In the theoretical dispute released at the time, the brothers Schlegel (Friedrich and A.W.) reacted to Hegel. According to them it is not a question of guilt or innocence – the two opposing characters are not at the same level. The real issue is the fidelity to the Gods. Under this light, Antigone is compared to the Christian martyrs, a sort of Jeanne d'Arc with no swords. As for Creon, in this line of interpretation, he is almost reduced to a bourgeois prototype, bound "to arrive too late".[17]

Sophocles, "the quintessence of the Greek"[18], would not involve himself in this discussion. He holds fast to his golden rule: measure, balance, proportion. Despite the changes of the two main characters, the author preserves the moral stature of both. One supports the other so that the economy of the play may work. To praise the martyr we have to respect the oppressor – otherwise Creon would pose as a petty and vain ruler and Antigone might look just as a resentful solitary woman or, worst, as a stubborn and spoiled girl. As it is, they are enemies in solidarity, partners to "the bitter end".[19]

Politics is the domain of circumstance and human power is not a faithful lover: it comes and goes. In *Antigone*, even the ultimate power – the power of the gods – remains elusive and mysterious, the *arcana Dei*, which will serve later as a model for the state secrets of the *arcana imperi*. We know that in the tragedy the cards are ear-marked but Sophocles succeeds in keeping the suspense. The initial confront – the law of the Polis *versus* the duties of kinship – will evolve showing new facets of the power-play and the true motives behind the resolve of the two protagonists.

The Chorus is the main tool Sophocles uses as a counter-balance to the clash between Antigone and Creon. Very often what is said by the council of elders is not what is implied (is that an inspiration for the language developed in the so-called parliamentary diplomacy?) Ambiguity is obviously a safeguard and it serves well the purposes of Sophocles: "… the city casts out the man who weds himself to inhumanity thanks to reckless daring" (414). The Chorus is referring to the rebel or to the tyrant? Interestingly enough this note of warning (and suspicion) appears exactly at the end of the most celebrated part of the play, the so-called Ode to Man, which begins in triumph: "Numberless wonders/ terrible

17 See Karl Reinhardt, who stresses the opposition between the human and the divine (*Sophokcles* , 1933). See also Prof. Eudoro de Sousa, *Uma Leitura de Antígona* (Editora Universidade de Brasília, 1978), which contains a review on the different interpretations of *Antígone.*

18 Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (1930).

19 Cf. Paul Ricouer, "La Tragédie de l'action" **in** *Soi – même comme um Autre*, 1990, p.284.

wonders walk the world but none the match of man…"(377). The sentry, in the previous scene, had just informed the king that the martial law had been defied.

The action proceeds and Antigone receives her final verdict: to be buried alive. She is fearless: "My death will be enough" (617). She had declared before: "I was born to join in love, not in hate – that is my nature" (590-1). It is almost a Christian confession. Antigone is no longer just a heroine – she is prepared to become a martyr. She seems to be defeated but now it is the turn of Creon to lose his ground: "And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule?"(821). "What? The city is the king's – that's the law!" (825). The tide has changed.

Antigone disappears from the stage 400 verses before the end of the play – from thereon the audience will hear from her only indirectly and this is a fantastic demonstration of self-confidence on the part of the author. Sophocles dismisses his main character, but Antigone remains the axe of the tragedy. As a literary figure, she is really a rival to his father Oedipus, who was sponsored by Freud, as we know. But Antigone has her own title: she is recognized as one of the most powerful women in Western literature. Why? Perhaps because she is so transparent and convincing, so real. Nevertheless there is an aura of mystery around her and much has been written about this.

It is worth mentioning that, in her last appearance to the audience, Antigone makes a very intriguing statement: "I'd never have taken this ordeal upon myself " (998) if it were for a dead husband or for her children. Furthermore, she tries to justify this last surprising stand, but not convincingly (1000-1004). These lines were put under suspicion by many scholars; Goethe, for one, refused to believe that they were authentic.

Has Antigone betrayed herself at the last moment? Did she deny her blood allegiance in front of her prison-tomb? Not the least – Antigone is stressing the perspective that was always hers. Now, more than before, she is able to see the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. She contemplates life with "the eye of the soul", to use a platonic image. By then Creon and all that stuff seems to her just as an unhappy accident and when she refered to husband and children she was making no more than a hypothetical comparison. Goethe should not be worried.

The fact is that all the dramatic action of the play turns around Antigone's suffering and – by Sophocles' unique craft – reveals her moral advancement. Antigone grows in the face of adversity. Gradually, Antigone realizes that her private war with her uncle is just a consequence of her soul-searching. "The conscience of existence is the conscience of the suffering of existence" – Hegel wrote this but it could as well have been written by Sophocles.

The final word belongs to the Chorus. In a few lines it gives a clue to the tragedy: "The mighty words of the proud are paid in full with mighty blows of fate" (1468/9). That is what Haemon, in other words, tried to convey to his confused but obstinate father. Certitude may be more dangerous than doubt, now the king realizes. Creon

committed a fatal sin: he tried to rule over the dead. He went off-limits into the realm of the gods – Antigone was absolutely right on this point. For a change, the Chorus is quite clear in this last judgment.

If Creon was guilt of arrogance, Antigone forgot the lessons of pratical wisdom. She gives us a lesson of dignity but not of modesty, except at the, when all is said and done. Her principles were honorable but her tact was clumsy. The fact is that her cry for freedom gave strength to tyranny. "Politics needs men who act freely but men cannot act freely without politics"[20]. The final remind of the old citizens is also for Antigone: she did not give a chance to diplomacy. To be fair, she did not have a chance at all in her troubled life.

The key-word in that short (and to-the-point) statement of the Chorus is *phronesis*[21]. The concept appeared in poetical language before being worked out by Plato and Aristotle.[22] It corresponds to the latin *prudentia*, "ce savoir singulier, plus riche de disponibilité que de contenu", "ce savoir plus vécu qu'appris, profond parce que non déduit, que nous reconnaissons à ceux don't nous disons qu'ils ont de l'expérience". [23] Prudence, for Aristotle, is the supreme political virtue, which is not the same as *sophos* (wisdom). Political intelligence is both a matter of science and art: it is knowledge but it is above all practice, experience, feed-back from reality. And it is not an excuse for omission; on the contrary, it is a requirement to act. But in the right way: *reta ratio agibilium*, in the concise formula of Thomas Aquinas.

A final word about the everlasting message of *Antigone*, which is really for us (through the characters of the play) and above all for the rulers of the world, here represented by the unfortunate Creon while Antigone stands for the society at large. The Chorus says that "the blows of fate will teach us wisdom at long last" (1470). The teaching will be most welcomed. Let's pray for rather soft blows.

20 Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (1962), p. 33.
21 Cf. Pierre Aubenque , *La Prudence chez Aristote* (1963), p. 162/3.
22 Id. Ib. , p.155.
23 Id. Ib. , p.60, 59.