

Antigone and Indeterminacy at the End of Euripides' *Phoenissae*

Antigone's role in the *Phoenissae* has been condemned as irrelevant to the central plot and even completely excised by Verrall (1895). The play's end has also been thought to show confusion between her announced intentions to accompany her blind father into exile or to stay and bury her brother's corpse, even at the expense of her own death. Critics such as Kitto (1939) have proposed radical textual surgery to disambiguate her future actions. Even a more sympathetic recent critic like Swift (2009) reads the ending very pessimistically, seeing Antigone bound to destruction by the same ancestral curse upon the Labdacids.

However, it should be remembered that the myth of Antigone was very unstable in drama, not having been canonized in archaic epic tradition; the *Thebaid* had Haemon killed by the Sphinx before Antigone was even born. The plot of Sophocles' *Antigone*, ending in her entombed death, was not the only version available; Euripides' own *Antigone*, probably produced in the decade prior to *Phoenissae*, had a happy ending with a love-struck Haemon helping her bury the corpse and then marrying Antigone, who was destined to bear a son (according to Aristophanes of Byzantium's hypothesis to Sophocles). The fourth-century Astydamas the Younger produced yet another version (perhaps preserved in Hyginus, *Fab.* 72). I would therefore propose that the open-endedness of *Phoenissae*, rather than being a loose end in the plot, is an intentional effort to acknowledge the fluidity of the myths surrounding the last survivors of the Labdacid era. A more limited open-endedness is observable at the end of Aeschylus' *Septem*, which I believe is authentic (see Lloyd-Jones 1959) and in any event was probably the ending that would be known by 409 BCE: although Antigone and a semi-chorus move offstage to bury Polyneices, we are left in the dark about her subsequent fate.

Antigone's role in *Phoenissae* is actually quite important, as the female counterpart to the play's other heroic youngster, Menoecius. In the teichoscopy scene (88-201), she appears as an eager child on a field trip, with permission from her mother, excitedly posing questions with a mix of wonder and revulsion. Her maidenly vulnerability is emphasized by her two most emotional reactions to the Argive warriors: her fear of Capaneus, with his threats of rape for Theban women (179-92), and her dismissal of the beautiful young Parthenopaeus, whom one might normally expect to excite some sympathy in a girl (145-52). Against both she invokes the wrath of Artemis, the goddess of maidenly isolation and protection. Artemis is also invoked in her underworld and celestial aspects in the theichoscopy (109-10, 175-76).

However, Antigone matures rapidly in her role as internal audience to the play's events. At the moment of greatest crisis, when Eteocles and Polyneices are about to face off in a duel, Jocasta drags a confused Antigone down to the battlefield with her (1264-83), only to have her witness the deaths of her two brothers and Jocasta's own suicide. In the exodos, Antigone returns as a person transformed by her tragic spectatorship, taught by exposure to her family's suffering to become bold and defiant: she flatly defies Eteocles' (757-60) and Creon's (1672-78) plans concerning her marriage to Haemon, not wanting to be bartered among men as a token of political exchange, as her mother had been by Creon after Laius' death (45-49), with such devastating results. Free from the patriarchal control of her brother, uncle, and fiancé, she even asserts independence from her enfeebled father, abandoning her earlier plan to attend him in exile in favor of staying behind in Thebes to defy Creon's interdiction of burial (1743-46). She appears even to reject Oedipus' fatherly advice about fulfilling rituals along with her age-mates at the appropriate altars and shrines (1747-52), responding bitterly that her previous Dionysiac devotions have brought her no return of *charis* (1753-57). With these aporetic last words, the

once-pious Antigone appears to realize the futility of religious faith, thereby freeing herself also from the ultimate patriarchal authority of the gods. At this point, she becomes a figure of open destiny, a self-determining existential agent whose future actions are in no way preordained.

Bibliography

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