

Antigone: The Cultural Work of Tragedy

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I. Introduction

Begin today by discussing the oddness and mystery of this play, but my overall goals for the lecture are tripartite:

1. Introduce you to two important techniques for reading literature in general and Greek drama in particular. These are close readings and readings within a cultural context.

2. Show you how you might use these different reading strategies to address what John Gould called "the Problem of Women" in Classical Greek Society (You'll remember that Gould spoke about this problem in the article you read earlier this semester --"Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens")

3. Argue that the primary goal of Greek Tragedy was ritualistic and that reading *Antigone* within its ritual and historical context gives us greater insight into why the women behave so bizarrely within it and how we might understand the figure of Antigone. I will begin with the oddness of this ritual context and the play itself and then lead you into a comparative analysis of the transgressive behavior of Creon and Antigone.

For contemporary Americans, plays are part of a secular context; yet for Athenians, tragedies such as the *Antigone* were performed during the City Festival of Dionysus (also called "the Great Dionysia") [In fact tragedy literally means "goat-song"--and the ancient explanation was that this referred both to

the "song for the goat" or the winner's prize in the dramatic competition of the Great Dionysia AND it referred to the she-goat sacrificed in honor of Dionysus (Dihle 93). What **would** it be like to see *Antigone* performed in this context? What **were** the essential elements of this festival?

Each March, the City Festival of Dionysus (or the "great Dionysia") began as an archaic wooden statue of the God Dionysus was brought in procession into Athens from the city of Eleutherai on the Boetian border (SLIDES #1 & 2 MAP & Dionysus: use pointer to show the route of the progression). This physical movement of Dionysus--the androgynous god of wine and excess--from "outer limits of Athenian territory" to the very heart of the Athenian world was symbolic of the ritual movement of chaos and strangeness into the pure and orderly city center. The end of the statue's torchlit journey lay near the city's core: the statue was placed in the sanctuary of Dionysus Eleuthereus near the theater of Dionysus where the tragedies of Athenian dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides would be performed as part of the five day festival of excess (Cole 26 --SLIDE #3 of THEATRE replace large map RIGHT FORWARD). This theater was located at the base of the acropolis--the religious, monetary, and political stronghold of the city--home of the Parthenon which David Silverman analyzed in lecture last Monday. (SLIDE #4 LEFT FORWARD: Athens Map of Classical Period. Show Procession route.)

Before the play could begin, the city and theater had to be purified. We know from inscriptions that part of the preparations for the festival included "an assignment to the *agoranomoi* [purification officials--this term and others are on the second page of your handout] to prepare and make level the streets through which the procession was to pass, and to collect fines from anyone who poured wash water or human waste into the street" (Cole in Scodel 27). We also know that the theater itself was purified in ceremonies that included the "killing of a pig

whose bleeding body was carried around the outer perimeter of the precinct to mark off the area as...sacred to the god (Cole 28).

The procession itself was no less bizarre. (SLIDE #5 LEFT FORWARD--PHALLEPHORIA). In spite of his own mixture of the masculine and feminine--or perhaps because of it--Dionysus was associated with obtrusive sexuality and, hence, part of the procession included a large painted phallus that was carried on a wagon along the route of the procession [this procession of the phallus is called a "phallegoria"--this is an Archaic representation of the Procession] (Cole 30-31). Inscriptions suggest that at least some of the attendants were dressed as satyrs (Cole 32) who were also symbolic of aggressive sexuality--men characterized by large phallus and half animals--such as the one holding the phallus in this procession (Cole 32).

"The final act of the procession took place in the theater itself" and by some accounts, ended with a frenzied dance, the lifting of the phallus, and a jeer or ritualized obscenity directed at the audience (Cole 33). While admittedly odd by our standards, these events were also at odds with the everyday life of the Athenians--Dionysus was after all the God of "escape from everyday reality" (Godhill in Winkler & Zeitlin 126). Like the pig's blood dripping around the edges of the theater, the procession, phallus, satyrs, and the ritualized insults all marked the boundaries between "the world of everyday affairs and the world of the festival" (Cole 33).

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It is in this context that Sophocles around the year of 441 BC presented his play *Antigone*. {TIMELINE ON PAGE #2 OF HANDOUT} Like the festival itself, *Antigone* tests, crosses, and remarks the boundaries between order and disorder, composure and excess, mortal and immortal, ritual and sacrilege. In it we see a young woman, who according to her own sister and uncle, steps outside of the

bounds of proper female subservience by burying her brother against her uncle and ruler's wishes. We also see her cousin and fiancée Haemon disrupt the social order by placing his desire for his bride-to-be above his love for his father and the city state which, if he were to have lived, he might have ruled. Similarly his father Creon places his own lust for power and desire for confirmation above the laws of the gods and the needs of his citizens. Antigone, Haemon, and Creon all disrupt the city's social order and transgress the laws and hierarchical divisions that constitute it. What **are** we to make of these transgressions?

In my mind, this is a question which is crucial with respect to all of the characters, but perhaps most so with Antigone who appears to be the protagonist of the play--that is she is the play's central character or heroine. The play revolves around her behavior and misbehavior and the moral lessons we as the audience might glean from her actions. When she dies at the end of the play, we must ask ourselves how we feel. Is her death a just punishment for her anti-social behavior or are we meant to feel that society in general--and Creon in particular--are to blame for allowing her to die so senselessly? What, if anything, **is redeeming or valuable** about her actions which lead to her death? What **do** these lessons tell us about how women were told to behave in 5th century Athens? Is Antigone a feminist rebel to be applauded or a social misfit whose behavior shouldn't be emulated unless one lusts for death?

In asking these questions, I am, addressing what John Gould called "the problem of women" in classical Athens. The problem with women is not that there were women (though this seems to have bothered some of the more misogynistic Athenians), but that we--as 20th Century scholars of Greece have a hard time understanding how the Greeks felt about women. As Gould notes, most of "the evidence available to us [about women] is almost without exception the product of men and addressed to men in a male dominated world" (38).

Like Gould, I will argue that the solution to reading these so-called "biased" or tainted texts is to read them within the context of the evidence we have about Athenian culture--whether it be inscriptions, legal documents, mythology, art or archeological evidence. This sort of cultural reading is the literary equivalent to what William Diebold called "iconographic readings" of art in his lecture on "Death in Archaic Greek Art" on Sept. 29th.

As you will remember the term "iconography" refers to the identification of images with symbolic content or meaning (Barnet 10). In general, this method looks to sources outside of the object which the critic feels will help illuminate what the artist might have intended the object to mean and how the audience at that time might have interpreted it. Thus, in his lecture on the representation of death in Archaic Greek Art, William Diebold turned to history, mythology, archeology, and literary texts for evidence of the cultural attitudes surrounding Greek death in the Archaic period.

In this lecture I will be using a similar approach for understanding Antigone and her death. I will be looking the cultural context for this play. In doing so, I am assuming that any event--whether it is the sacrificing of a pig on the boundaries of a theater or the staging of *Antigone* in 5th century Athens--has a specific cultural significance for the people viewing it during a particular historical period. This is what I mean by my title, "the cultural work of tragedy": Tragedies perform a certain social function within Athenian culture, and I am arguing that that particular social function is religious and ritualistic.

However, before I begin discussing the function of this ritual, it is important to note that just as iconographic readings in art history build off of the tools of formal analysis, so will my cultural reading build off of the literary equivalent of formal analysis--close readings. While the art historian is interested in the visual elements from which the art object is made, the literary

critic interested in the verbal elements from which literature is constructed. In particular I will be paying attention to figurative language (such as the trope of the Bride of Death) and the use of language to construct characters. (BLANK SLIDES)

So what **was** this context? What **is** the cultural work of tragedy? How **can** the surrounding circumstances help us understand what the transgressions and death of Antigone meant to the Athenians? Another way of phrasing this is to ask "why did Athenians **NEED** tragedy"? Now that we have established that tragedies were set in a ritualized context of transgression, it is worth asking why **was** a festival that displayed transgression so important to Athens? (Meier 1). One answer to this question is that during the fifth century Athens was busy redefining its borders, hierarchies, and self image. Ritualized transgression was a means of safely testing these boundaries, so as to relieve tension, confirm their viability, or present alternatives (REPEAT). During the fifth century, Athens was testing its boundaries on a number of levels but I would like to highlight two of these: that of the empire and the democratic polis.

[I'm now at Roman Numeral 2 on my outline--the Cultural Work of Tragedy]

II. The Cultural Work of Tragedy

In the opening of my lecture, I remarked that the procession of the statue of Dionysus moved from the city of Eleutherai on periphery of the Athenian territory to the city center. The rise of tragedy is coexistent with the rise of the Athenian empire in the 5th Century and it reflects the demands and anxieties of Athens' new role as a power broker in the Mediterranean. As historian Christian Meier explains (**#1 on handout**),

Around the time at which the oldest extant tragedies were produced, the Attic citizenry, mainly men of little education or experience who had hitherto existed within the confines of a provincial horizon, gained wide dominions as a result of the Persian Wars, assuming virtual primacy in the Aegean. Shortly afterwards they toppled the aristocratic Council of the Areopagus and adopted sole responsibility for Athens and its empire. This demanded a long arm and considerable boldness in the making of policy and the conduct of war over a domain that stretched from the Black Sea to Egypt and was soon to take in the rest of Greece. As a result, undreamt-of fields of activity and expectation opened up, so that in every area things could be perceived, shaped and mastered anew, initiating a great torrent of change.

How did the Athenians cope with this power? (Meier 2)

How *did* the Athenians cope with this power? As we have already seen in Herodotus' *Histories*, the reaction was a mixture of pleasure and anxiety. On the one hand, Herodotus and other pre-Peloponnesian writers and artisans take great pride in Athens and their texts display hallmarks of nationalism. Critics such as Pollitt have argued that the Parthenon is one such display of this belief in Athenian greatness. On the other hand, fifth Century Athenians were anxious about their ability to maintain this power. As Herodotus points out, the Gods are envious of those who achieve greatness--i.e. those who transgressed the limits of mortals--and Athens now controlled a great empire. Would she, too, be brought low? Athenian dramas such as the *Oresteia*, and as I will argue, *Antigone*, staged this anxiety by reenacting mythical scenes of overreaching monarchs.

Moreover, democracy itself was a new and unstable thing. As Meier's quote attests, the victory against the Persians was coexistent with a revolution within Athens. This revolution meant that Athenians had to test the boundaries

and meaning of the polis, as well as the limits of their empire. While the shift away from the rule of tyrants was exciting and potentially liberating, the fall of the aristocracy also left Athens vulnerable: for all their boasting, "The Athenians had no state, no government, no institutions, on which...they might have relied. They had no police to speak of, no administrative apparatus, no public education. Everywhere responsibility lay among the citizens" (Meier 2-3). Tragedy attempted to heal this anxiety. In many ways, the City Festival to Dionysus in Athens clearly affirmed the power of the city through ritual. Before any play was performed in this festival, four ceremonies were enacted that reinforced the city's authority:

In the first of these ceremonies, ten generals presented libations and offerings to Democracy, peace, and good fortune. One impact of this ceremony was to reinforce the inherent connection between these ideas--in essence, democracy *was* peace and good fortune. The other three ceremonies in this series consisted of displaying of tribute, crowning of polis heroes, and parading of orphans who were recognized as heroes of the city because...[their fathers] had died in battle" (Goldhill 102-106). These ceremonies displayed the greatness and benevolence of the city and the dedication of its citizens. Thus, Greek festivals, such as this one, were a crucial means of "binding citizens together" (Meier 4).

Whereas these rituals seemingly unambiguously championed the city, the tragedies, on the other hand, played out, by the way of myth, the concerns of the citizens about the polis and the relationship between their new way of life to the old (Meier 3). In this sense, Tragedy is a democratic phenomenon. A crucial tenet of Greek democratic philosophy is that the dominant ideologies are subject to critical exploration (Buxton 33). This is an idea that we will see later in Plato's *Republic*, but we have already seen it at work in the Athenian court system in the *Oresteia* and in Vernant's discussion of the polis. The very structure of tragedy

embodies this democratic spirit: one of the innovations of Greek drama was the way that it not only set the actor and chorus in dialogue--or debate--but also how it set actor against actor. (One of Sophocles own innovations is the addition of a third actor.) Thus, tragedies stage disputes between individual actors, as well as between the individual actor and the community/chorus. (It is worth noticing in Antigone how integral debates are to propelling forward the plot: Play opens with a debate between Antigone and Ismene, moves to one between Antigone and Creon, Creon and Haemon, and Creon and Teiresias: violence always begins where persuasion and debate end.) As our old friend J.-P. Vernant argues "In tragedy, the city must both recognize itself and bring itself into question. In other words tragedy involves both order and disorder" (Vernant 264). By re-enacting democratic principles, Greek tragedy paradoxically supports, questions, and subverts the city. It is in this sense that tragedy is what I would call carnivalesque.

Carnavalesque is a term made famous by Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin [**his definition is on the handout #2**] Bakhtin used the term "carnavalesque" to describe festivals such as the City Dionysia which "celebrate temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete" (Bakhtin 109). When I use the term, "carnavalesque" in the rest of my lecture, I am referring to this "topsy-turvey" world in which "all is mixed, hybrid, ritually degraded and defiled" (Stallybrass and White 8). Thus, the carnival does not merely uphold or subvert the social order, but in a way does both at once. Tragedies were part of the "sacred time of a festival as a period of inversion--men dressed as women, slaves becoming masters...the social order...reversed" (Godhill 127).

In final section of my lecture I will argue that the reason that Antigone's transgressions are acceptable and applauded because her transgressions conform to the democratic principles of this sacred time. It is worth noting, however, that this is not the only way that transgressions can be used either in festivals or literature. Two other types of transgression are worth exposing here, in part because they point to two other ways people have understood *Antigone*. You might want to consider in conference whether you find these readings of Antigone's transgression more appealing than mine.

The first alternate suggestion of how use of transgression works is that it is basically conservative or repressive: by telling about characters who cross boundaries, a writer/storyteller can affirm the current social order (this is one way of reading the festival of Dionysus--as a temporary crossing of borders that are reaffirmed by the festival's end). We have seen in this type of transgression in the myth of Prometheus in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and more recently in the *Oresteia*. In the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra crosses the boundaries between feminine and masculine: as Gail Sherman pointed out in her last lecture, Clytemnestra is described as a "unwomanlike" and Orestes uses the masculine plural to address her (ll. 940, 688-89). Aeschylus' presentation of this border crossing is unambiguously negative: Clytemnestra's transgression brings ruin to her family, her oikos, and her city. Thus they confirm that women must stay in their place or bring a blight upon themselves and people they love. One reading of *Antigone*, which I reject as misguided, argues that Antigone's death functions in the same way--it is a warning of what will happen to women who speak out and defy their place.

A second argument about transgression is that writers--or rebels--can use transgressions is to subvert the social order. This is a way transgression was used in Greece. For example, in the summer of 415 BC, shortly after Antigone

was performed and right before the "boldest Greek military effort since the Trojan War," a "group of conspirators, moving through the city [of Athens] under cover of night, mutilated statues of the god Hermes. (SLIDE #8: Marble Herm--SLIDE LEFT FORWARD). Found in every neighborhood, and in front of private dwellings as well as in public places, these statues had the shape of plain rectangular columns except for two carved features: the head and the erect genitals. When Athens awakened, almost all of these phallic sculptures had been castrated" (Keuls 16). This act is clearly transgressive and disruptive: by cutting off the genitals of Hermes, the conspirators transgressed the boundaries between sacred and political and caused real panic in the city, for as historian Eva Keuls points out, "it does not seem to have occurred to anybody to take the mutilation as a harmless prank carried too far: it was seen as a subversive act, indicative of plots to overthrow the government. Hermes, after all, was the god of travel, and the sacrilege must have cast an ominous spell over the preparations for the expedition" (Keuls 388).

This subversive act gets taken up as a literary subject by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* (6.27.1) and is alluded to by Aristophanes in his comedy *Lysistrata* when the chorus warns a group of sex-deprived men that "If you are smart, you will cover up with your shirt, so that the herm choppers won't catch sight of you" (Keuls 387; L 1093-94). While these writers may have attempted to use this transgression to show how Athens' boldness left the city-state vulnerable to attack, the critique of Athenian hubris--like the castrations of the Herms-- was clearly meant to challenge--and potentially change--the social order. Feminists have liked to argue that this is the type of transgression made in *Antigone*, but I believe that this is overstating the fact. As I will argue in the rest of my lecture, the point of *Antigone* is not to overthrow or change the social

order, but to question it through dialogue and debate, and thereby heal any social rifts.

Through the tragedy of *Antigone*, Athenians were able to "gain distance from the everyday, to find equilibrium and clarity and to keep open the principles of their existence, indeed to evolve these further": they were able to nurse, and heal their anxieties (Meier 4). [I would like to now turn to close reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* and address how by voicing anxieties about boundaries, the play seeks to heal the city.] (BLANK SLIDE)

III. The Cultural Work of *Antigone* in Fifth Century Athens

In *Antigone*, Sophocles presents a city that is self destructing through illness. Ironically, this illness is brought on in part by the transgressive acts of Creon, the King of Thebes: Teiresias, the blind prophet, warns the king that he has brought a plague to the city because his failure to bury his nephew Polyneices has defiled the ancient places of divination. In doing so, Creon invokes the anger of the gods who, as a consequence, refuse to take Teiresias' prayers and sacrifices on the part of the ailing city.

Yet, paradoxically it is just after this revelation of Creon's transgressions, that, in despair, the Chorus of Theban elders turns to the god **Dionysus**--the god of transgression, and sometimes death--to seek a cure for the diseased city. On. pp. 204-205 (11.1192-1225), the elders invoke Dionysus, praise his strengths, argue for his love, and ask for his curative dance. In this invocation, the chorus of elders clearly feels that Dionysus has the ability to cure Creon's transgression: they ask Dionysus to "come with [his] healing foot" to the "city...gripped by a violent plague" and to dance his frenzied dance. What **are** the differences between the transgressions Creon has undertaken, and those Dionysus and his frenzied dance offer? I would like to answer this paradox in two parts: 1) by

addressing what Creon has done that is so wrong and 2) by looking at the type of cure Dionysus and his "frenzied" attendants bring to the city of Thebes and, ultimately, to the city of Athens. For, it seems to me impossible that Athenians could listen to this invocation of Dionysus during the festival of Dionysia and not feel that it is meant to cure them, too. If in ancient times Dionysus was the patron of Thebes, surely Fifth Century participants in the City Dionysia at Athens saw him as their special patron as well. I am interested, then, in what cure Dionysus provides for Athens.

First--what **has** Creon done so wrong? I would argue that Creon's transgressions in *Antigone* are like those of Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*. That is, they belong in the first alternative type of transgression I mentioned before. They serve social function of reinforcing that certain boundaries are not meant to be crossed. Like Clytemnestra who usurps the domain of men, Creon usurps the role of the gods. In the "Hymn to Man" on p. 174 (ll. 368-411), the Chorus provides us with an equation that we have seen before: just as man rules beasts and the natural world, so do the gods rule man. The chorus argues that honoring the gods brings elevation, while transgressing the "laws of the earth" and the "justice of the gods" brings destruction (ll. 404-11, p. 175). People would do well to remember that their position in life is due to the will of the divine.

Creon, however, is deaf to this warning. Creon is clearly guilty of great impiety in the play *Antigone*. First he has denied the burial of his nephew Polyneices and has left the body to be defiled by animals. This is not his right: as Teiresias, points out, now that Polyneices is dead, he is not under Creon's command, but instead belongs to the gods of the underworld: Teiresias warns: (p. 202 PAUSE)

one [Polyneices] that belonged indeed to the underworld
gods you have kept on this earth without due share

of the rites of burial, of due funeral offerings,
a corpse unhallowed. With all of this you, Creon,
have nothing to do, nor have the gods above.

These acts of yours are violence, on your part (1139-44, p. 202).

Creon's assumption that the body belongs under his command is an act of violence against the divine order.

Throughout the play, Creon makes the mistake of confusing the justice of man with the justice of the immortals. With a "breezy confidence" Creon asserts that the gods judge the worlds as he does (Mikalson 140). For example in line 310-320, Creon reasons that the it is impossible --and indeed insulting--to suppose that the gods might have buried Polyneices themselves since it is unreasonable to believe that the gods might have "honored criminals" (ll. 318-319, p. 172). Yet here Creon assumes that the gods would judge criminality in the same terms that he has: yet, as we know from the *Iliad*, the villain of one city and one god, is often the beloved of another--and as Athena showed us in *The Oresteia*, part of the power of the gods' justice is their ability to see the "big picture."

Creon's hubris is a flaw he potentially shares with the leaders of Fifth Century Athens. As we have seen in Herodotus' *Histories* (and it is worth remembering that Sophocles and Herodotus were friends), those who rose to greatness were destined to fall. As Sophocles' chorus warns in lines 143-44 "Zeus...hates the most / the boasts of a great tongue" (p. 166) just as Herodotus warns in Book 1 chapter 32 that "the Divine is altogether jealous and prone to trouble" those who have good fortune (Herodotus 47). *Antigone*, like the *Histories*, emphasizes the temporary nature of greatness: man is a victim of time. As Antigone reminds Creon repeatedly, his rule is limited: his ordinances are of "today and yesterday" whereas the laws of the gods--like the gods themselves

"live forever" (ll. 498-500, p. 178). Creon, like Oedipus and Laius before him are raised up only to be brought low. In 441 BC [the year *Antigone* was probably first performed], Athens was also wavering at the pinnacle of her might: the control of Boiotia and the central Greek land empire was lost to Athens in 446, yet Athens' command of the eastern seas seemed unimpaired (Hornblower 88). Would Athens fall prey to the same illness of hubris?

If these transgression serve as a warning to both Thebes and Fifth Century Athenians, why **does** the Chorus call upon Dionysus--the god of transgressions--to heal the city? I would argue that Dionysus' dissolution of boundaries follows a different pattern than that of Creon. Whereas the Dionysian spirit of the carnival and tragedy is democratic in its desire to question and expose ambiguity, Creon's transgressions are tyrannical. Throughout the play, Creon's impiety is compounded by his inability to listen to opinions other than his own. In his opening speech, Creon gives lip service to the importance of debate: he argues that the worst man for the city is he who "does not reach for the best counsel for her, / but through some fear, keeps his tongue under lock and key" (198-200, p. 167). Yet, as the play progresses, we see that Creon himself has instilled this very fear in all of his citizens. His messenger, quite rightly, fears giving him the news of Polyneices burial, and both Antigone and Haemon assert that the entire city disagrees with Creon's actions but they "keep their mouths shut for the fear of you" (p. 180 l. 556). Like the Xeres--the tyrant in Herodotus' *Histories*, Creon seeks to put a "yoke" (p. 172) around the necks of his citizens. Creon, then, has usurped the role of the gods, not to open it up dialogue, but to crush his underlings.

In contrast, the god Dionysus offers a cure for the city that uses transgression to bring about debate, not to shut it down. I would like to explore

how Sophocles presents this cure for the city through the figure of Antigone, her gendered transgressions, and the image of the Bride of Death.

C. Antigone and Gender Transgressions

Antigone's role in the **curative** process of Dionysus is not wholly unexpected. Antigone's transgression of Gender norms reflects the standard women's role in the Dionysian rituals. Yet, the meaning of these ritualized violations has plagued scholars for generations. I would argue that in both the case of Antigone and the women participants of the festival, the role of transgression was curative: that is, it sought to exposure societal ruptures in order to alleviate tensions and to raise questions.

The transgression of gender roles played an important part in Dionysian rites. In the festival of Dionysus, female participants were expected to manifest "'subversive' traits in acts of aggression and self-assertion" (Zeitlin 132: SLIDE #9 MAENAD--LEFT FORWARD). In the festival of Dionysus, ranting women--or "Maenads" took part in ecstatic dances during which they entwined their bodies with ivy, handled phallic snakes, threw back their heads, raised their hands in wild gestures, made noises with clappers, [and] mauled young animals in the "cruellest fashion," brandishing the severed limbs as they wandered over the mountains in nocturnal rites in the company of a collective of women" (Zeitlin 136, Keuls 360: show images). This was NOT normal Athenian female behavior--but rather its opposite. Why **would** 5th Century Athenian men have allowed such ritual transgression, which was clearly threatening, if not perverse?

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One answer to this has been that the festivals allowed women to vent steam: as classicist Froma Zeitlin puts it, "the hysteria described in... the group ecstasy of Dionysian rituals served to express and potentially to redress a certain

imbalance in the relationships between men and women. They both served as a socially contained and socially acceptable way of presenting, negotiating, and readjusting serious disturbances in intrapsychic equilibrium" (Zeitlin 134). In other words it allowed women to vent. At the same time the Dionysian rites of the "ranting women" reinforced the need for male control: the unruly and lascivious behavior of the Maenads played into Greek stereotypes of women as diseased and wild; in this way, the festivals helped prove the need for socialization and male domination (Zeitlin 136). The women's rites then played an ambiguous and multivalent role in Greek culture: they served both to assert and redress the imbalance between men and women.

I would argue that Antigone's gendered transgression play a similarly ambiguous role: Antigone's transgressions are not simply, as some feminist scholars have argued, a display of female power, or as traditionalists have argued, a condemnation of transgression, but an interplay between the two poles. In this sense, Antigone's transgressions open up a sort of dialogue or debate, that can serve to air the wounds of the city. It is not coincidental that a woman played this role, as women were seen by Athenians as creatures of the frontier or borders. They stood in the divide between civilized and savage, foreign and domestic, natural and unnatural (Zeitlin 143). The city's ability to incorporate women into its system of order was a crucial test of the ability of the city to regulate, care, and make room for its most deviant inhabitants. In this context **is** Antigone's behavior a threat?

At the beginning of the play (p. 163, ll. 55-78), we see Antigone's sister Ismene chastising Antigone for her transgressive behavior. She fears that Antigone's violations will harm the city. When Antigone insists that she will bury their brother Polyneices against Creon's wishes, Ismene protests by reminding Antigone of the horrors transgressions have wrought upon their

family (ll. 55-78, p. 163). She warns her that their family members have paid for such infractions: whether it is Oedipus' attempt to subvert fate, their mother's sexual crime with her own son, or their brother's trespass of the bonds of the oikos, all of the other members of the family have died in bizarre and painful ways as a result of disobeying the laws of nature. Transgression, according to Ismene, is a form of suicide. Just as the prohibition against incest is a law of nature, so is the rule of women by men divinely ordained: she tells Antigone:

You ought to realize we are only women,
nor meant in nature to fight against men,
and that we are ruled, by those who are stronger,
to obedience in this and even more painful matters....
Extravagant action is not sensible .

To fight against men is not merely headstrong or "insensible," it is to court death and disaster.

But is Ismene correct? Certainly, Ismene's plea has a prophetic ring, since Antigone's disobedience does bring about her own death and the downfall of her loved ones. Yet as traditionalist such as Mary Lefkowitz (of *Not Out of Africa* fame) have argued, Antigone's primary motives are not rebellion but piety: if she dishonors Creon, it is because she want to give honor to a higher source, not because she is a "rebel without a cause." Thus, Antigone rebuts Ismene's outcry against of the lawlessness of Antigone's actions by rejecting Ismene's interpretation of the burial as well as Ismene's so-called submission.

[HANDOUT] Antigone argues

I would not urge you [to bury Polyneices] now; nor if you wanted
to act would I be glad to have you with me.
Be as you choose to be; but for myself
I myself will bury him. It will be good
to die, so doing. I shall die by his side
loving him as he loved me; I shall be

a criminal--but a religious one.

The time in which I must please those that are dead
is longer that I must please those of this world.

For there I shall lie forever. You if you like,
can cast dishonor on what the gods have honored. (ll. 84-88, p. 164)

Antigone's rebuttal is complex and multilayered. Although Ismene, and later Creon may choose to see Antigone's behavior as transgressive and immoral, Antigone feels that is not the place of either Creon or Ismene to make such judgments: "she must please those of the dead" before those of the living. In making this choice, Antigone is not acting in either a masculine or rebellious fashion: it was clearly women's role in 5th Century Athens to care for the dead. Funerals were the special concern of women: "Women wash[ed] the body, and women...[were] the leading mourners" (Redfield 189). In caring for her brother's corpse, Antigone is fulfilling her obligations to her family and to the gods that demand that such rituals occur--it is not her place to "cast dishonor on what the gods have honored."

Throughout Antigone's rebuttal, she acknowledges that she is caught in a bind: in order not to transgress the laws of the gods and the dead, she must transgress the laws of man. It is symbolically charged that Creon is both her uncle and her ruler: for in disobeying him for the sake of honoring the gods, she is breaking the bounds of both her oikos and the city. It is the fate of the tragic hero or heroine to be caught in such a bind: you will remember that Agamemnon himself faced such a dilemma when he chose to sacrifice Iphigenia: if only, the chorus laments, he could have seen the future--but of course, he could not, and as David Reeve argued, would this really have changed anything anyway? Like Agamemnon, Antigone is caught in time. Creon, too, is caught in time, but, unlike Creon, she is not necessarily its victim. In the Hymn to Man (p. 174-75), the chorus suggests that man's escape from the yoke of mortality lies

in reason: man may have "no means of escape" from death, but "he has found in the depths of his mind" "escape from hopeless disease" and "with some sort of cunning, inventive / beyond all expectation / he reaches sometimes evil, / and sometimes good" (ll. 398-402, pp. 174-75). In other words reason or logic saves us sometimes--but not always--from the troubles we face.

This seems to me a mildly optimistic solution, but **is** it the same one that Antigone offers? I would suggest no: the chorus' solution is comparable to Creon's solution to his mortality, not Antigone's: in his debate with Antigone, Creon uses "cunning" and "inventive" reason to argue for his system of Justice. While in the past his logic has led to some good (for example saving the city of Thebes), it also clearly leads him to evil--for example death of his son, wife, and niece. Antigone on the other hand, is not interested in human reason as a means of facing her own mortality, instead she offers another solution to the problem of her relationship to time. She must consider the desires of the gods of death before human logic because their reign lasts longer. Antigone's solution is paradoxical, but archetypally religious: by subordinating herself to death and the gods of the underworld, she transcends mortality. I would argue, however, that the viability of this model--like that of Creon's rationality--is not wholly optimistic: in Antigone's resolution there, too, is "sometimes evil, and sometimes good." Thus, Creon's and Antigone's solutions and transgressions take the form of debate which is never fully resolved by the play. I would like to examine the terms of Antigone's response to this debate in the closing figure of Antigone as the "Bride of Death." In examining these images I will be returning to a question I raised at the beginning of my lecture: what **are** we to make of Antigone's death?

Throughout Sophocles' play, Antigone courts death as a lover. Unlike Orestes, Antigone is not only *willing* to suffer the consequences of her actions, but *eager* to do so: in the play's opening scene, she tells Ismene "It will be good / to die...[burying Polyneices] I shall die by his side, / loving him as he loved me" (ll. 82-84, pp. 163-64). For Antigone, love and death are connected: her desires and allegiances belong to the gods of the underworld, and to her loved ones who now reside below the earth. Creon jeers at Antigone for her love of death, when he tells the chorus to "Spit on her, throw her out like an enemy, / this girl, to marry someone in Death's house" (ll. 717-19, p. 186). Antigone, too, sees her death as a type of marriage: her tomb she announces on p. 195 is also her "bridal chamber" (l. 945, p. 195). Ultimately this rhetoric is ironic, because it is in death that Antigone is united with Haemon, her betrothed. But, at the time both Creon and Antigone see her as being the Bride of Death, I would like to explore the social ramification of this image for 5th Century Athenians.

The figure of the Bride of Death was popular in fifth century Athens and it encapsulates the fears and anxieties Antigone embodies. Bridal images were common on grave markers for young women who, like Antigone, died before marriage: In part this connection was ceremonial: there were a number of parallels between 5th C Athenian weddings and funerals, including rites such as the washing and adorning of the body, the processions, and the feasts. (Redfield 188-89). Perhaps more importantly, by figuring dead young women as the bride of death, Athenians made sense of their loss: the bride of death was associated with Persephone or "kore" the goddess of the budding grain who was abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld, to become his bride. (SLIDE #10--LEFT FORWARD : Kore) Persephone, as the bride of death, represented the paradoxical figure of the dead maiden in Greek eyes: she was at once both fertile and virginal, creative and desolate. By figuring young women as the bride of

death, Athenians honored them with both perpetual virginity and the fertility of marriage they had lost on earth. We can see an example of this on a grave marker of a young Greek woman named Phrasicleia (this is on the handout):

the epitaph of Phrasicleia reads:

Phrasicleia's monument. Always I'll be called virgin.
Instead of marriage the gods gave me this name.

...As J.P. Vernant has seen, Phrasicleia is the female counterpart of a *kouros* [male funerary statues](Vernant 1978.464); this instance may help us to understand the *kore*- type in general [*kore* literally means "the maiden"--SLIDE #9 this slide is an example of a *kore* from the Acropolis Museum in Athens] ...The *kouros*, Vernant (1978) tells us, is the proper monument of a young warrior since it represents in the form of a beautiful naked body the perfection of manhood achieved on the battlefield.... The equivalent moment of perfection for the woman is the moment of marriage; when death intervenes before marriage the woman is appropriately represented as a *kore*, a female body elaborately adorned with jewelry and embroidery. The *kore* thus, like the *kouros*, represents a person not naturalistically but in the form of an archetype--in the woman's case, as that perfect *agalma* which is the bride. (Redfield 190)

Thus, in one sense, by presenting Antigone as the bride of death, Sophocles is presented her as woman perfected--eternally pious and virginal. In this reading, Antigone resolves the problem of time by transcending it: Antigone has not been punished with death for her transgression, but rewarded with it.

Yet, this understanding of the Antigone's death is counteracted by Antigone's own final response to her impending death and this provides a tension in the play. Ultimately, Antigone mourns her death since it potentially robs her of her earthly husband, and her mature role in society: her presentation of her funeral/wedding procession is hardly positive. She cries,

No tears for me, no friends, no marriage. Brokenhearted
I am led along the road ready before me.

I shall never again be suffered
to look on the holy eye of the day.
But my fate claims no tears--
no friend cries for me. (ll. 929-34)

For Antigone, her death is doubly pitiful because she believes that, unlike for her brother, there is no one to mourn her loss. Moreover, her life has been cut short: she laments "I am the last of them [my family] and I go down / in the worst death of all--for I have not lived / the due term of my life" (ll. 949-51, p. 195). Rather than seeing death as her reward, Antigone asks what "law of God she has broken," and sees herself as abandoned even by the gods (ll. 978-82). For all her early bravado, Antigone is by the end a decrepit and sad spokeswoman for piety. Even the chorus seems to think that she is doing more than paying for her own "extreme daring," and suggests that perhaps she is "paying requital" for some "ordeal of her father" (ll. 908-12, p. 194).

Antigone's solution then to the claims of time, then, is not wholly optimistic: just as reason cannot save Creon, piety alone is not enough either. In what way **does** Antigone's death, then, "cure" either the city of Thebes or of Athens? One of hallmarks of tragedy is that, unlike comedy, the protagonist is not reintegrated into the social order. (The Shakespearean convention is that comedy ends in marriage and tragedy in death, but here the two are combined.) Instead of being reintegrated, the tragic hero, like a sacrificial animal, is led off carrying the sins of the community. Like sacrifice (or the pig bled around the edges of the theater), tragedy purifies the community by ridding itself of its scarred and sin-laden citizen. However, Antigone's death is not so clear. As Antigone is led off to her sacrificial death, it is hard not to remember the decaying body of Polyneices lying on the sacrificial altars of Teiresias, and to question whether this death too will appease or offend the gods. Antigone's transgressions and her cure, I would suggest, do not to "resolve" the questions

Sophocles raises in this play, but open them up further. At the play's end, the audience is left to ask itself about these unresolved dilemmas (and I think these are worth discussing in conference): is the individual's allegiance to the state or to the family greater? Can one disobey earthly justice in order to pay homage to the divine (separation of church and state)? Is one's allegiance to one's blood relatives greater to one's romantic love interests? Can either reason or piety allow people to escape the curse of time and death? What evidence does the play offer for either side of any of these questions? In the spirit of the carnival, I will leave you to debate these questions, and others, in conference.

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