

κέρδος 2.0: Profit and Linguistic Confusion in the *Antigone*  
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In the *Antigone*, after Creon forbids anyone to bury the corpse of Polyneices, he asks the Bhorus to take extra care in guarding the edict. The Chorus responds, οὐκ ἔστιν οὔτω μῶρος ὃς θανεῖν ἐρᾷ “No one is so stupid as to want to die thus” (220). Creon replies:

καὶ μὴν ὁ μισθὸς γ' οὗτος. ἀλλ' ὑπ' ἐλπίδων  
ἄνδρας τὸ κέρδος πολλάκις διώλεσεν.

This is indeed the price. But, under hopes,  
Gain has often destroyed men. (221-22)

Antigone, who has already broken the edict twice and now faces execution, confronts Creon and, echoing the earlier conversation, tells him:

...εἰ δὲ τοῦ χρόνου  
πρόσθεν θανοῦμαι, κέρδος αὐτ' ἐγὼ λέγω.

...Even if I should die before my time,  
I consider it gain. (461-62)

Antigone's “gain”, however, is different than Creon's. Where Creon suspects bribery, assuming gain on a materialistic level, Antigone aspires to a more metaphysical notion of gain, a profit which accompanies death. Their divergent understandings of κέρδος become a major source of confusion and contention between the two characters. My paper will argue that, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the word κέρδος expanded its meaning, becoming more metaphysical. The *Antigone* reflects this change as Creon adopts the older, more materialistic κέρδος while Antigone adopts the emerging, more metaphysical κέρδος.

Before the 5<sup>th</sup> century, κέρδος had already undergone several transformations. For example, Homer uses a variation of κέρδος as a comparison, to say that one thing is better than another: ὦδε δέ οἱ φρονέοντι δοάσσατο κέρδιον εἶναι... “And as he pondered, this thing seemed to him the better” (*Iliad* 13.458). In later writers, however, the word assumes more materialistic associations, often negative with adjectives like αἰσχρὸν and κακόν modifying it: κέρδος αἰσχρὸν κάκιστον “shameful gain is most evil” (Septem Sapientes *Sententiae* p. 215.7). Then, in the 5<sup>th</sup> century with Sophocles and the other tragedians, κέρδος broadened its scope to become more metaphysical, closer to our English “profit”. Tragedians and philosophers alike began to associate the word with θανεῖν. As evidence of the expanding meaning of κέρδος, Plato writes a dialogue *Hipparchus*, which is entirely on the subject of the word κέρδος. In it, Socrates attempts to pare κέρδος down to its most fundamental, abstract meaning, essentially stripping the word from its older, materialistic meaning. He also tries to apply a moral connotation to the word: τὸ δὲ κέρδος ἀγαθὸν ὠμολογήσαμεν; “We admitted that gain is good?” (*Hipp.* 227.C).

It is during κέρδος's transition to the metaphysical sphere that Sophocles writes the *Antigone*, explaining some of the confusion among the characters about the word. Sophocles is able to manipulate some of the ambiguity surrounding κέρδος and use it as a platform for conflict.