

The Death of the *oikos* in the *Antigone*

In her final speech to Creon, Antigone explains that she would not contradict the law of the *polis* to bury a hypothetical husband or child (905-15) as she did for her brother. Antigone's moral reasoning has drawn criticism because she indicates that she would apply unequally the "unwritten laws" (ἄγραπτα ... νόμιμα, 454-5) which she expounded earlier in the play. While ancient and earlier modern critics have judged Antigone inconsistent, sophistic, or lacking emotion in the passage and even doubted the text itself (see Neuberg 1990, 54-61 for an overview), more recently there has been increased interest in explaining how this passage characterizes Antigone's moral stance (a significant opinion has been that it points to Antigone's view of marriage, e.g. Neuberg 1990, Murnaghan 1986, and Rehm 1994, 63-4). I suggest Antigone's emphasis on her brother expresses the exceptional situation of her family's extinction. Antigone's morbid connection to a defunct *oikos* provides a highly particularized basis for her moral reasoning in this play.

In this paper I will offer new discussion of several images for the defunct *oikos* in the *Antigone* and show how these characterize Antigone's behavior. In ancient Athens the destruction of a family was an image that elicited anxiety because the family unit held tremendous significance as the basis for individual identity in the community. This anxiety is evident in the practice of the punishment κατασκαφή, the razing a family's house to the ground (Connor 1965), and also in the orators' pathetic depictions of the potential extinction of a house for lack of heirs (Griffith-Williams 2012, 146-8).

In the same speech to Creon, Antigone deploys several figures which develop the image of the destroyed family. Twice Antigone describes her *oikos* with the image of κατασκαφή (891-2 and 920), just before and after her argument for burying her brother. This term, deriving from

the verb to “dig down,” goes beyond the usual translation of “destruction” to capture the specific experience of the individual and family, since κατασκαφή was a spectacle of a punishment with the goal of removing an individual from the community by destroying the whole family, including the home. Antigone also describes her family’s misery as τριπόλιστον (859), “thrice plowed up.” Because the agricultural figure is often not rendered, it has often gone un-noted how specifically this term contributes to the metaphor of the family’s physical dissolution.

The chorus’ second stasimon further develops an image of the destroyed family, describing how “just now, light had stretched over the last roots in the house of Oedipus” (Νῦν ... ἐσχάτας ὑπὲρ / ῥίζας ἐτέτατο φάος ἐν Οἰδίπου δόμοις, 598-9). Though commonly identified as the girls (Griffith 1999, 225 and Winnington-Ingram 1980, 167), I argue that the roots convey Polyneices and Eteocles. The root-image emphasizes the critical role they played in continuing Oedipus’ family. If we accept Lloyd-Jone’s reading of κόπις, the next lines convey the finality of Polyneices’ death for his *oikos* through another image of cutting down a plant (601-2).

The choral image expresses Polyneices’ priority to Antigone and deepens her motivations in connection to her defunct family. Like Electra, whose doomed house the chorus evokes through thick Aeschylean resonances, the combination of imagery of life and regeneration with the contrasting tomb creates a tense ambiguity between the possibilities of life and death for both the woman and the *oikos*. For both women, hope attaches to brothers. While Electra’s grim character is resolved by Orestes reestablishing the family, for Antigone the possibility of regeneration has been lost because there is no living male in Oedipus’ line. The strong organic connection which Antigone maintains with her extinct family decides Antigone’s sustained affinity with the dead.

Because he ultimately experiences a similar fate, Creon's misunderstanding of Antigone's relation to her defunct family reveals these particular circumstances of her moral reasoning. The chorus connects the two families when they follow the image of the ἐσχάτας ῥίζας by describing Haimon in terms which emphasize his position as the last of Creon's line (παίδων τῶν σῶν νέατον γέννημα, 626). Having already lost one son in Thebes' recent war, Creon does not lose all until Haimon's and Eurydice's deaths, too late coming to understand the particular exigencies of Antigone's position.

Bibliography

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