

Heroic Revenge in Euripides' *Antiope*

In Euripides' *Antiope*, which survives only in fragments, the play ends with the appearance of Hermes as *deus ex machina* to rescue the heroes Amphion and Zethus. Hermes interrupts their vengeance on their aunt and uncle for the harm done to their mother Antiope; confirms that they are the sons of Zeus; and orders them to rule Thebes. This is often considered a happy ending (e.g., Trivigno 2011, 134; Nightingale 1995, 80; Zeitlin 1993, 175). But a closer examination of Hermes' speech shows that he also forecasts future disaster, suggesting that the brothers' pursuit of heroic revenge ultimately will have too high a price.

The mother of the twins Amphion and Zethus is the Theban princess Antiope, who was imprisoned and tormented by her brother Lycus and his wife Dirce after Zeus (assuming a beast shape) raped and impregnated her. Before being imprisoned by her relations, Antiope gave birth to the twins on Mt. Cithaeron, where she abandoned them to be raised by a herdsman. The play begins when the twins are young men. The twins are shown engaging in a famous debate referenced in later literature, including Plato's *Gorgias* (as extensively discussed in Nightingale 1995). In this debate, Amphion praises his intellectual life of poetry and philosophy; Zethus urges the superiority of his own more active life of farming and politics (see especially Frs. 183-9, 193-4, 198-202). The action of the play focuses on Antiope's escape and return to Mt. Cithaeron in flight from Lycus and Dirce. Although Amphion initially doubts that Zeus would assume the form of a beast to rape a mortal woman (Fr. 210), the twins recognize Antiope as their mother, rescue her from attempted murder by Dirce, and serve a savage revenge on Dirce by tying her to the horns of a bull that tears her to pieces (Fr. 221). The twins are about to kill Lycus as well, when Hermes brings the play to an end (Fr. 223).

Although the audience would probably have considered avenging a family member a duty properly undertaken by a hero (e.g., Kovacs 1987, 117-8, commenting on Euripides' *Hecuba*), in the *Antiope*, the twins not only kill but mutilate a woman who has harmed, threatened, but *not* killed their mother. And although Hermes' rescue of the twins may seem to approve their vengeance, Hermes' prophecies suggest a connection between that vengeance and the brothers' future downfall—or at least the downfall of Amphion, who at the end of the play is speaking for both brothers.

Most of Hermes' speech relates to the brothers' future success, such as Amphion's helping to build the Theban walls with his poetry—often construed as validating Amphion's preference for the intellectual life, despite the potential difference from what seems to be the cosmogonic poetry practiced by Amphion earlier in the play (Fr. 182a) (e.g., Trivigno 2011, 134). But Hermes also declares that Amphion will marry the daughter of Tantalus. As the audience would know, this refers to Niobe, who will become subject to a divine vengeance that has some parallels to the twins' vengeance on Dirce. Dirce imprisoned and tormented Antiope after she had borne children to Zeus; Niobe will insult the goddess Leto, mother of Apollo and Artemis, by comparing herself to the goddess. The twins not only kill Dirce to avenge the harm to their mother, but do so with a cruel and bloody mutilation; the twins Apollo and Artemis do not kill Niobe, the person who insulted their mother, but rather Amphion and Niobe's children—leading (in most versions of the myth) to the deaths of Amphion and Niobe as well. There will even be a parallel between the ultimate fates of Dirce and Niobe, in that Dirce gives her name to the Theban river Dirce (by Hermes' order), while Niobe is best known for becoming a weeping stone that is the source of an endless stream of water.

Thus although Hermes rescues Zeus' sons from the Attic borderlands and restores them to their rightful position as rulers of Thebes, the audience would be reminded that ultimately their move to Thebes will end in disaster, and it would be left to ponder the price of assuming royal and heroic status through a literally bestial vengeance.

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