

## Water, Food, Life, and Death in Euripides' *Phoenissae*

Much has been written recently about the use of physical and dramatic space and its intertextual connections within the action of Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (e.g., Papadopoulou 2008; Lamari 2010, 2017). These concepts may be extended to the spaces mentioned by the actors and the chorus as part of their prior understandings and anticipation of future events, as well as what occurs on or immediately off stage. Euripides' depiction of water, especially rivers, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, food are unifying features, linking the themes of geography, life, and death.

The names of rivers or allusions to the sea link several major locations in *Phoenissae*. The βαθύς river Dirce (730) comprises the main boundary and signifier of Thebes (101-2, 131, 730, 825-6). The Mycenaean leader Hippomedon lived by the waters of Lerna (126), with its main spring Amymone (187-190), while the Cadmeans' history in maritime Tyre and Cadmus's own slaying of the serpent while seeking sacrificial water connects the Theban rulers with the chorus of Phoenician women (639-660). Although some riverine descriptions have sensuous undertones and are connected to gender portrayal in the play (Swift 2009), such references ultimately focus on Dirce and its liminal importance for the battle.

References to food are often negative. For humans, it is scarce, as in Polyneices' answer (401 "day to day") to his mother's question of how he ate in exile (400 ἐβόσκου). The main exception, the plentitude of wine-producing grapes at Delphi (228-231), is turned into "service that is no service" to Bromios (1757) at the end of the play, when Antigone vows to bury her brother rather than taking Oedipus's advice to serve Dionysus. Other creatures, such as the

sphinx, snatch people (1040-1). The teeth of the “murderous” dragon (657) sprout into equally violent soldiers who bedewed the earth with blood (734).

Euripides’ allusions to food and liquids reaches an unsavory climax in the battle for the city. The shields carried by the seven leaders contain two such references (in comparison, those in Aeschylus’s *Septem* have none). Adrastus’s shield shows one hundred snakes grabbing the Cadmeans’ children in their jaws. Polyneices’ design depicts Potnian colts, who have been driven insane (1123-1127). The culprit was perhaps a diet of human flesh (cf. Mastronarde 1994), although Pausanias (9.8.2) claims the locals knew the spring had this effect on mares (Craik 1988). In either case, these two designs may be understood as metaphors for war, particularly civil war, devouring the most precious members of a community (Goff 1988).

After the deaths of Eteocles, Polyneices, and Jocasta, references to sustenance are less prominent but are striking when they occur. As in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Euripides’ Creon situates the *polis* and its justice in his personal rule. In both cases Polyneices’ corpse is to be thrown to dogs (E. *Phoen.*1650; S.*Ant.*206). However, subtle differences exist. These include the depiction of dust; it is “thirsty” (205 *διψίαν*) in Sophocles, “moist/wet” (1664 *ὕγρην*) in Euripides. Given water’s significance earlier, moistness in this context may do double duty, referring backward to the battlefield muddied by soldiers crossing the Dirce as well as forward to the loss of funerary libations (see Craik 1988, Mastronarde 1994). Oedipus will be interred at Colonus, home of the “horse god” (1707), i.e., Poseidon, also god of the sea. The reference to horses may also balance Polyneices’ depiction of the colts on his shield (Craik 1988); the tainted spring may enhance this connection. Ultimately, maritime transportation recedes to a metaphor. Antigone guides Oedipus “like a breeze escorting a ship” (1413 *ναυσίπομπον* a *hapax*), but they go on foot.

*Phoenissae* was staged ca. 411-409 BCE if assumptions about authorship and meter are accurate (Lamari 2017 *inter alios*). This means Euripides would have written under increasing constraints of Athens' loss of its maritime empire and its food security (Moreno 2007). *Phoenissae*, like most tragedies, does not refer directly to politics. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that its geographical space, as seen through water and food, shrink as the work progresses, and that the images become increasingly disturbing. The beginning of Oedipus's final journey out to Colonus expands our gaze once again but is complete only in a Delphic prophecy.

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