Sophocles' *Antigone* and the Biological Imperative to Marry

In antiquity, the institution of marriage was an amalgam of social and cultural values, deeply embedded with the contemporary understanding of the biology of sex. Attesting to this, many portrayals of marriage in ancient Greek literature carry medical nuances, while many of the gynecological treatises of the Hippocratic Corpus exhibit the indelibly social dimension of the female reproductive system, in which a young woman's transition into adulthood entails her moving house and the assumption of her role as wife, and mother thereafter. Two such texts are Sophocles' *Antigone* and the Hippocratic treatise *On Diseases of Girls*, which, examined in parallel, present the inextricability of marriage (the social) from *menarche* (the biological). In this paper, I argue that Sophocles' *Antigone* exhibits early, developing stages of the medicalization of the cultural imperative for young women to quickly marry after puberty, a concept that would later be formalized in writing by the Hippocratics in *On Diseases of Girls*.

Modern scholarship has made note of how well Sophocles' depiction of Antigone fits into the diagnosis of the unwed virgin in *On Diseases of Girls* (Cairns 2016), but has been wary to claim any influence of one upon the other, on account of the uncertainty behind the dating of the Hippocratic treatises and the less than booming medical scene in fifth-century BCE Athens (Craik 2018). However, given that the theater of ancient Athens was not self-contained, but instead a stage for the exploration of popular and socially important topics (Whitmarsh 2004), it comes as no surprise that there was a tragic heroine whose unfulfilled role as wife and mother is equated with the end of her life . In fact, Creon articulates the details of Antigone's sentencing to the cave, not soon after she had pleaded guilty to burying her brother, but only after he had finally spoken to his son Haemon and canceled his marriage with her (Soph. *Ant.* 774).

Hippocratic gynecology was replete with cultural values (King 1998), noted by the fact that unwell young women were frequently prescribed defloration and regular intercourse with a husband (Dean-Jones 2018). Few Hippocratic treatises demonstrate this supposedly biological imperative for women to marry more plainly than *On Diseases of Girls,* dated to the late fifth or early fourth century BCE (Craik 2014). This short text warns that young women must "marry" (*συνοικῆσαι ἀνδράσιν,* Hippoc. *Virg*. 42) and bear children shortly after *menarche,* lest the excess of blood, unrelieved by the development of the fetus, climbs up within their bodies and causes them to long for nooses (*ἀγχόνας*, *Virg*. 32), want to hang themselves (*ἄγχεσθαι, Virg*. 35), and, generally, "desire death as if something good" (*ἐρᾷ τοῦ θανάτου ὥσπέρ τινος ἀγαθοῦ, Virg*. 36-37).

Examining Sophocles' *Antigone* through the lens of *On Diseases of Girls,* I explore the cross-genre dialogue between the two works to reveal the conceptual translation of cultural and biological norms, while allowing an interpretation of the *Antigone* informed by the medical thought of its time. I begin with an analysis of Antigone's parallel death sentence and denial of marriage (*Ant*. 524-575, 654, 750-751, 891), and their near simultaneous administration by the same agent, Creon, her legal guardian. Secondly, I offer a reading of Antigone's behavior as symptoms of a will-bending disease, and a "desire" for death (*Ant*. 443-500, 891-920), including mention of the unmarried Ismene's impulse towards sharing her sister's fate (*Ant*. 536-537) and Antigone's bemoaning her lack of pregnancy (*Ant*. 918). I conclude with an examination of Sophocles' cave scene and his grappling with the concept of a traveling "excess" of blood, reified on Antigone's cheek by means of Haemon's own suicide (*Ant*. 1192-1243), contrasting with the traditionally "bloodless" death of virgins (Loraux 1987). Assessing the dialogue between the *Antigone* and *On Diseases of Girls* allows one to understand the

inveterately biological nature of the ancient Greek wedding, the tenets of which have endured through the ages. Reading the two works together reveals the foundation of antiquity's "marriage" of culture and science.

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