

9-28-2020

Antigone the Bride of Death

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Recommended Citation

Gomes, Bailey (2020) "Antigone the Bride of Death," *Conspectus Borealis*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: https://commons.nmu.edu/conspectus_borealis/vol6/iss1/3

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Antigone: the Bride of Death

Antigone is held as one of the first feminist plays. Written by Sophocles in 441 BC, it also remains as one of the oldest Greek plays. Despite this feminist label, there are still several misogynistic undertones that can be found within the play. This essay will describe the hierarchy of Greek culture, the importance of burial rites, and how Antigone's worth is directly tied to her eligibility for marriage, with the play's specific focus on the imagery of Antigone's marriage to Death. There are many instances within this play that show bridal imagery when talking specifically about Antigone's fate and about her worth. These examples will be fully expanded on in this essay.

A key piece to the puzzle of this play's conflict is the concept of burial. Burial rights are extremely important to Greek philosophy as well as to their religion. In order for an individual to go to the afterlife, they must be buried and given full ritual rights. To understand the full impact of this concept on the play, the events that predate the play must first be discussed. Oedipus was the King of Thebes and had four children: Polynices, Eteocles, Antigone, and Ismene. When Oedipus died, he left the kingdom of Thebes to his two sons, Polynices and Eteocles. His request was that each year, the brothers switch between who has control of the throne. However, Eteocles decided he no longer wanted to share the throne, which caused a war between the two brothers. During this war, the brothers ended up killing each other, branding Eteocles as a war hero, and Polynices a traitor. Because of this, the new King of Thebes, Creon, made a royal decree that Eteocles will be buried with full honors, while Polynices is not to be buried at all, therefore taking away his burial rights, and essentially damning his spirit, not allowing him to move on to the afterlife. Creon's decree forbids any citizen from burying Polynices, under

penalty of death if they dare to defy his will. This begins the central conflict of the play because this decree goes against the rules of the gods.

The most important thing to discuss before delving into the bridal imagery is the hierarchy of Greek society. The hierarchy is tiered, where those who are held in the highest regard sit at the top, and those who are the lowest in society are settled at the bottom. This hierarchy is as follows: the gods, men, married women, children, and unmarried women. This is essential to the story and there are several instances where this hierarchy can be seen in full effect. In Greece at this time, reverence to the gods was extremely important and women were expected to submit to men under every circumstance. This can be seen at the very beginning of the play when Ismene says, "Remember we are women, we're not born to contend with men. Then too, we are underlings, ruled by much stronger hands, so we must submit in this, and things still worse" (Sophocles, 74-77). As two unmarried women, both Ismene and Antigone must submit to all men. Even if they get married, they will have to submit to their husbands and will only be above their own children in this hierarchy. This hierarchy comes into play as a power struggle between Antigone and Creon. Antigone challenges the hierarchy and believes that all men and women are equal and must submit to the gods, whereas Creon views himself as equal to the gods, as he is the King of Thebes. Creon's decree that Polynices must not be buried goes directly against the wishes of the gods. Antigone believes that the laws of the gods should be superior to all laws of man, and therefore she believes she does not have to follow the laws made by man if they directly contradict those of the gods. Creon believes that his laws should be followed regardless of whether they go against the gods' wishes or not. This causes the conflict between Antigone and Creon as both of them view their way of life as correct and neither are

willing to bend in their views. Since both of these individuals are incredibly stubborn, this power struggle is the main cause of conflict within the play.

As an unmarried woman, Antigone's worth comes directly from her eligibility to marry. For Antigone, marriage is the only way to increase her worth in a socially acceptable way. She is engaged to Haemon, Creon's son, and as Oedipus' firstborn daughter, she is the true heir to the throne of Thebes, since his two sons are now dead. By marrying Haemon, the throne would be legitimately held, increasing the status of Creon, Haemon, and Antigone. Because of this, when Antigone is caught burying Polynices, Creon tries to let her off for the crime despite his previous threat of execution. He asks, "Do you deny you did this?" (Sophocles, 491) and, "were you aware a decree had forbidden this?" (Sophocles, 496). Her worth to Creon is as Haemon's bride, but Antigone asserts her free will and maintains that she has intentionally defied Creon's orders. She tells him "it wasn't Zeus, not in the least, who made this proclamation—not to me. Nor did that Justice, dwelling with the gods beneath the earth, ordain such laws for men" (Sophocles, 499-502). When she says this, she challenges Creon's power and masculinity so he doubles down on her punishment. Antigone disregards the hierarchy by placing herself as Creon's equal and this makes Creon angry. She is not staying in her place on the hierarchy and it upsets him. This is where her marriage to Death begins. Before this point, she has been referred to as a bride, but after this exchange, her marriage will be to Death, not Haemon. The chorus labels her as a "doomed bride" (Sophocles, 703), and from there on out, her fate is sealed. Creon begins dehumanizing her, speaking about her as if she is already dead when he says, "let her find a husband down among the dead" (Sophocles, 730). She is still alive, but she no longer holds any worth to Creon so, to him, she is already dead.

This bridal imagery tied to death follows Antigone throughout the rest of the play. The moment she is sent away to her tomb, the chorus closes out the scene by saying, “I see Antigone make her way to the bridal vault where all are laid to rest” (Sophocles, 898-899). Antigone mirrors this sentiment when she reflects during her last living moments. She says, “Denied my part in the wedding-songs, no wedding-song in the dusk has crowned my marriage— I go to wed the lord of the dark waters” (Sophocles, 906-909). At this moment, Antigone both recognizes and accepts her marriage to Death and in doing that, assumes the role of Death’s bride. In her final soliloquy, she cries out, “O tomb, my bridal-bed—my house, my prison cut in the hollow rock, my everlasting watch! I’ll soon be there, soon embrace my own, the great growing family of our dead Persephone has received among her ghosts” (Sophocles, 978-982). Antigone refers to her eternal tomb, her resting place, as her bridal bed. The bridal bed, which is typically indicative of a long and loving marriage, is instead corrupted and turned into a bridal tomb fit for Death’s bride. The messenger mentions the bridal bed again when he recounts the details of Antigone and Haemon’s deaths. The messenger describes how “we turned and made for that rocky vault of hers, the hollow, empty bed of the bride of Death” (Sophocles, 1327-1328). Yet again, there is a reference to Antigone’s marriage to Death, this time directly labeling her as the bride of Death. The messenger continues, saying, “we took his orders, went and searched, and there in the deepest, dark recesses of the tomb we found her... hanged by the neck in a fine linen noose, strangled in her veils—and the boy, his arms flung around her waist, clinging to her, wailing for his bride...” (Sophocles, 1344-1350). Then, when Haemon stabs and kills himself, the messenger says, “he embraced the girl and breathing hard, released a quick rush of blood, bright red on her cheek glistening white. And there he lies, body enfolding body... he has won his bride at last, poor boy, not here but in the houses of the dead” (Sophocles, 1366-1371). This

description of Antigone and Haemon's deaths is tragically beautiful with its imagery: Antigone's noose being her wedding veil, the two lovers locked in an embrace, the bright red blood on Antigone's cheek mimicking the blush of a bride. If death had not been specifically mentioned, taken out of context, the imagery paints the scene as a wedding between Antigone and Haemon. Unfortunately, rather than being a joyous embrace between newlyweds, this is the tragic scene of a husband and wife, eternally bound not in marriage, but in death.

Antigone chooses to kill herself as one final act of free will. As an unmarried woman, she has no rights, no choices, and very little free will. Antigone does everything in her power to break free from the sentence of Death's bride. She fights to earn her worth in the world, not as a bride, but as a loyal sister to Polynices. With every action Antigone takes, she asserts her free will and stays true to her beliefs, regardless of the opposition she faces from everyone around her. Ultimately, despite her best efforts, she is faced with death. Nevertheless, even in her final moments, Antigone gives herself a choice. She makes the choice to reclaim autonomy over herself one last time by killing herself, rather than allowing Creon to dictate her death. She stays defiant to Creon through her last breath and although she dies, Antigone maintains her worth as she willingly takes Death's hand in eternal marriage.

Works Cited

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