

# Was Antigone Murdered?

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**A**NTIGONE is regularly assumed to have been a suicide. The crucial passage is Sophocles, *Antigone*, verses 1219-1230. Fortunately there are no textual difficulties; the problems are those of interpretation. The Greek text of A. C. Pearson<sup>1</sup> reads:

- τάδ' ἐξ ἀθύμον δεσπότην κελυσμάτων  
1220 ἠθροῦμεν· ἐν δὲ λιοισθίῳ τυμβεύματι  
τὴν μὲν κρεμαστὴν αὐχένος κατείδομεν,  
βρόχῳ μιτώδει σινδόνας καθημμένην,  
τὸν δ' ἀμφὶ μέσση περιπετῆ προσκείμενον,  
εὐνήσ ἀποιμώζοντα τῆς κάτω φθορὰν  
1225 καὶ πατρός ἔργα καὶ τὸ δύστηνον λέχος.  
ὃ δ' ὡς ὄρα σφε, στυγνὸν οἰμώξας ἔσω  
χωρεῖ πρὸς αὐτὸν κἀνακωκύσας καλεῖ·  
ὦ τλήμον, οἶον ἔργον εἴργασαι· τίνα  
νοῦν ἔσχες; ἐν τῷ συμφορᾶς διεφθάρης;  
1230 ἔξελθε, τέκνον, ἰκέσιός σε λίσσομαι.

Difficulties arise here and often elsewhere in Sophocles simply because the text is rarely *literally* translated. Rather it is paraphrased even by the most accurate critics. I should render the Greek text of A. C. Pearson literally as follows:

“Therefore at the commands from a disheartened master *we proceeded to*<sup>2</sup> look; and in *the innermost part of the tomb*<sup>3</sup> on

<sup>1</sup>A. C. Pearson, *Sophoclis Fabulae* (Oxford 1924). The following editions are of particular importance and will henceforth be referred to by name of editor alone: Lewis Campbell, *Sophocles edited with English Notes and Introductions* 1<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1879); M. L. D'Ooge, *Sophocles, Antigone* (Boston 1884); R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles the Plays and Fragments: Part III, The Antigone*<sup>2</sup> (Cambridge 1891); F. C. Wex, *Sophoclis Antigonæ* II (Leipzig 1831). In the latter volume will be found conveniently collected the views of earlier commentators, e.g., Hermann and Musgrave.

<sup>2</sup>This is the translation of H. Weir Smyth written in his interleaved copy of D'Ooge preserved in Widener Library. The Widener number is Gs 31. 419. 03.

<sup>3</sup>So D'Ooge *ad loc.*

the one hand we saw her hanged from her neck, having been made fast with a threaded noose of linen, and on the other hand him lying falling round about her middle, *bewailing loudly*<sup>4</sup> destruction of a bride, the one below, and a father's deeds and the wretched marriage-bed. But he, as he sees them, having wailed a gloomy wail, goes within to him and having *wailed aloud*<sup>5</sup> he calls: 'O miserable, what a deed you have done; what mind did you take on? *At what point of calamity did you go mad?*'<sup>6</sup> Come out, child; supplicating, I beg you.'"

For τὰδ' I follow Hermann,<sup>7</sup> in an interpretation approved by Ellendt-Genthe.<sup>8</sup> The pronoun is retrospective and looks back to the words (especially verses 1217-1218) just spoken by Creon. Ellendt-Genthe catch the nuance with "Circumspiciebant igitur ministri, num recte audivisset ille." The scholiast rightly glosses ἡθροῦμεν with ἐθροῦμεν. G. Dindorf's *explorabamus* is a better translation than Ellendt-Genthe's *vidimus*, which destroys the studied contrast of tenses in the two finite verbs. The scholiast further suggests that *the threaded noose of linen* was the girl's ζώνη, a view endorsed by Campbell, while D'Ooge thinks it her *veil*; but the whole approach is documentary in Waldock's sense<sup>9</sup> and so to be avoided. εὐνής (1224) and λέχος (1225) seemed synonymous to Dindorf, who therefore thought the verse otiose and an interpolation; but there is a distinction. By metonymy εὐνής is the bride, as Musgrave saw (*coniugis iam apud inferos agentis*), and λέχος the marriage. So Jebb saw, who translates "bewailing the loss of his bride who is with the dead, and his father's deeds, and his own ill-starred love." This way there is a logical and rhetorical denouement. Haimon recalls first his dead bride, then the evils of his father, and finally his own condition.

At verse 1226 I have proposed a new translation by taking σφε to be plural. In the tragedians the pronoun often means *eos, eas*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> So Liddell-Scott-Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford 1940) *s.v.* ἀποιμῶζω.

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*, *s.v.* ἀνακωκύω.

<sup>6</sup> So Campbell, p. 556.

<sup>7</sup> See Wex, *ad loc.*, p. 277.

<sup>8</sup> Fr. Ellendt and H. Genthe, *Lexicon Sophocleum*<sup>2</sup> (Berlin 1872) *s.v.* κέλευσμα.

<sup>9</sup> See A. J. A. Waldock, *Sophocles the Dramatist* (Cambridge 1951) 11-24.

<sup>10</sup> See Raphael Kühner and Fr. Blass, *Ausführliche Grammatik der griechischen Sprache* 13 (Hannover 1890) 593.

This way the pronoun becomes neatly resumptive, including τὴν of verse 1221 and τὸν of verse 1223. The result of the new translation is that the motivation for Kreon's outburst on entering the tomb becomes the sight of Haimon *and* Antigone. The importance of such a motivation will be soon evident.

The crux in the passage is ἔργον of verse 1228. What is the *deed* to which Kreon refers? Commentators regularly ignore the problem and only Jebb on verses 1228 f. interpreted: "*i. e.*, Haemon's forcible entrance into Antigone's tomb." For some seventy years this view was not challenged. Then in a passage of remarkable insight Professor S. M. Adams<sup>11</sup> suggested that the word refers to the *hanging*. He made the simple and cogent observation that if Jebb is right the words (p. 57): "are mad enough, since Creon intended to do precisely that and should have welcomed this anticipation." This view is clearly correct and it is only a wonder that it had not earlier been brought forward. Otherwise there is no motivation for τλῆμον and διεφθάρης. The verb indicates that Kreon fears the boy deranged.<sup>12</sup> This is plausible if he believes that Haimon has murdered his betrothed, but is nonsense otherwise. The urgency of verse 1230, together with the affectionate τέκνον replacing Kreon's usual παῖ, support this view. In short, we can believe only that *Kreon considers Haimon to have murdered Antigone.*

Was Kreon mistaken? Professor Adams thinks he was; that it was this infamous accusation that enraged Haimon to attempt parricide and then, in despair at failure, to take his own life. Adams' view is an opinion, albeit an intelligent one; for he provides no evidence. It is difficult to find any, but in defence of his view I note two points. At verse 763 Haimon asserts that Antigone shall never perish by his side; but he is distraught, referring to the immediate threat of Kreon, and might easily later have reconsidered. Just so Kreon (760-761) will have Antigone done away on stage but at

<sup>11</sup>S. M. Adams, *Sophocles the Playwright* (Toronto 1957) 57-58 with n. 7. I approved this interpretation at *CP* 54 (1954) 70, but did not explore the consequences.

<sup>12</sup>See Campbell and Jebb *ad loc.* who are elaborating the view of J. W. Donaldson (London 1848) *ad loc.*

verses 773 ff. reconsiders. Further, as D'Ooge cleverly observed,<sup>13</sup> when the servants enter the cave, Antigone has been cut down.<sup>14</sup> Haimon is lying over her (1223.) After his suicide, corpse lies on corpse (1240). It is difficult to imagine why the young man would cut down his victim. Perhaps there was a change of heart or else he wished to die close to her. The dramatist did not choose to tell us and we should not pry. Obviously Kreon was not disturbed by this circumstance and perhaps we ought not to be.

In defence of the veracity of Kreon's opinion we may remark that his words are the last reference to the circumstances of Antigone's death. They are never contradicted by the Messenger or by any other character in the play. It would seem careless, if not naive, for Sophocles to present an error in a messenger-speech and never to correct it for his audience. Notice also that at verse 750 Kreon tells Haimon that he shall not marry Antigone while she still lives. Jebb renders Haimon's reply: "Then she must die and in death destroy another." These words are by no means incompatible with a murder. Finally Hyginus in Fable 72 abstracts a dramatic treatment of the story of Antigone. His version is not the Sophoclean play. The fabulist's source is either Euripides' or Astydamos' *Antigone*.<sup>15</sup> Hyginus writes (p. 56. 13 Rose): "Haemon se et Antigone coniugem interfecit." The killing of women by hanging is of course paralleled at *Odyssey* 22. 465 ff.

Sophocles' ambiguity concerning his heroine's death is apparent from the text. We can only surmise his motive. Perhaps in the received version (reflected in Hyginus?) Antigone was

<sup>13</sup>D'Ooge, p. 146 on 1223: "From 1237-1240 it is evident that Antigone's body lay prostrate on the ground. The attendants could not have seen Antigone suspended, but they inferred that this was the manner of her death from the noose that was still around her neck. It is also inferred that the first thing that Haemon did was to unfasten the noose from the ceiling, that he might save Antigone, if possible, from death." Notice that the first inference is made by the attendants; the second by the modern critic and contains the documentary fallacy.

<sup>14</sup>Obviously if Antigone lies on the floor *κρεμαστήν* means *dead from hanging* and *καθημμένην* *tied*.

<sup>15</sup>For the Euripidean attribution see e.g., Schmid-Stählin, I. 2. 358 n. 5 (after Welcker). James H. Paton in *HSCP* 12 (1901) 269-276 provides sensible reasons to doubt a Euripidean source and supports (after George Müller) Astydamos. The dogmatic treatment of the Hyginian fable by Carl Robert, *Oidipus* I (Berlin 1915) 381-2 is not useful. We can only safely say that Hyginus is evidence for a tradition, probably dramatic, of murder by Haimon.

put to death by Haimon. Sophocles did not consider such a murder to be compatible with his characterization of the heroine. A noble heroine ought better like Ajax or Deianeira to take her own life. The dramatist chose therefore to *imply* a suicide but carefully used ambiguous language that never *literally* contradicted a murder. For just such slyness elsewhere in Sophocles compare the Neoptolemus who never *literally* lies although it is implied to almost any spectator that he does.<sup>16</sup>

I hold therefore that the Sophoclean text nowhere explicitly contradicts the view that Haimon murdered Antigone, while in order to consider Antigone a suicide a spectator must contradict the words of one who reportedly was at the scene. A murder also has the advantage of reconciling the Sophoclean account with that of the drama abstracted in Hyginus.

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<sup>16</sup>This has been noted by Adams, *op. cit.* (*supra* n. 11) 140 with n. 1.