

### Snuffing the Promethean Flame by Ethan J. Plante

Some myths exist to explain particular natural phenomena such as earthquakes, floods, the seasons, or even life and death. Other myths exist to explain the genesis of particular ceremonies, such as those at the Dionysian celebrations of Ancient Greece (Harris and Platzner 42). At their core, myths from most cultures are embedded with information which is considered integral to survival. In the case of volcanic myths, the survival information directly preserves both the individual and community from a physical existential threat. However, upon examination many other myths are encoded with survival information which reacts to an existential threat that is not physical, but rather social. These myths are built upon the cornerstone of ideas about what a particular society is and can be. These ideas include attitudes, actions, beliefs, and dynamics between archetypal characters which comprise a sketch of the prototypical ideology of a given culture. The Ancient Greeks were intensely concerned with both the creation of civilized society, and the ideas and beliefs which they held as precedent to its preservation. This explains much of the rejection and maltreatment of femininity and its empowerment present throughout their mythology. In their myths about female divine forces, it becomes apparent that they associate feminine autonomy (the feminine divine, such as the parthenogenic power of Gaia) with egalitarian pre-civilized forebearers to classical antiquity (Harris and Platzner 136-37, 144). The more dominant that the patriarchal rule becomes, the more demonized and disempowered female characters in Greek myth tend to be (Harris and Platzner 145-6), as evidenced by the redistribution and subversion of Gaia's power throughout the pantheon of gods. Both successful and tragic female characters alike in Greek myth are consistently forced to be subservient, patient, and passive. Psyche, Persephone, and Penelope are but a small sample of the numerous cases wherein female mythic characters embody restriction,

chastity, and passivity. The eponymous character of Sophocles' play, *Antigone* is another prime example of the attitude Ancient Greek Myth (and society) cultivates toward feminine autonomy. The relationship between Antigone and Creon is paradigmatic of a perennial struggle between egalitarian and stratified-patriarchal values, and their conflict ominously foreshadows the fall of Greco-Roman society.

Anthropological research has solidified the argument that until the advent of agriculture 10,000 years ago, the pre-civilized hunter gatherer societies were egalitarian (Guest 390). This means that duties and positions in society were shared by both men and women, and that women in these societies enjoyed a similar autonomy to men. It was not until the agricultural revolution that stratification became prevalent in society, and by its association with pre-civilization, female autonomy began to be demonized as corrosive and anarchic (*Antigone*, is an example of this). This shift concretized gender roles, creating indelible associations between them and the creation (and preservation) of civilization in its entirety. Antiquarian civilization is thus a fire spread from the spark of the Promethean flame of a stratified patriarchy, which is credited by Ancient Greece as integral to society. This ideological association establishes female empowerment and social equality as antithetical and deleterious to civilization. The weight of Antigone's actions and repercussions can only be properly analyzed and appreciated within this context.

Antigone is a personification of egalitarian values which are deemed anarchic (and exemplar of their association with female autonomy). In her quest to honor her dead brother, regardless of his choosing to fight against the rule of organized society via the throne Creon inherits (Sophocles 729, 19-33,) she places the egalitarian value of *communitas* as primary above the stratified-patriarchal value of preservation of the state (and its ethnocentric model). Her illegal pseudo-burial of Polyneices is driven by the sense of (and a fidelity to) a larger

community (the human race), the boundaries of which cannot be drawn on a map. She also utilizes an autonomy for which women in Greek myth are classically punished (and upon which egalitarian precivilization functioned). By this action she consciously chooses death to defend her familial loyalty (a fate many heroines, and empowered female characters are subjected to in Greek myth). Thusly she aligns herself with an assemblage of values that are antithetical to the boundaries of the state, and also the fealty that is ideologically demanded by the patriarchy. Antigone's humanism is similarly primary in her refusal of her sister Ismene's attempt to sacrifice her life along with Antigone (Sophocles 743, 390), although Antigone does deride Ismene for her initial refusal to eschew the decree of the king. Her individual sacrifice is motivated by the same *communitas* which drove egalitarian society. She is incapable of considering herself above the needs of humanity and sees the preservation of her brother's legacy by traditional burial rites as paramount to her continued existence. At every turn she presents herself as the antithesis of what Creon both demands and represents. She matches his rageful, individualistic allusions to omnipotence, with self-sacrifice for the good of humanity (over the construct of the state). Creon sees Antigone as a threat to his nascent rule and draws a direct comparison between her and anarchism (Sophocles 736, 190-197, 748, 541).

Conversely, King Creon is a paragon of the dominant paradigm of Ancient Greek stratified patriarchy. Much like Agamemnon or the gods themselves, Creon is unrelenting in his demand for subservience to his will. He declares in no uncertain terms that he is the state (Sophocles 748, 549), and his heightened stratification mirrors the deification of the gods, driven by a fear of death (which Antigone is alternatively empowered by). In this regard he paints himself as an exemplar of the patriarchy and recognizes that defiance of his decree represents a defiance of the construct of society. Thusly, like Ancient Greek society itself, he demonizes

female autonomy and enforces its association with anarchism and the erosion of civilization. He places the preservation of the state and the rule of law as primary over the welfare and wishes of his constituents, even his daughter-in-law to be, and his own son. He becomes a caricature of the individualism which drives the stratified patriarchy. Even when it becomes clear via a messenger that his will opposes the gods (the natural order of things), he still refuses to relent (Sophocles 756 764-7). In his failure to recognize his own fallibility before time runs out, he causes the death of his son, as well as Antigone. Here the future generation of leadership is destroyed by the arrogance of the contemporary demagogue. Metaphorically the state is destroyed as well. Ironically, his dogmatic insistence upon the law of the state results in its metaphorical destruction. At this point Sophocles diverges from the standard demonization of the feminine divine (and egalitarian precivilization) and through Creon's filicide cautions against the attitude which will ultimately cause the filicide of all Ancient Greek society. The ideological rigidity with which he mercilessly defends the stratified Ancient Greek patriarchy thusly foreshadows the inevitable collapse of Greco-Roman society in the Dark ages. Rome (and the Greek society it inherited and grew from) fell because of the same heightened reverence of stratification, and its inflexibility. The Roman state was similarly certain of its pseudo-omnipotence and asserted itself on so many territories that it became unwieldy and impossible to defend. The hubris of Roman emperors to believe that they can and must conquer, is the same hubris of Creon, who is incapable of considering that his own formulation of society is indefensible. Both are cases of rulers that became so ideologically rigid that they failed to recognize the self-defeating fatal flaw within their belief structures, a pattern which echoes throughout antiquity and into modernity.

This same dogmatic adherence to ideology plagues us today. Stratified patriarchal values diminish equity in modern American society and seek to reduce the autonomy of individuals

(groups which are not of the dominant paradigm are more heavily targeted) in the service of plutocratic fervor. Capitalism is a system which is predicated on infinite growth in a world of finite resources. Common knowledge suggests that it is not only harmful to the constituents of states which employ it (via the reduction of autonomy and expansion of inequity), but also that it presents a greater existential threat to humanity as a whole (climate change and war are examples). Despite this knowledge our society has become ideologically rigid in the same fashion as our Greco-Roman forefathers. We cannot imagine a formulation of society which reduces the qualities of Capitalism which are corrosive, without demonizing these ideas as anarchic, or communist. The mental map of reality which we have constructed our modern society upon is fatally flawed, and we find ourselves trapped within a self-defeating paradox which recalls that of Romulus Augustus and Creon of *Antigone*. The Promethean flame of civilization was nearly snuffed out after the fall of Rome during the dark ages because the dominant paradigm of antiquity was unsustainable, and we can clearly see that the dominant paradigm of modernity is unsustainable as well. It is within this context that we must ask ourselves, are we capable of learning from history, or are we doomed to repeat it?

Works Cited

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