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Funerary Rituals, Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Antigone*

BY KATERINA ZACHARIA

Abstract

The legislation of Dracon (c. 620 B.C.) and Solon (early sixth century) in Athens is the beginning of the long process by which the family or household, the *oikos*, was restrained and the *polis* (city-state) encroached on some of its former functions. The first stage was the restriction of the right to blood-vengeance. This is the background to the family revenge depicted in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. An analysis of the funerary legislation in Athens as transmitted by Plutarch, Demosthenes, and Cicero, points to an attempt by the state to curb excessive ostentation by the elite. I examine epigraphic evidence from purificatory regulations, and return specifically to a discussion of pollution by death, and the light thrown by the *Eumenides* on attitudes to the family, blood-feud and death, especially violent death. I close with a discussion of Greek ethics and the preoccupation with burying the dead properly in *Antigone* and a number of examples from historiographical and oratory sources.

CATEGORY: Article

FIELD: religion, literature, culture

KEYWORDS: death, ritual, city-state, *homonoia*, religion, myth, tragedy, culture

At first sight, these two mid fifth-century B.C. plays, by different playwrights, are not all that similar. In the Aeschylus play, a son, Orestes, has on the god Apollo's instructions killed his mother, Clytemnestra, because she killed her own husband, Orestes's father Agamemnon. The Erinyes, a.k.a. Eumenides or Furies, have a special concern with blood-guilt in the family so they pursue Orestes for this crime even though Apollo has ordained the matricide. This generates a tussle between two gods, Apollo and Eumenides, which is represented as one between the young god and the old gods. The issue is played out at Athens, and is resolved only when the goddess Athena empanels a new court called the Areopagus or hill of Ares. (This court was absolutely historical, and had in the pre-Aeschylus period extensive political as well as judicial powers.) The play ends with a trial and a vote by the jury and Orestes is acquitted. The Eumenides now accept the verdict in return for the promise of cult at Athens.

The themes of the Aeschylean trilogy were treated at about the same period by the Theban lyric poet Pindar in his *Eleventh Pythian Ode*. Pindar is interested in Clytemnestra's motive for killing Agamemnon: was it just adulterous lust for her lover Aegisthus or was it anger at Agamemnon's sacrificing of his daughter Iphigeneia so as to get favorable winds for the expedition to Troy?

Was it then the sacrificial slaying of Iphigeneia at Euripos far from her homeland that provoked her to rouse up her heavy-handed anger? Or did night-time love-making lead her astray by enthralling her to another's bed? (*Pyth.* 11.2off.)

Aeschylus handled these issues in the first play of his trilogy. I merely note here that it was not only Athenian poets like Aeschylus who found these issues of blood-guilt interesting; modern scholars tend to try to relate the themes of Greek tragedy to the democratic circumstances of Periclean Athens, but we shall see that concern for family vengeance and burial is attested elsewhere in the Greek world, e.g., in inscriptions from Cyrene in north Africa and Selinus in Sicily. Of course, the Areopagus aspect is peculiar to Aeschylus and Athens; Pindar has no mention of that.

The *Eumenides* was the final part of a trilogy, the *Oresteia*, produced in 458 B.C. Famously, it was politically topical because only four or five years earlier the Areopagus court had been deprived of most of its political powers in a set of internal reforms associated with two men, one obscure the other very famous: Ephialtes and Pericles. At the same time (late 460s) the Athenians had broken off relations with the Spartans and formed an alliance with the people of Argos instead; nobody nowadays disputes that Aeschylus endorses this foreign policy shift which his speakers go out of their way to mention approvingly. But just what Aeschylus thought of the internal reforms is much more controversial. On the one hand he had been personally associated with the young Pericles in 472 when—as we happen to know from an inscription—the rising young politician financed Aeschylus's earlier play the *Persians*. On the other hand, the *Eumenides* contains warnings, which can be interpreted in a less than democratic sense; but these warnings are ambiguously phrased. Alan Sommerstein argues in his commentary (1989: 31) and his later general book on Aeschylus (1996) that the ambiguity is deliberate.

So they sacrificed to Ares, thus giving a name to the rock and hill of Ares. Here the reverence of citizens, their fear and kindred do-no-wrong shall hold by day and in the blessing of night alike all while the people do not muddy their own laws with foul infusions (1989: notes on *Eum.* 690–692).

It is not clear what “fear of the citizens” means; are the people being told to fear i.e., respect the Areopagites or are the Areopagites being told to fear the people? I do not want to explore that angle. I will deal instead with the light thrown by the *Eumenides* on attitudes to the family, blood-feud and death, especially violent death. As we shall see, a Greek inscription from Sicily which was in the Getty museum in the early 1990s and dates from just the time of Aeschylus’s *Eumenides*, has further illuminated the role of the Eumenides in legislation about coping with the aftermath of violent death and shows that Zeus, the king of the gods, was also closely associated with the Furies.

[Column A] To Zeus Eumenes and the Eumenides sacrifice a full-grown sheep, and to Zeus Meilichios in the plot of Myskos a full-grown sheep. Sacrifice to the Tritopatores, the impure, as one sacrifices to the heroes, having poured a libation of wine down through the roof, and of the ninth parts burn one...

[Column B]: If a man wishes to be purified from *elasteroi* (vengeful spirits of the wronged dead) having made a proclamation from wherever he wishes and whenever in the year he wishes...let him purify himself ... let him purify himself in the same way as the *autorrektas* (probably = homicide) does when he is purified of an *elasteros*.¹

The *Antigone* of Sophocles dates from a decade and a half later, probably 443 B.C. Two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, the sons of Oedipus, have fought for his Theban kingdom. Polynices enlisted Argive help to do so and is thus a sort of traitor, although Polynices in one version of the myth had some right on his side because Eteocles refused to stick to an arrangement to share the power in alternate years. This is the version followed or perhaps invented by Euripides in his *Phoenician Women* of about 409 B.C. (The topic was also handled by Aeschylus in his *Seven Against Thebes*). Both brothers are killed. The new king Kreon, brother of Oedipus’s wife Jocasta and thus uncle to the disputing brothers, has ordered that nobody bury Polynices. But Antigone, their sister and thus Kreon’s niece, defies him, placing divine law above Kreon’s merely human pronouncement. He condemns her to death, but though the gods do not save Antigone they make their extreme displeasure at Kreon felt by refusing civic sacrifices and by destroying him utterly through the death of his son and wife.

The situation is superficially unlike the Aeschylean play: there is no formal lawcourt, like the Areopagus; on the contrary, the arbitrariness of Kreon’s enactment is part of the issue in the play: it is not at all clear that he symbolizes the power of the community as he claims to do initially. The divine will displays itself not in a kind of trial but by unseen interventions. There is no direct “epiphany,” the technical term for the appearance in person of a god or goddess. Nevertheless, the two plays are interestingly comparable because both of them are

concerned with the power of the state or of non-related human individuals to interfere in the most intimate area of all: the family. In Greek terms what we are dealing with is the gradual encroachment of the *polis* (city-state) on the *oikos* (family or household).

Let us go deeper and take the Aeschylus and Sophocles plays in that order. What Orestes is doing is taking vengeance into his own hands. The legislation of Dracon at the end of the seventh century, perhaps 620 B.C., and of Solon at the beginning of the 6th century in Athens is the beginning of the long process by which the *oikos*, was, so-to-speak, tamed, and the *polis* encroached on some of its former functions. The first stage was the restriction of the right to blood-vengeance.

The first and very shadowy reformer is Drakon in the seventh century B.C. at Athens. His law-code was famously ferocious, but it does limit the family blood-feud, by setting down in writing rules about homicide; we have a fifth-century fragment of the homicide law of Drakon which may be original. The ferocity of the rules is less important than the vital fact that it is *the community which now decides the procedure*, although the family still has a big role in carrying it out: "relatives as far as cousinhood", i.e., perhaps children of cousins, and cousins, are to make proclamation to the killer in the agora. The prosecution is to be shared by "cousins, children of cousins, sons-in-law, fathers-in-law and members of the phratry,"² a fifth-century re-carving of an older enactment:

The law of Drakon about homicide shall be inscribed by the recorders of the laws [...] Even if without premeditation someone shall kill someone, he shall be exiled [...] Proclamation shall be made against the homicide in the agora by relatives as far as the degree of cousin's son and cousin. Prosecution shall be made jointly by cousins, sons of cousins, sons-in-law, fathers-in-law, and members of the phratry (a kinship group) responsible for homicide [...].²

It is true that the very ancient court of the Areopagus must in fact, even before Drakon, have some power of arbitration between *gene* in such a case (Lacey 1968: 54). This is the background to the family revenge depicted in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. In the end the institution of a formal law-court with a special homicide responsibility symbolizes the end to blood-feud and the acknowledgment of the paramountcy of the community.

The issue in the *Antigone* is burial. Why was burial, of any kind, such an issue? It was not a problem confined to the world of the tragedians: witness the bitter real-life historical argument, described by the historian Thucydides at the end of his book four (4.97ff.) between the Athenians and the Thebans in 424 B.C. after the battle of Delion, about the return of the casualties in that battle. The Thebans refuse to relinquish the Athenian dead for burial unless the Athenians vacate a temple, which they have occupied:

A herald from the Athenians on his way to ask for the Athenian dead was met by a Boeotian herald, who turned him back, telling him that nothing was to be gained until he, the Boeotian, had completed his own mission. The Boeotian herald came before the Athenians and said "the Athenians had done wrong and transgressed against Hellenic law. It was a rule established everywhere that an

invade of another country should keep his hands off the temples that were in that country” (Thuc. 4. 97)

And so on, a long dispute in which the Athenians reply that under Hellenic law whoever was in control of a piece of country also took possession of the temples of that country. The dispute is sometimes thought to be reflected in a more or less contemporary play of Euripides, the *Suppliants*, but some of the arguments for the dating of this play are circular. Nevertheless, it shows how intense were the feelings about proper treatment of the dead. Bowie shows that the last third of the play recalls the solemnity of Athenian public funerals, exposure and solemn carrying out of the dead,³ grave-side eulogy, cremation, and then bestowal of the ashes with further shows of grief.

To mention some other relevant historical examples: Towards the end of the Peloponnesian War of 431–404 BC, there was a sea-battle in the east Aegean between the Athenians and the Spartans at Arginusai (406 BC). The Athenians won the sea-battle, but the fleet-commanders failed to pick up the survivors clinging to the wreckage, or to collect the corpses. There was a popular outcry back at Athens, and feelings were inflamed by the appearance of people in mourning for the dead.⁴ The generals were tried *en bloc* instead of separately as law and justice required, and the six were put to death. There are two ancient accounts of this notorious episode, one in Xenophon’s *Hellenica* (1.7), the other in Diodorus of Sicily (13.99–103), a writer who lived in the Roman period but who drew on earlier, nearly contemporary authorities. Diodorus speaks only of corpses; Xenophon of survivors, “many speakers attacked the generals on the grounds that they should be held responsible for not picking up the shipwrecked.” Diodorus says “the Athenians were angry that the generals had allowed the men who had died to maintain their supremacy to go unburied (*ataphous*)” (13.101). On the whole, modern scholars are inclined to prefer Diodorus’ account of the whole Arginusai episode (sea-battle and trial), but the probable solution is that both survivors and corpses were abandoned to the elements. If so, then like the battle of Delion, except at sea not on land, this is an example of intense Athenian preoccupation with the fate of the dead.

A second example comes from a speech of the Athenian orator Lysias, delivered only a few years after the Arginusai affair. There was an ugly oligarchic phase just after the end of the Peloponnesian war, in 404–403 BC, the so-called regime of the Thirty Tyrants, an extreme group of oligarchs installed by the victorious Spartans. One of their worst excesses was the arbitrary killing of some rich resident foreigners, so-called metics; the best-known is Polemarchus because he was Lysias’ brother and Lysias wrote a speech denouncing Eratosthenes the man who had arrested his brother. The speaker whips up feeling against Eratosthenes in all sorts of ways, dwelling on horrific details like the way the culprits tore the ear-rings out of the ears of Polemarchus’s wife. But the worst part is this:

The Thirty gave Polemarchus their customary demand to drink hemlock, with no prior statement as to the reason for his execution, let alone a trial and a chance to make his defence. And as he was being carried dead from the prison they did not allow a funeral to be conducted from any one of our three houses, but they laid him out in a small hut they had hired. We also had many cloaks, yet

they refused our request for one for his burial; but one of our friends supplied a cloak, another a pillow, and others what they each happened to have, for the burial (Lysias 12.17–18).

The same speech actually goes on to refer back to Arginusai to make a point:

Would it not therefore be shocking [to let these men off], when you have punished with death those captains who won the sea-battle; you thought that you must give satisfaction to the valour of the dead in spite of the pleas of the captains that they were unable to pick up the men because of a storm (Lysias 12.36).

Why then the preoccupation with burying the dead properly? This is not so easy or obvious a question as it might appear.⁵ The *Iliad* of Homer ends “and so they carried out the burial of Hector, tamer of horses.” This is a very important line because for several of the previous books of the poem it has been seriously in doubt whether Hector would be buried at all. Achilles has mutilated the body, but the god Apollo miraculously keeps it from defilement and decay. Nevertheless Achilles has uttered some terrible threats about what he is going to do to it, throw it to the dogs etc. The worst thing is to throw it to be eaten by the fishes.

Why this preoccupation with the fate of corpses? One answer is based on the belief that one is somehow sentient in the afterlife. Nasty things done to one's corpse will affect one in Hades. But this is not totally satisfactory; the Greek Hades is a twilight sort of place and an explanation in terms of the afterlife does not seem enough to explain the obsession with the fate of the corpse.

The best answer is in terms of powerlessness. In Greek ethics, it is terrible to be in someone else's power, this is the worst thing about slavery, the absence of choice as you are dragged off on your “day of slave.” The corpse is the extreme case of the powerlessness to which a person can be reduced. Your enemy can insult and humiliate you and there is nothing you can do about it.

This explanation must be on the right lines. In the earliest phase of Greek history, the job of caring for the corpse falls on one's literal nearest and dearest, one's kin. In particular, one's female kin, because of the way in which women occupy the private as opposed to the public civic space. This continues to be true in a limited degree even in the classical period. This appears from the inscriptions, which regulate the behavior of women at funerals—the so-called aggressive funeral, that is, the funeral which amounts to a piece of aristocratic family display. (Compare the tenth century BC archaeological evidence from Lefkandi on Euboea, the remains of a Wagnerian funeral were discovered in 1981, with very splendid gold and other objects and even some horses included in the burial, in Homeric style. Hard to believe this was anything but a royal burial, at the very least it was an extravagant and ostentatious one). The funeral was an opportunity for aristocratic families to assert themselves ostentatiously and the developed *polis* had an interest in restraining such behavior. This has been discussed by Richard Seaford in his *Reciprocity and Ritual*.

⁶ Seaford's explanation for the need for legislation in the funerary sphere is that such legislation was envisaged as contributing to political harmony, Greek *homonoia*.

There is, he plausibly suggests, a contradiction between the *homonoia* of the *polis* and the public display of two highly emotional and closely interconnected kinds of solidarity—of the mourning group with the dead, and of the mourning group among themselves. It is significant that the first legislators to interfere over funerary ritual were those who played a formative role in the creation of the *polis* (like Solon in Athens, but there are others). The point is that the *polis* was, as Seaford puts it, concerned to limit the autonomy of the powerful kinship groups (*oikos* versus *polis* again). Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood (1995) and Seaford (1993) think that attitude to death changed in the seventh century from an accepting attitude to a new attitude associated with the rise of the *polis*, namely an attitude characterized by anxiety and fear of pollution. On this view, funerary legislation belongs to the general shift. Robert Parker puts it very strongly: “the totalitarian side of the classical city and its religion is here for the first time on display.” (1996: 50).

Let us look at the legislation itself. The sort I am discussing starts at Athens with the lawgiver Solon, who set out rules about funerals, but there was more legislation after Solon as well. The evidence is transmitted by later writers. Plutarch (in the Roman period) says Solon passed a law to do with the ‘goings out’ – (*exodoi*) of women, their mourning, and their festivals, forbidding disorder and licence. He also “abolished the practice of lacerating the flesh at funerals, of reciting set dirges, and of lamenting any person at the funeral ceremonies of another.” (Plutarch *Solon* 21). People were also forbidden “to sacrifice an ox at the graveside, or to bury their dead with more than three changes of clothing, or to visit the tombs of others beside their own family except at the time of burial.” Plutarch, who lived in the late first century AD and came from Chaeronea in Boiotia, adds that most of these practices “are forbidden by our own laws in Chaeronea,” which is valuable as showing that archaic and classical Athenian arrangements were not unique in time or place, although as for so many topics the Athenian evidence preponderates in our sources. There is some Spartan evidence (Plutarch *Lycurgus* 27), which says that the lawgiver Lycurgus forbade anything to be buried with the dead except a red robe and olive leaves, and abolished lamentation and mourning—hardly credible, but it shows the fierce desire to curtail the family's activities and replace them with state control.

To return to Athens. The orator Demosthenes in the fourth century adds some more (43.62):

The laying out (*prothesis*) must take place inside, the funeral procession (*ekphora*) must be before sunrise on the day after the *prothesis*. In the *ekphora* the men must walk in front and the women behind. No women except close relatives must enter the chamber of the dead when the body is carried out.

The last source is the Roman writer Cicero (*On Laws* 2.64–5 with Parker 1996: 134) who is talking about the early Roman legislation known as the Twelve Tables (mid-fifth century BC). This was allegedly copied from Solon's laws at Athens, a story not absolutely incredible—there are some very striking parallels between Athenian and Roman developments

in this period, the tribal reforms of Cleisthenes for instance (late sixth century BC) being in several ways paralleled by the changes of Servius Tullius at about the same time. Cicero repeats some things we already knew from the Greek sources but adds a detail which has been much discussed. It actually relates not to Solon but to some legislation passed “a little later,” *aliquanto post*. He says at that time the size and decoration of tomb monuments was limited, and praise of the dead was prohibited except in public funerals by someone publicly appointed to do it. Specifically, the rule was that no grave monument was to be more elaborate than the work of ten men would accomplish in ten days. It has been suggested (Humphreys 1983: 90) that this refers to grave mounds. In any case it clearly curbed excessive ostentation by the elite. It is possible that this post-Solonian restriction on private funerary monuments, and another institution I shall be coming to shortly, namely public funerals for the war dead, should be, as Parker puts it, “seen as two sides of the same coin” (1996: 134).

So much for Athens proper. But we also have rules of this Athenian, Solonian, sort from Gambreion in the region near Troy in Asia Minor, and from Iulis on the island of Keos, a place significantly under Athenian influence.⁷

There is another kind of epigraphic evidence, however, namely purificatory regulations. Death, birth and menstruation were the great polluting events of the life-cycle and had to be wrapped up in controlling ritual, rather like the insulating tape wrapped round a cable of electricity to make it safe—a strikingly common simile in the anthropological works dealing with this topic (Douglas 1966). In a fourth-century Cyrene cathartic, i.e., purificatory law, we find allusions to the polluting effects of death (Parker 1983: appendix). And we find similar provisions in a very important fifth-century Greek sacred law from Selinus in Sicily, which was in the Getty museum in California in the early 1990s but has now been returned to Italy. This mentions the role of the Eumenides or Furies, and refers to Zeus Eumenes, a newly-attested cult title but one, which clearly relates to the Eumenides. The *Eumenides* of Aeschylus shows the role of the Eumenides in avenging violent death, and it has been suggested that the Selinus regulations reflect a bloody recent outbreak of *stasis* or civil strife which needs to be put right. And there is a reference in the inscription already mentioned from Selinus in west Sicily to Zeus Meilichios, the “kindly one”; this is propitiatory, i.e., a way of appeasing a possibly dangerous god by attributing to him the kindness you hope he will show. Though Meilichios is a well-attested cult title elsewhere in Greece, e.g., in Athens, it has been intriguingly suggested, that the cult title here shows semitic, specifically Phoenician, influence, and that this Meilichios is really a form of semitic MLK, i.e., Moloch. The particular reason for thinking that there may be some Phoenician influence is the presence nearby in the same part of the city of Selinus of dedications in semitic writing to *b'l m'l'k*, King MLK, a Carthaginian/Phoenician, i.e., semitic deity. In other words, Zeus Melichios has been assimilated to a god whose syllabically spelt name has the same three basic consonants as the Greek cult title of Zeus. This is historically plausible because Sicily was an area in which Greeks coexisted with Carthaginians in the west of the island; Carthage in north Africa was not far way across the sea from Sicily. Colonial Greeks like those in Sicily must often have borrowed elements of local culture and religion.

In this area as in most areas of classical Greek history we know most about Periclean Athens but the examples I have just given show that we should be careful to remember that

other states had rules and rituals too and that there was non-Greek influence to be reckoned with (cf. my earlier comments about Pindar). Before we say that something was specific to the Athenian democracy we ought to ask, does it occur in non-democratic places as well? Because, if so, we will perhaps be talking about something more widespread. Though it is true that the Athenian evidence can be tied very tightly in with Athenian political institutions, nevertheless we have a casual mention in Herodotus of public burial of a foreigner on the island of Samos. A Spartan called Archias was honoured by the Samians after he had died fighting for them (Hdt. 3.55). Herodotus met Archias' grandson who told Herodotus that he honoured the Samians because they had honored his grandfather with a public funeral.

But Athens followed its own special development. I just mentioned Solon; he started the process of state regulation of the doings of the family. The area of funerary ritual was just one such area; but there were others, as I tried to suggest when I talked about the family; inheritance laws, for instance. But the funeral was the most worrying area of potential conflict between the state and the family, between the *polis* and the *oikos*.

The dating of the next stage is more controversial. Solon had merely restricted the ways in which families were allowed to behave. It did not take over any of the actual functions of the family. The next step was much bigger and bolder, namely the assumption by the polis of the expense of the whole funerary responsibility for war dead, including transportation, in fact for public burial in the strong sense: state burial at public expense, with a funerary oration delivered by a prominent individual. This, as Christopher Carey has suggested (1989: 6 n.31), was the classical successor of the sung funeral elegy or dirge (cf. the lamentation at the end of *Iliad* 24). This is what Thucydides refers to as the ancestral custom, the *patrios nomos* (2.34.1).⁸

Funerary ritual is one way of coping with death. To be specific, funerary meals and especially games are part of an attempt to reassert life in the face of death. As we have seen, our evidence for this topic is not just literary, e.g., the laws of Solon in 594 BC; we have so-called "sacred laws" on stone inscriptions, which specifically mention pollution. An example is a fifth-century BC sacred law which I have already mentioned from the city of Iulis on the Aegean Greek island of Keos.⁷ As Parker says (1983: 34–5), the difference between Solon's funerary legislation and that in the Iulis inscription is that the inscription is explicit about pollution but Solon, as far as we can see—an important qualification—, was not. We need to trace the idea. A big problem for students of religion is that pollution is apparently not there in Homer. Were the ideas of pollution and purification products of late archaic anxiety, i.e., is the absence in Homer a real absence? Or is the truth more subtle, as Parker suggests, i.e., the idea is implicitly there after all, for instance, when Hector's body is kept from decay by the gods, this is more than just physical decomposition, i.e., uncleanness, it is metaphorical as well. Achilles is made to perform elaborate washing rituals before making a libation in preparation for his great prayer to Zeus, lord of Dodona:

He now took this goblet from the chest and first purified it with sulphur, and poured out the wine looking into the sky, and Zeus who delights in thunder looked on. "Zeus, king, lord of Dodona, Pelasgian, you who live far away and rule in wintry Dodona, as you granted my former prayer, now grant his further desire" (*Iliad* 16.228ff.).

This does seem to assume the existence of purificatory functions of a metaphorical i.e., more than just physical or hygienic kind; the medical idea of contagion was not known even to the Hippocratic doctors in the fifth century, though it does seem to have been something Thucydides was aware of (Holladay and Poole 1979).

Essentially those views which argue that, e.g., preoccupation with homicide after the time of Dracon in the seventh century attest a new fear about pollution, are based on a false premise, namely the idea that there is a big transformation, “sudden and otherwise inexplicable, in the treatment of killers.” But this transformation as Parker says (1996: 116) “simply does not occur.” Dracon’s code is part of a gradual process.

Returning specifically to pollution by death, we saw that there were certain categories of person to whom pollution anyway did not apply, above all heroes. This was a comforting notion if diluted a bit so as to imply that good men and women do not die. There is an early Hellenistic epigram of Callimachus which says “here Saon son of Dikon of Akanthos sleeps a sacred sleep. Do not say that good men die.” In the later fifth century, we start to meet the idea that the ether as opposed to Hades received the souls of some special categories of dead. But the idea of special afterlife treatment of a privileged few is perhaps traceable back to Homer and the notion of the Elysian fields at the ends of the earth, see *Odyssey* 4.563ff., where Menelaus the husband of Helen goes; this man is a favorite of the poet being addressed by him in the vocative like Patroclus and Eumaeus, two other favorites. Elysian may mean struck by lightning, a special kind of apotheosis or deification. Rhadamanthus the brother of Minos is in charge there, and the place obviously resembles the Islands of the Blest in the far west (Gardens of the Hesperides). Possibly they were identified with the Canary islands or Madeira. Anyway by Virgil’s time the Fields are no longer on the earth but under it, see *Aeneid* 6. 637ff.

In historical times, the extreme case of this attitude (good people get special treatment) is the doctrine known as Euhemerism, after a man called Euhemerus of Messene in the Peloponnese. His idea was the gods were promoted human beings, given divine status because of their benefactions, *euergesiai*, towards their fellow men. This idea was a solvent of traditional religious ideas in some of the ways that the classical sophists’ ideas were solvents of the traditional ideas of their times (Fraser 1972: vol. 1, 294). And one of the sophists, a fifth-century thinker called Prodicus, has been identified by Albert Henrichs (see “Hades” in OCD³) as a proto-Euhemerist because his view of the gods was similar to this. So exceptional people did not pollute. Nor did the war dead.

But in the fifth century the normal view was that ordinary, i.e., sub-heroic and sub-divine mortals should be buried. To deny them burial would itself produce pollution, and this is the situation in the *Antigone* of Sophocles, to which at last I return. To remind you, the angry king Kreon has denied burial to Polynices, who has fought traitorously against Thebes. He is the son of Oedipus and brother of Antigone. Kreon has issued an instruction (*kerugma*) that nobody shall give Polynices burial. Antigone places the unwritten law, which says you must bury the dead, above the *kerugma* or earthly pronouncement of Kreon, and is punished for it. The gods do not however like what Kreon has done to Polynices. Tiresias speaks:

In fear, I essayed burnt sacrifice on a duly kindled altar; but from my offerings the Fire god showed no flame; a dark moisture, oozing from the thigh-flesh, trickled forth upon the embers, and smoked, and sputtered; the gall was scattered to the air; and the streaming thighs lay bared of the fat that had been wrapped round them. Such was the failure of the rites by which I vainly asked a sign, as from this boy I learned; for he is my guide, as I am guide to others. And 'tis thy counsel that hath brought this sickness on the state. For the altars of our city and of our hearths have been tainted, one and all, by birds and dogs, with carrion from the hapless corpse, the son of Oedipus, and therefore the gods no longer accept prayer and sacrifice at our hands, or the flame of meat-offering; nor doth any bird give a clear sign by its shrill cry, for they have tasted the fatness of a slain man's blood (998ff.).

The implication is clearly that Kreon is in the wrong. But why? After all he has forbidden burial to a traitor, and this prohibition was exactly the rule at Athens. It is significant that the traitorous aspect of Polynices' behavior is played down in the play, though see Kreon at line 518 "he [Polynices] died trying to ravage this land." The answer is simply that Sophocles was not a comprehensive social historian. He was interested in exploring the Kreon-Antigone clash as a male-female clash, a young-old clash, a state-individual clash (this was what interested the German philosopher Hegel) and above all as a human-divine clash, in ways brilliantly discussed by George Steiner (1984). To have foregrounded the traitor-brother clash would have made the issues less clear-cut. Sophocles wants us emphatically to conclude that Antigone was right on the central issue: divine laws, the "unwritten laws of the gods" as she calls them, must prevail over human ones. The state certainly legislated about how to deal with pollution, and how to conduct funerary ritual, but the framework of belief is that the dead must be dealt with somehow, they cannot be left to rot and a human being could not ordain that they should be so neglected — even though this is in fact what was ordained for traitors by the classical Athenian state.⁹ Sophocles might have written up the traitor-brother clash but he chose not to do so, although traitors were one category to whom proper burial was indeed forbidden. Our conclusion must be that Greek tragedy illuminates attitudes and legal enactments, but does not necessarily mirror them in their totality.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 Jameson, Jordan, and Kotansky (eds.) 1993: 14–17, for the Greek text and English translation.
- 2 Meiggs & Lewis 1988: no. 86; translated in Fornara 1983: no. 15B.
- 3 Bowie 1997: 39–62; esp. 51: Theseus's invitation to Adrastus to speak recalls the criteria used, according to Thucydides, by the city in choosing an orator for the funeral oration: 'a man of greater talent, speak to the youth of the citizens, you have understanding' *Suppl.* 842ff.; cf. Thucydides 'a man chosen by the city for his intellectual gifts and for his general reputation.' Thucydides mentions female relatives, and cf. the mention of beds (*klinai*) for the symbolic laying-out (Thuc. 2.34); cf. the *eunai* at Eur. *Suppl.* 766.
- 4 For wearing mourning as a deliberate way of inciting political violence in Roman politics, see Lintott 1968: 16f., section called "squalor."
- 5 Good discussion by Parker 1983: 45f., and 1995: 1–9.
- 6 See 1993: chapter 3c "the aggressive funeral"; and for *homonoia*, see 1993: 82–83 citing Plutarch *Solon* 12.
- 7 Funerary Ritual Inscriptions: (1) Dittenberger, no. 1218 = Sokolowski 1969: no. 97, from Iulis on the island of Keos, fifth century BC; (2) Dittenberger no. 1219 = Sokolowski 1955: 16, from Gambreion, near Troy in Asia Minor, 3rd century BC.
- 8 The meaning of Pausanias 1.29.4 is crucially disputed (is "the first buried here" chronological or topographical?).
- 9 Rules about traitors: Thucydides 1.138.6 and Xenophon *Hellenica* 1.7.22 with Parker 183: 45 and n.47.
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