

The Bloody Dust in *Antigone* 599-603

In the second stasimon of Sophocles' *Antigone*, the chorus sing these puzzling lines:

Νῦν γὰρ ἐσχάτας ὑπὲρ
ρίζας ὃ τέτατο φάος ἐν Οἰδίπου δόμοις,
κατ' αὖ νιν φοινία θεῶν τῶν νερτέρων
ἀμᾶ κόνις, λόγου τ' ἄνοια καὶ φρενῶν ἐρινύς.

599-604 (Jebb)

("Now the light (of salvation) which, arising from (or 'consisting of') the last (surviving) root, had been spread out in the house of Oedipus –the bloody dust of the Underworld is burying (it) again, mindlessness of speech and Frenzy of wits" (Griffith, *ad loc*, reading ὅπερ in 599). This passage has been extensively discussed, by among others Jebb, Griffith, and Easterling. In the most questionable passages, I accept κόνις read in the manuscripts; I accept Jebb's suggestion that καταμᾶ must mean something like "mowed down," but the object, I suggest, is "root," with Griffith, and when he observes that there is no agent of this destruction, I suggest we look again at the "bloody dust." Jebb assumes, and others agree that this dust is the dust poured over Polyneices by Antigone. The agent, I would suggest, is the blood.

The use of κόνις in part at least serves to connect this play with Aeschylus' *Septem* and *Oresteia*. Twice the guard says that someone has scattered "thirsty dust" (δίψιος, 247, 429) on the body. Aeschylus uses "thirsty dust" in a similar context: to announce the arrival of the messenger in *Agamemnon* 495. "Bloody dust," as it is used here, may refer to Antigone's act of symbolic burial, but "bloody" more directly refers to the body of Polyneices. We are told it is "wet" (*mudon*, 410), and, in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, when κόνις "drains the blood of a dead

man,” there is no return to life (647). Later in the same play the chorus of Erinyes pray, “may the *κόνις* not drink the black blood of its people. . .” (979-85, Lloyd Jones).

The Erinyes themselves drink the blood of kindred murder (*Agamemnon* 1188) and so the bloody dust implies they are present. In these lines are also described states of mind typically caused by the Erinyes, “*ἄνοια* of word and a Fury of wits” (*ἐρινύς φρενῶν*).” *ἄνοια* recalls Ismene’s description of Antigone’s mental state in the final line of the prologue (*ἄνους*, 99, repeated by Creon, 563). *ἐρινύς φρενῶν*, however, comes from Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, where the chorus of Erinyes say that their song is “crazing the brain” (*φρενοδαλῆς*) 330. There are also Aeschylean echoes in the chorus’ description of the effects of the Erinyes. In *Eumenides*, the chorus pray, “may no hurtful wind blow to the destruction of the trees . . . may no deadly blight draw nigh to kill the fruit” (*δενδροπήμων δὲ μὴ πνέοι βλάβη. . . μηδ’ ἄκαρπος αἰανῆς ἐφάρπετο νόσος*, 938-42, Lloyd-Jones). If Sophocles’ phrase “bloody dust” recalls the Erinyes to the audience, what would destroy the “last root” would be this “fruit destroying disease.”

“Bloody dust” is a rich term in itself, but it seems also to be paired with the image that appears in the same position in the preceding strophe: when a house is “shaken from heaven, the curse fails nevermore. . . even as, when the surge is driven over the deep by the fierce breath of Thracian sea-winds, it rolls up the black sand from the depths and there is a sullen roar from wind-vexed headlands that front the blows of the storm” (585-91, Jebb). Jebb’s “over the deep” translates *erebos hyphalon*, which ignores the primary meaning of “erebos” as “the Underworld Darkness.” The “wave roils the “black sand heaps.” This black sand parallels the bloody dust—blood itself is often “black.”

The Thessalian winds and the bloody dust embody the nightmare vision of the sailors and the farmers of Attica. Behind both wind and dust lie the Furies, as the agents “of the gods and of

Hades, “as Tiresias will describe them (1075). The deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices were not the end of the storm, as Creon hoped (162-3); elemental forces of much greater destruction have been unleashed, and here Sophocles borrows Aeschylean language to describe them.

Works Cited

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