

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. These threat ideas include attitudes,

actions, beliefs, and dynamics between archetypal characters which comprise a sketch of the

prototypical ideology of a given culture. The Ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, which is the myth of the Titan Prometheus, is a story of rebellion and punishment. Prometheus, the youngest Titan, defied the gods by stealing fire from Zeus and giving it to humanity. As punishment, he was bound to a rock on a cliffside, where an eagle would attack his liver every day. This myth is often interpreted as a symbol of the human condition, the struggle for knowledge, and the consequences of rebellion against authority.

preservation. This explains much of the rejection and treatment of femininity and

empowerment present throughout their mythology. In their myths about female divinity,

it becomes apparent that they associate feminine autonomy (the feminine divine such as

parthenogenic power of Gaia) with egalitarian, pre-civilized forebearers to classical

(Harris and Platzner 36-37, 144) The more dominant the patriarchal rule became,

the more demonized and disempowered female characters in Greek myth tended to be (Harris

and Platzner 145-6), as evidenced by the redistribution and subversion of Gaia's power

in the pantheon of gods. Both successful and tragic female characters in Greek myth

were consistently forced to be subservient, patient, and passive. Psyche, Persephone, and

but a small sample of the numerous cases where female mythic characters embodied

chastity, and passivity. The eponymous character of Sophocles' play, *Antigone*, is another prime example of the attitude Ancient Greek Myth (and society) cultivated 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 (Causes 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 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 men and the creation (and preservation) of civilization in its entirety. Antiquarian civilizations 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 the association with female autonomy). In her quest to honor her dead brother, regardless of his choosing to fight against the rule of organized society, she challenges Creon inherits (Sophocles 729, 1933,) 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 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 communal values 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 anarchy (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 his 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 the Ancient Greek society itself demonizes

female autonomy and enforces its association with ~~ars and~~ the erosion of civilization. He places the preservation of the state and the rule of law as primary over the ~~are fans~~ wishes of his constituents, even his daughter ~~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 good ~~(the natural order of things)~~, he still refuses to relent (Sophocles 756-764). 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~~.

the saw t thi

(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 with 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

- Guest, Kenneth J. *Cultural Anthropology: A Toolkit for a Global Age*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017.
- Harris, Stephen L., and Gloria Platzner. *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*. 6th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2012.
- Sophocles. *Antigone*. *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*, by Stephen L Harris and Gloria Platzner, McGraw-Hill, 2012, pp. 728–65.