THE BURIAL OF POLYNEICES IN SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE*

There is no corpse that I know of in Greek literature - perhaps in any literature, for that matter - that has raised so much controversy over itself as the corpse of Polyneices in the *Antigone* of Sophocles. So many scholarly feet have tramped round it in the last few decades in the search for explanations to the questions asked about it that the metaphorical dust cloud that has been stirred up must rival even the real one which hid Antigone on her second - or was it first, after all? - visit to it. But, unlike the latter cloud of dust, which subsided quite suddenly to reveal the girl, this has neither abated, nor is likely to do so; if anything, it appears to me to be getting thicker, with new feet joining in. So that, in the circumstances, I may be forgiven if I add my own bit of trampling round the body, even if I succeed in doing little more than adding my share of dust to what has already been raised by the rest.

According to the plot of the mythical episode as treated by Sophocles in his play, Polyneices, leading an Argive army against Thebes to wrest the throne from his brother, Eteocles, had died the previous day, killing, and being killed by him. Creon, their uncle, had thereupon assumed kingship and immediately given burial to Eteocles with all honour; as for Polyneices, he had issued an edict that he was to be left (presumably where he fell), unwept, unburied, a feast of flesh for dogs and carrion birds. Hearing this, their sister, Antigone, first decides to carry the corpse away and give it proper burial, and solicits her sister, Ismene's help. When Ismene is reluctant to help her, fearing for Antigone as much as for herself, Antigone resolves to bury Polyneices by herself. At sunrise the sentries posted to guard the corpse find it covered with a layer of dust, together with evidence of certain funeral rites having been performed at the same time. There is no knowing who had done it. A guard, with great trepidation, reports the matter to Creon. Creon is furious and threatens to consider the man himself implicated in the act if he fails to catch the culprit. The guards wipe the dust off the corpse and, stationing themselves upwind to avoid the stench, keep a sharp watch. At the height of noon a dust storm, rising suddenly and filling the sky like a plague from heaven, temporarily obscures their view; and when it settles abruptly, there is Antigone standing by the corpse with things for a libation and screaming curses at those who had done the deed. Thereafter, they see her cover it with dust brought in her hands, and pour a triple libation. At this point they rush up and arrest her, and our guard takes it upon himself, this time with a certain amount of enthusiasm, to report to Creon with the girl.

Of the things which the text makes certain, one is that it was Antigone who performed the second burial. We have witnesses for this - Creon's guards saw her with their own eyes bring dust in her hands, and caught her *delicto flagrante.* Notwithstanding the ingenuity of the suggestions put forward to explain the first burial of Polyneices, no writer that I know of has denied Antigone's responsibility for the second - not even ventured to suggest that the guards had framed her with a tissue of lies

to save their own wretched necks for a deed which they had either themselves committed, or let some other unknown person commit through their negligence of duty. Indeed, Antigone herself admits it, and with no hesitation, when charged with the deed, first by the guards (vs. 434-435) and then by Creon (vs. 441-443). Nor has anyone suspected Antigone of a death-wish, as Socrates in recent times by some like I.F. Stone.[1] The closest one comes to such a thing in the case of Antigone is J. Pinsent's view that she wished to be seen and identified on this occasion as the one who had successfully fulfilled the burial of her kin on the first occasion.[2]

The vexed question is why Antigone came to the corpse a second time, and the answer must in some way involve the libation things she had with her on that occasion. Jebb in his day wrote: "I have never seen the question put or answered", and suggests, perhaps as a "refuge of despair", that Antigone may not have performed the *choai*, as she had forgotten to bring them.[3] Time and again it has been mentioned how uncharacteristic this would have been of Antigone, and how poorly such a lapse would reflect on her concern for her brother, for whose burial she was risking her very life, and for which these *choai* were needed.[4] But if such forgetfulness would suggest a mental debility on the part of the girl at the first burial, her having in her hand libation things, unless purposefully to use them on that occasion (as use them she did) must imply that she was positively unhinged!

However, it is the acceptance of the evidence that it was Antigone who came to the corpse of Polyneices the second time, and that she came to (whatever else she intended to do) pour a libation, that has given rise to the principal controversy. If Antigone performed the second burial, as is sure, was it she who did the first as well?

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1. *The Trial of Socrates* publ. Little (1988). For a resume, see his article in question and answer form, 'A New Apology for Socrates' *Dialogue* No. 82 (1988) p. 19 - 23, reproduced also in *Harper's* February (1988) p. 60 - 65 as 'When Free Speech was First Condemned.

2. 'The Double-Burial in the Antigone' Liverpool Classical Monthly vol. 5, no. 1. (January, 1980) p. 17.

3. *Antigone* 3rd ed. Cambr. (1900) p. 86, n. on vs. 429. D.A. Hester, 'Sophocles the Unphilosophical: a study of the Antigone', *Mnemosyne* series iv.vol. XXIV (1971) p. 28, calls this absentmindness "highly untragic".

4. The *choai* may not have been needed for the minimum ritual burial, as Jebb implies from Horace *Odes* 1.28.35 - a wayfarer, not prepared for encountering a corpse, would not have the wherewithall for such a thing. But Antigone here is not performing such a burial, nor is in such circumstances. She set out from home prepared for a burial which included certain rites, even if they were not all the rites.

Or was someone or something else responsible for that - and if so, who or what? If that burial was the work of Antigone and not someone else, and if it was a ritual burial, how explain the guards wiping off the dust and her second burial of the corpse? Even if it was more than a symbolic burial, what made her visit the body again?

The first burial is recognized as useful to the dramatic organization of the play. It exasperates Creon before the culprit is found and puts him in proper mood for the harshness which he shows afterwards. The anonymity and mysteriousness of it adds to the puzzlement of the characters and make the arrest of Antigone come to them as a dramatic surprise. But there may also be another reason, as we shall mention later on.

Anyone who assumes that one, or both, of the burials were ritual burials must arrive at this from three considerations at least, all of which are mistaken. Firstly, the idea may be owed to the threefold character of the libations which Antigone poured at the body of Polyneices,[5] when read, and carelessly, in terms of the meagre quantity of dust that had been put on the corpse on both occasions. The incompleteness in the description of Antigone's action with the dust (which is all too cursorily mentioned in one line (vs. 429), though it would have taken some time in the doing), when run into her next action of the pouring of a libation of triple nature, could suggest that the dust itself was a threefold pouring of the nature of a ritual burial - and then read back to the first burial as well to interpret that too as a ritual burial. The second is that what the guards found at the first burial was no regular tomb (*tumberes men ou*: 255)but a light covering of dust, as by one who was no more than fulfilling an obligation that would save him from pollution. The third of these considerations is the belief that what Creon was seeking to do by depriving Polyneices of burial was to thwart the release of his soul to Hades, and that what Antigone was set on was securing her brother that facility by a ritual burial. E.J. Messener counted this as a secondary motive,[6] but to Bowra and many other commentators it was the true one.[7]

A good part of the difficulty connected with the second burial has arisen from such an assumption with regard to the first. The state of existence of the disincarnate soul (or shade) still bound to earth was, by implication, thought to be distressful, so that in Homeric religion the dead beg of the living to see to their release from the earth by

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5. vs. 430-431. These consisted of honey, wine and water, poured out at three pourings; *Od.* x. 518; xi. 26.

6. *CJ.* (1942) p. 515-526.

7. H. Muller 'Die Tragodien des Sophocles' Heidelberg (1909) p. 29; K.W. Meiklejohn 'The Burial of Polyneices' *CR.* vol. XLVI, no. 1 (February 1932) p. 4-5; T.B.L. Webster *Greek Interpretations* Manchester (1942) p. 50; M. Bowra *Sophoclean Tragedy* Oxford (1947) p. 91-92; I. Erradonea *Sophocles* Madrid (1958) p. 83-84 etc.

at least a symbolic burial constituting of three handsful of earth cast upon the body.[8] The threat of inflicting such torment upon the soul of the dead man by denying him burial, or worse, seeing his corpse eaten by animals and birds, is a very real one in Homer, though, as J.E.G. Whitehorne points out, it was hardly ever carried out in the case of any of the heroes.[9] The obligation to bury a corpse appears to have survived in practice in Greece, even when the basic eschatological belief had considerably weakened, or even changed.

Be that as it may, we are dealing with drama - and a dramatist who, while he plays against the religious and cultural milieu of his particular audience, treats it as the raw material of his artistic production, whether by accepting or ignoring elements in it, rearranging, reinterpreting or otherwise rehandling the reality. Thus, in this instance Sophocles blacks out the eschatological significance of burial in favour of the physical. He does not here concern himself with the fate of Polyneices' soul and makes not the slightest reference to it, or for that matter, to ritual burial as the means of release of the soul to the underworld. Kitto, Struck and Wilamowitz - and like them, several others, are correct in seeing that ritual burial is no part of the play.[10] As Hester observes, "it is (like casting out) one of the red-herrings that has been drawn across the trail by too learned commentators."[11] Creon's intention is not to punish Polyneices by denying his soul release, nor is it Antigone's purpose to secure a release for Polyneices' soul by giving him a symbolic kind of burial. If it were so, by the first covering of dust Antigone would have won, and Creon lost; also, thereafter, Antigone's second visit to

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8. See E.L. Halliday 'Three Notes on Sophocles' *CR.* vol. XII. (1962) p. 13. He faults Jebb with confusing two distinct ancient practices of burial, viz. the symbolical sprinkling of earth on an unburied corpse by a passer-by who wishes to safeguard himself from pollution, and burial by a surviving relative to protect a dead man from desecration. But surely symbolic burial was not without significance to the obligation for the living. However, Halliday is right, with many others, that the play centres on the second, not the first sort of burial.

9. 'Polyneices Disinterment and Reburial' *Greece and Rome* vol. XXX,no. 2, (October 1983) p. 133 f. Homer's heroes often enough threaten their foes that they will leave their corpses for vultures and dogs to feast upon. See C.P. Segal 'The Theme of the Mutilation of the Corpse in the Iliad' *Mnemosyne* suppl. 17 (1971) and J. Griffin *CQ.* n.s. XXVI (1976) p. 161-85, also *Homer on Life and Death* Oxford (1980) ch. iv.

10. T. Von Wilamowitz - Moellendorf *Die dramatische Technic des Sophocles* Berlin (1917) p. 26-38, esp. 37; H.D.F. Kitto *Form and Meaning in Drama* 2nd ed. London (1950); E. Struck *Gymnasium* vol. LX (1953) p. 327-334. See Hester *op.cit.* p. 22.

11. *loc.cit.*

the corpse would have been rendered as superfluous as the guards' wiping off of the dust from it meaningless. Nor, I think, did Sophocles even wish to imply such a punishment over and above whatever else Creon intended by the exposure of the corpse - for then, by her first act of burial Antigone would have succeeded in thwarting the king to that extent at least. And this is surely why Sophocles does not make mention of either the punishment of withholding the release of Polyneices' soul to Hades on the part of Creon, or a ritual burial on the part of Antigone. And yet we see that Antigone had no doubt whatever that she would meet Polyneices as much as her father and mother, when she herself got to Hades (vs. 897-899).

K.W. Meiklejohn, in an effort to retain the interpretation of both burials as ritual burials, finds himself in difficulty with the *ker* of the dead man. Such a burial, he says, can be annulled by the forces of Nature (e.g. a windstorm that might strip the body of its covering dust) without effect on the *ker*. "But", he asks, "has the action of the Guards in 'unburying' the corpse any effect on the spirit of the Dead? Can their action not only insult the spirit, but deny it rest in the hereafter, although it has already received the necessary rites? Have human beings the power Nature has not - a truly religious paradox."[12]

Why then did the guards 'unbury' the corpse, and why did Antigone come to it again? A.T. von Bradshaw suggests the guards did what they did in obedience to Creon's order. This order, he says, was not, as is usually supposed, the original commission to see that no one pays honour to the corpse and that it be left open to defilement by birds and dogs, but the new command most forcefully expressed in 304-312 and again 324-326: "Bring me the criminal!" And Antigone came, he thinks, as a tiger returns to its kill; it was the custom of Greek mourners to return to their graves, and the guards only chance of catching their quarry is to watch the grave.[13]

Wilamowitz had argued that the guards had no reason to expect the person who had performed the first burial would come back again, and that the arrival of Antigone merely intensified the difficulty, as her return to pour libations was neither necessary nor obvious.[14]

Bradshaw seems to forget that this is no ordinary burial but one done surreptitiously and at the risk of death, and that the 'grave' was not the sort that could have been visited without trepidation in accordance with Greek custom. Thus, Wilamowitz is right that the guards had no reason to expect the person who did the first burial to visit the grave, having done the best possible burial the circumstances

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12. *loc.cit.* p. 5.

13. 'The Watchman Scenes in the Antigone' *CQ.* n.s. vol. XII p. 207.

14. *op.cit.* p. 32.

permitted, unless there was sufficient provocation to take the risk, or a sudden unforseen opportunity offered itself to be able to visit the corpse for some purpose as secretly as on the previous night, and get back undetected - or perhaps both. By the first of these I mean news of the re-exposure of the corpse by the guards; by the second, that Antigone saw the building up of the sand storm *well before it took place* (rather than that it happened quite fortuitously and facilitated her getting up to the corpse, which she was intent on revisiting in broad daylight in any case).

As there is no suggestion that Antigone had heard about the guards having undone her work, whether by private information or a public announcement (designed to lure the tiger bach to its kill!), we must be satisfied with the assumption that she anticipated the sand storm and seized the opportunity that offered itself to revisit the body (in the Greek manner, if you please) and pour a libation. This is consistent with the nature of her fury, when she found the body cleaned of its covering of dust, which even made her throw caution to the winds and shriek. Had she already heard that the guards had done this, she would not have shown that element of surprise in her anger, nor even such sudden anger as to lose her head and behave as she did.

Such a view of things must imply correspondingly that, when the guards stripped the body of its dust covering and left it exposed again, they could not have expected to lure the tiger back to its kill (to continue using that expression) by that particular action of theirs, unless it was also published to reach the ears of the unknown person who had done that first burial.[15] If they caught the criminal, it was by sheer circumstances, not by any cleverness on their part, and for this I think they have to thank, if anything, a certain dust storm. As for the explanation of their unburying the body, we have to look for some other reason - which may be no more than to restore it to the condition in which it was upon the orders of Creon before the night-intruder interfered with it, and which the guards had, by their negligence, failed to foil.

Whitehorne explains Antigone's return to the corpse of Polyneices as out of a wish to advance the burial further towards "as full a burial as she could". The necessary rites she had performed at the first burial (*aphagisteusas ha chre*) were such as were 'necessary' or 'appropriate' to *that* stage of the burial. It is not equal to a complete burial, which, he says, would be *panta ha chre*.[16] "In fact, Antigone was now bringing the *choai*, not because she had forgotten them earlier, but in order to perform a further stage of the full burial which she had always intended her brother to have." Antigone had come prepared to continue one burial ceremony from the point at which she left off at dawn. Now she finds what she has done undone, and must begin the process all over

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15. Wilamowitz (*op.cit.* p. 32 f.) felt it was absurd for Creon to order the watchmen to produce the criminal, and the watchmen's action of scraping the dust off the body and mounting guard again quite mad.

16. *op.cit.* p. 32.

again.[17]

Again, as in the case of von Bradshaw, the circumstances of this particular burial are being lost sight of. Creon had decreed that the body of Polyneices should be left unwept, unhonoured and unburied, and anyone caught disobeying him ran the risk of death. Antigone had no illusions about this when she set out to do what she did. She should, and would, therefore have been thankful that she was able to get away with having given her brother a burial of sorts, even if it was the minimum, as we must understand from the kind of tomb she made, which could hardly be called a tomb (vs. 255-256), and the rites *ha chre*. She would indeed have to have been a remarkable optimist if she hoped to improve on that burial in broad daylight, without expecting to be immediately apprehended and charged with the offence of the previous night as well (- as indeed happened when the sand storm which she exploited let her down). It is difficult to think that, sandstorm or no, she would have kept coming to the corpse, knowing it must be guarded, either out of the Greek custom of visiting the grave or the desire to keep advancing the burial towards a complete burial.

S.M. Adams and W.H.D. Rouse have interesting theories, though quite different from each other, which seek to explain both Antigone's second visit to Polyneices' corpse and the libation things she brought along. According to them, the occasion when she was arrested was simply not Antigone's second visit to the body but her first! Adams thought the first burial was the work of the gods, emphasising its miraculous nature, as also the sand-storm which helped the girl to come right up to it. Of course the gods do not do this from their concern for Antigone's noble sentiment - quite the contrary; they do all this to have her treacherously trapped and thus pose Creon a choice (as they once posed Agamemnon) between his edict and the life of his neice - "a position familiar enough to Greek audiences."[18]

Rouse's explanation of the first burial is even more fascinating. He says, "Ismene did it." She had done it to anticipate Antigone and thus save her. He cites two places where she admits to the deed, v.s. 536: *dedraka t'ourgon* and again vs. 558: *kai men ise non estin he 'xamartia*. But apparently no one took notice of her then, as they

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17. *op.cit.* p. 140. See also the summary of his contention in p. 132-133.

18. 'The Burial of Polyneices' *CR.* vol. XIV. no. 3 (1931) p. 110 - 111. In his *Sophocles the Playwright* Toronto (1957) p. 49 Adams suggested the burial was the result of a previous dust-storm, similar to that in vs. 417 f. If so, asks Halliday (*op.cit* p. 14, n.1), why did not the latter do the same? See also M. MacGregor (*Studies and Directions in Greek Literature*, London (1937) p. 74-87), who holds the same view about the gods being responsible for the first burial.

have not the last two thousand years - to be exact, until 1911 and Rouse![19]

The first burial indeed sounds strange, especially because that is the way the guard wants to make it sound in the interests of both himself and his fellows who had slept on the job. If the Chorus soon afterwards tells Creon it looks like the work of the gods (*theelaton t'ourgon*: vs. 278-279), it is typical of their conciliatory nature, which leads them to concur with what has just been spoken by one character or another. The guard - and he is followed by certain modern commentators - cleverly tries to make something in his favour from the practice of Greek dramatists of eliminating the negatives in any account of thing before, and in order to, accentuate the positive. The evidence, or rather the lack of evidence, of the nature mentioned, which is made much of for a divine hand in the burial, i.e. the absence of the use of pick or shovel, or of a vehicle, is no surprise, since there was no grave dug in the earth for the need of a pick or shovel, nor had the body been transported away to need a cart. The absence of signs of human activity on the ground - though there appears to have been enough otherwise - is accounted for by the dryness and hardness of the earth around (vs. 250-251), and the absence of tracks of animals (vs. 257-258: birds are not to be expected at night) simply by the fact that the covering of dust that had been given to the corpse had, for that short time at least, proved effective. Had animals attacked the corpse, Creon would not have been properly defied by whoever did the deed, and the issue between him and Antigone would have lost its edge.

Notwithstanding these 'mysterious' circumstances, the guards appear to have had no doubt it was the work of a human agency; otherwise why did they start by accusing each other and almost come to blows, instead of experiencing religious awe at the phenomenon? "Anyone might have done it," our guard says, "but it wasn't evident who it was, nor was there any possibility of finding out" (vs. 262-263).

There must, however, have been traces of some other activity besides the dust that covered the corpse for the guard to have concluded that some rites had also been performed, whether these were upon the corpse itself or on the ground close beside it. Unfortunately he does not specify what these were, perhaps because the audience could have surmised. But surely they must have included the most obvious of these - the pouring of libations.[20] When the earth around is described as hard and dry (vs. 250-

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19. 'The Two Burials in the Antigone' *CR.* vol. XXV. no. 2 (1911) p. 40-42. I wonder whether Rouse is being serious or only trying to show that there is a case.

20. See n. 4 above. Rouse *op.cit.* p. 40 is quite affirmative about this. He says that when Jebb says that the *choai may* have been omitted at the first burial, he fails to tell us why Antigone should have been such a fool as to do half the rite and leave the rest undone; nor gives any reason why the words of Sophocles should not include *choai*. "Sophocles says (245): *konin palunas k'aphagisteusas*

251) it need not prelude the possibility of a small patch that was moistened by the pourings.[21] Or were the necessary rites short of libations because Antigone had forgotten to bring the needful *choai*?

But all this was part of the minimum of a burial and gave no indications as to who it was who had done it, or how. Which is something else that the guard is trying to suggest, so as to give the impression that the culprit they were dealing with was so subtle that their failure to catch him/her should not reflect too gravely on their negligence.

A.B. Drachmann argues that it was Antigone's intention to carry the body away, and that even though Ismene did not give her a hand to do so, she was actually made to have done it, when Sophocles began the play.[22] This, Drachmann finds in keeping with the tradition as it is preserved in Apollodorus,[23] and if one assumes this was the case, he thinks it would explain such inconsistences as why Creon suspected the guards of having been bribed (vs. 280 f.), why the Chorus sings of the cleverness (*deinotes*) of man (vs. 332 f.), why Antigone visited the corpse a second time (vs. 384 f.), why Creon accused Ismene of complicity without any reasonable basis in the story as it now stands (vs. 488 f.), the hope expressed in the second stasimon (vs. 615 f.), and the words of

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ha chre. If *choai* were necessary, she therefore did the *choai*: that is a fair inference. Jebb's guess is the refuge of despair." Soon afterwards he concludes, "enough for me that *ha chre* includes the *choai*, if words mean anything."

21. See Bradshaw *op.cit.* p. 208. He refers to W. Schmid (Schmid-Stahlin I.ii.349, n.3) as taking 'dry dust' (*dipsia konis*) in vs. 246-247 to imply that no libation had been poured, but is of opinion himself that this puts too strong a meaning on what is no more than an *epitheton ornans*.

22. 'The Composition of Sophocles' Antigone' (transl. from article in *Hermes* vol. XLIII. 1 (1908) *CR.* vol. XXIII (1909) p. 212-216. Drachmann's theory was refuted by Wilamowitz in his article cited above.

23. iii. 78. The passage translates: "Creon succeeding to the throne of Thebes, cast out the corpses of the Argives without burial, and placed guards over them, proclaiming that no one should bury them. But Antigone, a daughter of Oedipus, secretly stole the body of Polyneices and buried it. She was found out by Creon and herself buried alive in a tomb." This may well have been the original tradition. As Pausanias had heard it (ix. 25.2) Antigone, finding the body too heavy to lift, dragged it and threw it into Eteocles' pyre. See also Philostratus (*Imag.* ii.29). According to Hyginus (Fab. 72) Antigone was helped by Polyneices' wife, Argia. Apollodorus does not say when and how Antigone came to be arrested - but it should be after she accomplished her aim.

Haemon, which suggest Antigone did not allow her brother's body to lie unburied and be ravaged by dogs and birds (vs. 696-698). He points out that neither pick axe nor mattock nor waggon were in any way to be expected from the course of events that preceded, while the remark that no trace of dogs or wild beasts was to be seen is wholly unsuited to the context. But he finds everything plain and simple as soon as we perceive that the report of the guard culminates in the sentence: the body had disappeared and left no trace. "No trace because it had neither been buried there on the spot, nor fetched away on a waggon, nor carried off by wild beasts."

In his opinion, however, all these details, as they stand at present, make it quite plain that a change has been made in the traditional story by the dramatist in mid-composition, because the corpse was absolutely essential for the whole conclusion of the tragedy from the Teiresias scene onwards. A radical alteration of what went before has been made only in one place, namely, the second watchman's scene. [It is impossible to suppose, he says, that Sophocles had changed his plan so as to have Polyneices' corpse lying *in situ* before the second watchman's scene.][24]

Quite apart from the fact that all these seeming 'inconsistencies' are not inexplicable severally without the necessity of assuming that Sophocles began the play with a missing body, and in mid-composition restored it to its place because he needed one for the latter half of his plot at least, one may ask whether the dramatist had no opportunity thereafter of reading through his manuscript, not once but several times, and removing any inconsistencies, if such he found them to be. Since however he let them stand, we are forced to the conclusion that they were not what Drachmann finds them to be - or at least not as bad as he finds them to be, to need the kind of explanation he has proposed which severely detracts from Sophocles' craftsmanship. The reversal Creon suffers through the very success of his intention with regard to the corpse of Polyneices cannot be the outcome of any sudden change of plot that came to Sophocles' mind partway through the writing of a play which he had originally conceived with a *fiat accompli*. It is not surprising that no other commentator has been prepared to go along with Drachmann in his hypothesis as the necessary explanation for the details he has underscored as otherwise satisfactorily inexplicable.

Whitehorne, while not ready to accept the notion of a first divine burial and second human burial, is still prepared to concede a degree of divine involvement in both. "The absence of footprints, the miraculous preservation of the body from scavengers, and later the choking dust storm, going on and on, described by the guards with conscious irony as a 'divine scourge' (vs. 421), all point that way," he says.[25]

This may or may not be the case. I rather think not. The absence of the kind

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[24]. *op.cit.* 214 - 215.

[25]. *op.cit.*

of evidence the guard mentioned at the first burial is attributable simply to the fact that the things that would have produced them had not been used at the burial, and partly also to the hardness of the ground, which would not take impressions. Besides, the body, which was putrefying and giving off a smell at the time the guards set about cleaning off the dust, was then not in so bad a condition, and whatever smell emanated from it could have been stifled by the covering of dust, so as to let it go unnoticed by nocturnal beasts - that is, even if we exclude (as Sophocles does in this play) consideration of the competition it would have received from the corpses of the other Argive dead, to whom also Creon had denied burial after the battle.[26] The sand storm is attributable to physical reasons; too much need not be made of the guard's likening of it to a 'divine scourge' (vs. 418) - that was just his exaggerated impression of it - unless of course one likes to think, as Adams does, that the gods assisted this girl, who was fighting to uphold their "unwritten and unalterable laws" at the risk of her life, only to play a dirty trick on her by dropping the dust screen just when she had reached the body, and having her nabbed in the act.[27]

However, Whitehorne does not deny that it was Antigone who was responsible for both burials, though he denies they were both ritual burials.[28] But the dismissal of the notion of ritual burial does not do away with what Hester calls "the pseudo - problem of the double burial.[29] For, having performed one burial in the dark of the night at

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[26]. The popular version of the story is that all the Argive dead were left unburied, until Adrastus persuaded Theseus to lead an expedition and had their burial done. Hdt. ix. 27, Eur. *Suppl.*, Isocr. *Pangyr* 55 and *Panathen.* 169, Plut. *Theseus* 29.4 show doubt whether Theseus defeated the Thebans in battle.

[27]. *op.cit* p. 110. "Why this extraordinary storm", he asks, "the abnormal form of which the poet is at pains to emphasise, if it is not a divine intervention to enable Antigone to perform the humanly impossible?.... She comes in the storm; she is all but an automation: it is evident, surely, that the gods intended this thing to happen." John Wilkins (and Mathew Macleod *Sophocles' Antigone and Oedipus the King* (Companion to the Penguin translation) Bristol (1987) p. 37) says the dust storm associates Antigone with the religious forces that Creon had disturbed, but that it is not clear whether the heavens sent the plague or are suffering from it. The gods, he thinks, certainly played a part, but "we cannot say precisely how the whirlwind, religious forces and Antigone are associated" and "Antigone herself does not fully understand the way the gods act."

[28]. *op.cit.* p. 132.

[29]. Following M. Polhenz (*Die Griechischen Tragodie. Erlauterungen* Gottingen (1954) p. 82) he waves away the distinction between symbolic burial and real burial as a modern illusion. Symbolic burial does not absolve the responsibility

grave risk to her life, ritual burial or not, it remains a problem why Antigone should have come back to the body of Polyneices again.

Wilamowitz and those who take his line of thought argue away the need to explain why Antigone returned to the corpse by supposing that Sophocles was not so much concerned with motivation as the dramatic requirement and theatrical impact of the presentation, and would have expected his audience to accept it without query; but here again, as Hester implies, the audience would at the same time have expected a logical reason for Antigone's behaviour.[30] At any rate, the *choai* must suggest she had one - unless of course we think she was in the weird habit of carrying them around wherever she went, just in case she came across some corpse!

As we have no evidence of her having heard that the guards had unburied the corpse after her first burial, we must, as mentioned before, presume she took the opportunity offered by the prospect of a dust storm to pour a second libation to her dead brother. True, as Drachmann points out, another was not due until the third day;[31] but chronological manipulation is not unusual in Greek drama, and a repetition of libation not as odd as a repetition of ritual burial. As Bradshaw writes,

> "it makes no difference whether libations were poured on the first visit or not. The purpose of *entumbioi choai* is such that even if Antigone had already offered them once, an Athenian audience would still find it perfectly natural for her to offer them again. It is a mistake to think of *choai* simply as one of the elements of the ritual burial. Burial is normally a single act of piety, whereas libation is the repeated offering of nourishment to the spirit of the departed for a considerable time

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of giving the dead a real burial, but a distinction does exist, as when in our day relatives throw a handful of earth into the grave, leaving the real burial to the undertakers. However, any burial that exceeds symbolic burial, (while it can be short of a real burial, both in the interment and the accompanying rites) must certainly also include it. The difference admittedly is one of degree - but in so far as symbolic burial is symbolic for the real (even if not from any other quality), is one of kind as well. Religion was prepared to accept the symbolic, where the real was not done; and thus Polhenz is right. However, the debate is irrelevant here, as Antigone was intent on protecting the corpse from the physical degradation Creon had in mind for it, and in any case had poured dust on it far in excess of the three handsful (including the performance of some rites, which Horace *loc.cit.* gave Jebb reason to think were not, however, *sine quibus non*.)

30. *op.cit.* p. 22.

31. *op.cit.* p. 213.

after death."[32]

But having taken the unexpected opportunity offered by the impending sand storm and come again to pour a further libation, she finds the body she had left covered bare and (the guard calls her 'child' (*he pais*) at this point: vs. 423) utters shrill cries like a bird, then laments and curses those who had done the deed (vs. 426-328).

Rouse, who attributes the first burial to Ismene and counts this Antigone's first and only visit to the body of Polyneices, contends that the word *psilos*, while it may be used of the body which had been stripped of the dust which she had spread upon it, may also be used of a body that has been stript of its body armour, or stript of its clothes or anything else. "It means in fact stript, and nothing else." "What Antigone says is perfectly natural to say if she now sees the corpse for the first time; and what she does is not natural if she had done it before, so Jebb implies by trying to explain it."[33] If Antigone did the act of burial twice, Rouse says, she did it in a state of unreasoning emotion; if she came a second time to look at the corpse, it had only to be out of a morbid attraction![34]

But what makes Antigone shriek in anguish and anger is, as Whitehorne points out, not an act of *omission*.[35] Had it been this, she would have been prepared for it, having heard Creon's edict, and not flown off the handle in that way, even forgetting the secrecy with which she had come, and disregarding the guards who were out there somewhere. Her reactions are not simply of anguish and anger, but of surprise as well. This is amply borne out by the guard who reports to Creon, when he compares her cries to the shrill scream of a bird, who (not expecting it, surely) finds her nest empty and her fledglings gone (vs. 423-425). With this she curses the perpetrators of the deed (*t'ourgon exeirgasmenois*: vs. 428) i.e. the deed of wiping the dust off the body, and not Creon, who had issued the edict that had originally left the body bare.

Once it is accepted (from the things she carried with her) that Antigone had revisited Polyneices' corpse to pour a libation (even if she had poured one at the first burial, as she must have, in the rites of which there was evidence there, and even if she is doing this somewhat too soon afterwards on account of the requirement of the drama),

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[32]. *op.cit.* p. 208-209. See p. 209. n.i. He points out that Sophocles had no more reason to be precise over this than to make Antigone wait till the third day after death to conduct the body for burial. "Tragedians were not bound by the rubrics of a national church."

[33]. *op.cit.* p. 40.

[34]. *loc.cit.*

[35]. *op.cit.* p. 132.

it is nothing unexpected that she should set about covering the corpse again, whether a ritual burial was involved in the first burial, or not.

The reason she does so, and also did on the first occasion, is why anybody (perhaps with certain exceptions, like the Parsis) buries a body, no matter what his eschatological beliefs may be. It is to, from consideration of the dead man, spare him the indignity of putrefying in the open and being disembowelled and otherwise torn and eaten by dogs and carrion birds in the sight of his fellow men, not to mention those to whom he was near and dear. It must be this pitiful and at the same time disgusting thing, more than any notion of physical pollution, that placed a religious pollution (*agos*) upon anyone passing a corpse, who failed to give it burial, or at least, (as in the case of a passerby in a hurry or not equipped to give a proper burial with due rites), to cover it over with earth or stones and do the best he could by way of rites.

It is just this that we find Antigone had done in the circumstances which prevented her from giving Polyneices proper burial with the *time* due to him from a kin. She intended to do a fuller burial, and she would indeed have done so, if Ismene had helped her lift the body and spirit it away. In fact, as we saw, the Apollodorus version, upon which Drachmann based his theory of a change in mid-plot in this detail in the *Antigone*, says Antigone actually stole the body and gave it burial (*krupta to Poluneikous soma klepsas ethapse*). As the text of the *Antigone* stands, however, what she was able to do is aptly described by the guard as like the work of someone trying to avoid the pollution (*agos pheugontos*: vs 256) of passing by the corpse without giving it the minimum burial with the barest of rites. No vehicle had been used to transport it, nor an implement used to dig a grave - it could hardly be called a regular tomb (*tumberes men ou*: 255); instead, the body was covered with, as Mitchell takes it, a layer of fine dust[36] - or if you like, a fine layer of dust, provided it was not enough to make a tomb of it, but yet enough to cover the body so as to hide it from sight (*ho men gar ephanisto*: vs. 255 - 256).

But it had served its purpose - it had kept the corpse from being mauled and eaten. And it is upon their cross-purposes in this respect with regard to the corpse of Polyneices that Creon and Antigone clash and the play as a whole is hinged. Creon is intent on punishing Polyneices, whom he continues to identify with the man's corpse (as Achilles did with Hector, when he dragged his corpse round the walls of Troy), and in making his fate, i.e. the revolting humiliation he suffers as a corpse, being eaten by dogs and birds, (*aikisthen idein*: vs. 206) a deterrent example to others who would play traitor to Thebes; Antigone, for her part, will do her best to spare Polyneices (again identifying him with his body) such degradation and insult.

This, and nothing more, is the issue between Creon and Antigone upon which

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[36]. *ad.loc.* in his edition of the tragedies of Sophocles, 2 vols. London (1841 - 1844).

the play pivots, and which leads to the burying, unburying and reburying (and, surely, unburying yet again) of the corpse of Polyneices in it. Were Creon's intention the denial of the release of Polyneices' *ker* to pass on untroubled to Hades, and the burials performed no more than ritual burials to help him win this, with the first burial itself Antigone would have won and Creon lost. And with this, the guards' unburying of the body would have been rendered as futile, as Antigone's reburying of it superfluous - indeed, even absurd. But in the issue that is singled out and concentrated upon in the drama (to the exclusion of other considerations) the victory is Creon's - and it is, by a dramatic peripeteia, out of just this very victory of his in the tussle with Antigone over the body of Polyneices, that he suffers his tragic reversal. Creon wins to lose; Antigone loses, but through her the sacred unalterable law of the gods, upon which she fought, wins - but only at the expense of poor girl's life. This is her heroism, and her tragedy.

First reference to the fate which Polyneices' body is to undergo instead of burial in a tomb with due lamentation (*to me tapho kalupsa mede kokusai tina, ean d' akalupton, ataphon.....*: vs. 27 - 29) is in Antigone's intimation of Creon's order to Ismene at the beginning of the play. The body is to be left "a tasty windfall for birds in search of the pleasure of carrion flesh" (vs. 29 - 30). Reiterating his proclamation to the Chorus of Theban elders, Creon specifically indicates his intention to have the body of Polyneices (here he refers to it as his 'physical form', *demas*) reduced to a revolting condition (*aikisthen*) by being eaten by birds and dogs (vs. 205 - 206) as an object lesson to all of his intention not to let the wicked triumph over the law-abiding (vs. 207 - 208). Implying the opposite - the kind of thing he had done for Eteocles - he says (vs. 209 - 210):

> "But the man who has the well-being of the city at heart,
> In death as in life will be treated with honour by me."

Critics and commentators who are for Antigone having done the first burial must place this between her attempt to coopt Ismene and the rising of the sun, which the Chorus greets in their parados song, which must also be about the time the first day-watch (*ho protos hemeroskopos*) took over duty from whoever was on duty before him (surely the last night watch). Thus far the body had escaped mauling by dogs - it may not have begun to spoil as yet, as we hear it had when the guards some time afterwards wiped the dust off it and re-exposed it, compelling them to station themselves upwind. But thereafter - to infer from what happened in the absence of it afterwards - it must have been the covering of dust provided by Antigone which sealed and concealed the body, (and not any miracle of the gods, as some like to make it out), which kept it from being gnawed and consumed by the prowling predators of the night.

It is this success, temporary though it was, which Haemon refers to when he speaks as if Antigone had not let her brother, fallen in death, lie unburied nor be ravaged

by carnivorous dogs and birds (vs. 696 - 698).[37] As regards the dramatic organization, it explains the need for the first burial - in the case of Antigone, to show that she actually carried out her intention of burying her brother, also thereby defying Creon and giving him reason for his harshness; in the case of Creon, to show that, unlike with the first exposure of the corpse, he was now *positively* implicated in the crime by undoing the burial that had already been given to it.

It is when we come to the Teiresias scene that the physical significance of the burial of a corpse, and the religious implications of not doing so, make their point and the point of the play as well, reinforced by the tragic consequences in which they involve the king. It will be recalled that when the leader of the Chorus, upon hearing the mysterious nature of the first burial, exclaimed (vs. 278 - 279):

> "O king, from the first I had a premonition
> That the gods were behind this deed,"

Creon rudely snubbed him, saying (vs. 280 - 283)

> "Hold your tongue before you rouse me to anger with such talk.
> Old you may be, but you don't have to talk like a fool.
> Blasphemy, to say the gods show concern for a corpse!"

In this Creon is right; as will appear, only too right. The Greek gods, like the gods of most other religions (though perhaps significantly not the Egyptian) avoid corpses, shunning the pollution that comes of death and decomposition. Nothing can be more opposed to the spiritual and the immortal than a corpse, the putrescent physical coil of mortality, bereft of its spiritual element. It will be recalled that even the noisome stench of Philoctetes' suppurating wound was enough to contaminate the purity of the Achaeans' sacrifices to the gods, so that they were perforce made to abandon him in a desolate island and be rid of him.

But it is just this very thing that Creon's insistence on exposing Polyneices' body to be eaten by animals and birds does - scatter the rotting gore and flesh upon the very shrines and altars of the gods (vs. 1015 - 1018). The gods are angered, says Teiresias; they no longer accept the prayers and offerings of the Thebans; nor do the birds, gorged with the blood of the slaughtered man, give any but shrill cries of ill-omen

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[37]. Drachmann *op.cit* p. 213 objects to Jebb's translation "would not leave him unburied, to be decovered..." without an explanatory note. He observes that this is wrong both as regards the Aorist *eius*' and the infinitive *olesthai*. Haemon speaks as if Antigone actually protected Polyneices against dogs and birds. See also vs. 897 - 899.

as they rip each other with their talons in deadly combat.[38]

But it is when Teiresias makes his first speech, pleading with Creon to be advised and give to the dead his due without harassing him further, that Creon rises to the height of blasphemy. Teiresias will not succeed in burying Polyneices, he cries (vs. 1039 - 1044), not even if the eagles of Zeus snatched his flesh and carried it to the very throne of Zeus himself. No fear of pollution would make him allow his burial; for he knows full well that no one can defile the gods. Afterwards, however, when Teiresias, under provocation, prophesies to him the deaths in his own family as well as the fury of neighbouring cities, roused to enmity when bird or beast carried the stench which desecrated their altars, and Creon sets out to bury Polyneices, where he lay at the edge of the field, the body is found to be in a pitiful state, ripped by dogs (*nelees kunosparakton*: vs. 1197 - 1198). The battle of the body is over; Creon has succeeded - but his success has brought him tragedy. What Antigone set out to do, now he himself, subdued and frightened, does.[39]

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At the conclusion of section II of his article, Whitehorne points out, of the burial of Polyneices, that to bury the dead was properly the duty of the immediate male next of kin of the dead man. He was usually also the heir; and Whitehorne refers to some inheritance cases of the next century, in which speakers based their claims to estates on the fact that it was they who had performed the last rites, while their opponents had done nothing.[40]

But to argue from this the reverse, i.e. that the act of burial is therefore held to indicate, if not actually determine, succession, and then go on to imply that, by Antigone's doing what Creon should have undertaken and burying Polyneices, she was

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38. Reference to Polyneices at this point (vs. 1018) as "the fateful son of Oedipus" or "the son of fateful Oedipus" (strongly drawn upon by E.F. Watling in the Penguin translation) means to intensify the pollution by the allusion. The ambiquity of application of the epithet 'fateful' is likewise suggestive.

39. Jebb. (p. xix) seems to call Creon's stopping to bury Polyneices before saving Antigone a "dramatic blemish". Halliday (*op.cit.* p. 14) argues "it is also a matter of urgency that Polyneices body should be rescued from the dogs and birds, which were already lacerating it." Everything does not depend exclusively on Creon's being in time to save Antigone (Jebb. p. xviii). To this we may add that Creon saw no terrific urgency to get to Antigone; he did not expect her to precipitate her death, as she did; he had provided for her to die of starvation.

40. *op.cit.* p. 137.

"challenging Creon's position as the head of the household ..... and in the final analysis (although it is not a point made out in the play) his position as king of Thebes, the legal successor to the political estate of Eteocles and Polyneices, its co-rulers,"[41] is to build a great deal upon a dubious logic. If indeed such were the case, Pinsent must be right that Antigone, who performed the first burial in stealth, did it to accomplish the obligation, but came to the scene a second time just in order to get herself seen and identified by the public as the kin who had done it, even courting arrest to establish this.[42]

This is surely worse than the suggestion that it was a morbid attraction that brought Antigone to the corpse on the second occasion, while it also gives quite a different complexion to the sand storm which concealed her - i.e. that Antigone had no need for one, and would have come up to the corpse in any case; its occurrence only screened her from the guards for some time, and that too quite fortuitously - and if it continued, would even have proved an obstruction to her purpose.

All this is to forget that the girl was under threat of death, doing what she did - and as her lament at the end shows, she went to her end helpless and in deep sorrow, having done what she had to do, not for herself but her brother. Implication of a desire to play head of the family, still more of the state, in what she was doing, is hardly evident in the drama, and if it was, would certainly have detracted from the tragic and noble characterization in which Sophocles presents her to us. Here is a clear case of reading into the text far more than it will allow.

In section III Whitehorne goes on to suggest that Creon, by depriving Polyneices of burial in his native soil, was punishing him in a way reserved for those guilty of sacrilege, treason or attempted tyranny, and that Antigone, by her act of burying Polyneices, was *defying and denying* all these charges.[43] These charges are made by Creon in his edict (vs. 199 - 202), and mentioned again in his long speech following the guard's disclosure of the first burial (vs. 285 - 287). For dramatic reasons the corpse cannot be made to be cast outside Theban territory and must be left to lie before Thebes' seventh gate, Whitehorne says, so that Antigone can get to it and back within the short time to which the plays chronology is adjusted. "Clearly there has been no time yet to think about such niceties as the *ekbole* of a traitor's corpse."[44]

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41. *loc.cit.*

42. *op.cit.*

43. *loc.cit.* (p. 137).

44. *op.cit.* p. 20. He too thinks Creon left the body in the wrong place, but that the plot compelled it to be near Thebes. He however cites Polhenz (*op.cit.* p. 186 and 195 - 197 to the effect this kind of legal quibble is irrelevant to the play.

Whitehorne here forgets that Polyneices is not being buried at all, only that he is left for animals and birds to consume, so that nothing of his corpse will remain in Theban territory to debilitate its safety (as a hero's body (or bones) reinforces it). Besides, the play here could well be satisfied with the narrower concept of the state of Thebes in that antiquity as the area confined by the walls of the city, and casting, or leaving the corpse outside the walls could be viewed as sufficient *ekbole* as against any extended concept of the state which took in considerable outlying territory.

However, like the matter of the release of the *ker* through ritual burial, Sophocles shows little or no concern with *ekbole* as against punishing Polyneices in the corpse by having it torn and consumed by dogs and carrion birds. So that, to argue evidence for an *ekbole* is likely to be of as little use as the matter of labouring over ritual burial. Nowhere does Creon say Polyneices' corpse is to be cast outside the boundaries of Theban territory or even outside the city walls. What he does say is that they should let him lie, presumably where he fell (*ean d' athaptou.....*: vs. 205), which was in any case outside the city walls - though perhaps not, as Whitehorne conjectures, at one of the very gates of Thebes, seventh or otherwise. For we are told later on that it was lying at "the edge of the field" (*pedion ep' akron*: vs. 1197), surely the outer edge of the field, a hard, dusty, windy and open ground, with enough leeway for the guards to move around and find a place to station themselves, upwind and some distance away from the body, when they needed to. Wilkins says "we should imagine a hill to one side, which happens to be underwind or, more likely, higher ground on two, or three sides of the corpse, with the guards choosing a side that is underwind."[45]

But what of Antigone defying and denying Creon's charges? Defy, we may allow - but deny? Can Antigone deny the charges - and does she deny them anywhere in the play? How could she deny them, when Polyneices was killed in an attack upon the city with a foreign army, at the same time killing his own brother, who defended it? On the other hand, it seems to me that this was just the strength of Antigone's case, viz. that though her brother was all that Creon said he was, she would treat him in just the same way that she would treat Eteocles, since both were her brothers, and both dead. Indeed, if Antigone was proposing to give Polyneices decent burial because she would not accept Creon's charges, and took him to be innocent of them, the whole point of her contention would be lost, and the drama, and with it Antigone's character, would suffer considerable reduction in stature. I can see no need to labour this point.

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45. *op.cit.* n. to vs. 455. Later, in p. 65 - 66, explaining "the edge of the plain" (vs. 1197) he adds "It is reasonably clear that Sophocles (or his predecessors) envisaged Polyneices' body lying to the north of the city, where the plain meets higher ground.... The area contained rocky caves where Antigone's prison could be made."