

Metaphors as  
euphemistic action in  
tragedy: indirection,  
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**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

There is no shortage of violence and death in the stories and myths adapted to the stage by the Ancient Greek tragedians. However, these actions are almost never depicted explicitly onstage: murders play out offstage while the audience is only privy to the sound of the victim's last cries, characters onstage recount violent events in words after they have already occurred unseen by the audience. Typically, the audience only views the aftermath of such an event, if that at all. In lieu of actually reenacting such fatal encounters onstage, Greek tragedians of Classical antiquity (such as the fifth century Aeschylus and Sophocles) perhaps opted to communicate these events through vivid metaphors. The enactment, or reification, of these metaphors can be done in an entirely bloodless way while still evoking powerful, emotionally resonant images of real violence and death. In this way, metaphors in tragedy—such as the carpet scene in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and the “marriage” of Antigone to Death in Sophocles' *Antigone*—allow a tragic poet working under the constraints of Ancient Greek staging to depict violence onstage in a way that more effectively informs the audience about the characters or themes of their work.

In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the Argive king, recently returned from a ten-year battle with Troy, is killed by his wife Clytemnestra for having sacrificed their daughter Iphigeneia at the outset of the war. Despite being a defining moment of the Greek myth surrounding Agamemnon's return to Argos, this act happens out of view. The true climactic scene of the play comes, instead, when Clytemnestra brings out a red carpet for Agamemnon to step onto from his chariot. Ostensibly, this is an act of love and reverence for her dear husband who valiantly fought and conquered the Trojans in battle, and

clearly this is how Clytemnestra wishes Agamemnon to receive her gift: “

Such is my greeting to him, that he well deserves” (Aeschylus I. 903).

However, like much of Clytemnestra’s speech in this play, her words here are expertly double-edged. She counts on her husband’s pride to infer that she thinks so highly of him that he could rightly walk on (and in so doing ruin) expensive, luxurious red robes. Indeed, such a presumptuous action is acknowledged by Agamemnon as “ befit[ting] the gods, and none beside,” so he initially refuses his wife’s request (I. 922). On the other hand, from Clytemnestra’s point of view, Agamemnon is the wretched killer of her beloved daughter; these red robes thus represent the innocent blood he shed and the life so rashly tread upon in the pursuit of glory in the Trojan War.

The sacrifice of Iphigeneia is of course never shown in Agamemnon, but this scene offers the audience something of a metaphorical reenactment of Agamemnon’s commitment of the act that also serves to illustrate vividly Clytemnestra’s own stance on the matter. While Agamemnon initially turns down Clytemnestra’s offer to march upon the red carpet, her persistence eventually wins out, and his “ feet crush crimson” as he walks with his wife toward their home (I. 957). This action has two layers of meaning. The first is that it demonstrates Agamemnon’s pride and aggrandized sense of self, a trait that Clytemnestra knows she can rely on. After a few lines of exchange between the husband and wife, he deigns to perform an act he has recently described as permissible only for the gods. This is not to say that he now believes himself a god, but rather that he had always thought himself worthy of it. Any prior objections were likely an attempt to save face in the eyes of

his peers. This scene reveals his true character as perceived by Clytemnestra: prideful and shameless. The second layer of meaning is that of the metaphor for Iphigeneia's death. Agamemnon's feet destroy precious crimson fabric, much like how, in the eyes of Clytemnestra, he destroyed the life of her precious daughter. While subtextual, this reading is no doubt evoked within the audience by the blood-coloration of the carpet and the act of destruction. Agamemnon's treading on the red carpet is an echo of his previous actions, and Clytemnestra sees it as yet more proof of the wretchedness of his character which condemns him to die at her hands. This metaphor for Iphigeneia's death thusly acted out onstage serves dual purposes of providing a way to depict this violent action (while still adhering to the conventions of Ancient Greek tragic theatre) and of manifesting physically just how Clytemnestra views her husband's misdeeds.

Likewise, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the metaphor of "marrying death" expresses more than just the action symbolized. In this play, the cursed daughter of Oedipus is sentenced to die for having performed the proper funeral rites for her brother Polynices against King Creon's orders. Once again, the actual event of Antigone dying is not shown, but the imagery of her metaphorical death is repeatedly provided throughout the play preceding it. Once Antigone is convicted of this crime, other characters and even Antigone herself begin to talk as though her death will be more of a marriage. Upon interrogating her and discovering her motives for defying his decree, Creon responds, "Go down below and love, / if love you must—love the dead" (Sophocles II. 591-592)! Antigone is a being made to love, in her own estimation, but the unfortunate circumstances of her birth and her

family line preclude any possibilities of normal, non-incestual love. She cares deeply about her family, a sentiment that likely reflects her father's relationship with their mother in being incestual. Her father and two brothers now dead, though, Antigone's love can only be directed at the deceased. The metaphor continues with references to her eventual tomb, a place described by the sympathetic chorus as a "bridal vault where all are laid to rest" (l. 899). This combining of marriage and death in one image is reinforced with Antigone's words as she faces the reality her fate: "O tomb, my bridal-bed" (l. 977). Here, no husband is explicitly provided for Antigone to wed, but it is clear enough through the repeated pairing of these two major life events that the very act of dying will be a "marriage" of sorts to death.

Although Antigone later describes herself as going to "wed the lord of the dark waters" and a messenger designates her as "the bride of Death," this metaphor of marrying death is more about Antigone's unwavering love for her late relatives than it is about a suicidal infatuation with the concept of dying itself (ll. 908, 1238). Discussing Antigone's death in such terms is somewhat euphemistic, but the real aim in employing this imagery is to highlight her feelings of love that go beyond the grave. Again, her death is not displayed onstage, but the realization of this metaphor is shown in its aftermath: the messenger's narration of the discovery of Antigone's body hung by her wedding veils corporealizes this hitherto only alluded to imagery. Even though it occurs out of sight, her passing can be vividly imagined, and the presence of this metaphor throughout the play allows for it to be so striking and to mean something more to the audience. Instead of simply taking her life to avoid dying a slow death in her tomb, Antigone's

suicide comes to embody her undying, incestual love for her family. This exhibits the tragic poet's adeptness at finding ways to best utilize the conventional constraints of staging of the time to enhance his work.

Although Ancient Greek tragic theatre typically did not allow for much show of physical violence onstage, poets like Aeschylus and Sophocles found ways to work around or even use this constraint to their advantage when crafting their works. As can be seen in the carpet scene of Agamemnon and the marriage of Antigone and Death in Antigone, metaphors made real can present visually descriptive scenes and pregnant events that communicate more to the audience than if the violence or death itself had been enacted onstage. Such metaphors allow the poet to express more information and in a more visually or conceptually compelling manner.