Antiphanes, Antigone and the Malleability of Tragic Myth[1]

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Freedom versus Necessity; self-determination versus the pre-determination of higher powers – *La Forza del Destino* of Verdi, *La Machine Infernale* of Cocteau and so forth. This clash or interaction has been a central issue in discussion of Tragedy during the last 250 years. And Greek Tragedy is often held up as the archetype for a destiny-dominated world. "Fate' and "Destiny" may no longer loom as large in modern accounts of Tragedy as they used to, but it is striking how often you still see Fate as the subject of an active verb such as "impels" or "forces", making a person act in a certain way. While I would not go the whole way to the opposite extreme, and claim that the humans of classical Tragedy are completely in charge of their own destinies, I do believe that fatalistic accounts are fundamentally untrue to the model of human behaviour that is explored in Greek tragedy. The "Infernal Machine" is, I would maintain, a way of viewing and trying to account for the tragic events *afterwards*, in retrospect, and is not the driving force that makes them happen.

One of the main fallacies behind the deterministic view has been the claim that "the stories were all fixed"; "the audience already knew what was going to happen; "all they did was to watch the inevitable unfold." In fact it is surprising how often you still find this asserted as an incontestable fact. It needs to be contested; and my topic today is, at root, an exploration of the "unfixedness" of Greek myth, the *un*predictability of the narratives of tragedy. I shall try to show that it was, on the contrary, part of the fifth-century audience's expectation and enjoyment that they never knew how the stories were about to be varied, or even to be newly created, before their eyes. I shall try to give some idea of this at work in two canonical cases, Medea and Antigone.

Now it is true that in our eyes there are tragic myths with widely recognised central narratives that carry something of the air of inevitability. But it was precisely a few highly influential tragedies of the fifth century that created these authoritative version, and laid down the form of the myth that all later treatments have to measure themselves against. In other words the tragedies created stories that have remained

[1] This is a revised version of the paper presented at Kyoto University on June 9, 2010.

canonical ever since. But in many cases, including Medea and Antigone, these canonical myths were invented by fifth-century tragedy, and did not pre-exist it.

The weight of these authoritative versions can be nicely seen in the trope that the central character's compulsion to enact a story somehow lies entailed in their very name. So it is when the Medea of Seneca steels herself to declare "*Medea nunc sum*" that she can finally embark on the end-game of killing her own sons. Once she accepts her mythological name, it is implied, she puts on the yoke of her own story. This is perpetuated by Cherubini's Medea who sings, in order to steel her resolve, "*Je suis Médée*".[2] But the crucial point is that it is not her name in itself that compels Medea to slaughter her children: it is *Euripides* who made her name indivisible from the child-killing – or, rather, it is the towering stature of Euripides' celebrated tragedy. So this is a conceit of *literary* determinism: it is not at all the same as some kind of absolute determinism, even though it thrillingly masquerades as that.

There is a star ancient witness in favour of the notion that the stories were all fixed and familiar; and that they were somehow built into the very names of the tragic characters. This is the comic playwright Antiphanes, in fragment 189, which is preserved from his play *Poiesis.* The passage is justly well-known because it is pleasantly and memorably entertaining, and I shall refer to it as "the Antiphanes Model". The speaker, who uses the first-person plural ἡμῖν of comic playwrights contrasts "our" difficulties (ἡμῖν δὲ ταῦτ᾽ οὐκ ἔστιν line 17) in having to make up plots, names, openings, conclusions etc., as compared with the easy ride enjoyed by the tragedians. First of all, the stories (λόγοι) are well-known (ἐγνωρισμένοι) to the audience – all the *poietes* has to do is to remind them. So if he merely says "Oedipus",

> τὰ δ᾽ ἄλλα πάντ᾽ ἴσασιν· ὁ πατὴρ Λάιος,
> μήτηρ Ἰοκάστη, θυγατέρες, παῖδες τίνες,
> τί πείσεθ᾽ οὗτος, τί πεποίηκεν. (fr. 189.6-8)

…and so on with Alkmeon and Adrastos as further illustrations. It is undeniable that the relationships of Laius, Oedipus and Iocasta *were* pretty firmly fixed: but the stories about their daughters (θυγατέρες) were definitely not, as we shall see. Even with their parents' stories there were variants, such as the way that Euripides in his *Phoenissae* has Iocasta living on in Thebes after the revelation of her second

[2] Maria Callas preferred the Italian version: "*Io son' Medea"*!

marriage as incestuous. He thus departs not only from Sophocles, but even from *Odyssey* book 11, which says that she hanged herself immediately on the discovery.

This detail leads to a simple but vital point; there was no definitive or authorised version of the stories, not even from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. There were no "facts" so set in stone that they could not be overturned. What was the most famous event of Greek myth? Helen ran off to Troy with Paris, and so started the Trojan War. Very well: Stesichorus, and after him Euripides, even denied that Helen of Troy went to Troy – although they do not deny of course that there was a Trojan War fought over her.

So tragedies would set themselves off against epic versions of the myths.[3] But it seems clear to me that in tragedy the favourite strategy was to set narrative variations in counterpoint with previous *tragic* versions, especially by composing variants upon certain tragedies that had become established as canonical. Before turning to Sophocles' *Antigone*, I shall illustrate this with Euripides' *Medea.*

In my study of the reflections of tragedy in fourth-century vase-paintings,[4] *I* found what I take to be some particularly striking illustrations of variations on *Medea.* First, it is almost certain that Euripides made a crucial innovation in 431 BC: he was the first to make Medea the killer of her own children. While this is not undisputed, most scholars now agree that, in all the pre-Euripidean versions we know of, it was others, Corinthians, who killed her children.[5] This means that Euripides *invented* what then became Medea's defining act, eclipsing all her other exploits. When in Seneca she says "*Medea nunc sum*", what she is really saying is "now I am the Medea of Euripides, the one who brings herself to kill her own sons". It is also more than likely that Euripides invented the narrative expedient of having Medea escape from Corinth in a magic flying chariot.

Neither of these features – the filicide and the chariot – is found in the iconographic record before 431, yet both are already prominent in vase-paintings from Magna Graecia by about thirty years later. This can be seen on a hydria found

[3] It was, in effect, Aeschylus in his *Achilles-trilogy* who made clear this simultaneous debt to epic and independence from epic, by both following the *Iliad* and at the same time departing from it in conspicuous ways. Thus, for example, his Achilles met the embassy (*presbeia)* with silence instead of the friendly greeting of the *Iliad,* his relationship with Patroclus was explicitly home-erotic, and, perhaps most radically, Priam came to Achilles' tent accompanied by a whole chorus of Trojans.

[4] Oliver Taplin, *Pots & Plays* (Getty Publications, 2007)

[5] For a judicious discussion see the edition by Donald Mastronarde (Cambridge 2002) 44-57. On the question of the priority between Euripides and the otherwise almost unknown Neophron, it seems to me quite clear that the 15 lines of Neophron fr. 2 are indebted to Euripides, not the other way round.

at Herakleia/Policoro, and a similar more elaborate iconography on a calyx-crater in Cleveland.[6] I went into the arguments in favour of relating these two pictures to Euripides' play in my book, and would rather not digress onto that issue at this moment. The relevant point for today is that other vase-paintings supply good evidence, I believe, of no fewer than three other tragic versions of the story, three more as well as Euripides', within the next century (we know that there were at least eight of them all together). In a neglected passage Diodorus Siculus actually says (4.56.1): καθόλου δὲ διὰ τὴν τῶν τραγῳδῶν τερατείαν ποικίλη τις καὶ διάφορος ἱστορία περὶ Μηδείας ἐξενήνεκται "there are such different and varied stories about Medea generally because of the tragedians' search for astonishing effects" – a direct contradiction of the Antiphanes model. I shall call this "the Diodorus Model".

Next consider an amphora of c. 330, now in Naples.[7] This has often been held to be also related to Euripides; the dead sons and the escape vehicle are indeed clearly following in Euripides' footsteps. But, (i) there is the figure of Selene in front of the chariot, apparently marking that it is her "Moon-chariot" rather than that of Helios; (ii) the chariot is on the ground, not flying; and (iii) Jason is close to catching it up. A further key thing to notice is, I suggest, that one son's body has fallen on the ground in front of the hooves of Jason's horse – the other is still in the chariot. I propose that in *this* tragedy, as was no doubt reported in a messenger-speech, Medea heartlessly threw the bodies of her sons out behind her in order to hold up the pursuers – just as she had earlier thrown gobbets of the corpse of her brother from the Argo.

Next, there is a famous and rather grandiose volute-crater of about 320 in Munich.[8] Among features in common with Euripides are the poisoned princess and the escape-chariot (driven here by *Oistros,* Frenzy). But the departures from Euripides are conspicuous. First there is a batch of further named characters, who do not figure in Euripides' play, including the ghost of Aeetes (ΕΙΔΩΛΟΝ ΑΗΤΟΥ), but, more importantly, Medea (here in full oriental regalia) ruthlessly kills *one* son, while the other escapes with an unnamed slave, as seen in the bottom left corner behind her. This is, in fact, one of the variants catalogued by Diodorus.

Finally, there is an extraordinary volute-krater of c. 330, first published in 1983, and now in Princeton.[9] It might have been inferred from the cross-torches and other

[6] *Pots & Plays* numbers 34 [Pl. I] and 35.
[7] *Pots & Plays* number 36 [Pl. II].
[8] *Pots & Plays* number 102 [Pl. III].
[9] *Pots & Plays* number 94 [Pl. IV], with reference to the article by Guiliani and Most.

tokens that this scene is set at Eleusis, even without the unusual inscription on the lintel of the shrine: ΕΛΕΥΣΙΣ· ΤΟ ΙΕΡΟΝ. What no one would ever have guessed, surely, without the identifying inscription is that the woman standing there with the old *paidagogos*-figure is none other than Medea (ΜΗΔΕΙΑ). Giuliani and Most are very probably right to argue that the two boys who have taken refuge on the altar below are Medea's sons. What this leads to is that, in this challenging version of Medea's story, she did *not* kill her children: on the contrary she rescued them by fleeing with them to the sanctuary at Eleusis. The figures of Heracles and Athena (top left and bottom right) confirm that this rescue was successful. It seems more than likely, then, that a fourth-century tragedy presented a Medea who did not carry out what had become, since Euripides in 431, her defining act. In this play she did not only not kill her two sons, she actively saved them.[10]

Now I turn to Antigone. Her story of self-sacrifice for the sake of her dead brother is no less her defining act than Medea's child-killing. In this case, thanks to the chances of the survival of texts, we can actually trace Sophocles' establishment of the version which then becomes the measure for all later treatments in more detail. Actually I wonder if it may not be mere chance that the nexus of Antigone-tragedies, *Seven against Thebes, Phoenissae and Oedipus at Colonus* survive.

As with Medea and Seneca, there is a nice example of the way that Antigone's mere name brings her story with it in its wake. You may recall how in Jean Anouilh's play *Antigone,* first performed in 1944, the "Prologue" figure who opens that play says that, although the young woman would have liked to live, her name is Antigone, and she must play her part through to the end. (*Mais il n'y a rien à faire. Elle s'appelle Antigone et il va falloir qu'elle joue son rôle jusqu'au bout…)* In the same way as with Medea, it is not Antigone herself who makes it a necessity that she plays her Anouilh part to the end, it is Sophocles.

Turning to the iconographic evidence, the case of Antigone is less interesting, although not without interest. For whatever reason, Sophocles is much less reflected in Western Greek vase-painting than Euripides. There is not one single vase-painting that can be probably related to his *Antigone*. There is, however, one that is often claimed for it: a nestoris or trozella, a local Italic shape, of c. 370 in the British Museum.**[11]** This is alleged to show the scene where the Guard brings Antigone

[10] I intend to discuss elsewhere the case for thinking that the tragedy in question was the *Medea* of Carcinus (the younger).

[11] BM F 175, widely reproduced, eg in Webster and Trendall *Illustrations of Greek Drama* (London 1972) III. 2, 4. As *Pots & Plays* number 24 I reproduced instead a little-known hydria in Taranto, which dates to much earlier, perhaps as early as 420: this also has a dignified young woman between

under arrest to face Creon. This is not out of the question, but I have to say that the king's elaborate oriental headdress is a major obstacle in the way of this interpretation.

There are two other vase-paintings which, by contrast, pretty clearly *do* reflect a tragic version of the Antigone story, but one that is definitely *not* Sophocles' version. The better preserved is a tall amphora of c. 350 in Ruvo; the other (in Berlin), which is similar in significant respects, is rather damaged.[12] Fortunately the major figures here are labelled. On the left is "Antigone" herself, bound as a prisoner; and behind her is "Haemon" in distress. In the centre is Heracles, who stands in a kind of shrine. On the other side of him is a regal "Creon"; and above him, seated with a casket (recognition tokens?), is "Ismene". The boy who stands behind Creon is not named, however. Now, we know that in Euripides' *Antigone,* Haemon and Antigone were married, that they probably lived in rural secrecy, and they had a son called Maion; also that Antigone was eventually captured and brought before Creon for him to punish. It is, I think, pretty likely to be the Euripides version that is reflected in this painting. What is interesting for my topic today is that Euripides, in his later play, created a myth that is significantly different from Sophocles. In Sophocles Antigone and Haemon die childless before they are married, of course. And yet at the same time Euripides was also evidently responding to the Sophocles, for example in having both Haemon and Ismene as supporting figures in Antigone's story.

This brings me to the key point about the place of Sophocles' play in the development of the Antigone myth: Sophocles more or less created it. Contrary to the Antiphanes model, Antigone herself was for Sophocles' audience far from being a familiar figure who brought with her an already well-established myth. The case for believing that she was very probably a figure of Sophocles' own invention has recently been well argued by Mark Griffith[13]. He writes: "In composing *Antigone* Sophocles appears to have made substantial innovations of his own to both action and characters, to the point that in some respects the myth is virtually reinvented." Sophocles may not have made up her rather peculiar name – ΑΝΤΙΓΟΝΗ – the evidence is inconclusive – but it is all but certain that he invented her defining story, by which I mean her burial of Polynices, her defiance of Creon, and her death as a

two young men with spears. In this painting the older man does not look at all regal: and, very unusually, he is painted in the space between the two fixings of one of the handles. If this figure is, as A D Trendall suggested, meant to represent Sophocles' Creon, then this might reflect a kind of pictorial interpretation of his role as somehow restricted, trapped in the bind of his own authority. But I would not want to press this speculation too hard.

[12] See *Pots & Plays* number 64 [Pl. V].

[13] Sophocles *Antigone* (Cambridge 1999) 4-12; the quotation is from p. 8.

consequence. The roles of Haemon and Ismene in relation to her are also almost certainly his invention. So Antigone turns out to be a strikingly direct contradiction of Antiphanes' explicit claim that audiences only have to hear the name of Oidipus and they know all there is to be known, not only about him but his *daughters* as well.

At the same time, the creation of canonical versions of tragic myths in the fifth century does to some extent come to Antiphanes' defence. By his time, in the third quarter of the fourth century, there were no doubt elements in the stories of Oedipus and his family that *will* have become the standard, canonical version – "default' versions that will have been taken for granted unless explicitly contradicted. And these will have been established by *tragedy*. For Antiphanes and his times it would have been the Antigone of Sophocles' play that was the "default" version of her story.

There is plenty of evidence that Sophocles' play immediately became one of the accepted "classics" of the golden age of Greek tragedy. When Demosthenes' deploys *Antigone* in the course of his attacks on Aischines, he explicitly says that it was "frequently performed".[14] But the primary evidence for the "immediate classic" status of *Antigone* comes, not from comedy, but from other tragedies (just as in the case of Medea). First and foremost there are the final 73 lines of the transmitted text of *Seven against Thebes.* There are probably still some scholars who defend the authenticity of this scene, although they are becoming pretty few and far between these days. There is, I suggest, a consideration that modern discussions have not taken sufficiently into account: the implications of this issue for the history of the Antigone myth. Suppose that the scene *is* authentic Aeschylus, what would that entail for the question of the degree to which Sophocles was or was not innovating?

Let me remind you how the scene goes. The play and trilogy seem to be drawing to a close, with the two sons of Oidipus about to be taken off to burial. Suddenly a representative of the Theban civil authorities arrives: he endorses the burial of Eteocles, but forbids the burial of Polynices, even by his *philoi.* Abruptly, with no further explanation, a sister of Polynices contradicts the edict, laying emphasis on her first-person determination. She does not name herself; it is simply an assertion of ἐγὼ δέ... There follows a conventional stichomythia, a clash of wills, which ends with the city's mouthpiece departing submissively. Finally the

[14] *On the Crown* 120. And already back from the fifth century we have a relevant papyrus fragment of comedy, almost certainly from Eupolis' *Prospaltioi*, in which case it comes from the 420s: these lines (23-6) unmistakably parody *Antigone* lines 712-4. The context suggests a rather sanctimonious tone, a character calling on what was already a highly respected authority.

chorus splits into two halves, one to accompany the funeral procession of each brother.

Now, suppose that this scene is as a matter of fact authentic Aeschylus, that would mean not only that Antigone herself pre-existed 467 BC, but also that her central role was already firmly established and familiar – her role, that is, as a defiant woman who upholds family loyalty in opposition to the weight of male authoritarianism. This scene of *Seven* cannot possibly be creating a new myth: it only makes sense as following in the footsteps of a well-established story and its consequential characterisation of the two sisters.

It seems obvious to me that the scene is intrusively tacked onto the end of an already complete trilogy. Also that it is heavily indebted to Sophocles' *Antigone.* It is particularly the *prologue* of Sophocles' play that underlies it: the *Seven*-confrontation owes much more to the Ismene-scene in Sophocles than to the later Creon-scene. It is noticeable that it is not so much the direct wording that is taken over as the attitude, Antigone's assertiveness and her certainty that she is in the right. Thus, for example, the "I-centredness" of Sophocles, as seen in (31-2) "Creon commands this σοὶ / κἀμοί, λέγω γὰρ κἀμέ..." Likewise τὸν γοῦν ἐμόν, καὶ τὸν σόν, ἢν σὺ μὴ θέλῃς, / ἀδελφόν...(45-6) lies behind the first words of Antigone in *Seven* – ἐγὼ δὲ Καδμείων γε προστάταις λέγω, / ἢν μή τις ἄλλος τόνδε συνθάπτειν θέλῃ, / ἐγώ σφε θάψω κἀνὰ κίνδυνον βαλῶ / θάψασ' ἀδελφὸν τὸν ἐμόν (1026-29.). Similarly look at her reiteration of first-person future verbs of burial in 1028 ἐγώ σφε θάψω, 1038 μηχανήσομαι, 1040 καὐτὴ καλύψω, and 1052 ἐγὼ δὲ θάψω τόνδε. This sequence derives from the whole tone of Sophocles, especially ἀλλ′ ἴσθ′ ὁποία σοι δοκεῖ, κεῖνον δ′ ἐγὼ / θάψω (71–2).

So the myth was created by Sophocles, maybe about 440 BCE, and the ending of *Seven* was added to pay homage to it, probably not much later. The next homage we know of, which also involves innovation, bouncing off the Sophocles, is in Euripides' *Phoenissae* (of c. 409). No one doubts that Sophocles' *Antigone* is one the several narrative streams that flow into Euripides' saga-like intertwining of Theban myths in this play. At the same time Euripides characteristically departs from the Sophoclean authority, and provides yet another example of mythological innovation – yet another Diodorus Model in counterexample to the Antiphanes Model. Euripides has Oedipus *outlive* his sons, and go finally into exile, accompanied by his loyal family-obsessed daughter Antigone. Antigone was the invention of Sophocles many years earlier (we don't know how many), but this

Antigone does *not* die in order to ensure the burial of her brother. Instead she stays with her father – very probably Euripides' own invention.

And then, finally, Sophocles himself not long after, in the closing year or so of his life returns to Antigone, with a further last twist, and himself revises her story yet again. In *Oidipus at Colonus (OC)* she accompanies her old father faithfully into exile: so this follows the lead of Euripides' recent *Phoenissae*. But in *OC* this all happens *before*, not after, the fatal confrontation of Eteocles and Polynices. This enables Sophocles to combine *both* the exile Antigone *and* the Antigone who dies in order to honour her brother.

In *OC*, after Oidipus has so terrifyingly cursed Polynices, who is resigned to going to his death at Thebes, the son turns to his sisters and begs them to ensure his funeral (1405-10). Antigone tries to dissuade him from going to Thebes at all, but (rather like Eteocles back in Aeschylus' *Seven*) he insists on fulfilling the curse through his own free will. Then, at the very end of the tragedy, Antigone asks Theseus to ensure that she and her sister have safe passage to Thebes, so that they can try to prevent their brothers from slaughtering each other. Theseus dutifully agrees, and the play ends with Antigone's departure. It is a signal of how well-established the authority of Sophocles' earlier *Antigone* was that it does not need to be spelled out what will happen there at Thebes. Everybody knows, even though the story was invented by this same playwright less than 50 years earlier: back at Thebes she will die defying Creon, the Creon who has been re-portrayed earlier in *OC* in a particularly nasty light.

In this way Sophocles, who had guaranteed Antigone eternal fame through his earlier play, now adds a second glory by portraying her patience and suffering in also caring for her exiled father. Polynices does, in fact, make this very point when he begs Antigone and Ismene to ensure his burial (*OC* 1411-3):

καὶ σφῷν ὁ νῦν ἔπαινος, ὃν κομίζετον
τοῦδ' ἀνδρὸς οἷς πονεῖτον, οὐκ ἐλάσσονα
ἔτ' ἄλλον οἴσει τῆς ἐμῆς ὑπουργίας. (*OC* 1411-3)

This is couched in duals, but the audience will be well aware that Ismene will do less and suffer less for the sake of the dead Polynices, just as she has played a part, but a much smaller part, in caring for Oidipus in exile. We see, then, how within the span of his own lifetime Sophocles constructed a higher story (a higher storey!) on the mythical foundations that he had himself laid in his *Antigone.* First he

invents the Antigone who dies for Polynices, then, developing on Euripides, he has her go into exile with her father as well.

In *Antigone* Haemon tells Creon that the citizens of Thebes dare not say in his presence things that he would not like. But he, Haemon, can hear what they are saying behind his back:

> ἐμοὶ δ' ἀκούειν ἔσθ' ὑπὸ σκότου τάδε,
> τὴν παῖδα ταύτην οἷ' ὀδύρεται πόλις,
> πασῶν γυναικῶν ὡς ἀναξιωτάτη
> κάκιστ' ἀπ' ἔργων εὐκλεεστάτων φθίνει·
> ἥτις τὸν αὑτῆς αὐτάδελφον ἐν φοναῖς
> πεπτῶτ' ἄθαπτον μήθ' ὑπ' ὠμηστῶν κυνῶν
> εἴασ' ὀλέσθαι μήθ' ὑπ' οἰωνῶν τινος·
> οὐχ ἥδε χρυσῆς ἀξία τιμῆς λαχεῖν;
> τοιάδ' ἐρεμνὴ σῖγ' ὑπέρχεται φάτις. (*Ant*. 692-700)

With our perspective, two and a half millennia later, we can see that the sentiments attributed to the Theban populace (πόλις*)* have turned out to be prophetic. Antigone did not die κάκιστα, as they deplored: she has instead won χρυσῆ τιμή. The assessment that advanced darkly through Thebes, ὑπὸ σκότου, has become the shining light of one the most celebrated tragic stories of all world literature. Furthermore, she wins her glory because she chose her actions, not because she was forced or fated, or because she had to enact her name. Antigone put on the yoke herself, but it was not the yoke of necessity.

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PLATE I

PLATE II

PLATE III

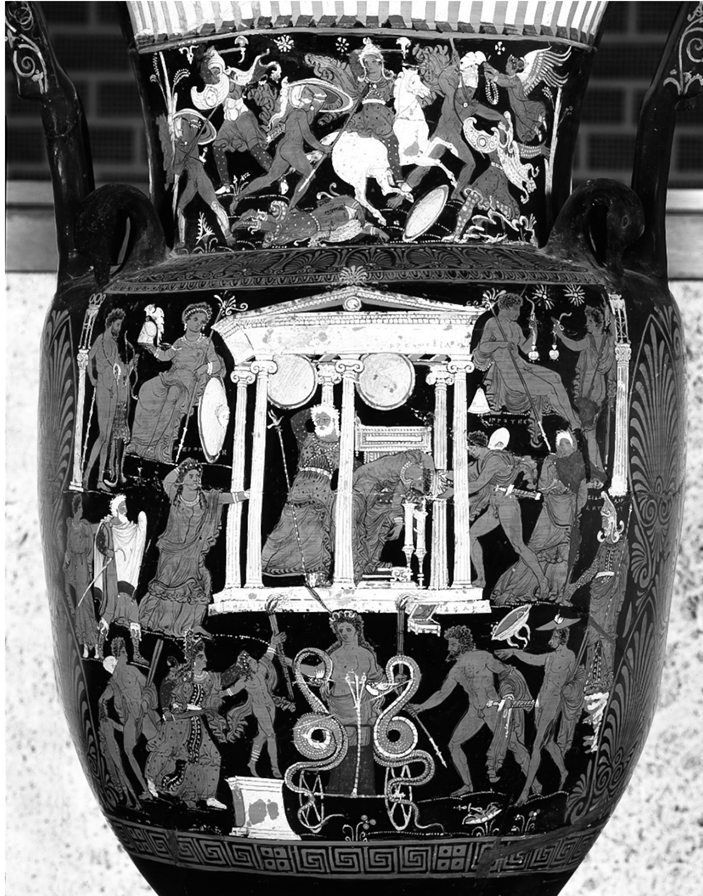

PLATE IV

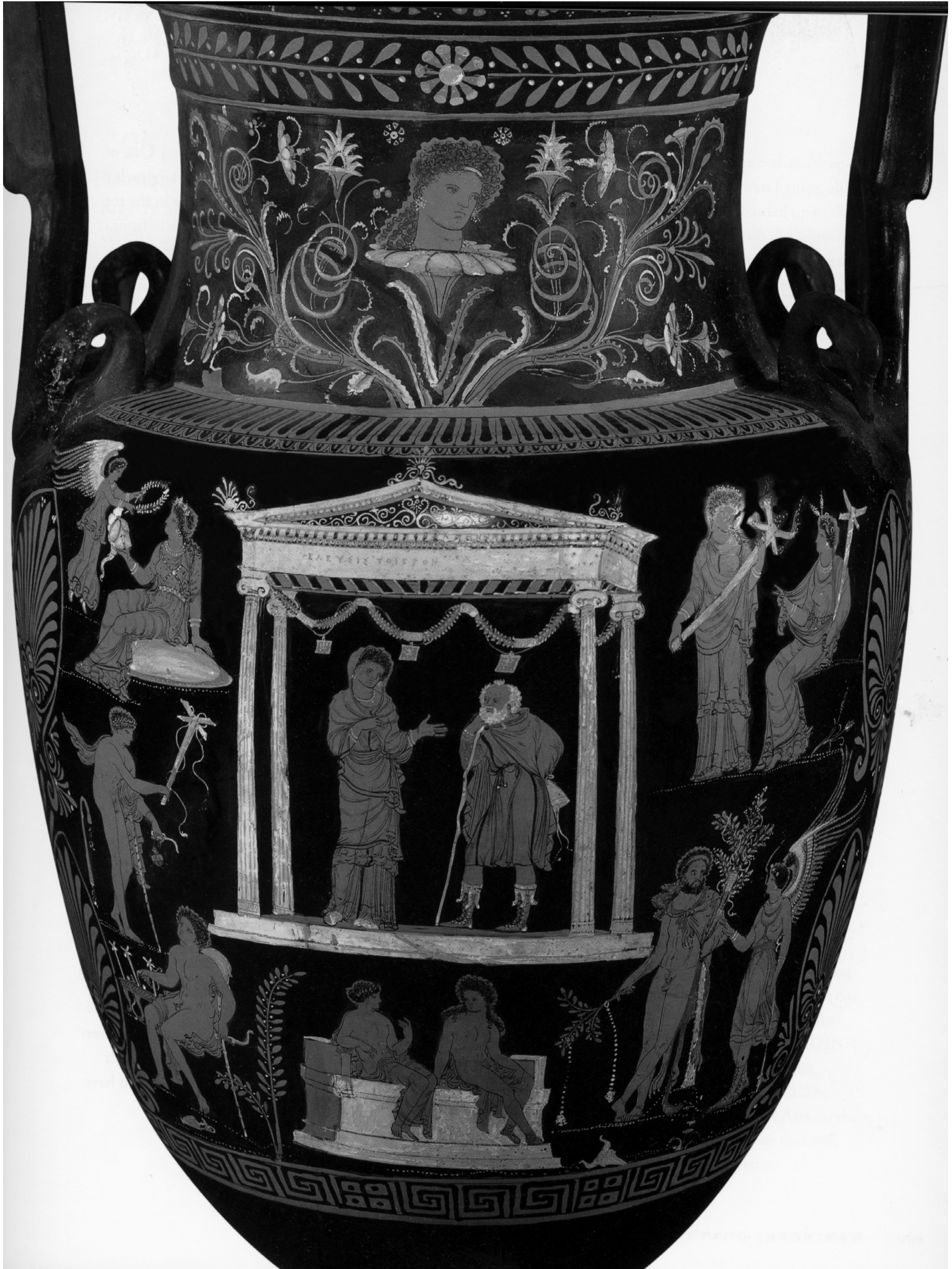

PLATE V