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Edwin Arlington Robinson's Antigone

by LEWIS E. WEEKS, JR.

On February 4, 1894, Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote to his closest friend, Harry de Forest Smith:

I have [been] thinking up a little scheme for this summer, but shall make no promises, even if it is agreeable to you. I think you first suggested something of the kind. My scheme is to make a metrical translation of the Antigone. You might find pleasure and profit in writing out a correct prose version of the play, keeping the Greek spirit as much as possible, and guiding me in the choice of words and suggestions as to the classical effect of my verses. My choice would be to make it in the main unrhymed, depending upon sonority and picturesqueness for the effect. If the thing should prove anything like a success we might have a small edition printed at the cost of an ordinary indulgence in the world's pleasures. A title page something like this would not be bad:

"The Antigone of Sophocles: A translation
by Harry de Forest Smith and Edwin Arlington Robinson.—An edition of fifty copies
printed for private circulation. Gardiner, Maine. REPORTER-JOURNAL JOB PRESS (!)
MDCCCCXCVIII."

This will probably end up like the stone house on the hill, but we have a right to build castles in Spain or where we please. This is a kind of Spanish castle in Greece. I wonder if the shade of Sophocles is grinning over my shoulder as I write this? If he is, I suppose he knows how the thing is coming out. The one great objection to this performance is the time it would take. The question is, would the time be well spent? Somehow all my schemes involve the spending of money instead of the making of it . . . .

Thus the project was incubated; it had apparently been conceived some time earlier by Smith, not by Robinson, as most biographers who mention it suggest. After considerable additional thought and more correspondence with Smith, Robinson undertook the task; and to it he devoted three and a half years of frequently interrupted effort. During this time, he held varying opinions of its value as a work of art and its effect on his development as a poet.

That the suggestion concerning the Antigone, whenever it may have originally been made, did not fall on unprepared ground is quite appar-
ent. During high school, though denied Greek because of his father’s refusal to let him take the college preparatory course, Robinson had had Latin. Experiments in turning material from Horace, Cicero, and Virgil into his own verse translations had been undertaken with considerable pleasure and success. These experiments in working directly from the Latin must have given the young poet not only practice in expression and word choice but significant insight into the problems of the translator of a foreign language and especially those of the translator of poetry, who must communicate ideas and also imitate a formal structure, deal with imagery, emotion, compression, and the allusions of a culture different in both time and place.

Four years before the Antigone scheme was put into effect, when Smith was a senior at Bowdoin and Robinson had been out of high school but two years, there was apparently an early Sophoclean experiment. Whether it was part of a larger whole, what its antecedents were, or whether there were subsequent results remains a mystery. On the back of the second of a three-page letter to Smith dated, Gardiner, January 25, 1890, appeared the following verse translation from the Greek, marked with numbered accents but completely unidentified:

9 -
8 No longer with feelings of awe
12 Go I to the navel of earth unapproachable,
8 Nor to the temple of Abae
8 Nor consult Olympian Zeus
6 Unless these things, hand shown,
7 To all mortals are in tune—
9 But O Mighty, if rightly hearing,
7 O Zeus king of all below
7 Let this escape thee not
7 Nor thy ever living rule,
8 For already they set aside
8 The waning oracles [of] Laius
6 Which the God sends Pythia
11 And no longer is Apollo in honor
7 At least in the sight of men,
7 But God’s word spreads slow and sure. 2

The passage is a translation of the second ant-strophe from the second stasimon in Sophocles’ Oedipus. There is no reference of any kind to this translation in the letter.

During the time Smith was at Bowdoin and before Robinson’s two exciting years at Harvard, the friendship of the two became so close that Robinson certainly shared many of his friend’s interests and, in effect, attended Bowdoin vicariously through him. I cannot but feel that Robinson’s refusal to attend Smith’s graduation was, in part at least, a recognition of how painful that celebration would have been, not being

2. Houghton Library, Harvard University, S(2).
his own. Smith himself, in a conversation reported by Notopoulos, spoke of their reading classical works together and of their special enthusiasm for Sophocles, a love of the Greek dramatist that culminated in the Antigone project.3

Indeed, the primary interest of the two in Sophocles is further supported by the fact that, according to Ellsworth Barnard, Robinson planned a Greek tragedy but never completed it.4 Barnard’s authority for this statement is probably Robinson’s letter to Smith of January 12, 1895, in which he says, “I have not been feeling particularly fine during the past week but have managed to do some work. Have almost finished the professor’s story and have done the first chorus in ‘Aegeus’—about fifty lines, which seem to me to have a little swing to them.”5 This chorus became “The Chorus of Old Men in Aegeus” and appeared in The Torrent and the Night Before, in 1896.

The brief reference in Robinson’s characteristic understatement does imply that the first chorus is only the beginning and that others are to follow. Sophocles composed an Aegeus, but it was not one of the few plays that survived from the more than one hundred he wrote. However, the tragic story of Aegeus’ life was well known; and it is certainly possible that Robinson planned a drama based on that tale.

The poem itself shows the power that Robinson had developed during the long periods of writing and rewriting the choruses of Antigone. The tragic reverberations strike deep and are movingly combined with delicate and vivid imagery. The contrast between this later poem and the much earlier verse from Oedipus is so obvious that it hardly needs comment.

The quite pervasive classical influence in Robinson’s work is also indicated by the many allusions, the frequent names and titles, and especially the series of poems entitled “Variations of Greek Themes.” Perhaps the best treatment of the classical influence on Robinson is Edwin S. Fussell’s Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1954). In view of this background, it is hardly surprising that Robinson felt challenged and intrigued by the Antigone plan, which was an essential part of Robinson’s friendship with Harry de Forest Smith, probably the closest, most intimate, and certainly one of the most important in his life, one that helped him endure some of his most difficult early years. Consequently, some account of the friend who originated the idea and collaborated on the project is in order.6

5. Sutcliffe, p. 194.
6. For further biographical information and the sources of this sketch, unless otherwise indicated, see: “The Faculty,” Amherst Graduates’ Quarterly, XXXII (May 1943), 247; “In Memoriam,” Bulletin of the Classical Association of New England, XXXVIII (1943), 4-5; David Merton, “The Retire-
Smith was born January 22, 1869, eleven months to the day before Robinson. His father was a burly, rather romantic figure who had run away to sea, become a ship’s carpenter and caulk er, and finally settled on a small farm in Gardiner. Unlike Robinson’s father, Smith’s, though he could ill afford it, was determined that his talented and ambitious only child should go to college; and, to Bowdoin, he went.

The friendship did not begin until high school, where interests in language, literature, and especially the classics drew the two together. Smith was the more practical of the two, with a clear idea of his future and a career that moved in well-defined paths. He graduated from Bowdoin with a degree in classics in 1891 and went to Rockland, Maine, to teach in the high school for four years, during the last of which he did the prose translation of the *Antigone* for Robinson to turn into poetry. Robinson spent more than two additional years on his end of the project. During Smith’s stay in Rockland, almost weekly letters passed between the two friends; and Robinson especially looked forward to the long summer vacations, which Smith spent at home, when the two could spend many hours under the apple tree or in the pine grove at Smith’s, warming themselves with friendship and good talk.

In the spring of 1894, Smith announced his engagement to Adela Wood, of Rockland. There were three more summers when Smith and his wife apparently spent the vacations with the former’s parents, and Robinson saw a good deal of him; although the friendship continued, the relationship must have changed significantly. In the fall of 1895, Smith and his wife settled in Cambridge, where the former attended Harvard, receiving his M.A. but not responding to Harvard with the same devotion and enthusiasm that Robinson had felt. After another summer in Gardiner, Smith and his wife sailed for Europe, where Smith attended the University of Berlin during the 1896–97 academic year.

That summer was the last that the two friends were to share, as Robinson left Gardiner and Smith took a position at the University of Pennsylvania for a year. Smith next taught Latin and Greek for three years at Bowdoin, his alma mater, after which he went to Amherst, where he spent the rest of his academic life, thirty-six years of devoted and beloved service to Amherst and his students. His career was primarily as teacher rather than as scholar. He was interested in collecting books; and, from 1934 to his retirement, he was also director of libraries and instrumental in establishing a number of special collections and in the expansion of the library’s physical plant.

He died after four years of retirement, on February 2, 1943, just a few days past his seventy-fourth birthday, survived by his wife and
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daughter. Perhaps the clearest insight into the man himself is offered by
the epigraph selected by James Notopoulos for his article about Smith.
It is from “Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford,” a poem
that reveals Robinson’s love of Shakespeare, another beloved teacher:
“... and there shines out of him again / An aged light that has no age
or station.”

It was early in 1894 that the first recorded reference to the Antigone
project was made, though it was obviously not the first time it had been
discussed. At this time, the heady days of Harvard were over. Edward
Robinson had been dead a little over a year. Dean, the beloved and
much admired oldest of the brothers, was thirty-six years of age, at
home, and in the advanced stages of morphine addiction. In six more
years he would be dead. As the result of the depression of 1893 and Her­
man’s unwise investments, the family fortune was seriously threatened;
Herman’s loss of confidence and his disintegration were beginning.
Mary Robinson, deeply affected by the loss of her husband, was in de­
clining health. Robinson himself had recently recovered from eye and
ear problems, and he was working assiduously on prose tales in an un­
successful effort to make money. At twenty-four, more than ever acutely
aware of and sensitive to his financial dependency, he had recently
begun to tutor Mabel Moore, his friend Ed’s sister, whom he had
known in high school several years before. Out of this experience, a ten­
tative romance began to bud; but the impossibility of supporting a wife
must have been discouraging.

The first letter referring to the Antigone scheme, February 4, 1894,
already quoted in part, shows the discouraged mood Robinson was in
and the problem of dependency that was on his mind. Three weeks
later, Robinson is still troubled about his dependency and wondering if
he can justify the time that would have to be spent on the translation.
Yet he is confident that the work will be worthwhile and is already plan­
ing his approach to the task, including considerable background read­
ing, a concern for form, a professional opinion of the completed work,
and a somewhat over-optimistic estimate of the time needed to complete
the project. The March 4 letter, apropos of the Antigone, ends in a
postscript relative to more background reading.

All but the last paragraph of the next letter, a long one, dated March
18, 1894, is devoted to the Antigone. Robinson is still avidly reading
background material, toying with various metrical possibilities, suggest­
ing that his ignorance of Greek may possibly be beneficial, and modestly
indicating Smith’s central role in the work. He also allays his fears of
the task being beyond him by characterizing his “Hellenic spirit,”

10. Sutcliffe, pp. 133–34.
11. Sutcliffe, p. 137.
which, he poignantly points out, lacks "some of the 'serene and child-like joy of life.'" 12

A couple of weeks later, Robinson, writing to one of his Harvard friends, George Latham, 13 speaks enthusiastically of the Antigone and this time, in reference to his Hellenism, mentions the lack of Greek robustness in his character. He thinks he can finish the project in a year—as we know a grossly optimistic estimate—and promises Latham one of the first copies if the work gets published. 14

The next letter which mentions the Antigone, that of May 27, 1894, touches upon Smith's engagement, announced a couple of weeks before, and indicates Robinson's sense of loss, his expectations for the last summer the two friends will have together, and his fear that something may come up that will interfere with this much-anticipated joy. He begs Smith not to forget the Antigone, hopes praise for it will come from men of discrimination, but expects no money for it. 15

About a week after this letter to Smith, another to Latham, who had decided to study Greek drama, is devoted to passing along Robinson's advice resulting from his study in preparation for his work on the Antigone. He wishes Latham could get to know Smith, for "he is just the kind of fellow you have been hunting for all your life and certainly did not find in me." 16

Still looking forward to the approaching summer visits with Smith, Robinson writes him on June 10, 1894, of his wish that he and Latham could meet. He also expresses the idea that a poetic translation should capture the spirit of the original, the "general effect," and his wish that Smith not complicate the poet's part of the work by introducing "poetical lines . . . of ten properly accented syllables. . . ." 17

The summer of 1894, with Smith home from Rockland, helped ease Robinson's loneliness, isolation, and family troubles; however, his health was not good. His ear troubled him most of the summer; and, when he writes Latham in September, 1894, one wonders if he found Antigone "good" for him because working on the play took his mind off his troubles, or because the heroine's situation was so much worse than his own that he could take courage from her fortitude and nobility in facing it. 18

By the time of his next letter to Smith, after the summer hiatus in their correspondence, he reports that he has pretty well won through the

13. George W. Latham received his B.A. in 1893 at Harvard, where he became a friend of Robinson. He subsequently taught in the Auburn, New York, high school; did graduate work at the University of Chicago; and taught at Brown for several years. In 1907, he went to McGill University, where he enjoyed a long and distinguished teaching career. (Leon Edel, "Portrait of a Professor: G. W. Latham [1871-1947]." The McGill News, Summer 1947, pp. 8-10.)
morbid and discouraged period already mentioned and has decided not to waste time and energy over dreadful events which can’t be helped. His “anxiety to see the thing [Antigone] in print amounts almost to childishness,” and he asks some questions about specific passages in the play. ¹⁹

Two weeks later, an enthusiastic and optimistic letter calls for more Antigone material to keep ahead of his output and deals with a problem of translation that is still not resolved. ²⁰ At about the same time, a letter to Latham indicates that the play is about a third completed. ²¹

In the letter to Smith of October 21, 1894, Robinson may imply that some of the Antigone has been sent to Ford, a Harvard friend who was teaching at Exeter Academy, although more likely the reference is to “The Chorus of Old Men in Aegeus.” Ford has criticized the verse form his friend is using as being too slow. After considering various possibilities, Robinson had settled upon blank verse as most appropriate and was determined to stick to it. He complains of problems with the second chorus and quotes his first two lines:

Of all the many marvelous things that are,
There is not one more marvelous than man. ²²

With his next letter, October 28, 1894, he included a typed version of the first two stanzas of the stasimon in which he combines the two lines in one, “Nothing is there more marvelous than man.” This is a solution that is quite satisfactory and avoids the repetitiousness of the second line. However, in Captain Craig he reverted to a two line version:

Of all the many marvelous things that are,
Nothing is there more marvelous than man.

By the time of Captain Craig, of course, Antigone was packed away in its box in the attic of the house in Gardiner.

Strophe I and Antistrophe I from the First Stasimon were referred to by Robinson as the result of “ten hours of diabolically hard labor.” They were typed on an undated half sheet of paper and included with the October 28 letter. The note after the verses is in Robinson’s hand and indicates the meticulous “tinkering” he practiced:

Nothing is there more marvelous than man!
Driven by southern storms he sails amidst
The wild white water of the win’try sea,
And through the thunder of engulfing waves;
And Earth—unceasing monarch of the gods—
He furrows, and the plows go back and forth,
And turn the broken mold year after year.

21. Hoagton, L(8).
22. Sutcliffe, p. 172.
He traps and captures—all inventive man!—
The light birds and the creatures of the wild,
And in his nets the fishes of the sea;
He trains the tenants of the fields and hills,
And brings beneath the neck-encircling yoke
The rough-maned horse and the wild mountain bull.

I have here been compelled to mix up clauses a little, but it has been done with always
one end in view—to get the effect of the original. That is my theory of translation. If you
like it better, say “While the plows go etc.” And is more poetical to me. “Light birds”
overcomes the difficulty and will do whether the word means light-hearted or light in
everything. Which seems to be a question. 23

Although Robinson’s problems with the subsequent verses of the
second chorus are vividly described in the November 4 letter, he remains
confident in the success of the work. The letter itself reveals much about
the way he worked and the nature of the collaboration with Smith,
involving a good deal more on Smith’s part than simply the prose
translation. 24 The original manuscript is typed except for passages and
notes I have placed in parentheses to indicate that they are written in
Robinson’s crabbed script. The brackets are his.

(Strophe II)
(And language has he learned and wind swift thought,—)
And speech and soaring wisdom has he learned,
With human measures and a way to shun
The sharp and painful arrows of the frost.
Full of resources, of all the future brings,
Resourceless meets he nothing; Death alone
He never shall escape; but he has found
([A cure]) for life’s unyielding maladies ([a cure]).

Thus gifted with a shrewd inventive skill
Beyond belief, now makes he for the right,
Now for the wrong, And first of all the state
Is he who honors most the nation’s law
And the sworn justice of the gods; but he
Becomes an outcast whom rash folly finds
In evil fellowship, nor shall he dwell
With me, nor think with me, whose actions thus . . .

I marvel at this portent of the gods!
Knowing her as I do can I deny
The maid Antigone?—O wretched girl—
Child of a wretched father, Oedipus,
Tell me!—they surely cannot lead
you here
Captured in this wild work against
the king! 25

With the letter of November 11, 1894, Robinson included a typescript
of the longest extant passage of the translation. It consisted of about

23. Sutcliffe, pp. 173-76.
24. Sutcliffe, pp. 176-78.
25. Houghton, S1(107). (Sutcliffe, p. 179.)
half of the second episode and followed the first stasimon (second choral ode), which had been sent to Smith in the two preceding letters. It had given Robinson almost as much trouble as the chorus, and he was likewise dissatisfied with it.²⁶

The November 19 letter reveals a disgruntled Robinson, complaining of his nieces running past his door, shaking the whole house, and upsetting him so much that he rushes out of the house to cool off. He says further, "If they stay here all winter, God only knows what will become of me." The rest of the letter speaks of his reading and writing. After the signature is a postscript referring to the Antigone: "I am on the last ‘bunch’ of Antigone. Please send another lot as soon as possible and oblige me." (Sutcliffe, p. 187, has transcribed me etc.)²⁷

The late November and early December letters reflect Robinson’s difficulties in satisfying himself with certain parts of the Antigone, especially with the choruses, which he thought to leave until he had finished the easier episodes but which some aspect of his character would not let him bypass.²⁸

The December 2 letter reveals considerable discouragement: personal problems, those of health, and those connected with work, especially the continued problems with the chorus, are mentioned.²⁹

In the December 9, 1894, letter, in spite of, or perhaps because of, his own discouragement, Robinson gives Smith a lecture about a period of depression the latter is obviously going through and advises a change of scene and activities, perhaps what he himself most longed for but could not manage. There are questions of the meaning in some Antigone passages and a strong expression of relief at the successful completion of the choruses.³⁰

Robinson’s discouragement at this time resulted in the stopping of work on the play for a long rest, as this letter and another to Latham indicate.³¹ The causes seem related to personal as well as literary problems. Although his letters to Smith continue on a regular basis, there are no further references to their project until October of 1895, a period of almost eight months. In the meantime, Smith had married—Robinson could not bring himself to attend the wedding—and had enrolled in the graduate school at Harvard for a year, to be followed by a year of study abroad. Although there had been another summer of fellowship in their pine bower at the Smith farm in Gardiner, the relationship was understandably different. Smith’s life had been reoriented, and his compass no longer turned fully towards his friend. Robinson was working on a book of poems as well as his prose tales.

²⁶. Sutcliffe, pp. 179-85.
²⁷. Houghton, S(110). (Sutcliffe, pp. 186-87.)
²⁸. Sutcliffe, pp. 187-89
²⁹. Sutcliffe, pp. 189-91.
³⁰. Sutcliffe, pp. 191-94.
³¹. Houghton, L(9).
A letter to Latham, February 24, 1895, confirms the vacation from *Antigone* and indicates that he was "positively unable to go any further." "This coming summer," he says, "I intend to take it up again and sometime to get the thing off my hands by printing a private edition of 100 copies or so for my friends and enemies to make fun of." He goes on to say, "The work has a tremendous fascination for me—too great in fact, for my well being—and I shall feel something like a slave out of his chains when I am done with it:—one of those slaves we read of who long for their servitude again." 32

The long rest from *Antigone* seems to have been effective and to have lasted the several months that Robinson mentioned; for by September 20, 1895, he reports that he has been back at work on the play and that the first draft is shortly to be completed. Smith is at this time doing his year of graduate study at Harvard, and Robinson will soon have enough poems in shape to start his first volume on its unsuccessful search for a publisher.

In a letter of October 6, 1895, Robinson refers to the messenger's long speech. He reports that he has only about a hundred lines of the play to finish, which he suggests will be plain sailing. He is still having trouble with the choruses as his reference to omitting until later the Hyporchema, the last chorus, indicates. 33 However, in spite of the relatively few lines to go, Robinson tells Smith on November 26 that he has again stopped work on the play because of the pressure of other work, but the play is spoken of as his only effort that may "live a year or two." 34

Almost a month later, in response to an inquiry from Latham, he indicates that the play will not be touched until summer and that he now has serious doubts as to its value. The other work that he referred to in the letter to Smith was probably the volume of poetry he was preparing with such desperate concern. This, his first published book, was completed and sent out for consideration late in February, 1896, but was rejected, revised, and finally printed at his own expense. It was intended as a surprise for his mother, who died, ironically, a couple of weeks before the volumes were delivered in early December of 1896. He mentions a sonnet which he wrote to go with the *Antigone*, and which he planned to include in his soon-to-be-published first volume of poems. However, the sonnet was not published, and seems to have disappeared along with the play. The contradictory opinions of the *Antigone* expressed in this letter, that it was beyond him and that it is the only respectable thing he has done, suggest the discouragement, the confusion, and the self-doubts that plagued Robinson at this time. 35

By September of 1896, the little volume of poems, having been re-

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32. Houghton, L(10).
33. Sutcliffe, p. 232.
34. Sutcliffe, p. 236.
35. Houghton, L(19).
lected for commercial publication twice, has been consigned to the printer for private publication; and Robinson is hard and enthusiastically at work on a revision of the Antigone, which he tells Smith is "vastly" different from the first version, principally in its departure from the literal. Indeed he is so concerned over what Smith may think are liberties taken with the text that he fears that his friend will not want to be associated with the project; but he hopes this will not be so, especially as Smith was the originator of the plan.  

Two months later, on November 6, an oblique reference to the Antigone shows, at least, that it is fresh in Robinson's mind, but it is obvious that the play is no longer of primary or even secondary concern. Robinson had worked for the election of McKinley in Gardiner as ward clerk and tells Smith of the procession on the early morning after the election: a local political figure was routed out of bed to join the torchlight parade, showed maudlin affection for Robinson, and made a boozy speech. Robinson went to bed at 3:00 A.M. and woke up with "sticks in my eyes." He concludes his reference to the election: "Elections are queer things, and I am glad that this one is over. There is to be a big time here next Tuesday evening, but I don't think I shall participate, though I may follow the crowd when the time comes. You know the guard in Antigone says, 'O King, 'tis not for any man to say / What things he will not do,' and I am inclined to think he is about right."  

In April of 1897, Robinson has passed through the terrible winter of his mother's death, the worrisome and finally rather desperate vanity publication of The Torrent, and his harried search for some positive faith with which to buttress himself and the family against the awful blows of life. 

A visit to Professor Johnson,38 one of Smith's teachers at Bowdoin, who had received a copy of The Torrent and praised Robinson's work, reveals that Johnson has reservations about the Antigone; but Robinson is not specific as to their nature although he admits their validity.  

In spite of the discouragement Robinson must have felt at Professor Johnson's criticism of his work on the Antigone, he does speak of feeling compelled to finish it "sometime." However, I have found no evidence that he did any further work on the project that had been undertaken with such high hopes and carried on for more than two years, generally and especially towards the end, with considerable optimism, en-

38. Professor Henry Johnson was Longfellow Professor of Modern Languages at Bowdoin, 1882-1918. Although his major subject was French, he did translations of Dante and Lucretius and interestingly was, like Smith and Robinson, a native of Gardiner. In his December 22, 1896, letter to Smith, who was in Germany at the time, Robinson quoted many of the responses to presentation copies of The Torrent and the Night Before. Johnson said, "You have sound reasons for writing and publishing." With characteristic modesty, Robinson asked Smith to destroy this letter, with its many flattering comments. In view of Johnson's own experience with translations, one imagines that his criticism must have carried considerable weight with Robinson.
39. Sutcliffe, pp. 283-84.
thusiasm, and expectation. His mention of finishing it would undoubtedly have meant the revision, for to undertake a revision certainly implies completion of the first version. The reference in the September 27, 1896, letter to Smith to his being 400 lines into the "new version" confirms this view.

1897 was a year of turmoil and change, beginning with the dreadful death of Mary Robinson late in 1896. There were increasing responsibilities for the heavy work about the house, with its family of seven, now consisting of Emma, Herman, the three children, Dean, and Win. Dean was a helpless problem rather than a help, and Herman was increasingly absent from home, drinking more and more heavily to dull the pain of his failure. Emma, sharing with Win the responsibilities of caring for and keeping the family together, became increasingly dependent on him; and she, with her great courage and competence, became even dearer to him than she had been before, if that were possible.

On the other hand, there was the helpful establishment of the "Quadru-peds" and the saving friendship with the Richards family and Hays Gardiner. There were poems to polish and revise and poems to be written for the private publication of his second volume, *The Children of the Night*, appropriately titled and dedicated to his mother and father and appearing in the last month of the year.

Robinson left home in late summer or early fall of 1897 because of a confrontation with Herman arising out of the latter's jealousy over an incident involving Emma's increasing dependence on him (Win). Not long after, he returned to the house; and his niece Ruth remembers him boxing up a number of his manuscripts, including *Antigone*. With the placing of the manuscript in this box, the play disappears and apparently ceases to be of any great interest to Robinson.

After the last summer in which he and Smith were to see much of each other, that of 1897, the letters between the two become less and less frequent. Few mention the *Antigone*, although there is some correspondence regarding a project of Smith's involving the translation of *Philoctetes*, one of the lesser known of the few survivals of Sophocles' enormous output. The letters indicate that Smith consulted Robinson on several questions concerning the work.

For six years the *Antigone* remained in its box, along with other papers, at the house in Gardiner. Then early in 1903, Herman, far gone in alcoholism and without means of support for his family, sold the Robinson house for $2200—$300 less than it had been appraised for two years earlier and $1800 less than the purchase price in 1870. Herman moved his family to a rented house and, upon the death of Emma's father in October, to the Shepherd home in nearby Farmingdale, where some of the things from the Robinson place were taken, including Win's

box of manuscripts, which was put in the attic next to one of the chimneys, and which contained the *Antigone* that had been packed away earlier, when Robinson had left home and Gardiner. Another six years passed before the *Antigone* was of concern again and the object of a search.

After Herman’s sad death from tuberculosis, alone in a Boston hospital in February of 1909, Robinson returned to New York from the funeral. In March, he resigned from his job in the Custom House, as a change in administration and a new supervisor brought the ultimatum that he would have to wear a uniform and keep regular hours. His poetic production had been negligible during the years of regular employment, even though the financial security that the position represented for him and for Herman’s family was a godsend. Several months later, he returned to Gardiner to settle the estate and to try to bring about a conclusion to his long and bittersweet relationship with Emma, Herman’s widow. At this time, he made an effort to locate the *Antigone* manuscript.

Robinson’s own word on the final disposition of his *Antigone* comes in a letter written in 1916 in response to an inquiry from Smith. Robinson had published *Captain Craig, The Children of the Night* in a new edition put out by Scribner’s, *The Town Down the River*, and *The Man Against the Sky*; and he was on his way to both critical and popular recognition. By this time, Smith had been teaching at Amherst for fifteen years; it was almost twenty years since Robinson had last worked on the play, and twenty-two years since Smith himself had completed his part in the project. Robinson had obviously all but forgotten the work. The letter suggests that Smith had some plans for it. Was he interested in trying to publish it? Was he thinking of using it in a course dealing with the classics in translation? Did he have a production in mind? He did produce the *Philocetes*, which he had translated, on the natural stage of Pratt Field at Amherst. Robinson to Smith, Peterborough, N.H., September 13, 1916:

> Your letter did not get to me until yesterday or I should have acknowledged it sooner. I’m sorry to say that when I was in Gardiner in 1909, I tried in vain to find my *Antigone*. I remember boxing it up with some books of mine, but I find that the box had been opened by the kids and its contents,—more or less scattered. I doubt, however, if you could use the play in its present condition—if it has any present condition—and I am sure that you could not use the choruses, which I turned as a foolish experiment into blank verse. I’m glad that you still remember the thing. For I remember that I had a grand time doing it. 42

Robinson’s reference to the choruses in blank verse as “a foolish experiment” is hard to understand, especially as he valued a few lines from one enough to use them in *Captain Craig*, and as the extant additional

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42. Houghton, S(194).
passages are, in my opinion, generally better than any other translation I am familiar with.

His recollection of what happened to his papers and especially the Antigone is confirmed by Professor Wallace L. Andersen, who reports that Mrs. Ruth Nivinson, Robinson's oldest niece, told him that the contents of the box were used by the children in their play and consequently destroyed.43

One cannot help but be intrigued by the question of what actually did happen to the papers. Did the children "scatter" them as Robinson indicated? Did they, as Mrs. Nivinson recalled many years afterward, use them as children would use paper that had one clean side by drawing on them, writing on them, coloring on them, perhaps even cutting some up for paper dolls? If so, what an irony that the magnificent Antigone should be reduced to a paper doll.

If the box were still intact at the time Smith reports its removal to the Shepherd house in 1903, it must have been opened some time after that. At that time, Ruth would have been thirteen; Marie, eleven; and Barbara, eight. One would expect the box to be labeled in some way as Uncle Win's, and Ruth, at least, must have had some curiosity and sense of responsibility about what was being used so cavalierly. Were all the children involved? Was there a gradual attrition from the treasure box of paper? How much "more" rather than "less" was the scattering? How much, if any, did Robinson rescue in view of his statement that the contents were only "more or less" scattered? Did Emma know of the violation of the box? If so, what was her reaction? There are numerous questions that will apparently never be answered.

Many years later a former student spent the evening with Smith, who reminisced about his and Robinson's friendship and their reading classical works together, especially their study of Sophocles. "The two boys' love of Sophocles found expression in translation. Smith made an accurate prose rendering of the Antigone, which Robinson used as the basis for one in verse form. Robinson's poetic translation, Professor Smith believed, was later destroyed by the poet; but the lines in quotation marks above are a memorable fragment of it which found its way into Captain Craig."44

Was Smith's memory playing him false when he reported to Nopoulos in 1942 that he believed the poet had destroyed the play? In 1916, as we have seen, Robinson had indicated to his friend in response to a specific inquiry that the children had destroyed it. Or did Smith actually believe that Robinson had destroyed the play and was only using the story of the children as a cover-up?

And so it is that the search for the missing Antigone comes to an end in pleasant reminiscences concerning a youthful labor of love fast fading

away in the mind of an old man. It was a labor begun with the enthusiasm of youth and dealing with a tragic but compatible subject, during a period of personal suffering. It was carried forward intermittently over a period of more than three years. At times, Robinson considered it to be the most important and potentially lasting work with which he was engaged. It involved a great deal of background reading and study. It was undertaken as a cooperative venture with a close and valued friend, and provided the subject of many passages in a long and prolific correspondence. It served to sharpen the vision and hone the compression and the word choice of a poet already intensely in love with language. It taught Robinson the many frustrations of the translator, especially of one who would change verse into verse without being master of the original language. Finally, as his own poetry came to be published and recognized by a discerning few, his interest in the translation weakened to the point where he could pack it away with a certain finality, learn of its destruction with apparent equanimity, dismiss its most poetic passages as a foolish experiment in blank verse, and remark somewhat inaccurately that the entire project had provided merely a "grand time" in the doing.

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