

REVIEWS

S. E. Wilmer, Audronė Žukauskaitė

Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism

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TIME AND AGAIN ANTIGONE

Only in exceptional cases do texts become classics. Even though what counts as a classic varies from reader to reader, it remains clear that when classics are invoked, one inevitably speaks of timeless texts. Just like other classics, Sophocles' *Antigone*, too, stood the test of time and acquired its own identity during the course of history. Numerous rewritings of the text, zillions of productions of *Antigone*, let alone the tremendous impact that the insoluble conflict between Antigone and Creon has made within the visual arts, stand as living proof of the timelessness of Sophocles' tragedy.

In this respect, it is pointless to ask such questions as "Why *Antigone*?" and "Why a series of scholarly work on *Antigone*?" upon the initial encounter with a book about Sophocles' piece. Rather, on such an occasion, the primary issue turns out to be the manner through which the work accompanies the reader within the realm of *Antigone*. One can thus find it tempting to ask: "To what extent does the book open one door of reading *Antigone* after another?" The approach adopted in the relatively recent collection of essays entitled *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy & Criticism* (2010), displays the extent to which the editors of the volume, namely S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė, aspire to present articles that tackle *Antigone* from as many contemporary intellectual perspectives as possible. The editors' introduction serves two functions: on the one hand, by succinctly touching upon such key readings of *Antigone* as those of Friedrich Hegel, Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, they "outline the main conflict in interpretation" (p. 2); on the

other, by offering a bird's eye view regarding each contribution to the volume, Wilmer and Žukauskaitė set the scholarly stage for the critical appreciation of *Antigone* in the twenty-first century. In so doing, the editors, in a way, position the book against the backdrop of Hegel's reading of *Antigone* as a clash between the unwritten laws and written laws, the momentous emphasis that Lacan places upon Antigone's desire "for death and self-annihilation" (p. 3) as well as Žižek's interpretation of Antigone's deed as the manifestation of the "ethics of the Real" (p. 4). Concordantly, this theoretical background gives rise to four separate, yet to some degree complementary parts of *Interrogating Antigone*: "Philosophy and Politics", "Psychoanalysis and the Law", "Gender and Kinship" as well as "Translations, Adaptations and Performance". As it is, the book makes considerable use of interdisciplinary approaches ranging from psychoanalysis to critical theory, thereby widening the perspectives that have already been provided by the respective monographs of George Steiner and Judith Butler on *Antigone*. Owing to the breadth of aspects covered in *Interrogating Antigone*, the volume thus becomes especially pertinent to contemporary theory.

The volume opens with Tina Chanter's chapter in which she takes direct aim at Lacanian and Žižekian perceptions of the heroine as a dangerous figure by "reversing monstrous readings of *Antigone*" (p. 28). Prior to her critical engagement with the psychoanalytical readings of *Antigone*, however, Chanter traces the traits of the protagonist's political legacies by casting an eye on the "translations and adaptations that draw inspira-

tion from the figure of Antigone as a radical resource" (p. 22). This approach can be deemed as the most significant feature of Chanter's study. Being entirely cognisant of the fact that the act of translation can barely be regarded as a mere transfer between languages and always involves a socio-political motive behind it, the scholar focuses on Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* with the purpose of concretising her arguments against the so-called 'monstrous' interpretations of *Antigone*. In tune with this cognisance, moreover, Chanter provides an incisive analysis of *The Burial at Thebes* regardless of Heaney's knowledge of Ancient Greek. After all, as Chanter argues persuasively throughout her essay, "for us, there is no going back to the original text of *Antigone*, no return to a pure Sophoclean drama that would be shorn of all the translations and adaptations it has inspired" (p. 46). The various echoes that Chanter hears – and compels the reader to hear – in what Walter Benjamin would consider as the *Fortleben* of Sophocles' *Antigone*, highlights the relevance of the piece in the socio-political-cultural dynamics of the new millennium.

Well, not only Sophocles' *Antigone*, but also his *Oedipus at Colonus* as well. This, exactly, is the point taken up by Cecilia Sjöholm in her contribution to the book. Sjöholm spots in *Oedipus at Colonus* "a figure of high political significance: the refugee" (p. 48). The scholar frames her rereading of *Antigone* in conjunction with *Oedipus at Colonus* within the writings of Hannah Arendt, whose ideas on *polis* and public space along with her reflections on the situation of refugees in modernity are laden with invaluable nuances with respect to the notion of tragedy. In this regard, Sjöholm makes a crucial observation on Arendt's work by drawing attention to the fact that Arendt herself does not "offer any sustained discussion of Greek tragedy" (p. 61) in her writings. Yet, for Sjöholm, tragedy can plausibly be seen as the other space of politics when thought in relation to the figure of the refugee who is "confronted with the threat of a permanent homelessness, but also with

possibilities that open up beyond the borders of existing nations" (p. 65). Hence, what proves to be tragic, in Sjöholm's opinion, becomes birth itself. At this juncture, it is worth noting that Sjöholm lays bare the tragic conflict of Sophocles' tragedies by appealing to such vital concepts as *zoe* and *bios* (p. 54), both of which form a basis for Žukauskaitė's essay where the editor discusses these notions chiefly within the context of Giorgio Agamben's writings. That these two essays, in a sense, converse with each other is a merit of *Interrogating Antigone* since this sequence of articles allows one to meditate upon Sophocles' tragedy within a perspective broadened by the dimensions that the scholars add. Other than those of Arendt, Žukauskaitė incorporates the ideas of influential thinkers like Michel Foucault into her discussion of *Antigone*, where the scholar calls attention to "an uncanny symmetry between the unburied body of Polyneices, which is exposed publicly, and the body of Antigone, which is still alive, enclosed in the tomb" (p. 77) and proposes to think these bodies in terms of sacrifice (or scapegoat).

Later on in *Interrogating Antigone*, Liz Appel takes a closer look at Antigone's strange status within the boundaries of her theatrical world in view of the concepts of autochthony, authorship and theatricality by pointing out that these three notions "work together to suggest a kind of generation based on erasure" (p. 229). Although Appel's essential concern is to focus on Antigone within the confines of her theatrical universe, she does not refrain from interspersing (accurate) references to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Euripides' *Bacchae* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* among her arguments. The scholar's pairing of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with *Antigone* invites consideration. At the beginning of her essay, Appel establishes a (seemingly) convincing connection between *Metamorphoses* and the final (autochthonous) moments of *Antigone* when the chorus invokes Dionysus. Appel esteems this supplication to Dionysus as a connection between autochthony and theatricality, which is reminiscent of the one that she finds in *Metamorphoses*,

and continues: "Later in the play, this connection will become much more stark. Before attending to this in detail, however, I would simply ask the reader to hold this doubling in his or her mind, to connect in imaginative space the image of figures coming up from the ground and the image of figures rising from the boards" (p. 231). Still, what stays doubling in the mind of the reader can be quite troubling when Appel's approach is (re) taken into consideration within the context of the Roman *appropriation* of Ancient Greece. Needless to say, such key notions as theatricality and tragic are the notions that suffered most in this acculturation process, which has been profoundly problematized by Martin Heidegger. Appel, of course, sidesteps the pitfalls of this issue by acknowledging the apparent difference/s between the Roman stage and that of Ancient Greece. Nonetheless, the solidity of the grounds upon which she develops her arguments remains open to debate.

Interrogating Antigone links the theoretical concerns raised during the course of the book with the rather practical issues of translating, rewriting, reworking and performing *Antigone*. Deborah H. Roberts, for instance, ruminates about the problem(atic) of translation, touching the crux of the matter thereof. That Roberts is utterly aware of the dynamic nature of translation is important in that it expands the scope of her theoretical framework in the scholar's critical survey of English translations of *Antigone*. Furthermore, thanks to the illuminating comparative textual analyses that Roberts provides, she discloses how English translators imposed Shakespeare's style upon Sophocles. After paying particular attention to the manner/s through which publishing houses (re) present *Antigone* to readers by employing Gérard Genette's terminology, Roberts makes a significant observation regarding the recent translations of the play into English: "Rather than making *Antigone* an imitation of a Shakespearean tragedy, they suggest a different kind of intertextual relationship – though one that similarly seems to reverse normal chronology – by allowing *Antigone* to

quote (if never exactly) the plays of Shakespeare" (p. 310). In doing so, Roberts not only underlines the (always acknowledged, yet rarely discussed at great length outside the realm of Translation Studies) *visibility* of the translators, but also how their approach shapes the comprehension of *Antigone*. It is, therefore, not surprising to find references to such noteworthy translation scholars as Antoine Berman, Gideon Toury and Lawrence Venuti in Roberts' article. At some points, however, one wonders if Roberts could have benefited more from contemporary translation theories. André Lefevere's approach, for one, which takes particular heed of translation as the most obvious form of rewriting, could have served as a conceptual bridge to Sean D. Kirkland's chapter where the scholar hones in on Cocteau's reworking of *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex* by pointing out how the playwright himself "refers to his versions not as translations, but as 'contractions'" (p. 316). In this regard, the notion of rewriting makes even more sense when thought in relation to Kirkland's arguments, certain of which lay accent on the values that the dramatist aspires to foreground in his reworking of Sophocles' tragedies: "Cocteau, seeks to return to these works an *original* linkage between the elements, and an intense tautness throughout that linkage." (p. 320, emphasis in the original). Building upon this point, moreover, Kirkland argues on Aristotelian grounds that Antigone's confrontation with her hubristic human praxis just before going to her tomb slows the pace of the heroine's futureless hurry; thus, the moment of *peripetia* and *anagnorisis* (p. 313, 327).

Erika Fischer-Lichte's chapter moves the interrogation/s of *Antigone* to the socio-political plane. In the historical account that she provides, Fischer-Lichte brings into focus three *Antigone* productions all of which have been staged in the crucial stages of German history: the Tieck/Mendelshon version in Potsdam (1841) after Friedrich Wilhelm IV's ascendancy to the throne, Karlheinz Stroux's production in Berlin (1940) under the reign of the Third Reich, as well as Christof Nel's

version performed in Frankfurt am Main (1978) when the trials against the terror organisation Red Army Faction took place in Stuttgart-Stammheim. Fischer-Lichte's investigation becomes remarkable in the sense that it accentuates that the 'political' aspect of theatre has nothing to do with an already 'political' text like *Antigone*. Instead, "the ways in which it will be politicized depend on the particular situation and circumstances of a production as well as on its aesthetic and the specific aesthetic experience it allows for" (p. 352). The stress that Fischer-Lichte places upon aesthetics enables one to pinpoint where actually the strength of her essay lies: its documentary of the prevailing dynamics of the German stage through particular productions of *Antigone*. While the Potsdam *Antigone* anticipates the Wagnerian aesthetics to come towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Berlin *Antigone* demonstrates the (unsurprising) dominance of Wagnerian stage aesthetics which envelops and immerses the audience in the performance; and lastly, total rupture upon the idea(l) of total theatre with the Stuttgart *Antigone* which "provoked shock and outrage" (p. 350) on the part of the spectators.

Astrid Van Meyenberg carries the investigation of *Antigone* to Nigeria with an examination of Fémi Osofisan's *Tegonni: an African Antigone* by way of which the playwright reassesses the history of his country. Thus, "by enacting a movement of socio-political change set within this past, performance becomes a way to transform history into an active site where a renewed (historical) consciousness may start to take shape" (p. 368). One can hardly miss the apparent parallels between Osofisan's dramaturgy and the theatre of Bertolt Brecht. Van Meyenberg, of course, does not fail to spot the point in question here by commenting upon the metatheatrical features of Brechtian aesthetics: "despite Brecht's significant influence on Osofisan's dramaturgy, metatheatrical techniques are equally characteristic of indigenous African performance practices" (p. 373). It is possible to strengthen this argument even more by observing

how metatheatricality is at the same time an immanent part of performance practices that are native to, say, Australia, Japan and China. Then again, when Brecht's particular engagement with Sophocles' *Antigone* is borne in mind especially within the context of his *Antigone* model, where he discusses the issues of performance at great length, it can be said that an in depth conversation between Brecht and Osofisan could surely have added an extra value to Van Meyenberg's essay. And finally, Wilmer's concluding essay to the volume wraps up the majority of the theoretical and practical issues dwelled upon throughout the book by moving once again Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* to the centre of attention. Even so, Wilmer by no means excludes other contemporary performances of *Antigone* from his discussion, foregrounding the relevancy of Sophocles' piece in the twenty-first century thereof. In the words of Wilmer, "by comparing such productions as *The Island*, *Antigona Furiosa*, *Antigone in New York*, and *The Burial at Thebes*, we can appreciate how the state of exception, theorized by Agamben, has become normalized" (p. 390). This is a dire observation, which emphasises the necessity of confronting the so-called 'exceptional' actions undertaken by governments across the globe with the transformative/revolutionary potential of theatre, which manifests itself in the raw on contemporary stage through performances that expose the *tragic* and the *pathos* into view.

A common expression used in conclusions is "all aspects considered", which makes perfect sense when it comes to saying a final word (whatever that word might mean) on *Interrogating Antigone*. The book itself *obliges* one to take all its aspects into consideration when attempting to give an accurate (whatever that would imply) account of the volume in order to be able to do critical justice to the variety of arguments, viewpoints, opinions and observations made throughout the study. As such, deeming *Interrogating Antigone* as another comprehensive compilation of "thought-provoking" scholarly work on Sophocles' play falls short of giving the book the credit it deserves in its en-

tirety. *Interrogating Antigone* demands of the critic that he/she reveal those thoughts provoked. The most significant merit of *Interrogating Antigone* lies precisely in this demand.

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