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Postmodern Antigones

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ANTIGONE AND DEMOCRATIC THEORY

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H. is a renowned political theorist, familiar to scholars in classics for her controversial interpretation of the first burial of Polynices in Sophocles' *Antigone* as having been performed by Antigone's sister, Ismene. The sororal conspiracy between Antigone and Ismene first appeared in 2011 in the journal *Arethusa*, entitled 'Ismene's Forced Choice: Sacrifice and Sorority in Sophocles' *Antigone*'. By then H. had already published two influential articles on *Antigone* ('Antigone's Laments, Creon's Grief: Mourning, Membership, and the Politics of Exception', *Political Theory* [2010] and 'Antigone's Two Laws: Greek Tragedy and the Politics of Humanism', *New Literary History* [2010]). In them H. argued that *Antigone*'s relevance for contemporary democratic theory rested, paradoxically, in the character's anti-democratic commitments to an aristocratic form of lamentation, which democracy was seeking to replace in the politics of burial in fifth-century Athens. This volume, which includes a revision of the three essays in the second part of the book (Chapters 4, 5 and 6), gives continuity to H.'s efforts in facilitating a new reception of the Greek heroine as a political conspirator; a reading with which to interrupt (first part of the book) the dominant reception of Sophocles' ancient play in 'political theory, philosophy, feminist theory and cultural politics' (p. 2).

The dominant reception she contests de-politicises *Antigone* (minimises the conflicts and neutralises the divisions) by considering the play as iconic of some kind of human universality in mourning, lamentation and death, where everyone is equally included. The book's main goal, which has been at the centre of H.'s scholarship since the publication of *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (1993), is to re-politicise the play, which means to accentuate the conflict, the divisions and the fractions where theory has tried to ground universality (Chapter 1). It is against such universal humanism – characteristic of both N. Loraux's turn to the tragic *oratio* (the mourning voice) as making us feel humans first and citizens second and J. Butler's emphasis on precariousness as an universal condition of ethical vulnerability – that H. proposes *agonism*, that is, rivalry and contestation (Chapter 2).

H. rejects different theoretical efforts to ground universality arguing that behind a culturally constructed burial does not lie a non-linguistic natural death, but one that is 'always already wrapped in meaning' (p. 23). This is H.'s deconstruction at its best. Rather than trying to read in a non-linguistic cry our shared humanity, H. reads the political friction that gets carried through the non-linguistic register. Doing so, she shifts the accent from 'the politics of *lamentation*' to 'the *politics* of lamentation', deconstructing the opposition between *logos* (semantics / reason / language) and *phone* (phonetics / voice / song). H. refuses to marginalise the *agon* (*rhexis*) in the theoretical glorification of the lament's universality (*kommos*). Her procedure is that of investigating the interval, of reading the *rhexis* in the *kommos*, the ways by which *logos* both interrupts and erupts into *phone* (p. 143). Such eruption and interruption H. traces in Antigone's plotting and conspiracy with language through mimicry, parody, double entendre, *adianoeta* (the simultaneous carriage of two separate meanings) and sotto voce, all of which 'gives expression to a certain aristocratic recalcitrance in the fifth century' that is none the less important 'to democratic politics and culture now' (p. 191).

H.'s reading of the play delivers us a politically robust Antigone with which to counteract both the death-driven self-sacrificial martyr that only says 'no!' – Antigone's dominant reception in the psychoanalytic tradition indebted to Lacan – and the isolated individual who objects the law in the name of her consciousness – the liberal view of Antigone. In opposition, H.'s Antigone is primarily oriented towards life rather than death, towards pleasure rather than pain. H.'s Antigone is affirmative, collective and seeking sovereignty, a narrative model that promotes a transactional rather than an oppositional relationship to the state, which H. considers more appropriate for feminist theory and cultural politics today.

Another important contribution of H.'s *Antigone* for democratic theory is her reflection on genre, which was first articulated in *Democracy and the Foreigner* (2001) where she defended the plurality and open-endedness of the gothic novel as a better literary frame for understanding democratic action. Indebted to J. Porter's distinction between classicisation (the historical confrontation of the past with the present) and classicism (empty aesthetic claims to universality), H. now traces the political *agon* in the frame, revisiting the tragedy of the past through the melodrama of the present. Deeply influenced by Walter Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*, the unheroic and deflated melodrama of the everyday life confronts the heroic and sublimated tragedy of eternal repetition in H.'s account of the film *Germany in Autumn* (1978). But H.'s efforts to think of politics as genre-switching or re-emplotment in the *agon* that she describes as taking place between the melodramatic interpretation of Fassbinder and the tragic one of Kluge (Chapter 3), is not without risks. Fassbinder's own performed vulnerability enables H. to recuperate Butler's *Precarious Life*, which H. previously rejected as participating in the same problematic universal humanism of lamentation (Chapter 2). In other words, rather than conflict and rivalry, melodrama domesticates H.'s *agon* with Butler. Melodrama does not support the confrontation of *Antigone's Claim* (where Butler defends a catachretic human that H. considered an apt figure for agonistic humanism) with *Precarious Life*, it appeases and neutralises the force of their disagreement. Furthermore, Fassbinder's melodramatic personification of Antigone culminates in his own paranoid policing of the household, which gives small room to the action in concert on behalf of collective life that H. celebrates as the normative horizon of democratic theory. Melodrama might call attention to the limitations of plotting and conspiracy as alternative modes of publicness to the idealised public sphere of deliberative democracy.

H.'s provocative reading offers another trajectory that her text does not pursue. Her rehabilitation of Hannah Arendt's political theory, which permeates H.'s appropriation of *Antigone* for agonistic humanism, does not revisit Arendt's own insights on collective action. One significant omission is a serious engagement with Arendt's conception of civil disobedience, which does not result in the mere resistance or reflexive anti-statism that H. rejects when theory invokes this frame to interpret Antigone's actions. No longer an isolated individual agent, but a collective conspirator, H.'s Antigone could be a literary candidate for Arendt's civil disobedience. H. would need to explain why Arendt's rejection of brotherhood as a depoliticising model does not extend to sorority, a project in which her own investments in opening up Arendt's philosophy for feminist theory (which she began when she edited *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* [1995]) could have a more promising continuity. H. will face more difficulties when having to reconcile Arendt's concept of *natality* as spontaneous action, which fosters a political model that celebrates action in concert – giving some room for H.'s collective conspirator even though conspiracy was hardly valued by Arendt as politically promising – with Arendt's rejection of sovereignty as anti-political. In my view H. mistakes natality as undecidably 'non or quasi-sovereign'

and I wonder if rather than anti or counter-sovereign, it is not better to think of Antigone's claim as gesturing towards a political alternative beyond the sovereign frame, à la Arendt?

My questions are provoked by the richness of H.'s fertile rehabilitation of a new and fresh political reading of the play; one that opens up the text again. H. herself engages in such exploration when she revisits the people's previously articulated desire for natality and dance, the 'forgotten alternative of reconstituting the community through festive forgetting' (p. 45). This is the kind of life-oriented pleasure that characterised the larger festival of Dionysus in which *Antigone* was featured, and which H. celebrates in Douglas Crimp's combination of mourning with militancy as the road not taken (Chapter 2). This is also what H. reads into Bruce Bernard's photograph of Lucian Freud's painting of Nicola Bateman, which serves as the cover of the book, the re-signification of political theory as an open-ended agonistic practice, enacted in H.'s own rivalry and conspiracy with receptions of the classical text to facilitate new roads not yet taken. The book uses the rope in Bernard's photograph to hang the martyr and the lamenter (to interrupt this reception) but also to aid both women to get out of their black holes by making conspiracy into a democratic alternative to idealised models of publicness. Readers will definitely find in H.'s beautifully written text a rope with which to hang their own lamentation of politics, get out of their own black holes and pursue their own wilful readings of the classical text in revitalised political ways.

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POSTMODERN ANTIGONES

WILMER (S.E.), ŽUKAUSKAITĖ (A.) (edd.) *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*. Pp. xiv + 429, ill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Cased, £92, US\$150. ISBN: 978-0-19-955921-3.

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This volume has its origins in the 'Interrogating Antigone' conference at Trinity College Dublin in October 2006, from which the book borrows its title. It is divided into four parts: philosophy and politics; psychoanalysis and the law; gender and kinship; and translations, adaptations and performance. An introduction and 21 articles, distributed across these four parts, make up the book. The articles themselves are richer than the divisions used to group them and it is impossible to do justice to them in a short review. Thus, I will explore some transversal themes in the book rather than providing a detailed treatment of only a few essays. Given the emphasis of the text on philosophy and criticism I shall start with the critic who receives the most theoretical attention in the book, Jacques Lacan. Most essays dealing with Lacan read his *Antigone* as trapped in Creon's frame, T. Chanter most significantly. Seeking to reverse readings of Antigone as monstrous – Hegel, Heidegger and Lacan, primarily, all of whom place her outside the symbolic order that Creon metonymises – Chanter emphasises Antigone's political trajectories in translation. Such trajectories refer to Antigone's ability to produce meaning and sustain a political alternative of female revolt in her different post-colonial, post-racist, anti-repressive and anti-imperialist futures, all of which are denied when her monstrosity is accentuated. J. Fletcher does something similar in her essay when she emphasises the richness of *Antigone*'s political language – rumour, gossip, citation and speech-acts – as a metonym of the democratic voice, even if her essay