

*Antigone's Excessive Relationship to Fetishism: The Performative Politics and Rebirth  
of Eros and Philia from ancient Greece to modern South Africa*

*(N.B. This paper is still in draft form. Please do not quote or reproduce without the express permission  
of Tina Chanter [tchanter@depaul.edu](mailto:tchanter@depaul.edu))*

O Eros unconquered in battle, Eros you who destroy  
men's resources, Eros you who keep night watch on the soft cheek  
of a maiden, you make your way over the deep sea and into wild  
beasts' lairs. No immortal can escape you nor can ephemeral man.  
And whoever possesses you is maddened. You lure even the just to  
injustice—to their own destruction. It is you too who have stirred  
up this strife among kinsmen. The love glance that shines from the  
eyes of the fair bride is victorious. That love is enthroned equally  
alongside the great laws. For the unconquerable goddess Aphrodite  
deceives her victims (*Antigone*, 781-99)<sup>1</sup>

If the death of tragedy can be asserted with confidence from the perspective of German idealism, for which art tends to remain in the service of the stability and preservation of the state, not everybody was invited to the funeral: Antigone, for instance. Antigone has taken on a life of her own. Or rather, she has taken on multiple lives in multiple epochs, political contexts, and performative conditions. Having died so many deaths, Antigone seems to refuse to die definitively. As many times as she dies, she comes alive, reborn time and again, born anew each time she enters the theatrical stage, inserting herself into a new political history, providing a commentary on the history of a people, embodying the hopes for the rebirth of a nation. In one performance, for example, she constitutes a

---

<sup>1</sup> For the translation see O'Brien 1977, 60.

means of negotiating the constraints under which a group of homeless people live and die in New York's Manhattan parks, while in another—one that I shall take up at the end of this paper--she negotiates the oppression under apartheid in the townships of South Africa (see Glowacki 1997, and Fugard, Kani and Ntshona, 1974). The energy of the play would seem to be conducted through the figure of Antigone, transmitting itself from age to age, from continent to continent, from one political struggle to another.<sup>2</sup> What accounts for this incessant rebirth of Antigone in widely divergent, international, political contexts, and how might it inflect the western philosophical tendency to imagine tragedy as dead, superseded, relegated to a past that bequeaths us only **tragi-comedy**?

## Section I

[In the first part of this paper, I use Patchen Markell's reading of *Antigone* as a counterpoint to my interrogation of that which continues to inspire political appropriations and performances of the play, and how this legacy might require a rethinking of the conclusions reached by German idealism and certain strands of phenomenology about the death of tragedy.] In a nuanced and compelling, but ultimately, I shall argue, problematic, reading of *Antigone*, Markell suggests that interpreters of *Antigone* have gone astray in emphasizing the characters of Antigone and Creon at the expense of the plot of the play. For Aristotle, character is subordinate to action; tragedy is essentially the imitation of action, and characters are subordinate to the plot, which is driven by the ways in which characters are moved—not only the ways in which they move themselves, but also the ways in which they are moved by unforeseen

---

<sup>2</sup> Kevin Wetmore suggests that Antigone “might even be considered the ‘most transcultured/most transcultural’ tragedy” (2002, 169).

developments. Enlisting Aristotle's *Poetics* in support of his argument, and influenced by the important role that the unpredictability of human action plays for Hannah Arendt, Markell suggests that those who ground their readings of Sophocles' play in the identities of protagonists-- in *who* Antigone and Creon are-- fail to reap the benefits of the Aristotelian view that plot is more important than character in tragedy. The salient point for Markell is that Antigone and Creon turn out to hold mistaken beliefs about who they are. At stake here is a larger, and justified, critique that Markell is making about identity politics.

Couching his interpretation as a rejoinder to what he believes to be an overly simplified version of Hegel, namely Charles Taylor's influential politics of recognition (1994), Markell understands Hegel and Aristotle to be in substantial agreement with one another.<sup>3</sup> For both of them, Markell argues, Antigone and Creon are confounded in their attempts to take control of their own fates. Each character is confronted with the contingency of the world, which is constituted by a plurality of actors and the unforeseeable ramifications of their own acts, such that the idea that one should aim for sovereign mastery, as if agents are potentially fully in control of the outcome of their deeds, is shown to be misguided. Although Markell makes some effort not to construe Antigone and Creon as equally thwarted in their attempts to make their mark on the world, he nonetheless submits to this assumption for the most part, reading them as

---

<sup>3</sup> For Markell, "on Hegel's account, identity-based social subordination is *not* fundamentally rooted in the failure of the powerful to notice some fact about the worth or value of the subordinated—though the denial of such worth or value may certainly be part of the practice of subordination. Instead, these practices are rooted in the failure of the powerful to acknowledge something about *themselves*—specifically, in their failure to acknowledge, to bear the full weight of, the fundamental human condition of finitude" (2003, 112).

largely symmetrical in their efforts, and in their undoing (see 2003, 88). The symmetry he accords them—or at least does not disrupt as much as he might-- needs reassessing.<sup>4</sup>

The impropriety of our actions is what Markell emphasizes above all. Both Hegel and Aristotle agree that Antigone and Creon take themselves to be capable of acting in the world in a way that is illustrative of who they are, yet their insights founder. They turn out to be impotent in precisely the ways in which they took themselves to be potent. Markell's claim is one that resonates with readings such as those by Heidegger and Lacan, which have emphasized the split, uncanny way in which to be human is to be *deinos*, both monstrous and wonderful: the very quality that gives humans power is also that which undermines them. We come unstuck. Neither Antigone nor Creon succeed in effecting what they want to effect, or what they think they have within their power. They overreach themselves. They are not in control of their destiny in important ways, in ways that are not incidental, but are rather endemic to the human condition. The famous ode to man, so central to Heidegger's influential interpretation of *Antigone*, emphasizes that while humans have managed wonderful accomplishments, having sailed the seas and cultivated the land, having tamed wild beasts, and invented language, death marks a limit

---

<sup>4</sup> Markell says, "Antigone and Creon each seek to achieve a kind of masterful agency through recognition, yoking their acts to their own identities (and Polynices'). . . in action, Antigone and Creon do, and become, more and other than they intend; and ironically, the consequences of this impropriety are intensified and rendered deadly by Antigone's and Creon's own impossible efforts to overcome the vulnerability and uncertainty to which they, like all human actors, are subject" (80). Yet this seems wrong on several counts. First, Antigone's sphere of action and desire for mastery, sovereignty or recognition is severely circumscribed from the start, in a way that is simply not symmetrical to Creon—who, after all, is recognized as sovereign in a way that Antigone can never be: he is king. As Oedipus's daughter, Antigone carries a heavy burden: her family has suffered terribly, her very identity as product of an incestuous union puts her, in some sense, beyond the pale, and she and Ismene are plunged into more suffering at the news that their brothers have killed one another in mutual combat, and one of them will be deprived proper burial. This sorry state of affairs is established as early as the powerful opening exchange between the two sisters. Add to the peculiar burdens of Antigone's existential situation her disqualification from political decision making in a democracy that is limited to men, and it is hard to sustain even the illusion of symmetry between Antigone and Creon. Indeed, the whole play is structured by Creon's unexceptional expectation that it is Antigone's duty to obey him, to submit to his authority without protest. In my own reading, Antigone's asymmetrical relationship to Creon structures much of the action of the play.

to their inventiveness. Less recognized by standard interpretations of the play, but no less central to its meaning, I would argue, is the ode to eros, which, like death, is also unconquerable, and to which reason also offers no resistance.<sup>5</sup> I will suggest that the power of eros, though somewhat neglected by Sophocles' exegetes, many of whom have been influenced by Heidegger's reading, is crucial to a thorough understanding of *Antigone*. As a corollary argument, I will also suggest that Antigone's concern to extricate *eros* from *philia*, where Oedipus had confounded them, is directed towards her broader concern to renew the principles according to which the polis is to be guided. Antigone acts upon the principle of *philia*, which she sees as fundamental for the health of the polis.<sup>6</sup>

Markell's fundamental point—and it is one with which I agree, at least in a qualified way—is that the tragedy of *Antigone* reveals that the aspiration for sovereign mastery not only reaches for an untenable ideal, but that the illusion that one could ever be completely in control of the meaning of one's actions amounts to a fundamental

---

<sup>5</sup> The usual assumption is that the ode to eros (quoted at the beginning of the paper) refers us to Antigone and Creon, but in my reading it refers, perhaps primarily, to Oedipus and Jocasta. O'Brien says, for example, "The Chorus is, of course, thinking of Haemon's great passion for Antigone" (1977, 60). While I agree with O'Brien that for Antigone passions are "not enslaving but ennobling" (60) I read the play, following Mader, by understanding Antigone to articulate a principle of disambiguation, and understand the commentary on eros to refer just as much (if not more) to Oedipus and Jocasta as it does to Haemon and Antigone. Antigone's retrospective perspective, designed to rectify the lines of inheritance that Oedipus had mixed up, conflating two orders—that of *eros* and *philia*—that should have been separated, is directed toward sorting through the familial relationships that have become confused by the incestuous act of Oedipus. At the same time, the rectifying work accomplished by Antigone also creates new possibilities, allowing the principle of Antigone's own act of burial to take on meaning beyond the simple act of burial, conferring on Polynices an identity that goes beyond that of being the son of Oedipus, and conferring on Antigone a meaning that goes beyond her identity as Oedipal daughter. The principle that emerges is one that implicates not just genealogical lines, but also the signification of Antigone's act becoming meaningful in ways that will echo throughout future polities. On this reading, the "bride" referred to is Jocasta, with whom Antigone might well be said to identify—and in this sense the ode to eros can be read as referring to both Jocasta and Antigone—it is Oedipus's acting on his attraction to Jocasta that exhibits the inescapability and destructiveness of eros, and which eventually leads Antigone to her death. The incestuous acts of Oedipus pit his sons against one another, and leads to the tragedy of *Antigone*.

<sup>6</sup>As O'Brien says, *philia* is Antigone's "guiding principle," one that "can . . . preserve life in society. Thus, the individualistic ethos gives way to one appropriate for the *polis*" (1977, xxv).

misconception. Not only does the ineluctable plurality of actors on the human stage preclude one from being the author of how one's own actions will come to signify—for Arendt, of course, it is not me but others who come after me who are able to discern and narrate the meaning of my actions--tragedy also reveals that the aspiration of sovereignty in and of itself is misguided, since the (illusory) sovereignty of some subjects is necessarily purchased at the expense of the sovereignty of others.<sup>7</sup> Suffering is, as Markell puts it, “ineliminable . . . the attempt to become master of our own deeds and identity is not only doomed to fail, but risks intensifying that suffering unnecessarily, even demanding that we give our lives for what will turn out to be an illusion of control. . . . the pursuit of recognition . . . involves potentially catastrophic failures of acknowledgment” (Markell 2003, 65-6). This is consonant with my reading of *Antigone* in terms of abjection, where certain subjects are abjected, in a way that fails to acknowledge their necessity to other subjects who abject them—although my emphasis is on how this excluded yet constitutive otherness is taken up even in apparently progressive discourses that recycle old terms in new ways, thereby creating a cyclical production of dejects. I follow this through by considering how *Antigone* is recreated in various political narratives, and how her rebirth is often implicated in a refiguring of

---

<sup>7</sup> Markell says “tragedy helps us understand both why a perfect regime of recognition is impossible, and, more importantly, why this impossibility is not only a regrettable limitation but itself a condition of the possibility of agency—the flip side, as it were, of freedom. To will truly successful recognition, on this view, is to exchange one sort of social death for another, sacrificing the uncertainty of the plural, futural world for the final word, the perfect subjection, of the eulogy—an exchange *Antigone* herself is willing to make” (2003, 88). Alternatively, one could read *Antigone*'s acceptance of her own death as a willingness to take on and think through the plurality of human action, her understanding that she is not the center of the universe, and that the ramifications of her actions have implications for others. In this way, *Antigone* might be seen to understand the limitations of her own sovereignty – an understanding she might be said to be predisposed towards, given the politically over-determined asymmetry that circumscribes the meanings any of her actions or words might take on.

abjection.<sup>8</sup> Markell plays out his insight about the extent to which claims of sovereignty stipulate others as non-sovereign in a Hegelian register. To believe in the ideal of equal recognition that Taylor reads Hegel as ultimately endorsing is to make Hegel stand for an ideal that Hegel is in fact just as concerned to problematize as he is to embrace, according to Markell.

While I agree with Markell that Taylor's position is untenable, both as a reading of Hegel and, in terms of its own argument, I also think that Markell's intelligently articulated and thought-provoking reading, while important and engaging at a number of levels, runs aground in ways that are finally insoluble.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, one of the insights on which Markell insists, namely the importance of what he refers to under the heading of the impropriety of action, and the impossibility and undesirability of retaining any

---

<sup>8</sup> Winston's response to John in *The Island* is a case in point. In his attempt to deflect John's ridicule at his dressing up as a woman in order to play Antigone, Winston engages in a maneuver that abjects women. He would rather be subjected to Hodoshe's inhumane treatment than be a woman. To be a woman is figured here as the most intolerable level of existence. Yet Winston's gesture is made in situation that could itself read as effeminizing. Both the treatment to which he is subject by the prison guard, and the frequency of prison rape function here as humiliations that Winston positions himself as embracing, in order to distinguish himself from the greater humiliation of being ridiculed for playing a woman, for playing Antigone. And yet the abjection that figures women is recuperated, when Winston, despite his misgivings, goes ahead with the performance of Antigone, and encounters not ridicule but respect. His audience of prison inmates understands only too well the profound sense in which Antigone's imprisonment for adhering to a principle, for being who she is, reflects their own situation.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor's position is untenable both because he seems to hold out the possibility of a fairer and more equal distribution of sovereignty without acknowledging that the sovereignty of socially privileged members of society is often won precisely at the cost those who are less privileged, as Markell says, and because Taylor does not take on board fully the fact that recognition itself is structured by systemic privileges that derive in part from the very privileges that are purchased for some at the cost of others. When Saul Bellow says that we will take the Zulus seriously if and when they produce a Tolstoy (see Taylor 1994, 42 and 71), he is assuming that western standards of what constitutes great literature are universally applicable, and that therefore any literature that falls short of such stands must be inferior. To be equal to Tolstoy is to be recognized as great. The Gadamerian notion of the fusion of cultural horizons to which Taylor appeals, which is not a matter of equally valued horizons coming to mutually inform one another, but rather a matter of cultures only being able to prove themselves according to preconceived criteria, does not, it seems to me, ultimately avoid the problems that Taylor points out in the remark attributed to Bellow. Criteria for judgment as to what constitutes good literature (or "the good, the holy, or the admirable" (72) derive from the west (replete with its colonialist exploitation and imperialist domination), criteria that tend to present themselves as universal and objective by assuming the God-given right of western subjects to construct themselves as the cultural center of the world, and to relegate others to its margins. The problem is precisely to the extent that certain privileged subjects assume the right to determine what is worthy of recognition and what is unworthy, and then to label objectively good what we recognize as worthy.

aspiration of complete sovereignty, needs to be applied both to his own relationship to the quasi-sovereign authority he grants Aristotle's *Poetics*, and to the stance he assumes in relation to the historicity of his own interpretive position.<sup>10</sup>

[I do not want to presuppose, with Markell, either that the philosopher can assume ultimate authority in revealing to us the meaning of tragedy (or that of any other work of art). Equally, I resist the gesture that would unequivocally elevate the work of art above the station of the philosopher, as if the philosopher can merely submit in humility to its revelatory truth. Philosophers can contribute significantly in elucidating the meaning of works of art, but so too can works of art expand, add to, challenge or transform philosophical assumptions. As philosophers we can learn from tragedy as much as it can learn from us, and as moderns, we are indebted to our past, but so too, our ideas of the past can benefit from the insights brought to them from a future to which the past gave rise, but which also escapes the past in ways it could not have predicted. The model of impropriety, together with the significance he attaches to finitude, is one that Markell might have done well to have taken to its logical temporal conclusion. We are not completely determined by our past any more than we are completely determinative of our

---

<sup>10</sup> Markell wants to rehabilitate Aristotle's view of tragedy, as if it has been violated, establishing Aristotle as the one who knows. At the same time, he makes Hegel play a supporting role, albeit one deserving of feminist critique, so that Hegel also turns out to be a quasi-Aristotelian. Yet Markell advances no corollary critique of the untenable position into which Aristotle pushes women. Aristotle's derogatory remarks about women are therefore left to stand, as if there were no relationship between Aristotle's political views on women, and his privileging of Oedipus as the model of the tragic hero. As a result, the symmetrical relationship that Markell establishes in his reading of Antigone in relation to Aristotle is only challenged under the rubric of his interpretation of Hegel. This leaves an unresolved tension: on the one hand Markell reads Aristotle and Hegel as largely in agreement in the their critiques of the pursuit of recognition, yet on the other hand he privileges Aristotle's authority over Hegel's, with the consequence that the substantial reservations he articulates about Hegel's attitude towards women appear to be trumped by Aristotle's consistently conservative observations about women, which Markell altogether neglects. Markell does acknowledge that "Greek culture was marked by . . . a structure of power that paid a kind of ontological wage to men, organizing the social world in a way that enabled them to experience themselves (however tentatively or imperfectly) as sovereign agents" (2003, 113), but he does not situate Aristotle in relation to this observation.

future. To be finite is not only to be mortal, to accept that we are subject to the vicissitudes of life, it is also to be inserted into a history that is not of our own making, a history that we can nonetheless subject to ever new interpretations. Tragedy is not what it used to be, Aristotle is not its ultimate authority, and Oedipus is not the only tragic hero.

I share neither Markell's presupposition that the readings of Aristotle and Hegel in most important respects coalesce, nor that the character of Antigone remains circumscribed by the political meaning either Aristotle or Hegel--or, for that matter, the limited constituency of Greek society that was privileged to attend tragic performances -- ascribed to tragedy. Even if, for Hegel, Antigone serves the purpose of fueling dialectical thinking, at least he pauses (albeit briefly and obliquely) to celebrate Antigone's nobility, citing the purity of her ethical sensibility as worthy of accolade, before he goes on to deny her the rationality of self-consciousness. He does not, with Aristotle, dismiss her before she even has the chance to enter the stage. By attending to the rich political legacy of *Antigone*, I want to ask what the legacy of its continual, dramatic renaissance could mean, and, Markell's Aristotelian protestations notwithstanding, how the literary and performative character of Antigone transcends not only the plot that she both facilitates and in terms of which she is inscribed, but also the political contingencies of the historical epoch of her birth.]

First, and perhaps most striking of all, especially in a sustained consideration of how the pursuit of recognition can itself be misplaced, Markell declines to devote any attention to the ways in which Antigone's plight might be informed by her father's own flawed attempt at self-recognition, and the catastrophic results his eventual self-knowledge bring. Oedipus and Antigone constitute very different types of tragic heroes,

Oedipus's deeds having been committed unwittingly and unintentionally, while Antigone's are committed in full knowledge of the inevitable consequences, consequences that Antigone embraces from the beginning.<sup>11</sup> Antigone knows she will be punished by death for her deed, but since she believes she is right in her piety, she is prepared to submit to the repercussions of her act, and in doing so she could be said to accept that she is not sovereign master of the meanings her act takes on.<sup>12</sup> Others, such as Creon, do not agree in their interpretations of her observance of the rites of burial as pious, preferring to focus on her defiance of state authority. Creon has condemned her in advance, having abstractly condemned anyone who might dare to flout his authority, and having determined the meaning of any possible violation of his edict in advance as disloyal. His discovery that Antigone is the one who buries Polynices does not deter him, at least initially, from carrying out his plan to the letter. In fact his discovery that it is a woman, and not a man—as he assumes—who has taken it upon herself to violate his edict, and moreover is proud of having done so, merely serves to inflame his anger, making him all the more determined to show no mercy.<sup>13</sup> Only the chorus's reservations, and Haemon's remonstrations, mediate his intention to have the perpetrator stoned, with the result that Creon might be said to relent when he decides instead to wall up Antigone alive in an underground cave. A more cynical explanation is also hinted at: Creon thinks by this means he can absolve himself of any repercussions, including guilt.

---

<sup>11</sup> Antigone is never in any doubt that she will die, although the mode of her death—death by stoning—does not conform to her expectation.

<sup>12</sup> Several explanations can be given as to exactly why Antigone believes herself to be in the right. Antigone addresses herself to different audiences throughout the play, to Ismene, to Creon, and to the chorus, and each time her focus is different. Ref Rosalie.

<sup>13</sup> Creon's assumption that a man must have buried Polynices, together with his failure to entertain any other possibility than corruption as a motive, demonstrates his narrowly political view of the world. Why would it not have occurred to him that those who are closest to him, his remaining family members, would have been most invested in burying him? Is it simply that he cannot conceive of women taking such an initiative, or is because the bonds of *philia* are always already subsumed, for him, by those of the polis?

That Oedipus and Creon are unwitting heroes, while Antigone knowingly does what she does, is crucial to whether or not, and in what way, Antigone and Creon might aspire to sovereignty, as is the salient fact that Oedipus and Antigone can assume a relationship to sovereignty from which Antigone is barred by the accident of birth. Yet the distinction is one that Markell makes unavailable to himself when he subsumes the question of what makes *Antigone* such a great tragedy under the question of what is the mark of great tragedy in general. In doing so he deprives himself of considering not only the possibility that *Antigone* might run counter to Aristotle's privileging of Oedipus, but also the possibility that Sophocles's play might have achieved greatness in a way that escaped both Aristotle's philosophical reflections on the genre of tragedy, and Sophocles' own aspirations. Markell altogether eschews the rather awkward fact that for Aristotle *Oedipus Rex*, not *Antigone*, is the exemplary tragedy. In doing so he opens his reading up to several elisions. He subsumes *Antigone*'s significance to that of tragedy in general, and elides the question of whether *Antigone* challenges, rather than confirms, the Aristotelian model of tragedy, precisely insofar as Oedipus, not Antigone, is Aristotle's exemplary hero.

Unlike Oedipus, it seems to me, Antigone knows only too well who she is. She is intimately familiar with the disastrous legacy bequeathed her: she has lived in its shadow from birth, she has suffered her mother's suicide, she and her sister have been the eyes for her father, blinded by his own hand, she has seen her two brothers' resolution of the tangled mess that constitutes her family issue is their mutual murder. If Oedipus had mingled *philia* and *eros*, remaking, redoubling, perverting familial bonds, Eteocles and Polynices resort to the other extreme. They cannot abide one another. They are too close.

It is as if they are doing everything in their power to avert a proximity that is already overly inscribed. Power sharing will not work for them, it would seem—perhaps it would repeat at the political level the incestuous familial bonds instituted by their father.

Against this background, with the inscrutable patience of Penelope unpicking the strands woven into her tapestry by day, Antigone works to sort through the kinship lines that have come to define who she is, parsing them out in a new way, conferring upon them a new order, assembling them in a new configuration. Her work is restorative: she tries to rectify the lines of kinship that Oedipus had thrown together, untangling the threads. Yet her work is also regenerative: she brings to life new possibilities, not for herself – she embraces her own finitude—but for those who outlive her, for her sister, and also for new generations to come. The work she accomplishes as a tragic hero inspires the reflection of multiple new generations in numerous polities across the epochs, and in this way her legacy lives on, helping to weave the fabric that constitutes our reflective political life.

In my reading, Antigone does not refuse the “vocabulary of politics” (Markell 2003, 80), only Creon’s narrow, authoritarian understanding of the political. Antigone engages the political in a way that challenges Creon’s view of the political, and she does so by insisting upon thinking through the relationship between *philos* and *eros*, in a way that acknowledges the importance of friendship and community for the political stability of the state. The bonds that unite loved ones play a grounding role in political community, the significance of which Creon, ultimately to his own detriment as political ruler, fails to see, having taken them for granted. While a plethora of interpreters have focused on the structuring role that the contrast between *philiros* and *echthros* plays in

*Antigone*, far fewer have honed in on the important relationship between *philia* and *eros*.<sup>14</sup>

The conflict between Creon and Antigone would appear to have been framed fairly decisively within a disagreement about the relative importance and meaning of *philia* (friendship or love) and enmity. The consensus about the importance of this dispute as to which constitutes the correct description of Polynices is, no doubt, in no small measure, due to Aristotle's famous pronouncement in the *Poetics* that recognition involves a change from ignorance to knowledge leading to friendship or enmity. For Creon, Polynices is an enemy (*echthros*), but for Antigone he is a *philos*.<sup>15</sup> When Creon tells Antigone "The enemy (*echthros*) is not a loved one (*philos*), not even when he is dead" Antigone replies "I was born [*ephyn*] to share in love, not in hate" [523]. Bernard Knox translates *ephyn* not to mean that it is in Antigone's *nature* to love, as do some translations, but in order to bring out its "literal force" (1992, 81), to show that it is "not citizenship but birth that determines one's allegiance" (81-2). Arguing that this line should be understood as "I was born not to join in their political hatred for each other but in their love for each other as blood brothers" (1992, 82), Knox understands Antigone's claim in terms of his more general argument that Sophocles "brilliantly" exploits the word *philos*, which could mean either 'close relative' or 'friend' (80).<sup>16</sup> Knox explains, "For with the meaning 'relative' it describes a situation not only arbitrarily imposed by birth (not dependent on choice, as is the case with 'friends') but also unchangeable ('friends' may turn into enemies but no matter what a relative does the relationship

---

<sup>14</sup> Charles Segal (1999) is among those to have acknowledged the important role that *eros* plays in *Antigone*, although the argument that I make about *philos* and *eros* is my own.

<sup>15</sup> See Segal 1999, 185, Knox 1992, 80-82, Foley 2001, 173, Markell 2003, 71-74, and O'Brien 1978, 5-6.

<sup>16</sup> See Knox 1992.

remains the same). For Antigone, Polynices, who is *philos*, her own brother, can never be an enemy, *echthros*, but Creon cannot admit that Polynices, an enemy, *echthros*, should be treated as *philos*, a ‘friend’” (80).<sup>17</sup>

Yet there is evidence that far from simply understanding *philos* to mean a blood relative, indicating an unchanging relationship, by recognizing Polynices as a brother, and only as a brother, Antigone is precisely effecting a change in his status. As we shall see further, when Antigone buries him as brother and nothing else, he no longer conflates the role of brother (as son of Oedipus) and uncle (as brother of Jocasta). The difficulty that has plagued many commentators—if Antigone is so committed to *philia*, how can she act with such apparent cruelty to her sister, also a *philos*?-- falls into place once we take seriously that Antigone is determined to disentangle *philia* from *eros*, and that in doing so she understands a *philos* as one who not only stands by their word, but who also acts appropriately towards loved ones. This is what Ismene manifestly fails to do, in Antigone’s view. Antigone will not tolerate Ismene as a *philos*, because she shows *philia* only in words, and not in deeds. Antigone demands of her sister an integrity, consistency and courage that Ismene learns too late to be considered *philos* by her sister.<sup>18</sup>

In the context of her incestuous birth, Antigone’s claim that she was born--or that it is her nature--to join in loving and not in hating, takes on a dual resonance. For the “nature” of her family, and the conditions of her birth are highly “unnatural,” at least according to the “natural” order dictated by the incest prohibition Oedipus has violated.<sup>19</sup> This “natural” order is of course anything but natural—it is in fact an order based upon a

---

<sup>17</sup> The irony is that in the case of this family, Polynices occupies multiple roles. Oedipus has compounded or redoubled the familial roles, confounding them so that it falls to Antigone to disambiguate the multiple Polynices has come to embody.

<sup>18</sup> See Blundell 1989, 112.

<sup>19</sup> See O’Brien on complexity of *nomos* and *physis* (1978, 64-5).

law (*nomos*) established to protect the conventional order of the city-state. Some might have claimed that it derives from religious authority (see O'Brien, 1978, 64), but it is nonetheless a political instrument, designed to perpetuate political power. So when Antigone claims as her nature, or as the condition of her birth, the imperative of joining together on the principle of *philia*, she might well be understood to be articulating a principle that repudiates the possibility of being the kind of lover that joins together those she loves through erotic bonds, refraining from redoubling, as Oedipus had done, the bonds of *philia* with the bonds of *eros*, remaking or reduplicating those bonds, mingling them with *eros*. In that case, she is not appealing to feminine instincts, or affirming a natural order, but rather she is distinguishing one kind of love from another, and in doing so, she is not only making a distinction that Oedipus had failed to make, but she is also articulating the need for a polity to take account of filial bonds in a way that Creon refuses. She is, in effect, calling for a polity that is based on the bonds established through *philia*, not on those established through *eros*. Since *philia* means friend, and not only those who are closest to according to familial bloodlines, Antigone can be understood to be calling for a polity based on bonds of friendship, not one in which the family (understood in terms of kinship through blood) serves unproblematically as a metaphor for the polis.<sup>20</sup> When Antigone insists on calling Polynices a friend, rather than an enemy she might be said to be refuting any principle of political inclusion based simply on the inheritance of a certain identity, whether this be understood in terms of autochthony or race.<sup>21</sup> She demands a loyalty to the good of the polis that goes beyond the

---

<sup>20</sup> Nicole Loraux points to the pervasive metaphorical service that the family performs for the polis. See *Divided City*, 30. I owe this reference to Brigitte Weltmann-Aron.

<sup>21</sup> Loraux points out that "*genos*" connotes not only "birth," but also "lineage," "family" and "race" (2000, 18). See quote from Aristotle's *Politics*, book 3: "If we suppose that *the same population inhabits the same*

contingent rules that happen to be articulated by a leader such as Creon, acts of law that derive from his fear of losing authority rather than any true insight into the political good of the polity.

There is no doubt that the conflict between Creon's and Antigone's assessments of the identity of Polynices—is he *philos* or *echtrhos*? – is crucially important to the play, that the question of defining friends and enemies ramifies throughout, but by shifting the focus of interpretation to the neglected relationship between *philia* and *eros*, I want to suggest that it is this relationship with which Antigone is definitively concerned. This is not to deny that *Antigone* can be productively read, up to a point, in terms of the important conflict that is set up between Creon's description of Polynices as enemy and traitor, and Antigone's description of him as a friend and loved one; to deny the salience of this opposition would be futile, since this language infuses the play. My point is rather that to focus on the different accounts that Antigone and Creon develop of who Polynices is--and therefore at the same time on who they are in relation to him—while it certainly captures certain significant elements of the play's conflict, also partakes of a subordination of *Antigone* to the model of tragedy in general. In doing so, it retains the Aristotelian impulse that recognizes Oedipus, not Antigone, as the exemplary tragic hero, subordinating the *Antigone* to a model that is importantly informed by a reading of *Oedipus Rex*, and obfuscating the specificity of the dynamic Antigone brings to light. Not incidentally, the Aristotelian model is one that puts an emphasis on action, rather than speech, and so presupposes subjects who are capable of having their actions understood, rather than those who have to work to establish the right to have their actions and words

---

*territory*, must we say that, as long as the inhabitants are of the same race (*genos*), the city remains the same despite the continual succession of births and deaths" [quoted].

taken seriously, to have their explanations and justifications heard in ways that matter. Antigone's actions leave a trace that is harder to discern, one that is unfolded through the multiple inscriptions of her character, in her rebirth each time she enters the stage.<sup>22</sup> Whether Aristotle or Markell like it or not, Antigone would appear to have escaped time and again any subordination to the plot of tragedy. If Antigone will not die a definitive death, perhaps her incessant rebirth is less a symptom of a melancholic culture that refuses to let her die, than of her restless, chthonic spirit, whose defiance of injustice is reborn when an unjust politic emerges as the order of the day.

Antigone makes an intervention into the definition of the political, demanding its renewal, retrospectively rectifying the relations between *philia* and *eros* that Oedipus has put askance, posing the question of whether the *polis* can reconstitute itself. By focusing upon the relationship between *philia* and *eros* I explore the sense in which Antigone calls for a rethinking of a polis that functions only by excluding from proper symbolic, political representation certain subjects on whom it nevertheless depends in ways that it systemically fails to acknowledge. The consensus about the importance of the dispute as to which constitutes the correct description of Polynices, whether he is *philos* or *echthros*, is no doubt, in no small measure, due to Aristotle's famous pronouncement in the *Poetics* that "Recognition [anagnorisis] . . . is a change [metabole] from ignorance or knowledge, leading to friendship [philian] or enmity [echthran]" (1995, 1429a). So long as we are in the business of quoting Aristotle as an authority, we might do well to remember too that Aristotle regards friendship as a key aspect of ethical conduct. "For friendship is a virtue,

---

<sup>22</sup> One might say that in order for her actions and words to take on their full meaning, an interpretive, community has had to appear, a community of readers and playwrights, one that is still in the process of constituting itself, in an ongoing conversation across the ages.

or involves virtue; and also it is one of the most indispensable requirements of life.”<sup>23</sup>

Creon might have done well to remember the importance of friendship (*philia*) in relation to virtue, and to acknowledge the sense in which Antigone redirects eros in order to safeguard the importance of both *philia* and *eros*.

Antigone and Creon stand in very different relationships to the contingency of the world.<sup>24</sup> Antigone is open to the fact that her deed is opposed by Creon, and that Creon has the power to punish her for it, while Creon insists upon his absolute sovereignty, come what may—until his denouement.<sup>25</sup> To what extent Antigone’s willingness to accept the limitations inherent in her control of the effects of her own action is a function of her structurally subordinate political position, how far it might be due to her character, and how far her character might have been shaped by her situation must remain an open question. As far as Aristotle’s views on these matters are concerned, he is better at articulating the ways in which character needs to be developed in synchrony with what the given conventions of a particular society – in this case fourth century BC Athens –

---

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle (1975, 451). Markell (2003, 74-9) has a useful discussion on the question of the relationship between Aristotle’s *Poetics* and his ethical philosophy, and the merits of looking to one rather than the other to provide an interpretative framework for tragedy. While I might quibble with the specifics of his argument, I shall accept his conclusion that it is legitimate to draw not only on the *Poetics* but also on Aristotle’s ethics—which is centrally concerned with the propriety or impropriety of human action, just as tragedy is—in order to illuminate tragic action.

<sup>24</sup> In this regard, Hegel’s comment to the effect that “when women are in charge of government the state is in danger, for their actions are based not on the demands of universality but on contingent inclination and opinion” ([Hegel 114; Phil of right sec 166] 2003, 114) might take on a very different meaning than the one he confers on it.

<sup>25</sup> Of course there is a sense in which Antigone cannot but be open to Creon’s contrary views, since he maintains a structural power over her that precludes any power she might have over him. This does not prevent him being threatened by her insubordination, nor does it prevent the repercussions of her deed—which takes on meanings that escape the authority Creon would impose on her—going beyond what they both might have expected. Even if Antigone is designated as subject to Creon’s political authority, or perhaps precisely because she is, there is a sense in which she is required to suffer his point of view in a way that he is not required to suffer his. Not only does she have no choice in the matter, but for her the necessity derives from a structural relationship of power, whereas the sense in which Creon ends up suffering the consequences of Antigone’s actions carries no necessity. As it happens, Haemon and Jocasta commit suicide—but it could have been otherwise.

deem appropriate according to certain contingencies of birth (such as gender) than he is willing to consider that such normative expectations might demand rethinking.

Aristotle's assumptions about what constitutes the appropriate actions and character for women turn out to be heavily informed by the political exigencies of his day. For Aristotle (1975), one learns appropriate actions by looking to the *phronimos*, whose actions are exemplary, one develops the ability to judge situations appropriately through the experience of being called upon to act in an ethically appropriate manner, and one becomes the sort of person who does indeed act appropriately through developing the desire to do so, through establishing good habits. In order to deliberate and act virtuously, for the right reasons, at the right time, with the right feelings and so on, according to Aristotle, one has to become the kind of person who not only knows how to judge situations appropriately and act in accordance with what is called for, but one also has to have developed the capacity to want to do so. One can only do this by engaging in virtuous acts, gaining appropriate experience, and becoming practiced and habituated to acting well and living a virtuous life. Indeed, this is precisely how one's character is formed. The process of developing a pattern of making the right choices is itself how one learns to become ethical.

Yet this begs the question of whether there might be legitimate reasons to question generally accepted views about what constitutes virtue. Such questioning is precisely what Antigone does when she challenges the wisdom and appropriateness of Creon's prohibition on Polynices' burial. Her act of burial, and her absolute conviction that she is right, brings into question that which constitutes appropriate feminine action as legitimated by dominant ideology. Her position is informed by an ethics that is marginal

to hegemonic ideas, yet which might also very well be right. In so far as Aristotle merely endorses the prevailing view that women are unsuited to politics and leadership, as he does when he stipulates that women are incapable of rigorous deliberation, he leaves no room for any consideration of viable changes to the status quo. For him, acting ethically is acting appropriately, and to act appropriately is what constitutes the norm. [Children learn by looking to others who embody the appropriate norm, and they become accomplished in their virtue by learning to judge situations in accordance with the mean.

By the mean Aristotle does not refer to some external standard or ideal to which everyone is beholden. Rather the mean will vary from person to person, since each person is unique. If one is disposed to anger, one will have to moderate one's anger in order to ensure that one does not allow the emotion of anger to be inappropriate to the hurt caused; but if one is phlegmatic, and slow to become angry about that which calls for anger, one needs to develop the appropriate response. Sometimes anger is called for. A grave harm demands outrage—otherwise we become tolerant or indulgent of that which should outrage us. The tension that comes fully into view here is that cultural norms dictating what is appropriate according to gender, class, or ethnicity tend to structurally privilege not only certain types of conduct, but in doing so they also elevate some subjects over others, thereby systematically endorsing certain types of entitlement which are aligned with certain contingent characteristics or accidents of birth.

Some of us will have different views about what should outrage us than others, and the general consensus on what should morally outrage us and what should not is culturally and historically variable. The history of slavery in the United States, for example, outrages some people, whereas others try to minimize it, and think we should

forget about it, that it is not important, that history has moved on, and that it does no good to dwell on the past. They believe we should forget slavery, rather than obsess about it. Such views tend to be held by those who have not suffered from the legacy of slavery; who tend to want to wipe the slate clean in a way that obliterates the significance of past wrongs. Such views tend to be promulgated by those whose social privileges have exempted them not only from the suffering that stems from the history of slavery, but also from seeing the salience of the suffering of others, and sometimes from seeing the suffering at all, from registering it as suffering. Social privileges are, in fact, constituted in part by the incapacity to recognize some suffering as meaningful, by a blindness that goes beyond individual failures of empathy, extending to the epistemic organization of what counts as salient or observable, structuring the very possibility of that which can signify according to legitimate ways of understanding the world. Often knowledge that is legitimated takes on the appearance of objectivity, withstanding any efforts to challenge its apparently undisputed status. Things are just the way they are, it would seem.

Those who continue to be, or learn to be, outraged by slavery typically construe a significant relationship between the fact of slavery and contemporary institutionalized racism. We do not think that we can afford to forget the past because we have learned to see its continuing effects. Either we have suffered, or we have learned to see as salient the difference between the relative ease with which some of us have been able to negotiate the world in order to accomplish our goals, and the difficulties faced by those afflicted with systematic discrimination in matters as central to living a viable life as income level, standards of housing, schooling and health care. We acknowledge causal links between race and differential levels of poverty, education, access to health, and residential

segregation. We admit that role models are crucial to how we conceive of what opportunities are accessible to us, and what kind of future we can conceive for ourselves. We have learned, or are learning to see, the riches that our relative privilege has facilitated for us, and that to which it has blinded us, or taught us not to see.

I insist upon this example of institutionalized racism and its relation to slavery and the difficulty some of us have in construing as significant and lamentable the suffering of others because during the time slavery occurred, to decry it was relatively rare—rare but possible, whereas to condone it was the norm. Aristotle does not seem to have been outraged by the slavery of ancient Greece. Yet some would argue that he should have been. Further, since Antigone makes a point of differentiating her brother from a slave, slavery occupies an abject position in the play.<sup>26</sup> It seems crucial, then, to be able to distinguish between the governing norms of the time, whether they condone slavery, apartheid, or political discrimination of any description, and what might now pass as just or virtuous.]

## Section II

Perhaps Antigone's excessive character, her excess of love for her brother, her refusal to be circumscribed by Creon's law, subsists less in the appeal that Antigone makes to unchanging, timeless, eternal laws, than in her strategic political re-emergence at times of political crises, which tells a different story.<sup>27</sup> If so it is precisely the contingency of the lines demarcating Antigone's exclusion that marks out her story, a contingency that

---

<sup>26</sup> Antigone contrasts Polynices to a slave in establishing the necessity to honor him in death, as if a slave would be unworthy of burial, insufficiently human: "for it was no slave, but a brother who died" (*Antigone*, 517; for the translation see Blundell 1989, 106). Creon, in his turn, will refer to Antigone as a "slave" (479; see Blundell 1989, 119).

<sup>27</sup> Ismene regards Antigone as excessive (see Blundell 1989, 111 and *Antigone* 67f)

becomes all the more pronounced with each rebirth of the play, as each new political context continues to plot out a history of the unstable content of excluded yet constitutive others, a history that proves to be variable over time and across cultures. If there is a sense in which Antigone exceeds any attempt to reduce her to the politics and ideology of an era in which it would have been enough to be a woman to suffer a politics of exclusion, I also want to resist the abstract gesture that is content to construe Antigone as a figure of excess, as if she merely marked the limits of the articulate, serving as a placeholder to designate that which is outside discourse (see Lacan 1992), as if her multiple dramatic rebirths did not itself etch out a political genealogy of multiple occupancy, a continual renaissance of that which is said to be excessive for each new political staging of Antigone's rebirth.

We should not imagine that the significance and meaning of the original production of *Antigone* is easily deciphered. Although we are dealing with a play penned by a male dramatist, acted by an all male cast for what was almost certainly an all male audience, in a society in which women occupied a marginal role, we cannot assume that a performance of *Antigone* would have operated solely in the service of patriarchal ideals, simply through the suppression of women. Politically women were confined to the private realm and excluded from the public—yet the play itself concerns how to negotiate the boundary between public and private, of where and how to draw the line.<sup>28</sup> Any interpretation of the impact of tragic theatrical performance in fifth century BCE Athens will depend both on what we take to be the political function of tragedy--the subject

---

<sup>28</sup> Sue-Ellen Case says, "The classical plays and theatrical conventions can . . . be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing actual women and replacing them with the masks of patriarchal production" (1985, 318). Yet Mclure is no doubt right to suggest that "Attic drama should not be understood simply as a univocal, hegemonic discourse in service of civic ideology; it is a complex, polyvocal, and polysemous genre that alternately subverts and reinforces the dominant agenda" (1999, 5).

matter of which in this case includes contesting the confinement of women to the private realm--and on how the performance itself enacts, even as it disavows, its own critique, re-creating the very conditions of exclusion it scrutinizes.

If (contra Aristotle) tragedy itself partakes in a process of meaningful political critique, we cannot assume that tragic drama merely confirms the socio-political privileges that dictate male privilege.<sup>29</sup> While J. Peter Euben's claim that "Tragedy called into question the dominance of *polis* over household, the enforced silence of women, the traditional masculine drive for glory and power, and the division of public and private in terms of rigid gender distinctions" (1986, 37) is borne out by *Antigone*, it is also clear that the material conditions of its performance re-enacted the very disavowal that it theoretically put into question. If women are confined to the *oikos*, excluded from political participation and also from the theatre of Dionysus, it was their exclusion that made possible the process of critical reflection enabled by the performance of tragic drama. Without the contributions of women and slaves, without their work behind the scenes—a phrase that can be read here more literally than usual--men would not have been free to pursue political debate, including that in which dramatic performances were implicated. Structurally the freedom of free citizens was dependent upon housework, in the same way that "[c]itizenship was dependent on family lines" (Case 1985, 319). David

---

<sup>29</sup> See Boal 1998. Greek tragedy is said to specialize in depicting the awful, chaotic, destructive consequences that ensue when women challenge the boundaries of convention, endangering the order of the polis by the very fact that they think and act for themselves, or "move on their own" (Borregaard 2005, 68). Tragedy is thus understood as merely confirming the danger that women represent when they violate the expectation that requires them not to be the authors of their own movement, not to act but to obey. Rather than construe tragedy as reaffirming the stability of the border separating politics from nature, so that if women are positioned "outside of society and its boundaries" they are necessarily "close to nature" (Borregaard 2005, 68), tragedy might itself become a way of contesting how those boundaries are drawn. To question how a society draws its boundaries is at the same time a way of demonstrating the politicized nature of those boundaries, of who is recognized as capable of acting politically, and who is legitimated as moving of their own principle and accord, and who is not.

Halperin suggests that “the silence of actual women in Greek public life and the volubility of fictional ‘women’ (invented by male authors) in Greek cultural expression do not represent opposed, contradictory, or paradoxical features of classical Greek society but, on the contrary, are connected to one another by a strict logical necessity. Greek men effectively silenced women by speaking for them on those occasions when men chose to address significant words to one another in public, and they required the silence of women in public in order to be able to employ this mode of displaced speech—in order to impersonate women—without impediment” (1990, 290). If the silence of women was required, so too was their physical seclusion; they occupied separate living quarters, a separation that was at least in part a function of the need to assert control over lines of inheritance (see Pomeroy 1995, 78). [Women were to be contained and controlled not least because they were needed to ensure the continuation of the polis through the reproduction of citizens, hence Solon’s restrictive legislation concerning not only “the walks, feasts, trousseaux, mourning, food, [and] drink” but also the “sexual activity of women” (Carson 1990, 156).<sup>30</sup> Secluded in the house for the most part, even within the house women were confined to certain rooms. In the words of Anne Carson, while men “habitually . . . le[ft] the house to confront the outdoors in war, commerce, political life, the fields the sea, the *agora*” a woman’s life was typically “closed upon itself in its own domestic space” (1990, 156), said to have been “dark and insanitary” (Pomeroy 1995, 59). As Pomeroy puts it, “Women of all social classes worked mainly indoors,” concerning themselves “with the care of young children . . . fabrication of

---

<sup>30</sup> On Solon’s legislative constraints on women see also Pomeroy 1995, 57 and 63, 80. McClure points out that “male anxieties about women’s reproductive power” may well derive from the fact that men could not “know the true paternity of their children” and so were “plagued by uncertainty” about the truth that was only known to women (1999, 27).

clothing, and the preparation of food.” While “[p]oorer women . . . went out to work . . . as washerwomen, as woolworkers [and] as vendors, selling food or what they had spun or woven at home” they mostly “pursu[ued] occupations that were an extension of women’s work in the home” (1995, 72-3).]

The political and legal inferiority of women in fifth century BCE Athens is well established. Women “play virtually no public role other than a religious one in the political and social life of ancient Greece” according to Helen Foley (**ref**). Since religion, as Sarah Pomeroy points out, “was subordinate to and an integral part of the state, and the state . . . was in the hands of men,” even women’s religious role was circumscribed.<sup>31</sup> [Pomeroy observes that “Direct participation in the affairs of government—including holding public office, voting, and serving as jurors and as soldiers—was possible only for male citizens” and that “Athenian law of all periods tended to regard the wife as a veritable child, having the legal status of a minor in comparison to her husband” (1995, 74).<sup>32</sup> Women’s work “was not highly valued . . . and their lives were not dissimilar” from those of slaves (1995, 71). The expectation was that women produce “legitimate heirs to the *oikoi* . . . whose aggregate composed the citizenry” (1995, 60). Marriage, with the aim of procreation, was therefore considered the principal duty of females, a duty that took on particular importance due to the scarcity of males as a result of frequent war.] Women were not citizens and yet were strictly necessary in their reproductive status. As Nicole Loraux says, “As progenitor of male children, woman provided her husband with sons, perpetuating his family, and the polis with citizens, for its own posterity. Without

---

<sup>31</sup> Foley [Halperin, 290]; Pomeroy 1995, 75.

<sup>32</sup> The fact that Antigone is referred to throughout *Antigone* as a “child” [insert] is reflective both of her inferiority as a woman, and, perhaps of the youth of unmarried females. Pomeroy says “A girl was ideally married at fourteen to a man of about thirty” (1995, 64).

this other, this woman, there was no polis . . . And yet in the Greek imaginary she was still an extra” (2000, 23).

A principal reason for requiring that women’s speech and movement be curtailed was the need for the polity of fifth century BCE Athens to control what was deemed to be women’s otherwise uncontrollable eros. For the Greeks, Carson suggests, women are associated with,

formlessness and the unbounded in their alliance with the wet, the wild, and raw nature. They are, as individuals, comparatively formless themselves, without firm control of personal boundaries. They are, as social entities, units of danger, moving across boundaries of family and *oikos*, in marriage, prostitution, or adultery. They are, as psychological entities, unstable compounds of deceit and desire, prone to leakage.

In sum, the female body, the female psyche, the female social life, and the female moral life are penetrable, porous, mutable, and subject to defilement all the time. . . . It is in her erotic life that woman most vividly lacks completion. . . . This porous sexuality is a floodgate of social pollution, for it is the gate of entry to *oikos* and *polis* (Carson 1990, 158-9).<sup>33</sup>

The demand for the policing of women’s sexuality resided in the importance of establishing clear lines of inheritance, which could only be achieved through the surveillance of women’s reproductive power.

If this was an era in which “[c]lear lines of reproduction were vital to the polis” (Case 1985, 319), it was also an era in which the nature and clarity of those lines was put

---

<sup>33</sup> See also Borregaard, who observes the ancient Greek fascination with “the woman who is taken beyond the boundaries of order to become an agent of ruination. These female prototypes cross the border into chaos in different ways but this action usually results in self-destruction” (2005, 68).

on trial in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and in Sophocles's Oedipal cycle. Yet we should not imagine that the capacity of tragedy to constitute critique had uniform effects for all its subjects, any more than we should assume that women's silence was absolute.<sup>34</sup> As Euben says, "By putting recognizable actions onstage and so on trial before the citizenry who had decided upon them but were now reconstituted as an audience reflecting on what they had done, tragedy contributed to the democratic tradition of self-critique" (1997, 143).<sup>35</sup> Of course, what needs to be emphasized is that in so far as this citizenry was exclusive of the active political participation of women and slaves the scope and implications of self-critique were always already susceptible to compromise.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, just as sanctioned forms of the public expression of women's voices, such as ritualized mourning, were subject to both delimitation and transgression, so the officially sanctioned public representations of femininity that theater constituted could not control the meanings performances might take on. [Laura McClure points out that in tragedy "most of the extant plays situate the action at the house door, a realm that is both a private domestic context and a public platform, where women's presence was considered a potentially disruptive and dangerous intrusion into public space." She draws the following conclusion: "For this reason, tragedy tirelessly enumerates the importance of remaining within the house for both women and girls" (1999, 24). One might equally read tragedy as challenging the enforcement of boundaries that keep women behind closed doors, as pointing out the liminal character of women's position, poised on the

---

<sup>34</sup> For McClure, "Although women were largely excluded from the discursive realms in which male civic identity was consolidated in classical Athens, their silence and seclusion have to be understood partly as the fictional constructs of men: women did speak, to their husbands, their sons, to one another; they found a public voice through ritual whereas noncitizen and lower-class women frequently moved through the public world of men" (1999, 24).

<sup>35</sup> See also Euben's introduction to *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (1986), esp. p. 24, 28-9, and 37.

<sup>36</sup> See Loraux.

threshold.] Even as the plot of Sophocles' *Antigone* condones the need for women to be controlled for the good of the social whole, endorsing the sacrificial imperative, I suggest the character of Antigone performs a redirection of eros, which is channeled towards a re-conception of the conventionally upheld relationship between sexuality and politics in Sophocles's Athens.<sup>37</sup> Women's erotic activity, which typically would have been subordinated to the reproductive imperative of ensuring the continuation of the family line, is rewritten in the figure of Antigone, whose performance contests, even as in another way it underwrites, political attempts to contain women within the *oikos*. While the authorial intention of Sophocles might well have been to demonstrate the need to curb Antigone's excess, this has not prevented the character of Antigone from having captured the imagination of political dramatists around the world, creating a legacy that has proved impossible to contain—even in the face of sometimes successful attempts to re-inscribe that excess in the name of dominant narratives.

In remarking on the fact that dramatic performances both exceed, and are subject to re-inscription by authoritative convention, it is worth reminding ourselves—and it does seem to be necessary to keep bringing it up, such is the frequency with which it disappears from view—that as far as we know the character of Antigone would have been acted by a male for an all male audience.<sup>38</sup> What is usually dismissed as Ismene's conventional feminine obedience, or heralded as Antigone's courageous stand against

---

<sup>37</sup> Cf Markell (2003), who exhorts us to return to Aristotle's prioritizing of plot over character, a move that risks reducing the political impact of tragedy to a conservative impulse, and ignores the possibility that Antigone's character might refuse to be contained by the plot Sophocles constructs for her, one in which her death puts to rest her defiance of the king. I am suggesting that Antigone escapes both Sophocles' grasp and any Aristotelian attempt to confine her to the contours of a tragic plot. Her spirit defies the death meted out to her, living on, not merely as a fetish, but in her call for a politic that doesn't blindly appropriate from those it refuses to recognize even as they remain indispensable to it. . .

<sup>38</sup> Although there has been some controversy over whether or not women attended performances, Goldhill (1997) reaffirms the traditional view that women were not in attendance. There is general agreement that women did not act in the plays.

such conventionality would have been presented by a male actor to what we assume to have been an all male audience (although there is still some controversy about this).<sup>39</sup>

The fact that a male actor would have performed Antigone's part means that a play that examines as a major theme the political exclusion of women re-enacts this exclusion as a condition of staging its interrogation. A politics of exclusion thus redoubles itself, even as it creates a space in which the performance of Antigone exceeds the political requirement that dictates women's silence in the public sphere.

The set of conventional corporeal codes intended to mark a character as a woman would have operated in such a way as to bracket the presence of a male body onstage, allowing the audience to read the performance of the character as a woman. Women's confinement within the house was such a mainstay of Athenian life that one of the performance features indicating to the audience that a character was female rather than male was a lighter skin color (since women would not have been tanned, given their confinement indoors), an effect that could be produced, if necessary, by the use of white lead.<sup>40</sup> Other indicators included tunics that were shorter than those worn by male characters, masks with long hair (Case 1985, 321) and "body padding . . . if the evidence of vase painting" is to be taken at face value (Ormond 2003, 1).<sup>41</sup> These performance codes operated in a manner that, rather than being disruptive of gendered roles, kept them safely in their place. As Kirk Ormond says, "Such conventions—body padding being the most obvious example—serve a double function: they allow the audience to suspend judgment on the sex of the actor, and they allow the actor to portray the female sex without fully taking the risk of adopting the other gender" (2003, 23). Accordingly, in

---

<sup>39</sup> See Pomeroy 1995, 80 and Winkler 1990, 226.

<sup>40</sup> Griffith 1998, 247.

<sup>41</sup> [Ref to voice in Aris—see Mclure 1999, 18/Aris Rhetoric]

contrast to Sue Ellen Case, Ormond concludes that far from seeing the “theatrical transvestism” of Greek drama as “drag” or “as a kind of flirting with an alternate gender identity” we should read it in terms of a strategy of containment.<sup>42</sup> “The formalized conventions used to portray women on the Athenian stage . . . effectively served to insulate the actors from any risk of a conversion that might carry over, dangerously, into real life” (2003, 28). If male actors were insulated from the risk of adopting the other gender, is it also the case that their performance of female gender would fail to jeopardize the clear lines of demarcation requiring women’s seclusion, silence, and subordination to an essentially reproductive function? Would the performance codes of Greek tragedy simply re-enforce the silencing of women, even if they sometimes became the subject of contestation within a particular play? Or should we imagine a more complex and conflictual series of dramatic effects?

A masked actor performing a female role produces a performance that on the one hand provides the ancient Athenian audience with the assurance that the conventions demanding the successful containment of women were not being violated, and on the other hand provided for a controlled range of representations of femininity, the terms of which were dictated (but not entirely contained) by those in power. A double condition must be thought through. For the Greeks, tragedy explores and contests the political requirement (among other things) that women remain subordinate, even as it controls the danger women are taken to represent by enacting onstage their transgression of socially condoned limits. It does so in a performance that reproduces women’s exclusion from

---

<sup>42</sup> Until Sue-ellen Case took seriously the significance of what she called “Classic drag: the Greek Creation of Female Parts” (1985), the topic had been signaled only by a dearth in the critical literature on Greek tragedy. Perhaps it is unsurprising that critics have only begun to take seriously the theatrical conventions of ancient Greek theatre since the institution of women’s and gender studies as a serious academic pursuit.

political processes by removing women's bodies from public view, and having men speak their parts. This situation mimics women's actual marginality, and the fact that they were under the guardianship of men, who did their public speaking for them.

### [Section III

By now it has become commonplace to remind ourselves that the project of defining the political itself necessarily involves political judgments, yet the application of this observation will not cease to yield new insights, as long as politics remains a contested field—that is, as long as the political retains its character as political. If theoretically this point is familiar enough, the practice of politics and the assumptions of theory do not cease to find new ways of cordoning off certain beliefs as if they were inviolable, offering them up as sacrosanct and incontestable, hermetically sealed from any conceivable challenge.<sup>43</sup> One might almost say that social history marches on in the name of progress precisely by rendering evident “facts” that will come to be disputed by certain interest groups. In the process of protesting the apparently impervious character of a particular state of affairs, protestors as often as not, and usually inadvertently, find themselves enshrining new grounds as unassailably true, thereby setting off a new series of disputes, which in turn reveal the contingency of the adduced grounds, even as they proceed to hypostasize differently articulated grounds which will themselves come to be treated as hallowed—until challenged. And so on, *ad infinitum*.

---

<sup>43</sup> As Euben puts it, “What is political is itself a political issue. . . . the very contestability of what constitutes politics may be distinctive to it . . . conflicts are not just conflicts about particular beliefs or even principles, but about principles of adjudication themselves. What is at issue is the meaning and scope of accepted political values” (1997, 139-144). Contra Creon, who assumes that “the more order he can establish the more secure politics will be” Euben argues that “Politics requires insecurity and rests on contingency in a way that makes political order both a necessity and an oxymoron. The messiness and transformative dimension to politics, cannot be contained either by the singularity of Creon's world or the opposition to it, which remains implicated in that world because of its opposition” (156).

Marx illuminated the mystification that occurs in processes of reification, whereby historical forces represent themselves as indisputable and implacable, standing over against the would-be freedom of its subjects. The magical allure of the fetish, be it of the commodity or psychic variety, resides in its appearance of necessity. We do not seem to be able to circumvent it—so compelling is its attraction. Whether the fetish imposes itself as irresistible in the sense of erotically desirable, or in the shape of an apparently self-evident, transcendent truth, it presents itself as inescapable. For Marx only the emergence of a new form of production can dispel the illusion of the implacability of the commodity form. What psychoanalysis has illuminated in the dynamic of fetishism are the lengths to which we are prepared to go in order to maintain our imaginary beliefs, even in the face of evidence that belies them. Even with the benefit of an intellectual analysis that maps out the illusory nature of a belief, the pull it exerts need not falter. The truth or falsity of an idea does nothing to interfere with the dynamic of fetishism, the solution of which is not to acquiesce to the falsity of an idea once it is revealed, but to disavow it, whether it is true or false. Accordingly, the revelation of falsity does not succeed in dispelling the affective power of the fetish, precisely because the fetishist has found a way of entertaining two contradictory truths without compromising the integrity of either of them, by oscillating between them. One might even say that the compulsion of fetishism concerns the incommensurability between logic and the affective investment in the fetish. A token that condenses meaning into a hieroglyphic and idiosyncratic language, the fetish is intended to keep at bay—without removing—a belief that has captured our imagination. In this sense, fetishism constitutes a strategy of avoidance.

Any attempt to engage with the logic of fetishism cannot afford to abstract itself from the history of particular fetishes, so that there can be no pure meta-narrative of fetishism. One might think that the critical value of debunking theories of fetishism lies in clarifying how particular figures have come to signify as fetishistic. And yet, the logic of fetishism consists precisely in a refusal to draw the Hegelian conclusion that derives from the application of reason, and consists in canceling out and surpassing a previously persuasive truth, which now betrays itself as one-sided and incomplete. Far from negating a previously held truth, by incorporating this negation in order to go beyond it in a way that reaches toward a more adequate account of reality the fetishist has no trouble at all in simultaneously sustaining positions that, if cashed out logically, would yield contradictory positions. As such, fetishism proves to be peculiarly resilient when it comes to sustaining a belief in a world, the internal dynamics of which are logically inconsistent. This would suggest that no attempt to unpack the logic of the fetish by pointing out its false assumptions will manage to undo its psychic investments. The falsity of premises holds no interest for the fetishist, whose compulsion is the fetish in which affect is invested. It is important then to unfold the specific dynamic according to which a fetish compels the interest of the fetishist, and the particular ways in which this affective investment precludes investigation of that which is disavowed, as prefatory to mapping out the contours of its excluded ground.

If one of the lessons of fetishism is that mere logic will not suffice to remove an affective investment, one of the more striking aspects of psychoanalysis is how it sustains its retreat from the logic of determinate negation in and through its appeal to fetishistic

disavowal, allowing it to refrain from interrogating the adequacy of its own premises.<sup>44</sup> One can know perfectly well that woman is castrated, while at the same time maintain one's investment in a fetish that compensates for her castration, without ever stopping to question the assumptions informing the mythical character of one's belief in castration theory. Even when the fictional character of the castration myth is articulated--there never was a penis in the first place, and the assumption that there was derives from the masculine expectation that female morphology should be homologous with male morphology--there is no compunction to give up, or withdraw one's affective investment from, the fetish. Indeed the fetish distracts from the fictional status of castration theory, making not only "the truth" but also the discrepancy between one myth and another irrelevant. Psychoanalysis is therefore able to affirm the authority of its own mythical origins without contest. There is no reason to interrogate a myth that is disavowed, especially when the fetish has been fabricated in the service of the pleasure drive. No reason at all—unless of course one is a casualty of that disavowal.

One of the functions of theatre is to recreate the affective pull of the ideological in all its particularity, as well as to scrutinize its politics. Yet the logic of the fetish re-asserts itself with peculiar virulence in critical analyses of Sophocles' *Antigone*. It would seem

---

<sup>44</sup> I do not mean to advocate an uncritical embrace of Hegelian logic; one of the strengths of psychoanalytic thinking is its recognition (even if this recognition is not applied with all the rigor that it might to the assumptions of psychoanalytic thought itself) of variant types of negativity, not all of which can be subsumed under the logic of negation, let alone determinate negation. By taking seriously the indeterminacy of the imaginary, and the various ways in which inconsistency is maintained and illusions are sustained, rather than being debunked--rather than cashing out the logical implications of incompatible premises--psychoanalytic theory is capable of shedding light on how political thought often proceeds. This is not to suggest that Hegel does not acknowledge the variety of subterfuges in which consciousness engages in order to keep itself from confronting and resolving contradictory theses by moving on to a more adequate epistemological position, only that the sheer importance Hegel attaches to dialectical thinking as that which drives thought leads to a privileging of the cashing out of logical contradictions that is not in keeping with the weight that actually attaches to the political fantasies that in fact compel us. Hegel certainly saw that there were a wide variety of ways in which consciousness operates in order to keep itself from confronting the illogicality of contradiction, but whether his privileging of speculative thought allows him to accord the necessary weight to these various modes of negativity is in question.

that critics have been seduced by the allure of the fetish, even as they have attempted to analyze it. In an almost slavish devotion to the figure of Antigone, commentators have been blinded to the political logic that attends her dramatic positioning, dazzled by a highly eroticized vision of the purity of her devotion, fascinated by her demonic extremity, awed by her “unnatural” death wish, whether in praise or condemnation. Swept away by the passion of such a vision, they have neglected the thoroughgoing political critique in which Antigone is implicated, even as she seduces readers of Sophocles. Critics have often failed to exercise reflective caution about their own ideological commitments, so that even those who argue, with some justification, that the figure of Antigone becomes an occasion if not to reshape the political, certainly to consider what should constitute the political, often fall back on unexamined political assumptions about the possibility or desirability of eliminating disorder from the political order.<sup>45</sup> These assumptions take various shapes, including a refusal to entertain the question of gender as a political question, or to consider the variable political circumstances of performance, both of which are not only worthy of consideration but central to the dramatic importance and longevity of Sophocles’s play.<sup>46</sup>

It turns out, then, that the reign of fetishism has every reason to continue its refusal to question its assumptions when it comes to Greek tragedy. The missing penis, which for Freud was a product of the masculine imaginary, turns out to have been there

---

<sup>45</sup> Ref Euben

<sup>46</sup> When Lacan applies the logic of the fetish uncritically to Antigone, he simply reformulates the appeal to natural womanly instinct (O’Brien), or women’s true reproductive vocation will inform otherwise erudite, sophisticated analyses. Knox acknowledges Antigone’s act is political (76), but . . . Segal acknowledged that Antigone’s “relation to civilized values” is one of ambiguity, and not simply a repudiation of the social order: Segal says, for example, “By challenging one principle of civilization in the name of another, she generates a tragic division that calls the nature of social order itself into question” (Segal 1999, 182). He also claims that in burying Polynices, Antigone “performs [a] basic civilizing act” (160) yet falls back on gender stereotypes. Ultimately, for Segal Antigone’s comparison of herself with Niobe is reminiscent of “the unfulfillment of her womanhood” (1999, 156).

all along in the case of Antigone—albeit veiled!<sup>47</sup> Or perhaps we should say, given the profound ways in which Greek myth, not least the dramatic fate of Oedipus, has shaped the masculine imaginary—and Freud’s theoretical apparatus is exemplary in this regard—that the presence of male bodies in the theater of Dionysus will turn out to have everything to do with the subtext of the theory of fetishism. After all, as I argue elsewhere (and this will come as no surprise to anyone who has spent time trying to decipher the convoluted defenses Freud constructs with his infuriatingly yet deliciously tortuous intellectual maneuvers), fetishism reveals itself to be a strategy for men to avoid homosexuality!<sup>48</sup> In effect, fetishism allows men to engage in relationships with women to whom they accord the phallus, which prevents them from having to confront what is read as the horror of women’s mutilation, the “nothing to see” of castration anxiety, while also “saving” them from engaging in relationships with other men. On this scenario, male actors provide the missing female phallus, thereby themselves performing a fetishistic function.<sup>49</sup>

To read the character of Antigone—or any other female character of Greek tragedy for that matter—as a woman fails to challenge the rules of conduct governing performances of women by male actors, performances that would have occurred within fictional scenarios that would only have been sustained as long as the audience agreed to acquiesce to a general suspension of knowledge: male actors always play female characters. This is the classic fetishist scenario, but with a twist: I know very well (that

---

<sup>47</sup> The phalloi that were paraded in satyr plays could then be read as a hyperbolic way of drawing attention to the maleness of a character . . .

<sup>48</sup> See *The Picture of Abjection: Film, Fetish and the Nature of Difference*, Indiana UP, forthcoming. See also, “The Exoticization and Universalization of the Fetish, and the Naturalization of the Phallus: Abject Objections,” *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva’s polis*, ed. T. Chanter and Ewa Ziarek, SUNY, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> See **Foucault and Halperin on Greek male homosexuality**.

the actor is male), but all the same (I agree to read the character as female). Depending on the stability and uniformity with which this fiction is maintained, the very appearance of female characters could serve either as a reminder that no female actors are allowed onstage (in which case the exceptional mimetic “presence” of female characters becomes the exception that proves the rule), or it could serve to obfuscate this fact. Presumably, the more successful the performance of the actor playing the role of a female, the more one could forget the actual exclusion of women from the stage. The more a male actor passes for a female, the less one remembers that the actor is male and not female.

What happens, then, in the case of a female character, such as Antigone, whose characterization in and of itself is presented in such a way as to draw attention to the fact that her actions and words do not conform to those to which women were expected to conform? In not only disobeying Creon’s prohibition, but exhibiting pride in having done so, even proclaiming herself to be in the right, Antigone is met with Creon’s concerted resistance to her having flouted his authority. If she has overstepped the bounds of acceptable feminine conduct, this excess lies not only in her failure to obey Creon, but in the manner that she refuses to acknowledge that her act of defiance constitutes a failure, in her claim, instead, to be in the right. *Antigone* could thus be said to stage the oscillation of the fetishistic scenario, so that the audience alternates between reading Antigone as a woman by following the conventions of the performative cues in play, and recalling that a male actor plays Antigone. From Creon’s point of view, Antigone is, by definition, guilty—that is, she is guilty of having acted inappropriately as a woman. Yet if she is guilty of disobeying him, she is also guilty of failing to recognize her disobedience as inappropriate. As such, she is guilty of acting *as if she were a man*—that is, as if she had

the right to act on principle, for the sake of a principle, as if she had the right to stand up for, to articulate, a principle that is disputed by Creon. In fact, the words of Antigone's character would have been spoken for and legitimated by, albeit via a circuitous route, the presence of a male body onstage, within a plot originating from a male playwright whose views on women are generally recognized to have been conservative.<sup>50</sup> The condition that demanded the exclusion of female actors from the stage, paradoxically, is also one that brings a peculiar verisimilitude to Antigone's manly demeanor, providing a fleshy materiality to her having taken up a masculine stance. The performative conditions of Antigone ensure that her aberrational behavior is brought into line with the normative expectations requiring any challenge to political authority to be underwritten by the presence of a male body. Yet would the performance of Antigone not also have had ramifications beyond the legitimating male body onstage, would it not have taken part in a fetishistic oscillation between knowledge and belief, reminding the audience of the political conditions that exclude a woman from performing the part of Antigone? Would Antigone not have also drawn attention to the political subordination of women that leads to their exclusion from the performance of their roles, thereby rendering visible the political boundary that operated both to prevent women's entry into the theater and to allow their theatrical representation?] In order to follow through two possible ways in which Antigone's performance might have been read (for surely it would have been read in more than one way), let me first present a reading that remains within the confines of the oscillation played out by fetishistic disavowal (I know that the actor is male, but all the same I agree to read Antigone's character as female), and a second reading that sees Antigone as intervening in the logic of disavowal, pointing to the discarded ground on the

---

<sup>50</sup> ref

basis of which the fetishistic fiction is maintained—namely the political conditions of exclusion that require that men stand in for women in the first place. This second reading, in which women’s political exclusion from a theatrical space in which they are nevertheless represented by male performers suggests that the motif of abjection might be appropriately applied to Antigone’s capacity to draw attention to the excluded other, the exclusion of which is accomplished by means of a porous boundary, one that operates to include women in a limited, controlled, and very specific way even as it prohibits their bodily presence.

In the first register, Antigone’s act can be read as restorative, as an act that puts women back in their proper place, secures their subordinate roles, and affirms the need for the family to be loyal to and answerable to the polis. Read in this way, Antigone acts to restore the kinship laws that Oedipus had violated. She becomes a memorial to that loss, a means of bringing back an old order that had been transgressed. In attending to the corpse of Polynices, Antigone’s act puts to rest the aberration of a norm, restoring the proper order. Such a reading is consistent with the fact that the dramatic performance of Antigone would have taken place at a public festival sanctioned by the state, a celebration that either materially or notionally would have been aimed at a male audience.<sup>51</sup> The life and death of Antigone would have confirmed the need to uphold the incest prohibition, the need for men to control women’s reproductive activity with the interests of the state in mind, and the sacrificial imperative—the need to eliminate the threat of disorder that Antigone, the product of incest, constitutes in her very existence.

---

<sup>51</sup> As Mclure puts it, it is almost certain that slaves were not allowed to attend, and few women, if any, would have been present; in any case, fifth-century Athenian drama clearly addressed itself to a conceptual audience of male citizens” (1999, 17).

To read Antigone as positively affirming the established order to such an extent that she is willing to die for it--while it may well have served the purposes of those seeking to perpetuate the structures of power already at work in Athens—is to reduce her to a conduit for Athenian society to produce an image of itself that re-establishes the need for a pre-existing order that would keep women in check. Even if women had the freedom to be heard, the power to think and act for themselves, the message seems to be, they would affirm the order more or less in place. Were women capable of the best kind of political deliberation (something doubted by Aristotle), they would merely invoke the boundaries that they were considered to endanger, re-affirming these boundaries in the face of their violation, and at the same time justifying male authority.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, to celebrate Antigone for standing up against Creon, for being able to discern the dependence of the polis on the family with greater insight than he can, is merely another way of putting women back in their place.<sup>53</sup> It is to affirm the political order that Creon tries, and fails, to protect, rather than to follow through the principle to which Antigone draws attention--or rather initiates. In short, such a reading runs the risk of once again fetishizing Antigone, who becomes merely a decorative ornament in a system that attempts to confirm its status as necessary.<sup>54</sup> The tendency to fetishize the figure of Antigone operates within the confines of sanctioning women's seclusion, failing to question the contours by which the political constitutes eros as subordinate to the aims of

---

<sup>52</sup> On another reading—which, however, ultimately refuses to recognize that Antigone calls for a new political order in such a way as to draw attention to the logic of the excluded other, Antigone's ability to act is acknowledged, but only at the cost of reading her action as a transgression of the properly feminine role, such that she must be punished for her manly action. Death becomes the penalty for daring to challenge the accepted boundaries that require women to conform to "ideals of stillness" (Borregaard 2005, 68).

<sup>53</sup> Ref Carson.

<sup>54</sup> a mere detail, rendering the Oedipal deviation from the law null and void, bringing him back to the law.

a polity that benefits from the contributions of women and slaves but in which full political participation is restricted to men.

While there are certainly grounds to suppose that a performance of *Antigone* would have condoned the need to confine women to highly circumscribed and subordinate roles, I am suggesting that such interpretations might coexist with alternative readings of the Sophoclean figure of Antigone, which contest, rather than confirm, the view that women are in need of confinement, to be restrained by the guardianship of men.<sup>55</sup> In one of its registers the performance of Antigone would have thereby confirmed the need for women's containment, even as in another register it interrogated any idea of the *oikos* as a space bounded by pre-political rules, by drawing attention to the politicized character of the boundary separating the *oikos* from the *polis* and the ways in which this boundary operated in the service of attempts to assure the stability of the *polis*, suggesting it could be otherwise.<sup>56</sup> Read in this second register, Antigone exhibits leadership in her reconceived relationship to eros, calling for a new political order—not one that consists in tyrannical rule and uncompromising orders, but one that calls attention to the excluded other of the polis, its necessary remainder (**ref**).<sup>57</sup> Far from merely corroborating the idea that women were especially susceptible to unruly eros that

---

<sup>55</sup> Oedipus proved to be distinctly unreliable as an overseer of reproductive clarity and control, unknowingly marrying his mother in a gesture that unleashes a series of consequences he is unable to contain.

<sup>56</sup> It is worth hypothesizing that those members of the Athenian audience in whose interests it was to control women's allegedly unruly eros might have found the first reading amenable, while those at the receiving end of exclusionary political measures (even if their access to theatrical performances was mediated by the reports of others) might have found the second reading more amenable. Neither the line separating these two different responses that I am characterizing in an overly schematic way would have been clear, nor would their political impact have been unambiguous. Even if it contests the idea that the nature of the boundary separating the *oikos* from the *polis* is pre-political, a performance of Antigone would have reduplicated the conditions that maintained women in their seclusion from active and vocal participation in the political.

<sup>57</sup> In contrast to Antigone, who refrains from ordering Ismene to help her bury the corpse of Polynices, in line with "his characteristic view of his subjects as animals, controlled and subjugated" (Segal 1999, 159), Creon's "speech consists in giving orders" (162). **See also Euben – find ref to guard.**

runs roughshod over boundaries and distinctions, and are therefore in need of the constraint of marriage and the subjugation of a husband, Antigone presents an alternative view of eros. She does not merely subject herself to the kinship strictures of patriarchy, she also points beyond them, disrupting the certainty and self-assurance of its claims.

In attending to this second register, I want to outline the political logic according to which Antigone lends herself to myriad political struggles. By figuring the excluded constitutive ground of the polity, Antigone illuminates the processes according to which any contingent fact (not just gender or sexuality, but also race, class, nationality, religion or some other contingency) can become a ground for an exclusionary politics. In this sense, it is not a question of Antigone acting as a woman—or in any other specifically gendered way. Rather it is a question of her acting in such a way as to rewrite or transform the grounds on which her exclusion from the system is written off as both inevitable and at the same time unintelligible to it. Antigone calls herself into intelligibility by challenging the grounds on which the polity writes her as unintelligible, unreadable, unsignifiable within its terms.<sup>58</sup> In doing so, she opens up to interrogation the condition that the polis, as represented by Creon, has written off as beyond the bounds of interrogation, as beyond the bounds of signification. Were her exclusion to have become capable of representation within the set of significations that requires it, then that system itself must have undergone transformation. Antigone calls for a redrawing of the lines of the polity, such that it is no longer possible to figure her only as its excluded outside—that is, to refuse her “proper” representation--while at the same time drawing on her resources for its own purposes. In this sense Antigone calls for a future polity that does not rely on the political exclusion of some of its members, and then legislate that

---

<sup>58</sup> My formulations here are informed by Butler (2000).

exclusion as unthinkable, or render it non-negotiable. She draws attention to political gestures that rely on casting as unintelligible those on whom it depends materially and psychically, but whom it systematically excludes from legitimate symbolic representation. Antigone is a figure who can only ever be represented improperly within the terms dictated by the politics of Greek tragedy.

As such she becomes a site for the reworking of the distinction between improper and proper, between that which is cast outside a system of intelligibility as unimaginable within its current configuration, and that according to which something is cast out as impermissible and unacceptable: she calls into question the very terms that render an order proper by designating something other than it as improper. She insinuates herself into a system that is sealed off from her proper representation. At the same time, she calls attention to the impossibility of her proper representation within the system that excludes her. This is not to say that she makes clear that her representation is impossible *per se*, only that it is impossible within the terms of representation as currently conceived. She calls, then, for a transformation of the politics that endorses her exclusion as a necessary condition of any proper representation—both the actual representation of those legitimated by it, and the potential representation of those excluded by it.

Mary Beth Mader (2005) asks us to reflect more carefully and thoroughly than commentators have done before on the exact status of the law to which Antigone appeals. We have already begun to see that a good deal of critical attention has been expended by a number of other commentators on the significance of Antigone's appeal to *philia*, the term according to which she insists on defining her relationship to Polynices, and which

is played off against Creon's insistence on understanding Polynices as *echthros*.<sup>59</sup>

Building on Mader's argument about the nature of the law that articulates the principle of Antigone's act, and extrapolating from the debate concerning the significance attaching to Antigone's determination of Polynices as *philos*, I argue that when Antigone chooses to die for the love (*philia*) of Polynices, rather than living for the (erotic) love of Haemon, she redirects eros away from its subordination to the reproductive telos governed by the polis. Through this redirection of eros, she resurrects the distinction between brother and son that Oedipus had violated, renewing the possibilities of *philia* in a way that acknowledges the sustaining role it plays not just for the ordering of *oikos*, but also for that of the *polis*. In this sense, Antigone acts for the preservation of the *polis*, and not for its destruction. Yet at the same time, her act constitutes an intervention into the logic of exclusion that configures her relationship to the idea of the polis upheld by Creon. One might be tempted to say that she acts as a woman, whose insight into the metalogic of the state's dependence on the family is superior to that of Creon's, proving her political capacity to be more profound than his, despite her exclusion, as a woman, from the public realm of politics. No sooner has a phrase such as "she acts as a woman" been articulated than the performative conditions that would have pertained in the original production of Antigone throw into question the intelligibility or legibility of such a claim. Nor does Antigone's character allow these performative conditions to fade into the background: there is an insistence on thematizing Antigone's refusal to adhere to the accepted boundaries of conventional femininity. The implications of Antigone's act—in so far as she is read as a female character, played by a male—bring into question the preservation of the actual political contours of the polis, calling for a polity in which the lines of

---

<sup>59</sup> O'Brien says, "The debate of the Prologue centers on *philos* and *echthros*" (1978, 5).

inheritance that qualify heirs as royal leaders would not be restricted to men, but would extend to women, a polity in which women would be allowed to represent themselves both as political citizens and in theatrical performances. In this sense, Antigone calls into question what it might mean to act as a woman, or to act as a man for that matter, by drawing attention to the way in which her character disrupts conventional gendered assumptions that require certain bodies, and certain body parts, to represent femininity, while others are required to represent masculinity. It is not that she acts as a woman (nor as a man, nor as androgynous, nor as one whose sexuality is undecidable), but rather she acts in such a way as to draw attention to the illegibility of her act as one that is authored by an excluded other, to the impossibility of it signifying as politically meaningful in a polis that is structured so as to exclude the very possibility of it becoming meaningful as a political act.

Basing her argument on Antigone's effort to treat Polynices as a brother, as distinct from a nephew or an uncle-- familial roles that Oedipus's incest with Jocasta had confounded--Mader understands Antigone's argument about irreplaceability to mean that she herself should not replace her brother. That is, Antigone should not beget another brother, by committing incest.<sup>60</sup> Antigone's insistence derives from her attempt to rectify the confusion caused by her father's failure to recognize Jocasta as his mother, and Jocasta's failure to recognize Oedipus as her son. Mader's argument has the considerable merit of taking seriously the words that Antigone herself uses to explain her deed, rather than accepting Creon's condemnation of Antigone's act as endangering the polis. What, then, would it mean, to both take Mader's argument about the irreplaceability of

---

<sup>60</sup> See Mader 2005, 8-9 and 21.

Polynices seriously, and inflect it in a more political direction than she herself does?<sup>61</sup> By building on Mader's argument about irreplaceability in the context of other contemporary readings of *Antigone*, I both want to reconstitute and recontextualize the political, philosophical and dramatic revisions that *Antigone* has undergone, and to broaden Mader's argument about the law that *Antigone* specifies.

If we follow through the political implications of Mader's argument for Creon's claim (true to his name) to be the ruler of Thebes, we are confronted with a further set of questions regarding the impact of *Antigone's* restorative act on Creon's authority as king. If in one sense *Antigone's* restoration of the incest prohibition violated by Oedipus also serves as a formal recognition of Creon's right to be king, in another sense it contests that right. To reinstate the claim that Polynices has on her as a brother, and only as a brother, is both to sanction and to undercut the legitimating claim of the kinship ties that prevail. Given the death of Polynices and Eteocles, as brother of Jocasta, Creon is next in line to inherit the throne. Insofar as Creon's claim to be king rests upon his kinship to Jocasta, as her brother, *Antigone's* act of disambiguating Polynices' relation to herself, clarifying his status as brother, might seem to sanction Creon's claim to be king. Yet if Creon is the brother of Jocasta, his inheritance also issues from the incestuous union between Oedipus and Jocasta, a union that *Antigone's* act of burying Polynices renders symbolically illegitimate. In this sense *Antigone* undercuts Creon's claim to be king. By emphasizing that Polynices shared the same womb as her, that is, that he qualifies as her brother

---

<sup>61</sup> Mader (2005) casts her argument against the background of those of Lacan's and Butler's. While in both cases, she disputes the status that law or legality play in their arguments, she does not expand her insights in order to draw out their political implications. I want to take seriously both the contemporary theoretical and political reflections with which theorists such as Irigaray and Butler asks us to engage, and the history of political dramatizations of *Antigone* that recapitulate the principle for which she stands in a wide variety of contexts, and which continue to draw energy from the figure of *Antigone* even as they refigure her.

because he shares her maternal lineage, Antigone draws attention to the maternal genealogy that unites her to Polynices.<sup>62</sup> She does so at the expense of the kinship line she shares with Polynices due to their common father, Oedipus. Had Oedipus not married Jocasta, Creon would have no claim to be king. So by emphasizing maternal, rather than paternal genealogy, Antigone might be said to be severing the legitimacy of Creon's claim to be king while at the same time underlining the fact that the bloodlines that establish Creon's claim to be king are the very same bloodlines that establish her as part of the royal family—bloodlines that proceed from an incestuous union. If Antigone's very existence as a child of incest is horrific, then so too is the nature of Creon's claim to rule Thebes, since it is based upon the same incestuous union that Antigone seeks to repudiate.<sup>63</sup>

Where Oedipus had mingled *eros* with *philia* in such a way as to make of Jocasta a loved one in two divergent and incompatible respects, as both mother and wife, redoubling the bonds of *philia*, Antigone disambiguates *philia* from *eros*, putting not only her blood relationship with Polynices before her erotic bond with Haemon, but in doing so specifying and delimiting the sense in which Polynices is a loved one, *philos*. He is a brother, and must not be a potential lover, but beyond this, he is a brother, and not also an uncle (as the half brother of Oedipus via Jocasta, who is not only wife but also mother of Oedipus).

If Antigone insists on clarifying her relation to Polynices, making him a brother and nothing else, what impact does her disambiguating act of burial have on her own

---

<sup>62</sup> Antigone insists on naming Polynices under the description of *autadelphos* (my own brother), and stressing that she shared the same the same womb (*homosplanchnos*) as him. See Segal 1999, 158, 170, 184; Knox 1992, 79.

<sup>63</sup> Rule about citizenship in Athens, Pericles, etc. See Loraux 1993, 119.

kinship status? She becomes nothing but a sister, distinguishing herself from the self-generating mother that her incestuous line had made of her. Symbolically, as a result of Oedipal incest, Antigone is already the next generation. As both daughter and granddaughter of Jocasta, she is, one might say, her own daughter, she is mother to herself. She herself must grieve for her impending death not only because Jocasta is dead, but also because there is a sense in which she herself is the granddaughter Jocasta will never have. Antigone is her own child.<sup>64</sup> She is both the daughter and granddaughter of Jocasta, since Jocasta is not only her mother, but also (as mother of Oedipus) her grandmother. She grieves then for a lost opportunity, for a child that will never be, for a generation that cannot be generated, for a generation that has been generated already. She grieves, one might say, for the child that she herself is, as mother and child rolled into one. This confusion of roles might account both for her lament, and for her identification of herself with Niobe, Kore, and Demeter, which would not be merely contradictory (cf Segal 1999). Each of them represents one of the multiple roles that Antigone must inhabit.

This multiplicity, Antigone's split identity, has been taken up and rewritten in the legacy Antigone has bequeathed, in which Antigone has come to occupy multiple symbolic roles, each role constituting a position that is written off as incomprehensible, intolerable, or unacceptable to a political order that refuses to recognize it as coherent or permissible, yet continues to usurp or exploit it in some way it renders unrecognizable. In attempting to render recognizable a position written off as incomprehensible, oppositional logics often participate in dynamics that replicate the logic of the excluded other,

---

<sup>64</sup> The fact that Creon refers to her throughout as child could be taken to refer to the dual symbolic status Antigone occupies as both daughter and granddaughter of Jocasta—in other words as her own child. Although as Pomeroy observes (see above), wives were viewed as having the status of children.

displacing it onto another identity, requiring some other to become other in order for the subject to become a subject. Antigone's split generational identity accords her multiple identities; perhaps this is why her character resists any easy resolution of subjectivity, whereby a subject shores up its identity by requiring the subjectivity of others to become unintelligible, in order to make intelligible its own claim as a subject. The political inheritance of *Antigone* is one that resists such a resolution; it is not a history in which one group's struggle for political representation succeeds at the expense of the marginalization or unintelligibility of another group, but rather one in which the successful articulation of one claim for political inclusion infuses life into the political struggle of another group, even as it mimics the abjection of dejects, while at the same time offering a recuperation of abjection. The regenerating energy of *Antigone*'s inspiration is geographically and historically dispersed, its dislocations facilitating metaphorical displacements that illuminate one political struggle from the perspective of another.

The political renews itself in Antigone's reconstitution of *philia* as central to the polis in such a way as to confirm the need to oversee the lines of inheritance, even as Antigone contests the very definition of the political as masculine. She thereby gives rise to a new way of conceptualizing women's relationship to eros at the same time as she both broadens the meaning of the political beyond Creon's narrow conception of it, and contests what it might mean to be a woman. Unlike Creon, Antigone does not want order for the sake of order, and neither does she act in such a way as to merely confirm or disrupt the prevailing conventions of femininity. If she works to reinstate distinctions that are vital to both familial and political life, this work does not merely eliminate the

disorder that women's association with eros was conventionally taken to embody, nor does it merely introduce disorder into the political order. It opens up to interrogation that which Creon tries to define as civil order by decree. Antigone is said by her sister, Ismene, to be "in love with the impossible" and yet in her insistence on burying Polynices she brings to light a new possibility, the significance of which Ismene ultimately recognizes.<sup>65</sup> That which was said to be impossible according to the limitations of Creon's order, proves to be possible in view of the new political order that Antigone could be said to call for.

An erotic fetishization of Antigone's sacrifice fails to think through the ramifications of Antigone's redirection of eros, which acknowledges the dependence of *philia*—and therefore, by extension, the reliance of the ordering of the *polis*--on the control of eros. The incessant rebirth of Antigones opens up the possibility of reshaping conventions that have consolidated themselves as political necessities, which might enshrine the need for apartheid, and the dangers of dismantling it, or the need for British imperialism to express itself in a colonial relationship to the Irish, who are figured as otherwise wild and untamable—or the need for numerous other boundaries of containment.<sup>66</sup> In order to begin to take seriously not only the politics of exclusion practiced in fifth century Athens, and its impact on the performance of roles such as that of Antigone, but also *Antigone*'s multiple political legacies and the multiple political

---

<sup>65</sup> See Michau 2005 for an interesting reading of Antigone and Ismene in relation to Kierkegaard and Levinas. Follow up ref he gives to Nissim-Sabat.

<sup>66</sup> Heather Rakes, in an unpublished seminar paper, "Antigone and Idiolect of Abject Anger" (DePaul, 2006), asks "Is it the anger of colonized, occupied, and/or incarcerated subjects [which] is intolerable and unintelligible, or is it the threat of an end to apartheid, segregation, exploitation, the prison industrial complex, by means of exposing their injustices? Is it, perhaps, both?"

exclusions about which her performance has come to speak, I will not restrict my interrogation of *Antigone* to fifth century BCE Athens. Let me turn, then, to *The Island*.

#### Section IV

In *The Island*, Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona take up and recast the question of cross-dressing in an intriguing way that both recreates the constraints of Greek tragic performance and radically displaces them, transposing the play into the context of apartheid, in South Africa's notorious Robben Island prison, the inmates of which have included Nelson Mandela. The conditions of performance that would have been formalized conventions for the Greeks, become a theme for investigation in *The Island*. Giving substance to the idea that far from simply embodying monstrosity herself, Antigone in fact reveals the monstrosity of unjust interpretations of the law, the playwright Athol Fugard tracks the inspirational role Antigone has had in the face of the deprivation of basic human rights suffered due to "the monstrous political philosophy which came to be known as apartheid" under which "black and coloured South Africans (to use the racial categories of the old South Africa)" including "free political association, freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom to have sex with or marry a partner regardless of race, had been taken away" (2002, 130).

In *The Island* two inmates are to put on a performance based on *Antigone*. Since the actor playing Antigone is male, he must give the appearance of being a woman. The play stages the constraints under which this performance takes place, bringing to light in the process the tension it produces for Winston's character, who must perform a woman's role in woman's clothes. The perfunctory costume afforded him as a prison inmate

includes “false ‘titties’” (Fugard, Kani and Ntshona 1974, 61) and the head of a mop, worn as a wig. John has persuaded Winston to play *Antigone*, but cannot resist laughing at his expense. Humiliated by his cellmate’s laughter, and anticipating further humiliation from a prison audience, Winston retorts that he would rather endure the humiliations of the prison guard than John’s: “I am not doing your *Antigone*! I would rather run the whole day for Hodoshe.<sup>67</sup> At least I know where I stand with him. All *he* wants is to make me a ‘boy’ . . . not a bloody woman!” (Fugard, Kani and Ntshona 1974, 60). Being made into a woman here functions as so undesirable that even the inhumane behavior to which Winston is subjected on a daily basis by his sadistic overseer is seen as preferable. An echo of the untenable, unthinkable position occupied by slaves in Sophocles’ *Antigone* is found in the way that women function in *The Island*, where fear of being made into a woman figures in relation to the racist theme of apartheid that informs the text at every level. Winston would prefer to be made into a boy than into a woman. Can his humanity be more easily recuperated in one case than in another, and if so why? How does his preference play out in terms of the effeminizing trope deployed by racist strategies? In what ways is Winston’s acute anxiety about impersonating a female exacerbated or shaped by the fact that as a prison inmate he is thrown together with another man in highly confined quarters, forced into an intense and prolonged physical and emotional intimacy? How does this play out in terms of the fact that when Kani and Ntshona, co-authors of *The Island*, actually performed a version of *Antigone* while they were imprisoned in Robben Island—a performance that served as the inspiration for *The*

---

<sup>67</sup> As Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. notes, “Hodoshe is a Xhosa word meaning ‘carrion fly’ that was the nickname of the infamous senior guard at Robben Island, well known for his cruelty” (2002, 195). See also Gray, 1991, 49. The concept of being a carrion fly has a special resonance for *Antigone*, given the important role played by Polynices’s corpse, left to the carrion birds.

*Island*—the performance of *Antigone* onstage, complete with mop, failed to raise, in Fugard’s words, “even a titter” (2002, 134)?

*The Island* recasts the performative and gendered questions inherent in the performance of ancient Greek tragedy. Here *Antigone* is played by a woman not, as in fifth century BC Athens, because women in general were not allowed to act female parts, but because blacks in general were subject to unjust and harsh treatment in twentieth century South Africa, as a result of which Winston is imprisoned. In his desperate attempt to retain his sanity under the brutal conditions of Robben Island, Winston claims to prefer his treatment at the hands of Hodoshe, declaring his preference to be treated as a boy rather than as a woman. What happens, then, when Winston relents, agreeing to play the role of *Antigone*, agreeing to perform the role of a woman after all?

In *The Island* Winston’s decision to take on *Antigone*’s role occurs within a play that is inspired not only by *Antigone*, but also more immediately by another play, the version of *Antigone* that took place in Robben Island. That performance too has a history that can be traced back to the performance of *Antigone* by a black drama group that was initiated when four people approached Athol Fugard to ask for his help. The story of *Antigone*’s “lone voice raised in protest against what was considered an unjust law” had spoken to the drama group from the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, the Serpent Players (132). Made up initially of “four black men and one woman (Norman Ntshinga, Welcome Duru, Fats Bokhilane, Mike Ngxcolo and Mabel Magada)” (130), these founding members were soon to be joined by others. Such was the significance to these actors of performing *Antigone* that when the actor scheduled to play Haemon, Sharkie (Sipho Mguqulwa), was summarily arrested on trumped up charges--as was common

under apartheid in the “black townships in and around Port Elizabeth” (132)--the denial of the opportunity to play Haemon weighed more heavily on him than the prison sentence meted out to him. Fugard reports: “The fact that he had been robbed of a chance to go on stage as Haemon and argue with his father for the life of someone he loved, and for her right to act in accordance with her conscience, was . . . an even greater blow than the sentence of twenty years that had been imposed on him” (133). In prison, Sharkie found a way to stage a “pocket version” (134) of *Antigone*, relying on memory to distill the play into a fifteen minute performance that could be fitted into the rubric of the annual concert granted prisoners on Robben Island. Sharkie reduced the drama to the “final confrontation between Creon and Antigone” (134). In the play that was to become *The Island*, Fugard, Kani and Ntshona, based their story on “Sharkie’s extraordinary fifteen-minute *Antigone* in the prison concert on Robben Island” (144). Fugard goes on to compare the reception of the play to that of,

Anouilh’s *Antigone* in Paris during the German occupation. The front row of German army officers had thought they were enjoying French culture, while behind them Parisians received a political message of hope and defiance. So too on Robben Island, the South African warders sat in front of the audience of prisoners, and really admired these Bantus for what they had cooked up for their entertainment (134).

Fugard offers the following comment: “I like to think of that moment of Sharkie’s triumph as possibly the greatest fulfillment of this magnificent play’s message since Sophocles first staged his *Antigone* in Athens in about 440 BC” (134).

The Robben Island performance of *Antigone* thus provided the context for

a play in which the living death Creon plans for Antigone parallels the living hell (see Fugard 2002, 145) faced by incarcerated prison inmates. Antigone's premature entombment in a cave for a crime that is not a crime serves as a metaphor for Winston's incarceration in a prison for a crime that was not a crime. Sophocles' Antigone is imprisoned as much for being a woman who dares to oppose Creon as she is for burying Polynices; in apartheid South Africa it was enough to be black to be treated as a criminal. For all his reluctance, Winston ultimately chooses to risk performing Antigone, and in doing so, paradoxically, there is a sense in which he risks being himself. He takes on the role that he had distanced himself from so vehemently, to the point of preferring the cruelty of a prison guard. The words that John uses in order to persuade him to take this risk resonate in more than one way.<sup>68</sup> "They will know it's really you." The audience of prison inmates—with whom audiences of *The Island* are required to identify-- will recognize that behind the façade of a woman is a man, but they will agree to suspend this recognition, an agreement that might well be informed by a political insight that allows a reading of Antigone's contest with Creon to reflect a black South African's struggle with apartheid. To see in Antigone's plight that of a black South African, is to see someone imprisoned for being who she or he is, imprisoned for being born a woman in fifth century BCE Athens, or for being born black in apartheid South Africa, or for any other contingency of birth, including—to anticipate the context in which Tom Paulin translates *Antigone*, to which I will turn in a later discussion—being Irish in the time of the

---

<sup>68</sup> Wetmore also quotes this line, but attributes to it a slightly different connotation (2002, 198).

troubles.<sup>69</sup> The audience will recognize themselves, and the contingency of the political conditions that dictate, or offer relief from, their own imprisonment.

If the performance of drama in Athens constituted an occasion for political critique, crucial for the political consciousness of the audience, such occasions were sanctioned in a way that can hardly be said for performances of *Antigone* in South Africa, where black actors risked arrest. If such performances embodied “one of theatre’s major responsibilities in an oppressive society: to break the conspiracy of silence that always attends an unjust social system” (143), we are led to wonder what impact the demand that men—and only men--speak for women might have had on the limitations of Athenian democracy. For the actors themselves, the performance of such plays constituted a matter of survival, rather than a duty to the polis. Survival here connotes both *zoe* and *bios*—to survive psychically, not merely biologically, to retain a hope for the future that consists in construing a polity that does not adhere to the regime of apartheid.

#### Concluding Remarks.

I have tried to elucidate how the conditions of performativity might have played out in relation to the political impact of tragedy in two different registers. In Athens, in a society in which women played no visible, political role, the female as well as the male parts in *Antigone*—a play that brings into question the separation of public and private, and how this lines up with male/female-- would have been acted by male actors. In one register *Antigone* would have been fetishized by readings that disavow the legitimating male bodies that constitute a condition of performing tragic drama: I know that the actor is

---

<sup>69</sup> The contingency under which *Antigone* labors, as the daughter of Oedipus, echoes the contingency of so many other accidents of birth, which then become grounds for exclusion from basic human rights.

male, but all the same I read the character as consistently female. On such a reading, a successful performance will consist of a male actor passing as a female, and will tend to minimize any oscillation between knowledge and belief. An erotic fetishization of Antigone succumbs to the allure of a character in love with the death drive, and dedicated to the preservation of the new laws of the socio-symbolic realm, which exclude women from the political and require the subordination of their erotic drive to the polity. In a second register, Antigone can be read as figuring the excluded, constitutive remainder that is disavowed. Here the challenge she presents to the social convention dictating women's silence is read not as a nostalgic memorial to the past, to the lost/missing/mythical object, but as a call to the future, for an expanded notion of democracy, one that is not premised on the silencing of women. This future democracy brings into question the narrow definition of the political construed by Creon, as order for the sake of order, a political order that would try to eliminate any risk or disorder by fiat. By refiguring the relation between *philia* and *eros*, Antigone acknowledges the symbolic importance of restoring the distinctions Oedipus had confused. Yet her act is not merely restorative of an order that had been violated. To restrict the meaning of Antigone's insistence upon burying Polynices to the restoration of the incest taboo is to read the tragic effect as a reining in of *eros*, consistent with the assumption that the political function of tragedy is entirely controlled by its sanctioning as a state performance. Antigone's sacrificial death would be in the service of the ordering of the polis; the meaning of her act of burial would be harnessed to the purpose of stabilizing a state that excludes women from full participation. Antigone's erotic aims would be subordinate to order and stability, as if the political meaning of the play could be reduced to the

recognition of the importance of the discrimination of various filial relations for the sake of initiating erotic relations appropriate to the preservation of a polity that persists in its subordination of women's erotic desires to its own ends.

To read the character of Antigone as one whose action calls attention to—rather than disavowing—the political conditions that exclude women from the public sphere, dictating that her role can only be performed by a man, is not to see the political function of tragedy as confined to the subjugation of women to the status quo. It is also to see tragic drama as performing a critique of political exclusion, a critique that calls for a version of democracy that does not survive by disavowing as excluded others members who are constitutive of its preservation. Antigone makes an intervention into the logic of fetishism by drawing attention to that which is disavowed, and as such her legacy is taken up beyond the logic of sexual difference. In *The Island*, the dynamic of abjection is explored in a way that does not merely condone a chain of abjection, but explores the reiteration of dejects within a play that both takes the risk of showing how racial exclusions can devolve into the abjection of women, while also recuperating that abjection. When Winston overcomes his fear and plays Antigone, replete with his ridiculous wig and false titties—the only costume his incarceration affords him—his audience do not ridicule him, because they see the profundity of the relationship between apartheid and Creon's version of tyranny.

Antigone calls for a polity premised not on excluded but constitutive others, but rather one in which the possibilities of political representation are transformed, so that the polity no longer relies upon stipulating certain subjects as unthinkable within its terms, while continuing to benefit from its appropriation of the material contributions of these

non-subjects, contributions that are nonetheless deprived of equal representation by the symbolic systems of signification in place. She calls for a polity that does not insist upon creating its own enemy within the city walls, relegating some of its subjects to a mythical state of nature, as if they were not civilized enough to fully participate in the democracy they nonetheless help to sustain. She calls for a polity in which women are no longer the eternal irony of the community. She calls for a polity in which not only do women vacate this role, but one in which no one is made to take their place.

#### References

- Aristotle. 1975. *Aristotle in twenty-three volumes*. Vol. 19. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library, vol. Aristotle in Twenty-Three Volumes, Vol. 19. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Aristotle. 1995. Poetics. Ed. and Trans. Stephen Halliwell. Longinus on the Sublime. Trans. W. H. Fyfe, revised by Donald Russell. Demetrius on Style. Trans Doreen C. Innes, based on W. Rhys Roberts. Loeb Classical Library, Aristotle, Vol. 23. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Blundell, Mary Whitlock. 1989. *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boal, Augusto. 1998. Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy. In *Tragedy*, ed. John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler. London and New York: Longman, pp. 123-140.
- Borregard, Tofa. 2005. The Tragic Heroics of Ancient Greek Extreme Women. *New Antigone*. Vol 1. Spring: 68-70.
- Butler, Judith. 2000. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life & Death*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Carson, Anne. 1990. Putting her in her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire. *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, Froma I. Zeitlin. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 135-169.
- Case, Sue-Ellen. 1985. "Classic drag: the Greek Creation of Female Parts." *Theatre Journal*. 317-327.
- Euben, J. Peter. 1997. *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Euben, J. Peter. 1986. Introduction. *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Foley, Helen P. 2001. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fugard, Athol. 2002. *Antigone in Africa*. In *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, ed. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton, London: Methuen.
- Fugard, Athol, John Kani and Winston Ntshona. 1974. *The Island*. In Statements: two workshop productions, *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, and *The Island*; and a new play, *Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Glowacki, Janus. 1997. *Antigone in New York*. Trans. Janusz Glowacki and Joan Torres. New York: Samuel French.

- Goldhill, Simon. 1977. "The Audience of Athenian Tragedy." *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P.E. Easterling. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 54-68.
- Gray, Stephen. 1991. *File on Fugard* London: Methuen.
- Griffith, R. Drew. 1998. "Corporeality in the Ancient Greek Theatre." *Phonenix*, 52 (3-4): 230-256.
- Halperin, David M. 1990. Why is Diotima a Woman? Platonic Eros and the Figuration of Gender. *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, Froma I. Zeitlin. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 257-308.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1975. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Trans. Ralph Mannheim. London: Yale University Press.
- Knox, Bernard M. W. 1992. *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lacan, Jacques. 1992. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Book VII. Trans. Dennis Porter. New York: Tavistock/Routledge.
- Loroux, Nicole. 1993. *The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas about Citizenship & the Division Between the Sexes*. Tr. Caroline Levine. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Loroux, Nicole. 2000. *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens*. Tras. Selina Stewart. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Loroux, Niclolle. **Date.** *Divided City*.
- McGarry, John and Brendan O'Leary. 1995. *Explaining Northern Ireland*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.
- Mader, Mary Beth. 2005. *Antigone's Line*. *Bulletin de la société Américaine de philosophie de langue Française*, 14: 2.
- Markell, Patchen. 2003. *Bound by Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mclure, Laura. 1999. *Spoken Like a woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Michau, Michael R. 2005. Antigone's Work(s) of Love: "you are in love with the impossible." *New Antigone*, Vol. 1, pp. 58-65.
- O'Brien, Jean V. 1977. *Bilingual Selections from Sophocles' Antigone*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- O'Brien, Jean V. 1978. *Guide to Sophocles' Antigone*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Ormond, Kirk. 2003. Oedipus the Queen: Cross-gendering without drag. *Theatre Journal* 55: 1-28.
- Paulin, Tom. 1985. *The Riot Act: A Version of Sophocles' Antigone*. London and Boston: Faber and Faber.
- Pomeroy, Sarah B. 1995. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Ancient Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Segal, Charles. 1999. "Antigone: Death and Love, Hades and Dionysus." *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. "The Politics of Recognition." *In Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Wetmore, Jr., Kevin J. 2002. *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Winkler, John. 1990. Representing the Body Politic: The Theatre of Manhood in Classical Athens. *Perspecta*, 26: 215-229.