Introduction

> The *inter* of a political *interesse* is that of an interruption or an interval. The political community is a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local . . .
>
> Jacques Rancière

> The lifespan of man running towards death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they may die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.
>
> Hannah Arendt

> Interruption is one of the fundamental procedures constitutive of form. It extends far beyond the orbit of art. It lies at the root – to take only one example – of citation. To cite a text means to interrupt its context.
>
> Walter Benjamin

This book is divided into two parts. In Part I, Interruption, I look at the role of Sophocles' play and its heroine in contemporary debates about agency, power, sovereignty, and sexuality. I suggest that the turn to Antigone in the latter half of the twentieth century and the first years of the twenty-first is best seen in the context of a series of turns to ethics, humanism, or maternalism, each aimed at countering certain forms of sovereignty or rationality (identified often with Oedipus). Lamenting sovereignty's excesses and the disappointments of rationalism, theorists and critics then seem to find in that very lamentation a new universalism that might take the place of these discredited contenders: whatever our differences, we are all mortal and we all lament our finitude, since the time of Antigone.[1] Thus, for them, lamentation also reassures as it steps in to take the place of the very thing whose loss we lament: universalism.

I go on to ask whether feminist and democratic theorists might rethink the rejection of sovereignty and consider devoting themselves instead to its cultivation. We might be critical of sovereignty's operations in particular contexts while still seeking to enlist the powers of sovereignty in others, for our own democratic or redistributive agendas. Analyzing some turns to Antigone, I ask whether the conventional figure of Antigone herself, much admired for her principled dissidence but also for her self-sacrifice, ultimately presses a certain impotence and resignation on her admirers as she leads them to embrace, as they think she once did, a politics of *lamentation*.

Part I's interruption of Antigone's reception history – in political theory, philosophy, feminist theory, and cultural politics – prepares the ground for a new reception, and stages my turn in Part II to an alternative reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* that might better inform and guide feminist and democratic theory. The aim is to break many theorists' fascination with rupture over the everyday, powerlessness over sovereignty, and heroic martyrdom over the seemingly dull work of maintenance, repair, and planning for possible futures.[2] My alternative reading identifies an Antigone who engages in a politics of counter-sovereignty. In place of the currently seductive politics of *lamentation*, I find in the play, read in fifth-century context and with twentieth- and twenty-first-century theory, a more robust *politics* of lamentation, in which lamentation is not "human," ethical, or maternal – tethered to the fact of finitude – but an essentially contested practice, part of an *agon* among fractious and divided systems of signification and power.[3] The issue posed by the *Antigone* (as opposed to by Antigone, the character) is not whether to lament the dead but rather how to do so, and what undergirds that question, broached repeatedly in the play, is the knowledge that lamentation stands for certain forms of life, social orders, ontologies, and histories.

The work of decaptivation and, ultimately, recaptivation to which this book is dedicated requires an immanent counter-reading of *Antigone*. This I proceed to offer in Part II, Conspiracy. Although Parts I and II can be read independently of each other and in either order, Part I's interruptions are meant to prepare the way for Part II's conspiracies, and to show why such conspiracies are important now. From the politics of *lamentation,* the focus in Part I, I turn in Part II to the *politics* of lamentation, tracking the ways in which various elites in the play can be seen to conspire with or against the new fifth-century democracy which is not the play's dramatic setting but is the context of the play's performance. Moreover, I argue that Antigone herself is a figure of conspiracy. She begins plotting in the dark

with her sister and moves gradually into more open and then into more veiled confrontations with Creon. Her open confrontations, tragic, doomed, courageous, have been the focus of scholarship until now. Attending to her other mode of engagement, though, and approaching Antigone as a conspirator, we see something else, in particular, her nuanced facility with language or, as we will see, language's conspiracy with her: she whispers, nudges, and puns her way through to communicate things on stage and to her audience that go right over Creon's head. On this reading, then, she is a heroine not only of resistance and frank speech (though she tries these too) but also of the open secret, that conspiratorial form of communication whose figure is *adianoeta*.

Interruption – there are several in the play – is the other important speech act, attention to which opens the play up in new ways. Although interruption is itself a speech act (even if J. L. Austin does not discuss it), it is the one kind of speech act to which the *Antigone*'s philosophical readers have been inattentive. Why? Perhaps because interruption is an odd sort of doing, not always a sort of doing, in fact. Interruption, which aborts another's speech, may be a deliberate speech act – "stop!" or "I object!" – but sometimes interruption just happens as a side effect or by-product of other doings. Thus, it seems different from the performatives to which J. L. Austin (1962) and Jacques Derrida (1988) call our attention and it is harder to track. Is interruption any speech act that precedes or causes the cessation of another? If so, it might be entirely perlocutionary – exhausted by that trait, unlike Austin's other performatives, which carry other forces as well.

The speech act of interruption has even less content, as it were, than Eve Sedgwick's "periperformatives," which broach or dance around speech acts but are never quite uttered and in this reticence find their power (2003: chapter 2). Like periperformatives, interruption is rarely straightforward. It does not take the form of the conjugal "I promise" or "I do" (whose centrality to speech act theory Sedgwick rightly decries), though it could of course take the form of another iconic performative solicited at weddings – the rarely uttered response to: "If there is anyone who believes there is a reason why these two should not be wed, speak now or forever hold your peace."[4] That is, interruption can take the form of saying or doing almost anything at all, if the effect is that of stopping the current speaker or redirecting unfolding events, or even just trying to do so (interruption may itself be interrupted, after all; and it may, like all speech acts, succeed or fail). Interruption is, then, often a *side* effect of other kinds of speech, whereas Austin's other, exemplary speech acts generally have effects that

are understood to be quite direct (indirect side effects are not ruled out but neither are they exemplary in Austin's speech act theory). This means we may miss the speech act of interruption unless we look out for it and this requires that we approach the texts we study dramaturgically. Those who approach Sophocles' play looking to identify its arguments or endorse certain of its characters' stances may miss the interruptions on which I will focus here. When political and feminist theorists approach the *Antigone* dramaturgically, we also interrupt many elements of its canonical reception history and open up new interpretative possibilities.

Set in a time and place distant from fifth-century Athens, Sophocles' *Antigone* provided a way for Athenians to work through issues that might have been too close to home to be worked out safely in an Athenian setting.[5] The play's distant setting might have allowed Sophocles to broach for public consideration issues that would otherwise be dangerous to consider. It may be for this reason that, as Jean-Pierre Vernant (1988) points out, the hero of Greek tragedy is almost always alien and from a distant past.[6]

The play begins in the aftermath of near civil war. The conflict occurs in the wake of the rule of Oedipus who ruled Thebes wisely and well but who also, with his acts of parricide and incest – unintended, unknowing, but still his acts – polluted the polity and brought it to near ruin. Oedipus' reign ends with his wife's/mother's suicide and his own exile and death. Left behind are the four children of his incestuous marriage to Jocasta: Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene. The sons, Eteocles and Polynices, both claim the throne after their father leaves. Some versions of the story suggest they agree to rule by turns. Eteocles takes power first but when the time comes to pass the throne to Polynices, Eteocles refuses to do so. Polynices (whose name means *many quarrels*) marries a daughter of the Argives, raises an army at Argos, and besieges his native city to claim what is his. The brothers do battle and each dies by the other's hand.

The play opens with Antigone telling her sister Ismene awful news. Ismene has not yet heard it. Their brother Eteocles has been buried with full honors by Thebes' new leader, their uncle Creon. Antigone participated in this ritual. But Creon has decreed that Polynices, their other brother, is "to be left," as Antigone puts it, "unwept, unburied, a lovely treasure for birds that scan the field and feast to their hearts' content" (28–30 [35–36]).[7] Creon, Antigone rightly perceives, has "graced one with all the rites and disgraced the other" (21–22 [27–28]).

Antigone cannot permit her brother's body to lie exposed. She feels compelled to bury him and assumes her sister will feel the same way. Thus

when Ismene demurs, Antigone is shocked and angry. She insists she will act alone and that she is willing to die for her cause – eager, even, to win glory. She leaves, resolute, and in the next scene a sentry, who has been guarding the body of Polynices to prevent its burial, appears before Creon to let him know someone has violated his edict. It happened at night and so quietly that none of the guards witnessed it. Creon sends the guard back to the scene with threats of dire consequences if he and his fellows do not guard the body better and catch the culprit who violated his edict.

The sentry soon returns with Antigone who this time has been caught in the act, dusting the body in broad daylight. Creon resolves to punish her along with her sister, whom he assumes was complicit. But, queried by the Chorus, he releases Ismene. Antigone is taken away. Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's betrothed, enters and tries to persuade his father to a more moderate course. Haemon argues that the people of Thebes support Antigone though they dare not speak up for fear of Creon. Creon rejects his son's arguments and the son leaves furious at his father's recalcitrance.

Although Creon had announced that anyone who violated his edict would be stoned to death, he now commands that Antigone be immured in a cave with enough rations to last a few days. It seems he is distancing himself from her death and is asking the gods to decide it. She is taken to the cave, outside the city, and along the way she sings her own dirge, lamenting her losses and her fate but not her actions.

Creon is then visited by the blind seer Tiresias who warns him he has gone too far in leaving a dead body unburied and putting a live person underground. Creon remains recalcitrant but, increasingly concerned after Tiresias' departure, Creon seeks the counsel of his elders, then rushes to undo his actions. He goes to bury Polynices and then to release Antigone. When he gets to the cave in which she is immured, he hears the sound of Haemon wailing inside. Antigone has hanged herself and Haemon has found her corpse. Creon enters the cave, calling his son out. Haemon tries to kill his father, fails, and then kills himself with his sword. His body spurting blood on Antigone's, he dies in her arms in an iconic marriage-to-death scene. Creon carries Haemon's body home in his arms, lamenting the loss of his son, only to find when he arrives that his wife Eurydice has also killed herself, having already heard from a messenger the news of her son's death. The play ends with Creon lamenting all his losses, begging someone to kill him, to put him out of his misery. But, as with most of his other orders, no one seems to obey and he is led away.

This brief summary of the play passes over the Chorus' role and many other important details, some of which I address in the chapters that

follow. For now I want to call attention to one theme that is significant for my purposes: the several scenes in which Antigone is interrupted.

- *When Antigone tends to the body of her dead brother, Polynices, in violation of an edict against doing so, she is interrupted by her uncle Creon's guards and arrested.*
- *Later, when she sings her own dirge en route to her death, she is interrupted by Creon who mocks her and tells his guards to take her away.*
- *When the guards fail to act on Creon's orders, Antigone goes on with her dirge, but Creon interrupts her again. This time, he threatens the guards – if they do not act quickly they will be punished – and so the guards interrupt her and seal her in the cave that will be her tomb.*
- *Antigone is interrupted yet one more time when her final act, virginal suicide, scripted by her as a return to her natal family, is redirected by her betrothed and Creon's son, Haemon. When the grieving Haemon commits suicide on Antigone's corpse, he marries her in death (the messenger says: "he has won his bride at last poor boy" [1240–1241 (1370)]), and reclaims her for the conjugal family form she rejected in life.*[8]

Sophocles' *Antigone* may be the most commented-upon drama in the history of philosophy, feminism, and political theory. But the interruptions listed here play no role at all in most readings of the play. Theorists and philosophers neglect the play's *dramaturgy* to attend to the play's role in the history of philosophy and to focus on what they see as the play's *arguments* about burial, obedience, authority, sovereignty, religion, gender, and more.[9] Other elements of the play, like gesture, tone, music, voice, rhetoric, and speech act for the most part go unremarked.[10] But approaching the play with its dramaturgy in mind has, paradoxically, more to offer political theory than any "arguments" we may cull from the play. A dramaturgical approach treats the text as a performance that may succeed or fail rather than as an argument that may be true or false, right or wrong.[11] It attends to shifting contexts in the play, noting for example the significance of how information circulates, which things are said directly by one character to another, which are said within another's hearing and are overheard, which are uttered in someone's absence, and which are said over another's head. In addition, a dramaturgical approach calls attention to double entendres, puns, and jokes, most of which have escaped the notice of critics until now. Such an approach is attentive to the asymmetrical powers of different speakers, the errancy of utterance which may end up in the wrong place, the pace and trajectory of textual and historical events, the possibility of conspiracy, coded communication,

irony, sarcasm, and hyperbole. All of these, as we shall see, play important roles in Sophocles' great tragedy. And through them we are shaped into certain fundamental assumptions about humanity, universality, loyalty, and more. They carry the force of argument.

Looking, in Part I, at the reception of Sophocles' play and its protagonist in contemporary feminist and queer theory, cultural politics, and political theory, and then, in Part II, reading the play in historical and contemporary contexts, I tack back and forth between classics and philosophy, feminist and political theory, reception studies, and historical, contextual approaches. I approach these literatures critically, sensitive not only to the history of philosophers' reception of the arguments in the play but also to the fact that even interpreters oriented to arguments and utterances are affected, though unavowedly so, by genred expectations. Throughout, I look at how the genred expectations of philosophers, literary critics, and theater-goers have shaped receptions of text or performance until now.

Reading *Antigone* in part through the trope of interruption, this book stages yet one more interruption: that of the received "Antigone." Since G. W. F. Hegel first canonized the play for modern philosophy in the early nineteenth century, admiring the heroine who would go on to haunt his modern state as its eternal irony, the various contending readings of Antigone that have filled the pages of political theory and philosophy books tend to identify Antigone with one of three roles:

(i) heroic conscientious objector who on political grounds violates an unjust law, challenges a powerful sovereign, and all by herself dares speak truth to power. This is the legalists' Antigone, invariably paired, whether or not to her advantage, with Socrates, that other famous civil disobedient.
(ii) humanist lamenter of the dead, grieving sister/mother/daughter, whose cries for her brother accentuate a sense of loss said to be familiar to all humans, instancing a universal that is pointedly poised against time-bound, divisive, and merely political distinctions between friend and enemy.
(iii) monstrous creature of desire unbound by the ordinary satisfactions of everyday life and therefore willing, even passionately eager, to die for her cause.

To these I add another; or better, against these I posit another.

The Antigone that emerges here is heroic but not isolated. She is pointedly political not transcendently universal but she can still speak to

us, centuries later, nonetheless. She laments, but she does so in a way that is also partisan, vengeful, not just mournful or humanist. And she is willing to die, yes, but not only for the divinely approved cause of equal burial rites nor because she exemplifies desire that, as followers of Jacques Lacan argue, appears as a monstrous attraction to death. She dies for her *atê*, her family *atê*, as classicists and Lacanians, in their different ways, have long argued. But she also, in a way perhaps less alien to contemporary readers, dies for her living sister. Antigone is impatient with Ismene and seems to scorn her, as virtually every commentator on the play has noted for centuries, but, as we shall see here, a close dramaturgical reading of the play shows that Antigone is also deeply loyal to the sister most critics think she only disdains.

This new Antigone may inspire those who see no path to action in times of confinement, constraint, or catastrophe. Herself faced with catastrophe (most of her family dead, her way of life criminalized by Creon), Antigone nonetheless *acts* politically in conditions of impossibility. When she laments, she does not only lament; she not only buries her brother against her uncle's edict, she also calls for vengeance against those who desecrated his body. She does not only resist sovereign power and martyr herself to an impossible cause, she makes a claim for sovereignty, both for herself and the form of life to which she belongs. She enters into political conspiracy against Creon, she conspires with language, and it with her (to borrow a phrase from James Martel [2011]), to solicit a public that may see things her way. These traits, I will argue here, rather than her resistance and martyrdom per se, are what democratic theorists now should be positing as exemplary. And we should be noting how Antigone does not act alone, though she is repeatedly isolated by devotees who celebrate her (or her act's) singularity. A close reading of the play shows that her actions are embedded in and enacted on behalf of forces, structures, and networks larger than the autonomous individual that modern liberals, humanists, and even radical democratic theorists tend to both love (as courageous, heroic) and berate (as anarchic or irresponsible).

The conventional Antigone – isolated and heroically transgressive, even monstrous – is also instructive. The new readings of the play developed over the course of this book show how selective were the canonical interpretations that generated the iconic tragic heroine and how symptomatic these insistent receptions were of her readers' needs, over time, for a certain kind of heroine: Christian martyr, Romantic suicide, idealized sister, heroic individual, maternal lamenter. That said, it must be owned that the new Antigone developed here may be a product of *its* moment as

well. She is surely made possible by recent work in classics on women's laments and the politics of burial in the fifth century. And she is surely enabled by over forty years of feminist work which has interrogated again and again received depictions of women in the history of philosophy and politics. New habits of reading, developed during that time, question every received gendered assumption and follow the injunction always to look again and take nothing for granted. These habits play no small part in generating the new readings offered here.[12]

There is also in these pages a not insubstantial engagement with queer theory, a relatively recently developed branch of political and cultural analysis rich with implications for *Antigone* interpretation. Some queer theorists are drawn to this heroine; most are not. Those who do turn to her differ in their judgments of her. Peggy Phelan (1997) rejects Antigone as a bad model for queer politics, while Lee Edelman (2004) and Judith Butler (2000) both endorse her, albeit for diametrically different reasons. Butler, who says that Antigone is a "not quite queer heroine," sees in her a generative example of political resignification – of language and kinship done otherwise – as well as a potent symbol of human equality in death (2000: 72).[13] Edelman sees Antigone as personifying forms of adamant refusal that queer theory ought to endorse and cultivate. Finally, queer theory, in particular, has emerged in part out of a politics of contested death, mourning, and lamentation practices, dealing with the impact of AIDS on the gay community since the 1980s. In the context of AIDS and AIDS activism, we find more polarized, politicized death practices than those we get from the ethical, mortalist, or maternalist humanisms with which Antigone these days is so often affiliated. My turn to queer theory, like my turn to Antigone, is on behalf of democratic theory, the branch of political theory devoted to enhancing or rethinking equality, and to investigating the subtle and explicit workings of power, enabling and inequitable. Queer theory shares those commitments and is, like the great tragedians, also interested in exploring the possibilities of action in conditions of seeming impossibility. Queer theorists more than others attend to how the politics of lamentation slides all too easily into the lamentation of politics. Critical democratic theorists do well to enlist feminist and queer theory along with cultural critique, psychoanalysis, film and literary theory, in their quest to identify and overcome obstacles to equality.

But, some will object, most of these obstacles are material and, in current contexts of inegalitarian, neo-liberal capitalism and globalization, the reinterpretation of classical texts hardly seems the most pressing task. There is something undeniable in this. And yet, as I write this, Sophocles'

Antigone is being staged in London's National Theatre, has just finished a run in Perth, Australia, and plans for its staging are under way in Ramallah, where it will be the first play performed in a new theater school.[14] The play's various restagings are not this book's object of inquiry. When I talk about "receptions" in this book I mean for the most part to refer to theoretical and philosophical receptions, not theatrical ones. But such restagings are surely part of its occasion. For the play, still alive, is working on us, framing our views of dissidence, martyrdom, and democratic politics, the politics of burial and lamentation, the clash between public and private, and the promise and politics of a pre-, post-, and ongoingly Christian humanism, often now secularized as a mortalist humanism. As I note here, those seeking to advance the cause of equality often turn to Antigone as a model of civil disobedience or alternative equality (of the dead) and are drawn, in part by received interpretations of this iconic figure, into mere resistance politics, reflexive anti-statism, or an extra-political humanism of equal dignity in death. There is another option: an agonistic humanism whose politics of counter-sovereignty, conspiracy, and solidarity is more promising for them and, arguably, more true to the richness of Sophocles' play and its complex reception history. The extra-political universalism of grief with which this classical heroine is increasingly identified in feminist and critical theory emphasizes equality in death; a politics of counter-sovereignty emphasizes equality in life. The latter is more properly the focus for democratic theory and is actually better, if still imperfectly, promoted by the divisive, vengeful, and politically partisan Antigone I find reason to promote from beneath centuries of distinct but overlapping Christian and Romantic interpretations caught up in an ardor for martyrdom that goes on to pervade the humanisms to which they give rise.[15]