ANTIGONE, INTERRUPTED

Sophocles' *Antigone* is a touchstone in democratic, feminist, and legal theory, possibly the most commented-upon play in the history of philosophy and political theory. From Hegel and Lacan through to Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Peter Euben, Arlene Saxonhouse, Lee Edelman, Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek, and many more, interpreters turn to the play for instruction regarding issues such as civil disobedience, the clash between public and private, the hubris of sovereignty, and the politics of psychoanalysis, gender, sexuality, and mourning. Bonnie Honig's rereading of the play thus intervenes in a host of literatures and unsettles many of their governing assumptions.

References to the play and its heroine also circulate in contemporary political culture, featuring in discussions of Argentina's Madres of the Plaza, West Germany's response to the Baader-Meinhof group as depicted in the 1978 film *Germany in Autumn*, Butler's theorization of "precarious life," and recent work by others following 9/11 in political theory and cultural studies on mourning as a resource for a politics that rejects sovereignty. Analyzing the power of Antigone in these political, cultural, and theoretical contexts, Honig explores what she calls the "Antigone-effect," which moves those who enlist the play from an activist politics that quests for sovereign power into a lamentational politics that bemoans the excesses of sovereign power.

However, Honig argues, this effect can be overcome by way of a new reading of the *Antigone*. Read in historical context, and in dialogue with contemporary political, literary, feminist, and queer theory, Sophocles' great tragedy offers something more than a model for resistance politics or a mortalist humanism of "equal dignity in death." Instead, Honig writes on behalf of an agonistic humanism: a politics of counter-sovereignty and solidarity which emphasizes equality in life.

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For Naomi, whose interruptions have taught me more than I can say . . .

If we wish to do justice to the conflicts that surround us and lead to one tragedy after another, we can do *no better* than to keep the example of *Antigone* constantly in mind.

James Tully

[W]e are, in our ethical situation, more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime.

Bernard Williams

It is not a good time for *Antigone*.

German television executive in *Germany in Autumn*

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Preface

> It is always possible to give up the search for a meaning [and] . . . say that established facts need no further explanation.
>
> Nicole Loraux

At my grandmother's funeral, I noticed that my grandmother and my grandfather who predeceased her were buried in plots located in the Socialist Bünd section of the Jewish cemetery in Montreal.

"Grandpa's buried in the Bünd section?" I asked my mother.

"No, he isn't," she replied.

"But look; there's the sign," I showed her. "It says the Bünd on it."

"Oh, that. That's nothing."

"What do you mean 'That's nothing'? If he is buried in the Bünd section that must mean something. Was Grandpa a member of the Bünd?" (My questions bore the mark of yearning. If my grandfather had been in the Bünd then perhaps I was a member of some oppositional leftist family and not in fact the child of middle-class, upwardly mobile post-war European immigrants to Canada.)

My mother would have none of it. "No, Grandpa was *not* a member of the Bünd. Don't be silly."

"Then *why* is he buried in the Bünd section? There must be a reason," I asked.

"There *is* no reason. He just bought the plots from them, that's all."

"But why? Why would he buy from them if he was not a member?" I persisted. "That doesn't make any sense."

"Yes, it does. They were cheaper," she said. "The Bünd sold them all together, and could make them available at a good price. Grandpa had just come to Canada and he did not have a lot of money so he bought from them. That's all."

And then, as I began again to press her further, my mother voiced a complaint I had heard before in a voice fatigued by the need to reprise it

yet again: "It doesn't *mean* anything, Bonnie. You always think there is more to things than there is."

A fascination with an excess or dearth of meaning may be a sign of madness. Susanna Kaysen notes in her memoir, *Girl, Interrupted* (1993), that one early sign that all was not well with her was her sense of being overtaken by patterns (*patterns*? but maybe she means, in scrambled form, her parents/paternals): "all patterns seemed to contain potential representations, which in a dizzying array would flicker to life. That could be . . . a forest, a flock of birds, my second grade class picture. Well, it wasn't – it was a rug, or whatever it was, but my glimpses of other things it might be were exhausting. Reality was getting too dense" (1993: 41). At the same time, for the same reason in effect, reality was losing some of its density: "When I looked at someone's face, I often did not maintain an unbroken connection to the concept of a face. Once you start parsing a face, it's a peculiar item: squishy, pointy, with lots of air vents and wet spots. This was the reverse of my problem with patterns. Instead of seeing too much meaning, I didn't see any meaning" (1993: 41).

Buried in detail, Kaysen saw too much or too little: unable to see the forest for the trees, and unable to see the trees for the forest.[1] Gripped by the patterns of a rug yet unable to discern the face of the other, Kaysen seems to confuse two different economies, as well: that of singularity (of the face) with that of goods (carpets). Kaysen was out of order.

Finding meaning in the right place and in the right amount is as good a definition of sanity as any. The same goes for lamentation and mourning. These are supposed to manifest just the right amount of attachment to the lost loved one: not too much lest we slide into melancholy, not too little or we risk infidelity to those we loved and lost.

Of course poetry, art, religion, philosophy, and political theory all turn on getting this balance wrong, on resetting it somehow. These arts and disciplines all seek to unbalance us because, out of balance, we might find deeper truths than those we live by every day.[2] Through hyperbole, fable, repetition, metaphor, parable, and more, the scales of the familiar are reset. Art may invite us to lament more than religion or convention tell us we should. Song may enable us to experience sadness more profoundly than mere weeping. A fable may reorient us to see a rug not as a mere floor covering nor even as a unique Persian handicraft but rather as a magic carpet.[3] With the guidance of critical theory, an animal can move from being a bearer of weight for man, to a source of meat in an industrial agricultural economy, to a sign of sacredness, to a creature indifferent to human needs and vulnerable to pain. A person possessed of dignity and

individuality can become a type for the social scientist, a number for a store clerk, an abject thing for a prison guard, a precious source of inspiration for the poet, a loved one for anyone at all.

Resetting the balance is not the same as becoming unbalanced, however, and the latter is what happens to Kaysen; her story is one of sliding from surfeits of meaning into madness, it is a tale of balance lost, but then regained. Two years after (un)wittingly committing herself to an institution for the mentally ill, Kaysen decides to marry and is released from institutional care.[4] In the film version of the book, release comes by way of a different dramatic device, not marriage but intervention. An uncharacteristically kind nurse takes Kaysen aside and talks some sense into the teenage girl, suggesting she is not really sick but rather self-indulgent. The nurse urges the girl to pick herself up, stop playing with madness, and go home to live her life, a life that is, the nurse emphasizes, worth living.[5] Kaysen is called back to herself by this intervention into what is cast as her faux-suffering (but this is from the perspective of her later "recovery"). Through an apparent act of will, Kaysen decides to be well. Released from the lure of madness, her madness interrupted just as it had earlier interrupted her, Kaysen leaves the institution. In the book version of *Girl, Interrupted* it is clear that her departure is aided by a fortuitous shift of circumstances: only a year or two after her institutionalization in the 1960s, Kaysen's resistance to responsible subjectivity, expressed by her teenage disinterest in school and her numerous boyfriends, are de-medicalized. What were once problematic alienation and promiscuity are now more accepted for a girl as adolescent underachievement and sexual liberation. Furthermore, Kaysen is vindicated when it turns out that bypassing college and supporting herself as a writer are viable life choices.[6]

If I begin *Antigone, Interrupted* with some discussion of Kaysen's book, it is not only to acknowledge this book's titular debt to hers, but also to note one reason for that debt: a slight and strange affinity between Kaysen's self-portrait and the subject of this book, another young teen who also makes unconventional choices and is said by some to flirt with madness – Sophocles' Antigone. In the case of Antigone, there will be no last minute sensible talking-to to rescue her from her path; and no saving marriage will pull her back from the brink. But, notwithstanding this significant difference, for many commentators over the centuries the one central question about Antigone is the one that precipitated the filmic Kaysen's return to normal life: if the girl's actions were mad, was she truly mad or merely self-indulgent?

Creon, Thebes' ruler, thinks the girl is mad *and* self-indulgent. His governor's perspective in this as in other matters governs receptions of the play to this day, or so I shall argue here as part of a broader effort to unsettle his lingering framing power. For Creon, Antigone's madness in defying his ban consists in unqualified attachments to the underworld and to her incestuous, destructive clan. Apparently unmoved by the prospect of marriage to Creon's son, Haemon, Antigone is overly devoted to her dead brother, Polynices, to the point where she seems indifferent to everything else including even the stability of the always vulnerable polis. Beyond reason, seemingly incapable of acknowledging and balancing plural goods, she is, as we say, unbalanced.

For Jacques Lacan, one of Antigone's many admirers, the heroine's lack of balance is striking. Her uncompromising stance is a sign of her passion, which has nothing to do with her brother, as such. The brother is simply the occasion for her expression of desire which ennobles Antigone and makes her a creature of monstrous beauty. For others, her lack of balance is a kind of self-indulgence. Most notably Jean Anouilh (1946) and more recently Jeremy Menekseoglu (2008) interpret the heroine through a chiasmus: in their versions of the play, she is not driven mad by too much love (for family or underworld). She is, rather, driven to exorbitant love by being mad.[7] In Menekseoglu's adaptation, Antigone is cast as a sort of late-modern celebrity and the Chorus are her paparazzi. Finding herself followed by a Chorus, she is delighted. Effect replaces cause as she comically infers that if she has a Chorus she must be a heroine whose story will someday be told, and she resolves to act accordingly. In both Menekseoglu's and Anouilh's adaptations of the play, the heroine is motivated less by substantive commitment or principle than by the sheer thrill of conflict and the reward of renown.[8] She is self-regarding, self-absorbed. It is not insignificant that both feature Antigone, in one scene, quite taken with her own image as she combs her hair in a mirror.

It is my aim in this book to move Antigone beyond the mirror stage.[9] I treat Antigone as a complex political actor engaged in struggle with Creon and others about the terms and sites of sovereignty in Thebes.[10] The focus is neither on her madness nor on her self-indulgence but on the political frames of reception that press us to see her that way. The focus here is on her speech acts, her historical context, and her signifying power in circulation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which has no small impact on how we receive and interpret all sorts of political conflicts today. The aim is to show how the various received Antigones, whether mad, self-indulgent, passionate, or principled, fail fully to prize this

protagonist's abundant political promise. The aspiration is to re-politicize this political actor or to understand her politicization differently and to do so in part by showing how she traffics in surfeits of meaning, in double and triple entendres, counter-sovereignties, lamentations that are also calls to vengeance, and raging rejections that are full of intimacy. These are her stock in trade. Attentive to them, I work through the *Antigone*'s ongoing impact on political thinking, and look for ways to rework it, in Part I, Interruption. In Part II, Conspiracy, I develop new readings of Sophocles' play. The hope is to inspire democratic theorists today seeking to theorize politics as a meaning-making practice, as action in concert on behalf of collective life, rather than as the sorts of solitary, heroic performances that may sometimes shift the plates of tectonic politics but also seem fated to rock undecidably on the border of self-indulgence and madness.

Acknowledgments

Henry Bienen got me started on this project by asking me in 2007 to contribute an essay to a special issue of *TriQuarterly Review* that he planned to edit on the topic, *The Other*. I had to say yes. He was not only a friend, he was at the time President of Northwestern University. I had a lecture on the *Antigone* I had been giving to undergraduates at Harvard and Northwestern for years and thought I might find something in that to contribute. Drafting my speculative classroom thoughts, I realized I had to do more research. There followed more than four years of reading in the political and legal history and archaeology of ancient Greece and *Antigone* scholarship in classics, political, feminist, and queer theory. The paper for Henry became two papers, then three, and before I knew it I was writing a book on *Antigone* or rather, as I often said: it was writing me.

At Northwestern, my exploration of new disciplines opened new conversations for me. Colleagues in classics and comparative literature were kind enough to respond to my new work and patient with my early errors. I began attending classics colloquia; I was even invited to participate in some. I want to thank the Classics Department for its hospitality, and also Sara Monoson, my colleague in political theory, who chaired the Classics Department for most of this time period.

Northwestern colleagues who shared work with me or generously responded to mine include: Kate Bosher, Héctor Carrillo, Nick Davis, Penny Deutscher, Mary Dietz, Steve Epstein, Peter Fenves, Jay Grossman, Marianne Hopmann, Andy Koppelman, Richard Kraut, Jeffrey Masten, Sara Monoson, Martin Mueller, Anna Parkinson, Ken Seeskin, Laurie Shannon, Viv Soni, Julia Stern, Jackie Stevens, Lars Tønder, Bob Wallace, Sam Weber, Reg Gibbons, and Will West. Cynthia Nazarian read the whole thing in penultimate draft just as I turned to the final revisions and gave me fabulous comments. I am grateful to the graduate students in political theory, and the undergraduates in my Antigone

seminars, for working through the play and its contexts with me in a variety of seminars from 2008 to 2010. I also taught parts of this book as a seminar at the School of Criticism and Theory in the summer of 2010 at Cornell University. This book owes a great deal to that incomparable experience. I want to thank especially Amanda Anderson, who makes the School an intellectually demanding and fun place, and who suggested I read *Middlemarch* (promising Antigone connections, the only explicit one of which came on the second to last page of that very long and fabulous novel).

I published parts of some chapters in *Political Theory* (Chapter 4), *New Literary History* (Chapters 1 and 5), and *Arethusa* (Chapter 6). All have been radically rewritten, reconsidered, and revised for this book. I thank those journals, the Johns Hopkins University Press Sage Press, for permission to use those materials here. I presented early versions of parts of this book at places too numerous to list, in the US, Canada, the UK, Sweden, and the Netherlands, as keynotes at graduate student conferences, as memorial lectures (for Linda Singer and Ferdie Schoeman), in Philosophy Departments and political theory colloquia, at conferences in political science, classics, and the humanities, at colleges, universities, and law schools. The University of Nottingham group, CONCEPT, hosted a conference on themes related to my work in April 2011 at which I presented the final pieces of this project. I am grateful to all my audiences and hosts for their questions, archives, and film recommendations. Colleagues at other institutions who supported, inspired, and helped improve this work with comments, criticisms, and the benefit of their own research include: Seyla Benhabib, Jane Bennett, Anna Bialek, Peg Birmingham, Tina Chanter, Bill Connolly, Davina Cooper, Page duBois, Peter Euben, Rita Felski, Chris Finlay, Alan Finlayson, Jason Frank, Jill Frank, Marcie Frank, Alexander Hirsch, Steven Johnston, George Kateb, Vassilis Lambropoulous, Julia Lupton, Lida Maxwell, David McIvor, Dana Mills, Stewart Motha (who always has relevant films to recommend), Josiah Ober, David Owen, Yopi Prins, Bruce Robbins, Diego Rossello, Elizabeth Rottenberg, Eric Santner, Arlene Saxonhouse, Andrew Schaap, George Shulman, James Tully, Stephen White, and especially John Seery and Christina Tarnopolsky, who read several drafts of several chapters and gave me encouragement early and often. Conspiring at the last minute with James Martel was a pleasure. James Porter, Adam Sitze, Elizabeth Wingrove, Simon Stow, Brooke Holmes, and one or two anonymous others read the penultimate manuscript for the presses and the book is much improved as a result of their reports.

The Chicago Legal History Seminar hosted my first public presentation of work from this book at the American Bar Foundation, where I am a half-time Research Professor. At the ABF, Bob Nelson supports an environment conducive to rigorous research on law-related topics defined broadly enough to include this book. Allison Lynch and then Katy Harris provided superb staff support for this project. The ABF funds research assistance, for which I must thank, in particular, Doug Thompson, Rachel Ricci, Demetra Kasimis, Diego Rossello, Nick Dorzweiler, and Lexi Neame. Javier Burdman, Anna Terwiel, and Ella Haselswerdt worked on the project at the very end and provided fabulous support. At the ABF, Bob Nelson, Laura Beth Nielsen, Susan Shapiro, Traci Burch, Vicki Woeste, John Hagan, Terry Halliday, Carol Heimer, Jim Heckman, until recently Bryant Garth, Chris Tomlins, John Comaroff, and many others constitute a great interdisciplinary intellectual community.

In the process of writing and researching this project, I sent drafts to people whose work I was reading but whom I did not know at the time. In response to emails from a stranger, Adam Sitze, Paul Allen Miller, Richard Seaford, Yannis Stavrakakis, and Robert Fowler entered into spirited conversation with me. My contact with Fowler was enabled by Chris Brooke, who with characteristic zeal followed up a casual question in an Oxford taxi and set in motion an email chain of inquiry about Wilamowitz's time at Oxford, the answers to which Bob Fowler knew. Late in the day, Jim Porter became another important email interlocutor. I cannot overstate the pleasure of just out of the blue finding someone fun to think with and I am always grateful when it happens. Miriam Leonard was a discussant of a very early version of Chapter 4 and has since become a cherished colleague. She read several drafts of this manuscript and illuminated problems I might not otherwise have seen. This book has benefitted greatly from our conversations over the years.

One of my interests in this book is how economies – of signs or money – work or fail to and by way of what powers they are (re)instituted and maintained. Related to that theme, I owe a debt to Richard Dunn and the American Philosophical Society, which helped fund a year of leave for me in 2008–2009 in support of my last book, *Emergency Politics*. I finished that book early in the year and spent most of my leave writing this one. I think of it as the dividend, a term with which I was reacquainted over dinner with Mary Dunn at the APS Sabbatical Fellows conference in the spring of 2008.

The American Bar Foundation and Northwestern University provided matching funds to support the year of leave during which I wrote the first

draft of this book. I spent that year at Oxford University's Nuffield College and the Centre for Political Ideology (CPI). Marc Stears organized a one-day conference on a very early version of this book (supported by the CPI, University College, and the Department of Politics and International Relations) and did a great deal more as well to make me feel welcome. At the conference, Marc along with Miriam Leonard, Melissa Lane, Simon Goldhill, Robin Osborne, and Lois McNay offered prepared responses to the manuscript. Throughout that year at Oxford, Mark Philp, Sunetra Gupta, Michael Freeden, Stephen Mulhall, Chris Brooke, and Josephine Quinn responded to bits of the manuscript with comments that prodded me further. I was fortunate that year as well to attend several Oxford student productions of Greek myths and tragedies.

For sharing that sabbatical year with me and supporting this book project throughout, I owe thanks as well to my family, Michael Whinston, Noah Whinston, and Naomi Honig. Noah's interest in ancient Greece preceded mine. Early on, he was so soaked in ancient Greek mythology that when his sister was born he wanted to name her "Athena." Michael, Noah, and Naomi started off a year of tragic theater (*Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello, Andromaque, Hippolytus, The Song of the Nightingale, The Bacchae* [performed in a summer-sunsetted Port Meadow], and others) when they came with me to see *The Burial at Thebes* performed as an opera at the Globe Theatre in London in the fall of 2008. Soon after, we traveled to Athens, and Noah and Naomi helped me find the Memorial to the Unknown Soldier. As I wrote, Noah reminded me – often! – of Greek myth details that eluded me. Michael watched, without complaint, all the films I rented, remarking only late in the year that all the films we had been watching seemed to be about death and burial. And Naomi saw other movies with me including, our favorite that year, the fabulous *Coraline.* Watching it in the dark of an Oxford cinema on a sunny Sunday afternoon, I laughed when out of the film suddenly burst several direct references to Greek tragedy and *Antigone* (one in a sung celebration of theatrical imagination: "You simply say / I'm in Hawaii /And you're there / You can be Antigone / Or Cher!"). Naomi came up with her own great readings of the films we saw together, while also asking often, but not too often, how the book, which she calls "my" book, was going.

This book is dedicated to Naomi.

I wrote my original lecture on *Antigone* before Naomi was born but this book would not have been what it is without my knowing her. Her family nickname is "born-without-volume-control" and it is an apt one. From her I have learned about the power and longing of sound.

Her vital force reminds me of a character in one of my favorite childhood books, John Wyndham's *The Chrysalids*. The character's name is Petra and she is born into the family of a puritanical minister whose oppressive community vigorously regulates physical normality in a post-apocalyptic world. Disfigured babies, people, animals are put to death or banished. Some children in the community discover they have telepathic powers which put them at risk because of their abnormality but these also provide the children with an undetectable alternative community they need to survive. Petra's arrival changes everything. She too has telepathic powers it turns out, but hers are an uncontrolled, blinding force that interrupts the older children's secret conversations, leaving them reeling and vulnerable to discovery (i.e., I only just now realize, Petra is *born without volume control* . . .).

As a child, reading this book over and over, I did not see what I cannot fail to see now: that Petra's *baby-sister-power* was like the semiotic breaking through the symbolic order, interrupting it to open the way to something more promising than the corrupt, cowed, or just limited everyday life to which Petra's fellow telepathic communicators resign themselves. In their dystopic context, they can only clutch at mere life, but Petra seeks more; or better, she never recognizes that dystopic world as her world. Unacquainted with resignation, she is receptive to calls from afar that sound like mere noise to her fellows, if they sound at all. Responding to sounds undetected, unresigned to what others call "reality," she is available to enter into conspiracy with others far and near – these are key elements of what I call in this book: agonistic humanism.