



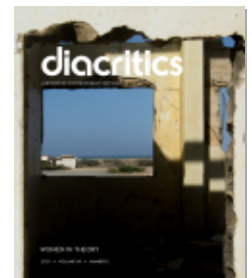
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Anti Antigone

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Diacritics, Volume 49, Number 2, 2021, pp. 13-22 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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ANTI ANTIGONE

ELISSA MARDER

My title “Anti Antigone” is meant to be read ironically: in remarking the negative force of the Greek prefix *anti* (against or in place of) inscribed within Antigone’s name (which means “against birth” or “in place of a mother”), I draw attention to the fact that Antigone is, above all, a “counter-figure” of the feminine rather than simply a feminine figure. In the following brief remarks (written as a series of polyphonic choral interventions punctuated by lines taken from Anne Carson’s contemporary rewriting of Sophocles’ play), I explore some of the potent paradoxes and consequences that arise from the thought that Antigone is not a “woman” in any simple sense. As a virgin/sister who dares to appeal to a law beyond that of the polis, she is accorded an authority that supersedes her status as a human woman. Instead, I suggest that Antigone occupies the position of a phallic virgin whose sovereign power is inextricable from a certain (primarily but not exclusively male) fantasy of phallic infallibility—a fantasy that is, paradoxically, often incarnated by an exceptional form of femininity. But that is only part of the story. One of Antigone’s many ironies is that the figure whose very name means “anti-generation” has been read by many as a powerful mother figure rather than as a threatening virgin. Moreover, judging by the abundant references to her in present-day works of critical theory, film, art, theater, and literature, Antigone is endowed with a seemingly unstoppable power to generate new iterations of herself. Confronted with current conflicts, questions, and cultural impasses, new generations of thinkers, poets, and activists continue to call upon Antigone to rearticulate the stakes and limits of political action, agency, and legitimacy.

Over the past fifty or so years, Antigone has become transformed into a generative matrix for feminist politics and philosophy. Beginning with Luce Irigaray’s groundbreaking essay, “The Eternal Irony of the Community,”¹ feminist philosophers have wrested Antigone from the place to which she was consigned within the philosophical tradition. More recently, in the wake of Judith Butler’s *Antigone’s Claim*, prominent women theorists have reclaimed Antigone for rethinking kinship, challenging exclusionary politics, and re-imagining sovereignty in the name of collective and progressive political action.² Other thinkers have explored her proximity to the earthly and avian realm. The reflections that follow cannot do justice to this rich and varied legacy. They are intended merely as a reminder that within the seductive image of Antigone’s sovereign autonomous power lurks a more painful, less triumphant, but perhaps more telling version of the way her femininity affects her fate and what we continue to inherit from her.

But how can she deny
The rule to which she is an exception
Is she autoimmune
No she is not
—Anne Carson, *Antigonick*³

Antigone never gets old. Sophocles’ tragedy endures in part because Antigone, the play’s central character, is undeniably awesome. This exceptional young girl has been admired, feared, emulated, and adored for speaking truth to power for millennia. Regardless of

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whether one understands her actions as having been motivated by chaste sisterly love, incestuous passion, intergenerational trauma, political engagement, respect for divine law, or an ethical commitment to the singular sovereign force of the law of her own desire, Antigone's fearsome and fearless display of defiance exerts a power that remains endlessly fascinating. In Sophocles' play, Antigone is referred to as a girl, a child, a sister, a virgin. She is also described as manly, inhuman, savage, uncanny, monstrous. She is compared to a mother bird who has lost her young. After G.W.F. Hegel, Antigone has become the feminine figure most examined and exalted both by and in the Western philosophical tradition. Within that tradition, however, she almost always functions simultaneously—and impossibly—both as an *example of* and as an *exception to* the general categories that she is asked to represent, whether that category is the family, the human, or the law.

For I'm a strange sort of inbetween thing aren't I?
Not at home with the dead or the living.⁴

Is Antigone a woman? At the level of the text, the dramatic action, and the characters, her relation to her sex is confused. Antigone herself never acknowledges that the category of “woman” applies in any way to her. Despite efforts by her sister Ismene to remind her of the fact that they are both girls and therefore ought to act accordingly, Antigone's very first gesture of defiance is to refuse to accept that designation. Likewise, when, later in the play, Creon rails repeatedly about not wanting to be defied (and implicitly unmanned) by a woman, Antigone neither responds to his preoccupation with her sex nor concedes that it has any relevance to her steadfast defiance of his laws. As far as he is concerned, she is a woman. As far as she is concerned, the category of woman has no bearing on their conflict. The only terms she deems meaningful are: brother, dead, corpse. After her sister Ismene fails to join her in her determination to bury the corpse, she no longer recognizes her sister as a sister. Her living sister becomes dead to her. When Antigone sings her final lament before being immured in the cave where she will hang herself, she declares she has no living kin: no one to weep for her, no loved one to mourn her death. She makes no mention of Ismene, who has disappeared from the play without leaving a trace. Because Antigone has severed all ties with the living, the chorus calls her “autonomous,” which, as Bernard Knox tells us, is a term “generally applied to cities . . . but is here applied, in a bold figure of speech . . . to an individual—she ‘lives by her own law.’”⁵ Antigone only becomes “autonomous,” a law unto herself, at the point of death.

Antigone: O one and only head of my sister whose blood inter-
sects with mine in too many ways⁶

Sisters. Although Antigone does clearly identify herself as a “sister,” that designation is itself confused. Critics have long been fascinated with the odd locution with which the play begins: “Of common kin, my very sister, dear Ismene” (*ō koinon autadelphon Ismēnēs kara*) that joins the rare word *autadelphon* (very sister) with *koinon* (common).⁷ The two sisters are initially conjoined and confused. This excess of commonality issues from their incestuous origins and their common provenance from the maternal womb

that they also share with their three brothers: Eteocles, Polyneices, and Oedipus (their brother/father). The Greek word for sister (*adelphē*) is a variant of the word for brother (*adelphos*), which means “of the same womb.” Later in the play, *autadelphos* refers to Antigone’s brother Polyneices rather than her sister Ismene.⁸ Antigone is a sister who acts like a kind of brother and vice versa. Glossing Hegel’s reading of *Antigone* in *Glas*, Jacques Derrida observes that Hegel never deigns to mention that Antigone is a sister to a sister as well as a sister to a brother. Derrida argues that the concept of brother belongs neither to culture nor to nature because it implies a structural conflict between virile figures who must attempt to destroy one another—qua brother—in order to take up the place of phallic authority to which they are ostensibly destined. After thus showing that the very category of “brother” is impossible, Derrida famously claims that Hegel’s whole reading of *Antigone* is predicated upon his “fascination by a figure inadmissible in the system” and that the sister in this brother/sister relation is “the vomit of the system.”⁹ Antigone occupies the position of the (appeasing) sister in relation to her brother, but she also functions as the (political) brother in relation to her sister. Antigone thus implicitly intimates that the only viable brother is a sister and that there is no sister for a sister. In each case, the aim is to neutralize the violence in the brother/brother relation and to elevate the invisibility in the sister/sister relation. Brothers are impossible, but sisterhood does not even exist. Ismene disappears halfway through the play. No one, not even the Chorus, takes note of her absence. She is ostensibly alive, but her life apparently does not matter. A sister cannot continue the line. Her disappearance from the scene is obscene.

Ismene: We two are alone
 And we are girls
 Girls cannot force their way against men
 Antigone: yet I will¹⁰

Antigone’s first sovereign gesture. In the opening scene of the play, in announcing her intention to bury her brother’s corpse in overt defiance of Creon’s edict, Antigone’s refusal to be regulated by the laws of her gender is inextricably linked to her rejection of the laws of the state. Antigone’s first sovereign gesture is thus to exempt herself from the constraints of being a woman. From this point on, everything that transpires throughout the play depends—in one way or another—on her estrangement from that category. Although one cannot read *Antigone* without implicitly making a decision about how to understand Antigone’s ambiguous relation to her gender, the implications of that reading gesture have rarely been addressed directly. The question of Antigone’s gender seems both too obvious (of course her character is identified as a woman) and too obtusely literal-minded (to ask this question is itself a sign of poetic and philosophical

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tone-deafness). As a general rule, readers working within the philosophical tradition mostly refrain from asking the question (it is reductive and uninteresting) whereas most feminist critics presume that she is a woman even if they disagree about what follows from this assumption. Moreover, while it is undeniable that Antigone succeeds, in apparently singular and spectacular fashion, in not being bound by the limitations of the category of her sex, the price she pays for that success in relation to her sexuality remains

a strangely elusive question. On one level, the answer to this question seems obvious: by deciding to bury her brother, Antigone chooses to suffer the punishment imposed by Creon (condemning her to be buried alive) before taking matters into her own hands by hanging herself. In choos-

ing death, she also renounces and turns away from the feminine place she will never occupy: she rejects the husband she will never wed and the children she will never bear. Throughout the play, Antigone's identity as a feminine figure is systematically both highlighted and disavowed. Because of this strange duplicitous structure, Antigone's status as a woman functions simultaneously as a fundamental aspect of the play's dramatic force while also seeming to be irrelevant to its larger—and implicitly more essential—poetic, philosophical, ethical, and political meanings.

Antigone: O tomb
 O bridal chamber
 O house in the ground forever
 I was an organized person and this is my reward
 I organized your deaths, my dear ones
 All of you father mother brother when you died
 You ask would I have done it for a husband or a child
 My answer is no I would not
 A husband or a child can be replaced
 But who can grow me a new brother¹¹

Antigone is and is not a woman. She is neither simply a woman, nor simply not a woman either. The undecidability underlying her relation to sexual difference often functions as an unthought supplement that undergirds many of the most influential reflections about how Antigone troubles the limits of the human. For many of the male philosophers and thinkers who love her dearly (Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, I am thinking of you), Antigone is more human than human. For them, she incarnates—in exemplary and exceptional fashion—an essential aspect of human experience. For all three of them, albeit differently, Antigone's feminine difference operates as a subliminal and untheorized intensifier of her hyper-human traits: on the one hand, she (implicitly) transcends the specific determinations of her gender status; on the other hand, that mark of difference enhances her status as an exceptional poetic and aesthetic figure

capable of incarnating essential dramas of human experience such as mourning, the work of the negative (Hegel), the uncanny essence of the human (Heidegger), and the impossible as the law of desire (Lacan). In writing about Antigone, they all draw upon a wide range of poetic, mythic, and conceptual motifs associated with femininity while simultaneously neglecting to incorporate any reflection about her troubled relation to sexual difference within their thinking. Antigone is the only woman worth thinking about because she is actually man at his most impossibly human.

Chorus: You chose to live autonomous
 And so you die
 The only one of mortals to go down to Death alive¹²

Antigone is excessively and hyperbolically human. Hegel admires the purity of her sisterly love and the way she works the negative. She “intuits” the emergence of ethical consciousness. For Lacan, Antigone goes toward *Atè* (ruin, catastrophe, atrociousness) and in so doing “goes beyond the limits of the human.” He says that

Antigone appears as *αὐτόνομος*, as a pure and simple relationship of the human being to that of which he miraculously happens to be the bearer, namely, the signifying cut that confers on him the indomitable power of being what he is in the face of everything that may oppose him. . . . Yet she pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire.¹³

Heidegger perhaps says it best, when he writes that “as a human being, she not only also belongs to the most uncanny that looms and stirs among beings; rather, within the most uncanny, Antigone is the supreme uncanny.”¹⁴ While Hegel, Heidegger, and Lacan all grant exceptional power to Antigone, none of them ever question how the specific ways in which she is marked as feminine might affect the universal claims they derive from her exorbitant relation to the human. Her femininity enhances the visibility of her hyper-human status even as all traces of the question of the feminine are effaced from the very philosophical understanding of the human that she grounds. Even though her problematic femininity is inscribed within everything she is and says and does, Antigone’s relation to being a woman (or not) is not a properly philosophical or psychoanalytic question. After engaging in pages of close reading with philological precision, Lacan concludes his reading with an assertion—unsupported by any textual evidence—that “the desire of the mother is the founding desire of the whole structure, the one that brought into the world the unique offspring that are Eteocles, Polyneices, Antigone, and Ismene. But it is always ‘a criminal desire’.”¹⁵ And then, in a sudden final leap, Lacan declares that the drama of criminal maternal desire in *Antigone* is essentially the same (although more extreme, more radical) as the one in *Hamlet*. But what gets forgotten in claiming that virgin sister Antigone and Prince Hamlet, son of King Hamlet, both suffer from the same impasse in desire whose source is the criminal desire of the mother?¹⁶

Guard: when I sneaked a look there she was
 the child
 in her birdgrief the bird in her childreftgravecry
 howling
 and cursing the poured dust onto the body with both
 hands
 she poured water onto the body with both hands¹⁷

Antigone is archaic. Many renowned classicists classify Antigone as an incarnation of pre-Promethean “Man.” As such, she belongs to the realm of the prehuman. According to Charles Segal, “in the great fifth-century debate between nature and convention, *physis* and *nomos*, Antigone stands on the side of nature.”¹⁸ For this reason, he argues that the famous depictions of the wondrous ways of man in the “Ode to Man” do not pertain to Antigone because she is “part of the human-dominated natural world”¹⁹ rather than part of the human. From this vantage point, Antigone cannot be considered either a man or a woman because she is older than sexual difference. Like Segal, Seth Benardete also describes Antigone as “Pre-Promethean.” For him, however, this designation makes her a uniquely monstrous figure:

The human being who has no arts, is wholly without hope and sees death before her is Antigone. Antigone is pre-Promethean man. She thus stands outside of everything that the Chorus have just mentioned to illustrate man’s *deinotes*. . . . Antigone is more than human *monstrum*. . . . Antigone is the only nonvisibly monstrous and wholly human being that is ever called a *teras*. . . . With her hot heart for cold things, her love of death, and her antigeneration, Antigone shows that the union of the divine and the human, which (the Chorus thought) the city harmonized, is essentially monstrous.²⁰

Antigone: the dead are cold
 they’ll welcome me²¹

Antigone is terrifyingly cold. Perhaps frigidly so. As Ismene puts it, in one of the most chilling lines of the play, Antigone “has a warm heart for cold things”²² and she loves the impossible. She inspires awe because she is as untouched by human desire, vulnerability, frailty as she is by human laws. She is impervious to everything that pertains to the living. Contrary to the view of many readers who tend to confuse her ritual acts of mourning (covering the corpse with dust, keening like a bird, voicing her own burial lament) with an expression of human feeling, Antigone does not, in fact, overtly express grief as such. Unlike her sister Ismene, who weeps and sobs openly, Antigone never sheds a tear. She is hard, tough, and unmovable. Antigone’s inhuman coldness provokes fantasies in her readers. Some of her most famous male readers appear to be particularly turned on by it. Her extreme coldness makes them hot. Her untouchability is a form of power; she escapes their grasp, their ken. She cannot be possessed by them. But that very inaccessibility is the source of the power, beauty, and authority that they invest in her. It is what makes her into a phallic virgin. Despite their claims

to the contrary (and both Heidegger and Lacan would argue vociferously that this is a fundamental misreading), her sovereign authority as a figure who cannot be mastered itself appeals to a fantasy of phallic infallibility. Phallic infallibility is best incarnated by a feminine figure who cannot be possessed. Lacan is famously enthralled by the power of her captivating beauty; she radiates with an unbearable splendor. For him, that radiance comes from her proximity to death, to the Real, to the Thing. But that very proximity to death, to the Real, and to the Thing is only possible because she has been rendered uniquely exempt from the trials of sexuality that beset human women. Her hyper-virile powers emanate from her frigid virginity. She loves, but everything about her love is cold. The object of her love is not her brother, but his corpse. Unlike the men charged with guarding the dead body who needed to stand out of the wind and cover their noses to ward off the smell, Antigone is unaffected by the stench of the rotting corpse. She touches the body without fear. She remains untouched and untouchable by human desire. *Autonomos*, she is a law unto herself. That law, however, draws its sovereign power from the complicity between death and femininity. The phallic virgin is the incarnation of that law. Antigone is a monster, a bird, a manifestation of dust. As phallic virgin, she is a frigid ice queen and a badass butch. Described as a “savage” just like her father Oedipus, she is a daddy’s girl and one scary dude. Curiously enough, even though she clings to her status as an unwed virgin, Antigone has consistently been read as a mother.²³ She is ascribed maternal powers because she communes with the Earth, identifies with her mother in death, is compared to a mother bird who has lost her young, and compares herself to Niobe (who turned to stone from grief after losing all her children). Frigid virgin and fecund mother. Ironically, the two go together—they are two sides of the same fantasy about (phallic) femininity. In his reading of Hegel’s reading of Antigone in *Glas*, Derrida claims that Antigone—whom he here (presumably following Hegel) identifies with “Cybele, the Mother-goddess”—wields irony like an all-powerful weapon of powerlessness:

But masculine power has a limit—an essential and eternal limit: the weapon, no doubt powerless, the all-powerful weapon of powerlessness, the inalienable blow struck by the woman is irony. The woman “internal enemy of the polity” can always burst out laughing at the last moment: she knows, in tears and in death, how to pervert the power that suppresses her. The power of irony—the ironic position, rather—depends—syllogistically—on the fact that the master produces and proceeds from what he suppresses, needs it and returns to it. Antigone is Cybele, the Mother-goddess who precedes and follows the whole process. She is present at every catastrophe, every fall, every carnage, remains invulnerable to them. Even her death does not affect her.²⁴

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Antigone: We begin in the dark
and birth is the death of us²⁵

Antigone is unborn. She is not, as Lacan would have it, “between two deaths” but rather between two births. In Greek, Antigone means “anti-generation” or “against birth” or “in place of a mother.” The very idea of anti-generation hearkens back to Cadmus, the founder of the line, who sowed feuding warriors from dragon’s teeth buried in the earth. Unlike in the case of Oedipus, whose name (“swollen foot”) is revealed within the unfolding of the action of the play itself to be the very signifier that resolves the mystery of his birth, Antigone bears a name that recalls the long history of her criminal paternal lineage (in which her slain brothers are merely the final chapter) and calls the very possibility of her own life into question.²⁶ Even before she attempts to bury her brother in the earth (in a gesture that conjures up the non-human maternal origin of the line), Antigone’s name recapitulates the very origins of her family, negates the particularity of her own existence, and marks her as the figure who is destined to be the family line’s end. Her life story was over before it began. As she herself says repeatedly throughout the play, she does not fear death because she is not alive. She is still (un)born: born still dead. Seen in this way, Antigone’s defiant actions are cast in another light. She does not merely act in accordance with a sovereign will, she “acts out” from within and against the history into which she has been born. As Mary Beth Mader has suggested, “Antigone’s insistence on performing the burial rites for her brother” is a performance of kinship that “attempts to bring a lost generational order back to the family.”²⁷ For Mader, the burial represents Antigone’s attempt to repair the crimes of her family’s criminal past. But one can also read her actions as a traumatic attempt to “unbirth” her brother by burying him and to unbirth herself through the double gesture of being “buried alive” in a womb-like space and hanging herself with an umbilical-like cord that both brings her back into the womb and reconnects her with her mother Jocasta by imitating and repeating the mode of her death.

Death who gathers all of us unto his old bent arms in
the end
is gathering me
But I am still alive²⁸

Nevertheless, she persists. Antigone is still very much with us today, bearing unbearable histories, acting up and acting out, as best she can.

Notes

- 1 Irigaray, "The Eternal Irony of the Community."
- 2 These references are to influential works on *Antigone* by Judith Butler, Tina Chanter, and Bonnie Honig. This essay is indebted to the work of the many women who have written on *Antigone*. Although I cannot engage substantively with them here, I would like to acknowledge some of them here by name: Tina Chanter, Carol Jacobs, Nicole Loraux, Judith Butler, Joan Copjec, Cecilia Sjöholm, Mary Beth Mader, Bracha Ettinger, Branka Arsić, Mary Rawlinson, Liz Appel, Adriana Cavarero, and Bonnie Honig. I would also like to acknowledge essays by J.M. Bernstein, Dany Nobus, Simon Goldhill, and Samuel Weber.
- 3 Carson, *Antigonick*, 40.
- 4 Carson, 30.
- 5 Knox, *The Heroic Temper*, 66.
- 6 Carson, *Antigonick*, 11.
- 7 I am indebted to Simon Goldhill for this commentary on and transliteration of the Greek in this passage (Goldhill, "Antigone and the Politics of Sisterhood," 141).
- 8 I am indebted to Charles Segal for this point (see Segal, *Interpreting Greek Tragedy*, 158).
- 9 Derrida, *Glas*, 183a. See Tina Chanter's commentaries on Derrida's reading of *Antigone* (Chanter, "Does Antigone Stand or Fall in Relation to Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic," 202–19; *Whose Antigone?*, 23–5).
- 10 Carson, *Antigonick*, 10–1.
- 11 Carson, 31.
- 12 Carson, 29.
- 13 Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 282.
- 14 Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister,"* 104.
- 15 Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 283.
- 16 For Lacan, Hamlet and Antigone are related figures. A year before his discussion of *Antigone* in Seminar VII, *The Ethics Seminar*, Lacan engaged in a famous reading of Hamlet in Seminar VI, *Desire and its Interpretation* (Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet"). In Seminar VI, Lacan analyzes Hamlet's alienation from his desire due to his preoccupation with his mother's desire. According to psychoanalyst/writer Jamieson Webster, "for Lacan, Antigone is an emblem of femininity, while Hamlet would seem to have an absolute horror of it" (Webster, *Stay, Illusion*, 98). In my essay, I contest Lacan's reading of *Antigone* by refusing to accept either his claim that Hamlet and Antigone can simply be read as counterparts, or that the "criminal desire of the mother" motivates the structure of desire in the same way for both figures. To do so, I suggest, domesticates the strangeness of the erotic relations of Sophocles' text by drawing upon the more familiar familial heterosexual oedipal drama that appears in *Hamlet*. It is also important that while the mother's desire is explicitly thematized in *Hamlet*, it is strikingly absent from *Antigone*.
- 17 Carson, *Antigonick*, 18.
- 18 Segal, *Interpreting Greek Tragedy*, 155.
- 19 Segal, 155.
- 20 Bernedete, *Sacred Transgressions*, 50.
- 21 Carson, *Antigonick*, 11.
- 22 Sophocles, *Antigone*, 88. The translation "you have a warm heart for cold things" is a common and accepted translation of line 88. Andrew Brown translates this line as "you have a hot heart for chilling deeds." Throughout this paper, I have consulted numerous translations of *Antigone*. When discussing specific critical readings of the play, I have relied upon the specific translations provided by the Hellenists and/or other readers as they are an essential part of their readings. When making my own textual claims, I have worked with a number of different translations to highlight the specific textual points in each case.

- 23 In "Dusting Antigone," Carol Jacobs offers a brilliant counter-reading of Antigone as a mother figure by showing how Antigone's motherhood disrupts figuration and traditional inheritance (910).
- 24 Derrida, *Glas*, 210a.
- 25 Carson, *Antigonick*, 9.
- 26 Even before becoming embroiled in patricide and incest, Antigone's non-maternal line was marked by criminal male homosexuality. Laius, Oedipus' father and Antigone's grandfather, notoriously incurred the curse of all generations to come because he raped and abducted the young bastard son of his host, Chryssipus.
- 27 Mader, "Antigone's Line," 164–65.
- 28 Carson, *Antigonick*, 29.