

Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 321, \$ 30.95, ISBN 9781107668157

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Antigone, Interrupted is Bonnie Honig's latest work, published by Cambridge University Press in 2013. The author has recently become Nancy Duke Lewis Professor-Elect of Modern Culture and Media and Political Science at Brown University, with a specialization in Democratic Theory. Her research on democratic politics focuses in particular on the concept of *agonism*, with which she aims to highlight the potential of political contestation in democracy. In her earlier work, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Honig primarily referred to Nietzsche and Arendt, to destabilize the traditional debate on democratic order based on the opposition between the concepts of "consensus" and "contestation". We find the same perspective in *Antigone, Interrupted*, in which Honig re-interprets the classic play: she refuses to attribute a lamentation of politics to Antigone (which she perceives as the main bias of most contemporary political readings of the play), but instead highlights how the heroine really *acts* politically in a condition of inability (the "*politics* of lamentation"). In doing so, Honig causes an interruption in the reception of the play and particularly in the many references to Antigone made by democratic, political and legal theory, feminism, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and even in the media between the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century. Honig strongly proposes a new interpretation based on the shift "from sentimental maternalism and mortalist humanism to agonistic humanism" (p.196), highlighting Antigone's quest for a counter-sovereignty, her partisan sororal tie with Ismene and, lastly, their conspiracy.

The book is divided into two parts (with two different introductions), entitled *Interruption* and *Conspiracy*, each comprising three chapters. The character of Antigone, made central for modern philosophy by Hegel, is traditionally seen by political theorists and philosophers either as a dissident who violates an unjust law and stands *alone* against a despotic power, as a humanist lamenter (sister/mother/daughter), or as a monstrous Lacanian creature, full of desire and born to die for her cause. The interpretational focus of the play has gradually

shifted from being conflict-centered to being especially mourning-centered.

In Part I, Honig interrupts the reception history of the play, analysing various works by theorists, philosophers and also directors, all of whom have made Antigone into an icon against Oedipus, who symbolizes – particularly in feminist theory – patriarchal and tyrannical power in family, society and politics. For example, in chapter 1, Honig refers to Nicole Loraux, whose “anti-politics of grief” suggests that tragedy, staging the lamentation – which had been banned from 5th century *polis* – “interpellated spectators into membership in an extra-political community” (p.25). Then, in chapter 2, Honig focuses on feminist theorists, who have ascribed powerlessness and a claim for equality to Antigone, instead of a claim for sovereignty. In this context, feminism has also referred to movements such as the Madres of the Plaza movement in Argentina, which Honig criticizes because, in her opinion, inasmuch as the Madres proclaim their own maternalist power as being related to the extra-political universality of mourning for war losses, “they just recirculate gender stereotypes rather than interrupt them” (p.14). In particular, Honig makes a distinction between Butler’s two differing references to Antigone, showing how the gender theorist, in her different re-readings of Sophocles’ play, moves from politics to a “humanism of grievability”. According to *Antigone’s claim*, Antigone challenges the main values imposed by the established power: she does not represent the normative principle of kinship, as Hegel states; instead, she is born as a result of incest and is thus a dangerous icon against the heteronormative family and the state. In this case, Butler attributes to Antigone a symbolic refusal of the performative effect that the repetition of traditional norms has upon us, a refusal which violently destabilizes our identities: according to Butler’s first reading of the play, Antigone shows us how the norms “need us and our compliance more than we need them to form us, to inform (on) us” (p.48). In a different way, Honig stresses how, in *Precarious life*, Butler’s reference to the heroine focuses more on Antigone’s decision to risk her own life to bury Polynices than on her counter-sovereignty and acts of resistance. According to this lamentation-focused reading by Butler, Antigone’s only claim appears to be based on a kind of “ontology of mortality”, which can provide neither political criticism nor an act of resistance. In addition, in this case,

Butler's only concern seems to be deploration of the violence of norms, rather than their renewed expression.

In chapter 3, Honig also focuses on Fassbinder's film *Germany in Autumn* (1978) as an example of the use of the "Antigone versus Oedipus" framework in queer theory. With his gay male Antigone, Fassbinder criticizes the main political values on which West German democracy is founded: self-discipline, citizenship and masculinity. Fassbinder chooses to use melodrama because the classicism of the traditional tragic genre was one of the ways in which Nazism glorified German national identity. Honig emphasizes how melodrama should be considered a useful genre for democratic theory, but only as a way to better understanding of democratic features, not as one in which to stage "a democracy of resignation rather than engagement" (p.79).

In Part II, after having interrupted the traditional reception of the play, Honig represents Antigone not as a mournful lamenter (against Nicole Loraux's *The mourning voice*) but rather as a political actor who demands vengeance and sovereignty, and who, in sacrificing herself for her sister, is devoted to life (against Lacan)—and who does *not* act alone. This is why the second half of the book is centered on *conspiracy*: Honig focuses on interruptions such as the dramaturgical devices with which Sophocles stages conspiracies, to show that new meanings can be found in the play. As she does in chapter 3 with melodrama, Honig refers to Benjamin's *Trauerspiel*, comparing its genre cues with ones in classical tragedy, stressing conspiracy, enacted in the *Trauerspiel* by the political type of the plotter.

In chapter 4, Honig turns that part of the critique which depicts Antigone as a partisan actor, referring to the historical context of the Periclean *polis* and, in particular, to the civic dispute over burial practices. Indeed, establishing norms about burial politics, aimed at limiting mourning and distinguishing between grievable and ungrievable dead people, Creon's edict reminds us of the previous discussion over funerary practices between about 440 and the 430 BC under Pericles' leadership. According to this interpretation, the conflict between Antigone and Creon may be compared to the opposition between aristocratic and Homeric praise of individuality, and democratic praise of replaceability, unity and membership. Honig demonstrates that this binary opposition can also be reformulated according to the

gender difference: the official act of mourning staged in tragedies and epitaphs is directly related to membership and identity (which were prerogatives of men only), whereas Homeric and aristocratic mourning is related to the *threnos* (which had been banned from the Periclean *polis*), a formal lament ritually arranged by women. Staging a lamentation similar to the *threnos*, Antigone would have openly challenged the male tyrannical power which excluded minorities from the political field of the *polis*. This kind of ritual mourning was therefore not only a loud public lamentation, but also a cry for vengeance (one of the reasons why it too was banned from the *polis*, where democracy was founded on oblivion of civic war). Lastly, in chapters 5 and 6, we find the very core of Honig's interpretation, in which she shows how there are several kinds of conspiracy in Sophoclean tragedy: Creon symbolizes the part of the *élites* in 5th-century Athens, who sided with the newly established democratic order (whereas Antigone represents those conservative aristocrats who stood against it). On one hand, the soldiers act as plotters against their superior officer, taking Antigone's side; on the other, Antigone herself *conspires*, both openly with language (in chapter 5 Honig analyses Antigone's final monologue, which actually constitutes the last part of the play), and secretly with Ismene (chapter 6 focuses on two earlier dialogues between the heroine and her sister). Antigone's final dirge, according to Honig, is not a mere lamentation, but is also related to the figure of speech called *adianoeta*: "an open secret of political critique aimed at Creon" (p.90): this is why she moves from lamentation (the dirge which she wants to sing to Polynices) to *logos* (the dirge which she pronounces for herself, and which Honig considers as a political claim). Here, Antigone refers to two different laws which, she states, govern her actions, but which seem incompatible: the equality of all the dead (for instance, that of all the members of a democratic *polis*) and the singularity and irreplaceability of her brother. Honig explains this paradox by interpreting Antigone's dirges as going beyond the traditional opposition between equality and singularity (and between the traditional and official male *logos* and the a-political female *phone* of the lamentation). In the same way, Antigone's conspiracy with her sister is political, in that she "enacts sorority as a different sort of citizenship" (p.91): this is exceptionally interesting for

contemporary democratic theory because it is a way in which to “constitute new publics” (p.196).

“Working the interval” (p.142) between “anti-humanism” (e.g., Rancière’s perspective) and “mortalist humanism” (e.g., that of Butler), and between the anti-political universality of mourning and politics related to civic identity, the binary oppositions which drive the traditional political interpretation of the play, Honig does not appear to be rigorous in her philological analysis of the text. Nonetheless, her work has the merit of comparing a huge number of references and, in an original way, focuses not only on the contents of the play but in particular on its dramaturgical aspects, thus creating a definite shift in the contemporary reception of the text. In fact, stressing the idea that Antigone’s mourning should be interpreted as a speech act with a political aim, Honig wishes to show how the protagonist of Sophocles’ play truly *acts* politically to counter Creon’s sovereignty. In addition, as a contemporary democratic theorist, Honig demonstrates how the re-reading of a classic can be useful for both political theorists, in better understanding the claims of contestation movements, and for protesters, in realizing how weakly they sometimes express their demands. She finds in the *agonism* between established power and resistance –agonism which should be at the core of democracy – a demand for equality in life and not the universalism of grief, and her work is guided by the “quest of a politics that is not reducible to an ethics nor founded on finitude” (p.19).

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