

Jonathan Strauss, *Private Lives, Public Deaths: Antigone and the Invention of Individuality*, Fordham University Press, 2013, pp. 216, \$ 24.00, ISBN 9780823251339

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Jonathan Strauss teaches French literature at Miami University. His previous books and articles focused mainly on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century French literature and cultural history. In his latest work, *Private Lives, Public Deaths: Antigone and the Invention of Individuality*, he turns instead to Sophocles' tragedy and to some other ancient texts, looking at a range of classic authors, including the most famous dramatists, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes and Lysias, and referring to the *epitaphioi logoi*. Nevertheless, he also works across a broad range of modern and contemporary authors: Hegel and Lacan, classicist scholars such as Vernant, Loraux, Fränkel and Steiner, and philosophers (for instance Derrida, Butler, Irigaray and Honig).

In his attempt to lead the tragedy back to its original historical and political context, Strauss focuses his analysis on some concepts that have always stood out in the contemporary reception of the play and also in his own personal studies, such as the antinomy between private and public, and the notions of "self", desire and death. He focuses on topics related to the idea of "individual", which was completely absent from ancient literature, framing this notion as opposed to the political and collective concept of state.

In Antiquity it was possible to talk about the duality of body and soul only in relation to death. In fact, Strauss highlights that "the mortal remains are [...] the specific possibility of thinking that particular abstraction and everything that derives from it, such as individual responsibility, legally accountable agency, and the sublime and vanishing point of the single citizen" (p.114). On the contrary, in this book he works around the definition of the *living* subjectivity, the value and the uniqueness of a single person – which was a "conceptual emptiness" in ancient literature – considering *Antigone* a fundamental starting point for understanding the entire cultural, historical and political moment.

Strauss' interest in Sophocles' play is clearly expressed in the *Introduction* of the book. *Antigone* lets us understand some of the struggles (both theoretical and practical) related to the rise

and to the preservation of the *polis* during the fifth century BC. As Nicole Loraux argues in her book *L'invention d'Athènes*, the city needed to justify its existence and to legitimize its *corpus* of laws (*nomoi*) through the invention of its mythic origins and through the necessary public narration and repetition of them in the theatre. The most significant thing was, as Strauss highlights, that the identity of the *polis* was based on the individual person- and in particular on the *sacrifice* of the individual person. The private will was entirely subjugated to the general one and the citizen was, above all, a soldier whose very essence was founded on the possibility of his death in war. The entire value of the single person depended on his or her sacrifice for the community.

The uniqueness of the single person was an intolerable idea for the time, and the corpse was the visual remnant of the individual. For that reason the dead body was considered *dangerous*: it “played the role of an alien force constitutionally hostile to the city, but it also served as an unconscious reminder of the city’s mythical origin, the other that needed to be excluded but that could never be fully removed” (p.2). Strauss stresses also the link between the material dead body and the archaic familial order (polluted by the miasmas of paternal guilt), with the ancient gods (the Eumenides of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*) and particularly with women, traditionally connected to the dimension of the kinship. That is why in archaic and classical Athens it was important to govern the bodies. In fact, referring to Ian Morris’ *Burial and Ancient Society*, Strauss highlights the link between the rise of the *polis* as a political entity, the widespread of funerary practices (granted to a larger portion of population) and, at the same time, the transformation of those practices, which have increasingly become more public than private/ familial. At the same time, the material walls of the *polis* represented also a symbolic border between the living and the dead, inasmuch as the cemeteries were built outside the city: those walls “stood [...] as an ongoing memorial to that originary political act: the expulsion of the corpse” (p.5).

Nevertheless, according to Strauss in *Antigone* we can find a significant effort to define the individual person through his or her *life* instead of death, and to elaborate the concept of individual self-identity. In doing so, the author’s reading of the play diverges from Hegel’s and Lacan’s ones, as they relate both individuation to human mortality. Such concepts as

“personhood” and “self-identity” are relevant particularly from a juridical point of view, to define “a legally responsible individual, accountable for his own acts rather than for those of his ancestors” (p.8). However, the “living individual” can be found in the play only as an *absence*, expressed – as Strauss argues – in the language of emotions, through “mourning, longing, loving” (p.101).

In the first chapter of the book, Strauss, referring to Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, discusses the basic antinomy between two different but equally legitimate forms of justice, an ancient one based on the law of vengeance and on the transmission of a miasma within a familial closed structure, and a newer one founded on the civic law. We can find these two forms of justice expressed in *Antigone* too (represented by Creon and Antigone), related to two different formulations of individuality. In fact, Vernant highlights that the play shows how the idea of the miasma of familial guilt has been gradually replaced by the idea of a “certain legally responsible individual, one who would be determined by his or her agency in relation to a criminal act” (p.29). He claims that the new social order of the *polis* legitimized itself on the rejection of the pre-political one. On the contrary, in the *Phenomenology* Hegel interprets the tragedy as based on the *unsolved* conflict between two antagonistic ethical positions both equally unilateral. The very core of the play by Hegel’s account is the advent of the *pure being* of the individual who existed for the city only as a dead one, in the memory of his or her family.

Strauss considers Hegel as a starting point for understanding the problem of the individual as a single *living* person, beyond the structural duality between the bonds of the family and the universality of the state. In chapter 2, Strauss focuses on the citizen, “one of the key models for attributing value to an individual in fifth-century Athens” (p.12). This new sort of person is central in classical Greek tragedy, to celebrate the *polis* against the family, history against myth. Nevertheless, Strauss stresses that the individual as a citizen was paradoxically celebrated at the moment of his death in service to the city. He was thus celebrated in his “selflessness” and the funerals were public performances where the autochthonous origins were glorified as long as, “according to the *epitaphioi logoi*, true motherhood is expressed in the state” (p.43).

The family, the women and the hero are all figures representing

the exclusion of the individual from the *polis*, unlike the citizen. At the same way “the valuable living individual did not exist in clear conceptual terms within the historical context in which *Antigone* was written, but he nonetheless made his possibility felt as an absence” (p.13). The dead body carries the signs of this loss and that is why Strauss titles chapter 3 *Loss embodied*. In fact the corpse, as Hegel argues, joins the material principle and universality together, insofar as the mourning and the funerary rituals produce a sort of *identity* of the dead. For this reason, Strauss claims that the meaning of the corpse in Sophocles’ play is not clear: as Antigone herself, the dead body seems to be the figure of the indeterminacy between life and death.

This indeterminacy is dreadful for the city, which is “built on this double containment of the corpse: its burial and then the erasure of that burial” (p.60). In chapter 4, Strauss refers to some other categories of exclusion (the criminal, the ostracized, the abject), highlighting that they have a *liminal status*, since they are indispensable when defining the identity of the city. In fact the legislator has to face the “persistent irrationality within the rational order of the city” (p.65) inasmuch as crimes like parricide and sacrilege – which are crimes against gods and the family – are related to the concept of *miasma* and to the archaic order. Antigone and women are symbolically relied upon those crimes and, as well as the ostracised, they are a reminder of the paradox, of the *aporia* of the state: the rationality of its legislation is founded on the terrifying irrationality of the ancient internal conflicts between families.

In chapter 5 Strauss focuses on the analysis of the notion of *philia* in fifth-century Greece and especially on Antigone’s affection. Her desire is considered specifically *feminine* since it is both directed to a single person’s uniqueness and dependent on the death of the heroine herself. Women’s desire affirms the irreplaceability of the beloved, who is *alive* – and this threatens the city, since it cannot categorize and thus control this uniqueness. In fact, referring once again to Hegel, Strauss argues that “as an abstract individual, the *anēr agathos* [...] of the eulogists is a product of death, and accordingly the most important instrument with which the state asserts control over the living person is war” (p.87). In legitimizing her female love and in situating it within the network of the family, Antigone “pollutes” the political space. She “elevates that affection to the

status of the tragic and, therefore, of the political [...] while opening the possibility for a different but still gendered notion of the political – one based on feminine love” (p.84). Antigone’s affection is “ironic” in Hegel’s sense, because it stands against both civil law and familial archaic order, since both of them dissolve the individual.

For this reason, in chapter 6, Strauss argues that the individual has to be thought of as this kind of erotic desire, repressed by the *polis*. Hegel related the conception of the citizen, “as an impersonal embodiment of his own death” (p.104) to gender difference, which was just one of the categorical and individual differences between people. Those differences were very dangerous for the city. By analysing Plato’s conception of *thumos* in the *Republic*, Strauss shows that the *polis* has always shown an irrational tendency toward the materiality, in the form of that sexual desire (considered specifically *feminine*) that it tried, at the same time, to banish and to remove. This irrationality is also connected to a specific kind of knowledge, different from official codes of definition and intelligibility: Strauss compares it with the Sphinx’s ambiguity in Oedipus’ myth and with the concept of “semiotic”, as Julia Kristeva names “the affective, irrational elements in language” (p.112).

Lastly, in chapter 7, Strauss tries to find a *positive* solution to the absence of the notion of living individual within ancient conceptuality. In *Sexes et parentés* Luce Irigaray, interpreting Sophocles’ play, highlights that “erotic, gendered desire” (p.130) creates human individuality, in deferring to a Lacanian model of language, centred on the masculine and paternal symbolic order. Strauss proposes instead another way to exit from Hegel’s lethal model of subjectivity, focusing on a “dynamic process” among people. He turns to the character of Haemon, Creon’s son and Antigone’s partner. In treating his girlfriend as irreplaceable, Haemon refuses familial hierarchy and, consequently, his identity as a citizen. He thus creates “a living individual through interpersonal choice, through an erotics and *philia* of reciprocal self-identification” (p.14).

The author refers to a wide range of ancient and modern sources – although often he seems to prefer to focus on traditional Hegel’s lecture of the poem than to analyse concepts in their own original context. Nonetheless, his work has the merit to face the important philosophical question of the relation between the individual and the political in an original way,

insofar as he highlights a huge problem for the fifth-century Greek literature and thought: how to frame the “vague but stillborn notion of a valuable individual life” (p.12).

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