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## Antigone Again: Conspiracy and Curse

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**Brooke Holmes**

No one can stop talking about Antigone. The conversation began long ago with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and, after an Oedipal interlude courtesy of Sigmund Freud, resumed with Jacques Lacan and feminist critics of Hegel, intensifying in the wake of Judith Butler's engagements with Antigone in *Antigone's Claim* (2000) and *Precarious Life* (2004). Antigone has become an almost unavoidable point of reference for a range of debates about the state; freedom; gender; citizenship, public and private; burial; desire; kinship; pluralism; and much else. The effect in recent years has been something of a din around Sophocles's singular hero. The decision to write a book about Antigone now is, for this reason, a gamble. If Bonnie Honig takes the gamble in her rich, compelling, and incisive new book, *Antigone, Interrupted*, it is because she thinks it is impossible to walk out of the conversation about Antigone. Instead, you have to interrupt it.

Book Reviewed: Bonnie Honig, *Antigone Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *AI*.

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1           What are the stakes of this interruption? Antigone's long and con-  
 2 tested reception history in political theory and philosophy makes her a  
 3 figure taut with competing energies: civil disobedient and conscientious  
 4 objector, subject of monstrous desire, vehicle of a universalizing grief that  
 5 transcends politics. But these energies also coalesce to drive and embed  
 6 certain habits of thought. Honig is especially interested in the work that  
 7 Antigone has done to enable a mode of humanism that has gained traction  
 8 over the last couple of decades through the work of Jean Bethke Elshtain,  
 9 Nicole Loraux, and especially Butler in response to the AIDS crisis and 9/11.  
 10 This humanist mode—Honig calls it “mortalist humanism”—universalizes  
 11 Antigone in the name of vulnerability, grief, and loss, and it comes at a  
 12 cost, Honig argues, to an agonal sociality grounded in difference, affirma-  
 13 tion, and striving; in the extreme, the mortalists' Antigone encourages the  
 14 abnegation of politics altogether, or at least politics as Honig understands  
 15 it, through her engagement with the work of Hannah Arendt and Jacques  
 16 Rancière, as a space of creativity, conflict, and action. Honig has a name  
 17 for the way in which appropriations of Antigone qua mourner (especially  
 18 mourning mother) script political agency as lament: the “Antigone effect.”  
 19 The hold of that script on political theory is what Honig aims to interrupt  
 20 by reworking the figure at its center.<sup>1</sup> She writes on Antigone not to classi-  
 21 cize a project that would survive without Sophocles's hero but because an  
 22 Antigone classicized as timeless mourner does too much work on behalf of  
 23 the lamentational politics of mortalist humanism to ignore her.<sup>2</sup>

24           The figure of Antigone in mourning gains its strength from an estab-  
 25 lished reading of Sophocles's tragedy. The task of breaking the Antigone  
 26 effect thus requires contesting her narrow emplotment through a new read-  
 27 ing of the play, one that discovers an Antigone who is canny, questing, and  
 28 vengeful, committed not just to death but to life. Indeed, Honig's strategy  
 29 of interruption stakes much on reading as a practice that is at once dis-  
 30 ruptive and generous. In and of itself, the return to the text is a common  
 31 move. From Lacan's proprietary (and anti-Hegelian) claim to the “Sopho-  
 32

33 1. “If we are going to endlessly reperform the gesture of turning to Antigone versus Oedi-  
 34 pus (or even if we hope to break this perpetual cycle of reperformance), we need a differ-  
 35 ent Antigone, one who does not just immerse us in a politics of *lamentation* premised on  
 36 shared finitude but also inaugurates an insurgent *politics* of lamentation that solicits out  
 37 of us a potentially shared natality” (*AI*, 85, Honig's emphasis).

38 2. On the collusion of classicism and a lamentational humanism, see also Miriam Leonard  
 39 and Jim Porter's “Co-conspiratorial Introduction,” in “Forum on Bonnie Honig, *Antigone*  
*Interrupted*,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* (forthcoming).

clean message,” to Patricia Mills’s citation of a line from the Chorus to counter Hegel’s denial of a conscious ethical life to Antigone, to Butler’s reading of the paternal curse in *Oedipus at Colonus* to break the hold of the Lacanian symbolic, the text has long been used to undermine the theoretical paradigms and positions erected in its name.<sup>3</sup> But the weaponization of the text has its problems. Honig herself criticizes prior appropriations of the *Antigone* that fail, she argues, to appreciate the play’s dramaturgy because they are too busy mining it for arguments (*AI*, 6). The dramaturgical approach she advocates instead attends to the text as a performance, by which she means a mode that is dynamic and dialogic, rather than one that is conventionally theatrical.<sup>4</sup> The Antigone interrupted of the title is an Antigone embedded in the cut and thrust of debate, double entendres, and sotto voce conspiracy.

Yet there is always a tension between reading and argument that is exaggerated when the irrepressibly alien and irrepressibly familiar texts of the Greek canon are brought to bear on contemporary politics, especially when the texts in question are literary. Honig’s book is no exception here. The sense of there being two separate planes of operation is emphasized by the structure of the book into two parts, the first, interventions in contemporary receptions of Antigone that mobilize resources beyond the play (notably Arendt’s concept of natality and Douglas Crimp’s queer politics of pleasure), the second, a close reading of the play. And Honig takes on directly charges that she is instrumentalizing the text, as I discuss further below.

Nevertheless, Honig is deeply committed to the productive coexistence of reading and theorizing. She is committed, too, to the possibilities opened up by elaborating the past through the present and vice versa, engaging as energetically with classicists and ancient historians as she does with democratic and queer theorists. These double fidelities are part of what makes the book an exceptional—and an exceptionally valuable—intervention in the well-populated domain of “Antigone Studies.”<sup>5</sup> The

3. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, vol. 7, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), 249; Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, “Hegel’s *Antigone*,” *Owl of Minerva* 17, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 131–52, esp. 141 (Mills is working from a translation, whose rendering of the Greek *autognōtos* at v. 875 as “conscious” is, however, misleading); and Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 65.

4. I owe this point to Miriam Leonard.

5. I borrow the term from Keri Walsh, “Antigone Now,” *Mosaic* 41, no. 3 (2008): 1–13.

1 self-conscious and sustained enactment of competing commitments also  
 2 makes the book a must-read provocation to different disciplinary communi-  
 3 ties invested in the disruptive political, theoretical, and creative potential of  
 4 classical antiquity, especially classicists engaged in reception studies and  
 5 political theorists oriented toward the classical canon.

6 But the accomplishment of the book is not only methodologi-  
 7 cal. Honig succeeds in using *Antigone* and the *Antigone* to open up new  
 8 ways of thinking about political subjectivity. By working intimately with  
 9 the text within a genre-bending frame—melodrama, accessed via Rainer  
 10 Werner Fassbinder’s gay male *Antigone* in *Germany in Autumn* and Walter  
 11 Benjamin’s analysis of the *Trauerspiel*, contributes much to her concepts  
 12 of plotting and conspiracy—she develops an often surprising and provoca-  
 13 tive *Antigone* whose laments mobilize logos to “constitute new publics” (*AI*,  
 14 196) and whose agency is not only boldly staged and individualist but also  
 15 conspiratorial and collaborative. This revisionist *Antigone* vectors political  
 16 theory away from mournful quiescence toward strategies of action that are  
 17 nimble, contingent, and passionate. Yet thinking with *Antigone*, even qua  
 18 “transitional object” (*AI*, 66), has its risks. The *Antigone* effect works in its  
 19 way on Honig, too.

20  
 21 . . . .

22 *Antigone, Interrupted* is, in many ways, a book about ends: about the  
 23 long and tangled afterlife of Sophocles’s *Antigone* and its effects; about the  
 24 promise and peril of Machiavellian readings of the canon that privilege ends  
 25 over means; about the questing after sovereignty in *Antigone*’s attempts to  
 26 frame her exit; about a trajectory traced by the play from sororal conflict to  
 27 sororal conspiracy, and beyond. But I want to start by suspending a discus-  
 28 sion of ends to think for a moment about where *Antigone* comes from. By  
 29 this I do not mean what are the mythological antecedents of “our” *Antigone*  
 30 (there do not seem to be many: the evidence suggests that Sophocles  
 31 basically invented her). Nor do I raise the question of origins to probe the  
 32 concept of natality that Honig borrows from Arendt in order to challenge  
 33 mortalist humanism’s fixation on finitude. Rather, I am interested in two  
 34 stories that Sophocles gives us in the *Antigone* about the conditions under  
 35 which *our* *Antigone* comes to be, that is, the *Antigone* who consigns herself  
 36 to death by honoring her dead brother.<sup>6</sup> By looking at the competing nar-  
 37

38 6. Sophocles could imagine other narratives for how *Antigone* becomes a political agent  
 39 at Thebes, as in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and these need not produce “our” familiar *Antigone*:

ratives that the play offers for understanding why Antigone does what she does, I want to consider how these narratives are captured by—or elude—the agonisms of *Antigone, Interrupted*. In other words: yet another return to Sophocles's text.<sup>7</sup>

*Antigone* offers up two models of how Antigone comes to be. Antigone herself articulates the first of these in her opening exchange with Ismene. Having conveyed the news of Creon's edict, she ends by giving Ismene a choice articulated in the terms of an aristocratic ethics. You will soon show, she says, whether you are by nature well-born (*eugenēs pephukas*) or, whether, although from noble stock, you are base (*Ant.* 37–38). For Antigone, the ban on burial is a touchstone—to borrow an image from the consummate elite poet Theognis—that will reveal Ismene's true nature. But we could also read the violation of that ban as the event that gives birth to an Antigone who at this point in the play is an ideal as yet unrealized. For all that she uses the language of revealing a nature that is already fixed, she presents Ismene with a decision that implies self-authorship. Born from a noble line, she must nevertheless *choose* not to die ignobly (*Ant.* 97). After all, descent is not necessarily a straight line: the noble can give birth to the base. The first birth, therefore, has to be actively affirmed so that one can return to the natal family in death, as Antigone so vividly imagines her own afterlife (“I will bury him: it will be noble for me to die accomplishing this. I, loved and loving, will lie with him—with him loved and loving—in pious transgression” [*Ant.* 73–75]).

We see already adumbrated here the Antigone who, on Honig's reading, seeks to control the frame by which her act is judged in the moments before she is led to her death. The Antigone who quests for sovereignty by controlling the terms of meaning in this later scene is first the Antigone who inaugurates the play by setting up conditions of ethical agency in the polarizing terms of archaic ethics: one acts and through acting becomes a legitimate target of praise and blame. The cut between praise and blame,

see Brooke Holmes, “Antigone at Colonus and the End(s) of Tragedy,” in “The Enigmatic Context: Approaches to Greek Drama,” ed. Richard Rader and James Henderson Collins II, special issue, *Ramus* 42, nos. 1–2 (January 2013): 23–43. For a Euripidean genealogy of Antigone, see Arlene Saxonhouse, “Another Antigone: The Emergence of the Female Political Actor in Euripides' Phoenician Women,” *Political Theory* 33, no. 4 (August 2005): 472–94.

7. The Greek text of *Antigone* is cited from Hugh Lloyd-Jones and N. G. Wilson, *Sophoclis Fabulae*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); hereafter cited parenthetically, my translations.

1 noble and base, mimes the cut between friend and enemy on which Honig  
2 will stake her definition of Antigone as an anti-Hamlet, a figure, that is, who  
3 is not paralyzed by melancholy but strives to act in the world. These cuts  
4 generate a space that is at once ethical and political.

5 There is also another model of Antigone's origins at work, articu-  
6 lated by the Chorus in response to Antigone's first public justification of  
7 her act of burial, her famous speech about "unwritten laws." The speech  
8 again trades in the terms of ethical self-definition. Antigone is not pained by  
9 her death sentence. What would pain her, she declares, would be to leave  
10 unburied the corpse of her mother's son. Polyneices's corpse must be  
11 recuperated and honored just as Antigone must be (re)birthed through the  
12 ethical act in order to gain entry to the natal family in death. The Chorus,  
13 however, views that act—or, rather, the defiant public framing of it—as lay-  
14 ing bare another genealogical model. Antigone's words make clear that she  
15 is the "wild offspring from a wild father" (*to gennēm' ōmon ex ōmou patros /*  
16 *tēs paidos* [*Ant.* 471–72]). To make their point, the Chorus mobilizes the  
17 figure of polyptoton: we encounter the adjective "wild" (or "raw": *ōmos*)  
18 first in the accusative, agreeing with "offspring," then in the genitive, agree-  
19 ing with "father."<sup>8</sup> For Antigone, the repetition of the same in the line of  
20 descent is a desideratum to be secured by an ethical act of self-definition.  
21 By contrast, in the hands of the Chorus, repetition reads more ominously,  
22 as the stutter of ancestral misfortune. The doubling of wildness intimates  
23 Antigone's incestuous origin, and with it, the curse.

24 One might be tempted to map these two models onto two subjec-  
25 tive perspectives, that of Antigone and that of the Chorus. Things are not  
26 so straightforward. For the Chorus again invokes the paternal "labor" or  
27 "conflict" (*patrōion . . . athlon* [*Ant.* 856]) in the lyrical dialogue (*kommos*)  
28 they enter into with Antigone before she is led offstage to her rock tomb.  
29 The frame they propose is one that Antigone herself accepts. "You have  
30 touched on my most painful cares" (*Ant.* 858), she responds. She defines  
31 her parents here not by their nobility but by their accursed coupling. It is  
32 from such wretches that she is born wretched; it is with such a family that  
33 she is reunited in death. Here she is birthed into a death that can only  
34 reenact the traumas of the Labdacid line.

35  
36 8. They use polyptoton in exactly the same way the first time they see Antigone, brought  
37 onstage as a criminal. There she is the "unhappy child / of an unhappy father" (*ō dustē-*  
38 *nos / kai dustēnou patros Oidipoda* [*Ant.* 379–80]). On the deployment of the motif of  
39 ancestral misfortune in the play, see further Renaud Gagné, *Ancestral Fault in Ancient*  
*Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 362–75.

We are given, then, the ethical agent who births herself by laying claim to her rightful honor as well as the wild, accursed offspring of a polluted line.<sup>9</sup> I have presented these stories in terms that are themselves simplified: the ethical choice can be seen as compelled by blood; the paternal curse is also a contest or a struggle. Nevertheless, the play roughly limns two divergent models of descent as the cause of action. Does it choose between them? Should we?

The question of competing frames of explanation is central to the concept of agonistic humanism so compellingly theorized in *Antigone, Interrupted*. These frames recur with iridescent richness, especially in the second half of the book. In chapter 4, an aristocratic ethos that vests the family with the task of imbuing individual life with value clashes with a new democratic politics of fungible citizens. In chapter 5, Antigone cycles through frames for her death and its consequences for the political order that decrees it. In chapter 6, agonism migrates to the sororal bond between Antigone and Ismene. The sisters enact different ethical models that Honig takes up from Alenka Zupančič, who labels them as classical and modern, while contesting Zupančič's diachronic orientation (so that Antigone is the exemplar of classical ethics, as in Zupančič, but Ismene becomes the emblem of a "modern" ethics, defined in terms of a sacrifice of ethical integrity itself).<sup>10</sup> Most obviously, agonistic humanism is set against mortal-ist humanism within the book's theoretical frame.

Yet within this field of dueling opponents and strategic maneuvers, the two narratives of Antigone's origin are not given much attention. The narrative of ancestral doom, in particular, is mentioned only very briefly by Honig, who presents it as a frame that Antigone tries out in her final sequence of speech acts but ultimately discards. In her reading, Honig is eager to reach the point where Creon appears and Antigone gives her final speech about the singularity of her brother, and, she implies, Antigone is eager to get there, too. The speech manifests "her ongoing determination to tell her story as she wants it told" (*A*, 141). It is the product, in other words, of will, desire, and intentionality. The teleological thrust of the reading makes sense in light of what the speech promises for Honig's larger project. It is here that we see most clearly Antigone read as a political agent deploying speech tactically in order "to frame her story and control

9. The hallmark of Lacan's reading is in making the monstrous creature of desire paradigmatic for ethics, but the ethics is psychoanalytic, not Greek.

10. See Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000).

1 the field of interpretation by which she will be judged” (*AI*, 129). Here, then,  
 2 is the culmination of a quest for sovereignty, the point where Antigone is  
 3 said, at the close of the book, to “graduate” to an agonistic humanism (*AI*,  
 4 196). Honig, of course, is well aware that the *Antigone* doesn’t end here;  
 5 that Haemon’s bloody suicide will lay claim to Antigone’s virginal body; that  
 6 Creon’s own sad fate still lies ahead (and she in fact gives a rich read-  
 7 ing of Creon’s grief at the end of chapter 4). Nevertheless, Antigone’s last  
 8 speech, with its subversive literary excesses and its defiant bid to lay claim  
 9 to the frame of meaning, feels like what the book is questing after as a  
 10 model that it also enacts.

11 Why does Honig neglect what she calls the Oedipal frame? Taken  
 12 as a means of understanding Antigone’s action, the idea of the family  
 13 curse is problematic for Honig in part because it is given by the Chorus,  
 14 not Antigone. It is, appropriately enough, not chosen by her. But that is too  
 15 simple. As we saw above, in the give-and-take of the *kommos*, frames are  
 16 exchanged back and forth. They are fundamentally malleable and dynamic.  
 17 Antigone herself accepts and expands the frame of ancestral doom. In fact,  
 18 it is precisely because she embraces that frame so enthusiastically that  
 19 the Chorus counters by in turn emphasizing her own agency (“your self-  
 20 willed [*autognōtos*] disposition has destroyed you” [*Ant.* 875]). If we want  
 21 to think about the ways in which agonism animates the tragedy, or about  
 22 dramaturgy instead of argument, the exchange with the Chorus is crucial.  
 23 The resistance they offer to each of Antigone’s attempts to give meaning to  
 24 her fate is formative of each subsequent attempt, and she in turn shapes  
 25 the frames they offer.

26 The dialogic and agonistic logic at play here is not easily assimilated  
 27 to a trajectory leading to a privileged frame: less circular than circuitous, it  
 28 maps a space where frames become entangled in one another, where the  
 29 Oedipal frame haunts the frame of ethico-political agency and vice versa.  
 30 The nonlinear structure could be seen as an interruption to Honig’s inter-  
 31 ruption, dispersing the teleological current of her reading. And if we pass  
 32 over its knots too quickly, we end up forgetting the basic lesson of genre—  
 33 namely, that there are different modes of making meaning. The lyric dia-  
 34 logue is not an inconsequential one (Mark Griffith calls it the “emotional  
 35 and musical climax of the play”<sup>11</sup>); Antigone’s speech (*rhēsis*) is another.<sup>12</sup>

36 11. Mark Griffith, *Sophocles, Antigone* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999),  
 37 260.

38 12. The shifts in Antigone’s own attempts to give meaning to her death in the scene have  
 39 long led commentators to worry about the consistency of her character; but this is a mis-



These modes do not follow a developmental story, like the account of the genres of evolving rationality in Bruno Snell's midcentury classic *Discovery of the Mind*. Rather, they enfold and complicate the plane of meaning emanating out from the event of Antigone's transgression.

Honig's theoretical tools, and especially her appropriation of Rancière's notion of "working the interval," are well-suited to capturing some of these complexities. Indeed, at the conceptual level, she develops a complex and sophisticated notion of political agency that grounds agency in contexts and communities. Her Antigone is allied to specific, historically nuanced principles (primarily aristocratic vs. democratic). She negotiates the impact of her stand for those principles in real time, soliciting sympathies, deftly handling critique, and modifying her strategies in response to the unexpected actions of Ismene. She is, in short, not an isolated actor.

Nevertheless, Honig's marginalization of the curse is symptomatic of her investment in an Antigone defined by a quest for self-authorship. Antigone's aspirations become those of the book. Part of the neglect of the dialogic nature of Antigone's—and the play's—working out of the meaning of her transgression seems to arise from Honig's uneasiness with lament as lyric. But mostly there is the familiar brilliance of Antigone herself, arrow of desire and vehicle of our longings. All of the attention to Antigone's conspiratorial, code-switching manipulations of language locates the play of frames in the hands of a heroized plotter. And even as she complicates the heroization of Antigone by recuperating Ismene as a political actor, Honig also does the Romantic tradition one better, rescuing Antigone from the ostensibly petty or cruel indifference to her sister that has long marred her idealization and allowing her, in no less than "a heroic scene" (*AI*, 168), to save her sister's life by outfoxing Creon through a masterful manipulation of double entendre. It is so easy to lose sight of how Antigone herself is emplotted by the tragedy, to let Antigone's voice become the metavoice of the tragedy.<sup>13</sup> If the slide from the *Antigone* to Antigone is virtually constitutive of the reception of Antigone since Hegel, Honig's readings are still under the spell of one powerful Antigone effect.

The investment in Antigone as resourceful dissident makes Labda-

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placed worry that fails to see how modalities of meaning—different ways of knowing—are privileged over psychological realism in Greek tragedy (though we would be equally misled if we threw out psychological realism altogether).

13. On this point, see Page duBois, "The Death of the Character," in "Forum on Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted*," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* (forthcoming).

1 cid *atē* problematic beyond the fact that it is a frame first introduced by  
 2 the Chorus. The legacy of ancestral doom undercuts the model of ethical  
 3 agency predicated on choice making that Antigone articulates early on in  
 4 the play. Honig's reading privileges that model, and so it is not surprising  
 5 that it finds little room for *atē*. Part of the problem is that, unlike in the *Oedi-*  
 6 *pus at Colonus*, no curse is articulated (and so there is no curse easily  
 7 susceptible to deconstruction). But more important still, the ancestral *atē*  
 8 is a vexing paradigm of givenness that haunts the quest for sovereignty. By  
 9 contrast, the necessity represented by Creon is a wall that is easy to push  
 10 against and easy to tunnel under. Indeed, it is because the play makes it  
 11 so easy to cast Creon as the villain that the identification with Antigone has  
 12 long been so seductive and appealing. The appeal of that identification can  
 13 explain why on Honig's reading Antigone is largely the author of her acts.  
 14 What is not really at stake in the book is a(n Oedipal?) story of tragic sub-  
 15 jectivity in the sense of a subjectivity riven and shadowed by the daemonic  
 16 and the divine.

17 There are, however, good reasons for this exclusion, and they are  
 18 worth exploring for the questions they raise about reading the *Antigone* tac-  
 19 tically and the broader politics of divided and distributed agencies. We can  
 20 begin with the question of why agency is so central for Honig. It is helpful  
 21 here to recognize the well-established feminist tradition of reading Antigone  
 22 as an ethico-political agent, often with the explicit aim of countering Hegel's  
 23 denial of ethical agency to Antigone and the depoliticized nihilist of Lacan's  
 24 reading. Honig engages this tradition directly via two of the thinkers she  
 25 sees as having been most influential for political theory, Elshtain and But-  
 26 ler. What these two theorists share, for Honig, is a curiously Janus-faced  
 27 approach to Antigone's potential as a resource for feminist politics. On the  
 28 one hand, each of them insists on Antigone as a figure capable of effec-  
 29 tively resisting the state, with Elshtain focusing on a care-centered "mater-  
 30 nal" politics that is eventually, in her second essay on Antigone (1989),  
 31 seen to be enacted by the Madres of the Plaza in Argentina, and But-  
 32 ler using Antigone's resistance to Creon to destabilize the Oedipal law  
 33 and the Lacanian Symbolic in the name of aberrant kinship. On the other  
 34 hand, because the political agency extended to Antigone takes the form  
 35 of the capacity for lament—for Butler this happens primarily in her second  
 36 "Antigone book," *Precarious Life*—Honig argues that it is essentially apo-  
 37 litical. Her intervention thus aims to make good on feminism's promise of  
 38 citizenship to Antigone.

39 Such a project, though, is no easy task. After all, what Honig sees as

the failure of Elshtain and Butler's attempts to claim Antigone for political theory is symptomatic of a deeper problem within many feminist and queer receptions of Sophocles's hero.<sup>14</sup> The Hegelian and Lacanian receptions, for all their differences, cast Antigone as outside politics. In countering that reading, feminist and queer theorists have vested Antigone with the power to disrupt politics-as-usual and statist hegemony. But they have struggled to transform her resistance into a viable politics. They have struggled, too, with the question of whether Antigone licenses a politics that is proper to women or a politics "in the feminine," in the sense of being birthed from a gendered (rather than a sexed) point of resistance. The claims of mortalist humanism represent one strategy for dealing with these impasses. They turn lament into a transcendence of politics, at least on Honig's diagnosis. Moreover, they avoid essentializing claims about women and the political by reworking the notion of the human with the help of concepts that gender as feminine (vulnerability, mortality, lament, grief) but are reread as universal.

Honig retains the humanist turn of these recent readings but resists any hint of transcendence or abnegation. She wants to keep Antigone in the fray. But, as we have just seen, this is not as simple as making her into a political actor. The larger question is how Antigone can be read as acting in the name of a politics that neither betrays the radical challenge she poses to Creon nor undoes its own conditions of power. Here, in essence, is Honig's task: to theorize a peculiarly Antigonean form of sovereignty—by which I mean a form of sovereignty that stays true to the political promise invested in Antigone by a tradition of feminist and queer receptions—by means of the resources of the text of Sophocles's *Antigone* and under its constraints. She undertakes this task by reclaiming the politicized valences of mourning within conflicts between aristocratic and democratic values in fifth-century Athens, by reworking the puzzling logic of Antigone's valorization of her brother as a covert and agile challenge to Creon and defense of the natal family, and by rescuing Ismene as a political actor working with but also productively contesting her bolder sister. The point, at any rate, is that in light of her project, it is not at all surprising that Honig downplays Antigone's *atē*.<sup>15</sup> Her decision is tactical, made in the service of a reading

14. For further discussion, see Brooke Holmes, *Gender: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2012), 150–80.

15. Compare Tina Chanter's strongly anti-Lacanian reading of the *Antigone* in "Antigone's Political Legacies: Abjection in Defiance of Mourning," in *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė (Oxford:

1 that requires the strategic embrace of agency and sovereignty to counter a  
2 slide toward an inert, mournful antipolitics.

3 I have deliberately chosen the word *tactical*, and it is worth thinking  
4 a bit more about what it means as a description of Honig's project. After  
5 all, it is no great revelation that every reading leaves some things out and  
6 focuses on others. Yet the received truth that all readings are, well, just  
7 readings masks a persistent tension between the instrumentalizing read-  
8 ing and the inert one, an uneasiness about what we want from the past and  
9 its alien texts. Honig is unusually alert to these tensions, which come to the  
10 surface in the closing pages of the book. She there repeats Simon Gold-  
11 hill's charge that her interpretation of the play's mysterious first burial as the  
12 work of Ismene (first published in a 2009 article) is a "wilful reading against  
13 the grain" as an occasion to define her methodological position.<sup>16</sup> Observ-  
14 ing that Sara Ahmed has recently laid claim to willfulness as "a cardinal  
15 feminist virtue," Honig declares, "The reading presented here *is* willful—  
16 pressing its case forward against other rivals, trying to make room for itself,  
17 amassing the evidence, seeking to reach beyond the established struc-  
18 tures and figures of language, pluralizing them and the genres of reception"  
19 (*AI*, 189; Honig's emphasis). The virtue of sovereignty moves from inside  
20 the interpretive frame to the frame of interpretation. The very tacticality of  
21 the reading is thus implicated in the book's larger argument on behalf of  
22 Antigone's political subjectivity and an agonistic humanism.

23 The embrace of willfulness is not, however, a concession to instru-  
24 mentalization. On the next page, at the start of the conclusion, Honig revisits  
25 the question of willfulness by citing Slavoj Žižek's worries about threats to  
26 the "dignity of the law" posed by "user-friendly" late modern interpretations.  
27 There, however, she takes a different tack, emphasizing the possibility that  
28 new readings, far from being "self-confirmations" (she is again strategically  
29 citing Goldhill here), may be "the hard-earned product of new perspectives,  
30 alien genres, and innovative interpretive resources" (*AI*, 190). The "hard-  
31 earned" part casts the readings of the book—capacious, conspiratorial,

32  
33 Oxford University Press, 2010), 19–47. Like Honig, Chanter is adamant about reclaim-  
34 ing political agency for Antigone. Luce Irigaray's recent work with Antigone undertakes  
35 a similar task—she "governs as far as she is permitted to do so"—but unlike Honig and  
36 Chanter, Irigaray is still committed to a politics of life, generation, and growth that is sexed  
37 as female. See Luce Irigaray, "Between Myth and History: The Tragedy of Antigone," in  
38 *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism*, 197–211, esp. 205.

39 16. Simon Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University  
Press, 2012), 247.

sororal—as not merely willful. The text comes to the fore here as a point of *resistance* to will: texts, she writes, sometimes “exceed and resist the demands of their interpreters . . . [they] are recalcitrant” (*AI*, 191).

The complication here is that in referring to texts as recalcitrant, Honig seems to be talking not about the *Antigone’s* resistance to her own readings but, rather, the text’s evasion of past interpreters and, more specifically, “paternal” or literalist readings. The excess creates space for other readings. By recognizing a collusion between the idea of the text and the (father’s) law, Honig suggests, we may come to see these ostensibly more creative readings as no less at home in the text than those that reconfirm the paternal law. I am sympathetic to Honig’s conceptualization of the text as conducive to a plurality of interpretations, even self-conscious about its open-endedness.<sup>17</sup> One could complain, however, that it is convenient to peg other readings as ideologically blinkered while implying that one’s own uncovers the text’s latent truths.

But Honig is not so naive about what she is doing. It is true that much as she displaces the curse in constructing the causal structure of Antigone’s own action, Honig displaces it at the level of reading onto other readers who have fallen under the “Antigone effect.” Nevertheless, if we’re talking about how to frame one’s own reading, the displacement of the curse feels right. You can gesture to your own embeddedness in an intellectual tradition, a culture, a disciplinary training, or a biography, but it doesn’t get you very far: at some point you have to own your readings. For classicists working within reception studies, this is an important reminder that one of the implications of that work is that even as readings are products of their circumstances, they are in the best cases more than that. In Honig’s hands, moreover, the idea of a quest for sovereignty becomes a powerful enabling figure for anyone strategizing about how readings of ancient texts might matter in the present. Even as she finds shades of meaning in the text that have had no place in readings of the play to date, she frames what she is doing less as a discovery of the text’s hidden meaning, more in terms of its generativity in the present.

Then again, it is not simply a question of owning one’s readings. Honig, as I’ve said, is deeply attuned to the tension between laying claim and being claimed. The opposition that I have been drawing between ethico-political agency and the curse does not take into account Honig’s own complication of her conceptualization of Antigone’s quest for sovereignty. The

17. On open-endedness, see Holmes, “Antigone at Colonus,” 38–41.

1 claim that Antigone “conspires” with language to articulate another politics  
2 under conditions of constraint has connotations of intentionalism, and her  
3 reading of Antigone’s frame seeking has a teleological streak, as I argued  
4 above. But for Honig, the notion of conspiracy also implies a lack of mas-  
5 tery: language and Sophocles’s text itself also conspire through Antigone,  
6 who is not and cannot be fully in control of her words (*AI*, 187–88). The point  
7 here is classically poststructuralist: sovereignty is undone within language  
8 itself. Moreover, it has implications for how Honig frames her own reception  
9 of Antigone. Repeating the move we have been tracing here, by which the  
10 language of theorizing political agency migrates to the practice of reading  
11 itself, Honig frames her own work as “conspiring with the text (and its con-  
12 text and its reception history)” (*AI*, 191).

13 Here, then, are the terms under which the agency of the text is  
14 allowed in, as a quasi-active element in the advancement of a theoreti-  
15 cal project. The resistance it poses is not negative—that is, eluding that  
16 project—but positive, enabling it. The figure of conspiracy resonates power-  
17 fully to capture the complexity of what it means to theorize with a canon-  
18 ical text and to read as a generative process. One does not have to agree  
19 with all Honig’s readings to see the force of such a formulation borne out in  
20 *Antigone, Interrupted*. The book not only Antigonzes but also, as it were,  
21 agonizes (the residues of the agon as well as agony are relevant here) over  
22 the play, responding to its complicated texture, the spillage and proliferation  
23 of meaning, even as it makes incisions in the text (the critic, after all, is the  
24 one who makes a cut). In many respects, it is that rare thing—a genuinely  
25 new book, alive with energies that will undoubtedly catalyze further debate.  
26 If I have focused on the residual Antigone effects in Honig’s readings, it is  
27 to extend its capacity for interruption. In these last couple of pages, I want  
28 to think briefly about why it is worth resisting an Antigone who is rather too  
29 successful in her quest for sovereignty.

30 First, we need to pay more attention to the way that gender has  
31 shaped the recuperation of sovereignty via Antigone. As we saw earlier,  
32 feminist and queer theorists have taken aim at Hegelian and Lacanian  
33 representations of Antigone as estranged from political agency due to  
34 an excess inassimilable by the symbolic or the state. To the extent that  
35 Antigone’s excess is gendered by both Hegel and Lacan as feminine, it not  
36 only excludes Antigone from the political sphere but does so on grounds  
37 that are easily conflated with all the reasons why women have historically  
38 been excluded from political participation in the Western tradition. These  
39

could be summed up by the figure of a monstrous, limitless, unknowing, desiring body.

It is true that Butler is an exception here. *Antigone's Claim* embraces Antigone precisely for the aberrant, incestuous conditions of her birth. But for other feminist readings, it has been important to deny or downplay *atē* as an implicit precondition of recuperating Antigone's political agency. The constellation of ideas summoned up by *atē*—monstrosity, blindness, necessity—read as the dark side of power when the subject is male, Oedipus being a prime example here. That is, because the purchase on knowledge as well as voluntary action (Oedipus's own defense of his actions in the *Oedipus at Colonus* is important here) is presumed in the male subject, it can be undone on the tragic stage. The unraveling of self-sovereignty feminizes the hero, but it does not actually make him into a woman. By contrast, the undoing of subjectivity is much more problematic in the woman because there is, both in the Greek imaginary and in the Hegelian-Lacanian reception of Antigone, no real subjectivity to be undone (the portrayal of Phaedra in Euripides's *Hippolytus* brilliantly drives the paradox home). So however productive tragic man may be for theorizing agency, tragic woman is, within the feminist tradition, something to worry about. For what makes her tragic seems only to reconfirm her as woman and nothing else. There is a hint in Honig's book that something like the curse is a threat to her revisionist Antigone insofar as it, like lament and mourning, necessarily genders feminine—and maternalist feminine, rather than sororal feminine—and so effectively disables political agency. Her marginalization of the curse thus raises the question of whether it is possible to implicate Antigone in *atē* without *atē* essentializing her as woman.

Honig does, as we have just seen, see sovereignty as always unmoored by language. So in one sense, Antigone is allowed to not be fully in control of herself without the loss of control consigning her to apoliticality. But—and this is my second observation—a primarily linguistic approach to the self as worked by other agencies does not do justice to the mesh of forces in which the tragic hero is embedded in Sophocles. These forces are divine and daemonic, nonhuman and other, but also mysteriously and horrifyingly proper to the human. It is because the hero is so deeply embedded in a network of forces that both the causes and the effects of what she does exceed the boundaries of the ethico-political subject, even as that subject takes responsibility for them. It is this network that we glimpse not only in the songs of the Chorus about the ancestral burden but also in other signs:

1 the portents of dead flesh polluting the gods' altars that are reported by the  
 2 seer Tiresias after Antigone's exit, for example, and the daemonic, noonday  
 3 dust storm that clears to disclose Antigone in the act of burying her brother  
 4 to the guards on watch.

5 Sophocles's masterful and allusive limning of such a network  
 6 invites us to balance, against quests for sovereignty and manipulations  
 7 of language, swarms of causes and the fields of forces that compromise,  
 8 block, exaggerate, and enable our agency and its effects. What we might  
 9 call tragic agency is not only—and in fact rarely—about resisting power.  
 10 It is more often about how our exercise of power exceeds our intentions  
 11 with devastating consequences, how agency is muddled and perverted  
 12 by madness. More relevant here than Cindy Sheehan is Army Staff Ser-  
 13 geant Robert Bales, the veteran of four combat tours in Iraq and Afghani-  
 14 stan who made a pair of nocturnal forays into Afghan villages, where he  
 15 methodically murdered sixteen civilians in a rampage that recalls Heracles  
 16 in Euripides's *Heracles Furens* or Ajax in Sophocles's play of the same  
 17 name. Where does Bales belong within an agonistic humanism? The Hera-  
 18 cles and Ajaxes (and Clytemnestras and Electras and Hecubas) of Greek  
 19 tragedy cast a darker light on the vengefulness and rage that Honig seeks  
 20 to recuperate in Antigone in the name of natality, implicating cycles of vio-  
 21 lence in curses and ancestral harms.

22 But power also ensnares us in less dramatic ways, making us com-  
 23 plicit, for example, in what Rob Nixon has called the "slow violence" of  
 24 ecological degradation.<sup>18</sup> Surely one of the challenges of political theory  
 25 right now is how to theorize the distribution of our agency through networks  
 26 that are both human and nonhuman without destroying the ethico-political  
 27 conditions of responsibility and reparation, that is, to think environmental  
 28 justice together with forms of new materialism. I would argue that tragic  
 29 agency is one way of trying to imagine this both/and: *atē* and self-willed  
 30 passion, actions that are ours and not ours, events that are both local and  
 31 catastrophically global in scale, rebounding across populations and gen-  
 32 erations and the trajectories of our own lives. Is it possible to take up both  
 33 sides of this double helix within agonistic humanism?

34 It is difficult to say. It may be that recognizing the full swarm of causes  
 35 around Antigone's act, as well as its cascading effects, takes us to the limits  
 36 of a reading of the play as efficacious for political theory, if what is needed  
 37

38 18. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA:  
 39 Harvard University Press, 2013).



is a pragmatics of action rather than the bewilderment and awe and horror  
 that the paradox and overdetermination of tragic agency inspires. It may be  
 that dwelling on the darker side of Antigone's agency arrests us in a melan-  
 cholic paralysis and pulls us away from natality toward finitude.

Nevertheless, if we imagine political theory in terms not of teleology  
 but of the lyric dialogue between the Chorus and Antigone, we can think of  
 Honig's book as an incitement to reflect on what other publics and agen-  
 cies and theories may be created by returning to Greek tragedy in the wake  
 of her powerful readings (e.g., a theorization of sovereignty that, by attend-  
 ing to the blurring between what is self-willed and the legacy of the past,  
 is less sanguine about vengeance and passion; an Antigone enmeshed in  
 a network that encompasses dust storms and birds as well as sisters and  
 brothers; a displacement of Antigone altogether). Indeed, the promise of  
 Honig's agonistic humanism demands nothing less.

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