



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

ANTIGONE'S CHOICE: TRAGEDY AND PHILOSOPHY FROM DIALECTIC TO APORIA

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Introduction

Written by Sophocles in 442 BCE, *Antigone* has survived over two millennia as a staple of both the philosophical and the dramatic canons, mainly because of its focus on the tragic battle between its main characters, the titular Antigone and Creon, her king and father-in-law, as a near-ideal illustration of dialectical/dramaturgical conflict between a number of binaries: state/family, human law / divine law, male/female. Tragedy is not dead, as George Steiner ([1961] 1980) argued, but its philosophical kernel—the thought—has shifted from dialectic to aporia, from binary to polynary. *Antigone*—with its multiple interpretations and critical lenses—illuminates this fundamental shift in our understanding of tragedy and, thus, the fundamental shift in the relationship between theatre and philosophy. This article offers a comparative analysis of multiple philosophical definitions of tragedy, attempting to illustrate how each of them grapples with forces within and without, both individual and collective. Tragedy and its various definitions is the crux that unifies theatre and philosophy, both struggling to understand and explain what makes tragedy a tragedy: an inescapable structural engine of history, subconscious self-destructive force of the death drive, a reflection of patriarchal and colonial hegemony, a function of state's biopower, and finally, an aporic condition of grief, and suffering. Tragedy and the tragic are products of self-aware consciousness; they are the markers of our humanity. We recognize something as tragic because we want to create meaning out of our human misery and suffering, and Antigone, with its multiple meanings and analysis, is one of the best dramatic vehicles to illustrate it. To quote Bonnie Honig (2013), in *Antigone*, "tragedy's power is not that it redeems suffering, but that it exemplifies it in ways that highlight what many think to be the human's most basic common denominator – the capacity to feel pain and suffer" (19).

Tragedy as Dialectic: Hegel

Hegel was fascinated by both *Antigone* the play and Antigone the character, calling the play “the absolute example of tragedy” ([1827] 1988, 353) and Antigone herself “the most magnificent figure ever to have appeared on earth” (Hegel [1835] 1975, 509). Framing the main conflict of the play in a dialectical clash between the religious/familiar interests (Antigone) and the political/state interest (Creon), which he then aligns with the characters’ respective genders, Hegel uses *Antigone* to justify “the ethical order” of patriarchy itself (Hegel [1807] 1979, 228).¹ The funeral rites for Polynices, which Creon refuses and which Antigone insists upon, are, for Hegel, a mark of the ethical, ontological, and sexual differences between the two. In *Phenomenology* Hegel considers the play as a struggle between the feminine order of kinship, represented by Antigone, and the public sphere of “the ethical order,” the patriarchal statehood, represented by Creon. In the *Philosophy of Right* ([1820] 1967, 166), Hegel further aligns man with the order of the state, and woman with the sphere of “happiness of the Family.”

To sustain itself, Hegel suggests, the state needs the family unit, which he then designates as a woman’s domain; however, this domain, by its very nature, can exist only in conflict with the interest of the state (thus the male citizen is constantly torn between his allegiance to his country and his allegiance to his family). Or, as Judith Butler (2000) commented, according to Hegel, Antigone “is outside of the terms of the polis, but she is, as it were, an outside without which the polis could not be” (4). Hegel ([1807] 1979) himself describes “womankind” as “an internal enemy” of the community, since it “changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family” (228). In other words, by defining Antigone’s actions as a crime against an order that is “right,” Hegel establishes the law of the patriarchal state as unalienable and unquestionable. Thus, for Hegel, Polynices’ corpse becomes the site of an ethical order and patriarchal subject-formation. Antigone’s and Creon’s relationships to Polynices’ corpse provide thesis and antithesis of political discourse of the law, from which Hegel can then delineate the essential lines of gender difference, framing them in ontological, political, and ethical terms.

Antigone, the play, then, becomes a model of tragedy characterized by insolvable conflict. In *Glas* ([1974] 1986), Derrida summarizes Hegel’s point stressing the interrelation of two oppositions between “divine and human, subterranean and diurnal, feminine and masculine, familial and political, and so on” (166). Derrida further points out that tragedy, according to Hegel, results not from individual action, but from the juxtaposition of dialectical forces within the entire socio-ethical structure. For this reason, the death which ends the conflict is always inevitable. Derrida writes:

Tragic carnage: murder no longer proceeds from a voluntary decision; it is inscribed as a fatality in the operation’s structure. If the ethical substance unites the two laws, the operation always comes down to a singular individual. So the operation recreates the split, the opposition of the divine and the human, of the woman and the man. Each on his or her side, Antigone and Creon hear or read only one law; they lack and betray the other. (171)

The ethical foundation of the binary between Creon and Antigone determines the outcome of the dialectical conflict, not the individual decision of each protagonist.²

And yet, Creon and Antigone represent not just opposing forces but also “an internal dialectic [...] between simultaneous unifying and separating forces” (20). Antigone and Creon, are, after all, related. He is her father-in-law, the closest thing to a parental figure she’ll have from now on. Thus, the conflict, although insolvable, presents an opportunity for “inter-penetration”—to quote Hegel again—“their antithesis is rather the authentication of one through the other, and where they come into direct contact with each other as real opposites, their middle term and common element is their immediate inter-penetration” (Hegel [1807] 1979, 278, para. 463). That “inter-penetration” of two irreconcilable forces is what for Hegel constitutes the essence of tragedy, or as Derrida puts in in *Glas*, “The copulation of these two ‘opposite movements’ appeases nothing. There is no reconciliation. Here tragedy begins” (170).

The dialectical approach to tragic conflict which *Antigone* illustrates can be extrapolated to historical forces, in which, as Martin Donougho (1989, 67–68) summarizes, “History is viewed as a tragic struggle between positive and natural law, each of which much get its cyclical due.” Political philosophy should then take tragic drama—and its dialectics—as its model of history which happens as if “in the theatre,” with thesis and synthesis battling it out toward the synthetic reconciliation: “The true course of dramatic development consists in the annulment of contradictions viewed as such, in the reconciliation of the forces of human action, which alternately strive to negate each other in their conflict,” Hegel ([1835] 1975, 1215) concludes. In her book *The Fragility of Goodness* (1986), Martha Nussbaum notes that Hegel’s concept of synthesis (as the reconciliation of two opposing dialectical forces) would suggest that tragedy represents “a primitive or benighted stage of ethical life and thought,” since the reconciliation only happens after the tragedy has taken place (while the proper rational reasoning would prevent it) (51). Antigone and Creon, Nussbaum writes, “resolve tensions in the wrong way; but the play shows us how to resolve them in the right way” (52). Tragedy understood as dialectic reveals the possibility of catharsis as synthesizing force, but only after the catastrophe already happens.

Many contemporary critics influenced by the Hegelian interpretation of *Antigone* as a dialectical conflict consider the play a political allegory in which the character of Antigone represents a defiant political protest, often in the face of overwhelming force of the unjust totalitarian rule (apartheid, fascism, communism, colonialism,³ etc.). She is “a defender of human rights against the monstrosity of tyrannical, repressive regimes”—as Tina Chanter summarizes it (2010, 23).⁴ Many modern adaptations and stagings of the play, including Seamus Heaney’s *The Burial at Thebes* and Athol Fugard’s *The Island*, provide similar interpretations. Seeing the play as a political allegory of liberatory struggle, Chanter very much relies on the same presumptions of realism that Hegel partakes. However, whereas Hegel sees the tragic as the unresolvable dialectical conflict of two equally valid ethical positions, Chanter sees the tragic in the discrepancy between the righteousness of Antigone’s cause and her lack of power to execute it. Chanter writes:

Antigone calls attention to the blindness and hypocrisy of a polity that defines its membership by precluding as worthy of full political participation those on whom

it nonetheless remains dependent materially and psychically. Such a polity requires unconditional loyalty from subjects on whom it refuses to confer political rights. It requires, that is, that such subjects remain silent about their right to be authorized as sovereign citizens, that they remain acquiescent to, subjugated by a political system whose efficacy their silent existence ensures. (24)

The vulnerability, frailty, and failure of the righteous to advance their cause is the essence of tragedy, Chanter suggests. Such definition of the tragedy parallels the morally unambiguous ethos of Christian passion play and Romantic melodrama, where the martyrdom of the good at the hands of the evil finds resolution and redemption in the unequivocal clarity of its moral purpose. Tragedy is the unfairness of the universe, its silence in the face of suffering of the weak, the unjust distribution of social and political power, and dramaturgically, a failure to deliver the satisfying closure of the poetic justice. Such understanding of tragedy, although perhaps closest to its colloquial meaning, skews the nuance of Hegel's interpretation towards prima facie axiom of human relations: the weak are powerless, the powerless are weak. This tautology is tragic, Chanter implies, because we humans aspire to moral order that transcend the ubiquitous of animal kingdom. Antigone, the character, represents that moral order (the law of the Gods), and *Antigone*, the play, its idealistic, rebellious, and doomed pursuit.

Tragedy as Death Drive: Lacan

In psychoanalytical discourse, tragedy is brought forth by the internal, subconscious forces that drive our decision-making, offering a startling vision of the human subject as fundamentally condemned to self-destructive impulse. Following Freud, Lacan locates the tragic in the death drive: a fatalistic, subconscious, and irrational suicidal drive. Lacan's (and subsequently Žižek's) interpretation of Antigone as inexplicable, irrational Other is derived from Martin Heidegger, who, in *The Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953) defines her as 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*). Un-canny, for Heidegger is "that which throws one out of the 'canny,' that is, the homely, the accustomed, the unusual, the endangered. The unhomely does not allow us to be at home" (161). At the same time, however, Heidegger considers Antigone's un-canniness to be an essential human condition: "the uncanniest is the basic trait of the human essence, into which every other trait must always be drawn" (161). We are not at home in the world, Heidegger seems to suggest, and the very nature of our existence, its randomness, the alienation of our selves from ourselves and the other, is un-canny.

Although he picks up Heidegger's thread, Lacan diverts from it by defining Antigone's un-canniness as an aberrant, self-destructive, element of human condition, and more importantly, in opposition to the *canny* of the ego and superego. In Lacan's psychoanalytic reading of Sophocles' play, Antigone, the character, embodies a "pure death drive." In his essay "The Essence of Tragedy," Lacan ([1959–1960] 1997a) writes that Antigone

literally cannot stand it anymore. Her life is not worth living. She lives with the memory of the intolerable drama of the one whose descendance has just been

destroyed in the figures of her two brothers. She lives in the house of Creon; she is subject to his law; and that is something she cannot bear. (263)

Giving consideration for the unconscious motives that drive fascination with transgression, Lacan's analysis of *Antigone* suggests that the transgressor embodies a surplus, lost enjoyment. This attitude of a "paradise lost," according to Lacan, is symptomatic, and the tragic appeal of Antigone's transgression lies in Antigone's self-destructive drive beyond this border: entering into the realm of the Real equals suicide.

For Lacan, Antigone epitomizes a pure death drive; she persists in her convictions with terrifying perseverance, fully conscious of her fate and unmoved by it. But the act of saying no to the existing structure intrinsically implies the act of saying yes to something else, and Antigone breaks the human law in the name of higher values of God's order. Her subjectivism, although opposed to social structure, is grounded within the paradigm of higher principles, which, in turn, is grounded within the symbolic order of the absolutes. Thus, Antigone's obstinate drive to self-annihilation is simultaneously a transgression against an order and re-establishment of another order of the absolutes. The rebel negates, but also ascertains, Žižek argues, quoting Camus ([1951] 1991): "Rebellion cannot exist without the feeling that, somewhere and somehow one is right" (13). The very nature of rebellion lies in the affirmation of "something higher," of some absolute: "An act of rebellion [...] seems like a demand for clarity and unity. The most elementary form of rebellion, paradoxically, expresses an aspiration to order" (23). In her assertion of the absolutes, the rebel is the propeller of the higher order, one that exists beyond the social structure. She is the proof of the overarching, big Other, the provider of meaning and significance, of the "subject presumed to know" the ultimate truths. Hence crimes committed in the name of love (romantic or other), revolution, social progress, and one's sense of justice have been often forgiven, if not in the trials of legal courts then in the courts of public opinion. They testify to the existence of the higher-order values, providing something absolute which cannot be questioned and which holds the body of the social fabric in its stitches. (Ironically, the only crimes of higher order that Western culture ceased to forgive are those committed in the name of God.)

In Žižek's (1988) interpretation of Lacan, the Lacanian traumatic kernel of the Real is located between the two deaths: the real and the symbolic (132). By entering into the realm of the Real, beyond *perdition*, Antigone is driven by the first death drive, the desire for physical annihilation, and by the symbolic pleasure principle, the desire to establish an order of supreme values. Driven by the death drive, she goes beyond the pleasure principle of ordinary reality (the pleasure based on objective social relations), but she follows the subjective pleasure principle of the symbolic order (the pleasure of reconstituting herself as a pure subject within the symbolic order of the absolutes). It is only the annihilation of the symbolic order—the impossibility of symbolization—that signifies absolute annihilation: "the radical annihilation of the symbolic texture through which the so-called reality is constituted" (132). The "second death" is the death of absolutes, the death of everything. The second death lies beyond the symbolic pleasure principle and beyond the pleasure principle of reality. If the first death is still incorporated within the symbolic system of the social order, the second death leads into the realm impossible to comprehend. It leads to pure nothingness. By

crossing the line of the second death, the transgressor breaks both the order of reality and the symbolic order: she rejects the social structure along with its symbolic umbrella within which her act is absorbed—she rebels against the social order and she rejects her own rebellion.

For Lacan, Antigone is an empty vessel of irrationality, the very embodiment of the death drive that fundamentally defines female subjectivity. Stubborn in her inexplicable and—according to Lacan—unjustifiable insistence on burying the corpse, Antigone is “inhuman,” but, Lacan ([1959–1960] 1997b) adds, “we shouldn’t situate her at the level of the monstrous” (263). Her inflexibility is, Lacan writes, what makes her a “tender and charming little thing” in the popular discourse, but it is this inflexibility that makes her go “beyond the limits of the human” (66). Or, as Žižek puts it, beyond the line of *até*, the line of irresistible and self-annihilating desire. The tragic appeal of Antigone’s transgression lies in her self-destructive drive beyond the border of the human: entering into the realm of *até* equals suicide. Žižek (1992) writes: “The barrier not to be crossed is none other than the one beyond which Antigone is drawn, the forbidden boundary-domain where ‘being insists in suffering’” (25). Antigone is the epitome of *aphanisis*, “the self-erasure of the subject when she approaches her fantasy too closely” (Žižek 1997, 175).

Both Lacan and Žižek see Antigone’s fantasy as specifically feminine: she desires symbolic self-erasure in the big male Other. Antigone is “between two deaths”: her physical death and her symbolic death, which signifies a total eradication of the subject’s symbolic universe. What she strives for, they argue, is a total symbolic erasure from the semiotic and ontological language of the heteromatrix. Žižek (1988) states the issue in terms of the Freudian question “what does woman want?”: “It is Antigone herself who necessarily evokes in us, pathetic everyday compassionate creatures, the question ‘What does she really want?’ the question which precludes any identification with her” (117). It is this lack of identification with the subject—the character’s death-driven self-expulsion beyond the line of perdition, beyond our understanding—that constitutes the essence of tragedy in Lacan’s psychoanalytical discourse.

In his essay on Lacan’s interpretation of *Antigone*, Terry Eagleton (2010), notes that the very nature of the drive, which Lacan argues pushes Antigone towards self-destruction, is at the core of Western understanding of tragedy and in fact, even Western ethics. Eagleton writes:

In a modern era where no moral commitment can apparently be securely founded, what matters is less the substance of your claim than the preternatural tenacity with which you cling to it. [...] in the terrible splendour of its intensity, which then becomes—like much modern tragedy itself—a kind of secular form of transcendence all of its own. (104)

The cause of transgression, Eagleton notes, is not as important as the intensity of rebellion, which becomes a form of performative pronouncement of one’s selfhood: Antigone’s claim. Because Creon’s edict is a perlocutionary speech act made publicly (as defined by J.L. Austin: it makes the law as it is being pronounced), to oppose it, Antigone’s gesture must also be performative, and it must be visible (the gesture makes a statement of defiance). In fact, Antigone berates Ismene’s offer to keep the matter private, telling her: “I will hate you still worse for silence—should you not

proclaim it to everyone" (II. 99–100). As Judith Butler points out, "Like Creon [...] Antigone wants her speech act to be radically and comprehensively public" (28). It is the tragic nature of human existence that this performance, necessary for the assertion of the self, must also lead to its self-annihilation.

Tragedy as Patriarchy: Butler and Irigaray

In response to Hegel as well as Lacan, in feminist interpretations, Antigone has often been heralded as a tragic heroine who sacrifices herself on the altar of sexual politics in the name of higher principles. For feminist theorists, however, Antigone's death drive is not internal and essential to her very being (as a woman) as it is for Lacan; instead, it is a function of the sociopolitical discourse of the heteronormative matrix which presupposes female self-sacrifice as axiomatic for the patriarchal status quo. In this interpretation, the essence of tragedy is rooted in the loss of female agency in service of patriarchal conflict and the tension between conscious and unconscious participation in the execution of that loss.

Masculinity in *Antigone's* world is in fact defined by the legal power of one's illocutions: if Antigone is not punished, Creon says, "now I am no man, but she the man" (Ant. 528–29). This juxtaposition between the masculine order of the law and feminine order of self-destruction necessarily genders the definition of tragedy, externalizing Antigone's downfall onto Creon: it is not her but his tragic flaw that bring destruction to the polis and the family. It is that lack of flexibility, Creon's self-destructive drive towards male self-certainty and self-perception as a lawgiver that destroys him and the polis he was chosen to rule. Tina Chanter (2010) takes this to imply that masculinity is the performance of an unstable signifier, and this performance is the essence of the tragic. In *Glas* ([1974] 1986), Derrida makes a similar point:

Human law, the law of the rational community that institutes itself against the private law of the family, always suppresses femininity, stands up against it, girds, squeezes, curbs, compresses it. But the masculine power has limit. (187)

Masculinity performed to extreme folds on itself revealing itself as pure performance.

Although Luce Irigaray (1985) praises Antigone as a model of "identity and identification for many girls and women living today" (70), she ultimately concludes that Antigone should be viewed through the prism of the socially devalued maternal affiliation: that is, as a product of "a culture that has been written by men alone" (Irigaray 1993, 118). Irigaray (1993) writes:

When engaged in redressing her brother's crime, Antigone is no longer fulfilling her own task, her affirmative relationship to ethics, she no longer serves her gods. The female gender, in its singularity, has been lost in this character who resists but nonetheless submits, out of womanly—or maternal?—fidelity to the male gods and to war among men [...] In order to wipe a stain once more. What stain? Fundamentally, the stain of her consciousness, of belonging to the female race of having maternal filiation. (125)

In other words, by burying her brother (against the wishes of her sister), Antigone aligns herself with the needs of the patriarchy, with the main conflict internal to patriarchal order itself—this is her tragedy. Indeed, although she is the titular heroine of the drama, Antigone appears in very few scenes of Sophocles' play. Antigone speaks less often than she is spoken *about* or *on behalf of* by men: Creon, Haemon, and Tiresias. It is the intercourse between the men—not that between Antigone and Creon—that establishes the primary battleground of the play, with Antigone a mere vessel for male conflict.

Following Irigaray, for Judith Butler (2000), Antigone “emblemizes a certain heterosexual fatality” (72) that always already presupposes female self-sacrifice as part of its econo-symbolic exchange. In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler tries to discern the stakes of Antigone's struggle, and she eventually concludes that Antigone cannot be viewed as a feminist figure because the conflict she embodies, between kinship and society (her allegiance to her brother vs. to her king/uncle), is itself bound by patriarchal underpinnings. Antigone refuses to follow the patriarchal power structure of the state as represented by Creon, but only on the grounds of honoring the patriarchal power structure within her family circle, as represented by Polynices. Thus, Butler argues, Antigone's claim to remain loyal to Polynices is prompted by the patriarchal form of kinship in the same way that the state's claim to have her disown it is prompted by its patriarchal *status quo*.

Antigone's “certain feminist impulse” cannot be seen as a model for resistance, Butler argues, because it does not challenge the patriarchal order as such, but merely its application (72). Butler writes: “Antigone emerges in her criminality to speak in the name of politics and the law: she absorbs the very language of the state against which she rebels, and hers becomes a politics not of oppositional purity but of the scandalous impure” (5). Not only does Antigone speak within the language of the patriarchal system, Butler suggests; she also embodies a certain fatality marked by a self-fulfilling expectation of failure. There is one liberatory potential in Antigone's futility, Butler says, which is yet unimaginable: “One might reapproach Antigone's ‘fatality,’” she writes, “with the question of whether the limit for which she stands, a limit for which no standing, no translatable representation is possible, is not precisely the trace of an alternate legality that haunts the conscious, public sphere as its scandalous future” (40). Antigone's rebellion, Butler suggests, offers a vision of alternative ethics in which marginality ceases to be so.

In turn, *Antigone*, the play, Butler argues, can be viewed in a modern context, putting into question the sociopolitical valuation of public grief, and loss: “which social arrangements can be recognized as legitimate love, and which human losses can be explicitly grieved as real and consequential loss?” The question of public recognition of one's death and public mourning has a particular historical significance for the LGBTQ community, whereas “those with publicly ungrievable losses—from AIDS, for instance—know too well” (24). As Audronė Žukauskaitė (2010) puts it, Antigone's act “is not an idiosyncratic transgression, motivated by her ‘pathological’ desire, but a universal transgression, identifying with the position of those who lack recognition in the public space” (80). The pursuit of this visibility is a righteous pursuit of justice as defined not by the law of the state, but by the dignitary claim to existence within the social structure of destructive autocratic illocutions.

In a sense, Chanter, Irigaray, and Butler share Lacan's analysis that Antigone's death drive is the source of the tragic, where they differ is in their views on the source of that drive. For Lacan, Antigone self-destructs in the pursuit of her female destiny, to be erased in the male Other. But for Chanter, Irigaray and Butler, Antigone's self-destruction is orchestrated by the male Other and located in the entire enterprise of the patriarchal state, its sociocultural and political framework, including its law.

Tragedy as Power: Foucault

Many contemporary critics and theorists read *Antigone* through the "reframing [of] the contemporary conflicts between contrary social, political and cultural values as *tragic* conflicts" (de Boer 2008, 32). Such readings point out the fundamentally paradoxical nature of power and the law that supports it: neither can exist without the other. In the poststructuralist definition of tragedy, the tragic constitutes mutually exclusive claims of power within the very structure of the state (not in its opposition), and the limit of this power. Thus, *Antigone* illustrates what Derrida (2003) calls *autoimmunity*: the limits of the law and power that form the foundations of the state, the limits that delineate the state's own suicidal impulse to violate the law that defines it (94). In his essay "Tragedy and Philosophy," Anthony J. Cascardi (2009) notes that *Antigone*, the play, illustrates not so much the tragedy of conflict but the tragedy of the state:

[I]f we consider Antigone more closely, what we see is not so much a struggle between two sets of laws, or between two conflicting sets of claims (family, state), but a tragedy that revolves around a political question, namely Creon's attempt to extend the laws of the polis in such a way that they apply *universally*. [...] *Antigone* is a tragedy that is rooted in the temptation to take the polis not as an *image* of the whole but as the whole itself. (170)

Creon sees himself as the stand-in for the state, believing that he acts in its best interest. To quote Martha Nussbaum (1986): "No claims are allowed to count as claims of justice unless they are claims on behalf of the city, no agents to be called just except in its service" (56). Creon's legitimacy is reaffirmed by his ascendancy to power, and by the law of the state. Yet he is also given the power to suspend the law that gives him that power, and thus ends up destroying it. As Katrin Beushausen (2008) explains, "In the body of the sovereign, the law sanctions its own suspension of the order on which the sovereign's authority is based" (18). By resisting Creon's edict, Antigone exposes "the paradox embedded in the law, revealing its fragility. Once this denouement is performed, the law loses its stability" (ibid.). The state as such cannot exist outside the law, yet the law is what can also destroy it. Creon suspends the law of burial on the basis of the law that gives him power to suspend it; but by suspending the law, he simultaneously undermines it and, thus, his power to suspend it.

The suspension of the law, which Agamben (2005) defines as "the state of exception" (104), marks the limit of the law: the sovereign cannot legitimize lawlessness without having hold on power, yet he simultaneously cannot maintain power without some sort of law. Thus, *Antigone* illustrates the tragedy of the state of *autoimmunity*, which Derrida (2003) defines as the "strange behavior where

a living being, in quasi-suicidal fashion, 'itself' works to destroy its own protection, to immunize itself against its 'own' immunity" (94). The play thus lays bare the limits of democracy which necessarily violates its own norms in its own name, destroying itself yet incapable of resisting that violation and self-destruction (Beushausen 2008, 25).

In a poststructuralist framework, tragedy is defined as a political dialogue on the nature of the state and its intrinsically impossible attempt to accommodate its conflicting interests of law and power. To quote Jean-Pierre Vernant (1972):

What tragedy is talking about is itself and the problems of law it is encountering. [...] Not only does the tragedy enact itself on stage, but most important, it enacts its own problematics. It puts in question its own internal contradictions, revealing (through the medium of the technical legal vocabulary) that the true subject matter of tragedy is social thought and most especially juridical thought in the very process of elaboration. Tragedy poses the problems of law, and the question of what justice is. (278–279)

Looking even further, one sees that *Antigone* is a political play about a state being forced to decide and in the process of choosing between its two survival modes: the biopower of sanitary considerations and the universality of the law, both essential to the survival of the state as a political structure and as a communal entity. The universality of the law on which the state is built is fragile and unstable; it depends on the multifaceted aspects of power and its execution, including biopower, the power over human bodies, both the living and the dead. Antigone is an "ideological battleground"—to borrow a term from Gayatri Spivak (1999)—between the law and the biopower of the state discourse. She embodies what Michel Foucault (2000) calls the state's "politico-sanitary discourse" (147).

Many contemporary critics forget that Polynices' corpse is at the center of the story: what happens to it, and why, are the two questions that initiate and drive the play's plot and political discourse. Antigone's fate is invariably bound to the fate of Polynices' corpse, and the arguments that Antigone makes and that are made on her behalf, either to defend her (by Haemon and Tiresias) or to condemn her (by Creon), revolve around the proper way to treat Polynices' corpse. Hegel, Lacan, Irigaray, and even Butler refer to Polynices as if he were still alive; they don't consider his body beyond a reference to the funeral rites that get Antigone into trouble. But the play profusely elaborates on the material condition of the corpse: the stench, the rotting, and the scavengers that feed on the carcass are all there. The odor of rotting flesh is carried by the wind, lingering at the gates of the city, reminding the citizens of what happens to traitors. The vultures rip the meat to pieces that they then drop onto holy altars as they fly over them. What happens to the body is both physical (it rots and smells) and symbolic (it needs funeral rites so as not to rot and smell). The smell of the rotting body serves as a political tool to keep the citizens in check and to strengthen Creon's authority. For his edict to be effective, the body has to rot; it has to give off the odors of death, reminding his subjects about the power that let it rot. The funeral rituals are performed by Antigone on religious grounds: honoring the age-old customs ordered by gods and ancestors. But the corpse is also a site of the biopower that delineates the relationship between the sovereign

and death; it is a site of the “politico-sanitary discourse” that defines the nature of the state and its opposing but equally valid interests.

A Hegelian reading of the play focuses almost exclusively on the dialectical battle between Antigone and Creon, omitting the relationships that both have with the other characters, particularly Haemon and Tiresias, each of whom is a stand-in for a separate political argument: the *political* and the *sanitary* of the “politico-sanitary” discourse. Antigone is caught between the legal and sanitary discourse, veiled, respectively, by the secular and the sacred letter of the law. Each side of the debate frames Antigone through a different lens, using her for its own ends.

The conversation between Creon and Haemon focuses on the nature of the state and the function of the sovereign. Arguing with Haemon, Creon tries to hold on to his idea of power and authority, one that involves absolute control over the living and the dead:

CREON: Oh?—
Isn't that just the sickness that's attached her?
HAEMON: The whole city of Thebes denies it, to a man.
CREON: And is Thebes about to tell me how to rule?
HAEMON: Now, you see? Who's talking like a child?
CREON: Am I to rule this land for others—or myself?
HAEMON: It's no city at all, owned by one man alone.
CREON: What? The city is the king's—that's the law! (l. 825)

The dialogue is a subtle bow toward Athenian democracy, but it is also a political dialogue that establishes the universality of the law and the role of statesmen (*politicos*). The other side of the debate is illuminated in Creon's later conversation with Tiresias, the blind prophet, who makes the connection between religious rites and their sanitary implications:

The public altars and sacred hearths are fouled,
one and all, by the birds and dogs with carrion
torn from the corpse, the doomstruck son of Oedipus! (line 1135)

To which Creon replies:

You'll never bury that body in the grave,
not even if Zeus' eagles rip the corpse
and wing their rotten pickings off to the throne of god!
Never, not even in fear of such defilement
will I tolerate his burial, that traitor. (line 1150)

Antigone fails in her rebellion because she relies on “theologico-religious” obligations to justify what is fundamentally a sanitary interest of the state. But Tiresias's argument, which finally outweighs Creon's stubbornness, is devoid of private interest and focuses on sacrificial responsibility as part of the sanitary procedure that the state must obey.

In *Politics*, Aristotle considers the most important role of the politician to be that of lawgiver (*nomothetês*), defining the appropriate constitution for the city-state, including its laws, customs, and institutions. According to Aristotle, the very existence of the city-state depends on its ruler; the community exists only insofar as it has someone who orders it. Aristotle (2000) states that “the person who first established [the city-state] is the cause of very great benefits” (I.2.1253a30–31). As Fred D. Miller (1997) notes, “This person was evidently the lawgiver (*nomothetês*), someone like Solon of Athens or Lycurgus of Sparta, who founded the constitution.” The power of the statesman depends on his authority, which must be acknowledged by all members of the polis. Thus, Creon’s understanding of his function as a lawgiver rests on his unfaltering belief in the authority of his position: he considers his authority as lawgiver to be necessary the survival of the state as a whole, even if it threatens the city from within (or from without). The public, postmortem punishment of Polynices’ body has, for Creon, a specific political function: it reaffirms his authority as *nomothetês*.

Greek funeral rites were elaborate and rich, offering an opportunity to display the family’s wealth and the strength of its kinship bonds. The rites (*kedeia*) consisted of three parts: *protheis* (the public display of the body), *ekphora* (the procession), and, finally, the disposal of the body. The corpse, dressed in a long gown and a crown of flowers, was displayed in public for two days, allowing the community a final opportunity to contemplate the deceased. After two days, the body was taken in a procession for either burial or public cremation (Kurtz 1971). Nicole Loraux (1986) points out that funerals of soldiers also had a civic function: they offered the opportunity for a funeral oratory that praised the dead man’s valor and his commitment to the state. The ceremony, Loraux argues, was essential to the “invention of Athens” as a political institution. In the fourth century, however, “the crisis in public values [...] offered a greater threat to the genre [of funeral orations]. Freed from the austere civic framework in which the democratic city had enclosed it in the fifth century, death was once again and more than ever a private affair” (109). Written in 442 BCE, *Antigone* captures the essential question of this transition: To whom does the body of the dead belong, the state or the family? Agamben’s (2005) concept of the sovereign “right of death” describes the right of the sovereign to give death and to interpret it. But the state’s ownership of the dead is complicated by its responsibility toward the living. As Foucault (2000) points out, “biopower” encompasses all aspects of control over bodies as such, including the protection of “the living from the harmful influence of the dead” (147). In “The Birth of Social Medicine,” Foucault (2000) notes that, within different cultural communities, religious discourse evolved as a veil hiding the “politico-sanitary discourse” of death. The symbolic purpose of funeral rites was to pay tribute to the gods, but their pragmatic purpose was to prevent the biohazard that the dead could potentially inflict; the dead had to be disposed of because corpses presented a real danger to cities and their inhabitants (147). Even Hegel ([1807] 1979) notes as much:

The dead, whose right is violated, knows therefore how to find instruments of its vengeance, which are of an actuality and potency equal to the power that injures it. These powers are other commonwealths whose altars the dogs or birds defiled with the corpse. [...] They rise up in hostility and destroy the commonwealth which has dishonoured and shattered its force. (para. 474)

Left unburied, the dead brought disease and the vultures, rats, and hyenas who fed on corpses. To leave a corpse unburied has a symbolic meaning (the dead is deprived of religious rites), but, foremost, it implies a clear and present danger to the living. Thus, leaving Polynices' body to rot in the Grecian sun, Creon acts not only in the name of the universal law that he established and that he believes will help hold the state together (by maintaining his power) but also against the biopower of sanitary precepts that allow the community to survive free of plague and other death-related biohazards. He exercises his sovereign "right of death," but in doing so he undermines the basic rules of biopower as necessary for survival for the community as a whole. How is the state to choose between one and the other if the two are at odds?

The play thus illustrates the state in crisis, asking itself whether the abstract rules that govern it should give way to "politico-sanitary reasons," or whether the rule of law provides such a strong foundation for the state that without it the state itself would disintegrate. Neither Antigone nor Creon speaks in the name of the state, simply because the state itself is inconsistent about where it should place its alliances: with the authority of the law or with biopower. Thus, the principal question the play poses pertains not to the conflict between individual and social interests but to the conflict internal to the construction of the state as such, and to the limits of power and the law. What is more important: to preserve the political institution of the city-state (its law as represented by the monarch), or to follow the basic sanitary precautions that protect the community from dangerous biohazards? The suspension of the law in the "state of exception"—to borrow Agamben's term—leads to the *autoimmunity* of the law—to borrow Derrida's term. The law and power self-destruct in their co-dependency. Tragedy not only illustrates this internal conflict but also provides meta-commentary on its public restaging. Yannis Stavrakakis (2003) summarizes this point succinctly:

It is the tragedian who assumes and re-inscribes radical socio-political critique within the heart of the city, reproducing democratic society by re-examining again and again—through a series of aesthetico-political re-acts—its ethico-political premises. (126)

The role of Antigone as an ethical subject disappears, and her voice is not a voice of political agency that could be appropriated as a model of political opposition or dialectical agon. In a poststructuralist interpretation of the play, the individual agency dissolves and the tragic resides in the performative impossibilities of power and law itself. Tragedy reveals power for what it is: a performative gesture.

Tragedy as Aporia: Beyond Character

Even as these philosophical approaches to *Antigone* have moved on from Hegelian frameworks, for the most part they have shared with Hegel a firmly rooted assumption of realism,⁵ with proper, true-to-life, consistent, and plausible characters—per Aristotle⁶—and with all the interpretational trappings of what Szondi ([1956] 1987) calls Drama (16; see also 8–9): a dialogic ("consist[ing] only of the reproduction of interpersonal relations") and Absolute ("conscious of nothing outside itself")

form of mimicry of human relations.⁷ The majority of the philosophical interpretations of the play that followed Hegel, from Kauffman, Lacan, and Irigaray, to Žižek and Butler, assume—like Hegel—its “real life” mimicry, with fully formed “true to life” Aristotelian characters as its central focus.⁸ This approach has also been a typical methodology in the dramatic canon—again, on account of Hegelian exegesis—including introductory drama courses where the play predominantly figures as an example of a classical agon: a tragic conflict between two true-to-life agents who both appear to be right and to be moved by sufficient passion—and hamartia—to drive the plot to its inevitable tragic, and cathartic, ending.⁹

In both of these critical traditions, the philosophical and the dramatic, the character is “the epicenter of dramatic conflict,” as Bernd Stegemann (2009, 16) puts it. Starting with the twentieth-century avant-garde, however, theatre became less and less interested in character as a foundation of drama and what follows, as the foundation of the theatrical experience itself.¹⁰ Today, in the era of postdramatic theatre and theory, previous assumptions about the role of character no longer hold true: the character no longer must serve as a basis of drama and, what’s most important, its interpretation; character is, as Elinor Fuchs (1996) taught us, dead. The postdramatic shift from psychology to non-representational models, allegory, and metaphor, has also allowed us to rethink the classic texts (in theatre at least), looking for modes of analysis that perceive them as something else, a conceptual, even abstract artform rooted in the conflict of ideas rather than people.

The postmodern death of character in theatre followed from philosophy’s assault on the monolithic idea of “man”—in the poststructuralist and posthumanist lineage (following Foucault’s 1966 essay “The Order of Things,” Derrida’s 1972 essay “The Ends of Man,” and Barthes’ 1967 essay “The Death of the Author”), and in opposition to the traditional Renaissance-era humanist ethics and aesthetics, which presupposed a coherent vision of the human being as imbued with certain essential characteristics (i.e., “soul” and “human nature”) and visually represented by the intact body. Just as “man” exited the twentieth-century philosophical discourse, so did “character”—portrayed by an actor—disappear from the twentieth-century theatrical landscape, subsumed under the new materialist and poststructuralist understanding of theatrical space. As Robin Nelson (2010) puts it:

[P]aralleling the displacement from centre stage of “Man as the measure of all things,” the actor’s agency and centrality are further diminished by her demotion from the apex of the hierarchy of stage signs. The performer today is just one of many signifiers in a complex, multi-layered event. (23)

In postdramatic theatre, neither the character nor the actor is the cynosure of the theatrical event: in fact, the frequent interlocking of the two is what dethroned them from their previous status near the top of the Aristotelian dramaturgical ladder. Bernd Stegemann (2009) argues that postdramatic theatre has brought with it an awareness of the artificiality of the character and, with it, the awareness of the artificiality of the theatrical project itself, thus unraveling the foundational aspect of Drama, its fiction, the mimetic suspension of disbelief:

Postdramatic theater's entire rejection of drama lies in this one damnation. The act of observing humans for the purpose of examining and understanding their behavior and their actions is considered to be an illusion and a habituated lie. With this stroke, dramatic situations lose all legitimacy as a form through which the world can be described or translated into narrative structures. (19)

Revealing the futility of theatre as psychology, the postdramatic turn reframed the very purpose of theatre, reminding us about its origins in philosophy: a representation of ideas rather than humans, and a search for meaning beyond a mere reflection of individual characters' actions and motivations.

Along our new postdramatic understanding of what character is, we have also experienced a shift in our understanding of other Aristotelian components of drama ("Plot" and "Thought") and dramatic genres ("Tragedy"). While "Plot" is the dramaturgical architectonics of Drama, Aristotle defines "Thought" as "the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances. [Thought is] found where something is proved to be or not to be, or a general maxim is enunciated" (Aristotle 2013a). Thought has been the axiomatic kernel of the relationship between theatre and philosophy. Like the classic understanding of a character, the classic understanding of thought has been unpinned by postdramatic dramaturgies, where multiple, contradictory, and deconstructive meta-thoughts vie for meaning and attention in the often synesthetic and acousmatic sensory overload of nonlinear and plotless aesthetic experiences. But postdramatic theatre has shown us that, like character, thought is, fundamentally unstable and performative, or, as Hans-Thies Lehmann ([2013] 2016) put it in *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*: "Onstage, no statement ever proves true and no meaning finds expression that might not be devalued by the response that follows" (182). As our sense of character and thought has shifted from stable to unstable, so has our understanding of tragedy and its role at the junction of theatre and philosophy.

Lehmann points out the limited potential of "fixation on dramatic representation," which he argues has been rooted in Hegelian dialectic while ignoring the structural evolution of the dramatic form itself. Rejecting a Hegelianism that would see a progression "from predramatic to dramatic, and then on to postdramatic" (10), Lehmann argues that

the tragic cannot be conceived either as the manifestation of a dialectic or as an intellectual paradox; it also cannot be conceived as an insoluble conflict or "insight" into the necessity of a subjective or world-historical collapse—even though commonplace definitions of the traffic affirm as much. If tragic experience were really thus, then tragedy would indeed be [...] superfluous. It would merely illustrate relations that concepts can grasp much more deeply and fully. Tragic experience is not simply a matter of reflection; it is also a pause in reflection—it is sensory, "blind" (so to speak), and affect-laden all at once; otherwise, it amounts to nothing at all. (10)

Interpreting the tragic as a dramatic conflict limits its true function: to represent something unrepresentable in language. Tragic experience cannot be understood through the characters alone because tragedy is not simply a conflict of ideas but rather an illustration of the impossibility

of dialectic itself. In that sense, Antigone “can be understood as the exemplary figure of tragedy itself” (176). In the text of the play, Lehmann writes, “*having a position at all* become a problem, one elaborated in a complex and contradictory process of dramaturgy and dialogue. The matter does not involve divergent understanding of one law’s priority over another; rather, it concerns incompatible understanding of what a law of commandment actually *is*” (178). The play thus puts into question not just the meaning of specific words, but the entire project of language itself, the tenuous threads of speech acts that produce our perceived reality.

Thus, Lehmann appears to define tragedy as aporia, or as “the possibility of impossibility,” as Derrida (1993, 72) would call it. Derrida (1993) reminds us that “*Diaporeō* is Aristotle’s term; it means ‘I am stuck’ (*dans l’embarras*), I cannot get out, I’m helpless” (13). In his book *Aporotics: Rational Deliberation in the Face of Inconsistency*, the philosopher Nicholas Rescher (2009) defines aporia as “an impasse, a blockage where there is no predictable way to go forward.” Aporia is “a group of individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses” (1). Aporia is when each of our senses tells us something different. Just like in postdramatic theatre where we experience dissociation between varied stimuli (acousmatic sounds and words detached from their meanings), creating a multitude of meanings and meta-Thoughts, so too in *Antigone*, the law means different things to different people in different circumstances. Given the difference between dramatic and postdramatic theatre, the latter achieves in form what the first achieves in language; in both, tragedy functions as aporia. As Lehmann ([2013] 2016) puts it: “the text [of *Antigone*] makes it more than evident that no argument ever ‘hits home’; everything is presented in a twilight state, relativized, and left in (or brought into) suspense” (181). As in aporia, “the *agon* of protagonists—which is essentially mute—precludes the communication of an argument.” As this article has addressed, the play presents multiple arguments and readings, but “[u]ltimately, the text endorses none of these readings” (182).

The dramatic structure of *Antigone* permits multiple interpretations of what the law is. The play doesn’t offer resolution, and its dialectical framework is unclear. Rescher (2009) quotes Protagoras, the founder of Sophism, who famously said that “*anything and everything* that we believed could be argued *for* and *con* with equal cogency” (4). The belief in unknowable truth is popular among philosophers and was most famously theorized by Karl Popper in his 1972 book *Objective Knowledge*. Popper argues that there is no truth as such, and that human societies implicitly understand this: totalitarian regimes that insist on being right must impose their version of truth through force, and whatever is considered to be truth is defined as such through performative metalanguage. This is what happens in *Antigone*, Lehmann ([2013] 2016) notes:

[M]eaning and truth achieve force only in dramaturgy, the varying arrangements and constellations of dialogue, and the rhythm of imagery; all of these components admit interpretation. The performative character of every utterance—including constative statements—make it possible to posit realities without the slightest regard for the truth. (182–183)

The tragedy thus has a dramaturgy of aporia, the sense of being stuck in multiple contradicting performative utterances.

For this very reason, Derrida (1993) notes that Plato's philosophical dialogues often end in aporia, in a place where

there is no longer any problem. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem that would constitute itself and that one would keep in front of oneself, as a presentable object or project, as a protective representative or a prosthetic substitute, as some kind of border still to cross or behind which to protect oneself. (12)

There is no place to go from tragedy: catharsis offers resolution to the past events, but no possible promise of the future. It is perhaps for this reason that grief is an aporic condition. In *Glas*, Derrida notes that Hegelian interpretation of *Antigone* suggests a kind of inherent aporia in the dialectic itself (166). Antigone's negativity is not outside of polis/state/law/ethics, but rather it is part of it, bound by the ties of both dialectic and aporia. In *Aporias*, Derrida drives the point more decisively: "Aristotelian aporia is understood, thought, and assimilated into that which is properly dialectical" (14). We draw a full circle from dialectic to aporia. What is at stake in philosophy's attempt to try to define what tragedy is? There is a tension between tragic form and philosophy's attempt to define it that seems to reveal the tension at the core of philosophy's very *raison d'être*. The many ways of defining tragedy, from dialectic to aporia, is itself an aporic exercise: we don't know what tragedy is, except on the most basic level a mutable dramatic form with Thought that reveals philosophy's biggest secret: that in its search for truth, it essentially searches for what Heidegger calls *Das Nichts*—Nothing, the unanswerable, unknowable mystery of being and non-being.

Notes

¹ Joan Copjec notes that Hegel's understanding of gender is social and biological, but not sexual. Copjec (2003) writes: "[...] this difference turns out to be, in his reading, only a gender or biological difference, not a sexual one; that is, Antigone and Creon enact a division of labor that is defined sociologically, according to the spaces they are allowed to inhabit and the roles they are encouraged to assume, given their biology" (15).

² Following Hegel, George Eliot ([1856] 2019) reiterates that main thesis: "Here lies the dramatic collision: the impulse of sisterly piety which allies itself with reverence for the Gods, clashes with the duties of citizenship; two principles, both having their validity, are at war with each" (189).

³ In his book, *Antigone in the Americas: Democracy, Sexuality, and Death in the Settler Colonial Present*, Andrés Fabián Henao Castro (2021) argues that Antigone's migratory status (and Oedipus' migratory status) reveals proto-colonial model of exclusion and supplication: "[W]hat Antigone's coerced migrations between Corinth, Thebes, and Colonus dramatize is the conflictive, triangular organization of political membership between the positionalities of the slave (full exclusion), and the metic (partial inclusion/partial exclusion), and the citizen (full inclusion). Political membership is only intelligible against the logic that relationally sustains these different positionalities" (4). Refocusing the play's central power struggle from the relationships of kinship to that of master and slave dialectic, Castro notes that Antigone's punishment deprives her of her political status (of metic), putting her on par with slaves. Creon can do this to her not only because he is the king, but because she is the other, the foreigner who never truly belongs and can be destroyed without fear of family reprisal. Castro suggests that it is this unequal status, the relationship of master and slave that generates the tragic conflict and that also provides a blueprint for the Western acceptance of colonization and its hierarchies.

⁴ Countering that argument, Yannis Stavrakakis (2003) asks: "Can Antigone really be presented as a model for progressive ethico-political action?" if her choices are not connected to broader socio-political order, and her actions are not an effort to alter that order, but are driven by her internal isolation from that order? (118). Stavrakakis writes: "Antigone can only function as a model for *radical* political action on the condition that she is stripped of her radically inhuman (anti-social and anti-political) desire" (119).

However, in her book, *Antigone Interrupted* (2013), Bonnie Honig offers a defense of Antigone as model for political action, noting that Antigone "is a heroine not only of resistance and frank speech (though she tries these too) but also of the open secret, that conspiratorial form of communication whose figure is *adianoeta*" (3). Honig argues that Antigone does, in fact, act on behalf of forces larger than her individual objectives, and therefore she can be viewed as a model of political resistance: "her actions are embedded in and enacted on behalf of forces, structures, and networks larger than the autonomous individual that modern liberals, humanists, and even radical democratic theorists tend to both love (as courageous, heroic) and berate (as anarchic or irresponsible)" (8). Antigone, Honig writes, is not placed outside of the polis looking in, outside of sovereignty but rather she "engages in a politics of counter-sovereignty" (2).

⁵ In *Aesthetics*, Hegel establishes the character as the foundation of tragedy (whether by external circumstances, as in Greek tragedy, or by its internal quintessence, as in Romantic characters): "The heroes of ancient classic tragedy discover circumstances under which they, so long as they irrefragably adhere to the one ethical state of pathos which alone corresponds to their own already formed personality, must infallibly come into conflict with an ethical Power which opposes them and possesses an equal ethical claim to recognition. Romantic characters, on the contrary, are from the first placed within a wide expanse of contingent relations and conditions, within which every sort of action is possible; so that the conflict, to which no doubt the external conditions presupposed supply the occasion, essentially abides within the character itself, to which the individuals concerned in their passion give effect, not, however, in the interests of the ethical vindication of the truly substantive claims, but for the simple reason that they are the kind of men they are" (Hegel [1823–1829] 2019, 186).

⁶ Different translations of *Poetics* use different terminology, including "appropriate" and "probable." The general notion of the Aristotelian character can be summarized as "true to life"—mimetically reflecting a real-life person, who is plausible and consistent, or "consistently inconsistent" (Aristotle 2013, 20–25).

⁷ Although Szondi ([1956] 1987) himself considered Greek drama to be predramatic, since by commenting on the events, the chorus breaks the fourth wall, making the Greek drama not yet absolute, not yet "conscious of nothing outside itself" (8).

⁸ In his essay on *Antigone, the play*, Mark Griffith (2010), notes that though Antigone, the character, has a "distinctive 'voice' [which] implies the existence of a distinctive 'character' as well. But we must pause to ask ourselves to what extent it is appropriate, or possible, to identify a single, coherent human personality within the cluster of speech-acts and behaviours associated with a stage figure such as 'Antigone', and what kind of inner life and motivations we are entitled to" (112–113).

⁹ In his seminal 1969 book, *Tragedy and Philosophy*, Walter Kauffman considers Antigone's character (her "nature" as a character) to be the impulse behind the entire drama: "Sophocles' Antigone is prompted not by any theology or philosophy but by her nature, her character, her feelings"—taking for granted the very existence of Antigone's "feelings." (She has feelings, ergo she's "true to life"; she's a real human being) (44).

¹⁰ One of the first to note the excessive primacy of character was Yeats, who in a 1910 essay on tragedy found character suitable for comedy but superfluous for tragic drama. In tragedy, Yeats postulates, character dissolves into the lyricism of the elevated language: "One dogma of the printed criticism is that if a play does not contain definite character, its constitution is not strong enough for the stage, and that the dramatic moment is always the contest of character with character" (216); tragic art, however, "distinguishes devices to exclude or lessen character" (218).

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Biography

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