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Then & Now



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***Private Lives, Public Deaths:
Antigone and the Invention of Individuality***

Jonathan Strauss. New York: Fordham University Press. 2013. pp. 208 + index. \$99 CAD (hardcover); \$26.50 CAD (paperback).

Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, the third installment of *The Theban Plays*, is rich with metaphors and thematic motifs all which contribute to its enduring significance and relevance to such prevalent issues as state control, civil disobedience, familial love and the definition of a citizen. The protagonist, Antigone, secretly buries her brother Polyneices' despite the decree issued by the king of Thebes that he is to remain unburied, left for the carrion birds due to his rebelling against the state, condemning the dead to the harshest punishment possible. The tragedy lies in the moral dilemma of Antigone: would she, as a proper Theban woman, obey her king, or would she fulfill the duty demanded by the gods and of her filial love, ensuring Polyneices' eternal rest, despite the fact that her actions will lead to her own death?

Jonathan Strauss' *Private Lives, Public Deaths: Antigone and the Invention of Individuality* de-parts from the more common philosophical debates which surround *Antigone*, including the role of women within society as embodied by the protagonist, problems of individual rights versus state law, and the dissension between moral/divine law and human law. Instead, the author argues that the tragedy reflects the rise of the individual's identity as defined through death, especially considering the emergence of the city-state. Sophocles was attempting to rationalize and digest the sudden change in social climes by focusing on the treatment of the dead, the identity of the city and by including the role of the individual within this tension. The pathos, Strauss claims, is in the addressing of the anxiety of the individual within the city, resulting in tragic suffering. Antigone asks how an individual can maintain their identity when the meaning of life is established in the identity of the city.

In seven chapters, Strauss delivers a succinct analysis of how Antigone embodies the tension of an individual's desire with that of the identity of the city by relying not only on the Sophoclean tragedy but also on contemporaneous literature such as Plato and Aeschylus. Chapter One explores the origins of justice and the emergence of the polis. Chapter

Two looks at the citizen as a defining feature of Athens and also charts the shift of the sanguine relationships to that of the chosen peerage as a characterizing aspect of identity. The following chapter, aptly called “Loss Embodied” looks at the treatment of the dead and the anxieties of the living projected onto the dead. Chapter Four discusses who was excluded from the city, namely the criminals and the shunned and how they are necessary in the identification of the city, with the subsequent chapter attempting to recreate the life found in *Antigone* with the help of texts that discuss the same issues, most notably that of familial love. “Mourning, Longing and Loving” explores the need of a mythic origin of the city and its consequent creation, and the dead body which frames that desire. The monograph concludes with a defense of the continued relevance of Classical Greek tragedies and for *Antigone* in particular.

Strauss wrestles with a difficult topic and yet presents his argument clearly and concisely mannered. There is an exceptional historical background which the reader will find useful in understanding the importance of family, citizenry, and the polis within 5th Century Athens. Strauss’ presentation of Hegel’s complex arguments of life, subjectivity, and the conscious over the unconscious; Lacan’s understanding of *Antigone*’s personified pain not as a result of her gender but rather her “relations to the symbolic order” (p. 132) and Irigaray’s feminist reading for the validity of the feminine, was comprehensible to those not-familiar with the subject.

Strauss’ careful explanation of Lacan, for example, enables the reader to fully situate the tragedy of *Antigone* not as an identified person who is defined through certain death, but rather as a definition of a person through life who attempts to create identity and fails. Through the use of classicist scholars—primarily Jean-Pierre Vernant, Nicole Loraux and George Steiner, supported by Plato and Aeschylus—for the social, political and the historical context of the tragedy, along with Hegel’s treatment of *Antigone*, Strauss is able to highlight the junction of individual identity, death and the city.

If there is a fault it is perhaps that it is too concise. While Strauss does justice to the topic at hand, the density of the subject matter demanded more elaboration and certainly more historical contextualization outside of Plato and Sophocles literary contemporaries. For example, aside from an occasional discourse, particularly the evolution of death rituals in Ancient Attica as demonstrated in his introduction, there was little historical or

archaeological background. It is not a coincidence that Sophocles wrote *Antigone* during a pivotal moment in Classical Greek history, and that of the state, because the change in the Attican burial practices reflect social change. By further developing the context through the incorporation of hard historical facts, Strauss would have been in a better place to situate his thesis within a larger social context.

Jonathan Strauss' use of classicist scholars, classical and especially 20th century philosophers creates a presentation that may appeal more to readers already well-versed in contemporary debates of identity as opposed to those who approach the book with more of a historical back-ground. And yet, his incorporation of current interpretations of the tragedy is hardly anachronistic. Instead, Strauss, in using various approaches, takes great pains in drawing the focus to the continued relevance of the tragedy today, and *Antigone* is still debated within the various disciplines of philosophy, psychology, literary and gender studies. It is not just a piece of historical literature but has contemporary value by asking the existential question of meaning of identity and then struggles to answer it.

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