

## Introduction to *Antigone*

... a body politic is always threatened more from its citizens than from any external enemies [hostes] ...

Spinoza, *Tractatus Politicus*, VI, 6

Sophocles seems to have already reached in *Antigone* the same insight about the body politic which will again be expressed in the seventeenth century by Spinoza: namely, the political has as its condition of possibility the potential for being challenged from within. Sophocles' play starts immediately after Thebes has successfully staved off a challenge from an external enemy – from Argos, another city state. However, during the battle, Eteocles, the king, and his own brother, Polynices, who in fact was heading the Argeans, both died. Thus afterwards Creon is elected ruler of Thebes. Creon's first act of government is to decree that Polynices' body is to remain unburied. If the new king thought that the worse was past him after the end of the battle, he was sorely mistaken. A challenge to his degree from one of the citizens and his own niece, Antigone, will not only lead to the decimation of his own family, but also to the new king being stranded alone at the end of the play, in charge of a self-incurred desert. Antigone, a stubborn teenage girl, is the cause of challenging the sovereign of Thebes and hence the city's body politic.

Antigone's challenge to the body politic results in the distinction between politics and the political. Her rebellion is, indeed, the precondition of the political. This insight is precisely what links Sophocles and Spinoza. Moreover, it is an insight fiercely opposed by the tradition. Thus, Aristotle in books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics* explicates a politics based on friendship (*philia*), which provides the bonds for the state to function, while what has to be excluded is *stasis* or rebellion which dissolves the state. However, a close look at the text makes the achievement of *philia* problematic, for instance because, as Aristotle states, if men are friends, then they no longer need justice to mediate their relation (1155a). Inversely, if the elimination of justice is impossible, then *stasis* challenges the primacy that *philia* is granted in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is this ineliminability of justice that the political affirms, and which is not commensurable with the empirical manifestation of a state or sovereign.

Following Aristotle, the Western tradition of political philosophy has striven to erase this possibility of rebellion intimately connected to the justice of the city, but without success. One of the most prominent examples of this attempt in relation to the *Antigone* is carried out by Hegel. The argument adumbrated in the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* is clear: there is a distinction between two legal orders, the family and the state. It is only by privileging the latter that politics can successfully create a community. However, as Judith Butler has recently demonstrated in *Antigone's Claim*, all attempts to find a stable origin of politics – such as the distinction between family and state – are bound to fail. Consequently, not only are the ‘abnormal’ filiations arising from Oedipus marrying his mother not to be expunged, but rather they point to the fundamental condition of the political: namely, the impossibility of a stable origin and the affirmation of a multiplicity of relations which challenge norms and normalcy as the condition of the possibility of the community.

Indeed, as Stathis Gourgouris has noted in *Does Literature Think?*, the name “Antigone,” as a compound of “anti” and “genos,” means three things: an opposition between kinship and state, an opposition to kinship, and the force of opposing as such. It is only by affirming all three elements together that a just community can be conceived. Of course, this requires the inscription of opposition inside the political. In other words, rebellion as a regulative principle is constitutive of the ontology of the political.

Due to this polyphony of meaning in the name “Antigone,” it has been deemed appropriate to title this special section of *Colloquy* simply “Antigone.” The various articles presented here approach this polyvalent proper name from different perspectives: offering close readings of the Greek text, showing its reception in Western thought, and presenting its impact on theatrical production and playwriting. What remains invariable is the need to talk about the political – and this is the legacy, if there is one, of *Antigone*.

Finally, two notes are necessary. First, the inspiration for this special edition of *Colloquy* on Sophocles’ *Antigone* has been a fascinating series of seminars on Sophocles’ play, conducted by Professor Andrew Benjamin at the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University, from March to May 2004. Andrew Benjamin’s breadth of knowledge and skill in closely reading the text have been a catalyst in showing to all those present the philosophical import of *Antigone*. Second, because of technical reasons related to the production of the journal, the diacriticals and spirits of the Greek text have been simplified to a monotonic system. This has been necessary to ensure that the characters are read properly by computer software.