

The Persistence of Critical Theory



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The Persistence of Critical Theory

Culture & Civilization, Volume 8

Gabriel R. Ricci, editor



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Culture & Civilization, Volume 8

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Female Resistance or the Politics of Death? Rethinking Antigone

Claudia Leeb

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss Sophocles' *Antigone* as a paradigmatic example of what the Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben identified as *homo sacer*, that is, someone who is simultaneously cursed and declared sacred. Set off from society, they are deprived of rights and, thus, may subsequently be killed with impunity. This ambiguous legal figure is first mentioned in Roman law and, for Agamben, refers to the "originary exception in which human life is included in the political order in being exposed to an unconditioned capacity to be killed. Not the act of tracing boundaries, but their cancelation or negation is the constitutive act of the city."¹ In this chapter, I elaborate on the ways in which Antigone dwells at the zone of indistinction between the public and the private, the included and the excluded, life and death, the animal and the human; which exposes the ways in which particularly woman and the feminine stands for bare life, and as such is exposed to an unconditioned capacity to be killed.

My reading of *Antigone* as finding herself at the zone of cancelled boundaries challenges contemporary readings suggesting that Antigone finds herself on either side or transcending boundaries. Furthermore, although I read *Antigone* through the lens of Agamben, I also provide a feminist reading of his thought, because Agamben himself failed to elaborate the ways in which the figure of *homo sacer* is connected to woman and the feminine. Moreover, my reading of *Antigone* as the paradigmatic female figure of *homo sacer* goes against the grain of much literature in contemporary critical, feminist, as well as psychoanalytic thought that reads *Antigone* as a figure not only of resistance but also of revolutionary change.

In feminist political thought, Catherine Holland, as an example, suggests that *Antigone* implies "a mediation about unthinkable change and the terms in which it might in fact be made possible," which allows new beginnings in politics.² For her, *Antigone* brought back the possibility of acting and speaking freely in Theban politics.³

Similarly, Tina Chanter argues that “Antigone must be read as calling for a renewal of the political itself.”⁴ For her, the staging of Antigone in totalitarian regimes, such as South Africa during apartheid, allowed for a transformation of such regimes.

Also in psychoanalytically inspired readings, Antigone is staged as a figure of radical sociopolitical transformation. Slavoj Žižek, as an example, equates Antigone with the psychoanalytic act, which leads to radical political change that reconfigures the entire field of symbolic reality.⁵ Similarly, Julia Kristeva points out that Antigone refers to women who transform contemporary societies. However, for her “this transformation first takes place in the depth of the psyche, before being consecrated, eventually, by political justice.”⁶ Cecilia Sjöholm suggests that Antigone points to another form of feminine sexuality, which is about giving up control and which allows us to experience pleasure more intensely and to see another form of freedom.⁷

Why has there been and continues to be such a persistent attempt in feminist and critical thought to read Antigone as a figure of rebellion and revolutionary change? Behind smooth stories of Antigone signifying freedom, new beginnings and radical change lurks the figure of the sacred *woman*, the one who is fully subjected to sovereign power, and banished and buried alive for her acts of resistance. At times, this figure briefly appears in such smooth stories. However, whenever it does, it is swiftly banished from view by reading Antigone as a figure of resistance and sociopolitical transformation.

Such a figure has its counterpart in contemporary societies, where women who challenge power are banned (such as getting fired from their job, do not get tenure, and exposed to injury by their fathers and uncles) or even literally killed by that very power they aim to challenge. Insofar as this essay brings to view this banished side of Sophocles’ Antigone, it also exposes the particular violence unleashed upon women who dare speak truth to power today. It seems that the persistent reading of Antigone points at a deeper desire that women, who challenge power, do *not* have the fate of *homo sacer*.

Antigone becomes the paradigmatic example of *homo sacer*, because she is signified as a woman, and as such, more than man, finds herself in the zone of indistinction, where *homo sacer* dwells. Her act of challenging male and state power merely exposed and made visible what she has always been, as a woman, an outcast, who is banished from the city and buried alive. This chapter aims to explicate the specific gendered dimensions of the figure of *homo sacer*, which continue to haunt women who challenge power today.⁸

This chapter is set up in the following sections: The second section, “The Included Excluded Woman” discusses Antigone’s peculiar position as the included excluded in both the polis and law, which exposes her to annihilation. It also outlines the peculiar dwelling of woman at the zone of indistinction between public and the private. The third section, “In Between-Life and Death,” challenges psychoanalytic and feminist readings of Antigone as “desiring death” and discusses those scenes in the play where she dwells at the threshold between life and death. The fourth section, “The Sacred Woman,” explains why Antigone’s living at the threshold between the sacred and the profane exposed her to death and why Creon changes the initial punishment for burying Polineices. The final section, “The Unburied Woman,” starts out to explore the parallels between Antigone’s and her brother’s status as the

living dead and then discusses why it is woman and not man that is the paradigmatic example of homo sacer.

The Included Excluded Woman

In the final moment where liberal democracy has succeeded to guarantee rights and formal liberties, it was not capable to save life itself and *homo sacer* emerged as the bare life who is included into the political community solely through its exclusion. As Agamben puts it, “bare life remains included in politics in the form of an exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion.”⁹ Antigone emerges as the paradigmatic example of the state of exception, which has become in liberal democracies more and more the rule. As such she assists us to shed light on the female aspects of bare life, which Agamben fails to elaborate.

Feminist thinkers, such as Holland, have pointed at Antigone’s exclusion from the polis.¹⁰ Similarly, Adriana Cavarero argues that Sophocles’ theater arises within Athenian democratic politics, with its “familiar political structure that identifies itself with a limited group of free men and that has definitely expelled women from its androcentric sphere. This exclusion is precisely what is played out on stage.”¹¹ Sophocles’ *Antigone* not merely played out the exclusion of women from politics on stage, as Holland and Cavarero claim. Rather, Antigone is included in the polis solely through her exclusion.

As Söderbäck points out that Antigone is included in the polis by her very exclusion, and “as a constitutive outside she [Antigone] finds herself at the very heart of what is inside. The polis would not exist without her.”¹² However, such dwelling at the threshold of the inside and the outside, which founds the polis, does not, as Söderbäck claims, inaugurate a revolution and a new beginning where women, like a mirage, find themselves at the inside of the polis. Rather, as bare life, those women who attempt to challenge their position at the threshold of the inside and outside, find themselves, like Antigone, exposed to unprecedented violence.

Furthermore, Agamben points out that “in Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men.”¹³ Agamben means here that bare life is not only the excluded included in the city but also the founding of the city itself rests upon its exclusion. Agamben is correct that in Western politics, bare life founds the city of *men*. However, he fails to explain the gendered aspects of such a scenario. Men have gained political power by excluding women and the feminine from the polis, which implies at the same time the capturing of women as bare life in the polis. Antigone is the paradigmatic example of woman as the constitutive outside that dwells in the inside of Western politics as bare life.

Chanter also suggests that “Antigone calls for a redrawing of the lines of the polity so that it is no longer able to cast her out as its excluded outside...Antigone calls into being a future polity that does not rely on the political exclusion of some of its members.”¹⁴ However, Antigone’s act, her attempt to challenge the power of Creon, did not allow any redrawing of the polity, as Chanter claims. Moreover, Antigone’s “No!” to Creon, which led to her excommunication from the community, did not, as Žižek wants to have it, at the same time lead to her freedom.¹⁵ Rather, her rebellious act led to her banishment outside the city walls made obvious what she has been

all along as a woman—a paradigmatic example of the state of exception, where she is included into the polis by her very exclusion.

It is not the friend/enemy distinction, which we find at the basis of the violence to which Antigone was exposed, as Cavarero claims.¹⁶ Rather, as Agamben points out, the relation of the ban is more original than the opposition between friend and enemy.¹⁷ It is the banishment of woman and the feminine that constitutes the essential structure of sovereign power. Antigone is its ancient expression. The city of Thebes, its laws and its people, *abandoned* Antigone at the moment she refuses to subject herself to male and state power. Such abandonment exposed her to annihilation.

Agamben explains the being-in-debt (*in culpa esse*) as “the condition of being included through an exclusion, of being in relation to something from which one is excluded or which one cannot fully assume. Guilt refers not to transgression, that is, to the determination of the licit and the illicit, but to the pure force of the law, to the law’s simple reference to something.”¹⁸ Antigone has not transgressed any laws. While she has violated Creon’s ad hoc edict, she has not violated the justice of the gods. As Antigone points out: “I go alive to the graves of the dead. What justice of the gods have I transgressed?”¹⁹ It was not the transgression of laws and their appropriate sanction, which we find at the center of *Antigone*.

Rather, Antigone, banished came under the under pure force of the law. As Agamben explains, “he who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather *abandoned* by it, that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable.”²⁰ Being abandoned by the law does not mean not having a relation to the law. Rather, it means coming under the *entirety* of the law at the same time as one resides outside its jurisdiction. Here, the law is all the more pervasive for its lack of content, and as a result, “the most innocent gesture or the smallest forgetfulness can have the most extreme consequences.”²¹

Whenever a person finds herself at the threshold where law and life become indistinguishable, anything she does can be used to unleash the most extreme forms of violence. Antigone finds herself in the zone of indistinction between life and law, which is also the zone where violence and law join together. Her innocent gesture of burying a loved one is met with an extreme form of violence—she is buried alive. Her abandonment by the laws exposes the intimate connection between justice and violence, where justice does violence to the most just.²²

Feminist political theorists have been concerned with the relationship between public and private in *Antigone*. Whereas Jean Bethke Elshtain suggests that Antigone privileges the private over the public, Mary Dietz and Söderbäck suggest that she privileges the public over the private.²³ Others, such as Holland, suggest that Antigone challenges not only the public/private split but also binary oppositions more generally, which opens up a space to think about difference.²⁴ Antigone finds herself either on the private side or on the public side, or she overcomes this binary opposition altogether.

In contrast to such readings, I suggest that Antigone privileges neither the private nor the public, or does she allow us to transgress the public/private split. Rather,

she dwells in the zone in between the public and the private, which is also the zone where bare life is exposed to unprecedented violence. As Agamben puts it, “bare life which dwells in the no-man’s land between the home and the city—is, from the point of view of sovereignty, the original political element.”²⁵ For Agamben, homo sacer dwells at the zone of indistinction between the home (private) and the city (public), and as the original political element, such dwelling is prior to setting up the boundary between the public and the private. Antigone exposes that this original political element is woman and the feminine.

In the beginning sentences of the play, Antigone points at the ways in which her living in the “no-woman’s land” between the home (the private) and the city (the public) contributes to her suffering: “There is no pain, no suffering, shame or dishonor that I have not seen in your sufferings and mine.”²⁶ In this scene, she tells her sister that their uncle and ruler Creon has decreed that anybody who buries their brother will be stoned to death. Antigone is expected like all Greek women at this time to spend most of her time in the home and where she has no privacy, which is why she has brought her sister outside the palace to have this conversation,²⁷ and which underlines the ways in which woman lives at the threshold between the home and the city.

Discussing Roman law and drawing on Foucault, Agamben points at the privileges of sovereign power to decide life and death. According to him, such privilege “follows immediately and solely from the father-son relation (in the instant in which the father recognizes the son in raising him from the ground, he acquires the power of life and death over him).”²⁸ The father’s power of life and death in the private realm has been extended to all male citizens in the public realm. As such, male citizens had to pay for their participation in political life with an unconditional subjection to a power over death.²⁹

How does the father–daughter relationship play out in this scenario? According to Agamben, “the father’s power should not be confused with the power to kill, which lies within the competence of the father or the husband who catches his wife or daughter in the act of adultery.”³⁰ Although both the power of life and death over the son and the daughter concern domestic jurisdiction, only the latter according to him “attaches itself to every free male citizen from birth and thus seems to define the very model of political power in general.”³¹ In Agamben’s explication of the power in the father–son relation as a model of political power, he uncritically takes over the gendered stereotype that he finds in Roman law, where only the father’s power over life and death over his son becomes public, whereas his power over the women in the household remains in the private realm and is sexual in nature.

Antigone throws Agamben’s tale of the origin of political power in the father–son relation into question. Her subjection to an absolute power of life and death to the head of the household, her uncle Creon who stands also for her father (as her own father Oedipus is dead) becomes apparent, not because she commits adultery, but because she challenges his power. Antigone decides to bury Polineices despite the threat of being killed by her own uncle/father. This act itself is situated neither on the side of the private nor on the side of the public but finds itself in the threshold between the public and the private, which is the zone where bare life dwells.

She publicly defies the laws of sovereign power (Creon), who is at the same time her father. She buries her brother, a private act of mourning, which is at the same time a public act of challenging Creon's power, the head of the state, who has made such an act a crime. As Creon is at the same time the head of the house, her act also challenges his power in the home. Creon has the power of life and death over Antigone in the home, which he extends in public, insofar as he exposes her to annihilation. *Antigone* exposes that it is the power over life and death in the father–daughter relation and not the father–son relation, as Agamben claims that is extended to all female as well as male citizens and as such becomes the very model of political power of modernity per se, where human life is politicized only through being abandoned to an unconditional power over life and death.

In-Between Life and Death

In the body of *homo sacer*, the ancient world finds itself confronted for the first time with a life that, excepting itself in a double exclusion from the real context of both the profane and the religious forms of life, is defined solely by virtue of having entered into an intimate symbiosis with death without, nevertheless, belonging to the word of the deceased.³²

Another reading of *Antigone* that one finds throughout critical, feminist, and psychoanalytic theory is her “desire for death.” Thinkers, such as Sjöholm and Kristeva, suggest what we find in the play is that *Antigone* “desires death.”³³ Why is there such a persistent reading of *Antigone* as desiring death? It is an attempt to fend off the uncomfortable insight that the play exposes—that it is woman, who finds herself, closer than man, at the threshold between life and death, the zone where *homo sacer* dwells. As Agamben explains, *homo sacer* exists “on a threshold that belongs neither to the world of the living nor the world of the dead.”³⁴ *Antigone* is the ancient expression of the living dead woman, who, still alive already finds herself in the realm of the dead.

However, whenever *Antigone* as the figure on the threshold between life and death emerges, she is swiftly eradicated from view with the argument that all she does is “desiring her death.” As an example, Söderbäck realizes that *Antigone*'s banishment from the city and her annihilation contradicts her reading of *Antigone* as “the example par excellence of an actor,” who creates according to her new beginnings in politics and whom must associate with miracles and revolutions in the Arendtian sense of these terms.³⁵ However, she covers over such contradiction, which might have allowed the female figure of *homo sacer* to emerge, by suggesting that at the end, there is no contradiction at all.

Rather, all we can find is *Antigone*'s “desire for death.” Insofar as *Antigone* merely acted on her desire for death, she retains the capacity of transformative agency. Moreover, her desire for death turns like a miracle into a “desire for life,” because contemporary plays and interpretations stage *Antigone* as a revolutionary. As a result, argues Söderbäck, *Antigone* “continue(s) to inspire and make possible acts of resistance.”³⁶ As such the figure of the revolutionary *Antigone* keeps the more unsettling figure of *Antigone* at the threshold between life and death at bay.

Also readings of Antigone, which suggest that she carries out the desire of the others, the mother's desire, as Cavarero argues, or the father's desire, as Butler argues, seem to fend off the uncomfortable figure of woman as *homo sacer*. As the latter puts it, "she is propelled by the words that are upon her, words of her father's that condemn the children of Oedipus to a life that ought not to have been lived. Between life and death, she is already living in a tomb prior to any banishment there."³⁷ Insofar as Antigone merely carries out what the father (and mother) desires and is nothing else but a matter of fate, her dwelling at the threshold between life and death, evident throughout the play, and foreshadowing the dwelling of women in modern societies, can be banished from view.

Instead of standing for the possibility of resistance to power, Antigone is the figure that exposes woman's subjection to total power, which becomes evident, whenever woman dares to speak up to such power. *Antigone* exposes that it is not so much man but woman that exists on the threshold between life and death. Her figure challenges the figure of the "living dead man,"³⁸ which is Agamben's main concern. She directs our attention to the living dead woman, which have been and continue to exist among the living in contemporary societies.

In the second episode, when Antigone takes full responsibility for burying her brother, which carries the punishment of being stoned to death, her sister Ismene returns to the scene, this time wanting to stand by her sister and die with her. Antigone responds to her: "Be strong. You are alive, but my spirit died a long time ago, to serve the dead."³⁹ In Greek antiquity, the spirit survives the dead body (*nekus*). Although Antigone's body (*soma*) is still alive and finds itself among the living, it is more like a corpse, because her spirit finds itself already in the realm of the dead. Insofar as she has found herself at the threshold of life and death for a long time ("my spirit died a long time ago"), her act of rebellion renders her particular dwelling at the zone in-between life and death merely visible.

At this point, Ismene laments her sister's impeding death, which Creon answers with the following words: "She...Don't speak of her. She no longer exists."⁴⁰ Here, Creon supports Antigone's assessment of living at the zone of indistinction between life and death, by pointing out that although she is physically present with them in the room, she no longer exists—her spirit is already dead. Once the particular dwelling of woman at the threshold between life and death has been revealed, any speaking of her actual presence among the living must be denied, which Creon's "don't speak of her" expresses.

Nowhere in the text does Antigone desire her death. On the contrary, when she learns that Creon decided to bury her alive she laments her dwelling at the threshold of life and death. "Oh ill-fated woman, with no home among mortals nor as a corpse among corpses, neither with the living, nor with the dead."⁴¹ Here, Antigone is describing herself as *homo sacer*. She uses here the term *métoikos* for home,⁴² which described a noncitizen alien in a resident state—banished by the city and buried alive, she is an alien both among the living and the dead.

Antigone uses *métoikos* also when she laments that she has to share her parent's home in death: "Was I then born for misery! To them I go, accursed and unmarried, to share their home."⁴³ Her lamentation of being deprived of a home among

the mortals and the dead does not suggest any “desire for death.” Rather, it implies her horror at her existence as the “living dead (wo)man,” who, while still living is already dead. The Chorus words also recall that to live in such a state is dreadful and that the one who challenges authority “has not city at all,”⁴⁴ which Sophocles’ Philoctetes also called the “living death.”

Antigone underlines the horror of her dwelling at the threshold between life and death by finding a parallel in Niobe, the daughter of Tantalus, a king in Asia Minor, whose children were killed and who herself was turned to stone when she was still alive because she boasted that she had more children than the goddess Leto.⁴⁵ As Antigone puts it, “The growing stone overpowered her...fate puts me to sleep just like her.”⁴⁶ Antigone sees a resemblance to Niobe, in that she was put to death when she was still alive, imprisoned in a tomb of rock.

Antigone uses the words “put to sleep,” to cover over the brutality of being buried alive in a tomb of rock, a fate which both women, Niobe and Antigone, shared. Similarly, Söderbäck suggests that Antigone’s living at the threshold between life and death implies a “beautiful death.”⁴⁷ As such, feminist thinkers, like Antigone herself, use euphemisms to cover over the horror of what happened to her. The Nazis also used the code names of “beautiful death” and “putting to sleep” as a mean to cover the brutality of annihilating *homines sacris* in their concentration camps. To call such deaths, “beautiful” covers over the peculiar position of women at the threshold between life and death, which Antigone helps us to expose.

Throughout his reading of *Antigone*, Lacan points at her dwelling in the zone between life and death, in which she found herself already before she was buried alive and which she laments: “She has been telling us for a long time that she is in the kingdom of the dead, but at this point the idea is consecrated. Her punishment will consist in her being shut up or suspended in the zone between life and death. Although she is not yet dead, she is eliminated in the world of the living. And it is from that moment on that her complaint begins, her lamentation on life.”⁴⁸ Similar to my argument, Lacan suggests that what is going on in the play has nothing to do with “human defiance”⁴⁹ and is connected to power.⁵⁰

However, unlike my reading of Antigone, and much like contemporary feminist literature, all that Lacan finds in her dwelling at the limit between life and death is “the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire.”⁵¹ Moreover, according to him, even “when Antigone depicts herself as Niobe becoming petrified,” this is nothing else but a manifestation of her “death instinct.”⁵² It seems that mostly psychoanalytically inspired feminist readings of Antigone have taken over the Lacanian interpretation.

However, the problem with such “pure desire of death” is that it simply makes it sound like an attempt to give her agency by declaring that she acted on her desire for death. Such an attempt does away with the fact that once woman finds herself suspended in the zone between life and death, there is no agency, and anything she does will not prevent her annihilation. Moreover, Lacan’s repeated depiction of Antigone as “the beautiful”⁵³ and references to “Antigone’s beauty”⁵⁴ distracts, much like feminist depictions of her “beautiful death” from the ugliness of her dwelling in the zone between life and death.

After Antigone's lamentation about her being buried alive, Creon, unaffected, points out to "lead her away at once, shut her in the covered tomb, as I proclaimed, and leave her alone, deserted, whether she wishes to die, or to live, entombed in such a home."⁵⁵ Creon's statement exposes two elements of *homo sacer*. First, he orders that everybody must leave her alone, that she is not to have an ally, which refers to the sacred (impure) woman that nobody can touch without dirtying herself, as discussed above. Second, Creon uses the same strategy as contemporary readings for covering up his absolute power over life and death, by suggesting that Antigone can wish "to die, or to live," although it is clear that she cannot "live entombed."

In keeping with feminist literature that reads Antigone's dreadful living at the threshold of life and death as her supposed "desire for death," Creon suggests that Antigone retains some autonomy in such a scenario where she can desire to either live or die. In both scenarios, such desire holds of the illusion of autonomy in the face of her total subjection to the Creon's power over life and death.

The Sacred Woman

Agamben points out that behind the long process that led to the recognition of rights and formal liberties "stands once again the body of the sacred man with his double sovereign, his life that cannot be sacrificed yet may, nevertheless be killed,"⁵⁶ which foreshadows the inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism. Sophocles' *Antigone* exposes the ways in which the body of the sacred woman is the paradigmatic example of a life that cannot be sacrificed, yet may nevertheless be killed without consequence. It is the feminine body, more than the male body that exposes the close proximity between democracy and totalitarianism.

In the third episode, we learn about Creon's change of mind: instead of stoning Antigone to death, which was the official punishment for burying Polineices, he aims to bury her alive outside the city walls: "I will take her to a place where men's feet have trodden no path, and I will bury her alive in a chamber of rock, giving her just enough food to avoid guilt so that the city as a whole escapes pollution...perhaps she will manage to avoid death."⁵⁷ Most secondary literature has read Creon's change of mind in Creon's sense—to avoid guilt and responsibility.

As an example, in the commentary on the play by David Franklin and John Harrison, a killing (stoning to death) entailed pollution (*miasma*), which could affect a whole community.⁵⁸ Creon hopes to spare himself and the city the guilt of responsibility of Antigone's death by leaving some food: thus, her death would be due to "natural" causes.⁵⁹ Söderbäck likewise suggests that Creon attempts to avoid responsibility by burying her alive instead of killing her.⁶⁰ In a similar vein, Cavarero argues that Creon buried Antigone alive "so that the guilt of her atrocious and wicked burial would not fall on the polis."⁶¹

However, Creon's change of mind, when read in the light of *homo sacer*, points to another, more unsettling meaning. Agamben points out that ancient recorded forms of capital punishment were purification rites and not death penalties in the modern sense. Purification as a response requires acknowledging that the person is included in the city, and hence steps must be taken to cleanse the "pollution."

In contrast, *homo sacer* confronts us “with a residual and irreducible bare life, which must be excluded and exposed to death that no rite and no sacrifice can redeem.”⁶²

As *Antigone* shows us, bare life cannot be redeemed through a rite of purification, implied in Creon’s first punishment of publicly stoning to death, which helps to account for his change of punishment to something that was not regarded as a rite of purification. Rather, because *Antigone* stands for the paradigmatic example of the female figure of *homo sacer*, we are confronted with a ban on sacrifice—Antigone was banished, as Creon puts it, to a place “where men’s feet have trodden no path.” Her banishment exposed that as a woman, she was always included into the polis via her exclusion, which exposed her to death and annihilated her.

Homo sacer, as Agamben points out, refers to a political structure that is “located in a zone prior to the distinction between sacred and profane, religious and juridical.”⁶³ Creon changed his mind from stoning Antigone to death, to burying her alive, because Antigone was not to be sacrificed. Creon, after announcing that Antigone will be buried alive, points out that “she will lose her right to live in the world above.”⁶⁴ However, his decision to bury her alive implies a double exception where Antigone has lost her right to live in the world above and below—she is set outside human jurisdiction without being brought in the realm of divine law. Here, the double exception takes the form of a double exclusion from human and divine law.

Agamben explains that Latin poets define lovers as sacred to point out that they have separated themselves from other humans beyond human and divine law. “Originally, this sphere was the one produced by a double exception in which sacred life was exposed.”⁶⁵ Also the love of Antigone for her brother, for whose burial she was willing to die, also separated her from other humans in a sphere beyond both divine and human laws, which rendered her life sacred and exposed her to an unsanctionable killing that is classifiable neither as a sacrifice nor as a homicide.

In classical, Greece life in itself was not considered sacred. Life became only sacred through a series of rituals whose aim was to separate life from its profane context, which is also the aim of killing such life. In order to kill the victim, she is rendered sacred, which necessitates her separation from the realm of the living. Whenever a person is declared sacred, killing becomes unpunishable. Antigone is the ancient expression of the sacred woman, which exposes that “life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed is sacred life.”⁶⁶

Persons and things considered sacred inspires both horror and respect, which one finds throughout secondary readings on Antigone. For Lacan, as an example, Antigone reveals an “unbearable splendor. She has a quality that both attracts us and startles us, in the sense of intimidates us; this terrible, self-willed victim disturbs us.”⁶⁷ He expresses her “unbearable splendor” by referring to her as “the sublime,”⁶⁸ talks about the “the divine use of Antigone,”⁶⁹ and even depicts her as a saint.⁷⁰ Although Lacan foregrounds Antigone’s sacredness in his depictions, he does not explain the ways in which her being separated from the profane, at the same time constitutes a precondition to eliminate her.

Kristeva points to the horror Antigone incites—her “no” to Creon, her disregard of her sister, and her coming to the aid of her favorite brother, the one who attacked the father and mother land. However, at the end, Kristeva declares Antigone,

“the sublime.”⁷¹ Like Lacan, Kristeva foregrounds the sacred dimension in the figure of Antigone. However, such a sphere is not the sphere of psychic and political transformation as Kristeva claims. Rather, as Agamben puts it, the “sacredness of life, which is invoked today as an absolutely fundamental right in opposition to sovereign power, in fact originally expresses precisely both life’s subjection to a power over death and life’s irreparable exposure in the relation to abandonment.”⁷² Antigone is the original expression of the sacred woman. Her sacredness fully exposed her to Creon’s power over life and death and led to her annihilation.

Sacredness implies an ambiguous character, where the indistinction between sacred and impure becomes apparent. As Agamben points out, “sacer designated a person or the thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself.”⁷³ Nobody stood by Antigone’s side, because she found herself at the threshold between the sacred and the impure. Helping Antigone would have meant dirtying oneself, and such dirtying carries the danger of becoming impure oneself. Antigone herself laments her being left alone before she is buried alive: “What ally should I call upon?”⁷⁴

She could not call upon an ally, because helping Antigone would have implied “touching her,” which posed the danger of becoming *homo sacer* oneself. Söderbäck, who reads *Antigone* as a paradigmatic example of a “political agent,” points out that Antigone’s acting alone without the help of others contradicts Arendt’s (and her) claim that agency occurs only when acting in concert with others in the public sphere. Söderbäck aims to do away with this contradiction by suggesting that Antigone must act alone because she is not equal and excluded from the public.⁷⁵ Antigone had to act alone, not because she was not equal and excluded from the public sphere (although this was also the case). Rather, her “impurity” as *homo sacer* led to a scenario where she had to act alone, because nobody wanted to get involved with her affairs, because this would have meant dirtying themselves. Antigone is the paradigmatic example of the “sacred woman,” whose acts of resistance make visible what she has been as a woman all along in the polis—an outcast, who cannot count on allies in her struggle against the totality of power, because such assistance would have endangered such allies to become like her *homininess sacres* themselves.

Agamben points out that there is a bond between *homo sacer* and the sovereign, insofar as they present two symmetrical figures: “the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all [wo-]men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all [wo-]men act as sovereign.”⁷⁶ However, there is another parallel between *homo sacer* and sovereign power—sovereign power needs to be careful, because s/he finds herself close to the threshold between life and death, which the relationship between Creon and Antigone expresses. At the end of *Antigone*, when Creon loses his son and wife to suicide, the messenger, a figure that points at a climax in Greek tragedy, points out “Now all is lost. When a man’s happiness forsakes him, I do not rank him among the living, but regard him as a breathing corpse.”⁷⁷

Like Antigone, at the end, Creon was nothing else but a breathing corpse who lived at the threshold between life and death, which exposes the intimate connection between the one subjected to power over life and death and the one in whose domain such power rests. As Creon points out in his response to the messenger,

“What are you saying? Ah, you have killed a man already dead!”⁷⁸ This bond between *homo sacer* and the sovereign power exposes the ways in which sovereign power easily can become *homo sacer*.

Such intimate connection between the one completely subjected to power and the one exercising power survives today in the fact that while killing *homo sacer* does not stage as a homicide (or constitutes less than homicide), the killing of the sovereign constitutes a special crime (more than homicide). But, as Agamben puts it, “in neither case does the killing of a man constitute an offense of homicide.”⁷⁹ Today such circumstance survives in the fact that the head of the state cannot be submitted to an ordinary legal trial and gets dismissed from office but never subjected to a legal sentence.⁸⁰

The Unburied Woman

Antigone’s burial of her brother has often been read as either disrupting or confirming ancestral lines. On the one side, we find Judith Butler, who suggests that Antigone destabilizes normative heterosexual family structures. As she puts it, Antigone “challenges that structure, for she does not conform to the symbolic law and she does not prefigure a final restitution of the law.”⁸¹ Since kinship structures are at the basis of the human, Antigone is for her “the occasion for a new field of the human.”⁸²

On the other side, we find those thinkers, such as Mary Beth Mader, who challenges Butler’s “kinship trouble” with her argument that Antigone buries her brother to set the “family crime” of incest straight by burying her brother as a brother and not her uncle, and at the same time, she confirms her father as her father and not her brother. For her, Antigone’s act is an act of restoration and relieving the family shame.⁸³ Similarly, Chanter suggests that Antigone’s burial of her brother was to bury her as a brother and nothing else.⁸⁴

In contrast of such readings of Antigone’s burial of her brother, I suggest that what is at stake here is not so much an unsettling or a restoration of kinship lines. Rather, Antigone’s burial of her brother was an attempt to bring him out of the threshold between life and death by granting him funeral rites. As Agamben points out that “the goal of funeral rites is to assure that this uncomfortable and uncertain being is transformed into a friendly and powerful ancestor, who clearly belongs to the world of the dead.”⁸⁵ Polineices was such an uncomfortable being, who unburied, neither belonged to the world of the dead, nor as a corpse rotting away in the city, did he belong to the world of the living, which exposes a central parallel between Antigone and her brother.

When Tiresias, the seer confronts Creon with the fault in his judgment of refusing burial to Polineices and burying Antigone alive he points out the irony: “You have cast one from the upper world in the lower, without due honour lodging a life in a tomb, and you keep here a corpse that belongs to the gods below, forsaken, deprived of rites due, robbed of ceremony.”⁸⁶ Tiresias equates here Creon’s offense against Antigone with the offense he commits against Polineices, insofar as he consigns a living person (Antigone) to the world of the dead by burying her alive in a tomb, and

he keeps a corpse (Polineices) that belongs to the world of the dead, in the world of the living by refusing to bury him.

Antigone's act to bury her brother was not so much to disrupt or cleanse her family lineage but to get him out of the threshold between life and death and make sure that he finds a home in the world of the dead. Pointing at this parallel between Antigone and her brother, a woman and a man might throw my overall argument that it is woman, more than a man who finds herself at the threshold between life and death into disorder. After all since her brother has the same fate as her, why should woman and not man, as Agamben continuously asserts, become the paradigmatic example of *homo sacer*?

There is a difference with what happens with the corpse of Polineices and with the corpse of Antigone. Antigone aimed to bury her brother twice—she made an attempt to provide him a home in the world of the dead, and although her attempts did not yield results as he was unburied twice, Creon, at the end, grants him funeral rites. As a result, we know what happened to the corpse of the brother—he is transformed into a friendly ancestor, who has made it out of the threshold between life and death, where *homo sacer* dwells. What about Antigone, the woman with whom I am concerned here?

Antigone, unlike her brother who receives funeral rites from both Antigone and finally also Creon, is not granted any funeral rites when she is buried alive in her tomb, which she laments in the fourth episode: "How I go unwept by loved ones, and with what ceremony to the newly raised mound of my strange tomb."⁸⁷ At the end, Creon only mourns the death of his wife and son and not the death of his niece/daughter, which supports Antigone's lament about dying unwept. Furthermore, what happened to the corpse of Antigone? What did the city do with such an uncomfortable and uncertain being, unburied and thus remaining at the threshold between life and death? While we clearly know what happens with the brother's corpse, we never learn what happens with her corpse.

Like Antigone, who buried her brother, to bring him out of the threshold between life and death, it seems that contemporary readings aim to bring Antigone out from this zone of indistinction between life and death, the zone in which *homo sacer* dwells. As an example, Moira Fradinger toward the end of her essay admits that she feels "unsettled at our apparent need to awaken her again and again. That is why I will continue trying, like so many other women and men, to imagine a world in which Antigone can cease being undead: a world in which she can either rest in peace—or live."⁸⁸ The unsettling feeling that Antigone arouses is her dwelling in the zone of the "undead," where she can neither rest in peace nor live, because she is the paradigmatic example of "living death."

Contemporary readings of her aim to bring her out of this no-woman's land between life and death, by reading her as a figure of life, such as Fradinger who points at the ways in which Antigone has been and continues to be staged as a revolutionary all over the world.⁸⁹ The problem with reading Antigone as a figure of life is to cover over the more uncomfortable figure she exposes—woman as the paradigmatic example of bare life, for whom simple acts of resistance to power are met with unprecedented violence. By wanting to ban this figure from view, the deeper insight

of Sophocles' *Antigone* is banned from view too. Moreover, the attempt to bring back Antigone to life as a figure that revolutionizes and transforms the totality of power is blind to another uncomfortable aspect of *homo sacer*—once woman finds herself in the zone of indistinction between life and death, she cannot be brought back to life.

The difference between Antigone's and her brother's dwelling at the threshold between life and death is also apparent when discussing the (dis)connection between the human and the animal. The first two verses of the first Choral ode describe how man has conquered nature: "With his skills he masters the animals that live in the wild."⁹⁰ Such mastery over the natural world was necessary for man to distinguish himself from animals and confirm his specific human qualities (his rationality as a political being). Funeral rites are the last rites enacted to secure such distinction. Burial, as Cavarero outlines, is also the last rite humans enact to distinguish themselves from animals that are once deceased become feasts for other animals.⁹¹

Antigone laments the fate of her brother, who is "unburied, a delicious hoard or the watching birds to feast on."⁹² She buried him twice to make sure that he does not become a feast for the animals. With this act, she also secured the last rite that distinguished him from the animal world. Antigone herself was denied any burial rites, which would have marked her separation from the animal world, in whose proximity she is placed, more so than her brother, because of her feminine body, which leads us to yet another question. Why is Antigone's and Polineices's dwelling in the zone between life and death not the same?

As Luce Irigaray in her classic reading of *Antigone* points out, Antigone has to bury the corpse "to enable man to sublimate a universality that smacks too much of the natural."⁹³ This natural condition is expressed in the odor that the deceased corpse spreads over the city. Irigaray also argues that Antigone stands for the feminine that is repressed to the unconscious. It sometimes erupts and threatens the community, but such moments remain without much consequence. As such Irigaray offers a rare reading of *Antigone* that does not stage her as a revolutionary, but without bringing attention to her status as *homo sacer*.

Agamben draws on the figure of the werewolf to point out that *homo sacer* dwells at the threshold between the human and the animal: "what had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city – the werewolf is, therefore, in its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city."⁹⁴ What about the woman who has been banned from the city? What had to remain in the collective unconscious, which includes the unconscious of Agamben's texts, is woman's relation to the threshold between the human and the animal, which has been and continues to be a more intimate one than man's.

As Cavarero points out "the human species in *Antigone* ponders itself on the crucial threshold between the animal and the human: no longer animal, yet no more than animal."⁹⁵ Sophocles, at various points, portrays the missing link between man and beast in terms of the feminine and the corporeal. As an example, the Sentry tells Creon about the scene when Antigone returned a second time to bury her brother, who was unburied by Creon's subjects: "The girl was seen, and she cried out bitterly, the shrill cry of a bird, when it sees its home empty, its nest stripped of the young."⁹⁶

Antigone is in this scene linked to the bird-mother, which underlines the ways in which women's capacity to give birth and become mothers as well as her feminine body that bleeds every month reminds of the repressed animal origins of humans, which had to be banished, together with women, from the polis. In the prolog, the chorus depicts Polineices as a bird who "flew over our land screaming like an eagle, shadowing our country."⁹⁷ One can understand this literally since his body was exposed and birds were consuming him, and consequentially, the birds would return to the sky and contribute to the pollution of the community.⁹⁸ Moreover, such depictions imply a distinctly feminine tonality in the names that Sophocles gives to the birds cited in the chorus, which underlines the ways that the feminine is associated with the animal.⁹⁹

Antigone, the woman who challenged male and state power, interrupted the *Frieden* (peace) of the polis, which turned her into the *friedlos*. In Germanic and Scandinavian antiquity, the *friedlos*, as Agamben explains, referred to "the man without peace, the one banned from the city whom everyone could kill, was also defined as a 'wolf-man.'¹⁰⁰ Antigone is the ancient expression of the woman without peace, the "wolf-woman," who was banned from the city and whom everyone could kill, because she aimed to expose the violence of justice.

The moment the human transforms into the were-wolf expresses according to Agamben the moment of the state of exception, which is the same moment, where "the city is dissolved and men enter into a zone in which they are no longer distinct from beasts."¹⁰¹ The state of exception has become in contemporary liberal democracies more and more the rule, insofar as humans (mostly, but not exclusively men) shoot other humans like beasts, and the beastly qualities of humans become undeniable in never-ending brutal wars. Antigone's fate foreshadows such a state, where the distinction between humans and beasts enters a zone of indistinction.

Conclusion

In this essay, I read *Antigone* in the light of Agamben's *homo sacer*, thereby providing a feminist reinterpretation of his figure. Given my challenge to contemporary readings and stagings of Antigone as a revolutionary does my reading imply that women can never challenge state and male power? Obviously not, as the history of women's struggles and their impact to make the lives of women more bearable all over the globe outlines. However, there are many more instances when women's speaking truth to power put them into the zone of *homo sacer* from which they will not return alive.

A contemporary example in Western societies are woman who speak up to power in professional contexts—once they find themselves in the no-woman's land where *homo sacer* dwells, and the institution aims to get rid of them because of their challenge to power, there is nothing they can do—no appeal to internal or external laws—they often "face death" and lose their jobs. Another example are the girls in contemporary rural Turkey who throughout their lives find themselves in a threshold between life and death, where they are threatened to be killed by their father-uncles if they aim to expose his sexual violence toward them or refuse to be

married off to a male stranger. Antigone is the ancient expression of such scenarios. Attempts to read Antigone as a figure of revolution and change cover over this more unsettling aspect of women's lives today. Returning to her allows us to shed light on those scenarios where woman continue to live buried alive and with the constant threat to be annihilated.

Notes

1. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Daniel Heller-Roazen (trans.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 85.
2. Catherine A. Holland, "After Antigone: Women, the Past, and the Future of Feminist Political Thought," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 27–43, 35–6.
3. Holland, "After Antigone," 39.
4. Tina Chanter, "The Performative Politics and Rebirth of Antigone in Ancient Greece and Modern South Africa," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 83–98, 86.
5. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 46.
6. Julia Kristeva, "Antigone: Limit and Horizon," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 215–29, 227.
7. Cecilia Sjöholm, "Beyond Pleasure: The Other History of Sexuality," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 173–93, 191.
8. When I claim that *Antigone* foreshadows the feminine aspects of the figure of *homo sacer*, I do not aim to assimilate or normalize the past for the present but aim to offer a reading of this text that can provide us with insights for a new future.
9. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 11.
10. Holland, "After Antigone," 27–43, 36.
11. Adriana Cavarero, "On the Body of Antigone," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 45–63, 48.
12. Fanny Söderbäck, "Impossible Mourning: Sophocles Reversed," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 65–82, 74.
13. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 7.
14. Tina Chanter, "The Performative Politics and Rebirth of Antigone in Ancient Greece and Modern South Africa," 83–98, 94.
15. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 46.
16. Adriana Cavarero, "On the Body of Antigone," 45–63, 59.
17. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 110.
18. *Ibid.*, 27.
19. Sophocles *Antigone*, David Franklin and John Harrison (commentary and trans.), 884–5.
20. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 28, my emphasis.
21. *Ibid.*, 52.
22. Which point according to Agamben to "the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence," Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 32.
23. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Antigone's Daughters Reconsidered: Continuing Reflections on Women, Politics, and Power," in *Life-World and Politics: Between Modernity and Postmodernity*, ed. Stephen K. White (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 231–3, 229; Mary G. Dietz, "Citizenship with a Feminist Face: The Problem with Maternal Thinking," *Political Theory* 13 (1985): 25; Söderbäck, "Impossible Mourning," 65–82.
24. Holland, "After Antigone," 27–41.
25. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 90.
26. Sophocles *Antigone*, 3–5.
27. *Ibid.*, 15–6.
28. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 88.
29. *Ibid.*, 90.
30. *Ibid.*, 88.
31. *Ibid.*

32. Ibid., 100.
33. Sjöholm, "Beyond Pleasure," 173; Kristeva, "Antigone: Limit and Horizon," 215.
34. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 99.
35. Söderbäck, "Impossible Mourning," 70.
36. Ibid., 77.
37. Judith Butler, "Promiscuous Obedience," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 133–54, 147.
38. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 99.
39. Sophocles Antigone, 524.
40. Ibid., 533.
41. Ibid., 808–12.
42. A *métoikos* was in ancient Greece, particularly in Athens, an alien or foreigner, who was mostly Greek, and who permanently lived in the city, but who was not citizen and as such had no political rights.
43. Sophocles Antigone, 828–32.
44. Ibid., 345.
45. Niobe was married to Amphon, a Theban king. She boasted that she had more children than the goddess Leto, at which Leto's two children, Apollo and Artemis, killed all her children. Niobe returned to Asia Minor, where she was turned to stone on Mount Siphylus.
46. Sophocles Antigone, 779, 787.
47. Söderbäck, "Impossible Mourning," 65–82, 70.
48. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, *Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 1959–1960), 280.
49. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 286.
50. Ibid., 245.
51. Ibid., 282.
52. Ibid., 281.
53. Ibid., 260.
54. Ibid., 248.
55. Sophocles Antigone, 856–8.
56. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 10.
57. Sophocles Antigone, 722–5.
58. And which could be cleansed only be ritual purification.
59. See commentary by David Franklin and John Harrison, Sophocles Antigone, 56.
60. Söderbäck, "Impossible Mourning," 68.
61. Cavarero, "On the Body of Antigone," 60.
62. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 100.
63. Ibid., 74.
64. Sophocles Antigone, 858–60.
65. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 86.
66. Ibid., 82.
67. Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 247.
68. Ibid., 287.
69. Ibid., 286.
70. Ibid., 254.
71. Kristeva, "Antigone: Limit and Horizon," 228.
72. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 83.
73. Ibid., 79.
74. Sophocles Antigone, 886–7.
75. Söderbäck, "Impossible Mourning," 74.
76. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 84.
77. Sophocles Antigone, 1123–5.
78. Ibid., 1246–8.
79. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 102.
80. Ibid., 103.
81. Butler, "Promiscuous Obedience," 143.
82. Ibid., 150.
83. Mary Beth Mader, "Antigone's Line," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 155–72.

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84. Chanter, "The Performative Politics and Rebirth of Antigone in Ancient Greece and Modern South Africa," 83–98.
85. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 98.
86. Sophocles *Antigone*, 1034–41.
87. *Ibid.*, 850–3.
88. Moira Fradinger, "Nomadic Antigone," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 15–23, 20.
89. Fradinger, "Nomadic Antigone," 15–23.
90. Sophocles *Antigone*, 321–2.
91. Luce Irigaray, "The Eternal Irony of the Community," in *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, ed. Fanny Söderbäck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 99–110, 100.
92. Sophocles *Antigone*, 24–5.
93. Irigaray, "The Eternal Irony of the Community," 100.
94. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 105.
95. Cavarero, "On the Body of Antigone," 55.
96. Sophocles *Antigone*, 395–7.
97. *Ibid.*, 102–4.
98. I would like to thank Gabriel Ricci for this insight.
99. Cavarero, "On the Body of Antigone," 54.
100. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 104.
101. *Ibid.*, 107.