

“Do Not Speak of Her; For She Exists No More”: Reading Necropolitics in Sophokles’ *Antigone*

The second *epeisódion* (ll. 384-581) of Sophokles’ *Antigone* opens with a guard reporting that Antigone, an *epíklēros* of the Theban royal house, has been caught in the act of attempting to bury her elder brother Polyneikes. Such an act was expressly forbidden by the edict of Kreon, lately King of Thebes and *kúrios* (“guardian”) to Antigone as her uncle, who had deemed Polyneikes *persōna nōn grāta* since “the exile returned wishing to burn his patrimony down from its highest reaches, as well as his native gods, by means of fire” (*Ant.* 199-201). When Kreon questions her overstepping of his laws (*nómous*, l. 449), Antigone replies that her actions were in accordance with the customs of the gods, customs which transcend any human decree (*Ant.* 450-60). At once, then, a distinction emerges between that which is *hósios* (“pious, sanctioned by the gods”) and that which is *díkaios* (“just, sanctioned by human law”), with Antigone representing the former and Kreon the latter (cf. *Gorgias* 507b; *Euthyphro* 10a).

From there, the two engage in an extended discourse until the end of the *epeisódion*, when the king sends her off to await her fate. Ismene, who has also been charged with treason alongside her sister, attempts to supplicate Kreon, asking what life there will be for her without her sister, her last living relative beyond him. The king responds censoriously, demanding that Ismene “not speak of her; for she exists no more” (*Ant.* 567: *mé lég’ · ou gár ést’ éti*). In a subsequent *epeisódion* (ll. 806-943), Antigone remarks that she herself is “miserable, neither a resident (*Ant.* 852: *métoikos*) among mortals nor a corpse among the corpses, neither among the living nor the dead.” These lines are perplexing and thought-provoking on account of their ambiguity (i.e., How could Antigone not be alive when she is still living? How is she neither dead nor alive? Why does she refer to herself as a *métoikos*, the term for resident foreigners in

Greek *póleis*?). Beyond those questions, however, exist potentially significant implications about how we may understand the ways in which monarchical sovereignty was conceptualized in *ostensibly* democratic, fifth-century B.C.E. Athens (cf. Thuk. 1.124.3; 2.63.2).

Thus, to understand them and their ramifications, this paper draws upon postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics (2003), which asserts that the "ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 2003: 11). In conceiving of Antigone as an individual under necropower, we can approach her own perception of her (in)existence as an instantiation of what Mbembe refers to as "death-worlds," in which the necropolitan is subject to "conditions of life conferring upon the status of *living dead*" (Mbembe 2003: 40).

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