

**BEAUTIFUL DEATH:  
THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FASCINATION WITH *ANTIGONE***

By Tara Beaney

**Abstract**

This article investigates the reception of Sophocles' *Antigone* in early nineteenth-century Germany, a period in which interest in ancient Greek tragedy flourished, with *Antigone* being particularly prominent. The essay considers two influential figures of the period who regarded the work highly: the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) and the poet Friedrich Hölderlin (1770-1843). In discussing their attitudes towards *Antigone*, the article raises the long-standing philosophical problem of how tragic representations of suffering and death, such as Antigone's self-sacrifice, can arouse aesthetic pleasure and fascination. To address this problem, a socio-historical approach is taken, exploring how the topos of female death may have appealed to the imagination of these important thinkers.

The story of Antigone has a peculiar persistence. Since Sophocles wrote the tragedy nearly two and a half thousand years ago, it has been repeatedly translated, adapted and interpreted, retaining its potential to captivate new audiences and readers. This phenomenon itself has attracted a wealth of critical studies, notably George Steiner's *Antigones* (1984). Moreover, as any survey of critical interest in *Antigone* reveals, the story has been discussed in a wide range of discourses, from philosophy to politics to psychoanalysis and, more recently, feminism. In this article, my focus is on an intriguing confluence within the play, namely that of tragic death and femininity.<sup>1</sup> I consider the reception of *Antigone* in Germany around the 1800s, when the tragedy was particularly popular, and I ask the question: to what extent was the fascination with this tragedy a fascination with Antigone's death?

**History's pre-eminent work of art**

As Steiner claims, the period from c.1790 to c.1905 saw *Antigone* widely proclaimed as a pre-eminent work of art (1984, 1). The philosopher G.W.F. Hegel stands out in having declared *Antigone* to be not only an excellent tragedy but one of the 'most sublime and most consummate works of art human effort has ever brought forth' (Steiner 1984, 4). The poet Friedrich Hölderlin and the philosopher F.W.J. von Schelling, Hegel's fellow students in Tübingen in the early 1800s, shared his admiration, participating in the propagation of an Antigone cult which persisted through the nineteenth century. In 1843, for example, the German playwright Friedrich Hebbel pronounced *Antigone* 'the masterpiece of all masterpieces'; in 1846, the English essayist Thomas De Quincey wrote that the play 'towers into affecting grandeur' like no other; and by 1869, the composer Richard Wagner had designated the play the 'incomparable *par excellence*' (Steiner 1984, 4-5).

However, there are some voices opposing this general picture of universal admiration painted by Steiner. A. W. Schlegel, for example, in his 1768-1803 lectures on dramatic art, voiced what he called the usual opinion, that *Antigone* (together with *Ajax*) is the poorest of Sophocles' tragedies.

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<sup>1</sup> Readers interested in the literary study of representations of female death might see Elizabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body* (1992).

In this respect, he took issue with the way *Antigone* stretches out so long after the so-called catastrophe, the young woman's death (1982, 200). For Hegel, and Hölderlin, however, as I will argue, the fact that Antigone dies so early on is no obstacle to the supremacy of the play. Moreover, the mere fact that the range of Sophocles' plays was commonly known and critically discussed by those such as A.W. Schlegel is testimony to a dominant strain in the zeitgeist of early nineteenth-century Germany; namely the spirit of Hellenism. Hegel and Hölderlin were key figures in this movement, which propagated an interest in the arts and culture of classical Greece and Rome, and favoured literature in the style of German classicism, such as was adopted by two leading German writers, Goethe and Schiller, from the late 1780s to the early 1800s. And if *Antigone* was, to an extent, at the forefront of the Hellenic movement, then it will be worth investigating what caused this particular play to be brought forward into the public sphere, and to be widely performed, discussed and criticised.<sup>2</sup>

### **Closure and meaning through death**

To understand why *Antigone* was of particular interest to writers like Hegel and Hölderlin, I will turn to the major themes of the tragedy, the core of which is Antigone's death. Her death pervades the play, as it is anticipated from the beginning, carried out in the middle, and followed by repercussions that establish the monumental significance of this young woman's demise.

Antigone raises the possibility of dying in the opening dialogue; by exhorting her sister to help bury their brother Polyneices, she opposes Creon's rule and puts her own life at stake. Since she believes in proclaiming her deed aloud (ll.76)<sup>3</sup> it cannot be long before Creon discovers that she has scattered earth over her brother, and sends her to be buried alive in a tomb. This is still only the middle of the play; the suicides of Creon's son and wife, the consequences of the death sentence, have yet to be played out. Thus, Antigone's death is thus not simply a tragic resolution to a plot relentlessly driving towards death (as with, say, *Oedipus Tyrannus*); rather, it is a vital element in the dramatic action, one which contributes to the overall cohesion and wider significance of the plot.

Death is often given the role of providing a sense of closure in written narratives and theatrical performances, for it is an act of greater finality and completeness than any other. The role that death assumes in *Antigone* has become canonical in Western tradition; here, death poses the potential for imparting a concluding meaning to a completed life. Before Antigone is sent to her death she is given a long sung dialogue (*kommos*) of emotional intensity in the fourth episode, in which she reflects upon the teleology of her life cut short before marriage and the fulfilment of her womanhood. This moment, as well as imparting pathos, allows her life to become 'transmissible' (Brooks 1992, 28). As Walter Benjamin put it, 'Death is the sanction of everything which the storyteller can tell' (1977, 450, my translation); in other words, it is only through the finality of death that the overall shape and value of an individual life story can be determined.

The idea of death as the supreme climax of life was especially popular amongst many German Romantics (such as Kleist and Novalis) in the late eighteenth century (Inwood 1992, 71). It is

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<sup>2</sup> The date that Steiner gives as the end of *Antigone's* popularity signals Freud's choice to view Sophocles' Oedipus as the central myth of Western culture. The recent rejection of this in psychoanalytic and feminist works (such as Lacan 1986 and Irigaray 1974) has encouraged a revival of critical engagement with *Antigone*, stimulating new debates on gender and kinship (such as Butler 2000) and articles devoted to the *Antigone* theme (for example as the focus of the Sept. 2008 *Mosaic* journal).

<sup>3</sup> The references to *Antigone* refer to line numbers in the Cambridge translation by David Franklin.

thus significant that Friedrich Schlegel, another key writer of the period, praised Sophocles' play as being 'vollkommen'- perfect or 'complete' (Steiner 1984, 3). This elevated idea of completeness, which is made possible through death, also allows for a celebration of life, as indicated by Hegel's attitude towards the actual death of his infant daughter; rather than feel any bitterness, Hegel remembers the joy of her birth (Houlgate 1998, 6). Unlike some previous philosophers (such as Parmenides and Spinoza), Hegel came to think of death as something imminent within any organism and which should be embraced as part of life (Houlgate, 16). The extensive influence of this idea might be traced through Nietzsche and into the twentieth century, with Rilke's poetic articulation of carrying death within us like the 'kernel of a fruit' (1996 II, 459).

Creon realises the significance of Antigone's final lament, ordering her to be swiftly led away before she can fully impart her life with tragic meaning in the face of death. Her last words are ones of imploration: 'See what I suffer and at whose hands/ Because I respected reverence' (ll.907-8). In asking the audience to realise her situation, Antigone brings us closer to the inevitability of our own deaths; such sensations of fear and pity are integral to tragedy, according to Aristotle (350BC, ch.9). By identifying with Antigone, we feel fear over what fate can bring, and pity for the victims of such a fate. It is important that the tragic events provide us with this insight, that the display of suffering does not appear completely senseless, for that would be at odds with the ideal of finding closure. To be moved by Antigone's death is to be convinced that death imparts some higher meaning or serves some purpose. To understand the powerful response to the play, therefore, not only requires a consideration of tragic death, but also involves making sense of Antigone's choice to sacrifice her life rather than leave her brother unburied.

### **Sacrifice**

*Antigone* has long been associated with noble, heroic death, a death that is accepted rather than resisted. Antigone asserts that she has 'chosen' to die (ll.519); she embraces her death, rather than merely submit to it passively. When she is sent to starve slowly in a tomb, she hangs herself instead, performing a final gesture of autonomy. For Hegel, this type of act came to signify a fundamental way of thinking about self-consciousness. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), he writes that the most basic way for a subject to achieve recognition of their subjecthood is to show that they are prepared to sacrifice their existence as an object: 'it is only through staking one's life that freedom is won' (1807, 113-4). Hegel's thinking here is dialectic; he considers two subjects engaged in a life-and-death struggle to realise their subjecthood. Just as each stakes their own life, so too do they seek the other's death, since 'the other' is something which opposes their own status as subject.

Hegel's discussion on the central conflict of the play (in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) follows the same lines, stressing the fundamental opposition between Creon and Antigone. This is suggested by their exchange, in the second episode, in which Antigone proclaims: 'There is nothing in your words that pleases me – I pray it never will – and what I say is just as displeasing to you. And yet how could I have won greater glory than by laying my own brother in his grave' (ll.458-461). Antigone seeks recognition for her choice, but not from Creon, whose outlook is as rigid as hers here. In highlighting this conflict, Hegel was able to articulate what he saw (according to popular interpretations of his work) as the historical conflict challenging Greek ethical life at the time, namely that of the tension between individual and state. In his works, this conflict forms the basis of ethics, which he calls *Sittlichkeit* - 'custom' or 'ethical substance'. He divides this into divine and human laws which, in his interpretation of *Antigone*, are represented by Antigone and

Creon respectively. Antigone thus upholds the law of the gods in her insistence on carrying out the funeral rites; she is further allied with the sphere of kinship, womankind and nature, whilst Creon's stance derives from concerns with governing the state.

The sense of antithesis between these two central characters in the play is brought out by the one-line exchanges (*stichomythia*) between Antigone and Creon. This is something which Hölderlin draws attention to in his discussion of the tragedy (in the notes to his poetic translation, *Antigone*): he calls these exchanges 'true murder by language', a linguistic articulation of irresolvable difference, which can culminate only in physical murder (1804, 788). Once the conflict has been set in place in this manner, it is possible, like Hegel, to see Antigone as a heroine of autonomy, striving to maintain her values and subjectivity in the face of opposing forces, and even sacrificing herself to realise her autonomy.

However, Antigone's act of sacrifice invites many further interpretations. For Hölderlin, who, like Hegel, supported the French Revolution, the play is clearly political, expressing 'vaterländische Umkehr' ('disturbances in the fatherland') (1804, 789).<sup>4</sup> Hölderlin uses words like 'Aufstand' ('uprising') in his translation (768), thereby writing the subtext of contemporary politics into the Greek play. For others, Antigone's self-assertive sacrifice might have been allied with movements towards female emancipation, though Steiner (1984) claims that this notion was still only part of the 'idiom of the ideal' at the time. For others, Antigone's sacrifice may have recalled that of Christ: De Quincey, for example, saw Antigone in this way, referring to her as 'a daughter of God, before God was known' (1845, 364).

Whilst Antigone's sacrifice can be regarded positively, as an emblem of some higher principle, it is also problematic, particularly with regards to the sisterly motivation for her act. Mathew Arnold (in 1853) famously said that a drama about sacrificing oneself in order to complete the burial of the brother is 'no longer one in which it is possible that we should feel a deep interest' (Walsh 2008, 1). In the earlier, German context, Goethe, whilst praising Antigone as the 'most sisterly of souls' (Steiner 1984, 12), was critical of a certain passage (ll.871-880) which became notorious in subsequent scholarship (Goldhill 2006, 158). This is the passage in which Antigone explains that she would be prepared to die for a brother, since with her parents dead, he becomes irreplaceable; yet she would not die for a husband or child, who could be replaced. There is still contention over whether these lines were part of Sophocles' original text (or lines added by actors before Aristotle's lifetime), yet they are significant in raising questions surrounding the values of kinship (Goldhill 2006, 158). This dispute underlies many of the conflicts in the interpretations of *Antigone*.

Hölderlin, however, was happy to stress the sister-brother tie, translating the contentious passage as: 'Wenn aber Mutter/ Und Vater schläft, im Ort der Toten beides/ Steht nicht als wuchs ein anderer Bruder wieder' – 'But if mother/ and father sleep, both in the place of death / another brother could not grow again' (768). Hölderlin introduces the imagery of nature here: the striking expression of the brother 'growing' emphasises Antigone's implication in the natural sphere, continuing on from the wasteland imagery which Hölderlin's used for Antigone's comparison of herself to Niobe (765). After such lexical associations, Antigone's following assertion– 'these are the laws by which I honoured you' – serves to implicate her in the sphere of natural law, as in Hegel's interpretation. For Hölderlin, Antigone's implication in the natural sphere is associated

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<sup>4</sup> All translations of Hölderlin are my own.

with her unreflective, intuitive nature; she responds to Creon's criticism of her act of honouring the brother who had attacked the state with what Hölderlin translates as 'Wer weiß, da kann doch drunt' ein anderer Brauch sein' – 'who knows, maybe there's another custom down there'. For Hölderlin, as he writes in his own notes, Antigone is endearing and dreamily naïve (784). It is her sisterly nature which he brings out with phrases such as the famous opening: 'Gemeinschwesterliches!' – an almost untranslatable adjectival monstrosity along the lines of 'oh common-sisterliness!' (737). Verging on the border of the incomprehensible (and Hölderlin was to descend into madness after writing this work), the phrase does justice to the closeness of the bond between Antigone and her sister Ismene. The literalism of the following line in Hölderlin – 'Oh Ismenes Haupt' ('oh body of Ismene') brings out the physical level of the Greek appellation (*Ismēnēs kara*). Thus, in Hölderlin's account, Antigone's sacrifice is a tribute to her compassion and femininity.

### **Death, marriage and crossing-over**

Sent to her death, Antigone finds a parallel in that other event which was of central, defining significance in a woman's life at the time: marriage. She describes dying as a 'marriage to Achelou' (one of the rivers in Hades), and, in this sense, views death as a transition in the same way as marriage would be, though one is a journey towards death as opposed to life. In this way, death becomes an act most properly belonging to the sphere of women. The self-sacrificial or suicidal nature of Antigone's death is particularly associated with femininity; like Antigone, Creon's wife also kills herself after hearing of her son's death. Steiner (1984) confirms this view, with the claim that antique sensibility attached 'an aura of the feminine' to suicide (242). Although Creon's son, Haemon (who was betrothed to Antigone) also stabs himself at the end of the play, he does so only after failing to strike his father, or, in other words, after a failure of masculine power. Haemon is also denigrated for his feminine associations earlier in the play, when Creon calls him 'lower than a woman' (ll.693) and 'slave of a woman' (ll.707). It is through suicide, therefore, that women, unable to kill their enemy, are able to seek male glory (which is what Antigone professes to seek in ll.460). Her act of self-sacrifice also links her to the fate of her brothers, who killed each other; *autoktonounte* is the word used for both Antigone's death and the 'kin-murder' of the brothers (Goldhill 2006, 152).

This idea that death is an act epitomised by femininity finds resonances in the nineteenth-century context. De Quincey, who approved of Antigone's spirit of martyrdom, writes: 'Yet sister woman[...] you can do one thing as well as the best of us men[...] you can die grandly, and as goddesses would die, were goddesses mortal' (in Bronfen 1992, ii). Here death has become associated with sentimentalised feminine submissiveness. Hölderlin's translation follows a similar spirit, suggested by Antigone's final lines: 'Welch eine/ Gebühr' ich leide von gebührenden Männern/ Die ich gefangen in Gottesfurcht bin' – 'what a/ charge I suffer from men to whom charges are due/ I being trapped in reverence for the gods (769). Words such as 'charge', 'suffer', 'trapped' belong to the lexis of victimhood, quite unlike the words used in Franklin's English translation, which express rousing defiance: 'See what I suffer, and at whose hands/ Because I respected reverence' (ll.907-8).

The transition from life to death, as from virgin girlhood to marriage, is marked by material thresholds; for Antigone, the tomb is her bridal chamber (ll.861). Hölderlin stresses this with his imagery of the earth, linking Antigone to the divine powers, such as Zeus, whom Hölderlin calls 'father of the earth' (758) (Hölderlin describes this as his way of making the myths more 'demonstrable', 786). The emphasis on the physical tomb and on the idea of interment and living

burial was one which, Steiner claims, enthralled the early nineteenth-century imagination (1984, 18), with its feel for the Gothic and the unsettling. The period's fascination with graveyards, morgues, *memento mori*, preserved corpses and death effigies has been discussed extensively (for example: Warner 2006, Bronfen 1992). This might be related to what Foucault (1973) describes as an epistemic shift in attitudes to death during the eighteenth century, when a greater consciousness of self brought forth a fear of the loss of autonomy posed by death. Like love, death posed the transgressive potential for the abandonment of the self, which was both feared and desired. By 1750, as Bronfen (1992) argues, death had become firmly situated in the realm of the 'other', with excessive ritual marking the transition to heaven, hence refusing finality (86-7). Finality was also denied when attention was shifted to the surviving family, as in *Antigone*.

Thus, contrary to the view suggested by A.W. Schlegel, that *Antigone* is poorer for its stretching out after the catastrophe of death, it may instead be this prolonged ritual of departing that endears the play to some individuals. The extended laments and the exploration of the consequences that Antigone's death has for the surviving family marks death as a ritual of transition. Attention also shifts to the spectator during the course of the play, through the interventions and odes of the chorus. In *Antigone*, these choral interventions have the function of marking death as a spectacle, helping us to make sense of it through the rituals of crossing-over.

### **Making sense of suffering**

To understand how the representation of a woman's death could have held such sway over the imagination of early nineteenth-century readers or theatre-goers, it is worth considering how representations of suffering and death can arouse pleasure at all. As I argued above, Antigone's death is far from being a meaningless act, but is accompanied by attempts to make sense of the act of death, both before and after the act, through the dialogues, conflicts, ethical choices and the entire aesthetic apparatus of the tragedy. In this way, *Antigone* can be read as an attempt to understand death and realise its position in our lives; such an insight into death may be profoundly pleasurable. Hegel, among with other Hellenists, was particularly impressed with the ancient Greeks' ability to cope with the fear of death (Inwood 1992, 71).

A further perspective on how Antigone's death can be aesthetically powerful can be gained from Nietzsche's exuberant work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), which might be seen as a culmination of the Hellenic spirit of Hegel and Hölderlin's day. For Nietzsche, the great value of Greek culture lies in their ability to see and accept the 'the terror and horror of existence', yet to still managing to exist with a 'triumphant sense of being' (1872, §3; my translation). In exploring the question of how we can make sense of the suffering of death, Nietzsche claims that it is primarily through art that suffering is meaningful: 'only an *aesthetic phenomenon* is existence and the world eternally *justified*' (§5; my translation). In *Antigone*, death is justified through being an aesthetic phenomenon, and only as such is it beautiful and meaningful. The Greek ability to find beauty in the greatest horrors of the world is something which, Nietzsche argues, our rational age desperately needs to return to. This is the view articulated poetically by Rilke, when he called beauty 'the beginning of terror, which we can yet bear, while it gently spurs to destroy us' (1996, 201; my translation).

It may seem that this attempt to find beauty in even the most wretched conditions of humanity is 'monstrous', as Michael Tanner suggests (1993, xxiii). In other words, by taking pleasure in representations of events such as a woman's sentence to death, it seems that we might be glorifying and seeking the pursuit of such terrible events. But as Daniel Cane argues, Nietzsche

is not advocating suffering as a goal, but positing it as an inevitable part of life towards which we must adopt some kind of stance, the best being the attempt to see it as beautiful (2006, 56). Not everyone could do this: Goethe claimed that he could not develop a deeply tragic situation without a lively pathological interest; whilst he admired the ancient ability to make terror an 'aesthetic game', for him the 'truth of nature' seemed too much bound up with the creation of art (in Nietzsche 1872, §22). For some, admiring *Antigone* as a mere aesthetic phenomenon or philosophical theory is not possible, because of the complex personal and ethical issues it provokes. In valuing the representation of suffering that is *Antigone*, however, nineteenth-century thinkers have been able to negotiate their own complex attitudes towards horror and death, and have done so through seeing Antigone's death as beautiful work of art.

## Conclusion

*Antigone's* endurance over the centuries is testimony to the aesthetic potential contained in its representation of female death. The story has generated a huge variety of interpretations and adaptations as it has taken on new cultural resonances across time, and has tapped into the perpetual, but constantly reinterpreted, concerns about the nature of death, existence and humanity. In investigating the reception of *Antigone* in early twentieth-century Germany, I have suggested some of the ways in which understandings of *Antigone* become bound up with broader conceptual and cultural issues: for Hegel, *Antigone* became part of a dialectic understanding about the self and other; Antigone's death articulates our strive towards autonomy and self-realisation. For Hölderlin, it was the pathos of early death, connected with sisterhood and femininity, which made *Antigone* particularly potent. For both writers, the cultural positioning of women and death in the early-nineteenth century played a role in their attitudes towards the play, suggesting a complex interrelation between fascination with and anxiety about death. Just as death is ritually marked as part of an 'other' realm, so too does *Antigone* allow us to make sense of death by placing it within an aesthetic framework. At the core of this tragedy is the transformation of a terrible event into a powerful aesthetic phenomenon, and the fascination this arouses signals the attempt to find meaning in finality.

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