After Antigone: Women, the Past, and the Future of Feminist Political Thought

Catherine A. Holland, University of Missouri

Sophocles’ tragedy of Antigone occupies a privileged position in modern political thought, for it has provided modern thinkers with an opportunity to reflect upon the place of women with respect to both the state and the household. Its heroine, Antigone, occupies a similarly prominent position within contemporary feminist thought, a figure around whom feminists have recast the relation of women to political action by contesting and reconfiguring relations between household and polis posed by the western theoretical tradition. This essay examines three interpretations of the tragedy by feminist political theorists, each of whom identifies in Antigone’s actions a model for a distinct variety of feminist politics, and each of whom, moreover, reads the work as a meditation about how feminists may speak politically from within a tradition that positions women, conceptually, as inimical to the public order. It suggests that these three readings, each in a different way and to a different degree, inadvertently collapse important distinctions between past and present and consequently risk accepting in slightly altered form a variety of problematic premises handed down by a tradition they contest. The essay goes on to reread Antigone in ways that heighten rather than attenuate the distinctions between politics past and present, and it suggests ways of thinking about its heroine’s actions that may provide contemporary feminist theorists with new ways of engaging the political and theoretical pasts.

“The task of the theoretical imagination,” as Sheldon Wolin wrote nearly thirty years ago, “is to restate new possibilities” (Wolin 1969, 1082). Wolin’s formulation is especially apt for the concerns that prompt this essay, for it captures the sense in which political theorists revisit the thought of former eras and seemingly distant problems, only to turn that thought and those problems toward more current affairs. Such an activity is not without its complications, of course. As Wolin also observed, whenever we mine past texts as resources for evaluating contemporary concerns, there is a danger that the “persistent and contemporaneous influence” of those texts can work to limit our political vision and thus narrow our political horizons (Wolin 1960, 26), a danger that the past will overfill the present, shrinking rather than expanding the space of political possibility.

The ambiguity of past texts, their ability to both enable and foreclose political vision, is of particular concern to feminist political theorists, who are committed at minimum to the belief that women matter politically, for

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within the western theoretical tradition, the figure of Woman appears not to
open up political possibility, but on the contrary to preclude it. This is espe-
cially true in the modern tradition, where women hold the paradoxical place
of representing both the necessary condition of politics and its prepolitical,
even antipolitical, other. The examples are many, but two should suffice. In
Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud elaborates both the phylogenetic de-
velopment of the species and the social organization of civilization in ways
that place women into permanent opposition with the public sphere. For
Freud, while women bear and nurture the fledgling citizen, political society
begins only when the male child abandons the “primitive” life of the family
and goes out into the world. Thus “forced into the background by the claims
of civilization,” women adopt “a hostile attitude towards it” and exert their
“retarding and restraining influence on it” (Freud 1961, 50).

A similar logic appears over a century earlier in Hegel’s celebrated re-
telling of Sophocles’ Antigone. The tale of the woman who defies her King
to honor her traitorous brother illustrates, for Hegel, how the interests of
women and family are incommensurable with the functions of state power.
While men leave home to become citizens, their sisters remain behind as
guardians of the divine law within the household. In this capacity, women
unavoidably end up, like Antigone, trying to reclaim their brothers for the
household gods, “chang[ing] by intrigue the universal end of the government
into a private end, transform[ing] its universal activity into a work of some
particular individual, and pervert[ing] the universal property of the state into
a possession and ornament for the family.” Like Antigone, women are thus
positioned as the “internal enem[ies]” of the state, at once a necessity and a
threat to the existence of the ethical order (Hegel 1977, 288).

It is no coincidence that Antigone occupies such a privileged position in
Hegel’s theoretical framework, for Sophocles’ tragedy has functioned as
what George Steiner calls a “pivot of consciousness” for moderns, an oppor-
tunity to reflect upon the nature of modernity (Steiner 1996, 8). Beginning in
the late eighteenth century and continuing up until the present day, Antigone
has served as the theoretical stage for reflection on a whole variety of con-
flicts and ambivalence seen as endemic to the modern condition: between
the old and the new, family and state, conviction and obedience, sentiment
and reason, women and men. Andironically enough, it is also to Antigone
that feminists have turned in their efforts to engage and contest the marginal
place assigned to women in the western political tradition, an occasion to re-
fect upon both the perils and the promise of trying to speak as feminists
from within a tradition that does not easily accommodate feminist thought.

This essay examines three readings of Antigone by feminist political theo-
rists Jean Bethke Elshtain, Mary Dietz, and Linda Zerilli, each of whom sees
in Antigone’s acts a model for a very different variety of feminist politics.
Interpreting Antigone as, in turn, the representative of an anti-authoritarian social feminism, a radical democracy with a feminist face, and a feminism of irreducible discursive otherness, their debate dramatizes both the generative power of Sophocles’ tragedy and the rich and multivalent nature of feminist political speech. However, as I will argue, in deploying Antigone as the model for contemporary feminist politics, an archetypal figure from the distant past who can be transported into the present as the enabling ground of feminism, all three readings ultimately normalize the past, attenuating our distance from it by overlooking the profound degree to which Antigone is, in fact, unlike us. And, I argue, it is Antigone’s difference from us, her very strangeness to our present, that is of greatest critical value to feminist thinkers.

This raises a series of questions about the symbolic significance of the past within contemporary feminist political theory. To what extent is feminist political thought dependent upon first securing an ontological ground from which we may speak? How might the project of identifying that ground in the past limit and constrain feminist political vision at least as much as it enables it? Finally, how can feminist political theorists “restate new possibilities” without reinstating the past? The remainder of the essay seeks to address these questions by reading Antigone in yet another way. Central to my reinterpretation of the play are three linked claims. The first is that Antigone cannot be made to represent any of the pasts attributed to her precisely because, for a variety of reasons, in her city women had no positive ground from which to speak. I develop this theme by turning to Aeschylus’s trilogy, the Oresteia, which can be read as a chronicle of the transition from a matrilineal to a patrilineal order, and which I argue functions as a sort of pre-history to the events described in Sophocles’ tragedy.

My second claim concerns the setting of the play itself, and I argue that the significance of Antigone’s actions should be read against the place that her city, Thebes, occupied in Athenian tragedy. Thebes’s role as the symbolic other of Athens throws new light on the nature of Antigone’s dispute with Creon, and it also clarifies what is at stake in that dispute. My third and final claim is that it is precisely because of the way in which Antigone speaks—without authority, in the vernacular of her city—that her words and actions have the effect of opening up the space of the political present in Thebes. And it is here, to Antigone’s “unwomanly” acts, I go on to argue, that contemporary feminist thinkers might look in their own attempts to articulate a specifically feminist political vision.

1. THREE FEMINISMS, THREE ANTIGONES, THREE PASTS

Sophocles’ tragedy takes place in a Thebes abandoned by Oedipus after discovering that he has unknowingly killed his father, King Laius, married his own mother, Jocasta, and fathered four children by her. Oedipus’s sons, Eteocles and Polynices, have killed one another in a dispute over succes-
sion to the throne and Creon, their uncle and Thebes’s new king, declares Polyneices a traitor and forbids his burial. Antigone, daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, defies Creon’s order, performs the rites of burial for Polyneices, and thus guarantees her brother’s passage into Hades. Caught by the king’s guards, Antigone insistently defends her actions as the sacred duty of a sister to a brother, arguing that her responsibility to family, ancestors, and the gods overrides the dictates of her king. For her disobedience, for her defense of a brother condemned for treachery, Creon pronounces Antigone to be a traitor as well, and he sentences her to imprisonment and eventual death in a cave just outside the city.

The feminist debate about the meaning of Antigone for contemporary feminism was opened by Elshtain in 1982, who wrote to “advance a note of caution” against the feminist embrace of the state as exemplified by the National Organization of Women’s initiative to have women included in the military draft (1982, 46). The allure of inclusion, she suggests, is itself the consequence of an ancient defeat, namely, of the usurpation of power from “older, less universal forms of authority” like the family that value women as full “participant[s] in social life” (55). To embrace the public order without simultaneously contesting its terms, Elshtain insists, is to ignore the ancient wisdom of Antigone, “the woman who [threw] sand into the machinery of arrogant public power” (55). Antigone’s defiance of her king marks a final, fatal attempt to defend the prerogatives of family and household against the “imperious demands and overweening claims of state power [that] run roughshod over deeply rooted values” (56). For Elshtain, Antigone chronicles the “final suppression of traditional female social worlds” (46), and in her view, a feminism that pursues assimilation not only bolsters state power but also violates a “primordial family morality” that “precedes and overrides the laws of the state” (53).

The task Elshtain proposes for modern feminists is “to see ourselves as Antigone’s daughters,” (59) as “maternal thinkers” (58–59) who reject amoral statecraft by working to preserve “the arena of the social world where life is nurtured and protected from day to day” (55). She counsels contemporary feminists to heed Antigone’s challenge to her sister, Ismene: “And now you can prove what you are: A true sister, or a traitor to your family” (53). For Elshtain, Antigone’s actions exemplify a social feminist defiance of the “impersonal, abstract, and rational standards” of statesmen, a feminism that tempers and chastens arrogant state power by humanizing and repersonalizing social life (51). Drawing on a tradition of activism that runs from Jane Addams through the Argentine Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, Elshtain urges feminists to “break out of the rigidities into which current feminist discourse has fallen” and to act in public on behalf of the concerns of household and family, of “human good and civic necessity” (Elshtain 1982, 56–59; Elshtain 1989, 229, 231–33).
While Elshtain shows how the perspectives engendered by the concerns of the private sphere may be marshaled by feminists to campaign for limits on the power of the state, Dietz questions the wisdom of Elshtain’s renegotiation of the public-private divide. In failing to recognize the primacy of the political, Dietz argues, Elshtain ends up reinforcing and gendering an already exaggerated and “abstract split between the public and private realms” (Dietz 1985, 25). Dietz shares Elshtain’s criticism of the hierarchy and depersonalized bureaucracy of a centralized state that has exchanged participation for administrative efficiency. However for Dietz, politics, not the family, is “primary to all other human activities, be they public or private” (27); feminists who reject the public realm to embrace the family forget that it is an engaged citizenry that “collectively and perpetually determine[s] the forever shifting boundaries of what is private and public” (28). Elshtain’s designation of the household as the privileged space of feminist action misses, indeed, dismisses the very venue of public politics that, Dietz argues, holds out the promise of feminist freedom and women’s equality. In doing so, Elshtain inadvertently reduces politics to the activity of the state and thus confinies women within the family and the household, idealizing those spaces as locations of women’s power only by ignoring the myriad inegalitarian relationships that have historically prevailed within them. Oppressive political institutions like the administrative state, Dietz insists, are best challenged not by “the language of love and compassion, but only [by] the language of freedom and equality” (34).

It follows, then, that Dietz’s interpretation of Antigone sees in the heroine’s actions a model for a more public and participatory “citizenship with a feminist face.” In Dietz’s reading, Creon has launched a concerted assault upon Thebes’s ancient democratic order, and Antigone acts not so much to defend the prerogatives of the family as to preserve “the customs and traditions of a collective civil life” (28–29). Read this way, Antigone emerges not simply as a ‘sister’ whose familial loyalties pit her against a King, but as a citizen of Thebes whose defense of her brother is rooted in a devotion to the gods and to the ways and laws of her city” (29). The challenge, therefore, for contemporary feminists is to politicize rather than maternalize women’s consciousness and for Dietz this means that feminism must be guided by overtly public commitments.

The seemingly irremediable opposition between Elshtain’s social feminism and Dietz’s “citizenship with a feminist face” which Zerilli maintains in her own contribution to the debate is not so much a split within feminism as it is a function of Elshtain’s and Dietz’s too ready adoption of the existing vocabulary of political thought. For Zerilli, their undertaking is an object lesson in the risks involved with feminist attempts to speak from within an established canon that forces them to “translate . . . the foreign, disso-
nent voice of Antigone into the more familiar, reassuring voice of mothers and/or citizens” (Zerilli 1991, 257). Both positions represent what Zerilli calls “counterfeit utterances” (257), problematic for their overdetermination in/by the discourse of the “political theory fathers” and thus for their bland inability to transmit the “more radical tones of feminist discourse” (258). Elshtain’s turn to family and household, Zerilli maintains, embraces rather than challenges a patriarchal vision of female domesticity, and it accepts in the name of social feminism a mere shadow of the power women once held. Dietz’s devotion to an Aristotelian language of civic friendship requires her to subsume all concern for the specificity of the feminine within sexual difference in order to argue for a model of citizenship that can be at best only occasionally and incidentally feminist. In the end, neither Elshtain’s maternalist social feminism nor Dietz’s finally sexually undifferentiated model of civic friendship manages to escape from the received categories of the western theoretical tradition.

How then can feminists speak simultaneously within and against the traditions in which they work? What alternative modes of speaking does the tradition offer those who seek not to maintain it but to transform it? Such questions, Zerilli suggests, may be partially answered by rereading Sophocles’ tragedy in yet another way. Drawing heavily upon the work of Irigaray (1985), Zerilli reads the conflict between Antigone and Creon as “more tragic, more mutually exclusive” (256) than either Elshtain or Dietz can allow, for Antigone preserves and deploys the last vestiges of a prepatriarchal past. Her actions memorialize an ancient matricide, a matricide most powerfully depicted by Aeschylus in his Oresteia trilogy. For Zerilli, the tale of the murder of Clytemnestra by her son, Orestes, recounts the final suppression of a matrilineal world, once secured by the “visible bond of blood,” by an emerging patriarchy that reorganizes “family and state . . . around the invisible: the legal fiction of paternity” (256). In light of the events of the Oresteia, Zerilli concludes, Antigone’s “discourse is not only criminal but suicidal in a political city which recognizes only the masculine voice” (256).

Central to Zerilli’s argument is the conviction that the language of the political theory fathers obscures and suppresses its roots in this ancient matricide but can never finally extinguish the violent terms of its own founding.

1More specifically, Zerilli’s reading of Antigone draws upon Irigaray’s interpretation presented in the commentary on Hegel in Speculum of the Other Woman. In fact, Irigaray has proposed a variety of interpretations of Antigone over the years, ranging from that of Antigone as tragic heroine who defends her maternal genealogy (Irigaray 1985) to Antigone as spokesperson in defense of the civic community more generally (Irigaray 1994). While this latter interpretation is arguably much closer to Dietz’s than it is to Zerilli’s, my discussion of Irigaray in this essay is occasioned by my discussion of Zerilli, and I will accordingly confine my comments to the Irigaray of which Zerilli makes use. For a more detailed survey of Irigaray’s numerous readings of Antigone, see Muraro (1994).
Insofar as feminist political thinkers must speak in the terms made available by a tradition of discourse, they can never speak simply within those terms, for feminist speech maintains other commitments. For Zerilli, feminists speak specifically as feminists only insofar as their speech, like that of Antigone, remembers and memorializes their “material beginnings in the original home of the mother” (262). Zerilli suggests a variety of discursive strategies that maintain this complex relation to a lost past: from the use of masks that demonstrate and exploit the ambiguities of political speech to a mimesis that converts the terms of female subordination into feminist affirmation and, finally, an evocative and provocative heteroglossia by which feminist speech resonates with multiple levels and strategies of meaning. Feminist politics thus conceived would both bring to light the original injury women have suffered at the hands of patriarchal power and demand redress through the revaluation of a once-suppressed feminine symbolic.

While I agree with Zerilli that feminists “cannot reclaim but must transform a political conversation that inscribes their absence” (270; emphasis in original), and that the positions promoted by Elshtain and Dietz fall too easily into the received categories of the western canon, there is a sense in which Zerilli’s project also moves in a reclamationist rather than a transformative direction. And it does so, curiously enough, in ways not so very different from Elshtain and Dietz. Without minimizing the substantial differences among them, I want to suggest that a common critical strategy nonetheless runs throughout their readings: in distinct ways and to different degrees, each identifies in Antigone’s actions the remnant of a lost past, a past that may serve as the ontological ground of feminist politics and thus inform and invigorate contemporary feminist practice. In each case, what is valued in Antigone’s action is its ability to help us recall an almost prelapsarian moment of resistance unsullied by statist, antidemocratic, or patriarchal power. Put differently, Antigone’s stance is understood to contain and command a prior moment, a past that feminist action in the present might to some degree reinstate. For these three feminists, the act of reading becomes an attempt to recapture what has been lost with Antigone in the past and to return it to us in the present as a feminist politics. For Elshtain, Antigone draws upon a “primordial family morality [that] precedes and overrides the laws of the state” (Elshtain 1982, 53) in ways that contemporary feminists, too, may take up as “an affirmation of the dignity of the human person” and a reminder that “public policy has an impact on real human beings” (59). For Dietz, it is not the family but the polis that has been eclipsed, and here Antigone represents and defends the “customs and traditions of a collective civil life” (Dietz 1985, 53). Accordingly, Dietz urges modern feminists to look to a tradition of civic friendship “for a model of the kind of bond we
might expect from, or hope to nurture in, democratic citizens” (32). Finally, for Zerilli, Antigone “refuses to forget . . . a repressed matricide which haunts the terms of discourse in Creon’s patrilineal and patriarchal state” (Zerilli 1991, 256), and Zerilli invites contemporary thinkers to reconsider their vocation “from the position of the woman who speaks but who refuses to forget or deny her material origins in the house” (254).

Of course, these three thinkers are not unique in taking recourse to an imagined past, for such a device is a frequent strategy of radical feminism as well as a whole variety of nationalisms. However, while feminists have long debated the character of some prepatriarchal, pretyrannical past, little attention has been devoted to examining the consequences of such a strategy for feminist vision, for our ability, that is, to act to reshape the present and the future in explicitly feminist terms. I want to suggest that this strategic reinstatement of the past does not serve feminism well, for it overcommits feminists to a backward-looking and reclamationist rather than a transformative imagination. In their various attempts to resurrect Antigone as a model for contemporary feminism, neither Elshtain nor Dietz, nor even Zerilli, allows Antigone’s disruptive course of action to remain disruptive. On the contrary, each discovers in Antigone’s acts a register of order that echoes the past, and each embraces that past as a counter-principle of order, seeking to reinstate it as the ground of a feminist politics that might redeem our present.

The allure of ancient texts for contemporary thinkers is, as Nietzsche put it, their untimeliness, their capacity for “acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come” (Nietzsche 1983, 60). The figure of Antigone is a powerful one, for it provides contemporary feminists with a set of possibilities now foreclosed, a language of politics no longer in use, though importantly, not yet completely forgotten. Yet, however much this strategy of mining the past for critical resources enables Elshtain, Dietz, and Zerilli to think outside the limits of the present, I am concerned that they do so in ways that unnecessarily—and paradoxically—normalize the past, eliding what is most distinctive about it. The attempt to recover the past for the present risks losing sight of the important distinctions between past and present that motivated their inquiry in the first place. By escorting an ancient heroine into the present

2It is important to note that while Dietz marshalls the past in her effort to reconstruct citizenship “with a feminist face,” her understanding of the relationship between the state and a patriarchal order is significantly different than that posed by her interlocutors. Whereas Elshtain and Zerilli see central state and patriarchal authority as different expressions of the same phenomenon, for Dietz the rise of the state may coincide with, but is not intrinsically linked to, patriarchy.

moment, they make familiar what initially attracted them by its strangeness, assimilating past with present by reasserting the past as the ontological ground for contemporary feminism.

If we are concerned with developing a transformative feminist politics, one that enables us to think and act in ways that take place within, but do not reinstate, the terms and constraints of either the past or the present, we need to cultivate the ability to view the past differently, to establish a relation of difference with the past in ways that retain its strangeness and its unfamiliarity. In doing so, I think we will find that such a strategy helps us to view not only the past but also the present as strange, as problematic, as something other than the given, logical, or even necessary culmination of prior events. For feminists cannot afford to forget that the most politically charged of all moments is the present, that the connection between past and present is neither logical nor chronological but political. As it happens, the tragedy of Antigone, read differently, may help us to understand this and to think differently about the way we resort to the past in our attempts to transform politics in the present.

In this regard, I want to suggest that we try to understand both Antigone and “the past” its heroine comes to represent in other, more radical—feminist and democratic—terms. Antigone’s actions may be read as a mobilization of the past that does not reinstate it but instead relegates it once and for all to the past. Antigone does not so much represent an idyllic past as exemplify her distance from it and her differences with it. With these considerations in mind, I want to turn now to two tragic cycles of the fifth century before the common era (B.C.E.), Aeschylus’s Oresteia and Sophocles’ Theban plays, to read them with and against prior feminist interpretations, and by doing so, examine more closely the two institutions with which Elshtain, Dietz, and Zerilli identify Antigone: namely, her home and her city, for each is central to Antigone’s speech and can, therefore, help us to develop a more complex understanding of her intervention.

2. The House Is Not a Home

While Sophocles’ Oedipus cycle documents an ancient patricide and the transgenerational consequences of that murder, in many ways King Laius’s death at the hands of his son echoes and supplements another saga of familial murder, vengeance, and justice. Aeschylus’s trilogy, the Oresteia, recounts the story of the House of Atreus, the ruling family of the city of Argos, and it marks a profound and permanent alteration of women’s social status. Commentators have long identified the Oresteia as the symbolic marker of a turning point in the social organization of kinship in the west, a moment when ties of blood were superseded by conjugal right, when matrilineage gave way to patrilineage, and public understandings of justice and
power were reorganized around the active estrangement of women from both family and polis. In both cycles, women may be said to represent “the forces and values of the past” (Zeitlin 1996, 103), of a past that is relinquished and renounced in the name of a new form of state and society. Arguably, the events depicted in the Thebes of Antigone take place on a conceptual ground established by the Oresteia, even if, as we will see, the Oedipus cycle revisits and reworks the transformation of kinship in ways more in keeping with the Theban tradition.

The first play of the Oresteia cycle, Agamemnon, opens with King Agamemnon’s victorious homecoming at the close of the Trojan War, his city’s triumph secured by his sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia at the behest of the gods. Upon Agamemnon’s return to Argos, his wife Clytemnestra lures him into her home, where she murders him to avenge Iphigenia’s sacrifice. The Libation Bearers, the second play of the cycle, opens with Clytemnestra in power. Her rule over Argos has become thoroughly corrupt and corrupting, an affront to both the gods and human justice. Her daughter Electra is confined to the home; her son Orestes has been exiled from the city. With the help of the god Apollo, Orestes returns from exile to avenge his father’s death, and he kills both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, her lover. The matricide conjures the ancient Furies, female spirits sent to avenge the murdered queen. In the final play of the cycle, The Eumenides, Orestes is brought to trial in Athens. Defended by Apollo, he is acquitted by the pronouncement of the goddess Athena who presides over the trial, and his acquittal purges the Furies of their anger and incorporates them into the Athenian cosmogony.

The symmetry of the murders depicted in the Oresteia is strikingly gendered—a woman murders her husband to avenge the sacrifice of her daughter; a son murders his mother to avenge the death of his father—and so, too, are the mytho-historical implications of these events. Aeschylus’s trilogy depicts the final days of a particular form of social and political order brought to a close by the emergence of new forms of kinship materialized in and through the figure of the father rather than the ties of (the mother’s) blood. This new form of law which elevates the husband as ruler over wife, children, and household, moreover, has distinct repercussions in

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5Here, my reading differs from Zerilli’s. As I read the Oresteia, it is not so much Orestes’s matricide as Apollo’s reorganization of kinship that alters the status of women and establishes a difference from the prior order. I am less convinced than Zerilli that Clytemnestra signifies an ideal, if final, instance of feminine power: in “public” she acts as a tyrant who, in Peter Euben’s words, “choke the space of public action by intimidating political speech” (Euben 1990, 73); in her own home, as Clytemnestra’s daughter Electra puts it, she “insults the name” of mother (Aeschylus 1979, 191–92).
the political-philosophical realm, for it complements the triumphs of justice over vengeance, of logos over mythos, of future over past (Zeitlin 1996, 111–12). Orestes’s acquittal at the hands of Athena not only justifies a matricide but fully displaces women from the public order, reshaping the public through an assault on the traditions of the House and the household.

Orestes’s acquittal rests on a distinction made in his defense by Apollo, who insists upon differentiating between the relative significance of male and female parents with respect to their offspring:

The woman you call the mother of the child
is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed,
the new-sown seed that grows and swells inside her.
The man is the source of life—the one who mounts.
She, like a stranger for a stranger, keeps
the shoot alive unless god hurts the roots.
I give you proof that all I say is true.
The father can father forth without a mother.
Here she stands, our living witness. Look—
[Exhibiting Athena]
Child sprung full-blown from Olympian Zeus,
never bred in the darkness of the womb
but such a stock no goddess could conceive! (Aeschylus 1979, 260–61)

By characterizing a female parent’s relation to her child as one of a “stranger for a stranger,” Apollo accomplishes a significant transformation of the mytho-cultural status of women, estranging them from the family and especially from their own progeny by supplanting the mother’s claim to her child with the priority of the legal fiction of the paternal name. Significantly, the securing of a democratic form of justice, and through that the political redemption of Argos, turns on the reorganization of kinship, on the subordination of women to men within the House.

With Iphigeneia and Clytemnestra dead and Electra mad, by the end of the Oresteia both the House and the polis have been effectively emptied of women. While the Oresteia is closed by a chorus of Athenian women who lead the way triumphantly out of the theater proclaiming a permanent peace

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6Irigaray (1985) understands this passage as the initiation of a new order of submission to “symbolic rules that might be supposed to carry the potency of blood one step further and . . . raise the family community to the types of laws in force in the city,” by elevating the Father’s laws, the Father’s language, and the Father’s name over the mother’s “power of red blood” (216). Euben (1990) understands the implications of the passage differently, as a redemption of motherhood from explicitly and exclusively biological terms. As he suggests, Apollo “inverts the conventional view that man belongs to culture and woman to nature,” granting instead to women the role of hostess (xene) to stranger (xenos) (80).
and an end to all civil war, this chorus of women is notably not coextensive with the jury of Athenian citizens (exclusively male) that hears Orestes’s case and is empowered to pass judgment on him. After Orestes’s acquittal, the Leader of the Furies confronts Athena with the accusation that her justice has rendered an older order archaic and obsolete: “You, you younger gods!—you have ridden down the ancient laws, wrenched them from my grasp” (266). Athena persuades the Furies to accept recompense, a new authority “in the depths of the earth, yours by all rights—stationed at hearths equipped with glistening thrones, covered with praise! My people will revere you” (267). The final act of the Oresteia, as Froma Zeitlin argues, “completes the transference of the political power . . . which Clytemnestra had brazenly claimed in the first play, to the ritual power of the female” as exemplified by the integration of the Furies into Athenian spiritual life (1996, 113; emphasis in original).7

Briefly put, under the combined ministrations of Apollo’s defense and Athena’s justice, women are transformed into something like internal strangers, strangers within the House, and likewise, within the City. Therefore, to understand Antigone’s later speech as an effort to confront the centralized state with the interests of either the House (following Elshtain) or the democratic citizenry (following Dietz) is to mistake the nature of the full transformation of both effected in the Oresteia. However much Antigone may articulate a discourse of family, her own relationship to that discourse is already too complex for her to speak simply on behalf of the House of Laius. Insofar as the House, like the household, was the “visual symbol of paternal heredity which entitles sons to succeed their father as proprietors of its wealth . . . and as rulers over its inhabitants” (Zeitlin 1990a, 131), Antigone’s “defense” is of something that is not her own. Put another way, although the ancient Greek household may have been the domain proper to women, it remained the property of men, both materially and symbolically. Insofar as she may speak of her House, she cannot speak for it; she is confined to the House, but she is not its representative.

Neither, however, can Antigone act as citizen. While Dietz may be right to suggest that Antigone takes action in the public realm, she acts in a space she may from time to time occupy but within which she has no independent standing. In the aftermath of the developments of the Oresteia, the woman who speaks in Greek tragedy in terms provided by either the polis or the household is never quite speaking for herself for she is a stranger to both, that is, she has no positive ground upon which to stand within—or

7It is precisely this displacement of women from political to spiritual life that is embraced, considerably later, by Hegel’s as well as Elshtain’s depictions of Antigone as the guardian of the hearth and spokeswoman for the Penates.
without—either of those spaces. Sophocles gives voice in Antigone to the difficulties encountered by a woman who attempts to speak and act within any order that can, as the Lane’s have suggested, “recognize only male actors” (1982, 165). How, then, can we understand the significance of Antigone’s actions? If, as I want to maintain, Antigone’s speech does indeed have something to teach us about the transformative possibilities of feminist politics, to what end and from what perspective does she articulate her defiance of Creon?

While I agree with Zerilli that Sophocles’ tragedy is caught up, intertextually, with the events and themes examined in the Oresteia, I must differ from her analysis of precisely what it is that occupies the space of that intertext. Zerilli’s focus on the matricide has the effect of installing the object of that crime as the unaltered and unalterable subject of feminist politics. By contrast, I am suggesting here that what is significant in the Oresteia is not so much an original matricide as it is the transformation of the ground of politics. Antigone’s actions neither reinstate nor memorialize the past but rather resignify it. Her actions do not preserve and restore but instead refocus and reorient the traditions of her House and her city. In Antigone there is redemption neither of nor from the past; rather, the tragedy shows us what it means to disclose a political present. Let me turn, then, to Antigone’s House, the House of Laius, and to her city, the Thebes that is depicted in Athenian tragedy.

3. **Athens’s Thebes**

If it is all too easy to mistake Antigone for a figure who speaks for some familial, pretynannical, or prepatriarchal past, this may be due at least in part to the place that Antigone occupies within her city, and the place, moreover, that her city occupies in the Athenian tragic imagination. As Zeitlin (1990b) has suggested, the cities of Thebes and Argos, the respective settings of the Oedipus and the Oresteia cycles, hold special significance in Athenian tragedy: both are theaters for the staging of distinctly non-Athenian, non-democratic political possibilities and their fateful consequences. Of the three cities, Thebes is by far the most corrupt; Argos represents a middle term between Theban tyranny and Athenian democracy. Argos, as we have seen, may be troubled by moments of tyranny and corruption, but it is nonetheless ca-

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8 As Cohen (1989) has pointed out, however, scholarship on women in ancient Greek society may present a distorted picture of women’s lives when it focuses exclusively on women’s positions in the polis and the household, the very institutions with which I am concerned here. Acknowledging that women had no standing in the public order and were similarly subordinated to the wills of men in the family, Cohen argues that women nonetheless inhabited a social sphere that enabled them to participate in a wide variety of activities both inside and outside the home.
pable of achieving the kind of redemption that Orestes’ actions accomplish. Thebes, on the other hand, is by Zeitlin’s account beyond redemption: those who remain in Thebes are mired in a place where the endless repetition of the past makes escaping it impossible, and for this reason Zeitlin designates Thebes the city of “Eternal Return” (1990b, 150). “Time in Thebes,” she observes, “returns always and again to its point of departure, since it can never generate new structures and new progeny that can escape the paradigmatic patterns of the beginning.” The “past inevitably rules” over the future, over the possibility of new beginnings, over the city’s prospects of departing from its endless cycle of self-identical repetition (153).

It is no coincidence that the crises of family and state, of identity and citizenship, and of past, present, and future dramatized in Sophocles’ *Oedipus* cycle should take place not in Athens but Thebes. The problems at Thebes, as Zeitlin puts it, “started at the very beginning,” in Thebes’s autochthonous founding (1990b, 141). It is beginnings, in fact, that lie at the heart of Thebes’s problems, problems that cycle through one generation only to be reconstituted and repeated by the next. By contrast with Athenians, who imagined a democratic future by negotiating a break from the past and their myths of origin (duBois 1995, 20–21; Dodds 1951), Thebans are caught perpetually in their own past, unable to break with it, unable to see even the need to break free.

In Thebes, the past suffocates the present: it suffocates politics. Thebans have developed no viable political institutions, and they adhere to no canon of law (Zeitlin 1990b, 147). Consequently, they have no means of engaging the tensions between identity and difference. “Unable to incorporate outsiders into its system and locked into the priority of the blood relations of the *genos* [clan], Thebes endlessly shuttles between the extremes of rigid inclusions and exclusions on the one hand and radical confusions of difference on the other” (148). In many ways, the problems within the House of Laius

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9 According to the Theban myth of origins, the city was established when Cadmus slew the dragon of Ares and sowed his teeth like seeds in the ground. From those seeds grew the Spartoi, who were torn by infighting; the five who survived became Thebes’s first inhabitants, grown from the earth on the very spot where the city stood.

10 In her discussion of Euripides’s *Ion*, Dougherty (1996) very thoughtfully analyzes Athenians’s use of theatre as a means of engaging their simultaneously-held yet contradictory myths of origin and the tensions entailed between, in this case, a myth of autochthony that informed Athenian democracy, and the ideology of Ionia that justified Athenian imperialism. Dougherty’s analysis raises some very interesting questions, especially about the relationship between autochthony and democracy, for as I will suggest in the following pages, autochthony is also promoted by Athenian tragedy as the undergirding of antidemocratic governance in Thebes. Although it is a subject for another essay (though one not necessarily to be pursued by this author), it may well be that the myth of autochthony contains at once both democratic and antidemocratic potential.
condense and contain the larger, more collective ills of the city. As, in *Antigone*, the Chorus intones:

> From ancient times I see the troubles of the dead of the [House of Laius] falling hard upon one another, nor does one generation release another, but some one of the gods shatters them, and they have no means of deliverance . . . . For present, future and past this law shall suffice: to none among mortals shall great wealth come without disaster (Sophocles 1994, 59–61).

Indeed, it is in terms of the tale of Oedipus that Thebes’s place in Athenian tragedy can be brought into greater focus.

Oedipus’s actions effectively collapse all boundaries—spatial, temporal, and finally moral—for his crimes are committed as much against the polis as the House. In patricide, Oedipus commits regicide as well; in incest, he recirculates his parents’s blood through his mother once more, (re)producing in greater concentration within the next generation Apollo’s original curse on his family and his city. As Euben puts it, Oedipus “occupies two generations at once” and thus lives not “in a progress of years, but on a coincident plane of diachrony and synchrony” (1990, 113). Like his city, Oedipus is self-engendering: husband to his mother, he becomes his own father, and brother to his own children. Thebes, the city that “respects no laws or institutions” (Zeitlin 1990b, 147), and Oedipus, the man who “collapses space and time into perverse singularity” (Euben 1990, 103), come together in a shared principle of reproduction that privileges the selfsame as both origin and destination. Autochthony and incest have in common the ideal of a self-originary, self-referential, self-generating, self-identical, self-continuous, and finally, self-enclosed narrative of beginnings that has nowhere to go except back to its original starting point. Oedipus, a seeker of “a place where he might be at home, where he might truly belong” (Zeitlin 1990b, 131–32), finds in Thebes a place that is at once too much of and yet not enough of a home—too much because his “adopted” family and city turn out to have been his original abode all along; not enough because in Oedipus’s case the embrace of that home not only fails to bring him redemption, but more deeply introduces him into precisely those crimes from which he must be redeemed. Finally, it is Athens rather than Thebes to which Oedipus must retreat in search of redemption from his crimes, and it is in Athens that Oedipus, like Orestes before him, gains the necessary distance from home that enables him to develop his sense of justice.

Events in Thebes are especially significant for Athenians, for this theatrical Thebes is the site onto which Athenians displaced their deepest and most profound concerns about their own polis; in short, Thebes represents what Athens might become if its citizens fail to engage the problems of de-
mocracy in thoughtful and creative ways. I want to suggest, as well, that within Athens’s Thebes, the figure of Antigone holds a special significance, for her speech and actions partake of the Theban tradition in ways that complexly reorder them.

4. THEBES’S ANTIGONE

The Oedipus cycle dramatizes the degree to which change in a place like Thebes is as impossible as it is unthinkable, yet its concluding work, Antigone, may be read as a meditation about unthinkable change and the terms in which it might in fact be made possible. In it, Antigone and Creon each produce a competing discourse of kinship and citizenship, of family and polis, and by doing so each promotes a distinct vision of the city’s future that attempts to alter the course of Theban time. In neither case, however, is the language of family as fully opposed to that of city as Elshtain and Dietz would have it, rather their respective discourses negotiate—to radically different effect—the peculiar relationship between the two that pertains in Thebes. In the end, neither Antigone nor Creon emerges victorious; however, while Creon’s failures may be seen as the defeat of an attempt to impose a wholly new order on the city, Antigone’s failures work to different effect. Where Creon fails in his attempt to rebuild Thebes on a foundation of distinctions that are rigid, and rigidly gendered, Antigone’s speech and actions deploy difference, particularly sexual difference, in novel ways.

Though Zerilli is right to claim that Antigone’s speech recalls what we might call the “old” ways, far from reinstating the past her actions suggest the possibility of a new beginning and offer to Thebans the opportunity to set aside a past that is otherwise inescapable.

Creon, son of the House of Meneceus and brother of Jocasta, ascends to power under what the Chorus calls “the new conditions given by the gods” (Sophocles 1994, 19)—as the warrior who oversaw the defense of Thebes against its Argive attackers. In his opening speech, Creon traces the lines of succession on which he rests his claim: from Laius to Oedipus, from Oedipus to Eteocles, and then on to himself, “by reason of my kinship with the dead” (19). Yet Creon cannot assume power in precisely the same terms as had his nephews, for the nature of Creon’s kinship to the House of Laius is different: it is affinal rather than ancestral. The Greek text denotes a break in Creon’s genealogy, indicating a gap in lineage between Oedipus and his sons on the one hand and Creon on the other. Into this break the Lloyd-Jones translation inserts the phrase, “with my sister as his wife” (19). This inserted passage smooths over and obscures the discontinuities in Creon’s genealogy, but it also points to what is novel about Creon’s new order. The appearance of continuity, the appearance of an unbroken line from Laius to Creon, is achieved by Creon’s replacement of ties of blood and ancestry with the legal
fiction of marriage, and his new order thus instrumentalizes kinship as a function of law.

These “new conditions given by the gods,” but pronounced by Creon, regard women as passive conduits of kinship: not Jocasta but her marriage(s) link Creon to Laius and his House. Much as Apollo’s defense of Orestes redefined women as mere “nurse to the seed,” Creon’s new order relies upon the formal exclusion of women from both political and familial authority. Commanding the guards to remove Antigone and Ismene from the public space in which his authority has been challenged, Creon demands that “from now on these two must be women, and must not be on the loose” (59). The House to which the sisters are confined is not a place of female power, however, for Creon’s rule is absolute not only in the city but in the House as well. As he tells Haemon, his son and Antigone’s betrothed, “there is no worse evil than insubordination! This it is that ruins cities, this it is that destroys houses . . . In this way we have to protect discipline, and we must never allow a woman to vanquish us” (65). Ismene, the dutiful niece, recognizes Creon as patriarch of both House and city when, in the play’s opening scene, she advises her sister that “we must remember that we are women, who cannot fight against men, and then that we are ruled by those whose power is greater” (11). Indeed, Creon seems to experience Antigone’s defiance as a double challenge to his public rule and to his manhood at once: “now I am no man, but she is a man if she is to enjoy such power as this with impunity” (47).

Creon’s new order replaces the rule of tradition with the rule of law by transforming the terms of kinship that organize family and city. In the new Thebes, kinship no longer signifies a shared ancestry, but instead establishes the links that relate men to one another through marriage—links that depend upon and formalize women’s presence, but also require and enforce their invisibility in both House and city. Where the law of marriage links men, it also establishes juridical distinctions between men and women. As the founder of this new order, Creon enshrines himself as the enforcer of a whole series of distinctions conferred by the state: woman and man, old and new, dead and living, enemy and friend. Creon’s law seeks to simplify and untangle the dense web of relations and events that characterized the Thebes of Oedipus’s rule. But where the Thebes of the House of Laius muddled all distinctions, the Thebes of Creon’s making draws them too harshly. This new order is too orderly, marked as it is by distinctions that are really oppositions, politically congealed in and through Creon’s law, impervious to rea-

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11Creon holds forth at some length about the parallel necessities for maintaining order within the city and obedience within the family. According to Creon, heads of household and heads of state alike must maintain discipline by tolerating no disagreement and accepting no arguments from those under their command. See Sophocles (1994, 63–65).
son, human action, or even death. "An enemy is never a friend, even when he is dead," Creon insists to Antigone (51).

Creon imprisons himself within his oppositions, and his intransigence and inflexibility foster only failure. The gods do not reward Creon in his brash attempt at imposing a new order, but instead remind him painfully of his own affective commitments to family, as well as to those he has declared traitors, enemies, and transgressors. It is not the living but the dead who bring down Creon’s rule: only in light of his son’s and, later, his wife’s suicides does Creon come to recognize his own investments in the House. “Woe for the errors of my mistaken mind, obstinate and fraught with death,” he laments, bearing Haemon’s body back into the city. “Ah, my son, young and newly dead, alas, alas, you died . . . through my folly . . .” (119). By their deaths, Haemon and Antigone strike directly at the foundations of Creon’s new order, namely, the power of the state to regulate kinship through marriage, for they consummate their marriage not with the imprimatur of Creon’s state but instead “in the house of Hades” (117). Creon is condemned to live out his days bereft of kin, “an animated corpse” (111) reproached by the dead for crimes from which there can be no expiation.

If, in his attempt to rid Thebes of its curse, Creon initiates a fundamental reorganization of the House, of kinship, and of the state, his antagonist, Antigone, might well be understood as the defender of the old ways, as the spokesperson for a past that has been superseded by Creon’s new order. The important interpretive question, however, is not whether Antigone’s speech recalls the past—indeed, her speech calls upon multiple and perhaps competing pasts—but rather how her speech effects something new, something decisively unfamiliar to Athens’s Thebes. Antigone’s actions, in effect, break the cyclical course of Theban time even if her words seem to reiterate it. Her acts deploy difference, and sexual difference, in ways that both undercut and overflow Creon’s rigid simplifications and gendered distinctions of home and state, and in doing so Antigone effects a departure from, rather than a repetition of, the past that her speech recalls.12

Antigone’s difference, Antigone’s departure from the eternally repetitive spiral in which her city is caught, is carefully articulated in the vernacular of her city, her people, and their gods. Significantly, her acts entail both a

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12Nussbaum (1986) makes a different argument, one that sees Antigone and Creon as equally single-minded and guilty of oversimplification—Creon because he views all things and all persons only in light of their instrumental value to the good of the city; Antigone because she is driven by a single-minded commitment to burying the dead. While Nussbaum is right in saying that Antigone’s resolve to bury her brother leads her to reject unnecessarily the counsel offered by Ismene and the Chorus, Nussbaum fails to note the complex nature of Antigone’s commitment to burying Polyneices, which she does not only for the sake of her brother but for all of Thebes and its gods.
repetition and an inversion of Orestes’ in the *Oresteia* and of Oedipus’ in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Unlike those tragic heroes before her, both of whom must travel to Athens to achieve the distance necessary to see things differently, Antigone finds a language that is specifically Theban, articulated in terms internal to Theban discourse. Throughout the play Antigone defends, variously, her brother, her family, her city and its citizens, and their gods. Antigone’s language restates the entirety of the Theban tradition, yet she does not reinstate the prior order. Rather, she reassembles what is most familiar in Theban discourse in ways that heighten its strangeness, as well as her own, for any woman who speaks, who acts publicly in Creon’s order, acts “unwomanly” (Euben 1997, 166). Unable to claim the ground to speak for either the House or the polis, Antigone speaks her city’s tradition complexly, with a difference, in terms that heighten the irony and liminality of her own position with regard to both House and polis.

By speaking and acting, as she does, where she does, in ways that transgress the limitations placed upon women in the Theban (as well as the Athenian) order, Antigone interferes in an instance where she has no formal right or standing. Her actions position her as a stranger, as one who acts without fully occupying the ground on which her actions take place. As Creon puts it, Antigone “act[s] apart” (Sophocles 1982, 128), she “think[s] differently” (Sophocles 1994, 49) from other Thebans; for her part, Antigone likens herself to Niobe, “the Phrygian stranger” once married to a Theban king (Sophocles 1994, 81). Yet her deployment of the multivocal traditions at work within Thebes position her as not an absolute but a familiar stranger to her own people, and her actions, though undertaken alone, work to open up and restore public space.

13 Antigone defends each of these constituencies at different points in the play. As she tells Ismene in the opening scene, “I will bury my brother and yours, if you will not. I will not be caught betraying him” (9). Just before she is led away to her death, she proclaims, “with my mother and my father in Hades below, I could never have another brother” (87). In explaining her actions to Creon, she speaks for her fellow citizens by claiming, “I would say that all these men would approve this if it were not that fear shuts their mouths” (49). Finally, Antigone defies her uncle by insisting that “I did not think your proclamations strong enough to have power to overrule, mortal as they were, the unwritten and unfailing ordinance of the gods” (45).

14 According to Greek mythology, Niobe was the daughter of Tantalus, King of Sipylos. After having boasted about her superior progenitive capacities, she was punished by Apollo and Artemis, who struck her children dead. As legend has it, her sorrow turned her to rock on Mount Sipylos, which continues to weep when snow melts.

15 I take issue here with Nussbaum’s (1986) conclusions that Antigone’s actions are solitary and without public effect, though in Nussbaum’s estimation this is not particularly damning. Insofar as Antigone acts alone, Nussbaum suggests, unlike Creon she harms no one: “she may be strangely remote from the world; but she does no violence to it” (66). By contrast, I want to suggest that if Antigone’s actions can be said to be solitary ones (though Antigone herself contests this characterization when she claims that Thebans are sympathetic to her cause), their effects are neither private nor individual.
Antigone’s speech has the effect not of reinstating a lost past, an old order that has been supplanted by Creon’s edicts, but of reorienting the distinctively Theban order. Her complex reiteration of Theban traditions produces what Foucault calls a “minute deviation” (1984, 81) from them, a tiny difference that in this case makes a world of difference, for her mobilization of an otherwise immobile past fundamentally alters the terms of that past and, thus, the terms of the Theban present and future. While Zeitlin’s denomination of Thebes as the city of “Eternal Return” (1990b, 150–67) may be an entirely appropriate description of that city under the rule of Laius, Oedipus, and his sons, it misses the effects of Antigone’s deployment of sexual difference, which lends to her acts an irreducible and nonsimple dimension that affects their meaning in important ways. A woman, Antigone acts in ways that are explicitly unwomanly (though not manly), in ways that contest and defy the highly constrained limitations placed upon women’s movements, in ways that compound and confound the orderliness of gender in Creon’s Thebes.

Unwomanly acts like Antigone’s cannot simply be lost in past crimes; they cannot be confused with past rivalries of father and son or brother with brother for they are constitutively nonsimple. Even as her condemnation and disavowal of her sister echoes parricide,16 Antigone’s insistence upon securing her brother’s place in Hades reverses, or at least tempers, the effects of another act of parricide. Further, she does not—cannot—claim the power of the throne. As Euben has put it, her actions are “an-archic”: they do not establish her as the new leader of Thebes, nor do they install her as the origin of a new order (Euben 1997, 166). It is not until Antigone’s actions have transformed her from familiar to stranger that the curse of her House—and a course of action set into motion by a stranger who is and becomes a familiar—can be broken. Where Oedipus’s incest, his hyperfamiliarity, both shapes and destroys the polis, Antigone’s strangeness—her groundlessness, her rhetorical stance, her defiance of Creon, her suicide—repeals the Oedipal order. In the end, Antigone’s death returns to Thebans the possibility, if only the possibility, of acting and speaking freely, freedoms doubly obliterated by the tyranny first of Oedipus and later of Creon.

Antigone’s actions bring to an end Thebes’s otherwise endless cycle of beginnings. Her death strikes a note as paradoxical as her life: she who lived “neither among the mortals nor as a shade among the shades, neither with the living nor with the dead” (Sophocles 1994, 83) is sent, “unwept, friendless, unwedded” (85) to her “strange tomb” (83). Although Antigone’s words and actions are worked out in distinctively Theban terms, they produce fundamentally different effects, for they do not introduce another generation into

16After Ismene attempts to share responsibility for Polyneices’s burial, Antigone all but disowns her: “I do not tolerate a loved one who shows her love only in words,” (Sophocles 1994, 53).
the cycle of Theban time. Rather, Antigone takes with her to her grave the curse on Thebes and its ruling House. Of her doomed family she is “the last” (87) and in this sense, even her name is significant, for Anti-gone translates to mean “anti-generation” (Benardete 1975, 156–57). Its significance resides, not in its announcement of Antigone’s renunciation of gender as Arlene Saxonhouse (1992, 69) suggests, but precisely in the connotations of sexual difference that it bears. Antigone’s fate is not to regenerate and, thus, recirculate the blood of her House, but rather to die childless, having refused the terms imposed on the life of her city by both the curse placed upon her family and by a tyrant whose acts sought to vanquish that curse and conquer the gods who pronounced it. Her actions break the endlessly repetitive cycle of Theban crimes and in doing so transform her from genos to xenos, a known stranger (if not, quite, a foreigner) on familiar territory.

What Hartouni (1986) calls “Antigone’s Dilemma” is precisely that—a situation where action and inaction alike harbor the consequence of non-innocence, where neither the womanliness of inaction advised by Ismene and demanded by Creon, nor the “unwomanliness” of public action offer any means of escape from tragedy. If, unlike Orestes, Antigone cannot survive her own acts, her death returns to Thebans not the opportunity to begin yet again but rather the opportunity to begin anew by continuing on different terms. What is generated by Antigone’s dispute with Creon is the possibility not for a repetition of the past but for the clearing of a space we might call the political present, which appears “as if for the first time, in its profound difficulties and divisions . . . ripe with possibilities once foreclosed” (Shulman 1996, 312).

5. A Different “Past”? Rereading Sophocles’ Antigone is a valuable enterprise for contemporary feminist political thinkers precisely because its heroine shows us how

17Ironically, Antigone’s “success” lies in the fact that she does not “win” her dispute with Creon. Had events worked out differently, had Antigone persuaded Creon to allow her to bury her brother, had Antigone not been imprisoned and thus led to commit suicide, there is little reason to believe that the course of Theban time would have been altered at all. On the contrary, Antigone’s marriage to her cousin Haemon would have introduced her family and her city into yet another cycle of Theban time, and a new generation into Thebes’s endless cycle of beginnings.

18Technically, Antigone is not “the last” of her family, for her sister Ismene survives her. Insofar as Ismene has already capitulated to Creon’s reorganization of power and kinship, however, she has arguably divorced herself from this strange family and thus normalized herself as, in the words of Slavoj Žižek, “the figure with which we can [most readily] identify” (Žižek 1989, 117). For discussion of Ismene’s survival in ancient myth and in twentieth-century theater, see Steiner (1996, 148).

19Interestingly, Zeitlin (1990b, 152) reads this only as an (inevitable) repetition of the fate of Thebes, evidence of “Antigone’s . . . overvaluation” of death. Saxonhouse (1992, 69), on the other hand, reads this as evidence of Antigone’s refusal of gender, an attempt to “neuter herself” in her refusal to marry and give birth to a new generation of young Thebans.
we may innovate from within a tradition, how we may speak through a set of languages handed down to us by disciplinary conventions that may not comfortably accommodate feminist politics, how we may employ those languages in ways that do not simply reiterate our own exclusion from those traditions, but instead remake them for the present. In doing so, we use the past not to legitimate our speech, not to establish it as our own, as an ontological foundation from which we may speak and act as feminists, but rather to establish our present as different from the past, to put an end to past unequalitarian, exclusionary doctrines and practices that make feminism appear impossible.

What, then, could it mean to treat the past as a relation of difference? As I have tried to suggest through my own reading of Antigone, feminist critics who must work within a canon of texts and textual practices may produce the critical present as distinct from its past(s) by looking to those moments, those texts, those “historical accidents” where difference emerges in ways that are at once irreducibly complex and yet also fully within the tradition(s) in which they reside. Surely Antigone, in this regard, is but one example of many. Feminist political thinkers may not—indeed, do not—share the same relationship to the “languages of the political theory fathers” as do our brothers, and yet we may nonetheless speak them to produce a difference, a counter-current, in the very place where disciplinary practices may seem to assure the continuity of the same. In this sense, we might view both Antigone and the disciplinary canon in which she resides as a “past from which we may spring rather than that from which we seem to have derived” (Nietzsche 1949, 24).

The past is a powerful and suggestive place, a place that we can neither fully escape nor strategically reinstate. It shows us that the present can be other than what it is or appears to be, and it can provide us with many of the tools and the terms we need to imagine something radically different from our present. But if in turning to the past we embrace it as the key to the political present, if we seek to reestablish its terms as our political present in our political present, we run the risk of normalizing the past, and thus we rob it of its difference(s)—and in doing so we deprive ourselves of the very insights that we might draw from it.

In very different ways, Elshtain, Dietz, and Zerilli each look to some aspect of a past, and with those pasts to Antigone, to locate a space and a stance that contemporary feminists may reclaim as the ground of feminist political speech and action. As Hannah Arendt (1958, 199–207) knew, however, the space in which politics takes place does not precede political action, it is brought into being by it. In this sense, the ground of feminist politics need not—indeed, cannot—be settled upon in advance.

If we look to Antigone for a link that might connect us with a prepatriarchal or preauthoritarian past, what Sophocles’ heroine shows us is the necessity of suspending that linkage, of learning how to engage the past—and
how to value the past—as a relation of difference lest we, like the people of Thebes, collapse temporal distinctions and by doing so lose ourselves as well as our capacity to judge and to act. Indeed, Antigone’s turn to the past embodied in her articulation of a familiar Theban language brings that past to its long overdue terminus, to a conclusion that recalls past riddles and past experiences even as it reformulates them. The artistry of Antigone’s response to the crises of her House and her city consists in her ability to find within her tradition the means by which she can effect a “minute deviation” from it, and thus cultivate a difference in the very place where difference was once most impossible, in terms of the very language that makes it most necessary.

“What seems to have been forgotten,” as Wolin reminded us nearly three decades ago, “is that one reads past theories, not because they are familiar and therefore confirmative, but because they are strange and therefore provocative” (1969, 1077). If, in reading past texts, feminists look only for moments that help us assimilate the past to our present, we are bound to uncover only what we already have in common with those texts, and we engage only what is already most familiar to us. In doing so, we disregard—indeed, we obliterate—important opportunities to discover and to engage the play of difference, of sexual difference, within those texts and within that past. Like Oedipus conducting his inquiry into the murder of King Laius, we learn only what we already knew, we encounter only what we already recognize as our own, and we derive from the past a ground for feminist politics that confirms only what is already given. Feminist political theory so conceived is only then truly impossible, for it is a politics deprived of vision, neglecting the challenge of each of its constitutive terms: feminism, politics, theory.

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REFERENCES


