

COLEÇÃO AUTORES GREGOS E LATINOS
SÉRIE ENSAIOS

Maria de Fátima Silva
Susana Hora Marques (eds.)

TRAGIC HEROINES
ON ANCIENT
AND MODERN STAGE



IMPRESA DA UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA
COIMBRA UNIVERSITY PRESS

REHEARSING INSTABILITIES IN AIDAN CARL MATHEWS' *THE ANTIGONE*

Anastasia Remoundou-Howley
(National University of Ireland, Galway)

"In disoriented times, we cannot accept the return of the old, deadly figure of religious sacrifice; but neither can we accept the complete lack of any figure, and the complete disappearance of any idea of heroism [...] Our task is: How can we find a new heroic figure, which is neither the return of the old figure of religious or national sacrifice, nor the nihilistic figure of the last man? Is there a place, in a disoriented world, for a new style of heroism?"

A. Badiou, *The Contemporary
Figure of the Soldier in Politics and Poetry*

"...and he that let go the goat for the scapegoat shall wash his clothes, and bathe his flesh in water, and afterward come into the camp".

"Leviticus" 16:26, *The Bible*

In searching for what Badiou terms "a new style of heroism" and a "new heroic figure" (2007)¹ during the political and social disillusionment of our modern times, Sophocles' *Antigone* has ironically come to represent a link and a rupture at the same time between old and new models of heroism and by extension between ancient and modern tragedy. More significantly, *Antigone's* modern reception signifies a fundamental re-turn to the central

¹ Badiou, A. 2007.

issues that concerned not only the ancient world but also our modern consciousness for she, more than any other tragic figure, exemplifies “a disruptive rendering of the very structure of the tragic hero, which in effect means a disruptive meditation on the essential political significance of tragedy itself”². Since this tragedy has as its central protagonist a female, Antigone’s ambiguous position is further implicated in a double paradox residing at the heart of gender politics: she is a girl (*païs*) threatening Creon’s masculine rule by exercising and exorcising the same qualities she herself opposes, i.e. a hardness assimilating the masculine quality. Unlike other tragic heroines, this creation of Sophocles famously described by Goethe as “the most sisterly of souls”³, posits the term “tragic heroine” under reconsideration. Antigone, as Stathis Gourgouris contends, can be hardly seen as an *exemplum*: she rather constitutes a problem and an *aporia* as she constantly returns to re-inscribe a question mark in our interpretations and reinterpretations of the play’s themes. This essay will examine the ways in which Antigone’s status as an iconic tragic heroine and a canonical tragic model is contested and destabilized in the loose adaptation by Irish author Aidan Carl Mathews.

In his controversial appropriation which was written and performed in the light of twentieth century traumas and apprehensions, local, national (Irish) and

² Gourgouris, S. 2003: 129.

³ Quoted in Steiner, G. 1984: 1. See also Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s poem invoking *Antigone* in the elegy of 1779 called “Euphrosyne”.

international events, Mathews rehearses⁴ a brave meta-theatrical experiment and provocatively politicizes the aesthetic: his rereading and rewriting of Sophocles' myth, on the one hand, underscores his belief in the centrality of instability that *Antigone's* character engenders in philosophy and theories of subjectivity, and here, in modern theatrical practices. From Aristotle to Hegel and from there to Judith Butler and Joan Copjec's seminal contemporary theorizations, *Antigone's* case is a conflictual *topos* where tragedy (as text and as performance) and philosophy strive to be reconciled. On the other hand, and within these same premises, Mathews questions both the obsession of Western Philosophy with the "self" rather than the "other" and this tragic heroine's almost sacred stature as a classic, with savage humour and irony.

Through a series of paradigmatic interventions (textual/ ideological/ performative), he destabilizes her classical identity as Greek canonical text, myth, archetype, re-sister and heroine and replaces it with a fantasy of Antigone as the anti-heroine, the alienated being, the martyr, the scapegoat, the "ultimate symbol of the ineffectual"⁵ that plays the same role of the dissident for centuries now. Or to paraphrase Badiou's

⁴ The title of this paper borrows its terminology from the playwright's own arguments: "Philosophy in the West begins with a notion of the Self, but it seems to me that it might have done better to begin with the Other. Accordingly, *The Antigone* which I've written rehearses the theme of instability, of a deep-seated privation which makes persons hate themselves while resenting the very individuals they most desire" (Mathews, A. 1984d: 18).

⁵ McDonald, M. 2002: 59.

argument, Mathews, in his quest for a new type of tragic hero, essentially deploys Antigone's tragedy within a novel system of subverted "heroism" which deliberately returns to the ever-clichéd place of "the old figure of religious or national sacrifice" and "the nihilistic figure of the exhausted" model in order to rehearse and restage the play's numerous instabilities in relation to natural law and state control, civil disobedience and spectres of citizenship, kinship and piety.

In 1984 alone, the year of the Irish *Antigone*-fever, three appropriations of *Antigone* emerged in Ireland, North and South, in a year that signaled massive national sociopolitical transformations. First came the rejection of the divorce referendum and of abortion rights, then the passing of the Criminal Justice Bill, a proposed government legislation that infringed on Irish civil liberties by increasing the power of the police. All of these were heated issues which divided Irish public opinion, and caused a rift between the Catholic Church and the state. Almost a decade earlier, the author had seen his first *Antigone* in Athens, two weeks after the Greek dictators' arrest in 1974: "The Athenians were booing the colonels, but I knew that as soon as they came out of this non-violence play, they would go out and beat up policemen"⁶. It is interesting that his first encounter with the play took place during the turbulent period of the military junta in the Greek capital and his version was created a decade later, in troubled and divided Ireland, for the Dublin stage. It is valid to say that

⁶ Mathews, A. 1984a: 4.

within the frame of the times in which Aidan Mathews presented the first modern version of *Antigone* to the Irish audience at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin, the motive was explicitly political apart from aesthetic: it was a powerful plea by the playwright against apathy and passivity, for action and civil disobedience. What is more, Mathews' subversive writing style constitutes an exercise in postmodernist terms. The result of this project substitutes a conventional narrative of tragedy as solely about kings, queens, heroes and gods with a language based on disruption, fragmentation, duplication, and irony in form and content.

This version is important for another reason too: it revives the myth of a female dissident in an otherwise "antimythical era"⁷, bringing forth the notion of male re-writing under the shadow of the female sex/ other. Mathews, in un-silencing the female voice of *Antigone* points to the violence committed against women in a time when debates of that sort had just started to be taken into consideration, particularly in Ireland. Undoubtedly, the role of Irish women had changed dramatically during the late 1960s as a natural consequence of the worldwide socio-political transformations concerning human rights, but the overall marginalisation of women persisted. During the 1980s, issues such as equality, female participation and representation in politics, education, and the working place, on the one hand, but also, the freedom of women to be responsible for their own bodies through the legalization of contraception

⁷ Gourgouris, S. 2003: 1.

and the access to information on heated ethical problems such as mixed religion marriages, sexuality, abortion, and divorce (most of which still constitute major battles to be won against inherited religious *mores*), were discussed and debated amid an atmosphere of increasing tension between the Catholic Church and the State. This ideological battle that has been dividing Ireland in relation to debates on public and private morale, could not be better portrayed than in the eternal clash between Antigone and Creon.

During this period, another major change had occurred in terms of dramatic approaches: the transition from conventional categories of theatre to more modern forms of dramatic discourse. Mathews' dramatic model was coming as a successor to pre-existing debates about the troubling effects of cultural trauma and historical amnesia brought about by the haunting omnipresence of the two successive World wars. Previous modernist writers had dealt with the myth of Sophocles' inflexible daughter and had exploited the easily-adaptable *Antigone*-material in order to critique and attack specific political ideologies: Jean Anouilh's 1944 version, for example, is remembered as both sympathetic to the French Resistance and complicit with Nazi ideology, addressing a figuration of the heroine which should not be elided: in it she is reconfigured as "the model fascist- youthful, vigorous, and rebelliously uncompromising"⁸ urging us to theorize her case and her appeal in contemporary employments of the myth. Soon after the Parisian

⁸ Quoted in Fleming, K. 2006: 182.

staging, around 1948, Bertolt Brecht produced a version of *Antigone* based on the famous translation of 1803 by Friedrich Hölderlin in Berlin. In many ways, *Antigone* served as the perfect aesthetic project of recuperation for a post-war and post-fascist Germany and Europe. Mathews was conscious of his predecessors' commitment to challenging *Antigone's* past, as well as their modernist propositions concerning the progressive, engaged work of art. In the decades that separate these international productions temporally and spatially, from the 1940s traumatized Europe to the transitional societies of the 1980s like troubled Ireland, the resurrection of *Antigone* is highly suggestive. Mathews is fascinated by the fusion of the personal and the political, the irrationality, rage, and violence, the wild Dionysian traits of the myth of *Antigone* which he rewrites from scratch as a saga of perpetual denouement. Affected by his times and the legacy of theatre after modernism, after the stylistic and ideological revolution brought about by the "theatre of the absurd," Mathews is in quest of an appropriate ideological model to accommodate inherited historical trauma while simultaneously searching for a language to accommodate the absurdity of history itself. This model, very much like Anouilh and Brecht, he finds in *Antigone*.

The director of the performance, Michael Scott, claimed that this was certainly not a version or updating of the original but a brand new play. The way both director and playwright understood the play lead to particularly illuminating perspectives: they mutually

“wanted to recuperate the source text, to cut cleanly through the intermediate readings proposed by Brecht and Anouilh, and to renew the hysteria and crisis of the primal plot so that the Theban site could host a thermonuclear scene”⁹. The original *Antigone* re-opens the question of feminism’s relationship to tragedy in its contemporary philosophical quests, but Mathews revisits this contested interpretive site by rejecting the tragic nostalgia: his version is not a forceful feminist manifesto but rather the iconography of an androgynous anti-hero, and her myth “repatriated” as a parable of sexless non-heroism.

Mathews, indeed, sees *Antigone* as the classic scapegoating play, the ultimate study of martyric energies. His interest in anthropology and comparative religion justifies to a great extent the intertextuality and the richness of philosophical and literary allusions. In reconstructing *Antigone*’s “cowed form”¹⁰, Mathews projected a postmodern scenario that questioned the premises of Western thought, but also offered an alternative to its collapse: the relativity of meaning and the abandonment of all meta-narratives claiming to legitimate foundations of knowledge. The poet and playwright viewed in retrospect his experience of rewriting the classical text for the stage, as an “anxiety to avoid the stylized, the stately, the ceremonious; to oust the inertia of our customary appreciation of the text and to introduce instead the energy of a startled re-

⁹ Mathews, A. 1984d: 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

cognition"¹¹. Most notably, the dedication of the play to French philosopher René Girard¹² (who was Mathews' professor at Stanford University) announced an explicit intention to re-cognize in depth the dynamics of culture and the primacy of social order as these are shaped upon the genesis of all myth, hence, the genesis of tragedy. The scope of this reading of *Antigone*, steadily and forcefully underscored his belief that violence and barbarism are at the heart of the sacred, while it sought to understand its mechanisms as they appear in any sacrifice that restores order in society: in Antigone's persistent sacrificial wish, in the militaristic regime at the outset of the play, in *the odd little breeze from the North* (3)¹³ reminding everyone of the *pro patria* sacrifices in Northern Ireland, or in the technological, emotional, social and political a-morality of modern power-states in the prophetic

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Girard, R. 1993. Most influentially René Girard has developed theories of sacrifice as a social process that take tragedy as a key example. For Girard, sacrifice- the central ritual of Greek religion- is to be seen as an institution that works to direct and control violence within the social group. In sacrifice, violence is sacralised and thus bounded by the rituals of religious observation. A surrogate, that is, a figure like the scapegoat which takes on itself the violence from within the group, is chosen as victim and is killed ritually. The crisis, the disorder, the violence, is avoided by such transference and such control. Tragedy is a dramatization -and thus ritualization- of the force of threatening, undifferentiated violence, a representation which displays the threat of disorder to expiate it. ("To know violence, is to experience it", "tragedy is the child of sacrificial crisis"). This definition will assist in our understanding of Antigone's death as a sacrifice, and her as scapegoat against Creon's *realpolitik*.

¹³ I am personally indebted to the playwright for providing me with a copy.

Orwellian year 1984 (the year of its production) and beyond. In this version, *Anti-gone*, like the etymology of her name suggests, is an anti-heroine, or even a non-heroine. She opposes heroism and glory like she opposes her incestuous line of descent, her *genos*. In Mathews' version she even opposes tragedy.

The first line in Mathews' script blurs time and space, deliberately avoiding to place the action within a single cohesive historical moment: *Set in Ireland in the 1980s B.C., soon after Sparta had entered the war on the German side* (1), the play (which remains unpublished to this day) primarily prepares the audience for an illusionist trip, almost a kaleidoscopic view of history, the devastating effects of war, and the traumatic outcome of risky politics. This is a notion of time which occupies a dynamic, teleological character for several reasons: for one thing, it literally defines the temporal distance between fifth-century Athens and twentieth-century Ireland. Second, with the dyad Sparta-Germany as historical allusions, it reminds us of the catastrophic consequences of the Peloponnesian War and the Second World War, the latter echoing Theodor Adorno's aphorism for the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz. Writing against Adorno and in the same lines, Mathews' version fosters the view "that suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man to scream"¹⁴. Heamon who has become Heman in Mathews' scenario, urges the Chorus into praxis: *We have an opportunity to collapse History. You and I together. To*

¹⁴ Quoted in Hall, E. 2004: 195.

begin all over. To resume time. To become totally human. To put all of this behind us[...]To step out of the soiled clothing of culture (5). Mathews' point seems to be that history is dead and that only myth has a recurring force: it always returns in times and places where (im)possibilities and (in)stabilities abound. His script contains a number of powerful signifiers most of which point to a political re-reading of *Antigone* as a meta-theatrical play: the theatre-within-theatre technique, the renaming of some of the characters, the distribution of copies of the Criminal Justice Bill to the audience- which was read at the end of the first act and during the intermission-, the purposeful juxtaposition of past and present time, the alteration of the traditional role of the audience and the direct communication between actors and spectators, all point to reworking of the myth both as a poetic drama and a theatre of experimentation in action.

Among the unhappy society of the play, the relationship of the police force to the city's ruler is considered in depth, even to quoting liberally from the controversial Irish Criminal Justice Bill, quotes that made many believe they were actually taken from George Orwell's *1984*. In the desolate modern landscape of the stage, his new characters gradually throw the ancient masks to uncover the delicate and dangerous distinction between role and self, private identity and public *persona*, tragedy and comedy: Antigone introduces her common, non-heroic self: *I represent ordinariness... tens of thousands of faceless women. Women who stand in queues and wait. And their waiting is more busy, more*

concentrated, than all the bustle of men (36). Mathews' *Antigone* operates as a way of talking about historical accountability through a radical critique of history (*The children are eating the stuffing out of old couches* (20)). As events unfold throughout his version, the constant reminder of the Chorus, *We're goin' round in circles* (12), underlines the inescapability of violence that is not only central to human history but crucial to it. Antigone is portrayed as a silent, passive young girl, tired of her cruel destiny (*I don't want to set an example* (12)) and acknowledges the position history has saved for her: *I know I'm colourless. I know I'm abrasive. I know I'm a bore. But I'm right, God help me, I'm right. And I have to go on being right until somebody sends help* (36).

A heavily pregnant Ismene reminds *Antigone* that it is her duty to *take the good with the bad* (17). A caricatured and submissive Heman, plays out the stereotype of the macho male: deploying the discourse of blind filial allegiance to Creon, and under the shade of a consistent misogyny, he degrades Antigone and condemns her deed. For Haemon Antigone was *axia timēs* (worthy of honor), but for Heman she lacks *nous/ noesis* primarily due to gender: *Such a waste. Such a squandering [...] You could have been my wife if you'd had any nous. You could have had me. Do you have any insight into what you've done to me* (49)? The dramatization of his apathy (*She's quite delusional. Why do I love her?* (18)) further articulates itself in a vulgar mocking of female nature: *You ride your own death in the female astride. You want to go out in a blaze of glory. Saint Antigone. Wafting*

off into cumulus nimbus while the rest of us stay where we are in the ruins. Walloping nails into wood [...] No wonder Christ chose men. Your sex is diseased (49).

President Creon who is the conscientious Minister for Justice proclaims: *The aim is rehabilitation. A bringing to the awareness of evil, not a driving to despair* (17). The playwright adds an ad-libbing one-man-show Chorus to replace the Theban elders, a Critic and Chora, and omits the messengers, the sentry, Eurydice, and Teiresias. Antigone's brothers are referred to as 'Polyneices' and 'Peteocles', and Antigone's transgression is writing the letter P on the walls of the city, standing for the first letter of both her brothers' names. Creon's edict at the beginning quotes the New Irish Criminal Justice Bill verbatim, and instead of leaving Polyneices unburied, he erases his existence from all the city's records. Antigone rebels because her brother has been reduced to a non-person and ends up in a psychiatric institution in order to be ideologically rehabilitated. The actors are actually all set for the last production of a Sophoclean play they have been rehearsing and performing for centuries. Worn out, they cannot remember their lines and covet each other's words. They have come to lose faith in themselves and their roles: *I've been playing this part for three thousand years. I can't remember why I took it. It wasn't like me. I'm so confused. I have the odd flash, but it's fainter all the time. What I'm doing is absurd. And they still don't understand. None of them. And neither do I* (10). But the show must go on: the drama must be revived all over again by people who

deplore injustice and the severity of the parts to which they have been assigned to. Antigone's martyrdom must "embroil the state in a fresh cycle of violence"¹⁵. The Chora, a smart character-invention of Mathews that in Greek means 'the country', flamboyantly exclaims: *To stay when Antigone comes? To participate in History? To have a seat at the centre of the epoch? To marry the era, and be impregnated by it? I'd do anything. I'd donate my kidneys* (31).

Throughout Mathews' play, Creon and Heman unite their masculine forces as father and son, and quite often seem to complement each other. In his quest for *the whole Truth* (22), Creon seeks forgiveness and pity for his past sins through Heman's reciting of famous philosophical aphorisms¹⁶. The conflict of the condition of man for Creon is a painful, nightmarish process of self-definition through and against Otherness, consequently through and against Antigone (*She's multiplying inside me like a white blood-cell* (32)). The fundamental structure of this conflict unfolds in Mathews with perfect economy, like in Sophocles' text. Antigone yet is immeasurably more direct in the way she defines lines

¹⁵ Scott, M. (1984) in the 'Programme Note for the *Antigone*': ii.

¹⁶ See *The Antigone*: 23. The focus is on the notion of freedom and democracy with references to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the patriotic American tradition of political pamphlets *The American Crisis* (1776-83) by Thomas Paine (who was ostracized for his atheism), and *What America Means to Me* by Pearl Sydenstricker Buck, the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Creon records in his dictaphone: "I love it: "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men and women, undergo the fatigue of supporting it" found in Paine's influential text in defense of the Revolutionary War in America.

of kinship. *You're turning me into your own creation* (38)
 Antigone protests and Creon responds:

Go home my little playmate. Bury your brother. Don't bother me about him again. The ways of the tree are not to be understood by its leaves. Go home and breed. The kindergartens are empty. The swings are tied up. Not a single sandwich wrapper drifts across a single school-yard. The gulls have given up and gone away. Go home and breed. We need the noise of children like the noise in a stony place (41).

Mathews, also reads Antigone's myth as synonymous to "nonviolence" and "anti-theatre." In the meta-theatrical gesture of her suicide, Mathews' version reenacts the perpetual occurrence of a vicious circle of barbarism, *a state of total war since the murder of Cain* (51) in which all of us have and will keep on bearing witness to an intolerable horror. The action is set in a quasi-Beckettian no-man's-land: a vaguely post-nuclear location designed as a mass of drying concrete, a wrecked car, graffiti, a dying tree, sand and even a river running through the stage. It could be Stalingrad in 1943, St. Petersburg in 1917, Nagasaki in 1945, post-Criminal Justice Bill Ireland in 1984; any shattered culture. The backdrop of a devastated city is the forum in which all acts of violence and accusation are castigated, a modern civilization in ruins in which everyone else is blamed for one's mistakes. In this visual wasteland where torture is routine, *Antigone's* scoring propaganda is not the object. Indeed, the question seems to be: can there be martyrs without monsters? Mathews makes the point that there are no monsters, only victims,

only casualties and that “we’re all equally guilty or innocent in crisis situations over which we have no control”¹⁷. Our desire to find a monster is based on our need to take away our own guilt:

[Director Michael Scott] *had this terrible image of holocaust. But once I started translating I realized that it wouldn't work as we expected. I wasn't writing with conviction because I doubted the premise. It rested on a certain idea of heroism and individual glory. That you couldn't have a martyr without a monster; you couldn't make Antigone without debasing Creon. So, I thought of a play with no culprits and a great deal of casualties*¹⁸.

Consciously moving away from the idea of heroes and villains, this version resists categorization: simultaneously unstable and intact it “expiates,” in the writer’s words, the “shame” of the primary classical text by subverting “the very notion of a classic”¹⁹:

*“Antigone, like all the major tragedies of the Greek canon, exist in cowed form. It has been sedated by its own stature. The harm of its art has been drained from it. As a result, it's suffered a sea-change, a fate worse than death; it has become a classic. There are a great many reasons why this is a shame. For one thing, Antigone subverts the very notion of a classic, if by classic we understand a text which inscribes the meaning of history- and, indeed, the history of meanings- [...] Antigone, in fact, is the record of a part of an individual to assent to such practices”*²⁰.

¹⁷ Mathews, A. 1984b: 8.

¹⁸ Mathews, A. 1984c: 14.

¹⁹ Mathews, A. 1984d: 18.

²⁰ Ibid.

The way Antigone is portrayed in Mathews' appropriation largely depends on the way she has been read through the ages. Mathews tests these ambiguities and contradictions (*Don't you fuckin' start Sartrin' round the place, a terrible man for the Hegelian Triangle, Don't go Antigonizing him*, etc. (12,19,34)) by bridging the dividing line between politics and aesthetics. The world that he constructs around Antigone, is a world of unprecedented fear, loathing and control, verbal and physical abuse, violence, a fluid, almost absurd setting, timeless and space-less. The crux of this telling exchange between desire and violence becomes the central preoccupation in Mathews' theorization of tragedy:

Acts of violence may occur offstage in the Greek plays but the fact of violence is usually transparent (and therefore sometimes invisible). Yet the exorbitance of conflict- the immediacy of rows and blows-disguises its more subtle forms, the tactical cohesion of an understated chat, the menace of mere presence[...]. I have an interest in the subspecies of violence of masters and models, of the impoverished self prostrating itself at the feet of an idol, of persons who are decentred by their own obsession with other people²¹.

In Mathews' loose adaptation, there is a violent reciprocity, in Girardian terms, modeled around a series of allusions to literary, fictional and historical configurations. In the same vein, the Critic ranks *Antigone* among the "foundation texts of Western culture, one of the flagstones of European achievement," along

²¹ Ibid.

with “several later works of the Christian era, notably the *Rule of St. Benedict*, Pico della Mirandola’s *On the Dignity of Man*, Thomas a Kempis, Montaigne,” Plato’s *Republic* and the *Bible*²². *Antigone* occupies a liminal space between figuring herself as a hopeless pacifist and *the real public enemy* (13). As Mathews puts it (*pace* the Critic): “the *Antigone* is a beautiful work, full of nobility and human anguish. It portrays the most fundamental spiritual and psychological, sorry, sorry (GIGGLES) the most psychological dilemmas of the spirit, the terrible confrontation between the conscientiousness of the Law and the law of conscience”²³. His Creon, like another Solon, outlaws mourning and *criminalize[s] any act of weeping as an incitement to gloom. Weeping must be done at home or in the darkness. And it cannot be loud. Audible gnashing or sighing will be punishable in the same way as silent sobbing* (31)²⁴. The multilingual outburst of the Chorus when confronted with *Antigone* and Ismene (*Poly has been fuckin’ vamoosed. An dtigeann tu? Verboten, finito, forget it* (13)) in English, Gaelic, German, and Italian, captures the turbulence which history brings to the reach of meaning. Coupled with *Antigone*’s writing of the letter P on the walls and defacing them, the theme of suppression of the freedom of speech and of cultural

²² Mathews, A. 1984a: 27.

²³ Mathews, A. 1984a: 27.

²⁴ It is fascinating to observe here that the negation of public lamentation (like in Ancient Greece) as an uncivilized practice became a target of a religious reformation of the Irish communities to the point where the Catholic church persistently opposed and publicly threatened female transgressors with the ultimate of punishments: denunciation and excommunication.

relativity is reminiscent of the linguistic and political suppression in Catholic Ireland. In the light of this, Mathews sees *Antigone* as a scapegoat “*depuis la fondation du monde*” (48) and the theory of scapegoating as the essence of Christianity. In this chaotic cosmic model, violence is inflicted against all those who are *blamed for everything* but are *guilty of nothing* (33), summed up in the apophthegmatic tone of the Chorus: *Where there are sheep, there will be scapegoats* (64).

During German Romanticism, Ludwig Tieck proclaimed that *Antigone* constitutes “the easiest ancient work for a modern Christian audience to understand”²⁵. Remediaki, in the light of this pronouncement, interestingly locates *Antigone’s* appeal within a purely theological re-figuration and a Christian ethic typified in the reception of the heroine’s stature as a “text-symbol”, offering thus itself to various parallelisms: Antigone as Mary Magdalene, the mourner and carer of Jesus body, or as Virgin Mary, the lamenting kin/mother (the parallelism here overtly ironic for virginal Antigone is famously remembered as the childless bride-never-to-be, shunning marriage and procreation by choosing to bury her brother’s corpse rather than marry Haemon), and finally Antigone as Jesus himself, the suffering martyr, the scapegoat, who is tried, humiliated, and sent to his death. A religious re-reading of *Antigone* seems particularly appealing for an Irish audience but the most crucial application of its claim

²⁵ Quoted in Ρεμεδιάκη, I. 2004: 155. The collection of the Conference papers that are published in this book are written in Greek. Translation of references in English is mine.

to Irish life is an unheeded critique of the Catholic church and its implacable rigidity to matters of public and private morale: Mathews' *Antigone* as another Joan of Arc or Calamity Jane, a "smile of a Gandhi, cheek of a Christ" proves that violence is at the heart of every ritual, every human history, every era, and "bloodshed [is] at the bottom of everything" and his treatment of the myth is employed as "a final irritant to those stodgy folk whom weekend radicals love to scapegoat"²⁶. Most interestingly, Mathews comments on the historical coincidence that relates the genesis of tragedy to the first Jewish prophets:

*"[...] because their shared concern is always and everywhere the nature of violence, whether in its routine form as lynclaw or in its ritual form as sacrifice, within that frail makeshift we call society"*²⁷.

The portrayal of *Antigone* in Mathews is twofold: she is the "quiet protester," the combatant for social Justice, a sort of androgynous Jesus but also enemy of the state, in the eyes of Creon who is Pilate (the crucifixion here transferred to a wooden rocking-chair). In the fragile relationship between mortal and divine, the individual and the state, Mathews develops a truthful re-evaluation of power-politics that applies to Ireland's long history of colonial oppression and violence. *Antigone's* crime in the eyes of those in power, is the crime that every individual commits in order to

²⁶ Mathews, A. 1984d: 18.

²⁷ Ibid.

safeguard family and dignity. This hubristic conflict of visions dramatizes an ethical strife between ancestral piety and civil obedience that has painfully challenged Ireland in the past and it continues to do so. Mathews exemplifies this reality in the conflicting perspectives on scene of inscribing the initial P around the walls of the city, standing for Polyneices and Peteocles:

“Antigone knows[...] that her brothers are identical, united by their own rivalry, mirror images of the very difference which divides them; and she knows as well that Creon’s version of the history is the old humanitarian perversion of the truth, a stubborn allegiance to the belief that the meta-physical force of Law, not the physical law of Force, determines everything”²⁸.

Written throughout in Irish colloquialisms, the play’s most radical departure from the original text comes in Antigone’s final speech when she addresses the audience:

(Chorus attempts to muffle her mouth with his hand. She bites. He strikes her.) Jesus, my nose is bleeding. Stop it please. Tell them. Tell them. They’ll come for the woman down the street. Will you tell them then? They’ll come for your next door neighbor. Will you tell them then? They’ll come for you. And after that, when there’s nobody left, they’ll come for themselves (58).

Mathews’ message is quite bleak: “*Antigones* don’t really exist, but their heroism, small and local, exists in

²⁸ Ibid.

martial Poland, in Greenham Common, in Argentina, everywhere²⁹. Antigone is lead to her death-finale in a deflated un-heroic ending, cross-examined and accused of *taking the sins of the world on her shoulders* (56) but Heman insists she is still alive and lost somewhere in Kharkov while Mathews establishes her fate as that of an eternal suspect bearing witness to the crimes of the century. The playwright actively encourages the audience to perform rebellion against oppressive and unjust regimes by having the characters prompting them into dissidence and resistance with phrases like *Can't you see that there's no greater crime in this world than having clean hands* (33)? In a Baudelairean fashion, Mathews exposes the voyeurism and the hypocrisy of a passive, apathetic audience and a guilty society: in the end, Ismene and Creon force the audience to leave: *Go home. Go back to your homes. Voyeurs. Peeping Toms. You can't do anything* (65).

²⁹ 1984a: 4.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adorno, T. W. (1967), *Prisms*. USA: MIT Press.
- Anouilh, J. (2005), *Antigone (La Petite Vermillon)*. London: European Schoolbooks.
- Badiou, A. (2007), "The Contemporary Figure of the Soldier in Politics and Poetry" [Online]. Available: <http://www.lacan.com/badsold.htm> [Accessed 16th March 2010].
- Brecht, B. (1984), *Antigone, a version*. Trans. by Holderlin, F. and Malina, J. New York: Applause.
- Butler, J. (2000), *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. USA: Columbia University Press.
- Copjec, J. (2004), *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*. USA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- Fleming, K. (2006), "Fascism on Stage: Jean Anouilh's Antigone", in Zajko, V. and Leonard, M. eds., *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 163-186.
- Girard, R. (1993), *Violence and the Sacred*. USA: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Goethe, J. W. (2005), "Euphrosyne" in Garland, H. B. and Garland, M. eds., *The Oxford Companion to German Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 215.

- Gourgouris, S. (2003), *Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Hall, E. (2004), “Aeschylus, Race, Class, and War in the 1990s”, in Hall, E., Macintosh, F. and Wrigley, A. eds., *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mathews, A. C. (1984a), “Aidan and Antigone in Athens”, *The Irish Press*, July 27th, 4.
- Mathews, A. C. (1984b), “Antigone, We’ll Hardly Know”, *The Irish Press*, July 28th, 8.
- Mathews, A. C. (1984c), “Getting Away from Heroes and Villains”, *The Irish Independent*, July 29th, 14.
- Mathews, A. C. (1984d), “The Antigone”, *Theatre Ireland* 7, 18.
- Mathews, A. C. (1984e), *The Antigone*, unpublished manuscript. Dublin.
- McDonald, M. (2002), “The Irish and Greek Tragedy”, in McDonald, M. and Walton, M. eds., *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*. Great Britain: Methuen, 37-86.
- Ρεμεδιάκη, Ι. (2004), ‘Η Πρώτη Παράσταση της Αντιγόνης στην Ελλάδα και την Γερμανία: Μετάφραση και άλλες Σχέσεις’, in Σχέσεις του Νεοελληνικού Θεάτρου με το Ευρωπαϊκό:

Διαδικασίες Πρόσληψης στην Ιστορία της
Ελληνικής Δραματουργίας από την Αναγέννηση
ως Σήμερα, Παράβασις, Επιστημονικό Δελτίο
Τμήματος Θεατρικών Σπουδών Πανεπιστημίου
Αθηνών, Παράρτημα-Μελετήματα [3]
Πρακτικά Β΄ Πανελληνίου Θεατρολογικού
Συνεδρίου Αθήνα: Έκδόσεις Ergo

G. Steiner (1984), *Antigones*. Oxford: Oxford University
Press.

The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments,
stereotyped by A.Chandler for the American
Bible Society. New York: American Bible Society,
1937), deposited in Harvard Library, 1886.