

Antigone's Letter¹

Jina Politi

As a child, I accompanied my mother and grandmother to the cemetery and watched them perform with meticulous care the memorial acts required. The monumental graves and immense cypresses overwhelmed me with the unspeakable wonder and terror of the Sublime. Faithfully, I carry on the atavistic tradition. It lodges in my psyche. Now I know that the boundaries between subject/object, inner/outer are fuzzy for women. The grave is there to confirm it. At school, we studied *Antigone*. Antigone's mask fell and her desire was revealed to me only in her lament. It puzzled me that it was so radically at odds with her "rebellious" act. Later in life, as a scholar, I read the relevant works written by the Antigonids on *Antigone*. My instinctive reaction to these is expressed in the words addressed by Antigone to the Chorus of Elders: "Ah, I am mocked!" (446). This "letter" constitutes a fantasy on counter-factuals: Antigone's desperate "had I been" (447).

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My sister, my Ismene,

In wishing to make a clean breast of my tragedy, I write to you from within the prisonhouse of Silence which the Ruler built around me and buried me there alive, hapless me! forever a metic in the realm of Language, an alien never at home either "with the living or with the dead" (Sophocles, *Antigone* 446). I speak of the Ruler who conceived the Universe

1. The idea of this "Letter" originated in a talk given at the Symposium: "The Writing Woman: Ritual and Religious Perspectives," organized by the Finnish Institute of Athens, 21-22 May 1997.

as a series of polar oppositions and established Laws written and unwritten: the Law of Light and the Law of Darkness, of Male and Female, Culture and Nature, *Demos* and *Oikos*. “While I live,” he declared, “no woman shall rule” (437). *Woman*: Earth, Darkness, Fertility, Decomposition, Night, Death, Hearth. It is upon these pantonyms of exclusion, confinement and dread that the foundations of his *Polis* and of his archetypal narratives rest. What in love / hate he projects, blindly we introject.

Thus, he awarded us to Hades, black, mourning shades eternally wandering in the leafy alleys of cemeteries, kneeling figurines washing the marble slabs, adorning the graves with flowers of atonement, scattering grains of wheat, almonds and pomegranate seeds - those fatal seeds which bound Persephone forever to marriage with Hades, all metonymic signs of our fertile bodies and blood, offerings to appease the avid scavenger whom the male imaginary phantasizes as lurking within us: *womb-tomb*. There, amidst the monumental sepulchres, dazed by the fumes of burnt incense that blur the cipher of the bones and of putrescent flesh, we form the ritual Chorus of a wild, intestine monologue which invokes by echolalia and gesture the lost, loved object, while our hysterical ear greedily listens for the maddening buzz of a stray bumble-bee, herald, so they say, of a restored presence. “Hades desires these rites” (436).

Hades. The abyssal hollow of our Dark Mother. Of Night who bore, as Hesiod tells, Doom, Discord, Dreams, Dolour, Death. *Gaia*. The Primal Object. Mother of the Erynnyes, female demonic power, black, foul. Fluids and dark liquids flowing within her insides, unseen currents of thick, clotted blood moving between the gloomy banks of *Acheron*. Dark mothering, sucking abyss, first-*lust* abode. For as old King Lear says, “Beneath [the girdle] is all the fiend’s. / There’s hell, there’s darkness, there’s the sulphurous pit; / Burning, scalding, stench, consumption. / Fie, fie, fie! pah, pah! Give me / an ounce of civet, good apothecary, to sweeten my / imagination” (Shakespeare 1230). No wonder that such a putrescent, imaginary object leads the deranged, old king to ask his pharmacist to administer a homeopathic, animal secretion to perfume his filthy imagination!

Thus inscribed within the Ruler’s imaginary, we are then made to recognize ourselves in these injurious, uncanny projections. Forever strangers to our own, lost maternal origins and banned, as Luce Irigaray notes, from a primary metaphorization of our female desire, we can never imagine, dream, or represent to ourselves the loved, lost object of our desire (101). Our gaze is, therefore, called to encounter *out there* the foul or fair objects of *his* loss, our speech to borrow *his* signs: *Amalthea*: the “good breast.” A

Goat. *Preying Mantis*: the "bad cunt." Madonna and whore. Platonic *anamnesis*, All Souls' Day, is a male privilege from which goats, locusts and women are debarred.

Yet, I often wonder, Sister, whether the substitution of one for another set of psychic objects constitutive now of female desire for the lost, maternal origin, as Luce Irigaray hopes, would really change things much, since the patriarchal foundations upon which these representations would rest would remain unchallenged. For, in my humble opinion, the problem seems to reside precisely in that powerful mytheme of *Origins* which from time immemorial has dominated the male imaginary and its archetypal narrative of the *Quest*.

This persistent "discursive formation" (which in truth is an allegory of the envy for the womb) has never really been put into question. Whether wrapped in the unfathomable mysteries of cosmogonic discourses, or deduced by the ruses of analytic reason, *origins* seem to have haunted all fields of knowledge. From a narrative point of view, the morphology of this mytheme seems to mimic that of a fairytale trial imposed by the King on the hero, whose function is to bring the *impossible* exploit to successful completion. Acquisition of the magical object by the King will then win for the hero the princess, crown and entrance to that higher stage of a "contractual," unheroic existence in the Symbolic Order.

In signing the contract, the hero pledges to *give up such and such* in order to secure *this and that*. First and foremost, that he must never desire the possession of that which the Other desires. Always in the service of the Other's interest, the trials which the hero undergoes must have as their sole aim the delivery of the desired object to his liege, his community, his gods. This "disinterestedness" is a fundamental presupposition for anyone aspiring to the title of a hero.

Thus, as the story goes, "ere commence commencement" (Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* 266), "the law of the jungerl!" (268) reigned supreme but was superseded in time by the Law of the "decent man" (262) who contracted the "CONSTITUTION OF THE CONSTITUTIONABLE AS CONSTITUTIONAL" (261). Whereupon, all the jungerls sang in unison: "Heil, heptarched span of peace! Live, league of lex, nex and the mores!" (273). Meantime, "flash becomes word and silents selflout" (267): poetic Echolalia gives place to Parlance, who begins to breed legions of arbitrary signs, Absence orders the exile of Presence and *jouissance* bows to the law of the "patrarc" (269).²

2. For a more extensive argument on Origins, see Politi.

In other words, *Castration* and *Leviathan* had the same notary public.

But, what is woman's role in this universal narrative? Woman's role is precisely to represent the *point d'origine*. Woman can never enter the contractual state because she lacks a *sign(n)ature*. Consequently, her function at both ends of this archetypal narrative is always already the "unclean job." Do you remember Leopold Bloom's thoughts about women on the death of his friend Dignam? "Glad to see us go we give them such trouble coming. Job seems to suit them. Huggermugger in corners. Slop about in slipper-slappers for fear he'd wake. Then getting it ready. Laying it out . . . Our windingsheet . . . Unclean job" (Joyce, *Ulysses* 108).

Know, therefore, Sister, that the Tragedy which bears my name is in reality a lesson in obedience. For the act I committed, the "unclean job," was in no sense an act of rebellion. On the safe side of the limit, within the strict frame set for us from time immemorial by the Patrarc, my *Persona* enacts on stage not a *πρόσωπον*, but a *προσωπείον*, not a person but a mask, like an automaton mechanically obeying and executing with *fanatical* fidelity the ritual acts prescribed by his "public object." For, in truth, "I feared to cast away the fear of Heaven" (Sophocles, *Antigone* 448) and follow the Nazarene's blasphemous advice: Let the dead bury the dead! To be sure, He would never have given such advice to a woman - they all so look forward to a *pietà*!

Sister, in spite of what has been claimed, it was not you but I who was meant to serve as an example for all to identify with. For, what the Antigonids forget is the fact that Authority bases its power on the icons of heroes and saints. In view of this, Creon was unwise when he stubbornly maintained that I was a monstrous deviation from the female norm, and so are the Antigonids when they interpret my anger at you as roused by your all-too-human, petty-bourgeois desire to back out from the dirty game. Ironically, my fury was roused by the fact that you dared defy the time-honoured role allotted to us women as the appointed guardians of subterranean *jouissance*, keepers of the sacred obligation towards the insoluble bonds of blood. Hence, by refusing to obey and, as expected, turn yourself into a magnificent spectacle as "Bride of Hades," you, my Ismene, were punished by History and forgotten by all. Indeed, even I forgot you and spoke of myself in my lament as "the last daughter of the house of [our] kings"! (448)

Come to think of it, not even Aristotle noticed that you were a real scandal, an inexplicable "gap" in Sophocles's well-made play, being the only character in familial tragedy, even in myth for that matter, to escape to *τετελεσμένον*. Euridice, you will remember, that model wife and stately ma-

tron, comes out of her palace; goes back in; thrusts into her fair bosom a phallic sword and is brought out in public again, having written her own version of the story with her body's violent death.

But you? Ever since he ordered the slaves to take us "within," declaring that henceforth we must be "women and not range at large" (578), I wonder, Sister, are you still crouching like some used, forgotten toy in a corner of his Palace? Neither dead, nor comfortably married, metamorphosed into a plant, tree, rock or animal - where are you Sister? How did you manage to "slip" out, escape the fateful causality of the genre? A lost trace, a mysterious erasure, how bold, how heroic of you to turn fugitive and walk unnoticed out of the play, out of the paradisi(m)al incestuous phantasies, a "New Free Woman with novel inside" (Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* 145)! Let any Lacanian come forth now and "psoakoonaloose" (522) for us this novelnavel "Borromean knot," or any Theologian for that matter!

As for me, for centuries now the Antigonids stage me, nail me onto their cross - interpretations unaware that their labors around my name unconsciously aim at the perpetual veiling, the repression of Oedipus's "διπλοὺν ἔπος" (Sophocles, *Antigone* 54), his "double name." I mean his *brotherly* relation to us. Yes, our *third* brother Oedipus! Not the fearsome Phallus, not the transcendental Signifier, name of all names. Simply and most importantly a *brother*. Do you remember? It was only at Colonus that he acknowledged this bond: "sisters of your own father" (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 329), he said, referring to us. But note: he did not say "*brother* of my own daughters." It was to *us* that he attributed the "double name"!

Thus, Sophocles has you, a woman, utter the terrible words: "Ah me! think, sister, how our father perished . . . then the mother-wife, two names in one . . . and last, our two brothers in one day . . . and now *we* in turn" (*Antigone* 424). So, is this monstrous "two names in one" an attribute of the *mother* and not of the son-husband-brother-*father*? Crafty displacement! For the Patraric knows full well that the woman simply mothered *five* children, the relation of which to her bears only *one* name and the relation between them one name as well. For the Womb does not generate logical paradoxes or legal fictions. It is the Phallus who fathers the "double name," the monstrous paradox which his symbolic logic excludes though his "desire," as Freud assures us, yearns after it.

Consequently, in order to resolve this contradiction between his logic and his desire, he began to weave daydreams about "origins." For example, the one about a lost, first homeland where all was feasting, unity and presence:

there mothers coupled with sons, fathers with sons and daughters, brothers with sisters - a perpetual orgy of sexual *jouissance*! Naturally, the aporia arises whether kinship names and ties which describe this primordial world of undifferentiation and license existed *before* or *after* the “origin” was on its way to Babel. In short, whether “origins,” as objects of desire, preceded or came into being as imaginary constructs simultaneously with the symbolic order. In which case, “incest” should not be seen as a cause, the effect of which was the imposition of a taboo which made possible the founding of society; rather, the taboo itself allowed the emergence of “incest” as the prime Signifier of man’s desire. But, over and above its function as the founding stone of society, “incest” served as an *Axiom* upon which was founded a logic that constructed a world-model from which tautology and contradiction were excluded. For then, and only then, could *representation* devour the *real*.

Consequently, his tale of origins tells how the son awoke from his symbiotic slumber with mother Nature and bowed to the positive Law of the Father (un)happily to live ever after in a world of strictures, absence and elusive desire. Myths of “Nostalgia,” discourses of perpetual longing, of an always “not it” and an always receding arrival, yearnings for an eternal return, these became the well-known, well-worn clichés marking the male imaginary and its fantastical quests for the ungraspable object: the shade of the Great Mother; the name of the Almighty Father; the “ringing-stillness of Being”; the *je ne sais quoi*; the *real*. Quests for the faraway object but also routes of escape from it, from the Irresistible seductiveness of Night, Nature and Dionysiac recycling towards the call of individuation, time and the Apollonian (nightmare) of history.

“Tragedy,” writes Nietzsche, “sits in noble ecstasy listening to a sad, distant song which tells of the Mothers of Being, whose names are Wish, Will, Woe” (124). “Child of the double door,” Dionysus is the one who “breaks the spell of individuation and opens a path to the maternal womb of being” (97). Through Dionysiac art, nature advises us “in a voice that rings authentic: ‘Be like me, the Original Mother, who, constantly creating, finds satisfaction in the turbulent flux of appearances’” (102)! The maternal voice “makes us realize that everything that is generated must be prepared to face its painful dissolution. It forces us to gaze into the horror of individual existence” (102), “the eternal wound of being” (108): *eros*, *thanatos*.

Yet, “Tragedy” is not the Mother’s offspring. As Nietzsche informs us, she is the daughter of those two “art sponsoring Deities, Apollo and

Dionysos,” when “at last, by the thaumaturgy of an Hellenic act of will, the pair accepted the yoke of marriage and, in this condition, begot Attic tragedy, which exhibits the salient features of both parents” (19).

Exit Mother. Enter the phantasm of Patrogenesis.

Alas! I, Antigone, was destined to be the issue of two unholy marriages! Of a human, incestuous one which condemned me to individuation, social stigma and death, and of a divine one between two gay Gods “whose mysterious marriage, after long discord, ennobled itself with such a child, at once Antigone and Cassandra” (36). Muddled Genealogy of Mor(t)als! On the one hand, there is the Great Mother's line which infuses me, as Luce Irigaray remarks, with *sang rouge*; on the other, the Olympian Father's *sang blanc*! How wise of you, Sister, to opt for the *semblant* (146-47)! “Thy choice was to live; mine, to die” (Sophocles, *Antigone* 438).

Thus, “by piety,” I earned “the name of impious” (448)! Creon misconstrued my act as a threat to androcentric rule, whereas my only drive was to act in defense of my ritual duties towards the sacred *sang rouge*! Hoping against hope, I knew in advance that I was foredoomed to be a “Bride of Hades,” unable to escape the preordained *topos* that mirrored his potency drive. There was no crisis in gender positions whatsoever. I simply served as the scapegoat in the fierce fight between two powerful institutions: State and Clergy. Consequently, Sophocles structured the plot in such a way as to ensure that I, Antigone, should be goaded on to perform what clerical Laws ordained: the “unclean job.” Can you see the absurdity? The comedy of it all? Me, a saintly rebel in defence of the *status quo*, by hook or by crook upholding my gendered position and ingested, infernal role?

Dear, it is not by accident that the Antigonids base their readings on Sophocles alone. The Oedipeans as well. Euripides they elide. For, not one of them dares unearth the repressed versions of our Saga, to exhume, for example, the titillating past of our grandfather Laius, who was exiled by his kin from his throne and hosted by Pelops, king of Argos; who, once there, fell madly in love and seduced the son of Pelops, Chrysippus; whom his brothers, Atreus and Thyestes, then killed and forced Laius to flee Argos. Whereupon Laius, *faute de mieux*, married our mother Jocasta, and the Oracle prophesied that his son would kill him and marry his mother Jocasta.

Now, to view the Oracle's prediction as something morally “marked” and not strictly as an “if-then” syllogism depends entirely on the subjective

interpretations of the parties involved. For that same Oracle had advised Thyestes that he would avenge himself on the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus Atreus, who had fed him with the cooked flesh of his sons, *if* he were to have another son with his daughter, the priestess Pelopeia. We have no information as to whether Pelopeia willingly agreed or not; it is a fact, however, that she bore her father a son, the famous Aegisthus.

Yet, no one seems to have made a fuss over this “unholy” coupling, or to have written a gory tragedy because Thyestes had both a paternal and a connubial relation to his daughter and, consequently, was both father and grandfather to his son! Which leads one to suspect that perhaps Oedipus’s *hamartia* was his insatiable urge for the *jouissance* which proof would provide him with; namely, that his repressed, incestuous desire had indeed been fulfilled! What is more, “incest” is the surest way of ascertaining the existence of a father and, consequently, of an identity.

Poor Uncle! Little did he realize that it was *his* unspoken desire to challenge *das Ding* by imposing upon the dead body of our brother his proud Decree. For death, as we have all been taught, is supposed to deprive the body of all earthly symbolizations and return it “free” to the “Lord of the Dark Lake” (445). Yet, Creon stubbornly desired to prove that bodies, dead or alive, never escaped the symbolic order and always bore upon them the indelible marks of their social determinations, marks which no ritual ablutions could ever efface. According to his view, dead bodies did not belong by right to Hades but to the *polis*, which had the exclusive right to decide which bodies were good and deserved burial, and which vile objects should be left as prey to the fury of the elements for all to see! Thus, he decided to keep “in this world one who belong[ed] to the gods infernal, a corpse unburied, unhonoured, all unhallowed” (452). He issued the order: let no one dare protect Polyneices’s dead body from being exposed to rot and be *thinged*. Death must die! *Ding-dong*.

The “Mothers of Being” took note of his *hubris*. *Nemesis* ensued. Out of the “sulphurous pit” appeared the ominous signifiers of their cryptic script, which only the androgynous seer could decipher: direful screeching of birds, dank moisture oozing from the burnt offerings, the altars choked with the droppings of dogs and birds, pollution spreading over the countryside and city. The City! Once a paternal object of love, beauty and civic pride, top on the list of eulogistic discourse, now metamorphosed into a horrendous, maternal object fit for the *topos* of censure! Our *Polis* turned inside out: ominous, female signs flowed from the openings of its foul body, shrieks, filthy fluids, faeces. For woman, like nature, writes with her

body. A primordial body dwelling in the land of metaphor. Similes and antitheses it ignores. They are man's exclusive privilege. He alone commands the "as if."

Thus was I, Antigone, goaded to become a Bride of Hades. My unveiled, hanging body *wrote* my death. My suicide was a staged performance which gave me the last and only opportunity of *authoring* a representation of myself. At the moment of death, being simultaneously subject and object, my dis-embodiment embodied my body as a sign: *Soma / Sema*.³ Like our mother Jocasta, I chose to end my life by wrapping around my throat the umbilical cord. I re-coiled back to her, my only.

Yet, even my macabre self-inscription and reunion with the lost, loved object, was appropriated. For, upon seeing my hanging corpse, Haemon violated the sublime *tableau* claiming me as his own. As the Messenger described the poignant scene to hapless Euridice: "he straightway leaned with all his weight against his sword, and drove it, half its length, into his side; and while sense lingered, he clasped the maiden to his faint embrace, and, as he gasped, sent forth on her pale cheek the swift stream of the oozing blood. Corpse enfolding corpse he lies; he hath won his nuptial rites" (456). Thus, the cultural norms which I so blindly obeyed while alive yet strove to invalidate by my death, were re-inscribed *over my dead body*.

Sister, for centuries now, playwrights, directors, psychoanalysts, scholars, phantasize me as their double, see in *me* their own desired reflection. It is not by accident that Sophocles puts into my mouth the following words: "Οὔτοι συνέχθειν ἀλλὰ συμφιλεῖν ἔφυν" (Αντιγόνη 88), "T'is not my nature to join in hating, but in loving" (*Antigone* 436). Yet, this is what I now say to you: until that moment comes when we shall win the right to articulate our own emotions of "pity and fear" ("συνέχθειν"). This phantasy about our "loving nature" is an imposed masquerade reflecting back to man the imaginary self his divided being yearns for.

Dearest, let this letter, this muddled monologue, be read as a lib "ma-mafesta" (Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* 104). Let us all rise against phallogocracy, which "creates a world after its own image" (Marx and Engels 53) and cast away the masks and tasks of "Female Nature," which "has no reality" but "exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy" (75).

Nearing the end of my analysis, I, Antigone, now hope, through this revision of my "drama parapolylogic" (Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* 474), to experience a *catharsis*. Like Medea, I aspire to rise above the *oikos* and with the

3. See Bronfen 141-43.

help of Dr. Euripides's chariot find the courage to fly away from the Master's piece, joining you in freedom.

P.S. Daddy sends his love. *Aristotle University of Thessaloniki
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