

Antigone 2020—on the 60th Anniversary of Dominik Smole’s *Antigone* (An Introduction)

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The myth of Antigone is a familiar fixture in European literature, philosophy, and broader social discourse. The most important articulation of the myth, Sophocles’s *Antigone*, already in antiquity gave rise to some celebrated interpretations and reinterpretations, including Euripides’s (lost) tragedy by the same name and Statius’s *Thebaid*, which was to overshadow even Sophocles’s work in terms of popularity and influence in the Middle Ages (and partly into the early modern era). Numerous translations of Sophocles’s *Antigone* were made in the sixteenth century (for example by Gentian Hervé, Giovanni Gabia, Veit Winshemius, Georgius Ratallerus, Johannes Lalamantius, and Thomas Naogeorgius, among others), followed over the next three centuries by more or less original (early) modern literary versions, reworkings, and supplements to the Antigone myth (by Luigi Alamanni, Robert Garnier, Thomas Watson, Thomas May, Jean Rotrou, Jean Racine, Vittorio Alfieri, and Pierre-Simon Ballanche, among others). In the nineteenth century, mostly thanks to Hegel’s famous interpretation of Sophocles’s tragedy, Antigone became one of the key mythological and literary references in the European philosophical canon. This trend continued in the twentieth century, mainly through the extraordinary influence of Heidegger’s and Lacan’s confrontations with Sophocles’s work.

The twentieth century too showed great interest in the myth of Antigone, most influentially with reference to Jean Anouilh’s famed and controversial *Antigone* (1944). The play’s success led to an unstoppable post-war flood of plays, prose, and poetry with takes on Antigone’s tale that more or less convincingly (dis)place the ancient heroine face to face with modern social and existential challenges. The *Antigone* of Dominik Smole, which was clearly influenced by Anouilh and premiered in 1960, is considered one of the best and most important Slovenian plays of the twentieth century. Even though there prevails a Slovenian consensus on its great aesthetic and thematic value, at the same time, the play has from the beginning inflamed researchers and given rise to disparate and even quite conflicting interpretations. One

of the best surveys of this broad horizon was the colloquium “Antigone ‘80,” organized by the Slovenian Comparative Literature Association on the twentieth anniversary of the opening of Smole’s play.

On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Smole’s *Antigone*, at the SCLA we decided that the time had come for a fresh reckoning with its legacy, as well as a broader reckoning with the myth of Antigone, which has seen a number of influential treatments, marked by Smole, in Slovenia over the past five decades: in literature (Dušan Jovanović, Rade Krstić, Jure Detela, Evald Flisar), literary criticism (Janko Kos, Taras Kermauner, Primož Kozak), theatre (Meta Hočevar, Eduard Miler, Matjaž Berger), philosophy (Tine Hribar, Slavoj Žižek, Lenart Škof), and philology (Kajetan Gantar, Brane Senegačnik, Andreja Inkret). Our main aim has been to tie the rich Slovenian reception of the Antigone myth together with the equally flourishing and interdisciplinary contemporary international interest it has garnered. That is the starting point for the present collection of articles that take us on a picturesque journey from the ancient foundations of the Antigone myth, via the varied responses to the broader Theban mythology in medieval and early modern literature, all the way to the most recent challenges in the literary-critical reception of Sophocles and Smole.

Aleksandar Gatalica is a Serbian writer and translator from ancient Greek, among whose many translations of Greek classics into Serbian we also find Sophocles’s tragedies *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. He outlines the key features and circumstances of the Sophoclean dramatic opus, in which he sees an ancient parallel to Shakespeare’s legacy, particularly as regards its influence, its powers of expression, and specific characteristics of style. In his study, Gatalica focuses on certain dimensions of Sophocles’s legacy that we are not used to seeing foregrounded: e.g. his contribution to the development of theatrical technique, the “economy” of his vocabulary, and the refinement of his verse. In his discussion of Antigone, he stresses that the character already in Sophocles transcends the eponymous tragedy, and that in *Oedipus at Colonus* we meet a kind of “proto-Antigone” who also imparts a fateful charge to the meaning of Sophocles’s most famous work.

Alenka Jensterle Doležal is a writer, literary historian, and expert on the modern reception of the Antigone myth, which she has discussed most exhaustively in the book *Mit o Antigoni v zahodno- in južnoslovanskih dramatikah sredi 20. stoletja* (*The Myth of Antigone in West and South Slavic Drama of the Mid-Twentieth Century*). Her paper

compares Smole's *Antigone* with one of the most prominent responses to Sophocles's heroine in Czech literature (though by critical consensus one of the least successful), the satirical play *Děvka z města Théby* (*The Whore of Thebes*) by the playwright Milan Uhde. Though the author rejects the possibility of mutual influence between the two dramatists, she still recognizes strong commonalities between them, which she largely explains by demonstrating the influence of Anouilh's *Antigone* on both plays; she particularly highlights the character of Creon, whom both Smole and Uhde give an enhanced role compared with the ancient original, and who also functions for both modern writers as a (more or less subtle) critique of the then communist regimes.

Brane Senegačnik is a poet, essayist, classical philologist, and translator, and a leading Slovenian expert on Sophocles and Greek tragedy. He compares Sophocles's and Smole's *Antigone* in terms of how the plays relate to "ultimate reality." This relation is established through the central "absent presences" in the two works: in Sophocles the absent presence of the gods, who do not appear directly in the tragedy, although the entire action is marked by the question of their part in it; in Smole, who portrays a world in which "there are no gods in the true sense of the word—in the sense, that is, of forces that, like in Sophocles, rule over ultimate reality," the absent presence is that of the title character (and at the end of the play also that of the Page, who takes over Antigone's mission). Although Senegačnik, describing Smole's removal of the divine from the Antigone myth (one might also say: *the absent absence* of the gods), raises the question "whether one could possibly be farther away from the world of Sophocles," he nevertheless in the end stresses the decisive spiritual parallels between the two (negative) views of reality: "Similar to how Sophocles's heroine lacks clear knowledge of life after death, Smole's too cannot know what it is like in the mysterious land where Polyneices is. She knows only that it is far from 'this world,' and moreover that it is 'the other side of life' [...]. Just as it is clear from Sophocles's 'ode to man' that man can approach the ultimate reality of life, death, only on his own, so man must also go to Smole's other land, to the other side of life, on his own."

Milosav Gudović is a Serbian philosopher who has previously dealt with the subject matter of Antigone in his treatise *Martin Heidegger in bistvo tragedije* (*Martin Heidegger and the Essence of Tragedy*), which has also been published in *Primerjalna književnost*. He engages with the rich philosophical reception of the first song of the chorus in Sophocles's *Antigone*, which his thoughtful hermeneutic analysis ties to the question of *sacrificialness* as the "original possibility of human existence"

and the “measure of anthropological and existential truth.” Against the problem horizon of Heidegger’s discussion of the relationship between the powerful (*deinón*) and violence in *Antigone*—a discussion that has become highly controversial over the past three decades (especially in light of the stormy reckonings with the philosopher’s political and historical baggage)—Gudovič offers a fresh rethinking of his interpretive framework: Antigone—with all the power of her sacrificial being, which is unveiled by her determined and decisive response to the “first calling,” the “option for brotherhood”—is not just non-violent, she *is non-violence as such*. The wrathful violence of “the ruler’s whim”—which seems to justify itself precisely with an equation of sacrificialness and violence that brooks no appeal (hence with a kind of *hermeneutic violence*)—in the end turns out to be “radically powerless.”

Alen Širca is a comparatist and president of the Slovenian Comparative Literature Association. His study unfolds the rich and turbulent history of the Antigone character from her birth in ancient Greece to the humanist Renaissance, focusing especially on the medieval reception, which has been quite neglected, not only in Slovenian studies of the Antigone myth but also internationally. Širca persuasively demonstrates that this neglect is far from justified, as medieval writers created one of the most unusual and hermeneutically challenging chapters in the 2500-year development of the Antigone mythology. Under the influence of Statius’s *Thebaid*, the Theban motifs became a prominent fixture of the chivalric romance, and in this literary tradition Antigone appeared in a bewilderingly wide range of forms, combining the different characteristics of ancient and medieval female characters in quite bold and arbitrary ways. This dimension of medieval literature reveals its original creativity “which keeps devising new possible receptions of the literature of previous periods and experimenting with new experiences and identities in the frame of its time and place,” while at the same time confronting researchers with “the otherness and difference of the ‘foreign’”—which, contrary to stubborn modern prejudice, “must always be taken seriously.”

In my own paper, I discuss the ending of Sophocles’s *Antigone*, the ingenious portrayal of Creon’s breakdown, remorse, and withdrawal, which is too often overlooked in modern interpretations of this fundamental work of tragedy, focusing as they do above all on the central conflict between Antigone and Creon. A careful analysis of the concluding lines spoken by Creon and the Chorus, both in the original and in the rich tradition of Slovenian translations, and of their broader intellectual-historical context (particularly the Attic under-

standing of the relationship between divine and state law), reveals a challenging theopolitical point that traces the horizon of meaning of Sophocles's entire work. In connection with this finding, the paper develops the concept of negative politics, which provides a framework for understanding the two antagonistic theopolitical paradigms in *Antigone* and how the particular dynamics of the clash between them also foreshadows some recognizable intellectual and social upheavals of (post)modernity.

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