

Antigone's Contests: Pasts and Presents in Scholarship and Performance, ancient and modern

As lutas de Antígona: passado e presente na investigação e representações antigas e modernas

Lorna Hardwick

Open University, UK

Lorna.Hardwick@open.ac.uk

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Introduction

It was an honour and a privilege to be able to celebrate with you all the anniversary of the Carnation Revolution in Portugal. The significance of this struggle for a democratic polity and the associated recognition of post-colonial politics and culture are landmarks in the cultural memory as well as marking staging posts in the constant struggle for humanistic values, past, present and future. The significance of the anniversary and the emblem of the carnation were recognised in a programme broadcast on BBC radio earlier in April 2024, in which the distinguished journalist Jon Snow recalled his presence in Portugal as a news reporter at that time.

In modern times, the figure of Antigone has become an emblem in the struggle for liberty from oppression. Antigone provides a fitting focus for a conference that celebrates the 50th anniversary of the carnation revolution in Portugal. The themes in Sophocles' play include fratricide, the fear and genesis of civil strife, crises in the exertion of power, the ethical and political dilemmas faced by ruling groups, and the violent and tragic effects of non-peaceful resolution of conflicts.¹ This essay starts by mentioning some of the contexts and performance styles in

¹ The importance of these themes over the centuries and in places, cultures, theatrical contexts and political situations world-wide has featured extensively in recent scholarship, for example Mee and Foley, 2011; Morais *et al.*, 2017; Fradinger, 2023.

which contemporary concerns have shaped interpretation, translation, adaptation and performance of Sophocles' text. The main part of the discussion then poses the question of whether 'present' concerns have appropriated the play in ways that marginalise or even repress some aspects of Sophocles' text. 'Presentism' has often been used by classicists as a term of disapprobation in order to criticise subsequent receptions of ancient texts, sometimes with the implication that there is a fixed meaning to be discovered if the ancient text is considered philologically within the context of its composition and performance, and that 'presentist' interpretations subvert this.

The main issues surrounding issues of immediacy and presentism are: Firstly (i) there is a variety of 'presentist' perspectives. Some presentist perspectives are inevitable in scholarly work as well as in the creative processes attached to performance and spectating. The 'present' (any present) is one node in a network of mediations and receptions. The 'histories' of interpretation, philological analysis and performance include nodal points, each of which operates in its own 'present' as well as exercising a mediating function that looks both backwards and sideways and opens the way for future realisations. The concerns, life experiences and cultural and ethical hinterlands of the practitioners and scholars working with Sophocles' *Antigone* inevitably have a shaping role in the agency associated with the play because their life experiences and socio-cultural orientations are not confined to those of ancient Greece. The same is true of readers and spectators who, wittingly or unwittingly, relate the play to their own 'present'. These 'present' concerns can generate a positive engagement with the ancient text and context. They only become negative if they are unacknowledged and if they close down meaning.

Secondly, (ii), typologies of mediation. Recent scholarship has engaged constructively with issues of mediality and its relationship with 'immediacy'. Pan-telis Michelakis summarised the main features succinctly and helpfully in his Introduction to the edited collection *Classics and Media Theory*, which included studies of media and of cultural processes. Commenting on the relationships between transmission and perception, Michelakis identified three metaphorical applications of the concept of 'mediality'. These are (i) media as conduits; (ii) media as languages; (iii) media as environments. All of these are relevant to analysis of how and in what form any reception of Sophocles' *Antigone* has come about. Individually and in combination, they deepen and extend the notion of mediality in classical reception so that mediality is not just limited to the functions of intertexts that in some sense 'transmit' the ancient texts to subsequent audiences and readers. The extensions embrace performance cultures and styles, modes of production (including the signals carried by words, images, singing, dancing). Adding the notion of mediation in and through environments introduces the conceptual and the perceptual processes that interpret and categorise through space, time and memory (which may be all or some of technical, cultural, imaginative, Michelakis, 2020, pp. 4-5). In Michelakis' view:

All knowledge about Greece and Rome is mediated knowledge. It is based on the material remains of texts and artefacts, and on the cultural practices and traditions with which those remains are interwoven and which have made their survival pos-

sible. How do we consider the complexities of cultural transmission in ways that allow us to account for what comes between long-dead senders and ever-changing receivers? (Michelakis, 2020, p. 7)

Thirdly, (iii), mediality and presentism in Sophocles. Philological and performative analysis of Sophocles' play demonstrates that the tragedian himself was engaged in a form of mediation of myth to drama and that his creativity had elements of 'presentist' activity. The narratives associated with Antigone and her family were adapted and augmented through a lens that reflected the social, religious and political urgencies of fifth-century Athens, especially the contested relationships between funerary traditions and social cohesion, and the transfer of power from aristocratic families to the democracy of the *polis*.

The approach taken in this essay will be to probe engagements in a particular context between the formal aspects of the texts, the cultural politics of the perceptual and interpretative lenses, and the opportunity offered by comparative studies to identify and account for the 'roads not taken' as well as those that have been, are, and may be in the future. Analysis of the relationship between ancient and modern 'presentisms' enhances both scholarly commentary and critique of tragedy in performance. Sophocles' play provides a site of temporal and metaphorical space that promotes and provokes further experimentation and engagement between ancient and modern, to the benefit of both.

The theme of this celebratory conference facilitated the analysis and comparison of narratives of different kinds. Writing in 2013 about the possibility of a 'Democratic Turn' in classical reception studies, Katherine Harloe noted how:

stories about the classical past continue to shape contemporary cultural, political and social ideas and practices: consequently, there is a role for critical questioning of those stories [...]. A 'democratic' researcher ought to be committed to using his or her authority to complicate those stories, widen their cast of characters, and open up debates over their meaning, rather than to close them down. (Harloe, 2013, p. 12)

Harloe's point about different kinds of 'narrative' to put alongside and challenge the traditionally hegemonic ones, and for newer narratives to challenge each other, is reflected in important recent and ongoing research, including traditional topics and also newer cross-disciplinary areas of investigation such as fugitive studies, analysis of discourses of nomadology, travel and frontiers, and in theoretical frames around border theory and colonially imposed difference in which local and metropolitan converge and diverge.² To this I would also add the imperative to include for critical analysis the 'narratives' about the classical past, its mediations into the present. Professor Maria de Fatima Silva has summarised the complexity and inter-dependence of the processes involved in researching

² All these themes reflect fruitful material embedded in the ancient texts, as discussed in Emily Greenwood's seminar paper for the Herodotus Helpline (Greenwood, 2021).

specific cultural contexts within the histories and narratives attached to receptions of ancient texts. Commenting on the trajectories involved in Lusophone classical reception scholarship she observed that:

The Greek – Latin heritage is also a perennial source of inspiration for Portuguese-language literature, especially in Portugal and Brazil, in a continuous and endless process of re-visits and re-significations [...] at the level of literary history, far from simplistic and linear visions, the complex and endless process of reception always implies a large number of variables, originating plural readings that interpenetrate, add and sediment with the passing of the centuries... [writers] stay in a constant tension between conservation and innovation, tradition and originality. (Silva *et al.*, 2022, xviii–xix)³

The intellectual and cultural journeys described by Professor Fatima and her colleagues (I almost wanted to call them Odysseys) mirror those in the ancient texts. For example, Carol Dougherty has drawn attention to encounter as a type of connection:

As a poem steeped in improvisation at every level – poetic, thematic, cultural – the *Odyssey* offers us the perfect opportunity to explore the *unexpected encounter* as a useful theoretical framework for reading classical and contemporary texts together as well. (Dougherty, 2019, p. 9, italics added)

The unexpected encounter and its effects on narratives surrounding Antigone will feature in my discussion. The ‘narratives’ that I am primarily concerned with in this essay are: the ‘story’ of Antigone and her family embedded in myth and in the flexibility surrounding the use and development of myth; the narratives of interpretation attached to the Sophoclean text itself in antiquity and subsequently; its performance and translation histories; and the hermeneutic, cultural and political narratives which have shaped modern perceptions of the importance of the story of Antigone. Here, I point just to two aspects. The first is the outstanding recent scholarship that has resituated Sophocles’ Antigone as a global literary and performance text. In addition to the 2017 edited volume published by Brill and edited by scholars in Portugal (Morais *et al.*, eds.), two especially pertinent examples are: the volume edited by Erin B. Mee and Helene P. Foley *Antigone on the Contemporary World Stage* (2011) and the recently published monograph by Moira Fradinger, *Antigonas: Writing from Latin America* (2023).

In their Introduction ‘Mobilizing Antigone’, Mee and Foley addressed the implications of placing *Antigone* in contemporary and global contexts:

The scope of this book might seem to imply that *Antigone*, and by extension Greek drama as a whole, is ‘universal’. However, our focus on performance allows us to see the play/figure not as an exemplar of ‘universal high Western culture’ but as a play/figure that has been remade in and on other terms, and consequently now ‘belongs’ to the word in a wide variety of forms [...]. Collectively, artists discussed

³ For further discussion of levels of awareness and the implications, see Hardwick, 2018; Foster, 2020; and the introduction to Hardwick, Harrison and Vandiver, 2024.

in this volume look at the Antigone story as a global rather than a Western property, to be reimagined, remixed and appropriated in response to specific historical, cultural and artistic needs. (Mee and Foley, 2011, pp. 3, 4-5)

Mee and Foley also point out that appropriations of the play/figure are provisional and not mutually exclusive – for example, in their book essays by Moira Fradinger and Fiona Macintosh respectively designate the play as the ‘national’ play of Argentina and of Ireland, thus ‘dislocating an unquestioned assumption about whose culture – and which time period – *Antigone* belongs to’ (Mee and Foley, 2011, p. 5). The ‘mobilization’ metaphor is given further force when they cite Edward Ziter’s comment on the commonalities in the receiving contexts: “There’s a reason people are interested in Antigone. We’re in an age of civil war and bodies are being left on the ground unburied” (Mee and Foley, 2011, pp. 5-6, quoting Ziter’s email to Erin B. Mee). I shall mention more recent examples later in the discussion.

In her 2023 monograph Moira Fradinger moved beyond the case study of Argentina that she had contributed to the earlier Mee and Foley volume and produced a finely documented and analysed study of Latin American receptions, including Hispanic, Lusophone, Creole and polyphonic vernacular. Many of these rewritings and performances were interventionist, generated by acute crises and marking watersheds. In her substantial Introduction to the monograph, Fradinger discussed the long and complex histories and distinctive features of classical receptions in Latin America and emphasises how they are resistant to the categorisations and conceptual frames imposed by assumptions about European imperial projects. In her research Fradinger directly confronted the issue of ‘what is to be done’ for those texts to be read within what she called ‘classics and comparative literature’s deracinating regimes of legibility’, that is: how dialogue can be established and political consciousness of change facilitated, without erasure of its contributing cultures and perspectives (Fradinger, 2023, p. 17). She pointed out how the increasing evidence about the genesis and impact of realisations of the play/figure of Antigone enables comparisons which reveal similarities but also resist generalisations that smooth out difference:

As transnational patterns take shape, the character of Antigona appears as a prism through which to catch a glimpse of similarities in postrevolutionary cultural dynamics through Spanish, Portuguese and French America...[exposing] a regional diversity, challenging any imagined uniformity we may want to assign the spectral entelechy named ‘Latin America’. (Fradinger, 2023, p. 4)

In the sections of the Introduction that discuss her methodology Fradinger emphasises the need to reset investigative frameworks and to consider vernacular play-texts as cultural artefacts in their own right, rather than as ‘translations’ of a Greek text, which would reinstate the associations with Europe and the histories of classicism as dominant:

A vernacular Antigone may be a sister, a cousin, a fellow traveler, a friend, a listener – and an insurgent at, times, with respect to other Antigonas or Antigones [...] a vernacular demands immersion in the political contingency of any given time and place. (Fradinger, 2023, pp. 40-41)

Fradinger's approach is consistent with (although not identical with) ways in which classical reception scholarship is exploring different and 'stretched' taxonomies in its mapping of the relationship between ancient and modern texts. The diffusion of Greek and Roman material and the varied starting points from which it is accessed and interpreted by scholars, practitioners, readers, and spectators has required methods and taxonomies that go beyond identifying intertextualities and direct allusions. They now include, for example, notions of 'affinity'; 'association' (such as responses to places and attributes of iconic figures from myth and history); encounters that may be 'glancing' (in which neither text is totally absorbed into the other); 'ghosting' (when traces survive into a reception but may lie dormant until resurrected by the reader's or practitioner's sensibility); and improvising and riffing (terms taken from music and used to indicate how a passage or theme may be taken from an ancient text and reworked, exploring variations before returning to the basic theme. That carries resonances with the notion of ring composition in epic, itself an oral art form, in which the poets 'sang', and is a further point of contact with oral cultures in the modern world.⁴

All these concepts provide tools for scholars and readers to map how ancient and modern may relate to one another, how those connections have been mediated, and how connections may be made that work across different cultural traditions. A helpful model is that of the rhizome, in which there are various points of entry that enable connections while also facilitating different pathways. For example, a scholar or practitioners or student who has a background in modern literature or performance or international relations may be drawn into the rhizome through an awareness of 'associations'. In the process, they may acquire knowledge of Greek and Roman material and its contexts that enables them to enter the rhizome at a different point and from a different perspective in the future. The same may apply to the interested general reader. The process also has a reverse side, in which a person knowledgeable in the classics will encounter material from other contexts, times, languages, and genres that extends and refines their own knowledge base and horizons of understanding. Reception scholarship creates and borrows useful terms to highlight phases and levels in these processes. An important distinction is between 'high' and 'low'-intensity awareness of Greek and Roman texts and figures. Low-intensity awareness might involve recognition of and some familiarity with the names of key figures such as Achilles, or Herakles, or Pericles, or Augustus, or even of Homer, or Virgil, and of course Antigone, but without detailed knowledge of the multiple implications of their provenance. For example, the popular idea of Homer might be to mistakenly regard the poet as simply a 'poet of war'. Low-intensity awareness can be transformed into greater intensity at moments of 'heightened awareness', when particular situations, figures, images, and texts take on an enhanced profile – for instance, in times of war or civil conflict, or when leading writers and

⁴ For fuller discussion of taxonomies, see the Introduction to Hardwick, Harrison and Vandiver, 2024.

theatre and film practitioners work with particularly iconic examples.⁵ So far as Antigone is concerned, popular awareness of her story has varied through the centuries and in different cultural and political contexts: she might be variously regarded as a 'freedom fighter', a proponent of female authority, a symbol of custodianship of traditional religion and funerary practices.⁶

Jacques Bromberg has usefully summarised the implications of the 'global' reach of classical material and its receptions:

[Global Classics] is predicated on three core suppositions. The first is that global issues are not only transnational but transhistorical... [secondly] classics is ideally positioned to add in important ways to discussion of global issues, which are too complex to approach from a single disciplinary perspective... [thirdly] the field of classics itself is at a crossroads, faced with questions of relevance and issues of access and inclusivity that threaten its existence. (Bromberg, 2021, pp. 6-7)

Bromberg's approach implies alternative spatialities and temporalities and also notices the 'existential' turn, in which the discipline of classical study and the texts from Greece and Rome struggle to disassociate themselves from past appropriations by class, gender and imperial hegemonies. Conceptually, cultural and literary studies have been marked by a series of 'turns'. 'Turn' is shorthand for a shift in the focus of enquiry, and in the methods and critical frameworks used. In classical reception studies the translation turn, the cultural turn, and the performative turn have all been influential. This last not only gave performance studies a central role but also encouraged reception scholars to consider the implications of performative speech in all situations, including its interaction with the contexts in which language was produced and used. To these 'turns' might be added the 'democratic turn' and the 'postcolonial turn', in which Greek and Roman material is recognized as an agent in resistance to colonial domination. More recently, two more 'turns' have proved important. The 'global turn' has promoted awareness of the study and use of Greek and Roman material worldwide,⁷ but this brings its own problems in concepts and methods, and is far from being a panacea for the decentring of classical study and knowledge from many public domains. The 'existential turn' is a shorthand name I use to highlight the concern that the role of Greek and Roman antiquity in the cultural and political histories of western European colonizing regimes has not only destroyed its modern status but also carries a toxic legacy from antiquity itself in seeding misogyny and slavery as social norms.⁸ The concept of the 'existential turn' also

⁵ See further Hardwick 2018 and 2022b.

⁶ The Table of Contents in Mee and Foley 2011 gives some idea of the modern range of associations.

⁷ See especially Bromberg, 2021.

⁸ See further Zuckerberg, 2019. For a measured analysis of classical receptions in various contexts of cultural and political trauma, see the essays in Richardson, 2019. Hardwick, 2021, addresses some of the issues involved in working critically on the past without either sanitizing or repres-

recognises that access to and knowledge about Greek and Roma antiquity is difficult to access and no longer has a central role in public awareness. Retreat can be a prelude to demise. A ‘softer’ term to describe the current situation of the study of Greek and Roman antiquity, but which nevertheless draws on both global and existential ‘turns’, is ‘postclassical’.⁹

However, it seems to me that the concept of an ‘existential turn’ has some positive aspects, including recognition of the need to recognise and address what is in the ancient texts and contexts themselves, rather than to repress the ‘dark underbelly’, or even to abandon study of Greek and Roman antiquity altogether. To focus only on what has been selected or added through the centuries would be to underplay the extent to which the seeds of questioning and debate are a core part of the formal and deliberative aesthetic of an ancient text. Sophocles’ *Antigone* provides a prime site for investigation of those aspects and for re-evaluation of the contribution that the study of antiquity and its receptions can make to the understanding of modern dilemmas and the crises and debates that surround them (see further Hardwick, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022b, 2023).

The Mee and Foley volume and the Fradinger monograph examine regional and global diversity and resist totalizing narratives.¹⁰ This also has implications for any enduring notions that classical texts provide examples to be emulated. Just as perceptions of cultural provenance and its associated authority have changed, so shifts have taken place in attitudes to exemplarity. Two quotes from essays focusing on temporalities and perceptions of the exemplary function of classical texts and ideas make the point:

While the exemplary use of the past has not completely vanished in the modern age, the uniqueness of epochs makes direct juxtapositions of different events rather problematic and if such juxtapositions want to claim some plausibility they have to take into account and weigh the cultural setting of the events that are compared with one another. (Grethlein, 2011, pp. 247-8)

Grethlein’s problematizing of exemplarity was further explored by Alexandra Lianeri, who explored the implications for critical uses of exemplarity and for the temporal frames of judgement:

[Grethlein] explores how the two historians[Herodotus and Thucydides] break with other commemorative genres by *deploying exempla for critical, rather than legitimising or glorifying purposes*, and by introducing into their narratives forms of action that challenge the temporalities of exemplary historiography.....By contrast the modern critique of exemplary history expressed the feeling that the future is open and

sing key issues. Hardwick, 2025, address the impact on classical reception studies of the notion of ‘turns’.

⁹ For a considered and penetrating analysis, see the Postclassicisms Collective, 2020.

¹⁰ The concept ‘omni-local’ has been discussed by Emily Greenwood, as a means of acknowledging global spread but without implying universality. A series of ‘local’ contexts avoids notions of diffusion from a centre or cultural hegemony (Greenwood, 2013). There are also potential connections with network theory.

can be shaped, while contingency had to be construed not so much as chance but rather as freedom to act'. (Lianeri, 2011, pp. 26-7, emphasis added).

Fradinger's research and the contributions of Grethlein and Lianeri on critical approaches to concepts of exemplarity and temporality lead directly into the second vital aspect of the implications of 'narratives'. They open the way to a deeper imperative – to do what Adorno in his essay 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past' categorised as 'seriously working upon the past' (Adorno, 2005, p. 89). This includes working on the ancient texts and contexts, as well as on how they have been mediated, refigured and interpreted in dynamic situations of conflict and urgency. This point was a crucial one for the commemorative conference from which the current volume has emerged. Adorno's 'working seriously upon the past' encapsulates the underlying dynamic involved in bringing together the Carnation Revolution and Greek drama. It provides a basis and rationale for enquiry but, as Professor Maria de Fatima Silva's comment indicated, the scope has to be extended to include working through interactions and mediations as well as on present realisations.

At this point I should comment briefly on the associations carried by the term 'the Present'. 'Presentism' has sometimes been used to denigrate work in classical reception studies by suggesting that the cultures of Greece and Rome are valued and interpreted only in the light of the concerns and lenses of the present. It has even been suggested that study of the post-classical histories of ancient texts automatically accepts the view that the study of history is only valid in so far as it enables the drawing of conclusion for the present. Such a claim is of course a travesty. A more nuanced analysis is needed of how the present plays a part in 'seriously working upon the past'. It is true that there is a sense in which the lens of the present always has a role in studying the past – the choice of texts and research questions, of teaching themes, of concepts and lived experience brought to bear in interpretation. That is true of all scholarship, as well as of readers, performers, translators, and practitioners. No scholar is working in a vacuum. No scholar, however learned, could be totally and solely a product of antiquity. That is one reason why transparency in explaining the choice of research questions and stating research methods is so important. Comparatively little attention has been given to how and why research questions are generated, how they are formulated, how questions shape research methods (and therefore impact on outcomes), and how scholars persuade others (including the wider public as well as their own peers) that the questions are important, the methods sound, and the judgements convincing. The personal, social and disciplinary histories involved in the identification of particular questions and problems as requiring investigation, the development of concepts and theoretical frames for addressing them, and decisions about how the results might best be tested and

evaluated all provide dense intellectual textures that need to be explained and communicated transparently¹¹.

Scholars of ancient Greek and Roman face particular challenges in fulfilling those obligations since the worlds of antiquity and the present day are multi-faceted, culturally and politically, and are both distant and in various metaphorical and material ways still present (Hardwick, 2021, p. 11). It is often the case that new directions in scholarship and questioning of 'conventional wisdoms' are generated by present concerns. Vindication of the importance of studying antiquity involves both respect for the ancient cultures and determination to combine critical thinking about antiquity and about subsequent times and places. Moreover, when researchers and teachers are dealing with texts and contexts across many centuries, places and languages, there is no such thing as one distinct 'present'. The sense of the 'present' is infused with the past, whether recognised or implicit. In turn, the past is made up of many different 'presents', visible and invisible, which is why attention to mediations, intertexts and self-reflexiveness in scholarship and teaching are so vital, and why the commemorative focus of this particular conference on freedom and oppression sets a clear frame for investigation of an ancient text, its figures, ideas and performative function and its relationship with subsequent events and political urgencies.

Every cultural event has a complex relationship with both its present and its past. Professor Edith Hall's paper at the beginning of the conference referenced the ways in which Sophocles' play was itself a work of reception, working on and selecting from different threads in the Antigone story to create a work that was both part of that tradition and through which he explored innovations that also spoke to his 'present'. In her essay in the Mee and Foley volume referred to above, Hall highlighted how Sophocles' location of his play in Thebes provided an inward-looking community setting for the traumatic events:

The strife-ridden mythical city of Thebes that these performers brought to dramatic life has come to serve as an infinitely transferable symbol of civil war. Yet, to Sophocles and his audience it was a very specific and concrete location... The rich and powerful city of Thebes was always an important player in politics beyond its own borders. (Hall, 2011, p. 52)

Hall emphasised that the community portrayed in the play does not allude extensively to the broader geo-political context. Sophocles narrowed the focus. All the main characters and Chorus are members of the same *polis*, and most of them members of the same family. The other side of that coin was the question of accountability – how should the ruling class balance the competing imperatives of present exigencies and past traditions if it was to justify retention of its status and power?

Professor Hall has also drawn attention to how the sophisticated political allegory embedded in Sophocles' play became a touchstone for political orators in

¹¹ These issues and related questions about 'engaged scholarship' and 'identity scholarship' formed the basis for the discussion in Hardwick, 2021.

the 4th century BCE (Hall, 2011, p. 57), illustrating how reception and mediation were active in the ancient world. So far as Sophocles' development of the 'story', via the theme and in his language is concerned, the 5th century BCE context is important¹² Sophocles was steeped in personal experience of the requirements and contexts of leadership and public service, both in management of the public finances (443-432 BCE), and as a *strategos* in the Samian War (441-430 BCE). He had personal experience of decision-making at times of crisis. His awareness of the social and political implications of funerary conventions was acute, especially regarding the stresses of changes in aristocratic funeral conventions to those of the *polis*. He was likely to have been familiar with the details of the social and political issues that underlay the *Epitaphios* attributed to Pericles (Thucydides 2. 34-46), in which Pericles is presented as justifying the move from family to *polis* oversight of the funerals of those killed in battle. In the Athens of the mid fifth century BCE, the public funeral then acquired the status of an event that symbolized and sustained the cohesion of different status groups in the Athenian democracy.¹³

The limited community portrayed in Sophocles' *Antigone* defined strictly the criteria for 'belonging', and excluded those who then had no home to receive them. This led subsequently to Sophocles' exploration of the theme of exile in *Oedipus at Colonus* and to the reimagining of the Antigone narrative in modern contexts of displacement and diaspora, as well as in contexts of stasis (civil strife within a state. In her 2011 essay 'Antigone in Egypt', the scholar and theatre critic Nehad Selaiha discussed examples from Egyptian theatre. *Antigone* was first staged in Egypt in 1965 and Selaiha described the context as 'the height of Egypt's socialist/nationalist era, exactly thirteen years after the coup d'état that had brought Nasser to power, and less than two years before the disastrous six day war with Israel.....the regime has replaced the old aristocracy with a newer, more corrupt, and greedier military one' (Selaiha, 2011, pp. 343-4). Selaiha discussed how the more recent history of productions in Egypt responded to the crises of global and regional crises, including the second Palestinian Intifada (uprising). Antigone 'recovered her status as a potent, multifaceted political symbol'. An iconic example of *Antigone* in performance was Frank Bradley's 2002 production at the American University in Cairo, in which the Programme Notes and the scenery that replicated a destroyed city aligned the play with 'those who inhabit the fallen cities of the West Bank and Gaza'. Antigone was identified in the eyes of many spectators and critics as a freedom fighter and martyr, following the suicide of Waafa Idris, a secular paramedic who had blown herself up in

¹² That Sophocles' play became a paradigm is shown by fourth-century revivals, the extended geographical range of performances and by citations by orators, for example in the normalisation of the 'ship of state' metaphor deployed by Creon in his *rhesis* on the nature of government (*Antigone* lines 162-210).

¹³ See Hardwick (1993) for discussion of the political context of the public funeral and the text of the *Epitaphios* in the first year of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta and their respective allies.

protest¹⁴. However, the director made clear that his concept did not limit the scope of the play to one example: 'Although Antigone was interpreted by many who saw it as a comment on the situation in Palestine, I did not set out to make a political statement on the 2nd Intifada but rather sought to allow the play's story to resonate against the background of the numerous fallen cities of recent years, from Sarajevo to Ramulla, to Kabul, to New York'.

Discussion of the geo-political range of Sophocles' play and the effects on staging and play-texts has also been enhanced by further case studies drawn from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in the recent volume *Greek Tragedy and the Middle East*, edited by Pauline Donizeau, Yassaman Khajehi and Daniela Potenza (2024). This includes an essay by Astrid Chabrit-Kajdan on the 2011 production at the Palestinian National Theatre in Jerusalem, directed by Adel Hakim. This was a partnership production between French and Palestinian theatre companies and was part of a project aiming at sustainable collaboration.¹⁵ The creation of the acting script raised key issues of the relationship between translation and adaptation.¹⁶ The performances took place mainly outside Palestine, and the language requirements of those spectators conditioned the translation process. There was 'double translation' from Greek to Arabic, and from Arabic to French (for the sub-titles). Furthermore, the choice of Egyptian Arabic, rather than Palestinian Arabic, was said to have been because of the poetic qualities of the former, but inevitably made the performance less likely to engage with the populations of Palestinian towns and villages.

The director modified Sophocles' text in one important respect, deleting the allusive and difficult but potentially cathartic fifth choral ode (Sophocles *Antigone* 944-987¹⁷) and replacing it with a poem by the distinguished writer Mahmoud Darwish (born in Galilee, Palestine 1941, died in the USA 2008)¹⁸. Darwish's poem 'On this Earth' meditates on what makes life worth living. It opens with the line 'On this earth what makes life worth living' and moves the focus from Thebes to the wider world, via the early days of spring, Aeschylus, a sun clock in a prison, and Palestine (English version in Chabrit-Kajdan, 2024, p. 170). The poet's voice was broadcast to the audience and the words of the poem projected in French and Arabic on the back wall of the stage. Chabrit-Kajdan's analysis proposes that the Sophocles and Darwish texts are actually aligned, in form, musical resonance, length, and above all in 'advocating for the same val-

¹⁴ For photographic images of the staging, see Selaiha 2011 and for documentation of the production, including comments by the director, see <https://www5.open.ac.uk/arts/research/greek-plays/> ID 2716 (accessed 29/10/24)

¹⁵ The political and logistical difficulties encountered in this and similar collaborations are discussed pp. 163-6.

¹⁶ For detailed discussion of adaptation and a wide range of examples, see Liapis and Sidiropoulou, eds., 2021.

¹⁷ See the discussion in Griffith. 1999, ad loc.

¹⁸ Darwish's poetry has been translated into more than twenty languages. He was imprisoned for his literary and political commitments to Palestinian independence, and as a consequence lived much of his life in exile.

ues' (Chabrit-Kaidan, 2024, p. 71). The impact made by the insertion of the poem as the only main change from Sophocles is additionally significant because the intervention is not directly didactic but is a poetic invocation of experiences and sensibilities shared beyond the immediate political situation.¹⁹ In that sense it is an alteration that respects the spirit of the Sophoclean appeal to a combination of mythical allusion and the agency of an audience's imagination in making the ode specific to their circumstances.

My next comment – based on the question of 'how' Sophocles framed these issues, has to be on the structure and dramatic conventions of Greek tragedy. The importance of the formal aspects – especially the relationships between the episodic structure, the *agon*, the stichomythia, framed by choral comment – are crucial to the way in which the play has provoked receptions that are both Interventionist and Deliberative. Deliberation takes many forms. Sophocles challenges not only the protagonists within the play and the supporting characters but also the spectators. The *agon* as a theatrical convention provides a framework not only for the presentation of opposing views, but for engagement between them – response to arguments, and quick repartee through stichomythia. This is nested within the episodic structure of the play, which progressively reveals further nuances. The initial debate between Antigone and her sister Ismene about the appropriateness or otherwise of female political engagement, is followed by the oppositional *agon* between Antigone and Creon in the second episode. In turn, Creon's intransigence is challenged in the third episode by his son Haemon, and in the fifth by the seer Tiresias. When Creon eventually changes his mind and orders the release of Antigone, it is too late to save Antigone, his own son, or his wife. Antigone, too, has refused to change her mind. The play is in part a study of the effects of intransigence, when both cases have some merit but both are inadequate as ways of negotiating political and social change or of reconciling the valid but competing claims of kinship and civic duty. Intransigence on both sides leads to misery and death. Although Antigone has often been regarded as emblematic of a freedom fighter in modern adaptations (Selaiha, 2011; Torrance, 2020; Zandieh, 2024)²⁰, she can equally be portrayed as the custodian of traditional religious values. Some modern contexts allow her to be portrayed as both. It seems to me, however, that Sophocles' text and the dramatic structure and theatrical conventions that he deploys actually make argument, deliberation and the conditions surrounding decision making the central focus for scholars, students, practitioners and spectators, rather than privileging the didactic statement of any one view.

¹⁹ See Hardwick 2022a for discussion of *metanoia* and the relationship between the formal elements in tragedy and changes of mind.

²⁰ Zandieh (2024) considers the figure of Antigone in modern Iran, exploring the nature of *antigonian resistance*, especially the 2022 Women, Life and Freedom movement, and situating Iranian examples alongside theoretical scholarship.

In the final section of this exploration, I would like to try to widen the lens and reflect on how the symbiosis of the anniversary of the Carnation Revolution and the focus on Sophocles' play *Antigone* also has global and temporal implications. The histories and the urgencies of the disciplines associated with classical study represent a microcosm of the challenges facing human society and its politics – both cultural and governmental. Studying Greek and Roman antiquity and its receptions brings the advantages of working with material that is both distant and present. It is an area of study, a site of performativity and a sphere of deliberation that carries with it the potential to move into vacant spaces and to create new spaces. Working seriously on the past, the present, and the future has always required and will continue to require distinctive qualities of commitment accompanied by determination to achieve the dispassionate assembly and analysis of evidence. Just as necessary is the ability to communicate and evaluate radical perspectives without being distracted by the rhetoric of the 'culture wars' that are disfiguring modern political discourse, distracting attention from attention to the underlying social and cultural dynamics and associated power structures.

Classical scholarship used to associate itself and be associated with intellectual, cultural and ethical hegemony. Then it was pushed to the margins. Now I see signs of recuperation, not least through the research and debate that is exemplified in this conference. Strikingly, this recuperation also marks a paradigm shift. Classical scholars and practitioners, and through them the informed general public, now have the opportunity to appreciate and critique the texts and performances of past and present. The diachronic, synchronic, spatial and linguistic histories of the field are included in processes that help to shape the cultural, intellectual and affective climate of the future. Classical texts, including those regarded as canonical, are important not because they are considered 'timeless' and so not imbricated in quotidian concerns but rather because they are of *every* time, and *every* place. Each instance has its own depth and resonances, both with its own contexts and with others. For that reason, analysis of forms, language and conventions of genre has to work together with analysis of historical context and modes of dissemination. Fiona Macintosh has summed this up acutely when she wrote about the importance of close textual work (including on vernacular translations, adaptations and performance texts)²¹:

the context-driven work of many diachronic studies [...] results in very little close textual work. Performance histories need to combine diachronic awareness with synchronic depth, together with formalist analysis of the texts in question. Form, as Jauss knew all too well, is always more or less political. (Macintosh, 2008, p. 251)

The series of 'presents' in and through which classical material has been created, communicated, experienced and re-energised helps us not only to 'work

²¹ This aspect is reflected in the increased recognition of the importance of archival work in all areas of classical reception studies.

seriously' on the past, but to envisage and create futures that are sensitive to the past and to its mediations, but are not bounded by teleologies, or by closures of meaning, or by temptations to sanitise the past or the present. Recent scholarship has engaged with this constellation of issues in different ways. Edmund Richardson reflected in the Introduction to *Classics in Extremis* that:

If it [sc.classical reception] is to fulfil its potential as a field, it cannot simply aim to effect a 'land-grab' – a radical expansion of the material that falls under the discipline of 'classics' – but must also come to terms with the obligation of finding different ways of understanding that material [...]. This decentred classics acknowledges the limits of all attempts to claim authority over the past, including our own. It embraces diversity over discipline, in both the subject matter it addresses, and the voices it listens to: not simply as a political position, but in a statement about how classical discourse has always operated [...] there will always be cracks in the façade, shifts in power – and opportunities to tell a different kind of story [...]. This is a classics which listens to different voices, however alarming; which understands the ways in which unfamiliar perspectives may yield profound insights. (Richardson, 2019, pp. 11–12)

The varied approaches to Sophocles' *Antigone* which were discussed in the commemorative conference, and which have featured in recent scholarship, provide a microcosm of this point²². Richardson's approach recognised the 'fragility' of classical material, both in terms of awareness of it in the contemporary public imagination, and in the ethical and political implications revealed by study of its appropriation over the centuries. In a recent book chapter Joy Connolly reflected on the perspective offered by the critical philosophy of Hannah Arendt, and especially Arendt's reading of Plato, Cicero and Virgil. Connolly commented that:

For Arendt the canon's embedment in the distant past is not an obstacle, but precisely what legitimates it as a dialogical partner in generating new thinking in the present. What leads Arendt to classical texts [...] is precisely the temporal double bind they inhabit: they orient themselves towards both past *and* future. Of classical literature Arendt asks, and directs us to ask, not only what, who, when, or why, but [...] how. How are we related to these texts here? How have others conducted their relations to them?... We would not be reading these texts today but for the tradition constructed by past readers. And what is the ethics implied by this? (Connolly, 2018, p. 314).

It seems to me that to the focus on philosophical and literary texts adopted by Arendt and Connolly, we must add the multi-faceted role of performance texts, and in particular Greek tragedy, and in particular among tragedians, Sophocles, and in particular among Sophocles' plays, the *Antigone*. The histories of performance, adaptation and translation of the play, its inspiration of rigorous analytic scholarship, its dynamic role in interacting with global contexts and its continu-

²² The figure and story of Antigone has also been resituated in modern fiction, for example in Kamila Shamsie's prize-winning 2017 novel *Home Fire*, in which the Antigone story is reworked in a narrative of two sisters and their radicalised brother in modern London.

ing agency in fermenting debate have been central to the work presented in this conference. The play exemplifies how original work engages with its pasts, with its present contexts, and with the futures that it seeds and sometimes anticipates. The histories and modalities of *Antigone* (in myth, in textual ‘play’ and in performance) bring together Adorno’s insistence on ‘seriously working on the past’ and Arendt’s insistence on the vitality of classical texts as dialogical partners with other pasts, other presents, and alternative futures.²³

I would like to conclude with a quotation from a Nobel Laureate, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, himself the author of two translations/adaptations of Sophocles: *The Cure at Troy* (1990, a response to *Philoctetes*, created and first performed in the context of the sectarian and political Troubles in the north of Ireland), and *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), a realisation of *Antigone*, created and first performed when the Republic of Ireland marked its role in the European Economic Community, against the background of the invasion of Iraq, and in the light of the past colonisation of Ireland by British political and cultural hegemony. In an essay that focused on the capacity and potential of poetry, including theatre poetry, to promote understanding of ethical issues in both past and present, Heaney wrote:

it is the poet’s job to be sensitive to the tensions and strains which run through the life of the times. What distinguishes the good poet is the ability to trace these tensions home through the fault lines of his or her own sensibility, and to be true to the workings of his or her own spirit while remaining alert to the workings of the world. That is what we might call artistic integrity and is a *sine qua non*. (Heaney, 1995)

In working with myth and creating *Antigone* as a tragedy based in Thebes, Sophocles was drawing on his own moral and aesthetic sensibilities, his political experience and insights, and above all on the ‘workings of the world’ that run through the pasts, the presents, and the futures of human beings, their aspirations and their conflicts. Acknowledging Sophocles’ deep awareness of all these aspects of human life seems a very appropriate element in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution.

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²³ For discussion of the creation of alternative futures, and understanding of different ways of looking at the world that are opened up in and through classical texts, see Holmes, 2016; Hardwick 2019, p. 24; and Hardwick, 2021, especially pp. 27-28.

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Abstract

In modern times, the figure of Antigone has become an emblem in the struggle for liberty from oppression. It provides a fitting focus for a conference that celebrates the 50th anniversary of the carnation revolution in Portugal. This paper starts by identifying and analysing some of the contexts and performance styles in which contemporary concerns have shaped interpretation, translation, adaptation and performance of Sophocles' text. The main part of the discussion then poses the question of whether 'present' concerns have appropriated the play in ways that marginalise or even excise some aspects of Sophocles' text. 'Presentism' has often been used by classicists as a term of disapprobation in order to criticise subsequent receptions of ancient texts, sometimes with the implication that there is a fixed meaning to be discovered if the ancient text is considered philologically and in terms of the context of its composition and performance, and that 'presentist' interpretations subvert this. The paper then argues that: (i) there is a variety of 'presentist' perspectives. Some are inevitable in scholarly work as well as in the creative processes attached to performance and spectating. The 'present' (any present) is one node in a network of mediations and receptions. The concerns, life experiences and cultural and ethical hinterlands of the practitioners and scholars working with Sophocles' *Antigone* inevitably have a shaping role in their agency because their life experiences and socio-cultural orientations are not confined to those of ancient Greece. The same is true of readers and spectators who, wittingly or unwittingly, relate the play to their own 'present'. These 'present' concerns can generate a positive engagement with the ancient text and context. They only become negative if they are unacknowledged and if they close down meaning. (ii) Philological and performative analysis of Sophocles' play demonstrates that the tragedian himself was engaged in a form of 'presentist' activity. The narratives associated with Antigone and her family were adapted and augmented through a lens that reflected the social, religious and political urgencies of fifth-century Athens, especially the contested relationships between funerary traditions and social cohesion and the transfer of power from aristocratic families to the polis. The concluding section of the paper argues that analysis of the relationship between ancient and modern 'presentisms' enhances both scholarly commentary and critique of tragedy in performance. Sophocles' play provides a site of temporal and metaphorical space that promotes and provokes engagement between ancient and modern, to the benefit of both.

Resumo

Nos tempos modernos, a figura de Antígona tornou-se um emblema na luta pela libertação da opressão. Proporciona um foco adequado para uma conferência que celebra o 50º aniversário da Revolução dos Cravos em Portugal. Este artigo começa por identificar e analisar alguns dos

contextos e estilos de performance em que as preocupações contemporâneas moldaram a interpretação, tradução, adaptação e performance do texto de Sófocles. A parte principal da discussão coloca então a questão de saber se as preocupações "presentes" se apropriaram da peça de formas que marginalizam ou mesmo excluem alguns aspetos do texto de Sófocles. "Presentismo" tem sido frequentemente utilizado pelos classicistas como um termo de desaprovação para criticar as receções subsequentes de textos antigos, por vezes com a implicação de que existe um significado fixo a ser descoberto se o texto antigo for considerado filologicamente e em termos do contexto da sua composição e performance, e que as interpretações "presentistas" subvertem isso. O artigo argumenta então que: (i) existe uma variedade de perspetivas "presentistas". Algumas são inevitáveis no trabalho académico, bem como nos processos criativos ligados à performance e à observação. O "presente" (qualquer presente) é um nó numa rede de mediações e receções. As preocupações, experiências de vida e territórios culturais e éticos dos profissionais e académicos que trabalham com a *Antígona* de Sófocles desempenham inevitavelmente um papel determinante na sua atuação, pois as suas experiências de vida e orientações socioculturais não se limitam às da Grécia Antiga. O mesmo se aplica aos leitores e espectadores que, consciente ou inconscientemente, relacionam a peça com o seu próprio "presente". Estas preocupações "presentes" podem gerar um envolvimento positivo com o texto antigo e o contexto. Só se tornam negativas se não forem reconhecidas e se fecharem o significado. (ii) A análise filológica e performativa da peça de Sófocles demonstra que o próprio trágico estava empenhado numa forma de atividade "presentista". As narrativas associadas a *Antígona* e à sua família foram adaptadas e ampliadas através de uma lente que refletia as urgências sociais, religiosas e políticas da Atenas do século V, especialmente as relações contestadas entre as tradições funerárias e a coesão social, e a transferência de poder das famílias aristocráticas para a pólis. A secção final do artigo defende que a análise da relação entre os "presentismos" antigos e modernos melhora tanto o comentário académico como a crítica à tragédia em performance. A peça de Sófocles oferece um espaço temporal e metafórico que promove e provoca o engajamento entre o antigo e o moderno, em benefício de ambos.

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