

Antigone “outsider” in Creon’s democracy: analysis of a contemporary reinterpretation of the Sophoclean myth¹

Antígona “outsider” na democracia de Creonte: análise de uma reinterpretação contemporânea do mito sofocliano

Marco Zanelli

Università Cattolica di Milano (sede di Brescia)

marco.zanelli@unicatt.it

ORCID: 0000-0002-5480-6953

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Introduction

1. I will focus on four contemporary rewritings of the myth of Antigone. The pioneering work is the novel *Home Fire* (2017) by Pakistani and British writer Kamila Shamsie². Two years after the Canadian director Sophie Deraspe, with her *Antigone* (2019), blended a free adaptation of the myth with a crime news occurred in 2008 in Montreal: a Honduran immigrant was shot to death by a

¹ In drafting this article I tried to maintain the appearance of an oral contribution, integrating – mostly in notes – the text of the speech with the extracts shown in the slides and reducing the bibliography to a minimum. Within these excerpts, the italics are mine. For the text of Sophie Deraspe’s film, originally in Canadian French, we report the English translation provided by the subtitles of the DVD edition (see References), assuming that it is faithful content in general but not at all literal. The text of Kaan’s rewriting, in the absence of a publication of the script, is derived from the transcription of the recorded version available online (see References). I owe special thanks to Auretta Sterrantino for her helpful suggestions. Thanks also to colleagues Lottie Parkyn and João de Mancelos, who at the Conference presented reports on some of the works considered in this article, providing me with the opportunity to further deepen the analysis. I also owe a big ‘thank you’ to the Organizing Committee for their availability and patience.

² On the novel, see particularly Krause, 2020; Jain, 2021, pp. 121-145; Morace, 2021.

Police officer and no criminal charges were filed, provoking public protests³. Then, two English plays were inspired by Shamsie's novel: in October 2021 *Aaliyah (After Antigone)*, written by Kamal Kaan and directed by Alex Chisholm and Dermot Daly for Freedom Studios, was staged at the same time live in Bradford and online; in September 2022 at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre, in London, was staged another *Antigone*, written by the Nigerian-born British playwright Inua Ellams and directed by Max Webster.

The plots

2. A brief synoptic look at the plots of the four adaptations is necessary, starting from Kamila Shamsie's novel. It is set mainly in the UK: Aneeka (Antigone) and her family are of Pakistani origin. Eteocles is not present in this reimagining. Antigone's twin brother Parvaiz (Polynices), in search of his own identity, attempts to follow his father's footsteps, and is recruited by ISIS as a foreign fighter. When he understands his mistake, he contacts Aneeka, who tries to help him to come back safe. She begins a romantic relationship with Eamonn, son of Karamat Lone (Creon), the new British Home Secretary, also of Pakistani origin, who built his career denying his origins and being more conservative and more inflexible towards Muslims than his colleagues. When he refuses to give any help, Aneeka organizes a plan, but it fails and Parvaiz is killed by the other jihadists while he is about to seek asylum at the British embassy. In the ensuing media storm, Karamat Lone speculates on the situation to reinforce his consensus: he reveals publicly that Aneeka seduced his son in a useless attempt to condition him and after denaturalizing Parvaiz refuses to repatriate the body in Britain for burial. So Aneeka goes to Pakistan and sets up camp with her brother's corpse until British government won't accept to take it back. Eamonn, first releases a video against his father, then reaches Aneeka in Karachi, but they both die in a terrorist attack embracing each other. The Home Secretary can only watch helplessly the tragedy on TV.

3. In Deraspe's film, Antigone, her siblings and grandmother immigrated to Canada from Algeria to escape the war which killed her parents. Although under Canadian law they are not yet entitled to citizenship, Antigone is a brilliant, well-integrated high-school student. But her life is turned upside down when the police arrest Polynice (who belongs to a gang with the Arabic name of "Habibis") in a raid and an officer shoots his older brother, Étéocle, who is unarmed. Despite the protests, no investigation is launched, while Polynice will probably be deported to an Algerian prison, where his life will be in danger. So Antigone helps her brother escape from prison, taking his place dressed up like him. After being discovered, she is arrested even if she is a minor. At the trial, the

³ See Deraspe's interview in Dunlevy, 2019 and Karakantza, 2022, pp. 190-191. As wrote Santoro, 2020, p. 228: "Deraspe's film [...] offers a provocative exploration of urban youth culture, immigrant trauma, gender and social inequality, and media manipulation".

girl declares she has done what her heart commanded her. Antigone's boyfriend, Hémon, comes into conflict with his father, Christian, a local politician, and starts a social campaign and a youth protest movement in support of Antigone. In the end, however, Polynice is recaptured and sent to Algeria. Antigone gives up a life as a Canadian citizen to stay with him, while her older sister, Ismene, instead chooses to remain in Montreal.

4. In *Aaliyah* by Kamal Kaan⁴, Aaliyah (Antigone) and Imani (Ismene) are two British sisters of Bengali origin who work as cleaners. Aaliyah is secretly married to Hussain (Haemon), whose mother, Parveen, is Home Secretary (like in Kamila Shamsie's novel). Aaliyah's brother Sayeed is a human rights activist who, due to his involvement in the Palestinian cause, is suspected of terrorist activity. Therefore, by Parveen's decree, he is about to be repatriated without trial to Bangladesh, where he will risk prison as a homosexual. Aaliyah, after having gathered a group of Sayeed's supporters, in disguise, stages a demonstration that blocks his departure. Filmed by cameras, the girl becomes famous as a mysterious anti-system heroine. Thus, the Home Secretary asks her, in exchange for her safety and citizenship, to remain hidden from the media and to break off her politically embarrassing marriage to her son. Meanwhile, against Aaliyah's wishes, Imami releases a video in which she urges British Islamics to protest so as not to be treated like second-class citizens. A large crowd joins to demonstrate in front of Bradford City Hall. But the situation worsens: Sayeed is deported anyway and Imami dies in clashes with the police. It also turns out that Aaliyah is pregnant. Parveen thus accepts the marriage, but on the condition that her daughter-in-law publicly disowns both her sister and brother and supports Parveen's politics. The girl refuses, with her husband's full support. The police surround the building and Hussain is shot dead. However, paradoxically, there is a happy ending, because Parveen Parvaiz understands her mistakes and, after resigning as Home Secretary, shortly thereafter becomes Prime Minister and takes action to bring justice to Sayeed's case. Aaliyah is alive and gives the baby the name Antigone, closing the metatextual circle.

5. Inua Ellams's rewriting is the closest to the Sophoclean plot and the most complex, both in terms of the number of characters (almost twenty plus different choruses), and for the numerous political references⁵. Set in London, it shows a British Antigone of Pakistani origin, activist and volunteer in a youth center, a point of reference for an Islamic-English community. Her two brothers both die during a terrorist attack: Polyneices is one of the attackers, who became a jihadist after his two children born in Syria were not granted visas for bureaucratic reasons and died of hunger; Eteocles was instead a policeman.

⁴ Two particularly insightful analyzes of this work were provided by Ward (2021) and Hutchinson (2021), the latter complete with an interview with the writer.

⁵ For a first investigation on the work, see the excellent reviews of Gentleman, 2022, and Akbar, 2022.

Antigone's uncle, Creon Jafari, takes advantage of his Pakistani origins and the tense climate to boost his career as an inflexible intermediary between the British majority and the Islamic minority and, after giving particularly harsh treatment to his own nephew, became Prime Minister. As in the Sophoclean tragedy, his repentance after having sentenced her niece to prison for trying to give her brother a Muslim funeral will be late and the girl will take her own life before she can be freed. Haemon will also die, not by suicide, but trying to kill Creon, like in Sophocles' plot.

6. In order to better visualize the similarities and differences of the four rewritings, a synoptic table of the main narrative aspects is provided below.

	Shamsie, 2017	Deraspe, 2019	Kaan, 2021	Ellams, 2022
Setting	United Kingdom (primarily)	Canada	United Kingdom	United Kingdom
Antigone	(Aneeka) Pakistani	Algerian	(Aaliyah) Bengali	Pakistani
Creon	(Karamat Lone) Pakistani	(Christian, etc.) Canadian	(Parveen Parvaiz) Pakistani	Pakistani
Polynices	(Parvaiz) terrorist	Drug dealer	(Syed) Activist	terrorist
Eteocles	/	killed by the police	/	Policeman
Antigone's actions	- relationship with Eamonn - defies British law to have his brother's body repatriated	- She helps her brother to escape from prison - youth movement to demand her release	- tries to stop her brother's deportation - becomes famous as an anti-system heroine - starts a protest movement	- activist and volunteer in a youth centre - challenges the laws to give her brother a Muslim funeral
Ending	- Aneeka and Eamonn die together in a terrorist attack - Karamat Lone can only watch the tragedy on TV	She and her family (except Ismene) are expelled from Canada, sent back to Algeria	- Sayeed is deported - Imami (Ismene) dies in a demonstration - Hussain (Eamon) is killed by the police - Parveen repents - Aaliyah survives with her baby ('Antigone')	- Eurydice, Haemon and others create a movement for her liberation - Creon repents but... - Antigone kills herself and Haemon dies, too.

Common themes

7. These operas share the traits of the same, particularly current reinterpretation of the Sophoclean story. In detail, there are three common themes through which the mythical matter is remold in an original and interesting way. First, Antigone and her family are not royals, but they are immigrants from a Muslim

country. By portraying them as foreigners, the rewritings depart significantly from the Greek hypotext, and bring the myth of Antigone into a domain that was previously almost exclusively that of Medea. In this way, modern themes such as integration, discrimination, prejudice, but also crime and terrorism⁶ (which is the violent response that Polynices opposes to the hostile environment in which he grows up) find a predominant place in the drama⁷. In this Antigone two successful modern reinterpretations of the heroine thus merge: the "terrorist" Antigone studied by Sotera Fornaro⁸ and the "migrants" Antigone⁹.

8. Secondly, in these works Creon is not an autocrat (a king, a tyrant or a dictator), but an important politician in a Western democracy (developing Seamus Heaney's intuition of inserting George Bush's republican rhetoric into Creon's words in *The Burial at Thebes*). And this changes everything, not only with respect to the Sophoclean model, but also to the main adaptations that defined the hermeneutics of the Antigone myth in the twentieth century: those by Anouilh (1944), Brecht (1948), Salvador Espriu (1955), António Pedro (1957), but also the interpretation of the Living Theatre (1967). In these four contemporary rewritings, in fact, Antigone stands against a democratic system and its laws, a political-institutional structure that Western culture considers the best and most capable of guaranteeing justice and rights (see Graeber, 2007). Antigone thus becomes an interpretative tool to unmask the limits of the Western socio-political structure that "democratic fundamentalism" - quoting a successful expression by Gabriel García Márquez (see Canfora, 2004) - prevents from seeing.

9. A third recurring element of these rewritings is the attention to some social aspects of today's world: two of the most significant ones are the nature and

⁶ On the theatre influenced by the "war on terror" after September 11, see Hughes, 2011, and Waal, 2017.

⁷ Among the experimental rewritings of Antigone most linked to civil and racial issues, consider in particular *Antigone in Ferguson* (<https://theaterofwar.com/projects/antigone-in-ferguson>), on which see Karakantza, 2022, pp. 184-190.

⁸ We refer in particular to Fornaro, 2016 (but important findings also in Fornaro, 2012, pp. 141-168). See also the brief discussion in Porciani, 2018. On the film *I cannibali* by Liliana Cavani, see also O'Rawe, 2022, pp. 9-11.

⁹ The bibliography relating to post-colonial rewritings of the Antigone myth, such as *An African Antigone* by Femi Osofisan, is very vast (see Rehm, 2007; Ajidahun, 2022). The use (naturally, diverging from Sophocles' model) of the Antigone myth as a symbol for the defence of human rights denied to migrants was recently at the center of a media case in Italy linked to Carola Rackete, captain of the ship Sea Watch 3, arrested for having opposed the order of the then minister Matteo Salvini not to disembark shipwrecked people rescued in the Mediterranean (see Porciani, 2021, pp. 216-221). Perhaps even in the wake of this event Thomas Köck's *Antigone. Ein Requiem* was produced in 2022 (<https://www.suhrkamptheater.de/stueck/thomas-koeck-antigone-ein-requiem-tt-102396>): in this rethinking, Antigone clashes with Creon's law by proposing to bury the corpses of migrants who died at sea and were thrown onto the beach. A similar content also presents *Antigone di barconi*, a theatrical show produced by the Veronese company Casa Shakespeare, written by Andrea de Manincor and directed by Solimano Pontarollo (see Ugolini, 2023). *Antigone Power* (2018) written by Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, directed by Giuseppe Massa, anticipated these themes (see Arimatea, 2018; De Luca, 2022).

effects of the media and social media (which constitute a contemporary application of the Tragic Chorus¹⁰) and the generational conflict which opposes young people's will to fight for a more just world and adults' tendency to maintain the order guaranteed by the status quo: a concept only mentioned in Sophocles¹¹ and which we see in reality today (for instance, with student demonstrations for peace).

Problems of integration and discrimination: textual occurrences

10. In *Home Fire* the plight of British Islamic people is evident from the beginning, when Isma (Ismene) is stopped at the airport and questioned for two hours about her "Britishness" for wearing the hijab¹² (see Ahmed, 2021). In Kamal Kaan's drama the theme is explored extensively. Aaliyah is a particularly protesting Antigone - modeled on Anouilh - and from her words¹³ we grasp the condition of otherness, discrimination (even at work), social contempt, of second-generation immigrants (it doesn't matter that they were born in Britain or what importance they have in maintaining the country): a condition compared to slavery, which also implies fewer legal protections¹⁴. Legal and employment dis-

¹⁰ On this fundamental topic, see Del Corno, 1989; Treu, 2006; Billings, Budelmann & Macintosh, 2013.

¹¹ Cfr. Soph. *Ant.* 726-7: οἱ τηλικοῖδε καὶ διδαξόμεσθα δὴ / φρονεῖν ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς τηλικοῦδε τὴν φύσιν;

¹² Shamsie, 2017, p. 5: "A man entered the office, carrying Isma's passport, laptop and phone. She allowed herself to hope, but he sat down, gestured for her to do the same, and placed a voice recorder between them.

'Do you consider yourself British?' the man said.

'I am British.'

'But do you consider yourself British?'

'I've lived here all my life.' She meant there was no other country of which she could feel herself a part, but the words came out sounding evasive.

The interrogation continued for nearly two hours. He wanted to know her thoughts on Shias, homosexuals, the Queen, democracy, the *Great British Bake Off*, the invasion of Iraq, Israel, suicide bombers, dating websites".

¹³ Kaan, 2021, 8:16-9:38; 10:44-11:03: "IMA. *We're foreigners in their country.* AAL. Their country? What the hell, Imani?! IMA. *We gotta follow their rules.* AAL. Rules? *They're bloody rat traps, to catch us and [imiting] 'send us back to where we came from'.* [...] Are you going to spend the rest of your life being a wet toilet tissue and let everyone walk all over you and you still clean their shit after with your bare hands? [...] This isn't just about my brother, is it? I don't know about you, but I'm bloody sick to death from all the crap we have to put up with. I might be some girl who's a cleaner from Bradford but *without people like us, this country would've been on its bloody knees during this past year.* Who said heroes wear capes? They wear niqabs now".

¹⁴ Kaan, 2021, 22:03-24:08: "AAL. *Who are we? We don't look like them. They can't even pronounce our names properly. So how do they see us?* IMA. *We were born here.* AAL. *You think that makes a difference? We might be in 2021, but slavery is still alive.* It's what they did to our lot back in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh for all those years. Kept us all as slaves, raped our land and made us fight between ourselves. [...] IMA. *I ain't no slave.* AAL. *We clean their toilets, that's all we're good for. We drive their taxis, work in their hospitals, feed them.* [...] It's everything to do with Syeed. *If they can do that to him, then it's us next.* IMA. *We were born in Britain. We have more of a right to be part of this place like everyone else.* AAL. *You think that's gonna save us? As long as we keep our mouth shut, don't*

crimination also emerges in the words of the appeal that Imami-Ismene addresses to citizens of foreign origin after embracing his sister's ideas¹⁵. In Ellams' work we find many references to the same theme. For example, in the dialogue with Antigone in which Nikomedes, the local Imam, refuses to help Polyneices because the situation for him and for the Islamic community is already too dangerous, with the application of a climate of suspicion, an open and violent anti-Islamic persecution and a police state in which he first - despite never having done anything wrong - is monitored day and night¹⁶. Or in a choral section sung by young Muslims, in which it is underlined that even the slightest suspicion is enough for very young children to be arrested and branded for life¹⁷. And this makes integration impossible. Ellams' work then broadens the perspective to themes such as neocolonialism and, we will see later, feminism:

ISMENE. To hide behind a dead body? If he [Creon] stepped forward, talked about British activities in the Middle East, those wars, refugees, 50 per cent of British Muslims live in poverty, budget cuts to services, all those lost, lost boys, if he told that story, it would be inspiring! (Ellams, 2022, p. 67).

11. Deraspe's film was born from a case of abuse towards minorities and the way in which the police hold Polynice with their knee pressed on his neck is a clear reference to the well-known American events that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement (see Muredda 2019; Chieppa, 2021). Antigone's fight is therefore against the entire Canadian democratic system, so that Creon is fragmented into multiple figures (see Ugolini, 2019): not only Christian, but also the commissioner who interrogates Antigone, the attendant at the center for troubled girls who carries out verbal abuse, and above all the judge of the trial, with whom

kick up a fuss, oh, we'll be okay, right? [...] *We either give up or carry on being treated like this, like second class slaves. Aren't you tired of feeling like that?*"

¹⁵ Kaan, 2021, 46:43-47:40: "We need you to join us in our fight for justice. You've all heard what they've done to Syeed. [...] And now he's being ripped out from this country because of a law that treats people like us with suspicion. [...] This is about a fight for all of us. All of us who do all those jobs that they don't: the cleaners, taxi drivers, the nurses, the zero hour contracts shift workers. Have we not done enough for this country? Are you tired of being treated like second-class citizens? If they can do this to my brother, they can do this to anyone. Who is it going to be next?"

¹⁶ Ellams, 2022, p. 29: "NIK. I want nothing to do with him. How dare you ask? *You know how many officers swarmed the mosque after he vanished? The cameras they installed? How many young men they abducted for questioning? Every time something happens! They asked me if I knew what Polyneices was planning, as if I would hide such a thing [...]* D'you know how many old men have been harassed? Sisters spat on?! Some are afraid to go out now. They pull their hijabs! One was set on fire while she was wearing it, Antigone! [...] *I'm under surveillance 24/7. When I'm preparing sermons, standing on the minbar, they are watching. I feel them in my head, among the verses*".

¹⁷ Ellams, 2022, p. 33: "And anyone who anyone thinks / seems suspicious is thrown on the list. / *How the hell are we meant to feel British, / how are we meant to just be and just breathe / when they're pushing our families down to their knees? // Four thousand, five, that's the number it is / of us they've arrested, half of us kids. / And this database is never erased / though you're released you're still disgraced / and police always remember your face / they track you forever, there's never a place / where you're not paranoid, where you feel safe*".

this dialogue is established which constitutes the fulcrum of the entire film¹⁸. Antigone contests a “bureaucratized” democratic order based on procedures and adherence to formal rules which, however, end up contradicting the principles of humanity. («Your disguise as a citizen hides your heart!»). The conflict between city law and *àgrapta nomina* is updated to a conflict between adhesion to Western citizenship (and its advantages) at the price of betraying one’s origins and family ties and the desire to defend them. (In another dramatic scene, Ismene declares she won’t follow her family, but will stay in Canada because she wants a “normal life”¹⁹). The same, unfair choice that is expressed in *Aaliyah*, when Parveen asks her to publicly deny her own family²⁰. The ideological background is that of a cultural dictatorship of the majority where either you assimilate or you are a potential enemy: either “with us and like us” or “against us”. The same situation in Ellam’s *Antigone*:

ANTIGONE. [...] Boys and girls kicked out of college, unemployed ones trying to fit into a country that tells them they won’t unless they change who they are... schools kick them out for poor performances, but don’t check why they can’t perform? Ignore them when they speak, say they’re suspicious when they’re quiet. Where do they fit? (Ellams, 2022, p. 31).

New interpretations of Creon

12. It is interesting how this split does not even spare the various “Creonts” of Pakistani origin. Shamsie’s Karamat Lone manages for almost the entire novel to deftly juggle his origins and the expectations of British conservatives, by being inflexible and presenting himself as a mediator and a model for his community:

¹⁸ Deraspe, 2019, 1:24:32-1:25:41: “LAWYER. Miss, for your sake, let the proceedings... ANTIGONE. I vomit on your proceedings! I’m talking to my brother. [...] Your honor... *you and your ceremonies are ridiculous*. JUDGE. Now you listen to me. This is your last chance. *Do you care about getting citizenship?* ANTIGONE. Citizenship? Citizenship... *a piece of paper?* JUDGE. Pardon? ANTIGONE. You can go wipe your ass with it! JUDGE. The court will recess for ten minutes. ANTIGONE. Ten minutes to bark orders, your honor! Convicted, Colonel, sir! *Your disguise as a citizen hider your heart! Where is your heart? I don’t see it. All I see are fancy uniforms and keys and titles... Let go of me! Polynices! [...]*”

¹⁹ Deraspe, 2019, 1:35:12-1:36:30: “ISM. *I want a normal life. [...]* I don’t want my family to decide my life. ANT: *You’d forget us to gain what?* The little life they are peddling? You’d reach for the happiness they toss to you, like to a dog? ISM: Know what I want? A bank loan for my hair salon. A small hair salon, four chairs. I want to get married to a decent guy, with no record. I want a house, all my own, with kids in it. That’s what I want. A normal life. Like everyone. Is it too much to ask? Is it too much? Too much to just want to be normal?”

²⁰ Kaan, 2021, 59:32-1:00:27: “PARV. [...] All you have to be willing to do is make a statement that *your brother was wrong, Imani too, and that you’re now on our side*. The side of the law. Are you willing? Are you willing? AAL. My brother was wronged. My sister was wronged. I was wronged. You think I can just walk back into the world knowing in my heart I didn’t stand up for justice? This is for us all. PARV. Understood. We’ve given you a choice and you’ve chosen to reject that choice. I am the Home Secretary and I have a duty to the people of this country. The people who trust me to protect them. *Aaliyah, if you’re not with us, you’re against us.*”

a Muslim who has succeeded in this great country by eliminating any traits of his previous culture that may not be accepted²¹. But Ellams's Creon instead manages to express his being crushed in the delicate balancing act of not irritating Muslims and liberals nor disappointing conservatives. And, above all, he is aware that - with one false step - the majority of English citizens will see him not as a leader, but as a foreigner²². And the situation is even worse for Kaan's Parveen Parvaiz, who in addition to her Pakistani origins is also a woman in a position of power, and therefore even more subject to public judgement²³. Ellams' Antigone delves deeper into the folds of the democratic crisis through the character of Aleksy, Creon's political advisor, the embodiment of politics that seeks consensus through polls and populism²⁴. He advises Creon to campaign by exploiting the deceased Polynices and pointing him out with enemy rhetoric that will attract the sympathy of a part of the electorate. And later, by stating that citizens elect a leader to think for them, he enunciates the key principle of the authoritarian drift of modern democracies:

ALEKSY. The polls don't lie. The data is there.

HAEMON. What data?! The country disagrees with you.

CREON. Should the country tell me what to think?²⁵

HAEMON. It should guide your thinking in a true democracy.

ALEKSY. They elected him to think for them. (Ellams, 2022, p. 60)

²¹ Shamsie, 2017, p. 88: "[...] He was willing to take on both the anti-migrant attitudes of his own party and the isolationist culture of the community he'd grown up in. [...] The Eamonn of a month ago would have been proud. Now, he kept imagining a meme of his father's voice saying 'don't set yourself apart in the way you dress'".

²² Ellams, 2022, p. 62: "If I criticise Islam, the Muslim community and liberal voters will destroy me. If I sympathise, conservative voters will. If I do nothing, the right wing press will label me a militant in Westminster. [...] Beyond this city, these cosmopolitan elites, this festering pit of privilege and wealth, the silent majority, most of whom still worship Churchill, won't understand or care why I'd want to discuss concepts they fear. We all look the same to them".

²³ Kaan, 2021, 56:59-57:32: "Do you know how hard I've had to fight? Do you know what it's like being a British Pakistani woman in a position like this? Constantly reminded of who you are, not what you do. Do you know what it's like to be publicly hanged in the papers every morning for something you say or something you wear or even just smiling in the wrong way? And if that wasn't bad enough, I get it from the Pakistani Muslim community giving it to me from the other side, calling me a traitor, a fake Muslim".

²⁴ Ellams, 2022, p. 20 (regarding the political use of security language and anti-Islamic hatred): "ALEKSY. There are certain late-voting subsets of our electorate for whom certain terminology evokes strong reactions. We disseminate footage, clips of you using such terminology across their timelines - I'm talking targeted, specific, precise exposure, from a man of your... character speaking on these issues - and I guarantee it will be enough to rouse them vote, to win you this election. [...] ANTIGONE. He was losing and used Polyneices. 'Their presence infects many parts of our country?' Infects? [...]".

²⁵ That is a clear reference to Sophocles' text (*Ant.* 734: πόλις γὰρ ἡμῖν ἀμὲ χρὴ τάσσειν ἐρεῖ). But the fact that it is a monarch speaking there and an elected leader of a Western democracy here gives the allusion a very strong meaning.

13. The sections that best represent the security and illiberal closure of these democratic structures are naturally those that reinterpret Creon's "crown speech" (Soph. *Ant.* 162-210), showing various debts with the theater of the "war on terror" that flourished after September 11. Therefore, in Parveen's speech with which Syeed (i.e. Polynices) is deprived of citizenship and deported without trial, we find recurring references in today's political debate: threat, defense of borders, unity through identification of the enemy, law and order, reduction of rights²⁶. In *Home Fire*, deprivation of citizenship and rejection of the corpse as an act of revenge towards the enemies of the state are expressed in a fleeting exchange between the Home Secretary and a journalist (Shamsie, 2017, pp. 188-189). Ellams' adaptation is also in this case closer to Sophocles' model (because it provides for differentiated treatment between the two brothers) and more in-depth in its political reflection. Creon always deprives Polynices of citizenship, but also issues an emergency decree strengthening his powers as prime minister in order to ensure public safety²⁷. By virtue of it, he can also suppress part of human rights in the fight against terrorism. But the core of Ellams' work is probably this passage which goes beyond overcoming the anti-Islamic radicalization of Western democracy and hints at a more serious and profound crisis of human conscience: first citing the infamy of femicide and then stating that the world's real problem is a patriarchal vision of the world, the quest for power and the violent manifestation and application of it over others:

ANTIGONE. Someone always ask why Muslim women wear hijabs. Why? It is to paint Muslim men as oppressors? It's never asked why Muslim women are attacked for wearing hijabs. Why are you so obsessed with what we wear? [...] But this is England, hijab or not, Muslim or not, aren't women attacked? Even by police? How many are killed by partners each week? [...] *The world has a problem, it isn't Islam, it's men and power. How they feel without it, what they do to get it, what that makes them*

²⁶ Kaan, 2021, 3:18-4:32: "Our nation is still very much under treat. One that's deadlier than the virus. This is why I say we must protect our borders. The safety of our citizens is our priority and in order to do that, I simply ask for unity and solidarity and anyone who cannot respect what we stand for will be considered an enemy of the state. We are the party of law and order in Britain once again. This is why in the situation regarding Syeed Miah [...] we have no other choice but to deport him back to Bangladesh. We will not tolerate suspicious criminal or unlawful behaviour. So let this message be clear to all citizens: anyone who is seemed to be non-conducive to the public good will be subjected to the deprivation of their British Nationality."

²⁷ Ellams, 2022, p. 24: "Today, the sun rises for Great Britain, but sets for terrorism. By electing me Prime Minister you, the British public have given me the mandate to effectively counter extremism. To that effect I would like to announce a ... Three Tier Counter Threat Bill, designed to discourage and destroy terrorism, foreign and domestic. My own nephew, Polyneices Lakhani, who brought terror to our streets, is subject to this bill. [...] Polyneices will receive no honour in death. With immediate effect, he is stripped of British citizenship and his body will be detained indefinitely pending necessary procedures. To those who will say this infringes on his Human Rights, I am calling for a British Bill of Rights because the Human Rights Act does not serve us. Too often it allows for criminality to charge unchecked through our streets. To mitigate against such needless death ever occurring, with the powers conferred to the office of Prime Minister in the state of emergency we are in, I am ending the automatic release of terror offenders and calling for ex-offenders to be recaptured and reassessed".

do. My brother had none, couldn't even talk in his mosque, look what happened (Ellams, 2022, p. 71)

Introducing two contemporary social issues into the tragedy

14. Finally, we can quickly observe the issues of the media and social media and generational conflict. In Ellams' *Antigone*, for example, Antigone's words spread thanks to the mass media: newspapers, the radio (Ellams, 2022, p. 76); in *Aaliyah* the characters communicate with the outside world off-stage via cell phones and the authority embodied by Parveen is always shown on video (see Smith 2021) and never in person (Kaan, 2021, 29:15). Kamila Shamsie, on the model of Anne Carson's *Antigonick* (see Gonçalves & Nascimento, 2019; Tavares, 2020; Liapis, 2021) fragments the narrative even in the forms of social communication, such as ashtags²⁸. Above all, the novel contains a good example of how tabloid information distorts reality and can lend itself to propaganda purposes: first, with an opinion article on the Islamic threat in Great Britain²⁹, then putting vulgar nicknames that discredit Aneeka-Antigone and her brother, while the Home Secretary is incensed³⁰. Sophie Deraspe's artistic choice is to use social media as a real chorus³¹, three times during the film: the first is the condolence and protests of young people for the death of Eteocles (Deraspe, 2019, 20:20-21:40); the second is the storm of media hatred and slander that rains down on Antigone after she lets her brother escape, in which the photo of the girl is artificially deformed and crossed with images of jihadists (1:01:21-1:02:18); the third is the support campaign that teenagers (and adults) spread to help Antigone during the trial, where people post photos in which they wear T-shirts with her image, write "free Antigone" and dye their hair the same red as the Antigone logo invented by Hémon (1:19:08-1:20:26).

15. Generational conflict is a theme present embryonically in the Sophoclean text³² and highly developed in modern and contemporary rewritings³³. In Ellams'

²⁸ Shamsie, 2017, p. 190 (expressing the Islamophobic media storm that erupted after it was revealed that a terrorist's sister was having an affair with the prime minister's son): "#WOLFPACK [...] #PERVYPASHA [...] #DONTSSULLYOURSOIL [...] #GOBACKWHEREYOU CAME FROM". The first hashtag contains the motto of the Home Secretary's supporters (whom the press called "lone wolf"); the second is the offensive nickname for Aneeka's brother, Parvaiz.

²⁹ Shamsie, 2017, p. 201. The article is titled: "How many Parvaiz Pashas will it take for the government to wake up?"

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204: "Aneeka 'Knickers' Pasha [...] Muslim fanatic Parvaiz 'Pervy' Pasha [...] The brave Home Secretary, who has taken a strong stand against extremists at risk to his own life [...]".

³¹ See Tonoli, 2023, 82-87, and Ugolini, 2019.

³² Soph. *Ant.* 726-727: οἱ τηλικοῖδε καὶ διδαξόμεσθα δι' / φρονεῖν ὅπ' ἀνδρὸς τηλικοῦδε τὴν φύσιν. It is still useful Reinhold, 1970, pp. 354-355. But see also Beltrametti, 2013, pp. 22-30 and Wallace, 2013, pp. 16-17.

³³ We can cite two contemporary rewritings such as Merlynn Tong's 2019 *Antigone* (see Zanelli, 2023) or Hollie McNish's *Antigone* (2021).

Antigone the protagonist is the beating heart of a youth center and of the youth community. But it is in Deraspe's film that this idea is deeply explored: *Antigone* in prison receives the support of a large youth protest (see Lussier, 2019), a pop revolution (Deraspe, 2019, 1:21:23-1:22:05). And one of the strongest scenes is the confrontation between Christian-Creon and Hémon (Deraspe, 2019, 1:08:05) who rethinks the third Sophoclean episode with strong references to Anouilh's reworking³⁴. Like the tired Creon of the French playwright, the politician experiences his work with suffering. But the harsh confrontation also reveals the split between the private "Creon", the father, and the public man. The young son's moral exuberance sticks like a blade into this contradiction, calling it cowardice:

HÉMON. So your public persona overrides your duty as a father?

CHRISTIAN. My duty as a father? When I pay for your fuckups, that's my duty as a father. I work till midnight, roll up my sleeves the next day, shut my mouth to toe the party line, and keep my job, all to provide for my son. All I do is for you.

HÉMON. I never asked you to. I'd prefer you speak out when you disagree.

CHRISTIAN. He talks like a kid. [...]

HÉMON. Old folks can learn from kids³⁵. I don't need you to get me out of anything. You're old and scared and want to save your ass.

CHRISTIAN. Fuck you!

Conclusion

16. In these contemporary rewritings the vicissitudes of *Antigone* and her family become a mirror of the difficulties of democracy in building a multi-ethnic society in which minorities are integrated and protected in their rights and identity, while the figure of Creon represents the possibility of a populist and illiberal drift that Western democracies risk incurring when citizens' fear and need for security leads them to accept limitations on freedom and justice (see Mounk, 2018). Other particularly urgent problems also find space in these adaptations, such as the exacerbation of generational conflict and reflections on the post-truth of the media and social media. These works not only allow us to reiterate the absolute relevance of a classical tragedy³⁶ in narrating modern society and its crises, but also to observe how classical material, in the hands of skilled and aware contemporary artists and intellectuals, can also be a tool for addressing these crises and, perhaps, proposing solutions.

³⁴ See Tonoli, 2023, pp. 60-62.

³⁵ See Soph. *Ant.* 728-729.

³⁶ It is interesting, for example, that about Kaan's *Aaliyah* Ward (2021) notes "the surprising antiquity of Britain's hostile environment" against people perceived as non-citizens. But we may read Akbar (2022) as well: "Inua Ellams's *Antigone* is the drama of unjust law and righteous rebellion that we know from Sophocles's Theban cycle ...but refitted for our times. The story of *Antigone*'s lone stand against the state is updated to the here and now with a British Pakistani Muslim family at its heart, embattled in a nation roiling with Islamophobia and prejudiced policing".

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Abstract

My paper analyzes four contemporary rewritings of Sophocles's Antigone: the novel *Home Fire* (2017) by Kamila Shamsie, the Canadian film *Antigone* (2019) by Sophie Deraspe, and two British dramas: *Aaliyah (After Antigone)* (2021) by Kamal Kaan and *Antigone* (2022) by Inua Ellams. These works present an original vision of Antigone as an Islamic girl (Pakistani, Algerian or Bangladeshi) whose family has emigrated to a Western democracy (Britain or Canada). In this reinterpretation as a foreigner, Antigone takes on traits traditionally typical of Medea. Although Antigone is well socially integrated, the situation of one or both of her brothers (terrorism, delinquency or political opposition) leads her to reveal the condition of racism, intolerance

and marginalization faced by minorities in a theoretically democratic, libertarian and inclusive country. At the same time, the characterization of Creon also undergoes a profound change, compared in particular to the Brechtian interpretation: he (or she, in Kamal Kaan's drama) is not a violent dictator, or a politician who came to power in an exceptional situation, but a legitimate leading exponent of a democratic Western government, who (except in Deraspe's film) shares the same foreign origins as Antigone's family, but precisely for this reason must be even tougher in order not to lose the consensus acquired among the nation he governs, a consensus obtained also by denying part of his/her own native culture and satisfying the people's need for order and security. This new interpretation thus allows the myth of Antigone to be used as a very current tool for social denunciation, not only of the failed integration of minorities in the great Western democracies, but of other problematic aspects of contemporary "civilized" countries, such as the populist tendencies of politics or the use of (social) media, through which, for example, the choruses are rendered in some rewritings.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa quatro reescritas contemporâneas da *Antígona* de Sófocles: o romance *Home Fire* (2017) de Kamila Shamsie, o filme canadiano *Antigone* (2019) de Sophie Deraspe, e dois dramas britânicos: *Aaliyah (After Antigone)* (2021) de Kamal Kaan e *Antigone* (2022) por Inua Ellams. Estas obras apresentam uma visão original de Antígona como uma menina islâmica (paquistanesa, argelina ou bangladeshiana) cuja família emigrou para uma democracia ocidental (Grã-Bretanha ou Canadá). Nesta reinterpretação como estrangeira, Antígona assume traços tradicionalmente típicos de Medeia. Embora Antígona esteja bem integrada socialmente, a situação de um ou de ambos os seus irmãos (terrorismo, delinquência ou oposição política) leva-a a revelar a condição de racismo, intolerância e marginalização enfrentada pelas minorias num país teoricamente democrático, libertário e inclusivo. Ao mesmo tempo, a caracterização de Creonte também sofre uma mudança profunda, comparativamente em particular à interpretação brechtiana: ele (ou ela, no drama de Kamal Kaan) não é um ditador violento, nem um político que chegou ao poder numa situação excepcional, mas um legítimo expoente de um governo democrático ocidental, que (excepto no filme de Deraspe) partilha as mesmas origens estrangeiras da família de Antígona, mas precisamente por isso deve ser ainda mais duro para não perder o consenso adquirido entre a nação que governa, consenso obtido também pela negação de parte da sua própria cultura nativa e pela satisfação da necessidade de ordem e segurança do povo. Esta nova interpretação permite assim que o mito de Antígona seja utilizado como um instrumento muito actual de denúncia social, não só da fracassada integração das minorias nas grandes democracias ocidentais, mas de outros aspectos problemáticos dos países "civilizados" contemporâneos, como tendências populistas da política ou o uso dos *media* (sociais), através das quais, por exemplo, os refrões são traduzidos em algumas reescritas.

