Antigone, Interrupted. By Bonnie Honig. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

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From G.W.F. Hegel's first canonization of Antigone, through the subsequent accounts of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, to those of Judith Butler and Jean Bethke Elshtain and others, Sophocles' *Antigone* has served as a key reference point in the histories of philosophy, political theory, and feminist and democratic theory, informing discussions of civil disobedience, sovereignty, and the division between public and private. Antigone herself has been cast as "heroic conscientious objector", "lamerter of the dead", and "monstrous creature of desire" (7). For Bonnie Honig, however, these received readings of *Antigone* all suffer from a fatal flaw: they neglect the full political promise of Antigone the *political* actor. In *Antigone, Interrupted*, Honig sets out to re-politicize Antigone/*Antigone* by interrupting these canonical interpretations of the play.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I, "Interruption", focuses on *Antigone's* reception history in feminist and queer theory, political thinking, and cultural theory, with a particular focus on the role of maternalist thinking. Honig examines the role of the mourning mother in contemporary politics (examples include Cindy Sheehan and the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo); the writings of authors such as Elshtain, Butler, Lee Edelman, and Douglas Crimp amongst others; and the 1978 film *Germany in Autumn*. Two things interest Honig. The first is the operation within this literature of what she calls the "Antigone versus Oedipus" frame, where a political problem is typically diagnosed as "Oedipal" (the power of the state, for instance) while its solution is cast as "Antigonean" (feminist resistance). The second is the emergence of what she calls "mortalist humanism". This is a mode of humanism centred on human finitude and vulnerability to suffering. With its turn to ethics and its attempts to bypass political division, for Honig, its "politics of lamentation" falls into a "lamentation of politics", a position her own *political* reading of Antigone is directly designed to counter.

This alternative reading is set out in Part II, "Conspiracy". Honig's conspiratorial re-interpretation of *Antigone* rests on an exploration of the dramaturgy of the play. Instead of assessing the relative merits of the arguments contained within the play, Honig reads *Antigone* as a melodrama rather than tragedy, focusing on lamentation as performative utterance. Honig bolsters this dramaturgical approach with an attention to historical context. The first conspiracy Honig discerns focuses on Creon's conspiracy with democracy and centres on Antigone's quarrel with Creon over the burial of Polynices. Honig reads this quarrel as a performance by Antigone of aristocratic objection to democracy, one reflecting the funerary politics of fifth century Athens. In Chapter 5 Honig contemplates Antigone's conspiracy with language, in particular how Antigone negotiates the tensions between *phonê* and *logos*. (Antigone has often been associated with one or the other term but not both.) Honig's focus is Antigone's dirge, where she outlines the irreplaceability of her brother Polynices. Innovatively, Honig reads this speech as a partisan political act delivering a critique of Creon through the citation, mimicry, and parody of the voices of the powerful (including both Pericles and Herodotus'). Finally, in one of the most original, and possibly most contestable, moves in the book, Honig outlines the putative sororal conspiracy between Ismene and Antigone, which rests, Honig alleges, on her contention that it is Ismene, not Antigone, who was the first to bury Polynices.

This last example of conspiracy highlights what some critics might view as one of the more challenging aspects of Honig's text. Received readings of Ismene have traditionally presented her as passive, lacking in agency, and anti-political. Focusing on the dramatic context of the play, here including Ismene's utterances and the putative coded communications engaged in by the sisters, Honig recasts Ismene as a political conspirator. This rendering not only interrupts those accounts of Antigone that classify her as the epitome of the heroic individual. It also interrupts those that, in Honig's view, overlook "those elements of most concern to democratic theory: solidarity or action in concert among equals" (152), the very themes that Honig's rereading of the play stresses. The issue here is whether

Honig's dramaturgical re-interpretation of *Antigone* rests on an identification of hitherto neglected aspects of the script or whether the frames guiding Honig's own reading, agonistic democracy and agonistic humanism, lead her to what Simon Goldhill has called a "drastic redrafting of Sophocles' play" (*Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy*, 2012, p. 247).

One of the most important features of Honig's reading of *Antigone* is her exploration of the politics of burial in fifth century Athens, a time when, she suggests, funerary practices were being intensely politicized. Conventional readings of *Antigone* construe it as a play about the death of Polynices, Creon's prohibition on burying him, and Antigone's refusal to obey Creon. For Honig, this allows Antigone to be cast as a universal figure of mourning. In fact, she contends, the "problem of when and how to mourn [actually] arises *several* times" in the play (96), as the actors are confronted with the death not only of Polynices but also those of Antigone, Haemon, Eurydice and Eteocles. From questions about how particular bodies ("from traitor to polis hero, from dissident resister to mourning mother" [193]) ought to be buried to how they ought to be mourned (as unique individuals or the nameless and replaceable; in public or private; excessively or moderately), for Honig, *Antigone* is a play that reveals lamentation, mourning, and burial to be sites of socially regulation, political contestation, and gendered practice. It is not a play about universal suffering or grief, as mortalist humanists surmise, but one about "the politicality of lamentation" (19) in all its plurality and conflict. Antigone is not simply a figure of resistance but rather the inspiration for an "agonistic humanism", attuned to life, natality, pleasure, power and desire.

Honig's primary worry with mortalist humanism is that it is depoliticizing, and exemplary of this, she argues, is Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004), with its critique of sovereignty, stress on vulnerability and mourning, and its turn to ethics. Certainly Butler, like many of the others Honig critiques, pays scant attention in her writings to the specific practices that make up contemporary mourning and funerary politics, except to note in the most general of terms how nationalist exclusions condition the publication of obituaries. Honig is surely right that such an oversight is problematic because it disguises the fact that

lamentation and burial are not, as Honig herself has eloquently demonstrated, universal and ahistorical phenomena but intensely contested, political practices. At times, however, the differences between agonistic humanism and mortalist humanism appear to be overdrawn. What are we to make, for example, of Butler's repeated invocations of "livability", and what she calls the "livable life" in her discussions of human vulnerability, terms that appear, albeit infrequently, in *Precarious Life*? However, this is, perhaps, a question for another time.

Antigone, Interrupted is a significant book. Like all of Honig's work, it is theoretically sophisticated, erudite, and engaging, furnishing both a trenchant critique of prior interpretations of *Antigone*, and an original, provocative, and highly political revisioning of the play. In so-doing it asks significant questions not only about the political consequences and risks of privileging mortality and vulnerability as ontological facts of the human condition, but also about the terms of democratic political engagement. It deserves to be widely read.