

## Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 5 (2013)

Hellenism Unbound



### Chanter Tina, Whose Antigone? The Tragic Marginalization of Slavery.

*Giorgos Giannakopoulos*

doi: [10.12681/syn.17439](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.17439)

Copyright © 2013, Giorgos Giannakopoulos



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

**Tina Chanter. *Whose Antigone? The Tragic Marginalization of Slavery*. SUNY Press: Albany NY, 2011. Pp. 233 + xxxviii. \$ 26.96 (Pb.)**

*Whose Antigone? The Tragic Marginalization of Slavery* is not just another addition to the long list of criticism on *Antigone*. Tina Chanter manages to offer new perspectives on a work of literature that has been foundational for Western thought and has exercised a tremendous and ongoing influence on its philosophical, literary, and psychoanalytic discourses. Addressing issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality while introducing a discussion on the overlooked issue of slavery to Sophocles's play, this book brings together classical and postcolonial studies as well as philosophy and literary criticism in a politically engaged, rigorous, and informed analysis.

Tina Chanter's main argument is simple, yet powerful, convincing and thought provoking. Antigone's decision to bury the body of Polynices brings forth the distinction between slave and free citizen in fifth century BCE Athens. By performing the act of burial, she distinguishes her brother's status from that of a slave, that is, one who is not worthy of burial. What is at stake, Chanter argues, is the humanity of Polynices denied by Creon, reducing him to a traitor, and therefore, symbolically, to a barbarian or a slave. At the same time, however, she re-inscribes the inferiority of the slaves as sub-human beings, and affirms the naturalization of slavery as the norm on which the social and political life of classical Athens was grounded. Chanter articulates her discussion of the discourses on slavery, and the related issues of citizenship, political rights, and the status of women, foreigners, and enemies, in which the Oedipal cycle is implicated, in relation to a wide literature on *Antigone*, ranging from Hegel to more recent poststructuralist, psychoanalytic, and feminist readings. Her aim is to challenge and renew the critical tradition, expanding it in a neglected area, while at the same time explain the reasons for this neglect. Furthermore, she stresses the relevance of her discussion to crucial modern ethical and political issues that colonialism, imperialism, and racism have given rise to, by focusing on two African appropriations of the play, namely, *The Island*, set in apartheid South Africa and *Tègònni*, set in nineteenth-century Nigeria.

In the first chapter, Chanter provides the historical background of Sophocles's play by situating it within the legal and social context of fifth century BCE Athens. She focuses on the marginal status of both slaves and women in Athenian society by showing how the 451 BCE Periclean law that changed the requirements for the Athenian citizenship is questioned in the Oedipal cycle and exploring how the slave/citizen dichotomy is at work in *Antigone*. The second chapter is dedicated to a critique of Hegel's reading of *Antigone*. Hegel's analysis privileges the family/state antithesis at the expense of any reference to other tensions that were at work in Athenian society. Chanter argues that the idealization of classical antiquity and tragic poetry as its exemplary artistic product by Hegel has led to a purified view of poetry. Poetry should be purged from any reference to the ugliness of life, and therefore slavery should be excluded from its discourses. Chanter exposes a blind spot in the Hegelian approach by showing that the white, Eurocentric tradition of Hegel and German idealism "was unable to attend to this reference to slavery because to do so might have led to introspection about its own complicity with New World slavery" (31).

Chapters 3 and 4 include discussions of the two African plays. Chanter reads *The Island*, a collaborative play by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona set in apartheid South Africa, in opposition to the psychoanalytic emphasis on the fetishisation of *Antigone*. She argues against such readings which have reduced *Antigone* to an object of adoration, totally neglecting the political significance of her positioning. She brings into her discussion the performative conditions of the original play—male actors performing both male and female roles—that *The Island* problematizes, thus bringing to light the dynamics of gender and sexuality that expose the politics of exclusion that was at work in Athenian democracy. She argues that tragic drama and its modern appropriations articulate "a critique that calls for a version of democracy that does not survive by disavowing as excluded other members who are constitutive of its preservation" (84). Building on the work of Judith Butler and Mary Beth Maderon *Antigone*, Chanter's reading of Femi Ôsófisan's *Tègònni: An African Antigone* brings the category of race into the feminist discourses that have placed their emphasis on the analysis of familial kinship structures and the critique of heteronormativity. Set in late nineteenth-century Nigeria but also resonating with the Nigeria of the 1990's, *Tègònni* brings the concerns of Sophocles's play into a colonial context and, as Chanter shows,

exhibits the potential of Antigone's legacy to address a variety of contemporary political concerns.

In chapter 5, Chanter approaches the work of Giorgio Agamben on the "bare life" of the Homo Sacer and his analysis on the state of exception from the perspective offered by Luce Irigaray's understanding of *Antigone*, while at the same time being critical towards both theoreticians. This short chapter includes one of the most powerful points that Tina Chanter makes in the book as she extends Agamben's theorization of the state of exception by drawing attention to the gendered dynamics underlying it. Chanter supports her argument not only in relation to Antigone, who is "always already in a state of exception, by virtue of her disenfranchised position as a woman," (122) but also with references to United States policy under the Bush administration, which exemplifies the sovereign exception by way of the fetishistic economy that is at work according to Irigaray's analysis.

In her numerous re-births throughout the ages, Antigone calls for a critique of the politics of exclusion that are operating within different historical periods and political circumstances, and reflects the urgent need for a constant redefinition of the political. The logic behind this redefinition of the political is the main concern of Tina Chanter's analysis:

By interrogating not only the specificity of the excluded other that Antigone comes to represent in new appropriations of her tragedy, but also the particular political configurations that demand such exclusions, whether these comprise a limited democracy such as that of ancient Athens or an exclusionary racial politic such as apartheid in SouthAfrica, I begin to delineate the political logic according to which the tragedy of *Antigone* can participate in a regeneration of the political. (58)

The two African revisions of *Antigone* that Chanter discusses open Antigone's legacy to new political contexts, ones that have inspired political struggles against colonialism and racism. Chanter's approach to these plays, albeit rather brief and far from being detailed and thorough in terms of the critical appreciation of the plays, is extremely fruitful in that it provides a concrete historical ground for the disclosure of the logic of the redefinition of the political that Antigone calls for.

The book includes an Appendix where Chanter provides synopses of *The Island* and *Tègònni*, which the reader who is not familiar with the plays will find helpful. *Whose Antigone?* is quite a demanding read for those unfamiliar with the critical reception of *Antigone* or with the work of theorists such as Butler, Agamben, and

## Book reviews

Irigaray and Chanter's dense writing style could discourage the general reader who may find it hard to follow the details of her arguments. However, the insights that Chanter offers are more than rewarding. She manages to renew the long critical tradition on *Antigone* by implicating the category of race in a serious and meticulous argumentation that opens the classical text to new interpretations capable of addressing the political contingencies of our time.

Giorgos Giannakopoulos  
University of Athens