

## ANTIGONE IN PERU

PÉREZ DÍAZ (C.) *Antígona by José Watanabe. A Bilingual Edition with Critical Essays*. Pp. xiv + 157, ills. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. Paper, £34.99, US\$44.95 (Cased, £120, US\$160). ISBN: 978-0-367-71336-2 (978-0-367-71338-6 hbk).

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*Antígona* was written by the Peruvian poet José Watanabe for the Yuyachkani theatre company in Lima. It was produced as a script for solo performance for, and in collaboration with, actress Teresa Ralli. The work came into being in 2000 at the instigation of the theatre group and the *Comisión de Derechos Humanos* after a twenty-year civil conflict that had caused tens of thousands of deaths and left Peru devastated and its surviving population traumatised. The cover of *Antígona*'s original script states that it is a 'version libre' ('free version') of Sophocles' tragedy. In her book P.D. gives a limpid translation of the beautiful Spanish text, and interprets and contextualises Watanabe's work in a series of insightful essays.

Acknowledging the dependency of *Antígona* on the text of Sophocles, P.D. nevertheless characterises this relation throughout with the preposition 'beside', which, in the words of E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping and other relations' (E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching/Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* [2003], p. 8). In reading *Antígona* in this way, P.D. displays mastery of theoretical approaches to adaptation, reception and performance studies, and of the history of performative and literary engagements with Sophocles' *Antígona* in Latin America and elsewhere, as the rich endnotes and the wide-ranging and up-to-date bibliography substantiate.

In this latter context, pride of place is given to the 'epitext' *El desmontaje de Antígona*, written and performed by Teresa Ralli, which 'inscribes the *Antígona* onto Ralli's body as the original performer and co-creator, who uses her body as a locus to give voice to the experience of real historical women and inscribe the text on Peru's landscape at the turn of the century, the geographical and historical context from which it emerged' (p. 11). Yet, while acknowledging these roots of *Antígona* in a specific place and time, P.D. also scrupulously engages with the broader idea of 'contexts', problematising it with reference to the thought of Charles Martindale and Jacques Derrida. To paraphrase: contexts are important, but we must not delude ourselves that we can ever fully reconstruct them, or thoughtlessly assume that they can fully explain the genesis and characteristics of a work. We must never lose sight of what a work on its own, read with the heuristic tool of its own poetics, can tell us.

Consequently, defending her 'aesthetic' approach (following Martindale), P.D. acknowledges and describes the historical, literary and cultural background against which Watanabe's work was written (pp. 1–15), but also, indeed, perhaps primarily, seeks to find meaning within the text itself, by carefully close-reading and deconstructing it, using 'the body and its affects' as well as 'memory' as heuristic tools, all the while pointing out how the text stands beside Sophocles' tragedy in particular as a work of 'neo-colonial' reception not so much 'writing back to the center' as 'cannibalizing' or 'ruminating' Sophocles' text (pp. 101–35). This approach works well since it is in accord with the remarkably 'uninscribed' (p. 11) and affective, embodied qualities (pp. 15–17) of Watanabe's text: while referring to Sophocles' plot and characters, to Thebes, to the

Labdacids and even to the Greek pantheon, there is nowhere any concrete referent in the play that directly relates it to the Peruvian or Latin American situation; its significance for and gestures towards this particular context are much more oblique and subtle, if no less evocative. Indeed, Watanabe's work has a wonderfully timeless, or as P.D. has it, 'omnitemporal' quality. It may have been written in 2000, in Peru; but, reading it in 2024, one could unfortunately see how it effortlessly speaks in the same poignant, sincere and deeply affecting manner to numerous bloody current conflicts and their potential aftermaths: just like Sophocles' text, it is both contextualised and 'tranhistorical' and 'omni-local', as P.D. brings out well (pp. 131–3).

As noted, Watanabe's text was written for solo performance in the voice of a single speaker, the unnamed Narradora ('female narrator'), who sometimes voices the speeches of others in her narration (*Antígona*, *The Guard*, *Creonte*). In a series of 22 numbered 'poems' or scenes, this Narradora relates the tragic events we know from Sophocles' plot, but with a series of subtle transpositions (in the sense of G. Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* [trans. C. Newman and C. Doubinsky, 1997], referred throughout as a theoretical framework by P.D.). This concerns, for instance, the narrative order: the poem opens with a reference to the end of the war and the unburied dead ('Today is the first day of the peace', I, p. 32), and Creonte's prohibition to bury Polinices (I–III). Only afterwards do we hear of Antígona's intention to brave Creonte's orders and bury her brother (IV). And of her unsuccessful attempt to enlist her sister Ismene in the burial, which opens Sophocles' drama, we learn only in the last of the poems (XXII).

P.D. brings out well how the narrative situation, a single voice rather than a drama with its stichomythic interactions, also plays its role in subtly changing the audience's perception of the interactions of the main protagonists of the plot. There is a great sense of isolation and disconnection between the characters that make appearances in the Narradora's account of events. The Sophoclean stichomythia may paradoxically underline the ultimate failure of communication (cf. S. Goldhill, *Sophocles and the Language of Tragedy* [2012]), but here the unbridgeable gaps between characters become visible through the monological nature of the text (pp. 116–17). Finally, while adding certain features (Antígona's imagined thoughts and feelings once she is inside the cave/tomb; the Narradora's final gesture of libations to Polinices), Watanabe also leaves out certain elements from the Sophoclean plot, most tellingly perhaps Antigone's infamous statement about how her brother's irreplaceability trumps any other claims of kinship or love (*Ant.* 905–12). P.D. convincingly reads this as a gesture towards a more universal acknowledgement by Antígona of the horror of violent deaths, which *all* require burial and lament. (X, p. 63: 'for every death I want a funeral', cf. pp. 112–15). All of this, as P.D. notes, influences the way in which we as readers or listeners construct the meaning of this 'parable' (p. 16, Watanabe's words) of 'political failure' (pp. 120–1).

The final twist comes when poem XXII reveals that the Narradora is in fact none other than Ismene, Antígona's sister, and she explains her involvement (XXII, p. 99):

The deaths of this story come to me  
not so that I make a trade of telling other people's misfortunes:  
They come to me, and so vividly, because they are my own misfortune:  
I am the sister who was hand-tied by fear.

When initially requested to help bury her brother by Antígona, Ismene found herself unable to act, 'hand-tied by fear' (*maniatada*). The narrative she has told is thus the confession of her shame, and her effort to commemorate rather than forget the traumatic events she fearfully and futilely tried to escape. Her final, similarly manual, gesture,

now that she has been freed from the manacles of fear, consists in picking up the death mask of Polinices and pouring a libation to it. P.D. lucidly interprets these manual, embodied gestures as addressing a frail hope that remembrance and a tribute to the dead may in some way be restorative, reparative, may 'open spaces for new realities', while 'conspiring' with the canonical past (pp. 122–30).

This book does great service to the text of Watanabe, which now becomes, for the first time, fully available to an English reading public. It will not fail to leave its imprint in classical reception studies. The thoughtful essays, while sometimes admittedly a little heavy on theoretical references, do a truly remarkable job in their sensitive, delicate interpretation of this great work of literary art, genuinely adding to the readers' appreciation and understanding.

*Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*

J.J.H. KLOOSTER  
[j.j.h.klooster@rug.nl](mailto:j.j.h.klooster@rug.nl)