

## ARTICLE

# From Psychoanalysis to Politics: Antigone as Revolutionary in Judith Butler and Žižek

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In this paper I will analyse two contemporary readings of Sophocles' *Antigone*: the one proposed by Judith Butler in the influential *Antigone's Claim* (2000) and the response to it by Slavoj Žižek in *Interrogating the Real* (2005), *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) and other works of his. Both readings stem from a psychoanalytical (Lacanian) approach in order to tackle social and political issues. After providing the reader with an investigation of Butler's and Žižek's interpretations, I will draw a comparison between the two, showing that Antigone is, for both, a revolutionary figure that challenges the established social order.

Sophocles' *Antigone* has fascinated thinkers and critics throughout the centuries. From Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Kierkegaard, the tragic heroine has been the object of countless studies and interpretations. Recently, she has been championed by fields so diverse as feminism, psychoanalysis, sociology and politics. In this article I would like to focus in particular on two contemporary readings which bring all these areas together: the one proposed by Judith Butler in the influential *Antigone's Claim* (2000) and the response to it by Slavoj Žižek – who regards Butler's reading of Lacan as a misinterpretation – in *Interrogating the Real* (2005), *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002) and other works. Both readings, in fact, stem from a psychoanalytical approach in order to address social and political issues. After providing the reader with Butler's and Žižek's interpretations, I will draw a comparison between the two, showing that Butler's gender-oriented reading is not quite as

distant from Žižek's more strictly political one (in the original sense of the running of the *polis*) as it might initially seem. In fact, both take Lacan's interpretation as a starting point and, while following different paths, both end up reaching the same conclusion: they consider Antigone as a self-conscious political figure, the revolutionary *par excellence*. This comparison, carried out with the support of significant textual evidence, aims at bringing together literary analysis and political readings, in the hope of shedding further light both on these two influential interpretations and on the text itself.

## Judith Butler's Antigone and the limits of kinship

*Antigone's Claim* starts with a question: why have all the most influential readings of Antigone been so apolitical? The thinker who holds major responsibility for this is, in Butler's opinion, Hegel, who has confined Antigone to the sphere of kinship and family, leaving politics to Creon. Lacan's psychoanalytical reading did not solve the problem since, in Butler's view, his 'symbolic' – which

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Antigone transgresses – is purely abstract and distinct from the social (2000: 1-3). Butler's aim is therefore to show the limits of these apolitical understandings and – as befits her politically engaged writings – bring Antigone back into the domain of politics.

Her first critique is directed at Hegel, who famously considered Antigone as the heroine of family values, opposed to the state and its demands. According to Butler these two spheres cannot be set one against the other to begin with: on the contrary, they are interconnected. In fact, she says, there cannot really be kinship without the mediation and support of the state and vice versa. Creon himself assumes his sovereignty only by virtue of the line of kinship that enables his succession (Butler 2000: 6). Moreover, to take Antigone, offspring of an incestuous love, as the champion of kinship is certainly rather odd. Here Butler insists on the fact that Antigone rarely calls Polyneices by his name, but mostly refers to him as 'brother,' a term that, in her particular case, is highly polyvalent. As Butler points out:

When she claims that she acts according to a law that gives her most precious brother precedence, and she appears to mean 'Polyneices' by that description, she means more than she intends, for that brother could be Oedipus and it could be Eteocles, and there is nothing in the nomenclature of kinship that can successfully restrict its scope of referentiality to the single person, Polyneices. (2000: 77)

Butler carries on to ask a polemic question:

Antigone says 'brother', but does she mean 'father'? [...] This equivocation at the site of the kinship term signals a decidedly postoeidipal dilemma, one in which kin positions tend to slide into one another, in which Antigone is the brother, the brother is the father. (2000: 67)

Far from reasserting it, Antigone transgresses kinship. She does so not only through her incestuous nature and feelings, but also through her scant affection for anybody else apart from Polyneices. Take, for instance, the famous passage that follows:

Never, had been a mother of children, or if a husband had been mouldering in death, would I have taken this task upon me in the city's despite. What law, ye ask, is my warrant for that word? The husband lost, another might have been found, and child from another, to replace the first-born: but, father and mother hidden with Hades, no brother's life could ever bloom for me again.<sup>1</sup> (Sophocles 2004: 165)

Antigone, therefore, 'represents not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement' (Butler 2000: 24). Not only is she Oedipus's daughter and sister, not only is she cold and rather hostile towards the other members of her family, her exclusive affection for her brother Polyneices also seems to be more than sisterly love. According to Butler, Antigone is in love with Polyneices – or maybe, considering her ambiguous naming practice we have mentioned above, even with Oedipus himself.

In support of this thesis, it might be relevant to quote here some of the many linguistic expressions of erotic-incestuous desire that appear in the text: 73 *phile met'autou keisomai, philou meta* ('Beloved, I shall lie with him, whom I love'); 75 *dei m'areskein tois kato* ('...I have to please/satisfy those below'); 898-9 *phile men hexein patri, prospheiles de soi, meter, phile de soi, kassigneton kara* ('Beloved I shall come to <my> father, dear to you, mother, and beloved to you, brother'). Significantly, Antigone is *phile* ('beloved') towards her father and brother, whereas she is merely *prospheiles* ('dear, kindly affectionate') towards her mother [note 2] As Mark Griffith put it, no other play contains such numerous linguistic references to the

act of 'lying with', 'pleasing' and so on (2010: 115-6).

Butler then proceeds to an analysis of Lacan's reading of the tragic heroine (Lacan 1992b), which was conceived as opposed to Hegel's but, in Butler's view, fails just as much in recognizing Antigone's political role. For Lacan, Antigone is the embodiment of 'the ethics of desire'. In order to understand this concept, we shall refer to Lacan's theory of the three orders that define human existence: the imaginary, the symbolic and the real (1992b).

The imaginary order emerges when the child first sees him- or herself reflected in the mirror in what Lacan calls 'the mirror stage' (1992a). In this way the child is able to recognise the Other as something that looks like him or her and that he or she can identify with on one hand, and compete against on the other. The symbolic order is the order of language and, therefore, of the social. From the moment when the child learns to speak, his or her relationship with the Other will be forever regulated and freighted, in a way, by language. The symbolic order is a realm where signs, or rather, signifiers, are constantly exchanged. The signified, in its pure individuality, is forever lost. This is what Lacan calls 'the Real'. Excluded from the symbolic, the Real is ineffable. It is, so to speak, a void around which the signifier exists or rather a void created by the signifier itself. Lacan uses here the metaphor of the vase, in which the void is created by the clay that surrounds it. To each order corresponds a different kind of desire. The imaginary is the pre-linguistic realm of basic needs like food and warmth. Linguistically articulated demands are obviously related to the symbolic. Desire proper – what Žižek calls drive, and that might be related to Freud's libido – is connected to the Real.

Antigone embodies the ethics of desire because 'she doesn't give way on her (pure) desire' (Žižek 1989: 117). She is moved by a drive, a craving for Polyneices' 'Pure Being', which comes from the unconscious. It fol-

lows that Antigone is far from being a self-aware political figure. She is just driven by desire. As noted by Miriam Leonard in *Laughing with Medusa*, by removing Antigone from the symbolic, and therefore political, sphere, Lacan automatically opposes her to Creon, who becomes then the (male) representative of the state. Lacan seems thus to fall back into the Hegelian reading, precisely the one he was opposing (Leonard 2006: 131-3).

Moreover, in Butler's interpretation of Lacan, Antigone loves Polyneices' 'Pure Being' in the sense of his symbolic aspect. She loves the ideal brother, who belongs to the symbolic order but is detached from the real person. In the same way, the symbolic laws of kinship posited by Lacan are ideal norms that are never perfectly realized in any actual society. Butler, in fact, describes Lacan's symbolic order as being

defined in terms of a conception of linguistic structures that are irreducible to the social forms that language takes or that, according to structuralist terms, might be said to establish the universal conditions under which the sociality [...] becomes possible. This move paves the way for the consequential distinction between symbolic and social accounts of kinship [...] The Lacanian view insists that there is an ideal and unconscious demand made upon social life irreducible to socially legible causes and effects [...] The symbolic is precisely what sets limits to any and all utopian efforts to reconfigure and relive kinship relations at some distance from the Oedipal scene. (2000: 20)

The structure of kinship, the Law of the Father that prohibits incest – which for Lacan is the basis of the symbolic and thus the very possibility of the social, since the mother stands for the forever lost object of desire – is exactly what Antigone challenges. She is incestuous, ambiguous, and impossible to pin down. What she is cannot be fit into is a

normative structure. Furthermore, not only is she a transgression of the Law of Kinship by nature, she also consciously chooses her brother above her husband, refusing in this way heterosexual marriage and generational continuity as such.

Hence Butler's wish for the re-articulation of the Law of Kinship, of whose foreclosing power Antigone is the victim *par excellence*. Lacan's concept of being 'between two deaths' is reinterpreted by Butler as the state of living an emotionally unfulfilled life. Antigone is between two deaths in the sense that love is forbidden to her: 'she claims that she has not lived, that she has not loved, and that she has not borne children [...] thus death signifies the un-lived life' (Butler 2000: 23). It is her 'impossible' love for Polyneices, her ineffable desire, that makes her life a living death.

In Butler's view, Antigone speaks in the name of all the non-traditional families that have now began to spread: blended families, families with adopted children, homosexual relationships, single parents, and so forth. How can all these new forms of kinship relate to the symbolic – ideal normative – order? Will there always be the spectre of unfilled positions or places? Will those families have to surrender to the fact that they are not quite as they should be? Even if we argue that the structure that regulates kinship is purely formal and can be therefore inhabited by anyone, this very formalism prevents the structure from being reformulated. Nevertheless, for Butler, in the final analysis there is nothing beyond social practice and its politics, there is no ideal symbolic, and we have to face the fact that society is changing or, rather, has already changed. It is time for the Law of the Father – to use Freudian-Lacanian terms – to cease haunting us (Butler 2000: 71).

What is particularly interesting is the way in which Antigone responds to the symbolic Law, which, in her case, is the curse laid by Oedipus upon her: 'There is no greater love than the one you had from this man, and you

will spend the remainder of your life in want of him' (*Oedipus at Colonus*, 1617-1619)<sup>3</sup>. Oedipus wants Antigone to love nobody else than him, thus linking her love to the realm of the dead. His curse will in fact strike Antigone, shown by the conspicuous number of references to her relation with death (*thanatos*): 71-72 *keinon d'ego thapso: kalon moi touto poiouse thanein* ('but I will bury him, well for me to die in doing that'); 461-462 *ei de tou chronou prosthen thanoumai, kerdos aut'ego lego* ('But if I am to die before my time, I count that a gain'); 524-525 *kato nun elthous', ei phileteon, philei keinous* ('Pass, then, to the world of the dead, and, if thou must needs love, love them'); 555 *su men gar eilou zen, ego de katthanein* ('Thy choice was to live, mine, to die'); 559-560 *e d'eme psuche palai tethneken, oste tois thanousin ophelien* ('But my life hath long been given to death, that so I might serve the dead').

What Antigone does, though, is to accept the curse and repeat it, yet in an aberrant form. Her only love is a dead man, true: but it is not Oedipus or, at least, not only. As I have shown, Antigone is in love with Polyneices, and possibly Eteocles as well. Therefore, Antigone's is what Butler calls 'promiscuous obedience' (2000: 60). From a Lacanian perspective it could be argued that, in this way, she betrays and obeys Oedipus at the same time. She willingly accepts what has been bestowed on her, thus freeing herself from the curse. The order becomes a choice. This is what Slavoj Žižek refers to as an 'Act' (1992: 44). I shall return to this point later.

What Butler argues is that we, like Antigone, expose the contingency of the Law of Kinship by repeating it in an aberrant form. It is particularly important to note that, as a perversion of the law herself, Antigone makes her claim precisely *within* the sphere of the law, by using its very language (Butler 2000: 68).

Here Butler refers to the passage where Creon accuses her of having violated his edict and in response she refuses to deny it, namely the verses 442-443: *Cr: Phes, e katarnei me*

*dedrankenai tade; An: kai phemi drasai kouk aparnoumai to me.* ('Creon: Speak, do you deny having done this? Antigone: I say that I have done it; I make no denial.') By refusing to be forced into denial, she appropriates the rhetoric of agency from Creon himself. As Butler asserts, 'He expects that his word will govern her deeds, and she speaks back to him, countering his sovereign speech by asserting her own sovereignty [...] her autonomy is gained through the appropriation of the authoritative voice of the one she resists' (2000: 11).

It follows that Antigone's claim does not take place outside the symbolic – which, for Butler, is not transcendental as Lacan posits, and represents instead the hypostatisation of a historically and culturally particular social order – but precisely within its terms. She is thus shown to be strongly related to the social and the political. Antigone's claim is a claim for other laws, laws that are not part of the established symbolic order. She makes her demand by showing the limits of the Law – it cannot make sense of her heritage or sexuality – and by doing it while using the language of the Law itself. Whereas for Lacan she steps outside of the symbolic (normative) order, for Butler she challenges it from within. The Law seems thus to bear within itself its own exception. The same conclusion, although from a different perspective, is reached by Slavoj Žižek, to whose work I now turn.

### **Slavoj Žižek's Antigone and the revolutionary power of the Act**

Žižek's interpretation of Antigone is not an organic one to be found in a specific book: the Slovenian philosopher refers to Sophocles' heroine in almost all of his works. His considerations of her stem from a Lacanian psychoanalytical basis to reach conclusions that, as I will show, have strong political implications.

Žižek agrees with Butler's idea that Antigone does not stand for kinship. In stating this, though, he refers to her actions rather

than her heritage. As noted by Butler, Antigone refuses motherhood and marriage, choosing death over the possibility of a future with Haemon. It is interesting here to refer to etymology. The name 'Antigone' is made up by the prefix anti-, ('against', 'in the place of') and *-gone*, which may derive either from *-gon/-gony* (corner, bend) or *-gen/-gon*, a root that is related to the idea of life, both in the sense of being and in that of generating. Antigone might therefore signify 'one who cannot be bent', or, as suggested also by Butler, 'in place of the mother', 'against motherhood'. Žižek connects the two meanings: by rejecting motherhood, Antigone refuses to be bent, to be subordinated (2010: 104).

More importantly, however, she is utterly apathetic towards her sister. Her stubborn coldness and lack of understanding for Ismene are such that Žižek comes to call her 'inhuman' (2006: 42). Whereas Ismene is the friendly neighbour, or, in Lacanian terms, our *semblable*, Antigone perfectly embodies the scary Other we cannot understand: she is what Lacan calls '*das Ding*', the Thing (1992: 243-290).

How is this possible? The Other is always both one's *semblable* – one's fellow human being, someone that looks like oneself, as is discovered in the mirror stage – and the Thing – the inhuman monster with whom no dialogue is possible (Žižek 2005: 347). The Other is an unfathomable abyss, but always hidden under a friendly mask. Why does Antigone become *one* with the Thing? Because she has stepped outside the symbolic order, the set of unwritten norms that mediate and make possible our interaction with the Other. It is precisely in this sense that Antigone is 'between two deaths'. She is physically alive, but symbolically dead (Žižek 1991: 16).

Unlike Butler, Žižek does not refer here to Antigone's inability to fulfil her emotional needs. She is symbolically dead because she is outside of the social order. This position is the domain of the Thing, what Lacan

calls 'Ate': a term that recurs twenty times in the text and that literally means 'ruin, reckless impulse, madness, fixation'. For Lacan, it is the limit that Antigone crosses with her transgression and, at the same time, the transgression itself. The domain of Ate is unbearable for more than a little time. This is why Antigone goes through her second (physical) death. The only other option would be to step back into the symbolic order, but this is something Antigone would never do. She does not accept compromise, she 'does not give way on her desire' and this is what makes her an ethical figure.

It is easy to link Antigone's connection with the dead mentioned in the previous section to what Žižek, following Lacan, defines as her 'death drive'. Antigone's desire makes her inhuman, by taking her away from the symbolic order. Such a gesture is suicidal: hence Antigone's striving to rejoin the dead in Hades. It is tempting here to suggest another interpretation of the name 'Antigone', by referring to the root *-gen/-gon* not in the sense of 'to generate' but in that of 'being': *Antigone* would thus come to signify 'against life', 'against being'.

Far from seeing death as the legitimate punishment for her immoral behaviour, Žižek – following Lacan – believes Antigone to be the ethical figure *par excellence*. She is not opposed to Creon in the usual political-apolitical antithesis. She is a revolutionary figure, because she acts. It is opportune to introduce here Žižek's conception of 'Act' as opposed to 'action'. The latter is an ordinary accomplishment, something we do that has no particular relevance to our lives. An Act, on the other hand, is something that makes us subjects. This is possible, paradoxically, only by annihilating our very subjectivity. As Žižek explains:

The act involves a kind of temporary eclipse, *aphanisis*, of the subject [...] by means of it, I put at stake everything, including myself, my symbolic identity; the act is therefore always a 'crime', a 'transgression', namely of

the limit of the symbolic community to which I belong. (1992: 44)

The reason for Antigone's striving for self-annihilation is therefore explained: to become a subject, to act, she has to exit the symbolic order and, by means of this transgression, enter the domain of Ate. It is important to underline here that to act means to 'freely assume what is imposed on us [...] subjectification is thus strictly correlative to experiencing oneself as an object' (Žižek 1991: 42), in a way that reminds of Kierkegaard's view on suffering.

And does not Antigone do exactly this? She is inhuman in the sense that she is – and sees herself as – an object. This admission of passivity brings us back to what we have mentioned above, namely that to act means to freely assume what has been imposed upon us. In Antigone's case, what has been bestowed on her is the Law of the Father, the incest taboo, which, according to Lacan, founds the symbolic order. As noted by Butler, Antigone repeats the Law, and she does it in its same language, thus freeing herself from it. In Butler's view this repetition of the Law in its very language is the proof of the fact that Antigone never leaves the symbolic but challenges it from within. In Žižek's interpretation, however, this means precisely that Antigone, by accepting her fate as if it was the result of her own decision, sees herself as an object and so acts – that is to say, enters the domain of Ate. Ate is, in this sense, 'transgression', it is Sade's 'crime': 'that which doesn't respect the natural order'. This kind of crime forces nature to start *ex nihilo*, and therefore possesses a revolutionary power (Lacan 1992: 260).

It is interesting that, immediately after Antigone's deed is revealed to Creon, the chorus utters the well-known sentence: 332 *polla ta deina kouden anthrôpou deinoteron pelei* ('Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man'). The Greek word for 'wonder' is *deinos*, which means both 'terrible', 'monstrous' and 'wonderful', 'marvellous'. Whatever the connotation, *deinos*

indicates something that goes beyond the human. In this way the chorus is signalling Antigone's stepping out of the symbolic and her consequent entrance into Ate, the inhuman.

Only by becoming inhuman can Antigone follow a 'drive', a concept that Žižek opposes to that of 'demand'. A demand is a striving for something that is not our real object of desire: we want something but what we are truly aiming for is something else (this is the logic of the symbolic). A drive, on the other hand, is somehow mechanic, automatic. It is a blind, insistent desire that has no 'logic' to it. It is a desire one cannot give way to, no matter what. It is easy to see how a drive so conceived is, so to speak, inhuman. A drive belongs not to the realm of the big Other, but to that of the Thing, the domain of Ate. And here is where Antigone goes. By stepping outside the symbolic, she accepts, wants and finally becomes the Thing (Žižek 1991: 15). It is following this view that Žižek rejects Butler's interpretation of Lacan:

The Thing is Pure Being, but not in the sense that Butler attributes to it. Antigone does not long for the 'ideal brother'. What the Thing stands for is the individual, the irreplaceable, the value of Being as such, regardless of its content: something that, because of its very uniqueness, cannot be exchanged in the symbolic order. 'In the case of Polyneices, it designates his absolute individuality that remains the same beyond the changing properties that characterize his person (his good or evil deeds).' (1992: 92)

In fact, according to Žižek, Butler's interpretation of the symbolic is an idealistic one. Butler sees it as an ideal prescriptive norm to which nothing can truly conform – hence her accusation of structuralism against Lacan. For Žižek though, her reading is a misinterpretation. The Law of the Father – the symbolic order – is not an aprioristic structure,

nor a prescriptive norm distinct from social practice. It is the name given to the whole of the contingent configurations that we find in society. Žižek in fact agrees with Butler: there is nothing outside of those, there is no ideal Law (2005: 35). In this way, the Lacanian symbolic order becomes, in Žižek, one thing with the social. Thus, Antigone's Act rises above the sphere of kinship (Hegel) and that of language (Lacan in Butler's reading) and regains its political value.

By becoming The Thing, Antigone is in fact opposed to *eunomia*, literally 'the good set of norms, the harmonious order', which was the principle at the basis of Ancient Greek democracy. Antigone is therefore antithetical to the *polis* and the community, but not in the way posited by Hegel. By breaking with the symbolic, Antigone acts, and in this way opens up the possibility for a new social order. In fact, as Žižek puts it, 'an Act is not only a gesture that does the impossible but an intervention into social reality that changes the very coordinates of what is perceived to be possible; it is not simply beyond the good, it redefines what counts as good' (2000: 672).

According to Žižek, Antigone's is the only way. No negotiation is possible. No compromise will work. To create a new social order, one needs to act, to challenge the symbolic, to stick to one's desire no matter what. This explains Antigone's scarce predisposition to dialogue, something that has been considered rather undemocratic. Consider, for instance, Derek Barker's remarks:

Antigone is one-sided and headstrong [...] she tends to speak in passionate outbursts rather than reasoned deliberation [...] she engages in all manner of hyperbole and insults her interlocutors (469-70) [...] Antigone demonstrates that she lacks the qualities [which are] essential to political life: sensitivity to others, openness to deliberation, and the ability to yield. (2009: 30)

This blind perseverance, however, is related to the drive as such, as we mentioned above. To act means to leave the sphere of the symbolic and to become, so to speak, inhuman.

Moreover, Antigone's attitude is deeply negative. To refer again to Barker, 'Antigone's negativity is a political end in itself [...] Antigone does not point to anything beyond herself' (2009: 133). Similarly, Žižek posits that she does not offer an alternative to Creon, she just opposes him. Her Act is to say: 'No!' This negativity, however, is a constitutive part of the Act as such. As Žižek points out, in fact, '[a]n Act always involves a radical risk [...] it is a step into the open, with no guarantee about the final outcome – why? Because an Act retroactively changes the very coordinates into which it intervenes' (Žižek 2002: 152).

The Act is therefore a violent rupture, but only violence can be a founding gesture. As posited by Benjamin, the foundation of the law coincides with its transgression. Every rule springs out of its own exception. Both the foundation and the preservation of the law are, furthermore, violent acts. Whereas Creon stands for the principle of 'law-preserving' violence – he stands above the law in order to protect it – Antigone's Act is 'law-making' – to create a new order there has to be a break with the present one (Benjamin 1999). As a Creator, Antigone has therefore to be *hupsipolis apolis* (370): both inside and outside the *polis* and its norms. Only in this way is a new order made possible.

Thus, another point of similarity between Butler's and Žižek's readings emerges: they both seem to lead back to Benjamin, and his idea that the revolutionary excess (in this case, Antigone) emerges precisely out of *eunomia*. It was Benjamin's belief that 'The good cannot reign over all without an excess emerging' (Lacan 1992: 259). Antigone does exactly the same: she brings Creon's sovereign power to an extreme, revealing in this way its repressive nature. As stated by Butler, Antigone shows the limits of the Law by speaking precisely in its language: the excep-

tion and the Law cannot exist one without the other<sup>4</sup>.

With her statement '523 *outoi sunechthein, alla sumphilein ephûn*' ('It is not my nature to join in hating, but in loving'), Antigone refuses the friend/foe policy that sustains (Creon's) power. To use another Benjaminian expression, Antigone is a 'great criminal': someone who, despite their violent and often immoral deeds, is admired for resisting power and exposing its inherent contradiction. Benjamin writes also that '[h]owever repellent Creon's ends may have been, [he] has aroused the secret admiration of the public' (1999: 59). It is easy to see how, in fact, the chorus' secret admiration for Antigone persists throughout the text: 504-505 'All here would own that they thought it well, were not their lips sealed by fear'; 800-805 'But now at this sight I also am carried beyond the bounds of loyalty, and can no more keep back the streaming tears, when I see Antigone thus passing to the bridal chamber'; 817-818 'Glorious, therefore, and with praise, thou departest to that deep place of the dead'.

It has been shown that Antigone is inhuman, that she goes beyond the limits of the symbolic and that, by breaking with the big Other, she opens up the possibility for a new social order. Žižek's psychoanalytical reading is in fact very much politically freighted, fulfilling Butler's wish to have Antigone returned to the sphere of politics.

## Conclusion

It is not hard to see that Antigone comes to have the same function in both Butler and Žižek. For Butler she exposes the contingent character of the Law both by her heritage and by her actions, showing the need for a re-articulation of the Law. For Žižek, she acts, defying the Law and showing its inherent contradiction – Creon's violence, which is an exception to the very law he stands for – opening up, in this way, the possibility of a new social order. Both thinkers not only bring Antigone back into the domain of

politics, but make her into the revolutionary figure *par excellence*, one who challenges the established social order, a role model, in a way, to be followed if we want to make our society better. In both readings, furthermore, we can see a strong connection to Benjamin's idea of 'law-making' and 'crime'.

Nonetheless, there are two major differences. The first consists in the fact that Butler refers specifically to the Law of Kinship, whereas Žižek's reading focuses on politics in the specific sense of the organisation of the state. The second refers to the mode in which Antigone's transgression should be read and transposed into today's political action. Butler advocates the need for a re-articulation from within – something that might be called a reformist perspective. In the feminist thinker's view, in fact, Antigone never leaves the symbolic order but challenges it from inside. Žižek, by positing the rejection and stepping outside of the symbolic as the very *conditio sine qua non* of the Act, calls, in a Leninist sense, for a revolution from the outside: in order to build something new the present order has to be destroyed.

## Notes

- 1 If not stated otherwise, all translations from Antigone refer to this edition.
- 2 My translation.
- 3 My translation. *Oedipus at Colonus* was written in 406 bc. Focusing mainly on Oedipus' death after his tragic discovery, it narrates events that occur after *Oedipus the King* and before *Antigone*.
- 4 Creon's excess, which is shown by Antigone, leads to another interesting point. When Creon condemns her to a living death, he denies her humanity. Expelled from the sphere of the law, she becomes what Giorgio Agamben calls a *homo sacer*: someone who can be killed, being physically alive, but not sacrificed, since their life has no value (Agamben 1998). (This reading might seem to turn Antigone into a victim rather than a wilful subject, but we have to remember that, for Žižek, the two aspects coincide.) Both Žižek and Butler refer to Agamben's concept in describing Antigone as an outcast.

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