

ANTIGONE: A STUDY OF THE CHARACTER.
THE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED POLISH TRANSLATIONS
AND THEATRE STAGINGS

By

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Antigone, the title character of Sophocles' tragedy, is probably one of the most recognizable ancient heroines. This young, steadfast and stubborn girl acting out of respect for her dead brother Polineikes objects to the unlawful royal order of Creon which prohibits to bury his body. Out of this respect she decides to sacrifice her life. In general, we may say that Sophocles' *Antigone* is about the feelings and devotion of one young girl to her brother; about the offering of one's life in the name of values regarded as important, justified and valuable; about the faithfulness to oneself, to one's family and one's values and ideas. However, Antigone's own feelings reflect the universal, common and timeless matters or issues which are still valid and worth raising and seeking answers to them, namely the respect for another human being and his or her dignity, the importance of the natural bonds between the relatives, as well as the courage to take the active stand in the situation of threat to our lives, rights, dignity or values.

As some scholars remark, although the character of Antigone often arouses extreme emotions, we should avoid idealizing her as well as condemning her. First of all we should interpret the character of this heroine from the perspective of the ancient, not ours, value system she is faithful to, and this system consists of fame – κλέος, honour – τιμή and beautiful death – καλὸς θάνατος, as well as φιλία – reverence for the relatives, δίκη – justice and εὐσέβεια – respect for divine laws. In giving honour to those values Antigone seems very close to the Homeric heroes such as Achilles or Aias. In respect to those values too, we should interpret her consent to her death, her dignity to the very end of her life,

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but also her stubbornness, pride and roughness, often misunderstood or misinterpreted by the scholars or audience.

In Polish culture, Sophocles' *Antigone* is probably one of the best known ancient tragedies and definitely one that is the most frequently translated and performed on stage. There are fifteen Polish translations of this tragedy and over ninety stagings. The knowledge, although often very superficial and simplified, of *Antigone* is very common and it is probably because of the fact that since the nineteenth century it has been included in the obligatory school reading list in Poland. But in Polish culture, in the context of Polish history, especially that of the 19th and 20th centuries, Antigone became someone more than a mythological heroine. She became a paragon, a symbol giving the Polish people faith in human dignity. She was used as a model of an active attitude towards reality. She spoke in the name of all those people threatened to be deprived of their rights, dignity, feelings or values. And with her love and devotion, Antigone became a person very close and important to the Polish people, a person people could imitate or compare themselves with. In Antigone's lot people could find a parallel to their lots and also to the lot of Poland itself.

That is why I decided to devote my dissertation to the analysis and interpretation of the character and image (or images) of Antigone in Polish culture that emerge from different, selected translations and theatre productions (which form a great part of the reception of Sophocles' *Antigone* in Poland), taking into consideration the wide social, political and cultural context of their origin. In my dissertation I also wanted to find answers to the following question: how the interpretation of this heroine was changing, depending on the circumstances and the times an interpreter lived in? I decided to take up such a subject at Prof. Alicja SZASTYŃSKA-SIEMION's suggestion that appeared in her article entitled „The Polish Antigones. The state of knowledge, the research postulates”¹, where she wrote that the history of Antigone is worth undertaking and studying, because this heroine seems to be very close to the Poles and it is worth asking who the Polish Antigone is. My dissertation tries to fulfil partially this postulate.

Sophocles' *Antigone* is one of the best known ancient tragedies as well as the most beautiful, as the ancients already affirmed saying: τὸ μὲν δρᾶμα τῶν καλλίστων Σοφοκλέους². For a long time this tragedy was also regarded as perfect. Hence, there is no wonder that the literature concerning this tragedy is extensive. Nonetheless, in the first chapter I tried to deal with the numerous problems this tragedy raises. I devoted this chapter to the analysis and interpretation of many aspects of this tragedy, such as religious, familial, moral, social, political or philosophical matters. I also presented the most common approaches

¹ A. SZASTYŃSKA-SIEMION, *Polskie Antyfony – stan badań, postulatory badawcze*, Eos LXXXIV 1996, pp. 345–353.

² Aristophanes of Byzantium, *Argumenta Fabularum Aristophani tributa*, fr. 1 NAUCK.

to this tragedy, the amount of which (together with their diversity) clearly proves the complexity and multidimensionality of this tragedy. However, it was not my aim to clarify all the misinterpretations, misunderstandings or simplifications of this tragedy, but rather to point out the different levels this tragedy could be interpreted on and to suggest that there is no sense in limiting the interpretation and meanings of such a deep and complex tragedy only to one issue or matter. Such interpretations render this tragedy banal and trivial. And I am wholeheartedly convinced that Sophocles' *Antigone* is a masterpiece that was and still is important, interesting and inspiring both to the audience and scholars. It is a masterpiece whose message is relevant at every moment and the issues it raises are timeless. Probably because of those many problems this tragedy in its structure and contents raises, there is no wonder that so many interpretations appeared and continue to appear that differ among each other especially because of the different time, context, circumstances or reality they were or are written in. Very often it is this reality, history, language or culture of the interpreter that influence the most the reading of the tragedy, understanding of its meaning and its interpretation. Sophocles' *Antigone* was often read through the context of the social and political reality of different times, especially those times when a human being was forced to defend his or her identity, values and relatives. Therefore, I devoted the second chapter of my dissertation to the analysis of selected translations of *Antigone* into Polish and their interpretations of this tragedy, emphasizing the image of Antigone that emerges from them.

Out of the fifteen translations of Sophocles' *Antigone* into Polish I have chosen six that, in my opinion, are the most representative ones of Polish culture. These are the translations that make some important additions to the interpretation and comprehension of the image of Polish Antigone. As Stanisław Zabierowski³ rightly says, the beginning of the history of Polish Antigones is the translation by Kazimierz Morawski made in 1898, and especially the prologue to this translation written by the translator. In this prologue Morawski made the connections between the Greek Antigone, the history of Christianity and Polish literature. In this way he paved the way for other artists and translators who wanted to see Greek Antigone as Polish Antigone, as e.g. Stanisław Wyspiański, Juliusz Osterwa or Ludwik Hieronim Morstin. It were the influential ideas of Polish romanticism and messianism that caused to appear religiously tinged Polish translations representing Antigone nearly as a Christian martyr sacrificing her life to religious values, in defence of divine laws contrasted with human and political laws represented by Creon. Presented in this way, Antigone was to be an ideal paragon of virtue to imitate, especially in the times of partitions or wars in the 19th and 20th centuries.

³ S. ZABIEROWSKI, *Polskie Antygony*, Rocznik Komisji Historycznoliterackiej XV 1978, pp. 163–180.

It was not before the end of the World War II that other translations of this tragedy appeared free from such religious and messianic additions, but often adding others, connecting translations with the contemporary political or social matters. The translators of *Antigone* such as Stanisław Hebanowski, Antoni Libera and Janusz Szpotański or Helmut Kajzar tried to extract other, more universal, values of this tragedy and to free it from the historical allusions. That is why Hebanowski interprets Sophocles' *Antigone* as a text about the human clash with death, love and fate. Libera and Szpotański emphasize the problem of human wisdom and the text of Kajzar is a modern paraphrase of Sophocles' *Antigone*, being in great part dedicated to the problem of the respect to and the dignity of human body.

Every translation as well as every staging classifies this tragedy in some way, defines it, places it in some social, historical or political context, emphasizes its important meanings and prompts certain interpretation, often different from others. However, there are those characteristics of a translation or theatre production that allow us to analyse how the interpretation of this tragedy and its characters was changing throughout ages.

That is why in the third chapter I dealt with the reception of Sophocles' *Antigone* in Polish theatre in the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century. Definitely, it is one of those Greek tragedies that are still present on the Polish stage. There are over ninety stagings in the whole 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, which means that it is the most often played Greek tragedy in Polish theatre. Of course, not every theatre production is worth attention, that is why I have chosen only five theatre productions that are, in my opinion, the most interesting ones. These are the stagings of Adam Hanuszkiewicz (1973), Andrzej Wajda (1984), Zbigniew Brzoza (1998), Bogusław Kierc (2005) and Andrzej Seweryn (2005). The directors of these productions tried to connect this Greek tragedy with modern history and some important events to show the timeless values and relevance of the Greek tragedy, regardless of time, place and culture the tragedy is performed in.

The stagings of Hanuszkiewicz and Wajda were especially important to the Polish public, because they were experienced as a political, engaged and emotional theatre deeply involved with the Polish history of the 1970's and 1980's. The Hanuszkiewicz's *Antigone* was performed in 1972 and, against the director's will, the public connected these performances with the demonstrations that took place in December 1970 at Gdańsk. It turned out that the offstage reality was one of the components to interpret and understand the spectacle. Apart from this Hanuszkiewicz was probably the first one who changed the traditional way of performing the Greek tragedies on Polish stage. He decided to introduce young people on stage with their emotionality, spontaneity, also dressed in a modern way. He resigned from staging a Greek tragedy that imitated the ancient theatre and ancient way of performing. The production of Sophocles' *Antigone*, made by

Wajda was performed in 1984 and necessarily it was interpreted with the reference to contemporary politics and events, especially to the martial law, although it was the result of deeper thoughts than the martial law in Poland only, and in this staging the director wanted to draw the public attention to many current events that took place at that time around the world, such as the political slaughters or the demonstrations in the defence of human rights, dignity and tradition⁴. But it was, once more, the offstage reality that was one of the main characters in the performance.

In the ensuing staging, Brzoza, the director of *Antigone* performed in Warsaw in 1998, decided to connect this Greek tragedy, again, with the current European history, namely with the Balkan war. Using the tragedy of Sophocles and the contemporary history, in this staging he presented the scenery of the present-day world which is torn by armed conflicts, destroyed, overcome by madness and insanity. By presenting the situation during and after the war, he emphasized that there is no difference between the war in ancient or modern times, because its consequences are the same for, mainly, ordinary people who suffer the greatest loss.

The last two theatre productions I dealt with in my dissertation are the spectacles both performed in 2005. The director of the first one was Kierc and his staging was in a great part the adaptation of the Kajzar's translation of Sophocles' tragedy. It was the first and, to the best of my knowledge, the only Polish production of *Antigone* performed by the puppet's theatre. The greatest emphasis in this staging, as well as in the Kajzar's translation, was laid on the dignity and respect for human body. The director of the second one was Seweryn and his production was realized not in the theatre but in the open air near Warsaw. Seweryn presented Greek Antigone as Slavic Antigone, but at the same time he emphasized that the change of place, circumstances or realities does not change the universal and timeless message and values of Sophocles' drama. The value of human wisdom, reverence for another human being and respect for gods presented in Sophocles' tragedy found their deep visualisation and reflection in Seweryn's staging.

There are many re-interpretations and re-vocations of the history of Antigone in Polish and European literature, culture or theatre, which proves the importance and relevance of this tragedy and the story of one brave girl who decided to defend at any cost the values she found important. The Polish history of Antigone shows that at some moments in history she became a person very close to and familiar to Polish society.

My aim in this dissertation was to reflect on how Antigone through different interpretations at different times functioned and is still functioning in Polish

⁴ Cf. M. KARPIŃSKI, *Teatr Andrzeja Wajdy*, Warszawa 1991, p. 137; E. UDALSKA, *Antygona*, in: A. KULIGOWSKA-KORZENIEWSKA, K. PACEK (eds.), *Teatralny świat Andrzeja Wajdy*, Kraków 2003, p. 113 f.

culture, who she is, how her behaviour and character are interpreted and understood, to what degree she differs from the Sophocles' heroine, and how she became a specific symbol in Polish culture. All those interpretations and re-vo-cations of the history of Antigone prove that at some time in the history she started living on her own, apart from the Sophocles' tragedy. Her behaviour and character as presented in the tragedy of the ancient playwright were often intentionally misinterpreted or changed in order to add to them some additional meanings that were important and relevant at a specific moment in history. While I devoted my dissertation to those transformations of the image of Antigone in Polish culture, it was not my aim, as I have already stressed, to explain all the misunderstandings or misinterpretations of this tragedy, especially because they often say some important things about the time and reality in which they came into being, as well as about people who put them forward. Many different, even wrong, interpretations are important to a further history of Sophocles' *Antigone*, because each of them tries to find the answer to the main issue of the tragedy, to present its main characters, but also is representative of the times when it was written and represents the ideas about this tragedy at the moment of the origin of an interpretation. That is why I did not want to point out the false interpretations but to point out the different possibilities and potentialities that are hidden in the tragedy of Sophocles and which are, in my opinion, more interesting and worth commenting on. The successive translations and stage representations show that Sophocles' *Antigone* is still a very inspiring and valuable work.

From many heroes and heroines of Greek tragedy Antigone appears, especially in the context of many re-interpretations, as a symbol of fight, revolt against unlawful and unjust orders, but also as a symbol of hope that there is something more than suffering, a symbol of the important and invariable values in the life of every human being which are worth defending and fighting for. Particularly at those times where politics deeply influenced people's lives, her character with all good and bad sides fascinated the public. Her active attitude towards reality, indicating that even when oppressed we cannot remain silent, was very close and familiar to the public in hard historical times when her character forced people to act and fight against the reality they did not accept. In some way Antigone became, as Marta Fik⁵ writes, almost "an archetype of the rebellious consciousness of the 20th century human being who does not consent to the triumph of evil".

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⁵ M. FIK, *Reżyser ma pomysły?*, in: M. FIK (ed.), *Przeciw konwencjom*, Warszawa 1994, p. 138: "archetypem buntowniczej świadomości człowieka XX wieku, niegodzącego się na triumf zła".