

# Sophocles' *Antigone*: Philosophy, Politics, and Psychoanalysis\*

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## I

Alenka Zupančič (born 1966) is a distinguished Lacanian philosopher and social theorist from Slovenia whose work focuses on psychoanalysis and continental philosophy.<sup>1</sup> She is a professor of philosophy and psychoanalysis at the European Graduate School, and a researcher at the Institute of Philosophy at the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts. Together with Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, Zupančič is one of the most prominent members of the “Ljubljana School of Psychoanalysis”. The thinkers on whose work her philosophy mainly draws include Alain Badiou, Mladen Dolar, Sigmund Freud, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Jacques Lacan, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Slavoj Žižek.

Zupančič's research interests include the relationship between sexuality, ontology, and the unconscious; critique of the theory of the subject; and theoretical exploration of the Lacanian concept of the Real. Her work concerning the relationship between sexuality and ontology culminated in the book *What Is Sex?* (2017). Zupančič's most recent book, *Let Them Rot: Antigone's Parallax* (2023), offers a fresh interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (2017), originally written in or before 441 BC. It contains three chapters, preceded by a preface and a prologue.

## II

Sophocles' *Antigone* has been central to many philosophers', literary theorists', and psychoanalysts' thought; those who have provided original interpretations and given the text significant critical attention include Friedrich Hölderlin, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Lacan, and Judith Butler. For example, Hölderlin (2009: 317–32) wrote two short texts on Sophocles' tragedies *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone*: his *Remarks on “Oedipus”* and *Remarks on “Antigone”*.<sup>2</sup> In both, Hölderlin mainly focuses on how Sophocles dealt with rhythm, language, and time (see also Rosenfield, 2010: 169–85). In particular, Hölderlin (2009: 318) analyses the caesura, stating that “[i]n both plays, it is the speeches of Tiresias which constitute the caesura”. Hölderlin (2009: 318) explains the caesura in the following terms:

the rhythmic succession of ideas wherein the *transport* manifests itself demands a counter-rhythmic interruption, a pure word, *that which in metrics is called a caesura*, in order to confront the speeding alternation of ideas at its climax, so that not the alternation of the idea, but the idea itself appears.

In this way, Hölderlin (2009: 317) explores the metre of Sophocles' tragedies, investigating how their content relates to his concept of “calculable law”, or poetic law.

Hegel (1975) mentioned *Antigone* quite often in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*.<sup>3</sup> He refers to *Antigone* when he deals with such concepts as power, action, pathos, and love. For example, in discussing the universal powers, Hegel (1975: 220–21) considers the “interests and aims which fight” in Sophocles' tragedy:

Creon, the King, had issued, as head of the state, the strict command that the son of Oedipus, who had risen against Thebes as an enemy of his country, was to be refused the honour of burial. This command contains an essential justification, provision for the welfare of the entire city. But Antigone is animated by an equally ethical power, her holy love for her brother, whom she cannot leave unburied, a prey of the birds. Not to fulfil the duty of burial would be against family piety, and therefore she transgresses Creon's command.

In this passage, Hegel contrasts the ethical power of family piety, personified by Antigone, with the power of law and the state, personified by her uncle, Creon. The tragedy turns on the friction between these two powers. In this respect, Hegel (1975: 1163) states, "the drama is the dissolution of the one-sidedness of these powers which are making themselves independent in the dramatic characters". The powers' one-sidedness is dissolved in the sense that they complement each other. Hegel (1975: 1213) deepens this concept when he discusses the conflict "between the state, i.e. ethical life in its *spiritual* universality, and the family, i.e. *natural* ethical life". This conflict of powers also emerges in the fact that Antigone, in honouring kinship ties,<sup>4</sup> honours the gods of the underworld, whilst Creon honours Zeus, who represents the power that dominates public life (see also Hegel, 1975: 464).

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger (2014: 163–83) offers a novel interpretation of the chorus' sequence of strophe and antistrophe (known as *The Ode on Man*), spanning lines 332 to 375 of *Antigone*. Heidegger's main aim is to unveil the essence of the human being as Sophocles understood it:

In the *first* phase we will especially stress what provides the inner integrity of the poem and sustains and permeates the whole, even in its linguistic form.

In the *second* phase we will follow the sequence of the strophes and antistrophes, and pace off the entire domain that the poetry opens up.

In the *third* phase we will attempt to attain a stance in the midst of the whole, in order to assess who the human being is according to this poetic saying. (Heidegger, 2014: 165)

Heidegger (2014: 165) focuses on the first two verses, which describe the primary feature of the essence of humanity:

πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδὲν ἀν-  
θρώπου δεινότερον πέλει.

Manifold is the uncanny, yet nothing  
uncannier than man bestirs itself, rising up beyond him.<sup>5</sup> (*Antigone*, 332–333)

According to Heidegger (2014: 165–66), the Ancient Greek definition of "[t]he human being is, in *one* word, *to deinotaton*, the uncanniest". Consequently, Heidegger defines humankind as the strangest and most mysterious of all species. But what does this mean? Heidegger develops this idea by analysing the Greek word δεινόν, defining it in a twofold way. On the one hand, δεινόν "is the terrible in the sense of the overwhelming sway, which induces panicked fear, true anxiety, as well as collected, inwardly reverberating, reticent awe. The violent, the overwhelming is the essential character of the sway itself" (Heidegger, 2014: 166). On the other hand, δεινόν

means the violent in the sense of one who needs to use violence – and does not just have violence at his disposal, but is violence-doing, insofar as using violence is the basic trait not just of his doing, but of his Dasein. (Heidegger, 2014: 167)

Heidegger (2014: 167) draws the following conclusion: "[b]ecause it is doubly *deimon* in an originally united sense, it is *to deinotaton*, the most violent: violence-doing in the midst of the overwhelming". Therefore, according to Heidegger, the essence of "Being-human" is violence-doing.

In his *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*, Heidegger (1996: 51–122) more extensively develops his own interpretation of *Antigone*, and particularly *The Ode on Man*. Heidegger (1996: 64) states that δεινόν means something fearful, powerful, and unhabitual:

the fearful as that which frightens, and as that which is worthy of honor; the powerful as that which looms over us, and as that which is merely violent; the inhabitual as the extraordinary, and as that which is skilled in everything.

However, these three definitions of the essence of δεινόν are not distinct, but intertwined: “[w]hat is essential in the essence of the δεινόν conceals itself in the originary unity of the fearful, the powerful, the inhabitual” (Heidegger, 1996: 64), and these three definitions can be synthesised with the term “uncanny”.

Heidegger’s updated definition of δεινόν embraces the one he provided in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*; that is, violence:

because active violence and power are also to be found within the δεινόν, one might think that the δεινότατον means that human beings are the most actively violent beings in the sense of that animal full of cunning that Nietzsche calls the “blond beast” and “the predator”. (Heidegger, 1996: 90)

After having defined the word δεινόν, Heidegger (1996: 92) investigates whether Antigone belongs to the essence of humanity the choral song describes, “the most uncanny among the uncanny”. His assumption is that “Antigone is not just any δεινόν. As a human being, she not only also belongs to the most uncanny that looms and stirs among beings; rather, within the most uncanny, Antigone is the supreme uncanny” (Heidegger, 1996: 104). She belongs supremely to the essence of the uncanniest species, according to Heidegger, because “[s]he makes the pursuit of that which is of no avail the origin of her essence”, as the introductory dialogue between her and Ismene makes evident (Heidegger, 1996: 109).

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan (2008: 297–53) devotes a chapter to *Antigone*. Lacan’s (2008: 300) analysis of the play begins with the notion of catharsis, which in *Antigone* “is linked to the problem of abreaction”. Lacan (2008: 301) borrows the definition of catharsis from Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “a means of accomplishing the purgation of the emotions by a pity and fear similar to this”. According to Lacan, the original meaning of catharsis, the aim of tragedy, is purification. However, as Lacan (2008: 317) states, Antigone is the only character who feels neither fear nor pity. For this reason, “she is the real hero” (Lacan, 2008: 317). Creon, in contrast, “is moved by fear toward the end”, which is the reason for his ruin (Lacan, 2008: 317).

Another aspect of *Antigone* that Lacan investigates is the concept of desire – which Zupančič also addresses in her book. As Lacan (2008: 346) states, Antigone “has been declaring from the beginning: ‘I am dead and I desire death’”. According to Lacan (2008: 348), Antigone “pushes to the limit the realization of something that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such. She incarnates that desire”. Antigone *desires* death; and Lacan (2008: 348) argues that *desire* is what structures the entire tragedy:

The text alludes to the fact that the desire of the mother is the origin of everything. The desire of the mother is the founding desire of the whole structure, the one that brought into the world the unique offspring that are Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone and Ismene; but it is also a criminal desire.

Thus, according to Lacan, desire is at the root of the tragedy.

A further key term that Lacan (2008: 323) analyses is ἄτη (*Atè*), which “designates the limit that human life can only briefly cross”. *Atè* is related to Antigone’s personality. Antigone “goes beyond the limits of the human” in the sense that “her desire aims at the following – the beyond of *Atè*” (Lacan, 2008: 324). As Lacan (2008: 331) states, “Antigone was after all walled in at the limit of *Atè*”. *Atè* may be said to be “the moment when she crosses the entrance to the zone between life and death” (Lacan, 2008: 345). In fact, Antigone’s punishment consists “in her being

shut up or suspended in the zone between life and death” (Lacan, 2008: 345). As Lacan (2008: 345) maintains, “[a]lthough she is not yet dead, she is eliminated from the world of the living”. He continues:

from Antigone’s point of view life can only be approached, can only be lived or thought about, from the place of that limit where her life is already lost, where she is already on the other side. But from that place she can see it and live it in the form of something already lost. (Lacan, 2008: 345)

According to Lacan (2008: 348), it is because the community refuses to grant Polyneices funeral rites that “Antigone is required to sacrifice her own being in order to maintain that essential being which is the family *Atè*, and that is the theme or true axis on which the whole tragedy turns”. Antigone thus perpetuates that *Atè*.

Finally, Lacan also analyses the hymn of praise to mankind on which Heidegger had previously commented. However, Lacan (2008: 338) translates the first two verses as follows:

There are a lot of wonders in the world, but there is nothing more wonderful than man.

Therefore, he translates *δεινόν* as “wonderful” where Heidegger translated it as “uncanny”. Furthermore, Lacan (2008: 337) uses Claude Lévi-Strauss’s formalisation of “the gap between nature and culture” to interpret this hymn:

what the Chorus says about man here is really the definition of culture as opposed to nature: man cultivates speech and the sublime sciences; he knows how to protect his dwelling place from winter frosts and from the blasts of a storm; he knows how to avoid getting wet. (Lacan, 2008: 338)

Whereas Heidegger used this hymn to find the essence of human beings, Lacan finds in it the explanation of the passage from nature to culture.

More recently, in *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (2000), Butler analyses Antigone’s complex family relations (Oedipus is both her father and brother) in order to interrogate family structures, including taboo issues, kinship, and sexuality. Butler (2000: 1) sees Antigone “as an example of a certain feminist impulse”. She continues, “Antigone might work as a counterfigure to the trend championed by recent feminists to seek the backing and authority of the state to implement feminist policy aims” (Butler, 2000: 1). In this respect, Butler (2000: 2) explores whether Antigone could be regarded as a “representative for a certain kind of feminist politics”, and decides that she represents a “feminine figure who defies the state through a powerful set of physical and linguistic acts” (Butler, 2000: 2). Butler (2000: 72–3) builds her claim on the socialist feminist tradition of the 1970s, according to which “there is no ultimate basis for normative heterosexual monogamous family structure in nature”, adding that “it has no similar basis in language”. As Butler (2000: 73) notes, “[v]arious utopian projects to revamp or eliminate family structure have become important components of the feminist movement and, to some extent, have survived in contemporary queer movements as well, the support for gay marriage notwithstanding”. Therefore, Butler considers Sophocles’ *Antigone* a paradigm of feminism *ante litteram*.

According to Butler (2000: 76), Antigone subverts the traditional family conventions when she “fails to produce heterosexual closure for that drama”. Butler (2000: 76) continues:

Certainly, she does not achieve another sexuality, one that is *not* heterosexuality, but she does seem to deinstitutionalize heterosexuality by refusing to do what is necessary to stay alive for Haemon, by refusing to become a mother and a wife, by scandalizing the public with her wavering gender, by embracing death as her bridal chamber and identifying her tomb as a “deep dug home”.

As she approaches death, Antigone chooses love for her brother over love for her betrothed. In this respect, Butler (2000: 76) states, “[a]s the bridal chamber is refused in life and pursued in

death, it takes on a metaphorical status and, as metaphor, its conventional meaning is transmuted into a decidedly nonconventional one". In *Antigone*, the bridal chamber coincides with the tomb, which Antigone chooses over marriage; Butler (2000: 76) posits that "the tomb stands for the very destruction of marriage". Consequently, through her actions, Antigone "upsets the vocabulary of kinship that is a precondition of the human, implicitly raising the question for us of what those preconditions really must be" (Butler, 2000: 82). Antigone thus calls into question kinship ties, which are also questioned, albeit in different ways, by the feminist tradition on which Butler draws.

### III

Zupančič's addition to this scholarly tradition sheds new light on the philosophical and psychoanalytical issues which arise from the Theban Trilogy (i.e. *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*), particularly from *Antigone*. As Zupančič states in the preface, she focuses on three principal aspects: violence, funerary rites, and "Antigone's statement that if it were her children or husband lying unburied out there, she would let them rot (*těkō*) and not take it upon herself to defy the decree of the state" (ix). The violence Zupančič refers to is "the violence of words, the violence of principles, the violence of desire, the violence of subjectivity" (viii). It is this violence that leads Antigone to bury her brother's corpse even though the law forbids it. And here is the link with the issue of funerary rites. Zupančič investigates "the relationship between language, sexuality (sexual reproduction), death, 'second death', and a peculiar nonlinguistic Real that occurs as a by-product of language yet is not reducible (back) to language or to the symbolic" (viii). Finally, Zupančič turns to Antigone's willingness to transgress the law, and therefore to die, to bury her brother (and no one else); and to Antigone's justification, according to which she is following the "unwritten law". In addressing this issue, Zupančič explores incest.

### IV

In the prologue, "A Hot Mind Over Chilly Things", Zupančič introduces her interpretation of *Antigone*. First, she considers Antigone's story both the implication and the presupposition of the other two stories of the so-called Theban Trilogy, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. In fact, key aspects of the first two plays (such as the Oedipus complex) are at the core of *Antigone*.

Second, according to Zupančič, "Creon is not simply a ruler, a king, a figure of state power, under whose rule the events described take place" (5). In this respect, it is important to know how Creon ascended the throne:

Polyneices and Eteocles, the two sons from the incestuous relationship, were to share the kingdom after the exile of Oedipus, each taking a one-year reign in turn. However, Eteocles refused to cede his throne after his year as king. Therefore, Polyneices raised an army to oust Eteocles from his throne, and a battle ensued. At the end of the battle, the brothers killed each other, after which Jocasta's brother, Creon, ascended the throne. He decided that Polyneices was the traitor and therefore should not be accorded funeral rites. (5)

Therefore, not only did Creon come to power when Polyneices and Eteocles, both sons of Oedipus, killed each other; the edict that honours Eteocles and excludes Polyneices from burial rites also coincides with his rise to power.

Third, in Zupančič's view, the replacement of Eteocles with Creon represents not only a change of ruler, but also a change from "the blameless but no less unspeakably 'criminal' rule associated with Oedipus (who, unbeknown to himself, has killed King Laius, his own father, taken his place, and married his mother, Jocasta) to a 'civilized', normal, business-as-usual rule" (5). In other words, "what is at stake here, at least in some respects, is the transition from prehistory (myth) to history" (6), in which this transfer of power represents the establishment of the normal social order.

In considering these aspects of Antigone's story, Zupančič discusses three main points: (i) violence and unwritten laws, (ii) death and funeral rites, and (iii) incest and desire. She also defines these as terror, undeadness, and sublimation.

## V

The first chapter, "Violence, Terror, and Unwritten Laws", concerns Antigone's justification for her rebellion, according to which Creon violated the laws of the state: "[b]y forbidding Polyneices's burial, Creon has not simply perpetuated the standard, imperceptible objective/systemic violence of the given rule but has himself performed a gesture of excessive, subjective violence" (10). Furthermore, the fact that Creon "has performed this gesture of subjective violence *in the name of the state and public law*" aggravates his offence (10).

According to Zupančič, by forbidding the burial of Polyneices, Creon violates "an unwritten dimension of his own law" (10–11). In *Antigone*, there is a distinction between symbolic (public, state) laws, represented by Creon, and unwritten ("sacred") laws, evoked by Antigone; symbolic law "begins with and depends on a crime that has never been prosecuted as such" (12). Therefore, the unwritten laws

are not simply a remnant of ancient traditions but arise (or appear) with the cut that inaugurates the new order – it is only at this point that a particular dimension of the old past is constituted as sacred because it is linked to the inaugurating crime of the new order. (12)

In this sense, the "sacred" law constitutes the inner limit of the symbolic law. As Zupančič explains,

[t]he inner limit of symbolic law means that the law does not hold at some point of its own edifice, that its barrier (the barrier that the law erects) is porous: that *there is a hole in the fence*, to use a suggestive image. (12)

A number of unwritten laws thus come into play, and are intimately related to the written laws: "unwritten laws are there to protect and regulate access to the leak/hole at the heart of public law" (13). Creon uses the symbolic power of law to demonstrate and consolidate his own power.

Considering Creon's behaviour leads Zupančič to discuss the concepts of decency and obscenity:

The image of the obscene feast that Creon creates with his decisions is quite explicit in the text; it is particularly prominent in the final dialog between Teiresias and Creon, the dialog that finally makes Creon change his mind and reverse his decision – only it is too late, Antigone has already hanged herself in her tomb. (13)

The term "obscenity" is an appropriate one to describe Creon's actions and their consequences, and the decency/obscenity dichotomy serves to identify the "dividing line that applies in relation to the unwritten laws" (14). In fact, the unwritten laws are a dimension of the written laws; respecting this unwritten dimension is therefore what is decent, whereas violating it, as Creon does, is tantamount to obscenity.

Creon violates the unwritten dimension by killing Polyneices a second time, pushing against the limit of the symbolic law. He pushes this limit even further by condemning Antigone to be buried alive. In the play, Teiresias describes Creon's double violation as follows:

You shall give in exchange for corpses the corpse of one from your own loins, in return for having hurled below one of those above, blasphemously lodging a living person in a tomb, and you have kept here something belonging to the gods below, a corpse deprived, unburied, unholy. Neither you nor the gods above have any part in this, but you have inflicted it upon them! (*Antigone*, 1066–1073)

As Zupančič states, "[t]hese two acts of Creon do not play simply with life and death but with something beyond life and death: they aim, as it were, at a third something" (14–15). What is

this “third something”? Here is the answer: Creon does not simply punish Antigone's actions with her death. He condemns her with an additional punishment: he forces her to *live her death* by being buried alive.

Therefore, neither Polyneices nor Antigone receives a proper burial. This aspect of the play introduces what Lacan (2008: 332–48) calls the dimension “between two deaths”. Zupančič applies this concept to her own reading of *Antigone*, describing Antigone's tomb as a “nonplace between two deaths” (15). Interestingly, Creon himself meets a similar end. Once he realises that all of his loved ones have committed suicide as a consequence of his decree, the messenger describes him as if he is among the living dead: “for when a man's pleasures have abandoned him, I do not consider him a living being, but an animated corpse” (*Antigone*, 1165–1167).

As Zupančič states, Creon seems to enjoy playing with the boundary between life and death. He is obsessed by another boundary too: by the limit of the law, and by pushing it back. It is precisely this behaviour that Antigone combats:

Her justice is principled, saying something like, *You cannot push this limit, play with it, without consequences*. To argue and prove her point (and her justice), *she is willing to be that consequence*; she feels she can't help but be that consequence. (16)

As a result, Antigone is willing to sacrifice her life to counter Creon's decrees. This is where Zupančič locates Antigone's ethics, in contrast with her sister Ismene's. Ismene refuses to help Antigone to bury their brother because, according to her, as women they would be acting in vain. However, Antigone “persists because she knows that she can embody the consequences of Creon's ruling and the violence of his decree for all to see” (16–17). But why, Zupančič asks, is this stake ethical? It is ethical because only one thing ensures that someone (like Creon) cannot play with the limit of the law without facing any consequences: the existence of some antagonist (like Antigone) who is willing to be that consequence.

Zupančič demonstrates the actuality of *Antigone* by drawing a parallel with modern times, when pushing the limit of the symbolic law, as in *Antigone*, is usually associated with state violence. State power sometimes resorts to illegal practices simply because it is the state – for instance, enhanced interrogation techniques. It is very hard to challenge the state when it does this sort of things. Julian Assange, Zupančič points out, is an Antigone-like figure of our time: he revealed classified US documents concerning war crimes via WikiLeaks, and has been almost literally buried alive as punishment.

Accordingly, Antigone has often been associated with modern terrorism. As Zupančič argues,

Antigone seems to occupy two positions simultaneously in the configuration of terror: she wants to bury the terrorists (those who are declared terrorists by the state), thus symbolically acknowledging their existence and death; but her act of perseverance and persistence is in itself perceived as an act of terror, a terrorist act by which she also becomes the enemy of the state; she is seen as even more “terrorist” than the original terrorists themselves. (19–20)

This is what happened to Assange and other whistleblowers like Edward Snowden, branded terrorists and enemies of the state for their actions. Zupančič states that “[t]he ease with which the term ‘terrorist’ is used today to dismiss those critics who point to the obscene [...] could be seen as a clear indication of the growing reliance of state power itself on that other, obscene side” (20). Or, she remarks, it could also be seen as a symptom of the dissolution of the state, which, as a consequence, is no longer able to provide for the common good or serve the public interest.

## VI

In the second chapter, “Death, Undeadness, and Funeral Rites”, Zupančič addresses the cultural significance of funeral rites. Antigone fights for a proper burial for her brother, something considered part of common custom and decency. Antigone's request is ordinary; what is extraor-

dinary, as Zupančič states, “is the fact that she, as a woman, takes it upon herself to act, rather than pleading, ‘supplicating’ others (men) to act on her behalf” (23). What breaks with custom is that a woman wants to act in the public sphere.

Hence the importance of the “divine laws” which Antigone invokes for her brother’s sake. But what exactly are these? In brief, they refer to the pointlessness of killing the dead a second time. This is evident in Teiresias’ statement: “[g]ive way to the dead man, and do not continue to stab him as he lies dead! What is the bravery of killing a dead man over again?” (*Antigone*, 1029–1030). Thus the “divine laws” are about the space “between two deaths”, or, better yet, the realm of the undead. As Zupančič puts it, the “divine laws” are about

the prohibition of the symbolic murder of a real corpse, or of the exploitation of a corpse as a symbolic stake, its torture and shaming, which in a certain sense precisely *does not acknowledge death*, but imprisons the person far beyond their death, condemning them to “wander without a grave”. (24)

At this point, a question arises: why do humans bury the dead? Zupančič states that the dimension of living death is peculiar to humanity.

She introduces the concept of the *surplus real*, which “is not ‘constituted through’ language; it is more like a parasite on it and on its functioning, with the capacity also to steer it, and our life, in unpredictable directions” (25). In other words,

it is not something constituted *by* speech but is essentially its by-product, which is not (directly) assimilable into the symbolic. This surplus real is situated in the intricate topology of the relationship between organic life and the symbolic, with the relationship between death and language as its pivotal point. (25)

Here the importance of funeral rites emerges:

funeral rituals are never simply a way of honoring the deceased, of paying one’s last respects and so on, although they are that too. They are a way of making death coincide with itself. For it is this coincidence that finally “releases” a body, allows the deceased to “rest in peace” – and not, for example, to continue to wander and haunt the living. (25)

Herein lies the importance of giving death a symbolic existence to which people can relate. In this sense, death becomes part of life. Hence the importance of the themes of the second death, of the difference between symbolic and real death, and of the realm “between two deaths” in *Antigone*.

It follows that, as Zupančič states, “[a]ll things that die are involved in a new form of life” (27). Therefore, Zupančič adds, “life cannot really be destroyed by death, since death is its immanent moment, itself involved in regeneration, not the opposite of life or its final end” (27). Since nothing in nature really dies,

the idea of an absolute, ultimate crime appears, a crime that would bring about an absolute death, something like a *second death* – a “total destruction”, the extinction of the natural cycle itself, thus freeing nature from its own laws, opening the way for the creation of life rather than its reproduction. (27)

That is why, in the Marquis de Sade’s *Juliette* (1968), life and death are not in opposition: life implies and contains death. Since death is part of life, not even death can destroy life.

The Sadean problem, Zupančič states, could be summarised as follows: how to free death from being merely an internal moment in the regeneration of life? This explains why life needs a second death. However, normal crimes do not suffice for this – “they extinguish individual life but not life as such” (28). Therefore, the problem is one of how to kill “that which in life is already dead and cannot die” (28). Sade’s aim is to eliminate death, to reach an absolute annihilation.

Zupančič explains this with a remarkable example. When a king dies, there is a ritual formula: “The King is dead. Long live the King!” This points to the continuity of the monarchy, not in spite of but *through* the occurrence of death. This also happens in the life of all species. Life “does not continue *despite* the death of individuals but *through it*, with its ‘help’” (29). Lacan (1998:



150) referred to this idea while discussing the relationship between sex and death:

We know that sexual division, in so far as it reigns over most living beings, is that which ensures the survival of a species [...] Let us say that the species survives in the form of its individuals. Nevertheless, the survival of the horse as a species has a meaning – each horse is transitory and dies. So you see, the link between sex and death, sex and the death of the individual, is fundamental.

Therefore, death is a precondition for the continuity of (sexed) life – for the survival of the species. As Zupančič points out, death “has to do with the *cut in continuity* as an inner moment of that very continuity” (29); sexuation “is first and foremost a cut in the continuity of life, a cut in which something is lost” (29). It is the repetition of this cut, this discontinuity, this loss of life, that constitutes the continuity of life.

Zupančič also distinguishes between symbolic life (such as how a person’s name or reputation lives on after death) and undeadness, “the undead life that seems to come with it” (33): “[a]s speaking creatures, human beings participate not only in symbolic life but also in fate, in the state of undeadness that comes with the symbolic but is not reducible to it” (33). She elaborates: “we live (exist) in the symbolic while being *undead* in the Real (neither dead nor alive but undead – this is where the death drive is located, both conceptually and topologically)” (38). Therefore, the state of being undead is the consequence of the symbolic.

Funeral rites represent a symbolic ritual aimed at “containing” the subject’s undead life: “[f]uneral rites are there to make this undead life coincide with the empirical life of the subject, to allow the disturbing undead life also to die, to rest” (39). According to Zupančič, when a person dies and no funeral rite is performed, as in the case of Polyneices, what remains is the undead life. This explains why the prohibition of a proper burial has always been considered the most severe form of punishment. For example, in the Christian tradition, the lack of a burial is considered a cause of eternal damnation because it represents a state of eternal *restlessness*, in contrast with resting in peace. Therefore, the role of funeral rites is to recognise death symbolically in order to separate life and death.

Whereas Zupančič discusses the social consequences of the lack of a proper burial, and how it constitutes a sort of intentionally inflicted undeadness, Slavoj Žižek (1992: 23) discusses the “return of the living dead”, another configuration resulting in undeadness:

The “return of the living dead” is [...] the reverse of the proper funeral rite. While the latter implies a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of loss, the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition. The two great traumatic events of the holocaust and the gulag are, of course, exemplary cases of the return of the dead in the twentieth century. The shadows of their victims will continue to chase us as “living dead” until we give them a decent burial, until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory.

The “return of the living dead” describes this failure to integrate a traumatic event into the symbolic.

The configuration of the unburied corpse and that of the “return of the living dead” are both present in *Antigone*:

the traumatic event of the two brothers killing each other (which can also be seen as a prolongation of the traumatic dimension of Oedipus’s reign) is further aggravated by Creon’s curious attempt to integrate this trauma into the symbolic (into the historical memory of Thebes) by refusing one of the brothers funeral rites: a strange attempt to integrate the traumatic excess into the symbolic by symbolically excluding it from it, that is, by redoubling the exclusion. (40)

Zupančič thus shows that the dimension “between two deaths” is at the centre of *Antigone*, and so, therefore, is the notion of the undead. Polyneices undergoes “a death that cannot die”, whereas Antigone has “a life that cannot be lived alive” (45). Antigone herself is “between two deaths” when she is *buried alive*.

Finally, Zupančič introduces the Lacanian notion of sublimation. As she explains, “to sublimate is to *elevate something* (an object) *to the dignity of the Thing*” (46). In burying her brother, Antigone “elevates ‘the Oedipal abject’ (*Unding*) to the dignity of the Thing (*das Ding*)” (46). Due to Creon’s actions, the disturbingly undead drive of Oedipus re-emerges in the undeadness of Polyneices; and Antigone’s actions immortalise and glorify it.

## VII

In the third chapter, “I’d Let Them Rot”, Zupančič deals with the problem of incest in Antigone’s family, the source of the name of the Oedipus complex. Sigmund Freud first introduced the idea of the Oedipus complex in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2001a, 2001b), and coined the term in “A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men (Contributions to the Psychology of Love I)” (2001c), turning this family’s singularity into a statement about the family in general.

To follow Zupančič’s argument, it is worth recalling this family’s singular vicissitudes. Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother, with whom he has four children: Antigone, Ismene, Polyneices, and Eteocles. When Oedipus discovers what really happened (at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus*), he gouges his eyes out and goes into exile. Antigone goes with him, whereas Polyneices and Eteocles remain in Thebes, fighting each other for the succession. Close to death (at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*), Oedipus curses Polyneices and Eteocles, foreseeing that each will die at the other’s hand. At this point, Polyneices makes Antigone promise to provide him with a proper burial.

“Is it a really dysfunctional family?” Zupančič asks. “Or, rather, is it the other, undead side of every normal, functional family, as Freud would seem to suggest?” (51). To address these questions, Zupančič analyses the crucial passage in which Antigone explains why she is fighting to give her brother a proper burial. The passage is as follows:

for never, had children of whom I was the mother or had my husband perished and been mouldering there, would I have taken on myself this task, in defiance of the citizens. In virtue of what law do I say this? If my husband had died, I could have had another, and a child by another man, if I had lost the first, but with my mother and my father in Hades below, I could never have another brother. Such was the law for whose sake I did you special honour. (*Antigone*, 905–914)

Antigone puts her life at risk for her brother (and only for her brother) because she cannot have another, since their parents are dead.

Her statement does not refer to a sort of universal humanity according to which everyone, even the worst criminal, deserves a burial. As Zupančič points out, “[p]erhaps everybody does indeed deserve a burial, but here’s the rub: Antigone wouldn’t do it for everybody” (51). This is why Antigone’s statement is rather *outrageous*.

According to Zupančič, Antigone’s statement should be read in the context of the kind of relationship involved – a purely symbolic tie, without any kind of affection or attachment: “[i]t is about a (bio)logical impossibility, not about individual uniqueness. If she could have another brother, Polyneices rotting out there would not be a problem” (52). Therefore, it is not kinship that guides her actions but something else:

it is almost as if she is trying to patch up a hole in the structure of kinship or as if that *particular* hole in the structure of kinship was especially unbearable, charged with something far beyond what it actually is. This may explain – or, rather, cast in a different light – the icy coldness of her claim and of the calculation behind it. (52)

Zupančič thus provides a different explanation of Antigone’s desire to bury her brother from the origin suggested by Hegel, her holy love for him.

Furthermore, Zupančič argues that Antigone does what she does because her family originated in an act of incest: “[t]here is something about brothers – and about the kinship caught in a

strange loop between the biological and the symbolic – that for Antigone cannot be separated from the incest or from incest and murder” (52). Zupančič argues that this is the law to which Antigone refers in her claim (“Such was the law for whose sake I did you special honour”).

Zupančič draws parallels between Antigone’s act and Immanuel Kant’s ethics. According to Kant, a truly ethical act is not only in accordance with the moral law but is also performed exclusively because of the moral law, uninfluenced by any other motives, such as personal reputation, fear of God, and so on. This is precisely how Antigone acts. Her action is not motivated by feelings for her brother (as Hegel stated) but by an unconditional “law” that she is following:

the ethical dimension of her act is evidenced not only through everything that she is made to suffer because of it (no gain for her in all that) but also by her motives concerning Polyneices as exempt from any “pathological” feelings (that is, from any feelings *tout court*). (56)

In the light of this, Zupančič proposes two interrelated conclusions, which constitute what she calls “Antigone’s parallax” (57).

The first conclusion involves incest. According to Zupančič, incest is the impossible coincidence of nature and culture, “the impossible point where one slips into the other, ‘nature’ into ‘culture’ and ‘culture’ into ‘nature’” (69). She continues: “[t]he prohibition of incest is neither cultural nor natural, but at the same time it is both” (69). Incest, according to Zupančič, is the impossible and inconceivable “*missing link* between nature and culture” (70). Therefore, Zupančič distances herself from Lévi-Strauss’s definition of incest, according to which it marked humanity’s passage from nature to culture. This transition consists of forcing members of a group to leave it. However, according to Zupančič, “[t]he incest taboo is there to cover up, with its prohibition, the impossibility of this passage or conjunction; it is the paramount case of prohibiting the impossible, of prohibiting what is in itself impossible” (70), since “symbolic prohibition covers a real impossibility and invites transgression” (70). The incest taboo “staunches the leak in the culture, the point where the latter is not fully constituted or operative” (70). This calls to mind how Antigone’s act is an attempt to patch up that leak in the structure of her family.

The second conclusion involves desire, which Zupančič considers a key concept in *Antigone*. Following Lacan’s reading of Antigone as a figure of desire, Zupančič interprets Antigone’s claim and “her inflexible insistence, her actions, her sacrifice as an issue of desire (of ‘pure desire’)” (74). Zupančič understands desire psychoanalytically – “as fundamentally related to the modality of the *question mark*, of questioning, addressed to the Other: *What am I to you? What do you want? (You are demanding this and that, but what is it that you actually want, or aim at?)*” (74). As she states,

Antigone emerges as a figure of pure desire precisely because, with her words and actions, she *incites in others* this tenacious question: *What does she want?* She states what she wants from the outset, yet there is no one in the play who is not baffled at one point or another by this question: Okay, she wants to bury Polyneices, but what does she *actually* want? It starts with Ismene, in her opening dialog with Antigone, and it reemerges again and again. (74)

Therefore, the question is: what does Antigone really want? Not least because she appears to be aware that her desire (to have Polyneices buried) will not be fulfilled. For this reason, Zupančič states that the play presents “Antigone’s desire and its enigma” (75): “her demand, although clear, remains deeply enigmatic and functions precisely like an enunciation, which those who are confronted with it will have to make into a statement and bear the consequences, which they will indeed end up doing” (75). In this sense, Antigone is a hostage of desire.

## VIII

In conclusion, *Let Them Rot: Antigone’s Parallax* proves to be an original interpretation of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, despite the considerable attention the play has received in the history of Western thought. One of the main achievements of this book is its profound analysis of the so-called

written and unwritten laws, which play such a key role in *Antigone*. Moreover, Zupančič's original reading of the play offers a fresh understanding of the notions of death, undeadness, and funeral rites, and of their significance in *Antigone*. Another strength of the book is its exploration of the concepts of incest and desire in relation to the play. Finally, Zupančič has also succeeded in explaining Antigone's claim that if it were her children or her husband left unburied, she would let them rot.

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### Notes

- \* This essay is a review of Alenka Zupančič's book *Let Them Rot: Antigone's Parallax* (2023).
- <sup>1</sup> For more on Alenka Zupančič's intellectual biography, see <<https://egs.edu/biography/alenka-zupancic/>> [accessed 12 December 2022].
- <sup>2</sup> Tellingly, Hölderlin also translated Sophocles' *Antigone* into German, publishing the result in 1804 (see Sophocles, 1989).
- <sup>3</sup> Hegel also briefly analyses the question of Antigone in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977) and the *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* (2008) when he discusses ethical consciousness and the unwritten laws of the gods.
- <sup>4</sup> Hegel (1975: 1217–18) explains the kinship bonds emerging from the tragedy as follows: “Antigone lives under the political authority of Creon [the present King]; she is herself the daughter of a King [Oedipus] and the fiancée of Haemon [Creon's son], so that she ought to pay obedience to the royal command. But Creon too, as father and husband, should have respected the sacred tie of blood and not ordered anything against its pious observance. So there is immanent in both Antigone and Creon something that in their own way they attack, so that they are gripped and shattered by something intrinsic to their own actual being. Antigone suffers death before enjoying the bridal dance, but Creon too is punished by the voluntary deaths of his son and his wife, incurred, the one on account of Antigone's fate, the other because of Haemon's death”.
- <sup>5</sup> This English translation follows Heidegger's translation from Ancient Greek to German.

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