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Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents

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Gherardo Ugolini*

"Man is a terrifying miracle": Sophocles' *Antigone* Staged by Massimiliano Civica. An Interview with the Director

Abstract

Gherardo Ugolini interviews director Massimiliano Civica on his staging of Sophocles' *Antigone*, produced by the Teatro Metastasio, Prato, and performed at the Teatro Arena del Sole, Bologna, 16 January 2020. Cast: Oscar De Summa (Creon), Monica Piseddu (Antigone), Monica Demuru (Ismene, Tiresias, Eurydice), Francesco Rotelli (Sentry, Haemon), Marcello Sambati (Coryphaeus).

Keywords: Massimiliano Civica; Sophocles; Antigone; Creon; Polyneices; Ismene

1. Creon, Partisan Commander and Antigone, Haughty Aristocrat

In a corner of the stage lies a fake dead body, the corpse of Polyneices abandoned without burial. Even before the play begins, the audience can see it as they take their places.[1] They can also see the way in which it is dressed: a black shirt, army boots and on its head a fez bearing the eagle badge. In this production, Polyneices is a fascist, and during the civil war, which has just ended, he was on the losing side. Oscar De Summa's Creon, who proclaims the new order, founded on the public interest and which does away with the family-based privileges of the past, is a democratic commander, a partisan with a red bandana at his neck and a red star on his uniform. The paradigm of fascism and the war with the *partigiani*, as a counterpart to the civil war fought at Thebes, which has concluded with the deaths of both Eteocles and Polyneices, two brothers which have challenged one another from opposite sides, is certainly the most striking feature of the *Antigone* staged by Massimiliano Civica at the Teatro Metastasio in Prato in December 2019 and then in other locations (Turin, Bologna and Rome) at the beginning of 2020.[2]

[1] The presence of Polyneices' body exposed onstage from the very beginning is an idea already to be found in Bertolt Brecht's reworking of *Antigone*. For this and other analogies between Civica's staging and the re-elaborated versions by Brecht and Anouilh see Fornaro 2020.

[2] Massimiliano Civica's *Antigone* is a production of the Teatro Metastasio in Prato. Translation: Massimiliano Civica; lights: Gianni Staropoli; costumes: Daniela Salernitano; cast: Oscar De Summa (Creon), Monica Piseddu (Antigone), Monica Demuru (Ismene, Tiresias, Eurydice), Francesco Rotelli (Sentry, Haemon), Marcello Sambati (Coryphaeus). First performance at the Teatro Fabbricone in Prato, 3 December 2019.

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The scenery is basic: a bench at the back and a stool on the right. At the beginning the actors file silently onto the stage and sit down on the bench. In the darkness can be heard cries of combat and desperation: a few intense moments for which there is no indication in Sophocles' original text, and which serve to evoke the tremendous suffering that war, especially civil war, always causes and all that brings in its train during the aftermath. From this moment on, the director follows the *ductus* of Sophocles' play faithfully and consistently, with only a few unimportant cuts. The political colouring (fascism, *partigiani*) that the costumes and the hangings emphasise, is essentially obscured, in the sense that it does not affect the dramatic action. The actors, who are always on stage, move like shadows of the past, and their *agon* concerning values to defend and decisions to make is conducted simply by means of words, making no concession to music or any other performative aids.

Civica's production of *Antigone* offers many fascinating examples of his perspicacity. The first of these concerns the essential demythification of the protagonist Antigone (interpreted by Monica Piseddu), defined not as a positive heroine, wholly committed to *pietas* towards the dead, a courageous objector against an authoritarian and tyrannical power trampling on the unwritten rules of human coexistence. Clad in the elegant robes of a member of the royal family, Antigone is a contemptuous and supercilious aristocrat, driven by a formidable feeling of dynastic pride and determined to defend and maintain the privileges she enjoyed during the *ancien régime*, and which the new post-war civic order may do away with. Civica bases himself on an interpretative bias in the play, that sees in the so-called 'unwritten laws' invoked by Antigone in her famous *rhesis* (Soph. *Ant.* 450-70) and in name of which she challenges authority, a reference to the body of ancient, sacred laws whose administration, in 5th century Athens, was the prerogative of a small number of aristocratic dynasties such as the Kerykes and the Eumolpidai.[3] This is the reason why Antigone is fighting for her brother's right to burial: because he is her kin, he is noble, and he belongs to the royal house.

Another original interpretative angle appears when the idea surfaces that the first attempt to bury Polyneices' body, carried out secretly by night, is not the work of Antigone, as everyone seems to believe, but rather of her sister Ismene (Monica Demuru), who is certainly not being required to enact the part of a timorous coward. Such an interpretation, one which is not easy to come across among the various studies on this point (see Rouse 1911, Honig 2011, Kirkpatrick 2011), is developed by having the audience see the burial rites carried out twice, though only through stylised gestures. Ismene, indeed, avoids the cliché of a girl subjugated by male power and instead becomes a woman clearheaded and rational, practical and calculating, much more sensible than Antigone who, in her manic desire for vengeance, exposes herself to certain defeat and self-destruction. So it is that Ismene carries out the first burial (in secret, without letting anyone discover her), in the hope of saving her sister and preventing her from ruining herself.

[3] See, on this point, Cerri 1979 and 2010. Depriving someone of burial (ἀταφία), either absolutely or at least within the confines of Attica, was a punitive measure usually reserved for traitors and profaners. See, also, Ugolini 2000: 137-56.

The modality chosen for staging the chorus is also successful. As often happens in modern performances, Civica does without a variety of characters and voices and assigns the choral songs and the speeches by the coryphaeus to a single actor, Marcello Sambati: an elderly and wise councillor, strikingly elegant and mild-mannered, expressing himself with diplomacy, who encourages equanimity and is careful not to show any partiality either for Creon or for Antigone. Less successful is the scene with Tiresias, which, within the dramatic economy of the play, assumes the function of touchstone: he endorses Creon's downfall, undermining the categories of perception and judgement. The role of the seer is, though not for the first time, taken by a woman, Monica Demura, the same actress playing Ismene and Eurydice. Tiresias comes on stage alone, without the guidance of a boy, completely enveloped in a white veil, and from his lips emerges a harsh, unpleasant voice, not in any way appropriate for a prophet of truth (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Creon, Tiresias, and the coryphaeus. Photo Duccio Burberi.

The final *coup de théâtre* is kept for the play's conclusion. When Creon begs pardon for his mistakes he too late recognized, when the mighty commander understands that his authority has been emptied of every power of decision, when his mouth can utter nothing but sighs and lamentations because of the terrible suffering he is experiencing, at this very moment the coryphaeus spurs him on: "Now you must think of us! It is your duty! Now you can govern! Now you must govern!" These words are clearly an interpolation on Civica's part, without any reference to Sophocles' text. Indeed, they take on a strong symbolic significance: politics can never stop; even after downfall, the government of the *polis* must continue. The reassurance and optimism of this conclusion is however only a façade, bearing in mind that man is "a terrifying miracle" as Civica translates the Greek adjective δεινός, and as is often repeated during the course of the dramatic action.

This production of *Antigone* is not Massimiliano Civica's first experience in staging ancient theatre. The director, born in Rieti in 1974, with a degree in Histo-

ry of Theatre from La Sapienza University of Rome, had a fortunate theatrical career which, after his graduation from the Accademia Nazionale d'Arte Drammatica Silvio D'Amico, saw him gain the position of director at the Teatro della Tosse in Genoa and then the triumph of winning the prestigious UBU, the prize for the best production, three times (2008, 2015, 2016). Recently, he has staged Euripides' *Andromache* (2004) and *Alcestis* (2014); both times Civica managed to dig into the folds of the Greek text and bring to light the most deeply buried implications of the tragedies and transmit them to the audience in a seductive manner. He used the same strategy with *Antigone*, a task for which Civica has been preparing for years, translating the original Greek text *ex novo* and reading and analysing interpretations scholars have been offering over the last ten years. He wanted to avoid the most influential ideological banalities, such as the ubiquitous idea that Antigone is the positive heroine *par excellence*, that she acts rightly from beginning to end, and that she struggles heroically against a powerful and authoritative tyrant whose only desire is to do her wrong.

2. Interview with Massimiliano Civica

GU: In the theatre program there is a sort of declaration on your part: "Greek tragedy is political because it is antipolitical". This is an obvious paradox. What exactly do you mean by it?

MC: In my opinion, Greek tragedy is political in that it exceeds politics in a discourse that goes beyond it, not only when debating mankind, but also when it opens towards religion. It seems to me that here we have the same conviction (even if this may seem crazy) of historically significant figures as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, that "I must overcome the malice, the camouflaged violence between the black and the white, so that the instant I come to power I don't revert to vengeance, I don't fuel the rancour of my black brothers, but I say 'love your enemy'". I think that Sophocles, and Aeschylus as well, by means of the idea of the divine (just consider the result of the draw decreed by the Areopagus in the *Oresteia*, whose outcome is determined by the intervention of the goddess Athena), are trying to show mankind that there is something greater to be reckoned with, and when they reach it they must stop. I am totally convinced that this is the right approach: Greek tragedy is not politics, it is rather a sort of 'supra-politics', so that precisely at the moment of religious festivals the discourse of that moment must be as elevated as possible, and a reconciliation is attempted through an opening towards religion which, however, is never dogmatic. The basic sense is this: don't forget that you are human beings.

GU: This idea of yours clearly goes straight to the roots of tragic theatre, to its religious and ritual origins, a field which has been discussed at length and continues to be debated, although the greater part of modern directors tends to ignore it. Why is it so important to you?

MC: It seems to me that the operating mechanism of theatre is just this: at the moment of a theatrical performance the audience, as far as the stage and the ac-

tors are concerned, takes the place of God; that is, the audience is the only entity in possession of all the information: it knows the myth, it alone knows the whole story, even things some of the characters don't know. It's as if it had been taken up and put on the clouds, as if it had been made divine and from up above, omnisciently, it can see the human beings below like ants running around without knowing what they're doing. In this way, the spectator undergoes the experience of omniscience, but s/he knows only too well that when the show ends s/he will go back to being a wo/man again. The fact remains that the spectator has experienced the play by watching it all from far above, like a god, and as s/he does so has become aware of how partial human vision is and of how blind men are.

GU: To return to the political nature of Greek tragedy I have one more question. It's certainly true that, as you have said, tragedy goes beyond day-to-day politics and transports the situation on stage to the level of paradigms of an existential and universal character. But the question remains open: why do you actually consider it "anti-political"?

MC: For the very reason that it goes beyond the political bias and prefers a vertical discussion on mankind. In this sense it is anti-political, because it belongs to the sphere of a superior politics. Politics is always biased, in the sense that its duty is to dictate what is right and what is wrong. Besides this, politics is concerned with the present, the decisions to make today. I think that, on the contrary, theatre is concerned with what endures in human beings, so it extricates this in a way from political topicality and says: 'You must govern every day and you have to make decisions, but remember both what your limits are and what you are.'

GU: It's also true that in 5th-century Athens it was unthinkable for certain opinions to be voiced as publicly in the theatre as it was possible in civic assembly. If anyone had dared to threaten to bring down democracy, for example, he would have been struck down immediately and deprived of his civil rights.

MC: It's clear to me that the Greeks were thoroughly aware of the separation between the theatre and the Pnyx, that's to say between stage performance and political assembly. Theatre is elsewhere. And even Sophocles himself, with all his *pietas*, his religious sense, his appeasing spirit, whenever he held political office proved himself to be appallingly violent (I'm thinking of the punitive expedition against Samos in 441/40 BC, when Sophocles held the position of *strategos*). It's as if he were saying to himself: 'When we are at the theatre we reason about these problems but in politics things work differently'.

GU: An interesting aspect of your production is the symbolic characterisation of Creon as a commander of the *partigiani* and of Polyneices as a representative of fascism. This is a very innovative choice: it's courageous, risky, debatable, even considering the fact that it's extremely stylised. The allusion to the civil war in Thebes is clear to me (a fratricidal conflict between Eteocles and Polyneices), but don't you think it's rather a long shot that could be misleading?

MC: Although I made no attempt to render the translation of the text of contemporary significance, I did make the rather audacious choice to dress Creon as a

partisan. It seems to me that it's a satisfactory counterpart to Sophocles' working hypothesis, as if he were saying: 'I've got this conflict, this civil war, the closest in time to us'. The paradigm of fascism and of the partisan struggle are useful historical references to mirror the conflict between the old family clans in Athens and the new-born democratic institutions: it was a way of making the conflict explode once again.

GU: Antigone, like her sister Ismene, wears long evening dresses, the sumptuous apparel of a princess, which of course she is, and she noticeably distances herself with her costume from her interlocutors.

MC: If Antigone's costume had been that of the average Greek woman it would evidently induce the audience to think that she's right, considering that not to bury a dead body is something that horrifies us. Dressed in her expensive gowns she's indicating her position as a member of the royal family, belonging to the conservative tradition.

GU: Let's get to the theme of Polyneices' forbidden burial. How far can this be considered a grave offence on Creon's part? Episodes of violence carried out on the bodies of victims, of atrocities committed on the enemy *post mortem*, have been repeated throughout history and are still going on. How did you treat this crucial core theme in your production?

MC: If we read the play in the context of its time, we realize that the failure to bury enemy bodies was part of warfare. For this reason, I have tried to make it obvious that the period in which this play takes place is an exceptional one, a moment when the war had only ended a few hours previously, a time when to remain humane is difficult. If we place ourselves in the situation of the fascist regime and of what happened only a few days after its fall (the summary execution of Mussolini and the atrocities committed on his body at Piazzale Loreto), we may understand this better. These are borderline situations during which the dynamics of political action become atypical.

GU: I find the parallelism with fascism convincing. The Creon who speaks at the beginning of the play does seem to be a democrat, a *homo novus* who wants to create a regime founded on prevailing public interest rather than on ties of kinship, and to bring down the ancient privileges based on caste. And yet he is usually represented as a brutal tyrant.

MC: To my way of thinking Creon gives voice to exactly those concepts and slogans typical of the democracy of the time. I've never understood why in many productions he is represented as a fascist or a Nazi. The contradiction between this kind of characterisation and the sense of his proclamations on stage is blatant. Creon is often defined as a tyrant, but a tyrant always acts in his own interest, while he destroys himself simply in order to keep faith with the principle that community comes before family.

GU: This is one of those cases when an interpretative pattern imposes itself and ends by dominating all others, being repeated passively without the consideration of possible alternatives. During the course of the play, however, it seems to me

that Creon does in fact acquire some tyrannical traits, for example when he says that the city is his, that other people should fear his power, etc.

MC: The central problem is really that of the fragility of democracy. Creon isn't a tyrant but he becomes a tyrant, and this transformation should be understood as a sort of warning on Sophocles' part to Pericles and the democratic leaders: 'Careful, tyranny can originate from the populace.' The figure of the tyrant is a political perspective to be avoided or repressed for the whole Athenian democracy, but while for the aristocracy, tyranny actually derives from democracy, for the democrats the danger of tyranny is inherent in the tradition of aristocratic families.

GU: The tyrant in the Athens of the 5th-century BC is an imaginary bogeyman, that is brandished every time a public figure becomes in any way threatening; Pericles himself was targeted by the comic poets as a potential tyrant. But it's difficult to transpose this interpretative idea on to the stage. I was very impressed by the grave and thoughtful way in which Creon bears himself on stage, without ever indulging in extreme gestures or immoderate exclamations.

MC: In Sophocles' texts there are precise indications about this. You see, I'm talking as a theatre director; in the end I'm a colleague of Sophocles, just as an amateur painter is a colleague of Picasso. The distance is immense, but the craft is the same. As I was saying, in the text there are signals that help us to understand how fiercely Creon is struggling with himself. For example, when he asks the sentry if he is sure of what he has seen, if he is aware of what this will mean, and the sentry, just to satisfy him, replies: "Yes, yes I'm sure; I caught her in the act" (*Ant.* 405). Or when Creon goes on asking Antigone: "Was it you or wasn't it?" (*Ant.* 444). At a certain juncture, so as to be able to maintain his consistency in the sight of the Thebans, he finds himself forced to condemn family members to death, something he does not want to do at all. To understand Antigone we must understand above all that this is a family, that Creon is the uncle, the successor of the two dead youths (Eteocles and Polyneices). Usually when we are watching Antigone we don't pay enough attention to this aspect, as if Antigone and Creon are strangers to one another. Besides this, at a certain point Creon tells Ismene that Antigone has always acted like a madwoman, while she, Ismene, is someone who has always used her reason. This is a valuable indication of the private family life they have shared and also of the fact that Ismene talks to him as you would talk to an uncle. Creon is forced to destroy himself by the position he is in.

GU: I want to ask you a question about Ismene's role. In your production it is clear that she is responsible for the first burial, and not Antigone as is usually assumed. This hypothesis has been suggested by several scholars, but it has never had much following. I think that your production is the first one to accept this possibility. Why is this? What effect does it have at the dramaturgical level?

MC: In Sophocles' play there are two attempts at the burial of Polyneices' body, but it has been rightly observed that actually, on the plane of the dramatic action, two burials are not necessary. It's the second one that carries the story forward, the first could just as well not have happened. The interpretations that have been offered of the first burial are more or less impressionistic. For example, may-

be Antigone had not really made up her mind, so the first attempt at burial is unfinished, but then she decides to do it properly; or, Sophocles has not been meticulous enough, and the first burial is simply a textual imperfection. For this reason, I preferred to follow the clues contained in the text. The first clue appears in the prologue, during the first dialogue between the two sisters, when it becomes obvious that they have very different ideas about the burial of their brother: Ismene wants to act secretly, Antigone would prefer to be discovered (Fig. 2). Well, this difference of opinion seems to allude to the different modalities of the two burials: the first one takes place at night, very quickly and unobtrusively; the second, which corresponds to Antigone's express wish, happens at midday with libations and cries of mourning, and seems to be accomplished with the deliberate desire to be found out. I don't think there is any sense in thinking that the first burial was carried out by Antigone, because it would have been an action in complete contrast to her manifest struggle to attain her end.

Fig. 2: Antigone and Ismene. Photo Duccio Burberi.

The second clue is hidden in an intradiegetic stage direction in the tragedy itself: Creon, after listening to the sentry's report of how he had surprised Antigone, turns to his niece and asks her to lift her eyes. This means that Antigone, having learnt from the sentry's account that there has been a first attempt at burial, is surprised by a paroxysm of sorrow and has bent her head, because she has immediately understood that it was the action of her sister, and she fears a terrible death awaits Ismene. If credence is given to this interpretation, the third clue is also solved: the dialogue the two sisters have in front of Creon. When Ismene asks to share her sister's death, Antigone replies "Death knows who buried him: this is the only thing that matters". It would seem a totally senseless answer, but, in reality, it is a coded message which tries to assure Ismene, without Creon understanding, that Polyneices knows that she too wanted to offer him his funeral rites.

GU: But in the end, in your opinion, who is right, Antigone or Creon? Is it possible to make a case for good and bad in both characters? Or should we read the conflict according to the classical paradigm of Hegel, as the struggle between two sets of circumstances that are both founded on good reasons, but that are not self-sufficient by themselves and end up mutually destroying one another instead of integrating?

MC: When we see Sophocles' *Antigone*, we are inevitably influenced by the politically and ideologically orientated critical interpretations the work has been submitted to throughout the centuries. From the very beginning, we are all convinced that Antigone is right, that she is fighting against a cruel tyrant for a just and noble cause. But if this were true, we should be looking at a melodrama, not at a Greek tragedy. Tragedy always puts borderline situations on stage, where it's never clear what is right and what is wrong. Antigone and Creon are paying for an identical fault: the presumption of feeling that they are exceptional, of being the best, of being above the norm. It's their arrogant nature, their incapacity to listen to other people's reasons, that brings them to ruin. To be on one side or the other, for Antigone or for Creon, means not to be able to see the only thing of any importance, what they have in common.

GU: I think your translation of the celebrated incipit of the first stasimon is particularly apt: πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ (*Ant.* 354) as "man is a terrifying miracle"; especially as these words become an actual slogan, repeated several times during the play, and accompanied by the adjective δεινός in Sophocles' text. What is the reason for this choice? How do you interpret this song on human progress?

MC: The adjective δεινὸς is a keyword in the Sophoclean tragedy, and it is repeated several times as it expresses the deep meaning of the tragedy. As we said before, Sophocles does everything he can so as not to have to decide who, between Antigone and Creon, is the guilty party: the Chorus, at different moments, recognizes that both have merits and demerits. Well, the term δεινὸς, indicating the mixed feelings experienced in the face of whatever goes beyond moderation, is exactly what they have in common: they are both δεινοί, exceptional people, marvellous and frightening at one and the same time. They may do good, but they may also do evil.

GU: To stay on the subject of the translation, I was also struck favourably by the way you render the well-known speech in which Antigone defines herself as "born not to hate, but to love" ("οὔτοι συνέχθειν, ἀλλὰ συμφιλεῖν ἔφυν", *Ant.* 523). You translated this as "I was not born to hate, but to love those of my own blood" grasping the full meaning, in my opinion, of the Greek verb συμφιλεῖν. How do you explain this particular choice?

MC: This speech is Antigone's reply to Creon's affirmation that she cannot love the traitor Polyneices in the same way as she loves the patriot Eteocles. Creon, following his 'logic of democracy', asks Antigone to discriminate between her two brothers because of their different behaviour towards the *polis*. The problem here is that Sophocles does not use the usual Greek term φιλεῖν, whose meaning is of course 'to love'; he coins a new term, never used before this: συμφιλεῖν. Nobody knows for certain how to translate this *hapax legomenon*, but surely, if Sophocles felt the need to invent a new word to describe Antigone's love for her brothers, it can't simply be translated as 'to love'. The prefix συν- indicates union, fusion, being 'naturally akin'; so I mean it as 'to love whoever is of the same blood, of the same family'. Antigone can't discriminate between her two brothers on a social/political basis: she was born to 'love' the males of her incesstuous family unconditionally. She is unable to free herself from her original family circle, she can't redefine herself by building a new family, her own, with Haemon.

GU: Your production reproduces Sophocles' text very faithfully with only the slightest of cuts. To compensate this there are a few very significant additions. I find the final speech of particular relevance: the coryphaeus addresses Creon, at this point overcome by the accumulation of disasters and annihilated by grief. He says to him: "Now you must think of us. It is your duty. Now you can govern. Now you must govern". What does this interpolation into the text mean?

MC: Yes, this is a deliberate addition of my own. After the downfall political life can't stop. The necessity for government is something that persists and from failure we must start again. Creon would like to die but the coryphaeus exhorts him to consider the problem of the act of government. And Creon lifts the index finger of his right hand high in the air in the classic attitude of the politician who is going to make a speech, but he can't manage to utter a word. From his mouth comes only a confused and incomprehensible stuttering. This is the manifestation of the impasse into which he has fallen, but from which he will inevitably have to emerge.

Translation by Susan Payne

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