

THREE IRISH ANTIGONES

Isabelle Torrance – Well, one aspect of Greek tragedy that I find fascinating is its continuing political power. And perhaps the most famous Greek tragedy is Sophocles' *Antigone*. It is set in the aftermath of a civil war between the sons of Oedipus, both of whom have died in this war. Afterwards, their uncle Creon has taken control of the city and has issued an edict prohibiting the burial of Polynices, who is branded a traitor for having attacked his homeland. Polynices' sister Antigone however can't bear to leave her brother unburied, so she defies the edict and performs a symbolic burial. And when her actions are discovered, she famously stated that she chose to obey divine rather than human laws, and is condemned to death by being walled up in a cave. Creon subsequently comes to regret his actions and goes to free Antigone, but it's too late, she has hanged herself and her fiancé, who's also Creon's son, kills himself in grief at her death.

Since I'm from Ireland, I will give three examples of Irish adaptations which use this tragedy for very different political purposes. So the first example is from 1985, it's called *The Riot Act*, by an author called Tom Paulin. And this adaptation reflects on the period of severe political unrest in Northern Ireland known as "The Troubles" between the nationalist and mostly Catholic minority at this time, and the Protestant and unionist-dominated government, police force and army. In that play, Antigone represents nationalist Ireland and Creon is Antigone's violent oppressor. So, through his adaptation of Sophocles, Paulin proclaims himself a nationalist, and his writing reflects a visceral reaction to the sufferings of other nationalists in Northern Ireland during this period.

Now, written at essentially the same time, but in the Republic of Ireland, is Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone*, of 1986. Kennelly's Antigone picks up on the disturbing nature of some ambiguous language in Sophocles where Antigone describes her relationship with her brother. And what Kennelly does, is he stresses the legacy of incest in this family and he implies an inappropriate relationship between the siblings. And all this occurs at a moment when huge scandals of Church-related sexual abuse were simmering in Ireland's cultural consciousness and about to explode in the mainstream media. So we have the same text used here at the same time in different parts of the same country for very different political purposes.

And I mention also, briefly, the late Seamus Heaney's adaptation, *The Burial of Thebes*, from 2004, where the main political message is a global one addressed to the Bush administration and its role in the Iraq war, as of course a cautionary critique. We have moved now from local and national political issues in the mid 1980s to global concerns in the early 21st Century, and this

also reflects in a broader sense how Ireland's place in the world has shifted and how it has become a culture that is increasingly concerned with global problems.

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