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Tragic Heroines on Ancient and Modern Stage
REHEARSING INSTABILITIES IN AIDAN CARL
MATHEWS’ THE ANTIGONE

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“In disoriented times, we cannot accept the return of the old, deadly figure of religious sacrifice; but neither can we accept the complete lack of any figure, and the complete disappearance of any idea of heroism [...] Our task is: How can we find a new heroic figure, which is neither the return of the old figure of religious or national sacrifice, nor the nihilistic figure of the last man? Is there a place, in a disoriented world, for a new style of heroism”?

A. Badiou, *The Contemporary Figure of the Soldier in Politics and Poetry*

“…and he that let go the goat for the scapegoat shall wash his clothes, and bathe his flesh in water, and afterward come into the camp”.

“Leviticus” 16:26, *The Bible*

In searching for what Badiou terms “a new style of heroism” and a “new heroic figure” (2007)¹ during the political and social disillusionment of our modern times, Sophocles’ *Antigone* has ironically come to represent a link and a rupture at the same time between old and new models of heroism and by extension between ancient and modern tragedy. More significantly, *Antigone*’s modern reception signifies a fundamental re-turn to the central

¹ Badiou, A. 2007.
issues that concerned not only the ancient world but also our modern consciousness for she, more than any other tragic figure, exemplifies “a disruptive rendering of the very structure of the tragic hero, which in effect means a disruptive meditation on the essential political significance of tragedy itself”\(^2\). Since this tragedy has as its central protagonist a female, Antigone’s ambiguous position is further implicated in a double paradox residing at the heart of gender politics: she is a girl (\(pāis\)) threatening Creon’s masculine rule by exercising and exorcising the same qualities she herself opposes, i.e. a hardness assimilating the masculine quality. Unlike other tragic heroines, this creation of Sophocles famously described by Göethe as “the most sisterly of souls”\(^3\), posits the term “tragic heroine” under reconsideration. Antigone, as Stathis Gourgouris contends, can be hardly seen as an \textit{exemplum}: she rather constitutes a problem and an \textit{aporia} as she constantly returns to re-inscribe a question mark in our interpretations and reinterpretations of the play’s themes. This essay will examine the ways in which Antigone’s status as an iconic tragic heroine and a canonical tragic model is contested and destabilized in the loose adaptation by Irish author Aidan Carl Mathews.

In his controversial appropriation which was written and performed in the light of twentieth century traumas and apprehensions, local, national (Irish) and


\(^3\) Quoted in Steiner, G. 1984: 1. See also Johann Wolfgang Göethe’s poem invoking \textit{Antigone} in the elegy of 1779 called “Euphrosyne”.

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