

Mourning with Antigone: Civil War and Public Mourning in Patricia Ariza's *Antígona*

Katie Billotte

Royal Holloway College: University of London

For a brief moment it appeared that the 2010 Colombian presidential election would be nothing short of revolutionary. It began predictably enough. When the country whose name is often perceived as synonymous with civil war and drug trafficking held congressional elections on the 14 March 2010, the results indicated that there was no reason to doubt that conservative forces within the country would continue to dominate the nation's political scene. This meant that Juan Manuel Santos, the minister of defence, was well-positioned to become the country's next head of state. What not even the most acute political observer could have expected was that only a few months later the mayor of Bogotá, Antanas Mockus, running under the banner of Colombia's newly formed Green Party, would become a serious contender in the presidential race. When the 20th June run-off election became a contest between Santos and Mockus, many began to say that a new way of doing politics was coming to the troubled nation.

The historic election of a 'Green' head of state in Colombia was, however, not to be. Mockus was soundly defeated by Santos, who won by a margin of almost three to one (Brodzinsky 2010). Santos' victory was seen by many as an endorsement of the hard line policies against drug cartels and Marxist guerrillas pursued by the Colombian government (with the help of significant U.S. aid) under Santos' predecessor, Álvaro Uribe.¹ These same reports praised how effective Uribe's policies had been in reducing the amount of violence in the country. What went widely unmentioned is the continued violence in Colombia perpetrated by government-backed paramilitaries as well as other grave human rights. A report by Amnesty International, submitted to the U.N.'s Human Rights Commission immediately prior to the election, details the troubling situation in Colombia. Along with

¹ Since 2000, most U.S. aid to Colombia has come through a scheme known as Plan Colombia. Plan Colombia was conceived in 1998 during a meeting between the then-U.S. president Bill Clinton and the then-Colombian president Andres Pastrana. Uribe has continued to pursue the policies laid out in Plan Colombia and has often been even more 'pro-active' in his military pursuit of rebels. While the plan does include aid to areas outside of defense, approximately 68% of the money is spent on military supplies and activities. This has led many critics to note that the scheme does little to address the underlying inequities in Colombian society which fuel both the drug trade and support for left-wing rebels. Moreover, increasing amounts of evidence suggest that Plan Colombia has not only been ineffective in reducing drug-trafficking, it might also actually be financing the drug lords. See Ballvé 2009.

describing the activities of drug lords and anti-government guerrillas, the report outlines a variety of illegal activities carried out by the Colombian government against human rights defenders and other activists:

A climate of hostility towards human rights defenders and other activists exacerbates the ongoing serious situation they face. Such hostility has been fomented by the Government, which appears to perceive human rights and security as mutually exclusive. Senior Government and state officials often seek to equate human rights work with support for the guerrillas or terrorism. Such a systematic, high-profile and public stigmatization has given a powerful incentive to those wishing to threaten and physically harm human rights defenders. (Amnesty International 2010)

Patricia Ariza, the author of the play referenced in this essay, is one of the activists who have been targeted by the Colombian regime. Ariza's work has always been overwhelmingly political in nature, so perhaps it should come as no surprise that she has both run foul of the Colombian regime and been drawn to *Antigone*. *Antígona* certainly represents an instance where it is difficult to separate Ariza's theatre from her politics. She began her work on *Antígona* after meeting rural women in the war-torn province of Urába, one of the Colombian regions most affected by the country's ongoing turmoil.² The lives of the women Ariza met in Urába shared a tragic parallel with the story of *Antigone*. Many of their male relatives had been killed in a recent bout of fighting, and they had been prevented from burying the dead men by governmental decree since the dead men were suspected rebels (Pinzón 2006). After meeting these women, Ariza spent nearly eight years working on *Antígona* which premiered in Bogotá in the summer of 2006 at La Calendaría, the theatre which Ariza helped to found almost three decades ago.

The play was produced as part of the Magdalena Project, an international theatre initiative that seeks to support female playwrights engaged in innovative and socially relevant work. It is difficult to doubt that Ariza's play is indeed innovative as she has altered the play's structure to include three Antigones and two Ismenes, a change which (if nothing else) is very inventive indeed. However, the question of relevance is, as always, much harder to define. Certainly, many of the questions raised by the story of Antigone are questions which continue to be asked. Some of these questions are particularly urgent in communities touched by widespread violence and long term civil conflict, places such as Colombia. First among these

² As much an activist as a playwright, Ariza has made similar trips throughout her career as part of her work in support of left-wing causes. It is important to note that while Ariza has never made a secret of her left-wing sympathies, she has long denied any connection with *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), the most active of Colombia's Marxist rebels. Several government investigations have attempted to tie her to the group, but they have produced no conclusive evidence. The Public Prosecutor now denies that Ariza was ever investigated by the antiterrorism unit. (International PEN 2009).

questions are those which centre on issues of mourning and violence and the relationship between the two.

It is important, before we continue, to take a moment to understand what exactly is meant by the term *mourning*. Mourning is not, as I will discuss it here, the same as grief. For our purposes, mourning is a series of public acts which may or may not be connected to genuine feelings of sorrow or loss. Mourning is not about for whom and how we actually grieve but for whom and how we are supposed to grieve. In the words of Émile Durkheim, ‘Mourning is not the spontaneous expression of individual emotions...it is a duty imposed by the group’ (Durkheim 1915: 397).³ I first became interested in the issue of mourning and its connection to violence through Judith Butler’s 2004 book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. In it, Butler connects the politics of violence to the politics of mourning to demonstrate not only that mourning is a political act (a point that is often overlooked), but also that it is crucial to understanding why and how violence occurs. This study continues Butler’s discussion through reflecting on the connection between violence and mourning as they are presented in Sophocles’ *Antigone* and through examining how Ariza maintains and adapts these connections in *Antigona*.

We begin with the portrayal of mourning and violence in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Butler asks in *Precarious Life*, ‘Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, What makes for a grievable life?’ (Butler 2004: 20; original emphasis). Perhaps more than the relationship between the state and the individual or the responsibilities of kinship, these are the matters at the heart of *Antigone*. Of course, all of these issues are interconnected. It is worth noting that in an earlier monograph, tellingly entitled *Antigone’s Claim*, Butler is concerned, amongst other things, with how the figure of Antigone relates to normative notions of kinship. To ask, ‘Who is kin?’ is not entirely dissimilar from asking, ‘Who is human?’ Both questions are concerned with the definition of the person as a relational category and the answers to both questions rely, in large part, upon community consensus.

Moreover, issues of kinship, death, mourning, and violence are all deeply connected to the body. When we ask who is human or how human beings are related to one another, we are asking about what it means to have a body such as ours and what the possession of that body means about our relationship to others with similar bodies. The body has, as Butler says, ‘an invariably public dimension.’ (Butler 2004: 26). And nowhere is the public dimension of the body clearer than in the rituals of mourning. Burial rituals are concerned with a body which is

³ Quoted by Davies (Davies 1997: 15).

completely devoid of life and thus any personality, and yet the very nature of the customs implies the unique personality of the lifeless body and affirms the connection between that body and the life which once inhabited it. It is for this reason that there is such a close connection between the worth granted to the individual and the amount of mourning afforded to the corpse. In his 1997 book *Death, Ritual, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funeral Rites*, Douglas James Davis stresses the continuity between the living body and the corpse as a fundamental feature of burial ritual, when he writes that through funeral rights, ‘[t]he identity of the body is not extinguished, it is simply transformed and revealed in its new state.’ (Davis 1997: 14). If the corpse maintains its identity, then the treatment received by the corpse is nothing other than the treatment received by the person who the corpse does not merely represent but is. The plot of *Antigone* depends upon this association, since clearly Creon’s decree to deny Polynices burial can only make sense if we accept an unbroken continuity between the living and the dead body (something the characters within the play clearly do). Note, for example, Creon’s reaction to the news of Polynices’ burial:

πότερον ὑπερτιμῶντες ὡς εὐεργέτην
ἔκρυπτον αὐτόν, ὅστις ἀμφικίονας
ναοὺς πυρώσων ἦλθε κἀναθήματα
καὶ γῆν ἐκείνων καὶ νόμους διασκεδῶν;
ἢ τοῦς κακοῦς τιμῶντας εἰσορᾷς θεοῦς;
οὐκ ἔστιν (*Ant.* ll. 284–89)⁴

[*Did the gods bury him with special honours for being/such a great benefactor to Thebes, a man who came here/to torch their column-ringed temples and all the rich offerings, /a man who came to destroy both their land and their laws? (Ant. 370)*]

This supposition places the body at the centre of individual identity by asserting that the body of an individual continues to be that individual even when every other defining characteristic has been cut off from the body by death.

If the body is at the centre of identity, then Creon’s decision not to bury Polynices has serious implications about Polynices’ identity. I would suggest that the denial of burial is an implicit denial of full humanity. Burial rituals, like language and tool-making, are one of the markers by which human beings are identified. This is why the presence of planned graves at an archeologically site has been used by paleoanthropologists as an indication of the presence of ‘modern humans’ (Davis 1997: 5). Thus by refusing Polynices’ burial, Creon is denying him one of the principle signs of humanity. This is obviously an extreme measure, which is why Creon must then legitimise his action by connecting his dehumanising treatment of

⁴ References accompanying quotations in Greek give the line numbers in *Sophoclis Fabulae*; those accompanying the English translations give the page number(s) in *Three Theban Plays*.

Polynices in death with Polynices' inhuman behaviour in life. Hence Creon describes Polynices as isolated from and hostile toward his community. For Creon, Polynices' rejection of his authority has severed Polynices' relationships within the community. This is because, 'Creon defines the self in relation to others in a hierarchal and contractual fashion' (Foley 2001: 184). If humanity is dependent upon having relationships to other human beings, and if, in Creon's view, Polynices has severed his human relationships, then it is possible to question whether Polynices still deserves to be called human. To suggest that someone who alienates himself from the community no longer qualifies as human is not an outlandish claim. Aristotle would say as much in the *Politics* when he declared that man is an animal who lives in a *polis* and that any man who should find himself without a *polis* is not a man at all but instead a god or a beast.⁵

The view that human identities are fundamentally relational is also present elsewhere within the play. Haemon tells his father that, 'καλῶς γ' ἐρήμης ἂν σὸ γῆς ἄρχοις μόνος [*Alone in a desert, you would make a perfect ruler*]' (*Ant.* 1. 739; *Ant.* 188). Of course, Haemon is implying that a ruler alone in a desert is no sort of ruler at all, since a ruler is only a ruler inasmuch as he has subjects over whom he can rule. This is part of the same paradigm of community-based identity which says that a human being without a *polis* is not a proper human being. Thus it is possible to say that the view of human identity advanced by Aristotle is present in the *Antigone*. Consequently, in alienating himself from his *polis*, Polynices has placed into question the status of his humanity. To deny him burial merely acknowledges and perpetuates his non-human status. Conversely, in burying her brother Antigone not only fulfils her role as a dutiful sister: she reasserts her brother's humanity.

By rebutting attempts to deny her brother's humanity and thereby delegitimising the decision to deny him burial, Antigone also calls into question the legitimacy of the violence which brought about his death. That it is necessary to dehumanise an individual in order to perpetuate violence against him or her is an oft-repeated truism; the mechanism by which this occurs is less often discussed. In *Precarious Lives*, Butler suggests one possible reason why individuals and/or groups of individuals who have been dehumanised rhetorically are thus rendered as potential targets of violence:

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange

⁵ (*Pol.* I.1253a): ὅτι ὁ ἄνθρωπος φύσει πολιτικὸν ζῷον, καὶ ὁ ἄπολις διὰ φύσιν καὶ οὐ διὰ τύχην ἤτοι φαῦλός ἐστιν, ἢ κρείττων ἢ ἄνθρωπος [*And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state is either above humanity or below it*] (Aristotle 2008: 28)

way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never ‘were’, and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. (Butler 2004: 20)

It is possible to see this paradigm employed in *Antigone* not only in Polynices’ death and subsequent non-burial but also in Antigone’s own death sentence. Haemon warns his father against doing violence to Antigone by noting that, ‘ὀδύρεται πόλις [*The city mourns*]’ (*Ant.* l. 694; *Ant.* 186) for Antigone. If Antigone is, to borrow Butler’s word, *grievable*, then she is shielded from violence since those who should be mourned cannot legitimately be the victims of violence.

Antigone, of course, does not accept that her brother should have been killed (except in the sense that she accepts that they are both from a cursed bloodline), and consequently she refuses to believe he should be unburied. She sees herself as obliged to correct this wrong, because he is her brother. She does not, however, believe that she would have a similar obligation were she to share any other bond with him, a point made clear in the following speech:

οὐ γάρ ποτ’ οὔτ’ ἄν, εἰ τέκνων μήτηρ ἔφυν,
οὔτ’ εἰ πόσις μοι καταθάνων ἐτήκετο,
βία πολιτῶν τόνδ’ ἄν ἠρόμην πόνον. (*Ant.* ll. 905–07)

[*And yet had I become a mother/of children, if a husband had died and lain rotting,/above the ground, I never would have taken up such a burden/against the will of the people. (Ant. 194–95]*

Such a disclaimer seems strange to our modern ears. This is, for example, clearly not a sentiment shared by the women who inspired Patricia Ariza to undertake an adaptation of *Antigone*. In fact, this is the very sort of statement which highlights the often deep chasms between the ancient world and our own. An adaptation of any ancient work must bridge these gaps if it is to be effective and meaningful within its own context. For this reason, I now turn to how the Sophoclean discussion of mourning and violence is translated in Ariza’s adaptation.

In order to do this, we must look at the structural differences between the two plays. There are many significant and telling ways in which Ariza departs from Sophocles. The most obvious of these differences I have mentioned earlier in passing. In Ariza’s adaptation there are three Antigones and two Ismenes on stage. But not only does Ariza create multiple incarnations of the characters who are already in Sophocles’ play, she also adds additional characters who are not present in the original. Polynices, Eteocles, Oedipus, and the Furies all add their voices to *Antígona*. Since the Chorus is still present, the result is a much larger cast than in Sophocles’ original.

The most immediate consequence of this expanded cast is that there are many more perspectives involved in the debate over whether or not Polynices should be buried. The dead and the living, the mortal and the immortal are all consulted on the issue of who should be mourned and how. In doing this they also, as we have discussed earlier, implicitly offer an opinion on who might legitimately be the subject of violence. Jocasta is the only member of Oedipus' original household who does not make an appearance at what one might think of as a very strange family reunion. I think that her absence can be explained if we understand *Antígona*, as I am suggesting, as a meditation upon mourning, violence, and their consequences.

The absence of Jocasta is particularly striking when one considers the significant role which organisations formed by mothers have played in anti-violence movements throughout Latin America. *La Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina is the most well-known of these organisations, but similar organisations and movements have appeared in many other countries throughout the region, including Colombia. These mothers' organisations have been central in organising the public mourning of those killed over the last century in various conflicts throughout Central and South America and have consequently also been one of the principal voices in calls to end the violence. A large part of the activism of such groups has centred on the idea that private grief is simply insufficient. The public act of mourning must occur for deaths, and the lives that preceded them, to have any real significance. Why, then, is Jocasta excluded from Ariza's extended cast is linked to the play's thematic focus on mourning and violence. If Sophocles' *Antigone* and consequently Ariza's *Antígona* are concerned principally with questions surrounding mourning and violence, namely who is worthy of mourning and who is worthy of violence, then the appearance of Jocasta in *Antígona* would undermine the play's ability to ask those questions. This is particularly true in the Latin American context where mothers have routinely organised and entered into the public debate explicitly in order to humanise the victims of political violence through mourning and thus to prevent further individuals from being victimised. For example, in Scene I Ismene 2 says, 'Estuve llorando en silencio a nuestros hermanos [*I have been crying in silence for our brothers*]' (Ariza 2006).⁶ In the context of decades of mourning-based activism by mothers, one would expect such a statement to be challenged by any mother in

⁶ All translations from Spanish are by the author of this article.

the play. This, however, would undermine the debate between the Ismenes and the Antigones which is so central to the play's activist character.

While Jocasta is completely absent from the stage, Polynices is nearly so. He appears only briefly in Scene VII, summoned from the underworld by Tiresias and the Furies. Considering the number of additional characters in Ariza's script and that Polynices is at the heart of plot, the brevity of his stage time is notable. Through the very short scene, Polynices remains on the periphery in every possible way which serves to reinforce the status which has permitted his violent and unmarked death. Polynices never speaks with his sister or uncle. He is only able only to communicate with Tiresias, the Furies, and the Chorus—all also marginal and marginalised figures. He tells them, 'Yo era el merecedor del trono por ser el de más edad [*I was worthy of the throne, being the oldest*] (Ibid). Yet this is the only defence he offers up for his inheritance or for his life. His final utterance, a piercing call for his sister, is perhaps the strongest assertion he makes for his right to belong still to the protected community of humankind. By that scream, he reasserts the final link he has with another person and this becomes his most defiant protest of his death and postmortem exposure.

But Polynices is not the only brother who speaks. Eteocles too appears in the Ariza's adaptation. What is interesting is that in *Antígona* the most condemning word about Polynices come from the mouth of Eteocles:

¡Silencio! ¡Silencio! No es conveniente ya llorar ni gemir. Polinices no tenía la virgen de la justicia en su escudo y tampoco escrúpulos en su corazón. Maltrató a su patria y por eso mereció la muerte de mi propia mano. Yo mismo me entregué al combate defendiendo el derecho al trono. Fue en franca y limpia lid, rey contra rey, enemigo contra enemigo, hermano contra hermano. (Ibid)

[*Silence! Silence! It is neither appropriate to mourn nor wail. Polynices did not have the virgin of justice on his shield nor scruples in his heart. He abused his country and therefore deserved death at my hand. I threw myself into the fight to defend right and the throne. It was fair and square, a king against a king, an enemy against an enemy, a brother against a brother.*]

Perhaps it is not surprising that in a play where Eteocles is allowed to speak that he should be the one who most virulently justifies the way Polynices was treated. He must deny his humanity, legitimise the violence done to him and confirm that he should go unburied, because when he is present it is Eteocles who has the most to justify.

Despite these structural differences, the basic paradigms put forward in Ariza's play around violence and mourning remain virtually identical to Sophocles'. Jocasta's notable absence, Polynices' brief and marginalised appearance, Eteocles' harsh condemnation; these are all aimed at demonstrating how Polynices has fallen outside the scope of the human community and therefore was both a legitimate target of violence and unworthy of burial.

Antigone's defiance therefore in both renditions of the play lies in her refusal to accept that her brother was anything less than human, or rather, that any human being can behave in such a way as lose his or her 'human' status. Antigone's crusade is therefore the crusade of human rights and anti-violence activists the world over. She stands as a symbol, not just of defiance against the arbitrary exercise of power by the state, but against any attempt to strip any individual of his or her full humanity both in life and in death.

Most certainly in Colombia, where generations have grown up under the threat of violence and in the shadow of the mourned and the unburied, it is difficult to do anything that is not in some way touched by the long shadow of that violence. Colombia is also a nation that is still torn apart into multiple warring factions and haunted by tyranny. These realities seem particularly hard to escape when staging any version of *Antigone* since *Antigone* has traditionally been understood to be about the relationship between the virtuous individual and the tyrant. It is, of course, important and necessary to question how an individual should respond in the face of tyranny, but I think that the (for lack of a better word) political questions which the *Antigone* asks extend much deeper than this. *Antigone* is asking not just how we should respond to violence but why that violence occurs in the first place. By looking at the dynamics of mourning, *Antigone* is questioning the legitimacy of violence.

These are questions one cannot help but ask when looking at the recent history of Colombia and they also are unavoidably part of *Antigone*. The building of a sound theoretical connection between mourning and violence has implications not only for the critical study of literature concerned with either or both but also for the numerous instances in which mourning is used as a tool for activism. Ultimately, this is the role which Ariza's *Antígona* is playing as well. While the women with whom Ariza met in Urába may have been denied the opportunity to mourn the men they loved in a conventional way, Ariza has created through *Antígona* an alternative means of public mourning for them and in doing so she has created a wider dialogue about the meaning of their deaths and the deaths of others like them.

At the end of *Antigone*, Creon is punished for his impiety by the death of his son. He is not immune from the violence he has allowed to be inflicted on others. But perhaps the best warning to us comes from Tiresia at the end of Ariza's *Antígona*:

Ciudadanos de Tebas, salgan ya de de sus casas y de sus guaridas, recorran el velo que les ciega la vista, Su silencio ha sido el mayor cómplice de la tragedia. Salgan, sé que están ahí, escondidos. Salgan y vengan a ver de una vez por todas las ruinas de la guerra. (ibid)

[Citizens of Thebes! Come out from your houses and your abodes! Lift the veil that blinds your sight! Your silence has been this tragedy's greatest accomplice. Come out! I know you are hidden there! Come out and see the ruins of war once and for all.]

Bibliography

Primary Texts

- Aristotle, 'Politics' in *De Arte Poetica Liber*, ed. by Rudolf Kassel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)
- Aristotle, *Politics*, no trans., facsimile of 1905 edn (New York: Cosimo, 2008)
- Ariza, Patricia, *Antígona*. Unpublished Script. Bogotá, 2006
- Sophocles, 'Antigone' in *Sophocles' Three Theban Plays*, trans. by Peter Constantine (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2007), pp. 159–212
- Sophoclis Fabulae* ed. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones and N.G. Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990)

Secondary Texts

- Ballvé, Teo. 'The Dark Side of Plan Colombia' in *The Nation* 15 June 2009 <<<http://www.thenation.com/article/dark-side-plan-colombia?page=0,0>>> [accessed 21 July 2010].
- Brodzinsky, Sibylla. 'Juan Manuel Santos wins Colombian Presidential Election' in *guardian.co.uk*. 21 June 2010 <<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jun/21/juan-manuel-santos-colombia-president>>> [accessed 20 July 2010]
- Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004)
- Davis, Douglas James, *Death, Rituals, and Belief: The Rhetoric of Funeral Rites* (London: Cassell, 1997)
- Durkheim, Émile, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915)
- Foley, Helen, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* Princeton, New Jersey & (Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2001)
- International PEN, *Women writers under attack in Latin America*. 5 March 2009, <<<http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/go/news/women-writers-under-attack-in-latin-america>>> [accessed 21 July 2010]
- Pinzón, Wilmar Cabrera. 'Ariza: 'Repetirnos Es Morir'', *El Tiempo* 14 June 2006 <<<http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-2064718>>> [accessed 21 July 2010]
- The Human Rights Situation in Colombia: Amnesty International written statement to the thirteenth session of the UN Human Rights Council (1–26 March 2010)* AI Index: AMR 23/005/2010, 16 February 2010, <<<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR23/005/en/8abbee9d-726e-4b33-b928-1174a15833f4/amr230052010en.pdf>>> [accessed 15 March 2010].

Further discussions of some of the issues raised in this article will be found in:

- Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, ed. by Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (London: Methuen, 2002)
- Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000)
- Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane, 'Assumptions and the Creation of Meaning: Reading Sophocles' *Antigone*', *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 109 (1989), 134–48
- Steiner, George. *Antigones* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984)