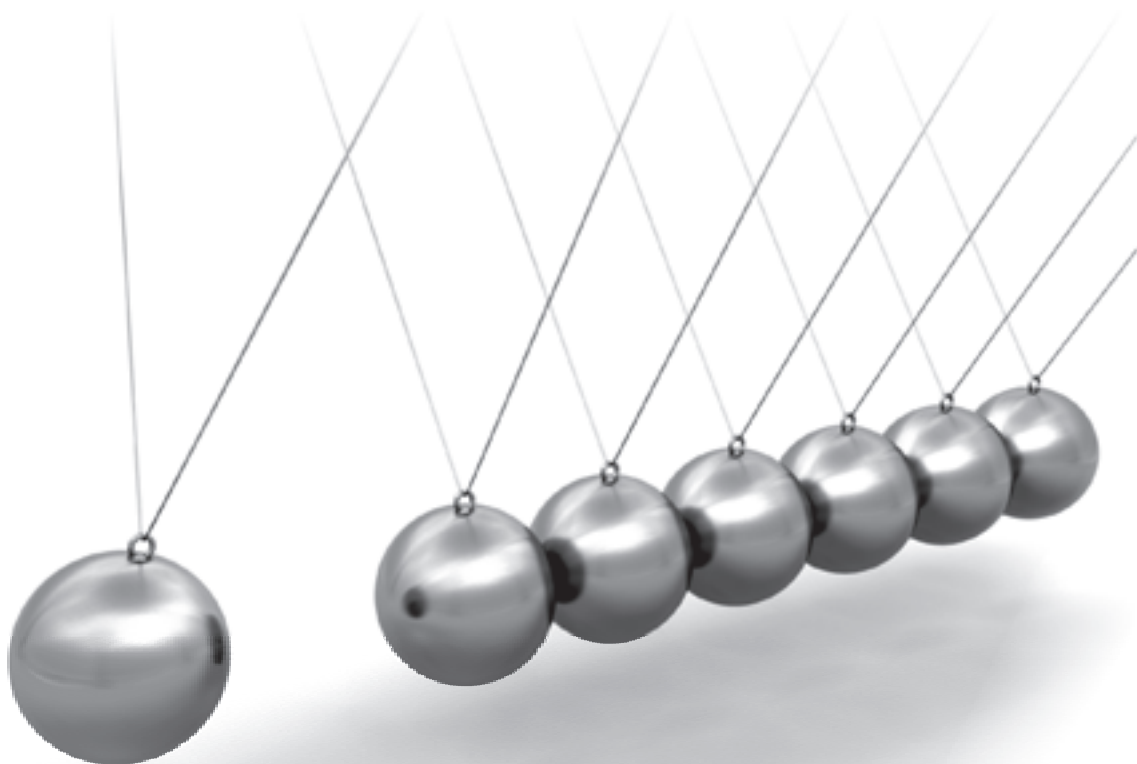


Women in Times of Crisis

Edited by Irina Deretić



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Edited by Irina Deretić
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Referees
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Professor Ljiljana Radenović
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Višnja Knežević*

HEGEL'S ANTIGONE: CRISIS AND COLLAPSE OF THE ANCIENT GREEK *SITTlichkeit*

Abstract: This paper reconsiders Antigone's role in the ancient Greek *polis* in the framework of Hegel's concept of *Sittlichkeit*, as developed in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. My main hypothesis is that Antigone appears to challenge both the Greek androcentric order and Hegel's hypotheses on subjectivity. I prove this by reevaluating Hegel's notion of the Ethical act (*sittliche Handlung*). Finally, I identify the endowment of *Sittlichkeit* on natural sexual distinction as the real reason for its collapse and point out the problematic consequences of such endowment for further development of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Keywords: *Sittlichkeit*, masculinity, femininity, natural difference, Ethical act, Antigone.

The Conceptual Framework of Hegel's Antigone: *Sittlichkeit* and the Natural Difference

Hegel's interpretation of Sophocles's *Antigone* is developed, primarily, in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807¹), in the chapter on the ancient

* Višnja Knežević, Research Associate, Institute for Philosophy, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, e-mail: visnja.d.knezevic@gmail.com.

1 In addition, Hegel thematises the problem of tragedy in general in the second volume of his *Lectures on Fine Art* (1835 Hotho). Because in the *Lectures* Hegel is interested in tragedy primarily as a poetry genre, while in the *Phenomenology*, he regards tragedy as a form of experience of cognising and acting subjectivity, the former seldom recur to the tragic situation of *Antigone*, whereas the latter is concerned primarily with it. Although the analyses from the two treatises complement one another to a degree, they are substantially different concerning results on the subject matter of tragedy. The crucial difference is the problem of reconciliation: the *Lectures* posit reconciliation as the tragic τέλος (Hegel, 1975, p. 1163, 1166, 1193, particularly p. 1197) but *Phenomenology of Spirit* provides nothing of the sort. This subtle nuance often escapes the notice of those interested in Hegel's reading of *Antigone*.

Greek ἔθος (*Sittlichkeit*²). The genuine subject of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the science of the experiencing consciousness, is Spirit in its self-cognising experience. At the end of its journey through various stages of mediation, the Spirit (re)cognises itself as a totality, unity of substance and knowledge, subject-object, as entire reality, that is – freedom. In the world of human self-consciousness, the struggle for recognition is its main motivational force. The Spirit is, hence, constituted on individual human πράξεις in the mutual struggle for recognition – it is a dynamic, struggling practical mutuality.³ (Hegel (1977) [PhG], §416–418). It naturally manifests itself, first, as the world of *Sittlichkeit*, which is not only a reality of self-cognition but a historical reality – ancient Greece. *Sittlichkeit* is the lively realm of the human πράττειν, and community life constituted on ἔθος, as well as the life of the community itself (Janicaud, 2013, p. 156). As such, it is both the πόλις and the πολιτεία but also the quotidian life, the οἶκος, the rites and the cult, the tradition. The ancient Greek *Sittlichkeit* is Hegel’s general framework for understanding Sophocles’s *Antigone*; specifically, it is the Athenian *Sittlichkeit*.

Hegel regards Antigone and Creon as (representatives of) the two Laws, the Human and the Divine, both formally equivalent in terms of their rights (legality). As Laws, they are formalities devoid of any substance, i.e., content, mere tautologies (PhG, §426, §431); neither one can hence claim its right over the other.⁴ However, in *Sittlichkeit*, the Human and the Divine Law are given substantial content. Human Law is the law of the City, community, active political life, universality – “the Law of light” (PhG, §447); Divine Law is the law of family, non-citizens, individuals, the οἶκος, private life, and hence particularity – “the Law of shadows” (PhG, §449). Nonetheless, the real domain of Divine Law is death: its cult is the cult of familial ancestors, its main practice is that of burial.⁵

2 Alternatively, *ethical order*, as *Sittlichkeit* is usually translated into English. The French language has more equivalents depending on the context: *unité étique*, *esprit étique*, *vie étique*, etc. (Janicaud, 2013, p. 156, n. 3).

3 Spirit stricto sensu is not possible in an isolated individual. An isolated individual is a purely hypothetical construct. The world is possible as my world only because it previously exists and is encountered as the world of Others, into whose community I enter by birth and with language; there is *my world* only because there is, first, *our world*.

4 That is, it cannot be recognised as Law but merely as a commandment or duty (PhG, §425). Inter alia, Hegel’s insight into the formal tautological nature of duty represents his critique of Kant’s deontological ethics, and consequently, an answer to all positions that justify Antigone’s claim from the framework of this ethics.

5 The opposition between human and divine law is present already in the ancient Greek language. It is the opposition between δίκαιος and ὄσιος, τὸ δίκαιον being that which is sanctioned by human law, whereas τὸ ὄσιον is that which is sanctioned by divine

The sexual difference provides Human and Divine Law with their content since, otherwise, they cannot be differentiated in respect to form.⁶ The natural difference additionally provides the substantial reason why both Laws are legitimate, and just the same, both equally criminal:

As regards content, however, the ethical action contains the moment of the crime because it does not do away with the natural allocation of the two laws to the two sexes but rather, being an undivided attitude towards the law, remains within the sphere of natural immediacy, and, qua action, turns this onesidedness into guilt by seizing on only one side of the essence, and adopting a negative attitude towards the other, i.e., violating it. (PhG, §468)

The conflict between Human and Divine Law is the very conflict of *Sittlichkeit* as the conflict between the ἔθος of masculinity (or, virility) and that of femininity⁷ (PhG, §459–460). One may say that sexual difference is its natural kernel and the ultimate source of its tragedy. The position of sexual difference in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as well as the patriarchal organisation of the ancient Athenian πόλις, provide the foundation for Hegel's reading of Sophocles's *Antigone*.

law. Traditionally, the difference between human and divine law concerns the different distribution of power and roles that men and women had in a society, which seems to be linked to the perception of sexual power in Indo-European societies (Linke, 1992). This is particularly visible in cult practices. Hence, e. g., we find in old Norse the difference between *galdr*, referring to popular magic or incantations practised by all, and *seiðr*, referring to the type of magic that was considered more severe and was practised only by women and those whose position in the society was regarded feminine. In addition, the Old Norse term *ergi*, “effeminacy” or “unmanliness,” shows that the previously mentioned difference is closely connected with asymmetry in power. The term referred both to women and passive homosexuals and was a grave insult when employed among those who considered each other “real” men (Sørensen, 1983). I am thankful to Aleksa Krivošija for bringing my attention to these facts.

6 This is not contingently so. *Sittlichkeit* occupies a unique place in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It is Spirit, but the Spirit in its immediacy. *Sittlichkeit* is the Spirit that is the most proximate to nature and hence its establishment on a natural difference. However, the difference in question cannot be one of talent, natural potential or “energy of the will” since these are unsubstantial and irrelevant for the quality of the human πράττειν (PhG, §402–403). The only natural difference that Hegel assesses as substantial is the one between the two sexes (PhG, §459–460).

7 Hegel regards the two ἔθη, respectively, as the ἔθος of universality and one of the particular interests. He discusses the relationship between πόλις and economic separatism of particular families occurring through their organisation into particular “systems of personal independence and property,” “their own special and independent associations,” “which tend to isolate themselves” from the universal τέλος of the City; in order not to let their individualism to “become rooted,” the πόλις, then, enters wars in the aim of compelling these families to recognise the only absolute “lord and master,” death (PhG, §455). However, I do not see how the described separatism can be brought into connection with the feminine principle. In the 5th century BC Athens, the Athenian women had no economic power at all.

“While I am alive, no woman will rule!” The Importance of Sister: The Ethical Act

Until the formation of the first Greek πόλεις in the period of 8th–6th century BC, women had their political πράξεις: burial and mourning of the deceased. Because mourning women had the power to impose blood feud, they directly regulated violence, which was their participatory role in society (Stevanović, 2013, p. 263). However, their power gradually reduced since the formation of the πόλεις. In addition, the reforms implemented by Solon in the 7th century BC significantly restricted their burial and mourning practice, resulting in the enclosure into the family domain (Stevanović, 2013, p. 263). By the time of the 5th century BC and Pericles’s infamous citizenship regulation, the political realm belonged exclusively to men (the Human Law). In contrast, the Divine Law, still in the hands of women, retreated to the sphere of privacy, οἶκος and family. Not only were they not granted the role of citizenship, women and everything that concerned them were left by the City to their fathers and husbands to privately “regulate” them as their masters and owners.

Antigone emerges in such a milieu and is perceived therein as a crisis of the order of power, a crisis of virility, and the very crisis of *Sittlichkeit*. At least, this is how she is perceived by Creon, who is the principal representative of Human Law. He is πόλις, its governing force (ἀρχή). At Soph. *Ant.*, 525 (Sophocles, 1891), Creon says ἐμοῦ δὲ ζῶντος οὐκ ἄρξει γυνή, *While I live, no woman will rule (me)*⁸. He perceives Antigone as a “disobedient element” of the society, as someone endangering the androcentric order of the πόλις. Although both his son and the choir warn him that this is neither what Antigone is doing nor what she represents, Creon ignores their words. On the other hand, Antigone does not actualise her subjectivity as a woman but as a sister and advocate of Divine Law, which claims civilised burial for every soul regardless of their conduct during life.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel specifically analyses woman’s actualisation as individuality of *Sittlichkeit* through familial bonds with brother. According to him, the relationship between brother and sister

8 On other occasions, he employs a similar argument or an insult. See, e. g., Soph. *Ant.* 672–80, 746 or 756 (Sophocles, 1891, 1912). Concerning the sentence ἐμοῦ δὲ ζῶντος οὐκ ἄρξει γυνή, I made the addition of the brackets following the most novel, Maričić’s translation into the Serbian language. Maričić comments (Maričić, 2020, p. 169, n. 394, original in Serbian): “If ἐμοῦ δὲ ζῶντος is genitivus absolutus, then [the translation is] ‘While I am alive [a woman will not rule]’ [*dok sam ja živ, žena vladati neće!*], but if it is genitive of object, then ‘While I live, a woman will not rule me’ [*pa mnome dok živim neće vladati žena*]. I decided on the first option.”

is a natural one, for they are of “same blood” but “blood which has... in them reached a state of rest and equilibrium”⁹ (PhG, §457). Hence, the fraternal-sororal kinship is a natural fact, albeit one of a “purer kind” since it is free from sexual desire. Hegel particularly points out that the bonds of kinship are not established on emotions of love or parental piety but on an ethical action (*sittliche Handlung*), which is the act of burial of the brother by the sister. The *sittliche Handlung* of burial is, in fact, prevention of the deceased from turning into a mere natural thing – death as “natural negation” – through which “the right of consciousness” is once again “asserted” in him (PhG, §452). In other words, it is an act of mediacy, whereby nature becomes consciousness.¹⁰

The sister is an “immediate mediacy,” an “immediate consciousness,” and “intuition.” She is Spirit – she has to be because she must bury the brother; to “assert to him the right of consciousness,” she herself must be consciousness. However, because she is an advocate of Divine Law, whose realm is the one of “shadows,” she is not self-consciousness (PhG, §457):

...the feminine, in the form of the sister, has the highest *intuitive* awareness of what is ethical. She does not attain to *consciousness* of it, or to the objective existence of it, because the law of the Family is an implicit, inner essence which is not exposed to the daylight of consciousness but remains an inner feeling and the divine element that is exempt from an existence in the real world.

More than nature, less than (self-)consciousness – that is the position Hegel bestows on a woman (sister) in his system following the one that woman had in the *Sittlichkeit* of the 5th century BC Athens. Yet, Hegel is obliged to such characterisation because he necessitates an integrative factor of nature, a transition from nature to self-consciousness. On the other hand, sister's immediacy is established in bonds of “blood in rest and equilibrium” – a description for which it is not clear if it is “quite” natural or not. The structural anthropology of the 20th century has proved kinship to be a cultural instead of a natural fact.¹¹ Hegel may or may not be obliged to recognise this fact, but he would have to account for some difficulties his interpretation of the kinship and sister hypotheses encounter.

9 Butler (2000) questions this point.

10 Hyppolite (1979, p. 343–344) points out that “the preeminent function of the family is to restore to death its true meaning, to remove it from nature and to make of it a spiritual action... The family community, as it appears in the ethical world, gives meaning to death.”

11 Founding his analyses on Lévi-Strauss' anthropological research, in an early article “La Famille” (1938), written for the *Encyclopédie française*, Lacan, too, extensively argues that kinship is not a natural fact but a social institution.

The True Meaning of Ethical Act. The Order of Power and its Recognition

Due to their specific relationship of peculiar “blood,” brother and sister are posited by Hegel as equals:

The brother ... is for the sister a passive, similar being in general; the recognition of herself in him is pure and unmixed with any natural desire... In this relationship, therefore, ... the moment of the individual self, recognising and being recognised, can here assert its right, because it is linked to the equilibrium of the blood and is a relationship devoid of desire. The loss of the brother is therefore irreparable to the sister and her duty towards him is the highest. (PhG, §457)

The “highest duty” is the burial, the *sittliche Handlung*. It is the sister’s ethical obligation to her brother, which one could interpret as her “symbolic return” of the “gift” of equality, received by nature – inasmuch as “balanced blood” is still “blood;” however, to the extent that mutual recognition of brother and sister is of supreme quality in comparison to the merely natural one between a man and a woman, and still of lesser quality than the recognition between the ἄνδρες, it is neither natural nor yet a struggle of two self-consciousnesses.¹² As the entire *Sittlichkeit* itself, it constitutes an intermediate phase between nature and culture, immediacy and mediation.

Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the moment of burial is of decisive importance not solely for the brother but for the sister, too. The burial constitutes a moment of “reassertion,” not mere “assertion.” If she has *already* become an individuality through bonds of kinship with her brother, the moment of burial is the moment wherein the sister reaffirms her individuality. She does this through herself, through *her* πράξις. It is precisely through their πράξεις that individualities, as well as Spirit, are *self-established* (PhG, §416–418). Due to this reason, the sister can reassert individuality to the deceased brother (who, after death and before the burial, is merely a natural “thing”). During the complex ethical act, what takes place is both mediation (of brother, by the *sister*, through *sittliche Handlung*) and self-mediation (or sister, by *herself*, through *sittliche Handlung*).

12 Hegel considers the relationship between the masculine and the feminine, as two sexes, a natural one (PhG, §456): it is exhausted in sexual drive and reproduction, neither of which, according to him, bring true but only natural satisfaction and recognition (PhG, §360). In the ancient Greek ἕθος this relationship is even more complex because, according to Hegel, an ancient Greek woman cannot find even her natural recognition. Whereas ἄνθρωπος, due to being a πολίτης, “thereby acquires the right of desire and, at the same time, preserves his freedom in regard to it,” γυνή possesses neither this right nor this freedom (PhG, §457).

Nonetheless, once self-mediation takes place, subjectivity occurs because subjectivity *is* self-mediation. The Sister should become a subject herself.

Why, then, is Antigone's self-consciousness not acknowledged, either by Hegel or by Creon? Due to the order of power. He who occupies the position of power, either in the ancient Greek society or in Hegel's system, is the one who chooses to grant or retrieve the "right" to subjectivity at *his* own free will. It is not arbitrary that reduction of feminine power in the ancient Greek πόλις occurred, first, by way of limiting of their burial and mourning πράξεις. It, too, is not a coincidence that Antigone's symbolic burial of Polynices angers Creon. The principal reason for the latter is the fact that someone is burying a proclaimed enemy of the πόλις. However, there is another reason: a *woman* does it.

Yet, is Antigone's subjectivity really not recognised by Creon? Being a woman, Antigone is a priori excluded from the political order. In addition, when it comes to the right of the deceased, she herself does not acknowledge this order because she speaks in the name of the Divine one. Thirdly, she does not perceive herself primarily as a woman but as a sister.¹³ However, Creon sees what Antigone does not: the feminine bifurcating the perfect stillness of the androcentric πόλις. *He* is the one who recognises Antigone as a woman. With Creon's identification of the burial committed as a *feminine* πράξις, Antigone's "inscription" into the realm of Human Law takes place. Whereas Hegel perceives Antigone's πράττειν as a purely familial, individual act, Creon does otherwise: for him – and he *is* the Human Law (PhG, §436) – a woman has entered the πόλις, and she has entered it politically.

Creon's judgment is not only a charge. It is also an unwilling acknowledgement. By saying that while he lives, no woman shall rule (him), Creon recognises Antigone's appearance in the political realm as the appearance of the feminine. Specifically, this occurs through his reaction to Antigone's πράξις.¹⁴ If a woman is not a citizen, why should anything that she does be of significance for the City? Is Antigone's deed different from a deed of a slave? If a slave were to commit a crime and bury an enemy of the state, would the state put her to death, or would it leave the execution of the penalty to the slave's master? Finally, and most importantly, if the state

13 The famous lines Soph. *Ant.*, 909–912 demonstrate this point: *A husband lost, another might have been found / and if bereft of a child, there could be a second from some other man. / But when father and mother are hidden in Hades, / no brother could ever bloom for me again* (εἰ τοῦδ' ἤμπλακον / μητρὸς δ' ἐν Ἄιδου καὶ πατρὸς κεκευθότων / οὐκ ἔστ' ἀδελφὸς ὅστις ἂν βλάστοι ποτέ), (Sophocles, 1891, 1912).

14 An interesting perspective on how women's πράξεις, as well as death, were introduced in the (modern) political order as a form of activism is provided by Rokai. See Rokai (2021) in this volume.

were to execute the slave, would it engage in a prior discussion with her? Creon's conversation, his discussion with Antigone, is his recognition. The one in the position of the political power does not *discuss* matters with the one who committed a crime and who has no political power; he *acts* upon them. Certainly, Creon does not recognise Antigone as an ὁμοία, but he acts *as if* she were so.¹⁵ Hence, in Hegel's terms, one may say that not only has Creon overstepped the limits of the realm of Human Law, but he has also admitted Divine Law into this realm.¹⁶ Although the deed is done involuntarily or unconsciously, it cannot be retrieved once done.

The End of *Sittlichkeit*. The End of the Feminine

A woman has entered the πόλις. At that very moment, the political seizes to be the exclusive order of virility – even if only for a brief instance, even if Antigone is to be executed for her “transgression.” Alternatively, if the order of power continues to be the one of virility, the woman herself has become “masculine.” The natural difference is erased. Men will become women, and women will become men. It is what Creon is conveying when he says: ἢ νῦν ἐγὼ μὲν οὐκ ἀνὴρ, αὕτη δ' ἀνὴρ, *In truth, then, I am no man, but she is* [Soph. *Ant.* 484], (Sophocles, 1891, 1912). The end of πόλις. The end of the world as ἄνδρες know it. Ἀκοσμία.

According to Hegel, however, the ancient Greek πόλις is doomed to collapse because of the immediate relationship of ethical consciousness to Law, either Human or Divine, resulting in formal “undecidability” between the two Laws (PhG, §476, §435–437). Content-wise, *Sittlichkeit* collapses because neither of the two parties, masculine nor feminine, realise that they both are *moments* of the dialectical movement of the ethical being.¹⁷ It seems that *Sittlichkeit* cannot withstand its inner contradiction,

15 One might say that Creon is entering a discussion with Antigone because she is a member of his family, but this objection is not sustainable, at least not when it concerns *Antigone* of Sophocles. Unlike Anouilh's, Sophocles's Creon never addresses Antigone as a future daughter-in-law or an actual niece. His position of speech is always and exclusively that of the governor of the City.

16 Entrance of Divine Law into Human Law may, too, be regarded as the entrance of death into life. Hence, on a more profound level, Creon's hostility towards a woman entering the πόλις may be interpreted as his fear of death. On the hypotheses of the ancient Greek fear of death, see Deretić & Smith (2021).

17 “Spiritual being is actual substance through these modes being valid, not in isolation, but only as superseded [moments]; and the unity in which they are merely moments is the self of consciousness which, being from now on posited in the spiritual being, makes that being actual, fulfilled, and self-conscious” (PhG, §435).

the conflict between the two genders. They negate one another, and due to this, both will be dialectically sublated, superseded: In *Legal Status*, both the masculine and feminine allegedly disappear, and a new opposition arises – the one between an abstract juridical persona and the Master of the world. The *dialektische Aufhebung* came from without. *Urbs* has overrun the πόλις.

Nevertheless, it seems that the real reason for the collapse of *Sittlichkeit* is precisely in its substantial dependence on nature:

This ruin of the ethical Substance and its passage into another form is thus determined by the fact that the ethical consciousness is directed to the Law in an essentially immediate way. This determination of immediacy means that Nature as such enters into the ethical act, the reality of which simply reveals the contradiction and the germ of destruction inherent in the beautiful harmony and tranquil equilibrium of the ethical Spirit itself.. On account of this natural aspect, this ethical nation is, in general, and individuality determined by Nature and therefore limited, and thus meets its downfall at the hands of another. (PhG, §476)

Nature made a “transgression” into the Spirit. One might say that the “transgression” refers to the establishment of *Sittlichkeit* on natural difference instead of on spiritual phenomenon. Along these lines, Hegel's argument could be improved as follows: The order of society cannot be established on the natural difference. If it is, the natural difference becomes a cultural opposition – the sexual difference becomes gender conflict. Both virility and femininity participate in nature, as self-consciousness is the property of both. If femininity and virility are one-sidedly attributed to nature and self-consciousness, respectively, such order is doomed to fail. (Inversely, the result would still be the same.) Since self-consciousness and nature are *opposed* to each other, collapse is an inevitable outcome: if nature is defined as an “unconscious Spirit,” it remains defined as opposed to the self-conscious Spirit, and, as well, from the position of the latter. What is unconscious can neither voice nor name itself. The voicing may occur perhaps through femininity, but the naming originates from the position of power – virility.

However, this is not *Hegel's* argument. First, Hegel does not evenly distribute nature and Spirit between the masculine and the feminine. He does precisely what the argument objects to, i.e., one-sided attribution of nature (intuition, immediacy) to femininity and Spirit (self-consciousness, mediation) to virility. If Hegel had recognised the sister's *πᾶξις* of burial as a self-mediated practice and consequently acknowledged sister's subjectivity, he would perhaps have succeeded in integrating nature into self-consciousness. Nevertheless, this is not what he does. As a result, nature and self-consciousness remain non-integrated, thorn apart, and as a con-

sequence of this “splitting” the woman falls back into nature, whereas the man rises to culture.

Hegel’s infamous lines about womanhood as “the everlasting irony of the community” (PhG, §475) may be his critique of the ancient Greek *Sittlichkeit*.¹⁸ However, I find this interpretation dubitable. If the “everlasting irony of society” is the irony of the male “supremacy,” the “otherness” of the masculine – the feminine – reveals the (petty) truth of the “sameness” of virility. This, however, is not what Hegel would claim; if he were, he would realise that both virility and femininity are self-mediated and mediated by the other, as well as they are one to another, and to their own selves, both the “other” and the “same.” This would eventually lead to questioning natural difference as ἀρχή of the ethical difference. The difference in primary sexual characteristics has no place in self-consciousness: conceptual thinking knows not of it, nor does it care for it. Yet, because the γυνή is left in *Sittlichkeit*, whereas the ἀνὴρ continues the “Odyssey of Spirit,” paradoxically so, he carries with him along the way the sheer determination he wishes to sublimate. The world of *Bildung* is the world of feudal European men, not men and women, and certainly not of genderless Spirit, self-absorbed in its hunger for freedom.

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18 Commenting such Hegel’s characterisation of womanhood, Kojève (1968, p. 92) provocatively voices Hegel’s perhaps silent thought: “La Femme est la réalisation concrète du crime.”

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Вишња Кнежевић*

ХЕГЕЛОВА АНТИГОНА: КРИЗА И ПАД АНТИЧКЕ ГРЧКЕ ОБИЧАЈНОСТИ

Сажетак: Полазећи од Хегеловог појма обичајности из *Феноменологије духа*, рад настоји да интерпретира Антигонину улогу у полису. Анализа обичајног поступка показује да је хероина изазов за андроцентрични поредак полиса, али и за Хегелове поставке о обичајној субјективности. Коначно, рад идентификује заснованост обичајности на природној разлици међу половима као садржински разлог пропасти овог облика искуства духовне самосвести.

Кључне речи: обичајност, маскулинитет, феминитет, природна разлика, обичајни поступак, Антигона.

* Вишња Кнежевић, научни сарадник, Институт за филозофију, Филозофски факултет, Универзитет у Београду, имејл: visnja.d.knezevic@gmail.com.