

Sophocles' *Antigone* Reworked in the Twentieth Century: the Case of Walter Hasenclever's *Antigone* (1917)

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I will focus on the adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* by the German expressionist writer Walter Hasenclever. Despite being essentially unknown and scarcely read in contemporary scholarship, Hasenclever's drama is particularly interesting because it explicitly situates the *Antigone* of Sophocles as a political work and invokes and expands the political questions raised by the play and its largely political tradition.

Hasenclever's version represents a crucial step towards the development of such a political interpretation of the play, in which *Antigone's* meaning is transformed into a call for peace and resistance against the principle of tyrannical power, manifested in Creon and his followers. The play becomes a condemnation of all kinds of injustice and autocratic oppression, embodied by a Kaiser-like Creon. Antigone's heroic act, the burial of her brother, reflects the trauma of losing a kinsman in the trenches, a reality common to the author and his audience during the tragic years of First World War. Written at the height of the Russian Revolution, Hasenclever's *Antigone* appears before the audience as a fiery revolutionary and social agitator: her call for peace and resistance reflects the political ideals of contemporary political leaders.

Hasenclever's understanding of the ancient source is therefore shaped by the traumatic events and by the repressive socio-cultural context of these years, which find echoes in his reception of the ancient tragedy. The divergences from the original represent a displacement which inevitably occurs when an author employs a classical work, as compelling as *Antigone*, for the modern stage. But they also reinforce the continuing power of the original, and its ability to speak forcefully to modern as well as ancient audiences.