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BETWEEN *BIOS* AND *ZOĒ*: SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE* AND AGAMBEN'S BIOPOLITICS



ABSTRACT: Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* and its biopolitics have been brought to bear on Sophocles' *Antigone* with some frequency. These biopolitical readings of *Antigone* rely on a binary distinction drawn by *Homo Sacer* at its very outset: a distinction between *βίος* and *ζωή* — between proper, political life and bare existence. However, these readings have not sufficiently examined how these words operate in Sophocles' Greek. Can *βίος* be meaningfully distinguished from *ζωή* in Sophoclean tragedy and, if so, how does this semantic binary operate in *Antigone*? Although the distinction is far from absolute in Sophocles' poetry, I argue that the conflict between Antigone and Ismene is underscored by their preference for *ζω*-words or *βίω*-words respectively. If the sisters disagree over whether to sacrifice their own lives to perform the act of burial in defiance of Creon, it is at least in part because they conceive of their lives' value quite differently.

INTRODUCTION

SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE* is a tragedy enmeshed in life, death, and the spaces in between. *Antigone* opens with Polynices lying dead yet unburied above the earth, while Antigone is entombed alive towards the denouement of the drama.¹ Muddled margins of mortality therefore feature prominently in *Antigone* and even structure the tragedy in a ring composition. Because Sophocles' heroine experiences a symbolic death in advance of her actual death, Antigone has frequently been interpreted as a liminal figure who inhabits a nether-region between symbolic and real death.² What precisely it means to be alive and exactly what sort of life is worth living are

1. I am grateful to my readers at *Logeion* for their expert and thoughtful comments and criticisms, from which I benefited immensely. Thanks are also due to Anne Feltovich and Tim W. Watson, who kindly read earlier drafts of the essay, and to Page duBois, with whom I first read *Homo Sacer* and *Antigone's Claim* some years ago.
2. See Lacan (1986) and Sorum (1982, 207). For Knox (1964, 67) Antigone's punishment is a "living death." Hutchinson (1999) 67-68 observes also of *Antigone* that "beyond the perfective moment of death lie various extended periods of time

questions that run throughout Sophocles' play, from Antigone's opening reminder to Ismene that "we yet live" (3) to the play's final scenes.

Because of its complex negotiation of "life" and its varied meanings, *Antigone* has undergone several biopolitical readings in recent decades, especially in the wake of Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.³ "Biopolitics" is a term Agamben draws from Michel Foucault to refer to socio-political power over biological life. Biopolitics is, for Foucault, control over bodies, and biopower is the right to take (or make) life.⁴ In the two decades since its publication, Agamben's *Homo Sacer* has been brought to bear on Sophocles' *Antigone* with some frequency. While Agamben never mentions *Antigone* specifically in the influential *Homo Sacer*, his discussions of biopolitics, sovereign power over human life, and constructions of "the camp" have been applied both to Sophocles' tragedy and to its modern rewritings and reinterpretations by numerous critics.⁵ These readings of

3. Agamben (1995).

4. See Foucault (2003, 240-47) for a brief overview of the term. While Foucault's definition of "biopolitics" is Agamben's referent, the word itself appears in print well before Foucault.

5. See, for instance, Butler (2000), Butler (2010) 149, Fradinger (2010) 59-60, Wilmer (2010), Žukauskaitė (2010), Tripathy (2013), and, obliquely, Honig (2010) 27 n. 5. Norris (2000) 50 n. 23: "Agamben does not mention *Antigone*, but his discussion of the symbiosis of sovereignty and sacred life is surely reminiscent of this most political of tragedies. The action of the play revolves around a conflict over the city's duties toward a body that is placed neither inside the city nor outside it: the body is of one of the sons of the city, but one who has fought against it, and as a result it lays in the fields outside the city wall, and not in the burial plot that would mark its passage out of this world. There are many ways to characterize Antigone's criminal refusal to obey Creon, but perhaps the most direct is to say that she tries to sort this confusion out, by burying the body, and hence putting it decisively beyond the city — or, more precisely, acknowledging that it always has been beyond or outside of the city, in the sense that it is not within the city's authority to hold it back from burial, and hence from death. If this seems an imposition of themes that are, strictly speaking, foreign to the play, consider its culmination in Creon's sovereign decision to condemn Antigone to an underground tomb — which perfectly symbolizes Agamben's threshold between life and death. The result is a monstrous confusion of death and life. In the words of the prophet Teiresias: 'you have thrust one that belongs above / below the earth, and bitterly dishonored / a living soul by lodging her in the grave; / while one that belonged indeed to the underworld / gods you have kept on this earth without the due share / of rites of burial, of due funeral offerings, / a corpse unhallowed' [Soph. *Ant.* 1136-42]. Creon's edict is a reaffirmation of the city's incorporation of the threshold between life and death: If Antigone dares to insist that the dead are simply that, and as such beyond politics, Creon will prove her wrong by condemning her to the threshold in which politics and death find one another." While his work predates both Agamben and Foucault's definition

Antigone(s) through Agamben's biopolitics each rely on a binary distinction drawn by *Homo Sacer* at its very outset: a distinction between *βίος* and *ζωή* — between proper, political life and bare existence:

The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word “life”. They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios* which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or group.... To speak of a *zoē politikē* of the citizens of Athens would have made no sense.⁶

Through the lens of Agamben, the politics of exclusion reduce *Antigone* to bare life: a state, which, in an Aristotelian schema, exists between death and a politically realized life.⁷ “Bare life,” a term Agamben borrows from Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence*, refers to the experience of living under the possibility of sovereign violence, of exposure to being killed without punishment.⁸ *Antigone* has *ζωή*, the biological state of being common to all living entities, but not *βίος*, a proper way of life marked by political inclusion. *Antigone* is Agamben's *homo sacer* (“sacred man”), “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed”, since her “life is included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)”.⁹ *Antigone* is, politically speaking, the living dead.¹⁰

From this biopolitical perspective, Audronė Žukauskaitė associates *Antigone* with “bodies, which are not dead, which are not dying, but are not alive either, or more precisely, which are not worth living”. Thus, *Antigone's*

of biopolitics, Cedric Whitman's (1951, 84) assessment that, in *Antigone*, “the political structure had shown itself indifferent to the claims of humanity” offers a proleptic gesture towards biopolitical readings of the play.

6. Agamben (1995) 1.

7. Agamben (1995) 1: “When Plato mentions three kinds of life in the *Philebus*, and when Aristotle distinguishes the contemplative life of the philosopher (*bios theōrētikos*) from the life of pleasure (*bios aploaustikos*) and the political life (*bios politikos*) in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, neither philosopher would ever have used the term *zoē*.”

8. Agamben (1995) 65. See also Žukauskaitė (2010) 74-75.

9. Agamben (1995) 8.

10. As Butler (2010, 149) notes (reprinted from Butler 2000) in association with *Antigone*, Agamben draws upon “what Hannah Arendt described as the ‘shadowy realm’, which haunts the public sphere, which is precluded from the public constitution of the human, but which is human in an apparently catachrestic sense of that term”. See Arendt 1969.

action becomes not a transgression of “pathological desire”, but rather “a universal transgression, identifying with the position of those who lack recognition in the public space”.¹¹ Steve Wilmer observes a trend in which many recent productions of *Antigone* have turned away from Hegelian and Lacanian Antigones determined to die, and have instead represented the heroine “defending human rights in defiance of an oppressive and arbitrary authority”. Wilmer suggests that many of these productions “have employed Antigone as a kind of *homo sacer*”.¹² Similarly, María Florencia Nelli has applied Agamben’s work to Griselda Gambaro’s *Antígona Furiosa* (1986), an important Argentine rewriting of *Antigone*, arguing that Antígona and the *desaparecidos* (“disappeared persons”) of Argentina’s “Dirty War” are, in effect, *homines sacri*. “Deprived of all their rights and political status” they dwell “in a no-man’s land between life and death”, where “there is no longer *bios* but only *zoē*”.¹³ The application of Agamben as a discursive lens to *Antigone* thus attempts to interpret the motifs of dispossession, symbolic death, and *l’espace de l’entre deux morts*, which pervade Sophocles’ text and numerous readings of it.¹⁴

Reading post-modern performances of *Antigone* through Agamben is, of course, a different enterprise than bringing contemporary philosophy to bear on an ancient play (or using an ancient play to construct postmodern philosophy). Somewhat curiously, those who have read Sophocles’ *Antigone* through Agamben have not relied on Sophocles’ Greek for their underpinnings. This is despite that fact that a binary semantic distinction in Greek vocabulary lies at the very heart of *Homo Sacer*’s argument: Agamben asserts that “the fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, *zoē/bios*, exclusion/inclusion”.¹⁵ How Sophocles’ text employs *βίος*, *ζωή*, and their etymological relatives therefore stands out as an obvious, important, and unaddressed question prompted by the

11. Žukauskaitė (2010) 79-80. Emphasis as original. Žukauskaitė here draws upon Slavoj Žižek in conjunction with Agamben.

12. Wilmer (2010) 381.

13. Nelli (2010) 359-60.

14. On *Antigone* and Lacan’s *l’espace de l’entre deux morts*, see especially Lacan (1986) and Miller (2007). Such a reading of Antigone between life and death suffuses the *Antigone* and *Antigone Legend* of Bertolt Brecht, both of which recurrently emphasize an Antigone simultaneously “living and dead”; Brecht (1984) 4. Charles Segal observes that Antigone repeatedly laments “being between living and dead”; Gibbons and Segal (2003) 154.

15. Agamben (1995) 8. For an alternative view, which critiques Agamben and questions the very possibility of “bare life”, see Butler and Spivak (2007) 35-43.

pairing of *Antigone* with Agamben. This essay attempts to do just this: to trace βίος and ζωή in Sophocles' *Antigone* as they relate (or not) to Agamben's biopolitics and the interpretation of *Antigone* as a *homo sacer*.

Attempts to read Sophocles' *Antigone* through Agamben's biopolitics prompt at least two questions. First, is the βίος/ζωή binary, which Agamben draws from Aristotle and ascribes to "the Greeks", a distinction aptly applied to Sophoclean tragedy? Second, if ζωή and βίος can be differentiated meaningfully, can *Homo Sacer* serve as a lens to interpret these words, and how might this reading contribute to our understanding of *Antigone*?

In the first portion of this essay, I examine the frequency and usage of ζωή, βίος, and related words in *Antigone* in relation to tragic poetry at large. To anticipate my conclusions, Agamben's βίος/ζωή binary proves problematic when applied to tragedy. However, I suggest that Sophocles' *Antigone* does give reason to differentiate between these word groups, especially when spoken by *Antigone* and *Ismene*. The division is not absolute and Agamben's biopolitics do not meaningfully shed light on every instance of ζωή and βίος-words in the play. Indeed, we should hardly expect perfect congruence between a 5th century Athenian drama and a philosophy developed in and shaped by modernity. Nevertheless, I argue in the second portion of this essay that the majority of *Antigone*'s instances of ζωή and βίος-words do acquire new poignancy when viewed through the lens of Agamben, especially in passages that suggest the possibility of inhabiting the space between the two deaths. It is not merely that Sophocles prefers words derived from ζω to those from βίω. Rather, the poet creates specific contexts for each word group. In particular, the conflict between *Antigone* and *Ismene* is underscored by their preference for ζω-words or βίω-words respectively. If the sisters disagree over whether to sacrifice their own lives to perform the act of burial in defiance of *Creon*, it is at least in part because they conceive of their lives' value quite differently.

ZOĒ, BIOS, AND ATTIC TRAGEDY

In the *Politics*, Aristotle argues that the *polis* first came into being for basic reasons of survival but that, once constituted, politics transformed the purpose of human existence from mere "living" to "living well" (... πόλις ... γινωμένη μὲν τοῦ ζῆν ἐνεκεν, οἷσα δὲ τοῦ εἶ ζῆν, 1252b29-30; cf. 1281a1). In the previous sentence, Aristotle uses βίος to describe this qualified *kind* of life. Aristotle, then, does differentiate between bare existence and the qualified life and he locates political inclusion in the *polis* at the center of this distinction.

Liddell and Scott's primary interpretation of *βίος* defines the word in opposition to *ζωή*: *βίος* is "life, i.e. not animal life (*ζωή*) but a course of life, manner of living". (In their secondary definitions, either word can mean "a livelihood" or "means of living".) This general distinction is present not only in Aristotle but also in Plato and other prose writers of the Classical period. For instance, Herodotus uses both words throughout Croesus' interrogation of Solon about human happiness and the blessed life. When Solon speaks of the mere fact of being alive, he uses *ζωή* (*ἐς γὰρ ἐβδομήκοντα ἔτεα οὖρον τῆς ζόης ἀνθρώπων προσιθῆμι* / "for I put the boundary of human life at seventy years", 1.32.2). However, when Solon discusses the quality of a man's life, Herodotus uses *βίος* exclusively.¹⁶

Similarly, Liddell and Scott instruct that *βίωω* is "to live, pass one's life (whereas *ζάω* properly means to live, exist)". So it is that Antigone uses *ζῆ* (457) to refer to the "unwritten, unyielding laws of the gods" (*ἀγραπτα κάσφαλῆ θεῶν νόμιμα*, 454-55), which live forever. Antigone reveres divine law and in no way demeans their *ζωή* in a pejorative sense. Indeed, she places divine law well above human existence. Nevertheless, these laws are immortal concepts, not people, so *ζῶ* is the more precise verb.

However, the above Aristotelian passage points towards a challenge to Agamben's dialectic: Aristotle uses *εἶ ζῆν* rather than *βιοῖν* to mean "to live well". While Aristotle may here repeat the verb for rhetorical effect, the syntax points towards larger issues in Agamben's schema.¹⁷ Agamben's tidy distinction between *βίος* and *ζωή* breaks down very quickly in the face of standard poetic — and especially tragic — usage, which may account for why previous scholarship on *Antigone* and Agamben has neglected to delve into Sophocles' Greek. The first and most obvious problem lies with related verb forms. Agamben himself acknowledges a potential challenge to his semantic binary, which is "the fact that in Attic Greek the verb *bionai* is practically never used in the present tense".¹⁸ *βίωω* is found in Homer and in the work of Sophocles' contemporary and associate, Herodotus, so, technical-

16. See Herodotus 1.30.4, 1.31.2, 1.31.3, 1.32.5, 1.32.7, 1.32.9. As David Grene shows (with a focus on different words), Herodotus uses nuanced vocabulary throughout this episode. See Grene (1987) 47 n. 19, 665-66.

17. As his critics hastily point out, Agamben seems to use Aristotle to stand in for "the Greeks", and the binary between *βίος*/*ζωή* is not so absolute even in Aristotle as Agamben would have it. See especially Derrida (2009) 327-28. Swiffen (2012) provides a good overview of Agamben's critiques, though apparently without access to Greek and Latin.

18. Agamben (1995) 2.

ly, the verb was available at Sophocles' disposal.¹⁹ Sophocles does use *βίωω* exactly once in the extant plays (*OT* 1488). However, the verb appears nowhere else in the Sophoclean corpus and its only other tragic parallel is in Euripides' *Alcestis* (784; interestingly, *Alcestis* also proposes a somewhat porous boundary between life and death).

Moreover, tragic language shows a marked preference for *βίος* over *ζωή* in substantive forms. The distinction between *βίος* and *ζωή*, present (if far from absolute) in Attic prose, evaporates in poetic usage (as Liddell and Scott note) and Dindorf observes that Sophocles occasionally uses *βίος* "even of animal life", which should be more properly fall under the heading of *ζωή*.²⁰ None of Dindorf's examples of this particular usage in Sophocles are drawn from *Antigone*, yet the general point that we cannot presume a precise division between *βίος* and *ζωή* in Sophocles holds true. As do Aeschylus and Euripides, Sophocles as a rule uses *ζῶ* for the verb forms and *βίος* for the substantive forms. This pattern is nearly absolute. Thus, there is an extent to which any attempt to differentiate meaningfully and systematically between Sophocles' use of *βίος* and *ζωή* is an endeavor best approached with a healthy degree of caution. At the very least, inquiry into any distinction between *βίος* and *ζωή* in Sophocles must instead investigate the grammatically incongruous *βίος* and *ζῶ*.

Some basic word frequency statistics illustrate the tragic preference for *βίος* for substantive forms and *ζῶ* for verbs. By my count, Sophocles' seven extant plays use *βίος* and related nouns (*βιοτή*) and adjectival forms (*βιόδωρος*, *βιοστερής*, *βίοτος*, *βιώσιμος*, *βιωτός*) a total of ninety-one times, versus the aforementioned lone use of *βίωω* in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. In contrast, there are one hundred six instances of *ζῶ* in Sophocles' extant plays, while *ζωή* is attested only in two Sophoclean fragments.²¹ Aeschylus' seven plays use *βίος*, *βιοτή*, and *βίοτος* on thirty-five occasions and *βίωω* on zero, while *ζῶ* appears twenty times versus one instance of *ζωός* (*Seven against Thebes* 939) and one instance of *ζώφοντος* (*Suppliant Women* 857-58). In Euripides' eighteen extant plays,²² *βίος* and its substantive relatives appear two

19. *Il.* 8.429, 10.174, 15.511; *Hdt.* 1.163.2, 2.133.1, 2.133.2, 2.177.2, 9.10.2. Herodotus uses *βίωω* to articulate living a lifespan (1.163.2, 2.133.1, 2.133.2, 9.10.2) and earning a living as a means of life (2.177.2). Powell (1938, 60) specifies that Herodotus uses *βίος* of "human" life. In contrast, the historian employs *ζωή* in reference to a cow at 2.132.2.

20. Dindorf (1870) 84.

21. *Soph. Fr.* 556, 592.4. See Dindorf (1870) 209.

22. I here include the *Rhesus* (as I have *Prometheus Bound* for Aeschylus), though its authenticity has long been in doubt. This inclusion is not meant to weigh in on the

hundred forty times (*ἀβίωτος* (3), *ἀβίωτον* (3), *βιώδωρος* (1), *βίος* (172), *βιώ-τευσσις* (1), *βιοτή* (12), *βίωτος* (46), *βιώσιμος* (2)), compared with fourteen instances of *ζωή* (4) and *ζωός* (10). In his verbal forms, Euripides uses *ζῶ* one hundred forty-seven times against only one instance of *βίω* and one instance of *βιοτεύω* (*Alcestis* 243).

We can thus observe some variation. Sophocles somewhat prefers verbal forms of “life” over substantives (107:91), while Aeschylus shows preference for substantive forms over verbs (37:20) as does Euripides (254:149). Sophocles and Euripides do show some amount of flexibility, in that *βίω* and *ζωή* are attested, even if minimally. Nevertheless, each poet broadly conforms to the use of *ζῶ* for verbs and *βίος* for nouns and non-participial adjectives. This, on the surface, would seem to discredit Agamben’s semantic distinction among “the Greeks” as a fruitful avenue for interpretation in *Antigone* or any other Greek tragedy.

However, as Sarah Nooter suggests, Sophocles does use “different vehicles of language” to construct and differentiate character.²³ Moreover, F. R. Earp and A. A. Long’s studies of Sophoclean language indicate that, among Sophocles’ extant plays, *Antigone* is exemplary in its precise language, interest in exact definitions, and meaningful tailoring of speech to suit character.²⁴ I suggest that, despite the cautions outlined above, *ζῶ* and *βίος* do prove to have diverse meanings and that Sophocles creates contexts, both thematic and syntactical, for each word group. A closer look at word frequency in *Antigone* suggests that Sophocles invests both *ζῶ* and *βίος* with specific purpose. Patterns, if not systematic rules, do emerge.

Sophocles’ seven extant plays use *ζῶ*-words over *βίος*-words slightly more than 53.5% of the time. In *Antigone* that ratio jumps to more than 71% (20:8). The instances of each word-group are by no means evenly distributed

debate, which is tangential to my argument. The inclusion or exclusion of *Rhesus* or *Prometheus Bound* does not seriously affect the patterns I trace in word usage.

23. Nooter (2012) 205-06. On Sophoclean language and character, see also McClure (1999) and Griffith (2001). See also Easterling (1999). Easterling’s notion of Sophoclean “contradiction” invites the possibility that words like *βίος* and *ζωή* might put forth opposing concepts in the play. Further, Easterling’s concepts of “shading” and “charging” suggest that Sophoclean words accumulate power and layered meanings through their literal and metaphorical meanings, as well as through their cumulative usages and associations throughout the play.
24. Earp (1944, 166) argues that *Antigone* marks a “turning point” in Sophoclean style, because the matter of the speeches are “highly relevant and characteristic of the speaker” and its dialogue “more precise and pointed”. Long (1968) 53: “An interest in precise definitions, uncharacteristic of Sophocles, is shown throughout this play [*Antigone*]”.

among the play's characters. Sophocles' syntax has Antigone use ζῶ-words over βίος-words nearly 90% of the time (8:1), yet puts βίος rather than ζῶ into the mouth of Ismene with absolute exclusivity (3:0). This warrants interpretation beyond grammatical context.²⁵

Thus, while Agamben's statement that "the Greeks" differentiated meaningfully between βίος and ζῶ is far from absolute and, generally, best qualified as pertaining to texts in prose, I suggest that the words are invested with specific meaning in many of their uses in *Antigone*. In most instances, ζῶ can be interpreted to refer to the simple fact of existence. By contrast, Sophocles uses βίος to refer to a richer life, marked by political inclusion.

SOVEREIGN POWER, SYMBOLIC DEATH, AND *BIOS* AND *ZOĒ* IN SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE*

We are left, then, in a precarious discursive position. On the one hand, Attic poetic *usus* collapses Agamben's semantic binary as it might pertain to Sophoclean tragedy. On the other hand, the disproportionate frequency of ζῶ-words spoken by Antigone and βίος-words spoken by Ismene suggests that Sophocles may well use these word groups very precisely to construct character in *Antigone*.

As I turn to βίος and ζῶ in the text, I adapt the approach of Robert Goheen to Sophoclean imagery:

The recurrent images of the play have at least a double value. They have the denotative value of their particular use, in a limited context. But they also take meanings from the pattern of similar images of which they are a part. And each pattern is to some extent qualified by the others. Their values are such as to characterize the points of view of different figures in the play and set them in sharp opposition on fundamental matters.²⁶

Any individual instance of βίος or ζῶ has specific meaning in context, but their patterns of deployment also have collective value in constructing characters and their perspectives.

I proceed with two sets of readings. In this section, I read particular instances of βίος and ζῶ in *Antigone* as they connect with sovereign power and the possibility of bare life. I propose that biopolitics contribute to powerful interpretations of Sophocles' text even if these layers of meaning are received

25. On the different speech patterns of Antigone and Ismene, see Griffith (2001).

26. Goheen (1951) 12.

through Agamben's philosophy and are not necessarily authentic to the play's ancient Athenian context. In the following section, however, I examine the pattern of word usage as it pertains to Antigone and Ismene. I argue that Sophocles' text does use *βίος* and *ζῶ* to create distinct voices with distinct perspectives for the sisters.

At lines 211-14, the chorus introduces a distinction between life and death as it relates to sovereign power:

σοὶ ταῦτ' ἀρέσκει, παῖ Μενοικέως, ποεῖν
τὸν τῆδε δύσνονν καὶ τὸν εὐμενῆ πόλει·
νόμῳ δὲ χρῆσθαι παντί, τοῦτ' ἔνεστί σοι
καὶ τῶν θανάτων χῶπόσοι ζῶμεν πέρι.²⁷

It is your pleasure, Creon, son of Menoecus, to do this towards the man who is hostile and to he who is friendly towards the city: you have the power to employ every law over the dead and us who live.

The chorus' use of *ζῶμεν* to draw a basic binary between life and death is significant in its context, in that the elders here acknowledge Creon's absolute power over their own bodies and lives. These lines follow Creon's declaration at 173 that *ἐγὼ κράτη δὴ πάντα καὶ θρόνονς ἔχω* ("I hold every power and the throne"). Creon's martial sovereignty (early in the play, he is variously called "king" (*basileus*, 155), "lord" (*anax*, 223; 278), "general" (*strategos*, 8), and "tyrant" (*tyrannos*, 60)) allows him to disbar bodies from the city and to order the executions of its inhabitants as he sees fit.²⁸ The word *tyrannos* "emphasizes", in the words of Bernard Knox, "the absolute power of Creon, conferred on him by the *polis* in the emergency".²⁹ As the chorus acknowledges, Creon

27. Throughout, I use Lloyd-Jones and Wilson's text of Sophocles (1990). All translations are my own.

28. These terms obscure actual inheritance and succession of power, since, as Charles Segal notes, they anachronistically run the gamut from the Homeric "lord" to "tyrant" to "general", a term which suggests "the electoral procedures of fifth-century Athens alongside the hereditary succession of ancient kingship". See Segal (1995) 129-30. On Creon as an absolute ruler, see also Winnington-Ingram (1980) 126: "Creon is a tyrant — or well on his way to be a tyrant."

29. Knox (1964) 63. Calder III (1968, 392-93) also stresses Creon's "extraordinary judicial powers" in "his dual capacity" as both general and king in a state of emergency. Holt (1999) upholds Creon's authority as ruler of the city to deny burial to Polynices and cites fifth century Athenian precedent for such action. On these historical precedents, see also Mette (1956).

is sole determiner and executor of law (*nomos*). Creon thus evokes a “paradox of sovereignty” for which Agamben argues, drawing on Carl Schmitt:

The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact that the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order. If the sovereign is truly the one to whom the juridical order grants the power of proclaiming a state of exception and, therefore, of suspending the order’s own validity, then “the sovereign stands outside the juridical order and, nevertheless, belongs to it, since it is up to him to decide if the constitution is to be suspended *in toto*.”³⁰

Antigone belongs to an intellectual culture, which, as John K. Davies has observed, was preoccupied with the questions, “who is to be, and who is not to be, in the Athenian political community, and why?”³¹ Set against this backdrop of inquiry into political inclusion and its processes, Creon’s sovereignty is misconceived to permit violent impositions of law over nature, the *oikos*, and kinship, which Antigone is often read as defending most fiercely.³² The ruler’s powers are all encompassing and extend over life and death, for both loyal and disloyal subjects. Although the town elders at present stand in Creon’s good graces, they choose ζῶ rather than βίος to describe their own condition. In this most political of tragedies, composed for performance in democratic Athens, might this word choice be a subtle means of underscoring the experience of living under tyranny?

Much later in the play, the messenger muses (Soph. *Ant.* 1156-60):

οὐκ ἔσθ’ ὅποιον στάντ’ ἄν ἀνθρώπου βίον
 οὔτ’ αἰνέσαιμ’ ἄν οὔτε μεμψαίμην ποτέ.
 τύχη γὰρ ὀρθοῖ καὶ τύχη καταρρέπει
 τὸν εὐτυχοῦντα τὸν τε δυστυχοῦντ’ αἰεί·
 καὶ μάντις οὐδεις τῶν καθεστώτων βροστοῖς.

I would never praise nor blame any sort of life of a man while it lasts. For fortune makes straight and fortune always brings low the fortunate and unfortunate man. And there is no prophet of what lies in store for mortals.

30. Agamben (1995) 15. Agamben’s internal quotation is from Schmitt (1922) 13.

31. Davies (1977) 106. See also Sorum (1982) 202.

32. Prominent readings of Antigone’s priorities include Nussbaum (1986) 63-67 and Hegel (1920).

Here, the messenger endows *βίος* with situational significance. To speak even of the possibility of giving praise or censure for *ζωή* would make no sense; the state of biological life common even to animals is not imbued with ethical quality. Fickle as it may be to the whims of fortune (*tuche*), *βίος* here represents, as for Agamben, a state of being endowed with value beyond bare existence.

A few lines later the messenger posits a space between the two deaths in foretelling Creon's ruination (Soph. *Ant.* 1165-67):

καὶ γὰρ ἡδοναὶ
ὅταν προδῶσιν ἀνδρός, οὐ τίθημ' ἐγὼ
ζῆν τοῦτον, ἀλλ' ἔμψυχον ἡγοῦμαι νεκρόν.

For when a man loses his pleasures, I do not consider him to live but to be an animated corpse.

Segal understands this maxim to apply specifically to Creon and also suggests that “this hedonistic statement is revealing for the degree to which the Greeks view human life in terms of enjoyment of pleasure, in contrast to mere biological existence”.³³ Here, then, is one instance in which Agamben's biopolitics do shed light upon the play but where his *βίος/ζωή* dichotomy breaks down in the face of poetic *usus*. By Agamben's schema, we should expect *βιοῦν* in place of *ζῆν* (Creon's use of *ζῶντος* at line 525 represents a second place where more precise usage would demand a *βίος*-word). Nevertheless, the messenger does ascribe Creon a liminal ontological status, which is reiterated a few lines later, when the messenger reports the deaths of Antigone and Haemon: *τεθνᾶσιν· οἱ δὲ ζῶντες αἴτιοι θανεῖν* (“They have died. And those still living are to blame for the deaths”, 1173). Creon must figure foremost among *οἱ ζῶντες*. If, as does S. M. Adams, one reads Antigone as the story of Creon, the play's peripeteia sees sovereign power reduced to bare life.³⁴

To this end, the chorus muses *οὐδέν' ἔρπει / θνατῶν βίοςτος πάμπολυς ἐκτὸς ἄτας* (“a very great life comes to no mortal without disaster”, 613-14). Similar to Herodotus' use of *βίος* throughout Croesus' questioning of Solon, *βίοςτος* must refer to human life filled with wealth and worth, well beyond simple ontological being. Creon uses *βίος* similarly at 1113-14:

δέδοικα γὰρ μὴ τοὺς καθεστῶτας νόμους
ἄριστον ἢ σφάζοντα τὸν βίον τελεῖν.

For I am afraid that it is best to end life obeying the established laws.

33. Gibbons and Segal (2003) 171. My own emphasis.

34. Adams (1955) 47. On Creon as protagonist, see also Calder III (1968) 390.

Here, *βίος* refers to a biological lifespan and also points towards a richer social existence.³⁵ The messenger affords *βίος* an ethical value possible to praise or censure, and Creon, too, uses the word to suggest something beyond the most basic animalistic sense. *βίος* is here presented in conjunction with human law (*nomos*). To choose to live in accordance with or outside of law and social convention is to have *βίος*, rather than merely *ζωή*.

A paradox of being simultaneously alive and dead plays out verbally throughout the play.³⁶ Antigone and the Chorus each make much of a living journey to Hades and Acheron, while Creon reemphasizes that Antigone will be entombed while living. For example, Creon insists that, having been sentenced to death, the living Antigone “no longer exists” (*οὐ γὰρ ἔστ’ ἔτι*, line 567). The sentence Creon pronounces upon Antigone revives the notion of an Antigone both alive and dead even as it proscribes her exclusion from the polis (Soph. *Ant.* 773-76):

ἄγων ἐρημος ἔνθ’ ἂν ἦ βροτῶν στίβος
 κρύψω πετρώδει ζῶσαν ἐν κατώρυχι,
 φορβῆς τοσοῦτον ὅσον ἄγος φεύγειν προθείς,
 ὅπως μίασμα πᾶσ’ ὑπεκφύγη πόλις.

Leading her on a path desolate of mortals, I will hide her, still living, in a rocky cave, putting out only enough food to avoid religious violation, so that the entire city might escape pollution.

This motif is used even more prevalently as Antigone goes to meet her fate, and the repetition indicates thematic importance. At lines 810-13, Antigone laments:

ἀλλὰ μ’ ὁ παγ-
 κοίτας Αἰδαῶς ζῶσαν ἄγει
 τὰν Ἀχέρωντος
 ἀκτάν

Hades who lulls all to sleep is taking me, still living, to the shore of Acheron.

35. Creon also uses *βίος* at 581: *φεύγουσι γὰρ τοι χοῖ θρασεῖς, ὅταν πέλας / ἦδη τὸν Αἰδην εἰσορῶσι τοῦ βίον* (“For those who are bold flee, whenever they see Hades already near to their life”). Here Creon uses *βίος* to refer to a lifespan. Given the context (ordering Antigone to be taken into custody and executed as swiftly as possible), it might appear that Creon here affords Antigone *βίος* in the sense of political life. However, the lines immediately preceding specify that Antigone and Ismene “must be women” (*χρὴ / γυναικάς εἶναι τάσδε*, 577-80). Therefore, Creon’s use of the masculine *χοῖ θρασεῖς* suggest that he is not talking about Antigone specifically in relation to *βίος*, but rather making a much more generalized statement.

36. See, for example, Hutchinson (1999) 68-69.

The chorus reinforces Antigone's paradoxical status at 821-22:

ἀλλ' ἀυτόνομος ζῶσα μόνη δὴ
θνητῶν Αἴδην καταβήσει.

But, self-willed, you alone of mortals descend to Hades while living.

The language here is important. Juxtaposed with the participle ζῶσα, Antigone is also described as ἀυτόνομος, self-willed or perhaps even sovereign. Robin Lane Fox observes that the word suggests “a protected degree of freedom in the face of an outside power which was strong enough to infringe upon it”.³⁷ At first glance, the pairing seems an odd one if we are to read ζῶ as significant in its word choice, especially since, as Fox also notes, this marks the first instance in extant Greek literature that ἀυτόνομος is applied individually to a woman. In the vein of *homo sacer*, to exercise autonomy (recognized by a third party no less) is to assert βίος not ζωή. However, ἀυτόνομος is here used both to mark Antigone's exclusion from the *polis* and to describe Antigone's choice to die.³⁸ Perhaps that is her only autonomy. In Creon's Thebes, she cannot *live* by self-will and self-rule; she can only die by it, outside of the *polis*.

Antigone again asserts her liminality at 850-52 through an opposite articulation: she who is both alive and dead, has no home and belongs (*μέτοικος*) “neither with the living nor the dead”.

βροτοῖς
οὔτε <νεκρὸς> νεκροῖσιν
μέτοικος, οὐ ζῶσιν, οὐ θανοῦσιν.

Having no home among mortals nor with the shades, neither with the living nor the dead.

As Charles Segal observes of these lines and the repetition of *μέτοικος* at 868, the phrasing is “almost a refrain” and “evokes her emotional suffering as she recognizes, more and more fully, her isolation”.³⁹ Antigone's political isolation is extreme; “in the end she will be a *μέτοικος*, an alien in the lands both of the living and the dead”.⁴⁰ Antigone thus embodies a state of excep-

37. Fox (2006) 7. Also Wilmer (2010) 383 n. 18.

38. The chorus has earlier insinuated that the person who disobeyed Creon is *ἄπολις* (370). See Wiltshire (1976) 30.

39. Gibbons and Segal (2003) 150.

40. Wiltshire (1976) 31. On Antigone's extreme isolation, see also Holt (1999) 668.

tion. She who is both living and dead is nevertheless excluded from both groups. Again at 920, Antigone insists:

ζῶσ' ἐς θανάτων ἔρχομαι κατασκαφάς·

I come living to the caverns of the dead.

Creon, who has already used ζῶ to refer to Antigone,⁴¹ again insists that Antigone will experience entombment whether dead or alive (Soph. *Ant.* 887-88):

εἴτε χρῆ θανεῖν
εἴτ' ἐν τοιαύτῃ ζῶσα τυμβεύειν στέγη·

Whether she wishes to die or to be entombed living.

Importantly, these examples systematically employ ζῶ to construct a liminal space between life and death. Moreover, by affording Antigone not βίος but only ζωή, Creon subtly dehumanizes the person he perceives as his political adversary. This reading is sustained by Martha Nussbaum, who understands Creon to be:

... incapable of seeing any opponent of the city as anything but an obstacle to be overcome. His conception of his wife as merely furrow, of proper civic maleness as the exercise of power over submissive matter (cf. 484-85) already tended to dehumanize the other party to the relationship. With opposition, this is more obvious still. Creon's plan does not permit him to respect a human opponent because of the value of that person's humanity. He or she contains only a single value, productivity or civic good; lacking that, she is "nowhere".⁴²

To adapt Agamben, Antigone experiences detention, a death sentence, and "definitive exclusion from the political community". Precisely because she lacks "almost all the rights and expectations that we customarily attribute to human existence", and yet is still biologically alive, she comes "to be situated in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside", in which she

41. Soph. *Ant.* 750 (Creon): ταύτην ποτ' οὐκ ἔσθ' ὡς ἔτι ζῶσαν γαμεῖς ("You shall never marry her while she is alive"). In addition to foreshadowing the rich postmortem bridal imagery later in the play, Creon's use of ζῶ underscores his exclusion of Antigone from the polity. Because she has been reduced to ζωή, Antigone is no longer fit for Haemon to marry.

42. Nussbaum (1986) 61.

is “no longer anything but bare life”. Because she has been detained and sentenced to death under sovereign tyranny, she is “assimilated” to a *homo sacer*, “to a life that may be killed without the commission of homicide. Like the fence of the camp, the interval between death sentence and execution delimits an extratemporal and extraterritorial threshold in which the human body is separated from its normal political status and abandoned, in a state of exception to the most extreme misfortunes”.⁴³

Sophocles’ Greek powerfully evokes the distinction between *βίος* and *ζωή* at the heart of Agamben’s limit zone between life and death. Albeit with several exceptions, Sophocles repeatedly employs *ζῶ* and its derivatives to articulate the experience of being simultaneously alive and dead, while *βίος* is used more rarely and always attached to the possibility of living a proper human life — a life with ethical value and, ideally, integrated with law and society.

ANTIGONE AND ISMENE

We might observe a marked difference in the language Antigone and Ismene employ to describe life and death. Almost without exception, Antigone uses forms of *ζῶ*, while Ismene exclusively speaks of *βίος*. This semantic difference reveals the sisters’ divergent world-views and may help account for their irreconcilable arguments. At the play’s outset, Antigone understands herself to be already as good as dead, reduced to *ζωή* — bare existence in social isolation under the tyrannical rule of Creon.⁴⁴ With the very first lines of the tragedy, Antigone tells Ismene (Soph. *Ant.* 1-3):

Ὡ κοινὸν ἀπτάδελφον Ἰσμῆνης κἀρα,
 ἄρ’ οἴσθ’ ὅ τι Ζεὸς τῶν ἀπ’ Οἰδίπουν κακῶν —
 ἄ, ποῖον οὐχὶ νῶν ἔτι ζώσαιν τελεῖ;

Ismene, beloved sister, do you know that Zeus — ah, which of the evils inherited from Oedipus is he not accomplishing while we yet live?

For Antigone, a wretched patrimony of patricide, fratricide, and incest has already removed the possibility of living well, and so it is that she is able to claim at lines 559-60 that “my soul died long ago”. G. O. Hutchinson

43. Agamben (1995) 159.

44. Wiltshire (1976) 30: “Antigone is utterly isolated from any sort of social involvement. She moves in a ‘terrifying vacuum’ with no hope, perhaps no desire, for help from any source.” “Terrifying vacuum” is borrowed from Knox (1964) 5.

writes that Antigone's death "is premature, but it will close only an existence of woe".⁴⁵ Even before Creon pronounces her death sentence, Antigone understands her own condition to be reduced to bare life, somewhere between βίος and actual death. ζωή is made to represent this liminal state.⁴⁶

Antigone again uses a form of ζῶ to devalue her own life as unworthy of being lived at line 464:

εἰ δὲ τοῦ χρόνον
 πρόσθεν θανοῦμαι, κέρδος αὐτ' ἐγὼ λέγω.
 ὅστις γὰρ ἐν πολλοῖσιν ὡς ἐγὼ κακοῖς
 ζῆ, πῶς ὀδ' ὀδ' κατθανὼν κέρδος φέρει; (Soph. *Ant.* 461-4)

But if I die before my time, I consider this a profit. For how does whoever lives among such troubles as I do not bear dying as a profit?

A life so debased is unfit for humanity and Antigone's use of ζῆ anticipates her death wish: ζωή is a state of life fit for animals and objects, not people.

Antigone does use βίος once in the play, at line 896: ὦν λιοισθία γὰρ καὶ κάκιστα δὴ μακρῶ / κάτειμι, πρὶν μοι μοῖραν ἐξήκειν βίου ("I am the last of these [deceased relatives] and I make the most wretched descent by far, before the term of my life has come"). Here Antigone uses βίος temporally to refer to her lifespan, but these lines also fall within the one speech in which Antigone qualifies her actions and devotion to the dead, since she offers at 905-12 that she would not have given up her own life to bury a husband or child.⁴⁷ Sarah Pomeroy bemoans that after her courageous actions and defense of her ideals, for which she is willing to die, Antigone's "last words dwell not upon her achievements but lament that she dies unwed".⁴⁸

45. Hutchinson (1999) 68.

46. Segal (1964, 51) also understands Antigone to esteem her life of little value: "Antigone, like Ajax, rejects life as compromise, gives up existence when it ceases to come up to the measure of the heroic self image". On Antigone as a representative of heroic, aristocratic values, see also Honig (2014).

47. Although Whitman (1951, 92-93) and Jebb (1900, 164) dismiss this speech (or at least parts of it) as spurious, contemporary scholarship does tend to treat these lines as an authentic, if challenging, part of the play. See Griffith (1999) 278: "The passage is treated by Aristotle as unquestionably Sophoklean (*Rhet.* 3 16 1417a32-3), and should not be doubted". As Lardinois (2012, 64) argues, in this speech Antigone "does seem to retreat from several of her positions". For a detailed analysis of the speech's structure, which treats the lines as authentic, see Cropp (1997).

48. Pomeroy (1976) 109. Hutchinson (1999, 69) argues of Antigone's lamentation that she meets death "with deep grief and a bitter sense of injustice".

Antigone's newfound regret (or at least ambivalence) towards her fate is reflected in her shift from ζῶ to βίος. This lone use of βίος by Antigone represents the sole point in the text in which she imagines and laments a lost opportunity to have lived *well*.

Antigone rebukes Ismene and mocks and renounces her for choosing life, rather than risking capital punishment for performing burial on Polynices.⁴⁹ I propose that semantic distinctions indicate a conceptual difference between the sisters' decision making and that, ultimately, Ismene's language suggests she places a higher value on her own life than Antigone places on her own life. It is not so much that Ismene is afraid of death, but rather that she sees the potential for true life, in the fulfilling sense of βίος. Ismene speaks of βίος, the possibility of a proper life. If βίος and ζωή are differentiated in part by political inclusion or exclusion, the sisters' social engagement is manifest in their diction.⁵⁰

Antigone projects her assessment of her own life's quality onto her sister. The use of the dual ζώσαιν in line 3 underscores Antigone's inclusion of Ismene in a life reduced to ζωή. The same is true in their argument before Creon, when Antigone tells Ismene, "You chose to live, while I chose to die" (σὸν μὲν γὰρ εἶλον ζῆν, ἐγὼ δὲ καταθεῖν, 555) and that her own "soul died long ago":

θάρασει: σὸν μὲν ζῆς, ἡ δ' ἐμὴ ψυχὴ πάλαι
τέθνηκεν, ὥστε τοῖς θανοῦσιν ὠφελεῖν. (Soph. *Ant.* 559-60)

Take heart: You are alive, while my soul died long ago, so as to help the dead.

Ismene, instead, seems to have clung to the possibility of βίος up until this climactic moment of Antigone's death sentence. In her exchange with Antigone, Ismene asks at line 548, καὶ τίς βίου μοι σοῦ λελειμμένη πόθος; ("And what desire of life remains for me, deprived of you?"). Later in the exchange, she again expresses the impossibility of living without her sister. Ismene asks of Creon at 566, τί γὰρ μόνη μοι τῆσδ' ἄτερο βιώσιμον; ("How

49. At line 551, Antigone tells Ismene: ἀλοῦσα μὲν δῆτ' εἰ γελῶ γ' ἐν σοὶ γελῶ ("It grieves me to mock you, if I mock you"). Given Antigone's tone in the argument to this point, I do not share Wiersma's (1984, 44) view that Antigone is here genuinely "affectionate" to her sister.

50. Susan Wiltshire (1976, 32) argues that Antigone is politically marginalized and apolitical, whereas "Ismene is political in that she gauges her responses first on their probable political consequences".

can I live alone without her?"). Here, Ismene uses *βίος* and *βιώσιμον*, rather than a form of *ζωή* or *ζῶ*. Ismene asks not how she might continue to draw breath, but rather how she might continue to live *well*, deprived of her sister, under tyranny, and excluded from the polity.⁵¹

We bear witness to the very moment in which Ismene understands her existence to transition from the state of *βίος* to something lesser. Antigone, as we have seen, has considered both herself and Ismene to be reduced to bare life from the tragedy's outset. Lacking consensus on the value of their lives and place in the *polis*, the sisters talk past each other throughout most of their dialogue. However, the moment Ismene asks to share Antigone's fate (lines 536-45) is joined to her recognition that, under such duress, she has no more potential for *βίος*. When the terms of life are renegotiated under sovereign power, Ismene asks to renegotiate her own relationship to her sister's rebellion.

CONCLUSIONS

As Žukauskaitė suggests, with regard to *Antigone* as "an object of conflicting interpretations and theoretical disagreements", "it seems that every attempt at interpretation reveals not the hidden truth of Sophocles' character, but says something about the interpreter's position and his/her theoretical background".⁵² The application of Agamben to *Antigone* may well be no different, especially since the opposition of *βίος* to *ζωή* in Attic poetic usage is nowhere near as tidy as Agamben might like it to be. But, as I hope I have shown, this particular pairing of classical tragedy with contemporary theory remains fruitful. In one direction, Sophocles' Greek, especially when spoken by Antigone and Ismene, fits and perhaps even supports Agamben's explorations of sovereign power and bare life through its semantic distinctions between *βίος* and *ζωή*. In the reverse, Agamben serves as a discursive lens through which to read new meanings into Sophocles' language and motifs.

In sum, Sophocles' use of *βίος* and *ζωή* throughout *Antigone* can be read as articulating meaningfully a devaluation of life under tyranny, a thematic tension between bare life and properly political human life, and a nether-region between life and death. Furthermore, the words underscore a reading

51. See Winnington-Ingram (1980) 134: "She [Ismene] loves her sister and cannot bear to live without her." Similarly, at line 54 Ismene says that Jocasta "did violence to her life with a twisted noose" (*πλεκταῖσιν ἀρτάναισι λωβᾶται βίον*). In addition to referring to a lifespan, *βίον* renders Jocasta's suicide more tragic by suggesting that her life had value.

52. Žukauskaitė (2010) 67.

of the play in which both Creon and Antigone exist in states of exception: the former is placed both within and above the law, while the latter finds herself disbarred from the polity and yet subject to its decrees and violent impositions upon the body. In the vein of Agamben's *homo sacer*, Antigone is both alive and not, dispossessed of political *βίος* in an authoritarian Thebes whose ruler's sovereignty extends over biological life. Also, the binary opposition between *βίος* and *ζωή* points towards important differences at the heart of Antigone's arguments with Ismene. Ismene exclusively uses forms of *βίος* in direct contrast to Antigone's preference for *ζωή*. This, I suggest, indicates fundamental disagreements over political status and the value of life itself.

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