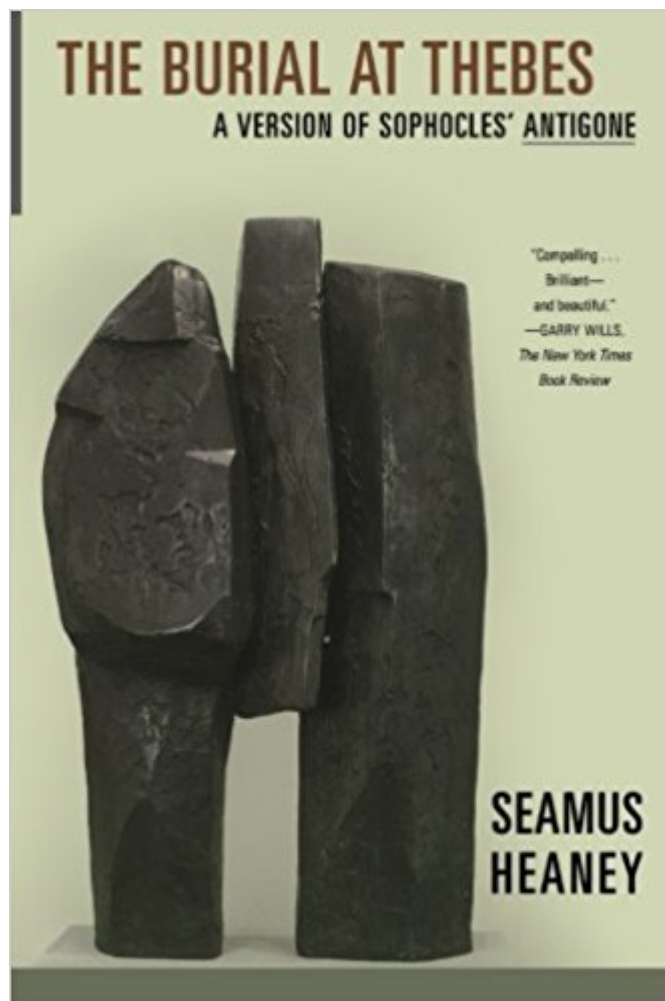




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The Burial At Thebes: A Version Of Sophocles' Antigone



Synopsis

In this outstanding new translation, commissioned by Ireland's renowned Abbey Theatre to commemorate its centenary, Seamus Heaney exposes the darkness and the humanity in Sophocles' masterpiece, and inks it with his own modern and masterly touch. Sophocles' play, first staged in the fifth century B.C., stands as a timely exploration of the conflict between those who affirm the individual's human rights and those who must protect the state's security. During the War of the Seven Against Thebes, Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus, learns that her brothers have killed each other, having been forced onto opposing sides of the battle. When Creon, king of Thebes, grants burial of one but not the "treacherous" other, Antigone defies his order, believing it her duty to bury all of her close kin. Enraged, Creon condemns her to death, and his soldiers wall her up in a tomb. While Creon eventually agrees to Antigone's release, it is too late: She takes her own life, initiating a tragic repetition of events in her family's history.

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Customer Reviews

A few years back, Mr. Heaney (an excellent poet in his own right) caused quite a stir with his stunning translation of Beowulf. My own reactions to that work were mixed. But who would have thought an Old English war epic/elegy would prove so commercially successful? Now comes an outstanding "translation" of Sophocles's Antigone--"The Burial at Thebes." I first came across this work in excerpted form in Tin House (a literary journal--one of the best actually). This book far exceeds what Mr. Heaney did with Beowulf. Yet the crickets are chirping. It is incomprehensible to me as to why this deeply abiding and thoughtful little book has not blown away the sales and

notoriety of the Beowulf volume. Whereas Heaney's Beowulf was clearly a labor of deep interest to the translator--a skillful and intriguing update of the language for the 21st century, The Burial at Thebes is just as clearly a work of love on behalf of the author...I mean translator--a satirical, lyrical, and prophetic work of the highest order that speaks directly to our world today. I could not put this play--this hymn to all that we are as humans, this song of our identity as individuals--not mere components of a state--down. Antigone's early question/indictment of her sister's complacency rings out like a bell against the twin idols of false patriotism and corporate globalisation: "Are we sister, sister, brother Or coward, coward, traitor?" What follows is a heroic tragedy. Not heroic in the way the Iliad or the Odyssey are (weapons, war, dust, funeral pyres and great feasts of blood), but heroic in the greatest sense (to know who you are and what is truly worth dying for). Homer and much of the rest of the world sing of war.

The Antigone of Sophocles exists in a number of English renditions. The Abbey Theatre commissioned Heaney to do yet another for its centenary. In an afterword to this volume he explains the genesis of his version -- why he decided to do it and how. He explained his poetic tactics, as it were, and justified a "middle style" by referring to Yeats, who wrote of a "common" style he and others used -- many years earlier, of course -- in plays for the Abbey. Hmm. There is no question that the language Heaney uses here is plain. It is possible to see his three-beat lines and his five-beat pentameter and his Beowulf-style 4-beat alliterative lines in the reading. What I don't see is poetry -- I don't actually even see much verse. The language seems neutral rather than charged. Poetry can use common words, but needs to cause shivers -- not in every line, but often enough that the reader keeps alert for more electricity. The various verse lines he uses are rather weakly distinctive: the forms hover around their ideals without touching them enough to keep a listener on track. I saw the play performed by the Chicago Shakespeare Theater company on September 18, 2005. It played somewhat better than it read (e.g. the initial byplay between Antigone and Ismene, and that between Creon and Haemon). Still, though, having read it, I was listening carefully (hopefully?) for the beat of the verse -- or at least the feel of the verse. In fact, though the actors did a good job and did, as I think, justice to the text, it seemed rather flat. Perhaps I disagree with the "plain" style. I think Sophocles was a powerful poet whose language rang with hard beauty and allusive power. He must have been.

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