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THE DEAD ONES THEBES HAS DISAVOWED? HUMAN RIGHTS, THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE RETURN OF *ANTIGONE*¹

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Resumo

Antigone is one of the most recreated works of literature, however, Sophocles' original work remains intact - this is because the universe and the dilemmas presented by the tragedian are still very contemporary. This work discusses the symbolic return of Sophocles' *Antigone* in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, through *postmortem* dignity.

Palavras chave: *Antigone*. Dignity. Law and Art. *Postmortem*.

Abstract

Antígona é uma das obras mais recriadas da literatura, entretanto, a obra original de Sófocles permanece intacta – isto porque, o universo e os dilemas apresentados pelo tragediógrafo ainda se faz muito contemporâneo. Discute-se, neste trabalho, o retorno simbólico da *Antígona*, de Sófocles, no contexto da atual pandemia de COVID-19, por meio da dignidade *postmortem*.

Keywords: *Antígona*. Dignidade. Direito e Arte. *Postmortem*.

The world is entering a new wave of the COVID-19 pandemic³ – which will certainly generate another major collapse of the health system, as can already be seen in several European countries, including Spain, the United Kingdom and Portugal (PLAZA; CORDERO, 2020).

The current pandemic – of multilateral proportions (SENHORAS, 2020) – is the biggest global public health threat since the Spanish flu pandemic in mid-1918 (ABRANTES, 2020). Is it possible to remember the teachings of the “Spanish flu”?⁴ It seems it is not, even with the important *Health Diplomacy* engendered by the World Health Organization. What we can see is the systematic denial and the perpetuation of necropolitics – that is, in the words of Mbembe (2016), the maximum expression of

¹ This work is the result of part of the author's presentation about Greek Literature and Law at the event "Law and Art" (The event took place between 03-06 November 2020), organized by the Methodist College Granbery (Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais, Brazil). The author thanks Professor Bruno Farage da Costa Felipe, as well as all the organization of the event, for the time provided at the event for the author's theme.

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³ It is worth mentioning that the nomenclature "second wave" should be used when new outbreaks occur in a place where the curve of infected and fatal victims had declined. There are differences, for example, if Brazil was entering a second wave of infections or if it never left the first wave.

⁴ Lilian Schwarcz says that history is an exercise in change, but also in repetition. Pandemics do not end up by official decree, it is necessary to follow the protocols and scientific studies - this is not what happened, for example, in Brazil in 1918, nor in Brazil in 2020 (SCHWARCZ, 2020).



sovereignty related to the power to dictate who can live and who should die – and who always dies? The answer may be: the vulnerable groups⁵.

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP or PIB, in portuguese) of the countries will be the deaths, again not only the physical deaths – until the closing of this text, there were more than 1,308,455 fatal victims of the Covid-19 disease in the entire world – but also symbolic ones, mainly of those who live on the margin of national public protection agendas.

According to Farage and Abrantes (2019), in the beginning of the story occurs the death of the two sons of Oedipus who were confronted by the throne of Thebes, Polynices and Etherocles. Thus, the person who could take charge of the city's power was Creon. In *Antigone*, a tragedy written by Sophocles, the heroine challenges the power of Creon - the representative of the highest authority of the city-state - to ensure the ritualistic observance of the burial of Polynice (brother of Antigone). Accused of committing an act of rebellion against the government, Polynice was convicted to having her body exposed, in putrefaction, at first, without the right to the due burial that her relatives desired, and her culture preached the purpose of preserving the memory and ensuring respect for the dignity of her spirit at the end of her life.

It is extremely valid to note that the character Antigone is not an ordinary woman like the others. She is the wild daughter, of Oedipus, destined to misdemeanor. The impossible is the horizon of the character. She leaves the domestic perimetry, known by Greek society as the place of protection of the feminine, breaking the traditions of the time. From that point on, Antigone invades politics by insubordination to the decreed norm. Norm that condemned her brother. Besides invading the law of men, which condemned the woman to silence (FARAGE; ABRANTES, 2019, p. 16).

Although it has been translated into several languages, recreated in several cultures and perspectives, Sophocles' *Antigone* still remains intact – this is because many people read in childhood stories in which princesses get married and are happily ever after and when it reaches those people, a story in which the princess does not get married and is not happily ever after, it flips one's imaginary. *Antigone*, in its original version remains intact, because it represents many faces of our current society, as well as that of several other times.

Among the many possibilities of dialogues in history, the current scenario makes us question the undignified conditions given to Polynice – *postmortem* violations. It is clear that ensuring integrity and total respect for the corpse is linked to the religious, cultural and moral aspects of each society – also, it is important to note that respect for the integrity of living people, as well as deceased people, is one of the core principles protected by law.

⁵ Here, it is emphasized: not only the physical death, but also the symbolic one. Refugees (GOULARTE; MARTINI; ANDARE; ANGARANI, 2020; VALDERE JATOBÁ, 2020).



However, what one can see within a global scenario is a collapse in which it is necessary to place dead bodies assembled in refrigerated containers and in other cases the bodies cannot be collected from the place of death, often one's residence.

As Flôr and Bezerra (2020) point out, the globe is facing (once again) a key moment in history, since the international scenario could recede in several aspects that go through the protection of human rights – on this point, it is important to point out the precariousness of public health services, the victims of COVID-19 occupy observation beds and, some of them, ICU beds; does the dignity of treatment also reach the cemeteries (*postmortem*)?

All *postmortem* aspects should be seen not only as a global public health issue, but as a factor protecting the rights of the human person, since it has an intrinsic relationship with health, peace, as well as personal beliefs. The international scene has not seen the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic with the proper lens, which means looking at the institute of death under the lens of civil life, as a legal good already protected and still in need of safeguarding.

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