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From Classical Tragedy to Political Allegory: Bertolt Brecht's Rewriting of *Antigone*

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Abstract

Bertolt Brecht's *The Antigone of Sophocles* represents a politicized rewriting of the ancient Greek tragedy *Antigone*. Brecht, being Confronted with the postwar decline of German theatrical art and the ideological crisis, transforms the tragedy into a political allegory through strategies of recontextualization, allusions to real-world figures, and a reconfiguration of the central conflict. Thereby, he launches out critique of totalitarian rule and aggression. This adaptation exemplifies his Marxist stance on ideological critique, thus offering new insights into how literary rewriting intervenes in social reality. His work stands as a crucial example of *Antigone* adaptations as political resistance theater.

Keywords

Bertolt Brecht; *Antigone*; rewriting; political allegory; tragedy.

1. Introduction

From the twentieth century onward, rewriting has become an global cultural phenomenon. The rewriting of Western classics has been witnessed an unprecedented resurgence. Among them, Sophocles' *Antigone*, with inexhaustible thematic depth, has drawn the various gaze of later playwrights. And forty-nine rewritten versions in the twentieth century alone have been done[1] And the *Antigone of Sophocles* (hereafter called as *Antigone*), after Bertolt Brecht's return to the European for years of exile, staged in 1948, as the very first work. He transplanted this tragedy into the historical milieu of wartime Germany, and delivers indictments of fascist totalitarianism and aggressive warfare. Centering on such adaptation, this study explores the strategies of the politicized recreation and its unique literary and historical meaning.

2. Resetting the Context: Antigone in Wartime Germany

Antigone was extremely popular during World War II, with about 150 productions staged in German theatres between 1939 and 1944 [2]. This enthusiasm did not fade after the war ended. But the situation had changed completely. The war had casted a series of catastrophic aftermath on Germany, moral issues, material collapse, soldiers missing, destroyed theatres and displaced people. Everything asked to be rebuilt. But one stands most desperately: the cleaning of Nazism, no matter in moral or ideological field. Brecht believed that "art can only find its direction by constantly moving forward, and it must walk alongside progressive groups instead of restraining itself from them" [3]. To rebuild the postwar German theatre, one must find out a new direction to rescue declination of artistic methods under Nazi. So, *The Antigone of Sophocle*s was precisely Brecht's innovative attempt to do so.

Brecht believed that theatres could become a true and free place for political debate [4]. For him, "the political virtue of play does not come from propagandistic yet agitating content, but from artistic methods which reveal the political connotation during daily life" [5]. In the preface of *Antigone-Model*, Brecht noticed that *Antigone*"possesses a certain real meaning, and raises some interesting formal questions" [3]. But he also pointed clearly that Antigone cannot

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represent the German resistance fighters [3]. She is not the most important protagonist of the drama. And his work, in his opinion, is not to pay tribute to her noble rebel. More importantly, he wanted to make the tragedy play a role in modern times, curing, to some degree, the ravaged Germany, after war and fascism. That is the very difference between the origianl drama and Brecht's rewriting. He believed what truly attracts in *Antigone* is the realization that violence as an important cause in the politics downfall [3]. This just shadows the failure of Hitler's fanaticism. Thus, Brecht transformeded *Antigone* into the historical context of Germany.

First, Brecht added a prologue to the play, mixing real elements into the opening dialogue, as the beginning of the drama, between Antigone and Ismene in Antigone . And the time and place were set in Berlin, Germany, April 1945, just on the eve of Germany's surrender. Two sisters return home from an air-raid shelter. Their brother has been hanged as a deserter, with his body hanging on a lamp post. So the two sisters argue on whether to take back their brother's body. One sister asks a question: "Would she really risk her life to rescue our brother right now—who might already be dead, or perhaps still alive?" [6] With this, the prologue ends. The deserters, air-raid shelters... real people and things are clearly reproduced in the show. By stressing the historical context and real background in the prologue, Brecht's rewriting keeps a distance from the story of the heroic age.

Second, in terms of stage design, Brecht also consciously used props to highlight the tension and terror of the real environment. On the stage, there are four pillars, used to divide the waiting area for actors and the acting area. On the top of the four pillars hang horse skulls, delivering a barbaric atmosphere. He believed that "all the content of *Antigone* belongs to the barbaric world of horse skulls". However, using such props is not ancient rituals, but to take it as a "symbol of violence" [7]. It hints to the audience that they are now in the Germany of 1945, where people are still trapped in a barbaric and violent war. Thebes is just like Nazi Germany, showing its barbaric virtue because of war and violence, and in the end, it will also be destroyed by violence and war.

3. Shadowing Real People and Events: The Greedy Tyrant and the Awakened Hero

In *Antigone-Model*, Brecht pointed out that Sophocles'*Antigone*"is a rejection of tyranny and a resolute support for democracy" [6]. His rewriting also continued this theme, make the connection with the real Germany. He reshaped the two main characters, Creon and Antigone, into a "greedy tyrant" and an "awakened hero." By shadowing real people, the play gained an anti-fascist political meaning.

The Greedy Tyrant

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, although Creon is a tyrant, he thinks about the interests of the city-state in everything and has clever political skills. But here, Brecht wiped out Creon's positive features and highlighted his negative ones, such as being stubborn, self-centered, and arrogant. He completely shaped Creon into a war-obsessed, greedy, and brutal tyrant, shadowing the ruler of Nazi Germany in reality.

In Brecht's version, Creon is an out-and-out tyrant. Everything he does is to fight for power and profit to satisfy his personal desires, including the war against Argos. The war between Thebes and Argos is started by Creon personally, out of his greed for the iron ore resources in Argos. Creon's obsession with war and thirst for victory almost reach a crazy level. He only plunders resources and wealth for his own greed. He cares nothing about the bloodshed and sacrifice caused by war.

Creon and Thebes clearly point to Hitler and the Nazi Germany under his rule. Many wording nuances in the play are actually metaphors for Creon and his army: Creon's guards call him "My führer" (the English translation of the play keeps the word "führer," meaning "leader") [6], and

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the army of Thebes is called "stormtroops" [6]. And the jargons are wartime names, known by every Germany in wartime. The former was the title for Hitler when he was the Chancellor of Nazi Germany, and the latter was the armed organization of Nazi Germany. Besides, the "SS MAN" in the prologue is the Nazi SS member, and "purge" also hints at Hitler's cruel slaughter of the Jewish people. Such settings can make the audience quickly connect the world on stage with the real Germany under Hitler's dictatorship.

The Awakened Heroine

Brecht shaped Antigone into an awakened person inside the ruling class. Compared with the Antigone who rebels against human laws in Sophocles' version. Brecht shaped Antigone and her rebellion more complex. He reminded the audience to notice Antigone's contradiction: she comes from a noble family and belongs to the ruling class, but finally betrays and leaves it. Her rebellion is the result of her own changing ideas, and it is also born under specific circumstances. Brecht gave this character a clear track of change: first a member of the ruling class, second an awakened individual, and then a rebel who criticizes Creon's totalitarian rule.

Brecht stressed Antigone's birth. She enjoys the privileges of being a noble: "She too had eaten the bread that was baked in the stony dark. When misfortune lurked in the towers, she too sat quietly in its shadow" [6]. Antigone is, by no means, a born rebel. Only when her brother died in the war does she gradually realize the cruel consequences——the war Creon plundering against Argos. Thus, she draws a clear line with the ruling class. And the she warns the people of Thebes not to join the war, otherwise they will be sacrificed for the ruler's selfish interests. From this, Antigone becomes an awakened one in the ruling class. She pierces Creon's political lies, accusing him of maintaining his rule under the slogan of unity while actually splitting the country.

Accordingly, Brecht also questioned whether such single rebellion is effective. In the drama, besides Antigone, Brecht also designed Haemon as the commander of the Theban stormtroops, He also condemns Creon's foolish behaviors. Brecht praised the "profound humanitarian spirit" of such rebellious acts [8]. But at the same time, he pointed out their tragic endings that the true rebellion should be started and led by the proletariat. This reflects Brecht's Marxist understanding of political conflict and revolutionary leadership. The failure of Antigone and Haemon's rebellion is just like the failed assassination against Hitler led by Count Stauffenberg on July 20, 1944 [3]. Brecht reflected on the resistance of bourgeois nobles. In Berlin at that time, the rebellion of a single noble was far from enough. Broader changes must be advocated from inside the society. Antigone's brave act is just "a symbolic gesture" [9]. It reveals and highlights the complex contradictions in the political system, but as for the act itself, it actually cannot change any current situation.

4. Shifting the Focus: From Debating the Burial Issue to the War of Aggression

In Sophocles' version, the war, between Thebes and Argos, is almost only as a background of the story, not the main object of discussion. However, Brecht put this war background to the front and made it the focus of the drama. The war was originally a self-defense against invaders, but Brecht changed the nature of the war. He set the root cause of the war as Creon's fight for the iron ore resources in Argos. Thus, the self-defense war was rewritten into an unjust war of aggression. The focus of the dramatic conflict also changed from whether to bury the dead to the condemnation of Creon's cruel rule and the war of aggression.

The beginning and end of war always go with bloodshed and violence. And the author believed that "in Antigone, violence is explained as a result caused by 'insufficiency.' The war against Argos comes from the bad governance of Thebes. Those who are plundered have to maintain themselves through plundering too. However, such actions go beyond the strength they can

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bear. Violence does not gather strength together, but splits it instead; when human nature is pushed to the limit under excessive pressure, it will burst out and drag everything into the whirlpool of destruction" [8].

The failure of the tyrant and the decline of the city-state prove that the power of bourgeois rulers is not unbreakable. It has an unstable side in itself. It is often built on the greed for profit and relies on unjust economic plundering. However, it will also destroy itself because of such plundering and violence, and finally collapse. The critical thought on war is shown in Brecht's treatment of the chorus. The play borrowed the commenting function of the chorus, but denied the irresistibility of fate it talked about, believing that "only when placed under the correct ideological framework—that is, the Marxist framework, can the chorus become a positive and constructive force" [10].

First is the part of the first choral ode. Sophocles praised human reason in the first choral ode: "Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man" [11]. Man can sail, plow, fish, and tame wild beasts. Man can use language, has extraordinary wisdom, can cure diseases, and invent skills, yet cannot escape death. But Brecht believed that if modern people lack cognition of human nature and the nature of human society, they "still cannot master nature... and may even turn it into the source of disaster" [6]. Therefore, Brecht no longer praised human cleverness and talent in the first choral ode. Instead, based on Hölderlin's translation of the first choral ode, he borrowed its concept of "ungeheuer (monstrous)" to stress that man is strange and terrible. This choral ode can no longer be called an "Ode to Man." What he wanted to express is the worry about the human condition and the war industry in a world of modern scientific and technological progress: "Monstrous things are many, but nothing is more monstrous than man" [6]. After that, Brecht also listed human skills like hunting and taming. But here it no longer refers to the respect for human reason and creativity, but refers to humans killing their own kind: "As soon as he steps out, he cruelly tramples on his own kind. By himself alone, he can never be satisfied... Humanity carries no weight for him" [6]. It is precisely human greed that turns man into such a monster, and will finally lead himself to destruction. This had a special meaning under the background of World War II. The war, the terror of weapons, and the greed of rulers all reminded the audience of the catastrophic aftermath of war.

Second is at the end of the play. Sophocles' chorus pointed out that people who do not respect gods will finally be punished, and the lesson of tragedy will make people act carefully when they grow old. However, Brecht's chorus gave a warning here: "For time is short, and disaster is all around; we can no longer live carefree and numb as before, sliding step by step from obedience into crime, until we repent in old age, when it is already too late" [6]. The chorus showed here that the tragedy could have been avoided, but humans repent too slowly while disaster is about to come. Through such an ending, Brecht encouraged the audience to think critically, take action in time, and master their own fate. At the same time, it also showed that man's self-destruction is due to his own desires. He must be responsible for what he has done and suffer punishment.

Through the rational comments of the chorus, Brecht gave the play an educational meaning, guiding the audience to reflect on the true causes of violence and war, and also condemning the totalitarianism of the fascist regime and the inhumanity of wars of aggression.

5. Conclusion

Rewriting classics is both a reinterpretation and a recreation of the text. It is also an important way for rewriting to build relevance with the contemporary social environment by reshaping classics. The contradictions in Sophocles' play can reflect various social problems that keep appearing today. This literary classic still has vitality and dialogic potential today, constantly updating and shaping the meaning of the text. George Steiner pointed out that *Antigone* has a "specific universality across ages". Even today, it still shapes our perception of the self and the

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world. It is both eternal and closely related to the "present" of any period. Brecht's *The Antigone of Sophocles* can be called one of the most representative politicized versions among the rewritings of *Antigone* in the twentieth century, showing a Marxist attitude of ideological critique. His rewriting is a politicized rewriting practice. It puts the classical text onto the stage of modern ideological struggle, which not only reveals the nature of capitalist war and bourgeois exploitation, but also provides a theoretical and practical model for later rewritings of *Antigone* guided by ideological critique and politicization.

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