

**Burying your Dead in Franco's Spain: Thanatopolitical Power and José María Pemán's  
*Antigone* (1946)**

**“Antigone: Freedom and Oppression”**

**Vasileios Balaskas**

**Abstract:** The 1946 José María Pemán's production of *Antigone* at the Roman amphitheatre of Italica reflected power relations crucial for the ideological consolidation of the Spanish dictatorship (1939-1975). Dictator Francisco Franco attended the performance accompanied by Spanish ministers and intellectuals.

Considering the Spanish political context of the period, *Antigone's* myth could become an ideological offence against the regime. However, Pemán's version emphasized the emotional aspect of the play. It was a Catholic reconfiguration of the classical myth, in which family love and divine right were displayed as the main features of a traditional society, where Christian order prevailed over civil rights. The heroine became a Christian martyr who sacrificed herself not because of the tyrant but because people hesitated to save her.

*Antigone's* concern about burying her brothers also reminded the audience about the right and legitimation of burial in early Francoist Spain. During a period when Franco's detention camps and prisons systematically filled unmarked mass graves of republican adversaries and civilians, assuming the right to decide on the enemy body, another circumstance showcased the regime's thanatopolitical power that cynically marked the dead bodies' political life beyond the grave.

The death of Falange's leader, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, and the regime's decision to convert him into a national hero attribute another sociopolitical dimension to *Antigone's* 1946 production. Primo de Rivera's ceremonial burial and worship showcased the right to decide on the glorification of the dead body or its disdain and disappearance, reflecting the thanatopolitical power that Franco's dictatorship systematically implemented to create its own heroes and collective narratives. Greco-Roman culture, thus, proved crucial in establishing an authoritarian way to experience reality, while a thanatopolitical strategy consolidated artistic expression as a practice of exclusion and punishment.