

Family values

Butler, Lacan and the rise of Antigone

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One may wonder, with George Steiner, what would have happened if psychoanalysis had chosen Antigone, rather than Oedipus, as its model.¹ One immediate answer might be: perhaps it would have been more interested in feminine desire. And perhaps its idea of the family would have been rather different. Antigone, as is well known, is the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, the latter Oedipus' own mother too, a fact which will determine Antigone's fate in Sophocles' tragedy.² Her brother lying dead outside the gates of the city of Thebes, Antigone decides to oppose the laws of King Creon, and to bury Polynices in the name of divine laws. The real conflict of the play is not, however, between the characters of Antigone and Creon, but between the divine, unwritten laws that she evokes and the human laws of Creon. It is not by chance, then, that the figure of Antigone has become central to various discussions in feminism, political theory and ethics which are critical of psychoanalysis, or at least of the Oedipal paradigm. Antigone is more political and more topical than Oedipus. She has been made into a metaphor for, among other things, individuation, ethical action, uncompromising desire, and feminist revolt. And now, in Judith Butler's latest book, Antigone has become a symbol for the collapse of heteronormativity, of the idea that desire and sexuality are necessarily determined by two sexes that are opposed to or complement each other. The hegemony of this idea today governs family politics in most countries, turning all claims to family bonds outside of the heterosexual norm into a kind of deviation.

In *Antigone's Claim*,* a long essay based mainly on her Wellek Library Lectures of 1998, Butler presents

a reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* that stresses the confusion surrounding not only the question of kinship or origin (for Antigone's father is her own brother) but also the question of sexual identity (for Antigone acts, it seems, more like a man than a woman). Butler's aim is to appropriate the figure of Antigone as a kind of challenge to Western family politics. We are confused, Butler argues, by Antigone's origin and by her gender, but in this confusion Antigone reveals the arbitrariness of the ways in which origins and kinship are determined. The question of kinship, that is, is not simply one of blood, but of *recognition*; the family, therefore, cannot simply be considered as something given, isolated from the political sphere.

Most importantly, Antigone's appeal, according to Butler, is in her challenge to a specifically conservative family politics. Since the origins of kinship are shown to be arbitrary, the question of what constitutes a family becomes negotiable. The family cannot be detached from the state and situated in a pre-political separate sphere. If politics begins with the question of kinship, everything that has to do with the family is bound up with the state and vice versa. Antigone's claim to represent divine law – or the laws of the family, the bonds of love, the customs of heritage and so on – shows that these laws and bonds are as arbitrary as those formalized by the state. Moreover, they cannot be detached from it. Readings of *Antigone*, such as that of Hegel, that insist on the separation of family and state, have effectively perverted the message of the play.³ Hegel makes Antigone into a representative of the 'natural' sphere, of love, family bonds and blood ties, as opposed to the universal order of the state. Butler suggests, however, that we

* Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000. x + 103 pp., £14.50 hb., 0 231 11894 5.

disassociate the question of origin from the question of bonds, that we find new ways of thinking about bonds that are not necessarily formed through blood, or that we recognize bonds that have not been created in traditional ways.

The attempt to treat Antigone as a political figure challenging traditional views on origins and kinship has a concrete motivation in a contemporary debate. One of today's most pressing sociopolitical issues concerns homosexual parenting and the right to adopt. Although there is little explicit discussion of the issue in Butler's book, much of her argument seems to revolve around it, Antigone's 'claim' functioning as the locus of a challenge to certain psychoanalytic presuppositions about the necessary (that is 'normal') structure of the family. It is, however, not certain that homosexual adoption of children would seriously threaten the norms implicit in psychoanalytic thinking if same-sex parents are still couples. If we presume that parents should always be *two*, the shadow of a heteronormative system is still at work. A psychoanalyst could easily argue that such a couple could represent a symbolic structure which does not necessarily assume that there must be a mother and a father, or even that a maternal function and a paternal function be present in the symbolic sense. As long as there are two of them, each parent would still desire someone other than the child. This is what the incest taboo is about, and what is crucial for the child's psychosexual upbringing from an analytic point of view. The idea of homosexual parenting in couples does not on its own challenge heteronormativity.

But the question of kinship has become complicated in numerous other ways too. There are very many single parents – homosexual and heterosexual – whom society seems to regard as deficient in various ways, asking: should single people have the right to adopt, or knowingly give birth to children on their own, without a partner of either sex? While in most cases, there is a biological father somewhere, in some the father is not only missing, but altogether anonymous or even dead at the time of conception. What kind of symbolic deficit – if there is one – follows in cases where the mother has simply gone to the sperm bank? In other cases, where there are more than two parents, is there a symbolic excess? What if gay men and lesbians decide to have children together as a foursome? There are many new family formations such as this where children live with 'plastic' parents – a Swedish expression denoting the partner of one's biological parent. What

function is he or she assuming? To face these issues squarely we certainly need to rethink the concept of family; the question is, how?

The Antigone complex

The question of the formation of the concept of the family is inseparable, historically, from its determination in terms of the norms of sexual identification, paternal authority and so on. In adding her voice to a chorus critical of the Oedipal paradigm in psychoanalysis, Butler strengthens the impression that Oedipus's theoretical rule may well be on its way to being replaced by a kind of Antigone complex. This is evident not only in some feminist discourses, where Antigone has long been a pivotal symbol, but also in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Antigone, Lacan writes, reveals 'the line of sight that defines desire'.⁴ Of course Lacan, being a Freudian, does not intend with this claim to replace the Oedipal paradigm, but he is certainly displacing the stakes of psychoanalysis, shifting from a concern with pathology to a concern with ethics. Lacan's reading of Antigone (1959–60) has attracted an increasing amount of interest in recent years, and Butler's own text is in part a response to it. But Butler sees Antigone as a figure who challenges what she considers to be the heteronormative presumptions of thinkers such as Hegel and Lacan, presumptions which politicize the conception of the family in their contribution to a reactionary ideology. Butler's criticisms, however, apply only to the Oedipal paradigm in psychoanalysis. Here I also want to consider the ways in which Antigone might function as a more potent figure than Oedipus *from the perspective of psychoanalysis itself*, contesting aspects of Butler's critique and suggesting an alternative psychoanalytic rendering of Antigone's challenge to the politics of the family.

Freud's Oedipal paradigm, as elaborated in various texts on feminine sexuality – for example, 'The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex' (1924) and 'Female Sexuality' (1931) – is concerned with the father, the mother, the daughter and the son. Presented in structural terms as the origin of desire, the Oedipus complex makes male desire coherent with a patriarchal logic of prohibition and metonymic displacement. The law of prohibition is paternal; the prohibited object maternal. The Oedipus complex is usually summarized as the boy's renunciation of the incestuous object – the mother – under the threat of castration. But the function of the law is not only to prohibit the maternal body; it also *constructs*

another object upon its prohibition and absence. It serves a twofold function: it creates an empty space where the maternal object used to be, an empty space which could be called the condition of possibility of desire, and it makes access to another object possible. While the maternal body is prohibited, desire is displaced onto another woman. The implicit presumption of structuralism thus subtends the Freudian argument – objects of desire can be exchanged and possessed. Freud's Oedipus can therefore continue to live in the illusion that the lost maternal object can be continuously replaced by other women.

For women, however, the case is different. There is no immediate coherence between the prohibiting law and the object of desire, and therefore no way to construct a simple metonymic chain of displacements from the maternal body. Freud himself, as well as many female psychoanalysts in the Freudian tradition from Melanie Klein to Julia Kristeva, points out that the Oedipal paradigm is one in which it is a far easier task for the boy than for the girl to undergo the actual process of separation, because of the girl's identification with the maternal body. Melancholy, a kind of 'white perversion' as Kristeva puts it, will restrain and bind her, leaving her riveted to silence and self-hatred.⁵ Rather than expressing a non-Oedipally structured form of subjectivity, feminine desire is considered as an Oedipal failure. This could perhaps be seen as something positive: when Oedipus is avoided, the severity of the superego is undermined. Feminine enjoyment – narcissistic, melancholic, hysteric, masochistic or frivolous – may even seem to point to serious gaps in the very foundation of the so-called Oedipal structure. But Freud resists the idea that a failed or weakened Oedipus complex might be welcome. Feminine desire is considered anarchic, but not in a productive sense. It is a disturbance and a threat to cultural values and ethical norms, but not in a way that would alleviate the destructive tendencies of the superego which feeds off these norms. Feminine desire is simply a resistance to the structures on which society builds. It is, according to Freud, effectively detrimental to culture, a 'retarding and restraining' influence.⁶



Simone de Beauvoir, formulating a critique of Freud in *The Second Sex*, claims that psychoanalysis is identical with patriarchy altogether. The problem with Freud, de Beauvoir complains, is that he takes the founding prohibition against incest for granted. She sees Freud as a kind of structuralist. What Lévi-Strauss calls 'our elementary structure of kinship' is based on a certain pattern of exchange of goods and possessions, all dictated by one fundamental law: the prohibition against incest, which forces men to search for wives outside the family.⁷ From this perspective, exogamy produces a certain codification of desire. This structure is easy to relate to the Oedipal paradigm, where the law of the father is the foundation of the incest taboo. But paternal authority, de Beauvoir insists, is not a structural necessity; it is a social construction.⁸ In mixing up these two perspectives, psychoanalysis fails to explain the relation between sexual difference and desire, merely reinforcing a certain view of it which becomes particularly problematic when the question of feminine desire is raised. It is impossible to presume both that patriarchy lives off woman as object and then to define *her* desire from this fact. Feminine desire falls outside of the Oedipal economy altogether. And even from a male viewpoint, de Beauvoir argues, the Oedipal model is inadequate. Desire must be more than a simple consequence of the incest-taboo; it has to do with the power of projection and the capacity for transcendence. The prohibition against incest makes

man want to possess 'that which he *is not*, he seeks union with what appears to be *Other* than himself'.⁹ Desire is not a structural necessity; it is a project.

Lacan takes up the challenge from de Beauvoir: there is not much point in simply explaining desire from an existing social structure. Lacan, however, does not break with the idea of a founding structure, but remodels it as a 'symbolic order' which can, in principle, be detached from social life. The symbolic order is the order of signifiers, which does not mean that it can simply be equated with language. The human order, says Lacan in the 1950s, 'is characterised by the fact that the symbolic function intervenes at every moment and at every stage of its existence'.¹⁰ The symbolic order is autonomous in relation to the experience of human beings: it is, as Lacan himself puts it, that which is most elevated in man but at the same time not in man at all.¹¹ This somewhat enigmatic formula means that the symbolic order can be formulated in a number of ways, for example as the law against incest, as the ten commandments, as linguistic rules and so on; but in its most abstract form the symbolic order is simply the castrating cut which makes the subject split and finite in relation to something which he cannot subsume. This is what matters in the law against incest.

At first sight, Lacan seems to give the incest taboo the same crucial place as Freud, which means that he also seems to give the same prominence to the system of exchange of women. In patriarchy woman is 'what is indicated by the elementary structures of kinship, i.e., nothing more than a correlative of the functions of social exchange, the support of a certain number of goods and of symbols of power'.¹² But what really matters about the structure of kinship is that it is a system of signifiers – it transforms human beings into signs.¹³ What matters in that transformation is not so much the value of the sign, or the role of the subject in the social sphere as mother, father, daughter, and so on, but the fact that the sign cuts and splits the subject. That cut or split is particularly important in Lacan's analysis of sexual difference and desire. Even if we may identify with signifiers in a social sphere (as man or woman for instance), it does not mean that our sexuality is determined in an unproblematic way. The subject is always *ex-static* in relation to the signifier, never completely at one with it. There is no authentic form of subjectivity, either for women or for men.

The moment we become signs for each other is a moment of what Lacan calls foreclosure. The subject never *inhabits* its sign but is somehow always outside of it, foreign to him- or herself. The aspect of foreign-

ness belongs to the domain which Lacan calls the real. Sometimes the real is translated as the foreignness of the body, as corporeality, flesh and drives. But it does have a more defined significance: the real is that part of the subject which is foreclosed through some kind of founding law. Nowhere does that foreclosure present itself more powerfully than in the relation between the sexes. The inscription of sexual difference will never result in a 'safe' sexual identity. It leaves a kernel resisting a positive definition. And, what is more important, there is no signifier for the sexual relation as such, only a cut between two asymmetrical positions. Thus Lacan challenges the traditional Oedipal theory of the castration complex, leaving the social function behind and making of it a wholly symbolic process.

The lack in the symbolic order represents a traumatic tearing out in the world where the process of sexualisation presents us with a void: 'Where there is no sexual relation, we find a "traumatism"'.¹⁴ There will, then, always be a component of the real in sexual identification. In short, one is never simply a man or a woman; some part of one's sexual identity will always fall outside of the possibility of signification. There is no moment where the mark of sexual difference could possibly affirm itself absolutely, or where the qualities of femininity and masculinity could crystallize. Sexual differentiation means failure; or, there is no ultimate goal to be achieved. This fact opens up an abyss in the symbolic order, which in fact reveals its true nature: it cannot simply be described as an order from which all things will follow, because the symbolic is never fully intelligible. Even if it carves out the structures of desire, the very cause of that desire is embedded in the real.

With Lacan, then, a significant shift from the structuralist viewpoint is effected. The implicit presumption of structuralism, that objects of desire can indeed be exchanged and possessed, is undermined. Desire does not primarily have an object or an aim, but a *cause*. Woman is not figured as a 'failed' man, but rather as a subject closer to the revelation of this fact. Since a woman is more nakedly deprived of possessions than men (and a man may well think of the phallus as a kind of possession), the elusive quality of that cause is laid bare. The male subject is more prone to cover the discrepancies of desire with the creation of objects, possessions, goals and aims. This has little to do with individual, male subjects. It has to do with the gaps in the symbolic order itself.

The traditional description of the Oedipus complex is not a good way of describing desire in terms of

its having a cause rather than an object. Perhaps this is what Lacan means in his *Ethics* seminar when he says that Antigone (rather than Oedipus) uncovers the line of sight that defines desire. Desire is no longer depicted as a striving towards the possession of an object, but as a movement of return towards an elusive origin. Antigone's desire may be interpreted in various ways: directed towards the brother, the mother of the common womb, death, the dead body of the brother, and so on. None of these, however, presents itself as an object that would be sustained by a recognizable symbolic order, and the actual cause of Antigone's desire remains foreclosed. Thus, if Antigone is to provide us with some kind of alternative to Oedipus (and this is my interpretation of Lacan) we could perhaps say that the Antigone complex is a figure for desire in a symbolic order which *fails to provide the fictional objects that would sustain it*. Antigone, unlike Oedipus, struggles in a kind of void. If the object appears in the Oedipal structure, it disappears in the Antigonean structure. She is closer to the eclipse and the fading away of desire. But the reason for her complicated relation to the object is not pathological – whether she is melancholic or hysterical is not the issue here. Desire can never really be reduced to the expectations of a social sphere, or to the adaption to certain norms; it can always only originate in a kind of failure of, or gap in, the symbolic.

Who's who?

In *Antigone's Claim*, Butler pursues this shift from Oedipus to Antigone. But rather than making Antigone into a figure of desire, a figure of femininity, a figure of maternal heritage, and so on, she makes her into a figure for whom the question of gender and origin are called into question altogether. Antigone figures 'the limits of intelligibility exposed at the limits of kinship'.¹⁵ She acts upon a heritage which is not simply there, but is part of a system which can be questioned and reconstrued. Moreover, sexual identity is not simply the result of identification with a mother or a father. It is a consequence of the way in which such an identification complies with a normative system, which is reiterated and reinforced through social practices, such as psychoanalysis. Antigone appears as an alternative to Oedipus because of her refusal to perform a 'heterosexual closure' to the play. This does not mean that Antigone becomes a queer heroine, but she becomes a heroine with no easily recognizable gender. If one can speak of an Antigone complex in Butler's theory, it is situated at the point at which the Oedipal law (in Freud's terms,

not Sophocles') is no longer intelligible, for her father is her brother, and their maternal origin the same.¹⁶ Unable to make sense of her origin, placed precisely at the limits of cultural intelligibility, Antigone also becomes the victim of the vicissitudes of cultural norms and rules. The Antigone complex in a Butlerian version, then, does not make Antigone into a model of culture, like Oedipus, but precisely the opposite: the limit of culture itself.

Both Lacan and Hegel, Butler argues, make the mistake of assuming that Antigone is 'precultural', rather than an effect of culture. Hegel does not allow Antigone to be self-conscious or part of an ethical order because she belongs to a sphere which is in opposition to the state. 'Generalizing' her as womankind, he neutralizes Antigone's subversiveness, because women are not given access to the mechanisms that would make their appeals recognizable by the state. His idea of woman as a perversion or irony of the ethical order is, in turn, for Butler, not really subversive, because it merely enforces their exclusion from the state.¹⁷ Butler's critique of Lacan is offered on similar grounds, conceiving Lacan's symbolic order as one which constitutes its own zone of exclusion, the real. Butler, herself, however, consequently rejects the idea that there could be anything significant beyond the norms and rules that shape our world. Or rather, she rejects the idea that the symbolic system of norms has an outside such as the real.¹⁸ Antigone's claim 'does not take place outside the symbolic or, indeed, outside the public sphere, but within its terms and as an unanticipated appropriation and perversion of its own mandate'.¹⁹ Lacan, according to Butler, sees Antigone as pushing towards the limit of the symbolic because he fails to see that his own conception of the symbolic mirrors his conception of the real, where what is inside and what is outside play less of a role than the determination of the limit of the symbolic itself.

Butler's own reading of Antigone focuses on the performative act of claiming *other laws*, calling into question the limits of intelligibility. The power of laws, according to Butler, stems not so much from principles as from language itself. Whereas for Lacan the word or signifier is structured around an empty space – the space of the real – for Butler it has a normative and performative power: there is no domain outside of language that could be considered as pre-linguistic or as something like the real. When Antigone claims that she follows divine laws, then, the extraordinary power of these words lies not so much in their content, as in the way they point to a crisis of intelligibility. Antigone does not go outside of the symbolic so much as show its limits, for within the (Oedipally structured)

symbolic we can make sense of neither Antigone's heritage nor her sex.

Butler also wants to insist, against Lacan, that no transcendental Law can be detached and formalized outside of a social order:

norms do not unilaterally act upon the psyche; rather they become condensed as the figure of the law to which the psyche returns. The psychic relation to social norms can, under certain conditions, posit those norms as intractable, punitive, and eternal.... In other words, the very description of the symbolic as intractable law takes place within a fantasy of

echoes de Beauvoir: the problem with psychoanalysis is that it takes the incest taboo and paternal power for granted, and confuses the existing social sphere with structural necessities. Lacanians, of course, would claim that the symbolic function can be separated from social content. The law of the father, which for many Lacanians is a kind of fundamental structuring factor in intimate relations, does not necessarily have to be represented by a real father; it could equally be a brother, another woman, perhaps even a job. The main point is that there must be another object of desire other than the child for the mother if the

child is not to be caught in a fantasmatic relation in which it simply becomes the object of desire for another, rather than a desiring subject.

For Butler, however, the claim that something else could fill the symbolic function of the father is not as progressive as it might seem, since the father function is nevertheless enforced as the final authority. The idea of the symbolic itself, she says, is nothing but a 'sedimentation' of social practices.²¹ The status of the father is nothing but an idealization: the law is the father and the father is the law.²² Lacan's 'formal' concept of the family is still stuck, therefore,

in the same system, according to which a subject's identity and desire are con-structed around a maternal/paternal axis. Psychoanalysis upholds a cultural heritage of heteronormativity²³ and psycho-analysis becomes reactionary because it is blind to its normative grounds. To become productive it would have to rethink its fundamental conceptual framework. This is true not least of the conception of sexual difference, which for Lacanians structures the desire of the subject unconditionally although it may do so in fantasmatic and unexpected ways. The extraordinary importance of sexual difference is particularly poignant when it comes to parents. Butler argues that there is a direct link between the psychoanalytic theory of sexual difference and, for instance, the French resistance against homosexual couples' right to adopt. In psychoanalysis, Butler argues, mothers and fathers are made into the foundation of culture and into the two necessary poles, man and woman, which inform the child's psy-



law as insurpassable authority. In my view, Lacan at once analyzes and symptomizes this fantasy.²⁰

For Butler, Lacan's notion of the symbolic is just the notion of the normative, but in such a way that it remains hidden. On Butler's reading of Lacan, nothing can exist outside of the symbolic order of language or outside of culture, and anything that challenges its limits suffers a real or symbolic death; such is Antigone's fate. Accepting, accordingly, that all language is normative, the problematic separation between the social and the symbolic sphere collapses and the erstwhile hidden normative injunctions in theories such as psychoanalysis are exposed and thus, hopefully, overcome.

From Butler's point of view, the hidden normative injunctions of psychoanalysis naively continue to uphold the family politics of conservative forces. In this process, the otherwise emancipatory claims of psychoanalysis are thwarted. On this point her critique

chosexual development and cultural upbringing. The consequence of this injunction is repressive.²⁴

This argument may seem to be rather extreme: after all, not all French are Lacanians, and not all Lacanians are against the rights of homosexuals to adopt. But Butler's challenge is important, as another example – this time from the Netherlands – well shows. A proposed law, according to which children would be able to choose either their mother's or father's surname as their own, was disputed by many, among them Lacanian psychoanalysts, who argued that the symbolic father, the paternal signifier, somehow ought to be present in a name. Even though some argued that both father and mother should be present in the name, the lack of the paternal signifier altogether was seen as a threat. Thus the Lacanian opposition to the law seems to confirm the ground and force of Butler's critique: the idea that mothers and fathers are formal functions is not just a theory of structure; it has normative social implications and psychoanalysis remains conservative or even reactionary.

Family politics, family ethics

But is Butler right? Is psychoanalysis working against emancipation, or is it still possible to use psychoanalysis for emancipatory projects? The question is in fact as old as psychoanalysis itself. From the beginning psychoanalysis has been allied to both feminism and the Left for long periods in the twentieth century. It has, however, been a complicated relationship, and new storms were whipped up with the arrival of queer theory. Are psychoanalysis and its allegedly progressive sympathizers simply ignorant, then, of the fact that it fits perfectly with a conservative and reactionary ideology? Or is it possible to build a progressive family politics on psychoanalytic grounds?

The crucial concerns are the concepts of norms and the normative. For Butler, normativity seems to imply the existence of certain codes and rules. A conception of kinship such as that of Lévi-Strauss would thus be normative because it implies a certain 'positive' law of what counts as kinship. Lacan's notion of the symbolic order, however, need not necessarily be considered as an authoritative system in the same way. Perhaps it is more fruitful to conceive the symbolic as, instead, radically empty. The function of the symbolic in its most minimalist version is to stand for a prohibition *tout court*. The function of this prohibition is not to force the subject into submission but, rather, to constitute an appeal against submission under authoritative systems. It is thus possible that

the symbolic function be detached from a normative content. The symbolic, that is, may be conceived as a mark of finitude located at the intersection between language and subject, between the universal and the singular, cutting not only the limits of the subject but the limits of a social and linguistic community as well. In this way, the symbolic does not proscribe norms, but limits the scope of any normative system.²⁵ Psychoanalysis, accordingly, does not know what femininity and masculinity are. If it tells us that *there must be sexual difference*, then this is not necessarily the claim that there must be men and women, mothers and father, daughters and sons of two well-defined sexes. What it does, rather, is to cut out an aspect of the subject which is incapable of simply complying with the demands of any normative order: 'be a woman', 'be a man', and so on. The symbolic is not a normative order of values and rules. It takes into account that there is a gap between a normative order of values and codes, of practices and habits that we need to incorporate in our daily lives, and the function of desire. There is no 'healing' symbol that would overcome this gap. But this fact, on the other hand, protects us from the invasion, eradication and submission under any kind of invisible symbolic authority that could be positivized as femininity, the father, the law, and so on. The subject originates in a necessary impossibility, both an obstacle against fullness and a shield against dissolution. It is the structure of this necessary impossibility which Antigone unravels, and in doing so, points to something which in its most minimalist version could simply be translated as the laws of finitude.

Antigone, I would suggest, does not merely bring us to the unintelligible limits of culture. In bringing us exactly to that point which is foreclosed, as death, incest, *jouissance* and so forth, she does not merely close the play. She opens up another space, the space of alterity, that may indifferently be called the space of the real, the space of ethics, of death, of natality, and so on, because what matters is not so much the actual nature of this space, but that it compels us, draws us, and *calls for* an understanding. Rather than being simply an outside or margin to culture, the real functions as a limit or an impossibility in the structure of a subject. The real cannot be integrated into a symbolic structure, but it functions as its 'other' side. It refers to some kind of foreign body or alterity beyond the scope of the subject or agent, which may be another person, may be nature, sexuality, death... When Antigone evokes divine laws, she calls for the city to protect certain customs concerning precisely these areas. But

although these customs may be protected by the law, they cannot be formalized altogether. The limits of love and desire, the negotiation of death and sexuality, touch on a space which is ethical, not political. Rather than enforcing certain practices and habits, the symbolic sets up restrictions and limits which make these negotiations possible. Subjectivity needs to be structured around some kind of impossibility or limit. This impossibility would correspond to its status as finite and as vulnerable. But it would also fill the function of defining us as desiring beings as such. The alternative might well be submission, invasion and fatalism: the giving up of one's subjectivity under the submission to an invisible authority.

Psychoanalysis works with the notion of a symbolic function which is separate from the state precisely because it can never be completely 'positivized' and transposed into a system of norms and rules. I would argue, from a Lacanian but also from a more general point of view, for the need for a theory which posits a radical break between the structure of subjectivity or agency and a normative order of values. As I see it, Lacan stresses just this point when he makes of Antigone a figure whose desire is determined where the symbolic order fails and fades. This does not mean, of course, that psychoanalysis would be dealing with a 'subversive' aspect of ourselves that would be completely untouched by culture, discourse, social contexts, and so on. What it means, rather, is that social and cultural norms do not simply form subjects, but are dependent also on the investments of those subjects. A cultural order is not to be understood merely on the basis of its values, but on the *desires* invested in those values. These desires are structured around a founding impossibility, pointing to a limit one cannot breach. It *could* be something with normative implications attached to the founding prohibition, like the incest taboo or the Ten Commandments. But it could also be something completely different: death, the finite perspective of the principle of natality, or sexuation.

There is, in fact, much to be gained in assuming the existence of a domain which is neither normative, nor collapsed into the social order. If we adhere strictly to the idea that everything that governs human behaviour can be referred to a normative order in some way, the question of what lies 'beyond' it becomes uninteresting. It means that there would be no remainder, nothing left outside, no body, no flesh, no real to take into account. But, most importantly, there seems to be no space left for *the ethical* in Butler's argument. There is no radical break in her notion of normativity, whether

that break be situated between the political and ethical, normative and ethical, or social and ethical. This means that there is no space that would disrupt or challenge the current norms of family politics, and thereby call for its change: a space where phenomena such as desire, love, or the play with new identities find their nourishment. Although Butler does accept that a part of the subject must always be foreclosed, she does not accept that any part of the subject would still *not* be submitted to the normative order (this is also made clear in Butler's insistence on the unconscious and self-defeating character of Antigone's actions).²⁶ Lacan attaches the symbolic to the real as its other side precisely in order to separate a normative order, which can be formalized, legalized and so on, from another domain: the domain of the ethical. For Lacan (and Hegel) Antigone's demands and desires are separated from the order of the state because she defends a domain that cannot easily be transposed into political discourse, the domain in which arise questions of love, desire, anxiety, death, and so on.

The postulation of a domain which is not easily universalizable, interior to the state but never wholly possible to transpose into the discourse which handles matters of the state, appears conservative if it is understood as the claim that ethical values should be founded on the 'apolitical' phenomena of love, desire and family bonds. But the claim that normativity and ethics could be separated from one another could also be made progressively political. Ernesto Laclau, for example, develops a category of ethics that is important for the functioning of hegemony. The ethical is *not* the normative; rather, the tension between the domain of the ethical, which is a promise of fullness, and the 'ought' of the normative, makes the renegotiation of the normative order possible:

There is an ethical *investment* in particular normative orders, but no normative order which is, in and for itself, ethical.... Hegemony is, in this sense, the name for this unstable relation between the *ethical* and the *normative*, our way of addressing this infinite process of investments which draws its dignity from its very failure.²⁷

Translating this into the specific question of what is to count and be recognized as a family, the ethical promise of which Laclau writes could perhaps be called love; the normative what is recognized as love. There is, today, an ever-widening discrepancy between love and what is recognized as love, recognized as a family, both in the social sphere and at a political level.

Butler's project is focused on the need to politicize the family; as I see it, however, a distinction between ethics and politics is necessary for the realization of the emancipatory aim of her project. This does not mean that the question of the family is apolitical. It means only that what Hegel called the 'natural' domain – or the domain of desire, love and care – cannot be politically determined or controlled. Indeed, the real problem has perhaps been the overly eager politicization of that domain. Under the banner of family values – not least in Britain and North America – politicians have made more or less intrusive attempts to 'normalize' the family. Since 'family values' and heteronormativity amount to pretty much the same thing, it is of course impossible – and undesirable – to leave the question of the family out of the political sphere altogether. Perhaps the problem is that the family has been made too political, rather than not political enough? Perhaps the best politics could do would be to protect this sphere from discriminating laws, rather than to try and regulate the structure of the family on its own terms. In which case the psychoanalytic demarcation between the normative idea of what is to count as a family and an ethical sphere which withdraws from such norms may well have some use for a progressive family politics, after all.

Notes

1. George Steiner, *Antigones*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984, p. 18.
2. See Sophocles' *Antigone*, ed. Mark Griffith, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999.
3. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 6.
4. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. D. Potter, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 247.
5. According to Freud, the maternal object is both given up and retained, thus creating a fundamental ambivalence. See, for example, 'Female Sexuality', where Freud has recourse to a pre-Oedipal domain, where the maternal love dominates, in order to explain the ambivalent relation to the mother as the key to the problems of feminine sexual identity (*Standard Edition*, XXI, Hogarth Press, London, 1953–73, p. 230). On Julia Kristeva and the melancholy of women, see the analysis of Marguerite Duras in *Black Sun*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1989.
6. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud argues that cultural norms and values enforce the superego, which is in fact is a major destructive factor in Western cultural pathology. On this theory women are not necessarily more pathological than men, but they do not identify with the normative system in the same way (*Standard Edition*, XXI, p. 130).
7. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. J.H. Bell and J.R. von Sturmer, Eyre & Spottiswoode, London, 1969, chs 3 and 4.
8. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parsh-

- ley, Vintage Books, New York, 1989, p. 41.
9. Ibid., p. 74.
10. Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Techniques of Psychoanalysis*, II, trans. S. Tomaselli, Norton, New York, 1988, p. 29.
11. Ibid., p. 116.
12. Ibid., p. 146.
13. Ibid., p. 75.
14. 'Là où il n'y a pas de rapport sexuel, ça fait "troumatisme"', *Les Non Dupes Errent*, 19 February 1974. From a Lacanian perspective, this tearing out or lack represents the negativity or void which for Heidegger would relate being to beings, the other sex always carries the negative mark which presents to one's own finite status: 'Ce qui est de l'être, d'un être qui se poserait comme absolu, n'est jamais que la fracture, la cassure, l'interruption de la formule *être sexué* en tant que l'être sexué est intéressé dans la jouissance' (ibid.).
15. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 23.
16. To this extent, Butler's reading of *Antigone* reiterates her critique of psychoanalysis in *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, London, 1990), where the structural relation which psychoanalysis assumes to exist between sex, sexual identity and desire is taken apart. See, for example, pp. 6–7.
17. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 35.
18. Butler's criticism of Lacan's notion of the Real is emphasized throughout her dialogues with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek. Since the Real is always a limit point determined by the symbolic, she argues, it is not useful in the determination of the incompleteness and complexity of the subject, which for Butler can never be covered by Lacan's notion of the symbolic. See Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, Verso, London, 2000, pp. 29–30.
19. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 54.
20. Ibid., p. 30.
21. Ibid., p. 19. This is also why Butler is critical of feminist psychoanalysts who argue for the idea that psychoanalysis only sketches positions of desire, and do not argue for fixed sexual identities.
22. Again, Butler's critique here echoes de Beauvoir's claim that paternal power is nothing but a social construction, and that psychoanalysis lets everything depend on that construction in a misguided way (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 41, Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 21).
23. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 71.
24. Butler, Laclau, Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 146.
25. Žižek's interest in the Real stems from the fact that it makes up an internal limit to the symbolic system itself, and he has emphasized sexual difference as the epitome of the Lacanian Real for this reason. The interpretation of sexual difference is also open to hegemonic struggles (see Butler, Laclau, Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, pp. 110–21).
26. The function of foreclosure is considered to be a function of arbitrary social prohibitions, and not, therefore, of what Lévi-Strauss would call founding cultural prohibitions (Butler, Laclau, Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 149).
27. Butler, Laclau, Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, p. 81.