

Judith P. Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 118 pp. Hebrew Translation: Daphna Raz (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2004), 121 pp., including the essay "Antigone, Towards What Lies Beyond" by Miri Rozmarin.¹

We are born into a social-political order and a language which jointly determine the scope of our significant thought and action. But can the present orders of speech and of the family and state be altered—radically altered? Or are their borders and possibilities set once and for all? What does Antigone as an exemplary figure of insurrection teach us about the possibility of conceptual and political revolution? What is Antigone's claim? And what, in view of the challenges posed by contemporary forms of kinship, does she politically claim of us? These are the basic assumptions and the most general questions raised by Butler in her thought-provoking and politically provocative book.

Butler's choice of protagonist and the domains she targets – i.e., social and political reality, and language and psychoanalysis – determine her two principal foils: Hegel and Lacan. In Hegel's discussions of Antigone she identifies two conflicting ideas. According to the first, Antigone stands for the eternal possibility of a radical revolution of the social-political order. Forcefully working against it is the idea that the modern state of Hegel's day is the ultimate end of the development of human freedom. Against his own deepest insights – insights Butler herself develops – Hegel ultimately fails to grasp the former idea. For his philosophy, conceptually and politically quashing the threat of Antigone's revolt is a necessary condition of the foundation of the state. The threats and possibilities of kinship are very clearly distinguished from the order of the state and are limited to the one end of supplying the polity with male citizens to fight its wars.

For Lacan the symbolic is the order of language, which determines the possibilities and limits of intelligibility. While specific social and political relations are contingent and variable, the possibilities of variation are limited by this necessary and – on Butler's reading – unchanging order. In particular, the paradigmatically "symbolic place of the father does not cede to the demands for a social reorganization of paternity. The symbolic is precisely what sets limits to any and all utopian efforts to reconfigure and relive kinship relations at some distance from the oedipal scene" (p. 20 [29-30]).² Lacan seems to relate the symbolic to the law that drives Antigone to action. But he elides the fact that her fate is a consequence of the violation of the incest taboo that is the very

1 I am deeply indebted to Shelly Rosenblum and Debbie Nelson, with whom I first read and talked about *Antigone's Claim*. I am very grateful to Niza Yanay, Galia Sabar, Lyat Friedman and Yanni Nevo for their comments on this review.

2 Numbers in brackets refer to the Hebrew translation.

condition of kinship and the symbolic more generally. And so he ultimately remains blind to the historically and conceptually revolutionary implications of her action. This theoretical legacy is still politically with us. Butler points to the contemporary examples of Lacanian psychoanalysts in France speaking against “contracts of alliance” for fear that “children raised in a gay family would run the immanent threat of psychosis” (p. 70 [85]); other analysts “trace the sources of autism in the ‘paternal gap’ or ‘absence’ similarly predict psychotic consequences for children with lesbian parents” (p. 70 [85-86]).

Readers of Lacan and Hegel will no doubt continue to contend with Butler’s interpretations. They might question whether Hegel does not in fact see Antigone as the origin of a new political order, the primary figure from which grows his notion of a world-historical individual who moves politics towards greater freedom. For when Hegel describes the conflict between what he calls the divine law of Antigone and the human law of Creon and the *polis*, he says that the “human law proceeds in its living process from the divine, the law valid on earth from the that of the nether world, the conscious from the unconscious” (Hegel, 1977:§460; see also §474, and see, e.g., Geiger, 2004:134-139; 2003). And readers of Lacan will similarly question whether the symbolic order is indeed ahistorical, in his early writing (the theoretical discussion of the symbolic addresses the second seminar from 1954-1955) and in his later writing (Butler herself notes that some seminars contain qualifications of the view she attributes to him; see p. 20 [29]).³ And they might further question whether Antigone does indeed stand for the symbolic and not for its violent emergence, which nevertheless lies outside the order of meaning: “Involved here is an invocation of something that is, in effect, of the order of law, but which is not developed in any signifying chain or anything else” (Lacan, 1997:278).

The very core of the book is the excellent reading of the Sophoclean tragedy, which carefully articulates the variety of idioms in which Antigone remains forever incomprehensible. Against the all-but-overpowering need to make Antigone speak for an eternal and acknowledged moral principle, Butler refuses to ignore or stamp apocryphal the scandalous lines in which Antigone attempts to give the reason that moves her to action and doom.⁴

3 See, e.g., Johnston (2002).

4 Some interpreters have pronounced the lines apocryphal. The main argument for this claim is the content of the reason. And this is not, of course, a philological argument. The main philological claim against it is that Aristotle quotes the lines and does not doubt their authenticity (Rhetoric 1417:a31-32). For a list of discussions of this question, which includes the vote of each interpreter, see Appendix D in Hester (1971).

What law,
You ask, do I satisfy with what I say?
A husband dead, there might be another.
A child by another too, if I had lost the first.
But mother and father lost in the halls of Death,
No brother could ever spring to light again.
For this law alone I held you in honor.
For this, Creon, the King, judges me a criminal
Guilty of dreadful outrage, my dear brother! (Sophocles, 1984, ll:904-915).

Here, Butler says, Antigone hardly represents the sanctity of kinship (p. 9 [17-18]). Quite the contrary, "Antigone is caught in a web of relations that produce no coherent position within kinship" (p. 57 [71]). Butler drives this point home by articulating the horror of the incestuous kinship of the house of Labdacus. Antigone must bury her brother against the edict of her uncle, Creon, to leave the body of the traitor Polyneices exposed. But Oedipus himself is both the son and husband of his mother Jocasta, and so both father and half-brother to Antigone. Indeed, Butler points to the too-much-protested sense that there is something incestuous about Antigone's devotion to her brother (pp. 17-18 [26-27]). And she further claims that on his deathbed Oedipus positions himself as her only one in a "demand that verges on incestuous possessiveness" (p. 60 [74]). Nor does Antigone occupy any simple position of gender. She is a woman who laments going to her death unwed and without children (p. 76 [92-93]; see also p. 22 [31-32]). Yet, her father calls his sons women and his daughters men (pp. 61-62 [75-76]). And Creon describes her revolt as unmanning him: "Now I am no man, but she the man [*aner*]" (Antigone 528) (pp. 8-9 [16-17]).

The force with which Butler shows that Antigone must remain inconceivable is the theoretical and poetical zenith of the book. But the book also takes upon itself a concrete political end. Butler accepts the founding insight of Kant's philosophy that our experience and thought of the world are conditioned by a necessary conceptual structure. And she contends with one of the most significant paradoxes it bequeathed to philosophy: Does the necessary structure of concepts that is a condition of significance change in history? Can we change it? This question of history is often directed at psychoanalysis. It might, though, seem strange to direct it at Hegel, the preeminent philosopher of history. Here we must remember the Marxist commitment, formulated most clearly by Engels, to free the revolutionary implications of Hegel's idea of the historical development of reason from the conservative drive to proclaim this history over (Engels, 1941:11-13). Butler clearly shares this end with the tradition of the Hegelian Left.

Butler announces her political agenda in the very first sentence of the book:

“I began to think about Antigone a few years ago as I wondered what happened to those feminist efforts to confront and defy the state. It seemed to me that Antigone might work as a counterfigure to the trend championed by recent feminists to seek the backing and authority of the state to implement feminist policy aims” (p. 1 [7]).

Towards the conclusion of the book she specifies some of the possibilities of kinship for which she wants Antigone to speak: a blended family where there might be more than one person a child calls “mother”; an adopted child for whom “father” is both an absent phantasm and a living presence; a young girl fond of her stepbrother; a single mother who has her child without a man; a family where there are two men or two women who parent (p. 69 [84-85]); “black urban kinship arrangements constituted by mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and friends who work together to raise children and reproduce the material conditions of life” (p. 73 [89]); kinship based on consensual affiliation (p. 74 [90-91]); and the social organization of need, e.g., “the buddy system that the Gay Men’s Health Clinic in New York has established for caring for those who live with HIV and AIDS” (p. 74 [91]; see also pp. 22-23 [32]).

Here we must question whether Antigone – as Butler herself best reads her – can stand for these political claims. I think the answer is that Butler’s own theoretical reading contradicts her concrete political undertaking – not because the goals she champions are not justified, *but precisely because they are justified*. It is clearly our duty to think our way into the forms of kinship we now find everywhere around us, to create social institutions and enact laws to support and protect these ways of life. With insight and imagination, with careful and thorough thinking, these tasks are within our reach. And precisely for this reason they are not Antigone’s claim. For Butler herself, better than any reader of *Antigone* I have read, shows that

the conditions under which the law [of Antigone] becomes applicable are not reproducible ... a law with no generality and no transposability ... a law formulated precisely through the singular instance of its application and, therefore, no law in any ordinary, generalized sense (p. 10 [18]).

Thus,

Antigone cannot quite stand for that subversion and for that future, because what she draws into crisis is the representative function itself, the very horizon of intelligibility in which she operates and according to which she remains somewhat unthinkable (pp. 19-20 [31]).

As Butler succinctly puts it: “Her language is not that of a survivable political agency” (p. 28 [38]).

Put in terms of kinship relations, the forms Butler names are not taboo, even if there are those for whom, she says,

the horror of incest, the moral revulsion it compels ... is not that far afield from the same [sic] horror and revulsion felt towards lesbian and gay sex, and is not unrelated to the intense moral condemnation of voluntary single parenting, or gay parenting, or parenting arrangements with more than two adults involved (p. 71 [86]).

This question of the incest taboo lies at the heart of the incongruity between the theoretical and political forces of *Antigone's Claim*. Theoretically, Butler sees very clearly that Antigone's example must remain incomprehensible for us and impossible to follow, precisely because she is inextricably implicated in incest. Politically, however, she wants Antigone to speak for forms of kinship which are not taboo; indeed, Butler repeatedly finds herself compelled to deny that she is out to destroy the taboo on incest (see pp. 24 [34], 30 [41], 66 [82]). The theoretical idea of the book is deep and convincing, and its political end is eminently justified. But they do not form one claim.

With her *Antigone* book, Butler joins the great philosophical tradition which grapples with the ancient tragedy of Sophocles founded by Hegel and continued by Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Lacan and earlier feminist philosophy. It is very well translated into Hebrew by Raz. And for the Hebrew reader of feminist philosophy, Rozmarin's excellent essay, appended to the translation, is an invaluable introduction to the book and to Butler's work more generally.

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