

ANTIGONE'S CLAIM. KINSHIP BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

Judith Butler

New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

(by Maite Escudero Alías. University of Zaragoza)

137

The tasks of redefining and resignifying culture have become the key elements to interpreting Judith Butler's main theses. Remarkably, the publication of her latest book on the myth of Antigone appears as a necessary claim for a progressive feminism and sexual politics. Within it, a further liberating and revolutionary claim is staked on Antigone's behalf, since Antigone faces the rules of power as established by Creon in Sophocles' play *Antigone, Oedipus at Colonus*. Many and diverse have been the readings on the mythic figure of Antigone. Yet, the main tenets of authors such as Hegel, Lacan and Lévi-Strauss are pervaded by an overall tendency, firstly, to represent Antigone as a destructive and unethical impulse against the social and political order, and then, to deny the possibility of an incestuous relationship. By revising their texts, Judith Butler offers a new interpretation of Antigone that attempts to reconceptualize both, the incest taboo and the forms of kinship that are legitimized within culture.

As Antigone has also been considered a feminist icon of defiance, Butler questions the semantic and political implications of such a statement in order to suggest, instead, that Antigone may represent a much more ambivalent position, for it is precisely Antigone's act of defiance against the State that leads her to her own death. The French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray rescues Antigone from anonymity and endows her with a skill in the art of feminine seduction, thus enabling Antigone to speak about the patriarchal forms of government, its order

and its laws. In contrast, Judith Butler wonders whether Antigone's act of rebellion does not imply reconsidering the hegemonic sexual politics in less reductive and orthodox terms. In other words, Butler is not so much concerned about stressing Antigone's anti-authoritative and scandalous act against the State, as with exploring the cultural limits that define the forms of kinship, wondering what other forms of kinship would have permitted Antigone to lead a legitimate life. How, Butler asks, "would psychoanalysis have been different if it had taken Antigone—the 'postoedipal' subject—rather than Oedipus as its point of departure"? And, "if the incest taboo is reconceived so that it does not mandate heterosexuality as its solution, what forms of sexual alliance and new kinship might be acknowledged as a result"? (front flap).

The responses to such questions are discussed throughout the three chapters that constitute the book: "Antigone's Claim", "Unwritten Laws, Aberrant Transmissions" and "Promiscuous Obedience". Deploying analytic deconstructive strategies, Butler retakes concepts such as the *resignification of language, gender performativity* and the *negation of an ontological origin*, all of which she coined and further elaborated in her previous theoretical works. By so doing, Butler's purpose is to contest and destabilize the history of cultural categories, suspiciously sustained by totalizing and naturalizing discourses when it comes to defining identity, culture, ethics and politics. Thus, the irreconcilable and disastrous consequences brought about by Antigone's act are reflected in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* and *The Philosophy of Right*, Lévi-Strauss' *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* and Lacan's *Seminar II* and *Seminar VII*.

In Hegel's analysis, Antigone is ironically positioned outside the terms of the *polis*, for she attempts to speak in the political sphere in a language that does not belong to her. In addition, she is not acknowledged as a citizen precisely for having transgressed the natural roles of her *feminine* gender and, therefore, she is accused of adopting *masculine* manners. Among other aspects of Hegel's thesis, Judith Butler denounces the rigorous divorce he makes between the notion of kinship and that of the State. Likewise, Hegel maintains that the only way left for Antigone to achieve citizenship is through her brother's recognition of her while negating the possibility of desire within their relationship. Again, Butler asks why there cannot be recognition with desire. For Hegel, incest constitutes the negation of recognition of citizenship, or, to put it in other words, kinship is exclusively sustained and supported by prohibiting incest. Paradoxically, then, Hegel's kinship is a precondition for the State's reproduction and vice versa; both, State and kinship are viciously and unavoidably interwoven. Taking these arguments into consideration, one may conclude that the legitimate scheme—in socio-cultural, political and legal terms—of being intelligible within a culture appears to be monolithic and unchangeable.

When defining the intelligible forms of kinship, Lacan's postulates—indebted to Lévi-Strauss for the theorization of the symbolic order—share a theoretical ambiguity which points to the division between kinship and the social order. Like Hegel, Lacan implicitly proposes a relationship of dependence between kinship and the social realm, for the latter will finally define the structural framework of cultural intelligibility. Furthermore, Lacan "establishes Antigone at the threshold of the symbolic, understood as the linguistic register in which kinship relations are instated and maintained; he understands her death as precipitated precisely by the symbolic insupportability of her desire" (p. 29). Thus, Antigone occupies a position *within* the symbolic-kinship but only to be expelled from it; that is, Antigone's act not only challenges the intelligible limits of the symbolic, but also provokes a crisis in the limits that define culture—and hence her *limited* death as the result of a perverse, aberrant and abject desire. Still, Antigone's act is deliberate and self-conscious. By transgressing kinship and gender norms, Antigone is aware of her fatality; before her death, she is banished to a living death. Antigone's kinship is placed between life and death. Her death, a daring desire to pronounce *the* words that will sententiously declare her guilt.

Antigone's words as the performative force of language interestingly become the other major aspect explored by Judith Butler. On this occasion, Butler focuses on the disassociation of a teleological relationship between words and deeds. "I say that I did it and I do not deny it" (p. 8). In stating these words, Antigone both acknowledges her act and pronounces *it*. Such overt hostility against the universal laws as acknowledged by and within the symbolic norms of culture, will displace Antigone on to the unknowable margins of the symbolic existence. In this way, her words accuse her of being guilty, depicting her kinship position as the reiterative and performative process of a set of linguistic practices that *do what they say*. This structuralist account of language, designed to establish an ontological origin of the cultural and legal apparatus, will be utterly questioned by Judith Butler inasmuch as that kind of language imposes and defines, *a priori*, which forms of existence (also read kinship) are legitimate and which ones are not. In short, it is the blind belief in the performative force of a language that, devoid of contextual resignifications, leads to Antigone's condemnation and prescribes a reductive and closed system of legitimate relationships. If Antigone were not her words, if her words were not her deeds, if her deeds were not a frozen performative act, would it not be possible to legitimate other different forms of contingent relationships which may entail their own iterability and resignification within the regulatory terms of a less restrictive culture and sexuality?

The theoretical necessity of denouncing the structuralist framework of an arbitrary language that conforms the socio-symbolic reality implies, in Butler's work, deconstructing a set of relations whose configuring structures timelessly tame any

attempt to re-interpret the notion of kinship. For our author, Antigone embodies the potential site to challenge the above mentioned language structure, since she neither holds the symbolic law, nor restores it at the very end. Tangled by and in *human* norms, Antigone is, nevertheless, simultaneously banished. Antigone speaks in the language of a forbidden right, problematizing the defining preconditions of a legitimate existence. In Butler's words, "if kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human" (p. 82). Such thoughts, far from being fruitless and barren, allow Judith Butler to reconsider Antigone as the emblem of a culture that, inhabited by the privilege of a normative heterosexuality, impedes and blurs different forms of sexual and political freedom. The controversy about whether to make legitimate different and varied configurations of kinship should not only consider the cases of miscenegation and homosexuality, but also the recognition of blood relationships. Innovative in her analytic strategies, Judith Butler purposes the legitimization and the recognition of such possibilities—which may well be embodied in the figure of Antigone—not without previously revising the tenets of a cultural and psychoanalytic apparatus that would easily discredit Antigone's act as aberrant and pathological. Hence, this book widens the communicative scope of culture, and enthusiastically attends to the resignification of diverse theoretical disciplines in order to explore different spaces of socio-cultural, legal and political existence. Interestingly enough, some of these possibilities already exist; they may subtly appear as real, and therefore, subject to the choice of being explored, embodied and lived. This has been Antigone's legacy for the culture of a new century, or so argues Judith Butler, the latest theorist to rediscover and reevaluate the mythic figure lost between death and life.

**SHIFTING CONTINENTS/COLLIDING CULTURES.
DIASPORA WRITING OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT**

Ralph J. Crane and Radhika Mohanram (eds.)

Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi. Cross/Cultures. Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English, 42, 2000.

(by Dora Sales Salvador. University Jaume I de Castellón¹)

"...at the crossroads of history and literature,
bridging the home and the world."

Homi Bhabha (1994: 13)

The issues addressed in this volume include reflections on the literature of the Indian diaspora, and the diverse ways of appraising identity, language, subjectivity, representation and constitution of self in cross-cultural contexts. From the outset, it seems important to clarify that, as Ralph Crane and Radhika Mohanram claim in their introduction, the "Indian diaspora" is not always interpreted in the same way. In a discussion of migrations, it is pertinent to distinguish between enforced exiles and chosen diasporas. In any case, identity is shown to be not a monolithic fetish, but a dynamic means to learn. And, as Nilufer Bharucha notes, it is worth remembering that India has experienced many and different diasporas: the precolonial diaspora, the colonial diaspora, the Partition diaspora, and the postcolonial diaspora. Diverse critical perspectives could be displayed, depending on the particular object of study and how the key concepts in this area are understood. Migration is mostly lived as a process of loss and pain. However, it can also be highly creative and motoric. Notions such as home, embodiment, identity and sexuality constitute the core of many considerations in this book, and it is in respect to all these threads that this book is at its most interesting.