

## ANTIGONE, THE POLITICAL AND THE ETHICS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS\*

*Classics and psychoanalysis: a missed encounter*

The Freudian engagement with the classical world represents one of the most important and intriguing episodes in the ongoing dialogue between antiquity and modernity. That Freud returned to antiquity to formulate his revolutionary theories of the human mind should strike classicists and psychoanalysts alike as a fascinating enigma. And yet classicists have to a large extent given short shrift to this issue. They have not only shown themselves indifferent to the question of why Freud takes the ancient world as the starting-point for his examination of modern man, they have also, by and large, rejected psychoanalysis as a methodological tool for providing insights into the classical world. Even those classicists who are most open to the benefits of contemporary theory have largely isolated psychoanalysis as a uniquely inappropriate methodology for understanding antiquity.<sup>1</sup>

So, for instance, those classicists who display an interest in the complex series of discourses and practices which surround the construction of the ancient self have explicitly distanced their analyses from the insights of psychoanalysis. Thus in Christopher Gill's 500-page work on 'Personality' in Greek culture,<sup>2</sup> Freud gets a mere three perfunctory citations. If one turns to Greek tragedy, the genre which, in the wake of Freud's Oedipus, might have seemed the most conducive to a psychoanalytic reading, most classicists have shown themselves equally hostile. Thus one critic has recently claimed:

The translation of tragic narrative into psychoanalytic narrative depends on three debatable assumptions. First that there is a universal psychological development, a cross-cultural transhistorical 'human nature'. Second that the Freudian

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<sup>1</sup> There are, of course, exceptions: see the special number of *Arethusa* (1974) dedicated to 'Psychoanalysis and Classics', Dodds (1951), (1960), Simon (1978), Segal (1982), (1986), du Bois (1988), Caldwell (1989), Padel (1992), Pucci (1992), Seaford (1998), Janan (1994), (2001) and Lear (1998). See also Devereux (1973) and on *Antigone*, Johnson (1997). The best account of Freud's relationship to antiquity remains Rudnytsky (1987), but see also Selden (1990) and Chase (1979).

<sup>2</sup> Gill (1996)

description of human nature is universally valid. Third that a dramatic narrative in a culture which does not know of psychoanalysis, can be (best) expressed as if it were an account of psychological development, so that tragedy can only confirm what – for the twentieth century – is already known about such a development.

It concludes:

The danger of a distorting appropriation of Greek culture to a modern model is, in other words, very strongly marked in such psychoanalytic readings.<sup>3</sup>

This insistence on the anachronism of the psychoanalytic reading reflects an orthodoxy within classical scholarship. Keen to locate Freudian psychoanalysis as a discourse which emerged in its own unique cultural and historical context, classicists have argued that its insights have no bearing on the pre-analytic societies of antiquity. And yet, why should critics who openly acknowledge their debt to contemporary theory make a special case for psychoanalysis? Why should psychoanalysis, any more than anthropology, structuralism, feminist theory or deconstruction, be guilty of anachronism? Any contemporary reading of antiquity is, of course, potentially open to this charge – surely this is just a structural necessity of studying the past. What seems to distinguish psychoanalysis from some other reading practices is precisely that it is so open about its commitment to a modern(ist) perspective. By making its appeal to a twentieth-century authority so explicit, psychoanalysis, as it were, comes clean about its commitment to the necessity of anachronism.

It might be instructive at this point to contrast the fate of anthropological readings of Greek tragedy.<sup>4</sup> Like psychoanalysis, anthropology as a modern discipline and methodology is intimately bound up with the rediscovery of classical myth. As is well known, many of the pioneers of nineteenth-century anthropology were themselves classicists propelled in their quest of discovering the secrets of far-flung cultures by their fascination with ancient ritual.<sup>5</sup> Mary Beard is the most recent scholar to have debated how the so-called 'Cambridge Ritualists', were at the centre of the institutional mediation between classics and anthropology at the close of the last century.<sup>6</sup> Thus a

<sup>3</sup> Goldhill (1997) 341. Richard Buxton launches an analogous attack on Freudian and psychoanalytic interpretations of Greek myth in Buxton (1994) 131–3 and 214–16. See also Lloyd-Jones (1985).

<sup>4</sup> This is a comparison made by Buxton: 'It has to be admitted that classicists ... have seldom shown a sophisticated awareness of contemporary work in psychology. While anthropology has been a regularly plundered treasure-house of data and methods, psychology has often been treated as something about which one's robustly commonsensical intuitions will serve well enough', Buxton (1994) 134. See also Caldwell (1976). A figure such as Dodds combined these two traditions: see Dodds (1951), (1960) and also his autobiography in which he describes his reading of Freud and adventures in 'parapsychology' which heavily influenced his understanding of the Greek irrational: Dodds (1977) 97ff.

<sup>5</sup> The relationship between classics and early anthropology has been extensively researched in recent years: see Humphreys (1978), Detienne (1981), Beard (1992), (2000), Goldhill (1997).

<sup>6</sup> See Beard (1992), (1999), (2000).

figure like Jane Harrison completely revolutionised the understanding of Greek culture with her ritualist readings of tragedy. In France Louis Gernet combined his anthropological readings with the insights of the newly emerging discipline of sociology to produce his own innovative readings of Greek law.<sup>7</sup> With the increasing professionalisation of classics, anthropology became marginalised within the discipline and between the two world wars classicists and anthropologists began to regard one another with mutual suspicion. The advent of structural anthropology hailed a renewed interest for some classicists. Lévi-Strauss' structural analyses struck home to many Hellenists who had themselves been meditating on the role of polarity and opposition within Greek thought. Structuralist and anthropological readings of Greek tragedy thus became increasingly popular in English-speaking classical scholarship throughout the 70s.<sup>8</sup> It is at this same time that some English-speaking classicists began to show a renewed interest in psychoanalysis. In 1974 the American journal *Arethusa*, for instance, ran a special number dedicated to 'Psychoanalysis and classics' at the same time as it was promoting new structuralist-influenced anthropological readings of the ancient world. Charles Segal's essay 'Pentheus and Hippolytus on the couch and on the grid: psychoanalytic and structuralist readings of Greek tragedy'<sup>9</sup> is one indication of how interlinked these two theoretical bodies had become within a certain strand of classical studies.

And this association is, of course, far from arbitrary. Not only can Freud be seen to have been influenced by early anthropology, but anthropology and psychoanalysis have maintained this dialogue throughout their histories.<sup>10</sup> So in his autobiographical narrative, *Tristes tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss traces his interest in anthropology to the influence of three formative disciplines – psychoanalysis, Marxism and geology.<sup>11</sup> Lévi-Strauss' close acquaintance with Freud's writings explains why he was to turn his attention to *classical* mythology and the Oedipus myth, in particular, when he came to formulate his vision of structural anthropology.<sup>12</sup> Later, the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, in turn, conceptualised his rethinking of the Freudian project as an extension of the Lévi-Straussian problematic.<sup>13</sup> Just as anthropology has influenced psychoanalysis, so psychoanalysis has played a crucial role in the development of anthropological thought in the twentieth-century. Moreover, it is precisely around their engagement with the classics that we can trace the narrative of their overlapping histories. To give an account of the complex interrelation of classics, anthropology and

<sup>7</sup> See di Donato (1995), Lloyd-Jones (1996), 60ff., Laks (1998).

<sup>8</sup> See Lloyd (1966), Kirk (1970), Pucci (1971), Turner (1977), Rubino (1977).

<sup>9</sup> Segal (1986).

<sup>10</sup> See Delrieu (1993) and Rudnytsky (1987).

<sup>11</sup> Lévi-Strauss (1955) 50: 'All three demonstrate that understanding consists in reducing one type of reality to another; that the true reality is never most obvious; and that the nature of truth is already indicated by the care it takes to remain elusive.'

<sup>12</sup> Lévi-Strauss (1963), on which see Turner (1977), Pucci (1971), Vickers (1979), Rudnytsky (1987), Carroll (1978), Rubino (1977).

<sup>13</sup> See Delrieu (1993).

psychoanalysis would be to tell one of the most fascinating chronicles of twentieth-century intellectual history. But what, then, happened to this story of the interconnected histories of classics, anthropology and psychoanalysis? How was the role of psychoanalysis written out of the history of classical scholarship?<sup>14</sup> Why did classicists forget psychoanalysis and at what cost?

I would argue that one of the reasons that psychoanalysis lost out in the Anglo-American classicists', so-called, turn to theory in the 70s was the inestimable influence of the figure of Jean-Pierre Vernant. Vernant's stinging critique of psychoanalysis in his seminal essay 'Oedipus without the complex'<sup>15</sup> seems to me have to played a considerable role in the marginalisation of psychoanalytic criticism. Written in 1967, 'Oedipus without the complex' sets out to discredit Freudian and Freudian influenced readings of Greek tragedy. Vernant starts by asking:

In what respect is it possible that a literary work belonging to the culture of fifth-century Athens, itself a very free transposition of a much more ancient Theban legend dating from before the institution of the city-state, should confirm the observations of a doctor on the patients who throng his consulting rooms at the beginning of the twentieth century?<sup>16</sup>

For Vernant 'this demonstration has all the semblance of the rigor of an argument based on a vicious circle'<sup>17</sup> and he uses this negative comparison to define his own model of 'historical psychology' against the Freudian methodology:

Here we seize upon the difference in method between the Freudian approach on the one hand and historical psychology on the other. Freud's point of departure is an intimate experience undergone by the public, which is historically unlocated. The meaning attributed to this experience is then projected onto the work in question regardless of its own sociocultural context. Historical psychology proceeds in the opposite manner.<sup>18</sup>

When Vernant's essay was later published in *Myth and tragedy in ancient Greece* its classical readers seem almost universally to have welcomed its assault on the reductionism of the psychoanalytically-inspired readings of ancient texts. Many of the reviews which appeared on the publication of this collection made a point of celebrating Vernant's debunking of the Freudian Oedipus.<sup>19</sup> Anglo-Saxon readers, predisposed to

<sup>14</sup> Selden asks similar questions about the marginalisation of what he sees as the 'Marx, Nietzsche, Freud' tradition in 'classics and contemporary criticism': Selden (1990).

<sup>15</sup> Vernant (1988a).

<sup>16</sup> Vernant (1988a), 85

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 87.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See, Anon. (1972), Duchemin (1973), Haldane (1973), Lesky (1974), Loraux (1973), Vian (1974), Taplin (1975), Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1986); Miralles (1988), Schamp (1988), Wankenne (1988), Redfield (1991).

be sceptical to theory, seem to have been particularly gratified to have found support for their hostility to psychoanalysis in a figure who stood for all that was associated with Paris intellectualism. Vernant, it would seem, was to be forgiven his allegiance to structuralism as long as he could be enlisted as an opponent of psychoanalysis.

Classicists who were so keen to appropriate Vernant's attack on Freud, however, barely paid lip-service to the rhetorical opposition that Vernant sets up in the quotation above. Vernant's plug for 'historical psychology' fell on deaf ears.<sup>20</sup> For his attack on the Freudian reading is, in fact, framed by an explicit promotion of his own alternative methodology. Indeed, 'Oedipus without the complex' cannot be read in isolation from its companion essay 'Ambiguity and reversal: on the enigmatic structure of *Oedipus Rex*'<sup>21</sup> which appears alongside it in *Myth and tragedy*. 'Ambiguity and reversal' is precisely the application of Vernant's notion of 'historical psychology' which he expounds in his critique of the Freudian reading. The Oedipus who emerges from this ground-breaking essay is not merely post-Freudian, he is in a fundamental way profoundly *anti*-Freudian. Vernant's almost complete occlusion of the sexual motif in 'Ambiguity and reversal' must at the very least be seen as mildly provocative. By shifting the focus of interest away from incest and parricide, Vernant's Oedipus emerges as a paradigm for the competing structures of *political* power. In 'Ambiguity and reversal' Oedipus is a figure trapped between the incompatible social institutions of tyranny and democracy. It is no surprise that Vernant puts such emphasis on the lack of what he calls 'sociocultural' contextualisation in the psychoanalytic reading as it is precisely Oedipus *qua* social/cultural figure who is the object of Vernant's analysis. 'Ambiguity and Reversal' substitutes the Freudian Oedipus as *sexual* subject with the Vernantian Oedipus as *political* subject.

But classicists, I would argue, have profoundly under-read the rhetoric of Vernant's attack on psychoanalysis in 'Oedipus without the complex'. By conveniently assimilating Vernant's position to the anti-theoretical stance of a classical orthodoxy, English-speaking classicists have ignored the politics of Vernant's intervention. Vernant's rebuke of psychoanalysis is a least as much an attack on the apoliticism of the Freudian reading as it is a critique of its ahistoricism. These two issues are, of course, related. But by placing the emphasis so squarely on the charge of anachronism, Vernant's readers failed to do justice to the true radicalism of his anti-Freudian Oedipus. Vernant's objection to psychoanalysis, I would argue, is both more accurately and more interestingly interpreted as a rejection of a depoliticised rather than an anachronistic Oedipus.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> This identification with the term 'historical psychology' immediately announces Vernant's allegiance to the work of Ignace Meyerson who Vernant cites as one of his two mentors along with Louis Gernet. Meyerson's Marxist 'historical psychology' was explicitly hostile to Freudian psychoanalysis. On Vernant and Meyerson see Di Donato (1990), (1995) and Laks (1998).

<sup>21</sup> Vernant (1988b).

<sup>22</sup> I am exploring the Vernantian interpretation of the Oedipus and its relationship to the politics of structuralism at greater length in a forthcoming book, *Athens in Paris*.

If Vernant *has* been as influential as I am suggesting, then many classicists' rejection of psychoanalysis may be based, at the very least, on a partial misunderstanding. At any rate it seems to me that classicists have generally underplayed the question of the relationship between psychoanalytic and broadly-speaking political readings of the ancient world. In the remainder of this paper I want to argue that it is this question, rather than the argument over anachronism, which raises the most interesting issues for a missed dialogue between classics and psychoanalysis. I want to argue that Vernant's rejection of the apoliticism of the Freudian Oedipus occluded a hotly-contested debate within the history of psychoanalysis itself about its own relation to the political. This is a vast subject and this is not the place to involve myself in the highly complex debates about the nature of Freud's political commitment. I want rather to see how an engagement with Sophocles' *Antigone* in the later history of psychoanalysis was at the centre of a debate about the relationship between psychoanalysis and the political.

What would have happened, George Steiner asks, if psychoanalysis were to have taken Antigone rather than Oedipus as its point of departure?<sup>23</sup> If Freud has forever changed the meaning of Sophocles' Oedipus for the twentieth-century, Oedipus' daughter – or should I rather say sister? – seems largely to have escaped the analysts' couch. Antigone, however, re-emerges to play a crucial role in the post-Freudian history of psychoanalysis.<sup>24</sup> In a characteristic Oedipal gesture, one might argue, Freud's intellectual inheritor, Jacques Lacan, bypasses the Freudian Sophoclean moment to ground his analytic vision in his own return to Sophocles. Lacan's engagement with Sophocles' *Antigone* in his *Ethics of psychoanalysis*<sup>25</sup> skips a generation in Freud's Oedipus myth, straining towards a new paradigm of psychoanalysis.<sup>26</sup> But Lacan's rewriting of the Freudian classical canon itself comes under attack in the writings of his own student, the feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray. In her challenge to what she sees as the phallogocentric edifice of psychoanalysis, Irigaray returns to the figure of Antigone to launch an attack on the repressive gender-politics of the analytic establishment.

This debate between these two post-war Parisian figures will be the starting-point of my argument. Lacan and Irigaray's confrontation over the *Antigone* not only marked a crucial turning-point in the history of psychoanalysis and its relationship to feminist thought, it also raises important questions about a whole series of ethical and political issues which arise from reading Sophocles' play. Indeed it is precisely the question of

<sup>23</sup> Steiner (1984) 18. A question asked again by Judith Butler in her recent engagement with *Antigone* and her readers: Butler (2000).

<sup>24</sup> For a psychoanalytically-inspired reading of the *Antigone* by a classicist see Johnson (1997).

<sup>25</sup> Lacan (1997).

<sup>26</sup> The whole question of Lacan's relationship to the Freudian Oedipus is a complex one which has been the subject of much debate in psychoanalytic literature: see Felman (1987). See also Sjöholm on Lacan and *Antigone*: 'Of course Lacan, being a Freudian, does not intend ... to replace the Oedipus paradigm, but he is certainly displacing the stakes of psychoanalysis, shifting from a concern with pathology to a concern with ethics': Sjöholm (2002) 25. My interest here is more in Lacan's investment in the different stages of the *Sophoclean* Oedipal narrative. On Lacan and the *Oedipus at Colonus* see Felman (1987) and Rudnytsky (1987).

a disjunction between the ethical and political planes which structures Lacan and Irigaray's debate.<sup>27</sup> This confrontation, I will argue, provides us with one answer to Steiner's question: if psychoanalysis had taken *Antigone* rather than Oedipus as its point of departure it would have given rise to a more explicitly politicised understanding of the psychoanalytic sexual subject. As Cecilia Sjöholm has put it: 'It is not by chance ... 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*', she concludes, 'is more political and topical than Oedipus'.<sup>28</sup> If classicists, for their part, engaged with this psychoanalytic debate they would have access to one of the most revealing interrogations of the nature of *Antigone*'s political choice.

*Lacan and his ethical Antigone*

Oui, l'éthique avant et au-delà de l'ontologie, de l'État ou de la politique, mais l'éthique aussi au-delà de l'éthique.<sup>29</sup>

Lacan's reading of the *Antigone* appears within the context of his seminar devoted to the *Ethics of psychoanalysis*.<sup>30</sup> As Lacan explains in his introductory session on the *Antigone*:

I told you that I would talk about *Antigone* today. I am not the one who has decreed that *Antigone* is to be the turning point in the field that interests us, namely, ethics. People have been aware of that for a long time. And even those who haven't realised it are not unaware of the fact that there are scholarly debates on the topic. Is there anyone who doesn't evoke *Antigone* whenever there is a question of law that causes conflict in us even though it is acknowledged by the community to be a just law?<sup>31</sup>

Lacan thus places the *Antigone* at the centre of the history of moral and political thought. But his language here is interesting. The slippage in terminology between a

<sup>27</sup> The problem of the relationship between psychoanalysis and the political which I am discussing in this article revolves around an impasse between 'ethical' and 'political' readings of the play. These difficult terms are to a certain extent mutually constitutive but their definition has been at the centre of a controversy about the ideological commitment of structuralist and post-structuralist thought. The debate about whether or not the ethical can be reduced or resolved to the political re-emerged most recently in Derrida's dialogue with the ethicist Lévinas: see Derrida (1997).

<sup>28</sup> Sjöholm (2002) 24.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida (1997) 15: 'Yes an ethics before and beyond ontology, the State and the political, but also an ethics beyond ethics' (my translation).

<sup>30</sup> Lacan's reading of the *Antigone* has recently attracted the attention of several critics: see Guyonard (1992), Lacoue-Labarthe (1991), Julien (1995), Van Haute (1998), Walsh (1999), Rabaté (2001) and Butler (2000). For some readings by classicists see Loraux (1991), Miller (1998), Bollack (1999).

<sup>31</sup> Lacan (1997) 243.

politics and an *ethics* of the *Antigone* will be crucial to Lacan. It will be this gap, this impasse between an ethics and a politics of psychoanalysis, which will be at the centre of my reading of *Antigone*. Lacan's conceptualisation of ethics consciously writes itself in and against a whole tradition of ethical thought – stretching, as he puts it, 'from Aristotle to Freud'.<sup>32</sup> But his search involves a complex manipulation of ethical, moral and political discourse.

Lacan's depoliticising gesture is achieved through a reading of the Sophoclean drama which places the figure of Antigone at the foreground of the play. In Lacan's version there is no room for any further protagonists – this is the tragedy of Antigone and Antigone alone. Creon finds himself utterly marginalised in Lacan's interpretation. In the Lacanian version, it will precisely be the *desire* of Antigone, outside the political context of a struggle of law and authority with Creon, which will provide the basis of Lacan's elaboration of the ethical programme of psychoanalysis.

So Lacan begins by asserting: 'What does one find in the *Antigone*? First of all, one finds Antigone.' Or as the classicist Nicole Loraux has put it: 'It is indeed Antigone, and only her, that Lacan encounters – "the heroine and not necessarily the play" – and I'm not sure that theatre really gets a look in this exclusive encounter'.<sup>33</sup> It may surprise you to find Loraux, a critic who is so often associated with Vernant, engaging with Lacan's reading of the *Antigone*. Loraux, in fact, took part in a high-profile conference on Lacan's relationship to philosophy in 1991.<sup>34</sup> There she opened her paper on Lacan's commentary with this striking statement: 'This should be understood from the outset – and don't forget I speak as a Hellenist – Lacan's reading of the *Antigone* is one of those great works which definitively puts an end to all those pious discourses in all genres which have surrounded Antigone. In order to understand Antigone it now impossible to ignore [Lacan]'.<sup>35</sup> Loraux's mission-statement for Lacanian Hellenism culminates in her assertion: 'the power of this reading makes itself felt to me as to every lover of Lacan's *Ethics of psychoanalysis*'.<sup>36</sup> Nicole Loraux – and remember she is 'speaking as a Hellenist' as she reminds us, as an 'amoureuse', a lover, of the *Ethics of psychoanalysis*! How classicists might gasp .... How may they gasp again when they read Loraux's introduction to the paperback parallel text of the *Antigone* which has recently appeared in the *Belles Lettres* collection.<sup>37</sup> Apart from her own texts, Lacan's seminar is practically the only secondary reference on the *Antigone*, cited as it is on almost every page of her eight page introduction! Can one imagine a *Loeb* where Lacan would become *the* primary reference of classical scholarship?

But Loraux's enthusiasm for Lacan's reading of the *Antigone* should not be taken altogether at face value. Entitled 'Antigone sans théâtre', Loraux's essay can be read

<sup>32</sup> Lacan (1997) 9.

<sup>33</sup> Loraux (1991) 42 (my translation).

<sup>34</sup> Later published as Avtonomova et al. (1991).

<sup>35</sup> Loraux (1991) 42.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Loraux (1997).



as a polite call to repoliticise psychoanalysis' appropriation of antiquity. I want to suggest that Loraux's critique of Lacan, her accusation that he leaves theatre out of the *Antigone*, can be read as a criticism of Lacan's lack of attention to the politics of Athenian drama – when Loraux tries to put the 'théâtre' back into Lacan's commentary she finds herself reintroducing the 'city' into the 'psyche' of Lacan's *Antigone*.<sup>38</sup>

So if Loraux begins her analysis by praising Lacan for moving away from the 'pious discourse' on the *Antigone*, she nevertheless shrinks back from endorsing the outright rejection of the Hegelian reading – Lacan's primary target in his commentary. For Hegel's reading of the *Antigone* is absolutely central to understanding the politics of Lacan's commitment to an *ethical* reading of the *Antigone*.<sup>39</sup> It is precisely against the dialectical reading of this play that Lacan's analysis is written. Hegel's seminal interpretation of Sophocles in the *Phenomenology of spirit* dramatises a clash between family and state, the individual and the *polis*. Hegel's meditation on the nature of Antigone's ethical consciousness is crucial to understanding the passage between ethics and politics in Lacan. For Hegel denies Antigone full ethical consciousness which aims at the universal. For Hegel's Antigone, in other words there is no accession to the political. Lacan starts from a different premise. He defines his project as a search for what he calls 'le pur désir', 'pure desire'. And it is Lacan's *pur désir* which is explicitly at odds with the 'morality' of Hegel's dialectical reading. So Lacan comments:

In effect, *Antigone* reveals to us the line of sight that defines desire. This line of sight focuses on an image that possesses a mystery which up till now has never been articulated, since it forces you to close your eyes at the very moment you look at it. Yet that image is at the centre of tragedy, since it is the fascinating image of Antigone herself. We all know very well that over and beyond the dialogue and the moralizing arguments, it is Antigone herself who fascinates us, Antigone in her unbearable splendour. She has a quality which both attracts us and startles us, in the sense of intimidates us; this terrible self-willed victim disturbs us.<sup>40</sup>

Lacan demands that his readers not confuse his ethics with pre-existing moral discourse: 'We are now in a position', he tells us, 'to be able to discuss the text of *Antigone* with a view to finding something other than a lesson in morality.'<sup>41</sup> As we saw above, Lacan wants to prise apart his ethics from 'la morale', and it is precisely in this space that he wants to construct his innovative programme.

<sup>38</sup> For Loraux's own subtle engagement with psychoanalysis in her readings of the ancient world see Loraux (1987).

<sup>39</sup> Hegel's reading of the *Antigone* spans several of his major works although the most important discussions appear in the *Philosophy of right*, the *Aesthetics* and the *Phenomenology*. Hegel's writings on tragedy are conveniently assembled in Paolucci and Paolucci (1962). The bibliography on Hegel's *Antigone* is vast. See Steiner (1984), Alegria (1995), Menke (1996), Donougho (1989), Shklar (1971), Conklin (1997). For feminist perspectives see Butler (2000), Starret (1996) and Mills (1996).

<sup>40</sup> Lacan (1997) 247.

<sup>41</sup> Lacan (1997) 292.

But as Loraux puts it:

Assigning to Antigone this position beyond the limit, Lacan knows or wants us to suppose – and he gets pleasure from not pointing it out directly – is tantamount to forbidding any return to Antigone *and* Creon, a couple which is Hegelian, for sure, but not *purely* Hegelian. Lacan is only concerned with Antigone and prefers to exile the all too human Creon from tragedy – from Antigone’s tragedy. ... It’s beautiful. ... But this would mean that one would have to stop reading the tragedy at the moment of the heroine’s exit from the stage, or at the very least before the arrival of the messenger so one could ignore the second passion of the *Antigone*, that of Creon, where the name of Antigone is not once spoken.<sup>42</sup>

So as Loraux reveals, Lacan will have to do away with a good third of Sophocles’ drama if he wants his interpretation to stick.<sup>43</sup> The almost complete absence of reference to *Antigone’s* tragedy in the last 300 lines of the play makes a difference to Lacan’s reading of Antigone’s ‘fascination’. More important than this distortion of the tragic narrative, however, are the consequences of Lacan’s reading for his ethics. Loraux’s interjection ‘C’est beau’, ‘It’s beautiful’, has perhaps more significance than her subsequent remarks allow. For the whole project of Lacan’s reading is predicated on a fundamental interdependency of ethics and aesthetics. As Lacan phrases it:

The violent illumination, the glow of beauty, coincides with the moment of transgression or of realization of Antigone’s *Atê*, which is the characteristic that I have chiefly insisted on and which introduced us to the exemplary function of Antigone’s problem in allowing us to determine the function of certain effects. It is in that direction that a certain relationship to a beyond of the central field is established for us, but it is also that which prevents us from seeing its true nature, that which dazzles us and separates us from its true function.<sup>44</sup>

Lacan’s ethics are rather what Lacoue-Labarthe will coin an ‘*esthétique*’.<sup>45</sup> For what is at stake in Lacan’s heroisation of Antigone is precisely the *beauty* of her choice. A beauty which is not assimilated to any particular good. In Paul Allen Miller’s words: ‘For Lacan, it is the beauty of Antigone’s choice of a Good beyond all recognizable goods, beyond the pleasure principle, that gives her character its monumental status and makes her a model for an ethics of creation rather than conformity.’

In order for Antigone’s choice to signify within the economics of a Lacanian ethics, Antigone must be removed from any dialectic with Creon. To see Antigone’s choice

<sup>42</sup> Loraux (1991) 43.

<sup>43</sup> In a recent book entitled *La mort d’Antigone: la tragédie de Creon*, Bollack argues that Creon is the true subject of the *Antigone’s* tragedy. Lacan comes under explicit attack in Bollack (1999) 98–104.

<sup>44</sup> Lacan (1997) 281.

<sup>45</sup> Lacoue-Labarthe (1991) 31. For the Vernantian take on the aesthetics of death see Vernant (1989).

as pitting one value up against another, one *dikê* in conflict with another, would be fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of her tragedy. As Van Haute puts it: 'According to [Lacan], what is at stake here is not a conflict between two contrary principles, each of which can make claim to equal justice or injustice, it is in fact, says Lacan, a matter of a conflict between, on the one hand, Creon, who makes a mistake, and on the other, Antigone, who is found, as it were, *jenseits von Gut und Böse*.'<sup>46</sup> Lacan can, of course, rest his case on the notorious difficulty of constructing a convincing discourse of Antigone's familial piety. We know well that Antigone's *differential* treatment of her family members and her uncomfortable hierarchy of family ties has made it difficult to assimilate her cause to a simple model of the *dikê* of the *oikos*. Her speech at 905ff. is, of course, at the centre of this controversy:

οὐ γάρ ποτ' οὔτ' ἄν εἰ τέκν' ὦν μήτηρ ἔφυν,  
 οὔτ' εἰ πόσις μοι κατθανῶν ἐτήκετο,  
 βία πολιτῶν τόνδ' ἄν ἠρόμην πόνον.  
 τίνοσ νόμου δὴ ταῦτα πρὸς χάριν λέγω;  
 πόσις μὲν ἄν μοι κατθανόντος ἄλλος ἦν,  
 καὶ παῖς ἀπ' ἄλλου φωτός, εἰ τοῦδ' ἤμπλακον,  
 μητρὸς δ' ἐν Ἄιδου καὶ πατρὸς κεκευθότου,  
 οὐκ ἔστ' ἀδελφὸς ὅστις ἄν βλάστοι ποτέ.<sup>47</sup>

Never, had I been a mother of children, or if a husband had been mouldering in death, would I have taken this task upon me in the city's despite. What law, ye ask, is my warrant for that word? The husband lost, another might have been found, and child from another to replace the first-born; but father and mother hidden with Hades, no brother's life could ever bloom for me again. (tr. Jebb)

Hegel's well-known interpretation of this passage not only sets up a dialectic between human and divine laws but also establishes sexual difference as the basis of its moral thought. So Hegel writes:

The loss of the brother is therefore irreparable to the sister and her duty towards him is the highest ... The brother is the member of the Family in whom Spirit becomes an individuality which turns towards another sphere, and passes over into the consciousness of universality ... He passes from the divine law, in whose sphere he lived, over to the human law. But the sister becomes, or the wife remains, the guardian of the divine law. In this way the two sexes overcome their (merely) natural being and appear in ethical significance, as diverse beings who share between two distinctions belonging to ethical substance.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Van Haute (1998) 111.

<sup>47</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone* 905–13.

<sup>48</sup> Hegel (1977) 275.

Where for Hegel what had been at stake was a fundamental collision between the laws of the gods and those of the *polis*,<sup>49</sup> Lacan exiles the gods from his tragic world. As Lacan phrases it, 'It isn't simply the defence of the sacred rights of the dead and of the family, nor is it all that we have been told about Antigone's saintliness.'<sup>50</sup> Religion and the gods play a complicated role in Lacanian psychoanalysis. From the central role of the law of the father to Lacan's assertion that 'les dieux, c'est bien certain, appartiennent au réel',<sup>51</sup> it would be possible to reflect at length on (Lacanian) psychoanalysis' complex negotiation of theology.<sup>52</sup> What interests me here, however, is how Lacan's secularising gesture removes his Antigone from the ethical framework set up by Hegel. Lacan's reading of the *Antigone* does, indeed, follow others in marking a break with the theologising interpretations of a nineteenth-century 'pious Sophocles'. And yet, it is interesting that Lacan should have turned to the very text which for Hegel had epitomised a debate between ethics and religion to found his radically secularised ethical programme.

But despite his rejection of the Hegelian theological reading, Lacan's emphasis on this passage in particular is significant. For it was Hegel's insistence on the importance of the brother–sister relation which sparked a controversy about the very text of the *Antigone*. For much to the embarrassment of its later nineteenth-century readers, Hegel not merely acknowledged this passage; he made these problematic lines the very corner-stone of his analysis of ethical consciousness in the *Phenomenology of spirit*. For Hegel grounds his whole thesis of the relationship between ethical choice and sexual difference on Antigone's privileging of her sororial duty. But reacting against an orthodox Hegelian reading of this passage in 1827, Goethe in conversations with Eckermann famously asserts: 'There appears in the *Antigone* a passage which has always struck me as a flaw, and of which I would give anything, if a competent philologist would demonstrate to us, it was an interpolation and spurious.'<sup>53</sup> Goethe's remarks entered into the hotly contested philological debate between August Ludwig Jacob who had argued in 1821 that this passage was spurious and August Boeckh who in 1824 followed his friend and colleague Hegel's emphasis on the Antigone–Polynices relation and pronounced these lines authentic.<sup>54</sup> By 1888 Richard Jebb can write in his commentary on the *Antigone* – a commentary which otherwise adopts a strikingly Hegelian interpretation (an influence duly acknowledged in introduction): 'Few problems of Greek tragedy have been more discussed than the question of whether these lines or some of them are spurious.' And Jebb goes on to say 'I confess that, after long

<sup>49</sup> On Hegel, *Antigone* and religion see Steiner (1984) and Starret (1996).

<sup>50</sup> Lacan (1997) 255.

<sup>51</sup> Lacan (1991) 58. Indeed it is precisely around this equation of the 'Laws of the Gods' and the Real that Lacan's most successful political interpreter constructs his own reading of Lacan's *Antigone*: see Žižek (1988), (1992).

<sup>52</sup> On ethics, religion and (Freudian) psychoanalysis see Wallwork (1991). On the controversy surrounding Freud's Judaism see Yerushalmi (1991), on which see Derrida (1995). On Lacan's complex relationship to Judaism see Haddad (1994) and Harasym (1998).

<sup>53</sup> Eckermann (1950) 476.

<sup>54</sup> See the appendix in Jebb's edition of the *Antigone*. On Boeckh and his vision of a new philology see Selden (1990).

thought, I cannot bring myself to believe that Sophocles wrote the lines 905–12. The composition of these lines', he concludes, 'is unworthy of Sophocles.' It is interesting that despite Jebb's obvious sympathy with the Goethian distaste for this passage his scepticism is exiled to a scholarly note rather than forming the basis of a textual emendation. Indeed, as these lines are quoted by Aristotle, Jebb acknowledges that the argument in favour of interpolation rests on pretty shaky ground. So in the Jebb version, at least, Goethe's dream of the 'competent philologist' coming to the rescue of Sophoclean morality remains unrealised. Is this an instance of the 'science' of philology resisting the dominant moral ideology of its time? Or is Jebb's reluctance to omit this passage the trace of his residual Hegelianism? At the very least the nexus of debates around these problematic lines of the *Antigone* shows how embedded in philosophical questioning the philological enterprise has always been. Well before Nietzsche and Wilamowitz the difficult but intense dialogue between philology and philosophy was already in full swing.

Lacan recounts this debate between Hegel and Goethe with some amusement. And citing Goethe's disapproval of this passage he writes: 'The sage from Weimar finds it all a bit strange.' But, he remarks 'It is important that some madness always strike the wisest of discourses.'<sup>55</sup> And Lacan concludes: 'In the end, precisely because it carries with it the suggestion of scandal, this passage is of interest to us.'<sup>56</sup> But for Lacan, unlike Hegel, far from representing a pious female 'ethical substance', the gaps in Antigone's logic of the *oikos* are tantamount to introducing the fundamental tautology of her existence: 'My brother is what he is, and it is because he is what he is and only he can be what he is, that I move forward to the fatal limit.' So it is that 'Antigone invokes no other right than that one, a right that emerges in the language of the ineffaceable character of what is – ineffaceable, that is, from the moment when the emergent signifier freezes it like a fixed object in spite of the flood of possible transformations. What is, is, and it is to this, to this surface, that the unshakeable, unyielding position of Antigone is fixed.'<sup>57</sup> In Lacan's reading, Antigone's choice to bury Polynices becomes the ultimate ethical action precisely because it is disinherited of any *moral* logic. But how resonant *is* this of the Hegelian Antigone? For it is Hegel's Antigone who is famously denied the ability to understand moral logic, to make an ethical choice. In Lacan it is the absolutist, tautologous, self-referential nature of Antigone's motivation – a motivation without motive – which is precisely what makes it an ethics. So he writes:

Because he is abandoned to the dogs and the birds and will end his appearance on earth in impurity, with his scattered limbs an offence to heaven and earth, it can be seen that Antigone's position represents the radical limit that affirms the unique value of his being without reference to any content, to whatever good or evil Polyneices may have done, or whatever he may be subjected to.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Lacan (1997) 255.

<sup>56</sup> Lacan (1997) 256.

<sup>57</sup> Lacan (1997) 279.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

But Lacan continues:

The unique value involved is essentially that of language. That purity, that separation of being from the characteristics of the historical drama that he has lived through, is precisely the limit or the *ex nihilo* to which Antigone is attached. It is nothing more than the break that the presence of language inaugurates in the life of man.<sup>59</sup>

In Antigone's relation to her brother, Lacan's ethics of psychoanalysis bring us back to language, to discourse, to the splitting of the self through man's encounter with the symbolic. Many classicists have also commented on the necessary inter-relationship between language and the politics and ethics of the *Antigone*.<sup>60</sup> One could think of how the discourse of *dikê* becomes profoundly destabilised in the clash of violent rhetorics of Antigone and Creon or how the language of duty decomposes around the different models of political and familial responsibility debated by Creon and Haemon. But Lacan's rejection of the Hegelian dialectic, of any kind of dialogue between Creon and Antigone, indeed of *any* context for Antigone's discourse, makes his a vision of Sophoclean drama where language rebounds in a self-referential echoing with no connection to social or political debate. Lacan's 'Antigone sans théâtre' is precisely an *Antigone* removed from the theatre of language, from the politics of drama.

By founding his ethics of psychoanalysis on the notion of 'pure desire', Lacan's anti-moralism recalls a familiar discourse of structuralism. For it is precisely this tendency of structuralist discourse to make the 'linguistic turn', as far removed from any social or ideological context, which has made it so suspect to its politically engaged critics.<sup>61</sup> Lacan would seem to perform this tendency almost to its limits in his reading of the *Antigone* under the sign of an ethics of psychoanalysis. For the ethics of *pure* desire would in a sense seem to be the personification of a double rejection of politics by the joint forces of structuralist and psychoanalytic discourse. But it is precisely at the moment when a system professes purity that it is the most vulnerable to political abuse. In other words, Lacan's model of a pure, contentless ethics, can all too easily let in all kinds of dubious ideological contents through the back door.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See Goldhill (2000), Loraux (1986).

<sup>61</sup> Butler (2000) 3 makes a similar point about the removal of Lacan's symbolic from the social in the context of her discussion of kinship: 'Lacan provides a reading of Antigone in his *Seminar VII* in which she is understood to border the spheres of the imaginary and the symbolic and where she is understood, in fact, to figure the inauguration of the symbolic, the spheres of the laws and norms that govern the accession to speech and speakability. This regulation takes place precisely through instantiating certain kin relations as symbolic norms. As symbolic, these norms are not precisely social, and in this way Lacan departs from Hegel, we might say, by making a certain idealized notion of kinship into a presupposition of cultural intelligibility. At the same time Lacan continues a certain Hegelian legacy by separating that idealized sphere of kinship, the symbolic from the sphere of the social. Hence, for Lacan, kinship is rarefied as an enabling linguistic structure, a presupposition of cultural intelligibility, and thus removed from the sphere of the social.'

But not only does his reading leave itself open to dangerous political manipulation, Lacan's own discourse of pure desire is hardly a politics-free zone. Even were one to accept Lacan's distancing of the *Antigone* from the moral plane, it hardly seems right, in the context of Sophocles' drama, to claim that Antigone's desire is entirely *pure*. In fact, it is a paradox of Lacan's reading that this psychoanalytic interpretation pays so little attention to the continuing cycle of the incestuous narrative of the house of Oedipus.<sup>62</sup> Antigone's decision to bury her brother and accept a certain death is not just the performance of an unconditional ethics, it also represents a rejection of normative patriarchal structures. Not only does Antigone as a woman stand up to the authority of her *kyrios* Creon, but her decision to die also denies generational continuity through her marriage to Haemon. Simultaneously the daughter and sister of her father, Antigone rejects the possibility of a return to normative genealogy by choosing her brother above her husband. As the critic Guyomard puts it:

A paradox emerges. The Lacanian eulogy of Antigone is the application of his theory of desire ... but it is also at the same time a hidden eulogy of incest. Is the pure desire which Antigone personifies an incestuous one? Is its very purity the sign of incest?<sup>63</sup>

In this respect Lacan is again strangely Hegelian. For it is Hegel who famously insists on the brother–sister relationship as representing *the* familial relationship without desire. So Hegel writes 'An unmixed (*unvermischte*) intransitive relationship, however, holds between brother and sister. They are the same blood which, however, in them has entered into a condition of stable equilibrium. They therefore stand in no such relation as husband and wife, they do not desire one another.'<sup>64</sup> For Lacan, of course, Antigone's choice to bury her brother is all about desire. But Lacan seems to repeat the curious blindness of the Hegelian text to the problem of incest. In their attempt to universalise the enigma of Antigone's being, both Hegel and Lacan have to ignore the specific oddity of Antigone's relationship to her brother. For Antigone's brother is not any brother, as Sophocles' text makes clear from its very opening sentence; Antigone's relationship to her siblings is from the very start overdetermined – they are not merely *adelphoi* they are *autadelphoi* – doubly related, the product of the over-investment of blood relations in the family of Oedipus.

Incest is not, however, entirely excluded from Lacan's version of events, but as Guyomard goes on to demonstrate, Lacan's theory of incest is intimately bound up with his discourse of *female* desire. So Guyomard continues, this alliance between pure desire and incest is

<sup>62</sup> This point is also made by Butler (2000) 14–15.

<sup>63</sup> Guyomard (1992) 59 (my translation).

<sup>64</sup> Hegel (1977) 268.

an uncomfortable conclusion which Lacan avoids. He does, however, explicitly raise the question of incest, but it is an incest which is forced upon the figure of the mother. In order to maintain a theory of a unique and unifying signifier, so closely aligned to his theory of the phallus that it is impossible to talk about one without implying the other (a theory which is itself upheld by the place of the father, and here that is to say Oedipus), the impurity, the confusion and the rupture are attributed to the mother and the maternal figure.<sup>65</sup>

So after having identified Antigone as the incarnation of pure desire, Lacan argues:

Think about it. What happens to her desire? Shouldn't it be the desire of the Other and be linked to the desire of the mother? The text alludes to the fact that the desire of the mother is the origin of everything. The desire of the mother is the founding desire of the whole structure, the one that brought into the world the unique offspring that are Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone and Ismene; but it is also a criminal desire. Thus at the origin of tragedy and of humanism we find once again an impasse that is the same as Hamlet's except strangely enough even more radical.<sup>66</sup>

In a swift gesture then, Lacan manages to exile all that is impure in Antigone's incestuous resolve to the crimes of the mother – the mother as the origin of both creation and destruction. The mother who gives birth inevitably also gives death to her children. In the process, Oedipus becomes innocent, excused of his responsibility for his own incest. The whole weight of the crime rests on Jocasta's shoulders. In an analysis which otherwise acknowledges the importance of gender politics as a frame for reading Lacan's discussion of the *Antigone*, one of Lacan's most recent critics, Jean-Michel Rabaté, interestingly tries to evade this difficult passage. So Rabaté claims 'The one problematic assertion made by Lacan concerns what he sees as the origins of the tragic "evil" or *Atê*, namely the desire of the mother.'<sup>67</sup> But after having quoted the passage I cited above, Rabaté merely retorts 'We should not attack Lacan for unduly blaming poor Jocasta!',<sup>68</sup> and goes on to discuss another issue. Why should one 'not attack' Lacan? Why does Rabaté think this is a sufficient commentary on a passage which he admits is central to the construction of Lacan's ethics? Rabaté's coyness shows us, again, how resistant many Lacanians remain to exposing the difficult ideological programmes that lie behind Lacan's vision of the ethics of psychoanalysis.<sup>69</sup>

But as a literary critic, Rabaté's complicity is all the more important for understanding Lacan's investment in Sophoclean drama. Lacan insists that his interpretation

<sup>65</sup> Guyomard (1992) 59–60.

<sup>66</sup> Lacan (1997) 283.

<sup>67</sup> Rabaté (2001) 83.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Walsh (1999) has a longer exegesis of this passage. Despite her feminist inclinations, Walsh too remains an apologist for Lacan's reading of Jocasta's desire.



is supported by the Sophoclean text – ‘the text alludes to the fact’, he retorts. It was certainly not beyond Sophocles to dramatise the destructive force of female desire: one need only think of the violent narratives of the *Trachiniae* or the *Electra*. However, Jocasta is nowhere portrayed in the *O.T.* as the active agent of Oedipus’ incest. The tragedy of the *O.T.* takes form precisely in Jocasta’s and Oedipus’ mutual ignorance of their actions. The Lacanian version, on the other hand, is predicated on a radical disparity of agency and responsibility – for Lacan, Jocasta has consciously acted out her desire on an unsuspecting Oedipus.

In other words, Antigone’s pure desire has its mirror image, its supporting opposite, in the impure desire of her mother. We have come back here to the most classic economy of misogyny. Antigone’s pure, sexless desire to care for her brother is held up in opposition to the active, dangerous, erotic desire of her mother Jocasta and her original sin of incest. As Guyomard puts it: ‘The feminine sees itself incarnated in its two most familiar traits: Eve, the temptress whose diabolical desire seduces man and precipitates his fall and the virgin, a new Eve, immaculate mother who saves man by bringing without either sex or temptation a divine child into the world.’<sup>70</sup>

The pure desire of Antigone, then, turns out to have a surprisingly literal meaning. Despite his efforts to escape Hegel’s Christianising reading, Lacan posits a virginal martyr at the centre of its construction of an ethics of psychoanalysis. In introducing the concept of an ethics of pure desire in his commentary on the *Ethics of psychoanalysis* the critic Julien is at pains to separate the notion of ‘*désir pur*’ from that of ‘*pur désir*’. As he puts it: ‘This is not a pure desire in the sense that one could make a judgement between pure and impure desires.’<sup>71</sup> For Lacan, he insists, there is no moral discrimination of desires, no desire which would be more or less impure than another. Julien’s reading, however, contrasts strikingly with Lacan’s taxonomies of female desire in the *Ethics of psychoanalysis*. Lacan’s amoral ethics is nevertheless predicated on a surprisingly traditional sexual morality. His formulation of a contentless ethics, then, could not be more disingenuous. When Lacan exiles politics and morality in the name of anti-humanism, it is only to return to the most pernicious and exclusionary rhetorics of humanist discourse. The pure desire of Antigone is complicit with the most traditional of humanist fantasies. *Man* remains very much at the centre of Lacan’s world.

Lacan’s reading of the *Antigone* in the *Ethics of psychoanalysis*, then, raises many questions about the political consequences of a Lacanian ethics of psychoanalysis. And it is precisely in the context of this dialogue over the *Antigone* that Luce Irigaray will find one of her most forceful denunciations of the political blindness of the ethics of psychoanalysis. By opening up a dialogue with Hegel around the *Antigone*, Irigaray puts the politics of this play firmly back on the agenda for psychoanalysis. Irigaray’s feminist critique of the phallogocentric bias of the edifice of psychoanalysis brings us straight back to the hidden ideologies of the Lacanian reading.

<sup>70</sup> Guyomard (1992) 62.

<sup>71</sup> Julien (1995) 107.

*Antigone's vicious circle: Irigaray and Hegel*

In the context of Lacan, Irigaray is not one feminist critique amongst others but rather *the very locus classicus* of a feminist engagement with the discourse of psychoanalysis. For Irigaray's critique of phallogentrism comes from the heart of the Lacanian institution of psychoanalysis. Originally her doctoral thesis, Irigaray's *Speculum of the other woman*, in which her Antigone essay is published, was responsible for her expulsion from Lacan's *École freudienne*.

Irigaray's critique of the Hegelian *Antigone* will help us articulate many of the questions which emerged from Lacan's *Ethics of psychoanalysis*. For it is precisely against the apolitical paradigm of the *Antigone* that Irigaray's analysis is written.<sup>72</sup> Irigaray makes this agenda explicit in *Thinking the difference*: 'With regard to civil rights and responsibilities, I would like to return once again to the character of Antigone, because of her relevance to our present situation, and also because she is used today to diminish women's role and political responsibility.' For *Antigone* she continues:

According to the most frequent interpretations – mythical, metaphorical and ahistorical interpretations, as well as those that denote an eternal feminine – Antigone is a young woman who opposes political power, despising governors and governments. Antigone is a sort of young anarchist, on a first-name basis with the Lord, whose divine enthusiasm leads her to anticipate her own death rather than to assume her share of responsibility in the here and now, and thus also in the order of the polis. Antigone wants to destroy civil order for the sake of a rather suicidal familial and religious pathos, which only her innocent, virginal youth can excuse or perhaps even make attractive.<sup>73</sup>

In Irigaray's version, Lacan's beautiful virginal figure, seductive in her innocence, is seductive precisely because she allows men to exile her from the civil sphere. But as Irigaray goes on to claim:

Antigone is nothing like that. She is young, true. But she is neither an anarchist nor suicidal, nor unconcerned with governing ... It suits a great many people to say that women are not in government because they do not want to govern. But Antigone governs as far as she is permitted.<sup>74</sup>

But Irigaray's appeal for the civil rights of women in *Thinking the difference* is based on her earlier reading of the *Antigone* in the *Speculum*. Here, through a rereading of Hegel's *Antigone*, Irigaray retrieves Antigone from the role in which she is cast by

<sup>72</sup> On Irigaray's *Antigone* see Whitford (1991), Chanter (1995) and Stone (2002).

<sup>73</sup> Irigaray (1994) 67–8.

<sup>74</sup> Irigaray (1994) 68.

Hegel in his reading of Sophocles' play, as the other of reason, ethics and knowledge.<sup>75</sup> The focus of Irigaray's analysis is Hegel's denial of Antigone's 'consciousness'; in the Hegelian version, although Antigone acts ethically, she does not know, indeed is congenitally incapable of knowing, it. Irigaray places as an epigraph to her reading of Hegel's *Antigone* a passage of Hegelian sexual biology:

On the one hand the uterus in the male is reduced to a mere gland, while on the other, the male testicle in the female remains enclosed within the ovary, fails to emerge into opposition, and does not become an independent and active cerebrality. The clitoris, moreover, is inactive feeling in general; in the male on the other hand, it has its counterpart in active sensibility, the swelling vital, the effusion of blood into the corpora cavernosa and the meshes of the spongy tissue of urethra ... On account of this difference therefore, the male is the active principle; as the female remains in her undeveloped unity, she constitutes the principle of conception.<sup>76</sup>

She will go on to show how Hegel's notion of ethical consciousness is inextricably bound up with this vision of the material sexual body. In other words, Irigaray shows up the naturalising discourse of Hegel's ethico-political thinking. The Hegelian reading places woman on the side of nature, outside the civic sphere. Such a reading, however, presupposes a deeply ideological reading of the 'natural'. Hegel's assertion that the reason that Antigone 'does not attain to *consciousness* of [what is the ethical], or to the objective existence of it [is] because the law of the Family is an implicit, inner essence which is not exposed to the daylight of consciousness, but remains an inner feeling'<sup>77</sup> is predicated precisely on his vision of biology. In her analysis of a Hegelian ethics, Irigaray will reveal their profound implication in a self-contradictory logic of sexual difference. So Irigaray comments:

We must go back to the decisive ethical moment which saw the blow struck producing a wound that no discourse has closed simply ... A dark potentiality that has always been on the watch comes suddenly into play when the deed is done: it catches the consciousness of self in the act – the act of also being, or having the *unconsciousness* which remains alien to it but yet plays a major role in the decision consciousness takes. Thus the public offender who has killed turns out to be the father, and the queen who he has wedded is the mother. But the purest fault is that committed by the ethical consciousness, which knew in advance what law and power it was disobeying – that is to say, necessarily, the fault committed by femininity. For if the ethical essence in its divine, unconscious, female side,

<sup>75</sup> Chanter (1995) 81.

<sup>76</sup> Hegel (1977) 281, quoted in Irigaray (1985) 214.

<sup>77</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of spirit*, quoted in Chanter (1995) 89.

remains obscure, its prescriptions on the human, masculine, communal side are exposed to full light. *And nothing here can excuse the crime or minimise the punishment.* And in its burial, in its decline to ineffectiveness and pure pathos, the feminine must recognise the full measure of its guilt.<sup>78</sup>

But as Irigaray goes on to comment: ‘*What an amazing vicious circle in a single syllogistic system. Whereby the unconscious, while remaining unconscious, is yet supposed to know the laws of a consciousness – which is permitted to remain ignorant of it – and will become even more repressed as a result of failing to respect those laws.*’<sup>79</sup> In the Hegelian version, the female is both on the side of the unconscious and on the side of the guilty. Determined by biology to passivity, woman is at the same time identified with subversive activity by her society. As Hegel puts it:

Since the community only gets an existence through its interference with the happiness of the Family, and by dissolving [individual] self-consciousness into the universal, it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy – womankind in general. Womankind – the everlasting irony of the community (*die ewige Ironie des Gemeinwesen*) – changes by intrigue the universal end of government into the private end, transforms the universal act into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family.<sup>80</sup>

It is in violating the laws of the community that Antigone is pushed to its margins, and yet her very action of rebellion is supposed to be unconscious and, therefore, one would assume, beyond responsibility to the law. Antigone’s action is, thus, doubly marginalised by the *polis* – its other, both as an *a*-political *and* as an *anti*-political action. For Hegel, woman combines within her this double and utterly inconsistent threat. Irigaray, on the other hand, wants to repoliticise Antigone’s choice by bringing it precisely back into the realm of the conscious, of the civic. In Chanter’s words, in her analysis of the *Antigone* Irigaray shows us ‘how it is necessary to create a symbolic order for women that will not only subtend their civil rights, but will also call for a new conception of the civic realm, one that takes account of sexual identity’.<sup>81</sup> In Irigaray’s interpretation, Hegel removes Antigone from the symbolic order and thus denies her the possibility of significance in the political world. Irigaray’s reading show us the necessity of ‘question[ing] again the foundations of our symbolic order in mythology and in tragedy, because they deal with a landscape which installs itself in the imagination and then, all of a sudden becomes law’.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Irigaray (1985) 222–3.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Hegel (1977) 288.

<sup>81</sup> Chanter (1995) 125.

<sup>82</sup> Baruch and Serrano (1988) 159.

Irigaray's challenge to Hegel, then, is in an important way also a direct challenge to Lacan. Although Lacan wants to place his reading under the sign of a radical anti-Hegelianism, Irigaray's analysis shows how complicit it remains with the premises of a Hegelian vision of sexual difference. By making Antigone the spokeswoman of the unconscious ethics of psychoanalysis Lacan ends up by confirming the Hegelian dialectic it wishes to subvert – as Lacan puts it himself elsewhere: 'Everybody is Hegelian without knowing it.'<sup>83</sup> As the representative of an a/anti-political ethics, Antigone ends up by adopting the same antithetical position to Creon that she does in the Hegelian version. So the anti-political agenda of Lacan's ethical programme is just one more way of removing Antigone from the political scene. Lacan's anti-humanism remains utterly steeped in a humanist conception of political *man*.

As Lacan's rebellious disciple, Irigaray wants to make a Creon out of Lacan. Although Lacan repeatedly identifies himself with Antigone, for Irigaray he is the ultimate representative of male authority. After all, she was, herself, at the receiving end of Lacan's institutional might. When Irigaray wrote her doctoral thesis she was effectively expelled from the Lacanian *polis*. For all its desire to appropriate the 'feminine', psychoanalysis remains on the side of Creon, on the side of patriarchy. Moreover, Lacan's highly problematic formulation of a theory of female desire will find itself repeating the same '*admirable cercle vicieux*' that Irigaray uncovered at the heart of the Hegelian analysis. As critics argue over the slippage between the biological and symbolic functioning of the 'phallus' in Lacan's work, Irigaray's reading of Hegel's anatomy alerts us to the always already mutually implicative force of these categories. Lacan's representation of Antigone, as we saw above, is already fully implicated in his theorisation of the nature of female *eros*. Irigaray's analysis shows us how psychoanalysis' discussion of the 'unconscious' will always be profoundly caught up in this political debate. As the debate continues to rage over the Lacanian contribution to feminism,<sup>84</sup> Lacan's *Antigone*, so often neglected by these polemics, can be seen to represent a uniquely privileged moment in such a controversy. Despite its protestations to the contrary, it is precisely at the moment when (Lacanian) psychoanalysis wants to profess its distance from ideology that it ends up performing its most ideologically motivated gestures.

As Antigone wages her battle with Creon over the body of Polynices, so psychoanalysis has waged its own battle about the political over the body of Antigone. Where Vernant had rejected psychoanalysis and its apolitical reading of Oedipus, psychoanalysts themselves returned to the figure of Oedipus' daughter to confront the very question of their a- or even anti-politicism. *Antigone* has long occupied a privileged position in European political thought. From Hegel to Jean Anouilh, the reception of this play has occupied a central position in the debates about the ideologies of modernity.<sup>85</sup> These political readings have repeatedly hinged on the question of the

<sup>83</sup> Lacan (1978) 93.

<sup>84</sup> See Gallop (1982), (1985), Wright (2000).

<sup>85</sup> See Steiner (1984).

meaning of Antigone's opposition to the state. The psychoanalytic debate I have been tracing lends a new dimension to this legacy. By analysing an impasse between an ethics and a politics of (the) Antigone, the Lacanian and Irigarayan readings question what Antigone's choice represents by interrogating the very representative function of Antigone's actions.<sup>86</sup> Where (new) historicist readings of this play have repeatedly highlighted the difficulty of establishing any secure version of the political meaning of this play for fifth-century Athens, the psychoanalytical debate has focused on the very difficulty of understanding Antigone's deeds from the perspective of the political. By mapping Antigone's opposition to Creon onto a debate about the relationship between sexual difference and political consciousness, psychoanalysis exposes how these terms have all too often become naturalised in so-called political readings of this play.

I would argue that classicists who followed Vernant's lead in rejecting the insights of psychoanalysis for their readings of Greek tragedy, have denied themselves access to one of the most illuminating debates surrounding the question of Antigone's political choice. The historically aware, politically sensitive reading of Greek tragedy which has so often been held up in opposition to the psychoanalytic reading has much to learn from this debate. Far from being self-evident, the premises of such 'historical' and 'political' readings of antiquity have to be held up to scrutiny. And the psychoanalytic debate, with its probing questioning of the nature of Antigone's political subjectivity is well placed to do this. For all the individual limitations of the Lacanian and Irigarayan readings, no other discourse has delivered such insight into the ever over-determined meaning of Antigone's resistance to the state. Classicists seeking to understand the complex set of issues which surround Antigone's political subjectivity and its relation to the question of sexual difference could do far worse than to turn to psychoanalysis.

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<sup>86</sup> See Butler (2000).

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