Derrida and Queer Theory

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Published by Punctum Books

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One of the stakes suggested by the juxtaposition of queer theory and deconstruction is that of genealogy and the family. Are queer theory and deconstruction related? Are they close relatives, brother and sister perhaps or are they involved in some sort of murderous Oedipal clinch? We are preparing to speak of such things here. What relation does either deconstruction or queer theory have to the named super-ego “Jacques Derrida”? In what way do they come after him, in filiation perhaps as the son or daughter follows the father? Or is this question of the “after” more a matter of family resemblance in that queer theory and deconstruction take after

Derrida? For some, the coupling will be a case of queer bedfellows, but let’s take the relation as axiomatic and “normative,” if only for the moment. Certainly, one of the issues which concerns me in such a conjunction between queer theory and deconstruction is that queer theory ought to know where it comes from. I do not say this in order to ultimately suggest that either deconstruction knows where it comes from, or that Derrida is the father of queer theory, along with everything else; queer theory being just another illegitimate child from the errant dissemination of his writing—an after-effect. Rather, it is to propose that queer theory, if there is such a thing and it is one, might learn a lot about itself by taking on board some of the reading practices familiar to deconstruction after Jacques Derrida. In particular, I wish to look at Judith Butler’s *Antigone’s Claim*, published in 2000 and originally presented as the Wellek Lectures at UC Irvine in 1988 and as the Gauss Seminars at Princeton in 1998 (these locations have particular significance within the institutional genealogy of deconstruction-in-America which firmly locates this text at the cross-roads of what we are calling today “queer theory and deconstruction”). Now, my particular issue with Butler’s book is the way in which, while clearly coming after Derrida in every possible sense of that phrase, it expeditiously relegates Derrida to three footnotes of various lengths. This seems odd to me, if not downright queer, especially in light of the treatment of Derrida in her first book on French Hegel, and I would like to pick at these footnotes for a while before returning to what else might be at stake in the partnership between queer theory and deconstruction.

**Oedipus Wrecks**

Now, before I continue, it is probably necessary to put down some disclaimers. First, I like Judith Butler both as a scholar and a person

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and I am, of course, enormously sympathetic to her intellectual projects and find myself in agreement with the vast majority (if not all) of her political positions. So, I do not propose to take issue with Butler for any sort of conservative or antagonistic reasons, neither philosophically nor politically. I would side resolutely with Butler against all of the unscrupulous and personal attacks she has received from both right and left in recent years. Secondly, I have strong reservations about accounting for Butler’s text in the way that I am about to because it may be read by some as privileging Derrida over Butler, Father over daughter, philosophy over anything else. This may be an unfortunate side effect of the reading I am about to attempt and it is not without political consequences or risks. However, I find Butler’s marginalization of Derrida in this most high profile and canonical of locations (indeed in Derrida’s front room as it were) so wantonly perverse that I am willing to take this risk and to see where it will lead us in our attempt to understand what might be involved in the “after” of the temporal conjunction between queer theory and deconstruction. It may ultimately be a pointless and self-defeating exercise to indicate the difficulties I have with Butler over the priority accorded to Derrida, but at this moment I feel as if I want to get queer theory’s skeletons as well as everything else out of the closet. Let us consider this, then, a family disagreement.

The argument of Butler’s book on Antigone is one I find both stimulating and am in sympathy with: she asks at a time in the west when “kinship has become fragile, porous, and expansive” (AC 22) and simultaneously under intense mediatic and partisan scrutiny from policy makers and opinion setters of every stripe, “whether there can be kinship . . . without the support and mediation of the state, and whether there can be the state without the family as its support and mediation” (AC 5). She makes the material consequences of her study explicit in the third lecture when she ties her account of Antigone and kinship to the specific issue of single-sex parenting and its location within both American political discourse and the “theoretical” justification of reactionary positions on “gay adoption” by Jacques-Alain Miller and other Lacanian psychoanalysts (AC 69-70). It is particularly in relation to this attempt to push her thought beyond the representational matrix of philosophical discourse to meet the emerging materialities of our
present conditions that I feel a bond of kinship with Butler in this book. It seems to me that this sort of “practical deconstruction” is precisely the direction that responsible philosophy should be taking after Derrida. However, that is another story. To return to the text in hand, Butler’s attempt to think kinship otherwise, leads her to suggest that the problem with a Lacanian (and critical theory’s post-Lacanian) appreciation of the symbolic place of the Father and the universality of the Oedipal schema is that it emerges from within Lacan’s turn to Lévi-Strauss’ *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, which in structuralist fashion places the incest prohibition at the determining center of sexual difference and subsequent kinship relations.6 For Lacan, says Butler, Oedipus is that which presents itself as true everywhere even though as a function of the Symbolic it is necessarily contingent and incommensurate within any individual. The problem being that Oedipus may not be universal but that when it appears it exercises the function of universalization and as a universal without the necessity for empirical grounding it cannot be challenged by any singular exception which would in fact be its ruin. Thus, asks Butler, does granting that Oedipus is not universal matter if, by the same pattern of thought, it remains universal in effect and consequence? That is to say, Lacanian psychoanalysis, for Butler, remains an onto-theology of the most profound kind, which ushers God out one door only to welcome him in through another. This idea of the Symbolic position of the Father is based on an elaboration of the Symbolic in an early seminar in which Lacan leans on Lévi-Strauss and essentially borrows the structuralist symbolic schema of the incest prohibition as the model for the Symbolic in general. The practical consequence of this for Jacques-Alain Miller is that children who live in families without the hetero-normative pairing of Father and Mother face a lifetime of analysis ahead of them.

Tempted as I am to pursue Butler’s argument a while longer if only to do justice to the text of Lacan (which she is shy of quoting), I will pause here to pick-up the first of her footnotes to

Derrida. Having offered us this deconstruction of the Symbolic in Lacan and Levis-Strauss, which some of us will be familiar with as a retread of Derrida’s early readings of Lévi-Strauss in *Of Grammatology* and *Margins of Philosophy,* she states “For a cursory but shrewd critique of the nature/culture distinction in relation to the incest taboo, which proves to be at once foundational and unthinkable, see Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ in *Writing and Difference*” (AC 87, n.17). Derrida does elaborate on this at considerable length in the *Grammatology* and it seems somewhat disingenuous to repeat one of Derrida’s most famous deconstructions and then to reference it as a “cursory” critique, but I will move on from here because even though this elision is symptomatic of a more general repression it is the least of Butler’s difficulties with respect to Derrida in this text. Having set up the problem of Antigone as an issue of contemporary relevance and having established the meat of her argument, namely, arguing that even if the incest taboo is a contingent social norm then that does not necessitate hetero-patriarchal normativity as its structural consequence, Butler turns to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Lacan’s seventh seminar on “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis” as a thinking of Antigone anterior to the state and kinship. Within a few pages of the treatment of Hegel we run into a note on *Glas.* It appears in the context of a commentary on Antigone’s defiant act of burying Polynicies in relation to the law and the relation of the unconscious to law. The note runs as follows:

Derrida points out that Hegel generalizes too quickly from the specific situation of Antigone’s family to the more general “law” she is said to represent and to defend. After all, she can hardly be representing the living and intact family, and it is unclear what structures of kinship she represents. Derrida writes, “And what if the orphanage were a structure of the unconscious? Antigone’s parents are not some parents among others. She is the daughter of Oedipus and, according to most of the versions from which

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all the tragedians take their inspiration, of Jocasta, of her incestuous grandmother. Hegel never speaks of this generation moreover [de plus], as if it were foreign to the elementary structures of kinship.” Although in what follows, he seems to concur with Hegel on the desire-less status of her relation to her brother, he may be writing ironically, since he both negates the desire but then also calls it an impossible desire, affirming it as a desire of sorts: “Like Hegel, we have been fascinated by Antigone, by this unbelievable relationship, this powerful liaison without desire, this immense, impossible desire that could not live, capable only of overturning, paralyzing, or exceeding any system and history, of interrupting the life of the concept, of cutting of its breath.” See Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 165-66. (AC 89-90, n. 4)

It is important for Butler’s argument to establish that philosophy (in the form of Hegel and Derrida) rules out the possibility of incest and deems the Antigone-Polynicies relationship to be “desire-less” because in this way Antigone’s act is a conscious one rather than a matter of the unconscious which is the insight that allows Butler to insert herself into the canonical genealogy of Antigone watchers. Her claim on Antigone is that the desire for her brother can never finally be arrested in an unacknowledged equivocation between Ploynices and Oedipus and so she is “living the equivocations that unravel the purity and universality of those structuralist rules” and in her desire “the symbolic itself produced a crisis for its own intelligibility” (AC 18). However, to suggest that this misrepresents Derrida’s reading of Hegel would surely be an understatement.

For reasons that I hope will become obvious I would like now to quickly take the remaining footnote from the third lecture where, in the context of the uncontrollable incoherence of the term “brother” in relation to Oedipus/Polyneices, Butler writes:

Like Lacan, Derrida appears to accept the singularity of Antigone’s relationship to her brother, one that Hegel describes, as we have already seen, as a relationship without desire. Although Derrida does not read the play, *Antigone*, in *Glas*, he does read the figure of Antigone in Hegel, working within the terms of that reading to show how
Antigone comes to mark the radical outside to Hegel’s own systematic thinking and Hegel’s own “fascination by a figure inadmissible within the system” (G 151). Although I agree that neither the figure nor the play of Antigone cannot be readily assimilated into either the framework of The Phenomenology of Spirit or The Philosophy of Right, and is curiously applauded in the Aesthetics as “the most magnificent and appeasing work of art,” it would be a mistake to take her persistent unreadability within the Hegelian perspective as a sign of her final or necessary unreadability. (AC 96, n.18)

So, this is to say that Derrida, in part, agrees with both Hegel and Lacan. At this point, wary readers familiar with the work of deconstruction might begin to hear alarm bells knelling around this account of Glas. Participants in Butler’s seminar would be forgiven for imagining that Derrida’s reading of Hegel’s reading of Antigone constituted only a passing reference in Glas. Indeed, seminar participants who did not have access to the footnotes would in fact have no mention of Derrida’s text at all. Butler dismisses it here as a “mistake” without further justification beyond her own need for Antigone to be in some way readable and certainly without any reading of her own. Further, the gist of Butler’s own title suggests that she is reclaiming Antigone for both feminism and queer theory from the misrepresentations of philosophy and psychoanalysis. If we were being charitable to Butler, we could put this down to an act of amnesia whereby she seems to have forgotten that the entire left hand column of Glas could be taken as a reading of Hegel’s Antigone, the politics of kinship, the symbolic family, and its relation to the incest prohibition. It is all there in considerable and explicit detail; this is no “cursory” critique. The first 142 pages of the left hand column provide a long unpacking of the onto-theology of the Family in the Hegelian schema through a series of hesitations and interruptions which, according to a familiar Derridean strategy, leave him yet to begin his reading of Hegel some 140 pages into his text. This discussion of the Family might be taken, in a certain sense, to have only ever been preparation for the introduction of Antigone. It is here on the top of page 142 that he writes, “Since the Hegel text remains to be read, I re-form here its ellipse around two foci: (the) burial (place), the liaison between
brother and sister. So Antigone will organize the scene and guide us in this abrupt passage” (G 142). What follows continuously until page 200 is a reading of Hegel’s Antigone, which in turn sets up an encounter with Marx and Engels on the Holy Family and the question of the incommensurability between the symbolic position of the Holy Family and any real family. This is to say, Derrida offers us a version of Antigone which is considerably longer than that offered by Lacan and Hegel (across three books) combined. What is significant here is not that Derrida has a substantial reading of Antigone which Butler ignores; this in itself is of no consideration. Rather, what is of interest is that Butler is avowedly aware of Derrida’s account of Antigone and that in fact Derrida’s text pre-empts Butler’s argument in almost every respect and turn in 1974. This renders problematic Butler’s claim that Lévi-Strauss-Lacan’s “structuralist kinship [is] the curse that is upon contemporary critical theory as it tries to approach the question of sexual normativity, sociality, and the status of the law” (AC 66) and that her own text points to “a future kinship that exceeds structuralist totality, [to] a post-structuralism of kinship” (AC 66). I think it fair to say that she manages this, but only by representing 26-year-old arguments first formulated by Derrida.

Glasnotes

*Glas* is one of Derrida’s queerer texts. The right-hand column is a full-frontal deconstruction of the texts of Jean Genet played out in all its permissive aberrations and promiscuous errancy, containing more puns on the penis and erections than one would have thought possible even in French. This acts as a counterfoil to the hypocritical heteronormativity of the Hegel column, which in turn is interrupted by barely commented upon lengthy quotation from Hegel’s own correspondence, which demonstrates the diremption between his own personal life and his idealist philosophical system. The “two” columns (the rigorous Hegel and the erect Genet) perform the double braid of Derrida’s work, one disarticulating a closed philosophical system, the other riding on the waves of a literary text, which is itself, according to Derrida here, a “practical deconstruction of the transcendental effect” (G 15b). Even the title is a queer
reference to Georges Bataille’s lyric, “The glas”:

In my voluptuous bell [cloche]
death’s bronze dances
the clapper of a prick sounds
a long libidinal swing. (G 220)

It is not surprising that Glas remains Derrida’s unread masterpiece. It is unreadable in any conventional sense as figures and themes bounce off one column to another between the prim Hegel and the wanton Genet, occasionally broken by the interruption of a third column of Derridean commentary, quotation, and extensive marginalia. It is not a book in an easy sense. It is clearly a labyrinth complex enough to undo a commentator as sophisticated as Butler, who it is probably fair to say has simply not read the 60 pages on Antigone. If she has read them then there is a remarkable case of theoretical amnesia at work here.

Let me offer you a necessarily truncated account of Derrida’s “post-structuralism of kinship,” although no one in France in 1974 would have used such a term. Derrida’s reading of Hegel in Glas is an attempt to deconstruct the closed philosophical system of speculative idealism by alighting upon the importance of the seemingly marginal trope of the Family and its contradictions within Hegel’s text, not as a guiding thread through Hegel himself, but as an experience of an unavoidable but impractical circularity in the Hegelian system. He states early on, “The family is a party to the system of the spirit: the family is both a part and the whole of the system” (G 20). The family for Hegel is the first moment of Sittlichkeit [ethical duty] and the family “forms its still most natural instance and accomplishes itself by destroying itself in three stages: marriage, patrimony, education” (G 20). On one hand, the family for Hegel is “a most narrowly particular moment” which determines both history and the history of spirit, but as a finite moment “the family is never passed through more than once” (G 21). Yet at the same time, as a controlling figure of hetero-phallo-logocentrism, this finite moment figures the infinite totality of Hegel’s system. The dilemma here for Derrida, as it is for Butler in her account of Lacan, is that given the universal projection of the familial schema “one needs to ascertain that the finite family in question is not infinite
already, in which case what the alleged metaphor would come to figure would be already in the metaphor” (G 21). That is to say, a deconstruction such as this must distinguish between identifying the symbolic universality of the family and running the risk of rendering the family universally symbolic by default.

Given that the family is a determining instance for the history of spirit, the family is announced for Hegel “between the animal moment and the spiritual moment of life, death in the natural life, natural death as the spirit’s life” (G 25). Now, this is not without consequences. First, it involves a dialectical paradox in that a natural living being develops without freedom because its self-mobility is finite, it does nothing but develop its seed and does not go outside of itself or have a relation to the outside and the absolute other. Thus, any self-mobility is the result of something other than the self. Accordingly, the natural living being must divide itself in two, but says Derrida reading Hegel, “since the division is not absolute, the animal has no absolute relation to itself. Or to the other. Neither self nor other. That is why there is no natural family, no father/son relation in nature” (G 28-29). Now, radically dividing itself, the human individual is conscious of itself as the other and no longer having (as a result of this division) its natural movement in itself, the human constitutes itself through its culture [Bildung] and its symbolic formation. Thus, the human is its own product, its own formation, or son, conceived or descended from its own germ. In this way, having interrupted natural pressures, the human gives itself law [is auto-nomous]. However, the human here can only ever be a particular and finite example of the infinite relation of spirit which relates to itself infinitely as its own resource. Thus, the human father/son relation is only a finite example of the infinite father/son relation which is the absolute rebound between the Aufhebung of the finite spirit and that of infinite spirit, which cannot be an example itself because it is infinite. Hence, Hegel’s system becomes jammed by this exemplary rhetoric in which it is necessary to determine what the finite is as the route to the infinite. The value and reason of the finite example is posited only by it presenting a passage to the infinite, while rhetorically speaking it cannot ground itself on its own as an example because as a finite example it can be substituted for other particular examples classed according to the general law. In this sense, Paul de Man would call the Family an
aberration in Hegel, in that it is one possible term amongst many which elevates itself above the chain of substitutions to establish itself in a transcendental way, controlling the play of all the other examples. This, in truth, is the classic strategy of phallogocentrism and as such might be a far more archaic and intractable problem than the one contemporary critical theory is said to inherit from Lévi-Strauss.

This is all a prelude to Antigone entering the scene, so let me pick up the pace a little. Of course, the claim by Butler that Derrida would be deaf to the possible incestuous desire between Antigone and Polynices simply does not ring true for anyone who follows Derrida’s writing with any care. Accordingly, if we turn to page 147 of the English *Glas*, we can begin to discern Derrida’s interest in Antigone and why he believes her to be inassimilable within the Hegelian system, although as early as page 145 Derrida has openly asked, “Where does Antigone’s desire lead?” (G 145). In Derrida’s words, “Hegel examines the elementary structures of kinship” (G 147), but does so selectively and without justification: husband/wife, parents/children, brother/sister and because the last two annul sexual desire they are obviously subordinated to the first. In this way, because the relation between husband and wife does not involve a suppression of the natural sexual urge, it is the most immediate, while the other two relations involve a sort of mediation and limit. Hence, the family goes outside of itself to culture and law to establish itself, just as we saw with the formation of the human-self above. In fact, the parent/child relation is particularly limited because against dialectical expectation there is a cultural (symbolic) prohibition on the return of natural desire to its seminal source. Thus, the brother/sister relation stands in Hegel’s schema as superior and singular because it involves no such carrying away of the right of the germ to return to its source. Brother and sister do not desire one another and they cannot be at war. This would seem to be a unique relation within the Hegelian universe and thus explains his particular interest in Antigone. Derrida comments that, since consciousness is what desires in Hegel’s other family relations “given the generality of the struggle for recognition in the relationship between consciousness, one would be tempted to conclude from this that at bottom there is no brother/sister bond, there is no brother or sister” (G 149), which would make sense given that such a
non-desiring, non-combative, non-dialectical relation ought to be impossible within the Hegelian schema.

Hence, the brother and sister are a unique example within a universal system based on repetition and accordingly will give Derrida occasion to pause. Antigone, or the brother/sister relation, is the finite example which cannot pass to the infinite and, for this reason, says Derrida, it is “what the greater logic cannot assimilate” (G 150). Antigone is what the system vomits up (G 150, 162). However, in an importantly complex way it is also subsequently that which stands in a transcendental position to the schema. It is in the *Aesthetics* that Hegel most uncharacteristically remarks that, “of all the masterpieces of the classical world—and I know nearly all of them and you should and can—the Antigone seems to me from this viewpoint to be the most magnificent and appeasing (befriedigenste) work of art” (qtd. in G 150). In this confessional first-person aside (and Hegel doesn’t do first-person very often), he underlines the importance of Antigone to him. For Derrida, what cannot be admitted to the system, except by way of appeasement, nonetheless plays “a fundamental role in the system, an abyssal role rather, the abyss playing an almost transcendental role . . . an element excluded from the system that assures the system’s space of possibility” (G 150-162). At this point Derrida interrupts his text with several pages of letters from Hegel which tell of the various ways in which he treated his own sister badly. Meanwhile, in the Genet column, we are told that just as “paternity is a legal fiction,” as Joyce would have it, there is no proper mother either. The family does not derive its legitimacy from a pure genealogy from the Mother; rather, because she sits at the bottom of the symbolic order she is “a thief and a beggar” who “appropriates everything” because “she has nothing that is properly hers.” It is not possible to follow both columns at once but I mention these two deviations to make the point that Derrida’s deconstruction of Hegel’s Antigone in fact goes considerably further than Butler is prepared to do in her post-structuralism of kinship. Indeed, Derrida will later say that “there is also no purely human family” (G 170), because the family is always exceeded by the Divine and the animal.

To return to the right hand column, two important points to note about the sister. First, although through the sister femininity reaches the highest presentiment of the ethical essence, it does not
reach consciousness (this is inadmissible for Hegel). Second, the absence of a sexual relationship between siblings is not the nondesire of “the without [sans] of a nonsexual relationship, [but rather] desire suspended in the sexual difference” between brother and sister. That is to say, for Hegel, the sister engages a positive but nonnatural relationship of recognition in which she depends on him in her for self (G 163). In other words, this non-dialectical relationship is also ultimately dialectical. So, while the greater logic suspends any choice between the symbolic sister and the empiric sister, the brother/sister relation remains a finite moment which spirit must pass through. And it is precisely around this question of brother/sister desire that Derrida is at his most unforgiving of Hegel, because while Butler asks in 2000, after George Steiner—“what would happen if psychoanalysis were to take Antigone rather than Oedipus as its point of departure?”—Derrida’s point, in 1974, is that Hegel has done just that, transforming “into structural and paradigmatic legality an empiric situation described in a particular text of the history of tragedies . . . And that for the needs of a cause—or of a sister—that is obscure” (G 165). Derrida says elsewhere that we have not yet left the age of Hegel; there are aspects of queer theory, some of the more wide-eyed appreciations of Antigone’s Claim, for example, that seemingly have not yet recognized they’re in the age of Hegel.

Let me cut to the chase and too quickly foreclose my presentation of Derrida’s text, for it is really little more than that. In response to the question where should queer theory be after Jacques Derrida as it tries in Butler’s words “to approach the question of sexual normativity, sociality, and the status of the law,” then, in light of the above, one might respond that where deconstruction takes queer theory is towards an awareness of the simultaneous allure and hopelessness of the dialectic. For Derrida, it is not a question of opposing the dialectic (for that would be the most dialectic of gestures). Rather deconstruction seeks to think about “a dialecticity of dialectics that is itself fundamentally not dialectic,” as Derrida puts it in an interview with Marrizio Ferraris. 8 Derrida attempts to

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show that within any dialectical situation there remains an element which does not allow itself to be integrated into the systematicity of the dialectic, but which presents non-oppositional difference that exceeds the dialectic which is itself always oppositional. This is what Derrida means by the *supplement* and as such is an inaugural gesture for deconstruction. This supplement, *pharmakon*, or vomit does not allow itself to be dialecticized and as that which not being dialectical is necessarily then recuperated by the dialectic that it relaunches. “Thus the dialectic consists,” says Derrida, “precisely in dialectizing the non-dialectizable” (TS 32). This scenario is not recognizable as the dialectic in any easy sense of synthesis, totalization, identification and transcendence. Rather this non-dialectical dialecticity of the dialectic is a form of synthesis without synthesis, or what Derrida frequently terms “ex-appropriation,” which is both an essentially anti-dialectical concept and the necessary condition of dialectics as such. In his reading of Hegel, this scenario is played out in the figure of the desire of the sister; it is, contrary to Butler’s cursory footnote, the whole point of the left hand column of *Glas*. It is a subtle and difficult point to follow, and Butler seems to miss it altogether, but the point about Antigone is not to make feminism or queer theory a dialectical phallocentric hierarchy by allowing the father/brother Oedipus to enjoy his mastery by losing it in subjugation to the subject Antigone sister/daughter. Rather, within the context of the infinite recuperative resources of the dialectic, “difference” itself and “sexual difference” in particular is far too general and indeterminate a concept to effect a deconstruction that would make any difference. As in the case of Derrida’s Antigone, it is necessary to follow the determining process of sexual difference within given conceptual orders, and to thus distinguish between difference as diversity (a moment of indifferent, external difference without opposition, i.e., a moment of identity) and difference as opposition (which is also a moment of identity). The point for Derrida is not that there is or is not desire between Antigone and Polynices, but that “just as there is not a sexual difference in general, but a dialectical process of sexual difference that passes, for example,

9. I refer the interested reader to what Derrida has to say extensively and explicitly about this in the left-hand column of *Glas*, 168-169.
from diversity to opposition, there is not first a desire in general that, from diversity to opposition, determines itself . . . as desire” (G 167-168). What this means for Hegel is that ethical duty [Sittlichkeit] is not the result of an absolute conferment of male consciousness but is rather the consequence of a non-absolute dialectic, which constructs sexual difference according to an opposition of two laws, feminine and masculine, neither of which can posit itself alone in (it)self and for (it)self.

While Butler represses Derrida in order to attempt a sort of dialectic between Hegel and Lacan, it is the dialectic itself which is for Derrida the very structure of repression. As he lays it out quite clearly in Glas:

In other words: what about the incest prohibition? . . . Can a certain scansion of reading make appear therein, at least by way of hypothesis, the trait that binds together the double concatenation and the interdiction of incest? What relation is there between monogamy, the incest prohibition, and the apparition of the value of objectivity (activity, virility, differentiation, reason, freedom, and so on) that forms the value of opposition in general? A slight syncope presses the question: what indeed does the relation with the object have to do with the incest prohibition? (G 191-192; emphasis added)

What indeed! I am doing very little work here beyond allowing Derrida’s text to speak for itself, but it should be clear by now, if it was not already, that Butler has not followed Derrida’s reading of Antigone to this point. Rather her footnote attempts to determine Derrida’s attitude to Antigone’s desire based on the single line, in which “he may be writing ironically.” Rather, it is the cause of Derrida’s entire deconstruction of the dialectical system. After a few pages of explaining the complex route of Sittlichkeit through marriage from the family to the political sphere, he concludes that repression cannot be said to be a priori good or bad, because it is the very dialectical structure by which such an opposition is formed. The situation of the incest prohibition is equally a question of the dialectic. The prohibition breaks with nature and it is for this reason, dialectically speaking, that it conforms all the more with nature. Marriage between blood-relations (ruled as unnatural by Hegel) is
opposed in the greater logic to marriage which is an ethical action of freedom as the passage of Sittlichkeit from the family to the public sphere, which in so far as it submits natural pressures to symbolic law is also opposed to nature. “Dialectics of nature,” writes Derrida, “it produces the incest prohibition in breaking with itself, but this rupture with (it)self is in its nature, in the nature of nature” (G 200). This an issue for Hegel which determinedly revolves around the brother/sister relationship; which is to say, contra both of Butler’s footnotes, not only does Derrida not describe the Antigone-Polynicese relationship as one without desire, but neither in fact does Hegel.

Redux

Judith Butler is eager, quite rightly, not to allow Antigone to stand as a representative figure of any single metaphysical truth. Rather, she mobilizes Antigone as “an allegory for the crisis of kinship” (AC 24). Perhaps, in Butler’s repression of Derrida in Antigone’s Claim, we have an allegory of the crisis of kinship between deconstruction and queer theory. I’m not sure this is a case of a daughter returning to murder the father, or even that Butler has that big an Oedipal attachment to Derrida. I’m certainly not prepared to fit this whole debate into the symbolic positions it does so much to unsettle. In fact, such a gesture would be a demonstration of Derrida’s most cogent contribution to the demasking of psychoanalysis here, when he says that “there is no operation-less unconscious” than Oedipus because the Oedipus complex depends on law which commands actual action and real opposition. For Hegel, Oedipus’s crime is banal because he did not know what he was doing and therefore cannot be a matter of ethical consciousness and thus an expression or perversity of spirit. This is not to say Oedipus is innocent: “the crime is unconscious and that is why it remains whole and irreversible” (G 171) as the action of two laws of sexual difference in opposition. Rather, the pure crime, the one most corresponding to ethical consciousness is that of Antigone, who in Butler’s words “not only did it, but she has the nerve to say she did it” (AC 34). Similarly, Butler not only represses Derrida, she is blatant enough to say that she is doing it. Perhaps, regardless of whether the repression
comes from intention or the unconscious, the effect of repression is still the same. Let us call it, after Paul de Man, a moment of blindness in this text on Oedipus. It is a moment in which the opposition between the knowing self of the footnotes and the actuality the self does not know (which determines everything about this text), between the conscious and the unconscious, queer theory and deconstruction, operates to both present and relieve a culpability which does not wash away. The textual operation has after-effects.

I am not going to be melodramatic and call this text the scene of a crime, even if the old saw, “talent borrows but genius steals,” might be applicable to Butler. Rather, I suspect Butler simply did not read beyond the page references that index Antigone in the John Leavey Glassary. This is unfortunate because she might have saved herself a lot of work. Ultimately, I have little inclination other than to laugh at this student error, although it is one that certain queer theorists have been repeating ever since. You cannot repress the non-dialectable as a way of perverting the dialectic; that is the most (straightforwardly) dialectical thing possible. The trouble with Butler’s “queer theory” in this book is not that it is deconstructive but that it is not deconstructive enough, but keep that to yourselves, I wouldn’t want any scandal attaching itself to the family.
