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mothers and fathers, who needs them?

Angela McRobbie

Antigone's Claim: Kinship between life and death

Judith Butler; Columbia University press; 2000; pp. 112; Pbk ISBN 0-231-11895-3 £11.95

re-regulating kinship, repudiating feminism

What follows in this review essay of *Antigone's Claim: kinship between life and death* by Judith Butler is a deliberately wide-ranging, even loose, reading of the text, for the very reason that this short book (three lectures given for the prestigious Wellek annual lectures at University of California, Irvine) points to the need for far-reaching feminist re-attention to questions of family and kinship in contemporary political culture (Butler, 2000). Butler suggests there has been something of a retreat in feminism from fiercely disputing the neo-conservatism of current family policies. There has also been, even within feminism, retrospective self-critique of aspects of so-called 1960s sexual politics (e.g. non-monogamy) which have had the effect of warranting a return to more proprietorial partnerships. Butler's focus is the US, but similar trends exist elsewhere.¹ What marks out the uniqueness of this moment then is the co-existence of the emphatic endorsement of traditional family values at the governmental level (we might add to this George Bush's recent support to the lobby encouraging celibacy among US teenagers) with, at the same time, what looks like a liberalization, in that there is now great diversity in family life, including gay and lesbian households, re-constituted families, families of choice, and simply ad hoc families-of-sorts. However, alongside both these developments there is 'feminist abeyance', an unwillingness to be positioned back in the firing line by questioning the very existence of the family as was once the norm (Bagguley quoted in Walby, 2002). My reading of Butler's *Antigone* is that it encourages us to recognize that this particular entanglement produces new normativities, new fields of interdiction and constraint. In fact there is a double entanglement that *Antigone* encourages us

1 The current New Labour government kindly provides 'handbooks for living' to all couples embarking on marriage.

to confront: the co-existence of neo-liberal with liberal values in relation to families and sexuality, and the co-existence of feminism as that which is reviled or, as I would put it, 'almost hated', and feminism as a political force which has achieved the status of Gramscian common sense, something that is now 'taken into account' (McRobbie, 1999).² Moving on from Butler, I would suggest that it is in the field of popular culture that some of the most indicative tensions in relation to this double entanglement are played out.

How does Antigone figure in this account? Or rather how does a young woman character from Greek drama precipitate such an analysis? In fact her presence in these lectures marks an absolute continuity in Butler's writing, in that she enables Butler to continue what she boldly set out to do in *Gender Trouble* (see Butler, 1990, Chapter, 2) and has subsequently returned to, which is the dislodging of the Oedipus complex from its position of unquestioned authority, on the grounds of its instituting the social (and seemingly universal) mechanisms of patriarchal heterosexuality and reproduction. Antigone is an integral part of the Oedipal scenario, but her presence can be re-cast, her narrative can be used to produce an alternative threshold of authority. She allows the possibility of envisaging a different modality of kinship, but this requires that the state be challenged, even when it seems to embrace or take on broad feminist concerns. Butler puts Antigone, a girl who in defying the state is seen to act in a manly way, at the threshold of social organization, at the point where it seems the laws of living a 'culturally intelligible' life are installed. This continues the political project of de-stabilizing the seemingly irrevocable 'foundations' of the social and psychic order.

But still, how to move from Greek drama to the contemporary dramas (or soap operas and sit coms) of family life? Butler's route is, not surprisingly given her earlier writing, largely through Hegel and Lacan, with references to feminist philosophers like Irigaray who have also been drawn to Antigone. Let me briefly summarize. Antigone, the offspring of an incestuous liaison and thus a symbol of the unimaginable and unintelligible in culture, insists on burying her brother against the instructions of her uncle. Through her defiance (which also emasculates the authority of patriarchy), her perceived gender as a woman is put in question. This de-stabilization of the foundations of both gender and kinship is further disturbed by the depth of love for a brother, which results in her death (or self-entombment). She chooses death rather than the normativities that might have saved her and re-secured her identity, that is, marriage and motherhood. Butler reminds us that Hegel reads Antigone as making way for the state and patriarchy to replace and supplant matriarchy and kinship, while for Lacan her necessary demise figures the inauguration of the Symbolic, which in turn poses certain strict forms of kinship as 'a presupposition of cultural intelligibility'.

The paradox of Antigone is then that she is both kinship gone badly wrong, and kinship itself. She embodies that which the Symbolic casts out, when it asserts the appropriate rules that must prevail between parents and their children. Antigone's

2 Feminism as common sense finds expression across the political spectrum. For New Labour in the UK, it has no place in any political vocabulary yet informs many policies (see Walby, 2002), even the word woman is recently excised in favour of the need for 'work-life balance'. The Bush administration justifies aggression with reference to the infringements of women's rights in Muslim states, in both cases, the idea that women deserve to be treated as equal to men becomes part of the claim to civilization and modernity. Outside politics and within the cultural realm, this common sense takes a diversity of forms, driving a woman's agenda on for example BBC Radio 3 and 4, whose listeners are of an age and social background for whom feminism remains important.

defiance stems from a protestation of love for her brother and insistence that he be properly buried. The anxious repetition among any number of writers that there is no incest in Antigone's love for her brother betrays their own fears, hence their anxious citing of the norm, 'no, it isn't incest'. The horror that is unthinkable and repelled is predicated on its proximity, its easy possibility. Lacan drew on Levi Strauss' account of the incest taboo, exogamy and the exchange of women to propose the Symbolic as that horizon of language and kinship that permits access to the cultural, a means for persons to live. It is Symbolic by virtue of being above the specific or particular social realities of family life; this universalism works on the basis that cultures may be very different from each other, but they largely obey the requirements of this law. Kinship and language are 'elevated to the status of elementary structures of the intelligible' and for the Lacanians 'language and kinship are not socially alterable institutions – at least not easily altered' (Butler, 2000: 15). However, if the Symbolic sanctions while also being unanswerable, is it not a God-like (or as Butler puts it, a theological) thing?

What if the Symbolic is thus nothing other than a threshold of jurisdiction in favour of reproduction and heterosexuality, which is able to evoke the horror of incest to instil fear and anxiety across a much wider field of activities as a way of sending out warnings to its subjects, and thus reining them in, alerting them to the dangers of other irregularities? This idea of wider remit is absolutely crucial to the argument here. The impact of the regulative dynamic is to conjure fear or horror in order to extend a field of jurisdiction in new directions. While able to countenance failure and also diversity and change in kinship, the Symbolic will invariably preside over these changes and insist, in the context of the family, on the need for a mother and a father. For Butler, this poses the question of those others whose parental love for a child carries no recognition within the mother–father regime and thus has no 'certainty or durability'. Why must gay families, for instance, with two mothers or two fathers find themselves compromised by the state to operate as if there was a mother and a father? What requires this specific organization of persons? Does the idea of having two mothers or two fathers, manageable perhaps in the context of everyday life, and a source of comedy in recent popular culture, hold up in law?³ Moreover what greater warning could there be to those who wish to move away from this norm that they might, in so doing, endanger the life of the child? The figure of Antigone allows Butler to imagine the psychic pain wrought upon the shadowy persons fulfilling 'unauthorized' or irregular kinship roles.

For these reasons Butler challenges psychoanalysis to critically interrogate its 'structuralist presuppositions', that is, its normative assumptions, which even though they troubled Juliet Mitchell many years ago nonetheless remain intact (Mitchell, 1984). She also chastises Lacanians for the authoritative defence of the Symbolic as above social critique, indeed for its function as warning against those who dare to pursue 'utopian efforts'. In a gesture reminiscent of her taking up the position of the 'phallic lesbian' in order to attack the Lacanian Symbolic in *Bodies*

3 In an episode of *Friends* broadcast in the UK (Channel 4) in September 2002, Phoebe poses as the 'second mother' of the child conceived as a result of Ross donating sperm to allow his ex-wife and her girlfriend to have a child. Phoebe does this as a way of bumping into the popstar Sting whose child attends the same school as the boy. The narrative

That Matter (Butler, 1993), Butler again pushes the Symbolic off its pedestal, reducing it to the status of just another horizon of social norms, 'a form of reification with stark consequences for gendered life'. To uphold the sanctity of the Symbolic as the basis for social and cultural organization, which psychoanalysis plainly does, is to retain an inner 'theological' core. That Butler so perseveres (as she has done in earlier work) with this job of prising open the doors of the Symbolic (which she here likens to Antigone's tomb) is testimony to her political commitment to re-arranging gender relations, and in this case to question the necessity of mothers and fathers. Of course, there is a total logic to this current inquiry, in that having demonstrated in *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 1990) how gender is called into being, and for the sake of heterosexual reproduction is repetitively enacted so as to become the basis for recognition in terms of what it is to be human (i.e. 'being a girl'), Butler now looks to the repeated enactments of kinship ideals when faced with the challenge to social organization proposed here in the figure of Antigone.

As though aware of the intractable problems in loosening the grip of Oedipus and replacing his authority on how we live, with Antigone's more fluid and uncertain power, Butler's persistence takes on something of Antigone's gesture of defiance. She will not relinquish psychoanalysis in favour of a mere feminist sociology of family life because that would be to let go of understanding desire and its unruly proliferations, the unconscious, fear, trauma, dreams, obsessions, compulsive repetitions, and so on. As Campbell has argued, 'Butler's work requires a psychoanalytic account of the social production of the subject' (Campbell, 2001). Psychoanalysis also allows exploration of the whole range of psychic resistances to change, which is necessary for political understanding. Antigone stands at the interface between the psychic and the social and through her Butler imagines a revised or re-articulated (let us say a weaker) Symbolic. A 'post-structuralist kinship' of this sort would allow more diverse 'socially survivable' arrangements, carrying fewer parental warnings about harm to children. Far from saying 'lets relax our attitudes to incest', Butler is showing how the horror and fear of interfering with this foundational stricture becomes a way of refusing to encounter proliferating and irregular relations of love and affiliation beyond those fully sanctioned by the state (see also Bell, 1997).

Antigone is the unimaginable in culture; by virtue of her incestuous parentage, her abject status produces a shudder across the social field, but she also resists this status by defying the state and asserting a human bond that she is not expected to dare to acknowledge. I think Butler asks us to read Antigone as a person who represents the unrepresentable, those various bodies in the body politic denied the status of the fully human and thus who confound and unsettle the principles upon which contemporary sociality is based. She is claimed as a 'not-quite' feminist figure, an 'almost queer heroine'. My reading of Butler here is that Antigone brings to the surface the new, more subtle, exclusions from the status of the 'fully

relies on the school teacher assuming her to be the 'second mum' and the humour of the episode stems partly from Phoebe's clumsy attempts to prove her lesbian status by flirting with the teacher.

4 The BBC Radio 4 programme *Womens Hour*, which carries on overtly feminist brief, ran an item (23/9/02) following the success of black UK singer Ms Dynamite winning the prestigious Mercury Prize. With lyrics that refuse the usual female stereotypes of much hip hop and r'n'b music, and by calling herself Ms Dynamite, the interviewer spoke with groups of North London girls from the area in which she grew up, asking them 'Did this make Ms Dynamite a feminist?'. The answers were overwhelmingly negative, they said they thought Germaine Greer was 'ugly', followed by all the usual man-hating stereotypes (see also Walter, 1996).

5 *Bridget Jones's Diary* was the title of a weekly column that ran in the *Independent* newspaper in the UK from 1996 written by journalist Helen Fielding. Its success led to publication as a book followed by the release of the 'blockbuster' feature film in 2001.

human', which come into being through the changes in gender norms in the post-feminist world. The feminist is always 'old' even 'ugly', she is that which younger women cannot be if they wish to be counted in the wider world.⁴ The feminist proposes a presence that is shunned, a feminism that in its repudiation is also, strangely, 'taken into account'. We might ask what is the political meaning of this spectral existence, to be, as a feminist, that which is granted a presence on the basis of being also reviled? Butler's *Antigone* also stands as a figure for whom the norms of family relations have been over-turned, she is too attached to her brother, and as a girl she refuses the possibility of regular affiliations. However, might we not ask, is there not something timely in this shadowy existence, are these irregular attachments and 'singularities' (or singledoms) not also played out at this very moment across the 'unconscious' of contemporary popular culture? To explore this more fully requires an intellectual leap from feminist theory to cultural studies, from *Antigone* to *Bridget Jones*.⁵

from *Antigone* to *Bridget Jones*

The double entanglement theorized in Butler's *Antigone* provides ample opportunity for exploring issues that are critical for feminism. While it is impossible in the space of this short review to engage with these in depth, I will instead propose that we can extract from the abject state to which feminism has been expelled (perhaps a retirement home in an unfashionable rundown holiday resort) and from its status as that which is capable of instilling dread and horror in young women, for fear that they might be mistaken as a 'feminist' and thus robbed of a sexual identity that counts and that has value, a margin of hope through the ambivalence and forcefulness and repetition of these repudiations. At the same time, it is the very success of the new right that it has made of feminism such a thing of contempt, and this accounts, I would suggest, for the strain of sadness that runs through Butler's *Antigone*.

In the light of this, I propose that *Antigone* provides us with the possibility of developing a socio-cultural analysis of current kinship anxieties influenced as they are by, but now also forced to do without, feminism and the political. While the social and the cultural are inevitably intertwined, for the sake of brevity and by way of a conclusion, I will force them apart and rehearse how some of these tensions are manifest first in contemporary family life and second in popular culture. Butler argues that along with families of choice there also comes into being new and expansive forms of constraint, control and surveillance. In passing, she also comments on irregular relations (for example, fondnesses between 'unrelated' step siblings) that give rise to concern on the part of adults. However, what we can surmise is that there has developed a climate where there is a tightening of the boundaries that mark out legitimate and proper relations in the fields of attachment, affect and affiliation.

Undesignated persons, those who can make no official claim in relation to the care or well-being of young persons, find themselves, if not considered overtly dangerous, at least possibly suspicious or with dubious motives. Thus, while the appearance in a home of a new stepfather is by and large socially acceptable, the appearance of a caring adult in the guise of an enthusiastic teacher, a too-zealous social worker or youth worker, or simply an adult friend is now subject to intense social disapprobation.⁶ To put it crudely we could say that there is no longer the possibility of being a Miss Jean Brodie.⁷ Thus those whose relations with children or teenagers are, as Butler puts it, of uncertain durability, or without the warmth and informality that only kinship now bestows, find themselves cast out in the cold, fearful of the law, and without any possibility of playing a role and of offering things of value in the life and upbringing of the young.

This is a far cry from the radical sexual politics of the family from the mid-1970s, which saw the development of communes, shared child-care arrangements and the positive encouragement of involvement on the part of adults with children with whom they had no kinship relation, but for whom they had a social obligation in terms of shared domestic responsibility.⁸ The horror now conjured up by the very word 'commune' (although it too can be a source of gentle humour as the Swedish film *Together* directed by Lukacs Moodyson (2000) demonstrated) is indicative of the end of experimentation in domestic relations, and in many respects this signals again a wider remit of familial conservatism, an impoverishment of community, a turning away from the possibilities of socialized child rearing, this also marks a new modality of social exclusion, a means of creating social outcasts and of further isolating the damaged, the unstable, the loners, the lonely and the childless. The disparaging of the irregular coincides with the pressure on gay families to be exemplary. The recognition of normative kinship within such units, including doting grandparents, loving aunts and kindly uncles, also must come at some cost.

If people and, in particular, younger people in the Western world now live out their kinship relations within this particular regime of double entanglement of liberal choice and neo-liberal family values, feminist common sense and feminist displacement, we might ask how is it done? The field of popular entertainment offers a wide space for the endless and repeated playing out of these anxieties as social comedy. Let me conclude this review by suggesting that *Antigone* points us directly towards *Bridget Jones* (the book and the film) and the US TV series *Friends*, *Ally McBeal* and *Sex in the City*. Writing many years ago about the widely read girls' magazine *Jackie*, I remember analysing how the teenage girl in the magazine was imagined week in and week out as someone in search of a boy (McRobbie, 2000). She could never relax until she had trapped a 'fella' and had a ring on her finger, and even then she had to be vigilant in case he found someone else more attractive. These stories were so much the subject of feminist critique that they came to sum up pre-feminist femininity, the desperate, 'always on the look out', search for Mr Right. This way of being a girl was, as many of us argued, a

6 Social workers regularly report on how their pastoral roles are now seriously curtailed as a result of publicity about abuse, with the effect that the work of befriending at risk youngsters, even offering them the occasional bed for the night, and being available at home for informal conversations, all of which have been so effective in the past, are no longer advisable, if not completely forbidden.

7 From deeply anti-feminist, well-nigh misogynist positions, a number of leading novelists (Philip Roth in *The Human Stain*, and also *The Dying Animal*, J.M.Coetzee in *Disgrace*, and Jonathan Franzen in *The Corrections*) explore this terrain in fiction, the extent to which intimate, intense, informal and irregular relationships between academics and their students are now impossible. The rightful highlighting of sexual abuse has nonetheless given rise to a wide climate of fear and suspicion, which in turn reduces the scope of human sociality.

8 I remember while living in Germany in the late 1970s visiting friends who lived in various communal arrangements, which in this context de-

veloped out of a politics of violently opposing the parenting practices of the older fascistic generation. Children were discouraged to relate with special attachments to biological parents, all adults had a responsibility for care, affection and the more routine tasks of domestic labour. Far from being exceptional or outlandish activities 'wohngemeinschaft' were barely remarkable at that time in Germany among left and feminist influenced people.

humiliating, subservient indeed unbearable, subject position. During the 1980s, this kind of imagery all but disappeared. However, this changed with the advent of self-consciously 'politically incorrect' post-feminist popular culture. Suddenly, as though relieved that all that angry feminism had gone, these same narratives reappeared with a vengeance, but with an irony that suggested that 'feminism has been taken into account'. Fear of not being married, fear of being left on the shelf, fear of being an old maid, or a spinster, fear of running out of time and of leaving it too late to have babies, indeed fear, dread and the horror of being a woman alone drives each of these girls now unashamedly in search of a man. From *Sex in the City* to *Ally McBeal*, and then most thoroughly in *Bridget Jones*, feminism has a spectral, shadowy, almost hated existence. They might find themselves having similar concerns on sexual technique as feminists once had (*Sex in the City*), they might find themselves opting for the value of female friendship over unreliable boyfriends, they might consider lesbianism, or have some good lesbian friends, goodness, they might even come close to endorsing sisterhood, but never is the word spoken, they must live out their sexual and emotional lives without recourse to sexual politics. This is the condition of existence of these popular narratives, they must cast the possibility of a new feminism aside, they must muddle through without it.

Despite this, new configurations of kinship do emerge, which feminism, now relegated to history, nonetheless makes possible, for example, Rachel in *Friends* becomes pregnant by former boyfriend Ross. She decides to have the baby, but not to re-start the relationship. Into the pregnancy she continually feels 'horny', goes on dates and reflects on the ethics of having sex with somebody new with a baby by somebody else in her womb. This is a post-feminist dilemma in a culture of female independence and choice, where single motherhood is nothing to be ashamed of. And yet running alongside this narrative in *Friends* is also that of Monica and Chandler whose courtship, engagement, shower party and traditional white wedding offers opportunity for comedy over a period of several months (including Chandler's transsexual father turning up at the wedding in drag).

One of the running jokes in the *Bridget Jones* film (adapted from the book) is that every time she casts her eyes on a suitable man, she finds herself fantasizing wedding bells, a white dress and an entourage of bridesmaids. The humour lies in the way in which she indicates that she knows this to be a bad thought, she has the fantasy 'in spite of feminism', and the audience laughs with her because they too know that this is not how girls or women are nowadays meant to be. Feminism is thus the censor; feminism is a psychic policewoman, disallowing girls from the pleasure of imagining the pleasures of pre-feminist womanhood (she also imagines herself at home in the country as a wife and mother happily servicing husband and children alike). The film opens with *Bridget* in her pyjamas facing up to the prospect of going home for Christmas, yet again, without a man, the soundtrack is *All By Myself* (sung by Jamie McNeal), and the humour emerges from the grimness, the social discomfort, and indeed the shame of being unpartnered. The wit and

intelligence, the intertextual referencing to *Pride and Prejudice*, the self-mocking awareness of the Bridget Jones persona, makes it an exemplary post-feminist text. Its enormous success at the box office, its immediate popularity in gay and lesbian circles,⁹ and the social landscape it portrays of confident girls spoilt for choice and enjoying the bright city lights but unable to find the right man and fantasizing a life back in the countryside, has made Bridget Jones representative of contemporary femininity. Only the hard-hearted, the too-serious, the earnest, humourless and generationally specific 'feminist' could object, could point to the white Englishness of Bridget Jones, to the voice it gives to the desire for tradition, to its (ironic) celebration of marriage and the assumption of conventional kinship as the solution to the fears and anxieties of being a single girl. In this sense, the original newspaper column (upon which the book was based) of Bridget Jones can be seen as a response by a younger woman journalist (Helen Fielding) to her feminist forebearers. It seems to be written as a counter to feminism, Bridget is scatter-brained rather than too clever, she is interested in calories rather than politics, her career is not her life and she craves the security of a well-qualified husband. Feminism has served its purpose by making various opportunities available, and for this some thanks are due; but now it can be dispensed with, its time is over. Butler's *Antigone* allows us to reflect on this shadow existence. For feminism to be taken into account, it has to be understood as having passed away.

9 In a feature in the *Observer Magazine* (Sunday 21st April 2002, p. 35) on gay marriage ceremonies, one young man named Saul Hazan described the event as follows: 'I had a real Bridget Jones moment during the ceremony when I thought, 'Oh my God, I've finally got my man!'' In keeping with pre-feminist tradition, this couple had adopted the same surname on marriage.

author biography

Angela McRobbie is Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths College University of London. She is author of several books on young women and popular culture. She is currently working on two research projects, one on post feminism and depoliticisation, the other on gender and self employment in the emerging cultural sector.

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