

Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between  
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## CHAPTER 1

### *Antigone's Claim*

I began to think about Antigone a few years ago as I wondered what happened to those feminist efforts to confront and defy the state. It seemed to me that Antigone might work as a counterfigure to the trend championed by recent feminists to seek the backing and authority of the state to implement feminist policy aims. The legacy of Antigone's defiance appeared to be lost in the contemporary efforts to recast political opposition as legal claim and to seek the legitimacy of the state in the espousal of feminist claims. Indeed, one finds Antigone defended and championed, for instance, by Luce Irigaray as a principle of feminine defiance of statism and an example of anti-authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup>

But who is this "Antigone" that I sought to use as an example of a certain feminist impulse?<sup>2</sup> There is, of course, the "Antigone" of Sophocles' play by that name, and that Antigone is, after all, a *fiction*, one that does not easily allow itself to be made into an example one might follow without running the risk of slipping into irreality oneself. Not that this has stopped many people from making her into a representative of sorts. Hegel has her stand for the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal rule, but also for the principle of kinship. And Irigaray, though wavering on the repre-

sentative function of Antigone, also insists upon it: "Her example is always worth reflecting upon as a historical figure and as an identity and identification for many girls and women living today. For this reflection, we must abstract *Antigone* from the seductive, reductive discourses and listen to what she has to say about government of the polis, its order and its laws" (*Speculum*, 70).

But can Antigone herself be made into a representative for a certain kind of feminist politics, if Antigone's own representative function is itself in crisis? As I hope to show in what follows, she hardly represents the normative principles of kinship, steeped as she is in incestuous legacies that confound her position within kinship. And she hardly represents a feminism that might in any way be unimplicated in the very power that it opposes. Indeed, it is not just that, as a fiction, the mimetic or representative character of Antigone is already put in question but that, as a figure for politics, she points somewhere else, not to politics as a question of representation but to that political possibility that emerges when the limits to representation and representability are exposed.

But let me recount my steps for you. I am no classicist and do not strive to be one. I read *Antigone* as many humanists have because the play poses questions about kinship and the state that recur in a number of cultural and historical contexts. I began to read *Antigone* and her critics to see if one could make a case for her exemplary political status as a feminine figure who defies the state through a powerful set of physical and linguistic acts. But I found something different from what I had anticipated. What struck me first was the way in which *Antigone* has been read by Hegel and Lacan and also by the way in which she has been taken up by Luce Irigaray and others<sup>3</sup> not as a political figure, one whose defiant speech has political implications, but rather as one who articulates a prepolitical opposition to politics, representing kinship as the sphere that conditions the possibility of politics without ever entering into it. Indeed, in the interpretation that Hegel has perhaps made most famous, and which continues to structure appropriations of the

play within much literary theory and philosophical discourse, *Antigone* comes to represent kinship and its dissolution, and Creon comes to represent an emergent ethical order and state authority based on principles of universality.

What struck me second, however, is a point to which I hope to return toward the end of this chapter, which is the way that kinship is figured at the limit of what Hegel calls "the ethical order,"<sup>4</sup> the sphere of political participation but also of viable cultural norms, the sphere of legitimating *Sittlichkeit* (the articulated norms that govern the sphere of cultural intelligibility) in Hegelian terms. Within contemporary psychoanalytic theory, based on structuralist presuppositions and made perhaps most salient by the work of Jacques Lacan, this relation emerges in yet a different way. Lacan provides a reading of *Antigone* in his *Seminar VII*<sup>5</sup> 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 sphere of laws and norms that govern the accession to speech and speakability. This regulation takes place precisely through instantiating certain kin relations as symbolic norms.<sup>6</sup> 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 enabling linguistic structure, a presupposition of symbolic intelligibility, and thus removed from the domain of the social; for Hegel, kinship is precisely a relation of "blood" rather than one of norms. That is, kinship is not yet entered into the social, where the social is inaugurated through a violent supersession of kinship.

The separation of kinship from the social haunts even the most anti-Hegelian positions within the structuralist legacy. For Irigaray, the insurrectionary power of *Antigone* is the power of that

which remains outside the political; Antigone represents kinship and, indeed, the power of "blood" relations, which Irigaray doesn't mean in a precisely literal sense. For Irigaray, blood designates something of bodily specificity and graphicness that fully abstract principles of political equality not only fail to grasp but must rigorously exclude and even annihilate. Thus, by signifying "blood," Antigone does not precisely signify a blood *line* but something more like "bloodshed"—that which must be remaindered for authoritarian states to be maintained. The feminine, as it were, becomes this remainder, and "blood" becomes the graphic figure for this echoing trace of kinship, a refiguring of the figure of the bloodline that brings into relief the violent forgetting of primary kin relations in the inauguration of symbolic masculine authority. Antigone thus signifies for Irigaray the transition from the rule of law based on maternity, a rule of law based in kinship, to a rule of law based on paternity. But what precisely precludes the latter as kinship? There is the symbolic place of the mother that is taken over by the symbolic place of the father, but what has instituted those places to begin with? Is this not the same notion of kinship after all, with an accent and a value being placed on separate terms?

The context for Irigaray's reading is clearly Hegel's, who claims in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* that Antigone is "the eternal irony of the community." She is outside the terms of the polis, but she is, as it were, an outside without which the polis could not be. The ironies are no doubt more profound than Hegel understood: after all, she speaks, and speaks in public, precisely when she ought to be sequestered in the private domain. What sort of political speech is this that transgresses the very boundaries of the political, which sets into scandalous motion the boundary by which her speech ought to be contained? Hegel claims that Antigone represents the law of the household gods (conflating the chthonic gods of the Greek tradition with the Roman *Penates*) and that Creon represents the law of the state. He insists that the conflict between them is one in which kinship must give way to

state authority as the final arbiter of justice. In other words, Antigone figures the threshold between kinship and the state, a transition in the *Phenomenology* that is not precisely an *Aufhebung*, for Antigone is surpassed without ever being preserved when ethical order emerges.

The Hegelian legacy of Antigone interpretation appears to assume the separability of kinship and the state, even as it posits an essential relation between them. And so every interpretive effort to cast a character as representative of kinship or the state tends to falter and lose coherence and stability.<sup>7</sup> This faltering has consequences not only for the effort to determine the representative function of any character but for the effort to think the relation between kinship and the state, a relation, I hope to show, that has relevance for us who read this play within a contemporary context in which the politics of kinship has brought a classical western dilemma into contemporary crisis. For two questions that the play poses are whether there can be kinship—and by kinship I do not mean the "family" in any specific form—without the support and mediation of the state, and whether there can be the state without the family as its support and mediation. And further, when kinship comes to pose a threat to state authority and the state sets itself in a violent struggle against kinship, can these very terms sustain their independence from one another? This becomes a textual problem of some importance as Antigone emerges in her criminality to speak in the name of politics and the law: she absorbs the very language of the state against which she rebels, and hers becomes a politics not of oppositional purity but of the scandalously impure.<sup>8</sup>

When I reread Sophocles' play, I was impressed in a perverse way by the blindnesses that afflict these very interpretations. Indeed, the blindnesses in the text—of the sentry, of Teiresias—seem invariably repeated in the partially blind readings of the text. Opposing Antigone to Creon as the encounter between the forces of kinship and those of state power fails to take into account the

ways in which Antigone has already departed from kinship, herself the daughter of an incestuous bond, herself devoted to an impossible and death-bent incestuous love of her brother,<sup>9</sup> how her actions compel others to regard her as "manly" and thus cast doubt on the way that kinship might underwrite gender, how her language, paradoxically, most closely approximates Creon's, the language of sovereign authority and action, and how Creon himself assumes his sovereignty only by virtue of the kinship line that enables that succession, how he becomes, as it were, unmanned by *Antigone's defiance*, and finally by his own actions, at once abrogating the norms that secure his place in kinship and in sovereignty. Indeed, Sophocles' text makes clear that the two are metaphorically implicated in one another in ways that suggest that there is, in fact, no simple opposition between the two.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, to the extent that the two figures, Creon and Antigone, are chiasmically related, it appears that there is no easy separation between the two and that Antigone's power, to the extent that she still wields it for us, has to do not only with how kinship makes its claim within the language of the state but with *the social deformation of both idealized kinship and political sovereignty that emerges as a consequence of her act*. In her act, she transgresses both gender and kinship norms, and though the Hegelian tradition reads her fate as a sure sign that this transgression is necessarily failed and fatal, another reading is possible in which she exposes the socially contingent character of kinship, only to become the repeated occasion in the critical literature for a rewriting of that contingency as immutable necessity.

Antigone's crime, as you know, was to bury her brother after Creon, her uncle and the king, published an edict prohibiting such a burial. Her brother, Polyneices, leads an enemy army against his own brother's regime in Thebes in order to gain what he considers to be his rightful place as inheritor of the kingdom. Both Polyneices and his brother, Eteocles, die, whereupon Creon, the maternal uncle of the dead brothers, considers Polyneices an

infidel and wants him denied a proper funeral, indeed, wants the body left bare, dishonored and ravaged.<sup>11</sup> Antigone acts, but what is her act? She buries her brother, indeed, she buries him twice, and the second time the guards report that they have seen her. When she appears before Creon, she acts again, this time verbally, refusing to deny that it was she who did the deed. In effect, what she refuses is the linguistic possibility of severing herself from the deed, but she does not assert it in any unambiguously affirmative way: she does not simply say, "I did the deed."

In fact, the deed itself seems to wander throughout the play, threatening to become attached to some doers, owned by some who could not have done it, disowned by others who might have done it. The act is everywhere delivered through speech acts: the guard reports that he has seen her; she reports that she has done it.

The only way that the doer is attached to the deed is through the linguistic assertion of the connection. Ismene claims that she will say that she did the deed, if Antigone will allow it, and Antigone refuses to allow it. The first time the sentry reports to Creon, he claims, "I did not do the deed, nor did I see who did" (25), as if to have seen it would have meant to have done it, or to have participated in its doing. He is aware that by reporting that he did see the deed, his very reporting will attach him to the deed, and he begs Creon to see the difference between the report of the deed and the deed itself. But the distinction is not only difficult for Creon to make, it survives as a fatal ambiguity in the text. The chorus speculates that "this action may have been prompted by the Gods" (29), apparently skeptical of its human authorship. And at the end of the play, Creon exclaims that the suicides of his wife and son are *his* acts, at which point the question of what it means to author a deed becomes fully ambiguous. Everyone seems aware that the deed is transferable from the doer, and yet, in the midst of the rhetorical proliferation of denials, Antigone asserts that she cannot deny that the deed is hers. Good enough. But can she affirm it?

Through what language does Antigone assume authorship of her act or, rather, refuse to deny that authorship? Antigone is introduced to us, you will remember, by the act by which she defies Creon's sovereignty, contesting the power of his edict, which is delivered as an imperative, one that has the power to do what it says, explicitly forbidding anyone to bury that body. Antigone thus marks the illocutionary failure of Creon's utterance, and her contestation takes the verbal form of a reassertion of sovereignty, refusing to dissociate the deed from her person: "I say that I did it and I do not deny it" (43), translated less literally by Grene as "Yes, I confess: I will not deny my deed" [in Greek, Creon says, "phes, e katamei ne dedrakenai tade" and Antigone replies: "kai phemi drasai kouk aparnoumai to ne"].

"Yes, I confess it," or "I say I did it"—thus she answers a question that is posed to her from another authority, and thus she concedes the authority that this other has over her. "I will not deny my deed"—"I do not deny," I will not be forced into a denial, I will refuse to be forced into a denial by the other's language, and what I will not deny is my deed—a deed that becomes possessive, a grammatical possession that makes sense only within the context of the scene in which a forced confession is refused by her. In other words, to claim "I will not deny my deed" is to refuse to perform a denial, but it is not precisely to claim the act. To say, "Yes, I did it," is to claim the act, but it is also to commit another deed in the very claiming, the act of publishing one's deed, a new criminal venture that redoubles and takes the place of the old.

Interestingly enough, both Antigone's act of burial and her verbal defiance become the occasions on which she is called "manly" by the chorus, Creon, and the messengers.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Creon, scandalized by her defiance, resolves that while he lives "no woman shall rule" (51), suggesting that if she rules, he will die. And at one point he angrily speaks to Haemon who has sided with Antigone and countered him: "Contemptible character, inferior to a woman!" (746). Earlier, he speaks his fear of becom-

ing fully unmanned by her: if the powers that have done this deed go unpunished, "Now I am no man, but she the man [*aner*]" (528). Antigone thus appears to assume the form of a certain masculine sovereignty, a manhood that cannot be shared, which requires that its other be both feminine and inferior. But there is a question that persists: has she truly assumed this manhood? Has she crossed over into the gender of sovereignty?

This, of course, leads back to the question of how this manly and verbally defiant figure comes to stand for the gods of kinship. It strikes me as unclear whether Antigone represents kinship or, if she does, what sort of kinship it might be. At one point she appears to be obeying the gods, and Hegel insists that these are the gods of the household: she declares, of course, that she will not obey Creon's edict because it was not Zeus who published the law, thus claiming that Creon's authority is not Zeus's (496–501) and apparently displaying her faith in the law of the gods. And yet, she is hardly consistent on this score, noting in an infamous passage that she would not have done the same for other members of her family:

For never, had children of whom I was the mother or had my husband perished and been mouldering there would I have taken on myself this task, in defiance of the citizens. In virtue of what law do I say this? If my husband had died, I could have another, and a child by another man, if I had lost the first, but with my mother and father in Hades below, I could never have another brother. Such was the law for whose sake I did you special honour, but to Creon I seemed to do wrong and to show shocking recklessness, O my brother. And now he leads me thus by the hands, without marriage, without bridal, having no share in wedlock or in the rearing of children. (900–920)

Antigone here hardly represents the sanctity of kinship, for it is for her brother or, at least, in his name, that she is willing to defy

the law, although not for every kin. And though she claims to act in the name of a law that from Creon's perspective can appear only as a sanction for criminality, her law appears to have but one instance of application. Her brother is, in her view, not reproducible, but this means that the conditions under which the law becomes applicable are not reproducible. This is a law of the instant and, hence, a law with no generality and no transposability, one mired in the very circumstances to which it is applied, a law formulated precisely through the singular instance of its application and, therefore, no law at all in any ordinary, generalizable sense.

Thus she acts not in the name of the god of kinship but by transgressing the very mandates of those gods, a transgression that gives kinship its prohibitive and normative dimension but that also exposes its vulnerability. Although Hegel claims that her deed is opposed to Creon's, *the two acts mirror rather than oppose one another*, suggesting that if the one represents kinship and the other the state, they can perform this representation only by each becoming implicated in the idiom of the other. In speaking to him, she becomes manly; in being spoken to, he is unmanned, and so neither maintains their position within gender and the disturbance of kinship appears to destabilize gender throughout the play.

Antigone's deed is, in fact, ambiguous from the start, not only the defiant act in which she buries her brother but the verbal act in which she answers Creon's question; thus hers is an act in language. To publish one's act in language is in some sense the completion of the act, the moment as well that implicates her in the masculine excess called hubris. And so, as she begins to act in language, she also departs from herself. Her act is never fully her act, and though she uses language to claim her deed, to assert a "manly" and defiant autonomy, she can perform that act only through embodying the norms of the power she opposes. Indeed, what gives these verbal acts their power is the normative operation of power that they embody without quite becoming.

Antigone comes, then, to act in ways that are called manly not only because she acts in defiance of the law but also because she assumes the voice of the law in committing the act against the law. She not only does the deed, refusing to obey the edict, but she also does it again by refusing to deny that she has done it, thus appropriating the rhetoric of agency from Creon himself. Her agency emerges precisely through her refusal to honor his command, and yet the language of this refusal assimilates the very terms of sovereignty that she refuses. He expects that his word will govern her deeds, and she speaks back to him, countering his sovereign speech act by asserting her own sovereignty. The claiming becomes an act that reiterates the act it affirms, extending the act of insubordination by performing its avowal in language. This avowal, paradoxically, requires a sacrifice of autonomy at the very moment in which it is performed: she asserts herself through appropriating the voice of the other, the one to whom she is opposed; thus her autonomy is gained through the appropriation of the authoritative voice of the one she resists, an appropriation that has within it traces of a simultaneous refusal and assimilation of that very authority.<sup>13</sup>

In defying the state, she repeats as well the defiant act of her brother, thus offering a repetition of defiance that, in affirming her loyalty to her brother, situates her as the one who may substitute for him and, hence, replaces and territorializes him. She assumes manhood through vanquishing manhood, but she vanquishes it only by idealizing it. At one point her act appears to establish her rivalry and superiority to Polyneices: she asks, "And yet how could I have gained greater glory [*kleos*] than by placing my brother in his grave?" (502).

Not only does the state presuppose kinship and kinship presuppose the state but "acts" that are performed in the name of the one principle take place in the idiom of the other, confounding the distinction between the two at a rhetorical level and thus

bringing into crisis the stability of the conceptual distinction between them.

Although I will return to Hegel and Lacan more comprehensively in the next chapter, it is helpful to see the various ways in which kinship, social order, and the state are variously, and sometimes inversely, figured in their texts. The state makes no appearance in Lacan's discussion of Antigone or, indeed, in Lévi-Strauss's early analysis of culture before him. A social order is based, rather, on a structure of communicability and intelligibility understood as symbolic. And though for both of these latter theorists, the symbolic is not nature, it nevertheless institutes the structure of kinship in ways that are not precisely malleable. For Hegel, kinship belongs to the sphere of cultural norms, but this sphere must be viewed in a subordinate relation to the state, even as the state is dependent on this structure of kinship for its own emergence and maintenance.

Thus Hegel can certainly acknowledge the way in which the state presupposes kinship relations, but he argues that the ideal is for the family to furnish young men for war, those who come to defend the boundaries of the nation, who come to confront one another in the life and death struggle of nations, and who ideally come to reside under a legal regime in which they are to some degree abstracted from the national *Sittlichkeit* that structures their participation.<sup>14</sup>

Antigone emerges as a figure for Hegel in the *Phenomenology* only to become transfigured and surpassed in the course of Hegel's description of what she does. For Hegel, however, Antigone passes away as the power of the feminine and becomes redefined as the power of the mother, one whose sole task within the travels of Spirit is to produce a son for the purposes of the state, a son who leaves the family in order to become a warring citizen. Thus *citizenship demands a partial repudiation of the kinship relations that bring the male citizen into being*, and yet kinship remains that which alone can produce male citizens.

Antigone finds no place within citizenship for Hegel because she is not capable of offering or receiving recognition within the ethical order.<sup>15</sup> The only kind of recognition she can enjoy (and here it is important to remember that recognition is, by definition in Hegel, reciprocal recognition) is of and by her brother. She can gain recognition only from the brother (and so therefore refuses to let him go) and because, according to Hegel, there is ostensibly no desire in that relationship. If there were desire in the relationship, there would be no possibility for recognition. But why?

Hegel does not tell us why, precisely, the ostensible lack of desire between brother and sister qualifies them for recognition within the terms of kinship, but his view implies that incest would constitute the impossibility of recognition, that the very scheme of cultural intelligibility, of *Sittlichkeit*, of the sphere in which reciprocal recognition is possible, presupposes the prepolitical stability of kinship. Implicitly, Hegel appears to understand that the prohibition against incest supports kinship, but this is not what he explicitly says. He claims, rather, that the "blood" relation makes desire impossible between sister and brother, and so it is the blood that stabilizes kinship and its internal dynamics of recognition. Thus Antigone does not desire her brother, according to Hegel, and so the *Phenomenology* becomes the textual instrument of the prohibition against incest, effecting what it cannot name, what it subsequently misnames through the figure of blood.

In fact, what is particularly odd is that in the earlier discussion of recognition in the *Phenomenology*, desire (§ 167) becomes the desire for recognition, a desire that seeks its reflection in the Other, a desire that seeks to negate the alterity of the Other, a desire that finds itself in the bind of requiring the Other whom one fears to be and to be captured by; indeed, without this constituting passionate bind, there can be no recognition. In that earlier discussion, the drama of reciprocal recognition begins when one consciousness finds that it is lost, lost in the Other, that it has

come outside itself, that it finds itself as the Other or, indeed, in the Other. Thus recognition begins with the insight that one is lost in the Other, appropriated in and by an alterity that is and is not oneself, and recognition is motivated by the desire to find oneself reflected there, where the reflection is not a final expropriation. Indeed, consciousness seeks a retrieval of itself, only to recognize that there is no return from alterity to a former self but only a transfiguration premised on the impossibility of return.

Thus in "Lordship and Bondage" recognition is motivated by the desire for recognition, and recognition is itself a cultivated form of desire, no longer the simple consumption or negation of alterity but the uneasy dynamic in which one seeks to find oneself in the Other only to find that this reflection is the sign of one's expropriation and self-loss. Thus in the earlier section, for the subject of the *Phenomenology*, there is no recognition without desire. And yet, for Antigone, according to Hegel, there can be no recognition with desire. Indeed, there is for her recognition only within the sphere of kinship, and with her brother, on the condition that there is no desire.

Lacan's reading of Antigone, to which I will return in the following chapter, also suggests that there is a certain ideality to kinship and that Antigone offers us access to this symbolic position. It is not the content of her brother, Lacan claims, that she loves, but his "pure Being," an ideality of being that belongs to symbolic positions. The symbolic is secured precisely through an evacuation or negation of the living person; thus a symbolic position is never commensurate with any individual who happens to occupy it; it assumes its status as symbolic precisely as a function of that incommensurability.

Thus Lacan presupposes that the brother exists at a symbolic level and that this symbolic brother is the one whom Antigone loves. Lacanians tend to sever the symbolic account of kinship from the social, thus freezing the social arrangements of kinship as something intact and intractable, as that which social theory

might do in a different register and at a different time. Such views sever the social and the symbolic only to retain an invariant sense of kinship in the latter. The symbolic, which gives us kinship as a function of language, is separated from the social arrangements of kinship, presupposing that (a) kinship is instituted at the moment that the child accedes to language, (b) kinship is a function of language rather than any socially alterable institution, and (c) language and kinship are not socially alterable institutions—at least, not easily altered.

So Antigone, who from Hegel through Lacan is said to defend kinship, a kinship that is markedly *not* social, a kinship that follows rules that are the condition of intelligibility for the social, nevertheless represents, as it were, kinship's fatal aberration. Lévi-Strauss remarks upon the interiority of the rules governing kinship when he writes that "the fact of being a rule, completely independent of its modalities, is indeed the very essence of the incest prohibition" (32, 37).<sup>16</sup> Thus it is not simply that the prohibition is such a rule but that this prohibition instantiates the ideality and persistence of the rule itself. "The rule," he writes, "is at once social, in that it is a rule, and *pre-social*, in its *universality* and the *type* of relationships on which it imposes its norm" (12, 14). And later he maintains that the incest taboo is not exclusively biological (although partially), nor exclusively cultural, but exists rather "at the threshold of culture," part of a set of rules that generate the possibility of culture and are thus distinct from the culture they generate, but not absolutely.

In the chapter entitled "The Problem of Incest," Lévi-Strauss makes clear that the set of rules he is articulating are, strictly speaking, neither biological nor cultural. He writes, "It is true that, through its universality, the prohibition of incest touches upon nature [*touche à la nature*], i.e., upon biology or psychology, or both. But it is just as certain [*il n'est pas moins certain*] that in being a rule it is a social phenomenon, and belongs to the world of rules [*l'univers des règles*], hence to culture, and to soci-



ology, whose study is culture" (24, 28). Explaining the consequences, then, for a viable ethnology, Lévi-Strauss maintains that one must acknowledge "the one pre-eminent and universal rule which assures culture's hold over nature [la Règle par excellence, la seule universelle et qui assure la prise de la culture sur la nature]" (24, 28). Lévi-Strauss makes clear how difficult it is to determine the status of this universal prohibition further along in this same discussion when he writes,

The prohibition of incest is in origin neither purely cultural nor purely natural, nor is it a composite mixture of elements from both nature and culture. It is the fundamental step [la démarche fondamentale] because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished. In one sense, it belongs to nature, for it is a general condition of culture. Consequently, we should not be surprised that its formal characteristic, universality, has been taken from nature [tenir de la nature]. However, in another sense, it is already culture, exercising and imposing its rule on phenomena which initially are not subject to it. (24, 28-29)

Although Lévi-Strauss insists that the prohibition is neither the one (nature) nor the other (culture), he also proposes to think of the prohibition as the "link [*le lien*]" between the one and the other. But if it is a relation of mutual exclusion, it is difficult to understand it as a link or, indeed, a transition.<sup>17</sup> And so it seems that his text vacillates between these various positions, understanding the rule as partially composed of nature and culture, but not exclusively, understanding it as exclusive of both categories, understanding it as the transition, sometimes understood as causal, or the link, sometimes understood as structural, between nature and culture.

*The Elementary Structures of Kinship* was published in 1947, and within six years Lacan began to develop his more systematic account of the symbolic, those threshold rules that make culture

possible and intelligible, which are neither fully reducible to their social character nor permanently divorced from the social. One question that will be pursued in the succeeding chapters is whether one might critically assess the status of these rules that govern cultural intelligibility but are not reducible to a given culture. Moreover, how do such rules work? On the one hand, we are told that the rule of prohibiting incest is universal, but Lévi-Strauss also acknowledges that it does not always "work." What he does not pursue, however, is the question, what forms does its nonworking take? Moreover, when the prohibition appears to work, does it have to sustain and manage a specter of its nonworking in order to proceed?

More specifically, can such a rule, understood as a prohibition, actually operate, however effectively, without producing and maintaining the specter of its transgression? Do such rules produce conformity, or do they also produce a set of social configurations that exceed and defy the rules by which they are occasioned? I take this question to be what Foucault has underlined as the *productive* and *excessive* dimension of the rules of structuralism. To accept the final efficacy of the rule in one's theoretical descriptions is thus to live under its regime, accept the force of its edict, as it were. How interesting, then, that so many of the readings of Sophocles' play insist that there is no incestuous love here, and one wonders whether the reading of the play does not in those instances become the very occasion for the insistence of the rule to take place: there is no incest here, and cannot be.<sup>18</sup> Hegel makes the most dramatic of such gestures when he insists that there is only absence of desire between brother and sister. Even Martha Nussbaum in her reflections on the play remarks that Antigone appears to have no great attachment to the brother.<sup>19</sup> And Lacan claims of course that it is not the brother *in bis content* whom she loves, but his being as such—but where does that leave us? What kind of place or position is this? For Lacan, Antigone pursues a desire that can only lead to death precisely because it

seeks to defy symbolic norms. But is this the right way to interpret her desire? Or has the symbolic itself produced a crisis for its own intelligibility? Can we assume that Antigone has no confusion about who is her brother, and who is her father, that Antigone is not, as it were, living the equivocations that unravel the purity and universality of those structuralist rules?

Lacanian theorists for the most part insist that symbolic norms are not the same as social ones. The "symbolic" becomes a technical term for Lacan in 1953 and becomes his own way of compounding mathematical (formal) and Lévi-Straussian uses of the term. The symbolic is defined as the realm of the Law that regulates desire in the Oedipus complex.<sup>20</sup> That complex is understood to be derived from a primary or symbolic prohibition against incest, a prohibition that makes sense only in terms of kinship relations in which various "positions" are established within the family according to an exogamic mandate. In other words, a mother is someone with whom a son and daughter do not have sexual relations, and a father is someone with whom a son and daughter do not have sexual relations, a mother is someone who only has sexual relations with the father, etc. These relations of prohibition are thus encoded in the "position" that each of these family members occupies. To be in such a position is thus to be in such a crossed sexual relation, at least according to the symbolic or normative conception of what that "position" is.

The structuralist legacy within psychoanalytic thinking has exerted a significant influence on feminist film and literary theory, as well as feminist approaches to psychoanalysis throughout the disciplines. Indeed, we hear a great deal of "position" talk within recent cultural theory, and are not always aware of its genesis. It also paved the way for a queer critique of feminism that has had, and continues to have, divisive and productive effects within sexuality and gender studies. From this perspective, we ask, Is there a social life left for kinship, one that might well accommodate change within kinship relations? For anyone working within con-

temporary gender and sexuality studies, the task is not easy, given the legacy of theoretical work that derives from this structuralist paradigm and its Hegelian precursors.

My view is that the distinction between symbolic and social law cannot finally hold, that not only is the symbolic itself the sedimentation of social practices but that radical alterations in kinship demand a rearticulation of the structuralist presuppositions of psychoanalysis and, hence, of contemporary gender and sexual theory.

With this task in mind, we return to the scene of the incest taboo, where the question emerges: What is the status of these prohibitions and these positions? Lévi-Strauss makes clear in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* that nothing in biology necessitates the incest taboo, that it is the mechanism by which biology is transformed into culture, and so is neither biological nor cultural, although culture itself cannot do without it. By "cultural," Lévi-Strauss does not mean "culturally variable" or "contingent," but rather, operating according to "universal" rules of culture. Thus, for Lévi-Strauss, cultural rules are not alterable rules (as Gayle Rubin subsequently argued), but the modalities in which they appear are variable. Moreover, these rules are what operate to transform biological relations into culture, but they belong to no specific culture. No specific culture can come into being without them, but they are irreducible to any of the cultures that they bring into being. The domain of a universal and eternal rule of culture, what Juliet Mitchell called "the universal and primordial law,"<sup>21</sup> becomes the basis for the Lacanian notion of the symbolic and the subsequent efforts to separate the symbolic both from the spheres of biology and the social.

In Lacan, that which is universal in culture is understood to be its symbolic or linguistic rules, and these are understood to encode and support kinship relations. The very possibility of pronomial reference, of an "I" a "you" a "we" and "they," appears to rely on this mode of kinship that operates in and as language.

This slide from the cultural to the linguistic is one toward which Lévi-Strauss himself gestures near the end of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. In Lacan the symbolic becomes defined in terms of a conception of linguistic structures that are irreducible to the social forms that language takes or that, according to structuralist terms, might be said to establish the universal conditions under which the sociality, i.e., the communicability of all language use, becomes possible. This move paves the way for the consequential distinction between symbolic and social accounts of kinship.

Hence a social norm is not quite the same as a "symbolic position" in the Lacanian sense, which appears to enjoy a quasi-timeless character, regardless of the qualifications offered in endnotes to various of the master's seminars. Lacanians almost always insist that it would be a mistake to take the symbolic position of the father, for instance, which is after all the paradigmatically symbolic position, and mistake that for a socially constituted and alterable position that fathers have assumed through time. The Lacanian view insists that there is an ideal and unconscious demand made upon social life irreducible to socially legible causes and effects. The symbolic place of the father does not cede to the demands for a social reorganization of paternity. The symbolic is precisely what sets limits to any and all utopian efforts to reconfigure and relive kinship relations at some distance from the oedipal scene.<sup>22</sup>

When the study of kinship was combined with the study of structural linguistics, kinship positions were elevated to the status of a certain order of linguistic positions without which no signification could proceed, no intelligibility could be possible. What were the consequences of making certain conceptions of kinship timeless and then elevating them to the status of the elementary structures of intelligibility? Is this any better or worse than postulating kinship as a natural form?

So if a social norm is not the same as a symbolic position, then a symbolic position, here understood as the sedimented ideality

of the norm, appears to depart from itself. The distinction between them does not quite hold, for in each instance we are still referring to social norms, but in different modes of appearance. The ideal form is still a contingent norm, but one whose contingency has been rendered necessary, a form of reification with stark consequences for gendered life. Those who disagree with me tend to claim, with some exasperation, "But it is the law!" But what is the status of such an utterance? "It is the law!" becomes the utterance that performatively attributes the very force to the law that the law itself is said to exercise. "It is the law" is thus a sign of allegiance to the law, a sign of the desire for the law to be the indisputable law, a theological impulse within the theory of psychoanalysis that seeks to put out of play any criticism of the symbolic father, the law of psychoanalysis itself. Thus the status given to the law is precisely the status given to the phallus, the symbolic place of the father, the indisputable and incontestable. The theory exposes its own tautological defense. The law beyond laws will finally put an end to the anxiety produced by a critical relation to final authority that clearly does not know when to stop: a limit to the social, the subversive, the possibility of agency and change, a limit that we cling to, symptomatically, as the final defeat of our own power. Its defenders claim that to be without such a law is pure voluntarism or radical anarchy! Or is it? And to accept such a law as a final arbiter of kinship life? Is that not to resolve by theological means the concrete dilemmas of human sexual arrangements that have no ultimate normative form?

One can certainly concede that desire is radically conditioned without claiming that it is radically determined, and that there are structures that make possible desire without claiming that those structures are impervious to a reiterative and transformative articulation. The latter is hardly a return to "the ego" or classical liberal notions of freedom, but it does insist that the norm has a temporality that opens it to a subversion from within and to a future that cannot be fully anticipated. And yet, Antigone cannot quite

stand for that subversion and for that future, because what she draws into crisis is the representative function itself, the very horizon of intelligibility in which she operates and according to which she remains somewhat unthinkable. Antigone is the offspring of Oedipus and so raises the question for us: what will come of the inheritance of Oedipus when the rules that Oedipus blindly defies and institutes no longer carry the stability accorded to them by Lévi-Strauss and structural psychoanalysis? In other words, Antigone is one for whom symbolic positions have become incoherent, confounding as she does brother and father, emerging as she does not as a mother but—as one etymology suggests—“in the place of the mother.”<sup>23</sup> Her name is also construed as “anti-generation” (*gonē* [generation]).<sup>24</sup> She is, thus, already at a distance from that which she represents, and what she represents is far from clear. If the stability of the maternal place cannot be secured, and neither can the stability of the paternal, what happens to Oedipus and the interdiction for which he stands? What has Oedipus engendered?

I ask this question, of course, during a time in which the family is at once idealized in nostalgic ways within various cultural forms, a time in which the Vatican protests against homosexuality not only as an assault on the family but also on the notion of the human, where to become human, for some, requires participation in the family in its normative sense. I ask this as well during a time in which children, because of divorce and remarriage, because of migration, exile, and refugee status, because of global displacements of various kinds, move from one family to another, move from a family to no family, move from no family to a family, or in which they live, psychically, at the crossroads of the family, or in multiply layered family situations, in which they may well have more than one woman who operates as the mother, more than one man who operates as the father, or no mother or no father, with half-brothers who are also friends—this is a time in which kinship has become fragile, porous, and expansive. It is

also a time in which straight and gay families are sometimes blended, or in which gay families emerge in nuclear and non-nuclear forms. What will the legacy of Oedipus be for those who are formed in these situations, where positions are hardly clear, where the place of the father is dispersed, where the place of the mother is multiply occupied or displaced, where the symbolic in its stasis no longer holds?

In some ways Antigone figures the limits of intelligibility exposed at the limits of kinship. But she does it in a way that is hardly pure, and that will be difficult for anyone to romanticize or, indeed, to consult as an example. After all, Antigone appropriates the stance and idiom of the one she opposes, assumes Creon's sovereignty, even claims the glory that is destined for her brother, and lives out a strange loyalty to her father, bound as she is to him through his curse. Her fate is not to have a life to live, to be condemned to death prior to any possibility of life. This raises the question of how it is that kinship secures the conditions of intelligibility by which life becomes livable, by which life also becomes condemned and foreclosed. Antigone's death is always double throughout the play: she claims that she has not lived, that she has not loved, and that she has not borne children, and so that she has been under the curse that Oedipus laid upon his children, “serving death” for the length of her life. Thus death signifies the un-lived life, and so as she approaches the living tomb that Creon has arranged for her, she meets a fate that has been hers all along. Is it perhaps the unlivable desire with which she lives, incest itself, that makes of her life a living death, that has no place within the terms that confer intelligibility on life? As she approaches the tomb, where she must remain entombed in life, she remarks,

O tomb, O bridal chamber, O deep-dug home, to be guarded  
for ever, where I go to join those who are my own [tous  
emautes].

(891–893)

Thus death is figured as a kind of marriage to those in her family who are already dead, affirming the deathlike quality of those loves for which there is no viable and livable place in culture. It is no doubt important, on the one hand, to refuse her conclusion that to be without a child is itself a tragic fate, and, on the other hand, to refuse the conclusion that the incest taboo must be undone in order for love to freely flourish everywhere. Neither the return to familial normalcy nor the celebration of incestuous practice is here the aim. Her predicament, though, does offer an allegory for the crisis of kinship: which social arrangements can be recognized as legitimate love, and which human losses can be explicitly grieved as real and consequential loss? Antigone refuses to obey any law that refuses public recognition of her loss, and in this way prefigures the situation that those with publicly ungrievable losses—from AIDS, for instance—know too well. To what sort of living death have they been condemned?

Although Antigone dies, her deed remains in language, but what is her deed? This deed *is* and *is not* her own, a trespass on the norms of kinship and gender that exposes the precarious character of those norms, their sudden and disturbing transferability, and their capacity to be reiterated in contexts and in ways that are not fully to be anticipated.

Antigone represents not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement, one that puts the reigning regimes of representation into crisis and raises the question of what the conditions of intelligibility could have been that would have made her life possible, indeed, what sustaining web of relations makes our lives possible, those of us who confound kinship in the rearticulation of its terms? What new schemes of intelligibility make our loves legitimate and recognizable, our losses true losses? This question reopens the relation between kinship and reigning epistemes of cultural intelligibility, and both of these to the possibility of social transformation. And this question, which seems so hard to ask when it comes to kinship, is so quickly sup-

pressed by those who seek to make normative versions of kinship essential to the working of culture and the logic of things, a question too often foreclosed by those who, from terror, savor the final authority of those taboos that stabilize social structure as timeless truth, without then ever asking, what happened to the heirs of Oedipus?