Review essay

The Exception and the Rule

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Antigone’s Claim, despite its title, does not actually focus that much on Sophocles’ Antigone. Instead, Judith Butler employs this text as a springboard for continuing long-running discussions from her earlier works. Through critiquing the Hegelian and Lacanian approaches to Antigone – Butler is principally concerned with “reading” Hegel and Lacan as themselves readers of Sophocles – she seeks to debunk the structuralist myth of a transcendent, normative symbolic system of kinship and gender positions in which the concrete person is an overdetermined by-product of a static, pre-given order. The conclusion Butler’s interpretive efforts build towards is that the organizing function of, for example, the family unit (primarily as portrayed through the prism of the Freudian Oedipus complex) has a genuine existence only insofar as it gets enacted by flesh-and-blood individuals. And, Butler’s notion of “parody” developed in her previous books maintains that all enactments (or, in Butlerian parlance, “performances”) of a structural norm necessarily introduce an irreducible margin of deviance/deviation into this same norm: the norm is never truly repeated, and all ostensible repetitions of it inevitably distort a formal purity that never was pure in the first place. Thus, since the very being of the symbolic order (as Hegel’s “objective spirit” and/or Lacan’s “big Other”) parasitically relies upon particular performances of its pseudo-general forms, its trans-individual universality is itself ultimately a fiction that falters in the face of parodic performativity.

Through an evaluation of four central aspects of Butler’s work (her critique of Hegel, her critique of Lacan, her overall tactic of approaching philosophical and psychoanalytic theories via a single piece of ancient literature, and her perspective on Sophocles’ writings), two fundamental problems with Antigone’s Claim come to light. First, Butler’s criticisms of Hegel and Lacan present readers with a false dilemma, namely, an unnecessary forced choice
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