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Lacan's Antigone: The Sublime Object and the Ethics of Interpretation

My paper examines Lacan's reading of the Antigone as an allegory of our own textual and ethical obligations as readers and critics. This paper addresses both the ethics and the aesthetics of our encounter with the text.

In 1959, Lacan presented Sophocles' Antigone as a model of pure desire for his seminar on The Ethics of Psychoanalysis:

Antigone presents herself as autonomos, the pure and simple relationship of a human being to that which it miraculously finds itself carrying, that is the rupture of signification, that which grants a person the insuperable power of being—in spite of and against everything—what he [sic] is. . . . Antigone all but fulfills what can be called pure desire, the pure and simple desire of death as such [i.e., of that which is beyond the pleasure principle]. She incarnates this desire. (1986: 328-29)

Lacan notes that Antigone's decision to defy Creon consciously seeks death. She makes no effort to defend Polynices' actions (Lacan 1986: 290, 323-25). Her choice takes her beyond the realm of rational discourse and the collective norms of human satisfaction it implies (Lacan 1986: 78, 281; Zizek 1991: 25). Hers is a position that transcends the comfortable binary oppositions that structure our daily ethical and social lives. Because her choice of death cannot be understood according to strictly rational norms, she cannot be read as representing some simple antithesis of freedom to tyranny, or the individual to the state (Lacan 1986: 281; Zizek 1992: 77-78). In fact, as she acknowledges, she had chosen death before Creon's decree against the burial of Polynices, and she defines herself to Ismene as one already belonging to the realm of the dead (ll. 559-60; Lacan 1986: 315, 326). Creon is not a tyrant who forces Antigone to make an impossible choice between life and freedom; rather, he embodies the civic norms that her pursuit of a desire beyond the bounds of those desires articulated within the realm of common life both requires as defining foil, and transcends. Her choice thus represents a pure ethical act shaped neither by a self-interested selection among communally recognized goods nor the self-loathing of conforming to a code that is recognized and despised (Zizek 1992: 77).

Such an ethical choice, as Lacan acknowledges, is Kantian in its devotion to a pure concept of duty, but psychoanalytic in its predication on a highly individualized desire whose content cannot be generalized into a universal ethical maxim (Lacan 1986: 68, 365-66). Antigone's choice, her desire, is pure precisely to the degree that it rejects the claims of the Other. For Lacan, it is the beauty of Antigone's choice of a Good beyond all recognized goods, beyond the pleasure principle, that gives her character its monumental status and makes her a model for an ethics of creation as opposed to conformity. It is for this reason that he cites Antigone's self-comparison to ever-weeping, petrified Niobe, another princess enclosed alive in stone—as the central axis around which the play turns (ll. 823-33). In this one image we see brought together the themes of beauty, monumentality, and death-in-life in a singular apotheosis of tragic transgression (Lacan

1986: 311, 315, 327). Beauty for Lacan represents the perfect moment between life and death, a moment both articulated by and beyond time and desire, a moment whose true achievement can only be imagined as the incarnation of a pure desire beyond any recognizable object.

In its beauty, Sophocles' Antigone presents what Lacan defines as a "Sublime Object." Our ethical obligation as readers and analysts is to be true to this object to the precise degree that it transcends all normative categories. As Antigone does not cede on her desire, neither can we assimilate her tragedy to a pre-existing set of critical categories, even psychoanalytic ones. This is an obligation to the text, but it is simultaneously an obligation to our own desire as readers, critics, and subjects: for the encounter with the sublime object is one that must shake us to our very core if it is not to be a factitious or mechanical exercise in the application of reassuring truisms. To meet our obligation to the sublime text we must go beyond the dictates of the pleasure and reality principles, beyond good and evil to encounter pure desire: the moment in which the canons of meaning shudder before their own beyond.

Works Cited

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