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### **Title**

The Abject: Kristeva and the Antigone

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8qt465qh>

### **Journal**

Paroles gelées, 13(1)

### **ISSN**

1094-7264

### **Author**

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### **Publication Date**

1995

### **DOI**

10.5070/PG7131003019

Peer reviewed

# The Abject: Kristeva and the *Antigone*

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Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject provides an illuminating and interrogative hermeneutic technique for Sophocles' *Antigone*. Kristeva has demonstrated the applicability of this theory to the Theban saga (although, perhaps, with mixed results) in her reading of Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Oedipus at Colonus* (*Powers of Horror* 83-89). Her interpretation of *Oedipus Tyrannos* not only reinforces Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, but also situates the concept of the abject, as an extension of Lacan, within the ancient text as the *agos*, "defilement" of Oedipus. Kristeva argues that the new king, as *agos*, represents the source of the abject and embodies its purification as *pharmakos*: "scapegoat." The structural and thematic oppositions in the *Antigone* between patriarchal, institutional uniformity in the *polis* and the more antiquated, chthonic obligations of the heterogeneous dead mark this drama, too, as extraordinarily well-suited for reinterpretation as a confrontation between an archaic, Greek Symbolic and the abject. In this paper, I use Kristevan theory to elucidate and reinterpret the primary oppositions in Sophocles's *Antigone* and demonstrate how such a reading differs from the structuralist interpretations of C.W. Oudemans and J.P. Vernant. Instead of reducing the antagonism of Antigone and Creon to a Hegelian or structuralist reading of binary opposition between equally legitimate claims, I demonstrate that the conflicts in the *Antigone* reflect the psychological tension between nascent patriarchal institutions and the excluded, but sanctified, feminine Other. First, however, it is necessary to present the main tenets of Kristeva's theory of the abject.

## I. Lacan and Kristeva

Julia Kristeva's work is deeply indebted to Jacques Lacan and his reinterpretation of Freudian principles in terms of post-structuralist discourse theory (Lacan, *Écrits*; *Télévision*). Lacan's theory of the symbolic order (or Symbolic) describes the indoctrination of the child into the phallogocentric system of cultural institutions. The Symbolic is a monolithic, unitary system that pervades language and, therefore, all cultural institutions because they are conceived

through language. The Symbolic is dominated by "the Law" (an idea appropriated by Lacan from Claude Levi-Strauss) which the father embodies for the child: a social taboo on incestuous relations with the mother.<sup>1</sup> At the same time that a child begins to acquire language, he/she<sup>2</sup> recognizes the Law and represses the "guilty desire" of incest. This repression of the incestuous desire becomes the unconscious. Before the acquisition of language when the child is prelinguistic and precultural, it expresses itself in a pre-oedipal, heterogeneous register Lacan calls the "imaginary," when the child cannot distinguish between the "self" and the world. Until indoctrination into the Symbolic by language, there is no clear distinction between the subject and the "object of desire." The child has no totalizable "I" (i.e., no ego). In this state of the "imaginary,"<sup>3</sup> its relationship with the mother is symbiotic; the child is unable to differentiate between its own identity and hers. Nevertheless, symbiosis is hardly idyllic, since the child may entertain aggressive and destructive fantasies about the mother (Klein 344-369). When the child acquires language and recognizes the Law, his intimate connection with the mother is sundered and he develops an ego. Thus, the object of desire, and all that the ego acts upon, (the effects of the ego), are no longer perceived as an internal part of the child's being; they become external and oppositional to the "self."<sup>4</sup>

In *The Revolution of Poetic Language*, Kristeva articulates her theory that the "semiotic" is a revolutionary force. As a hidden vestige of the pre-oedipal, pre-thetic<sup>5</sup> experience within language, the semiotic is inextricably associated with the maternal body and becomes an antagonistic, excluded, linguistic Other. It exists not only in diachronic precedence to the Symbolic, but also opposes it synchronically from its excluded position in language. Kristeva views the difference between the imaginary and the symbolic order as a gender opposition in language in a way that Lacan does not. She imagines the rhythms of the semiotic as a "genotextual" alterity that undermines the modality of the Symbolic.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the semiotic subverts the Law of the Father. Since Kristeva proposes that this "other language" is opposed to the rigid significations of institutional, patriarchal language (God, state, father, etc.), the semiotic becomes revolutionary. Accordingly, Kristeva's language is often reminiscent of an insurgent political discourse.<sup>7</sup>

## II. *Theory of the Subject*

Kristeva identifies the monolithic, patriarchal Symbolic with all cultural institutions. Because institutions are conceived through language, which reflects patriarchal dogma, language and culture preclude the acknowledgement of maternal drives (*pulsions*). The maternal represents the prelinguistic and precultural state called the "imaginary" by Lacan. Again, this is the register of the child, the *infant* who has not yet acquired speech (Eagleton 188). These maternal drives are associated with a non-totalizable, heterogeneous experience. They involve gender ambiguity, submission to the maternal, and unfettered expression of incestuous feelings for the mother. It should be noted here that Kristeva's translation of the imaginary into a register of the maternal drives (or "the feminine") excluded by the Symbolic involves a rather significant modification of Lacanian theory. Kristeva introduces the idea that the child's indoctrination by a repressive, patriarchal system requires a rejection of the "feminine" object: the maternal. Unlike Lacan, Kristeva now focuses almost entirely on the ominous consequences of the subjugation and exclusion of the maternal drives.

In *Powers of Horror* (1-5), Kristeva theorizes that the unhealthy symptom of the Symbolic's hegemony is the superego/object relationship, in which the patriarchal is canonized and maternal drives are transformed and repressed. Before the development of the superego, the ego/object relationship is less exclusionary. Since Kristeva proposes that the object represents the maternal drives, she seems to imply that at the preliminary stage of the child's development of identity, there is still the possibility of a mutual recognition of the ego and the feminine object. As the child transcends the imaginary, his first recognized "object" is the maternal body. The impending tyranny of the superego institutionalized by the Symbolic, however, represses and banishes the maternal object. Institutional language becomes a surrogate parent when the maternal is excluded (*Powers* 45). This exclusion seems to result from a kind of hypertrophy of the active subject when it is glutted by a restricted diet of phallogocentric, institutional doctrine. The ego becomes so "hyperinflated" by the "paternal" Symbolic that the object is first obscured, and then "flatly driven away" (2). Thus, the object is transmuted into the *abject*, which threatens and challenges the Symbolic from its banished, hidden position. As a result, the

excluded object, the *abject*, becomes frightening and subversive. As Kristeva states:

The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain “ego” that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. Without a sign (for him), it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. To each ego its object, to each superego its abject. (*Powers* 1-2)

The abject represents the excluded and repugnant effects<sup>8</sup> of the superego: physical effluences, decay, and death. Therefore, as the etymology suggests, the abject represents what is “thrown out” by the Symbolic. It could be seen as a rather horrifying intensification or transmutation of the Freudian concept of the death instinct (Freud 46-49; 58-69). Significantly, it is the very act of exclusion by the superego that transforms the maternal object into the subversive, horrifying abject (*Powers* 2-4). In this way, the maternal is associated with what is now regarded by the superego as “unclean and improper”:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck. The shame of compromise, of being in the middle of treachery. The fascinated start that leads me toward and separates me from them. (*Powers* 2)

In other words, the abject represents the waste that the superego casts off in order to live. If the abject signifies the detritus of the superego, the inveterate repression of the object finds its culmination in a discarded corpse: the physical embodiment of the jettisoned object. Therefore, death is associated with the maternal:

... refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this

shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. (*Powers* 3)

Since the superego cannot completely avoid its own effects, it is always impure, unclean, and unhealthy. Moreover, despite its attempt to exclude the abject, it is constantly reminded of the imminence of death. This desperate attempt to exclude the Other, which nevertheless contaminates from the borders of the superego, leads to the abjection of self. Kristeva graphically illustrates the constant turmoil of self-abjection:

I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself. That detail, perhaps an insignificant one, but one that they ferret out, emphasize, evaluate, that trifle turns me inside out, guts sprawling; it is thus that *they* see that "I" am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. (*Powers* 3)

Kristeva argues that the abject is a revolutionary force which constantly threatens the superego and advocates a "purification"<sup>9</sup> of the abject on the only fronts where it can be recognized, the artistic and the semiotic. These are the registers in which an epiphany of the maternal drives is possible, compelling us to confront and acknowledge the maternal. The purifying recognition of the maternal, or *jouissance*, is a sexually painful, nostalgic acknowledgement of the maternal achieved through the semiotic. Since *jouissance* involves a recognition of the maternal, it allows the purification of the abject. It is evoked by the semiotic through certain kinds of polyphonous, defamiliarizing language in which the subject/object opposition is subverted, collapsed, and assimilated. According to Kristeva, when we read innovative, defamiliarizing language, we gain access to the hidden forces of the semiotic. She argues that the highly unorthodox, defamiliarizing use of language by Modernistic writers, (specifically James Joyce and Virginia Woolf) and the French Symbolist poets, causes an evocation of maternal drives and, therefore, forces a confrontation with the abject. She describes the "semiotic plasticity," the heterogeneity of Joyce's language as:

How dazzling, unending, eternal—and so weak, so insignificant, so sickly—is the rhetoric of Joycean language. Far from

preserving us from the abject, Joyce causes it to break out.  
(*Powers* 22)

The collapse of the subject/object opposition in language recalls the heterogeneous and polyphonous experience of the infant.<sup>10</sup> This compels us to confront and acknowledge the excluded maternal drives. As a result, we experience *jouissance* and the abject is purified. In other words, when we are forced to recognize the maternal, the superego's hegemony is usurped. In this way, we transcend the destructive superego/abject opposition and achieve a psychological balance; we "return" to the ego/object.

### III. Kristeva's Interpretation of Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannos*

Before we turn to *Antigone*, it is useful to examine briefly Kristeva's interpretation of the *Oedipus Tyrannos* as a confrontation with and purification of the abject. First, we must establish the connection between myth and the semiotic. Although she does not state it directly, Kristeva apparently views myth as a kind of monolithic discourse that opposes the state-sponsored, institutional language of fifth-century B.C.E. Athens.<sup>11</sup> From Zeitlin's examination (101-141) of Thebes as the *topos* of "otherness" in Athenian drama helps to clarify and evaluate this notion. She argues that the Theban plays serve as a dramatic Other through which the most horrifying and insoluble conflicts (incest, parricide, etc.) are confronted by the Athenian audience, but are displaced, safely, in the penumbral scenes of Thebes and Argos (102-3; 116-123). While Zeitlin's argument is fascinating and sensible, Kristeva seems to suggest that myths are not only dramatically Other, but also evince linguistic defamiliarization. Like the innovative language of Joyce or Baudelaire, myth should be equated with the semiotic, a hidden force that challenges the Symbolic even as it is displaced or rejected. There are a few problems with this argument. First, we must ask ourselves, are myths not conveyed only *through language*? Second, despite the psychological atmosphere of "otherness" in the Theban myths described by Zeitlin, there may not be anything patently "defamiliarizing" about the language of Greek drama *per se*. Even if there were defamiliarizing elements in the texts, it would be exceedingly difficult for a modern scholar to recognize them without access to the entire corpus of ancient texts and secure knowledge of everyday speech in the fifth century

B.C.E. In any event, Kristeva views myth as a semiotic discourse that counteracts the institutional language of the Greek *polis*.

Kristeva interprets *Oedipus Tyrannos* as a confrontation with and purification of the abject. She says that Oedipus's "tragic ... fate sums up and displaces the mythical defilement [abject] that situates impurity on the untouchable 'other side'" (Powers 83). In the play, Oedipus is unaware that the object of desire is his mother, Jocasta. According to Kristeva, Oedipus's attempt to find the truth reveals his own intimate connection with incest and death, his abjection. In order to protect Thebes, (the archaic Symbolic), from defilement, Oedipus blinds and exiles himself. Kristeva interprets the act of blinding as Oedipus's attempt to displace the objects of his desire, Jocasta, the wife/mother, and his children. This displacement transforms the object into the abject. The king's recognition of his self-abjection then compels him to exclude the defilement from Thebes by exiling himself.

Specifically, Kristeva views *Oedipus Tyrannos* in the following way: Oedipus transforms himself into an object of defilement, an *agos*, in order to purify the city, which has become contaminated by his *miasma*, or "pollution" (Powers 84). Kristeva's conception of *miasma* is similar to that of J.P. Vernant, who views *miasma* as the result of a structurally oppositional tension between the internal, individuated *ethos* of the protagonist and the external *daimôn* (Vernant 35-6). His discussion of the psychological dimension of *atê* ("reckless folly") and *miasma* is not only illuminating, but also bears striking parallels to Kristeva's theory of the abject. Defiled, as an abject figure, Oedipus suffers from the ambiguity of his roles.<sup>12</sup> Kristeva places great importance on the significance of ambiguity in the play:

The mainspring of the tragedy lies in that ambiguity; prohibition and ideal are joined in a single character in order to signify that the speaking being has no space of his own but stands on a fragile threshold as if stranded on account of an impossible demarcation. (Powers 82-3)<sup>13</sup>

The act of incest represents a transgression of the Symbolic's boundaries. Oedipus's *peripeteia*, "reversal of fortune," transforms him into a being of abjection and a *pharmakos*, "scapegoat." Rene Girard's analysis of the role of the *pharmakos* in Greek tragedy is instructive here. He asserts that the community defers wholesale



violence by objectifying collective guilt in the *pharmakos*, and then exterminating him (Girard 121-4). Therefore, Oedipus's role as the *pharmakos* provides the city with a means by which it can objectify and exclude the defilement, the abject. But, by recognizing his incestuous and intimate connection with the maternal, Jocasta, Oedipus purifies the abject. Kristeva goes on to analyze the *Oedipus at Colonus* as further evidence of the purification of the abject (Powers 86-9). Her arguments about "the complete otherness" of Oedipus in *OC* and the relationship between the abject and law are abstruse and problematic. For the sake of brevity, I do not discuss her analysis of the *OC* in this paper.

#### IV. *Antigone*

Rather than extrapolating a Kristevan reading of the *Antigone*, the following interpretation is intended to illuminate the primary oppositions in the Greek text by means of her theory.<sup>14</sup> Although my interpretation proposes a loosely oppositional structure in the play, this does not mean that I view the antagonism of Antigone and Creon as a Hegelian antithesis between two equally legitimate claims. In contrast, C.W. Oudemans, the structuralist critic, envisions the *Antigone* as a rigidly Hegelian structure of "interconnected cosmology" between celestial and chthonic divinities (118-203; 237-48). Oudemans also interprets the conflict between Antigone and Creon as oppositional, but mutually valid. One of the problems with Hegelian analyses of this play is that its *dénouement* must somehow be recast, paradoxically, as a salutary, but "negative resolution." Based on the text alone, it is difficult to see anything auspicious in the resolution of the *Antigone*. There is sufficient textual evidence that Sophocles intended for Antigone to be seen not only as more heroic than Creon, but more righteous. Therefore, I attempt to distinguish my Kristevan reading of the play from the structuralist interpretations of Oudemans and Vernant. I also adapt Kristeva's ideas a bit when I feel the modification adds insight to the *Antigone*.<sup>15</sup>

Since the *Antigone* is a depiction of the tensions between the authority of the more antiquated chthonic gods and the celestial divinities of the nascent polis, we can employ Kristeva's theory to interpret the chthonic as the prehistoric maternal and the Olympians as the patrons of the new institutions of a Greek Symbolic. In this view, the child's transition from the pre-oedipal phase to

indoctrination by the Symbolic represents not only a historical development from the precultural "infancy" of civilization to the dominance of the *polis*, but also, simultaneously, a political phenomenon in Sophoclean Athens. The child's intimate connection with the mother's body parallels the mythological association of the older chthonic gods, such as Hades and Persephone, and the pre-olympian monsters, such as the Titans and the Erinyes, with the earth-mother goddess, Gaia.<sup>16</sup> Sophocles's description in the Ode on Man (338) of the subjugation of the earth by civic man introduces the new hegemony of the Symbolic over the maternal. As Charles Segal has pointed out (46-66), this chorus describes the potential for repression and bondage through human ingenuity. The mastery of natural, bestial forces described throughout this chorus parallels the superego's subjugation of the primitive pre-oedipal phase. In my extension of Kristeva's theory, the association of the chthonic deities with death, burial, and blood becomes particularly suggestive. This connection symbolizes the exclusion of the maternal drives and their horrifying transformation into the abject. Therefore, in the *Antigone*, the chthonic represents the Other: the wild forces, decay, and death that are banished beyond the city walls, but threaten to penetrate and contaminate the *polis*. And, if we accept Benveniste's speculations that Greek kinship was based on the matrilineal blood tie (subsumed later by the patrilineal phratry), a matrilineal origin suggests the "precultural" dominance of the maternal.<sup>17</sup> These oppositions between the maternal and the Symbolic in *Antigone* are represented by the conflict between Antigone and Creon.

The legacy of the incest of Oedipus and Jocasta is inherited by Antigone and marks her abjection. Like Oedipus, Antigone is an ambiguous being who defies categorization and, therefore, subverts the Symbolic. She is both male and female, a savior and an *agos*, a *parthenos* ("virgin") and a bride. Her heterogeneity of roles, her polyphony, parallels the pre-oedipal diffusion of the maternal. Her devotion to Polyneices is maternal; when she finds his body laid bare, she cries out like a mother bird who has discovered an empty nest (423-425). Antigone's intimate connection with his corpse and chthonic obligations of burial emphasize her abjection. In fact, Antigone's frequent references to her love for Polyneices, e.g., "loved shall I lie with him, beloved with beloved" (73, et al.), resonate with incestuous desire: the erotic relationship between the

maternal and the child condemned by the Symbolic's Law. Like Kristeva's maternal, Antigone's relationship with her family is symbiotic. In recognition of the authority of precultural, ineffable divinities, anterior to the polis, she cannot separate her brothers based on their allegiance to the city.

Creon, on the other hand, as the paragon of the Symbolic, represents the hegemony of patriarchal institutions. Like the superego, he categorizes and excludes. Just as the subject opposes the object, and so the superego the abject, Creon excludes the body of Polyneices as an impurity, a contaminant. The corpse lies unburied on the border of the city walls, however, and contaminates the Symbolic from its banished position. Creon's rejection of the feminine emphasizes his subordination of the maternal. He is extremely concerned with the maintenance of boundaries between male and female. As he states, "I am not a man, but she is the man, if I cede this victory to her with impunity" (484-485). He says that he would rather be usurped by a man "than be called weaker than woman-kind" (676-680). Creon's valorization of the male elucidates his role as the *hégemôn* of the Symbolic.

The ambiguity of language in the *Antigone* suggests the tension between the institutionalized, fixed significations of the Symbolic and the semiotic's hidden discourse. In Sophocles's play, the same words have vastly different meanings in the mouths of Antigone and Creon. As Simon Goldhill has pointed out, Antigone's conception of *philos* is antiquated, even Homeric; it refers simply to one's blood relatives, the members of the *oikos*, "household." Therefore, Antigone defines *echthros*, "enemy," as anyone who threatens or disregards the family. Antigone's values should be seen as anterior to the rise of the polis, when the *oikos* was subsumed by a "family" of interdependent citizens.<sup>18</sup> Creon, as the representative of the nascent city-state, defines *philos* and *echthros* only in relation to political loyalty. As Vernant argues, the protagonists' antinomous conceptions of *philos* and *echthros* recreate the political and religious conflict in linguistic terms. He states:

So the function of the words used on stage is not so much to establish communication between the various characters as to indicate blockages and barriers between them and the impermeability of their minds, to locate the points of conflict. (42)

Vernant uses this definition of linguistic antagonism to argue that it is the "one-sidedness" of both characters which leads to their demise (42-3). Like Oudemans, Vernant seems to imply that the argument between Antigone and Creon represents a conflict between rights that are diametrically opposed, but equally legitimate. While this view is certainly arguable, Oudemans is so interested in the discovery of neat, formulaic oppositions that he tends to obscure significant textual evidence.

In "The Episodes of Sophocles' *Antigone*," Oudemans proposes that Creon and Antigone represent claims that are oppositional and "one-sided," but equally valid. This is not to say that Oudemans views their arguments as infallible or unassailable; in fact, he seems to suggest that the protagonists are diametrically opposed precisely *because* of the ambiguity of their positions. Oudemans' strategy is to reduce the conflict to a neat binary opposition by emphasizing the fallibility of both claims. He begins by presenting sound arguments for the contradictory nature of Creon's position. For example, Oudemans points out that Creon must acknowledge his consanguinity with the defiled Oedipus, even as the new king claims that his ascension is auspicious for the city (161). On the other hand, he argues that Creon's decisions are divinely sanctioned because of the "interconnected nature" of sovereignty, the city and religion (160).<sup>19</sup> Whether the actions of a sacrilegious *tyrannos* would enjoy divine support, however, is open to question. Creon's contemptuous attitude towards the authority of Hades and his final condemnation of Zeus *Dikē* not only illustrate his impiety, but also nullify his sovereignty. Although Oudemans emphasizes the risk of Creon's lofty position in the city, he does not acknowledge his abuse of power (163).

Because Creon's actions are so vulnerable to criticism, Oudemans must attempt to undermine Antigone in order to preserve the structural symmetry of the play. While he admits the legitimacy of the divine principle that Antigone upholds, he emphasizes her "one-sidedness" and claims that she refuses to recognize the divine sanction of the king because she "challenges the whole interconnected order" (166). To support this argument, Oudemans cites lines 453-54, in which Antigone repudiates the *kêrugma* ("edict") of Creon. Oudemans fails to recognize that Antigone does not challenge the relationship between sovereignty and divine sanction; instead, she questions the legitimacy of a

*tyrannos* who would deny the sacred obligation of burial. Significantly, Antigone never blasphemes Zeus *Dikê* here, or anywhere else in the play. She specifically denies Zeus' association with Creon's proclamation (450). Furthermore, Oudemans's contention that Antigone recklessly transgresses the boundaries of acceptable feminine behavior when she buries her brother seems to ignore the fact that no one else is either willing (Ismene and Creon have refused), or able (the other family members are dead) to perform the ritual. If we acknowledge the sanctity of this rite, who else could possibly perform it *but* Antigone?

The textual evidence suggests that Antigone is a more righteous figure than Creon. For example, a supernatural storm is sent by the gods either to punish the guards for uncovering Polyneices's corpse, or to obscure Antigone's return (417-423). In either case, this intervention on behalf of Antigone suggests that her actions are divinely sanctioned. Unlike Antigone, Creon is sacrilegious. During the course of the play, he not only ridicules the authority of Hades (524), but also eventually blasphemes the divinity whom he has celebrated as his patron, celestial Zeus (1039-1044). In contrast, Antigone does not impugn the rights of the polis; she questions the authority of its *tyrannos* (e.g., 48, 453-459). The difference between these attitudes emphasizes Antigone's piety. Also, as Bernard Knox points out, Antigone's unyielding character reflects her primacy in the text and associates her with other Sophoclean heroes, such as Oedipus and Ajax. Creon, on the other hand, despite his initial obstinacy, abdicates his principles almost entirely. His eventual capitulations suggest that he is the weaker character (Knox 62-89). There is other textual evidence of Antigone's righteousness, but it is not necessary to give a comprehensive statement of it here. Therefore, while Vernant and Oudemans may be right that the protagonists' arguments are "one-sided," the positions of Antigone and Creon are not *equally* legitimate.

In addition to Antigone's and Creon's opposing conceptions of *philos*, *echthros* and *nomos*, there are other major linguistic conflicts in the play. There is a revealing difference between the most significant example of civic language in the *Antigone*, Creon's *kêrugma*, and Antigone's *agraphoi nomoi*, "unwritten laws" (invoked by her in 454). As we might expect of the Symbolic's language, the *kêrugma* is proscriptive; no one may bury the body of Polyneices. It is a state-sponsored categorization which institution-

alizes the discrimination between the two brothers. The *kêrugma* parallels the exclusion of the object by the Symbolic. Like the language of a monolithic, unitary superego, the proclamation represents the prejudicial repudiation of the Other by one man, Creon. Also, like the discourse of the Symbolic, the *kêrugma* represents the nascent authority of the *polis*.

In contrast, Antigone's *agraphoi nomoi* are so ancient that "no one knows their origin in time" (457); that is, they represent a precultural authority. These unwritten laws are not proscriptive, but prescriptive; they demand the burial of *all* who have died. They do not discriminate. As Antigone says, "Death yearns for equal justice for all the dead" (519). This absolute absence of categorization parallels the heterogeneity of the pre-oedipal phase. Furthermore, unlike the *kêrugma*, the authority for the obligation of burial is not unitary; it seems to be shared by a number of deities, including Hades, Zeus *katachthonios*, and Persephone, suggesting the polyphony of the maternal. The antithetical language of Creon and Antigone in regard to burial, law, and friendship, is distilled in her defiant statement to the king: "Nothing that you say is in accordance with my thoughts. I pray it never will be. Nor will there ever be anything pleasing to you in what I say" (499-501).

If there is a symbolic purification of the abject in the play, it occurs when Creon recognizes his mistake and attempts to save Antigone (1210-1240). When the king discovers her dead body and witnesses the suicide of his son (1192-1243), he confronts the abject. Now he is compelled to acknowledge what he has excluded so adamantly, the Other. The king's wail of recognition pronounces his self-abjection; his hysterical desire for suicide defines him as *pharmakos*:

Oh no!  
I shudder with affright.  
O for a two-edged sword to slay outright  
A wretch like me,  
made one with misery! (1307-1311)<sup>20</sup>

The hegemony of the symbolic order has become the source of Creon's own contamination. Now, as the text indicates, he must recognize his own intimate connection with the defilement of Oedipus and the Labdacids, although he has tried to suppress it. Unlike the salubrious effect of reintegration in Kristeva's theory,

however, Creon's recognition of the abject accentuates his demise. The disastrous effects of confronting the abject in the play may define limits for the use of modern, psychoanalytical theory to interpret ancient drama. On the other hand, if we speculate that the citizens of Thebes come to recognize the legitimacy of Antigone's allegiance to chthonic authority, the city is cleansed, in some sense, according to Kristeva's concept of "purification." Nevertheless, it seems inappropriate to propose that the *dénouement* of the *Antigone* is a salutary, but "negative resolution"—the oxymoron underscores the fallacy of such a notion—since the text indicates otherwise. Antigone has killed herself, Creon is an *empsychon nekron*, "living corpse" (1167). While the king's own body becomes a metonym for self-abjection, his *miasma* spreads outward in a widening pool of defilement. In a frightening acceleration of destruction at the end of the play, the whole family is exterminated.

A Kristevan reading of Sophocles's *Antigone* requires neither textual manipulation, nor the imposition of structural categories unsupported by the play. Although Kristeva's theory may not be perfectly applicable to the *Antigone*, it serves as a useful hermeneutic technique for the analysis of the primary conflict between Antigone and Creon. There is no question that Antigone represents a more antiquated period of Greek society when the *oikos* was predominant and allegiance was determined by the family. As I have suggested in this paper, it is interesting to view the play as a depiction of the rise of the *polis* and its historical development from the precultural "infancy" of civilization. As the *polis* excludes the authority of the older, chthonic gods and, therefore, its association with the maternal body, it ushers in the new hegemony of the Symbolic over the maternal and the superego's subjugation of the primitive, pre-oedipal phase.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Levi-Strauss's *The Raw and the Cooked* (48, 55, 57, 62, 64, 81-2, 286, 295-6, 312). Madan Sarup also discusses Lacan's indebtedness to Levi-Strauss (1, 2, 10, 31, 43, 44, 152).

<sup>2</sup> Although he does not state it explicitly, it is likely that Lacan is referring to a *male* child: any attempt to introduce a female into this system of conflicts would be highly problematic. Nevertheless, unlike Kristeva, Lacan does not make specific gender distinctions. In fact, one could take the position that Kristeva's conception of the opposition between a patriarchal Symbolic and maternal semiotic actually *codifies* the exclusion of the feminine. It is not surprising that many modern French feminists, including Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, have rejected not only the Lacanian model, but also Kristeva's. Irigaray has provided one of the more provocative transfigurations of Lacanian theory in "Plato's Hysteria" (243-364). In this chapter, she reinterprets Plato's Allegory of the Cave (*Republic* VII, 514-517a) as an inversion of the Lacanian Symbolic in which the cave represents the primacy of the womb. Whether Irigaray avoids the problems of essentialism simply by reversing the symbolic order, however, is open to question.

<sup>3</sup> The heterogeneous register of the imaginary coincides with the preliminary stage of the child's development of identity. It must be distinguished from Lacan's abstruse notion of the "real," a state that is completely *outside* of all systems of signification.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term "object" to indicate not only the Freudian differentiation between the ego and the "object of desire," but also to suggest the Lacanian elaboration of Freudian concepts in regard to discourse as the opposition between the "subject of enunciation" (the "I") and the predicate "object." For a more detailed discussion of the difference between Freudian theory and Lacan, see Madan Sarup (25-33).

<sup>5</sup> As the etymology suggests, this is the phase before the child "positions" himself (from the Greek *tithêmi*, "to place") in opposition to the object in language; that is, before the "positing of signification." See Kristeva, *RPL* in *The Kristeva Reader* (98-100). Thethetic phase is roughly equivalent to Lacan's "mirror stage."

<sup>6</sup> Kristeva describes the difference between "genotext" and "phenotext" in *RPL*:

The [genotext] encompasses the emergence of object and subject, and the constitution of nuclei of meaning involving categories.... The genotext is thus the only transfer of drive energies that organizes a space in which the subject is not yet a split unity.... The genotext can thus be seen as language's



underlying foundation. We shall use the term *phenotext* to denote language that serves to communicate ... [it] is constantly split up and divided, and is irreducible to the semiotic process that works through the genotext. The phenotext is a structure ... the genotext is a process. (*The Kristeva Reader* 120-1)

<sup>7</sup> We should not conclude, however, that Kristeva sees the semiotic as a means of actually overthrowing modern society. Despite her early affiliation with the *Tel Quel*, she appears to have lost faith in actual political revolution by 1974 when *Revolution in Poetic Language* was published. See Calvin Bedient (809). Indeed, she makes very few references to political events in *Powers of Horror*. One assumes that Kristeva's theory of the abject is intended primarily to challenge the strict institutions of language. In other words, at this point, her approach is strictly theoretical.

<sup>8</sup> These effects could be defined both as what is "acted upon" by the superego (e.g., as a sexual object) and what is "thrown out" (excrement, semen, vomit, etc.).

<sup>9</sup> In other words, Kristeva seems to imply that the process of purification requires nothing more than a recognition of the maternal (through *jouissance*), which would undermine the hegemony of the Symbolic because the exclusionary relationship between the superego and abject would now be impossible. I must admit, however, that this is my own inference from *Powers of Horror*; in fact, Kristeva does not give a satisfactory explanation of this process. It seems likely that this difficulty illustrates the impracticality of attempting to apply such a recondite theory to actual experience.

<sup>10</sup> Kristeva's theory of the relationship between defamiliarizing poetry and the maternal drives is discussed by Calvin Bedient and Elizabeth Grosz.

<sup>11</sup> Kristeva's use of the concept of a "mythic discourse" reflects the profound influence in literary criticism of ideas promulgated by Claude Lévi-Strauss and his structural anthropology. See, e.g., Lévi-Strauss' *The Savage Mind* (*passim*) and *The Raw and the Cooked* (e.g., 48, 123, 132, 340).

<sup>12</sup> Vernant provides an excellent description of both the ambiguity of Oedipus's roles and his ruinous ignorance:

Installed in his role of solver of riddles and king dispensing justice, convinced that the gods inspire him, and proclaiming himself the son of Tuche, Good Luck, how could Oedipus possibly understand that he is a riddle to himself to which he will only guess the meaning when he discovers himself to be the opposite to what he thinks he is: not *Tuche's* son at all but his victim, not the dispenser of justice but the criminal, not

the king saving his city but the abominable defilement by which it is being destroyed? (45)

<sup>13</sup> Ambiguity of status is certainly not unique to Oedipus. In fact, it is a defining characteristic of *all* heroes. It may be instructive to view Hesiod's Five Ages of Man (*Works and Days*, 110-200) as an early, metaphorical expression of the hero's intermediary position between gods and men. Aristotle comments that the extraordinary character of heroes contributes to their ambiguous status (*NE* 7.1.2.-1145a, 22f.). For an incisive and imaginative analysis of the linguistic evidence concerning this subject in ancient texts, see Gregory Nagy (174-210).

<sup>14</sup> I must admit, however, that I have some reservations about applying this modern, psychoanalytical theory to an ancient drama. I am aware that such insouciant confluences of primary texts with literary criticism provoke the hostility of more traditional classicists. Therefore, as a means of providing a preemptive defense, I assert that reinterpretations of the ancient text, so long as they are qualified sufficiently as speculative, serve not only to rejuvenate literature which might otherwise become ossified, but may even uncover new insights about Greek psychology.

<sup>15</sup> All translations of the Greek are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>16</sup> If we view Hades in the context of the abject, it is interesting to consider that he voluntarily leaves the company of the Olympians for his "hidden" realm of death. In other words, he is not "thrown out" of the sky. For the ancient Greeks who evolved Hades' myth, perhaps death was not "abject," although the overwhelmingly negative depiction of the underworld in Homer casts doubt upon this possibility. For a more detailed discussion of the associations between chthonic monsters and the dead, see Walter Burkert's unparalleled work, *Greek Religion* (190-203).

<sup>17</sup> See Emile Benveniste (212-215, 217-222). It must be admitted, however, that Benveniste's fascinating conclusions are difficult to confirm. Furthermore, a matrilineal origin, even if it is exceedingly archaic, suggests the presence of some kind of culture. Therefore, it is difficult to postulate a "pre-cultural" existence.

<sup>18</sup> The opposition of these terms is examined in great detail by Simon Goldhill in *Reading Greek Tragedy*. See especially 88-106. My discussion here owes a great deal to his analysis.

<sup>19</sup> I am somewhat puzzled by Oudemans's frequent invocation of the concept of "interconnectedness." His use of this structural device seems non-specific and ambiguous.

<sup>20</sup> This translation is from *Sophocles*, vol.1. Trans. F. Storr. (Cambridge: Harvard UP [Loeb Classical Library], 1912).

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*Paroles Gelées* was established in 1983 by its founding editor, Kathryn Bailey. The journal is managed and edited by the French Graduate Students' Association and published annually under the auspices of the Department of French at UCLA. Funds for this project are generously provided by the UCLA Graduate Students' Association.

Information regarding the submission of articles and subscriptions is available from the journal office:

*Paroles Gelées*  
 Department of French  
 2326 Murphy Hall  
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 Box 951550  
 Los Angeles, California 90095-1550  
 (310) 825-1145

Subscription price:   \$10 for individuals  
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# CONTENTS

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## ARTICLES

- The Subject: Kristeva and the *Antigone* ..... 5  
*Clifford Davis*
- L'entrée royale de Saint-Simon:  
Événement narcissique ..... 25  
*Diane Duffrin*
- Rhetoric, Referent and Performance:  
Reading in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* ..... 35  
*Benjamin K. Kolstad*
- The Contextualized Body:  
Narrative Event in *La Religieuse* ..... 49  
*Heather Howard*
- Destabilized Security in Mérimée's Short Stories ..... 63  
*Marianne Seidler-Golding*
- Les plis dans les puits:  
Identity and Narrative in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* ..... 75  
*Anne-Lancaster Badders*
- UCLA French Department Dissertation Abstracts ..... 91
- Call for Papers ..... 95
- Ordering Information ..... 96

