Antigone's Mirrors: Reflections on Moral Madness

ANNIE PRITCHARD

Sophocles's Antigone continues to attract attention for its portrayal of the themes of moral agency and sexual difference. In this paper I argue that the contradictory factors which constitute Antigone's social identity work against the possibility of assessing her actions as either "virtuous" or not. I challenge readings of the play which suggest either that individual moral agency is sexually neutral or that women’s action is necessarily and simply in direct opposition to the interests of the public sphere.

I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I examine the adequacy of the model of individual moral agency for women. I challenge the liberal claim that the gender-neutral individual, detached from moral, social, and relational contexts is the most adequate account of the moral individual for a feminist ethics. I take up the radical feminist claim that the way in which we read the ethical actions of subjects cannot be separated from the issue of gender, as moral agents are always gendered subjects who live within, and define themselves in terms of, specific ideological systems.

I raise these issues by discussing Sophocles' Antigone\(^1\) and suggesting that many critics have mistakenly interpreted the heroine by underplaying the significance of her gender and ignoring the way in which competing ideological constructions of her ethical frame of reference, such as family and civil society, clash with one another. I begin by looking at Hegel’s reading of Antigone as an early attempt to challenge the account of the individual ethical agent who consciously weighs up conflicting moral claims. Hegel does think that Antigone’s gender is important to the action of the play, but his reading simplifies important elements of the text. I discuss Hegel’s account of the familial role of women and indicate the limitations of his reading of Antigone. Many critics have seen the play as a clash of opposing viewpoints or opposing

*Hypatia* vol. 7, no. 3 (Summer 1992) © by Annie Pritchard
claims of duty. I argue that there is more going on here than a simple moral dilemma in which duties can be weighed against one another by some form of moral calculation. Antigone suffers from a condition that Kathryn Morgan has termed “moral madness,” and this is the central pivot around which the ambivalences of the play revolve.

I show how Antigone can be read through Kathryn Morgan’s account of moral madness and argue that Antigone is a play that centers on multiple fractures of identity, which are interpreted as evidence of madness, and multiple mirrorings of the past. These are central not only to the plot and as a stylistic device in the text but also in reading the character of Antigone herself. Furthermore, I argue that such conflicts and mirrorings are a central aspect of subjectivity and are particularly vivid in the lives of women in patriarchal societies. Antigone, like many women, has a fragmented sense of self, riddled with conflict. She “finds herself dispersed in the shards of a broken mirror” (Irigaray 1986, 238).

II. HEGEL'S CRITIQUE

Hegel’s discussion of Antigone in his Phenomenology of Mind (Hegel 1949, 464-499) is a polemic directed against “modern morality” by which he means the Kantian view of the individual as the conscious determinator of ethical maxims, motivated by the good will. “What is of value in Hegel’s understanding of the family is that it rests on a social theory which supersedes the atomistic models of liberalism” (Easton 1984, 4).

Hegel completely dismisses the view of Antigone as the individual, the loner, taking on the community with her goal fixed on a higher purpose: “virtue is a civic act, not personal edification pitted against the course of the world” (Shklar 1971, 86). For Hegel, Antigone is simply carrying out her social obligation; she is, “neither a criminal nor a martyr to conscience” (Shklar 1971, 86).

Hegel sees the role played by the family in ancient Greece as central to the play. Aristotle saw the family as the necessary economic base for the polis. “For Hegel, the distinguishing feature of the family is that it lies outside the realm of possessive individualism and thus provides a counter to the fragmenting forces of civil society as it forces individuals to move beyond subjectivity” (Easton 1984, 4). Hegel saw the family is an ethical rather than simply a productive unit. Women are the guardians of the family ethos, which provides the base from which men can rise toward the universal: citizenship.

For Hegel, ethics is not something that one adopts after reflection and deliberation. Antigone has no moral will as Kant would understand it. Morality is simply custom and is divided into two complementary spheres: the customs of the polis (human law) and the customs of the family (divine law). And for Hegel, neither family nor civil society is found outside the state.
Women's role in the maintenance of society stems from their being rooted in particularity and nature, so they subordinate themselves to the needs of the family and the state. Men have individual particular needs that are met within the family, so they are then free to enter civil society. Women's access to the universal is derivative, i.e., via their menfolk. "[They] do not accede to the public sphere to which he has access because his particular needs are looked after in the family" (Whittford 1991, [author: 1991a or 1991b??] 120). Women are thus excluded from the polis and reduced to immanence/nature.

By refusing Polynices burial, Creon is condemning his body to degenerate into the "natural". But by taking on the burial and so turning the natural fact of death into a spiritual one, Antigone "places the kinsman back into the womb of the earth and thus reunites him with undying elemental individuality" (Irigaray 1985, 215). Far from ensuring her own individuality by defying Creon, Antigone is ensuring her brother has what she will lack—doubly so, as there will be no one left to mourn her.

III. THE "OPPOSITIONS" CRITIQUE

George Steiner, perhaps the most widely read modern critic of Antigone, reads the play as being centered on five binary oppositions: man/woman, gods/humanity, society/the individual, youth/age, the living/the dead. I want to challenge readings of Antigone based on conflicts between various binary oppositions. In doing so, I will suggest problems with reading Antigone as the champion of "private" morality against Creon's oppressive statism (Elshain 1983). While I recognize that conflict plays a crucial role in the play, I think that the conflicts are far more involved than such oppositions would suggest, and more importantly, such readings ignore the central role played by continuity, especially as exemplified by the importance of the family and tradition, in the play.

Jean Bethke Elshtain sets out to place feminist political theory in a tradition of women's political action from Antigone onward. She argues that feminists should be aware of the importance of maintaining the division between the personal and the public spheres. She claims that women have mounted important resistance to oppressive aspects of statism and should not be lured into focusing their own goals on this legalistic paradigm. Her purpose is to reclaim for women a social identity that locates them very much in and of the wider world but that positions them against overweening state power and overarching public identity under its terms. [Her] aim is to define and defend a female identity and a feminist perspective that enables contemporary women to see themselves as the daughters of Antigone (Elshtain 1983, 300). I disagree with her reading of Antigone's motivation, which "puts a woman against the arrogant instances of statecraft" (Elshtain 1983, 304-5). She depicts Antigone as the champion of tradition and of family honor, strong in
her defiance of Creon and in contrast to her more traditionally “feminine”
sister Ismene. This is a powerful and attractive view of a politically motivated
heroine but it is not Sophocles's Antigone. The character is not this straightforward,
she is tormented by contradictory moral impulses. It is precisely at the
points at which Antigone fails to be a strong, steadfast, duty-bound feminist
heroine that her true interest rests. Elstain also assumes that the concepts of
the “public” and the “private” realms can be unproblematically assumed,
whereas these concepts are historically specific and cannot be assumed to be
constants across centuries.

Many critics have followed similar impulses and elided the deeply problematic
and disturbing ambivalences of the heroine’s motivation. George Eliot
wrote that the “turning point of the tragedy is not . . . reverence to the dead
and the importance of the sacred rights of burial, but the conflict between these
and obedience to the State. Here lies the dramatic collision: the impulse of
sisterly piety which allies itself with reverence for the gods, clashes with the
duties of citizenship; two principles, both having their validity, are at war with
each” (Eliot 1963, 263). Both Antigone and Creon are conscious that “in
following out one principle, they are laying themselves open to just blame for
transgressing another; and it is this consciousness which secretly heightens the
exasperation of Creon and the defiant hardness of Antigone” (Eliot 1963,
264). Eliot concludes with the Chorus “that our protest for the right should be
seasoned with moderation and reverence” (Eliot 1963, 265).

Martha Nussbaum echoes Eliot’s conclusion and claims that the play centers
on the dangerously rigid and inflexible worldviews of both Antigone and
Creon. Antigone is single-mindedly acting out of loyalty to her family, and
Creon is attempting to replace blood ties with civic duty (Nussbaum 1986,
000-000). Nussbaum argues that the moral of the play is that we must remain
adaptable and hence allow the possibility of resolution rather than catastrophic
oppositions of conflicting duties and obligations.

In a similar vein, Steven Wagner sees the play as centering on the clash
between Creon and Antigone. He does not, however, accuse Antigone of
inflexibility. He claims that there is no real moral conflict: Antigone is morally
correct, and Creon is simply a tyrant and a misogynist who is putting Thebes
in danger of retribution from the gods. Wagner claims that Antigone’s single-
mindedness of purpose is not the moral tunnel vision that Nussbaum accuses
her of but rather the omission of extraneous factors (love for Haemon or her
sister, recognizing the threat Polynices posed to Thebes, etc.) in response to
the demands of the situation. Wagner terms this “rational fanaticism.” The
moment in the play where Antigone seems to falter reflects not a flaw in her
character but rather the voicing of ambivalences that she had previously
repressed to perform the burial of her brother. The fanatic’s strategy is the
rational solution to the problem of how to pursue the right course in the face
of almost certain doom. Wagner’s sympathetic attempt to claim that
Antigone’s actions are wholly consistent is, however, ultimately implausible. Antigone is not consistent, though she battles to the point of madness to attempt to find consistency. Her inconsistency is not, however, some kind of “tragic flaw” but rather an all-too-familiar aspect of women’s lives.

IV. PUBLIC MORALITY AND PRIVATE MADNESS

In her excellent paper “Women and Moral Madness,” Kathryn Morgan discusses the painful moral ambiguities that face the female ethical agent in contemporary society. (Morgan 1987). I would argue that her claims can be applied to any patriarchal social system and they apply directly to the situation of Antigone. Morgan claims that the whole idea of women’s moral agency is called into question by the fact that women are not men. Women are also put in various ethical doublebinds, by which if they do what is virtuous they are not behaving like women, and if they behave as women should “by nature” they are incapable of virtue. We can see this situation graphically in Antigone. Ismene behaves like a “true” woman and is fearful of defying Creon’s edict to leave Polynices unburied. The play begins with this opposition between the “feminine” Ismene:

Remember we are women, we’re not born to contend with men.
Then too we are underlings, ruled by much stronger hands, so
we must submit in this and in things still worse (74-77)

and her “wild, irrational” sister who is “in love with impossibility” and on “a hopeless quest” (116, 104, 107).

Creon’s edict seems particularly harsh not only because it flies in the face of tradition but also because it is a member of his own family, his sister’s son, whose corpse he is allowing to be “left unburied, / his corpse carion for the birds and dogs to tear, / an obscenity for the citizens to behold” (229-231). There really does seem to be some deep-seated human revulsion at the idea of the desecration of the dead. Exposing the bodies of the enemies of the state is often used as a public warning or as a collective punishment. Creon’s treatment of Polynices’ corpse fits Foucault’s notion of a monarchical system of punishment. Creon sees Polynices’s crime as a crime against the person of the king, and the body of the condemned becomes the text of punishment: “A body effaced, reduced to dust and thrown to the winds, a body destroyed piece by piece by the infinite power of the sovereign” (Foucault 1979, 50).

Antigone is motivated to defy Creon’s edict by her pride in her lineage, her duty to the gods, and her unique love for her brother. I agree with Wagner that there is no doubt that Antigone is doing the right thing, but doing the right thing is not necessarily enough when women are the ethical agents.

Kathryn Morgan says that women are assumed to be experts in the private sphere, in the realm of the interpersonal, but as a result of these apparent
strengths women are immediately suspected of not being capable of principled, impartial, moral action. In the play however, we are not shown Antigone's care and sympathy, at least not for the living. She never mentions her husband-to-be Haemon; she is cruel to the point of sadism to Ismene, who shows genuine distress and love for her stubborn, doomed sister. Antigone claims, "I was born to join in love, not hate—that is my nature" (590-91) but we see precious little of this in her speeches. Those who claim that Antigone exemplifies love and care as opposed to Creon's public morality are on shaky ground. Ismene and Haemon would perhaps be more plausible candidates for this binary opposition.

V. IDENTITY AND MORAL MADNESS

Critics like Bernard Knox who claim that Antigone has the unambiguous mark of classical heroism in her sureness of self and individualism are reading only part of her character and are subsuming her ambivalences. These ambivalences are vital keys to understanding her character, and each highlights the tension in her social and moral position. The very fact that she does feel ambivalent is given as being evidence of her madness, and the strong links she feels with her dead parents and brother challenge the atomistic view of the individual.

The challenge to the view of Antigone as an individualist rational ethical agent and feminist heroine comes just before her entombment. Antigone appears to renounce duty as the motivation for her action, claiming that she would only have done this for her irreplaceable sibling:

if I had been a mother of children
or if my husband died, exposed and rotting
I'd never have taken this ordeal upon myself,
ever defied our people's will...
A husband dead, there might have been another.
A child by another too, if I had lost the first.
But mother and father both lost in the halls of Death,
no brother could ever spring to life again. (996-1005)

This argument strikes modern ears as deeply strange, but it echoes the Arabic proverb "A husband can be found, a son can be born, but a brother cannot be replaced" (Briffault cited in Walker 1983). It is important to realize that relationships take on differing statuses at different historical moments. The relation that we might take as primary, romantic love, would have little significance in a society in which marriages are arranged according to political expediency.

This speech of Antigone's is also important to Hegel's reading of the play; he claims that, "[i]n a household of the ethical kind, a woman's relationships
are not based on a reference to this particular husband, this particular child, but to a husband, to children in general—not to feeling but to the universal... The brother, however, is in the eyes of the sister a being who's nature is unperturbed by desire and is ethically like her own; her recognition in him is pure and unmixed with any sexual relation” (Hegel 1949, 476-77). Hegel interprets this relationship as being unique in that it is non-dialectical (not based on the master/slave dichotomy). He thinks that this is a relation of genuine reciprocity, not mediated by desire or power, beyond the war of the sexes. But as Irigaray astutely recognizes, “this moment is mythical of course, and the Hegelian dream... is already the effect of dialectic produced by the discourse of patriarchy” (Irigaray 1985, 257). Antigone and Polynices do not have a relationship of reciprocity; it would be impossible for any woman of that time to be seen as an equal, even by a beloved brother. Rather, Antigone serves as what Irigaray has called a “living mirror,” (Irigaray 1985, 221) mediating her brother’s death, but leaving no one to mourn her in turn.

Several French feminists have made the point that the silent voice in the story of Oedipus’s family is that of Jocasta (Olivier 1989, Irigaray 1985, Feral 1978). As Irigaray points out, “the family of Oedipus would be quite exemplary because the mother of the husband is also his wife, thus re-marking the blood tie of the children of that union—including Polynices and Antigone” (Irigaray 1985, 216). Antigone’s love for Polynices might then be for him as her mother’s son. This matrilineal slant is endorsed by the Greek word for brother—adelphos, “one from the same womb.” Antigone “will choose to die a virgin, unwedded to any man, rather than abandon her mother’s son to the dogs and vultures” (Irigaray 1984, 218).

Irigaray goes on to argue that feminists should take up a maternal genealogy to unearth our buried mothers and voice their silences so that the histories of women’s moral actions are no longer lost. I believe that feminist theory has, to some extent, adopted some of the premises of genealogical method independently of French philosophers like Irigaray and Foucault. Feminist theory has also tended to emphasize the importance of remaining closely tied to feminist political practice as well as emphasizing the importance of uncovering the “lost” voices of historically marginalized women. “What emerges... is something one might call a genealogy, or rather a multiplicity of genealogical researches, a painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of their conflicts... Let us give the term genealogy to the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today” (Foucault 1980).

It is important that we recognize how threatening such identification with our foremothers might appear to patriarchal society. “Hegel explains that the daughter who remains faithful to her mother must be excluded from the city, from society. She cannot be put to death by violence but she must be put in
prison, deprived of liberty, air, light, love, marriage, children... We may as well say that she is condemned to a slow and solitary death" (Irigaray 1991, 199).

The reader has been prepared for irrational and conflicting behavior from Antigone from the very beginning of the play. Ismene, on hearing of the burial plan, says, "why rush to extremes? It's madness, madness," (80) and she calls her sister, "wild (and) irrational" (115). Creon says of the sisters, "They're both mad, / I tell you, the two of them / One's just shown it / the other's been that way since she was born" (632-35). These claims of madness echo to the reader when we face the apparent contradiction of Antigone's last speech in which she tells us she would only have defied Creon for Polynices' sake. Ismene alludes to the suffering Antigone has gone through in her life—wandering with her doomed father, her mother's suicide, her brothers killing one another—and points out to Creon "the sense we were born with cannot last forever... / commit cruelty on a person long enough / and the mind begins to go" (635-37). Suffering and contradiction are crucial aspects of Antigone's character. Matt Klingsky is correct to point out that expecting "normal" behavior from Antigone such as displays of romantic attachment to Haemon or obedience to Creon's edict, ignores the fact that the amount of tragedy that she and her family have suffered is far from "normal." But she is still loyal to and proud of her doomed family; her parent's incestuous marriage, her brother's treachery against Thebes. When she displays this "private," familial loyalty in public and rejects the authority of the state, she is labeled mad.

Nussbaum is correct in claiming that Creon is trying to replace the blood ties of family with the ties of civil obligation as the moral basis of the state. This is underscored by the fact that he rejects his obligations as maternal uncle to Antigone, Ismene, and Polynices. In societies that practice matrilineal descent, Jocasta's children would be considered Creon's heirs; Haemon would be heir to his mother, Eurydice's line. By rejecting these familial obligations of blood and religion, Creon has made the move toward modern notions of state and civil society. Antigone points out to those who value the laws of civil society more than family or religion that "your wisdom appealed to one world—mine, another" (628). I am not claiming that Antigone is using a different foundation for moral calculation but rather that she refuses to conform to Creon's artificial distinctions between different aspects of life, labeling some, such as family and spirituality, as inferior to the public life of the state. Creon's radical separation between the public and private leads to the situation that Kathryn Morgan describes as "the perceived invisibility of actual moral domains in women's lives so that often women don't even recognize when we are being moral" (Morgan 1987). Antigone does recognize that she is being moral, but her assessment is undermined by Creon, Ismene, and the Chorus.
If we were to take up the liberal argument and demand equal rights for Antigone based on her being an individual, rational agent, we would not necessarily address her predicament. Ethical systems based on a respect for an individual’s rights alone are compatible with serious moral impoverishment and human suffering. As Carol Gilligan points out, “people have a real emotional need to be attached to something and equality does not give you attachment. Equality fractures society and places on every person the burden of standing on his [sic] own two feet” (Gilligan 1982).

Antigone values the connection of her family ties, and she does not feel the same kind of ties to the community of the city. The lives of women in classical antiquity were defined in terms of the household, so it is hardly surprising that Antigone identifies more with blood than with the state. She is pained by the fact that there will be none left to mourn her; she feels isolated and abandoned by her only remaining sister, is sentenced to death by her maternal uncle, and is accused of hubris and madness by the chorus of elders. Antigone believes that she does not “fit” anywhere: “I go to my rockbound prison, strange new tomb/ always a stranger, O dear god,/I have no home on earth and none below,/ not with the living, not with the breathless dead” (939-42). This lack of connection, of community, reflects her fragmentation, the contradictions in her character and motivations.

Our sense of identity derives largely from our “place” in our immediate communities, as daughters, as philosophers, as activists, as teachers, or whatever. The depression that overtakes us after some difficult life event, such as grief at the loss of a parent, despondency after prolonged unemployment, loneliness and self-reproach after the end of a long-term relationship, comes at least in part from the consequent shift in our social “place,” our locatedness in the web of social relationships, in our sense of identity. Antigone suffers precisely this kind of dislocatedness and concurrent ambiguities: one moment she says she is acting out of duty to the gods, the next she appears to be taking delight in her defiance of Creon; at times she does seem arrogant and heartless, and then she falls into hopeless grief over her lost brother. Our sense of self relies on our connection with others; without this we cannot even maintain the illusion of being wholly consistent individual ethical agents. Creon says “Her? Don’t even mention her—she no longer exists” (640) and to some extent he is correct: Antigone has separated herself from others, only feels connection with the dead, and so is in some sense what she claims, in a state of living death.

VI. GENDER, DEATH, AND EROS

It does not require a feminist reading of this text to realize the centrality of Antigone’s gender to the play. On hearing that his order has been disobeyed and the corpse buried, Creon immediately assumes that a man would be
guilty—“What man alive would dare” (281) and is obviously further enraged on hearing that it was a woman who disobeyed him. Creon is an archetypal image of patriarchal authority: he demands absolute obedience, particularly from those he perceives as weaker than himself, such as women and his son. In fact, it could be claimed that Creon’s self-image derives from comparing himself to others and finding them wanting. “While I’m alive no woman is going to lord it over me” (592).

Immediately before Antigone’s capture, the Chorus speaks the famous “ode to man.” The images of domination, and particularly of rape, that pervade this ode underscore the fact that the “feminine” must be overcome for the greater advancement of patriarchy. “The oldest of the gods [man] wears away—/ the earth, the immortal, the inexhaustible—/ as his ploughs go back and forth, year in, year out/ with the breed of stallions turning up the furrows” (382-85). The ode is concerned with the taming of wildness to aid man. Creon underscores this link between nature and women, particularly Antigone, when he comments that when she is dead, “there are other fields for [Haemon] to plough” (643). It is interesting to note that the “ode to man” centers on the essentially creative aspects of human beings, enabling them to take the “brute” matter of nature and mold it. But while nature can be modified, the nature of women apparently cannot. Patriarchal ideologies that insist on a strict natural basis for the oppression of women deny them moral agency by virtue of their not being men.

During this period women were presented as potential threats to the masculine social order, always on the verge of excess. Think of the popular depictions of the female followers of Bacchus who at once were at one with nature, suckling small animals at their breasts, but could change without warning into possessed creatures. Elizabeth Berg claims that the bacchante oscillate between opposites/doubles: mothers who kill their children, chaste women who partake in orgies. “The contradictions that they incarnate are scandalous, but these are the contradictions of an affirmative woman” (Berg 1982).

I disagree with Hegel’s claim that the sibling relation between Antigone and Polynices is outside desire. The erotic manner in which Antigone speaks of Polynices is undoubtedly scandalous, but it is reminiscent of the erotic relation between siblings common in mythology: Isis and Osiris, Artemis and Apollo, Diana and Dionysus, even Zeus and Hera. We cannot help but see the mirrored reflection of Jocasta and Oedipus’s incestuous love in Antigone’s assertion that “even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory. I will lie with the one I love and loved by him—/ an outrage sacred to the gods” (86-89). But surely incestuous desire must be evidence of madness?

Antigone’s gender is also important because of the control women were credited with over birth and death—the passing into and out of darkness (Pradel 1983). “As among the gods, so among the mortals was death every-
where woman's business. A woman is said to have invented wailing for the
dead....Women cradle the infant and the corpse, each to his particular new
life" (Lederer cited in Walker 1983, 215). Irigaray points out that woman is
the guardian of the blood tie, the sang rouge, and the guardian of burial rights,
leaving no one to ensure her own rights. Again the view of Antigone as the
individual standing against the state is simplistic; she is, at least in part, carrying
out her socially assigned role. In fact, as Mary Lefkowitz has pointed out,
Antigone must be female for the dramatic action to take place—only a sister
or daughter would feel the compelling obligation to bury her dead (Lefkowitz
1983).

As we see in the "ode to man," Antigone and women in general are
identified with the earth, with fecundity, and with procreation channeled by
masculine control. Antigone is strongly identified with the Greek myth of
Demeter and Persephone. Interestingly, she is identified with all three aspects
of the goddess; she is at once the young virgin Kore, Persephone in her aspect
of the queen of the underworld, who "goes to wed the Lord of the dark waters"
(908) but she is also the grieving mother through the identification of her with
the earth, Demeter.

I have discussed Antigone in her Persephone aspect of obligations concern-
ing death, but the Kore or virgin element of her character is also significant.
In ancient Greece young virgins were seen as being in particular danger of
madness. It was claimed that their menstrual blood was impeded by the hymen
and the blood traveled up through the body to the brain, causing madness. The
cure, predictably, was pregnancy (King 1983). These "mad virgins" frequently
took their own lives by hanging themselves. Eva Cantrella claims that such
suicides reached almost epidemic proportions in this period (Cantrella 1985).

Antigone is identified with Demeter through the connection of women and
the earth, but also her grief for Polynices is identified in terms of maternal loss:
"she cried out a sharp, piercing cry/ like a bird come back to an empty nest,/ peering
into its bed, and all the babies gone..../ Just so when she sees the corpse beat/ she
bursts into a long, shattering wail/ and calls down withering curses on the heads/ of
all who did the work" (471-77). This allusion to the Demeter-Persephone myth situates
Antigone in the tradition of women's victimization by, and resistance to, patriarchal
violence. In the myth, Demeter's grief for the loss of her daughter leads the earth to stop reproducing
and "die." The mother's revenge is formidable and forces Hades to return
Persephone to her mother for the six months of spring and summer when
Demeter returns the earth to fertility.

VII. SCAPEGOATS AND PUNISHMENT

The claim that the play surrounds the oppositions of the public and the
private buys into the idea that Creon does have the public good at heart. It
seems equally plausible, given Creon's despotic and xenophobic machismo, that he is hiding his personal ambitions behind his claim to be speaking for the state. It is important to remember that Creon has only been king for a very brief time and needs to establish his leadership. It seems entirely possible that Creon is using both Polynices and Antigone as scapegoats in order to galvanize public opinion behind his authority. Kathleen Jones points out that, "Antigone's actions speak compellingly to the community because they remain connected to the fabric of its life. Her being silenced by the authority of the state reminds us what connections are lost in Creon's (male) view of authority" (Jones 1988, 128).

Haemon suggests that his father does not have the support of the people by claiming that the rumors in Thebes say: "No woman ... ever deserved death less, / and such a brutal death for such a glorious action / ... Death? She deserves a glowing crown of gold!/ So they say and the rumor spreads in secret, darkly ..." (775-84). And Creon does seem to believe Haemon's tale to some extent, as he changes Antigone's punishment from a public stoning, a punishment that would require the direct collaboration of the population, to a hidden death, entombed, silenced in a cave away from the city. Antigone is silenced and placed outside the city so no one can witness her challenge to the patriarchal order of civil society.

Creon's choice of punishment for his enemies is precisely what Michel Foucault described as the use of the body as cultural text and site of practical social control. Creon uses Polynices's corpse and Antigone's punishment as texts upon which to inscribe and establish his political authority. The desecration of the corpse is symbolic denial of Polynices's status as an individual bearer of rights, let alone a member of the community or the royal family of Thebes. Antigone's is a death in life (as she has lost her family) and a living death (being entombed alive). This is a symbolic act as well as a political expediency, a punishment to fit the crime, as in feudal systems where a thief loses his hand or a rapist is castrated (Foucault 1977, 49-50). Creon buries Antigone for the crime of burying her brother.

VIII. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Demeter's grief, like Antigone's, leads her to behave irrationally; she is mad from grief. But of course, labeling such behavior madness or immoral presupposes that ethical action is rational and individual. Many feminists have claimed that the strong philosophical tradition claiming that to be moral one must be rational and impartial, and able to apply one's decision-making procedure universally, ignores precisely the kinds of social ties within which women have traditionally defined their sense of self. So if one is trying to be a "good" mother or a " dutiful" daughter—i.e. being consciously partial towards and caring for one's own—one can never be truly moral. Kathleen Jones's
contention that the "inability to reconcile authority with human agency is the result, in part, of a conception of the self in isolation from others as opposed to a self in connection with others" (Jones 1988, 128) helps to illuminate part of what is at stake in the conflict between Antigone and Creon.

Kathryn Morgan and others have pointed out that women are simultaneously praised and blamed for being strong individuals: "women are put into the impossible position of simultaneously being moral and immoral, virtuous and vicious for the same behavior" (Morgan 1987, 154). In Antigone this is particularly apparent in the ambivalences of the Chorus toward her actions and avowed motivation. Her attempts at self-empowerment by comparing her action to those of characters from Greek myth are undermined by the Chorus's interpretation of this as an example of hubris. This is precisely the kind of doublebind within which we attempt to formulate our ethical actions and, more broadly, our subjectivity.

Women are told that power and effective self-determination, though essential for men, are bad in a woman and that self-sacrifice is good. Women, then, are forbidden to be "full" individuals but are then condemned as incapable of ethical action. Kathryn Morgan is correct in pointing out that what is considered a "virtue" in a man undergoes metamorphosis and becomes a vice in a woman (Morgan 1987, 154). And the characteristically "feminine" virtues are at the same time the vices of passivity, emotionality and masochism. The hysterical woman is beyond the pale of moral discourse, but Antigone is beyond the pale for her apparent coldness.

The feminine vice of masochism is dramatically illustrated in Antigone's suicide. If our model of ethical agency is the rational individual, then surely we must see this as an act of madness. Kant tells us that we cannot rationally will our own death (Kant 1964, 89). Camus would disagree, claiming that Antigone's death was not only a rational act but an authentic one (Camus, 1967). So perhaps in her last act Antigone was trying to cheat Creon out of her death by killing herself, affirming her individuality, being a rational fanatic? I would suggest instead that this is the kind of psychologically extreme position in which an individual might find herself in a highly gender-stratified society. And I think that a feminist genealogy might uncover many such Antigones, suffering moral madness across very different historical epochs.

Moral madness is not the result of some unlikely series of events, lost in the mists of time, but is a situation that women find themselves facing daily. Let me pick only the most visible of examples. As I write this, the defense lawyer in the Mike Tyson rape case has claimed that the alleged rape victim is "mentally unbalanced." Accusations of mental instability have also recently been thrown at the alleged victim in the William Kennedy Smith rape case and at Anita Hill. I, like many others, found Anita Hill's testimony the picture of unemotional, rational moderation, and yet congressmen and the press claimed that as the polygraph proved she wasn't lying, she must be mentally
unbalanced—why else would she make such a testimony against Clarence Thomas? Why is it so much easier to imagine that a successful, much-admired professional-woman is crazy than it is to imagine that a successful, much-admired professional-man once indulged for a period of time in shameful behavior? All three women were also subjected to having their private lives dissected, while the private lives of the men in question were held to be inadmissible evidence. When these three women tried to make a moral stand, or looked to the American legal system for “justice,” they were dismissed as being mentally unbalanced, gold diggers, or whores.

The situations of an Antigone or a Demeter illustrate how individualistic accounts of ethics, particularly duty- and rights-based ethics, are inadequate for feminist ethics. As feminists working on ethics, we need to take seriously the kinds of extreme predicaments in which women and others find themselves in societies with radical asymmetries of power. Rather than creating sanitized feminist heroines, we need to consider the real-life conflicts of women who find themselves put in, or who put themselves in, extreme predicaments. We need to address the position of women who feel driven to kill—for example: Sarah Thompson, Tess of the d’Urbervilles, Clytemnestra, Medea—or the women who turn the violence against themselves: Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Mary Wollstonecraft, Eleanor Marx, or Simone Weil. We do not need a new hagiography of feminist “saints” but a complex and multiple collection of genealogical researches into the reality of women’s lives. We also need to investigate how our connections with others and our place in both the political community and the private sphere form the bases of our moral practices and our definitions of self.

Antigone’s suicide within the womblike prison of the cave exactly mirrors her mother’s fate. She kills herself by hanging herself with her veils, the symbol of her socially ascribed position as a woman. Other mirrorings in the play might lead us to think that as long as we maintain oppressive gender delineations we are doomed to repeat the fates of our ancestors. Antigone’s love for Polynices mirrors Jocasta and Oedipus; Haemon’s attempt to kill his father mirrors Oedipus’s murder of Laius; Antigone’s suicide and the resultant suicides of Haemon and Eurydice perpetuate the cycle of death. It is only by disentangling the intersections of differing elements of our social reality, rather than simply assigning them to one or the other side of a binary opposition, and by deconstructing gender oppositions that we might start to escape women’s endless reflections in the mirror of moral madness.
NOTES

I would like to thank Steven Wagner for his boundless enthusiasm for this project and for his criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper. Thanks also to Pamela Grath and the three Hypatia referees for their helpful comments.

1. All quotations from this play are taken from Robert Fagels, trans., The Three Theban Plays (Sophocles 1984). Line numbers follow quotations in the text.

2. I am thinking of the Vichy government’s exposing of the corpses of French Resistance fighters, or the Israeli government’s refusal to return the bodies of Palestinians who die in detention to their families for burial.

3. Pamela Grath has pointed out to me that “moral madness” is a very ambiguous term that could mean madness in the face of patriarchal morality, madness as evidence of patriarchal morality, etc. This is a valid criticism. I hope that this paper at least begins to explore Kathryn Morgan’s concept, but I realise that there is much more work to be done.

4. It is interesting that, even though the Chorus readily accuses Antigone of madness, it never questions Creon’s sanity. Given the belief systems of the time, surely it could be argued that Creon’s dismissal of divine law was, at least, irrational.

5. Nussbaum points out that Haemon means “blood” in Greek, which seems to underline the idea of descent (Nussbaum 1986, 62).

6. Antigone is undoubtedly too hard on her sister here. Rosalyn Diprose points out that “above all it is in Antigone, rather than in her brother, that Ismene recognises herself, so that her sister’s action/crime becomes her own” (Diprose 1991, 168). That Antigone rejects this identification is further evidence of her moral turmoil.

7. Antigone’s love for Polynices is certainly seen as inappropriate, but interestingly, at this period in history, Haemon’s romantic love for her, dramatically revealed in his attack on his father and his eventual suicide, would also be seen as inappropriate. See Foucault 1986, on the “proper” relations between man and wife.

8. See Rene Girard (1977) on the role of the scapegoat in civil society.

9. In his books on classical ethics, The Use of Pleasure and The Care of the Self, Michel Foucault points out that at some points in classical antiquity there were in fact acknowledged separate ethical maxims for men and for women.

10. Thanks to Pamela Grath for this point.

REFERENCES


——. 1991. *The necessity for sexuate rights*. David Macey, trans. ed. Margaret Whitford. [author: please provide data of publication; we cannot find any data under this title].


Wagner, Steven. N.d. Antigone's reasons. Unpublished manuscript.