

The Disintegration of Traditional Image: On Antigone's Free Will and Action

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Abstract: In the great tragedy *Antigone*, for a long time, it seems that the study of female image, Antigone, is imprisoned in the Oedipus family and ancient Greek city-state, family ethics and city-state law, feminism and masculinity. However, based on deconstructionism, American scholar Judith Butler advocated breaking the binary opposition of gender category. In the paper, the image formula of Antigone is broken based on Butler's revelation of the gender category and the construction of kinship, and combined with the "desire" doctrines of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic ethics. It highlights Antigone's free will and action, which is of great significance to clarify Antigone's spirit of freedom and enrich her image.

Keywords: Antigone, Action, Free will, Judith Butler, Lacan.

1. Introduction

Antigone is a great tragedy of ancient Greece, in which the female image of Antigone has been widely discussed and studied in depth. However, research on Antigone seems to have been limited to the Oedipus family and ancient Greek city-states, family ethics and city-state laws, feminism and masculinity. If the female identity of Antigone is to be dismantled, then what is the identity of Antigone? What is the relationship between Antigone and the people around? Why would Antigone act against Creon? What are the results and effects of Antigone's revolt? What does the result reflect?

Based on the anti-essential view of deconstructionism, American scholar Judith Butler advocated breaking the binary opposition of gender categories, and creatively showed us the variability of kinship and gender opposition. The article reveals that Antigone, the role, has achieved a dual departure from gender and family, and her own situation makes her a symbol of disintegrating heterosexual families, rather than a representative of maintaining kinship. What she did is a self-action under the control of free will, desire and spirit. The paper will use Butler's revealing of the gender category and the construction of kinship as the basis, combined with the "desire" doctrines in Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic ethics. It attempts to break the stereotype that solidifies the traditional image of Antigone, highlighting the free will and self-action of Antigone's transgender identity and kinship transgressor. It is of great significance to clarify Antigone's personal spirit of freedom and enriches the personal image.

2. Antigone's "New" Identity: Gender Construction and Kinship Transgression

2.1. Gender Opposition in Family and City-state

Hegel regards all conflicts of Antigone as two sets of interdependent elements: one is that according to the divine law, Antigone believes that a person should be buried after death, which conflicts with the law of the city-state; the other is that Antigone represents the family, that is, the ethical value

of the family, while Creon represents the city-state, that is, the political concept of the city-state.[1] In other words, men and women respectively belong to city-states and families, and thus represent different ethical properties. In Hegel's view, men represent city-states, and women represent families; men represent universality, and women represent individuality. According to the regulations, the individuality of a person belongs to the family, and the universality to the city-state. Citizens enjoy happiness in the family, while in the city-state, they need to abide by the general order.

Antigone recognizes that her own actions and Creon's actions are at the poles of the law set by God and men. According to Hegel's interpretation, women are the guardians of the laws of the family and the divine law, and they regard the maintenance of ethics as their own nature. Antigone's actions can be attributed to a female ethical unconsciousness based solely on ethical instincts. The dedication of non-self desire had already engraved an obligation before she was born.

However, Butler reminds us that there is an important relationship between the family and the city-state. They are not separated. Without family, the city-state will cease to exist.[2] If the family and the country are regarded as two opposing elements, they undoubtedly solidify the binary opposition between men and women. The family, as an important place for gender identity, solidifies both the gender structure and heterosexual hegemony.[3]

2.2. Antigone and Oedipus

After learning deconstructionism, Butler began to question whether Antigone has the qualifications to characterize the traditional kinship structure. How about Antigone's blood relationship? First of all, the blood relationship is chaotic. Antigone was born of incest. She is the daughter of Oedipus in the kinship structure, but from the perspective of blood relationship, Oedipus is of the dual identity, that is, he is the father and brother of Antigone. According to Levi-Strauss' structuralist kinship chart, incest is excluded from kinship, and Antigone can hardly find its place in kinship. As a result, Butler believes that Antigone can only represent blood relationship, and cannot appear in the posture of maintaining kinship.[4]

Secondly, judging from the name of Antigone, the English is “Antigone”. The “gone” of it means “reproduction”, so this name means “anti-reproduction”. In other words, Antigone ranks the reproductive parents, children and other relatives in the kinship relationship after the non-renewable brothers and sisters.[2] Moreover, in the relationship between Antigone and Creon’s son Haemon, Antigone’s indifference to Haemon shows that she is unwilling to enter into a heterosexual normative marriage to assume the role of wife and mother. In fact, these precisely show Antigone’s rejection of heterosexual kinship.

2.3. Antigone and Polyneices

Antigone’s behavior of defending his brother with death greatly surpassed the usual sibling relationship. According to the divine law, as long as the deceased has a symbolic cover of sand, they can be protected by the gods. However, Antigone buried his elder brother twice, and the second time was unnecessary. Butler believes that the second funeral is symbolic, because Oedipus, who died in a foreign land, wanted to be buried in the land of Thebes. Antigone’s second burial of his brother was to symbolically put Oedipus on the land of hometown.[3] Antigone was taken to Creon for the second burial. Antigone’s deep feelings for father and brother have led to the loss of basic sense and judgment, protecting family members at the expense of self.

Antigone is a family member excluded from the kinship structure, who refuses to enter a heterosexual role, and defends father and brother in a self-sacrificing manner. As a result, Butler believes that Antigone’s own situation makes she become a symbol of breaking up heterosexual families, rather than a representative of maintaining kinship. Butler’s interpretation of the identity of Antigone makes us see the crisis of heterosexual structure. Since the heterosexual family structure cannot fully accommodate the transgressors of gender identity, it is an unequal identity structure that excludes sexual minorities. To some extent, Butler’s deconstruction of heterosexual families is in extremes. However, she has shown us the variability of kinship and the duality of gender.

3. Antigone’s Self Subversion: Free Will and Action

3.1. Ethics of Lacan’s Psychoanalysis

Based on the ethics of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan reinterpreted the tragedy Antigone. From the perspective of psychoanalytic ethics, Antigone is a typical example, because she absolutely acts according to her own desires. Lacan believes that the conflict between Antigone and Creon is not just a normal conflict between two ideas. It is in the form of crime that Antigone realizes desires, which is a violation of Creon’s law. The essence of her symbolic burial of Polyneices is that she unconsciously obeys the ethics of psychoanalysis, acting according to her own desire, the desire for death.[5] Traditional ethics center on goodness and require people to restrain desires. However, the core of the ethics of psychoanalysis is desire, regarding goodness as an obstacle to desire. It forces the subject to face the relationship between action and desire in the present, and emphasizes the way where desire can finally break through the constraints of the law and be achieved.

Lacan points out that what Antigone said when she confronted Creon is also a secret expression of the desire for

death.[5] Antigone would even hold a funeral for Polyneices at the expense of death, but the reason is merely that Polyneices is her brother. And if he is replaced by someone else, even her husband or children, she would give up. The confrontation between Antigone and Creon is neither to defend the sacred rights of the siblings after death, nor is it because of her noble character, but only to fulfill her obligation to act according to her own desire for death. This is an ethical obligation in psychoanalysis, even though she herself does not know it.

3.2. Free Will and Ethical Feeling

Lacan believes that Antigone’s resistance to Creon is not related to any kind of law. Through extremely detailed reading, Lacan found a lot of evidence that Antigone’s behavior was not out of observance and defense of a certain law, but completely out of her own free will. Although Antigone repeatedly emphasized that “he is my brother”, these words have become emptied of the signifier: who Polyneices is and what he did during his lifetime is completely unimportant. No matter what the signifier of “Polyneices” is, as long as he is the signifier, he should deserve a basic funeral. To say that Polyneices is a signifier, does not mean that he has become a word, but that by virtue of this signifier he occupies a position in the symbolic order. As a result, he possesses the most basic inalienable right as a “person”. The uniqueness of Polyneices does not come from his ethical relationship with Antigone, which is the most common sibling relationship. This relationship will never become extraordinary because of the death of their parents, and it will not be so special that Antigone pays her own life for it. His uniqueness only comes from the symbolic order, and it is the order that gives him the right to be buried. [6]

The significance of Antigone is manifested in the strangeness: unyielding, full responsible, and uncompromising to true desires. In order to challenge the established order for death in an extreme posture, Antigone decided to plunge into the dark abyss of life. In the play, the singing team emphasized Antigone’s autonomy twice. “This daughter is stubborn by nature, born of a stubborn father; she doesn’t know how to bow to disaster.” [7] In the fourth act, the singing team once again said to Antigone: “Your stubborn willfulness has harmed you.” [7] The “stubbornness” of Antigone is a manifestation of her absolute free will. The free will and individual actions are never meant to defend God’s laws and ethics.

3.3. Individual Action and Female Resistance

Psychoanalysis is inseparable from morality and political philosophy. In terms of promoting human change, psychoanalysis provides a good framework for understanding and guides the process, while political philosophy is about how to make change possible. Action is the connection between the two. Action is the core concept of Žižek’s political philosophy, which aims to subvert the symbolic order itself. It is of a free subjective dimension, which enables individual or group intervention, and ultimately leads to a radical change in politics and society. The interpretation of the action is centered on the tragic character Antigone, and she is the prototype.

Antigone insisted on burying Polyneices who betrayed the city-state, and openly rebelled against the power society represented by Creon, perfectly demonstrating “a complete rejection of a certain ideal state of goodness” [5]. With a

decisive attitude, she created a possibility of subverting the symbolic order. Compared with usual resistance, “Antigone’s posture of nonviolent resistance is far more radical in performance: by insisting on holding a decent funeral for her dead brother, she challenged the dominant notion of goodness.” [8] Fundamentally speaking, Antigone not only questioned and challenged the legitimacy of the established order, but more importantly, she established a new standard of goodness and endowed it with a kind of rationality. Antigone broke the old concept and established a new order adapt to the logic of her behavior. This is Antigone’s highlight. It is not a simple resistance as a woman, but an individual action with significance of social change.

4. Antigone’s Survival Predicament: Desire Choice and Paradoxical Results

Antigone finally went to death, because she faced the survival predicament. In this dilemma, she faces a game of two desires. One is the happiness of the world, and the other is the end of sin. For this, she resisted, but her resistance was actually a kind of submission. This is the paradox ending of Antigone, thus highlighting her tragic nature.

4.1. Earthly Happiness and End of Sin

Antigone’s death is the result of her free will and self-action, and here the reasons will be explored for her survival dilemma caused by her independent choice. Antigone faces the dilemma, and one is earthly happiness, the other the end of sin. The choice of earthly happiness is paradoxical to her, because the lover is Creon’s son, and choosing to marry Haemon means entering into Creon’s ethics, obeying city-state laws. Marrying Haemon and changing the blood relationship will make the original sin of the family gradually dissolve in a long time. In this way, Antigone seems to have obtained temporary peace through “goodness”, but the internal aggression has been secretly brewing, which has been preserved in the form of “guilt”. This has become an unbearable weight for herself. Therefore, she completely stopped this sin, that is, “confessing guilt after death”.

The judgment of the earth requires her to endure and live in the humiliation, and to turn a blind eye to the prohibition of the burial of her brother who continued their father’s sins. If Antigone does not sacrifice her earthly happiness, she will live in the sense of guilt that cannot rest forever. Therefore, she must give up the happiness of the world in order to end the original sin of the family on herself. This is her choice made by human trade-offs and comparisons. The longing for death in the self-desire is actually the surrender of one’s own guilt and the burial of the desires of the world. It can be seen that Antigone’s death was her own choice, a choice she had to make. This earthly happiness and the end of sin led her to act autonomously under the control of her free will, choosing the road to death.

4.2. Resistance and Submission

Antigone’s desire to death is indeed a manifestation of her free will, her rebellion against Creon and the laws of the city-state. In fact, however, this resistance is also a form of submission. Her choice of free will produces a paradox that embodies the paradox of Antigone’s ending, which again coincides with the tragic nature of the tragedy.

Antigone used her own free will and self-action to choose

to resist the city-state laws in the transgender identity, but she had to find a way out in the city-state laws and think about how to bury her brother. Antigone is undoubtedly paradoxical. With an absent action gesture, she hints at the gap in the legal system represented by Creon, and at the same time her actions quickly fill the gap, with an unconditional way to occupy its place. [9] It is especially important to make this clear, because the absolute autonomy of action is consistent with its absolute inevitability, in line with the logic of totalitarianism. It is mainly characterized by identification with absolute laws, setting the ultimate goal of a heaven on earth, and identifying oneself as the personification of people’s will or social general will. As a transgender person and kinship transgressor, Antigone’s free will and self-action lead to a paradoxical outcome that exacerbates her tragedy.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, whether Antigone can represent women has been questioned by some scholars. Butler argues that the kinship represented by Antigone is not compatible with existing kinship norms, and that the gender characteristics reflected in her do not conform to the definition of femininity within the binary tradition. [3] The traditional binary framework defines masculinity as courage and responsibility, and Antigone, as a woman, also fully demonstrates the commitment to responsibility. Butler noted that Antigone’s devotion and action in caring for her family gave her a manly presence. Besides, Antigone mourned her elder brother in public, which was against the ancient Greek rules for women’s living space. In ancient Greece, mourning was supposed to take place at home, so women mourning in public was a threat to civic order. Although Antigone was in a marginalized family and as a woman in marginal status in the city-state, Antigone’s insistence on speaking out gives her image a strange brilliance.

Based on Butler’s revelation of gender categories and the construction of kinship, the paper combines the “desire” theory of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic ethics. Firstly, by discussing the position of Antigone in blood kinship, it re-establishes the identity of Antigone, proving that she cannot appear as a gesture of maintaining kinship. Secondly, by discussing what actions Antigone takes in the “new” identity, it reflects the free action guided by her free will; Finally, it explores the reasons why Antigone chooses the “desire” of death, showing her paradoxical ending and highlighting the tragic nature. The article attempts to break the stereotype of Antigone’s traditional image, and highlights her free will and self-action, which is of great significance to clarify Antigone’s spirit of freedom and enrich her image, guiding attention to the multi-faceted interpretation of classic images in classic works.

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