

## Hegel's *Antigone*

by Patricia J. Mills

---

*The Antigone [is] one of the most sublime  
and in every respect most excellent works of art of all time.*  
- G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*

Hegel's interpretation of Sophocles' play *Antigone* is central to an understanding of woman's role in the Hegelian system. Hegel is fascinated by this play and uses it in both the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* to demonstrate that familial ethical life is woman's unique responsibility. Antigone is revealed as the paradigmatic figure of womanhood and family life in both the pagan and modern worlds although there are fundamental differences between these two worlds for Hegel. In order to situate the interpretation of this play within its wider context I begin with a brief outline of the pagan world described in the *Phenomenology*. I then consider the interpretation of this play within the analysis of the modern world in the *Philosophy of Right*. Throughout, the focus is on woman's role in Hegel's philosophy.

In the *Phenomenology* we learn that history can be understood as a dialectic of particular and universal: Man seeks recognition of his own particular self from all men; he seeks universal recognition of his particularity.<sup>1</sup> And universality, as the overcoming or *Aufhebung* of the opposition between particular and universal, is "concrete" or universal individuality. However, in the pagan world, which is a specific historical moment in the movement of Spirit toward self-realization, the dialectical opposition between the particular and the universal cannot be overcome in life because the *polis* or city-state only recognizes or realizes the universal aspect of human action and risk while the particular remains embedded in the family.

Man is necessarily a member of a family and the family is the sphere of the particularity of the pagan male's existence. Within the family, man is *this* particular father, *this* husband, *this* son, and not simply *a* father, *a* husband, *a* son. But the family is the sphere of "merely natural existence," "mere particularity," and as such its supreme value is essentially inactive biological existence or animal life. While man has particularity inside the family circle, it is an unconscious particularity because, within this circle, there is no negating action – no risk of life

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper the term 'man' is used to refer to adult males and never as a generic or universal term. This is done to illuminate the problems of sexual difference and sexual domination which are obscured by the use of 'man' and 'mankind' to refer to the human species.

for recognition. Within the family man cannot achieve self-consciousness or truly human satisfaction because, according to Hegel, in the pagan world the truly human demands the conscious risk of life.<sup>2</sup>

While neither male nor female can achieve self-consciousness within the family in Hegel's schema, the pagan male moves out to become a citizen. He does so

. . . because it is only as a citizen that he is actual and substantial; the individual, so far as he is not a citizen but belongs to the Family, is only an unreal insubstantial shadow.<sup>3</sup>

Hegel writes that within the *polis* "the community is that substance conscious of what it actually does" which is in opposition to the family as "the other side" whose form is that of "immediate substance or substance that simply is."<sup>4</sup> The community draws man away from the family: By subduing his "merely natural existence," and his "mere particularity," it induces him to live "in and for the universal." What is achieved in the *polis*, through action and risk, is "the manhood of the community." But while the universal aspect of a man's existence is recognized here, this existence is not truly *his*: It is not *he* as a particular who is recognized by the *polis*. Acting on behalf of the *polis* man achieves universality at the expense of his particularity. The *Aufhebung* of the familial particular and the political universal which results in concrete or universal individuality is possible only in death in the pagan world.<sup>5</sup>

In this world the transcendence of death in and by historical memory is achieved through the family. The ethical relation between the members of the family is not that of sentiment or love but duty in connection with burying and remembering the dead – as well as avenging them if need be. Through these obligations to the dead the "powerless, simply isolated individual has been raised to universal individuality."<sup>6</sup> Since familial life does not depend on the activity of the members but simply on their being – their inaction – death changes nothing in the value attributed to and by the family.<sup>7</sup> And by burying and remembering the family members, the family maintains the continuity of the human community through time.

In the pagan world the family and the *polis*, the particular and universal spheres of man's existence, are mutually exclusive: The family represents life and the *polis* represents the risk of life. The conflict between these two spheres is inescapable and unalterable. Man cannot

---

<sup>2</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, translated by James H. Nichols, Jr. (New York: Basic Books, 1969), pp. 58-61.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) p. 270, paragraph 451 (amended translation). Miller's translation of *marklose* as 'impotent' is not to be confused with Hegel's term *Ohnmacht*, used to describe nature as "impotent" or "unconscious." Many of Hegel's ontological insights are rooted in Aristotle's philosophy. The bifurcation between familial and political life which Hegel subscribes to here can be found in Aristotle's *Politics*.

<sup>4</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 268, paragraph 450.

<sup>5</sup> J. N. Findlay, *Hegel: A Re-Examination* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), pp. 116-117; Kojève, pp. 60-61, 296-298; Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp.172-177.

<sup>6</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 271, paragraph 452.

<sup>7</sup> Kojève, p. 61.

renounce the family since he cannot renounce the particularity of his existence nor can he renounce the universality of his action in and for the *polis*. This conflict between the familial and the political makes for the tragic character of pagan life and creates a fundamental antinomy between family life as the natural ground of ethical life and ethical life in its social universality in the *polis*.<sup>8</sup>

For Hegel the conflict between family and *polis*, particular and universal, is also a conflict between divine law and human law as represented in the conflict between woman and man. Nature, according to Hegel, assigns woman to divine law and man to human law. Thus while the political life of the city-state represents the manhood of the community, the family is the sphere of womanhood. The two are opposed such that when they come into open conflict woman, as the representative of divine law, sees human law as “only the violence of human caprice” while man, as the representative of human law, sees only “the self-will and disobedience of the individual” in obedience to the divine.<sup>9</sup>

In the section on the pagan or Greek ethical world in the *Phenomenology* where the interpretation of the *Antigone* appears, and where we find the only discussion of woman, Hegel is in search of the ideal relationship between a man and a woman as a relation of identity-indifference. He begins with an analysis of heterosexual marriage and says that there is reciprocal recognition between husband and wife in the pagan world, but that this recognition is “natural self-knowledge,” not realized ethical life. That is, it is a process of recognition rooted in the immediacy of desire or affective understanding, not in conscious ethical intention.

Hegel claims that the wife’s desire for the husband always has a universal significance while for the husband desire and universality are separate. Here Hegel accepts the traditional view that there is a separation of morality and desire in man’s relation to woman, but that morality and desire are united in woman’s relation to man, and, therefore, that woman is ethically “purer” in her love relations. That is, a wife’s ethical relation to her husband is not to feeling or the sentiment of love but, rather, is a relation to the universal.<sup>10</sup> What creates the separation of morality or universality and desire or particularity in man is the bifurcation of his life into the public and private spheres. While woman remains confined to, and defined by, the family, man lives within the *polis* as well as within the family. In this way Hegel distinguishes the family for itself from the family in itself. That is, woman represents the family as immediately universal for itself while, from the perspective of the man, she represents the family in itself as the sphere of particularity. Thus, central to the relationship between particularity and universality in the family is the split between desire and morality in the pagan male’s existence.

For Hegel, the husband acquires the *rights* of desire over his wife precisely because he has the rights of a citizen. The husband’s authority and position in the *polis* allow him to have sexual domination over the wife in the family and simultaneously keep him “detached” from his

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 298.

<sup>9</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 280, paragraph 466.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 274-275, paragraph 457.

desire for her: Man rules woman in the private sphere because he rules in the public world. And as he rules in the public world and in the family he rules himself.

What is most significant in this analysis of desire in marriage is that for Hegel it is *male* desire that taints the purity of the male-female relationship: The husband's desire for the wife is expressed as merely particular desire such that a moment of indifference and ethical contingency is introduced into the relationship. However, insofar as this relationship *is* ethical, the wife is without the moment of knowing herself as *this* particular self in and through an other.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in the ethical family of the pagan world the husband gains an unconscious particularity, as *this* husband, through the wife's exercise of universal recognition of him as *a* husband, while his recognition of her is such that she never achieves particularity. He is particularized but she is not. Man, says Hegel, achieves particularity in the pagan family, through the wife's recognition of him, precisely because he leaves this sphere to attain universal recognition in the political sphere. But woman never enters the political sphere; she is caught and bound within the immediacy of the family circle.

For Hegel, the relationship between husband and wife in the pagan world is a mixed and transitive one in which male desire infects the process of recognition between a man and a woman so that each maintains a knowledge of dissimilarity or "independent being-for-self." Husband and wife are separated as male and female. Thus, the husband and the wife retain an independence – a being-for-self – such that the "return-into-itself" of the relationship cannot take place. Rather, the relationship is necessarily externalized through the child. The husband-wife relationship is not complete in itself, it needs the child to complete it, and the child changes the relationship.<sup>12</sup> Given this, the husband-wife relationship is not the ideal relationship of identity-in-difference between man and woman.

However, Hegel believes he has found this ideal in the relationship between a brother and a sister because he believes that this relationship is without desire and therefore without the separation and ethical uncertainty that male desire entails. He writes:

The relationship [between man and woman] in its unmixed form is found, however, in that between brother and sister. They are the same blood which has, however, in them reached a state of rest and equilibrium. Therefore, they do not desire one another, nor have they given to, or received from, one another this independent being-for-self; on the contrary, they are free individualities in regard to each other.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, translated by J. B. Baillie (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), p. 477. In both the Miller and the [1910, 1931] Baillie translations of this passage the word 'particular' is added in several places to reveal Hegel's meaning. Hegel sometimes underscores the word for 'this' (*dieser*) instead of using the word *Einzelheit* to refer to the "particular" individual.

<sup>12</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 273, paragraph 456.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274, paragraph 457.

Brother and sister are not independent of one another because they are united through the blood tie. Thus, the brother-sister relationship is a unity of male and female that is not recognition as separation, distinctiveness or dissimilarity: It is a relationship of identity-in-difference. Their recognition is that of “free individualities in regard to each other” which transcends the indifference or ethical contingency characteristic of the husband-wife relationship. Whereas mere particularity is implicated in the husband-wife relationship through male desire, “The brother . . . is for the sister a passive similar being” and the recognition of the sister in the brother “is pure and unmixed with any natural desire.”<sup>14</sup> The brother’s nature is ethically like the sister’s – that is, directly universal, which allows for the realization of self in and through an other. The sister’s recognition of herself in the brother is therefore pure and complete, as is his recognition of himself in her, and “the moment of the individual self, recognizing and being recognized, can here assert its right.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, Hegel makes a distinction between, on the one hand, the process of recognition between man and woman based on an immediate unity (an immediate universality grounded in blood), which is transcended through the process of recognition into a unity or identity-in-difference (brother-sister), and, on the other hand, recognition grounded in desire, where the mere particularity of male desire necessarily retains separation and dissimilarity in such a way that a unity of male and female cannot be fully realized (husband-wife).

While Freud’s theories and anthropological studies of incest taboos would seem to make the assertion that “brother and sister . . . do not desire one another” at least dubious if not altogether untenable, it is significant that Hegel believes that this lack of desire offers woman, as sister, the possibility of truly mutual recognition. The death of a brother thus becomes an irreparable loss for the sister since with his death she loses the ideal relationship with a man. The nature of this relationship is such that the sister’s familial duty to the brother is the highest in terms of honoring and remembering him after his death.

Woman as sister in the pagan world is the paradigmatic foreshadowing of ethical life precisely because she represents familial duty to man which is “purely” spiritual. But the brother-sister relationship is not one of *conscious* ethical life; rather, the law of the family is the sister’s immediate, unconscious nature. The sister in the pagan world cannot realize or actualize this life completely because, according to Hegel, the dualism of the pagan world resists the possibility of transcendence or the realization in consciousness of ethical life. Hegel writes:

. . . the feminine, in the form of the sister, has the highest *intuitive* awareness of what is ethical. She does not attain to *consciousness* of it, or to the objective existence of it, because the law of the Family is an implicit, inner essence which is not exposed to the daylight of consciousness, but remains an inner feeling and the divine element that is exempt from an existence in the real world. The woman is associated with these household gods [Penates] and

---

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 275, paragraph 457.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

beholds in them both her universal substance and her particular individuality, yet in such a way that this relation of her individuality to them is at the same time not the natural one of desire.<sup>16</sup>

Hegel retains his understanding of the ethical purity of the brother-sister relationship being tied to sexual purity in his *Philosophy of History* where he describes Apollo as “pure” precisely because “he has no wife, but only a sister [Artemis, the virgin goddess of the hunt], and is not involved in various disgusting adventures, like Zeus.”<sup>17</sup>

The unity of the brother-sister relationship necessarily “passes beyond itself” when the brother “leaves this immediate, elemental, and therefore, strictly speaking, negative ethical life of the Family, in order to acquire and produce the ethical life that is conscious of itself and actual.”<sup>18</sup> The sister merely moves into another family situation by marrying and becoming a wife: She moves from the family of origin to the family of procreation. Thus, the brother passes from divine to human law while the sister continues to maintain divine law as wife. In this way, according to Hegel, natural sexual difference comes to have an ethical determination.

At this point it is important to note several problems in the brother-sister relationship which Hegel does not address. In the first place, this relationship takes place *within* the family of origin before the brother has entered the sphere of the state and accepted the claims made on him by that sphere. Woman is said to realize herself within the family, but insofar as the brother is still only part of the family, he is an adolescent, not part of the manhood of the community and therefore not an adult male in Hegelian terms. The fact that the brother is in this way only a *potential* man, not a realized one, undermines Hegel’s claim that brother and sister represent the ideal relationship between man and woman. Certainly such a relationship requires, at the very least, that there *be* a man and a woman. Second, the brother-sister relationship does not entail equal responsibility. Since the brother’s vocation is to accept the bifurcation of life, and with it the separation of desire and morality, he leaves the family of origin and does not look back. The sister assumes the familial obligations of divine law which require that she bury and remember her brother when he dies, but there is no mention of any responsibility the brother has to his sister in terms of human or political law. Thus woman, as sister, assumes a responsibility for the brother as a member of the family of origin, which the brother does not reciprocate. This unequal responsibility mitigates the sense in which the brother-sister relationship can be seen as ideal. And third, Hegel is in search of the self-complete relationship between man and woman that is an identity-in-difference: It must be a “natural” relationship that is dialectically transcended through consciousness (recognition/history). But there is no guarantee that a woman will *have* a brother. Insofar as Hegel attempts to institutionalize forms of consciousness this

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 274, paragraph 457.

<sup>17</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, translated by J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), pp. 245-246.

<sup>18</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 275, paragraph 458.

means that a woman without a brother can never achieve even a glimmer of an unconscious self that might be the equal of man's.

\*

Setting aside these objections for the moment, we find that in Sophocles' *Antigone* Hegel finds the superiority of the sister-brother relationship demonstrated in a way that reveals the profound ethical conflict inherent in the pagan world between family and *polis*, woman and man, particular and universal, divine law and human law. Thus, while the central *conflict* for Hegel is between Antigone and Creon – (as woman and man who represent the conflict between the family, as the natural ground of ethical life, and ethical life itself in its social universality in the *polis*) – the central *relationship* in this drama is, for him, that between Antigone and Polyneices: Antigone's enduring sense of duty to her dead brother is explained in terms of the ideal male-female relationship of mutual recognition.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Antigone “premonizes and foreshadows” most completely the nature of familial ethical life precisely because she represents the relation between man and woman not as wife but as sister. She is the paradigm of the law of the family as she carries out her “highest duty” toward her brother in attempting to bury and honor him.

While it is true that Antigone's burial of Polyneices represents familial duty (and in particular that between sister and brother), Hegel does not consider the play in its entirety. His references to the *Antigone* are scattered throughout his discussion of the ethical world and ethical action in the *Phenomenology* as “evidence” for his claims regarding the relationship between male/human law and female/divine law in the Greek pagan world. But Hegel's interpretation of this play, and in particular the conflict between Creon and Antigone, is an over-simplification made to fit his view of the tragic character of pagan life as a conflict between equal and contrary values.

Hegel considers the situation that precedes the action in the *Antigone* – the struggle between the two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, for control of the city of Thebes. “Nature” has provided two potential rulers where only one can rule. In the pagan world the ruler is the community as individual soul: Two cannot share power. Hegel claims that the two brothers each have an equal right to rule and that the inequality of the natural order of birth can have no importance when they enter the ethical community of the *polis*. Thus, the right of primogeniture

---

<sup>19</sup> The speech in which Antigone defends her decision to bury her brother, saying she would not make the same sacrifice for a husband or son, is omitted from many modern translations. This speech is reprinted in *Ten Greek Plays in Contemporary Translations*, edited by L. R. Lind (Boston: The Riverside Press, 1957), p. 100. For an interesting analysis of this speech from a Hegelian perspective within a psychoanalytic framework, i.e., from a perspective which focuses on the problem of recognition between man and woman, see Robert Seidenberg and Evangelos Papathomopoulos, “The Enigma of Antigone,” in *The International Review of Psycho-Analysis*, 1 (1974), pp. 197-205. It is also worth noting that this paradigm of mutual recognition between sister and brother, which is supposed to be devoid of desire, is rooted in the incestuous origins of the house of Thebes. Antigone's father, Oedipus, is also her brother making Polyneices her uncle as well as her brother and she his aunt as well as his sister. In choosing this seemingly atypical family to represent the family as natural ethical life, Hegel gives significance to the Oedipus myth long before Freud.

is denied. However, the equal right of the brothers to rule destroys them both, since in their conflict over power they are both wrong.

In human law or political terms, it is the right of possession that is most important. Thus, because Eteocles was in power when Polyneices attacked the city, Eteocles is given a formal burial by Creon, who has become the ruler of the war-torn city-state. But Creon's edict, which forbids anyone to bury Polyneices on pain of death, is a denial of sacred claims: Without burial Polyneices' soul cannot safely enter Hades. By honoring one brother and dishonoring the other, human law and divine law are set in opposition. And the "right" of human law is revealed as "wrong" through the vengeance of war waged on Thebes by Argos.<sup>20</sup>

Through his discussion of the *Antigone*, Hegel reveals the way in which the tragic conflict in pagan society between the universalistic *polis* and the particularistic family ends in the destruction of the pagan world such that it becomes one "soulless and dead" bare universal community. But, according to Hegel, it is not only external forces that destroy the community. Rather, there is within the community the seeds of its own destruction in the family. The family, for Hegel, is "the rebellious principle of pure individuality"<sup>21</sup> which, in its universality, is inner divine law; and this law, as he claims again and again, is the law of woman. Thus, woman is the agent of destruction of the pagan world. Since particularity is not *included* in the *polis*, it destroys the *polis*. Woman, as the representative of the family principle, the principle of particularity which the *polis* represses, is the internal cause of the downfall of the pagan world:

Since the community only gets an existence through its interference with the happiness of the Family, and by dissolving [individual] self-consciousness into the universal, it creates for itself in what it suppresses and what is at the same time essential to it an internal enemy – womankind in general. Womankind – the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community – changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family.<sup>22</sup>

Woman, as the representative of both the immediacy of family life and the principle of particularity, represents the spirit of individualism as subversive. She revolts and destroys the community in the pagan world by acting on the young man who has not yet completely detached himself from the family of origin and therefore has not yet subordinated his particular existence to the universality of the *polis*. She persuades him to exercise his power for the family dynasty

---

<sup>20</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, pp. 285-287, paragraphs 473-474.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.286, paragraph 474.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288, paragraph 475.



rather than for public welfare. According to Hegel, woman does this by asserting the power of youthful male authority: as son, as brother, or as husband.<sup>23</sup>

The question of exactly how woman can represent the sphere of particularity while never knowing herself as this particular self is a question never addressed by Hegel. In *Negative Dialectics* Adorno challenges Hegel on precisely this transformation of the particular into particularity. For Adorno:

. . . the particular would not be definable without the universal that identifies it, according to current logic; but neither is it identical with the universal.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the concept of the particular is a concept of the dialectics of non-identity whereas the concept of particularity eliminates the particular *as* particular in order to absorb it into a philosophy of identity dominated by the universal. For Adorno, Hegel “. . . shrinks . . . from the dialectics of the particular which destroyed the primacy of identity”<sup>25</sup> when he substitutes the concept of particularity for that of the particular. The transformation of the analysis away from a concern with the particular to a concern with particularity in relation to woman is the paradigm case of what Adorno points to. That is, Adorno shows that Hegel’s identity philosophy necessarily excludes forms of human experience, and it is my contention that it is primarily forms of *female* experience, which Antigone symbolizes, that are excluded.

While Antigone, as the paradigm of the ethical family, does not, in the *Phenomenology*, represent woman as the principle of particularity destroying the *polis* through intrigue and perversion, nevertheless Hegel misses what is most significant: that Antigone must *enter* the political realm, the realm of second nature, in order to defy it on behalf of the realm of the family, the realm of first nature. In doing this, as we shall see, Antigone transcends Hegel’s analysis of “the law of woman” as “natural ethical life,” and becomes *this* particular self.

Sophocles presents a situation in which Antigone must reconcile her obligations to the family and its gods with the demands of the political sphere represented by Creon. Her tragedy is that no matter which course of action she chooses she cannot be saved. If she defies the law of the *polis* and buries Polyneices, she will die; if she fails in her familial duty to her brother she will suffer divine retribution and loss of honor. She defies Creon and in so doing brings divine law into the human community in opposition to the authority of the *polis*.

According to Hegel, in the pagan world the two forms of law, human and divine, as represented by man and woman, exclude and oppose each other; their separation means the loss of certainty of immediate truth and creates the possibility of crime and guilt. Crime is defined here as the adherence to one of the two laws over and against the other. Thus, there is no *Aufhebung* of the two laws, but only opposition. For Hegel, “essential reality” is the unity or identity-in-difference of both human law and divine law; that is, there can be no justice without

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, By claiming that woman shows man the power of his authority, especially that as son he is master of his mother, Hegel suggests that woman conspires with man to realize male domination.

<sup>24</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 173.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

revelation.<sup>26</sup> But such an *Aufhebung* is only possible in the *modern* world, after the advent of Christianity. It is the revelation of God in Christ that allows man to acquire the knowledge necessary to make the transition to an ethical life which is self-conscious and therefore truly universal. In the pagan world conflict is always “resolved” on one side or the other, but the two laws are inextricably bound up with each other such that the fulfillment of one calls forth the other’s revenge. The purer ethical consciousness acknowledges the other law but interprets it as wrong and acts as it deems necessary because “what is *ethical* must be *actual*.”<sup>27</sup> In this sense Antigone wittingly commits the “crime,” according to Hegel. However, by acknowledging the other law, ethical consciousness must acknowledge that it has committed a crime against this law, and it must admit guilt. It is here, in the analysis of the relation between crime and guilt, that we begin to see the inadequacy of Hegel’s interpretation of the *Antigone*.

Against Hegel’s interpretation, Sophocles does not create Antigone and Creon as ethical equals. Antigone alone is the ultimate defender of the good; one sees this revealed in the fate meted out to Creon and in Antigone’s *refusal* to admit guilt. In Hegel’s attempt to fit the *Antigone* into his view of the tragic character of pagan life in terms of crime and guilt he has to “interpret” this play in the *Phenomenology* to the extent of changing Antigone’s final words. In the section on ethical action Hegel makes it seem as if she acknowledges her “guilt” for the “crime” of burying her brother. What she actually says is:

. . . I have done no wrong,  
I have not sinned before the gods. Or if I have,  
I shall know the truth in death. But if the guilt  
Lies upon Creon who judged me, then, I pray,  
May his punishment equal my own.<sup>28</sup>

With her death she believes that she will enter the world of the gods and that *they* will determine whether her act was right or wrong. In a dialectical turn, Creon ends up living the fate he has tried to inflict on Antigone by entombing her alive: He must endure the solitude of a “living death,” for his actions lead to the suicides of his son and his wife. In the end he declares: “I alone am guilty.”<sup>29</sup>

While Antigone chooses to obey the gods, or divine law, nevertheless she does not admit guilt concerning human law.<sup>30</sup> From Hegel’s point of view Antigone’s admission of guilt is necessary for her ethical consciousness to be equal to that of Creon and for the play to represent

---

<sup>26</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 276, paragraph 460.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Sophocles. *Antigone*, in *Drama: An Introductory Anthology*, alternate edition, edited by Otto R. Reinert (Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1964), p. 22 (amended translation, since the translators, Fitts and Fitzgerald, translate ‘gods’ as ‘God’). See also *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 284, paragraph 470, and *The Phenomenology of Mind*, p. 491.

<sup>29</sup> *Antigone*, Reinert edition, p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> One might want to argue that these gods are the divine representatives of male authority to which Antigone bows. Nevertheless, she does not accept male domination in its more obvious human guise.

the tragic conflict of pagan life. When we adhere to what actually happens in the play and put it within Hegel's interpretative framework we find that Creon's admission of guilt actually makes *him* the hero of the play since it gives him a *higher* ethical consciousness. Thus, there are not two equal and contrary values in opposition in the conflict between Antigone and Creon, as Hegel tries to claim, but rather a "higher" political consciousness of the male and a "lower" familial consciousness of the female. From this perspective the play should have been called *Creon* since only Creon has the self-recognition made possible through the admission of guilt. While the action of the play transforms Creon from a criminal to a tragic figure for both Sophocles and Hegel, within Hegel's framework Antigone remains "criminal" in that she upholds only the law of the family and does not recognize the law of the *polis* as legitimate. Thus, Hegel *wants* Antigone to be a tragic character but he cannot show her as such without misrepresenting and "adapting" what she says to make it look as if she admits guilt.

In his interpretation of the *Antigone*, with its emphasis on crime and guilt, Hegel misses several critical components of the play that are central to an understanding of female experience. To begin with, Antigone retains a steadfast devotion to what is noble and just, which goes far beyond the mere intuition of natural ethical life and the consciousness which comes from burying and remembering the dead. Antigone has a moral courage which allows her to *choose* a course of action even though it condemns her to death. Whereas Hegel claims that the sister's intuition of ethical life is not open to the daylight of consciousness, the chorus in Sophocles' play cries out to Antigone: "Your death is the doing of your conscious hand."<sup>31</sup> Sophocles shows Antigone choosing to carry out her duty to her brother and choosing to disobey Creon's edict. While she claims to owe a stronger allegiance to the dead, to her brother and to the gods, it is not an unreflective position she takes. It is not an unconscious intuition of her ethical duty as Hegel would have us believe. Rather, it is a noble stance, consciously taken.<sup>32</sup>

According to Hegel, the woman who remained in her place never felt the tragic character of pagan life, never felt the conflict between particular and universal, because she never entered the *polis*, the sphere of universality. Thus, it is Ismene, Antigone's sister, rather than Antigone herself, who maintains the traditional place of woman. Curiously, Hegel fails even to mention Ismene in his discussion of the play. This is probably because Ismene's "instinctive" reaction is contrary to her supposed "natural ethical orientation": She explicitly sides with the political authority of the *polis* over the divine law. And in siding with the law of the *polis* Ismene bows to "the law of woman" as male domination. When Antigone asks Ismene if she wishes to help bury their brother Ismene cries out:

---

<sup>31</sup> *Antigone*, Reinert edition, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Later, in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, Hegel himself describes Antigone as choosing her course of action: Insofar as she has *pathos*, she has free will. Here, Hegel describes Antigone's *pathos* as less than that of Creon's because she worships the underworld gods of Hades while Creon worships the daylight gods of self-conscious political life. However, the argument concerning the conscious, deliberate choice involved in Antigone's actions undermines the claim in the *Phenomenology* that the sister's ethical life is not conscious or actualized. See *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), pp. 232, 464.

Think how much more terrible than these  
Our own death would be if we should go against Creon  
And do what he has forbidden! We are only women,  
We cannot fight with men, Antigone!  
The law is strong, we must give in to the law  
In this thing, and in worse.<sup>33</sup>

However, Ismene, motivated by feelings of sisterhood, overcomes her initial fears and attempts to share the responsibility for burying Polyneices, after the fact. Antigone protests that there is no need for them both to die for something she alone has done. Ismene replies:

What do I care for life when you are dead?<sup>34</sup>

Antigone rejects Ismene's offer of sisterly solidarity, but what we see here in Ismene is a second, more traditional woman, a woman representing conventional womanhood, created in human rather than heroic proportions, attempting to choose an honorable death over the continuation of an ignoble life.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Ismene wavers in her commitment to the good but her decision to do what is right is rooted in the familial devotion between sisters, not in the sister-brother relationship. Hegel completely disregards this aspect of the play.

Unlike Ismene, Antigone *acts* on behalf of the family, the sphere of inaction. She moves outside the sphere of the family and as a consequence becomes different *within* the family. As we saw earlier, the brother-sister relationship of mutual recognition, in which the sister is said to realize herself, necessarily ends when the brother leaves the family of origin. And Hegel asserts that it makes no difference to woman that she is not *this* particular self within the family of procreation. He claims that there is reciprocal recognition between husband and wife, but when we examine this claim carefully we find that it contradicts his claim concerning what one is to *gain* from the process of recognition within the family of procreation, i.e., particularity. Thus, man gains an unconscious particularity through woman's relation to the universal, but man's relation to the universal is separate from his relation to woman so that she is never *this* particular self. While the husband cannot renounce the particularity of his being in the pagan world, the wife never achieves it. She cannot achieve an unconscious particularity as *this* wife within the immediacy of the ethical family and she is not allowed out into any other sphere of life. In the Hegelian schema woman cannot even achieve the self-consciousness of the slave because she does not *do* anything – she is not seen as being involved in the process of work as objectification or world creation. She has no universal recognition of her action or humanity in the *polis* – she

---

<sup>33</sup> *Antigone*, Reinert edition, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Joyce Nower, "A Feminist View of Antigone," in *The Longest Revolution* (February/March 1983), p. 6. Why Antigone rejects Ismene's offer of sisterly solidarity is an enigma that can perhaps be illuminated by the fact that patriarchal society attempts to set women against each other so that they learn to see themselves primarily in relation to men.

is not seen as someone who *acts* but merely as someone who *is*. Since woman remains confined inside the family she must remain the walking dead of “unreal insubstantial shadow.” Thus, if Antigone were to proceed as a “normal” woman she would marry Haemon, her betrothed and Creon’s son, move from the family of origin to the family of procreation, and never know herself as *this* particular self. But Antigone, like the male, leaves the family to risk her life in the *polis*. While it is true that she is in the *polis* on behalf of the family, nevertheless she experiences the duality of pagan life and has the potential to become *this* particular self. Through the conscious risk of life in the sphere of the *polis*, Antigone transcends the limitations of womanhood set down by Hegel.

If we accept Hegel’s interpretation of pagan life as a tragic conflict between the familial particular and the political universal which cannot be overcome in life, then Antigone’s decision to commit suicide, which Hegel does not discuss, is of paramount importance. That is, unlike the male, Antigone cannot *live* out the contradiction of pagan life. Man is able to endure the duality of pagan life through his relation to woman as wife – she maintains the family as the sphere of his particularity while he acts in the *polis*, the sphere of universality. But woman’s relation to man does not offer her a way to make this duality tolerable. His desire for her is such that she is never a particular self in relation to him nor does she experience the universality of the *polis* through him. And when woman as sister leaves the family to experience the universality of the *polis* and to achieve particularity there is no relation to man that can sustain her. Thus, while man lives the tragic conflict of pagan life, woman dies from it. By violating the norms of womanhood, Antigone comes to embody the tragic conflict inherent in Greek life. Her suicide expresses the inability to be both particular and universal in the pagan world. It expresses the fact that there can be no reconciliation, no *Aufhebung*, of particular and universal in that world. Against Hegel’s focus on crime and guilt which misrepresents Antigone, it is a consideration of the play itself, and most notably, a consideration of Antigone’s *actions* on behalf of the sphere of inaction, that reveals her tragedy as the tragedy of Greek life in Hegelian terms.

In addition, Antigone’s suicide can be understood as a form of defiance against male domination. If we extrapolate from Hegel’s theory of desire, Antigone’s suicide maintains her purity since she never marries and therefore never has a husband whose desire can overreach her ability to become this particular self. More important, however, by choosing to kill herself Antigone does not allow Creon to have the ultimate power over her fate that he seeks: She takes her own life to refute the power of the male, the power of the universal, over her. In Greek society death was seen as preferable to slavery: It was more noble to kill oneself than to have one’s fate controlled by another. Hegel himself writes of the liberating aspects of suicide, although not in regard to Antigone’s tragedy. In his essay on *Natural Law (Naturrecht)* Hegel claims that voluntary death is a manifestation of freedom because it reveals one’s independence from the life situation. He qualifies this by saying that this is not a *realization* of freedom, since it ends in nothingness rather than in free existence.<sup>36</sup> However, in Antigone’s situation a

---

<sup>36</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Natural Law*, translated by T. M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), pp. 90-92. See also: Kojève, pp. 247-248.

manifestation of freedom is all that is possible since her choices are only death or submission to the male principle as the principle of universality, which decrees that she remain confined to the family in subjugation to man. Antigone's suicide is an honorable alternative which shows that she prefers virtue or *arete* (ἀρετή) to male domination.

In the *Phenomenology* "action is the principle by which distinction in unity is carried out in social life. Therefore the consideration of its significance is an essential problem of the social mind."<sup>37</sup> Yet Hegel chooses to emphasize only Antigone's burial of Polyneices and misrepresents her "confession." When one considers *all* of Antigone's actions we see first that her burial of Polyneices is for her a moral imperative that goes beyond the mere intuition of ethical life and that she confesses no guilt in terms of the human law; second, that her action in the sphere of the *polis* allows her to transcend the Hegelian framework (which confines her to the family) so that she becomes a particular self; and third, that her suicide may be seen as the ultimate expression of the tragic character of pagan life as well as a refutation of male domination. Thus, through her actions Antigone goes far beyond what Hegel attributes to her.

For Sophocles it is because Antigone and Creon come upon the limits of their respective spheres that they both are transformed from criminal to tragic figures. Hegel also wants to show this but does so by misrepresenting both Antigone and Creon. That is, where Hegel does not consider the consequences which result from the fact that Antigone must leave the family in order to protect it, must *act* on behalf of the sphere of inaction, he also does not consider that Creon's behavior must *necessarily* be unjust. Hegel's interpretation of Creon as the just representative of the law of the *polis* is as radical a departure from Sophocles' tragedy as is his portrayal of Antigone. The conflict between the just moral law and the unjust political law which is central to Sophocles' *Antigone* is muted in Hegel's interpretation. For Sophocles, Creon's rule is *not* that of reasoned arguments and the rational order of the city-state; nor is Creon the community as an individual soul. Rather, Sophocles shows Creon to be a misogynist and a tyrant who requires unquestioned obedience.

Creon is forever fearful that man shall be "done in" by woman, yet he expects a man to bury Polyneices; he finds it unthinkable that a woman, even as the necessary defender of divine law, would act in the public realm to transgress the laws of the *polis*. When he finds out that Antigone has committed the "crime," he exclaims: "If we must lose, let's lose to a man, at least! Is a woman stronger than we?"<sup>38</sup> And when Haemon challenges Creon's decision condemning Antigone to death, Creon rebukes him saying "Fool, adolescent fool! Taken in by a woman!"<sup>39</sup> While the *polis* sides with Antigone, Creon declares:

Whoever is chosen to govern should be  
obeyed – Must be obeyed, in all things,

---

<sup>37</sup> *The Phenomenology of Mind*, p. 483. These are Baillie's words, not Hegel's.

<sup>38</sup> *Antigone*, Reinert edition, p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. The psychological basis of Creon's fear of womankind is explored by Eli Sagan in *The Lust to Annihilate: A Psychoanalytic Study of Violence in Ancient Greek Culture* (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1979), pp. 95-101.

great and small, just and unjust! . . .  
My voice is the one voice giving orders  
in this City! . . . The State is the King!<sup>40</sup>

Confronted with the inexorable force of Antigone acting on behalf of the family, Creon becomes irrational precisely because he cannot incorporate the claims of the family within the political sphere that he rules. In a world divided between family and *polis*, particular and universal, Antigone becomes tragic when she must leave the family to protect it, and Creon becomes tragic when, to protect the *polis*, he becomes an irrational and unjust ruler.

In summary, what we find are four aspects of Sophocles' *Antigone* that are overlooked by Hegel in the *Phenomenology* in his attempt to use the play to reveal the pagan world as a world defined by tragic conflict between particular and universal, family and *polis*, divine law and human law, woman and man. First, Hegel completely disregards the sister-sister relationship in his search for the ideal relationship as a male-female relationship of identity-in-difference. Thus, Hegel describes the family as the sphere of womankind without showing any curiosity about the relations *between* women. This is like describing the sphere of pagan political life as "the manhood of the community" without ever discussing the relations between men. While Antigone rejects Ismene's show of solidarity, nevertheless, it is important to note the attempt at sisterhood and to recognize that Ismene does not display the "natural ethical orientation" required of her sex: She instinctively sides with male political authority rather than with the divine law of the family.

Second, Hegel disregards the conscious choice involved in Antigone's actions. Sophocles creates a conflict in which Antigone represents not only eternal familial values but individual moral choice, in opposition to Creon who represents not only temporal legal authority but dictatorial rule.<sup>41</sup> Hegel fails to see Antigone's action as anything more than the result of her intuition of the natural ethical law of the family, just as Creon fails to see it as anything more than the result of female rebellion against his absolute, patriarchal authority. But Antigone's tragedy is the result of strength and moral courage – the so-called "masculine" virtues – not an emotional "feminine" intuition. (One wonders if Hegel would have reduced Socrates' "daimon" – a private intuition unrecognized and persecuted by the *polis* – to the level of "feminine intuition" if Socrates had been a woman.)

Third, Antigone transcends woman's place in Hegel's framework because she breaks out of the limitation to the familial which he requires of her sex. She represents the ethical family and as such she must relate to the universal as immediate, but, according to Hegel, she is not to know herself as this particular self. When we look carefully at Hegel's claims we find that woman is bound to immediacy as wife (within the family of procreation) through male desire,

---

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 18.

<sup>41</sup> In their play *The Island*, Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona present the *Antigone* as a play within a play to reveal the ancient drama's relevance to the situation of black South African political prisoners under apartheid. In both plays moral laws are juxtaposed to state laws to demonstrate that justice and the law are not necessarily the same thing. This point, as we have seen, is lost in Hegel's interpretation.

which overreaches her ability to become this particular self in and through her relationship with her brother (in the family of origin). The brother-sister relationship, as a relationship of mutual recognition, is transitory and ends when he enters the *polis*. The sister does not act in the *polis* but merely moves into another family to become wife – the object of male desire. And, the husband’s life in the pagan city-state overreaches the wife’s familial life as she remains confined to first nature. Woman has no contradiction to negate between herself and “first nature” – she lacks negativity because she remains confined within the sphere of “mere animal life” and thus remains “unreal insubstantial shadow.” But Antigone moves beyond the limits Hegel tries to impose on her when she moves into the political sphere on behalf of the sphere of the family and becomes, like man, a participant in both spheres. She does not represent the principle of particularity which changes the community through intrigue, but openly insists on the rights of the family, the rights of “first nature,” within the *polis*.<sup>42</sup> Unlike other women, it becomes possible for Antigone, subordinating herself to the universal, to know herself as *this* particular self and thus to epitomize the tragic conflict between particular and universal which Hegel claims characterizes the ancient Greek, pagan world. (Hegel’s analysis of the relation between crime and guilt, which does not allow for the transformation of Antigone from a criminal to a tragic figure, also disallows the necessity of portraying Creon as an irrational, unjust ruler.)

And finally, Hegel fails to discuss Antigone’s suicide. When the chorus declares: “What woman has ever found your way to death?”<sup>43</sup> it reveals Antigone as unique, as the exception to female behavior, and therefore as a transitional character, not the paradigm of pagan divine law as represented by woman. While embodying the tragic conflict between particular and universal, Antigone also represents the history of the revolt of women who act in the public sphere on behalf of the private sphere, the sphere of inaction. She is the precursor of the women who, in the recent past, proclaimed the personal as political.<sup>44</sup> Antigone rebels against Creon’s claim to the right of the universal *over* the particular and in so doing she refuses to fit neatly into the

---

<sup>42</sup> According to Hegel it is because Polyneices offered Antigone the ideal relationship of mutual recognition between woman and man in life that Polyneices makes the greatest claim on Antigone with his death. I have argued that within the family of origin Polyneices was only a *potential* man and becomes a man at the same time that he severs his relationship to his sister, thus challenging the sense in which this relationship can be seen as the ideal one between woman and man. According to Sophocles, it is not the relationship of recognition based on blood ties, but the *uterine* relationship, that exerts the primary claim on Antigone: It is the fact that Polyneices and Antigone are of the same womb, the same mother, that is most significant. Antigone says: “. . . if I had suffered him who was born of my mother to lie in death an unburied corpse, in that case I would have sorrowed . . . it is nothing shameful to revere those . . . from the same womb” (lines 465-511). Here the ancient womb/tomb imagery, the association of woman with life and death, is revealed as an integral part of the play. Creon shifts the discussion away from the uterine relationship to a discussion of the more general concept of blood ties (lines 512-513). This shift and the emphasis on the uterine relationship in the Greek text are revealed in the Oxford translation of the *Antigone* (1880).

<sup>43</sup> *Antigone*, Reinert edition, p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> Antigone may also be seen as the precursor of the suffragettes of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and the women involved in the temperance movement insofar as those women were trying to achieve familial goals in the public realm. For an interesting analysis of this process see: “Moral Woman and Immoral Man: A Consideration of the Public-Private Split and Its Political Ramifications” by Jean Bethke Elshtain in *Politics and Society*, 4, 4 (1974), 453-473.



Hegelian enterprise in which universality ultimately dominates. In criticizing Hegel's interpretation of the *Antigone* we begin to see another story in Western philosophy – one other than that of Hegelian reconciliation: the revolt of the particular against subsumption under a universal schema.

\*

In the analysis of Hegel's interpretation of the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology* I have focused on Hegel's understanding of the pagan world as suffering from a dualism in which particularity, as represented by woman in the family, is in conflict with universality, as represented by man in the *polis*. I have shown that his understanding of this conflict causes him to systematically misrepresent or ignore critical aspects of female experience which Sophocles' play actually reveals.<sup>45</sup> Given the inadequacy of the account of the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology*, it is not surprising to find that Hegel's use of the play in the *Philosophy of Right* is also partial, and therefore "false." This indicates that Hegel's philosophy of the modern world cannot reconcile the opposition between particular and universal in the context of sexual difference any more than the ancient world could. I will argue in the following pages that the modern world described by Hegel, like the pagan world, is made at woman's expense and that *Antigone* is misused to represent woman in the family in transhistorical terms.

In the *Philosophy of Right* we learn that the bifurcation of reason in the pagan world is *aufgehoben* in Spirit's movement toward universal self-knowledge with the development of the modern Christian world into a triad consisting of the family, civil society and the state. The bourgeois family is the sphere of the universal as undifferentiated unity or immediacy;<sup>46</sup> civil society represents the moment of particularity; and the state is the sphere of universality in which the universal and particular are reconciled. The aim of the *Philosophy of Right* is to resolve the relationship between desire, morality, and ethical life; the analysis begins with a discussion of sexual desire within marriage, shifts to a focus on the generalized desire of civil society and the abstract morality of that sphere, and ends with a consideration of the concrete ethical life or *Sittlichkeit* of the state.

The reference to the *Antigone* and the only discussion of woman in the *Philosophy of Right*, as in the *Phenomenology*, appears within the discussion of the ethical life of the family. And, as in the *Phenomenology*, the *Antigone* is used as a paradigm to justify woman's confinement to the family. But, significantly, here the play does not represent the relationship

---

<sup>45</sup> To be sure, Hegel believes that the real historical conflict of the pagan world would be visible only after the Christian revelation had introduced the possibility of its *Aufhebung*. Nevertheless, since Hegel sees the tragic conflict of the pagan world revealed through the great Greek tragedians, all significant aspects of these ancient authors would have to be taken up into the *Aufhebung*.

<sup>46</sup> Hegel's philosophy is ideological in its lack of an analysis of the difference between the working class and the bourgeois family as well as in its patriarchal assumptions. It is difficult to know how the working-class woman, confined to a subsistence level of existence within her own family which is *not* based on property and capital, or confined to the bourgeois family as a domestic servant, fits Hegel's schema.

between brother and sister as a relationship untainted by male desire; nor does the play represent the relationship between crime and guilt. Rather, it represents the opposition between man and woman as the opposition between divine law and human law within the context of a discussion of the relationship between husband and wife. In the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel is not concerned to find the ideal relationship between man and woman that is *free* from desire, but to show how the relation *of* desire can be transcended.

Hegel claims that the husband-wife relationship is the ideal ethical relationship between man and woman in the modern world because the secret moment of desire, the moment of physical passion, is transformed into self-conscious love through marriage. Physical desire is a moment that vanishes when satisfied, while the spiritual bond of Christian marriage is above the contingency of desire. Hegel distinguishes the marriage ceremony from the marriage contract. The ceremony, as a public proclamation of the ethical intention to take responsibility for family life, puts sensual desire into the background, while the marriage contract is said to be a contract to transcend the standpoint of contract.<sup>47</sup> That is, a contract is a relation of civil society between atomic individuals while the ethical family is a unity bound together by love in such a way that one exists in it not as an atomic individual but as a member of the group. Through a relation of civil society the family transcends the familial problem of desire: The marriage contract eliminates the capricious subjectivism of love as sentiment, an “immediate form of reason,” and makes love the ethical or self-conscious moment in marriage.

This is quite a different situation from the one we encountered in the *Phenomenology*, where love in the pagan world was not self-conscious and where male desire infected the relationship between husband and wife so that it could not be the ideal relationship between man and woman. The bifurcation of man’s life in the pagan world into public and private spheres caused a split between desire and morality which introduced a moment of ethical contingency into the marriage. Only the brother-sister relationship, which was supposedly free from desire and took place before the brother entered the *polis* and experienced the bifurcation of his life, could be seen as ideal. According to Hegel, the modern Christian world has radically transformed the situation so that male desire is no longer a problem. The tripartite structure of the modern world is seen as overcoming the dualism of the pagan world, allowing for the reconciliation of desire and morality through the marriage ceremony, which is both a contractual relation (a relation of civil society) and a religious (familial) one.

Thus, in the *Philosophy of Right* there is a significant shift away from the brother-sister relationship as the ideal relation of recognition between man and woman, a relationship seen as *free* from desire, to a consideration of the husband-wife relationship as a relationship that *transcends* desire. This shift is characteristic of the claim of Hegelian philosophy as a whole to overcome the externality of Greek philosophy and society with the realization of philosophy in historical life. Significantly, the shift changes the site of the paradigm of male-female relations from the family of origin to the family of procreation. Here Hegel wants to distinguish the

---

<sup>47</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, translated by T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 111-114, paragraphs 161-164.

“natural” feeling of love, which binds family members through an original blood tie, from a later, deeper, self-conscious tie of love in marriage.<sup>48</sup> He defends the nuclear family against the rights of the extended family of origin. In the modern world any conflict of claims regarding duties and obligations between the family of origin and the family of procreation is always resolved in favor of the higher ethical family, the family of procreation: That which comes later is a more mature form of reason. The shift to the focus on the family of procreation also replaces the contingency noted earlier. That is, while only some women may have brothers in the family of origin all women may potentially have husbands.

In the *Philosophy of Right* love is subordinated to the claims of marriage and reproduction, which in turn are subordinated to the claims of property. Thus, the relation of husband and wife in the modern world is no more inherently self-complete than it was in the pagan world. The husband and wife still need the child as an externalization of the unity of their love.<sup>49</sup> Marriage is for procreation and woman must remain confined to the family as “mother” so that the family may achieve its objective, explicit unity. As I have argued more comprehensively elsewhere, it is not really a question of man and woman coming together in love that is at issue here, but rather the inheritance of family property.<sup>50</sup> For Hegel, property is the manifestation of ethical self-consciousness in the material and public world. Man expresses his freedom and gains historical continuity by effectively appropriating and transmitting property through his family. Woman, on the other hand, is allowed to own property in her lifetime, but she cannot bequeath it to others. Thus, woman’s relation to the family property leaves her deprived of the experiences of freedom and historical continuity. Here Hegel’s complicated schema which attempts to give woman, as person, equal rights in terms of the family property is overreached by his conception of woman as wife and mother, tied to immediacy.

According to Hegel, woman, as wife and mother in the modern world, like her counterpart in the pagan world, is a passive and subjective being who has knowledge only as feeling or intuition. She never leaves the family but “has her substantive destiny in the family, and to be imbued with family piety is her ethical frame of mind.”<sup>51</sup> Here Hegel refers to the *Antigone* as “one of the most sublime presentations” of family piety as the law of woman.<sup>52</sup> However, the reference to the *Antigone* in the *Philosophy of Right* is within a context which puts the claims of the family of procreation over and above the claims of the family of origin, whereas Hegel’s interpretation of the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology* concerns the highest claim of duty

---

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116, paragraph 172; Hegel also maintains this understanding of the relation between the family of origin and the family of procreation in his *Aesthetics*, pp. 463-464.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264-265, Addition to paragraph 173.

<sup>50</sup> Patricia J. Mills. “Hegel and ‘The Woman Question’: Recognition and Intersubjectivity,” in *The Sexism of Social and Political Theory: Women and Reproduction from Plato to Nietzsche*, edited by Lorenne M. G. Clark and Lynda Lange. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 74-98. My analysis of Hegel is part of a larger project which focuses on the role of woman in the dialectical theory of Hegel, Marx, Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno. See my *Woman, Nature, and Psyche: The Domination of Nature in the Tradition of Critical Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

<sup>51</sup> *Philosophy of Right*, p. 114, paragraph 166.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*; Hegel refers to the *Antigone* in almost the exact same words in the *Aesthetics*, p. 464.

and obligation within the family of origin, i.e., the duty of the sister to bury and honor her brother. Given Hegel's original interpretation of Antigone as the paradigm of ethical family life *precisely because* she represents the relationship between man and woman *not* as wife but as *sister*, this new appropriation of the play within the context of a discussion of marriage in the modern world seems quite untenable. While Hegel believes that the modern world has transformed the relation of desire between man and woman through Christian marriage (as ceremony and contract), and consequently has solved the problem of male desire, nevertheless, since Antigone represents "holy sisterly love," a love free from desire according to the *Phenomenology*, and since she never marries, it is hard to see how she can serve as a model for wifely piety in the modern world. Hegel's attempt to use the play to reinforce his assumption that woman must remain confined to the family in the modern world is without a conceptual or historical analysis that would justify such a use. Most significantly, Hegel posits Antigone as a *transhistorical* paradigm of ethical family life and the role of woman: The play has lost its historical reference to the pagan world in the *Philosophy of Right* in order to justify the confinement of woman within the family in the modern world. While Hegel's system is meant to be an historical account of the development of humanity, woman is presented as outside history.

For Hegel, as we have seen, particularity must necessarily be incorporated into political life in order for that life to be truly, rather than abstractly, universal. But this does not mean that woman *qua* woman needs incorporation into the political sphere. Rather, Hegel develops a philosophical system in the *Philosophy of Right* in which he conceives of particularity without the impediment of immediacy. Where woman was confined to the family in the pagan world as the representative of particularity, in the modern world she is confined to the family as the representative of immediacy; particularity and immediacy are separated, and particularity is taken up into the male realm of civil society while woman remains trapped in the ahistorical immediacy of the family. Thus, the *Philosophy of Right* details man's progressive movement into a world that reconciles particular and universal, but woman is forced to take a step backward: she now represents immediacy – a moment which *precedes* particularity and is therefore a less developed form of reason.

Hegel wants to claim that freedom is realized in the modern world, while at the same time he excludes woman from the spheres of civil society and the state, the spheres in which man manifests his freedom. Woman's exclusion from these spheres is made necessary by the dialectical structure which requires that the sphere of the family be maintained or preserved as well as negated in the process of the development toward the universality of the state. Modern man leaves the family in order to move into the realm of civil society where he emerges as a particular self; but the sphere of undifferentiated universality or immediacy must be maintained. Therefore, modern woman is forced to do the family "maintenance" work required by the Hegelian dialectic: Woman stays home to preserve the family. Only man "dirempts" himself; only he struggles for recognition in the universal sense. Fortunately, he can come home after a

hard day of self-diremption to the wife who offers him “a tranquil intuition of . . . unity.”<sup>53</sup> In this way man achieves a wholeness through woman while woman remains confined to the family where only an abstract or undifferentiated identity can be achieved. Confined to the family as the sphere of immediacy in the modern world, woman still lacks the negativity which results from the initial sundering from nature; therefore she never achieves an independent self-consciousness. In preserving the sphere of the family woman is again forced to sacrifice any claim to self-consciousness. Thus, modern man’s realization of himself, along with Hegel’s dialectical structure, are at modern woman’s expense.

Given Hegel’s schema in which woman must necessarily remain confined to the family, he must systematically misrepresent Antigone, especially her movement out of the family. His failure in the *Phenomenology* to analyze comprehensively Antigone’s actions means that he cannot bring an analysis of these actions into the discussion of Antigone in the *Philosophy of Right*. Rather, he misuses her as a transhistorical ideal of woman as wife confined to the family as the sphere of animal life, the sphere of inaction.

Examining Hegel’s work in the *Philosophy of Right* via his discussion of Antigone raises two crucial issues: the problem of female desire and the question of whether or not the sphere to which woman has been assigned (the family) *can be* taken up and dialectically *aufgehoben* in Hegel’s sense if woman is to be allowed her freedom.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, as in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel tries to solve the problem of the division of man’s life by leaving woman in the position of not experiencing the division. Marriage to woman is said to resolve the bifurcation of modern man’s life between family and civil society by mediating two forms of desire: desire as familial, heterosexual union and desire as general and differentiated in civil society. Woman remains confined to one sphere, the sphere of the family, precisely for the purpose of giving man an intuition of unity. In Hegel’s schema, if woman lived in two spheres she could not offer man the access to wholeness that he seeks. However, what Hegel does not address is the fact that *because* she lives in only one sphere woman has no internal motive for seeking marriage as mediation. That is, there is no necessity for the institutional mediation of two forms of desire in woman’s life since she does not experience two forms. Therefore, woman does not need marriage as ceremony and contract. From her perspective, marriage is the result of external coercion: Man’s need for marriage forces her to accept it. Given this conceptual framework, what emerges is that woman’s confinement to the family as the sphere of immediacy indicates that she can represent desire only as capricious and contingent. Just as woman has no internal motive for marriage, she also has no internal motive for desiring one man over another. Female desire itself, if it is to focus on a stable object (one husband rather than many lovers), must be coerced. Thus, when we look carefully, we find that in Hegel’s schema of the modern world the problem of male desire is “solved” only by creating a problem of female desire.

In terms of the dialectical structure, Antigone can be seen as the representative of woman as actor who refuses to fit neatly into Hegel’s system which requires her to stay home to preserve

---

<sup>53</sup> *Philosophy of Right*, p. 114, paragraph 166.

the family. Her move out of the family transforms her so that she has the potential to be a particular self. However, when woman in the modern world follows in Antigone's footsteps by participating in civil society and the state, the spheres of particularity and universality, then the family is not preserved or maintained as well as transcended in the Hegelian sense. Once woman lives in more than one sphere she cannot offer man the intuition of unity he seeks and the dialectical structure necessarily breaks down.

Hegel's philosophic formulation of the relation between woman and man in the modern world is important because it reveals the problem of how to achieve unity in a world in which each one seeks satisfaction of particular needs and desires. But through an examination of his use of Antigone in the *Philosophy of Right* we find that his solution, which separates particularity and immediacy so that the family remains the sphere of immediacy in which woman is confined and coerced, is not an adequate formulation of the required mediation. And, for Hegel, it is precisely the *Aufhebung* or reconciliation of the modern world that reveals the dualistic conflict of the ancient world. The inadequacy of Hegel's formulation of the modern reconciliation in the context of sexual difference in the *Philosophy of Right* is, to a significant extent, due to his misuse and misrepresentation of this conflict in his interpretation of the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology*.

By confining woman to the family in the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* the progressive movement of Spirit toward universal self-consciousness is never recapitulated in woman. Woman can never aspire to "concrete" universality or individuality since she cannot attain particularity much less universality. With the limitation of woman there is a limitation of the Hegelian system. Hegel's universal is necessarily male and male is *not* universal. Humanity is both male and female and the claim to encompass the universality of human experience must allow for woman's experience and participation outside the sphere of the family: It must allow for a more comprehensive account of the *Antigone* than Hegel provides.<sup>54</sup>

University of Toronto<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> In reformatting this article I have corrected printing errors and clarified some statements made in the original version published by the *Owl of Minerva* in 1986. *PJM*, October 2017.

<sup>55</sup> I would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the Fellowship which facilitated my research for this article.