

# FAMILY, RELIGION, PEDAGOGY AND EVERYDAY EDUCATION PRACTICE

**EDITORS**

**BEATA PIETKIEWICZ-PAREEK**

**RAFAŁ WŁODARCZYK**

INSTYTUT PEDAGOGIKI  
UNIwersytetu Wrocławskiego

WROCLAW 2022

**GRAŻYNA LUBOWICKA**

University of Wrocław

ORCID: 0000-0001-5988-112X

## ***ANTIGONE'S CLAIM. NORM AND NON-NORMATIVE MODEL OF THE FAMILY BY JUDITH BUTLER***<sup>1</sup>

### **ABSTRACT:**

Judith Butler's problems in *Antigone's Claim* concern a decomposed and diverse family in postmodernity or a family subjected to deformations and displacements, and the question about which model(s) the family may be heading. The traditional family model based on the primacy of the heterosexual matrix of family and sexuality is deconstructed by Butler by unmasking the basic prohibition of homosexuality for culture and based on the assumption that interpersonal bonds are generated in a historical social space. Butler proposes a new relationship ontology in which human lust is not governed by the imperative of heterosexuality.

### **KEYWORDS:**

Antigone, family, performativity, cultural norm

The transformation of the family model in postmodernity dislodges the privileged position of the monogamous family based on marriage between a man and a woman and proliferates its various models. Along

<sup>1</sup> Originally published: Grażyna Lubowicka, "Żądanie Antygony. Normy i nienormatywny model rodziny Judith Butler", *Wychowanie w Rodzinie* 2019, vol. XXI, no. 2, p. 373-383.

with the multiplicity of family models and the freedom of their formation, feminist discourse proposes emancipatory actions that would lead to equality of choice of the family pattern regardless of gender configuration, and even introduce a revolution in the very understanding of the family. Such a revolution is proposed by Judith Butler, who replaces the notion of family with a much broader one of kinship. She attempts to re-evaluate the family model in her book *Antigone's Claim. Kinship Between Life and Death*, in which Antigone comes to the fore with her claim to recognise natural law, or the law of the family, before social law<sup>2</sup>. Butler offers her diagnosis of the current state of the family:

Consider that in the situation of blended families, a child says 'mother' and might expect more than one individual to respond to the call. Or that, in the case of adoption, a child might say 'father' and might mean both the absent phantasm she never knew as well as the one who assumes that place in living memory. The child might mean that at once, or sequentially, or in ways that are not always clearly disarticulated from one another. Or when a young girl comes to be fond of her stepbrother, what dilemma of kinship is she in? For a woman who is a single mother and has her child without a man, is the father still there, a spectral 'position' or 'place' that remains unfilled, or is there no such 'place' or 'position'? [...] Is the father absent, or does this child have no father, no position, and no inhabitant? Is this a loss, which assumes the unfulfilled norm, or is it another configuration of primary attachment whose primary loss is not to have a language in which to articulate its terms? And when there are two men or two women who parent, are we to assume that some primary division of gendered roles organizes their psychic places within the scene, so that the empirical contingency of two same-gendered parents is nevertheless straightened out by the presocial psychic place of the Mother and Father into which they enter? Does it make sense on these occasions to insist that there are symbolic positions of Mother and Father that every psyche must accept regardless of the social form that kinship takes?<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> The word 'kinship' in Polish means ties, kinship, kinship ties. Judith Butler uses this expression to emphasise its meaning broader than the concept of family. On the different forms of kinship in different cultures see D. Jabłoński, L. Ostasz, *Zarys wiedzy o rodzinie, małżeństwie, kohabitacji i konkubinacie. Perspektywa antropologii kulturowej i ogólnej*, Olsztyn 2001.

<sup>3</sup> J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, New York 2000, p. 69.

Butler proposes an ever more far-reaching deconstruction of the traditional family model than that typical of the shifts in the postmodern society.

The question of a decomposed and diversified family in postmodernity or a family subject to deformation and displacement and the question of what model(s) it might be heading is put by Judith Butler in *Antigone's Claim* as follows:

what sustaining web of relations makes our lives possible, those of us who confound kinship in the rearticulation of its terms? What new schemes of intelligibility make our loves legitimate and recognizable, our losses true losses? This question reopens the relation between kinship and reigning epistemes of cultural intelligibility, and both of these to the possibility of social transformation. And this question, which seems so hard to ask when it comes to kinship, is so quickly suppressed by those who seek to make normative versions of kinship essential to the working of culture and the logic of things, a question too often foreclosed by those who, from terror, savor the final authority of those taboos that stabilize social structure as timeless truth<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, "which social arrangements can be recognized as legitimate love, and which human losses can be explicitly grieved as real and consequential loss?"<sup>5</sup>.

Addressing the problem of the family, its current status, i.e. its crisis, the destruction of its traditional form and its extension to different models and gender configurations, which is mainly the result of the collapse of the monogamous heterosexual family, I refer to Judith Butler's reflections on the family, its model, its determinants, and its evolution presented in *Antigone's Claim*. Judith Butler's approach to the problem of family stems from her engagement with feminist theories, complemented by poststructuralism (gender constructivism), more specifically performativity, and psychoanalysis, mainly as practiced by Jacques Lacan. What is the family model proposed by Butler, where bonds based on heteronormative norms are replaced by kinship relations? Referring to Butler's ideas, I will outline how the postulates

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 24–25.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

of expanding the family model derive from social and cultural theory and, within it, from the concepts of the formation of cultural norms and normativity. What role in the concept of normativity and normalization does the character of Antigone, the heroine of Sophocles' drama of the same title, play? The text is an illustration of postmodern and feminist thesis about the social and cultural shaping of normativeness. The author of *Antigone's Claim* maintains that family relations standards are created and consolidated by repeating aberration performative acts.

## ANTIGONE AND HER CLAIM

Antigone, a literary figure, has for many readers and interpreters of Sophocles' tragedy been a symbol of civil disobedience. However, the figure of Antigone has also been emblematic of feminist activism, of feminist, *gender*, and *queer* criticism, providing a role model. Who is Antigone for Judith Butler?

Sophocles' heroine is a representative of a family; she is connected to Oedipus, her father, to Eteocles and Polynices, to her brothers, to Ismene, her sister, by 'blood ties', but, as Butler shows, "hardly represents the normative principles of kinship, steeped as she is in incestuous legacies that confound her position within kinship"<sup>6</sup>. Butler makes a reference to another tragedy by Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Antigone and Ismene are offered the male *gender*<sup>7</sup>. In the tragedy, Oedipus repeats that, as Butler notes,

Ismene and Antigone have quite literally taken the place of their brothers, acquiring masculine gender along the way. [...] And so we've arrived at something like kinship trouble at the heart of Sophocles. Antigone has, then, already taken the place of her brother; [...] By the time this drama is done, she has thus taken the place of nearly every man in her family<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> "If I had not begotten these daughters to attend me, I would not be living, for all you did for me. But as it is they preserve me, they are my nurses, they are men, not women, when it comes to working for me; but you are sons of some other, and no sons of mine" (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, Cambridge 1994, 1559–1563).

<sup>8</sup> J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, op. cit., p. 62.

Butler stresses that we deal here with mix-up of roles within the family. Antigone is taking the place of nearly all family members. By not belonging to a particular *gender*, by having ambiguous family relations, Antigone does not belong to any known and constituted order, she does not represent any norm. She is doomed to fail in the space of universal norms and laws and becomes a figure of the excluded. Butler writes of her:

Although not quite a queer heroine, Antigone does emblemize a certain heterosexual fatality that remains to be read. Whereas some might conclude that the tragic fate she suffers is the tragic fate of any and all who would transgress the lines of kinship that confer intelligibility on culture, her example, as it were, gives rise to a contrary sort of critical intervention: What in her act is fatal for heterosexuality in its normative sense? And to what other ways of organizing sexuality might a consideration of that fatality give rise?<sup>9</sup>

For Butler, an example of such transgression of sanctioned family relations, being taboo as incest, is the taboo of homosexuality developed in the heteronormative discourse. Antigone, then, may come to symbolize those excluded whose desire is deemed illegitimate in a given culture.

Furthermore, as Butler explains, Antigone's family itself transgresses the norms set for her by familial relationships. She is the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, born of an incestuous relationship, given to impossible incestuous love for her brother, irrevocably condemned to death for her attempt and claim to bury him, to mourn and to grieve. "In her act, she transgresses both gender and kinship norms [...]"<sup>10</sup>. Through the character of Antigone in her non-normative family relationships, Butler shows the mutability of social forms of family relationships. The heroine herself also belongs to a deformed family: "Antigone represents not kinship in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement"<sup>11</sup>. Antigone transgresses the norms of family and gender, revealing at the same time the nature of these norms, their formation and reiteration. Butler makes the heroine of Sophocles' tragedy shown in non-standard

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 72.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

family relations the starting point for analysing the social constitution of norms, and with them the setting of the border and exclusion, for the analysis of normativity itself or the normalization of the process of understanding the family model. As Butler emphasizes: “Antigone represents neither kinship nor its radical outside but becomes the occasion for a reading of a structurally constrained notion of kinship in terms of its social iterability, the aberrant temporality of the norm”<sup>12</sup>. Antigone’s behaviour, then, is meant to be an illustration of the subordination of cultural norms, their repetition and embodiment and, at the same time, their deformation and displacement.

## NORMS AND NORMALISATIONS OF THE FAMILY MODEL

In her analyses of the family model based on changing norms and regulations, Judith Butler, as well as the broad feminist discourse, relies on the postmodern assumption of socio-cultural conditioning, and with it the boundary and the prohibition, separating what is normal and natural, separating the natural family model and what is outside the norm, and is therefore an aberration. As Butler observes: “I hope to show how one might reapproach the kinship-founding function of the incest taboo within psychoanalysis with a conception of a contingent social norm at work”<sup>13</sup>. When analysing culture, we always encounter norms defining what is proper, normal, right and even moral and what is an aberration, a deviation from the norm or something unusual. Culture creates the norm and at the same time creates prohibitions and boundaries and then regulations related to what is non-normative, separating and excluding those who break out of the existing paradigms and rules of conduct. Culture and cultural norms normalize those who deviate from the patterns or exclude them. Postmodern thought and feminist discourse always emphasize that culture provides norms and rules of conduct, while at the same time creating exclusionary systems based on non-normative behaviour. Although patterns and norms are changeable and subject to modification, they are treated as fixed,

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

unchanging and natural. In Butler's view, even if cultural norms are based on biological premises or prohibitions-taboos, such as the incest taboo, one cannot derive from them the conclusion that norms are naturally based in the order of things and thus they cannot be regarded as unquestionable. As Joanna Hańderek notes in her study in the book *Wykluczenia (Exclusions)*:

We also often forget that the minority, like the majority, is recognized and constituted by people. Therefore the norms and cultural categories, or traditions, invoked by people who exclude the minority are established and produced over generations. By speaking of sound principles or natural law, [...] a mythologization of the majority and its peculiar sanctification is made, giving it the status of supremacy<sup>14</sup>.

How, then, do family relations take on some specific form sanctioned by law? The way social norms are established and changed is described by Butler in the context of feminist discourse, where she takes a constructivist stance on the concept of gender or, more broadly, the concept of subjectivity and its identity.

Butler emphasizes that the basic pattern and source of norms concerning the family is the assumption of heteronormativity, a cultural order that assumes that the only legitimate rule of human sexual life is the relationship between a man and a woman. For feminist discourse, heteronormativity is the dominant cultural matrix that determines how sexuality is used and consequently defines the family model. Legal conditions favour the heteronormative relationship, reproduced via practice and socialization. However, as Butler and feminist discourse have it, it is not an intrinsic, natural disposition, but merely a norm determined by cultural practice, perpetuated and reinforced through multiple social gratifications. These norms are reinforced by the ongoing reproduction of social behaviour and they then merge with the conditioning of power, which transforms normativity into normalisation, and are ultimately legitimized by the state and its institutions. As Ewa Majewska writes: "Yet the subject is not 'naturally' heterosexual, the construction of the

<sup>14</sup> J. Hańderek, "Wokół wykluczenia", [in:] *Wykluczenia*, ed. J. Hańderek, N. Kućma, Kraków 2017, p. 26.

'prohibition of sexuality' is also a product of culture, so fundamental that it predates gender difference"<sup>15</sup>. Based on her interpretation of Antigone's actions in Sophocles' tragedy, Butler outlines how the cultural norm of the family and the law derived from prohibition is shaped, and simultaneously how there is a shift in the family model and a shift in the law as a new invariant of the social organization of sexuality: "What happens when the perverse or the impossible emerges in the language of the law and makes its claim precisely there in the sphere of legitimate kinship that depends on its exclusion or pathologization?"<sup>16</sup>.

The way in which social norms are established, which the interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy is meant to illustrate, is for Judith Butler related to her poststructuralist theory of performative acts. This concept originates in the theory of cultural gender performativity, which belongs to the feminist discourse. According to this theory, gender appears as a socio-cultural construct, a product of repeated social practices, a process of repetition and enactment of cultural representations of masculinity and femininity. The subject or identity of which gender is a part becomes a forced repetition of the norm and is the result of repeated normative acts.

Judith Butler is a representative of the performative turn, derived from John Austin's modified speech act theory, which pointed to the connection between speaking and acting, claiming that speech has performative power. Performativity assumes that language not only represents reality, but causes changes in it, specific utterances or behaviours themselves are normalising. Social norms (and cultural gender) are thus the result of the forced repetition of certain actions, their reiteration. At the same time this discourse/action is subordinated to authority. In this sense, the norm is a social contract, a construct. The subject makes use of the discourse that they have inherited and in which performativity is a constant reiteration of certain behaviours, which have already been established. In Butler's theory there is no place for a pre-discursive sphere, everything is a construct and functions within discourse; there is no pre-discursive sphere, understood in an essentialist way<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> E. Majewska, *Feminizm jako filozofia społeczna: szkice z teorii rodziny*, Warszawa 2009, p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, op. cit., p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> "Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications*

Furthermore, the norms of family relations are not derived from natural, biological conditions. Butler refers here to Foucault's category of discourse as a normative regulative force producing subjects. Performative acts bring norms into view and perpetuate them, organizing and regulating social life, enshrining them in the bodies of subjects. Butler moreover finds important Foucault's thesis that the subject is under the dominion of power discourse and subjected to a series of exclusions.

Butler notes that

Foucault points out that juridical systems of power *produce* the subjects they subsequently come to represent. Juridical notions of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms—that is, through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, control, and even 'protection' of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operation of choice. But the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures<sup>18</sup>.

The authority creates a discourse in which the subjects' action is possible, also in a negative way (the authority oppresses the individual and does not offer a choice of free action or does not create a possibility of action at all), which in Foucault's terms is the mechanism of subjugation of the subject<sup>19</sup>. The subject is, on the one hand, a product of authority, and on the other, a necessary condition for the occurrence of authority. Butler explains this aspect of Foucault's thought in more detail: "Subjection is, literally, the *making* of a subject, the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced. Such subjection is a kind of power that not only unilaterally acts on a given individual as a form of

manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse [...]" (J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, London 2007, p. 185).

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 2-3.

<sup>19</sup> "This 'subjection' or *assujettissement* is not only a subordination but a securing and maintaining, a putting into place of a subject, a subjectivation" (J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*, Stanford 1997, p. 90-91).

domination, but also *activates* or forms the subject<sup>20</sup>. The manufactured subject is simultaneously regulated or subjugated, and the forced repetition is a form of regulation, a repetition that embodies the normative ideal.

Through her actions, Antigone makes a claim to transform the cultural norm of the family model, challenging its heteronormative structure. Judith Butler shows how she becomes entangled in family relationships while remaining outside of these norms; she transgresses heterosexual norms and the limitations of family relationships. Antigone does not achieve a sexuality other than the heteronormative one, yet she rejects it. She rejects the role of mother and wife, revealing her ambiguous gender. The actions of Sophocles' heroine reveal the mutability of social forms of family relationships<sup>21</sup>. In her analysis of Butler's discussion of Antigone, Ewa Majewska observes: "From the perspective of considerations about the family, of essence here is the disruption of traditional distributions and the establishment of new ties that may be considered contrary to those accepted as the norm"<sup>22</sup>; once a norm has been culturally created and established, it can be shaped anew. Change is possible only within the cultural context in which the individual finds himself; the individual invariably remains entangled in a system of meanings imposed by the normative-regulatory practice. However, change in the process of forced repetition becomes the effect of resistance, and therefore destabilisation, aberration, ceasing to be a simple repetition, and therefore a reproduction and reinforcement of domination. Antigone in Butler's interpretation is to be such a character (subject) through resistance initiating change. The subject's capacity for action must therefore be sought in variation, repetition. Butler claims:

If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility, i.e., new possibilities for gender that contest the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms, then it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible. [...] The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 84.

<sup>21</sup> See E. Majewska, *Feminizm jako filozofia społeczna*, op. cit., p. 213.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 214.

<sup>23</sup> J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, op. cit., p. 198–199.

## FAMILY AS KINSHIP

Butler deconstructs the traditional family model based on the primacy of the heterosexual matrix of family and sexuality in the language of feminist theories, and instead proposes an ontology of kinship in which human desire is not governed by the imperative of heterosexuality. As Ewa Majewska shows in her analysis of Butler's ideas, the concept of kinship makes it possible to see and recognize non-traditional forms of the family, to oppose the perpetuation of certain cultural norms, and to open the possibility of their transformation.

Butler's concept appears from this perspective as the most open to social change, already described by sociologists in their studies of new forms of family. Therefore, it opens up opportunities for the emancipation of those family forms that are marginalized in society, that is, all non-traditional kinship patterns<sup>24</sup>.

According to Butler's assumption of performativity, the family is a set of specific practices that also complement Antigone's actions it is a set of relations renewed over time as a result of being repeated: "Kinship is what she repeats through her action; to redeploy a formulation from David Schneider, it is not a form of being but a form of doing"<sup>25</sup>. Antigone's action as an aberrant repetition of a norm, a custom, a convention in the cultural sphere leads to change and to the undermining of the existing order. Butler emphasizes that this change begins with a claim, a demand that Antigone makes that is both action and speech, establishing aberration at the heart of the norm. Butler asks:

my question is whether it can also become the basis for a socially survivable aberration of kinship in which the norms that govern legitimate and illegitimate modes of kin association might be more radically redrawn. [...] What happens when the perverse or the impossible emerges in the language of the law and makes its claim precisely there in the sphere of legitimate kinship that depends on its exclusion or pathologization?<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> E. Majewska, *Feminizm jako filozofia społeczna*, op. cit., p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> J. Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, op. cit., p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67, 68.

In the context of the performative act theory, the modification of norms occurs in the course of their aberrant repetition, so that the engine of change is the conscious distortion of norms and the very possibility of their being conceived differently. Butler takes a feminist perspective on the radical reformulation of family relations that provides a basis for the possible extension of the legitimacy of various forms of family ties, without reducing kinship relationships to a normative model of the family. Family relationships constitute a variable system responsible for the organization of the reproduction of material life, for the ritualisation of birth and death. These relationships guarantee the existence of intimate ties and regulate sexuality through specific sanctions and prohibitions. Butler's aspiration, in line with emancipatory currents of feminism, is to legitimize extra-normative families.

In her *Antigone's Claim*, Butler mentions examples of remodelling the family structure, such as the struggle to legitimize the African American model of family relations described by Carol Stack in *All Our Kin*. In this family arrangement, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and friends work together to raise children and ensure the reproduction of material living conditions. Other radical family or kinship relationships are described by Kath Weston in *Families We Choose*, where blood ties are contrasted with relationships based on voluntary decision. Kinship relationships that transcend the normative family model also include voluntary single parenting, gay or lesbian parenting, and parenting arrangements involving more than two adults. Thus, Butler argues, the symbolic place of the mother may be occupied by several people or people of different genders, for it is not identifiable with a particular person. Butler asks:

Do we say that families that do not approximate the norm but mirror the norm in some apparently derivative way are poor copies, or do we accept that the ideality of the norm is undone precisely through the complexity of its instantiation?<sup>27</sup>.

The families that approximate the norm are a model with a maximum differentiation of roles and which according to Butler should be

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 78–79.

accepted and promoted. For this to happen, it must first be expressed and thought, it must coexist with cultural intelligibility. The method of introducing this cultural intelligibility is precisely the repetition of scandal and aberration, thanks to which what cannot be expressed nevertheless comes to the fore.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Butler J., *Antigone's Claim*, Columbia University Press, New York 2000.
- Butler J., *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, London 2007.
- Butler J., *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1997.
- Hańderek J., "Wokół wykluczenia", [in:] *Wykluczenia*, ed. J. Hańderek, N. Kućma, Ośrodek Badawczy Facta Ficta, Kraków 2017.
- Jabłoński D., Ostasz L., *Zarys wiedzy o rodzinie, małżeństwie, kohabitacji i konkubinacie. Perspektywa antropologii kulturowej i ogólnej*, Anaphora, Olsztyn 2001.
- Majewska E., *Feminizm jako filozofia społeczna: szkice z teorii rodziny*, Difin, Warszawa 2009.
- Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1994.