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‘THE ANTIGONE AND ITS MORAL’: GEORGE ELIOT’S ANTIGONEAN CONSIDERATIONS

By Kathryn Brigger Kruger

As early as 1856 with the publication of the essay, ‘The Antigone and Its Moral’,¹ George Eliot turned her literary attention to the Sophoclean figure of Antigone. Scholars such as Gerhard Joseph² and David Moldstad³ have enumerated Eliot’s multiple references to Antigone, and they have argued that Eliot makes Antigone a relevant figure for “‘modern” life’ (Joseph, 27) and an example of ‘the continuity of man’s elemental self, concerned in all ages with similar needs and problems, though moral codes have come and gone’ (Moldstad, 531). Where Joseph traces the specific Antigone references in Eliot’s fiction – especially in *Middlemarch* (1871–1872),⁴ *Romola* (1863),⁵ and *Daniel Deronda* (1876),⁶ Moldstad argues that *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)⁷ is Eliot’s Victorian reenactment of the *Antigone* conflict. This essay furthers Joseph’s and Moldstad’s arguments by suggesting that Eliot’s novels challenge the patriarchal assumptions of the *Antigone* tragedy endorsed by Hegel and upheld within Eliot’s mid-Victorian milieu. Judith Butler’s feminist reading of the *Antigone* as she outlines it in *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (2000)⁸ similarly disputes such paternalistic *Antigonean* conclusions. Where Hegel famously cites the figure of Antigone as the archetypal representative of the familial sphere (with Creon operating as the exemplum of the political),⁹ Butler argues instead that Antigone is anything but a paragon of normative familiarity ‘steeped as she is in incestuous legacies that confound her position within kinship’ (2). Butler situates Antigone not at the threshold between family and politics but rather as a catachretic emblem of the inherent elision between the two. Butler’s claim, as I shall argue, parallels Eliot’s emphasis on a ‘new Antigone’ (*Middlemarch*, p. 838); indeed, Eliot’s reconfigured Antigone is a heroine who challenges and confounds the conventional assumptions of kinship and gender iterated within the Hegelian philosophical system. Rather than perpetuating the traditional division between the sexes where the man operates in the political sphere and the woman functions primarily in the domestic, Eliot’s *Antigonean* characters serve as examples of the constitutive relationality between the political and the familial and between the genders. Eliot thereby projects her ‘new Antigone’ into the future as a precursor to Butler’s ‘aberrant, unprecedented’ (82) Antigone figure. What follows is a three-part essay that examines (1) Hegel’s reading of *Antigone*; (2) Eliot’s divergence from Hegel’s gendered and binary interpretation of Sophocles’ tragedy; and finally (3) Eliot’s insistence on the expansive nature of kinship and appeals against a Hegelian paternalistic determinism not unlike Butler’s *Antigonean* arguments.

I. Hegel’s *Antigone*

Hegel appreciated the *Antigone* tragedy for its ability to narrate in classical form his systematic philosophy: ‘Of all the masterpieces of the classical and modern world – and I [Hegel] know nearly all of them, the *Antigone* seems to me to be the most magnificent and satisfying work of art of this kind’ (2:1218). For Hegel, Antigone’s burial of her brother is at once an act of civil disobedience and a display of sisterly fidelity; similarly, Creon’s condemnation of Antigone is at once an act of civil defence and a display of familial castigation. Both figures have equal and yet opposite moral and ethical responsibilities – Antigone’s to the individual sphere of the family and Creon’s to the collective sphere of the *polis*. Antigone represents one side of a moral

totality – the feminine and the familial; meanwhile Creon represents the opposing side of the Hegelian dialectic – the masculine and the secular. In Hegel’s system, it is only through the collision and necessary conflict between the two extreme positions that such polarities reconcile themselves unto each other in their process toward Absolute Spirit or *Geist*. Hegel’s lectures on the *Aesthetics* read:

The true development of the action consists solely in the cancellation of conflicts as *conflicts*, in the reconciliation of the powers animating action which struggled to destroy one another in their mutual conflict. Only in that case does finality lie not in misfortune and suffering but in the satisfaction of the spirit, because only with such a conclusion can the necessity of what happens to the individuals appear as absolute rationality. (1215)

Thus, Hegel’s reading of the *Antigone* tragedy is a teleological and processional one insofar as the ‘satisfaction of the spirit’ is achieved through the cancellation of an inherent and mutual conflict between two polarities – a conflict that is at once tragic yet necessary.

Hegel’s *Antigonean* interpretation is inherently paternalistic in its defense of Antigone’s fatal outcome. Creon – Hegel’s paradigmatic example of masculinity, historical relevance, secularity, and the political sphere – is allowed to survive in the ‘satisfaction of the spirit’, whereas Antigone – Hegel’s exemplar of femininity, familial obscurity, religiosity, and domesticity – becomes rationally dispensable and necessarily eradicated in the fulfilment of Hegelian *Geist*. Hegel writes in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

[Creon and Antigone] are the same blood, which, however, in them has entered into a condition of stable equilibrium. They therefore stand in no such relation as husband and wife, they do not desire one another; nor have they given to one another, nor received from one another, this independence of individual being; they are free individualities with respect to each other. The feminine element, therefore, in the form of the sister, premonizes and foreshadows most completely the nature of ethical life.¹⁰

Hegel thereby situates Antigone as one who ‘premonizes and foreshadows’ the ethical dimension; she resides at the threshold between the familial and the secular but does not break through the barrier between the feminine and the masculine or the domestic and the secular. Hegel conceives of an Antigone whose primary function is that of a dutiful sister. She does not operate as a wife or as a mother – female roles contingent on sexual identities; instead, Hegel applauds Sophocles for suspending any connotation of Antigone’s sexual identity in the margins of the text or in the brief (and ultimately unfulfilled) references to her affianced status to Haemon. In this way, Antigone’s vestal virginity is preserved and her sisterly status is uninterrupted by the threat of conjugality. Hegel’s Antigone is devoid of overt sexuality and/or the threat of maternity and is thereby precisely apposite to Hegel’s dialectic considerations. Because of her insularity in the private sphere and her lack of sexual impulses, Hegel positions Antigone as the paradigmatic desexualized heroine – a woman who operates as a self-sacrificing martyr for her family even to the degree where she sacrifices her own claims to maternity for the sake of her perpetual sister status; she is neither swayed nor tainted by sexual, political, or public desire. Cecilia Sjöholm argues that Hegel portrays Antigone as a ‘higher form of purity. Rather than being detached from the ethical order as a chaotic and threatening force, Antigone is elevated above it’.¹¹ Thus, Hegel’s Antigone forever resides in the familial sphere of kinship and sisterhood, denied access both to sexual experience and to the political

realm. Hegel's Antigone functions merely as a precursor to ethical, secular, and political life rather than a full participant; this is in large part owing to the fact that Antigone is denied any possibility of an identity beyond the sisterly role: maternal, matriarchal, or otherwise.

II. Eliot's 'New Antigone'

Eliot, like Hegel, also identifies Sophocles' *Antigone* as 'one of the finest tragedies of the single dramatic poet', and she further writes in her essay, 'The Antigone and Its Moral', that, 'Sophocles is the crown and flower of the classic tragedy'. Eliot enunciates her familiarity with the Hegelian reading of *Antigone* when she writes, 'The turning point of the tragedy is not [...] "reverence for the dead and the importance of the sacred rites of burial"', but the *conflict* between these and obedience to the State. Here lies the dramatic collision: the impulse of sisterly piety which allies itself with reverence for the Gods, clashes with the duties of citizenship; two principles, both having their validity, are at war with each' (emphasis original). By employing words and phrases such as 'conflict', 'collision', 'sisterly piety', 'clashes', and 'war', Eliot's vocabulary is resoundingly Hegelian. Unlike Hegel, however, Eliot does not emphasize the cataclysmic conflicts of human life but rather makes a weighty appeal toward moderation, reverence, and mutually beneficial relationality. Eliot refutes the polemicism of a Hegelian system at the conclusion of 'The Antigone and Its Moral': 'Perhaps the best moral we can draw is that to which the Chorus points – that our protest for the right should be seasoned with moderation and reverence'. Eliot here turns neither to the character of Creon nor to the figure of Antigone for the moral of the tragedy but rather to the harmonious invocation from the Chorus – a multiplicity of voices directed in a shared delivery – which points toward 'moderation and reverence'. Eliot offers a more nuanced interpretation of the *Antigone* play than Hegel's binarism can provide: 'It is a very superficial criticism,' Eliot writes, 'which interprets the character of Creon as that of a hypocritical tyrant, and regards Antigone as a blameless victim. Coarse contrasts like this are not the materials handled by great dramatists'. Eliot's moral of the *Antigone* challenges a Hegelian interpretation that would render the figure of Antigone as a necessarily dispensable agent operating on one side of the dialectical and paternalistic process toward Absolute Spirit; Eliot's appeals to 'moderation' and 'reverence' illustrate her insistence that a moderate approach – a nuanced one that considers the individuality of each situation and person – is not merely an alternative, secondary, or occasional pathway toward self-consciousness but rather is the *only* ethical route toward human spiritual progress in a teleological worldview. Eliot thereby does not endorse the absolutism of a one-sided victory in a binary conflict, but rather she allows for the possibility that both, or better, multiple sides are right, viable, and defensible in the face of critical opposition.

Moldstad has already enumerated the similarities between Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and Sophocles' *Antigone* tragedy; it is my further contention that Eliot's 1860 novel offers a counter-Hegelian reading of the *Antigone* play in Eliot's insistence on the unifying principles of relationality, moderation, and reverence for opposing worldviews. As has already been cited in Eliot scholarship, Eliot employs metaphors of threads, fibres, and webs that are often interpreted as, above all else, connective – but they are also metaphors that comprehend tension and stress. In *The Mill on the Floss*, for example, Eliot's repeated emphasis on fibres and threads seeks to rectify the tension played out in the novel between Maggie and her Dodson relatives, between Maggie and her brother, between Maggie and the residents of St Ogg's, and

so on.¹² Eliot attempts to connect together seemingly disparate forces – brother and sister; past and present; childhood and maturity – and she does so not only via plot but also through the rhetorical deployment of words that conjure unity, restoration, and moderation. Eliot's narrator writes:

I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie – how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts. The suffering, whether of martyr or victim, which belongs to every historical advance of mankind, is represented in this way in every town, and by hundreds of obscure hearths; and we need not shrink from this comparison of small things with great; for does not science tell us that its highest striving is after the ascertainment of a unity which shall bind the smallest things with the greatest? (272-3)

As in her essay, 'The Antigone and Its Moral', Eliot here employs a Hegelian rhetoric in her emphasis on that which is 'necessary', the 'onward tendency of human things', and the 'historical advance of mankind'. And yet Eliot semantically refutes a Hegelian emphasis on collision, conflict, and reconciliatory negation with her rhetorical appeals to 'the strongest fibres' of connection and her insistence that the 'highest striving is after the ascertainment of a unity which shall bind the smallest things with the greatest'. Rather than emphasizing the patriarchal victors of the cataclysmic march of history as Hegel's systematic philosophy delineates, Eliot here offers an alternate moral of the *Antigonean* tragedy. In the above-quoted passage, Eliot emphasizes the sorrows of the ordinary personage, the struggles of the hundreds 'of obscure hearths', and she thereby makes the ordinary 'martyr or victim' worthy of novelistic attention not to illustrate the inevitable collisions that contribute to historical development per a Hegelian frame of reference but rather so as to forge a sympathy, a fellow-feeling, and an expansive definition of human kinship that connects the 'smallest things with the greatest'.

In a didactic moment, Eliot's narrator writes, 'The casuists have become a byword of reproach; but their perverted spirit of minute discrimination was the shadow of a truth to which eyes and hearts are too often fatally sealed – the truth, that moral judgments must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot' (497-8). Far from endorsing 'justice by a ready-made patent method' (498), Eliot suggests instead that morality lies in the exertion of 'patience, discrimination, impartiality' (498) in each individual circumstance rather than a comprehensive formula applied indiscriminately and uniformly. Eliot writes, 'The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it: the question whether the moment has come in which a man has fallen below the possibility of a renunciation that will carry any efficacy, and must accept the sway of passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master-key that will fit all cases' (497). Even when Mr Stelling misses the mark in educating Tom with the ready-made Eton Grammar curriculum, the narrator bemoans such a pedagogical predeterminism: 'I say nothing against Mr Stelling's theory: if we are to have one regimen for all minds, his seems to me as good as any other. I only know it turned out as uncomfortably for Tom Tulliver as if he had been plied

with cheese in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it' (138–9). Throughout *The Mill on the Floss*, conflict arises not because characters refuse to follow the rigid morality outlined by social code but rather *because* of the strict prescripts that fail to take into consideration the needs of the individual person and circumstance.

The Mill on the Floss consistently emphasizes and enacts the damaging effects of a one-sided deterministic worldview. Tom's unbending loyalty to his father's retributive inscription in the family Bible against the Wakem family serves as but one example of Tom's one-sided attitude toward justice, kinship, and familial honour. Meanwhile, Maggie senses at the outset that Mr Tulliver's last will and testament is an ironic act of sacrilege – it being a vendetta codified in a Christian Bible that dictates forgiveness and goodwill. Tom's adherence to his father's final wishes certainly illustrates his family fidelity, but alternately it also underscores his flawed moral reasoning, for where Tom maintains an intransigent hatred toward the Wakem family, he thereby disallows Maggie the fulfilment of a suitable marriage with Philip. His relationship with his sister is strained owing to his one-sided moral outlook despite his intention toward family accord. Eliot writes, 'All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the man of maxims; because such people early discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy' (498).

Meanwhile, Maggie's passionate disposition often causes her to doubt or waver over her original determination: 'But if Tom had told his strongest feeling at that moment, he would have said, "I'd do just the same again." That was his usual mode of viewing his past actions; whereas Maggie was always wishing she had done something different' (53). Where Tom adheres to an unbending and fixed moral casuistry, Maggie's moral ambivalence between familial fidelity, faithful friendship, cousinly integrity, or amorous fulfilment similarly contributes toward the novel's tragic conclusion. Maggie's expansive worldview that considers the feelings of others before her own happiness best enacts the narrator's warnings against the 'man of maxims', and yet her multiple allegiances to her brother Tom, to her cousin Lucy Deane, to her admirer Stephen Guest, and to her childhood friend (turned quasi-fiancé) Philip Wakem result in her own cancellation. In many ways, Maggie's paradigmatic moderatism itself leads to her fatal demise just as much as Tom's insistent one-sidedness leads to his. In this way, *The Mill on the Floss* carries forward the Hegelian interpretation of the *Antigone* tragedy in extremis. Unlike Sophocles' tragic ending in which Antigone dies and Creon is allowed to survive – an ending that Hegel applauds, Eliot's adaptation of the Antigone myth results not in a Hegelian frisson of spiritual satisfaction but rather in the protagonists' mutual extinction. The novel's dénouement which results in the double death of both Maggie and Tom thereby illustrates the negating if not nihilistic consequences of Hegel's hegemonic assumptions. As much as the novel is woven together through metaphors of connectivity and an emphasis on conciliatory reciprocity, the two protagonists do not embody constitutively such thematic insistences on unity and restoration and suffer instead their fatal premature conclusion. Maggie's moderating influence – as compelling as it is for readers and for her posthumous legacy within the novel itself (indeed, Stephen and Lucy, united at last, often visit her grave as does Philip) – can only be redemptive, Eliot suggests, if it is met with a reciprocating attitude of sympathetic moderatism that Tom cannot offer until the 'presence of a great calamity' forces him to confront the 'artificial vesture' of his grievances toward Maggie – a reciprocating

moment of understanding each other's 'primitive mortal needs' that occurs only in the wake of imminent tragedy (518).

Eliot's text further warns against the gendered assumptions perpetuated in a Hegelian worldview. Tom's discomfort with his sister is not so much her erratic behaviour but instead her inability or unwillingness to behave in a manner St Ogg's society has deemed befitting a girl and later a woman. At the novel's beginning, it is Tom who shows a 'maternal' proclivity toward infant children and dolls when he often tends to Mr Stelling's daughter Laura whom he once gifts a Dutch doll, whereas Maggie's maternal instincts are so weak that she forgets to tend to Tom's pet rabbits so that they die due to neglect, and her attention to her doll consists of a fetishistic insistence on the vicarious infliction of pain to those (Aunt Glegg primarily) who injure her childish pride. Just as Maggie holds her doll 'topsy-turvy, and crushed its nose against the wood of the chair' (24), Eliot too offers topsy-turvy gender attributions for her characters so that it is Tom who 'became more like a girl' (141) or Philip whose father 'brought [him] up like a girl' (421) while Maggie readily acquires the 'masculine wisdom' (287) of Tom's Eton Grammar education. Much of Tom's dislike for Maggie resides in the fact that she outshines him in those areas that are traditionally troped as 'masculine': schoolwork, moral conviction, freedom of speech, and action. At the scene of the novel's 'Final Rescue', it is the female Maggie who expertly rows to the Mill to rescue Tom (however much social custom previously disallowed Maggie and Lucy to row without male accompaniment), and it is only when Tom takes over the oars that the boat collides with the huge fragments of wooden machinery in the floodwater. Time and time again Maggie blurs (or indeed crosses) the line between traditional assumptions about 'femininity' and 'masculinity' and in these moments of gender elisions, Eliot undermines Hegel's paternalistic insistence that the Antigone figure is a paradigmatic representative of the 'feminine element' on the mere threshold of moral and ethical life.

Further, Maggie's brief forays into the world of sexual consciousness – a world from which Antigone is precluded save for her marginal affianced status – defy Hegel's emphasis on Antigone's perpetual sisterly status. Maggie's apparent willingness to drift into sexual love for Philip Wakem or Stephen Guest over sisterly devotion to her brother Tom distinguishes her from Hegel's Antigone – the paradigmatic, desexualized, and desire-less sister-heroine. And yet, what makes *The Mill on the Floss* a complicated case study is the fact that Maggie ultimately does not actualize her sexual impulses. Maggie's role as a sister is one that trumps every other relationship in her life not unlike Antigone herself, and her virginal/sisterly role is kept intact albeit somewhat depreciated after her dalliances with Philip in the Red Deeps and after her scandalous departure with Stephen. The novel's tragic conclusion, however, suggests that it is actually this very suppression of sexual desire, her enactment of the Hegelian 'sisterly piety', that leads to Maggie's untimely death: had Maggie only realized her sexual identity and allowed herself sexual awareness via conjugality she might have saved herself from the premature death that the novel portends. If Maggie had managed to defy the Hegelian dialectic instead of operating as a dispensable, one-sided, female agent of 'historical advance', she instead might have been spared her drowning death in the arms of her brother and might have been granted the opportunity toward self-consciousness, maturation, actualized female sexuality, and the possibility of a maternal legacy.

And yet, where Tom's paternal claims of futurity are forever silenced by his drowning, Eliot finds a way to allow for Maggie's matriarchal progeneration even unto her death through

the *deus ex machina* effect of a second Maggie in the novel's concluding chapters. Bob Jakin's unlikely infant daughter (indeed, Jakin earlier preferred the company of his dog over the prospect of a wife) bears Maggie's name as a tribute to her sympathetic spirit toward even the simple Jakin. Although Tom too benefits from Jakin's abundant generosity of spirit by way of lucrative trade arrangements and lifelong friendship, it is Maggie who receives the eponymous tribute of generational longevity from Jakin and his wife Prissy. While Eliot's novel serves as a cautionary tale against the polemical stance of the Hegelian dialectic and the gendered assumptions it presupposes, *The Mill on the Floss* further defies the Hegelian reading of the *Antigone* by providing a means for maternal survivability through Maggie the younger – a vindication of Maggie's moderating impulses however much her death ostensibly nullifies her self-sacrificing morality. This theme of maternal survivability is one that Eliot's *Romola* also maintains, as the next section of this essay addresses.

III. George Eliot and Judith Butler's *Antigone*

Eliot's *Antigonean* considerations adumbrate feminist critiques of the *Antigone* myth that similarly question the moral of a story where the female heroine has no recourse other than death or excommunication while the paternal is allowed to survive. Like Eliot's fiction, Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim* undermines the Hegelian binary and gendered interpretation of Sophocles' *Antigone* tragedy. Butler argues instead that Antigone and Creon represent the elision rather than the division between femininity and masculinity, between the family and the state. In her opposition to Hegel, Butler writes:

Although Hegel claims that [Antigone's] deed is opposed to Creon's, *the two acts mirror rather than oppose one another*, suggesting that if the one represents kinship and the other the state, they can perform this representation only by each becoming implicated in the idiom of the other. In speaking to him, she becomes manly; in being spoken to, he is unmanned, and so neither maintains their position within gender and the disturbance of kinship appears to destabilize gender throughout the play. (10, emphasis original)

Butler here insists on the fundamental relationality between kinship and the state, and she further identifies the spurious gender claims that a Hegelian reading presupposes. Butler's *Antigone* heroine is the very embodiment of equivocality where one gender easily slides into the other and where kinship easily pervades the political realm. Just as Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* often illustrates the catachresis of gender assumptions when Maggie assumes the 'masculine' roles her brother feels he ought to embody, Butler's reading of the *Antigone* play similarly befuddles the strict delineations of gender identity prevalent in Hegel's systematic philosophy.

Despite Hegel's insistence that Antigone serves as the paragon of familiarity, he fails to acknowledge Antigone's aberrant genealogy that makes her anything but the perfect representative of heteronormative kinship. Butler's text emphasizes the dysfunction of Antigone's incestuous familial inheritance: '[Antigone] hardly represents the normative principles of kinship, steeped as she is in incestuous legacies that confound her position within kinship' (2). Indeed, Antigone's father is also her brother, since Jocasta is mother to them both; her brothers are her nephews, since they are her brother-father Oedipus's sons. Butler writes:

To the extent that the incest taboo contains its infraction within itself, it does not simply prohibit incest but rather sustains and cultivates incest as a necessary specter of

social dissolution, a specter without which social bonds cannot emerge. Thus the prohibition against incest in the play *Antigone* requires a rethinking of prohibition itself, not merely as a negative or privative operation of power but as one that works precisely through proliferating through displacement the very crime that it bars. The taboo, and its threatening figuration of incest, delineates lines of kinship that harbor incest as their ownmost possibility, establishing 'aberration' at the heart of the norm. (66–7)

The Mill on the Floss's concluding scene of a perpetual sibling embrace is also suggestive of incestuous brother-sister liaisons, and such an incest taboo further heightens the novel's *Antigonean* connections. By intimating an incestuous relationship between Maggie and Tom, Eliot like Butler, questions normative definitions of kinship that Hegel assumes in his *Antigonean* framework. By concluding her novel with the realization of a quasi-incestuous relationship, Eliot proposes a figuration of incest not unlike the taboo that Butler theorizes. Read in this way, it is no coincidence that Eliot likens Mr Tulliver explicitly to Antigone's incestuous father, Oedipus (130). Although Maggie ultimately is condemned to death for her infatuation with her brother, Maggie's sisterly devotion to Tom is forever sealed in their final incestuous embrace. Eliot thereby projects into futurity a lasting image of brotherly-sisterly incest – a social taboo that overrides every other relationship in the novel and that prefigures a Butlerian version of a 'socially survivable aberration of kinship' (Butler, 67).

Throughout her fiction Eliot challenges the patriarchal socionormatives that dictate human relationality, sexuality, and familiarity. Unlike Butler's radical disavowal of gender delineations in the political and the familial spheres, Eliot's fiction belies her ambivalence between familial obedience and familial dispersions. Eliot mourns the tenuousness of the family in Victorian modernity, and she grapples with a pastoral Wordsworthian ideal of siblinghood that never materializes. And yet, she also provides a literary framework that implicitly endorses an expansive approach to kinship in all of its aberrant, unprecedented, or non-sanguineous forms. Aunt Glegg clings to her belief in the Dodson family's preeminence ('There were some Dodsons less like the family than others – that was admitted; but in so far as they were "kin," they were of necessity better than those who were "no kin"' [44]), whereas the Guest family displays the same condescension toward the Gleggs, Pullets, and Deanes – the maternal inheritors of the Dodson family lineage. Meanwhile, the humbler characters in the novel display a beneficence 'for any number of collateral relations' (156) as the narrator describes Mrs Moss's genial outlook and Bob Jakin's altruistic generosity even given his penchant toward dogs over people ('Hev a dog, Miss!—they're better friends nor any Christian' [283]). Maggie is more than once identified by her 'kinship with the grand Scotch firs' (299), and she revels in a kinship with her past self when her memory allows her to play the piano easily after a long absence of practice: 'It was pleasant [...] to sit down at the piano alone, and find that the old fitness between her fingers and the keys remained, and revived, like a sympathetic kinship not to be worn out by separation' (401). Maggie's appreciation for Dr Kenn the local cleric is rooted in her wide 'sense of human brotherhood' (435), and he confides too that Maggie's ideals match those of the Church which 'ought to represent the feeling of the community, so that every parish should be a family knit together by Christian brotherhood under a spiritual father' (495), however much these tenets fall flat in human practice. Indeed, throughout the novel, Eliot emphasizes the varying degrees of kinship – the word specifically invoked by Butler in her *Antigonean* interpretations – so as to interrogate and widen traditional boundaries of kin and relationality. Although Maggie seeks to strengthen the ties of duty,

obligation, and family, her enlarged view of kinship is precisely that which resonates in a Butlerian worldview. A unity between the 'smallest things with the greatest' (273) is that which Maggie seeks, and her kinship with nature and music (not to mention Kenns' teachings on Christian kinship and Jakin's model of kinship with animals) stands in stark contrast to the narrowly delineated notions of familial kinship endorsed by the Dodson family matriarchs however surprising and redemptive Aunt Glegg's loyalty to Maggie becomes after Maggie's scandalous departure and return to St Ogg's. Whether it is 'aberrant' as Butler dubs it or 'expansive' as I call it, Eliot widens the scope of conventional attitudes toward human relationality and asserts instead models of self-abnegating kinship as enacted by Eliot's 'new Antigone' heroines.

Vestiges of the *Antigone* myth appear in nearly all of Eliot's novels (as Moldstad and Joseph have already established), but it is in *Romola* where the intertextual allusions to *Antigone* appear most explicitly and where Eliot parallels Butler's *Antigonean* claims most succinctly. Piero di Cosimo, the novel's historical painter, imagines a painting of Romola and her father, the blind Bardo di Bardi, as Florentine versions of Antigone and Oedipus – an apropos comparison given the shared blindness between Oedipus and Romola's father. The incestuous subtext that the Antigone-Oedipus allusion conjures is also apposite given Romola's multiple roles of daughter and surrogate wife to her father after her mother's death and her sisterly-wifely role to her brother, Dino. Romola also attempts to fill the role of the scholarly apprentice son: 'I will try to be as useful to you as if I had been a boy, and then perhaps some great scholar will want to marry me, and will not mind about a dowry; and he will like to come and live with you, and he will be to you in place of my brother [...] and you will not be sorry that I was a daughter' (56). In this one sentence Eliot conflates and confounds gender normatives and familial roles just as Butler later suggests Antigone most fully enacts. Romola conditionally wills herself to behave 'as if [she] had been a boy' while simultaneously imagining herself a suitable female fiancée in a hypothetical heterosexual marriage. The husband Romola envisions for herself will 'like to come and live' not with Romola but rather with her father 'in place of [her] brother'. In this instance and throughout the novel, the delineated roles of kinship are complicated by the multiple identities the various characters assume and project. Romola hopes for a husband who will function primarily as a brother, as a son, and as a restorative agent of Romola's daughterly status rather than as a companionate heterosexual marital partner.¹³ In her re-creation via marriage of the father-son-daughter triangular relationship that dominated Romola's childhood, Romola illustrates a Butlerian version of kinship – a kinship that is unorthodox in its absence of a maternal figure, in the quasi-incestuous daughterly-wifely-sisterly roles that Romola assumes and in the suggestion of a marital alliance based on companionship for her father rather than a heterosexual alliance for herself.

Romola's moral equilibrium is always threatened by the polarizing male figures that inhabit her life, and the novel emphasizes Romola's ambivalence between obedience to the laws of paternity and the corresponding impulse toward patriarchal rebellion. Throughout the novel Romola often is forced to decide between two antithetical positions. She wavers between daughterly obedience to her father and sisterly loyalty to her brother. She is forced to negotiate between her godfather Bernardo del Nero's warnings against Tito Melema and Tito's subsequent marriage proposal. She wavers between allegiance to her father's intellectual humanism and acceptance of Savonarola's Christian piety. She must choose between

supporting Baldassare Calvo's justifiable revenge on his son, Tito, or remaining faithful to her husband despite his dishonorable conduct. She even contemplates the alternatives between living in Florence and fleeing her home in favour of an anonymous life or, worse, suicide. Romola, therefore, vacillates between submission to the male figures in her life and rebellion against the patriarchal domination prevalent in her fifteenth-century Florentine reality.

Romola, unlike the ideologically driven men in her life, operates according to a theory of moderatism not unlike Maggie Tulliver, and it is owing to her temperate worldview that she is allowed to survive. Indeed, by novel's end, Romola inhabits a world entirely devoid of men (save for Lillo, Tito's boy child whom he fathered with Tessa). Unlike the conclusion of Sophocles' *Antigone* in which the matriarchal Antigone dies and the paternal Creon lives – an outcome exalted in the Hegelian dialectic, Eliot's Lady Antigone/Romola is allowed to survive owing in large part to her moderate ideological outlook that favours duty to her fellow Florentines and to her undeserving husband Tito, even after his death. Romola's vacillation comes to an end only after all the male characters are removed from her situation thereby allowing her the female autonomy that she was denied under the polarizing worldviews of her father, brother, godfather, husband, father-in-law, and priest alike. Eliot's narrator writes, 'All that ardour of her nature which could no longer spend itself in the woman's tenderness for father and husband, had transformed itself into an enthusiasm of sympathy with the general life' (388). Void of the paternal claims to Romola's sympathies and allegiances, she is free to exercise her influence as the head of an untraditional household, a household that she inherits owing to her dutiful sense of obligation to her deceased husband and his small children and second wife. In this way, Romola operates as a decided contrast to Hegel's Antigone who resides only at the threshold between the familial and the civil. By novel's end Romola devotes herself as a servant to the poor so that she becomes an emblematic figure throughout her native Florence, and her patroness responsibilities allow her full access to the political world of ethical relationality – a world closed off to women in a Hegelian philosophical framework. Eliot challenges the heteronormative strictures of kinship when she concludes her novel with Tito's two wives, Tessa and Romola, living side by side in the confounded roles of sisterly-wifely-motherly relationality as they care for Tito and Tessa's two infant children, Ninno and Lillo. In her recasting of the *Antigone* tragedy, Eliot allows the maternal to survive even while the claims to paternity are cast aside. In fact, we might even argue that Eliot's matriarchal conclusion to *Romola* offers an *over*-corrective response to Hegel's *Antigonean* interpretations in her emphasis on matriarchal survivability and patriarchal demise. The novel's bigamous, incestuous, and homosocial subtexts compounded by the matriarchal conclusion and corresponding paternal dissolution parallel the Butlerian definition of aberrant kinship that Eliot's Romola/Antigone figure enacts.

Always beneath the surface in Eliot's fiction is a subtle renegotiation of socially acceptable modes of human relationality: quasi-incestuous plotlines, bigamous intrigues, cross-generational marriages, inter-familial relationships, and homosocial dénouements challenge the heteronormative assumptions of Eliot's Victorian era and foresee questions of kinship as they arise in modernity. Just as her own unmarried conjugality with George Henry Lewes however unwillingly defied the social parameters of her time (and resulted in a strained relationship with her brother), Eliot's heroines also push against the conventions of the patriarchal system and the heteronormative constructs of marriage, the nuclear family, and the gendered roles ascribed to women. Eliot's fiction presciently speaks to the inimitability of

kinship and its ‘fragile, porous, and expansive’ (Butler, 22) nature by engaging those aspects of human relationality that confound delineated compartmentalization and definition. Eliot’s fiction refutes the Hegelian notion that the family and the state are distinctly separate and conflicting entities; rather, Eliot’s worldview parallels more closely a Butlerian assertion that kinship and the state are, in fact, ‘implicated in the idiom of the other’ (10). Further, Eliot refuses to reduce human relationships to a system of binaries, conflicts, and necessary collisions of the Hegelian variety. Thus, Eliot’s *Antigone* is one for whom symbolic and social designations have become incoherent, confounding as *Antigone* does the boundaries between daughter, wife, mother, sister, brother, husband, father, and citizen. Eliot projects her ‘new *Antigone*’ heroine – a heroine who embodies the moderating position between the familial and the political – into the unforeseen future so that both author and subject stand as models of female autonomy and unforeseen kinship.

Notes

- George Eliot, ‘The *Antigone* and Its Moral’, *Leader*, 7, no. 314 (29 March 1856), p. 306 (Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition, online [<http://ncse-viewpoint.cch.kcl.ac.uk/>], accessed 28 March 2013). All further references to this work will appear in the text.
- 2 Gerhard Joseph, ‘The *Antigone* as Cultural Touchstone: Matthew Arnold, Hegel, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Margaret Drabble’, *PMLA*, 96, no. 1 (1981), pp. 22–35. All further references to this work will appear in the text.
- 3 David Moldstad, ‘*The Mill on the Floss* and *Antigone*’, *PMLA*, 85, no. 3 (1970), pp. 527–31. All further references to this work will appear in the text.
- 4 George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* [1871–2] (London: Penguin, 1994). All further references to this work will appear in the text.
- 5 George Eliot, *Romola* [1863] (New York: Random House, 2003). All further references to this work will appear in the text.
- 6 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* [1876] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 7 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* [1860] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). All further references to this work will appear in the text.
- 8 Judith Butler, *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). All further references to this work will appear in the text.
- 9 Georg Wilhelm Friederich Hegel, *Hegel’s Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), II, pp. 1214–25. All further references to this work will appear in the text.
- 10 Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807], trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 475–6.
- 11 Cecilia Sjöholm, *The Antigone Complex: Ethics and the Invention of Feminine Desire*

(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 46.

- 12 Eliot's narrator writes in *The Mill on the Floss*, 'There were tender *fibres* in the lad' (p. 39); '*fibre* that turns to true manliness' (p. 143); and 'Philip's letter had stirred all the *fibres* that bound her to the calmer past' (p. 515); 'Everything she learned there seemed like the ends of long *threads* that snapped immediately' (p. 286); 'The tissue of vague dreams must now get narrower and narrower, and all the *threads* of thought and emotion be gradually absorbed in the woof of her actual daily life' (p. 337); etc. [emphases added].
- 13 See Anthony F. D'Elia's *The Renaissance of Marriage in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), for more information on Florentine approaches to marriage.