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The Pleasures of Unpleasure: Jacques Lacan and the Atheism Beyond the “Death of God”

During a discussion of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) in *Seminar XI*, Jacques Lacan pauses to observe that “the true formula of atheism is not *God is dead* [...] the true formula of atheism is *God is unconscious*.”¹ Characteristically, Lacan resumes his analysis without any further clarification, leaving it to commentators to fathom the significance of this statement. Oliver Harris, for example, argues in *Lacan’s Return to Antiquity* (2016) that Lacan is referring to the scientific reduction of the divine to a reality-producing machine, “passing no judgements, making no commands” yet silently “holding everything together, underwriting the coherence of the world.”² Harris’s reading makes sense in light of the discussion of the Cogito in *Seminar XI*, in which Lacan observes that “Descartes inaugurates the initial bases of a science in which God has nothing to do.”³ Christopher Watkin offers a different explanation in *Difficult Atheism* (2011), observing that Lacan is expressing the disparity between the atheist’s belief in freedom from divine mastery and the continuing effects of unconscious prohibitions.⁴ Rather than “God is unconscious,” however, Watkin is describing the enduring effects of a father/god whose authority is reinforced (rather than abolished) by death. Lacan regards this “God is dead” form of atheism as unviable because “the father’s murder” remains “the condition of *jouissance*,”⁵ a negation in which “the more you perceive yourself as an atheist, the more your

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¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A. Sheridan, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979, p. 59.

² Oliver Harris, *Lacan’s Return to Antiquity: Between Nature and the Gods*, London and New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 138.

³ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 226.

⁴ Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux*, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Press, 2011, p. 93.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. R. Grigg, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007, p. 120.

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unconscious is dominated by prohibitions which sabotage your enjoyment.”⁶ The “death of God” fails because it spoils the freedom and enjoyment that the abolition of the paternal law was supposed to achieve.

The challenge, then, is to implement “the true formula of atheism,” to articulate an atheism that goes beyond the death of God.⁷ For Lacan, this process requires a new ethics of pleasure, which he formulates through a rereading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and by examining earlier modes of desire, from courtly love to Greek tragedy, to see what made those historical attempts to generate *jouissance* so successful. Alenka Zupančič notes, for instance, how the Greek gods are now read not as supernatural beings, but as symptoms of the real. Their role in the tragic drama is to create “a certain impasse of desire,” resulting in an “absolute antinomy between the signifying order and the realm of *jouissance*.”⁸ In contrast to the easy gratifications of the modern world, Lacan’s interpretation of tragedy shows how this divine frustration of human desire generates and intensifies *jouissance*. The Greek gods thus perpetuate the interplay between pleasure and unpleasure that underpins the possibility of enjoyment with a caprice that is unconscious rather than negative.

Pleasure and Unpleasure

In his critique of modern pleasure in *Seminar VII*, Lacan situates his work on the ethics of psychoanalysis as a response to a new emphasis on freedom in political and ethical philosophy during the eighteenth century. Lacan points, in particular, to the emergence of the “man of pleasure,” a subject of liberated desire who assumes pleasure can be explored and tasted without limits.⁹ The paradoxes produced by this “man of pleasure” distinguish this mode of human desire in all its modern peculiarity. The liberation of desire unexpectedly foregrounds the death drive, the beyond of the pleasure principle, a paradoxical longing for

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⁶ Slavoj Žižek, “God is Dead, but He Doesn’t Know It: Lacan plays with Bobok”, 4 April 2009, Lacan.com, accessed 23 February 2022.

⁷ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 59.

⁸ Alenka Zupančič, “Ethics and Tragedy in Lacan”, in ed. J.-M. Rabaté, *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 174.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. D. Porter, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1992, p. 3.

unpleasure and destruction that would have baffled the ancient world. “Would Plato have understood what psychoanalysis was about?” ponders Lacan. “No, he wouldn’t have understood it, despite appearances, because at this point there’s an abyss, a fault, and this is what we are in the process of looking for, with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.”¹⁰ This “fault” or “abyss” is not new to human desire, but the “man of pleasure” has made its existence conspicuous in the modern world.

The unfolding discovery of the “beyond” of the pleasure principle is traced by Lacan through the timeline of Freud’s intellectual development. In *Seminar II*, for instance, he talks about why Freud began, from 1920 on, to develop his metapsychological model, which “has been misread, interpreted in a crazy way by the first and second generations following Freud – those inept people.”¹¹ Freud’s new model, he contends, is a response to the decline of Freud’s therapeutic success during the second decade of the twentieth century. Unlike his initial success, when “subjects recovered more or less miraculously,” Freud finds the treatment of his patients increasingly difficult, leading to a “crisis of analytic technique.”¹² Lacan suggests that the “new notions” Freud develops arise not only as a response to this crisis, but also as a theoretical attempt “to maintain the principle of the decentering of the subject.”¹³ This gesture was widely misunderstood as a revival of the “*autonomous ego*”¹⁴ – Freud’s attempt to decenter the subject thus led to the opposite result, a *recentering* of the ego among many of his followers.

Lacan then makes the surprising claim that “Freudian metapsychology does not begin in 1920. It is there from the very start.”¹⁵ The decentering of the subject, the paradoxes of desire, the perverse pull of unpleasure, all of these elements are already in Freud’s earliest writings, from his letters to Wilhelm Fliess to the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Rather than following the conventional

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Techniques of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. J.-A. Miller and J. Forrester, trans. S. Tomaselli, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

idea that Freud's metapsychology dates from 1920, therefore, Lacan argues that we should instead see this stage as "what might be called the last metaphysical period" of Freud's thought.¹⁶ "For this period," contends Lacan, "*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is the primary text, the pivotal work. It is the most difficult."¹⁷ Lacan is reiterating a position described nearly twenty years before in "Beyond the 'Reality Principle'" (1936). Commenting on Freud's earliest outlines of his thought in *The Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), Lacan observes:

The first sign of a submission to reality in Freud's work was the recognition that, since the majority of psychical phenomena in man are apparently related to a social relations function, there is no reason to exclude the pathway which provides the most usual access to it: the subject's own account of these phenomena. [...] If we wish to recognize a reality that is proper to psychical reactions, we must not begin by choosing among them; we must begin by no longer choosing.¹⁸

According to Lacan's interpretation, the Freudian division between the pleasure and reality principles has been entirely misunderstood. The reality principle is not something external, but rather operates as part of the subject, working to diagnose what is unpleasurable and therefore, presumably, undesirable. "It is thus worth recalling that, from the outset, Freud did not attribute the slightest reality as a differentiated apparatus in the organism to any of the systems in either of his topographies," observes Lacan later in *Écrits*.¹⁹ The conclusion from Lacan's various remarks is that the reality principle has not only been misunderstood but also misnamed: it has nothing to do with external reality, and everything to do with what Dennis Porter pointedly translates with the neologism "unpleasure" (*déplaisir*).

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Lacan's commentary in *Seminar II* must therefore be reinterpreted in the context of Freud's early work, which dramatically reconfigures the relationship between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Understanding the reality principle as one of *unpleasure* helps to distinguish it from the narcissistic desires of the pleasure principle. Whereas the pleasure principle is what the ego wants,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. B. Fink, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, p. 65.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 545.

the reality principle is what the Other wants – or more accurately, what the ego *imagines* the Other wants. “[T]he reality, so to speak, of each human being is in the being of the other. In the end, there is a reciprocal alienation,” observes Lacan.²⁰ Even more surprising is that, far from the two principles being in opposition, Freud saw the pleasure and reality principles as aspects of each other. “It never occurred to him that there wasn’t a pleasure principle in the reality principle,” says Lacan. “For if you follow reality, it is only because the reality principle is a delayed-action pleasure principle. Conversely, if the pleasure principle exists, it is in conformity to some reality – this reality is psychic reality.”²¹ Lacan’s interpretation that the reality principle, by withholding or denying what the pleasure principle wants, is not trying to thwart desire but to prolong and intensify it, is a revolutionary rereading that nonetheless makes sense when applied to the practice of desire.

In the game “Odd or Even,” for instance, my opponent’s aim is to create unpleasure by denying me the satisfaction of winning the marbles. Yet it is precisely the opponent’s refusal that keeps the game interesting *for my own pleasure*: an opponent who too easily reveals their hand is an unsatisfying partner. My gratification is thus predicated on the infliction of unpleasure by the other, my partner in the game. The pleasure principle ceases to function once a level of satisfaction has been reached and, to this end, it needs the opposing principle of unpleasure:

The pleasure principle – the principle of pleasure – is that pleasure should cease. Within this perspective, what becomes of the reality principle? The reality principle is usually introduced with the simple remark that too much pleasure-seeking ends in all kinds of accidents – you get your fingers burnt, you get the clap, you get your face smashed in. That is how we have the genesis of what is called human learning described to us. And then we are told that the pleasure principle is opposed to the reality principle. In our perspective, that obviously acquires another meaning. The reality principle consists in making the game last, that is to say, in ensuring that pleasure is renewed, so that the fight doesn’t end for lack of combatants. The reality principle consists in husbanding our pleasures, these pleasures whose aim is precisely to end in cessation.²²

²⁰ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, p. 72.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 84.

In other words, the reality principle, by bringing unpleasure to the subject, prolongs the game of pleasure to revive and preserve the flame of passion. Unpleasure, the failure to get what we want, is thus, paradoxically, what we need to feel that the fulfillment of our desire has been enjoyable.

Pleasure, it turns out, is not satisfying in and of itself. Only when pleasure is accompanied by unpleasure, by an outcome that we do not desire, can passion truly be inflamed. For desire, “it is the wrong form which prevails,” says Lacan. “In so far as a task is not completed the subject returns to it. The more abject the failure, the better the subject remembers it.”²³ This rotating cycle of desire and unpleasure also explains why Freud emphasizes the importance of repetition in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, most famously in the *fort-da* game played by his grandson, Ernst. Ernst uses a cotton reel as a symbolic substitute for his absent mother, resulting in a repetitive game in which the boy imagines himself controlling her absence (*fort*) and presence (*da*). “The object is encountered and is structured along the path of a repetition – to find the object again, to repeat the object,” explains Lacan. “Except, it is never the same object which the subject encounters. In other words, he never ceases generating substitutive objects.”²⁴ A further dimension of the work of unpleasure is thus revealed: not only does it prolong the game of pleasure, but it also provides the subject with the sensation that the scenario of desire has been renewed, so that even when the same objects or players are involved, they nonetheless feel like a new iteration. For Lacan, this interplay of pleasure and unpleasure constitutes the central drama of the human psyche, a repetitive but infinitely variable game.

The Gods Belong to the Field of the Real

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Like the reality principle, Lacan’s theorization of the “real” must similarly be read as a function of the symbiosis of pleasure and unpleasure, rather than as a product of the opposition between reality and illusion, or truth and falsehood. As such, the real “in its dialectical effects” is felt as “originally unwelcome,” he states in *Seminar XI*.²⁵ The real can never be grasped directly, for its manifestations are only glimpsed through its effects on the imaginary and symbolic.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁵ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 69.

The real is beyond the automaton, the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs, by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle. The real is always that which lies behind the automaton, and it is quite obvious, throughout Freud's research, that it is this that is the object of his concern.²⁶

The reality principle, by contrast, describes the subject's way of *handling* the contingencies of the real, this "obstacle to the pleasure principle" which ensures "that things do not turn out all right straight away."²⁷ The conditions of modernity have made humanity increasingly fascinated with the real, with the effects of unpleasure – not because of a wish to experience unpleasure for its own sake, but from a surfeit of easy pleasures.

Lacan explores this condition through the problem of nihilism in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), in which Fyodor Dostoevsky explores how the abolition of God leads humanity not to universal freedom, but to the contrary emotion of feeling imprisoned by life. In an essay in *Écrits* reflecting on criminality and psychoanalysis, Lacan links Dostoevsky's final novel to Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and Nietzsche's announcement of the "death of God" in *The Gay Science* (1882), arguing that all three authors exhibit the increasingly common symptoms of modern humanity's unexpected loss of pleasure in the face of unrestrained freedom.

We can understand why Freud [...] wanted to demonstrate the origin of universal law in the primal crime in *Totem and Taboo* in 1912. Whatever criticism his method in that book might be open to, what was essential was his recognition that man began with law and crime[...] [...] The modern face of man was thus revealed and it contrasted strangely with the prophecies of late nineteenth-century thinkers[...] [...] To the concupiscence gleaming in old man Karamazov's eyes when he questioned his son – "God is dead, thus all is permitted" – modern man, the very one who dreams of the nihilistic suicide of Dostoevsky's hero or forces himself to blow up Nietzsche's inflatable superman, replies with all his ills and all his deeds: "God is dead, nothing is permitted anymore."²⁸

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²⁸ Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 106.

The fundamental oversight of the “man of pleasure” was the erroneous belief that abolishing all rules and limits could lead humanity to a state of unrestricted freedom and pleasure. What the repressive aspect of the law obscured was its other crucial role in the regulation of desire in the form of unpleasure, without which the enjoyment of pleasure becomes impossible. “[W]e analysts know full well that if God doesn’t exist, then nothing at all is permitted any longer,” reiterates Lacan in *Seminar II*, again alluding to *The Brothers Karamazov*. “Neurotics prove that to us every day.”²⁹ What is neurosis, after all, but a longing for unpleasure when pleasure has been emptied of all meaning, the result of an ego that always, tediously, gets what it wants, but never on the terms that it can actually enjoy?

In the godless universe shown in Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and Freud, the human being experiences a life of interminable, neurotic dissatisfaction, in which pleasure is constantly available but enjoyment is forever out of reach. In *Seminar XI*, however, Lacan utters another enigma when he says that the “*gods belong to the field of the real*,” a statement that is not connected in any way to the supernatural.³⁰ Instead, what Lacan is saying is that the divine, in its identification with the real (unpleasure), refers to a domain beyond the ego. The gods may have originally been born as human creations, as Feuerbach posits, but they have since gained an autonomy that makes them representatives of the forces of chaos and unpredictability, beyond the control of human existence. When Lacan is talking about the “gods” or “God,” therefore, he is not referring to “the good old God” of Christianity.³¹ These terms refer exclusively to the real, to the principle of unpleasure that curtails the ego in order to produce and regulate human desire.

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Lacan is fascinated by how this divine function of unpleasure is built into the ancient structures of myth and religion, regularly encouraging his audiences to learn the lessons of the past by returning to earlier discourses in the modern context of psychoanalysis. If religion was a symbolic system ultimately designed for the creation of *jouissance*, then the decline of religion and the advent of athe-

²⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, p. 128.

³⁰ Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, p. 45.

³¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink, New York and London, W.W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 68.

ism in the modern world have ushered in an age of greater access to pleasure, but also a diminished enjoyment of it, according to Lacan's diagnosis. As such, it is the task of psychoanalysis to rediscover enjoyment without a regression to illusion and superstition. That is why in *Seminar VIII*, for example, Lacan locates Freud's discovery of the unconscious in a new relationship to the "divine":

If the discovery of the unconscious is essential, it is because it has allowed us to extend the field of messages we can authenticate, in the only proper meaning of the term, insofar as it is grounded in the domain of the symbolic. In other words, many of the messages that we believe to be opaque messages from reality (*réel*) are merely our own. This is what we have reclaimed from the world of the gods.³²

This approach demystifies the gods, showing that modern humanity now recognizes that what it mistakenly thought were the supernatural messages of the divine were merely the profane echoes of the Other. Lacan nonetheless locates this Other outside the control of the ego, and thus capable, regardless of its lack of true divinity, of functioning as a regulator of desire. Indeed, for Lacan, cultivating this function of unpleasure is often the primary role of the competent psychoanalyst. An analyst may allow themselves initially to be imagined as a divine, omniscient entity, a "subject who is supposed to know" in Lacanian terminology, but this preliminary idealization is the predicate to the "unwelcome" experience of disillusionment that ultimately, unhappily, opens the way to a possible cure. The unpleasure that the analyst provides to the neurotic by introducing them to the experience of the real is precisely what allows the analysand to rediscover the interplay of desire, and with it their lost feeling of enjoyment. Another version of Lacan's rereading of the divine function can be found in *Seminar XX* in the session titled "God and Woman's jouissance," in which Lacan cheekily suggests that the love relationship between a man and a woman is really a *ménage à trois* with an imaginary "God." Lacan precedes his commentary with two important caveats that are easily overlooked in his controversial analysis of the love relation. Firstly, Lacan talks directly about his use of the term "God" as the Other, suggesting that he has elsewhere shown the impossibility of understanding this term in its conventional, theological sense.

³² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII: Transference*, ed. J.-A. Miller, trans. B. Fink, Cambridge UK and Malden MA, Polity, 2015, p. 122.

[P]eople [...] were surprised when they heard that I situated a certain Other between man and woman that certainly seemed like the good old God of time immemorial. They were, by God, [...] from the pure philosophical tradition, and among those who claim to be materialists[.] [...] Materialism believes that it is obliged, God only knows why [...] to be on its guard against this God who, as I said, dominated the whole debate regarding love in philosophy. [...] It seems clear to me that the Other [...] was a way, I can't say of laicizing, but of exorcising the good old God. After all, there are even people who complimented me for having been able to posit in one of my last seminars that God doesn't exist. Obviously, [...] they hear, but alas, they understand, and what they understand is a bit precipitous.³³

This passage is replete with irony, from Lacan's provocative interjections ("by God," "God only knows") to his closing lament that some of his listeners believe they have understood him, when in fact they have not. Having claimed to have effectively "exorcized" the traditional concept of God in *Écrits*, Lacan then tells his audience that "today, I am [...] going to show you in what sense the good old God exists."³⁴ Lacan is not merely being playful, for in approaching the topic of the divine in this oblique way, he strategically avoids the negation associated with the "death of God".

The second caveat is that the love relationship Lacan describes in *Seminar XX* is not based on the paradigm of the "man of pleasure," but derives instead from the medieval ideal of courtly love. Lacan invokes this tradition to highlight the extent to which modern life has diminished pleasure to an imperative of the superego. The proponents of courtly love may have possessed shortcomings in their sexual politics, but Lacan shows they had a far superior grasp on the production of *jouissance*. The ethos of courtly love is the opposite of the free-for-all of the "man of pleasure," constituting "a highly refined way of making up for (*suppléer à*) the absence of the sexual relationship, by feigning that we are the ones who erect an obstacle thereto."³⁵ The principle of unpleasure, while suppressing the sexual relationship, at the same time increases the sensation of *jouissance* for the two lovers through the crucial addition of "the notion of the obstacle."³⁶ This "obstacle" turns out, of course, to be the role imagined for

³³ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX*, p. 68.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

“God.” Returning to his earlier playful address to his “materialist” critics, Lacan ponders: “[W]hy should materialists, as they are called, be indignant about the fact that I situate – and why shouldn’t I – God as the third party in this business of human love? Even materialists know a bit about the *ménage à trois*, don’t they?”³⁷ The forgotten virtue of the adherents to courtly love (and in a later example by Lacan from the same session, of medieval mystics like St. Theresa) is that, in contrast to the modern “man of pleasure,” they instinctively understood that religion’s authority rested on the ability to generate pleasure, a *jouissance* that exists in proportion to the unpleasure of its rules and obstacles. The mindset of the courtly lover mirrors that of the neurotic insofar as they both long for unpleasure. The problem for the modern neurotic, however, is that with the death of God (unpleasure), pleasure has far greater difficulty renewing or sustaining itself. “[I]t’s no accident that Kierkegaard discovered existence in a seducer’s little love affair,” reflects Lacan at the end of this session. “It’s by castrating himself, by giving up love, that he thinks he will accede to it.”³⁸ This self-defeating and unwholesome solution to the problem of desire, the unexpected but logical outcome of the great expectations of the “man of pleasure,” reiterates Lacan’s point that ultimately “we are duped (*joués*) by *jouissance*.”³⁹

Tragedy, or Atheism Without The “Death of God”

The unpleasure that lies at the heart of tragedy makes it a natural object of interest for psychoanalysis, as the enduring fascination with a play like *Antigone* testifies. Yet tragedy is rooted in theological and mythical structures that sit uneasily with psychoanalysis’s claims to being a system of modern, rational thought. This apparent paradox is extended by the fact that Freud, despite being an avowed atheist, often chose to express his ideas through quasi-mythical examples, from the murder of the father in *Totem and Taboo* to his imaginative rewriting of ancient Jewish history in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Lacan addresses this issue on many occasions, such as in *Seminar XVII*, where he outlines the relationship between psychoanalysis and myth. In the eighth session of that seminar, for instance, titled “From myth to structure,” Lacan begins by commenting on an article by Marie-Claire Boons about the death of the father in

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

Freud's work. Boons argues that through this paternal death "in some way psychoanalysis frees us from the law," a vision of negative freedom that echoes the philosophy of the "man of pleasure" Lacan dealt with a decade earlier.⁴⁰

Whereas Boons claims that the death of the father – in other words, the abolition of the symbolic aspect of the law – is the first step toward liberation, Lacan argues that Freud shows the exact opposite to be the case: the death of the father (which is interchangeable with the death of God) is actually the *precondition* for the religious economy of divine *jouissance*.

The father's death, insofar as it echoes this statement with its Nietzschean gravity, this statement, this good news, that God is dead, does not seem to me of a kind to liberate us, far from it. [...] [R]eligion itself reposes on something that Freud quite astonishingly puts forward as primary, which is that it is the father who is recognized as deserving of love.⁴¹

Lacan concludes this paragraph with the startling conclusion that he will later repeat with even greater force in his lecture "The Triumph of Religion" (1974): "There is already the indication of a paradox here [...] a certain difficulty concerning the fact that, in sum, psychoanalysis would prefer to maintain, to preserve, the field of religion."⁴² Lacan's position appears paradoxical to the point of absurdity: how can a psychoanalytic discourse, rooted in atheism and rational skepticism, possibly support an enemy like religion?

When Lacan makes statements like these his words must always be read with caution. His commentary on the "good old God" in *Seminar XX* is a perfect example: what Lacan actually means by "God" in his analysis of courtly love and sexual *jouissance* bears only the most superficially comical resemblance to the god of Christianity, with its divinity stripped down and hollowed out to become nothing more than a god-function. Just like in Spinoza, there is nothing personal in this god, no arbiter of right and wrong, and certainly no aspect of the supernatural. The realm of Lacan's gods is the realm of the real – if we are going to conceive of a new atheism, then, it is necessary to stop repeating the error of

⁴⁰ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, p. 119.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

equating the death of God with the end of religion. “The pinnacle of psychoanalysis is well and truly atheism,” says Lacan in *Seminar XVII*, “provided one gives this term another sense than that of ‘God is dead,’ where all the indications are that far from calling into question what is in play, namely the law, it is consolidated instead.”⁴³ This passage makes it clear that while Lacan considers himself to be an atheist, he also observes something important to the ethics of enjoyment in the religious mindset that must not be lost – namely, its role as an obstacle in the production of *jouissance*. Truth without pleasure, as Oedipus discovered, can be a very bitter thing indeed.

The notion of a “religion without religion” has been popularized in recent times by John D. Caputo’s *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997), which wrestles with the notion of the “impossible” in Jacques Derrida’s thought in a way that bears some resemblance to the complexities of the Lacanian “real.”⁴⁴ However, the foregrounding of myth in psychoanalysis, especially the tragic myths of the ancient Greeks, means that a model of “religion without religion” already exists. No modern reader, after all, actually believes in the Greek deities, and yet, through these stories, we gain an intimate understanding of the role of the “divine” in the production of *jouissance*. Lacan’s readings of Greek tragedy might crudely be divided between two poles, with the example of Oedipus occupying the negative, cautionary side. There is a long and complex discussion of Oedipus’s story in *Seminar XVII*, in which Lacan distills the drama to a reflection on the earlier theme of the death of the father.

[L]et’s start with the death of the father, allowing that Freud did declare it to be the key to *jouissance*, to *jouissance* of the supreme object identified with the mother, the mother as the object of incest. [...] It’s here, in the Oedipus myth as it is stated for us, that the key to *jouissance* is found. [...] The Oedipus myth, at the tragic level at which Freud appropriates it, clearly shows that the father’s murder

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Martin Häggglund performs a pertinent critique of Caputo in *Radical Atheism*, arguing that “Caputo reads the paradox of impossibility in the wrong direction” a misreading that produces a religious conclusion that is the very opposite of Derrida’s deconstructive atheism. See Martin Häggglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008, p. 122.

is the condition of *jouissance*. If Laius is not brushed aside [...] then there will not be any *jouissance*.⁴⁵

Lacan then relates this Oedipal notion of the dead father back to Freud's modern myth of the murdered father in *Totem and Taboo*, arguing that this motif designates "a sign of the impossible itself"⁴⁶:

And in this way we discover here the terms that are those I define as fixing the category of the real, insofar as, in what I articulate, it is radically distinguished from the symbolic and the imaginary – the real is the impossible. Not in the name of a simple obstacle we hit our heads up against, but in the name of the logical obstacle of what, in the symbolic, declares itself to be impossible. This is where the real emerges from.⁴⁷

Lacan's logic here can be difficult to follow, until we translate it back into the terms of pleasure and unpleasure. The real is not reality, let us not forget, but rather the principle of unpleasure, and the reason it is "impossible" is because it lies outside the purview of the ego's desire – that is to say, it belongs to the uncontrollable realm of the gods, whose unpleasurable meddling in human affairs is required to ensure the continuation of *jouissance*. Following in the footsteps of Freud, then, Lacan reads the drama of *Oedipus Rex* as a model for the religious production of an economy of pleasure/unpleasure.

At the same time, this analysis of Oedipus and the death of the father/God should also be read as Lacan's explicit (and poorly understood) wish to move *beyond* this well-worn model of desire. The mythical examples of Oedipus, of *Totem and Taboo*, of Christ on the cross, even of Nietzsche's Dionysus, are problematic because they are all predicated on a logic of divine/paternal death. If Lacan finds in Oedipus the negative pole of Greek tragedy, in which the tragic hero's abject ruin culminates with him being symbolically blinded/castrated by his own hand, then the positive pole of Greek tragedy is surely occupied by Oedipus's daughter, Antigone, the unexpected nobility of whose death, unlike that of her father, contradicts the disgrace of her circumstances. In her commentary on Sophocles's

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⁴⁵ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII*, p. 120.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

play in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), Luce Irigaray argues that the stand-off between Creon and Antigone reveals how language and subjectivity are implicitly loaded with gendered forms of oppression, with Antigone's defiant refusal to conform making her an inconvenient "remainder" or "supplement" that Creon, in seeking to reestablish the law of the community, wishes to abolish. "In her case 'I' never equals 'I,'" she writes, "and she is only that individual will that the master takes possession of, that resisting remainder of a corporeality to which his passion for sameness is still sensitive."⁴⁸ For Irigaray, Antigone is a figure of defiance who stands up bravely to the oppressive patriarchal community that refuses to acknowledge her as a valid subject. In *Antigone's Claim* (2000), Judith Butler, by contrast, argues that Lacan's reading of the play ultimately sides with Creon as the representative of the symbolic order, a figure grounded in the law of the father. Like Irigaray, Butler also casts Antigone as a figure of defiance and unconventionality who resists all forms of collaboration with the repressive intertwining mechanisms of heteronormativity and the state.

While both of these readings make coherent political points, their vehement rejection of Lacan's reading of the play is puzzling. In his extended commentary on *Antigone* in *Seminar VII*, after all, Lacan first praises Antigone as "the real hero" of the drama before launching into an extended analysis that condemns Creon's "error of judgment."⁴⁹ A more convincing overview of Lacan's interpretation of *Antigone* appears in Joan Copjec's *Imagine There's No Woman* (2002), which juxtaposes Lacan's reading of Antigone's character to Hegel's analysis of the play:

Hegel [...] effectively argues that Antigone ("that consciousness which belongs to the divine law") and Creon ("that which holds to human law") are, in their very decisiveness and intransigence, both guilty, both in the wrong, insofar as they both abandon or alienate one principle through the very act of embracing its opposite. Acting on behalf of a particular individual, her brother, Antigone betrays the community and terrorizes the state, while Creon acts on behalf of the city-state and thus sacrifices Polynices and the values of the family. Lacan attacks the deep undecidability of this reading in order decisively to side with Antigone, praising hers as the only real, ethical act in the play and condemning the actions

⁴⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. G. C. Gill, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 224.

⁴⁹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, pp. 258–259.

of Creon as crimes. In this reading it is only Creon who, through his actions, renders himself guilty.⁵⁰

Although his interpretation is not motivated by the critiques of gender and heteronormativity that underpin the arguments of Irigaray and Butler, Lacan nonetheless joins them in opposing the Hegelian reading to side with Antigone. What really interests Lacan about Antigone's example, though, is the glimpse that her character gives of a completely different economy of pleasure and unpleasure, one that is distinct from (and therefore inimical to) the contradictions of the patriarchal law in which Creon finds himself so tragically entangled. The importance of Antigone, in this context, is her ability to generate a *jouissance* that is beyond religion, thus demonstrating the possibility of an atheism beyond the "death of God".

The fatal error that Lacan attributes to Creon is that "he seeks the good," a charge that, at first glance, might not seem particularly damning.⁵¹ More surprising is Lacan's contention that "the ethic of tragedy" is "also that of psychoanalysis," thus making an important distinction between the psychoanalyst and Creon: the duty of the former is *not* to seek the good, reiterating that the true task of psychoanalysis is not therapeutic.⁵² The psychoanalyst would be wrong to seek the good of the analysand for the same reason that Creon is wrong: such a move assumes an "identity of law and reason" in a way that seeks to compel the other *in the name of their own desire*.⁵³ Doing so opens up the paradoxical territory of compulsory pleasure, of the contradictory mandate to enjoy. As such, Creon urges Antigone to conform to the law for the good of herself and her family, a petition that ultimately frames his appeal in the terms of the superego: what you *ought* to do equates with what, from a purely rational, utilitarian perspective, authority assumes that you *want* to do.

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The characteristic response of characters in modern literature to such a challenge, from Stendhal's Julien Sorel to Dostoevsky's Underground Man to Albert Camus's Meursault, has been to leap into the abyss of the irrational or absurd

⁵⁰ Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2002, p. 15.

⁵¹ Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, p. 258.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

when the superego imposes itself in this way. In each of those instances, the law has been devoured by reason to the point where the protagonists of those novels have nowhere left to turn except against reason itself. In his reading of *Antigone*, Lacan reminds us that the religious context of the play provides a way out that is unavailable to the modern, secular world, a dimension of the law that, because it belongs to the realm of the divine, also stands outside the sphere of human reason.

[Creon's] language is in perfect conformity with that which Kant calls the *Begriff* or concept of the good. It is the language of practical reason. [...] His refusal to allow a sepulcher for Polynices [...] is founded on [...] a maxim that can be given as a rule of reason with a universal validity. Thus, before the ethical progression that from Aristotle to Kant leads us to make clear the identity of law and reason, doesn't the spectacle of tragedy reveal to us in anticipation the first objection? The good cannot reign over all without an excess emerging whose fatal consequences are revealed to us in tragedy. What then is this famous sphere that we must not cross into? We are told that it is the place where the unwritten laws, the will or, better yet, the $\Delta\iota\kappa\eta$ of the gods rules.⁵⁴

The centerpiece of Antigone's argument against Creon, contends Lacan, is that he has made the hubristic error of putting humanity – in the form of human law, in this instance – on the same footing as the divine. Making the law into a universal in this way excludes the (divine) Other, a tyranny of reason that regards any exception to it as “impossible.” Yet Antigone herself, her very existence, from this perspective, is already “impossible” – the prohibitions against incest should have prevented her birth, yet it was the gods themselves who made such an event possible. Without seeming to realize what he is doing, Creon crosses “that famous limit” that separates the human and the divine, so “that Antigone defends it [...] the unwritten laws of the $\Delta\iota\kappa\eta$.”⁵⁵ The crux of Creon's error, then, is that he is “impious” in the hubristic way he transforms human law into a divine universal.

In so doing, he does not claim merely to speak for the law of the community, but also to represent his human interests as equivalent to the will of the divine. Creon's move represents a tyranny of reason that Lacan also identifies in Kant's cat-

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

egorical imperative. “Antigone is the heroine,” reiterates Lacan. “She’s the one who shows the way of the gods.”⁵⁶ The admiration that Lacan expresses for Antigone derives precisely from her refusal to be assimilated, from her unyielding position as “ὠμός,” a word from the Greek text that Lacan translates as “inflexible” or “something uncivilized, something raw.”⁵⁷ In contrast to Irigaray, who sees this term as a diminution of Antigone, Lacan regards this heroic refusal to compromise from her position, highlighted by Antigone’s unvarnished remarks to her sister Ismene, as a mark of her authenticity. “This then is how the enigma of Antigone is presented to us,” says Lacan. “she is inhuman.”⁵⁸ Lacan is careful to distinguish this state of affairs from “the level of the monstrous” – Antigone’s remarkable inhumanity, her incarnation as an unbending principle of unpleasure, is what aligns her, at least in function, with the realm of the divine.⁵⁹

At the same time, Antigone finds herself abandoned by both gods and humans. Her accusation of Creon – “You made the laws” – charges him with impiety and tyranny, yet it does not arouse the gods to act in her favor.⁶⁰ Her insistence that her brother Polynices be given a proper burial even though he is regarded as a criminal is not received as a divine edict. “She pointedly distinguishes herself from Δίκη,” points out Lacan.⁶¹ Antigone instead derives her authority from a place where she feels herself to be unassailable, a place where it is impossible for a mortal being to υπερδραμεῖν, to go beyond νόμιμα, the laws. These are no longer laws, νόμος, but a certain legality which is a consequence of the laws of the gods that are said to be ἀγραπτα, which is translated as “unwritten,” because that is in effect what it means. Involved here is an invocation of something that is, in effect, of the order of law, but which is not developed in any signifying chain or in anything else.⁶²

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Antigone has placed herself entirely in the field of the Other, no longer herself, but a figure reduced to the unrelenting demand that Polynices be given a decent burial. “Antigone’s position represents the radical limit that affirms the unique

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

value of his being without reference to any content, to whatever good or evil Polynices may have done, or to whatever he may be subjected to.”⁶³ This radical alienation from her ego is why Antigone is impervious to Creon’s appeal to the utilitarian questions of pain and pleasure, honor and dishonor, right and wrong.

Antigone’s example is crucial to Lacan’s thought because she demonstrates that it is possible for human beings to enact for themselves, without reference to any gods, the divine principle of unpleasure. If we learn from her example, then access to the unpleasure that is the precondition of *jouissance* is available to all human beings without the burdens and prohibitions of religion. Antigone is the foreshadowing, in other words, of a true “religion without religion”, of an economy of pleasure and unpleasure beyond the “death of God” and its patriarchal implications. At the end of *Seminar VII*, Lacan famously says that “from an analytical point of view, the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire.”⁶⁴ Antigone’s startling transfiguration, the “violent illumination, the glow of beauty” that “coincides with the moment of transgression,” are outward markers of Antigone’s refusal to give ground on desire – not her own, but the desire of the Other.⁶⁵ “Antigone appears as *αυτόνομος*, as a pure and simple relationship of the human being to that of which he miraculously happens to be the bearer, namely, the signifying cut that confers on him the indomitable power of being what he is in the face of everything that may oppose him,” concludes Lacan.⁶⁶ Antigone never backs down on a desire that is not hers, that is beyond her ego, and it is this relentless ethical commitment to the Other that serves as the guarantee of her satisfaction, even though in the end it costs her everything.

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⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

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