

had “several excellent anthologies, comprehensive and specialized, that introduced us to much of the material then known to only a few people” (367), she omits what I consider three important collections available before the Barksdale and Kinnamon anthology (1972): *From the Roots: Short Stories by Black Americans* (1970), edited by Clarence James; *Black American Literature: Poetry* (1969), edited by Darwin Turner; and *The New Black Poetry* (1969), edited by Clarence Major. In particular, James’s anthology was my most important resource as I attempted to offer African American literature to my students in fall 1970. It provides not only important selections of fiction from 1889 to 1969 but also invaluable historical information in charts at the ends of the five sections in the book. To not mention James’s early contribution to the field and to use the term “Wheatley court” inappropriately may be simple slips in research and writing, but a splendid scholar such as McKay nonetheless should have avoided them.

Finally, I applaud Nellie McKay’s collaboration with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others in the editing of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1996). The work has been needed for years and should prove a valuable cornerstone in the foundation of future African American studies programs.

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To the Editor:

Nellie McKay is absolutely right that the profession should have decisively addressed the challenge of increasing minority enrollment in PhD programs thirty years ago. Had we done so, we would now have a strong cultural tradition to sustain us through the long-term employment crisis in higher education. Unfortunately, the problem will now be much harder to solve, and we will not be successful if we altogether separate the genuine need to encourage minority enrollment from all the economic and social forces working to discourage it.

Several trends may dissuade African American undergraduates from pursuing humanities PhDs: (1) the massive shift from full-time to part-time faculty employment; (2) substantial recent increases in the typical level of graduate student debt; (3) the emergence of a new class of full-time, tenure-track faculty positions at annual salaries of \$25,000 or less; (4) continuing conservative attacks on multiculturalism, on the expanded canon, and on efforts to increase recognition of the historical role of racism in American culture. These forces are combining to degrade the cultural capital, social mobility, and financial rewards associated with college teaching. They are

making teaching English or foreign languages much less attractive career options. Moreover, their combined effect is still worse. High debt and a low salary work together to encourage students to pursue other careers.

Most of the emerging economic forces will also be negative. The explosive growth in distance learning, for example, is exaggerating the shift toward part-time employment. We will not bring more minority students into a profession losing its dignity. The completed work of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment and the ongoing effort of the association’s Graduate Student Caucus to turn the profession’s primary attention toward its complex and massively unfair job system are essential to any effort to achieve McKay’s commendable goals.

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Lacanian Tragedy and the Ethics of *Jouissance*

To the Editor:

In “Lacan and the New Lacanians: Josephine Hart’s *Damage*, Lacanian Tragedy, and the Ethics of *Jouissance*” (113 [1998]: 395–407), James M. Mellard refers to a “paradoxical, perhaps perverse, twist Lacan gives to ethics and traditional tragedy” (395). More specifically locating this idea, Mellard asserts, “In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan insists that the true ethical position is not that which abides by the desire of the law of one’s culture but that which accords with [and a lot depends on what Mellard means by “accords with”] *jouissance*, with the drive of the other within oneself” (406). But while a shift “from an ethics of desire to one of *jouissance*” may have taken place in history (396), such a shift is not at all evident in Lacan’s *Ethics* seminar, where *jouissance* is by no means privileged over desire.

Mellard’s *PMLA* article drastically simplifies and misrepresents the intricate complexity of Lacan’s argument about the ethics of psychoanalysis. I question Mellard’s damaging idea that the ethics of psychoanalysis is illustrated by a character who causes various forms of horror by superimposing his own death-driven *jouissance* on that of a femme fatale. (Mellard refers to a “horrifying element” in Stephen Fleming’s “drive,” “the horror of this *jouissance*,” “the obscenity of his demand,” and the “obscene kernel of [his] enjoyment” [406].) An underlying concern of this letter is what sort of value psychoanalysis could possibly have in the practical arenas of the clinic and social change were its ethics to be conflated with the death drive.

In any case, this is not what Lacan proposes. First of all, Antigone is not presented as a model for the ordinary subject. It might be said that Antigone, like Christ, possesses—instead of desire that must not be ceded—*jouissance*. And nowhere in the *Ethics* seminar does Lacan assert that the ordinary subject ought not to cede *jouissance* to be ethical. So even if Stephen Fleming can be conceived of as a tragic hero like Antigone, as Mellard sees him, this would not make Fleming an ethical subject.

In the *Ethics* seminar, Lacan is primarily concerned with an analogy between the ethics of tragedy and that of analysis. He pairs the spectator with the analysand and Antigone with the analyst. And analytical experience is, to Lacan, “an invitation to the revelation” of the subject’s desire (Lacan, 1992, 221), which is hardly “passive,” “lawful,” or “conscious,” as Mellard’s domesticated, erroneous conception of desire makes it seem. The play has something to teach us about desire, Lacan points out: it “reveals to us the line of sight that defines desire” (Lacan, 1992, 247).

But whose line of desire-defining sight is Lacan referring to here? It cannot be Antigone’s, for such a line of sight arrives at a mysterious image, one we can barely look at: “the *fascinating* image of Antigone herself” (Lacan, 1992, 247). We are riveted on Antigone, who is devoted to death. While drive does not come up in Lacan’s chapters on *Antigone*, Lacan ascribes to Antigone a “death instinct” (the two concepts are quite distinct in Lacanian theory). The ethical question about this tragic heroine, therefore, is how she sustains us in the function of desire by offering us a relation to death. On losing Antigone (the object of our fascination) at the end, just as the analyst must fall from the analysand’s idealization, we experience a powerful moment of loss coupled with intense arousal, in which desire emerges. We are enraptured by the fading image of Antigone, an image that correlates with (Freud’s) *das Ding*. We, like the Chorus, are moved to visible desire because Antigone has breached “the limits of the field of the conflagration” (Lacan, 1992, 269). If the Jeremy Irons figure in *Damage*, therefore, had experienced the birth of desire through his encounter with Anna, and not *jouissance*, Lacanian ethics might have been illustrated (the film then would have been entirely different). But instead, to Mellard, he “does not forswear his enjoyment” (405), his horrible *jouissance*.

Propelled by a scandalous, incestuous passion, Antigone too goes straight to the source of pathological *jouissance*. Antigone is the one “who is made for love”—which, as we learn from *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, “can be posited only in [. . . the] beyond” (Lacan, 1977, 276)—the one who, like Christ, attracts to herself

“all the threads of *our* desire” (Lacan, 1992, 262; my emphases). Antigone’s beauty offers us a relation to the beyond, which in turn constitutes our desire. Antigone’s “sublime desire” (her “desire” for death) pays the debt of ordinary desire. Both Anna (the *femme fatale*) and Stephen Fleming seem situated in Antigone’s position.

Like Antigone, the analyst must offer an encounter with “the limit in which the problematic of desire is raised” (Lacan, 1992, 300). The analyst must, as Antigone does, cede ordinary desire in order not to cede (transference) Love (or sublime desire); from this, the analysand learns to cede Love so as not to cede desire. Antigone, again like the analyst, thereby finds for us what we are not so that we can find our measure. To experience desire (that must not be ceded), we must enter the zone of “those who go crazy through a trance, through religious experience, through passion or through anything else”; but we must return, pull out, having gained access to what we are not (Lacan, 1992, 311).

Instead of referring to anything as neatly packaged and yet incomprehensible as “the ethics of *jouissance*,” Lacan gives the following complicated definition: “If there is an ethics of psychoanalysis, it is to the extent that analysis in some way or other [. . .] offers something that is presented as a measure of our action” (Lacan, 1992, 311). The Jeremy Irons character in *Damage* is far removed from any measure, as he plunges into chaos by (according to Mellard) encrypting his dead son as part of his psychic effort to access the *jouissance* of his son’s death. As Lacan writes, “We need to know what we can do to transform this damage into our ‘dame’ in the archaic French sense, our lady” (84).

Mellard forces Lacan into alignment with postmodernity, distorting one of Lacan’s richest, most complex, and most clinically useful texts.

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To the Editor:

Hardly anything James Mellard’s essay states about Lacan is correct. Which explains the near absence of quotations from Lacan.

Desire is neither “quiet” nor “contented” (398), nor is it “allied with consciousness” and the pleasure principle (406). Psychoanalysis does not identify desire as “oedipal, pacific, and tolerant, drive as narcissistic, violent, aggressive, and preemptive” (398). Instead, Lacan characterizes desire as “paradoxical, deviant, erratic, eccentric, even scandalous” (*Ecrits* 286; all references to Lacan’s texts are to the English translations), as “desire