

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

of the Other,” necessarily unconscious (*Ecrits* 312) and always located beyond the pleasure principle. The “oedipal” quality of desire, dear to Mellard, indeed determines neurosis and perversion. Nobody, however, is condemned to remain “oedipal.” Contrary to Mellard’s invocation of “the benevolent patriarch who permits our oedipal (erotic, reproductive) desire” (396), the desire Lacan aims at leaves oedipal desire behind, is contingent not on a benevolent patriarch but on the symbolic (Name of the father), and has not the slightest concern for the biological function of reproduction. Trying to play out a “late” Lacan against the “early” Lacan, Mellard nonetheless constantly invokes *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1959–60). During the same year, Lacan refreshingly recalled that “it is not enough to wave the flag of sexual rivalry” and that “psycho-analysis is not the rite of the Oedipus complex” (*Ecrits* 310, 316). “Desire” for Mellard is exclusively the neurotic, oedipal desire that assumes an identity between interdiction and the Law. For Lacan, however, the “interiorization of the law has nothing to do with the Law” (*Ethics* 310): the interpretation of the law as interdiction is not the Law of the signifier and of desire. If it is never possible to completely leave the symptom (to achieve complete sublimation) and if Lacan’s approach implies a depathologization of the different subjective positions toward desire and castration, Lacanian psychoanalysis does not condone a subject’s clinging to neurotic or perverse imaginary identifications that actively, albeit unconsciously, deny the difference between desire and incestuous desire.

Mellard writes that “[b]y defying Creon and the law and aligning herself with ‘natural’ law, Antigone places herself on the side of death,” the side of *jouissance* (399–400). Lacan in his *Ethics* situates Antigone frequently in the realm of desire but not once in the realm of *jouissance*. Far from following a natural law, Antigone acts according to the law of the signifier, in the name of the pure signifier, or of pure desire: of “the break that the very presence of language inaugurates in the life of man” (*Ethics* 282, 278f). Antigone becomes unrecognizable when Mellard claims that she “denies the validity of her culture’s other, of its symbolic structure” (400). According to Mellard’s central claim, Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* “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 *jouissance*, with the drive of the other within oneself” (406). No pagination is given for this claim, and none could be given: nothing of the kind is to be found in *Ethics*. Neither Antigone nor Oedipus, Lacan’s examples of tragic heroes, pursues “narcissistic *jouissance*,” since both suspend the realm of the imaginary (*Ethics* 248–49).

Mellard’s “narcissistic ethics of *jouissance*” (405) can’t be reconciled with Lacan’s definition of the ethical: “the only thing one can be guilty of is giving ground relative to one’s desire” (and not one’s *jouissance*, as Mellard thinks). In his characteristic opposition to a utilitarian ethics guided by human “good,” Lacan continues, “There is no other good than that which may serve to pay the price for access to desire—given that desire is understood here [. . .] as the metonymy of our being.” The price to pay “is called *jouissance*” (*Ethics* 321f).

For Lacan absolute *jouissance* is impossible or is possible only in death. *Jouissance* that is not “foresworn” is tantamount to the manifestation of perversion: thus the importance in Lacan’s *Ethics* of the analysis of Sade. But perversion is the flip side of neurosis: the perverse interpretation of the Law (“the law commands transgression”) is the photographic negative of its neurotic interpretation (“the law forbids transgression”). This, not the Lacanian “ethical,” is what Mellard’s text is about. In his *Ethics* Lacan underlines that it is more comforting “to accept interdiction,” to believe in sexual rivalry, its neurotic threats and perverse cruelty, than to confront the Law of the signifier, which inscribes every subject into radical finitude (307). As for *jouissance*, Mellard considers only its phallic version, which he confuses hopelessly with the “true ethical.” Lacan’s judgment on “phallic *jouissance*” can be found in his seminar from 1973, *Encore* (81). Elsewhere Lacan underlines that “even if the law [the noncapitalized law, which is about interdictions and commands] commanded the plenitude of *jouissance* in the order ‘jouis!’ (‘enjoy!’), the subject could only respond with ‘j’ouïs’ (‘I hear’)” (*Ecrits* 319; trans. corrected): the subject could only respond by introducing an apostrophe, a gap into that pretended plenitude. In short, it is not Lacan who gives a “perverse twist” to ethics (Mellard 395) or to the notion of the tragic (405).

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### Reply:

Curiously, Frances L. Restuccia and Elisabeth Weber ignore my primary purpose, to use the interpretation of Lacan found in the “new Lacanians” to read a literary work. That work is not *Antigone*, nor is my subject the ethics of psychoanalysis. My essay may have been better, more important, had it focused on those topics, but it does not and so merely is what it is: a poor thing, but mine.

As my title suggests, I focus on Josephine Hart’s *Damage* and the literary consequences of the ethics of *jouis-*