

Lecturer uses Sophocles' *Antigone* to discuss state and kinship loyalties

By Lee Konstantinou '00

University of California Chancellor's Professor Judith Butler, a central figure in gender studies and psychology and this year's Messenger Lecturer, gave a series of three lectures on campus, Sept. 14, 16 and 18.

In her lectures, Butler addressed Sophocles' classic play *Antigone*. Focusing on the theme of "Kinship vs. the State: Antigone's Legacy," she discussed the way Sophocles' play has been used by theorists to explore loyalty to family and conflicts with patriotic responsibility, while, at the same time, she proposed a modern reading that could be applied to the field of gender studies.

Antigone is part of Sophocles' trilogy of plays about the family of Oedipus and its tragic fate. In the play, Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, buries her brother Polynices against the orders of her uncle, Creon. Creon puts Antigone to death for her crime. Butler's three lectures -- "Psychoanalysis, Politics and Kinship," "Life, Death and Psychoanalysis," and "Family and Psyche Beyond the Incest Taboo" -- each focused on the way *Antigone* has been used to explore and, in some ways, define normative notions of kinship.

Reviewing and commenting on analyses of *Antigone* put forth by such seminal thinkers as Hegel, Lacan and Levi-Strauss, Butler said Antigone and Creon do not fit into their proscribed roles as easily as these previous theorists have suggested. She pointed out, for instance, that although earlier analyses place Antigone and Creon in opposition -- with Antigone representing the principle of kinship and Creon representing the principle of law -- Antigone in fact uses the language of the state to justify her right to bury her brother, while Creon uses the language of kinship to justify his right to rule.

Ultimately, Butler suggested that a kind of complicity exists between acts of resistance and the structures that those acts resist, and that language has a performative power -- that speaking of a deed makes it so.

The Messenger lectures are sponsored by the University Lectures Committee. The lectures were established in 1924 by a gift from Hiram Messenger, who graduated from Cornell in 1880.

September 24, 1998

[| Cornell Chronicle Front Page](#) | [| Table of Contents](#) | [| Cornell News Service Home Page](#) |