



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Publishers Since 1893*

New York, Chichester, West Sussex

Copyright © 2006 Columbia University Press

All rights reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bodily Citations : religion and Judith Butler / edited by Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-231-13406-1 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-231-13407-x (pbk. : alk. paper) —

ISBN 0-231-50864-6

1. Religions. 2. Butler, Judith. 3. Feminist theory. 4. Sex role—Religious aspects.
5. Gender identity. I. Armour, Ellen T., 1959– II. St. Ville, Susan M., 1963–

BL410.B63 2006

202.082--dc22

2005034516

Ⓢ Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

## INTRODUCTION

**O**UR PREFATORY ACCOUNT of Butler's work has begun to indicate, we trust, its rich and varied potential as a resource for scholars of religion. Indeed, the essays gathered here reflect in their complexity the many directions this intersection can take. Multiple themes run through and overlap in these pieces. For heuristic purposes we have grouped these essays into three sections representing the main topics of textual interpretation, agency and religious subjectivity, and prospective theoretical directions. The essays, however, refract each other in varied ways and so, in Butlerian fashion, could be grouped and regrouped to provoke still further avenues of inquiry.

## TEXTUAL BODIES

We begin with three articles that draw on Butler to interpret religious texts, in each case finding unexpected meanings in works that have been influential in both Eastern and Western religious traditions. Susanne Mrozik, a scholar of Buddhism, reviews the Sanskrit tale of Rūpāvatī, a narrative that in its unfolding offers teaching on what is required to attain a virtuous state.

Mrozik finds useful analytical resources in Butler's theories of the materialization of bodies via the citational process as well as in the production of the abject. Appropriating these insights for her own purposes, she critically reassesses the formation of "virtuous bodies" as these are exemplified by the Buddha and his precursor the Boddhisatva. Mrozik's creative reappropriation works to uncover unexpected depths in Butler's views as she extends them to fit Buddhist contexts, allowing her to produce interpretations that challenge normative assumptions in Buddhism that routinely equate the ideal of virtue exclusively with the male body.

As Mrozik reminds us, the attainment of Buddhahood evolves through a process of birth and rebirth. The story of Rūpāvātī outlines three successive lifetimes of the founder of Buddhism. The tale is particularly useful for Mrozik because it offers multiple accounts of sexed bodies and their alterations. To point to only a few, the Buddha first appears in this story in the form of a woman, Rūpāvātī (Beautiful Woman). In the course of the narrative Rūpāvātī, in an act of generosity, mutilates her body by cutting off her breasts to feed a starving mother. Her breasts are eventually restored only to be lost again when she is reborn as a Beautiful Man (Rūpāvātā), and as successive male Boddhisatvas, in the end attaining Buddhahood. While traditional readings have interpreted Rūpāvātī's excision of her breasts as a moment when her body becomes male (thus in line with the ideal that equates virtue with the male body), Mrozik sees in this mutilation an embracing of the abject and the emergence in Rūpāvātī's altered form of alternatively sexed beings. With this reading in place, the way is opened for a proliferation in interpretations of the Buddha as, in Mrozik's terms, "omnibodied" and for a more fluid reconceptualization of the Buddhist community as well.

Authors Ken Stone and Teresa Hornsby draw on Butler's writings to interpret the Hebrew Bible and New Testament respectively. Stone focuses his attention on the two creation accounts found in Genesis. Noting the tendency of queer critics to concentrate on undermining biblical passages that explicitly condemn homosexuality, Stone takes a different tack. He argues rather for the importance of calling into question those texts like the creation stories that, while silent on homosexuality, exert force by working to establish and secure the norms of binary sexual difference and compulsory heterosexuality. His review of the priestly account in which God creates humans in the divine image as male and female demonstrates the ways the text has prompted biblical interpreters as disparate as Karl Barth and Phyllis Tribble to find a divine sanction in sexual dimorphism. When Stone turns to the Yahwist account, however, he follows Butler's interpretive lead to locate instabilities and ambiguities in the text that call into question the totalizing reach of the Scriptures' assumed heteronormativity. In this passage, where God first creates a single human being who only later is divided into two, Stone suggests

questions of sex and gender are more ambiguous than most interpreters have acknowledged. Stone finds, for example, in the undefined sex of the initial human creature a space where alternative models of subjectivity might proliferate. His reexamination of these central scriptural passages leads Stone finally to a consideration of the task of queer biblical interpretation and the transformative effects that are opened, in this case for gay male readers who continue to engage and be shaped by these texts.

In “The Annoying Woman: Biblical Scholarship After Judith Butler,” Teresa Hornsby considers the ways in which Butler’s insights raise the stakes for feminist biblical interpretation. Butler’s observation that even our most subversive actions emerge from the web of cultural discourses and so are prone to unwittingly perpetuate its ideologies leads Hornsby to question what remains possible for feminist biblical interpretation. She explores this question through a consideration of Luke 7:36–50 in which an unnamed woman anoints the feet of Jesus. While Hornsby is drawn to the powerful physical and erotic overtones of this story, she observes that traditional interpretations routinely cast the woman as a prostitute or as otherwise guilty of sexual transgression or excess. Further, feminist scholars have been no more effective in finding positive value in this figure. More commonly, they have critiqued Luke for undermining the anointing woman by casting her as silent, nameless, and subservient. In so doing, Hornsby charges, feminists reinforce reigning assumptions that equate silence with powerlessness, overlooking the force of the woman’s physical actions and the possibility that a more radical meaning might be found in her seemingly subordinate stance.

To chart a different course, Hornsby uses interpretive tools exemplified in Butler’s reading of the classic *Antigone* story. Like *Antigone*, she suggests, the anointing woman can be viewed as a liminal figure who because of her very anonymity cannot easily be placed in the social structure. Butler cautions against the desire to fill in the outlines of such an undefined figure and in so doing to seek a representative model for behavior. Rather she recognizes the lack of definition as opening a space for the generation of unexpected possibilities.

For Hornsby, viewing the silence of the anointing woman in this way draws attention more fully to her actions, particularly to the erotic physicality or desire that plays between the woman and Jesus. Where earlier interpretations skirt this aspect, or note it only to quickly condemn or restrain it, Hornsby is able to call it to the fore. She demonstrates how this desire works in the text to give the lie to the stability of social and sexual standards that have heretofore held place. Still, Hornsby ends with a cautionary reminder that her own reading, too, functions as a performance that is subject to unexpected appropriations. Though her reading cannot then effect a full-scale revolution, its disruption of norms makes a beginning.

## EMBODYING IDENTITIES

The four papers comprising the middle section of the collection use Butler in different ways to ponder questions of agency. In “Disturbingly Catholic: Thinking the Inordinate Body” Karen Trimble Alliaume critically analyzes orthodox Catholic teachings against women’s ordination as well as feminist responses or challenges to the magisterium. She finds Butler useful as she untangles the “web of symbolism” that links Jesus’s corporeal body to the constitution of the corporate body of Christ that is the Church and does so in such a way that women, precisely because of their bodies, are excluded from leadership roles. Tracing how “gender matters” in the formation of Roman Catholic women, Alliaume suggests that Butler helps us to see the full extent of the violence inflicted on women through the Church’s teachings. She observes that at its deepest levels Christianity is structured according to a “logic of imitation” wherein Christ stands as the model believers must mimic in order to be saved. And yet, given Catholicism’s official insistence on gender complementarity, this is an imitation from which women will always fall short.

In her article Alliaume details how this logic of imitation marks the magisterium’s teaching that priests must be male because only men can adequately resemble the male Christ. Still further, she contends that feminist challenges to this teaching unwittingly continue to employ its underlying logic when they advocate copying the humanity of Christ. Following Butler, Alliaume then turns to imagine the possibilities that open when the relationships between Christ, believers, and the church are rethought according to a logic of citationality. Such an emphasis shifts attention from the figure of Jesus, which is rooted in the past, to the ongoing communal process of seeking to both follow and reembody the living Christ. It is sustained by the recognition that it is through these citations that Jesus’s body, as well as the bodies of believers, is continually materialized. As with all performative processes, Alliaume observes, the re-citation of Christ would be marked by an openness to multiple and unexpected redeployments—in this case to the multiple ways in which Jesus could be re-presented by Church leaders to the faithful. Such an openness, she suggests, offers renewed pathways for women’s agency within Catholicism.

Christina K. Hutchins writes “Unconforming Becomings” in the context of debates over the inclusion of gays and lesbians in Christian church communities. As she notes, these often contentious discussions have brought concreteness to issues of identity politics more often discussed in the abstract. As a minister in the United Church of Christ and as a lesbian, Hutchins is well aware of the immediacy of these questions. She frames her

article with reflections on the ambivalence she feels when asked to speak as a representative of gay members of her church. Hutchins traces this discomfort to the fact that such efforts at inclusion tend to assume an essentialist understanding of gay identity that, however defined or understood, is inherently reductive and inevitably reinforces a binary opposition between homosexuals and heterosexuals. She is thus led to explore the alternative models of subjectivity proposed in Alfred North Whitehead's process metaphysics and Judith Butler's theory of performativity. While there are important differences between these thinkers, Hutchins finds in both a vision of the subject that both honors engagement with concrete experiences and emphasizes openness to change and renewal. These more fluid models of identity, she asserts, avoid or deconstruct the binarisms of essentialism that fund the logic of exclusion. Furthermore, both theorists locate the subject's agency in what Butler terms its capacity for "subversive resignification." Significantly, both characterize this tendency of the subject toward the unexpected in positive terms as a movement toward or capacity for pleasure.

With these models of subjectivity in hand, Hutchins proceeds to articulate the implications they hold for a theologically disclosive politics of inclusion. While it is important to maintain identity categories (e.g., lesbian) so that visibility is secured, she argues that it is equally important to highlight the instabilities of all identities. By giving full and public recognition to the incompleteness in their midst, religious institutions become part of the movement that enables structural transformation. Hutchins moves beyond Butler (though with Whitehead) to claim that this dynamic process evidences the presence of a holy and creative love. She concludes with the suggestion that the process leaves believers with dual directives of responsibility and hope. Responsibility resides in the call to remain attentive to possibilities for change in the face of an unexpected future. Hope in turn is found in the excess that lies always beyond what is actualized.

Claudia Schippert finds in Butler's writings a valuable resource as she begins to envision the shape a queer ethics might take. Against those critics who have discounted Butler's usefulness for ethics because she deconstructs the voluntarist subject, Schippert argues that performativity provides an alternative form of agency that can fund the moral decision making of those who are rendered invisible by the dominant culture. In particular she highlights suggestions in Butler's texts that the realm of the abject holds open such possibilities. To build on those suggestions, Schippert conducts a rereading of Katie Cannon's womanist ethics through a Butlerian lens. She finds in Cannon's description of the moral wisdom of African American women a realization of the radical promise that might reside in a realm that both exceeds and forms the "constitutive outside" of the dominant culture. Suggesting that

a queer ethics can be developed along parallel lines, Schippert offers the phrase “taking on the abject” to describe its character. As the dynamic constitutive of queer moral agency, “taking on” connotes both embracing that which is excluded and countering that which is normative. Such agents, and this ethics, Schippert imagines will function according to “a different geometry,” one more akin to that evidenced in black holes where what is invisible exerts decisive influence.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood takes up the question of agency in the context of her study of a contemporary women’s mosque movement that is part of the Islamic revival in Egypt. Movements such as this—in which women intentionally engage in practices from study to prayer to veiling in order to cultivate more modest and pious selves—have most often been dismissed by Western feminists as examples of the repressive reach of religious conservatism. To Mahmood, however, such critiques reveal more about liberal conceptions of freedom and agency that have predominated in feminist theory than they do about the subjectivity forged by the women of the mosques. She turns to Butler’s performative subject as a model that is better able to honor the historical specificity of this movement. At the same time, her ethnographic research rooted in Islamic women’s descriptions of their desires, practices, and goals sheds a critical light, revealing blind spots and gaps in Butler’s theory. She notes, for example, that in her writings Butler tends to develop the concept of agency primarily in the context of supporting resistance against social norms (e.g., her reading of drag’s significance). Yet Butler neglects to articulate other ways beyond conformity or conflict in which subjects come to inhabit social structures. Mahmood deepens her critique of Butler by suggesting that the gaps in her theory result in part from Butler’s tendency to conceptualize performativity in terms of signification. She sketches a broader notion of performativity informed by ritual theorists and Aristotelian notions of habitus, which she contends is better able to capture the nuances of the bodily practices and disciplines of the women in the mosque movement that enable the cultivation of a particular subjectivity.

Mahmood’s analysis carries implications for contemporary feminist theorists as well as a broad range of scholars of religion. Recognizing that our conceptual formations have been decisively shaped by a progressive political agenda leads to important questions: what is elided from view by these formations, and what forms of implicit and explicit violence are wrought as a result on those whose lives are not shaped in accord with Western political ideals? Mahmood’s article serves as a call to keep feminist political and analytical work open to challenges arising from the multitude of socially specific sites. As she observes, this call is of particular importance in this historical moment when religious difference takes such a prominent and problematic place in international affairs.

## THEORIZING BODIES

We conclude with two pieces more directly concerned with theoretical questions posed to Butler, particularly as these center on the controversial relationship between the discursive and material realms. Rebecca Schneider's training as a scholar of performance studies allows her a unique perspective from which to reflect on the status of language and the body in Butler's theory of performativity. She does so through a close reading of Butler's 1997 *Qui Parle* article "How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?" and a passage in *Excitable Speech* in which Butler interprets a traditional folk parable.

In the *Qui Parle* article Butler takes up Descartes' reflections on doubt, writing, and the body in order to answer critics who charge that her own work dissolves the material body. Butler argues convincingly in the article that she, like Descartes, has not done away with the body but rather continually finds its trace in and through her writing. Yet Schneider continues her inquiry to ask about the status of the body Butler has retrieved. She notes that while Butler's article claims to examine the dynamic of writing and reading, her focus is primarily on writing. As a result, the body Butler finds remains elusive, the specter of the hand that writes but that remains always at a distance.

To Schneider Butler's concentration leaves aside other modes in which the body is known and encountered in language. These modes are represented by the act of reading wherein Butler herself suggests those who take up a text are "compelled" to reperform its language. To explore these occluded possibilities, Schneider turns to a brief passage in which Butler comments on a folk tale retold by Toni Morrison as a parable about writing and reading. In the tale a group of children attempt to trick an elderly blind woman by asking her whether a bird they are holding is alive or dead. The woman responds, "I do not know—what I do know is it is in your hands." Following Morrison's reading, which portrays the woman as a writer, Butler interprets her response as highlighting the blindness of writing, the fact that once written the writer (and her body) stand at a remove from the text (itself a body) and its fate. When Schneider takes this parable into her own hands, however, she finds an alternative interpretation, one that evokes the existence of a form of "tactile knowing" using the text. Here the writer's body moves through the spoken word to touch the children, evoking and underscoring the significance of their own bodily, in-handed response.

This evocation of another relationship of the body to language as well as another form of knowledge, Schneider suggests, can also be seen in the work of performance artists who seek to challenge and break down the timeworn distinction between theater, with its disembodied spectator, and the more

participatory practice of ritual. Such an understanding of body and language, which is indebted to yet moves beyond Butler, holds promise for religious studies, not only in its reflections on ritual as a mode of knowledge but also in considering more fully the embodied character of religious texts.

Amy Hollywood likewise attends to Butler's attempts to answer those who accuse her of granting excessive power to language. She observes that Butler's response hinges on her claim that language is performative and as such materializes rather than eliminates the body. Further, Butler suggests that it is through ritualized bodily practices as well as speech acts that subjects come to be. Still, Hollywood notes, critics remain unconvinced in part because these rituals, when theorized at all by Butler, tend to be construed along the lines of the theory of performative linguistic utterances she has adopted from J. L. Austin. Thus, her treatment seems to return the body to the realm of language. Hollywood seeks to provide a fuller account of ritual and bodily practices that could clarify Butler's theory of performativity and reduce its vulnerability to the charge of inadequately accounting for the material.

To accomplish this task, Hollywood reviews the understanding of ritual found in Austin and Derrida, two main influences on Butler's thought. For Austin, rituals stand as prime examples of what distinguishes performative speech from ordinary constative speech. While constatives mean what they say via the sign's similarity to the signified independent of context and speaker, rituals do not. The power of the ritual is context dependent, Austin argues; it resides in its ability to recite conventions and in the speaker who performs and authorizes it. Derrida challenges Austin's attempt to distinguish between constative and performative language on these grounds. As structuralism claims, language is a system of signs arbitrarily connected to what they signify by convention. Thus all language is performative. So-called constative language's ability to mean what it says is, like all rituals, dependent on iterability and ultimately lies outside the control of the speaker. The resemblance between ritual and language goes the other way as well. The arbitrariness of language extends to all rituals, Derrida argues. Thus, strictly determining the external context that authorizes a ritual is ultimately impossible. Rather, performatives constitute or generate their own contexts in the process of enactment.

Hollywood draws on Derrida to outline a view of ritualization that places bodily practices at the heart of the reiterative process. Derrida's account of performativity enables a more nuanced theory of the bodily actions of ritual practice that can address problems in Butler's thought. Thinking ritual and language together would allow Butler to develop her claim that the body is materialized in language in such a way that the two are neither strictly separate nor reducible to each other. Such a move would provide theoretical bal-

last to her ongoing insistence that the force of the performative resides in the body and constitutes it as a potential site of resistance. Hollywood's reflections also extend and deepen theories of ritual offered by religious studies scholars such as Talal Asad and Catherine Bell. To acknowledge the arbitrariness that shapes the intersection of language and the body as affecting belief and practice underscores the potential inherent in ritual to "misfire" and thus contribute to the development of new and unexpected religious subjects.