



Vanity Fea

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The Oedipal subject in 'Hamlet'

To Thine Own Self Be True

Notes on a psychoanalytic reading of William Shakespeare's 'Hamlet', from "Hamlet: The Poisonous Message"— a chapter in Nicholas Ray's 'Tragedy and Otherness: Sophocles, Shakespeare, Psychoanalysis' Oxford (etc): Peter Lang, 2009. A retropost from 2011.



Notes on "Hamlet: The Poisonous Message"— in Nicholas Ray's [*Tragedy and Otherness: Sophocles, Shakespeare, Psychoanalysis*](#). Oxford (etc): Peter Lang, 2009.

Nicholas Ray finds significant that Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* was written in response to the death of Freud's own father. This book's reading of the protagonist's Oedipal conflict in *Hamlet* is well known, and it will therefore come as no surprise that Ray's last chapter on *Hamlet* engages more directly with Freud. While it examines the play from an interesting and original perspective, I find that it is less suggestive and intense than [the previous chapters on Oedipus Tyrannus and Julius Caesar](#).

The main point is once again Freud's failure to adequately engage with otherness—in this case "leaving increasingly unacknowledged the significance of parental desire in the constitution of the subject's psychic life" (174). Once again the historical context plays a role—praying for the dead being at the time a Catholic custom recently banned under the new dispensations of the Church of England. The Ghost's call "Remember me!" rather than "Revenge!" should be interpreted in this connection, as well as Hamlet's general predicament, trapped in a mourning ritual without issue.

This argument echoes well with Stephen Greenblatt's reading of *Hamlet* in *Will in the World* or in *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Ray's reading complexly engages the critical literature on Hamlet understood (mistakenly, he argues) as a modern subject; Ray emphasizes the imagery of audition and "poisoning through the ear"—as symbols of excessive remembrance. Polonius' injunctions to Laertes are reread here, paradoxically, as representing a quite modern self-fashioning, free from the excessive weight of fatherly instruction. There is no absolute freedom from the father in *Hamlet*, but it is only when Hamlet becomes more self-determined, like Laertes, that he achieves a measure of freedom from the weight of paternal overdetermination, and is able to fulfil his mission. "Auto-fidelity must, in the final analysis, override fidelity to any of the father's foregoing precepts" (207).

But, as shown by the example of Polonius, this autonomy from paternal authority is also elicited and enabled by the father himself. As noted before, one might argue that there is in Ray's Hamlet an element of self-portrayal—as regards this distancing from the psychoanalytic Father, the better to fulfil his mission and also fashion one's own life path.

An afterword insists that Freud's approach was not "mistaken" but rather caught up in the exigency of his own ipsocentric focus on the individual psyche. Ray, with Laplanche, emphasizes the role of unforeseen, multiple, and irreducible

others in the constitution of the self. Attention to the role of otherness in the de-centered subject, he argues, should make psychoanalysis more aware of the multiple dimensions of the cultural field, and transform itself into a more de-centered, and more complex, inquiry into the structure and constitution of human subjects and their cultural artifacts. His book is an excellent contribution to this project.

[Resurrección simbólica de Hamlet Shakespeare](#)



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