



Vanity Fea

José Ángel García Landa


A repost from 2011—on retroactive insight

Tragedy and the Oedipal Subject: Sophocles and Freud

Notes (written in 2011) on the first half of Nicholas Ray's 'Tragedy and Otherness: Sophocles, Shakespeare, Psychoanalysis' (Oxford, etc: Peter Lang, 2009).

Vanity Fea

26/8/2021

 Send to a friend



Tragedy and psychoanalysis have always been at work within each other—with major tragedies explicitly inspiring Sigmund Freud's work, and with psychoanalysis waiting to be unravelled out of the conflict between next of kin in the works of classical tragedians like Sophocles or Shakespeare. Nicholas Ray works from within the field of psychoanalytic criticism—a little askew, though, as the approach he favors is broadly that of Jean Laplanche, and he casts a critical gaze on the Freudian concepts and on Freud's account of the self. The Oedipus, notably, is here an object of interrogation, rather than a psychological process which is taken for granted. Ray stresses the complexity

of the process by which self relates to other in both tragedies and psychoanalysis, a complexity which may be foreclosed by Freud's own formulations. Or by an overly strict adherence to them.

One significant issue is Freud's early formulation, and then abandonment, of the "seduction theory"—i.e., Freud came to believe that neurotic symptoms did not originate in an actual traumatic childhood episode, furthering instead the view that such traumatic episodes were retroactively created fantasies. This was a crucial step for Freudian psychoanalysis to take, all the more so from the point of view of psychoanalytical poetics, since the psychic material came to be treated as being analogous to fiction. These fantasies are grounded, according to standard Freudianism, on a universal and deterministic process of sexualization. The development of the Oedipal theory coincides with Freud's use of Sophocles and then Shakespeare as illustrations. Ray's book sets out to reexamine the relationship between the theory and the texts, to reread the texts askew from the Freudian view, watching the blind spots of Freud's reading, and to challenge Freud's totalizing and deterministic view of sexuality and fantasy.

This is an interesting project in many senses, not just as a critical revaluation of Freudian criticism or a new examination of tragedies by Sophocles and Shakespeare—it also provides suggestive insights for [a theory of retrospection and of retroactive effects](#)—what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*. Ray's reexamination of psychoanalysis is indebted to Laplanche's critique of the Oedipus: according to Laplanche, Freud's account of psychosexual development is misleadingly endogenous and deterministic and does not make sufficient allowance for otherness, for the unexpectedness and contingency of the encounter with externality and the other. Freud's Copernican revolution of the human subject was also Copernican in a limited sense, that is, it didn't consider the possibility that there might be no center whatsoever for the psyche.

In Laplanche's poststructuralist version of psychoanalysis, the self is radically de-centered, and this calls for a rewriting of the Oedipus. In abandoning the theory of seduction, and the role it gave to exogenous elements in the constitution of the self, Freud was conniving with the subject's tendency to mask his heteronomy, his dependence on the intervention of the other. Laplanche insists on the fundamental otherness of the messages received by the infant: otherness in the sense that they are fundamentally misunderstood, coming as they come from an unassimilated adult world, and otherness because of their lack of self-transparency to the adults, the senders, as unconscious elements are involved in any message. Therefore Laplanche goes back to the seduction hypothesis with a difference—any interaction between the child and the adult world contains a potential for the element of retroactive traumatism that Freud had identified in his early formulation of the seduction hypothesis. And the subject, and his unconscious, are structured around these unassimilated or insufficiently symbolised

elements—all of which is Laplanche's own version of the Lacanian tenet that the unconscious is not so much within the subject as "between" subjects.

These psychoanalytic models would of course benefit from an integration with a theory of social interaction, and of the social constitution of the subject understood as an interiorized system of relationships—which was in part R. D. Laing's contribution—although I am not aware of any sustained and satisfactory integration of psychoanalytic work with, say, [Goffman's symbolic interactionism](#).

Riding on the back of Laplanche's theory of the role of alterity in the constitution of the subject, the self-stated aim of the book is "to endeavour to bear witness to the irreducible alterities which inhabit the three tragedies examined, and the specific ways in which they can be shown to resist the exigency of narcissistic closure to which Freud's thought becomes more emphatically subject after the formal repudiation of the seduction theory" (42). Ray defines, in passing, what a Laplanchean hermeneutics of art might be: a nonprogrammatic encounter with otherness, given that works of art or culture are a prime example of enigmatic otherness, indeterminate messages only partly controlled by the author, and which will produce undeterminable effects, unforeseen by the artist. "In other words, the site of cultural production is a reopening of the subject's originary relationship to the other" (44). And Freud's own production of psychoanalysis was partly derived from his encounter with the enigmatic alterity of Sophocles' and Shakespeare's tragedies. These texts (*Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*) apparently narrate the protagonist's assumption of an identity, a centring of autonomous subjectivity: "Oedipus the fifth-century philosopher, Brutus the revolutionary libertarian, Hamlet the frustrated figure of an ostensibly modern severance from paternal law" (50).

Ray seeks to identify in the tragedies themselves an originary de-centering at work, one which undermines the protagonist's status as an autonomous subject. These are, moreover, tragedies about parricide, a subject central to Freud's account of ritual and psychic life in *Totem and Taboo*. Parricide as a move necessary for the coming-into-being of the subject is ambivalent, and Ray further explores its intrinsic ambivalence, already prominent in Freud's analysis, with an added emphasis on the role of pre-existing and external otherness in the constitution of the parricidal subject. That otherness is partly accounted for by "the contingent ideologies of the subject's surrounding culture" (53)—the trajectory of the subject is irreducible to an intrinsic fate. As an analyst, Freud identifies with Oedipus, Brutus, Hamlet—while Ray tries to dissociate himself from this identification and underlines those elements of the text which problematize the protagonist's autonomy, those "forces which threaten the self-presence that Freud is led to assign to the primal, parricidal text" (55).

Ray's reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and of Freud's reading of the same,

emphasizes the elements of enigmatic otherness in the mythical story. This alterity is not adequately addressed by Freud, who "remains blind to the troublingly enigmatic specificity of the tragedy" (59). Oedipus, an optimistic rationalist, relies on his own intellectual strength and minimizes the significance of the Sphinx's challenge—Freud does likewise, calling it a "riddle", whereas the story resonates with more troubling and enigmatic overtones. Ray notes, for instance, that Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, which first addresses the Oedipal theme, was written according to Freud as "a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father's death" (qtd. in Ray, 61).

There is also a story told by Ernest Jones about [a curious premonitory scene](#), in which Freud saw himself, like Oedipus, as a riddle solver, apparently without realizing the unconscious irony of this identification. Oedipus' answer to the Sphinx was an answer to a riddle, but Ray notes that it should have been understood as an enigma, not a riddle. An enigma may require an answer, but "any response will be inadequate" (63)—and, moreover, the interpreter's relation to his answer is an enigma in its own right.

Oedipus was associated to the fifth-century philosophers by Hegel and then by Jean-Joseph Goux (*Oedipus, Philosopher*), as the emblem of the new humanist paradigm which saw man as the measure of all things, a symbol of Western thought as a whole, actually. Goux notes that, contrary to Nietzsche, Hegel did not realize the troubling and ambivalent consequences that the tragic fate of Oedipus suggests for philosophy. Freud's notion of the unconscious comes to symbolize, too, the dark, pulsional, parricidal nature of this move, and it is not by chance that "Freud discovers the unconscious and the Oedipal drives at the same time" (Goux, qtd. in Ray 75). Yet the reduction of fate to the unconscious, Freud's own answer to the Oedipal riddle, only has the effect "of displacing the riddle elsewhere, namely 'back' into the primordial constitution of the subject" (Ray, 79). Freud's partial blindness in reading the Oedipus story discloses for Ray "a great deal more about Sophocles' play and, in turn, about psychoanalysis than Freud was fully able to grasp" (83). The Freudian theory of the subject minimizes the role of alterity in its constitution, reducing it to an endogenously determined unfolding, "no more than the manifestation of an initial centrifugal explosion" (86)—but Sophocles' play is about Oedipus' failure to secure himself as a self-sufficient source and origin of his own destiny.

Ray's reading of Sophocles emphasizes the way in which Oedipus enacts a fate which was not even his, but originally his father's; an interesting intertextual allusion in the self-blinding scene, to Polyphemus' blinding by "Nobody" in the *Iliad*, emphasizes the way Oedipus believes to the last that he can control his own actions—mistakenly. "Thus, against the tyrannus' continued Oedipean assertions of his own autonomy, the fabric of Sophocles' text allows neither Oedipus' self-blinding nor, in its connection with it, the murder of Laius, to be dissociated from this prior scene of the inscription by the father on the son's body" (99).

One should note the way in which Ray's own "killing of the father" is similarly inscribed within the logic of psychoanalysis. Michel Foucault argued (in "What Is an Author?") that Freud was a prime example (like Foucault himself, one might add) of a novel mode of authorship: *the authorship of discourse practices*, i.e. new theoretical approaches to the analysis of human phenomena, a peculiar type of discourse in which the disciples or followers need to refer continually both to the phenomena under discussion and to the foundational texts of the founding father. In this sense, Ray's text is a prime example of Oedipal Freudianism, which makes it all the more suggestive.

[Tragedy and the Oedipal Subject: Shakespeare \(and Freud\)](#)

—oOo—

Other issues Blogs

- ✓ Anatomy of Melancholy
- ✓ Exposing the 'Great Reset' Agenda behind the Covid Hoax
- ✓ Covid is a Global Propaganda Operation
- ✓ Patents Prove Coronavirus Was Manufactured
- ✓ The Pandemic Is All About the Vaccine
- ✓ The Dice Are Loaded
- ✓ There Is a Tale in Everything
- ✓ The Covid Worldwide Conspiracy: Tucker Carlson Interviews Dr. Peter McCullough
- ✓ Hegel on Wilde
- ✓ Gain of Genocidal Function

