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A retropost from 2011

Tragedy and the Oedipal Subject: Shakespeare (and Freud)

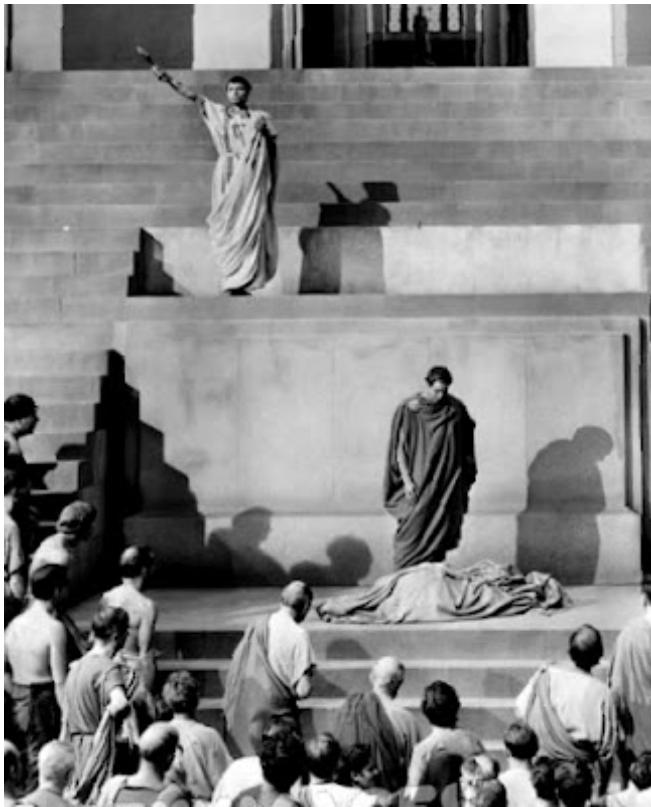
Notes on the second half of Nicholas Ray's 'Tragedy and Otherness: Sophocles, Shakespeare, Psychoanalysis'—a reading of Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar', with some interesting dimensions for the student of retrospective action. The relationship to the Freudian project is rather indirect, but the chapter stands on its own strength as an outstanding reading in the deconstructivist mode.

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

Chapter Two of *Tragedy and Otherness* is an excellent reading of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and it has some interesting dimensions for the student of retrospective action. The relationship to the Freudian project is, however, much more indirect—the play is related via a comment by Harold Bloom to Freud's parricidal theory of ritual in *Totem and Taboo*. However, Freud's explicit references to this tragedy are meager and indirect, and arguably Ray makes too much of them. Still, the chapter stands on its own strength as an outstanding reading in the deconstructivist mode.

It is also an example of the way Ray combines psychoanalytic insights with historical and contextualized readings—seeing Julius Caesar not merely as an instance of archetypal parricide, but as an intervention in the context of early modern debates on tyranny and kingship:

"If the *tyrannus* of the fifth century BC marks out the (albeit aporetic) vector of an inaugural subjectivity, the figure of the tyrant proleptically deconsecrated by early modern tragic drama is a measure of the subjectivity which the sons of the realm are constitutively denied: their liberty and autonomy is to be attained at the cost of rising up against the absolute Father, setting him on the 'scaffold' and cutting him off" (120).



But was Caesar a tyrant, or is tyrannicide a legitimate step in any case? Following Ernest Schanzer's reading, Ray argues that "the tragedy works to hold open the very question of just what it is that the assassination might mean" (122). The event itself was inherently ambiguous—the crux of the matter being that Julius Caesar was *not yet* a tyrant, although he seemed to be well on the way to becoming one. Therefore, his assassination could be described as tyrannicide only proleptically, and the doubt is cast that the actions of his murderers were caught in a vicious circle, or a defectively self-fulfilling prophecy.

Alterity enters the argument as follows: everywhere the play resists attempts to oversimplify the significance of Caesar's assassination (although there is no lack of one-sided views coming from many characters, notably the contrasting public speeches of Brutus and Antony). What is more, the play "refuses to be assimilated to the model of anachronistic back-projection whereby the present context of its composition would impose, in terms of its own epistemological purview, a single and identifiable meaning in the past it represents" (124). Caesar is a complex character, inherently contradictory in his actions and purposes, and the play preserves the enigmatic core of his otherness—which could only have been dissipated by the non-existent future which was cut short by the murder. And the conspirators' actions also had unintended consequences (notably the Civil War), different too from the ideal restoration of the Republic they invoked as their purpose.

Once again, Ray's reading is finely attuned to the narrative interplay of prospection and retrospection. In this case, too, he points out that Freud's reading of this tragedy (to the extent that there is one) forecloses the play of difference, for example in the interpretation of Brutus' character. Brutus too is complex, divided within, hesitating between two father figures or ancestries, Caesar himself, perhaps, and (or, rather, or) the ancient Brutus who expelled Tarquin from Rome and instaurated the Republic. Ray examines the way in which Brutus' "double coinage" is manipulated by Cassius and others, and the way the paradox of the self cannot be solved here either: "The moment of centring, the accomplishment of selfhood, is equally and necessarily one of decentring" (141), and so Brutus fashions himself as an inherently divided subject. The tragedy incorporates the double genealogy of Brutus with a greater tolerance for contradiction than is found in Plutarch—emphasizing the way Brutus is, like Rome, at war with himself. The difference between tyrannicide and tyranny is also deconstructed, as the logic of their actions drives the conspirators into mimicking the very gestures of "hermeneutic tyranny" they reject in the prospective tyrant.

According to Laplanche and Pontalis' entry on "Deferred action [Nachträglichkeit / Après-coup]", "It is not lived experience in general that undergoes a deferred revision but, specifically, whatever it has been impossible in the first instance to incorporate fully into a meaningful context" (153). (One might want to argue that deferred revision or [retroactive fashioning](#) is only especially visible or significant in these cases, and that anyway *lack of comprehension* is rarely the only cause for deferred action: an additional reason for revision is usually at work behind the subject's return to prior experience).

Anyway, in formulating his seduction theory, Freud had to acknowledge that the original (now traumatic) event cannot be returned to exactly as it was, as the Same—and Ray uses this analogy to emphasize the element of otherness that the conspirators' deeds and their interpretations add to Caesar's self and actions. Perhaps Hillis Miller's conception of the performative would be a useful complement to Ray's perspective here: the conspirators try to define Caesar as a tyrant, etc., and they don't recognize the constitutive and performative element in their own portrayal of him, due to the inescapable prematurity of their deed.

As to the play itself, in Ray's reading it refuses almost eerily to determine the meaning of the events it portrays: one could perhaps say that its own performative intervention on the events is a deliberately self-dismantling one: "Shakespeare's metadrama seems to say that the deed can be repeated, the scene reconstructed, the words spoken translated, but that this alone will not give us access to what the scene means" (159). One could add that this view holds a suggestive potential of implications for the staging, one could almost say the *performative performance*, of Shakespeare's play. The conspirators themselves imagine the future representations of this event, but quite characteristically they assume their meaning will be nonambiguous. The playwright knows otherwise.

The Freudian connection comes almost as an afterthought to this

chapter: in *Totem and Taboo* Freud assumes that the Primal Patriarch's murder is unequivocally an instance of tyrannicide, although a reactive performance of guilt will follow in the rituals developing from it. Ray makes Freud side with the conspirators in their tendentious denunciation of the tyrant—since Freud conceives of the archetypal patriarch as consistently tyrannical. But one wonders whether Freud, like Brutus, was not somewhat more [ambivalent in his views on the patriarch](#), under the surface of his text.

"Complex, not the same as itself from the outset, the event, like the experience of trauma, makes possible and necessary the deferred and constant returns to it of which Shakespeare's [or Freud's? - JAGL] text is only one of innumerable instances" (170).

[Julio César](#)

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