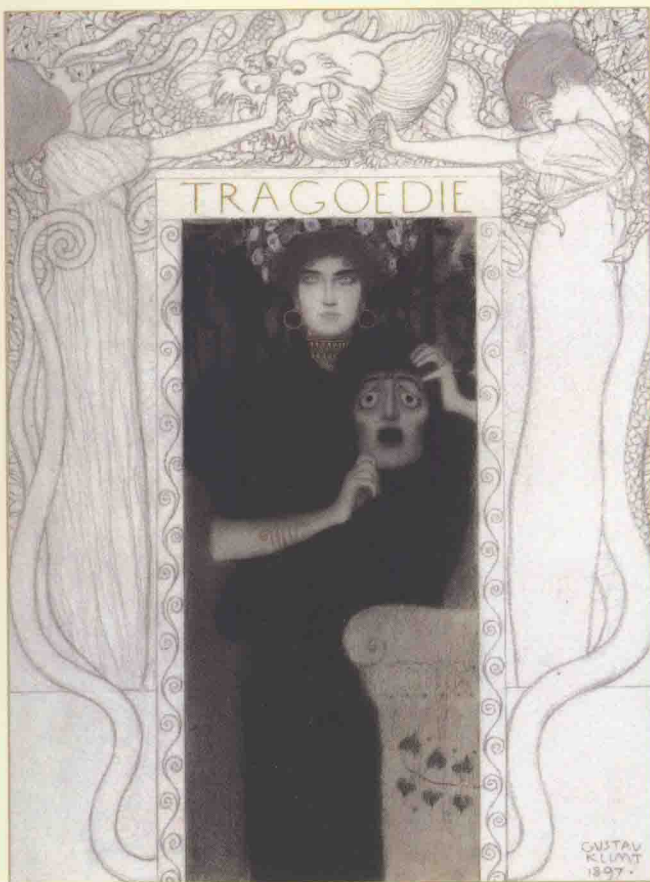


# TRAGEDY AND OTHERNESS



Sophocles, Shakespeare, Psychoanalysis

NICHOLAS RAY

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NICHOLAS RAY



PETER LANG

Oxford · Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Wien

Bibliographic information published by Die Deutsche Bibliothek  
Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche  
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available on  
the Internet at <<http://dnb.ddb.de>>.

A catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Ray, Nicholas, 1975-

Tragedy and otherness : Sophocles, Shakespeare, psychoanalysis /  
Nicholas Ray.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-3-03910-501-4 (alk. paper)

1. Tragedy--History and criticism. 2. Psychoanalysis and literature.  
3. Other (Philosophy) in literature. 4. Seduction--Psychological  
aspects. 5. Sophocles--Criticism and interpretation. 6. Shakespeare,  
William, 1564-1616--Criticism and interpretation. I. Title.

PN1892.R37 2009

809.2'512--dc22

2008050674

ISBN 978-3-03910-501-4

Cover image: Gustav Klimt, *Tragödie* (1897) © Vienna Museum

© Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2009  
Hochfeldstrasse 32, Postfach 746, CH-3000 Bern 9, Switzerland  
[info@peterlang.com](mailto:info@peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.net](http://www.peterlang.net)

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Printed in Germany

For my parents  
and Vicky



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## Acknowledgements

Thanks are due first and foremost to John Fletcher who oversaw the inception and development of this project. Without his unfailingly rigorous and generous support it would never have been begun, let alone finished. I am very grateful for the critical input of David Hillman and Alan Sinfield who read the initial version of this text scrupulously and offered indispensable suggestions for improvement. The book has also benefited from conversations with and/or critical readings by Catherine Bates, Ian Fairley, Paul Hammond, Anna Johnson, Penny Murray, Eugene Musica, Roger Starling and Paul Taylor. Lucy Frank has been an invaluable interlocutor and an immeasurable support from first to last.

Various parts of the book have been presented at conferences and colloquia at the universities of Amsterdam, Berkeley, Leeds, Reims and Warwick. I am indebted to all those present who offered responses and suggestions.

Finally, I thank Alexis Kirschbaum – formerly of Peter Lang – and Helena Sedgwick for whose patience and generosity throughout the period during which the manuscript was being prepared I remain deeply grateful.



## Introduction

# Psychoanalysis, Tragic Drama and the General Theory of Seduction

## Conjunctions

It would perhaps be impossible to review, in strict accordance with a certain academic protocol, all the previous studies that have engaged or sought to engage with the topic that is the focus of this book. The problem is the essence of the topic itself. That is, the conjunction between tragic drama and psychoanalysis, for better or worse, is one that has always borne at its root the claim to a certain essential affinity – a rapport which implicitly contaminates in advance the critical discourse of each by the other. On the one hand, finding support for its own conceptual apparatus in the exemplars and denominations inherited from, in particular *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Hamlet*, psychoanalysis is as it were ‘*originally* at home in its reflections on Sophocles [and] Shakespeare’ (Laplanche 1992d, 221). Tragedy has always been ‘within’ psychoanalytic theory. In part, the latter is a response to it. On the other hand, insofar as classical psychoanalysis positions itself as the answer or solution to the enigmas of those texts, some of Freud’s grander claims, if taken at face value, would suggest that psychoanalysis has always already been at work ‘within’ tragic drama, just waiting to be decrypted and disinterred. In part, psychoanalysis is characterised – or characterises itself – as a continuation and development of tragedy. So forceful has this mutual conjunction proved that on the horizon of any critical engagement with either (psychoanalysis or tragedy) there looms the ineluctable question of both (psychoanalysis and tragedy). Whether or not an individual author ever formulates an overt response to this question, the question still remains, like an imperative whose interpellating demand cannot *not* be heard. Any critical approach to tragic drama

‘after Freud’ cannot fail to express, or at the least implicitly presuppose an attitude towards Freud. Nor, by the same token, is it possible critically to approach Freud without taking account of the constitutive role which tragic drama plays in his thought.

A conjunction, however, isn’t necessarily a happy encounter. It can equally describe a fraught relation of hostility, a battle between opposed interests (*OED*, sense 2c). More to the point, it can describe what is no real encounter at all, but the illusion which screens an actual *disjunction*, such as the merely apparent or virtual proximity of stars as witnessed by the earthbound astronomer (*OED*, sense 3). There can be no doubt that from the fields of classical and Shakespearean studies alike, some of the most vociferous voices to have emerged with an overt response to the advent of psychoanalysis have been those which labour to repudiate its claims and to affirm its relationship to its favourite tragedies as one of incompatibility or of misleading appearances. For all that, of course, their texts do not cease to be at once texts ‘on’ psychoanalysis and Freud as much as ‘on’ tragedy and tragedians. But these indigenous defenders against the colonial masters of the psychoanalytic empire have fought (sometimes justifiably and productively, sometimes much less so) to affirm a diremption between psychoanalysis and its privileged literary object – one that would challenge the claim to an intrinsic or cognate relation to tragedy on which psychoanalysis has thrived since its beginnings, and which would never have been visible from the perspective of the psychoanalysts themselves. The Greek ‘subject’, and especially the one on the Greek stage, is not the Freudian subject; nor is the Shakespearean one. The epistemological field occupied by Freud and his patients is alien to that of fifth-century Athens and early-modern London. Not all of those who rehearse these familiar arguments remain blind to the fact, and to the continuous need patiently to study and investigate it, that the epistemological world which oversaw the birth of psychoanalysis was nonetheless already and complexly burdened with debts to those two precursors. One could cite, in this regard, the two very different books by Jean-Joseph Goux (1993) and Philip Armstrong (2001), concerning Greek and Shakespearean culture respectively. Yet even their efforts to unravel the epistemological heritage of psychoanalysis, and thereby to look afresh at the Freudian

and post-Freudian claims made on tragedy, remain anchored in the conviction that an irreducible difference or alterity will always compromise those latter, and mark the apparent conjunction that has determined them as illusory, misleading and even dangerous.

This is not the place to attempt a detailed critique of the many and varied attacks on psychoanalysis which have been emerging from the classicist and literary establishment from the start. The general project of this book constitutes a broad response to them nonetheless. It is to be emphasised straightaway that this book aims to take seriously and to develop in quite specific ways both the claim that tragedy is internal to the fabric of psychoanalysis and that psychoanalysis continues to offer a critical insight into the enigmas of tragic drama. Such aims are not, however, undertaken in the service of simply defending or reaffirming the Freudian reading of the literary texts that are the subject of the book's individual chapters – whatever the implied unity of the term 'Freudian' might suggest (and it is supposed throughout that a Freudian reading is never univocal). What I intend to establish in what follows is the function of difference, alterity, disjunction *within specific tragedies themselves*, tragedies to which in one way or another Freud finds himself impelled at certain moments in the itinerary of his thinking. To stick to a convenient term: 'conjunctions' already internal to these tragedies individually – that is, the conjunction between a particular text and its mythological, historical or literary antecedents; between one protagonist and another in specific scenes as they happen or as they are reconstructed; and, most significantly and most paradoxically, between a protagonist and himself – these are, in advance, decisively problematic. They convey a manifest simplicity, unity or coincidence that is only ever apparent; that conceals, in ways which Freud was not always adequately prepared to recognise, dislocation, division and rupture, as well as the ghostly enigmatic space which fills the resultant breach. The force of this rupture, or, what I go on to call this 'otherness' which operates within and at the level of the tragic texts will be mobilised to clarify but also productively to challenge and reach beyond both the dominant tendencies of Freud's readings of them and of his own Sophoclean- and Shakespearean-indebted theoretical apparatus. It is my charge that the conjunction between psychoanalysis and tragic



drama is neither simple nor merely virtual, but is to be located in a mutual, if often muted, attempt to think the complex, the non-simple; to account in different guises for an otherness which would radically compromise the possibility of any simple relation to or conjunction with the other or the self as such.

This introductory chapter tries to unpack the meaning of that charge, and to do so by explicating and justifying the terms which appear in the book's title: What 'otherness'? What psychoanalysis? Which tragedies, and why? Broadly, speaking it takes up these questions in the following ways: 1) by considering the historically and theoretically specific moment in 1897 when Freud initially calls upon and claims for the first time to be able to understand fully the two great specimen texts of psychoanalysis, *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Hamlet*; 2) by introducing and elaborating, on the basis of that historical and theoretical timing, what might be called the critical apparatus supporting the book's interpretative project: namely, the general theory of seduction, as it has been elaborated by the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche; 3) by delimiting the principal connecting motif through which Freud and the three tragedies under discussion are to be put to work.

## Freud's turn to Sophocles and Shakespeare in 1897

It has long been commonplace to observe that Freud's earliest and most explicit intuition about what would one day be called the Oedipus complex appeared at a moment of crisis in the development of his early thought. Within less than a month of the famous letter to Wilhelm Fliess of 21 September 1897, announcing that he had been forced to reject the 'seduction' theory of the neuroses on which he had laboured for so long, he wrote to his friend with the idea that desire for the mother and antagonism towards the father are perhaps essential components of childhood existence. This early intuition, it has become equally commonplace to observe, coincides exactly with Freud's