'Greek Tragedy and Freud',

Citation for published version:

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Textual Practice

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Book Review

Olga Taxidou


There are a number of critical contexts within which Rachel Bowlby’s new book, *Freudian Mythologies: Greek Tragedy and Modern Identity*, could be read. One is the modernist-infused and predominantly Anglophone school of classicism that approached Greek tragedy as embodied, physicalized and ritualistic, spear-headed by the Cambridge School, with Jane Ellen Harrison, Mary Beard and Simon Goldhill as past and present representatives. This particular tradition has over the past fifteen years or so undergone significant revision through work that has been inspired by a combination of neo-historicist and reception/performance studies-based approaches (the influential work of Richard Seaford, Edith Hall, Oliver Taplin and Fiona MacIntosh comes to mind). Earlier than this, however, the French School, driven by a post-1968 political urgency made its own radical revisions of Greek tragedy, as seen in the groundbreaking work of Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, and Nicole Loraux. At the same time, Greek tragedy has occupied a privileged position in the philosophical discourses of modernity from Nietzsche to Deleuze, from German Idealism to French post-structuralism. This book is written in the wake of all these traditions and knowingly nods to them in the presentation of its central theme: the relationship between Greek tragedy and Freudian psychoanalysis. Such an endeavour would, of course, have to excavate another crucial critical encounter, that between feminism and psychoanalysis. Again, writing in a long tradition this book is also framed by a political narrative that interrogates the efficacy of the Freudian (Oedipal) model of identity in a world one hundred years after Freud, where gender roles and family structures are forever changing. In this sense, the book, like Judith Butler’s *Antigone’s Claim* (2000), returns to the Greeks in a quest both of a model of critique of the Oedipal family and of an alternative model for utopian families of the future.

Freud’s Hellenism is approached from various interlocking perspectives. On one level, it results from his immediate historical and social context, where a knowledge of Greek carried with it an air of sophistication and power. The rigorous philological training that Freud received seemed to have paid off in familiarizing him with Greek tragedy but, significantly also with Greek mythology, and the power of myth in general. In the chapter entitled ‘Freud’s Greek Mythologies’, Bowlby, traces Freud’s sources in the writings of his contemporaries on myth and tragedy (Léopold Constans’ *La légende d’Oedipe* and the work of prominent German classicist, Jacob Bernays, the uncle of Freud’s wife Martha Bernays, are mentioned). Freud’s Greek is also located by Bowlby within the broader philosophical framework of German Idealism that saw in the Greeks, and Sophocles in particular, not the serene, classical drive towards civilization, power and knowledge, but the subversive, bleaker aspects of that project; the Greeks themselves were seen as moderns. Like Nietzsche, as Bowlby states, Freud turns to the Greeks ‘to make his case for a universality of murderous and incestuous impulses in humankind’ (p. 37). That this turn is also a gendered one is a central concern of this analysis. The shift from the centrality of *The Oresteia* as ur-
myth of the creation of democracy/patriarchy/capitalism (as exemplified in the different uses made of the trilogy in the works of Bachofen and Engels), to the Sophoclean Oedipus as the locus of subjectivity is also one that is fuelled by different negotiations of gender. Bowlby’s analysis links these tensions with contemporary concerns about gender, sexuality and parenthood. In this sense, Bowlby uses the term mythologies to refer both to a version of Hellenism and to the structuralist post-Barthesian use of the term where it fuses with ideology, theory, discourse, even the aesthetic. Indeed, Greek tragedy itself might be seen as the ideal medium for such a reading of mythology (and Barthes’s championing of Bertolt Brecht is not irrelevant here). In turning myth into mythology, the tragic stage has always offered the best metaphor for ideology. However, it does this through a very specific form of aesthetic mediation. Although Bowlby touches upon the formal relationships between therapy and tragedy, the sense that the tragic experience involves an embodied, civic event, particular to its aesthetic conventions rarely features as worthy of comment. The categories of myth and tragedy are sometimes interchangeable and the distinctiveness of tragedy as dramatic performance and its impact on the creation of Freudian mythologies do not really concern the analysis (apart perhaps from Freud’s witnessing specific performances of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s translations of Sophocles in the early 1900s). Bowlby is not alone here; the ‘philosophization’ and ‘narrativization’ of tragedy has always formed a kernel of western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle. One would expect, however, that the encounter with psychoanalysis might also throw up problems of embodiment, reception, performance and performativity, and the ways in which they contribute to the creation of modern identities.

The book continues with explications of Freudian thought through the lens of Greek tragedy and myth. Readings of Freud’s Studies on Hysteria, of his views of gender differentiation, of the difficult position occupied by women in the Oedipal model are all informed by Bowlby’s insightful interpretations of Freud’s Hellenism, sometimes appearing in the form of an obscure reference, others through a full-blown analysis of a Greek tragedy. Bowlby presents a compelling reading of the myth of the Danaids and its significance for Freud, as analogy for the notion of the ‘endless analysis’. Interestingly, as Bowlby stresses, James Strachey’s (1955) English translation for the Standard Edition turns the Danaids into Sisyphus; the process of analysis itself becomes Sisyphian rather than Danaidian. Bowlby traces this apparent absence of the Danaids in Anglophone Hellenism (in its visual and literary references), while analysing the gender implications of such a substitution. In this sense analysis itself is viewed as an endless process, like the water-carrying punishment of the Danaids. Bowlby reads the crime of the Danaids in the tradition of Jane Harisson’s interpretation, quoted in the book, as ‘clearly not only that of murder, but of rejection of marriage’, and Bowlby continues, ‘their punishment perpetually repeat[ing] the filling and leaking of the resisted event’ (p. 90, n. 32). Despite her initial claim of the absence of the Danaids in Anglophone literary and visual culture, Bowlby is surprised to find quite a few Symbolist and Modernist Danaids as the myth proved very appealing to the feminist New Woman. She mentions Mona Caird’s fascinating novel The Daughters of Danaus (1894), which presents a type of feminist utopia-cum-dystopia, infused with ideas from the Celtic Twilight and early feminism. Here the myth is used both to signify youthful (female) rebelliousness, and the non-ending punishment that follows, as this modern Danaid moves from the wilds of Scotland to the civilizing pastures of the ‘home counties’, where she reluctantly accepts marriage, only to run away to Paris and have an affair, leaving her husband and two sons behind, but taking an adopted daughter and a nanny. This alternative
family does not last long and, true to the myth, our heroine ‘returns and submits herself once more to a life of eternal domestic tedium’ (p. 99). Bowlby’s reading is a welcome addition to a growing body of research on Hellenism and literary modernism.

For this reader, the most persuasive and insightful section of the book is to be found in the two chapters that offer close readings of two plays: Sophocles’ *Oedipus the King* and Euripides’ *Ion*. Bowlby’s meticulously controlled reading of Sophocles’ play highlights Freud’s interpretation but also reveals aspects of the Sophoclean drama that Freud’s ‘Oedipalization’ ignored. Revelations of incest and parricide apart—and it is a big aside—Bowlby reveals a story not solely about the quest for identity but also about the different types of families (biological, adoptive, fostered), problems of infertility, adoption, national and transnational. Indeed, the story of Oedipus emerges as fundamentally un-Oedipal; rather it is Freud who turns it into the pre-requisite of identity. In turning the Oedipus story into a ‘hereditary schema’—a term he borrows from recapitulation theory in biology—Freud’s reading ignores a series of crucial aspects of the play. And Bowlby’s reading draws attention to these: Oedipus’s ‘Oedipal’ crime is not committed against his ‘Oedipal’ parents, but against his biological ones (‘ergo no complex’, as Bowlby states, quoting Vernant’s famous essay of 1967, ‘Oedipe sans complexe’); Freud focuses on the son’s emotions, whereas Sophocles is interested in delineating the different family structures that helped to ‘create’ Oedipus—the adopted parents are caring, the biological murderous; Freud’s approach is child-centred whereas Sophocles’ play is concerned with childlessness and parenthood, mainly fatherhood. Motherhood in this scheme of things is seen as ‘something to make up for the lack of a penis’. Interestingly, it occupies an equally ambiguous position in the play as both Merope and Jocasta are seen as negotiating relationships between father and son. Where Freud is concerned with hatreds and desires of small children, the play is about an adult’s need to investigate origins. No wonder Oedipus is confused! With four parents (not counting the shepherd) and two countries of origin he can hardly answer the question, ‘tis kai pothen? (Who are you and where do you come from?). It is not so much the unwilled acts of parricide and incest that form the *sine qua non* of identity but possibly the play suggests the raising of these questions. It is Oedipus’s quest for *zoe* against the *bios* that his biological parents gave him (and almost took away). It is Sophocles and not Freud who makes ‘the point like a structural anthropologist, by way of the unbearable impossibility of naming that ensures when incompatible relational terms overlay one another, mixing, fathers, brothers and children, and brides, wives and mothers’.

However, take away the parricide and incest and we don’t have much of a tragedy. I am not suggesting that Bowlby does this. In her desire to make these stories ‘speak’ to contemporary debates about families, gender and sexuality, parenthood and technologies of reproduction (to which, I, too, agree they do ‘speak’), she sometimes loses sight of the fact that they are tragedies, and not animated essays on anthropology, philosophy and psychoanalysis. In an application of recapitulation theory that she borrows from rhetoric and biology she views these plays as having spoken to Freud and his time in a particular way and to ours in another. While I fundamentally agree with this, (against the George Steiner thesis that tragedy is impossible in a godless universe or that the invention of psychoanalysis itself means that we can no longer have high tragedies like *Oedipus the King*), the specific dramatic quality of tragedy remains ‘tragic’ despite and because of this recurrent ability to talk to different historical contexts and to different audiences. This un-Oedipal reading of *Oedipus the King*, eloquently voiced by Bowlby could be further
augmented with a reading of *Oedipus at Colonus* that deals with issues of old age, male-to-male friendship (*philia*), exile, hospitality (*philoxenia*) and private/public mourning. Indeed, Bowlby’s own translation of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Hospitality*,² includes a fascinating reading of *Oedipus at Colonus*, which she briefly alludes to.

Bowlby’s shift from *Oedipus* to *Ion* in the second chapter that concentrates on a single play follows a twentieth-century trajectory that saw the gradual adoption of Euripides in the place of Sophocles as the quintessentially modern Greek tragedian. From Gilbert Murray’s early translations, through T.S Eliot’s and H.D’s adaptations to the neo-primitivist revivals of the 1960s and 1970s (Richard Schechner’s *Dionysus 69* and Pasolini’s film version of *Medea*), Euripides is the playwright most associated with disruption and critique, with exile and difference. Bowlby’s reading of *Ion*, aptly subtitled, ‘Reproductive Realism’, sees it as a play that ‘includes a queen who speaks out publicly for the first time many years after being sexually abused; an adopted adolescent’s wish to know his birth mother; a woman’s search for the baby she had in her teens; and a couple’s consultation about their family problem’ (p. 192). It is this kind of psychological realism that makes Euripides, ironically, rather than Sophocles more attractive for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – the Oedipal and anti-Oedipal eras, one could argue. *Ion*, as Nicole Loraux’s splendid study in *The Children of Athena*³ claims, is also about hierogamy (for this is a holy rape), crisis of succession and autochthony (*ou pedon tiktei tekna*, - the ground does not give birth to children - says Xuthus to Ion). And in reading the kinds of subjectivity enacted in *Ion* against those in *Oedipus*, Bowlby also points towards ways in which the play negotiates identity between private and public spheres. Bowlby’s reading of *Ion*, itself heavily inflected by psychoanalysis and contemporary debates about technologies of reproduction, acts as a crucial supplement to Loraux’s now canonical reading. It is a nuanced reading of a neglected play and should be compulsory reading for any course in the Humanities.

Sometimes the strengths of this book also reveal its slight weaknesses. The author’s desire to make Greek tragedy relevant to contemporary critical thinking and experience about identity, sometimes reduce both to straight forward, linear and somewhat evolutionary narratives – usually narratives of critique and emancipation. Although one can see the political imperative of this drive, it tends to read the developments of the past twenty years in matters of gender, sexuality, parenthood, reproduction as part of an emancipatory movement and in some cases these new families seem to have already arrived. And, amazingly, Greek tragedy can still speak to our present human condition. However, the case of the term ‘single parent’, one that she highlights both in her book and in her article ‘Generations’ in the previous issue of this journal, is worth mentioning. For Bowlby the term acts as a corrective to ‘the stigma of illegitimacy’ previously attached to the ‘now obsolete and culturally meaningless ‘unmarried mother’ and it, of course, could be a man or a woman. Is it not significant, though, that most ‘single parents’ are under-aged, unemployed women, at least in the UK (and the issue of the geopolitical location of this analysis remains unexplored)? As feminists in the UK, is it not of interest to us that we have the highest under-age pregnancy rate in the ‘developed world’? Yes, the women have entered the work place, but the work place itself has changed very little (again the UK has the worst childcare provision in the EU). The economy mostly continues to run ‘as if’ there is woman – who now might be a man - at home, raising children, providing the unpaid labour that allows it to function. Most amazingly, however, Greek tragedy speaks to these issues, too. Arguably it does this precisely because it is tragedy and not epic or romance. And this is where the dramatic, performative
dimension of tragedy spills out into the public domain. Bowlby’s numerous references to ‘test-cases’ that push the limits of the Oedipal model exhibit just how public these narratives of new families are, at once contemporary but also ancient. This public domain is also the domain of performance, as the recent revivals of Euripides in the context of the ‘war on terror’ clearly exemplify. The relationships between tragedy and history only feature in the sidelines of this analysis, making the references to historical instances of new families seem a little too ‘optimistic’ and un-tragic.

As Bowlby clearly states, this is a book about Freud, psychoanalysis and Greek tragedy, and through that particular constellation makes a very welcome contribution to a growing body of work that continues to probe Greek tragedy with speculative thinking and political urgency.

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