TRAGIC WILL AND THE SUBJECT OF POLITICS

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"For those belonging to Western contemporary societies, the will constitutes one essential dimension of the person. The will can be described as the person seen as an agent, the self seen as the source of actions for which it is held responsible before others and to which it furthermore feels inwardly committed."[1] So begins Jean-Pierre Vernant's essay "Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy." "Such statements have come to seem so natural to us that they no longer appear to present any problems." But, Vernant, goes on:

The will is not a datum of human nature. It is a complex construction whose history appears to be as difficult, multiple, and incomplete as that of the self, of which it is to a great extent an integral part. We must therefore beware of projecting onto the ancient Greeks our own contemporary system for the organization of modes of behaviour involving the will, the structures of our own processes of decision and our own models of the commitment of the self in action. We must try to see how, through various forms of social practice (religious, political, legal, aesthetic, and technical), certain relations between the human subject and his actions came to be established.

Vernant's proclamations at the opening of his essay have a decidedly anti-humanist ring about them. His musings on the "difficult, multiple, incomplete" history of the agent seem to align him unambiguously with the structuralist movement and its relentless questioning of the primacy of the subject. Read alongside Michel Foucault's all too famous peroration to *Les mots et les choses* published some six years earlier, Vernant's meditation on the history of the agent seems fully in tune with this age of the death of the subject:

One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed to human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area—European culture since the sixteenth century—one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it .... If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea.[2]

    [1] Vernant 1988a [1972]: 50.
    [2] Foucault 2002: 422. James Porter's discussion (above, 121–132) of the complex and evolving debate about "man," "the subject," and the "self" in Foucault and his dialogue with antiquity acts as an important complement to this paper.

But by insisting on the historical specificity of the Greek tragic moment, Vernant will take the argument in a new direction. "What is the significance, in the psychological history of the will," he asks "of this tension that the tragedians constantly maintain between the active and the passive, intention and constraint, the internal spontaneity of the hero and the destiny that is fixed for him in advance by the gods?"

Why this ambiguity in precisely the literary genre which, for the very first time in Western history, seeks to portray man in his condition as an agent? Placed at the crossroads of a decisive choice, with before him an option that will settle the way the whole drama is to unfold, the tragic hero is presented as actively committed, facing up to the consequences of his actions. We have elsewhere already stressed that the rise, flowering, and decline of tragedy—all within the space of less than a hundred years—mark a particular historical moment of strictly limited duration, a period of crisis in which transformation and abrupt change are sufficiently interwoven with elements of continuity for there to be a clash, sometimes a painful one, between ancient forms of religious thought that lived on in legendary traditions and new ideas connected with the development of law and new political practices.[3]

The hero has an incipient notion of political subjectivity, he is "actively committed, facing up to the consequences of his actions," but his accession to the new order remains "incomplete." For Vernant, this identity is specific to the historical development of Athens as a democratic *polis* in the fifth century:

In fifth-century Athens the individual, with his own particular character, emerged as a subject to the law. The intention of the subject was recognized as a fundamental element in responsibility. Through his participation in political life in which decisions were taken following open, positivist, and secular debate, each citizen began to be aware of himself as an agent responsible for the conduct of affairs, more or less master, more or less in a position to direct the uncertain course of events by reason of his *gnome*, his powers of judgement, his *phronesis*, his intelligence.[4]

It was the individual's identity, then, as "a subject to the law" which defined his emerging self-awareness as an agent. As "each citizen began to be aware of himself as an agent," he became aware of himself (Vernant speaks here, by definition, of the *male* citizen subject) as "master" of his actions and master of his "reason" and "power of judgement." Vernant's political man, however, has not yet reached a full sense of his own subjectivity:

But neither the individual nor his internal life had acquired enough consistency or autonomy to make the subject the centre of the decision from which his actions were believed to emanate. Cut off from his familial, civic and religious roots the individual was nothing; he did not find himself alone, he ceased to exist.[5]

[3] Vernant 1988a [1972]: 79.
[4] Vernant 1988a [1972]: 82
[5] Vernant 1988a [1972]: 82.

Vernant's fifth-century individual, then, can only exist in his relation to the civic community which defines him. There is a lack at the centre of the individual whose identity can only be delineated in relation to the wider community. Defined by the negative, fifth-century tragic man is never quite fully his own master. His actions are always overdetermined, forever exceeding the grasp of his *gnome* and his *phronesis*. As Vernant puts it provocatively, removed from the social order: "he did not find himself alone, he ceased to exist." The tragic hero is no Romantic hero who seeks solitude to search out the truth of his soul unencumbered by society; rather, his very existence is predicated on his participation in the civic realm.

And yet, for all its rhetoric of historical specificity, Vernant's proclamations about the limits of ancient subjectivity have a strikingly atemporal flavour. While Vernant seems to be defining this lack as a product of the historical conditions of the emerging ancient democratic *polis*, his critique of "contemporary Western" notions of the will seems to represent more than a mere historical corrective:

Tragedy expresses this weakness inherent in action, this internal inadequacy of the agent, by showing the gods working behind men's backs from beginning to end of the drama, to bring everything to its conclusion. Even when, by exercising choice, he makes a decision, the hero almost always does the opposite of what he thinks he is doing.[6]

By expressing an "inherent" truth about the "weakness of action" and the "inadequacy of the agent," Vernant's notion of tragedy would seem to stand in for the structuralist critique of subjectivity. By substantiating Foucault's claim that the humanist conception of man has a recent and discontinuous history, does Vernant end up by making a transhistorical statement about the limits of agency and political subjectivity? Could it be that tragic man is the very incarnation of the post-Foucauldian subject?

This is the question I want to explore in relation to Vernant's and Foucault's reading of the Oedipus story.[7] In his debate with the *haute*-structuralist reading of the myth by Lévi-Strauss, Vernant again finds himself negotiating the shibboleths of structuralist orthodoxy. His idiosyncratic appeal to historical specificity and to the insights of Marxian "historical psychology" provides one of the most original internal critiques of structuralist and post-structuralist thinking about the political subject.[8] It has become almost an orthodoxy in recent classical scholarship to

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[6] Vernant 1988a [1972]: 83

[7] Froma Zeitlin (1991: 9) memorably sums up the distinctiveness of the French post-war reading of Oedipus: "Oedipus in France is also the Oedipus of Lévi-Strauss, an exemplar of the human dilemma of 'born from one, born from two' or the 'anti-Oedipus' of capitalist society as promoted by Deleuze and Guatarri, where for Vernant, of course, the original Oedipus is 'sans complexe,' a figure of the theater who reflects his society in the ritual role of the scapegoat (*pharmakos*) and the political institution of ostracism." It is interesting that Zeitlin does not mention the highly influential reading of *Oedipus* by René Girard (1977).

[8] In the preface to Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988, Vernant himself situates his work between the poles of Louis Gernet's "historical anthropology" and Ignace Meyerson's "historical psychology."

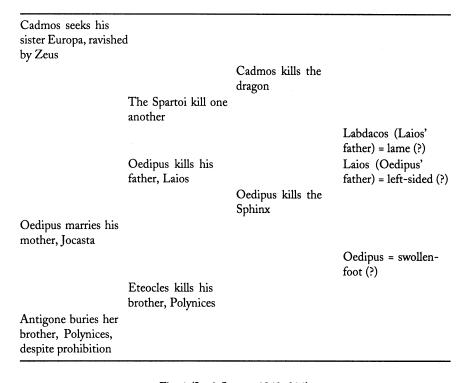|			
Cadmos seeks his sister Europa, ravished by Zeus			
		Cadmos kills the dragon	
	The Spartoi kill one another		
			Labdacos (Laios' father) = lame (?)
	Oedipus kills his father, Laios		Laios (Oedipus' father) = left-sided (?)
		Oedipus kills the Sphinx	
Oedipus marries his mother, Jocasta			
			Oedipus = swollen-foot (?)
	Eteocles kills his brother, Polynices		
Antigone buries her brother, Polynices, despite prohibition			

Fig. 1 (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 214).

take issue with the stereotype of (in particular, Victorian) classicists' claims to the universality of human nature. Modern scholars, so the myth goes, could never be guilty of such blatant anachronism in their analysis of the pre-modern societies of ancient Greece and Rome. But few contemporary classicists would see their "historically sensitive" accounts of the differences of ancient conceptions of agency and the self as emerging from structuralist and post-structuralist critiques of the subject. In our appeal to "historical specificity" we occlude the political valence of the twentieth century's assault on a universalist conception of man. By exploring Vernant's dialogue with Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, my aim is to rethink the relationship between the debate about ancient models of political subjectivity and modern constructs of the political.

In Fig. 1, I have reproduced the notorious chart from which Lévi-Strauss delineated his interpretation of the Oedipus myth.[9] In his four vertical columns Lévi-Strauss wishes to illustrate diagramatically the distinction between the

On Vernant's relationship to Meyerson, see Di Donato 1990 and 1995 and Laks 1998. On Vernant and Gernet, see Di Donato 1983 and 1995 and Champagne 1992.

[9] On Lévi-Strauss and Oedipus, see Turner 1977; Pucci 1971; Vickers 1979; Rudnytsky 1987; Carroll 1978. For Vernant's own exegesis, see Vernant 1980: 228.

diachronic and synchronic aspects of the myth. "Were we to *tell* the myth" he asserts, "we would disregard the columns and read the rows from left to right and from top to bottom. But if we want to *understand* the myth, then we will have to disregard one half of the diachronic dimension (top to bottom) and read from left to right."[10]

Lévi-Strauss identifies a common feature in each of the vertical columns. The first is associated with what he terms the *"overrating of blood relations,"* the second with the *"underrating of blood relations,"* and the third with the "slaying of monsters." The fourth column gets a more extensive decoding with Lévi-Strauss turning his hand to etymological readings. All the "hypothetical meanings" of the names in Oedipus' father-line, he contends "refer to the *difficulties in walking straight and standing upright."* The relationship between the two columns on the right is thus explained in terms of the *"denial of the autochthonous origin of man"* as the killing of the dragon and sphinx are identified with the repression of the chthonian beings and the presence of lameness is associated by Lévi-Strauss with the difficulties of walking experienced in mythology by men who are born from the Earth:

Turning back to the Oedipus myth we can now see what it means. The myth has to do with the inability for a culture which holds a belief that mankind is autochthonous (see for instance Pausanias, VIII, xxix, 4: plants provide a *model* for humans), to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Although the problem cannot be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problem—born from one or from two—to the derivative problem: born from different or born from the same?[11]

Lévi-Strauss's interpretation is essentially a reformulation of an old Freudian problematic, but his reading adds a fundamental new dimension to the Freudian interpretation. As Roland Champagne puts it: "The binary oppositions create an ambivalence at the core of the Oedipus myth. Overrating and underrating blood relations are set off against the denial and persistence of the autochthonous origins of man. Simply put, the Oedipus myth is the acting out of a struggle over human origins."[12] When Lévi-Strauss turns to Oedipus he finds a myth which articulates the ambivalent nature of man. Man is neither quite fully human (born from man and woman) nor completely "natural" (born from the Earth). The human always has an element of the inhuman within it. Lévi-Strauss's Oedipus negotiates the poles of culture and nature.

For Vernant, of course, Oedipus' fate is structured by an irreconcilable opposition between the *pharmakos* (the scapegoat)[13] and the *tyrannos* (the tyrant):

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[10] Lévi-Strauss 1963: 214.

[11] Lévi-Strauss 1963: 216.

[12] Champagne 1992: 40.

[13] In the preface to the second volume of *Myth and Tragedy*, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet explicitly distance their reading of Oedipus from Girard's conception of the scapegoat. They write (1988: 17):

"*Divine king* and *pharmakos*: these are the two sides to Oedipus that make a riddle of him by combining within him two figures, the one the reverse of the other, as in a formula with a double meaning."[14] But this anthropological binary opposition is immediately mapped onto the socio-political landscape of the ancient city. "This mythical image of the hero," he writes, "exposed and saved, rejected and returning in triumph, is continued in the fifth century in a transposed form, in one particular representation of the *turannos*."[15] In "Ambiguity and Reversal," then, Oedipus is a figure trapped between the incompatible social institutions of tyranny and democracy. In stark contrast to the Lévi-Straussian interpretation, Vernant's reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* makes the context of Athenian democracy integral to its analysis and thus poses a challenge to the ahistorical and apolitical vision of Lévi-Strauss. Vernant's focus on the political identity of Oedipus is an expression of his ambivalence towards the quietism of structuralist orthodoxy.

It is the notion of an emerging political subject which Vernant rescues from the Lévi-Straussian reading of Oedipus. For Vernant Oedipus can never be a fully self-constituting subject, a historical agent who accepts full responsibility for his actions. In short, for Vernant Oedipus can never simply be a representative of Man. Like his Lévi-Straussian counterpart, Vernant's Oedipus expresses the limits of the Human. And yet, Vernant replaces Lévi-Strauss's abstract timeless "structures" of the Oedipus myth with historically specific political frameworks. Vernant does not quite substitute the Freudian Oedipus as *sexual* subject with the Vernantian Oedipus as *political* subject. Rather Vernant's Oedipus is a hybrid figure—a figure whose genealogy can only be traced back to the complex arguments about the *question* of the subject in structuralist thought. Vernant manages to reintroduce some notion of politics into the abstraction of the Lévi-Straussian scheme, even if he never quite succeeds in re-establishing a notion of political agency in structuralism.

Foucault's rereading of the Oedipus story in his neglected essay "Truth and Juridical Forms"[16] appropriates Vernant's anti-psychoanalytic agenda but reinterprets it through the prism of May '68 and the *Anti-Oedipus* of Deleuze and

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"After all, Oedipus is *not* a *pharmakos* . . . . *Pharmakos* is one of those extreme terms that make it easier to understand the tragic hero, but the two are by no means one and the same. Oedipus does not belong to a prehistory of salvation, in the guise of a victim."

[14] Vernant 1988b: 131.

[15] Vernant 1988b: 127.

[16] Originally a series of lectures delivered in May 1973 at the Pontificia Universidade Catolica in Rio de Janeiro and published in Portuguese translation in 1974, the essay first appeared in French as Foucault 1994 and was later translated as Foucault 2000. This essay has largely been ignored in Foucauldian scholarship with the exception of Bernauer 1987 and Bernauer and Mahon 1994. One of the many interests of Foucault's essay to classicists is its role in elucidating his return to antiquity in the *History of Sexuality*. Foucault's later interest in Greece and Rome as models of pre-analytic societies is discussed by Porter in this issue (121–132).

Guattari.[17] Where Vernant had conceptualised tyranny as the external enemy of democracy, it is the tyrant *within* who is unmasked by Foucault. While Oedipus has traditionally been characterized as "the one who didn't know . . ., the man of forgetfulness, the man of non-knowledge, the man of the unconscious for Freud," Foucault is intent on showing that Oedipus "is not the one who didn't know but, rather, the one who knew too much. He is the one who joined his knowledge to his power in a certain reprehensible way, and whom the *Oedipus* story was meant to expel finally from history."[18] Foucault's Oedipus as king appears to follow the lines of Vernant's interpretation. Having argued that the *O.T.* is essentially a narrative about "the power of Oedipus," Foucault comes to the unmistakably Vernantian conclusion: "So in Oedipus we have no trouble recognizing a figure that is clearly defined, highlighted, catalogued, characterized by Greek thought of the fifth century—the tyrant."[19] Despite its heavy reliance on Vernant's political interpretation of the Oedipus story, however, Foucault has a quite different model of politics in mind. "This tyrant figure is characterized not only by power but also by a certain type of knowledge . . . . What is this knowledge that Oedipus possesses?," he asks.[20]

Oedipus is the one who says repeatedly: "I asked questions, and since no one was able to inform me, I opened my eyes and my ears, and I saw. He is the man of seeing, the man of the gaze, and he will be that to the end."[21] But this faculty of vision, of knowing, is also fundamentally linked to the wielding of power: "It is this autocratic knowledge of the tyrant who can govern the city through his own abilities."[22] The narrative of the drama, however, shows how precarious this alliance between knowledge and power has become. Within the new order, Oedipus has become a figure of excess.

What I would like to show is that in Sophocles' play Oedipus basically represents a certain type of what I would call knowledge-and-power, power-and-knowledge . . . . At the end of the play Oedipus is a superfluous figure. He is superfluous in that this tyrannical power, this knowledge of one who wants to see with his own eyes without listening either to the gods or to man enables an exact match-up of what the gods had said and what the people knew. Without meaning to, Oedipus succeeds in establishing the junction between the prophecy of the gods and the memory of men. Oedipal knowledge, the excess of power and the excess of knowledge were such that he became unnecessary.[23]

For all the emphasis on political power and its role in formulating a new model of the knowing subject, it is striking that Foucault does not mention the

[17] Deleuze and Guattari 1984.
[18] Foucault 2000: 24.
[19] Foucault 2000: 28.
[20] Foucault 2000: 28.
[21] Foucault 2000: 29. On Sophocles' puns on the name Oedipus, see Goldhill 1984.
[22] Foucault 2000: 29
[23] Foucault 2000: 30

advent of democracy. The frame of the democratic *polis* is wholly absent from Foucault's discussion of historical development and the changing structures of political power. Unlike Vernant who places the figure of the tyrant firmly within a context of democratic rhetoric, Foucault, in fact, later turns to Plato for his model of anti-tyrannical discourse. Vernant's Oedipus, buffeted between the *democratic* conceptualisations of the *tyrannos* and *pharmakos*, becomes in Foucault's version a universalised tyrant, an abstracted Platonic philosophical figure who has a trans-historical identity in the mind of the dissident intellectual. Foucault's occlusion of the specificity of the political structures of democratic Athens in the end, paradoxically, makes his Oedipus as historically indeterminate as its Freudian counterpart.

It is, indeed, the forgotten specter of the Freudian Oedipus which provides the key to Foucault's analysis. Far from the political frame of Athenian democracy, Foucault's Oedipus is a critique of contemporary bourgeois democracy represented in post-'68 Paris by the figure of the Freudian Oedipus. At the very beginning of his discussion of *Oedipus Tyrannus* Foucault comments: "Since Freud, the Oedipus story has been regarded as the oldest fable of our desire and our consciousness. However, since last year's publication of the book by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, the reference to Oedipus plays an entirely different role."[24] He goes on to explain how "Oedipus, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is not the secret content of our unconscious, but the form of constraint which psychoanalysis, through the cure, tries to impose on our desire and our unconscious. Oedipus is an instrument of power."[25] The power that the analyst exercises in controlling the desire and unconscious of the patient soon comes to be associated with the wider concept of the "panoptic society" that Foucault will go on to delineate more fully in *Discipline and Punish*.[26]

Vernant's and Foucault's readings of Oedipus represent two very different engagements in the structuralist and post-structuralist debate about the nature of the subject. Vernant's Oedipus is barred from self-knowledge not by the unconscious, nor by the abstract structures of Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, but by the competing political determinations of fifth-century Athens. In Foucault's hands this emphasis on the incompleteness of Oedipal self-knowledge comes full-circle. For him, Oedipus is the one who knows too much, whose excess of knowledge is allied to an excess of power. But this excess of knowledge and excess of power is precisely his *unconscious*. Foucault's "anti-Oedipus" turns Vernant's democratic subject on its head by showing how, even and especially in a democracy, self-knowledge is just another instrument of the state's intrusion into all our lives. Vernant rescues Oedipus from the determinism of structuralist anthropology only for him to be recolonized by the panoptic aspirations of the

[24] Foucault 2000: 16.
[25] Foucault 2000: 16.
[26] Foucault 1977.

Foucauldian state. For Vernant and Foucault alike, however, the question of Oedipus' subjectivity will always be intimately bound up with an examination of the political process. Despite both Foucault's and Vernant's appeal to a certain historicism, their readings of Oedipus ultimately look towards the present. For Vernant and Foucault (both of whom write in the shadow of Freud) examining the subject of antiquity represents a powerful intervention into contemporary debates about agency and the modern citizen.

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