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 interpelling 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
interpretative breakthrough with respect to two great tragedies by Sophocles and Shakespeare. In the letter, dated 15 October, he puts forward a solution to the mysteries of *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Hamlet* which he will reiterate publicly many times and with little alteration during the rest of his career:

A single idea of general value dawned on me. I have found, in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood […] If this is so we can understand the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*, in spite of all the objections that reason raises against the presupposition of fate […] [T]he Greek legend seizes upon a compulsion which everyone recognises because he senses its existence within himself. Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy […]

Fleeting, the thought passed through my head that the same thing might be at the bottom of *Hamlet* as well […] How does [Hamlet] explain his irresolution in avenging his father by the murder of his uncle […]? How better than through the torment he suffers from the obscure memory that he himself had contemplated the same deed against his father out of passion for his mother […]? (1887–1904, 272).

Freud’s theory of seduction, or the *neurotica* as he sometimes called it, is one of the major preoccupations of this book and is elaborated more fully below. For now it may simply be observed that it had been an attempt to account for the pathogenic force of the premature and traumatic intrusion of adult sexuality into the passive infantile subject – infancy still representing for the early Freud a phase of asexual innocence. With the *neurotica*, Freud had posited that behind particular scenarios recollected by neurotic patients there lay concealed from consciousness the unassimilable remembrance of a real event of infantile sexual abuse. The orthodox narrative of the evolution of Freud’s thought – a narrative inaugurated in Freud’s own later autobiographical writings – has tended to regard the abandonment of this theory as the condition of possibility for the discovery of psychoanalysis ‘proper’, firmly grounded in the precepts of infantile sexuality, fantasy and of course the Oedipus complex.¹ But the question has been too rarely asked: *What was given up with the*

¹ See esp. Kris’s (1954) introduction to the original publication of the Fliess papers.
seduction theory? To be sure, the hypothesis itself was heavy-handed and problematic in a number of ways; and since the 1980s well-publicised demands for its wholesale revival, and for the discrediting of Freud’s subsequent work, have tended to be critically crude and polemically opportunistic.2 The issue here, however, is not whether one should take the early Freud as an alternative to the later, supposedly ‘misguided’ Freud. The question is whether a conditional and very specific rehabilitation of the early theory of seduction has anything to offer by way of 1) productively re-elaborating certain aspects of Freud’s subsequent thought, and 2) rethinking the psychoanalytic approach to literary texts. To this end, it is worth traversing some fairly well-trodden critical territory in order to clarify and underscore a few fundamental points.

For much of the twentieth century the guardians of psychoanalytic orthodoxy sought to consolidate the impression that the letter to Fliess of 21 September marked a clean and definitive break – a moment of synchronised anagnôrisis and peripeteia in the theory. As Rand and Torok (1997, 24–44) among others have demonstrated, however, Freud in fact continued to vacillate for a number of years subsequently, periodically resuming then relinquishing the neurotica in line with the results of his clinical work.3

Difficult as it may be to isolate a single point of rupture with respect to the seduction theory, it remains true that with its eventual passing from Freud’s explicit theoretical apparatus an immense transformation took place. For a significant number of Freud’s critics this transformation amounted to an outright denial of reality and ‘truth’ – owing to the risk of personal or professional scandal – and an evasive embrace of the realm of fantasy: ‘The early traumas his patients had had the courage to face and report to him’, argues Jeffrey Masson (1984), ‘he was later to dismiss as the fantasies of hysterical

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2 Masson (1984) is only the most egregious example of this kind of work.
3 The original publication in the 1950s of Freud’s letters to Fliess was carefully edited so as imply that Freud never returned to the seduction theory after first expressing a loss of faith in it. Only thirty years later when an uncensored edition appeared did Freud’s subsequent hesitation over its rejection become clear.
women who invented stories and told lies’ (11).\(^4\) Even for a more balanced commentator such as Philip Armstrong (2001) Freud’s loss of confidence in the reality of seduction scenes and the subsequent shifts in his theoretical orientation imply that he somehow gave up on reality. ‘Examining his own childhood memories’, Armstrong states,

Freud ‘finds’ [in September 1897] that [seduction] scenes are fantasies, produced by the child’s desire for one parent and its corresponding jealousy towards the other. Thus the material presented to the analyst by the client [sic] – the very stuff of psychoanalysis – whether in the form of memories, fantasies or dreams, will henceforth be read as fiction (18).

On this view, Freud turned his back once and for all on the reality of seduction, and thereby reduced the data provided by the analysand to the same epistemological level as imaginative literature.

Yet accounts of Freud’s itinerary which rely upon a polarised conception of reality versus fiction, are hardly adequate to the complexity of his thinking in this period. It is true that in the letter of 21 September, outlining the need for a change of tack, Freud remarks on ‘the certain insight that there are no indications of reality in the unconscious, so that one cannot distinguish between truth and fiction that has been cathected with affect’ (1887–1904, 264). The far-reaching implications of this insight will be discussed later on; here it is only necessary to clarify that it doesn’t amount to a self-authorised licence to promote the realm of fiction or fantasy at a commensurate cost to the category of reality. In the September letter Freud goes on to propose two quite different responses to his finding. Firstly, he suggests that scenes recounted by patients as childhood memories might be adult fantasies projected back onto childhood. This is a position which he will never take up exhaustively, and will later expend a good deal of energy refuting in the work of others.\(^5\) Secondly, and more importantly, he

\(^4\) As the carefully worded title of Masson’s book indicates, he sees the abandonment of the seduction theory as an ‘assault on truth’. Other (psycho)biographical explanations of the repudiation of the neurotica can be found in Balmary (1979); and Krüll (1979).

\(^5\) It amounts to what will become the Jungian theory of retrospective fantasies. Freud’s most extended attack upon it is found in the Wolf Man case history (1918).
says that without the *neurotica* ‘the factor of hereditary disposition regains a sphere of influence from which I had made it my task to dislodge it’ (265). It is in relation to this crucial factor that an alternative to the seduction hypothesis begins to open up for Freud, one which will eventually obtain a fundamental position in psychoanalytic doctrine.

This alternative which eventually gains the upper hand after 1897 is a conceptualisation of sexuality and psychopathology that is firmly grounded in the hereditary, constitutional and biological reality of the human being, fantasy figuring essentially as its secondary expression. First and foremost in this regard is the biological conception of infantile sexuality, initially articulated in 1905 in the *Three Essays* – the spontaneous and quasi-programmatic unfolding of the well-known oral, anal and phallic ‘stages’ of libidinal development. Freud’s subsequent elaboration of the typical or ‘primal’ fantasies (of seduction, castration and parental coitus) will demand a yet more emphatic grounding in reality, relying on the notorious arguments that they are the phylogenetically transmitted representation of ‘real occurrences in the primeval times of the human family’ (Freud 1916–1917, 371).

Thus from late 1897 onwards although Freud finds himself less and less convinced of the objective reality of the scenes recalled by his patients, he remains unable to resign himself to their being purely imaginary creations, and begins instead to seek the more fundamental reality on which he believes they must be based. By the same token, he doesn’t turn to dramatic fiction having given up on factual reality and sought refuge in the imaginative realm of pure fantasy; his great interpretative breakthrough with respect to the tragic dramas of Sophocles and Shakespeare corresponds to and coincides with this new effort to identify a reality elsewhere.

It can be said, somewhat schematically perhaps, that from 1897 onwards the gradual displacement of the *neurotica* and the increasing focus on hereditary disposition thus amounted to the following tectonic theoretical shift. With the seduction theory Freud had been endeavouring to conceptualise the traumatic introduction of sexuality into the subject from the outside – that is, by the contingent external agency of a typically perverse adult other. With the gradual relinquishment of this essentially intersubjective model of excitation we
see the groundbreaking and doubtless necessary abolition of the myth of an asexual infancy, but only by way of a deterministic conception of sexuality which prioritises factors that are both endogenous – biological and/or phylogenetic – and supposedly universal.

Freud’s conceptualisation of the Oedipus complex does not have an existence independent of this alternative trend, but is – and will for the most part remain – wholly subordinate to it, as indeed are his interpretations of Sophocles and Shakespeare. As a number of commentators have pointed out, although the fundamental Oedipal impulses are identified in a rudimentary way in 1897, the ‘Oedipus complex’ – named and formalised as such – does not appear in Freud’s writings until 1910.6 By the time of Totem and Taboo (1912–1913), of course, the Oedipus complex has been annexed to Freud’s arguments around phylogenesis, forming the structuring principle of the dynamics of the primal family. In any case, from first to last Oedipal desire is articulated in terms of a universal sexual determinism.

Nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than in the critical readings of Sophocles and Shakespeare by which the Oedipus complex is unfailingly shored up time after time. Discussing Oedipus Tyrannus in the letter of 15 October, Freud invokes in passing ‘the objections that reason raises against the presuppositions of fate’. In response, he appeals to the gripping power of the play upon its audience, which he says must be a result of their all having experienced the desire to do as Oedipus does. Such desire is ‘a universal event’. From the moment of its theoretical inception, Oedipal sexuality is thus conceived as being outside the sphere of contingency and firmly located in necessity. It is no less programmed than Oedipus’ inadvertent transgressions are decreed in advance by fate. Freud’s subsequent expository works invariably invoke the same objection and produce the same answer, directly construing the exogenous force of fate as a necessary poetic distortion of the scandalous Oedipal theme: ‘Fate and the oracle [are] no more than materializations of an internal necessity’, he argues in the Autobiographical Study (1925, 63). Their presence, he continues to insist until his final text, An Outline of

6 See in particular Forrester (1982, 84–96).
Psychoanalysis (1940), ‘is a recognition [on the part of Sophocles] of the inevitability of the fate which has condemned every son to live through the Oedipus complex’ (192). Not only does the content of Sophocles’ Oedipus story illustrate the objects of Oedipal desire and hatred; its deterministic unfolding dramatises the non-contingency of the Oedipal phase in every subject.

Oedipus Tyrannus poetically figures forth the universal necessity which propels each and every human being from the inside. Thus in the October letter through to the Outline, what matters in Hamlet is not why, like the Theban, the Dane too should wish to kill his father and unite with his mother (a question never raised), only the fact that this automatic complex of feelings pertaining to Hamlet has already been usurped by his uncle and acted out ‘by proxy’.

Sophocles and Shakespeare, then, explicitly enter Freud’s thought at the moment it starts out on the new path suggested to Fliess in September 1897, with the emphasis firmly on a universal and pre-ordained schema of psycho-sexual development. Freud will henceforth read Oedipus Tyrannus and Hamlet as dramatic fictions founded upon and expressive of a determined and universal human ‘fate’.

It is the theoretical suppositions and blind-spots that structure this alternative emphasis which this book seeks to identify and move beyond. It does not decry some postulated de-privileging of reality from September 1897 onwards. Its purpose on the one hand is to challenge the totalising and essentialising tendency which underpins Freud’s subsequent efforts to root sexual and fantasy life in a universal biological or collective prehistoric reality. On the other hand, it seeks to reconsider some of the key tragic texts which have been conscripted into supporting this latter theoretical tendency, and to do so from a critical perspective in which the implicit potential of Freud’s early seduction hypothesis is more fully realised.