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Oedipus reframed: from Greek tragedy to psychoanalytic discipline

Edipo riformulato: tra tragedia greca e disciplina psicoanalitica

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Abstract

[EN] This paper examines the persistence of ancient mechanisms for addressing madness, particularly tragic catharsis, within the modern paradigms of mental health, drawing on Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*. The first section explores the collective dimension of catharsis in Greek tragedy, showing how shared affective experience mitigates communal suffering. The second turns to Freud's reinterpretation of the Oedipus myth, which relocates interiority within the domain of sexuality and thus epitomizes a decisive epistemic shift in the modern understanding of the self. Within Foucault's framework, psychoanalysis appears as part of the dispositive of sexuality through which power gains access to the most intimate regions of subjectivity. The paper traces how this configuration transforms ancient practices of emotional regulation into modern techniques of governance, revealing the continuity between cathartic purification, psychoanalytic introspection, and disciplinary control.

Keywords: Disciplinary power, madness, subjectivity, sexuality, psychoanalysis

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[IT] L'articolo analizza la persistenza di antichi meccanismi di gestione della follia, in particolare la catarsi tragica, nei paradigmi contemporanei della salute mentale, assumendo come quadro teorico la *Storia della follia nell'età classica* di Michel Foucault. La prima sezione indaga la dimensione collettiva della catarsi, mostrando come l'esperienza affettiva condivisa allevi le forme di disagio collettivo. La seconda esamina la rilettura freudiana del mito di Edipo, che sposta l'interiorità nel dominio della sessualità e segna un mutamento decisivo nella comprensione moderna del soggetto. In prospettiva foucaultiana, la psicoanalisi si configura come parte del dispositivo di sessualità, attraverso cui il potere accede agli strati più intimi della soggettività. L'articolo mostra come tale configurazione trasformi le antiche pratiche di purificazione emotiva in tecniche moderne di governo, rivelando la continuità tra catarsi, introspezione psicoanalitica e controllo disciplinare.

Parole chiave: Potere disciplinare, follia, soggetto, sessualità, psicoanalisi

1. The medical interpretation of tragic catharsis

Oedipus, as the tragic hero par excellence, exemplifies the core mechanisms of catharsis in Greek tragedy, serving as a lens for examining the emotional and therapeutic function of tragic drama. Freud radically reconfigured this healing dimension, appropriating Oedipus for his psychoanalytic framework. In Freud's view, the tragic hero was transformed from a symbol of catharsis to a central figure in modern psychoanalysis, reconfiguring him as a psychological subject within the discourse of sexuality. From a Foucauldian perspective, this displacement reflects the 20th-century redefinition of individual interiority through the lens of sexuality, diverging from its original context. Today, Oedipus is often re-coded as a deviant figure whose twisted psychology, in a modern sense, led him to the consequences we know. However, this interpretative lens obscures the deeper meaning of Oedipus' story in its original context.

This article argues that catharsis is not a literary or psychological concept but a historically contingent practice whose meaning is produced through the shift in regimes of power and truth: from a collective, ritual, and performative process in Greek tragedy to an individualized, confessional, and disciplinary technique in psychoanalysis. By tracing this shift through Aristotle, Bernays, Freud, and Foucault, it shows how catharsis can be conceived as a privileged site for observing changes in Western regimes of truth, power, and subjectivity.

To fully grasp how this transformation became possible, it is necessary to return to the original configuration of catharsis within Greek tragedy. For the Greeks, the value of tragic heroes lay in

their capacity to elicit this emotional process, the most powerful yet controversial mechanism in tragedy. But what is catharsis? Is it possible to define it peremptorily?

Since its first appearance in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the concept has captivated scholars across diverse fields. This work argues that Greek tragedy harnessed it to alleviate collective psychological distress, what Guidorizzi calls *ethnic stresses,*[1] tensions arising from the conflict between individual desires and strict communal norms. Tragedy provided a mechanism for addressing such tensions, creating a space for collective emotional release.

A pivotal contribution to this understanding comes from Jacob Bernays' essay[2] *Outlines of Aristotle's Lost Work on the Effects of Tragedy*. In this work, Bernays argues that tragedy's true effect lies in its medical dimension, functioning as an early form of collective psychotherapy.

In the sixth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle defined tragedy's purpose as follows: «Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious [...]; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions».[3]

The philological debate concerning the translation and interpretation of this passage underscores the enduring misinterpretation

[1] See Guidorizzi 2010.
[2] A similar interpretation was advanced by Giacomini 1586 during the Renaissance, but Bernays provided a more systematic and explicit account of catharsis as a medical mechanism. Whereas Giacomini merely described tragedy as a form of emotional purgation, Bernays proposed that catharsis could be considered an early form of collective psychotherapy. His interpretation influenced later scholars, notably Schadewaldt 195, pp. 129-171, and Flashar 1956, pp. 12-48.
[3] Aristotle 2008, pp. 37-38 (English translation mine).

of tragic catharsis, stemming from two main factors: the decontextualization of the term both from the *Poetics* and from Aristotle's broader philosophical system,[4] and the incompleteness of the edition of the *Poetics* as it has come down to us,[5] with gaps resulting from the editors' decision to omit the more strictly philosophical sections.[6] As a result, the pages in which Aristotle technically defined the concept of κάθαρσις have been lost; pages that he himself seems to reference in the eighth book of the *Politics*, where he discusses the function of musical catharsis and directs readers to the *Poetics* for a more detailed explanation.

When, in 1857, Bernays published *Outlines of Aristotle's Lost Work on the Effects of Tragedy*, the debate had already polarized around two dominant interpretations.[7] The first, theorized by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in his *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, offered a moralistic reading of catharsis.[8] Lessing posited that tragedy, through its depiction of actions that engage with the innermost and irrational aspects of the spectator, evokes pity and fear, thereby purging disruptive passions and reconfiguring them into virtuous dispositions.

The second major interpretation,[9] proposed by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his *Supplementary Notes to Aristotle's Poetics*, advanced a purely aesthetic view of catharsis.[10] Convinced that art

[4] Cf. Ugolini 2020, p. 29.
[5] See Aristotle 2008, pp. xcvi-xcviii.
[6] Cf. Bernays 2020, p. 126.
[7] Cf. Ugolini 2020, p. 50.
[8] Lessing's moralistic interpretation of catharsis influenced many scholars over time, such as Halliwell 1986, Schmitt 2008, and Diano 1968.
[9] Goethe's aesthetic interpretation also influenced the scholarly debate, in particular: Butcher 1895, Golden 1962, pp. 51-60 and Else 1957.
[10] See Goethe 1992, p. 267.

has an inherent purpose, Goethe argued that tragedy serves no end beyond itself, rejecting the idea that it could cause any form of moral elevation.

Bernays confronted these paradigms, translating κάθαρσις as «relieving discharge»[11] and challenging earlier readings. His critique of Lessing and Goethe reflects this shift: while Lessing emphasized tragedy's moral transformation and Goethe its aesthetic autonomy, Bernays framed the concept within the realm of medicine, interpreting it as a psychological mechanism rooted in ancient Greece ritual and healing practices, and suggesting that Aristotle's familiarity with the Hippocratic principle of homeopathy[12] parallels the emotional purgation at the core of tragic experience. In this process, pity and fear are amplified until they are pushed out of the body through weeping or physiological reactions.[13] According to Bernays, this reading is further corroborated by the connection he draws between *Poetics* VI and *Politics* VIII. In the *Politics*, Aristotle discusses musical catharsis and its central role in the ethical and civic formation of the Greek citizen.[14] In this case, the Stagirite describes catharsis in explicitly medical terms: individuals with a permanent disposition to pity and fear are said to be calmed by sacred melodies, «as if obtaining a sort of cure and κάθαρσις».[15] Catharsis

[11] Bernays 2020, p. 129.
[12] Ancient medical practice of treating illnesses with substances that produce symptoms like those of the disease. It is rooted in the idea that "like cures like", where the goal is to stimulate the body's natural healing processes by introducing a mild form of the disease-causing agent to promote recovery.
[13] See Schadewaldt 2006.
[14] See Aristotle 1955, pp. 340-346.
[15] Ivi, p. 344 (trans. mine).

is clearly treated as a therapeutic process aimed at the regulation of emotional states.

However, this medical-musical model does not exhaust the meaning of catharsis in Aristotle's work: in the *Poetics*, it appears to operate primarily at the level of intellectual clarification.[16] Through the unfolding and resolution of the tragic plot, the spectator experiences a peculiar form of pleasure, linked not to the mere discharge or expulsion of emotions, but to the cognitive satisfaction that arises from the intelligibility achieved in the narrative resolution.[17] Catharsis, in this context, is less a medical "purging" than a process of clarification through which pity and fear are reorganized and made intelligible within the structure of the muthos.

As Pierluigi Donini suggested, Bernays' interpretation risks both flattening the notion of catharsis by privileging its medical-purificatory dimension at the expense of its clarifying function and oversimplifying the role of pity and fear in the tragic process by conceiving them as pathological conditions to be entirely suppressed.[18] This reading neglects the fact that, in the IV chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle has already made clear that pity and fear are the natural and healthy emotional responses that tragedy is expected to produce in the spectator.[19]

Bernays' interpretation can thus be refined by arguing that it is not pity and fear *per se* that should be regarded as pathological, but rather their excess. The function of catharsis would therefore be

[16] See ARISTOTLE 2008, pp. XCIX-CVI.
[17] See, e.g., GOLDEN 1962.
[18] Ivi, p. XCVII.
[19] See DONINI 1998, p. 28.

to regulate – or normalize – the intensity of these emotions.[20] Yet this revised version of Bernays' account remains vulnerable to criticism, particularly the charge that it merely reconfigures the traditional moralistic reading, directing, moreover, to the doctrine of the mean, which *Poetics* does not mention. For this reason, Donini suggests a shift in perspective: instead of treating catharsis as the proper effect of tragedy, the analysis reframes the role and status of the concept within Aristotle's broader corpus, thereby granting it a renewed meaning and function. Bernays' most perceptive move, according to Donini, was to tie the interpretation of *Poetics* VI to *Politics* VIII. Through this connection, catharsis can be understood as a process that, beginning with musical catharsis at a young age as part of every citizen's education, culminates in and is completed by the contemplation of a tragic play.[21] Tragic catharsis would thus represent not an isolated effect of theatrical spectacle but rather the completion of a pedagogical and emotional process inaugurated long before. In this sense, Donini's contribution, in addition to integrating and correcting Bernays' thesis, also allows an epistemological repositioning of catharsis, reinserting it into the systematic horizon of Aristotle's thought and transforming its conceptual status and explanatory function.

The transition from Aristotle's framework to Bernays' reinterpretation (later refined by Donini) represents a crucial moment in the attempt to understand catharsis as a psychological and therapeutic process. In the closing section of his study, Bernays reconstructs

[20] See, e.g., Janko's interpretation in RORTY 1992, pp. 341-358.
[21] ARISTOTLE 2008, pp. CVII-CIX.

the genealogy of tragic catharsis, tracing its roots back to the ecstatic Dionysian rituals in which music and dance induced altered states of consciousness and a controlled release of affect. These practices did not merely inspire Aristotle's reflections; they were a cultural technique through which purification took tangible form, temporarily resolving the tension between the irrational drives of inner life and the rational demands of intersubjective relationships and social order. Seen from this angle, catharsis appears not as an abstract notion but as a historically situated practice where ritual, therapy, and communal normativity intersect.

By describing catharsis as both a psychological and medical process, Bernays encourages a broader view of the cultural and ritual settings in which purgative mechanisms were not only theorized but performed. Hence, Dionysian rites stand as a paradigmatic example of catharsis experienced as emotional release and psychological transformation.

2. The flute and the grapevine

Dionysian rituals exemplify the cathartic mechanism through ecstasy. Plato categorized the cult of Dionysus among four primary forms of frenzy: poetic, erotic, prophetic, and ritual.[22] Unlike the other, more solipsistic forms, bacchic frenzy was channeled toward an intersubjective and public sphere,[23] giving rise to a distinctive cultural phenomenon: maenadism. Given its connection with key

[22] Plato 1988, pp. 59-63.
[23] Cf. Vernant 2006, p. 356.

aspects of the god's divinity, it is crucial to explore the central traits that define him. Dionysus embodied the vitalistic joy of springtime rebirth, the spontaneity of a cyclically regenerating nature. However, he was, above all, the god of wine,[24] a powerful source of illusion that, much like theatre, can dissolve ordinary boundaries[25] and reveal the liberating potential of transfiguration. At the core of the god's essence lay the ability to traverse opposites: mortal and divine, rational and irrational, presence and absence.[26] This duality found its most vivid expression in Greek tragedy, where actors embodied the art of illusion through the mask, mirroring the god's transformative and elusive nature.

Dionysus also employed illusion and transfiguration to bewilder human minds, at times driving them into madness.[27] Unlike many Greek gods who inflicted madness as a punishment, he was himself mad.[28] This intimate understanding of madness shaped his unique connection to mortals: unlike other gods, Dionysus did not merely take pleasure in his followers' devotion but personally participated in the rituals. This bond is reflected in the shared designation Βάκχος, used both as an epithet of Dionysus and as a term for his devotees, the Bacchants.[29]

Although Dionysus takes part in sacred rites, he often conceals his divine identity behind various disguises. It is in the guise of a

[24] Cf. Jeanmaire 1972, p. 12.
[25] Cf. Vernant 2006, p. 355.
[26] Cf. Henrichs 1993, pp. 13-43.
[27] E.g. in Euripides' *Bacchae*, Dionysus uses transfiguration to drive Agave to dismember her son Pentheus, making her believe he is a fawn.
[28] Cf. Burkert 2012, p. 223, but also Otto 1996, chapter 1.
[29] Cf. Jeanmaire 1972, p. 56.

prophet of his own faith that he appears in Euripides' tragedy *The Bacchae*, one of the rare sources[30] shedding light on the ceremonies held in his honor.

This play, though a literary work not intended as a direct account of orgiastic rites, represents the most exhaustive depiction of the maenads at the heights of ritual frenzy. These women, organized into local congregations called *thiasoi*, gathered during festivals dedicated to Dionysus, but their assemblies were likely far more frequent, as such rituals required both psychological and physical preparation.[31] The composition of the *thiasoi* was heterogeneous, including both mature, married women and young virgins, with roles varying significantly by age and marital status.

The first phase of the rite, the *oribasia*,[32] involved a frenzied run to the mountain where the celebration would take place. This was followed by a trance-like state induced by dance and music. In this altered state, the bacchants felt no pain and could perform feats requiring far more strength than they would normally possess. Intense hallucinations accompanied these actions.

The final phase of the ritual, the *spragmos*,[33] involved tearing apart a sacrificial victim – typically a fawn or a small animal – and consuming its raw flesh. This custom echo the myth of Dionysus, who, as a child, was torn apart and partially devoured by the Titans.[34] Because the victim's execution mirrored the deity's own fate,

[30] The Greeks were very familiar with Dionysian rites, hence the scarcity of sources.
[31] Ivi, p. 175.
[32] From Greek: ὄρος, mountain, and βαίνω, to go.
[33] On the practice of *spragmos*, see KERENYI 2010, pp. 238-261.
[34] Ivi, pp. 244-248.

the *spragmos* likely symbolized theophagy:[35] by eating the flesh of the animal, the maenads symbolically consumed Dionysus' body. The meaning of theophagy centers on the belief that consuming divine flesh strengthens spiritual powers and improves moral qualities: eating the god allows to "absorb" his qualities, much as consuming food allows to assimilate its nutritional properties.

In *The Bacchae*, Euripides describes the sacrifice, though with some poetic liberties. Although the victim in the tragedy is Pentheus, rather than an animal, its significance lies in the broader structure of the maenadic ritual. While such practices may seem repugnant to modern sensibility, they were, for the Greeks, firmly embedded within the religious institution, offering a healing resolution to the tensions between internal drives and external prohibitions. Maenadism offered the liberating experience of transcending the normative constraints of daily life, enabling a dissolution of the self and access to a shared realm of interconnectedness with others and with nature.[36]

Dionysian rites illuminate both the origins of catharsis and the tension between order and chaos central to Greek thought. Nietzsche's Apollonian-Dionysian duality in *The Birth of Tragedy* frames catharsis as the interplay of these forces. The Dionysian embodies raw, unmediated reality, and the Apollonian veils it through beauty and order. Rooted in the *principium individuationis*,[37] the Apollonian affirms individuality, while the Dionysian dissolves boundaries, fostering collective subjectivity and unity[38] epitomized in the ecstasy of

[35] On theophagy, see Girard 1972, pp. 93-118.
[36] Cf. Guidorizzi 2010, p. 160.
[37] Cf. Nietzsche 1999, p. 17.
[38] *Ibidem*.

Bacchic rituals.[39] These forces are not merely antagonistic but mutually constitutive: Apollonian form shapes Dionysian chaos, while Dionysian vitality enlivens Apollonian order.

Catharsis thus exceeds emotional purgation or moral refinement: it is a creative reconciliation, transforming the confrontation with chaos and terror into intelligible experience. Tragedy stages dissolution and restoration, allowing spectators to face existential disintegration without succumbing to it. As a symbolic death and rebirth, catharsis reveals both the fragility and resilience of subjectivity. In the paradoxical unity of Apollonian and Dionysian,[40] tragedy illuminates the precarious balance of existence.

3. From catharsis to institutional control

In contrast with ancient Greece's conception of madness – not as an aberration to be suppressed but as an integral part of human existence – modernity marked a radical shift in its understanding and management, establishing institutions where the mad were confined, isolated, and silenced alongside those deemed morally deviant – libertines, criminals, prostitutes, and the poor. [41] Foucault identifies this reconfiguration as foundational to the modern repressive model of madness, reflecting broader shifts in power, knowledge, and truth.[42] In *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault traces the developments that, beginning in 1656 with the founding of

[39] Cf. Girard 1979, pp. 126-127.
[40] Nietzsche 1999, pp. 104-105.
[41] Foucault 1988, pp. 199-220.
[42] Cf. Fraser 1989, pp. 20-25.

the first *Hôpital Général*, led to the confinement of the mentally ill within houses of internment. This institution enabled disciplinary power to infiltrate medical and psychiatric practices, granting unprecedented access to the inner life.

According to Foucault, disciplinary power emerged in opposition to sovereign power,[43] aiming not only to shape[44] and exploit[45] bodies but to produce subjects aligned with its functioning.[46] Uniform across institutions, it centers on the body as both its object and instrument, generating knowledge that categorizes and regulates subjects. The relation between power and knowledge, frequently identified as the central theme of Foucault's thought from 1975 onward, finds its most complete articulation in the concept of the *dispositif*,[47] a network of coercive practices that situate discipline at the core of subjectivation. By regulating behavior and shaping subjectivity, disciplinary power produces individuals who perpetuate its mechanisms, such as soldiers trained for obedience or students conditioned to conform to institutional norms. As Deleuze observes, subjects and objects «are like vectors»,[48] through which disciplinary power spreads and replicates itself.

Modernity's confinement of the mad reflects an effort to protect society from perceived deviance through mechanisms of re-education and correction. Within this framework, the mad became objects of medical inquiry and administrative regulation. Madness

[43] Foucault 2006, p. 42.
[44] Foucault 1977, pp. 135-141.
[45] Ivi, pp. 162-169.
[46] See Dreyfus - Rabinow 1983, pp. 153-160.
[47] See Deleuze 1992.
[48] Ivi, 338.

was reframed as an internal disorder, defined and perpetuated by institutional practices designed to manage it. This process did not merely respond to an existing reality but actively constructed a new one. Psychiatry exemplifies this dynamic: far from responding neutrally to pre-existing conditions, it constituted its own object of knowledge – the mentally ill subject – shaped by norms imposed through disciplinary power. Removed from the undifferentiated spaces of general hospitals and confined within specialized institutions, the mad became the focus of an inquiry that aimed to scrutinize the deepest recesses of their identity. This separation, though partially liberating, also imposed new forms of control. Freed from the chaos of shared spaces, the mad began to articulate their experiences with unprecedented openness. This liberation of speech[49] laid the foundation for the emergence, in the 20th century, of psychoanalysis, a discipline that transformed this speech into a means of interpreting and reshaping the psyche. Yet, as Foucault argues, psychoanalysis, far from freeing the mad from institutional silence, subjected them to a subtler form of control and normalization.[50]

In Foucault's early work, his attitude toward psychoanalysis, and toward Freud in particular, is deeply ambivalent. While acknowledging its role in the anti-psychiatric movement, he often marginalizes it,[51] treating it with skepticism and even hostility. Although he concedes that «we must do justice to Freud»,[52] his engagement

[49] Cf. Foucault 1988, p. 234.
[50] See Fraser 1989, p. 23.
[51] Derrida 1994, pp. 233-234.
[52] Foucault 1988, p. 198.

with Freudian thought remains limited,[53] appearing mainly in the conclusion of *Madness and Civilization*.[54] This stance shifts a few years later, with the publication of *The Order of Things*.

Here Foucault argues that transformations in the interplay of power and knowledge gave rise to what he calls the modern episteme: a network of practices and discursive habits that enable the forms of knowledge and beliefs of each epoch, allowing the emergence of distinct fields of inquiry. The modern episteme, in particular, produced "man" as an epistemological object. Before this threshold, man functioned as the subject of knowledge, never as the proper object of science. With modernity, however, "man" becomes a fundamental epistemic reference point, giving rise to a series of positive knowledges that take him as their object and fall under the designation of human sciences:[55] psychology, sociology and sociolinguistics. Psychoanalysis, too, is situated among the derivative human sciences.

A close reading of the section on the human sciences of *The Order of Things* reveals a more nuanced assessment of the epistemological status of psychoanalysis than might be inferred from *Madness and Civilization* or *The History of Sexuality*. Whereas the former situates psychoanalysis within the broader critique of psychiatric rationality, the latter, belonging to Foucault's mature and more technical phase, interrogates it as part of the *dispositif* of sexuality, a biopolitical apparatus that penetrates the most intimate dimensions of

[53] Cf. Bernini 2021, p. 232.
[54] See Derrida 1999, p. 229, and Eribon 2014 in Faubion 2014, pp. 71-87.
[55] See Foucault 2018, pp. 368-369.

life. In *The Order of Things*, by contrast, psychoanalysis is theorized as the effect of an epistemic configuration that situates "man" at the center of inquiry. It thus appears not only as an instrument of subjection, but also as a discourse that renders intelligible the psychological subject constructed by the *scientia sexualis*. Through this epistemological reconfiguration, it is possible to reassess one of *Madness and Civilization*'s most difficult and contested aspects. As Derrida points out in *To Do Justice to Freud*, Foucault, in his first book, repeatedly seeks to reduce psychoanalysis to the object of his critique, «rather than to that from what out of which he speaks».[56] In *The Order of Things*, Foucault acknowledges that psychoanalysis, as a science emerging from the modern episteme, is what makes possible to conceive a man as a psychological subject, even though he remains reluctant to recognize it as the very condition of possibility of his own discourse.

Situating psychoanalysis within the modern episteme not only clarifies its conceptual architecture but also offers a valuable vantage point from which to revisit its historical beginnings.

In 1895, Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud published a seminal work titled *Studies on Hysteria*, introducing their therapeutic approach under the provisional designation "cathartic method".[57] The reason for this choice can be traced to the analogy the two observed between their therapeutic approach and the cathartic mechanism in Greek tragedy. Freud had a deep, lifelong interest in Greek culture and devoted considerable time to studying the schol-

[56] Derrida 1994, p. 232.
[57] Breuer - Freud 1977, pp. 175-188.

arly interpretations of the concept of catharsis. Moreover, his wife, Martha Bernays, was the niece of Jacob Bernays,[58] whose medicalized reading of catharsis influenced Freud and Breuer's choice of terminology. The "cathartic method" involved sessions in which the patient, through hypnosis, accessed repressed regions of the unconscious and confronted the traumatic experiences underlying their distress. By reconstructing the history of the symptom, the triggering event could be identified and, through verbalization, expelled,[59] thus relieving the patient of their psychological burden. Just as catharsis does, psychoanalysis also facilitates a relieving release of repressed drives.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, following the analysis of the Oedipus myth, Freud asserts that «the action of the play consists simply in the disclosure, approached step by step, and artistically delayed (and comparable to the work of psychoanalysis) that Oedipus himself is the murderer of Laius, and that he is the son of the murdered man and Jocasta»,[60] establishing a parallel between tragic anagnorisis and how psychoanalysis, by slowly advancing through the contents of the unconscious, brings repressed material to the surface. Although many intellectuals welcomed the analogy, it remains conceptually fragile. While psychoanalysis opens the unconscious through guided techniques and hypnosis, tragic catharsis is an entirely autonomous process. The ancient Greek spectator did not attend the theatre to cure a psychopathology or relieve the burden of

[58] Cf. Ugolini 2020, p. 103.
[59] Cf. Breuer - Freud 1977, pp. 3-17.
[60] Freud 2005, p. 110.

repressed drives, but to enjoy a form of entertainment, engaging with an artistic work whose creator was unaware of producing any therapeutic effect in the audience.

Greek tragedy evoked catharsis by exposing the raw essence of human drama and breaking the rigid social patterns that compelled the repression of deep instincts. Spectators saw themselves reflected in tragic heroes: ill-fated individuals, undeserving of their plight, yet at the mercy of events and forced to act. They often defied social taboos, committing acts unthinkable to Greeks constrained by fear of public judgment. This defiance revealed a new possibility: the choice to be authentic in a world demanding conformity.

Freud's "cathartic method" reconfigures, rather than reproduces, the ancient notion of catharsis, as its conditions were deeply rooted in the sociocultural context of Greek tragedy. Unlike the emotional release of tragic catharsis, the "cathartic method" required the intervention of a therapist, imposing external control over the patient's unconscious. What was once spontaneous and self-directed was recast as a process of intervention dictated by the power dynamics of the therapeutic relationship.

Moreover, tragic catharsis was inherently communal, uniting audiences in an intense emotional experience that deepened their understanding of human suffering. This collective dimension, central to Greek tragedy, was absent from Freud's method, which focused on the isolated individual and the dyadic physician-patient relationship.

Freud and Breuer's attempt to parallel psychoanalysis to tragic catharsis, though intriguing, risks oversimplifying the complex nature of the original concept. While Freudian psychoanalysis rep-

resented an unconventional shift in the intellectual landscape of contemporary Europe, it reinterpreted an ancient notion to serve its theoretical needs, sometimes stretching its original meaning.

4. Oedipus in the unconsciousness garden

When Freud awakened Oedipus from his millennial slumber, the Theban king reemerged burdened by revelation. In seeking the source of Thebes' plague, Oedipus discovers the unbearable truth: he was the cause, the murderer of Laius. Blinded by his failure to see the truth earlier, he enacts his own punishment: the solver of the Sphynx's riddle «could not solve the riddle of himself».[61]

Faithful to his word, he exiles himself and dies near Colonus, where Sophocles grants him a final poignant disappearance. Yet Oedipus's story resists closure. Its enduring power lies in its ability to evoke a visceral response by confronting the tension between human agency and the inscrutable forces that shape existence. Oedipus embodies the paradox of human freedom: bound by divine decree, yet acting as the agent of his own destiny. His self-blinding and exile reveal an autonomous commitment to justice, exposing the existential burden of responsibility in a world where control is elusive, and consequences exceed intention.

Freud saw Oedipus as a symbol of the unconscious – a figure whose ignorance of his own conflicts mirrors the universal hu-

[61] Foucault 2013, p. 239.

man condition.[62] His fate, he suggested, could be our own.[63] Jocasta's remark – that prophets often err and that dreams of incest are common[64] –struck Freud as decisive, for it seemed to expose the latent desires and repressions structuring the psyche. From this recognition came one of his most striking insights: the notion of the unconscious as the repository of desires that shape and evade conscious thought.

This idea first took shape in Freud's 1897 letter to Wilhelm Fliess, where he speculates that if Oedipus embodies the human condition, and Jocasta hints that the wish for union with a parent is universal, then such a drive must belong to human nature itself. Building on his clinical work, Freud later transformed this intuition into what he would call the Oedipus Complex, formally elaborated in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

According to this model, around the age of four children begin to develop sexual impulses. Unaware of these emotions, they often end up directing their desire toward the parent of the opposite sex. This desire is thwarted by the parent of the same sex, who becomes a rival for affection. Resolution of this conflict enables identification with the same-sex parent and integration into the symbolic order; failure to resolve it results in fixation and melancholic identification with the lost object of desire.

By reinterpreting the tragedy and appropriating Oedipus for psychoanalysis, Freud removed him from his original context –

[62] Cf. Clark 2009, p. 234.
[63] Cf. Freud 2005, p. 110.
[64] Ivi, p. 111.

Greek tragedy – and reframed him as a narrative about sexuality. This shift is crucial: it displaced the therapeutic function of one of tragedy's most powerful figures. Freud's reframing resonates with what Foucault identifies as the dominant tendency of the 19th and 20th centuries: shaping subjectivity around sexuality.[65] According to Foucault, psychoanalysis inaugurated a new era in discourse on sex, in sharp contrast to previous centuries.

Foucault challenges the modern myth of sexual liberation, the belief that the 19th century redeemed sex from the silence imposed by 17th an 18th century puritanism.[66] In earlier centuries, discourses on sex were governed by repressive logics that enforced silence regarding all forms of sexuality outside the marital contract: sex could be spoken of only in relation to procreation, while the existence of other forms, deemed deviant, was relegated to the brothel or the asylum.

According to Foucault, the 19th century did not abolish prohibitions but rather reconfigured it: from a repressive logic of prohibition to a productive logic[67] of exhortation. Compelling individuals to speak about sex, sexuality became a complex of practices and knowledge through which power took hold of individuals' lives, exposing them to observation, judgement, and classification as normal or abnormal.

Power thus began to control sexuality by presenting individuals with an image of their most intimate selves. Sexuality became a *dis-*

[65] Cf. Dreyfus - Rabinow 1983, pp. 173-174.
[66] See Foucault 1978, pp. 3-13.
[67] Cf. Fraser 1989, p. 18.

positif – a tool through which inner life is subjected to mechanics of power and knowledge strategies,[68] aligning it with the disciplinary logics of contemporary Western societies. Foucault writes:

> One has to be completely taken in by his internal ruse of confession in order to attribute a fundamental role to censorship, to taboos regarding speaking and thinking; one has to have an inverted image of power in order to believe that all these voices which have spoken so long in our civilization – repeating the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one is not thinking – are speaking us of freedom. An immense labor to which the West has submitted generations to produce [...] men's subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word.[69]

For Foucault, the medical field played a crucial role in establishing sexuality as a *dispositif* of power. Once reframed in medical terms, discourse on sex proliferated within the bourgeoisie:[70] the attempt to appropriate sexuality began with its scientific codification. This production of discourse was regulated through four strategic frameworks, largely shaped by medical examination, which structured prohibitions and taboos around sex – above all the hysterization of the female body, the psychologization of childhood sexuality, and the psychiatrization of perverse sexuality.

Sex thus emerged as both a biological and moral object, a powerful drive requiring dramatic forms of collective control and self-examination. Among these mechanisms, disciplinary power adopted

[68] Cf. Dreyfus - Rabinow 1983, pp. 169-178.
[69] Foucault 1978, p. 60.
[70] Ivi, pp. 104-106.

confession,[71] formerly used by ecclesiastical authority to govern souls. The central subject of confession was the body's desires, seen as a privileged access to individual truth. In the modern era, confession migrated from the religious to the medical domain,[72] finding in psychoanalysis one of its most refined expressions. Structured as the voluntary disclosure of inner truth within the asymmetric relationship between therapist and patient, psychoanalysis reactivates the logic of confession under a scientific guise. What induces individuals to submit to these mechanisms is the false belief in a repressive force that silences sexuality: speaking of desire, impulses, and perversions appears, then, subversive.[73] Individuals are led to believe they are challenging the establishment, yet they unwittingly comply with power. Psychoanalysis exposes the unconscious and reveals a hidden dimension of the psyche, containing the deepest, most secret desires and inclinations of the individual.

If modernity is defined by a "will to truth" that demands access to the truth of individuals, psychoanalysis, by granting access to the unconscious, becomes its most faithful ally. By revealing hidden truths and making them accessible to reason, it offers individuals access to their own truths,[74] while simultaneously embedding them within the disciplinary structure of power.

Foucault's analysis leads to the conclusion that psychoanalysis, far from fostering subjectivation through self-determination, instead enables subjectivation in the form of submission to the pow-

[71] See Dreyfus - Rabinow 1983, pp. 173-178.
[72] Cf. Lorenzini 2023, pp. 29-30.
[73] Cf. Foucault 1978, p. 6.
[74] Cf. Lorenzini 2023, p. 92.

er structures that dominate contemporary society.[75] The defining feature of this power is its productivity: it generates the very discourses, objects, and subjects over which it exerts control.

In the attempt to elucidate the mechanisms of the unconscious, Freud turned to one of tragedy's most emblematic figures, Oedipus, and reinterpreted his story, displacing its original therapeutic dimension. While approaching him as an admirer of classical culture, Freud decontextualized the myth and reimagined it within a sexual narrative aligned with contemporary discourses, positioning sexuality as the driving force behind subjectivation.

Foucault's analysis of the *dispositif* of sexuality suggests that Freud's reworking of the Oedipus myth was not simply a reinterpretation but a discursive move that helped shape the modern understanding of the psyche. Seen through a Foucauldian lens, the Oedipus myth unveils the intricate power relations that underpin psychological theory and invites reflection on the ways we construct and interpret reality.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the evolution of catharsis from its origins in Greek tragedy to its psychoanalytic reinterpretation, highlighting its role as both a psychological and social tool. From Aristotle to Freud, catharsis has been transformed from a collective, performative practice to a technique of individual regulation, mirroring the broader displacement of ritual plurality into institutional control.

[75] See, e.g., Hook 2007, pp. 19-61.

The paper analyzed how Freud's appropriation of Oedipus transformed the original therapeutic function of Greek tragedy into a modern mechanism of disciplinary control, aligning the cathartic release of the ancient audience with the psychic regulation of the individual. This shift, reflecting Foucault's theories on power, highlights the transition from collective emotional release to individualized psychological discipline. By tracing this evolution, the study emphasizes the need to reconsider the genealogies of emotions, truth, and power to address contemporary questions of subjectivity.

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