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Contesting Genealogies: Vernant's Oedipus Revisited

Jean-Pierre Vernant's essays on Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* radically changed the direction of the study of Greek tragedy in the Anglo-American classical academy. Although now more often cited than actually read, these essays remain massively influential for the study of Greek tragedy. Although there has recently been a growing interest in understanding Vernant's writing in the wider context of contemporary French thought, these essays have yet to be reconsidered against the background of this intellectual history. My paper will reassert the central importance of the French cultural and institutional context for understanding Vernant's writing. By examining how this genealogy has been obscured by the Anglo-Saxon reception of Vernant's essays, its aim will be to reclaim some of the original radicalism of this now familiar reading of Sophoclean tragedy.

More than twenty years ago, when the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant and the so-called "Parisian School" started to have an impact on the directions of Anglo-American classical research, a group of classicists had indeed become interested in the question of what Levi-Straussian anthropology or structuralism had to offer the study of the ancient world. From the analysis of myth and religious practices to the interpretation of ancient literary texts, the problem of how to harness these novel methodologies to the more traditional modes of engagement with antiquity became a preoccupation of many English-speaking classical scholars. This version of the "structuralist" debate may long have been buried. We no longer feel the need to ask what "structuralism" can do for classics. We are, however, still dealing today with the legacy of Vernant. There are few in the hellenist's ranks who would unselfconsciously call themselves Vernantians. And yet, it would be difficult to see now what an engagement with Greek tragedy would look like without at least some reference to his work. In this sense he has become an integral part of an Anglo-American classical tradition - he is very much one of us. My paper will argue that this construction is based on a dual level domestication of his ideas. I will be suggesting that we have not only lost sight of the radicalism of his methodology, but that in so doing we have also removed him from a fascinating cultural history of classical scholarship which gives a different sense of the nature of his preoccupations. In a reading of his most famous Oedipus essay, "Ambiguity and Reversal", I shall be showing how the terms of Vernant's enquiry, rather than emerging organically from the Greek text, place him at the very heart of a French post-war history of the anthropological study of the Greeks. Between Louis Gernet and Claude Levi-Strauss, Vernant's Oedipus is the product of the encounter between French classical studies and the development of anthropological theory which spans a century of French academic history. This paper, then, aims to offer a more "sociological" reflection on this essay, treating it as an important moment of the intellectual history of classical studies.