



PROJECT MUSE®

---

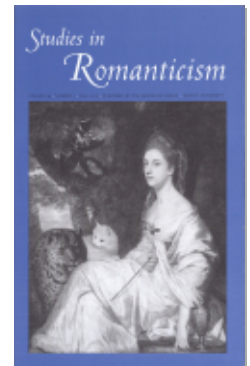
*The Tragedy of Fatherhood: King Laius and the Politics of Paternity in the West* by Silke-Maria Weineck (review)

Jeffrey A. Bernstein

Studies in Romanticism, Volume 54, Number 3, Fall 2015, pp. 429-431 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2015.0015>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/741570/summary>

# Book Reviews

Silke-Maria Weineck. *The Tragedy of Fatherhood: King Laius and the Politics of Paternity in the West*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. Pp. 208+x. \$29.95.

That the trope of “fatherhood” has played an overwhelmingly dominant role in the political, legal, and religious development of Western civilization is *per se* no monumental insight. The visible disjunction between that tropic organization and the existing family structures out of which it arose, however, might signal the exhaustion of a certain way of understanding what that civilization has been and what it might yet become. To understand the vicissitudes and functioning of this trope is the motivating force behind Silke Weineck’s illuminating *The Tragedy of Fatherhood: King Laius and the Politics of Paternity in the West*. In her words: “the father may still function as the *figure* of the law, but his traditional double function—to protect and prohibit—ha[s] long been absorbed by a state that ceased to resemble the family and had become a disembodied system” (4). If the father-trope is nothing more than an empty ideal, it fails to do justice both to (a) the intellectual possibilities inherent in the institutions of law, politics, and religion and to (b) the actualities inherent in fatherhood (as well as in motherhood). Weineck’s book is, therefore, not so much a critique of “paternity” (although it is that as well) as it is a genealogical diagnosis of a crucial philosophical, artistic, political, and theological self-understanding of the West.

If readers of this journal wonder why this book is being reviewed by a journal specializing in Romanticism, it perhaps suffices to mention the category of “figure.” While the *figure* of “figure” is as old as Homer and the Hebrew Bible, the *concept* of figure is given prominence in the 19th century when thinkers both German and English begin to view literary categories—e.g., tragedy—as philosophical problems. Thus, to paraphrase Peter Szondi’s famous remark, Aristotle may have given us a poetics of tragedy, but only with Schelling do we have a philosophy of tragedy. Thus, while Weineck’s perfervid study spans the works of Sophocles, the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Lessing, Kleist, and Freud, the optic she uses is (I believe) clearly one that emerges in the Romantic period. Differently stated, if the content of Weineck’s study traverses multiple historical periods, its form finds its decisive measure in the 19th century.

“One of [the] aspirations [of *Tragedy*] is to hear the fathers speak, in however mediated a way” (7). While paternity has dominated Western discourse, it does not “speak” in the first person (this despite the fact that Oedipus, *qua* literary character, speaks). Rather, one initially hears it through the voice of the sons: “The absence of the father’s voice as anything but a distorted echo in the writings of sons . . . has led to a pervasive failure to articulate the place of the father as a subject position” (7). If paternity rules through the traces or traumatic marks left on the children, then it cannot be other than repressive and defensive. The legal, political, and religious institutions that operate according to its logic amount, therefore, to a hollow standard that either bestows or robs legitimacy from concrete actors. This situation not only causes repression of these actors, but it also assures (in strict Athenian fashion) that the figure of the father will bestow a murderous destiny on his family: “If fatherhood, as I argue, is at core the always-tenuous incorporation of potentially conflicting . . . claims to legitimacy, then its form is itself tragic” (10). This is true no less for Freud, despite the fact that he changed the terrain on which the father exacts his discipline and/or protection from politics, religion, and family to psychological fantasy (or, “inner object” [15]).

The Sophoclean version of King Laius is given pride of place in Weineck’s study insofar as Laius exemplifies the silent (in fact, always already dead [29]) father that condemns his offspring to repeat his repressive and morbid constitution. It is Sophocles’ rendition that, in fact, becomes the figure of repression in the work of Freud: “Freudian paternity is a space in the shadow of Oedipus, and it is in that shadow space that Laius has lived for a very long time” (34). For Weineck, however, the power invested in this father is actually a product of “sonhood”—that is, it is the son who—in either dutifully following the father’s instruction or revolting against the father’s interdiction—establishes the primacy and perverse legitimacy of the father figure. In perhaps the most striking chapters of the book, Weineck traces this “Laius Complex” as it emerges in the two roots of Western civilization—Athens and Jerusalem: “our thoughts and feelings regarding fatherhood have been deeply shaped by two deeply conflicting grand traditions, one ancient Greek or Athenian, the other biblical. The distinction between Jerusalem and Athens emerges as that between a world in which there is an original father who, being fatherless himself, grounds and limits the power of all fathers after him, and a world in which the highest paternal power—Zeus—is always also a son whose revolt succeeded” (40). The manifestation of the Laius Complex in Greek tragedy involves the political privileging of “the *patria* over paternity, the fatherland over the father, in a radical yet metonymic slide that once again both invokes and destabilizes the father’s power” (57). In an analogous move to the Athenian

“sacrifice[ing of] the father to the polis,” the Hebrew Bible “sacrifices the son to the nation” (57). But whereas Oedipus’ fate is a result of Delphic prophecy, Abraham is directly *commanded* to sacrifice Isaac (59). In both cases, however, real fatherhood is eclipsed behind the paternal figure of politics and religion—neither Oedipus nor Abraham act like fathers. The first attempts to become his own successor by “fathering . . . children with [his] own mother” (55) while the second becomes one of the major scriptural patriarchs precisely in his abdication of fatherly responsibility (70).

It is the subsumption of real parenthood to the trope or myth of paternity that forms the political and religious landscape of the West. In subsequent chapters, Weineck deals deftly with the transformations of the *Laius Complex* in the thought of Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Lessing, Hegel, Kleist, Freud, Federn, Weininger, and Hofmannsthal. If it is beyond the confines of this review to detail the development of Weineck’s argument and readings of these texts, it is surely not beyond the confines of the reader’s engagement with her book to enjoy and learn from it. Mention should be made, however, of Weineck’s fascinating reading of Hobbes: the thinker most associated with tyranny turns out to be the thinker who most stringently interrupts the authoritarian trope of paternity by “locating the origin of [paternal] power in the appeal of an infant in need” (115)—paradoxically, it is Hobbes who defends fatherhood. And although this brief moment in *Leviathan*—“almost concealed within the relentless logic of power grounded in the specter of death” (115)—does not appear to exert the gravitational pull away from the aforementioned trope, it does glimpse at a question that Weineck does not answer (mainly because it has no philosophical answer): What does it mean to be a father? For this, as well as for her impeccable treatment of the paternal trope, I suggest that *The Tragedy of Fatherhood* is a book for the whole family.

Jeffrey A. Bernstein  
College of the Holy Cross

Brian McGrath. *The Poetics of Unremembered Acts: Reading, Lyric, Pedagogy*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013. Pp. 167. \$45.

Who remembers learning to read? No doubt most of us claim memories of a self that preceded literal literacy; but does anyone—can anyone—possess as a memory that fabulous instant (supposing it were to exist as an instant) when marks become letters? No pedagogical accomplishment, in the modern developed world, is more ordinary than learning to read; but a touch of necromancy still lies latent in this moment when it is imagined