Skenè Studies I • 2

Oedipus at Colonus and *King Lear*: Classical and Early Modern Intersections

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

Supplement to *SKENÈ. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies*

ISSN 2464-9295
ISBN 979-12-200-6185-8

SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
https://textsandstudies.skeneproject.it/index.php/TS
info@skeneproject.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezzù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138

Contents

8

Lost and Found in Translation: Early Modern Receptions of *Oedipus at Colonus*

Robert S. Miola

Abstract

I here survey some early modern receptions of *Oedipus at Colonus* to discover what especially struck early modern readers of the play, and how their excerpts, commentaries, and translations transformed the Greek text to serve later political and moral ends. I begin with the fragmentation of the play into *sententiae* and proverbs by Bartolomeo Marliani and Desiderius Erasmus. Then I examine the influential reception of Joachim Camerarius, who sought to read Greek tragedy in light of contemporary understanding of Aristotle and the *Poetics*. Philipp Melanchthon offered a translation and commentary that advanced a polemically Christian reading of Greek tragedy. Heir to these traditions, John Milton created the period's most brilliant reimagining of Greek tragedy and *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Samson Agonistes* (1671). Milton's reception illuminates by contrast Shakespeare's outright denial of moralizing *sententia* traditions and the Christian hermeneutic in *King Lear*.

Keywords: *Oedipus at Colonus*; sententiae; Bartolomeo Marliani; Desiderius Erasmus; Joachim Camerarius; Philipp Melanchthon; Aristiotle's *Poetics*; *King Lear*: John Milton

What certainly seems to be missing from early modern receptions of *Oedipus at Colonus* is any modern sense of its originality, its stunning volte-face from *Oedipus Tyrannos*, wherein the gods torment Oedipus, polluted by guilt and shame; here he thrice asserts his moral innocence and assumes the just treatment of the gods, basing his belief and actions in a new oracle. Divinely favoured, Oedipus rises to moral authority and heroic stature in death (see, e.g., Knox 1964: 143-62; Edmunds 2006: 26-30, 50-3). This transformation seems not to be noted either by ancients like Longinus,

who commented on the superb visualization of the ending but not its significance (*On the Sublime*, 15.7); and it appears to be rejected by Seneca, who portrayed in *Phoenissae* the aged Oedipus as guilty and longing for death as release. Mesmerized by Aristotle's discussion of *Oedipus Tyrannos*, early modern Italian and English theorists tend to ignore this play altogether except for passing comments. I have found only Castelvetro's notice that, like Euripides' *Iphigenia* plays, Sophocles' *Oedipus* plays differ in "plots, complications, and resolutions" (Castelvetro 1984: 136); and Denores' mention of the play among those works that feature a change in fortune but not a true reversal or recognition (Denores 1972: 393).

Like much of Sophoclean drama, *Oedipus at Colonus* reached many early modern readers not as drama at all but as wise or memorable sayings, usually translated into Latin. The urge to mine ancient texts for *sententiae* arose from belief in the wisdom of the ancients, the universality of human experience, and the compatibility of at least some pagan and Christian teachings. In 1545 Bartolomeo Marliani published a Greek and Latin life of Sophocles along with *sententiae pulcherrimae* in Greek with Latin translation. As he explains in the Dedicatory Epistle, "simul & nonnullas, quas Graeci γνώμας vocant, eiusdem Poetae sententias, in vnum congessi, interpretatione Latina, ad eorum vsum, qui Graecas literas ignorant, praeterea apposita" (1545: sig. Aiiv), "at the same time from this poet, I gathered together in one place some wise sayings, which the Greeks call *gnomai*, with Latin translation placed beside, for the benefit of those who do not understand Greek". Marliani arranges the entries according to play rather than theme or subject and prints 23 excerpts, ranging from one to seven lines, from *Oedipus at Colonus* in chronological order. The collection begins with Oedipus's opening declaration and Marliani's acceptable rendering:

> στέργειν γὰρ αἱ πάθαι με χὠ χρόνος ξυνὼν
> μακρὸς διδάσκει καὶ τὸ γενναῖον τρίτον (7-8)[1]

1 I quote all Greek from Lloyd-Jones and Wilson (eds.), 1990, with modernized sigmas. All translations from Greek and Latin are mine. For general accounts of the play and its reception see Scharffenberger (2017) and Finglass (2018).

> Calamitates primum, deinde longum tempus,
> nouissime genus, docent me paruis contentum esse.
> (sig. Cii)
>
> [First sufferings, then time long my companion, and third, my nobility, teach me to be content with few things.]

But the passage is wholly removed from its dramatic context: there is no rural setting on the outskirts of Athens, no sacred grove of the Eumenides, rock ridge, or statue of Colonus. The lines are not spoken to Antigone by Oedipus, blind wanderer, mythical and colossal figure of suffering, who here, surprisingly and proleptically, presents himself in some sense, as post-traumatic. In time he has learned στέργειν, to feel affection, to accept suffering, to be content. Instead no identifiable person speaks the lines in no specific place or time and for no specific reason. Oedipus's revelation of hard-won knowledge functions here as a detached, general, vaguely Stoic exhortation to be content with less rather than more.

Such anonymity and decontextualization facilitate the compiler's didactic purpose, his presentation of excerpted passages as timeless, universally applicable *sententiae*. Oedipus's argument to Theseus that Athens may someday need protection from Thebes since change is inevitable becomes similarly dislocated into an isolated set piece on that favourite early modern theme, mutability, here broken into two separate entries for easier apprehension and remembrance.

> Soli Dii
> Non senescunt, nec moriuntur:
> caetera omnia confundit, & superat tempus.
> Perit enim terrae vis, perit & corporis:
> perit & fides, pullulat perfidia.
> Nec eadem voluntas
> amicis est semper, neque ciuitatibus.
> (sig. Cii)
>
> [Only the gods do not grow old, nor die; time confounds and conquers all other things. Even strength of earth and of the body dies, faith also dies, treachery springs up. Good will does not endure among friends forever, and not among cities.]

> Aliis nunc, alias aliis iocunda
> amara fiunt, & rursus grata.
> (sig. Ciiv)
>
> [For some now and others at another time, joyful things become bitter and pleasing back again.]

Theseus's reminder to himself to listen first before a decision (594, ἄνευ γνώμης γὰρ οὔ με χρὴ ψέγειν, "For I must not blame without judgement") becomes elevated into a general principle, "Nihil est vt umquam temere loquamur" (sig. Cii, "We must never speak rashly"). The movement to the first-person plural subjunctive substitutes the reader for the Sophoclean speaker and transforms the meaning. Later, Oedipus's anguished defense of his actions, done unwittingly, culminates in this bitter accusatory question to Creon: πῶς ἂν τό γ' ἄκον πρᾶγμ' ἂν εἰκότως ψέγοις; (977, "how could you reasonably blame an involuntary action?"). Again using the first-person subjunctive, Marliani turns the climactic moment into this bland general axiom: "Non est vt rem non sponte peractam merito vituperemus" (sig. Ciiv, "It is not fair that we find fault with an action done involuntarily").

Sometimes Marliani's Latin translations travel an even greater distance from their Sophoclean originals. Creon's assertion about anger knowing no old age until death (954-5) becomes a confused commonplace about old age and fear of death without any mention of anger: "Senectus nihil est aliud, quam timor mortis: / sed mortuos nullos attingit dolor" (sig. Ciiv, "Old age is nothing other than fear of death; but sorrow touches none of the dead"). Occasionally, the compiler misconstrues alien Greek ideas and beliefs. Not wishing to spread his pollution by touch, Oedipus recoils from Theseus and says,

> τοῖς γὰρ ἐμπείροις βροτῶν
> μόνοις οἷόν τε συνταλαιπωρεῖν τάδε.
> (1135-6)
>
> [Only those mortals experienced in these things are fit to share in the misery.]

Here, Jebb notes (in Sophocles 2004: 181), Oedipus asserts that the κηλὶς κακῶν (1134, "the stain of evils") that defiles him despite

his protestations of moral innocence cannot be contracted anew by his daughters as they are already involved in the family misfortunes. Wholly missing the Greek subtext about pollution and physical contact, Marliani translates to make a very different general observation about suffering and pity:

> Qui non ignari malorum sunt,
> Facile est aliorum miseriis commoueri.
> (sig. Ciii)
>
> [Those who are not ignorant of woes themselves are easily moved by the woes of others.]

After Oedipus's triumphant death, moreover, Theseus tells his daughters to stop grieving:

> ἐν οἷς γὰρ
> χάρις ἡ χθονία νὺξ ἀπόκειται,
> πενθεῖν οὐ χρή· νέμεσις γάρ.
> (1751-3)
>
> [In cases where the favour of the underworld is stored up as the night, it is not right to mourn; that will bring nemesis, or retribution.]

Theseus here imagines death as χάρις ἡ χθονία, "the kindness of the Dark Powers" (1900: 269) in Jebb's fine phrase, and warns against νέμεσις, the mysterious process of divine anger and punishment. Marliani renders the passage as follows:

> Cum mors pro beneficio data est,
> non est cur lugeas,
> ne deos ad iram prouoces.
> (sig. Ciiii)
>
> [When death is given as a benefit there is no reason you should mourn, lest you provoke the gods to wrath.]

The dark powers of the underworld disappear into the neutral passive construction and the terrifying nemesis dwindles into a paraphrase.

The humanist project of reception by fragmentation culminates in Erasmus' great collection of proverbs, first published as

Adagiorum Collectanea (1500, 953 entries) and finally as *Adagiorum Chiliades* (1536, 4151 entries). To improve and adorn writing and speaking Erasmus collects brief *sententiae* that are witty and popular, adagia or paroemiae, or in other words, proverbs: "Paroemia est celebre dictum scita quapiam nouitate insigne" (1536: 3, "the proverb is a famous saying, remarkable for some shrewd novelty"). Under each proverb Erasmus provides explanations, illustrations, parallel passages from antiquity, and at times commentary on contemporary issues such as the vanity of princes, the corruption of the church, and the new humanism. The main organizational principle of this collection is not source or author but the proverb or proverbial phrase, under which Erasmus gathers an astonishing range of classical examplars, including, according to Margaret Mann Phillips' analysis of sources, 115 references to Sophocles (1964: 401). Among these I count 8 quotations from *Oedipus at Colonus*.[2] The lines Marliani botched about anger lasting until death appear here correctly under the heading "Ira omnium tardissime senescit" (1.7.13, "Anger grows old most tardily"), as does the passage on change under "Omnium rerum vicissitudo est" (1.7.63, "There is change in all things"), and the grim choral reflection on the futility and pain of human life (*OC* 1225-6) under "Optimum non nasci" (2.3.49, "It is best not to be born"). Though Erasmus is a better reader of classical texts than Marliani, he too parcels out the play into memorable snippets, and thus subscribes to the same decontextualizing, rhetoricizing, and moralizing hermeneutic.

Like Marliani, Erasmus sometimes distorts the text of *Oedipus at Colonus* by decontextualized quotation. The entry for "Gratia gratiam parit" (1.1.34, "One favour begets another"), for example, quotes *OC* 779, χάρις χάριν φέροι, "his kindness would bring kindness". But the quotation omits the all-important adverbial οὐδὲν, "not at all". In context the original passage depicts Oedipus as rejecting Creon's offer of fake hospitality and turns on a double meaning of χάρις both as a benefit and as something perceived as such. It actually says, "this kindness would bring no real kindness at all". The citation under "Senem erigere" (3.4.20, "To raise

2 I have used the indices provided by the Erasmus of Rotterdam Society and the Toronto *Collected Works* edition, vol. 30.

up an old man") travels an even further distance from the originating play. Erasmus quotes *OC* 395, γέροντα δ' ὀρθοῦν φλαῦρον ὃς νέος πέσῃ ("It is a poor thing to raise up an old man who fell as a youth"). This is Oedipus's bitter reply to Ismene's excited revelation of the prophecy that his body will protect the land where it is buried; it is a direct riposte to her comment, νῦν γὰρ θεοί σ' ὀρθοῦσι, πρόσθε δ' ὤλλυσαν (394, "Now indeed the gods raise you up, though before they destroyed you"). In context Oedipus's line is a bitter reflection on the gods' late generosity, a complaint about the prospect of being raised up after a lifetime of being fallen down. Erasmus, however, translates, "Erigere durum est, qui cadat iuuenis, senem" (1536: 721, "It is a hard thing to raise up (straighten out) an old man who has fallen as a youth"), and the change from φλαῦρον ("poor, petty, trivial") to "durum" ("hard, difficult") changes the absent subject of the infinitive from the gods to the old man, and initiates an entirely different reading of the raising and falling. "Haud facile dediscuntur a senibus uitia, quae pueri didicerint, & in omnem inhaeserint uitam. Et tamen in senecta quoque conandum, ut uitiis careamus, quantumuis inhaeserint" (1536: 721, "Not easily do old men unlearn those vices which they learned as youths and which have become ingrained throughout their lives. But nevertheless in old age too we must attempt to be without vices, howsoever ingrained"). This reading entirely misses the point of Oedipus's reply, his rueful protest at the powers above who destroy humans and then capriciously prop them up just before death. Instead we hear a little sermon on the difficulty old people have in breaking bad habits and becoming free of long practiced sins.[3]

The *sententiae* tradition continues in Latin translations of Sophocles by Gabia (1543), Lalamant (1557), Naogeorg (1558), and Rataller (1570), wherein marginal quotation marks identify wise sayings and memorable passages. Naogeorg (1558: 308) even tags *OC* 1225-6 ("Optimum non nasci") as "Celebrata multis sententia" ("a wise saying celebrated by many"), before ascribing it to

3 Erasmus rarely goes so far astray, and since this quotation is one of the very few that lacks identification of author and play, let alone any explanation of dramatic context, it may well derive from an intermediary source.

Silenus on the testimony of Cicero and Lactantius, and referencing Erasmus' *Chiliades*. The fragmentation of Sophoclean tragedy into Greek phrases adorned with Latin explication and paraphrase reaches an entirely different level of complexity and importance in Joachim Camerarius' *Commentarii interpretationum argumenti thebaidos fabularum Sophoclis* (1534). As the title indicates Camerarius published a running commentary on *OC* in the context of Sophocles' three Theban plays, situating it logically in the middle of the action that begins in *OT* and ends in *Antigone*. He glosses over two hundred Greek words, phrases and lines with philological, rhetorical, and moralistic commentary. The passages on the vicissitudes of time, anger never growing old, and on not being born are all duly noted as *sententiae* but placed in the context of the developing action. Camerarius seriously engages with the play as drama, making comments on the characters and stage action, including the climactic thunder at the end (1534: sig. H6) that signals Oedipus's imminent death and the fulfillment of the oracle. The commentary, furthermore, belongs to a fully articulated theory of interpretation, what Michael Lurie has well called the "Aristotelization of Greek tragedy" (2012: 441), the viewing of the plays through the lens of the *Poetics*, as then understood. For Camerarius Sophoclean tragedy presents the spectacle of a good person suffering an undeserved fate that arouses pity and fear:

> At ubi uir bonus & honestatis uirtutisque amans, indignum in malum impellitur quasi fatali ui, aut peccata vel non voluntate, vel ignoratione quoque commissa, poenas extremas sustinent, tum & metus & misericordia talibus ab exemplis homines inuadit, et lamenta horroresque excitantur. (1534: sig. B3)
>
> [But when a good man, loving honesty and virtue, is driven to an undeserved end as by the force of fate or by sins committed involuntarily or ignorantly, and these sustain extreme punishments, then both fear and pity by such examples seize men and laments and dread are aroused.]

The auditors, themselves "extra pericula, tamen horrescant representatione eorum quae diximus" (1534: sig B2v, "outside of danger, nevertheless shudder at the representation of those things we mentioned"). Camerarius says that by common consent the first

among such works are Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, "Oedipus duplex" (sig. B2v), according to a witty marginal manuscript note, the second play being a continuation and culmination of the first, both presenting a good man driven to an undeserved, and therefore tragic, end.

Others perceived "Oedipus duplex" differently and reached different conclusions about the protagonist, his fate, and the nature of Greek tragedy. Philipp Melanchthon advanced a Christian interpretation and argued that Greek tragedies depicted just punishments for "depraved passions" (1555: sig. a2v, "prauis cupiditatibus").[4] Spectators of Sophocles and the others learned to turn themselves "towards moderation and control of desires" (1555: sig. a2, "ad moderationem, et frenandas cupiditates"). Melanchthon declared further that all Greek tragedy taught one universal truth, "quam Vergilius reddidit: Discite iustitiam, monui, et non spernere divos" [*Aen.* 6. 620] (1555: sig. a2v, "as Vergil rendered it, 'Learn Justice,' I advised, 'and do not scorn the gods'"). The plays pointed upward to reveal the guiding presence of "aliquam mentem eternam" (1555: sig. a2v, "some eternal mind") that always dispenses deserved punishments and rewards, not Zeus, Poseidon or any of the Olympian deities, that is, but the just Judaeo-Christian God.

Melanchthon's Christian interpretation, advanced as early as 1545, became the dominant hermeneutic of reception, evident in the Latin translations of Lalamant (1557), Naogeorg (1558), Rataller (1570), and others. In time even Camerarius got on board, echoing these ideas in his later published commentary on all seven Sophoclean tragedies, *Commentatio explicationum omnium tragoediarum Sophoclis* (Basel, 1556). Here Camerarius argues that Sophoclean tragedy teaches two things: 1) "When things turn out contrarily to men's hope and expectation, there is some greater

4 Melanchthon, of course, develops a tradition of Christian interpretation that Edmunds (2006: 62-78) traces variously through Statius' *Thebaid*, the *Roman de Thèbes*, Boccaccio, Lydgate, the anonymous 12th-century *Planctus Oedipi*, and medieval stories of Judas and Pope Gregory. In the later exemplars, "the common theme in these medieval recastings of the figure of Oedipus is repentance and redemption" (ibid.: 77). Dramatizing Boccaccio, Hans Sachs's tragedy *Jocasta* (1550) refigures the Erinys as Satan and the blinding as "failure to bear one's cross" (ibid.: 88-9).

power than human, a moderator and controller of all things in this world" (1556: sig. a4v, "cum plurima eueniant contra spem & expectationem hominum, esse aliquam uim maiorem, quam humana esse possit, moderatricem & gubernatricem rerum omnium in hoc mundo"); 2) "It must be understood that changes are inherent in all human life, as well as a variety of fortune, and that this indicates the necessity of prudence" (1556: sig. a4v, "Secundum, cognoscendam esse humanae naturae conditionem, & rerum vices, atque fortunae varietatem; & hac consideratione comparandam prudentiam"). Furthermore, in a change from his earlier view, Camerarius declared that Sophocles' tragedies displayed providential justice in action, punishing the wicked person for "culpa impietatis, audaciae, superbiae, peruicaciae suae" (1556: sig. a4v, "for his fault of impiety, boldness, pride, obstinacy"). "Human wisdom cannot understand" the will of the eternal (1556: sig. a4v, "humana sapientia perspicere nequit"), but nevertheless it can distinguish between virtue and vice and follow one and avoid the other (1556: sig. a4v-a5, "tamen omnes sciunt sensu naturae infinitio, esse aliquid honestum (quod uocamus uirtutem) & huic contrarium turpe in uita (cui nomen est uitium), & illud sequendum, hoc fugiendum"). In this interpretation the plays take place in a rational, humanly comprehensible and just universe, wherein the gods reward virtue and punish vice.

Melanchthon's student, Veit Winshemius, produced a Latin edition of his teacher's lectures on Sophocles (1546) and gave these ideas specific application and wider circulation. The tragedies present "many outstanding examples of human misfortune" (1546: sig A3, "imagines multae illustres humanarum calamitatum"), which serve sometimes for warning, sometimes for consolation (1546: sig. A3, "tum ad commonefactionem, tum ad consolationem"). The disasters that befall the house of Laius and Oedipus originate in "tetra libido Laii" (1546: sig A4v, "the foul lust of Laius"), who raped Chrysippus and begot Oedipus in defiance of a warning oracle. The disasters deter audiences from vice, teach them to control wicked passions, and show that evil deeds will always be divinely punished ("sed statuebat vere diuinitus puniri scelera", 1546: sig A4v). *Oedipus at Colonus* features specifically another moral lesson: "Honora parentes" (1546: sig. R4v, "Honour

parents"), an echo of the Decalogue. And Oedipus's advice to Theseus not to trust in present concords also carries sage political advice grounded in universal wisdom, "quod nihil firmi aut fidi sit in foederibus & societatibus hominum" (1546: sig. R5, "because there is nothing firm or trustworthy in the treaties and unions of men").

In Winshemius and Melanchthon's edition of the play marginalia gloss the Latinized text to point these morals and adorn the tale. Oedipus's opening remarks about the lessons of his past exile (7, στέργειν) get the predictable gloss about "patientiam" (1546: sig. R8, "patience"). Theseus's kind reception of his fellow mortal Oedipus (568-9) occasions a general recommendation of mercy and hospitality, "aliorum calamitates debent nobis esse doctrina modestiae, & misericordiae" (1546: sigs. T3r-v, "the calamities of others should teach us the doctrine of humility and compassion"). Creon's assertion that Oedipus must endure his insolence (883) draws this censure, "Vox tyrranica, fatetur iniuriam esse sed tamen ferre eos oportere" (1546: sig. V1v, "the tyrant's voice confesses something to be an injury but nevertheless believes that others should bear it"). Speeches are marked according to rhetorical kind (precatio, deprecatio, oratio, querela, metalepsis, occupatio, encomion, insinuatio, apostrophe, petitio, narratio, antithesis, amplificatio); the wise saying gets glossed as "locus communis" (1546: sig. V8), or "sententia" (1546: sig V8v, "optimum non nasci", again). Significantly, Oedipus's defence of himself to the Chorus (*OC* 258ff.) gets twice marked as "excusatio": "Excusatio, feci non volens, feci ignarus" (1546: sig. S5. "Excuse, I did it unwillingly; unknowing, I did it") and "Excusatio de nece paterna" ("Excuse, concerning the killing of the father"). This same label also marks Creon's specious defence of himself and Oedipus's answer, his self-defence because of ignorance and divine compulsion (*OC* 939ff., 1546: sigs V3r-v). The term "excusatio" reduces the complex moral issues to a rhetorical form that suggests the very guilt Oedipus would deny. *Qui s'excuse, s'accuse.* We will not long be troubled in this translation by Oedipus's eloquent voice of protest and suffering.

Instead, the *consolatio* promised in the preface for Greek tragedy in general will three times appear duly marked to comfort the

reader in the conclusion of this play: the first "consolation" glosses the choral counsel of acceptance (1694, τὸ θεοῦ καλῶς φέρειν, "bear courageously what comes from God"): "Consolatio prima: Quod Deus ita destinauit, id patienter ferendum esse" (1546: sig Y1, "First Consolation: What God has so decreed must be patiently borne"). The second glosses 1720-3: ἀλλ᾽ ἐπεὶ ὀλβίως ἔλυ- / σεν τέλος, ὦ φίλαι, βίου, / λήγετε τοῦδ᾽ ἄχους· κακῶν / γὰρ δυσάλωτος οὐδείς, "But since he has completed well his end, stop grieving: for no one is hard for evils to capture". The marginal note reads, "II Consolatio: haec est communis sors hominum" (1546: sig. Y1v-Y2, "Second Consolation: this is the common fate of men"). The third consolation glosses Theseus's lines (1751-3), here given to the Chorus: παύετε θρῆνον, παῖδες· ἐν οἷς γὰρ / χάρις ἡ χθονία νὺξ ἀπόκειται, / πενθεῖν οὐ χρή· νέμεσις γάρ, "Cease to lament, children. In cases where the favour of the underworld is stored up as the night, it is not right to mourn; that will bring nemesis, or retribution". Here the translation of the text wanders a bit: "Desinite lugere filiae: Nam quibus / Mors exoptata contigit / Eos deplorare non decet, neque fas est" (1546: sig Y2v, "Cease to mourn, daughters. For those whom a longed-for death comes it is not fitting to mourn, nor is it right"). As in Marliani's rendering, χάρις ἡ χθονία (175), "the favour of the underworld" disappears, this time becoming simply "mors exoptata" ("longed-for death"); nemesis makes just a token appearance, unexplained, in an asterisked marginal note ("vel prohibit Nemesis", "or Nemesis prohibits it"). The marginal note hastens to offer the promised comfort: "III Consolatio: Cum eo bene actum est qui decessit sicut optauit" (1546: sig. Y2v, "Third Consolation: his lot is a happy one when one has died as he has wished"). Here again, all is as it should be. The reader of this Greek tragedy is thrice consoled.

In this Christianizing tradition stands *Samson Agonistes*, John Milton's Hebraic re-imagining of Greek tragedy and *Oedipus at Colonus*. In the preface Milton himself praises ancient tragedy as "the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems" and then invokes Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Citing Paul's putative quotation of Euripides, Pareus' classification of the Book of Revelation as a tragedy, and Gregory Nazianzen's supposed authorship of the play *Christ Suffering*, Milton insists on the com-

patibility of Christianity and classical tragedy. Studies have long recognized the impress of ancient drama and provided a detailed analysis of Milton's indebtedness to Greek tragedy and *Oedipus at Colonus*, noting many parallels in plot, character, and rhetoric, though most prudently stop short of claiming Sophocles' play as a direct source.[5] Both *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Samson Agonistes* begin with the hero as a blind beggar in rags, who bears the burden of his past and receives a Chorus as well as a series of challenging visitors. Each experiences a prompting that leads directly to the catastrophe, the thunder that summons Oedipus to his end, the "rouzing motions" (1382) that prompt Samson to go to the festival. Both die offstage, astonished messengers report, and both deaths get represented in the plays as a kind of expiation and reconciliation with the divine. Both deaths have national as well as personal dimensions, guaranteeing variously the futures of Athens and Israel.

It has not been as well noted that Milton's Greek tragedy dramatizes and culminates the traditions of early modern reception represented by Marliani, Erasmus, Camerarius, and Melanchthon. Not meant for staging, the play is constructed as a long dramatic poem (the 1671 edition appeared with through line numbering), replete with rhetorical figures and devices (see Moss 1965). The play features many memorable and excerptable *sententiae*, often, for better and for worse, voiced by the Chorus. "Apt words have power to swage / The tumors of a troubl'd mind" (184-5), they solemnly intone. Consoling Samson, they offer a general observation on human nature: "wisest Men / Have err'd, and by bad Women been deceiv'd; / And shall again" (210-12). Reflections often appear as a familiar type of admonition: "Yet beauty, though injurious, hath strange power, / After offence returning, to regain / Love once possest" (1003-5). There is sententious preaching: "Just are the ways of God, / And justifiable to Men; / Unless there be who think not God at all" (293-5). And there are plenty of those commonplaces so attractive to later compilers and writers of marginalia: "Fathers are wont to lay up for thir Sons" (1485); "Sons wont to

5 See Parker 1963: 168-76; Mueller (1980: 193-212) offers extended analysis of *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Samson Agonistes* as tragedies of "Deliverance".

nurse thir Parents in old age" (1487). Samson believes that he has become an adage himself, his story having been reduced to a negative exemplar, a cautionary tale about sin and punishment: "Am I not sung and proverbd for a Fool / In every street, do they not say, how well / Are come upon him his deserts?" (203-5).

At one point in the play the Chorus explicitly refers to the *sententiae* traditions in order to commend the very virtue commentators found in *Oedipus at Colonus*: "Many are the sayings of the wise / In antient and in modern books enroll'd; / Extolling Patience as the truest fortitude" (652-4). Milton's commendation of this virtue here is entirely consistent with the praise of "the better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom" in *Paradise Lost* (9.32-3) and the commendation of Job's patience in *Paradise Regained* (1.426). And this commendation significantly echoes later in *Samson Agonistes* as the Chorus lauds patience as the acceptance of suffering and reliance in God that enable triumph over all adversity and misfortune:

> But patience is more oft the exercise
> Of Saints, the trial of thir fortitude,
> Making them each his own Deliverer,
> And Victor over all
> That tyrannie or fortune can inflict,
> Either of these is in thy lot,
> Samson, with might endu'd
> Above the Sons of men; but sight bereav'd
> May chance to number thee with those
> Whom Patience finally must crown.
> (1287-96)

These articulated and integrated traditions of reception advance a reading of Samson as the suffering hero of the play who learns to practice patience after accepting responsibility for his sins. Many voices, including Samson's own, echo Winshemius and Melanchthon to moralize his tragedy. Their condemnation of "depraved passions" echoes in his pained recognition of the "foul effeminacy" that held him "yok't" to Dalilah (410). Blinded, in rags, bereft of his strength, he laments his betrayal of his divinely appointed mission, "Who like a foolish Pilot have shipwrack't, / My

Vessel trusted to me from above" (198-9), and sees himself, "ad commonefactionem", "to Ages an example" (765).

These voices sound strongly at the end to portray Samson finally as God's chosen instrument, as the hero who regains his lost virtue and identity. After hearing of his destruction of the temple and death, Manoa declares "Samson hath quit himself / Like Samson, and heroicly hath finish'd / A life Heroic, on his Enemies / Fully reveng'd" (1709-12). The Chorus fully moralizes the spectacle, first condemning the Philistines for their sinfulness, "Drunk with idolatry, drunk with wine / And fat regorg'd of Bulls and Goats, / Chaunting thir Idol" (1670-2). They go on to sermonize about the foolishness of mortals who invite their own destruction and the just wrath of the Almighty:

> So fond are mortal men
> Fall'n into wrath divine,
> As thir own ruin on themselves to invite,
> Insensate left, or to sense reprobate,
> And with blindness internal struck.
> (1682-86)

Finally, the Chorus affirms the unsearchable wisdom of divine Providence, and summarizes the tragedy, "ad consolationem":

> CHOR. All is best, though we oft doubt,
> What th' unsearchable dispose
> Of highest wisdom brings about,
> And ever best found in the close.
> Oft he seems to hide his face,
> But unexpectedly returns
> And to his faithful Champion hath in place
> Bore witness gloriously,
> (1745-52)

These lines reference the catharsis promised in the preface, the purgation of pity and fear and terror and like passions: the Chorus claims that righteous viewers of "this great event" gain "peace and consolation . . . And calm of mind, all passion spent" (1756-8).

But not all readers have been duly consoled as instructed and some have thought that the Chorus of consolation, like

its many classical counterparts, doth protest too much.[6] For one thing, Samson is far more articulate and persuasive on what he did wrong than on what he does right, which, after all, happens off stage. Readers must infer regeneration and restoration from an absent and silent protagonist. Those "rouzing motions" (1382) that move him to go to the Gaza festival, moreover, may be the promptings of divine grace, but a previous "intimate impulse" (223) Samson believed to be "motion'd" (222) of God moved him to his first ill-fated marriage with "the daughter of an infidel". There is no prayer to God, as in the Biblical source, Judges, and no assurance of any heavenly reward in the afterlife. The destruction of the temple results in his own death and that of many others, and while the post 9/11 sensibility that brands his actions as religious terrorism is surely anachronistic, the ending certainly sorts oddly and unexpectedly with the depiction of repentance and patience. The Chorus, after all, may be right, and our doubt may be simply the necessary condition for our faith, but the play has left many with disquieting uncertainty.

All this is to say that the full expression of pity, terror and the darker energies of Greek tragedy had to wait for another day and another play. That play, I submit, is *King Lear*, which stages and cancels the early modern hermeneutics of reception. The Fool's rhymed advice (arranged as verse in F) evokes the moralizing sententiae tradition:

> . . . more than thou showest,
> Speak less than thou knowest,
> Lend less than thou owest,
> Ride more than thou goest,
> Learn more than thou trowest,
> Set less than thou throwest,
> Leave thy drink and thy whore,
> And keep in-a-door,
> And thou shalt have more
> Than two tens to a score.
> (1.4.116-25)

6 See, e.g., Wittreich 2002, Mohamed 2005, and the spirited refutation of Gregory 2010.

The recitation of these "wise sayings", "ad commonefactionem", concludes in nonsense arithmetic; in the Quarto Lear aptly observes, "This is nothing, fool" (Q 126).[7] Edgar as Poor Tom similarly evokes the *sententiae* tradition, even echoing the Decalogue: "Take heed o' the foul fiend; obey thy parents, keep thy word justly, swear not, commit not with man's sworn spouse, set not thy sweet-heart on proud array" (3.4.78-80); "Keep thy foot out of brothels, thy hand out of plackets, thy pen from lenders' books, and defy the foul fiend" (94-6). Here the precepts of conventional morality and proverbial wisdom, voiced by a beggar pretending to be a madman, are manifestly inadequate to the situation. Such familiar injunctions provide little protection against the rising storm of evil in the play. Edgar's choric commentary later fully dilates upon the familiar proverb "It is good to have company in trouble (misery)" (Dent 1981: C571):

> When we our betters see bearing our woes,
> We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
> Who alone suffers, suffers most i'the mind,
> Leaving free things and happy shows behind.
> But then the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip,
> When grief hath mates and bearing fellowship.
> (3.6.99-104)

Later he expands upon another proverb, "When things are at the worse they will mend" (Dent 1981: T216):

> To be worst,
> The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,
> Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.
> The lamentable change is from the best,
> The worst returns to laughter.
> (4.1.2-6)

But company in misery in this play means more not less suffering, Edgar painfully learns when he meets his blinded father a few moments later. He then precisely contradicts the second proverb:

7 For references to *Lear* I have used Foakes' Arden edition (1997) but sometimes departed from it to quote the Quarto reading; in such case I have prefaced the citation with "Q".

> O gods! Who is't can say "I am at the worst"?
> I am worse than e'er I was
> . . .
> And worse I may be yet; the worst is not
> So long as we can say "This is the worst".
> (4.1.27-30)

Familiar commonplaces offer no solace in a world where suffering has no limits.

Many voices in the play speak "ad consolationem", declaring that the gods above are just and that they reward the good and punish the wicked. Edmund, for example, tells Gloucester of his warning to Edgar: "I told him the revenging gods / 'Gainst parricides did all their thunders bend" (2.1.45-6). But the reported conversation is a fiction, part of Edmund's plot to disinherit his brother, and Edmund, ironically, will be responsible for his father's blinding and death later. Brother Edgar similarly assures Gloucester of the gods' providential care when he reports their intervention against the horned demon: "Think that the clearest gods, who made them honours / Of men's impossibilities have preserved thee" (4.6.73-4). The comfort gains additional authority by allusion to Matthew 19: 26 ("With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible"). But this is another fiction, a lie told to free Gloucester from suicidal despair: there is no demon, no cliff, and no miraculous preservation. These two direct assertions of divine order appear as blatant falsehoods.

When Regan plucks his beard, the bound Gloucester himself significantly protests, "By the kind gods 'tis most ignobly done" (3.7.35). After Cornwall puts out one of his eyes, he cries, "O cruel! O you gods!" (69). But these invocations, like the Servant's "Now heaven help him!" (106) get no thunder in response and merely echo in a dark void. Later Gloucester prays to the heavens that the "superfluous and lust-dieted man / That slaves your ordinance . . . feel your power quickly" and that "distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough" (4.1.70-2, 74-5). But the heavens do not punish the wicked in this play and the vision of a universal distribution of wealth remains a fantasy. Kneeling in the Quarto, Gloucester voices a moving prayer before attempting suicide:

> O you mighty gods,
> This world I do renounce and in your sights
> Shake patiently my great affliction off.
> (4.6.34-6)

But Edgar's imposture and manipulation undercut the invocation and prevent the renunciation. There are no mighty gods witnessing or justly ordering human affairs. Glimpsing this dark truth earlier, Gloucester famously rejects both classical and Christian notions of theodicy: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; / They kill us for their sport" (4.1.38-9). This vision of divine cruelty and pleasure in human suffering annuls all possibility of consolation. But equally terrifying, perhaps, is the vision of divine justice that Edgar proposes when reporting his father's blinding to Edmund:

> The gods are just and of our pleasant vices
> Make instruments to plague us.
> The dark and vicious place where thee he got
> Cost him his eyes.
> (5.3.168-71)

Here, according to Edgar's callow moralization, the justice of the gods manifests itself in his father's horrific blinding, deserved punishment for begetting the illegitimate Edmund.

Like Edgar, Albany at times sees the workings of divine justice in the action of the play. Hearing about the servant who slew Cornwall after the blinding, he proclaims, "This shows you are above, / You justicers, that these our nether crimes / So speedily can venge" (4.2.79-81). Asking for the bodies of Goneril and Regan to be brought on stage, he says similarly, "This justice of the heavens that makes us tremble, / Touches us not with pity" (Q 5.3.230-1). In his view the spectacle of divine justice, though terrifying, cancels the pity that tragedy would normally evoke in the spectator. As in Winshemius and Melanchthon's edition, all is as it should be. But the ending of the play shatters this comforting vision of divine order. Upon hearing of the plot to hang Cordelia, Albany calls upon heaven to protect her, "The gods defend her" (5.3.254); this cry is answered immediately as Lear then enters with Cordelia dead in his arms. The tableau vividly and finally

contradicts the previous assertions of providential justice. At this point Albany's earlier words echo hauntingly:

> If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
> Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
> It will come:
> Humanity must perforce prey on itself
> Like monsters of the deep.
> (4.2.47-51)

Heaven sends no angels to prevent and punish the vile offences on display; humans prey upon each other like sea monsters.

The rhythms of supplication and denial, assertion and contradiction, comfort and cancellation, and consolation and despair play out most powerfully in the tragedy of King Lear himself. The mad, impatient king repeatedly prays bootless prayers: "O let me not be mad, sweet heaven! I would not be mad. / Keep me in temper. I would not be mad" (Q 1.5.44-5). "You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need" (2.2.460). He curses Goneril ineffectually: "All the stored vengeances of heaven fall / On her ungrateful top! Strike her young bones, / You taking airs, with lameness!" (2.2.351-3). Like Gloucester, he dreams about a day of reckoning for the wealthy and a universal distribution of riches: "Take physic, pomp. / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That thou mayst shake the superflux to them / And show the heavens more just" (3.4.33-6). Like Edgar, he sees a supernatural order and purpose in the events of the play, reading the storm as an agency of divine punishment for the wicked:

> Let the great gods
> That keep this dreadful pudder o'er our heads
> Find out their enemies now. Tremble, thou wretch,
> That hast within thee undivulged crimes,
> Unwhipped of justice.
> (3.2.49-53)

But this hope for heavenly justice is as hollow and empty as the mock-trial he stages in the Quarto with the help of the fool, madman, and beggar. Like Albany, and with the same results, Lear begs the heavens to send down spirits to aid and protect him.

> O heavens!
> If you do love old men, if your sweet sway
> Allow obedience, if you yourselves are old,
> Make it your cause. Send down, and take my part!
> (2.2.378-81)

And like Albany he suffers a devastating final blow to his faith in providential order.

Lear's reunion with Cordelia occasions a brief belief in divine approval and harmony: he dreams of a future wherein and they take upon themselves "the mystery of things" like "God's spies", and wherein "The gods themselves throw incense" upon their sacrifices (5.3.16-17, 21). But the death of Cordelia destroys this vision:

> Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!
> Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
> That heaven's vault should crack: she's gone for ever.
> I know when one is dead and when one lives.
> (5.3.255-8)

No divine incense can ratify this sacrifice but, contrarily, it should disjoint the firmament, crack heaven's vault. "Is this the promised end?" No consoling word can be said and only the Folio Lear dies in the spurious comfort of delusion. The ending of Shakespeare's play pointedly contrasts with the happy restoration of Lear in all other versions of the story, those by Geoffrey of Monmouth, John Higgins, Raphael Holinshed, Edmund Spenser, and the chronicle play *King Leir*. The last words of Shakespeare's play spoken by Albany in Q, Edgar in F, pointedly reject the usual choral comforts of solace, explanation, and generalizing reflection.

> The weight of this sad time we must obey,
> Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
> The oldest have borne most; we that are young
> Shall never see so much, nor live so long. (*Exeunt with a dead march, bearing the bodies.*)
> (5.3.322-5)

Authorizing grief, insisting on unblinking confrontation with the tragedy on stage, *King Lear* precisely and devastatingly contradicts the prevailing Christian hermeneutic, "tum ad commonefactionem, et tum ad consolationem".

Works Cited

Bible, *Geneva Bible (1560/1599)*, http://www.genevabible.org/Geneva.html (Accessed 2 February 2018).

Castelvetro, Lodovico (1984), *Poetica d'Aristotele Vulgarizzata et Sposta* (1570), ed. and trans. by Andrew Bongiorno, Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies.

Camerarius, Johann (1556), *Commentatio explicationum omnium tragoediarum Sophoclis*, Basel.

— (1534), *Commentarii interpretationum argumenti Thebaidos fabularum Sophoclis*, Hagenau: Officina Seceriana.

Denores, Giason (1972), *Discorso* (1586), ed. by Bernard Weinberg, *Trattati di Poetica e Retorica del Cinquecento*, 'Scrittori d'Italia', No. 253, Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli.

Dent, Robert William (1981), *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language: An Index*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Edmunds, Lowell (2006), *Oedipus*, London: Routledge.

Erasmus, Desiderius (1982-2017), *Prolegomena to the Adages*, and *Adages* in Margaret Mann Philipps, R.A.B. Mynors, et al. (eds), *The Collected Works of Erasmus*, Toronto: Toronto University Press, vols. 30-6.

— (1536), *Adagiorum Chiliades*, Basel: Froben.

— *Index to the Adages*, Erasmus of Rotterdam Society, http://erasmussociety.org/links/ (Accessed 2 February 2018).

Finglass, Patrick J. (2018), "Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*", Oxford Bibliographies Online, www.oxfordbibliographies.com (Accessed 8 March 2018).

Gregory, Tobias (2010), "The Political Messages of *Samson Agonistes*", *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 50 (1): 175-203.

Hardison, O.B. (1974), "Catharsis in *Samson Agonistes*", *The Classical Journal* 69 (4): 322-7.

Knox, Bernard M.W. (1964), *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lalamant, Jean (1557), *Sophoclis . . . tragoediae, quotquot extant septem*, Paris: apud Michaelem Vascosanum.

Longinus (1995), *On the Sublime*, trans. by W.H. Fyfe, rev. by Donald Russell, *Aristotle Poetics, Longinus On the Sublime, Demetrius On Style*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Lurie, Michael (2012), "Facing up to Tragedy: Toward an Intellectual History of Sophocles in Europe from Camerarius to Nietzsche", in

Kirk Ormand (ed.), *A Companion to Sophocles*, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 440-61.

Marliani, Bartolomeo (1545), *Sophoclis tragici poetae vita . . . eiusdem poetae sententiae pulcherrimae*, Rome: Antonius Bladus Asulanus.

Melanchthon, Phillipp (1555), "A*dhortatio . . . de legendis tragoediis & comoediis*", in *P. Terentii Afri Comoediae Sex*, Nuremburg: Montanus & Ulricus Neuberus.

Milton, John, *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Lost*, *The John Milton Reading Room*, https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/contents/text.shtml (Accessed 8 March 2018).

Mohamed, Feisal G. (2005), "Confronting Religious Violence: Milton's *Samson Agonistes*", *Papers of the Modern Language Association* 120 (2): 327-40.

Moss, Leonard (1965), "The Rhetorical Style of *Samson Agonistes*", *Modern Philology* 62 (4): 296-301.

Mueller, Martin (1980), *Children of Oedipus and Other Essays on the Imitation of Greek Tragedy 1550-1800*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Naogeorg, Thomas (1558), *Sophoclis tragoediae septem*, Basel: Oporinus.

Parker, William Riley (1963), *Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in Samson Agonistes* (1937), Hamden Conn.: Archon Books.

Phillips, Margaret Mann (1964), *The 'Adages' of Erasmus: A Study with Translations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rataller, George (1570), *Tragoediae Sophoclis quotquot extant*, Antwerp: Officina Gulielmi Siluii.

Scharffenberger, Elizabeth W. (2017), "Oedipus at Colonus", in Rosanna Lauriola and Kyriakos N. Demetriou (eds), *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Sophocles*, Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 326-88.

Shakespeare, William (1997), *King Lear*, ed. by R.A. Foakes, Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd.

Sophocles (2004), *Oedipus Coloneus*, in *Sophocles: Plays* (1900), ed. by R.C. Jebb, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co.

— (1990), *Sophoclis fabulae*, ed. by H. Lloyd-Jones and N.G. Wilson, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Winshemius, Veit (1546), *Interpretatio tragoediarum Sophoclis*, Frankfurt: Brubach.

Wittreich, Joseph (2002), S*hifting Contexts: Reinterpreting Samson Agonistes*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press.