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
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Contents

9

"More sinned against than sinning": Acting and Suffering in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*

Sheila Murnaghan

Abstract

This paper takes two strikingly similar lines in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear* as the starting point for a consideration first of the two plays' complicated interactions in the history of reception, and then of some key similarities and differences between them. In both, the outcast protagonist offers a pithy claim to sympathy marked by wordplay, paradox, qualified acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and self-identification as passive rather active. Oedipus assures the elders of Colonus that they should not fear him with the rather strained expression ἐπεὶ τά γ' ἔργα μου / πεπονθότ' ἐστὶ μᾶλλον ἢ δεδρακότα, "For my deeds have suffered rather than acted" (266-7). Lear on the heath admonishes the guilty to "tremble" and beg for mercy, then sets himself apart from them with the ringing declaration, "I am a man / More sinned against than sinning" (3.2.60). In Oedipus' case, his passivity (in relation to gods who have imposed on him experiences more conventionally described as activity) has to be understood in relation to ancient Greek hero cult, in which an exceptional figure is drawn into acts that are destructive and transgressive but that also lead to a special quasi-divine status. Lear's passivity (in relation to other people who have harmed him more than he has harmed them) has to be related to the mutedly Christian context of the play, in which the acceptance of suffering, or 'patience', is a virtue that is open to all who embrace it and tied to the renunciation of any sense of special distinction. Yet, despite these vital differences, both plays share a conviction that is often seen as essentially tragic: that suffering is the precondition of the most meaningful action.

Keywords: Oedipus; Lear; suffering; passivity; patience; reception

Oedipus and Lear, two old men in need of shelter, displaced by children who misjudge their worth, both seek to justify themselves in strikingly similar terms: each makes a claim to sympathy with a pithy statement that is marked by wordplay, paradox, qualified acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and self-identification as passive rather active. These resonant declarations epitomize some of the significant similarities and differences between *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*, while also revealing the mutual entanglement of the two plays within the history of reception.

In the first, Oedipus tries to reassure the elders of Colonus, who have responded in horror at the sound of his name and rescinded their initial welcome. Oedipus insists that their fear is a reaction only to his name, not to his body or his past deeds, and then goes on to make a crucial point about those past deeds, with a highly strained expression: ἐπεὶ τά γ' ἔργα μου / πεπονθότ' ἐστὶ μᾶλλον ἢ δεδρακότα, for which a literal translation would be "For my deeds have suffered rather than acted" (266-7).[1] What Oedipus means by this is generally assumed to be something like, 'For my deeds have consisted of suffering rather than acting'. Later in the play, Oedipus makes this same point – that he did not act when he committed his notorious crimes but was acted upon – when the chorus tries to tell him that he acted when he married Jocasta and he insists that he did not act: he only received a gift (*OC* 537-41).

ΧΟΡΟΣ ἔπαθες –
ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ ἔπαθον ἄλαστ' ἔχειν.
ΧΟΡΟΣ ἔρεξας –
ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ οὐκ ἔρεξα.
ΧΟΡΟΣ τί γάρ;
ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ ἐδεξάμην
δῶρον, ὃ μήποτ' ἐγὼ ταλακάρδιος
ἐπωφελήσας πόλεος ἐξελέσθαι.

1 Quotations from Sophocles are from the Oxford Classical Text by Lloyd-Jones and Wilson, with some adaptation (Sophocles 1990); translations are my own. My thanks to Silvia Bigliazzi, Guido Avezzù, and Francesco Lupi for organizing the stimulating conference at which this paper first took shape. For help with bibliography and/or for sharing unpublished work, I am also indebted to Pat Easterling, Micha Lazarus, and Deborah H. Roberts.

[Chorus You suffered . . .
Oedipus I suffered unforgettable grief.
Chorus You did . . .
Oedipus I did nothing.
Chorus What do you mean?
Oedipus I received
a gift which I – miserable I –
should never have taken, from the city for my service.]

Here too, the horrific events of Oedipus' past acquire a different significance through a denial of agency that involves the replacement of activity by passivity (although in both instances this is accomplished through sense rather than morphology, without actually using the passive voice).

The second of these declarations is made by Lear when he is on the heath, battered by the elements and watched over by Kent. Construing the raging storm as divine punishment, he admonishes the guilty to tremble and beg for mercy:

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. Hide thee, thou bloody hand,
Thou perjured, and thou simular of virtue
That art incestuous. Caitiff, to pieces shake,
That under covert and convenient seeming
Has practised on man's life. Close pent-up guilts
Rive your concealing continents and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. I am a man
More sinned against than sinning.
(3.2.49-60)[1]

When he sets himself apart from those guilty wretches with his concluding claim to be "[m]ore sinned against than sinning" (3.2.60), Lear seems especially to echo Oedipus at that particular moment in *Oedipus at Colonus* when he commends himself to the elders of Colonus by redescribing his past actions as passive rather than active. Yet, as a quick google search reveals, Lear's phrase

1 Quotations from *King Lear* are from Shakespeare 2017.

is also often applied to Oedipus in general, without any particular reference to that passage. This occurs in a wide range of contexts, from the scholarly article to the theatrical review to the online study aid; it is possible, for example, to find the following prompt for a practice timed essay: "In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the king declares, 'I am a man / More sinned against than sinning.' In a well-organized essay, discuss whether or not Oedipus would be justified in making the same claim about himself".[2] In many cases, "[m]ore sinned against than sinning" is evoked simply as a familiar phrase that seems to fit Oedipus as a sympathetic figure who, whatever his shortcomings, hardly deserves his punishing downfall, without any intended reference to *King Lear* or even awareness that the phrase comes from Shakespeare.

At the same time, the close identification of those two specific passages has a long history and has played a significant role in the reception and even the transmission of *Oedipus at Colonus*. [3] Oedipus' words strain so much against normal sense that many editors have adopted an emended version of the text: ἐπεὶ τά γ' ἔργα με / πεπονθότ' ἴσθι μᾶλλον ἢ δεδρακότα, "Know that I / have suffered my deeds rather than done them". This version, which is printed in several important contemporary editions, including the Fondazione Valla edition of Guido Avezzù (2008), the Oxford Classical Text of Hugh Lloyd-Jones and Nigel Wilson (1990), and the Teubner edition of Roger D. Dawe (1985), produces a more straightforward statement that undoes the transmitted text's challenging shift of agency from the doer to his deeds: Oedipus himself, rather than his past deeds, is the first person subject of the suffering and (non)acting that he is reflecting on.

By a notable coincidence, this emendation was suggested independently by two late nineteenth century classicists, both of whom cite Lear's line in support of their proposal. The German scholar, Theodor Hertel, who published his emendation in 1876,

2 https://www.scribd.com/document/230670241/Oedipus-Test-Review (Accessed 2 November 2019).

3 In a note on *OC* 266 in his 1871 commentary, Lewis Campbell observes that "The words of Lear (3.2) have often been compared, 'I am a man more sinned against than sinning'" (271).

begins from the premise that the transmitted text is simply too bold. He then brings up Shakespeare's line – "I am / More sinned against than sinning" – on the grounds that it represents the only possible parallel from an author notably given to bold expressions.

> Aus dem an kühnen Redewendungen so reichen Shakespeare hat man nur das eine Beispiel beigebracht: "I am a man more sinned against than sinning." Dieses würde nur passen, wenn Sophokles geschrieben hätte: "Ich habe meine Taten mehr gelitten als getan." Und das Sophokles so gechrieben habe, is nach meiner Ansicht wahrscheinlich. Deshalb möchte ich ändern. (Hertel 1876: 14)
>
> [From Shakespeare, so rich in bold expressions, only one example has been adduced: "I am a man more sinned against than sinning". This would only be acceptable if Sophocles had written: "I have more suffered my deeds than done them". And that Sophocles did write thus is, in my opinion, likely. Therefore, I would like to emend. (My translation)]

For Hertel, Shakespeare's English represents the outer limit of boldness in the expression of what he assumes to be the same idea; it therefore provides a self-evident check on Sophocles' Greek, which Hertel remodels so that Oedipus' words more closely resemble Lear's.

In a much longer and more contentious note, first published in 1892 but making no reference to Hertel, the English scholar A.E. Housman also finds the transmitted text untenable. Stating outright what Hertel assumes, Housman declares "The sense is to be Shakespeare's 'I am a man more sinned against than sinning'" (1972: 181) before launching into an extensive demolition of other scholars' attempts to argue that the transmitted text can have that sense. He then goes on to propose the exact same emendation as Hertel had. For these scholars, Shakespeare clarifies what Sophocles meant to say and dictates how he must have expressed it. Assuming the transmitted text is correct, those who read the *Oedipus at Colonus* in an edition that adopts this emendation are encountering a version of Oedipus who has been reworked to sound more like Lear: a version who shares Lear's focus on himself as the subject of his doings and sufferings rather than one who pointedly substitutes his deeds for himself in order to erase

his own agency and distance himself from those deeds.[4] This, then, is a literal instance of a phenomenon that is both the basis of a joke about the absurdity of literary scholarship and, when construed less literally, a serious point made by reception studies: the influence of a later author on an earlier one.[5]

That same time-bending influence is detectable in what was once a widely-read English translation of *Oedipus at Colonus*, the version by Francis Storr that appeared in the first Loeb Classical Library edition of Sophocles, published in 1912. Storr's Greek-speaking Oedipus, on the left-hand page, follows the text transmitted in the manuscripts, but his English-speaking counterpart on the facing page actually does fulfill the suggestion of that essay prompt by "making the same claim about himself" as Lear does. Storr's Oedipus appeals to the chorus by pointing out, in iambic pentameter, "For me you surely dread not, nor my deeds, / Deeds of a man more sinned against than sinning".

Storr's translation encapsulates one model for thinking about these two plays together, which was arguably at its peak when he was writing. This model relies on an essentialized concept of tragedy as a dramatic form that expresses unchanging truths about human nature, appearing especially at cultural high points like classical Athens and Elizabethan/Jacobean England, of which Sophocles and Shakespeare are the supreme practitioners. In an essay on the art of translation, Storr addressed the question of how literal a translation should be by rejecting the scrupulously literal in favour of an approach that captures the spirit of the original: "There is a plain issue between the literalist and the spiritualist schools, and I unhesitatingly take my stand on the text: 'The

4 For a compelling defence of the transmitted text on the grounds that "the separation of the acts from the doer is exactly Oedipus' strategy", see Budelmann 1999: 173-4. The unamended text is printed in the editions of Campbell, Jebb, and Pearson, and in the forthcoming edition by Pat Easterling in the Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics series.

5 The most famous version of this joke comes in David Lodge's campus novel *Small World* (1984: 51-2), where an ambitious student has written an MA thesis on "The Influence of T.S. Eliot on Shakespeare", although he also explains himself in terms that are compatible with serious discussions of reception theory (in which Lodge's joke is often invoked).

letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life'" (1909: 367). He then goes on to make his case by comparing the King James version of the Bible, from which he has just quoted, to the more literal, and to his mind inferior, Revised Standard Version. In using Shakespeare's words to convey Oedipus' thought, Storr is making the same use of a timelessly applicable formulation as he does with his quotation from the New Testament. He is also employing what he saw, in common with many of his contemporaries, as the natural English meter and poetic register for tragedy and the best available English expression of a shared spirit.[6] Storr's sense of the spiritual equivalence of Sophocles and Shakespeare is registered in another way in the Introduction to his Loeb edition, where he explains that the epitaph "His life was gentle" that Ben Jonson "applies . . . to Shakespeare himself . . . fits even more aptly the sweet singer of Colonus" (1912: ix).

The apparently self-evident suitability of the phrase "[m]ore sinned against than sinning" as equally applicable to Lear and Oedipus is no doubt partly due to the way that Lear claims only a relative innocence, allowing that he is sinning as well as sinned

6 For another instance of Storr translating Sophocles into Shakespeare, see Harvey 1977: 260. On borrowings from Shakespeare in English translations of Greek tragedy in general, which underwent a shift from unmarked uses of Shakespeare as a self-evident analogue (such as Storr's) to more pointed quotation in later twentieth and twenty-first century examples, see Roberts 2010: 306-11. That shift is reflected in an unpublished translation from the 1960's or 1970's of Aristophanes' comedy *Thesmophoriazusae* by William Arrowsmith, in which the same line from Shakespeare is adapted in order to evoke a tragic register and to give "modern audiences a frame for understanding, in terms of both artistic form and cultural significance, the ancient and potentially alien drama of Euripides" (Scharffenberger 2002: 448). A speaker quotes from a (now lost) play of Euripides to make the point that the women who are attacking Euripides in Aristophanes' own play are not entirely innocent: κᾆτ' Εὐριπίδῃ θυμούμεθα/ οὐδὲν παθοῦσαι μεῖζον ἢ δεδράκαμεν; ("Then why should we be angry with Euripides, when we have suffered [harm] no more than we have done it?", *Thesm.* 518-19 = Eur. fragment 711 Nauck). Signalling the quotation as Aristophanes does not, Arrowsmith translates: "So why, ladies, should we be so furious with Euripides / since, to adapt his words from another context, / we women 'sin more than we are sinned against'".

against. This wording succinctly identifies him as fully deserving of sympathy but also imperfect, a combination of qualities that make him and Oedipus at once spiritual brothers and quintessential examples of the tragic hero, a great man who is also flawed. Storr's translation appeared less than a decade after A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* of 1904, the most influential account of the so-called 'tragic flaw' or, to use Bradley's own term, "the tragic trait" as a definitive feature of the genre. In keeping with the emphasis on character that he inherited from 19th-century criticism, Bradley reworked Aristotle's concept of *hamartia*, an error or misunderstanding that belongs to the circumstances of the tragic plot, into a "fatal imperfection or error" (21-2) within the hero's character that coincides with his greatness and drives him towards disaster (Holderness 1989: 54-5).

Storr's sense of Shakespeare as the natural route through which Anglophone readers can reach Sophocles is widely echoed in the way that a comparison to *King Lear* is used well into the late twentieth century to make Oedipus at Colonus more accessible via a familiar analogue; this can be found in works such as Gilbert Norwood's *Greek Tragedy* from 1920 (171-2) or Peter Levi's *A History of Greek Literature* from as recently as 1985 (196), to mention two fairly random examples. Before saying anything about Sophocles, the influential British classicist Gilbert Murray begins the preface to his 1948 translation of *Oedipus at Colonus* with the statement that "The Oedipus at Colonus has often been compared to *King Lear*". He goes on to cite a series of spiritual and formal affinities that echo Bradley's vision of the tragic hero's flawed or uneven greatness: the two protagonists, each "breathing a strange atmosphere of kingly pride alternating with helplessness, or towering passion with profound peace", the two plays' similar trajectories towards the hero's redemption, their similar demands on the producer for "tempests and thunderstorms," and the fact that, "while neither can quite be called a 'well-made play,' each nevertheless contains some of the author's very greatest work" (5). On Murray's assumption (which would no longer be made), any student or interested general reader who might pick up an English translation of Sophocles would certainly be familiar with Shakespeare's major works: in the kind of reversal of-

ten brought about by literary history and highlighted in David Lodge's joke about the influence of T.S. Eliot on Shakespeare, *King Lear* takes priority and anticipates *Oedipus at Colonus* in the reader's experience.

This model of an essential affinity between two tragic heroes and the plays that present them requires no influence of one on the other, and it flourished alongside the belief that Shakespeare had virtually no knowledge of Greek tragedy, so that the similarities between these two plays were understood as manifestations of a "strange" (Silk 2004), uncanny kinship. But more recent scholarship has shown that Shakespeare and his contemporaries had many opportunities to encounter Greek tragedy, which they recognized as the point of origin for the emerging contemporary genre of tragedy, and that the figure of Oedipus and the mythology surrounding him were widely known from both dramatic and non-dramatic sources.[7] These findings give us reason to adopt a literal rather than a spiritual model for the relationship between these plays, and it becomes possible to go back to Lear's speech and to see that Shakespeare has constructed him as someone who does in certain respects anticipate Oedipus.

The figures in Lear's catalogue of evildoers who should be trembling in the face of divine justice are strikingly reminiscent of Oedipus, especially as he appears in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The two specific crimes that Lear mentions are Oedipus' crimes of incest and murder and, beyond that, he especially stresses that these crimes are "undivulged" (3.2.52): the perpetrator of incest is a "simular man of virtue" (3.2.54); the murderer hides under "covert and convenient seeming" (3.2.56); collectively, they hold "pent-up guilts" (3.2.57). These criminals do differ from Oedipus in that they are "perjured" (3.2.54), well aware of their crimes and know-

7 On the availability of Greek tragedy, see especially Pollard 2017: 1-88; Demetriou and Pollard 2017; Lazarus 2020 (including discussion of why the presence of tragedy in early modern Europe has been invisible to scholarship). On the currency of the Oedipus myth, see Miola 2014 and, for its contribution to *King Lear*, Kerrigan 2018: 63-82. For indications of the influence of Sophocles on Shakespeare in the wording of particular passages, in the conception of his characters, and in the plots of his plays, including *King Lear*, see the brief but suggestive discussion in Harvey 1977.

ingly duplicitous as Oedipus is not; Oedipus' ignorance has been replaced with deceit in keeping with Shakespeare's pervasive interest in dissimulation and bad faith. Nonetheless, Lear's appeal to the gods to "find out their enemies now" (3.2.51) sounds as if he is trying to conjure up – to will into being – the plot of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where at a moment of civic crisis, Oedipus, the perpetrator of both incest and murder, is found out by an omniscient divine power. As the play's chorus puts it to him, ἐφηῦρέ σ' ἄκονθ' ὁ πάνθ' ὁρῶν χρόνος . . . ("All-seeing time found you out, without you willing that . . .", *OT* 1214). Cordelia predicts a similar plot trajectory for *King Lear* itself when she warns her sisters at the end of Act 1 that "Time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides / Who covert faults at last with shame derides" (1.1.282-3). With his impassioned call for a general version of the same scenario, Lear – the protagonist of a work set in primeval times and preoccupied with the question of origins (Kerrigan 2018: 76-7) – wishfully anticipates the action of one of the great original tragedies.

In a rather different sense, Lear also anticipates the Oedipus of *Oedipus at Colonus* through his claim to be set apart from the imagined criminals he addresses, and on whom he calls down divine punishment, because he is "[m]ore sinned against than sinning". It is impossible to know for certain whether Shakespeare's formulation here was influenced by the words of Sophocles' Oedipus, but the likelihood of that is increased by the fact that at least one of the Latin translations of *Oedipus at Colonus* in circulation by Shakespeare's time already reworks Oedipus' words to locate agency with Oedipus himself rather than his deeds. In the 1547 translation of Winshemius, we find Oedipus asserting that the elders of Colonus rightly fear neither his body nor his "facta", "nam quod ad facta attinet / passus sum verius quam feci quidquam," ("for as regards my deeds / I more truly suffered than I did anything").[8] Here the plot thickens and the reception histo-

8 In the 1543 translation by Giovanni Gabia, the text preserves the more challenging Sophoclean formulation, "quoniam certe opera mea / passa sunt magis, quam operata", ("since surely my works / suffered rather than performed") but is accompanied by a marginal gloss on "passa" that introduces the more normalized first-person subject: "passus sum ego magis, inuriam quam effecerim" ("I suffered rather than enacted injustice"; my translations).

ry of Sophocles' lines acquires another layer: it may be that the Shakespearean phraseology that inspired Hertel's and Housman's rewriting of Sophocles' words in the medium of the scholarly emendation was itself inspired by a prior rewriting of those same words in the medium of Latin translation.

When Lear concludes his speech by sounding like Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, he effectively leaves the first of Sophocles' two Oedipus plays behind and projects himself into the second, identifying himself with the later Oedipus, who finds similarly apt language with which to acknowledge his crimes but also to subordinate them to a forceful disavowal. At this point in his story, however, Lear is making this disavowal prematurely. His wits are only beginning to turn, he has not yet had his moral horizons expanded by the sight of poor Tom, and he has not yet solicited and received Cordelia's absolving "No cause, no cause" (4.7.75). He is still the figure identified by Regan, who "hath ever but slenderly known himself" (1.1.294-5). More has to happen to him before he catches up to the final instantiation of Sophocles' Oedipus.

This discrepancy points to one of the most salient differences between the two plays. *Oedipus at Colonus* presents from the outset a figure who is already at the end of a long period of travel and reflection. His response to his own criminality has evolved over time from a sharp impulse to harsh self-punishment to his present position that he deserves no punishment (*OC* 431-44); he has arrived at an understanding of himself that is stable, if challenging to others, which he repeatedly articulates as he distances himself from his past actions and elaborates (in various registers, including the legal as well as the religious) on his conviction that those actions should be seen as suffered rather than performed. In *King Lear*, the protagonist undergoes the full trajectory from oblivious confidence to extremes of shame and deprivation to self-acceptance within a single play.

But even in this moment, in which Lear appears to be presenting himself as an avatar of Oedipus, is he really saying the same thing as his Sophoclean predecessor? With their shared insistence on a relative innocence formulated as passivity rather than activity, Oedipus and Lear have seemed so clearly to be making the same point that, as we have seen, editors and translators have

gladly allowed Shakespeare to speak for Sophocles: as Housman puts it, Sophocles' sense "is to be Shakespeare's" (1972: 181). But in terms of the experiences that they are talking about, the two heroes are actually saying something quite different. Oedipus is referring to a single set of events – τἄργα τἄμα, "my deeds" – for which he is substituting one description for another, a description that allows him to disavow any agency where those deeds are concerned, even though he does not deny ownership of them. Lear, on the other hand, is toting up and weighing against each other two sets of actions, those performed by himself towards other people and those performed by other people towards himself, and finding his own actions less reprehensible than those of others.

It is true that Oedipus at other times makes similar calculations and draws similar conclusions in his own favour, arguing that his own actions, however horrific, were less reprehensible than things that were done to him by others. In the rest of his speech to the elders of Colonus, he presents himself as less culpable in two ways than Laius, the father he himself killed. First, Laius was the aggressor during their fatal meeting at the crossroads, so that Oedipus acted only in self-defence. Secondly, and more importantly, Oedipus acted in ignorance of his victim's identity, while Laius had tried to kill him when he was a baby, in full awareness of what he was doing.

> καίτοι πῶς ἐγὼ κακὸς φύσιν,
> ὅστις παθὼν μὲν ἀντέδρων, ὥστ' εἰ φρονῶν
> ἔπρασσον, οὐδ' ἂν ὧδ' ἐγιγνόμην κακός;
> νῦν δ' οὐδὲν εἰδὼς ἱκόμην ἵν' ἱκόμην,
> ὑφ' ὧν δ' ἔπασχον, εἰδότων ἀπωλλύμην.
> (*OC* 270-4)
>
> [For how can I be evil in nature?
> I responded to what I had suffered, so that even if
> I had acted with awareness, I would not have been evil.
> But in fact I arrived where I arrived knowing nothing,
> while those at whose hands I suffered knowingly tried to kill me.]

Oedipus' ignorance is the overriding factor that shifts the meaning of his actions and guides his comparative rankings, sometimes in surprising ways. Somewhat later, in his long speech of self-de-

fence against Creon's suggestion that Oedipus should be liable to conviction for murder by the Areopagus, Oedipus claims that Creon is more to blame for intentionally bringing up and speaking about Oedipus' incest than he himself was for engaging in it.

> ἀλλ' ἓν γὰρ οὖν ἔξοιδα, σὲ μὲν ἑκόντ' ἐμὲ
> κείνην τε ταῦτα δυσστομεῖν· ἐγὼ δέ νιν
> ἄκων ἔγημα φθέγγομαί τ' ἄκων τάδε.
> (*OC* 985-7)

> [One thing I know for sure: you willingly
> speak ill of me and of her, while I
> married her unwillingly and speak of these things unwillingly.]

These, then, are strong and provocative claims to be "[m]ore sinned against than sinning", in terms that are comparable to Lear's and they substantiate the widespread view that Lear's words can aptly be applied to Oedipus. But it is nonetheless the case that, when he equates suffering with his own acts, as distinct from the things that other people have done to him, Oedipus is making a very different point than Lear, and this difference bears on the broader question of what it means for each of these figures to identify themselves as passive.

Passivity is equally essential to the religious visions of the two plays, but those are very different visions, in which each protagonist plays a different role and assumes a different status. This difference is falsified or obscured by an assumption like that of Francis Storr that they are expressing themselves in the same, implicitly Christian spirit. Oedipus, as several essays in this collection discuss, is being singled out for the distinct and singular status of the supernaturally empowered cult hero.[9] Cult heroism is one of the distinctive features of Greek religion that has been increasingly studied and acknowledged as a vital constituent of Greek tragedy in the century-long period since Storr's translation – with the result that scholars and translators are now much more wary of using the language of sin, with its Christian connotations, to describe the transgressive actions of ancient tragic actors.

9 For the sometimes muted but significant role of cult heroism in Sophocles' plays, see Currie 2012, Henrichs 1993.

An important element of the process by which a human individual becomes a cult hero is the experience of being drawn against his will and in ways that defy his understanding into a plot in which he is the perpetrator of transgressive criminal acts and the victim of aggressive forms of divinely orchestrated retribution. This is a bewildering and demeaning experience which those heroes often articulate by using the passive voice. Two related examples of such uses of the passive are provided by figures whose future in cult is more implicitly signalled than that of Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, both of whom experience their disorienting shift in outward status and internal disposition in terms of gender reversal. The first is Ajax in *Ajax* in the riddling so-called 'deception speech', who finds himself undergoing an unexpected change that involves most immediately a greater sympathy for his partner Tecmessa and he declares that he has been made female in his way of speaking: ἐθηλύνθην ("I have been feminized", Ai. 651). The other is Heracles in *Trachiniae*, who under the pressure of great physical pain confronts the emergence of a side of himself – one given to involuntary cries of pain – that he and no one else had ever seen before. He declares, and here we find that same idea of being unmasked or found out that describes the experience of Oedipus in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, θῆλυς ηὕρημαι ("I have been found to be female", *Tr.* 1075). In a somewhat different register, at the end of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Oedipus looks back to the time of his birth and exposure and describes his entire life's course having begun with himself as the select object of a particular form of passivity: οὐ γὰρ ἄν ποτε/ θνήσκων ἐσώθην, μὴ 'πί τῳ δεινῷ κακῷ ("For I would not have been saved from dying, if not for some strange doom", *OT* 1456-7).

Passivity is also central to the mutedly but appreciably Christian context of *King Lear*, highlighted in the repeated calls for "patience" that occur throughout the play.[10] A Christian conception of patience is implicated in Lear's characterization of himself as "sinned against", as Winshemius' Latin translation of Sophocles' πεπονθότ' ("suffered") as "passus sum" makes clear.

10 On the theme of patience in King Lear and, in particular, its relationship to the biblical story of Job, see Hamlin 2011.

Lear knows that he needs patience ("You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need!", 2.2.460) and eventually undertakes (somewhat prematurely) to model it ("I will be the pattern of all patience", 3.2.37); echoing the advice he receives sincerely from Albany (1.4.254) and self-servingly from Regan (2.2.327), he goes on to recommend patience to Gloucester ("Thou must be patient", 4.6.174), as does Edgar ("Bear free and patient thoughts", 4.6.80); in Cordelia, patience competes with sorrow at her father's mistreatment (4.3.16).

The very fact that we hear so many characters in *King Lear* recommending "patience" to one another or commending it in others indicates that this is a different form of passivity than that which is forced upon Heracles, Ajax, and Oedipus. Both involve a loss of control and a new awareness that the world is ruled by mysterious forces, something that does not come easily to someone like Lear. But those Sophoclean heroes are exceptional figures – destined for a special "strange doom" that sets them apart from ordinary people, while patience in *King Lear* is a universal virtue tied to humility and the renunciation of a sense of apartness or of extraordinary power. Acceptance of humanity's shared subjection to the gods is, of course, the basis of an ethic of equality in the Greek tradition, beginning with Achilles' speech to Priam in *Iliad* 24 (525-33) about the jar from which Zeus gives bad fortune to everyone. But for the hero destined for cult, charged with a superhuman power, suffering at the hands of the gods has a further, distinguishing significance: it means being drawn against his will and against his seeming nature into deeds that are tantamount to sufferings but are also the prelude to a powerful permanent status. In contrast, at the end of *King Lear*, Lear has come to earn and fully inhabit his own self-designation as "[m]ore sinned against than sinning" because he no longer thinks of himself as different from other people or better than ordinary sinners. When Lear withdraws his hand from Gloucester's kiss, it is because it "smells of mortality" (4.6.129); Oedipus, by contrast, will not let Theseus touch him because he is uniquely and permanently contaminated by his singular crimes (*OC* 1130-5).

At the same time, to mention another important distinction, Lear is sinned against, not through the strange contingencies of

fortune, which leave Oedipus blind to what he is really doing, but through the sinfulness of hard-hearted human beings. The agency Lear elevates above his own is that of the people around him, not of divinities. While that human hard-heartedness may be as ultimately unfathomable as the purposes of the Greek gods, the play also foregrounds the skewed and faulty nature of human values, which makes the virtuous especially vulnerable to being sinned against, as in the verse from the Sermon on the Mount which proclaims "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (Matthew 5.10). In the world of *King Lear*, finding oneself in a position of passivity is a sign of distinction in this rather different sense, and again one that is open to any good person.

Within that play's broader range of intertwined plots, we find several of the most virtuous characters described as victims of mistreatment – that is to say, as sinned against – in the passive voice. Their persecutor, the one doing the sinning, is Lear himself, as we meet him at the beginning of the play, very much in the active voice, or as Kent forcefully puts it to him: "From my throat / I'll tell thee thou dost evil" (1.1.166-7). Kent himself is one of those victims, and he assumes his passive victimhood as a badge of identity and basis for his future actions when he apostrophizes himself as "banished Kent":

> . . . Now, banished Kent,
> If thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemned
> So may it come thy master whom thou lov'st
> Shall find thee full of labours.
> (1.4.4-7)

Cordelia also is markedly identified with her mistreatment, again in the passive voice, when she is embraced by France, taking on a new identity as his wife as "most choice forsaken and most loved despised":

> Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor,
> Most choice forsaken, and most loved despised,
> Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon. . .
> (1.1.252-4)

In her case too, the passive reception of unfair blows is the springboard to action, labour, and loving service.

There is a kind of symbiosis, and a convertibility, between suffering and doing that is captured by both of the statements with which this discussion began, however differently their underlying conceptualizations. This points back to the undeniable similarities between *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear* and to the transcendent tragic vision that they seem to share. Whether their similarities are fortuitous or the result of actual influence, and however much we may recognize the idea of an essential tragic spirit as a construct, both plays testify to painful connections between suffering and wisdom, and between suffering and beneficial action, that seem to lie at the heart of the genre, finding definitive expression in Aeschylus' terse and enigmatic πάθει μάθος ("in suffering learning", Aesch. *Ag.* 177). So, to end with one of the many points of alignment that justify thinking about these two plays together, we can return, with *King Lear*'s wronged good actors in mind, to Oedipus' statement at the end of the *Oedipus Tyrannus* that he was saved (ἐσώθεν, *OT* 1457) at the beginning of his life for some strange fate.

At that point, Oedipus has not yet fully grasped the meaning of this fate, but given the acuteness of his shame and anguish and his participation in a worldview in which not to be born is understood to be the best thing that can happen (memorably expressed at *OC* 1224-5), it is clear that for him to be saved means to have had great suffering imposed on him. Pat Easterling has made the suggestive observation that at the end of a play by Sophocles one often feels that the story is not really over, that "there *is* a future . . . but this would have to be the subject of a different play" (1981: 69, elipses original). In the case of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, that other play was ultimately written, in the form of *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which we find Oedipus in a position to contemplate his own entire history and so to understand what he himself said at that earlier point. There through the mysterious equatability of passive and active, the one who had been subjected at the beginning of his life to a mysterious salvation with painful consequences becomes at the end of it himself an active saviour – once again a σώτηρ – bringing a permanent form of protection to Athens through a

death that he enacts with his confident departure from the stage. However different the spiritual universes in which they are set, in both *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear* – with their shared emphasis on the ever-cycling reversals brought by time and fortune – it is the one who suffers who takes the most weighty action.

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