

**Skenè Studies I • 2**

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

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi



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## Oedipus' εἶδωλον, "Lear's shadow" (*Oedipus at Colonus* 110, *King Lear* 1.4.222)

ANNA BELTRAMETTI

### Abstract

The essay analyses the principle correspondences between the themes of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The double plot of the Shakespearean tragedy reworks and expands Sophocles' interwoven themes of sovereignty and paternity which simultaneously contaminate both the bonds of kinship and power relationships. Resorting to poetic retrieval or quotation, or to more elusive recollection – exclusion-vagrancy-resilience; blindness-madness; endurance-(re)action; dynastic and generational conflict – the possibility emerges that *King Lear*, though its perspective is of course Elizabethan, takes up certain of the main ideas behind Sophocles' Theban plays, but with the specific intention of assuming and dramatizing the space-time of liminality and of the transformation of the aged king. This space-time, only presumed and never confronted by the surviving Sophoclean tragedies that fall between the end of *Oedipus Rex* and the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus*, is the space-time of knowledge and consciousness that re-elaborates the shame and repudiates the guilt constantly evoked by the aged Oedipus, by now an anachronism to himself and about to undergo the miraculous consecration of his death.

KEYWORDS: Sovereignty; paternity; kinship; political compromise; fall; resilience; liminality

### 1. Sources, Models, Echoes

Shakespearian criticism has accurately identified the sources of *King Lear*, a play whose title and main plot recalls the story of the aged king Leir and his three daughters, which has existed in var-

ious forms since the twelfth century. It first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historiae Regum Britanniae*, and continues with variations until the publication of the anonymous play *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir* in 1605, which is considered to be Shakespeare's most immediate and direct source. In the same way, in Philip Sidney's courtly and pastoral romance *Arcadia*, published in 1590, the main themes of the story of old Gloucester and his two sons are to be found (Melchiori 1989: xxxvii-xli). Parallel to this, textual analysis has discovered in the complex weaving of tragic dramaturgy the persistent presence of the language, techniques and *clichés* typical of popular theatre (Weimann 1988: 349ff. and 397).

The origin of the dramatized stories in the Matter of Britain, in history, chronicles, legends and their more recent rewritten versions, placed Shakespeare's tragedy on Lear in direct continuity with its public's shared knowledge and collective imaginary – *de te fabula agitur*. The incorporation of mimetic and expressive forms of dramatic tradition still very much alive at the time, from mimes to Moralities, satisfied customary expectations of enjoyment, guaranteed interaction between stage and spectator and aided the transmission of the new play's more powerful and more complex quality.

The Matter of Britain and the traditional techniques, which ensured that the tragedy of Lear complied with the most long-standing conventions of public taste, nonetheless seemed in the last analysis destined more to surprise and dismay than to satisfy. *King Lear* is unanimously recognized as the most complex of Shakespeare's tragedies, with its double plot structure from the formal point of view, its intricate selection and arrangement of subject matter from that of content (Melchiori 1989: xlix), and, furthermore, as the "greatest and most polyphonic" (Serpieri 2018). Right from the beginning of the first act, native sources and models fade into the background and become an integral part of the play. The sophisticated structure, where the sub-plot runs parallel to and often intersects the main plot may be considered as an advanced version of the multiple plot so often utilized by Shakespeare in the comedies. Nevertheless, the range of themes, developed with a great wealth of motifs and dynamics, bring to

mind those works of classical antiquity which Renaissance humanism had helped to disseminate.<sup>1</sup>

It is Sophocles, more than Aeschylus or Euripides whose shadow may be discerned behind the double plot of *King Lear*, and in particular the Sophocles of the three Theban plays. In these, *Antigone*, the oldest one, written without any doubt in 442, and *Oedipus at Colonus* written in 406/405, with *Oedipus Rex* somewhere in the middle, probably belonging to the post-Periclean period 430-425 (Beltrametti 2012), Sophocles had come back again and again to working almost obsessively on the grandiose theme of regal and paternalistic sovereignty, twisted within the vicious circles of blood relationships and political covenants, the same theme of corruption which runs through both plot and sub-plot of *King Lear*. In the first tragedy, *Antigone*, composed in the most affluent years of Pericles' democracy, Sophocles had staged the harshness and trouble of the beginning of Creon's reign, founded on a political compromise (161-210) and obstructed by a tenacious resistance on the part of the aristocracy, which was generated by loyalty to the bonds of blood and kinship. With *Oedipus Rex*, he had created the tragedy *par excellence* of personal power, with its cargo of crimes of deadly transgression and life-threatening violence dealt to one another by blood relations with the purpose of maintaining or gaining sovereignty. With the posthumous *Oedipus at Colonus*, he had returned to the figure of the aged king, exhausted and destitute, but whose deeds are nevertheless once more absolute in their capacity not only to curse his male heirs, who are struggling against one another for the throne, but also to offer his devastated body as a promise and a gift of salvation for the city of Athens for not rejecting him, that city which had first and most drastically of all the others abolished the monarchy and demonized the king into a tyrant.

Shakespeare's old, crazed, vagabond king, lost on the tempest-torn heath after dividing his kingdom between two of his three daughters inevitably evokes the aged Oedipus, ravaged, beggared and blind, at Colonus. Both of them are all that remains of

1 On the close relationship between the humanists, classical antiquity and Tudor politics, see Weimann 1988: 284-90.



kings who have abdicated their power, and in this way have unleashed a savage civil war between their sons or daughters, and thus the turmoil of dynastic crisis. But the double plot of *Lear* seems at many points of its dramatic resolution to echo *Antigone*. The theme of brotherhood that degenerates into the fratricide of Eteocles and Polyneices clearly underlies the story of Gloucester's sons and is maintained in the deaths of both Regan and Gonerill, the first of whom is poisoned by the second who then stabs herself to the heart, having murdered her sister and rival to the hand of Edmund. Yet again, the family catastrophe that overwhelms Lear seems to replicate the carnage that ensues around Creon. The retribution that strikes Lear who has rejected the humility of Cordelia, his youngest and dearest daughter, had also fallen on Creon, who had completely denied kinship and paternity in the name of positive laws and civic principles. And finally, the progressive knowledge and understanding of himself that Lear undergoes in the storm that shakes the heavens and his mind, his recognition of himself as 'Nothing', beneath the masks and ornaments of authority, behind the 'Everything' that he was told he was and that he believed himself to be, brings into the foreground the Oedipus of the most famous Theban tragedy, the *anagnorisis* of the king, of the elected one (Delcourt 1981, Nicolai 2018, Beltrametti 2003) who discovers himself to be a monster (Beltrametti 2012).

Sophocles seems apparent throughout the two interwoven plots of *King Lear*. The themes and even the characters of the Greek dramatist seem to inhabit the deep structures of Shakespeare's tragedy, which could almost be considered as a reworking of the Theban plays in an Elizabethan key. The old who are by now spoilt and disenchanting by life – Lear calls them "sophisticated" (3.4.104) – are relegated to blindness or madness, to vagrancy or beggary, as liminal conditions of a suspension necessary to the opening towards or the conquest of a new knowledge or a new clarity of vision; the young are drunk with power more than even their fathers were, and already corrupted by its ways. They too are 'sophisticated', like Gonerill and Regan, the eldest and middle daughters of Lear, like Cornwall, Regan's greedy husband, and like Edmund, Gloucester's unscrupulous bastard son. And then, on the other hand, there are the vulnerable young,

pure, spontaneous, defenceless in their naivety, like Edgar-Tom o' Bedlam, Gloucester's misjudged legitimate son, the "[u]naccommodated man" (as Lear calls him: 3.4.105), the eccentric misfit, disguised as a mad beggar and supposedly possessed by "the foul fiend" (3.4.59),<sup>2</sup> and like Cordelia, Lear's unappreciated daughter.

There exists no document attesting to Shakespeare's knowledge of Ancient Greek, nor to his having seen performances of Greek drama, but many recent studies bring credible evidence to bear upon the diffusion of the Classics, including Greek texts, in Elizabethan England and consequently legitimate the belief in the Humanist content of Shakespeare's dramaturgy (see e.g. Burrow 2013; Demetriou and Pollard 2017). And in the specific case of King Lear, a multiplicity of signs, disseminated at various levels of the tragedy, seem to be there on purpose to guide the reader and the audience towards its most recondite origins, and to discover how Shakespeare in the fullness of his mature powers succumbed to the ascendancy of the ancient world and more particularly to a playwright's epiphany on meeting not with Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, not with the Euripides of the *Phoenician Women*, but with Sophocles' versions of the Theban myths.

## 2. The Wittenberg Effect

The vexed question of Shakespeare's relationship with Greek drama, that is, whether he was aware of it and, if so, how well, has not yet been conclusively settled. Nonetheless it is impossible to ignore the many authoritative studies following those of Freud (1900), Murray (1914) and Starobinski (1961), which famously aver the similarities of the Shakespearian character Hamlet with the Greek characters Oedipus and Orestes, or, again, the references to Euripides' *Alcestis* in the plot of *The Winter's Tale* (Wilson 1984, Most 2004, Dewar-Watson 2009, Wofford 2018). Furthermore, the

<sup>2</sup> The term "fiend" recurs often, but the character of Tom o' Bedlam closely recalls the figure of the *yurodivyl*, the Holy Fool or Fool-for-Christ, typical of the ascetic practices of Orthodox Christianity and linked to the Fools for the cause of Christ according to the definition of Paul of Tarsus in the First Letter to the Corinthians and Letter 11 to the Hebrews.

English translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, carried out by Sir Thomas North in 1579 on the French version by Jacques Amyot, is an important and constant background presence that should never be forgotten. Shakespeare definitely drew heavily on this text for the Roman plays, but there is the possibility that he also used it to satisfy his interest in Greek culture. And Sophocles, in particular, could have met this requirement, with his Theban tragedies which dramatized on the stage the theme of the continual strengthening and then the reciprocal spoiling of the combination of political power and kinship, so typical and intrinsic a part of Renaissance courts and in this case of the English monarchy.

In 1534, in Leipzig, Joachim Camerarius had translated and commented the three plays in Latin,<sup>3</sup> and Philipp Melanchthon,<sup>4</sup> who was professor of Greek at Wittenberg from 1518, gave public readings in the city from Luther's *Studium* – he had become, over the years, a friend of Luther's and his close collaborator.<sup>5</sup> How is it possible, then, to fail to imagine a Wittenberg effect, an impact that the cultural attraction and brilliance that this exceptional, ground-breaking city must have had on Europe, animated by the teaching of such prodigies as Luther and Melanchthon, besides by their close friendship and collaboration. Wittenberg, where the translation, commentary and reading of the Bible went on in parallel with the translation and reading of the classics, criss-crossing them and at the same time profoundly modifying cultural conventions, must have been the most powerful magnet for all the European intelligentsia of the period, and of this phenome-

3 My intention is to further explore the Latin translation of Camerarius elsewhere. Here I confine myself to emphasizing the similarities, in Sophocles and Shakespeare, between images suggested by their words which are independent of any precise lexical correspondence.

4 Melanchthon translated the tragedies of Euripides, published posthumously in 1562, already translated into Latin by Erasmus in 1506. For the relationship with Sophocles, see Lurie 2012.

5 In 1521 Melanchthon published the *Loci communes rerum theologicarum*, the first exposition of Luther's theses and of reformed theology. In 1522 he collaborated with Luther in the German translation of the New Testament and then, in 1524, of the Old Testament and these translations became the Luther Bible that was published at Wittenberg by Hans Lufft in 1534.

non Shakespeare bears witness through some of his characters. The University of Wittenberg was the one Hamlet's fellow student Horatio had just left and where Hamlet himself wanted to return (*Hamlet* 1.2).

Sophocles' versions of the Theban myth, with the three paradigmatic scenes of fratricide, the fall of a king and his reintegration into the Athens of Theseus and its proto-democracy, must have seemed to sixteenth-century Humanists, as they do to us today, the greatest and the most thought-provoking interpretations of these myths and of their principal motifs. Confirmation of a generalized attention for the Theban stories in the culture of the time and consequently in the courts may be found in Lodovico Dolce's *Giocasta*, a rewriting of the *Phoenician Women* by Euripides, published in 1549, and its adaptation in English, with the title *Jocasta*, by George Gascoigne and Francis Kinwelmersh, performed in 1566 and first published in 1573 (Miola 2002, Dewar-Watson 2010, Bigliuzzi 2014). But the apotheosis of Sophocles may be considered to have occurred with the performance of *Oedipus Rex* in the vernacularized version of Orsatto Giustiniani (Mazzoni 2013: 280) on the occasion of the Carnival of 1585 and the inauguration of the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, designed by Andrea Palladio. The stage settings by Vincenzo Scamozzi reproducing the seven streets of Thebes became an integral part of the structure of the theatre. There can be no good reason to believe that Shakespeare remained ignorant of this event in Vicenza, a momentous one in theatrical history,<sup>6</sup> at the very time he was using the Veneto region as the setting for four important plays, *The Taming of the Shrew* (before 1594?) in Padua, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* (1594-1597) in Verona, and, in Venice, *The Merchant of Venice* (1594-1597) and *The Tragedy of Othello the Moor of Venice* (1602-1611).<sup>7</sup>

6 With the reference to the first performance at the Olimpico I have no intention of suggesting that Shakespeare had any idea of the theatre's scenography but simply to call attention to Sophocles' theatrical success and especially that of *OT* in Europe at the end of that century.

7 For dates of composition see Melchiori 1989: xxv-xxxiii.

### 3. The Shadows of Kings and Fathers, the Deaths of Children. Continuity

It is not the expertly crafted structure of *King Lear* that recalls Sophocles. The elaborate but at the same time geometrically balanced composition<sup>8</sup> of a Shakespeare at the peak of his technical and poetic capacity is as different as it could be from the simple structure typical of Greek tragedy so well described by Aristotle in the *Poetics*. The two plots, the main one concerning Lear and the subplot of Gloucester's tragedy, are sometimes parallel, sometimes mirror one another and occasionally meet when the characters of both stories encounter each other and interact, giving rise to a spiral movement which is much more baroque than classical. But the baroque framework seems created to enable the greatest possible evocation and expansion of Sophoclean themes, to multiply their motifs, to develop them in a greater variety of situations and to extend the time and space of their representation. The two old men, Lear and Gloucester, the madman and the blind man, mirror one another, duplicating and differentiating the themes of decadence and crisis of regal and paternal authority which distinguishes Sophocles' Oedipus. Gonerill and, the perhaps even greater hypocrite, Regan, are, in this case, female enactors of the Sophoclean theme of the desire for the throne that overwhelms filial piety – the accusation that the aged Oedipus makes against his two sons in the grove at Colonus – and Edmund is the Shakespearean personification of this desire. Cordelia and Edgar, the supportive children, take up and amplify (in the case of Edgar, to the highest degree) the theme of care<sup>9</sup> which belonged to Antigone and, though to a lesser extent, to Ismene.

The principal themes of the crisis of authority and of the ensuing conflict between fathers and children and also that between brothers could have arisen in Shakespeare's work completely inde-

8 Melchiori (1989: xlix) mentions a mathematical centre to the play, which corresponds to Lear's rant during the storm in 3.2.1-24.

9 The theme of *nursing* of the father, is evidenced in the story Edgar tells his half-brother Edmund as he lies dying after being mortally wounded by Edgar in a duel (5.3.180-98).

pendently from any connection with Sophocles, simply as reflecting the transformations in history which were in the process of occurring between the reigns of Elizabeth and James. But the numerous coincidences of particular images and expressions sound very much like echoes of the ancient dramatist in the work of the modern one.

We are at the end of the first act of *King Lear*. In scene four, the results of Lear's abdication, and the unjust division of his realm between his two eldest daughters, Gonerill and Regan to the detriment of Cordelia, now married to the king of France, are in the process of being fully realized. The Earl of Kent, the first character to come on stage in the opening scene to introduce the story, and among the last to leave it, in the company of Edgar and Albany, at the play's conclusion (5.3.311-25), has come back disguised as a servant after Lear has banished him for having warned him, the king, of his folly and alerted him to the danger of the servile flattery of his two elder daughters and their husbands (1.1.140-88).<sup>10</sup> At this point the Fool enters after Lear has complained of his absence. The Fool had been keeping away as he was sorry for Cordelia's departure, and now with the sincerity that his status as "bitter fool" (133) allows him, and between one piece of doggerel and another, he serves as a mirror to his king, revealing to him the madness into which he has fallen, the zero, the nothing, the empty pea-pod, the "shadow" he has become:

LEAR Dost thou call me fool, boy?

FOOL All thy other titles thou hast given away *that thou wast born with*.

(1.4.141-3; my emphasis)

FOOL Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. *Now thou art an O without a figure*. I am better than thou art now. I am a Fool. *Thou art nothing*. [*To Gonerill*] Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue. So your face

10 Kent throughout the play, whether as himself or in disguise, is present on stage longer than any other character, and wherever he happens to be it is he who, by word or deed, moves the action along. Indeed it is Kent himself who, as narrator, informs Edgar, after he has recognized him, of Lear's story (5.3.203-20).

bids me, though you say nothing. Mum, mum!  
 He that keeps nor crust nor crumb,  
 Weary of all, shall want some.

[Points to Lear] *That's a shelled peascod.*

(1.4.182-90; my emphasis)

LEAR Does any here know me? <sup>Q</sup>Why<sup>Q</sup>, this is not Lear. Does  
 Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes? Either his  
 notion weakens, <sup>Q</sup>or<sup>Q</sup> his discernings are lethargied – Ha!  
<sup>Q</sup>sleeping or <sup>Q</sup>waking? <sup>Q</sup>Sure!<sup>Q</sup> 'tis not so. Who is it that can  
 tell me who I am?

<sup>F</sup>FOOL<sup>F</sup> *Lear's shadow.*

(1.4.217-22; my emphasis)

The new order that Lear hoped to create has recoiled against him, becoming the external sign of an internal state of confusion and mental blindness – “old fond eyes”, it is thus that Lear refers to his eyes that weep for Gonerill’s betrayal, and he threatens to pluck them out and throw them into quicklime (1.4.293-6) – that have overwhelmed him for Cordelia’s “small fault” (1.4.258). The old king curses Gonerill and leaves the palace of Albany, with the intent of joining Regan and Cornwall at their home instead, but in point of fact beginning his time of vagrancy and expiation.

Lear’s shadow, that from this point onwards starts to haunt the tragedy, cannot fail to recall the shadow, the “ghost of the man”, of the aged Oedipus, the εἶδωλον under whose sign the tragedy of Colonus has its commencement. Oedipus knows he has reached the time and place of the end and of reconciliation. Blind, lame and a beggar, with his daughter Antigone as his guide, he arrives at Colonus, near Athens, to hear the expressions of fear and disgust that his wretched figure prompts in the inhabitant of the neighbourhood, who should have welcomed him. It is Oedipus himself, as he prays to the goddesses of the sacred grove, who asks for mercy for the poor shade, ἄθλιον εἶδωλον, that he has become, for his body that is no longer what it once was, οὐ γὰρ τοῦδ' ἀρχαῖον δέμας: “Pity this poor ghost of the man Oedipus! For in truth it is the former living body no more” (OC 109-10).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> References to the Greek text are to Sophocles 2008; if not otherwise stated, translations are from Sophocles 1889.

And the motif of the king's degradation does not simply launch the plots, but it reappears at the crucial moment of recognition, of the protagonists' new awareness that reverses the progression of events and indicates the break, the end of the fall and the beginning of resilience. Oedipus soon regains the tenor and the attitude of a sovereign. The first episode sees Ismene arrive at Colonus with the news that he will be the guarantee, dead or alive, of the victory of one side or the other of the civil war between his sons for the sovereignty of Thebes (*OC* 361-90). And it is at this point that Oedipus rediscovers the kingliness that will survive his bodily ruin and rise again from its annihilation:

ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ ὄτ' οὐκέτ' εἰμί, τηνικαῦτ' ἄρ' εἴμ' ἀνὴρ;  
 ἸΣΜΗΝΗ νῦν γὰρ θεοὶ σ' ὀρθοῦσι, πρόσθε δ' ὠλλυσσαν.  
 (*OC* 393-4)

[OEDIPUS When I no longer exist then I am a man? ISMENE Yes, for the gods now raise you up; but before they worked your ruin.]

For Lear and for Gloucester, his double, the pathway towards self-awareness and resilience in the play is a much longer one. Lear's, and also Gloucester's redemption only has its beginning in 4.6. The Fool, an illuminating counterfigure of his king, has once again disappeared (3.6). The storm is over, after battering the heath and overturning Lear's sanity (3.2) to the point where he discovers compassion for his Fool (3.4.26) and then for Edgar, the poor madman of Bedlam (3.4.104-7), and, in this way, becomes a man among men, able to immerse himself in relationships that royal ceremonial had up till now hindered him from joining. Now, in the play's greatest scene (4.6) in which the time has come for madmen to lead the blind,<sup>12</sup> the blinded Gloucester manages to wring the truest wisdom from insanity. Gloucester, whose eyeballs had been trodden beneath Cornwall's feet (3.7.66-83), has just mimed on stage the climb up the cliffs of Dover, the fall from the top, apparent death and salvation. He has dramatized the theatrical metaphor of a path of expiation and rebirth that the words of his son Edgar-Tom have accompanied step by step, in a dialogue of the

12 Reference is to Gloucester's line: "'Tis the time's plague when madmen lead the blind" (4.6.49).



greatest poetical effect (4.6.1-80), and have described to him as fact. And as physical blindness sucks Gloucester back into delusion, the arrival of Lear, who has reached the depths of madness with the simulated trial of his daughters (3.6), turns everything around. The meeting and interchange of folly and blindness in the abyss into which the characters have plunged cause the first stirrings of resilience. Lear, in two tirades, one after the other, that precede his final self-discovery and his meeting with Cordelia (4.7), first ridicules the hypocritical adulation of his two elder daughters:

LEAR Ha! Goneril <sup>F</sup>with a white beard?<sup>F</sup> They flattered me like a dog and told me I had <sup>F</sup>the<sup>F</sup> white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to everything <sup>F</sup>that<sup>F</sup> I said 'ay' and no' to was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding, there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o'their words: they told me I was everything, 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof. (4.6.96-104)

Then he denounces the deceptions of authority, the subterfuges that mask its crimes, the lies on the part of the powerful, who are weak with the strong and strong with the weak. Lear envisages authority as a farm dog barking at a beggar and making him flee, a 'solemn' image that Gloucester could see better with his ears, by listening to it barking, than with his eyes:

LEAR What, art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears. See how yon justice rails upon yon simple thief. Hark in thine ear: Fchange places andF handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? Thou hast seen a farmer's dog bark at a beggar?

GLOUCESTER Ay, sir.

LEAR And the creature run from the cur – there thou mightst behold the great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office. Thou, rascal beadle, hold thy bloody hand; Why dost thou lash that whore? Strip thine own back, Thou hotly lusts to use her in that kind For which thou whipp'st her. The usurer hangs the cozener. Through tattered clothes great vices do appear; Robes and furred gowns hide all. Fplate sin with gold,

And the strong lance of justice hurtless breaks;  
Arm it in rags, a pigmy's straw does pierce it.  
None does offend, none, I say none. I'll able 'em;  
Take that of me, my friend, who have the power  
To seal the accuser's lips.F Get thee glass eyes,  
And like a scurvy politician seem  
To see the things thou dost not. Now, Fnow, now, now,F  
Pull off my boots; harder, harder, so.  
(4.6.146-69)

And while Lear, with the madman's propensity for a language rich in imagery, is beginning to understand the world and the sense of history, Gloucester, for his part, starts to become aware of the significance of the full and painful mastery of his own feelings and his own knowledge:

GLOUCESTER The King is mad: how still is my vile sense,  
That I stand up and have ingenious feeling  
Of my huge sorrows? Better I were distract;  
So should my thoughts be severed from my griefs,  
And woes by wrong imaginations lose  
The knowledge of themselves.  
(4.6.274-9)

The transformation of Shakespeare's two old men, both noblemen and both fathers, is described through a web of metaphors woven of the same images and the same words as those portraying the redemption of the aged Oedipus. In the open spaces of the grove of the Eumenides (Avezzi 2008) or of the heath, backgrounds to the wandering and beggary of the protagonists, both Sophocles and Shakespeare first inscribe the disfigured bodies of the old men – the shadows of Oedipus and Lear, the empty eye-sockets of Oedipus and Gloucester – piercing images of disorder and dissolution which have infiltrated deeply both into the minds of the sovereigns and into the social body, figures of an instability which may only be put right with the overturning of the habits and conventions of perception and comprehension. Then each playwright, interpreting in his own way the motifs of liminality and reversal which are imposed by the attainment of the limit, retraces its resilience.

The separation of the kings and fathers from their past and from the false certainties which had caused them to lose their way is punctuated by the curses that Oedipus calls down upon his sons and upon Creon, figures of a power untempered by affection (*OC* 421-60; 951-2; 1372-89; and 1405-10) and that Lear cries out first against the more shameless Gonerill (1.4.267-81, 2.2.347-57) and then against Regan (2.2.455-75)<sup>13</sup> whose ill-concealed cruelty and deceitfulness he has at last perceived beneath the elegance and docility of her manners.

Redemption requires more drastic behaviour, and implies the reversal of the relationship madness/reason, the recognition of madness as a more authentic form of consciousness, indeed as a sort of liberated reason, and a different use of the senses. Oedipus, having by now reached the end of his peregrinations and also of the introspection facilitated by his blindness, tells the inhabitants of Colonus to see by means of the voice – φωνῆ γὰρ ὄρω (“In sound is my sight”, *OC* 139). Gloucester begins to see Edmund’s scheming against Edgar clearly, through Regan’s words, from the very moment he is blinded by Cornwall (3.7.66-83) and then later he will be urged by Lear to see with his ears in order to free himself from false perceptions and from a view of life which is too repressed, inhibited by pseudo-wisdom and conformism (4.6.151).

Reversal occurs after the experience of the ultimate limit. When the inhabitants of Colonus arrive, Oedipus is seated on a jagged lump of rock, untouched by human hand, ἐπ’ἀξέστου πέτρου (“unshaped stone”, *OC* 19), on the bronze threshold χαλκόπους ὁδός (“the bronze threshold of this land”, *OC* 57) which is one of the defensive bastions of Athens, but also at the same time, according to poetic tradition,<sup>14</sup> one of the gates to Hades, the realm of the dead where Oedipus will disappear (*OC* 1590-7) without trace. Lear abdicates so that he may “unburdened crawl toward death” (1.1.40) and at the moment of awakening, just before he regains full sanity and recognizes his daughter Cordelia, he rebukes her for removing him from his tomb (“You do me wrong to

13 Corresponding to 2.4.155-65 and 261-75, respectively, should the long 2.2 follow the modern division into three scenes.

14 See *Iliad* 8, 13-18; Hesiod, *Theogony* 811-12.

take me out o' the grave", 4.7.45).

With the experience and the language of the ultimate limit is connected the motif of suffering. The discovery, near death, of having unwittingly suffered and endured rather than having acted intentionally, establishes the theme which belongs most specifically to the aged Oedipus – . . . ἔργα πεπονθότα μᾶλλον ἢ δεδρακότα (OC 266-7: "I have been in suffering rather than doing"), ἔπασχον (OC 274: "I suffered", my translation), πέπονθα (OC 516, 595, 892, 896: "I have suffered") ἠνεγκον ἀέκων (OC 521-2; 964: "I suffered through unintended deeds"), ἔπαθον (OC 538: "I have suffered"), Oedipus repeats continuously, and in particular to Chorus, first in words (OC 265-74) then as a duet (OC 512-48), and to Creon, at the heart of the long rhesis on innocence (OC 960-90) – and Lear, on the storm-blasted heath, makes it his own: "I am a man / More sinned against than sinning" (3.2.59-60). Just as he, Lear, will also appropriate the *gnome* of the third *stasimon*: "Not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best (μὴ φῦναι τὸν ἅπαντα νικᾷ λόγον); but when a man has seen the light of day, this is next best by far, that with utmost speed he should go back from where he came" – the Chorus had sung in the antistrophe (OC 1224-7); "We came crying hither / . . . When we are born we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" – Lear tells Gloucester before being led away by Cordelia's attendants (4.6.174, 179-80).

The number and quality of the coincidences of motifs, words and images could be reason enough to consider *Oedipus at Colonus* as a kind of hypotext or strong reference text of *King Lear*. But the echoes put back on the table Sophocles' other, older Theban plays too. At the heart of the tempest and of the dramaturgy, in 3.2, in a speech of extraordinary intensity, Lear invokes the terrifying bluster of the heavens as an instrument of truth in the hands of the gods, as a jolt that can overthrow pretence and reveal closely-guarded and secret sins, that can even uncover the extreme guilt of incest hidden within a simulacrum of virtue. He, Lear, is a man who has suffered more wrong than he has done.

LEAR	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  
 Hast 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.  
 (3.2.49-59)

Lear's speech in this case goes beyond Oedipus' suffering at Colonus and echoes almost *verbatim* the first Oedipus in the most tragic moment of *anagnorismos*, of his self-recognition, triggered by the famine of Thebes and arrived at by means of the relentless revelations that while they seem to relieve the sovereign of any guilt, they in fact drag him back into the abyss of his past. The exposure that Lear invokes from the storm coincides with the discovery of the horror that Oedipus finds hidden within himself, within this best of sovereigns, a marvel that hides corruption, κάλλος κακῶν ὑπουλον ("how fair-seeming was I", *OT* 1396),<sup>15</sup> an absolute sinner, so defiled by shame, αἴσχιστα ("all the foulest deeds") that he cannot do or say anything about, that just before he exits the stage he begs to be hidden, καλύψατε, or killed, φονεύσατε, or thrown into the sea, θαλάσσιον ἐκρίψατε, where he will no longer be visible, ἔνθα μήποτ' εἰσόψεσθ' ἔτι ("hide me somewhere beyond the land, or slay me, or cast me into the sea, where you will never behold me any longer", *OT* 1408-12). And this idea will be taken up in the long and important scene of 4.6, when the crazed Lear meets the blinded Gloucester and, after resuming the motif of the mask that hides blame (4.6.160-78) and commenting on the evil of being born (4.6.178-83), he prepares to leave the stage with the same expression as Oedipus Rex at the end of the scene with Jocasta, when he believes she has rejected him:

LEAR No rescue? What a prisoner? I am even  
 The natural *fool of fortune*. Use me well,

<sup>15</sup> References to the Greek text of *OT* are to Sophocles 1912; translations are from Sophocles 1887.

You shall have ransom. . . .  
(4.6.186-8; my emphasis)

ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ ὅποια χρήζει ῥηγνύτω· τούμὸν δ' ἐγώ,  
καί μικρόν ἐστι, σπέρμ' ἰδεῖν βουλήσομαι.  
αὕτη δ' ἴσως, φρονεῖ γὰρ ὡς γυνὴ μέγα,  
τὴν δυσγένειαν τὴν ἐμὴν αἰσχύνεται.  
ἐγὼ δ' ἐμαυτὸν παῖδα τῆς Τύχης νέμων  
τῆς εὐ̄ διδούσης οὐκ ἀτιμασθήσομαι.  
τῆς γὰρ πέφυκα μητρός· οἱ δὲ συγγενεῖς  
μῆνές με μικρὸν καὶ μέγαν διώρισαν.  
τοιόσδε δ' ἐκφύς οὐκ ἂν ἐξέλθοιμ' ἔτι  
ποτ' ἄλλος, ὥστε μὴ ἴκμαθεῖν τούμὸν γένος.  
(OT 1076-85)

[OEDIPUS Break forth what will! Be my race ever so lowly, I crave to learn it. That woman perhaps—for she is proud with more than a woman's pride – feels ashamed of my lowly origin. But I, *who hold myself son of Fortune* that gives good, will not be dishonored. She is the mother from whom I spring, and the months, my kinsmen, have marked me sometimes lowly, sometimes great. Such being my heritage, never more can I prove false to it, or keep from searching out the secret of my birth. (My emphasis)]

The aged Lear, like the aged Oedipus of Colonus, revisits his story from the beginning. The function of time<sup>16</sup> that Sophocles had distributed throughout the diptych and that dominated the tragedy of the old Oedipus, is realized through memories and fears that surface in the madness of the final Lear who seems to recall his past identity through the beginning and end of the story of the Theban king. Now, emptied of everything, deprived of the adulation of his subjects and his courtiers, 'nothing' remains of Lear, the same nothing that Oedipus knew he had become when he arrived at Colonus. But the Fool of Fortune, the useful tool and plaything of Chance, that Lear recognizes himself to be, foregrounds the memory of the first Oedipus, the King. Thus, the guilty crimes of the powerful, the dark side of power itself hidden beneath the pomp

16 On the function of time in the dramaturgy of *Oedipus at Colonus* and of *King Lear* see, respectively, the contributions of Guido Avezzi and Silvia Bigliuzzi in this volume.

of authority that Lear desires to expose, are still those ultimate sins that Oedipus had discovered in his own past and of which incest remained the paradigm.

Neither is *Antigone* missing in this great Shakespearian tragedy. The conclusion of *King Lear*, crystallized in the image of the desperation of the aged sovereign who comes on stage with his daughter's corpse in his arms and then dies (5.3.255-309) seems to have been modelled on the exode of *Antigone* (1257-76), where Creon comes back on stage from the cave of death where he has immured Antigone with the body of his son in his arms, and falls to the ground when he learns that his wife too has killed herself in the palace, overcome by grief. But not only this. The whole of the long third scene of the fifth act which concludes the play, the scene in which all the characters appear one by one to die one after the other and one because of the other, a scene without joy, dark and savage – "All's cheerless, dark and deadly" (5.3.288), says Kent, as soon as he has revealed himself to Lear – is interwoven with memories, almost quotations, from *Antigone*. The scene, which opens with Edmund's triumphant order to imprison Lear and Cordelia (5.3.1-19), continues with the confrontation between the two elder sisters (5.3.62-106) and culminates in the duel between Gloucester's two sons in which Edgar kills Edmund. Edgar reveals his true identity to his dying brother, and as he does so he seems like a new *Antigone*, a wandering beggar beside that father who has just died of a broken heart but with a smile, having recognized his legitimate son and blessed him before the duel. And before Edmund is carried away to die, on being informed of the deaths of both Regan and Gonerill, he salutes them, superimposing marriage and death, "I was contracted to them both; all three / Now marry in an instant" (5.3.227-8), repeating the same figural and linguistic short-circuit characteristically reiterated by *Antigone*. Then, just as Creon did, he retracts too late the secret mandate to hang Cordelia, which was supposed to simulate her suicide (5.3.250-3).

Marriage and death, a double fratricide, albeit carried out differently between the pairs of brothers and sisters, an implacable sequence of deaths of fathers and children of two interconnected families, with the single exception of the innocent Edgar, un-

tainted by power. The tragedy of Lear that began on the pattern of *Oedipus at Colonus* ends by reclaiming *Antigone* and in this way reversing Sophocles' dramaturgy. It does so through ever more frequent echoes of images and words, by greatly extending the original dramatic segments and by ensuring that the atmosphere of "decay" (5.3.286) and of the collapse of a world into 'nothing' prevails over the gift of salvation promised by Oedipus to Theseus *in extremis*.

#### **4. The Two Hostile Brothers and the Three Caskets, Blindness and Madness. Discontinuity**

The echoes of Sophocles' Theban plays, revisited starting from the final posthumous tragedy, are too specific and also far too numerous in *King Lear*, to be considered as being merely fortuitous. They are indeed so literal that they cannot be passed off as the result of the consultation of handbooks or summaries of mythology in general terms. Neither do they owe anything to Seneca. On the contrary, the references to Sophocles even elude the contemporary interpretative strategy, in its literary form, of intertextuality, which is too often applied as a sort of universal key to texts, even to forms of poetic memory independent of books which rely on auditory echoes from public lectures or theatre, which could neither have foreseen this nor endorsed it. The matter, the structure and the languages of *King Lear* all forbid the hypothesis of simple *en collage* citation. Themes, scenes, and speeches from Sophocles appear as if dropped into the plotting of the Matter of Britain and then are expanded into a virtuoso design, both dual and unitary at the same time. The story of Oedipus and of his four children is here divided into two plots that mirror one another, conferring depth and resistance to the theme of decay and decadence, of the crisis of paternity and sovereignty which contaminates or at least jeopardizes the younger generation. And in the poetic universe of *King Lear*, where madmen accompany blind men, the blindness which Oedipus inflicted on himself by tearing out his eyes so as never again to see the world nor those who stared at him in horror, is divided into two states, madness and blindness, that follow



and defer to one another continually through metaphor and metonymy but never coincide completely.

With the creation of *King Lear*, Shakespeare seems to push the dualistic implications of his work, constrained between traditional culture and the horizons of humanism, between old and new theatre, to the absolute limit. He appears to handle his legacy of legend at a moment when he was fascinated by the Sophoclean dramaturgy of paternity and sovereignty but simultaneously to be compelled by the necessity to transcend this and contend with the urgency of the history of his own times.

The dramatic construction of the play is no longer that of *mise en abyme* so admirably executed in *Hamlet* a few years previously, where the performance by the strolling players, that sort of “mousetrap”, imitates on stage at the palace the plot of the killing of the king, old Hamlet, replicating the manner in which it happened but abridging the action. In *King Lear* Shakespeare does not play with embedding, but with expansion, increasing the poles of conflict and the scenes of recognition which paradoxically allude to the lack of any true understanding the characters might have had of one another – Lear cannot distinguish between his cruel daughters and his kind one, Gloucester falls into the trap laid by his bastard son who slanders to his own advantage his legitimate half-brother and Gloucester’s true son. The result of their misrecognition is dramatized on the stage as degradation: on the one hand, the decay of kings and noblemen, of “sophisticated” minds into beggarly halfwits and vagabonds, and their belated recovery of a now powerless nobility, on the other, the extreme humiliation of self as a way of redemption and salvation, which is put into practice by the “unaccommodated”, by Kent in the guise of a servant and by Edgar dressed in the rags of an outcast from a madhouse.

Divided into two and developed in the two plots derived from the Matter of Britain, the ancient story of Oedipus generates an extraordinary wealth of situations and images. The father of two sons who wage war against one another and of two daughters who, in their various ways, sustain him, is divided into the figures of Lear, the father of three daughters and Gloucester, the father of two sons. The opposition of gender which worked for Sophocles

no longer does so for Shakespeare, especially as his times had been dominated for so long by powerful queens and their conspiracies against one another. The ancient dividing-line between caring daughters and sons who had preferred the throne to their father (OC 421-60) would no longer have rung true in the England of Elizabeth and James. By now, power conflicts involve women no less than men, thus complicating the dynastic intrigue with the erotic plot of the two sisters who dispute the possession of Edmund. And Shakespeare also varies the underlying structure of the sisters' story in Lear's household and that of the brothers' story in Gloucester's. Between the two brothers, the motif of fraternity degenerates as the succession to power becomes imminent. It follows the formula of the Theban fratricide up to a point, but breaks with it when introducing first, the idea of a bastard who compensates for his inferiority by the use of cunning and then that of the legitimate son who, falsely accused of wanting to kill his father, disguises himself in the rags of a Bedlam beggar, a madman, possessed by demons. The relationship between the three sisters and the rejection of Cordelia by her father, Lear, who does not recognize the value of her discretion, is constructed on the basis of the traditional motif of the fable of the three caskets, of gold, silver and lead, used before in *The Merchant of Venice*.

Divided between the madness of Lear and the blindness of Gloucester, in *King Lear* Oedipus' blindness changes its significance. Oedipus, who had torn out his eyes after the discovery of the truth of his past and the shameful actions that he had experienced and understood as representing trials overcome by strength and intelligence, reappears at Colonus as a blind man with the wisdom of the masters of truth, seers, poets and augur-kings: his blindness to the world had been the price and the possibility for him to look inside and behind himself and to understand, to gain that more archaic and sacred dimension of sovereignty that in the fullness of his royal functions he had lost.

The physical blinding of Oedipus is a point of arrival, the sign of the gap that lies between the delirium of secular omniscience and omnipotence of the early Oedipus and the wisdom and self-awareness that underlies the character of the old man of Colonus. The initial metaphorical blindness of both Lear and

Gloucester is a starting point, the sign or the symptom of the darkening of vision, the loss of reference points, of true madness taken for normality. Neither of these two characters, as opposed to Oedipus, who wanted to see too much and too deeply, are able to see or understand the reality surrounding them, but believe in the projections or hallucinations of their minds and in the falsity of their flatterers. And their paranoia will last until Lear's encounter with other forms of madness – first the lucid, Erasmian folly of his Fool and then the sacred madness of the beggarly Edgar-Tom o'Bedlam in the cosmic fury of the storm (3.4) – dissolves the opacity of his spirit, and until physical blindness means, for Gloucester, the discovery of reality so that, notwithstanding the destruction of his eyes, he becomes aware of the obstacles that, paradoxically, had made him stumble when he could actually see them (4.1.20-6).

But now the cards have been reshuffled where is Sophocles?

### **5. Exclusion, Reintegration, Liminality. Oedipus' gift, Lear's 'Nothing'**

The two Sophoclean tragedies of Oedipus, a distanced diptych with the strong intention of revisionism, are tragedies of the exclusion and reintegration of a king. They can be read as a pair: the older play of the two, through the investigation of Oedipus, unveils not only the monster that lies hidden in the best of kings but also the violence, the criminality, necessary to the establishment of personal power; the final, posthumous tragedy reverses the perspective and discovers in the monster, in this humiliated Oedipus who has almost descended to the level of a thing in the course of his beggared vagrancy, the charismatic and powerful sovereign claimed from Theseus and from Athens by Polyneices and Creon as a bastion of salvation. The first tragedy prepares us for the exclusion, better, the self-exclusion, of the saviour king who is found guilty of the recent emergency, the second dramatizes the difficult, but opportune reintegration of this king in a new reality, the reality of Athens which has banished its kings and abolished the monarchy. The first play ends with the self-blinding of Oedipus who

in this way eliminates the sight of worldly appearance, and indeed desires to be helped to disappear himself. The second opens on the figure of the blind Oedipus, guided by Antigone to the *locus amoenus* of the sacred grove of Colonus, the completion of his destiny. What we still read by Sophocles, and what Melanchthon read at Wittenberg in 1545 in Camerarius' Latin translation and with his commentary, are the plays of the first and third moments of the transformation of the old king/father. The tragedy of *King Lear*, with all the Sophoclean memories with which it appears to be studded, slips into the space left by Sophocles and fills it perfectly. It is the tragedy of wandering and of liminality in search of salvation, for Edgar-Tom o' Bedlam and Kent or, of the end, for Lear and Gloucester.

*King Lear* takes on the space-time that runs between *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the time of transformation, spent in the *locus horridus* of the tempest-torn heath. And, while in the sacred grove of the Eumenides, the goddesses who have been transformed and converted from vengeance to benevolent concord, the metamorphosis of the aged, exhausted Oedipus is completed and from the ashes of the old sovereign his authority is reborn, there is, on the other hand, no redemption, no conversion in *King Lear*. The death of Cordelia, the sacrificial figure of self-determination and authenticity, signals the collapse of both ethics and politics; the old die having understood too late; the young, who had carried their ambition too far through exasperation with the power of the old and had fought them and one another savagely to gain this power for themselves – Gonerill and Regan, Cornwall and Edmund – fall victims to their own plotting. A few blameless characters, saved by their ingenuousness, are left to take responsibility for the recovery of the realm. The aged Kent ready to follow his king to death, Albany and Edgar, the least corrupted by the machinations of power, but also the least capable of governing.

Change is the core element of Sophoclean dramaturgy: in the most ancient tragedies the archaic figures of the warrior, the sovereign and the father are called into question. Such characters in plays written after the events of 411 are rehabilitated and re-introduced. Change is the sign of Sophocles' profound political awareness. His theatre knows how to express the tension that is

unleashed in cities, that may sometimes flare up between the innovative arguments and dynamics of politics and the conservative resistance of the collective ethos. And he also has the language to represent the dream of innovation, from 411 onwards justified as a return to the constitution of his/their forebears. Shakespeare, in *Lear*, captures a world that in the first years of James I's reign seems to implode upon itself without finding redemption either in generational change or in a possible brotherly solidarity. A world, in short, that from the tempest-torn moor returns, more corrupt than ever to imprison itself in the palace, and plunge back into the closed, secret chambers of a diseased power, impossible to heal even in the light of the auspices of Albany to Kent and Edgar "[r]ule in this realm and the gored state sustain" (5.3.319). Sophocles opens the grove of the Eumenides on to the city that Antigone describes in the distance on her arrival. In Shakespeare it is the desolate heath that penetrates the palaces and sweeps them away.

Jan Kott, in a celebrated essay, read *Lear* as the premise of Beckett's *Endgame*. I believe he could not have made a more pertinent judgement, especially when he pointed out occasions when sense is swallowed up by nonsense, verisimilitude by the surreal. This comparative and close reading does not intend to go any further than Shakespeare. It stops here having tried to make evident in King Lear the persistent and pervasive memories of Sophocles' Theban tragedies and to understand how these memories generated a deeply-felt dramaturgic challenge and the first *reductio ad absurdum* of sovereignty and paternity. How the threads extracted from the ancient tragedies of king and father who changes and renews himself from what remains of him were rewoven by Shakespeare in a new portrait of the king and the father as 'Fool' and as 'Nothing'.

*Translation by Susan Payne*

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