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

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

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Time and Nothingness: *King Lear*

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Abstract

Lear's division of the kingdom among his daughters splits his own time into a before, when he was a King, and an after, when he is no longer one. The action of cutting, separating, allotting is symbolically aligned with measuring affection quantitatively within parental relations. It brings about the subversion of roles, power, and meaning, precipitating time into the nothingness of death and unbelief in both the future and the transcendental. Taking up a topic which he had already dealt with in such an early play as *Richard II*, Shakespeare deals once again with the effects of abdication on both the socio-political and the private levels. By divesting himself of the title of King, like Richard before him, Lear reduces himself to nothing within the symbolic system of the power signs he has handled until then. Once reduced to an "O without a figure", as the Fool tells him, he discovers the meaning of being a 'thing', the 'real thing' in fact, outside that system. Lear's famous interrogation of what is a man, chiming in with Montaigne's own identical question, passes through an experience of nothingness which looks back at the story of Oedipus, and, at the same time, raises questions about how one's choices determine one's 'being' or 'non-being'. This essay discusses ideas of nothingness in relation to a subjective experience of time and to its dramatisation on stage, and considers the many ways in which the play echoes and seems to respond, conceptually and performatively, to issues Sophocles had raised centuries earlier.

Keywords: Shakespeare; King Lear; Oedipus; nothingness; time

1. Time and No-Time

We are accustomed to thinking that time and nothingness lie at the core of all ideas of the tragic. Northrop Frye (1996), David

Kastan (1982), Matthew Wagner (2014 and 2018), and Rebecca Bushnell (2016 and 2018), among others, have argued that the tragic vision is qualified by a linear view of time, according to which nothing can be "undone", and "all experience vanishes, not simply into the past, but into nothingness, annihilation" (Frye 1996: 3). Tragedy leads us to experience in the present the anxieties of that "directional, irrreversible, and finite" time that leads us to death (Kastan 1982: 80). As Wagner and Bushnell have suggested, that present is not a simple 'now', but multidirectional and 'thick', phenomenologically stratified with layers of past experiences and future expectations. Or in Bergsonian terms, it is an elongated *durée*, more dense than any single point in a linear succession of moments in time. On stage the thickness of the now may be displayed in many ways, making it border on subjective time, strictly, and tragically, intertwined with the subject's sense of an ending. As Heidegger famously argued, our being is constituted by being in time, and it is only in dying that, he says, "I can say absolutely, I am" (1992: 318; see also Wagner 2014: 9-10; Bushnell 2016: 2):

> The certainty that "I myself am in that I will die," is *the basic certainty of Dasein itself*. It is a genuine statement of Dasein, while *cogito sum* is only the semblance of such a statement. If such pointed formulations mean anything at all, then the appropriate statement to Dasein in its being would have to be *sum moribundus* ["I am in dying"], *moribundus* not as someone gravely ill or wounded, but insofar as I am, I am moribundus, The MORIBUNDUS *first gives* the SUM *its sense*. (Heidegger 1992: 316-17)

Perhaps in no other Shakespearean tragedy as in *King Lear* a sense of the complexities of time conflating origin and ending in the 'now', as both dramatic and psychological categories, invades the play from its very outset. Or, at least, not in the same way. What is peculiar about this play is that its beginning inaugurates a new temporality entirely unconnected with what lies in the 'before' of the offstage and deeply imbued with a tragic sense of time. Even references to historical time are absent and what we perceive is the invocation of the mythical time of "classical deities such as Hecate and Apollo, and unidentified pagan 'gods'". As

Foakes further remarks, "the historical past is pretty much a blank, and the present is what matters in the action" ("Introduction" in Shakespeare 2017: 12-13). The first exchange between Kent and Gloucester only vaguely suggests a past when Lear had favoured Albany over Kent. But this feeling is soon dispelled when Gloucester avows that "now, in the division of the kingdom", all seems uncertain, as "it appears not which of the dukes he values most" (1.1.4-5).[1] Lear's purpose is "darker" (1.1.35), that is, secret or possibly "more wicked than the overt purpose of the formal court meeting", as glossed by Foakes. But whatever the meaning for us it remains unrooted in the past, and only in that first scene will it unveil itself, showing Lear's concern about the arrangement of his youngest daughter's marriage. Only in that first scene will all be disclosed, marking the beginning of a new period of time.

Lear's division of the kingdom has been compared – very recently by Kerrigan (2018) – to God's division of heaven and earth in Genesis (1.1-7). The map he asks for visualises his concern about space (1.1.36) as the main criterion to measure power through the extension of one's domain and rule. And yet, his speech shows that his first preoccupation is about time. "Unburdened" he wants to "crawl toward death" (1.1.40). In his self-depiction as an old man wishing to be relieved of worries Lear disowns responsible agency as a prefiguration of his own life's end and a premature abdication of his duties, yet not of his royal rights. But, as Cicero famously recommended in *De senectute* – "the standard authority about old age, widely read in Elizabethan grammar schools" (Kerrigan 2018: 69) – old men should never 'abdicate', as old age "is honoured only on condition that it defends itself, maintains its rights, is subservient to no one, and to the last breath rules over its own domain" (1923: 11 [38]). The negative particle "un-" in Lear's line encodes his desire of a 'lightness' in life to which old age should not give access unless fully aware of the subtraction of 'being' it involves. In this view 'being' depends on predication, not on existence, it entails meaning and this, in turn, entails power: the power of making oneself recognisable as meaningful, which in Lear's case signifies being endowed with royal authority, not with a royal name.

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1 All quotations are from Shakespeare 2017.

Lear desires to "shake all cares and business" (1.3.38), but these are not 'shakeable' without the rest being shaken too. Once drained of agency, the name he retains (1.136-7) drains him too of meaning – and 'being'.

Timewise, Lear is entangled in a paradox: he looks ahead at his own ending but closes himself, solipsistically, within a 'thin' now where he does not commit himself to the future, but instead prepares to fully enjoy the present, authoritatively and arbitrarily exerting a power he no longer has (1.3).[2] Being "unburdened" means being 'light' also with regard to time; it means being 'unthinking about the future', unprojected ahead, confined in the 'now'; the negative particle is the figure of his own presentness as negation of becoming; it is the figure of his own death – discursive and symbolic before being actual. The picture he draws of himself on a slow trajectory towards self-dissolution further elaborates on an idea of subverted time, conflating old age and infancy into the figure of an old man morphed back into a baby, tentatively moving on all fours towards his end. This image will recur again with an echo effect in Goneril's comment that Lear is an "Idle old man / That still would manage those authorities that he hath given away" (1.3.17-19; lines present in Q only), and like old fools he is a "bab[e] again and must be used / With checks as flatteries, when [he is] seen abused" (1.3.17-20; in Q only). As Adrian Poole remarks, "[t]he bonds and the differences that make family relations are not static and given, once and for all. This is the fond belief into which Lear has hardened, and which the daughters have allowed to go unchallenged until now" (1988: 228).

Thus, Lear's first words, albeit apparently commonsensical on the part of an old man, in fact suggest a troubled relation with time, a negation of the sense of his own ending the moment he proclaims it. Not surprisingly, the first two acts show the "picture of a man who is not intent on moving forward towards death

2 Paduano (2018: 105) rightly remarks that Lear shows two different types of folly. The first one has often been neglected by criticism and is refereable to a form of narcissistic, solipsistic egotism that results "in mental pathology" and consists in "a partial rejection of traditional logic, such as the Freudian unconscious and infantile dimension".

but on living fully and perpetually in the present" (Wagner 2014: 90). That is the sense of a 'thin' now, compared to Goneril's and Regan's 'thick' sense of their father's unruly character rooted in the past and resulting in future capriciousness (1.1.280-309).

Lear's division of the kingdom inaugurates yet another temporality, that of succession-as-hereditariness. The first portion of his kingdom will be "perpetual" to "[Goneril's] and Albany's issues" (1.3.65, 66), and the "ample third" allotted to Regan will "[r]emain" to her and her "hereditary" (79-80). Time has been split into two separate long portions: that of *genos*, or lineage, concerning Lear only in terms of the cyclic time of two branches of his family succession. Thus, before crawling towards death, Lear, like the God of Genesis dividing light from darkness and creating the cycles of seasons, days, and years, marks the beginning of a new time, and new genealogies. But there's the rub, as he will be unable to complete his new creation and add a third portion of long temporality to his design. Time will soon be barred to the third daughter and Lear will become the creator of no-time for her. Cordelia will respond with "nothing" when requested to speak, and, as a consequence, in a logic of retribution based on the linear sequence of 'before' and 'after', and 'cause' and 'effect', she will 'have' nothing, and will finally 'be' nothing: non-being will be revealed as intrinsically connected with doing-as-saying in the linear course of time; *ex nihilo nihil fit*: "nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.90).

2. Saying Nothing

As Parmenides famously claimed, whatever is is, and can never not be:

> οὐ γὰρ μήποτε τοῦτο δαμῇ εἶναι μὴ ἐόντα·
>   ἀλλὰ σὺ τῆσδ' ἀφ' ὁδοῦ διζήσιος εἶργε νόημα.
> (Parmenides 1951: B7.1-2)

> [For never shall this prevail, that things that are not *are*;
> But do you restrain your thought from this route of enquiry.
> (Parmenides 2000)]

This statement entails that non-being can neither be thought nor

said. Plato would contest this assumption in the *Sophist* arguing in favour of a philosophy of plurality and difference, so that non-being would in fact be predicable as long as it is not opposed to, but different from what is (that is, from truth).[3] Despite Parmenides' denial of the speakability of nothing, we normally use this word to indicate non-existent objects, as Lear does in 1.1 with a strongly performative function. His speech-act banning Cordelia turns her into a 'nothing' estranged from both himself and the kingdom. In his reply to her "nothing", the denial of allotment of the last third of the kingdom to her, he precipitates the primary meaning of "no-dowry", implying relative value (I will disown you, turning you into a 'nothing' for me), into an existential, absolute meaning, suggesting her non-existence within a system that connects being with owing (property, name, identity).[4] Lear's nullification of Cordelia is a death sentence with immediate execution, entailing her symbolic death and the final severing of her own 'personal time' from that of her family, as well as the denial of 'family time' to her progeny.

Howard Caygill has studied Shakespeare's remarkable treat-

3 In the *Sophist* Plato famously commits 'parricide' on Parmenides by demonstrating the relativistic nature of non-being, according to which 'what is not' should be interpreted as 'what is different from' (not opposite to) 'what is'. In this dialogue, the 'Stranger' tries to define the qualities of the 'false wise man' to demonstrate that discourse is different from things and concepts, which is the premise for arguing that it is possible to say things different from truth. Contrary to Parmenides, the Stranger summarises the demonstration of his dialectical method as follows (258e-259a): "[258e] Then let not anyone assert that we declare that not-being is the opposite of being, and hence are so rash as to say that not-being exists. For we long ago gave up speaking of any opposite of being, whether it exists or not and is capable [259a] or totally incapable of definition. But as for our present definition of not-being, a man must either refute us and show that we are wrong, or, so long as he cannot do that, he too must say, as we do, that the classes mingle with one another, and being and the other permeate all things, including each other, and the other, since it participates in being, is, by reason of this participation, yet is not that in which it participates, but other, and since it is other than being, must inevitably be not-being" (Plato 1921).

4 For a discussion of a similar property-bound, gendered conception of 'being', as put forward by Lady Capulet in *Romeo and Juliet* 1.3, see Bigliazzi 2015: 252-4.

ment of 'nothing' in his plays,[5] claiming that it can hardly fall within traditional philosophical categories.[6] His nothings are 'monsters' of nothing, because their equivocal uses at the same time state and disclaim being. Such cases are instantiated especially by the "performative negation of nothing" which "issues in the equivocal condition of not-nothing, a state that is neither being nor nothing" (2000: 107). In this tragedy, Caygill observes, Cordelia's first 'nothing' and Lear's *ex nihilo* reply produce "neither unequivocal being nor unequivocal not-being but a series of equivocal events linked by dissension, betrayal, civil war and madness – not being but not nothing" (ibid.). I am not sure whether equivocal in this case is the right word, unless it refers to communicative equivocation, as some scholars have argued. Recently Burzyńska has remarked that "it is indeed ironic or painfully existential that the two people who believe that they love each other repeat these 'nothings', totally misunderstanding their mutual intentions or needs" (2018: n.p.). But is this really a communicative failure? In this scene Lear and Cordelia display opposite attitudes on the subjects of power and parental and filial affection,[7]

5 Shakespeare's use of 'nothing' and negation has increasingly attracted critical attention in recent years. Here I can only refer to the following studies and make occasional reference to some of them in the course of the present discussion: Fleissner 1962, Fisher 1990, Tayler 1990, Caygill 2000, Rotman 2001, Bigliazzi 2005, Levin 2009, Sheerin 2013, White 2013, Burzyńska 2018, Chabis 2018, Lucking 2018, Pellone 2019.

6 Caygill's assumption that philosophical categories fail to encompass Shakespeare's uses of 'nothing' has recently been challenged by Chiba (2018), who has argued that there are more equivocal categories of philosophical ontology than those of Hegel and Heidegger extensively referred to by Caygill. Both studies, though, stress the equivocal dimension of Shakespeare's 'nothings' as intermediate conditions between being and non-being where nothing indicates meaningless presence or meaningful absence. My own reading of Shakespeare's nothings pits different uses of this word against two opposite semiotic conceptions of being referable, on the one hand, to a symbolic interpretation of identity grounded in a shared, predetermined value, and, on the other, to a subjective, relative meaning concerning the speakability of passion or its effects upon one's perception of reality. In both cases nothing hovers between being and non-being but with significantly different connotations. For a full discussion see Bigliazzi 2005.

7 This is not the place to discuss knowledge deriving from parental con-

and their conflict cannot be reduced to a question of misunderstanding. The ensuing action makes the meaning of 'being nothing' deriving from that first conflict of 'nothings' very clear within a system which guarantees position in society and 'meaningful being' to those who conform to its rules, but transforms those who do not into non-beings/no-things. Yet it is true that at some level there is ambiguity, and it emerges on the discursive plane when the two senses of 'nothing' mentioned earlier (the evaluative/predicative and the existential) are conflated. Only a few examples will suffice.

Metaphors of designified, inert bodies – anticipating by contrast the meaninglessness of nudity, acknowledged by Lear in the storm, as testimony of true manhood, of politically unqualified, bare life (in Agamben's terms, 1998) – or of bodies deprived of any 'addition', define the semantics of banishment in Lear's words as a synonym of symbolic death and nothingness. For siding with Cordelia Kent will be exiled and called a "banished trunk" (1.1.178), a carcass symbolically assimilated to brute matter. In turn, Cordelia herself will be objectified into a body whose "price is fallen" (1.1.198), reduced to a "little seeming substance" (199) which has "nothing more" (201) to it than itself; she is "*Un*friended, *new adopted* to our hate, / *Dowered* with our curse and *strangered* with our oath" (204-5; my emphasis). These are the figures of her having been turned into a no-sign within the kingdom (no longer the King's daughter) and therefore into a no-thing or a meaningless presence. Her nothingness cannot be separated from its perspectival position and its belonging to the eventive domain of being-in-time, which contemplates that, outside that sphere, in another time (that of her banishment), she is both a 'thing' (a living body) and has also become the wife of France (she has a new identity). The ambiguous notion of not-nothing which does not result unequivocally in something, relies precisely upon the combination of these different perspectives: although one may be nothing symbolically within one system, one may continue to be existentially and acquire a different 'being' elsewhere through a resignifying pro-

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flict and loss, although it is relevant to the overall discussion. On the epistemological value of Lear's experience see Zamir 2007.

cess that produces 'something' out of that 'nothing' (Cordelia is and is France's wife, despite being a banned 'nothing').

That kind of symbolic, eventive not-nothing, which is both evaluative and existential within the social system, yet not in absolute terms, is the fate Lear has ironically and tragically prepared for himself. In the course of 1.4 the progressive emptying out of his performative word in his encounter with Goneril corresponds to the increasingly deconstructive power of the Fool's own language. Starting from that scene, the Fool famously builds a counterdiscourse unveiling Lear's original error which designifies his own royal title (". . . Only shall we retain / The name and th'addition to a king; the sway, / Revenue, execution of the rest, / Belovèd sons, be yours; which to confirm, / This coronet part between you", 1.1.137-40). The Fool notoriously exposes the logic of the 'monstrous' not-nothing Lear has turned himself into, bringing in full view the consequences of his subversion of time and regression to infancy: he has made his "daughters [his] mothers", given "them the rod" and put "down [his] own breeches" (169-71) – an echo of Lear's own earlier image of himself morphed into a crawling baby. The use of nothing is insistent in their exchanges in ways that it will not be at any other time in the course of the play after Lear is finally expelled. Still inside, he is but a zero with no figure before it, a non-entity 'disquantified' to nihil, non-existent:[8]

> 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 Goneril*] Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue. So your face bids me, though you say nothing. (1.4.182-6; my emphasis)

A grotesque sign drained of meaning, Lear has lost himself. He has a body, yet it is unsignifying; body and being have been stripped apart:

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8 On practices of mensuration and disquantification see Rotman 2001, and David Lucking's chapter in this volume. For a recent discussion of the relation between the digit 'nought' and 'naught' in King Lear, see Pellone 2019. See also Fleissner 1962, Fisher 1990, Barrow 2001, White 2013.

> LEAR Does any here know me? ᵠWhyᵠ, this is not Lear. Does
>   Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes? Either his
>   notion weakens, ᵠorᵠ his discernings are lethargied – Ha!
>   ᵠsleeping orᵠ waking? ᵠSurelᵠ 'tis not so. Who is it that can
>   tell me who I am?
> ᶠFOOLᶠ *Lear's shadow.*
> (1.4.217-22; my emphasis)

We know that he will reconnect body and being once he dis-
covers the meaning of naked manhood on the heath, prey to the
natural storm and that of the mind (3.4.12), face to face with other-
ness (3.4.99-107) – bare life. At that point he will recognise man in
the bare forked animal he sees in Edgar-Poor Tom: one who thus
disguised remains "something yet", while, as a 'banned' man and
nameless, he "nothing" is ("I nothing am", 2.2.192). We also know
that Lear's own distraction will be perceived on stage as going be-
yond his own individual fate. In 4.6 Gloucester will interpret it
as the sign of the nothingness of the entire universe brought to
its own destruction: "O ruined piece of nature! This great world /
Shall so wear out to *naught*. . . " (4.6.130-1; my emphasis). Both the
King-no-King and the world seem about to implode upon them-
selves and time to reach an end.

3. The End of Time

We have seen that the division of the kingdom entails a division
of time. It produces a new beginning, creating the time of new ge-
nealogies, but also, contrariwise, the no-time of Cordelia's sym-
bolic death – and soon of Lear himself. It is both a genesis and its
reverse. This posits the problem of origin as one concerning a dia-
lectic between being and non-being from which there derives the
ambiguous, 'monstrous', concept of not-nothing as an eventive
and perspectival category. But we have also noticed that in the or-
igin of that new time of the divided kingdom yet another sense of
nothingness is contained, referring to the absolute end on an ex-
istential plane: physical death. Chiba's reference of death to that
same ambiguous category of meaningless nothing is convinc-
ing in so far as it too is in turn referred to a perspectival, subjec-

tive category of apprehension: "[f]or Lear, Cordelia's dead body is still Cordelia" (2018: n.p.). And yet, her lifeless body can hardly be called Cordelia in absolute terms. It is still 'something' with regard to her bodily presence, but this too is destined to become 'nothing' over time. And to nothing the moment of intimacy that Lear and Cordelia find at the end of the play is also reduced, shattered by Cordelia's sudden death. As Burzyńska points out, this is what "brings out the whole horror of *King Lear*, as well as its full existentialist load", "mock[ing] the very idea of poetic justice" (2018: n.p.).[9]

Such a radical sense of final ending in which both meaning and existence are drained is what motivates Lear's initial abdication and division of the kingdom (and of time) in the first place. It is a sense whose full meaning Lear will grasp only when confronting Cordelia's lifeless body, but which constitutes the horizon which we all know limits everybody's life even before we directly experience the suffering of someone's loss, itself a prefiguration of our own self-loss. It is that sense of impending annihilation one is aware of, if only abstractly, that incongruously morphes the old man Lear into an infant crawling towards his end as a paradoxical figure of resistance to the idea of ending. It is that same sense that we are eventually brought to distinguish as different from Lear's own symbolic not-nothingness outside the kingdom ruled by his daughters. There he still is, while being nothing, precisely as time still is, and continues to be, indifferent to the collapse of the kingdom's symbolic order following the collapse of its King's meaningfulness and expulsion from it. But on a different plane, that collapse is, again perspectivally, not indifferent to the larger world. In the figure of distracted and demolished Lear Gloucester senses the world's 'wearing out' and annihilation ("O ruined piece of nature, this great world / Shall so wear out to naught", 4.6.130-1).

9 Burzyńska reads this moment through Gabriel Marcel's notion of "creative fidelity" (2002), "a condition of being 'available' for someone over time" (2018: n.p.), as insufficient to restore meaning to an absurd reality, thus challenging ideas of poetic justice. For a very different view on a fundamentally positive redemptive ending, see Pratt 1985. For a similar, yet more critical, appreciative stance of the discovery of compassion and re-evaluation of the sense of mortality in *King Lear* see Pellone 2019.

In this respect, Wagner, among others, has argued that "*King Lear* executes what might seem to be an impossibility: it materializes time precisely by providing an experience of apocalypse; it gives its audience time by generating an encounter with the end of time" (2014: 68). Yet in order to produce this dynamic between origin and ending theatrically it is the present of the action that is spotlighted. Again Wagner, who has offered perhaps the most extensive recent contribution on this topic, has further noticed that in this play "we also see the complex and living, fluctuating dynamic between the time of the theatre and the time of the world – the 'promised end' is both a real apocalypse and 'the image of that horror' (V.iii.261-262)" (69). In that dynamic between our time and that of drama we perceive conflicting patterns which we are also led to sense when the 'thickness' of 'now' becomes manifest on stage. Wagner has elucidated how this happens in a few cases: for instance in the coexistence of different temporalities in the same scene, as when in 2.2 Kent is shown to fall asleep in the stocks and then Edgar enters and disguises himself as Tom O' Bedlam: here we do not know whether a scene break is needed, in fact nowhere is this indicated either in F or in Q, but what we feel is that "two mutually exclusive clocks remove us from clock time altogether and place us instead into a world of unmeasured and perhaps unmeasurable duration" (89). Later in the same scene a radical change of the pace of time, and of its quality, overthrows our sense of normal time scansion. In the space of 172 lines, from 316 to 498, we move from morning to night as we first hear Lear say "Good morrow" to Regan and Cornwall (316), then only seventy-four lines later Gloucester says that "night comes on" (490), and eight lines later Cornwall comments that "it is a wild night" already (498). This collapsing of time into a very short span produces "the destruction of the clock: measurable time has sped up to its breaking point, and we are hurled out into a timeless night and 'storm still'" (Wagner 2014: 89). This may reflect Lear's own subjective sense of time after storming against Regan and Cornwall, as Wagner contends, as if dramatic time were now ruled by his own subjectivity;[10] but it may as well be a dramatic device to ac-

10 On Shakespeare's experimentalism on focalisation in drama see

celerate the action and get Lear's own storming with his daughter and the storm outside closer to one another. In either case, dramatic time is clearly subverted and through conflicting time schemes the 'now' shows itself as having become 'thick'. In 3.2, it is once again the Fool who discloses the extent of the dismantling of linear time by demolishing causal links in his prophecy, "making the relationship between 'when' and 'then' . . . uncertain" (94), and finally setting an unfathomable time frame that reminds us that Lear's story in fact predates Merlin's by fourteen centuries (being set in the eighth century BC by Holinshed, while Merlin is located in the sixth century AD): "This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time" (3.2.96). His last line in 3.6, "And I'll go to bed at noon", in response to Lear's last mad line, "we'll go to supper in the morning" (81), mirrors Lear's own inversion of time before falling asleep, and before the Fool disappears for good.

But if it is true that we "encounter the end of time" in *King Lear*, how does this happen? Besides, whose time? As already suggested, linearity and causality begin being done away with in 2.2 when Lear is about to face the storm in Nature and in his mind, as well as his own not-nothingness in the face of Edgar-Tom's human some-thingness. After cursing Regan in 1.4, and his prayer not to be engulfed by madness in 1.5 ("O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven! I would not be mad", 1.5.43-4), his fury against Regan in 2.2 is unrestrained, and yet ineffective. Even imaginatively he cannot envision what he will do in the end – except go mad:

> . . . No, you unnatural hags,
> I will have such revenges on you both,
> That all the world shall – I will do such things –
> What they are yet I know not: but they shall be
> The terrors of the earth! You think I'll weep
> No, I'll not weep: ᶠ*Storm and tempest*ᶠ
> I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
> Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws,
> Or e're I'll weep. O fool, I shall go mad.
> (2.2.467-75)[11]

Bigliazzi 2020.

11 Corresponding to 2.4.275-83 in modern editions dividing 2.2 into three

Lear is neither a God of creation and of destruction, as in 1.1, nor a *homo faber* any longer; he has lost agency, even in sinning (he says that he is "a man / More sinned against than sinning", 3.2.59-60)[12] and is more a figure of Passion than of action. Imaginatively, his mind is overcome by imageless fury, which will regain figurative power only when he stands alone against the unmerciful heavens, in the "Blow winds" apocalyptic speech of 3.2. Significantly, when Lear experiences his own not-nothingness in the storm, himself a bare 'forked animal' facing Nature's fury, his nullification is no longer talked about using the language of 'nothing', it is dramatised on stage. The last significant use of the word not coincidentally precedes Lear's expulsion from Regan's home; it occurs in 2.2, when Edgar acknowledges that it is only through Tom that he can become 'something'. The shift from an idea of symbolic nullification to that of absolute nothingness in 5.3 is marked by different words, diversely connected to a sense of time: 'No', denying the evidence of death in its present factuality, and 'never', stating the end of time future.

This scene opens on Lear's refusal to see his two wicked daughters and his voiced desire to seclude himself with Cordelia in a prison ("No, no, Fno, noF. Come, let's away to prison", 5.3.8). Both of them are two 'not-nothings', banished and crushed in the same way, but meaningful to each other, and he wishes for yet another time-space, just for the two of them, outside 'social' time, spectators of human life, of nature and society; separate from the spectacle of life, spying on "the ebb and flow by the moon", "as if they were God's spies" (5.3.17). But then that dream of a prison outside time is smashed to pieces and Lear experiences absolute nothingness in the face of Cordelia's not-breathing, her having "gone for ever" (257). Language fails him except for the ability to invoke howling, and howling himself, like an animal, four times (255: "Howl, howl, howl, Qhowl Q"), crying out the torment he feels in his own flesh for his own flesh's end of life. Absolute nothingness erases human time: neither time past nor time present, but time future; this is how time is finally nullified. The trochaic pen-

scenes.

12 On this see Sheila Murnaghan's essay in this volume.

tameter inverts with an obsessive sequence of five "never" the usual rhythmical sequence of blank verse (307), encoding rhythmically and in the pounding nasal signifier, linking back to nothing, the sense of the end of time. It follows the emphatic spondaic "No, no ᶠnoᶠ life" (304), reinforcing that same feeling through Lear's refusal to accept Cordelia's absolute nothingness: not the relative no-time that Lear created for her, and unwillingly for himself, but the absolute No-time he must suffer in suffering her death. No time beyond is accessible, even imaginatively.

"Is this the promised end" (5.3.61), asks Kent, or is it "the image of that horror", figure of the apocalypse, asks Edgar (5.3.62). Yet whose end, and in what way is this the end of time? As Beales has recently noticed, even before the play's end

> [t]he impossibility of the future depicted by the Fool [in his prophecy of a topsy-turvy future when "shall the realm Albion / come to a great confusion", 3.2.79-96] reflects the status of Lear's kingdom in Shakespeare's play: since the play ends with the destruction of the ruling family, Britain has no future. The Fool glimpse at futurity is destabilized by Shakespeare's main historiographic alteration, the implosion of the British dynasty. The Tudor and Stuart monarchs traced their ancestry back to the ancient legendary kings of Britain, a line which included Lear. By ending the dynasty prematurely, Shakespeare's play breaks that ancestral link, and thus early modern Britain's genetic and dynastic links to its ancient past. (2018: 201)[13]

13 Bertram has elaborated on the Fool's ineffectual prophecy as further proof of the play's sceptical approach to knowledge: "The Fool reminds us that matter is known only through words, yet words are always somehow detached from matter. Since Merlin has not even made the prophecy yet, there is no matter in the Fool's prophecy, and thus it exists as a collection of words with no real temporal substance. The Fool cannot offer a prediction of the future because words are mired in the materiality of the present. Despite or perhaps because of its confusion, the passage seems to question utopian prophecy by commenting obliquely on the metaphysical idea that the immaterial future can be foretold by words in the material present. The Fool does not offer a visionary escape from disorder and the reality principle, but he does grapple with the moral confusion of reality itself through negation. Unlike the witches in *Macbeth*, the fool cannot 'look into the seeds of time / And say which grain will grow, and which will not' (1.3.58-59)" (2004: 164).

And yet, as Kermode noticed, on a different plane this is not the end of time. "*King Lear* is a fiction that inescapably involves an encounter with oneself, and the image of one's end" (1968: 39), not the end of All. Life goes on, albeit sadly and bleakly. And this is the worst of it, that it does not end at all. That would be a relief. Although nothingness awaits each one of us, more or less horribly, yet life goes on and on, and we must endure, once we have been born:

> Lear   . . . We came crying hither:
>   Thou knowest the first time that we smell the air
>   We wawl and cry. I will preach to thee: mark ᵒmeᵒ.
> Gloucester   Alack, alack the day!
> Lear   When we are born we cry that we are come
>   To this great stage of fools. . .
> (4.6.174-80)

Perhaps we must "repent" "Our being born", as Beckett would say (2000: 3),[14] dismally aware of a knitting machine, indestructible, that "has knitted time, space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions – and nothing matters". This is Conrad (1983: 425). But perhaps it all started with ancient wisdom, echoed by the Chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus*:[15]

> Πάντων μὲν μὴ φῦναι ἐπιχθονίοισιν ἄριστον
>   μηδ' ἐσιδεῖν αὐγὰς ὀξέος ἠελίου,
> φύντα δ' ὅπως ὤκιστα πύλας Ἀίδαο περῆσαι
>   καὶ κεῖσθαι πολλὴν γῆν ἐπαμησάμενον.
> (Theognis 425-9)

> [The best lot of all for man is never to have been born nor seen the beams of the burning sun; this failing, to pass the gates of Hades as soon as one may, and lie under a goodly heap of earth. (Theognis 1982: 280-1)]

> μὴ φῦναι τὸν ἅπαντα νι-
> κᾷ λόγον· τὸ δ', ἐπεὶ φανῇ,
> βῆναι κεῖθεν ὅθεν περ ἥ-

14 On Beckett and *King Lear* see Barry A. Spence's essay in this volume.
15 Quotations are from Sofocle (2008) for the Greek text and from Sophocles (1994) for the English translation.

κει πολὺ δεύτερον ὡς τάχιστα.
(*OC* 1224-7)

[Not to be born is, beyond all estimation, best; 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.]

Coda: Circle and Line

Kerrigan has reminded us that "Edgar's advice to Gloucester, 'Ripeness is all' (5.2.11)", derives from Cicero's *De senectute* (19 [71]), and that in that text Shakespeare would have found a reference to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* which might "have helped Shakespeare see how plots from Holinshed and Sidney could combine and resonate with Greek tragedy" (2018: 69).[16] Closer parallels have often been traced with Seneca. For instance, occasional references to the "learned Theban" as Oedipus-the-solver of the riddle of the Sphinx have been put forward with regard to Seneca's mediation.[17] But more substantially Pratt (1985) has argued that Seneca is closer to Shakespeare than to Sophocles in so far as the moral conflict in his tragedies is internalised in ways that were not in Greek tragedy.[18] On a different note, Kerrigan has noiced sim-

16 Here is the anecdote: "Sophocles composed tragedies to extreme old age and when, because of his absorption in literary work, he was thought to be neglecting his business affairs, his sons haled him into court in order to secure a verdict removing him from the control of his property on the ground of imbecility, under a law similar to ours, whereby it is customary to restrain heads of families from wasting their estates. Thereupon, it is said, the old man read to the jury his play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, which he had just written and was revising, and inquired: 'Does that poem seem to you to be the work of an imbecile?' When he had finished he was acquitted by the verdict of the jury." (Cicero 1923: 22-3).

17 See e.g. Cutts 1963, Hebert 1976, Pascucci 2013: 240n55. Pascucci's claim that the "good Athenian" could instead be Sophocles (239n55) rests on tenuous evidence: his traditionally being qualified as *chrestos* ('useful', 'good') by ancient biographers..

18 "For Sophocles, the divine order involves moral values, to be sure, but it is difficult to find any meaningful, decisive relationship between moral values, or the lack of them, and the downfall of Oedipus. For that matter, 'downfall' is a false term, for in Sophocles the affirmation is not of a moral order,

ilarities between the episode of Gloucester's self-deluded jump from Dover Cliffs and the one Oedipus envisages from the steep hill of Cithaeron he is heading towards with Antigone in Seneca's *Phoenician Women*. Shakespeare might well have known this text, in Latin and/or in Thomas Newton's English translation (1581).[19] But apart from superficial similarities between those two episodes, the old raging man ranting against his two sons at the beginning of the second fragment cannot but remind one of Lear's invoked apocalypse in the storm, including his cursing of his offspring and the ensuing end of his own time qua end of the time of his *genos* or dynasty. Like the Sophocles of *Oedipus Rex*, yet not of *Oedipus at Colonus*, and like the Euripides of *The Phoenician Women*, Seneca plays around with the paradoxical timelessness of Oedipus' story. Reduced to the instant of his own victory over the Sphinx, in Euripides that single moment in time contains both Oedipus' future fortune and misfortune (1689: ΟΙΔΙΠΟΥΣ: ὄλωλ'· ἓν ἦμάρ μ' ὤλβισ', ἓν δ' ἀπώλεσεν, "Oedipus: Lost for ever! one day made, and one day marred my fortune", 5.5.154).[20] Shakespeare knew that version, if not in Greek or in Latin,[21] via Gascoigne and Kinwelmersh's *Jocasta* (performed 1566; printed 1573), which offered an English adaptation of Lodovico Dolce's own version of that play (1549).[22] But compared to those versions, Seneca emphasised a more radical question. If in Euripides the focus was on the temporal contradiction inherent in being 'done' and 'undone' in the instantaneous conflation of fortune and misfortune when

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but of a great human spirit who remains on his feet and goes on. The change in the treatment of moral matter is a great difference between ancient and most modern tragedy. But it began in Seneca." (1985: 53).

19 On Shakespeare's access to Latin and Englished Seneca, see Gray 2016.

20 The Greek text is based on Euripides 1994, the translation is from Euripides 1938.

21 For instance "Periit. una dies me beauit, una quoque perdidit" (Euripides 1541); "Occidi. Unus me beauit, unusque pessumdedit dies" (Euripides 1562).

22 On Dolce and Gascoigne-Kinwelmersh see Miola 2002, Dewar-Watson 2010, Bigliazzi 2014. "Edipo: Un dì mi fe' felice, un dì m'ha ucciso" (*Giocasta* 5.5.153), "Oedipus: One happie day did raise me to renoune, / One hapless day hath throwne mine honour doune" (*Jocasta* 5.5.154-5) (Cunliffe 1906: 402, 403) .

Oedipus solves the riddle, Seneca moves that paradox to a deeper level. Oedipus is directing his steps towards Mount Cithaeron ("*meus* Cithaeron", he says, 13; emphasis mine) where he was first exposed to death when he was born, and where he now wants to encounter the death he was then denied. Temporal circularity here replaces linear time in his tragic experience. Seneca makes it very clear that the nothingness he is after now is different from the imperfect nothingness he has inflicted on himself through blindness and beggary. Oedipus is a self-expelled wandering unburied corpse, he says to Antigone ("peccas honesta mente. pietatem vocas / patrem insepultum trahere", 97-8; "But piety it canot be, to dragge thus vp and downe / Thy Fathers Corpes vnburied", Newton 1581: 43).[23] He finally wants to achieve the real, perfect nothingness of death. He wants to accomplish his destiny inscribed in his own beginning: the day he was born, he was born to die, although it is generally thought that being born means being given life. In Seneca, Oedipus' suicidal drive is twofold: on the one hand, his death accomplishes his own destiny through punishment for the crimes he committed innocently ("scelera quae feci innocens", 218); on the other, his curse against his two sons prefigures the destruction of his own family. In the fragments we possess we do not see what ensues from either of his desires, but we hear Oedipus refrain from his suicidal purpose on account of Antigone's life-inspiring affection, which redresses Oedipus' circular temporality into the directional time of life's endurance: and yet it is a temporality deprived of future in so far as the curse prefigures the end of time of his own stock. Thus, after all, Oedipus' tragic experience does not escape the temporal directionality comprised within the circularity of his birth-and-death: his self-blinding is an imperfect death in linear time which only postpones within that directional temporality Oedipus' accomplishment of the circularity of his destiny. First he longs for a perfect, definitive death, and then he wishes one for his sons too. It follows that for Oedipus linearity is only a fragment of a temporal paradigm whose tragic dimension resides in the paradox of the coincidence of birth and death. They coincide in the instant of their simultane-

23 Latin quotations are from Seneca 1921.

ous happening, but they also coincide in the full circle of Oedipus'
return to Mount Cithaeron where he was first exposed to death
when he was born. Both are temporal figures of his paradoxically
being criminal and innocent at the same time.[24]

In *Oedipus at Colonus* too we find an old man reduced to a no-
man, or no-thing, as he says to Ismene: "When I no longer exist,
then I am a man?" (393: ὅτ' οὐκέτ' εἰμί, τηνικαῦτ' ἄρ' εἴμ' ἀνήρ;).
An exile like Lear, Oedipus is a monstrous 'not-nothing', alive yet
nullified. His rage is directed against his son Polyneices who first
banned him in accord with Eteocles, differently from what hap-
pens in Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, where banishment is at the
hands of Creon. Like Lear "crawling" towards his own end, how-
ever he knows that there is something awaiting him beyond. But
how can the prospect of a transcending temporality be reconciled
with the time of his own godly predetermined 'innocent crimes',
the time of his unknowing, which Oedipus recuperates at Colonus
by referring back to that removed part of his myth in the previ-
ous play? How can he be pacified by the promise of a redemptive
time beyond? Before being summoned to the grove, still lingering
in the liminal space of his 'non-being' outside Athens, Oedipus re-
claims his being 'something' through negative agency: he denies
himself his homeland when urged to go back to Thebes and stands
out as a willing 'thing' outside; he denies support to Polyneices,
and curses him instead. But how can he accept recompense for
being the victim of the god's first rage against his own father?
Resistance to such an acceptance surfaces in his vindication of un-
knowing and irresponsibility[25] – the one that Antigone will al-
so claim for him in Seneca's *Phoenician Women* and that Oedipus
himself suggests in the paradoxical image of "scelera quae feci in-
nocens" for which he inflicts self-punishment.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus' resistance to be-
ing pacified finally contradicts his acceptance of a timelessness be-
yond tragic linearity. This contradiction makes the fragments of
Seneca's *Phoenician Women* closer to Shakespeare's *King Lear*, at

24 On the paradigm of circular time in Seneca see Paduano 2005: 333-7.
25 See especially the long *rhesis* where he claims his innocence (*OC*
960-90).

least as far as a tragic conception of time, unredeemed by pros-
pects of beyondness, is concerned. Lear has no experience of cir-
cular time, like the old, self-blinded Oedipus; he is an old man who
has cut time, somehow like the young Oedipus of *Oedipus Rex*,
but for different reasons.[26] Like the God of Creation, he has divid-
ed time into a before and an after, producing linearity: the time of
his daughters' reign and the no-time of the 'nothings' to which he
reduces Cordelia and eventually himself. Although at this point a
suffering patient, "[m]ore sinned against than sinning", he is the
one who initiates the tragic temporality. This leads to the process
of nullification he himself undergoes, prefiguring the End of his
own time and of his genealogy. Lear shares with Seneca's old wild
Oedipus both the sense of his irreconcilability with his past and
that of paternal affection. This sense produces in him the delusion
of an elsewhere he thinks he can inhabit with Cordelia, as Oedipus
presumably does with Antigone at the end of the first fragment
in Seneca. But, indeed, that is only a delusion. If Sophocles' old
Oedipus does not understand the why of his tragic life, but accepts
his final deification, in *King Lear*, on the other hand, one can hard-
ly believe in a sense of significance, if not justice, beyond the char-
acters' own actions. As Gloucester famously remarks, "As flies to
wanton boys, are we to the gods. / They kill us for their sport"
(4.1.38-9). Oedipus only hints at that sport. But then the thunder
calls him and he goes. Lear's End of time is yet to come.

26 As Guido Avezzù has argued in his essay in this volume, Oedipus
"produces an *epoché*" by narratising himself from the moment of his exploit
with the Sphinx, after which he divides time into discrete units following a
before/after pattern. He is the master of a linear temporality which delusori-
ly turns the essential circularity of his time into a directional, temporal frag-
ment. He draws a genealogy for the Thebans starting from his kingly acces-
sion, although he thinks himself not a Theban. A *homo faber*, he gives his
time pace and direction, yet vainly, as the time he forges for himself will turn
out to be a segment of a longer circular temporality he is still unaware of. In
Oedipus Tyrannus he is still an active agent before awareness of that circular-
ity turns him into a suffering patient in *Oedipus at Colonus*. For a reading of
the essential irreconcilability of Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus* see Gherardo
Ugolini's essay in this volume.

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