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

Edited by Silvia Bigliazzi

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

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# Happy Endings for Old Kings: Jean-François Ducis' *Œdipe* and *Léar*

Nicola Pasqualicchio

Abstract

The French dramatist Jean-François Ducis (1733-1816) is, to our knowledge, the only author who ever wrote both a tragedy inspired by Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. His *Œdipe chez Admète* (1778) – a peculiar hybridization of the Sophoclean source with elements taken from Euripides' *Alcestis* – originated from his liking for the tragic theme of Oedipus' old age and death, confirmed by the revival of *Œdipe chez Admète* in 1792 and the creation of *Œdipe à Colone* in 1797. While the treatment of this theme is Ducis' only thematic descent into Greek tragedy, *Le Roi Léar* (1783), following *Hamlet* and *Roméo et Juliette* and preceding *Macbeth*, *Jean sans Terre*, and *Othello*, is one among the many passionate and unfaithful homages the Versailles author paid to Shakespeare. We should look at *Œdipe* and *Léar* as contiguous works, especially if we take into account that Ducis' dramatic muse fell silent during the five-year interval between the composition of these plays. This circumstance stimulates a critical comparison of the two dramas with special regard to their common elements. In the first place, I will devote special attention to the similar enlargement, in both pieces, of the roles of the daughters (Antigone and Helmonde, the Cordelia-figure in *Le Roi Léa*r) which, differently from the originals, results in a more precise focalization on the relationship between the fathers and their favourite daughters. Secondly, I will focus on the two Providence-inspired happy endings both works progressively tend to and which, in a perspective of Christian theodicy, eventually redeem the tragic course of the two old kings.

Keywords: Ducis; neoclassical tragedy; Sophocles; Shakespeare; Oedipus; King Lear

The French tragedian François Ducis (1733-1816), is, to our knowledge, the only dramatist to write works inspired both by the theme of *Oedipus at Colonu*s and by the story of *King Lear*: *Œdipe chez Admète* (1778, afterwards extensively rewritten as *Œdipe à Colone* in 1797) and *Le Roi Léar* (1783). This circumstance becomes all the more significant when we notice that the two works, despite the fact that more than four years separated their composition and the dates of their first performance, were actually written one after the other, with no other theatrical opus completed and staged between them. This has led us to hypothesize that Ducis became aware of a possible continuity between the two tragic tales and that it is not merely coincidental that after the only time he ventured into the realm of Greek tragedy, he decided to return to his beloved (if oft-betrayed) Shakespeare with a reworking of *King Lear*. Some similarities between the two tragic themes do, of course, immediately leap to the eye, especially the superficial ones such as the relationship of an aging monarch, exiled and abandoned, and his children, among whom the character of a loving and best-beloved daughter stands out. The relationship between the two tragedies was recognized and remarked by Ducis, who, however, adapted them to his own artistic aims and beliefs and in so doing twisted them in ways that distance them conspicuously from their original sources.

Our analysis will be elaborated in three stages: the first two concern the comparison between Ducis' two tragedies and their source texts *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles and *Alcestis* by Euripides for *Œdipe chez Admète*; Shakespeare's *King Lear* for *Le Roi Léar*; the third will analyse the way in which examples of Ducis' reworking of the text have highlighted certain elements of a possible continuity between the original stories of the aged Oedipus and Lear.

## 1. *Œdipe chez Admète*

*Œdipe chez Admète*, a tragedy in five acts in Alexandrine metre, performed for the first time at Versailles on 4 December, 1778,

has its origins in a bizarre combination of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Euripides' *Alcestis*. There does not seem to exist any precedent for such an amalgamation so it was very probably an original idea of Ducis'. In this way, the sole example of the adoption of Greek drama as source material on the part of the French playwright may be considered as both a re-visitation and an intersection of two classical tragedies, which might seem to have little to do with one another, either from the point of view of specific content or from that of mythological relationship. However, it is certainly the case that the two plays share a particular feature which is clearly connected to the idea Ducis held of 'the tragic', as far away as was possible from any direct reference to bloody events or to the pitiless inevitability of a fate that concedes no justification or redemption of human suffering. Though both the source plays have death as a thematic fulcrum, it is presented in a way which is far more amenable to the Christian concept of reconciliation between mankind and death towards which Ducis' theatre tends: Oedipus' death in Sophocles is an event accepted in a wise and dignified manner, and it benefits the city that has taken him in; Admetus' grief for the death of Alcestis only lasts until the moment he realizes that she is alive when he sees her return from Hades, thanks to the intervention of Heracles. Hospitality, gratitude, love, all these attenuate or postpone death's cruelty (although, as we shall see later, Ducis needs to soften the negative elements even further). The intersection between two distinct mythological narratives permits Ducis, in one fell swoop, to present Oedipus' death as the ascent into heaven of a redeemed sinner and to avoid death's entrance, if only temporarily, into the house of Admetus. Indeed, the underlying idea of this pastiche is that of allowing the aged Oedipus to cleanse himself of his terrible, if unwitting, offences through offering his life, by this stage at its end, in exchange for those of King Admetus and Alcestis, his wife, who, as is familiar, had decided to sacrifice her own to prolong that of her husband.

Just as he does in Sophocles, Oedipus, with the help of his loving daughter Antigone, reaches the vicinity of a sanctuary dedicated to the Eumenides. But this is not, however, at Colonus, near Athens, and under the jurisdiction of Theseus, but in Thessaly, in

the neighbourhood of the city of Pherae, which was of course in the kingdom of Admetus. The juncture between the two different storylines necessarily presupposes simplifying both of them, with the consequent elimination of the two characters of Creon and Ismene in Sophocles' play and of Heracles and Admetus' parents in that of Euripides.

It may be recalled that, initially, the plan for Ducis' first foray into Classical mythology was only to involve Euripides' tragedy, consequently, the story of Admetus and Alcestis with no amalgamation with other tragic plots. From a letter to the actors of the Comédie Française of 13 December, 1773, we learn that the playwright had entered in the registers of the Comédie a tragic work entitled *Admète et Alceste* together with his reasons for wishing the realization of this project to precede a further sortie into Shakespeare, this time on the subject of *Macbeth*: "Après ma tragédie de Roméo, j'ai voulu offrir aux yeux du public des tableaux d'une autre nature, et ne point lui présenter de suite le terrible Macbeth après le terrible Montaigu. Je me suis donc attaché au sujet d'*Admète et d'Alceste*, et c'est dans la préface de l'*Iphigénie* de Racine que j'ai puisé la noble tentation de traiter cet admirable sujet" (Albert 1879: 16; "After my tragedy on Romeo, I wanted to offer pictures of another kind to the public eye, and not present them with the terrible Macbeth straight after the terrible Montague. So I set to work on the subject of *Admète et Alceste*, and it was the preface to Racine's Iphigénie which caused me to succumb to the noble temptation to treat this admirable subject"; all translations from the French are mine). Here, as can be seen, there is no hint of a possible fusion with the story of the aged Oedipus, with whom Admetus has to share the stage in the play actually put on in 1778, and then surrender it completely to him in the remake of 1797. From Ducis' letter to David Garrick on 6 July 1774, we learn that the tragedy of Admetus has been completed: "Je viens de terminer une nouvelle tragédie: c'est *Admète et Alceste*, sujet tiré de notre Euripide. Je suis à la veille de la faire lire à la Comédie-Française" (Albert 1879: 20; "I have just finished a new tragedy: it is *Admète et Alceste*, the subject drawn from our Euripides. I am about to give it to the Comédie Française to read"). This, however, is the last time the tragedy derived solely

from Euripides is mentioned; in a letter dated 25 January 1775 to his friend Michel-Jean Sedaine we find the first reference to a tragedy about Oedipus, which is already very probably the one destined to become *Œdipe chez Admète*: "Je lis demain ou après-demain ma tragédie d'Œdipe à M. le marquis de Montesquiou, et mes mesures sont prises pour que Monsieur l'entende à son tour et demande qu'elle soit représentée devant le roi" (ibid.; "Tomorrow or the day after I shall read my tragedy on Oedipus to the Marquis of Montesquiou, and I have taken all measures to ensure that Monsieur [the king's brother] will hear it in his turn and will ask for it to be performed before the king").

To return to the juncture of the two storylines mentioned above, the character of Admetus and the plot-line involving him are just as important as that of Oedipus, who in point of fact only comes on stage in the second scene of the third act, although it must be said that from now on the stage will belong almost entirely to him. In this way Oedipus makes his appearance when we are already almost halfway through the tragedy, at the point where the topic of the fated death of the King of Pherae and his wife's offer to sacrifice herself in his place has already been amply presented and developed and has served as a thematic fulcrum to the first two acts. However, the mingling of the two stories is revealed from the very first lines of the tragedy, in the exchange between Admetus and Polyneices: Oedipus' son has come to Pherae to ask for the king's help in the attack that he is about to launch upon the city of Thebes and on his brother Eteocles, who is governing it illegally. And even if Admetus is for now far from imagining a meeting with Oedipus so soon, the aged king is mentioned several times both by his son and by Admetus himself in their dialogue. Indeed, Oedipus' miserable condition, soon to be before the eyes of the spectators, is already prefigured in the words with which Admetus evokes the son of Laius: "Hélas! Sur sa misère, / Quel cœur, s'il est humain, ne s'attendriroit pas!" (1.1) (Ducis 1819: 180; "Alas! Over his misery / What heart, being human, would not melt?"). On his part, Polyneices, who (as different from Sophocles' depiction of him) repents of having exiled his father and mourns over the old king's miserable lot:

Hélas! pour un vieillard si vertueux, si rare,
La terre est sans asile et le ciel sans flambeau!
L'Univers dès long temps n'est pour lui qu'un tombeau :
Il n'a pour tout secours, privé de la couronne,
Que ses pleurs, ses destins, et le bras d'Antigone.
Que ma sœur est heureuse! elle aura pu, du-moins,
Guider ses pas tremblans, lui prodiguer ses soins.
(ibid.)

[Alas! For such a rare and virtuous old man,
Earth is without refuge and heaven without light!
For a long time the universe has only been a tomb for him:
He has, for his only aid, lacking the crown,
His tears, his destiny, and Antigone's arm.
How lucky my sister is! At least she has been able
To guide his trembling steps, to lavish her care on him.]

The coming together of the two stories in a single text also entails the impossibility of maintaining the perfect unity of place that characterizes both the source tragedies: in Sophocles, the sacred wood on the hill at Colonus, and in Euripides, the space behind Admetus' palace. In Ducis, the place of the action is divided between the interior of Admetus' palace in the first, second and fourth acts and the space in front of and inside the temple of the Eumenides in the third and fifth. But the differences between the French play and its Greek sources are particularly striking when we come to the character, behaviour and motivation of the main dramatis personae.

Ducis' Oedipus is in some ways very similar to Sophocles' aged hero: a blind vagrant, poverty-stricken and forlorn, who despite everything bears his terrible misfortune with a noble dignity. However, he is in some ways, especially during the first part of the tragedy, more fragile, more bewildered, and even more frightened than his Greek model. If the Greek Oedipus on more than one occasion asks Antigone for advice on how to behave, he always takes personal responsibility for his decisions. Ducis' hero, on the other hand, is shown almost as a victim of infantile regression, and is consequently much more dependent on his daughter's protection. The proximity of the Eumenides terrifies him and makes him ask Antigone, just as a small child would ask his moth-

er, to put her arms round him and protect him. He has not even the courage to reveal his identity to the citizens of Pherae: they find it out by themselves. When Oedipus becomes aware of their hostile reaction to this, he first asks Antigone to hold him in her arms, and then falls to the ground as if in a faint.

On the other hand, when Sophocles' Oedipus realizes he is in Colonus he feels reassured because he knows that this is the place towards which the gods have been driving him so that he may die a serene and sacred death. It is not chance, but a divine edict prophesied to him by Apollo that has led him to the place of his death near the sanctuary of the Eumenides:[1]

> ὅς μοι, τὰ πόλλ'ἐκεῖν'ὅτ'εξέχρη κακά,
> ταύτην ἔλεξε παῦλαν ἐν χρόνῳ μακρῷ,
> ἐλθόντι χώραν τερμίαν, ὅπου θεῶν
> σεμνῶν ἕδραν λάβοιμι καὶ ξενόστασιν.
> (Soph. *OC* 87-90)
>
> [For he told me, when he predicted all that evil, that this should be my respite after long years, when I came to the land that was my final bourne, where I should find a seat of the dread goddesses and a shelter.]

But Sophocles' hero also knows that the gods have entrusted him with a final duty before he dies; he must reveal to Theseus the secrets upon which the prosperity of Athens will be founded, a duty which the aged king will carry out with a fully aware authority:

> ἐγὼ διδάξω, τέκνον Αἰγέως, ἅ σοι
> γήρως ἄλυπα τῇδεκείσεται πόλει.
> χῶρον μὲν αὐτὸς αὐτικ' ἐξηγήσομαι,
> ἄθικτος ἡγητῆρος, οὗ με χρὴ θανεῖν.
> τοῦτον δὲ φράζε μήποτ' ἀνθρώπων τινί,
> μήθ' οὗ κέκευθε μήτ' ἐν οἷς κεῖται τόποις.
> (1518-23)
>
> [I will explain, son of Aegeus, what things are laid up for your city, invulnerable to passing time! I myself, with no guide to lay a hand on me, shall now show you the place where I must die. Do

1 Text and translation are from Sophocles 1994.

not ever reveal to any human being either where it is concealed or the region in which it lies.]

On the contrary, the gods have not revealed anything about his death to the Oedipus of Ducis' tragedy. Pherae for him is nothing but another stage in his wanderings, not in any way remarkable. Here there is no reason for a possible relief of his fear and suffering. Only the development of events will disclose the fact that this is where he is fated to die and where the possibility of his redemption will be generated by his offer to give his life in exchange for that of Admetus. Correspondingly, this will occasion a psychological evolvement in the character, who is able to rise above his initial state of fragility and regression. This change is already to be discerned in the tense and emotional meeting with Polyneices: at first it is Oedipus' inflexible anger towards his son which allows the aged hero to reassume an attitude of authority and dignity as regal as it is paternal; then these re-acquired virtues are displaced into the magnanimity of forgiveness, in response to Polyneices' repentance and love.

Nevertheless, this is only a passing recovery on the part of Oedipus. The news of the imminence of Admetus' death touches the old man so deeply (as it also leads him to interpret the approaching calamity as the result of defilement from the guilt he bears with him) that it causes him to suffer a fresh state of prostration. This he will recover from at the conclusion, when he gains back an even greater human and heroic stature, at the moment he finally understands that his arrival at the court of Admetus, so that he might offer his life in exchange for those of the king of Pherae and his wife, was in fact the work of the gods. We realize at this point that Oedipus has undergone a genuine transfiguration, not one that is doubly concealed from the eyes of the spectators, such as is the case in Sophocles, by the ῥῆσις of the Messenger and by the modality of the disappearance of the protagonist which is in any manner of speaking mysterious and invisible. In Ducis' climax everything is explicit in a modality very close in type to that of Christian redemption. Indeed, the spirit of Christianity in the last words of an Oedipus forgiven and saved is more than evident, as is the fact that, behind the formal preservation of a plurality of

gods, the aged king's farewell to life is directed towards a god in the singular:

> Grands Dieux! par vous bientôt mon ame va s'ouvrir
> A ce jour éternel qui doit tout découvrir !
> . . .
> Tout fuit, le temps n'est plus ; je meurs, je vais renaître.
> . . .
> . . . il n'est point de malheur où survit la vertu.
> Mais je sens que mon ame en dédaignant la terre,
> A l'approche des Dieux s'agrandit et s'éclaire.
> . . .
> Et vous, Dieux tout puissans! si vous daignez m'absoudre,
> Annoncez mon pardon par le bruit de la foudre ;
> . . .
> Mon esprit se dégage ; il n'est plus arrêté ;
> Je tombe, et je m'élève à l'immortalité.
> (5.7; Ducis 1819: 87-8)

> [Great Gods, thanks to you my soul will soon open
> To that eternal light that will show everything
> . . .
> All is fleeing from me, time is no more; I die and I prepare to be reborn;
> . . .
> here is no unhappiness where virtue survives,
> But I feel that my soul, disdaining the earth,
> As the Gods come nearer expands and brightens,
> . . .
> And you, almighty Gods! If you deign to absolve me,
> Announce my forgiveness with a thunderclap;
> . . .
> My spirit frees itself; it is no longer chained;
> I fall and raise myself to immortality.]

A thunderclap, the sign of divine forgiveness, is immediately heard, and the flash of lightning that follows strikes Oedipus,[2] who

2 The way in which Oedipus dies seems to clash with the symbolism of the scene of forgiveness and quasi-beatification of the hero; but in the ancient world death caused by a flash of lightning was not always the sign of vengeance or punishment on the part of the gods. Erwin Rohde points out

falls down dead at the foot of the altar, in sight of the audience.

Another substantial difference from the Sophoclean text, is evinced in the meeting between the aged king and his son. Sophocles' Polyneices is actually in the process of looking for his father to convince him to come home (his motive being that the oracles say such a move would help him regain power over the citizens of Thebes), while the fact that he comes across his father in Pherae is presented by Ducis as simply a matter of chance. Polyneices has come to Thessaly, as has been noted above, with the objective of obtaining military aid from Admetus: however, Admetus politely but firmly refuses it. In this way he avoids increasing the mythologically famed number of the seven against Thebes. But Polyneices' visit to Pherae for reasons of diplomacy results in a fortuitous meeting with his father. The absence of any purely exploitative motivation in this meeting on the part of Ducis' Polyneices renders him a far more positive character than the one we meet in Sophocles' play. This version of Polyneices is someone sincerely sorry to have exiled Oedipus and he makes no attempt at all to convince his father to return to Thebes for self-

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that, on the contrary, "in many legends death by *lightning* makes the victim holy and raises him to godlike (everlasting) life" (Rohde 2001: 581). The German philologist cites the case of Semele (Pind. *Ol.* 2.27) as an example, but even recognizes in the case of Capaneus the emblem of divine retribution by lightning, an aspect of deification not in contradiction with the punitive element. Referring to Euripides' *Suppliants*, in which Capaneus, even though he dies struck by divine lightning, "is certainly not regarded . . . as an impious person (as he is generally in Tragedy) . . ." (582), Rohde argues that in this case "the death of the Hero by lightning can no longer stand for his punishment, but is on the contrary a distinction. He becomes a ἱερός νεκρός . This, however, could not be done by Euripides unless the view that such a death might in certain circumstances bring honour on the victim and elevate him to a higher plain of being, had at that time widespread and generally recognized" (ibid.). Ducis, to tell the truth, had not initially intended his protagonist to die struck by lightning, but gratefully recognizes his debt to his friend the Count of Angivilliers who suggested this spectacular final solution: "J'ai fait mourir mon Œdipe au pied de l'autel, après une prière, renversé par un coup de foudre. C'est M. d'Angivilliers qui m'a donné ce conseil, qui y a insisté ; et, par ma foi! il a eu raison". (Albert 1879: 21; "I have made my Oedipus die at the foot of the altar, after a prayer, struck down by lightning. M. de Angivilliers suggested this to me and, in faith! he was right").

ish reasons. On the contrary, when he obtains his father's forgiveness his happiness is so great that he even seems to forget for a moment his hatred of his brother Eteocles, and proposes the sacrifice of his own life to lengthen that of Admetus. In parenthesis we should add that Ducis' Admetus is indeed a lucky man: here, people almost seem to be queueing up to save him, whereas, as we know, in Euripides things were very different. In any case, Polyneices' sacrifice does not take place: the Eumenides, as they make known through the words of their chief priest, do not consider him worthy of such a gesture. So Oedipus' son realizes that, come what may, his fate is leading him towards war and mortal combat with his brother, and at this point he consciously accepts this fate, not as a confirmation of his opportunity of power, but as a punishment for his sins that have rendered him unworthy of a generous death.

On the other hand, Antigone, here, embodies pure filial virtue. We find in her the absolute devotion to her father and the loving care she takes of him which are hallmarks of the same character in Sophocles, with the addition of a degree of maternal protectiveness and reassurance in direct proportion to the fragility and bewilderment of the French Oedipus. She also manifests a heartfelt desire to repair the relationship between her father and her brother Polyneices.

Admetus, on his part, fully inherits an emphasized version of the traits of nobility, justice and welcome of Sophocles' Theseus, which render him a prototype of the ideal sovereign. He shares very little, on the contrary, with his namesake in Euripides. He does not fear death, rather he wishes to postpone it – not from terror, but because he does not want to leave his beloved subjects unprotected; and he does not desire at any point to accept the sacrifice of his wife, who is also in her turn much less undecided and fearful of making the fatal decision than her counterpart in Euripides. To the wide variety of examples of selfishness and arrogance that the two Greek tragedies are studded with, Ducis opposes a world of prevailing generosity, where no-one is completely bad, and forgiveness and redemption are waiting at every corner; so that there is not a single "criminal" who is not at the same time at least potentially "vertueux" (4.2; 1859: 53).

Very little of what concerns the part relative to Oedipus is changed in *Œdipe à Colone*, performed for the first time at the Théâtre Français de la rue de Richelieu on 5 June 1797. But the story of Admetus and Alcestis is completely eliminated, with the consequent reduction of the play to three acts and the restoration of the setting in Athens and Colonus. Theseus, who regains the role assigned to him by Sophocles, corresponds, however, in every particular, to the preceding character of Admetus, save only in the involvement of his wife in his death. Theseus too, like the king of Pherae, is predicted by the oracle to suffer an impending death, but he will manage to avoid it thanks to Oedipus' offer to take his place. Although at a textual level the character of Polyneices does not undergo any changes, it gains particular emphasis, especially in the performance, owing to the fact that it was played by the great Talma, who, moreover, had already interpreted this role in the repeat performance of *Œdipe chez Admète* in 1792, and had become in the meantime Ducis' favourite actor. A letter from the playwright to Talma bears witness to how, in the rewriting of his *Œdipe*, he was already thinking of the great *tragédien* as the ideal embodiment of a heroic character with the traits of Polyneices:

> Je viens de mettre mon *Œdipe* en trois actes, tout est au moment d'être achevé. J'ai fait l'annonce de Polynice, ou de vous: sur ce signalement il n'y a point de gendarme, point d'agent de police qui ne vous arrête dans toute la république. Votre figure appartient à la famille de Laïus ou de Pélops.
> (Madame Veuve Talma 1836: 331-2).

> [I have just put my *Œdipe* into three acts, and it is almost at the point of completion. I have just announced the arrival of Polyneices, or of you: on the basis of his description not a *gendarme* or a police agent exists in the whole republic who would not arrest you. Your appearance is that of a member of the family of Laius or of Pelops.]

In *Œdipe chez Admète*, the character of Polyneices was on stage from the very beginning, together with Admetus, and a dialogue between them opens the play. On the contrary, *Œdipe à Colone* opens with an exchange between Theseus and his servant Arcas, which is interrupted by the entrance of Phoenix, another servant,

who announces (and this is the *annonce* to which Ducis is referring in his letter) the arrival of a stranger:

> Seigneur, un étranger vous demande audience:
> Tout annonce dans lui son rang et sa naissance.
> . . .
> . . . Dans son superbe ennui,
> Il m'a paru porter, renfermant sa vengeance,
> Le poids d'un grand malheur et d'une grande offense.
> On voit percer la haine et l'orgueil irrité
> A travers sa douleur et son calme affecté.
> Quelque tourment secret l'agite et le déchire.
> Pourtant il intéresse, il plait, il vous attire;
> Par son air, par sa grâce, on se laisse charmer;
> Mais quand son œil se trouble, on frémit de l'aimer.
> (1.2; Ducis 1824: 9)

> [Sire, a stranger is asking for an audience:
> Everything about him announces his nobility and his breeding
> . . .
> . . . In his proud nonchalance
> He seemed to me to be bearing, while controlling vengeful thoughts,
> The weight of a great grief and a great injury.
> One can see the shadow of hatred and insulted pride
> Beneath his suffering and his unnatural calm,
> Some secret torment distresses him and tears him asunder.
> Despite this, he fascinates, pleases, attracts;
> By his air, by his grace, we feel ourselves enchanted;
> But when his glance is troubled, we fear to love him.]

This passage therefore on the admission of the author himself was engendered and moulded by the figure, the deportment, the declamatory style of Talma. For whom, it transpires, in that very period (it is the same letter we have already quoted that informs us of this) Ducis was working on yet another *Œdipe*, by Voltaire,[3] to which the actor had asked him to make a few changes to his role

3 *Œdipe*, the first tragedy by François-Marie Arouet and the first work to be signed by him with the pseudonym Voltaire, was staged for the first time on 18 November 1718 at the Comédie Française. The author derives his story from Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, adding the character of Philoctetes, who is supposed to be passionately in love with Jocasta.

of protagonist. This task, that of a *dramaturg* more than of a playwright, inasmuch as he is an adaptor of someone else's text with the intention of facilitating a specific performance, also concerns the theme of Oedipus, and confirms the fact that this was the only myth from Greek tragedy (with the sole, momentary exception of Admetus-Alcestis) on which Ducis bestowed his attention as a tragedian.

## *2. Le Roi Léar*

In 1780, interrupting two Shakespearian projects he had already started, the adaptations of *Macbeth* and *Timon the Misanthropist*,[4] Ducis began to plan and then to write his version of *King Lear*, basing it on the recent translation of the tragedy by Pierre Letourneur (1799). We shall return to the motives behind the tragedian's decision later: what is certain is that the theme of Lear absorbed Ducis' creative energies completely, right up to the moment he finished it, in the spring of 1782. It was staged from the 20 January 1783 at the Comédie Française (Faubourg St-Germain), and was therefore Ducis' first public appearance as a playwright since the period of *Œdipe*. His previous adaptations of Shakespeare (*Hamlet* and *Roméo et Juliette*) had been based on abridged 'translations' (especially in the case of the tragedy of the lovers from Verona, which was no more than a summary) by Pierre-Antoine de La Place. But now Ducis' *Le Roi Léar* could start from Letourneur's translation which was in prose and almost integral; indeed Golder affirms "it was as complete a version of *King Lear* as the restrictions of his age and Letourneur's own limitations as a poet would permit" (Golder 1992: 116). This meant that Ducis was beginning from "a much more faithful reflection of the original than anything from which [he] had yet worked" (129), not that this permits us to imagine that "what the Comédie Française pre-

4 *Macbeth* would only have to wait a year before being staged, in January 1784; the play on *Timon*, that Ducis had begun on the advice of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, despite the fact that its performance would be announced several times, was never staged, and perhaps not even completed (see Golder 1992: 350).

sented in January 1783 was genuine Shakespeare. What Paris saw was a play by Ducis which had taken Shakespeare's *King Lear* as its point of departure" (ibid.).

However, in this play the dramatist from some points of view attempted far more than he had ever dared before, both on the level of dramatic structure (fourteen speaking characters was a very large number for a neoclassical tragedy) and on that of the staging (Ducis exploits the spectacular possibilities offered by the tempest to their utmost limits, creating a scene much more suited to the popular taste of the minor theatres or to the visual effects of the opera house[5] than the aristocratically dignified and word-centred aesthetics of the Comédie). The greatest risk Ducis took, however, was that regarding one of the thematic nuclei of the tragedy, that of the king's madness. This was a very thorny subject in pre-revolutionary France, and became the target of several critical reviews of the play; and even when the criticism was positive, the madness of the king was mentioned as an obstacle which had been brilliantly overcome, but nevertheless as an obstacle, as much from the viewpoint of moral tolerability as from that of dramatic stability. An example of this is to be found in an article in the *Journal de Paris*: "Il était difficile de faire supporter pendant le cours d'une longue tragédie un vieux prince qui a presque entièrement perdu la raison. Mais M. Ducis a jeté tant d'intérêt sur ce personnage qu'il est parvenu à vaincre cet obstacle". (Golder 1992: 145; "It was difficult to make bearable for the whole stretch of a long tragedy the subject of an old king who had almost completely lost his mind. But M. Ducis has invested so much interest in this character that he has managed to overcome the obstacle"). The playwright himself was, however, perfectly aware of the problem and shows this in the "Avertissement" prefaced to the text in the 1819 edition: ". . . j'ai tremblé plus d'une fois, je l'avoue, quand j'ai eu l'idée de faire paraître sur la scène française un roi dont la raison est aliénée. Je n'ignorais pas que la sévérité de nos règles

5 Here it is interesting to note the judgement (real or invented) of a spectator quoted sarcastically in the *Journal de Monsieur*: "Oh, c'est superbe, mon ami, c'est comme à l'opéra!" (Golder 1992: 151; "Oh, it's marvellous, my friend, it's just like the opera!").

et la délicatesse de nos spectateurs nous chargent de chaînes que l'audace anglaise brise et dédaigne" (Ducis 1819: 271; ". . . I trembled more than once, I confess, when the idea came to me to bring on to the French stage a king who has lost his mind. I was not ignorant of the fact that the severity of our rules and the gentility of our spectators load us with chains that English audacity shatters and disdains").

In reality, what had made Lear's madness acceptable to at least a part of contemporary criticism and to most of Parisian theatre-goers was the marked watering-down and softening of this aspect on Ducis' part. He transforms it into "un égarement doux et paisible" (3.7; Ducis 1819: 332; "a sweet, peaceful bewilderment") never completely separated from a vestige of awareness, and therefore a long way away from the desperate mental darkness in which Shakespeare immerses his sovereign. As a demonstration of the fact that not only the theme of madness, but also the other "audacities" mentioned above, do not possess a force of impact that can, not cancel, but at least diminish Ducis' propensity to replace the tragic with the pathetic, his deference towards Neoclassical *bienséances*, his repudiation of any trace of comedy, his allocation of every human action within the perspective of Christian morality, and finally his incapacity to accept the existence of real irremediable evil either in human acts or in nature. In this way it is inevitable that Ducis' *Léar* ends up by expressing a vision of the theatre, human beings and the world which is the complete opposite of Shakespeare's.

We only need examine the changes made to the plot to realize the stringency of the ethical and aesthetic margins between which Shakespeare's tragic genius is forced to flow. The tragedy begins when the kingdom has already been divided between the two elder of Lear's three daughters, Régane e Volnérille (Shakespeare's Gonerill), while the third and youngest, Helmonde (corresponding to Cordelia) has been disinherited and cursed because she has been accused of plotting against her father's realm together with Prince Ulrich of Denmark. Léar has been informed of this plot (in reality completely non-existent) by the jealous and greedy Volnérille. Kent, the king's best friend, as he has defended the innocent Helmonde is in his turn repudiated and exiled. Léar very

soon falls victim to the toils of his two heirs, who deny him hospitality and any residual power, and send him away humiliated. Meanwhile Helmonde has disappeared and there are rumours of her death. In reality she has found a secret refuge in a cave thanks to the help of Edgard, Kent's son, who tells his brother Lénox what he has done and involves him in a rebellion that he is organizing in favour of Léar and Helmonde against Cornouailles, Régane's husband, who has officially assumed sovereignty. The two brothers, to keep their father, Kent, from harm, fail to reveal their plans to him, and he interprets their behaviour as an indication that they are on the side of the new regime and, by taking advantage of it, are betraying him. With his mind weakened by grief and remorse towards Helmonde, Léar wanders about with Kent whom he has met with and restored to his favour. On a stormy night he happens across Helmonde's hiding place and seeks refuge there. Father and daughter meet again, but Léar's disordered mind makes him take Helmonde first for one and then for the other of his ungrateful elder daughters. When, in a brief flash of lucidity, he finally recognizes Helmonde for who she really is he is overcome by guilt and threatens to kill himself, but Helmonde manages to dissuade him from this. Cornouailles' troops arrive, having for the moment got the better of the rebels and they capture the king and his daughter. The counterattack by the rebels with Edgard at their head, with the aid of Albanie, the husband of Volnérille, succeeds in freeing the two captives and leads to the happy ending, with the arrest and imprisonment of Volnérille, Régane and Cornouailles, the complete reconciliation of Kent with his sons, the wedding of Edgard and Helmonde and their accession to the throne, beneath the paternal and benedictory eye of Léar.

The narrative framework of Shakespeare's *King Lear* is clearly recognizable in the plot we have just summarized, and so are many of the situations, the dramatic resolutions and the relationships between the characters. But the various absences and changes are just as evident, together with the ideological overturning of the English tragedy they cause. On the level of dramatic structure the difference that immediately leaps to the eyes is the elimination of the subplot regarding Gloucester, Edgar and Edmund, of whom, in Ducis' version there only remains a weak reflection in the fig-

ures of Kent, Edgard and Lénox. The character of the duke of Gloucester is completely eliminated – a figure whose destiny tragically doubles that of Lear in his mistaken opinion of his children's worth. This error causes Gloucester's repudiation of the faithful and generous Edgar, his legitimate son, a consequence of the slanderous accusations of the cunning and perfidious bastard Edmund, who on the contrary manages to gain his father's trust. It is very obvious that Ducis combines the characters of Gloucester with that of Kent, who becomes the father of two sons who are non-existent in Shakespeare. One of them, Edgard, is a moral replica of Gloucester's legitimate son – even his name is almost identical (with the exception of the final 'd'), but the second is certainly not his rival and opposite: the gentle and honest Lénox has nothing in common with the diabolical Edmund. The quarrel between father and sons is limited, as we have seen, to a short-lived suspicion Kent nourishes regarding Edgard and Lénox, which in the end vanishes without trace when the good intentions of the two young men are recognized. Ducis' main objective here is not so much that of eliminating or even of reducing to the minimum the anti-Classical redundancy that a subplot represents; it is more that of cancelling the part of the original play in which human cruelty and the ferocity of its consequences rises to almost intolerable levels, much more so than what happens during similar events in the main plot involving Lear and his daughters. The torture and blinding on stage of Gloucester naturally could not occur in Ducis' play or indeed in any other French (and not only French) tragedy at the time. But what disgusts Ducis even more than the visible demonstration of such savage violence is the behaviour of Regan and Gonerill, their sadistic, inhuman brutality towards Gloucester, that reduces the two sisters to two unprecedented monsters of cruelty. It is impossible for such beings to frequent Ducis' theatrical world, where evil is never strong enough to vanquish good completely, and no heart is so pitiless as not to harbour at least a possibility of redemption. The fact that Shakespeare can make two women the incarnation of such absolute evil makes their characters and actions even less acceptable in the eyes of the French playwright. If the absence of Gloucester from *Le Roi Léar* is linked to the attenuation of the cruelty of the king's two elder daughters,

that of Edmund (desired in Shakespeare by both of them) permits Ducis to absolve them from the sin of adultery as well. But even this does not seem to the playwright to represent sufficient ethic and aesthetic caution. Because of this, Volnérille, who is the more determinedly evil of the pair, although she is frequently mentioned, never appears on stage, while Régane is so watered-down as to cause Golder, though he exaggerates, to affirm that "the character as written is not heartless at all" (143), given that she is ignorant of the plot against Helmonde hatched by Volnérille, and when she encourages Cornouailles to kill her younger sister, "it is because she still believes her sister to be the traitor that Volnérille and Cornouailles have made her out to be" (144).

As far as the deeper significance of the play is concerned, the most flagrant dissociation from Shakespeare's tragedy is not the elimination of Gloucester and Edmund, but that of the Fool. Irrelevant to the development of the action (*King Lear* can very well be summarized without mentioning him once), the court jester, almost the incarnation of a Shakespearian version of the Erasmian *Moriae encomium*, has been recognized as one of the fundamental symbolic keys to this tragedy: the first emblematic representation of madness in the play, on the one hand, he embodies and simulates it through his paradoxes, his overturning of logic, his lack of reverence towards authority, and on the other, by revealing himself, beneath the apparatus of feigned madness, the most lucid and straightforward among the characters, he accentuates the madness resulting from arrogance, obstinacy and greed to which the majority of the characters, their actions and finally the whole story succumb. In Shakespeare's play madness spreads rapidly, infecting to a greater and greater extent the language, the emotions and the actions both of human beings and soon of nature itself, which finds, in the storm, the language for its own madness: "such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder, / Such groans of roaring wind and rain" (3.2.46-7)[6] have never been seen or heard before, a chaotic chorus of the elements that acts as a background for the bizarre demented trio interpreted by Lear, the Fool and Edgar-Poor Tom. Between the madness of the

6 Quotations are from Shakespeare 2017.

elements and that of human beings, and among these last between true and simulated madness, between joyful madness and desperation, there is no longer a dividing line; madness is the unremitting figure of a world entirely and irremediably sunk in chaos.

Not only the peaceable and reasonable Ducis, but also the whole of French cultured society of the time, would have refused to accept even an infinitesimal part of such a view of the world, and even less would they have tolerated its representation on the stage, which would have been perceived as the conflagration of a whole series of *bienséances*, both moral and aesthetic, which were considered as finding their proper place of validation on the tragic stage. As we have already seen, even the more restricted theme of madness on the part of the king presented a significant problem, but this could be solved (as in fact it was, although this raised the eyebrows of quite a few of the critics) by mitigating the intensity of the madness, justifying it by citing wounded affection as its cause and in any case making it transitory. The passage from pathological folly of the individual to universal disruption would, however, have been intolerable to the rationalism of neoclassical eyes and was therefore impossible to realize. The theme of madness in the tragedy had necessarily to be reduced simply to that of the protagonist, thus eliminating the Fool, the transformation of Edgar into Poor Tom and the importance of the flamboyant objective correlative of the storm, relegated to becoming simply a phenomenon adding to the element of spectacle and the dramaturgical expedient required to cause Lear to seek shelter in the cave where Helmonde is hiding.

It was almost inevitable, with these premises, for Ducis to decide to allow the various stories to come together in a happy ending. This, in point of fact, was not the first time it had happened: the English playwright and adaptor, Nahum Tate, had in this regard actually preceded Ducis by a century. In 1681, *The History of King Lear* had been performed, and this adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy replaced the original almost completely on the English stage, right up until 1838. The new political and cultural climate of the Restoration had encouraged the theatres to prefer a 'purged' version of the story, with the intention of saving the figure of the monarch as much from an excess of guilt as (even)

from death. This version had influenced Letourneur's translation hardly at all,[7] but Ducis evidently had at least indirect knowledge of it, as his adaptation shared with Tate's some substantial changes such as the disappearance of the Fool or the absence of France, first as Cordelia's refuge and then as military reinforcement when she comes back to England again (in both versions Cordelia/Helmonde stays in England to hide and it is a local revolt not a foreign army that makes war against the enemies of Lear/Léar). Above all in both there is a happy ending, which includes the survival of the king and the marriage between the rediscovered daughter and Edgar/Edgard. The softening of the atmosphere on Tate's part does not, however, manage to rescue the villains from death; in Ducis, on the contrary, they are saved by the clemency of Léar, who simply sends Volnérille, Régane and Cornouailles to prison. However hard it may be to believe about a work that is among the most violent and pitiless of the Bard's tragedies, nobody in *Le Roi Léar* actually dies except for Oswald, *officier* to the Duc de Cornouailles (present also in Shakespeare where he is Gonerill's steward). He becomes the scapegoat for all the nobles and is much more evil as an individual ("monstre inhumain" and "perfide" he is labelled by the Duc d'Albanie, 85.12; Ducis 1819: 386) than the servile, despicable pawn for the unscrupulous he appears in the source play (". . . a lily-livered, action-taking ºknave, aº whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave", as Kent defines him, 2.2. 16-20). But he is certainly not important enough as a character to be considered the incarnation of absolute evil which of course in Ducis is non-existent.

## 3. Oedipus and Lear: Continuity Between the Two Tragedies

"Not everyone felt that Ducis was right to go ahead with *Léar*. Similarities between it and *Œdipe chez Admète* . . . had not passed unnoticed and there were some who tried to persuade Ducis to

7 "Letourneur's translation . . . has undergone relatively little NahumTatification" (Golder 1992: 116).

substitute his *Macbeth*, which had been accepted by the actors [of the Comédie Française] 'avec acclamation'" (Golder 1992: 115). Some friends, in particular Léonard-Antoine Thomas, had expressed their anxiety that the touchy nature of the subject, together with the too close similarity of the theme with regard to *Œdipe*, might lead to its failure (ibid.). Ducis himself was well aware of the resemblance between the two tragedies: he does not seem to disagree with those who draw his attention to the fact that "ce sujet a un fond de resemblance inevitable avec *Œdipe*" (Albert 1879: 59; "this subject matter has an inevitable underlying resemblance to *Œdipe*"), he wrote in a letter to Monsieur Deleyre on 23 September 1782. Immediately afterwards, in the same letter, the playwright mentions a practical reason for anticipating the staging of *Léar* to that of *Macbeth*: the expediency of not wasting Brizard's study of the part, which the actor chosen to play Léar had already completed. Considering the fact that the sixty-one-year-old actor's memory was already failing, a substantial postponement of the début of *Le Roi Léar* might very well make matters worse. There are, however, two details which are worth noticing. First of all the adjective, *inevitable*, that Ducis attributes to the similarity between the two tragedies. It is certainly true that both in the story of *Oedipus at Colonus* and in that of *King Lear* the central relationship is that between an old dethroned king and his favourite daughter. This constitutes an objective similarity between the tragedy by Sophocles and the one by Shakespeare, but this is only to be considered at a superficial level, because on going deeper it is evident that the father-daughter relationship in the two plays takes on a dramatic role and a connection with the general dramaturgical context which is profoundly different and very difficult to equate. The resemblance is there, but perhaps, in point of fact, it is not really so *inévitable*. If Ducis had produced two tragedies which were much closer to the originals, he would have had no difficulty at all in objecting that the similarity exists but it is not significant. But in the two plays that he actually did write, the resemblance is very much closer, simply because it is the dramatist himself that has not wanted to avoid it, moreover, he has clearly emphasized it. Our hypothesis is that, to all intents and purposes, the resemblance between *Œdipe* and *Léar*

is not, in Ducis' opinion a drawback, but, on the contrary, a motive for making one the continuation of the other, and therefore preferring to stage *Le Roi Léar* before *Macbeth*. This hypothesis would seem to be borne out by the second point: Brizard's interpretation. The reasons the playwright gives for not losing the opportunity to make certain of him in the role of Léar, as he says in the above-quoted letter, are true but incomplete. He withholds the very significant fact that Brizard had been the (highly acclaimed) interpreter of the character of Oedipus. To desire him in the role of Léar, as well, means that Ducis wanted to reaffirm on stage what he had already made clear within the text, that is his intention of making the Greek hero live again in the English king by creating between the two characters a recognizable resemblance and quasi-identification.

To reach this objective, it is above all the adaptation of the character of Léar which appears forced respecting the original: in Ducis there remains nothing of the almost obtuse pride, the rancour and the irritability of Shakespeare's king. Like Oedipus, he is presented as a wise and generous sovereign, much beloved by his subjects; just as the king of Thebes is, at least to modern eyes, the innocent victim of Fate, so is his English counterpart the guiltless dupe of one of his daughters. When calamity arrives and overwhelms them both it weakens them, but not enough to take from them their dignity and the strength that enables them to react and redeem themselves. They both experience moments of bewilderment, sometimes Léar advances as if he were blind, as Oedipus is, and the way in which Kent guides him reminds us of Antigone's attitude towards her father, just as later Léar will ask his restored Helmonde a physical and emotional support which is very like that which Oedipus receives from his daughter. Indeed, faced with the symptoms which are common to both old men, of a sort of infantile regression, both daughters behave like protective mothers. This bewilderment, as we know, takes on, for both kings, the form of a slight ephemeral madness, consisting of memory gaps and confused identity (significantly, both Oedipus and Léar suffer hallucinations which cause them to mistake their good children for their bad ones: Oedipus suddenly rejects Antigone, convinced that he is talking to his son, Polyneices, instead of her, and in the same

way Léar confuses Helmonde first with Régane and then with Volnérille). In both tragedies the relationship between the protagonist and the best-loved daughter acquires an even greater position and significance than the already prominent one it had in the original works. Ducis' Antigone has far more to say than Sophocles', and also does not have to share her father's love with her sister, Ismene, who is absent from the French tragedy. But, above all, the emotional aspect of the dialogues between father and daughter, is far more evident with the reiterated expressions of mutual affection, the voicing of care and protection on the daughter's part and gratitude on the father's.

As Volnérille does not appear on stage and Régane's part is much less incisive in comparison with her Shakespearian counterpart, Léar's negative emotions towards his ungrateful daughters interfere much less with his loving and positive concentration on Helmonde. The only scene in which the king's hostile repudiation and banishment of his youngest daughter is carried out, is relegated to the antefact, and the Léar who appears on the stage is from the outset a loving father towards Helmonde, tormented not so much by the betrayal on the part of his elder daughters as by that which he perpetrated in regard to his youngest, when he believed the lies about her. The long separation that the plot imposes upon the two characters does not allow them much more time face to face, when compared to Shakespeare's text, but the thoughts that cross their minds before they meet set up a sort of painful long-distance dialogue between them, filled with remorse on the father's side and apprehension and regret on the daughter's. Nevertheless, Helmonde is granted, throughout the play, many more speeches than are the lot of Cordelia, who is consistently sparing of words from the beginning to the end of Shakespeare's play. On this subject it is useful to compare the respective scenes of the two plays in which the king, finally escaping from the mists of his madness, recognizes his daughter and realizes he is forgiven. A few, intense speeches in *King Lear* (4.7.44-76), decidedly brief on the woman's part, but a long, and of its kind, masterly, piece of *comédie larmoyante* in *Le Roi Léar* (4.5; Ducis 1819: 349-58), where Helmonde, replacing (and outdoing) the doctor in Shakespeare, gradually calls her aged father back to sanity, combining an emo-

tional daughterly solicitude with a therapeutic and cathartic skill. Very different is the real climactic scene of the love between Lear and Cordelia, augmented by Shakespeare in the play's conclusion (5.3), where the daughter can no longer answer her grief-stricken father as she lies dead in his embrace.

Even though there was not the same coincidence of interpreters (Madame Vestris, who played the part of Helmonde, had been Alcestis in *Œdipe*, while the role of Antigone had been given to Mademoiselle Saint-Val *cadette*), the characters of the young daughters, consistent with those of the respective aged fathers, are also juxtaposed, thanks especially to the elimination of those traits of harsh clarity which, at least at the beginning, characterized Cordelia. Another conferral of different roles to the same actor leads us to retrace yet another, less predictable element of continuity between Ducis' two works. We are referring to Talma, and to his almost contemporary *début* in the role of Polyneices in June 1792 and of Edgard in July of the same year. Linked, in Ducis' writing, by the same noble and generous attitude, that inspires them to fight for the renewal of justice and the rule of law, the interpretation of this great actor must certainly have caused the similarity of the two young heroes to stand out, and in this way build yet another bridge, on the level of spectacle, between Ducis' two tragedies.

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