

Skenè Studies I • 2

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

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi



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Sam Shepard's 'Body' of Tragedy

TAMAS DOBOZY

Abstract

Sam Shepard's play, *A Particle of Dread (The Oedipus Variations)*, is haunted by a biological inevitability pointing to Shepard's own death from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis in 2017, one characterized by precisely the progressive degeneration of muscles and mobility, ultimately leading to paralysis, that guides the form of his last published play.

KEYWORDS: Sam Shepard; Oedipus; ALS

Since Sam Shepard's death on July 17, 2017, of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), there has been an uptick in reevaluations of his legacy. The "Backpages" section of the *Contemporary Theatre Review* featured a number of articles/eulogies that took issue with a 'narrow' critical discourse that had framed Shepard as a writer of "family dramas" (Scott-Bottoms 2017: 536); or, conversely, praised him for not writing "the same play over and over again", becoming "more not less ambitious as he got older" (Parker 2017: 541); or, celebrated his willingness to experiment beyond the conventions of mainstream theatre (Kreitzer 2017: 542). James A. Crank, in *Understanding Sam Shepard*, affirmed Shepard's late-career "evolution" from the "familiar emotional territory of his early work" (2012: 114) towards a more experimental theatre devoid of psychological realism. Shannon Blake Skelton's monograph, *The Late Work of Sam Shepard*, argues that Shepard's "late style" – beginning with his film *Far North* in 1988 – constitutes not a tapering off of creativity, but a new phase that "stands apart from [his] pre-

vious work” (2016: 3) both formally – creating “transmedia” works that revolutionized his approach to theatre – and in forging into new thematic territory, including topical politics, feminism, and aging, among others. Add to this the critical acclaim for the prose works Shepard published during the last two decades of his life – three story collections and two novels – and it seems that a scholarly renovation of Shepard is beginning to pick up speed.

As in Skelton, this paper argues that a productive reading of the last new play Shepard lived to see staged, *A Particle of Dread* (*Oedipus Variations*), must abandon the usual critical practice of focusing either on Shepard’s treatment of a mythic, western American masculinity, or the family drama. Neither of these explains why *A Particle of Dread* should be considered an important play within Shepard’s canon. Rather, it is the play’s focus on the diseased body in light of its source texts – Sophocles’ *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* – that offers critical insight. In this play, the body’s treatment as metaphor – for either the moral order or the state – is continually questioned. Hence the play’s fascination with DNA, blood, dismemberment, procreation on the level of content, and with disintegration on the level of structure. As Lisa Diedrich suggests in *Treatments: Language, Politics and the Culture of Illness*, Shepard’s play belongs to that late 20th- and early 21st-century literature that treats the body as both “affective as well as effective” (2007: xviii), in ways at once highly personal but also beyond “any particular individual’s experience and account of it, reflecting wider cultural categories” (vii). Shepard’s long obsession with identity – poised between authenticity and performance – is put to bed here, as the play suggests that the condition of both is nothing more than healthy biology. The play is less a reenactment of Sophocles than its impossibility. With that comes the undoing of much of what the source text foregrounds: accountability, individual and state order, revelation. Ultimately, however, the institution that Shepard takes on is not Sophocles but himself. As Skelton observes, an artist’s late style is often a repudiation or reconsideration of, as well as alienation from, the early works and the discourse they are part of (2016: 4). In Shepard that includes what James A. Crank has noted as the conflation of the fiction and autobiography that constitutes the public persona of Sam Shepard

(2012: 2, 7). What we are seeing, I think, is no less than a repudiation of that persona.

A Particle of Dread premiered in Ireland in 2013. As stated, the text recasts parts of Sophocles' *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, though the former provides the main intertext. *A Particle of Dread* vacillates between its sources and a fragmented murder mystery, often resequencing Sophocles' timeline and violating the integrity of his play altogether. As Skelton observes, "The work serves not as an adaptation . . . but rather a rumination and reflection on fate and destiny that appropriates elements from the classic tragedy . . . [It] duplicates and remixes the Oedipus myth, while generating and constructing a piece that unfurls in a seemingly different time and place" (2016: 66). The play's bifurcation between ancient text and this "different time and place" is mirrored in a bi-, tri- and sometimes quadfurcation of its characters. Classical Oedipus is at once modern-day Otto, two characters performed by one actor. There is the quadfurcated Tiresias/Traveller/Uncle Del/Maniac of the Outskirts (Brantley 2014: C1) who seems to absorb the characters of the seer, Creon, Messenger and Shepherd from *King Oedipus*, and also another incarnation of Oedipus himself, albeit prior to being identified as the murderer of Laius and his travelling companions, while he is still, as yet, an unnamed suspect in the minds of the detectives investigating the roadside slaying. We have the character of Laius/Lawrence/Larry/Langos at once king, father, brother and mobster. Jocasta/Jocelyn and Antigone/Annalee round out the multiply-identified characters.

In one example of the intertextual spasms created by Shepard, the Maniac's scenes are sometimes adjacent to those of Oedipus, as if we really were dealing with one person in two characters. The Maniac admits he is someone with a "powerful lineage" whose father "had one of the largest, most expansive Chevy dealerships in the entire county of San Bernardino" (2017b: 28). Throughout, Oedipus appears sometimes whole and at others with his eyes already gouged out, though he has not yet realized his fate and committed the act of self-mutilation. This odd dwelling in Sophocles while also departing from him without getting anywhere else, is further compounded by Annalee/Antigone, who at times seems

to be Oedipus's daughter – leading him, blind, aged, and befuddled, but before Jocasta's suicide, to Colonus (62) – and at other times his mother – such as when she mentions her own child, “scarred” and “branded”, presumably on the “ankle” (44). The fact that she discusses this scarring with Oedipus/Otto makes for an even more convulsive temporal and intertextual frame. She is, as well, married to someone called James, who, as the play opens, has raped and murdered a babysitter. In other words, while the play's arc does begin with prophecy, progressive revelation, and ends with Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus's blinding – in other words while it is recognizably *King Oedipus* in its broad strokes – it is also something other, though what this other is is not quite ascertainable. The play seems rather, a decomposition or disintegration of Sophocles than a second or complimentary play alongside his. This pathologizing is most visible in the fact that Otto/Oedipus spends much of his time during the play in a wheelchair, as if Shepard's own take on the material never quite finds its legs, and that this is at least part of the point. I will return to this momentarily.

When *A Particle of Dread* was performed in 2014, *New York Times* critic, Ben Brantley, asked what “new insights” (2014: C1) Shepard had brought to Sophocles, and found the play wanting. For Brantley, *A Particle of Dread* is a contemplation on “the nature of tragedy” and the “value (or lack thereof) of self-knowledge and the persistence of myth in our collective memory” (ibid.). In bringing together myth and self-knowledge, he suggests a connection between the concern over authenticity in Sophocles with that of Shepard's long fascination with performance as the medium of both self-expression and loss of self. Brantley draws attention to the fact that, in this particular staging of *A Particle of Dread*, characters move between an “Irish and an American Western accent”, accompanied by “polymorphous string music”, where the “slip-page” “ingeniously suggests how a myth mutates from era to era and culture to culture” (ibid.). He likewise notes the bi-, tri-, and quadfurcation of characters who are “paradoxically both outside of and implicated in the world they observe” (ibid.). Finally, Brantley ends with the assessment that this is an “endlessly circular play” (ibid.) that visits and revisits Sophocles, as well as the markers of

Shepard's own theatrical works, without arriving anywhere new. It is, in other words, paralyzed – neither fully inhabiting nor fully exiting its corpus. In this sense, Brantley is correct, though somewhat unintentionally, in noting that this “restless riff on ancient themes [ultimately] says more about its creator than its subject” (ibid.). He does not go on to question why and how this reference to its “creator” might feed back into our appreciation of the spectacle. Nor does he question what the static action of the play is in service of. This is left to a later critic, Stephen Scott-Bottoms, to answer: “As the musical term ‘variations’ suggests, [Shepard] offers not a coherent (Aristotelian) narrative, but theme and repetition. The play is an assembly of fragments which often deliberately confuse time-frames and family relationships, so that in the end, nothing is certain except for the persistent, traumatic return of violence itself” (2017: 539). At centre is a continual enactment of violence whose focal point seems to be theatrical coherence, or the very act of playwrighting itself. Hence the importance of Brantley's inadvertent observation on the centrality of the play's creator. *A Particle of Dread* is, then, a kind of meta-theatre, whose disruptions prevent summary understanding, and leave us only with spectacle itself: one of violent disintegration and paralysis. In a sense, it is meta-theatre for the purposes of forestalling any meta-level of awareness, as if the play wishes only to have us experience symptoms without diagnosis or cure. A pure pathology.

In the latter half of the play *Annalee/Antigone* approaches the audience directly to ask: “Oh tragedy, tragedy, tragedy, tragedy. Piss on it. Piss on Sophocles' head. . . . Why waste my time? Why waste yours? What's it for? Catharsis? Purging? Metaphor? What's in it for us? . . . I'd rather not know. Tell you the truth. I go around and around and around about it. . . . Am I better off? No! Are you?” (76-7). Key here is *Annalee/Antigone's* experience of the moment of theatre rather than take-aways such as “catharsis”, “purging”, or “metaphor”. Theatre is not articulated as knowledge. It is not even motivated by the possibility of or desire for it. *Annalee/Antigone's* last question, “What's in it for you and me? A broken memory?” (77) suggests that tragedy is not even conducive to historical awareness, since the witnessing of its spectacle is to ‘break’ with “memory”, to misremember, to attend upon that

which fails, ultimately, to permanently register or cohere. While there is arguably a restoration of sorts at the end of *King Oedipus*, *A Particle of Dread* offers only an irremediable brokenness in a series of persistent questions. At the same time, it is a refuge from the goad of answers. In other words, inauthenticity becomes one half of a dualism whose legitimacy Shepard calls into question. Spectacle is, in the end, self-enclosed, repetitive, paralyzed, and inauthenticity and authenticity are irrelevant. Purgation is understood as the exorcising of what is debilitating in Shepard: the desire for catharsis, purging, metaphor, closure – in other words redemption or transcendence – none of which seems to account for the desire underlying theatre. As Jocelyn/Jocasta tells Oedipus, “What can I trust if not my mind?” to which he responds, “They’re shaping things in you that don’t exist” (93). Note that the mind is plural here – “they” – as multiple, self-conflicted, and static as the characters on stage. Gone are the Shepard characters who demanded the “true west”, as in the title of one of his mid-career plays, or any other form of authenticity. What is left is the constant seizure of a disintegrating corpus – pure spectacle, without remedy. I want to be clear here: it is not that Shepard denies metaphor, but that he probes its functions without reconstituting it. It is action or process, not a discernible content, that this play enacts.

When Brantley identifies the centre of this play as its creator he is probably speaking of Shepard the Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, Oscar-nominated movie star, celebrity ex-husband of Jessica Lange, not the Shepard of the late works, which are increasingly taken up with the aging body. In *A Particle of Dread*, as I hope to have suggested, the diseased body is itself a vital structuring agent. If, in Sophocles, the body is often the figurative expression of destiny and/or condition of the state, in Shepard it is “de-metaphorized” as such. The gesture is always away from metaphor. The creator at the centre of this play is the aging playwright, actor and husband/father stricken with ALS. His final two prose works, *The One Inside*, published in 2017, and *Spy of the First Person*, published posthumously but also in 2017, are explicit in their descriptions of the ravages of the disease: “Lately, there’ve been spasms, clenings at the calves and feet – strange little electric jolts around the neck” (2017a: 48). That Shepard testifies to

writing the novel from which this excerpt emerges as far back as the documentary, *Shepard and Dark*, released in 2013, suggests that he was conscious of the disease during the writing of *A Participle of Dread*. That the typical time frame between the onset of ALS and death is three to five years, and sometimes as long as ten, further corroborates this.

Textual evidence abounds. The opening scene features Oedipus mopping up his own blood, which continues to pour from his face (but not his eyes) throughout (5); his opening line, "This . . . this was the place, wasn't it?" (5) conflates the setting with the body itself. Scene 2 continues this focus on corporeality with Uncle Del/Tiresias digging into a vat of bloody animal and human parts from which he reads the future, as he and Lawrence/Laius discuss the benefits of various sexual positions for procreating with Jocelyn/Jocasta (9). Uncle Del/Tiresias makes clear that the body itself supplies "futures" (11) again conflating the play's non-story with the body. That Uncle Del/Tiresias is reading, at that point, before even the birth of Oedipus, the intestines of someone executed for lying "about his origins" (11) suggests the fatality of the body rather than the "lies" of a narration bound up in progress from and fulfilment of an origin. Here, there is no way to speak of origin, understood biologically, because there is no departure from it. Later on, Uncle Del/Tiresias corroborates this, telling the audience that people come to him for prognostication, but all the while they know that "things are hopeless. Futile. Obliteration. Annihilation . . . All the while they've felt it creep in their bones . . . They know. They already know" (45). This embodiment is echoed throughout, such as where Uncle Del/Tiresias describes the scene of Laius/Lawrence/Larry/Langos's murder: "The bodies were all in pieces . . . The heads here. Arms and legs over there. They had to search for all the parts. The king's penis was missing. Imagine that! . . . They put the bodies back together. Laid them out like a jigsaw puzzle" (18). The disposition of the body takes centre stage, but the story is never recovered. In other words, the failure to redeem the fatality of dismemberment 'is' the story: "Disembowelling, hearts torn out, drawn and quartered, heads rolling. Blood dripping down the altar steps" (23). Most glaringly, Otto's frequent appearance throughout the play in a wheelchair – unaccounted for

as both medical condition or anachronism – further foregrounds ailment as well as the connection between the subject of the play and its author. Here, rather than being a medium for prognostication, the body is destiny, and the play as a whole is haunted by a biological inevitability pointing to Shepard’s own death from ALS, a disease characterized by precisely the progressive degeneration of muscles and mobility, ultimately leading to paralysis, that is structurally enacted in the play. As the detectives say, “Tire tracks, bones, teeth, pieces of cloth . . . They all tell a story” (22), but the story they tell is not one of “sense” (23) but of non-sense, for in this play even primal emotions – fury, depravity, aggression – are merely aspects of the blood (47) rather than individual will, and Otto/Oedipus is not tragic by virtue of a character flaw he might have attended to, but “a deadly thing, beyond cure” (38). It is Langos/Laius who midway through the play states directly what Shepard has been telling us all along: “These ‘tellers of tales’ never know what goes on inside a man’s feelings. They turn things to suit their own needs. Plot twists, story – inventions to make the listener think he’s onto something while all the while intestines are roiling, blood is shooting itself into the heart” (50). Shepard offers no mirror to Sophocles’ source text because that is precisely his point: there is no alternative narrative. “All the guts are now on the table” (79) and what they tell us is, as the Maniac puts it, “What fleeting skin we wear. Every day shedding another layer until nothing’s left but blood and muscle” (91). He is, indeed, not Oedipus at all, even if they inhabit the same character in a play. Reconciliation is not possible.

So, then, what to make of this non-play, whose final lines treat sickness not as a metaphor of a state in peril of moral and political rot, but as the ‘origin’ of the desire for such metaphors? “I am sick”, Oedipus tells us. “Sick in daily life. Sick in my origins” (115). Narrative is borne in the attempt at rememberment, both restoration of the body and the construction of a dependable memory, none of which are attainable here in this dismemberment of Sophocles. The fact that Annalee/Antigone has already given birth to a new Otto/Oedipus before the current Otto/Oedipus has been blinded, much less died, foregrounds the circularity of a biological fatalism, and the illusory nature of selfhood as the expression

of will in the face of fate. The subjectivity Shepard has wrestled with throughout his work has at last been proved irrelevant, since the subject is nothing more than a spectacle of health/infirmity, simultaneously engendering and collapsing metaphor. The derangement of the spectacle is no less than the derangement of the diseased subject.

I will close by noting that relatively little work has been done on the conjunction between disease and literature, and certainly none, as far as I have been able to ascertain, vis-a-vis Shepard. Yet it suggests fertile ground for renovating scholarship around his work. Articles such as Andrea R. and Michael H. Kottow's "The Disease-Subject as a Subject of Literature" (2009) suggest that the healthy and diseased body is itself the 'origin', as Shepard puts it, of narrative form: "Disease and its sequels redimension the limits and possibilities of the body and, as the subject becomes aware of these modified boundaries, it develops into a disease-subject in search of a narrative adapted to the new circumstances" (Kottow 2009: 1). Writing on the need for clinical practice to engage with these narrative adaptations, such work probes, as Shepard's does, the "biographical disruption between the subjective experience of disease, and a modified subject . . . whose different mode of being-in-the world requires a new narrative" (1-2). What we are witnessing in Shepard is precisely this turn – an almost real-time observation of how a disease-subject reconfigures text and narrative to reposition him or herself in the world, one that has little patience for the aesthetic, political, and cultural meanings that offer coherence. It is as if, in the end, Shepard had finally achieved the synthesis of spectacle and authenticity he had long been striving for. Much to his horror.

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