

## LEAR AND THE LEARNED THEBAN

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**Abstract** - The affinities between Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and in particular the pattern of allusion to eyes and to eyesight developed in both plays, is familiar critical terrain. The purpose of this essay is to consider in a somewhat broader perspective *King Lear*'s relation not only with *Oedipus the King*, but with the entire group of works generally referred to as the Theban plays. Elements in common between the works by Shakespeare and Sophocles, among which are the eyesight motif and its symbolic connotations, the figures of devoted daughters, a concern with relationships between parents and children, and an interest in what constitutes real knowledge of the self and of the world, are discussed in the first section of the essay. The question of why such parallels should exist, and in particular of whether Shakespeare knew Sophocles' works either at first hand or as mediated through the derivative plays of Seneca, is investigated in the second part, while in the third the symbolic implications of the sight pattern shared by the works are examined in depth.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Sophocles, King Lear, Theban plays, Oedipus.

### 1.

Among the more curious utterances of which Shakespeare's Lear delivers himself as his reason begins to founder during his ordeal on the heath are those he uses in referring to Edgar, who has appeared on the scene in the guise of a vagrant reduced to the last extremity of destitution, and identifying himself as Poor Tom or Tom o'Bedlam. Notwithstanding the abject appearance and incomprehensible speech of this personage, Lear refers to him cryptically as "this same learned Theban" (3.4.153),<sup>1</sup> although a few lines later he reclassifies him as a "good Athenian" (3.4.176). These inconsequential and, at least on the face of it, mutually inconsistent epithets have taxed the exegetical ingenuity of editors and critics alike. The Arden editor Kenneth Muir, noting that the first of these phrases also occurs in a later work by Ben Jonson, suggests that it may be "an expression, the meaning of which is now lost" (Muir 1993, p. 119n).<sup>2</sup> The Oxford Classics editor Stanley Wells argues that since "Thebes was a city state not far from Athens [...] whose inhabitants were supposed to be particularly stupid", the reference "may then be a joke" (Wells 2001, p. 195), although if this is the case it is perhaps to be wondered how many members of Shakespeare's audience would have been capable of understanding so recondite a jest. But there is another possibility that is not generally remarked upon by commentators, and yet that has a potentially important bearing on the meaning of the play. Thebes is a city indelibly associated in the literary imagination with one of the most celebrated figures in classical drama, and one with whom, in quite different connections, Lear is frequently compared. This is Oedipus, who at the apogee of his career occupies the throne of Thebes but who, according to the more familiar

<sup>1</sup> All references to Shakespeare's works throughout this paper are to the single volume Arden Shakespeare Edition *Complete Works* edited by Proudfoot, et al (2001).

<sup>2</sup> The masque by Jonson in which the phrase appears is *Pan's Anniversary*. See also Muir's note on pp. 117-18.

versions of his story at least, finishes his days in the environs of Athens after years of wandering in exile. The man who during one phase of his existence has been renowned for his keenness of intellect, earning his position as king of Thebes by solving a riddle that has defeated the wit of less endowed mortals, ends his life as an adopted citizen of Athens, destined to be posthumously apotheosized as a kind of tutelary spirit of that city. And so it is that, in however eccentric a manner, a learned Theban might be said to have metamorphosed into a good Athenian.

It would doubtless be unwise to construe this as a deliberately coded hint on Shakespeare's part. Having acknowledged as much, however, the suggestion can perhaps safely be hazarded that there may at the very least be subliminal associations operating here. The observation that there are close affinities between *King Lear* and that version of the Oedipus story elaborated in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is one so frequently made that it has entered into the catalogue of commonplaces concerning Shakespeare's tragedy,<sup>3</sup> and it is not difficult to perceive that this network of correspondences extends beyond Sophocles' most famous tragedy to the entire cluster of works, generally referred to collectively as the "Theban" plays, that take as their focus the vicissitudes of Oedipus and his family. The question that presents itself in this connection is whether these analogies are to be attributed to influence or coincidence or deep structures of the imagination operating independently of cultural context. More specifically, it might be asked whether there is any respect in which the Theban plays can be considered to constitute a kind of intertext for *King Lear*, in the broad sense of providing a conscious or unconscious point of reference in terms of which it establishes its own meanings. It is these issues and some of their more salient ramifications that I propose to explore in the discussion that follows. In order to do so it might be useful to recapitulate, at a purely descriptive level, and admittedly at the risk of reiterating what might sometimes seem to be the obvious, some of the parallels that can be established between *King Lear* and the Theban plays, before speculating as to their origins and—perhaps more importantly—their possible significance.

It is perhaps worth remembering, first of all, that when we refer to the Theban plays—*Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*—we are not talking about a single unified work of art, or even a trilogy in the sense that Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is a trilogy. They are three distinct dramas dealing with members of the house of Oedipus at different points of their lives, and belonging also to very different periods of their author's life. They were not written to be performed together, and were not composed in the order in which they are generally printed together in modern editions, which follows the story of Oedipus and his children in chronological sequence. That sequence begins with the events at Thebes recounted in *Oedipus the King*, when Oedipus, the capable but somewhat arrogant king of a city afflicted with sterility, undertakes to discover the reasons for the blight and discovers that they reside in the circumstances of his own biography. It continues with the episode of Oedipus' death at Colonus near Athens, after years of exile and tribulation in which he has been forsaken by all except his daughters and most particularly the devoted Antigone. And it ends with the death of Antigone herself, who after returning to Thebes comes into collision with the king of the city Creon over the issue of whether her dead brother Polyneices is to be accorded the funeral

<sup>3</sup> I am using the title given to Sophocles' play in the Everyman edition of the plays translated by David Grene (1994), from which all references to the Theban plays are taken throughout this paper. The name spellings I employ also conform to those in this edition. Comparing the text of a Shakespearean play to that of a modern translation of ancient Greek drama is of course a risky undertaking, and to make it somewhat less so the Penguin edition of the plays translated by E. F. Watling (1973), and the Loeb edition translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (1997, 1998) have also been routinely consulted, and cited in footnotes when it has seemed useful to do so. These translate the title of Sophocles' tragedy as *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *King Oedipus* respectively.

rites prescribed by custom, and commits suicide in despair after she is immured in a tomb-like cavern by the incensed tyrant whose will she has defied. This is not, however, the order in which the plays were composed. The first of the works to appear was *Antigone*. This was followed, after an interval of many years, by *Oedipus the King*. *Oedipus at Colonus* was written when Sophocles was a very old man, and was in fact first performed after his death. There are continuities between the plays, as is only to be expected given their intersecting subject matter and dramatis personae, but they do not comprise a compositional or even imaginative unity.

When we compare *King Lear* to the Theban plays, then, we are setting a single tragedy—though one, it is by no means irrelevant to remember, that exists in several significantly different variant versions<sup>4</sup>—against a number of entirely disparate works written over something like thirty-six years, the contents of which only partially overlap. The fact that the three plays are very often printed in the same volume in modern editions, however, suggests that whatever Sophocles' original intentions may have been they are closely associated with one another in the literary consciousness of our own culture, to the extent that they are often collectively though somewhat misleadingly referred to as the Oedipus Trilogy even if they do not constitute a true trilogy in any of the senses in which the term is technically employed. Though other versions of the legend were elaborated in the ancient world, and have continued to be subject to imaginative refashioning in more recent times as well, it is that composite version narrated in these three works in particular that has etched itself so deeply upon the European imagination as to constitute the Oedipus story that most people recognize to be such. Since Shakespeare also belongs to the culture that recognizes the association between the three dramas, there seems to be ample warrant for comparing *King Lear* with the entire cycle of Theban plays rather than with any particular work in isolation, and it is this that I shall be doing in what follows.

Perhaps the element shared by *King Lear* and the Theban cycle that most readily leaps to the eye, if that is not too unhappy an expression to use in this connection, is the image of blindness, and the figurative role played by images of sight and its absence in both. In a pioneering discussion of what he describes as the “sight pattern” developed in *Oedipus the King*, Robert Heilman remarks that “the critical reader can hardly fail to be struck by the resemblances between what Sophocles does in *Oedipus* and what Shakespeare does in *King Lear*” (Heilman 1963, p. 23), and Norman T. Pratt also notes “the remarkable parallelism between the two in their development of the theme of seeing and not-seeing. Language and action of vision and blindness fill both plays from beginning to end” (Pratt 1965, p. 49). The metaphors of eyesight and blindness that are pervasive in *Oedipus the King* become grimly literalized when, in a desperate act of self-mutilation that has important symbolic connotations, Oedipus destroys his own sight at the end of *Oedipus the King*, thrusting into his eyes the broach pins he has torn from the body of the woman who is at once his mother and his wife. At the conclusion of the tragedy he appears on stage one final time bereft of sight, using his hands to orientate himself and asking the Chorus to assist him. When we come upon him again in *Oedipus at Colonus* he has been destitute of the faculty of vision for many years, and is dependent on his daughter Antigone for guidance. In *King Lear* the protagonist is not physically blind, but the character whose vicissitudes in some ways parallel his own—the Earl of Gloucester—has his eyes gouged from their sockets in a scene of gruesome ferocity, and this

<sup>4</sup> The single volume edition of Shakespeare's works edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (2006) prints the quarto and folio texts of the play as separate works, and this has been the policy also of other editors.

only too literal sightlessness has implications concerning Lear's situation as well. It is generally accepted that the details of the Gloucester subplot were taken in large part from the story of the Prince of Paphlagonia and his two sons in Philip Sidney's *New Arcadia*, but it should not be overlooked that this episode in Sidney's work would itself almost certainly have been influenced by some version of the Oedipus narrative,<sup>5</sup> and that in any event the metaphorical significance that the story is made to assume in *King Lear* is something more reminiscent of *Oedipus the King* than of Sidney's romance.<sup>6</sup>

But although the eyesight motif represents one of the most striking points of convergence between the Oedipus cycle and Shakespeare's tragedy, this is only one of the ways in which the works can be correlated. Another notable parallel between the Theban plays and *King Lear* is the extraordinary and self-abnegating devotion displayed by a filial figure with respect to the ageing protagonists of the respective works. It has sometimes been observed that the character of Cordelia, who has consecrated herself so completely to her father's welfare that she seems oblivious to any exigencies other than his, has her most luminous precedent in the person of Antigone in *Oedipus at Colonus*. "Of Cordelia's heavenly beauty of soul, painted in so few words, I will not venture to speak; she can only be named in the same breath with Antigone", was August Schlegel's fervent observation on the subject (Schlegel 1904, p. 413), and his sentiment is one that has often been echoed since. In *Oedipus at Colonus* Oedipus' daughter has served as inseparable companion and guide for her blind father for many years, renouncing any prospect of personal fulfilment in order to assist her parent in his distress. Cordelia, though she has earlier protested that she will owe her future spouse as much love as she does her father (1.1.100-102), in fact leaves her husband in order to command a military expedition against those who have been subjecting Lear to brutal mistreatment, and dies in the effort to succour him. In *King Lear* things are somewhat more complicated than in *Oedipus at Colonus*, because the dramatis personae of the play includes two devoted children corresponding to the two ageing fathers whose ordeals run parallel with one another.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Antigone, Cordelia does not accompany her father in any literal sense, though she may be said to attend him by proxy in the figure of the Fool, with whom, as has widely been observed by commentators on the play, she is subtly associated. Edgar however, though in disguise, does function in the capacity of guide for his blind father Gloucester. It is as if the different though related aspects of the role of Antigone in *Oedipus at Colonus* were distributed between the two faithful children in *King Lear*, just as those of the role of Oedipus himself are distributed between the characters of Lear and Gloucester.

Antigone eventually accompanies her father to Colonus, where it has been prophesied that he is destined to die. Edgar conducts his father to Dover, which Gloucester himself has designated as the place he is to die. In the moment before his death Oedipus requests Antigone and her sister to leave him so that he can meet his destiny alone. When Gloucester believes himself to be standing at the edge of the cliff he has determined to fling himself from he asks Edgar to leave him. Both blind men confront in solitude the deaths they have travelled so far

<sup>5</sup> Sidney's close familiarity with Seneca's version of the Oedipus story is indicated by the fact that he actually quotes from it in the original Latin in his *Defence of Poesy* (Sidney 2008, p. 230), as well as elsewhere, including in a letter proffering advice to the Queen (see Duncan-Jones's note, *ibid.*, p. 340). For an interesting account of how Seneca's plays were enlisted during the Elizabethan period as vehicles both for reflecting on the political situation of the age with relative impunity, and for obliquely dispensing counsel to individuals in positions of power, see Winston 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Though William F. Zak's assertion that "when we compare their fates, Gloucester shows himself the king's foil—playing a suicidal Jocasta to Lear's Oedipus" is perhaps a trifle strained" (Zak 1984, p. 140).

<sup>7</sup> In fairness to Oedipus' second daughter Ismene, it must be pointed out that she too has been unstinting in her endeavours on behalf of her father. She lends support to her sister's efforts to secure burial rites for Polyneices in *Antigone* as well, but does not pay the supreme penalty for her family loyalty as Antigone does.

to encounter, or at least think they do. Oedipus' death, seemingly facilitated by "some messenger / sent by the gods, or some power of the dead", takes a form that partakes of the sacred and, although the precise manner in which it occurs remains mysterious, "if any man ended miraculously, / this man did" (p. 131).<sup>8</sup> Gloucester's "death" is a fiction contrived by his son, for he is not in fact standing on the edge of a precipice when he makes what he thinks is his fatal leap and so only tumbles headlong onto the ground. The event is however instantly given a quasi-religious coloration by Edgar who, speaking in the voice of yet another of his assumed personae, assures the old man that "Thy life's a miracle" (4.6.55), and that he has survived his fall only because "the clearest gods [...] have preserved thee" (4.6.73-4). If Oedipus' death assumes the character of a mystic translation under the auspices of the gods, the episode of Gloucester's abortive suicide amounts to a symbolic death and resurrection, once again undergone under divine tutelage, that has its echo in Lear's story as well.

The extraordinary devotion exhibited by Antigone on the one hand, and by Cordelia and Edgar on the other, is contrasted with the savage treatment meted out to their parents by their other children. This leads in both *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear* to the father being provoked into performing the extreme and seemingly unnatural act of pronouncing a malediction against his own children (p. 121; 1.4.267-281, 292-3). In Sophocles' play Oedipus rails in the most bitter terms about the fact that his two sons have subjected him to mortifying neglect, and that it is his daughters instead who have sacrificed themselves in order to minister to his needs. One of the discrepancies between this play and *Oedipus the King* lies precisely in the circumstance that Oedipus lays the blame for his banishment from Thebes on his sons, whereas in the earlier play it is he himself who insists that he be exiled in order to purge the city of pollution. By thus imputing responsibility for his suffering to his male offspring the extraordinary dedication manifested by his two daughters, and most particularly by Antigone, is thrown into even starker relief. The vituperative words which Oedipus directs at his son Polyneices in *Oedipus at Colonus*, accusing him of having driven him from his home and condemned him to a life of vagabondage (p. 120), might well be compared to those with which Lear berates his ungrateful daughters Goneril and Regan, whose treatment of him exhibits so vivid a contrast with that of Cordelia.

Yet another striking parallel between *King Lear* and the Theban plays is the nature of the fate that finally befalls the devoted daughter figure. Antigone dies by hanging, by her own hand, though she is driven to this gesture of desperation by the cruel treatment she has been subjected to by Creon. Shakespeare's Cordelia also dies by hanging, the death in her case being a murder instigated by Edmund. Antigone dies in a cavern to which she has been consigned by Creon. Cordelia is killed in the prison in which she has been confined by Edmund. The relevance of this comparison might be contested on the grounds that in one of Shakespeare's sources, Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene*, Cordelia commits suicide by hanging herself while she is in prison, so that it seems unnecessary to look to Sophocles as a precedent. But it is important to recognize that neither in Spenser nor in Shakespeare's other sources does Cordelia's suicide ensue as an immediate consequence of those actions that Shakespeare chose to build his play around. It occurs many years later, and as the result of an entirely different set of circumstances. It is not part of the primary story, but constitutes a kind of epilogue to it. This is not the case with the fate that overtakes Shakespeare's Cordelia,

<sup>8</sup> "He was taken without a pang, [...] a passing more wonderful than that of any other man" (Sophocles 1973, p. 121); "the man was taken away [...], if any among mortals, by a miracle" (Sophocles 1998, p. 585).

who no less than Antigone dies in direct consequence of her having promoted family loyalties above the promptings of merely personal expedience.

But this is not all that is to be said concerning the deaths of Antigone and Cordelia respectively. In *Antigone* Creon has decreed that Antigone should die, but is persuaded in the end to remit this sentence, and undertakes himself to release the girl from confinement. It is too late by the time he arrives, however, for Antigone has already taken her own life. When Creon arrives on the scene her body is being mourned over by her betrothed Haemon, who attacks his father in a rage and then kills himself. In Shakespeare's play, Edmund gives instructions for Lear and Cordelia to be executed the aftermath of Cordelia's failed attempt to restore her father. He too decides at the last moment to rescind his decree, and in this case as well the change of heart comes too late, for Cordelia has already been hanged. Like Haemon, though with somewhat greater success, Lear attacks the man responsible for murdering the woman to whom he is devoted, killing the executioner as Haemon attempts to kill Creon. At the conclusion of *Antigone*, the desolate Creon appears on the stage bearing in his arms the dead body of his son. In what is perhaps the most wrenching moment of Shakespeare's tragedy, the distracted Lear appears on the stage bearing in his arms the lifeless body of his daughter. In *Antigone* Creon's wife Eurydice commits suicide when she learns of the death of her son. In *King Lear*, it is the king himself who expires over the inanimate body of his daughter.

There are other tantalizing parallels between *King Lear* and the Theban plays as well. One is to be discovered in the motif of the division of a kingdom, something that might, in a subtle way, be connected with the sight pattern that has already been mentioned. In *Oedipus at Colonus* Oedipus learns from his daughter Ismene that after his exile from Thebes his two sons Polyneices and Eteocles initially agreed to allow Creon to rule, but subsequently became locked in a vicious struggle over possession of the throne. Towards the end of the play Polyneices, preparing an assault against Thebes in order to unseat the brother he accuses of usurping power, solicits Oedipus' support, but Oedipus—angry over the long years of neglect to which he has been subjected by both sons—refuses to grant his benediction for the enterprise. It is in *Antigone* that we learn that Polyneices carried through with his attack on Thebes, and that the two contenders for the throne slew one other in a final fratricidal confrontation. In *King Lear* events have their point of origin in Lear's decision to divide his kingdom among his heirs before his death. The consequence of Lear's decision too is that the two men to whom he has prematurely bequeathed his kingdom, brothers by marriage if not by blood, come into conflict with one another. This is touched on only in passing, but it seems that "There is division [...] 'twixt Albany and Cornwall" (3.1.19-21), and although the two men join forces in order to confront the menace constituted by the invasion of the French army it is uncertain how long this precarious truce would have endured had Cornwall not been killed.

In both *King Lear* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, storm figures as an important element, and is in both cases associated with the gods (though in the case of *King Lear* the question of whether these are present or absent remains moot). After Oedipus' final confrontation with Polyneices, the sky is illuminated by a bolt of lightning which the Chorus interprets as a portent though without being able to fathom its significance:

The thunderbolt unspeakable, hurled by Zeus. [...] There, again, is the flash of the lightning! / It burns in the sky. What event will it yield? [...] It is not for nothing when it lightens so; there will be issue of it. (p. 124)

The king of Athens Theseus also remarks on the portentous but at the same time undecipherable nature of the storm, asking whether it is "the thunder of Zeus or rushing hail?", and adding that "One can indeed conjecture anything / when Zeus sends such a storm" (p. 126). It is Oedipus who supplies the key to the meaning of the tempest when he interprets the thunder as a presage of his own imminent passing. When he announces that his end is at

hand Theseus asks “What evidence have you of this impending death?”, to which Oedipus answers: “The gods are their own messengers to me; / they are not false to the signs they have arranged”. Theseus asks “What signs?”, and Oedipus replies: “The long continued thunder, the massive lightning / hurled from the hand that never knew defeat” (p. 126). What the storm betokens is the intervention in human life of the supreme powers operating in the universe at large.

The importance of the tempest in *King Lear* hardly requires comment. Lear’s confrontation with the storm is one of the supremely iconic moments in English literature, represented in a multitude of works of art. It is often suggested that the inspiration for the storm derives from allusions to thunder and lightning in one of Shakespeare’s sources, the *True Chronicle History of King Leir* (Anon. 2002, 4.7.194 SD, 4.7.294 SD), but the role these elements play in that earlier work is a relatively marginal and on the whole rather unproblematic one. They appear at a critical moment in *King Leir* to deter the Messenger dispatched by Gonoril and Ragan from carrying out his project of murdering Leir and his friend Perillus, and so confirm the watchful presence of a benevolent Providence in the world. Shakespeare elevates these elements instead into a powerful composite metaphor for the psychic turmoil within Lear himself—a perturbation at once intellectual, moral and spiritual which Lear himself will memorably describe as the “tempest in my mind” (3.4.12)—and also for the forces of anarchy irrupting within the ordered universe as a whole, forces with which Lear obscurely identifies at the same time as he suffers their onslaught. As occurs in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Lear also veers between different interpretations of the significance of the storm he has to confront on the heath. Sometimes he reverts to the traditional vocabulary of religion, referring like Oedipus to the thunder-bearer (2.2.419). But at another moment he asks, in a kind of parody of rationalistic inquiry, “What is the cause of thunder?” (3.4.151), thereby posing a question to which no answer is forthcoming. In this case as well the tempest comes to represent the ultimate forces with which human beings have to contend, both within the self and in the cosmos at large. This is not the case with the admonitory thunderclaps that make themselves heard in *King Lear*.

Not the least conspicuous of the elements that *King Lear* and the Theban cycle have in common are some of the personal traits shared by the principal characters of the plays, the existence of which goes some way towards explaining the parallels that can be traced in the trajectories their lives pursue. Both Oedipus and Lear are imperious, both avid of control, and both given to violent fits of anger when crossed. There is a certain analogy in the episodes of rage that lie at the origin of their respective tragedies: Oedipus slays his father over a question of precedence on a road, since both he and Laius refuse to give way to one another, while Lear repudiates his daughter over a question of precedence in affective relationships, since she has offended him by declaring that she will be bound to love her future husband no less than she does her father. In the course of the plays in which they figure as protagonists, both kings are obliged to confront the dark abyss underlying the fiction of control and prosperity they have been inhabiting. This has implications concerning their sense of their own identity, founded in each case on a counterfeit conception of who they are and of the place they occupy in the world. Each, to borrow the phrase that Regan uses in connection with her father, has but “slenderly known” himself (1.1.295), and is condemned to discover the truth about himself in the most painful way possible. As Oedipus relentlessly interrogates the witnesses who testify before him Jocasta cries out to him “God keep you from the knowledge of who you

are!” (p. 45),<sup>9</sup> but notwithstanding this warning he obstinately perseveres in what turns out to be a fatal quest to unravel the secret of his own origins. Realizing that he has been deceived by his daughters’ hollow protestations of love into divesting himself of the power and authority which are all he has had to ensure his position in the world, Lear plaintively asks “Who is it that can tell me who I am?”, to which the prompt and provocative answer supplied by the Fool is: “Lear’s shadow” (1.4.221-2). Both characters, at the outset of plays whose very titles ironically proclaim the identity as kings they are destined to forfeit, are in thrall to an illusion of who they are, and both are severed from that illusion.

But the resemblances between the protagonists of *King Lear* and the Theban plays are not confined to the male figures. The personalities of Antigone and Cordelia also display interesting points of correspondence other than those already mentioned, and as Schlegel intimates comparison between the two seems not only legitimate but, indeed, inevitable. Both are devoted daughters, but there is also a streak of moral obduracy in both that contributes to the tragedies which eventually overwhelm them. It is to be remembered once again that the first of the Theban plays to be written was *Antigone*, in which Creon’s relation to Antigone is not only that of king but also of uncle and of prospective father-in-law. Creon exhibits many of Lear’s more disagreeable traits, he too being splenetic, formulaic, inflexible in exacting obedience and in imposing a value system he considers to be the only one possible. Both men, in their different ways, insist upon the public dimension of existence at the expense of the private though, ironically enough, they are both punished by being smitten in their most intimate affections. Antigone and Cordelia, on the other hand, are torn between the exigencies of the public and the private, and both assign primacy to values at variance with those their respective kings insist on, refusing to play by the rules dictated by their real or substitute fathers on grounds they perceive as being essentially arbitrary. In both *Antigone* and *King Lear* it is this resistance on the part of the daughter figure that precipitates events. Antigone’s gesture of dissent is provoked by Creon’s refusal to accord Polyneices the customary funeral rites, Cordelia’s by Lear’s determination to oblige his daughters to make formal professions of their affection for him in a public forum. Creon prohibits ceremony where ceremony is due, and Lear insists upon ceremony where ceremony is irrelevant: both in their different ways have divorced the ritual aspect of existence from its meaning in the inner life of human beings, and so emptied it of significant content. Antigone and Cordelia on the other hand rebel against such vacant formalism and seek to reinstate the value of the personal, and it is for this transgression that they are punished.

## 2.

Taken in their aggregate rather than individually, the correspondences between *King Lear* and the Theban plays of which some account has been given here would seem to be too numerous and too pronounced not to possess some sort of significance. The problem is: what exactly is the *nature* of the significance that can legitimately be ascribed to them? Various kinds of explanation might be invoked for the parallels that have been adumbrated here. Perhaps the most intuitively obvious is that advanced by Gilbert Highet when he argues that if we find the thoughts of a classical writer appearing in Shakespeare’s work the reason must be, very simply, that “great poets in times and countries distant from each other often have similar thoughts and express them similarly” (Highet 1985, p. 201). Parallels such as those

<sup>9</sup> “O never live to learn the truth!” (Sophocles 1973, p. 55); “God keep you from the knowledge of who you are!” (Sophocles 1997, p. 45).

we have been discussing may be attributable to the elementary fact that there are constants in the human condition, and constants in the manner in which the human imagination, or at least the artistically engaged imagination, tends to respond to them. Not dissimilarly, Heilman, whose discussion of the resemblances between the imagery of vision and its failure that he discerns in both *Oedipus the King* and *King Lear* has already been cited, suggests that “the tendency of totally independent poetic imaginations to explore comparable situations in identical, or at least comparable, ways leads to the suspicion that a certain complex of raw materials may always [...] exact from the artist a certain kind of aesthetic strategy” (Heilman 1963, p. 23). In other words, creative minds vastly removed from one another in time and place will tend to treat analogous situations in similar ways, and thus produce works of arts which exhibit certain affinities with one another irrespective of the specific cultural contexts in which they have emerged.

There is a great deal to be said for such an approach, particularly in the light of the fairly obvious consideration that the artists we are concerned with were themselves human beings immersed in the vicissitudes of ordinary experience, and that this would inevitably have had some impact on the works they produced. In a full-length book dedicated to the relation between Hamlet and Oedipus, Ernst Jones famously argued that Shakespeare’s character exhibits certain resemblances to that of the Oedipus legend, “as developed for instance in Sophocles’ tragedy”, because Shakespeare was himself traversing something approximating to what Freudians would call an oedipal crisis when he composed this particular play (Jones 1976, pp. 79, 101-126). Without necessarily having to venture out quite so far as this on the speculative limb, it seems eminently plausible that at least some of the analogies that can be discovered between works such as *King Lear* and the Theban plays might stem from analogies in the lives they reflect. As long as there exist families comprising parents and children there will also be tensions operating within them which, however differently they might manifest themselves in different cultural contexts, will find parallel expressions in works of art dealing with such families. The failure of children to understand their parents, and of parents to understand their children, the fear of neglect on the part of the elder generation and of disparagement on the part of the younger, and so forth, are part and parcel of the dynamics of generational relationships. There is therefore nothing particularly surprising about the fact that authors dealing with the relation between the generations will approach the issue in ways that bear certain similarities to one another, even if they belong to different cultures and to different historical epochs. If there is any truth to the story, recounted by Cicero and so not inconceivably known to Shakespeare himself, that Sophocles’ sons sought to have their ageing parent declared legally incompetent so as to deprive him of the management of his own estate, then it is possible that the ire directed by Oedipus against his sons in *Oedipus at Colonus* had its basis in the circumstances of the playwright’s private life.<sup>10</sup> It would be hazardous to speculate about the nature of the familial anxieties that Shakespeare might have been experiencing during the period in which he wrote *King Lear*. Nonetheless the fact that his daughters had at that point attained maturity, and that although by no means old himself he be-

<sup>10</sup> The story is recounted in the seventh book of *On Old Age* (Cicero 1971, p. 222). Cicero relates that Sophocles frustrated this scheme by reading from *Oedipus at Colonus* before the magistrates hearing the case, who were sufficiently impressed by his performance as to dismiss the charge of incompetence brought against him (ibid.: 222). The episode is mentioned in Montaigne’s essay “On the Inconstancy of our Actions” (Montaigne 1991, p. 379), and Shakespeare might have encountered it there. The veracity of the anecdote has however been questioned, Hugh Lloyd-Jones stating for instance that “there can be little doubt that the whole story derives from a comedy” (Lloyd-Jones 1997, p. 14).

longed to the generation that was by now ineluctably on the wane, might plausibly have been among the factors influencing his preoccupations in the play.

If this is the case, of course, then it might seem that there is no need to assume that there is any relationship of direct influence between *King Lear* and the Theban plays, and thus that the tendentious issue of whether Shakespeare knew Sophocles' works at first hand can be conveniently skirted. One can assert the presence of a similarity, and indeed delineate the elements of that similarity in extensive detail, without being obliged to demonstrate that Shakespeare was personally familiar with Sophocles' works. Because the fact is, of course, that there is no incontrovertible evidence indicating that Shakespeare read Sophocles or saw him performed. It has been categorically stated by one authoritative biographer that Shakespeare himself "didn't know Sophocles" (Fraser 1992, p. 224), and other commentators have been of the same opinion. If this is so, then it might seem that the simplest explanation for such resemblances as can be discerned between Shakespeare and his ancient predecessor is in terms of the universality of human experience and the essential continuity over the centuries of human thinking processes. The risk latent in such an approach is, however, that it will finish in banality. It is the equivalent of saying that works of art depict human beings with arms and legs because all human beings possess limbs: the observation may be true, but it does not tell us very much about the works we are trying to understand. What is of interest in this case is not so much the mere presence of shared elements in *King Lear* and the Oedipus cycle, as the analogies that can be perceived in the manner in which those elements are combined and developed in both works. It is these that suggest that the relation between Sophocles and Shakespeare might be more than a matter of commonality of experience alone.

It is perhaps to be added at this point that it is by no means obvious that the hypothesis that Shakespeare knew Sophocles' works is necessarily to be dismissed out of hand. It is not even impossible that he read them in the original Greek, however haltingly. Here there is a great deal of room for debate, and nothing can be established with certainty, so it is necessary to tread cautiously. Ben Jonson famously remarked of Shakespeare that he possessed small Latin and less Greek (Shakespeare 2006, p. lxii), and many—it is not always certain on what grounds—have taken him at his word. Highet for instance affirms that he "read Latin keenly but sketchily and Greek not at all" (Highet 1985, p. 210), but there is no consensus in this matter. T. W. Baldwin, in a full-length study dedicated to the subject of Shakespeare's knowledge of the classical languages and their respective literatures, argues that "it seems highly probable [...] if not absolutely proved, that Shakespeare had gone as far with his Greek as the New Testament, which was the conventional first author", and to the question of "what would have been his further probable progress?" he suggests that "the tragedies of Euripides or of Sophocles" might have been part of the fare of boys attending grammar schools (Baldwin 1944, pp. 647-48). Even if Shakespeare did not proceed quite this far, and was really as little competent in Greek as Jonson alleged, he might still have read Sophocles in translation. John Harvey points out that "by 1570 all of Sophocles' tragedies had been translated into Latin several times over", and that "Sophocles was an established classic, recommended from the early part of the century for sixth-form study in the grammar-schools" (Harvey 1977, p. 259). Shakespeare's Latin, however exiguous it might have been—and it is unlikely to have been quite as "small" as Jonson implied<sup>11</sup>—would probably have sufficed to give him

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Bate argues that "a few years in an Elizabethan grammar school would have yielded enough Latin to last a lifetime", and that in the course of his schooling Shakespeare "would have achieved a level of proficiency above that of many a modern undergraduate student of the classics" (Bate 2008, p. 81). The view that "a boy educated at an Elizabethan grammar school would be more thoroughly trained in classical rhetoric and Roman (if not Greek) literature than most present-day holders of a university degree in classics" is also that

access to a body of literature that figured too high on the reading lists of educated people of the time to be safely ignored by anyone in the least degree concerned to cut a creditable figure in cultivated society.

Moreover, even if Shakespeare did not personally read Sophocles either in the original or in Latin translation, the Athenian playwright was too well known to the Elizabethans for Shakespeare not to have known of him at least by hearsay. And what he would have heard would surely have whetted the curiosity of a man of the theatre such as himself. Francis Meres for instance alludes to him in his *Palladis Tamia* (1598), which also happens to be the first book to give a critical account of Shakespeare's own works, saying that "Sophocles was called a Bee for the sweetness of his tongue" (Smith 1967, p. 316). Sir Philip Sidney mentions him in his *Defence of Poesy* in connection with his depiction of Ajax's destructive anger, but also refers to "the remorse of conscience in Oedipus", which seems more descriptive of Sophocles than of the other possible source in Seneca (Sidney 2008, p. 222). In the eulogy to Shakespeare that has already been quoted, prefaced to the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's works published in 1623, Ben Jonson names all three of the great Greek tragedians in, as it were, the same breath as he does Shakespeare himself:

And though thou hadst small Latin and less Greek,  
From thence to honour thee I would not seek  
For names, but call forth thund'ring Aeschylus,  
Euripides, and Sophocles to us,  
Pacuvius, Accius, him of Cordova dead,  
To life again, to hear thy buskin tread  
And shake a stage (Shakespeare 2006, p. lxxi)

It is not therefore necessary to believe that Shakespeare personally read Sophocles in order to affirm that he would have been exposed to the influence of Sophocles. Many people in the world today have experienced the influence of Shakespeare without having read Shakespeare, and if somebody alludes to *Romeo and Juliet* we do not have to demonstrate conclusively that he read Shakespeare's tragedy before we affirm that he is referring to it. The role of cultural osmosis in fashioning a literary consciousness is not to be underestimated, and neither is that of convivial conversation among drinking companions steeped in classical lore. If Shakespeare did not personally read Sophocles, he was almost certainly acquainted with plenty of people who had, and who would doubtless have been willing to fill in any gaps there might have been in his knowledge. Shakespeare may not have been university trained, but he was deeply enmeshed in the literary culture of his period, and that culture included Sophocles. Kenneth and Julia Reinhard Lupton, discussing what they refer to as "*King Lear's* foreclosure of the Oedipus plays" argue that such foreclosure "cannot be strictly intertextual, since Shakespeare most likely did not read Sophocles", and that the plays are linked "not by the connections of influence, but by their arrangement in the canon" (Lupton & Reinhard 1993, p. 214). Such a clarification might be excessively subtle. Some sort of influence would seem to be present irrespectively of the issue of whether Shakespeare delved into Sophocles' writings on his own account, and it might seem unduly restrictive to insist on the notion that intertextuality must necessarily depend upon the personal familiarity of the author with a text and of his making specific and deliberate reference to it.

argued in Stanley Wells' General Introduction to *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Wells 2006, p. xvi).

It must not be forgotten of course that there was one version of the Oedipus story other than Sophocles' to which Shakespeare had ready access in a language that no one disputes he was conversant with, this being English itself. This is the version found in Seneca's *Oedipus*, an English rendering of which was published by Alexander Neville in 1563, and the *Thebais* or *Phoenissae*, which was translated into English by Thomas Newton. Newton published a volume of Seneca's plays, including Neville's translation of *Oedipus* and his own rendering of the *Thebais*, in 1581, under the title *Seneca His Tenne Tragedies: Translated into Englysh* (Seneca 1887). Seneca's *Oedipus* follows Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* very closely, but there are significant divergences. In Seneca's *Oedipus* Tiresias (accompanied, incidentally, in what may be a reminiscence of *Antigone*, by his daughter Manto and not by a boy as in Sophocles) does not reveal that Oedipus is the man who has killed Laius, although he does prescribe the procedure through which the truth can be discovered. It is Creon who, following Tiresias's instructions, confers with the shade of Laius and learns from him that the present incumbent of the Theban throne murdered his father and married his mother. In Seneca's version Oedipus does not destroy his eyes with broach pins but, in a scene described in gruesome detail by a Messenger, tears them from their sockets with his hands. Jocasta is not yet dead when he performs this act, but when she witnesses the mutilation to which he has subjected himself she decides to share in his punishment, killing herself by means of Oedipus' sword—and not by hanging herself as she does in Sophocles' play.

Seneca's *Thebais*, also known as the *Phoenissae* from the play by Euripides on which it is largely based, includes elements from *Oedipus at Colonus*. The first part of the play depicts Oedipus blind and shorn of power, wandering in exile in the company of his faithful daughter Antigone and debating the possibility of suicide. Interestingly enough, in view of Gloucester's determination to end his own life by throwing himself from Dover cliff in *Lear*, Seneca's Oedipus contemplates the possibility of leaping down from a crag overlooking the sea in order to terminate an existence that has for him become unendurable, although he is dissuaded from this drastic course of action by Antigone.<sup>12</sup> The second part of the play takes place outside Thebes, where Oedipus' son Polynices is preparing to launch an attack against the city in order to wrest the throne from his brother Eteocles. Jocasta, who is mysteriously still alive notwithstanding her suicide at the conclusion of *Oedipus*, tries to avert war by prevailing upon Polynices to desist in his efforts to secure the throne by force, and the play breaks off while her efforts at mediation between the rival brothers are still in progress. A number of the elements that I have enumerated as being shared between *King Lear* and the Oedipus story are to be found in Seneca's plays. But Seneca does not develop the imagery of eyes and seeing that is so prominent in Sophocles' work. Nor does Seneca's version of the story include the subsequent history of Antigone which, as I have suggested, also exhibits parallels with *King Lear* that it is difficult to believe are entirely coincidental. It seems improbable, then, that the analogies between Shakespeare's play and the version of the Oedipus story elaborated by Sophocles are to be attributed solely to the playwright's familiarity with the Senecan adaptation.

### 3.

<sup>12</sup> The possibility that Shakespeare remembered Seneca's play in depicting Gloucester's attempted suicide is mentioned by Muir 1977, p. 202. It might be recalled that the blind Prince of Paphlagonia in Sidney's *Arcadia* also contemplates suicide by throwing himself from a rock, and is prevented from doing so by the devoted son by whom he is accompanied (Sidney 2008, p. 254). In this matter as well, however, Sidney may have been influenced by Seneca's play.

In the absence of more definitive information regarding the source and extent of Shakespeare's knowledge of Sophocles, the most fruitful manner of exploring the affinities that can be perceived between *King Lear* and the Theban plays is perhaps to investigate somewhat further the meanings that are to be ascribed to those elements that are shared between them. The most intriguing of these is that already mentioned, namely the role played by images of sight and blindness in both works. Some indication of what these images might signify in metaphorical terms is possibly to be found in the story of Cupid and Psyche recounted in Lucius Apuleius' novel *The Golden Ass*, composed in the second century AD although it was very probably based upon a tale that was already extant. This story may have had some influence on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,<sup>13</sup> and is related to such other folk tales as that of Beauty and the Beast as well. In this story Venus, envious of the mortal maiden Psyche whose beauty surpasses her own, instructs her son Cupid to humiliate the girl by causing her to become enamoured of a creature she would normally find repellent. While executing this mission Cupid inadvertently scratches himself with one of his own arrows, and falls in love with his intended victim himself. Eventually the two become lovers, but Cupid visits Psyche only by night, adjuring her when he does so that she must never attempt to look upon him. Psyche's sisters insidiously implant in her mind the suspicion that her nocturnal encounters might be with a monster, and she resolves to determine the truth of the matter by viewing her visitor's person by the light of a lamp. While she is examining the recumbent form of her lover, however, some of the burning oil from the lamp falls on his shoulder. Cupid wakes, understands that his prohibition has been disregarded, and abandons the girl who has betrayed his trust. In Apuleius' version the story has a happy ending, but that does not concern us here. What matters is the idea conveyed by the story that, as Juliet remarks in *Romeo and Juliet*, "if love be blind, / It best agrees with night" (3.2.9-10), the corollary being that the act of subjecting the lover to the scrutiny of the eye will fatally shatter the spell. Love and the world that sight reveals belong to disparate realms, and to bring the visual sense to bear in the world of love is inevitably to destroy that world. Not only is love blind, but if it is to endure it must remain so.

The story of Cupid and Psyche has lent itself to allegorical interpretations of various kinds, but one of the things that it would seem to be dramatizing in its own mythic terms is the contrast between different modes of understanding, and the different ways of responding to experience they entail. One of these modes, evoked in the Cupid and Psyche story when Psyche decides to inspect her lover's body by the light of a lamp, is that commonly associated with the faculty of vision. An assimilation of this kind is implicit for instance in the metaphoric schema designated by George Lakoff and Mark Turner's formula "UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING", by which is meant that "what enables you to see is metaphorically what enables you to understand" (Lakoff and Turner 1989, p. 94).<sup>14</sup> It has been pointed out by Eve Sweetser that words referring to vision have often assumed the meaning of *know* in various Indo-European languages, that "the objective, intellectual side of our mental life seems to be regularly linked with the sense of vision", and furthermore that images of sight are also connected with the concepts of control and monitoring (Sweetser 1991, pp. 37, 38). According to Lakoff and Turner, what lies at the basis of this recurrent pattern is "a widespread and ancient

<sup>13</sup> This possibility is argued in McPeck 1972.

<sup>14</sup> See also Lakoff and Johnson 2003, pp. 48, 103-4.

conceptual metaphor that KNOWING IS SEEING”,<sup>15</sup> as is evidenced for instance by the fact that the words *wit* and *vision* “have the same Indo-European root” (Lakov and Turner 1989, p. 130). The metaphorical association of sight and knowledge is, according to this argument, a fundamental one, so deeply engrained in the cognitive apparatus through which we apprehend experience that we are seldom aware of its presence, though it reveals itself indirectly in the idioms we employ in common speech. To say that we see what someone means, or see their point, is to say that we understand what they are trying to communicate. But the kind of understanding that is referred to is of an intellectual rather than intuitive nature, a matter of comprehension rather than apprehension, as Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* might say (5.1.5-6, 19-20). To “see” is to see in a certain way.

The sense of sight is often represented in negative terms by Shakespeare, who not infrequently sets off different modes of seeing against one another and by so doing generates semantic tension in the words by which sight is denoted. If seeing is believing, it is precisely this that is the problem, because all too often seeing—or the compulsion to see at all costs—renders the individual vulnerable to the possibility of deception and hence to figurative blindness. When Othello demands that Iago “give me the ocular proof” of Desdemona’s infidelity (3.3.36), Iago follows his instructions to the letter, contriving a charade in which it appears that Cassio is boasting about his affair with the Moor’s wife, and in which what seems to be the most damning piece of evidence against Desdemona is provided by a handkerchief that has in fact been filched from its owner. Confronted by what appears to be unimpugnable visual corroboration of Iago’s story concerning Desdemona’s faithlessness, Othello is duped into believing something that is entirely contrary to his deepest instincts concerning his wife and, as it happens, entirely at variance with the truth. Claudio and Don Pedro are similarly deluded in *Much Ado About Nothing*, when Don John mounts a comparable spectacle so as to beguile them into an erroneous assessment of Hero’s virtue. But there are many other instances of the phenomenon of false seeing in Shakespeare as well. King Duncan in *Macbeth* observes rightly enough that there is no art that can find the mind’s construction in the face (1.4.12), but fails to apply this maxim to the individuals he encounters in daily life, with consequences that are disastrous for himself and for the country he rules. He is not the only character in Shakespeare who proves deficient in this respect. Sight, and the kind of intellectual and manipulative knowledge that sight metaphorically represents, confines itself to surfaces, to the exterior aspect of things, and potentially to the delusive world of mere appearances. Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* successfully negotiates the casket test because he has become, if only temporarily, one of those rare individuals who “choose not by the view”, and in selecting the least visually alluring of the caskets implicitly rejects the world of appearances in favour of that adumbrated in Portia’s remark that “If you do love me, you will find me out” (3.2.131, 41).<sup>16</sup> The other men undertaking the test reason instead that there must be some sort of correlation between the external aspect of the caskets and the quality of the prize that is to be awarded, and being “deliberate fools”, as Portia disparagingly calls them, “have the wisdom by their wit to lose” (2.9.81-2).

It is the world governed by appearances—one that lends itself to inspection, analysis, and quantification—that, at the beginnings of the plays that bear their names, is inhabited by the protagonists of both *Oedipus the King* and *King Lear*. The tendency to rationalize, to conceptualize, to perceive and interpret experience in terms of external or public categories, is

<sup>15</sup> Heilman uses the phrase “seeing is knowing” in connection with the symbolism of *Oedipus the King* (Heilman 1963, p. 22).

<sup>16</sup> In view of the Cupid and Psyche story mentioned earlier, it is perhaps interesting that, possibly in unconscious response to Portia’s comment about “Cupid’s post”, Nerissa should invoke “Lord Love” in connection with Bassanio’s arrival at Belmont (2.9.101-2).

differently represented in the two tragedies. Oedipus is depicted by Sophocles from the start as a problem solver, a man of knowledge and intellectual acumen. Before *Oedipus the King* opens he has performed the notable feat of solving the Sphinx's riddle, consisting in the question of what walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at night. Oedipus correctly divines that the answer is Man, who crawls as an infant, walks upright in maturity, but can only get about with the aid of a cane in old age. Oedipus is proud of the perspicacity he has displayed in dealing with this enigma, and in a heated argument with Teiresias explicitly contrasts the kind of understanding he is capable of bringing to bear on a problem with that of the seer:

And yet the riddle's answer was not the province  
of a chance comer. It was a prophet's task  
And plainly you had no such gift of prophecy  
From birds nor otherwise from any God  
to glean a word of knowledge. But I came,  
Oedipus, who knew nothing, and I stopped her.  
I solved the riddle by my wit alone.  
Mine was no knowledge got from birds. (pp. 18-19)<sup>17</sup>

The intellectual acuity that enables Oedipus to untangle such puzzles as that posed by the Sphinx is intrinsic to his legend. "So was hee to mee in this bundle of riddles an understanding *Oedipus*", is John Florio's tribute to a man who had helped him decipher obscure references in Montaigne (Florio 1965, p. 5), words that Shakespeare very probably read before composing *King Lear*. In Ben Jonson's *Sejanus, His Fall*, written in the same year that Florio's translation of Montaigne was published, and in which Shakespeare is known to have performed, a character protests that "I am not Oedipus enough / To understand this Sphynx" (Jonson 1999, 3.1.64-5). It is Oedipus' success as a solver of riddles that, ironically as it turns out, renders him eligible to become king of Thebes and husband of Jocasta.

This however will lead to another enigma of a somewhat more difficult kind, for when *Oedipus the King* opens the king's problem is to discover the reason for the sterility that is plaguing his city. Jocasta's brother Creon consults the Delphic oracle, which informs him that in order to remedy the city's ills the murderer of the former king Laius must be discovered and punished. Armed with this crucial item of intelligence, Oedipus attempts to solve the problem using the procedures most readily available to a man such as himself: marshalling evidence, examining witnesses, cross-checking their testimony. He is urged to desist in his inquiries by the blind prophet Teiresias, who knows the truth and knows also that this truth is a dangerous one. Teiresias's mind is not comparable in intellectual power to that of Oedipus, but it delves deeper into the inner reality of things, and as the Chorus says "what the Lord Teiresias / sees, is most often what Lord Apollo / sees" (p. 13).<sup>18</sup> Oedipus does not understand this, however, and in rejecting the seer's advice to suspend his investigation taxes him

<sup>17</sup> "There was a riddle too deep for common wits; / A seer should have answered it; but answer came there none / From you; bird-lore and god-craft all were silent. / Until I came [...] And stopped the riddler's mouth, guessing the truth / By mother-wit, not bird-lore" (Sophocles 1973, pp. 36-7); "her riddle was not one for the first comer to explain! It required prophetic skill, and you were exposed as having no knowledge from the birds or from the gods. No, it was I that came [...] and put a stop to her; I hit the mark by native wit, not by what I learned from birds" (Sophocles 1997, pp. 363-5).

<sup>18</sup> "To the lord Phoebus the lord Teiresias / Stands nearest [...] in divination" (Sophocles 1973, p. 33); "he whose sight is closest to that of the lord Phoebus is the lord Tiresias" (Sophocles 1997, p. 351).

with being “blind in mind and ears / as well as in your eyes” (p. 17).<sup>19</sup> This is ironic, because it swiftly transpires that it is he and not the prophet who is blind to the reality of his situation. The problem raised by the play, as Heilman argues, is that of “the ways in which man sees, or fails to see, the truths that are available to him”, and in this respect the “self-confident, keen-eyed reasoner fails” because he is incapable of going beyond the “limited truths of fact” (Heilman 1963, p. 22). As Teiresias himself says in replying to Oedipus’ charge of mental blindness: “You have your eyes but see not where you are” (p. 19).<sup>20</sup>

The answer to the riddle of who has committed the fatal homicide is, as it turns out, Oedipus himself. It is he who, entering into an altercation with a stranger at the crossroads, has killed the king, who is also his own father. As the suspicion grows in him that it is none other than he himself who is responsible for the blight on his city he says that “I have a deadly fear / that the old seer had eyes” (p. 33).<sup>21</sup> At the same time that he comes to recognize his guilt, Oedipus also learns the secret of his own identity. His name means swollen foot, and he is told that his ankles were pierced in preparation for his being exposed as an infant, a detail that explains the lameness by which he continues to be afflicted. Everything is brought to light, though ironically there are other personages in the play—Teiresias, Jocasta, the herdsman who is summoned to give his deposition—who guess the truth before Oedipus himself. What is perhaps worth noticing is that the devastating revelation that overwhelms Oedipus at the end of the play in a certain sense invalidates the merely intellectual truth of his solution to the Sphinx’s conundrum. Oedipus as an infant had his feet pinned together, so that he could not even crawl; and as appears in *Antigone*, as an old man he is reliant not on a cane, but on another human being, for locomotion. The shortcomings of numerical thinking are in a certain sense reflected in one of the puzzles that the play raises but leaves unresolved, for if Oedipus’ success in solving the Sphinx’s riddle depends on a capacity to deal with discriminations based on number, this proves inadequate when he is dealing with the problem of who killed Laius. A witness reports that the thieves who assaulted the king’s party “were many and the hands that did the murder were many” (p. 8), and for a while Oedipus is hopeful that this detail might exculpate him in the matter of Laius’ death, for “One man cannot be the same as many” (p. 36)<sup>22</sup>—an affirmation quite different from that with which he responded to the Sphinx’s riddle. However faultless his logic, the conclusions Oedipus draws concerning his innocence are wrong, and the loose end continues to dangle at the end of the play.

Lear’s addiction to the kind of knowledge associated with the categories of rational thought manifests itself differently, revealing itself in his case not in skill in solving puzzles but in a propensity towards externalization, visualization, and mensuration. The opening scene of the play enacts the king’s compulsion to have the sentiment of love formulated in explicit terms, and if Psyche’s determination to scrutinize her lover by lamplight puts the very foundation of her relation with the deity at risk, Lear’s insistence upon rendering public the intimacies of feeling proves to be no less destructive. His daughters are required to articulate their devotion to him in speeches that will enable him to gauge “Which of you [...] doth love us most” (1.1.51), so that he can bestow upon them portions of his kingdom commensurate with the degree of sentiment that is expressed. A map of his realm is open before him during

<sup>19</sup> “Shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless sot!” (Sophocles 1973, p. 36); “you are blind in your ears, in your mind, and in your eyes” (Sophocles 1997, p. 361).

<sup>20</sup> “Have you eyes, / And do not see your own damnation?” (Sophocles 1973, p. 37); “you have sight, but cannot see what trouble you are in” (Sophocles 1997, p. 365).

<sup>21</sup> “Had then the prophet eyes?” (Sophocles 1973, p. 46); “I have grievous misgivings that the prophet may have sight” (Sophocles 1997, p. 401).

<sup>22</sup> “Not one but many [...] Fell in with the King’s party and put them to death”, “one is not more than one” (Sophocles 1973, p. 29, p. 49); “he died not through one man’s strength, but by the hands of many”, “one is not the same as many” (Sophocles 1997, pp. 339, 411).

this ceremony, and as his two elder daughters produce the routine formulas of affection that are expected of them he promptly transcribes them in cartographic terms, converting the formal professions of devotion into demarcations on a two-dimensional diagram of reality. Marshall McLuhan's observation that "the map brings forward at once a principal theme of *King Lear*, namely the isolation of the visual sense as a kind of blindness" (McLuhan 1969, p. 19), draws attention to the paradox that the insistence on projecting all aspects of experience into the domain of the visible fatally entails an amputation of vision, that to "see" in one sense is not to see at all in others. As occurs in the case of Oedipus as well, this manifests itself in a quite literal refusal on the part of the king to see what cannot be seen in his own terms. When Cordelia fails to produce the kind of speech he expects Lear dismisses her with the exclamation "Hence and avoid my sight" (1.1.125), and to the expostulations of his loyal courtier Kent, who protests against his brutal treatment of the girl, he responds in a very similar vein: "Out of my sight!" (1.1.158).

Unlike his sovereign, Kent is clear-eyed enough to be able to perceive the sincerity of Cordelia and the hypocrisy of her sisters. The argument that erupts between Lear and himself is comparable to Oedipus' altercation with Teiresias in *Oedipus the King*, the conflict in both cases being between clashing modes of understanding. As Teiresias tells Oedipus that "You have your eyes but see not where you are" (p. 19), so Kent admonishes his king to "See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye" (1.1.159-60). But Lear, like Oedipus, will have to learn the hard way. His emphasis on eyesight leads to fragmentation and, ironically enough, fragmentation increases in proportion as attempts are made to reduce the world to an abstract unity. Lear expects conformity of emotional response from his daughters, and it is precisely this he obtains from two of them, yet the map which in a certain sense presides iconically over the opening scene in fact codifies the division which will become one of the verbal and symbolic leitmotifs of the play. As Oedipus, so astute in dealing with the Sphinx's riddle based on numbers, will run into difficulties in quantifying the number of robbers implicated in the murder of Laius, so Lear will be confounded by the logic of mensuration he himself has implicitly invoked in inviting his daughters to compete with one another in their professions of love for him. The *reductio ad absurdum* of this kind of logic appears in the episode in which, haggling with his daughters over the number of knights he is to be permitted to have in his train, he says to Goneril that "Thy fifty yet doth double five and twenty, / And thou art twice her love" (2.2.451-2), and she proceeds to ask him why he needs even this many. "O, reason not the need!" Lear groans (2.2.456), oblivious as yet to the fact that it is his own compulsion to rationalize what lies beyond the scope of reason that is responsible for his predicament. It is Cordelia who understands that, as Antony says in *Antony and Cleopatra*, "There's beggary in the love that can be reckoned" (1.1.15), and her devastating word "Nothing" that brings into question the logic of quantification and measurement that dominates her father's thinking (1.1.87-9).

What occurs after the fateful uttering of that word in *King Lear* is too familiar to require extensive commentary here, but the analogy with the story of Oedipus, who destroys his own eyesight when he learns that he has failed to see reality in its true aspect, is plain. Lear seems to be on the point of repeating Oedipus' extreme gesture when he warns his "Old fond eyes" that "I'll pluck ye out" if they shame him by weeping (1.4.293-4), and although he does not act upon his threat in any literal sense the madness into which he descends figures his progressive alienation from a world he once saw as real and now understands is not. By the time he encounters Cordelia he is not even certain that the hands he is holding before his eyes are his own, and pricks himself with a pin (another recollection of Oedipus?) to assure himself that they are (4.7.55-6). The experiences undergone by Lear at a moral and spiritual level

are reflected in more immediately physical terms by Gloucester, who is duped by Edmund into reading a letter he claims was written by his brother but that he himself has forged. It is Gloucester's insistence on examining the contents of the letter—"Let's see. – Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles. [...] Let's see, let's see" (1.2.35-6, 44)—that leads him to misperceive his two sons' respective characters, and thus to construct a false picture of reality. In the end Gloucester is literally blinded when Cornwall puts into effect Goneril's vicious recommendation to "Pluck out his eyes!" (3.7.5), but in the very instant that he is deprived of the physical faculty of vision he gains a true perspective on his situation:

GLOUCESTER: All dark and comfortless? Where's my son Edmund?  
 Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature  
 To quit this horrid act.  
 REGAN: Out, treacherous villain,  
 Thou call'st on him that hates thee. It was he  
 That made the overture of thy treasons to us,  
 Who is too good to pity thee.  
 GLOUCESTER: O my follies! Then Edgar was abused?  
 Kind gods, forgive me that and prosper him! (3.7.84-91)

As in *Oedipus the King*, the loss of physical sight is associated in *King Lear* with the attainment of interior vision, and a realization at the same time that the mode of understanding associated with sight has been inadequate. Oedipus will immolate the eyes that have bound him to a spurious conception of reality, allowing others to direct his steps for the remainder of his life, and Gloucester too will realize his error, acknowledging that "I have no way, and therefore want no eyes: / I stumbled when I saw" (4.1.20-21). In both *King Lear* and the Theban plays the acquisition of inner vision is represented poetically through synaesthesia, as characters come to "see" the world through sensory modes other than that of sight. "There shall be sight in all the words I say", announces the blind Oedipus, who also asserts at a slightly later point in *Oedipus at Colonus* that he can "see / by the sound of a voice" (pp. 68, 70).<sup>23</sup> In *King Lear* Gloucester apostrophizes the absent Edgar with the words "Might I but live to see thee in my touch, / I'd say I had eyes again" (4.1.25-6), a phrase strikingly reminiscent of Oedipus' poignant comment concerning his daughters in *Oedipus the King*: "I wish that you might suffer me to touch them [...] Can I really be touching them, as when I saw?" (p. 60).<sup>24</sup> When Lear remarks to him that "you see how this world goes", Gloucester says "I see it feelingly" (4.6.143-5), and Lear responds by advising him to "Look with thine ears" (4.6.147). At this point in the spiritual trajectories traced in both Sophocles' work and Shakespeare's, eyes in the merely physical meaning of the term have become redundant. A messenger describing Oedipus' death at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* says: "How he moved from here with no guidance of friends, / you yourselves know. [...] He was himself the guide to all of us" (p. 129).<sup>25</sup> For his own part Lear, though admitting near the end of *King Lear* that "Mine eyes are not o'the best" (5.3.277), dies pronouncing the words "Look there, look there!" (5.3.310). What exactly he is seeing in that final instant, or if he is seeing anything at

<sup>23</sup> "My words shall not be blind", "I am the man [...] of whom they say, / Ears are his eyes" (Sophocles 1973, pp. 74, 76); "All the words I utter shall have sight!", "I see with my voice, as they say!" (Sophocles 1998, pp. 423, 427).

<sup>24</sup> "If I could touch them once [...] and I could I think I had them / Once more before my eyes" (Sophocles 1973, p. 66); "If I can lay my hands on them I can seem to have them with me, as when I could see" (Sophocles 1997, p. 477).

<sup>25</sup> "You saw how he refused the guidance of his friends, but led us all boldly forward" (Sophocles 1973, p. 119); "how he left here you know well [...] with none of his friends to guide him, but himself giving directions to us all" (Sophocles 1998, p. 579).

all, we do not know with any certainty. But he himself has already pointed out that “A man may see how this world goes with no eyes” (4.6.146-7), and if there is a common insight emerging from both the Theban plays and *King Lear* this would appear to be it.

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