

Keynote Lecture

Stephen Orgel

“How to be Classical”

Modern notions of the classical were essentially invented in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, with the writings of Winckelmann in Enlightenment Germany and the installation of the Elgin Marbles in Regency London. But 16th-century England consciously undertook to develop classical models for English literature and the visual arts, and those looked quite different from anything we recognize as classical. What did ‘classical’ sound like and look like to Sidney and Spenser? A good deal of energy in the period went into the devising of appropriately classical models for vernacular verse. The Earl of Surrey, in the 1530s, translated two books of the *Aeneid* in a style designed to be classical, a poetic meter intended to serve as an English equivalent to Virgilian hexameters. The meter was what became known as blank verse, and strictly speaking, all that was Virgilian about it was that it was unrhymed. Surrey presumably considered pentameter ‘natural’ to English, as hexameter was to Latin. The assumption was shrewdly prophetic, but in the 1530s it would have seemed very surprising.

Early Modern and Classical Intersections

Carlo Bajetta

“Elizabeth’s and Raleigh’s ‘classics’”

Both Queen Elizabeth and Raleigh had a penchant for classical (especially late-classical/early medieval) authors. While their use of classical sources, both in their literary works and in their correspondence, has been the object of a selected number of important studies, what seems to have escaped modern scholarship is the concrete provenance of the original texts – how and in what form they had met the eye of the Queen and of her favourite, and the shape (sometimes, also in terms of mise en page) that they assumed when integrated into letters, poems or prose pieces. This paper will endeavour to contextualise Elizabeth’s and Raleigh’s “quotations” from a material perspective, providing examples from the manuscripts of these exceptional protagonists of the English Renaissance.

Francesco Dall’Olio

“A Voice from the Present in Ancient Stories: the Vice’s Role in Pickering’s *Horestes* and Preston’s *Cambises*”

Both John Pickering’s *Horestes* (printed 1567) and Thomas Preston’s *Cambises* (printed 1571) are characterized by a “hybrid” dramatic structure, where elements of early Tudor theatrical genres are mingled with a writing and dramatic style prefiguring the subsequent developments of Elizabethan theatre. My paper will focus on one aspect of this particular structure, the Vice, and his importance in voicing the political and ethical message of the two plays. Traditionally allowed to speak outside of the dramatic fiction, the Vice is in the best position to convey to the audience, with both his actions and his words, the message lying behind the events played on stage. This task was particularly important, since these plays were written in order to be represented in front of the nobility (*Horestes*) or even the Queen (*Cambises*), and they were also adaptations of stories from the Greek mythical and historical traditions (even if mediated through non-Greek sources) – a condition that only a cultured audience could appreciate. In Pickering’s interlude, the progressive identification of the Vice with Revenge contributes to underlining the ambiguity of *Horestes*’ action and strengthening the call for a real justice. In Preston’s tragedy, the Vice,

relieved of all responsibility in the corruption of the titular character, is paradoxically the harshest and most sincere accuser of the legitimate king once turned tyrant. In both cases, the analysis of the role of the Vice provides us with important elements in order to understand and evaluate how the ancient myth was revived and adapted in these dramas to deal with the political and cultural issues of the time.

Marco Duranti

“Orestes in European Renaissance Drama: a Deviant, an Ordinary Man, or a Hero?”

My paper will illustrate a few transformations of the tragic character of Orestes in European Renaissance rewritings of Greek tragedies. He may appear as a Christianised hero who carries out a mission prescribed by God, as in Giovanni Rucellai’s *Oreste* (1520s.), the first adaptation of a Greek tragedy featuring Orestes as protagonist instead of Iphigenia, as in the Euripidean model of *Iphigenia Taurica*. Contrariwise, he may show a ‘darker side’ with an emphasis on the issue of matricide from different perspectives. While a few tragedies, such as John Pickering’s *Horestes* (1567), acquit him of his crime by presenting him as the victim of divine will, or even insist on the lawfulness of Orestes’ murder of his own mother, others, such as Thomas Heywood’s *The Second Part of the Iron Age* (pub. 1632), indulge in the depiction of Orestes’ furor and guilty conscience. These different readings build on the original ambiguity of the character of Orestes, and are influenced by the contemporary discussions on the nature of tragedy which were inspired by Aristotle’s *Poetics* especially, while also reflecting some examples of the changes Orestes underwent in the Renaissance in relation to both its ancient sources and the historical and aesthetic demands of modernity.

Early Modern Oedipuses

Sarah Knight

“Oedipus in the Academy”

I will explore how the Oedipus myth was represented in the schools and universities of Elizabethan England. I will refer to Seneca’s influential treatment of the story, but my discussion will focus mainly on the aspects of the myth included by Sophocles in the Theban trilogy, and on how early modern institutional dramatists embellished that myth. I will examine three late Elizabethan plays in English and Latin, extant in manuscript and print, which invent new elements and place fresh emphasis on the existing classical sources. These plays’ mixture of *imitatio* and *inventio* is striking, and I will suggest how – and whether – each of the authors engages with the original Greek, or relies more on Latin or continental vernacular translations to shape their writing. First, I will discuss the anonymous English *A Tragedie Called Oedipus*, written and performed probably during the 1590s at the grammar school either in Newcastle-upon-Tyne or in Berwick-on-Tweed. This extraordinary manuscript (Yale University, Elizabethan Club) weaves together sections of English translations of Seneca, interludes, some original material about Oedipus’ boyhood and adolescence, and a rare musical setting. Next, I will consider Thomas Watson’s translation of *Antigone* (1581), positioning Watson as an author shaped by the environments of Oxford and the Inns of Court, and arguing for the impact of these institutional contexts on his writing of one of the first English translations of Greek drama. Finally, I will look at William Gager’s passages from a Latin version of *Oedipus* (preserved in his notebook, British Library Add. ms. 22583), written at Oxford (1577-1592). Reconstructing the academic milieu in which these plays were generated is crucial for understanding the particular moral and intellectual emphasis they derive from the mythic source. Late sixteenth-century England witnessed a bright flowering of academic drama

and produced many plays that drive a Greek or Latin original in culturally (and pedagogically) interesting directions. These academic representations of the Oedipus myth illuminate the lively parallel world of institutional drama which evolved alongside the much more well-known commercial theatre.

Robert S. Miola

“Lost and Found in Translation: Early Modern Receptions of *Oedipus at Colonus*”

I here survey some early modern receptions of *Oedipus at Colonus* to discover what especially struck early modern readers of the play, and how their excerpts, commentaries, and translations transformed the Greek text to serve later political and moral ends. I begin with the fragmentation of the play into *sententiae* and proverbs by Bartolomeo Marliani and Desiderius Erasmus. Then I examine the influential reception of Joachim Camerarius, who sought to read Greek tragedy in light of contemporary understanding of Aristotle and the *Poetics*. Philipp Melanchthon offered a translation and commentary that advanced a polemically Christian reading of Greek tragedy. Heir to these traditions, John Milton created the period’s most brilliantly ambivalent reimagining of Greek tragedy and *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Samson Agonistes* (1671). Milton’s reception illuminates by contrast Shakespeare’s outright denial of moralizing *sententia* traditions and the Christian hermeneutic in *King Lear*.

Oedipus and Lear

Guido Avezù

“Man in Time: Oedipus at Colonus”

By solving the Sphinx’s famous riddle, Oedipus unveils man’s fundamental bond with time, his essence lying in the sequence of infancy, adulthood, and old age. And yet, Oedipus does not know himself, and even gets enmeshed in the ambiguities of *tyche* when talking about himself as the child of chance (1083), marked first small and then big (i.e. mighty) by the passing of time, beyond a biologically-bound definition of birth, growth, and decay. This suggests a problematic interpretation of ‘being in time’ through either ‘doing’ or ‘being made to do’. This idea of *tyche* leaves the question of agency undecidable. In the liminal position of the exile about to die, Oedipus at Colonus eventually solves this ambiguity. On the threshold of non-being (death), while ‘being no-one’ socially – an exile doomed to wander away from Thebes –, Oedipus eventually refuses to be brought back to his own homeland, raising a challenging question about man: only once reduced to ‘nothing’ for Thebes, does Thebes acknowledge him to be someone. Is man a man only when reduced to nothing? What does being a man mean at that point? This paper investigates the idea of ‘man in time’ in *Oedipus at Colonus* by looking back at the issues of ‘being’ and ‘non-being’ raised in *Oedipus Rex* on both the social and the mundane planes, and reconsidering the role of the transcendental in this later play.

Anna Beltrametti

“Dramaturgies of Kingship, Deception, and Pity: The Children’s Struggles Rouse the Old Fathers’ Ghosts”

My paper will focus on the routes of resilience which Oedipus, a shadow of his former self, and Lear, whom the Fool recognizes as a shadow, follow in order to reclaim their power and kingly authority. This investigation will rely on the analysis of the two plays’ intricate plots (in *King Lear*’s the pattern suggested above is doubled by the house of Gloucester’s intrigues) that hinge on the children’s lies and their fratricidal struggle for power.

Anton Bierl

“*Oedipus at Colonus* as a Reflection of the *Oresteia*: The Abomination from Thebes as an Athenian Hero in the Making”

This paper explores how Oedipus, arriving at his final destination, stage-manages his own heroization. After the expulsion from Thebes, the blind and errant beggar continues to act like a tyrant. Kolonos, bearing the meaning of ‘tumulus’, is the ideal place of his burial. Trespassing the sacred space of the Benevolent Ladies, he experiences their other side as terrible Furies against the intruder from outside. Realizing this ambivalence, I contend, Oedipus does everything to install himself as a similar power in Athens. By promising to become a saviour for his new city, he reaches asylum from Theseus. While Thebes as the tragic place of the ‘Other’ also wants to have Oedipus back to use his dead body only as an apotropaic sema at the boundary without granting him a burial place inside the city, his tomb in the deme of Kolonos will have a double force. He thus can continue working as a negative force against his former city and at the same time he helps to save his new home. The paper explores how the play puts the cursing of Thebes on stage, meaning at the same time a defense against the ‘Other’ and a blessing for Athens. Moreover, it investigates how *Oedipus at Colonus* showcases Oedipus as a hero in the making on his way towards death, ending with Oedipus’ mystical disappearance in this sacred landscape. There he becomes similar to and fuses with its main divine agents, i.e. Demeter as Erinys as well as goddess of fertility, prosperity and mysteries, Poseidon Hippios, the tremendous shaker of the earth and power of the horse, and, most of all, the *Semnai Theai*, the Eumenides who act as Erinyes against enemies. In this regard, the last surviving tragedy of the 5th century reflects Aeschylus’ canonical *Oresteia*, playing with and alluding to its political and religious themes and subtexts.

Silvia Bigliuzzi

“Time and Nothingness: *King Lear*”

Lear’s division of the kingdom among his daughters also divides Lear’s own time into a before, when he was king, and an after, when he is no longer one. The action of cutting, separating, and allotting is symbolically in keeping with measuring affection quantitatively within parental relations, a choice that brings about the subversion of roles, power, and meaning, precipitating time into the nothing of death and unbelief in both the future and the transcendental. Taking up a topic which he had already dealt with in such an early play as *Richard II*, Shakespeare deals once again with the effects of abdication on both socio-political and private levels. By divesting himself of the title of King, like Richard before him, Lear reduces himself to nothing within the symbolic system of the power signs he has handled until then. Once reduced to an “O without a figure”, as the Fool tells him, he discovers the meaning of being a ‘thing’, the ‘real thing’ in fact, outside of that system. Lear’s famous interrogation of what man is, chiming in with Montaigne’s own identical question, passes through an experience of nothingness which looks back at the story of Oedipus, and, at the same time, challenges received ideas of ‘being and non-being’ by interrogating the role of individual choices (doing). At the same time, the play explores the extent to which those choices are intentional, by inquiring into the relation between reason and madness. This paper discusses ideas of nothingness in relation to the subjective experience of time and to its dramatization on stage, and it will consider the many ways in which the play echoes and responds conceptually and performatively to issues Sophocles had raised centuries before.

Alessandro Grilli

“The Passion According to Sophocles: Regality and Redemption in *Oedipus at Colonus*”

Taking some aspects of René Girard's theory of sacrifice as a point of departure, I will carry out a comparative investigation of the figures of Oedipus, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Jesus, in the Gospel narratives of the Passion. Among other features, I will look especially at the representation of kingship and the salvific function of the sacrificial victim. My paper will therefore aim at foregrounding some specific aspects of Sophoclean poetics by relating them to anthropological and religious structures that can be found in different historical and cultural contexts.

Vayos Liapis

"Oedipus in Athens: Integration and its Discontents in *Oedipus at Colonus*"

Oedipus at Colonus is largely about the exiled Oedipus' integration into a new political community, namely Athens. However, this process is neither straightforward nor unambiguous or free of paradox. To begin with, Colonus is inhabited by members of a political community (78 *dēmotai*) but at the same time the specific place where Oedipus and his daughter have sought refuge, the grove of the *Semnai*, is not to be trodden (37, 39, 126, 167); indeed, it is no less than a Hades-like territory (57 "a bronze-footed threshold", *khalkopous oudos*, recalling the "bronze threshold" of Hades in epic), in accordance with the ancient belief (recorded in the ancient *schol. ad 57*) that the grove provided entrance into Hades. After all, the grove is sacred to the dreadful daughters of Earth and primordial Darkness, namely *Semnai/Eumenides* (39-42). The ambivalence of the place seems to be fully embraced by Oedipus. He is determined to make his abode in this place precisely because it lacks all traits of a civilized dwelling. The paradox is further enhanced by the fact that Oedipus' course towards integration is initiated with a violation of the customs of the very place where he wishes to settle: his firm intention to remain in the grove (45) is in violation of the polis' *nomima* (142 *anomon*), and his act turns a place that is not to be trodden (167-68 *abatōn*) into a place that is *bebēlos* or "profane" (cf. 10), since Oedipus has trespassed on it. It is a further paradox that Oedipus' resolute violation of the *nomima* nonetheless brings about for his hosts an invigorated sense of attachment to their *nomima*, especially when Theseus and a host of Athenian warriors set out to retrieve the suppliant Oedipus from his captor Creon. The end of the play provides no resolution to the paradox. Oedipus' tomb will, abnormally, remain unknown to his everyone, including his own daughters (1529, 1640-44, 1724-36, 1756-67); contrary to common Greek practice, there will be no tomb (cf. 1681), and Oedipus will not receive the proper rites at it (cf. 1714). In conclusion, Oedipus, even as he throws political and familial *nomima* into disarray, is able to preserve his adoptive polis — which, however must keep well within the limits imposed by its *nomima* in order for Oedipus' blessings to become permanent. This paradoxical tension between observing and transcending the *nomima* dominates the play.

David Lucking

"Seeing Better: The Eyesight Motif in *King Lear* and the Theban Plays"

The affinities between Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and in particular between the patterns of allusion to eyes and to eyesight developed in both, is familiar critical terrain. The purpose of this paper 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, particular attention being paid to the eyesight motif and its symbolic connotations.

Francesco Lupi

"Liminality, (In)accessibility, and Negative Characterization in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*"

In Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* a focus on liminality is introduced early in the play: in the opening lines Oedipus hints at the possibility that he and Antigone may be treading sacred ground

(9-11 ἀλλ', ὧ τέκνον, θάκησιν εἴ τινα βλέπεις / ἢ πρὸς βεβήλοις ἢ πρὸς ἄλσεσιν θεῶν, / στήσόν με κάξιδρυσον κτλ.). The two have in fact arrived at the sacred grove of the Eumenides, at Colonus. The grove is a liminal place in many respects: pervaded by chthonic elements, it is an "in-between" area between life and death, but it is also liminal with respect to its being at the outskirts of the urban world of Athens. The play's setting is further characterised as inaccessible through apt word choice: the grove is a place οὐχ ἄγνόν πατεῖν (37), ἄθικτος οὐδ' οἰκητός (39), ἀσιβές (126), and so on. Yet, paradoxically, the only place where Oedipus is bound to station is the one that virtually no man can access. Privative features, however, do not only apply to the land of Oedipus' future heroization. Such features also help define Oedipus' persona and status in the play: the former Theban king – now a debased exile – defines himself ἀπόπολις (208) and ἄπολις (1357); he is οὐ σπουδαῖον εἰς ὄψιν (577). In a sense, Oedipus is what he is not anymore. Through a detailed linguistic analysis, the paper aims to show how Sophocles in the *Oedipus at Colonus* established an interplay between the privative features of Oedipus and those of the land bound to receive him. Further instances of such interplay are disseminated throughout the play and even apply to ritual-performative aspects (the water Oedipus is expected to pour libations with is a χεῦμ' ἀκήρατον, 471; in performing the purification rites for the Eumenides, he is also instructed to remain ἄστροφος, 490). Thus, the paper argues, Sophocles strove to provide coherent and congruent characterizations of Oedipus, the 'liminal' hero deprived of his social status, and the sacred, inaccessible grove of Colonus.

Sheila Murnaghan

“More Sinned Against than Sinning’: Acting and Suffering in *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*”

When Lear on the heath declares that he is “a man / more sinned against than sinning” (3.2.59-60), his pointed self-description as passive rather than active suggestively recalls Oedipus' insistence to the wary chorus of *Oedipus at Colonus* that they should not fear him, ἐπεὶ τά γ' ἔργα με / πεπονθότ' ἴσθι μᾶλλον ἢ δεδρακότα, “since my actions/ were suffered rather than done” (266-67). The similarity between these formulations is tacitly registered in Francis Storr's 1912 Loeb edition of Sophocles, produced at a time when Greek tragedy was regularly assimilated to Shakespearean tragedy and read through a Christianizing lens. Storr's English-speaking Oedipus in effect quotes Lear, telling the chorus not to fear “deeds of a man more sinned against than sinning.” This paper will take the close similarity of these formulations as the starting point for a comparison between the two plays. While there are significant differences that the identification of these lines glosses over – Lear is comparing the acts of diverse human actors while Oedipus is redescribing a set of acts performed only by himself, Lear is the victim of human adversaries while Oedipus is acted upon by the gods – the acceptance of passivity is central to the trajectories undergone by both protagonists as they come to terms with the loss of worldly power and understand themselves as participants in superhuman scenarios that they cannot dictate or actively control. Both Oedipus and Lear learn to experience and express themselves in the passive voice as they discover new forms of agency and self-knowledge that are bound up with suffering and endurance.

David Schalkwyk and Elena Pellone

“Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?’ or Something Comes of Nothing in *King Lear*”

We wish to offer a language workshop and a linked paper on the topic of “nothing” in *King Lear*. Both the paper and the workshop examine the language in the play and the negative space of ‘nothing’ as a force that generates continual consequences as ‘something’. Cordelia's inability to say the ‘something’, required of her as formal rhetoric that her heart knows means ‘nothing’, leaves her speechless –

literally uttering 'nothing' – and leads to her banishment and Lear's demise. Edmund's letter of 'nothing' leads to Edgar's exile, and ultimately Gloucester's death. Lear must painfully learn what the value and the weight of 'nothing' is – stripped of all possessions and identity. Not only is he mistaken that 'nothing comes from nothing' but indeed that everything comes from 'nothing'. This space of "nothing", the mighty O, the loss of all – self-identity, preconceptions, societal deceptions – the very nascent state of nothing – allows Lear – literally reduced to a state of nothing, naked in a storm, – to begin to see enlightenment and wisdom in the act of saying 'nothing'. [*King Lear* (3.2.39) LEAR: No, I will be the pattern of all patience. / I will say nothing.] We will look at the ways in which 'nothing' is spoken in the text in a workshop on speech and rhythm in key-scenes between Cordelia and Lear, Lear and the Fool, and Edmund and Gloucester, and an exploration on whether nothing is ever nothing onstage – where silence is not evidence of nothing, but rather a very eloquent something.

Seth Schein

"Fathers Cursing Children: Anger and Justice in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*"

This paper elucidates the dramatic and ethical significance of verbal assaults by fathers against their children in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, especially of the angry, hateful curses they hurl at them (e.g. *OC* 421-7, 789-90, 1372-82, *KL* 1.1.109-21, 1.4.267-81). It moves from close, comparative study of the language of the curses, the dramatic contexts in which they are delivered, and the ways in which they are motivated, to a broader discussion of the family dynamics that the fathers' discourses are part of, the political and religious institutions and values they both exemplify and pervert, and the fathers' changing understanding of their own responsibility for what they do and suffer. On the one hand, such discussion throws light on the essentially positive achievement of Oedipus, who dies successfully and gains honor posthumously as, in effect, one of the Eumenides, with the power to dispense intrafamilial, retaliatory justice and to benefit Athens. On the other, it illuminates the horrifically destructive and self-destructive failure of Lear, who unleashes suffering on an individual, social, and cosmic scale that the play challenges readers and viewers to consider meaningful. Lear's radical madness may bring to momentary consciousness his dysfunctional inadequacy as parent and king, but his death, together with the deaths of those he hated and loved, invites reflection on a dramatic universe of apparently meaningless waste and suffering.

Laura Slatkin

"Revisiting *Oedipus at Colonus*"

Gherardo Ugolini

"A Wise and Irascible Hero: Oedipus from Thebes to Colonus"

My paper aims at foregrounding the opposite yet complementary dimensions which typify Oedipus' character in *Oedipus at Colonus*. On the one hand, he is introduced as a wise man, the old blind one – both blindness and old age being traditionally associated with wisdom – who has learnt from experience and is now able to grasp life's deepest meaning. This wisdom is based upon religious piety, the awareness of fate's superior and unfathomable power, but also of time as well as of the oracles' truthful validity. Such model of wisdom is radically different from the one young Oedipus exhibited in *Oedipus Rex*, where he sported a knowledge through which he wished to measure and dominate time in contrast with the word of oracles and prophecies. On the other hand, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus is often prone to uncontrollable outbursts of anger; in that

he retains a tendency towards ὀργή (anger, wrath, irritation), which, in the previous drama, was an essential component of his character and whose most manifest expression dwells here in his repeated curses against his two sons. Wisdom and impulsiveness are therefore the two main aspects which characterize Oedipus' identity in Sophocles' last play. They intertwine continually and set the rhythm of the play by creating a tension between two identities: a more human one, dominated by impulsiveness and connected with the protagonist's familial history and his own past crimes (i.e. parricide and incest) of which he cannot get rid, even though he pleads innocent, and one that tends towards divinity, eventually transforming him into a cult hero and the protector of the Attic land.

Susanne Wofford

"Pity, Pollution and Blessing in King Lear and Oedipus at Colonus"

Modern and Contemporary Oedipuses and Lears

Nicola Pasqualicchio

"Happy Ending for Old Kings: Jean-François Ducis' *Œdipus* and *Léar*"

The French dramatist Jean-François Ducis (1733-1816) is, to our knowledge, the only author who ever wrote both a tragedy inspired by Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. His *Œdipe chez Admète* (1778) – a peculiar hybridization of the Sophoclean drama and Euripides' *Alcestis* – sprang from his penchant for the tragic theme of Oedipus' old age and death, later confirmed by the partial rewriting of his own *Œdipe chez Admète* that he produced in 1792, and the composition of an original play, entitled *Œdipe à Colone*, in 1797. While Ducis' dramatic handling of this topic is his only thematic foray into Greek tragedy, *Le Roi Léar* (1783), which followed *Hamlet* and *Roméo et Juliette* and preceded *Macbeth*, *Jean sans Terre*, and *Othello*, is one among the many passionate and unfaithful homages the Versailles author paid to Shakespeare. We should look at *Œdipe* and *Léar* as contiguous works, especially if we take into account that Ducis' dramatic muse fell silent during the five-year interval between the composition of the two plays. This circumstance calls for a critical comparison of these dramas, with special regard to the establishment of their common elements whose analysis will constitute the core of my paper. In particular, I will discuss how the similarly broadened roles of the daughters (Antigone and Helmonde, the Cordelia-figure in *Le Roi Léar*) lead to a deeper focalization on the relationship between the fathers and their favourite daughters, compared to the originals. Also, I will concentrate on the Providence-inspired happy endings that both works progressively move towards and which, in a perspective of Christian theodicy, eventually redeem the tragic progression of the two old kings.

Tamas Dobozy

"Sam Shepard's 'Body' of Tragedy: A Particle of Dread (*Oedipus Variations*)"

Sam Shepard's play, *A Particle of Dread (The Oedipus Variations)*, first performed in 2013, recasts Sophocles' *King Oedipus* in a series of fragments. Shepard's Sophocles alternates between the classical source text and its re-telling as a detective mystery, often re-sequencing (in apparently random order) the original scenes, and lacing them with black humor. Here, Sophocles' concern with authenticity meets Shepard's career-long obsession with theatre as a metaphor for the inevitability and inescapability of performance as the medium of self-expression. What governs A

Particle of Dread, for Shepard, is an irreducible fascination with what theatre critic Ben Brantley calls “the persistence of myth in our collective memory”. For Brantley, *A Particle of Dread* is a meta-theatrical meditation on the “value,” if any, to be found in the enactments of these myths in the form of tragedy, one that ultimately fails to assign meaning to our fascination, offering only an “endlessly circular” return to questions around the form itself: “Why waste my time? / Why waste yours? / What’s it for? / Catharsis? / Purging? / Metaphor? / What’s in it for us?”. My paper will argue that Shepard’s treatment of Sophocles works to “purge” “metaphor” from the play by disclosing the body itself as a vital structuring agent of the play. If, for Sophocles, the body is often the figurative scene of a theatrical expression around destiny and the state, in Shepard it is “de-metaphorized”. Rather than being a medium for prognostication, the body is destiny itself. Thus, one of Shepard’s very final works is haunted by a biological inevitability pointing to his own death from Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis in 2017, a disease that is hinted at everywhere in his final works, one characterized by precisely the progressive degeneration of muscles and mobility, ultimately leading to paralysis, that guides the form of his last published play.

Barry A. Spence

“Shades of King Lear on Beckett’s Stage”

Samuel Beckett’s late prose work *Worstward Ho* (1981), which arguably breaks ground as a form of theater of the page, performs multiple recursive variations of his favorite line from *King Lear*, Edgar’s remark as an aside, on seeing his blind father: “The worst is not / So long as we can say ‘This is the worst’” (4.1.28-9). This line is among a group of lines from Shakespeare’s play that Beckett copied into his so-called Sottisier Notebook in the 1970s (UofR MS2901) and that pertain to his longstanding preoccupation concerning the limits of language. Using the fact of the importance of *King Lear* to such late works as this and *Stirrings Still* as a jumping off point, this paper offers a reading of Beckett’s theater of the 1950s and 60s as directly and indirectly influenced by this most devastating of Shakespeare’s tragedies. I plan to pay particular attention to his 1956 play *Krapp’s Last Tape*, given the fact that the play’s central crux is built on a formulation remarkably similar to Edgar’s aside. My overall intention is to use Beckett’s engagement with *King Lear* (perhaps along with a glancing consideration of his interest in Sophocles’ Oedipus plays) to think about how Beckett’s postwar poetics created a theater that renovated and re-envisioned Shakespearean (and Sophoclean) tragedy.