

## The Sophoclean Trilogy and Shakespeare's King Lear in the Light of the Poetics

Dr. Bashir Habib Manai

Assistant Professor of Theoretical Linguistics, College of Arts, University of Hail, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence Author: Dr. Bashir Habib Manai, E-mail: bechirmanai@gmail.com

### ARTICLE INFO

Received: January 25, 2019

Accepted: February 20, 2019

Published: March 31, 2019

Volume: 2

Issue: 2

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.2.1

### KEYWORD

*Tragedy; Fate; Hamartia;  
Nature of governance; Free  
will; Justice; Catharsis*

### ABSTRACT

The present article sought to provide a comparison between The Sophoclean Trilogy and King Lear, respectively produced by Sophocles in the 5th century BC Greece and by William Shakespeare in 1606 at the end of the Elizabethan era in Britain. The comparison was set to investigate the two playwrights' adherence to the production of a good tragedy such as the one Aristotle described in his Poetics. Another attempt was to explain how tragedy evolved during Elizabethan times and measure the extent of deviation both from Aristotle's and Sophocles' conception of some essential tragic factors relating mostly to the hero's hamartia and fall, learning and recognition, fate and free will, retribution and redemption, in addition to diction and style. As the comparison showed, some changes were, indeed, made in the tragedy of King Lear, namely at the level of form, including, among others, the division of the play into separate Acts and Scenes, the breaking of the unity of Action, the increase of the number of characters, etc. At the level of content, the changes appear to have equally touched some important issues, namely the role of fate and prophecies, the characters' flaws, in addition to the nature of the relation between family members, to mention but a few changes. At a deeper level, however, Shakespeare's tragedy mostly remained faithful to its classical heritage, namely through the punishment of the bad and the gratifying of the good. The gods were always omnipresent and ready to reestablish the status quo, restore justice and bring back prosperity and peace, though sometimes in an incomprehensible way, especially when their action was coupled with fate and bad fortune.

### 1. The Sophoclean Trilogy and Shakespeare's King Lear in the Light of the Poetics

As the title suggests, the main aim of the present article resides in comparing *The Sophoclean Trilogy* (also known as the *Sophoclean Tragedy*, *The Greek Trilogy*, or simply *Sophocles' Oedipus Trilogy*) with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. This comparison, it should be explained, is primarily conducted according to Aristotle's definition of tragedy as stated in the *Poetics*:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.<sup>1</sup> (Aristotle, qtd. in Hazard Adams, 1971: 51)

In addition to analysing the characteristics of the mentioned plays essentially from an Aristotelian perspective, the general views of other

literary critics, namely Corneille and Dryden, will equally be considered to further highlight the similarities and expose the differing stylistic skills of the two playwrights without, however, pretending to draw a thorough overview concerning ancient Greek or Elizabethan drama. Even though the *Theban plays* will be analysed first owing to their interlacing plots and somewhat interwoven actions<sup>2</sup> their comparison with *King Lear* mostly rests on an attempt to elucidate the following three questions:

1. To what extent was Aristotle's conception of tragedy respected and implemented by both playwrights?

2. How did the artistic conception of tragedy evolve during Elizabethan times?

3. What changes, if ever, affected the Sophoclean notions relating essentially to the hero's hamartia and fall, fate and free will, redemption and retribution, in addition to the concept of nature of governance?

## 2. The Sophoclean Tragedy

Sophocles was born about 496 BC in Colonus Hippius in Greece and wrote his plays between 406 and 441BC. During his time, a tragedy was traditionally based on a set of principles, namely morality, myths, and religion, to mention but few relevant features, and essentially attempted to depict the true nature of man and to highlight his various occupations and struggles throughout life. The aim was mainly to strip all the characters (good or bad) off their masks and disclose all their flaws and secrets in a bid to both explain what had befallen them, and to allow the audience to either sympathize with them or condemn their actions.

As the following list of characteristics clearly indicates, the Sophoclean Tragedy largely corresponds to the Aristotelian conception of tragedy mentioned above and does to a large extent align with the criteria set in the *Poetics*:

- The main character or protagonist is either a king or one of his descendants.
- He is doomed right from the beginning.
- He suffers from a flaw (hamartia).
- This flaw is what causes his downfall.
- Alongside his fall, the main protagonist discovers his true nature and gets the ability to discern his flaw(s).
- Finally, the audience watching the play experiences some kind of purgation of emotions resulting from the scenes and actions on the stage.

In spite of their familiarity and acquaintance with the stories, the audience's immediate reaction is expected to translate into fear and pity for what befalls the main characters who are all "famous and prosperous" if judged by the standards of the *Poetics*. The hero's fall, which cannot be easily discerned in *Oedipus At Colonus* but which can still be thought to lie at a stage prior to the action of the play itself, is, generally speaking, brought about by a movement from a complete state of fortune and well-being into one of misery and misfortune, and from a state of sheer ignorance of self and others to one of high awareness and deep knowing of both.

The insistence on knowing and discovering, which is translated in the play by the profuse number of words like: "knowing", "seeing", "coming into light", etc., is not always straightforward, as knowing does not simply refer to who knows what. Rather, it equally represents an attempt to get to "true knowing" as can be inferred from the following repeated questions: "Do I see what I see?", "Do I know what I know?" "Are the seeing "truly" blind?" "Do the blind "truly" see?" etc. This quest for knowing is at times wrapped up in a certain kind of irony when the characters inquire about events or a special set of circumstances that they have directly or

indirectly gone through as in Oedipus's comment on Laius's death:

You said he spoke of robbers-  
That robbers killed him. If he still says

robbers,

It was not I; one is not more than one. (*King Oedipus*: 49)<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to Oedipus's claim above, his relentless inquiry for truth reveals that he is, indeed, the "many": a father, a son, a husband, and a brother. Both knowing and learning do not, it must be explained, occur without suffering as when Oedipus discovers that he has indeed killed his father, married his mother and begotten her children who should, beyond all imagination, be considered as his brothers, sisters and proper children, all at once. When the whole story unfolds, Oedipus does not refrain from blinding himself at the end of the play, an act which can be interpreted as a form of atonement for the wrongs he committed, as well as a way of escape to another world where he may possibly find rest:

I would not rest  
Till I had prisoned up this body of shame  
In total blankness- For the mind to dwell  
Beyond the reach of pain, were peace indeed.

(ibid. 64)

This kind of discovery (learning) is also witnessed in *Oedipus At Colonus* where the main protagonist's long suffering and physical blindness have "brought him to a sense of his symbolic sacredness, as a person set apart, a sufferer in whom others may find redemption." (E. F. Watling, qtd. in Sophocles: 16). The complementarity between these two plays (i.e. *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus At Colonus*) is equally paralleled in the *Antigone* play where both tremendous suffering and painful knowledge are the direct consequence of defying the gods' laws (Creon), the moral principles (Oedipus's sons) and the king's authority (Antigone).

The protagonists' fall, as it is depicted throughout the plays, is mostly attributed to an error of judgement inherent in the main characters, such as Oedipus's hot and rash temper, when he accuses Teiresias and Creon of plotting against his power. The killing of his father is also a direct consequence of his hot temper and sheer stubbornness:

Quick as lightning, the staff in this right hand

Did its work; he tumbled headlong, out of the carriage,

And every man of them there I killed. (*King Oedipus*: 48)

In *Antigone*, Creon's hamartia does not so much lie in his motives, which can, to a certain extent, be qualified as noble and responsible- he was simply defending his city and punishing a traitor and rebel. Rather, his weakness mostly lies in his refusal to pay the barest rights of sepulture to a dead corpse. His speedy condemnation of Antigone though he had a choice not to do so and his failure to heed his son's words at the beginning of the play all constitute a significant part of his moral frailty.

As can be inferred from what preceded, the depiction of the main characters in *The Sophoclean Trilogy* seems to meet Aristotle's seeing them as being "both renowned and prosperous" in order to make them appear worthy of their suffering, and consistent with their actions. When the citizens of Thebes came to seek Oedipus's help in the opening of the play, for instance, his retort was no other than:

And while you suffer, none suffers more than I.

You have your several griefs, each for himself;

But my heart bears the weight of my own, and yours

And all my people's sorrows. (*King Oedipus*, 27)

This elevation and loftiness of the main characters, who do not all deserve their adverse fortunes are, indeed, what stirs the audience's feelings of pity and fear about their fall: pity for what befalls the protagonists and fear lest the same misfortunes happen to them. As explained earlier, the adverse fortunes which later affected Oedipus were surprisingly decreed by the gods before his birth. As he exclaimed, he was manipulated by the gods, and his doom was none of his choosing:

I tell you, then, I have endured  
Foulest injustice; I have endured  
Wrong undeserved; God knows,  
Nothing was of my choosing. (*Oedipus At Colonus*, 87)

In a similar way, Antigone was simply acting under the effects of compassion and piety when she decided to bury her brother's dead corpse. She did not as such deserve her speedy condemnation and nor did Haemon.

Secondary and minor characters, like the shepherd who saved Oedipus's life, do also appear noble and grand both in their actions and by their speeches which are often set within the frames corresponding to the Aristotelian criteria of consistency and conformity to type. When Ismene, for instance, warns her sister against any attempt at rebellion, she is simply conforming to type. Being a woman, she clearly reveals her inability to challenge

Creon's decree and expresses her submissiveness and obedience to men:

Oh think, Antigone; we are women; it is not for us

To fight against men; our rulers are stronger than we,

And we must obey in this, or in worse than this. (*Antigone*, 128)

The same idea was expressed earlier in *Oedipus At Colonus* when Oedipus, bitterly criticising his two sons for not behaving like true men, could not restrain his anger:

Instead of troubling themselves about my business,

They sit at home like girls and let you two [Antigone and Ismene]

Bear all the burden of my calamities. (81)

Concerning the tragic burden, it seems that it was almost fully inflicted on the king in *King Oedipus*, with the rest of the characters taking turns in providing clues, heightening the mood and reporting Oedipus's tragedy and shattered integrity. As was mentioned above, he ended up fragmented and divided into four: a husband, a father, a son, and a brother. As for Jocasta's suicide, it can be interpreted as one form of atonement for the suffering she endured after knowing the truth.

In *Oedipus At Colonus*, however, the tragic burden was shared: both Antigone and to a lesser degree Ismene shared their father's suffering. In *Antigone*, the main characters sharing this burden were respectively: Creon, defied in his authority by a woman and suffering the loss of a son, Antigone, who was bereft of her two brothers both dead in a single battle, and who had to meet her doom at the hands of the very person who sat on her father's throne, and finally Haemon who died of grief and deep consternation.

With regard to the Chorus, it seems to play multiple roles through its multiple songs and lyrics. Indeed, it introduces the new characters and even addresses the audience directly as in: "Sons and daughters of Thebes, behold: This was Oedipus." (*King Oedipus*: 68) It criticises, substitutes for the audience and also comments on what is/was taking place: "Would you had never lived to read this riddle." (ibid. 63) It equally narrates what happened or is still happening behind the scenes as when Laius's death was reported: "He was said to have been killed by travellers on the road" (ibid. 33), thus offering various means to link the different scenes, relate the seemingly disparate events, and smoothly advance the action of the play.

In addition to its diverse roles, the Chorus is equally made to relay what takes place on stage to the audience: the protagonists' flaws, sufferings and

emotions are quite often elucidated and conveyed to the spectators through the Chorus, which might stir their fear and pity and even provide them with a direct access to the real moral principles the characters are carrying behind their masks. In spite of its multiple roles and live presence on the stage, this actor is not, however, completely devoid of making self-contradictions. A good example on his ambivalence is, on the one hand, the rejection of Antigone's appraisal and rebellion against Creon's refusal to bury her brother's corpse and, on the other, the quite implicit justification of her behaviour on religious grounds. Both comments are, it should be reminded, made almost simultaneously:

Chorus: My child, you have gone your way  
To the outermost limit of daring  
And have stumbled against Law enthroned  
This is the expiation  
You must make for the sin of your father.

[...]

But authority cannot afford to connive at disobedience. (*Antigone*: 149)

And later, addressing Creon:

Release the woman from her rocky prison.  
Set up a tomb for him that lies unburied.  
[...] The gods do not delay

The stroke of their swift vengeance on the sinner. (ibid.155)

Such apparently confounding comments and judgmental uncertainties, though emanating from a supposedly well-respected character, do, in fact, entail that as human beings, we are all actors and spectators at the same time, and as such, our allegiance and total obedience must not only be granted to the mortal rulers, but should primarily be dedicated to the revered and omnipresent gods who control and manipulate everything from above.

With reference to action in *The Sophoclean Trilogy*, its portrayal equally falls within Aristotle's criterion of completeness and proper magnitude. It has a beginning with the main characters portrayed as proud, prosperous and blind to their inner nature; a middle depicting the turmoil and punishment befalling the main protagonists due to their failure to see the truth and their stubbornness to heed the warnings of the prophets or more informed peers around them; and finally, an end where the punished finally relinquish their arrogance and acknowledge their former misbehaviour, therefore becoming humbler, more obedient and submissive to their god's will, regardless of whether or not they were predestined to experience the stroke of adverse fortune that hit them. This, as it were, corresponds to the three stages mentioned in the riddle of the Sphinx and also to Oedipus's life- his infancy, maturity, and old age. In a like manner, action is complex if we measure it by the Aristotelian standards, in that

reversal is accompanied with recognition as in *King Oedipus*, where the messenger bringing the news of Oedipus's father's death also revealed to him his true identity and precipitated his downfall.

Contrary to *King Oedipus*, *Oedipus At Colonus* does not appear to have a clear prologue, episode, or exodus and, if we judge by the *Poetics*, its less intricate action also appears to meet Aristotle's definition of "An action which is one and continuous [...] I call simple, when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition." (Aristotle, qtd. in S. H. Butcher, 2000: 15). As a matter of consequence, in *Oedipus At Colonus*, the main protagonist's hot temper and stubbornness to stay at Colonus do not actually represent the real tragic flaw that ultimately causes his death towards the end of the play. Such frailties, it should be explained, do not seemingly cause any development or reversal at the level of the action. Oedipus is depicted as a doomed person right from the beginning. He has no other paths to follow and his death is therefore inescapable.

Considering the matter from another angle, whenever recognition occurs, it usually occurs through remembering as when the messenger asked the shepherd in *King Oedipus*:

Well then, maybe you remember a baby boy  
You gave me, and asked me to rear it as my

own? ( 57)

It is also brought about through tokens and signs as in the messenger's talk with Oedipus:

The infirmity in your ankles tells the tale.

[ ... ] To it you owe your present name. (ibid.

54)

As described in the *Poetics*, the action in a Tragedy should, in addition to being serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude, be presented in language that is:

lofty and raised above the commonplace which employs unusual words. [...] the strange (or rare) word, the metaphorical, the ornamental, and the other kinds above mentioned, will raise it above the commonplace and mean, while the use of proper words will make it perspicuous. [...] Again, in examining whether what has been said or done by someone is poetically right or not, we must not look merely to the particular act or saying, and ask whether it is poetically good or bad. We must also consider by whom it is said or done, to whom, when, by what means, or for what end; whether, for instance, it be to secure a greater good, or avert a greater evil. (30, 36- 37).

Aristotle's definitions above can very easily apply to the text of the *Theban Plays* where Sophocles mostly adopted the same artistic means in his plays, namely figurative language, metaphors, repetition, and rhythm to transcend commonality and stress the actions that the audience was in principle expected to remember the most. Given the great artistic similarities between the plays within the Trilogy, the following examples and comments concerning diction mostly refer to *King Oedipus*.<sup>4</sup>

As it were, a close look at how Sophocles manipulated style and diction will soon reveal that meaning is quite often channelled through the combination of words where the juxtaposition of terms such as 'blind and seer', 'night and day' and 'light and dark' is repeated again and again as can be illustrated by the following few excerpts:

-Chorus: "In Thebes, City of Light, from the Pythian House of Gold" (*King Oedipus*, 30).

-Oedipus's response to Creon Towards the beginning of the play:

"I will start afresh; and bring everything into the light." (*ibid.* 29); and later

-Oedipus raging at Teiresias:

'Living in perpetual night, you cannot harm Me, nor any man else that sees the light'

(*ibid.* 36)

The aim of Sophocles was probably the simplifying of meaning, unveiling of the true personalities of the characters and guiding the spectators towards a better understanding of what was going on and off the stage. A good example is when blindness and seeing reveal the true character of Oedipus who was unable to see the truth presented to him by the unseeing Teiresias:

"You are pleased to mock my blindness.

Have you eyes,

And do not see your own damnation? Eyes,  
And cannot see what company you keep?"

(*ibid.* 37)

Curiously, Oedipus seems to have regained his ability of discerning the truth after he became blind:

"How could I meet my father beyond the grave

With seeing eyes; or my unhappy mother,  
Against whom I have committed such  
heinous sin

As no mere death could pay for?" (*ibid.* 63).

In a like manner, some key words like the word 'crossroads' associated with the figure 'three' are symbolically repeated several times through the play, highlighting different themes and raising a certain consciousness about concepts such as 'free will', 'fate' and 'prophecy' which ironically brought the downfall of the main protagonist in the end. As a matter of fact, the figure three may refer to the three parts of a good and complete action as described in the *Poetics*, to the three stages of a man's life as suggested by Oedipus when he attempted to solve the Sphinx's riddle, to the three meeting roads where Oedipus ironically and fatefully slayed his real father Laius whom he was trying to flee, and to Oedipus's tragic life as he exclaimed towards the end of the play:

"Alas! All out! All known, no more concealment!

O Light! May I never look on you again,  
Revealed as I am, sinful in my begetting,  
Sinful in marriage, sinful in shedding of blood!" (*ibid.* 58).

In relation to what preceded, style remained steady and faithful to the development of events and the gradual unfolding of the story. According to the examples given above, most of the characters remained 'true to type' in their exchanges and did not attempt to transgress their social ranks. When we hear the exchanges between Oedipus and Teiresias in *King Oedipus*, we notice the profuse use of the pronouns 'we' and 'us' by the former instead of the pronouns 'I' and 'me' by the latter:

Oedipus

- "We all beseech you; we are all your suppliants." (34)

- "Tell us all you know" (36)

Teiresias

- "Ask me No more. It is useless. I will tell you nothing." (35)

- "I say that the killer you are seeking is yourself." (36)

The chanting of the Chorus was equally informative, interpretative and suggestive. The various recitations quite often included metaphors, similes and references to Greek mythological gods as in:

-Chorus: "Speak to us, Daughter of Golden Hope! Come, deathless word!

Deathless Athena! First, Daughter of Zeus,  
on thee

We call; then on thy sister Queen.  
Artemis, over our city enthroned in her  
majesty;

And Phoebus, Lord of the Bow;  
Show us again your threefold power  
This hour, as in ages long ago. " (*King*

*Oedipus*, 30)

- "The order flashed, to hunt a man from his hiding.

And where is he?

In forest or cave, a wild ox roaming the mountains [...]" (ibid. 39)

In addition to the above, we notice that language is at times vague and susceptible to more than one interpretation on the part of the spectators. A good example is Teiresias's retort to Oedipus:

Oedipus: Hear him! Such words - such insults to the State

Would move a saint to anger.

Teiresias: What will be

Will be, though I should never speak again. (ibid. 35)

Such vagueness and ambivalence is, so to speak, likely to force the spectators to use their imagination and make guesses concerning the real consequences such 'daring' words might incur on the sayer. However, in a bid to save the spectators from totally getting trapped in their own imagination and keep them focussed on the action of the play, Sophocles immediately put the following words in Oedipus's mouth, which in a way clarified the speaker's hidden intention and revealed his inner nature as someone who was simply seeking the truth and nothing but truth:

Oedipus: What is to be, it is your trade to tell. (ibid. 35)

### ***King Lear***

At later times, however, significant changes about how tragedies were written and enacted on stage took place. In order to evaluate such changes and measure the extent of their deviations from the tragic principles as described by Aristotle, the second part of this article offers to look at a subsequent tragedy, *King Lear*, and at the way it was conceived and written by William Shakespeare around the year 1606. The first feature that strikes us when reading this play is its neat division into five acts, with each act being in turn subdivided into scenes. On the whole, this division appears to facilitate the transition between the various scenes and acts of the play. It is also likely to ease the mind of the spectator by not forcing him to listen to long introductory speeches such as the ones delivered by the Chorus in the *Theban Trilogy* and by granting him some time to reflect, when the curtain falls, "on what he has seen, to praise it or to find fault with it depending on whether he has been pleased or displeased". (Corneille, qtd. in Hazard Adams, 1971: 222)

At the same time, the number of characters in every scene has not always been restricted to three characters as was the practice in Sophoclean tragedies. In Act One, Scene One, for instance, the

play opens with three characters: Kent, Gloucester and Edmund, his "illegitimate" child. Shortly afterwards, they are joined by *King Lear*, the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall, Goneril, Reagan, Cordelia and their followers. This profuse number of characters together with the division of the play into acts and scenes brings a touch of realism by Shakespeare who, in the words of Dryden's character, Neander, indirectly appears as "the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensible soul." (Dryden, qtd. in Hazard Adams, 1971: 247)

Besides, as they are portrayed in this play, the main characters do, without exception, come from families which are just as prosperous and renowned as those depicted in the *Poetics*, but with a few differences, however: Oedipus was presented as a man who was full of vitality, skilful at solving riddles and who even became sacred at the end of his life. On the contrary, Lear was presented as an old man who could be easily tricked and swindled by the very daughters he trusted the most. Moreover, whereas Oedipus's misfortune had been foretold by the gods, even before he was born, *King Lear* had the choice not to dispose of his Kingdom in the way he did. Similar to what happened in *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus At Colonus*, both he and Gloucester did not know themselves and their children very well, which later inflated the number of their flaws and intensified their suffering. On the one hand, Lear was fooled by his eldest daughters' (Goneril and Regan) flattery and quite superficial praise as can easily be understood from the following two excerpts:

Goneril:

Sir, I love you more than words can wield  
the matter;  
Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty; (I. i. 55-56)

Regan:

Only she [Goneril] comes too short: that I  
profess  
Myself an enemy to all other joys, Which  
the most precious square of sense possesses;  
(I. i. 75-77)

On the other hand, he was totally blind to perceive Cordelia's (his third daughter's) sincerity and/or be touched by the true expression of her deep affection:

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave heart  
into my mouth. I love your majesty According  
to my bond; no more nor less. (I. i. 95-97)

Both she and Kent, one of Lear's loyal friends, ended up banished in spite of their loyalty and high esteem for the king. Gloucester, for his part, was unable to discern his children's true inner nature: Edmond's deceit and Edgar's virtue. He even

intended to kill the very son who saved his life while disguising himself as poor Tom. His total determination to serve the King cost him his two eyes and led him into a state of misery and perdition. The husband of Goneril, Albany, was another character who suffered from some kind of blindness which prevented him from clearly discerning the wickedness of her motives and boundless greed. As in the *Sophoclean Trilogy*, it was, however, after nearing madness (Lear) and totally losing sight (Gloucester) that self-knowledge and the knowing of others were brought to the surface. Talking about his two ungrateful daughters, Lear bitterly used the following imagery:

Down from the waist they are centaurs,  
Though women all above. (IV. vi. 124-25)

In the same manner, Gloucester, weeping his misfortune, affirmed in a stinging sensation:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes;  
I stumbled when I saw. (IV. i. 19-20)

For his part, Albany finally exploded when he uncovered Goneril's devilish wickedness:

O Goneril, You are not worth the dust  
which the rude wind

Blows in your face! (IV. ii. 34-35); and

later:

Wisdom and goodness to the vile seem vile:  
Filths savor but themselves. What have you  
done?

Tigers, not daughters, what have you  
performed? (IV. ii. 42-44)

Like the Chorus in the Sophoclean Tragedy, Lear's all licenced Fool, using a typical humourist and light-hearted speech, was not afraid of telling the truth even when it hurt. Indeed, after noticing what befell his Master, he could not refrain from criticising the King at the beginning of the play:

"If I gave them all my living. I'd keep my  
coxcombs

Myself." (I. iv. 111-12)

And later,

"All thy other titles thou hast given away.

That

thou wast born with." (I. iv. 153-154)

when he indirectly reprimanded Lear for having relinquished everything to his daughters without leaving anything for himself. He was even daring in some of his interventions, cladding his words in some metaphors, as when he criticised Lear for his fatal mistake and outrageous act towards himself and his disinherited daughter, Cordelia, when he left the door wide open for his other two daughters to unscrupulously exploit and manipulate him:

May not an ass know when the cart draws the  
horse? (I. iv. 224)

As it were, after having unwisely yielded all his

possessions and lost all his kingship and prerogatives in favour of two ungrateful daughters, the former king became no more than a simple citizen:

"Now thou art an O without a figure. I am  
better than thou art now. I

am a Fool. Thou art nothing." (I, iv, 192-194)

As a fully attentive and lucid character, he also showed a clear discernment of Goneril and Reagan's evil nature and the damage they were liable to cause:

"The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long  
That it's had it head bit off by it

young.[sic]" (I, iv, 221 – 22)

Contrary to the language of the Chorus in the Sophoclean Tragedy, the Fool's diction looks more informal and mundane. His addresses, though shrewd and wise, mostly relate to worldly matters and do not as such appear to directly relate to the heavenly and more sacred world. In addition to the limitation of his addresses to the King and rarely to few other characters, his behaviour seems, as it were, to clearly counterbalance Lear's direct appealing to the forces of nature and to the heavenly, especially in moments of despair, as the following outcry during the storm indicates:

Blow, winds, and crack your  
cheeks; rage, blow.

Your cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drench'd our steeples,  
drown'd the cocks! (III, ii, 1-5)

Concerning the two stories of Lear and Gloucester, their overlapping seems at a first glance to break the unity of action, so dear to the Greeks. As Crites, one of Dryden's four characters put it:

Two actions, equally laboured and driven

on by the writer, would destroy the unity of  
the poem;

it would be no longer one play, but two."  
(Dryden, qtd. in Hazard Adams, 1971: 232)

A close look at the two intertwined stories does, however, reveal that although the events in both run parallel, the action is, in fact, one. Shakespeare uses various linking devices such as characters, time and place, in addition to some other themes, to unite the story of Lear and his daughters with that of Gloucester and his sons. Edmund's schemes are directed against Lear and Gloucester, and so are the schemes of Goneril and Regan. The physical torment that is inflicted on Gloucester is also an attempt to highlight and counterbalance the King's spiritual suffering and agony as he is slowly nearing madness.

In addition, this action can be divided into a beginning, with Lear trying to divide up his Kingdom between his three daughters; a middle, with Lear

falling into madness and his discovery of the true nature of things; and an end, when Lear, after his reconciliation with his disinherited daughter, Cordelia, tasted real love and human warmth before his death. Though artistically laboured by Sophocles, such congruence and unity of action are, to a lesser degree, hard to discern between the *Sophoclean Tragedy* which encompass different times and do not as such represent a single play with one continuous action.

Concerning the unity of place, Shakespeare also seems to have innovated on the Greek playwrights by proliferating places to the point that the action was firstly started in *King Lear's* Palace but had to end in Dover. Unlike the Greeks who kept their actions more or less in the same place (in Antigone, for example, all the main actions took place in front of the royal palace in Thebes), Shakespeare even went further by changing scenes not only between acts but also within the same act, as in Act One which was divided into five scenes, all portraying quite different places; and it is such a variety of places which probably explains the diverse and profuse number of characters in each scene.

In the same line of thought, the multiple divisions and numerous scenes may also account for the alteration of the roles of the classical Chorus as they were performed by the old Greek playwrights. To bridge the gaps between far-off places and refer to what happened or was still happening off stage, Shakespeare, in fact, resorted to informants and reporters, as when a messenger and a gentleman reported the deaths of Cornwall and Lear's daughters. At a later time, Corneille, refusing to adhere to such practices, suggested two things:

[ ... ] first that the scene should never change in a given act but only between acts [ ... ]; the other, that these two places should not need different stage settings and that neither of the two should ever be named, but only the general place which includes them both. (Corneille, qtd. in Hazard Adams, 1971: 226)

Due to such factors, then, the time of presentation can justly be said to exceed Aristotle's "revolution of the Sun". Likewise, Shakespeare's squeezing of the story of Lear's last days within the time of the play certainly defies the general concept of Mimesis in addition to the two principles of probability and possibility. As Dryden's character, Eugenius, talking about the historical plays of Shakespeare, explained:

If you consider the historical plays of Shakespeare, they are rather so many chronicles, of kings, or the business many times of thirty or forty years, cramped into a representation of two hours and a half;

which is not to imitate or paint nature, but rather to draw her in miniature, to take her in little [...] This, instead of making a play delightful, renders it ridiculous. (Dryden, qtd. in Hazard Adams, 1971: 240)

When Lear fell into madness essentially because of his daughters' ungratefulness, that too was improbable and not much convincing. As it were, Gloucester also witnessed a quite identical experience with Edmund, his "illegitimate" son, had nonetheless kept his sanity until the end. Similarly, the attempt by Edgar, Gloucester's second son, to persuade his father that he had jumped from Dover Cliff in addition to the unpredictable departure of the King of France, leaving his wife behind to face the British armies by herself were also two quite improbable and therefore unconvincing actions.

In a like manner, the blinding of Gloucester and the killing of Edmund before the public might either bring shock and aversion among the audience or simply draw attention to the artificiality of the action, therefore removing all feelings of pity or fear, and destroying any pleasure that might arise through the identification with the characters in question. As Eugenius put it:

I have observed that in all tragedies, the audience cannot forbear laughing when the actors are to die; it is the most comic part of the whole play [...]. There are many actions which can never be imitated to a just height: dying especially is a thing which none but a Roman gladiator could naturally perform on the stage, when he did not imitate or represent but naturally do it; and therefore it is better to omit the representation of it. (Dryden, qtd. in Hazard Adams, 1971: 241)

Commenting on the quotation above, at least three remarks can, indeed, be made: First, Sophocles seems to have avoided such practices by either reporting his characters' deaths to the audience or by simply making them retreat and die far from where they could be seen, as in *Oedipus At Colonus* and in *Antigone*. Second, although the used artistic practices in *King Lear* appear at times in contradiction with the very spirit of mimesis and the idea of realism invoked above, Aristotle's preference for a "convincing impossibility" to an "unconvincing possibility" (The *Poetics*, chp. 25) offers a certain justification for Shakespeare's depiction in that one action has primarily to look plausible and natural regardless of whether or not it draws a picture that is true to life. Third, the apparent discrepancy between Shakespeare and Sophocles in representing certain actions can also be ascribed to their dedication to fulfilling their audiences' expectations: contrary to Elizabethan audiences, the Greeks had no taste for violent actions produced on stage.



In relation to the above, and contrary to the Trilogy with its constant invocation of the gods as the real instigators and masters of what befalls human beings, Shakespeare's tragic characters are given more freedom and often appear in full command of their fate. Their flaws are typically human and their tragic fall is to a great extent, their own deed. The gods were, so to speak, quite often invoked to reestablish the natural order and/or restore justice as in<sup>5</sup>:

"O! Let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven; keep me in temper; I would not be mad!" (I, v, 40).

At other times, they were even used as scapegoats to be blamed for humans' mistakes

When we are sick in fortune,--often the surfeit

of our own behavior,--we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars: as if we were villains by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treachers, by spherical predominance; drunkards,

liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of

planetary influence; and all that we are evil in,

by a divine thrusting on. (I, ii, 120-30)

Referring to diction in *King Lear*, one can easily discern three linguistic styles: First, the style associated with funny and sometimes simple-minded figures as in the King's Fool's messages. Second, the colloquial style associated with the free exchanges between some characters like Edmund and Gloucester, to mention but two names. Third, the alternation between plain language characterising madness and/or foolishness and verse mostly accompanying conscious and/or alert states as A. C. Bradley explained:

The idea underlying this custom of Shakespeare's [sic] evidently is that the regular rhythm of verse would be inappropriate where the mind is supposed to have lost its balance and to be at the mercy of chance impressions coming from without (as sometimes with Lear), or of ideas emerging from its unconscious depths and pursuing one another across its passive surface (1905: 399).

Overall, language in *King Lear* proved to be a powerful arm in the hands of some characters like Goneril and Regan on the one hand, and Edgar and Kent on the other. However, whereas the former used words of flattery in order to fool the king and get properties from him, the latter chose deceit in order

to help people and soothe their pains. Besides, Lear was "grand in his use of language, though foolish in some of his actions" (Neil. McEwan, 1984: 79), and his fool's "cutting truthfulness counterbalances Goneril's and Oswald's hypocrisy as they half disguise their intentions." (ibid. 117). The language of anger Lear used when invoking Nature to "convey sterility" on his ungrateful daughter, and to "dry up" her reproductive organs (I. 4) equally serves to portray his internal emotional state and feelings of bitterness and is, indeed, highly reminiscent of Oedipus's loud cry and appeal for blindness reported above.

### 3. CONCLUSION

To conclude this article, a careful reading of *King Lear* and *The Sophoclean Trilogy* broadly reveals that, in spite of the subsequent alterations affecting mostly the confection and form of tragedy, the purity of the genre with its scope, characteristics, components, and settings did, to a great extent, survive in Elizabethan and Neo-classical times. As was explained above, the changes that took place during the time of Shakespeare mostly affected the form rather than the content. Increasing the number of characters, dividing the play into clear Acts and Scenes, altering the Chorus's functions, introducing parallel actions, therefore lengthening the time of the performance, are some of the features that changed the form. Concerning the content, only fewer differences can be spotted: Shakespeare seems to have replaced fate with free will, As it were, Man's feelings, weaknesses, blunders, and sufferings, in addition to the general principles of divine justice, retribution and repentance, among others, all portrayed in language that is "embellished with each kind of artistic ornament" and cleverly laboured, lie at the heart of both Shakespeare's and Sophocles' works.

The success of both playwrights does not so much lie in the narration of simple events or the recounting of mere old tales. Their real merit does, in fact, reside in re-enacting the actions and letting their audiences live the stories and share the characters' feelings of abhorrence, fear, happiness, pity and sympathy, all conducing to the disclosing of their real identities and self-recognition. As has been explained throughout this article, both self-discovery and the disclosing of other peoples' true identities, indeed, represent the crux of the matter in the two dramatists' works.

According to both playwrights, life is no more than a big stage and human beings are its real actors. Regardless of whether they belong to renowned families or come from humble origins, whether they are responsible for their deeds or are

simply doomed right from the beginning without any apparent cause, whether they lead a happy life or experience denial and rejection, whether they are prosperous and feel greater than all the others or utterly miserable and live below the state of poverty, whether they are lucid and perceptive or fool and ignorant, whether they are defiant and aggressive or submissive and obedient, whether they are self-sufficient and satisfied with what they have or greedy and always plotting to lay their hands on what is not theirs, and finally, whether they are what they are or they are what they are not, they all have their place under the sun. They all have a role to play, be it veiled or unveiled, noble or mean.

Such was the message that the two playwrights appear to have incorporated in their two well-respected tragedies. No more, no less! Even the themes about fate and predestination that seem to have caused Oedipus's fall and Lear's misfortune can be interpreted within the general framework described above. In both plays, the gods were presented as careless, idle and merciless, whose main preoccupation was to "kill for their sport" as in *King Lear* (IV, i, 42), or cause "wrong undeserved" as in *Oedipus At Colonus* (87). A realistic reading of both assertions can, however, tell us that "knowing beforehand" does not exactly mean that the gods are "doing" or "executing" or even pushing the victim to perform this or that action. When Oedipus killed his father, married his mother, and begot her children, the decision was none but his. He was ignorant, arrogant and stubborn but he perpetrated all that was mentioned by his own proper hands. *King Lear* also disposed of his kingdom and of all that is precious simply out of short-sightedness and ignorance. The gods did nothing to lead him to madness and misfortune, as was mentioned above.

At this level, one may ask, if the gods are totally above this, what is/are their exact role(s) and why did the two playwrights mentioned them? These are legitimate questions especially when we consider the high number of the gods mentioned and/or invoked in both plays. To put it simply, the gods' main role appears to lie in re-establishing order, rewarding the good and punishing the bad. The incurred punishment, as was explained all along, is no more than one form of cleansing and redemption from the sins and wrongs committed. After all, one can only reap what he/she sows.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>. Although the *Poetics* offers a broad observation on how poetry, tragedies, comedies, and some kinds of music are conceived or played, Aristotle's specific definition of a tragedy together with the components that contribute to its artistic success did not, however, escape criticism and even modification at later times.

<sup>2</sup>. The attempt to read the *Sophoclean Trilogy* chronologically and to consider their plots as highly uniform and closely related is a view which is, contrary to expectations, not supported by a significant number of literary critics. As Michael

J. Cummings

explained: "Because each play can stand alone as a separate dramatic unit and because Sophocles wrote the plays years apart and out of sequence, they technically do not make up a trilogy, although some writers refer to them as such. Most writers refer to them instead as 'The Sophoclean Tragedy.' However, even this name is a misnomer, since the second play takes place at Colonus." (2003)

<sup>3</sup>. For ease of finding the quotations and relating them to their contexts, all in-text citations in this section will refer to their corresponding plays as they are included in the *Sophoclean Trilogy*.

<sup>4</sup>. The purpose being mostly a comparison between *King Lear* and The Sophoclean Tragedy in light of Aristotle's *Poetics*, in addition to the fact that the works belonging to the trilogy were written at different times (*Oedipus At Colonus* was written between 405–406 B.C., *King Oedipus* around 430 B.C., and *Antigone* around 441 B.C.), I consequently saw no need to describe the artistic style and diction in each play separately.

<sup>5</sup>. The fact that Shakespeare was more cautious and restrained when referring to religion, can be ascribed to the passing in 1606 of a protective legislation by the parliament, which was called the "Act to restrain Abuses of Players" aiming essentially to prevent all sorts of profanity or looseness towards religion on stage, particularly at a time when many religious upheavals took place. (*The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*).

## REFERENCES

- [1] "Act to Restrain Abuses of Players (1606)." *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*. <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110810104316930>>
- [2] Adams, Hazard, editor. *Critical Theory since Plato*. US: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971.
- [3] Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Second ed., Macmillan, 1905. <<http://www.shakespeare-->

navigators.com/bradley/tr399.html>.

[4] Budelmann, Felix. *The language of Sophocles: communality, communication and involvement*. USA: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

[5] Cummings, Michael J. *The Sophoclean Tragedy of Sophocles: Study Guide and Plot Summaries*, 2003.

[6] Dutton, Richard. *An Introduction to Literary Criticism*. UK: Longman Group Ltd., 1984.  
<http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/playmenu.php?WorkID=kinglear>

[7] MC Ewan, Neil. *Preparing For Examination in*

*English Literature*. UK: Longman Group Ltd., 1984.

[8] Shakespeare, William. "King Lear." *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by Peter Alexander. London: Collins, 1951.

[9] Sophocles. *The Sophoclean Tragedy*. Translated by E. F. Watling. GB: The Chaucer Press Ltd., 1978.

[10] Sophocles. *Oedipus the King*.  
<[http://ahargroder.wikispaces.com](http://ahargroder.wikispaces.com/file/view/oedipuspdf) /file/view/oedipuspdf>

[11] Whiting, Frank M. *An Introduction to the Theatre*. Revised edition. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961.