American Shakespeare
ISSN 2283-8759
DOI: 10.13133/2283-8759/17622
pp. 362-395 (2021)

Come Die with Me: A Riddle in *King Lear*

Massimo Stella

This article explores a case of methodological criticism that has been neglected by Shakespearean scholars and, amongst them, philologists and critics who have studied and edited *King Lear*: namely, the mythic and linguistic model of Shakespeare's *King Lear* between Freud (*The Theme of the Three Caskets*) and Lévi-Strauss (*The Structural Study of Myth*), in the re-reading of the eminent French classicist Clémence Ramnoux.

Keywords: Theory of poetic language, Myth, Ramnoux, Freud, *King Lear*

Myth and Ludic Language: A Methodological Premise

> As I was looking for a connection between the fields of psychoanalysis and mythology or history of religions, I realised that I had found it in a specific and unexpected object, one which may be difficult but nonetheless fruitful to investigate. That object is wordplay. Psychoanalysts know well that wordplay is one of the main tools to explore the unconscious or at least preconscious strata of the mind, and that is also true of misinterpretations, puns, and dreams. These phenomena occur as if an unexpressed and inexpressible desire and the shadow of its pseudo-satisfaction insidiously disintegrated a clear utterance and used its very elements, its words or its syllables, to shape a new expression, which is a compromise between the expressed and the unexpressed. The interpretation of a dream or of its account, that is to say the process whereby a dream is translated into a revelatory utterance, relies on a set of associations: a single word or even a syllable leads to an image that evokes a phantasmal and illusory projection, which conceals the unexpressed and the most unexpected elements of the account. This process takes place within ambiguous areas of the soul, in which words are replaced by images and images are then again replaced by words. […]. The puns which can authentically uncover those hidden elements continue to hold a strong appeal for us: they produce a "poetic" effect. […]. Throughout the course of their history,

> the Greeks employed puns in religious contexts: they created compromise expressions capable of leading from legend to thought as well as restoring wonder to the most elevated thought. This suggests that we are dealing with a "mental regime" rather than with "cultural stratifications". (Ramnoux 2020f, 419)[1]

For that reason, the nature of myths and legends (or fairy tales) is intrinsically linguistic. A myth is not merely a sequence of actions carried out by one agent in a specific space and at a specific time; in other words, it is not what we call a *récit*. The *récit* is merely its narrative frame, which tends towards *mimesis*. Beyond or within that frame there is also language, with its devices and its wordplay, a kind of language that is not *langue*, but rather *parole*, in that it relies on the concrete and idiosyncratic act of playing with the rules of the *langue*. The *parole* of the *jeu de mots* certainly produces images which are not fantastic ('invented') but rather phantasmal, that is to say experiential (i.e. related to corporeal and psychic experiences): the *parole* draws on the Imaginary rather than on imagination (and it simultaneously creates it). For that reason, those who wish to analyse a myth should try to analyse its linguistic structure, in that myth cannot be considered a mere 'subject matter', or a 'theme', or a 'set of themes', but it is rather a logic. Myth and Thought are thus contemporary to each other because they are 'mental systems' rather than cultural and historical elements: that explains why philosophers, from Plato to Nietzsche and Heidegger, have always focused on myth. Philology has a lot to learn from psychoanalysis and Saussure's theory of language so as not to become a mere scholarly exercise. That was the idea of Clémence Ramnoux, a prominent scholar in the field of ancient philosophy who carefully investigated ancient philosophy using the tools of philology, (structural) anthropology and Freudian psychoanalysis, and also ventured into the fields of history of religions and comparative mythology. Ramnoux examined pre-Socratic and Orphic thought, which is always in verse and aims at creating myths, and constantly looked for foundational 'logophanies' or verbal expressions which may originate possible and possibly coexisting 'ideational

[1] All translations are mine.

constellations'. She used the same approach in her studies on tragedy and comedy. One of the most remarkable examples of her methodology, that is of how she read myths and of the idea that myths contain conceptualisations and have a 'poetic function', is surprisingly not offered by a study on Greek tragedy or on ancient philosophers, but rather by an essay on Shakespeare, whose works she could brilliantly interpret. The essay, a true masterpiece of comparative methodology, is entitled "Mythe, conte et tragédie. Une interprétation freudienne du *Roi Lear*"; it deals with Shakespeare's *King Lear* and it appeared in 1967 in *Revue d'esthétique.* It was later included in the collection *Études présocratiques*, published in 1970, in that it was recognised as having much in common with the studies on the function of myth in Greek philosophical poetry contained in that volume. Ramnoux's essay, though, should also be included in the tradition of *Shakespeare studies*, and it should finally be recognised as one of the most prominent studies in that field by virtue of its brilliant analysis of Shakespeare's theatrical text and of its wide-ranging critical perspective.

The Mythical Riddle: Re-reading Freud

> Modern men in Western Europe seem to be trying to destructure themselves, animated by an impulse to re-emerge from ancient stratifications, so as to rebuild themselves in a different way. Hence the fascination for the early philosophers of ancient Greece. (Ramnoux 2020b, 228)

Clémence Ramnoux recognises that psychoanalysis played a prominent role among the human sciences in the twentieth century; in other words, she understands that (Freudian) psychoanalysis, beyond its aims and its specific objects of study (neurosis, the unconscious, the way impulses work, therapy…), offers a global *vision* of both individual and collective human experience. It is a *way* of considering and a *method* of understanding the processes through which the structure of an individual and the cultural memory, language, art, and religious beliefs of communities are

formed. Psychoanalysis is the most relevant symptom of the new *episteme* of the twentieth century, the symptom of the fact that men were trying to "destructure" themselves so as to reconstruct and project themselves beyond their time, rediscovering an Antiquity which is not classical antiquity but rather the (primitive) 'Immemorial'. Ramnoux also recognises that anthropology and psychoanalysis are equally interested in researching and recovering that past. Through psychoanalysis and anthropology, myths and fables (or 'legends') become available once again and they also become extremely effective in the epistemic world of the twentieth century by re-emerging as *active* forms of thought. Similarly, poetic language ceases to be perceived as a mere *objet d'art*, and starts to be regarded as an invention which stemmed from involuntary and collective memory. Ramnoux's special interest in Freud's essay on *The Theme of the Three Caskets* is due exactly to the way in which Freud reads the poetic language of Shakespeare's *King Lear* as a mythical structure by analysing a cluster of narrative elements that are typical of a fable: how does the tragic poet work with a legendary tradition and brings to light its underlying myth? And what is the meaning of its re-emerging? Ramnoux especially focused on one question: is the object which we consider to be the 'work' of an 'author' really the work of an author or is it rather the 'work' of language, created on the basis of a core idea and of a general experience of humankind? What is the relationship between *tragedy*, that is to say poetry, *myth*, that is to say experiential memory, and *story* (a legend, a fairy tale), that is to say the narrative expression of a memorised experience? And what relevant discoveries can be made by looking at that persistent relationship between *tragedy*, *myth*, and *story*?

It is widely known that, in *The Theme of the Three Caskets*, Freud argues that a mythical scenario underlies the plot of *King Lear*, as is suggested by the hero's choice before the three sister goddesses of destiny – the three Parcae or Moirai, the goddesses with the cosmic spindle, or the Norns or the Valkyrie of Norse mythology. Freud's remarkable hypothesis has enjoyed a peculiar state of 'isolation' caused by its fame and uniqueness: although it had a wide reception in Shakespeare's criticism, especially in feminist

criticism[2], it was generally read either focusing on its content, or in a cultural or ideological key, but never as a pure *fait de langage*. What critics found controversial in that essay was Freud's association of Cordelia with the Moira of Death.

It is undoubtedly true that Freud's style in that work – as was often the case in his essays on literature – is narrative and descriptive, and that the structure of his argument is episodic and rhapsodic, as if the author were trying to conceal the logical structure of his thesis. That choice, though, can hardly be a coincidence: he is telling without revealing. It is exactly on that deliberate reticence that Ramnoux focuses in analysing Freud's text and trying to extract its *linguistic* essence. She also offers an accurate reading of the female figure identified with death without giving an ideological or feminist reading of the text.

Before moving on to Ramnoux's remarkable work, we will focus on Freud.

> Two scenes from Shakespeare, one from a comedy and the other from a tragedy, have lately given me occasion for posing and solving a small problem. (Freud 1958, 291)

This is how Freud begins his essay. The understatement "posing and solving a small problem" conveys the idea of a scholar allowing himself a distraction from his usual field of study so as to satisfy a marginal curiosity. He then immediately compares two scenes, that of the choice of the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice* and that of the division of the kingdom among the king's daughters in *King Lear*. Why does Freud associate them despite the fact that they seem to have nothing in common? In *The Merchant of Venice*, three suitors are required to choose one of three caskets to win the hand of a woman. Freud argues that "das Orakel der Kästchenwahl", the "oracle", that is to say the "riddle", of the three caskets, was not invented by Shakespeare, but it is rather a traditional motif (interestingly, the word "oracle" implicitly produces a semantic shift). It is worth reminding that riddles underlie the most important heuristic device of neurotic complexes,

[2] For a useful overview, see McLuskie 1985 and Thompson 1991.

namely the *myth* of Oedipus (the riddle of the Sphinx about the ages of man, Oedipus who solves the riddle; the riddle of incest: a son will kill his father and lie with his mother). Freud then states that Shakespeare borrowed the traditional motif of the choice of three caskets from *Gesta Romanorum*, a collection of stories upon which he drew when he wrote *The Merchant of Venice*, but, in that source, the situation is the opposite of the one depicted in the play, in that it is a girl who has to choose among three caskets to win the hand of a suitor. How can that inversion (a maid chooses one of three caskets to win the hand of a suitor / three suitors choose among three caskets to win the hand of a maid) be explained? Freud suggests that one of the laws of dreams should be applied to myth, namely the law of displacement and transference: the three caskets represent three women, in that the casket stands for the female body. Hence, the original formulation of a man choosing among three caskets, which can be inverted, actually represents a man choosing among three women. Moving on to analyse the aforementioned scene in *King Lear*, Freud asks himself and his readers: "Is not this once more the scene of a choice between three women?" (293). Indeed, it represents the division of the kingdom between Lear's three daughters according to how much each of them loves him. That reading finally leads to the primary equivalence between the three women and the three Moirai and hence also to the association of Cordelia with Death. Yet, at that point, readers of Freud's article may wonder why the author should need to turn to the motif of the caskets to reach the rather obvious conclusion that the division of the kingdom between Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia is indeed a choice between three women. How does the symbol of the casket influence *King Lear*, considering that no casket is mentioned in the play? Why is its '*latency*' important? And why is the identification between the three women and the three Moirai necessary?

Ramnoux draws on Freud's text and explains his theories. She argues that Freud's aim is that of identifying "the original myth" ("le mythe originel"), which is not to be conceived of as an "archaic nucleus" ("noyau archaïque"), i.e. the most ancient features of the myth that can be philologically reconstructed by examining the sources, but rather as a "fundamental formulation". That

"fundamental formulation" is based on the expression "Three Parcae", "Three Norns", which is neither a symbol, nor an image, nor a tale, but rather "un élément de vocabulaire", "a vocabulary entry", that is to say a phrase conveying an idea (Ramnoux 2020d, 252). More specifically, it is "un élément de vocabulaire entrant dans la composition de plusieurs ensembles", "a vocabulary entry which is involved in the creation of various ensembles", ensembles which are the different narrative variants of the primary phrase/idea.

Those variants form a very heterogeneous corpus, so much so that Freud's analysis may be dismissed as "savage comparativism" ("comparatisme sauvage" [253]) by scholars who fail to realise that he was not focusing on the cultural homogeneity of that corpus (nor was he trying to find a common source), but rather on its *linguistic* homogeneity. Among those variants, the tale of Cinderella and her sisters, the myth of Psyche, the bride of Eros who is envied by her cruel sisters, and Paris' choice between three sister goddesses are especially relevant. Ramnoux then explains that Freud aims to "assimiler le dissemblable pour raison de structure, préludant ainsi sans le savoir à une science contemporaine des mythes", "associate different elements because of their structure, thus unwittingly anticipating the contemporary study of myth". Ramnoux is here clearly alluding to Lévi-Strauss's article, *La structure des mythes*, published nine years earlier (1958) in *Anthropologie structurale*, which focuses on the myth of Oedipus. The word *structure* is crucial for Ramnoux: the primary phrase/idea only has meaning within a system, a structure, just as is the case with any semantic or non-semantic item of language (in Saussure's sense of place of enunciation).

That is the reason why the signifier "casket" gives meaning, by difference, to the signifier "goddess/woman": the three caskets can be associated with three female goddesses of destiny by virtue of the principle that meaning is created and conveyed by and through another element. In other words, the meanings linked with the element of "three Parcae or Norns" are conveyed by something else, that is to say they are displaced to the signifier "casket". That process takes the form of a *riddle*.

Ramnoux argues that, in order to associate the three women with the three caskets, Freud relies on the tools of psychoanalysis, namely on the interpretive technique of *Traumdeutung*, which is unsurprisingly based on language and its workings. It is indeed widely known that three processes at work in dreams, namely condensation, displacement, and representation, also take place in language and are especially akin to metaphoric transformation and metonymic association. Metaphor and metonymy would later be identified by structural linguists as the main structural elements of the poetic function. It is also worth emphasising that the language of dreams is *involuntary*, it alludes to experiences that have not been processed by the mind, that is to say *latent* experiences. The "original", the "primary", the "fundamental" – however one may wish to call it – thus has to do with that latent element and with its re-emergence.

Ramnoux then goes on to reconstruct a plausible structural model of Freud's intricate and reticent discussion and, in doing so, she brilliantly clarifies not so much the 'content' of Freud's essay but rather the *wordplay* which Freud detects in Shakespeare's works.

Freud links the opposition man/woman with the numerical opposition one/three: one woman for three men (*The Merchant of Venice*), one man for three women (*King Lear*). Indeed, if the signifier "woman" is changed into the signifier "casket", in other words if the three women are equated to the three caskets, it is easy to see that two of them are "empty"/"deceiving" ("opposition plein/vide ou encore vrai/trompeur", says Ramnoux [254]) and that only one contains the image of a woman. Hence, there is only one woman (who takes three different forms) for one man, and, similarly, only one of the three men is the chosen one. The two correspondences "1 woman: 3 men" and "1 man: 3 women" are thus the inverted formulation of the same 'phrase'. One and three are the other sides of the same coin. The oppositions between full and empty casket and between truthful and deceiving also mirror the antithesis between *Cordelia*, who tells the *truth*, and her *lying sisters* (= leaden casket / gold and silver caskets).

Ramnoux uses the metaphor of knitting to state that "le canevas trame 1/3 sur chaîne de homme/femme", "on the tapestry, 1/3 are

woven on the warp of man/woman", while the other couples of opposites only play a role in shaping, that is to say "embroidering" ("broder" [254]), the variants. The couples of opposite traits involved in the creation of the different variants are: *young/old* (the young suitors and old King Lear); *shiny/dull* (the golden and silver caskets, and the leaden casket); *loquacious/silent* (the two suitors who glorify the golden and silver caskets, and Bassanio who chooses the humble leaden casket without heeding his rivals' eloquence; Cordelia's two eloquent and lying sisters, and Cordelia's silence and sincerity).

In addition to these couples of nominal opposites, there are also two verbal opposites, namely: *choosing/excluding*; *choosing/being taken*. The two suitors in *The Merchant of Venice* choose but are excluded from the 'competition'; Portia is won (taken) by Bassanio but she is the one who actually chooses (whereas Bassanio chooses but he is in fact taken). Free choice can indeed evolve into a situation in which one is captured, 'taken'. That twist is a key issue in Freud's analysis in that it alludes to death.

Ramnoux then raises an important question: how is the theme of marriage in *The Merchant of Venice* related to the situation in *King Lear*? The fact that the male character in *King Lear* is a "vieillard paternel", an "old father", or rather an "old man who is also a father" (the expression "vieillard paternel" lays more emphasis on old age than on fatherhood), means that he cannot play the role of groom and sexual partner. For that reason, the scene of marriage is turned into a "scène d'héritage". Another couple of opposites is thus formed, namely that of "*marriage/inheritance*" ("*mariage/héritage*" [260]). Yet, Ramnoux points out that the scene of inheritance is highly eroticised by Freud, who rightly draws attention to the fact that the old man demands a profession of love from his three daughters, and his request for love is overwhelming: the greatest part of his kingdom will be given to the daughter who declares that she loves him the most. However, the daughter who truly loves him the most and who the king loves the most refuses to take part in that game, and hence she is not chosen as the winner, but rather excluded from the game and from the inheritance. What is the meaning of that exclusion and of that reversal? Why is the motif of inheritance eroticised?

The signifier "casket" has an implicit influence on the characterisation of the three sisters and daughters. Freud states that the third sister takes on the same characteristics as the leaden casket: she is pale, humble, and silent. These are underworld traits (which, according to Freud, Cordelia shares with Cinderella and Psyche)[3], and so is the fairy-tale motif of the exclusion and isolation of the last-born child[4]. Ramnoux then clarifies one of the numerous passages that Freud had left implicit in his article. The association of woman and casket in *King Lear* triggers a series of "transformations" ("conversions" [257]):

> 1° On a figurative level: *beautiful women* become *women so ugly that people fear them*, or remain beautiful but deplorably cold.
> 2° On an emotional level: *lovable women* become *fearsome women*. The most desirable qualities become the most terrifying ones.
> 3° On a narrative level: the verbal action implied in the story is also changed into its opposite. The implicit predicate "if only I could choose one among the most beautiful women in the world!" is turned into: "fearsome women are taking me and dragging me away, as has been decided by fate". The man here clearly has a passive role, but the active subject is not the *living woman* but rather *Death*. One last couple of opposites is thus implied in Freud's analysis: on the one hand there is the grace and erotic allure of the woman, on the other, the goddess of Death. (257)

Ramnoux points out that choice turns into *fate* and fate is deadly. The old man is thus "taken", ensnared, and the exclusion of the third daughter and sister is the negative opposite of that fatal capture. The ambiguity of the signifier "casket", that is to say the caskets' external appearance, which can be golden, silver, and leaden, becomes a source of anxiety: what was once desirable

---

3 On Cinderella's underworld traits, see Ginzburg 1989.

4 On the underworld atmosphere and on the motif of the last-born child in the legend of King Lear and in European fairy tales, see Cocchiara's thorough but sadly forgotten study *La leggenda di Re Lear*, which examines an extraordinary amount of material and convincingly confirms Freud's hypothesis (Cocchiara 1932). It is also worth drawing attention to the figure of Psyche, the youngest and most beautiful of three sisters, who was so beautiful as to be feared like a goddess and ignored by suitors, who were too afraid of her.

becomes fearsome, what was once beautiful, ugly, and what was once associated with life becomes deadly.

So far, it is evident that the mechanism of the "mythe originel" operates at a purely linguistic level and it is inextricably linked with wordplay, that is to say the *riddle*. Its narrative and dramatic outcomes are peculiar but homogeneous and they stand at the crossroads between the metaphoric and the metonymic axis. The riddle, for example, shows that the truth of 'things' lies in words, and not vice versa. Words 'cling to' experiences and carry them, 'weave' them, and fictitiously organise them: in Freud's terms, words are the representation of unconscious (repressed) psychic experiences; in other words, a word is the element of a repressed psychic experience which resurfaces, like a ghost (indeed, *represent* means *resurface*). The image of knitting, which Ramnoux explicitly employs, is equally significant: words are 'knotted' with experiences. In his XXIII seminar on Joyce (*Le Sinthome*, 1975-76), Lacan would later develop his theory of knots by studying the different ways in which the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary are knotted together.

Cordelia: "l'image poignante" and "la scène primitive"

Having so brilliantly interpreted the "code" of Freud's language in the aforementioned study, Ramnoux focuses on the key issue of Cordelia. Ramnoux is surprised at Freud's depreciation of the figure of the "daughter" which runs parallel to his depreciation of the role of the father. Why does Freud empty parental relations of value and reduce them to non-semantic traits? The daughter is replaced by the *Verderberin*, the Destroyer:

> The fact that the relation between father and daughter is simply erased is even more surprising. The daughter has become the destroyer. Why? How is that substitution operated? And how should we interpret it? (Ramnoux 2020d, 261)

Ramnoux does not try to give an ideological interpretation of the fact that the figure of the daughter has been "erased", she rather tries to understand it. Parental relationships, which are basic and

fundamental for anthropologists (Ramnoux is here implicitly alluding to Lévi-Strauss's *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*), are instead secondary social structures for the psychoanalyst. It seems that, according to Freud, the main themes of *King Lear* are not patriarchy, the exchange of material goods, inheritance, and generational succession[5]. The true meaning of the tragedy lies somewhere else, namely in the alteration of the traditional family relationships and of the very taboo that regulates them, that is to say incest. There is thus something much more powerful than the fascination/horror towards incest and than power/inheritance.

Ramnoux points out that Freud denies Lear's incestuous fixation with Cordelia: "Cordelia n'entre même pas avec lui dans la relation d'Antigone à Œdipe" (256). This matter will be further explored later. Yet, as has been pointed out above, the relationship between Lear and Cordelia is undoubtedly eroticised. Lear's question leaves no doubts: if it does not imply incest, then what is its meaning? What is the libidinal drive directed towards in *King Lear*, and how?

> According to Freud, the original myth is not the story of Paris [his choice between three goddesses], which, as has been pointed out above, is a childhood fantasy of the male ego. And yet, the image of three goddesses exposed to his desire [the desire of Paris and of men in general] half-reveals the model that is being researched. (256)

Ramnoux argues that the image of the choice between three goddesses is a "poignant image": that expression, as used by Ramnoux, means a *traumatic*, violent image, a dreadful and painful image which carries with it a fundamental but annihilating psychic experience. It is an image which has the power of bringing to light unbearable repressed material in a covert form. How?

> The idea of original myth has become familiar. It would be useful, though, to recognise its images and its contexts. Freud gave us some relevant examples of images: *three great ladies* of enigmatic and stern appearance, ready to be metamorphosed into *three beautiful* and

[5] For a radically different reading, see two among the most famous interpretations of *King Lear*: Dollimore 1984 and Greenblatt 1990.

> erotically appealing *young maids*; or *three cruel witches* or *the brazen virgin who carries the corpse of the dead hero*, a situation which can be altered into that of *the old man who carries the body of the dead daughter*, or into that of the old lady who has *on her lap the corpse of the dead hero*. The association originated by these inversions leads to the *Pietà* by Michelangelo. The core of the myth thus consists in a malleable image that can be transformed by way of conversion and according to the different modalities that the process of conversion takes on. (263)

The original myth and the traumatic image ("l'image poignante") are located at a middle point, so to speak, between the two extremes of erotic fantasy, on the one hand, and the terrible "lesson" ("leçon" [259]), namely the scene of trauma, on the other.

Instead of a young man who has to choose between the gifts of three goddesses (power, knowledge, and love), *King Lear* shows "un vieillard concupiscent en face de trois belles jeunes femmes", "a lusty old man standing before three beautiful women" (259). Ramnoux then mentions (and translates) the crucial passage in *The Theme of the Three Caskets* in which Freud states that Lear is not only an old man but also one who is close to dying but not ready to renounce the love of women. Ramnoux thus explains:

> The love of women is here something completely different from raw sexual drive (either general or directed towards a specific object). It rather indicates attachment to life due to fear of death, which is imminent. Just as a kid clings to his mother for fear of falling into the void or into darkness, so the man clings to the warmth of female love. He refuses to see that the last embrace and the breast that will last be offered are those of earth and of his tomb. (262)

Freud explicitly states: "Cordelia ist der Tod. […]. Es ist die Todesgöttin", "Cordelia is Death. […]. She is the Death-goddess who, like the Valkyrie […], carries away the dead hero from the battlefield" (301). According to Ramnoux, the fact that Lear angrily excludes her from the inheritance must thus be interpreted in this light:

> If Cordelia = Death and if her father has excluded her from the inheritance, this means that the old man refuses death. In doing so, he

> violates one of the laws of nature and rebels against the last of the Three. (265)

Lear's *libido* is thus *libido vivendi* rather than incestuous love for his daughter. As a consequence, Lear's exclusion of Cordelia is a signifier which conveys his ancestral fear, his horror and rejection of death. It is the old man who treats the figure of the young woman with sacred horror: it is the dying man who invests her of an underworldly and fearsome aura. Ramnoux wonders whether that is a "*primitive scene*" ("*scène primitive*"), an *Urszene*:

> Would it be possible to associate the idea of original myth as it appears in Freud's text [*The Theme of The Three Caskets*] with the more widely known notion of *primitive scene*? That association appears legitimate in that it is an image which the playwright unveils while it is being staged. Freud links the primitive scene to a childhood memory, or even to a memory formed before speech is developed, namely the image of the sexual act in the form in which it is stored in the memory of a child who was faced with it without being able to defend himself. Can the three female figures not be related to the image of female faces who lean over the crib? Does Freud himself not associate the three women, including the youngest one, with the figure of the mother? This would be a perfectly Freudian explanation, which would account for the enigmatic and protean form of a regained mother who is invested of a magic and majestic aura, which the mother ordinarily involved in the family routine has generally lost. It would also explain the fascination linked with the recurrence of childhood visions that had been repressed before the acquisition of the faculty of speech. Behind a smiling face is hidden a graver one, behind a young face there is an older one, just like in Da Vinci's painting *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*. (264)

As is evident, that extract is somehow different from the rest of Ramnoux's text and that can be perceived in her writing, which reveals a powerful female perspective. The implicit identification of the mother with the bride and the daughter, of the maid with the matron, of the old woman with the young lady, of the smiling woman with the grave and majestic one (in other words the ambiguity and protean nature of the female figure) is probably *un souvenir de berceau*, so to speak, a 'memory from the crib' which was formed before the development of speech and which re-emerges in

speech in the form of verbo-visual re-elaborations and perturbing speech events. Is Ramnoux alluding to the idea of eternal feminine, *das Ewig-Weibliche* (which was particularly important to Goethe)? No, she is not referring to an allegory or a fictional and abstract stereotype. On the contrary, she is referring to *a concrete and involuntary memory*, to "a regained mother" ("une mère retrouvée"), who resurfaces from the past, from a distant time in which the child was in the crib. By mentioning Da Vinci's *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, Ramnoux also covertly hints at Freud's essay *Eine* Kindheitserinnerung *des Leonardo da Vinci*, *Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of His Childhood*, which focuses on the interpretation of Da Vinci's painting. Ramnoux's suggestion is clear: *The Theme of the Three Caskets*, published in 1913, is strongly linked to *Leonardo da Vinci: A Memory of his Childhood*, published in 1910. In that essay, one of the most adventurous and complex works written by Freud, the author tries to interpret an oneiric riddle that concerns Leonardo da Vinci: the artist remembered, or thought he remembered, that, while he was still in the cradle, a kite put its tail into his mouth and the tail repeatedly hit his lips. In analysing that oneiric and enigmatic episode, Freud argues that the image of a motherly female figure emerges from the artist's childhood memory into his adult mind: the ghost of the figure which once hovered around his cradle reappears in one of his most famous paintings. *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne* is the representation of a trinity or of a female element which is three and one: the fact that the child is destined to die is hinted at by the sacrificial lamb which he embraces. Everything, including death, is contained in the smile and the embrace represented by the painter. Ramnoux does not challenge but rather rewrites, through the lens of her female perspective, Freud's theory of an all-encompassing motherly and triadic element: or better, she does not so much rewrite it as rebalance its emotional component and its emphasis on drives. Freud's version is frightening and violent:

> We might argue that what is being represented here are the three inevitable relations that a man has with a woman – the woman who bears him, the woman who is his mate and the woman who destroys him; or that they are the three forms taken by the figure of the mother

> in the course of a man's life – the mother herself, the beloved one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more. (Freud 1958, 301)

Ramnoux supports Freud's thesis but dissolves its phobic rigidity and frees it from its (male) object fixation. It may convincingly be argued that she does so for the sake of Cordelia. In the epigraph of her essay, Ramnoux quotes lines 94-103, which are spoken by Cordelia in Act I, scene i:

> Good my Lord,
> You have begot me, bred me, lov'd me: I
> Return those duties back as are right fit,
> Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
> Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
> They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,
> That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
> Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
> Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
> To love my father all.
> (Shakespeare 1989, I.i.94-103)

Cordelia's words, quoted in the epigraph, suggest that Ramnoux's discussion of Shakespeare's and Freud's *King Lear* focuses on her and that is due to the fact that Cordelia refuses to exaggerate and display her love for her father and especially to falsely satisfy his unreasonable request for love (indeed, that satisfaction cannot but be illusory). The fact that Lear's request is excessive is emphasised by the words "No" and "Nothing" uttered by Cordelia: if it were not for Cordelia's "No", we would not be able to understand the nature of the (instinctual) ghost which exerts a considerable influence on Lear and his behaviour, namely fear of death, which is here experienced not so much by a father as by a *man*, or rather by *all human beings*. Cordelia's "No" sheds light on Lear's phobic "No" to the universal destiny of all human beings and on his consequent desperate and excessive need of love which signals his *voluptas vivendi*. Lear's "No" stems from excess, Cordelia's "No" is instead a sign of measure. If that is true, then how should the final scene of the old man carrying the body of his dead daughter be interpreted

("le vieux père porte au tombeau le cadavre de son enfant" [Ramnoux 2020d, 264-65])? That episode is the inversion of the scene of a *Pietà*: as has been pointed out above, Ramnoux clearly alludes to Michelangelo's *Pietà*. In Michelangelo's masterpiece, it is a woman, a mother, who holds on her laps the dead body of her young son. The Son of Man, born of a Woman, dies. If the same pattern were reproduced in *King Lear*, Cordelia, a virgin daughter, would carry in her arms the body of her old father in the way a mother would do. The image of the *Pietà* is somehow 'contained' in that primary scene which Ramnoux recognises when she focuses on the bodies and faces of the three Parcae: she identifies *la grand-mère*, *la mère*, and *l'enfant* destined to an untimely death, the three figures in *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, which, according to Freud, were represented by Leonardo as a sudden memory of his own childhood and perhaps as an involuntary memory which lies at the core of human experience more in general. The original pair, mourning Mother and sacrificed Son, is turned into the symmetrical one of foolish Father and hanged Daughter, the mourning Mother is changed into the Father who has squandered his life.

Lear and Moses: The Father, Anger, and Mortality

Ramnoux is one of those scholars who are truly capable of opening up new perspectives. The last paragraph of her discussion of Freud's reading of *King Lear* focuses on the relation between the idea of the "mythe originel", such as that of the three caskets in Shakespeare's play, and religion. The "mythe originel", that is to say the primary or original myth, is structurally linked to the essence and experience of the sacred on two distinct but intertwined levels. Both the original myth and the sacred somehow make the repressed resurface; they both contain wisdom (*sagesse*) which has nothing to do with morality but which rather reveals the truth of a trauma. Ramnoux states that, to fully grasp what *King Lear* represents according to Freud, it is necessary to analyse Freud's last work, *Moses and Monotheism*, which is also his last

discussion on the role of religion[6]. Freud seems to have found the figure of Moses intriguing but also enigmatic for much of his life: the first essay which he wrote on that character was *The Moses of Michelangelo*, published in 1914. He then continued to reflect on the figure of Moses, which led to his publication of *Moses and Monotheism* in 1938. Scholars generally argue that the two works are utterly independent of each other, but Ramnoux thinks that they are instead closely related. By examining Michelangelo's *Moses*, Freud faces the embodied image of his own ghost, namely the figure of a hero and a founding and law-making father, an extremely virile figure, whose manliness is symbolised by his thick and magnificent beard (which reminds of Samson's hair), a man caught in the act of containing his anger toward the idolatrous "rabble" (this is the word Freud uses). The sculpture represents the famous episode of the golden calf. Michelangelo had a revolutionary idea: he decided not to portray Moses' anger (as is well-known, Moses threw the tablets of the Law on the ground, enraged at the foolish idolatry of his people), but rather his effort to restrain it. Why was Freud so fascinated with that choice? The law of Moses established that his people should believe in a religion *without magic and without the promise of immortality*, one without *illusions*. It is also a religion which compels men to come to terms with their condition and especially with the inevitability of death: a religion *without* immortality! That is exactly what psychoanalysis does too (Freud is thus a Moses-like figure). Just like psychoanalysis, the law of Moses exposes the deceptiveness of desire and the original trauma of mortality. Moses' attempt to restrain his anger is thus a sign that he is *renouncing his drives*: drive renunciation is not an attempt to pursue an alleged moral good, but it rather stems from the tragic awareness that human beings are moved only by drives that must be controlled. Similarly, the renunciation of magic and idols is a sign of the awareness of the phantasmatic processes that underlie compulsions and drives.

---

[6] Ramnoux alludes to Freud's reading of Moses in her article on *King Lear*, but she also focuses specifically on Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* in a very complex work entitled "Sur une page de *Moïse et le Monothéisme*", which appeared in *La Psychanalyse* 3 (1957): see Ramnoux 2020c.

Wrath is the drive that characterises the figure of the hero (most famously Achilles) and of the father: it is the emotion associated with the Father and the symbol of his majesty. By renouncing wrath, Moses unveils the true nature of human beings, and, by forbidding his people to indulge in the illusion of mortality (a prohibition which Christians would later not accept), he obliges men to face their ancestral fear, namely the terror of disappearing from the world, the anguish of the void, the "crisis of presence"[7]. The sacred thus unearths the original trauma, and so does myth. Freud narrates (*Moses and Monotheism* is indeed a novel, as Freud himself admitted) that the reason why the Jews killed Moses is that they did not want to see what the prophet was trying to show and, above all, they forgot it and refused to see what they could not bear.

Freud considered Lear to be a figure antithetical to Moses[8]:

> What is Lear's main passion? One may answer that he is passionate about himself, he is characterised by a kind of overwhelming exhibitionism which triggers the indecent "striptease" with which the tragedy opens. It is at that point that an apocalyptic voluptuousness sets in, causing him to fall from his high throne to the ground. […] Seized by rage and stirred by affection, he loses his balance and falls to the ground in an awkward tumble. That is where Lear's fault and tragic fall lie. (Fusini 2010, 275)

Unlike Moses, Lear is indeed a Father dominated by wrath. Unlike Moses, who, in Freud's reading of Michelangelo's sculpture, forced himself to sit and remain silent after having leapt to his feet with the intention of hurling the tablets of the Law to the ground, Lear allows himself to be 'uprooted and carried away' by the violent storm of his anger, which is due to his 'love for himself'. Anger is the drive *par excellence*, *the* "Trieb", and, according to Seneca's *De Ira*, it is also *the* most significant theatrical emotion. Lear also has something in common with Yahweh, the jealous and vengeful god

7 I am here borrowing Ernesto de Martino's expression.

8 According to Piero Boitani, instead, "Lear is at the same time Job and Christ accomplishing Job's destiny", while "Cordelia is a Daughter just as Jesus is a Son in the Gospels" (Boitani 2009, 41, 53). Beyond the different paradigms and perspectives that may guide readers, it is undoubtedly true that in Shakespeare's *King Lear* some traits of God the Father of the Old Testament are present.

(Exodus 20:5), the wrathful god whom Moses himself dissuaded from destroying Israel. Lear's famous line is significant in this respect: "Come not between the Dragon and his wrath" (Shakespeare 1989, I.i.121), and so are his enraged outburst: "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!" (III.ii.1) and his equally famous self-diagnosis of "*Hysterica passio*" (II.iv.55). The tragedy thus displays the explosion of that dragon-like, monstrous, and uncontrollable wrath which destroys and then swallows up everything, leaving a trail of death and desolation, and which is triggered by Cordelia's "No", by the imperative to renunciation that reveals the *deadly* nature of the blind *lust* for living. Love for life is deadly. Interestingly, that sentence can be regarded as a condensed version of Freud's entire *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*[9]. The motif of the three caskets, which was rewritten and inverted in *King Lear*, brings to light that painful truth, a sacred, religious but also *repulsive* truth:

> Freud established a remarkable dichotomy in the field of religion […]. His dichotomy opposes religion involving magic to religion without magic and religion that promises immortality to religion that does not promise it. The former two encourage men to follow the path of their desire, while the latter two, of which Mosaic religion is the model, lead men to the truth and hence help them to accept the laws of their condition. […]. Let us now return to the last or the youngest of the three Parcae. (Ramnoux 2020d, 270)

As for the *work* of myth, which parallels that of religion:

> On the one hand, myth is a phantasmal representation of desire or foolish hope; but on the other hand it opens up a new dimension, that of eternal wisdom. Myths can be read in different ways but the best reading is the straightforward one. The original form is the best one. The reversed ones with their multiple combinations of narratives variants represent, on the contrary, [Paris'] foolish hope or [Lear's] foolish rejection [of Cordelia]. A slight correction is here required: the traumatic image which must resurface from the narration even though the narration *speaks* without having the possibility of *showing*, the scene

[9] It is Freud that Fusini echoes in entitling her above-referenced work on Shakespeare's theatre *Di vita si muore*.

> that re-emerges from the secret depths of the imagination is a plastic image. It can be painted white or black, made to represent old age or youth […]. Nothing prevents it from leading to phantasmatic compensation or, on the contrary, to wisdom. It all depends on how it is elaborated. (267)

The Mythopoetic Role of the Writer: The "tragédie oubliée de la psyché"

"It all depends on how [myth] is elaborated", writes Ramnoux; in other words, it all depends on the poet and on his *words*, but especially on the poet-playwright. Unlike other poets, the poet-playwright not only tells, but also has the chance of *showing* as he "puts on stage" (*en montant en scène*) a specific image.

> Just as in ancient mysteries, in which what is *said* can be distinguished from what is *shown*, [in plays], too, the thing that is shown and its innermost imaginary aspects hit man where his defences are lowest. Shakespeare staged a *re-elaborated* version of what Freud called the original myth, one that is capable of capturing men with its violent and almost unnatural quality. That version raises a question: what crime did Lear commit to be punished with carrying the body of his dead daughter to the tomb? The context is that of a covering, a disguise aimed at introducing and justifying the culminating scene, the tragic climax, a disguise which conceals the answer. That context requires a careful analysis aimed at digging below its surface, just as one digs behind the facade of a dream. Since the poet chose to represent the sisters as young and attractive and the hero as an old man, the relationship between them cannot but be that of father and daughters. The poet also chose not to develop the theme of eroticism and incest and hence the plot takes the form of a story of inheritance which contrasts with the majesty and grandeur of the elements at play. Such discrepancies encourage the spectator to look further afield for the interpretive key to the play. (264-65)

Using her insight as a scholar of ancient Greek theatre, Ramnoux encourages her readers to analyse *King Lear* as if it represented a scene from a mystery rite, such as, for instance, a scene from the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which the ritual objects – that is to say the 'images' – shown to the person about to be initiated were only shown and not 'said'. In other words, the dramatic text with its plot,

its characters, its symbolic scenes (the *con-text*, as Ramnoux calls it) is a 'transposition', a metaphor of the traumatic experience whose memory the poet tries to evoke in the spectator's mind. The entire text is a metaphor. Thus, as has been briefly mentioned above, the themes of patriarchy, inheritance, family, and power are the subjects of the story, they are *that which is said*, but not *that which is shown*. Ramnoux, though, does not underestimate the importance of *that which is said*: the themes of sovereignty, kinship, and family are indeed pivotal and thoroughly explored in her research on mythical and pre-Socratic theogonies and on the tragedy of the fifth century. Ramnoux's education was heavily influenced by Dumézil and she explored the notion of kingship in ancient Greece and in Celtic mythology. Her interest in *King Lear* and in Freud's interpretation of the play may even have been reinforced by her studies on Irish culture, which date back to the 1940s and 1950s and were then gathered in *Le grand roi d'Irlande*, her last volume, which was published in Perpignan in 1989 (Ramnoux 1989).

> [In *King Lear*], Shakespeare was able to evoke an apocalyptic atmosphere by representing the end of a kingdom and of a royal dynasty. It is a catastrophe that extends from the social sphere to the Universe and that the myths of Western Europe constantly associate with the avarice of a King who clings to his kingdom even when his magic is no longer working. […]. The Irish legend of King Bress is a relevant example: his avarice causes the decline of his realm and that is due to the fact that he has lost his magic and his fertility. In the cycle called "The Cycle of Kings", the figure of a usurper appears towards the end of the dynasty: he is destined to be sacrificed during a magical battle and replaced by a "son of promise". Disorder, famine, and anarchy are caused by these fallen kings or usurpers, as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* famously shows. (Ramnoux 2020d, 263)

A few pages before the passage that has just been quoted, Ramnoux points out that the expression associated with King Lear, "a lusty old man standing before three beautiful women", can also be rewritten as "un jeune premier en face de trois vieilles sorcières", "a bold young man standing before three old witches", a phrase which may aptly describe the famous scene in *Macbeth*:

> That situation is common in Welsh folklore or in the Goidelic folklore of Scotland and Ireland, and Shakespeare was certainly familiar with that corpus of stories. [In that folklore], the *three beautiful women* and their "inverted" counterparts, namely *the three old witches*, play a pivotal role in the selection of the next candidate for the throne, as is demonstrated by the three witches in *Macbeth*. (259)

By analysing the mythical 'device' in Shakespeare's plays, Ramnoux thus enables us to glimpse a connection between *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, to see one through the other. She also offers interesting insights into how Lear's kingship should be read: are we supposed to focus on the magic or on the political aspect? Focusing on the political aspect would lead us to the constitutional debate on the crown. The magical aspect – which emerges also in the inverted situation in *Macbeth* – is instead much more *poignant*, as Ramnoux would say: the magical priest-king is an apotropaic figure who averts the "crisis of presence", the crisis of natural rhythms and cycles. The priest-king is the last bulwark of the community against collective death. Lear, though, cannot fulfil that role in that his attachment to life goes beyond the limits of his own power and fecundity. If analysed from the perspective of magical kingship, *King Lear* is thus a play about facing death.

What is most important, though, is that all these transformations, all these images and points of view were created by the poet, William Shakespeare. How does the poet work with the mythical device? Does he use it consciously or unconsciously? How does he shape "la tragédie oubliée de la psyché" (Ramnoux 2020e, 284)[10]?

> The poet's work can be compared to the construction of a dream: it takes place in the twilight of the semi-conscious but preserves a facade of rationality which dreams can more easily drop. The dramatic text also conceals uncomfortable truths and weaves veils that help the man-

[10] I prefer not to translate this brilliant expression used by Ramnoux in another essay, "Mythe et Philosophie" (Ramnoux 2020e), which appeared in *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 66 (1968). Above all, I will not translate the word *psyché*, which, in this context, means soul, mind, and unconscious, and it carries those three meanings simultaneously. The semantic polysemy is here impossible to render in another language.

> child to assimilate crude lessons. More precisely, the poet draws on the legend that had previously fulfilled the same function and brings it closer to the myth. At the same time, though, he tears those veils with the blade of revealing words written for those who can understand them, and demolishes the facades through shocking and enigmatic visions. The poet is a figure that lies somewhere between the demiurge of dreams and the seer-interpreter and is sometimes closer to the former and sometimes to the latter. At least, that is what happens when a literary work stirs the reader's imagination and prompts them to think, thus deserving the banal title of "profound work". (Ramnoux 2020d, 265)

It is difficult to find a more brilliant and more accurate description of what the philological *esprit géométrique* weakly calls 'the problem of sources'. The sources on which a poet draws, at least a poet of the stature of Shakespeare and Aeschylus, are the 'memories from the cradle', namely his own memories (the memories of the man-child) and those of his entire community. Indeed, the "deep mines of the mental soil", to borrow Proust's words in *Du côté de chez Swann*, are those of the subject as well as of the entire community. When *that* kind of poet reads the work of another poet or writer, he thus plunges it deep into the flow of tradition and experience. In all his studies on art and literature as well as in his essays on anthropology and sociology, Freud himself explores subjective psychic experience and phylogenetic transmission simultaneously, without ever focusing exclusively on one or the other, as the poet does. For that reason, *The Theme of the Three Caskets* should not be regarded as an essay *on* Shakespeare or a psychoanalytic interpretation *of* Shakespeare, but rather as an attempt to trace the poet's steps, to study his techniques in working with images and words. In a passage in *The Theme of the Three Caskets* – a passage that has been accurately analysed by Ramnoux – Freud explicitly states that he is interested in studying the poet's reuse of the mythemes examined and argues:

> We get an impression that a reduction of the theme to the original myth is being carried out in [Shakespeare's] work, so that we once more have a sense of the moving significance which had been weakened by the distortion. It is by means of this reduction of the distortion, this partial

> return to the original, that the dramatist achieves his more profound effect upon us. (Freud 1958, 300)

Commenting on those lines, Ramnoux asks: do Freud and Shakespeare "not do the exact same thing, after all? They both try to find a simple, traumatic, and universally human meaning by digging below the distortion of oneiric riddles or enigmas [in Freud's case] or of traditional legends [in Shakespeare's case]" (Ramnoux 2020d, 251). Drawing on Freud's and Frazer's theories, T. S. Eliot called this operation "mythical method" and argued that it was used not only in Joyce's *Ulysses* but also in his own *Waste Land* and by *modern poets* more in general[11]. Eliot knew very well that "the mythical method" is actually an immemorial technique used by poets of all time, and not just by *modern poets*:

> For the artist is, in an *impersonal* sense, the most conscious of men; he is therefore the most and the least civilized and civilizable; he is the most competent to understand both civilized and primitive. (Eliot 1919, 1036, emphasis mine)

That is what Eliot wrote in his review of a collection of Indian-American shamanic songs, *The Path of the Rainbow* (published in 1918 and edited by George William Cronyn), which appeared in *The Athenaeum* in 1919. The *parole* of the poet is thus the *builder* of myths in that, in oral as well as in literate cultures, it is linked with tradition and ensures that tradition exists in a community. Thus, there would be no *langue* of the myth without the poet's *parole*, as Ramnoux clearly explains. In that regard, her idea is utterly antithetical to that of Lévi-Strauss. In one of his most important works, *The Structural Study of Myth*, published in *The Journal of American Folklore* in 1955, Lévi-Strauss stated:

> From that point of view [myth] should be put in the whole gamut of linguistic expressions at the end opposite to that of poetry, in spite of all which have been made to prove the contrary. Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of serious

[11] I am here obviously referring to Eliot's famous review of Joyce's *Ulysses*, "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth", which appeared in *The Dial* in November 1923.

> distortions; whereas the mythical value of the myth remains preserved, even through the worst translation. […]. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the *story* which it tells. (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 430)[12]

On the contrary, Ramnoux believes that the *langue* of myth described by Lévi-Strauss, without the contribution of the poet's *parole*, is a *langue sans sagesse*, that is to say a language deprived of its experiential, psychic, and traumatic nature, a 'neutralised language' if not one made only of empty words[13].

Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Echoes of the Oedipus Myth in Shakespeare's King Lear

So far we have focused on Ramnoux who reads Freud who reads Shakespeare. Let us now go back to *King Lear* itself and try to trace *in the poet's words* the structural elements of the "original myth" represented in the tragedy. There are three relevant passages: the use of a verb in I.i.42; a sentence spoken by the Fool in I.iv.169-70; and a sentence uttered by Lear in V.iii.20. These must be regarded and interpreted as elements that make up an oneiric riddle or wordplay.

As soon as he appears on stage, Lear announces his intention of dividing the kingdom. His speech appears to be lucid at first but, after a few lines, it becomes confused. "[W]e have divided / In three our kingdom" (Shakespeare 1989, I.i.36-37), says Lear, but the

[12] That study was first published in English and then translated into French by Lévi-Strauss himself under the title *La structure des mythes*. It appeared in *Anthropologie structurale*, published by Plon in 1958. This is probably Lévi-Strauss's most famous essay. The French version of the extract reads: "À cet égard, la place du mythe, sur l'échelle des modes d'expression linguistique, est à l'opposé de la poésie, quoi qu'on ait pu dire pour les rapprocher. La poésie est une forme de langage extrêmement difficile à traduire dans une langue étrangère, et toute traduction entraîne de multiples déformations. Au contraire, la valeur du mythe comme mythe persiste, en dépit de la pire traduction. […]. La substance du mythe ne se trouve ni dans le style, ni dans le mode de narration, ni dans la syntaxe, mais dans l'*histoire* qui y est racontée" (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 232).

[13] See Ramnoux's brilliant and polite comments on Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques* in Ramnoux 2020g.

kingdom has not been divided yet. Is it because the division has already been made in his mind? And how has he imagined it? What is the criterion he has planned to use? As we soon find out, the criterion is not equality but proportionality. Instead of dividing his kingdom equally among his daughters, Lear decides to divide it proportionally according to the amount of love that his daughters will profess. The division is thus a sort of auction won by *the highest bidder*. Lear hopes that the third buyer will outbid the other two, but she surprisingly states that, as far as she is concerned, the auction is worth "[n]othing" (86). Everything becomes worthless. The performance put up by Lear collapses. It is a false image. That word, "nothing", is disrupting: the game based on prices, bids, and assigning value to love is nothing but a facade erected to hide something… But what?

If we try to read the signs in this scene, we realise that the poet is presenting the audience with the fragments of a legend or a fairy tale, "the choice of the three caskets", which acts as a veil or a mirage. The word "nothing" dissolves that mirage, it blows away the narrative veil and untangles the dense and tangled web of words spun around the frame of the figurative situation.

The void that has opened before the audience compels them to carefully examine words and images. Once the fiction has collapsed, only an image and a word-phrase (or an image of a word) remain, which cannot be annihilated in that they are non-mimetic in nature. To "crawl toward death" (40): Lear sees himself crawling towards death (or, perhaps, wishes to do so), "[u]nburthen'd" (40), freed of the heavy burdens of his kingdom and his role. That vision is shocking: the king regresses to a child-like state in which he crawls and is incapable of speaking and walking. The effect achieved is conceptual rather than visual or descriptive: a disturbing antithesis is produced. An old man crawls like a baby but he crawls towards death. The scene of the division of the kingdom veils that "darker purpose" (35), that *secret*: crawling towards death. A mytheme, namely that of the ages of men, thus involuntarily emerges from Lear's words.

> Four, two, three – by using these numbers the Sphinx mocked the wisdom of men, who could not understand her riddle until Oedipus

> came. Oedipus solved the riddle but was forever hunted by guilt. As for Lear, he expects to have three supports in his old age, but his daughters are not identical, so he ends up lame. He also gives away his crown, which could have worked as an effective support, as the insolent fool who truly loves Lear later points out. (Fusini 2010, 309)

According to Athenaeus, Asclepiades of Tragilus reported the riddle of the Sphinx as follows:

> *A thing there is whose voice is one;*
> *Whose feet are four and two and three.*
> *So mutable a thing is none*
> *That moves in earth or sky or sea.*
> *When on most feet this thing does go,*
> *Its strength is weakest and its pace most slow.*[14]

Tetra-pous, *di-pous*, *tri-pous*… *Oidi-pous*, Oedipus. The mythical riddle poses the enigma of man, of that creature and its limited existence from its origin to its end, walking on four, two and three feet. The interpretation of the theme of walking, standing, and limping offered by Lévi-Strauss in his study on the myth of Oedipus is well known. It is a clever reading (despite the implications that Lévi-Strauss derives from it) which can be usefully summarised here. Standing and walking (or migration) represent autonomy from Mother Earth, movement towards the world, and conquest of knowledge, power, and exogamy. Limping is instead the (underworld) symbol of regression towards Mother Earth, towards men's earthly and material origin (and hence towards incest and parricide) (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 244-49). Oedipus is the living riddle – "the thing itself", as we could say borrowing the words used by Lear to describe Poor Tom (Shakespeare 1989, III.iv.104) – he is the man who answers the riddle with *his own name*, without knowing what he is going towards and what he is

[14] As is widely known, that riddle is not reported in the *Oedipus Rex*, although the Sphinx is mentioned three times (Sophocles 2010, lines 130, 391, 1199-200). Yet, the sources all seem to support the version that has been quoted here: see, for instance, the fragment of Euripides' *Oedipus*, fr. 540 Kannicht; Asclepiades of Tragilus, FgrHist 12 F 7a; *Antologia Palatina*, XIV, 64; the ancient commentaries on *Oedipus Rex* and on Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*; and the scholia on line 50 in Euripides' *The Phoenician Women*.

returning to, in other words, without knowing his destiny: man (Oedipus) is blind to himself. He is told so by contrasting and antagonistic voices. The soothsayer Tiresias warns him: "you have your eyesight, and you do not see how miserable you are, or where you live, or who it is who shares your household. Do you know the family you come from?" (Sophocles 2010, lines 414-16). His Mother and Bride says: "Why should a man whose life seems ruled by chance live in fear – a man who never looks ahead, who has no certain vision of his future? It's best to live haphazardly, as best one can" (lines 976-79). Finally, Oedipus himself identifies with Fate, that is to say with his own horoscope, when he states: "I see myself as a child of Fortune – and she is generous, that mother of mine from whom I spring, and the months, my siblings, have seen me by turns both small and great" (lines 1080-83). The man and his horoscope overlap, just as, in the horoscope, the child who crawls on Mother Earth and the adult who kills and conquers overlap. Oedipus is the *homme-enfant*, the *héros-enfant par excellence*: his 'memories from the cradle', which have fallen into oblivion but have not been forgotten, haunt him until he disappears in the woods of Colonus.

"Crawling towards death" is thus an expression that is linked with fate. Lear faces the Moira (the Moirai). He appears before her and he apparently offers something to her, but, in fact, he asks for something: "to set my rest / On her kind nursery" (Shakespeare 1989, I.i.122-23). These words are clearly the expression of a fantasy of death: the ambiguity of the words "rest" and "nursery" pierce the ear. Lear surrenders himself to death and waits to die in the arms of the last Nurse and Nurturer (Cordelia). The etymological origin of the word "nursery" – *nourrire*, *nourrice* – is still present, and it contrasts with the idea of death. A remarkable line uttered by the Fool reactivates the maternal echo of the word: "When were you wont to be so full of songs, sirrah?", asks Lear; "e'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers", answers the Fool (I.iv.167-69). Then he goes on to depict a grotesque and obscene *nursery scene*: "for when thou gav'st them the rod and putt'st down thine own breeches, / *Then they for sudden joy did weep, / And I for sorrow sung, / That such a king should play bo-peep, / And go the fools among*" (169-74). The Fool evokes a 'cradle scene' in which the mother or the nurses

play bo-peep or peekaboo with the child and he with them[15]. That childhood game is nothing else but the *Fort-da-Spiel*, as Freud explains in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It is a game which simulates the disappearance or loss of an object and then its reappearance. The main actors are the mother and the child, who is poised between fear and joy, namely fear of losing his mother and joy of finding her again. If we think about it, this is the magic trick *par excellence* in that it entails making things disappear and reappear. It is the game of being and non-being, of presence and absence. It has to do with the anguish of being alive, the anguish of seeing our mother disappear when we still walk on all four, and the anguish of disappearing as we approach death.

For that reason, Lear asks the Moira for one last deal: *fort-da*, his kingdom for her love. That is his way of dealing with Death: trying to make a deal, *that* is the "darker purpose" which he mentions on entering the stage. Behind the fairy-tale, legendary motif of the three parts of the kingdom and the three daughters of the king, there is a match between the hero and the Parca. Cordelia, though, answers, "No", "Nothing". At Lear's insistence, she then explains that "nothing" is what she has to say to obtain a larger part of the kingdom and, as for her love, she has devoted just the right amount of it to her father: she has given him half, not all of it. "So young, and so untender?", asks Lear; "So young, my Lord, and true", answers Cordelia (I.i.105-6). But the truth is an enemy to those who seek *compromise*.

Lear will thus walk towards death in a rather crude way: he will walk on all fours, he will crawl, devoured by senile and infantile rage, having experienced neglect, madness and nothingness. His own 'nothingness'. The annihilation of the King – that had already been discovered on an intellectual and linguistic level by Hamlet, who famously uttered: "The King is a thing. / […] / Of nothing" (Shakespeare 2016, IV.ii.26-28) – echoes another mytheme, namely

[15] For an interpretation of the game of bo-peep, see Shakespeare 1989, 43. The reader should be warned that, ever since the eighteenth century, scholars have often speculated as to how to interpret the game of bo-peep, but they tend to agree on the fact that it is not so much peekaboo but rather a sort of blind man's bluff (although they have offered no proof of that).

the story of the old and maimed king, the disgraced, mourning, and wounded king. His destiny is shared not only by Lear, but also by Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, although Oedipus' story has a completely different outcome: Oedipus becomes a hero, he is elevated to the status of deity; Lear, on the contrary, is destined to face the grim nothingness of death[16].

In analysing the line Lear utters over Cordelia's dead body – "And my poor fool is hang'd" (Shakespeare 1989, V.iii.304) – scholars have often argued that the Fool is her double. Yet, an actor's line is often a trap, it is a wink at the audience and an allusion to the art of acting itself. Cordelia disappears after pronouncing her judgement on her father's "darker purpose" and then reappears when she *must* reappear, namely when death finally comes. The breach between father and daughter has to be deep and unbridgeable and it cannot be compensated for by the presence of the Fool. The Fool is part of Lear's upside-down, carnivalesque, freakish, and lugubriously circus-like court. Cordelia is instead different, stern, righteous: above all, she does not play with words and meanings. She is *uncompromising* and sublime. Yet, it would not be wrong to say that Lear would like her to be his *fool*, his *fool-nurse*.

Lear never gives up on that wish despite everything he has gone through. He would like to be accompanied towards death in a way that reminds him of life, that keeps him attached to life until his very last breath. For that reason, the audience is shocked when Lear exclaims, like a child, "Have I caught thee?" (20). These words written by the poet tear another veil. Like a child, Lear rejoices at being locked in prison with Cordelia. It is impossible to forget his extraordinary and perturbing lines: "Come, let's away to prison; / We two alone will sing like birds i'th' cage: / […] so we'll live, / And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh / At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues / Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them

[16] For an analysis of the mythical and fairy-tale motif of the old king, which emerges in the story of *Oedipus at Colonus*, see Propp 1975. For an excellent thematic and textual comparison between *King Lear* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, see Beltrametti 2019 (in the same volume, which focuses on classical echoes of *Oedipus at Colonus* in *King Lear*, see also the articles of Carlo Maria Bajetta, Robert S. Miola, Seth L. Schein, and Silvia Bigliazzi). On Antigone and Old Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, see Pinotti 2013.

too" (8-9, 11-14). Lear invites Cordelia to play with him, to join him in his prison, to descend to his Hades, to accompany him to his death, or rather to die with him. "Have I caught thee?": he speaks like the child who says *da*, with a questioning wonder and in a way that seems to ask for complicity (*da?*). Lear wants to die with the joy of a child: there is *Lust* in this crawling towards death, there is a death-oriented desire. The poet's *parole* shows a primary scene in which life has reversed its course. When Lear enters the stage carrying Cordelia's body, the audience faces the traumatic experience of inversion. The desire of death swallows up life. A similar situation is described by Macbeth: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" (Shakespeare 2015, V.v.18); but days never really flow forward, they rather flow backwards "[t]o the last syllable of recorded time" (20), as if time were crumbling. That image of the old man who is eager to die and who, abusing life, has survived his honest and young daughter triggers the audience's moral rejection. The audience would like to overturn it, to reconvert it into its opposite. They would like to 'break the tables of the Law' in the face of that error and of that horror. That horror/error, though, concerns them too, as the poet seems to say.

References

Beltrametti, Anna. 2019. "Oedipus' εἴδωλον, 'Lear's shadow' (*Oedipus at Colonus* 110, *King Lear* 1.4.222)." In *"Oedipus at Colonus" and "King Lear": Classical and Early Modern Intersections*, edited by Silvia Bigliazzi, 265-90. Verona: Skenè Theatre and Drama Studies.

Boitani, Piero. 2009. *Il Vangelo secondo Shakespeare*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Cocchiara, Giuseppe. 1932. *La leggenda di Re Lear. Saggio d'una interpretazione etnologica del gruppo novellistico "Sacrificio del figlio minore."* Torino: Fratelli Bocca.

Dollimore, Jonathan. 1984. "*King Lear* (c. 1605-6) and Essentialist Humanism." In *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 189-203. Brighton: Harvester Press.

Eliot, T. S. 1919. "War-Paint and Feathers." Review of *The Path of the Rainbow: An Anthology of Songs and Chants from the Indians of North America*, edited by George W. Cronyn. *The Athenaeum*, October 17, 1919, 1036.

Freud, Sigmund. 1958. *The Theme of the Three Caskets*. In *The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, 291-301. Vol. 12 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press.

Fusini, Nadia. 2010. *Di vita si muore. Lo spettacolo delle passioni nel teatro di Shakespeare*. Milano: Mondadori.

Ginzburg, Carlo. 1989. *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba*. Torino: Einaudi.

Greenblatt, Stephen. 1990. "The Cultivation of Anxiety: King Lear and His Heirs." In *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture*, 80-98. New York: Routledge.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1955. *The Structural Study of Myth. The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (October-December): 428-44.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1958. *La structure des mythes*. In *Anthropologie structurale*, 227-55. Paris: Plon.

McLuskie, Kathleen. 1985. "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*." In Political Shakespeare: *New* Essays in Cultural Materialism, edited by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, 88-108. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Pinotti, Patrizia. 2013. "Il Vecchio e la Fanciulla. L'altro lato dell'edipo." In *Edipo. Confini, margini, periferie*, edited by Patrizia Pinotti and Massimo Stella, 113-58. Pisa: ETS.

Propp, Vladimir Jakovlevič. 1975. *Edipo alla luce del folklore. Quattro studi di etnografia storico-strutturale*. Translated and edited by Clara Strada Janovič. Torino: Einaudi.

Ramnoux, Clémence. 1989. *Le grand roi d'Irlande*. Perpignan: L'Aphélie.

Ramnoux, Clémence. 2020a. Vol. 2 of *Œuvres*. Edited by Rossella Saetta Cottone, revised by Alexandre Marcinkowski. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.

Ramnoux, Clémence. 2020b [1956]. "Hadès et le Psychanalyste. Pour une anamnèse de l'homme d'Occident." In Ramnoux 2020a, 215-28.

Ramnoux, Clémence. 2020c [1957]. "Sur une page de *Moïse et le Monothéisme*." In Ramnoux 2020a, 229-47.

Ramnoux, Clémence. 2020d [1967]. "Mythe, conte et tragédie. Une interprétation freudienne du *Roi Lear*." In Ramnoux 2020a, 248-70.

Ramnoux, Clémence. 2020e [1968]. "Conclusion. Mythe et philosophie." In Ramnoux 2020a, 271-84.

Ramnoux, Clémence. 2020f [1977]. "De la légende au code de sagesse à travers le jeu des mots." In Ramnoux 2020a, 419-29.

Ramnoux, Clémence. 2020g [1979]. "Hommage à Lévi-Strauss: L'ethnologue et le vieux sage." In Ramnoux 2020a, 479-92.

Shakespeare, William. 1989. *King Lear*. Edited by Kenneth Muir. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Routledge.

Shakespeare, William. 2015. *Macbeth*. Edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury.

Shakespeare, William. 2016 [2006]. *Hamlet*. Rev. ed. Edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury.

Sophocles. 2010. *Edipo re*. Translated and edited by Massimo Stella. Roma: Carocci.

Thompson, Ann. 1991. "Are There Any Women in *King Lear*?". In *The Matter of Difference: Materialist Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, edited by Valerie Wayne, 117-28. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.