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The blindness of mind and eyes in Sophocles' *Theban Tragedies* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Oedipus, Lear, and Gloucester

Аннотация. Сходство между Эдипом Софокла и Лиром Шекспира впервые было замечено несколько десятилетий назад. Литературоведы обратили внимание на эпизоды, в которых оба царя отталкивают тех, кто говорит правду (например, Тиресия и Кента), убиты два сына Эдипа и две дочери Лира, Эдип оплакивает свою жену и мать, мертвую Иокасту, а Лир — свою дочь, мертвую Корделию, Креон входит с трупом Антигоны, а Лир — с трупом Корделии, слепого Эдипа ведет Антигона, а слепого Глостера — Эдгар и т.д. Несколько лет назад (2019) был опубликован целый сборник статей, посвященных параллелям между «Эдипом в Колоне» и «Королем Лиром». И хотя в этом сборнике сходство между двумя пьесами анализируется с разных точек зрения, однако не уделяется особого внимания метафорическому смыслу слепоты ума и глаз, аспекту, на который автор данной статьи впервые обратил внимание в 2015 г. и более подробно рассматривает в этой статье. «Лучше быть слепым глазами, чем слепым умом»: это изречение армянского историографа V в. Егише, встречающееся и в других древних источниках, как нельзя лучше подходит к драматичной истории Эдипа, который, в свою очередь, имеет хорошо известные аналоги в шекспировском «Короле Лире» — Лира и Глостера. В статье рассматривается интересная параллель между этими тремя персонажами, а именно мучительный, трагический путь обретения ими мудрости через слепоту (в случае Эдипа это пророческая мудрость).

Ключевые слова: слепота ума, слепота глаз, мудрость через слепоту, пророческая мудрость, Эдип, Лир, Глостер

Для цитирования: *Topchyan A. S.* The blindness of mind and eyes in Sophocles' *Theban Tragedies* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Oedipus, Lear and Gloucester // Шаги/Steps. Т. 10. № 2. 2024. С. 310–317.

Поступило в редакцию 28 ноября 2023 г.; принято 31 марта 2024 г.

https://doi.org/10.22394/2412-9410-2024-10-2-310-317

Shagi / Steps. Vol. 10. No. 2. 2024
Articles

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The blindness of mind and eyes in Sophocles' *Theban Tragedies* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Oedipus, Lear and Gloucester

Abstract. Similarities between Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's Lear were first noticed decades ago. Scholars called attention to the episodes in which both kings repel truthtellers (e. g., Tiresias and Kent); Oedipus' two sons and Lear's two daughters are killed; Oedipus laments over his wife and mother, the dead Jocasta, and Lear weeps over his daughter, the dead Cordelia; Creon enters with Antigone's corpse and Lear with Cordelia's corpse; the blind Oedipus is led by Antigone and the blind Gloucester by Edgar; etc. A few years ago (2019) an entire collection of articles was published on the parallels between *Oedipus at Colonus* and *King Lear*. Although in this collection the similarities between the two plays are analyzed from different points of view, no special attention has been paid to the metaphorical meaning of blindness of mind and eyes, an aspect about which the author of this article first wrote in 2015 and discusses it in more detail in this paper. "It is better to be blind in the eye than blind in the mind": this saying of the 5th century Armenian historiographer Yeghishē, found in other ancient sources as well, perfectly fits the dramatic story of Oedipus, who in his turn has well-known counterparts in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, namely Lear and Gloucester. This paper focuses on an interesting parallel between these three characters, namely, the painful, tragic way by which they acquire wisdom (in the case of Oedipus, prophetic wisdom) through blindness.

Keywords: blindness of mind, blindness of eyes, wisdom through blindness, prophetic wisdom, Oedipus, Lear, Gloucester

To cite this article: Topchyan, A. S. (2024). The blindness of mind and eyes in Sophocles' *Theban Tragedies* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Oedipus, Lear and Gloucester. *Shagi / Steps, 10*(2), 310–317.

Received November 28, 2023; accepted March 31, 2024

https://doi.org/10.22394/2412-9410-2024-10-2-310-317

Similarities between Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's Lear were first noticed some decades ago. John Harvey, in his article "A Note on Shakespeare and Sophocles", called attention to episodes where both kings "throw out" the truthtellers (such as Tiresias and Kent respectively), Oedipus laments over the dead Jocasta and Lear weeps over the dead Cordelia, Creon enters, as Harvey supposes, with the dead body of Antigone (in *Antigone*)[1] and Lear enters with the dead body of Cordelia, the blind Oedipus is guided by Antigone and the blind Gloucester is led by Edgar, Oedipus' two sons and Lear's two daughters are killed, etc. [Harvey 1977: 264–265]. A decade later, Adrian Poole drew a parallel between Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, Euripides' *Bacchae*, and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, calling the readers' attention to the fact that all three tragedies "rouse and weigh ‹...› questions about death and justice" [Poole 1987: 234]. Further, after more similarities had been demonstrated by other scholars [Miola 1992; Kerrigan 2018], a whole collection of articles was eventually published a few years ago [Bigliazzi 2019]. In her fine summarizing "Introduction" to this volume, the editor, Silvia Bigliazzi, stresses the "need to investigate more thoroughly into the connections between these two plays, both genetically and comparatively, reconsidering conjectures about Sophocles as a possible catalyst in Shakespeare's uses of a variety of different sources ‹...› as well as diverse linguistic, thematic, and conceptual parallels" [Bigliazzi 2019: 18]. However, although in this collection of papers the parallels between the two plays are analyzed from different points of view, no special attention is paid to the metaphorical meaning of the blindness of mind and eyes, an aspect which I first discussed in the introduction to my Armenian translation of *King Lear* [Topchyan 2015: 32–35].

Blindness, both in the ordinary and metaphorical senses of the word, is one of the main motifs and concepts in the tragic story of King Lear. In his introduction to the play published in the Penguin Shakespeare series, the distinguished Shakespearean scholar Kiernan Ryan writes: "But, just as the metaphorical madness of Lear's actions in the opening scene mutates into the actual madness through which he acquires wisdom, so Gloucester's blindness to the true nature of his sons morphs into the real blindness which allows him to see feelingly the way the world goes" [Ryan, Hunter 2005: loc. 608–610].

When meeting the blind Gloucester, Lear says: "No eyes in your head? ‹...› yet you see how this world goes", to which Gloucester answers, "I see it feelingly" (IV.6.146). In the first scene of the play, Lear is blind in the mind, a blindness that is not objective and dictated by the circumstances, but rather subjective, self-willed and extremely stubborn. It is not that he is completely lacking in the ability to understand the actual reasons for the behaviour of those surrounding him, but he is simply unwilling to see what is obvious, with its inevitable consequences (cf. [Halio 2007: 14]). This is sheer kingly obstinacy: he is used to the fact that whatever he says or does is appropriate and cannot be questioned. Therefore, it is in vain that Kent tries to direct his gaze towards the truth ("See better, Lear; and

[1] In fact, if Creon himself carries a dead body, it is rather Haemon's than Antigone's. Cf. Griffith's comment on 1257–60 [Griffith 1999: 346].

let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye" — I.1.159–160). Because at that moment the blindness of the mind is unpreventable.

There is a saying of the 5th century Armenian historiographer Yeghishē (Eḷishē), found in other old sources as well (see [Thomson 1982: 68]): "It is better to be blind in the eye than blind in the mind". We can hear something similar to this proverb, in different wording and formulation, from the Earl of Gloucester as well (IV.1.20–22):

> I stumbled when I saw: full oft 'tis seen,
> Our means secure us, and our mere defects
> Prove our commodities.

Paradoxically, Gloucester, who, being "blind in the mind", behaved foolishly, believing his villainous son Edmund and rejecting his honest son Edgar, later on, thanks to his physical blindness, sees better with his mind. He has his famous archetype in Ancient Greek drama.

The myths about Oedipus' family, the Labdacids, were well known in the time of Sophocles, but, of course, each author could interpret them creatively, in his own way (a good example of this creative freedom is Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, where we find the Oedipus story to be significantly different from the Sophoclean version). In the brief references to Oedipus in Homer's *Iliad* (23.679–680) and *Odyssey* (11.271–280), it is said that after he has killed his father and married his mother, the gods immediately make this known to the people. His mother and wife, whom Homer calls Epicaste, hangs herself, while Oedipus continues reigning in Thebes, and after his death games are organized in his honour.

In his tragedy *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles chose another variant of the story and significantly reworked it, examining in Oedipus' character an everlasting philosophical and psychological problem — the man doesn't know who he is in reality, and when, in the end, he inevitably comes to know that, it is too late.

Oedipus, king of Thebes, who at the fatal moments of his life, when killing his father and marrying his mother, had suffered from the lack of knowledge and had not seen when his eyes were in their place, suddenly, after losing them, becomes a seer and predicts the future. Such is his character in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*: he knows what is going to happen, he foretells that the army of the seven generals will not conquer Thebes, but that the campaign will be disastrous first of all for them, and that his sons Polynices and Eteocles are going to kill each other. Moreover, not only he became a blind prophet but also was endowed with magic power. He dies in mysterious circumstances; although blind, he himself goes to find the place of his grave, which must also be known only to Theseus, king of Athens, and which is going to have divine power and protect Athens from enemies. There is an underground thunder at the moment of his death, a divine voice calls on him to die, something terrible happens, and Theseus, the only man who is present, covers his eyes with his hand in order not to see that. As is supposed by the messenger who tells us about his death, probably the earth had split open and devoured him.

All this somehow, especially the mysterious circumstances, reminds us of the supposed suicide of Gloucester in *King Lear*, when he, as it seems to him, throws

himself from a high rock into the precipice remarkably described by Edgar, while an awful creature, a fiend with two full moons instead of eyes and with a thousand noses and horns, as Edgar says, had accompanied him to the dread summit of the rock.

Even more interesting is the likeness between Oedipus and Lear. Both of them are deprived of the royal throne and become miserable wanderers, the first, because of his unknowingly committed sins, and the second, because of his self-conceited, capricious character and blindness of mind. Oedipus, as he says in *Oedipus at Colonus*, is expelled from his city by his power-seeking sons (or at least they don't oppose his expulsion), while Lear is thrown out of their houses by his ungrateful and wicked daughters. Oedipus, when deeply insulted and angered, cruelly curses his son Polynices (1380–1396), while in Shakespeare's play Lear fiercely curses his daughter Goneril (I.4.266–279).

That is to say, the source of the subjects and motifs of Shakespeare's stunning tragedy can already be found in the classical world, which, of course, doesn't mean that when writing *King Lear*, Shakespeare doubtlessly had Oedipus' character in his mind. Although he knew classical mythology and some Greco-Roman writers quite well, there is no evidence that he ever read the Greek tragedians first-hand. As Ben Johnson famously wrote, Shakespeare knew "small Latin and less Greek", and as Harvey in his above-mentioned article noted regarding the similarities, "not possessing Shakespeare's copy of Sophocles, we have no way of knowing whether they are more than coincidences" [Harvey 1977: 261]. More recently, Kerrigan has expressed an opposite view ("Among the origins of *King Lear* ‹...› are the tragedies of Greek antiquity" [Kerrigan 2018: 65] and "Shakespeare had read some Sophocles" [Ibid.: 73]), which, however, is rather a hypothesis than a conclusion based on factual evidence. In the tragedy of Hamlet, Polonius mentions Roman, not Greek, dramatists, namely Seneca and Plautus as exemplary playwrights (there is a special study on the influence of Seneca on Shakespeare [Miola 1992]). Nevertheless, there were Latin translations and adaptations of Greek dramas in Shakespeare's England, and he should have been familiar at least with some of them (cf. "...Many recent studies bring credible evidence to bear upon the diffusion of the Classics, including Greek texts, in Elizabethan England" [Beltrametti 2019: 269]). Besides that, Seneca himself wrote a tragedy entitled *Oedipus*. In this view, we could either suppose that the parallels between Sophocles' Theban tragedies and Shakespeare's *King Lear* are accidental and independent of each other, or, rather, they are expressions of the same traditional motifs, especially, the blindness of eyes and the blindness of mind.

Furthermore, there are also other similarities between Greek drama and Shakespeare's works. Particularly two of Sophocles' Theban plays, namely *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, are among the oldest classical examples of a tragedy in which the dramatic conflict between irreconcilably opposing characters and realities inevitably leads to a disaster, a great misfortune — examples on the basis of which important theories of theatre and drama were later developed. Let us remember, for instance, several definitions by the eminent Shakespearean scholar Andrew Cecil Bradley [1905: 5–39]:

1. The action in Shakespearean tragedy is essentially a conflict. It can often be perceived as an antagonism between two characters, one of which is the protagonist, or else as a collision of two sides or groups, in one of which the protagonist is the most prominent figure.

Accordingly, the actions of Sophocles' tragedies *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone* are dramatic conflicts as well. In the first one, the conflict is between the protagonist Oedipus and the circumstances surrounding him: a seeming wellbeing on the one hand, and imminent catastrophe on the other. In other words, this is a conflict between the blindness of mind and lack of knowledge on the one hand, and grim reality on the other, as well as between unawareness and awareness in the characters of ignorant Oedipus and the knowing blind prophet Tiresias. In *Antigone*, the dramatic conflict is between the protagonist Antigone and Creon, king of Thebes, which more precisely corresponds to Bradley's definition. If we overlook for a moment the particular characters and speak more generally, the conflict is between a sister's self-sacrifice and a king's tyranny, and from an even more general point of view, between unwritten divine laws and human laws.

2. According to Bradley's next definition, Shakespearean tragedy is always related to people of high estate, often, to kings and princes, and if not, then to important figures of a country (such as, for instance, Coriolanus, Antony, or Othello), or at least, to significant noble families (for example, in *Romeo and Juliet*). Though we can say that the soul of a prince and of a peasant can suffer and feel pain in the same way, still the story of a king, prince, triumvir or general "has a greatness and dignity of its own. His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence — perhaps the caprice — of Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival" [Bradley 1905: 10]. And Bradley cites the famous passage about the maddened Lear: "A sight most pitiful in the meanest wretch, / Past speaking of in a king" (IV.5.200–201).

Accordingly, in the three Theban tragedies of Sophocles, the royal family of the Labdacids perishes (with the exception of Ismene, but her story finishes when her sister Antigone dies), and in *Antigone*, thematically the last (though probably the earliest by date) of those tragedies, Cleon, king of Thebes, "falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust", and his wife and son die.

3. So, Bradley says, Shakespearean tragedy is a story "of human actions producing exceptional calamity and ending in the death of men of high estate" [Bradley 1905: 16], a definition which well fits many of the surviving ancient Greek, including Sophoclean, tragedies. In other words, Shakespeare's plays are closely related to the traditions of Greco-Roman theatre.

This prompts us to remember another parallel with Ancient Greece. Protagoras, the famous Greek philosopher of the 5th century BC, said: πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος ("Man is the measure of all things"; see, for instance, in Plato's *Theaetetus*, 152a). While such an approach was not very viable in Protagoras' own day and often aroused the opposition of his god-fearing contemporaries, in the period of Late Renaissance it became widespread. Hence, there is

a significant difference between Sophocles' Theban tragedies (especially *Oedipus Rex*) and Shakespeare's plays. While the actions of the latter's characters are usually dictated by themselves, the "man-measures" (with some exceptions such as the Ghost's intrusion into Hamlet's life), the pernicious behaviour of Oedipus and the extermination of his family are predestinated from above. A power outside the human microcosm affects the descendants of the Labdacid family, directing them with irresistible force to where they shouldn't have been and making them do what they shouldn't have done. That same power, after its unprovoked and incomprehensible cruelty towards Oedipus, suddenly decides in the end to make a blind prophet of him and to endow him and his grave with supernatural qualities. The Greeks called that power by different names: τύχη, πότμος, πεπρωμένη, μοῖρα (fate, destiny, fortune, lot, doom) or ἀνάγκη (the necessary, the inevitable). It was present in the life of everyone, but, nevertheless, in certain works (for instance, in Sophocles' *Antigone* or in Euripides' *Medea*), it significantly lost its importance, became secondary and almost unnoticeable, leaving the arena to the free will of the opposing parties and characters, and bringing those plays nearer to the future, to Shakespearean tragedy.

Thus, the motif of blindness, having originated in the Ancient Greek world and having been reassessed, particularly, in the plays of the great tragedian Sophocles, reached Shakespeare and acquired new shades of meanings and connotations (but, let me repeat, we cannot insist that when creating the characters of Lear and Gloucester, Shakespeare was directly under the influence of Sophocles' Oedipus). The mental blindness of Oedipus, when he kills his father and marries his mother, is not a result of his free will but is predestined by his inevitable fate. Although, after his unintentional sins are revealed, he blinds himself willfully, during an outbreak of wild frenzy, yet later on, again through supernatural interference, he becomes a wise seer and soothsayer.[2] By contrast, Lear's mental blindness is free-willed and leads him to a complete loss of reason. However, after passing through the path of madness, at the end of his life the aged king, by way of both the external circumstances and the transformations that have taken place in his soul and mentality, acquires wisdom which previously he never had or looked for (unlike Oedipus who thanks to his wit had saved the Thebans from the Sphinx). Gloucester, too, demonstrates blindness of mind, partly willfully and consciously, and partly due to external influence (for he becomes a plaything in the hands of his son Edmund), and eventually loses his eyes. After becoming blind, he begins to see clearly with his mind. Thus, just as in the case of Oedipus, a new capacity of mind appears as a result of mutilation and terrible physical pain, with the difference that while Oedipus' blindness is the deed of his own hand, Gloucester's blindness is the deed of others. That is to say, in all three cases the result is wisdom (in the case of Oedipus, superhuman prophetic wisdom) as an extremely painful, torturous achievement, and this ominous way from blindness to wisdom is nothing else but tragedy.

[2] For Oedipus' "blindness and insight", from a different point of view, cf. [Goldhill 1986: 205–221]. Cf. further [Segal 1995: 149–152].

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