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À propos of King Lear in the New Italian Translation and Edition by Alessandro Serpieri (Venezia: Marsilio, 2018)

Abstract

This new Italian translation and edition of *King Lear* by Alessandro Serpieri foregrounds at least three points for discussion: 1. the sense of subjective identity so crucial to Renaissance thought; 2. the polyphonic, plurivocal orchestration of this play, when opposed to the monologic structure of other so-called great tragedies; 3. the theme of madness, from the Erasmian *Praise of Folly* to modern psychoanalytical interpretations.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *King Lear*; translation; madness; Alessandro Serpieri

Let us begin with King Lear's famous question (which actually sounds much more like an implicit statement to me): "Who is it that can tell me who I am? (Serpieri ed. and trans. 2018, 1.4.204). Italian versions of this crucial question/statement are, among others (taken from the most popular ones) the recent Bompiani edition (D'Amico trans. 2014): "C'è qualcuno che possa dirmi chi sono?"; or the classic Sansoni edition (Chiarini trans. 1977): "Chi è che mi sa dire chi sono?". Serpieri drastically and incisively shortens the sentence, switching its meaning from a merely poetic/literary stance into a dramatic, oral performance, by transferring the implicitly neutral *someone* into the subjective 'I', a spectacular finale: "Chi sa dirmi chi sono *io*?", which requires the actor to stress the last syllable. Lear's imperative musing is basic to all Shakespearean drama. And particularly in the plays mostly admired by Serpieri, from *Richard II* through the so-called great tragedies to the so-called last *romances*. *Who am I?* could also have been easily resounding in Serpieri's inner ear, given his fondness for Puccini's operas ("Chi son?", sings Rodolfo in *La Bohème*).

Thus, who am I? Lear's hopeless, maybe a madman's cry both reflects and challenges Hamlet's too famous words ("What a piece of work is a man . . .", 2.2.303), construed as it is upon Psalm 8:44 ("What is man, that you are mindful of him?"). If both Hamlet and the Psalmist are vague about what the 'quintessence' of humanity is (physical or metaphysical? Human or un/sub/super-human?) Lear's tragic interrogation is strictly but doubly personal. His rhetorically emotive explosion of desire about his own identity – probably aroused by his mental instability – condenses at least two fundamental questions. Who am I in particular, to be sure, but also, who is in the intellectual or psychological position to know and tell

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me? This search for an understanding of one's self is notoriously central to Renaissance humanist thought. The *self* becomes an obsession, an entity to be analysed and known, as Polonius famously advises his son Laertes; also introducing the notion of multiple identities: individuality is necessarily a shifting phenomenon, always under negotiation, and a substantially Joycean 'work in progress'. Identities are evasive and precarious, slippery and provisional, and therefore subject to the phenomenon that Stephen Greenblatt – with reference to Renaissance thought – has called *improvisation* (1980): a practice of symbiotic creativity and concealment through which the 'selfhood' is formed, or – so to speak – under construction. Part of Lear's identity crisis includes the dissonances of his commitments in simultaneously being the father of three daughters *and* "every inch a king" (4.6.103: "dalla testa ai piedi un re"). The trauma caused by the perception of losing the respect that is due to his kingly authority comes to the fore in Lear's encounter with Oswald who, in reply to the king's question "Who am I, sir", coldly affirms, "My lady's father" (1.4.66-7). Which means that identity is after all the convergence of how individuals see themselves and how they are perceived by others. It is precisely in the conflict between internal and external views that the Shakespearean drama of identification lies. It is also a drama of social and political reputation. This is why Serpieri always detects in Shakespeare's historical/tragic plays *exempla* of the 'overall symbolic and signic system' (both medieval and early-modern) which advancing modernity was due to disrupt.

Anyway, in order to understand his own identity, Lear needs to be 'told' by someone else, as if recognizing himself solely by a narration told by 'others'. Just to name Shakespearean characters Serpieri has frequently dwelt upon, dealing with this specific subject: Richard II, Hamlet, Othello, and precisely Lear. Richard II, in a delirium of self-effacement, only claims to be remembered in a biography narrated in retrospect and sorrow. Hamlet, when dying, commands Horatio to "draw thy breath in pain / To tell my story" (5.2.339-40).¹ Othello, not relying on anyone else to commemorate him, manages to give his own version of his story just before committing suicide. It is indeed a typical Shakespearean paradox that identities can only be known when they are about to be lost, as if 'loss of identity' should be 'the condition itself for self-fulfilment'. Moreover, the search for an identity, the need to be a distinctive individual both implies awareness and requires acceptance of the self's *tragically isolated* condition. When Lear puts his question, it is pertinently the Fool who answers: "Lear's shadow" (1.4.205). Where a binary explanation opens up: foreknowledge of the mad king's desperate solitude, and also the relation between identity and drama, in as far as "shadow", in Shakespeare's idiolect, can mean an 'actor'. Subjective identities can, in a dramatic context, not only be precarious and evasive, but performative as well: both fictional roles and interpersonal, dialectic, fluid 'personations'.

In Serpieri's analysis (which is equally distributed among introduction, marginalia and notes), his emphasis on this tragedy of non-entity continuously oscillates between the existential and the political levels. He envisages Lear's 'fall' – in strictly Elizabethan terms, a downfall from high to low existential/political/nominalistic

¹ Quotations from *Hamlet* are from Shakespeare (1997).

attributions – as the embodiment of the collapsing symbolic and social system derived from the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. Lear, as the apex of the feudal pyramid, not only loses his political power when he arbitrarily delegates it to his mischievous daughters, but more substantially destroys it when he accepts to be defrauded of his axiological commitment as both father and monarch. It is in this ‘undoing’ – reminiscent to me of Richard II’s – of his simultaneously political and existential function that Lear achieves his nullification, his becoming “nothing”. Lear – and to be sure Gloucester, his double or alter ego – can stand for the partial truths of a passing defective society; but they are fundamentally undone by the total lies of their respective existences.

One further point which I would like to foreground concerning Serpieri’s linguistic, critical, and epistemological vision of *King Lear*, is the one according to which this play is a symphonic and polyphonic architectural composition, almost unique among the great monologic, introspective tragedies based on the sole interiority of the eponymous leader (both as a character and an actor). Here we find a multi-functional interaction, with two plots, two fathers, two daughters, two sons-in-law, who interfere with each other; moreover, there is a friction of two possible worlds *within* the conscience of the tragic hero; but chiefly we have the continuously strained and endemically subversive ‘duologue’ between the King and his Fool. Thinking of which, one should recall Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*, which Serpieri correctly recognizes as one of the fundamental matrixes for this play.

King Lear states indeed the basic ontological distinction of Erasmus’s two follies, a distinction which goes far beyond the classic Platonic opposition between a creative and a disruptive *mania* as posited in *Ion* and *Phaedrus*. Following Moria’s eulogy, Shakespeare discriminates folly as true, genuine perception of the inner nature of human things (here represented by the Fool) from madness as the false, distorted perception of it (the King’s). The same bipartite structure informs any articulation of this primary, founding opposition, in as much as: 1. both folly and madness can be either authentic or simulated; 2. each category is signified by two characters; 3. the opposition between authenticity and simulation is represented by couples of characters. According to this scheme, one can find pure Erasman folly in the nominalistically privileged figure of the Fool, and a fake (though semantically authentic) Erasman folly in the figure of Kent (who feigns folly to be helpful to his dethroned master), while we can detect pure Erasman madness both in Lear (a genuine one) and in Edgar (an affected one). On the side of naturalness there is the veridical foolishness of the Fool contrasted with the veridical madness of Lear, while on the side of artificiality we have the supposed – but true to Erasmus – foolery of Kent contrasted with the supposed – yet, in Erasmus’s terms, correct – madness of Edgar.

The most elementary thematic antithesis, that between the King and the Fool, moves from one of the simplest Erasman distinctions, that between folly either in old or young people. Old age, Erasmus says, provokes a form of *stultitia* which deprives people of any sense of intellectual discrimination, forcing them again to the state of wayward infancy; Shakespeare delegates the formulation of this topic to Goneril, the hater of all filial dignities: “Old fools are babes again, and must be used / With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abused” (1.3.19-20; Serpie-

ri's translation: "I vecchi sciocchi sono di nuovo bambini, e li si deve trattare / con le sgridate, oltre che con le lusinghe, quando li si vede traviati"). Completely different, that is, lively and witty, is the folly of the young: an instinctive foolishness, an apparent fickleness which is typical of the "sweet" Fool, the one outspoken and unrestrained, and such is the self-conscious foolery of a disguised jester like Kent. The Erasmian polarity is fully established by Lear's famous exclamation when the symbolic storm – both natural and psychological – is approaching him at the end of Act 2: "O Fool! I shall go *mad*" (2.2.473). Significantly enough, the "bitter fool" that Lear embodies is echoed at a distance by his own counterpart, the "sweet fool" reified in the lineaments of his court jester, when the storm is actually raging: "This cold night will turn us all to *fools* and *madmen*" (3.4.71: "Questa fredda notte ci farà diventare tutti matti e pazzi").

The old king proves to be decisively mad within an Erasmian frame of reference. His folly makes him *blind*, as Kent intuits: "See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eyes" (1.1.158-9). Serpieri's translation: "Guarda meglio, Lear, e lascia che io rimanga / la veritiera messa a fuoco del tuo occhio". Lear is 'blind', as Erasmus comments on his unhinged, uptight men of power, justly because he refuses to see truths otherwise manifest before his blurred (in)sight. Lear is also connoted as mad because he is 'dreadfully' furious, enraged by too violent and disruptive passions, like those defined in the *Praise of Folly* as misplaced love, covetousness, desire for revenge, and anxiety about punishment.

Turning to the eponymous Fool, he, like Moria's devotees – as well as Moria herself – has an innate instinct to ever tell the truth, whatever the external circumstances: "Prithee, Nuncle, keep a schoolmaster that can / Teach thy Fool to lie: I would fain learn to lie (1.4.156-7; Serpieri's translation: "Ti prego, zietto, prenditi un maestro che insegni al tuo / Matto a mentire; vorrei proprio imparare a mentire"). Kent's affected foolishness also comes to the fore (2.2.85-9) as that of an honest, straightforward fool: "praised from bluntness" ("apprezzato per la sua schiettezza"); "he cannot flatter, he" ("non sa lusingare, lui"); "an honest mind and plain" ("mente onesta e sincera"); "he must speak truth" (ll. 85-90; "deve dire il vero"). In any case, the Fool's primary role is that of relieving the king's existential pains, which Kent worries about. When asking if someone is caring for Lear's mental and physical status (3.1.15-17), the answer sounds quite obvious: "None but the Fool, who labours to outjest / His heart-struck injuries" (ll. 16-17); Serpieri's translation: "Solo il Matto che tenta di lenire con le burlle le sue ferite al cuore". A particular device the Fool adopts to alleviate Lear's sufferings is the one enacted at the beginning of Act 3. To soothe the old man's anguish, his Fool conceives a long prophecy, in his version of Merlin's style, foreseeing a forthcoming ideal world where everything in life shall be just as it should be: honest, pure, balanced, fair (3.2.75-91): such is the pure Erasmian 'inspiration and divinity' formulated in history by Merlin, because the Fool, like the Magus, "lives before his time" (ll. 91-2; "Questa profezia la farà Merlino, perché io vivo prima del suo tempo").

At the end of his critical introduction, with a formidable but not at all arbitrary jump from Erasmus to Freud (after all, deranged people are still at stake!) Serpieri summons up a modernist/psychoanalytic view of this play with reference to Freud's famous annotations on *King Lear* (Moran 2010; Hollitscher 2017). The ina-

bility of the old and insane man to evolve from his primitive mental state, as well as the insistent need for the accomplishment of prohibited (probably sexual/incestuous) desires, leads to a decline into madness and determinist inevitability. Indeed, his legal and familiar abuses have been determined by his privileges both as a father and a king. In Freud's interpretation, a crucial, devastating event has separated him from both his family and his kingdom. He cannot move beyond his splitting mental status. His only possible reaction is that of anger, endemically reverting to a paranoid schizoid position, when his desires are not being fulfilled or when his repressed intents are made manifest through his own or other characters' inability to convey what they mean to say. The destabilisation of both his family and his kingdom shows Lear's regression into symbolic formations and internalisations of events throughout the play, up to the moment of his acceptance of Cordelia's death.

Multiple recent psychoanalytical readings of this play mostly attend to the Freudian incest taboo intertwined with Melanie Klein's object relations: absence of mothers or disregard for motherly figures; one could name scholars such as Bott-Spillius, Milton, Couve, Garvey, and Steiner (2011), Daniels (1987), Chiu (2012). In my very tentative exemplification, the objectification and introjection of the mother (who is talked about but never present in the plot) trigger numerous complex conceptual and social consequences. Flaunting an aggressive attitude towards the mother figure (as in "I would divorce me from thy mother's tomb / Sepulchring an adulteress", 2.2.313-14; "Io divorzierei dalla tomba di tua madre / perché sepolcro di un'adultera") Lear demands a form of validation from his daughters, which can – in psychoanalytical terms – be regarded as internal objects, or projections of what he sees as Good. Lear's projective identification of his fears into the validation he demands from his daughters might be his unconscious defending what he fears most. These defences are the pathological organization of a personality, where unconscious fantasies constitute the basis for all his symptoms, patterns, thoughts, dreams, etc. The old king displays behavioural aspects that would indicate that he has not matured beyond personality splitting, a condition which explodes when Cordelia refuses to fulfil his fantasy of validation itself. To his request to the three daughters: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most" (1.1.50; "Chi di voi dovremo dire che più ci ama"), Cordelia merely replies with a triple *nothing*, which means that, unlike her sisters, she does not lend herself as an object of incestuous desire, and precisely this refusal establishes Lear's *thanatos*, i.e. his aggression or death instinct.

It is unfortunate – a naive reader could observe – that the character of King Lear himself, unlike those of Richard II, Hamlet, Macbeth, or Othello, does not offer a single soliloquy to allow for such unrestricted (farfetched?) accesses to his mind. What can I add? Psychoanalytical leads have been meanwhile intercepted by medical researchers to whom Lear's madness can be simply the sign of a mental illness, more specifically he could be suffering from 'senile dementia', or 'Alzheimer's disease' (see Lee and Jarvis 2004 and Daniels 1987, among others). For life expectancy of the period, to have Alzheimer's disease being more than eighty years old could have been almost a miracle.

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