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Kin(g)ship and Power

Edited by Eric Nicholson

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Contents

Kin(g)ship and Power

Edited by Eric Nicholson

ERIC NICHOLSON – <i>Introduction</i>	5
ANTON BIERL – <i>The mise en scène of Kingship and Power in Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes: Ritual Performativity or Goos, Cleonomancy, and Catharsis</i>	19
ALESSANDRO GRILLI – <i>The Semiotic Basis of Politics in Seven Against Thebes</i>	55
ROBERT S. MIOLA – <i>Curses in Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes and in Shakespeare’s Richard Plays</i>	87
ELENA PELLONE and DAVID SCHALKWYK – <i>“Breath of Kings”: Political and Theatrical Power in Richard II</i>	105

Miscellany

ANNA NOVOKHATKO – <i>Epic-Oracular Markedness in Fifth-Century BCE Greek Comic Fragments</i>	119
APRIL WEINTRITT – <i>The Deliverymen of Florentine Comedy: 1543-1555</i>	137
KONRAD WOJNOWSKI – <i>Performative Uncertainty and Antifragile Theatre</i>	159

Special Section

MICHAEL COVENEY – <i>Dominique Goy-Blanquet, Shakespeare in the Theatre: Patrice Chéreau, London: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare)</i>	183
GHERARDO UGOLINI – <i>When Heroism is Female. Heracles at Syracuse</i>	189
ANGELO RIGHETTI – <i>Measure for Measure: Shakespeare Festival, Roman Theatre, Verona, 19-21 July 2018</i>	197
MARK BROWN – <i>Waiting for Godot in the Marketplace: Setting the 2018 Edinburgh Festival in Context</i>	201

Books Received	211
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ERIC NICHOLSON*

Introduction

Monarchies not only excel in ordinary, everyday matters,
but they have also acquired every advantage in war.
Monarchies are better able than other governments to prepare
their forces, to use these to make the first move unobserved,
to persuade some and force or bribe others, and to induce
yet others by other means. (Isocrates 2000: 174)

Even supposing the principle to be maintained that kingly power
is the best thing for states, how about the family of the king?
Are his children to succeed him? If they are no better than
anybody else, that will be mischievous. But, says the lover of royalty,
the king, though he might, will not hand on his power to his children.
That, however, is hardly to be expected, and is too much
to ask of human nature. (Aristotle 2001: 1201)

God gives not kings the style of gods in vain,
For on his throne his scepter do they sway,
And as their subjects ought them to obey,
So kings should fear and serve their god again
If then ye would enjoy a happy reign.
(James VI/I 1603: A2)

HAMLET The body is with the King, but the King is
 not with the body. The King is a thing.
GUILDENSTERN A thing, my lord?
HAMLET Of nothing.
 (Shakespeare 2006: 360-1)

1. The Staging of Kin(g)ship and Power, Between Affirmation and Negation

What is at stake, and what changes take place, when an actor plays the part of a king before a live audience? Will the performance affirm the supreme virtue, perhaps even the divine right of the monarch and his dynas-

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ty, or will it expose the human frailties of the ruler and his regime, showing how kingship risks degeneration into tyranny and being (self-)negated? Will audience members necessarily believe in the efficacy of the actor's impersonation of a heroic, godlike or at least sacred king, or might they perceive that the actor is only a 'shadow' of the real 'thing'?

Numerous theatre traditions throughout world history have confronted these questions in a variety of ways, their distinct cultural contexts shaping differences in the portrayal of kings either divine or mortal, in relation to crucial religious and political differences. The most important of surviving ancient Egyptian ritual dramas, which has been called "The Mystery Play of the Succession" (Frankfort 1978: 123-39) entailed the playing of the part of the new Pharaoh by the allegedly divine king himself, and supporting roles by royal princes, priests, and court attendants. In this case, then, presentation supersedes representation. The ritual drama's script and props – featuring the 'qeni', a kind of stomacher, worn during the climactic embrace between the new Pharaoh and his recently deceased predecessor – are used not only to enact but to effectuate the continuity, indeed the eternal life of the Egyptian realm, through the transformation of the old king into Osiris, god of the night and of the dead, and of his son the new king into Horus, god of the day and of the living (Frankfort 1978: 124).¹ Presentational, apotropaic as well as commemorative criteria also take precedence in such ritual dramas as the Mayan "Rabinal Achi", still sung and danced by the Quiché speakers of highland Guatemala, whose performance counteracts malevolent curses and connects their reenactment of the story of the famous king Quicab with the maintenance of order in both the state and cosmos (Tedlock 2003). A similar objective, if expressed in more representational terms, can be seen in Kalidasa's classical Sanskrit drama *Abhijnanasakuntala* ("The Recognition of Sakuntala"), which concludes by celebrating the reunion of the hero-king Dusyanta with his semi-divine wife Sakuntala and their son Bharata, destined to become the entire world's benevolent ruler (Kalidasa 2008). While medieval Christian theologians and ecclesiastical authorities would eventually promote stagings of Jesus' miracles, sufferings, death and resurrection as a means of affirming the power and glory of the King of Heaven, the "Passion" and "Mystery" plays also made room for critiques and satires of kingship, in figures like the ranting and raving tyrant Herod.² As secular, professional theatre emerged in early

¹ On the ritual drama of Abydos and other ancient Egyptian theatrical ceremonies, see also Gaster 1950: 380-403, and Zarrilli, McConachie, Williams, and Sorgenfrei 2006: 53-84.

² On medieval religious drama in general, see Beadle (ed.) 1994, and on the ranting and raving figure of King Herod, who typically appears in the Mystery plays of "Herod and the Magi" and "The Slaughter of the Innocents", see Beadle and King (eds) 1999, es-

modern Europe, concomitant with the rise of both absolutism and neo-republicanism, questionings and de-sacralizations of abusive kingship gain prominence in several histories and tragedies by Marlowe, Shakespeare, Calderon de la Barca, Corneille, and other leading playwrights.³ Especially since the French Revolution, the foolish, invalid, phantasmatic, or caricatured king, often cast as the embodiment of an outmoded or oppressive world order, has become a featured character in a wide range of plays and musicals, such as Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, Pirandello's *Henry IV*, and Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*. To use Robert Weimann's apposite terms, the Western theatrical King has been dislodged from his honoured ceremonial 'state' or throne in the upstage locus, to his place of demystification and potential ridicule in the downstage *platea*.⁴

Against the arguments and performances of 'lovers of royalty' like Egyptian pharaonic adherents, Isocrates and King James I, there thus has flourished a long and influential line of disdainers of royalty, whose sceptical positions have also been expressed on public stages. If the radical extremes of Hamlet's imagined annihilation of the king, or of the full frontal nudity of 'The Emperor's New Clothes' fable have rarely if ever been performed, thorough and complex dismantlings of kingship have. These include the topos of the 'king-as-beggar', in epic poetry strategically used by Homer's Odysseus to reclaim his throne and title, but very differently applied by the actor of Shakespeare's King of France (in *All's Well That Ends Well*) to remind his audience of his own humble human condition, and to request applause: "The King's a beggar, now the play is done" (Shakespeare 2008: epilogue 1).

'Kingship and Disempowerment' therefore pertains as much as 'Kingship and Power' to this monographic section of *Skenè* 4.2. This is not, however, to suggest that the two tragedies in question here – Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* and Shakespeare's *Richard II* (designated as a "Tragedie" in its 1597 first quarto edition)⁵ – consistently affirm or negate kingship, and

especially pages 65-74 and 88-97, as well as Weimann 1987: 64-77. Hamlet's famous complaint against loud, bombastic, and exaggerated players specifically targets the acting style that out-Herods Herod.

³ For these authors' influential plays on kings in crisis, see Marlowe, *Edward II* (Marlowe 2016), Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* (Shakespeare 2006, 2005, and 2015), Calderon de la Barca, *La vida es sueño* ("Life Is a Dream") (Calderon de la Barca 1997) and *El gran teatro del mundo* ("The Great Theatre of the World") (Calderon de la Barca 2007), and Corneille, *Le Cid* (Corneille 1980).

⁴ For an elaboration of the contrast between *locus* ('locality') and *platea* ('place'), and their relationship with the actor's "figureposition", see Weimann 1987: 208-37.

⁵ Citations of *Seven Against Thebes* and *Richard II* are taken from Aeschylus 2013, and Shakespeare 2011, respectively.

decisively exalt or challenge the powers of the monarchic institution. These are not political or philosophical treatises but complex, dynamic plays, and while they notably differ in terms of their respective cultural contexts, stagecrafts, and receptions, they share dialectical and ambiguous patterns of representing the words and actions of their kingly protagonists. As the four following essays demonstrate, both Aeschylus and Shakespeare dramatise situations of extreme political crisis, where the state's current ruler is under so much pressure to maintain his legitimacy that he attempts manoeuvres of material and especially verbal control paradoxically destined to escape control, and sabotage their declared intent. A crucial element of both these tragic scenarios is the kings' self-aggravated undoing of their own regal powers through the very effort of maintaining those same powers. In this regard, they are both haunted and brought down by the familial prerogatives and ensuing rivalries identified by Aristotle as a built-in weakness of dynastically-inclined monarchies. In short, kinship both perpetuates and undermines kingship.

Thus in *Seven Against Thebes*, the rational, level-headed Eteocles, raised from childhood to be a king, makes all the necessary, well-considered preparations to defend his city against the attacking Argive armies, and admirably deciphers the presumptuous, often sacrilegious hubris of his opponents' arrogant and boastful champion-leaders. Yet the Theban king's own pride and reckless desires to vanquish his elder brother, despite or even because of his awareness of the potent "Ara" or Curse relentlessly pursuing their Labdacid line, impel him to fight a duel that can only end in his self-destruction. For his part, Richard II, son of the heroic 'Black Prince' Edward, implements royal privilege to sanction and then nullify a trial by combat between the lords Mowbray and his first cousin Bolingbroke. His attempt at imposing his regal authority backfires, as he blatantly favours his blood relation. At the same time, he cannot fully divert attention from his own complicity in the murder of his uncle the Duke of Gloucester, and its ensuing cover-up. Following this débacle, Richard will undergo a series of checks and defeats that reveal the inadequacy and eventual impotence of the very trappings and signs of kingship that supposedly would uphold his sovereignty, through his deposition, imprisonment, and valiant but futile struggle against his assassins.

Still, a first reading or viewing of these plays would suggest that they have little in common, and that even their respective king-protagonists have such mutually contrasting personalities, relationships with others, legendary-historical backgrounds, ideological frames of reference, and dramaturgical articulations that they would not merit critical juxtaposition, let alone comparison. In fact, only one of the essays (by Robert S. Miola) does pursue direct comparison between the two plays. Taken togeth-

er, however, the four studies reveal several crucial ways by which *Seven Against Thebes* and *Richard II* can be instructively connected. As already noted, both Aeschylus and Shakespeare dramatise the complex, multiple imbrications of kinship with kingship, with a focus on the ambiguously legitimising and de-legitimising dynamics of hereditary monarchy. Kingship entails dominion over territory and resources, but frequently deprives the monarch's close relatives some share in that dominion, and/or reduces their property holdings: conflict and crisis almost inevitably will ensue, as witnessed in both Eteocles' and Richard's stories. Although Shakespeare's version of King Richard's Christian English world does not allow for the display, decoration, and supplication of life-sized statues of multiple deities so prominently and compellingly staged in Aeschylus' ancient Greek play, it expresses a shared awareness that ritual-based communications and manifestations of divine power can be flawed, insufficient, or cynically arbitrary. At least this is Eteocles' more fifth-century BCE sophistic than heroic age viewpoint, as both Anton Bierl and Alessandro Grilli explain; parallel doubts about the coherence and sanctity of traditional ceremonies are shown by the capricious and indeed ludicrous rituals of gage-throwing and royal pardoning in *Richard II*.⁶ This de-sanctification process reaches an almost farcical climax in 5.3 when the "shrill-voiced suppliant" (74) Duchess of York kneels and begs the new King Henry Bolingbroke to pardon her son Aumerle, against the wishes of the latter's father Duke of York, who is also on his knees. After Henry recognises that "Our scene is altered from a serious thing / And now changed to 'The Beggar and the King'" (78-9), he does grant his pardon, prompting the Duchess to declare "A god on earth thou art" (135). If the Duchess's bald simplification of the divine right of kings doctrine strikes a comically profane note, serious and sacred strains resonate in the play's recurring personifications of England's "earth" as both mother and child, alternately life-giving, neglected, and blood-soaked. These tropes significantly recall the Aeschylean figuration of Thebes and its earth as a nurturing Mother-goddess, yet one who will drink her sons' mutually-spilled blood, providing them with the space that suffices for a grave (815-20). Finally, and most suggestively, the scripts of these two tragedies about doomed kings insistently explore the nuances, complexities, and ambivalences of language and signification in multiple registers, from bird-flight omens and frightening meteors through non-verbal wailings and invisible daemonic curses to a variety of human utterances and speech-acts, especially illocutionary ones. The breath of kings, as Elena Pellone and David Schalkwyk demonstrate, is essential to their potentially heroic and

⁶ See Liebler in Woodbridge and Berry 1992, especially pp. 232-9.

godlike power, but being mere breath, it also determines their fragility and vulnerability.

2. “A Play Full of Ares”, “I am Richard II”, and Other Potential Responses

By fortuitous chance, the dramatisations of kingship and power in *Seven Against Thebes* and *Richard II* also can be linked through the strong, revealing impressions that they made on their first audiences. It is rare to have surviving testimonies of contemporary responses to specific Shakespeare plays, and even more rare to have ones to specific plays by the classical Athenian dramatists. Yet in this case, we can be sure that both these plays not only had continuous and widespread appeal for several decades after their respective first productions, but also that at least *Richard II* seems to have sparked an overt reaction from the monarch who was at the time Shakespeare’s patron, Queen Elizabeth I herself. Gorgias and Aristophanes record how *Seven Against Thebes* became known and admired as a “play full of Ares”, providing lessons for organising and managing defences against sieges,⁷ while there are strong hints that Elizabeth did interpret the Earl of Essex’s specially commissioned revival of *Richard II* as an admonition directed at her: the Queen did allow herself to be quoted as saying “I am Richard II, know ye not that?”⁸ Before I devote close attention and consideration to the Elizabethan anecdote, I will briefly assess the implications of the purported “full of Ares” status of *Seven Against Thebes*.

As re-confirmed by the recent publication of a collection of scholarly essays on the subject (Torrance 2017), there is no question that Aeschylus’ great tragedy, focused as it is on a city in a state of siege and facing an imminent final attack, dwells on matters of warfare under the influence of Ares. Moreover, the play was first staged only thirteen years after the Persian invasion of Athens and burning of the Acropolis, as part three of a trilogy (following the now lost *Laius* and *Oedipus*) dedicated to the cursed house of the Labdacids, rulers of Thebes and heirs to its foundation by Cadmus and the surviving warriors born from his sowing of a slain dragon’s teeth. This climactic play thus realises the full-scale fratricidal and autochthonic violence prepared by the two preceding ones. It devotes full attention to military conflict, expressed first in Eteocles’ long speech of exhor-

⁷ See the essay by Alessandro Grilli in this issue, especially pages 80-2.

⁸ On Elizabeth’s statement and its implications, see Hammer 2008, especially pages 30-4, the “Introduction” by Anthony B. Dawson and Paul Yachnin to their Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Richard II* (Shakespeare 2011), especially pp. 2-9, and most recently Greenblatt 2018, 16-23.

tation to his adult male subjects – now Thebes’ soldier-defenders as well as “citizens of Cadmus” (l. 1) – then in his tense confrontation with the terrified young women of the city, followed by the central scene of the king’s repudiation of the besiegers’ threats hubristically (except in the case of the wise prophet Amphiaraus) emblazoned on their great round shields, and finally his arming for the decisive, fatal encounter with his brother Polyneices. The consequences of this catastrophic duel, which simultaneously and ambiguously saves the polis but extinguishes the male heirs of the Labdacid genos, bring the play to its close with the Messenger’s report and the Chorus’ mixed victory song for their city / threnody for the fallen king and his brother. Thus the famous fifth-century orator Gorgias had every reason to recognise that *Seven Against Thebes* is “full of Ares”, a comment which may be echoed by Aeschylus himself in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, during his dramatic poetry contest with the recently deceased Euripides, challenger to his supreme playwright’s throne in Hades (the basic parallel with the agonistic plot-line of Oedipus’ rival sons is at least implicit).⁹ Yet though the Aristophanic character claims that his play infused warlike spirit into its spectators, and the twelfth-century Byzantine scholar John Tzetzes praises the Aeschylean Eteocles for his actions as a perfect leader and general,¹⁰ can we be sure that *Seven Against Thebes* stands as an homage to militarism? As Stephen Halliwell notes in his edition of *The Frogs*, the tragedy “concerns the mutually fatal encounter between Oedipus’s sons, Eteokles and Polyneices (and is therefore hardly an encouragement to martial valour!)”.¹¹ For however much the defending King fulfils the mission of a capable civic commander and protector, he cannot escape the facts that he is both under a heavy familial curse, and acting in defiance of the pact that he had made with his brother to annually alternate their sovereignty. Eteocles could listen to the pleas of the Chorus to desist from a battle that is as much a personal as a political one, but he chooses not to. If the Theban maidens escape the hideous fate of capture, rape, and sexual enslavement that they graphically foresee in their powerful stasimon (327-32), they and their fellow citizens must face the contentious aftermath of the battle, which leads to the tragic end of Antigone and the family of the succeeding, tyrannical ruler Creon. Fittingly enough, the Ares that fills *Seven Against Thebes* has a remorselessly destructive as well as valorous spirit, which takes no prisoners. As Alessandro Grilli argues, the play casts Eteocles as the “good brother,” and makes him exemplary in his conduct—to use the

⁹ For extended quotation and treatment of this scene, see Grilli in this issue.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ For Halliwell’s comment, see his edition of Aristophanes 2016: 288 (note to line 1021).

script's own metaphor—as ship-captain of the militarized state in its time of extreme crisis. Yet, as Anton Bierl underlines, the cries and viewpoints of other voices, especially female ones, also are heard throughout the play, qualifying the potential effect of complete and consistent exemplarity.

It is indeed the notion of the King as an exemplar, whether positive or negative, that gained prominence during the Middle Ages, and persisted into the early modern era to inform the script of *Richard II*, but even more, some contemporary receptions of it. At the turning point moment of his disastrous return from his failed campaign in Ireland, Richard himself regales his handful of loyal followers with an eloquent disquisition on the exemplary, instructive fates of his royal predecessors:

For God's sake let us sit upon the ground
 And tell sad stories of the death of kings,
 How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
 Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
 Some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed –
 All murdered. For within the hollow crown
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king
 Keeps death his court, and there the antic sits,
 Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
 Allowing him a breath, a little scene
 To monarchize, be feared and kill with looks,
 Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
 As if this flesh which walls about our life
 Were brass impregnable, and humoured thus
 Comes at the last and with a little pin
 Bores through his castle wall – and farewell king.
 (3.2.155-70)

Much fine commentary has been devoted to this extraordinary speech, and further fine insights are provided by Pellone and Schalkwyk in their contribution to this special issue. I therefore will limit myself here to noting how the king first invokes the Deity, and then insists that he and his friends sit humbly upon the ground, the same “gentle earth” that he had greeted a few moments before, at once “weeping, smiling” with his own “royal hands” (10-12). Physically extending the play's metaphors of England as garden and an alternately fertile and abused earth-mother, Richard thus enacts a radical levelling of himself and his royal privileges. He does so in tandem with his verbal repetition of “deposed”, that corroborates the decline of his sceptred sway, but initiates his ascent towards philosophical detachment and insight.

The point that Shakespeare's king himself recognises his abject vulnerability, and his own heritage of sudden usurpation, was apparently not

lost on the first audiences of *Richard II*. Queen Elizabeth's notorious comment "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" is the fitting 'punch-line' to the sometimes grotesquely comical, sometimes poignantly tragic and pitiful failed coup attempt hastily devised and ineptly led by her former favourite the Earl of Essex in February of 1601. In fact, Elizabeth is also reported to have somewhat cryptically added that "He that will forget God, will also forget his benefactors; this tragedy [Shakespeare's *Richard II*?] was played forty times in open streets and houses".¹² Rather than to the play, the Queen might have meant her hyperbolic statement to refer to Essex and his botched project to rouse up public support for his scheme to constrain Elizabeth to dismiss his rivals at court and confirm James VI of Scotland as her successor. Still, her statement bespeaks a recognition that the deposition of Richard II held strong theatrical appeal to her contemporaries, implying that she too could become a mere player-monarch. Even if this implication is an oblique one, Elizabeth's remarks convey a sense of her own precariousness, and of the physical frailties she was facing in her late sixties, as Anthony Dawson and Paul Yachnin have lucidly explained.¹³ If she was potentially a Richard II, then she was willing to acknowledge that her human, transitory body made her susceptible to the ambitions and pressures applied to her by her very own favoured subjects, in the way that her predecessor of more than two centuries before had experienced. Perhaps excessively, recent criticism of *Richard II* has invoked the medieval theory of the "king's two bodies", as studied by E.H. Kantorowicz, to underline and interpret the play's exposure of the physical fragility of the sovereign, a facet most likely perceived all too clearly by the ageing Queen Elizabeth.¹⁴ While this political-theological theory does not figure prominently in the studies gathered here, it does implicitly inform the representation and understanding of these monarchs' relationships with divine order. Yet Queen Elizabeth's response was only one among thousands: a London citizen or Southwark teenager would have had different thoughts and feelings when witnessing King Richard's self-described reduction from "anointed king", confident that "the breath of worldly men cannot depose / The deputy elected by the Lord" (3.2.56-7), to the untitled, ordinary human being who does indeed "live with bread like you, feel want, / Taste grief, need friends. Subjected thus, / How can you say to me I am a king?" (3.2.175-7).

¹² See Dawson and Yachnin "Introduction", in Shakespeare 2011: 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ On Kantorowicz's work and its influence on the study of Shakespeare's histories and tragedies, especially *Richard II*, see Norbrook 1996.

3. Speaking, Acting, and Speech-Acts

One of Aristotle's best-known contentions is that *homo sapiens* is a political animal, but perhaps less famously the Stagirite identifies the capacity to speak a shared, intelligible language as the trait that enables humans to be political (Aristotle 2001: 1129). In short, government of the state depends on the use of complex words. To give but one basic example of this phenomenon, a king could not command without the verbal medium, refined and strengthened through rhetorical devices. Nor could he enlist the support of laws and narratives justifying his legitimacy over rival claims to the throne, often made by his nearest blood relations. Not coincidentally, then, all four essays in the monographical section of this issue of *Skenè* together focus on language, signification, speech-acts, and their ambivalent role in communicating the power – and limits thereon – of the king.

Anton Bierl's essay opens the section by accentuating how King Eteocles tries to affirm his military authority through rationalistic argumentation constructed to win debates, first against the female Chorus with their panicked utterances and emotional outbursts, then against the invading champions with their huge, menacing, and often boastful shields. Eteocles takes pains and enacts systematic measures to assert himself as an effective *strategos*, a self-styled helmsman of the ship of state who can navigate past the potentially disheartening interference of the lamenting maidens, and whose cleodomantic skills will decipher the enemies' emblems of destruction and at the same time defuse their hubristic threat. The central pre-dramatic scene of the shields thus becomes a symbolic version of the military duels to come, providing a substitute for their violence and a prophetic confirmation of the Theban defenders' victory. As Bierl convincingly argues, Eteocles eventually undoes his own *strategos* status by insisting on the autochthonic showdown with his brother, that will simultaneously deploy the fraternal combatants' shared *miasma*, bring the curse to its culminating destruction of the genos, and confirm that the maidens' goos and reverent supplication of the city's protective gods has had more efficacy than the king's authoritative speaking as well as sophistic strategizing. Professor Bierl refines and expands the horizons of this religion-related analysis, emphasizing the play's Dionysiac qualities and linking its fratricidal plot to an ancient Mesopotamian ritual designed to achieve healing and purification through the reciprocal, sacrificial elimination of opposing forces. Ultimately, the palindromic Dionysiac patterns suggest how the polis is saved, through catharsis that also involves the audience, validating both the disabling of the shields' semiotic presumptions, and the reverent speaking and acting of the Chorus/community.

Thoroughly and carefully analysing the integral, dynamic rapport be-

tween semiotics and politics in *Seven Against Thebes*, Alessandro Grilli explains the play's expression of "epistemic fragmentation". While sharing Bierl's insight that the efficacy of speech-acts is at stake, Grilli argues that the play conveys positive endorsement of Eteocles' rationalistic approach to language and communication, all the way through the central *Redepaare* until the king's fatal choice to meet his brother in direct combat. He shows how Aeschylus' script sets in motion a conflict between on the one hand an Archaic Greek trust in the coherent sacred-magical properties of language, and on the other an understanding of reasoning and linguistic discourse as analytic means towards managing here-and-now reality. Since the former approach reflects aristocratic consciousness and social structures, while the second partakes of the democratic innovations of early fifth-century BCE Athens, the semiotic contrast is also a political one. As Professor Grilli clarifies, the reigning King Eteocles regards language as the instrumental vehicle for relaying factual information and communicating practical decisions, while the Chorus of young maidens employ language to transmit sensory stimuli and release strong, complex emotions. An inevitable clash is thus played out through the mutual antipathy of these two ways of regarding language and its political potential. For Eteocles, the Theban maidens' emotionally charged agitations, along with their supplication of the gods' statues, pose an internal threat to the disciplined, well-coordinated defence of the city. He regards it as his duty to counter this threat with his intellectually controlled, analytic, and non-supersitious discourse, which guides his admirable management of resistance to the siege, and distinguishes him as the good brother, worthy of his name meaning 'true glory', opposed to his bad brother Polyneices, whose name means 'much strife'. Even Eteocles' ultimate yielding to the pressures of the family Curse, and his decision to ignore the pleas of the Chorus and fight the deadly duel with his brother, marks him as the noble and resolute hero-protector of the city. In this interpretation, his commitment to his polis-defending kingship may ultimately supersede traditional strictures of kinship, including the pollution brought by fraternal bloodletting. The speech-act of the play's final funeral lament thus can be seen as a key step in the process of joyfully restoring order, and renewing the life of the polis.

Charting important similarities between *Seven Against Thebes* and *Richard II* as well as *Richard III*, Robert S. Miola focuses on the crucial speech-act of cursing, i.e. the dramatic speaking of imprecations that have the power to cause harm and bring down supernatural punishment. The vindictive capabilities of genos relationships loom large here, as Oedipus' curse on his sons, now personified as an implacable, manipulative Fury or Erinys, insists on the mutual spilling of the two brothers' crime-infected blood. This cycle of familial vengeance disables the project of the king

to rule according to his appointed political mandate, as the tragedies of past generations – as well as the coming one of Eteocles' sister Antigone – come to haunt and overwhelm the present moment. As Miola succinctly puts it, "Theban history is not primarily national and political but familial and personal". If the personified "Ara" of the Labdacid house in *Seven Against Thebes* operates with irresistible force, by contrast the curses uttered in *Richard II* lack efficacious power. The king himself, as well as his queen, speak vehement maledictions, but their words fail to accomplish their aim. Instead, as Miola elucidates, the inefficacious human speech-act of cursing in this play works as a foil to the overriding divine speech-act of God's primal curse on Adam and Eve, its providentially ordering as well as prophetically dooming powers being felt by numerous characters, including at the close the new king Henry IV. This same Christian conception of God's omnipotent justice becomes evident in Shakespeare's other King Richard play, where Margaret's seemingly potent curses are actually mere pointers towards the primary and far superior agency of divine retribution. Deftly returning to analysis of *Seven Against Thebes*, Miola illuminates further revealing links between Aescylus' and Shakespeare's plays, for example showing how "Eteocles is both victim of the curse and its enactor", and how Bolingbroke, in trying to repeat and transfer God's cursing of Cain on to Exton, only succeeds in making the guilt of primal sinning redound upon himself: "The curser utters God's curse and is himself cursed". Here especially the question of the kin(g)ship syndrome re-emerges, since the Cain and Abel fratricide finds its anxious, murderous, and destructive parallels in the contests between the cousins Richard and Bolingbroke, and between the brothers Eteocles and Polyneices.

In the final essay of the monographic section, the intricacies and paradoxes of regal speech-acts take centre stage. Incisively applying J.L. Austin's distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech-acts to the evolution of Richard's utterances in the play, Elena Pellone and David Schalkwyk extend a key observation of Miola's essay, namely that the king gains respect, humanity, and wisdom as he loses his political power. Most urgently and originally, the co-authors demonstrate that Richard's disempowerment as a king chiastically enables his empowerment as an actor, a theatrical presence who commands the attention and empathy of his audience. The essay derives its own power from a convincing, practice-based rebuke to the unjustified and distorted twentieth- and early twenty-first-century British theatrical convention of playing Richard as a weak, capriciously effeminate ruler, often exhibiting clichéd 'gay' behaviours. Pellone and Schalkwyk thus bring readers back to the actual protagonist of Shakespeare's script, and his historical model. By so doing, they sustain their persuasive thesis that the king paradoxically assumes genuine

power once he sheds his ritual apparatus and ceremonial rhetoric. Richard experiences a process wherein he gains a new-found illocutionary authority precisely at the moment of his self-divesting, and of his surrendering of the crown to Bolingbroke, allowing him to attain a fecund poetic eloquence and perlocutionary charisma hitherto beyond his reach. In solitary confinement as an imprisoned character, the king learns to confront, accept, and share his human vulnerability, and thus to connect with his audience through a shared recognition of common humanity. In this way, whether as king or beggar, or any role in between, he is anything but alone. Nor, as Richard's listeners and fellow players in the theatre of life, are we.

How can this be? How can a king be rescued from the violent bane of curses, from vengeful kin-murders, from the snowy mockery conducted by antic death within his hollow crown, from the oblivion of turning into mere dust and passing through the guts of a beggar? Precisely through a clinching paradox: "But what'er I be, / Nor I nor any man that but man is / With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased / With being nothing" (5.5.38-41). As King, the King indeed exists as a thing of nothing, a mere walking shadow... but as a poor player/humble mortal, his shadow takes on substance, and he can be imagined a thing of everything, in a well-peopled community whose love conquers hate.

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