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Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents

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Introduction

1. The Queen's Two Bodies[1]

Recent scholarship has highlighted the response of early modern theatre – particularly Shakespeare's – to the Greek dramatic tradition, either as self-conscious engagement, or as a departure from it.[2] In these studies, queenly rule, obviously on account of Elizabeth's issues with identity (especially with regard to her illegitimate, 'bastard' birth and unmarried state) has proved a paradigmatic focus of interest: compared with "the hollow crown" of kings "all murdered" (*Richard II* 3.2.156),[3] a dangling, "awry" crown is tested as a signifier of the dynamics of queenship: denoting an unstable position between being subjected to and being the subject of,[4] between power and authority. Not only a stage prop suggesting a title (with its complementary trappings) but a character *per se*, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*: the last act of this play being a case in point of queenship represented and conceived as a spectacle ("*Show* me, my women, *like* a queen" (5.2.223, emphasis mine). The ancient and the early modern stage host a number of queens fashioned as tragic icons of violence both suffered and inflicted, often with the victims turned into killers, in a pattern of horrors displayed in a dual, anamorphic perspective. An oblique vision of queenship runs from the Greek repertoire to Shakespeare's production which

[1] This volume is a follow-up to the insightful issue on "Kin(g)ship and Power" edited by Eric Nicholson (*Skenè* 4:2, 2018). My heartfelt thanks to Silvia Bigliazzi for trusting me with this engaging theme, and to Guido Avezzù for his competent and friendly support in my 'return to the Mothers' from a lifetime spent elsewhere.

[2] As Catherine Belsey states (2015: 63): "It's what he changes that throws into relief what makes him Shakespeare".

[3] All quotations from Shakespeare are from Shakespeare 2016.

[4] A fascinating portrait of Elizabeth I's anxiety about her awry crown is in Nadia Fusini 2009. A compelling investigation into this issue is also in Continisio and Del Villano 2018.

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puts to the test – and challenges – Seneca's revision, retrieved among others and recast in a modern light. A network of Didonian intertextuality haunts the imaginary of the Renaissance, newly engrafted in Marlowe's dramatic form: an episode, however compelling, functional to the (cultural) foundation myth of Rome, narrated in Books 2 and 4 of the *Aeneid*, whose spinoff sees Dido as the protagonist of an independent play in her own name, *The Tragedy of Dido Queen of Carthage*, a self-contained tragedy of queenship and its discontents (see Ziosi 2015). A similar transference of female rulers from the liturgy of myth to the lexicon of dramaturgical invention, in fact a departure from their merely functional role in plots which transcend them to transform them into full-fledged characters conceived as protagonists in their own right with a pervading presence onstage, had started with Aeschylus, who turns the *Oresteia* epic saga into a dramatic version, with Clytaemnestra as the main character of the plot (see Monica Centanni's essay in the current issue). Such a formal and cultural dynamics is at the core of the representation of queenship tackled in some of the essays of the current issue of *Skenè*: as tragic characters Jocasta and Medea, Phaedra and Electra (with Hecuba looming in the background as a fundamental intermediary figure) cease to be a mystery to be endorsed and become a problem, calling for interpretation.

All the more true since tragic form, based on dialogue, can give voice to the reasons and the grief of the Other, a stranger in terms of both gender and birthplace – a task that Greek tragedy takes upon itself, making room for barbaric queens alien to Athens' dominant culture, but also an engaging venture undertaken by Shakespeare in multiple ways, arranged in a prismatic pattern: in the shocking scenario of Gothic Tamora (in *Titus Andronicus*) and of the French queen Margaret (a pervasive character in the first tetralogy), in the distressing trial against Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* ("The Emperor of Russia was my father", 3.2.116; "You speak a language that I understand not", 3.2.76), and of course in the glorious, impenetrable portrait of the "gypsy" queen/quean of Egypt (see Holdsworth 2018), an icon of gender and cultural interaction – the stranger *par excellence*. Marked as monstrous hybrids because of their virile connotation (see Michael Neill's essay in the current issue), these queens could however be later transformed by an exotic touch, bent into the shape of reassuring objects of consumption, as in Dryden's adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra* in terms of a sheer, self-contained tragedy of love (*All for Love. Or the World Well Lost*, 1677). Less reassuring, on the other hand, is Dryden and Lee's 'unveiling' of Jocasta's incestuous passion for Oedipus, bestowing upon the queen of Thebes a larger room onstage than in the ancient Greek versions of Sophocles and Euripides (*Phoenissae*), with an expansion into criminal agency (see Marisa Sestito's essay): another story altogether.

In early modernity the stage treatment of female rule is inscribed within the dialectics of 'the Queen's two bodies', a metaphor denoting an interdependence between the queen's natural body, smacking of mortality, and a symbolic body fashioned by an actor in performance. In Shakespeare's history plays, such a paradigm takes over the medieval paradigm of the 'King's two bodies' (see Kantorowicz 2016): the body politic connoted as holy according to a theological code is de-sacralised by the dramatic form, the crown turned from holy to hollow,[5] and replaced by a theatrical body, an aesthetic one, a *persona*. A shadow, yet not destitute of power, rather endowed with a sort of authority: the energy to signify an emotion through a skilful handling of verbal and body language, in other words the power of rhetoric, able to shape the "airy nothing" of the imaginary. It is this power that will prove a central theme in Shakespeare's production, in tune with the issue of the poet's airy identity extolled in Mercutio's Queen Mab speech (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.4.55-96), in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, (5.1.7-17) or with the Actor's commitment to Hecuba as an icon of absence in *Hamlet* (2.2.451-4):

> Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
> A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
> With forms to his conceit – and all for nothing –
> For Hecuba.

Hamlet's metatheatrical vision of Hecuba as an actor as well as a character must be read against this metamorphosised version of royalty, consistent with the reciprocal dependence of throne and stage claimed by Elizabeth (and emphatically taken over by James I).[6] Consistent, too, with the feminised version of myth fashioned by Euripides and exploited by Shakespeare – who was certainly familiar with the Greek playwright[7] – in a number of plays. Interestingly, Silvia Bigliazzi has emphasised the modelling role of

[5] "For within the hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king / Keeps Death Its court" (*Richard II* 3.2.156-9).

[6] See respectively: "We princes, I tell you, are set on stages in the sight and view of all the world"; "A king is as one set on a stage", quoted and discussed in Orgel 1975: 42. See also Mary Axton's introductory motto to her *The Queen's Two Bodies. Drama and the Elizabethan Succession* (1977): "Since your sacred Majestie / In gratious hands the regal Sceptre held / All Tragedies are fled from state, to stadge (sic)". However, in spite of the analogy with the title of my argument, Axton's issue concerns rather the legal side of English national identity.

[7] Recent studies have highlighted Euripides's popularity in early modern England, from Erasmus' Latin translation of *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* (Paris 1506, newly published the following year by Aldo Manuzio) to George Peele's vernacular translation of *Iphigenia in Aulis* (about 1582); see next note.

the queen of Troy on the entire course of Shakespeare's production – from *The Rape of Lucrece* to *Titus Andronicus*, *Coriolanus* and *Cymbeline* – under the sign of a 'feminisation' of revenge (see Bigliazzi 2019).[8] And this is also a leading concern in the current issue of *Skenè*.

2. Staging Memory in Shakespeare's History Plays

Coming to terms with the foundations of the original national heritage is a necessity that the English drama of the last decades of the sixteenth century shares with ancient Greek drama of the fifth century BC. In both cases, the stage develops opportunities for a reassessment of the past – on the one hand myth, on the other history; a revival not lacking in critical vision. The dramatic stance of Shakespeare's two tetralogies on a century of English history parallels the revision of classical myth turned into tragic form by Aeschylus, who in the *Oresteia* had set this model for future playwrights. The revision takes its cue from ideological concerns with national identity: in Athens the rise of democracy and of its related idea of justice, the latter largely endorsed by Aeschylus (*Eumenides*), and ambiguously supported by Euripides; in England the achievement of peace with the firm establishment of the Tudor monarchy (and related dawn of the imperial theme)[9] after a chain of violence and bloodshed stirred by dynastic conflicts and contradictions. That Shakespeare took his cue from narrative sources (Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed's chronicles) can hardly be refuted; however some scholars, going against the grain – among them Giorgio Melchiori (see Shakespeare 1979) – have spotted intimations of theatricality in a number of episodes and events in the sources, pinpointing in the narrative fabric scenes of rich dramatic intensity when queenship is at stake.[10] In his turn, Christopher Marlowe could take from the epic structure of the *Aeneid* a number of cues for a dramaturgical swerve of the plot: some studies by Antonio Ziosi, like the one published in this issue, argue that the *Tragedy of Dido* not only stems from the plot of Virgil's epic, but actually develops a number of theatrical linguistic traces encapsulated in the narrative; first and foremost the eloquent pair of tragic boots (*cothurni*) worn by Venus when first meeting in disguise her son Aeneas on the

[8] See also Bigliazzi 2018, Pollard 2012, and Tassi 2011.

[9] The reference is to Wilson Knight 1951. The English imperial ambition is of course an issue in Shakespeare's Roman plays (with Rome as a metaphor of England) once English power was established on the firm basis of Tudor and Stuart monarchy - an aftermath of the histories.

[10] For a synthetic treatment of queens as performers of their grim past see Melchiori's *Introduction* to *Richard III* (Shakespeare 1979: 2.823-37).

shore of Carthage (Book 2),[11] leading to the tragic outcome in Book 4. Just like Virgil had grafted the memory of Troy anew onto the cultural roots of Rome, Marlowe's haunting memory of Dido and Helen makes fragments of myth 'immortal' to legitimise the classical foundations of Renaissance England. After all, in the intricate maze of historical ancestors of the country's identity (from William the Conqueror onwards) a mythical Brutus, grandson of Aeneas, was supposed to have been a founder of the English lineage.

Although, in the chronicles, kingship is the main object of contention, four queens are given ample room in Shakespeare's early staging of the English medieval past – the memorable sequence of dynastic wars fought by the 'roses' of York and Lancaster, as well as by the rival nations of France and England. Blood runs from open battlefields to dark interiors: castles, palaces, and of course prisons – fit locations for the performance of such criminal events as treasons and murders, appropriations and expropriations of the crown. And fit locations, too, to store a character turning his own gaze upon himself, as in Richard II's acknowledgment of the path of ambition and humiliation which has led to the undoing of his royal body and the loss of its divine symbols (Acts 4 and 5). It so happened that a 'feminised' Richard II could be set forth as the shadow of Queen Elizabeth, the stage holding up a mirror to both of them.

It is worth stressing the point that in the dramatic invention of the histories, the marginality of female agency in the comprehensive kingship plot undergoes a shift into a powerful, disturbing presence on stage. Characters of queens-to-be and no-longer queens succeed one another, mostly with negative connotations: malicious and ambitious, cunning or superficial, erotically charged or "unsexed" (Lady Macbeth looms in the distance).

Strategically, three of them are brought together in *Richard III* 4.4, as *dramatis personae* in a sort of pageant at the centre of the play: a play-within-the-play of kingship, a sort of transcription of the Chorus of ancient Greek theatre, in the guise of Erinyes "hungry for revenge" (61).[12]

Enter, in sequence:

– Queen Margaret, the French queen, a mix of Joan of Arc's arrogance and Helen of Troy's erotic appeal, a strong character with a prominent role in the script of *2Henry VI* and subsequently in *3Henry VI*[13];

[11] See Antonio Ziosi's comment, and relevant bibliographical footnote on p. 114 of this issue.

[12] For obviously intentional dramaturgical reasons, Queen Anne Neville, whose title, conferred on her by the killer of her husband, had lasted for a short time, has disappeared.

[13] "Not only did the playwright stretch her character over the four plays of his first tetralogy – a unique instance –, but he also took liberties with the historical sources in

– The Duchess of York, the earliest of them, queen and not-queen: since she was never granted the title she deserved, being the widow of the founder of the York dynasty;
– Queen Elizabeth of York, ambitious and easily manipulated, a poor instrument in the plot of Richard of Gloucester ("relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!", 431).

They hate each other; consider Margaret's words to Elizabeth (using a theatrical vocabulary):

> I called thee . . . poor shadow, painted queen
> . . .
> A queen in jest, only to fill the scene,
> . . .
> For queen, a very caitiff crowned with care.
> (83-101)

However, as wives and mothers they share a consuming despair. Widowhood and wounded maternity (another trace of Hecuba?) are their hallmark, foregrounding lack as the symbol of a ghostly identity, the paradigm of a constitutive alienation.

And yet they own the power of words – the same displayed by Richard III in his evil plottings, but 'feminised' by grief. They voice such power in a range of rhetorical modes, according to the tradition of queens in classical drama: like Hecuba, running from lamentation to curse and to persuasion (*peitho*)[14]. As Giorgio Melchiori argues: "This scene marks a genuine dramaturgical revolution", in a play which represents " a fundamental step in the founding process of modern playwriting wrought by Shakespeare and culminating in *Hamlet* with the overturning of the essential function of theatre: from the representation of a conflict to the investigation into an existential condition" (Shakespeare 1979: 3.828, translation mine). Once again, the suffering of these queens on stage appears as the suffering of the Other (see Cacciari 2010). As *Hamlet* shows, it is a step the roots of which stretch back in time.

Shakespeare worked on the two tetralogies in the last decade of the sixteenth century; the first stretching from *Henry VI* plays to *Richard III* (1592-1594); the second from *Richard II* to *Henry V* (1594-1599).[15]

her portrayal . . . the theatrical Margaret was largely invented by Shakespeare." (Stevanato 2018: 67).

[14] For a thorough investigation into Hecuba's rhetoric, both in *Hecuba* and in *The Trojan Women*, see Avezzù 2019 and Billing 2007.

[15] According to Giorgio Melchiori's chronology, *The First Part of King Henry the Sixth* (1588-92), *The Second Part of King Henry the Sixth* (1588-92), *The Third Part of King*

In 1613, having retired to Stratford, the playwright took a further, final step into the issue of queenship in British history at the end of his career with *Henry VIII*, yet again a radical invention of historical events, and actually a remake of a previous drama by Samuel Rowley (*When You See Me You Know Me*, 1604), which it deliberately challenged, starting from the title *All is True*, or, *King Henry VIII*. The play was also the last of his entire production. A move into a more recent past, in a changed perspective from Rowley's gross manipulation of the chronicle, and also a big change in style; a prominent dramaturgical shift – with Fletcher's collaboration – into the contemporary mode of masques and spectacular performances. *Henry VIII* is in fact the most spectacular of his *corpus*, arranged in a sequence of pageants constituting the pattern of the most relevant scenes concerning queenship as an issue: from the divorce trial in court of Queen Katherine, to be deposed – thus joining her unwedded, "unqueened" state (4.2.172) with that of a "stranger" ("I am a most poor woman, and a stranger / born out of your dominions", 2.4.13-14), and the decay of her body politic with that of her old natural body ("I am old, my lords", 3.1.118) – to the glorious coronation of Anne Bullen wed by her master to her noble title. The former – once "a queen and a daughter to a king" (4.2.172), now sick and "kneeling", the latter – a handmaid "lowly born" (2.3.19) made queen despite herself,[16] "in a rich chair of state", in royal robes, "with all the royal makings of a queen, / As holy oil, Edward Confessor's crown, / The rod, and bird of peace, and all such emblems / Laid nobly on her" (4.1.90-2). One enraptured in ecstasy by a spiritual vision of angels, the other showing herself as a vision of beauty ("opposing freely / The beauty of her person to the people" (69-70). Yet, of the two, the widowed queen has the more powerful presence onstage, filling the scene with noble and humble speeches.

The fall of Katherine in Act 2 takes up the largest span of the time of the performance (23,5%, 660 lines) against the rise of Anne Bullen in Act 4 (about 10% of the time, 290 lines), silent in the solemn scene of her coronation, depicted by means of a report given by two spectators onstage. A triumphal scene which is also a triumph of dramatic irony, counting on the point of view of the spectators offstage, certainly aware of the queen's imminent tragic destiny. And it is worth noting that in "The Epilogue" the appeal to the audience calls attention to the ladies' entertainment:

Henry the Sixth (1588-1592), and *The Life and Death of Richard the Third* (1591-1594) constitute the first tetralogy; the second tetralogy includes *The Life and Death of King Richard the Second* (1594-1595), *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth* (1596-1597), *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth* (1597-1599), and *The Life of King Henry the Fifth* (1599).

[16] "I swear, I would not be a queen / For all the world" (2.3.45-6). Katherine of Aragon was, again, daughter to the king of Spain.

> For this play at this time is only in
> The merciful construction of good women,
> For such a one we showed 'em . . .
> (The Epilogue, 9-11)

No representation of queenship could be more different from the 'awry crown'-scenario of female rule met "with base infection" (Sonnet 94, l. 11) in the past, now happily concluded with the celebration of baby Elizabeth, just born to incarnate the needs of English national identity.

And yet the dramatic irony on her mother's glorious coronation could not escape the audience, aware of the violence later done to Anne Bullen, in this play hidden by all that is not said: after all the rival queens of the play share a common lot of *Vanitas*.

In this light, the ethical strain of the morality play conflates with the memory of the chronicles and with the magic of spectacular pageants, a fusion consistent with the needs of an English national identity which has expressed its own Bildung by means of the shapes and metaphors of the theatre. For a decade, Shakespeare had been the great interpreter of the process, but at the close of the Elizabethan age, staging memory with a view to fashioning an identity had become redundant. With the 'I' taking centre stage, a great reversal had occurred in the function of theatre, a shift towards the representation of an interior struggle of divided selves. In 1613, *Henry VIII* is rather an off-season fruit (see Shakespeare 1979: 3.697).

3. Displacement

At the outset of Aeschylus' *Agamennon*, a beacon signal on the hill hanging over Argos advertises the end of a lengthy war, and the return of a king long absent from his canonical residence of power, transferred in the interval to "*basileia*" Clytaemnestra, whose title is legitimised by the absence of her royal husband.[17] The war has however released its constitutive violence into another setting, not only geographical (from Troy to the palace of Argos) but also literary, from the epic narrative of military actions to the tragic form of a genos conflict. It seems as if the past could never end; it could only repeat itself, although not mechanically, since the transference into a domestic setting has shifted the corpus of ancient Greek tragedy from male heroes to female protagonists: wives and (step)mothers, daughters and sisters. The *Oresteia* trilogy sets the tune subsequently followed by the works

[17] For an interesting comment on the play's incipit – also in terms of gender rhetoric in Clytaemnestra's discourse, intersecting female and virile codes of communication – see Goldhill 1984: 8-98.

of Sophocles and Euripides. In *Hecuba*, *Medea* and *Phaedra*, the female protagonists are so central to the dramatic action that the plays are called after them. "Troy is no more" (Euripides, *The Trojan Women*, 99-100, translation mine), but the fire that had consumed Ilium is not completely extinguished. It still burns in the flame spotted by an excited Chorus, and is metaphorically transferred onto the red carpet laid down by the adulterous queen as the sign of a pretended solemn celebration of the king's entrance into the palace, in fact depicting a symbolic transference of blood – also erotically connoted – from the multiple Trojan scene to an interior setting. From a distant armed conflict and the offstage altar of Iphigenia's ritual sacrifice, violence has intruded upon the domestic sphere onstage, with the queen at the centre: director as well as agent of a renovated plot of lust, blood and revenge, like the one at the origin of the Trojan War. A renovated plot that in *Coephori* will involve her children Electra and Orestes: an endless repetition in a nightmare from which tragedy is trying to awake.

Recently, in an engaging online lecture organised by the University of Siena, Franco Moretti has claimed that tragic form takes its cue from war, arguing about its liminal presence in *Antigone* and *Macbeth*.[18] Moretti's thesis can be fruitfully applied to the majority of Greek and Shakespearean productions – from Aeschylus' *The Persian*s (here tackled by Monica Centanni) to Euripides' *Hecuba*, located at the gates of Troy, but also from *Hamlet* to the subsequent major tragedies. *The Tragedy of Macbeth* is paradigmatic: from the brutal war offstage ("What bloody man is that?" *Macbeth*, 1.2.1) the Weird Sisters herald a transit of violence to the criminal plans performed at Inverness castle, where, amongst others, a tragedy of queenship is consumed.

Myth is by definition undefinable, in constant transformation, allowing for unforeseeable and infinite metamorphosis, which is mostly effected by its transmigration to the stage, often through radical reinterpretations and remakes.[19] This is the main theme of this issue: Marisa Sestito delves into Jocasta's metamorphosis from a marginal, ineffective agency in Sophocles' *Oedipus rex* to its displacement into a character of no importance in Corneille's manipulation, refashioned by Dryden and Lee into a full pres-

[18] "Uccidere con le parole", May 6, 2020; forthcoming in *Memoria di Shakespeare. A Journal of Shakespearean Studies* 8 (2021).

[19] Of course, displacement is not in the mode of a variant, or a simple adaptation of previous texts, practically an editing practice, but rather of a remake, according to the creative freedom of the author. If Cleopatra's pageant on the Cydnus to meet Mark Antony is a case of grafting fresh meaning into Plutarch's source, the noble and tender character of Queen Isabel in *Richard II* 3.4 and 4.1 (incidentally a stranger, native of France) is completely invented with respect to the previous *Woodstock*, an evidence of Shakespeare's dramaturgical focus on queenship when reinterpreting the sources of his plays.

ence in command of the plot, to the point of leaving no space for a dramaturgical future to the Laius dynasty; one and a thousand Jocastas like the one and a thousand Medeas presented by Nadia Fusini, up to the character's transmigration into a Pasolini film. Then comes Phaedra (see Anton Bierl's essay), shaped like Medea, and like her stepson Hippolytus initiated into a plot of double violence, both practised and received, in the dramaturgical and metatheatrical perspective of fatal mothers, including Agave in Thebes ("the worst crime, in Thebes, is the love of a mother"),[20] as well as the denied maternity of Lady Macbeth. Guido Avezzù carries out an engaging argument on the dramaturgical chain of the Electra story, each play a reprise of the previous one, from the Greeks to the twentieth century. A multiple intercultural scenario of a thousand Didos is provided by Antonio Ziosi, intersecting her symbolic imagery of wounds and flames with the figurative language of her past and future 'sisters'. Finally, Michael Neill analyses the 'monstrous' identity of Cleopatra, escaping to be captured in its essence, and only lending itself to semiotic and semantic displacement from Plutarch's source as it comes to a final transmigration into the aesthetic sphere, with the 'strange' incarnation of queenship into a work of art in her play's last scene. Taking our cue from Roland Barthes (1977), we might be tempted to say "many authors, no author", 'difference' being the main feature in the map of an "écriture infinie". Each of the plays explored in this volume is indeed a palimpsest (see Genette 1982); in tune with the multifarious, plural nature of myth, perhaps perpetual remake is the DNA of Attic and Shakespearean drama.[21]

Such a moveable feast calls for an anamorphic perspective. When queenship is the issue, the focus on the crown as key symbol of the royal status, conferring legitimacy on power, takes an "awry" turn. As a signifier, the crown questions the relation between power and authority: in a gender code, it cannot be grasped simultaneously with the signified; there is always a gap between them. In *Henry VIII*, Katherine no longer has the power she thought she had, but the spectator is fully aware of her authority from the noble content and length of her speech. Similarly, Cleopatra's display of regal authority in her final *mise en scène* covering the last, most important act of the play occurs when she is no longer queen of Egypt. Not only has she lost political power, but she has even gone to the extreme of despising it:

[20] Seneca, *Oedipus* 629-30: *maximum Thebis scelus* / *maternus amor est* (translation mine).

[21] Due to the function and length of this introduction, I had to make some ruthless and painful choices, omitting references to Seneca's and Ovid's important roles as mediators between classical and Renaissance drama.

> 'Tis paltry to be Caesar
> Not being Fortune, he's but Fortune's knave,
> A minister of her will.
> (5.2.2-4)

A blank is shown to be a crucial element in the signifying process.

4. Absence

As Michael Neill reminds us (p. 158), conventionally the word queen suggested an incomplete identity. It denoted not a ruler but the wife of a king, it was derivative rather than properly authoritative. With the exception of Cleopatra ("as I am queen of Egypt", 1.1.29; "Hear me, queen", 1.3.42), it denoted a ruler in office, not one in power; a function of regality. However, in the absence of a husband – whether dead or engaged elsewhere (like Aeschylus' Agamemnon, or Theseus in Euripides' *Hippolytus*) – the title of queen took on a connotation of authority. This hybrid of absence and power, and the consequent contamination of female and male codes of discourse,[22] lies behind Clytaemnestra's criminal plotting, but it also subsequently accounts for Elizabeth I's determination to stay unmarried, anchoring her absolute independence on the construction of a virgin *persona*.

On the other hand, absence also involves loss and dispossession, encoding mourning and curses as paradigmatic codes of expression in the revenge rhetoric of a queen. In this context, Euripides' "unqueened" stands out as an icon of all possible metaphors of absence both in the play bearing her name and in *The Trojan Women*: the loss of her husband, her children, her wealth, deprived as she is of the crown and other symbols of sovereignty; her body humiliated by age, pain and grief. She enters the stage destitute, a slave, and she exits doomed to exile; in short, nullified, an allegory of the "nothing" that haunts Hamlet's vision of an actor in performance (see Bigliazzi 2008).

Yet absence is also a function of desire. Euripides' Phaedra tragically incarnates this apparent contradiction, as does Shakespeare's Cleopatra. Yes, of course, Cleopatra exercises power on her own account, but in so far as she makes herself both the subject and object of desire. Within the play's maze of passionate yearning for *eros*, political dominion, beauty, she is also the incarnation of a death wish. In Enobarbus' narrative, which reports of her *persona* floating in a royal barge along the Cydnus waters, a life, rather than a body, is shown; exactly the opposite of her rival, Roman Octavia,

[22] On the play of difference between male/female, saying/showing, signifier/signified in *Agamemnon*, see Goldhill 1984, 8-98.

in the messenger's report ("She shows a body, rather than a life", 3.3.20). No wonder that her love story with Antony stems from her absence, since the very fact that she is hidden from Antony's sight, in the first chapter of their affair, fans the flames of his longing.

Cleopatra's desire takes on different forms, such as the dream of Antony in the shape of a hero unleashed by his loss ("I dreamt there was an Emperor Antony", 5.2.75) or even a maternal fancy – a projection of her instinct onto the agent of her death ("Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, / That sucks the nurse asleep?", 5.2.297-8). The climax comes however at the end, when Cleopatra projects herself into the empty space of the stage,[23] which she fills with her longest speech (5.2. 269-302) in pursuit of the queenly status that she has lost and is about to be ridiculed in Caesar's triumphant return to Rome. Cleopatra's triumph lies in this play-within-the-play challenge. But an awry crown prevents the play from coming to a close ("what should I stay –", 5.2.302) and leaves the shadow of her royal status incomplete.

In a perceptive essay inspired by the themes explored in this issue, Guido Avezzù highlights the etymology of Electra's name, stressing the meaning of *alektros*, 'excluded from the marriage bed' (*lektron*). He argues that the princess's 'unwedded' destiny is etched in her name, claiming that a double absence hangs over her character: lack of leadership in her *genos*, and lack of an origin in the epic tradition: "Electra is primarily a character belonging to tragedy".[24]

Her myth is a creation of tragedy, which Avezzù explores in a variety of reprises and displacements from Aeschylus' *Choephori*, to the two plays on Electra respectively by Sophocles and Euripides, up to twentieth century remakes, focusing on her frustrated will to incarnate her royal dynasty only in the role of an attendant to her father's memory.

Electra's revenge tragedy against the murder of her father and her subsequent matricide is focused on her being an orphan, and a virgin: both features involving a condition of loss. On the one hand, loss provides her with an energy and will-power that make her a stronger character than her brother Orestes; on the other hand, it frustrates her desire for a crown: she perceives herself as a 'slave in the palace', dressed meanly, conscious of a doom in her ethical choice to stay a virgin, excluding her from motherhood and from family inheritance (p. 95): "In Sophocles, too . . . the virgin-

[23] The reference is of course to Brook 2008.

[24] Avezzù makes a point of Electra being absent in the epic tradition. However, as a tragic creation, the character undergoes a process of mythicisation in a variety of interpretations.

al state and the exclusion from the family inheritance (ploutos) are one and the same thing".

And yet, at least in Euripides' version, she is "the only one among the Electras of the 'Oresteiai' to have left an inheritance", that of an "unequivocal, though frustrated, idea of sovereignty" (p. 110).

The tragical repertoire of queenship and its discontents extends – at least in the plays examined in this issue – from an offstage Troy (a ghost ever looming in the background: even *Hecuba*'s and *The Trojan Women*'s plots unfold in the Greek camp outside the gates of Ilium) to a number of metatheatrical cities: in classical productions it spreads from the palace of the Persian capital Susa (*The Persians*) to Argos (*Agamemnon*), to Colonos, to the Mycenean acropolis (Sophocles' *Electra*), to Thebes (*Oedipus Rex*, *The Bacchae*); from Corinth (*Medea*) to Troezen (*Hippolytus*, *Phaedra*); in early modernity it reaches Carthage (*Dido, Queen of Carthage*) and Alexandria (*Antony and Cleopatra*); Rome (*Titus Andronicus*) and London (Shakespeare's histories).

One city is missing – Athens. Theseus rules in Athens, but the conflict does not take place in Athens. No conflict is staged in the city that in the fifth century BC had established her hegemony over the whole of Greece. Onstage Athens is the city where conflicts, if any, are not to be seen, only resolved. Not a site of royal palaces, but of a court of justice[25] and a place of democratic, rational dialogue. The dialogic space of tragedy lies elsewhere.

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[25] On the challenging topic – and lexicon - of justice as practised in a historical-mythical past in comparison with the idea of justice in the democratic *polis* see the rich Introduction in Euripides 2018: 1-28.

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