

# Under the blue pencil: Greek tragedy and the British censor

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The regularity with which Greek plays have been produced in Britain over the last ten or fifteen years has meant that a Greek tragedy can claim as legitimate a place in the classical repertoire of a London theatre as, say, an Elizabethan tragedy. From our current standpoint, therefore, it is astonishing to discover that audiences in the past were often prevented from seeing Greek tragedies on the stage in Britain. But even a brief look into the annals of the Lord Chamberlain's Office will reveal how Greek tragedy in translation and adaptation has fallen foul of the British censor on a number of occasions from the eighteenth century onwards.

In the early stages the objections to the plays were broadly political; but by the middle of the nineteenth century, there was a marked shift in concern and the grounds for refusing a licence were largely moral. As late as 1910 audiences were unable to watch a professional production of *Oedipus the King* because, in the words of a leading actor-manager of the day, it might 'prove injurious' and 'lead to a great number of plays being written ... appealing to a vitiated public taste solely in the cause of indecency.'<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, by falling under the censorious 'blue pencil' towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, *Oedipus the King* may be said to have played a major role in the early stages of the campaign to abolish stage censorship in Britain.

The Licensing Act of 1737 provided the basis for the law surrounding theatrical censorship that survived, substantially unchanged, until the 1968 Theatres Act when the British stage was finally freed from the clutches of the censor.<sup>2</sup> Under the Act of 1737, the Lord Chamberlain was granted the power to refuse a licence to any play acted 'for hire, gain, or reward' anywhere in Great Britain 'as often as he shall think fit'. The main thrust of the legislation of 1737 was political, having been drawn up by the Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, with the express purpose of curbing the political satires of Henry Fielding that were playing to packed houses at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket.

The legislation proved effective in so far as it prevented Fielding from rallying

the Opposition from the auditorium of a London theatre, but it was by no means foolproof. Some few months after the Act came into force, the poet James Thomson submitted an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* to the Lord Chamberlain's Office. And on 14 January 1738, the play was granted a licence for performance at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, even though the ancient characters of Aeschylus' play had been re-fashioned by Thomson with the sole intention of providing a blistering attack upon Walpole's personal and political conduct.<sup>3</sup> The censor's only objections lay with the prologue – written not by Thomson, but by the playwright David Mallet – and references to the British stage '...unbias'd yet by Party-Rage' as well as pleas for the audience to supply 'Our last best licence' were to be omitted from stage production.<sup>4</sup>

But the fact that Thomson's own work had apparently escaped the careful scrutiny of the Lord Chamberlain's Office is particularly surprising. For in addition to being an established poet, Thomson was a known supporter of the Opposition who had openly published two or three pieces in their support already. He had, moreover, been the anonymous author of the Preface to the reprint of the great tract for press freedom, Milton's *Areopagitica*, which had been hurriedly issued by members of the Opposition in response to the repressive measures of Walpole's Licensing Act.<sup>5</sup> Whether it was the Greek myth that veiled the contemporary allegory from the Lord Chamberlain's eyes, or whether it was leniency on his part, Thomson's *Agamemnon* opened at the Drury Lane Theatre on 6 April and ran for nine performances to popular acclaim.<sup>6</sup>

The *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, however, was clearly an ideal starting point for Thomson's *exposé* of private and public venality. Agamemnon's absence from Argos conveniently represented George II's protracted visit to Hanover during 1736-1737, when his wife Queen Caroline (the Clytemnestra figure of the play) was left in charge of affairs of state in England with (her Egisthus) Robert Walpole. Although the death of Queen Caroline in November 1737 had undoubtedly removed some of the sting from Thomson's attack, the contemporary allusions to Walpole and his chicanery were readily appreciated by the first audiences.<sup>7</sup>

Thomson's concerns in his *Agamemnon* necessarily entail a shift in focus away from the Aeschylean original – Agamemnon's marginality is even more marked than it is in Aeschylus; and (in this respect, as in others) Thomson's tragedy gestures towards the Senecan version where Aegisthus assumes a commanding role.<sup>8</sup> The audience is very often treated to an off-stage version of the events of Aeschylus' play: the opening scenes, for example, show us a not wholly

unsympathetic Clytemnestra trying in vain to resist her fierce passion for the arch-Lothario, Egisthus. Egisthus in Thomson's play is also the master of political subterfuge; and when he comes face to face with Agamemnon, he justifies his previous treachery as a necessary response in order to stifle the dissemination of 'democratic Views' and republican sentiments (Act II, sc.v). Great play is made of the difference between the returning warrior Agamemnon and the decadent Egisthus, who has left the country to 'rot in weedy Peace / In slothful Riot, Luxury, Profusion' (Act III, sc.ii) – an overtly topical allusion to Walpole's pacific policy to Spain, which was a favourite target of his opponents.

Cassandra's presence amongst Agamemnon's retinue is retained but modified: she is no longer a concubine, but an unfortunate victim of war who is to be treated by Agamemnon with dignity and respect as if she were a second daughter. Cassandra's presence, however, is sufficiently galling to Clytemnestra to be exploited by Egisthus in his plan to enlist her services in his plot against the King. But Thomson's Clytemnestra is no murderess, and she rejects the plan to kill Agamemnon with a defiant cry: 'You shall not rise by me into his Throne / I will not be the Tool of your Ambition' (Act V, sc.i).

Increasingly, the political realities behind the plot become remarkably difficult to reconcile with the dictates of the myth: of course, no one killed the King on his return from Hanover in January 1737; and George II no less than his Queen had already become estranged from the Prince of Wales, so that there was no Orestes to avenge the King in the political arena. But although the removal of Clytemnestra from the plot to kill Agamemnon necessitates some considerable departures from Aeschylus' play, Thomson's ending – closely modelled on Greek tragedy in general, with Egisthus revealing the body of Agamemnon to a distraught Electra towards the end of the play – enables him to vilify his anti-hero absolutely.

It is often alleged that the Greek plays were generally neglected, except by professional scholars, in the early eighteenth century, and that Aeschylus in particular was ignored.<sup>9</sup> But the example of Thomson's *Agamemnon* would indicate otherwise. Contemporary accounts of the performances show that audiences were sufficiently conversant with the Aeschylean original to appreciate Thomson's deviations from his source – notably in his more sympathetic portrait of Clytemnestra.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the fact that the first edition of three thousand copies and one hundred royal copies of the play was sold out almost immediately – leading to a second edition of fifteen hundred copies being printed three days later<sup>11</sup> – is surely ample testimony to the powerful, albeit forgotten, influence that Greek

tragedy exerted during this turbulent period of Britain's political history.

Adaptations of Greek tragedies, however, did not always fare so fortunately with the censor. When Thomson tried once more to use a Greek tragedy as a vehicle for a critique of contemporary political events, he was not so lucky. Thomson's tragedy *Edward and Eleonora* draws heavily on Euripides' *Alcestis* and was denied a licence whilst in rehearsal at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden in 1739. The play is set in Palestine during the Crusades, and is based upon an apocryphal story concerning Edward, Prince of Wales (the future Edward I) whose wife, Eleonora is said to have sucked poison from her husband's mortal wound at the risk of her own life.<sup>12</sup> The medieval tale is fleshed out with details and (very often) verbatim translations from Euripides' pro-satyrical play concerning *Alcestis*' similarly altruistic act to save her own husband's life.<sup>13</sup>

Although Samuel Johnson was unable to understand the reasons behind the censor's objections to Thomson's play,<sup>14</sup> the parallels between Edward (the Admetus figure) and Frederick the Prince of Wales (Thomson's patron) are obvious. Thomson has chosen to eulogize the Prince of Wales and thereby advance the cause of the Opposition once again. At the beginning of the play, Edward is urged by Gloster to abandon war in the Holy Land and to return to affairs of state at home, where his aged father has fallen prey to evil counsellors (Act I, sc.i). Towards the end of the play (after the death of Eleonora) comes news of the death of the King, and Edward is roused into taking revenge. And once the Heracles figure – appropriately, the Sultan himself – has rescued Eleonora from death with a miraculous cure, Edward is set to return to England, realizing that it was misplaced zeal that led him to go to war against the Sultan in the first place (Act V, sc.iv).

Whilst the parallels with the *Alcestis* serve to dignify the Princess of Wales, Augusta of Saxe-Gotha (to whom the printed edition of the play is dedicated), it is the deviations from Euripides' play, above all, that serve to ennoble the Prince. In Thomson's version, Edward (unlike Admetus) does not endorse his wife's self-sacrifice at any point, but actively seeks to oppose it once he discovers the identity of the willing substitute. The most notable deviation from Euripides' text, however, is the absence of the confrontation between father and son, which would have mirrored contemporary events rather too sharply. Of course, topography precludes any such encounter in Thomson's version, but by suppressing this scene in particular – where Admetus' moral duplicity is exposed no less than the opportunism of his father – Thomson guarantees that Prince Edward's conduct

remains unimpeachable.

In November of 1762,<sup>15</sup> a version of Sophocles' *Electra* by William Shirley was also denied a licence when it was in rehearsal at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden. Shirley vainly wrote to the Lord Chamberlain to protest against the decision to ban his play which (in his own words) 'had been written near twenty years, and was no other than the Electra of Sophocles, adapted to the English stage'.<sup>16</sup> And he subsequently re-submitted the play for licence in the spring of 1764, when Lord Gower succeeded the Duke of Marlborough in the Office of Lord Chamberlain. But the play was denied a licence for the second time. No explanations were proffered to the frustrated Shirley concerning the reason for the ban – indeed, the Lord Chamberlain's prerogative of silence was inevitably what the dramatists deplored most – but a statement by Shirley in his preface to the published edition of the play provides a strong clue as to where the Lord Chamberlain's concerns lay. Shirley writes that although he finished the play in the spring of 1745, any coincidence between the content of his play (a young prince returning to reclaim his dead father's usurped rights) and the events of the Jacobite Rebellion were purely fortuitous. According to Shirley, 'the subject...had [been] casually chosen', but that lest it 'be considered as invidious and offensive while the nation continued in so unhappy a situation', he had laid it aside.<sup>17</sup>

What Shirley finds astonishing – and critics too have shared his astonishment<sup>18</sup> – is that the play was still deemed subversive some twenty years after the Rebellion itself. But such a response is surely feigned or simply naive. Shirley's political stance may be hard to determine from the evidence of the Preface alone, where only his staunch opposition to the censor is unequivocal. Shirley's passionate dedication to Lord Chesterfield (the chief opponent of the Licensing Act) merely confirms this. However, one suspects Shirley of writing with more than a touch of irony when he claims complete ignorance of any potentially dangerous subtext to his play. For Shirley has chosen to adapt the Sophoclean original in such a way that the political parallels obtrude. And although it was his intention to have the tragedy performed together with his *Masque of Heracles*, which was written in celebration of the birth of the Prince of Wales, Shirley's *Electra* remains, *faute de mieux*, a stirring piece of Jacobite history.

Shirley has translated the intensely personalized revenge of the Sophoclean version into a tragedy of state, where according to one choric figure: 'A royal orphan's rights, a nation's rescue, / A tyrant's overthrow, a king's revenge, / Press to decision – on an hour depend' (Act I, sc.ii). Aegisthus, in Shirley's play, is the

out-and-out tyrant; Orestes, the Young Pretender. The recognition scene of Sophocles' play is here flanked by two public recognition scenes (Act II, sc.x; Act III, sc.iv) – hailed by Pylades as a 'Most happy meeting of a prince and people' (Act III, sc.iv) – where Orestes is revealed to his supporters within the city. And instead of Electra's brief invocation of Agamemnon's ghost in the presence of Orestes, the Tutor, Pylades and a chorus of women, we witness in Shirley's play a group of political dissidents who vow allegiance both to the dead Agamemnon, before whose tomb they now kneel, and to 'Another monarch, like our Agamemnon, / [who] Comes, as a god, to scatter blessings round him' (Act III, sc.iv).

Towards the end of the play – and here no doubt the censor's objections lay – Shirley departs absolutely from his source and gives Aegisthus temporary victory over the perpetrators of the unsuccessful rebellion. Despite some fears of inflaming opposition, Aegisthus, now entirely alienated from Clytemnestra, who is reconciled to her children, plans to kill Orestes to 'blast rebellious growth / And root up rancorous hope' (Act V, sc.i). If contemporary history has dictated the events of Shirley's plot so far, the conclusion gives way to wish fulfilment. Before Aegisthus is able to carry out his plan, he is foiled by the arrival of fifteen hundred Phocian troops who secure victory for Agamemnon's cause with a view to restoring Orestes to his rightful role as ruler over Argos. And then, almost as if wishful thinking in the political arena were becoming rather too obtrusive, Shirley jerks his play back into the realms of Greek myth. And it is a return to Greek myth generally, rather than to the specifics of Sophocles' play, because Shirley now includes both the matricide and Orestes' guilt at his deed. Since Clytemnestra here is no enemy, Shirley has set himself an almost impossible task: only by making the matricide an accident can the Greek frame for his play remain intact. Indeed, in the last two acts Sophocles' *Electra* is reduced to the most slender of frames within which Shirley is depicting events that the eighteenth-century censor might legitimately consider capable of giving life to any Jacobite sympathies that were still in existence.<sup>19</sup>

As the eighteenth-century adaptations of Greek tragedies demonstrate, both the legislation of 1737 and its subsequent implementation by succeeding Lord Chamberlains were of a highly political nature. The Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, however, which gave the Lord Chamberlain the power to ban any play (old or new), and to rescind any licence already granted, was generally implemented with reference to moral rather than political criteria. Under Section 14 of the Act, the Lord Chamberlain had the power to stop any performance in the interest of 'good

manners, decorum or of the public peace'.<sup>20</sup> However laughable this may seem to us, it must be remembered that Victorian audiences themselves jealously guarded the notion of strict public morality, and thus perceived the powers to protect that morality as a necessary rather than as a repressive measure.

What was, however, perceived to be increasingly absurd about the legislation was the fact that an individual – in theory the Lord Chamberlain himself, in practice his Assistant, the Examiner of Plays – should be granted absolute authority over matters of decency and decorum. And not only did the Lord Chamberlain's right of silence continue to prove irksome to individual playwrights whose plays were refused a licence – as had been Shirley's experience with his *Electra*; it also became increasingly resented that no questions at all relating to the Lord Chamberlain's decisions could be made in the House of Commons because his name appeared on the Civil List. Furthermore, the unsystematic and often inconsistent method that the Examiners of Plays adopted in their work turned more and more writers towards active opposition. Although between 1895 and 1909 out of some eight thousand plays submitted for licence only thirty were banned,<sup>21</sup> amongst the thirty was Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, which was being widely read by schoolboys and had been performed by undergraduates at Cambridge in 1887. A measure of the arbitrary and inconsistent nature of the licensing procedure at this time is the fact that the Examiner of Plays from 1895 to 1911, George Alexander Redford, consistently refused to license Sophocles' play, and yet happily granted a licence to Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, a comedy that was considered sufficiently ribald for subsequent Examiners to deny it a licence on a number of occasions during the inter-war period.<sup>22</sup>

The experience of Sophocles' play at the hands of the British censor can be charted from 1886 onwards, when the campaign to abolish theatre censorship began to gather momentum. In 1886 the Shelley Society mounted a production of Shelley's controversial play about incest, *The Cenci*, at the Grand Theatre, Islington some seventy years after it was written. When they thrust *The Cenci* into the limelight, they established a similarly high profile for Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. And from 1886 until 1910, when *Oedipus the King* was finally granted a licence after much public pressure – *The Cenci* had to wait until 1922 to receive a licence – the fates of these two plays are inextricably linked, featuring prominently in almost every important debate concerning theatrical censorship. Furthermore, it may be argued that it was the eventual prising apart of the two plays that led to a dilution of the case against censorship in 1910, when the increasingly splintered

opposition was left without a *cause célèbre* around which to rally.

The linking of the plays was perhaps inevitable given that both plots involved incest and parricide. In his Preface to the published edition of *The Cenci*, Shelley himself refers to Sophocles' Oedipus plays, although he refrains from pointing to the obvious thematic parallels.<sup>23</sup> And the members of the Shelley Society followed Shelley's example and similarly invoked the Sophoclean precedent without drawing explicit parallels between the two plays.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, a glance at the Evidence given to the Joint Select Committee of the House of Lords and House of Commons in 1909 shows that not only has the twinning of the plays become habitual by this time, but that the two playwrights are now united in the cause against censorship as well.<sup>25</sup> When Henry Arthur Jones, a playwright, was unable to attend the Joint Committee to give evidence in person, he issued a vitriolic pamphlet in which Sophocles and Shelley have become bywords for the absurdity of the licensing system. Jones writes: 'Thus the rule of Censorship is "Gag Shelley! Gag Sophocles! License Mr Smellfilth! License Mr Slangwheezy!"...'<sup>26</sup>

It is extremely difficult to assemble the evidence for the case for censoring Sophocles' play, particularly since the evidence given by George Redford, Examiner of Plays, to the Joint Committee in 1909 is terse, to say the least. Redford was asked why a version of the *Oedipus* by the *Daily Telegraph* drama critic, and former Oxford don, W.L. Courtney, had been refused a licence. When asked by Mr Harcourt if an alleged impropriety had led to the banning of Courtney's version whilst the *Oedipus* by Dryden and Lee was apparently exempt from such strictures, Redford replied: 'Mr Courtney's version was submitted and it was considered; Mr Dryden's version was not considered.'<sup>27</sup> Harcourt's line of enquiry here is an attempt to ascertain the extent to which precedent determined the fate of newly submitted plays. And it is clearly precedent in the case of *Oedipus the King* that is affecting its fortunes at the hands of the censor. For the analogy with *The Cenci*, and the refusal of a licence to Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* in 1893 – Wilde's play remained unlicensed until 1931 – meant that any play dealing with incest in any shape or form was deemed indecent and unfit for stage representation.<sup>28</sup>

It may seem incredible to us that Sophocles' tragedy can be reduced to a play about incest *tout court*. But it is important to remember that our readings of the play are essentially post-Romantic and post-Nietzschean, if not also part-psychological and part-anthropological, whereas Redford and his colleagues are subjecting Sophocles' play to a reading where incest in its most literal sense is the stumbling block. For us, the incest of Oedipus and Jocasta has been raised to an



image of cosmic disorder, a metaphor of the multilayered self, or a schema of the threat to boundaries on which civilization depends. For the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century reader, however, the indelicacy of the subject matter obtrudes.

Perhaps the baldest example of such a pre-modern reading can be found in the copy of Gilbert Murray's translation of Sophocles' play that was submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's Office in November 1910, and which is now amongst the collection of the Lord Chamberlain's plays in the British Library. On the first page, in the list of *dramatis personae*, Jocasta is described as 'Queen of Thebes; widow of Laius, the late king and now wife to Oedipus'. 'Now wife to Oedipus' is underlined in blue pencil – the only such underlining in the text – and the reason for this becomes clear from Redford's comment in his letter to Lord Spencer, the current Lord Chamberlain. Redford writes:

I have read the Gilbert Murray version. In many respects it differs from Mr Courtney's treatment, but it follows the classic story throughout, and the character of Jocasta 'now wife of Oedipus', is represented and all the well known situations of the play are retained.<sup>29</sup>

Redford's comments are overwhelmingly naive – indeed by implying that a version of *Oedipus* without Jocasta would be permissible, he might as well be asking for a *Hamlet* without the ghost; but when the Comptroller of the Lord Chamberlain's Office, Douglas Dawson, wrote to members of a recently formed Advisory Board to seek their advice concerning the Murray translation, he broadly adopted Redford's terms. Dawson writes:

Some years previously a translation of the same drama was made by Mr W.L. Courtney and was refused licence for stage performance on the ground that it was impossible to put on the stage in England a play dealing with incest.

There was a precedent for the action which the Lord Chamberlain took on this occasion in the refusal of successive Lord Chamberlains to license 'The Cenci'.<sup>30</sup>

So jealously did they guard their role as the custodians of public morality that the incumbents of the Lord Chamberlain's Office were in danger of confusing

representation with imitation. For as Henry Arthur Jones wryly observed at the time:

Now, of course, if any considerable body of Englishmen are arranging to marry their mothers, whether by accident or design, it must be stopped at once. But it is not a frequent occurrence in any class of English society. Throughout the course of my life I have not met more than six men who were anxious to do it.<sup>31</sup>

As efforts had been made to stage Shelley's play, attempts were underway to stage *Oedipus the King* in London. The first attempt seems initially, at least, to have been unrelated to any political campaigning. In 1904 Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree – inspired by a performance in Paris by the famous French actor Mounet-Sully in the role of Oedipus – sent his Secretary at His Majesty's Theatre, Frederick Whelen, to ask Redford about the possibility of mounting a production of Sophocles' tragedy in London. Despite the precedent of an undergraduate production in the original Greek in Cambridge in 1887, Redford said that a London production of *Oedipus the King* was out of the question.<sup>32</sup>

Tree's informal inquiry led to a flurry of activity. First and most significantly, W.B. Yeats seized the opportunity to use the ban as a means of putting the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on the theatrical map of the English-speaking world when it opened at the end of the year. The Lord Chamberlain's Office had no jurisdiction in Dublin; and it was recognized by the founders of the Abbey that there could be no more effective beginning to a national theatre's career than to stage a play which would enable the theatre to go down in history as the champion of intellectual freedom: Ireland would liberate the classics from the English tyranny. When Yeats announced the establishment of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, he added:

*Oedipus the King* is forbidden in London. A censorship created in the eighteenth century by Walpole, because somebody has [*sic*] written against election bribery, has been distorted by a puritanism which is not the less an English invention for being a pretended hatred of vice and a real hatred of intellect. Nothing has ever suffered so many persecutions as the intellect, though it is never persecuted under its own name.<sup>33</sup>

Yeats' interpretation of Redford's 'real hatred of intellect' masquerading behind

'a pretended hatred of vice' is highly apposite because comical treatments of unorthodox sexual relations were routinely licensed by the Lord Chamberlain's Office. And the banning of Sophocles' great play was confirmation for Yeats that England was the mean-spirited stifler of the intellect that Ireland would proudly defy.

Almost immediately, Yeats wrote to Gilbert Murray asking him to write a translation of Sophocles' play for the newly founded Irish theatre.<sup>34</sup> Murray had already seen his translation of Euripides' *Hippolytus* being successfully performed by a London theatre company, but he declined Yeats' invitation to turn his hand to Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* on the grounds that the play was 'English-French-German...all construction and no spirit', with 'nothing Irish about it'.<sup>35</sup> It was clear, however, that Yeats's letter had opened up new areas of concern to Murray who replied: 'I am really distressed that the Censor objected to it. It ought to be played not perhaps at His Majesty's by Tree, but by Irving at the Lyceum, with a lecture before...and after. And a public dinner. With speeches. By Cabinet Ministers.'<sup>36</sup> The banning of such a significant play, according to Murray, should be taken to heart by the British establishment. And, indeed, some years later when he had completed his own translation of *Oedipus the King*, Murray – then Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford – appropriately became the person to take Sophocles' tragedy to the heart of the British establishment, when it was his translation that was used in the celebrated Reinhardt production of *Oedipus* at Covent Garden in 1912.

While Yeats was trying to find a suitable translation for an Abbey production of Sophocles' tragedy, Shaw's *The Shewing up of Blanco Posnet* fell victim to the stringencies of the Lord Chamberlain's Office in 1907, and it was decided to stage his play at the Abbey as well.<sup>37</sup> Although Shaw's play went ahead successfully (despite threats from the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to revive his powers of censorship), the plan to stage *Oedipus the King* lost some of its initial force when campaigns in London to produce the play looked as if they would upstage those at the Abbey.<sup>38</sup> And it was not until 1926, after Yeats had completed his version of the play, that the Abbey Theatre finally staged Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*.

Another actor-manager, John Martin-Harvey had (like Sir Herbert Tree) been inspired by Mounet-Sully's performance as Oedipus; and it was Martin-Harvey who had approached Courtney, the drama critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, to produce a free version of *Oedipus the King*.<sup>39</sup> As a former classical scholar with an intimate knowledge of the professional stage, Courtney was an ideal choice. Furthermore, his connection with Greek drama went back a long way to the time when he was

a young don at Oxford, and together with Frank Benson, had mounted the famous undergraduate production of the *Agamemnon* in 1880 which was the first production of a Greek tragedy in the original Greek in modern times in Britain. Courtney's free version of Sophocles' tragedy was refused a licence by Redford (as we have heard already), despite Courtney's impeccable credentials. So significant was the ban that the rejected play was submitted as evidence before the Joint Select Committee on Censorship in 1909; and its presence guaranteed that a high profile was granted to Greek tragedy in general, and Sophocles' play in particular throughout the proceedings of the Committee. Robert Harcourt, the Member of Parliament who had introduced the Theatres and Music Halls Bill designed to abolish Censorship, was determined to keep the Sophoclean scandal at the forefront of the Committee's concerns. Even Sir Herbert Tree, who (like most actor-managers of the time) was against abolition *per se*, nonetheless admitted under Harcourt's assiduous questioning that the Lord Chamberlain's stance over the *Oedipus* was clearly mistaken.<sup>40</sup> When the half-million-word report on the Committee's findings and recommendations appeared in November 1909, the frequency with which references to Sophocles' play occurred made it inevitable that a production would be mounted in London before long.

By the middle of 1910, two leading theatre managers were planning to stage *Oedipus the King*.<sup>41</sup> Sir Herbert Tree, undeterred by Redford's previously negative response, was again hoping to mount a production at His Majesty's Theatre; and Herbert Trench, the new Manager of the Theatre Royal in the Haymarket, had approached Murray for his almost completed translation of Sophocles' tragedy.<sup>42</sup> Murray's involvement in the 1909 campaign had undoubtedly led him to a temporary rejection of Euripides in favour of a translation of Sophocles' now notorious play. When Trench sent Murray's translation to the Lord Chamberlain's Office, Redford was all set to return it to Trench with the customary rejection based on precedent. When Redford wrote to the Lord Chamberlain for his seal of approval, he did add, however, the significant *caveat* that: 'Mr Trench and Dr Gilbert Murray are opponents of the office, and no doubt desire to make capital out of a prohibition of an ancient Greek classic so familiar to every school boy etc etc.'<sup>43</sup> The *caveat* was evidently heeded because the Lord Chamberlain's Comptroller, Douglas Dawson, acted swiftly, telling Redford to inform Trench that the play was under review; and Murray's translation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* was to be granted the dubious distinction of being the first play to be referred to the newly appointed Advisory Board.<sup>44</sup>

All the members of the Board felt that a ban would be hard to sustain, although the retired Actor-Manager Sir John Hare recommended that 'the greatest caution should be exercised and the matter very seriously and deliberately considered in all its bearings before a licence is granted.'<sup>45</sup> Professor Walter Raleigh from Oxford, however, injected some common sense into the debate when he pointed out – as neither side, for obvious propaganda purposes, had done before – that 'any supposed analogies' with *The Cenci* 'should [not] be allowed to have weight' because the treatment of incest in both plays is of such a different order and degree.<sup>46</sup> The recommendations of the Advisory Board were heeded and Murray's translation of Sophocles' play, entitled *Oedipus, King of Thebes*, was finally granted a licence on 29 November 1910. And, perhaps, by no means coincidentally, on the same day the Lord Chamberlain's Office issued a licence for Strauss' opera, *Salomé* which used Wilde's play (albeit in the German translation of Hedwig Lachmann) as the basis for the libretto, and the opera was performed a few days later at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden on 8 December.

Not only had the greatest barrier to a performance of Sophocles' play now been removed. News from Germany of an exciting new production of *Oedipus the King* by the celebrated Austrian theatre director Max Reinhardt gave an even greater impetus to the British campaign. In October 1910, Harley Granville Barker, the British theatre director, had gone to Berlin to see the production, which had just transferred from Munich, where it had opened in September, and wrote enthusiastically to Murray about what he had seen.<sup>47</sup> Given Trench's dilatoriness, the chances of a production at the Haymarket looked increasingly remote;<sup>48</sup> and the attention of directors, actors, and theatrical impressarios alike towards the end of the year was fixed on the Reinhardt production that played thirty times to rapturous audiences in the Zirkus Schumann in Berlin. In mid-February 1911, Reinhardt's emissary Ordynski came to London saying that Reinhardt himself wanted to stage a London production using Murray's translation.<sup>49</sup> Although negotiations conducted on Murray's behalf by Frederic Whelen to produce the play at the Kingsway Theatre fell through with the death of the financier, by the end of July there were firm plans for a production of the *Oedipus* in January 1912 at Covent Garden, with Martin-Harvey in the leading role and Barker's wife, Lillah McCarthy, as Jocasta. Because the original production used the free version of Hugo von Hofmannstahl, Murray's translation had, in the event, to be slightly adapted by Courtney. In the programme note to the play, the production was hailed as 'the first performance of the play in England since the seventeenth century',<sup>50</sup> a clear allusion to Dryden and

Lee's *Oedipus* written in 1679, and an oblique reference to the earlier ban.

Reviews of the production, however, remained curiously silent about the play's recent history at the hands of the British censor. Shortly after the opening of the Reinhardt production, Granville Barker drew attention to this serious omission in a letter to *The Times*:

Sir, – Public memory is short. In no review of the production of *Oedipus Rex* at Covent Garden has it been recalled that until a year ago this was a forbidden play. But neither has any critic even suggested that it is a thing unfit to be seen. This is a famous case against the Censorship. It is, as it were, brought to trial, and judgement goes by default. Why have the Lord Chamberlain's champions, eager to support him in principle, never a word to say in defence of any of his important acts? Here is a chance for them; and if they feel it is one to be missed, will they not in fairness offer a vicarious apology to the public and the theatre, who have been for several generations wantonly deprived of their property in this play? – Yours etc.<sup>51</sup>

Even though no theatre critic found Sophocles' play 'a thing unfit to be seen', not every one shared this view. When Martin-Harvey took the Reinhardt production on a tour around Britain in 1913, the Manager of the New Theatre in Cardiff (no less a person than the brother of George Redford, former Examiner of Plays) refused to allow *Oedipus* to be performed in his theatre, and Martin-Harvey and his company had to find an alternative venue.<sup>52</sup>

*Oedipus* may have been finally freed but the British stage was to remain under the shadow of the censor for another fifty years. The new Examiner of Plays was even more stringent than his predecessor and his high-handedness provoked a petition that was presented to the King on 11 June 1912 with the signatures of over sixty dramatists. In the petition, the recent success of Reinhardt's *Oedipus* was held up as evidence of the absurdity of the system of censorship. The statement avows:

That the Lord Chamberlain's Department by working on custom and not on ascertainable results has been grossly unjust to managers, authors and the public, and has cast discredit on the administration of the Department by its treatment of classical plays, and of plays in which scriptural characters appear, as may be instanced by the repeated refusals to many

managers of a licence for Sophocles' great play *Oedipus Rex*, which now, at last permitted, has been produced with every indication of public approval.<sup>53</sup>

However strong a statement of protest the petition contained, a censored *Oedipus* had clearly been a far more effective weapon against the Lord Chamberlain's Office than a liberated one could ever be. Moreover, Granville Barker's concerns, expressed to Murray in 1910 before the ban on the *Oedipus* was lifted, were proving prophetic. Barker had written:

My fear is that the Lord Chamberlain means to scotch opposition by making as many concessions as he can – we – the general body of opposers – are so rottenly divided on the question of principle – that it would be an easy job if he had the wit to set about it. Personally one will be glad to see the *Oedipus* through but – at once – everyone will bless the name of the committee and say that nothing more need be done.<sup>54</sup>

Redford may not have had sufficient wit to scotch the opposition single-handedly; but by implying in his letter to the Lord Chamberlain that the Sophoclean tragedy was the opposition's trump card, he had unwittingly guaranteed his Office's survival for some more years. For by withdrawing the *Oedipus* from the fray, the Lord Chamberlain had deftly wrongfooted the opposition; and the British stage had to wait until the 1960s for its freedom.

The history of Greek tragedy on the British stage is thus closely interwoven with the history of British stage censorship. Thomson's adaptation of the *Agamemnon* in 1738 was one of the first plays to challenge the authority of the Lord Chamberlain's Office. And had *Oedipus Rex* remained on the list of proscribed plays a year or two longer, it may well have been that a London production of Sophocles' tragedy would have been mounted to celebrate that Office's demise.

## NOTES

- 1 Sir John Hare, Member of the Advisory Board on Stage Plays, in a letter to the Lord Chamberlain, November 1910. Lord Chamberlain's Plays' Correspondence File: *Oedipus Rex* 1910/814 (British Library).
- 2 On stage censorship in Britain generally, see F. Fowell and F. Palmer, *Censorship in England* (London 1913); R. Findlater, *Banned: A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain* (London 1967); and J. Johnston, *The Lord Chamberlain's Blue Pencil* (London 1990).
- 3 L.W. Conolly, *The Censorship of English Drama 1738-1824* (San Marino 1976) 49. For an alternative, Jacobite reading, see M.J.W. Scott, *James Thomson, Anglo-Scot* (Athens, Georgia 1988) 228.
- 4 J.B. Kern, 'James Thomson's revisions of Agamemnon', *Philological Quarterly* 45 (1966) 292; Conolly, *The Censorship*, 50. All citations are from the first edition (London 1738).
- 5 D. Grant, *James Thomson: Poet of 'The Seasons'* (London 1951) 176-7; A.D. McKillop, 'Thomson and the licensers of the stage', *Philological Quarterly* 37 (1958) 449.
- 6 See Grant, *James Thomson*, 184-5 *contra* Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, (ed., G.B. Hill, Oxford 1905) Vol.3 291 who contends that the play 'was only endured'. For the removal of the Hemon-Electra sub-plot after the first performance, see Kern, 'James Thomson's revisions', 289-303, and J.C. Greene, *The Plays of James Thomson 1700-1748* (New York 1987) Vol.1 109-14.
- 7 Thomas Davies, *Memoirs of the Life of Garrick* (London 1780) Vol.2 33.
- 8 On the Senecan debt, see Greene, *Plays of James Thomson*, Vol.1 115-18, although Greene overlooks the Euripidean Phaedra model for Thomson's Clytemnestra in Act I, sc.i.
- 9 See, e.g., M.L. Clarke, *Greek Studies in England 1700-1830* (Cambridge 1945) 144.
- 10 Davies, *Memoirs*, Vol.II 33.
- 11 Grant, *James Thomson*, 186. Cf. J. Feather, *A History of British Publishing* (London 1988) 94 for details of eighteenth-century editions. The majority appear to have been of 1000 to 1500 copies, and so Thomson's first edition of 3000 was well above average.
- 12 Grant, *James Thomson*, 189; Greene, *Plays of James Thomson*, Vol.II 225-28.
- 13 Act III, iv (Daraxa's report of Eleonora's death) is taken from Euripides' *Alcestis* 152ff.; Act III, v (Eleonora enters dying on a couch) is very closely modelled on 244ff.; and Act V, iv (the Arabian Prince protesting his innocence, calls in a woman as witness who turns out to be Eleonora) draws on 1006ff.
- 14 Johnson, *Lives of the Poets*, Vol.III 292.
- 15 See Shirley's preface to the printed edition of the play, *Electra: A Tragedy and the Birth of Hercules: A Masque* (London 1765) from which the following details of the play's experience at the hands of the censor are taken.
- 16 Shirley, 'To the Reader' (1765).
- 17 Shirley, 'To the Reader' (1765).
- 18 So Conolly, *The Censorship*, 73-4.
- 19 According to Conolly, *The Censorship*, 74 n.24, the Jacobite Rebellion was a sensitive issue with the censor as late as 1806, and he cites the example of Charles Kemble's *The Wanderer*.
- 20 Fowell & Palmer, *Censorship*, 373.
- 21 Findlater, *Banned*, 79.
- 22 See the letter from Granville Barker to Gilbert Murray dated August 1910 in C.B. Purdom, *Harley Granville Barker* (London 1955) 113: 'You know I suppose that the Little Theatre opens with the Lysistrata – blessed by Redford.'
- 23 Although Shelley does not refer explicitly to their thematic parallels, he was fully aware that such parallels would not be missed. Thomas Love Peacock, who had vainly submitted the play to Covent Garden at Shelley's request, doubted that *The Cenci* would have been granted a licence anyway because other treatments of the delicate subject of incest (including Dryden and Lee's *Oedipus*) had been barred



- from the stage in recent times. For details and comment, see G.E. Woodberry, ed., *The Cenci by Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Boston & London 1909) xxxiii-xxxv.
- 24 See A. Forman & H.B. Forman's Introduction to the Shelley Society edition of the play published in 1886.
- 25 See *Censorship and Licensing (Joint Select Committee) Verbatim Report of the Proceedings and Full Text of the Recommendations* (London 1909) *passim*.
- 26 Henry Arthur Jones' pamphlet, written in the form of a letter to Herbert Samuel, Chairman of the Joint Select Committee, is reprinted in *Censorship and Licensing* (1909) 199-203.
- 27 *Censorship and Licensing* (1909) 16.
- 28 There were other plays involving incestuous relationships that were also banned at this period: e.g., M.G. D'Annunzio's *La Città Morta* – which Eleonora Duse had tried to stage in London – was denied a licence in 1903.
- 29 Letter from George Alexander Redford to Lord Spencer 10 November 1910. Lord Chamberlain's Plays' Correspondence File: *Oedipus* 1910/814 (British Library).
- 30 Letter from Douglas Dawson to Sir Edward Carson 11 November 1910. Lord Chamberlain's Plays' Correspondence File: *Oedipus* 1910/814 (British Library).
- 31 Cited by Fowell and Palmer, *Censorship*, 275 n.1.
- 32 *Censorship and Licensing* (1909) 68.
- 33 William Butler Yeats, 'Samhain: 1904' in *Explorations* (London 1962) 131-2.
- 34 24 January 1905 in the Bodleian Library, reprinted in D. R. Clark & J.B. McGuire, *W.B. Yeats: The Writing of Sophocles' King Oedipus* (Philadelphia 1989) 8-9.
- 35 27 January 1905 in R.J. Finneran, G. Mill Harper & W.M. Murphy (edd.), *Letters to W.B. Yeats* (London 1977) 145-6.
- 36 27 January 1905 in Finneran et al. (edd.), *Letters to Yeats*, 145.
- 37 Findlater, *Banned*, 101-2; Clark & McGuire, *W.B. Yeats*, 14-15.
- 38 Clark & McGuire, *W.B. Yeats*, 17-18.
- 39 John Martin-Harvey, *The Autobiography of Sir John Martin-Harvey* (London 1933) 391-403.
- 40 *Censorship and Licensing* (1909) 74.
- 41 See the Barker-Murray correspondence in Purdom, *Granville Barker*, 99-102.
- 42 See Murray to Barker 6 August 1910 in Purdom, *Granville Barker*, 112.
- 43 Letter from Redford to Lord Spencer 10 November 1910. Lord Chamberlain's Plays' Correspondence File: *Oedipus Rex* 1910/814 (British Library).
- 44 Letter from Dawson to Redford 11 November 1910; and from Dawson to Sir Edward Carson 11 November 1910. Lord Chamberlain's Plays' Correspondence File: *Oedipus Rex* 1910/814 (British Library). The other members of the Board were Sir Squire Bancroft, Sir John Hare, Professor Walter Raleigh and S.O. Buckmaster.
- 45 Sir John Hare, in Lord Chamberlain's Plays' Correspondence File: *Oedipus Rex* 1910/814 (British Library).
- 46 Professor Walter Raleigh, 22 November 1910, in Lord Chamberlain's Plays' Correspondence File: *Oedipus Rex* 1910/814 (British Library).
- 47 Purdom, *Granville Barker*, 114-5.
- 48 Purdom, *Granville Barker*, 116.
- 49 D. Wilson, *Gilbert Murray OM 1886-1957* (Oxford 1987) 165.
- 50 A copy of the programme is in the Production File to the *Oedipus Rex* in The Theatre Museum, Covent Garden. The note was written by F.B. O'Neill.
- 51 *The Times* 18 January 1912, 9.
- 52 Martin-Harvey, *Autobiography*, 490.
- 53 The petition is quoted in full in Fowell and Palmer, *Censorship*, 374-6.
- 54 Purdom, *Granville Barker*, 116.