



Beyond the Ancient and the Modern: Thinking the Tragic with Williams and Kitto

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Abstract

The philosophy of Bernard Williams, recognised as a prominent expression of ethical thought, presents an intense dialogue with ancient Greek tragic culture. Combining erudition and elegance, Williams evokes Greek tragedies to discuss modern ethical ideas and conceptions. Our article intends to consider Williams' thought from a cultural point of view: we propose analysing Williams' cultural methodology, which may be described as a way of thinking beyond the traditional dichotomies between the ancient and the modern, especially concerning the notion of *the tragic*. Accordingly, we shall examine the affinities between ancient and modern tragic cultures by identifying common narrative and poetical elements. To do so, we shall consider the interpretation of *Hamlet*, developed by the classicist scholar H.D.F. Kitto. In *Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and of "Hamlet"* (1956), Kitto proposes reading *Hamlet* in close alliance with *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Kitto maintains that both tragedies are poetical expressions of a shared tragic element: *miasma*, or "pollution", a concept thoroughly treated by Williams in the third chapter of *Shame and Necessity*. Our article aims to combine Williams' cultural methodology—we may call it the deconstruction of the repeated theoretical frameworks regarding the differences between the ancient and the modern—and Kitto's reading of *Hamlet* in line with *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which may be understood as an illustration of the persistence of common tragic elements beyond time and the historical separation of cultural periods. Our perspective shall be both cultural and aesthetic.

Keywords Tragedy · Ancient · Modern · H.D.F. Kitto · Bernard Williams

1 Preliminary Remarks about Williams' Methodology: The Refusal of Some Modern Assumptions

Let us begin by invoking the final paragraphs of *Shame and Necessity*. Bernard Williams concludes the chapter "Possibility, Freedom, and Power", the last chapter of the book, with an interesting remark about "the persistent fantasies" (Williams 1993, p. 166), developed by the modern world, regarding Greek Antiquity as "a time where things were both more beautiful and less fragmented" (Williams 1993, p. 166). According to Williams, "no serious study of the ancient world should encourage us to go back to that world to search a lost unity, in our social relations to one another

or, come to that, in our relations to Being" (Williams 1993, pp. 166–167).

These concluding assertions illustrate an intense analysis of Greek tragedy, as provided by Williams in *Shame and Necessity*, as a form of art that rejects presenting an ideal and perfect harmony between human beings and their world, showing, by contrast, the impossibility of conceiving the world in its presumed full intelligibility. As Williams argues, the Greek tragic element expresses a metaphysical framework involving a dark conception of human existence and fate; in fact, the Sophoclean tragedies represent "human beings as dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly, with a world that is only partially intelligible to human agency and in itself is not necessarily well adjusted to ethical aspirations" (Williams 1993, p. 164). The important point to Williams is that the Sophoclean metaphysical picture is not fully compatible with Plato's and Aristotle's efforts to develop a clear picture of the universe as an intelligible entity and of human reason as an

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autonomous rational faculty.¹ The idea of having two Greek metaphysical frameworks—the tragic and the philosophical—must be accepted and understood. Along with these remarks, Williams presents some oracular assertions:

[...] we are, in our ethical situation, more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime. More particularly, we are like those who, from the fifth century and earlier, have left traces of a consciousness that had not yet been touched by Plato's and Aristotle's attempts to make our ethical relations to the world fully intelligible. (Williams 1993, p. 166)

How are we to read these lines? According to Williams, we have good reasons for supposing that our metaphysical picture is characterised by a tragic tonality, or at least a serious disposition to understand the Greek tragic element. It is as though our metaphysical outlook were closer to the Sophoclean universe than to Plato's and Aristotle's rationalistic projects. Actually, Williams clearly asserts that our time is shaped by the loss, or the failure, of the Kantian and Hegelian legacies: “We know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world, that our history tells no purposive story, and that there is no position outside the world or outside history from which we might hope to authenticate our activities” (Williams 1993, p. 166).

Such assertions leave room for considering the existence of tragic times or epochs: we share with the Greeks of the fifth century B.C. the same kind of tragic element, which cannot be surpassed or overcome by philosophical thinking and its attempts to develop an intelligible picture of the universe and human reason. At this point, we must come back to Williams' warning regarding the emergence of false conceptions about the metaphysical perfection and completeness of the Greeks. In fact, it is not entirely bizarre to assume that our time, our contemporary time, involves an especially tragic dimension; however, the recognition that ancient Greece is characterised by a dark metaphysical conception about human existence and its place in the universe is not so trivial, regardless of the cultural importance attributed to the Attic tragedy as a prominent form of art. As a matter of fact, our modern world has produced prolific ways of depicting Greek antiquity as the paramount expression of metaphysical harmonious unity. The contrast between the ancient and the modern, determined in metaphysical terms, has shaped Modernity and its modes of defining itself as

a distinctive philosophical and cultural period. Conceiving Greek antiquity as a representation of a metaphysically perfect framework is a serious modern assumption, and it lies behind the most predominant modern conceptions about Greek culture and art. The comparison between the ancient and the modern—that is, a cultural pattern according to which Modernity thinks of itself in its multiple reflective ways—means, ultimately, the comparison between a harmonious metaphysical picture and a fragmented metaphysical outlook. Modernity has assumed that its own identity is the expression of a cultural time defined by metaphysical fragmentation and scission, as presented in its several dichotomies, such as subject and object, or human being and nature, and by the extirpation of a sense of totality. This metaphysical picture stands in sharp contrast to a conception of antiquity as a time of metaphysical perfection and harmony, characterised by a full continuity between human beings and nature, and deprived of the pernicious loss of the idea of totality.

It would not be superfluous to consider some expressions of this cultural pattern, which can be described as the comparison between the ancient and the modern, as incessantly produced by Modernity itself. The famous *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, which took place in France during the seventeenth century, is the first clear example of such a cultural pattern, representing an aesthetical dispute about the possibilities of modern art and poetry. The idea behind this cultural pattern is, first and foremost, the cultural contrast between the ancient and the modern; nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the aesthetical inquiry into the potentialities—and the artistic value and quality—of modern art and poetry forms the heart of this cultural debate. In a word, the modern reflective dimension shapes these cultural concerns.

The same reflective modern anxiety is fully present in Romanticism, especially in German Romanticism, which produced a German variation of the French *querelle* at the end of the eighteenth century. As Roger Ayrault elucidates in his book, *La g nese du romantisme allemande (1961–1976)*, the emergence of German Romanticism could be explained by a certain melancholic Romantic recognition of the theories developed by Winckelmann about the excellence and exceptionality of ancient art. Winckelmann's aesthetical theories, intensely read and studied by the Romantics, lie behind the Romantic interrogative concern: should we, modern artists and poets, be mere imitators of the art of the past, namely Greek art, whose quality is considered by the cultural tradition as aesthetically unsurpassed and unattainable? This is a question of epigonism, indeed.

The essays * ber das Studium der griechischen Poesie* by Friedrich Schlegel and * ber naive und sentimentalische Dichtung* by Friedrich Schiller, both published in 1795, are

¹ See “*The Women of Trachis: Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics*” (1996), published in *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the Philosophy of History* (2006). This essay deals with the cultural and ethical significance of fictional tragedy and suffering, using the example of the Sophoclean tragedy *The Women of Trachis*.

two major expressions of such German *querelle* devoted to the aesthetical contrast between ancient art and modern art, presenting an intense depiction of the principles and potentialities of modern art, namely poetry. The differences underlying ancient art and modern art could be expressed according to several dichotomies, culturally recognised and reiterated: organicity vs. fragmentation; nature vs. subjectivity; nature vs. artificiality; nature vs. sentimentality; nature vs. reflective conceptuality. A complex set of notions is developed to describe the aesthetical singularity of modern art, against the major principle of ancient art, which turns out to be, invariably, nature as an artistic axis. In fact, these aesthetical principles are founded on metaphysical pictures: subjectivity, the most relevant aesthetical principle of modern art, expresses the loss of the idea of totality and its replacement by the predominance of fragmentation and scission between subject and nature, or subject and object; on the other hand, nature, the central principle of ancient art, represents the idea of a perfect and harmonious metaphysical continuity between humans and Being, preceding the emergence of the modern fragmented framework.

It is generally accepted that Williams' philosophy expresses the refusal of a certain progressivism involving some modern claims and assumptions, especially in terms of autonomy, freedom, and moral responsibility. However, the final paragraphs of *Shame and Necessity* offer us an interestingly new view, which we could describe as a cultural warning against the modern eagerness to consider ancient Greece as a time of metaphysical completeness and harmony. At this point, Williams is interested in rejecting not only modern ethical progressivism but also modern false conceptions, developed in cultural terms, about ancient Greece as the perfect metaphysical framework. In truth, according to Williams' view, such modern conceptions about the otherness of the ancient Greeks show the same pattern of argument and the same mistake as well: the erroneous conception of a profound metaphysical split between the ancient and the modern. Modern progressivism and modern longing for the idea of a lost Antiquity are not opposing but identical.

The examination of the tragic element of our existence and ethical life beyond the dichotomies involving the ancient and the modern is one of the most fruitful ideas of *Shame and Necessity*. Those considerations presented in the final paragraphs of the book are the starting point of the present article. We believe that those important remarks express Williams' cultural methodology, which may be described as a way of thinking beyond the traditional oppositions between the ancient and the modern. Our perspective shall not be strictly ethical, but predominantly cultural and aesthetical: we intend to analyse the similarities between ancient and modern tragic cultures by identifying common narrative and poetical aspects.

Interestingly, Williams' cultural methodology, as we call it, seems to be remarkably in line with the interpretation of *Hamlet* developed by a prominent classicist scholar, H.D.F. Kitto. In his book *Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and of "Hamlet"* (1956), Kitto's intention (which could be described as risky and perhaps insolent) consists in reading and thinking Shakespeare, the modern, and *Hamlet*, the most modern of all tragedies. The touchstone of Kitto's interpretation is determining the common tragic element present in *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the most perfect of all ancient tragedies (as proclaimed by Aristotle). According to Kitto, the common tragic element shared by Shakespeare's play and Sophocles' play is *miasma*, or pollution. In a word, the pollution that is ravaging Thebes, the pollution that is rotting the Kingdom of Denmark—this is the central axis of Kitto's interpretation of both tragedies. Kitto's reading of *Hamlet*, developed in line with his view on *Oedipus Tyrannus*, could be taken as an attempt to critically reject the cultural *clichés*, according to which Modernity has defined its own theories about the Bard, namely the assumption of Shakespeare as the distinctively modern tragic poet, and the Shakespearean tragedies as the expression of the most powerful transgression against the classic poetic rules. The intensity of such a poetical and tragic abyss between Shakespeare and the ancients is a prevailing and repeated axis of modern efforts to theorise about Shakespeare. Against those aesthetical modern views (most of them Romantic, as we know), Kitto intends to reject, in a deliberate way, the contrasting cultural framework devoted to the determination of the principles of ancient and modern art, providing us with a new reading—which is, in truth, an eminently *ancient* reading—of *Hamlet* and Shakespeare.

The plan of our article is as follows. After some preliminary remarks about our interpretation of Williams' thought (Sect. 1), we begin by analysing the tragic concept of *miasma* as treated by our philosopher in the third chapter of *Shame and Necessity*, a chapter largely devoted to the reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* (Sect. 2). The analysis of such a concept—*miasma* or pollution—is crucial for us. To show its central importance, the studies by A.W.H. Adkins and Erwin Rohde are also mentioned. Subsequently, we propose reading the interpretation of *Hamlet* as developed by Kitto through Williams' cultural methodology (Sect. 3). Our intention is to emphasise the narrative, poetical, and aesthetical affinities involving the Shakespearean play and Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, rejecting the repeated traditional dichotomies between the ancient and the modern. We also thoroughly consider the notion of *miasma* in the case of Kitto's interpretation of *Hamlet*.

2 The Ancient, the Modern, and the Tragic Element of *Miasma*

Let us analyse the third chapter, “Recognising Responsibility”, of *Shame and Necessity*. The Greek tragic notion of *miasma* is one of the most relevant concepts of this chapter. *Miasma*, or pollution, is, according to Williams, the result and the effect—“a supernatural effect” (Williams 1993, p. 59)—of a crime, namely the crime of killing a human being, a murder, regardless of the intentionality (or unintentionality) of such an action. In *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the crime of killing King Laius is the cause of the *miasma* that is affecting Thebes, or the pestilence, as we can read at the beginning of the plot. The *miasma* requires purification to restore peace and harmony within the *polis*, and, ultimately, the perfect balance of the cosmic order. As Williams writes, “the belief was that killing could bring affliction on a family or a whole city and that the supernatural forces underlying this would be appeased only when the person responsible, the person who has done it, was killed and banished” (Williams 1993, p. 59).

The third chapter of *Shame and Necessity* is devoted entirely to the philosophical treatment of intentionality, analysed from the point of view of Greek poetry, especially Homeric and Sophoclean. Also in this case, Williams’ argumentation tends to emphasise the affinities between the Greek outlook and the modern framework, rejecting the progressivist view regarding the supposed emergence of a proper definition of intentionality only in modern times. As Williams maintains, the ancient Greeks do have a concept of intentionality, as well as a clear idea about the difference between intentional and unintentional action.

Williams begins by invoking the end of the *Odyssey* and an unintentional mistake committed by Telemachus. When Odysseus and his son are fighting the suitors, both realise that someone must have opened the door of the storeroom, as the suitors are seen with the weapons that were kept inside that room. How is that possible? Who opened the door of the storeroom for the suitors? Immediately, Telemachus says to Odysseus:

Father, it was my mistake,
and no one else is to blame,
I left the door of the room, which can close tightly,
open at an angle. One of them was a better observer
than I. (*Od.* 22.154).

According to Williams, those lines of the *Odyssey* shed light on the existence of a Homeric notion of intentionality (and, conversely, of unintentionality), despite the prevalence of

some canonical studies that tend to deny it.² In truth, Telemachus’ mistake explicitly expresses the dichotomy between an intentional and unintentional action, and Telemachus’ action is compatible with the latter. As Williams writes, “Telemachus left the door open—that was indeed something he did—but he did not mean to” (Williams 1993, p. 50). The absence of a Homeric word for intention does not mean that Homer did not have such a concept; Telemachus’ incidental mistake is actually a description of such a notion.

Furthermore, Telemachus explicitly says to his father that he is the only one to blame. He left the door open, although in a non-voluntary way. As Williams elucidates, Telemachus says that he was *aitios*—the *cause* of what has happened—that is, the fact that the suitors got the armour and weapons. Telemachus is to blame; he accepts responsibility for such a mistake, for he is *aitios* “in virtue of something he did unintentionally” (Williams 1993, p. 52). The word *aition* means, as Williams explains, “cause” or “explanation”, and it is also present in Herodotus and the Hippocratic writings. Nevertheless, the most interesting description of such an idea of cause as responsibility can be found in tragic poetry, especially in the most perfect tragic play, as Aristotle proclaimed it: *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. At the beginning of the play, Thebes is described as a city affected by a pestilence, a plague, and Creon is sent to the oracle to discover the cause of such a calamity and how to put an end to it. According to the oracle, the cause of the pestilence—the *miasma*—that is affecting Thebes is the killing of King Laius, the preceding King, and the presence of his unpunished murderer (or murderers) in the city. As it is well known, finding the murderer (or murderers) of Laius is the urgent task that Oedipus, the King of Thebes, must perform. As Williams eruditely elucidates, the word “crime” is used by Sophocles. The Greek word is *aitias*, which refers to a crime, understood as a cause for something, and this is, as it is known, the cause of Thebes’ devastation. “Crime” and “cause” are words used in close alliance in this Greek context. Interestingly, in the Sophoclean tragedy, *aitias*, the word for “cause”, expresses the sense of diagnosis and rational inquiry, which is deeply compatible with the entire language and subject matter of the play. Oedipus, as a character, represents the supreme power of reason and his rational intelligence is the element that enables Oedipus’ conquests, namely the throne of Thebes, by solving the enigma presented by the Sphinx, the monster.

² Williams rejects the progressivist assertions of the German classical philologist Bruno Snell, as developed in his book *Die Entdeckung des Geistes. Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*, published in 1946. According to Snell, the formation of a complete ethical subject is not fully present in the Homeric man; it is in the context of the lyrical and tragic poetry that, as Snell maintains, we may contemplate the emergence of a perfect ethical subjectivity.

The cause of the plague that is afflicting the city of Thebes is the unpunished killing of King Laius, as the oracle proclaimed. And *miasma*, or pollution, is the correct word for the supernatural element linking the criminal cause and the current destruction of the city. Accordingly, *miasma* refers to supernatural forces that could bring devastation to a whole city and can only be stopped when the person who performed the crime is effectively punished. The purification of the city is accomplished by the killing or the banishment of the murderer. As Williams explains, the supernatural forces of *miasma* arise from intentional and unintentional crimes; it is the effect of the act of killing a human being, and it must be urgently punished and purified. The difference between an intentional and unintentional killing is not at issue here. This is why the crime of Oedipus, the murderer of King Laius, is so illustrative according to this tragic picture of *miasma*. In fact, the crime committed by Oedipus involves a certain unintentional element. The *miasma* that is devastating Thebes is the result of his crime; however, as we know, what Oedipus did was the manifestation of a horrible fate expressed by the gods before his birth. In truth, what Oedipus did was inexorably fated. As Williams points out, in *Oedipus at Colonus*, the final play of Sophocles, Oedipus reflects on his crimes and mentions that he did not intend to perform such horrors.

At this point, Williams explains that the idea of *miasma* because of an unintentional crime is present not only in the poetic sphere but also in the Athenian courts. In fact, this notion of pollution is wider than its poetic or tragic expression. The *Tetralogies* ascribed to Antiphon, a work of the fifth century B.C., is the expression of an analysis of pollution deprived of any considerations about magical belief, supernatural forces, and divine fatalism. These writings are concerned with everyday problems and the correct application of the law. Pollution is understood as the result of a homicide, which demands the punishment of the murderer and the compensation of the victim. Interestingly, the most relevant aspect of these discussions lies in the fact that the central issue is causality: “whose action brought about the death?” (Williams 1993, p. 61) is the fundamental causal question. The subject matter of the *Second Tetralogy*, supposedly discussed by Pericles and Protagoras, is the expression of a misadventure or, simply, bad luck. As Williams describes, “[o]ne young man is practising the javelin in the gymnasium; at the moment he throws it at the target, another boy, on an errand, runs into its path, is hit, and is killed” (Williams 1993, p. 61). This is the picture of an accident, an unintentional and unfortunate death, but the question about who caused such a death must be answered and someone must be blamed. Who causes the death? Is it the boy who throws the javelin and hits the victim? Or is it the victim who caused his own death by his imprudence?

Thrower or victim, who is to blame? Who is the cause of the death? One of them must be blamed and punished, but the victim has already paid his penalty with his own death and cannot be accused. In analysing this framework presented in the *Tetralogies*, Williams emphasises his refusal of the progressivist view regarding the difference between ancient and modern conceptions of moral responsibility. Our modern conception of moral responsibility, involving the idea of intentionality, is not so different from that of the Greeks. The only difference lies in the fact that the modern world has developed a more complex concept of law and legal responsibility, giving the state the power of demanding “a response for certain acts and certain harms” (Williams 1993, p. 65), but not a different notion of responsibility. As Williams clearly states, “in as much as we are still concerned with responsibility, we use the same elements as the Greeks did” (Williams 1993, p. 65).

Turning back to tragedy and *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the mistake at the crossroads, which caused the death of King Laius and the subsequent devastation of Thebes, shows considerable similarity with the accident in the gymnasium. In fact, at Colonus, Oedipus incessantly says that the things he did—killing his father and marrying his mother—were not intentional. In an expression quoted by Williams, Oedipus says, “I suffered those deeds more than I acted on them” (*OC* 266–67). Despite the unintentionality of his deeds, even though those terrible deeds were not the fault of his own, Oedipus urgently feels the need to punish himself through blinding and exile. In truth, Oedipus did those horrible things—not someone else, as he first believed and hoped in the play *Oedipus Tyrannus*—and his existence is inexorably shaped by those deeds. As Williams writes:

The whole of the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, that dreadful machine, moves to the discovery of just one thing, that *he did it*. Do we understand the terror of that discovery only because we residually share magical beliefs in blood-guilty or archaic notions of responsibility? Certainly not: we understand it because we know that in the story of one’s life, there is an authority exercised by what one has done, and not merely by what one has intentionally done. (Williams 1993, p. 69)

As Williams interestingly points out, it would be pertinent to invoke the beginning of *Oedipus at Colonus* and the terror of the Chorus when they discover that the person who has come to their city is this horrible man, “the polluted man” (Williams 1993, p. 71), the man who killed his father and married his mother. The question of unintentionality is not at issue here, and it does not express any possible kind of remission or mitigation of the dreadful dimension involving the deeds committed by Oedipus.

In *Merit and Responsibility* (1960), A.W.H. Adkins writes in an elucidative way: “in so complex a situation, however, good intentions are not enough” (Adkins 1960, p. 97). The fifth chapter of *Merit and Responsibility* offers a comprehensive analysis of pollution in ancient Greek culture, showing that, for fifth- and fourth-century writers, homicide is the most relevant cause of pollution, and the murderer, the polluted man, is seen as a dangerous man, someone who should be expelled from the city, regardless of the intentionality of his crimes. The fate of the killer is not mitigated by the presumed distinction between premeditated or accidental homicide. As Adkins explains, the protagonist of *Oedipus Tyrannus* “has, despite all his efforts to avoid it, killed his father and married his mother; accordingly, he is a parricide and incestuous, and there can be no extenuating circumstances” (Adkins 1960, p. 98); hence, “what he has done, not his intentions, is all that is taken into account. He is ‘polluted’ and must be driven out” (Adkins 1960, p. 99). In analysing the Homicide Law of Draco and the *Tetralogies* attributed to Antiphon, Adkins insists that in Athenian trials the lack of intention is irrelevant for considering the murderer as a polluted man: pollution is not subjected to an idea of the intentionality involving the act of killing.

Regarding the tragedy of Oedipus, Adkins states that *Oedipus at Colonus*, the last tragedy of Sophocles, implicitly expresses a mode of thought that could be taken in close alliance with the complex development of such discussions about pollution in Athenian law documents. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, we are faced with a man who firmly claims his innocence and the unintentionality of his actions. The important point for Adkins is that *Oedipus at Colonus* constitutes a tragedy that emphasises “individual intention and moral responsibility over a wider field” (Adkins 1960, p. 106), and such a wider field is that of the homicide law, which determines, in a deep way, the poetic concerns of Sophocles’ final tragedy.

Adkins’ book offers us an interesting evocation of Erwin Rohde’s *Psyche: Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, published in 1894. In this work about the Greek concept of immortality, Rohde discusses the connection between homicidal pollution and the cult of the souls. The desperate situation of the killed victim’s soul is a cultural question analysed by Rohde. According to Rohde’s impressive study, in the Greek context, the soul of the person who was killed (deliberately or accidentally) is seen as an angry soul, unable to find rest, seeking revenge against his murderer. It is as though the boundaries between Hades and the world of living beings were not so well defined: in truth, the soul of the killed person lurks in the grave, needing rituals and imposing upon his living relatives the obligation

of revenge.³ In fact, the soul of the unfortunate killed person, who resents the murderer’s pleasures of life and seeks revenge, turns out to be a maligned soul. As Rohde writes, “he himself would become an ‘avenging spirit’; and the force of his anger might be felt throughout whole generations” (Rohde 2019, p. 177). This is the reason why the punishment of the murderer, the polluted man, is so imperative: “when he suffers punishment, he suffers it for the satisfaction of the soul of the murdered man” (Rohde 2019, p. 178). In a word, it is a question of expiation. As Rohde explains, such beliefs could be taken as a relic of the ancient duty of the blood-feud; however, they are still present in the fifth and fourth centuries, producing “a strange and ghostly mythology” (Rohde 2019, p. 181), which pervades, for example, the speeches at murder trials in which Antiphon tried to “arouse terror and awe, as at the presence of indubitable realities, by calling upon the angry soul of the dead man and the spirits that avenge the dead” (Rohde 2019, p. 181). In analysing such a cultural framework, Rohde maintains that the ancient belief in the influence of the souls of murdered men could have formed general convictions about the immortality of the soul.

3 The Tragic Affinities Between *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*

According to Kitto’s thesis presented in *Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and of “Hamlet”*, *miasma* is the tragic axis that links *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Hamlet*. Rejecting the psychoanalytic interpretations of the two plays, Kitto analyses the similarities between the Sophoclean play and the Shakespearean play by emphasising the presence of a persisting tragic element: *miasma*, or pollution, which is affecting the city of Thebes and the Kingdom of Denmark. *Miasma* is the devastating consequence of the murders of the two kings, Laius, the King of Thebes, and Hamlet’s father, the Ghost, the King of Denmark.

Kitto’s interpretation of *Hamlet* expresses the refusal of a prevailing cultural tradition that insisted on reading *Hamlet* as a “tragedy of character” and focusing on the psyche of the tragic hero, the irresolute and melancholic character, the archetype of modern subjectivity. Differently, Kitto aims at reading *Hamlet* through an ancient lens. Comparing *Hamlet* to *Oedipus Tyrannus* is the key to developing an accurate analysis of the rottenness—the pollution—that is affecting the whole Kingdom of Denmark. Interestingly, Kitto argues

³ As Adkins elucidates, we can find such discussions in many ancient writers. One of them is Plato. In the *Laws*, Plato mentions the need for purification after killing a man by accident or at games, for the newly dead resents the fact that his killer is still alive, and he desires revenge. See *Laws* 865D.

that the miasmatical element in *Hamlet* has a twofold expression: first, the murder of King Hamlet, and second—and this is one of the most fascinating axes of Kitto’s interpretation of *Hamlet*—the corruption of love by Claudius and Gertrude, the couple representing perverted and sinful love, the malign element that destroys everything and everyone. As a matter of fact, in Kitto’s view, the miasmatical dimension of the play is intensely complex, affecting and killing innocent characters such as Hamlet, Ophelia, and Laertes. According to this outlook, Kitto offers us a new analysis, shaped by his erudition regarding ancient tragedies, about the most enigmatic scenes of *Hamlet*, especially the scenes that present Hamlet and Ophelia, the two lovers, such as the “nunnery scene” and the conversation immediately before the “Gonzago play” (Hamlet’s spiritual torment, as expressed throughout the play, is the sign of his state of being fatally affected by the malign element, that is, *miasma*).

As we know, *Oedipus Tyrannus* begins by describing the plague that is devastating Thebes, and such a plague is caused by the presence in the city of a man who has done “two things foul and unnatural above all others: he has killed his own father, and he is living incestuously with his own mother” (Kitto 2014, p. 253). Kitto points out the affront against nature, against what Sophocles calls *dikē*, committed by Oedipus. The destruction of the city and its people, and the sterility of its soil and animals, which are the manifestations of *miasma*, are ultimately the outcome of Oedipus’ deeds.

The same picture is presented at the beginning of *Hamlet*. *Miasma* is the common narrative element that defines the beginning (and the development) of the Shakespearean play. The appearance of the Ghost, that supernatural terrifying creature, “something so clean contrary to the natural order” (Kitto 2014, p. 254), to Marcellus and Bernardo, and Horatio as well, is a dreadful sign that terrible things are happening.

In truth, the appearance of the Ghost at the very beginning of the play cannot be neglected. And this initial—and decisive—picture is presented to us poetically. The following lines are said by Marcellus and, as Kitto points out, “at this point, Shakespeare decides to write some poetry—and he is never so dangerous as when he is writing poetry” (Kitto 2014, p. 254):

It faded on the crowing of the cock.
Some say that ever ‘gainst that season comes,
Wherein our Saviour’s birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,

So hallowed and so gracious is the time. (*Hamlet* 1.1. 162–69).

The beauty of those poetic lines expresses something deeply important in a clear way: the spirits of the night, the supernatural beings rising from their graves, are impure and hideous creatures, for during the night of our Saviour’s birth, a holy and pure night, the sky was purified against the presence of those evil entities. The Ghost is certainly an evil entity, and he fades on the crowing of the morning cock, the bird of dawning. His soul is full of rage, and he is coming for merciless revenge. Perhaps Rohde’s views about the Greek ghosts could also be applied to modern ghosts.⁴ As Kitto comments, this supernatural framework, as presented at the very beginning of *Hamlet*, is the “dynamic centre” (Kitto 2014, p. 255) of the play. It is, in a word, the manifestation of *miasma*, the tragic element that is rotting the kingdom. And Hamlet, the central character, recognises this dreadful sign from the first moment. So says Hamlet when he sees the Ghost for the first time:

My father’s spirit – in arms! All is not well.
I doubt some foul play. Would the night were come.
Till the sit still, my soul. Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o’erwhelm them, to men’s eyes.
(*Hamlet* 1.2. 255–58).

“Foul deeds”, indeed. As Kitto writes in a concise sentence, “We are in the presence of evil” (Kitto 2014, p. 255). Later, in Act 1 Scene 4, when the second appearance of the Ghost is imminent, Marcellus oracularly says, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (*Hamlet* 1.4. 90), and Horatio, in prophetic terms, “Heaven will direct it” (*Hamlet* 1.4. 91). In truth, the foul deeds of *Hamlet* are the same as those of *Oedipus Tyrannus*: murder (in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, patricide; in *Hamlet*, fratricide) and incest. Deeds against nature, deeds against *dikē*. According to Kitto, the similar beginnings of *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* provide us with “the foundations and framework” (Kitto 2014, p. 255) of both plays. This supernatural background, the plague that is devastating Thebes and the appearance of spirits rising from their graves in Elsinore, are manifestations of *miasma*, the tragic element shared by the Sophoclean play and the Shakespearean play.

The most important point for Kitto is the rejection of a long and persisting tradition of reading *Hamlet* as a tragedy

⁴ According to Wilson (2009), the Ghost in *Hamlet* is a Catholic being, which constitutes a problematic issue under the Protestant ambience of the Elizabethan period. Contrary to Wilson, we tend to consider the Ghost in line with the studies on the Greek concept of soul (and ghostly mythology) developed by Rohde.

of character. It is precisely that psychological turn⁵ involving modern criticism of *Hamlet*, so vivid during the twentieth century, that Kitto aims to reject. But not only that. The Romantic readings of *Hamlet*, concerned with developing an interpretation of the protagonist's soul as an archetypical manifestation of the theoretical, thoughtful, and reflective man, with no ability to act (as famously stated by Goethe in his novel *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship*⁶), are also rejected by Kitto. Interestingly, Kitto mentions the well-known film *Hamlet* (1949), performed by Laurence Olivier, and its (unfortunately) representative subtitle: "The tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind". This is the tone of the predominant and widespread modern criticism of *Hamlet*.

But Kitto is a classical scholar, and his reading of *Hamlet* points in another direction: the Greek tragedy. Kitto is not concerned with the psychological aspects involving individual characters but with the possibility of determining the tragic elements in both metaphysical and poetical dimensions. The "ancient vs. modern framework" does not constitute a valid hermeneutic tool for Kitto, for his purpose lies in deciphering the common tragic element that structures *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Tyrannus*. *Miasma*—the pestilence of Thebes and the rottenness of Denmark—is the keyword. As Kitto writes:

In *Hamlet*, eight people are killed, not counting Hamlet's father; of the two families concerned in the play, those of King Hamlet and Polonius, both are wiped out. Eight deaths are enough to attract attention, and to make us wonder if the essential thing has been said when the play is called "the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind". [...] These are plain and striking dramatic facts; how far does "Hamlet's fatal indecision" explain them? Are they an organic part of a tragedy of character? Or did Shakespeare kill so many people merely from force of habit? (Kitto 2014, pp. 249–50)

Abstracting one character from the whole play seems to be the modern method for reading *Hamlet*. But the idea of focusing on the psychological dimension of the protagonist turns out to be an obstacle, an interpretative obstacle, for taking *Hamlet* as a play in line with the tradition of tragic poetry. Thinking the tragic element in *Hamlet* is the valuable task of Kitto's aim, and a proper analysis of such an element—the tragic element—requires examination of the play as a whole, as an artistic unity, in which the metaphysical

framework, or the "framework of inexorable law" (Kitto 2014, p. 243), must be contemplated, for this is the only explanation for all human activity, misfortune, and suffering. As Kitto writes, "suffering is seen as a part of a world-order, which though not always beneficial, is at least intelligible" (Kitto 2014, p. 256), and this is so in ancient tragedy as in modern tragedy, as well. Once we stop taking *Hamlet* from a modern psychological point of view, we may see that the proclaimed enigmatic element involving this play—"which sets it apart not only from other plays but also from all other works of art, except perhaps *Mona Lisa*" (Kitto 2014, p. 247)—does not constitute the essence or touchstone of it, as moderns tend to believe (it would be pertinent to say that the mysterious allure surrounding *Hamlet*, so typical of the modern taste, is something that Kitto entirely rejects). The claimed modernity of *Hamlet* is a result of a line of interpretation that obstinately tends to abstract one character from the whole, overlooking the plain consideration of the play as an elaborate dramatic composition. Yet, the key for *Hamlet* lies precisely in the whole.

The *miasma* in *Hamlet*—the rottenness that is affecting the Kingdom of Denmark—is the consequence of two crimes: the murder of the King and incest. This *miasma* picture is a tragic variation, so to speak, of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Claudius, the new King, is the murderer of his brother, King Hamlet, and Gertrude, the Queen, is now his wife. Incest is accomplished by a man who marries the wife of his own brother, that is, his sister. So, Claudius tells us, "our sometime sister, now our queen" (*Hamlet* 1.2. 8). This couple reigns and governs the rotten Kingdom of Denmark. And their counsellor is Polonius. Interestingly, according to Kitto, in *Hamlet*, we cannot link *miasma* to only one character, which could be possible in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for Oedipus is the polluted man. In truth, in *Hamlet*, we have three characters representing the circle of evil: Claudius, the villain, obviously; Gertrude, the corrupted queen; and Polonius, the loyal counsellor. These three characters form one group, which Kitto calls the "evil group". The other "innocent group" of characters, conversely, is formed by Hamlet, Ophelia, and Laertes. How are we to understand such a division?

It would not be superfluous to emphasise that, according to Kitto, *miasma* in *Hamlet* is the outcome of the corruption of love, as performed by the baneful couple, Claudius and Gertrude. What Claudius and Gertrude have made of love—entirely unnatural (against the *dikê*), criminal, and poisonous—is the central axis for understanding the narrative development of the play. This couple is the centre of evil, and Hamlet seems to know it. In fact, in his first soliloquy, the crime of incest, as committed by his mother, is the chief topic addressed. In truth, the words said by the Ghost are only a confirmation of Hamlet's deep despair. Regarding

⁵ The most relevant psychoanalytic study about *Hamlet* is the well-known *Hamlet and Oedipus* by Ernest Jones, published in 1949.

⁶ See Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Years of Apprenticeship*, Book IV, Chap. 13.

his brother Claudius, the Ghost seems to be very assertive: “Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast” (*Hamlet* 1.5. 42). And his warning to Hamlet is even more illustrative: “Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest” (*Hamlet* 1.5. 82–83).

Alongside this incestuous couple, we have Polonius. Polonius, a very relevant character for Kitto, is the faithful counsellor of the King, which is not a secondary role, as Kitto insists. As a matter of fact, Polonius is the active agent in destroying the pure love between Hamlet and Ophelia, the true love between the young couple, which leads to the death of Laertes, also a young, innocent character. Therefore, Polonius could not be a more perfect counsellor. The corruption of love, and the destruction of all pure and innocent love, is the subject matter of *Hamlet*, representing the consummation of *miasma* as the tragic element present in the play. As Kitto writes:

It is obvious, I think, as soon as we contemplate the play in its true perspective, which is not the perspective of tragedy of character. [...] he [Shakespeare] has built up a background of treachery, lust, unreason, suspicion, crime. Horatio spoke the truth when he said “Heaven will direct it”; we know to what consummation Heaven does direct it: to the destruction of both these two houses. (Kitto 2014, pp. 266–67)

Two houses and two families will be destroyed by *miasma*: Claudius’ house (Gertrude and Hamlet), and Polonius’ house (Ophelia and Laertes). As Kitto comments, Polonius “is often to be interpreted as something of a Dickens character” (Kitto 2014, p. 250), an elderly man, full of verbosity, often seen as a comic and reliable figure. He is a worthy servant and an old father, who treats his children with care and wisdom. However, according to Kitto, “Polonius, like everything in Denmark, is rotten” (Kitto 2014, p. 250). Let us briefly analyse some hints of it. In Act 3 Scene 1, Claudius and Polonius, the King and his servant, spy on Hamlet by using Ophelia’s innocent feelings, and Shakespeare clearly shows us the indecency of it. The pure love of Ophelia for Hamlet is used by “two evil men who besmirch everything they touch” (Kitto 2014, p. 251) to spy on Hamlet and hopefully discover the cause of his antic disposition. As presented in this scene, Polonius gives a holy book to Ophelia and asks for her intervention to spy on Hamlet’s words and soul. “Lying, spying, double-dealing, are second nature to this wise old counsellor” (Kitto 2014, p. 251).⁷ Polonius is a crafty old man who uses his daughter as a puppet for the King’s benefit. In truth, during this scene, Polonius also

mentions seducing the Devil and making an ally of him by using young, pure love and the exercise of devotion.

Read on his book,
That show of such an exercise may colour.
Your loneliness. We are oft to blame in this,
‘Tis too much proved, that with devotion’s visage,
And pious action we do sugar o’er.
The Devil himself. (*Hamlet* 3.1. 44–8)”.

And Claudius, aside, consequently confesses the rottenness of his own soul.

O ‘tis too true.
How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience.
The harlot’s cheek, beautied with plast’ ring art,
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it.
Than is my deed to my most painted word.
O heavy burden! (*Hamlet* 3.3. 49–54).

It is an illuminating scene, indeed. Polonius is the “man who has been sugaring o’er the Devil himself” (Kitto 2014, p. 251). Polonius, the chief advisor, always standing at the right hand of the King and Gertrude, is a rotten character. In truth, this scene is eloquent in showing the influence of certain malign forces on the pure love of Hamlet and Ophelia. It would be pertinent to analyse some parts of the play, from Act 1 Scene 3, in which we are faced with the so-called wisdom of Polonius, especially addressed to his children. First, let us mention the advice Polonius gives to Laertes, taken for centuries as the “quintessence of human wisdom” (Kitto 2014, p. 261), as we all learned by heart in school. Is this advice an expression of true wisdom? Perhaps not. As Kitto suggests, if such advice is to be considered as wisdom, it may only be the quintessence of “worldly wisdom” (Kitto 2014, p. 261), which is a kind of wisdom much more compatible with the soul of this crafty, mundane man. At this point, let us analyse, in a more careful way, the instructions that Polonius gives to his daughter, Ophelia, who is in love with Hamlet.

In few, Ophelia,
Do not believe his vows, for they are brokers,
Not of that dye which their investments show,
But mere implorators of unholy suits,
Breathing like sanctified and pious bawds.
The better to beguile. This is for all.
I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth.
Have you so slander any moment leisure.
As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet.
Look to’t, I charge you. Come your ways. (*Hamlet* 1.3. 126–35)”.

⁷ It would not be superfluous to mention that Polonius is killed when he is—precisely—spying, an activity that he incessantly performs for his Sovereign’s benefit.

The language used by Polonius to describe Hamlet's affection for Ophelia is vulgar and rude. This is how the old man sees the pure love between Hamlet and Ophelia: in rotten and foul terms. Kitto explicitly writes that, during this scene, another Polonius should be considered by us, not the wise and caring father, but the "disgusting and dirty-minded old man" (Kitto 2014, p. 261), who is also the most significant agent in blackening the innocent love of Hamlet for Ophelia. These two characters are the innocent victims of the corruption of love as performed by Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius. Laertes⁸ will be the third young victim. For, as Kitto states:

That is to say, we should not try to consider everything in the play as something that reveals or influences the mind and the fate of the one tragic hero, Hamlet; rather should we contemplate the characters as a group of people who are destroyed, as work each other's destruction, because of the evil influences with which they are surrounded. Hamlet is not the centre of the play; he is the epicentre. (Kitto 2014, p. 262)

Denmark is full of evil, and the only thing that is not corrupted in this dreadful place is Hamlet and Ophelia's love. It is true, pure, and innocent. But the sins committed by Claudius and Gertrude—"the original crime" (Kitto 2014, p. 269), which illustratively invokes Greek tragedy—surround the young couple, inevitably leading Hamlet and Ophelia to destruction and death. The love between Hamlet and Ophelia is a major concern for Kitto. According to the classicist scholar, to understand it we need to consider "what Hamlet was, and what he has become; what a fair prospect there was, and why it ends in madness and death" (Kitto 2014, p. 269). This is the moment when Kitto analyses Hamlet's soul, but his aim is original. Kitto intends to understand the influence of evil on Hamlet, the noblest and most virtuous man presented in this play, by considering the progressive

ruin of his pure love for Ophelia. This is about *miasma* and love, not about psychological diagnoses.

According to Kitto, at the beginning of the play, we can see an "unclouded Hamlet" (Kitto 2014, p. 270), a noble and virtuous young man who is in love with Ophelia. We all know by heart the words of his letter to his beloved Ophelia (interestingly, this naïve love letter is indecently read by Polonius to Claudius and Gertrude in Act 2 Scene 2). Hamlet's soul is pure, as Shakespeare depicted it before the imminent damnation caused by *miasma*. And, from time to time, Shakespeare gives "glimpses of the real Hamlet" (Kitto 2014, p. 270), for example, when he happily welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, or the Players. He is a "man of genius: the courtier, scholar, soldier; 'eye, tongue, sword'; the artist, the philosopher" (Kitto 2014, p. 270). His noble character and behaviour, his virtuous manners and thoughts, and his moral and spiritual dignity differentiate Hamlet from Oedipus. As Kitto elucidates, "Sophocles made Oedipus hasty and hot-tempered not only in the fatal encounter at the crossroad, but time after time, as in his dealings with Tiresias and Creon" (Kitto 2014, p. 270). Oedipus is too confident and self-assured, too determined and resolute, but always in an arrogant way. This is not the case with Hamlet, who is presented to us as a man of spiritual excellence.

"O, what a noble mind is here o' erthrown" (*Hamlet* 3.1. 151), says Ophelia. The ruin of Hamlet's soul is expressed in the scenes with his beloved Ophelia. These are the moments when Hamlet shows his madness, or, in other words, his own spiritual destruction, as caused by the atmosphere of evil that surrounds him. The love scenes between him and Ophelia are the signs of Hamlet's grief and despair. Virtue and pure love are corrupted by "this omnipresent evil" (Kitto 2014, p. 273). Let us begin by mentioning Ophelia's rejection of Hamlet. Polonius, who is "treacherous, crafty, insincere, disastrously wrong in judgment" (Kitto 2014, p. 275), is the malign cause of such a rupture between Hamlet and Ophelia. Another cause, certainly a more dreadful cause, is Gertrude, the feminine figure who perverted not only love, by reducing it into sinful lust (luxury is the chief subject of Hamlet's impressive speech addressed to his mother in Act 3 Scene 4), but also female beauty and virtue. For Hamlet, "love has been poisoned" (Kitto 2014, p. 274), and the pure love between him and Ophelia will also be ruined. As Kitto states, "Gertrude is one of Shakespeare's most profoundly tragic characters" (Kitto 2014, p. 276). She genuinely desires Hamlet's and Ophelia's happiness; she continuously praises Ophelia's beauty and her sincere feelings for Hamlet; she truly wants her son to be saved and healed by Ophelia's love; and she deeply wants Ophelia to be "my Hamlet's wife" (*Hamlet* 5.1. 243). Nevertheless, Gertrude is the most destructive agent in damning such an innocent love.

⁸ In Act 2 Scene 1, Polonius commands his servant Reynaldo to travel to France to spy on Laertes. As Kitto elucidates, this scene has nothing to do with Hamlet, and we have good reasons to believe that Shakespeare's intention is to show us all the craftiness and vulgarity of Polonius. This scene is, in truth, about Polonius' soul—why not to say, Polonius' rotten soul? In this dialogue between Polonius and his servant, it is quite interesting how shocked Reynaldo seems to be when confronted by Polonius instructions and words. We can see, in a clear way, Polonius' soul, which is totally opposite to that of a good old man as, conventionally, we all supposed. As Kitto writes: "The Polonius who gives these revolting instructions to Reynaldo is the same man who, in effect, said to his daughter, in the morn and liquid dew of her youth: Don't be a fool, all the man wants is to seduce you. He is the same Polonius who, in his capacity of wise counsellor, stood at the right hand of Claudius and Gertrude. He is not meant to be an amusing buffoon; nor, I suspect, is his habitual mode of speech meant to be funny." (Kitto 2014, p. 265).

Gertrude's sins have poisoned Hamlet's view regarding love, virtue, and feminine beauty. And his disgust, which defines his new behaviour, is disturbingly expressed during his scenes with Ophelia. Let us mention the "nunnery scene" (Act 3 Scene 1), when Hamlet violently tells Ophelia to go to a nunnery, to become a nun, never marry, and never have children, for love is a corrupted thing. There is a long tradition that interprets "nunnery" as an old slang word for brothel; however, Kitto reads Hamlet's words in a very literal way, and there is no reason to look for subverted meanings. Denmark is a prison, full of evil, and so is the whole world and human existence. "Get thee to a nunnery. Why, wouldst thou be a / breeder of sinners?" (*Hamlet* 3.1. 121–2) is serious and despaired advice expressed by a soul, which sees the omnipresence of evil, to another soul, which is pure and could escape from the "foul farce" (Kitto 2014, p. 280).

Hamlet and Ophelia meet once more when the Gonzago play is about to begin, and this is a terrible scene. As Kitto comments, "it is horrifying, and Shakespeare meant it to be horrifying" (Kitto 2014, p. 282). Hamlet insults Ophelia in a rudely obscene way; however, as Kitto points out, one should not interpret it as a manifestation of some kind of sexual obsession, because the reason for such offensive words does not lie in his supposed mistrust regarding her honesty and purity. In fact, as Kitto reads it, this scene represents the expression of the corruption of Hamlet's noble soul and heart, as performed by the evil that pervades the kingdom after Claudius' and Gertrude's sins. Evil is corrupting Hamlet, and this scene can be understood as "the climax of his disillusion and revulsion" (Kitto 2014, p. 282). As Kitto writes:

Love happens to be one of Shakespeare's symbols of goodness; the perversion of love is black sin. In the wild and agonised speeches of the Nunnery scene Hamlet cried out on marriage and honest love; in the play-scene there is little crying out, since he "must be idle"; but we can see what has taken the place, in his mind, of love and healthfulness: lewdness and a cruel indecency. (Kitto 2014, p. 282)

This is not the Hamlet we knew at the beginning of the play. The differences between what Hamlet was and what Hamlet is now are clearly shown by Shakespeare. And Ophelia is the character who must face such a terrible transformation: "the present Hamlet is torture to her" (Kitto 2014, p. 282). Ophelia's madness and death become imminent.

Miasma is the keyword, indeed.

4 Final Remarks

As is well known, there is an important contemporary tradition of reading *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Tyrannus* as similar plays. It is the psychoanalytical tradition. Kitto, the classical scholar, does not belong to that tradition; in truth, he vehemently rejects it. Kitto's interpretation of *Hamlet* (supposedly the most modern of all tragedies), developed in line with *Oedipus Tyrannus* (the most perfect of ancient tragedies), expresses an interesting affinity with Williams' positions, mainly those that can be clearly read in the final paragraphs of *Shame and Necessity*. Kitto's analyses are primarily poetical and literary, while Williams' positions are chiefly philosophical and ethical. Nevertheless, there is a significant similarity shared by both authors regarding the concept of the tragic; at the heart of that similarity lies the rejection of the repeated cultural oppositions involving Antiquity and Modernity.

Kitto is not a philosopher, but it would not be entirely right to assume that there is no metaphysical or ethical thought in his interpretation of *Hamlet* or of Greek tragedy. Perhaps *miasma* is nothing but a metaphysical and ethical concept, which constitutes the fundamental ground and framework of both *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Hamlet*, something significantly more mysterious and complex than a mere narrative element. To conclude our article, it would be pertinent to emphasise perhaps a deeper affinity between Williams and Kitto: the (metaphysical and ethical) conviction that the tragic is an inexorable part of human existence and cannot be totally removed from our lives, whether we are ancients, moderns, or contemporaries. In Williams' words, "We have more in common with the audience of the tragedies than the progressivist story allows" (Williams 1993, p. 18).

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