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**Rereading Classics in 'East' and 'West'  
Post-colonial Perspectives on the Tragic**

**Edited by**

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**REREADING CLASSICS IN 'EAST' AND 'WEST':  
POST-COLONIAL SELF-REFLECTION AND  
CONFLICTS IN TRAGIC IDENTITY**

Freddy DECREUS & Mieke KOLK

The conference we held in Ghent, from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2003, dealing with 'Tragedy as a literary genre within Western and Arabic drama: Reading *Oedipus* as an example of cultural differential thinking' assembled some forty scholars from Egypt, Morocco, Europe and the USA. The group was not only multicultural by nationality, but also interdisciplinary in specialization: philosophers, Arabists, classicists, and, of course, representatives of theatre studies and criticism. The general background of this project in comparative cultural studies was a shared interest in the development of the European and Arabic theatre traditions, and more specifically, in the rewriting of classical texts as an ongoing process of (re)-interpretation, or as we would say today, in deconstructive readings of the old dramas. What might have seemed a confrontation between different worldviews, between 'East' and 'West', turned from the outset into a multilevelled and heterogeneous discussion. Indeed, as soon as one leaves general statements à la Huntington and his 'clash of civilizations' theory (1998) and concentrates on specific historical and philosophical problems (tragedy as a genre and an experience), the complexity of many cultural statements and assumptions becomes apparent. From the start, it was clear that choosing a worldwide famous Greek tragedy as *Oedipus* as a starting point for an intercultural discussion made it possible to thrive on a lot of common knowledge. However, the idea of relying on this 'traditional' knowledge of a Greek tragedy itself became the object of a second level of investigation: indeed, as one of the tenets of post-structuralism holds, knowledge and its historical, ideological and epistemological functioning is not a value-free enterprise, but always a creation and a construction of the mind depending on local and spatial circumstances. Formulated in post-colonial terms, this colloquium involved theoreticians and practitioners from different countries and cultures studying the question of the role and functioning of theory and language as well as the formation of texts, genres and discourse, in order to deconstruct traditional cultural ideas that have been taken as natural or normal. Put in a more concrete way, this colloquium investigated the use of binary thinking, universal models, teleological structures and essentialist positions concerning tragedy and the tragic experience.

Generally speaking, its activities can be classified around four different topics:

- first of all, the tragic as a philosophic, religious and epistemological category, somehow always largely determined by Aristotelian poetics in its historical reception, and part of a paradigmatic evolution of the West;
- secondly, the presence of tragic elements in Arabic literature;
- thirdly, tragedy as a literary and dramatic category, exemplified by *Oedipus Rex*, in contemporary discussions;
- finally, some general statements about cultural politics and post-colonialism.

The first topic examined the idea of whether or not the tragic experience should be considered as a mainly western philosophic notion. Karel Boullart defended the idea of the ontological impossibility of the tragic in traditional religions, such as Christianity and, presumably, in Islam, and moreover in orthodox communism as well. In his opinion, the possibility of having a tragedy depends on the way that a culture as a whole accepts or denies the existence of unsolvable conflicts, and consequently considers human finiteness. The idea of paradise on earth, in historical times, reflecting the idea of heaven, in eternity, are worldviews implying that, in principle, adequacy and completeness can be attained, that problems create their own solutions, and that unsolvable conflicts cannot occur. The same is true for every strictly determinist worldview, Boullart suggests, since ‘chance’, an essential element in the non-triviality of dramatic action, does not obtain or, at least, is not really what it seems. Predestination excludes tragedy, as does determinism, and, apparently, the notion of fatalism associated with Islam. In a regular tragic landscape, tragic action and the tragic hero are always phenomena which are strongly determined by their cultural surroundings and the norms and values of their social group. The tragic hero is a strong believer, taking full responsibility, but failing because the problem solving power of his cultural sets fails.

Herman De Ley only connects the tragic outlook with a naturalistic view of the world, be it so-called paganism or modern secularism. In the Biblical and Koranic traditions, the worldview of the three ‘Abrahamic’ religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all three proclaiming a belief in one personal god, and relying upon a *creatio ex nihilo* which introduces a radical distinction between the Creator and his creation, man is not so much confronted with the order of nature, but with the will and command of his creator. Hence, what is important is not a naturalistic understanding of the laws of nature and the universe, but obedience and allegiance to God’s commands. However, in the opinion of De Ley, the

reason why the “Eastern” inheritors of Greek civilization and culture – i.e. the spokesmen of Arabic Hellenism- did not partake in the tragic spirit, has not so much to do with fundamentally opposing worldviews, but with an ideological divide running across both Eastern and Western Cultures. As an example of the often heterogeneous nature of cultures and worldviews, he referred to the Muslim physician Abû Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyyâ ar-Râzî (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> c.), a medieval Arabic philosopher famous for his knowledge of Greek, an outspoken non conformist, who conceived a philosophic system of his own, based upon the idea that the creation of the world, for human souls, had mainly tragic consequences.

Ahmed Etman, departing from the reception of Aristotle’s *Poetics* and the many misunderstandings it generated both in Western and Eastern traditions, based his interpretation of the tragic on the intermediate position of the hero, who, seen from a religious perspective, occupies a place between men and the Gods. Striving to be received on the Olympus (*apotheosis*), -an effort often resisted by the gods, but representing the seed of the tragic conflict-, the tragic character fails to understand his human destiny as formulated in the famous Greek adage *Know Yourself*. This means, in terms of the Greek tragedy, ‘know your rank, know to which realm you belong and do not transgress the boundaries of human existence’, but mostly the tragic hero is willing to do anything which might earn him the glory of this type of heroism (*heropoiesis*). The reworking by Tawfiq Al-Hakim of *King Oedipus* (1949) clearly illustrated some of the religious concerns driving him to present an Oedipus which reconciled Arab traditional culture with the Greek tragic experience. Since Al-Hakim, in his book *Equilibrium*, stated that man is not alone in this universe and therefore never could be absolutely free, he could not accept the ideas of André Gide’s *Oedipus* (1932), which allowed man to become the center of the universe. Therefore, he removed those mythological elements which Arabic mentality could not appreciate, depriving Oedipus of his longing for *heropoiesis*, but, on the other hand, increased his human dignity.

Michiel Leezenberg approached the Arabo-Islamic interpretation of the tragic and of Aristotle’s treatise on Greek tragedy from a different point of view, choosing as his angle of incidence Averroes’s misunderstanding of Aristotle’s understanding of the tragedy. In his opinion, there is much to be gained simply by starting our investigation the other way around. Rather than examining the dramatic genres that they did not develop, we should try to understand the whole concept of narrative genres that they did develop. Arabo-Islamic interpretations reflect a significant difference in scientific methods and aims (for instance in considering rhetoric and poetics as parts of logic) and Averroes’s discussion of

the cross-cultural and political aspects of poetry raises new questions about the local conventions and universal effects of literature, and in particular about politicized and depoliticized readings of tragedy. Aristotle was the first to present an essentially depoliticized, or if you like humanistic reading of classical tragedy in terms of pity, fear and *katharsis*. Classic Arabic theories of poetics focus on the politics of language, neglecting the *mimesis* and its 'fabricated tales' in favor of the performative function of the words as speech-acts, of which Leezenberg gives an example reading *Oedipus in Colonus*.

As an introduction to her intervention, Caroline Janssen argued that the West and the Arabic world share a lot of common ground, which in itself suggests that a 'gap' between them may be narrower than it seems. Indeed, both cultures were influenced by the cultures of the ancient Near and Middle East, and in both of them the heritage of late Antiquity played an important role in the formative years of their development. She felt that the West and the Islamic world were simply too intertwined to be separated in a strict way, each of them being complex entities, looking more like 'mosaics'. Examining examples of Arabic literature, she noted that tragic elements can be detected both in early literary and mythic texts belonging to the Sumerian and Babylonian era and in pre-Islamic Arabian poetry.

Eman Karmouty studied the character of Isis in three historical dramatic texts and detected on every occasion different aspects of tragic behavior. In Pharaonic times, Isis had to fight a ritual combat against her enemy Set, in order to win back the mutilated body of Osiris. In her search for justice, Isis was acting on her own, bold enough to demand her rights, claiming law and order (*maat*, a notion which seems to forecast the Greek concept of *dike*), bringing about poetic justice and not a tragic ending. In modern times, Tawfiq Al-Hakim wrote his *Isis* (1955), a drama heavily loaded with socio-political overtones, where Isis had to ask for justice in a world dominated by corruption and struggle for power. In Nawal Al Sadawi's version (1986), the myth was read in the context of a feminist discourse, which heavily challenged masculine patriarchy and was asking for justice and *maat* in contemporary society.

Both Nehad Selaiha and Richard van Leeuwen explored *A Thousand and one Nights*, elaborating the tragic aspects of the Shahrazad theme, both in drama-adaptations and in the book series itself. Van Leeuwen focused on the narrative sources of the *Shahrazad* version of Tawfiq Al-Hakim, written in 1934. Contextualizing the debate on cultural orientation (*nahda*), van Leeuwen explored the concept of the tragic in the theories of Al-Hakim that concentrates

itself in the end in the specifically Egyptian notion of the tragic: the efforts of man to overcome the limitations of time and space. The ancient Egyptians' ideal, the author declares, was to strive for a victory of the spirit over time and space, a victory which is not to be found in resurrection, but into this same world, this same earth, within its time and space. *Shahrazad* portrays the contest between men and space, a meaningful observation when put into the framing story of the *Nights* linking the story-telling with the disruption of a spatio-temporal equilibrium destroying the King's identity as a man and a ruler.

The remark of van Leeuwen that Shahrazad has disappeared from this drama was explored by Nehad Selaiha in her lecture about the successive versions of the Sharazad-theme on the stage. She vigorously described her ongoing amazement at the popular mind in the Arab world condoning the most atrocious crimes committed by males against females and extolling a wiliness as a feminine virtue, trotted out under the rubric of wisdom. In Al-Hakim's hands the tangible reality of a woman and her solid presence seem to dissolve into thin air, transmuted in the object that gives the subject his substance. The remark is in line with many feminist studies in the West about the creation of male subjectivity in reality and in representation. In Selaiha's description of the historical development of the theme, one can read, as in the Oedipus legacy, the political moments of the time conferring themselves into the texts.

In his lecture, Marvin Carlson recalled that there has been a strong tradition in Egypt to revitalize the classics. The theme of *Oedipus* was especially popular and has known four important versions between the fifties and the seventies, reflecting the political upheavals of the first post-colonial period of the country. From tragic, to comic to farce, Egyptian authors have changed the modality of the text, but not the urgency and actuality of the message, thus creating a strong expectation for new versions explaining to the public what happened to them during the events and changes that took place in the Arab world of the last decades.

Versions of other African authors also used the political background offered by the source-text of Sophocles as an analogue for internal conflicts in their own countries. Lorna Hardwick examined the Oedipus theme in order to detect moments of ambivalence and tension which would lead to an interrogation of post-colonial perspectives. Indeed, both of Sophocles' plays dealing with the Oedipus theme question the political and ideological position of the outsider/foreigner and stimulate a discussion about cultural identity and the price of discovering one's own place in society. Her contribution opened the way not

only to questioning monolithic notions of culture, but also to exploring what might be meant by a 'decolonisation of the western mind'. Discussing David Greig's adaptation of *Oedipus* (2000), staged by 'theater babel' in Scotland, she pointed to processes of ambivalence in the identity of Scots as both colonizers and colonized and analyzed the variety of techniques used by a contemporary director to deal with old and new sensitivities.

But not only the political dimension created, for more than 2500 years, a perpetual *caveat*, also the homecoming of Oedipus and the subsequent incest-relation with his mother have been considered culturally dangerous material. Mieke Kolk, in her lecture dealing with tragedy and the hero in an intercultural perspective, noticed that three of the newest Egyptian versions staged the marriage between Oedipus and Jocaste in a discrete way. Surprisingly the early version (1949) of Tawfiq Al-Hakim shows us a King who refuses to leave his wife-mother and declares his ongoing love for her. It is this humanizing process of the Greek heroic examples that Al-Hakim takes over from his French examples of the late 1930's: Giraudoux, Gide, Anouilh etc. Sharing this francophone background with a female author born in the Magreb, it is not clear if the African or French context explains the remarkable analogies between the texts of Al-Hakim and Hélène Cixous, written some thirty years later. Although for quite different reasons, both authors protect the legitimacy of the love between the couple and attack the *hubris* in the domain of rationality and intellect that drives Oedipus to his end. But attacking male rationalization in Oedipus, as Cixous does, is not the same as evaluating rationality as such. Al-Hakim confronts this rationality as being Western with religion as the other domain. Refusing to accept the existential loneliness of Western man without God, he writes: 'My feeling is that the Easterner always lives in the two worlds I mentioned. That is the last fortress for us to shelter from Western thought which lives in a single one, the world of man alone. It is nothing other than the feeling of Islamic philosophy (...) that stands on two pillars: the intellect and religious dogma.' However, since the world of God and the community is sacred, no man is allowed to attack these domains. Thus a free human being cannot move against the will of God or the logic of history and consequently discover, as western ideology wants it, a new aspect of his identity.

In his survey on Greek mythology in Arab tragedy, Younes Loulidi made a number of statements about the specific Arabic use of the old Greek mythic 'models'. Starting from the attention paid by Tawfiq Al-Hakim to a number of Greek myths (*Pygmalion*; *Oedipus*; *Electra*), he stressed the importance that the Oedipus story took for a number of other playwrights, both Egyptian (Ali Ahmed

Bakathir, 1949; Ali Salem, 1969; Fawzi Fahmi, 1968) and Syrian (Walid Ighlassi, 1977). He outlined the presence of a number of other mythic protagonists (Pygmalion; Antigone; Sisyphus; Medusa) in the works of Arab dramatists and dealt with the varying ways they have been treated, sometimes with comic overtones, sometimes situating the Greek tragic experience in a more generalized philosophical setting, but often enough using the plot in order to indirectly comment on contemporary politics.

The last two papers addressed the changed pragmatic and epistemological context in which the post-colonial debate has been held on the 'Eurocentric' roots of Western culture. In the eyes of classicists, this process may take the character of a paradigmatic shift which invites for a serious revision of previous positivistic, romantic and idealistic positions, as Freddy Decreus noticed. The 'Black Athena' discussion clearly proved that classics (and opinions on Eastern influences) can no longer be considered innocent and value-free historical constructions, but plainly have been rooted in nationalistic and even racial Eurocentric assumptions. Discussing Oedipus along these lines is asking why mythology and tragedy in general, and the Oedipus theme in particular, have till recently been studied in a way to overlook as much as possible oriental influences. Therefore it is not surprising that only in recent decades, the tragic experience, as the philosophical experience which turns the literary category of tragedy into an existential one, has been related to the Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh and the prevailing tragic situation of its hero.

In his paper, Erwin Jans discussed some reasons why cultural philosophers and theatre practitioners have to be interested in defining new global cultural roles. In the past, culture mainly has been interpreted in terms of stasis and harmony, characterizing mainstream tradition, but ignoring all possible intrusions and fissures. Today, however, intercultural discussions focus on the complex relationships between culture, politics and economics, a meeting place where a struggle for power is always present. Hence, the idea of interpreting cultures as moments and places of permanent conflict, as occasions where, on the one hand, consolidated tradition protect ethnocentric assumptions, and where, on the other hand, *loci* of confrontation are prepared. Therefore, cultural continuity is continuously challenged by a process of discontinuity, ideals being attacked and threatened by insufficient implementation. Taking as an example for an intercultural discussion the Western interpretation of Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, Jans investigates what it takes to be considered a good critic of non-Western cultural heritage.

## THE TRAGIC AS A PARADIGM IN THE WEST

### BEREAVEMENT AND RIFT. THE EXPERIENCE OF TRAGEDY AND THE DEMISE OF CULTURE

Karel BOULLART

#### Introduction

'Culture', generally speaking, is a man-made set of values, attitudes and ends, means and actions, invented and implemented to realise the 'good life' that, as defined by the cultural set in question, makes sense of man and his being in the world. Tragic action (henceforth 'tragedy' in the non-artistic sense) is a consequence of the fact that this endeavour to realise the good life, is in principle fallible. No set of values is coherent under all mental conditions and under all factual circumstances. 'Happiness' that can be taken down to one's grave in peace, is not for all. Far from it. At least, such happiness cannot be guaranteed. Cultural endeavours however, so it seems, are intentionally set against this fatality, no matter how futile they may turn out to be. Hence tragic constellations, which lead to tragedy, are characterised by cultural and material circumstances in which the 'good', as culturally defined, is no longer possible. In history pragmatic dilemmas, pragmatic contradictions cannot be excluded: the nature of existence is such that at the same time it holds for the cultural and moral imperative of the 'good' and for its eventual impossibility. Whatever we try to obtain, we can also fail to obtain, precisely because we have to *try* to do so; no action is without risks. 'Agamemnon in Aulis' cannot behave as he should. He must be 'tragic', whatever he intends to do. And he cannot but act, because he is culturally representative and paradigmatic. He cannot sneak away, as most of us would try to do in the circumstances. It is clear that these dilemmas, if they are acted out effectively -if they do not degenerate pathologically, in non-action or stark denial- have the following characteristics. First fatal ignorance, or, as Aristotle said, *hamartia*, i.e. the heuristically well-motivated, but nevertheless false belief that there is after all a culturally acceptable, that is conformable solution, which, second, if acted upon, *ex hypothesi* turns out to be counterproductive at large -hence the action is heterotelic, it fatally fails to realise its goals- and, third, boils down to the inevitable recognition of the unsolvability,

within the cultural set, of the conflict at hand. Tragedy therefore is a destructive necessity or fatality that reveals itself as the consequence of chance, i.e. bad luck, on the basis of cultural pretense at general problem-solving. It is the demise of a cultural set: tragic action reveals the finiteness of our problem-solving capabilities. It makes their limits explicit and, by doing so, transgresses them. The tragic 'hero' is a culturally paradigmatic person, who believes in the problem-solving capability of his set of values (hence his culturally determined 'initial religiosity') who, inevitably, by ignorance and error (due to his finiteness, especially his epistemic finiteness) and the heterotely of the actions that ensue, realises that these convictions have their limits, and hence, given the circumstances -which are exceptional but real nevertheless- fatally fail to realise the culturally obligatory goals. Hence the rift in the cultural set and the bereavement of the hero: he inevitably fails and, at one and the same time, he is a drop-out, a scapegoat and a saint. In so far as the set of values cannot be changed at all (e.g. because the nature of culture as such requires them) or because it is, for whatever reasons, rigid (e.g. when the cultural set is foundationally seen as god-given), the 'hero' is by definition an ambivalent person: he is culturally paradigmatic but at the same time he has to be eliminated because of his so-called *hubris*, as he reveals the chaos beyond the cultural order he has shown to be deficient. In this sense, the tragic person has destroyed the most holy of things: the problem-solving power of his culture, the very source of its existence and of its right to exist. He has not so much murdered people, even if he has. Such things could be forgiven or otherwise disposed of within the boundaries of the cultural set, its attitudes and values. He has done something much more ominous and irreparable: he has murdered, as far as the culture is concerned, the essence of humanity so conceived. Hence his liminal position, at the same time in and out of the cultural domain: tragic action is destructive yet, nevertheless, productive as well. It destroys the old dispensation and it makes room for new ones. As such however, it is not, nor can it be a dispensation in its own right. Neither can it anticipate the set of values, the *religio* to come. It cannot but register the failure of the cultural set, its failure in action, and consequently, the demise of politics and, more generally, of the powers that be. The home country of its heroes is, after all is said and done, always a no-man's land. Tragedy is culturally and, consequently, philosophically dangerous, and accordingly the consciousness of it has to be repressed. Hence the question arises: 'Under which conditions is "tragedy" culturally accessible and thematically acceptable, and a fortiori, possible as a literary-theatrical category?'

### Philosophical inhibitions

Let's recapitulate. The culturally unsolvable conflict, the clash of values, the dilemma, the action itself, presupposes ignorance and error (*hamartia*), counterproductiveness and, finally, the revelation of the 'truth', the unsolvability of the conflict. Initial religiosity (to take one's culture seriously, the paradigmatic stance) and final religiosity (recognising the inevitability of the dilemma without relinquishing one's cultural set). In short, the acceptance of the finiteness of existence on the one hand and the finiteness of culture on the other, as two sides of the same coin. To conclude and to summarise: 'high tragedy'. If this definition is true, some culturally specific, philosophical, even ontological conditions have to exist in order for tragedy, as a cultural and artistic category, to obtain. Let's sum up some of them.

First, the concept of tragedy cannot be universalised without triviality. One might be inclined to think that existence itself, because of its finiteness, is tragic. Indeed, in order to stay alive, we live, and by doing so we inexorably die; and the more we live, so to speak, the more we die. The problem is insolvable, and its only possible solution -to go on living- is patently counterproductive. Hence, the argument goes, transcendence, eternity and immortality aside, human existence, or perhaps even the world itself, is pantragic by nature. Tragedy is the direct and inevitable consequence of our mortal condition. I think this is wrong, because the idea robs tragedy of its special character, indeed of all character whatsoever. Moreover, if this pantragic stance were true, the consciousness of tragedy ought to be universal. Its contrary would be incomprehensible. The idea therefore seems to be wrong, even stupid, which is worse. Nevertheless, it has its 'raison d'être': it is the night that falls on earth when heavenly suns, religious or philosophical ones, darken. Tragedy becomes universal when transcendence, which guaranteed, at least metaphysically, the 'good life', for whatever reasons -in fact because the device is trivial- starts to lose its credibility. If we believe that death can be vanquished, -death being the unsolvable conflict *par excellence*-, there would be no unsolvable conflicts at all, and in the heavenly realm of our cultural beliefs no tragedy. The immanent evidence of death and finiteness as such and in the cultural order possible tragedy, is denied on the then 'really' real transcendent level, which then works as an impeccable general problem-solving device. Pantragicism then is the earthly counterpart of its absolute denial. Man is 'une passion inutile' (Sartre), not because that is so in fact, immanently, or because man ought to be useful in an absolute sense (whatever that means), but because he cannot be or become 'God', as he -being 'une passion inutile'- has to in order

to make sense at all. Or so it is thought. Hence too Plato's notorious fear of tragedy and its ontological impossibility in traditional religions, such as Christianity and, presumably, Islam, and, moreover, in orthodox communism as well. Or rather, generally speaking, its repression, its neutralisation, even its exorcism in any culture whatever which denies the existence of unsolvable conflicts, or - what boils down to the same thing- the metaphysical denial, one way or another, of our finiteness.

Let's expatiate on this theme, because this 'meta-belief', if we can call it that, is more insidious and more widespread than is generally assumed. As indicated, the reason why in Christianity, strictly speaking, tragedy in the full sense is unthinkable, is simple. Ontologically it cannot be construed on its premises, because Christianity -as with traditional religions in general- is inter alia conceived and invented precisely to ward off the allegedly unbearable consciousness of our cosmic futility. In other words: to safeguard man, because he is assumed to have an infinite will, against existential and cultural 'nihilism' that -counterproductively, tragically enough- has its very origin exactly in the heavenly ambitions of religion. In short, the fear of finiteness and death is dealt with by the denial of their reality; this makes for yearning for eternity and makes it reasonable to do so; hence the necessity to neutralise, even to exorcise death. And, in its wake, follows the futility of our finite existence, grounded in the inacceptability of death. Nihilism therefore -just like pantragicism for that matter- is not a given of existence but culturally 'learned', a consequence of the *hubris* of our will, in so far as it is thought to be insatiable. Which, pace Schopenhauer, it is not. Our finiteness makes for a finite will, a finite 'life-force', and finite energy, it does not make eternal longings. We don't have them naturally with us. If that seems so, it is the virtual effect, the after image of our capacity for boundless and consequently trivial generalisation. Christianity knows of no tragedy in the world, because in God's hand, what has been done, can be undone (like death), and what has gone wrong, can be rectified. For all grief there is redress. However, if this could be believed in all cases, then only *quia absurdum est*. Now, after science, the idea is not only absurd, it has become unthinkable, intellectually and even emotionally. Such beliefs indeed strip the world as it is of its undeniable reality. But even philosophies that deny reality as it is, must at least have reality as it is thought. Christianity therefore *does* have tragedy after all, and a unique one at that: the denial namely of its all-round problem-solving capability, i.e. the denial of God, the rebellion of Lucifer. Paradoxically, his victory -if thinkable at all- would, metaphorically speaking, again pave the way for the possibility of 'tragedy', if Lucifer would not be so misguided -as he naturally is- to want to replace God on his Throne. Which doesn't change the

matter that much. In other words, tragedy knows no devils, no angels and no Gods: its kingdom is of this world, on the right side of death, so to speak.

Strange as it may seem, something very similar occurs in orthodox communism or 'vulgar materialism', as it is called. 'In socialism there is no tragedy', as Lunatcharsky, the First Commissar for Culture, once said. Indeed! If socialism obtains, by definition at least the weighty societal problems of humanity are solved: there are no unsolvable problems, as Hegelian dialectics has already proclaimed. The consequence is that socialism does not and cannot exist, at least not on earth, that is, not in history but after it, in a so-called posthistorical time as mythical as heaven always has been. Paradise on earth, hence, is only conceivable as a sophisticated, modern version of millenarianism. The reason for the parallel with fully fledged religion is that the idea of 'paradise on earth' in historical time can easily function in the same way as the idea of 'heaven' in eternity: it suffices to replace the eternal virtual 'now' of God by the historical virtual 'future' of History. But just as eternal bliss or vertical eschatology has its theodicy -Why not yet and why not all? What about the useless fuss of finiteness?- so eschatology turned immanent and horizontal, has its own demise: 'Encore un effort, citoyen'! Why not yet? Why tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow? Why, after all, history?'. With one big difference though: whereas God's dispensation can be accepted a priori, because what is done can be undone, the 'fait accompli' of History, especially its manifest evils, cannot so easily be overlooked. In consequence, because of the fact that the intellectual fallacy of final progress progressively is revealed, belief in the future of universal problem-solving devices progressively loses its appeal, until, once again, it becomes the lie it always has been. After the demise of the history of salvation, the heroic individual who was prepared to sacrifice, as a revolutionary, his life and well-being, in fact his individuality, for the community of the future, is no longer prepared to do so: his really heroic stance -however stupid it finally turned out to be- melts away and is transmuted to unbelief, cynicism and possibly to a belief in profit-making at all costs. And just as in traditional religion, there *is* tragedy in revolutionary endeavours, and it is of the same kind. In the history of salvation by historical man there is indeed only one unique kind of tragedy: the denial of the sense of history at large. And this idea is as devilish a stance as the denial of God: the end of history with a capital H is no less of a black hole than God and His Revelations. With, perhaps, after all, one essential difference: the idiocy of history is much more in evidence and by far easier to detect than God's stupidity ever could be.

The invisibility of tragedy, or at least its denial -with tragic or, if one prefers,

comic, even ridiculous results- is not limited to religions, but is, it appears, as widespread in philosophy. For instance, as said, in Plato. If I remember rightly, the reason why tragic poets are gently pushed out of the ideal *polis*, is that their theatrical pieces are very impressive, but, alas, false: they tell lies. Platonically speaking, this must be so: what classical tragedy makes crystal clear, is that people may be confronted, from time to time, with unsolvable dilemmas, that are not made-up but are, as chance has it, simply given. An ideal state, modelled on a universe of Platonic Ideas, that in principle cannot contain or imply or produce contradictions, cannot accommodate tragedy, precisely because it shows that this presupposition of intellectual 'harmonie préétablie', and harmony otherwise, does not obtain in the world. The mere possibility of tragedy therefore definitely undermines the very possibility of political utopia; and consequently, if Plato has to be right -which he manifestly thinks he must- Sophocles has to be deadly wrong. For if he and his colleagues indeed were right, the whole onto-epistemic construction of platonism would founder and collapse. It would become futile. And this *ought* not to be. Hence... Otherwise said, the notion of tragedy is a stranger to all philosophies that pretend to the kind of worldview that implies that adequacy and completeness can be attained, if only in principle. This idea of 'completeness' however is provably impossible: it is an onto-epistemic falsehood. To pretend to the contrary is onto-epistemic *hubris*, as Sophocles unmistakably showed in *Oedipus Rex*: it is indeed possible in fact, always and everywhere, not to be in a position *in* the world to know what one ought to in order to be able to avoid catastrophe. It is manifestly false -as Hegel's dialectics presume and as Marx said in his 'Political Economy'- that if a problem arises the conditions for its solution are, for that reason alone, accessible as well. It is clear this means that unsolvable conflicts cannot occur, neither in history nor anywhere else. Plato would have approved. But that, tragically, would be a stupid thing to do. As it would, once again, make finiteness fake. The same is true moreover, for instance, for philosophical stances such as strict determinism, so that 'chance', an essential element in the non-triviality of tragic action, does not obtain or, at least, is not really what it seems. Just as predestination excludes tragedy, so does determinism, and so does, apparently, the fatalism associated with Islam.

### **Societal Conditions.**

Besides these onto-epistemic conditions, some less arcane and more urbane ones are required for an individual to become a 'tragic hero'. These requirements are essentially societal in nature: the individual must be paradigmatic of his culture at large; he has to be its uncontested representative, at least initially; he must be

empowered to act with full authority and might on his own initiative, i.e. he has to be able to act on behalf of society at large, he must be in power or he must be powerful; and lastly, he must act autonomously, i.e. he must take upon himself the problem-solving capacities of the culture he has been educated in and is an outstanding member of. In consequence, he has to have a strong, a full and, as E. G. Forster would say, a 'round' character. For tragedy to fully occur, the tearing apart of the cultural set, the bereavement and the no man's land the tragic person finds himself in, have to occur in full consciousness of their importance and their consequences: the hero must understand, at least finally, what is at stake. Otherwise paradigmaticity is impossible. Secondly, tragic action has to be highly energetic: the person, given his initial religiosity, must do his utmost to find a solution for the conflict at hand and he must be empowered to take all measures necessary to do so. In other words -initial circumstances evidently apart- the tragic action must be fully of his own making. Thirdly, he has to take responsibility for what happens, for as *he* has to try to find a solution for the cultural impasse he is in, *he* himself is responsible for his cultural stance, its wishes for survival and its ultimate death: he has to take this holy burden upon himself.

It is clear that such conditions rarely obtain: they are exceptional indeed. It even seems that they are only effectively possible in small groups, among people with an aristocratic turn of mind, who know one another rather well, who can survey their cultural set in its entirety, who can assess the conflicts that occur and can envisage the solutions, if there are any. In short, tragedy in the full sense is only possible in a small society of free, equal and aristocratically-minded people, in the world of an uncontested elite: high society and high culture are required. As in classical Greece. It appears indeed that classical Greek tragedy was a very 'theatre of the mind', of Greek culture, of its problems and conflicts. It is no mere coincidence then that in ancient Greek democracy (aristocratically after all), mathematics and philosophy, in our sense of the word, were developed more or less at the same time. For all three are, so it seems, intrinsically bound up with a heightened sense of what it means for man to be an animal that is fully cultural because he made himself so, and to be fully conscious of the fact: culture, history, etcetera is indeed *ta gignomena ex anthropoon*, as Herodotus said. In this perspective democracy is a meta-societal idea: it implies that social life and its organisation are no givens, but have to be negotiated by free, autonomous and self-conscious individuals who have a thorough grasp both of their interests as individuals and of their responsibility as member of the community. Human culture and its organisation are no heavenly gift but the result of a continuously negotiated consensus, again and again. Consequently, it presupposes fully

conscious convictions of the individuals concerned and relevant, conclusive and, if possible, compelling argumentation in the realm of thinking and negotiating: hence rhetoric and logic, philosophical argumentation, and mathematics, because its deductive method is close to irrefutable proof or could be thought to be so. Moreover, culture interpreted as an essentially contested concept, as indeed it is, is only conceivable in such an aristocratically minded, argumentative and democratic environment. Hence, further, the problem of the foundation of culture and consequently the idea of the 'good life': 'Les philosophes au pouvoir!', so to speak. In this perspective one can fruitfully compare, we surmise, Socratic dialogue with the traditional relation between master and pupil in e.g. classical Taoist texts. However, human existence and its self-cultivation is perhaps too large, too complex and too opaque to be fully, completely and adequately knowable. Perhaps, pace Plato, the good itself is ambivalent. And, perhaps, as said, no cultural set is effectively consistent: perhaps consciousness and thinking -and for that matter culture at large- in principle and in practice occasionally have their unsolvable problems and conflicts, hence their tragedies. Who is right? Plato or Sophocles? Plato, the Republic and the utopian drive for the perfect cultural set? Or Euripides and his *Bacchae*, the dionysian destruction of the 'soi-disant' universal problem-solving power of Platonic idealism, rationalism and control? It seems that up till now the oscillation between those two classical positions continues unabated. A satisfying solution yet to be found: the tragedians don't want to leave the 'polis', presumably because they cannot. At least, not yet.

However, this does not mean that tragedy, historically speaking, apart from cultural sets that inhibit tragic consciousness, is universally present. Mass-societies, for instance, as we know them, cannot sustain it either. This does not mean that our societies, as all others, do not from time to time act tragically, counterproductively, etcetera. On the contrary. But it appears that these eventual tragedies can no longer be concentrated in the individuals required. Tragedy, if it occurs nowadays, has become systemic: it takes place behind our backs. It seems that the world of man has become too big for tragedy proper. Nobody can take such a burden upon himself, because first, there is no such monolithic culture anymore, second, it cannot be fully known, as it is too diverse and too complex - we have to know too much with the result that we always know too little-, and third, we are not able to adequately survey our options and their consequences, because the former are fluid and the latter are too big, too complex, too dense. And, finally, there are too many of them. Which means that in a sense we always act irresponsibly, however well-informed we may be: collectively we have become responsible for all and everything, so that individually we end up being responsible for nothing at all. In other words, our responsibility escapes us, just

as everything else: we are systemically driven, we don't act in the full sense: we all have become Woyzecks more or less, not tragic heroes, not actors on the stage, but casualties, victims, or even 'collateral damage' in the cellars of history, no more, no less.

### **Final Reflections.**

But, perhaps, the time for culture and its tragedies is a time irrevocably past. Just as 'after Gödel' there is no question anymore of completing mathematics, so 'after tragedy' there is no unique, final, stable, complete and adequate cultural set on the human agenda any longer: the idea is dead. From a foundational point of view, plurality in mathematics, in worldviews and in culture, is the wisdom of the day. As with the Absolute in religion, the 'cultural absolutes' tragedy requires are completely outdated. It is no longer possible to believe in such 'Absolutes'. Consequently, tragedy has become impossible, not only because the material and societal conditions required don't obtain any longer, but first and foremost because cultural conditions have fundamentally changed. In two respects. First, perhaps, because culturally driven scientific, technological and economic progress enables us, at least in principle, to satisfy our common material needs and our mental ones, the common, the individual and even the idiosyncratic. If that is true, it seems that in our times, the market is the place to be. If our material needs are biologically driven and hence collective by nature, our cultural ones, contrary to what was the case in the past, turn out to be specific, individual and finally idiosyncratic. Consequently, as long as the market is in place and there's enough for everyone, cultural preferences, however important individually, are collectively indifferent. Consequently, tragedy is no longer at the core of things cultural: today, in so far as it occurs at all, it is only of private interest: collectively speaking, it is but a 'fait divers'. Given the superabundance, materially and mentally, of the market, culture, as traditionally conceived, will dwindle to a kind of amusement and tragedy will become an accident of minor or no importance. No insurance company will worry about it anymore, if ever they did or could. However, it is not a certainty that our cultural nature is a thing as weightless as that. Nevertheless, there is, perhaps, a more substantial reason why tragedy might turn out to be a fossil of the past. Indeed: scientifically and technologically we are probably so far advanced, i.e. we have made such cultural progress after all, that our very biology is in jeopardy. Perhaps our knowledge of the world and consequently the cultural superiority of science, can overcome these old dilemmas of our cultural plight. Perhaps Plato's project can be endorsed eugenetically. We are cultural beings, uncertain, dubious, ambivalent and

contradictory. And if we could get rid of all this? If, in fact, we could get rid of culture and tragedy at the same time? By effectively transmuting our nature into a new, a post-cultural state of nature: the genetically determined, unique and unavoidable set of values required for the harmony of ourselves, our kin and our world? Possible? The question therefore seems to be this: 'Can culture and its problems be overcome by nature so redefined? In *casu*, redefined by ourselves... and our culturally, in this case, scientifically informed expertise? Yes or no? The answer is 'no'. Why? Because, if ever the problem was real in the first place, it of necessity has to remain so. In other words, tragedy cannot be overcome. And the reason is simple to the point of simplicity. If our nature is finite -as it manifestly is- it has to remain so: if our knowledge would be sufficient to transcend our condition, it would not be available in this our very condition in the first place; consequently, we could never reach the state of affairs required from the starting point we *de facto* occupy. And *de facto* we have to start. Hence -to use traditional jargon- the help of God is required to change our nature successfully. We, on our own, cannot do this except, by chance. And then, naturally, mostly for the worst. And perhaps, this kind of 'transsubstantiation' is excluded in principle. For what kind of being would it be that could transcend our humanity? What would the world be like beyond the possibility of tragedy? What is beyond contradiction in thinking? What beyond contradiction in consciousness, beyond suicide biologically? What, in the word, beyond an entity in the world that is capable of deciding not to be? The answer seems to be: nothing. And 'nothing' indeed it is. Frankenstein's monsters must be intolerably stupid: they cannot doubt their own intelligence. And consequently, the happiness they pretend to must be fake.

## ARABIC HELLENISM. BETWEEN REASON AND VOLITION

Herman DE LEY

### Prologue

Did ‘the tragic experience (as a philosophical attitude) and tragedy (as a literary category) seriously influence the creation of a specific Western way of thinking, experiencing and feeling’? Did they found ‘a fundamental attitude of being and acting which, during 2500 years, provided a specific Western face of art, religion and philosophy’? And was ‘consequently, Western man... stimulated to act, to feel released from nature, to make choices and to take responsibilities, all aspects of human life relying upon the human “will” ‘? (quotes taken from the conference outline)

If so, and if the ancient Greeks did initiate the exploration of the tragic world view, bequeathing it to the West, how to explain that the ‘Eastern’ inheritors of Greek civilization and culture - i.e. the spokesmen of what I prefer to call ‘Arabic Hellenism’ - did *not* partake in that tragic spirit? In my short contribution, I would like to explore the thesis that it is not so much a question of fundamentally opposing world views, an Eastern ‘Islamic’ one versus a Western ‘Christian’ one, as of an ideological divide running across *both* Eastern and Western cultures.

1. Is it true, as seems to be implied by the conference outline, that the tragic experience ‘relies upon the human ‘will’ ? There are reasons to doubt it. The ancient Greeks were unfamiliar with the notion of ‘the will’. Neither in their poetry nor in their philosophy do we find a word that is completely equivalent to our familiar concept of ‘will’ (that word being derived, of course, from the Latin, *voluntas*). Actually, when surveying Greek literature, starting with Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, one gets the impression that, in order to describe human behaviour, the poet is using a *dual*, basic psychology. In other words, human behaviour is explained by the interaction between *two* (not three) basic faculties or powers: the rational one of human understanding, on one side, and the irrational urge of our emotions and passions, on the other side. We find this psychology confirmed in Greek language: the act of volition, for which we use the one verb, ‘*to will*’, is split up in ancient Greek between *two* word groups:

(a) the first one (*ethéloo*) is used in order to express a passive and spontaneous receptivity towards external influences or stimuli; its meaning is: 'to be ready, to be inclined; to be disposed to; to give in to, to desire'... As such, the verb is referring to our emotional and 'irrational' functioning.

(b) the other verb (*boulomai*) refers primarily to our planning and deliberating, preceding any conscientious action (etymologically, the verb is related, in Greek, to words denoting 'consultation, deliberation and counseling'). We could paraphrase the meaning of it with: 'I prefer or decide on the basis of rational deliberation'.

Greek language, you could say, actually *rationalizes* human volition. Inasmuch as 'willing' is considered to be an *active* faculty, resulting in conscientious and purposeful action, it is reduced to a function of human intelligence, of reason, and consequently it is subordinate to *knowledge*. Moral value judgements, thus, in the Greek view of man, refer primarily to what we would call the *intellectual* performances implied in a person's behaviour. Accordingly, the Greek word for 'to sin' (*hamartanein*) means literally: 'to miss one's target', just like the archer missing the bull's-eye. Take, for example, Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, with the parricide, the sphinx, the incest, Oedipus' blinding of himself: surely, this is not a drama of the human *will*, but one of human *knowledge and ignorance*. The same goes for Greek ethical and philosophical thinking. Greek ethical intellectualism, of course, is best epitomized in the famous dictum of Socrates: 'virtue is knowledge' - i.e. in order to choose the good, and thus automatically to do it, it suffices to *know* it. Or to put it otherwise, *immoral* behaviour is due to *ignorance*, i.e. ignorance that is of 'the good'.

What is implied in this world view, is the objective existence of 'the good', *not* in so far as it would be personified in a theistic (Christian or Islamic) God. One could call the Greek view rather a *naturalistic* one: the good for man coincides with the rational order in nature (nature as a whole being deified). The first philosopher to have formulated for us this intellectualist and at the same time naturalistic view of man, was Heraclitus of Ephesus (5th c. B.C), fragment 112:

'thinking well is the greatest virtue, and wisdom is to speak and act things true, according to nature, paying attention'.

2. So, in Greek tradition, human intention is referring back to *knowledge*, and thus to an objective, eternal and rational order of being. However, in the Biblical and Koranic tradition, on the contrary, i.e. in the world view of the three “Abrahamic” religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, things are viewed quite differently. All three of them proclaim the belief in one, personal god: God. The point of departure of this religious view is the principle of ‘absolute creation’, i.e. the creation of the world out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), through God’s almighty will alone. What is introduced, that way, is the principle of a radical distinction between the divinity, i.e. the Creator, on the one hand, and natural reality, as a created reality, on the other hand. More important, still: inasmuch as creation is dependent on the divine Will, this will transcends all order and regularity within the world. God being understood as the only reality truly worthy of that name, nature and its order are not truly real: it’s all a question of divine... *voluntarism*. Yahwe’s or God’s promise to his chosen people, for that reason, is more trustworthy than any regularity or stability man is observing in nature. As it is said in the Bible, *Isaiah*, 54.10:

‘For the mountains may recede and the hills may stagger, but my mercy will not recede from you and my covenant will not stagger, says the Merciful, your Lord’.

In the Qur’ân roughly the same idea is succinctly expressed in sura 28, verse 88:

‘And do not invoke anyone besides God. For everything will perish, except His countenance, which is eternal. His alone is the command and to Him alone everyone shall return’.

In this monotheistic, religious world view, man is not so much confronted with the order of nature, but with the will and command of his creator. What is primarily expected of a human being, within the Covenant concluded by God with mankind, is not knowledge or understanding (i.e. of the universe), but obedience and allegiance to God’s commands. ‘Whoever obeys God and His Prophet, shall without a doubt attain salvation’ (Qur’ân, s. 33:71). Just like the rest of the universe (‘all who are in the heavens and all who are in the earth, the sun and the moon, the stars and the mountains, the trees and the beast’, Qur’ân, s. 22:18), man as well has to submit or surrender himself (in an act of “*islâm*”, you could say) to God’s will. In man’s case, though, that submission has to be voluntary, since of all creatures, man alone freely agreed to “*carry the Trust*”, cf. s. 33:72:

‘We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to carry it and were afraid of it. And the human being carried it’.

The sharpest test of this Trust or Covenant, in the three religions, was of course God demanding Abraham (Îbrahîm), that he would kill and sacrifice his own son - an order which from the point of view of human intelligence is completely incomprehensible, even repellent. The more so since there is no “rational” *quid pro quo*, as is the case in Euripides’ tragedy, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*: king Agamemnon is required to immolate his own daughter, in order that the winds might blow in the right direction, and he himself might uphold his leadership. According to the biblical story (in the Catholic Dutch translation it is called ‘this beautiful story’), *Genesis*, ch 22, at the last minute - Abraham already raised his knife, ‘in order to cut his son’s throat’ (22.10) - God’s angel intervenes and says (22.12):

‘Now I know that you fear God, for you did not want to withhold from me your only son’.

In the Qur’ân as well this sacrifice is presented as a true example of “*islâm*”, i.e. of putting one’s trust in almighty God, s. 37:102-107:

‘Abraham said to his son: “My son, I have had a dream in which God has commanded me to sacrifice you. What do you say to this?” His son replied: “My dear father! Carry out the command of God. You will find me, if God so wills, compliant and forbearing”. And so when they had both submitted their wills to God’s command and Abraham had laid his son on his side, and brought the knife close to the boy’s neck, We called out to him: “O Abraham! You did not doubt the veracity of your dream. Thus do We reward those who do right. This was clearly a great trial”. And we gave a large sacrifice to be immolated in his place’.

Summing up: the principal human value, in the three religious traditions, is nót rational understanding or intelligence (albeit that humans are called upon to learn God’s *signs*, in order to know his will), but the basic value is *fidelity* or *faithfulness* (*amunâh*, in Hebrew; *amâna*, in Arabic; *pistis*, or “*faith*”, in Greek), resulting in trustful and grateful submission (*islâm*). This is of course a matter of human volition. The actual construction of the *concept* of the will, as being one

of three faculties of the human psyche, was to be the work of the Latin Church Father, St Augustine. I said: “*grateful (submission)*”. *Alhamdu lillâh!*, ‘*all praise belongs to God!*’ In daily life, a Muslim uses this phrase frequently, thus giving voice to the basic ethos of his or her religion. Indeed, as Emilio Platti (one of Belgium’s most distinguished experts on Islam) puts it:

‘Islam is one of the world’s most positive religious philosophies: Thank God! This way a Muslim experiences the profound meaning of his life. Islam is the opposite of an attitude of revolt against the disappointments and the ordeals (of life); the opposite also of a sorrowful or tragic view of this world’ ... (p. 18, my translation).

‘The opposite of a tragic view of this world’: this is confirmed by the British Muslim philosopher, Shabbir Akhtar (*A Faith for All Seasons*, 1990, p. 160):

‘it is no exaggeration to say that for both modern and classical Islam, tragedy remains a foreign category of reflection’, and ‘the lack of a theory of tragedy within Islam is not accidental, being as it is a deliberate feature of a characteristically Islamic religious vision’ (p. 236 n. 32).

Akhtar, however, is mistaken - at least in my view - when he characterizes the *Christian* religious outlook ‘as being a supremely tragic one’. There may be *pathos* in the passion of Jesus Christ, but there is no tragedy. I am convinced that tragedy is not at home in *either* of the two religions, real differences between them notwithstanding. I would suggest that the tragic vision demands a naturalistic view of the world - be it that of ancient-Greek, so-called paganism or of modern secularism.

### 3. But what of Arabic Hellenism?

It goes without saying that, in order to broach this subject within a limited time-span, I have to be extremely selective. So let me draw your attention to a fascinating figure, supporter of an ‘integral rationalism’ (Badawi): the Muslim physician, alchemist and philosopher, Abû Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyyâ’ar-Râzî (865-925). Râzî was an outspoken nonconformist; later on, in the Muslim heresiographic literature, he was classified as a notorious *zindiq* or freethinker. Being conspicuous amongst medieval Arabic philosophers for his knowledge of Greek, Râzî concocted a philosophical system of his own. With its *Five Eternals* (*al-qudamâ’ al-khamsa*) - the Creator, the Soul, Matter, absolute Time and

absolute Space -, it was based on the ideas of different Greek philosophers, foremost Plato (his *Timaeus*), Democritus (his atomism) and Epicurus (his ethics). In opposition to the so-called ('atheistic') *Dahriyya*, supporting the eternity of the universe, Râzî argued for the creation of the world in time and its final destruction. However he confronted the Muslim *mutakallimûn* or theologians as well, and denied the possibility of a creation out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). At the same time, though, Râzî integrated into his system a *gnostic* view of the world, i.e. he shared 'the gnostic conclusion that creation is a tragedy or mistake' (Lenn E. Goodman). This 'world of ours', as Râzî calls it, is mostly a place of sorrow, i.e. (and I quote from the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III.12, pp. 441-2 Pines, when writing about what he calls: Râzî's 'ravings'):

'(R. thought) that there is more evil than good in what exists; if you compare man's well-being and his pleasures in the time span of his well-being with the pains, the heavy sufferings, the infirmities, the paralytic afflictions, the wretchedness, the sorrows, and the calamities that befall him, you find that his existence - he means the existence of man - is a punishment and a great evil inflicted upon him'.

The creation of the world, i.e. the creation of this 'tragedy of horrors' (*hè tragoodia toon foberoon*, as the gnostic world view was earlier characterized by the ancient philosopher, Plotinus, *Enneads*, II.9.13), was primarily due to the ignorance of the Soul (I quote from Nâsir-i-Khosraw): 'out of ignorance, Soul fell in love with Matter and... tried to produce forms out of Matter, in order to get corporeal pleasures'. Or, according to another source (Abû Hâtîm): 'The Soul was overcome by lust and she was ignorant of the calamities that were awaiting her'. Matter resisting the imprint of form by the Soul, God in his compassion intervened and helped her. His creation of 'this world of ours' was motivated by his wish that Soul, 'having experienced the disastrous consequences of her act' (Abû Hâtîm), might learn (i.e. '*pathei mathos*', 'learning through suffering', as the Greek tragedian, Aeschylus, once wrote), learn, that is, 'that she made a mistake, out of which this world came into being' (Nâsir-i-Khosraw). As a matter of fact, it is the responsibility of *human* souls, all having been endowed by God with reason ('*aql*'), to emancipate themselves. I.e. 'learning philosophy, (they have) to recognize their own world, to cause no one, if possible, sorrow, and to acquire knowledge', in order to be able to return. Once *all* human souls 'have become aware of this secret, thanks to philosophy' (Nâsir-i-Khosraw), and once *all* of them will have returned to their proper world, then this material world will

come to an end, 'Matter' getting liberated once again from its bondage.

So far Râzî's cosmogonic myth and what we might call his tragic world view. The 'Gnostic-Platonic expedient of Soul' (Goodman) made it possible for him to argue in favour of the *conceivability* of creation in time, against the objections of the *Dahriyya*. Soul's ignorance and irrational desire, in particular, could explain why God at that particular time changed his (rational) will, i.e. 'from the will, not to create the world, to the will, to create it' (Nâsir-i-Khosraw). All this *could* suggest a basic psychology that is comparable to that of the ancient Greeks, but I wouldn't want to press this point.

### **Epilogue**

Râzî's case, of course, is not a typical one - he is not even representative of medieval Arabic philosophy as a whole - but my purpose with this paper was a very modest one. What I said should suffice in order to be able to conclude that historically as well in the matter of tragic vision, it is not simply a question of the West *versus* the East.

## THE GREEK CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY IN THE ARAB CULTURE. HOW TO DEAL WITH AN ISLAMIC *OEDIPUS* ?

Ahmed ETMAN

### **Fruitful Circulation and Different Receptions**

Aristotle's treatise *Peri tes poietikes* (*Ars Poetica*) dates from about 335 BC, i.e. towards the end of the author's life (384-322). The finishing of this important treatise is obviously so rough that many critics believe that it contains simply lecture-notes taken by one of Aristotle's students in the Lykeion. The general form and style of the text confirm this point of view. However, there is nothing like the fate of this book in all the human literary tradition. Although it is the only extensive critical and theoretical survey of Greek drama from the whole antiquity, it goes from one misinterpretation into another through the different ages and till the present time. Noteworthy is that the Greek concept of tragedy and the Aristotelian concept are not precisely identical. In other words, the Aristotelian theory does not apply to every Greek tragedy. *Prometheus Bound*, *Aias*, *Oedipus in Colonus* and the majority of Euripides' plays are not Aristotelian, but they are highly rated tragedies throughout the successive ages. It is noteworthy, however, that Aristotle himself criticized Euripides bitterly for many reasons, but nevertheless described him as the most tragic (*tragikotatos*)<sup>1</sup> of all poets.

This Aristotelian paradox can be naturally justified, if one remembers that when Aristotle gave his lectures on the *Poetics*, Aeschylus had been dead for more than hundred years. Sophocles and Euripides were dead for seventy years. So one must consider this gap of time between the Aristotelian theoretical notes and Greek tragic performances, which are the subject matter of this theory as a whole. It is not acceptable to use the phrases *Aristotelian tragedy* and *Greek tragedy* as synonyms. The first link in the chain of misinterpretations is the application of Aristotelian rules as strict criteria to the Greek tragedies and to applaud this, or to banish that accordingly. This does not mean that dealing with Greek tragedies, one can do without Aristotle's theory, which has assured itself as the *sine qua non* of any well-balanced effort to understand Greek tragedy or the tragic as a whole. But it is not agreeable to distort or to squeeze Aristotle's theory in order to apply it to every Greek tragedy. Perhaps it is more reasonable to begin by studying the Greek tragedies and performances before moving on to Aristotle, not vice versa.

Aristotle's times, the fourth century B.C., saw transitions from Hellenic into Hellenistic, from the democratic *polis* (city-state) to the empires and cosmopolis, and culturally, and from the oral into the written<sup>2</sup>. The general sociopolitical background of the fourth century B.C. is quite different from that of the golden fifth century of Athens, when Greek tragedy (and comedy) flourished. Aristotle himself is rather a Hellenistic philosopher and a precedent prototype of the encyclopedic scholars in Alexandria Library. He is the tutor of Alexander the Great, whose conquests were responsible for the change from the Hellenic into Hellenistic. The reception system before Aristotle had been based on listening to or looking at, not reading. From the age of Aristotle onwards, the relation between the author and receiver began to be transformed into a writing-reading system. Aristotle notes that some authors now compose their work for reading (*anagnostikoi*)<sup>3</sup>.

Aristotle's *Poetics* can be considered as a comprehensive and concise comment on the Greek concept of art as a whole and tragedy in particular. This means that the proper way to understand the Aristotelian theory is to begin with a systematic reading of Greek literature in general and Greek tragedy especially. The seeds of tragedy and the tragic concept lie in Greek traditions beginning with Homer, Hesiod, lyric poetry and mythic legacy. In other words, the Greek concept of tragedy is a part of their concept of human life itself.

Aristotle's rules in the *Poetics* were imitated or epitomized many times within Greco-Roman antiquity. Theophrastus, Demetrius of Phaleron, Longus, Longinus and Horatius are among prominent Aristotelian successors. In the Byzantine period Aristotle was interpreted and commented on several times. Yet all these efforts in different ages were based on different cultural and artistic backgrounds<sup>4</sup>. Great performances of Greek tragedy had almost faded away during, or even before his times. It is true that we have few fragments of some Hellenistic tragic poets<sup>5</sup>. In ancient Rome, tragedies were written by Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Accius, Pacuvius and Ennius. Also we have the ten tragedies of the Stoic Seneca, which were written in the first century A.D. Yet Roman tragedies and their performances are so different that they can not be approached in the same way as the Attic performances. We have no testimony as to whether Seneca's tragedies were performed - or not- in ancient Rome<sup>6</sup>. In short, tragedy flourished only in the fifth century B.C. in Athens. Dramatic festivals either disappeared or were transformed into a different kind of event. After the recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, theatre was censored as a pagan and therefore undesirable heritage. Consequently there was no interest in the *Poetics* of Aristotle, except for philologic and linguistic reasons.

### Aristoteles Arabus

Abd El Rahman Badawi, a very active and prolific translator who died few years ago, refers in the introduction of his translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* to the Arab efforts to absorb Aristoteles:

'Reading the epitomes of El Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) one concludes painfully feeling disappointed because the Arabs did not utilize this book as the Europeans of the Renaissance did, and as the Arabs themselves did with the other writings of Aristotle which indeed fertilized the Arab mind. We imagine that if the Arabs could have absorbed the *Poetics* of Aristotle in the right way, and if they could have utilized its subjects, rules and views, Arab literature would have intended to introduce the higher poetic arts i.e. tragedy and comedy, from the period of its zenith in the third century of Hegra (= 9-10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). Then Arab literary tradition would have totally changed. Who knows? Perhaps Arab civilization as whole would have changed in a similar way as it happened in Renaissance Europe.'<sup>7</sup>

This quotation from Badawi is typical of the general tendency in modern and contemporary Arab scholarship concerning the ancient Arab Aristotelian tradition. The present writer, however, is not convinced that a good translation of the *Poetics* would have resulted in the introduction of tragedy (or comedy) into the Arab literary tradition. Again it is necessary to remember that the Greek tragic production preceded Aristotle's theory by at least one hundred years. Accordingly, Arabs should have experienced dramatic performances to understand and absorb Aristotle's *Poetics*, or to have their own theory and concept of tragedy. In Byzantium, with which the Arabs had mutual cultural exchanges, dramatic performances, as we have mentioned above, were forbidden. It is unreasonable then, to expect that the Aristotelian Arabs, translators, commentators or philosophers would understand what Aristotle means by *tragoidia* and *komoidia*. Usually they transliterate the two terms, being unable to find parallel Arabic terms. And when they tried to translate the terms, they were misled using *Praise Poetry* for tragedy and *Satires* for comedy.

On the other hand, the Arabs understood very well and fruitfully the other Aristotelian principles and terms in the *Poetics* and his other works. The main reason for that, the present writer believes, was their great traditions of rhetoric and poetry. Consequently, Aristotle's theory of the arts of rhetoric and poetry were perfectly absorbed. Terms like *poiesis*, *mimesis*, *lexis*, *rhetorike*, etc. were

easily interpreted in a very creative way by translators, commentators, philosophers and critics. Commentators were successful not only in adopting the Aristotelian terms, but also in remodelling and adapting them to traditional Arab poetry and rhetoric. For example, the word *mimesis* was translated in the beginning as imitation, but later they turned to El Takhieel = creative imagination, which indicates an original modification of their concept of art and poetry<sup>8</sup>. This tendency to improve and promote the Aristotelian theory justifies why there were at least three translations of the *Poetics* in the ancient Arab tradition. They represent a certain progress in the Arabic-Aristotelian tradition.

According to Ibn El Nadim, Aristotle's *Poetics* was translated three times into Arabic, first by Abu Bishr Matta Bin Iunis (died 328 H.= about 940 A.D.), Ishaq Ibn Hunain (died 298 H. = about 910 A.D.), and Yahia Ibn Adie (282-363 H. = about 893-974 A.D.)<sup>9</sup>. Anyhow one translation only, that of Abu Bishr Matta, survived, the other two having been lost.<sup>10</sup> In the meantime there are four epitomes or synoptic abstracts of the *Poetics* in Arabic, achieved by four well known philosophers, namely El Kindi (died 252 H. = about 870 A.D.), Al Farabi (268-338 H. = about 870-950 A.D.), Ibn Sina (d. 1037 A.D.) and Ibn Rushd (514-586 H. = about 1126-1198 A.D.). The work of Al Kindi, however, has unfortunately not survived, a great loss since most probably he knew Greek. It is obvious that Al Farabi, influenced by the comparison of Aristotle at the end of the *Poetics* between epic and tragedy, tried to develop a parallel comparison between Greek and Arabic poetry. Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd were guided by such a comparison in their efforts to apply Aristotle's *Poetics* to Arabic traditional poetry<sup>11</sup>.

Modern scholars dispute concerning the Arabic Aristotelian tradition. Many orientalist deny any understanding of Aristotle by the Arabs. The translation of Matta was not accurate, nor did it help any philosopher or critic to understand the *Poetics*. Arab contemporary critics recognize this fact, saying that no Arab understood the *Poetics* except Ibn Sina who conceived the real meaning of *mimesis* and general other Aristotelian principles, which can be applied to Arab literary traditions. This opinion has been followed by Abd El Rahman Badawi<sup>12</sup>. Moreover the concept of El Takhieel goes beyond the Aristotelian *mimesis*. Hazem El Qarthagani applying the Aristotelian *mimesis* to Arabic poetry adds a very important note: 'Aristotle should have added other poetic rules and genres to his book if he had found in Greek tradition what we have in Arabic'<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless Hazem and other ancient Arab critics were confused by the Aristotelian ideas concerning the function of myth in poetry. In his book *Methods of Rhetors*, he says: 'Greek poets were inventing things as a basis for their poetic

creations, using them as the directing marks for their writings. They made these things, which do not take place in life, as examples to what happened indeed. In this way they build fabricated stories, exactly as the old grand mothers relate to young children tales of a kind which is impossible to take place. Abu Ali Ibn Sina, who dealt with *tragoidia*, used something about this subject saying that they were fabricated in analogy with extant names. But this was rare. Rarely also a name of something, with no parallel in life, was invented and used to denote a general meaning. Ibn Sina disapproves of this kind of poetry saying: poetry is in no need of such tales which are indeed fabricated stories.’<sup>14</sup>

The present writer thinks that in the foregoing quotation from Hazem the main obstacle in the way of ancient - and modern - Arabs being to absorbing *tragoidia* is underlined, i.e. the function of myths or as they say the fabricated tales. Moreover terms like *mythos* (myth), *desis* (plot), *lysis* (solution) and *opsis* (scene) can never be understood by any Arab of those days, because such terms are closely connected with the dramatic spectacle which was unknown to them<sup>15</sup>.

### **Aristotle and tragedy rediscovered in Europe**

Averroes (Ibn Rushd) was known to the Europeans as an Islamic philosopher and as the expositor or interpreter of Aristotle. His writings were translated into Hebrew and Latin towards the end of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance<sup>16</sup>. His synoptic epitome of the Aristotelian *Poetics* was translated twice into Latin: the first by Mantinus from the Hebrew version of Tadrus Tadrusy and the second by Hermanus Alemannus from the Arabic original. Abd El Rahman Badawi, the contemporary Egyptian scholar, believes that this Latin translation of Ibn Rushd misled the Europeans, because the Arab philosopher did not conceive the real meaning of the Aristotelian *Poetics*<sup>17</sup>. Yet it is a well-established fact that it is this inaccurate Arabic version translated in its turn into Latin that introduced Aristotle’s *Poetics* into Western European culture.

R.R. Bolgar says that the efforts of Arabic scholarship have uncovered a great deal: ‘ They will in time uncover more, and the mists which now enshroud the intellectual life of the twelfth century may soon be dissipated. But at the moment all one can safely say is that large selections of Aristotle’s treatises with numerous works by his Arab commentators and expositors reached Paris in Latin translations between 1160-1200 and were most favorably received on arrival.’<sup>18</sup>

Ibn Rushd’s epitome of Aristotle’s *Poetics* was translated into Latin chiefly in

Toledo about 1200 A.D. From the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the tendency to translate Aristotle from Greek began to appear. Roger Bacon (1214-1294) censured the poor quality of all these Latin translations and lamented the general ignorance of Greek in Western Europe. Highet says that at that time Greek still remained almost a closed field. A medieval copyist writes Latin correctly and beautifully, but he breaks down when he comes to Greek. He usually adds a plaintive note saying: 'because this was in Greek it was unreadable', hence the proverbial saying: 'it is all Greek for me'. It is noteworthy that Dante appears to have known no more than a word or two of Greek<sup>19</sup>. This ignorance was not cured until the fall of Constantinople in 1453. The first Greek edition of Aristotle's *Poetics* was published in Venice (Aldus) in 1508 by Giovanni Lascaris. Thus generally speaking Ibn Rushd's Aristotelian *Poetics* was dominant in Western Europe throughout three centuries, i.e. from the twelfth to the fifteenth. From 1508 onwards a stream of literature follows in the form of textual criticism, theoretical researches, applied studies on Greek and other drama. It is almost impossible to collect a precise bibliography of Aristotelian scholarship, his theory of art and the like. And unfortunately the misinterpretations of the *Poetics* are still increasing from century to century. The Italian Aristotelians, represented by Francesco Robertello, interpreted the *Poetics* (1548) and paved the way for the Neo-Classicists in France. Yet the French neo-classicism was misled by the Italian interpretations to a kind of slavish worship of the Aristotelian Rules. The Three Unities Rule in the Renaissance drama is an obvious misinterpretation of Aristotle, who stresses only the dramatic Unity (or Unity of Action) calling it "*arche kai psyche*" (the beginning and the soul)<sup>20</sup>. The Unity of place and time came in the Aristotelian context simply as a remark on the Greek performances<sup>21</sup>. The European Renaissance dramatists were also misled by a mistaken interpretation of *katharsis* as a result of *fear* and *pity* caused by the tragic events. Consequently, and influenced by Seneca's tragedies, Renaissance drama was a sort of Bloody Kingdom. The *Spanish Tragedy* (1585-9) by Thomas Kyd can be considered as a significant example, where the ghost of Andrea and Revenge dominate the scene from beginning to the end. Moreover, they decide to follow their victims, having been killed in a terrible manner, in the other world. Gradually this defect was cured when the concept of the tragic became more poetic, and they understood that *katharsis* was the result of the dramatic action itself and not violence. This development took about two centuries. i.e. from the fifteenth to the seventeenth<sup>22</sup>.

### **Tragic Hero: A Revision of the Concept**

Another misinterpretation of Aristotle can be found in the favorite expression *tragic hero* used everywhere in the literature about drama. Aristotle himself never uses in the *Poetics* the term *tragikos heros* (tragic hero), he rather speaks of *tragikon ethos* "tragic character". He even says:

'There remains then the mean between these. This is the sort of man who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, and yet it is through no badness or villainy of his own that he falls into the misfortune, but rather through some flaw in him, he being one of those who are in high station and good fortune, like Oedipus...' <sup>23</sup>.

And more precisely Aristotle says:

'A plot does not have unity, as some people think, simply because it deals with a single character. Many and indeed innumerable things happen to an individual, some of which do not go to make up any unity, and similarly an individual is concerned in many actions which do not combine into a single piece of action' <sup>24</sup>.

Unfortunately many critics concentrate their efforts looking for the *tragic hero* not only in Greek plays, but also in modern drama. Greek tragedy in particular suffers from another disastrous generalization. Numerous critics in the West, and in the Arab World, confine the tragic conflict as merely the defeat of Man by Gods and Fate. The present writer does not deny that some of the extant Greek tragedies can be interpreted as partly a Man-God conflict, but not all of them. Let us first investigate the meaning of the Man-God conflict in Greek Tragedy. This is closely connected with the Greek concept of heroism as a whole. Therefore one must begin with the question, what is a Greek hero?

As for the religious rituals, there is a distinction between hero-cults and god-cults. This distinction itself denotes the fundamental difference between the heroic nature and the godly. Gods are immortal, and their happiness and youth are eternal, while heroes are originally mortals whose life on earth is full of troubles, pains and adventures. After the death of a hero he is buried in a tomb, which gradually becomes the center of the hero-cult. The bones of a hero within his tomb represent the focus of worship, since they are revered either through love or fear. In other words these bones can offer many useful services to the people, but can also endanger their existence should the hero be roused to anger.

But the power of a hero is naturally restricted to the area around the tomb, he

never becomes a pan-hellenic. In mythological tales about heroes, we note that no hero achieves glory unless he achieves victories in a field of the human activity, such as war, athletics, poetry, music etc. The earthly career of a hero is a series of adventures, dangers and tests, which are crowned at the end by success. Odysseus suffers twenty years of estrangement before he returns home. Heracles fulfills the twelve labours by the order of another man less than him in strength and value, Oedipus solves the riddle of the Sphinx. Every one of them deserves a reward. Odysseus saves his wife and his son from the suitors, Heracles is deified and in the Olympus he marries Hebe, the goddess of youth. Oedipus is enthroned as the king of Thebes, the city which he saves. He is also given the hand of the widow-queen, whom he later discovers to be his mother.

In the Greek concept of life, reflected in their myths and literary works, there are three main elements, namely the human kind, the heroes, and the gods. If we imagine these three hierarchical levels as circles, then they are not entirely separated, or exclusive. Yet nor are they identical. In fact they intersect each other. There are two intersections, the first is the common area between the world of the human kind and heroes, the second lies between the realm of the heroes and the realm of the gods. This means that there is something heroic in human existence, as there is something godly in the heroic nature. It goes without saying that the heroic circle plays the role of a link between men and gods. Heroism is the intermediate sphere of existence, and heroes are the mediators between Earth and Heaven. The Greek saying "*panta rhei*", that is everything moves and changes, means in our context that it is natural to expect movements in between these three circles either downwards or upwards.

As for the downward movement, some scholars of Greek mythology argue that the Homeric heroes, for example, were originally gods who with the passing of time degenerated to the rank of heroes and human beings. This theory is applied to Helen of Troy, for instance, as she was in the mythological tradition, before Homer, a goddess of fertility worshipped under the divine epithet Dendritis, i.e. the protectress of trees. Noteworthy is that anthropomorphism helped Homer to duplicate the epic action. For the Trojan War in his *Iliad* takes place on two parallel levels and at the same time. One is the actual fighting around Troy between the Greeks and the Trojans, the other level is divine, where the Olympian gods are divided into two parties, some help the Greeks, while others are on the side of the Trojans. The first group encourages the aggressiveness of the Greeks embodied in Achilles, the second group defends the cause of Trojan patriotism personified in Hector. And so each kind of human heroism finds its symbol and patron on the divine level. The Homeric

anthropomorphism or the movement of the gods downwards to the rank of heroes and human beings is paralleled by a movement of the human beings upwards to the rank of heroes and gods. All the prominent Homeric characters enjoy superhuman abilities, whether as warriors or even singers. The epithets 'divine', 'godly', 'semi-god', or the like, are bestowed on almost all the Homeric heroes. Many of them challenge the gods themselves in the field of their specialization. For example a warrior may wound Ares, the god of war, or surpass Apollo in the field of music. Odysseus going to the underworld, then returning has conquered Death itself, and the god of the dead, Hades. So these human beings are represented in Homer as superior, in some aspects, to the gods themselves.

The promotion of a man to the realm of the gods takes him across the two intersections, the common area between men and heroes on the one hand, and that between heroes and gods on the other. The first step is called in mythology *heropoiesis* (= making a hero), the second is *apotheosis*. The first is achieved after a miraculous death, which is sometimes considered as purification. *Heropoiesis* brings a man nearer to the realm of gods, nevertheless a small number of selected heroes obtain the privilege of *apotheosis*. Only the favorite heroes, and especially those who are the offspring of any god or goddess, are received on the Olympus. Two examples can be mentioned here, namely Dionysus, son of Zeus from Semele, and Heracles, son of Zeus from Alkmene. Any hero looking for the *apotheosis* is resisted by the Olympian gods themselves. This is the seed of the tragic conflict. Very often the destiny of a tragic character comes as an explanation of the ancient Greek wisdom inscribed on the façade of Apollo's temple in Delphi, viz, '*know yourself*'. In other words the shortage of the human knowledge or even late-learning *opsimathein* is the principal source of tragic suffering. The most indicative example is Oedipus who solves the riddle of the Sphinx, but fails to know himself, he is even ignorant of who his parents are. He spends his life seeking the truth, and when he finally discovers everything, it is too late, all the catastrophes he tries to evade have already taken place. Consequently, we can say that the continuous efforts of Oedipus to know himself form the kernel of the dramatic action in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*. *Know yourself* in the context of a Greek tragedy means "know your rank", know to which of the three circles you belong, and consequently it means do not overpass the limits of human existence, or in Greek terms do not commit a *hybris* or else you will be subject to *nemesis*, the punishment of arrogance.

He who obeys this divine order and keeps within his limits, loses every claim to heroism. He is a simple human being who is not equal to the challenge. He is not willing to pay the price of greatness and glory, he prefers his earthly simple

everyday life. This type of human beings is represented in the Sophoclean plays by Ismene and Chrysothemis. They know their weaknesses and they refuse to take part in any large action. On the other hand any tragic person in general, and any Sophoclean one in particular, is ready to do everything, and to pay any price in order to achieve the glory of heroism. He spends all his life in painful endeavour, he sacrifices his happiness for the sake of rising above his station, and dares to cross the limits at the expense of his life itself, to obtain immortality. Take the example of Oedipus again. This hero blinded himself when he discovered that he had killed his father and married his mother, and that he had fathered his own brothers and sisters. He was also banished from Thebes. In other words he loses everything, family, country, sight, and of course the psychological balance and the harmony with life in general. Yet our estimation of this outcast is very high, and he increasingly wins our respect and sympathy. His solid character is admirable, we feel that he is not a simple human being. He deserves to rise to the higher realms i.e. the heroic or divine world. Sophocles portrays this concept in *Oedipus at Colonus*, where we find this hero as a blind beggar, an outcast scapegoat, whom the people fear to deal with. This is the impression we get from the first glance at the play. Yet step by step, we change our opinion, because we realize that this blind beggar is more powerful, more revered and honoured than anyone else in the play. Thebes and Athens are contending to obtain from him the approval to be buried in each one's soil, because after death his bones will be a source of blessedness. This blind beggar knows his way and guides all the others around him, although they have their eyes. This blind beggar now enjoys the clarity of the divine vision. He is now at the gates of the godly kingdom and is going to be a hero-god. *Oedipus at Colonus* can be considered, then, as an apotheosis procession of the human, or tragic, pains. It testifies to the fact that one must pay much in order to reach the status of a hero-god. Everyone who is ready to pay such a price, as Oedipus did, can achieve it<sup>25</sup>. Obvious this play cannot be considered Aristotelian.

Yet it is not reasonable to reduce Greek tragedy to a conflict between Man and God or even Man and Fate. The Olympian Gods, headed by Zeus, are themselves subject to Fate *Moirai* and the laws of Necessity (*Ananke*), i.e. the natural occurrence of events and things. For instance Zeus himself was unable many times to save his sons (demi-gods begot from human women) from dangers or even from death decided by the goddesses of fate, *Moirai*. Many times he obeys painfully the requirements of Necessity. We meet such situations in Greek literary works from Homer<sup>26</sup> to Greek tragedies. On the other side the tragic conflict in *Antigone* is not between a man and a god, but between two human beings. Creon represents *nomos* that is law written by human beings, or civic law, to protect society and the welfare of the citizens. Antigone represents *physis*, i.e. the unwritten laws of Nature, or even the natural occurrence of things, namely to bury the dead<sup>27</sup>.

### Tragedy in Modern Arab Culture

Modern Arab Culture, naturally, reflects the Aristotelian Arab tradition together with the modern European Aristotelian scholarship and the different modern trends of theatre arts. Arab critics on the other side dispute the problem of the originality of Arab theatre. Some believe that it is an imported art which came to the Arab World from Europe very recently. Others say that Arabs knew drama from ancient times. Others even state that the Arabs influenced European drama during the Renaissance through Andalusia in Spain. That many countries which are now included in the Arab World, had practiced some forms of dramatic performance before the Arab conquest is beyond question. The ancient Egyptians, for instance, acted some religious plays inside the temples with subjects based on the myth of Isis and Osiris<sup>28</sup>. The other ancient civilizations of this area are rich in myths and rituals which contain the germ of drama. The ancient Greeks were influenced by such oriental myths and rituals. Dionysus himself is considered as oriental by origin, and he is identified with Osiris by Herodot, Plutarch and other Greek writers<sup>29</sup>. What interests us now is that, according to some scholars, certain concepts and rituals of these oriental civilizations survive in Islamic folklore. This means that the Arabs of the early Islamic ages knew some *rudimental forms* of drama. Yet these forms never reached the stage of maturity except in modern times after being fertilized by European influences. Thus some Islamic rituals, popular among the common people, contain the germ of drama. It is sufficient to mention here one example only, namely the “*ta’azi*” (Consolations) of the Shiat, especially those of Iraq and Persia around the tomb of El Hussein. These rituals which are still performed yearly in the festivals of ‘Ashura’, held in honour of El Hussein’s death and around his tomb, are considered by some scholars as the remnants of pagan times, i.e. the heritage of the oriental civilizations before Islam. Noteworthy is that El Hussein of these popular festivals bears - in the beliefs of simple masses - some attributes of Baal, Adonis, Osiris and Dionysus which were not testified by the Holy Koran.

Passing by the shadow plays of Ibn Danial during the thirteenth century A.D., let us move directly to modern times. The theatre emerged in Lebanon, and in Syria and Egypt from the second half of the nineteenth century. Yet in a way an idea of this art had been introduced into Egypt by the French expedition led by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798. From that date onwards many European companies visited Egypt and performed plays either in French, English or Italian. On the

other hand educational missions to Europe, beginning with that of Rifaha Rafi el Tahtawi in 1834, helped to create an audience capable of understanding the techniques and functions of the European theatre. George Abyad, a Syrian by origin, was the first to be sent by the Egyptian government to France to study theatre in 1904. On his return in 1912, he organized an Egyptian company. His first performances were of plays translated into Arabic, from French, by Farah Antun. The first pure Egyptian theatrical company began with the Greek play *Oedipus*. In addition, the works of Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine, Molière etc. were performed in Arabic by other Egyptian companies, having been previously performed in Egypt by foreign companies. These works included many pieces of the neo-classics in Europe, such as *Andromache* by Racine, *Tartuffe* by Molière, *Anthony and Cleopatra* by Shakespeare etc.

On the other side, the poetic translation of Homer's *Iliad* by Soliman El Bostany (1904) and the establishment of the Classical Studies Department in Cairo University (1925) mark a turning point. Writing a book with the title *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, Taha Hussein asserts that the historical connections between Egypt and Greece or the Mediterranean culture as a whole are unique and are perhaps stronger than the connections between Egypt and the other countries of the Middle East. He even believes that there will be no cultural renaissance in Egypt if the Egyptians neglect the Classical heritage. These opinions of Taha Hussein were strongly resisted by some nationalists and Muslim scholars of El Azhar. The Philhellenism of Taha Hussein brings to our memory the Dutch Desiderius Erasmus and his role in the revival of Classics in the European Renaissance. Taha Hussein was the first to translate Sophocles' plays into Arabic. This translation played a great role in developing the Arabic theatre, although the translator depended on the French rather than the Greek original itself. The success of this translation is partly due to the charming style of the translator, being undoubtedly one of the best modern Arab prose writers.

Lewis Awad followed the model of Taha Hussein and published many translations and studies of classics depending on his wide readings in English. In the present time, however, many Egyptian Universities, among which is El Azhar, the most ancient Muslim University in the world, include a Classical Department. So there is a new generation of Classicists who finished their studies in England, France, Germany, Italy and Greece. They diffuse philhellenism not only in Egypt but also all over the Arab World. They publish new translations of the Greek authors, especially the dramatists, from the original texts. The efforts of the classicists are reflected in the creative literature<sup>30</sup> and especially in poetry and drama.

The originator of poetic Arab theatre is Ahmed Shawqy. At first glance one can discern the two essential aspects and purposes of his play *The Death of Cleopatra*, viz. the innovation of Arabic poetic drama and the defense of Cleopatra's patriotism. Noteworthy is the fact that, being semi-foreigner on the side of his (Greco-Turkish) grandmother, Shawqy's attitude is similar to that of his heroine, Cleopatra, Macedonian by origin. The two aims of Shawqy proved to be too ambitious to be achieved in the Egypt of the twenties of the foregoing century. Introducing dramatic art into Arabic poetry requires beside Shawqy's poetic genius, an in-depth knowledge of the origins of drama, a thing which Shawqy lacked. Dramatic education must begin with the Greeks, that is, with Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes. This rule is to be established later in the Arabic dramatic literature through the experience of Tewfiq El Hakim. But as for Shawqy depending on his education and its sources, one cannot find any indication that he knew the Greek dramatic masterpieces. Of course simple knowledge, which as a matter of fact Shawqy had obtained even before his stay in France, is not sufficient.

Furthermore the present writer believes that the dramatic education of Shawqy as a whole is neither high, nor systematically complete. No doubt he knew the neo-classical writers of France and the heads of the Romantic revolution there, such as Victor Hugo. He also knew many other dramatists, yet he did not digest their works. Even the performances which he attended in Egypt and in France, were not so fruitful for him. The genius of the prince of Arabic poetry had been previously directed elsewhere, to fields different from the dramatic art. Composing any play of classical origins, such as *The Death of Cleopatra* of Shawqy, needs two basic requirements. First the author has to keep a direct and systematic contact with the classical sources. Secondly he must possess considerable experience in dramatic art and technique. Fortunately the new generation of Arab verse dramatists tries to meet these two requirements<sup>31</sup>.

Arabic prose drama profited from the classical culture more fruitfully than the poetic. Going to France ostensibly to study law, Tewfiq El Hakim devoted himself to drama. From his wide reading in French Literature he was convinced that in order to achieve any success as playwright he must begin from the natural beginning, i.e. to go back to the Greek authors, the eternal masters of drama. He read them, but in French translations. The result was that Tewfiq El Hakim wrote three plays with Greek themes, namely *Pygmalion*, *King Oedipus* and *Praxa*. The last one is an imitation of Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazousai* or *Women in the Assembly*, the Arabic title *Praxa* being an abbreviated form of Praxagora, the

protagonist. Yet the Greek influence upon Tewfiq El Hakim is not confined to these three plays, it extends to all his works and even to his very way of thinking. In his play *Food for Every Mouth*, he adapts the myth of Orestes to a contemporary theme. And in his semi-autobiographical story *A Bird From the Orient* he falls in love with a beautiful French girl during his stay in Paris; and he reveals his feelings to her for the first time through a French translation of a poem by Anacreon (frgm. No.11) entitled *To Love*, although he translated it into Arabic as meaning *The Combat* <sup>32</sup>.

The influence of Tewfiq El Hakim was tremendous. It is enough to mention here that there are no less than four Arabic adaptations of Oedipus. Each one reflects a certain period, and is connected with this or that political event from the debacle of Palestine (1948) to the defeat of the Arabs June (1967). This means two things. First that Oedipus has been absorbed into Arabic modern life at least on the stage. Secondly many other plays on the Oedipus theme are to be expected in the coming years.

Noteworthy is that many other Greek myths have been exploited one way or another on the Egyptian stage. In short, the study of the classical sources of modern Arabic theatre is recommended by the present writer as a promising approach for a well-balanced understanding of philhellenism in the Arab World as well as the development of the concept of tragedy in Modern Arab Culture.

### **The efforts to adapt Oedipus to Islam**

The Ancient Arabs avoided translating Greek tragedies for many reasons, foremost of which is that pagan myths are the *sine qua non* in these tragedies. Generally they did not digest the function of myths or - as they say - "*fabricated tales*" in poetry as has been noted in the foregoing lines. In modern times the situation is somewhat different. For instance the prominent poets in Egypt and the Arab World use myths of Ancient Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia, Persia and India in their poetic imagery. Yet the problem in dramatic performances is more complicated. Tewfiq El Hakim in the introduction to his play "*King Oedipus*" says that by this play he aims to reconcile Arab traditional culture with the concept of Greek Tragedy. Being asked if indeed he planned to create an Arabo-Islamic character from the Greek mythological Oedipus he answered:

'When I began to write *Oedipus* I read four years about the myth, but also I read some books of Islam scholars on Fate and Destiny as explained by Abu

Hanifah and Ibn Rushd and others... These readings convinced me that my interpretation of Oedipus should be in harmony with Islam' <sup>33</sup>.

El Hakim also justifies the traditional Arab avoidance of Greek tragedy on the basis that this literary genre was not for reading, but for performance. He adds that these tragedies cannot be separated from the theatre technique which was unknown in the ancient Arab World. But why does the Arab tradition, being rich in mythology and poetry, not include drama ? Tewfiq El Hakim suggests that they lived in the desert without any civic settlements. This is probably right as far as the Pre-Islamic period is meant, yet in the Northern and Southern edges of the Arabian Peninsula there were many big cities with established great settlements rich in every kind of luxurious life. The main reason that they did not translate Greek tragedies, according to Tewfiq El Hakim, is that they considered their own poetic tradition the perfect prototype, and so had no need of translations from any other nations poems. Tewfiq El Hakim states that any modern Arab should absorb Greek tragedies with the background of his own national tradition, not as any European. He thinks that the religious origin of Greek tragedy is nearer to the Oriental peoples who are more religious than the Western. Man, he said, became god for Modern Europe. And this is exactly what we see in the *Oedipus* (1932) of André Gide (1869-1951), where man became the center of the whole universe. Such point of view cannot be accepted in the Orient.

In his book *El Ta'aduliah (Equilibrium)* El Hakim states that man is not alone in this universe and thus he cannot be absolutely free. Man is not the God of this World. Nor is his will quite free, but he moves freely within the circle of the Divine Will. This does not mean that Man is to be passive, on the contrary he must do his best to go beyond the limits imposed upon his will. El Hakim states that his aim in *Those of the Cave* - known in the European tradition as the *Seven Sleepers* - was not just to adapt a Koran story to a simple performance, but to look in the Islamic traditional stories through the Greek concept of tragedy. Thus, he said, we can achieve a reconciliation - or even a marriage - between two traditions and two different concepts.

El Hakim did his best to remove the mythological elements which the Arab Islamic mentality cannot easily digest. Some critics think that Islamic fatalism is in contradiction with the Greek concept, i.e. the defeat of Man by the Divine Fate. El Hakim however stresses the interpretation of Islam as denoted by the words of Abu Hanifah: 'My belief lies in the middle, i.e. there is no irresistible obligation, nor absolute free will but in between'. Man is responsible, because he is - at least - partly free-willed<sup>34</sup>. El Hakim goes on to say that he deprived Oedipus from his

mythological glory, in order to increase his human dignity. Such a humanized Oedipus can be received better by the Muslims, whose prophet Mohamed was merely a human being. Many Islamic sayings and ideals are repeated in the play. The tragic essence in El Hakim's *Oedipus* is based on the fact that he lives in a great lie created by the conspirators around him. He tries continuously to find out the truth about himself and his parents referring to the Greek wisdom embodied in the words: *know thyself* inscribed on the temple of Apollo in Delphi. El Hakim's Oedipus after the terrible recognition does not blind himself, nor does he cut his relation with his mother - wife. He justifies his unexpected reaction by the ideas explained in his book *Equilibrium*. This means that any one committing an error is not to be punished, but to lead a life of goodness and charity, for thus he balances his errors with beneficent deeds<sup>35</sup>.

Aly Ahmed Bakatheer, of Yemen origin, graduated in Cairo University from the English Department. He introduces his play *The Tragedy of Oedipus* saying: 'a new treatment of the Greek myth, with a new content, a new ideology different from Greek beliefs which made man a plaything in the hands of Fate, a victim of the divine caprices'. His play reflects the sociopolitical changes in the Arab World from 1948, i.e. the debacle of Palestine, to the Egyptian Revolution of 1952. The author connects the inner corruption in the Arab World with British Imperialism. The interaction of these two factors created the tragedy of Palestine. The major problem in Bakatheer's play is that this political content cannot be easily concluded from the dramatic action itself. This meaning has been exposed by the author himself in his explanatory note. In the meantime Bakatheer followed in the footsteps of El Hakim with the aim to create an Arabo-Islamic Oedipus. Like El Hakim he created from the myth of Oedipus a great lie without any religious flavour, a chain of wicked intrigues planned by a villain priest. In this play the frame of the actions and the names of the characters are Greek, but the sayings and behaviour are Islamic to the degree that Tiresias says: 'You know, our God does not eat, nor drink, and he gives us all these goods and these treasures to utilize and live...'. It seems as if Tiresias here is a priest of Allah! He has no idea about anthropomorphism in Greek theology. It escaped his notice that the Olympian Gods eat ambrosia and drink nektar. Like human beings they also are vulnerable and subject to many flaws, yet they are immortal, as has been explained above. Bakatheer's *Oedipus*, after the terrible recognition of his parents, prefers not to blind himself, in order to put himself in the service of his people, i.e. for patriotic reasons. This non-tragic end indicates also the failure to create an Arabo-Islamic tragic character of Oedipus.

Oedipus the Egyptian was transformed into a comic character. Ali Salem, a

contemporary playwright read the book of I. Velikovsky *Oedipus and Akhnaton Myth and History* translated into Arabic<sup>36</sup>. He wrote his play *You are the killer of the Monster. The comedy of Oedipus* under the influence of this book. Oedipus in this play is a Pharaoh, because the author believes that the Greek myth of Oedipus was moulded after the historical events in the palace of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akhnaton and his family. Moreover Ali Salem believes that there was an Egyptian play about a king who married his mother. It was performed in Egypt, Ali Salem thinks, and it was the prototype for *Oedipus Tyrannos* of Sophocles. He generalizes saying that the Greeks took the dramatic art as a whole from Egypt. Ali Salem in the introduction of his play stresses his belief that Oedipus was originally a Pharaoh. The present writer thinks that such justification is not necessary. Every playwright is free to delineate his Oedipus as he likes, with the essential condition to be artistically convincing. The Sphinx riddles represent in Ali Salem's play the Arabs' defeat within six days in the war of June 1967, *The Sphinx conquered the people of Thebes*, i.e. Egypt and the Arab World. Through the bitterness of the defeat and the efforts to decipher the Sphinx riddles the play exposes the different diseases in sociopolitical life before and after 1967, e.g. despotism, hypocrisy and corruption. These diseases also offer a fertile soil for sarcasm and many comic elements. In spite of the heavy defeat Oedipus was deified, and thus he is identified with Nasser of 9 & 10 June 1967. The major issue is that a great tragic hero was transformed into a clown.

Fawzi Fahmi's play *The Return of the Absent* utilized all the previous Arabic versions. It tries, sometimes successfully, to avoid the dramatic defects of these versions, but generally speaking it follows their main outlines. Oedipus of Fawzi Fahmi after the recognition of the terrible truth convinced his mother to keep the whole affair secret, and to stop their husband - wife relations, i.e. to save themselves for the sake of the people's common interests. In addition, Oedipus married a young girl, Euryganeia<sup>37</sup>, to save himself, his mother and his country, because he is a socialist champion of the poor proletariat. Fawzi Fahmi omitted any mention of Oedipus' four children from his own mother. This, added to the marriage of Oedipus - Euryganeia, aimed to make him more acceptable to an Islamic audience.

To conclude it is noted that the Egyptianized Oedipus passed through four stages. Tewfiq El Hakim based his Oedipus' character on the fervent search of truth: Oedipus does not blind himself and continues his husband-wife relation with his mother, even after the tragic recognition. Bakatheer's Oedipus was atheist, but recognizing that his wife is in fact his mother he stopped this relation and became a great believer and reformer. Oedipus of Ali Salem is more popular,

a Pharaoh nearer to a farce character, more remoted from the mythological origins. Fawzi Fahmi's Oedipus was more successful as a dramatic performance<sup>38</sup>. This Egyptianized Oedipus reflected successively the current changes in the sociopolitical life. This means that it is reasonable to expect many other Oedipus performances as dramatic responses to the great events and radical changes, which took place in the Arab World during the last few decades. Peoples, there, still live and daily suffer, looking forward for a new version.

## NOTES

- 1 Aristoteles, *Poetica* 1453a 10
- 2 Noteworthy is that the present writer has stressed the general oral nature of Greek Literature as a whole from the beginnings to the fourth Century B.C.: See Ahmed Etman, *Ancient Greek Literature. A Human and Universal Legacy* (in Arabic) third edition, Cairo 2001, pp. 41-102, 525-541. cf. G.S. Kirk, *Homer: The Meaning of an Oral Tradition*, in "The Classical World" edited by D. Daiches and A. Thorlby (Aldus Books London 1972) pp. 155-171. J.B. Hainsworth, *The Criticism of an Oral Homer*, in: JHS 90 (1970) pp. 90-98. M.S. Jensen, *The Homeric Question and the Oral- Formulaic Theory*, in: Museum Tusculanum Press, (Copenhagen 1980) pp. 36 ff. J.A. Notoupolos, *Studies in early Greek oral Poetry*, in: HSCPh 68 (1964), pp. 1-77.
- 3 Arist., Rh 1413b 12-14. Cf. F.G. Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Oxford 1932.
- 4 G.A. Kennedy (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*. Volume 1 *Classical Criticism*. Cambridge 1989, reprint 1997, pp. 200 ff.
- 5 On Hellenistic drama see: G.M. Sifakis, *Studies in the History of Hellenistic Drama*. London 1967 ; G. Xanthakis-Karamanos, *Studies in Fourth Century Tragedy*. Akademia Athenon. Athens 1980.  
T.B.L. Webster, "Fourth Century Tragedy and the Poetics", *Hermes* LXXXII (1954) pp. 294-308.
- 6 On Roman Tragedy generally and Seneca in particular see: P. Grimal, "La role de la mise - en - scène dans les tragédies de Sénèque: Clytemnestre et Cassandre dans l' Agamemnon" (in: *Théâtre et spectacles dans l' Antiquité*, Leiden - Brill 1983), pp. 123-140. L. Hermann, *Le Théâtre de Sénèque*. Paris, Les Belles Lettres 1924. J. Jacquot - M. Odon, ed., *Les Tragédies de Sénèque et le Théâtre de la Renaissance*. 2nde edition. Ed. Du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) 1973.
- 7 Abd El Rahman Badawi, *Aristoteles, Poetics* together with Ancient Arabic Translation and the explanations of El Farabi, Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd. Modern Translation and Interpretation. Dar El Thaqaafah Beirut, 1992, p. 56. Noteworthy is that there are at least three other modern Arabic translations of Aristotle's *Poetics*.
- 8 Shukry Aiad, *Aristoteles' Poetics*, The Translation of Abu Bishr Matta bin Iunis El Kunaie from Syriac into Arabic. With Modern Translation and A Study of its Influence upon Arabic Rhetoric. Cairo, 1993, pp. 225-248.
- 9 Ibn El Nadim, *El Fihrst*, p. 349-350.
- 10 See G.D. Ziaka, *Aristote dans la Tradition Arabe*. Thessalonika 1980, passim.
- 11 cf. F. Rosenthal, *The Classical Heritage in Islam* (Trans. by Emile and Jenny Marmorstein,

- Routledge, London- New York 1992, pp. 256 ff.
- 12 See note 7.
- 13 Abd El Rahman Badawi, *Hazem El Qarthagani and Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Rhetoric*, Cairo 1961, p. 11.
- 14 Ibidem.
- 15 Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, pp. 256 ff.
- 16 Ahmed Etman, *Greek into Latin through Arabic*, in: JOAS (Journal of Oriental and African Studies) Vol.9 (1997-1998) pp. 29-38.
- 17 Abd El Rahman Badawi, *Aristoteles*, p. 13.
- 18 R.R. Bolgar, *The Classical Heritage and its Beneficiaries*, Cambridge, 1973, University Press, Reprint 1973. p. 174, cf. 172-3, 284-285 and passim
- 19 G. Highet, *The Classical Tradition. Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*, Oxford, 1949, Clarendon Press, p. 14 and passim.
- 20 Arist., *Poet.*, 1450 a19-20.
- 21 Ibidem, 1449 b8-9.
- 22 Ahmed Etman, *Classicism in Renaissance Theatre & The Restored Tradition in the Plays of Shakespeare and Racine*. Cairo, 1999. pp. 284-300.
- 23 Arist., *Poet.*, 1453a 5.
- 24 Ibidem, 1451 a 1-2.
- 25 Ahmed Etman, *The Conception of Heroism in Greek Literature*, in: Classical Papers Vol. III, (Cairo University 1994) pp. 35-50.
- 26 Hom., *Iliad* III, 348, 458, XV 199. "ananke" in Greek means "necessity, compulsion, constraint, compulsion of circumstances".
- 27 See Ahmed Etman, *A Light from Thucydides on the Problem of Sophocles' "Antigone" and its Tragic Meaning*, in: L'Antiquité Classique 70 (2001) pp. 147-153.
- 28 On the theatre of Ancient Egyptians see: E. Drioton, *Le Théâtre dans l'ancienne Egypte*. Paris 1954: Translated into Arabic.
- 29 On the Egyptian and Oriental origins of Greek Myths generally and Dionysus particularly see: Ahmed Etman, *Isis in the Greco-Roman World with a Special Reference to Plutarch's Treatise 'De Iside et Osiride'*, in: JOAS Vol. 2 (Athens 1990), pp. 11-21.
- 30 Idem, *Gli Studi Classici e il loro influsso sulla Letteratura Creativa in Egitto e nel Mondo Arabo*, in: ACME LIV (Milano 2001) pp. 3-10.
- 31 Idem, *Cleopatra and Antony: A Study in the Art of Plutarch, Shakespeare and Shawky*. Second ed. Aegyptus, (pp. 511) Cairo 1990 (with summary in English).
- 32 Idem, *Les Sources Classiques du Théâtre de Tewfik El-Hakim: Etude Comparée*, (avec un résumé en français). Ed. Seconde Longman 1993. cf. Idem, *The Classical Sources of Arabic Theatre*, in: Xlle Congrès International d'Archéologie Classique, Athens 4-10 September 1983, Practica Tomos 1 (Athens 1985) pp. 126-129.
- 33 Idem, *les Sources classiques*, pp. 48-53.
- 34 Ibidem.
- 35 Ibidem, pp. 72-75.
- 36 I. Velikovsky, *Oedipus and Akhnaton Myth and History*, London, 1960, Sidgwick and Jackson (Translated into Arabic by Farouq Farid).
- 37 According to another Greek mythical version Oedipus begot his four children from another wife, and not from his mother. This second marriage of Oedipus is mentioned by Pausanias (IX, 11) and Apollodorus (III 85). Yet Pherekydes (Schol. Eurip. Phoenissai, 53) gives her the name Astymedousa.
- 38 Ahmed Etman, *Oedipus between his Mythical Origins and his National Anxiety on the*

**KATHARSIS, GREEK AND ARAB STYLE.  
ON AVERROES'S MISUNDERSTANDING OF ARISTOTLE'S  
MISUNDERSTANDING OF TRAGEDY**

**Michiel LEEZENBERG**

**Prologue: Arabic translations and commentaries of the *Poetics***

The medieval Arabic translations from the Greek include texts from all the major sciences (ranging from rhetoric and poetics to astronomy, astrology, and medicine), but few if any literary or dramatic texts. Partly in consequence of this, the classical Arabo-Islamic understanding of Aristotle's remarks on tragedy is vastly different from ours. These interpretative differences, however, depend on largely contingent factors, and do not reflect anything inherent to classical Greek, medieval Islamic, or modern Western civilization. Occasionally, one hears claims to the effect that Islamic culture, with its monotheistic notion of divine omnipotence, has no concept of human agency, and cannot by extension develop any notion of tragic action. Such sweeping cultural considerations are no more useful than musings on the question of why, for example, Japan developed the most sublime forms of Nô drama, whereas China developed nothing more sophisticated than opera. First, in Greek tragedy, human agency is not a presumption but a problem. Tragic actors cannot and do not take control over their own actions for granted. It may even be positively dangerous to claim full sovereignty over one's own words and actions: statements about one's own powers, even if true, may well cause resentment among other people or among the gods. Thus, Sophocles's Ajax is punished for saying to Athena, with perfectly good reason, that he can attack a Trojan gate without her help (*Ajax*, vss. 758-77). This statement so enrages the goddess that she takes revenge by driving him to insanity and subsequent suicide. Islamic parallels for Greek tragedy, or perhaps more precisely, examples of the tragic in Islamic literature, are certainly there; but they should not be sought in dramatic genres that did not develop, or developed only much later, in Arabic or the other languages of Islam, but rather in the narrative literary genres that did develop, notably in Persian epic and romance like Firdausi's *Shahname* or *Book of Kings* and Nizami's *Khosrow and Shirin*, or in Arabic narratives like the *1001 Nights*.<sup>1</sup> None of these texts carries any suggestion that human beings are mere puppets of an omnipotent God. Arguments about divine omnipotence leaving no room for human agency or any other form of secondary causes may have had their place in speculative theology,

witness for example the debate on *kasb* or ‘acquisition’ of one’s actions among Ash’ari theologians; but they were largely ignored by others, and even by theologians when writing non-theological texts (cf. al-Azmeh 1986).

Second, classical tragedy was not a generically Greek but a much more specifically Athenian genre; in no other city did anything like it develop, if we are to believe the testimony of the ancient authors on these matters. Moreover, the rise, flourishing and decline of classical tragedy is pretty much confined to the fifth century B.C.; ancient sources agree that after the death of Euripides and Sophocles, no new authors of a comparable stature emerged. Some of the main features of Greek tragedy, then, should be systematically linked to the specific city where and the precise historical moment when it blossomed (cf. Vernant & Vidal-Naquet 1972: ch. 1). A more general way to state this point is that appeals to Greek or Arabic or Islamic ‘culture’ are not particularly useful, as the culture concept derives from a nineteenth-century romantic nationalism that has itself had a rather problematic history both in Europe and in the Middle East. Neither ancient Greek nor classical Arabic texts, it should be kept in mind, yield any near equivalent of a concept of ‘culture’ of the kind we are familiar with.

In reading Arab commentaries on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, it is tempting but all too facile to focus on the misunderstandings and leave it at that. Such a hasty conclusion reproduces the conventional stereotype of Arabic philosophy as wholly derivative from, and parasitic upon, the great Greek models. This dismissive attitude, however, risks overlooking the fact that the Arabic reception had a significant dynamic of its own. An adequate appreciation of Arabic writings on Aristotle’s *Poetics* should therefore not start from cultural generalizations, or from assertions that they did not and could not understand the Greek text adequately, but rather from the question what poetic texts were supposed to achieve in their own Arabo-Islamic context. To illustrate this point, I will focus on a single phrase in the *Poetics*: the definition of tragedy in terms of *katharsis* or purification given in chapter 6. In the first paragraph, I briefly review the major translations and commentaries of this definition. In the second, I will indicate how vastly different Arabic and Aristotle’s understanding of poetic language really are; these differences do not reflect an Arabic misunderstanding of an allegedly timeless Greek wisdom but rather the autonomous development of both traditions. Paragraph 3 argues that even Aristotle’s own understanding of tragedy has serious shortcomings; in particular, he wholly ignores the political dimension of tragic and other language use,- and it is precisely this dimension to which medieval Arabic theorizing calls attention. I will conclude my argument with a brief anti-Aristotelian reading of Sophocles’s *Oedipus in Colonus*, which brings

out these political implications of language use.

In dissecting the Arabic reception of Greek poetical theorizing, not much help can be expected from the by now somewhat old-fashioned notion of ‘deconstruction’; instead, a crucial feature of my own analysis will be the concept of *performativity*, which over the past decade has been gaining ground as a key concept in the human sciences. Employment of this notion involves more than just a call for systematic attention to the performance aspects of dramatic and other statements; it zooms in on the social, and hence political, efficacy of language. Arabic writings, I will argue, express a far greater and much more systematic awareness of this efficacy than do Aristotle’s.

### **A definition and its transformations**

No Arabic translations of any Greek tragedy (or, for that matter, of any literary as opposed to scholarly text) appear to have been made, although it has been claimed that Arabic authors were familiar with a small number of quotes of Euripides as a source of moralistic sayings. But even disregarding the question of how widespread this aphoristic knowledge of Euripides was, there is no evidence whatsoever of any substantial Arabo-Islamic familiarity with the peculiar cultural genre that was classical Athenian tragedy (or, for that matter, of any genre of Greek poetry). This lack of familiarity decisively affected the Arabic reception of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which, of course, focuses on tragedy as the prototypical form of poetic language use; but below, I will argue that this was not the main factor affecting the Islamic understanding of tragic *katharsis*.<sup>2</sup> Generally, Aristotle’s remarks on ancient tragedy and comedy were transferred to more familiar Arabic-language genres of encomium and satire, respectively, both of which tended to represent characters rather than actions, and were recited rather than enacted. Surprisingly, none of the commentaries discussed below refers to other genres of Arabic prose or poetry, including specimens like al-Jâhiz’s *Book of Misers* or the famous *Shahname* or *Book of Kings* by Avicenna’s contemporary Firdausi, even though such works come much closer to the Aristotelian definition of tragedy as the imitation of an action. The original definition by Aristotle, the ‘First Master’ (*al-mu’allim al-awwal*) as he was often called among Arab commentators, would seem so familiar as to hardly need repeating. In chapter VI of the *Poetics* (1449b24-28), we read:

‘Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished (*hêdusmenôî*) with each kind of

artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation (*katharsis*) of these emotions (*pathèmatôn*)'. (Butcher 1951[1911]: 23)

The familiarity of this passage, however, is deceptive: few parts of the already controversial *Poetics* have aroused as much discussion and debate as this definition. Crucial to it is the famous but unexplained and deeply problematic notion of *katharsis* ('purification' or 'purgation')<sup>3</sup>. Does Aristotle mean that tragedy itself causes the very emotions of pity and fear which it then purges? If so, why should it do so at all? Or does it rather purge affections which humans have anyway, but to an excessive degree? If so, how can it do so by arousing those very emotions it is supposed to purge? For a long time, it was believed that *katharsis* should be seen in a quasi-medical way; but more recently, it has been argued that the notion should be understood against the background of Aristotle's remark that pleasure (*hèdonè*) is the aim of the arts in general (*Poetics*, ch. 4; cf. *Metaphysics* 981b17ff.).<sup>4</sup>

But these questions are less relevant here than the question of what the Arab translations and commentaries made of the notion of *katharsis*. Few of the translators, and none of the commentators, it seems, had direct access to the Greek original. Avicenna (Ibn Sîna) and Averroes (Ibn Rushd) only knew of Aristotle's ideas through different Arabic translations, which in turn derived not directly from the Greek text but from Syriac intermediaries. The importance and complexity of this lengthy intermediate stage should not be underestimated, and it is thus only with some misgivings that I directly juxtapose the writings of Aristotle, Avicenna and Averroes here, skipping the entire tradition of Alexandrian commentators and the subsequent Syriac reception. Below, it will appear that these intermediate stages imported several substantial ideas and doctrines that directly affected the later understanding of the *Poetics*.<sup>5</sup> There is some evidence of how the *Poetics* came to be translated into Arabic. According to al-Nadim's *Fihrist*:

'Abû Bishr Mattâ translated it from Syriac into Arabic, and Yahyâ ibn 'Adî translated it. It is said that on it there was a statement by Themistius, but it is also said that this was falsely claimed to be his. Al-Kindi wrote an abridgement of this book'. (*The Fihrist of al-Nadîm*, p. 602)

Yahya ibn Adi's (d. 975 CE) translation, however, has not come down to us. What has survived is the slightly older translation by Abu Bishr Matta (d.940).

Yahya has the reputation of being more philologically precise than Abu Bishr Matta, for example by using transcriptions of Greek terms rather than trying to provide near equivalents in Arabic; but we may surmise that even his text differed considerably from the Aristotelian original. Obviously, none of the medieval translations were made according to modern philological standards; but searching for and lamenting over alleged errors and mistranslations is a rather less fruitful exercise than investigating the creative interplay of the translated texts and their new contexts (cf. Gutas 1998: 187). Abu Bishr Mattâ's translation of the *Poetics*, the *Kitâb Aristutâlîs fi'l-shi'r*, renders the Aristotelian definition of tragedy as follows:

'The art of eulogy (*madîh*) is an imitation and similitude (*tashbîh wa muhâkâh*) of an action that is voluntary (*irâdî*), serious and complete; having magnitude and length; in useful speech, except each one of the kinds that are effective in the parts, not by promises; modifying the affections (*infi'âlât*) and impressions (*tâthîrât*) and purifying and cleansing those who are affected (*yuf'alûna*)'. (Tkatsch 1928: 230; cf. Dahiyat 1974: 85)

A first remarkable feature of this translation is the fact that it does not transliterate the Greek term *tragôidia* but circumscribes it: it assimilates tragedy to the Arab genre of eulogy (*madîh*), which represents lofty characters as lofty without trying to debase them as Greek comedies and Arabic lampoons do. Second, this translation not only reproduces the vagueness of the Aristotelian notion of *katharsis*, but introduces even more potential for interpretative divergence. Thus, as Gutas (1990: 97) observes, it splits up the Greek participle plus substantive in the phrase on the emotional effects of tragedy into two separate verbal phrases; moreover, the translation has much more of an ethical than a medical or psychological ring to it. But the ambiguity in the Arabic text also arises in part because it employs different forms of the same verbal root *fa'ala*, 'to act', 'to do'; specifically, it leaves implicit who or what is the subject of *yuf'alûna*, the passive form of *fa'ala* indicating 'those who are affected'. Given its immediate context speaking of affections and impressions, the obvious reading would seem that the persons affections (*infi'âlât*) and thereby purified are the audience of the poetic utterance. It is also possible, however, to read *yuf'alûna* as referring to the persons affected by the actions (*af'âl*) imitated by the characters *in the text*. The actions of a tragedy, or a poem of praise, may involve the affections and impressions of the audience; but they may also involve those of the represented characters. To readers with access to the Greek original, the latter reading is most implausible; but such access is of course precisely what most Arab commentators did not have. Below, it will be seen that it is precisely

this ambiguity that accounts for a major twist in Averroes's commentary.

Even more surprises appear in the first major Arab commentary on the *Poetics* that has come down to us, Avicenna's *Kitâb al-shi'r*, which, significantly, forms part of the logic section of his encyclopaedic *Shifâ* ('Healing'). He writes:

'Tragedy (*al-tarâghudiyya*) is an imitation of an action complete and noble, and elevated in rank; in very appropriate speech, not devoted to every particular part; affecting the particulars not with respect to quality but with respect to action - an imitation which moves souls to pity (*rahma*) and piety (*taqwâ*). (cf. Dahiyat 1974: 89)

Several things stand out here. First, this definition employs a transcription of the original Greek expression rather than Abu Bishr Matta's *madîh*, suggesting that Avicenna had indeed another translation, possibly Yahya ibn Adi's, at his disposal. Second, and even more remarkably, the text contains no explicit reference to the notion of *katharsis* at all. This absence may likewise be due to the different translation he has used, but there is also a more substantial reason: Avicenna was simply after something else than Aristotle. Whatever the precise status of *katharsis* in Aristotle's linguistic, medical and other writings, it has a far less prominent role in the classical Islamic tradition. In paragraph 2 below, it will appear that the lack of emphasis on *katharsis* as a psychological and emotional affection reflects a more general view that the aim of poetic and other utterances is not to cause pleasure, but rather to convince an audience.

The divergences from Aristotle's text are at least as dramatic in Averroes's *Talkhîs kitâb al-shi'r* or Middle Commentary on the *Poetics*. His gloss on the definition of tragedy is:

'[Eulogy (*madîh*)] is a comparison and imitation (*tashbîh wa muhâkâh*) of a complete, virtuous voluntary action - one that with respect to virtuous matters has a universal potential, not one that has a particular potential and pertains only to one or another virtuous matter. It is an imitation that affects souls to a state of moderation by engendering pity (*rahma*) and fear in them. It does this by imitating the purity (*naqâ*) and cleanliness (*nazâfa*) of the virtuous'. (cf. Butterworth 1986: 73, Gutas 1990: 94f, Butterworth 1994: 24)

It may be that the considerable differences between Avicenna and Averroes are in part due to their relying on these different translations; thus, the latter appears to reproduce the terminology of Abu Bishr Matta, like *madîh* instead of

*tarâghudiyya*. Further, the purity involved in this characterization is not the result of purifying the spectator's or hearer's soul, but rather a matter of the purity or nobility of the characters represented in the text; that is, Averroes's interpretation hinges on precisely the abovementioned ambiguity of the passive *yuf'alûna* that appears in Abu Bishr Matta's translation. It would be the wrong conclusion, however, that Averroes, the philosopher who more than any other tried to purge Arabic-language Aristotelianism from its neoplatonist accretions, wrote a hopelessly flawed commentary on the *Poetics*. He was not a slavish but incompetent follower of Aristotle; rather, he pursued philosophical and political aims of his own. Averroes's aims are different from those of Avicenna and even of Aristotle himself: in his introduction, he explicitly indicates that he tries to distill the canons of poetry that are common to all or most nations, as Aristotle's comments are largely specific to Greek poetry. He also gives poetry the explicitly political aim of instilling old-fashioned virtues in its audience. This function, he argues, is especially important for the Arabs, who in his view do not constitute a 'natural' (*taba'î*) nation, unlike the Greeks (para. 10). This explicitly political perspective betrays a sophisticated awareness of the cross-cultural differences between the various genres of poetry.

### **Arab misunderstandings of Aristotle**

It thus appears that purity (*nazâfa*) and purification (*tanzîf*) do not play anywhere as central a role in the Arab commentaries by Avicenna and Averroes as does *katharsis* in Aristotle's original text. There is no good reason to ascribe this discrepancy to either a sweeping cultural inability to grasp 'the tragic' or even to a lack of awareness of the specific cultural genre of Greek tragedy, and therefore an inability to understand what there was to be purified. Indeed, if the doctrine of *katharsis* may indeed be plausibly be explicated against a medical background, the Arabic interpretation of it becomes all the more surprising, as Aristotle's and other ancient Greek medical views were readily available to the Islamic thinkers, and especially to an author with such a thorough medical training as Avicenna. The reason for the divergence should instead be sought in the distinct status of the language sciences in the Islamic tradition: of central importance here is the so-called 'context theory', the view that rhetoric and poetics should be seen as parts of logic (cf. Black 1990 for a detailed overview).<sup>6</sup> Outlandish as it might seem to modern readers, this doctrine was of a long and respectable standing; it did not even originate with the Islamic translations, but goes back to at least the sixth-century commentator Simplicius.

For those adhering to the context theory, including Avicenna, Averroes and other Islamic thinkers, the aim of poetic language is not causing purely aesthetic, emotional or medical *hèdonè* or pleasure, but rather convincing an audience. As part of this conviction, authors like Farabi and Avicenna developed an elaborate theory of the ‘poetic syllogism’: just as a purely discursive philosophical argument or syllogism is meant to lead to intellectual conviction or assent (*tasdîq*), so rhetorical and even poetical ‘arguments’ aim at effecting imaginative assent or *takhyîl* <sup>7</sup> In this perspective, poetic language is a rhetorical or imaginative complement or surrogate for intellectual argument. For philosophers like Farabi, poetical language is a mere surrogate or auxiliary for truths that can be fully, and more adequately, grasped intellectually and expressed in purely abstract, demonstrative terms. For him, even the sacred revealed texts of revealed religions thus merely support, and certainly do not transcend, philosophical truths.

For Farabi, poetic syllogisms by definition yield false conclusions; but Avicenna has a more positive appreciation of poetry, given his views of the role of the imagination in prophetic and other inspiration. But more important than the relative evaluation of poetical language and philosophical argument is the division of intellectual labor that this approach yields. Poetic texts try to convince their audience with concrete imitations rather than abstract arguments, and appeal to the imagination rather than the intellect; for this reason, poetry is an adequate means for convincing the illiterate masses, whereas the educated few are better served by abstract philosophical arguments and truths. Treating poetics as a part of logic, and treating poetic language as a particular kind of argument thus calls systematic attention to its discursive, and even political (as opposed to purely aesthetic and emotional) dimensions. The Arabic reception of the *Poetics*, and in particular its reformulation within the context theory, reflects a much more explicitly social and political concern than the Aristotelian original. The political implications of the context theory are unmistakable; but this point should be kept distinct from the more general claim that Arabic-Islamic philosophy has an important and perhaps irreducible political dimension, as has been claimed by a whole school of reading Islamic philosophical texts initiated by Leo Strauss and Muhsin Mahdi,- a school to which also Charles Butterworth, the translator of Averroes’s commentary, adheres. I find myself in considerable sympathy with Butterworth’s general point that political concerns are a central ingredient of Averroes’s thought; but the particular grounds on which, and the particular ways in which, this claim is defended here are not entirely convincing, I find (cf. Leezenberg 2001: 266-7; Gutas 2002: 19-25). Most importantly, one should not ignore the crucial importance of the technical logical vocabulary in which

Averroes and others express their views. Butterworth (1994: 22-3) narrowly misses grasping the central role of the poetic syllogism, and instead jumps to an overhasty conclusion about an alleged fight between Islamic philosophers and poets regarding the best regime. There is no evidence at all, however, for such a Plato-like controversy in the Islamic world. Further, he generically translates the term *takhyîl* as ‘imitation’ equivalent to Greek *mimêsis*, and argues that for Averroes, it is virtually synonymous with *muhâkâh* (imitation) and *tashbîh* (comparison) (1986: 63n18; cf. 1994: 27); but in this rendering, the much more specific technical sense of ‘imaginative assent’ resulting from a poetic syllogism is lost. An adequate appreciation of the political dimensions of Islamic philosophy cannot afford to ignore logical and linguistic considerations.

### **Aristotle’s misunderstandings of classical Greek tragedy**

The Arabic commentators of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, in short, had a radically different idea of what poetic language is about from Aristotle himself. We might be tempted to treat this difference as a shortcoming; but we should be wary of crediting Aristotle with both the first and the final word on tragedy. For, in fact, Aristotle has an understanding of classical tragedy that is already quite far from the circumstances and experience of fifth-century drama, and which is demonstrably at odds with the understanding of Sophocles’s and Euripides’s contemporaries.

First of all, he dismisses the actual performance as inessential, and treats tragedy as primarily a text; he also seems to locate the kathartic effect in the text rather than the performance. In chapter 6 of the *Poetics*, he states that “tragedy even has its effect in the absence of performance and actors” (1450b19-20).<sup>8</sup> The original audience, however, first experienced tragedy by seeing it in performance at the city Dionysia, and only later (if at all) through reading the written text of the plays. Second, as mentioned above, he identifies individual pleasure (*hêdonè*) as the goal of tragedy, and thus downplays not only the performance, but the fact that such performances were public and indeed collective events. Third, and related to the preceding point, Aristotle’s discussion takes tragedy completely out of its religious and political context. The Greater Dionysia at which the classical tragedies were originally performed were not only religious festivals but also civic events celebrating the city of Athens. Obviously, this does not mean that classical tragedy can be reduced to religious ritual or political propaganda; but the extant tragic texts do unmistakably address, and problematize, the main political concepts, practices and debates of contemporary Athens. This point was most

famously argued by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1972), and later by authors like Simon Goldhill and Froma Zeitlin. Plato was still very much aware of the social and political effects of tragedy and other forms of poetry; as known, he considered those effects largely undesirable, and hence banished the poets from his ideal city in the *Politeia*. Aristotle, by contrast, already discusses tragedy in a wholly depoliticized way, and in the broadly humanistic terms of individual pleasure and other emotions. Some more recent scholars have argued that Aristotle's abstracting away from the particular political circumstances of fifth-century Athens has helped to bring out the universal aspects of tragedy; but there is no good reason to think that political matters of government and justice are any less universal than psychological matters of wrath, pity and terror. It is precisely this political dimension of poetical and other language usage, forgotten or denied by Aristotle, which is brought to the fore by the Arabo-Islamic authors discussed above. Rereading their commentaries is therefore not merely an exercise in philology, but may actually yield us new questions and insights when we reread Greek tragedy today.

Another dimension that does not receive any systematic attention from Aristotle is the so-called performative variety, or dimension, of language usage. The concept of performativity rests on the analytical-philosophical insight that the utterance of a sentence may constitute the very fact it at first sight only seems to describe. Thus, utterances like 'I resign' or 'I baptize this ship the *Shehrazad*' do not describe independently existing actions or facts, but rather constitute those actions and facts themselves. Uttered in the appropriate circumstances, by the appropriate persons, performative speech acts may thus create facts out of nothing, so to speak. This 'verbal magic' is not without its limits, however. First, the facts created or constituted by performative acts are social facts rather than brute or natural facts. To use Searle's example, one can felicitously say *I hereby resign* and thereby resign, but one cannot successfully say *I hereby fry an egg* and thereby fry an egg. Second, the felicitous utterance of such sentences, and hence the successful creation of such facts, depend on the speaker having been granted the authority, or more appropriately a specifically symbolic form of power, to do so; thus, not just anybody may successfully conclude marriages or declare wars (cf. Leezenberg 2002). Finally, this power in performative language, though often taken for granted and remaining unnoticed, may at all times be contested; thus, a priest's power to marry couples may be challenged; or conversely, some speakers may declare the independence of their country even if they have not been given the authority to do so (as happened, among others, in the American declaration of independence in 1776).

In the Arabic linguistic writings with which I am familiar, I have not found any unambiguous indication of an awareness that the very uttering of language may bring about the situation or event it appears to describe, but I would not at all be surprised to find it. For example, much of relevance may be found in legal discussions concerning the question of whether, and if so under what circumstances the very utterance of *talâq*, “I divorce thee”, constitutes the divorce itself. Indeed, it would seem that more substantial inquiries and insights into language usage as a form of practice or social action are yet to be recovered from the vast corpus of Islamic juridical writings, rather than from the equally impressive body of Arabic linguistic and literary theorizing.<sup>9</sup>

### **The other Oedipus: Sophocles’s final play**

Performativity is a highly relevant concept for the study of classical tragedy.<sup>10</sup> Not only do all tragedies, and in particular Sophocles’s plays, feature numerous examples of explicit performatives, such as Athena instituting a new legal court in the *Eumenides* and Creon declaring a draconic law early on in the *Antigone*; they also characterize the power to speak, and to act through one’s words, in agonistic and indeed confrontational terms. As a short encore, I will illustrate this conjunction of politics and performativity with a reading of Sophocles’s *Oedipus in Colonus*, which not only was written and first performed in the years surrounding the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War, but which also overtly addresses political themes like exile and citizenship; the (social and political) power of words; questions of guilt and pollution, and agency and responsibility; and the relation between justice and power. In this play, it will be recalled, the aged exile Oedipus seeks asylum in king Theseus’s Athens, and is ultimately immortalized as a patron hero of his adoptive city. In the process, he severs all his links with his native city of Thebes and even with his own family, violently cursing not only his brother-in-law Creon but also both of his sons.

Whatever the play’s effect on its audience, one should resist the temptation to read it as involving any *katharsis* of its main character. That is, one should resist the influential Hegelian reading, which takes the story of Oedipus finding a haven at Athens and subsequent heroification in terms of a reconciliation or indeed a quasi-christian redemption after a life of undeserved and unjust suffering. For one thing, Oedipus explicitly says that he will find no reconciliation even in or after death, but that his dead and buried body will “drink the blood” of his fellow Thebans (621-2); for another, he not only betrays his native city and curses his own sons, but also knowingly ruins his daughters. It is hard to see what is pure or

noble about these incredibly violent words and actions. That being said, what is this play about? I will ignore here the thematic of Oedipus as an exile, which is highly relevant for the contemporary adaptation and reception of the play.<sup>11</sup> Instead, I focus on the questions it raises about the politics of language.

First, the *Oedipus in Colonus* raises questions of what counts as ‘voluntary action’, and consequently what counts as guilt or responsibility. It never unambiguously resolves the question of whether Oedipus is guilty or polluted, or guilty or innocent. At one point, Oedipus protests that, although polluted, he is not guilty of either parricide or incest, as he did not know at the time that the man he encountered on the road was in fact his father, and the queen he subsequently married was in fact his mother. In other words, the play expresses no assumption that human agency is the first and final source of all linguistic action. On the contrary, human agency, or responsibility for one’s actions, is precisely what is thematized and radically questioned in most if not all extant tragedies.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, this play explicitly and dramatically thematizes the (potentially violent and destructive) power of words. In particular, the recurrent mention of the power of names and naming indicates the kind of verbal magic referred to above: for example, the Furies are constantly referred to as ‘the kindly ones’ or ‘those whose name we fear to speak’. The magical power of performative language, and its potentially confrontational character, become even more explicit in the speech acts of the curse and the blessing, both of which abound in these and other tragedies. There is no need here to fall back on a primitivist conception of magic as the confusion between the social, the natural and the supernatural. On the one hand, the social efficacy of both Oedipus’s curses and blessings is unmistakable; on the other, it is the very distinction between these three spheres (and the ambiguous position of the tragic hero in between them) that is at stake here.<sup>13</sup>

It is especially the abovementioned point that linguistic and other power may always be challenged that is relevant for the study of Greek tragedy (cf. Leezenberg, to appear). The words of various speakers, and indeed their very right to raise their voice at all, are constantly contested. To the aged, weakened and powerless exile Oedipus, words may be deadly weapons: mentioning his very name or his past crimes is death to him. But also conversely, he realizes that his words are the only weapons at his disposal, and he makes ample use of them. By cursing Polyneices, he prevents him from ever gaining the legitimate rule of Thebes. One particularly intriguing conjunction of the themes of human agency and the power of words is the repeated point that words spoken in a state of anger (*thumos*) should not be taken seriously, and have no effect. Thus, Theseus observes that

‘Many threats have taken the form of many angry words; but when the mind is in control of itself, threats vanish’. (658-60; transl. H. Lloyd-Jones)

The authenticity of these lines has been challenged, but they echo Oedipus’s own words, in a passage that is so revealing as to be worth quoting in full:

‘When my passion (*thumos*) was still blazing, and it was my dearest wish to be stoned to death with rocks, no one came forward to help me realize that desire; but after a while,... after I had come to realize that my anger (*thumos*) had gone too far in punishing my former errors, at that time, the city drove me out by force, after many years, and my sons, who could have helped their father, refused to act, but for want of a brief word I went off into exile’. (431-44; emphasis added)

Here, Oedipus not only argues that even the words that he himself has spoken in a state of anger should not have been taken seriously; but also that his social status as an exile could be decided by the utterance of a single word, or by a declaration of whether or not he still qualified as a Theban citizen. The theme of *thumos* is a central but problematic one here. In the course of the play, the level of Oedipus’s anger steadily rises; this rising anger does not appear to decrease the efficacy of his words, however. On the contrary, it finally explodes in his violent curse of his son Polyneices (1370-96), possibly one of the most shocking and ferocious episodes in all the extant tragedies. Another interesting conjunction of politics and performativity appears in the relation between justice and power. Greek tragedy offers little support for the humanistic view that justice and power are opposites, or at the very least that in the end, justice does or should overrule brute force. When Creon tries to lure Oedipus back to Thebes by trickery, and subsequently takes his daughters hostage, there is little question that this is hardly a noble way of acting. It is a different matter altogether whether or not his action is just. Remarkably, Creon claims that he is entitled to ‘take what is his’ (830-4), and even more remarkably, nobody contests this claim. Instead, Theseus retorts by explicitly acknowledging that Creon may have justice on his side:

‘I would never have entered your country, even in the justest of causes, without the consent of the ruler of the land, whoever he was... I would have known how a stranger must conduct himself in relations with the citizens’. (924-928; emph. added)

What Theseus is saying here is that it is the sovereign word of the local king, rather than any pre-existing general norms or laws, which decides what is to

count as just. This may strike a modern reader as overly relativistic, and may have struck a fifth-century Athenian audience as overly undemocratic; but in the text of the play at least, nobody openly disagrees with Theseus. On the contrary, his words echo sentiments found elsewhere, as in *Antigone* 666-7, where it is Creon who says:

‘One must obey the man whom the city sets up in power in small things and in justice and in its opposite ‘(emph. added)

To be sure, the subsequent course of events in the *Antigone* does not give much reason to think that Creon is right in identifying justice with his personal decisions; but classical Greek audiences do appear to have sided with Creon rather than Antigone in these matters, witness Demosthenes’s famous appeal to the *Antigone* in praise of patriotism and loyalty in his speech against Aeschines (19.246-50). Whatever one’s sympathies in these, the *Oedipus in Colonus* states very clearly that it is the power of the local ruler’s word that defines what is just; and that it is the word of the powerless that calls this and other powers into question. A politicized reading of Greek tragedy, in short, brings out the power of the word.

## Conclusion

Can we draw any morale from these creative forms of misunderstanding? I hope that it has become clear that the Arabo-islamic interpretations of Aristotle on tragedy and its kathartic effects are not merely a deplorable error, but reflect a significant difference in scientific methods and aims. It is especially the inclusion of poetics among the logical sciences that leads to these differences; no grand civilizational barriers are involved here. More concretely, Averroes’s discussion of the cross-cultural and political aspects of poetry raises anew, and in somewhat unexpected terms, questions about the local conventions and universal effects of literature, and in particular about politicized and depoliticized readings of tragedy. Aristotle is the first to present an essentially depoliticized or if you like humanistic reading of classical tragedy in terms of pity, fear and *katharsis*. A more politicized (and if you like anti-humanistic) reading, by contrast, focuses on the politics, not necessarily of the *polis* or the modern state, but of language. What classical Arabic theories of poetics remind us of, then, is a renewed awareness that the debate about the workings of words is not merely logical but also political.

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## NOTES

- 1 Thus, for example, *The Book of Kings* features something like a mirror story of the Oedipus myth, when the hero Rostam kills his son in battle without recognizing him
- 2 For a detailed overview of the historical background, see especially the introduction to Dahiyat's 1974 translation of Avicenna's commentary.
- 3 There is another brief discussion on the kathartic effects of music in *Politica* VIII, 7, but there the concept is not elaborated upon, either.
- 4 For an overview of the different interpretations of Aristotelian *katharsis*, cf. Luserke, ed. 1991.
- 5 An extensive, and highly polemical exchange on the translation and interpretation of Arabic commentaries on Greek philosophical texts, and especially on the Aristotelian definition of tragedy and its fate in the Arabic-language tradition, may be found in Gutas 1990 and Butterworth 1994.
- 6 Both Gutas (1990: 94) and Butterworth (1986: X, 49; 1994:22) erroneously speak of the art of poetry as being considered part of logic by Averroes; it is of course more appropriate to describe Averroes as claiming that poetics, the study of poetic language usage, is part of logic as the study of argumentative language usage in general.
- 7 For more discussion, see Leezenberg (2001: 94-95); cf. Schoeler, 1983.
- 8 For this reason, Gutas's observation (1990: 97) that Arab commentators like Averroes totally miss the acting or performing dimension of tragedy, though correct, is less relevant than it seems.
- 9 On the related matter of linguistic normativity, cf. e.g. Görgün 1998.
- 10 A famous recent reading of tragedy with particular attention to matters performative is Butler, 2000. However, it spends much more time on discussing Hegel, Lacan and Irigaray than on analyzing the performative moment in the *Antigone*, which are far more widespread than even Butler suggests.
- 11 Witness, for example, Wole Soyinka's recent adaptation *Oyedipo in Kolhumi*, representing Oedipus as the king group of Afghan refugees aboard a ship off the Australian coast.
- 12 Cf. J.-P. Vernant, *Ebauches de la volonté dans la tragédie grecque*, in: Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1972
- 13 Cf. the famous remarks on the essential ambiguity of tragic concepts, in: Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1972

## ARABIC LITERATURE AND THE TRAGIC

### MIND THE GAP?! SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE STUDY OF TRAGEDY FROM AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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#### **Prolegomena: Questions questioned**

The papers I received as an invitation to this colloquium specified that its aim was to study literary expression, in casu tragedy, from an intercultural perspective. Two world views were to be contrasted: that of the Western world, which rests upon the Greek heritage, and that of the Islamic world, different from it. Tragedy and the tragic experience were a test-case to explore cultural differences between the Islamic world (the main focus lay on the Arabic-speaking parts)<sup>1</sup> and the West. As a working hypothesis, it was stated that tragedy and the tragic experience 'seriously influenced the creation of a specific Western way of thinking, experiencing and feeling', and founded 'a fundamental attitude of being and acting which, during 2500 years, provided a specific Western face of art, religion and philosophy.' Greek tragedy in the Arab world is 'a phenomenon of minor importance'. Thus, the question was raised whether the tragic genre, or maybe the tragic experience as such, was typical of the West. Could the tragic experience possibly find its expression in an Islamic context, or was the Islamic world view irreconcilable with it?

When reading the questions raised by the conference papers, my thoughts drifted to an article from the sixties called 'Shakespeare in the Bush'. In it, an anthropologist relates the reception of Shakespeare's Hamlet by a group of West-African tribesmen. She unfolds in full colour how the cultural gap ruins the impact of a story she believed to be of universal appeal.<sup>2</sup> When my thoughts were recollected I became aware why the questions raised by the organizers had caused uneasiness (and why similar questions in scholarly literature had the same effects). I somehow felt that they were of a delusive character, and much more complex to answer than they appeared to be. I felt that the West and the Islamic world are simply too intertwined to be separated in such a way; and that each of them were complex entities, 'mosaics' to use a popular metaphor, with important

historical evolutions. The simple questions raised by the organizers could not be answered in a straight way because I questioned the assumptions they were based upon. In the first part of our contribution we will provide some elements that show that the West and the Arabic world share common ground and may be less fundamentally different than it seems. E.g., both cultures were influenced by the cultures of the ancient Near and Middle East, and in both cultures the heritage of late antiquity played an important role in the formative years of their development. In the second part we will investigate whether tragedy and tragic experience are a truly Greek/Western genre. We will then return to some of the questions, and see what light has been shed on them.

### **Intertwined cultures**

The links between West and East are multiple. Relations between the Middle East and Greece, or rather the Mediterranean regions, have existed from the earliest days of civilization. This is why it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between West and East, already in antiquity. Is not Greek culture greatly indebted to the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt? Did the Near East not give her the blueprint for her script? Had Greece not borrowed scientific knowledge, literary motifs, religious concepts, mythological material and so many other things from the cultures of the East?<sup>3</sup> Was not the ‘Greek miracle’ a product of cultures in contact - like so many other miracles later: the blossoming of sciences in the medieval Islamic world, the Renaissance and Baroque, ...? Did Greece not adorn itself with plumes borrowed -or rather ‘stolen’ - from the Middle East, as a Persian Alexander legend had it?<sup>4</sup> Were not some important centers of Greek civilization located in the Near and Middle East, in Anatolia and Egypt, regions not of ‘lions’, but with age-old intellectual traditions?

Hellenism brought Greek culture to the Middle East and Indian subcontinent; the knowledge that had once been imported from the East had been remoulded, enriched and systematized by scholars such as Aristotle, Euclid and many others. New centres of scholarship excelled. At the same time, this was not a one-way movement, but part of a larger process of cultural exchange. The first centuries AD are crucial for what happens next. First, Greek and Roman culture underwent a sometimes underexposed cultural transformation which laid important foundations for Western culture. They abandoned their pagan roots and shifted to Christianity, a movement firmly rooted in the monotheistic religions of the Middle and Near East, and that had sprouted from Judaism.<sup>5</sup> Note that Islam would later explicitly link itself to the same religious stratum. During the

persecution of ‘heresies’ Greek Christians fled eastward, and influenced the cultural and intellectual life of the Middle East and beyond, in regions where Islam would later define itself.<sup>6</sup>

An important link between East and West is that of the translation movements of late antiquity. It is often stressed, that Islamic culture translated and adopted a part of the Greek intellectual heritage. While this is true, there is a broader context that is often ignored. According to Persian and Arabic sources, this translation movement had started earlier, under the auspices of the Persian kings (including Ardashîr (r. 226-241 AD) and Sâbûr (r. 241-71 AD)). The sources indicate that the translation movement lasted several centuries. It also included more than Greek texts alone. There is an ‘East face’ to the Sasanian translation movement:

‘Sâbûr, the king of kings, son of Ardashîr, further collected the non-religious writings on medicine, astronomy, movement, time, space, substance, accident, becoming, decay, transformation, logic and other crafts and skills which were dispersed throughout India, the Byzantine Empire and other lands, and collated them with the Avesta, and demanded that a copy be made of all those (writings) which were flawless and be deposited in the Royal Treasury. And he put forward for deliberation the annexation of all those pure (teachings) to the Mazdean religion’.<sup>7</sup>

Three facts are worth noting. First, there is no mention of the literary heritage of the Greeks (poetry, theatre), only of religious (in previous passage), scientific and philosophical texts. Second, the translation movement is used in the imperial ideology. The Sasanians ‘undid’ the loss of knowledge supposedly brought about by the destructions of Alexander the Great.<sup>8</sup> The translated texts were thus depicted as part of the national cultural heritage. Third, the translation and study of ancient texts is explicitly linked to official religion. When the Arabs conquered the Middle East, just after the advent of Islam, they were familiar with oral traditions of region, but as a people they had hardly any knowledge of the written heritage of late antiquity. The great scientific and philosophical texts had never been translated into their language and the Arab tribes had not participated in the great debates. The sources state that this was due to their lifestyle in what is commonly known as the ‘Period of Ignorance’ (*Jâhiliyya*). Ibn Khaldûn says that their interest was awakened thanks to their contacts with the Christian bishops and priests, after they had started participating in sedentary life.<sup>9</sup> After the Arabs had become rulers of the Middle East however, Arabic would gradually become the language of learning and instruction. Arabic became the target language of a

new translation movement, which reached its peak under the ‘Abbâsids. The conquered peoples, such as the Persians, who had knowledge, libraries and academies to protect, tried to preserve what was precious to them by translating the texts into Arabic:

‘So Mâhânkard translated what still survived by his time - when the rule of the Persians fell to the Arabs. (...) Then later Sa‘id ibn-Khurâsân-khurreh translated them into the Arabic language in order that this science should not fall into desuetude and its outlines (...) should not be wiped away.’<sup>10</sup>

This intercultural achievement is the basis of the flourishing of sciences and philosophy in the Middle Ages, when Bagdad became the heart of the scholarly world. Indeed, we cannot understand Islamic culture when we focus on what happened on the Arabian Peninsula in the times of the prophet alone; the impact of the ancient cultures of East and West is such, that any approach ignoring these facts would be a distortion of cultural history. Texts from India, Persia and Greece had a great impact on early Islamic culture, even if they were often in contradiction with the teachings of the Qur’ân. The Sasanian translation movement had crossed a linguistic and religious border. This process of fermentation gave its splendour to medieval Islamic culture. It became the guardian of science and philosophy. This all happened in the formative years of Islam, i.e., during the first centuries of the *hijra* <sup>11</sup>. Arabic became the language of a heterogenous population and expressed the ideas of many cultural segments of the new empire.

The brilliance of this culture had its impact on Southern Europe and reached the Western world through Andalusia, Southern France, and Italy. Greek texts in Arabic translation came to Europe through Islamic scholarship before the original texts would be readily available in the Renaissance. From the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards an impressive amount of these texts were translated into Hebrew and Latin. Jewish scholars often served as intermediaries for the European elites of France, England and Italy. <sup>12</sup> It may be speculation, but we can boldly ask ourselves the question, whether these translations did not as much pave the way for the Renaissance and the subsequent modernization of Europe as the Greek sources themselves.

After the rediscovery of the classical heritage, and the birth of classical studies, it was almost natural that Europe became interested in oriental cultures. In the Baroque, treasures from the East became collectors’ items, texts such as

Galland's translation of *The Arabian Nights* appeared, and a hunt for manuscripts began. D'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale, ou dictionnaire universel contenant tout ce qui regarde la connoissance des peuples de l'Orient*, based on the dictionary of Hâjjî Khalîfa (1609-1657 AD), inspired many Western authors, including Voltaire, Nerval and Goethe. The Orient became a source of romantic inspiration. Meanwhile, between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, translations from Greek and Latin texts were made in the Ottoman empire. The extent of these activities is still under investigation.<sup>13</sup>

A new translation movement led to the spread of European ideas to the Arabo-Islamic world. After Napoleon had invaded and occupied Egypt (1798-1801), the Orient had all of a sudden realized that it had underestimated the vitality and achievements of the West. Local reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would invest in the modernization of the region. They sent students to the West and had a vast number of Western books translated into Arabic. This, together with a rediscovery of the own heritage, as a reaction to the influx of foreign ideas, led to the Nahda, the period of 'Awakening'. Ideas, concepts, literary genres and motives pervaded the Orient wherever the Europeans gained power, and laid the foundation of the modern global culture.

To come to our conclusion: tragedy in the Arabic-Islamic world cannot be compared to a 'Shakespeare in the Bush'-like experience. The two cultures are interrelated, share important blood vessels. Both cultures have indeed developed different world views, but they also share a lot of common ground. Both are inspired by the intellectual and spiritual heritage of late antiquity. Even if today the two cultures seem different, one cannot draw a sharp line between East and West, or worse, between a 'Western spirit' and an 'Arab mind', an attitude rightly criticized by Dimitri Gutas.<sup>14</sup> As Edward Said rightly put it: 'Partly because of empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic.'<sup>15</sup> This was the first cause for our uneasiness: we cannot separate the two worlds as radically as it is sometimes done. This brings us to the question 'why the West has '2500 years' of tragedy and tragic experience', and why the same concept fell on infertile soil in the Islamic world. Before we answer this question however, we have to see whether it is not a delusive one.

### **Tragedy and tragic experience**

These questions bring us to fundamental questions: what is 'tragedy', and even

harder to answer, what is the 'tragic experience'? For intercultural studies it is necessary to deconstruct the concept, so that comparisons can be made with similar phenomena. But although our imagination immediately conjures up a world of suffering, passion and strokes of fate, and so many scholars, philosophers, literary critics and others have contributed to the question, it is difficult to define a ready-to-use set of characteristics. Even for our explorative paper, we realized we had to dive into troubled water. 'Tragedy' is a piece of theatre, that clearly originated in Greece. It is a complex piece of art, with its own conventions (actors, dialogues, story line) and material requisites. Concepts associated with tragedy are that of a *hamartia* ('tragic flaw' of pride) and punishment. The tragic hero is the victim of fateful events and is destroyed because of his failures. Attention is further drawn to the fact that the audience experiences *katharsis*. Scholars often rely on Aristotle but they have also noted that his analysis is not fully adequate for quite a number of tragedies and ignore some important aspects <sup>16</sup>.

For our purpose, Sommerstein offered an interesting approach. His analysis is based on a broad range of Greek tragedies, and by providing a set of characteristics, he helps to deconstruct the concept of tragedy and even of tragic experience. His main observations are: <sup>17</sup>

1. Tragedy is centered on suffering; those who suffer are the great figures of the heroic age
2. Tragedies are based on mythological material. Tragedians do not make a *mis-en-scène* of a myth, but use the *materia mythologica* as a source of inspiration. As Sommerstein puts it: 'Many myths, whose tragic versions have become so familiar to us that we think of them not just as one variant of the story but as the story, probably never existed in those forms before the tragedians got to work on them.' <sup>18</sup> The events that are unfolded do not occur 'because they were an inalterable part of the saga', as Sommerstein puts it, but they have a function in the artistic creation of the tragedian. Audiences might know a general outline of the saga, but they did not know how a tragedy would end or unfold itself.
3. According to Sommerstein, tragedies can follow different schemes. a. A horrific act can be or lead to a catastrophe; b. A horrific act occurs, but the survivors reach a new equilibrium (e.g. the instauration of a new system of justice); c. A horrific act is narrowly avoided and there is a 'happy ending', except for the obvious 'villain'; a *deus ex machina* often saves the situation. Although one is inclined not to consider this type as pure tragedy, it is a pattern which became increasingly popular by the middle

of the fourth century BC, a fact Aristotle ascribed to ‘the feebleness of audiences’ who were too distressed by pure tragedies; so excluding this type would considerably reduce the amount of ‘tragedies’; d. A horrific act is narrowly avoided but the catastrophe happens nevertheless.<sup>19</sup>

4. Some later tragedies dramatized the suffering of historical figures from a distant past.
5. Very rarely the plots were pure fiction.<sup>20</sup>
6. Tragedies consist of spoken dialogues (actors), and songs (chorus). The actors show no awareness of the occasion of the performance.
7. Tragedy explores the contradictions of the human condition.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, Sommerstein also speaks about the failures of tragedians. He points out that when in 493, Phrynichus composed a tragedy on the capture of Miletus by the Persians, and used a recent historical event instead of a heroic saga, he was fined and the play was banned ‘*because he had reminded the Athenians of their own troubles*’.<sup>22</sup> We may understand from this that the *katharsis* could not be achieved by staging one’s own suffering. With these basic ideas about tragedy and the tragic experience, we invite the reader to follow our investigation of Helicon’s East and West face. We will ask the question, whether ‘the tragic experience’ was born in Greece; then we will investigate, how representative ‘tragedy’ is of Greece itself, and of Western culture; whether we can indeed speak of a continuity of 2500 years of cultural history.

### **Ancient Mesopotamia**

Tragedy did not exist as a literary genre in ancient Mesopotamia, and there were no theatres. Yet elements from the ‘tragic experience’, as described by Sommerstein, can be recognized in Sumerian and Babylonian literature. First of all, the literary texts of Mesopotamia use sages of the heroes and gods. Cycles of stories were centered around a hero or god(ess). Several variants of the same story emerge from the cuneiform sources. Typically, episodes clearly belonging to a cycle of stories were transmitted as independent pieces. This is even true for what we know as the Epic of Gilgamesh. In Sumerian, several episodes of the cycle were transmitted apart. Only in a late phase of its existence were the episodes united and the texts transformed into one epic.<sup>23</sup> Sommerstein’s observation on Greek tragedy, that raw *materia mythologica* is reshaped into art, seems quite applicable to Mesopotamia’s ancient literature. We can safely assume that there is a big difference between crude texts from oral tradition, and the polished literary texts that were composed from this material by the educated

scribes.<sup>24</sup> On the thematic level, it is clear that suffering and the human condition are important themes in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Its heroes commit 'horrendous acts', such as killing the guardian of the cedarwoods and the bull of heaven, sent by the god An. They were bound to be punished by their insults to the gods. Enkidu dies, and Gilgamesh loses his best friend and is confronted with his own mortality. In vain he will search for eternal life. In the end, a new equilibrium is reached: man can only achieve immortality through his deeds, not physically; a type-b tragic plot in Sommerstein's scheme. Several elements from his scheme can be recognized in this plot (1, 2, 3, 4, 7). We agree with F.M.Th. De Liagre Böhl and other Assyriologists who consider the Epic of Gilgamesh as 'ein Vorläufer der griechischen Tragödiendichtung'.<sup>25</sup>

Similar observations can be made for the songs on Dumuzi and Inanna. The *materia mythologica* from oral tradition was used by scribes who reworked the raw material into a piece of art and cut it like a diamond. The different episodes were recited on different occasions (their love was sung on weddings, laments on Inanna's sufferings when mourning was appropriate).<sup>26</sup> The saga was elaborated in different songs, which were tuned for the occasion. The story as it emerges from the episodes has a tragic nature. The goddess Inanna and the hero Dumuzi are lovers. One day Inanna transgresses the rules of life and death and descends into the nether world, where she is treated like a dead body; when she wants to leave the way is blocked. When the gods come to her rescue, she can only return to the world of the living by providing a substitute. Seeing that her lover is the only one not mourning about her, she condemns him to die. After her fateful decision, she is inconsolable. A horrendous act leads to the downfall of Inanna (elements 1, 2, 4, 7).<sup>27</sup> Lamentations were an important literary genre, and there were special lamentation priests. If lamentations are recited on cultic occasions, is it not to achieve *katharsis*? We can therefore state, that in the 'mother culture' of the Middle East and Greece, the 'tragic experience' existed. The tragic experience is not born in Greece, even if tragedy is. Is it lawful to look into other genres of texts in order to trace the origins of tragedy, or the tragic experience in other cultures? The Greek sources themselves invite us to do so. According to Athenaeus, in his *Deipnosophistae*, Aeschylus described his tragedies as 'slices from Homer's great banquets'.<sup>28</sup> He thus confirms the intertextuality between tragedies and other texts, here the epic genre.

### **Pre-Islamic Arabia**

Tragedy did not exist in Pre-Islamic Arabia and there were no theatres. So here

again we have to look into other genres, to see whether the tragic experience exists. The realm of fiction and feelings is poetry.<sup>29</sup> Some ‘tragic elements’ are present in Pre-Islamic poetry (which supposedly date from the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD onwards): destiny plays a role, there are fateful events; the poems tell about the human condition and express feelings; recitation in the group, especially of lamentations and sad odes, may have led to *katharsis*. Yet they are further removed from Greek tragedy than the Mesopotamian texts. This is due to the fact that these are not the texts of an agricultural society with written traditions, performed on cultic festivals, representing never-ending cycles; but they are the creation of a culture of nomads, semi-nomads and traders and were embedded in oral traditions (the poems were only recorded after the advent of Islam). The recitation of this refined poetry is a tribal event: the heroes who suffer are not figures from a distant past, but members of the tribe. The function of this poetry is to glorify its deeds and to create a bond between its members. Even lamentations often contain an element of tribal *fakhr* or self-glorification. The cults of Pre-Islamic Arabia (see Ibn al-Kalbî in his *Book of Idols, Kitâb l-Asnâm*) are not linked to the agricultural festivals but to a tribal society. Ibn al-Kalbî mentions offerings, processions, immunity at the sacred places and oracles, but no ‘dramatic performances’.<sup>30</sup> The connection with tragedy is far less outspoken than in Mesopotamia, even if some tragic elements are definitely there. Mesopotamia comes closer to ‘tragedy’ than Pre-Islamic Arabia, and this may be the result of the kind of society they constituted.

## Greece

The literary genre of tragedy, as a theatre piece, is truly Greek. This form of art is intimately linked to the history of Athens. Tragedy is etymologically explained as ‘songs of the he-goat singers’ and its roots are sought in the performances of cultic festivals. Even later, the plays were performed in the heart of the city, near the cultic places. The altar on the stage, which became a dramatic device of its own, is interpreted as a silent witness of the former cultic context. Tragedy as dramatic art is believed to have been ‘invented’ by Thespis, who, in the 530s BC, created the dramatic dialogue between himself and the chorus, a decisive innovation for the development of the genre. The timespan between the ‘invention of tragedy’ and its heydays, under the ‘Big Three’, is very short: Aeschylus won his first victory in 484 BC and is said to have introduced the second actor; Sophocles won the dramatic contest in 468 BC and would have introduced the third actor; and Euripides’ first entry in the dramatic contest was submitted in 455 BC, one year after Aeschylus’ death<sup>31</sup>. Under Euripides the

tragic experience was brought to a human level.<sup>32</sup> Sophocles and Euripides dominated the second half of the fifth century. The flourishing of tragedy coincides with great and turbulent moments of Greek history: the Persian and Peloponnesian wars, reforms, struggles between democratic and antidemocratic forces, the Plague, the birth of Socrates and Plato. It is as if these unsettling events created a favourable background for a genre focused on suffering, fate and (im)morality.

The 'Big Three' soon became classics, outshining new pieces. In the fourth century there was a tendency to take the feebleness of the audiences into account and tragedies tended to have happy endings (Sommerstein's type-c plot). Moschion, who lives towards the end of the fourth century BC, is believed to be the last Athenian tragedian of some importance.<sup>33</sup> If we look at the total number of tragedians known by name there are some 200 'tragicci minores' to be added to the trias for the entire period of Greek antiquity, including what may have been dilettanti who only once or twice ventured to write a tragedy.<sup>34</sup> Not many of the later pieces survived.

There are two tendencies in scholarly literature. According to one, tragedy never died, and there was a constant production of new pieces, which were performed next to the older ones. It is suggested that there is a continuous tradition of 'tragedy' in Greece, but that due to the hazards of transmission, our image is distorted. Other authors do not 'fill the gaps'. According to Peter Burian, the 'great period of Greek tragedy' was very short and lasted less than a century.<sup>35</sup> New tragedies were produced afterwards, but they often tended to melodrama. Old tragedies were part of the cultural heritage, popular in schools, and sometimes 'revived'. E.g. in the City Dionysia a contest in 'old plays' was instituted in 386 BC.<sup>36</sup> The *didaskaliai* from Athens attest to the fact that old tragedies were performed next to new plays (341-339 BC). Does this however allow us to conclude that there was a continuous flourishing of tragedy? According to some, the genre would not regain its full vitality after the fourth century BC<sup>37</sup>. Aristophanes complains in the *Frogs* that 'all good tragic poets are dead'. It is of course a comedian's view, and scholars point out that Aristotle does mention good later authors next to the older ones, but there is this feeling that the Big Three brought the genre to its culmination and that after that tragedy became 'a classic', a treasure. In the third century the *Sitz im Leben* disappeared when Greek society changed. There is a revival however among the poets of Alexandria, the famous center of learning, where tragedies were collected, emended and commented on.<sup>38</sup> But does this mean that tragedy was alive, that it was an innovative genre? We have to ask ourselves what the exact context of

these revivals was: a celebration of the past, philological pleasure, ... Most later plays being lost, it is difficult to estimate what happened in this period, up to the end of pagan antiquity. From the second century BC up to the end of antiquity seventeen lines are preserved which can be ascribed to authors whose names and dates are known.<sup>39</sup> Do these few traces mean that tragedy 'never disappeared from Greek or Latin usage'<sup>40</sup> or was it only a marginal phenomenon? Shouldn't we take care not to assume that there was a continuous flourishing of the pure tragic genre throughout this period?<sup>41</sup> Rome produced Greek tragedies after the Greek model from 240 onwards. The Romans translated Greek pieces and created new ones. It was another society, however, and when the genre was exported modifications occurred. On the whole, there was a predilection for tragicomedy rather than pure tragedy.<sup>42</sup>

From 200 A.D. onwards however, the record for Greek tragedy falls silent. The whole society was changing rapidly, a.o. through the spread of Christianity. The last surviving plays date from the end of pagan antiquity, although theatre as such would continue to exist for some time.<sup>43</sup> Some tried to use the old prestigious form for religious purposes and created tragedies based on biblical themes (Ezechiel), but this was not really successful. We can wonder whether there is a link between the growth of Christianity and the diminished interest in one of the 'classic genres' of the pagan past. Did it lose its function as a marker of Greek identity? Or could 'the soteriological world view' not be reconciled with the tragic experience and tragedy as it had developed in ancient Greece? The question, raised by the organizers for the Islamic context, might be interesting for the Christian world as well. What happens to the literary heritage in late antiquity is a grey zone. Pagan poetry, and theatre, almost disappear in the Western world. It lasts until the middle of the ninth century before ancient poetry starts raising interest again in the Byzantine empire, and the first surviving manuscripts of tragedy date from the mid 950s (the West, meanwhile, would not know about them for more than half a millennium). This grey zone is interesting for our purpose: finding the answer to the question why tragedies appeared so late in the Islamic world.

### **Tragedy and the Islamic World in premodern times**

Tragedy was not 're-invented' in the West, but copied from the ancient models. In East and West, it is borrowing that leads to the creation of new tragedies; in the West in the Renaissance, in the East in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after the *Nahda* ('Awakening'). So when we compare and contrast Western and Islamic

culture, we do not ask the question why Islamic culture did not ‘invent’ tragedy earlier; it is not something civilized cultures ‘should do’; the question is, why Islamic culture did not borrow tragedy during the ‘Abbâsid translation movement. F. Rosenthal noted that the genres related to the ‘rhetorical formation’ were not transmitted to the Arabs<sup>44</sup>. We wish to place this in a broader perspective. As we saw above, the Islamic translation movement was preceded by that of the Sasanians; those who translated into Arabic often had a Persian background. We saw that Greek tragedy (and other literary genres) was not included in the corpus of texts translated in Sasanian times. So it is not Islam, but cultural history that determined that tragedies were not transmitted. The cause is to be sought in the mother culture, where tragedy was virtually dead. When tragedy was revived in Byzance the heyday of the ‘Abbâsid translation movement was over. Tragedy, in late antiquity, was something from the past, mere cultural heritage, cherished by few. Foreign cultures were after the Greek knowledge and thought, not after the cultivation of rhetorical skills in the Greek language, or in search of a treasure useful in building a Greek identity. We can only speculate what would have happened, if tragedy had been a living tradition among the Greeks who lived in the Near East. Would it have been translated if it had had a *Sitz im Leben*? Would its pagan contents have been an obstacle for its translation into Arabic? We do not think so. Early Islamic culture produced quite an impressive number of highly controversial texts: obscene, blasphemous poems, (think of the famous Abû Nuwâs), celebrating all that is forbidden by Islam. It seems that if at any point of Islamic history ‘unislamic texts’ could infiltrate into Islamic culture, it was in the formative years, the first centuries A.H., when a clash of cultures among the different segments of the population led to a highly volatile, explosive literary scene. The fact that tragedies were not introduced early in Islamic culture is perhaps no more than a missed opportunity.

### **Tragedy and the West**

There is a tendency to see Western culture as a direct continuation of Classical antiquity, and to minimize the gap of thousand years in which so many texts sank into oblivion. Even for tragedy, it is as if there is a direct line from the Big Three to Corneille and Racine. This however is a false impression of continuity. The first tragedies in the West appeared in the fifteenth century, when the original Greek texts re-emerged. It soon found a true European offspring which contributed to its vitality: opera. This was due to what Sommerstein calls ‘one of the sublimest errors in the history of human culture’:<sup>45</sup> the fact that the Camerata Fiorentina (followed by Claudio Monteverdi) supposed that the text of Greek

tragedy was sung. Soon Greek tragedies were translated into Latin and Spanish, French, English and Italian. But until well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, only the Vicenza *Oedipus* was actually performed on a public stage.<sup>46</sup> Tragedy reached a new peak in the Baroque period (e.g. Racine). The theme of communal suffering soon made place for inner drama; in tragedies such as Phèdre, the myth becomes a metaphor for the passions of the soul.<sup>47</sup> P. Burian however relativizes the impact of tragedy: 'With Phèdre, Greek tragedy is again at the centre of the European stage, but a hundred years will pass before another play appears that is as complex in its response to a Greek original ...'<sup>48</sup>

Is tragedy truly popular today? Or is it a venerated genre belonging to the cultural heritage? How many films are truly tragic, and which audiences do they reach? How 'modern' is the image of tragedy? According to P. Burian, "Tragedy returned to the European stage with a special prestige conferred by its antiquity and status as the loftiest form of poetic discourse", a prestige still felt by authors such as Goethe, Schiller, Byron and others; but he adds that 'It would perhaps be hard to find a playwright today for whom tragedy still has that kind of appeal'.<sup>49</sup> Of all the Western tragedies, inspired by Greek examples, *Oedipus the King* is doubtlessly the most famous one. Because Freud 'raised the *Oedipus* myth to the status of master discourse of the unconscious'<sup>50</sup>, it has acquired a special place in modern European cultural history.

### **Tragedy in the Arabo-Islamic world, after its exposure to Western culture**

Tragedy is a complex concept; it is not of all times and all places. The Arab world discovered Western tragedy and opera during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the period of Awakening (*Nahda*). When during Napoleon's campaign to Egypt (1798-1801), French theatre was introduced in the region it was a novelty. Although under Napoleon these theatres served the French troops rather than the local population, curiosity was aroused and in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century theatre became part of upper class life in Lebanon and Egypt (in this period the Théâtre de la Comédie (Masrah l-Komedi, 1868) and the Théâtre Khédivial de l'Opéra (Dar l-Opera, 1869) were founded).<sup>51</sup> In those days, students were sent to Europe and many texts were translated from Western languages into Arabic. New literary genres were introduced into Arabic literature: novels, short stories and theatre pieces inspired by French, English, Russian and Italian prototypes. Western life stood for modernity, and Shakespeare and Corneille were performed for the new westernized elites of the Arab world. Yet tragedy would not fall on fertile soil. Is this due to the 'Islamic world view'? I hardly think so; so many other

irreconcilable concepts were successfully introduced. Of course, the Arabo-Islamic world had no tradition of theatre in the Western sense of the word, and tragedy was not part of its own cultural heritage. But there is more. In the West, tragedy had its special status because it had the aura of belonging to the Greek and Roman past. Western culture derived its identity from the claim to be the continuators of the Classical world. This claim is partially based on a false continuity (not uncommon in identity-constructing), and partially true, since intellectual life from the early Renaissance onwards was inspired on its achievements. Thus tragedy appealed to the intellectual elites of the West, who were aware of the 'roots' of their civilization.

In the Arabo-Islamic world, the Greek heritage did not play the same role. Greek culture had been partially incorporated into Islamic culture in medieval times, but 'Greece' was not an identity marker. 'Western culture' on the other hand became a symbol of modernity in the East. Tragedy was first imported as a part of Western culture, and thus appealed to a small elite of truly westernized intellectuals. But it did not speak to the imagination as a symbol of modern life. This was exactly what Western culture stood for. This is why tragedy, contrary to other modern genres, was less likely to succeed. It was part of Western tradition, not of Western modernity.

One tragedy may be an exception: Oedipus the King. Though tragedy is generally perceived as something antique, in West and East, the use of the *materia mythologica* in Freudian psychology gave this myth an aura of modernism and a new role in literature. It became a symbol of suffering, dark passions, and the unconscious. Thus, Oedipus became an expression of modernity. This gave him a place in global culture.

## NOTES

- 1 Most Muslims today live outside the Arab world, and in some of these regions there is a long tradition of theatre (South and East Asia). It would be interesting to include these regions for a research on 'interculturality'. For this paper however I confined myself to the Arabic-speaking parts.
- 2 L. Bohannan, *Shakespeare in the Bush*, in: *Natural History*, 1966, reprinted in: A. Podolefsky & P.J. Brown, *Applying Cultural Anthropology, An Introductory Reader*, London & Toronto, 1994 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), pp. 41-46.
- 3 M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford, 1997, Clarendon Press.
- 4 'For when Alexander conquered the kingdom of Dârâ [Darius] the King, he had them all translated into the Greek language. Then he burnt the original copies which were kept in the

- treasure-house of Dârâ, and killed everyone whom he thought might be keeping away any of them'. From the *Book of Nativities (Kitâb l-Mawâlid)*, cited by D. GUTAS, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbâsid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries)*, London & New York, 1998, p. 37.
- 5 D. Boyarin, *Borderlines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Philadelphia, 2004, is devoted to the 'common ground' and the 'partition' of Judaism and Christianity.
- 6 See F. McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquest*, Princeton, 1982.
- 7 Passage from the *Dênkard*, book IV, see D. GUTAS, *op.cit.*, 35-36.
- 8 Alexander the Great is one of the figures with a 'double face' in Islamic culture. On the one hand, he is depicted as one of two pious kings (next to Solomon!); on the other hand he is held responsible for the destruction of Middle Eastern culture. See C. Janssen, *Bâbil, the City of Witchcraft and Wine*, Ghent, pp: 181-184.
- 9 *Muqaddimah*, translated by F. Rosenthal, Vol. III pp. 115 and 130 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1967).
- 10 Introduction to the Arabic translation (c. 750 AD), of the *Book of Nativities*. See D. Gutas, *op.cit.*, p. 37-8.
- 11 See also C. Janssen, *At the Banquet of Cultures: Mesopotamia's Heritage in Arabic Times*, in: A. Panaino & G. Pettinato, *Ideologies as Intercultural Phenomena*, Bologna, 2000, pp. 119-135, especially p. 124ff.
- 12 The article "Translation and translators" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* gives an impression of the sheer volume of their activities. Vol. 15, p.1318ff.
- 13 D. Gutas, *op.cit.*, 173-74.
- 14 D. Gutas, *op.cit.* p. 6 and note 9.
- 15 *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, p. xxv, cited also by D. Gutas as a motto to his excellent book *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, see above.
- 16 P. Burian, *Myth into muthos: the shaping of tragic plot*, in: P.E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, pp. 178 and 181.
- 17 A.H. Sommerstein, *Greek Drama and Dramatists*, London & New York, 2000, pp. 15ff.
- 18 A.H. Sommerstein, *op.cit.* p. 16.
- 19 A.H. Sommerstein, *op.cit.* pp. 15-17.
- 20 According to Aristotle this was the case with Agathon's *Arteus*, cf. A.H. Sommerstein, *op.cit.* p. 20.
- 21 A.H. Sommerstein, *op.cit.* p. 21.
- 22 A.H. Sommerstein, *op.cit.* p. 19, citation of Herodotus 6.21.2.
- 23 *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, III, 360ff.
- 24 I thank prof. M. Tanret, Assyriologist of the University of Ghent, for sharing his sparkling ideas with me.
- 25 *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, III, 364.
- 26 M. Tanret, 2001: *Helse liefde*, in: C. Janssen, *Het gebroken hart in Oosterse literaturen*, Gent, 2001, pp. 9-19.
- 27 M. Tanret, *op.cit.*, p. 14ff.
- 28 *Deipnosophistae* VIII, 347e; P. Burian, *op.cit.*, p. 185.
- 29 The poems we know as pre-Islamic poetry are believed to date from the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. onwards, but they were only recorded after the Islamic conquests. See e.g. the introduction by A. Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry*, 1996, Vols. I and II.
- 30 Text and translation are accessible in R. Klinke-Rosenberger, *Das Götzenbuch Kitâb al-Asnâm des Ibn al-Kalbî*, Winterthur, 1941. An English translation is N.A. Faris, *The Book of Idols*, Princeton, 1952.
- 31 P.E. Easterling, *op.cit.* p. 352 (chronology).

- 32 'Noch tragen die Gestalten die Namen der Heroen der Heldensage, aber man merkt ihnen ihre Gottkindschaft kaum noch an, sie sind nicht mehr in Größe, Tat, Schuld, Leid übermenschliche Kolossalgestalten wie bei Aischylos, sondern Menschen, die auf menschliche Weise ein tragisches Schicksal erfahren, es meistern oder an ihm zerbrechen', in: Der Kleine Pauly, 1979, Band 2, 443 s.v. Euripides.
- 33 A.H. Sommerstein, *op.cit.* p. 121.
- 34 See p. 156 in G.A. Seeck, *Geschichte der griechischen Tragödie*, in: G.A. Seeck, *Das Griechische Drama*, Darmstadt, pp. 155-201.
- 35 P. Burian, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
- 36 P. Cartledge, 'Deep plays': *theatre as process in Greek civic life*, in: P.E. EASTERLING (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 213.
- 37 P. Burian, *ibid.*
- 38 P.E. Easterling, *op. cit.*, p. 225.
- 39 A.H. Sommerstein, *op.cit.*, p.62.
- 40 P.E. Easterling, *From Repertoire to Canon*, in: P.E. Easterling (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 212.
- 41 See p. 156 in G.A. Seeck, *op.cit.*: 'Eine Darstellung ihrer Geschichte, die das gesamte, uns verlorene Material zur Verfügung hätte würde zweifellos deutlich machen, daß wir nicht von einer tausendjährigen Entwicklungsgeschichte sprechen dürfen, sondern daß auf ein Jahrhundert lebhafter Entwicklung dann ein mehr oder weniger festes Beharren auf der tradierten Grundform folgte, ganz in Übereinstimmung mit Aristoteles, für den die Tragödie längst vor seiner Zeit "zur Ruhe gekommen war, weil sie ihre eigentliche Natur erreicht hatte.'
- 42 A.H. Sommerstein, *op.cit.*, 4.
- 43 P.E. Easterling, o.c., p. 211 and n. 3 *ibid.*
- 44 F. Rosenthal, *Das Fortleben der Antike im Islam*, Zürich & Stuttgart, 1965, pp. 24-5 and 344.
- 45 A.H. Sommerstein, *op.cit.* p. 4.
- 46 P. Burian, *Tragedy adapted for Stages and Screens: the Renaissance to the Present*, in: P.E. Easterling (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 237.
- 47 P. Burian, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
- 48 See pp. 231, in P. Burian, *op. cit.*; also pp. 228-300.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 276.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 240.
- 51 D. Rubin (ed), *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre, Vol. IV, The Arab World*, London & New York, s.v. Lebanon, 1999, pp. 140ff

**THE QUEST OF ISIS FOR LAW AND JUSTICE : MAAT.  
VERSIONS OF HER DRAMA FROM PHARAONIC TIMES  
TILL THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY**

**Eman KARMOUTY**

Isis, mother-goddess, goddess of magic and healing, consort to Osiris and mother of Horus, is one of the Abydos Triad. This consisted of the Father/Osiris, the Mother/Isis, and the Son/Horus and was part of the Great Enead, made up of nine divinities. The cult of Isis spread beyond Egypt to Syria, Palestine, Greece and the Roman Empire and she was worshipped until Christian times. In Robert Graves's translation of *The Golden Ass* by the Roman writer Apuleius, second century AD, the Goddess herself appears and explains:

‘I am Nature, the universal Mother... The primeval Phrygians call me Pessinuntica, Mother of the Gods; the Athenians sprung from their own soil, call me Cecropian Artemis; for the islanders of Cyprus I am Paphian Aphrodite... and the Egyptians who excel in ancient learning and worship me with ceremonies proper to my Godhead, call me by my true name, namely Queen Isis’.<sup>1</sup>

In Egypt the Festivals of Isis were very popular and an Isis-play was performed every year. Other dramas in which she had a prominent role were *The Coronation Drama* and *The Memphite Drama*, also known as *The Memphite Theology* (c.1100) and a earlier text *The Triumph of Horus*. This text was made up of sixteen pages, set on papyrus, and dating back to the Twentieth Dynasty, the reign of Ramesses V (c. 1147- c.1143). A more permanent but briefer version of this drama exists on the walls of the Ptolemaic Temple of Horus at Edfu. As a powerful, domineering figure in Egyptian mythology, showing no fear or signs of intimidation for her enemies as the Forces of Evil - the Sungod Ra and Set- writers turned to her as a source of inspiration. Prominent among them was Tawfiq Al-Hakim, the father of modern, 20th century Egyptian drama who completed a version in 1955: “ Ever since the writing of *Sharazade* in 1930 the character of Isis was destined to materialize... between both women was a similarity seen in the relations with their husbands. Each achieved something glorious for her husband”.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, this vision was criticized by feminist author Nawal Al Sadawi who decided to write her one, and only, play *Isis* (1986) to rescue the ancient goddess as an important icon and example for the women of Egypt.

In my article I want to outline the Isis character in these three different versions. It is clear that Isis' quest for justice touches the realms of suffering and pain. Her never-ending patience and love, her endurance, bring her in the end the victory for her son Horus. Her drama offers thus no tragic ending but a form of poetic justice which belongs in the domains of religion, be it Islamic or Christian, or in the much older Pharaonic concept of 'maat', concerning law, justice and order, which seems to forecast the Greek concept of *dike*.

### **Pharaonic Times**

Egyptian mythology draws Isis as the devoted wife of Osiris, king of the lands, and loving mother of Horus. Her tale, narrated in Egyptian villages, tells how Osiris' envious brother, Set, contrives a plan to trap the good king in a box, which he tosses into the Nile. Isis patiently follows its trace and discovers the box lodged in the trunk of a tree, in Byblos, Syria. The king of Byblos, struck by the tree's huge size, has it cut down and placed in his palace as a pillar. Isis, disguised as a woman, is employed as nurse for the King's son. At night, she places the child in the fire but his horrified mother, snatches him away, whereupon Isis reveals herself as the Goddess of Magic and Healing, and how it was her intention to make the child immortal. Awed by this revelation, the King asks how he may serve Isis and she demands the tree that has been fitted as a main pillar for his palace. Granted her desire, she takes Osiris back to Egypt. She revives him by her magic spells and conceives her son, Horus. When the evil Set discovers Osiris' return he kills him and cuts up the body into fourteen pieces, which he hides in different places. Again the patient Isis searches for them and gathers them, making Osiris whole again but he is doomed to the underworld where he rules as Lord of the Dead. She then hides Horus, whom she watches over until he is old enough to avenge his father's murder and restore his throne.

These acts of stamina and patience endeared Isis to the people everywhere and she came to be regarded as the eternal mother of life and of all living things in her struggle against the evil Set, and in the retrieval of her son's right to succession in place of his murdered father, Osiris. "Hor (later known as Horus to the Greeks) was described in various texts as fighting a ritual combat with another male deity known as Set. Set is generally identified as the uncle or brother of Hor. The fights symbolized the conquest of Hor over Set, Hor symbolizing light and good, Set standing for darkness and evil".<sup>3</sup> The temple priests acted out the plays and the king had a role to play which was probably performed by somebody else. A Chorus made up of the temple's singers and musicians probably also

existed, with whom the audience joined the chant, “Hold fast, Horus, hold fast!” referring to the striking of the evil Set with harpoons, the annihilation of the enemy and the restoration of order after chaos (p.31). The town spectators, the privileged audience seated at the Sacred Lake, the actors and the Chorus, all took part in the play: “All knew the story, all understood its significance, all were intensely excited and involved.... in particular at points of excitement and of tension, there would be completely unrehearsed and spontaneous interventions from the onlookers ... encouragement and incitement of Horus ...”<sup>4</sup>.

*The Triumph of Horus* was acted annually on the 21st day of the second month of spring. Its performance was believed to have a magical effect but more importantly a political significance, strengthening the new king’s accession through identifying him with Horus and identifying the late king with Osiris, whereas Set symbolized the enemies or invaders of Egypt. Isis plays a major role in this play, as the events begin with Horus’ demand of his legacy, after Osiris’ death. She is referred to as the great mother of Horus and supports him in his struggle against Set. Thus conflict in ancient Egyptian drama was between the forces of good and evil, between Isis and Set, or Horus and Set. Isis’ sojourn can therefore be viewed as a symbolic quest for *maat*: ‘“Truth”, “order”, “justice” or “balance”, ... *maat* as universal order or harmony corresponds with the most fundamental role of the reigning king. This was to maintain *maat* (... ) certain crimes were considered crimes against *maat*. These included disorder, rebellion, envy, deceit, greed, laziness, injustice and ingratitude’.<sup>5</sup>

The action in *The Coronation Drama* begins with ‘The Contendings of Horus and Set’ which shows Isis’ demand for law and justice. A divine court of nine judges is appointed to settle the dispute between Horus and Set, each of whom claims the right to rule the land. Ra, the sun god, presides over this panel, but is biased in favour of Set, who, as a true supporter, helps fight off those who attempt to attack the sun boat of Ra. The other judges are undecided, as Set seems a more appropriate candidate, being older, more experienced and politically and militarily seasoned, unlike the young Horus. Set loudly defies Isis to prove that Horus is Osiris’ son, as he was conceived after the latter’s disappearance from the land, whereupon he was assumed dead. Ignoring Set’s attempts to dispute her claim for her son’s legacy, Isis remains firm and bold. *The Memphite Drama* contains scenes pertaining to the trial viewing the dispute, after initially narrating the ‘Creation Myth of Memphis’. Other plays, as *The Return of Set*<sup>6</sup>, clarify the powerful stand of Isis and her call for law and justice, despite Set’s power and despotism. Although elements of the play are missing, in the part that remains Horus does not have any actual participation whereas Isis appears mid-stage, cal-

ling out boldly to Geb<sup>7</sup> and the Enead, the panel of divine judges: ‘I am Isis, your grand-daughter. Behold! He who has robbed me of my possessions, Typhon<sup>8</sup>, is on the rampage again! Disaster befalls the place in which he sets foot! He has dared to usurp the rule of land through brute force and violence, oblivious of the reverence that should be accorded your majesty. He has attacked Egypt without informing you and most certainly without receiving any such orders’.<sup>9</sup> Isis does not show any fear or intimidation in this scene, either of the great Enead or of the usurper Set. Her call for justice is complied and Geb issues orders that Set should be banished to the desert. In this text Isis appears as the main protagonist, as Osiris is already dead and Horus seems to be still a child. She acts on her own, without any supporters or help from anyone, but is bold enough to demand her rights of the divine court. She calls attention to the chaos that Set has unleashed with his actions and demands that *maat*, law, justice and order, be restored to the land of Egypt.

#### **Modern Times: Tawfiq Al-Hakim (1955)**

Isis’ powerful, domineering figure is a source of inspiration for many Egyptian writers who turn to ancient Egyptian mythology for symbols of power and resistance. Among these is Tawfiq Al-Hakim<sup>10</sup>, father of the Modern Egyptian Theatre. Isis’ strength, perseverance and devotion to Osiris, is exhibited in Al-Hakim’s play *Isis*. Set, who is called here Typhon, his name in Greek,<sup>11</sup> tells that Osiris is unfit to rule. The author supports this opinion by showing Osiris as irresponsible, naive and passive, in spite of being a man of learning. Isis on the other hand, seems a more formidable opponent for Typhon, commanding more respect than her husband. In Typhon’s conversation with Sheikh Al Balad, the corrupt official who acts as his aide, Typhon expresses his fear of Isis in spite of his power and authority:

Sheikh al Balad:	She’s a woman ... what can a woman do?
Typhon:	She’s not that simple, you don’t know her.
Sheikh al Balad:	She’s a woman alone.
Typhon:	But strong as a rock ... she’ll search for her husband in every corner knock on every door ... and ask everybody ... she’ll cause trouble.

Al-Hakim’s play is ‘realistic’ in its approach, that is following a logic of possibilities in situations, motivations and characters. So for instance, instead of having Osiris drown (and revived) after being pushed into the Nile, Al-Hakim makes him land safely in Byblos, Syria, where Isis finally finds him. It is in kee-

ping with Osiris' passive nature as drawn by Al-Hakim, to take up residence there and not inform his wife of his whereabouts. Again when he returns to Egypt and finds that the people believe the rumors spread by Typhon, defaming his character, he makes no attempt to defend himself but is satisfied with the existence of a refugee, hiding in the Marshes and helping the people cultivate their land. He is called El Ragul El Akhdar, the Green Man, by the villagers of Khamis, where he has taken up abode after returning from Byblos. This would seem to refer to his ability to make arid lands fertile, or to the mythological role assigned to him as God of Fertility and Vegetation. It could also refer to his immaturity.

Another realistic aspect of Al-Hakim's *Isis* is that the divine characters of Isis, Osiris, Typhon and Thoth appear as humans, not deities, seemingly under the influence of pre-war French playwrights as Andre Gide, Jean Cocteau, and Jean Anouilh, whose plays, derived from Greek mythology, made the human element the main issue: "Gide and Cocteau and the others find a certain relief in humanizing, debunking, and even vulgarizing ... by bringing the myths nearer to humanity they make them more real".<sup>12</sup> Many Egyptian critics, as Louis Awad, disapproved of Al-Hakim's action, stating that this deprived the figures of their legendary grandeur and dignity. Others critics supported him, as Typhon's treachery is a human trait, as is the goodness of Isis, as well as her firmness and resistance against evil, represented by Typhon. The urge for vengeance, expressed by Isis and Horus, is another human tendency. Mandoor discerned the logic of Al-Hakim's realistic approach as enabling the stage- performance of the play and guaranteeing the audience's approval.<sup>13</sup>

Of course Osiris has ambivalent characteristics already in early mythology. He is believed to have been a king who was later turned into a deity. He had taught his people how to plant, read and write but by mingling with the commoners he may have threatened the order of social hierarchy. The attack upon him and his subsequent dispatch to the underworld could indicate rejection of his philosophy. The figure of Osiris, reinstated by his heir, Horus, was put to use by the pharaohs, who identified themselves with Horus, legally claiming the throne, and incorporating the myth into a ritual performance. These socio-political overtones of ancient Egyptian drama were realized by Tawfiq Al-Hakim and employed accordingly. His socialistic Osiris is depicted as an inventor of water wheels and other agricultural tools, instructing the Egyptians on the cultivation of their land and leaving state matters in the hands of his wife, Isis. Typhon/Set on the other hand is drawn as a devious politician who employs bribery, threats, conspiracies and assassination to become king of the land. He bribes corrupt government officials into supporting his cause and getting rid of Osiris. The trapping of Osiris in

a box is presented as a conspiracy made up of several men, as in Plutarch's version. Typhon also terrorizes and instills fear into the hearts of the people so they will not resist his rule.

These two male figures stand in Al-Hakim's *Isis*, as in many of his plays, in a conflict of opposites, creating a balance of extremes. Osiris represents knowledge, benevolence and compassion; Typhon represents corrupt politics, brute force and power. This is related to Al Hakim's theory of "*Al T'adulliyah*"<sup>14</sup> (Equilibrium). It is interesting to note the affinity between Al-Hakim's *T'adulliyah* and the concept of duality in ancient Egypt. A. Ismael comments on this equilibrium: 'This is by no means a personal tendency; it stems from the orientation of Eastern society in general, and of Islamic society in particular, from which he derives his deeply rooted belief in the supernatural, and which has established a perfect equilibrium between the spiritual and the material....For Tawfiq Al-Hakim, the more urgent duty was to restore the equilibrium between the world of reality and the world of dreams in which the oriental mind used to live and revel '<sup>15</sup>. The structure of Al-Hakim's play, *Isis*, is based on the conflict between the world of reality and the world of dreams, between politics and knowledge, deviousness and compassion, attempting to achieve a degree of balance between them. Al-Hakim, in his epilogue comments: 'Who should rule the world? The scientist, who invents, discovers and provides food and changes destinies or the other who succeeds in overcoming the crises of the crowds?' His play implies that might is right and that people should be strong to stand against any form of oppression. In view of the people's weakness and apathy and Osiris' ineffectual benevolence and passiveness, it is Isis who must provide the required resistance and resilience against Set's autocratic plans. She demands justice, law and order in a world dominated by corruption and power. Undaunted by the tremendous forces she confronts she resorts to subterfuge, even stooping to the wiles employed by her arch enemy, Set. She bribes Sheikh Al Balad to bear witness with her in court against his former master and so wins her case about the succession of her son Horus. The end of the drama does not evoke feelings of excitement but a sense of disappointment at the yielding of principles, morals and ideals in the face of corruption, brute force and treachery. Left with the *overwhelming question*, to borrow Eliot's famous query, about the meaning of the triumph of Horus at the end of the drama the author returns the question to his reader with another question: 'Is it morally wrong to use the corrupt means employed by one's enemy or better to remain pure but risk being destroyed, as seen in Osiris' case?' With the 'dirty hands' obtained through bribery and corruption, Isis managed to arrange 'poetic justice', but not as a triumph of its own accord but by means of the power of evil...' <sup>16</sup>

### **Feminist Times: Nawal al Sadawi (1986)**

Nawal Al Sadawi<sup>17</sup>, international famous feminist writer, considered Hakim's Isis a poor shadow of the actual mythological figure and an insult to Egyptian women, who have always regarded themselves as offspring of the ancient goddess. She had even made reference to herself by entitling her autobiography: *A Daughter of Isis*. To remedy Al-Hakim's offensive incursion against women, Al Sadawi decided to write her *Isis*, 1986, a play in two acts. She claimed she would write the actual story of Isis. Her play is a re-reading of the original myth in the context of an actualized feminist discourse. In her preface she deprecates Al-Hakim's comparing of Isis to Penelope, the faithful wife of Greek hero Odysseus, and Sharazade of *A Thousand and One Nights*. The comparison, she notes, calls for an appraisal of their wifely devotion and motherhood, totally disregarding all other human qualities: 'Tawfik Al Hakim's patriarchal philosophy, which views woman only as a shadow in her husband's footsteps, prevents him from seeing the multidimensional character of Isis ... as the Goddess of wisdom, knowledge and speed....not only did she love justice but sought for it.' (pp. 11-12). Gender politics dominate Al Sadawi's *Isis*, which opens with a scene in which Ra, the Sun god shows favoritism towards Set, promising him the land, in exchange for the latter's protection of the Sun-god's boat. Ra expresses contempt for women in general: 'The heir must be a male...a man...not a woman or female. The reign of women has come to an end and that of manhood, power and terror has begun....' (p. 24). Many important issues are raised in this opening scene: terrorization, dictatorship and male rule. Ra is seen in following scenes complaining of the infidelity of his favorite concubine who has betrayed him with one of his slaves, a black slave. It is the story of *A Thousand and One Nights*, once more employed by Al Sadawi intertextually, revealing how Ra's chauvinistic slogans are hollow echoes of impotence. Set also reveals that he desires to ravish Isis but has failed to do so because of her superior power and intellect.

Al Sadawi's gender discourse stridently challenges patriarchy: 'The play's scope is extended, in the attack against patriarchy'.<sup>18</sup> Set delivers a pompous lecture on the pre-destined domestic role for women and that of leadership for men, since men are physically superior, but is curtly checked by an amusing reposte from the clever goddess: 'If whoever is physically superior should rule, why aren't we ruled by mules? Doubtlessly mules are stronger than you, Set ...' (p. 84). The reply would also seem to be directed to Al Hakim's inferred suggestion of the superiority of power. As Al-Hakim before her, Al Sadawi tries to avoid supernatural contrivances, but retains Isis' position of goddess. To explain Osiris' appearance after his supposed drowning, she inverts the boatman incident belonging to the myth, but especially as it appears in Al-Hakim's play. Instead of speaking contemptuously of

women, the courageous sailor expresses his admiration for the goddess and tries to help her in spite of Set's commands that none should help her. As Isis is also the Goddess of Navigation, he announces, 'You saved me from drowning when I was out at sea. I have brought you a gift from Syria ... [*opens a wrap in his hand*]. Dates of Syria....' (pp. 87-88). The dates are symbolic of the child, Horus. In the following scenes, the sailor is called Osiris, transforming into her beloved husband. In this manner Al Sadawi draws the figure of Isis in a modern light, choosing her own mate and fashioning him in the image she desires. The angry Set challenges the new Osiris: 'If you are Osiris, Isis' husband, then you must be my brother; are you my brother?', who answers: 'No, I'm not your brother and I don't want to be....' (p. 109). The 'old' Osiris does not appear at the beginning. The opening announces his disappearance as in the myth and plays of ancient Egypt. When he returns it is only for a short time. Isis searches for him, but refuses to acknowledge his death: 'No! He is not dead. Osiris is the God of Goodness and gods do not die and goodness will never come to an end in this world. Osiris, the God of Kindness lives on in my heart and in the heart of every kind human ... Osiris is love ... is beauty ... is morality ... is peace ...' (p. 46).

Employing a technique of symbolic representation, Al Sadawi does not attempt to adopt Al Hakims realism drawn from Greek Classicism, but moves in the other direction towards the ancient drama form of Egypt concentrating on Isis as the main protagonist, a powerful, assertive, (tragic) heroine. Her quest is two-fold, the search for Osiris and for justice. She is accompanied by 'Maat' and insists on restoring Osiris, the symbol of love, peace and harmony. These can be attained only in the presence of law, order and justice, which Sadawi re-enacts through the ancient Egyptian conflict between Isis and Set, order and chaos, law and crime, justice and tyranny. The political innuendo referring to the invading elements in Pharaonic plays, as *The Triumph of Horus*, is discerned in the role of Ra, who, as in the myth seems favorably inclined to Set for services rendered. In order to allude to contemporary social and political issues, however, Ra is given a more prominent role in Al Sadawi's play, assuming the role of a tyrant who fuels Set's growing ambition through bribery and unlawful allotments. Presented as an overbearing dictator, who needs the support of blackguards like Set to maintain his rule, Ra has nudged Nut, the sky goddess, out of political life into the shadows of domestic life. Under house-arrest, she is not to be spoken of anymore. Ra's example is followed by Set, who tries to do the same with Isis but fails. Ra echoes the illustrious Shahrayar in his sexual frustration and misogyny. Unable to impose fidelity on his concubine, who produces a dark-skinned child, Set advocates the violent abuse of women in blind retaliation. In the final courtroom scene, Isis, the eternal representative of Egyptian women, avenges them by brus-

hing aside his edicts as a point for judicial reference in the trial:

SET: (protesting): I am the chief magistrate by command of the Great Ra.

ISIS: You cannot be judge and defendant, too, and the God Ra's orders do not apply to this court. It is a public court and not all present believe in Ra. There are various gods and religions and in this court of justice we cannot impose only one god or one religion (p. 127).

Resolving the conflict in a public rather than a divine court, Al Sadawi's play echoes the Pharaonic plays in concluding with the triumph of law and justice in the face of tyranny and oppression. It also refers to contemporary socio-political issues such as assertive feminism in the face of male dominance and the role of the masses in political representation. Having criticized Al-Hakim for allowing Isis to appear as a helpless woman and resorting to Set's corrupt methods of bribery, she avoids the same pitfall by slightly switching the situation. In her play it is the brutal military commander of Set's armies who approaches her, heavy with guilt, offering to help in any way, as atonement for his past sins. Assigned the difficult task of luring Set to the court, he is stabbed by the furious God of Evil. Al Sadawi ends her play in true ancient Egyptian style, as she promised to do in her preface, with Set compromising himself publicly; chaos and anarchy receding before the power of law, justice, order and harmony. The pursuit of *maat*, law, justice and order in the previously viewed variations on the Isis-Osiris theme reveals two interesting aspects of the social and political implications in Egyptian drama, both ancient and modern. In all of them Isis insists on attaining all her legal rights as an Egyptian citizen. The eternal demand for *maat*, justice, is in all these plays, ancient and modern, rooted in and expressed through myth: 'Myths are permanent. They deal with love; with war; with sin; with tyranny; with courage; with fate: and all in some way or other deal with the relation of man to those divine powers which are sometimes felt to be irrational, sometimes to be cruel, and sometimes, alas, to be just'.<sup>19</sup>

The search for *maat*, justice, law and order, is a difficult mission especially in the face of evil and power. Egyptian duality however dictates the joining of opposite forces. Isis acts as a neutralizing force, uniting them all. Her quest comes to a successful end only to be renewed again and again with the withdrawal and subsequent flood of the Nile waters, whereupon it is re-enacted by another Isis, in an eternal flow as a never-ending quest for *maat*: law, justice and order.

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## NOTES

- 1 Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman*, New York , 1990, pp.22-23
- 2 Tawfik Al-Hakim, *Isis*, Al Fagalla, Maktabet Misr, 1988, p.115
- 3 M. Stone, *op. cit.*, p.89
- 4 H.W.Fairman, translated and edited, *The Triumph of Horus*, London, 1975, p.51
- 5 Lorna Oakes & Lucia Gahlin, *The Mysteries of Ancient Egypt*, London, 2003, p.462
- 6 This play is inscribed on a papyrus, referred to as the Louvre Papyrus 3129, and was deciphered by the famed Egyptologist, Etienne Drioton. Probably inspired by the Horus-Set trial of the Shabaqo Stone, it seems to have been written for public performances.
- 7 The divine personification of the earth and husband of the sky goddess Nut. The father of Isis, Osiris, Set and Nephthys, he is inclined in the favour of his grandson, Horus, during the trial but hesitates in expressing this.
- 8 Cf 7.
- 9 Etienne Drioton, *Le Théâtre dans l' Ancienne Egypte* ( Al Masrah Al Misri Al Kadeem), Cairo, 1986
- 10 Born in Alexandria (1898-1987), he grew attached to the theatre; the performances of the time were basically adaptations of Western drama. Sent by his father to Paris, to study law, Al Hakim came to the realization that the void that existed between Egyptian theatre and World theatre could only be bridged by employing the basics of Greek theatre within a Middle Eastern context. He was impressed by the French Theatre and dramatists. He was also highly interested in the plays of Shaw, Ibsen, Pirandello and Maeterlinck.
- 11 Al-Hakim uses the Greek name for Set, Typhon. He also uses much of Plutarch's version of the Isis-Osiris myth.
- 12 Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*, New York/Oxford, 1985, pp. 532-533
- 13 Mohamed Mandoor, *Masrah Tawfik al Hakim*, Cairo, 1966, pp. 44-45
- 14 Al-Hakim's concept of *Al T'adulliyah (equilibrium)* is based on a balance between all natural elements; in the sphere of intellect and literature it maintains a balance between matters of the soul and body, mind and heart, good and evil. See Ahmed Sakhsookh, *Tawfik Al Hakim*. Cairo: El Hayaa El Masriyah El Aama L'il-kitab, 2002, pp. 17-63.
- 15 A. Ismael, *Tawfiq Al Hakim: His concept of Equilibrium*, in: Noosoos Inglizia Fi Al Adeb Al arabi Al Hadeeth, Ed. Abdl El Kader El Kot, Beirout, 1978, Dar El Nahda El Arabia, pp.105-106
- 16 Fouad Dowara, *Masrah Tawfik Al Hakim*, 2 vols, Cairo, 1986, 2, p.205
- 17 Born 1931, Dr. Nawal Al Sadawi become a successful psychiatrist and rapidly occupied a high post in the Ministry of Health, from which she was ousted for her outspokenness and boldness of expression in her *Woman and Sex*. She has written countless other books and novels, all expressing her feminist beliefs. *Isis* is the single play she has written.
- 18 Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Men, Women and God(s): Nawal El Sadaawi and Arab Feminist Poetics*, translation Summer Ibrahim, Fagalla: Dar Al Mostakbal, 2003, p.195
- 19 G. Highet, *op. cit.*, p. 540

**THE NARRATIVE SOURCES OF  
TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM'S *SHAHRAZAD*:  
THE *THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS*.**

**Richard VAN LEEUWEN**

The first half of the 20th century was a period of great political and intellectual ferment in the Arab world in general and in Egypt more specifically. Various political movements were resisting foreign domination and carving out the contours of national entities. In Egypt, the nationalist revolution of 1919 prepared the way for a complex power struggle between political factions and the British administration, in which rivalling ideologies, class interests and foreign economic penetration contributed to a new ideological configuration, a new social awareness, and a new sense of identity. Within this struggle, the nature of the cultural tradition, as the constituent element of an emerging national identity, became a subject of debate. The sources of cultural identity were rediscovered, re-examined, and, perhaps, re-invented to justify and determine the boundaries of a national community. The debate was partly the culmination of the process of *nahda*, or 'renaissance', which had begun in the 19th century and which involved a broad cultural self-examination in order to redefine Egypt's cultural orientation and to mobilize the assets of the cultural heritage.

Within this period of upheaval, Tawfiq Al-Hakim wrote his celebrated theatre-play *Shahrazâd*, in 1934. In a way, Tawfiq Al-Hakîm personifies the many contradictions of his lifetime, the political vicissitudes and, especially, the search for cultural roots and a cultural identity for the buttressing nation. This intellectual endeavour, combined with an astonishing productivity, made Tawfiq Al-Hakîm into one of the doyens of Egyptian culture, together with such figures as Taha Husayn and Nadjîb Mahfûz. It is these literati who not only laid the foundations of the modern tradition of Egyptian, and even Arabic, literature, but also represented the hegemonic tendencies within the broader cultural debate. In this contribution I will concentrate on Tawfiq Al-Hakîm's play *Shahrazâd* as an example of the author's thinking about his literary sources, focusing on the main narrative model of the play, the *1001 Nights*, and on the way in which this source is used to conform to a notion of the tragic element in drama. Parallels and differences between the play and stories of the *1001 Nights* will be related to Tawfiq Al-Hakîm's quite original distinction between Greek and Egyptian forms of tragedy.

### **The *nahda* and the debate on cultural orientation.**

In the second half of the 19th century the confrontation of the Arab world with Western political, economic and military hegemony, unleashed a debate on the condition of Arabic and Islamic culture. This debate was aimed firstly at formulating responses to Western dominance and what was seen as the failure of Arab societies to link up with the European model of modernity. To achieve this, firstly, the sources of Western power had to be examined, in the fields of science and technology, social and political organization, and philosophical and cultural concepts. Secondly, the Arabic-Islamic tradition was subjected to an intensive reinterpretation, to determine the potential of modernization, the components securing cultural continuity and the indigenous sources for a new sense of identity. In the course of time the complexity of these efforts was revealed, since the cultural tradition was found to be far from monolithic and unambiguous: it showed a rich configuration of components which were part of an inherited identity and which in many ways resisted an easy incorporation into a 'modern' vision of life.

For Egyptians the main constituents of the common identity derived from diverse historical currents: some intellectuals stressed Egypt's heritage from Pharaonic times as being typically, and exclusively, Egyptian. Others stressed the Arabic component of Egypt's tradition, which had shaped its language and literature. A third group thought the Islamic component to be most prominent and most essential for Egyptian culture, while, finally, some advocated the preservation of the link with the Ottoman-Turkish political framework. These elements were not only evoked to revitalize the indigenous culture as a response to Western hegemony, they were also reinterpreted as a possible basis for cultural renewal combining a sense of authenticity with influences from the West. There were some who were more rigorously inclined to adopt Western models of life and society as the best means to shake off European tutelage. Although the various ideological strategies crystallized into political groups which sometimes vehemently competed with each other, the question of identity remained complex and diffuse for all currents, as radical Islamist movements recognized the necessity of reform, while radically secular intellectuals would not relinquish their rich cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup>

It seems justified to say that Tawfiq Al-Hakîm to a large extent personified the debate on cultural orientation. He was well-versed in Arabic literature when he set out to study in France in the 1920s. In these formative years he absorbed an enormous corpus of Western literature and philosophy, which greatly impregnated his view on literature and life. He stressed the Islamic contribution to Western civilization, but deplored the fact that the influence of ancient Greek thought on

Islamic culture had remained limited to philosophy and science, excluding *belles-lettres* and, especially, the theatre. He also felt inspired by the ancient Egyptian world-view, which for him supplemented the geniuses of European, Greek and Arab civilizations. His vision combined a proclivity towards 'enlightenment', expressed in Greek and European notions of political freedom and human rights, and an 'Eastern' sense of religiosity which imbued Arabic-Islamic culture and which for him enriched the Western forms of humanism.<sup>2</sup>

Evidently, Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's outlook on culture was especially focused on the theatre. In his comments on his own work, Tawfîq Al-Hakîm distinguishes various approaches to the concept of the 'tragic'; first of all he mentions the Greek notion as reflected in the works of the great tragedists, which are marked by man's futile struggle against the forces of Fate. According to Al-Hakîm, this sense of Fate cannot dispense with a certain awareness of religiosity, as an acknowledgment of forces which are beyond man's power and comprehension and which steer the course of his life. It is this essential feature that is lacking in the European form of tragedy, which was shaped by the humanist vision and which became confined to the psychological and emotional struggle of man. Religiosity was replaced by a belief in the sovereignty of the will and therefore Western theatre lost the fundamental quality of the tragic. Finally, Al-Hakîm distinguishes a specifically Egyptian notion of the tragic, which is not, as in Greek theatre, focused on the struggle between man and the forces of Fate, but rather on the efforts by man to overcome the limitations of space and time.<sup>3</sup>

In accordance with these views, Tawfîq Al-Hakîm holds that only an Easterner can understand the essence of tragedy, since he has preserved the sense of religion which is an essential component. He deplores the refusal of Islamic culture to absorb the theatrical concepts of the Greeks; if the link between Islamic and Greek culture would have been achieved, not only Arabic culture, but also European culture through it would have been enriched. However, he denies that Islamic culture is unable to sustain a conception of the tragic, as is claimed by some, because it is a mistake to think that Muslims believe in forms of predestination. Thus, the cultural concepts that Al-Hakîm summarizes all have a potential susceptibility of the tragic, and, not surprisingly, Al-Hakîm is inclined to search for a synthesis. He seems to prefer the Egyptian notion, however, since he states that the ancient Egyptians would have written theatre from the same perspective as he, if they had practiced the theatrical genre. In his plays, Al-Hakîm attempts a reconciliation of these various traditions, which have shaped his world-vision and which also form an ideal balance between general concepts and specific configurations: it is only in Egypt that such an amalgam of concepts of tragedy can originate.<sup>4</sup>

Among Al-Hakîm's sources derived from the Arabic literary tradition is the *1001 Nights*, the famous collection of tales, whose first version was probably collected in the 9th century. The oldest, partial, text that has survived is a manuscript from the Mamluk period (15th century), which served as the basis of the first European version made by Antoine Galland in the beginning of the 18th century. In the 18th and 19th centuries various versions were compiled; some of these attempted to reconstruct the original work, others were clear mystifications. In 1832 the first Arabic edition was printed on the Bûlâq press in Egypt. Although it is not known if the *1001 Nights* as a collection had survived in the circuits of oral storytelling in the Arab world, the appearance of the printed text led to a gradual revival of the interest in the work. It was especially important for the nascent stages of Arabic theatre, which developed in the second half of the 19th century. Writers such as Mârûn al-Naqqâsh and Ahmad Abû Khalîl al-Qabbânî drew from the tales of the *1001 Nights*, both for strong plot-structures and for comic elements. Moreover, in order to gain the interest of the audience, the playwrights preferred to rework indigenous sources taken from their own cultural and literary heritage. The *1001 Nights* thus greatly contributed to the birth of modern Arabic theatre.<sup>5</sup> In the beginning of the 20th century, the *1001 Nights* remained an important source of inspiration for Egyptian playwrights and theatrical producers, mainly for comedies and vaudeville spectacles. By now the work was also intellectually recognized, however, when a dissertation on the 1001 Nights appeared under the supervision of the scholar and reformist thinker Taha Husayn in 1943.<sup>6</sup> The support of Taha Husayn raised the *1001 Nights* from a mere folkloric text to an important part of the Arabic literary heritage, which could inspire modern Arab authors. This interest in the *1001 Nights* may have partly been instigated by Tawfîq Al-Hakîm, who once wrote to a friend, complaining about the inclination of Arab authors to confine their admiration to 'high literature': 'To this day, popular literature has remained unrecognized in the history of Arabic literature. An immortal work like the *1001 Nights*, acknowledged by every nation in the world... this exalted work of art has not been openly acknowledged by a single Arab writer.'<sup>7</sup>

Throughout his life, the *1001 Nights* remained an important reference for Tawfîq Al-Hakîm. At an early stage in his career, he wrote an operetta entitled 'Ali Baba', completed in 1926, and he compiled a novel modelled after the *1001 Nights* together with Taha Husayn (*al-Qasr al-mashur*, 1936). Several of Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's plays contain references to or elements from the *1001 Nights*, such as *Solomon the Wise* (1943), *The cavemen* (1933), *Bayt al-naml* and *Harun al-Rashid and Harun al-Rashid* (1969). In *Sultan of Darkness* (*Sultan al-zalam*, 1941), a collection of essays, he uses Shahrazâd as a symbol for 'truth' as opposed to oppression and the 'darkness' of tyranny. However, his most important

work in this respect is *Shahrazâd*, which was published in 1934 and which still counts as one of Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's major works. Tawfîq Al-Hakîm himself claimed that one of the aims of the play was to break down the barriers between 'high literature' and popular literature, by using folkloric models for an intellectually appreciable work, thus making philosophical contemplations accessible to a broad audience. With this claim Al-Hakîm responded to some of his critics, who regarded his plays as mere intellectual acrobacy, which could not be satisfactorily presented on stage.<sup>8</sup> However, Al-Hakîm's claim is hardly convincing, since *Shahrazâd* marks a clear break with the previous echoes of the *1001 Nights* and is first of all an intellectual exploration and not a form of comical social criticism. In what way, then, was the *1001 Nights* reworked to become this ambitious play, how was it reinterpreted and how did it fit into Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's intellectual ambitions?

### *Shahrazad.*

Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's play *Shahrazâd* consists of seven scenes, staged respectively on a desolate road, in the king's palace, the palace hall, the wilderness, the king's hall, Abû Maysûr's tavern, and Shahrazâd's boudoir. Most of the scenes take place at night, at sunset or at dawn. The number of characters is limited to, beside Shahriyâr and Shahrazâd, a magician and his daughter, a serf, the king's executioner, Abû Maysûr the tavern keeper, and Qamar, the king's vizier. The narrative of the play *Shahrazâd* is presented as a sequence to the well-known frame-story of the *1001 Nights*:<sup>9</sup> Shahrazâd has finished her storytelling and has cured Shahriyâr from his obsession, which instigated him to marry a virgin every night and have her executed in the morning. However, instead of being transformed into a faithful and responsible husband and father, Shahriyâr has become 'insane'. The stories have re-created him from a 'body without a heart, matter without spirit' into a human being, but, curiously, he is no longer interested in Shahrazâd's physical beauty and is obsessed by the longing to know 'who she is'. It is as if 'another infinite horizon has been revealed to his inner eye', which prompts him to go out and roam the world in a tireless quest for knowledge. Shahriyâr compares Shahrazâd with nature, which displays its beauties, but veils its secret. It is this secret, the essence of Shahrazâd's being, which he insists on knowing, but Shahrazâd reprimands him, claiming to be completely transparent and accusing him of insanity.

During one of his journeys, Shahriyâr is accompanied by Qamar, his vizier, to whom he explains that his peregrinations are caused by his liberation from the confines of his bodily drives. He has come to loathe human bodies, and the prison of physical yearning. Qamar, who is the paragon of reason and common sense,

tries to persuade him to return to the palace and to give up his tireless quests, just as previously he tried to soothe Shahrazâd to effectuate a reconciliation between the two. In despair, Shahrazâd decides to provoke Shahriyâr and stage a kind of *déjà-vu* for the king, hoping in this way to restore him to his common sense. She invites a humble serf to come to her boudoir, where he is found by Shahriyâr upon his return. However, instead of becoming infuriated and killing the serf, Shahriyâr merely sends him away. He is no longer susceptible to the passions of love. Shahrazâd acknowledges that she has failed and Shahriyâr, as she formulates it, remains suspended between heaven and earth. Qamar, meanwhile, kills himself with the sword of Shahriyâr's former executioner.

As the title indicates, the central figure of the play is Shahrazad, although more attention is directed to the strange mental condition of Shahriyâr. Each of the characters sees his main disposition reflected in the queen: the serf lusts after her beautiful body; the vizier, who is in love with her, praises her intellect and sensitive heart; Shahriyâr, finally, discerns a hidden truth inside her, which she is unwilling to reveal and which is the cause of his flight from his material existence. Shahrazâd states that they all see her as the 'mirror of their souls', detecting in her the essence of their own nature. She is a kind of neutral entity, in which the other protagonists project their inner urges. In spite of her extensive storytelling, Shahriyâr has not come to know her; it appears that she has only awakened the suspicion in him that there is some ulterior reality, hidden behind the seemingly neutral, uncomplicated, façade of things and persons. And it is this reality, hidden either in Shahrazâd, or somewhere else in the universe, that he indefatigably looks for.

Critics have interpreted the play on various levels. Firstly, the figure of Shahrazâd is seen as a reflection of Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's difficult relationship with women, which is attested by many statements and autobiographical comments. As becomes clear from his other works, Tawfîq Al-Hakîm was fascinated by the female mystery which for him Shahrazâd represented, as a strong and intelligent mistress, who symbolized perfection, but was still tainted by the peculiarities of her sex. As one critic remarks: 'Woman is, for him, an enigma, theoretically capable of achieving perfection, which is not given to man to do, but in practice riddled with far more faults and blemishes than her male counterpart could ever stoop in displaying.'<sup>10</sup> For some Shahrazad is the quintessential woman, the epitome of human contradictions, a combination of the elevated and the trivial. Similarly, one critic regards Shahrazâd as a symbol of the unknowable, mysterious woman, whom every man interprets according to his own disposition, but who remains an enigma.<sup>11</sup> She represents the 'unfathomable nature of reality'

which cannot be comprehended by man. According to a comment by the critic Mohammad Mandur, she proves that a human being cannot live by and for the intellect, ignoring the calls of the body and the heart.<sup>12</sup> Finally, one critic perceives a mystical element in Shahriyâr's quest: Shahrazâd represents the beloved divine entity, around which the lover hovers as a moth around a candle, fleeing his material body, and seeking some form of spiritual unification.<sup>13</sup>

These observations show the depth of Shahrazâd as a literary character and of the themes that Tawfîq al-Hakîm wove into his play. They contain plausible interpretations of the piece and explain its philosophical purport. Remarkably, however, no attention is given at all to the narrative context of the play and the possible importance of intertextual relationships for its interpretation. No reference is made to the 'master' text of the *1001 Nights* from which the themes are so explicitly derived. It seems obvious, then, to relate the play to one of its most significant sources.

#### ***Shahrazad and the 1001 Nights.***

It is evident that the matrix of Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's play *Shahrazâd* is derived from the framestory of the *1001 Nights*. This story provides Tawfîq Al-Hakîm first of all with a dramatic configuration which is taken from his own 'Oriental' literary heritage, which is, admittedly, reworked according to ancient Greek and European narrative modes. Tawfîq Al-Hakîm himself, however, does not restrict the narrative roots of his play to these domains, and explicitly relates them to what he considers to be the 'Egyptian' form of tragedy. In Egyptian tragedy, he states, it is the struggle between man and the forces of time and space which is the central theme. The ancient Egyptians' ideal was to strive for a victory of the spirit over time and space, a victory which is not to be found in resurrection 'into another world where time and space are unknown, but into this same world, this same earth, with its time and space.'<sup>14</sup> According to him, whereas *The cavemen* pictures the contest between man and time, *Shahrazâd* portrays the contest between man and space. This remark is mentioned by several critics, but it is subsequently dismissed as an irrelevant remark, since the spatial aspect seems to be secondary to the main theme.<sup>15</sup> However, if the narrative of the play is related to the matrix of the *1001 Nights*, Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's statement becomes much more meaningful.

Elsewhere I have attempted to analyse the framestory of the *1001 Nights* on the basis of the hypothesis that it should be read as the linking of storytelling with the disruption of a spatiotemporal equilibrium, the destruction of a temporal and spatial structure by an event of dramatic proportions.<sup>16</sup> The basic idea is that

Shahriyâr's identity, as a man and as a ruler, is founded on a specific congruency between the king's body, his authority, and the location of his power. Shahriyâr's authority is derived from a set of boundaries which guard his integrity and the coherence of his person, and which is symbolized by the impregnability of the palace. That this congruency is based on deception is revealed when the king leaves his palace, and his body is removed from the location of his power. This event is enacted twice, in the case of Shahzamân and in the case of Shahriyâr, and in both cases the king is enabled, so to speak, to peep into his own sacred domain from the outside. They both witness a truly horrible sight: they find their spouses passionately making love to the most despicable of human creatures, a cook's mate and a black slave. This spectacle completely destroys the image that the kings have of themselves and their status, and, more importantly, it disrupts the relationship of each king with the locality of his power.

The functions of boundaries, both in the social and in the spatial sense, can be epitomized by the Heideggerian/ Derridan concept of the 'house', that is, a domestication of space based on the exclusion of a specific 'other'. Boundaries are here meant to create a domain governed by a specific idea of a homogenous self, of a hierarchy of power, of an imagined unity, which can only be achieved by banning the 'excess' of this self-image to the realm outside. However, the exclusion of the other by constructing a domestic space implies that this 'other' is always in some form present in the inside. The 'other' is the reason for constructing the spatial domain and defining its shape and boundaries, and is therefore always inherent in the construction itself, as an invisible 'intruder', a spectre that will at one point horrify the inhabitants.<sup>17</sup> We can see this mechanism quite clearly in the episode of Shahriyâr and his brother. The carefully constructed convergence of self-image, power and locality is cruelly disrupted by that which it is meant to exclude, the antithesis of the king's identity, the most despicable contamination of the image of a king. What was thought to be locked out, in fact turns out to be present in the very core of the king's domain of power.

The breaking-up of the spatial integrity of the palace leads to the breaking-up of the integrity of the king's identity, which now appears to have been built on a delusion, an artificial construct created only to hide what it cannot destroy. It can be argued, moreover, that what the king sees is not so much an intruder from outside, but rather a part of himself, a kind of *alter ego*, that he has always tried to ban from his identity. He now realizes that what he has always seen as a unified personality, the basis of his self-image as a man and a king, in fact consists of at least two versions of his self, the mighty king and the low, lustful serf. The spatial domain protecting the congruence of his locality, his body and his power, turns out

to contain his body-double, a copy of himself as his antithesis, a component of himself which he cannot control without the structure supporting his authority.

The dislocation of Shahriyâr's self-image is caused by an act of mobility, that is, by Shahriyâr's crossing the boundary between the inner and outer domains, creating a distance between himself and his constructed 'interior' space. The theme of mobility is of course tightly linked to the theme of dislocation, as is shown by the reaction of the two kings to the fatal blow to their person's integrity: now that the system of boundaries protecting their status has been demolished, they start roaming the world disguised as beggars. Since they have lost their identity, their space is no longer marked with the indications of their status. The world has become a boundless desert. Only when they imagine to comprehend that it is in fact woman who is the cause of their downfall, they return to the palace and start the fateful cycle of sex and death, with the intention of restoring the integrity of their identity. The domain of women is eliminated from their lives and a new unification of body, power and location is realized.

The cost of this restoration is immense, however, since it not only depletes the reservoir of marriagable virgins, it also blocks any possibility of reproduction, since no heir to the throne can be conceived. Shahriyâr is caught in a circular motion of time, preventing progress and condemning the empire to stagnation and fossilization. Shahrazâd has 'reconquered' his domestic space, but only by excluding the forces of time. At this point Shahrazâd enters the stage. By her storytelling she not only succeeds in redeeming Shahriyâr from his ritual cycle and restoring the regular sequence of time; she also teaches Shahriyâr that the world is essentially multifarious and that no unified, monolithic identities exist. She fills Shahriyâr's space with marvels and characters, dilemmas and devices, persuading the king that he has to accept the temporal aspect of change in his domain and the diversity in the world and in himself. He accepts this multiple identity, linked to the forces of time and transformation, and therefore reintegrates the female domain into his spatial structure. This happy ending is symbolized by Shahriyâr's promise not to have her executed, and by the three children that Shahrazâd has borne during the period of storytelling.

This analysis of the story of Shahriyâr and Shahrazâd inspired by spatial concepts helps us to better understand Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's remarks about the spatial dimension of *Shahrazâd*. In the play, too, Shahriyâr has been transformed by Shahrazâd's storytelling, but here the 'happy ending' is lacking and although Shahriyâr is cured from his obsession, he seems to be afflicted with another disease. Shahrazâd's stories have failed to reconcile Shahriyâr with his 'body-dou-

ble', his lower self and the physical part of his personality, which in the *1001 Nights* allow him to accept her in his domain, but have now rather separated him from it and destroyed it. When Shahrazâd attempts to re-enact the scene of adultery by hiding a serf in her boudoir, it appears that Shahriyâr is unaffected by her ruse and fails to respond in the 'normal' way: he has detached himself from physical desires and from the jealousy associated with love. But this also means that no reconciliation has occurred between Shahriyâr and Shahrazâd, between the female and the male domains. Shahrazâd now appears as an all-encompassing entity, inaccessible to Shahriyâr, who, now, has no means of amalgamating her world with his world.

This lack of reconciliation is expressed in terms of space. In the *1001 Nights* the disrupted spatiotemporal equilibrium is restored after Shahriyâr has accepted Shahrazâd's admonitions and acknowledged the duality of himself and the space which contains his identity. A new congruency is created allowing him to accept his multiple personality which enables him to accept Shahrazâd, as a female component, in his domain. In the play it seems that, after Shahriyâr's effort to appropriate his royal space and keep it to himself, by excluding women and constructing a monolithic vision of himself, it is now Shahrazâd who, by her storytelling, has appropriated the space of authority, monopolizing it with her closed, female, domain. After Shahriyâr has shed his libidinal self, the space of his former self has no longer any markers for defining his identity, as a man or as a king. When Qamar summons him to return from his peregrinations, Shahriyâr responds with the question: 'Where to?'<sup>18</sup> The place of his royal authority is no longer linked to his self-awareness and this is why he is condemned to eternal travelling, exactly as previously, when he had just discovered the queen's betrayal. If the spatial construction of his royalty is broken, only roaming through the world remains, without the paraphernalia of kingship.

The storytelling, then, has failed to restore Shahriyâr's sense of spatial harmony, and has only succeeded in postponing the sense of its loss. After Shahrazâd has finished her stories, this sense of loss is reinforced and, it seems, perpetuated, as Shahriyâr has freed his 'body from the hobbles of a place' and feels in his soul a 'dissolution of the spatial attribute'.<sup>19</sup> One of the functions of the storytelling has been to uphold an illusionary spatial harmony, which created a distinction in Shahriyâr's awareness of an 'inside' dominated by imagination and thought, and a 'reality' outside. Now that Shahrazâd has stopped telling stories, the temporary harmony is broken and Shahriyâr is forced to go out and search for the 'Real'. Here we can again observe a confrontation between constructions of reality - spatial constructions, storytelling - and the Lacanian Real, that which cannot be

structured by narratives and symbolic systems. As a spatial structure, reality is a constructed system, meant to hide or exclude the unnamable, the Real, the Thing that cannot be comprehended. After the discovery of the queen's unfaithfulness, the 'return' of the Real is warded off by the structuring function of Shahrazâd's tales, but once the storytelling has ended, the Real looms up again as an object of irresistible desire. Without the structuring encapsulation achieved by narratives, the Real destroys boundaries and differentiations, and turns the world into a limitless, unordered space, without markers and hierarchies. The only spatial entity which Shahriyâr cannot cast off is his body. Although he has pledged to forsake his physical/spatial identity, he remains locked in the space of his body, which 'space has formed the way a container gives form to the water'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Shahriyâr's life is reduced to an isolated existence within the confines of his body, seemingly without links to the space and bodies that surround him: 'My life took on the shape of the space and time containing my body'.<sup>21</sup> His fundamental question is: 'Do I have any true existence outside of the time and space which encompass my body...'<sup>22</sup>

### ***Shahrazâd* and the story of the 'Queen of the serpents'.**

An analysis of the spatial dimensions of the framestory of the *1001 Nights* and Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's play *Shahrazâd* shows the way in which the alternation of spatial equilibrium and rupture provides the dynamism of the narrative and the explanation of Shahriyâr's state of mind. It explains, in my view, why the play can indeed be seen as a narrative about 'space', as Tawfîq Al-Hakîm has claimed. However, there is more. There is another story of the *1001 Nights* which seems to have influenced *Shahrazâd* and which has a clear intertextual relationship to it: the story of 'the Queen of the serpents'. It is certain that Tawfîq Al-Hakîm knew this tale, since it seems to have inspired his play *The cavemen*, which was published in 1933, one year before *Shahrazâd*. In the 'Queen of the serpents', the main setting is a cave, as in the play, and the queen herself is named Yamlikha, as is the shepherd guarding the cave in Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's play. The interwovenness of the tale with *Shahrazâd* adds another dimension to the play, which is directly related to its dramatic purport. It accentuates the vanity of Shahriyâr's efforts as an inherent part of the human condition and the inescapability of Fate.

In the story of the *Queen of the serpents*<sup>23</sup>, Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn, the son of a Greek philosopher, but now a humble lumberman, is accidentally imprisoned in a cave filled with honey. After some time he finds a hidden exit out of the cave, enters a mysterious landscape, falls asleep, and is woken by the arrival of the serpent queen with her retinue. The serpent queen, named Yamlikha, tells him the story of Bulûqiyâ, an Israelite king, who finds a text in the treasury of his father

in which the future arrival of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned. Bulûqiyâ dons his royal robe and sets out on a journey to meet Muhammad. To achieve this, he has to go to the grave of Solomon, steal his ring, and find the Fountain of Life, in order to live until Muhammad's time. After he fails to obtain the ring, Bulûqiyâ is taken on a journey by the angel Gabriel, who shows him the secrets of the cosmos and the mechanisms governing the natural world. To his great disappointment, however, he is not allowed to meet Muhammad and he returns to his palace to resume his kingship. After he has listened to the stories of the serpent queen, Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn is allowed to go back to the human world, where destiny overtakes him: it turns out that he is destined to cure the sick king, but only by sacrificing the serpent queen, whose body he has to boil. After he has drunk the broth of the boiled serpent, he gains insight in all the sciences of the cosmos and the divine secrets, and suddenly enters into a state of utter bliss.

The parallels between the story of the *Queen of the serpents* and the play *Shahrazâd* are evident. As Bulûqiyâ, Shahrazâd finds a trace of 'truth' intruding into his life. He is subsequently taken on a 'narrative' journey by Shahrazâd, who shows him the marvels of the world and the secrets of human nature. However, these stories do not quench Shahriyâr's thirst, since they fail to reveal to him the ultimate truth which he knows to lie hidden behind the outer appearance of nature. In the story of the serpent queen, Bulûqiyâ is contrasted with Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn, who is of a humble position and is imprisoned in a cave, but is nevertheless afforded a glance into the true nature of things and the hidden forces of spirit and matter. The contrast between the two reveal the ironies of Fate: Bulûqiyâ gives up his kingship and sets out on an arduous journey to learn about the Divine Truth, but fails, whereas Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn, who has refused even to learn a trade, is chosen by destiny to become one of the chosen few to gain esoteric knowledge and power. It is the tragedy of Shahriyâr that, like Bulûqiyâ, it is not his destiny to know the 'truth' that he desperately longs to know, which is, in fact, his only reason to exist. He is obliged to roam forever, bounded by the laws of space and time, without being allowed to overcome these laws and obtain inner enlightenment.

Within this narrative complex, Shahrazâd fulfils the roles of both the angel Gabriel and Yamlikha, who explain the nature of the world to the heroes, by a journey and by storytelling, withholding the ultimate truth. For Shahriyâr, Shahrazâd is his antithesis, his Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn, who has obtained knowledge of everything although she has always been confined to her rooms. She represents a kind of Borgesian 'aleph', a microcosm in which the nature of all things can be seen. She acts with the precise calculation of the celestial bodies and is fin-

ally regarded as a 'great intellect'. Although she denies to hide some secret, she reinforces this image, when she says that if the veil between them were to be removed, he would not be able to bear living with her.<sup>24</sup> Shahrazâd, therefore, is the symbol of Divine Truth, of Yamlikha, and of Muhammad. Her truth is unattainable for some, while others are predestined to obtain it. But it can only be obtained within the cycle of decay and rebirth: the serpent queen has to be sacrificed in order for the secret knowledge to be transferred upon others. Ironically, perhaps, Shahrazâd will have to be killed before the knowledge she represents can be reborn in Shahriyâr.

Not much is known about the sources of the story of the *Queen of the serpents*. It seems likely that it has never been part of an original version of the *1001 Nights*, but has been adapted from earlier texts to fit into the collection. The story of Bulûqiyâ can be found in the ancient collections of stories of the prophets, where it is not embedded in the story of Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn. The latter story shows clear traces of alchemist and neo-platonist influences, with its references to Greek philosophy, various kinds of metals, the cycle of knowledge, the sacrificing of the serpent, the Fountain of Life, the name Yamlikha [Jamblichus'], and the state of blissful insight. These influences are confirmed by a remarkable parallel between the cave of Hâsib Karîm al-Dîn and the cave of the nymphs as described and analyzed in a famous essay by the neo-platonist philosopher Porphyry. The cave of the nymphs - based on an episode of Homer's *Odyssey* - is filled with honey, too, and has two entrances/ exits, one of which may only be used by the chosen few who have gained divine knowledge.<sup>25</sup> At least some works of Porphyry were known in Abbasid times and it is not impossible that the *Cave of the nymphs* was also known in a certain period, although no Arabic translation has survived. More generally, neo-platonist theories have had a profound impact on Islamic philosophy and mysticism,<sup>26</sup> and it seems justified to compare Shahriyâr's tireless quests with the esoteric strands within the Islamic tradition, partly through the story of the *Queen of the serpents*. What Shahriyâr strives for is a unification with the Intellect, which is represented, but perhaps also shielded off, by Shahrazâd.

### Conclusions.

Tawfîq Al-Hakîm mentioned among the influences shaping his play *Shahrazâd* the examples of several European authors and the great Greek playwrights. These influences are, thematically, superseded by the clear reworking of an indigenous, Arabic source, the *1001 Nights*. And ultimately, the play is based on Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's concept of the 'Egyptian tragedy', that is, of man's vain struggle against the confines of space and time that shape his destiny and impose their laws on

him. The complex nature of these narrative sources reflects the intellectual debate in Egypt in the beginning of the 20th century, when a modern literature was moulded on a variety of indigenous, foreign, modern and traditional models. Typically, Tawfîq Al-Hakîm sought to reconcile these various cultural resources which were available to him, as a result of his unique position as an Egyptian intellectual, on the point where Eastern and Western, modern and traditional, spiritual and materialistic tendencies converged. Tawfîq Al-Hakîm's oeuvre is an attempt to weave these strands into a new, original, texture, a landmark in the evolution of a new Egyptian tradition in which universal and local components complement each other.

As far as *Shahrazâd's* theme is concerned, the synthesis between the various influences is found firstly in the conceptualization of space as a constructed reality, which can be fractured, disrupted, or, so to speak, put out of order, subjecting man to the relentless unordered confrontation between his body and the Real. It seems that this is the essence of the tragic component of what Tawfîq Al-Hakîm calls Egyptian tragedy: the way in which space imposes itself upon the human body and the human mind, forcing his psyche to accept a constructed reality or else deliver him to a state of non-identity, undifferentiatedness, amorphousness, without a will to oppose the force of spatiotemporal laws. In the *1001 Nights* Shahriyâr at first refuses to accept a spatial duality which reflects a duality in himself, and instead attempts to enforce a unified space/self upon reality, thus creating a reality in which the harmonious interaction of time and space is disrupted. Shahrazâd tries to make him realize that the co-existence of various components is the essence of human life and a precondition for a coherent vision of the world and of the self, creating a new spatiotemporal balance. In the play *Shahrazâd* this balance is not achieved, since Shahriyâr fails to recognize space as conceptualized in relational terms; he only sees the absolute space dominated by Shahrazâd, without differentiations which would enable him to shape his identity, throwing him into an abyss of Real time and space. His tragedy is that he is forced to move into a world without boundaries, without an aim, but also without a starting-point, a point to return to.

The essence of tragedy, according to Tawfîq Al-Hakîm, is the human struggle against the forces of the Divine, as expressed in the Greek theatrical tradition. In *Shahrazâd*, the essence of the tragic concept must be sought in the relationship between the human soul and its spatial environment, the impossibility of reconciling inner experiences of space with Real space, the inability of humans to accept the artificial constructions of space which mediate between their vision of the world and the incomprehensible Real, which encapsulate the Real and situate

it in a livable reality. For Shahriyâr this mediation has been revealed as false and illusionary, but his intuition of the proximity of the Real gives him the illusion that the Real can be 'known' and 'discovered', instead of only sensed and conjectured. He yearns for a mystical unification which has wiped out his links to reality. Here, the divine forces are not represented by Fate, but by the limits of human knowledge and the discrepancy between knowledge and experience. There is no question of predestination, but of the ultimate boundedness of the human condition. It is man's tragedy that he is essentially unable to combine his experience and his rationalization of the space in which he lives and from which he cannot escape from.

For Shahriyâr, the interlude of storytelling by Shahrazâd has been a kind of *katharsis*, which has radically changed his vision of life. But it is a *katharsis* in the mystical sense, a sudden awareness of a hidden truth which enables him to throw off the chains of material life, of the passions of the body, and the trivialities of social conventions. This sense pushes him into a permanent state of liminality, which prevents him from returning to his former life, but also from being incorporated into some new reality in a new configuration. His metamorphosis is incomplete, his initiation has only detached him from his past, without providing the possibility of a reincorporation. The *katharsis* has effaced the boundaries which are necessary to complete a process of transformation and link it to a structurally coherent reality. Shahriyâr has found some form of insight, but it is the insight that some deeper knowledge exists, not the knowledge itself or the insight that reaching this knowledge is essentially impossible. In this, he resembles Bulûqiyâ, who is aware of a form of truth but is unable to attain it. Tawfîq Al-Hakîm has once remarked that he intended to write another play as a sequence to *Shahrazâd*, entitled the 'Return of Shahriyâr', but that he was unable to conceive the narrative embedding of such a return. In fact, it is Shahriyâr's tragedy that such a return is inconceivable.

## NOTES

- 1 For an introduction to intellectual currents in the nahda period, see A.L. Hourani, *Arabic thought in the liberal age 1798-1939*, London, 1970.
- 2 R. Long, *Tawfiq Al-Hakim. Playwright of Egypt*, London 1979 , p. 13; Tawfîq al-Hakîm, *Sultân al-zalâm*, al-Qâhira, s.d., p. 23.
- 3 W.M. Hutchins, *Plays, prefaces and postscripts of Tawfiq Al-Hakim*, Washington 1981, vol. 1, 'Introduction', p. 6; 'Introduction to King Oedipus', pp. 281-283, 287.

- 4 Long, p. 194; Hutchins, 'Introduction to King Oedipus', pp. 273-5, 277, 280, 283.
5. About the textual history and reception of the *1001 Nights*, see: U. Marzolph/ R. Van Leeuwen, *The Arabian Nights. An Encyclopedia* (forthcoming), which also contains references to the influence of the work on Egyptian theatre.
- 6 S. al-Qalamâwî, *Alf layla wa-layla*, reprint: al-Qâhira 1976.
- 7 Cited in: P. Starkey, *From the Ivory Tower. A Critical Study Tawfiq Al-Hakim*, London 1987, pp. 184-5.
- 8 Long, pp. 8, 86; Starkey, p. 38.
- 9 There are several Arabic editions of the play; references here are to the English translation by W. Hutchins, in: id. (1981).
- 10 Long, p. 132.
- 11 Starkey, p. 41.
- 12 Long, p. 32.
- 13 Hutchins, 'Introduction,' p. 3.
- 14 Starkey, p. 38.
- 15 Id., pp. 43, 127.
- 16 R. Van Leeuwen, *The Poetics of the Journey in the Thousand and One Nights*, in preparation.
- 17 See about these approaches to spatial constructions: M. Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction; Derrida's Haunt*, Cambridge/ London 1997.
- 18 Scene four, Shahrazad, p. 155.
- 19 Scene three; Shahrazad, pp. 152-153.
- 20 Scene seven; id., p. 171.
- 21 Scene seven; id., p. 169.
- 22 Id., p. 169.
- 23 The story of the 'Serpent queen' can be found in the Bûlâq edition, Nights 482-537; see also: Marzolph/ Van Leeuwen.
- 24 Scene two; Shahrazad, p. 146.
- 25 English translation: *Porphyry, The Cave of the Nymphs in the Odyssey* (A rev. text with translation), Buffalo 1969.
- 26 See: M. Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, New York 1983.

## FACES IN THE MIRROR. IMAGES OF *SHEHERAZADE* ON THE EGYPTIAN STAGE

Nehad SELAIHA

It never ceases to amaze me how the popular mind in the Arab world can condone the most atrocious crimes committed by males against females and how lying and wiliness are extolled as feminine virtues and classed under the rubric of wisdom. In a seminar at the AUC last winter, after a lecture by Iraqi scholar Feryal Ghazouli about Sheherazade, Mona Ibrahim, a young assistant professor at Cairo university, wondered aloud about the validity of the image of Sheherazade propagated by *The Nights*. The reforming of the rake theme, familiar in European fiction and drama in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, was here stretched beyond the bounds of credibility. Far from an ordinary rake, Shahrayar was a downright brutal murderer. 'How could a woman tolerate being nightly raped by such a man and then treat him like a baby, sending him to sleep with bedtime stories?' Ibrahim validly asked. The answer was 'fear' and the survival instinct. Sheherazade had to spin out the web of her days with yarns, Ghazouli said.

Though the stories of *The Arabian Nights* have inspired many writers and provided material for scores of films and plays, their narrator took some time to arrive on the scene. The first person to air Sheherazade on the Egyptian stage, as far as I can discover, was Sayed Darwish in a four-act comic operetta that carried her name and for which the pioneering colloquial verse writer, Biram El-Tonsi, wrote the lyrics. It was performed by Darwish's own company in 1919 and was later revived, according to an extant theatre bill, in 1926, under the direction of the first acknowledged Egyptian theatre director, Aziz Eid, with comedian Bishara Wakim (whose lively comic performances are preserved in old movies) and Alia Fawzi in the leading parts. Long before the theme of the good ruler being corrupted by his evil entourage became rampant in the drama of the 1960s, after Nasser's accession to power, El-Tonsi and Darwish presented us with a startling image of Sheherazade as a dissolute queen, spoilt by her vicious, power-grabbing court, and turned into a ruthless autocrat. Rather than spend her nights taming Shahrayar (here conspicuous by his absence) and ridding him of his ferocious blood lust, she amuses herself with chasing after prospective handsome lovers, even as the country faces the threat of foreign invasion. Fortunately, however, Za'bullu, a valiant, virile officer, comes to the rescue, arriving timely on the scene to subject her to a long and tempestuous process of edification which steers the play to a happy end.

Za'boulla, the hero, a simple, upright man of peasant origins, is a budding symbol of the national hero (modelled perhaps on Sa'd Zaghoul – remember 1919 was the year of the famous national popular uprising against the British) and he is deeply in love with one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting, also originally a peasant. When the flighty, selfish and pleasure-loving Sheherazade (a clear symbol of the ruling royal family then) falls in love with him and tries to seduce him with promises of wealth and power, he resists and remains steadfast. Eventually, after many trials and ordeals, he manages to 'knock some sense' into her and she promises to reform, to dismiss her villainous stooges and become a good queen. Salah Abdel-Sabour was to return, years later, to the same skeletal plot-frame in his verse drama *A Princess Waiting* (1971).

In 1934 Tawfiq Al-Hakim dragged Sheherazade onto the stage once more and made her into an emblem of the mystery of life. She was projected purely through Shahrayar's eyes and became the focus of his agonized philosophical-cum-existential quest for the truth and of his reflections on the paradoxes of appearance and reality. In Al-Hakim's hands, the tangible reality of the woman and her solid presence seemed to dissolve into thin air, making her into a diaphanous symbol of the inscrutability of life and the unknowability of the truth. The 'battle of the sexes' theme, which frames her relationship with Shahrayar, both in the *Nights* and in the popular mind, was here waived aside or, rather, transmuted into a juxtaposition of subject and object, of meaning and experience, of reality and representation in the creative mind and subjective consciousness of Shahrayar as El-Hakim's surrogate. A profound theme indeed, but quite unwieldy stage-wise. This may explain why Al-Hakim's *Sheherazade* had to wait until 1966 to make its way to the boards. And even then, when the climate was more tolerant of new theatrical forms and experiments, and despite a good cast headed by Sanaa Gamil and Mohamed El-Sab', and with the brilliant Karam Mutaweh (fresh from his studies abroad) in the director's seat, the play proved baffling and attracted few audiences.

In this respect, Sheherazade fared better with Ali Ahmed Bakatheer (a prolific and unfairly ignored dramatist). In *The Secret of Sheherazade*, performed with great success at the old Opera House in 1953, with Amina Rizq in the title role, the heroine of *The Arabian Nights* occupies the centre of interest and recovers her traditional image as the ideal female who tames with kindness and stoops to conquer. Besides her beauty, wisdom, moral uprightness, eloquence, artistic and literary accomplishments and many seductive arts, she is also a bit of a psychiatrist. Not only does she cure Shahrayar of his sexual impotence (triggered by his wife's adultery and the root cause of his murderous misogyny in the play), she also manages to rid him of his obsessive sense of guilt and to save his soul.

Bakatheer, however was essentially a romantic moralist in an Islamic vein and the psychological perspective of the play remains superficial. The real message, as summed up in the Qur'anic epigraph to the printed text, is simply that it only takes a good woman to reform the worst rake. But even if one swallows this stupendous fallacy, there remains the intractable fact that the rake in question is a homicidal maniac who has nearly decimated the female population of his kingdom. The reader is asked to accept: firstly, that a depraved fiend like Shahrayar is capable of love and repentance and, secondly, that a young woman, let alone an intelligent female whom he drags into his den and rapes, could actually love him. Bakatheer obviously worked from the premise that madness in great men forgives all crimes, especially when the victims are women, and that maleness *per se* excuses everything.

As hero, Shahrayar literally gets away with murder. Bakatheer, however, craftily camouflaged the monstrous side of Shahrayar under the mantle of sexual impotence, confident that his audience, predominantly male with occasionally a sprinkling of brain-washed females, would view it sympathetically as a perfectly acceptable motive for the worst atrocities. Indeed, the play's concentration on sexual impotence and healing largely accounts for its popular success at the time, particularly since the author took all possible precautions not to cause offence or challenge any deep-seated assumptions. It was at once excitingly daring in theme and thoroughly conventional in mental outlook and moral attitude. Not surprisingly, despite many erotic, purple patches and a strong streak of sexual titillation, *The Secret of Sheherazade* maintains a didactic, preachy tone and abounds in moral sentiments.

More irking still is the insistent harping of the text on the blackness of the slave with whom Shahrayar's first wife is suspected of having committed adultery. It brings out all the traditional negative associations of blackness and slavery and seems intended to make the wife's offence appear more heinous than if she had committed it with a free, non-black man. It is tempting and could be worthwhile to ponder the streak of racism strongly discernible in the *Nights* and see if it could be linked with the shameful involvement of Arab merchants in Africa in the slave trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or even before; but this is not the place for it. It is, however, a point to be heeded by future deconstructivists of *The Nights*. One wishes Bakatheer had paid even scant attention to this and other issues, or had not swallowed the conventional attitudes embedded in *The Nights* and in his patriarchal culture in such a wholesale manner, without the slightest degree of critical scrutiny. As it seems, he did neither. In *The Secret of Sheherazade*, it did not seem to matter to him how many innocent women Shahrayar, had killed. The

main thing was to pamper and cure the insane ruler and then everything would be alright.

Worse still, in 1955, Aziz Abaza, a redoubtable poet, wrote a verse drama called *Shahrayar* in which that butcher of a king became the object of desire fought over by both Sheherazade and her sister, Doniazade. Once more, Sheherazade was reduced to a symbol, this time of superior knowledge, while her sister became the embodiment of carnal pleasure. As if a woman could not combine both! And why should women always be condemned by writers to the status of symbols?! The battle between the two sisters over the hoggish sultan results in the conversion of *Shahrayar* to a near mystic and ascetic moralist. It was once more a case of using Sheherazade as a prop on which to project the dilemmas of Arab males and their deeply-divided, fascination-revulsion attitude toward women.

In the 1970s, Sheherazade popped up again in a musical comedy at the Balloon theatre, written by Rashad Rushdi, directed by Galal El-Sharqawi, and starring Libliba. Rushdi was the first dramatist to invest her with a positive political dimension as the symbol of Egypt. Refreshingly, she escapes the palace of *Shahrayar* (the corrupt ruler and symbol of Nasser's autocratic regime) and teams up with the popular hero, El-Shatir Hassan (played by comedian Mohamed Awad) to expose the corruption of the state. The production had a distinct Egyptian flavour and atmosphere and was rife with theatrical, topical allusions. It felt as if Sheherazade had suddenly been transposed from Haroun El-Rashid's opulent court in 8<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad to a popular quarter in present-day Cairo and reborn as a typical Egyptian *bint* balad.

In the 1980s, Sheherazade not only kept her political dimension, but acquired a definite feminist one. In a verse drama staged at the Youth theatre, Sheherazade finally rebelled and decided, at the hands of playwright and poet, Fatma Qandil, to cast off her long-inherited robes and appear as a real woman and a revolutionary. Qandil's play made her into a thorough rebel who denounces both her husband's male chauvinism and his despotic rule. Rather than indulge *Shahrayar*'s whims or bewitch him with her tales, she conspires against him and leads a revolution that eventually destroys him. Predictably, this new image of the legendary charmer did not meet with favour. The heroine of the *Nights* was projected here as an outspoken feminist who reads *against* the text of *The Nights* in order to undermine the image imposed upon her by its successive authors, or by the popular mind in general. In Qandil's hands, the tales were clearly interpreted as a political ruse, a manoeuvre to hoodwink the tyrant *Shahrayar* and lull him into a false sense of security. Once more Sheherazade was allowed to escape his iron

grip and redefine herself as a social and ideological rebel and militant feminist.

No one however has gone as far as Nahid-Na'ila Naguib in ideologically deconstructing the frame-story of *The Nights*. Naguib takes up the character of Sheherazade and gives it a new, startling interpretation. She begins with the premise that mental and physical coercion cannot breed sane characters. Imagine a woman living for years in total oppression, under fear of death, and having to succumb daily to sexual and mental abuse. What can you expect? In the *Harem*, leading a life of idle luxury and sensual indulgence, under fear of death for disobedience, women can only rot, Naguib argues. How can you expect wisdom out of such fetid, paltry stuff. Naguib presents us with a Sheherazade who, after years of imprisonment in the court of Shahrayar, of impotent inaction, churning out silly tales, has become thoroughly corrupted. She is projected as scheming, lustful, greedy and morally degenerate. This new image, however repellent, has a lot to justify it in terms of realistic psychology. It is only logical to assume that a life of isolation, bored indolence and cloying sensuality can eventually erode the toughest mind. Needless to say, Naguib's message did not prove palatable to the censor who refused permission for the text to be publicly performed. When the writer asked for an explanation, she was told she had tampered with the national heritage, distorting one of its hallowed symbols. Indeed, it is doubtful that any play by a man or a woman which dares controvert the traditional image of Sheherazade will see the limelight or be sympathetically viewed if it does.

Ezzat El-Amir's *The Reign of Sheherezade* (also of the seventies, but staged at the National in December, 1994) attempted to be bold without being outrageous, steering a middle course between the traditional view of the character and the political interpretation she received in the 1970s and 1980s. It presents us with a Sheherazade who is at once a freedom fighter and a typical slave girl, a rebel, spear-heading a revolution against a despotic tyrant, and a faithful, loving wife to that same deeply hated and universally resented and damned tyrant. The compromise does not work and the old formula of the conflict between love and duty which the author calls to his aid fails to reconcile the two faces of the heroine.

Indeed, in her performance of the title role (her third stage appearance), film star, Raghda, seemed to be hopping between two different texts all the time, while Ahmed Maher's sudden plunges, as Shahrayar, from light-hearted comedy into the depths of melodrama were quite disconcerting. They were at their best in the battle-of-wits scenes, or when engaged in sexual bantering. For the rest, their performances seemed belaboured and artificial. But one could hardly blame them; the text itself is more like a debate than a drama and, as such, could only

sustain the interest of the audience for half an hour. Instead, it was stretched over two hours and embroidered with many songs and dances which served only to repeat the play's already obvious and banal political message. Slides were used too, as well as a short puppet show and, at one point, director Mahmoud El-Alfi drowned the stage in smoke – all in the interest of visual vivacity; but nothing – not even Raghda's voluptuous beauty and Ahmed Maher's vivid ranting – could relieve the boredom as the minutes ticked away. At the heart of the play one sensed an absence. It was not simply that Sheherazade was split down the middle, she had also been made into a mere mechanical and most unconvincing mouth-piece for the author's somewhat stale political ideas and reduced to a lifeless symbol of the nation and the guardian-angel of Shahrayar, the ruler.

In February 1995, within two months of El-Amir's play, Sheherazade surfaced again at Al-Hanager Centre in Abu El-Ela El-Salamouni's *Diwan Al-Baqar* (The Chronicle of Cows). This time, however, she appeared incognito, as Norhan, the Europe-educated, intellectual daughter of an honest, enlightened vizier in some imaginary country. Like Sheherazade, the westernized Norhan, played by actress Nahid Rushdi, tries to use her wits and narrative powers to knock some sense into the head of the sultan who had fallen under the spell of a Tartuffe-like sanctimonious rogue who had virtually usurped his powers, assumed his authority, and turned his people, through his wiles and frenzied preaching, into a herd of cows. In Karam Metaweh's production, her efforts land her in deep waters. She ends up on the stake, condemned to death by fire. In the original text, however, she is saved when, in a desperate, last bid for survival, she defies the charlatan's hypocritical, fanatical sermons by appealing to the people's inherent love of dancing. She urges a former *ghaziyyah* (a kind of gypsy dancer) to tear off the veil she had been forced to wear and display her banned art. The *ghaziyyah* obliges and all is saved. As an antidote to bigotry and fanaticism, her dancing proves more effective than all Norhan's stories. Talk of the power of the body!

Three months later, in May the same year, and at the same venue, French-trained actor and director Gamil Rateb staged a revival of Tawfiq Al-Hakim's 1935 *Sheherazade*. The production was a repeat of an earlier one Rateb did in Paris with French actors and bore the marks of the French classical tradition – the cool, elegant surface, the intense passion, the simple, austere design and the resonant vocalization. In it, Al-Hakim's seemingly dry, intellectual drama came alive and gained in urgency and tragic stature. The rigidly schematic conflict between the male and female principles, the mind and the body, essence and transient manifestation was charged with visual poetry and intense emotion. Rateb distilled the

two major extended metaphors in the text – the Circle and the Mirror – and reproduced them visually on stage in the set design, the lighting and the movement.

Recently, on the last two days of the Independent “light comedy” festival, held at Al-Hanager in the first week of July this year, Effat Yehya and Nehad Abul-Enein staged a play-reading of a new venture into the magical realm of Sheherazade. *Once Upon a Time*, written collaboratively by Yehya and Tunisian actress Amel Fadji, a member of Fadil Gu’aibi’s prestigious *Familia* company, features an imaginary meeting between the Arabian princess and her Greek, oppositional counterpart, Antigone. The project germinated in an international symposium on Greek Drama and *The Arabian Night*, held in Marakesh, in the year 2000. At the end of the two-week grueling lecture-sessions, as Effat tells me, the participants were given four days to prepare an intercultural dialogue, in dramatic form, and asked to team up with one or two members of the group to produce something that related to the event. In the early 1990s, Yehya had built a play, *Desertscape*, round the first act of Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls*. The idea of women from different ages and diverse geographical and cultural background meeting outside the ordinary geo-temporal frame had intrigued her and resulted in an intelligent adaptation which brought together Churchill’s Pope Joan (a brilliant scholar who passed herself off as a man, was appointed Pope and killed when she became pregnant) side by side with Sheherazade’s docile and lovely “Anis El-Galis,” the perfect embodiment of the ideal odalisque. No wonder Yehya jumped at the proposition: to stage an encounter in the afterlife between Sheherazade and a Greek character was an irresistible opportunity.

The first draft of the dramatic project, according to Yehya, did not focus on the stories of either Sheherazade or Antigone. Rather, it sought to distill the essence of both, and combine the image of the female rebel with the theme of taming a powerful, possessive male in a third fictional figure drawn from *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, a book of fables by the 8<sup>th</sup> century Abbasid Persian writer, Ibn Al-Muqaffa’. It told the story of a Moorish princess who had mystical longings and succeeded in taming the king who fell in love with her. Rather than join his *Harem* to entertain him with her feminine charms or stories, she managed to persuade him to allow her to go her own way and remain alone in the desert, dancing under the stars, singing to the moon and conversing with the deity. This initial draft of the project found favour with the sponsors of the workshop and in July, 2002, Yehya was allowed one week in Paris with Fadji to develop it further. The two women worked closely for that space of time and the result was a highly poetic text in terms of construction and verbal texture, but somewhat puzzling in its ideological underpinnings.

With exquisite costumes and a few carefully chosen props and accessories – a dainty teapot, burning incense in an antique dish, enveloping the gallery at Al-Hanager in a grayish-blue aromatic haze, and traditional Turkish music playing softly in the background – Effat and Nehad read or recited their parts, emphasizing the points of contact and juxtaposition between the two legendary figures. The stories of both women – Antigone, the woman who never said ‘yes’, and Sheherazade, the woman who never said ‘no’ – are foregrounded; and though they differ in course, detail and direction, they ultimately constitute two variations on the theme of the oppressed woman. Paradoxically, by the end of the dialogue and intersecting monologues, Antigone’s ‘no’ and Sheherazade’s ‘yes’ become ambivalent. Antigone never said ‘yes’ but failed to get her way; Sheherazade never said ‘no’ and yet achieved what she set out to do. Both women, however, are losers. Though sexually surfeited, Sheherazade died just as unfulfilled as the virgin Antigone. Both lived in the shadow of death, which forms a major point of intersection between the two stories.

It was to save her father, her sister and herself from death that Sheherazade threw herself into Shahrayar’s arms, and her cryptic allusion to her brutal rape at his hands on their first night together – in the form of a few splintered verbal images – is quite painful. More shattering still is the fact that when he raised his sword at dawn to murder her, she clung to him desperately to arouse him sexually once more though she was, as she admits, in great pain. The stories came later, she confides to Antigone, and, ironically, what freed her finally from her bondage and the fear of death was the sight of her father lying dead. Antigone, on the other hand, had to bear the burden of the curse put upon her parents and all the deaths it entailed until it was finally her turn. Despite her long acquaintance with death and her heroic, rebellious confrontation with Creon, the text vividly portrays her panic when she finds herself entombed alive.

What *Once Upon a Time* ultimately seems to suggest is that, in the context of a patriarchal culture, whether a woman says ‘yes’ as a rule and succumbs to the dictates of the status quo or opts for clear, straightforward opposition, she is doomed. Both women were deprived of the joy of life early on in youth. Antigone never got to enjoy Haemon’s love and Yehya’s Sheherazade had to give up Qamar El-Zaman, the man she really loved. By way of vicarious compensation, she wove him into her stories and slept with him in her imagination, using the body of Shahrayar as a surrogate. When Antigone asks her if in time she came to love the tyrant, she simply says: “I loved his body.” Equally, Shahrayar, as she admits, never really knew her. He slept with a different woman every night, all fictional fabrications.

But enchanting and occasionally gently humorous as this imaginary encounter was, I could not at the time help feeling a bit uneasy about the two women's obsession with their fathers and their total oblivious disregard of their mothers. It felt as if, like the mythical goddess, Athena, reportedly conceived in the thigh of Zeus, both women were engendered exclusively by men. And yet, at one point, Yehya's Sheherazade tells Antigone that when her father died she felt the load of fear lift off her shoulders. She went to Shahrayar and boldly told him that from now on there would be no more stories. She wasn't afraid then; nothing seemed to matter; she didn't even feel angry; anger seemed such a useless luxury, she says. When Shahrayar begs her for one last story after which he will set her free, she tells her own and he falls silent. I remembered Tunisian actress, Galila Bakaar, telling us during a meeting of creative Arab women in theatre, held in Susa some years ago, that she could never really come into her own as an actress and feel free with her body on stage while her father was alive. I think Effat's Sheherazade was freed in a similar way. When Antigone asks her to forgive as she has forgiven all who have wronged her, the woman who never said 'no' stoutly declares that she will never, ever forgive. To do so would mean unlearning the lesson and going back into bondage.

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## OEDIPUS: A HISTORY OF REWRITINGS

### EGYPTIAN OEDIPUSES. COMEDIES OR TRAGEDIES?

Marvin CARLSON

Sophocles's *Oedipus* occupies a predominant position in the Western theatre. Aristotle's *Poetics*, the founding text of Western literary and dramatic theory, holds it up as the model of dramatic writing, and in part due to the influence of Aristotle, it has from the Renaissance onward been considered a model of dramatic structure and concentration. In the Western tradition only Shakespeare's *Hamlet* rivals it as an indispensable dramatic work. And yet there is a strange contradiction in this reputation. Unlike *Hamlet*, Sophocles' *Oedipus* is rarely presented on Western stages. *Antigone*, *Medea*, and even such difficult works as *The Oresteia* or *The Bacchae* are much more often staged. Even stranger, despite the high regard in which it is held, *Oedipus* has never served as a model for a major or particularly successful later reworking by a European or American dramatist, unlike *Antigone*, *Medea*, *Orestes* or *Electra*, who have appeared in countless retellings, among them works by the most respected Western dramatists.

The Arab, and especially the Egyptian dramatic tradition provides an interesting contrast to this, since here we can find a number of powerful retellings of the Oedipus story by some of the Arab theatre's leading dramatists. Today I wish to examine briefly four major Oedipus plays from Egypt, in order to suggest what use Egyptian dramatists have made of this story and perhaps, at least in part, why it has been more attractive and useful to them than it has to European dramatists. As a part of this project I wish also to address the interesting question of tonality, since in the European tradition *Oedipus* has been almost universally regarded as the ideal model for tragic writing, while in the Egyptian tradition that tragic dimension has been seriously qualified, in some cases turning to outright comedy, even farce.

The first modern treatment of Oedipus in the Egyptian theatre was the work of Egypt's pre-eminent dramatist, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, published in 1949. In an important preface to this play, the dramatist suggested both what attracted him to this myth and how his own treatment differed from that of his classic model. In

his preface Al-Hakim did not devote much attention to the specific case of the lack of interest in the Oedipus story itself among later Western dramatists, but rather dealt with it, as Aristotle had, as the central example of Greek tragedy, whose decline in the West is the major focus of this essay. The Greek concept of tragedy, Al-Hakim argued, was based upon a religious sense, upon man's feeling that he is not alone in existence. As this religious conviction declined in the West, the idea and practice of tragedy declined with it. Thus the last age of tragedy, properly understood, was the seventeenth century, when Corneille and Racine still retained a remnant of the religious feeling necessary for this genre. As Western man came to believe in no god other than himself, and in an existence bounded by his state, his government, his leaders and his authority, the possibility of tragedy disappeared entirely. However, Al-Hakim, an Eastern author, still retaining something of the religious sense lost in the West, felt an affinity with ancient tragedy that his contemporary European colleagues had lost. This in turn led him to explore the possibility of creating a new tragedy seeking to recapture the spirit of the original drawing upon different, but somewhat parallel cultural sources, combining Islamic and European thought, and recognizing human error without renouncing his divine inspiration. Instead of a struggle between man and fate, Al-Hakim suggested a struggle between what he called fact and truth, what his translator W.M. Hutchins has called "the subjective reality of the heart and the objective truth of the intellect." Here, I recognise a strong similarity, to tragic action as discussed at this conference by Professor Boullart. In principle it is possible to be good, but in reality it is not. This is a theme central to Al-Hakim's work, from his first major success, *The Sleepers in the Cave* onward. In *Oedipus* the love of Oedipus and Jocasta and the achievement of Oedipus form the subjective reality, which is challenged by Oedipus's discovery of the objective truth of his past and parentage.

The result of this orientation emphasizes human, not divine operations, but still retains a relationship with the latter. Al-Hakim calls theatre based on human activity material theatre and that based upon the activity of thought mental theatre. He wanted his Arabic *Oedipus* to be a material, human drama, one, we might say, which dealt more with politics than with philosophy, but he also wanted it to have a 'veil of Arab mentality.' Through this combination, Al-Hakim suggested, the Arabic theatre might in fact be able to achieve something closer to the original spirit of Greek tragedy subsequently lost in the Western theatre. In Al-Hakim's *Oedipus* the action is driven by a rather uneasy mixture of human and supernatural forces. On the human level, the first act reveals that it was the scheming Tiresias who poisoned Laius' mind with the prophecy of a murderous son and who later converted Oedipus into a supernatural hero by turning his conquering

of an ordinary lion into an encounter with an imaginary beast asking a riddle invented by Tiresias himself. All his schemes were undertaken to disrupt the natural lineage and to institute instead a system which would accept the most deserving and heroic person as leader, regardless of background. So Tiresias becomes a political manipulator and idealist, not a religious visionary. The second act is the closest to Sophocles, with Creon's report of the oracle and the revelation of Oedipus' past by the shepherds. The third act returns to Al-Hakim's own concerns, with Oedipus arguing for the fact of his love for Jocasta and their children while she counters with the truth of the newly revealed past. Unable to break free of that past, Jocasta kills herself, and it is more in reaction to her death than to the revelations themselves that Oedipus blinds himself and embraces exile. The contrasting pulls of the fatalistic Greek original and the human operations of Al-Hakim's reconceived Tiresias and Oedipus give the play a curious doubled effect, not only in terms of action, but even, to some extent, of tonality. This is most clearly expressed by Tiresias, in the final line of the second act, when the contrasting human and divine actions have both been fully laid out. 'With respect to Oedipus and Jocasta, it is a tragedy. With respect to me a comedy. You who rule this palace must shed tears. I am obliged to laugh.' I will return later to this striking an unexpected evocation of a comedic tonality.

One way to reconcile the apparently somewhat contradictory operations of Tiresias's manipulations in Al-Hakim's first act and the operations of fate or destiny in his second has been suggested by Sami Munir, in his 1979 book, *The Egyptian Theatre after World War II*, which advanced a specific political reading of Al-Hakim's version of *Oedipus*. Munir read the play in the light of one of the major political events in Egypt in the years just before it was written. Six years earlier, in February of 1942, British troops surrounded King Farouk's palace and forced him to appoint a Wafdi government headed by El-Nahhas Pasha. Munir argues that Al-Hakim's play looks back to this turning point in modern Egyptian history, with Oedipus representing the Wafdi leader, whose claim to leadership is legitimate, but who forfeits that legitimacy, and the support of the populace, by gaining power through the misrepresentations and threats of force of Tiresias, who represents in this reading the occupying British.

Another major Egyptian *Oedipus* play appeared the same year as Tawfiq Al-Hakim's version. This was *The Tragedy of Oedipus* by Ali Ahmad Bakatheer. Although Al-Hakim insisted that an Islamic spirit was critical to his concept of drama, Bakatheer was even more centrally devoted to using drama to express Islamic beliefs. As a result, his *Oedipus*, while arguably less successful theatrically than Al-Hakim's, presents a much clearer and more direct social and politi-

cal statement. Nehad Selaiha has noted that Bakatheer's *Oedipus* was written in the wake of the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine in 1948, a defeat which caused Bakatheer enormous emotional suffering, and she has suggested that his Islamic/political *Oedipus* was his response to this. She points out the close relationship between this play, the intensification of the Islamic movement in the late 1940s, and Sayed Qutb's book, *Social Justice in Islam*, which argued for the development of a modern Islamic theory of social justice to counter the rising tide of atheistic Marxism in the Arab world. This argument clearly appealed to Bakatheer, deeply committed both to Islam and to Arab nationalism. The villain in Bakatheer's play is not Tiresias, as in Al-Hakim, but a new major character, the wily, unprincipled high priest and political leader Luskias. Tiresias, on the contrary, is a kind of visionary prophet, who speaks in a literary style strongly suggesting the Koran and who preaches submission to the will of Allah. He has been banished from the state by Luskias and the corrupt priests of the Temple, who fear his honesty. These two struggle over the soul of Oedipus and of the Theban people. Oedipus begins as a kind of parody Marxist, denouncing religion, appropriating the goods of the temple to distribute them to the people, and refusing to listen to the arguments of Tiresias. Tiresias reveals to Oedipus that the high priest has been manipulating events, creating the prophesy that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother, and then arranging events so that Oedipus would kill Laius and become king. When Oedipus confronts the high priest, Luskias confesses all, but threatens to reveal the prophesy and Laius' murder by Oedipus unless Oedipus returns the temple's property and banishes Tiresias. When Oedipus refuses to give in, the high priest exposes him, but the manipulations of the high priest are in turn exposed when the King of Corinth and the two shepherds arrive to support Tiresias' story. The high priest is condemned to death and the people beg Oedipus to remain as king. Oedipus, however, decides instead to devote himself to religious study and total submission to the will of Allah, the only real hope for himself and for social justice for the people.

Although Bakatheer calls his work a tragedy, it is in fact much closer than that of Al-Hakim to comedy, if not in tonality, at least in the Dantean sense of a narrative that ends in redemption for its protagonist. The same is true of the next major Egyptian version of this story, by Fawzi Fahmi, which was written, like the earlier versions, in the wake of a major military setback for Egypt, this time the 1967 war. Following Egypt's defeat, Nasser had resigned, but resumed the nation's leadership at popular insistence. Fahmi's *Oedipus*, called *The Return of the Absent*, was written just after these events, in 1968. Like that of Bakatheer, Fahmi's *Oedipus* is distinctly political in nature, and is clearly much more concerned with the proper qualities and conduct of a leader than with such matters as

prophesies, plagues, or incest. Its hero is clearly modeled on Nasser, who is much closer to the Oedipus with which Bakatheer begins than to the religious convert with which he ends. Like the previous Egyptian Oedipuses, Fahmi's hero is an honest and dedicated man surrounded by a court steeped in corruption and intrigue. At first, like Bakatheer and Al-Hakim's heroes, he attempts to solve his nation's problems single-handedly, hiding the corruption from the people and from an innocent young woman who loves him. Finally, however, he undergoes a conversion, this time political rather than religious. He challenges the fatalistic course of the traditional myth, as Al-Hakim's Oedipus wished to do, but in fact could not, and instead of blinding himself, which Fahmi relates to closing his eyes to the corruption of the court, he reveals the system's failures to the people and embarks on a new course of purified political action for himself and for his nation. Despite its sympathetic depiction of the Nasser-like hero, Fahmi's play was apparently considered too severe in its critique of the government as a whole, and it was not allowed public performance until 1977, when it enjoyed a great success at Egypt's National Theatre.

The next major Egyptian version of this story was created in 1970, two years after that of Fahmi. This version, by Ali Salem, well known in Egypt as a comic dramatist, was the first to frankly call itself a comedy, but despite its more comedic tone in fact ended in a distinct dark note. Ali Salem's *The Comedy of Oedipus* was also the first reworking that, although it used the major characters and basic situation of the Greek myth, actually set it not in the Greek Thebes, but in the Egyptian one, thus making the reference to local politics even more direct. In this version Tiresias plays the role of the chorus, but less the traditional role of the Greek chorus than the sort of modern adaptation of such a chorus as we find, for example in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, a figure that provides background and most important commentary on the implications of the action. In the play's opening speech Tiresias addresses the audience directly: 'Gentlemen—you who live in this city. Let me tell you the story of another city. The story of Thebes—Thebes, the bride of the Nile, the capital of the ancient world.' Thus at the outset the story of Oedipus is displaced from its Greek location to the even more famous Egyptian namesake (an easy shift, since I often have students who think the Sophoclean play in fact takes place in the Egyptian city). It is immediately clear however that we are dealing with the same or a very similar story, since Teiresias informs us that this Thebes also is suffering from the depredations of a Sphinx, who is killing all travelers who cannot solve its riddle. This Thebes also has suffered the loss of a king mysteriously killed at a nearby crossroads, but that part of the legend is not at all developed by Ali Salem. His Oedipus is no mysterious stranger but an average citizen of Thebes, albeit a particularly clever one, the

town chess champion. The first response of the town is to send out to confront the beast the most distinguished professors from the university, all of which are eaten. Tiresias argues in vain that this strategy precisely suits the goal of the beast, who, after devouring one by one the cleverest people in the city, will more easily destroy the foolish ones who are left. He urges the people instead to go out and confront the beast as a group. His advice is not heeded, and indeed Thebes' chief of police Awalih, argues his arrest as a troublemaker. Awalih plays the role of the villain in this piece, but he is not a cynical and imaginative plotter like the Al-Hakim's Tiresias or Bakatheer's Luskias, but a rather more modern figure, an unprincipled thug who puts his machinery of torture and oppression, and his already prepared list of political suspects at the service of whoever happens to come to power. When the people refuse to rise to Tiresias's challenge, and Creon, the military leader, also demurs, Oedipus, a commoner, but reportedly the shrewdest of his class, steps forward and offers to kill the Sphinx and advance the civilization of Thebes if he is made King and allowed to marry Queen Jocasta. All consent to this except Tiresias, who once again urges the people to solve their problems collectively rather than appealing to some heroic leader. Once again his advice is ignored. Oedipus goes out alone, and returns, apparently having killed the beast. Made King, Oedipus begins to create inventions to improve the life of the Theban people, but these are turned to commercial ends by the Theban capitalist Onah and, even more dangerously, the high priest and Dean of the University Horemheb, claims to have found proof that Oedipus is descended from the gods, like all the pharaohs. Everywhere songs, plays, and popular tales celebrate the 'one who killed the beast' and whenever Oedipus attempts to speak to the public, shouts of 'You're the one who killed the beast' drown out his words. Awalih and Jocasta resent Oedipus' growing power, but cannot find a way to attack him until again a beast appears outside the walls, reported by some to be a new beast and by others the original beast, never in fact killed. This time Oedipus urges the people to listen to the renewed pleas of Tiresias that they confront the beast themselves, rather than rely on a hero who must some day inevitably die. Inspired by his words, the people rush out, but instead of the conclusion that one might expect in viewing this play either as a comedy or a political allegory (and it of course has strong features of both) the people are defeated by the beast and Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias are left, in the closing scenes, to come to terms with this disaster. Neither Creon's military skill nor Oedipus' brilliance have prepared their people for this encounter. How can such a failure be explained? Once again, it is the *raisonneur* Tiresias who provides the answer. By allowing Aliwah, the master of repression, to continue to operate during his regime, Oedipus has subjected his people to the corrosive operations of fear, and this fear has prevented the Theban people from ever realizing their true potential. Oedipus, his sight

mysteriously fading, leaves the palace to seek both literal and metaphorical enlightenment. Creon, determined to set an example to the people, rushes out alone to his death, and over his body Tiresias pronounces a moral, that Creon has sacrificed himself to show others that in death Man loses nothing but fear, that ‘annihilation is preferable to a life threatened by the Sphinx.’ Tiresias concludes with advice about the reception of his story. Although it may have provoked its audience to laughter, he ends “I swear to you by all the gods that that was not my intention.”

There is clearly a close similarity between Ali Salem’s *Oedipus* and President Nasser. And Oedipus’s exhortations to the people late in the play to become self-reliant since he would not be with them forever took on a special resonance in 1970, the year of the play’s publication as well as of the President’s death. Nevertheless, despite the enormous achievements of Salem’s *Oedipus*, he is a less commanding figure than any of his Egyptian predecessors, not only because he is the only actual commoner, but because he fades entirely from the play’s consciousness at the end, giving way to a focus on the people. Tiresias makes this point clearly: ‘It is not important that we know what happened to Oedipus....Now Thebes will belong forever to its people.’ Given this new emphasis, it is perhaps disturbing that the people’s first unified action should end in defeat, but I would argue that the agony of the 1967 war haunts this play, as it haunted Fahmi’s darker version two years before. This time, however, the darkness is alleviated by the hope of a brighter future, since the people of Thebes have learned from their suffering, have learned to move beyond their fear of the enemy outside the city walls as well as their subservience to a presumed savior within their city. ‘From suffering comes wisdom,’ sang the Greek tragic chorus, speaking however of the wisdom of the suffering hero. In Salem’s modern political parable the focus moves to the more important project of enlightening an entire people.

The shifting tonalities of the various Egyptian *Oedipus* plays might seem to suggest that Al-Hakim’s project to recover the tragic vision within an Egyptian context has not succeeded, but I think such a conclusion would be far too simplistic. There is already a distinct political orientation in Al-Hakim’s own version, an orientation which becomes more pronounced in subsequent versions and which is surely the most striking feature of these four plays taken as a whole. Does this mean that this group of distinguished Egyptian dramatists have succumbed to the same anti-tragic orientation that Al-Hakim found dominating modern European dramatists, based on a belief ‘that there is nothing but man in this existence—his state, his government, his leaders and his authority.’ Surely this cannot be the case with so religious an author as Bakatheer, nor do I think it

is true of Fahmi or Ali Salem. In all of these authors I think can be traced some version of Al-Hakim's struggle between fact and truth, a recognition of the divine spark that gives hope in the face of the crushing reality of human corruption and the most difficult physical circumstances.

Thus, even though these dramas move toward comedy, or at least tragicomedy, such generic distinctions are less important than the fact that they all participate in the exploration of the most serious questions of human action and responsibility. In so doing, they have shown a way that the ancient story of *Oedipus* can be made again relevant to the most contemporary audiences. The contrast of the fortunes of this story on the modern stages of Europe and of Egypt could not be more striking. Al-Hakim was quite correct in noting that in Europe the few modern reworkings have been specialized experiments experiments like the nihilistic and affected version of Cocteau or the cold and abstract version of Gide, which Al-Hakim rightly criticizes for its purely intellectual approach. The Egyptian versions have an intensity, a richness, and a resonance in the life of the society that have proven far more successful and central to the theatrical life of the culture.

It would be encouraging to hope that these Egyptian dramas might provide a model and an inspiration for European authors to find a way to revitalize their own relationship to the ancient story of Oedipus, so widely venerated but so infrequently imitated or even presented on stage. It may be, unhappily, that Al-Hakim is correct—that contemporary Western culture is so focused upon man and the material that the spark of divinity that still exists in Islamic culture allows Egyptian dramatists to reconnect with this myth and particularly to find it a relevance to current political and social concerns that is simply no longer available to the West. Still, as a Western theatre-goer and theatre scholar, I hope that the dramatists of my own culture can find some way to achieve something akin to the fresh insights the Egyptian dramatists have provided into this ancient story. The West is well provided with its own troubled leaders, its own dissatisfied and suffering peoples, its own misunderstood and ignored prophets, and perhaps especially today, its own destructive fears of the threatening Sphinxes that many in the West are certain lurk outside the walls of their obsessively defended cities. All these contemporary echoes suggest that Western dramatists today could again profit from a return to the story of Oedipus as these imaginative Egyptian dramatists have done.

## SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS* AND CONFLICTS OF IDENTITY IN POST-COLONIAL CONTEXTS

Lorna HARDWICK

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is an investigation of past events and identities that are apparently unknown but are partly suspected and partly suppressed. The *past* history of Oedipus is something that is also *present*; it has to be confronted. Ironically, the impact of Freud's psychoanalytic theory on modern conceptions of Oedipus has sometimes been used to claim that it is not easy to rewrite or adapt Sophocles' play in the context of modern political debates.<sup>1</sup> Yet the performance history of the play attests to its potential for radical political and social critique.<sup>2</sup> Adaptations of Sophocles' play in the last fifty years have built on its potential to say the unsayable and have explored culturally and politically dangerous or controversial material. Important examples include Ola Rotimi's *The Gods are not to Blame* (1968) in which the play became an analogue for the internal conflicts in Africa, especially the Biafran war. More recently, Rita Dove's *The Darker Face of the Earth* (published 1994, first performed at the Oregon Festival in 1996 and subsequently at the Royal National theatre in London) set the story in an ante-bellum cotton plantation in the southern states of the USA and explored the institution of slavery as the source of pollution. Incest was replaced as a focus by miscegenation.<sup>3</sup> In film, the Columbian production *Edipo Alcalde* (*Mayor Oedipus*, 1996), with screen-play by the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Gabriel Marquez, relocated the story in present-day war-torn Columbia with the country's civil strife corresponding to the Theban plague. Thus the performance history of the play defies cultural stereotyping and exemplifies rewriting in the context of the moment.

The play has proved no less fertile as a field for debate by theorists and critics. Charles Segal has pointed to the ways in which Sophocles' play has come to be regarded virtually as a source for the Oedipus myth as well as a version of it.<sup>4</sup> Levi-Strauss has analysed the myth in terms of its mediation of opposites, Vernant has grounded it historically as a treatment of political excess and tyranny. Girard has focused on the myth's exploration of violence and its control. There have also been discussions that use the myth itself to critique or extend Freudian theory. Lacan has related the Freudian notion of the unconscious to the discourse of the Other which is misunderstood or denied by the conscious self.

Deleuze and Guattari have offered a critique of 'the imperialism of Oedipus' as an influence on every area of life, including politics and global economic power.<sup>5</sup>

Against this background of performative and theoretical diversity, I propose to examine the potential of the play for the identification, interrogation and transformation of fissures in national, cultural and moral senses of identity in relation to post-colonial situations. Because each post-colonial history is different I have chosen to focus in some detail on the formal, linguistic and contextual aspects of one example, the *Oedipus* written by David Greig and staged by theatre babel in Scotland in 2000, directed by Graham McLaren. The theme of this conference in Gent invites us to read Oedipus as a way into discussion of cultural differential thinking. This theme suggests reflection on differential thinking within cultures as well as between them. It opens the way to questioning monolithic notions of culture and to the identification of points of stress and starting points for realignment. An understanding of this kind of cultural differentiation, of sensitivity to uncertainties and dilemmas and to the masking of the past in the present may perhaps lead to communication across cultural groupings as well as within them.

My framework for this paper is therefore four-fold:

- 1) Sophocles' play, with its outsider/foreigner who is not and its mystery of self-discovery is a rich field for exploring modern crises of identity and self-recognition - political and cultural as well as psychological.
- 2) Modern staging of Greek drama is a significant means of exploring post-colonial situations. Greek drama is both tainted and empowering through its place in colonial education and yet paradoxically is liberated from that context through its exploitation by post-colonial writers. Recent research on post-colonial writing and classical material has challenged facile identification of Greek culture with the value systems of its appropriators, Western or otherwise, and has drawn out the distinctions between Greek humanism and colonial cultures.<sup>6</sup>
- 3) Colonisation and Decolonisation have many phases. 'Decolonisation of the mind', to borrow the term used by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, may begin while physical colonisation is still in place.<sup>7</sup> Equally, the process may be hard and long-drawn out, continuing long after liberation. Decolonisation of the mind is important among both the colonisers and the colonised and also those who occupy the space between.
- 4) When comparing source text and adaptation, the formal conventions are as important as the myth and the director-led aspects of staging. It is the

interaction of the form, language and context of performance that gives tragedy its capacity for radical critique.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is a prime example of a text of central cultural dominance (it underlays the Aristotelian paradigm for Greek tragedy) which nevertheless becomes the vehicle for challenging dominance. In translated and adapted form it has become a metaphor for the fraught discovery and exposure of enslavers and colonisers. Here, I want to focus on a less obvious aspect of the play's capacity as an agent for the decolonisation of the mind and to suggest that among the certainties challenged by *Oedipus* are those of unexamined political and cultural origins and of easy distinction between colonisers and colonised. The play was a central text for the showcase in Glasgow, Scotland, in the year 2000, when three leading Scottish playwrights were commissioned (supported by a grant from the National Lottery) to adapt Greek tragedies as a mark of the flourishing of theatre arts in the years before and following Scottish devolution.

Devolution of most aspects of self-government in Scotland came about after the referendum of 1997 and the elections of 1999 as a result of which the Scottish Parliament was reconvened after a gap of almost 300 years. The previous Parliament in the Scottish capital, Edinburgh, had been subsumed in the Westminster Parliament in London after the Treaty of Union in 1707 (The Union of the Crowns had taken place a century earlier when James VI of Scotland became James I of England after the death of Queen Elizabeth I).

Devolution and the reconvening of the Parliament were marked by celebrations of Scottish culture and identity and a re-examination of socio-political assumptions. The three classical plays chosen for the festival and gathered together under the title *Greeks* were Sophocles' *Electra* (adapted by Tom McGrath), Euripides' *Medea* (Liz Lochhead) and Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (David Greig). The Glasgow – based company theatre babel performed all three over a week in the Old Fruitmarket, a converted warehouse in the centre of the Merchant Quarter of Glasgow, Scotland's industrial city and formerly known as the second city of the British Empire. The week culminated in an evening performance when all three plays were performed, beginning with *Oedipus*. As the director Graham McLaren put it,

'Politically Scotland is changing and with the millennium the world is changing. Now is the time to be defining what it is to be, not just a Scot in Scotland but what it is to be human in the world....*Oedipus* is as close to a universal text as you'll get. It starts off with the simple mystery of who kil-

led Laius but finishes up by asking absolute questions about what it is to be human'.<sup>8</sup>

However, between the mystery of the identity of the killer and the questions about the nature of the human, David Greig's adaptation explored ambivalences about identity which were both historical and contemporary. At the time of Devolution there was a sense that Scotland was emerging from domination by the English. Yet it was also the case that Scots played an important, even dominant role in the government of Great Britain, in industry, education, medicine, arts and sport. Great Britain represented a Union between Scotland, England and Wales (which also won some measure of devolution at this time). Could Scots be British as well as Scots? What had been the role of Scots historically in the centuries between the Treaty of Union and the present day, centuries in which the British Empire had developed and then retreated from a position of commercial, military and political dominance in several continents of the world? How did the cultural politics of Scotland deal with this ambivalent status?

Certainly, the role of Scots in the growth of the British Empire had been extensive and the articulation of various aspects of Scottish identity in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had been closely interwoven with Empire. The recent study by Tom Devine (*Scotland's Empire 1600 – 1815*) examines the advantages in direct trade with the colonies that followed the Treaty of Union – 'the tobacco trade transformed the social and cultural world of Glasgow...with capital provided by British merchants, planters in America could purchase slaves and indentured labour'.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the claim that Glasgow, unlike Bristol and Liverpool, played little part in the slave trade has been refuted. Not only has the Scottish role in trafficking slaves from Africa to the Caribbean been underestimated but it has been shown that Scotland was heavily involved in the development of a colonial economy which 'could not have functioned without an entrenched and expanding system of slave labour'.<sup>10</sup> Scottish regiments were (with Irish) at the military heart of British imperial expansion in India and even before the expansion of Empire Scots were major holders of East India Company stock.<sup>11</sup> Warren Hastings, Governor-General of India 1774-1785, was known as Scotland's Benefactor, promoting Scots in the civil and military services and placing them at the centre of power. Later on, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the contribution of Scots to the military extension of Empire and its policing and administration were also extensive. Yet this picture also has to be balanced by the position of poor Scots whose displacement and extensive enforced migration, including eviction of the Gaels or Gaelic speakers from their crofts and small landholdings during the Highland clearances, left them in a more oppressed position than even the

indentured labourers who had preceded them overseas. Devine argues that the new Scotland that emerged from the later 18<sup>th</sup> century was largely grounded in the imperial project – ‘The Scots were not only full partners in this grand design but were at the very cutting edge of British global expansion’.<sup>12</sup> Devine’s other major recent study of Scotland, *The Scottish Nation 1700 – 2000*, makes a corresponding point by showing how the Scottish sense of national identity was shaped by Empire.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the differences and social conflicts in the Scottish imperial experience became potential faultlines in the Scottish sense of identity. David Greig’s adaptation of *Oedipus* explored the issues of political identity and the holding and transfer of power in a way which got to the heart of the ambivalence in the identity of Scots as both colonisers and colonised. His treatment drew on ways in which the psychological and political dimensions of incestuous relationships reflect a similar ambivalence and mirror the language of motherhood and sexual intercourse that has become a metaphor for colonial relationships.<sup>14</sup> The production explored these issues through the coherence of its setting, design and language and through the ways in which it reworked Greek dramatic conventions.

It is frequently the case that in adaptations of Greek drama modern resonances are signalled to the audience by directorial fiat – by choice of setting and design or by changes made to the acting script. Now, I do not at all subscribe to the view put forward by some classicists that such input is improper. Theatrical productions are artistic events in their own right and in any case the Greek plays were written in order to be performed not just to be analysed by philologists. However, I do share the view, put forward most recently by Rush Rehm in *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy and the Modern World*, that it is in the ancient play-text, its story, language and form, including its theatrical conventions, that the energy for its adaptation to modern political and artistic concerns is to be found. Thus according to Rehm,

‘Greek tragedy reminds us that humans live real lives (the only ones we have) and die real deaths (no matter how hard we try to deny it). Those hard truths provide the inspiration for tragic performance, and suggest simply and directly why this ancient form of theatre might be particularly timely now’.<sup>15</sup>

I therefore propose to examine Greig’s *Oedipus* with reference to his treatment of the conventions of Greek tragedy as well as with reference to the set and design. The play was short, as *Oedipus* goes, with a running time of approxima-

tely one hour and twenty minutes. I shall first discuss the setting and then consider how this setting was integrated with the language and formal conventions of the play.

The costume and setting suggested the India of the British Raj. The same basic set was used as for the other plays in the sequence. There was a mid-blue backcloth which the lighting design tinged with pink at the lower level. Incorporated with this was a plain entrance which had the appearance of an upright *stèle*. For *Oedipus*, a dead tree was added towards the rear of the acting space. In the centre was a ritual circle used for taking auspices and, at the end, for enacting the verbal image of ashes with glowing embers and smoke. The dried-up tree signalled aridity and drought as a man crawled in search of the last dregs of water in the dried-up river in a silent and stunning opening sequence to the play.

Costume also explored class gradations in the Indian setting. Oedipus and Creon wore white high buttoned coats and trousers. Tiresias was dressed like an Indian holy man, the Chorus as simple people (rather than the Elders of Sophocles' play). The Indian context and associated religious ritual distanced the struggle for political change from the modern time and place of the performance yet there was contemporary impact in the theme of transfer of power and the exposure of corruption and the causes of disease. The combination of costume and set design suggested that the sun was setting over a colonised city – an ironic allusion, perhaps, to the British Empire over which, it used to be said, the sun never set. The language and acting styles ensured that there was never a simplistic or closed definition of who or where was colonised. Both usurper and liberator spoke English with Scots' accents and idiom and the identification of Creon and Oedipus with the roles of usurper and liberator fluctuated throughout the play. The setting and focus reminded anyone who was tempted to forget that Scots, too, were leaders in the expansion and organisation of the British Empire and the play resisted equation with the notion that post-devolution Scotland was simply emerging from colonial rule. Yet both colonial histories, of the Raj, of devolution, were there, in the context of the associated crises of identity.

The tone and focus of the play was set by Greig's adaptation of the Greek theatre conventions, especially Chorus, *Agon* (including the stichomythia of the sharp exchanges) and Messenger speech. The Sophoclean prologue was replaced by the immediate intervention of the Chorus. As they sat under a dead tree one man among them crawled towards the palace. The Chorus (of seven, both genders, dressed in white, barefoot) asked god to give them the power to see such

pain and yet feel no pity, a feeling fatal to humans:

He wants water.  
 There's none. He's licking at the dust...  
 He's sniffing at the ground, he thinks he can smell a river...  
 A cruel river trick that: to leave its smell behind...  
 Give him a kick. See if he moves  
 (*When the man slumps*)  
 I think we should say a prayer...  
 We beg you god.  
 Kill the pity in us.  
 Make us like you.  
 Give us the power of your hate.  
 The power of god to see pain and feel nothing.  
 Hear our prayer. Plunge our hearts into divine fire.  
 Cauterize our souls against this fatal human feeling – pity.  
 He's dead now.<sup>16</sup>

This Chorus introduces the twin themes of drought and the ironies of pity that permeate the play, combining the effect of the priest and the *parodos* in Sophocles but also communicating an intensified communal desperation. The cause of their despair is not immediately explained, in contrast to the very specific and contemporary allusions in Liz Lochhead's version of the *parodos* in *Thebans*, 2002, which refers to the outbreak of foot and mouth disease that devastated British agriculture in 2001 and to the SARS virus that was at the time causing panic in western cities.<sup>17</sup> In Greig's play the stress on drought and the absence of the longed-for river resonates with images of water in post-colonial critical discourse, for example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has written in his book *Decolonisation of the Mind* of the way in which rivers can become bridges rather than barriers<sup>18</sup>. The river in Greig's setting is dried up, a source only of thirst and plague and a symbol of suffering rather than communication. Later in the play, the Chorus, in its role as both suffering people and commentator, also elaborates on the language associated with the plague that is ravaging Thebes:

Don't ask.  
 This plague's tearing out the heart of everything.  
 It's cut open scars  
 And picked at scabs.  
 Leave it alone.<sup>19</sup>

Greig alludes to the scars that have become images of the wounds of Empire in the writing of post-colonial writers such as Derek Walcott. I think of Philoctetes' scar in *Omeros*, caused not by a snake-bite as in Homer but by a rusty anchor left behind by an imperial navy. In Walcott's work more generally, and in Seamus Heaney's version of *Philoctetes, A Cure at Troy* (1990), the scars of colonial histories are seen as wounds of affliction and oppression which may be reopened by poetry but which nevertheless have then to be allowed to heal if new futures are to be created.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the closing Chorus looks at what Oedipus stood for and what ultimately destroyed him. These are the material achievements and effects of imperialism, many associated with Scots:

Look at him.  
 This is Oedipus. Dam builder.  
 Road maker.  
 Visionary.  
 He has been consumed by the fire of his own life...  
 Look at him closely.  
 What do you see.  
 Nothing beyond.  
 Only  
 Ashes.  
 And the memory of the fire.<sup>21</sup>

Greig also exploited the Greek convention of the *agon*, the verbal contest between two leading characters. It is through the *agon* that Sophocles presents the successive challenges to Oedipus' assumed identity as husband, father, ruler and protector of the people. In Greig's play the exchanges with Tiresias follow the Sophoclean pattern quite closely. Greig uses the *agon* with Creon to introduce the dual aspects of the struggle for power inherent in the conflict between Oedipus' status as a supposed bringer of better times and Creon's inheritance as a member of a family of kings. The sub-text is that ironically these aspects are reversed. Creon could have brought better times by avoiding mistreatment and exploitation of the people (shown in his contemptuous dismissal of the people's way of life and their environment, an analogy perhaps with the Scottish clan chiefs' destruction of the traditional way of life of their people and their own consequent absorption into the ruling class of Great Britain after the Union) while Oedipus, ostensibly the reforming outsider, is actually the legitimate inheritor of power who becomes the destructive insider. In the contest between Oedipus and Creon, the

ambivalence of identity of power-holder and complicit ruling class, of coloniser and colonised is given a coruscating focus.

The Greek convention of the Messenger Speech uses focalised narrative and refinements of diegetic space to enable the audience to imagine off stage action and to explore its own perspectives as well as those of the stage characters. Sophocles refines this by using the apparent messengers, the herdsman and the driver, to interact with Oedipus' growing self-awareness. Greig's version takes this further. The driver weaves into the action the Pity motif set out in the opening Chorus with his ironic

My pity saved him  
Nursed him  
And brought him through time  
To a cross roads near where three rivers meet .<sup>22</sup>

The meeting of three rivers is substituted for Sophocles' motif of the three roads. The servant's account of Jocasta's suicide – by drowning in the brown-red water, not by hanging as in Sophocles – followed by Oedipus' self-blinding, unites the motifs of water, aridity and blood in Oedipus' history. Finally, Oedipus in a post-Freudian *rhexis* reflects on pity and 'The facts of my life'

Inside my skin is all the agony the world can make  
I hold it in me  
My skin protects you.  
Outside my skin the world is good.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the production resisted crude or reductionist contemporary allusion while retaining contemporary impact. Graham McLaren, the director, wrote: 'With this project I wanted to create lasting work that would impact on Scottish culture. I wanted to commission writers that could truly articulate the principal elements of the myths and so create plays that would transform great and ancient classical works into pieces that would speak not only directly to a Scottish audience but also of universal modern experience<sup>24</sup>'.

In addressing the ambivalent identity of Scots as both colonisers and colonised, Greig's version of *Oedipus* also addressed modern experience – and *vice versa*. The process of decolonisation of the mind persists long after the end of Empire. In his adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, David Greig created

a metaphorical territory on which the concealed past of Scottish colonial experiences could be explored and the basis of community memories questioned.

## NOTES

- 1 See, for example, the discussion in K. Hartigan, *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage: Ancient Drama in the Commercial Theater, 1882 -1994*, Westport CT and London, 1995, Greenwood Press, p 148.
- 2 For the changing contexts of performances and adaptations of *Oedipus* from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, see Fiona Macintosh's chapter 'Revolutionary Oedipuses' in *Oedipus Tyrannos: A Production History*, Cambridge, forthcoming, and 'Oedipus in the East End: From Freud to Berkoff', in E. Hall, F. Macintosh and A. Wrigley (eds.), *Dionysus since '69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Millennium*, Oxford, 2004, Oxford University Press, pp 313-328.
- 3 For discussion of this and other examples, see Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., *Black Dionysus: Greek Tragedy and African American Theatre*, Jefferson NC and London, 2003..
- 4 C. Segal, *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*, New York and Oxford, 2001, Twayne Publishers, chapter 4.
- 5 These and other responses to the myth and the play are discussed, with full bibliography in Segal, o.c., chapter 12.
- 6 See Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Classical Greek Tragedy*, Jefferson CA and London, 2002, p 31 and compare the view of Ngugi wa Thiong'o that Aeschylus and Sophocles were fundamentally un-English because of their type of humanism, *Decolonising the Mind*, Oxford, Nairobi, Portsmouth NH, 1986, p 90. See also the discussion in Lorna Hardwick, *Greek Drama and Anti-Colonialism: Decolonising Classics*, in Hall, Macintosh and Wrigley, op.cit., pp 219-242.
- 7 Ngugi, op.cit.
- 8 Source: interview by Steve Cramer, Programme Notes for *Greeks*, 2000.
- 9 T. Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600 -1815*, London, 2003, p 73.
- 10 Devine, op.cit., p 74.
- 11 Devine, op.cit., chapter 11.
- 12 Devine, op.cit., p 360.
- 13 Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700 -2000*, London, 1999.
- 14 See, for example, Seamus Heaney's poem 'Act of Union' in *North*, London, 1975, pp 43-4. The title of the poem puns on the incorporation of the North of Ireland within the United Kingdom after the rest of Ireland had gained independence. In the poem Heaney uses the act of impregnation as a metaphor for the repeated recolonisation of a 'half-independent' Ireland:  
 And I am still imperially  
 Male, leaving you with the pain  
 The rending process in the colony...  
       No treaty  
 I forsee will salve completely your tracked  
 And stretch marked body, the big pain  
 That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again.

- 15 Rush Rehm, *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy and the Modern World*, London, 2003, p. 20.
- 16 From David Greig, 2000, *Oedipus*, p 1. I am grateful to David Greig for allowing me access to his as yet unpublished text.
- 17 Liz Lochhead, 2002, theatre babel's *Thebans* - Oedipus, Jokasta and Antigone, after Sophocles and Euripides, London, p 3,4:  
 for death is everywhere  
 death blights our crops they blacken in our fields  
 death has ravaged our herds and flocks  
 the burning pyres of their blebbed and blistered remains  
 send up a pall that chokes us  
 our babies abort themselves unborn  
 we elders anaesthetise ourselves with alcohol  
 we young folk pervert our lives with poisons...  
 new diseases daily invent themselves  
 the spores of mutating pestilence  
 in each polluted gasp of air we breathe.
- 18 Ngugi, *op.cit.*, p 90.
- 19 Greig, *op.cit.*, p 27.
- 20 See further, Lorna Hardwick, 2000, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* ch. 5 and 6 and 'Classical Texts in Post-Colonial Literatures: Consolation, Redress and New Beginnings in the work of Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol 9 no 2, Fall 2002, pp 236 -256.
- 21 Greig, *op.cit.*, pp 53-4.
- 22 Greig, *op.cit.*, p 45.
- 23 Greig, *op.cit.*, p 50.
- 24 Source: Introduction to published text of Liz Lochhead, 2000, theatre babel's *Medea*, after Euripides, London.

**TRAGEDY AND THE HERO IN INTERCULTURAL  
PERSPECTIVE.  
KING OEDIPUS REWRITTEN BY TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM  
(EGYPT, 1949) AND HELENE CIXOUS (FRANCE, 1977)**

**Mieke KOLK**

Some time ago I spoke at the conference of the *Festival of Experimental Theatre* in Cairo about the specific *Westernness* of the Aristotelian drama model, i.e. the way his theories about the perfect tragedy, already marked by ‘rationalism’<sup>1</sup>, developed in the western part of Europe after the 16th century. Doing away with the epic properties of Greek tragedy (prologue and chorus), the dramatic dialogue absorbed all action and defined character, while the plot structured the representation of reality not only within the universal laws of probability and necessity but, more particular, in a socially acceptable and strictly logical way (*bienséance* and *vraisemblance*). In this way aesthetic and ethical categories of the text melted together. At the end of the 19th century the softly purring motor of the well-made play had indeed dismissed all ‘demonic forces’ of ancient tragedy, as Nietzsche remembered them in chaos, pain, suffering and the experience of the senseless. While an optimistic bourgeois society projected the teleological, linear narrative model on every theory and text available, promising liberation and progress (Lyotard’s *Grand Récits*), Aristotle’s poetics survived in realistic drama, soon to be found no longer adequate.

I also discussed a Western, European theatre tradition that showed, in its history of the rewritings of classic texts, an ongoing process of re-interpretations that was, some time after the Second World-war, taken over by theatre-directors in a deconstructive reading and performance of the old dramas. It appeared that just in this act of appropriation itself, western cultural heritage was mastered and recognized as a part of our cultural identities. A far-away cultural past, once domesticated, played its own part in the present, defining an open global, but at the same time, most pointedly local identity.

I was most surprised to see that a comparable process had taken place in Egypt, where in a mediating way not only foreign plays were adapted but where also new theories and political strategies were tried in dramatic writing and in theatrical practice, ‘swallowing and digesting’ the strange material in order to

assimilate it in its own culture. In what appears to be an intercultural dialogue between this part of the East and parts of Europe during the last century, the successive drama-modeling, drama-versions and theatrical performances show ideological shifting and changes in space and time, cultures choosing their own historical moments and social impetus as point of attack. Cultural differences then can be discovered out of this complicated dramatic interplay and intermingling of social and cultural phenomena.

Here, I want to focus on these cultural differences which seem to inspire and create two versions of Sophocles' *King Oedipus*. French Algerian author H  l  ne Cixous wrote in 1977 a libretto-text for an opera with the title *The Name of Oedipus, Songs of the forbidden Body*<sup>2</sup>. The drama of Tawfik al-Hakim<sup>3</sup> was mentioned in the book of Nehad Selaiha on *Egyptian theatre*<sup>4</sup> in which she exasperatedly remarks on the "almost claustrophobic obsession with the incestuous figure of Oedipus which (had) haunted or rather bedeviled, all treatment of Greek themes in the Egyptian theatre". Reading his *King Oedipus* I was prepared for all sorts of differences: those between a male and a female (even feminist) perspective; those between two times (there is a lapse of thirty years) and of course, what is supposed to be, the most important one: the difference between 'Easterners' and 'Westerners' as Al-Hakim called it. What I found was an amazing form of 'sameness'. Sameness showed at the more ideological and intellectual level of the text in the construction of new mental spaces concerning the incest-taboo, god and masculine rationality. Difference was reflected in the dimension of Fate, the concept of the tragic and in the act of narration itself, structuring specific possibilities for an effective communication.

### **Sameness: taboo, God, male-ness**

1. What is most remarkable in both rewritings is the insertion of scenes, dismissed by Sophocles, after the discovery of their impossible relationship. Oedipus and Jocaste as a loving wife and husband have to confront themselves with a multitude of other positions in their family: killer of his father, married to his mother, brother of his sons and daughters, abandoned child; lover of her son, wife to father and son, mother to her children and grandchildren. In both texts the outcome of this confrontation ends in the death of Jocaste, but neither Cixous nor Al-Hakim accepts any guilt or responsibility for their Oedipus. Instead, there is an astonishing denial in the Egyptian Oedipus; he wants to overcome the situation as soon as possible and go on with his life, including his marriage with Jocaste. But his Jocaste recoils and dies. Like Al-Hakim's Oedipus, Cixous' Jocaste accepts her incestuous love for her son, as love only later, lately forbidden. Her

husband /son needs time to reconsider but accepts in the end his unspeakable love for his wife who is also his mother.

Keeping herself on the side of the mythological material of the Theban cycle which for anthropologist Lévi-Strauss reflected the troublesome process to come to knowledge: born out of one (the earth) or born from two (male and female), Cixous stresses this space between myth and tragedy: 'In reality myth was what took the place of analysis in former times. The myth of Oedipus (...) was of great importance. (...) Stronger than the social, myth is always outside the law, like the unconscious. Only afterwards there is a story, which signifies there has been a clash between the in-law and out-law'.<sup>5</sup> Before the material is put into a narrative structure, in the mythical realm the law has to be discovered. As for Al-Hakim's remarkable confrontation with the incest-taboo, he draws a comparison with another of his plays (*The sleepers of Ephesus*), in which a struggle arises, not between man and fate, but rather between man and the 'sublime unseen forces', which are greater than man, like Time, Reality, Space etc.<sup>6</sup> Two lovers share hidden blood ties: "Learning about the truth of their relationship it destroys what they had in common".

2. Both authors also share an undoing of the metaphysical elements of Sophocles' tragedy. Al-Hakim does not present or represent God in the play, no (divine) oracle and no earth-god / the Sfinx turns out to be a lion. The absent God is nevertheless omni-present in his divine revelation and the human believers in which he is reflected. A comparable mental domain is created in Cixous' discursive space of the *Name of the Father*, as the first hierarchical term (Logos) in all cultural institutions of a patriarchal society: religion, philosophy, science, arts etc. Both realms conflate in Oedipus' characteristics which turn out to be a version of his 'tragic flaw': hubris, rationality, intellect and, one could say, a typical male disconnection with spiritual powers for Hakim and with the other world of the unconscious for Cixous. But their op/positioning is different: against the curiosity and intellect of the hero, Hakim places not only divine revelation but also, on a personal, human level, the powers of the heart – seen as more true than those of the mind. The fact that Oedipus would want to know what is not knowable, seems a form of excess.

In the questioning of *what* he should want to know, Cixous turns to the source of hidden knowledge in the unconscious and in the body, 'more ancient than the gods'. Of course her critique points to the Western Cartesian mind/body opposition, deconstructed by Nietzsche and Freud, but her rewriting of Sophocles' text is also an attack on the Freudian Oedipal theory, that dismisses

the acceptance of the mother as the origin of life and love. Sharing a male/female oppositional outlay Cixous and Al Hakim create a comparable chain of further connotations in mind-body, ratio-emotions, inner-outer and private-public. But attacking male rationalization in Oedipus, as Cixous foregrounds in her text, is different from criticizing rationality (as a domain of male experience), as in Al-Hakim's evaluating -system. He confronts this rationality, being western, with religion as the other domain. What Al-Hakim describes as characteristic of the Greek tragic hero: the existential loneliness of western man without god, he refuses to accept for his world: 'My feeling is that the Easterner always lives in the two worlds I mentioned... That is the last fortress for us to shelter from Western thought which lives in a single one, the world of man alone. It is nothing other than the feeling of Islamic philosophy (...) that stands on two pillars: the intellect and the religious dogma.'<sup>7</sup> Since the world of God and the community is sacred, no man is allowed to attack these domains. Thus, a free human being, cannot move against the will of God or the logic of history and consequently discover, as western ideology would have it, a new aspect of his identity.

## **Difference**

### **Fate, the tragic, tragedy as genre**

1. In this ongoing debate in the Arab literary domain, in the 60s, the impossibility of an existential conflict or of a split consciousness for an Islamic 'hero', implies the impossibility of Islamic drama (as long as drama is still defined as conflict). Algerian scholar Aziza<sup>8</sup> uses in his debate a quote of French Orientalist Massignon: "The world, more grander and perfect than the artistic form, is only a mechanic puppet, whose lines are moved by the Master, just as he wants it. It is as if we were in a puppet theater. (...) Freedom is, what Muslims concerns, subjected to the will of God ...". And of course a Dutch scholar knows this paradigm of Calvinistic predestination all too well. And maybe Massignon projected this harsh protestant model into Islamic thinking. But given the absolute power of a Christian God, who decides, whatever the believer does or doesn't do, the God of Islam allows a free willing subject, but only within the boundaries of the heavenly Will, which shall be done in the end. Since God can thus be no partner in the play, Egyptian author Yusef Idriss describes the Arab hero as a man who is confronted with a real or recognizable problem of daily-life, in a struggle between himself and others, who he can master by healthy pragmatism and a strong will. His heroism is a perfect victory against the blows of Fate. And he is the better of his peers. He outsmarts them, his intelligence saves him.<sup>9</sup> A Greek hero on the other hand suffers a cruel Fate, guilty against his will; his intelligence or his stupidity is of no importance.

2. While different western theories about the end of tragedy (George Steiner, Richard Wagner) focus on the loss of a religious or ideological unity in society and, as a consequence, that of an experience of the tragic, in the world of Islam the gods are still there, at least as ‘something greater than and above man’, present but even more absent. In combination with the heroic faculties of the Arab hero that point to a superb potential of problem solving, every possibility for a tragic experience in the western sense seems to disappear - the tragic problem is tragic because simply it cannot be solved. And more or less at the same moment that in the West tragedy as genre seemed to become a historic impossibility, the East started to re/invent a tradition of the tragic genre. It is not that Al-Hakim is not aware of this. He mentions the ideological shifting from the metaphysical dimensions of *western* tragedy into ‘acts of will’ and dividing ‘oppositional emotions’ in the work of Corneille and Racine as an end of a European tradition. And he is absolutely not sure about the outcome of his own experiment with his *King Oedipus* as an *Arab* tragedy.

Like Aristotle, Arab scholars seem to read inter-textual in and from their own discourse on tragedy. Drama theory and practice speak with each other. Friederike Pannewick, a German scholar of both Arabic language and literature and of drama and theatre<sup>9</sup>, gives a fascinating exposé of this debate. The poetical prescriptions of the Greek philosopher, translated by Andalusian scholar Ibn Rush in the 11th century, are in this discourse often essentialized, ‘culturalized’, that is analyzed as foreign to Arab mentality. Whereas the struggle of the hero possibly belongs to the religious /ontological domain, the discussions about formal and structuring aspects of the drama-text seem to me more part of an aesthetic choice. The difference then between a Greek mentality and an Arab one, crystallizes in a ‘natural’ choice for the dramatic or the epic genre, that is stylistics in a specific structuring of the plot. In terms of the Syrian theatre-scholar Abdalfattah Rawwas Qal’agi (1988), Greek mentality showed itself in “a condensation and concentration of life for a representation on the stage, bounded by time and place“, and Arab mentality in a “treatment of life in its real dimensions, (...) the dramatic action unifies life in its real expansion without a short-cut and condensation.”<sup>10</sup> The first theoretical explanation that offers itself is the big difference between narrated time and time of narration in drama and the more extensive combination of these ‘times’ in the epic genre. One could also think of the discussion between filmmakers Eisenstein and Vertov, who both claimed a greater veracity for their films, Eisenstein offering a montage of loose scenes held together by the theme and Vertov offering ‘life’ as the product of a non-stop camera-activity.

Also recognizable is the argument of a Greek ‘fictional’ ordering of life as it should/could be, against the so called Arab ‘real’, anti-illusionistic (Brechtian) presentation of life as it is. And if we connect ‘mentality’ with literary taste, maybe the ancient art of the story-teller as a specific epic form is close to Arab ears. But the actual deconstruction of the dramatic model during the last century seems able to transform the cultural differences into historic ones. In global aesthetic developments the category of time more than that of place are of crucial importance, as we will see.

### **Form=content**

Returning to our texts about Oedipus and the way the authors structured their narrative, we should consider the real *act of narration*. We see that the Egyptian writer adopts the western drama-model in its latest form, the strict realist one with three acts in different scenes, while Cixous chooses for a total open text form. It is a text fluid in short dialogues and interior monologues, there is a poetic interplay of doubled voices of the characters and the chorus, memories are retold, dreams recalled and long silences persist. Although the storyline slowly becomes clear, the female writer escapes plot and action and unfolds the past events in a poetic evocation of situations: ‘like the pulsing of the unconscious, it will be a text, a body decoding and naming itself in one slow long push; the song of women being brought into the world, of a woman (...) experiencing herself as many, the totality of those she has been, could have been or want to be’<sup>11</sup> In this loose structure, her text touches, audibly and visibly, those desires ‘outside the law’, still present in the mythological material, opening it towards an experience of the heterogeneous, the incongruous and ‘otherness’ as the hidden of (western) culture. Al-Hakim chooses in the same way his ‘right’ form. Realist theatre is the ultimate illusionistic form: it is ‘here and now’ and knows exactly its own ‘time and place’. Therefore the writer is not only legitimized but also forced to strip the story of what he calls ‘superstitious belief’ that Arab or Islamic mentality would scorn: the monstrous Sphinx, and the insertion of this other part of the Oedipus story, that of the happy family, living their private life inside the palace till its downfall; the family-atmosphere in the life of Oedipus being pivotal for his choice. This ultimate humanization/personification of the mythical material, turning an archaic story and characters into a drama of a well-to-do bourgeois family is of course also a phenomenon of the late nineteen thirties and forties and, especially, of French literature.<sup>12</sup>

I found it intriguing that an experienced drama-writer such as Al-Hakim should turn so far away from the Oedipus-mythology to put on stage the destruc-

tion of a happy family – a fall from grace. A happy family in my culture is a topic for comedy or, ... melodrama. In the opening scene we see a nice father, a sweet mother and impeccable little children playing together the ur-scene of the oedipal family: daddy tells mammy and the children about this one big event; his adventure with the sphinx. When all is discovered the grieving husband picks out his eyes in order not to see his dead wife. In the introduction to the English translation of his plays W.M Hutchins writes : “When Al-Hakim follows Sophocles and has Oedipus blind himself the act seems to be motivated by the grief of a loving husband, not by an avenging fury”.<sup>13</sup> It is clear that Al-Hakim does not accept the guilt that Sophocles, the Greek juridical system, Freud and Western culture bestow on the poor king-son. Or does he refuse the hidden anxiety of Western culture about even imagining the possibility of a mother-son relationship? Because this is what happens: he makes this love-relationship visible and thinkable in the same way that thirty years later, French Feminist Hélène Cixous defends this same love in a provocative deconstructionist text. And both versions invite us to rethink the laws of society and of the literary genre that wants to reflect on that reality. Both texts show us a hero who does not fulfill his duty: a non tragic hero who is pivotal to the new perspectives.

### **Hero and flaw**

The category of the Western hero knows a mythological positioning and a literary theory sharing many characteristics. In the old myths he is someone in between the world of the gods and that of human beings: a mediator, a trespasser going over boundaries, a saviour, one who makes the world turn. We recognize him in Hercules, Prometheus, Jesus Christ and German mythology (used by Wagner). His outstanding status and his crossing of boundaries are reflected in Aristoteles’ figuration of the protagonist: better than us but with some flaw (*hamartia*), able to come to insight (*anagnorisis*) about his responsibility concerning his actions and true to his nature: a man is intelligent and courageous, a behavior not to be expected by a woman or a slave...

Considering Tawfik Al-Hakim’s Oedipus character it appears that our hero is of course King of Thebe but also a cheat and a liar. With Tiresias, acting like corrupt and businesslike politicians, they created the big lie: there never was a Sphinx only a lion. Not much better than us, perhaps slightly worse, Oedipus is a willing victim in the hands of Tiresias who wanted to undo the prophecies that a son would kill his father, by accepting a stranger on the throne of Thebe. In the end all his calculations prove wrong; he brings destiny exactly where God wanted it. Oedipus is driven by an insatiable search for knowledge, truth and his origins. Eager to know and violent in his behavior against his opponents his tragic

flaw is made clear by a series of remarks of the Priest:

-You don't prevent us (from returning to God)... You can't, - but you are always investigating what you ought not and always asking questions which you should not pose... Heavenly revelation is for you a subject of scrutiny and exploration.

-We have sought another to go to the Temple at Delphi to ask gods guidance in what is right for us... (p. 86)

And Oedipus himself, answering Creon who returns from Delphi:

I love nothing more than searching....My whole life is nothing but a search. So long as god - as you say- is the one ordering me now to search and investigate, you will find me thoroughly obedient. Do you hear me Highpriest? (p. 88)

Even Jocaste dying, reflects on this drive:

Joc.: Oedipus! You whom I cherish more than myself. Don't try to lighten the effect of the catastrophe on me.... The actuality is as you described it, but the truth Oedipus.... What shall we do with the screaming voice of truth?

Oedipus : The truth? I have never feared its face a day.... Nor been alarmed by its voice.

Joc. : (as though addressing herself) For how long have I cautioned you against that... I have worried about it for you... you who have spent your best days chasing after it...from city to city in order to grasp its veil until she turned on you at last, bared a little of her terrible face and screamed in her resounding voice. It devastated the palace of our happiness and brought us in a state you see. (pp. 116,117)

And as a farewell the Highpriest concludes the argument:

If you wish to draw near to god and light the lamp in your soul. But you have preferred to light the candles in your intellect which have gone out be the first gust of wind...(p. 127)

His kingdom taken, his desire to know punished, it makes a very lonely world. All that Oedipus rests is his family. It becomes clear why Al-Hakim needed this happy family-life in order to give his hero the power to grow above himself. In a

astonishing speech Oedipus declares his world:

Joc. : Oedipus!... My.... I don't know what to call you.

Oed : Call me anything you like, for you are Jocasta whom I love. Nothing will change what is in my heart... So let me be your husband or your son..  
Names or epithets cannot change the love and affection rooted in the heart.

Let Antigone and the others be my children or siblings. These terms cannot change the affection and love I harbor for them in my soul. (...)  
(p. 116)

And (as though addressing himself)

Oed : What a destiny! I am a hero because I killed a beast they claimed had wings. I am a criminal because I killed a man they showed to be my true father. I am neither a hero nor a criminal... I am just another individual upon whom the people have cast their fictions and heaven its decrees...(p. 117)

Compare these utterances with:

Joc. : His entire life spent amid threats, deaths, and murders of his kin. Among those he loved, while causing their ruin...

I wanted to deliver him from *names*

All the names that pass for gods

That impose themselves by fraud,

That we adore and obey as 'pure beings'

Father, mother, truth, life, death, fault, debt, wife, truth,

Husband, king, birth, what man can say which he is.

It is the words that rule

I wanted to free him (p. 295)

O, my love

Whom to mutter your names

My lover mother, my fool (p. 296)

The text comes from Cixous (1994), where Jocaste conducts the process of liberating Oedipus from this world of investiture of names as organizing social functions; in theoretical terms: a liberation of the violence and repression of the Symbolic Order, decided through names, kinship and law. But it is in the other space, outside the laws of the Father, in that of the Mother that these socially and sexually framed words can acquire other meanings connected with positions of love. For Cixous' Jocaste and Al-Hakim's Oedipus a perfect and absolute love is

not longer forbidden, a love that fights against the deep rooted collective mechanism. It is clear that Cixous, by inscribing a voice for Jocaste also makes the Queen the hero of the play; she is the one who mediates between Oedipus, his past and his present, who guides him through this horrible silence, in which he can no longer speak. Together with Tiresias and the chorus she re/creates him for himself and for us. When we all know what has happened, and that occurs very soon in her play, they start to describe this *male* personality: the archetypal western Man, vulnerable in his heroic aspirations:

Chorus: He is a man. As with all men  
 His desire is  
 Always the same:  
 To stand great and pure in his children's eyes, after his death  
 To be, in the children's eyes the only king /  
 For you it is not enough  
 He is a child. Never adored enough.

Jocaste: No, Not a child. He is the father he never had  
 The father without fault, without threat, the boundless father  
 He would have liked to have. Powerful and gentle like a mother.  
 And the city is his daughter.... (p. 262)

And as for his desire for knowledge:

Oedipus: I must go to what I fear most  
 What I dread beckons me  
 I am not  
 A man of doubt and disguises (p. 262)

When Oedipus in the last scene of the text cries out, and accepts his love for Jocaste, his wife and mother, Jocaste has already died, or better, has faded away in the arms of her mother/lover who has come to take her. The too-late as an aspect of the category Time Al-Hakim mentions. And again there are curious analogies with the Jocasta of the Arab writer. His Jocaste also has her domain in the palace, her husband and children. But there are people outside, and Jocaste cannot forget them: 'What would they say if we continue this abnormal life after today. I am no longer fit to stay. Darling there is only one solution for me: to go' (p. 117). And so she dies, in bed. 'Above all a wife', Nicole Loraux writes about Sophocles' Jocaste, ending their life in bed as all married heroines. Their marriage bed. 'And the remote sanctum where they meet their death is equally the sym-

bol of their life – a life that finds its meaning outside the self and is fulfilled only by the institutions of marriage and maternity, which tie women to the world and lives of men. It is by men that women meet their death, and it is for men, usually, that they kill themselves'.<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusion

How do we explain the astonishing similarities between the two texts? One explanation is that Cixous has been influenced directly by the version of Al-Hakim. And of course they share a background: the northern part of Africa as the other side of the Mediterranean and an intellectual education in France. And if Cixous has read the text of Al-Hakim, this text must have been so attractive to her that she has let herself be inspired by this daring transgression of the incest-taboo and the guiltless guilt of the hero, admitting his love for his mother-wife. And there is another reason for her to write this alternative option for the tragedy: her text follows directly after her *Portrait of Dora* in which she attacks the Freudian Oedipal-theory. An interesting explanation for the similarities is also offered by classical scholar Lorna Hardwick in the aftermath of my lecture. Dealing in her work with the aspect of post-colonial reconstructions of the classics, she mentioned the notions of femaleness and the associated challenges to the primacy of rationality in my analysis of the texts of both Cixous and Al-Hakim: 'There are interesting affinities between the use of the 'feminine' as a term of abuse and the construction by western orientalist chauvinists of Eastern thought and traditions of 'soft' and female. The way in which non-European productions subvert the association between non-rationalistic approaches and 'softness' and marginalization are important I think.'<sup>15</sup> If we take her remark seriously we must turn towards another mental space shared by more 'others' in a dominant western discourse. And in that sense all sorts of new meetings are possible.

### NOTES

- 1 Stephen Halliwell writes in *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, Volume 1, Cambridge, 1989, p.175: "Aristotle allows the genre the power to stir deep emotions of pity and fear by displaying human fallibility and instability in the setting of actions whose momentum is one of ethical seriousness. But in doing so, he deprives it of the scope to move to the edge of, and even outside, the realm of rational understanding, or to dramatize events whose meaning cannot be encompassed by the logic of probability and necessity." The argument is repeated in Hans-Thies Lehmanns *Postdramatisches Theater*, 1999. See also Mieke Kolk, *Facing the War, Visions of Death; From Epic Structures to Postdramatic Theatre* (forthcoming).

- 2 H. Cixous, *The Name of Oedipus/Songs of the Forbidden Body*, in *Plays by French and Francophone Women*, edited and translated by Christiane P. Makward and Judith G. Miller, Michigan, 1994.
- 3 Tawfiq Al-Hakim, *Plays, Prefaces and Postscripts, Volume I: Theatre of the Mind*, translated W.M. Hutchins, Three Continents Press, 1981.
- 4 Nehad Selaiha, *Egyptian Theatre : A Diary 1990-1992*, Cairo 1993, p.137.
- 5 Verena Conley, *Hélène Cixous : Writing the Feminine*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1984, pp. 155-156.
- 6 Tawfiq Al-Hakim, 1981, p. 283.
- 7 Tawfiq Al-Hakim, 1981, p. 87.
- 8 M. Aziza, *Al Islam wal-masrah*, Kairo, 1971.
- 9 Friederike Pannewick, *Das Wagnis Tradition, Arabische Wege der Theatralität*, Wiesbaden, 2000, p. 112.
- 10 Pannewick, o.c., p. 85.
- 11 H. Cixous, *Aller à la Mer*, in *Modern Drama*, 27, 1984, p. 546.
- 12 Al-Hakim mentions himself the Oedipus' versions of St. George de Bouhelier, Jean Cocteau and Andre Gide. I suppose that the rewritings of the Greek classics by Anouilh, Giraudoux and Marguerite Yourcenar would be even more adequate to reflect this collective moment which represents the 'Zeitgeist', inspiring an artistic community to comparable thematic motivations, artistic forms and imagery.
- 13 Tawfiq Al-Hakim, 1981, p.7.
- 14 Nicole Loraux, *Tragic ways of killing a woman*, Cambridge, M, 1987, p.23, p. 106.
- 15 Lorna Hardwick mentions Wole Soyinka's discussion of the contrast between Western and Yoruba thought patterns and cosmology, brought out in his version of *The Bacchae* of Euripides and most recently in Nigerian productions of Greek plays. An adaptation of Euripides *The Women of Troy* in a Yoruba setting *The Women of Owu*, by Femi Osofisan recently had its world-premiere.

**GREEK MYTHOLOGY IN ARAB TRAGEDY. A RETURN OF  
THE MYTH OR TO THE MYTH?**

*Younes LOULIDI*

Beyond any doubt, Tawfiq Al-Hakim has been the first Arab author to have introduced Greek mythology in Arab theatre. He wrote his *Pygmalion* (1942) after his visit to France (1925-1927), where he became convinced that any attempt at becoming a 'serious' author had to lead him to the roots of Greek theatre. It was in Paris that he discovered through French translations the dramatic writings of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, based as they were on mythological stories. These myths were a primary tool for him, since they allowed him to develop the type of conflict he liked so much to express, the one between man and the different forces inhabiting the universe. From then on, it became clear to Al-Hakim, that any attempt at integrating the theatre into our Arabic society and culture, implied on the one hand, a movement towards the origins, towards the ancient Greeks, and, on the other, a projection of their mythic stories, belonging to another society, into our oriental ethic and intellectual values<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, after having written his *Pygmalion*, he turned to the most famous of all Greek myths and in 1949 he wrote *Œdipe Roi*, not unexpectedly, since he had read the Sophoclean version and has seen it staged in French theatres, and since, at the same time, he had also read *Œdipe* by André Gide and *La machine infernale* by Jean Cocteau. Both of these writers tried to integrate the modern world into the human epic experience, but Al-Hakim tried to distinguish himself from all those who had adapted or revisited this myth in Western literature. In his opinion, all mythic symbols that the Arabic mentality could not understand had to be eliminated, but at the same time, he also wanted to frame this myth into a more Islamic atmosphere. Therefore, he chose not to stage a purely Greek Oedipus, but rather a more human version of him. Unfortunately, he only succeeded in staging an Oedipus who had poor human and heroic qualities and who solved no riddle at all, since there was no Sphinx. Moreover, once he knew that he was the son of Jocaste, he insisted that both of them remained husband and wife.

After his *Pygmalion* and *Œdipe*, Al-Hakim turned to the famous myth of Electra, one of the great foundational stories of the West which ran across western theatre and which was immortalized from the earliest Greek texts on, to *Mourning becomes Electra* by Eugène O'Neill (1931), *Electre* by Gide (1937) and *Les Mouches* by Sartre (1943), passing by the Italian version of Vittorio

Alfieri's *Agamemnon and Oreste* (1783), the French version *La tragédie d'Electre et d'Oreste* of André Suarès (1905) and the Austrian version of *Elektra* by Hugo Von Hofmannsthal (1909) <sup>2</sup>.

In the line of this tradition, Al-Hakim wrote in 1962 a new version of the Electra theme, called *A manger pour tous*, in which the old mythic character of Electra is turned into the modern one of Nadia, while Orestes becomes Tarek. In this version, there is a clear thematic correspondence between the female parts, the male parts being strongly differentiated. Whereas Electra manages to convince Orestes to kill their mother, as a revenge for the death of their father, Nadia fails both to convince her brother Tarek to do the same and to avert him from his prime objective, to change the face of the world fighting famine.

From Pygmalion to Electra, passing by Œdipe, Al-Hakim was looking to actualize myths belonging to another culture, using different icons, in order to create stimulating conflicts between absolute ideas, often abstract and ambiguous for an Arabic public, and mediating between reality and truth, art and life, jurisdiction and power. Conflicts like these, based as they were on different kinds of myths, created an intellectual type of theatre which addressed a public that was ill prepared for it. Therefore, Al-Hakim took the licence to transform the Greek myths in a way that revealed big differences between geno- and phenotext. However, this freedom was not granted to him when writing his *Isis*, based upon the famous pharaonique myth of Isis and Osiris, which was felt to function as a sacred text.

In the next section, it will become clear that the myth of Oedipus, which ran across the whole western theatre, from the foundational texts to contemporary theatre, meanwhile passing through the whole western civilisation, has managed to do the same in Arabic theatre.

Ali Ahmed Bakatheer wrote *Le roi Oedipe* in 1949, just after Al-Hakim's *Oedipe*, but in doing so, he was inspired by an Islamic philosophic vision. Greek destiny became Arabic destiny and the conflict between Oedipus and the priest became one between good and evil. Bakatheer's *Oedipe* was singled out not as a tragic hero –according to Aristotelian criteria- but as a popular hero who ran across difficulties and who knew how to surmount them<sup>3</sup>. And just like Al-Hakim, Bakatheer changed the myth in an important way: in his version, Jocaste knew that Oedipus had killed her husband Laius before marrying him.

The myth of Oedipus continued to attract Arabic writers, especially Egyptians, and among them one can refer to Ali Salem who wrote *C'est toi qui a*

*tué le monstre* in 1969, a play which originally had another title, *Oedipe 68*. This play was a political parody showing us a contemporary Oedipus, looking more like an Egyptian than a Greek. The events did not take place in the Greek city of Thebes, but in Thebes Luxor, the Egyptian town on the Nile. In the eyes of Ali Salem, the story of Oedipus is not a Greek myth, but rather a pharaonique one<sup>4</sup>. And once more, the Arabic writers allowed themselves to introduce some great changes in this myth. This Oedipus did not kill his father, and neither did he marry Iocaste, the only link between the old and the new Oedipus being his capacity to resolve the riddle, without, however, being able to free the city of the sphinx. Another kind of ambiguity persecuted this Oedipus, who spent all his time finding ways to improve the life of the citizens, whereas those who surrounded him did not cease to suppress these same citizens. When the sphinx came back, threatening the city once again, the same citizens, wanted to attack it, but were unprepared and had to withdraw. In fact, this defeat symbolized the one which upset Egypt and the whole Arabic world in 1967 and the whole play was inspired by the revolution of 1952 and the great expectations of the Egyptian people after the rise to power of Jamal Abdennaser. Finally, however, all the great victories acclaimed by the media between 1952 and 1967, appeared to be lies.

In 1968, Fawzi Fahmi, another Egyptian writer, was inspired by the same myth and wrote *Le retour de l'absent*, a play which was only staged in 1977, ten years after the defeat, as if during these ten years nobody dared to stage our defeat, our deception and our pain. Fawzi Fahmi too allowed himself to introduce a great number of changes in the myth, as if it was the destiny of Greek mythology to go through a lot of changes in Arab drama. A political conspiracy replaced the old mythical malediction and prophesy, a transformation that both here and in all the other representations of Oedipus in the Arab world, observes the political importance of this theme. This frequent reappearance even makes us wonder whether the convocation of the myth finally is not a pretext to develop this political discourse, since it allows one to substitute the philosophical reflections, so strongly present in the Greek myth, for the more precise political actuality of the Arab world. In Fawzi Fahmi's version, Oedipus even refuses to blind himself for the well-being of Thebes, leaving the classical solution to blind himself with Jocaste's broche aside.

In 1977, the Syrian writer Walid Ighlassi, was inspired by the same myth and wrote his *Œdipe*, a play which he qualified as a 'modern tragedy'<sup>5</sup>. It was situated in a large modern city, the place where intellectuals and businessmen were facing the newest imported technological devices. It was a play secretly pervaded by myth, since the first names of the characters were no longer the same as in

Greek mythology, charged as they were there by a strong cultural force. No Oedipus, Iocaste or Creon this time, but on the contrary names like Soufiane, Bahy, Modar ..., professors, directors of university centres, informaticians. No longer any sphinx, prophecy nor priest, but rather a conflict between man and electronic brain. This means a transposition of myth, but hardly transposed, a nearly invisible work of mythic materials, demanding a very careful process of interpretation.

However, Greek myths continued to be present in Arab tragedies, as can be seen in the successive use of the Pygmalion-theme after Al-Hakim. Later on, there was *Pygmalion* by the Syrian writer Khalil Hindawi (1942) and *La fin de Pygmalion* written by another Syrian writer Mohamed Haj Houssein (1962), two plays in which the notion of 'l'art pour l'art' is applied and where the imagination is venerated.

But also the myth of Prometheus has been reproduced in Arab tragedy, and more specifically in three plays, two by the Syrian writer Khalil Hindawi *Le voleur du feu* (1945) and *La rose du volcan* (1960), and one by the Moroccan Mohamed Kaghat *Prométhée 91* (1991). Whereas the *Prometheus* of the Syrian Hindawi is still heavily coloured by mythical traditions and the narration of the eternal story, the *Prometheus* by Kaghat is situated in the Arabic Gulf, and more precisely, during the second Gulf War. His protagonist is certainly still charged by beliefs which characterize his original site, but on the other hand, he is also situated within Islamic traditions and Arabic myths : he is a hero and a saviour, bringing civilisation to the Arab world, evoking on the very moment of the collapse of contemporary myths (Jamal Abdenasser, Saddam Houssein...) a kind of nostalgia present in the great myths.

Also the myth of Antigone has been present in recent Arabic tragedy. The Syrian writer Saad Allah Wannous wrote in 1965 *L'émissaire inconnu dans les funérailles d'Antigone*, a play which reflected upon the political reality of the present-day Syria. The Syrian author Riad Ismat took his inspiration from the same myth writing in 1978 *Le deuil sied à Antigone*, a tragedy which recalled the trilogy written by the American playwright Eugène O'Neill *Le deuil sied à Electre*. Although the myth of Antigone largely remained invisible in Riad Ismat's play, still it could easily be recognized and dealt no longer with the battle of the *Seven against Thebes*, but rather with Lebanese civil war.

Moreover, not only did Arabic dramatists find their source of inspiration in the great Greek myths, present as they were from the origins of theatre, they also

relied upon mythological material hardly known or present in western tragedy. This is the case with the Syrian writer Khalil Hindawi who, in 1962, wrote his *Sisyphé*, a play which highlighted eternal human suffering and its conflict with the mysterious divine imperatives, but which also presented Sisyphus fighting and revolting. The Syrian Saad Allah Wannous also relied upon a myth which is hardly known in western tragedy, the one by Medusa, the famous sorceress who could transform everything she looked at into stone. In 1963 he wrote *Méduse regarde la vie dans les yeux*, staging the antagonism between science and art, love and power, underscoring at the end of this tragedy that power meant the greatest danger for mankind.

These few lines present a short outline of the way that Greek mythology has been used in the Arab dramatic system, a track in a civilisation which is not a native given one, and in a culture where it is not an object of belief, not well known, and where it has been presented to a public which has not been instructed in it. That's why it has been read, re-read, transformed, deformed and interpreted by Arabic dramatists, who have modified the artistic treatment of myth, and the relationship to myth, turning the Arabic theatre which was inspired by Greek mythology, into the most political of Arabic theatres.

Some remarks:

- 1) If the Egyptian Al-Hakim was the first Arab writer to have introduced Greek mythology in the Arab literary system, then the Syrian Khalil Hindawi can be considered the Arabic dramatist who has written the largest number of plays inspired by Greek mythology.
- 2) If, of all occidental writers, the French dramatists are the ones who had most to do with Greek mythology, then, of all Arab writers, the Syrian dramatists are the ones who have been most inspired by this mythology, for example Khalil Hindawi, Abderrahman Abou Qaws, Mohamed Haj Houssin, Saad Allah Wannous, Ali Ouqla Arsan, Riyad Ismat, Walid Ikhlassi..., to name just a few.
- 3) Egyptian writers have been mostly attracted by the myth of Oedipus. Between those to have written an Oedipus, we mention: Tawfiq Al-Hakim, Ali Salem, Fawzi Fahmi...
- 4) If the myth of Pygmalion has not had a wide appeal among western dramatists, it has attracted a lot of Arabic dramatists, especially Al-Hakim, Khalil Hindawi and Mohamed Haj Houssin, all of whom wrote a *Pygmalion*.
- 5) If the German writer Heinrich Von Kleist (1777-1811) was the first dramatist to have transferred –within the western dramatic system, the story

of Oedipus from its tragic into a comic atmosphere, writing *La Cruche Cassée* in 1808, an enterprise which has been seen as a very provocative treatment of the famous myth<sup>6</sup>, then the Egyptian writer Ali Salem realized the same kind of treatment of the same myth, writing *C'est toi qui a tué le monstre* in 1969, a comedy.

- 6) If Arab dramatists have imitated Greek and western writers, referring to the same myths which made up the glory of western foundational texts, they differentiated themselves by elaborating myths hardly known, or lacking a great career in the western tradition.
- 7) Since Greek myths treated in the Arab dramatic system happen to be myths used outside of all belief, and outside of the context of their origin, Arabic dramatists allowed themselves to assemble in one and the same play, myths which were not interrelated. And so it happened that the Egyptian Al-Hakim gathered in his *Pygmalion* three different myths: Pygmalion, Narcissus and Galatea. The Syrian Ali Oqla Arsan brought together in his play *Maternité* three myths: Oedipus, Antigone and Electra. The Moroccan Mohamed Kaghat assembled in his *Mythes contemporains* (1993) three myths: Io, Antigone and Electra.
- 8) Since Greek mythology is hardly known by an Arab audience, Arab dramatists felt obliged –in their dramatic systems- to tell the story, to present the plot, to fill in the white spaces brought about by specific cultural causes. Sometimes this storytelling was successful from an artistic and literary point of view, sometimes it was so naive that it resulted in a total failure.
- 9) In the beginning, when Arab dramatists, in their tragedies, evoked Greek myths, it was especially meant to present questions of a metaphysical and theological order, questions dealing with the absolute sense of beings and things. It has only been after a number of political, social and economic defeats, and after a great number of military losses, that Arab writers have started to treat the same myths in order to discuss everyday problems, also to think about Arab political systems, social, economical and cultural questions, and also about the sense of the proper developments of the tragedies they wrote
- 10) The presence of Greek mythology has proved to be a dominant one in Arab tragedy, more important than any other mythology, since only few Arab writers, with the exception of the Egyptians, have been able to approach Pharaonique mythology, and with the exception of Iraqi dramatists, only few Arab dramatists have been visiting Babylonian mythology. Nevertheless, most Arab writers have been able to adapt, visit and convolve easily Greek mythology, as if it were a moment belonging to Arab culture itself.

- 11) If the use of Greek mythology in the western dramatic system has been an artistic choice, a return to roots, a nostalgic longing for sense, as well as a desire to write on the basis of a story, facing some other writing practices where the stories have been fading out<sup>7</sup>, often enough, in the Arab dramatic system, the convocation of Greek myth has been a way of formulating silently whatever what one was not allowed to say loudly or to say in a direct way, faces and voices of a mythic character being used in order to sidestep every kind of censorship. Often enough, this has been an obligation rather than an artistic or literary choice. That is why the Syrian Khalil Hindawi spoke in the name of most Arab writers, saying: “When I discovered that I could not talk about reality as I wished... I returned, as a lost one, towards myths, this time towards Greek myths »<sup>8</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1- Tawfiq Al-Hakim, *Préface d' "Oedipe roi"*, Le Caire, 1977, Bibliothèque des littératures , p. 31.
- 2- Jacques Schérer, *Dramaturgies d'Oedipe*, Paris, 1987, P.U.F, p. 180.
- 3- Moustapha Abdallah, *Le mythe d'Oedipe dans le théâtre contemporain*, Caire, 1983, p. 104.
- 4- Ibid., p. 137.
- 5- Walid Ighlassi, *Oedipe : Tragédie moderne*, Libye, 1981.
- 6- Jacques Schérer, o.c., p. 182.
- 7- Cf. *Le retour du mythe ou le travail de l'origine*, in : Les cahiers des Lundis, 1993/1994, p. 31-32. (Association théâtrale, Paris)
- 8- Khalil Hindawi, as mentioned by Ahmad Ziyad Mhabak, in : *Le mouvement de l'écriture théâtrale syrienne (1945-1967)*, Damascus, 1986, Les éditions de l'union des écrivains arabes, p. 303.

## CULTURAL POLITICS

### CHANGING PARADIGMS. SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS IN DEALING WITH *OEDIPUS REX*

Freddy DECREUS

#### ***Oedipus Rex* as part of an epistemological discussion**

Some years ago, in 1987, an earthquake profoundly disturbed and terrorized the friendly looking Olympian club of philologists and classicists all over the world. One of their colleagues, belonging to the department of Chinese literature, published a book, announcing from the very start the publication of three more volumes. The title of this naughty piece of research was *Black Athena*. Subtitle: *The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. The author's name was Martin Bernal. His major claim was that Classics, c.q. Western-Europe as it has been conceived by classicists, has been based, among other things, upon nationalist, ideological and sometimes even openly racists suppositions. Part one dealt with "*The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985*". For centuries, the ancient Greeks were considered to have come from the East and the South, let's say from Palestine and Egypt (from Herodot on, a common point of view), but during periods of German cultural and political domination in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the hypothesis was launched that, on the contrary, the founding fathers of Greek mainland civilisation came from the North. They were Indo-Europeans, or Aryans. During the two world wars, in German eyes, it was just impossible to accept that the intellectual fathers of Greece came from Palestine, and would have Jewish blood in their veins.

The publication of this book, written by an outsider in classical philology, started one of the major cultural wars of the last century. In 1991 the American magazine *Newsweek* published a front page picture of Bernal addressing the public with the question: 'Was Cleopatra Black?'<sup>1</sup>. Robert Palter, in his article *Black Athena, Afrocentrism and the History of Science*<sup>2</sup> mentioned a video film *Black Athena: Did Europe Start in Africa?* Edith Hall opened her article in *Black Athena Revisited*<sup>3</sup> as follows: (it) 'has excited more controversy than almost any other book dealing with Greco-Roman antiquity to have been published in the

second half of the twentieth century'. The historicist Mario Liverani<sup>4</sup> even said: '(it is) the most discussed book on the ancient history of the Eastern Mediterranean world since the Bible'. Important for the development of the discussions, was the early Arabic translation of *Black Athena* in 1998 by (a.o.) the Egyptian classicist Ahmed Etman, Founder and Director of the Center for Comparative Linguistic and Literary Studies (Awarded as the Best Book, Cairo International Book Fair, 1998).

In this discussion, you easily felt the presence of leftists and conservatives, of statements and positions rarely present in decent academic circles. Later on, Mary Lefkowitz and Guy MacLean Rogers attacked Bernal in their book *Black Athena Revisited* (1996) and Martin Bernal defended his position in *Black Athena writes back* (2001). Fifteen years after the publication of the first volume, it is clear that it was not academic knowledge as such that was under fire, but the whole idea that human sciences were an innocent, value-free and neutral occupation: suddenly it became clear that intellectuals had responsibilities (cf. Jacques Berlinerblau, *Heresy in the University. The Black Athena Controversy and the Responsibilities of American Intellectuals*, 1999).

Classics was no longer a province where everybody could drop the kind of epistemological remarks he wanted, no, in the light of the current emphasis on Cultural Politics, Cultural Poetics or Cultural Studies, new forms of criticism arose, addressing classics in a striking new way. It was typical that somebody like Seth Schein, publishing an article in a reader about Cultural Studies, said in 1999: 'The main reference tool in classical studies remains a Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft that was begun in 1894 and completed in 1983. As far as methodology goes, the latest articles are often indistinguishable from those in the earliest volumes. Partly as a result of these old-fashioned emphases, Classics, as a scholarly discipline, ... seems to me somewhat outmoded and marginalized both within the university and in society generally. I think increased awareness of, ..., the new field of Cultural Studies that has established itself so strongly in the past decades, can help to revitalize the work that classicists do.'<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1990's, Classics (just like the Humanities in general) became a fully historical construction, no longer standing outside of History, but definitely a part of it, and more specifically a part of the western worldview, a historical and cultural construction between so many others. During so many centuries of self-glorification, classics was considered as an epistemological construction that created its own legitimacy, aims and methods, although it was also obvious that it adapted and changed every century some of its basic assumptions. Therefore,

Classics never ARE, they're always BECOMING, and culture has to be conceived, as Steven Greenblatt says (and New Historicists in general), as a battlefield, never as a fully harmonized institution. Hence, a tragedy like *Oedipus Rex* can neither exist as a closed monument nor a transparent window 'through which the past opens itself up for inspection', but it rather looks like a collection of 'building blocks in the collective "reality effect" to which every cultural formation gives shape and meaning'<sup>6</sup>. The last decades, it has become obvious that many classicists have been living too long in romantic and neoclassicist settings, admiring Winckelmann's nostalgia for 'edle Einfalt und stille Grösse', taking the exoticism of Ingres' and Delacroix's odalisques for the only truth.

As one of the existential categories which are in constant construction and deconstruction, Greek tragedy is now going through a period of denaturalisation, it is stripped out of its 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural clichés. Nowadays, we detect voices which were kept silence for centuries, for instance the genderspecific organization of tragedy or the 'fabrication' of its orientalist aspects (M. West, 1977; E. Said, 1978; Ch. Penglase, 1994; W. Burkert, 1999). In her book *Inventing the barbarian* (1991), Edith Hall reveals how the invention of the notion of the 'barbarian' resulted from a very explicit political will, right after the invasion of the Persians and the successive battles of Marathon (490) and Salamis (480), from a desire to create a new mythology which was spread all over the Parthenon (friezes, metopes and entablatures) and which was based upon oppositions such as male-Greek-western-rational and female-oriental-barbaric-weak-irrational. Hence, the creation of large numbers of scenes referring to an *Amazonomachia*, *Centaureomachia*, *Gigantomachia*, which opposed the weeping female orientals to the cold-blooded rational Athenians. From then on, as Edith Hall said, the story of the Trojan war could be interpreted as a precursor of recent history, a previous defeat of Asia by Hellas<sup>7</sup>. The last half of the fifth century B.C., a period called the golden fifth century of Greece, clearly excelled in a deliberate (re)use of mythology for ideological purposes (cf. Boardman John, *The Archaeology of Nostalgia. How the Greeks re-created their mythical Past*, 2002).

However, the present attention paid to the discussion of the female Other (Cf. Froma Zeitlin, *Playing the Other. Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, 1996) or the invention of the oriental Other is no more strange or exceptional than the Renaissance and Baroque mixture of Christian and Greek (pagan) elements, than the appearance of Oedipus as the political and religious saviour in the works of Jean Cocteau 1922, Igor Stravinsky 1927, Henri Ghéon 1938, T.S. Eliot 1958, or Peter Hall, 1996, than the Freudian detection of the Oedipus complex (1900), than René Girard's ritual scapegoat theory (1972), or

the Deleuzian plea for *L'Anti-Oedipe* (1972-73). Greek culture and art have always been used for a number of 'pragmatic' reasons, a number of subjective statements reflecting changes in taste, style, culture, religion and ideology.

Therefore, today we have to ask ourselves: who is gathered here, what do we know about their intentions, whose theories will this time be illustrated by poor Oedipus? Anyway, the present discussions on interculturalism and orientalism surely make us aware of the fact that a tragedy like *Oedipus Rex* is bound to function in an epistemological context.

### ***Oedipus Rex* as part of a philosophical discussion on the tragic**

From the very start, Greek tragedy (mainly a fifth century BC artefact) has occupied a central position in shaping major sensibilities of the western world, in choosing fundamental categories, hierarchies and oppositions which express our ideas of what it means to be a cultural being. It determined for a great part our visions on life and death, on human responsibility and finiteness, on our participation both in the horizontal axis which unites us to other people, and in the vertical axis which brings along divine and the sacral dimensions, gods and fate, transcendence and the religious Other. Ever since the reappearance of *Oedipus Rex* in the famous *Teatro Olimpico* in Vicenza in 1585, this tragedy has kept on fascinating the western sensibility because it raises the problem of the unknown, a threat that could cost a man's eyes, the longing for knowledge and the price which has to be paid for achieving true wisdom. During its historical career in the West, the Oedipus tragedy (as a literary composition, as an order and a structure) went through a lot of interpretations which not always rendered in a really tragic way Oedipus' quest for his identity (the tragic as a philosophic, existential and even ontological category, cf. Storm, 1998). Baroque, romantic and religious motives turned Oedipus into a sinner or a nostalgic wanderer, into a political leader and a *pharmakos*. We had to wait for Hegel and the development of the 18<sup>th</sup> c. German idealistic philosophy to question tragedy again in terms of the tragic experience. From Kant, Schelling, and Schopenhauer on, philosophy focused again on the notion of the tragic, be it in a very idealistic and romantic way, but at the same time a number of German philosophers profoundly disturbed the Arcadian innocence of Dionysos and led us to the Nietzschean reevaluation of Dionysian reality and energy (1872). From then on, Dionysos became the radical Other, he was restored as the stranger who questioned human nature in a radical and frightening way. In the 20<sup>th</sup> c. the presence and shadow of this god could be witnessed in the disconcerting tragedies of Ionesco and Beckett, the doubts of Gide and Camus, the amazing performances of Rafaello Sanzio and La Fura Dels Baus.

It is obvious, though amazing after 2500 years, that our society still thinks in the same old categories of the tragic experience of life. However, one of the major problems of interpreting this return to 'roots', is that it is no longer clear whether or not these were really Greek. It has been a favourite western habit to refer to Aristotle and to rely upon his explanation of archaic practices and harvest rituals which were thought to have led to the origin of the tragic festivals. Of course, no one has to doubt the existence of rural harvest festivals, but why should they have been tragic? George Steiner once said that the tragic is a 'world-view summarized in the adage preserved among the elegies ascribed to Theognis, but certainly older, and present also in Middle Eastern sacred texts: "It is best not to be born, next best to die young"<sup>8</sup> Steiner is one of the rare scholars who explicitly mentions Middle Eastern texts as one of the forerunners of the Greek tragic feeling. In general the West believes that the tragic feeling is a purely Western invention and that we have to rely on Aristotle to understand its genesis. Only recently have people realized that no trace at all of the tragic experience can be found in Aristoteles' *Poetics*. Aristotle wrote an important survey of the functioning of tragedy, but he remained completely silent about the tragic experience.

Steiner and some others were right in asking our attention for Middle Eastern forerunners and especially for the story of Gilgamesh. In this epic, as has been shown in the brilliant new translation of Andrew George (1999), all the elements are present to confront us with the first fully developed adventures of a human hero who assumes all human pain and risks. This is neither a didactic nor mythological epic, it is not even primarily dealing with the gods or the kings. The Assyriologist William Moran has recently expounded the Gilgamesh story as a tale of the human world, characterized by an 'insistence on human values' and 'an acceptance of human limitations'. This observation led him to describe the epic as 'a document of ancient humanism' and indeed even for the ancients, the story of Gilgamesh was more about what it is to be a man than what it is to serve the gods. As the beginning and the end of the epic make clear, 'Gilgamesh is celebrated more for his human achievement than for his relationship with the divine', as Andrew George said<sup>9</sup>. The epic of Gilgamesh circulated in the Middle East for more than 2000 years and can now be restored and read in its 'Standard version'. The king of Uruk precedes the king of Thebes by some 1500 years and the story about his wanderings already contained the main motives of the tragic existence, although it ends in a relatively more optimistic way than most Greek tragedies do. After having lost all his possessions and dreams, Gilgamesh comes back to Uruk and understands that he has to enjoy and accept life in its complicated nature. He accepts fully the human condition, which makes this story, in Moran's phrase, 'a document of ancient humanism'. What a strange idea, that cuneiform texts found

in Basra (one of the towns under heavy fire during the last war against Iraq) offer us today a clear picture of the first tragic adventures of men, documents found in Basra and not in Boeotia. Sorry to say so, Mr. Winckelmann, but perhaps our Western roots are not only Greek, but also Iraqi.

Therefore, what this colloquium is dealing with, is the intellectual game and joy of discovering how the western mind has been functioning, how Eurocentrism came into being, how a text always functions in a much larger context, how a statement never exists alone, and how we can only see what culture enables us to see. Our twentieth century cultural system revealed to us that we are bound to make constructions about the world, about ourselves, constructions where it is temporarily good to live in (be it only because it provides us a provisional certainty about ourselves and the others, fixed boundaries, a couple of selected enemies), but it also showed the ever provisional and relative character of such an enterprise. Therefore, looking for eastern or western aspects of Greek tragedy might be a good exercise to get in touch with unusual or hidden ways of thinking, to meet the Other in ourselves.

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## THE VIOLENCE OF CULTURE

Erwin Jans

“Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. (...) A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another’s performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies.”<sup>1</sup> Victor Turner’s famous words are characteristic of a certain humanism and universalism in the field of interculturalism. One can however ask the question if Turner’s vision is not too idealistic and too unproblematic, too harmonious and too much based on a high level of academic perfection in human knowledge and understanding, communication and cultural exchange. What does really happen when cultures or cultural practices meet? Is it a dialogue or a conflict? Is there room for negotiation or is there only a clash? Do they give each other the space to express themselves in their uniqueness or is it a struggle of power to set the terms of the exchange?

Many sites of tension remained unarticulated in Turner’s project: tensions between art and culture, between the individual artist and the community he belongs to, between the economically strong and economically weak societies, between hegemonic and minority cultures etc. The place where these cultural clashes occur is not in the first place the academic environment but the everyday reality of the contemporary metropolis. It is the modern city, with its cultural and intellectual life, its social and economical mobility that, provides the constitutive framework for these encounters. This more complex view on interculturalism is expressed by the Mexican artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena in his 1979 performance ‘The Loneliness of the Immigrant’. Gomez-Pena wrapped his body in a floral-patterned batik crisscrossed by ropes. He put himself on the floor of a public elevator. The package had the shape of a human figure. Gomez-Pena stayed in the elevator for twenty-four hours. To one of the walls a text was attached that was only noticed by a few people: ‘Moving to another country hurts more than moving to another house, another face, another lover... In one way or another we are or will be immigrants. Surely one day we will be able to crack this shell open, this unbearable loneliness, and develop a transcontinental identity.’<sup>2</sup> It is an ambiguous text. Does it refer to a general situation? Is the package on the floor the shell that has to be cracked open? By whom? The performance raises many questions, especially on communication with the public. The fact that on the one hand the public is completely helpless and troubled in its confrontation with the wrapped up artist (and sometimes even reacts in an aggressive way) and on the

other hand that the artist is mute, anonymous and invisible goes against all the premises set out by Victor Turner. 'The Loneliness of the Immigrant' can be read as a kind of allegory of the cultural clashes in an urban multicultural environment.

This is not the place to investigate the complex genealogy and the even more complex dissemination of the concepts of interculturalism and multiculturalism, cultural diversity and cultural difference, and of so many other concepts that were and are developed to describe and analyse the contemporary cultural practices in the metropolis. Naming is not without danger. What are we talking about when we talk about intercultural theatre? Does it refer to an artistic reality? Or does it only create a kind of artistic segregation between theatre on the one hand and intercultural theatre on the other hand? Is it a world vision and a philosophy or does it only refer to the colour of the skin of the makers? The French theatre researcher Patrice Pavis edited an anthology called 'The Intercultural Performance Reader'. In his introduction he tries to define the field of interculturalism. In order to do so he lists a number of theoretical concepts: intercultural, intracultural, transcultural, ultracultural, precultural, postcultural, metacultural. He then concentrates on the field of theatre and makes a distinction between intercultural theatre, multicultural theatre, cultural collage, syncretic theatre, postcolonial theatre and theatre of the fourth world. It is not difficult to add more categories: third world theatre, immigrant theatre, ethnic theatre, and a name that is used in Holland and recently also appeared in Flanders 'allochtonentheater'. Is this list of concepts an indication of the diversity and the richness of the intercultural field? Maybe. But it could also be a sign of intellectual and academic confusion and embarrassment.

The notion of interculturalism forces us to rethink the relationships between culture, politics and economics. What are the repercussions of this on the autonomous field of the arts? The work of art can be, using once more the vocabulary of the anthropologist Victor Turner, a liminal or liminoid space, a transitional space where existing and fixed cultural identities are questioned, decentred, dislocated and opened up to a process of doubt, reflexivity and change. But at the same time the field of art is not a garden of Eden protected against ideology, power and interests. The world of art and culture, artistic institutions, musea, art galleries, theatres, publishing houses,... all reproduce to a certain extent the mechanisms of exclusion of the society they belong to. This has enormous consequences for non-western artists or for artists living in Europe and coming from the ex-colonies or the migration countries. There has always been an interest in the other cultures. This interest has had and still has a multitude of names: orientalism, exoticism, primitivism, ethnic art, world music,... but these names stand

for processes of commercialization, fetishism, commodity, processes of appropriation of the other into the same. All this has serious consequences for the position of non western artists or for immigrant artist in the artistic scene of the west.

It is the notion of culture itself that has to be examined. In many contemporary discourses knowledge of and respect for one's own culture and the culture of the other are articulated as efficient non-violent strategies against racism and xenophobia. But we should not forget that a long intellectual history intertwines the notions of culture and national character on the one hand and race on the other hand. It is only after the second World War that the use of the word race became highly problematic, but not its underlying concept, as Paul Gilroy makes clear: 'After 1945, the effects of the Nazi genocide made respectable academic opinion shy and cautious about openly invoking the idea of racial difference in purely biological terms. In those conditions, the concept of culture supplied an alternative descriptive vocabulary and a more acceptable political idiom with which to address and simplify the geographical, historical, and phenotypical variations that distinguished racialized inequality.'<sup>3</sup> In other words: the terrible injustice, the violence and the brutality justified by the ideology of 'race' found shelter under the roof of 'culture'. It should make us aware of the complexities and ambiguities involved in the fluency with which the word 'culture' is used in all kinds of contemporary political, cultural, social, sociological,... discourses.

Let me return to one of the decisive moments in the construction of the western theatre, that was also one of the decisive moments in the construction of western culture: the emergence of Greek civilization. The 'wonder' of Greek civilization and its artistic, intellectual and political achievements have been celebrated as the single most important source of western culture. The word 'wonder' tries hard to ignore the troubling question about the sources of Greek civilization itself. This question of origins is the question of culture and of identity par excellence. In a challenging essay on the tragedian Aeschylus the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare raises an intriguing and disturbing question concerning the origins of Greek culture. Why, Kadare asks, was the ancient Greek civilization so obsessed by the Trojan War? Why from Homer to the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, so many of the stories that were told were in one way or another stories about that war that took place so many centuries earlier? The answer Kadare gives is purely hypothetical but impressive and provocative in its assumptions on culture and cultural identity: 'In the same way as someone recalls a long forgotten crime committed in his youth, the Greek people, at the moment of its full maturity, woke up to the regret over a crime committed in its youth. Eight hundred years earlier it had suffocated the Trojan people in its sleep.'<sup>4</sup> Greek

literature and Greek tragedy are, according to Kadare, ways of dealing with this crime, ways of dealing with the collective guilt of the Greek people for having destroyed another culture. From that moment onwards Greek literature and Greek tragedy are haunted by the ghosts from the burning ruins of Troy. What impressed me in this hypothesis of Kadare is his vision on culture, on what culture is and what it excludes, and on how what is excluded comes back and defines and defies by its very exclusion that culture. What Kadare tells us about culture or civilization is that it is always based on a crime that is forgotten, denied or repressed. In other words: culture and violence are deeply involved. To understand better what is at stake when the word 'culture' is used we should get aware of its traumatic and explosive contents. I use words like 'trauma' and 'explosion' on purpose to refer to the physical and psychic destructions involved in those contemporary conflicts that have (national, ethnic, religious,...) cultural identity as their main issue.

We use the word 'culture' when we talk about the highest achievements of mankind: the arts, philosophy, science, our political institutions. For the 19th century English writer and thinker Matthew Arnold, culture was the reservoir of the best that was known and thought in a society. He believed that culture could soften, although not neutralize, the destructive effects of a modern, aggressive and materialistic urban life. By reading Homer, Dante and Shakespeare, by listening to the Flemish polyphony, Mozart, Händel and Beethoven, by looking at paintings or sculptures by Van Eyck, Michelangelo and Da Vinci, we keep permanently in touch with the best that mankind created. By doing so we get a deeper understanding of ourselves, our tradition and our society. We also use the word culture to talk about the highest personal ideal: the ideal of being a 'cultured' or a 'cultivated' person. However being an ideal, culture is also always, as Werner Hamacher points out convincingly, 'culture's shame for perhaps not being sufficiently culture': 'No culture is Culture, culture itself, no culture can measure up to its claim to be culture. (...) It is, therefore, not a possession, this culture, but a projection and a reproach, an attempt to reach a goal - itself, that other - that is by definition unattainable: ever another culture, and each time guilty of not being the other culture and of not being whole.'<sup>5</sup> Culture is always a split concept, a permanent conflict between its realisation and its goal, its ideal and its insufficiency. Culture in other words introduces from the onset conflict in cultures and conflict between cultures. The consequences of this interpretation of culture are far reaching. Culture is used as a polemical term for the distinction between culture and non-culture, culture and nature, culture and barbarism,... and thus as a weapon in the struggle against other cultures, as an instrument of denunciation and barbarization of other cultures: 'Culture is always also a declaration of war.'<sup>6</sup>

The above mentioned miracle of the fifth century in Athens was historically partly due to the national pride of Greece after having defeated the Persians in the 5th century B.C. It is one of the great achievements of Greek civilisation to have given a voice to the defeated. This achievement took place in Aeschylus' tragedy 'The Persians'. Aeschylus, who distinguished himself as a warrior during the Persian Wars and lost a brother in battle, gave voice to the pain, the misery, the lament of those who were defeated. The tragedy is a proof of the humanism and the deep empathy the Greeks were capable of. With these words the messenger in the tragedy announces the defeat of the Persian army: "O cities of wide Asia! O loved Persian earth,/ Haven of ample wealth! One blow has overthrown/ Your happy pride; the flower of all your youth is fallen./ To bring the first news of defeat's an evil fate;/ Yet I must now unfold the whole disastrous truth:/ Persians, our country's fleet and army are no more" (Aeschylus, vs. 130). But in his English translation Philip Vellacot misses an important point, that is brought to the surface in the French translation by Paul Mazon. Here the last two lines run as follows: "Et pourtant, il me faut déployer devant vous toute notre misère, Perses: l'armée barbare tout entière a péri!" (Eschyle, vs. 117) The Persian messenger uses the word the Greeks used to talk about the others: the barbarians. The Dutch translation by Herman Altena uses "the non-Greeks" as translation. (Aeschylus, vs. 61) It is in the end not a Persian who is speaking - for how could he refer to himself as a barbarian? - but a Greek. In any case it shows the antagonism (the 'symbolic' violence) between Greeks and Persians even at a moment where the highest point of empathy (of being 'cultivated') was reached.

This silencing of a difference at the heart of Greek culture was repeated once more in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his highly discussed, but thought provoking book "Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization" Martin Bernal analyzes the major shift that took place in the study of Greek civilization in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He makes a distinction between what he calls the Ancient Model and the Aryan Model. According to the Ancient Model the ancestors of the Greeks had lived around the Aegean in idyllic simplicity until the Phoenicians and rulers from Egypt arrived and acquired territories, built cities, and founded dynasties. They introduced many of the arts of civilization, notably, irrigation, various types of armaments, writing and religion. Already in the 5<sup>th</sup> century this idea of cultural dependence was not much appreciated by the Athenians, as the panhellenic, anti-barbarian passions clearly proof. The other model, the Aryan Model, sees Greek civilization as the result of the conquest of the Aegean basin from the north by the Hellenes, speakers of an Indo-European language. The Aryan Model took over from the Ancient Model in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century because, according to Bernal, it fitted into the new cultural

identity Europe was constructing in that period. Bernal distinguishes four different forces affecting the social and ideological environments of scholars in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: (1) the establishment of the paradigms of progress; (2) the triumph of romanticism; (3) the revival of christianity; and (4) racism. Bernal adds: 'Although it was only one of four factors behind the fall of the Ancient Model, racism became the major ideological force by which the Aryan model achieved and maintained its dominance from 1850 to 1950.'<sup>7</sup> That period is the period of imperialism and colonialism that saw the emergence of racist theories and ultimately fell into the abyss of fascism and nazism leading to the extermination camps during the second World War.

In his study Martin Bernal looks for a compromise model. Accepting the argument of the Aryan Model that Greek is fundamentally an Indo-European language and that at a certain stage the Aegean basin must have been substantially influenced by the north (as a result of conquest or migration), he does not want to exclude the possibility of substantial cultural influence from the south and the east as well: 'It is plausible to suppose that, rather than being the result of a pre-Hellenic substrate, the non-Indo-European elements in the Greek language and culture were largely later Semitic and Egyptian superimpositions on an Indo-European base. Possibly these were the result of conquest and elite settlement around the Aegean, and certainly they came from trade and diplomatic contacts between Egypt and the Levant, on the one hand, and the Aegean, on the other'.<sup>8</sup> This is not the place to go into the details of Bernal's thesis and the arguments of his critics. What his analysis makes clear is that a pure origin of culture does not exist and that purity (and for the same reason racism) is not a fact but always a political or ideological rewriting of fact. The French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy formulates it as follows: 'Every culture is in itself "multicultural", not only because there has always been a previous acculturation, and because there is no pure and simple origin, but at a deeper level, because the gesture of culture is itself a mixed gesture: it is to affront, confront, transform, divert, develop, recombine, combine, rechannel.'<sup>9</sup>

If the essential gesture of culture is conflict and confrontation, it implies that what we call culture and especially the dialogue between cultures (inter-culturality or multi-culturality) always hides the possibility of aggression, power relations and feelings of superiority. Returning to my field of profession I want to focus on a theatre performance from the eighties that on the one hand was praised as a model of intercultural understanding, but that on the other hand also has been interpreted as a culturally imperialistic and eurocentric work of art: 'The Mahabharata' by Peter Brook. For more than three decades the celebrated direc-

tor Peter Brook has been manifesting his interest in working with theatrical traditions and actors from other cultures. In many projects he showed his ability to communicate with actors from very different cultural backgrounds (European, American, African, Asian,...). Towards this intercultural communication he takes a humanist and utopian position. Brook makes a rough distinction between three forms of culture: the culture of the 'state', the culture of the 'individual' and the culture of 'links': 'Both cultures - that of the state and that of the individual - have their own strengths and achievements, but they also have strict limitations due to the fact that both are only partial. At the same time both survive, because both are expressions of incredibly powerful vested interests. Every large collectivity has a need to sell itself, every large group has to promote itself through its culture, and in the same way, individual artists have a deeply rooted interest in compelling other people to observe and respect the creations of their own inner world.'<sup>10</sup> The state as well as the individual are, according to Peter Brook, characterized by clearly defined interests and by a will to defend those interests. Recognizing the merits and the force of the cultures of the state and of the individual, Brook chooses explicitly for what he calls the 'third' culture, the culture of 'links': 'It has the force that can counterbalance the fragmentation of our world. It has to do with the discovery of relationships where such relationships have become submerged and lost - between man and society, between one race and another, between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between humanity and machinery, between the visible and the invisible, between categories, languages, genres. What are these relationships? Only cultural acts can explore and reveal these vital truths.'<sup>11</sup> It seems that in the culture of the state and the culture of the individual certain truths and relationships are submerged or ignored, that can only be revealed by a culture of links, i.e. a culture of relationships. An important dimension of the culture of links is the dialogue with other cultures. Brook expresses his great expectations from such an intercultural dialogue. The same did Victor Turner in the quotation that opens these reflections. This understanding was what Peter Brook was after in his staging of the great Indian epic 'The Mahabharata'. The performance became the central reference in the ongoing debate on the possibilities and methods of an intercultural theatre.

But by Third World critics the merits of this kind of intercultural exchange were very profoundly questioned. The most passionate and fierce criticism was articulated by the Indian critic and director Rustom Bharucha. His analysis was a 'cold shower'<sup>12</sup> for well meaning western interculturalists. Bharucha makes clear from the outset in what tradition he places Brooks performance of 'The Mahabharata': 'It was the British who first made us aware in India of economic appropriation on a global scale. They took our raw materials from us, transported

them to factories in Manchester and Lancashire, where they were transformed into commodities, which were then forcibly sold to us in India. Brook deals in a different kind of appropriation: he does not merely take our commodities and textiles and transform them into costumes and props. He has taken one of our most significant texts and decontextualized it from its history in order to 'sell' it to audiences in the West'.<sup>13</sup> For Bharucha the work of Peter Brook continues the British imperialistic and colonial enterprise in India. In saying so he stresses the often hidden or ignored unequal socio-economic structures underlying the so called intercultural exchange. Bharucha articulates very explicitly that intercultural projects still execute an (often unconscious) colonial agenda: 'as much as one would like to accept the seeming openness of Euro-American interculturalists to other cultures, the larger economic and political domination of the West has clearly constrained, if not negated the possibilities of a genuine exchange. In the best of all possible worlds, interculturalism could be viewed as a 'two-way street', based on a mutual reciprocity of needs. But in actuality, where it is the West that extends its domination to cultural matters, this 'two-way street' could be more accurately described as a 'dead end'<sup>14</sup>. Bharucha is most convincing when he points to the economical and political power relations that underlie intercultural exchange. Bharucha's detailed analysis and criticism of the performance remains an important document that should make us aware of the many traps of intercultural communication and of culture/multiculturalism as such. Bharucha himself does not completely avoid the trap of seeing culture as a closed entity. One could ask the question at what point one is familiar enough with another culture to deal with its cultural and artistic achievements? How much knowledge of context and history is needed? Could Brook ever reach the level of understanding Bharucha wants him to reach? Does Bharucha have that level of understanding himself? Through merely belonging to the Indian culture? Or through study? Is one ever familiar enough with one's own culture? Is culture something one has or can have? To avoid these crucial but difficult questions, culture is often defined in reductive terms. The more however a culture perceives and defines itself in terms of purity, unity, sameness, health, authenticity, race, ethnicity, national or cultural identity,... the more a culture denies its fundamental and original trauma, its violence against and its exclusion of the other. Belonging to a culture than means literally partaking in a crime, prolonging a criminal scene. It means that there is no such thing as a healthy, a pure or a sound culture. Because of the crime that is committed there is something fundamentally 'unheimlich' ('uncanny') in culture. Culture can therefore never be a place where we are at home, a 'domus', where we feel members of the same family, of the same herd, of the same blood, of the same race. Extreme right, racist and fascist discourses try to 're-domesticate' the multicultural public space, try to recreate a pure domestic space only for family

members, a space that never existed and whose existence as an ideal is only possible because of the repression of initial violence and exclusion. There is no culture of the domus any more. There is only the culture of the polis, of the metropolis. The polis is the culture of what the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls 'the mêlée' (the mixed). In an essay about and for Sarajevo, one of the recent tragic names of this 're-domestication', Nancy writes: 'A city does not have to be identified by anything other than a name, which indicates a place, the place of a mêlée, a crossing and a stop, a knot and an exchange, a gathering, a disjunction, a circulation, a radiating (un étoilement). The name of a city, like that of a country, like that of a people and a person, must always be the name of no one; it must be the name of anyone who might be presented in person or in the own right (en propre). (...) The "proper" name must always serve to dissolve the ego: the latter opens up a meaning, a pure source of meaning; the former indicates a mêlée, raises up a melody: Sarajevo.'<sup>15</sup> The melody of Sarajevo was however suffocated in a brutal screaming for ethnic cleansing.

Western culture (and maybe culture itself) is by definition urban culture. We can't talk about modernity without talking about the modern city and the way it fundamentally changed our perception of ourselves in relation to the other, to the others, to other cultures. It is in the streets of the modern city that culture meets its traumatic history. Walking through the city of Brussels, as I do every day, I am confronted with the Belgian colonial past and its marginalisation of Africans in Belgian society; with the immigration from North-Africa and the social disruption of a whole community; with the consequences of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe; with the European and Belgian laws concerning political and economical refugees... The public space in the modern multicultural city has become the scene of our traumatic and violent history.

Let me return for a moment to Kadare. He seems to argue that there is a moment of maturity in cultural development. That moment of maturity is the moment of recognition of the initial crime that founded culture. Is it possible that at the beginning of this third millennium there are certain signs of the maturity Kadare was talking about? The maturity to face the crimes underlying culture? The maturity to face colonialism, imperialism and its terrible consequences? To face fascism, nazism, Auschwitz? To face racism, xenophobia and intolerance in all its visible and invisible appearances? To face the challenges and the complex demands of the multicultural society? The rescue of culture lies in its affirmation of cultural self suspicion, says Werner Hamacher<sup>16</sup>. Culture is always in crisis, because it is crisis itself. At the height of the political and cultural achievements in the age of Pericles and the Acropolis, Greek tragedy confronted the Greek citi-

zen with “das Unbehagen in der Kultur”, the uncanny in (his) culture. It is important that a culture gets aware of the symbolic violence at work in its very heart. It means that a culture has to rethink and reconstruct itself. A culture of the *mêlée* is a culture based on a new set of questions, as is made clear by Paul Gilroy: “Can we improve upon the idea that culture exists exclusively in localized national and ethnic units - separate but equal in aesthetic value and human worth? What significance do we accord to the histories of imperialism and white supremacy that are so extensively entangled with the development of modern aesthetics, its storerooms, collections, and museums and the anthropological assumptions that governed their consolidation? How, if we can reject the over-simple diagnoses of this situation offered by ethnic absolutism, might we begin to frame a trans- or cross-cultural criticism? What role does expressive cultural creativity play in mediating or even transcending racialized or ethnically coded differences? What recognition do we give to the forms of non national and cross-cultural practice that are already spontaneously under way in popular-cultural en disreputable forms, many of which have supplied important resources to the trans-national social movement against racism?”<sup>17</sup>

Let me concentrate for a moment on the Flemish theatre - my professional field of work - and list some concrete questions that can be asked, not to accuse or to condemn but to open up a discussion on this symbolic violence that is also a violence of representation. How many actors and directors of Moroccan, Turkish or African origin are working in the Flemish theatres? How often performances in the Arabic language or in other languages are programmed? Are the new urban subcultures an artistic expressions represented on the official stages? What kind of strategies are developed to communicate with new audiences? Are there many youngsters of non-European origin in the theatre schools? If not, what are the reasons for their absence? Do journalists and critics write in a well informed way about non-European theatre or dance performances? Do our theatres stage non-European plays? Do festival organisers visit the festivals in Beyrouth, Damas and Tunis or do they only go to Berlin, Avignon and Edinburgh? What is the role and function of government policies in all this? These are questions that involve the notions of power and representation, of cultural identity and artistic assimilation. Creativity is not a human faculty that is developed outside of the socio-economic and political ideological context. It is always also related to mechanisms of cultural dominance, recognition and exclusion, to the laws that regulate the positions of the centre and the margins in the artistic field.

When we talk about a multicultural society we have to take it seriously on all levels, politically as well as culturally. Only then we have a possibility to deal

with the trauma's of history and to reach out for what the sociologist Paul Gilroy calls 'a different view of culture, one which accentuates its plastic, syncretic qualities and which does not see culture flowing into neat ethnic parcels but as a radically unfinished social process of self-definition and transformation.' Or in the words of Nancy: 'The *mêlée*, therefore, is not. It happens; it takes place. There is *mêlée*, crisscrossing, weaving, exchange, sharing, and it is never a single thing, nor is it ever the same.'<sup>18</sup> That theatre and performance can play an important role in this culture of the '*mêlée*' is also the point of view of Una Chaudhuri: "Like the theatre, which must always negotiate some kind of meeting between the heterogeneous orders of text and performance, of the written and spoken, the intercultural project must reconcile the claims of disparate orders of being, various temporalities, historicities, ethnicities. This resemblance suggests that the view of theatre as a modelled differentiality could also be the site where the future of interculturalism might be imagined.'<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

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