

In that same period a very famous comic actor, director and playwright emerged, Al Fadil Saeed, who began to perform the monologues of Abu Elruth, but quickly developed more elaborate sketches at the end of the 1950s. This marked a turning point in the history of comic theatre in Sudan. Fadil Saeed asserted that these comic performances were unique, maybe even more convincing than the former comic interludes, and pleaded for comic theatre as a structural part of Sudanese arts. His opinion was strongly presented during his touring in the country. The well-composed sketches he performed played an important role in the developing comic theatre, although the sketches were about character-stereotypes rather than social issues. His success was due to the charming style of his acting, presenting some of the most famous characters *Kartoob* and *Bitgudaim* in Sudan. Many pioneers followed him like Osman Ahmed Hamid with *Tor Aljar* and Mahmoud Sirag with *Abu Dal' aiba*. They took their models from everyday practice. Fadil Saeed's influence both in acting, directing and playwriting was very strong on a new generation of comedy-groups whose members studied at the Institute of Music and Drama in Khartoum. At this moment however the character-stereotypes are discouraged. The Institute tries to establish new forms of comic theatre based on social issues.

Comedy theatre in Sudan has more profited from Arabic comic drama such as the writings of Almagott, Faroug Korshid and Mahfouz Abdelraman etc. than from Sudanese playwriting. As a consequence, present comic plays are not about specific Sudanese issues although both the texts and the typical characters are adapted like *Almuharig* the clown (Almagott) and *Habazlam Bazaza* (Abdelraman). These adaptations were made during recent graduation projects of the directors-course of the Institute of Music and Theatre and later transferred to public performances. It becomes clear that influences from Arabic theatre in general and Egyptian theatre in particular has been very strong and that the tradition of Fadil Saeed's stereotyping is still very much alive.

Notes

- ¹ Shams El Din Younis, *Sudanese Rituals throughout History*, Arabic text, Khartoum, Sudan, 2004.
- ² Osman El Nasari, *Foreign Community Theatre 1905-1919*, Arabic text, Khartoum, Sudan, 1979.
- ³ Al Hamid Mohammed, *Sudanese Comic Poetry*, Arabic text, Khartoum, Sudan, 1999.

TRADITIONAL WESTERN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE COMIC HERO VS. THE LACANIAN CHALLENGE The Case of *Amphitruo*

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Amphitruo, deluded hero and cheated husband, great Theban warrior and king, has figured as the victim of randy and almighty Jupiter in a long series of Western comedies. In the hands of Plautus, the greatest comedy writer of Roman Republican times, this poor king was manipulated by the father of the gods himself, so that Jupiter could assume the complete identity of Amphitruo and seduce his wife, the decent Roman *domina* Alcumena. The father of the gods temporarily but totally deprived him of his human appearance, and in pursuance of his love-making, stretched the length of the night into three (the *nox longa-motive*). When the real Amphitruo arrived the next morning and wanted to tell his wife of his military successes, he could not understand why her reception was so cool and why she already seemed to know what had happened on the battlefield. On top of that, Amphitruo's slave, Sosia, was reduplicated by Mercurius, a situation which resulted in the farcical scene of two couples facing each other, a human general and his slave, and a divine 'copy-paste version' of Jupiter and Mercurius. The story ended in an even more incredible way, with the double accouchement by Alcumena, a double birth which revealed that Jupiter was the father of Heracles, and Amphitruo the father of Iphicles. And do not precisely the adventures of Heracles, prototype of the fallible hero, and son of an ever amorous father, illustrate, *ad nauseam*, the painful limitation of the human race that never can cope with its lustful nature?

Reading a story like this, one must admit that its topics really are something special, outstanding in fact. Let us focus just on three themes, all of which illustrate primal human problems and which keep on returning in later Western interpretations. First, there is the god/men relationship in Jupiter's descent from heaven and his amazing experiences in a human world, an elaboration of the sacred marriage between heaven and earth. Secondly, there is a man's anxiety about his wife and his inability to understand her as the radically other, she who is able to bear children and who succeeds in puzzling him so profoundly. And finally, this 'comedy' continually asks questions about doubles: two gods (Jupiter; Mercurius) doubling two humans (Amphitruo; Sosia), two fathers

generating two sons (Jupiter/ Heracles and Amphitruo / Iphicles) and fighting them in different ways (esp. Amphitruo has to face the divine son, Heracles). Indeed, the mingling of these three thematic lines provides enough material to illustrate a special edition of Freud's primary family triangle. As a matter of fact, these topics really belong to a tragedy, not a comedy, and in his opening lines, Plautus repeatedly draws attention to the way he has revived older tragic material in a new comic context. As has been shown¹, the more serious aspects treated in this comedy did indeed originate from Greek tragedy. But in Plautus's hands, a god decided that he could turn a tragedy into a comedy, as can still be read in vs. 65, *tragicocomoedia* (HSS), a mixed form halfway between the two.

A history of de-sacralization

For about 2500 years, the West has staged *Amphitruo* in all possible comic and farcical tones, in a never ending series of adaptations and transpositions, questioning both the vulgar and the grotesque (cf. the beating of Sosia by Mercurius and the rape of Alcumena by Jupiter), allured by the lurking doom of regression which threatens both gods and humans. Giraudoux, in his *Amphitryon* 38 (published in 1929) calculated that up to that point, the Western tradition knew exactly 38 new versions of this story. However, he did not rely upon the most accurate accounts and missed some of them. Today we know of more than 100 adaptations, making this comedy the most popular and most imitated of all Plautus' plays.

Even in Antiquity, the way Plautus treated the Amphitruo-theme revealed a very provocative mixture of mythical, tragic and comic elements. Nevertheless, in his hands, the play still was a farce, which functioned so well because of the technical perfection of the reduplicated scenes. However, as Otto Rank has shown in *Une étude sur le double* (1932), one of the most threatening aspects of our human existence, the apparent loss of identity, an experience which might lead to madness and the triumph of the absurd, was touched upon here. Apparently, the principle of pleasure (Charles Mauron) wins out in this case over the principle of reality, but is softened by a religious and moral context. As a matter of fact, the theme of Jupiter making fun of human piety was handled by Plautus with extreme care and needed to be overlaid with a great number of precautions. But in his hands, the continuous loss of human identity and the unceasing appearance of doubles, two main problems in becoming and maintaining our status as human individuals, were handled in such a fresh and captivating way that all later productions were conditioned by it.

The Comedy of Errors was Shakespeare's first comedy (staged sometime between 1589 and 1594), often dismissed as pure farce, and based upon both Plautus' *Menaechmi* and *Amphitruo*. The play focused especially on the theme of the doubles and the wanderings of twins separated from each other in a distant past and having servants who were also twin brothers. At the same time, he also gave greater voice to problems of gender and the overall relationship between men and women. Much later, from the middle of the twentieth century, this comedy would fascinate large audiences, as witnessed in a famous Broadway production, the Rodgers and Hart musical *The Boys from Syracuse* (1938), the Cole Porter version in the musical comedy *Out of this World* (1950) and the rap version (called the "ad-rap-tation" of Shakespeare) by New York University students in *The Bomb-itty of Errors* (2000). Fantastic shows no doubt, thriving on the tension between illusion and reality, always sailing close to the wind of the city's restrictive "blue laws".

Four years after the creation of *Le Tartuffe ou l'Imposteur* (1664), a comedy in which Molière hilariously attacked 'le parti dévot' and which, in the eyes of the church, turned him into the very devil (leading to an official banning from the public stage by Louis XIV and an act of excommunication by the archbishop of Paris on all actors, readers and members of the public), he wrote his *Amphitryon* (1668), 'une comédie-ballet', an unedited combination of text, ballet, songs and machineries, conceived in free verse. These new techniques seemed the best possible way to render this wonderful world in which everything seemed possible and which could be considered a defence of pleasure and liberty. In this play a truly ridiculous Jupiter intensified the artifices of seduction and deceit that characterize both Don Juan and Tartuffe, a technique that allowed the playwright to articulate a socio-moral complaint against those who disrupted the functioning of society. For French audiences, the ancient gods functioned only as characters in a fictional context and therefore the Plautinian tragic-comical seriousness could easily be staged in a purely comical atmosphere (without mention of the birth of Heracles). At the same time, the vague romanticism prevailing in the Salons allowed an emphasis upon newly discovered aspects of the freedom of the woman. This entrance into 'modern times' profoundly disturbed the traditional distribution of the themes of gods/doubles/female; the religious dimension definitely lost its primary importance, new issues concerning the position of both the king and the social classes were engaged with and the intriguing powers of lust and desire were finally allowed to be fully acknowledged.

In his *Amphitryon, or The Two Sosas* (1690), John Dryden added new subplots and introduced some minor characters, such as the greedy, horny Phaedra

flirting with both Sosias. In the wake of Molière, Dryden explicitly made fun of the gods, especially Jupiter. To enhance the frivolous nature of his version, Dryden accorded great importance to the music (the composer was Henry Purcell) and created a play with incidental music, singing and dancing, close to the seventeenth century idea of an opera. The process of de-sacralisation, which Molière had started - by turning the tragicomedy into a comedy, was thus taken further by Dryden, who never tired of poking fun at the gods.

Heinrich von Kleist (*Amphitryon*, 1807) was the first modern playwright who made Jupiter see that even a god had to face his limits. Jupiter had to recognize that he could be loved as Amphitryon, but never in his capacity as a god. Descending from heaven and assuming human passions and emotions meant for him to be touched by human fragility and to experience in a very physical way the inner conflicts which so easily tear humans apart. At the same time, Alcmene was torn between a strong feeling of guilt and the memory of that splendid divine moment she had been able to share with the master of all gods. At the end of the play she utters this meaningful cry of deep regret: "Ach...".

For Jean Giraudoux (*Amphitryon* 38, 1929) this story contained a theme ideally suited to illustrating his 'critical humanism'. Indeed, as his comical theatre concealed a philosophy, which was aiming at purifying the human being and delivering it from all its phantoms, his humanism staged both a human being able to choose its own dignity and a human couple that really could function as a central link in society. The feelings of Alcmène were those of a modern woman, fully in control of herself, for whom the presence of Jupiter was felt as a burden. Just as Molière had dispensed with the religious elements, so Giraudoux dispensed with the farcical background (Sosie being beaten up by Mercure) and the playful tossing around with doubles. At the end of the play, Alcmène was a happily married woman, from whose mind, by divine grace, all traces of infidelity had been erased.

Contrary to the general trend of Western interpretation, Peter Hacks, that fellow-traveller of Heiner Müller, in his *Amphitryon* (1968), took Jupiter seriously. In his eyes, this god had to be seen as the embodiment of all human capacities, an illustration of what love is able to achieve in human life. From the very start, Alcmene felt very akin to Jupiter, and these feelings led her to a higher degree of self-knowledge, but also to a thorough-going analysis of her husband, who suddenly looked very tiny. Considering all the worldly obligations that one has to fulfil in this society, only a god can fully be a man (III. *Es ist von solchem Ernst die Welt beschaffen, / dass nur ein Gott vermag, ein Mensch zu sein*) and

therefore Hacks's reworking of the old theme finally focused on utopia and its possible integration and fulfilment in reality, a process of an ever growing tendency towards perfection. Hence Jupiter's final appeal: '*Du bist begrenzt. Doch seine Grenzen sehn, / heisst schon sie überschreiten. Mann, Mann, Mann / Nimm deine Mängel nicht als selbstverständlich*' (III). Thus was the old religious paradigm turned into a newer social and political message, sexual love into a sublimated form of understanding humanity.

Parody

This short summary, which has highlighted the most significant aspects of some important adaptations, reveals that both the intrusion of Jupiter into the human world and the mysterious creation of doubles was originally cast in a mythic context, enhancing an initial fear of the phantoms of the primitive mind, as analysed by Otto Rank. Plautus was the first to parody the theme, Rhinton, in a series of South-Italian *phluakes* (see also the numerous vase-paintings), the first to make a burlesque of it. Molière ridiculed the social setting, Giraudoux insisted on the value of the human relations, Hacks on their utopian meaning. Laughing at human finiteness remained a central issue, but there was a continuous change of the type of laughter, illustrating a small history of what laughter has been about throughout Western civilisation. Clearly, not all historical moments were open to the same kind of comic and grotesque situations, and often enough, religious, political and moralizing sub-themes emerged, calling for extreme care. Christians did not fancy the intrusion of a divine character (ultimately, a specification of the *hieros gamos*, the marriage between the sky and the earth) nor the disruption of the stable *ego*. Even Plautus himself was aware of the risks he took in poking fun at traditional religion and in destabilizing the strictly codified place of the Roman *domina*. And sometimes, religion even counterattacked and religious minds staged newly written spiritual interpretations, like the Christian mystery play *Sacri Mater Virgo* (1621) conceived by Johannes Burmeister, a baroque play which cast Alcmene as Maria, Jupiter as the Holy Spirit, Mercury as the angel Gabriel, adding also Asmodes as the devil.

In general, an overview of the interpretations of this play through history shows how the old religious context was de-sacralized (the gods being frozen in their anthropomorphic characters), the existential anxiety for doubles reduced (reshaped in psychological theories) and the situation of women reconsidered (victimized women repositioned in feminism and Goddess Movements). Being an important part of the de-construction of the traditional and patriarchal world-view

that lent itself to comedies of this type, Lacanian theory has been questioning a lot of the presuppositions that led to the construction of this type of male and female identity and hence to the kind of rapist society that Greece and Rome often established. In the next section we will investigate some of the assumptions and intuitions that have governed the constitution of the *ego* and hence the functioning of its major (mythic) narratives.

An archetypal approach

Only gods dispose of the truth and nothing but the truth, and these beings of infinite beauty and wisdom do not need to smile at traces of imperfection. In the words of Karel Boullart: "Banqueting Olympians aside, gods are no laughing matter, certainly not when they are almighty, know everything and consequently cannot be surprised. Indeed, how could a being of infinite perfection have any sense of humour and what could such an entity be humorous about?"² In contrast, humans are by definition finite beings, and therefore imperfect, subject to all kinds of laughter, always inferior to the gods and to themselves. Comic theatre, that ongoing process of an artistic and far reaching reflection on human nature, always presupposes the human condition in its bare state of existential finiteness. Referring to Henry Bergson's book *'Le Rire'* (1900), one could say that the real object of humour always has to do with the human being as such (animals only interfere when compared with or related to humans) and that, by virtue of that fact, laughing is bound to be a social activity which is always in need for people who are similarly disposed to laugh. In a general way, laughter arises when man cannot really cope with his mortal condition and discovers that he has to see himself as the limited character he actually is. Having a good laugh often presupposes the necessity of respecting some distance, or the will to shatter illusions and to tear up cultural pretences. Therefore, comedy, no less than tragedy, asks for a global interpretation of life, not of life as a biological process, but of life as a series of cultural choices and of specific and local interpretations, always a provisional synthesis of personal and collective opinions conceived in terms of a specific world-view.

Analyzed in its deep structure, the *Amphitruo* reflects both a particular and a more general cultural pattern, expressing both a specific Western answer and a more universal quest. First of all, it represents the 'romantic tragicomedy' type of drama that happens to have one of the most common plots one can find across different traditions: it tells the story of the union, separation, and ultimate reunion of lovers.³ As a 'romantic comedy' it seems to share some 'universal'

characteristics, but on the other hand, it is clear that not all cultures felt the need to stage this particular version of it. Surely, this type of 'romantic tragicomedy' forms part of 'our' social and collective process of interpreting reality in terms of our own Western finiteness and this Theban story deals with a number of episodes in the life of a Greek hero which reflect our own search for stability and identity. The radical finiteness that turned Amphitruo and Heracles into lonely seekers after the truth is part of our search for an all-embracing explanation of our human condition. In past and present times, this has been part of the search for our mythic identity, a longing for answers that constitute the 'self-interpretation of our inner selves in relation to the outside world, ...narrations by which our society is united...and which are essential to the process of keeping our souls alive and bringing us new meaning in a difficult and often meaningless world'⁴. Like any other form of mythology (and the New Age sensibility is full of them), Greek mythology, in a civilization which did not rely upon a holy book nor any divine revelations dealt with a great number of stories about what it is to be on earth, to experience death and get to know our destiny, the gods, fate, human lust and desire. Amphitruo felt what it was like to lose his identity and to be cheated in a most grotesque way, especially since this was provoked by the gods themselves, those 'banqueting Olympians' who normally, incarnating infinite perfection, are not supposed to have any sense of humour.

When we investigate the kind of analysis that Western culture has conducted of the comic hero, it is interesting to note that in the 19th and 20th centuries, myths have most frequently been interpreted in terms of an essentialist and/or archetypal approach. The comparatism of Frazer, the ritualism of van Gennep, the symbolism of Cassirer, the return to primordial times of Eliade, and the process of individuation and the archetypes of Jung all thrive on a number of essentialist suppositions. Many Western theories shared the idea that the mythic subject could be seen as a wholly knowable, accessible and readable essence, open to objectification, able to realise himself in and through the plot of a (mythic) story. From the 'classical' Greeks onwards to the times of Descartes, the male individual became the ultimate norm and criterion by which to measure human behaviour. The contemporary post-Jungian heritage, as it has been formulated by Joseph Campbell and his followers, continues to rely upon essentialist interpretations and suggests that human life can be fully known, described and mastered in a series of six or eight phases, the so-called 'monomyth'⁵. Surveys such as his, testifying to the enormous appeal of mythic interpretations, clearly reveal that in general the Western subject wanted to be characterized in terms of the wholeness and completion that the other could bestow on him. In a more general way, this is the main idea behind all monotheistic religions and the

ontology that supports them. Among many other intuitions about human *genesis*, it was Plato, who, in his *Symposium*, launched the idea that, in the beginning of time, humans had the shape of perfect globes but, because of their conspiracy against Zeus, were sliced into two halves, each half desperately longing for its fellow (189d-191d). Ever since, the West has focused its explorations on all aspects of mythical one-ness.

Lacan and the phantasm of the Other

But in the same *Symposium*, there was also this other intuition, touched upon by Lacan in his *Séminaire VIII*, concerning the relation between Alcibiades and Socrates, a relation between the *erastes* and the *eromenos*, but one which is never completely fulfilled, the ideal example of the 'torn halves'.⁶ The drunken Alcibiades, trying to explain his love for Socrates, had to admit that his friend fascinated him simply because of that untouchable *agalma*, that mysterious treasure deep inside of him, a phantasm of the other that revealed to him that love was not at all a complementary matter and that convinced him of the lack of total correspondence between the two lovers. What is missing in one of them is not hidden in the other, but is part of a particular vision and construction that creates the other.

In the wake of this latest idea, Jacques Lacan, child of the late twentieth century, an age that has been called post-structural, post-essentialist and post-humanist, vigorously attacked the notion of a unified subject, able to know and master itself. Re-interpreting the Freudian legacy, he dismantled the presumptions of a stable *ego* and a natural(ized) core of identity, claiming that the subject will never be able to fulfil its desire. Creating his own myth of the 'hommelette', he compared the birth of all humans to the breaking of an egg, suggesting that you can never break it without losing once and for all the initial state and without introducing the 'sexual animal' inside it to the world of mortality. As he cynically remarks, the male lover continues to deceive himself, chasing after romantic ideals and partners who will completely respond to his wishes. Love can never aspire to heal the initial and fundamental rupture by which the two sexes and every individual came into being. Two lovers are bound to never meet, in the sense of becoming One.⁷ As Elisabeth Grosz argues:

"This demand for One-ness is the demand behind the profession of desire for the woman in romantic love, for a "cure" from the analyst in the therapeutic relation, and for God in religious faith. Lacan makes it clear

that this demand for One is a demand for an impossible harmony and complementarity between the sexes. It is impossible, he asserts, because the relation to the other is always mediated by the Other, the linguistic and socio-economic system behind every other. Lacan suggests that men always attempt to put his amorous relations in place of his relation to the Other. God, perhaps man's most sustained attempt to come to grips with the Other, always intervenes between man and his other, creating a sort of "philosophical ménage-à-trois"... "The good old God of old times", as Lacan calls him, is a reification of the Other. Romantic love is not a form of homage to the woman, but to the Other. For the man, the woman is a means to this greater end".⁸

Therefore, the symbolic order that Lacan postulates and that predates the coming into being of each concrete historical subject requires a subject irrevocably split, divided by language, governed by the phallus and the Other. The desire for the One is, for Lacan, the desire of the Other, that big Other beyond every concrete other, constituted by language and the symbolic order. Lacan even explicitly denies that the sexual relation is a relation between two subjects, but rather between five beings: the subject, the other, the phantasm of the other desired by the subject, the phantasm of the subject desired by the other, and the big Other.

In terms of the Lacanian dismantlement of the *ego*, the *Amphitruo* raises important issues, since it deals with a major attack on the human personality (*Amphitruo*), a regressive form of castration (Jupiter assuming the shape of a human) and an exploration of female *jouissance* (*Alcmène*). This comedy, based upon a play with false identities, pokes fun at doubles and duplicates in a breathtaking manner, stages mirrors and twins, and obliges its characters to pass through a temporary but devastating loss of personality. Leaving *Sosia* ('ce brave petit moi de petit bonhomme comme vous et moi dans la vie de tous les jours'⁸⁹) outside of the picture, there is a difference to be made between three types of heroes who play their various games: two cases of supposedly normal male and heroic behaviour, and one of a female anti-hero, all three facing the fundamental human situation of failure, lack and desire. The male heroes search endlessly for what they lack; demand and desire are haunting them and oblige them to go through various stages of the imaginary process.

A haunting desire

First there is **Amphitruo**, the great warrior and king of Thebes. He is looking for fame, as it has always been defined as *kleos*, epic glory, and, after his return from the battlefield, the first things he wants to tell his wife about, in a very boastful and inflated style, are the military successes he has achieved. However, this episode is only one part of his mythic career, which speaks of a long series of revenges and thefts (war against the Paphians, theft of cattle) and a number of killings followed by purification (the killing of Electryon, by accident; murder of Comaetho, as punishment for betraying her father), these being various aspects of a fundamental 'demand' which always asks recognition from the others. In death, neither acclamation nor apotheosis (as in Heracles' case) awaited for him, since it was a stupid accident in a war between two cities, which was fatal to him, a conflict in which Heracles, once again, was more successful than him. Later on, he was honoured as a local Theban hero, but then again, his cult was taken over by that of Heracles. He is a perfect example of the never ending human search for (re)cognition, and also a constant illustration of the insatiable demand resulting from the *ego's* continuous longing for aggrandisement. Besides, the great general constantly tasks undertakes that have mostly been imposed upon him by others, members of the family (Pterelas vs. Electryon); he runs after a number of temporary and imaginary illusions which are never able to satisfy his longings and clearly can never escape the realm of rivalry. The whole family feud involves obtaining what the other possesses (ultimately rule over the city of Mycene, more commonly the possession of cattle), a clear illustration of what René Girard called mimetic desire. As a consequence of Alcumena's double childbirth, he had to accept, for the rest of his life, the scarcely flattering title of the 'lesser' father; in terms of rivalry, both the father and the son, Iphicles, are superseded by their divine counterparts. And even worse, Jupiter, in his well calculated plan to snatch away Amphitruo's identity, obliges him to re-entertain the old doubts concerning the constitution of his "I" identity, a phase of personal growth in which every subject, through a number of imaginary identifications with the image in the mirror, imagines a self that apparently has no lack. Hence the threatening appearance of doubles and twins which radically question the concept of self.

The second hero is **Jupiter**, supreme representative of the divine order and therefore of that completely different and mysterious area from which men originally came. In mythic terms, knowing Jupiter means to respect the fundamental gap that keeps men and gods apart. In Lacanian terms it refers to the conflict between the subject and the big Other, that particular place in the symbolic order which is everybody's goal and where the separation between self

and other is annihilated. Lacan, however, considers desire an intrinsic human characteristic, a fundamental lack which can only be satisfied by yet another desire, and therefore, by definition, cannot be fulfilled. It is this position of the (never accessible) centre of the system, of the Real (the lack of lack) that predates every evolution and of the entrance into Language itself, that on a mythic level is assumed by Jupiter. Gods are a way of revealing the Real,¹⁰ Lacan writes, and as mortal beings we are obliged to imagine them in the symbolic order, and thus in an ever insufficient way. Since the place of the original unity is all Fullness and Completeness, a place where there is no need that cannot be satisfied (because there is no absence or lack), there is also no language in the Real.

Jupiter's incredible 'descent from heaven' both calls for a human awareness of castration (definite Lack) and a loss of his divine position as the Other. As beholder of the symbolic Phallus, he falls prey to a very physical phallus, exchanging the part of the symbolic representative of the patriarchal order of culture for one that stages a fierce and lustful exemplar of primal sexuality. Ensnared in the web of language, he has to become a speaking subject who is totally subjected to the rules of language and therefore is to the Lack. In Giraudoux's version, answering Mercure's question 'Mais enfin que désirez-vous?', Jupiter says: 'Ce que désire un homme, hélas! Mille désirs contraires. Qu'Alcmène reste fidèle à son mari et qu'elle se donne à moi avec ravissement' (Acte II,3). In the third act (Scène 5), Alcmène puzzles him with words and offers him her friendship, 'son amitié', the highest possible category in her appraisal of the god, and a shocking experience for him: 'Amitié! Quel est ce mot? Explique-toi. Pour la première fois, je l'entends'. As a divine creature, Jupiter was supposed to encompass the fullness of being, but now he experiences what it means to be obliged to use empty signifiers which take the place of the direct experience. His first lesson in linguistics (Acte III, Scène 5) invites him to consider deeply what definitions are (what is: l'avarice, les lunatiques, les sadiques,...?), an inevitable part of his introduction in the signifying chain where one signifier only has meaning because of the other signifiers, a point of view inevitably leading to the conclusion that ultimately nothing gives stability and hence meaning to the whole system. What a world of difference, when one considers Alcmène, who refuses the privilege of belonging, even for a tiny moment, to the divine sphere of the all-knowing gods. When Jupiter asks her: 'Alcmène, chère amie, je veux que tu participes, fût-ce une seconde, à notre vie de dieux. Puisque tu vas tout oublier, ne veux-tu pas, en un éclair, voir ce qu'est le monde et le comprendre?', she self-assuredly answers: 'Non, Jupiter, je ne suis pas curieuse'.

Leaving his place of big Other, the central place that everyone tries to occupy and that stands for the merging of self and other, and forsaking as well the position of the Name of the Father (or the Law of the Father) in order to become submitted to the law itself, this Jupiter can never again be seen as the patriarchal embodiment of the Symbolic Order, only as a human representative of it. But on the other hand, seen from the human perspective, this representative of the Real is always bound to be seen in and through the symbolic order, a complete *adynaton* indeed, but the only way that humans can imagine the Real. We can certainly grasp the idea that gods do not know death, pain or lack, but this *theologia negativa* indicates very well the limited nature of our approaches. If we want to know what gods are really like (what the Real is really like), we utterly fail. That is the reason for Lacan's double affirmation: it is not only philosophy which intends to eliminate the gods ('tout progrès philosophique tend, de par sa nécessité propre, à les éliminer'), but also Christianity in its interpretation of divine revelation¹¹. As soon as humans want to describe what it is to be a god, their language and mythological imagination hopelessly stutter, hence the enormous pleasure that comedies and tragedies take in describing the sheer enormity of the gap that separates humans from gods. That is why Heinrich von Kleist (*Amphitryon*, 1808) made Jupiter recognize that divinity conceived in human terms definitely has its limits. The god had to accept that he could only be loved as Amphitryon, never as a god. Jean Giraudoux (*Amphitryon* 38, 1929) made Jupiter remark: 'Un dieu aussi peut se plaire à être aimé pour lui-même', which, unfortunately for him, is immediately contradicted by Mercure, saying: 'Je crains qu'Alcmène ne vous refuse ce plaisir', a statement which recalls the Lacanian law that in fact desire desires the desire of an other. What Jupiter discovers here is that, in the symbolic order, every human subject desires the desire of the other as its object.

Jouissance

And finally, there is **Alcumena**, object of desire of both Amphitruo and Jupiter. What are they searching for in their relation with her? 'Was will das Weib?', Freud rather desperately asked, missing the point in nearly all treatments of his female patients. What does female 'jouissance' mean, often wondered Lacan, he who has been labelled both seducer of feminists and their radical enemy. In the patriarchal universe, which characterizes the three dominant religions in the Mediterranean (Greek-Roman, Judaism-Christianity, Islam), and which are obviously three different interpretations of the reign of the Phallus or the Father's Law, the part that Alcumena plays remains the same: she is supposed to assume the passive and subordinated role. In all of the (Western) literary versions, she

resists patriarchal attempts at seduction, albeit in a very subtle and delicate way, but what she experiences, no man can tell. For that creature who wants to classify, compare, name and master all differences, and interpret them in his own male way (see even Lacan's own vacillating definitions of the Phallus), this 'jouissance' is 'other' because it happens to be non-phallic and not-classifiable under a signifier. What happens to characterize her in the first place is the lack of the phallus. Dazzled by the charms and challenges of the vertiginous presence of Jupiter, at the very end of the play, Heinrich von Kleist's Alcumena only says: 'Ach...', a supreme illustration of what remains unspeakable and is always bound to lead to disappointment. Alcumena, just like Lacan's favourite example of female 'jouissance', Bernini's Theresa of Avilla, represents 'l'autre jouissance', a pleasure that challenges all symbolic description. Therefore, in a more general way, this type of 'autre jouissance' might be said to evoke the experience felt by any other person which is bound to remain outside of our reach, a very special kind of experience which reminds us of the position of God, this very special 'other' that we never can be and who always remains out of our scope. This God is the other 'par excellence', for what else does it mean to be a god than to be both yourself and the other?

Laughter within two discourses: the thinkable and the un/sayable

The Western tradition, characterized as it is by its ontological preference for Oneness and Sameness, by the hypothesis that humanism and spirituality must be defined from a masculine perspective and by the idea that the Cartesian subject can be considered a natural and unified individual, for almost 2500 years, developed the Amphitruo-theme along those lines. Both Amphitruo and Sosia temporarily lost themselves but felt reconstituted at the end. They never doubted the 'natural' sexual positions they represented and treated Alcumena as a virtually mute sexual character. At no point at all they were astonished at the anthropomorphic escapades of the gods or at the patriarchal structure of religion tout court. In this first type of 'discourse', human laughter could only express what was 'thinkable' in a Foucauldian sense, along the lines of traditional humanism and religion. When the human condition is cast in a world-view which has not the sharpest possible awareness of its finiteness, or relies upon soteriological and euhemeristic criteria, laughing about human life takes place along protected lines and provokes a mild smile more often than it does bitter irony. The fundamental disparity between being and thinking as well as the heterotelic nature of human life as such are hardly recognized and all elements leading to a revolt against human insignificance carefully covered up.

In the poststructuralist perspective of Lacan, essences are denounced, humanism de-humanized, the self-mastery of the subject ridiculed. The subject, no longer a coherent and rational *res cogitans*, nor an immediate source or master of discourse, has to admit that he can only be defined in and by language, only by a detour around that impersonal Other. The average citizen, the Sosia puzzled by sudden loss of identity, the Amphitruo always fighting for recognition by others, the Jupiter thinking that he, in his earthy disguise, is still the holder of the Phallus, all fall prey to insatiable desire. He who thought himself to be the central and most secure foundation of the process of getting to know the world appears only as Mr. Ego, inherently alienated, merely the product and function of a concrete socio-symbolic and linguistic system.

This short excursion into the developments in the Amphitryon-theme has shown that the general process of laughing always takes place within boundaries and definite types of culture, especially when it concerns fundamental religious and sociological processes. One may wonder how much laughing can be done by the average western citizen when the functioning of patriarchal power, sexuality and subjectivity are exposed in a Lacanian, denaturalizing way? And although the analytical tools to do this may be contemporary, the stories about speaking and desiring subjects, confronting their death and loss, are much older. The way they have been cast in comic (and tragic) categories differ significantly from one culture to another and therefore are particularly relative, but for the human subject who is at the heart of all comicality, experiencing the kind of humour he is susceptible to, in an active and passive mood, is a major exercise in self-understanding.

Notes

- 1 E. Lefèvre, in his *Maccus Vortit Barbare. Vom tragischen Amphitryon zum tragikomischen Amphitruo* (Wiesbaden, 1982), elaborated the idea that the Greek original might have been Euripides' *Alkmene*, a play that the contemporary audience could have seen staged in Latin adaptation in the same period.
- 2 Karel Boullart, *Laughing matters or comoedia naturalis*, in: *Philosophica* 38, 1986, 2, p. 5.
- 3 Patrick Colm Hogan, *The Mind and its Stories*, 2003, pp. 94-102
- 4 Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth*, New York, 1991, W.W.Norton & Company, p. 20.
- 5 Joseph Campbell, in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1948), discovered the presence of a so called 'monomyth', a narrative parcours in which the hero had to go through a number of fixed stadia in order to be saved or to feel completely realized. The same Joseph Campbell, writing with Bill Moyers *The Power of Myth* (1987) called us to 'follow our bliss, as the track that has always been waiting for us, with "hidden hands".'

Carol S. Pearson, in *The Hero Within. Six Archetypes We Live By* (1986), presented an operating manual for the psyche, six 'imprints of possibility' which were available for everyone to access. Later on, Carol S. Pearson, in her book *Awakenig the Hero Within. Twelve Archetypes to Help Us Find Ourselves and Transform Our World* (1991) suggested that 'the hero's journey is first about taking a journey to find the treasure of your true self, and then about returning home to give your gift to help transform the kingdom – and, in the process, your own life'. James Hillman's book, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling* (1996) invited the readers to search for that 'something' that drove them on, since persons carry inside them 'an active kernel of truth, or an image, waiting to be lived'; remember the Greeks who had the word "daimon" and the Romans the word "genius" to describe the invisible guiding force in their lives. David Adams Leeming, in his *Mythology. The Voyage of the Hero* (1998), developed the eight basic events that reflect the supreme mythic structure of the hero's life.

- 6 R. J.C. Young, *Torn Halves. Political conflict in literary and cultural theory*, Manchester & NY, 1996.
- 7 J. Lacan, *Ecrits*, Paris, 1977, pp. 151-169.
- 8 Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan. A Feminist Introduction*, London & New York, 1990, Routledge, p. 138-139.
- 9 J. Lacan, *Sosie*, in: *Le Moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* (Séminaire II), Paris, 2001 (1955), Seuil, p. 363. In this early article, Lacan, quoting a number of Sosies answers (Sosie 2: 'Quel est ton sort ? Dis moi'. Sosie 1: 'D'être homme, et de parler') ironically refers to his own seminars: 'Voilà quelqu'un qui n'avait pas été aux séminaires, mais qui en a la marque de fabrique' (p. 365).
- 10 'Les dieux, c'est un mode de révélation du réel', cfr. J. Lacan, *Séminaire Livre VIII*, 2001 (1991), p. 58.
- 11 J. Lacan, *Livre VIII: Le transfert*, 2001 (1991):58: 'Par rapport à la notion du dieu comme summum de révélation de Numen, comme rayonnement et apparition ...réels, le mécanisme de la révélation chrétienne se trouve incontestablement sur le chemin qui va à la réduire, et, au dernier terme à l'abolir'.