

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.¹ Yet the performance history of the play attests to its potential for radical political and social critique.² 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.³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶
- 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.⁷ 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'.⁸

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 18th and 19th 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'.⁹ 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'.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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 19th and 20th 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 18th 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’.¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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’.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ 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 barriers¹⁸. 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.¹⁹

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.²⁰

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.²¹

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.²²

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.²³

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 experience²⁴'.

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 18th 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, *op.cit.*, 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'¹, 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 assi-