

## 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(dess). 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 'tragici 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

- <sup>1</sup> 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.
- <sup>2</sup> 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.
- <sup>3</sup> M.L. West, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford, 1997, Clarendon Press.
- <sup>4</sup> '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 (Kitāb l-Mawālīd)*, cited by D. GUTAS, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbāsīd 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 *Dēnkard*, 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, *Bābil, 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 Kitāb al-Asnām des Ibn al-Kalbī*, 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