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

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Prologue: Arabic translations and commentaries of the *Poetics*

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

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

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

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

out these political implications of language use.

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

A definition and its transformations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Arab misunderstandings of Aristotle

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

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

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

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

Aristotle's misunderstandings of classical Greek tragedy

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

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

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

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

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

The other Oedipus: Sophocles's final play

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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NOTES

1   Thus, for example, *The Book of Kings* features something like a mirror story of the Oedipus myth, when the hero Rostam kills his son in battle without recognizing him

2   For a detailed overview of the historical background, see especially the introduction to Dahiyat's 1974 translation of Avicenna's commentary.

3   There is another brief discussion on the kathartic effects of music in *Politica* VIII, 7, but there the concept is not elaborated upon, either.

4   For an overview of the different interpretations of Aristotelian *katharsis*, cf. Luserke, ed. 1991.

5   An extensive, and highly polemical exchange on the translation and interpretation of Arabic commentaries on Greek philosophical texts, and especially on the Aristotelian definition of tragedy and its fate in the Arabic-language tradition, may be found in Gutas 1990 and Butterworth 1994.

6   Both Gutas (1990: 94) and Butterworth (1986: X, 49; 1994:22) erroneously speak of the art of poetry as being considered part of logic by Averroes; it is of course more appropriate to describe Averroes as claiming that poetics, the study of poetic language usage, is part of logic as the study of argumentative language usage in general.

7   For more discussion, see Leezenberg (2001: 94-95); cf. Schoeler, 1983.

8   For this reason, Gutas's observation (1990: 97) that Arab commentators like Averroes totally miss the acting or performing dimension of tragedy, though correct, is less relevant than it seems.

9   On the related matter of linguistic normativity, cf. e.g. Görgün 1998.

10   A famous recent reading of tragedy with particular attention to matters performative is Butler, 2000. However, it spends much more time on discussing Hegel, Lacan and Irigaray than on analyzing the performative moment in the Antigone, which are far more widespread than even Butler suggests.

11   Witness, for example, Wole Soyinka's recent adaptation *Oyedipo in Kolhuni*, representing Oedipus as the king group of Afghan refugees aboard a ship off the Australian coast.

12   Cf. J.-P. Vernant, *Ebauches de la volonté dans la tragédie grecque*, in: Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1972

13   Cf. the famous remarks on the essential ambiguity of tragic concepts, in: Vernant & Vidal-Naquet, 1972