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

Freddy DECREUS & Mieke KOLK

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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