OEDIPUS: A HISTORY OF REWRITINGS

EGYPTIAN OEDIPUSES. COMEDIES OR TRAGEDIES?

Marvin CARLSON

Sophocles's *Oedipus* occupies a predominant position in the Western theatre. Aristotle's *Poetics*, the founding text of Western literary and dramatic theory, holds it up as the model of dramatic writing, and in part due to the influence of Aristotle, it has from the Renaissance onward been considered a model of dramatic structure and concentration. In the Western tradition only Shakespeare's *Hamlet* rivals it as an indispensible dramatic work. And yet there is a strange contradiction in this reputation. Unlike *Hamlet*, Sophocles' *Oedipus* is rarely presented on Western stages. *Antigone, Medea*, and even such difficult works as *The Oresteia* or *The Bacchae* are much more often staged. Even stranger, despite the high regard in which it is held, *Oedipus* has never served as a model for a major or particularly successful later reworking by a European or American dramatist, unlike Antigone, Medea, Orestes or Electra, who have appeared in countless retellings, among them works by the most respected Western dramatists.

The Arab, and especially the Egyptian dramatic tradition provides an interesting contrast to this, since here we can find a number of powerful retellings of the Oedipus story by some of the Arab theatre's leading dramatists. Today I wish to examine briefly four major Oedipus plays from Egypt, in order to suggest what use Egyptian dramatists have made of this story and perhaps, at least in part, why it has been more attractive and useful to them than it has to European dramatists. As a part of this project I wish also to address the interesting question of tonality, since in the European tradition *Oedipus* has been almost universally regarded as the ideal model for tragic writing, while in the Egyptian tradition that tragic dimension has been seriously qualified, in some cases turning to outright comedy, even farce.

The first modern treatment of Oedipus in the Egyptian theatre was the work of Egypt's pre-eminent dramatist, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, published in 1949. In an important preface to this play, the dramatist suggested both what attracted him to this myth and how his own treatment differed from that of his classic model. In his preface Al-Hakim did not devote much attention to the specific case of the lack of interest in the Oedipus story itself among later Western dramatists, but rather dealt with it, as Aristotle had, as the central example of Greek tragedy, whose decline in the West is the major focus of this essay. The Greek concept of tragedy, Al-Hakim argued, was based upon a religious sense, upon man's feeling that he is not alone in existence. As this religious conviction declined in the West, the idea and practice of tragedy declined with it. Thus the last age of tragedy, properly understood, was the seventeenth century, when Corneille and Racine still retained a remnant of the religious feeling necessary for this genre. As Western man came to believe in no god other than himself, and in an existence bounded by his state, his government, his leaders and his authority, the possibility of tragedy disappeared entirely. However, Al-Hakim, an Eastern author, still retaining something of the religious sense lost in the West, felt an affinity with ancient tragedy that his contemporary European colleagues had lost. This in turn led him to explore the possibility of creating a new tragedy seeking to recapture the spirit of the original drawing upon different, but somewhat parallel cultural sources, combining Islamic and European thought, and recognizing human error without renouncing his divine inspiration. Instead of a struggle between man and fate, Al-Hakim suggested a struggle between what he called fact and truth, what his translator W.M. Hutchins has called "the subjective reality of the heart and the objective truth of the intellect." Here, I recognise a strong similarity, to tragic action as discussed at this conference by Professor Boullart. In principle it is possible to be good, but in reality it is not. This is a theme central to Al-Hakim's work, from his first major success, *The Sleepers in the Cave* onward. In *Oedipus* the love of Oedipus and Jocasta and the achievement of Oedipus form the subjective reality, which is challenged by Oedipus's discovery of the objective truth of his past and parentage.

The result of this orientation emphasizes human, not divine operations, but still retains a relationship with the latter. Al-Hakim calls theatre based on human activity material theatre and that based upon the activity of thought mental theatre. He wanted his Arabic *Oedipus* to be a material, human drama, one, we might say, which dealt more with politics than with philosophy, but he also wanted it to have a 'veil of Arab mentality.' Through this combination, Al-Hakim suggested, the Arabic theatre might in fact be able to achieve something closer to the original spirit of Greek tragedy subsequently lost in the Western theatre. In Al-Hakim's *Oedipus* the action is driven by a rather uneasy mixture of human and supernatural forces. On the human level, the first act reveals that it was the scheming Tiresias who poisoned Laius' mind with the prophecy of a murderous son and who later converted Oedipus into a supernatural hero by turning his conquering of an ordinary lion into an encounter with an imaginary beast asking a riddle invented by Tiresias himself. All his schemes were undertaken to disrupt the natural lineage and to institute instead a system which would accept the most deserving and heroic person as leader, regardless of background. So Tiresias becomes a political manipulator and idealist, not a religious visionary. The second act is the closest to Sophocles, with Creon's report of the oracle and the revelation of Oedipus' past by the shepherds. The third act returns to Al-Hakim's own concerns, with Oedipus arguing for the fact of his love for Jocasta and their children while she counters with the truth of the newly revealed past. Unable to break free of that past, Jocasta kills herself, and it is more in reaction to her death than to the revelations themselves that Oedipus blinds himself and embraces exile. The contrasting pulls of the fatalistic Greek original and the human operations of Al-Hakim's reconceived Tiresias and Oedipus give the play a curious doubled effect, not only in terms of action, but even, to some extent, of tonality. This is most clearly expressed by Tiresias, in the final line of the second act, when the contrasting human and divine actions have both been fully laid out. 'With respect to Oedipus and Jocasta, it is a tragedy. With respect to me a comedy. You who rule this palace must shed tears. I am obliged to laugh.' I will return later to this striking an unexpected evocation of a comedic tonality.

One way to reconcile the apparently somewhat contradictory operations of Tiresias's manipulations in Al-Hakim's first act and the operations of fate or destiny in his second has been suggested by Sami Munir, in his 1979 book, *The Egyptian Theatre after World War II*, which advanced a specific polical reading of Al-Hakim's version of *Oedipus*. Munir read the play in the light of one of the major political events in Egypt in the years just before it was written. Six years earlier, in February of 1942, British troops surrounded King Farouk's palace and forced him to appoint a Wafdi government headed by El-Nahhas Pasha. Munir argues that Al-Hakim's play looks back to this turning point in modern Egyptian history, with Oedipus representing the Wafdi leader, whose claim to leadership is legitimate, but who forfeits that legitimacy, and the support of the populace, by gaining power through the misrepresentations and threats of force of Tiresias, who represents in this reading the occupying British.

Another major Egyptian *Oedipus* play appeared the same year as Tawfiq Al-Hakim's version. This was *The Tragedy of Oedipus* by Ali Ahmad Bakatheer. Although Al-Hakim insisted that an Islamic spirit was critical to his concept of drama, Bakatheer was even more centrally devoted to using drama to express Islamic beliefs. As a result, his *Oedipus*, while arguably less successful theatrically than Al-Hakim's, presents a much clearer and more direct social and political statement. Nehad Selaiha has noted that Bakatheer's *Oedipus* was written in the wake of the defeat of the Arab armies in Palestine in 1948, a defeat which caused Bakatheer enormous emotional suffering, and she has suggested that his Islamic/political *Oedipus* was his response to this. She points out the close relationship between this play, the intensification of the Islamic movement in the late 1940s, and Sayed Qutb's book, *Social Justice in Islam,* which argued for the development of a modern Islamic theory of social justice to counter the rising tide of atheistic Marxism in the Arab world. This argument clearly appealed to Bakatheer, deeply committed both to Islam and to Arab nationalism. The villain in Bakatheer's play is not Tiresias, as in Al-Hakim, but a new major character, the wily, unprincipled high priest and political leader Luskias. Tiresias, on the contrary, is a kind of visionary prophet, who speaks in a literary style strongly suggesting the Koran and who preaches submission to the will of Allah. He has been banished from the state by Luskias and the corrupt priests of the Temple, who fear his honesty. These two struggle over the soul of Oedipus and of the Theban people. Oedipus begins as a kind of parody Marxist, denouncing religion, appropriating the goods of the temple to distribute them to the people, and refusing to listen to the arguments of Tiresias. Tiresias reveals to Oedipus that the high priest has been manipulating events, creating the prophesy that Oedipus would kill his father and marry his mother, and then arranging events so that Oedipus would kill Laius and become king. When Oedipus confronts the high priest, Luskias confesses all, but threatens to reveal the prophesy and Laius' murder by Oedipus unless Oedipus returns the temple's property and banishes Tiresias. When Oedipus refuses to give in, the high priest exposes him, but the manipulations of the high priest are in turn exposed when the King of Corinth and the two shepherds arrive to support Tiresias' story. The high priest is condemned to death and the people beg Oedipus to remain as king. Oedipus, however, decides instead to devote himself to religious study and total submission to the will of Allah, the only real hope for himself and for social justice for the people.

Although Bakatheer calls his work a tragedy, it is in fact much closer than that of Al-Hakim to comedy, if not in tonality, at least in the Dantean sense of a narrative that ends in redemption for its protagonist. The same is true of the next major Egyptian version of this story, by Fawzi Fahmi, which was written, like the earlier versions, in the wake of a major military setback for Egypt, this time the 1967 war. Following Egypt's defeat, Nasser had resigned, but resumed the nation's leadership at popular insistence. Fahmi's *Oedipus,* called *The Return of the Absent*, was written just after these events, in 1968. Like that of Bakatheer, Fahmi's *Oedipus* is distinctly political in nature, and is clearly much more concerned with the proper qualities and conduct of a leader than with such matters as prophesies, plagues, or incest. Its hero is clearly modeled on Nasser, who is much closer to the Oedipus with which Bakatheer begins than to the religious convert with which he ends. Like the previous Egyptian Oedipuses, Fahmi's hero is an honest and dedicated man surrounded by a court steeped in corruption and intrigue. At first, like Bakatheer and Al-Hakim's heroes, he attempts to solve his nation's problems single-handedly, hiding the corruption from the people and from an innocent young woman who loves him. Finally, however, he undergoes a conversion, this time political rather than religious. He challenges the fatalistic course of the traditional myth, as Al-Hakim's Oedipus wished to do, but in fact could not, and instead of blinding himself, which Fahmi relates to closing his eyes to the corruption of the court, he reveals the system's failures to the people and embarks on a new course of purified political action for himself and for his nation. Despite its sympathetic depiction of the Nasser-like hero, Fahmi's play was apparently considered too severe in its critique of the government as a whole, and it was not allowed public performance until 1977, when it enjoyed a great success at Egypt's National Theatre.

The next major Egyptian version of this story was created in 1970, two years after that of Fahmi. This version, by Ali Salem, well known in Egypt as a comic dramatist, was the first to frankly call itself a comedy, but despite its more comedic tone in fact ended in a distinct dark note. Ali Salem's *The Comedy of Oedipus* was also the first reworking that, although it used the major characters and basic situation of the Greek myth, actually set it not in the Greek Thebes, but in the Egyptian one, thus making the reference to local politics even more direct. In this version Tiresias plays the role of the chorus, but less the traditional role of the Greek chorus than the sort of modern adaptation of such a chorus as we find, for example in Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, a figure that provides background and most important commentary on the implications of the action. In the play's opening speech Tiresias addresses the audience directly: 'Gentlemen—you who live in this city. Let me tell you the story of another city. The story of Thebes—Thebes, the bride of the Nile, the capital of the ancient world.' Thus at the outset the story of Oedipus is displaced from its Greek location to the even more famous Egyptian namesake (an easy shift, since I often have students who think the Sophoclean play in fact takes place in the Egyptian city). It is immediately clear however that we are dealing with the same or a very similar story, since Teiresias informs us that this Thebes also is suffering from the depredations of a Sphinx, who is killing all travelers who cannot solve its riddle. This Thebes also has suffered the loss of a king mysteriously killed at a nearby crossroads, but that part of the legend is not at all developed by Ali Salem. His Oedipus is no mysterious stranger but an average citizen of Thebes, albeit a particularly clever one, the town chess champion. The first response of the town is to send out to confront the beast the most distinguished professors from the university, all of which are eaten. Tiresias argues in vain that this strategy precisely suits the goal of the beast, who, after devouring one by one the cleverest people in the city, will more easily destroy the foolish ones who are left. He urges the people instead to go out and confront the beast as a group. His advice is not heeded, and indeed Thebes' chief of police Awalih, argues his arrest as a troublemaker. Awalih plays the role of the villain in this piece, but he is not a cynical and imaginative plotter like the Al-Hakim's Tiresias or Bakatheer's Luskias, but a rather more modern figure, an unprincipled thug who puts his machinery of torture and oppression, and his already prepared list of political suspects at the service of whoever happens to come to power. When the people refuse to rise to Tiresias's challenge, and Creon, the military leader, also demurs, Oedipus, a commoner, but reportedly the shrewdest of his class, steps forward and offers to kill the Sphinx and advance the civilization of Thebes if he is made King and allowed to marry Queen Jocasta. All consent to this except Tiresias, who once again urges the people to solve their problems collectively rather than appealing to some heroic leader. Once again his advice is ignored. Oedipus goes out alone, and returns, apparently having killed the beast. Made King, Oedipus begins to create inventions to improve the life of the Theban people, but these are turned to commercial ends by the Theban capitalist Onah and, even more dangerously, the high priest and Dean of the University Horemheb, claims to have found proof that Oedipus is descended from the gods, like all the pharohs. Everywhere songs, plays, and popular tales celebrate the 'one who killed the beast' and whenever Oedipus attempts to speak to the public, shouts of 'You're the one who killed the beast' drown out his words. Awalih and Jocasta resent Oedipus' growing power, but cannot find a way to attack him until again a beast appears outside the walls, reported by some to be a new beast and by others the original beast, never in fact killed. This time Oedipus urges the people to listen to the renewed pleas of Tiresias that they confront the beast themselves, rather than rely on a hero who must some day inevitably die. Inspired by his words, the people rush out, but instead of the conclusion that one might expect in viewing this play either as a comedy or a political allegory (and it of course has strong features of both) the people are defeated by the beast and Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias are left, in the closing scenes, to come to terms with this disaster. Neither Creon's military skill nor Oedipus' brilliance have prepared their people for this encounter. How can such a failure be explained? Once again, it is the raisonneur Tiresias who provides the answer. By allowing Aliwah, the master of repression, to continue to operate during his regime, Oedipus has subjected his people to the corrosive operations of fear, and this fear has prevented the Theban people from ever realizing their true potential. Oedipus, his sight mysteriously fading, leaves the palace to seek both literal and metaphorical enlightenment. Creon, determined to set an example to the people, rushes out alone to his death, and over his body Tiresias pronounces a moral, that Creon has sacrificed himself to show others that in death Man loses nothing but fear, that 'annihilation is preferable to a life threatened by the Sphinx.' Tiresias concludes with advice about the reception of his story. Although it may have provoked its audience to laughter, he ends "I swear to you by all the gods that that was not my intention."

There is clearly a close similarity between Ali Salem's *Oedipus* and President Nasser. And Oedipus's exhortations to the people late in the play to become self-reliant since he would not be with them forever took on a special resonance in 1970, the year of the play's publication as well as of the President's death. Nevertheless, despite the enormous achievements of Salem's Oedipus, he is a less commanding figure than any of his Egyptian predecessors, not only because he is the only actual commoner, but because he fades entirely from the play's consciousness at the end, giving way to a focus on the people. Tiresias makes this point clearly: 'It is not important that we know what happened to Oedipus….Now Thebes will belong forever to its people.' Given this new emphasis, it is perhaps disturbing that the people's first unified action should end in defeat, but I would argue that the agony of the 1967 war haunts this play, as it haunted Fahmi's darker version two years before. This time, however, the darkness is alleviated by the hope of a brighter future, since the people of Thebes have learned from their suffering, have learned to move beyond their fear of the enemy outside the city walls as well as their subservience to a presumed savior within their city. 'From suffering comes wisdom,' sang the Greek tragic course, speaking however of the wisdom of the suffering hero. In Salem's modern political parable the focus moves to the more important project of enlightening an entire people.

The shifting tonalities of the various Egyptian *Oedipus* plays might seem to suggest that Al-Hakim's project to recover the tragic vision within an Egyptian context has not succeeded, but I think such a conclusion would be far too simplistic. There is already a distinct political orientation in Al-Hakim's own version, an orientation which becomes more pronounced in subsequent versions and which is surely the most striking feature of these four plays taken as a whole. Does this mean that this group of distinguished Egyptian dramatists have succumbed to the same anti-tragic orientation that Al-Hakim found dominating modern European dramatists, based on a belief 'that there is nothing but man in this existence—his state, his government, his leaders and his authority.' Surely this cannot be the case with so religious an author as Bakatheer, nor do I think it is true of Fahmi or Ali Salem. In all of these authors I think can be traced some version of Al-Hakim's struggle between fact and truth, a recognition of the divine spark that gives hope in the face of the crushing reality of human corruption and the most difficult physical circumstances.

Thus, even though these dramas move toward comedy, or at least tragicomedy, such generic distinctions are less important than the fact that they all participate in the exploration of the most serious questions of human action and responsibility. In so doing, they have shown a way that the ancient story of *Oedipus* can be made again relevant to the most contemporary audiences. The contrast of the fortunes of this story on the modern stages of Europe and of Egypt could not be more striking. Al-Hakim was quite correct in noting that in Europe the few modern reworkings have been specialized experiments experiments like the nihilistic and affected version of Cocteau or the cold and abstract version of Gide, which Al-Hakim rightly criticizes for its purely intellectual approach. The Egyptian versions have an intensity, a richness, and a resonance in the life of the society that have proven far more successful and central to the theatrical life of the culture.

It would be encouraging to hope that these Egyptian dramas might provide a model and an inspiration for European authors to find a way to revitalize their own relationship to the ancient story of Oedipus, so widely venerated but so infrequently imitated or even presented on stage. It may be, unhappily, that Al-Hakim is correct—that contemporary Western culture is so focused upon man and the material that the spark of divinity that still exists in Islamic culture allows Egyptian dramatists to reconnect with this myth and particularly to find it a relevance to current political and social concerns that is simply no longer available to the West. Still, as a Western theatre-goer and theatre scholar, I hope that the dramatists of my own culture can find some way to achieve something akin to the fresh insights the Egyptian dramatists have provided into this ancient story. The West is well provided with its own troubled leaders, its own dissatisfied and suffering peoples, its own misunderstood and ignored prophets, and perhaps especially today, its own destructive fears of the threatening Sphinxes that many in the West are certain lurk outside the walls of their obsessively defended cities. All these contemporary echoes suggest that Western dramatists today could again profit from a return to the story of Oedipus as these imaginative Egyptian dramatists have done.