

## SOME ASPECTS OF METHODOLOGICAL BLINDNESS IN INTERPRETING SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS

In this paper<sup>1</sup> it will briefly be examined how some forms of conscious and unconscious blindness<sup>2</sup> have guided our interpretations of Greek tragedy. We will take a brief look at the reception history of two of the most important Greek tragedies, the *Oedipus Rex (OR)* and *Oedipus Coloneus (OC)* by Sophocles, and ask what kind of blind spots may be detected in the history of their interpretation and performance.<sup>3</sup>

First of all, this kind of investigation must be situated in terms of the dual<sup>4</sup> character of each tragedy, be it a Shakespearean or a Greek one. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that a tragedy is always written both in an aesthetic (literary) language and in an existential one. The literary history of the West is characterized by a long chain of literary and aesthetic products called tragedies, which commented on man's existential, political, philosophical and economic situation during important moments of (r)evolution.<sup>5</sup> As can be

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the Sixth International Symposium on Ancient Greek Drama organized by Nicos Shiafkalis, Droushia (Paphos), 2-5 September 2000 (Theme: Hybris and blindness in Greek Tragedy).

<sup>2</sup> See Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, New York, 1968 (1959), Harper & Row; Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1962, Chicago University Press.

<sup>3</sup> For a history of Euripidean interpretation, cf. Ann Norris Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition*, Madison, 1987, The University of Wisconsin Press. In his article *Retrospection on Classical Literary Criticism* (in: Thomas M. Falkner, Nancy Felson & David Konstan, *Contextualizing Classics. Ideology, Performance, Dialogue*, Lanham, Boulder, New York & Oxford, 1999, Rowman & Littlefield Publ., pp. 1-15), Charles P. Segal discusses the paradigmatic changes in classical criticism, using Greek tragedy as an example.

A good survey of all Portuguese representations of *OR* and *OC* from 1975-1997 is given by Maria de Fátima Sousa e Silva (Coord.), *Representações de Teatro Clássico no Portugal Contemporâneo*, Lisboa, 1998, Ed. Colibri, pp. 71-82. Cf. also Hellmut Flashar, *Inszenierung der Antike. Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit 1585-1990*, München, 1991, Verlag C. H. Beck; Karelisa V. Hartigan, *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage. Ancient Drama in the Commercial Theater, 1882-1994*, London, 1995, Greenwood Press.

<sup>4</sup> William Storm, *After Dionysus. A Theory of the Tragic*, Ithaca & London, 1998, Cornell University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Clifford Leech, *Tragedy*, London & New York, 1969, Routledge; Volkmar Sander (Hrsg.), *Tragik und Tragödie*, Darmstadt, 1971, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft; H. A. Mason, *The Tragic Plane*, Oxford, 1985, Clarendon Press; Richard Kuhns, *Tragedy. Contradiction and Repression*, Chicago & London, 1991, The University of Chicago Press; Rudolf Boehm, *'Tragik'. Von Oidipus bis Faust*, Würzburg, 2001, Königshausen & Neumann.

seen in the following enumeration, a great number of historical periods used tragedy as a vehicle of confrontation, transformation, interpretation.

Teatro Olimpico, Vicenza, <i>Oedipus Rex</i> , 1584	Renaissance
Pierre Corneille, <i>Œdipe</i> , 1659	French Classicism
Voltaire, <i>Œdipe</i> , 1718	Enlightenment
Percy B. Shelley, <i>Oedipus</i> , 1820	Romanticism
Jean Cocteau, <i>La machine infernale</i> , 1934	Modernism
Robert Wilson, <i>Oedipus Rex</i> , 1996	Postmodernism

However, not all of these periods can be called real tragic periods. William Storm only accepts four eras: "The truism persists that tragedy has truly flourished in only four historical epochs: the fifth century B. C. in Greece; the Renaissance, particularly in Britain; France in the late seventeenth century; and Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These periods, in and of themselves, have become the instruments of measurement and comparison".<sup>6</sup>

In general, one can say that during all historical periods mortal human beings continued to experience both their finite state of being and the divisive forces that make them truly human. Having been born as humans, they were obliged to undertake actions, to make mistakes and to face the consequences. Especially (only?) in the West, this experience has led them to recognize the tragic sense in life, a basic feeling which has been socially allowed and artistically developed since Greek mythology. Other continents and cultures generated other basic visions and imaginations about man, without recurring in the first place to dismembering, oppositional and clashing forces, or without developing a free, independent and ontological human Self.<sup>7</sup>

As a limited construction that flourished only during a small number of historical eras, Western tragedy also displayed a tragic sense of very varying quality. Some tragedies tended to privilege the binding factors in life (reintroducing transcendence, cf. Baroque tragedy), others affirmed the complete lack of consolidation in people's lives. The tragic sense was fully experienced by Oedipus at the end of a long and stubborn quest, which characterized him as the man who wanted to know his identity at all costs, searching in an extreme way to know who he really was.

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<sup>6</sup> W. Storm, *After Dionysos*, o. c., p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> For the difference between some basic aspects of Eastern and Western mythic imagination, see: D. T. Suzuki, Erich Fromm & Richard de Martino, *Bouddhisme Zen et psychanalyse*, Paris, 1998, PUF (1971). See the staging of *The Death of Oedipus* by Qu Xiaosong (1993-1994), a production which was fundamentally based upon the *OC* by Sophocles, but which tried nevertheless to combine the Greek tragic feeling with Buddhist resignation and acceptance of fate.

Surveying the reception history of *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus Coloneus* in a very superficial way, one could say that the next four thematic fields, among others, have been developed in a number of tragedies.

### 1. A longing for salvation and redemption: the vertical axis

All texts and productions listed next share a definite longing for salvation and redemption which was already present at the end of *OC* (Oedipus suddenly disappeared: was he saved, did he reach heaven, was he completely spiritualized, why can he figure as the ultimate protection for Athens?). In general, Oedipus' ability to function as a divine king and saviour was recognized, and from the Middle Ages on (cf. the *vitae* of Judas, Gregorius, Albanus),<sup>8</sup> he played a part in a christianizing context (see also Vondel, *Koning Edipus*, 1660). In Corneille's *Oedipe* (1659) the ontological dimension that leads to an escape from tragic seriousness and abyss was replaced by political reasoning: the neoclassic criteria of *gloire*, *rationality* (even leading to an artificial kind of Stoicism), *bienséance* and *vraisemblance* never allowed chaos to take over and the Divine King to be ruled out.<sup>9</sup>

These qualities were still present after the First World War, when Oedipus represented the hope of a better future.<sup>10</sup> The drama written by Saint-Georges de Bouhélier (*Oedipe, roi de Thèbes*, 1919) reflects the idealistic and prophetic visions he wants his tragedy and tragedy in general to convey. In the poetry written by Pierre Jean Jouve *Sueur de sang* (1933), Oedipus is just another name for Christ who assumes human pain, Colonus just another name for Golgotha.<sup>11</sup> In his neo-classical opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex* (1926-1927), Igor Stravinsky wanted the French libretto written by Jean Cocteau to be translated into Latin by Jean Daniélou. Ritualistic staging, based upon liturgical incantation and tragic distancing, turned this production into a strange combination of epic impersonality and terrifying grandeur, not an illustration of a human(istic) search for understanding, but rather a dark longing for sacralisa-

<sup>8</sup> A. H. Krappe, *La légende d'Oedipe est-elle un conte bleu*, in: Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 34, 1933, p.11-22; P. Schreiner, *Oedipusstoff und Oedipusmotive in der deutschen Literatur*, Wien, 1964; W. Puchner, *Europäische Oedipusüberlieferung und Griechisches Schicksalsmärchen*, in: W. Siegmund (Hrsg.), *Antiker Mythos in unseren Märchen*, Kassel, 1984, p. 52-63.

<sup>9</sup> Charles P. Segal, *Oedipus Rex. Tragic Heroism and Sacral Kingship in five Oedipus Plays and Hamlet*, in: *Helios* 5, 1977, 1, p. 6, reminds us that the King's blood, as it is dripping out of Oedipus' eyes and touches the floor, has magical powers and is able, as "a Christ-like miracle", to cure three young men dying in the palace; cf. P.A. Ogundele, *The Oedipus Story in the Hands of Sophocles, Seneca and Corneille*, in: *Nigeria and the Classics* 12, 1970, pp. 31-51.

<sup>10</sup> Françoise Dury, *Oedipe dans la littérature française de l'entre-deux-guerres*, in: *Les Etudes Classiques* LIV, 1986, 1, p. 59-79.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Jean Jouve, *Les Noces suivi de Sueur de Sang*, Paris, 1964, Gallimard (cf. Jean Starobinski, Préface, p. 24, mentions "l'élaboration du paysage spirituel").

tion.<sup>12</sup> Especially the period between the two world wars seems to have used the myth of Oedipus to question old religious solutions: the radical disbelief of André Gide (*Oedipe*, 1931) even provoked a statement of radical belief by Henri Ghéon (*Oedipe ou le crépuscule des dieux*, 1938), since, in his opinion, the myth of Oedipus was intended to prepare a tribute to a new god of Love who would put an end to all suffering.

Of course, this tragedy lost a great deal of its tragic substance from the moment it was considered from a transcendent and an eschatological point of view. Every time the tragic sense and its ontological position were questioned by christianity (and its soteriological intentions)<sup>13</sup> or by ritual theatre (Robert Wilson, 1996, staging Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *OR*; Harry Mulisch, *Oidipus Oidipus*, 1972, replacing linear time by cyclical time, creating events which are subjected to an eternal repetition of the same),<sup>14</sup> tragedy was challenged in its tragic seriousness. Since the tradition in the West has been largely dominated by Christian civilization, many tragedies were staged in a climate of pseudo-tragic reality. Lately, no other reworking was so profoundly christian as Lee Breuer's production, *The Gospel at Colonus* (1983) where the resurrection of Oedipus as a new Christ turned Colonus into the affirmation of man's immortality.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In the introduction to Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* by Esa-Pekka Salonen (Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, 1991), Wolfgang Dömling discusses the creation of the *OR*: "At a somewhat later date Stravinsky intimated that religious experiences had been the principal motivation behind his decision to set to work on the piece. In September 1925 he had appeared as soloist at a concert given by the International Society for New Music as part of Venice Festival and "had prayed in a little church, before an old miraculous icon", as an apparent result of which an abscess on his finger was miraculously healed. On returning to Nice, he bought a "book about St. Francis and decided after reading it to use the language that is also the language of the Western Church, and shortly after that I chose the archetypal drama of purification:, in other words, the Oedipus legend" (p. 7).

<sup>13</sup> See the longing for salvation and for spiritual victory in the words of Hegel describing the arrival of Oedipus at Colonus: "Oedipus in Kolonos spielt an die Versöhnung und näher an die christliche Vorstellung der Versöhnung an: Oedipus wird von den Göttern zu Gnaden angenommen, die Götter berufen ihn zu sich" (*Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, II, Frankfurt am Main, 1991, Suhrkamp, p. 135).

<sup>14</sup> Patrick Primavesi, *Ritual and Formalization. Approaches to Greek Tragedy and Myth in the Work of Robert Wilson*, in: Savas Patsalidis & Elizabeth Sakellaridou (Eds.), (Dis)Placing Classical Greek Theatre, Thessaloniki, 1999, University Studio Press, p. 281: "And the end of the oratorio offers a solution in an almost Christian sense of mercy – the struggle of the hero is transformed into an example of suffering and redemption, similar also to the mysterious end of Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus".

<sup>15</sup> Marianne McDonald, *Mapping Dionysus in New Global Spaces. Multiculturalism and Ancient Greek Tragedy*, in: Savas Patsalidis & Elizabeth Sakellaridou (Eds.), (Dis)Placing, o. c., p. 161-163. Her conclusions were: "This Christian musical meditation is a tour de force. It features not only brilliant and inspiring music from the African-American tradition, but merges it with one of the greatest classical texts of antiquity. Sometimes the fit is uncomfortable, but as Christian-

Add to this religious climate the radical and unquestionable presence of the capitalistic gods called Shopping and Profiting, and you easily understand why, in the last century, to the great annoyance of Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, Howard Barker, Edward Bond, or Sarah Kane, no real discussion about the meaning of life was carried out in tragic theatre.

## 2. The tragic vision of man's solitude (the horizontal axis)

The next series of texts and performances explores the feeling of being left alone. From the moment that (modern) man realized that he might be alone in the cosmos, the gods disappeared and they relegated him to a world which offered none of the traditional possibilities of transcendence, and therefore, as a new version of Ahasverus, he wandered about like a "sans papier". Modernism explored a vision of the world in which man started to become the centre of everything, while losing connection with the traditional final answers and experiencing problems with established notions like fate and destiny (Cocteau, *Oedipe-Roi*, 1928). Therefore man started to interpret the ancient tragic worldview in a radically new way, "secular" from the Renaissance on, "enlightened" from the Age of Reason on (Voltaire, *Oedipe*, 1718), always mediating the gap between man and god, reducing the frightening force of the unknown (Hugo Claus, *Oedipus*, 1971; *Blindeman*, 1985).

As André Gide puts it in his *Oedipe* (1931), the most important pass word preventing people from being torn apart by the sphinx, is the conscious and repeated use of the statement "c'est l'Homme".<sup>16</sup> In *La machine infernale* (1934) Jean Cocteau continued his attack against all transcendence: in his opinion the position of mankind was the strongest pitfall ever conceived by the gods. The one who was forced to assume the part of Oedipus in a cruel experiment staged in a Nazi concentration camp described by Alberto Moravia in his play *Il Dio Kurt* (1968) also felt that the world was clearly and totally removed from any divine order. Oedipus could no longer pretend that he testified to Girard's cultural anthropology, playing the part of the pharmakos, the sacred and royal victim. Rather, he was reduced to assuming the part of no more than the victim. Or, as Charles Segal said: "Although there is no reach-

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ity accepts all-comers, so this opera/service takes the classical text as affirming God and man's salvation. Past merges with present and promises a glorious future, with all believers glory-bound to paradise. Not just one single Oedipus is the hero now; all mankind shares in the divine promise".

<sup>16</sup> The clash between horizontal and vertical axes becomes visible right after the failure of Tiresias: he could not free the city with the help of the gods of the sphinx, knowing very well that "le seul mot de passe pour n'être pas dévoré par le sphinx, c'est l'homme".

ing of God, his last act can at least destroy the pretences of those who would play God".<sup>17</sup>

The reworking of the Oedipus story in *Les Gomme*s (*The Erasers*) by Alain Robbe-Grillet (1953) affected many categories which have been at the heart of the Western humanist world.<sup>18</sup> In this "nouveau roman", one could not hold the gods or Fate responsible for the situation of mankind, since the world was, in the eyes of the author, not at all charged with signification and thus meaningful, nor, on the other hand, principally absurd. The world was just there, totally split off from men and their need for meaning, because the world is chaotic and indifferent by definition. Therefore in *Les Gomme*s, the author intentionally undermined the clichéd construction of a detective story which looked only vaguely like a modern version of Oedipus; therefore, he erased all empathizing psychology and added long accurate descriptions (for instance of a piece of tomato) which were bound to reveal a completely non functional world.<sup>19</sup> People, as was indicated by the title of another "nouveau roman", are constantly living *Dans le labyrinthe* (1959). In general, Robbe-Grillet wants to stress the fact that the category of the tragic is only a human construction and invention, maybe a necessary one in a given kind of situation, but all things considered, only one of the many ways of getting even with reality.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Charles P. Segal, *Tragic Heroism and Sacral Kingship*, o. c., p. 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> Bruce Morrissette, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, Paris, 1963, Editions de Minuit.

<sup>19</sup> B. G. Garnham, *Robbe-Grillet. Les Gomme*s and *Le Voyeur*, London, 1982, Grant & Cutler Ltd, p. 25-26: "Such descriptions as these emphasise the view that the only quality of the external world is its presence. It hides beneath its surface no meaning, no life, and above all it enters into no communion with man: "Or le monde n'est ni signifiant ni absurde. Il est tout simplement". It is part of the new novel's role to "decondition" the reader, to enable him to see the world about him with new eyes and to undo the work of what Robbe-Grillet calls "des franges de culture (psychologie, morale, métaphysique etc.)" which have deformed objects, making them more familiar and reassuring by tainting them with human emotions and meanings. ... The new novel should reinstate the world in its true condition, existing independently of man: "Cf. Manfred Nowak, *Die Romane Alain Robbe-Grillet. Von "Les Gomme*s" bis "Projet pour une révolution à New York". *Struktur und Genese des Erzählwerks*, Heidelberg, 1982, Carl Winter, pp. 26-35: "Der Roman als Superposition von Gattungsstrukturen – der Oedipusstoff".

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Nature, humanisme, tragédie* (1958), in: Pour un nouveau roman, Paris, 1963, Les Editions de Minuit, Collection Idées, p. 66: "Et cette absence de signification, l'homme d'aujourd'hui (ou de demain...) ne l'éprouve plus comme un manque, ni comme un déchirement. Devant un tel vide, il ne ressent désormais nul vertige. Son cœur n' a plus besoin d'un gouffre où se loger".

### 3. Freudian readings: the individual explained

Conceived as a discipline belonging to the human sciences, Freudian psychoanalysis explained and rationalized human behaviour.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the psychological development of the male child was sanctified and proclaimed as perennial example. Therefore, a lot of activities of the Vienna circles of art, medicine and psychoanalysis of the 1900s pointed the way for many decades of considering the female as a hysterical, irrational and pathological case.<sup>22</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, working as a contemporary of Freud's, was deeply engaged in the study of perversion and incest (cf. Richard Strauss, *Salome*, 1905, *Elektra*, 1909). Symbolism had already alerted the West to the deeper layers of the female personality (Gustave Moreau, *Oedipus et le Sphinx*, 1864; Ferdinand Khnopff, *Les Caresses*, 1896), painters and writers belonging to the Vienna Sezession did just the same (Gustave Klimt, Oskar Kokoschka). After some notorious failures with female patients (Ida Bauer as Dora; Bertha Poppenheim as Anna O.<sup>23</sup>), Freud admitted that he could not arrive at an adequate interpretation of female sexuality and psychology. He who considered himself an improved version of Oedipus could not interpret his Antigone. Generally speaking, in his opinion, the psychic and sexual development of the little girl was to be conceived in strict analogy to the development of the boy, and this reduction provided her with a completely secondary identity. On the other hand, this theory of biological determinism was also meant to prove the so-called natural superiority of men.

In André Gide's *Oedipe* (1931) the psychic and sexual development of the sons Eteocles and Polynices leads them to fall in love with their sisters and to want a very explicit kind of incest with them, under the veil of developing their own personality and obeying their urge for freedom.

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<sup>21</sup> Driek van der Sterren, *Oedipus. Nach den Tragödien des Sophokles. Eine psychoanalytische Studie*, Frankfurt am Main, 1986 (1948), Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag; Didier Anzieu, *Oedipe avant le complexe ou de l'interprétation psychanalytique des mythes*, in: *Les temps modernes* XXII, 1966, 245, p. 675-715 (severely criticized by Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Oedipe" sans complexe, in: Jean-Pierre Vernant & Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en grèce ancienne*, Paris, 1972, Maspero, pp. 75-98).

<sup>22</sup> O. Weininger, *Sexe et caractère*, Lausanne, 1975, (1903); S. Žizek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment. Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, London, 1994.

<sup>23</sup> L. Martens (Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, in: *German Quarterly*, 60, 1987, pp. 38-51) argues that Hofmannsthal actually read the work of Freud and Breuer before composing his *Elektra*; moreover, in his opinion, Anna O. (ps. for Bertha Pappenheim, also a patient of Breuer's) can be seen as a model for his *Elektra*. Cf. M. Worbs, *Nervenkunst. Literatur und Psychoanalyse im Wien der Jahrhundertwende*, 1983, Frankfurt am Main; Ph. M. Ward, *Hofmannsthal, Elektra and the representation of women's behaviour through myth*, in: *German Life and Letters*, 53, 2000, pp. 37-55. Cf. Sigmund Freud & Jozef Breuer, *Studien über Hysterie*, Frankfurt am Main, 1970 (1895), Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag.

Fascinated as he was during the twenties and thirties by the myth of Oedipus (*Opera*, 1927, *Oedipus Rex*, 1927, *Oedipe-Roi*, 1928), Jean Cocteau flirted the most with Freudian references in *La Machine Infernale* (1934). In the first act the maternal feelings of Jocaste take frightening and even surrealist proportions and result in a nearly ironic rereading of Freud. In a discussion with Tiresias, the rather lustful priest she constantly calls Zizi, Jocaste even says: "Les petits garçons disent tous: "Je veux devenir un homme pour me marier avec maman".<sup>24</sup>

In his film *Edipo Re* (1967), Paolo Pasolini presented some scenes from his own youth before turning to the real Greek tragedy; he explicitly denounced both the bond he had with his mother and the absence of his father. In *Affabulazione. Orgia* (1977-1979) the father killed his son out of jealousy (after having met the ghost of Sophocles). He realised that his son now represents the symbolic position of fertility, which pushes him into the position of the child. In *Teorema* (1968) the father discovered that it was the son who really was in charge of the richness of fatherhood.

In a lot of works by Hugo Claus the Freudian Oedipus complex holds the key to the imagination. Both in *Oedipus* (1971) and *Het huis van Labdakos* (1977) Jocaste consciously marries her son and testifies to her hate towards Laius, who incorporates both the hated father image and that of the power-mad dictator. On the other hand the "Electracomplex" (Antigone privileges the love for her father) and the "Jocastacomplex" (projected onto Creon's wife, Eurydice) constitute new psychological relations which were not developed in the ancient myth.

Harry Mulisch's reworking *Oidipus Oidipus* (1972) was a remarkable attempt to do away with a number of "improbabilities" of the Sophoclean text, which led the author to propose 13 corrections. Amongst them was the idea that at Colonus Oedipus metamorphosed into Teiresias, who for the rest of the play acts as an Oedipus who knows it all. The creation of Teiresias who in his blindness is aware of the cyclical repetition of life, also implies that the seer is sure that Jocaste has recognized her child and knows that she has kept silent about it. That is why he feels obliged to kill her, knowing too well that a mother's love for her son is much stronger than her feelings for her husband. Exacerbating the Oedipus complex out of (what are probably) biographical reasons, Mulisch even states that many men don't care much for their fathers and have been dreaming of killing them.

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Cocteau, *La Machine Infernale*, Paris, 1993 (1943), p. 62, Bernard Grasset.



#### 4. Feminism: new ways of constructing vertical and horizontal axes

The stories of Voltaire, von Hofmannsthal and Teirlinck, although rooted in a strong patriarchal tradition, were among the first to pay attention to the inner life of Iocasta and to add some critical notes about the social functioning of her feelings. What were her opinions, her wishes, her secret thoughts? Even the postmodern versions of Frans Strijaards (1986) and Robert Wilson (1996) do not affect this patriarchal basis. Herman Teirlinck, in his *Jokaste tegen God* (1961), staged a Jokaste who didn't want to play her traditional part, because an authentic Jokaste would love her husband and child in a much deeper way and would interfere in a much more active way, she said.

In Steven Berkoff's drama *Greek* (1980) the story is situated in a suburb of London during the eighties, the (in)famous Thatcher period. In one of the poor quarters of the East End, Eddy (Oedipus) struggles to find his place in life. Part of his solution is to marry his mother, in order to experience a love that is true and sincere, a remedy which seems more appropriate than sinking down into the swamps of the suburb. That is reason enough to refuse to cut out his eyes and expressly want to return to the womb. In Steven Berkoff's opinion, this kind of regeneration certainly cannot solve all problems, but the positive forces Oedipus discovers in love might help him to cure himself. A distant echo of the final words pronounced by Jocaste in Jean Cocteau's *La Machine Infernale* (Acte IV), where as a primal mother she reappears and tries to comfort her suffering son?

The most detailed rewriting of the part played by Iocasta has been presented by Hélène Cixous in *The name of Oidipus. Song of the forbidden body* (1977). This tragedy conveys a totally different vision of the world and is set up through a profound and elaborate rethinking of all major presuppositions.<sup>25</sup> Roughly speaking, one could say that the classical tragedy is "de-constructed" and that another interpretation of the *libido* is introduced to question the traditional mythological patterns. Many deep structures belonging to the levels of language and the text (for instance, processes like focalizing, causality and Episiering) and to the construction of space and time are deeply affected. Since Cixous constructs a radically new semantic universe that reflects the choices and the values of Iocaste, the wife of Oedipus, she elaborates a totally different way of constructing identity and sexuality, not based upon the Freudian interpretation of the castration complex.<sup>26</sup> Her text consists of a prologue and twelve lyric songs, small lyric scenes, monologues and (dream)scenes,

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Mieke Kolk, *Spoken om het leven. Vrouwelijke subjectiviteit in het postmoderne theater*, Amsterdam, 1995, Universiteit van Amsterdam.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother / Daughter Plot. Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Bloomington, 1989, Indiana University Press.

memories from a distant past leading without transition to a dramatic present. As a mother, who knows everything that ever happened, Iocasta asks Oedipus to trust her and to believe in her love for him.<sup>27</sup>

Elaborating a new myth in a radical way also means reconsidering Aristotelian poetics with their well-known compositional schemes. Cixous questions the long lasting emphasis put upon unity and its linear construction and breaks into the linguistic and scenic reality of the text. Just as Brecht, the other great "dis-organizer" of text and scene, she uses all possible epic and lyric means to dislocate that well-known (male) tragic climax. It was Camille Paglia who, in her *Sexual Personae* (1990), emphasized the relation between the male genre of tragedy and the male will to work slowly but surely towards one decisive end.

Therefore Cixous also needs to re-define the basic categories and the semantic fields which shape the new mythical heroine.<sup>28</sup> Iocasta constantly stimulates her son not to be afraid of the mother and she invites him to explore the depths of a mother's love. Once Oedipus will succeed in recognizing the value of this maternal love, all fear of castration will come to an end as would the terrifying mechanisms which inspire fear of the generalized Female and which urge him to exhibit strong macho behaviour.

But this Oedipus is not ready for the new mythological parts he has to play and cannot forget his feelings of guilt; it is only when Iocasta dies because of this failure that he disposes of his earlier cultural programming and discovers his new name and identity. Only after her death, does he discover that he can freely explore his subconsciousness and get in touch with the female principle in his inner Self, without fear of the regulations (the Law) which have turned him into a Western man. Not the threat of a castrating father, but the acceptance of the complete female nature, gets the child out of the primary narcissistic stage.

Deconstruction of the Greek myth leads to a great number of questions, dealing with the tragic as an ontological and aesthetic category and provoking a type of cultural history which was meant by men for men. Therefore, femi-

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<sup>27</sup> A comparable kind of begging for understanding and peace can be found at the end of *Oedipe, roi de Thèbe*, by Saint-Georges de Bouhélier (1919), when Jocaste starts to dance in the middle of crying masses.

<sup>28</sup> In her book *Hélène Cixous. Authorship. Autobiography and Love*, Cambridge, 1996, Polity Press, p. 59, Susan Sellers mentions the female longing for remembering as fundamentally different from the male will to know: "This capacity to remember what might otherwise be effaced is an important component of Cixous' vision of *écriture féminine* and is evoked in other texts written at this time. In *Le nom d'Oedipe* ("The Name of Oedipus"), remembering is linked to the mystery of origin. Woman's intimate knowledge of the origin is contrasted with Oedipus' desire which perversely involves renouncing life: "my whole life for the answer".

nism refused to consider the Oedipus complex as a universal law, but rather saw it as a historical phase in the formation of a patriarchal culture.<sup>29</sup> Hence the science of literature itself, according to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979), can be seen as a continual oedipal struggle between established male authors and their revolting sons.<sup>30</sup> Anyway, in a society where the prevailing order is "phallogocentric", no real female identity can be constructed since it always has to be considered as a form of deficiency or absence.<sup>31</sup>

Deconstruction of the patriarchal Greek myth in terms of a new feminist reading leads to a number of questions, which were not asked for more than 2000 years. They concern the construction of our cultural history, the forging of methodological instruments and the creation of gender-determined stories. Do women conceive the tragic universe differently from men? Are they more interested in cyclical than in linear structures? The latest Eurydice refuses to accompany Orpheus when he comes to free her in the Underworld. No, thank you, the Earth is more my element, I don't want to be your slave again up there, your source of inspiration, your secretary, your mama.<sup>32</sup>

## 5. Some afterthoughts

5.1. The socio-cultural history of the West noticed that, often enough, artists wanted to escape from the tragic condition, creating gods, patterns of salvation, stories meant to generate a personal or a collective redemption. From Aristotle on, tragedies have been staged in all kinds of non-tragic ways.

5.2. The world of the "nouveau roman", of modernism and postmodernism intensified ontological doubts and left people alone in this world, in its horizontal axis. The twentieth century taught him not to blame the outside world for being chaotic and indifferent, but, on the contrary, to assume full responsibility for a newly-won life. Although traditional tragedy (in an Aristotelian sense) may have left us, the novel and the "infra-tragedy" of Beckett and Ionesco brought back the tragic sense on a large scale; the recent reappraisal of the Dionysiac force and the reintroduction of polytheism, nomadism and an intensive way of living made people aware of the tragic condition in a postmodern worldview.

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<sup>29</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, London, 1974, Allen Lane.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. Theory of Poetry*, New York, 1973, Oxford University Press.

<sup>31</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Paris, 1977, Minuit.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Segal, *Orpheus. The Myth of the Poet*, Baltimore & London, 1989, The John Hopkins University Press, pp.155-198: Chapter 7. Orpheus from Antiquity to Today. Retrospect and Prospect.

5.3. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, human sciences in general and Freudian psychoanalysis in particular, have done their best to understand (and rationalize) all the ways of becoming a subject. The example of *OR* clearly helped them to prove that women are to be considered second-hand creatures and pathological cases.

5.4. Feminism created new ways of dealing with language and the text, the construction of heroes and mythology in general. For more than 2500 years, women didn't write tragedies and didn't favor the tragic condition as much as men did, and since they have started to do so in the sixties, their handling of the tragic topoi and the tragic experience has revealed a totally different imagination.

5.5. *Oedipus* remains the myth of a male truth.