Ain Shams University
Women College
Department of English

Modern Variations of the Classical Myth of Oedipus As Exemplified in T.S.Eliot's *The Elder Statesman*, Tawfik Al-Hakim's *Oedipus the King* and W.B.Yeats' *Sophocles' Oedipus the King* and *Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus*

An M. A. Thesis in English Literature

By
Rasha Abbas Mohammed al-Saddany
Demonstrator
Faculty of Education
Mansoura University

Under the Supervision of

Prof. Dr. Zaki M. Abdalla
Prof. of English Literature
Faculty of Education (Damietta)
Mansoura University

Prof. Dr. Fadila Fattouh
Prof. of English Literature
Women College
Ain Shams University

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Contents

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Introduction

This thesis attempts a comparative study of W.B.Yeats' Sophocles' Oedipus the King (1926) and Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus (1927), T.S Eliot's The Elder Statesman (1958), and Tawfik Al-Hakim's Oedipus the King (1949) as modern versions of the Oedipus myth. These plays are analyzed in terms of the themes, characterization, structure, techniques, and language.

Because Yeats and Eliot have different cultures and Al-Hakim, as an Egyptian dramatist, does not belong to the English - speaking community, the thesis can be considered a study in comparative literature, the field which studies the interrelationships of literature from two or more cultures or languages. The major two aooroaches in that filed are The French School and the American school. The former dominated in the early part of the20th century as an empiricist and positivist approach. In it, "scholars examined works forensically, looking for evidence of "origins" and "influences" between works from different nations. Thus a scholar might attempt to trace how a particular literary idea or motif traveled between nations over time" ("Comperative Literature", 2006: 1). The American School appeared in the postwar period as a reaction to the French School with the aim of returning the field to matters more directly concerned with literary criticism. "[It] was more closely aligned with the original internationalist visions of Goethe and Posnett (arguably reflecting the postwar desire for international co-operation), looking for examples of universal human "truths" based on the literary archetypes that appeared throughout literatures from all times and places." (ibib).

The present thesis has an introduction which defines the concept of myth, provides a detailed account of the Oedipus myth and a brief reference to the ancient treatments of it and to the ancient Greek drama in general, and finally gives some biographical notes on the dramatists under discussion. The body of the study comprises four chapters. Chapter

one aims at exploring the different themes each playwright exploits the myth to display. Chapter two demonstrates the way Yeats, Eliot, and Al-Hakim portray Oedipus and the other characters in their plays. As for chapter three, it seeks to uncover the structures of the plays and the techniques used, while the last chapter investigates the characteristics typical of the diction each dramatist manipulates. The thesis ends with a conclusion that surveys the points discussed.

The word 'myth', as Bernard Doyle contends in "Mythology", comes from the Greek 'mythos' which originally meant 'Speech' or 'discourse', but which later came to mean 'fable' or 'legend'. He defines myth as "a story of forgotten or vague origin, basically religious or supernatural in nature, which seeks to explain or rationalize one or more aspects of the world or a society" (2002: 1). Peter Kohler states in "What Is Myth?" that myth is "a tale believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant or other worlds, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters" (1989: 1). In the same article, The New College Edition of the American Heritage Dictionary adds that myth is not only a fictional story, but is also "a recurring theme or character type that appeals to the consciousness of a people by embodying their ideas or by giving expression to their deep, commonly –felt emotions." (1989: 2)

Most myths, particularly the Greek ones, are characterized with "the presence of gods and goddesses experiencing the same human emotions in the act of their frequent intervention in the life of the humans, the portrayal of extraordinary traits, and the occurrence of metamorphoses" (Williams, 1999: 2). Myths perform multiple functions in the society. They are primitive, unscientific attempts to discover the world and the nature and mechanism of the universe. Apollo; for example, is said to drive the chariot of the sun across the sky. They also explain distinctive cultural philosophies concerning the entity of Man, the nature of humanity, and the creation of the world. Furthermore, myths explore the metaphysical dimension of life and the depths of the

psyche. They also foster morality, give a record of important historical events, and document ancient religious beliefs and rites.

Although myth, folktale, and legend are interchangeably used, the three are completely different in nature. Like myth, a folktale is a story whose plot is purely fictional, but it has no particular location in either time or place. It is “a symbolic way of presenting the different means by which human beings cope with the world in which they live” (“Myth and Legend”, 2003: 2). Yet, a legend is always associated with a particular place and time in history. Unlike myth which deals with a supernatural subject matter, the legend is “a story from the past about a historical event whose subject is a saint, a king, a hero, or a war.”(ibid)

The Oedipus myth is the most tragic story ever told. “It belongs to the Theban cycle of myths, which comprises stories of doomed kings and ghastly, cult-oriented passions” (“Oedipus: the Tragic Story”, 2002: 1). It tells the story of Laius, the Theban king, who receives an oracle from Delphic Apollo that his son will kill him. So, when queen Jocasta gets a baby-boy, the king thrusts a spike through its feet and sends his trusty slave to leave it on Mount Cithareon. The slave takes pity of the baby and gives it to the childless royalty of Corinth: Polybus and Merope. The baby is given the name Oedipus (swollen feet) and he grows up in Corinth, believing that he is the son of Polybus. On reaching manhood, Oedipus is taunted with being a suppositious son. Hence, he goes to Delphi to know who his real parents are. But the oracle tells him that he is destined to kill his father and to marry his mother. Knowing no other parents than Polybus and Merope, he leaves the shrine resolved never to return to Corinth.

Journeying on, distraught and deep in thought, Oedipus approaches the crossroads between Delphi, Thebes, and Corinth. He meets Laius in a chariot with afew attendants. That man wants to pass first and pushes Oedipus with his scepter. The angry Oedipus grabs the staff from his hand, killing him as well as the slaves who want to seize him. Unaware,

Oedipus thus fulfills the first part of the terrible prophecy. Then, he approaches Thebes and faces the Sphinx. That winged monster with a woman's face and a lion's body used to ask a question and to kill those who fail to answer it. It asks Oedipus: "Who in the morning walks on four legs, at midday on two, and in the evening on three?" Oedipus answers that it is man; he begins as a crawling baby then an adult and finally an old man leaning on a cane. Consequently, the Sphinx throws itself down from a cliff and the road to Thebes becomes free.

Oedipus arrives at Thebes and finds it in turmoil. As it happened, the old king Laius just lately has been killed in a highway accident on his way to Delphi. The throne, which was left empty, is given to the young stranger who marries the queen, unknowingly fulfilling the second part of the prophecy. They live happily and have four children: Etoecles, Polyneices, Antigone, and Ismene. All goes well till the plague strikes. The crowds of people come to Oedipus and beg him to save the city. Accordingly, he sends for the oracle at Delphi to find out the cause of the plague. Apollo answers that the gods are angry because the death of Laius was not avenged. Knowing that there is only one survivor of the accident, Oedipus asks his soldiers to fetch him and Tiresias the seer, but the latter refuses to answer him directly and prophesizes a hideous fate for him. Jocasta's tale of how Laius was killed increases Oedipus' doubts that he is the murderer.

At that crucial moment, the Corinthian messenger comes to inform Oedipus of the death of Polybus and of the wish of the Corinthians to have him as their king. When Oedipus refuses for fear of the fulfillment of the prophecy, the messenger tells him that he is not a true son of Polybus and that he himself got him from a Theban shepherd. With the arrival of the Theban herdsman, the truth of Oedipus' origin is finally revealed. Upon the discovery, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus grabs the pin from her dress and pokes out his eyes. Then, he goes to his exile guided by Antigone.

After many years of wandering, Oedipus reaches the Athenian suburb of Colonus, where he is destined to die. Its people welcome him, especially after he tells them that his bones will bless their land. And at the moment of death, marked with lightening and earthquakes, he goes unaided to his secret tomb, but not before he calls a curse down on his two sons that they will die at each other's hand.

The ancient Greek dramatists are the first to write plays recording the myth of Oedipus. But since "myth comes into existence through oral tradition" (Kohler, 1989: 3), it usually has more than one version. "It is altered, abstracted, compressed, and reduced. The dramatists leave out this point or that, depending on their own ideology and the other factors which may differ a lot during time" (Slotkin). Therefore, the tale of each dramatist differs considerably, especially in the details of Oedipus' fate.

The Oedipus myth appeared in the Greek literature as early as the writings of Homer (700b.c.). In his Odyssey, "Jocasta, who is given the name Epikaste, hanged herself on concluding that Oedipus is her son, but there is no reference to Oedipus' self-blinding or the Sphinx" ("Euripides", 2002: 1). Elsewhere, he refers to Oedipus as having 'fallen'. This means that "he died by violence, perhaps in battle and was buried with the usual funeral rites" ("Oedipus", 2002: 1). In Aeschylus' The Seven against Thebes (467b.c) as well as in Euripides' Phoinissai or The Phoenician Women (410b.c), the focus is on the war between the two sons of Oedipus for the throne of Thebes. In Euripides' play, "Oedipus is still in Thebes at the time of the expedition, dragging on a meaningless life. Jocasta goes to the battlefield with Antigone, but is unable to stop her sons from killing each other. Accordingly, she kills herself." (McDonald, 2002: 1)

Hesiod mentions Oedipus in The Works and Days as "one of the race of heroes" ("Classics", 2002: 2). He says that Oedipus lived and died in Thebes and that the Sphinx was the daughter of Echidna and its father was the dog Orthos. Pausanius argues that the mother of Oedipus'

children was Euryganeia not Jocasta, whereas Pherecydes writes that “Oedipus got his two sons by Jocasta and his two daughters by a second wife whom he outlived and married another one called Astymedusa” (“The Riddle of the Sphinx”, 2003: 1). Despite all these different versions, Sophocles’ Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus (500b.c) have come to dominate the tradition, keeping all the details of the original myth. Although Oedipus is said to be found by a Corinthian during the gazing season in Sophocles’ Oedipus the King, he is exposed in winter in Aristophanes’ parody The Frog.

The basic structure of almost all these Greek tragedies dealing with the Oedipus myth is fairly simple. They begin with a prologue giving the mythological background necessary for understanding the events of the play and spoken by one or two characters before the chorus appear. This prologue is followed by the Parade, or the song the chorus give as they first enter the orchestra (the dancing place). The play is divided after that into episodes (dialogue scenes) and coral odes called stasima. The final scene, or the exodus, is a song in which the chorus give a comment on the actions of the play.

Those Greek tragedies were always performed in outdoor theaters where the audience, standing or sitting, could watch. From the late 6th century BC to the 4th and 3rd centuries BC there was a gradual development towards more elaborate theatre structures, but the basic elements of the Greek theatre remained the same. The major components of Greek theater are:

> *The Orchestra* (literally, "dancing space") was normally circular. It was a level space where the chorus would dance, sing, and interact with the actors who were on the stage near the skene. There was also the *Theatron* (literally, "viewing-place") where the spectators sat. It was usually part of hillside overlooking the orchestra**.** The *Skene* (literally, "tent") was the building directly behind the stage directly in back of the stage, and was usually decorated as a palace, temple, or other building, depending on the needs of the play. Finally, there was *Parodos* (literally, "passageways"), or the paths by which the chorus and some actors …

> made their entrances and exits. The audience also used them to enter and exit the theater before and after the performance. (2006: 1)

W.B.Yeats (1865 - 1939) is probably the twentieth century's greatest literary figure and certainly one of its complex men. He was born in Dublin suburb of Sandy Mount. Though born into a Protestant family and his grandfather was an Anglican clergyman, he abandons the religion of his Rationalist upbringing and makes a new religion of poetic tradition. His interest in occultism begins early in his life, an influence which defines him and all his works. Being a man of a profoundly significant spiritual outlook, he sees himself as "a citizen of two worlds, the visible and the unseen, walking as an envoy from each into the other." (Kunitz, 2003: 3)

Yeats influences the English and the Irish literature not only through his poetry, but through his drama as well. Commenting on the importance of drama, he says in an article entitled "Plays and Controversies" in The Literary Times, 10 Jan. 1924:

> What attracts me to the drama is that it is, in the most obvious way that all the arts are upon, a last analysis. A farce and a tragedy are alike in this, that they are a moment of intense life. An action is taken out of all other actions; it is reduced to its simplest form, or at any rate to a simple form as it can be brought to without our losing the sense of its place in the world. The characters that are involved in it are freed from everything that is not a part of that action; and whether it is, as in the less important kinds of drama, a mere bodily activity, a hair- breath escape or the like, or as it is in the more important kinds, an activity of the soul of the characters, it is an energy, an eddy of life purified from everything but itself. The dramatist must picture life in action, with an unpreoccupied mind, as the musician pictures her in sound and the sculptor in form. (qtd. in Jeffares, The Critical Heritage, 1978: 261)

Therefore, he, together with a group of intellectuals sharing his beliefs and enthusiasm, launched The Irish Dramatic Movement in 1899. It sought to revitalize drama by rejecting the realism of Ibsen and reviving Irish themes and poetic language.

Actually, Yeats is deeply attracted to ancient Greece and its great civilization.

> At the core of that civilization was a theatre situated on the slopes of the Acropolis, focused at the centre of the life of the community … The theatre became a kind of religious temple within the framework of a civic holiday where the myths and rituals of the people of Athens were transformed into art forms in order to raise their cultural level and evoke within them a powerful sense of communal identity. (Flannery, 1989: 62)

Yeats intends to do the same in Ireland. He studies the Irish folklore and ancient beliefs and tries to create drama that can unite the teachings of Christianity and the rituals of these pagan notions. As a founder and director of Dublin's Irish National Theatre in 1908, which later comes to be known as The Abbey Theatre, he successfully implements this objective through the production of esoteric plays that reject the actual world and gain the integrity of the soul as he hopes.

Yeats' dramatic works are tragedies. He argues for the purity of tragedy over comedy in "The Tragic Theatre" (1910). Tragedy, he says, "moves us by setting us to a reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. So, our minds expand, filled with images" (qtd. in Beum, 1990: 3). Among his most famous tragedies are The Countess Cathleen (1892), The Land of Heart's Desire (1894), Cathleen ni Houlihan (1902), The Hour Glass (1903), The King's Threshold (1904), Deidre (1907), The Golden Helmet (1908), Sophocles' Oedipus the King (1926), and Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus (1927). These influential plays are marked with originality and they, as well as his poetry, won him the Nobel Prize for literature. In the tribute to his works, T.S. Eliot writes: "Yeats was one of the few whose story was the history of our time, who are part of the consciousness of our age, which cannot be understood without them." (Fraser, 1954: 6)

Yeats has certain things in common with Eliot. Both pay a special attention to the soul in relation to history and eternity. They want to realize eternity in a fragmentary world full of failures. Eliot is well aware

of Yeats' grand influence on the English literature. Although he criticizes some of Yeats' notions, he admits in his article "The Cutting of an Agate: A Foreign Mind" in the Athenaeum 4 July 1919, that Yeats' influence stems from "his importance of our time, his part of the consciousness of an age, and his ability to remain always a contemporary." (Jafferes, The Critical Heritage, 1978: 231)

T.S.Eliot (1888 - 1965) is a prominent poet, a literary critic, an editor, and a dramatist. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri and attended Smith Academy there until he was sixteen. In 1905, he studied for a year at Milton Academy outside Boston before he joined Harvard University in the fall of 1906. He got a B.A. in comparative literature and an M.A. in English literature. Then, he devoted himself to the study of anthropology, Hindu thought, and philosophy.

"[Eliot's] attempts to render his vision of the boredom and the horror and the glory of life in dramatic terms have given us the finest dramatic verse that has been written in English since the seventeenth century" (Gardner, The Art of T.S.Eliot, 1968: 127). That is why he received The Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. Later, he was awarded the Hanseatic Goethe Award, the Dante Golden Medal, and the American Medal for Freedom. By 1934, Wyndham Lewis could assert that "there is no person today who has had more influence upon the art of literature in England and America than Mr. T.S.Eliot." (Julius, 1995: 4)

Unlike Yeats who is irreligious, Eliot is a religious conservative man in his life and works. He admits in his famous preface of "Essays for Lancelot Andrews" (1928), after becoming a British subject in 1927, that "the general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, a royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion" (qtd. in Stevens, 2002: 3). As all the works of Yeats reveal a mystical view of life, Eliot's reflect his everlasting passion for religion and literature and the relation between the two.

Actually, Eliot, who makes a clear-cut distinction of religion and literature, always affirms the close connection of the two, regarding religion as the core of all cultures. In "The Lessons of Baudelaire" (1922); for instance, he remarks that all first rate poetry is accompanied with morality and that what matters for the artist is the idea of good and evil. In "The Experimental Criticism" (1929), he stresses the notion that literature is the expression of philosophical and religious meanings. And in "Notes towards the Definition of Culture", he considers art as "one of the essential constituents of the soil in which religion flourishes. Literature does have a moral dimension and is subordinate to the sanctification of man and to the human values." (qtd. in Mittal, 2003: 2)

Indeed, what Eliot wants from religion is stability. He defines literature as the element that creates harmony between the soul and God. In contrast to Yeats who identifies religion and literature, art, for Eliot, is not a means in itself, but a way towards salvation. In "The Definition and Use of Art", he explains that "it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perfection of an order in reality, to bring us into a condition of serenity, stillness, and reconciliation."(qtd. in Miller, "Statements on Eliot", 1995: 3)

Attempting to satisfy a large audience of different tastes, Eliot spent much of the last half of his career writing varied kinds of plays. His double task has been "the interpretation of the age to itself and maintaining the standards of strict literary excellence, 'purifying the language of the tribe', as he himself, quoting Mallarme, declared his aim to be" (Baradrouk, 1950: 9). As early as 1923, he wrote Sweeney Agonistes and in 1934 he composed a play with a chorus entitled The Rock. Later, he wrote Murder in the Cathedral (1935), dealing with the martyrdom of Thomas a Becket, and The Family Reunion (1939), which was based on the plot of Aeschylus' Eumenides, but was designed to tell a story of Christian redemption. The Confidential Clerk (1953) and The Elder Statesman (1958) were his last and more elaborate plays. They

"succeeded in handling moral and religious issues of some complexity while entertaining the audience with farcical plots and some shrewd social satire." (Gardner "Eliot, T.S.", 1986: 1)

Tawfik Al-Hakim (1898 - 1987) is an immensely prolific short story writer, an essayist, a novelist and undoubtedly the greatest playwright in the modern Arabic literature. He was born in Alexandria and joined the School of Law. In the fall of 1925, his father sent him to the Sorbonne in Paris in order to resume his study of Law and to keep him, at the same time, away from the theatre and art to which he was deeply attracted. He spent three years there, but he broke all completely with the Law and threw himself to both old and contemporary literature along with the French theatre which all shaped his own art.

The time Al-Hakim spent in Paris also acquainted him with the vast body of the English drama and the classics translated into French. He considers the great Greek dramatists as Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles "the source of true drama and the ancestors of Europe's flourishing theatre" (Long, 1979: 19). It is obvious that the French, English, and classical dramaturgy defined his genius and intensified his interest in drama. In The Prison of Life (1948), he asserts the influence of the western art on his theatre, saying: "My serious literary production did not begin till I had been to Europe and drunk at the true springs of culture which shaped my intellect." (2)

As Eliot, Al-Hakim is a moralist. He believes that art is not an end in itself, but a means for fostering the sense of beauty and improving the quality of life on a basis of profound understanding. He regards drama as the most useful kind of literature for achieving these objectives because "it confronts the audience with the immediate impact of problematic situations and events." (Ali, 1968: 41)

Actually, Al-Hakim is the true founder and the undisputable pioneer of the Egyptian drama. Through his eighty plays, which are written in more than half a century, he can change the quality of the

Egyptian theatre and restore its long lost respectability. To him goes the credit of prompting the theatre of the absurd when he writes You, Going up the Tree (1962) with the aim of "identifying new effects that enhanced the theatre movement in general" ("The Wise Sage", 2002: 1). Accordingly, he was awarded the Decoration of the Presidency and the Nile Collar.

Al-Hakim's dramatic output can roughly fall into two main categories: social or realistic and abstract or intellectual plays. The first kind began with the revolution of 1952 which brought him to a direct contact with the new ideas of Socialism. Plays of that kind are Soft Hands (1954) and The Deal (1956).Yet Al-Hakim is more interested in the intellectual plays. Showing their nature, he says in the preface of Pygmalion (1942): "I establish my stage in the mind. My personages are ideas in struggle dressed in symbols and move in the absolute ... Are these plays stageable? I admit that I never thought while writing The People of the Cave or Shahrzad or Pygmalion of the possibility of performing them." (5)

The subject-matter of these intellectual plays, which is necessarily symbolical, is driven from different sources. Al-Hakim is inspired by the Greek myths when he writes Oedipus the King (1949) and Braska or The Governing Dilemma (1939). He also draws from the heritage of the Arabian nights in Shadrzad (1934) and The Bewildered Sultan (1960). The religious themes of the Holy Quran are considered in The People of the Cave (1933) as wall as in Solomon the Wise (1943). Similarly, he adapts the ancient Egyptian mythology in Isis. (1955)

In all his intellectual plays, Al-Hakim "handles abstract notions such as Man's relation to God, the universe, time and place and the artist's relation to life and women. He also deals with other intellectual issues as truth vs. illusion and reality vs. reverie and the problems of art and genius" (Dawara, Tawfik Al-Hakim's Theatre, 1985: 9-10). The physical action of these plays is substituted with a clash of notions