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"Oedipus, King of Thebes (Egypt): Adaptations by Egyptian Playwrights Tawfiq al-Hakim and Ali Salem

"Oedipus Tyrannos" has, unsurprisingly, inspired numerous reworkings the world over. In modern Egypt several dramatists have blended east and west to answer local and global questions of increasing importance to newly interested westerners. Tawfiq al-Hakim's "Oedipus the King"(1949) and Ali Salem's "Comedy of Oedipus: You Killed the Beast!"(1970) apply Sophocles quite neatly to their own social agendas for an Egypt in flux.

Tawfiq al-Hakim's experimentation with traditions from Aristophanes to Kafka across the formative years of post-colonial Egypt warrants more attention outside the Middle East. In his preface to "Oedipus," al-Hakim discusses adapting themes for an Islamic audience: no Greek fatalism presenting gods as unjust plotters against man (Wahab "Modern Egyptian Drama" 1974); less humanistic centering on Oedipus the mystery-solver (al-Ra'i "Modern Arabic Literature" 1992); no fabulous Sphinx, just a propagandized lion. Al-Hakim reinvents character dynamics by drawing on themes undeveloped or even actively confronted in OT. Al-Hakim's Tiresias is the political conspirator that Sophocles' Oedipus suspects. His Oedipus ignores facts and consequences for others, unconcerned by his sin, but rather, fixated on his personal quest for identity and intellectual pursuit of 'truth' (Atiyeh 1972; Starkey JAL 1977). Oedipus here is a devoted family man driven to self-destruction, not by awareness of culpability, but by the suicide of his love (al-Ra'i 1992). Oedipus fails by scoffing, along with Tiresias and Jocasta, at the gods' clear signs of doom.

Sophocles' and al-Hakim's philosophical psychodramas influenced socio-political satirist Ali Salem to produce "Comedy of Oedipus," an Aristophanic fantasy on Nasser's lionization before the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and Egypt's humiliation afterwards. Oedipus is preoccupied with revealing the truth (he did not kill the beast; he is human, not divine pharaoh), which he conveniently concealed when it benefited his rise to power. Tiresias is conscience and reason, but a Cassandra and a comically intrusive emcee who appears just to profess deep thoughts. Tiresias' and the play's final line, for example, is a Salem hallmark confessing that the audience may have laughed, but that was not his intention (Frag-Badawi JAL 1981). Salem's Jocasta continuously walks in on quarrels, reminiscent of her entry in OT, and she IS the woman worried about "marrying down" whom Sophocles' Oedipus dreams up. Creon is the dutiful helper, as Sophocles has him declare, but cast by Salem as a caricature of an officious revolutionary general. Most amusing and compelling are Salem's Egyptian characters (Awaleh, a stereotypically abusive police chief; Horimheb, haughty university president and defender of privileges; Senefru, a playwright muted by state orders). Nasser's bureaucratic web, his self-imposed hero cult, and the UAR's omnipresent "group think" are ridiculed with the recurring crowd chant "Oedipus killed the beast!" Salem leaves much of his play's development where Sophocles started, with constant evocation of devotion and appeal to Oedipus' godlike wisdom, but this comic prequel ends in a mystical exit and a declaration that

Thebes will survive without its hero-king. Not quite "Oedipus at Kolonos," but lots more fun.