The Modernization of the Oedipus Myth: Contrasting Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine* with Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*

Muhammad Furqan Tanvir

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore, by contrasting Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine*, how mythological stories and characters are in their essence archetypes that are exploited by authors in different ages to project different visions of the human situation. Every writer imbibes the influence of his age to a certain degree and if the art of Sophocles is set against that of Cocteau, the dichotomy of moral and philosophical outlook thus established cannot go unnoticed. Written in the twentieth century, Cocteau's play is in major ways different from the Greek version written more than two thousand years ago in spite of the fact that the plot outline of both remains the same. The contrast will be highlighted in both thematic and structural terms: the former in conceptual differences of heroism, providence, man's consciousness and destiny, and the latter in the different manipulation of theatrical devices like the chorus and physically evident poetic symbolism. Through recourse to comments made by some literary authors and critics on the characteristic features of the literature of the modern age, it would be shown how *The Infernal Machine* is to be categorized within it both historically and philosophically.

This paper explores, by contrasting Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* with Jean Cocteau's *The Infernal Machine*, how a dramatist's individual mind is conditioned by religious and socio-cultural values on the one hand and by the opportunities offered to him and the restrictions imposed on him by contemporary theatrical conventions on the other, thereby bringing out the differences in the vision of the two dramatists' handling of the same myth.

The word Myth can be defined in the simplest terms as "a 'sacred' narrative, from which legends and fairy tales are not always clearly distinguishable" (Bullock & Stallybrass 407) and one of the most important features of this narrative is its extreme adaptability, the ease with which an author can mould it to suit his purposes. The Oedipus myth was known even to the Greeks in more than one versions, none of them absolutely true or false. By pinpointing the differences in the accounts of Homer and Sophocles, this point is explained by Barry B. Powell thus:

> The poets Homer and Sophocles both report that Oedipus, king of Thebes, killed his father and married his mother, but in Homer's account Oedipus continues to rule after the truth comes out, whereas in Sophocles he pokes pins in his eyes and leaves the city, a wretched wanderer. Neither is the "true" version of which the other is only a variant; the myth of Oedipus is the complex of all the variants, however many there may be. (3—4)

So, one should avoid the mistake of thinking that Cocteau has, in any way, tampered with the play of Sophocles and that his version is only a parody of the genuine play. Rather, he has reinterpreted the myth and created a modern tragedy out of the material used by Sophocles to write a classical tragedy. In the case of this myth, the fame of Sophocles' version is such that by comparison the others by Homer, Aeschylus, etc. are reduced to insignificance. For this reason, the play of Sophocles has been labelled as "the canonical version" (Storey and Allan 234) of the Oedipus myth and it is only natural that Cocteau draws upon this version rather than any other for the plot of his play.

In the discussion that follows, the opposition between the standards of classical and modern tragedy will be highlighted to assist the placing of the two dramatists in their respective socio-historical contexts. But a problem that a modern critic may confront in evaluating the reworking of ancient myths by modern writers, and needs to be cleared up before undertaking textual analysis, is why a writer of the twentieth century, with different notions of tragedy than his classical predecessors, should take up their myths when, merely by changing the names of characters and their setting, he would apparently have created a new work suggestive of his modernism in a more forceful manner. Gilbert Highet describes the reasons for this at length: the modern playwrights, according to him, "are in search of themes which can be treated with strong simplicity—themes which have enough authority to stand up without masses of realistic or 'impressionist' detail to make them convincing" (532). Secondly, "these themes are not only simple in outline, but profoundly suggestive in content—and it is here that the neo-Hellenic dramatists join hands with the psychologists, for they know that every great myth carries a deep significance for the men of every age, including our own" (532). This is specially relevant to the study of *The Infernal Machine* since the theme of Oedipus Complex, the topic that has attracted every major psychologist since Freud, is not only retained but elaborated here in greater detail than in Sophocles.

The most important issue in Cocteau's reworking is the different character, status and role of the tragic hero. The concept of the tragic hero has changed radically since the times of Sophocles and Cocteau modifies the character of Oedipus to the extent that may validate the claim of reinvention.

In *Oedipus Rex*, the play opens with the crowd of suppliants before the palace of Oedipus, beseeching him to remove the distress of the plague from them as if he were a god. The very first words of the Priest fully express the god-like absolute authority the king enjoys over them: "Great Oedipus, O powerful King of Thebes! / You see how all the ages of our people / Cling to your altar steps…" (4). The link between his authority and that of the gods is further established as the Priest tells a few lines later that the rest of the population of the city is waiting at the two shrines of Pallas and that of Apollo. Thus the royal palace is seen by

them as another place of succor like the three temples of the gods. After reporting the wretched plight of the city, the Priest concludes: "Therefore, O mighty King, we turn to you: / Find us our safety, find us a remedy, / Whether by counsel of the gods or men" (5). The possibility that the counsel of both men and gods is equally accessible to Oedipus enhances the same idea. The full impact of these lines is understood when one notes the marked similarity between them and the invocation of gods by the chorus in the first stasimon: "O gods, descend! Like three streams leap against / The fires of our grief, the fires of darkness; / Be swift to bring us rest!" (11). The crowd of suppliants is an almost exact counterpart of the chorus, the former invokes the help of Oedipus, the latter of the gods and the total effect of linking the two authorities is seen in Oedipus' response to the song of the chorus: "Is this your prayer? It may be answered. Come, / Listen to me, act as the crisis demands, / And you shall have relief from all these evils" (13). Here he confuses the address made to the gods with the previous address of the Priest and sounds as if he himself has the power to rid the city of its tribulation. The carefully constructed illusion of bringing Oedipus nearer to the gods than his fellowmen right from the beginning of the play serves the dramatist's purpose of bringing his hero in conformity with the traditional Greek concept of heroes, the "great men of the past, who come to form an intermediate category between ordinary men of the present day and the gods proper" (Jameson 223). This image of Oedipus persists when during his angry exchange with Tiresias he once refers to himself as "the simple man, who knows nothing" (22) because this expression is consciously and deliberately meant to be ironical, setting his self-reliant imagination in contrast with the prophet's apparent inability to guess the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx.

This pomp and magnificence that makes a hero larger than life is not credible from the viewpoint of the stalwarts of typically modern tragedy. In his essay *Tragedy and the Common Man*, Arthur Miller condemns the belief that "the tragic mode is archaic, fit only for the very highly placed, the kings or the kingly" (1232) and defends the modern concept of a tragic hero:

> I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. On the face of it this ought to be

> obvious in the light of modern psychiatry, which bases its analysis upon classic formulations, such as the Oedipus or the Orestes complexes, for instances, which were enacted by royal beings, but which apply to everyone in similar emotional situations. (1232)

Raymond Williams in his book *Modern Tragedy* advances a similar argument when he says that his own experience of tragedy does not involve "the death of princes" (13) but has more to do with the lives of common men "driven back to silence in an unregarded working life" (13).

Apparently, Cocteau's hero Oedipus follows the classical pattern of the hero in so far as he is the king of Thebes just like the Sophoclean hero, occupying the same authority and importance in the social life of his city. But this similarity is not only superficial but also positively misleading. Cocteau's Oedipus, in spite of wielding great worldly power and high social status, is a true representative of the dramatist's own age. Throughout the play he is presented as a common man: no suppliants or chorus celebrate his power; his fall is seen more as the tragedy of an individual since in the discovery of his identity and his sins the role of the great plague of Thebes is not emphasized as much as it is done in the play of Sophocles.

Unlike the Sophoclean representation, the opening scene of *The Infernal Machine* does not depict the hero as having attained the highest social status that makes the dream of pursuing more power superfluous, keeping his attention focused only on retaining what he has already achieved. Rather, he is in every respect a common man who starts out to find happiness and prosperity in life and expresses his ambitions to the Sphinx as any commoner may.

His encounter with the Sphinx is a most scathing satire on the conventional delineation of a hero. He does not possess the unfailing courage, selfless devotion or nobility of character that usually distinguished a hero from commoners among the Greeks. His vanity before the Sphinx is different from the Sophoclean Oedipus' display of hubris before Tiresias and the crowd of suppliants since the long years of

successful and wise rule provide a reasonable justification for it while in his modern counterpart the proud boast, "I have pursued studies which give me a great start over the riff-raff of Thebes… And I don't think this simple-minded monster is expecting to be confronted by a pupil of the best scholars of Corinth" (Cocteau 680), is self assertive without any merit and immediately brings on him the penalty which he deserves when the Sphinx slyly answers, "A pity, for, I own, Oedipus, I have a soft spot for weak people, and I should like to have found you wanting" (680). His immediate destruction is averted only by the emotional appeal the Sphinx finds in him. The ironical implications of this vain boasting of Oedipus are brought into focus later in Act III when in his dream Anubis repeats his own words to him and leaves him to ponder over his helplessness.

Since man cannot escape the might of the gods, the only possibility of getting one's way in such circumstances is to generate their pity or sympathy by confessing his helplessness; to challenge their power simply excites their desire to destroy the vain pretender. What follows when the Sphinx comes out in her true colours is a complete inversion of the Greek concept of the Tragic Hero.

Even though Sophocles does not show the encounter with the Sphinx, in his story it is a plausible presupposition that Oedipus did think out the answer to the riddle by dint of his own intelligence though guided to it by the gods who had calculated it to be the means of his downfall. Given the emphasis the chorus lays on the intelligence of Oedipus ("I saw him, when the carrion woman faced him of old, / Prove his heroic mind!" Sophocles 26), nobody in the Greek audience would have thought that he had not figured out the answer himself. However, in Cocteau's play, this is what happens. From the first to the last, the Sphinx exerts full control over him and her behaviour is quite literally like that of a cat playing with a mouse. The "demonstration" of her awe-inspiring power to him is undertaken as a part of a casual whim: "And now, I am going to give you a demonstration, I'm going to show you what would happen in this place, Oedipus, if you were any ordinary handsome youth from Thebes, and if you hadn't the privilege of pleasing me" (681). It is clear that the two conditions of not being an ordinary youth and having the privilege of pleasing the Sphinx are interlinked i.e., the only thing that actually

distinguishes him from other people is not his courage or intelligence, but the fact that she has taken a fancy to him. She herself tells him the answer to the riddle while he is writhing in agony on the stage and then, after releasing him from her fatal power, puts the question to him on the insistence of Anubis only for the sake of formality. He then proceeds to give the answer with perfect composure as if he had spontaneously worked it out for himself: "Why, man, of course! He crawls along on four legs when he's little, and walks on two legs when he is big, and when he's old he helps himself along with a stick as a third leg" (683).

The naivety with which he says this almost amounts to foolishness especially when right after this answer, on seeing the Sphinx swaying on her pedestal, he gives out a triumphant cry "Victory!"(683) as he rushes towards Thebes to claim his reward. These impulsive responses of Oedipus simply make the whole episode into a farce and in this exposition of heroism could also be found a faint trace of the interchangeability of the sublime and the ridiculous that the Theatre of the Absurd is famous for. Thus, the Sphinx's sarcastic comment on seeing Oedipus paralyzed, "As your legs refuse their help, jump, hop…. It's good for a hero to make himself ridiculous" (681), has twofold implications: he makes himself physically ridiculous at the moment when she has overpowered him without the least effort but to reinforce the complete lack of dignity in him, he makes himself equally ridiculous at the moment of his supposed triumph over the Sphinx by gloating over the fall of the enemy to whose kindness he owes his success.

Perhaps what Cocteau is suggesting is that the general tendency of common folk to elevate an individual to a legendary status by surrounding his achievements with myths is responsible to a large extent for the making of heroes. These myths are often created by those in power to uphold their distinction among commoners. Having become the king of Thebes, Oedipus does not hesitate to glorify himself by giving a false account of his meeting with the Sphinx to Jocasta which is cut short only by her heavy sleepiness (697). Moments later, in his sleep, he is heard crying for help when his nightmares take him back to the ruins where he had supposedly conquered the monster. Jocasta's persistent belief that he had begun to tell her "the most marvelous story in the

world" (698) is an apt observation on the proneness of people to mythologize heroes.

Jocasta's expectations from Oedipus are complemented by the views of the Matron, one of the important characters who, in the absence of the Greek chorus, performs the function of letting the audience know the commoners' way of looking at important and consequential happenings. Highlighting the city's need for a hero, she tells the Sphinx, "I tell you, my dear, what we want is a man of action … What we want is a ruler to fall from the sky, marry her [Jocasta], and kill the beast; someone to make an end of corruption, lock up Creon and Tiresias, improve the state of finance and liven up the people, someone who would care for the people and save us, yes, that's it, save us" (675). But the impossibility of the realization of such wishes is expressed by Oedipus himself in a highly matter of fact tone:

> Jocasta still loves in me the wanderer dropped out of the clouds, the young man stepping suddenly out of the shadows. It will unfortunately be only too easy to destroy this mirage to-morrow. In the meantime, I hope the queen will become sufficiently submissive for her to learn without disgust that Oedipus is not a prince fallen from the sky, but merely a prince. (694)

The honesty of Oedipus while thus addressing himself to Tiresias is unexpected keeping in view his later conduct before Jocasta but it effectively shows that he, in spite of his high aspirations, is conscious of being a man and not a demigod. Notwithstanding Oedipus' proud boasts, the dramatist makes him an instrument to satirize the theatricality of classical heroes as he thinks over the best posture in which to carry the Sphinx's body to the city. Carrying it before him on his outstretched arms, he says, "No, not like that! I should look like that tragedian I saw in Corinth playing the part of a king carrying the body of his son. The pose was pompous and moved no one" (687). He then holds it under his left arm but is again dissatisfied with the impact and finally, imitating Hercules, puts it over his shoulder. All this while, Anubis ridicules his childish gestures with marked contempt.

Although he is not writing a comic play, Cocteau's uncompromising attitude towards the myths surrounding the lives and exploits of heroes is unmistakably reminiscent of Mark Twain's novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* which sets the standards for the modern motif of ridiculing the magnificence of ancient heroes as, throughout the book, a twentieth century man systematically undertakes the task of bringing out the ludicrousness of almost everything that is traditionally regarded as a symbol of heroism. Here, for instance, is his comment on a knight's massive armour, regarded as a sign of nobility, grandeur and power in those times:

> I wanted to try and think out how it was that rational or even half-rational men could ever have learned to wear armour, considering its inconveniences; and how they had managed to keep up such a fashion for generations when it was plain that what I had suffered today they had had to suffer all the days of their lives… I wanted to think out some way to reform this evil and persuade the people to let the foolish fashion die out; but thinking was out of the question in the circumstances.(Twain 68—69)

Bringing heroes down from their exalted station through sarcasm is, therefore, a technique shared by Twain and Cocteau even though the former was writing a comedy while the latter was writing a tragedy. This aspect of modernizing myths is rightly described by Gilbert Highet in the following words: "Since the French intellectuals are always defending themselves against the Olympians, Gide and Cocteau and the others find a certain relief in humanizing, debunking, and even vulgarizing some of the formidable old traditions. By bringing the myths nearer to humanity they make them more real" (532).

In *The Infernal Machine*, characters appear as they are, ordinary human beings who do not need elegant and elaborate masks to amplify themselves. The absence of masks and archetypal costumes in the modern theatre is a significant departure from the old concept of heroism. In the production of Sophocles' tragedy, Oedipus would be wearing a mask that would distinguish him from the rest of the characters and, conversely, the masks worn by the suppliants, the chorus and the messengers would emphasize their commoner quality. No such

distinction would be made in Cocteau's play which shows that the very nature of theatrical devices in the two ages are conducive to establishing and demolishing a particular concept of a hero.

The Sophoclean hero left his own state Corinth and so did Cocteau's hero but whereas for the former it was a sad and pitiful necessity, for the latter it was a voluntary decision that opened up to him the proposition of earnestly longed for adventures. The following lines in the Greek play require an explanation in this respect:

> And from that day
> Corinth to me was only in the stars
> Descending in that quarter of the sky,
> As I wandered farther and farther on my way
> To a land where I should never see the evil
> Sung by the oracle. (Sophocles 42—43)

It was the fear of the gods which restrained him from going back to Corinth but his impulses continued to goad him to do so and the fact that he had to struggle to ward off this dream which continually haunted him is evident from his romantic pondering over the stars that disappeared over the horizon in the direction of that city. Stars, besides carrying the connotations of romantic dreams and fantasies, are an obvious symbol of light in the darkness and this, coupled with the sorrow and weariness of wandering "farther and farther" into an unknown land, shows that he regards it as a journey from light to darkness.

On the other hand, for Cocteau's Oedipus it is an adventure undertaken for delectation and gratifying his curiosity, thereby asserting his essential modernity in yet another way. Here is his explanation for why he left Corinth:

> At first this oracle fills you with horror, but I'm not so easily imposed on! I soon saw how nonsensical the whole thing was. I took into account the ways of the gods and the priests, and I came to this conclusion: either the oracle hid a less serious meaning which had to be discovered, or the priests who communicate from temple to temple by means of birds found it perhaps to their

> advantage to put this oracle into the mouth of the gods and to weaken my chances of coming into power. Briefly, I soon forgot my fears, and, I may say, used this threat of parricide and incest as an excuse to flee the court and satisfy my thirst for the unknown. (679)

Whereas the Sophoclean Oedipus was looked upon by the chorus (and the Greek audience) as the tenacious and self-willed man who overstepped his limits in contumaciously trying to escape the will of the gods and, later, in joining Jocasta in denying the truth of the oracles, his rebellion against the traditional theology is nothing as compared to the contemptuous and matter of fact analysis of the situation by his modern counterpart in the above mentioned lines. Howsoever outspoken he might be before Tiresias or rebellious in denouncing the oracles, the Sophoclean Oedipus is quintessentially pusillanimous in the face of divine authority and a profound irony in his approach to the oracles is discernable in his reaction to the news of Polybus' death. The triumphant exclamation—"Polybus / Has packed the oracles off with him underground. / They are empty words" (50)—is followed moments later by his refusal to return to Corinth for fear of marrying his mother—"But I fear the living woman" (51). So, his act of refuting the oracles is only superficial and both his departure from Corinth and his dread of returning there even after his alleged father's death illustrate how the deep-rooted awe of divinity conditioned his unconscious as might be expected from a typical Greek of Sophocles' times. But in the long quotation from *The Infernal Machine* given above not only does Cocteau's hero dismiss religion with post-Nietzschean skepticism, the spirit of modernity is also averred through his desire for "the unknown," the impulse to seek a romantic escape from the mundane domestic life, which is often an important character trait of dissatisfied young men in modern drama. To prove that it is an oft-repeated motif in modern drama two examples from twentieth century American writers would suffice: the first is of Biff, in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, loathing the urban life his father urges him to adopt and near the end of the play giving vent to his anger for being denied the chance of leading an adventurous and carefree life: "What am I doing in an office, making a contemptuous, begging fool of myself, when all I want is out there, waiting for me the minute I say I know who I am!" (105). The second

example, equally relevant, is of Tom Wingfield, in Tennessee Williams' play *The Glass Menagerie*, a young poet who finds the banality of family life stifling and eventually deserts his family because of his belief that "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the warehouse!" (26). Indifferently referring to the oracle as "nonsense," Cocteau's Oedipus joins the group of modern protagonists by voluntarily deciding to abandon the luxurious snugness of princely life for the sake of confronting and experiencing the "unknown."

The substantial differences between the tragic hero who is virtually a demigod and a modern hero can be reinforced considerably by concentrating on the fact that the play of Sophocles is commonly analyzed as a part of a trilogy while that of Cocteau is a complete whole. This leads to the conclusion that, whereas the story of Cocteau's Oedipus ends with certain vague predictions about the hero's fate after his downfall, according to the interpretation of Sophocles it continues in *Oedipus at Colonus* until the fallen hero is fully redeemed and adequately recompensed by the gods for his tribulations. In this difference also can be found the patterns typical of the modern and classical models of tragedy. Recognizing the grove of the Furies as the site where another of Apollo's oracles would be realized, this is how Oedipus expresses his relief in *Oedipus at Colonus*:

> A resting place,
> After long years, in the last country, where
> I should find home among the sacred Furies:
> That I might round out there my bitter life.
> Conferring benefit on those who received me,
> A curse on those who have driven me away. (Sophocles 90)

The power of conferring benefit and curse on others metamorphoses the detested sinner into a much prized and highly venerated old man whose support means as much to the two contending city-states as the favours of a god. In the fulfillment of Apollo's last oracle about Oedipus' destiny can be found a direct affinity with the fates of mythological personages who, having undergone long periods of trials and tribulations are deified and join the Olympians. An example that seems particularly relevant to

explain this point is the posthumous deification and warm reception of Heracles among the Olympians (Graves 203).

Such is not the fate of Cocteau's hero. The action ends when he blinds himself but it is an open ended text since Tiresias notes the freedom of Oedipus from the humiliation of being subordinated to Creon: "Your police may be well organized, Creon; but where this man goes they will not have the slightest power" (708). Here is a slight indication that Oedipus is likely to become larger than life but the play ends with Creon and Tiresias expressing opposite views about his future: the former thinks that he would find "dishonour, shame" (710) while the latter maintains that he is on his way to "Glory" (710) and the interrogative closure is finally established as it ends with Tiresias' non-committal remark which means, in effect, "Who knows what fate awaits him?" The dramatist has a specific purpose in making the august seer rather than somebody else speak these words i.e., while he wishes it to be left to the reader or the audience to interpret the ultimate end of Oedipus the way they like, the word "unknown"—having obvious connotations of modern sensibility—carries immense signification as it becomes centrally embedded in the play's structure.

Whether one chooses to have faith in the prophesy of Tiresias or the more reason based evaluation of Creon, the fact remains that placed side by side with Oedipus' intense tragedy the consoling words of the prophet have a very minor impact and Cocteau's vision does not essentially involve the eventual redemption of Oedipus to demonstrate which Sophocles wrote a separate play.

Thus, Alexander Piatigorsky's label for the story of Oedipus, "A myth of becoming a god" (68), is far more appropriate to the version of Sophocles than that of Cocteau and, by implication, reiterates the initial idea of a modern hero as being a commoner while the Greek concept, inspired directly by religion, regarded a hero as an intermediate link between the human beings and the gods.

The most important consequence of this change in the basic concept of the hero is that one is more likely to identify oneself with an ordinary man sharing one's own weaknesses without the classical embellishments

and so Aristotelian catharsis is stimulated more by the modern tragedy than by the ancient Greek tragedy. This point is understood easily if studied in the light of Martha C. Nussbaum's statement that the "imperfections in a hero enhance our identification. There is a kind of excellence that is so far beyond our grasp that we regard its possessor as being above and beyond our kind, not among us" (387). To emphasize the hero's proximity to the gods and disengaging him from common folk is one way of granting him the kind of excellence which hinders identification. The arousal of pity and fear, regarded in *The Art of Poetry* as the end of tragedy (Aristotle 16) is made easier by the modern drama with an increase in the scope of the audience's identification with the hero.

The Third Act of *The Infernal Machine* gives a detailed and intimate picture of Oedipus and Jocasta's wedding night that has important structural and thematic implications and offers some important insights about the whole issue of the myth's reworking. In Sophocles' play incest is seen as something so horrifying that the very mentioning of it is thought to be a breach in the moral order of that world. Its revelation is preceded by a passionately expressed desire to withhold it. When Oedipus commands the Shepherd, "You will die now unless you speak the truth" (62), his fretful response is, "Yet if I speak the truth, I am worse than dead" (62). So when the verbal statement of parricide and incest can no longer be averted, the Shepherd's acquiescence is deliberately shrouded in a prologue of a stupendous admission of horror and even after this he successfully manipulates evasive language to project the truth without plainly stating the king's sins. The most that he could bring himself to utter is, "For if you are what this man says you are, / No man living is more wretched than Oedipus" (64). Before rushing into the palace, Oedipus' last words also highlight the same overwhelming sense of horror: "I, Oedipus, / Oedipus, damned in his birth, in his marriage damned, / Damned in the blood he shed with his own hand!" (64). The phrase "I Oedipus" is personal and turns the weight of the agony on his own self with such starkness that he feels obliged to displace himself from his identity, at least through language. So in the next two lines he speaks of Oedipus as if he were a detached entity when he employs no less than four third person pronouns. This deliberate distancing from his own self allows him to avoid being

explicit in his confession of incest. Once again, in the choral ode that follows, the references to incest are deliberately made so ambiguous that it is quite difficult to interpret the words without their context:

> O Oedipus, most royal one!
> The great door that expelled you to the light
> Gave at night—ah, gave night to your glory:
> As to the father, to the fathering son. (66)

This reservation about stating and acknowledging acts that are indecorous and imply degenerated morals is ordained by the standard code of the classical tragedy. Tragedians of Sophocles' times were practitioners of the most eloquent form of art that strictly observed a suitable degree of propriety. Lowell Edmunds, in his paper entitled *The Body of Oedipus*, contends that Oedipus' act of blinding himself is a symbolic representation of self-castration and explaining the need for this symbolism says: "The question might arise: Why did Oedipus not just castrate himself? Why was this symbolism necessary? The answer lies in the decorum of the Greek hero myths. Neither the Oedipus myth nor any other could admit a castration" (54).

The limitations imposed on the Greek dramatists by the decorum of the hero myths and the moral criteria of tragedy is, because of radical cultural and anthropological changes, not an obstacle for twentieth century dramatists. Hence Cocteau does not think it his obligation to talk obliquely about matters like incest and the conversation that takes place between the newly wedded Oedipus and Jocasta in their bedroom highlights the tragedy of their relationship with a starkness that was virtually inadmissible on the Greek stage. Consider, as an example, the effect of the amorous quality of the following statement of Oedipus: "… I don't want sleep to spoil the miracle of passing this joyous night alone, unutterably alone with you. I suggest we remove these heavy clothes…" (689). Focusing on incest in this way creates an affinity between Cocteau's play and Philip Saville's 1968 film *Oedipus the King* about which Paul Oppenheimer says, "…Saville challenges his audience with a number of horrors that classical decorum keeps to the background or conceals" (135). So this unencumbered audacity and diffident

reservation are typical traits of the tragic art in the modern and the classical ages respectively.

The second noteworthy aspect of the Bedroom Scene has to do with surrealism. Cocteau is specially noted for being influenced by the movement (Wilson and Goldfarb 405) and here he effectively uses its basic technique of assimilating the conscious and the subconscious states of the mind. Between dialogues that are delivered with full consciousness of their meaning, both Oedipus and Jocasta utter vague words that figure like fragments from the dreams that haunt them. For example, the following ejaculations of Oedipus, as drowsiness overtakes him, are not stimulated by anything present in his immediate physical surroundings: "I said…I said…that it's he…he…the dog…I mean…the dog who won't…the dog…the fountain dog…[His head droops]" (688). Jocasta undergoes a similar state in which reality and dream become inseparable: "This rampart wall. [She starts.] A wall….What? I …I … [Haggard.] What's Happening?" (689). The audience knows what the characters themselves do not know: that Oedipus' thoughts go back to Anubis while Jocasta's mind is unconsciously struggling with the rampart wall on which she failed to see the ghost of Laius. This subtle exploration of the characters' subconscious mind manifests the dramatist's skilful incorporation of the features of a contemporary movement in the old myth.

A further point can be made about how Cocteau has modernized the myth of Oedipus from the perspective of theatrical spectacle. The facilities of the modern theatre enabled him to heighten the dramatic tension in a sensational manner while Sophocles had the disadvantage of lacking those means in his theatre. Important examples of visual symbols used in *The Infernal Machine* are the image of Laius' ghost seen on the rampart wall calling out desperately to Jocasta, the sudden and dramatic changes in the physical appearance of the Sphinx, the spectacle of Jocasta's red scarf which carries an ominous sense of doom with it since The Voice has revealed in the very beginning that she will hang herself with that very scarf (654).

On the other hand, the symbols used by Sophocles like the specially made masks worn by all the actors, the blood on Oedipus' robes on his

last appearance, the staff that Tiresias carries, etc. can hardly be said to procure the stunning spectacles that are typically expected from the theatre of the modern age. After pinpointing several differences between the Greek and the modern theatre, Brockett and Ball aptly comment: "What any group accepts as effective theatrical performance depends to a great extent upon the group's familiarity with, and acceptance of, a particular set of conventions and upon the skill with which those conventions are handled" (71).

The presentation of the Sphinx in the two plays is widely different. First, there is the obvious difference that in one it is physically presented onstage while in the other it is not, implying that in the latter it is no more than a name and a myth in the sense that no physical reality attached to that name is shown on the stage. This technique might be appreciated for the reason that because the Sphinx is in its very essence supposed to be an incomprehensible creature, its mystery is preserved by its invisibility and attachment with the remote past. This is how Charles Segal recommends what is not shown in the play by Sophocles: "The theatrical spectacle of *Oedipus Tyrannus* works as much by what is not said and not shown as by the spoken and visible elements of the performance. Certain things are more powerful for being left unsaid and unseen" (148). Segal goes on to give the example of the two long narratives of Oedipus and the Messenger and praises the dramatist for leaving things to be "played out all the more effectively in the interior theatre of our imaginations" (148). This argument, in conjunction with the psychoanalytic critics' concern with the working of the unconscious, is strong and its appeal might make one inclined to think that by presenting the Sphinx onstage and recording its long verbal interaction with the human beings, Cocteau has in fact reduced the mythical status of the creature. The following argument attempts to show that it is not so and that his handling of the Sphinx is indeed far more subtle than that of his Greek predecessor.

In Sophocles's play, there are numerous references to the Sphinx but they all are calculated to build a coherent and uniform image of a destructive beast. The chorus calls it the "carrion woman" (26) and at another place "the virgin with her hooking lion claws" (65) while Oedipus himself refers to it as "hellcat" (21). In *The Infernal Machine*,

the incomprehensibility of the Sphinx is given a material form since it is not given a coherent image that may conform to a set description. Its personality is four-dimensional in the physical sense because it first appears as a timid girl clad in a white dress that seems to suggest its purity and innocence, then as a huge winged monster that wields terrific power, then as a dead girl with a jackal's head and finally as a shade that has no physical body but whose voice can be heard. But the complexity of this being is not confined to physical changes. Being a goddess she is immortal and pities human beings—"Poor, poor, poor mankind!" (687)—but she also says that the only happiness she can attain is possible in the human form (676); she is a killer but loves passionately and desires to be loved; in her long speech addressed to Oedipus about her immense powers (682) she gives the impression of being an absolute sovereign like the Christian God and yet she is herself ruled by higher powers. Finally, the description of her shade as Nemesis gives her a far more complex role than that of a killer. The total effect of all these character traits is the combination of irreconcilable opposites and that is a manifestation of the incomprehensibility for which the Sphinx stands. It might be said that its character has evolved since the fifth century B. C. and in the modern age, along with the evolution of man's mind towards more intensified intricacy, it has transmuted into the complex being depicted in Cocteau's play.

An important change that serves as a key factor in determining how the particular culture and intellectual environment of the two authors was radically different is discernable in their attitude towards Providence. In the times of Sophocles, religion and the rule of gods was commended by tragedians because the performance of these plays was a regular religious ritual while, with a few exceptions, all the notable intellectuals, philosophers and literary men of letters of the western world of the modern period are known for their secularism or the resentment and sarcasm they display towards Providence.

The gods play a decisive role in both the plays by being the makers of Oedipus' destiny but the way in which they are regarded by the authors differs so widely that it will not be an exaggeration to say that Cocteau's views about the working of Providence are exactly opposed to those of Sophocles.

Though "critics disagree as to whether Sophocles is defending or attacking the gods and traditional religious ethic" (Feldman 59) in *Oedipus Rex*, ample textual support can easily be provided to prove that he, in spite of all his sympathies for the protagonist, vindicates the power of the gods and celebrates their wisdom. The one voice that comes nearest to being that of the poet in many Greek tragedies is that of the chorus. Unlike the general rule, the chorus is not static in this play but undergoes a definite change in its attitude towards the protagonist and if this progress is examined carefully, the poet's religious views become quite clear. As noted earlier, in the beginning the chorus behaves like the crowd of suppliants in revering Oedipus as the great wise ruler who is its only ray of hope in times of trouble. After the hero's confrontation with the blind prophet, it has no hesitation in doubting his divinely inspired wisdom in order to justify Oedipus' act:

> And well though this diviner works, he works in his own night;
> No man can judge that rough unknown or trust in second sight,
> For wisdom changes hands among the wise.
> Shall I believe my great lord criminal
> At a raging word that a blind old man let fall? (26)

The fact that is noteworthy here is that the chorus is not of a permanently servile nature since it recognizes the variability of man's wisdom but chooses to regard the prophet void of wisdom rather than the king whose mind, by the nature of the argument, is made as susceptible as that of the prophet. But this body that expresses the society's collective consciousness is pragmatic enough to sever all links with the king at the very first hint of his true identity. Instead of siding with the tragic character and condemning the gods who brought such undeserved fate upon Oedipus, in the second choral ode it takes a stance diametrically opposed to that of the first one. Both Oedipus and his wife are severely condemned for their lack of reverence for the gods and the punishment, which has not yet been confirmed, is thought fit for them for their pride because of the theological law that "Haughtiness and the high hand of disdain / Tempt and outrage God's holy law" (46). The same Oedipus who was revered so greatly is now called a tyrant who "is a child of pride" (46) and there cannot be any doubt that the chorus is here voicing

the poet's own views since in the same ode the poet states his own responsibility to enlighten the people by condemning people like Oedipus: "Though fools will honour impious men, / In their cities no tragic poet sings" (46). It is notable also that even though the chorus generously sympathizes with Oedipus during the last episode of the play, it does not dare say a single word against the ruthlessness of the gods.

Cocteau's radically different approach is evident even from the title of his play. He describes the execution of gods' plans to destroy a human being in metaphorical terms as the working of an infernal machine and accuses them of taking a sadistic pleasure in these maneuvers against the helpless human beings: "For the gods really to enjoy themselves, their victim must fall from a great height" (654). This satanic enjoyment is once again referred to in the address of The Voice in Act IV: "For their infernal machine to work properly the gods wanted all ill luck to appear in the guise of good luck" (703). The two important adjectives that The Voice uses for the gods in the first and the fourth Act respectively are "infernal gods" (654) and "cruel gods" (703). Thus the play begins and ends, as it were, on a note of deep resentment against the ways of gods and this fact, together with the demolition of the tragic hero studied earlier, justifies the comment of Francis Fergusson that in the play "the emphasis is on mortal stupidity and upon the cruelty of the gods" (716).

In Greek Tragedy, a particularly important space is occupied by the chorus, the group of singers and dancers that has several important functions to perform like providing the audience with the essential background information, commenting on the action of the play, advising the protagonist, etc. and its presence makes the dramatist's task easier in several technical ways. The conventions of modern stagecraft, however, made it impossible for Cocteau to introduce a similar body of chorus in his play and this difference brings out the spirit of modernity in his version of the myth in a striking way. On close observation, it can be seen that Cocteau has adapted the chorus according to his times and in *The Infernal Machine* it has been divided into two parts: "The Voice" that directly addresses the audience at the opening of each of the four Acts and the commoners who interact with the main characters. How these two elements in the play form a modern equivalent of the classical chorus is discussed below.

As the play opens, The Voice delivers a long address in which it performs two functions: it narrates the myth on which the play is based and, secondly, it interprets it to enable the reader to share the dramatist's own perspectives on it. The events of Oedipus' life form a plain narration of the myth and a statement like this one is the dramatist's commentary on it: "Spectator, this machine, you see here wound up to the full in such a way that the spring will slowly unwind the whole length of a human life, is one of the most perfect constructed by the infernal gods for the mathematical destruction of a mortal" (654).
The advantage gained by the dramatist through this technique is that since the voice is impersonal and abstract, it is omnipresent in the world of the play and can operate on several levels by cancelling out the restrictions of space and time while they confine the Greek chorus which is constituted of human beings. It oversteps space when, at the beginning of Act II, it takes the audience to another place and directs them thus: "Spectators, let us imagine we can recall the minutes we have just lived through together and relive them elsewhere. For, while the Ghost of Laius was trying to warn Jocasta on the ramparts of Thebes, the Sphinx and Oedipus met on a hill overlooking the town" (670). The chorus in *Oedipus Rex* is unable to manipulate events like this since it stays all the time before the palace of Oedipus. The Voice oversteps the limits of time when it announces the passage of seventeen years at the beginning of Act IV (Cocteau 703) which has important structural implications. The action of *Oedipus Rex* deals only with the span of about one day at least partly because the chorus could not be shown to have accompanied the protagonist through the various stages of his tragic career. These limitations necessitate the play's heavy reliance on the off stage action and the long narratives of the concerned people about it.

The second element in the play that can roughly be equated to that of the Greek chorus is the crucial role played by commoners. Andrew Brown notes that in Greek Tragedy, "normally the chorus is in some degree detached from the action, commenting on it from the point of view of ordinary men or women and broadening the focus of the drama beyond the narrower concerns of the characters" (62—63). The soldiers and the Matron play almost the same role of commenting on the action from the viewpoint of ordinary people in *The Infernal Machine*. The play opens

with a conversation of the two soldiers who not only set the tone of mystery which persists until the last Act but also give us the necessary background information about the fear of the Sphinx that has overtaken the entire city: "…you're in a real state of nerves, like me, like everybody in Thebes, rich or poor alike, except a few big pots who make something out of everything. There's not much fun in war, anyway, but we don't know a blind thing about the enemy we're up against" (656). The general atmosphere of suffering and anguish in Thebes because of the plague is similarly revealed by the Sophoclean chorus: "Now our afflictions have no end, / Now all our stricken host lies down / And no man fights off death with his mind" (11). The Matron in Cocteau's play, as mentioned earlier, contributes to the action of the play in the same way through her long speeches about her own and her family's views concerning the Sphinx. To conclude, it is clear that because Cocteau could not make use of the Greek convention of the chorus, he innovated to create characters that could function as modern substitutes to serve the same purposes.

On the basis of this discussion, it can be concluded that notwithstanding the resemblance of plot outline and characters' names, Cocteau's play, offering radically heterogeneous communal and theatrical semantics, is a completely modern reworking of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*.

WORKS CITED

Primary Sources

Cocteau, Jean. "The Infernal Machine." Trans. Carl Wildman. *Introduction to Literature*. Ed. Louis G. Locke, William M. Gibson, and George Arms. Rev. ed. New York: Rinehart & Company, 1954. 653—710. Print.

Sophocles. "Oedipus Rex." Trans. Dudley Fitts & Robert Fitzgerald. *The Oedipus Cycle: Oedipus Rex; Oedipus at Colonus; Antigone*. A Harvest Book. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977. 1—81. Print.

Secondary Sources

Aristotle. *Aristotle's Art of Poetry: A Greek View of Poetry and Drama*. 1940. Trans. Ingram Bywater. Ed. W. Hamilton Fyfe. London: The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1966. Print.

Brockett, Oscar G., and Robert J. Ball. *The Essential Theatre*. 7th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 2000. Print.

Brown, Andrew. "Chorus." *A New Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1983. 61—64. Print.

Bullock, Alan, and Oliver Stallybrass, ed. "Myth." *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*. London: Fontana, Collins, 1977. Print.

Edmunds, Lowell. "The Body of Oedipus." *The Persistence of Myth: Psychoanalytic and Structuralist Perspectives*. Ed. Peter L. Rudnytsky. New York: The Guilford Press, 1988. 51—66. Print.

Feldman, Thalia Phillies. "Taboo and Neurotic Guilt in the Oedipus Theme." *Oedipus Tyrannus*. Ed. Luci Berkowitz, and Theodore F. Brunner. A Norton Critical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970. 59—69. Print.

Fergusson, Francis. "On Cocteau's 'Infernal Machine'." *Introduction to Literature*. Ed. Louis G. Locke, William M. Gibson, and George Arms. Rev. ed. New York: Rinehart & Company, 1954. 710—719. Print.

Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths*. Vol. 2. Baltimore: Penguin, 1959. Print.

Highet, Gilbert. *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*. 1949. London: Oxford University Press, 1967. Print.

Jameson, Michael H. "Mythology of Ancient Greece." *Mythologies of the Ancient World*. Ed. Samuel Noah Kramer. New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1961. 219—276. Print.

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. 1940. Penguin, 1961. Print.
-------. "Tragedy and the Common Man." *An Introduction to Literature*. 11th ed. Ed. Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, William Burto, and William E. Cain. New York: Longman, 1997. 1232—1235. Print.
Nussbaum, Martha C. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Print.

Oppenheimer, Paul. *Evil and the Demonic: A New Theory of Monstrous Behaviour*. New York: New York University Press, 1996. Print.

Piatigorsky, Alexander. *Mythological Deliberations: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Myth*. Ed. Audrey Cantlie. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1993. Print.

Powell, Barry B. *Classical Myth*. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998. Print.

Segal, Charles. *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*. Twayne's Masterwork Studies. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1993. Print.

Sophocles. "Oedipus at Colonus." Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. *The Oedipus Cycle: Oedipus Rex; Oedipus at Colonus; Antigone*. A Harvest Book. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1977. 82—173. Print.

Storey, Ian C., and Arlene Allan. *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Print.

Twain, Mark. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. A Perennial Classic. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *Modern Tragedy*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1966. Print.

Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie*. 1945. Hereford Plays. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1968. Print.

Wilson, Edwin, and Alvin Goldfarb. *Living Theater: A History*. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1994. Print.