

*Metamorphoses of Oedipus in Modern French Literature.  
From an Intellectual Drama to a Psychoanalytical  
Reflection on Ideal Love*

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**Abstract.** *Oedipus Rex*, a tragedy created twenty-five centuries ago, is still a source of inspiration for many writers. However, the overall message of modern interpretations of the Oedipus myth differs considerably from the message of Sophocles' play; these works are no longer the stories of a man punished by gods for his haughtiness (*hybris*). André Gide modernizes Sophocles' tragedy, transforming it into a lesson in secular humanism. The play by Jean Cocteau focuses on the transition from ignorance to awareness. Alain Robbe-Grillet creates an anti-story about the contemporary version of Oedipus, whose lot is determined, not by gods, but by chance and unconscious desires. As for the psychoanalytical interpretation of the myth by Jacqueline Harpman, it is first of all the reflection on ideal love, fully realized in an incestuous relationship between the son and his mother.

**Keywords:** Oedipus; myth; Jean Cocteau; Jacqueline Harpman; André Gide; Alain Robbe-Grillet

### How Did the Story of Oedipus Originate?

The oldest literary traces of Oedipus' story can be found in *Odyssey*, where Homer mentions the tragic lot of Oedipus' mother Jocasta encountered by Odysseus in Hades. Allusions to the myth can be found in Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Pindar's *Pythian 4 Ode*, Euripides' *Phoenician Women* and Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*. However, the contemporary readers mostly know the story of the man who defeated Sphinx from two tragedies by Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex* (ca. 427 BCE) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (ca. 406 BCE) (see Astier 1974: 12–13).

In the mythical story reconstructed on the basis of these texts, Oedipus' parents, the king of Thebes Laius and his wife Jocasta, decide to pierce the feet of their newborn son and abandon him on Cithaeron mountain once they learn from the Oracle that the boy will kill his father and marry his mother. The baby is saved from death by the shepherd Phorbas and transferred to the custody of

the king of Corinth, Polybus. The king names the baby Oedipus, i.e., ‘the one with swollen feet’, and raises him as his own son, hiding the tragic background from the boy. When Oedipus grows up, the Oracle reveals to him the truth his parents learnt before. So as to prevent the realization of the prophecy, he flees from Corinth. On his way to Thebes, he meets Laius and kills him in a fight, unaware that his opponent was his father. Before he reaches the town, he overcomes the Sphinx, a female monster being a hybrid of a lion, a bird and a snake. He does it by solving her riddle, in fact referring to the definition of man. In return for removing the Sphinx who has been tormenting them for years, the residents of Thebes make Oedipus their king and let him marry queen Jocasta. This way, the Oracle’s prophecy comes true. After twenty years of Oedipus’ successful rule, an epidemic breaks out in Thebes. The residents learn from the Oracle that the plague will only stop when the murderer of Laius receives proper punishment. In order to help the town, Oedipus carries out the investigation and finally finds out the terrible truth. In despair, Jocasta hangs herself, and Oedipus blinds himself and leaves Thebes with his daughter Antigone. After a long journey, he reaches Colonus near Athens, where he dies and is buried, which according to the prophecy is to ensure the town’s residents’ prosperity.

Leaving the baby in the mountains, killing his own father, overcoming the Sphinx, marrying Jocasta, as well as Oedipus’ punishment and apotheosis in Colonus are the six key elements of the story presented almost identically in all its different versions. According to the renowned French Hellenic Studies specialist, Marie Delcourt, all these motifs originally existed independently in different historical and social contexts (Delcourt 1981). However, all of them referred to the same ritual, i.e., the killing of the old king by a younger successor. Therefore, the myth of Oedipus is a kind of patchwork, made up of events with the same symbolic message (see Astier 1988: 1086). Considering the origin and nature of the mythical character, Marie Delcourt concludes that he is actually the sum of the events in his life: “Oedipus is neither a historical character nor a minor deity considered to be a human in ancient times. He is one of the heroes with ritual roots, [...] whose adventures precede the origin of the very character” (Delcourt 1981: 33–37).

### The Troublesome Legacy of Sophocles

The main elements of the story of Oedipus were first compiled in *Oedipodia* and *Thebaid*, but these epic poems have not survived to this day. Therefore, the story presented in *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* is considered to be

the oldest complete version of the myth. The tragedies by Sophocles are not a simple account of what happened to Oedipus but are a literary interpretation of the traditional mythical story (see Astier 1974: 48–61). The playwright consciously exposed some of its elements to create the story of a man who was punished by gods for his haughtiness (*hybris*). Both tragedies were based on symbolic antitheses of darkness vs light and blindness vs clairvoyance, illustrating the opposition between human ignorance and divine omniscience. The juxtaposition of three temporal planes – the past, the present and the future – allowed him to show the contrast between the stages in Oedipus' life, and as a result, highlight the uncertainty of the human lot.

As Colette Astier points out, “[Sophocles] treated Oedipus' biography as a story of fate” (Astier 1988: 1087), transforming Oedipus' aimless wandering into a journey of an accursed hero, who had to “confront himself, other humans [...] and the *sacrum*” (Astier 1974: 62) on his way from Thebes to Colonus.

It may seem that twenty-five centuries ago the genius playwright created an exhaustive interpretation of Oedipus' story, not leaving too much space for his successors. Astier calls *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* “fascinating but troublesome legacy” (ibid. 84), because – although both tragedies still fascinate readers, they also give the impression of being “closed”, as if they did not need anything to add. Unlike other myths, Oedipus' story recorded in an almost perfect form by Sophocles does not offer writers too many opportunities for transformation. Contemporary writers need to shift the emphasis to different elements of the story, add new issues or even deconstruct it completely, which inevitably leads to a change in its general message.

### *Oedipus (Edipe)* by André Gide: an Intellectual Drama

In the first staging of *Oedipus* by Gide at the De l'Avenue theater in 1932, Georges Pitoëff limited the scenery of the play to lights with different colours, which was to help the audience focus on the actors' performance (see Derche 1962: 53). This was totally in accord with Gide's intentions. The playwright wanted to create a purely intellectual drama, without any decorative elements. The text of the play does not include any stage directions, so the plot cannot be set in any specific place.

When commenting on *Oedipus* in his *Journal*, Gide writes that he did not intend to compete with Sophocles or raise too strong emotions in the viewers:

It is Sophocles' play and I am not trying to compete with him. I leave the paths to him. But there is something in this story that Sophocles failed to discern and

understand, something that I understand, not because I am more intelligent but because I live in different times. [...] I refer to your intellect. I do not intend to scare you or to make you cry. I want to make you think. (Gide 1951: 1151)

Gide stresses that the drama presented in his play takes place on a plane other than in the ancient tragedy, because his main focus is to show a conflict of ideas, where an individual's liberty conflicts with the necessity to subject it to religious authority. Each protagonist is first of all the expression of a particular concept of man and human existence.

At the beginning of Act One, Oedipus introduces himself as someone whose success is the effect of his own actions only:

I am Oedipus. Forty years old, and for twenty years a king. With my own strong arm I have pulled myself up to the highest point of happiness. A waif and a foundling, without papers or citizenship, I am glad above all that I owe nothing to anyone but myself. Happiness was not given to me; I conquered it. (Gide 1950: 3)

As we can see, the protagonist was to be a spokesman for Gide himself. Just like the playwright, Oedipus appears to believe that every man is the architect of his own fortune. In Act Two, as the king of Thebes talks to his sons Eteocles and Polynices, he actually delivers a eulogy for secular humanism:

Tiresias bores us with his morality and his mysticism. [...] [He] has never thought of anything for himself and could never give his approval to those who are all for discovery and invention. He claims to be inspired by God, with his auguries and revelations, but it wasn't he who answered the riddle. It was I and I alone who understood that the only password, if one didn't want to be eaten alive by the Sphinx, was Man. [...] You must understand [...] that each one of us encounters at the beginning of his journey a monster that confronts him with the riddle that may prevent him from going farther. And although to each one of us [...] the Sphinx may put a different question, you must persuade yourselves that the answer is always the same. Yes, there is only this one same answer to those many and various questions; and that this one answer is: Man; and that this one man, for each and all of us, is: Oneself. (Ibid. 27–28)

The above-mentioned soliloquy reveals the image of Oedipus as a rebel against the established order, whose embodiment is the blind prophet Tiresias. The play involves a conflict of two attitudes: extreme individualism bordering on self-worship and blind belief in (singular) God combined with the desire to humbly carry out his will. Tiresias believes that only repentance may relieve

God's anger and stop the epidemic, so he calls Oedipus to convert. The man, however, ignores the appeal, since he has no intention of submitting to any authority.

But with time, Oedipus' attitude changes. He slowly begins to realize that his happiness is based on lies. The comfortable life of the Theban court becomes unbearable. He is fed up with his wife and mother, Jocasta, being the incarnation of "natural and social forces [...] that stop man's development and make him reverse" (Derche 1962: 55). Actually, from the very beginning, Oedipus defines himself and evolves, not only in opposition to Tiresias but also to Creon, the intellectually limited and unambitious ruler, who only wants to retain his position. In Gide's play, Creon is a conservative, respecting tradition and unwilling to introduce any changes (see Albouy 1969: 281). It is he who orders the stopping of the search for the killer of Laius, because he believes it is not very prudent to let the people realize that the king can be killed like any other mortal. Oedipus, to the contrary, wants to know the truth at any cost, even if the truth may be painful. At the end of Act Two, he realizes:

Dulled by my rewards, I had been twenty years asleep. But now at last I feel within me the new monster stirring. A great destiny awaits me, lurking somewhere in the shadows of evening. Oedipus, your days of tranquillity are over. You must awake from happiness. (Gide 1950: 32)

When Oedipus finally finds out who he really is, he pokes his eyes out to punish himself for living in illusion for so long. In another play by Gide, *Theseus*, Oedipus explains that dramatic act to the king of Athens:

what I wanted to destroy was not so much my eyes themselves as the canvas they held before me; the scenery before which I was struggling, the falsehood in which I no longer believed; [...] I put out my eyes to punish them for having failed to see the evidence that had, as people say, been staring me in the face. (Ibid. 106)

By blinding himself, Oedipus symbolically departs from the world of illusion to be able to "contemplate what is divine". In the conclusion of the play, blind Oedipus leaves Thebes, led by his daughter Antigone, an unrealized Vestal Virgin with strong faith in God. This event can be interpreted as an act of putting faith in God. However, we need to remember that until the end, Oedipus is conflicted with Tiresias, so his conversion does not mean a complete rejection of his old beliefs.

It seems that the story of Oedipus as presented by Gide was to be an example of how to accommodate egotism and faith, but faith free from traditionally imposed principles. The author's intentions are not clear, however, because his work is full of contradictions. In his *Journal*, Gide admits that the conclusion does not really suit the general message of the play: "Oedipus is almost finished, but I'm afraid I have deviated from the subject in Act Three, and I need to rewrite it completely" (Gide 1951: 1013).

Gide quite closely reproduces the plot presented in Sophocles' tragedy but he also wants to show his distance to the original work. He does so by using various stylistic devices, e.g., anachronisms, colloquial expressions or linguistic jokes. This way, he manages to "avoid the pathos" of the ancient tragedy and change its message completely.

We may say that Gide used the myth of Oedipus as an instrument to defend his own beliefs. The play was written in the period when the writer's friends were trying to convert him to Catholicism and is probably his literary response to their arguments. For Gide, the symbolic story of the king of Thebes became an obvious allegory, reflecting in a rather unoriginal way his concept of the human lot (see Astier 1974: 115, 129).

### Surrealistic *The Infernal Machine* (*La Machine infernale*) by Jean Cocteau

Jean Cocteau's way of presenting Oedipus' story is completely different to Gide's one. His *The Infernal Machine* (1932) is not a drama of ideas presented in an ascetic form but is a surrealistic play in which the elements of the ancient tragedy intertwine with oneiric visions of the underworld. We may have the impression that in this work historic the town of Thebes borders on the fantastic world inhabited by supernatural characters, apparitions and gods, who are eager to cross the border of their kingdom. The extraordinary atmosphere is strengthened by intricate decorations, costumes and props. Many of them have a symbolic meaning and play an important role in the development of the plot.

Unlike Gide, Cocteau does not try to question the original message of the myth. What he wants to achieve is to emphasize the tragic message of Oedipus' story. As pointed out by Colette Astier, *The Infernal Machine* is characterized by "longing for grandeur", indeed representing "longing for the *sacrum*" (Astier, 1974: 104–105). In this sense, the work is similar to the tragedy by Sophocles. It does not mean, however, that the French playwright is completely faithful to the original story. Although he retains the basic structure of the plot, he considerably expands some motifs which were only briefly mentioned by

Sophocles. He devotes particular attention to the events preceding Oedipus' reign in Thebes.

Cocteau presents very vividly Oedipus' meeting with the Sphinx in the ruins of an old temple. The monster alternately shows up in the form of the Egyptian god Anubis, the guard of the dead, or Nemesis, the Greek goddess of vengeance. Bloodthirsty Sphinx-Anubis, killing all the passers-by for centuries, shows exceptional mercy to Oedipus at the request of his female incarnation, tired of pointless cruelty. Overjoyed, the protagonist does not express any gratitude for having had his life saved. In addition, he boasts about his victory, which is to ensure him the position of the ruler of Thebes and husband of Jocasta. This makes Nemesis furious, and the goddess asks Anubis to punish the bighead. He promises her to punish not only Oedipus but also all the Labdacids.

An important role in *The Infernal Machine* is also played by the scene of Oedipus and Jocasta's wedding night, full of symbolic meanings. When the newlyweds go to their bedroom, "red as a butcher's shop" (Cocteau 1963: 61) after the wedding, Oedipus lies down across the bed, laying his head on the cradle that is standing there. In the conversation during the night, Jocasta calls him her "young hero", "silly darling", and "a big child" (ibid. 61–78). Everything proceeds towards the realization of Anubis' prophecy of Oedipus' incestuous relationship with his mother. However, the exhausted newlyweds quickly fall asleep. As they sleep, Jocasta is tormented by nightmares about the infant that she left in the mountains doomed to death, and Oedipus in his dream again goes through the meeting with the Sphinx, realizing that he is a cowardly bighead the monster just allowed to win.

We may have the impression that the detailed description of the wedding night of Oedipus and Jocasta is not only there to develop one of the motifs of the ancient tragedy but it also refers to its interpretation proposed by Freud. Although *The Infernal Machine* does not include direct references to the psychoanalytical theory, everything in the play suggests that Cocteau was under the strong influence of that theory when writing the text. An indirect proof to support this hypothesis is the striking similarity between the setting, characters and events presented in the first act of *The Infernal Machine* and those from the first scene of *Hamlet* by Shakespeare. It is very likely that Cocteau linked the story of Oedipus with the story of the Danish prince, inspired by the psychoanalytical interpretation of Hamlet presented in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (see Freud 2010: 281–283).

Interpreting some of the motifs of *The Infernal Machine* in the light of the "Oedipus complex" seems to be fully justified, but it should not distract the

reader's focus from the main message of Cocteau's work, which is first of all a story of discovering one's fate.

The reader of the play knows from the beginning what Oedipus' lot will be, because as early on as in the "Prologue", the Voice outlines the whole story of his life. However, he does not do it, as Roland Derche claims, to help the unerudite and confused viewers to understand the plot (see Derche 1964: 60), but to emphasize that the fate cannot be avoided. At the end of the "Prologue", the Voice says to the audience:

For gods to be royally entertained their victim has to fall from very high. [...] Watch now, spectator. Before you is a fully wound machine. Slowly its spring will unwind the entire span of a human life. It is one of the most perfect machines devised by the infernal gods for the mathematical annihilation of a mortal. (Cocteau 1963: 6)

The play includes a number of utterances announcing what will happen to Oedipus and his family. In Act Two, Anubis reveals to Nemesis that "the son of Laius and Jocasta [...] will marry Jocasta, his mother. [...] His two sons will cut each other's throats. One of his two daughters will hang herself. And so will Jocasta" (ibid. 54–55). At the beginning of Act Three, the Voice explains to the audience that "although destiny drops a few polite hints, they are too tired to see the trap that is closing on them forever" (ibid. 60). In the same act, Tiresias tries to warn Oedipus: "your auguries are most unfavorable. [...] Jocasta is old enough to be your mother. [...] Do not ignore the signs I have seen, Oedipus, nor the extent of my wisdom. I have good reason for being apprehensive of this marriage" (ibid. 65–67). Finally, at the beginning of Act Four, the Voice announces: "After false happiness the King shall know true unhappiness, the true consecration. And this King of Spades, who has been manipulated by the cruel gods, will be made, in the end, into a man" (ibid. 84).

Some objects occurring in the play are also the signs of what the future holds. The characters often mention, as if incidentally, the scarf Jocasta will use to hang herself and the pin Oedipus will blind himself with. The cradle standing in the newlyweds' bedroom, called "the cradle in which [his] luck will grow" by unaware Oedipus, also has a symbolic meaning.

The reader has the impression that the plot of the play, full of announcements of future events, takes place on two different planes simultaneously: in the world of omniscient gods and in the world of humans unable to predict the upcoming tragedy. In Act Two, we can see a metaphor that illustrates this situation perfectly. When showing the Sphinx' robe to Nemesis, Anubis says:

Look at the folds in this fabric. Press them together. Now, if you run a pin through them, then withdraw the pin and smooth out the material so that the folds are gone, do you think a simpleton would believe that those spaced-out holes were all made at the same time by the one pin? [...] Man's time is folded and hidden in eternity. But I [...] see the whole life of Oedipus unfolded, stretched out before me like a picture in one dimension. All the episodes, from his birth to his death, are pinpricks in the fabric of time. (Ibid. 54)

Oedipus only begins to understand gods' plans when he discovers his real identity. The act of blinding himself should be interpreted as a symbolic act of transition to another level of perceiving the reality. Just like blind Tiresias, he then begins to see what the gods see. It is not a coincidence that the first act of *The Infernal Machine* takes place in the night, and the last during the day. Cocteau's play is a story of transition from night to day, from ignorance to awareness.

### *The Erasers (Les Gommages)* by Alain Robbe-Grillet: the Deconstructed Myth

Alain Robbe-Grillet presented an original interpretation of the Oedipus myth in his first novel titled *The Erasers* (1953). Its plot takes place in an unspecified town. One day, someone breaks into the home of Daniel Dupont and tries to kill him. The crime was probably ordered by a terrorist group. Inspector Wallas sent to the crime scene does not find the body. Actually, Daniel Dupont was only slightly injured during the attack but decided to take advantage of this event and disappear. With the help of his friend, doctor Juard, he has faked his own death and hidden in an unknown place. Although he cannot find the dead body, Wallas continues the investigation. He circles around the town to collect evidence and find the suspects. During the investigation, he talks to many people, but none of them is able to help him. Hence, he decides to search Dupont's house once again in the night. There, he accidentally meets the owner, who has returned for some documents. However, he fails to recognize him in the dark and, taking him for a criminal, kills the man. This way, he himself becomes the killer he wanted to find.

On the surface, the story of inspector Wallace has little in common with the story of Oedipus. But in fact, the book is based on the myth and is a kind of dialogue with Sophocles' tragedy. The motto taken from the tragedy – "Time that sees all has found you out against your will" (Robbe-Grillet 1964: 5) – is the interpretation key to the novel. The affinity to *Oedipus Rex* is visible in

the specific structure of the book, made up of five parts, the prologue and the epilogue. In addition, the plot of *The Erasers* takes place in two twenty-four-hour cycles, which can be regarded as a reference to the classical rule of the unity of time.

In the novel by Robbe-Grillet, we can also find several references to the main events from the myth (see Astier 1974: 197–200). The motif of abandoning the baby in the mountains appears as the motif of embroidery in the windows in the town where Wallas does the investigation. The killing of Dupont seems to be the contemporary version of the accidental death of mythical Laius, especially that one of the scenes described in *The Erasers* suggests that the victim may be the inspector's father. The ambiguous relationship between Wallas and Dupont's ex-wife may be regarded as the counterpart of the incestuous relationship between Oedipus and his mother.

In addition, there are some subtle allusions to the myth throughout the novel. One of supporting characters is a drunk who has the same riddle for all patrons of the bar, including Wallas: "What animal is parricide in the morning, incestuous at noon, and blind at night" The same drunk persistently takes the inspector for the aggressor who had tried to kill Dupont. Other witnesses also confirm that the killer looked like Wallas. Moreover, on the central square of the town, there are sculptures representing Laius on a chariot and blind Tiresias led by a child. Wallas also notices an enlarged photo of an artist drawing the ruins of Thebes from nature, exhibited in the window of the shop run by Dupont's ex-wife. The clinic of Dupont's friend, doctor Juard, is located in the Rue de Corinthe. Furthermore, from the very beginning of the investigation, Wallas obsessively looks for an eraser in all stationery shops, an eraser similar to the one he once used, on which only the two middle letters, "di", have remained of the manufacturer's brand, at the same time being the middle letters of the name "Oedipus". Another subtle allusion to the name of the mythical protagonist, meaning the man with swollen feet, is the following fragment: "Wallas feels the day's accumulated fatigue beginning to make his legs numb" (ibid. 217).

The novel is full of allusions to Oedipus' story, but all the references to it are actually superficial and, instead of taking the plot forward, they gradually cause its decomposition (see Astier 1974: 199–208). Robbe-Grillet uses different elements of the myth only to stress the distance between his work and *Oedipus Rex*. The writer consciously disassembles the plot of Sophocles' tragedy, at the same time questioning its message.

Unlike the protagonist of the story, inspector Wallas, who accidentally becomes the criminal he is looking for, has no real secret to discover. Besides,

in *The Erasers* there are actually no counterparts of the opposition between human and divine knowledge or between an individual and the community, underlying *Oedipus Rex*. In the streets of the sleepy town Wallas does not meet a modern seer Tiresias or Creon caring for the public good. Actually, all the persons the inspector meets are completely unimportant, and his wandering about the town is pointless.

In *The Erasers*, the Oedipus myth is presented very superficially. The name of the mythical hero appears in a fragmentary form on an eraser, the enigma of the Sphinx becomes a riddle of a drunkard, and the protagonist is not a king but a mediocre detective who absurdly kills the survivor of the assault.

Instead of a story of fate, the unavoidable punishment for all those who are guilty of *hybris*, Robbe-Grillet presents the story of contemporary Oedipus with no *fatum* over him. Colette Astier rightly calls *The Erasers* “a novel about depressing drabness, [...] meaningless waiting, [...] helplessness and emptiness” (ibid. 196).

But paradoxically, there is a similarity between *The Erasers* and *Oedipus Rex*: the protagonists of both works cannot decide about their lot. Sophocles’ Oedipus goes the way set by gods, and the life of inspector Wallas is subjected to chance and unconscious drives.

The world without God presented in the novel resembles the reality from a bad dream, where anything may happen. It is telling that its characters are often half asleep and hardly differentiate between the waking and dream. Furthermore, the detailed descriptions of places and objects characteristic of the Nouveau roman often transform into oneiric visions. One of the daydreams of inspector Wallas, thinking of the town slowly disappearing under the swelling waters of the canal, seems to be a metaphor illustrating how the world of dreams gradually merges with the reality: “The glaucous water of the canals rises and overflows, covers the granite quays, overflows the streets, spreads its monsters and its mud over the whole city [...]” (Robbe-Grillet 1964: 252). The closing image of cloudy water in the water tank and sunken ships can be interpreted in a similar way (ibid. 256).

In light of these observations, *The Erasers* appears to be a story of the victory of unconsciousness over consciousness. Usually, critics interpret the title of the novel as an allusion to “erasing”, i.e., eliminating, from the book the elements of a traditional novel, such as a logically developing plot or the psychological analysis of the characters’ behaviours. However, the title can also be understood in another way, as a symbol of “blurring” the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious parts of the human psyche. So perhaps

inspector Wallas is closer to Oedipus known from Freud's writings than to the one from Sophocles' tragedy?

### *Mes Œdipe* by Jacqueline Harpman: a Psychoanalytical Reflection on Ideal Love

The play *Mes Œdipe* (2006) by Jacqueline Harpman is similar to *The Infernal Machine* in many respects. Just like Cocteau, the Belgian writer returns to the key moments from the youth of Oedipus, which precede the events presented in the tragedy by Sophocles. Upon hearing the oracle, the protagonist promises to himself that he will never kill a man and will never have sex with a woman older than him. However, on his way from Corinth to Thebes he accidentally injures an elderly man (as it turns out later, his father), causing his death. Then, as a result of a trick by the slave girl Sophronia, he finds himself in the bedroom of Jocasta, whom he then marries in return for overcoming the Sphinx. In this way the horrible prophecy comes true.

Just like *The Infernal Machine*, Harpman's play is first of all a story of fate that cannot be avoided. In both works, Oedipus, who cherishes the illusion of controlling his life, becomes a plaything of cruel gods. Tiresias describes the attitude of Olympus residents to mortals this way: "We are their favorite toys, because they may not have others. They have created us to play, and the more we scream for fear, the more satisfied they are" (Harpman 2006: 67). Like the Voice from Cocteau's play, the diviner from Harpman's work compares gods' actions towards Oedipus to the functioning of an infernal machine. "Everything works well and gains the momentum, the mechanism is excellent, oiled, the small cogwheels drive the big ones, the pistons move to and fro, and the levers rise and fall. Oh! I'm so happy! You are on your way, you are running, you have lost everything" (ibid. 163–164).

Despite clear inspirations with *The Infernal Machine*, Jacqueline Harpman manages to give an original touch to the mythical story. A particularly innovative thing to do seems to be the presentation of some events known from Sophocles' tragedy from the perspective of Jocasta. In conversations with the slave girl Sophronia and with Oedipus, the queen of Thebes recalls the tragic events from the past: her unhappy childhood as a princess raised without love, marrying an old man at the age of 14, humiliation and violence experienced in marriage, and cruel Laius forcibly taking her newborn baby, wounding him and leaving in the mountains to die. Jocasta's confessions largely suit the narrative structure of the myth known from ancient works, providing an interesting complementation of the mythical story. However, it is worth mentioning an

important modification Harpman makes to the motif of abandoning the baby, which in Sophocles' tragedy Jocasta herself ordered to be done by one of the slaves.

Perhaps Harpman releases the queen of Thebes of the responsibility for her deed not only so as to portray her as a victim of the cruel husband but also to highlight her unusual, deep affection for Oedipus, experienced from the moment of his birth. The ideal love between marriage partners which also involves the bond between mother and child is one of the focal points of the work by the Belgian writer. Unlike in the ancient versions of the myth, the incestuous relationship is presented here not as a curse but as a way to achieve utmost happiness. Upon learning the truth, Oedipus says to Jocasta:

My darling! The source of my life, the mother of my children, the woman loved twofold! [...] The fate that I feared so much has come true. And it has proved to be the happiness of my life. [...] Mother and wife, indivisible love, perfect unity of soul [...]. You are my origin and my completion. (Ibid. 169–171)

When in the last part of the play blind Oedipus tells an accidental passer-by about his relationship with Jocasta, his words assume the importance of the universal truth about man, who “can only achieve the absolute happiness in the body of his mother” (ibid. 199).

These fragments, so different to the message of the ancient version of the myth, seem to refer directly to Freud's interpretation of the tragedy by Sophocles. In her play, Harpman, a professional psychoanalyst, also includes other, less obvious references to the studies by the psychiatrist from Vienna. At the end of the first part of the play, Oedipus confesses to Jocasta that “his mom was kind of his partner and defended him from the father, who was demanding and fussy” (ibid. 94). Right before committing suicide he states that “there is no man who will not bear the traces of [his] existence in their most secretive, unconscious memories” (ibid. 293–294). The words of prophet Tiresias directed to Creon can also be considered as a playful allusion to the method of psychoanalytical therapy: “I have not revealed to you anything that you would not be able to reach by yourself” (ibid. 43).

References to psychoanalysis, and especially the vision of an incestuous relationship as ideal love, make the Harpman's work different from all the other versions of the myth. But its uniqueness mostly depends on a kind of “metaconsciousness” of its characters: most of them are aware of being the characters from a mythical story. In the moment of sincerity, the slave Sophronia from Harpman's work confesses: “I have betrayed everyone. But

who am I? A slave. History will not remember my name” (ibid. 103). Ordering the guards to kill Jocasta, Creon tries to justify himself with the words: “I have always been only an executor, a supporting character. [...] I am an extra in a story that is not mine” (ibid. 175–176). Antigone, asked by his father to bury Polynices, refuses: “I don’t want to sacrifice myself for my brother. I don’t want to be another beautiful legendary character” (ibid. 288).

Oedipus is the most aware of being part of a mythical story. He seems to be convinced of the inevitability of the events included in the myth: “The legend has taken us all. It consumed me even before I was born. I tried to escape but it was always catching up on me” (ibid. 216–217). At the same time, he feels the story of his relationship with Jocasta will be an inspiration for other stories: “We are a legend from which all other legends will arise. Innumerable lovers will curse our names and feed their dreams with our great crime” (ibid. 183). In the light of these words, the story of Oedipus and Jocasta, understood as a story of the ideal love that cannot be achieved, appears as a kind of original myth giving rise to all literature.

## Conclusions

Each author of the contemporary versions of the myth of Oedipus uses a different strategy of dialogue with tradition. André Gide modernizes Sophocles’ tragedy, transforming it into a lesson in secular humanism. Jean Cocteau basically remains faithful to the message of *Oedipus Rex*, but his main goal is to present the mythical hero as a plaything of cruel gods. The subject of his play is not *hybris* and the punishment for it but rather the journey from ignorance to awareness. Alain Robbe-Grillet deconstructs the plot of the classical tragedy and uses its elements to create an anti-story of contemporary Oedipus, whose lot is determined, not by gods, but by chance and unconscious desires. The psychoanalytical interpretation of the myth proposed by Jacqueline Harpman is first of all a reflection on ideal love, fully realized in an incestuous relationship between the son and the mother. The Belgian writer seems to perceive the myth of Oedipus as an original story being the source of all literature.

Obviously, none of the discussed versions of the myth exhausts all its meanings. Each of them, just like those that are still to be created, is only another attempt to answer the Sphinx’ riddle.

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