

THE USE OF GREEK THEMES IN THE CONTEMPORARY  
FRENCH THEATRE

By

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## PREFACE

Within the last twenty-five years, Greek themes have received much attention from a number of contemporary French dramatists. In this thesis I propose to study a group of these modern plays and have classified them under four themes: a sense of fate; the rights of the individual vs. the rights of the state; the revenge motif; and present happiness threatened by past experiences.

The dramatists whose works I shall study and the year of publication of their works follow:

Jean Anouilh: Antigone (1946), Eurydice (1942), Médée (1946);

Jean Cocteau: Antigone (1948), La Machine Infernale (1934),  
Oedipe-Roi (1928), Orphée (1927);

André Gide: Oedipe (1942), Perséphone (1942);

Jean Giraudoux: Amphitryon 38 (1929), Electre (1937), La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu (1935);

Jean-Paul Sartre: Les Mouches (1947).

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## CHAPTER I

## A SENSE OF FATE

The Greeks derived an undue amount of satisfaction from the ironical misfire of intentions. More interested in irony--the unfolding of events whose course the audience knows while the actors do not--than in plot, the Greeks enjoyed seeing a tragic figure walk into an obvious disaster unconsciously and with the best intentions in the world. The dramatic formula, basically then, is that of a serious-minded person making for an objective, only to encounter frustration--a formula which could do as well for comedy as for tragedy. Whether the dénouement is tragic or comic depends on the amount of pain it gives. The tragic character is complex and is capable of making a profound appeal to our sympathy. Within him there must be unyielding opposing forces; and within us there must be a conflict of sympathies as we witness a person, who on the whole appeals strongly to us but who, by some failure of insight or want of balance lays himself open to the catastrophic surprise we have been able to foresee.

Tragic irony is nowhere better exemplified than in Sophocles' Oedipus, King of Thebes, which has furnished the theme for Gide's Oedipe and Cocteau's two plays on the same theme, Oedipe-Roi and La Machine Infernale. In Sophocles' version, Oedipus, son of Laius, the King of Thebes, had been exposed at birth and left to die, because his father had been warned that any son he might have would kill him and marry his mother. But the infant was carried away by a kindly

servant, taken to Corinth and there brought up as the foster-child of the king and queen. On reaching manhood he was chided as not being their true son. Disturbed, he went to seek the truth from the oracle, and learned only that he was doomed to kill his father and marry his mother. In order to avoid such a fate, he refused to return to Corinth to those he deemed his parents, and wandered into the vicinity of Thebes. In a brawl he unwittingly killed King Laius, his real father, and in due course of time, by ridding the city of the Sphinx, became king of Thebes and husband of Jocasta, his real mother. During the next twenty years they had four children. No hint of their relationship appeared, until at last a pestilence came upon the country, presumably a sign of divine displeasure.

At this point the action of Sophocles' play begins. Oedipus announces to his people that he has sent to Delphi to learn the reason for the pestilence. The messenger returns to say that the slayer of Laius must be expelled from the country. Oedipus pronounces an awful curse upon the slayer, and resolves to find out who he is. He unearths the truth step by step until his incestuous connection with Jocasta is revealed, whereupon she commits suicide and he blinds himself and goes into exile. During the search, Oedipus' relentless absorption in discovering the truth makes him misjudge the good faith of his advisers, who are doing all they can to shield him. He pours scorn upon Jocasta, whose motives he painfully misconstrues, and blasphemously repudiates the oracle from whose grim prophecy he realizes there is no escape.

Gide's Oedipe uses essentially the same theme in a tragedy of extreme individualism. Oedipus wants to be and tries to convince everyone that he is happy and that he is governing happily, but he is cheating himself, his family, and his people. The best indication of this unhappiness is pronounced by the people of Thebes. Their chorus demurs to Oedipus' foolish assertion that everybody is happy. "Mais nous ne sommes pas heureux, nous, ton peuple"<sup>1</sup> grumbles the chorus. The radical group even goes so far as to say, ominously, "Du reste, nous n'allons pas sans penser que ton bonheur et notre malheur sont, en quelque mystique façon, solidaires".<sup>2</sup> Since he did not know who he was, Oedipus had taken advantage of the public ignorance and made it his stronghold. Oedipus' independent and individualistic character is not portrayed by Sophocles.

It is in the third act of the drama that Oedipus, who thought himself "guidé par un dieu"<sup>3</sup> realizes the inevitability of the situation. His palace is deeply stained with blood; horror is there; and the slow footsteps of fate, clearly heard, ever inexorably drawing nearer to the doom that must be. "Dès avant que je fusse né, le piège était tendu, pour que j'y dusse trébucher."<sup>4</sup> Now that Oedipus has discovered his sin, he rushes out to blind himself. Gide, unlike Sophocles, keeps the chorus on the stage at this point. Instead of keeping

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1 André Gide, "Oedipe," Théâtre, p. 255

2 Gide, loc. cit.

3 Gide, op. cit., p. 296

4 Gide, loc. cit.

silence or chanting a song of pity and terror, it breaks out into offending trivial comments: "Oedipe, qui te disais heureux, mais qui faisais de l'ignominie ta litière, puissions-nous ne t'avoir jamais connu!"<sup>5</sup>

King Oedipus has made good a promise he formulated in the prologue: that he wants to put forward succinctly and directly whatever he has to say and will not indulge in fancy words, sublime poses, and beautiful lies. Blinded, he leaves the city of Thebes determined to communicate his inner light to all people.

Jean Cocteau's La Machine Infernale is a more colorful adaptation of the Oedipus legend than Gide's interpretation. "Il tuera son père. Il épousera sa mère."<sup>6</sup> Thus spoke the oracle in the opening line of the prologue to La Machine Infernale. Again, the wheels of fate will slowly make a complete revolution.

Much like Shakespeare's Hamlet, Cocteau relies upon a phantom to put the play into action. There is no question in the minds of the two soldiers, to whom the phantom appears, that it is the spirit of Laius. For the fifth time, the phantom has appeared, beseeching the soldiers to "prévenir sa femme d'un danger qui la menace."<sup>7</sup> Upon hearing the rumor concerning the apparition, Jocasta, the pitiful, nervous, but still beautiful queen, enters leading Tiresias, the blind seer

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5 Gide, op. cit., p. 298

6 Jean Cocteau, La Machine Infernale, p. 13

7. Ibid., p. 73



who foresees her tragedy. Her scarf trails behind her, and Tiresias treads on it. She cries:

"Je suis entourée d'objets qui me détestent! Tout le jour cette écharpe m'étrangle. Une fois, elle s'accroche aux branches, une autre fois, c'est le moyeu d'un char où elle s'enroule, une autre fois, tu marches dessus. C'est un fait exprès. Et je la crains, je n'ose pas m'en séparer. C'est affreux! C'est affreux! Elle me tuera."<sup>8</sup>

This powerful symbol of guilt is indeed the scarf with which she hangs herself and she is destined in the last scene (visible only to the blinded eyes of Oedipus) to appear with it bound around her neck. She takes matters into her own hands with regard to the phantom and while questioning the soldiers, the spectre calls out to her, but to no avail. To the soldiers, he is heard to disclose rejoicingly: "Je suis sauvé"<sup>9</sup> for at this moment, a young man is approaching the gates of Thebes.

This young man, whom we know to be Oedipus, has just consulted the oracle and for fear of parricide and incest, has fled the court of Corinth. On his journey he encounters the Sphinx, a deity vastly more powerful than the arrogant young Oedipus. She tells him her secret because he has charmed the human part of her, but, in her rôle as Nemesis, looks on with pity at the fulfillment of his burning ambition, an ambition favored by the gods: that he shall supplant his father, win the kingdom, marry his mother, and, after the fuse has burned down to the explosive, be shattered in the ruins of his own

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8 Ibid., pp. 42-43

9 Ibid., p. 71

strength.

The marriage festivals are over; we find the two in the bridal chamber, exhausted by the coronation ceremonies, the long processions, and the heavy robes. They move and live half asleep in an uneasy dream. Oedipus falls asleep just as he has thrown himself down to rest, across the marriage bed, his tired head lolling over the foot of it. And his head rests on the empty cradle, (once his own) which Jocasta kept in memory of the child she lost; and then, as he sleeps, she rocks the cradle. A few minutes later, she removes his sandals and screams in horror when she sees his "blessures de chasse"<sup>10</sup> for they remind her of something which she has always tried to forget. This colorful scene of the wedding, the procession, and of the bedroom, are not found in Sophocles' version.

Seventeen years later, a pestilence is rampant in Thebes. One day a messenger informs Oedipus to the effect that Polybus is dead and that Meropê is unconscious. Overcome with grief at this information, he also rejoices for now he knows it is impossible for him to murder his father and marry his mother. The messenger continues his account, adding that Oedipus is but an adopted son, having been bound to a limb, and found by a shepherd who gave him to the sterile king and queen of Corinth.

Reflecting upon his past, Oedipus recalls that though he did not kill Polybus, he did kill an old man accidentally and

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10 Ibid., p. 180

by pure misfortune. Upon hearing this, Jocasta rushes from the room to hang herself, whereupon the shepherd reveals the truth to Oedipus, adding, "Inceste et parricide, les dieux te pardonent."<sup>11</sup> In the next scene Antigone reports seeing her father punch out his eyes and when he appears to them, blinded, Tiresias offers his cane to him, that he may be led around by Jocasta (who appears to the blinded Oedipus as his mother) and Antigone.

Thus, fate has run its course. Man has again met his doom, much to the satisfaction of the gods. "Pour que les dieux s'amusement beaucoup, il importe que leur victime tombe de haut."<sup>12</sup> Man, the "machine infernale" created by the gods, is a self-destructive force that slowly moves on to the inevitable end to which he is doomed.

Cocteau had previously made an adaptation of Sophocles' Oedipus, King of Thebes in his Oedipe-Roi, following the Greek version closely but putting more emphasis on the fact that in man is the doom of man. Says Tiresias in this version, when Oedipus calls upon him to name the murderer of King Laius, "L'assassin du roi est un roi. Je dis toi, toi être l'assassin de l'homme, l'assassin que tu cherches."<sup>13</sup> Apparently, this theme of man in the earlier adaptation formed a preparatory basis for the more original interpretation as found in La Machine Infernale. Here, there is no violent scene between

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11 Ibid., p. 209

12 Ibid., p. 14

13 Jean Cocteau, "Oedipe-Roi," Oedipe-Roi; Romeo et Juliette

Oedipus and Creon as in the former. This latter version differs from his previous adaptation and from Sophocles' in that Oedipus himself finds Jocasta hanged and blames his followers and advisers: Vous me l'avez tuée....<sup>14</sup>

Underlying all these versions of Oedipus is the relentless power of destiny and the fruitlessness of human efforts to evade it. The exposure of Oedipus by his parents, the secrecy observed by his foster-parents, his misguided attempts to escape his doom by leaving Corinth, all these are to the same effect. They are either evasions or else good intentions that lead to results precisely opposite to those calculated. Within the action of the plays Oedipus' determined steps to avoid the present displeasure of the gods and to make amends for them, the kindness of his subordinates in trying to divert him from his course and to hide from him the knowledge that must bring horrible suffering, the agonized plea of Jocasta to let well enough alone, all ironically help to tighten the net about Oedipus and to reveal at last the terrible truth. So far as the events are concerned, the essence of the plays is the misfire of human effort, the wasting of good intention, the painful and pitiful miscalculation of human judgement.

Another treatment of the sense of fate is found in Jean Giraudoux's La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu, which uses the theme of Euripides' Trojan Women, that despite the destructive propaganda of the warmongers, a war--merely on account of "Helen's beautiful eyes"--is surely incredible and even out of

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<sup>14</sup> Cocteau, La Machine Infernale, p. 205

the question. There is a tragic quality in Giraudoux's play in that it shows the fruitless efforts and sacrifices made by the statesmen on both sides to avoid the Trojan war, which was being forced upon them by the passionate folly of mobs and demagogues.

The play opens with Hector bringing his weary troops back to Troy, after a victorious war, "the last war". Since his wife, Andromache, is pregnant, his only thought is to enjoy his happy home and the peace he has regained. But Paris, his brother, has kidnapped Helen, wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta, and Troy is again embroiled in an international affair. Helen, meanwhile, has enchanted all the old men, poets, and non-combatants of the town and they are ready to go to war again for her sake, for she represents "leur pardon, et leur revanche, et leur avenir."<sup>15</sup> But above all, Fate--the enemy of peace--is at work. What is this Fate? The play begins:

"Andromaque: La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu,  
Cassandre!

Cassandre: Je te tiens un pari, Andromaque."<sup>16</sup>

and Cassandre proceeds to explain that destiny "est simplement la forme accélérée du temps."<sup>17</sup> Against this, men have only their affirmations, "ces phrases qui affirment que le monde et la direction du monde appartiennent aux hommes en général, et aux Troyens ou Troyennes en particulier. . . ."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jean Giraudoux, La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu, p. 51

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 11

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 13

Perhaps, says Hector, the old men should be placed in the firing lines of the armies, and to Andromache, who wants to mutilate her son so that he will not be a soldier, he makes the following reply:

"Si toutes les mères coupent l'index droit de leur fils, les armées de l'univers se feront la guerre sans index... Et si elles lui coupent la jambe droite, les armées seront unijambistes... Et si elles lui crèvent les yeux, les armées seront aveugles, mais il y aura des armées...."<sup>19</sup>

"Les armées", Le Géomètre declares, "doivent partager les haines des civils... Quand on les laisse à elles-mêmes, elles passent leur temps à s'estimer... ils perdront tout goût à l'insulte, à la calomnie, et par suite immanquablement à la guerre."<sup>20</sup>

Hector, who has just returned from battle, thinks it is absurd that the Trojan people should feel compelled to assail the Greek people or to be assailed by them, solely because the flirt, Paris, decided to make love to the beautiful Helen. He persuades Helen, who does not really care for Paris, to return to Greece. Ulysses, the Greek chief, impressed by Hector's persistent pleas for peace between Greece and Troy, finally agrees to arbitrate the situation by claiming Helen in the name of the cuckold Menelaus. Hector gladly gives her up, and, completely master of himself, endures the provocations of Ajax, Ulysses' companion. Peace seems assured, but Ulysses, who understands the situation better than Hector, is afraid that the gods may provoke war in spite of all their efforts.

It is a melancholy play. Hector and Andromache struggle in vain against the malice of men and the power of Fate. The

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-21

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 109

suspense of the play lies in the question whether or not they will succeed in closing the gates of war, which by custom remain shut in peacetime. At the end of the play the gates have been closed and the curtain begins to fall.

Hector's ordeal is not yet over. The drunkard, Ajax, goes so far as to flirt with Andromache. Hector raises his spear. Will he strike down the provocateur? Once more he controls himself. He lets the brute go his way, but at this moment, Demoskos, the national poetaster appears; he has seen the affront. He immediately starts to arouse the people to cry out for revenge. It is he whom Hector pierces with his spear. But before he dies, that grotesque character, whose mind is made up to have a war, falsely accuses the Greek Ajax of having assassinated him. Thus Hector, who wanted to avoid the conflict at any cost, finds that he has brought it about by a most unexpected detour.

The importance attached to this question of fate in La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu is further exemplified by the author himself when, in the final scene, he denies his title and acknowledges as the curtain falls, "Elle aura lieu."<sup>21</sup>

In Amphitryon 38 Giraudoux has written a play that deals with the passionate defense of human life against the deathless privilege of the gods. The Greek original is no longer extant but Plautus has given us a version which has been widely popular since his time. The story is a simple one: Jupiter, inexhaustible beyond imagination in his modes of courtship has

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 199

been charmed by the lovely Alcmena, wife of Amphitryon, general of Thebes. In order to possess her since she is a virtuous wife, he resorts to a stratagem while Amphitryon is away at war, and is constrained to assume the outer form of her husband. Accordingly, he presents himself to Alcmena as her husband using for an excuse that he is home on a brief visit from the warfront. Mercury, in the guise of Amphitryon's servant, Sosia, aids and abets his master in this affair. Jupiter spends a night with her, stopping the movement of the sun and the stars for the purpose of lengthening the night. And it is under these circumstances that the demi-god Hercules is procreated. Jupiter is not satisfied with a triumph through deceit, which after all affords little satisfaction to his ego. He is even more dissatisfied when he learns that his partner has discovered nothing during the course of the twenty-four hour night which struck her as more than familiarly connubial, and so he must try--and fail--to win in his own person the privileges which before he had merely usurped. Amphitryon, himself, now returns from war and convinced of her infidelity because of her aloofness to his caresses, sets out to denounce her to their kinsmen. Returning again, he finds himself locked out of his home while Jupiter is with Alcmena. He becomes so infuriated at this insult that he has to be silenced by a thunderbolt. It is then that he learns the truth; and overcome completely by the divine infiltration now in the family stock, he submits to the father of the gods as would any devout mortal.



Up to the early 1900's, the climax of the story of Amphitryon has been the husband's jealousy and the outraged love of Alcmena when he accuses her of infidelity. With Giraudoux's 38 (ostensibly because it is the 38th version), one will not likely need a short course in Greek mythology; it is explicit enough even for the most unlearned. Giraudoux has not taken any more liberties than his thirty-seven predecessors, but he has managed to give it some original twists. His version profits by the sheer fact that its basis lies in farce. For example, the scene in which Jupiter tries to tell Alcmena all about Olympian prowess while they are having breakfast, falls extremely flat much to the dismay of the god. And in Act II, Giraudoux creates a new complication when he has Alcmena warned too late of Jupiter's interest so that she persuades Leda to take her place that night when it is the real Amphitryon who returns from the battlefield. Not only that, but Alcmena, by artful flattery, even persuades Jupiter to make the general forget, and then she introduces Jupiter to her husband as a friend. There is the matter of that dawn held back for the sake of a god's passion, and the household moments which underscore the simple, passionate, human life of Alcmena.

Mortals have night and death; they grow old and see new life spring up. On the otherhand, the gods are glorious outside death, but they must pay for their immortality. Jupiter, in the face of this human love and his aggressive desires and power, can neither share nor take away the limitations he has put on the mortal. Fatalistically, he grants these loves

completeness in their own kind. If the gods themselves seek erotic adventures, that does not imply that the gods are trivial but only that amorous curiosity is, after all, very nearly godlike. Only when Jupiter arrives on earth does he realize that to assume human simplicity is a very complicated process.

Husbandly attention Alcmena welcomes, lover's desires she abhors. "Ruses des hommes, désirs des dieux, ne tiennent pas contre la volonté et l'amour d'une femme fidèle."<sup>22</sup> Jupiter is charmed into a distinct loss of dignity and self-esteem as the price of his stolen night in this battle of wits and wills between the omnipotent god and the constant matron. Amphitryon 38 is rich in its power of revealing the unexpected concerning the love of husband and wife, the power of any woman over any man (be he a god in man's disguise), and the relation of man and the gods.

André Gide has used the Homeric legend of Persephone in his play of the same name. According to the legend, Persephone, while gathering flowers in a meadow, was seized by Pluto and carried to the underworld. Demeter, her mother, seized with an uncontrollable grief at the loss of her daughter, wandered for nine days and nights in vain search. It was Helios who told her the truth, whereupon Demeter renounced the society of the gods and went to Eleusis, where she entered the service of King Celeus as the nurse to his son, Demophoon. She set about rendering her ward immortal, feeding him ambrosia by day

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22 Jean Giraudoux, Amphitryon 38, p. 161

and plunging him in the fire by night. But Queen Metaneira, his mother, had this process stopped. Indignant at the spoiling of her plans, the goddess could only be appeased if a temple were built in her honor. Gladly the people set about raising one, and there she dwelt apart for a year, withholding her aid and the corn did not grow. The whole human race might have perished had not Jupiter pacified Demeter by returning Persephone to her. Persephone came back to earth, but not permanently because, while below, Pluto had persuaded her to taste a grain of pomegranate, which prevented her from remaining the whole year away from him. So, for eight months, she lived on earth, and spent the remaining four with the dead.

Gide's play begins with the first morning of the world with Persephone playing among the nymphs to whom her mother has confided her. She is moved to compassion by the odor of the sweet and deathly narcissus, which serves as the motive of her descent. Eumolpus, an attendant of the nymphs, tells her that whoever looks into the narcissus shall see the unknown underworld. Moved to pity for the flower by its odor, she gazes into it and says, "Je vois errer tout un peuple sans espérance, triste, inquiet, décoloré."<sup>23</sup> Advised by Eumolpus that her youthfulness will enlighten their distress and her spring charm their endless winter, she bids farewell to the nymphs, taking the springtime with her from the earth. In the unending night of the underworld she lies clutching the narcissus. Eumolpus tells her that it is her destiny to rule,

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23 André Gide, "Perséphone," Théâtre, p. 312

that she must forego pity. The chorus of the Danaï offer her cups of water from the Lethe and the treasures of the earth, which she rejects. The gods send Mercury, who offers a pomegranate to Persephone. When she eats it, the savor of the lost earth returns to her and she gazes once more into the narcissus to see the world in its winter and Demeter, her mother, wandering in rags among briars, sharp stones, and tangled branches. From the underworld she calls to her mother, who does not hear her voice. Then Eumolpus declares that the winter can not remain eternally and that in the palace of Celeus in Eleusis, Demeter is nursing Demophoon with ambrosia and nectar in order to render him immortal. Persephone sees her mother leaning toward the child over a burning brand. She also perceives the noble lad being swept away toward immortality. In a sort of trance she greets him, who will once more teach men to plow and by whose efforts she will see the rebirth of the earth.

Reviving, she sees the day and she salutes the earth, and her earthly husband, Tryptolemus.<sup>24</sup> A Chorus, including children's voices, hails the returning Queen as Persephone falters forth from the gates of the tomb. She dances; she plights her troth to the hero; and then once more, of her own free will, she prepares to return to the unhappy underworld:

Je n'ai pas besoin d'ordre et me rends de plein gré  
Où non point tant la loi que mon amour me mène  
Et je veux pas à pas et degré par degré,

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<sup>24</sup> Demophoon became Tryptolemus, Persephone's earthly husband

Descendre jusqu'au fond de la détresse humaine.<sup>25</sup>

The Chorus celebrates the departing lover; and Eumolpus explains the precept of unselfishness to be derived from the story of Persephone.

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<sup>25</sup> Gide, op. cit., p. 327

## CHAPTER II

THE RIGHTS OF THE INDIVIDUAL  
VS. THE RIGHTS OF THE STATE

Nor do I deem thine edicts of such force  
That they, a mortal's bidding, should override  
Unwritten laws, eternal in the heavens.<sup>1</sup>

Thus spoke Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, in Sophocles' Antigone, the tragedy of the Thebian princess who defied a tyrant. After her father's death (Oedipus at Colonus) Antigone's brothers agreed to rule Thebes during alternate years but Eteocles refused to give Polynices his turn on the throne and Polynices besieged the city (Seven Against Thebes). The brothers eventually died in a duel at the city's gates and that left their uncle, Creon, the King of Thebes. Creon promptly declared that Polynices had been the aggressor in defending his rights, that Eteocles had been a hero and would have a hero's funeral, but that Polynices' body, on the contrary, was to be left rotting on the ground outside the walls. To the Greeks, whose idea of human dignity gave to decent burial and funeral rites a sanctity, this was an unholy edict. Antigone, the same loyal girl who had led blind Oedipus into his wanderings, determined that her brother's body should have the rites prescribed by the gods. Her sister, Ismene, admired her purpose but confessed she lacked the courage to face the death penalty. Antigone is undeterred. Arrested by the

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<sup>1</sup> Sophocles, Antigone, translated by Lane Cooper, Fifteen Greek Plays, p. 225

frightened guards, she exonerates the weeping Ismene, defends the right of natural law proudly adding that she hears the charge of folly from a fool. Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's affianced husband, declares that no city can belong to one man. But Creon is obdurate until Tiresias, the seer, threatens him with divine punishment. Losing his nerve, Creon then rushes out to rescue Antigone from the cave in which his soldiers have walled her up. Too late! Antigone has hanged herself and Haemon has killed himself on her body. But this isn't all--Creon's wife, Eurydice, has gone to her room with a dagger. The broken Creon asks to be led away, crying he is a rash and foolish man. Wisdom is the better part of happiness and reverence to the gods must be inviolate, are the last admonitions of the Chorus.

Jean Anouilh, in his Antigone, has taken Antigone's story and in many ways has brought it up to date: Creon and Haemon in white ties and tails; Ismene and Eurydice in evening dress; Antigone in a dull green negligee; the guards in tuxedos and raincoats. Anouilh has also added an old nurse in a brown wrapper, and there are the modern flourishes--card playing, and an automobile.

When the curtain goes up, the cast is seated on the stage, immobile, waiting, listening. The Chorus introduces them, and they drift off, one by one, to reappear in their appointed courses as the play moves forward. The audience is caught up at once in the fateful tide of events. Once again Antigone defies her uncle Creon and goes out onto the plains of Thebes to bury her brother Polynices, killed in mortal combat at its

gates. Once again her sister argues with her not to risk torture and death in this never ending battle between the rights of an individual and the power of the state. Once again Haemon pleads for Antigone's life and Creon proves with icy logic that law and the state come before the individual needs. As the curtain falls, law has had its way: Antigone is dead, but so also are the tyrant's son, and the tyrant's wife. At the last, accompanied only by his page boy and the veiled threats of the Chorus in his ears, Creon goes wearily into the palace to continue his rule and to try to understand what it is that drives the Antigones, generation after generation, to their strangely triumphant doom. Antigone, so great, so tortured, goes to her death not uncomforted; death was her choice, and, as she dies, the Chorus tells her, "son devoir lui est remis."<sup>2</sup> But she must do what she believes to be right without compromise. So she dies without ever knowing that she has forced a protest from Haemon and Eurydice, "The weak things of the world hath God chosen, that He may confound the strong."

In restating the Greek drama for modern use, Anouilh has interpolated a love scene between Antigone and Haemon, but the crux of the whole affair for Anouilh's audience is, of course, the scene between Antigone and Creon. No Tiresias appears and Creon never shows remorse. Eurydice, who knits throughout the drama, never offers any support to Creon. He

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Anouilh, "Antigone," Nouvelles Pièces Noires, p. 211



orders that Antigone's tomb be opened because another voice, which we know to be Haemon's, has been heard inside it. He takes his son's and wife's suicides with a stoic front, and goes off to a Cabinet meeting. In the older version, it was the City Council, not Creon, that decreed the shame for Poly-nices' corpse and which was defied by Antigone, who was supported by the Chorus of her Maidens. The religious motive in the modern play is less stressed than in the Greek text and because of this, Antigone never seems quite sure what she is dying for. Anouilh's conception of Creon, his cold white face, his assurance, his ability, is perhaps a composite of several centuries of the Sophoclean story plus the modern French conditioning and application. Creon is usually the typical harsh tyrant; but in Anouilh's Antigone he explains very coolly and patiently that, so far from being cruel, he is merely an administrator of the law and order and efficient government, an ideal nobler than any individual's private code of morals. Yes, and after the tragedy, after Antigone has hanged herself, after Creon's own son has denounced him and killed himself, after his own wife has cut her throat, he only sighs heavily and goes off to do his duty by presiding at a Cabinet meeting: a death as complete, though not as tragic, as those of the others. Again, it is in Anouilh's Antigone that Creon confides to Antigone that both brothers were disreputable sons of Thebes, and that he doesn't honestly know which body was treated as a hero. It was Sophocles, on the other hand, who imagined her solitary state and resolution

and the love theme of Haemon.

Jean Cocteau has made an abridgement of Sophocles' Antigone in his French version of the same title. Haemon offers stronger protests to his father's injustice than in the original: "Je l'épouserai donc morte, aux enfers."<sup>3</sup> And when Antigone is walled in, Creon has the living tomb demolished because he had heard another voice inside, adding, "Je crains qu'il soit impossible de s'en tenir toujours aux vieilles lois."<sup>4</sup> When the tomb is opened, Haemon spits in his father's face. The play closes with approximately the same note as the original, for when Creon asks for immediate death, he is counselled by the Chorus: "Il faut craindre d'injurier les dieux."<sup>5</sup>

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3 Jean Cocteau, "Antigone," Théâtre, p. 25

4 Ibid., p. 31

5 Ibid., p. 33

## CHAPTER III

## THE REVENGE MOTIF

Sophocles' Electra is a drama that deals with the vengeance taken by Electra and her brother, Orestes, on their mother, Clytemnestra, who, with the aid of her paramour, Aegisthus, had murdered her husband, Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae, upon his victorious return from Troy. As the play opens in Mycenae, Electra is held a virtual prisoner by Aegisthus and lives only in hope of the return of Orestes, whom she had rescued as a child and had given for safe-keeping to a servant who had remained faithful to his old master. The son of Agamemnon at this point returns, being of full age, accompanied by this same servant and his own friend Pylades, with whom he has already planned a fitting vengeance on his father's murderers, in obedience to Apollo's command. Orestes and Pylades agree to pose as Phocians bearing Orestes' funeral urn. As they leave the scene, Electra appears from the palace bitterly lamenting her fate and praying for the return of her brother. Her sister, Chrysothemis, follows her, but she has resigned herself to life in the household of her father's murderers. As Chrysothemis leaves to lay an offering from the conscious stricken Clytemnestra on Agamemnon's tomb, the mother herself appears to defend the murder of her husband on the grounds that he unjustly sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, at Tauris, to placate Artemis. This dialogue is interrupted by the old servant who comes to announce Orestes' death and is

welcomed to the palace by Clytemnestra. Chrysothemis returns excitedly with the word that she has found tokens of Orestes' presence at the tomb, but Electra, who is convinced of her brother's death, readily dismisses this notion. Orestes and Pylades then arrive with the funeral urn and Orestes reveals his identity to his grieving sister. The joy of their reunion is interrupted by the old servant who recalls them to their purpose. Orestes enters the palace with the urn and Clytemnestra's cries for mercy are soon heard. He appears with his hands dripping with blood but re-enters the palace as the return of Aegisthus is announced. Aegisthus' joy at the rumored death of Orestes is turned to terror at the discovery of Clytemnestra's body in the palace. The play ends with the completion of Electra's vengeance as Orestes forces Aegisthus inside at sword point.

In Les Mouches, Jean-Paul Sartre uses the greater part of the Sophoclean version of the Orestean legend to attack the notion that guilt is inextinguishable. He holds that constant penitence is a form of slavery imposed by Jupiter. Orestes, guilty according to the law, is on the right track in the Sartre thesis, because Orestes believes he can free himself. What really happens here is that Orestes is "free" in the sense that he is revolted by the spiritual slavery, the self-abasement of the people of Argos, and their wallowing in remorse. He performs a necessary act of liberation without emotional hypocrisy by freeing the citizens, leaving them to choose and to create a different life from the one they had

led under Aegisthus. He refuses to accept the bondage of the city's and his own sister's codes of righteousness and penitence. He does not succumb to their theology as represented by Jupiter who holds man in bondage through superstition, fear, and self-degradation.

The day on which Orestes and his tutor arrive in Argos is the fifteenth anniversary of Agamemnon's death--the day on which Electra, by Aegisthus' command, becomes a princess again, and on which all the people, including Clytemnestra, indulge in the national pastime: public confession for everything that has happened since Agamemnon's death. It is Jupiter who informs Orestes of the situation in Argos telling him that he cannot share in the repentance of the people since he did not share in their crime. It is also Jupiter who warns Aegisthus to imprison Electra and Orestes for he suspects foul play. He states also, that all crimes do not displease him--he is interested in only "les crimes qui paient."<sup>1</sup> And when struck down, the dying Aegisthus consels Orestes, "Prends garde aux mouches, Oreste, prends garde aux mouches. Tout n'est pas fini."<sup>2</sup> while Electra contemplates his body, saying: "Il est mort et ma haine est morte avec lui."<sup>3</sup> With Clytemnestra's death, Orestes is free, "la liberté a fondu sur moi comme la foudre." but the flies, which represent the Furies, surround

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1 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les Mouches," Théâtre, p. 76

2 Ibid., pp. 80-81

3 Ibid., p. 81

4 Ibid., p. 83

him and Electra as they flee to Apollo's sanctuary.

Jupiter does not appear in the original version, but at the end of Sartre's drama, he offers the throne of Argos to Orestes and Electra provided they wear the mourning gowns which Aegisthus and Clytemnestra wore during their reign. To this offer, Orestes replies, "Tu es le roi des Dieux, Jupiter, mais tu n'es pas le roi des hommes."<sup>5</sup> It is in this same version that we are told that Jupiter allowed Aegisthus' crime to take place because "c'était un meurtre aveugle et sourd, ignorant de lui-même, antique, plus semblable à un cataclysme qu'à une entreprise humaine."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, if Aegisthus, a mortal, is to be killed by another mortal, the gods can do nothing about it, especially since the inhabitants of Argos will be free. The all-powerful god even has to accept his fate:

"Eh bien, Oreste; tout ceci était prévu. Un homme devait annoncer mon crépuscule. C'est donc toi? <sup>7</sup> Qui l'aurait cru, hier, en voyant ton visage de fille?"<sup>7</sup>

Now Orestes replies: "Il n'y a plus rien eu au ciel, ni Bien, ni Mal, ni personne pour me donner des ordres."<sup>8</sup> Liberty is his, for he is "condamné à n'avoir d'autre loi que la mienne."<sup>9</sup> His crime becomes his "raison de vivre."<sup>10</sup>

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5 Ibid., p. 99

6 Ibid., p. 76

7 Ibid., p. 102

8 Ibid., p. 101

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 108

On the political plane, Les Mouches tells the story of the destruction of a tyranny--the tyranny of ideas; tyranny of a religious, political, and ideological nature over the mind and spirit of man. Sartre asks what kind of man can really overthrow these tyrannies, and begins to investigate the question of what it is that makes a man "free". The usual view is that it is the slaves--who, of course, cannot do so, because they have been mastered inwardly; they have incorporated the tyrant man or system into their psyche. That only free men can liberate is Sartre's answer.

Jean Giraudoux's interpretation of the Orestean legend is modeled after Euripides' Electra. Essentially, the subject is the same as Sophocles' version, but Euripides modified it by introducing a romanesque element. The action takes place on a desolate mountainside. In the prologue, a peasant describes how Agamemnon had been murdered at the hands of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and how Electra had been forced by the former to marry him in order that her children might be of ignoble birth and therefore unfit to take revenge upon Aegisthus. The peasant has high respect for Electra's rank and their marriage is never consummated. Thus she hopefully awaits the return of her brother, Orestes, who soon arrives accompanied by his friend Pylades. The former servant of Agamemnon brings about the mutual recognition of the brother and sister and tells them that Aegisthus is at the moment making sacrifice to the wood nymphs in a nearby forest. Aegisthus, out of courtesy, will be forced to ask the two, Orestes, and Pylades, to join

the feast, thus giving Orestes the opportunity to avenge his father's murder.

Meanwhile, the old peasant is sent to Clytemnestra with a false report that Electra has just borne a child. Orestes and Pylades soon return with the body of Aegisthus which is carried into the hut at Electra's bidding. Clytemnestra arrives and goes with Electra into the hut to make sacrifice for the birth, but Clytemnestra's cries are soon heard from within. The doors open and Orestes and Electra come forth, stained with their mother's blood, followed by attendants bearing the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Brother and sister are both overcome with remorse and Electra covers her mother's body. Castor and Pollux, brothers of Clytemnestra, appear to pronounce judgment on the matricide. Electra is to be given in marriage to Pylades, and Orestes is to wander over Hellas until he arrives at Athens where his sin will be forgiven.

In Giraudoux's Electre, the peasant offers her to a stranger (Orestes) whose presence Clytemnestra fears and whom Aegisthus had believed to be a delegate from the gods to Electra's marriage. As long as Orestes is disguised as a stranger, Electra pretends to be a somnambulist, a condition which causes Aegisthus and Clytemnestra to ask her the reason for her illness and to which Electra answers: "Pour me guérir, c'est simple. Il suffit de rendre la vie à un mort."<sup>11</sup> An interesting contrast with the Greek is a violent scene between Electra and Clytemnestra in which it is the question of whether

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<sup>11</sup> Jean Giraudoux, Electra, p. 63



or not Orestes, as a child, fell or was dropped from his mother's arms. The result of it is Electra's confession to Orestes: "J'aime tout ce qui, dans ma naissance revient à mon père. Tout ce qui est de cette naissance du côté de ma mère, je le hais."<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Aegisthus, disgusted at Electra's indignation and perfidiousness, entreats her again to allow him to save the city from the devastation of the Corinthians. Electra replies to this that if he dare take one step in this direction, she will call for Orestes. Clytemnestra appeals to Electra to allow her to marry Aegisthus, her lover of ten years duration; their marriage has been put off in consideration to Electra. It is at this moment that we learn that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus had soaped the steps to the swimming pool so that when Agamemnon descended them, he slipped, enabling Aegisthus to pass his sword through him. Every night for the past seven years, Clytemnestra has had nightmares of this massacre. After the death of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, war breaks out; the Corinthians have assaulted Argos. The Eumenides hasten to surround Orestes as the drama closes.

Still another portrayal of the vindictive motif is found in Euripides' Medea, the drama of oppression and revenge. After their flight from Colchis to Corinth, Jason and Medea, daughter of the barbarous King of Colchis, have been living, though unmarried, as man and wife with their two sons. The King of Corinth, now growing old, offers the hand of his daughter, the Princess Creusa, to Jason who graciously accepts the offer

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 89-90

and thereby envisions the end of his affair with Medea. In a very skilfully managed soliloquy by the nurse, which serves as the prologue, we are told about the Argonautic expedition and Jason's abandonment of Medea and his two sons for the bed of his new bride. The voice and cries of the angry Medea may be heard from within the house followed by her appearance to the women of Corinth, bemoaning her misfortunes. Creon, the King, escorted by armed attendants, enters and announces to Medea her banishment: she must leave the country at once with her children. Throwing herself down and clinging to Creon, she begs for and obtains one day's grace, gaining thereby ample time to accomplish her meditated vengeance.

Jason enters and rebukes Medea for her anger, excusing his own course on the ground of desire for royal authority to benefit his sons and Medea. He attributes her exile to her own unrestrained tongue and offers her money. By pure coincidence, Aegeus, King of Athens, happens to pass the downcast Medea, seated upon her doorstep. He is on his way home from Delphi where he has consulted the oracle and prayed for children. Learning from Medea her misfortunes, he offers to her a refuge in Athens, binding himself by an oath to protect her there. She in return, by her powers as an enchantress, will make of him "a childless man no more."<sup>13</sup> After his departure Medea has a long, exulting soliloquy. Certain of having a refuge, she announces her plan. She will pretend to make

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<sup>13</sup> Euripides, Medea, translated by Lane Cooper, Fifteen Greek Plays, p. 472

peace with Jason and the Princess and will ask that the children be allowed to remain in Corinth with their father. In order to accomplish her fiendish idea, she will send the two boys to Creusa with valuable gifts smeared with a fatal poison which will burn to death, her and anyone who will touch her. Then she herself will kill the two children thereby making Jason childless. She puts her plan into execution at once, calling for Jason and pretending to regret every bitter word that she has uttered to him. Moreover, she leads him to believe that she is convinced that everything he has done was for the best. He is completely deceived.

In the next long soliloquy, Medea is undecided; at one time it seems that she is determined to murder her children for the sole purpose of distressing Jason, and then it appears that her maternal instinct will triumph. Finally her desire for a complete vengeance is stronger, and her determination is taken. A messenger hastens to inform Medea of the death of Creusa and Creon, and to urge her to flee. She rejoices on hearing the messenger's narrative of the victims' agony. Although she is determined to kill her children, she again wavers and her motherly instinct almost overcomes her desire for revenge upon Jason. But again, the revenge motive plus her fear of seeing the boys become the victims of the furious populace, decide her, and she goes to accomplish her dreadful deed.

Jason rushes in to try to save the children from the people who undoubtedly will come to revenge the death of their

King and Princess. Arriving at the doorway, Jason is informed by the Chorus of their slaying, and before he can enter the castle, Medea appears on the roof, ready to leave for Athens, in a chariot drawn by winged dragons, in which are the children's bodies. Medea is not in the least concerned about Jason's reproaches and refuses to leave him the bodies. After prophesying the unhappy life which now awaits him, she is slowly borne away, leaving him to protest against the treatment which heaven has accorded him.

Jean Anouilh has drawn very closely on Euripides for his Médée. Jason, in Euripides, is a wife deserter motivated by personal gain while Creusa becomes an unbearable creature, accepting the children because of the gifts they bring her. In Anouilh, Jason is fleeing from a wicked woman interested in crime, whereas Creusa, out of love for the children, accepts and wants them as much as Jason. This latter version lacks the use of the Greek sense of fate as the motivating element behind the characters.

## CHAPTER IV

PRESENT HAPPINESS THREATENED  
BY PAST EXPERIENCES

In Eurydice, Jean Anouilh has modernized the setting of the classical legend of Orpheus, in which Eurydice, wife of the master musician Orpheus, has died suddenly from a snake bite. So enchanting was his music that Orpheus was permitted to descend into the world of the dead and return with Eurydice on the condition that he would not gaze upon her until they had reached earth. During their return he forgot his promise with the result that he lost her forever. He wandered about Thrace in desperation until such time as he was torn apart by the savage maenads.

In Anouilh's play, Orpheus, son of an itinerant musician, is a café violinist. While waiting for a train, he meets Eurydice, a touring actress, and falls in love with her at once. As they prepare to leave the railway station, the two make mutual promises to confess their past life. Suspicious of her not having revealed the entire truth, since she talks in her sleep, Orpheus insists upon knowing the bare facts of her previous affairs. In the meantime, Eurydice has received a letter from a lover whom she had omitted in her confession of the previous day. Because of the uncompromising situation in which she now finds herself, Eurydice leaves their hotel room on the pretext of having to shop. As Orpheus is about to leave in search of her, he is interrupted by a mysterious

M. Henri (who would be quite meaningless if he were not understood as part of the Greek myth, the figure of Death) whom they had met at the railway station. Soon after, Dulac, the cynical impressario of the troupe, arrives and announces that he had written the letter to Eurydice instructing her to meet him at the railway station. Perplexed at the situation in which they now find themselves, the three are on the point of leaving in hopes of finding her when a police wagon arrives with her body. She has been killed in an accident. M. Henri promises the broken-hearted lover that he will return Eurydice from the dead on the condition that Orpheus shall not look at her face until morning. When this undertaking has been accomplished, Orpheus asks her again for the whole truth and stares her in the face. When she realizes what he has done, she confesses everything, knowing that she will leave him at dawn. Soon after her departure, M. Henri reappears to assure Orpheus that he can regain his lover through death, a thing to which he consents.

Orpheus' tragedy, as an indication of the fact that a lover cannot keep from trying to find out everything about his sweetheart's life, even if it will kill their love, is also symbolic of the power of the gods. "La rencontre d'Orphée et d'Eurydice est marquée de tous les signes de la fatalité."<sup>1</sup> said a critic of Anouilh, because as Orpheus says himself:

" . . . ce petit garçon et cette petite fille inconnus  
qui s'étaient mis en marche un beau jour, des années

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1 Hubert Gignoux, Jean Anouilh, p. 56

à l'avance, vers cette petite gare de province. Dire qu'on aurait pu ne pas se reconnaître; se tromper de jour ou de gare."<sup>2</sup>

And now they have met; their future is just before them: "Ah! nous voilà dans de beaux draps tous les deux, debout l'un en face de l'autre, avec ce qui va nous arriver déjà tout prêt derrière nous."<sup>3</sup>

Anouilh has modified several things in his adaptation. For example, Orpheus, a doubting lover, must know the exact truth concerning the past, thus becoming the victim of his own inquisitiveness. In the ancient version, Eurydice was bitten by a serpent whereas Anouilh has her killed in a wreck; and Hades becomes a railway station. This fatalism is even more significant when Orpheus, victim of his doubts, choses death as the best and only solution, as he says to Eurydice, "Je t'aime trop pour vivre."<sup>4</sup>

Jean Cocteau has also given us a version of the Orpheus legend in his Orphée, generally regarded as his masterpiece.<sup>5</sup> It is a surrealist extravaganza in which Orpheus is a poet of Thrace who consults a spiritualist alphabet in preparing a contribution to a poetry competition. The message, tapped out by a horse, is "Orphée hunts Eurydice's lost life."<sup>6</sup>

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2 Jean Anouilh, "Eurydice," Pièces Noires, p. 340

3 Ibid., p. 312

4 Ibid., p. 383

5 Jean Cocteau, Orphée, translated by Carl Wildman, p. v

6 Ibid., p. 6

Orpheus has rescued Eurydice from the Bacchantes, led by Aglaonice. Eurydice has a letter from Aglaonice which the latter wants returned to her, in exchange for a lump of poisoned sugar with which Eurydice intends to poison the horse. Given Aglaonice's self-addressed envelope by Heurtebise, the glazier, Eurydice seals it and in so doing, becomes paralyzed. Heurtebise, in the meantime, has run in search of Orpheus, while Death enters the room to claim the body of Eurydice. Returning to the house, Heurtebise promises to bring Eurydice back to Orpheus. Spying the rubber gloves left behind by Death, Orpheus puts them on in order to return them to her. Thus, he will be able to speak with her. Doing this, he soon returns with Eurydice on condition that he not look at her. Following their return, there is a lover's quarrel and as Orpheus tries to leave, Eurydice retains him by the end of his coat, causing him to lose his balance and to look at her, whereupon Eurydice mysteriously disappears. Orpheus finds a letter in the room in which the Bacchantes demand his death because the initial letters of his verse form a word which is offensive to the jury of the competition. Orpheus rushes out onto the balcony to meet the approaching Bacchantes. Orpheus' head, torn from his shoulders, rolls into the room. This is followed by the appearance of the Police Commissioner who questions the suspected murderer, Heurtebise. At this point, the spirit of Eurydice reappears to invite Heurtebise to join her and the spirit of Orpheus at lunch. As they sit down to eat, Orpheus offers a prayer of thanks to Heurtebise, their Guardian Angel.



## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSION

In making this study two questions have been constantly recurring: why have contemporary French dramatists revived Greek themes and how have they adapted them to the contemporary theatre? Two possible answers to the first question have been circulated and seem to have at least some popular acceptance. It has been suggested that this return to Greek legends is the result of having little of genuine interest to read during World War II.<sup>1</sup> Other critics have seen in the movement a phase of resistance to German occupation, wherein the playwright used the classics as a weapon against enemy indoctrination in spite of strict censorship.<sup>2</sup> My own study of this problem has made me reject both these possibilities as satisfactory answers to the question. Both conjectures may, of course, partially explain the matter; it does seem obvious that these plays, particularly Anouilh's Antigone and Sartre's Les Mouches, gave encouragement to the spirit of resistance without incurring the wrath of the censor. However, these two theories do not satisfactorily explain the whole movement since it began in the late 1920's and has continued uninterrupted to the present.

It seems to me as a result of this study that one of the

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1 Jacques Lemarchand, "Freedom of the Theatre in France," France Lives, I (1946), pp. 37-39

2 John Gassner, "The Theatre," Forum (April, 1946), p. 75

principal reasons that contemporary French dramatists have turned to Greek mythology for their plots is that, being simple in outline and profoundly suggestive in content, the themes readily lend themselves to a treatment which does not have to be based upon realistic detail in order to make them convincing. These myths are permanent and universal. They are reflections of natural processes eternally recurring. They deal with war; with love; with sin; with tyranny; with courage; with fate;-- the problems which do not change, because men and women themselves do not change. Anouilh, Cocteau, Giraudoux, and Sartre were attracted to them not only for their symbolic significance, but because they saw in them a means of combatting the materialism, so prevalent during the period after World War I. Anouilh's Antigone is, perhaps, the best example of this reaction toward materialism. This play is not simply a conflict between democracy and totalitarianism but a conflict between what is best in man and any tyranny that seeks to crush it. Creon, unlike Sophocles' portrait of him, becomes a man of good will and sound intelligence; his governing is determined by his material well-being. Antigone becomes an obstinate girl rejecting those promises of prosperity, and of happiness which he made to her provided she would agree to surrender her independence. That is why Creon, the reasonable, efficient man, seriously devoted to the interests of the state, was very patient with Antigone's morbid behavior. All these dramas are concerned with answering the big human question of man's relation with the world. In Sartre's Les Mouches, the word

LIBERTY recurs constantly in the mouths of Orestes and Electra. Anouilh also, under the cruel action of his plays, makes a moving appeal for a less pitiful life and a more peaceful society. The heroes have to suffer, and almost always in order to save others. Oedipus suffers for Thebes; Orestes suffers for his father; Eteocles suffers for Thebes and Antigone suffers for her brother.

In their treatment of the themes the contemporary dramatists have made both adaptations and modernizations of various Greek legends. In both cases the moderns have felt entirely free to use the themes for their own purposes, yet most of them are surprisingly close to the general outlines of the myths on which they are based. Sometimes, there are intentional anachronisms, modern settings and flourishes in the plays. We find for example, white ties and tails and evening dresses, card-playing and an automobile in Anouilh's Antigone; in Giraudoux's Electre, there is a swimming pool with soaped steps and in the Orphée, Cocteau does not hesitate to use self-addressed envelopes; and in Eurydice, Anouilh transforms Hades into a railway station. In Giraudoux's Electre, an angry wife talks of having to light her husband's cigars and having to filter his coffee. Also, in his La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu, Helen of Troy says Paris may desert her for a while "pour le jeu de boules ou la pêche au congre."<sup>3</sup> There is an interesting innovation in Cocteau's Orphée, where the poet is torn to pieces by the Bacchantes because he submits in a poetry competition the

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3 Jean Giraudoux, La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu, p. 145

phrase "Orphée hunts Eurydice's lost life.", the initial letters of which were displeasing to the jury. Further, in Anouilh's *Antigone*, several sentries employ a very coarse language about getting drunk and visiting a brothel, a manner of expression quite modern. Lastly, the Chorus, so important to the Greek originals, has degenerated into a few women in Gide's Oedipe and into a single narrator in Anouilh's Antigone and Cocteau's Antigone and Oedipe-Roi.

The French dramatists were not as interested in the appearance of the supernatural beings as were the Greek playwrights. Those who did use the supernatural element gave their creations new forms. The flies of Sartre have replaced the furies that pursued Orestes. The furies in Giraudoux's Electre appear in the opening scenes as three little girls who progress into maidenhood and then into powerful women, while the revenge of Orestes approaches its culmination point. In the same play, a vulture is seen in the last act, at first floating very high above the head of the doomed Aegisthus, and then gradually planing lower. Cocteau's Orphée portrays death as a beautiful impassive young woman who puts on a surgeon's white mask and coat while her patient Eurydice is dying.

To conclude it seems to me that the revival of Greek themes has given to contemporary French drama an imaginative power which has been lacking. Because of the modern world's emphasis on material power and possessions it is extremely difficult to write a contemporary play which will rise above the sordid and yet resist the temptation to escape into the world of dream

and magic and otherworldly vision. Greek dramas have furnished modern French playwrights, as they have many generations since the age of Pericles, a means of treating contemporary problems, often resulting in a solution which is poetic but nonetheless real.

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