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August 2010
God at his computer
Fatality in Cocteau’s *La Machine infernale*

Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One: Fate and the Gods</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two: The Role of Time</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three: The Role of the Mythical Framework</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four: Liberty and Free Will</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Les dieux existent: c'est le diable - Jean Cocteau

The key to this essay lies in the title of Cocteau's play, *La Machine infernale*. Cocteau sees the universe as a machine designed, "not for man's well-being, but for his annihilation". The world is essentially a hostile place. *La Voix* - an omniscient Voice Cocteau has created as a type of Greek chorus to foretell the future - expresses Cocteau's intention in writing the play to the audience in the prologue:

Regarde, spectateur, remontée à bloc, de telle sorte que le ressort se déroule avec lenteur tout le long d'une vie humaine, une des plus parfaites machines construites par les dieux infernaux pour l'anéantissement mathématique d'un mortel.

Cocteau personifies the gods, "les dieux infernaux", implying they are capricious beings with no feeling whatsoever of humanity and compassion. The importance of this concept to an understanding of the play is emphasised by Cocteau's choice of epigraph: "Les dieux existent: c'est le diable". Oxenhandler interprets it that "the world is a thought in the mind of a perhaps nonexistent God". The gods, the universe, destiny, is in charge. This concept of fate and the gods will be addressed in chapter one, as will in chapter two the question of time as a force of the gods, working against humanity. Cocteau's choice of a mythical framework to express the theme of fatality will be examined in chapter three. Fatality leads to the question of liberty: if one's life is wound up like a spring waiting to uncoil from the time one is born, what implication do one's choices have on one's life? In *La Machine infernale*, as will be demonstrated, Cocteau implies that one's choices are limited, if they exist at all. This leads later to the question of responsibility in chapter four, in which the concept of liberty in *La Machine infernale* will be examined. First, however, *La Machine

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2 Jean Cocteau. *La Machine infernale*, Livre de Poche, Paris, 1994, p. 12. All further references to this text will be from this particular edition unless otherwise stated.
3 Oxenhandler, p. 147.
La Machine infernale will be examined in the context of Cocteau’s other works, and criticisms often directed at the play will be addressed.

Cocteau’s view of nature as a hostile force is not unique to La Machine infernale, as Oxenhandler points out. Expressions of this same view can be found in many of Cocteau’s other works. In Antigone and Orphée, as in La Machine infernale, the hero is presented largely as a sufferer. He is “acted upon by the crushing forces of society or nature”. Lefere explains Cocteau’s perception of the fate of humanity, as depicted in his novels: “une vitesse fatale emporte ces êtres inhumains, monstrueux et sublimes, faits pour l’amour dans la mort”. This negative imagery is further observed by Oxenhandler, quoting Journal d’un Inconnu in which Cocteau labels time as “[...] une immobilité vibrante, goulante, terrifiante [...]”. Our universe is a lawless one in which:

[...] cette justice suprême nous prouve chaque minute qu’elle s’exerce selon un code incompréhensible et déroutant les nôtres, supprimant les bons, mânegeant les méchants, sans doute au nom d’une économie occulte à quoi elle n’exige point que l’homme se substitue. La nature nous pousse à détruire en masse.

Ignoring La Machine infernale’s treatment of this existential question, many have criticised Cocteau’s play as superficial, arguing that it relies on the author’s cleverness and gimmicks. Cocteau saw himself above all as le poète, never referring to himself as le dramaturge. To others who also saw poetry as Cocteau’s raison d’être, the theatre in which he became absorbed in the 1930s was merely “a rather arid interlude”. Crosland notes that during the 1930s Cocteau published less poetry than at any other time in his life. Perhaps one of the reasons for which Cocteau’s theatre is often dismissed as gimmicky is revealed by Laura Doyle Gates:

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4 Oxenhandler, p. 145.
5 Oxenhandler, p. 165.
8 Jean Cocteau. Journal d’un Inconnu, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1953, p. 71. All further references to this text will be from this particular edition.
In his earliest dramatic works, Cocteau concerned himself almost exclusively with plastic and architectural aspects of the theatre as opposed to literary or psychological ones.\textsuperscript{11}

*La Machine infernale*, written in 1932 and first performed in 1934, was indeed one of Cocteau’s earliest theatrical works. Francis Steegmuller agrees with the notion of Cocteau’s plays as ‘plastic’, writing of *La Machine infernale*:

\[
\text{[...]} \text{ despite lofty pretensions, a high old legend had been reduced fairly close to the level of modern situation comedy [...].}\textsuperscript{12}
\]

Frederick Brown also appears to fail to understand the deeper themes of the play:

All in all, *La Machine infernale* has the personality of a master trinket’s vehicle, composed of old spare parts ingeniously riveted together with gimmicks.\textsuperscript{13}

Even Levi’s *Guide to French Literature* states that Cocteau is important mostly for the playfulness of his fantasy.\textsuperscript{14} Connon warns against this view, that the “surface glitter” of *La Machine infernale* “should not blind us to the presence of issues important enough to engage our philosophical attentions [...]. themes such as the nature of personal identity or individual freedom”.\textsuperscript{15} Oxenhandler agrees that Cocteau’s “spectacle, fantasy [and] the fairytale atmosphere” are all secondary and subordinate to the central drama of Œdipe’s struggle with the gods.\textsuperscript{16}

The issue of Cocteau’s departure from the Oedipus of Sophocles is a further frequent criticism. Act IV is most closely aligned with Sophocles’s work. In chapter three Cocteau’s reasons for staging a version of a myth will be examined, as will the way in which it furthers his theme of fatality.

\textsuperscript{12} Steegmuller, p. 431.
\textsuperscript{16} Oxenhandler, p. 155.
If indeed, as will be affirmed, destiny and free will are Cocteau’s central preoccupations, the opinion that Cocteau’s work is “merely entertaining or clever” must be examined as to its validity.

17 Roger Lannes, quoted in Oxenhandler, p. 148, believes that destiny and free will are Cocteau’s central preoccupations.
18 Lydia Crowson, cited by Connon, p. 31.
Chapter One: Fate and the Gods

*La Machine infernale* is essentially an expression of the lack of free will possessed by human beings in this universe, of an all powerful universe in which our fate is cruelly sealed. Cocteau views Sophocles's myth as the Greeks did, as a statement of the most terrible fate allotted to a man. Hartigan writes that Cocteau is “entranced” by the inevitability of OEdipe and Jocaste’s destinies. Oxenhandler poses himself the essential question relating to Cocteau’s handling of fate and the gods: “what is the nature of this destiny which drives such lighthearted heroes to their doom?” This chapter will attempt to answer this question, as well as examining all types of expressions of fate in Cocteau’s play, and assessing various interpretations of it.

The title of *La Machine infernale* gives a clue as to Cocteau’s intent on writing the play. The title itself is paradoxical and ambiguous: it suggests a bomb, reinforcing the feeling of fate as a sense of impending doom, yet is personified. Cocteau’s choice of the word *infernale* is loaded. The word brings with it extremely negative connotations, an impression of a being which is vicious, evil and vindictive. It is in this way that Cocteau presents his concept of fate in the play, fate in the form of capricious gods out to harm people over whom they have complete control. Cocteau himself wrote about the title he gave *La Machine infernale*:

> Il ne s’agit pas dans ma pièce, de ces machines infernales que les anarchistes construisent pour tuer les rois. Il s’agit d’une machine plus mystérieuse que les dieux grecs destinaient au même usage.

This fate can be viewed from two perspectives: as being the gods, or as a greater entity still: the universe, which in turn has complete control over the gods. This sense of ambiguity is typical of Cocteau, as Levitt explains that in his work Cocteau aims for “potential levels of meaning, the potential for ambiguity”.

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20 Hartigan, p. 94.
21 Oxenhandler, p. 125.
23 Levitt, p. 365.
Furthermore, another perspective of fate is that it is an insertion of weakness into us, the formation of our subconscious wishes. In this way, Œdipe’s weakness for older women, sealing his fate, could have been implanted at birth by these vicious gods. Œdipe does not want a younger woman, he wants a face that has been slapped by fate:

Il me faut les cicatrices, les tatouages du destin, une beauté qui sorte des tempêtes.  

Cocteau himself is quoted in the Echo de Paris, confirming his perception of the existence of capricious gods:

Les dieux sans cœur se livrent aux distractions de l’enfance et arrachent les ailes des mouches.

This would suggest that, for Cocteau, “man is fate’s toy and is doomed to suffering”. 

Gérard Lieber, in his introduction to the Livre de Poche edition of the play, reinforces the idea of fate existing as childish gods:

La fatalité qui poursuit Œdipe n’est pas le juste châtiment d’une faute, mais un supplice cruel voulu par des dieux méchants. Une transcendance confuse et mauvaise joue avec les humains, les bouscule et leur fait endosser peu à peu un destin qu’ils n’ont ni choisi ni construit.

The image of childish and vindictive gods is further evoked by Sonja G. Stary, who suggests that Œdipe’s fate is caused by “the vengeful curse of a female admirer”, that the Sphinx has sealed his fate after her love was rejected. However, Œdipe’s cruel fate is due to much more than the Sphinx’s revenge. The entity which controls the lives of the characters is in charge of even the Sphinx herself, as will be demonstrated later in the chapter.

Renée Winegarten refers to the “diabolic gods”, who are deceitful, providing mortals with “false hopes, false clues and supreme trickery [...] it is as if the malignant gods themselves have written a script to which the actors have to adhere, whatever

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24 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 96.
26 Knapp, p. 82.
27 Lieber, p. viii.
contributions they mistakenly think they are making to the plot". Winegarten implies that Cocteau’s ‘actors’, Oedipe and Jocaste, have no influence whatsoever over their own fate. Oedipe mistakenly believes that he will get out of life what he deserves ("chercher mon dû"), when the ironic reality is that he will get only what the gods have decided for him, his birthright.

Cocteau implies that what humanity considers to be chance or bad luck is certainly not random, but the work of the gods:

Car les dieux ont voulu, pour le fonctionnement de leur machine infernale, que toutes les malchances surgissent sous le déguisement de la chance.  

Oxenhandler believes that Cocteau’s characters are caught up in a plot, against which they struggle blindly. He points out that the machine-like plot is a symbol of the destiny woven by the infernal gods. In such a hostile universe where people are treated as objects, man may be considered to be doomed. Thus, Oxenhandler views Oedipe as the tragic hero. Knapp agrees:

Oedipus battled against insurmountable odds; he was on trial for having been born, suffering because of his idealism and naïveté, struggling impotently to alter the course of that “infernal machine” which is fate.

Hartigan considers Oedipe’s cruel fate to kill his father and marry his mother as “clear proof of the hostility of gods to men, the hostility of the universe itself”. Oxenhandler believes Oedipe’s tragic revelation of the truth conforms to the title Cocteau gave to his play.

With the establishment of the extent to which Cocteau’s characters must live in a hostile environment, as play-things of the gods, it could be said that the characters are

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30 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 94.  
31 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 113.  
32 Oxenhandler, p. 195.  
33 Oxenhandler, p. 147.  
34 Knapp, p. 83.  
35 Hartigan, p. 95.  
36 Oxenhandler, p. 144.
persecuted. Oxenhandler sees Cocteau’s heroes, in general, as “invariably involved as sufferers, playing largely a passive role [...] they are pursued and tracked down while battling to free themselves from society or from the forces of nature”. Oxenhandler argues strongly that the main theme in *La Machine infernale* is what he calls the “purity-persecution theme”. This is basically an extension of the idea of fatality as the pursuit of man by a larger force, the gods or the universe. Oxenhandler notes that others of Cocteau’s plays have shared this purity-persecution theme. *Orphée*, for instance, is concerned with a poet’s triumph over life and death, and the attainment of wisdom through death.

Related to the purity-persecution theme perhaps is Cocteau’s own personal life, in particular his homosexuality. Oxenhandler notes that Cocteau never dramatised the suppressed theme of homosexuality, “instead extending the metaphor of persecution to cosmic dimensions”. In *La Machine infernale*, evidently the gods themselves become the persecutors. Winegarten also associates Cocteau’s homosexuality with the theme of fate and free will in *La Machine infernale*.

The concept of fate and personified gods is also evoked in one of Cocteau’s earlier works, *Le Grand Écart*, published in 1923. Winegarten quotes Cocteau from that novel: “We believe that we choose, but we have no choice”. This emphasises Cocteau’s belief in a larger force, effectively a type of fate. The plot of *Le Grand Écart* is explained by Winegarten: “Death is surprised to encounter a gardener who is due for his death elsewhere, and who flees in terror to the city appointed for his demise”. This brings us to an important theme in *La Machine infernale*: that, just like Oedipe, man can never escape his fate, it will only follow him.

Danielle Chaperon emphasises this certain power of the gods which is evident in the play. This power is on a higher level, beyond man:

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37 Oxenhandler, p. 148.
38 Oxenhandler, p. 144.
39 Oxenhandler, p. 125.
40 Quoted by Winegarten, p. 438.
41 Winegarten, p. 438.
Cocteau, through Anubis, explains the absolute insignificance of man in the context of the greater universe. At the same time, he suggests that Òedipe’s existence, and implicitly man’s existence, is laid out before him from birth to death:

Le temps des hommes est de l’éternité pliée. Pour nous, il n’existe pas. De sa naissance à sa mort la vie d’Œdipe s’étale, sous mes yeux, plate, avec sa suite d’épisodes.

The question of time in relation to fate will be further examined in chapter two.

Cocteau expresses through Òedipe his opinion of the fate of humanity in general:

Cocteau regarde son propre destin au miroir du mythe.

As Hartigan writes, “no one ever doubted the terrible destiny of Oedipus”. Certainly, fate was also an important element of the Oedipus of Sophocles. The rôle of La Voix in La Machine infernale is significant in explaining Cocteau’s concept of fate and pre-determinism for Òedipe.

Essentially, at the beginning of each Act, La Voix conveys to the audience what will happen, before it actually eventuates. The Voice, like the Oracle of the gods, has expressed all that is predetermined to happen. Òedipe’s destiny, like a machine, is “remontée à bloc”. Nothing will be changed, and this the Voice conveys: the future is set in stone. In this way, the very structure of the play conveys a sense of fate. Hartigan sees the Voice as a representation of Cocteau himself, stating the author’s views of the gods and “the destiny they weave for man”. Further evidence for this view of the Voice exists in the fact that Cocteau often played the role himself, including in the first production of the play in 1534. In this way, Miller believes that “the infernal machine equals Cocteau, or at least his spirit, present and in control

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43 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 72.
44 Lieber, p. viii.
45 Hartigan, p. 92.
46 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 12.
47 Hartigan, p. 91.
throughout”, in the form of the Voice.\textsuperscript{48} The Voice is a vehicle for Cocteau’s meaning. Hartigan also notes the dramatic effects of the Voice, as the ‘character’ allows Cocteau to emphasise the sense of theatricality he desired.\textsuperscript{49} In the prelude to Act I, \textit{La Voix}’s speech encompasses the principal theme of the play:

\begin{quote}
Regarde, spectateur, remontée à bloc, de telle sorte que le ressort se déroule avec lenteur tout le long d’une vie humaine, une des plus parfaites machines construites par les dieux infernaux pour l’anéantissement mathématique d’un mortel.\textsuperscript{50}
\end{quote}

Hartigan interprets this as that “the gods, to be royally entertained, prefer their victims to fall from very high [...] thus they have arranged Ædipe’s rise and his ruin”.\textsuperscript{51} Knapp agrees:

\begin{quote}
Whatever joys he experiences are merely traps set by the gods to make his eventual agony that much more acute.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

\textit{La Voix} is an effective dramatic tool in the way in which it expresses concisely the ideology behind the play, as well as evoking a mood of predestination structurally.

In addition to the use of \textit{La Voix} as an Oracle, further aspects of the structure of the play add to the expression of the themes. Cocteau’s choice of setting and vocabulary emphasises a sense of fate and control over the characters. The \textit{décor} evokes the pressure of fate, with imagery of claustrophobia and suffocation:

\begin{quote}
Les personnages, placés sur un petit théâtre semblent manipulés par des forces supérieures.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

Act III, in which the incestuous scene takes place, is set on a small stage in front of the main stage, emphasising Jocaste and Ædipe’s suffocation by their unfortunate fate. The setting itself is almost prophetic of Ædipe’s self-blinding, the bedroom being the colour of blood. The setting and mood of this Act help to convey the sense of Ædipe, the doomed hero, returning to the place of destruction: his birth place.

\textsuperscript{49} Miller, p. 207.
\textsuperscript{50} Cocteau. \textit{La Machine infernale}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{51} Hartigan, p. 91.
\textsuperscript{52} Knapp, p. 182.
\textsuperscript{53} Lieber, p. viii.
Foreshadowing also helps to incorporate a sense of fate into the play. By the end of Act II, Cocteau has managed to create an atmosphere which evokes the feeling that something terrible is going to happen, a fatalistic feeling of impending doom. Troubling and unsettling events have occurred, for example the drunkard who speaks the truth, and the unusual silence which has taken over the every-day noise. This, coupled with the thunder foreshadowing the accomplishment of fate’s design in Act III, is perhaps indicative that the natural order has been disrupted.

Cocteau’s choice of vocabulary is also evocative of fate, the repetition of verbs like obéir, distribuer, bouger and falloir reinforcing the idea of obligation and lack of control. The words libre and pas libre are also consistently repeated, the characters constantly debating their freedom while the truth remains that their lives are predetermined. Jocaste tells the captain “vous êtes libre”, a statement which is one of the consistent lies of the play to which the characters subscribe. The use of repetition also serves to add to the understanding of the inescapable nature of fate: fate is everywhere in the play. It is inescapable in Cocteau’s words, just as it is inescapable for OEdipe and Jocaste: “Madame, je vous conjure. Il y a une consigne.” While Tiresias speaks the truth to Jocaste, neither she nor OEdipe will believe it until the end of the play when it is too late.

Knapp believes that the “ominous sense of fatality” in the play is magnified “when the protagonists have dreams of the sorrowful nature of what is to happen”. Jocaste senses the doom around her, even on her wedding night. She compares her room, a symbol of her life, to a prison.

Cocteau takes the idea of being controlled by fate to another level. Although in the play we witness OEdipe and Jocaste at the mercy of the gods, Cocteau also implies that even the gods themselves are not free. It is implicit in the play that they, too, are controlled by a force which is greater than even themselves as gods. Perhaps they are controlled by the universe itself.

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54 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 29.
55 Knapp, p. 83.
At the beginning of Act II, Anubis explains to the Sphinx that the gods’ being, like that of humans, “is only a part of the cosmos and as such is tied to other realms”:


Sonja G. Stary interprets Anubis’s statement as conveying that, though mortals consider Anubis and the Sphinx as gods, the latter are also compelled to their own gods. Both the Sphinx and Anubis are acting in the command of larger forces. Hartigan finds Cocteau “mysterious” in this, in that “he offers no further clue as to what this line may mean”. Hartigan believes that Cocteau hints at “a larger meaning, a greater structure to this world, but he does not reveal what this might be.”

Lieber in his introduction agrees with Hartigan, with Cocteau’s implied cosmic “hierarchy”:

Surely this is the greatest expression of fatality, when the gods who control our own human lives are themselves not free, instead controlled by an unnamed greater force. Anubis tells the Sphinx “nous ne sommes pas libres”, demonstrating that on one level, the Sphinx, who becomes in the play the great Nemesis, is no better off than all of us. In this way fate is a kind of equaliser, a humbling of the universe. Sonja G. Stary offers a further example of the equalising nature of control. Anubis explains that “her hideous mask and the Sphinx’s stonelike appearance are simply requirements which the human realm demands of them”, conveying that in some way the gods are controlled by human expectations:

56 Stary, p. 46.
57 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 50.
58 Hartigan, p. 93.
59 Hartigan, p. 93.
60 Lieber, p. viii.
61 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 49.
62 Stary, p. 46.
63 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 50.
Stary concludes that the domain of Cocteau's gods, like the mortal world, is connected to and dependent on other spheres of the cosmos, above and below it. In other words, there are levels of obligation in this universe. It is an expression of infinity.

The Sphinx herself acknowledges that she, like Œdipe and Jocaste, is not free but under the directions of her own controller. Her fate is set:

> Nos dieux m'ont distribué le rôle de Sphinx, je saurai en être digne.\(^{64}\)

Nemesis realises she is governed like men. However, it appears that she is better off for being aware that she is fated. She possesses the truth, if nothing else. Nemesis pities the ignorance of human beings who wrongly believe that they are free:

> Les pauvres, pauvres hommes... Je n'en peux plus, Anubis... J'étouffe. Quittons la terre.\(^{65}\)

In the same way, at the end of the play when Œdipe and Jocaste know the truth, they too see the folly in the blindness of humanity.

The Sphinx, like Œdipe, tried to thwart her fate, stepping outside her orders by loving Œdipe, helping him solve the riddle. However, as Knapp points out:

> The Sphinx's sacrifice [...] is merely another trap set by a still higher force intent upon ensnaring both her and the mortal.\(^{66}\)

Yet the Sphinx has realised the fact that no one in this universe can escape his or her fate. Œdipe's attempts to sidestep his fate are seen as foolish and arrogant, in that for everyone in this universe it has been an age-old problem:

> Prétendez-vous résoudre en une minute le problème du libre arbitre? Hélas! Hélas! Le pouvoir vous grise.\(^{67}\)

Œdipe continues to push aside the realisation he is controlled until the final Act when he learns exactly who his tormentors are: the gods.

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\(^{64}\) Cocteau. *La Machine infernale*, p. 74.

\(^{65}\) Cocteau. *La Machine infernale*, p. 78.

\(^{66}\) Knapp, p. 83.

\(^{67}\) Cocteau. *La Machine infernale*, p. 88.
Sonja G. Stary refers to the hierarchy of fate and control as a state of "cosmic disorder":

Cocteau describes the lives of his protagonists as being isolated from and closed to the existence of other worlds. Earthly life is shown to represent only one level of reality, as Cocteau also describes the existence of a spirit world, a world of gods and a dream world in his play.  

Stary extends her theme to compare the lives of Jocaste and the soldiers on the ramparts in Act I. This scene emphasises the fact that everyone, no matter who he is, has no control over his life. Jocaste, although royalty and thus above the soldiers, is just as bored with her life as they are with theirs. Stary believes that Cocteau uses anachronisms to modernise his characters, in order to demonstrate that the play is applicable to modern day. The implication is that the audience, as human beings in the 1930s, were no more in control of their lives than were Ėdipe and Jocaste, nor are we any more so now, moving into the new millennium. Many critics have made comparisons between Jocaste and contemporary film star Isadora Duncan, who was strangled when her scarf caught in the wheel of her car, just as Jocaste was strangled by her own scarf. Perhaps this allusion was intended to imply the relevance of the fatality theme to modern times.

Cocteau’s belief in fate is pessimistic in that it makes clear the insignificance of humanity. Cocteau implies that human beings are ‘thinking reeds’, that is, that they realise that they cannot be completely free in this universe. He believes that we are merely puppets controlled by external forces. In this, Cocteau is in accordance with Pascal’s theory that “[the universe] is endowed with a certain degree of independence, though of course it can never escape - nor should it - from its original subordination to God.” Nemesis’s realisation that she too is controlled by external forces is an example of Cocteau’s expression of the thinking reed. Stary states that Cocteau devalues the significance of Ėdipe’s fate, because it is merely human:

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68 Stary, p. 43.
Jocaste’s statement above implies that ÓEdipe’s fate is essentially just another component of the human world. Stary writes: “One may also infer from Jocaste’s statement that the true meaning of existence cannot be found in earthly life, but only by going beyond it”. 71 In this way, ÓEdipe’s destiny is as unimportant and trivial as “every other aspect of mortal existence portrayed in the play”. 72 His fate, though hideous, is essentially insignificant.

The principal theme in La Machine infernale is that of fatality, the existential question which affects all human beings and is an expression of the human condition. As has been demonstrated in this chapter, Cocteau skilfully uses his characters, structure and vocabulary to express this theme. The next two chapters will concentrate primarily on the structure of the play, the role of time and the myth, and the way in which they are successful in expressing Cocteau’s theme.

70 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 125.
71 Stary, p. 48
72 Stary, p. 48.
Chapter Two: The Role of Time

The theme of time is closely related to the question of fate. Time is seen as a force of the gods, a force which is also working against humanity, as part of the hostile universe. Furthermore, the suspension and acceleration of time portrayed by Cocteau in *La Machine infernale* add to the sense of fate and inevitability in the play. Connon, author of "*Folded Eternity: Time and the Mythic Dimension in Cocteau’s La Machine infernale*", sees the theme of time as of key importance to the play, pervading the work on both the thematic and structural levels.⁷³

The ‘infernal machine’ is strongly evoked in the temporal structure of the play, which Connon describes as a trap. Rather in the way that Ædipe’s life and fate are set from the time of his birth, the play behaves as a trap which has been set and which inevitably snaps shut. Connon believes that Cocteau is describing such a trap in *La Voix’s* words at the start of Act I:

> Pour que les dieux s’amusent beaucoup, il importe que leur victime tombe de haut. Des années s’écoulent, prospères. Deux filles, deux fils compliquent les noces monstres. Le peuple aime son roi. Mais la peste éclate. Les dieux accusent un criminel anonyme d’infester le pays et ils exigent qu’on le chasse. De recherche en recherche et comme enivré de malheur, Ædipe arrive au pied du mur. Le piège se ferme. Lumière est faite. Avec son écharpe rouge Jocaste se pend. Avec la broche d’or de la femme pendue, Ædipe se creve les yeux.

> Regarde, spectateur, remontée à bloc, de telle sorte que le ressort se déroule avec lenteur tout le long d’une vie humaine, une des plus parfaites machines construites par les dieux infernaux pour l’anéantissement mathématique d’un mortel.

According to Connon, these words describe "the extreme slowness with which the trap operates, speeding up until the moment the jaws snap shut,"⁷⁴ thus evoking a feeling of fatality: the trap, like Ædipe’s fate, has been irrevocably set. The structure of the play echoes this pattern. Acts I and II, which are set simultaneously, evoke a feeling of stasis. The first two Acts are also much longer than the last two. Connon

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⁷³ Connon, p. 33.
⁷⁴ Connon, p. 34.
notes that “by Act III, the events are gaining momentum - time has moved on, it is now the evening after the first two Acts [...] and this one is shorter”. By Act IV, the time-frame has speeded forward seventeen years, momentum is building up quickly. *La Voix* indicates that the seventeen years have passed “vite”.

Hartigan believes that the mythological element of Cocteau’s play is relevant to the reason for which Cocteau chose to make Acts I and II simultaneous: “since the events happening now are also those which happened long ago, the action is both past and present”. Hartigan notes that the future is also present, assuming that the audience is familiar with the legend of Oedipus and the fate that lies before him. Due to the use of the myth, the audience has a preconception of the characters. This warps the sense of time in the play, as the audience knows what will happen before it takes place, in the same vein as the role of *La Voix*. Hartigan believes that this serves to “heighten the sense of inevitability”, of fatality, as well as negating normal time frames.

While Sophocles’s play is a portrayal of Oedipus’s discovery that he has already fulfilled his destiny, Cocteau’s emphasis is on the motivation for his actions rather than on the final events, opting for “active presentation rather than retrospective narration”. Yarrow believes that Cocteau achieves this by setting the majority of the play prior to the seventeen-year gap between Acts III and IV. Hartigan agrees that “Cocteau has set himself the problem of dramatising determinism [...] neither an action or an emotion, it is difficult to portray on stage”. The distortion of time, coupled with the imagery of the trap, helps Cocteau achieve this dramatisation of fatality. Margaret Crosland believes that “in attempting to translate the Greek conception of destiny for the twentieth century [...] a series of episodes was obviously the way to present a force that has no equivalent today”.

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75 Cannon, p. 33.
76 Cocteau. *La Machine infernale*, p. 113.
77 Hartigan, p. 91.
78 Hartigan, p. 91.
79 Yarrow, p. 113.
80 Hartigan, p. 92.
81 Crosland, p. 137.
Essentially, time in the play is out of joint with the time we know. Danielle Chaperon explains:

Le temps remplace la dimension manquante, la dimension spatiale manquante, ou plutôt, et plus gravement, le temps est produit par l’infirmité de la perception spatiale. Le temps serait la quatrième dimension, en tant qu’elle échappe à l’homme. Ainsi, les dieux, si cruels envers Œdipe, sont typiquement dotés d’une acuité perceptive d’êtres de la quatrième dimension.82

Time is viewed as an extra dimension which escapes man. However, the infernal gods are quite at ease with this hostile force of time which is working against humanity. In this way, the characters are “prisoners in the timescale in which they live.”83 The acceleration of time leads to an inherent need to achieve things before time runs out. This race against time is evident throughout the play: in Act I, when Laius must communicate his message before daybreak; in Act II, when the Sphinx waits for the moment which will release her from her obligation to kill; in Act III, when Œdipe and Jocaste struggle to stay awake on their wedding night. In fact, “l’angoissante question du temps”,84 like the fatality it expresses, is everywhere in the play.

Time in La Machine infernale is of a completely different nature to that of the world we know. As has been gathered from the simultaneous nature of Acts I and II, time is not sequential, it simply exists. This is further underlined in the play through anachronisms and the use of the faulty timescale. Knapp writes of Cocteau’s use of anachronisms:

The soldiers in La Machine infernale are contemporary figures who speak in present-day slang, jazz music blares forth from night clubs, and talk of revolution and war continues throughout. This realism makes disturbingly actual the plight of the entire family - a whole society - at the mercy of an inescapable fate.85

This non-chronological attitude to time manifests itself in the characters’ possession of an anachronistic knowledge: Jocaste wonders whether she is perhaps attracted to

82 Chaperon, p. 31.
83 Connon, p. 37.
84 Claude Maurias. “Jean Cocteau ou la vérité du mensonge”, (Paris, 1945, p. 129), quoted in Connon p. 44.
85 Knapp, p. 82.
the young soldier because he reminds her of Œdipe, before she has even met Œdipe. Questions are answered before they are asked. Œdipe speaks of “le tragédién de Corinthe que j’ai vu,” though in reality he could not possibly have seen him, as the tragedy occurred significantly after his time. This warped sense of time further adds to the sense of fatality: every human being’s life is predestined because time is meaningless. Miller emphasises the disjointed nature of time in the play:

As evident in stage directions and repeated textual references, the whole of Cocteau’s play is inscribed in the half-light of a time neither night nor day - a dream state of unrationalised awareness.

Hartigan believes that this breaking down of the barriers of normal time and space, including Cocteau’s use of ghosts and spectres, is “crucial [...] in a legend where the past so impinges on the present.” Furthermore, Hartigan credits the audience’s involvement and “sense of terror at the inevitability of Œdipe’s lot” to the dramatic presentation itself, Cocteau’s “strategy of temporal and spatial negation”, rather than to the characters themselves. While it is true that the temporal structure adds much to the effectiveness of the play, nonetheless Cocteau’s characters are engaging in their development, attracting and retaining the audience’s attention. The transformation of Œdipe and Jocaste as they find out the truth is a visible and pivotal part of the play.

Cocteau’s distortion of time is essential to the play and its expression of fatality. The image of time as it is presented in the play, as a trap, implies that it is a force of the gods, working negatively towards human beings. Further distortions of time within the play only serve to further the impression of a trap, a disjointed time which helps convey the impending fate inflicted on Cocteau’s protagonists.

The mythological framework is related to the theme of time in that it, too, helps to add to the sense of inevitability in the play. The next chapter will examine in closer detail Cocteau’s decision to work within a well-known myth.

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87 Miller, p. 206.
88 Hartigan, p. 90.
89 Hartigan, p. 92.
Chapter Three: The Role of the Mythical Framework

The use of myth, and in particular the use of the Oedipus myth, was so common in French theatre in the 1930s that André Gide wryly proclaimed an “Œdipémie”.90 Cocteau’s play Antigone (1922) “preceded plays by Gide and Giraudoux on Greek themes, and inspired those of Anouilh and Sartre. Certainly Anouilh acknowledged his debt to the creator of Orphée.”91 Indeed, Miller notes “the willingness among French theatre people to acknowledge the fundamental question between theatre and myth: both appeal to what is primal or preconscious in human beings.”92 Connon believes that the use of myth became “a rather monotonous feature of twentieth century French theatre”.93 So why did Cocteau choose to write La Machine infernale within this mythological framework? Perhaps the answer lies in the advice he once offered to an acquaintance: “Always hit the same spot in a different way”.94 Knapp describes Cocteau’s preoccupation:

The Oedipus legend has always held enormous fascination for Cocteau. First he had adapted Sophocles’ Antigone (1922), then came a free translation of Oedipus Rex (1925), now an original four-act play La Machine infernale (1932) on the same subject.95

In basing his play on the Oedipus myth, Cocteau could select certain aspects of the story “with which he can effectively present to his audience his own view of man”,96 his sense of fatality. Hartigan believes that the benefit of the myth is that “the story is so familiar, the audience can pay more attention to the final artistic production and recognise both its present significance and its larger meaning”.97 The mythical structure in La Machine infernale is imperative in expressing the principal theme of fatality in the play.

90 Mentioned in Brown, p. 309.
91 Winegarten, p. 438.
92 Miller, p. 203.
93 Connon, p. 31.
94 Quoted in English by Winegarten, p. 437. Original source not given.
95 Knapp, p. 81.
96 Hartigan, p. 89.
97 Hartigan, p. 89.
Perhaps Cocteau was attracted to Sophocles's Oedipus because "Sophocles' reaction to the intellectual situation was somewhat similar to that of our existentialists". Hathorn points out that in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus:

[...] confronts the dilemmas of personal commitment [...] of his own relationship to fate and freedom [...] of apparent existence and true being. Oedipus' story, as handled by Sophocles, if it is not strictly existentialist, may at least be called existential. In *Oedipus Rex* Sophocles undoubtedly attempts to point out the limitations of human reason.  

Cocteau retains these existential questions in his own version of the Oedipus myth, with Ėdipe's relationship to fate and freedom as central questions. However, Judith G. Miller argues that Cocteau's Oedipus has more in common with Freud's "neurotic" Oedipus than Sophocles' "detective-story dramaturgy." The use of antiquity serves to add authenticity to Cocteau's expression of fatality. Lowe explains:

What follows in the play is set against a background of historical authority, magnified in Cocteau's case by the added weight of Sophocles' work. Therefore, the classical framework not only further emphasises the theme of fate, but also adds to it a certain aura of truthfulness.

Sophocles's story of Oedipus "gains its power from Apollo's prophecy, spoken in a world which believed that a man's destiny was completely woven at birth". However, in a twentieth century performance Cocteau had to find another way to make believable this aspect to a contemporary audience. The use of the myth adds to the audience's awareness of fate, in the way that the audience already knows what will happen to Ėdipe. Lydia Crowson describes the advantage of myth in the following way:

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99 Hathorn, p. 224.
100 Miller, p. 203.
102 Hartigan, p. 90.
since the spectator has access to Oedipus’s perspective in addition to his own, the two horizons of knowledge are juxtaposed before him.\textsuperscript{103}

The sense of repetition evoked by the myth is further emphasised by Cocteau in his use of the Voice foretelling the story before it is performed in the play, as well as by a further retelling by Anubis. The scene in which Œdipe attempts to solve the riddle is enacted twice, once in the hypothetical conditional tense and then as an actual event. Connon notes that in the same way, Œdipe and Jocaste both reinvent their pasts in telling each other stories in Act III - Œdipe recreates his meeting with the Sphinx, and Jocaste tells that it was not she, but her servant who abandoned a baby.\textsuperscript{104}

Mythology allows ambiguity, which is essential to the theme of fate with reference to the existence of other realms and powers. Oxenhandler writes that “the role of the myth is to orient the play in a realm of fantasy. We find ourselves in a mysterious zone where things are real and unreal at the same time.”\textsuperscript{105} According to Oxenhandler, this “strange suspended quality”\textsuperscript{106} evident in Cocteau’s play is part of the very nature of myth.\textsuperscript{107}

Yarrow believes that Cocteau is essentially expressing the mythology of ambiguity. Cocteau wrote in a programme for a performance of \textit{La Machine infernale} which he produced: “Jocaste et Œdipe seraient-ils bêtes ou criminels, Tirésias pédant ou voyant?”, emphasising this ambiguity. A sense of ambiguity is heightened in \textit{La Machine infernale} in that the audience is expecting the well-known story of the Oedipus myth. Yarrow points out that “the introductory synopsis by the Voice appears to confirm this, but immediately we are plunged into a world very different from the traditional idea of a classical Greece”.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{104} Connon, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{105} Oxenhandler, p. 163.
\textsuperscript{106} Oxenhandler, p. 154.
\textsuperscript{107} Connon, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{108} Yarrow, p. 113.
The audience’s ability to predetermine the outcome of the play from their knowledge of the myth is essential in understanding much of the loaded dramatic irony in the play. Connon notes that “jokes relying on our foreknowledge of the dénouement are a further deformation of timescale possible only in a version of a myth”.109 The irony of Jocaste’s comments about her scarf (“Tout le jour cette écharpe m’étrangle.”110), and references that Jocaste is old enough to be ÓEdipe’s mother (“L’essentiel est qu’elle ne le soit pas.”111), rely entirely on the understanding of the audience’s foreknowledge of the myth.

In the same way that the use of the myth adds to the sense of fate in the play, further borrowings achieve the same end. The opening scene in Act I, with the appearance of the ghost of Láhus on the ramparts of Thebes while the soldiers keep watch, has echoes of *Hamlet*. Felman writes:

> L’ouverture de *La Machine infernale* constitue, en effet, un subtil pastiche de la scène inaugurale de *Hamlet*: des soldats montent la garde de Thèbes et s’aperçoivent du fantôme de Láhus qui, se promenant sur les lieux, essaie - mais en vain - de communiquer une sorte d’avertissement ambigu qui demeure incompréhensible.112

However, Hartigan believes that Cocteau’s purposes are wider than simply a literary echo, as this scene is also successful in evoking two realms, which is essential to the theme of fate in that it signifies the existence of another power.113 Similarly, many critics have compared Act III with Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, particularly the scene where Jocaste hears a drunkard singing a “cruel ditty”114 about women who marry men far younger than themselves, in the same way Emma Bovary hears a drunkard sing the truth about herself. Jocaste and Emma are also both portrayals of foolish women in love. Further literary comparisons are made by Oxenhandler, who even refers to Cocteau’s play as “an improvisation on a fairy-tale.”115 Oxenhandler argues that the play’s “real unity is in this simple make-believe dream tale”, with ÓEdipe as

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112 Felman, p. 21.
113 Hartigan, p. 90.
114 Brown, p. 310.
115 Oxenhandler, p. 135.
the fairy-tale hero “who is a projection of the author’s (and our) childish fantasy.” Connon compares such intertextual references to the implied comparison between Jocaste and Isadora Duncan, which also emphasises the proximity of life to myth.

Connon fears that these intertextual references are “too frequently dismissed as further examples of Cocteau's ‘cleverness’”, whereas they are important to the play in “universalising the myth, showing links which cross cultural and temporal limitations.” Connon also notes that Cocteau incorporates mythology of a different culture, with the Voice’s reference to the German myth of Siegfried:

Comme s’élancera le jeune Siegfried, Oedipe se hâte.

In this way, Cocteau’s use of the myth of Siegfried helps to emphasise the relevance of the play to modern day. In the 1930s the mention of Siegfried was particularly timely, emphasising cultural differences as a Franco-German war loomed ahead. This serves to further emphasise that a myth is of universal relevance. Furthermore, in *La Machine infernale* Cocteau has borrowed a character from Egyptian mythology in the form of Anubis. Anubis is the canine god of cemeteries and embalming in Egyptian mythology. He is traditionally a wise figure “who is upon his mountain”, offering leadership over the dead. This adds weight to Cocteau’s Anubis, when he makes such telling remarks as:

[...] l’Égypte, la Grèce, la mort, le passé, l’avenir n’ont pas de sens chez nous [...].

Cocteau’s decision to rewrite the Oedipus myth evokes a sense of fatality due to its familiarity. Intertextuality helps Cocteau show that the theme of fatality remains applicable in his modernisation of the myth.

The myth remains, however, essentially a framework for Cocteau’s themes, a vehicle in which he can better present his ideas to the audience. As Levi writes:

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116 Oxenhandler, p. 135.
117 Connon, p. 43.
120 Cocteau. *La Machine infernale*, pp. 50-51.
For Cocteau, myth was an opaque sunshade for the apparent social satire of *La Machine infernale*, despite its clever fidelity to Sophocles and its borrowings from elsewhere.\(^{121}\)

Finally, the mythical framework acts as a symbol of the infernal machine. Lowe explains:

> Although Cocteau attempts to insert change, his conclusion to the myth remains the same. Like Oedipus in the myth, Cocteau is stuck in his own infernal Oedipal machine.\(^{122}\)

Therefore, for whatever reasons Cocteau chose to write *La Machine infernale* as a version of a myth, the myth is successful in expressing the fate which awaits the protagonists. The foreknowledge which the myth allows the audience is imperative to the understanding of both the subtleties of the play and the major theme of fatality.

The next and final chapter will examine the role of liberty in the play. Now that the way in which the temporal and mythological structure help evoke the theme of fate is clear, one can decide whether Oedipe and Jocaste can take any responsibility for their actions.

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\(^{121}\) Levi, p. 171.

\(^{122}\) Lowe, p. 185.
Chapter Four: Liberty and Free Will

Related very closely to the central theme of fatality is that of liberty. Cocteau himself believed that “Le libre arbitre et le fatalisme s’enchevêrent”.\(^{123}\) If Cocteau’s characters’ lives are predetermined at birth, does any liberty exist for them at all? Oxenhandler believes that, in any criticism of Cocteau, the central problem is liberty.\(^{124}\)

Cocteau’s opinion was that the liberty of humankind is limited. He wrote in *Journal d’un inconnu*:

> Nos actes n’y peuvent rien, imputables à quelque courant d’air qui bouscule des feuilles mortes.\(^{125}\)

Oxenhandler writes that Cocteau believed that we should “try to resist the pressure of the fate around us, which is constantly moulding us”,\(^{126}\) further evidence for Cocteau’s view of human liberty.

Liberty has perhaps been examined most visibly in French literature by Jean-Paul Sartre. However, Cocteau’s perception of liberty was different to that of Sartre. Oxenhandler notes the differentiation:

> For Sartre, liberty is only the liberty to choose. Cocteau believes that liberty ceases to be liberty when it chooses.\(^{127}\)

Oxenhandler believes that it is for this reason that Cocteau’s characters are “suspended in time and space, unwilling to commit themselves to a goal or course of action, fearful of the consequences to the personality which follow such commitment”.\(^{128}\) That is, Cocteau’s characters talk themselves out of any action. However, this is not strictly true. Cédipe does act, in fact he makes the decision to have a relationship with Jocaste and is very much in love with her: “Je l’aime, je

\(^{123}\) Cocteau. *Journal d’un inconnu*, p. 73.
\(^{124}\) Oxenhandler, p. 148.
\(^{125}\) Cocteau. *Journal d’un inconnu*, p. 190.
\(^{126}\) Oxenhandler, p. 151.
\(^{127}\) Oxenhandler, p. 153.
\(^{128}\) Oxenhandler, p. 153.
l’adore, Tirésias; auprès d’elle il me semble que j’occupe enfin ma vraie place.”

Œdipe also makes the deliberate decision to leave Corinth at the end of the play.

Oxenhandler, though acknowledging the importance of the theme of fate in La Machine infernale, believes that Cocteau “refuses to find the truth of his characters’ tragedy within themselves, where it belongs”. Cocteau shifts blame from the individual to “obscure forces beyond men, on their destiny”. Winegarten agrees, arguing that in La Machine infernale Cocteau avoids the notion of any human responsibility:

By regarding himself as a person enacting a role in a play that had already been written, he reduced the element of human responsibility in affairs.131

The play’s description of the trap, the infernal machine which has been irrevocably set, essentially frees Œdipe from responsibility for his own life: no matter what he does, or what responsibility he takes, his fate is set. Winegarten is critical of this element:

What of responsibility for one’s sins of commission and omission? The capacity of humankind for evil is eluded, and this ultimately serves as a limiting factor in his work. Cocteau [does not] even seem to be aware that any moral choice is at stake.132

Ralph Yarrow agrees, though in criticising the weaknesses of Œdipe and Jocaste he also undermines Cocteau’s theme of fatality:

At any time, Œdipe and Jocaste could write an alternative sequence, but all they do is seal their own fate. They create their own character and weave their own plot, we as audience can be perfectly clear that the versions they opt for are by no means inevitable.133

This view completely ignores the principal theme of the infernal machine, the fact that the fates of Œdipe and Jocaste are wound up and predetermined from the first scene. However, it cannot be denied that Œdipe and Jocaste could be viewed as shallow

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129 Cocteau, La Machine infernale, p. 90.
130 Oxenhandler, p. 125.
131 Winegarten, p. 438.
132 Winegarten, p. 443.
133 Yarrow, p. 114.
characters who are *unwilling*, not just unable, to see the truth. Regardless of the fact that they are cruelly fated, Ódipe and Jocaste both ignore multiple warning signs in Act III which should make the truth obvious. This point will be elaborated on further on in the chapter.

Stary believes that Cocteau “diminishes Ódipe and Jocaste to average human beings, as flawed as any other mortals”. However, this humanisation of his characters was indeed deliberate and serves to strengthen the universality of the play. Ódipe is portrayed as arrogant and complacent, “totally egocentric and abandoned by true intellect”. Miller distinguishes Cocteau’s Ódipe from Sophocles’s in this:

> It is difficult to identify with let alone empathise with Cocteau’s supercilious, cowardly, vainglorious ‘hero’, Sophocles’ hero, rash and headstrong as he is, assumes full responsibility for his acts.

Nonetheless, Miller fails to note that Cocteau’s Ódipe also assumes responsibility for his acts once he has learned the truth. In Act IV Ódipe clearly feels some sort of guilt or self-hatred at what he has done when he blinds himself.

The nature of Cocteau’s Ódipe is skilfully displayed in his encounter with the Sphinx, where Ódipe, confident he is more intelligent than every other man who tried to solve the riddle, clearly overestimates his ability. Stary explains:

> [Ódipe’s] self-claimed superiority looks particularly ridiculous when spectators see that he eventually succeeds in solving the Sphinx’s riddle only because the Sphinx tells him the correct answer ahead of time.

Unfortunately, Stary does not recognise that in giving Ódipe this particular characteristic of arrogance, Cocteau makes him even more human and therefore representative of mankind. It is human nature to overestimate one’s abilities.

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134 Stary, p. 44.
136 Miller, p. 207.
137 Stary, p. 94.
Yarrow argues that both Œdipe and Jocaste blatantly refuse knowledge “in favour of confirmation of their own image”.138 In fact, Jocaste has always wanted to know the truth: in Act I almost everything Jocaste says is a questioning of what is happening, and what is the truth. For example, she wants to discover the truth about Laius’s death: “A-t-on fait tout ce qu’on a pu pour découvrir les assassins de Laius?”139

Perhaps the key metaphor of blindness, present in each Act, is a manifestation of Jocaste’s inability to see the truth, rather than a refusal to see the truth. The role of this metaphor is to demonstrate that Œdipe and Jocaste are both living in their own worlds, by their own choice or not, “quite out of contact with what goes on in other parts of themselves or on more mundane levels”.140

In Act I, the ghost of Laius attempts unsuccessfully to attract Jocaste’s attention. Jocaste, though she can “see” Œdipe in the young soldier, fails to see the ghost. Jocaste feels there is something amiss (“Je sens les choses.”141), yet is unable to see beyond this realm to see the ghost. Leadbeater explains that “while the truth surrounds her, her ‘vision’ is focused elsewhere”.142 Though she cannot see Laius, it is not through a lack of receptiveness to the supernatural on her part. On the contrary, Jocaste deplores the rational mindset. However, at the same time, Jocaste treats the soldiers, who have the ability to see the ghost, as innocents. Yarrow sees in this an analogy of “the way in which information from the lower depths frequently fails to get through to the upper echelons of consciousness”.143 This alludes to the question of the paradox: that the truth came to Jocaste when she was asleep, only she could not understand it. In _La Machine infernale_, the dream world is the world of truth.

Œdipe’s behaviour in Act II exhibits his own blindness, as he blinds himself into believing he has defeated the Sphinx, when in reality he is defeating only himself in trying to avoid his fate. Like Jocaste, Œdipe is unable to see beyond everyday reality:

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138 Yarrow p. 112.
140 Yarrow, p. 110.
142 Leadbeater, p. 120.
143 Yarrow, p. 109.
Neither the Sphinx nor the ghost of Laüs succeeds in touching the lives of Cocteau’s protagonists, as they rebuff these attempts in favour of commonplace goals.\textsuperscript{144}

In Act III, when the scene of the wedding night takes place, the imagery becomes much more intense. OEdipe and Jocaste are plagued by hints of the truth but they are still blind to reality, unable to see. Cocteau uses dramatic irony to emphasise their lack of perception. Yarrow believes that in this Act:

They determinedly ignore all promptings of dream, subconscious, fantasy and supernatural: all manifestations of the internal energies they are blocking.\textsuperscript{145}

In this Act OEdipe looks into the future, but sees only what he is allowed to see: marriage, wealth and children; not the awful truth. Paradoxically, the truth is literally declared by everything they see and say during this Act:

Each word, like each object and each structure includes a sort of warning, a kind of indicator that things are not what they seem.\textsuperscript{146}

The relationship of Jocaste to OEdipe, in this Act especially, is heavily maternal. OEdipe’s cradle is present, and Jocaste dreams of a gluey lump which represents a foetus. She sees the scars on OEdipe’s feet, but believes his explanation that they are from hunting wounds, again denying the truth. Jocaste nurses her new husband and treats him like a child. The drunkard who sings the truth is ignored, as is Tirésias, who spells out all the signs of impending disaster, only to have his intuition continually dismissed.

Jocaste and OEdipe’s “fatal dreams”\textsuperscript{147} represent the truth, but the characters can only see these truths when in the dream state. Jocaste also dreams of the rampart in Act I where Laüs attempted to communicate with her, whereas OEdipe dreams of past warnings and future misfortune, as well as the confrontation with the Sphinx. These dreams go beyond everyday reality, representing all the warnings they have been given.

\textsuperscript{144} Stary, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{145} Yarrow, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{146} Lydia Crowson, quoted by Stary, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{147} Brown, p. 310.
Tirésias is essential to the theme of blindness. Through this character in particular, Cocteau implies a relationship between physical blindness and internal sight. Tirésias, the character who most perceives the truth, is constantly referred to as “presque aveugle” or “un pauvre aveugle”. Although blind, Tirésias’s “interior eye” perceives the truth long before Œdipe and Jocaste do:

Mes yeux de chair s’éteignent au bénéfice d’un œil intérieur, d’un œil qui rend d’autres services que de compter les marches des escaliers.148

Even when Œdipe thinks he is blinded with pepper in his eyes, the emphasis is on regaining his physical sight. Leadbeater notes that Œdipe is not yet ready to ‘see’:

Mal, mais je vois, je vois. Ouf! J’ai bien cru que j’étais aveugle.149

Miller notes in this an inherent difference between Cocteau’s Oedipus and that of Sophocles:

Whereas Sophocles’ Oedipus is ‘blind’ but wants to know: “Children [...] what is the meaning of this supplication?” (Act I sc v), Cocteau’s Oedipus is ‘blind’ and wants to stay that way: “the thing is [...] to wear blinkers”.150

Leadbeater believes that Anubis correctly points out that “man’s problem lies in his reliance on sight - he believes only what he sees”.151 Anubis sums up the situation when he says:

Beaucoup d’hommes naissent aveugles et ils ne s’en aperçoivent que le jour où une bonne vérité leur crève les yeux.152

In this way, it is only at the end of the play when Œdipe is blinded that he is able to perceive the truth. Hathorn believes that therefore:

Oedipus’ punishment is not really punishment at all, but the only means by which the gods may enlighten a blindness of such profundity”.153

148 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 25.
149 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 92.
150 Miller, p. 206.
151 Leadbeater, p. 123.
152 Cocteau. La Machine infernale, p. 77.
153 Hathorn, p. 225.
This alludes to the question of transcendance, that with the truth Oedipe has moved into a different world, the world of truth. However, Miller is sceptical that Cocteau's Oedipe achieves wisdom with blindness:

When at the play's end Oedipus puts out his eyes, he does not become the newly-sighted wise man of Sophocles.¹⁵⁴

Nevertheless, the blind Oedipe can see into the other world, for example, he now sees Jocaste as mother only. The truth has become clear.

Whitman debates the guilt or innocence of Sophocles's Oedipus:

The error occurred when Oedipus slew his father and married his mother. He was innocent, in that he acted in ignorance, but he was wrong in that he did these things.¹⁵⁵

While this may be true, Whitman's interpretation ignores the fact that while Oedipe was wrong in what he did, he himself had no control over his actions. If the fate Cocteau has evoked is to be believed in, then everything that happens in the course of Oedipe's life is not due to cause and effect, but to the infernal machine. Therefore, even if the actions were wrong, it is the gods, not Oedipe, who are guilty of them. Some would disagree, arguing that Oedipe did the deeds and is therefore guilty of them. However, by Cocteau's definition of fate in the play, this cannot be the case.

If, as has been demonstrated, Cocteau's characters are fated from birth, they can have no liberty as to the outcome of their lives. While it is true that Oedipe and Jocaste can be seen as shallow or selfish, is that under their control? Jocaste and Oedipe are criticised as they do not seem to want to see the truth. In another world this would affect their lives. But in the world Cocteau has created in La Machine infernale, regardless of whether they are motivated to see the truth, they ultimately have no influence over their own lives. In Cocteau’s world, fatality and liberty cannot co-exist. In blaming Oedipe for his actions, critics such as Yarrow and Winegarten are

¹⁵⁴ Miller, p. 207.
¹⁵⁵ Cedric Whitman, quoted in Hathorn, p. 225.
mistaken. They have failed to understand the importance of the power of fatality in Cocteau's play.
Conclusion

Cocteau's *La Machine infernale* is an important play with a worthwhile message. This essay refutes the idea that the play is all show, with no underlying meaning of any importance. These words from Cocteau himself confirm the perception of the play as an expression of the forces of fate:

> Quant à la pièce, dont le thème est le jeu infernal des dieux se distrayant du malheur des hommes, elle se résume par ce que j'écris en exergue: “Les dieux existent, c’est le diable”.156

In this essay it has been demonstrated that almost all aspects of *La Machine infernale* - myth, structure, distortion of time, vocabulary - serve as a means to express the end theme of fatality. In this way, freedom, and therefore responsibility, can be seen as variables which do not exist in Cocteau's play. Yarrow believes that “[the protagonists] entangle themselves in the threads of their own fate”,157 but the fact remains that fate exists, and would entangle them regardless of their own actions. Cocteau’s desire to express fatality, “l’obsession métaphysique”,158 is clear. Lefere believes that Cocteau was “convaincu de la malice du Destin”,159 of which there is vast evidence in *La Machine infernale*.

In the preface to a 1934 publication of *La Machine infernale*,160 Cocteau takes pains to underline the importance to the play of the difference between être and avoir l’air. Essentially in the play this is an expression of appearance versus reality: we appear to be free but in reality we are not free.

In this way, all claims that *La Machine infernale* is superficial, gimmicky, and with no substantial theme, are refuted. Not only does the play contain a principal theme of fatality, questioning the human condition, it also corresponds with Cocteau’s *poésie*

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156 Cocteau, quoted by de Miomandre, p. 105.
157 Yarrow, p. 111.
158 Lefere, p. 343.
159 Lefere, p. 346.
du théâtre as Levitt sees it: “Contradiction, ambiguity, confusion between reality and illusion”.  

Felman asks an essential question of the play:

Est-ce que c’est à dire que, comme l’Œdipe de Cocteau, nous n’avons - encore - rien compris?  

The answer to this question is in the affirmative. Cocteau used his theatre as an expression of life, and believed life is mirrored in myth. Cocteau wrote of his work: “I accentuate..., I emphasise... the absurdity of life... I try to paint more truly than the truth”. In this way, the fatality which exists for his protagonists is the fatality which exists for us all.

Perhaps the final words of the play are the ultimate expression of fatality: “Qui sait?” That is, after all Cocteau has implied through the play - that humanity is fated - we will never really know either way. Perhaps what we have come to understand in the play is in itself just another aspect of the gods controlling us. But there again, perhaps “Qui sait?” is paradoxically implying that the machine loses in the end. There is no absolute truth.

“Les dieux existent: c’est le diable”. This essay will conclude as it started, with this crucial sentence which encapsulates the play, as indeed it does this essay.

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161 Levitt, p. 366.
162 Felman, p. 25.
163 Quoted in English by Levitt, pp. 364-365. No original source given.
Bibliography

Primary Texts


Books

  
  This is a huge work, a philosophical textbook which is much too broad when trying to get a brief overview of the philosophical issue of free will in general.

  
  This text is made up of articles written by journalist Bald for the Tribune on Paris life in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Cocteau is established as part of the Left Bank group of artists and intellectuals.

  
  Borgal is interested in Cocteau as the poet, and notes his interest in the metaphysical. He makes reference to the juxtaposition in *La Machine infernale* of Cocteau’s loyalty to the myth and his own creation (Act I).

  
  In her work on the art of Montparnasse in the early twentieth century, Bougault sees Cocteau as a bridge between the Montparnasse artistic community and the Parisian aristocracy. This book also features a full colour photograph of a Kisling portrait of Cocteau. Interesting in the context of artistic life in Paris, but not in the context of *La Machine infernale*.

  
  This is a book of photographer Brassaï’s photographs from night-time Paris of the 1930s, and is not concerned with artistic life or Cocteau.

This biography of Jean Cocteau includes a basic commentary of *La Machine infernale*, giving a plot summary and mainly concentrating on the role of fate and the question of antiquity. Brown is dismissive of the play, one of the critics who see it as full of gimmicks and not much else.


Cahn examines the problem of fatalism from a philosophical point of view, expressing complex theories and mathematical proofs which are difficult to understand. However, the introductory chapter is helpful in placing Cocteau’s preoccupation with fatalism into a wider context.


Carpenter is interested primarily in the Americans, however he also delves into the general Parisian art scene. Cocteau is mentioned as being on the fringe of the Dadaists, with particular interest paid to *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. Although concerned with the time before *La Machine infernale* was written in 1932, Carpenter is interesting in that he places Cocteau in the context of the artistic world around him.


An unusual text, Chaperon is interested in Cocteau’s poésie. The book mainly consists of quotes from Cocteau’s poetry, prose and plays; however it offered a different perspective of other realms and timescales in *La Machine infernale*.


Clark’s text on Egyptian mythology was not useful in that it did not contain much information on the origins of Anubis.


Cocteau’s diaries, written in the last thirteen years of his life, were kept secret until 1983. They provide a window into his life and creativity. However, there is no direct reference to *La Machine infernale*.

Cohen is not so much interested in examining the freedom of the individual in the context of the universe, but in the libertarian principle of self-ownership, which is used to defend capitalist inequality. This book is not relevant to Cocteau and *La Machine infernale*.


This matter-of-fact biography is concerned mainly with Cocteau's social circle and the role he played in the art world of his time. Crosland is not interested in the literary merits of Cocteau's works.


Davidson's text on Pascal's theories was helpful in forming an understanding of the concept of the thinking reed.


This text is old and difficult to read. Davidson examines the fatality issue from different cultural points of view, such as Hebrew, Greek and Roman philosophy. It would be useful if one were delving further into the issue of free will, rather than writing just a short literary essay such as this one.


Sylvia Beach was the owner of Shakespeare and Company, the first American library and bookshop in Paris. Although Cocteau was not strictly part of this school of writers, he is referred to as part of the general artistic circle in Paris of the time.


This text, as part of the *Écrivains de Toujours* series, is obviously concerned with aspects of Cocteau's writing. Fraigneau sees *La Machine infernale* as an important work. He notes that Cocteau originally planned to write a play about the meeting of Ædipe and the Sphinx, the subject matter which would eventually become Act II in a four act play. Fraigneau sees Cocteau as true to Sophocles, and expresses the importance of "l'inflexibilité du système", the hierarchy of fate.

Gosling portrays the sixteen year old Cocteau as a school truant, already beginning to make his name known in literary society. An interesting insight into Cocteau, yet Gosling is interested in the time period twenty years before *La Machine infernale* was written.


Green takes a similar view to Cocteau regarding man’s role in the universe, that he is controlled by forces in another realm. This text is useful in that it focuses the mind on the philosophical way of thinking that man is not free, though is not specifically helpful to the essay.


Hampshire is concerned with the problem of human freedom, emphasising the difference between the desire to act and the power to act. This book is not as easy to read as other similar ones which are available.


A comprehensive biography of Cocteau which concentrates on his works as well as his life. Knapp examines *La Machine infernale* in the context of Cocteau’s own philosophies, seeing his vision of life as “macabre and fundamentally distorted”. Includes a good basic discussion of the nature of fate and the distortion of time.


A basic biography in French of Cocteau’s life, concentrating on his various acquaintances and companions, and not on his works. This work is not very relevant to *La Machine infernale*.


Lottman writes about intellectual life in this specific time frame, mainly of the French but also the Russians and Americans. The author reveals that Cocteau was a potential target of the Germans in occupied Paris due to his aesthetics and lifestyle. However, Lottman does not delve into Cocteau’s works.

Lowe compares *La Machine infernale* with works by Baudelaire and Zola, and is particularly interested in the treatment of the female. Gender issues are important. There is a discussion of the Sphinx and Jocaste: Lowe considers that Cocteau 'blames' the female characters. There are some interesting comparisons with Sophocles.


This text is too large and broad to be of interest to this topic, and did not include a discussion of Anubis.


This biography is concerned with the females in Cocteau's life, and was not very helpful in this study of *La Machine infernale.*


This work contains extracts from letters written by Cocteau to the author. Meunier uses examples from across all of Cocteau's works to demonstrate his philosophy. Freedom and fate are discussed, giving a good overview of Cocteau's stance on these matters.


Another biography of Cocteau the man. It is not very much concerned with literary aspects, but offers interesting insights and quotes which help place *La Machine infernale* in the context of his beliefs.


A helpful book with which to begin one's study of Cocteau, including a comprehensive biography which is focused on his works rather than his life. There is a full chapter on *La Machine infernale,* discussing the nature of fate and the gods, as well as the infernal machine and its negative impact on the lives of human beings.

This is a book of photographs of the much photographed Cocteau, with an introduction by Francis Steegmuller. Although in his biography of Cocteau Steegmuller had been dismissive of _La Machine infernale_, here he sings Cocteau's praises.


This biography's interest in _La Machine infernale_ lies primarily in the first production of the play, with descriptions of the original cast and staging. Furthermore, the authors note that it was this play which established Cocteau as a serious playwright.


Another biography which is more interested in Cocteau's life than works, and is dismissive of Cocteau's plays. Containing no real literary criticism, this work is not very helpful.

• Touzot, Jean. _Jean Cocteau_. La Manufacture, Lyon, 1989.

Touzot's biography includes some beautiful photographs and copies of Cocteau's drawings. There are only a few lines on _La Machine infernale_, but again the discussion of Cocteau's personal philosophies help provide an understanding of the play.


This text sees Cocteau through the eyes of the author as a child. Jean Marais approved of Weisweiler's work, which shows a different side of Cocteau not previously written about. Weisweiler is interesting but is not concerned with Cocteau's plays.

**Articles and Essays**


Unfortunately only the abstract of this thesis was available. _La Machine infernale_ is one of four works of Cocteau's studied in this thesis. Andra is primarily interested in mythic unity, and negative female archetypes. I did not find the abstract particularly helpful for my essay, and I suspect the body of the thesis would not have been either.

This article was a great help in forming the chapters on time and the mythological framework. Connon argues the importance of the role of the temporal structure, as well as including material on the literary references, blindness and dramatic irony.


This article was not very useful to this study. Felman is concerned with the concept of truth in general, and it is a very philosophical piece. However, Felman includes a small discussion of Sophocles and Cocteau, examining the question of fate versus chance.


Gates’s article was concerned with Cocteau’s works Parade, Le Bœuf sur le toit, and Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel. While it was not particularly relevant to work on La Machine infernale, it offered an understanding of Cocteau’s poésie.


Hartigan examines Cocteau’s strategy of interpretation of the Oedipus legend, looking at the benefits of the myth, as well as the role of the Voice and the literary allusions. This article was extremely helpful in the discussion of myth.


Hathorn’s article is concerned with Sophocles’s Oedipus rather than Cocteau’s. Though difficult to read and a little old-fashioned in style, it offered some insight as to the conformity or lack thereof of Cocteau to Sophocles.


Leadbeater wrote this article as rebuttal to Cocteau’s various critics. He argues Cocteau’s consistency with Sophocles and the issue of man in a hostile
universe. There is much detail on Sophocles which is quite difficult to read without a good knowledge of Sophocles’s Oedipus.


Lefere confirms Cocteau’s preoccupation with the metaphysical question of destiny, giving examples from his four novels *Le Grand Écart* (1923), *Thomas l’imposteur* (1923), *Les Enfants terribles* (1929), and *Le Fantôme de Marseille* (1933).


This article is about Cocteau’s *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, but provides some insights into Cocteau’s interest in ambiguity, as well as the concept of form echoing content.


Miller writes of the love of the French theatre for the myth, and compares Cocteau’s Oedipus to Sophocles’s and Freud’s. Miller is also interested in the existence of another realm and blindness. Unfortunately, the section on Hélène Cixous is not particularly relevant.


This article is composed of extracts of photographs and texts from a book of the same name. It offers interesting snapshots of different times in Cocteau’s life but is not particularly relevant to a literary criticism of his work.


Stary writes of “cosmic disorder” in the play: the hierarchy and existence of other realms. Stary is helpful in her discussion of fate and dramatic irony. The author responds negatively to Cocteau’s Édipe, regarding him as arrogant.


Easy to read, this article discusses the paradoxical nature of Cocteau’s work. Winegarten sees fate and free will as central, but in Cocteau’s work in general rather than in *La Machine infernale* in particular. The article addresses criticism of Cocteau, and is concerned with Cocteau the ‘poet’.

Yarrow’s chapter in a book about le fantastique concentrates on the existence of spectres, spirits and other realms in the play. Yarrow fails to see the importance of the fatality theme, blaming ÒEdipe and Jocaste for their fates.

Dictionaries


This text includes a brief biography of Cocteau, making particular note of his interest in dream and reality, truth and falsehood. France notes Cocteau’s allusions to Freud in La Machine infernale.


Hart’s dictionary was useful in discovering the origins of Anubis. It includes a thorough explanation of his rôle in Egyptian mythology, adding insight to Cocteau’s choice of the character.


The biography of Cocteau in this biography is virtually identical to that in the earlier edition (see Reid).


This piece is a good basic biography of Cocteau’s life. While it is interesting on his childhood and spans his whole career, there is not much on each individual work.


This dictionary offers just a very brief biography, listing in full Cocteau’s œuvres. Reid is favourable towards Cocteau’s works, calling him the ‘spearhead’ of literary and artistic movements between the two world wars.