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Valorisation of Mythological Female Characters  
in the Writings of Azama, Huston, Lemoine, and  
Py, at the Turn of the Century (1980–2020)\*

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Waloryzacja roli mitologicznych postaci kobiecych w interpretacjach  
Azamy, Huston, Lemoine'a oraz Py z przełomu wieków (1980–2020)

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**Abstract.** In mythological rewritings in French and Francophone theatre at the turn of the century, female characters are valorised compared to their counterparts in hypotexts. They obtain a more significant role through various processes. The aim of the paper is to explore this issue, and, above all, to examine how the foregrounding of female characters is achieved in the rewritings of *Enchaîné* [Bound] by Olivier Py, *Iphigénie ou le péché des dieux* [Iphigenia or the Sin of the Gods] by Michel Azama, *Jocasta reine* [Jocasta Regina] by Nancy Huston, and *Médée, poème enragé* [Medea, Written in Rage] by Jean-René Lemoine. These particular works have been selected, among others, because they are representative of the process of attributing more significance to mythological female characters.

**Keywords:** myths, women, French and Francophone theatre, the 20<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> century, Olivier Py, Michel Azama, Nancy Huston, Jean-René Lemoine

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\* The volume is funded from the budget of the Institute of Polish Studies of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, from the funds of the Minister of Science and Higher Education for activities promoting science (contract no. 615/P-DUN/2019) and under the “Support for Academic Journals” programme (contract no. 333/WCN/2019/1 of 28 August 2019). Publisher: Wydawnictwo UMCS.

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**Abstrakt.** W interpretacjach mitów antycznych w teatrze francuskim i frankofońskim z przełomu XX i XXI wieku postaci kobiece zyskują na znaczeniu w stosunku do ich pierwowzorów z hipotekstów. Dzieje się tak dzięki wykorzystaniu różnorodnych zabiegów. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przybliżenia tego zagadnienia, a przede wszystkim zbadania, w jaki sposób nadaje się większą wagę postaciom kobiecym w tragediach: *Enchaîné* autorstwa Oliviera Py, *Iphigénie ou le péché des dieux* Michela Azamy, *Jocasta reine* Nancy Huston oraz *Médée, poème enragé* Jean-René Lemoine'a. Utwory te wybrano między innymi z uwagi na ich reprezentatywny charakter w ukazywaniu waloryzacji roli postaci kobiecych wywodzących się z mitologii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** mity, kobiety, teatr francuski i frankofoński, przełom XX–XXI wieku, Oliver Py, Michel Azama, Nancy Huston, Jean-René Lemoine

To state that mythological female characters have more significance in contemporary rewritings would be too vague a generalisation. It seems more fruitful and interesting to scrutinize various ways and processes through which this is achieved, especially when the valorisation becomes crucial in reconceiving an ancient myth. It is therefore necessary to delimit the scope of study, which is very vast, by establishing precise criteria; to examine whether female figures contribute to a different extent to the story as it progresses and whether they break the mould; whether they themselves become central to the action, unlike in the hypotext; to study whether they bring a semantic renewal of the myth; and whether, how and why their characters evolve.

It is not self-evident that in all the rewritings, the role of female characters changes in the same way, or in an original and significant way. In some of the rewritings, the ancient myths are renewed by means of different procedures, which will not be discussed in this paper as they do not fall within its scope. Clearly, not every example of a myth being rewritten involves a reconception of the mythical subject matter, hypotexts, mythical characters and their status as the action progresses. This article presents some examples that are most significant for the reconception of female characters with regard to their status, their expression and their role in the unfolding of the action.

## WOMEN'S STATUS AND "FUNCTION" IN THE ANCIENT THEATRE

Although this subject seems too vast to be exhausted herein, we provide a broad outline of leading researchers' positions on it to have some frame of reference for the status of women in contemporary rewritings. One needs to admit that in ancient Greek drama, especially in the tragedies of Euripides, women held an important role. Why then speak of the valorisation of female characters in contemporary theatre? For

several reasons. Because, as demonstrated by numerous researchers, ancient Greek theatre had a civic and political aspect to it. According to Jean-Pierre Vernant, in the theatre of ancient Greece the precepts of the myth are conveyed through its heroes. Thus, the chorus expresses novel opinions of citizens while the hero represents the principles and ideals of the myths of yesteryear, established once by the old order, which the audience regards as a thing of the past. The internal conflict of the hero and the tragic aspect of the play is based on a large discrepancy between hero's own beliefs and new practices of the city-state to which he must submit. Being against it, he destroys himself<sup>1</sup> (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, 1982, pp. 25–28). Jacqueline de Romilly focuses on the role of the poet as a committed citizen: “Greek theatre could be an example to those who expect literature to be more than purely artistic pleasure, and who want the poet to be also a citizen engaged in the political reality, taking sides and serving a cause” [“Le theater grec a pu servir d'exemple à ceux qui, attendant de la literature autre chose qu'un plaisir purement artistique, et qui veulent que le poète soit aussi un citoyen, engage dans la réalité politique, prenant parti et servant une cause”]<sup>2</sup> (Romilly, 1982, p. 165). Not only does Christian Meier share this opinion, but he even wrote a book in which he explains how the political issues of the time, derived, on the one hand, from traditions, on the other hand, from the problems that citizens had to face, were presented and “discussed” on stage as a form of “political education.” Meier offers an interpretation of Greek tragedies based on political and civic issues that were contemporary with a period of their creation. The theatrical mask of the mythological subject allowed citizens to take a step back and approach the issue from a different angle. Through the mirror of the mythological depth, they could discern more clearly and with more certainty the situations “in question” in which they were called to decide (Meier, 1991, pp. 231–250). However, without denying the political function of Greek tragedy, Cornelius Castoriadis maintains that it constitutes only part of a much wider range of functions theatre played in the life and imagination of citizens (2008, pp. 135–153).

Yet subjects discussed on stage which had civic and political connotations concerned only half of the population, namely men. Women were excluded from managing the citizens' affairs. In this vein, studies conducted by Nicole Loraux reveal the status of women in ancient society of the city-state, which was also “reflected” in Greek tragedies. According to Loraux, there are two conditions governing the cause of women in a tragedy. First of all, a tragedy serves as a means of

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<sup>1</sup> This observation is valid for some tragedies, such as *Antigone* by Sophocles. In the play, a young woman defends the right to bury a dead body, an ancient tradition, in defiance of Creon, who on his own account forbids the burial representing authority and a new order.

<sup>2</sup> All the French quotations have been translated into English by the translator of the article [translator's note].

expression for those excluded (the Trojan captives, Andromache, Medea – a foreigner, Philoctetes, Ajax). Loraux considers the tragic intervention as anti-political: she defines as anti-political “attitudes which in fact violate the civic order” [des “attitudes qui excèdent de fait l’ordre civique”] (1999, p. 45). From there, the anti-politics takes on a double meaning: on the one hand, that of “female politics” [“politique au féminin”], and on the other hand, of “any behaviour which hinders a normal functioning of the city-state society, while it asserts itself as being genuinely political, but political in an anti sense – with one policy being opposed to another” [“tout comportement refusant le fonctionnement ordinaire de la cité, et de tels comportements se revendiquent comme authentiquement politiques, mais politiques sur le mode de l’anti – d’une politiques’ opposant à une autre”] (1999, p. 46). As a result, in ancient tragedy behaviours which society limited, or even rejected, since they hampered its functioning, are shown on stage. For example, the mourning of women in the *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba* by Euripides, the excluded in *Philoctetes* and *Ajax* by Sophocles. Loraux maintains that Attic drama “dramatises, for the use of the citizens, the essence of exclusions in the city-state” [“dramatise, à l’usage des citoyens, l’essentiel des exclusions auxquelles procède la cité”] (1990, p. 21). She also maintains that “such a representation of mourning, as a weapon, constitutes the tragedy in engaged theatre” [“cette représentation du deuil, comme une arme, constitue la tragédie en théâtre engagé”] (1999, pp. 26–27).

On the other hand, Loraux notices that in Greek tragedy women’s threnody is always associated with the nightingale’s song. The myth of the nightingale implies that a woman is guilty of her own misfortune. By equating all female moans with the song of the nightingale, all female lamentation is surreptitiously impregnated with guilt (Loraux, 1990, pp. 87–100). Therefore, we cannot maintain that the presence of women in ancient drama implies that their condition is seen as more important, quite the opposite seems true.

### REWRITING AS A CRITICAL ACT

The most recent works on intertextuality have stressed that the author of a hypertext is first and foremost a reader, sometimes critical, of its hypotext. In his article *La réécriture comme poétique ou le même et l’autre* [Rewriting as Poetics or the Same and the Other], Henri Béhar supports this thesis by analysing the poetic rereading by Jacques Roubaud in *Autobiographie chapitre dix* [Autobiography Chapter Ten] of *Corps et biens* [Body and Goods] by Desnos (1981, pp. 56–59).

Similarly, it is possible that the author becomes both a commentator and a creator – a critic-creator. In this regard, Georges Steiner observes that: “Any serious

form of art, music, and literature is a critical act” [“Toute forme sérieuse d’art, de musique, de littérature, est un acte critique”] (1991, p. 30). He also notes that: “Literature and the arts are also criticism in a more specific, more practical sense. They provide a reflection, a value judgment on their heritage and their context” [“La littérature et les arts sont aussi une critique dans un sens plus spécifique, plus pratique. Ils exposent une réflexion, un jugement de valeurs sur l’héritage et le contexte qui sont les leurs”] (1991, p. 31).

By questioning the past, a text to come is endowed with a critical vision on its classical hypotext. Additionally, it is enriched since it takes into account the knowledge and mentalities of modern times. It is precisely this contribution, so precious and interesting from a critical point of view, which, in fact, governs all the works examined herein.

#### REWRITING AND RESIGNIFYING [*RESÉMANTISATION*] OF THE MYTHICAL CONTENT

In some rewritings, the emancipation of the female character leads to a rereading of the myth, which modifies its semantic content. Thus the tragedies *Jocasta reine* [Joacasta Regina] by Nancy Huston, and *Iphigénie ou le péché des dieux* [*Iphigenia or the Sin of the Gods*] by Michel Azama can be named as representative examples.

#### *JOCASTA REINE* BY NANCY HUSTON

The tragedy *Jocasta reine* by Nancy Huston was inspired by the classical Oedipus myth. Published in 2009, the piece was written at the request of the Swiss stage director, Gisèle Sallin. It was performed for the first time in 2009, in Freiburg and it has been played regularly in several French and Francophone theatres ever since. Jean Siag shares some quotes from a telephone interview he conducted with Nancy Huston: “She wrote me a letter [Gisèle Sallin], in which she said that for a very long time she had dreamed of creating a play revolving around the character of Jocasta. [...] She told me that she had remained silent for 2,500 years and that she had to be given a voice” [“Elle m’a écrit une lettre [Gisèle Sallin] où elle me disait qu’elle rêvait depuis longtemps de créer une pièce autour du personnage de Jocaste. [...] Elle me disait qu’elle était restée silencieuse depuis 2500 ans et qu’il fallait lui donner la parole”] (Siag, 2013). Unlike in its hypotext, *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, this time, the main role is given to Jocasta, Oedipus’ wife (and mother), who becomes the central figure in the story. It also includes a long

argument that leads to deconstructing the elements that make up the ancient knot, based on the oracle. Jocasta criticises the oracles and the gods on many occasions. She says to her daughter Antigone:

JOCASTE:

Tu as raison.

Depuis toujours, voyant un mal,  
les humains en cherchent le remède au ciel,  
alors que c'est sur terre qu'il faut chercher...

Les dieux, au lieu de nous inciter à l'entraide,  
sèment entre nous soupçon, discorde et haine,  
nous dressent les uns contre les autres,  
nous mentent effrontément ! Ah ! il aurait mieux fait,

Laïos, de ne jamais aller à Delphes !<sup>3</sup> (Huston, 2009, pp. 67–68)

When a plague descends on Thebes, Oedipus sends Creon to Delphi to seek advice from the gods. However, Jocasta is of a different opinion:

JOCASTE:

Oh ! siçavous amuse...

Les dieux s'amuseent sûrement aussi,

Mais ils n'y sont pour rien dans cette histoire.

La peste n'est ni mystère, ni malédiction, mais maladie. L'un attrape, son souffle la transmet à ses proches, et les rats font le reste : voilà l'épidémie ! Franche, claire, fatale, elle appelle des solutions fermes et sèches : organiser les soins des souffrants, les séparer des bien-portants, assainir les sources, s'acharner sur la vermine : travaux trop bas pour les rois, sans doute ? Trop humbles exigeants trop de patience ? (Huston, 2009, p. 21)

Yet, the deconstruction of the oracle with its implications is attributed not only to Jocasta. Coryphaeus' contribution is also acknowledged. He wonders about the gods and their curse. At this point, it is worth making a digression about the main events in the myth. When Jocasta is pregnant with Oedipus, her husband, Laius, consults the oracle, who says that if he has a son, he will kill his father and marry his mother. When the baby is born, Laius orders a servant to tie the newborn's feet together and to leave him on the mountainside of Cithaeron. A shepherd who finds the abandoned baby saves him and brings him to Polybus, the king of Corinth, who does not have children of his own and who raises the boy as his own son. Polybus names the baby Oedipus, which means "the one with swollen feet." When Oedipus grows up, he consults Pythia, who gives him an oracle according to which he will

<sup>3</sup> To retain the original structure and rhythm of the passages quoted from the plays analysed in the paper, the citations have been left in the source language [translator's note].

kill his father, and marry his mother. He decides thus to flee Corinth. On his way, at the crossroads, he meets an old man on a chariot who prevents him from passing. They quarrel and Oedipus kills the man. The old man was Laius, the king of Thebes, and his real father. Upon arriving in Thebes, Oedipus meets Sphinx who puts him the famous riddle which he solves. The relieved people of Thebes proclaim him the king, and he also marries the widowed queen, Jocasta. They have four children. About twenty years after these events, a plague comes upon Thebes. The oracle predicts that the plague will only end when the murderer of their former king, Laius, is brought to justice. Oedipus starts then searching for the murderer.

In the rewriting, the Coryphaeus leading the chorus, first of all, emphasizes the fact that the gods waited about twenty years following the murder of Laius to put their curse on Thebes (1991, p. 48). Next, he notices another inconsistency of the myth: when the young Oedipus, who still lives at the court of Corinth, learns from a drunken young man that he is not the son of Polybus and Merope, he visits the temple of Delphi to find out the truth about his origin. The oracle foretells that he will kill his father and marry his own mother. However, the oracle does not answer the question Oedipus asks to find out who his parents are. Instead, it tells Oedipus that he will kill his father and sleep with his own mother. Until that moment, Oedipus had doubts as to whether Polybus and Merope were his true parents. But the moment he hears the oracle of Pythia, even though it is really vague and does not answer his question, he becomes certain that Polybus and Merope truly are his parents, and he decides to leave Corinth forever. The text is revealing in this respect:

#### LE CORYPHÉE

Tu demandes quel est ton passé,

elle te raconte ton avenir

Tu demandes qui sont tes parents,

elle te raconte ce que tu feras avec.

Et ensuite tu te comportes comme si

elle t'avait effectivement répondu ! (Huston, 2009, p. 59)

The third inconsistency of the text is the lack of communication between the two spouses concerning the most important events, prior to their meeting, such as the first baby of Jocasta, abandoned on the mountain with his ankles pierced, the oracle which demands his death, the murder of Laius, the oracle which forces Oedipus to flee Corinth, the same as the one Laius received long before. None of these major subjects, which could lead to a more transparent conception of reality, are ever discussed by the two spouses. What is more, it should be pondered why no one in the palace ever speaks to Oedipus about his predecessor, or the past oracles which Laius received; How is it possible that Oedipus never asks about how Laius died and no one ever mentions

the circumstances of Laius' murder? These inconsistencies are identified, brought to light, discussed at length, and analysed eloquently (Huston, 2009, pp. 63–66).

Such remarks change the view of the reader or member of the audience about the essence of this myth, which weighs heavily on human destiny. The ancient myth implied the guilt of Oedipus, who gouges his eyes out, and of Jocasta, who commits suicide in the hypotext of Sophocles. However, the rewriting sets the record straight and these two characters, victims of an inexplicable decision of the gods about their fate, are absolved partially of their blame. Criticising the mythical material through questions asked about the events, the audience is brought to a new reception and interpretation of the mythical content.

### *IPHIGÉNIE OU LE PÉCHÉ DES DIEUX* BY MICHEL AZAMA

The myth on Iphigenia is based, above all, on the tragedy *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Euripides, which tells a story of Iphigenia being immolated so that favourable winds could blow and the Greek fleet could set sail for Troy to retrieve the beautiful Helen. In this context, the seer Calchas reveals that the goddess Artemis got angry with Agamemnon, the head of the army and Iphigenia's father, after he had killed a sacred stag of the goddess during a hunt. To appease the goddess and to make her let the winds blow, Iphigenia must be sacrificed.

At the beginning of Euripides' play, the young woman refuses to sacrifice herself. However, later she gives in to pressure from people surrounding her and changes her mind. As a result, she decides to wilfully go to the sacrificial altar, to contribute with her own death to the common cause. This is only Euripides' interpretation as Aeschylus does not depict Iphigenia's consent. The text of Euripides turns the myth into a symbol of the Greeks unifying against a common enemy. Edouard Delebecque highlights allusions to the political situation (1951, pp. 363–388); the Athenians were to face the Persians, who, at the time, were making an expedition targeting Greece. Except for references to Corinth, Chalcis, Argos and Sparta, it seems that the theme that Euripides was most concerned about was the danger from the Barbarians, embodied by the Persian king Cyrus the Younger, to whom Sparta had got closer in order to receive subsidies (Jouan, p. 42). What is more, it is also possible that Cyrus the Younger managed to lure Athenian sailors to Samos (Jouan, p. 43). In his tragedy, siding with the Greeks, Euripides calls for a panhellenic union against the Barbarians. The allusions to the common interest are quite numerous:

Agamemnon calls himself the "panhellenic" leader (see 414); he commands, alongside his brother, a "common army" of the Greeks (see 1591). Undoubtedly, the idea of a common expedition

can be found both in the *Iliad* and in Thucydides' account (I, 3, 9); but the poet's insistence shows that he develops an essential idea: he has very strong feelings on the Greek community getting united by the same panhellenic interests and patriotism. (Delebecque, 1951, pp. 374–375)<sup>4</sup>

Euripides' text thus recalls this glorious past. It is a reminder of the ancient unification of the Greeks against their past enemy, the Trojans, and therefore it suggests their path against their current enemy, the Persians.

Yet the Iphigenia of Michel Azama does not see her immolation in this way. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Azama retells the story of Iphigenia in Aulis to refer to contemporary problems. Behind its theatrical mask of a myth, the rewriting identifies the wounds of contemporary society; the causes and pretexts for today's wars, young people's deaths, and potential hypocrisy of decision-makers.

In the introduction, the author shares with us his concerns:

With Iphigenia, this army waiting to go to war is once again all the swords of Damocles hanging over the head of humanity. To say that this old myth is still new, what a truism! Invading a country – committing genocide – executing the youth to the sound of patriotic hymns... The gods themselves are not absent from our star wars: the Christian God – the Jewish God – the Muslim God (and if we are told they are all the same, this is even greater derision), the gods are always there to persuade us of the famous “historical necessity.” It is not that nothing has changed, it is just that everything has become worse: every day somewhere in the modern world thousands of Iphigenias are sacrificed. (Azama, 1991, pp. 7–8)<sup>5</sup>

In Azama's rewriting, Iphigenia denounces the real motives for her death as futile and mean. Tension between the gods who decide about Iphigenia's death and the fate of mortals; and by extension, between those who take decisions concerning wars and people who die in them. The gods are all accused as decision-makers of an atrocious act. Shortly before her death, against which she fights until the very last moment, once again she tears down the veil of hypocrisy:

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<sup>4</sup> “Agamemnon se fait appeler le chef des »Panhellènes« (see 414); il commande, avec son frère, une »armée commune« de Grecs (see 1591). Sans doute cette idée d'expédition en commun se trouve-t-elle dans l'*Iliade* et dans Thucydide (I, 3, 9); mais l'insistance du poète montre qu'il développe une idée essentielle : il a le sentiment très vif d'une communauté grecque unie par les mêmes intérêts et le même patriotisme panhelléniques.”

<sup>5</sup> “Avec Iphigénie, cette armée qui attend de partir à la guerre, c'est une fois de plus toutes les épées de Damoclès suspendues au-dessus de la tête de l'humanité. Que ce vieux mythe soit toujours neuf, quelle lapalissade ! Envahir un pays – accomplir un génocide – exécuter la jeunesse au son d'hymnes patriotiques... Les dieux eux-mêmes ne sont pas absents de nos guerres des étoiles : Dieu chrétien – Dieu juif – Dieu musulman (et si on nous dit que c'est le même, la dérision n'en est que plus grande), les dieux sont toujours là pour nous persuader de la fameuse »nécessité historique«. Ce n'est pas que rien n'ait changé, c'est que tout est devenu pire: chaque jour dans un lieu du monde moderne s'accomplit le sacrifice de milliers d'Iphigénie.”

IPHIGÉNIE

Ne faites pas de moi

Une statue enterrée par les siècles.

Faites de moi

Ce que je suis:

Morte pour la guerre pour le plaisir des dieux

Morte pour rien

Et ma vie fut bien plus et bien moins qu'une vie. (Azama, 1991, p. 67)

At the moment of her death, Iphigenia laments how little value her life represents for those in charge, those hidden behind the theatrical mask of the gods and ancient characters. Her threnody juxtaposes the value of one's life with political goals which are sometimes accomplished by means of wars. She regrets that her life is to be abruptly ended, and there is no ideology, no higher destiny which can comfort her. In this rewriting, Iphigenia is given an opportunity to speak and she denounces the frivolous motives for wars, and those leaders, those political decision-makers who sacrifice pointlessly the youth of their nations. She is an Iphigenia who fights, Iphigenia who goes to the sacrificial altar and all this not for any common cause, but because she cannot flee this atrocious world immolating her youth.

#### WHEN FEMALE CHARACTERS REVIVE THE ACTION

In some of the rewritings of our times, they find themselves in a position to initiate the story on their own. This is the case of the monologue *Médée, poème enragé* [*Medea, Written in Rage*] by Jean-René Lemoine, or of the Oceanids in Olivier Py's play *Enchaîné* [*Bound*], which are both studied below.

#### *MÉDÉE, POÈME ENRAGÉ* BY JEAN-RENÉ LEMOINE

In this rewriting, the eponymous heroine is the only character in the play. Her monologue is presented in several voices and through her story she evokes other mythological characters. However, by telling their stories on her own, she does it as she pleases, emphasising little-known or ignored facts, influenced by her own feelings about the events she is referring to.

Medea begins her monologue by recounting her adolescence spent in her father's kingdom. She relates three kinds of events: well-known ones, such as the gesture she makes with Jason and the conquest of the Golden Fleece, her flight, her mad love for Jason, her abandonment by Jason, the murder of her own children; lesser-known

events, such as her life with the king of Athens, Aegeus, after her escaping from Corinth; and some fictitious events involving members of her family, such as her conflict with her parents, an almost incestuous relationship with her brother Apsyrtus, and dialogues with her nanny. In her monologue, Medea tells the myth from her point of view, in praise of her life, her acts, and her words. She assumes:

J'avance, fragile, sur les tessons de mon passé. La pureté, la perfection du crime. Tous mes souvenirs sont atroces. On voudrait ne pas commencer. Rewind, please, rewind. Stop. Je suis la plus coupable et la plus misérable. Pas de pardon pour moi, ni remise de peine, ni morphine, ni camisole, je hais tous les compromis, non, non, pas de grâce pour la magicienne, plongez le glaive dans mon ventre, d'un coup. Je vous le dis, que d'innocence, que d'innocence dans ce naufrage ! Qu'ai-je fait d'autre qu'aimer celui qui ne m'a pas aimé ? (Lemoine, 2013, p. 14)

She talks about her family, her love, her relationship, problems of each period of her life. It seems almost a psychological approach, psychoanalytic discourse, as in the extract below:

est-ce ma faute si je l'aime comme au premier soir, comme au premier matin ? Où est-il ? Allez le chercher, pitié, dites-lui que Médée va mourir ! Dites-lui qu'il la tue, dites-lui que l'apatride est prête à reprendre la route, je refuse l'asile, tous les laissez-passer, demandez-lui pourquoi il me quitte, est-ce pour l'argent ? Est-ce une fatalité d'être mises au rancart quand nous leur avons tout donné ? J'ai fait de toi une divinité, j'ai tout quitté, plus de parents, concubine prisonnière à Corinthe, déchet. (Lemoine, 2013, pp. 28–29)

A detailed retelling of her story, relentless, over and over, to extremes, until the moment of her moral downfall, in order to please Jason (p. 35). Nevertheless, her narration follows the chronological order and is enriched in two ways; on the one hand, she describes her feelings provoked by each event she recounts, on the other, her descriptions are interspersed with scenes and objects from her current life. Therefore, there are swimming pools, “beauty cases,” hotels, bedside tables, books, white lace and the like emerging in her narrative. This fusion of the mythological past with the objects and places of today brings the myth to contemporaneity. As a result, behind its theatrical mask of the myth, it becomes a suitable material for talking about current issues affecting families and couples, and thus to dispose of them; a means of catharsis, relatively speaking.

Medea is in charge of the whole story and has the space she needs to talk about everything: her experiences as a daughter, a lover, a wife, an abandoned woman, and a stranger. In the play, the myth is rewritten by emancipated Medea. She expresses herself freely, she provides her own version and interpretation of events, and she displays to the viewer a thorough examination of psychological repercussions of those events, from her own point of view.

## THE OCEANIDS

The role of the chorus of Oceanids seems to be along the same lines in the rewriting of the myth of Prometheus by Olivier Py. In his retelling of the story entitled *Enchaîné* [*Bound*], it is the chorus of Oceanids which acquires more importance. In its hypotext, the tragedy *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, the chorus of Oceanids is presented as fearful and reticent. They sympathise with the martyrdom of Prometheus, but they do not dispute the authority of Zeus. Quite the contrary, they suggest that the hero should be more humble. They reproach Prometheus for his “*eleutherostomein*” (see 180), for “speaking freely.” Responding to Prometheus’ objections, the Oceanids reprimand him: “You are too proud” [“*Tu es trop fier*”], “Your mouth is too free,” [“*aganeleutherosotmeis*”], they tell him. Ioanna Papadopoulou-Belhmedi maintains that “fear” [“the phobos”] of the Oceanids, the tragic phobos, arose from the “contradiction between ties and free words” [“contradiction entre liens et paroles libres”] (Papadopoulos-Belhmedi, 2003, p. 59).

However, in the rewriting of Olivier Py, the chorus acquires more importance in two ways. First of all, it takes up all the part added at the end of the play subtitled *Prométhée délivré, Un épilogue* [*Unbound Prometheus, An Epilogue*], which is pure invention of the author. This subtitle obviously constitutes a direct allusion to the lost play by Aeschylus’ under the same title. It is the last play in the Prometheia trilogy. In the rewriting, this part deals with deeper reflections on the human condition and power (Py, 2012, pp. 107–111). The Oceanids become pivotal to the narrative. By developing their reasoning and imagining different humanity, they suggest that Hermes become the god of language. They say:

Hermès est aussi enchaîné au pouvoir de Zeus, il voudrait être autre chose qu’un porte-voix, il voudrait être la parole ! Il voudrait qu’on dise: au commencement était Hermès. (Py, 2012, p. 108)

The gods must give this “poet’s weapon” [“l’arme du poète”], as named by Olivier Py, “a weapon stronger than lightning” [“l’arme plus forte que la foudre”] (p. 108) to humans. This is the topic of the conversation between the Oceanids and Hermes.

LE CHŒUR D’OCÉANIDES. Zeus n’est pas autre chose que son terrible père, Kronos, tant que son pouvoir est fait de violence. Il a régné par la foudre, il mourra par la foudre.

HERMÈS. Qui connaît une arme plus grande que sa foudre ?

<sup>6</sup> *thrasus*, see 178.

<sup>7</sup> See 180.

LE CHŒUR D'OCÉANIDES. Le poète.

HERMÈS. Quelle est cette arme ?

LE CHŒUR D'OCÉANIDES. La parole.

HERMÈS. Comment manier cette arme ?

LE CHŒUR D'OCÉANIDES. C'est aux dieux de donner la parole. [...]

HERMÈS. Qu'est-ce que je serais moi dans cette alliance ?

LE CHŒUR D'OCÉANIDES. Le dieu de la parole, non pas seulement le messager des dieux, non pas cette parole qui tombe comme la foudre, qui assourdit comme le tonnerre, mais le dieu de la possibilité du dire, le dieu de la parole même, le dieu de cette parole qui, comme les vagues, éternelle, toujours recommence, toujours finit...

HERMÈS. Je serais le dieu de la parole ?

LE CHŒUR DES OCÉANIDES. Et Zeus, ton roi, sera le roi d'un monde qui peut se dire. Apollon a jeté la lumière sur le monde et les choses sont apparues. On ne les voyait pas dans la nuit titanesque. Et maintenant, il reste que l'on peut les nommer.

HERMÈS. Je ne comprends pas. (Py, 2012, pp. 108–109)

Hermes comes to accept the Oceanids' idea as his own. At the end, the play offers a prediction that Hermes will succeed in convincing Zeus, which represents a final victory for the humankind.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the above analysis, it is clear that in the studied rewritings the roles of female characters are valorised in a number of ways. Almost everywhere, women's roles are extended. However, there is also a semantic aspect to this extension. It allows for free expression, which goes hand in hand with the emancipation of mythological characters taking responsibility for themselves and arguing their own cases. What is more, the narrative is transformed to such an extent that a woman becomes pivotal to its progression. For example, when in the rewriting of the myth of Prometheus by Olivier Py, the Oceanids proclaim Hermes the god of language. It is often the case that female characters question and challenge the myth. In Azama's rewriting, by re-reading the myth, Iphigenia challenges it at the same time. She challenges decisions of those in charge, including politicians, regarding wars, as well as her father's authority. Similarly, Jocasta in Nancy Huston's retelling of the story, contests the core of the myth. Such modifications of the ancient matrix lead to redefinitions of the mythological content, as shown above. Finally, a large number of rewritings of Medea,<sup>8</sup> the most retold myth of all, is an overview of today's prob-

<sup>8</sup> On the rewritings of the myth of Medea in contemporary theatre, see, among others, the study by Florence Fix (2010).

lems of couples, of the other, of women, of foreigners, as Medea is both a woman and a foreigner. This mythological figure undertakes to talk, or rather shout about the current problems of couples, in a primitive way that civilization has repressed for good. Myths keep feeding imagination and reflection of authors, directors and the contemporary audience. It seems that the great omnitemporal issues myths dealt with, or better yet, ancient writings of the fourth and fifth centuries BC, are still relevant in today's world, which to better understand itself sometimes takes a look in the mirror of ancient texts adapted to contemporary needs. Female figures depicted in contemporary rewritings sometimes bring a different perspective on myths of yesteryear.

*Translated into English: Agnieszka Stawecka-Kotula*

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Article submission date: 31.03.2020

Date qualified for printing after reviews: 03.06.2020