Various aspects of love in the theatre of Jean Cocteau

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THE VARIOUS ASPECTS OF LOVE
IN THE THEATRE OF JEAN COCTEAU

By

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.  EARLY EFFORTS AND EXPERIMENTATION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. LOVE IN A MAGIC GARDEN</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. LOVE BEFFTS THE IDEALISTS, THE REVOLUTIONARIES AND THE POETS</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. MOTHERS AND LOVERS</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOOTNOTES</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

EARLY EFFORTS AND EXPERIMENTATIONS

My thesis will treat the varying aspects of love in the plays of Jean Cocteau (1889-1963). In this chapter which will serve as an introduction, I shall consider the earlier and less important of Cocteau's plays. These early works are the literary efforts of a young artist trying to find himself. Cocteau will remain too much of an eclectic. He will never adopt a special style. He does, however, in his later plays, begin to consider concrete questions in their universal as well as particular content. In his early plays, nothing is too deeply discussed. For this reason I shall discuss the early contributions as a background to the later works. I shall not concentrate on the subject of love, but I shall discuss the plays generally, pointing out various tendencies and characteristics which continue to be evident in the playwright's later work.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

There are those who think of Cocteau as the enfant terrible of the century, full of sound and not too much fury, a juggler of words and styles, an entertainer with a bag full of tricks. He was the young poet of the pre-World War I period who was influenced by the romanticism of Anne de Noailles and the experimental vigor and force of Apollinaire. Jean Cocteau, reminiscing in Le Parisienne, said of those years, "Ce sont les neiges d'antan."1

This was the time of dadaism and of Breton's surrealist manifestoes. The young artists breaking away from the old literary regime
of prewar Europe, were searching for new answers to old questions and were preoccupied by the need to discover new forms of expression. In his search for the unusual and the fresh, Cocteau created Parade (1917), Le Boeuf Sur le Toit (1920), Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel (1921). He summarizes his artistic efforts of that time in this way:

Ils étaient les véhicules d'une entreprise ambitieuse: sauver la scène française coûte que coûte, exploiter les ressources du théâtre en soi, négliger jusqu'à nouvel ordre la littérature dramatique en faveur d'une beauté qui ne peut se mouvoir hors les planches.2

However, in spite of Cocteau's early divertissements whose character was superficial and experimental, simply there to shock and surprise, the poet will move on to more serious undertakings. Without ever losing his ability to be a clown of words and motions or his need to delight, he will set out in his later works to confront serious philosophical problems and to seek answers, or at least, to ask questions of a more universal nature.

It is of his later works that I shall write further on in my presentation. I shall concentrate on specific themes of Cocteau as they are developed in Orphée (1925) and the stage productions that followed and as they culminate in Bacchus (1952).

I shall talk only in passing of Cocteau's other creative contributions such as his poems, critiques, paintings, letters, or more popular film productions. To examine them all is to go far beyond the scope of this endeavor. Each one of his separate experiments in artistic form should be examined separately as a complete unit and end in itself.

One cannot think of Cocteau's early contributions, or should I say pre-Orphée contributions, without thinking of dadaism and the mu-
tations that sprouted from it. I would like to quote Tristan Tzara, the master-mind of dadaism, concerning the goals of his new-found move-
ment:

Démoraliser partout et jeter la main du ciel en enfer, les yeux de l'enfer au ciel, rétablir la roue féconde d'un cirque universel dans les puissances réelles et la fantasie de chaque individu.

Parade and Les Mariées de la Tour Eiffel are indeed a "universal circus." They were, along with Le Boeuf Sur le Toit (or the Nothing Doing Bar), the offspring of Cocteau in collaboration with other rebel artists representing various arts. The music was by Eric Satie and Darius Milhaud, the sets by Pablo Picasso, costumes by Jean Hugo, choreography by the Ballets Suédois of M. Rolf de Mare, just to name a few.

The result was interesting. If we take as an example Les Mariées de la Tour Eiffel the result is a fantastic tableau, a surrealistic amalgamation of all arts, mixed in a witch's cauldron. Characters become one with objects which, in their turn, take human dimensions. An ostrich walks around the stage having escaped from a photographer's camera, the humanized phonographs comment on the insane happenings that get more weird every moment.

It is the objects which become the links between the playwright and the audience. The camera of Les Mariées becomes a source of all kinds of unexpected things. Any sense of reality is completely lost and merged with the photographer-poet's imagination. The pace is quick and the treatment is brutal. The whole impression is defined by the intensity which shocks the sensibility of the audience. One gets the feeling that the totality of the presentation is seen through the quick click of the camera, as if telescoping a reality within a reality.
The playwright makes no attempt to create what E. M. Forster calls "round" characters. Whether it is a question of the lion that comes out of the photographer's camera or whether it is a question of the talking phonograph, the whole thing is nothing but a reflection of an illusion. Cocteau presents a spectacle of objets disparates that their only sense of unity lies in the fact that they are all deviations from standard reality, trying to ridicule the banality of the status quo.

It is rather difficult to summarize the story of Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel since there is no plot. The central ingredient of this theatrical impression is a wedding party which comes to be photographed on the Eiffel Tower. Using love and marriage as his point of departure, Cocteau tries to state his views on life. But although his views on the futility of life, love, and the destructiveness of war might be important, his approach lacks depth and seriousness. Other ingredients, like dance and music, prevent the spectator from concentrating on possible grave questions.

The playwright stresses one point, however, and that is that existence is a mirage, a mirage of a possible reality which escapes us. When Phono Un worries that maybe the poor general will be eaten by the lion that escaped the camera, Phono Deux says:

*N'ayez pas peur. Il ne peut y avoir de lion sur la Tour Eiffel. Donc, c'est un mirage, un simple mirage. Les mirages sont en quelque sorte le mensonge du désert. Ce lion est en Afrique comme la cycliste était sur la route de Chatou. Ce lion me voit, je le vois, et nous ne sommes l'un pour l'autre que des reflets.*

But in spite of his occasional contact with deeper meanings—an indication of which is seen in the above quotation—the poet remains fascinated by superficial effects. The same thing occurs in Parade.
The audience never identifies with the characters. Actually there are no characters with which to identify. Everything is changeable, mobile, but never quite real. Actual life and reality are eluding the poet, and they always will be, even in his more mature work which follows these *bagatelles*. In the introduction to *Les Mariés* Cocteau writes, "Puisque ces mystères nous dépassent, feignons d'en être l'organisateur."\(^5\)

He never quite becomes *l'organisateur*. He remains the clown and the entertainer. He keeps his audience awake by keeping them guessing, and looking for the next trap. Grossvogel, speaking of Cocteau's *Les Mariés*, describes it as "a series of free associations derived from interlinking puns."\(^6\) Cocteau himself summarizes his theatrical intentions of the early 20's:

> Le secret du théâtre, qui nécessite le succès rapide, est de tendre une piège, grâce auquel une partie de la salle s'amuse à la porte pour que l'autre puisse prendre place à l'intérieur. Shakespeare, Molière, Chaplin le savent bien.\(^7\)

Cocteau is so concerned with techniques, he neglects content. His interest at this time is to set theatrical traps which will captivate the attention of the audience.

In his search for the novel, the different, or perhaps in his search to find a deeper self, Cocteau decides to rewrite the classics. Like others before him as well as after, he becomes interested in the Greek classics and especially in the Theban trilogy.

He also becomes interested in Shakespeare and he wants to create a new version of Romeo and Juliet. He does so and he calls it his "prétexte à mise en scène." Unfortunately it is, indeed, only a *prétexte*. Very little remains of the beauty of probably the world's best known love story.
The feud among the members of the warring houses has lost its passion in Roméo et Juliette. The characters lack life. Cocteau's characteristic problem in projecting into his audience is never more apparent than in this play. Roméo et Juliette is a bad play without Shakespeare's thematic depth and concern with character. Cocteau's lovers seem devoid of both their beauty and their purpose.

But in spite of rather obvious faults of character development many sensitive dramatic characteristics are evident—which Cocteau will develop later in his more mature plays. The poet-hero, for instance, is outlined in the character of Roméo. He is always aloof, separated from the other youths. He is different. He seems to live on another plane. In one of the stage directions to the play Cocteau describes him: "Tous les jeunes gens élégants de Verone auront certain démarche agressive, la main sur la garde de l'épée. Roméo seul ne suit pas cette mode et marche comme endormi."

Romeo the dreamer, Romeo the Montagu, with the heart of a poet, falls in love with a girl promised to another man from the enemy's camp. The theme of the Shakespearean play appealed to Cocteau, if for no other reason than that it speaks of the impossibility of love.

The young, innocent love of Roméo and Juliette does not fit in the corrupt society of endless fighting and the feuding for a false sense of pride. In spite of their efforts to make love survive, the young lovers get involved in a series of complications. For example, Juliette is promised by her parents to another man. It is not life that will offer them a place for their love. It is death. Cocteau will be more seriously concerned about love in death in later plays which we shall discuss, such as L'Aigle À Deux Têtes and Orphée.
In this early play, however, Cocteau does not add anything new to the Shakespearean concept. In fact, he claims in his notes of 1926:

Je voulais opérer un drame de Shakespeare, trouver l'os sous les ornements. J'ai donc choisi le drame le plus orné, le plus enrubanné.\(^9\)

But after one reads it, one is more apt to agree with Joseph Chiari who states that Cocteau, "in search of the bone, reduced the most moving poetry to an ossuary."\(^10\)

The Theban tragedy of Oedipus and his family has become the source of many an artist's inspection. Cocteau will write three plays based on the Oedipus legend. In this chapter I shall talk briefly about the first two, Oedipe-Roi and Antigone. The third play, La Machine Infernale, is, by far, the more mature. In retrospect the first two seem tentative sketches for the creation of the third.

Although Oedipe-Roi was completed a month after Orphée, it definitely belongs with Antigone which was produced three years earlier. In his introduction to the publication of Oedipe-Roi and Roméo et Juliette, Cocteau claims that: "J'ai mis Antigone au rythme de notre époque. Oedipe c'est la méthode d'Antigone après l'expérience du théâtre."\(^11\)

This is the period during which Cocteau is interested "À retendre un vieux chef-d'œuvre, le dérider, déblayer ses matières mortes, enlever la patine."\(^12\) Obviously the patina is necessary to the old masterpieces. Cocteau's two Greek adaptations are sadly lacking in depth. Cocteau's state innovations, although different, are not necessarily important. The chorus becomes a voice hidden behind a statue. Although
this is quite impressive at first, it does not allow the pathos of the Greek tragedy. Cocteau is still more interested in the impression than the depth of his plays. Elements that will become important in his more mature plays are only lightly touched here. I partially agree with Grossvogel when he labels Cocteau's theater, "a theater of surfaces." Cocteau has formed some thought-provoking statements in his theater, but they are not to be found in these early plays.

Antigone, Gassner says in his essay entitled "The Annihilators," "is little more than a sketch upon which Honneger could fashion his music and Picasso his designs." Picasso's designs present the chorus as "cinq têtes monumentales de jeunes hommes en plâtre." The costumes by G. Chanel "se mettaient sur des maillots noirs dont les bras et les jambes étaient recouverts. L'ensemble évoquait un carnaval sordide et royal, une famille d'insectes."

The whole impression is that of a surrealist painting whose dadaist presence tells of a world where innocence has come to an end. In the play the life of the heroic Antigone comes to an end. Her only crime was her sense of justice according to the laws of the gods and not the laws of men. But all these questions have already been discussed by Sophocles. Cocteau, by adapting the play to a new rhythm, to the atmosphere of the times, does not add anything to the main substance. He does, however, use the classic premise for his own statements which will be better presented in later plays.

The central figure in Antigone represents a saint and poet concept which has always been such a favorite with Cocteau. She rises above the laws of men and she perishes, a victim of society's inexorable and inflexible rules. Although individuals like Antigone are set apart
by society. They are also destroyed by society which refuses to accept anyone who does not fit the pattern which society itself dictates.

But it is not just society that kills saints like Antigone. It is also the gods who set traps for humans to fall in. Cocteau will develop this idea more concretely in *La Machine Infernale*. Le Choeur tells Antigone as she is walking to her death, "Mais dépêche-toi donc, la vengeance des dieux galope." The same feeling is expressed by Créon who is presented as the tool of society and the gods. He finds that he cannot help himself. He is simply there as a gadget which turns the screw that determines Antigone's fate. He says: "Un dieu me tenait à la gorge, un dieu me poussait dans le dos. Toute la maison du bonheur s'étouffe sur moi." 17

Antigone, goaded by her fate, dies alone while society watches impassively, making no effort to prevent her death. The only one who makes an effort to prevent it is young Hémon, Créon's son, who loves Antigone. Here, only in passing, does Cocteau touch the subject of love. It is the sad, impossible love of a young man who tries unsuccessfully to save Antigone.

It is sad that people like Antigone, guided from love as well as duty to do well by their fellow men, have no chance to be loved. Although the subject of love is barely touched here, it is obvious that in the legislated world of Créon, love does not have a place. Perhaps love is too much of a poet's concept to become an everyday reality. The tragic results of Hémon's efforts to save Antigone are only too well known to anyone who has read Sophocles' play. Hémon commits suicide by Antigone's dead body.

Cocteau treats *Oedipe-Roi* the same way he treats Antigone. He
follows very closely Sophocles' play. He was obviously pleased with the result of Antigone's presentation, because the treatment is similar. The emphasis is more on the surfaces and the mise en scène than on the depth and breadth of the play. As soon as the curtain rises, the attention of the audience is focused on a golden statue draped in red. From its open mouth the voice of the chorus will be heard. The Prologue will soon walk on the stage and he will give a résumé of the play. He is the voice of the statue dressed in a dinner jacket. His presentation is very much like that of a news commentator. Clipped, dispassionate, detached. The play itself will be presented in the same fashion. Stripped of all its classic splendor, Oedipe-Roi reminds one of a newsreel where even the most tragic things are separated from the viewer by distance and a sense that he, the viewer, is not quite involved. Here is an excerpt from the Prologue:


Les années passent. Il a deux fils: Étécocle et Polynice; deux filles: Antigone et Ismène. La peste éclate.19

The play itself will follow the same quick pace. Cocteau, having eliminated many of the elaborate forms of speech that lend feeling and richness to the classic version, makes his play roll too fast. The audience, not having time to get involved, feels left out. Only occasionally the playwright stops to ponder over serious themes. For example, the Prologue, discussing Thebes as it was in the time of Oedipus, says that it was "emplacement idéal pour les dieux qui aiment bâtir et poser des pièges."20 Further on he states, "Les dieux grecs
ont la cruauté de l’enfance et leurs jeux coûtent cher aux mortels.”

This is an idea touched in Antigone, repeated here, and fully
developed in La Machine Infernale. It is the idea of the unavoidable,
the ruthless and inexorable way of life with its prepared traps, and
of men who try their best to avoid them. The gods, compared to enfants
terribles, play with their human toys in the same way that little Ismène
in Oedipe-Roi fondles a little toy bought, perhaps, at some kind of
bazaar.

If the gods use men as playthings, perhaps men themselves use
each other, and as a result abuse each other. Cocteau, in Antigone and
Oedipe, compares his characters to insects. Conceived and grown in the
same nest, all these human lepidoptera feed upon each other, and they
end by destroying each other. Cocteau does not quite develop this
theme. He merely understates it. In Antigone, he suggests that the
costumes should bring forth this idea. He describes them in this way:

Les costumes se mettaient sur des maillots noirs dont
les bras et les jambes étaient recouverts. L'ensemble
évoquait un carnaval sordide et royal, une famille
d'insectes.22

In Oedipe-Roi, Cocteau presents a more concrete image of the
same concept. Le Prologue, introducing the play to the audience, speaks
this way of the members of the royal house of Thebes:

Là [meaning Thebes] s’entre-dévorent de grandes familles
en costumes de romanichels et dont les moeurs res-
semblent beaucoup à celles des insectes souterrains.23

This is, indeed, a very different view of Oedipus and his celebrated
house. In the classical concept of the play, man is a tool of the gods
for a supreme statement on man's fate. In Cocteau's version men, here
the members of a royal family, not only become toys of the gods, but
also they lose their human status. They become *insectes souterrains*. With such a statement, the playwright attacks not only the gods but men also. The blame is placed both on heaven and earth.

Cocteau questions the place of the gods and of men in the universe; but in his early works already mentioned here, his search for answers is superficial. He taps the sources without exhausting them. *Oedipe-Roi*, like *Antigone*, could better serve as a sample of Cocteau’s early efforts than as a complete, mature creation. But the poet has sown the seeds of serious thought. Without curing himself of his excessive showmanship and his need to shock and surprise, he will go on to examine more serious questions. He sees himself as a poet, and he questions the place of the poet in society. He sees the poet as a misunderstood mutation. Although society desperately needs poet’s vision of things in order to create anew and to bring to our lives a touch of beauty, it does not quite accept them, and it often kills them. But Cocteau does not just see the poet as a mutation; he also sees love as a mutation. He considers it a form of disorder, a weird kind of bloom. Love is a magic flower that grows in an enchanted garden, and when it comes in contact with everyday reality it withers and dies, unfulfilled. In *Oedipe-Roi* love results in a monstrous bed of incest. Unwittingly, Oedipus loves and marries his own mother. This kind of love will haunt Cocteau through his later plays. It will be the subject of *Les Parents Terribles*. It should be worthwhile to trace Cocteau’s sense of the paradox of love as he presents it through his later theatre pieces.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
Before examining the plays of this chapter, I would like to mention that I have not grouped Cocteau’s theatrical creations chronologically. Cocteau was an eclectic. He chose any style which fit his inspiration at the time he gave it its concrete form. His plays show no evidence of specific periods or of specific styles. I have grouped Cocteau’s plays according to their particular similarities as they seem to suit my presentation.
CHAPTER II

LOVE IN A MAGIC GARDEN

In this chapter I shall discuss love as it is presented by Cocteau in a magic environment. The plays to be examined in this chapter are *Renaud et Armide* (1943) and *Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde* (1937). In the 16th century, the Italian poet, Torquato Tasso, wrote an epic called *Gerusalemme Liberata*. In this long adventure story one finds many romantic incidents. In one of them Tasso acquaints us with Renaud. He was a kind of Christian Achilles who, on his way back to his queen and his kingdom of France, is kept prisoner for a short time in the magic gardens of the enchantress, Armide.

Cocteau bases his one play in verse on Tasso's tale. *Renaud et Armide* is the story of love caught, for a short interlude, somewhere between the magic and the real, eternity and life. Renaud is found, much to the despair of his squire, Olivier, in love with his dream, with a woman he has not yet seen. This is how his servant, Olivier, describes him: "...un pauvre dément/ Prisonnier d'un nuage et d'un enchantement."

In the opening scene both men find themselves in the magic gardens of Cocteau's imagination and Armide's realm. I envision them very much like the gardens of La Bête in Cocteau's film, *La Belle et la Bête*. The whole atmosphere vibrates with metaphysical anticipation. Cocteau finds himself very much at home in such an element, which befits the magician of the French stage. Throughout the play, Cocteau offers his audience a sense of metaphysical suspense. But although his charac-
ters find themselves in a magic setting, they are faced with a very real problem: love.

In this play Cocteau creates a masterful paradox. Although Renaud is the outsider who is initiated to the mysteries of a magical world, it is the enchantress, the witch of Tasso's classic, who, in Cocteau's play, suffers the real kind of love. Renaud is in love with a dream. Armide is in love with a man. If one could say about Renaud that he is an ordinary kind of man who is thrown in an extraordinary kind of situation, Armide is an extraordinary kind of woman who finds within herself feelings that belong to ordinary humans. It is interesting to note that when Renaud sees Armide for the first time, he does not recognize her. She does not fit the dream. When she appears to him, he is frightened and he rejects her. When Armide, full of love and anticipation, asks:

Comment me trouves-tu, Renaud?

He answers:

Vous m'effrayez
Plus que la foudre, plus que les fauves rayés
Un étincellement glacial vous hérissé

Armide, desperate, says to him:

Renaud c'en est assez. Arrêtons ce supplice
Ne jouons plus ce jeu. Ne faisons plus un pas.²

Renaud answers her, summarizing the whole of Cocteau's attitude toward the impossibility of love, "L'Armide que j'aimais ne vous ressemblait pas."³

In *Renaud et Armide*, Cocteau states that, somehow, in spite of the lovers' good intentions, love, this tender, illusive creation, this "nuage et enchantement," escapes all, even when set in a magic environ-
ment. The two lovers spend too much time being misunderstood instead of trying to get close to each other. For Armide this is not only a
time for love, but also of introspection and self-questioning. She also seems to be the mouthpiece of Cocteau. Finding herself in this novel situation, she, who is actually an apprentice in enchantment, questions herself and wonders about love:

"Ah, pauvre Armide, où sont les choses que j'aimais?
Je ne les aime plus et c'est mon mal que j'aime. Comment me reconnaître en ce désordre extrême? APPROCHONS de Renaud sur des pieds de voleur. OUBLIONS qu'il allume un feu sombre et nuisible."

Love is, according to Armide, a kind of illness, a disorder that upsets the equilibrium of life. A person in love upsets his own balance, his individual status quo, and that of others. Armide says that she does not enjoy anymore the things she liked, the familiar things that she had accepted. Being in love, she is chosen by fate for something different. But Cocteau does not let us hope for the future happiness of his characters. Armide says of her newly-found emotion, "c'est mon mal que j'aime." Oriane, the older fairy, asks her to give up this disorder of her soul and to finish her fairy apprenticeship. Oriane suggests that Armide become the queen of magic and enchantment instead of the slave to it. Here are some of Oriane's arguments:

"Quoi? Reine de l'amour et de l'enchantement?/ Vous n'êtes qu'une femme et rêvez d'un amant!" But Armide is already caught. She is very willing to give up her supernatural, all-powerful future for another kind of glory. She answers, thinking only of Renaud, "Qu'il est beau!" Oriane reacts to Armide's love in the same way that Armide herself did: "Voilà donc le désordre où chaque femme tombe!"
If love is a disorder, it is because it is at times bigger than the people who feel it. Individuals are more comfortable thinking about it than confronting it. For instance, Renaud can dream about Armide, but he is shocked when faced with the reality of his love.

In one of the most important scenes of Cocteau's fairy tale in play form, the two lovers talk while Armide remains invisible for Renaud. Armide is able to see Renaud, but he cannot enter her magical circle. He is separated by a kind of insurmountable distance. Most of Cocteau's lovers find themselves in similar predicaments. Eighteen years before Renaud et Armide, Cocteau created a similar scene in Orphée, an earlier play which I shall discuss in a later chapter. It is the instance where Orphée is not allowed to see his wife, Eurydice. But contrary to Eurydice and Orphée, whose final disagreement makes them face each other which results in Eurydice's disappearance, Renaud and Armide express their love, although separated by Armide's invisibility. In this lovely, tender scene, Armide talks rapturously of love, while Renaud foresees disaster. He is afraid. But she insists it is love.

Armide
Il bat ton coeur.

Renaud
Si fort qu'il annonce un malheur.
C'est comme le cheval du malheur qui galope.

Armide
Je veux fuir loin de moi sur ce cheval d'amour!

Renaud
Est-ce l'amour? Est-ce le suicide?
Je ne sais plus.

Armide
Ni moi. C'est l'amour.

Renaud
C'est l'amour.
Renaud talks about *malheur* and *suicide* as if he is prophesizing Armide's end. She is sacrificial in her love and decides to give up all the spells that were cast upon Renaud by her and her magic garden. In order to do this, she has to give up her magic ring which has made her all-powerful over Renaud. But, ironically, by giving up her ring, she is also giving up Renaud. Armide throws away all her weapons. In the denouement she appears with her hair loose around her shoulders, dressed in white, as if ready for the sacrifice. She is, indeed, being sacrificed to the impossible love she could never have. In the last scene, freed from the spell, Renaud decides to return to a queen he does not love and to a reality he does not quite understand. He asks from Armide a last embrace. She knows that if he touches her she will die. She hesitates. Renaud is leaving without that last gesture of tenderness. Armide calls him back and dies in his arms as he kisses her.

*Armide*
Faites qu'à ce baiser, mon Dieu, je me decide.
(Renaud va disparaître. Elle crie:)
Embrasse-moi, Renaud!
(Renaud revient vers elle.)

*Renaud*
Armide... 
(Il la prend dans ses bras et l'embrasse. Elle meurt.)
Armide!
(Elle tombe. Il se jette sur elle.)
Armide!
In the original story, the crusader Renaud is imprisoned by the enchantress, Armide. Tasso presents Armide as a Renaissance Circe, a spirit to send good soldiers wandering away from their land. But this is Cocteau's tale. In spite of the Renaissance influence, his Renaud and Armide emerge as two lovers who, in spite of their good intentions, do not manage to avoid the obstacles of fate, and they do not find complete love. At the end of the play, it is Renaud who leaves, abandoning a sacrificed Armide. If it were her charms that kept him there, it was his presence that tore the magic gossamer of her life and unwittingly killed her, proving the impossibility of such love.

Cocteau does not let us forget that all this takes part in a magic garden. We are always aware that all these characters are under a spell. To anyone who knows of Cocteau's theater, it is obvious that the great wizard is Cocteau himself. This is the kind of play where he can use all his magic tricks. Characters like Armide and Oriane can be visible and invisible at will. Spells are cast. Even objects take magic proportions. The ring on Armide's finger unseals the invisible door which leads from the world of witchery to the raw reality of the outside world. Never does the audience forget that it is watching a fairy tale. The viewer always remains the viewer, never does he become a participant. But in spite of this particular sense of distance, Cocteau conjures charms that delight and, at the same time, present the playwright's point of view on life and on love.

One wonders if Cocteau, the poet, in a childlike delight enjoys playing the magician. Or is it, perhaps, an endless search
for answers beyond the concrete of reality, answers which, if found, will offer the poet, and through him, his audience, the key to life and love.

Cocteau uses his tricks not only in his plays like in Renaud et Armide, but also in other forms of expression as in the film La Belle et la Bête, which one could say, serves as a "catch-all" for all of Cocteau's favorite gimmicks, which are seen in Renaud et Armide, as well as in Orphée, and most certainly in Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde. In La Belle et La Bête, La Bête, himself, gives a list of Cocteau's favorite magic symbols which are seen time and again in his work: a rose, a mirror, a horse, a glove, a key. The horse found a very meaningful place in the play, Orphée.

In Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, Cocteau has found an ideal medium for his supernatural elements. The plot is directly out of the medieval and Renaissance versions of the Arthurian legends, concentrating on the starcrossed lovers, Guenièvre and Lancelot.

Again our lovers find themselves in an enchanted atmosphere. The royal castle is under a spell, as if suspended between reality and imagination. (One cannot help wondering if it is safe to use terms like reality and imagination when one talks of Cocteau's plays. The impression that one has of his pieces is that all of them emerge from someplace in between.) Lancelot himself belongs to both worlds. Guenièvre describes him this way: "Fils des fées, nourri par les fées dans l'enchantement du lac des fées . . ."¹⁰ But although the two lovers, as well as king Artus and all his court, live in an atmosphere that is totally removed from everyday life, one has the impression that the playwright, in spite of his involvement in a fairy tale, offers his audience a dimension of
reality. Oreste Pucciani in his book of criticism entitled The French Theatre Since 1930, describes in this way the world of Cocteau. He calls it "a subjective world but a world of authentic poetry and myth implying a mysterious commitment to reality."11 One could say that although the audience never does quite identify with Cocteau's fictionalized attitudes, it does, at times identify and project with some of his problems. Like Federico Garcia Lorca and Luigi Pirandello, he is paradoxically interested both in illusion and, at the same time, in the reality behind the illusion. It is interesting to note that although Lancelot is the child of the fairies he demands a real kind of love. He is very much like Armide who, as we already saw, did seek a tangible, very human kind of love. Lancelot, talking to his queen, states his need in this way:

\[ J'exige un vrai bonheur, un vrai amour, un vrai château, une vraie contrée où le soleil alterne avec la lune, où les saisons se déroulent en ordre, où de vrais arbres portent de vrais fruits, où de vrais poissons habitent les rivières et de vrais oiseaux le ciel, où la vraie neige découvre de vraies fleurs où tout soit vrai, vrai, vrai, véritable.12 \]

Lancelot demands a form of truth, a sense of true being, which is lost in the enchanted palace, put under an evil spell by the magician, Merlin, and his apprentice, Ginifer. This way one sees a kind of reflection inside a reflection. Devious Merlin has placed a hex upon the palace and, consequently, upon Lancelot's and Guenièvre's enchanted love. Lancelot demands an answer to the distortion imposed upon everyone's life. He who is a dream of a fairy's world is searching for a concrete answer. It is his search for an answer which will eventually lead to his death. This is indeed Cocteau's sense of dramatic irony.

Guenièvre mistrusts Lancelot's need for new quests after truth. She is a nest builder. She is only interested in the immediate environ-
ment where her love rests. Like a typical woman she explains his restlessness as lack of love. She cannot quite understand that a man has to leave the nest and accomplish deeds for his own sense of pride and self-realization. More than that, Lancelot is a cerebral kind of mature lover, while the queen, after eighteen years, remains an eternally youthful and impetuous little girl.

Maybe one could say that one of the reasons that love becomes so impossible is because the woman is only interested in staying within the circle of her love, and the man has to find himself outside of it. In Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, Guenièvre and Lancelot present the two sides of love, male and female, a sort of aigle à deux têtes. Lancelot urges his queen to be more prudent. The queen reacts in a charming and foolish way:

\[
\text{La reine} \\
\text{Un amour qui se consulte est-il de l'amour? Lancelot, tu m'aimes moins.}
\]

\[
\text{Lancelot} \\
\text{Je t'aime mieux. Nous étions fous.}
\]

\[
\text{La reine} \\
\text{Fous l'un de l'autre. Te voilà sage; je reste folle. C'est bien ce que je voulais dire.}^{13}
\]

Further on Lancelot suggests that maybe their selfish love is the cause of the newly fallen disaster that has beset the palace for the last two years. This is the queen's reaction:

\[
\text{La reine} \\
\text{Laisse, je ne veux pas y penser, Lancelot.}
\]

\[
\text{Lancelot} \\
\text{Voilà ce que je te reproche.}^{14}
\]

But in spite of his prudence and intellectuality towards their love,
sensitive, poetic Lancelot will add further on, "Je n'ai pas le privilège des femmes qui s'inventent le bonheur qu'elles veulent."³

Throughout this tender, passionate and powerful scene, one has the feeling that there is a distance that separates these two people, a distance which comes from within their different natures. Guenièvre answers, but she does not quite hear Lancelot. The same holds true of him who, in spite of his responses, remains distant. The queen sums up the two-sided experience in a very perceptive way, true to the nature of things.

Laisse. Je sais que tu m'aimes. Mais, ne nous aimons plus pareillement. Sans doute m'aimes-tu mieux; c'est possible. Je t'aime davantage. Tu me reproches d'être aveugle. J'y vois clair, hélas.³

Lancelot belongs to two worlds. He is very much like the poet Orphée. His soul inhabits Cocteau's favorite setting which is, to quote Wallace Fowlie, "the circus tightrope with heaven above and death below."³⁷ This is the status of exceptional beings whether they are poets or men in love. Poetry, after all, according to Claude Mauriac, "c'est une forme plus élevée de l'amour."³⁸

It is people of this special kind that bring about changes and sometimes death. The change, which is Lancelot's answer to his quest for truth, will be brought about by the knight in white, Galaad. He comes with all his magic trappings. He represents Cocteau's poet-knight, a sort of Promethean light bearer, an extension of Lancelot. He wears the pure, white costume of the pure in heart and poetically pure in spirit. He is the son of Lancelot from his union with the Fairy Melusine. But the pièce de résistance of the play's wizardry is the talking flower. It is a visual, sensuous projection of poetry and, perhaps, of love.
It is a demonstration of Cocteau's "poetry of the theatre" of which Grossvogel speaks in his 20th Century French Drama. Cocteau had already described such a flower in an earlier collection of poems entitled, *Cherchez Apollon*:

> Sur la vertu de l'herbe interrogez l'oracle  
> Sa bouche d'ombre imite un bâillement de fleur  
> Dont la gorge à points blancs que du feu rose racle  
> Laisse entendre une voix lointaine de souffleur.

After the arrival of the knight, Galaad, the play develops quickly. The moment of truth occurs when Artus, the king, discovers that his queen has been the mistress of his most trusted friend for eighteen years.

If the love of Lancelot and Guenièvre is the most glamorous, there is another kind of love in *Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde*—that of Artus. The gentle king had affection for everyone around him. This is the way that the queen describes her relationship with this quiet man:

> Lancelot, le roi savait en m'épousant que je ne l'aimais pas d'amour. Il a voulu m'épouser quand même et laissait mon cœur tranquille.

The king's love is tranquil. He wants to live in a circle of peace. This is really a simple kind of man, caught in a complicated kind of life. He is easily duped because he readily accepts people. He becomes, however, a pathetic Othello when he suspects his wife of infidelity. His whole edifice of love crumbles. Love proves again to be futile, perishable, fragile, in a way, impossible. But even in his moment of absolute despair, at the moment of the terrible truth, he, the cheated one, still believes in love. Crying over his friend's death and his own lost innocence, he says:
La jalousie est une arme effrayante. Ma main a trouvé sa dague. C'est ma main qui a frappé, ce n'est pas moi... Il vous aimait... Vous vous aimiez... Quel mal y avait-il à cela? Quel mal je me demande?

But love is doomed to end. Love is, for Cocteau, a kind of disorder, like most beautiful things seem to be, like poetry, for instance. Such disorders, mutations of life's banalities, have to end in violence. The queen finds herself in an impossible situation. She cannot leave the man to whom she is married, or abandon the man with whom she is in love. The only way out is death. She says to Artus:

Il était impossible que je vous abandonne. Impossible que je le quitte. Tout était désordre, tout était impossible. Il fallait que cette chose arrive.

In Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, love ends more happily than in Cocteau's other plays. The two lovers will live together above and away from the laws of men in Lancelot's metaphysical world. Artus, although left alone, gains insight to life and himself. Love and its impossible complications being removed, life resumes its normal pattern. The spell is removed from the palace.

Cocteau presents the last scene as the moment of self-recognition. With the help of Galaad, the poet-knight, Artus and those around him are able to see the Graal. One gets the impression that it stands for an extension of one's self. Lancelot, talking about it earlier in the play, says:

... ce vase possède le pouvoir de répandre les merveilles et les désastres. L'ennemi a beau jeu d'embrouiller les cartes.

Later on Artus will ask Galaad:

Artus
Chevalier... verrai-je le Graal?
Galaad
Cela dépend de vous.

Artus
Dites, chevalier, dites . . .
pour le voir . . . il faut mourir?

Galaad
Ce serait trop simple. Non,
Artus, il faut vivre. Toute l'erreur
du monde est là.²⁵

In the plays discussed, love is presented as a fragile mutation, something which occurs under a spell. One questions whether Cocteau has defined the place in men's lives which can be occupied by love. Is love an emotion too subtle and too perishable to withstand everyday realities? Is it like a dream spun by a fairy? Does it only belong in a poet's imagination? In the following chapters I shall examine love as it develops in different environments and among different attitudes in other of Cocteau's plays.
In this chapter I shall examine love as it affects a poet caught between life and death, a revolutionary in love with a queen, and a young thinker who, driven by love for all humanity, wants to save mankind. All of Cocteau's characters are more or less exceptional, but the characters of Orphée (1926), L'Aigle à Deux Têtes (1946), and Bacchus (1952), seem to be more so as we shall see further on in this chapter.

Thinking people are able to project beyond the immediacy of their everyday lives. But it takes more than just a thinking person to bring about changes. Such is the work of revolutionaries, of poets, and of people in love, according to Cocteau. In their need to express their strong emotions, in their need to find a unifying knot in the odd threads of life, they upset social customs and the ordinary patterns of life around them. By doing so, they bring about violence, disorder, and anarchy. They upset life's status quo. In Orphée, L'Aigle à Deux Têtes, and in Bacchus, more than in his other plays, one is aware of Cocteau's special sort of people. Hypersensitive and poetic, they are acutely aware of life around them. They are, however, also aware of the attraction of death. Since love, according to Cocteau, is a perfect form which cannot survive for very long in our everyday lives, Cocteau searches for a possible place for love in death.

Love, according to Cocteau, brings about violence and disorder. Very often it culminates in death. In L'Aigle à Deux Têtes, a play which I shall treat in this chapter, two violent people, the queen and Stanislas,
meet for a short moment and die violently together.

In *Orphée*, Cocteau presents love as it festers in conjugality. Perhaps as a result of love’s failure in life, the poet Orphée searches for the meaning of life and love beyond the finite frontiers of man. The poet finds himself wanting to embrace Death. Perhaps he falls in love with her. (Death is a beautiful woman in *Orphée.*) For the poet to be in search of perfection, he must be in love with death, since perfection is not to be found within the limits of our finite environment.

In Cocteau, the poet always reaches beyond the tangible, visible reality for answers. He learns to walk through mirrors which are the doors to answers on the "other side." He becomes a kind of Mercury, a go-between, between the gods and man.

In *Bacchus*, love becomes more complicated. It is not merely love between two people. The central figure emerges as a Christ-like hero. Hans-Bacchus is sacrificed because he is too loving, too good, because he offers his love to other men who are not quite ready to accept it. So in these three plays Cocteau’s poet-hero rises to face life, love, and death. One senses that Cocteau's special hero sees life, love and death as one cycle. That is, if one is going to find any hopeful answers, he should be able, when life fails him, to find such answers in death.

Cocteau’s *Orphée* is based on the Greek myth of Orpheus. Orpheus, the poet and musician, falls in love with beautiful Eurydice and marries her. Right after the wedding, she is bitten by a snake and she dies. Orpheus goes to retrieve her from the underworld. He charms death and
gets Eurydice back on one condition: she is not supposed to look back. She does, however, and she is lost forever to Pluto’s kingdom. Orpheus wanders desolate and sorrowful, till he comes upon a band of bacchantes who, frenzied, slay him and throw his head into the swift river, Hebrus.

Cocteau introduces new elements to the Greek myth. He adds a talking horse and Heurtebise. Heurtebise is Orphée’s guardian angel. He also serves as a guide to the poet, when Orphée visits the underworld, the "other side.” One should keep in mind that in the Greek myth, death is a place where life has ended. Cocteau adds a new dimension to that concept. Death and the underworld are not only the "other side," but also a tempting, beautiful woman. Death becomes another side of love, a sensuous, as well as poetic concept.

The horse, in Orphée, becomes a sort of Pegasus without wings. It is, like Heurtebise, a link between the poet’s immediate present and the "other side.” The horse brings Orphée a prophetic message: "Madame Eurydice reviendra des enfers." It is a prediction of the things to come. But to Eurydice, the horse and the message mean nothing, except that her comfortable, tangible life has ended. She finds herself surrounded by mystery. She detests mystery. She says: "Le mystère est mon ennemi. Je suis décidée de le combattre." She prefers the old Orphée who was a popular poet, not searching for meaning, but only for superficial entertainment.

Love, as it is offered to Orphée through Eurydice, is stultifying. She is possessive without giving any latitude so that he may be comfortable in her love. She dislikes any form of his creativity. Love is not something ever-growing for her, but something stunted. She is really one of the common crowd. She used to be one of the bacchantes
before she married Orphée. The bacchantes in Cocteau's play are very similar to the Greek bacchantes, who were loud, crude, and destructive female followers of Bacchus. They represent the cruel, negative crowd which suffocates artists.

When Eurydice dies, having fallen in the trap set for her by her old companions, Orphée goes, with the help of his guardian angel, Heurtebise, to find her. He crosses the barriers of everyday life and goes to the "other side." But is it love for Eurydice, that makes him go to the underworld? Or is it the poet's love for the unknown, the poet's attraction for Death? Did Death really forget her gloves, or did she use them as a way to lure the poet into her dark region? One could even ask whether Death is a beautiful woman or simply a visual projection of the poet's wishful imagination. Reading Orphée, one is not sure of the playwright's attitude. But the audience is sure of Orphée's attraction to Death. Orphée does not go through space, through his own reflection in the mirror, to simply save Eurydice. He goes to meet Death. His guardian angel guides him to this rendez-vous:

Heurtebise
Marchez sans crainte devant vous...

Orphée
Et après?

Heurtebise
Après? Personne au monde ne peut vous renseigner. La Mort commence.

Orphée
Je ne la crains pas.\(^3\)

In Orphée, Cocteau is omnipresent. He is Orphée, but he is also Heurtebise, Orphée's guardian angel. When, at the conclusion of the play, Orphée, Heurtebise, and Eurydice enter eternity, one has the feeling that
all three are conceptually one. Eurydice is not the same Eurydice that she was at the beginning of the play. She is more a projection of Death in Eurydice's image. After all, Death is partially everywhere, but wholly nowhere. The poet Orphée becomes comfortable in love when in death. What he found unbearable and impossible in the character of Eurydice in life does not seem to exist anymore. Everything is purified and conceptualized in death. So, in Orphée, when the poet finds that his earthly love, as it is projected in the character of Eurydice, proves hard and impossible, he broadens his scope to take in infinity itself, where Death becomes a primary source of inspiration, and where love and life complete the cycle.

Before discussing L'Aigle À Deux Têtes, I shall give a short summary of the plot. In a small kingdom, similar to that of Luxembourg, during the splendid wedding of King Frederick to his beautiful queen, the king is shot before the couple have even the time to reach their chambers. Ten years later, the widowed queen is still haunted by the ideas of death and the love she never tasted. One stormy night a young, rebellious poet enters her room. He is there to kill the queen who, absorbed by her inner torments, has been very ineffectual as a governing monarch. The young man bears a striking resemblance to the dead king. The queen regally welcomes him. She welcomes in him the love she never had, and the death that she has longed for for ten years:

Quoi, vous me demandez qui vous êtes? Mais, cher monsieur, vous êtes ma mort. C'est ma mort que je sauve. C'est ma mort que je cache. C'est ma mort que je rechauffe. C'est ma mort que je soigne. Ne vous y trompez pas.

Stanislas, the poet, responds to such an atmosphere. He, too, feels a sensuous, erotic attraction toward death. He considers the room
where he met the queen as his nuptial chamber. There he met the queen whom he came to kill and the woman with whom he fell in love. Somehow, death and love become fused in his mind:

Quand je suis entré dans votre chambre, j'étais une idée folle, une idée de fou. J'étais une idée en face d'une idée. J'ai eu le tort de m'évanouir.

Quand je suis revenu à moi, j'étais un homme chez une femme. Et plus cet homme devenait un homme plus cette femme s'obstinait à être une idée. Plus je me laissais prendre par ce luxe dont je n'ai pas la moindre habitude, plus je contemplais cette femme éclatante, plus cette femme me traitait comme une idée, comme une machine de mort.

J'étais ivre de faim et de fatigue. Ivre d'orage. Ivre d'angoisse. Ivre de ce silence qui me déchirait plus qu'un cri. Et j'ai eu le courage de me reprendre, de redevenir cette idée fixe qu'on me demandait d'être, que je n'aurais pas dû cesser d'être. Je tuerais. Cette chambre deviendrait ma chambre de noces et je l'éclabousserais de sang.5

After his encounter with the queen, Stanislas recognizes that he is acting for himself, not for a general cause. Their encounter becomes a duel of wits, will, and fate, a search for love and death.

Again, as in Orphée, one wonders if the queen is in love with Stanislas, or if she is in love only with the idea of death. For ten years she has lived with the vivid memory of her dead king. Stanislas, the young poet who drops into her salon, is the living image of the king who never became her husband. Seeing him, she is shocked and delighted. For, at last, death has come in the person of a man who looks like the king.

The queen is a rare creature. Sometimes she appears too much so. One gets the impression that one is viewing not a play, but the inside of Cocteau's imagination. But this is not only because Cocteau created an exceptional woman, une femme éclatante, according to
Stanislas, but also because of the playwright's attitude towards his characters. He is aware that they are two ideas, two fictionalized attitudes more than two living creatures who met, fell in love and died in one quick, short moment in time. Cocteau has been accused of having created a theatre of surfaces. That is quite true of his early plays. If one reads carefully his later plays, one realizes that the feeling of distance one receives, the lack of identification with the characters performing on stage, is not the result of the playwright's inability to create true characters. This condition exists because of the playwright's attitude toward important matters, such as love, life, and death. Love, in Cocteau, is elusive and destructible. As a result, exceptional, beautiful creations like poetry and love, find their perfect state in death. Speaking of his two exceptional creations, Stanislas and the queen, Cocteau says in the introduction to the play, that when they meet:

... une reine d'esprit anarchiste, un anarchiste d'esprit royal ... Ils deviennent une constellation ou mieux un météore qui flambe une seconde et disparaît.

In the very moving Scene IV of Act II, when the queen speaks of her love, one has the feeling that she is also preparing for her death. She speaks of it as a kind of cleansing, as a moment of truth. Both she and Stanislas are, for a very brief moment, separated from all other things and all other beings. The queen, before telling Stanislas that she loves him, delivers a kind of prayer, as if preparing for an ultimate sacrifice. Here is the queen's confession of love:

La reine
(bas) Mon Dieu, arrachez-nous de cette glu informe....
foudroyez les protocoles et surtout
celui de la prudence que je prenais pour la pudeur. Donnez-moi la force de m'avouer mes mensonges. Terrassez les monstres de l'orgueil et de l'habitude. Faites-moi dire ce que je ne veux pas dire. Délivrez-nous.

(Silence. La reine abaisse son voile, avec une maladresse naïve).

Stanislas, je vous aime.

Stanislas
(même jeu) Je vous aime.

La reine
Le reste m'est égal.

Stanislas
C'est maintenant que je pourrais vous tuer pour ne plus vous perdre?

Love is an act of deliverance. It is presented as an act of God as well as man.

Stanislas, the poet and revolutionary, uses the name of the Moslem angel of death as his pen name--Azrael. In spite of the fact that he tries to become a real man and see the queen as a real woman, he does not stop thinking of himself as the angel of death. He vacillates between being an idea and reality. At times the two are fused into one. The audience has the feeling that when Stanislas-Azrael says to the queen, "C'est maintenant que je pourrai vous tuer pour ne plus vous perdre," that it is both the man and the idea talking. The man and the idea see this love, this union both as an act of love and as an act of death. Stanislas-Azrael has expressed a similar idea when he has said to the queen, earlier that he wanted
But, although Stanislas, this creature with many sides, this poet, man, deliverer, and angel of death, thinks of death as the consummation of love, he remains, in spite of all, very young, and indeed, very alive. He is, after all, a man of the mountains. He identifies himself with the living part of nature. It is the queen who sees herself as already dead. It is she who carries death in her soul as well as in the vial of poison around her neck. Stanislas accuses her of using him as a machine of death:

Vous n'osez plus vous suicidez, ce qui manquerait de sublime, et vous avez voulu vous faire suicider par moi.°

One of Stanislas' parting gestures is to try through his love to give the queen a chance to live. He tries to make their very impossible kind of love become more creative and alive. He wants the queen to abandon her macabre ideas, leave her death chambers, and her endless mourning, and return to reign in her city. He wants her to surround herself with men she can trust. He wants the queen to become alive. In this manner he might save her and, perhaps, save himself too:

Changez en un instant votre mode d'existence. Retournez dans votre capitale. Etingelez... Nommez le duc de Willenstein généralissime. Appuyez-vous sur ses troupes. Passez-les en revue, à cheval. Etonnez-les.10

Stanislas sees himself in this rare moment of hope as an angel of life. He will return to his mountains and listen for the queen's new glory:
The queen, taken by his enthusiasm, prepares for a triumphal entrance to her city and to life. She makes some wild plans to meet her poet in one of her hunting lodges. But all this is impossible. Pressured by her chief of police, Stanislas realizes that his only way out is death. He takes the poison from the vial that was to be the queen's way of dying. He comes to say good-bye to his queen and his fate. The queen realizes what he has done. She insults him and humiliates him. He, desperate, plants his hunting knife in her back. He is, till the last minute, unaware that insulting him was her way of inducing him to kill her. The last scene befits the Cocteau tradition. The lovers die, separated by an enormous staircase. They remain bitterly apart till the last moment of their tormented lives. The following are Cocteau's stage directions for the closing scene:

Il se précipite, enjambe les marches, mais il est foudroyé par le poison au moment où il va toucher la reine. Stanislas tombe à la renverse, roule le long des marches et meurt en bas, séparé de la reine de toute la hauteur de l'escalier. La reine s'écroule en arrachant un des rideaux de la fenêtre.12

The queen and Stanislas are not successful in fulfilling their responsibilities toward their people. The queen never reigns directly, and Stanislas kills by default, as a frustrated lover. Cocteau is more interested in showing two poetic ideas in love than two individuals interested in saving their people. In Bacchus, Cocteau gives greater
dimension to his hero. Bacchus emerges as a social reformer and a thinker, as well as lover and poet. But love, on this level also fails.

Love and kindness become at times synonymous in Bacchus. Kindness is a part of the central theme of love. Love, kindness, and desire to better society transform the peasant Hans-Bacchus into an extraordinary man.

Cocteau uses a historical background for this play. In the sixteenth century, a kind of masquerade was popular in Switzerland. At a given time of the year, a man of the people was chosen as Bacchus, and he was dressed in a Dionysian costume. He reigned for a week. Everyone was to obey him. The whole experience was simply a masquerade. No Bacchus took his role too seriously.

Hans-Bacchus takes his role seriously and tries to improve his people's lot. He also falls in love with Christine, the daughter of the duke who is his protector. Earlier in his life, Hans had lost his mind temporarily when hunted down by young noblemen. He had recovered his sanity, however, when at a later time, he watched the same group of young débauchés kill one of his friends purely for their amusement.

Elevated to the status of Bacchus, the young peasant becomes an extraordinary person. He has had some previous coaching for his role. He has been the disciple of a heretic who, in his turn, was the disciple of Luther. As a result he comes in conflict with Cardinal Zampi from Rome who is visiting with the bishop of the area. He is also in direct disagreement with local dignitaries.

The same concept of deliverance which the queen in L'Aigle à Deux Têtes finds in her love is present in Hans-Bacchus. But his love takes in all men. He becomes a Christ-like figure. His personal affair
is a tender, pathetic interlude which, like his social affair with humanity, ends only too soon and too unhappily. It withers like a magic flower with no ground on which to grow. Man's church and man's society have no place for poetically pure love and for tenderness.

Cardinal Zampi represents the Church. He sees, however, the inconsistencies of his religious institution as well as those of society. Bitterly he asks the question, "Quelle aurait été notre attitude si nous avions été pontifes à la synagogue de Jérusalem?"\(^{13}\)

The answer is obvious. Christ and Christ-like poets with their pure love and sense of justice do not belong in our contaminated world. Although we long for them, we chase them out of our hearts and our temples. The laws of man, in spite of their gross injustices, befit mankind. The cardinal, very wisely and perhaps bitterly, says to Hans when he frees a thief who had stolen from a merchant:

\[ \text{Vous venez de vous supprimer deux électeurs. L'un vous maudira. L'autre vous croira stupide. Le voleur conseillera le vol aux voleurs. Le marchand émeutera la corporation des marchands.}^{14} \]

Hans argues almost to the very end that it is up to man, and perhaps up to a Christ-like poet, to teach man kindness and love. If man is not good it is not his own fault, but that of a Supreme Being who permits man to fall into perdition. Free will, says Hans, is simply God's alibi for setting traps for man:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Hans} & \quad \text{Si l'homme avait commis une faute,} \\
& \quad \text{Dieu l'aurait commise. Il est responsable de nos actes.} \\
\text{Le Cardinal} & \quad \text{Et le libre-arbitre?} \\
\text{Hans} & \quad \text{Le libre-arbitre est l'alibi de Dieu.}
\end{align*}
\]
Le Cardinal
Osez-vous prétendre que Dieu feint
de nous laisser libres?

Hans
Si Dieu, qui habite hors du temps
et l'embrasse dans son ensemble, a
créé l'homme pour sa perte et pour
la nôtre, il est un monstre. 15

But it does not matter whose fault it is. Whether man's fault
or God's, the fact is that men cannot come to terms with love. Love
remains too perfect for man, too elusive for lovers. It seems that
the only one who is impressed with Hans' love is Christine. The aggres­sive, noble woman, now in love, finds herself unable to save her Bacchus,
who vainly hopes for miracles:

Hans
Je t'aime, Christine. Ne crains,
rien. Il arrivera un miracle.

Christine
Les miracles ne se produisent que
si on les méritent.

Hans
Tu les mérites.

Christine
Tu n'y crois pas et tu les mérites.
Je ne mérite aucun miracle. L'amour
a tué toutes mes revoltes. Mainten­
tant, j'ai honte d'être une
femme sans force. 16

The end comes quickly and inevitably. Hans dies, killed by his
best friend who tries to save him from the more ignoble death of being
burned by a jeering mob. Left alone, Christine can hope only for the
salvation of his soul. A bitter end indeed for a man of love.

For Cocteau, love, on any plane, remains elusive. Poets
search for it in death. Love, like anything that is beautiful, is
easily destroyed. Poets, according to Cocteau, are the only source of
creativity and imagination. But, although poets are misunderstood and unloved amidst a society which lacks understanding and kindness, they seem to be continually reborn and they are always ready to die for beauty and love.
CHAPTER IV

MOTHERS AND LOVERS

In this, my last chapter, I will deal with another facet of love which seems to interest Cocteau: the older woman-younger man relationship. This kind of relationship is most prominent in the three plays I shall discuss here, La Machine Infernale (1932), La Machine à Ecrire (1941) and Les Parents Terribles (1938).

La Machine Infernale is based on the Oedipus myth. Although the Greek myth is very well known, I would like to give a brief summary of it. Laius, king of Thebes, and his wife, Jocasta, learn from the oracle of Apollo that their son will kill his father and marry his mother. Trying to avoid such fate, the king and queen give their newborn son to a shepherd with orders to kill the child. The shepherd, instead of obeying, gives the child to another man who, in turn, gives it to the childless king and queen of Corinth, Merope and Polybus. When the boy, Oedipus, grows into manhood, he receives the same message from the oracle of Apollo: he will kill his father and marry his mother. In order to avoid his fate, Oedipus leaves Corinth. On the road to Thebes, he meets a group of men. He enters into dispute and kills one of them. He was king Laius. Not knowing who was his victim, Oedipus approaches Thebes. There he learns that a Sphinx is outside the walls of the city demanding the correct answer to a riddle. Many men had died without supplying it. But Oedipus solves the riddle and kills the Sphinx. In triumph, he enters the city and marries the recently widowed queen, Jocasta. The oracle has been fulfilled. Years later, after the birth of his two daughters and two sons, Oedipus finds out who he really is. Jocasta hangs herself.
Oedipus, in shame and despair, blinds himself, leaves his kingdom, and goes wandering through Greece. Cocteau introduces a new element to the classic myth: the wedding night. This new element occupies most of Cocteau's play.

I shall concentrate on the relationship of Jocasta and Oedipus. Cocteau's Jocasta lacks any heroic nobility. The characteristic which moves us concerning her is her vulnerability. She is very attracted to younger men. Cocteau makes it clear that the coquettish queen is sexually interested in young men who remind her of her abandoned son. She is on the stage but a few minutes when she is fondling the young soldier who is guarding the ramparts. Talking to Teiresias, the blind prophet who accompanies her, she says:

Jocaste

Alors tâte... Tâte-le. Il a une cuisse de cheval.
Il se recule. N'aie pas peur ... Dieu sait ce qu'
il imagine le pauvre; il est tout rouge! Il est adorable! Il a dix-neuf ans! 1

Jocasta puts her desires into a more concrete statement when a little later she says to Teiresias:

Jocaste

Les petits garçons disent tous: "Je veux devenir
un homme pour me marier avec maman." Ce n'est pas
si bête, Tirésias. Est-il plus doux ménage, ménage
plus doux et plus cruel, ménage plus fier de soi
que ce couple d'un fils et d'une mère jeune? 2

The queen is vain and she is trying to stay young. She will, all through the play, vacillate between being a mother in search of a son and a mistress trying to stay beautiful in order to please younger men.

The next time we meet Oedipus, after his initial encounter with the Sphinx, is in Act III, on his wedding night with Jocasta. Act III occupies most of the play, and it is purely an invention of Cocteau. It has little to do with the Greek myth. The scene is full of incestuous
undertones. There is a small crib in Jocasta's room which belonged to her lost son. Oedipus calls it "le berceau de ma chance." He continues by saying, "Ma chance y grandira près de notre amour, jusqu'à ce qu'il serve à notre premier fils." For the reader and for the spectator, Oedipus' loving, flirtatious remark becomes a monstrous joke. His love and his luck, predetermined by unkind, ruthless gods, will end in tragic incestuous complications.

It is interesting to note here that Oedipus and Jocasta's unfortunate love serves as a weapon to the gods who, for reasons of their own, set traps for men. In spite of his desperate efforts, Oedipus falls in the trap. Poor Jocasta is an even easier victim. Because of her vanity, she is too easily used by the ruthless supernatural. Cocteau stresses the point that both she and Oedipus are used for the amusement of the gods.

On her wedding night, Jocasta is delighted with her young man. Her pleasure makes her approaching tragedy even more poignant. Oedipus too is attracted by his wife. He searches for the mother as well as the mistress in the woman he had married. In Cocteau's wedding night the two newlyweds are genuinely fond of each other. But their fondness is underlined with incestuous implications. After the wedding ceremony, Jocasta and Oedipus are exhausted. In spite of their efforts to stay awake, they fall in a state between consciousness and sleep. They both make remarks that they would not make if they were fully in control of themselves:

Oedipe
(encore dans le vague) Oui, ma petite mère chérie.

Jocaste
(l'imitant) Oui, ma petite mère chérie...
Quel enfant! Voilà qu'il me prend pour sa mère.
Oedipe

(reveillé) Oh, pardon, Jocaste, mon amour, je suis absurde. Tu vois, je dors à moitié, je mélange tout. J'étais à mille lieues, auprès de ma mère qui trouve toujours que j'ai trop froid ou trop chaud.5

At the conclusion of Act III, the queen hears a drunkard sing a mocking song. He is making fun of her mismatched marriage. He sings:

Madame, que prétendez-vous
Votre mari est trop jeune
Bien trop jeune pour vous... Hou!6

He continues, mumbling to himself:

Si j'étais la politique.... je dirais à la reine:
Madame! un junior ne vous convient pas ... Prenez un mari sérieux, sobre, solide ... un mari comme moi.

But the queen does not choose a serious, solid man of her age. That would be to act against her instincts and against the will of the gods. Love, in La Machine Infernale, is indeed part of the gods' trap. Vain, flirtatious Jocasta is only too willing to accept what comes her way. Her only worry is her quickly vanishing youth. She is a woman interested in immediate pleasures. It is the present which counts. The present demands that she stay young and beautiful. Before lying next to the sleeping Oedipus, she only thinks of her beauty. The words of the drunkard do not awaken any other thoughts. In the closing moments of Act III, the queen is looking in the mirror. The following are Cocteau's stage directions: "... Jocaste, le visage contre le miroir vide, se remonte les joues, à pleines mains."8

In spite of their difference in age, the queen and her young husband live happily for seventeen years. But all the happiness and love are part of the trap of the gods, according to Cocteau. "Toutes les malchances surgissent sous le déguisement de la chance."9 In the
last act of the play, the gods give their coup de grâce. During the plague which incapacitates the kingdom, a messenger from Corinth tells Oedipus that Polybus, in his deathbed, had said that Oedipus was not his true son. The other unhappy details of the past follow. Oedipus learns the terrible truth. As a result Jocasta hangs herself. Oedipus becomes tragic in his great sorrow. In despair, he accuses the ones around him for the death of Jocasta:

Oedipe
(à la porte) Vous me l'avez tuée ... elle était romanesque ... faible ... malade...10

One finds in these few words a tremendous amount of tenderness and love. An equally moving scene closes the play. The dead Jocasta appears to the blind Oedipus. She will be his guiding spirit during his coming years of exile. Their love is freed from earthly bonds. In death, Jocasta does not retain her double identity of mistress-mother. She is simply Oedipus' mother. She tells her son:

Jocaste
Oui, mon enfant, mon petit enfant ... Les choses qui paraissent abominables aux humains, si tu savais, de l'endroit où j'habite, si tu savais comme elles ont peu d'importance.

Oedipe
Je suis encore sur la terre.

A peine...11

Jocaste

From Cocteau's concluding thoughts, one wonders if death is not the only place where man finally escapes the traps of the gods and limitations of society.

If one reads La Machine À Écrire after La Machine Infernale, he is indeed very disappointed. It lacks the compassion and feeling that
Cocteau obviously had when he wrote his earlier play in 1932. *La Machine à Écrire* is a mediocre mystery story in play form. The story takes place in a small provincial town where everybody is driven to terror by threatening letters signed M. Didier's twin sons, Pascal and Maxime, who are endlessly feuding over the same girl, Margot, accuse each other of being the guilty one. Solange, who once was to be married to Fred, is hiding Maxime. He has had complications with the police, and he does not dare return to his father's home. Fred is an old friend of Didier who is visiting with the family. In reality, he is there to solve the mystery of the letters.

Solange is the most interesting character of this mediocre play. Widowed for many years, she lives a lonely life in the small provincial town. The young man who comes into her life, becomes her son away at school as well as her husband long dead. Actually he becomes more than the husband. He becomes a romantic lover, an escape from the dreariness of her boring life. In a few lines Solange describes her life before Maxime came into it. She is talking to Fred:

```
Solange
Fred, j'étais une mère, une dame mariée sans amour, veuve, gérant une propriété vide, contente, triste, calme... et, tout à coup, Claude m'amène Maxime à la maison... La foudre venait de tomber sur Malemort... 12
```

Maxime is temporarily pleased with the arrangement. After the death of his own mother, he had felt left out. Being a wild, imaginative young man, he believed that his father preferred his conservative brother. In Solange he finds a woman who loves him with the tenderness he had not had since the death of his mother.

The whole incident of the threatening letters, the whole atmosphere which has upset everybody's life is a disorder which, sooner or
later, will pass. The love which has grown in it will end too. Solange knows it all along. She is aware that her affair with Maxime is a deviation from her ordinary life. She says several times through the play that she is in love with a shadow, a ghost. She is aware that for Maxime this is a moment of excitement, a moment to be in love with love. The excitable romantic young man will soon find something else to fire his imagination. But Solange is starving for love, and she is willing to pay the price.

All through the play, one has the impression that Maxime, in spite of his emotional outbursts—he goes through a false epileptic seizure—is not very involved in the affair. He is going along, enjoying the experience. He and young Margot enjoy going through their theatricalities simply for the pleasure of performing. They are both unaware of the pain they inflict upon others. Both Maxime and Margot are—to use one of Cocteau’s favorite expressions—deux enfants terribles.

Love does not necessarily stop one from knowing the truth. It does, however, at least in the case of Solange, stop one from wanting to face it. Solange can talk to her friend Fred of the elusiveness of her affair, but, when she is faced with the possibility of ending it, she panics. Here is part of the conversation between her and Fred:

Fred

... Ne m’aviez-vous pas avoué vous-même que vous couriez après un ombre, que cette aventure ne pourrait pas avoir de suite.

Solange

Je me mentais ...

........................

Fred

Vous aimez un fantôme.13

As her world falls apart around her, Solange says in despair:
Solange
Je me moque des histoires de fantôme. Mon amour
est une réalité. Je suis une pauvre femme qui aime.¹

This woman in love finds herself alone only too soon. If her love is a reality, it is only so to her. Maxime runs away into the night with Margot. Fred tries to convince Solange that life goes on. She, however, refuses to face life and truth. Love is a disorder and a deviation which drives Solange to suicide.

Solange remains always an outsider. She lives apart and never joins life. She remains the kind of person who does not try to live but watches others live. When Maxime comes into her life, she considers him as her only chance to life. When this chance is gone, there is only one thing left for her: death. Love makes Solange soar into the sky only to let her fall and die on the hard surface of a reality she refuses to face. Solange dies quietly. Her only complaint is against the society which has no place for people like her. This is not true of Yvonne of Les Parents Terribles. She holds as long as possible onto the young man she loves: her own son.

In La Machine à Ecrire, the audience rarely identifies with Solange. It is perhaps the fault of the playwright, who makes her talk too much and act very little. One ceases to see Solange. It is more Cocteau speaking through his character. In Les Parents Terribles, however, Yvonne is presented in much stronger colors. Although it is difficult to identify or sympathize with a woman who tries with such fury to possess her son, she is, nevertheless, a strong character. The audience finds her very fascinating.

Yvonne and her husband, George, live together without love.
Yvonne has placed all her devotion in her son, Michel. At the time of
the play, Michel is twenty-two years old. He lives with his parents
and his aunt Léo in a house of complete disorder. Any simulation of order
is due to Léo, Yvonne’s sister. She was once engaged to George, but she
decided to stay on and take care of things once George chose to marry
Yvonne.

Yvonne spends long hours in her bed, in a dark bedroom, wrapped
in an endless amount of blankets and shawls. She lives in a reality all
of her own. She uses her bad health as an excuse to keep the people around
her in her service. She is like a spider. She keeps her victims around
her mesmerized by her delicate, sickly pretense which hides a will to
use others. Her main interest lies in Michel. In order to keep him by
her side, she uses all the tricks of her female nature. Their relation­
ship is scored with incestuous implications. He calls her his little
Sophie and he is her Mik.

In spite of her desperate efforts, however, he wants to escape
and be a separate entity. After sleeping a night away from home, he comes
to tell her that he is in love with a young girl. Yvonne behaves like
a mistress who is about to lose her lover. It is ironic, but Michel treats
his mother like a jealous girlfriend:

\begin{verbatim}
Yvonne
Si tu avais à m'exposer une intrigue nette, con­
venable, digne de toi et nous, il est probable
que je t'aurais écouté sans colère. Au lieu de
cela tu n'oses pas me regarder en face et tu me
débites une histoire dégoûtante.

Michel
Je te défends.

Par exemple
\end{verbatim}
Michel
(dans un mouvement adorahle) Sophie...

Yvonne
(le repoussant) Tu as plein de rouge à lèvres sur la figure.

C'est le tien.

Yvonne
Je ne pourrais pas t'embrasser sans dégoût.

Michel
Sophie... Ce n'est pas vrai.21

At the end of the scene, she has lost complete control of herself. She is insane with jealousy.

After this first outburst, Yvonne has George, Léo, and Michel around her. But not for long. Michel is sick of his mother's physical and emotional disorder. He yearns for a youthful relationship. He wants to escape his mother's web. But there are complications in his affair with young Madeleine, and, for a time, one gets the impression that Yvonne might have her son back. George, for reasons of his own, pressures Madeleine into lying to Michel that she does not love him, and that she has another man. With the help of Léo, however, who stands for order in a house of disorder, the two young people get together.

Yvonne cannot tolerate the intrusion of another woman in her life and the life of Michel. Once her web of love is broken, she feels like an outsider. At the end of the play while Léo, George, Michel and Madeleine are together discussing plans for the future, Yvonne slips away. She takes an overdose of medicine, and she dies calling the name of the only man she loves: Michel.

It is interesting to note that after her death, order enters into everyone's life. Life is again on an even keel. Although still shocked
and horrified, George, Léo, Michel, and Madeleine find themselves a new kind of peace. These are the closing lines of the play:

On sonne dans le vestibule. Léo traverse la scène et sort par le fond à droite. Madeleine met sa tête contre celle de Mik.

Madeleine
Michel... Michel. Mon chéri...

Léo
(elle rentre) C'était la femme de menage. Je lui ai dit qu'ici elle n'avait rien à faire, que tout était en ordre. 16

In all three of the plays discussed in this chapter, love brings death to the ones who love. The only possibility for happiness lies in the future of the young couples, Margot and Maxime in La Machine À Ecrire, Michel and Madeleine in Les Parents Terribles. But love in Cocteau does not last long. One wonders if the young couples whose love caused someone else's death, will enjoy their happiness for very long.
CONCLUSION

Quoting Jean Cocteau, Claude Mauriac writes in his book entitled *Jean Cocteau ou La Vérité du Mensonge*:

> Nos maîtres cachèrent l'objet sous la poésie. Nous avons prolongé, compliqué, même ensuite simplifié, cet effort. Notre rôle sera dorénavant de cacher la poésie sous l'objet. Voilà pourquoi je propose des pièges et point des pièges inattendus. Qui se douterait en face de cette petite chose que l'amour, la mort et la poésie l'habitent?

In his effort to create something different, to offer a novel presentation, Cocteau misled his audience. Trying to hide poetry, love and meaning under the object, he earned the title of the entertainer, but not that of the serious artist. His theatre has been called a theatre of surfaces. He has been compared to a magician with a hat full of unexpected tricks.

His early plays like *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, *Parade* and others, exist simply to surprise and entertain. If Cocteau intended "de cacher la poésie sous l'objet," he succeeded only too well. The audience saw only the objects, which at times were very entertaining and original, and missed the artist's more meaningful concepts.

When Cocteau in his later works made an effort to present philosophical and universal questions, his audience was still looking for entertaining tricks, and it ignored Cocteau's serious statements. His critics, even after his mature works as *L'Aigle à Deux Têtes*, *La Machine Infernale*, and *Les Parents Terribles*, accused Cocteau of still creating a theatre of surfaces.

Cocteau, however, is interested in more serious questions, besides mere entertainment. One of these questions is love. Love, according to
Cocteau, is a rare kind of flower, a mutation sprung out of life's banalities.

Love is violent. Because of its mutative nature, it is a devi­

ation and a form of disorder. It affects the poets, the revolutionaries,

and the pure in heart. In his plays, Cocteau talks of various mani­

festations of love. They all prove that love is elusive, impossible

and, almost always, it ends in death.

In Orphée, Orphée, the poet, disenchanted with his love with Eurydice, searches for Death, who is a beautiful woman as well as a poetic concept. It is after death that Orphée finds a kind of peace.

In L'Aigle à Deux Têtes, Stanislas, the young rebel-poet, falls in love with a violent woman: the queen whom he came to kill. Their love affair is short and explosive. Stanislas kills the queen and commits suicide.

One hopes that their poetic souls found perfect love in death. In Renaud et Armide and Les Chevaliers de la Table Ronde, love flourishes like a magic flower in a spellbound world. Once the spell is broken and the gossamer of magic is dispelled, love can only be found in death. Armide dies in the arms of Renaud when she finds herself deprived of her magic powers. Lancelot and Guenièvre are transferred to another world, one of poetry, the world of the fairies.

In Cocteau's La Machine Infernale and Les Parents Terribles, love becomes a monstrous kind of bloom. In La Machine Infernale, the gods trap young Oedipus into marrying his mother, Jocasta. Their short seventeen years of love end in tragedy. In Les Parents Terribles, Yvonne is jealous, and she wants to keep her son only for herself. Her possessive love is stifling and overpowering. When he falls in love with a girl of his age, Yvonne dies.
Speaking about Cocteau's work, Claude Mauriac said that "la poésie est une forme plus élevée de l'amour." Cocteau sees further than that. In his plays love becomes a higher form of poetry. It is in love that his exceptional kind of characters search for poetic expression. But love cannot survive in a world where the gods as well as society set their traps for creative beings. Cocteau stated once, talking about his poet friend Apollinaire, that society kills its poets. Cocteau proves in his work that it kills its lovers too.

Love is a disorder because it tries to grow in a society which rejects it. That is why poets and lovers search for it in death. Stanislas, the poet and revolutionary, tells his queen: "J'aurais dû te tuer dans ta chambre la première nuit et me tuer ensuite. Voilà une façon définitive de faire l'amour." It seems that death is a better ground for the realization of love. Perhaps in death love is no longer a disorder and a mutation, but the natural goal for creative spirits in search of ultimate expression.
FOOTNOTES

CHAPTER I


4 Cocteau, loc. cit., p. 61.

5 Ibid., p. 42.


7 Cocteau, loc. cit., p. 45.


9 Cocteau, Théâtre, Vol. I., p. 36.


11 Cocteau, Oedipe-Roi, Roméo et Juliette, p. 2.

12 Ibid.

13 Grossvogel, loc. cit., p. 53.


16 Ibid., p. 32.

17 Cocteau, Oedipe-Roi, Roméo et Juliette, p. 9.

18 Ibid., p. 7.

19 Ibid.

20 Cocteau, Théâtre, Vol. I., p. 11.

21 Cocteau, Oedipe-Roi, Roméo et Juliette, p. 7.

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CHAPTER II


2 Ibid., p. 248.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 229.

5 Ibid., p. 223.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., pp. 231-2.

9 Ibid., p. 297.


13 Ibid., p. 94.

14 Ibid., p. 95.

15 Ibid., p. 96.

16 Ibid., p. 97.


22Ibid., p. 161.
23Ibid., p. 162.
24Ibid., p. 95.
25Ibid., p. 169.

CHAPTER III
2Ibid., p. 51.
3Ibid., pp. 72-3.
5Ibid., p. 357.
6Ibid., p. 302.
7Ibid., p. 374.
8Ibid., p. 357.
9Ibid., p. 355.
10Ibid., p. 376.
11Ibid.
12Ibid., p. 415.
14Ibid., p. 116.
15Ibid., p. 117.
16Ibid., p. 189.

CHAPTER IV
2Ibid., p. 65.
3Ibid., p. 144.
CONCLUSION

2Ibid., p. 137.
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