

GREEK CLASSICS MODERNISED

M. ANDRÉ GIDE'S
"ŒDIPUS"

RETURN OF THE
PITOËFFS

By THE DRAMATIC CRITIC

IN the Paris theatres at present, Greek mythology is attracting a little attention. The Pitoëffs, after a prolonged tour in Belgium, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Italy and the French provinces, look possession of the Avenue on Friday, opening their season with a programme of which M. André Gide's new version of the Sophoclesian tragedy "Œdipus the King" is the salient feature.

And to-morrow evening, the Opera is to produce "Elektra," also by Sophocles, but in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's adaptation as a lyric tragedy with Herr Richard Strauss' music: this will be its first performance here though the work is nearly a quarter of a century old. But—*tout vient à point à qui sait attendre*...—And great art, like good wine, improves with age.

I can speak of M. Gide's "Œdipe" only from the reading of it. For the Pitoëff company decided to inaugurate its new headquarters unembarrassed by the presence of foreign critics. Has it seen enough of the species on its foreign tour?

Striking Personality.

However that may be, I rather regret the decision; for M. Gide, though not precisely the spiritual guide that could be desired for such angelic souls as dramatic critics are reputed to be, is a striking intellectual personality in the literary world. And it would have interested me to compare the impressions created by the perusal of "Œdipe" with the effect it produces when acted.

M. Gide's appearances in the rôle of dramatist are not very numerous. His represented works of which I retain any recollection at this moment comprise only: his Biblical tragedy "Saul," produced by M. Jacques Copeau in the heroic days of the Vieux-Colombier; his fine translation of "Antony and Cleopatra," written for Mme. Ida Rubinstein who produced it at the Opéra in a resplendent setting; and, finally, "Amal," a translation of one of Rabindranath Tagore's poetic reveries: it was presented in Paris by the Petite Scène, always on the look-out for the rare in dramatic art.

His "Œdipe"—published very recently by the Gallimard firm in the N.R.F. collection—differs notably from that of Sophocles. In the first place, M. Gide adds to the list of characters, bringing in the two sisters, Antigone and Ismene, and their brothers, Polyneices and Eteocles, the purpose of the addition being mainly, or solely, to furnish the pretext for a scene of peculiarly Freud-Gidean suggestiveness.

In the second place, whatever beauty there may be in the language is intellectual, not lyric, in its essence. The dialogue, subtle and big with innuendo, is compounded of sinister and humorous elements, of grandeur and triviality at one and the same time, producing a curious effect of satire in drama. The effect is deliberately sought; perhaps too deliberately: for the predominating result suggests play of the reasoning faculties rather than the play of emotions.

Shavian Flippancy.

The clash of the tragic and the comic—M. Gide himself calls his humour "buffoonery"—is particularly evident in the choruses. "The plague, since we must call it by its name, continues to afflict the town," wail the townsfolk. The sly crib from La Fontaine, "*puisqu'il faut l'appeler par son nom*," on the lips of the plague-stricken Thebans, makes even the kind-hearted smile.

And there is the comic spirit in many of Œdipus's comments; as, for instance: "A god guides thee, Œdipus... That is what I say every Sunday, and on holidays. I haven't time to say it on other days." It is the flippancy of Mr. Bernard Shaw, the Shaw of "Caesar and Cleopatra"; but the Shavian flippancy is employed here by a deep thinker.

M. Gide also makes Œdipus the prototype of man's revolt against destiny. He takes as the test of his philosophical drama, a verse from the "Antigone" of Sophocles: "The universe is full of prodigies, but the most prodigious is Man." Œdipus, the Gideon Œdipus, will admit of no superior power; all his acts are the creation of his will; he refuses to accept the punishment due to an incestuous parricide, but inflicts the punishment upon himself, of his own free-will. His spirit is the spirit of Manfred:

*I have not been thy dupe, nor am
[thy prey,
But was my own destroyer, and will be
My own hereafter.*

He is the exaltation of individualism. The answer to all the enigmas of the Sphinx Life is, he says: "Man." "I hold the answer ready," he adds, "before the question was put; and my strength was that, no matter what the question might have been, I would have admitted no other reply." It is this almost frenzied spirit of independence and self-pride which gives grandeur to M. Gide's dramatic meditation—for it is that, more than a play—and makes its production a notable current event in French drama.