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**The metamorphosis of nymph Syrinx: The eternal fidelity of the
Adulterous Woman
(Camus: *La femme adultère*)**

La femme adultère fait partie de ces œuvres de Camus où l'auteur nous offre l'image de la solitude impitoyable, de l'abandon absolu et l'expérience harcelante de *vanitatum vanitas*. Selon ma considération, la particularité de cette œuvre réside en le cadre mythologique créé par la reproduction d'une métamorphose ovidienne, de l'histoire qui relate la transformation de la nymphe Syrinx (*Met. I*, 689-712). Dans mon travail, je vais démontrer comment ce cadre mythologique peut ennoblir la femme doublement infidèle et en faire l'incarnation de la fidélité éternelle.

Camus' *La femme adultère* is one of those works which depict an artistic portrayal of merciless solitude, seemingly definitive loneliness and the painful feeling of the vanity of vanities (*vanitatum vanitas*).¹ In the following, I will argue that its unique value and speciality lies in the mythological frame surrounding the text, the story relating nymph Syrinx' transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (*Met. I*, 689-712.). In my study, I intend to analyse how this mythological framework makes Camus' twice unfaithful wife the symbol of eternal fidelity.

The Adulterous Woman, the title of this short story is a judgement, which pins down the fact that the protagonist has committed adultery. However, the short story itself leaves us in the dark concerning the question of what constituted the act of infidelity in the text, and in this sense, the title can be considered a question, as well, which leaves us wondering about the meaning of adultery and faithfulness. There are many signs at the beginning of the short story which foreshadow an extramarital affair:² the spiritual

¹ *The Adulterous Woman* is the first short story published in the volume *Exile and the Kingdom*. See: Albert Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, translated by Justin O'Brien, New York, Vintage Books, 1957, p. 4-12.; Albert Camus, *L'Exil et le Royaume. Nouvelles*, Paris, Gallimard, 1957, p. 9-41.

See further: Alfred Noyer-Weidner, « Albert Camus im Stadium der Novelle », *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, No. 70, Juni 1960, p. 1-38.

² *The Adulterous Woman* – *La femme adultère*: The title evokes a biblical locus: Exodus 20,14, so the sixth commandment: « *tu ne commettras pas d'adultère* » – in the Bible of Jerusalem. Vo. Jn 8, 1-11 (the parable of the adulterous woman).

struggles of Janine who is unhappily married to the textile merchant Marcel, the description of Janine's agonizing thoughts, the sympathetic attitude of the French soldier, and the unobtrusive non-verbal communication between the soldier and the heroine seem to prepare the reader for the description of an act of infidelity. However, it is important to note that the short story does not contain any direct allusions to this matter. The figure of the French soldier becomes gradually relegated to the background, until he is almost eliminated from the horizon of the reader, with the sole exception of the end of the short story when his character is evoked again in the vision of an increasingly transcendent final scene. There Janine gets absorbed in a strange mystic-natural experience with the desert landscape, which is reminiscent of a sexual act.

Thus, the description of the relationship between Janine and the French soldier is only elliptical without an explicit depiction of its physical or psychic nature. At the same time, the heroine's inner struggle is projected into an absurd vision of unifying nature and love³, which does not provide unambiguous answer to the question of Janine's infidelity. Hence, the reader meets a twofold difficulty in the interpretation of the text: on the one hand, the question of the heroine's infidelity or fidelity requires a solution; on the other hand, without answering the first question, it remains apparently hard to understand the meaning of the entire short story.

To understand these two dominant problems of the literary interpretation of this story, we have to examine the system of allusions at work in this text, and we have to explore the hypertextual references between the *Adulterous Woman* and other literary texts⁴. In my opinion, the two most significant literary topoi referred to by Camus are the metamorphoses (following the Ovidian *Metamorphoses*)⁵ and the dream description of the heroes in the novels of Dostoevsky⁶.

In order to solve the problems of interpretation we have raised, one has to analyse the hypertextual relationship between Camus' short story and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In *Metamorphoses* 1, 689sq. Ovid relates the tale of transformation of the nymph Syrinx (Met. 1, 689-712.)⁷, a tragical love story between the beautiful nymph and Pan, the Arcadian god of

shepherds and goatherds.⁸ The Ovidian version of this fatal love story has been the basis of Camus' short story as a substantial pretext, not only as a single lexical or thematic allusion: the story of Syrinx, rewritten and actualised by Camus in its entirety, advocates the eternity of human anguishes in emulation of the Ovidian pretext. The Ovidian myth is recreated in Camus' short story as an absurd emulation of the original metamorphosis of Syrinx, where Janine's existential crisis is relieved by a supernatural transformation. Thus, the *Adulterous Woman* becomes the absurd supertext of the Ovidian myth.

The first and at the same time the most explicit allusion to the Ovidian pretext appears in a comparison of Janine's husband, the textile merchant Marcel to a sulky faun⁹ at the very beginning of the short story:

Janine looked at her husband. With wisps of graying hair growing low on a narrow forehead, a broad nose, a flabby mouth, Marcel looked like a pouting faun. At each hollow in the pavement she felt him jostle against her.¹⁰

With this identification between Marcel and the faun, Camus brought forth a semantic isomorphy based on outward appearances. The parallel between Marcel and Pan, the faun creates the possibility of a mythologically inspired reading of the whole text at the very beginning of the short story. The enumeration of Marcel's deformed corporal features is in favour of this line of interpretation, as well. Marcel's undoubtedly deterrent appearance, his broad nose, flabby mouth and his naked, clumsy hand introduce him as a reincarnation of ugly Pan, the god of shepherds¹¹.

⁸ As one day ugly Pan besieged Syrinx with his frightening love, the nymph had exactly the opposite attitude to the horrid god and fled from him. Finally, the nymph escaped from the seemingly hopeless love struggle by a metamorphosis and she was transformed into a reed by her father, Ladon, the river god of Arcadia: « Pan, believing he had caught her, held instead some marsh reeds for the body of the Nymph; and while he sighed the moving winds began to utter plaintive music in the reeds » (« Panaque cum prensam sibi iam Syringa putaret, corpore pro nymphae calamos tenuisse palustres, dumque ibi suspirat, motos in harundine ventos effecisse sonum tenuem similemque querenti. » (Ovid, *op. cit.*, Liber I, 705-708.). Paradoxically, the ill-fated nymph became an eternal captive of Pan's fatal love: the sweet voice of the reed into which the nymph was changed enchanted Pan so much that he made a pan-pipe (syrinx) out of the reed, thus binding the nymph to himself for ever.

⁹ For Pan and Faunus see: Leonhard Schmitz, « Pan », in *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, William Smith and Ann Arbor (ed.), Michigan, University of Michigan Library, 1870, p.106-107.; *Id.*, « Faunus », in *Dictionary of Greek and Roman...*, *op. cit.*, p. 137-138.

¹⁰ Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, p. 8.; « Janine regarda son mari. Des épis de cheveux grisonnants plantés bas sur un front serré, le nez large, la bouche irrégulière, Marcel avait l'air d'un faune boudeur. À chaque défoncement de la chaussée, elle le sentait sursauter contre elle. », *Id.*, *L'Exil et le Royaume*, p. 11.

¹¹ The iconography of the ancient depictions of Pan serves as a convincing proof of this similarity. In ancient art the attributes of Pan who was often treated in literary sources as being identical to Faunus, reveal an ugly, clumsy figure similar to Marcel.

³ See: Anthony Zahareas, « La Femme adultère: Camus' Ironic Vision of the Absurd », *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 5, No.3, Autumn 1963, p. 319-328.

⁴ Without doubt, the Biblical and Judeo-Christian tradition is prevalently present in the entire text, mostly appearing in the usage of Biblical phrases, theological arguments, lexical elements and syntactical constructions. Moreover, the literary tradition also exerted a remarkable influence on the textual and conceptual structure of Camus' short story.

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Brookes More, Boston, Cornhill Publishing Co., 1922.

⁶ The dreams of Stavrogin (*Demons*), - a ridiculous man (*The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*), - Versilov (*The Adolescent*). See Kenneth Lantz, *The Dostoevsky Encyclopedia*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004, p. 116-120.

⁷ For the Ovidian myth see: Paul Murgatroyd, « Ovid's Syrinx », *Classical Quarterly*, vol. 51, Issue 02, December 2001, p. 620-623.

Another fundamental pillar of the interpretation of Camus' short story with the help of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the characterization of Janine's external and internal features in the *Adulterous Woman*. The most significant feature in the description of the not too young, rather mature heroine's outward appearance may be the strange, seeming contradiction between Janine's charms and her age: Janine has been a married woman for many years, who has committed herself to her husband formally, but she has still retained her appeal to men by her fine, tall, slim and voluptuous figure. These corporal features of the heroine, above all her tall, delicate and slim constitution, coupled with the weakness and fragility are closely reminiscent of a reed. The botanical characteristics of the reed (*Phragmites australis*) are very similar to the aforementioned female features¹². The correspondence between Janine's external features and the characteristics of the reed is also a semantic isomorphy, which indicates the powerful presence of the Ovidian pretext in Camus' short story, as well.

The similarity between the heroine of the *Adulterous Woman* and the Ovidian figure of Syrinx becomes even more palpable if we survey the symbolic sense of the reed in ethnography and in the Bible¹³. In the folklore tradition, reed is the symbol of the crying and singing soul, which tries to express itself with its song. Reed is present with a similar shade of meaning in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt 27, 29), where it symbolizes the defencelessness, suffering and anguish in connection with the Passion of Christ. Besides, this ethnographical and biblical symbolic meaning is observable in Janine's behaviour and gestures at many levels. On the one hand, her anguishes make her similar to a reed, symbolizing the defencelessness and the distress of the heroine. On the other hand, Janine actually bursts into tears of grief, too: the short story ends with Janine's weeping. We can regard these mental processes and quivers of the heroine both in their explicit and implicit form as being related to the melancholic voice of the already transformed nymph Syrinx¹⁴ in Ovid's fatal love story: "and while he sighed the moving winds began to utter plaintive music in the reeds."¹⁵ – as we read in the *Metamorphoses*. The same kind of permanent and unrelenting pain is bringing tears to Janine's eyes, who has also been already transformed in a symbolic way during her encounter with the desert: "She was weeping copiously, unable to restrain herself."¹⁶

Furthermore, the allusion to the Ovidian myth of the nymph Syrinx and Pan is observable on the lexical level of the short story, as well. The Ovidian pretext of the

¹² The reed is a wetland plant which grows a tall stem and long leaves. It has a slim, yet strong and massive stalk: it is not easily broken, but bends well following the wind.

¹³ See: Szimbólumtár. Jelképek, motívumok, témák az egyetemes és magyar kultúrából, József Pál and Edit Újvári (ed.), Budapest, Balassi, 2005.

¹⁴ For Syrinx see: Schmitz, « Syrinx », in *Dictionary of Greek and Roman...*, op. cit., p. 966.

¹⁵ « *dumque ibi suspirat, motos in harundine ventos effecisse sonum tenuem similemque querenti* ». (Ovid, op. cit., *Liber I*, 705-708.)

¹⁶ « *Elle pleurait, de toutes ses larmes, sans pouvoir se retenir.* » Camus, *L'Exil et le Royaume*, p. 41.

Adulterous Woman appears above all in the organic substance comparisons on the phraseological and lexical level of the short story. Camus' short story contains two figures of speech which belong to this type of comparisons. At the beginning of the *Adulterous Woman* we can read the following sentence describing the unfolding of the landscape before the eyes of Janine and Marcel:

Two or three frail, whitened palm trees which seemed cut out of metal flashed into sight in the window only to disappear the next moment.¹⁷

Later on, we can find a second instance of this kind of organic substance-comparisons as part of the description of the married couple's travel:

But she could still see the French soldier, long and thin, so thin in his fitted tunic that he seemed constructed of a dry, friable material, a mixture of sand and bone.¹⁸

We can interpret both comparisons only as anticipating motives, which prepare the metamorphosis of Janine in the last scene. Both of these figures of speech (palm trees which seemed cut out of metal; the French soldier as a mixture of sand and bone) suggest the same type of transformation as the archetypical process of Janine's metamorphosis in which the nymph Syrinx was transformed into a reed in the Ovidian myth. These comparisons evoke the Ovidian pretext on the lexical level, as well, by accentuating the process of the metamorphosis.

Reed, which is the main motif in the metamorphosis of the Ovidian myth appears not only implicitly in the text (by the associations of the organic substance-comparisons), but also in concrete form, as an expressive lexical element: in the Algerian hotel room, where Janine and Marcel stay, a folding screen from reed (un paravent de roseau) is mentioned as a piece of furniture. The wall, appearing in the form of the folding screen, has a complex symbolical semantic content in which the component of delimiting, shutting out and defending is particularly present. This semantic content also evokes Ovid's *Metamorphoses* together with the material of the folding screen from reed, which refers to the result, the last phase of the transformation of nymph Syrinx. Furthermore, an additional intertextual reference indicates the presence of the Ovidian pretext in the *Adulterous Woman*. This intertextual reference to another Ovidian metamorphosis is elicited by the lexical element „the wall, the folding screen.” In the story relating the tale of Priamus and Thisbe (Met. IV, 55-166)¹⁹, the „wall” appears as a medium, which disconnects the young loving couple of the Ovidian myth (”Thou envious wall why art thou standing in the way of

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4. « *Deux ou trois palmiers grêles et blanchis, qui semblaient découpés dans du métal, surgirent dans la vitre pour disparaître l'instant d'après.* »

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5. « *Mais elle revoyait encore le soldat français, long et mince, si mince, avec sa vareuse ajustée, qu'il paraissait bâti dans une matière sèche et friable, un mélange de sable et d'os.* »

¹⁹ See: T. T. Duke, « Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe », *Classical Journal*, vol. 66, No.4, Apr. - May 1971, p. 320-327.

those who die for love?"²⁰) The folding screen of the *Adulterous Woman*, equally connected to the story of Pan and Syrinx, just as well as to Píramus and Thisbe, symbolizes simultaneously the possibility of flight (as that of Syrinx from Pan) and self-defense.

The moments of flight, which precede the metamorphosis in the Ovidian myth, can be found in Camus' short story, too. Two contrary feelings are present in Janine's soul: paradoxically, she is afraid of the transformations which await her and the causes that will motivate these changes, while at the same time she feels the unavoidable necessity of flight. This fear is induced by two parallel reasons: on the one hand, Janine is suffering from an existential crisis, a complex pathological state of mind caused by an external, social problem: the general indifference of mankind²¹. On the other hand, her state can be regarded as a consequence of an internal, private problem, as well, her unhappy marriage with Marcel²². Her double existential crisis is solved by a strange metamorphosis, which can be interpreted as an absurd form of the Ovidian transformation between nymph Syrinx and the pipe. But before this metamorphosis, the heroine has a nightmare, which requires interpretation.

When Janine and Marcel arrive at the hotel, they go to the terrace to see the desert landscape. The panorama of the oasis dazzles the heroine and it produces a supernatural enthusiasm in her. Subsequently, we get to know from the text that Janine suffers from very high fever, which becomes higher and higher as her falling asleep is drawing near. We may suppose that Janine has already had a high fever on the terrace, and this feverish condition contributed to her natural enthusiasm and her following internal illusions. Indeed, Janine experiences visions induced by a delirium:

With a nasal twang old phonographs in the Moorish cafés ground out tunes she recognized vaguely; they reached her borne on the sound of a slow-moving

²⁰ « "invidere" dicebant "paries, quid amantibus obstat?" » (Ovid, *op. cit.*, Liber IV, 73.)

See further: Louis A. Perraud, *Amatores Exclusi: « Apostrophe and Separation in the Píramus and Thisbe Episode »*, *Classical Journal*, vol. 79, No.2, Dec. 1983 - Jan. 1984, p. 135-139.

²¹ See: Rob Roy McGregor, « *La Femme adultère: A Metaphor of the Fall from Absurd* », *The French Review*, vol. 67, No.3, Feb. 1994, p. 478-485.

²² Their marriage resembles the semantics of 17th century love. See: Niklas Luhmann, *Szerellem-Szenvedély. Az intimitás kódolásáról*, Budapest, Jószyveg Műhely Kiadó, 1997.

The need of an escape from this grave, depressing state of mind appears in the text of the short story recurrently: one time Janine is longing for the desert landscape, which seems to her a peaceful, free world; another time she is troubled by her unstable emotions in relation to her husband and she shows great concern about the thought of divorce. The initial phase of Janine's flight is realized only on the level of her thoughts in the form of interior illusions: her desire to break out is not fulfilled.

crowd. She must sleep. But she was counting black tents; behind her eyelids motionless camels were grazing; immense solitudes were whirling within her.²³

These feverish illusions have been provoked by the elements of the early evening landscape, which she imagines as the location of a Biblical, prelapsarian state, of a certain „Promised Land”²⁴. In this part of the short story Camus recalls the dream descriptions of Dostoyevsky's novels, above all the vision, which may be read in *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man*²⁵. This intertextual reference invokes the topic of sin and sinfulness, as all dreaming heroes of Dostoyevsky's novels are sinners in some measure. As opposed to the deadly sins of Versilov and Stavrogin, the sin of the ridiculous man is an ethical sin, which one could call acedia using the medieval terminology²⁶. Similarly, Camus' unfaithful woman is also guilty of acedia because she lets the indifference and the existential crisis dominate her²⁷. Nevertheless, following the lesson which can be learnt from Dostoyevsky's novels, her sinfulness paradoxically renders the vision of an almost Biblical, prelapsarian state possible, which opens the door of action and performing good deeds before her²⁸.

Thus, the experience of the overnight vision produces heartfelt emotional effect on Janine who decides to turn to action for this reason. At night, after waking up from her nightmare, she makes her mind up to change her life, which seemed so unhappy till then, and she goes out to the terrace where she can behold the panorama of the entire desert landscape, which represents the universe and a Biblical „Promised Land” for her. It is exactly at this moment that an absurd metamorphosis happens to Janine: the heroine goes

²³ Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, p. 10.; « *Les vieux phonographes des cafés maures nasillaient des airs qu'elle reconnaissait vaguement, et qui lui arrivaient, portés par une rumeur de foule lente. Il fallait dormir. Mais elle comptait des tentes noires; derrière ses paupières paissaient des chameaux immobiles; d'immenses solitudes tournoyaient en elle.* » *Id.*, *L'Exil et le Royaume*, p. 34.

²⁴ « *Elle savait seulement que ce royaume, de tout temps, lui avait été promis...* », *Ibid.*

For the motif of desert and another intertextual reference see: Brian Duffy, « *Journey to the Desert and Other Motifs in Albert Camus' La femme adultère and Richard Ford's Abyss* », *Revue de littérature comparée*, No.334, 2010, p. 197-210.

²⁵ For *The Dream of a Ridiculous Man* see: János Szávai, « *Aletheia, avagy nem találunk szavakat* », *Vigília*, No.5, 2006, p. 369-376.; for the similarity of Janine's and Raskolnikov's dream see: Stirling Haig, « *The Epilogue of Crime and Punishment and Camus' La Femme adultère* », *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 3, No.4, 1966, p. 445-449.

²⁶ See: Siegfried Wenzel, « *Acedia 700-1200* », *Traditio*, vol. 22, 1966, p. 73-102.; Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *A hét főbűn*, Budapest, Európa, 2011.; Sergio Benvenuto, *Jóra való restség. A közönyösség szenvedélye*, Budapest, Typotex, 2011.

²⁷ So Janine remains slothful, inactive, she fails to act, and rather sinks back to her double existential crises.

²⁸ In the world of Dostoyevsky's novels, such a redemption is the privilege of the biggest sinners. Clearly, the acedia, which overran and filled Janine's heart, belonged to this category, for *acedia* is one of the seven deadly sins. Therefore, the ridiculous man and Janine alike would

through a strange sensual experience, during which she feels united with the desert landscape in the course of an intimate encounter with nature, almost reminiscent of a sexual act. In this unusual, mystical and natural experience, the „water of night” plays a significant role. The „water of night” appears as a transubstantiated, transformed material:

Then, with unbearable gentleness, the water of night began to fill Janine, drowned the cold, rose gradually from the hidden core of her being and overflowed in wave after wave, rising up even to her mouth full of moans.²⁹

After this strange transubstantiation Janine goes back to her husband in the hotel room, and starts crying as an act of revelation: „She was weeping copiously, unable to restrain herself.”³⁰ This totally absurd overnight experience of the unfaithful woman is thoroughly imbued with the thematical moments of the Ovidian myth³¹.

The dominant presence of the Ovidian pretext in Camus’ short story makes possible a new reading of *La femme adultère*. As the heroine of Camus’ short story escapes from her double existential crisis in the last scene by a strange, mystical-natural union, she becomes unfaithful to her usual indifference and to her husband, Marcel, as well. Still, it is exactly through an Ovidian reading of this event that Janine, „the unfaithful wife” may become the symbol of eternal fidelity, too. As Syrinx became the eternal captive of Pan through her metamorphosis, and hence a truthful lover of God from whom she escaped, Janine’s faithfulness, inspired by that of Syrinx, may finally make the symbol of eternal fidelity out of Camus’ twice unfaithful wife.

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²⁹ Camus, *Exile and the Kingdom*, p. 32.; « Alors, avec une douceur insupportable, l’eau de la nuit commença d’emplir Janine, submergea le froid, monta peu à peu du centre obscur de son être et déborda en flots ininterrompus jusqu’à sa bouche pleine de gémissements. » Id., *L’Exil et le Royaume*, p. 40.

³⁰ Id., *Exile and the Kingdom*, p. 32.; « Elle pleurait, de toutes ses larmes, sans pouvoir se retenir. » Id., *L’Exil et le Royaume*, p. 41.

³¹ In Camus’ short story, the water of night, its slowly and permanent flooding, Janine’s wailing mouth and her unstoppable crying in the last scene are the equivalents of the river-god Ladon and his slow flooding, of the moments of the sigh, and the complaint of nymph Syrinx, which are recalled in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.