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Oedipus or the Wrecks of the WASP Disguise

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Woody Allen's 1989 film *Oedipus Wrecks* is typically considered to be a throwback to his light-hearted early comedies, reduced to the caricature of the archetypal overbearing Jewish mother. Yet, the title of the film, largely regarded as a Freudian gag, does not merely refer to the psychoanalytic term 'Oedipus complex,' but also echoes the Greek tragedy of Oedipus. In this chapter I would like to suggest that the intertextual relations between Allen's *Oedipus Wrecks* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* shape the thematic complexity and richness of the film. Sophoclean leitmotifs, such as the tension between choice and fate and the struggle between hiding and revealing one's authentic identity, are intertwined in Allen's work. Analyzing *Oedipus Wrecks* through the mythical prism also brings the film into dialogue with some of Allen's earlier films, as well as various modern Jewish-American literary works portraying the self-hating Jew, who is eager to assimilate into American culture.

The notorious Jewish mother

Oedipus Wrecks, the final segment of the *New York Stories* trilogy, is centered around Sheldon Mills (Woody Allen), a successful middle-aged lawyer, and his unresolved relationship with his overbearing Jewish mother, Sadie Millstein (Mae Questel). Sheldon's secret wish, that his unbearable mother would disappear, is fulfilled when she mysteriously vanishes while taking part in a magician's act.¹ But soon after that, his worst nightmare comes true, as Mrs. Millstein miraculously reappears as a giant specter in the sky over New York City, eager to discuss her son's life with the passersby and the media.

Woody Allen directed this 45-minute film after completing two of his most melancholic films, *September* (1987) and *Another Woman* (1988), and right before his ambitious *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). Against the background of these acclaimed works, *Oedipus Wrecks* was not taken seriously and its importance to Allen's oeuvre has been considered nugatory. The film was viewed first and foremost as a funny little piece, entirely concocted from materials that Allen had used before, which is limited to the simplistic caricature of the archetypal overbearing Jewish mother (Wernblad 133; Del Negro 164; Fox 196; Yacowar 271; Blake 164; Kael 50–51; Antler 173–174; Lee 249).

Sadie Millstein is indeed one of the most prototypical representations of the Jewish mother, and her grotesque portrait seems to be the center of this film, from its opening scene to the very last one. The film commences with Sheldon complaining to his therapist that his mother constantly embarrasses and humiliates him. Even in his dreams, as he shares with his therapist, his mother does not stop controlling his life. In the second scene, Allen switches from telling to showing, and we witness Sadie Millstein's "horror show" as soon as she appears on the screen.

Sadie Millstein's very first words in the film, as she opens the door to Sheldon, who brought his fiancée Lisa (Mia Farrow) to meet his mother for the first time, are: "You look terrible." Then, she kindly informs Lisa that her son's surname is not really Mills, but Millstein, and also notifies her that Sheldon is going to be completely bald, just like his father. Over dinner, Mrs. Millstein constantly rebukes her son for not eating enough and does not allow him to interfere with her investigation of Lisa. Finally, after sharing with his fiancée Sheldon's embarrassing childhood issues, such as bedwetting, Mrs. Millstein tells her 50-year-old son not to marry his fiancée. Additionally, not only does Sheldon's mother embarrass him in front of his life partner, she also embarrasses him in front of his work partners, as one day she surprisingly appears at his law firm with her sister.

In her tiny body, Sadie Millstein embodies the stigmatic content of the Jewish mother. This stigma evolved in American comedy, literature, and films in the 1960s, and the most memorable and fully elaborated caricature, at least until *Oedipus Wrecks*, can be found in Philip Roth's 1969 novel *Portnoy's Complaint* (Ravits 6). In fact, the fantastic element in *Oedipus Wrecks*—the reappearance of Sheldon's mother in the sky over New York City—can be viewed as a realization of the opening chapter of *Portnoy's Complaint*, entitled "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met," which introduces the protagonist's mother through her young boy's eyes: