

Racine's Tragedies

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Part I

Racine the playwright

Part II

Andromaque

Part III

Britannicus

Part IV

Phèdre

Lecture 6

6.1 Background to Phèdre

6.1.1 Euripides and Seneca

Phèdre is another play where Racine's mastery of the Greek classics is used to its fullest extent. Knight tells us that Racine was "the only Greek scholar writing for the theatre" (5, 1) in Paris at the time *Phèdre* was performed. His sources for this play, originally entitled *Phèdre et Hippolyte*, were two ancient plays. The older was by Euripides, called simply *Hippolytus*, and its later derivative was by the Roman orator Seneca, whom we saw as a possible character in Racine's *Britannicus*, as well as a minor source for that play. His play on the present story was called *Phaedra*, like Racine's.

6.1.2 Sexual pathology

As well as plot and characterization borrowed from this play, Racine also appropriated a much more important aspect: the idea of "the pathology of the sexual drive" (25, 131). This is especially interesting to us since it predates a now commonly accepted (even clichéd) use of violent euphemism in order to approach questions of sex, along with a whole vocabulary of psychoanalysis which is habitually applied to the subject. Thus the scene where Phèdre invites Hippolyte to run her through with his sword on learning of her desire for him would have to be skilfully directed in order not to inspire wincing at the too-obvious metaphor today. Not so in Racine's time, when the implications would have been much more obtuse to the audience, which would have been given food for psychological thought after a play already rich as a precursor to Freudian theory.

If we compare the relevant passage in the two plays, we find striking parallels; but perhaps the interest is in where the versions differ. The Senecan version runs:

HIPPOLYTUS	What? Does she fling herself into my arms? Here is my sword to see full justice done... I have her by the hair, this shameless head In my left hand . . . O Goddess of the Bow, Never did blood more justly stain thy altar.
PHAEDRA	Hippolytus! My prayer is answered now, My mind made whole. More than my prayer is granted, Now I can die by your hand, saved from sin.
HIPPOLYTUS	Rather than that, go, live, obtain no boon From me! . . . Let this contaminated sword Never again come near my spotless side! . . .

(22, 126)

In Seneca's version, Hippolytus casts the sword aside which is later used in Phaedra's suicide. It seems as if he regards it as tainted by his stepmother's unclean touch, that it has been infected by her unnatural desire. One could plausibly infer that this reflects an even strenuous rejection of his own (repressed) sexual drive, following the disturbing revelation of carnal lust from a woman who shared his father's bed.

Racine's version has Phèdre grabbing the sword out of Hippolyte's hands and departing, ostensibly to use it against herself. In this the extra dynamic of Hippolyte's love for Aricie has come into play. (In the original myth he spurned all lovers.) He does not use the revelation as a pretext to reject sexual love further than he has already (by his preference for Artemis over Venus). He is merely stupefied, and appears to the audience as an innocent victim rather than the symbolic enemy of Venus' realm. He is "confused and even ashamed of the role he has unwittingly played" (25, 131) in his stepmother's self-destructive career.

This is very different from the aggressive, disgusted attitude of Seneca's character, and shows how Racine labours to portray the victim in this tragedy in a sympathetic light to a Parisian audience, for whom austerity in matters of love would have held little attraction. One might also speculate that the appearance of a true understanding of the nature and depth of Hippolyte's stepmother's motivations may have tainted him in the eyes of the audience—a case of the "victim" being "contaminated" by the crime. Indeed, in the case of incest, this idea is one of the main motivations for its extreme taboo status in most societies.

As for Racine's Phèdre character: she does not even use the sword she has appropriated, but instead takes a slow poison prepared by Médée. The connotations of illicit lust present in the Seneca model are of a far different character here. The audience feels sympathy for Phèdre at the last. She is another victim of the arbitrary rage of the gods, and not complicit in it as in Seneca. In this way Racine avoids the various horrors which a contemporary audience would have experienced when confronted with the bare drama of the Senecan version. As Knight says in his introduction to a bilingual version of the play:

Three things in [Seneca's] Phaedra story shocked the growing squeamishness of the Paris public, which was far more censorious about art than life—a married heroine with a sinful passion . . . a false accusation of rape, and worst of all, a young man who would not or could not love a woman.
(5, 3)

Knight duly credits Racine with courage for finding a way "to put back as much of the old story as he did" (5, 3). The differences which still remain tell us more about the aforementioned "squeamishness" of the audience than Racine's intentions, which were probably to evoke a similar reaction in his audience as Seneca might have in his. So Hippolyte is given a love interest, and he is only charged with attempting to seduce his stepmother. Instead of Phèdre herself making the accusation it is Œnone who gives Thésée this slanderous information. As well, the slander happens "off-stage"—that is, between Act III and Act IV. We hear of the accusation through the mechanism of Thésée's reply:

THÉSÉE	Ah ! Qu'est-ce que j'entends ? Un traître, un téméraire Préparait cet outrage à l'honneur de son père ? (20, 106, l. 1001-02)
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While we are detailing the ways in which the play had to be “toned down” for his audience, it is worth noting that the original story contained no suggestion that Phaedra thought Theseus was dead at the time of her attempted seduction of his son. Here is merely another detail to soften the effect of the outrageous lengths to which Phaedra’s illicit and divinely inspired lust will carry her. If we listen carefully, however, we see that, this detail established, Racine makes use of it to elaborate on her love as an ironic reflection of her desire for her missing husband. In short, Racine makes concessions for his audience, but resolves to give them little comfort out of them.

6.1.3 Venus’ curse

Phèdre refers to the curse put on her family by the goddess Venus, which caused her family to experience unnatural desires, beginning with her mother Pasiphae, whose coupling with a bull¹ resulted in the birth of the Minotaur, a creature which was half human and half bull (25, 126–27). This is the Pasiphae whom Aeneas sees in the Underworld in Book VI of *The Aeneid*. He meets the ghost of his lover Dido there, in the realm assigned to those who have died for love. Here also is where Pasiphae and Phaedra end up. They are described in pathetic tones:

Not far from thence, the Mournful Fields appear
So call’d from lovers that inhabit there.
The souls whom that unhappy flame invades,
In secret solitude and myrtle shades
Make endless moans, and, pining with desire,
Lament too late their unextinguish’d fire.
Here Procris, Eriphyle here he found,
Baring her breast, yet bleeding with the wound
Made by her son. He saw Pasiphae there,
With Phaedra’s ghost, a foul incestuous pair.
(28, VI, l. 595–603)²

Thus Phaedra is linked thematically with a diverse range of characters: with Procris, a jealous wife accidentally killed spying on her husband while hunting; with Evadne, who threw herself on her husband’s funeral pyre, with Laodamia who died in the arms of her warrior husband’s ghost, and with Caenis, ravished by Neptune, who granted her wish to become a man. (See note in 27, 424)

And what about the motivation for the curse? Well in Euripides’ version of the story, which closely follows the ancient myth, Aphrodite³ was jealous of the young Hippolytus’ spurning of women’s love, and his preference for the goddess Artemis⁴ over her. He preferred hunting and running in the woods.

In Euripides Aphrodite herself speaks in the play, expounding on her anger at Hippolytus’ ignorance of her influence over mankind: “that son of Theseus, born of the Amazon, Hippolytus, whom holy Pitheus taught, alone of all the dwellers in this land of Troezen, calls me vilest of the deities. Love he scorns, and, as for marriage, will none of it”.

¹Daedalus had made a bronze heifer inside which Pasiphae hid, fooling the bull into mating with her. (17, 51)

²(27, 170, see also footnote to same.)

³Venus

⁴Diana, goddess of hunting

The goddess of love doesn't take lightly to being scorned: "Those that respect my power I advance to honour, but bring to ruin all who vaunt themselves at me," (2) she proclaims. Aphrodite therefore resolved to ruin Hippolytus, and cast the curse of unnatural desires on his stepmother knowing it would result in the intrigue which is set forth in the play.

6.2 Exposition

6.2.1 Characters in the play

Thésée King of Athens, recently returned from his adventures in the Underworld.

Phèdre As well as being motivated by the unnatural passion resulting from Venus' curse, Racine has the character of Phèdre affected by the classical interpretation of her as self-critical. This is a result of her father Minos' role as judge in the underworld. She is therefore caught in a dilemma, in which she is forced to commit thoughts and actions which she immediately condemns in herself. This gives her a stricken quality, and illustrates, as Tobin puts it, that "*Phèdre* is the dramatization of how consciousness of failure is a noble human trait" (25, 131). She is the centre of the play's action, and it is through her character that the important themes of the play are demonstrated. In a real sense the experiences of the other characters reflect and emphasize hers.

Oenone Phèdre's former nurse and confidant. She will do anything to protect her mistress from the consequences of her recklessness, even to the extent of compounding the evil.

Panope Another attendant of Phèdre's.

Hippolyte Prince of Athens and child of an Amazon queen.

Théramène Hippolyte's attendant.

Aricie Lover of Hippolyte. Their love is forbidden because of the enmity between their two families resulting from a battle for the throne, and because a union with the prince would reestablish her family's claims to it.

Ismène Aricie's confidant.

6.3 Plot

6.3.1 Action

It is the tale of a queen [Phèdre] who, believing her husband dead, declares her love for her stepson, Hippolyte, who, unbeknownst to Phèdre, loves Aricie. King Thésée returns and, on the evidence of false statements by Oenone, Phèdre's confidant, condemns his son. Learning of Hippolyte's death, for which she is ultimately responsible, Phèdre takes poison and dies.

(25, 124–25)

Racine has added one important factor to the original ancient version of the story, and the one used by Seneca in his *Hippolytus*. In Racine's story, Hippolyte is in love with Aricie, a character who is not implicated in the original versions.

6.4 Themes

Cycles According to Tobin, the 17th century was preoccupied by the study of cyclical phenomena, and this found its way into theatrical works as well as other art. Apart from *Phèdre*, he cites the structure of *La Princesse de Clèves*, which is based around concentric circles. This theme manifests itself through multiple reflections of aspects of character such as longings, troubles, and so on. For example, Hippolyte and Phèdre separately express a desire to flee the city.

Displacement Trézène is the last place that each of the characters will live, despite their striving to leave.

The multiple protestations of farewell by the characters, especially Hippolyte's and Phèdre's, are pierced by irony, and all of them will be immobilized in the unique setting of the play, Trozen. . . .
(25, 125)

The theme of displacement is "visible throughout Racine's works" (25, 129)

Alienation Linked to the theme of displacement, alienation is "a new aspect" in Racine's works. In the last act Hippolyte's horses no longer recognize him.

6.5 Key Passages

- Phèdre seeks out Hippolyte, and pretending to pine for Thésée, reveals her desire for the son (II,v). This leads to the dénouement described earlier, where Phèdre declares her intention to kill herself with the sword which Hippolyte would not use against her on her request. The manner of his rejection of her leaves him blameless.
- So overcome is Phèdre by her feelings of self-reproach combined with the thought of imminent condemnation by the combined forces of her husband the king and his precious son, that in III,ii she calls upon her divine enemy to work in her favour. In this her confusion seems to overwhelm her:

PHEDRE	Ô toi, qui vois la honte où je suis descendue, Implacable Vénus, suis-je assez confondue ! Tu ne saurais plus loin pousser ta cruauté. Ton triomphe est parfait ; tous tes traits ont porté. ⁵ Cruelle, si tu veux une gloire nouvelle, Attaque un ennemi qui te soit plus rebelle. Hippolyte te fuit ; et, bravant ton courroux, Jamais à tes autels n'a fléchi les genoux ; Ton nom semble offenser ses superbes oreilles : Déesse, venge-toi ; nos causes sont pareilles. (20, 92, l. 813-22)
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- Cœnone arrives and says that Thésée is not dead as they thought, and he is arriving in the city. This thread of the story, introduced as a pacifier for the French audience, is now exploited to its fullest extent as it provides an essential peripeteia.

⁵In Knight's translation: "Thy triumph is entire, each shot has told." (15, 83)

This reversal plunges Phèdre's already desperate emotional state into a moral vacuum. ,

- Counter-measures by C enone to ensure that Ph edre's sin is not made public—this has the added advantage of revenging Hippolyte's rejection, even though the self-critical side of Ph edre's character realized that his reciprocation was a vain hope in any case.

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