

HIPPOLYTUS

Euripides

Overview Euripides' *Hippolytus* was first performed in 428 B.C., and won first prize in the City Dionysia, as part of a trilogy. The remaining version of the play deals subtly with the passion of Phaedra, the stepmother of Hippolytus, who falls fatally in love with the handsome, but woman-scorning young man. In an earlier version of the play, which Euripides' audience seems to have found crude, Phaedra appears to have directly propositioned her stepson, rather than told her nurse of her love, and then framed her stepson.

Story

Euripides' *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.E.) is set in the community of Troezen, in the Peloponnesus. At the outset of the play the goddess Aphrodite comes on stage to complain that Hippolytus, the son of Theseus, the ruler of Troezen, no longer respects her rights and rituals. Instead of eros, which Aphrodite represents, Hippolytus has taken up the path of Artemis, the goddess of chastity, the hunt, men's cults. Aphrodite has decided to take revenge on Hippolytus. The vehicle of her revenge, she reveals, is Phaedra, Hippolytus' stepmother, and the plan is to make this lady fall in love with her woman-averse stepson. The last scene before the first choral entry offers us Hippolytus and followers paying honors to a revered statue of Artemis; a worried servant advises Hippolytus against dissing Aphrodite, but the handsome young man refuses to pay attention.

The chorus, composed of young married women of Troezen, dance in in great distress, reporting that Phaedra has not eaten for several days, and is ill: a fact her nurse confirms, entering with Phaedra, and eliciting from her the confession that she is in love with Hippolytus. At the shocked response of the chorus and the old nurse, Phaedra explains that she has no choice but to starve herself, which is the only way to keep her honor intact. The nurse intervenes, saying she has another solution, which will solve the problem for Phaedra. From this point on, the nurse is the evil genius of the drama.

The nurse, who wants to bring 'harmony' between Phaedra and Hippolytus, to get them to bed together, then takes her own disastrous initiative, telling Hippolytus of Phaedra's lust, and suggesting that she can 'bring them together.' Hippolytus is horrified by the suggestion, and threatens to tell his father, which of course would create the maximum havoc. Phaedra, knowing that her husband is on the way home at the moment, realizes that disaster is at hand, urges the chorus to maintain secrecy, and goes inside to hang herself.

Theseus soon returns, learning the ghastly news. He sees his wife's dead body, but does not know the cause of the death, because the chorus has been sworn to secrecy. He then discovers a message, on Phaedra's body, which claims that Phaedra was raped by Hippolytus. In fury, and without examining the charge carefully, Theseus calls down curses on his son, and calls on his father, the god Poseidon, to see to the exile or death of Hippolytus.

At this point, as is the formal practice in Greek tragedy, a messenger enters with a dreadful scene to report. Hippolytus has decided to leave the country, but as he is driving his chariot along the seashore Poseidon emerges as a roaring bull from the sea, dragging and smashing Hippolytus's chariot, and leaving the young man nearly dead—dead and innocent, the messenger insists.

Theseus refuses to believe the innocence-story he hears, and is rejoicing in his son's suffering, when the goddess Artemis intervenes, and tells Theseus the devastating truth, thus exonerating Hippolytus and

pinning the blame on Phaedra. In the end, as Hippolytus lies dying, Theseus accepts the truth and pardons his son.

Themes

Moderation The notion that nothing should be done in excess is deeply Hellenic, having been a philosophical maxim for Aristotle. Aphrodite and Artemis represent dangerously opposed extremes, for those who care to follow one or the other exclusively. The fate of Hippolytus exemplifies the folly of moral excess.

Hamartia Personal downfall in Greek literature is often associated with overhasty judgment—Agamemnon's rage in the *Iliad*; the fury of Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia*; Pentheus' ill considered voyeurism in *The Bacchae*. Theseus makes a dreadful mistake, in acting precipitously against Hippolytus.

Characters

Theseus, the king of Troezen, returns from exile to find that his wife Phaedra has killed herself, allegedly raped by Hippolytus, his stepson. Only at the end does the king discover the dreadful truth of what has happened in his absence.

Phaedra, the stepmother of Hippolytus, falls in love with her stepson—at the provocation of Aphrodite. She kills herself, having first left on her body incriminating evidence which leads to the death of Hippolytus.

Hippolytus, the son of Theseus and stepson of Phaedra. Converted to the cult of Artemis, Hippolytus rejects Aphrodite and the world of the erotic. He pays a terrible penalty when Phaedra fatally (and cruelly) incriminates him.

MAIN CHARACTERS

HIPPOLYTUS (introvert)

Character Hippolytus is a handsome young man whose passion is for wild nature, the hunt, and manly pleasures; he seems to the goddess Aphrodite to scorn sexual love, and thus to be worthy of her hatred. Artemis, the goddess of hunting and the wild, favors Hippolytus and bemoans the sufferings he has to go through at the hands of the spirit of sexual love, Aphrodite. Hippolytus himself is somewhat one-dimensional in the play, for his presence is required as an indicator: of the power and tragedy that can come from sexual lust such as that which his stepmother Phaedra feels for him; and of the error of becoming a partisan either of the hunt or of sexuality.

Parallels Ancient and modern literature abound in versions of the Hippolytus-Phaedra story, rich because of the multiple ways one can read Phaedra's reaction to her passion. Whereas in Euripides, Phaedra frames Hippolytus, passing her poison through the nurse, in Seneca the Younger, *Phaedra* 54 B.C., Phaedra is a sophisticated self-critic, who cannot help herself, and directly tells Hippolytus of her passion for him. In Racine's *Phèdre* (1677) the love driven woman, her stepson and husband both absent, learns with surprise that 'her husband is dead,' informs her nurse, then must face her husband when suddenly he returns. Furious, he brings a horrible death onto his son, Hippolytus. In 1962 Jules Dassin produced a startling movie version of the theme, *Phaedra*, which sets the action and death among a society of wealthy Greek shipping magnates.

Illustrative moments

Ardent Hippolytus first appears to us surrounded by servants and hunting buddies; they are carrying weapons and traps, appropriate to the fields and woods. Hippolytus is singing praises to Artemis, and is followed by a chorus of huntsmen. They follow Hippolytus to the altar of Artemis, where he lays a wreath of honor. In the prologue to the play, Aphrodite, looking down on this scene, has said of Hippolytus: 'the

doors of death are open for him...he is looking on his last sun.' Is she correctly predicting the downfall of this ecstatic young man?

Chaste Hippolytus addresses Artemis with reverence, presenting to her the wreath he has just woven in the Inviolable Meadow he has dedicated to her, where no shepherd or reaper can enter. 'Its gardener is the spirit Reverence...' and its dominant working principle is chastity, a condition no one can gain by learning. Nature, in the garden Hippolytus adores, is pure, clean, and free of the odious complexities of sexual generation. It is Hippolytus' wish that he shall throughout life remain faithful to the simple purity of the goddess of the Fields.

Defiant Coming in from the hunt, Hippolytus and his men head for supper—'a plentiful table is an excellent thing'—and Hippolytus turns his back on the servant who has just been advising him to pay attention to both noble gods, Aphrodite along with Artemis. After dinner Hippolytus goes out to exercise his horses, shouting, as he goes, 'a long goodbye' to Aphrodite, whom he scorns. The audience cringes at the youngster's boldness, for not one spectator but knows the adage 'nothing in excess,' and lives it as part of his cultural steering mechanism.

Discussion questions

Are Hippolytus and Phaedra equally guilty of excess, in their addictions to hunting or erotics? Can you feel that either party is uniquely guilty, of the horrible deaths of the protagonists?

How do you interpret the roles of Artemis and Aphrodite, as presiders over the events in this play? Are these 'gods' functioning here as 'psychological indicators' or—here put yourself in fifth century B.C. Athens—are these 'gods' true gods?

Has Euripides himself a view point that pervades the whole play? Is that viewpoint essentially that of the chorus, which from its first appearance, commenting on the wasted frame of Phaedra, anticipates a horrible sequence of events?