

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
HIPPOLYTUS

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Hippolytus (in Euripides' *Hippolytus*) **introvert**

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, 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.

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?