

PHEDRE

Racine

Overview Jean Racine (1639—1699) was educated at the Jansenist Seminary of Port Royal in Paris, where he received a thorough training in classical languages and literature. In this case this meant a superb training ground in prosody, grammar, and theological reasoning, traits which were of central value to his dramatic writing. His first highly successful effort on stage was *Andromaque*, composed when he was 27, but this work was soon followed by others—*Britannicus*, *Phèdre*, *Athalie*, *Iphigénie en Aulide*—before he made the step, at the the age of 38, of retiring altogether from the theater.

Story Hippolytus, son of the ruler of Athens, Theseus, sets off to find his father, who is away from the kingdom. One motive for this setting off is to get away from Aricie, daughter of the former Athenian regent; Hippolytus is in love with her, but her father has forbidden her to marry. The second reason for leaving is even simpler; Hippolytus dreads the strange persecution he is suffering, at the hands of his stepmother, Phedre, who, it turns out in conversation with her nurse, is deep in a forbidden and incestuous love for her stepson, Hippolytus. Phedre is also involved in the politics of the court, and of her son, Hippolytus. She has heard the rumor that her husband Theseus is dead, and she wants to enforce the claim of her own child to the court of Athens—in which conflict Aricie is her competitor. So Hippolytus decamps.

At the outset of Act II, the young Aricie, far more an innocent even than Hippolytus, realizes that she too is falling in love with him; she shyly divulges this passion, to Hippolytus. At this point Phedre herself comes on stage, intending to discuss issues of kingship succession with her stepson, but upon seeing him cannot hold back the expression of her passion. Predictably, Hippolytus is horrified, and Phedre pulls out her sword to kill herself. At this moment—see how breathlessly Racine stacks his actions, one on top of another!—Theramenès rushes in with news that Theseus may be alive after all, and at this news Hippolytus quickly decides to fight against Phedre's claim to the throne, and to defend Aricie's rights.

Phedre, for a moment refiguring her chances to secure political power, then realizes that Theseus is truly returning, and again makes to stab herself. Reconsidering again, and yielding to the nasty thinking of her ladies' maid, Oenone, she hits on a plan to get rid of Hippolytus.

In the semifinal act, Oenone drives home to Theseus the 'perfidy' of Hippolytus; the master strides into his halls uttering every possible curse against his son. Theseus rejects every effort to Hippolytus to justify himself, then must confront Phedre herself, who has been hit hard by remorse, for her slander of her stepson, and who is at first eager to make a case for Hippolytus' innocence. But upon learning that she has a rival for Hippolytus' love, she breaks again into an uncontrollable rage. She is no longer capable of defending her stepson.

The final act explodes into deep pain. Hippolytus is far too proud to clear his name, as though he cannot stoop even to dismiss Phedre's allegations. Hippolytus arranges a meeting with Aricie, so that—he hopes—they can wed before he leaves. After Hippolytus leaves, Theseus enters, convinced of his son's evil, but at that point Aricie finds her voice and stands up to the master, gradually convincing him of the innocence of Hippolytus. Theseus, upon learning that Oenone, the nurse, has killed herself, and upon sizing up Phedre's irrational behavior, realizes that he has fatally wronged his son, Hippolytus, whose death has just been reported to us. Phedre had, as she confesses, slandered the young man, and upon making her confession she dies, of a poison she had taken earlier.

Themes

Accusation. If there is a simple moral, it must be that false accusation is the deadliest poison for the human soul. Phedre is reckless with her accusation that Hippolytus tried to seduce her.

Tragic families. If there is a grand theme, it is that tragic networks can run through families, as in fact they frequently do in the greatest Greek tragedies, and the best of Racine. Fathers and sons, stepmothers and stepsons, and insider nurses who know the whole story up close, and will plot with their favorites; these are the thematic ingredients of a tightly hewn tragedy in the Greco-Racinian vein.

MAJOR CHARACTER

Phèdre (emotional)

Character Phèdre is Racine's remodeling of the great heroine of Euripides' play, *Hippolytus*. In the work of both authors Phèdre finds herself caught in a tragic dilemma, deeply in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, but unable to express her passion, and facing desperate consequences as soon as this romantic information reaches her husband, Theseus. In Racine's play Phèdre falls totally for this forbidden relation, then finds herself tricked, by false information about her husband's apparent death, into a calamitous error: confessing her love to Hippolytus. The result is that Hippolytus—thanks to the fury of his father, Theseus—is killed by Poseidon's revenge and Phèdre poisons herself.

Parallels Racine's account of Phèdre's tragic love is surrounded by earlier and later versions of the same theme. Euripides' *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.) tweaks the tale in a bitter angle: the nurse learns, from Phèdre, of her love; Phèdre kills herself after learning that the nurse has spilled the beans to Hippolytus. Seneca's *Phaedra*, 54 A.D., takes a direct tact, highlights a Phèdre frankly lustful, and unashamedly in pursuit of her love object. Unamuno's *Fedra* (1911) hews to the Racinian version, sending Phèdre to her death from shame. Eugene O'Neill, in *Desire under the Elms* (1924), screws the Racinian pain tighter, by having Abbie (Phèdre) kill her child as well as lust fatally after her stepson.

Illustrative moments

Disturbed From our first view of Phèdre she is deeply disturbed, stepping briefly outside of her palace, so she can see the light of day, and appear in finery, and almost immediately feeling despair and constriction at the heavy garments she is wearing. What she really wants is not far to be sought: 'Oh that I were seated in the forest shade, where through a cloud of dust I could behold a chariot racing by!' All she wants, despite her better judgment, is to catch a glimpse of her stepson. Short of that she is torn apart by contrary emotions and desires.

Haunted In dialogue with her confidante, Phèdre makes clear that she is fascinated by Hippolytus, though she is deeply reluctant to mention his name. She wants to assure her confidante that no outrage has occurred; 'thanks to the gods, my hands are guiltless still. But would to heaven my heart were innocent as they!' Racine takes us into the inner recesses of guilt, which for Phèdre—deeply conscious of her own bestial lineage—is a deep stain regardless whether action has accompanied it. 'Love,' she says, 'led my mother into desperate ways.' To which her confidante responds: 'forget them, Madame.'

Desperate Phèdre soon reveals, to her confidante, the whole panorama of her passion. From the time she first glimpsed her step-son, she declares, 'I felt my body freeze and burn; I knew the terrible fires of Venus, the tortures fated to one whom she pursues.' She goes on at length to describe the profile of this overwhelming lust. For a time she saw the son in the father, and found Hippolytus becoming her mate. Then, finding no way to deflect the dangerous drive taking her over, she turned to persecuting Hippolytus, 'thus to banish the enemy I worshipped, by assuming a step-mother's proverbial cruelty.'

Confessional The news having arrived at court, that Theseus is dead, Phèdre takes the impulse of her confidante, and momentarily feels freer to admit her love for her step-son, who is no longer—in a sense—the child of her husband. She begins to tell Hippolytus how deeply she pines for her husband, but in the telling she only succeeds in showing she is thinking about the son when she describes the adventures of the father. Eventually Hippolytus, to his horror, realizes what she is confessing to him, and answers: 'O Gods! What do I hear? Do you forget this Theseus is my father, and you his wife?'

Discussion questions

What is Phèdre's own personal background? How does it impact her sense of self as she falls in love with Hippolytus?

If Phèdre is so deeply passionate about Hippolytus, why does she quickly turn to Aphrodite, to ask the goddess to take revenge on Hippolytus? Does Phèdre love Hippolytus, or is her passion entirely physical?

Aristotle said that a great tragedy should arouse feelings of pity and fear. Does Racine's *Phèdre* do this for you?