

PHEDRE*Frederic Will, Ph.D.***Phèdre** (in Racine's *Phedre*) **emotional**

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.

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 Phedre frankly lustful, and unashamedly in pursuit of her love object. Unamuno's *Fedra* (1911) hews to the Racinian version, sending Phedra to her death from shame. Eugene O'Neill, in *Desire under the Elms* (1924), screws the Racinian pain tighter, by having Abbie (Phedra) 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?