

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
HIPPOLYTUS

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Hippolytus by Euripides

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.

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, 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.

Themes

Nothing in excess 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.

Nothing in ill considered haste. 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.