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Euripides' *Hippolytus*: Tragedy, Divinity, and Moral Ambiguity

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Abstract: This paper revisits Euripides' *Hippolytus* as a tragedy that resists moral simplification and refuses narrow containment. Departing from readings that treat the play as a corrective to the impropriety of *Hippolytus Unveiled*, the essay argues that Euripides' second dramatization does not replace scandal with moral clarity but instead intensifies the problematic nature of tragic responsibility. Through an analysis of divine agency, psychological characterization, and the operation of human error, the paper shows how *Hippolytus* internalizes tragedy, transforming it into a drama of conflicting desires and ethical blindness. Euripides' gods emerge not as moral guarantors but as antagonistic forces whose rivalry translates into human suffering, while the play's characters, Hippolytus, Phaedra, Theseus, and the Nurse, each contribute, through partial vision and misguided action, to a catastrophe desired by none. The tragedy ultimately exposes the limits of moral knowledge and the instability of ethical judgment in a world governed by incompatible values.

Keywords: Euripides; *Hippolytus*; Greek tragedy; divine determinism; sophrosyne; nomos and physis; tragic responsibility; psychology.

Introduction: The Myth Reconsidered

The theme of *Hippolytus* can be discerned in many societies, manifesting itself in many mythic forms. The skeleton story of a human lover who repulses the advances of a female deity, suffers abasement or death, and afterwards is glorified forms the basis of the biblical story of Joseph and his wife Potiphar, while the first Greek version to appear in the literature is the tale of Bellerophon and queen Anteia recounted by Glankos in book six of the Iliad. The *Hippolytus* that we read today is unique as Euripides second play on this theme, the only known instance of another rendition of the same subject by the same author. His earlier play entitled *Hippolytus unveiled*, shaped a tradition leading to Roman playwright Seneca's *Phaedra*, and further the French playwright Racines's *Phedra*. *Hippolytus Unveiled* presented a rather conventional Phaedra, who



boldly declared her love to Hippolytus and when she was rebuffed by him she retaliated by telling Theseus that he had raped her at sword point. On Hippolytus' death Phaedra committed suicide in remorse for having killed him.

Hippolytus was performed in 428 BC and won the first prize. In his second rendering of the play Euripides takes the myth and radically changes it. The traditional malevolent Phaedra, of Euripides' initial rendering later becomes a figure of sympathy. Euripides, characteristically complicates the story. In doing so he appears to be illustrate Protagoras' sensibility by foregrounding conflicting interpretations. Though many critics regard the second play with its morality of a "good woman" as correcting the impropriety found so objectionable in the first play, the play, as diverse interpretations testify does not deliver itself up to such simplistic interpretation.

In this paper, I will focus on the problematic nature of the play, which refuses narrow containment. The text proliferates in meaning and exemplifies Euripides' innovative engagement with the dramatic form. In the process, I will discuss the major characters to arrive at an adequate perceptual interpretation of the play. Euripides is a complex and often contradictory playwright, his works are at once refreshingly realistic and extraordinarily artificial, deeply tragic and blatantly sensationalist, moving and academic. *Hippolytus*, likewise, is a curious mixture of realism and artifice.

Artifice, Realism, and Divine Framing

The play begins with a formal prologue, where Aphrodite appears on stage, where she fulfils an expository role in a direct address to the audience. She introduces them to the background of the play and her manipulation of the events that follow. The appearance of Aphrodite in the prologue is paralleled later by Artemis stepping into the scene in the epilogue. The sudden appearance of the gods, the use of the folk tale motif (Theseus' three wishes), the reference to miraculous happenings (the messenger's account of Hippolytus' death) and the formal debates, all contribute to the element of fantasy and artifice, as well as theatricality, which Euripides appears to revel in. Nevertheless, there appears to be a corresponding stress of realism in the play. *Hippolytus* appears to be the only Greek tragedy which so emphatically opens with the declaration of the predetermination of human action by an external power. In the *Oresteia* or *Oedipus Rex*, the inscrutable will of Zeus remains embedded in the background. And yet, as Bernard Knox points out,



Hippolytus strikes us with its surprisingly psychological characterizations. What we are presented with in the play are human beings, who even as they unconsciously work out the goddess' plan, do so with apparent freedom, which is hard to reconcile within the predetermined divine framework.

Divine Rivalry and Human Cost

The meta theatricality of the appearance of the goddess also serves to reveal the reason behind Phaedra's affliction, which in the play is kept secret at the start. Nevertheless, "Euripides, uses the occasion of the exposition" according to Peter Burian "to make the drama itself a kind of play-within-a-play staged by the goddess of love, just as Dionysius stages the action to come in the prologue of *Bacchae*" (203). Often, critics resolve the dilemma of mortal responsibility versus divine determinism by interpreting the Greek gods as only symbols of human passions. But such interpretations tend to dilute and invisibilise the trenchant criticism of the figures of divinity, which Euripides brings into focus, play after play. Aphrodite singles out Hippolytus for punishment, not directed by moral principles, but because she feels slighted, "He will none of the bed of love or marriage, but honours Artemis Zeus' daughter, counting her greatest of the gods in heaven" (14-16, 163). That Phaedra will suffer and die in the process causes no qualms in Aphrodite. who proclaims. "her suffering does not weigh in the scale so much/that I should let my enemies go untouched" (48-49, 169). Similarly, towards the end of the play, Artemis offers Hippolytus with the consolation that "I'll wait until she loves a mortal next time, /And with this hand-with these unerring arrows/I'll punish him"(1419-21, 219). In effect, Euripides suggests that the vindictive rivalry among the gods only translates into human suffering.

Hippolytus and the Violence of Purity

Hippolytus is as much about the eponymous protagonist Hippolytus, the target of divine malice, as about Phaedra, the incidental victim in the tragedy. Much of the criticism surrounding the play amounts to character studies where either Hippolytus or Phaedra is given prominence over the other. Statistics of the play help in identifying the problem of emphasis. Hippolytus speaks 271 times, Phaedra and Theseus 187 each and the nurse more than either Phaedra or Theseus, 216 times. Bernard Knox suggests the futility of the search for a central tragic figure. He states that "when the action is so equally divided among four characters, the unity of the work cannot depend on anyone, but must lie on the nature of the relationship of all" (311). The structural significance apart, it is the sympathetic characterisation of the main characters which provides the ground for

diverse critical responses. Like a true artist, Euripides appears to possess negative capability which enables him to create rounded characters, an understanding of whom is crucial to any understanding of the play.

According to HDF keto, Hippolytus lacks tragic complexity, for his is a tragic singleness. For all his purity, it is his one-sidedness, which makes him unattractive. His refusal to worship Aphrodite is only a rejection of hypocritical reverence. As he explains, “men make their choice; one man honours one God, and one another.” In a polytheistic culture. Hippolytus appears to have every right to worship Artemis, who represents chastity. Hippolytus experiences *sophrosyne* through the purifying power of Artemis, a word which can be variously translated as wisdom, chastity, moderation, character, but which etymologically derives from the adjective *sophron*, which means having a mind that is sound and safe. Robert Bagg in his introduction to the play quotes Henry Thoreau who makes “the most confident, modern assertion of chastity’s indispensable connection to higher moral virtue and to divine Insight and Euphoria” (Thoreau, qtd. in Bagg vii).

Chastity is the flowering of man, & what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it. Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. (Bagg 7)

Phaedra is living proof before Hippolytus of how passion destroys moral sense. Part of Hippolytus’ tragedy arises from his purity, which lies beyond his father’s comprehension. Theseus, as the first chorus reminds the audience, had kidnapped Hippolytus’ mother an amazon named Hippolyte. He had also kidnapped Helen and Adriane, sister to Phaedra. Bagg, viewing Theseus as a lecher insightfully suggests that Theseus’ “own character led him to comprehend the supposed crime more easily than the actual innocence.” (8). Hippolytus’ sweeping denunciation of women coming from a young enthusiast of a chastity cult may, to an extent, be excused. Yet Hippolytus carries his chastity of the realm of *sophrosyne* into a state of arrogant, narcissistic hubris, which contributes to his self-destruction

His end, which is recounted beautifully by the messenger, is persuasive even in its supernaturalism. The poetic symbol of the bull as unrestrained sexual passion suggests the potency of that which Hippolytus had rejected. Even Hippolytus’ is very name, which means releaser of horses comes to reflect ironically on him as the horses, which also symbolize virginity and are associated with Artemis and the hunt, escape disastrously out of control.



Phaedra: Knowledge Without Power

Phaedra, whose name derives from *phaidros*, means the radiant one, is, according to critical consensus, the most self-aware character in the play. In his reworking of the same myth Euripides presents the same outline in a frame which exonerates, to a large extent, the character and motivation of Phaedra. According to Bagg, Euripides persuades his audience “to sympathize with Phaedra more than their prejudices would normally let them do - all women, especially erotic ones, were suspect in Greek popular morality” (4). As in *Medea*, the play revolves around a female protagonist who is not a citizen, lacking parent citizens on both sides. Though, Phaedra may seem to be innocent, as her passion is imposed on her for no fault of her own, this passion may also be taken to reflect her character. Phaedra herself assumes she has inherited a tendency for misdirected passion. Her mother, Pasiphae’s love for a bull led to a bestial union that gave birth to the Minotaur, while her sister, Ariadne, Dionysus's wife, had run away with Theseus.

Phaedra most clearly illustrates Euripidean tragedy, which unlike Sophocles’ idealistic portrayals is a tragedy of human weakness and failings. For example, in *Oedipus Rex*, the protagonist’s tragedy arises from his failure to comprehend the opaque forces that shape and govern human existence; there is no question of Oedipus being divided in his desires or intentions, while in *Hippolytus* the tragedy has been internalized and made a matter of psychology. Phaedra knows exactly what she should do and tells us so, but she is unable to bring it to pass. Phaedra’s plight illustrates a division between the cognitive and emotional self and seems to suggest the source of human suffering is not some inscrutable external force, but a more troubling division within us. She acutely feels the opposition between *nomos* and *physis*: *nomos* tells her that it is morally reprehensible to commit adultery with her stepson. However the irresistible pull of her natural desires *physis* drive her the other way. Phaedra’s situation exposes Euripides’ skepticism toward the Greek tendency to equate moral understanding with ethical practice. Greek moral thought largely assumed that right action followed from sound judgment, treating crime and immorality as manifestations of folly or ignorance. The belief that knowledge is virtue, and wrong is never committed knowingly, fails to take into account human desire, the pull of which Phaedra finds difficult to resist:

I think our lives are worse than the minds quality would warrant. There are many who know virtue. We know the good, we apprehend it clearly. But we can’t bring it to achievement (377-81, 180).



Also, when she chooses death as the last resort, it is not due to any moral scruples, but for the sake of reputation, hence, she proclaims: “It would always be my choice to have my virtue known & honoured, so when I do wrong I could not endure to see a circle of condemning witnesses” (402-4, 180).

It is Phaedra’s concern for reputation which causes her to take the extreme step of slandering Hippolytus, which makes it difficult to regard her as wholly innocent. For Phaedra, public repute takes precedence over personal worth. With the loss of actual innocence (*aidos*), the longing for virtue survives only as a preoccupation with its appearance, even when that appearance must be secured through destructive means. In Hippolytus, we find the exact opposite. He lets himself be disgraced and dishonoured, preferring to maintain an integrity, which is meaningful only to his inner self.

Theseus, the Nurse, and Misguided Action

Theseus, another character directly involved in the tragedy errs in hastily drawing conclusions in the absence of thorough enquiry. According to Peter Burian, he is “like his son, he knows what he knows and refuses to acknowledge that what he doesn’t know is of any consequence” (205). As a statesman conscious of the public gaze, his immediate action, the invoking of Poseidon’s curse, is pronounced before the citizens. Theseus’ second pronouncement of exile betrays a hint of scepticism which manifests itself further when the messenger appears with news of disaster. Theseus’ first thought is political news rather than misfortune befalling his son. Theseus’ recognition of the innocence of his son is possible only with the divine intervention of Artemis. While Oedipus rex starts with everyone in ignorance in Hippolytus, the ignorance is constructed before us, in the course of the play. Euripides constructs this pattern of human ignorance at the human level, so well that he can only bring the truth to light through divine intervention.

The nurse precipitates the tragedy as much as she tries to avert it. Her overriding aim is to save Phaedra's life, but the outcome is to make her death even more imperative and to bring about Hippolytus’ death as well. She views life practically, and attempts to save Phaedra’s life, not her honour. For her logos or speech and reason are the answer of to all problems. The nurse in her flexibility clearly reflects the contemporary sophists who, like her, had a confident and secular approach to human problems, coupled with the rhetorical skill to present their solutions convincingly. The nurse explains that “we should not in the



conduct of our lives be too exacting” (467-182) and accuses Phaedra of pride in refusing to submit to passion, which even the gods are liable to.

The interrelation of all the major characters reveals a tragedy of misguided action, where each fails to perceive the other. Above the human level, the play disturbingly emphasizes the gulf between god and man. Artemis offers to apotheosize Hippolytus to make up for his suffering, but being a goddess refuses him company as he lies dying. In her final words, she dissociates herself from him, saying “Farewell, I must not look upon the dead. / My eye must not be polluted by the last gaspings of breath. I see you near this” (1437-9, 220).

Conclusion: Tragedy Without Consolation

The play leaves one with the feeling as George Dimock puts it, “there is no justice, no order in heaven - if in short there are no gods -- nothing matters. There is no serious right or wrong” (250). This feeling, Dimoch suggests, can be linked to the contemporary demoralized state of Athenians, who regarded the plague that had gripped the city as a godsent curse. But Euripides was not merely presenting contemporary attitudes, if at all he was. His unpopularity during his lifetime, suggests a modern temperament, which was at odds with his age. Euripides is a peculiarly intellectual drama, a “drama of ideas” as often termed by critics, which generated criticisms such as Aristophanes’, who accused Euripides of making Athenians think and question everything. On an intellectual plane, the tragedy rests on the inability of human perception to separate truth and falsity and thereby avoid misunderstanding. As Theseus complains, “Everyman ought to have two voices, one truthful, and the other fitted to the occasion, so that the honest voice would confute falsity, and we would not be deceived” (928-31, 201).

Euripides’s destruction of social hierarchies is apparent in his investment of minor characters with prominence and authority, of which both Hippolytus’ servant and Phaedra’s nurse are examples. Hippolytus in keeping with Euripides’s non-conformist spirit, is a tragedy not centred on a single tragic character, but a dysfunctional family with all members contributing to their collective destruction. The sense of the tragic is intensified by the open-endedness of the play as Artemis’ resolve to retaliate against a favourite of Aphrodite, opens up the prospect of further human suffering in the future.



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