

LUST IN ACTION: THE FACES OF PHAEDRA

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We have come together this afternoon to honour the memory of Professor Klaus Mayer - distinguished scholar, beloved teacher, gastronome, and a dear friend to many of us present here. In proposing to cast my net rather wider than his particular field of expertise - sixteenth-century French literature - I trust I shall not offend his watchful spirit hovering over us. Those of us who knew Klaus were well aware both of his enthusiasm for drama in performance and for literatures other than French. Culturally broad and perfectly trilingual, he would, I like to think, have been in sympathy with a subject that comes broadly under the heading of "Comparative Literature".

The moment I utter this I realise that I am walking into a quicksand. Comparative Literature has latterly fallen into some disrepute. As long ago as 1964 a contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote that -

"The comparatist is content to ignore the varied contour of imaginative achievement. . . as he hovers purposeless above the unrelieved tract of literature, making readings that decrease in value as he gains in altitude."

At the risk of cruising at these dizzy heights I propose to examine some of the dramatic guises of one woman who has sporadically haunted the boards: Phaedra, Queen of Athens. This princess is the archetypal tragic heroine in spite - or rather precisely because - of her "*pukka*" background. Let me remind you that she was the great-grand daughter of Zeus through her grandfather Minos, who posthumously became a judge in the underworld, and of Apollo the Sun God through her mother Pasiphae. Familiar as we are with dysfunctional royals, Pasiphae must stand in a class of her own. She was afflicted by Poseidon with a passion for a bull which her husband had refused to sacrifice to the god; and her monstrous coupling resulted in the Minotaur. When Phaedra was carried off to Athens by Theseus to be his wife, it was her turn to attract the wrath of heaven. Aphrodite made her fall in love with

her stepson Hippolytus which was to result in the gruesome death of both of them.

This tale is eminently dramatic in that it combines incest, adultery and (literally) monstrous violence. Also - and this has ensured its survival over the millennia - it questions traditional gender roles. My main spur for comparing some of its stage versions (in which I leave out of account other media such as opera and film) has been my long-standing preoccupation with Jean Racine's *Phèdre*.

Our comparatist balloon flight takes off in Greece, for obvious reasons. The myth was dramatised in fifth-century Athens at least three times: once by Sophocles, twice by Euripides. Only one play - that of Sophocles - was actually called *Phaedra*: of this there are only some eleven fragments left. Euripides' two treatments bore the name not of *Phaedra* but of *Hippolytus* who was indeed the principal character.

Why did he tackle the subject twice? Athenian playwrights recycled the common stock of myths over and over, but it was unusual for any one dramatist to rehash the same story. Euripides must have been dissatisfied with the reception of his first version, only some twenty fragments of which still exist. We do not know the date of its performance at the City Dionysia; what we do know is that it failed to win a prize. When Aristophanes, in his satirical comedy, *The Frogs* (of 405 BC), made the ghost of Aeschylus argue with the ghost of Euripides, the older playwright reproached his colleague for staging the "shameless *Phaedra*". When Euripides says, "Why, did I invent the story of *Phaedra*?" Aeschylus replies, "No, the story is true enough; but the poet should hide what is vile and not produce or represent it on the stage."

This putdown clearly refers to *Hippolytus* Mark I. The second, still extant, version gave less offence and was in fact a winner at the City Dionysia of 428 BC - one of the mere four victories Euripides ever achieved.

The *Phaedra* theme is part of the cluster of legends around Theseus whose ascension to the Athenian throne *Lempriere's Classical Dictionary of 1788* has helpfully dated for us as having taken place precisely - precisely! - in the year 1235 BC. According to some, Theseus was fathered by Aegeus, King of Athens; according to others by Poseidon. His divine father had granted him the three magical wishes of universal folklore, one of which he was to use so disastrously against Hippolytus. As Athens rose in importance in the second half of the sixth century BC,

it promoted the cult of this mythical king. He was credited with having united the various Attic communities into a single state. A temple - the *Theseion* - housed his supposed bones brought over from Skyros in 475 BC. An epic poem now lost but composed some time in the third quarter of the sixth century - the *Theseid* - celebrated his exploits. His chief festival, the *Theseia*, commemorated him every October.

There was much in the king's life to praise and much to deplore; but Athenian playwrights, Euripides among them, took a patriotic rather than a censorious line on him. In his youth Theseus had rid the land of brigands and monsters; later he fought and defeated both the centaurs and the Amazons. His greatest feat was the slaying of the Minotaur, Phaedra's half-brother. But the dark side of his character spelt trouble for his family. There was his killing of the fifty Pallantides, cousins who had opposed his rule in Athens. There was his disgraceful desertion on the isle of Naxos of Phaedra's sister Ariadne, whose thread had guided him out of the Minoan labyrinth. There was also his relentless Don Juanism. He kidnapped Helena, whose face was later to launch a thousand ships, before her tenth year. Plutarch, writing long after the age of classical tragedy, said that

"there are... traditions of the marriages of Theseus, neither honourable in their occasions nor fortunate in their events, which yet were never represented in the Greek plays."

His joining his friend Perithous on the latter's disreputable expedition to abduct Queen Persephone from the underworld was used by later dramatists - though not by Euripides! - to account for his absence while his wife was making advances to her stepson. Hippolytus was the son Theseus had earlier fathered on the Amazonian queen Antiope (or Hippolyte) - a partner whom he was said subsequently to have murdered. Clearly, such a disturbed family was a rich seedbed of dramatic material.

Let us quickly remind ourselves of the performance conditions of tragedies at Athens in the age of democracy. With only a text in front of us, we may risk losing sight of the actual context. These conditions not only profoundly affected the meaning of what was being presented - they have made all later uses of the same thematic material, if not a falsification, at any rate something quite unlike the original experience. So before considering Euripides' play we must bear in mind that -

- The open-air Theatre of Dionysus on the slope of Acropolis seated a vast, predominantly male crowd numbering as many as 15,000 to 20,000 spectators, in other words a substantial part of the city's total population of free male citizens. The dramatised story of Phaedra and Hippolytus was not a chamber play, but a matter of public, indeed communal, concern.
- Tragedies were only a part of the *City Dionysia* held annually at the end of March or the beginning of April. This festival combined religious and civic functions with popular entertainment and a strong element of artistic competition. It included processions, sacrifices, libations, and other public events.
- The tragedies coming in groups of three, followed by a satyr play - all performed in the space of one day - were linked narratively or at any rate thematically. Considering one play in isolation may fail to reveal its full meaning. We do not know the context of the *Hippolytus*.
- The fact that the presentation could never be fully scenic does not mean a total absence of stage furniture. In the case of the *Hippolytus*, the permanent presence of statues (or perhaps altars) of both Aphrodite and Artemis had a significant bearing on the action.
- The performances on such a stage were necessarily stylised. This was made apparent visually by the wearing of masks covering the whole head and of costumes quite distinct from everyday dress conventions; and it was signalled acoustically by diction falling into a great variety of metrical patterns, often accompanied by an unmasked player of the *aulos* - the double flute.
- Not only were the performances addressed to a largely masculine public: the performers themselves were all men. Though often enough the characters portrayed in significant roles were women - like Phaedra and the Nurse in this instance - we must not forget the eminently masculine nature of the occasion.
- The number of speaking - and at times singing - actors was limited to three at any one time: more speakers wearing the masks would have been confusing. This limitation made the doubling of roles essential. It did not mean an absence of other,

non-speaking actors on stage. The most important additional players were of course:

- The chorus of fifteen masked men - singing, gesturing and dancing in the round *orchestra*, the Greek theatre's principal acting area. In the *Hippolytus*, the chorus represents the women of Trozen, a place some thirty miles south of Athens which is the scene of the action. The poetry of the choral odes broadens the play's scope. Take the second ode for instance. Its first strophe and antistrophe express the chorus's wish to fly far, far to the ends of the earth away from the unfolding calamity; the second strophe and antistrophe reverse this outward movement by describing as a journey towards disaster Phaedra's voyage from Crete to Athens to become Theseus's wife. The image of the ship's ropes becomes, to our shocked surprise, the rope with which Phaedra has just hanged herself.

The Queen herself is not the main person here; she actually disappears halfway through the action. The focus is on Hippolytus. Two epiphanies frame the narrative: Aphrodite as the prologue, Artemis at the end. Aphrodite first appears and proclaims that she disapproves of Hippolytus's exclusive worship of Artemis, the virginal goddess of the hunt, so strongly that she will cause his stepmother to fall in love with him. This she intends to lead to Hippolytus's death. It will also bring about the innocent Phaedra's death - but that is, in the current idiom, mere collateral damage.

The goddess gone, we see the young man return with his companions from the hunt, singing a hymn to Artemis. He garlands her altar but insolently fails to honour that of Aphrodite before entering the palace. The Chorus of Trozenian Women come and speculate on various reasons why Phaedra has sunk into suicidal despondency.

When the Queen is carried out of the house she has her secret coaxed out of her by her aged Nurse: she confesses that she is guiltily, irresistibly in love with her stepson. The Nurse decides to save her mistress from death. Since Phaedra refuses to plead for Hippolytus's love, the Nurse goes into the palace on the pretext of fetching some curative philtres. In fact she reports Phaedra's feelings to Hippolytus. The young man comes storming out of the palace, damns the Nurse together with all of womankind: he wishes the human race could be propagated without female assistance! But he has sworn to keep silent about this shameful offer.

Phaedra who has overheard all this denounces the Nurse, goes into the palace - and in humiliation and despair hangs herself. The wailing of the Chorus brings on Theseus returning, not from an ignoble expedition to the underworld as legend had it but, in this loyalist account, from the Delphic oracle.

Phaedra's body is wheeled out on the *ekkyklema*, the theatrical device for bringing on an object from the interior of a house. Clutched in her hand Theseus finds a tablet accusing Hippolytus of rape. He curses his absent son and calls on Poseidon to destroy him. When Hippolytus enters he is amazed to find Phaedra dead, more amazed still at his father's rage. Theseus banishes his son who leaves - but, mindful of his oath, does not defend himself.

After a choral lament, a messenger brings the king the news of Hippolytus's hideous fate. On his drive along the coastal road his horses had been panicked by a monstrous bull rising out of the sea at Poseidon's instigation: so, dragged along the ground by the horses, the young man's body had been torn to pieces. But now in a second epiphany Artemis appears on high - either on the *theologeion*, a raised platform on the scene building at the back, or on a *mechané*, a crane or flying device.

She reveals Aphrodite's mischief-making and shares the king's grief for his son. Enter Hippolytus dying, supported by servants. In a long scene, father and son are reconciled. Hippolytus has an affectionate exchange with the goddess whose position up aloft makes her invisible to him. He remains arrogantly self-righteous and misogynistic to the end. Anemias offers to have her revenge on Aphrodite and promises that Hippolytus after his death will become an object of worship. Hippolytus was in fact a cult figure in nearby Trozen. Young girls would cut off a lock of their hair and dedicate it to him before getting married and - Artemis adds - they would even celebrate Phaedra's love for him. When he is about to breathe his last, the goddess takes her leave, since immortals cannot bear the pollution of death.

What of the moral balance-sheet of this story? All the flaws of the *dramatis personae* - Hippolytus's misogyny, Phaedra's slanderous accusation, the Nurse's duplicity, Theseus's blind rage - contribute to the catastrophe. But these negative qualities are carefully counterpointed. Hippolytus's athleticism is attractive. Phaedra fights her obsession as best she can. Theseus is not the philanderer of

tradition but a sincerely grief-stricken father. Even the Nurse only acts out of love for her charge.

What we are shown, then, is the perennial combat between two lop-sided existential postures - unbridled sensuality on the one hand, life-denying asceticism on the other. The playwright leads us to an harmonious ending, a sort of resolution on the aesthetic, even the moral, plane.

Let us leap forward nearly half a millennium to our next Phaedra, that of Lucius Annaeus Seneca. We are in the Rome of the latter days of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Seneca, born in Cordova and trained in Rome as a philosopher, served first as tutor, then as political advisor to Nero - an unwise career choice in that his *alumnus* forced him in 65 AD to commit suicide. Of the eight plays currently accepted as his work, five were inspired by Euripides. Since all branches of Roman literature had long been dominated by Greek models, a knowledge of the Phaedra story could be taken for granted among educated Romans. The Olympian goddesses are mentioned but neither appears in person: in Rome the theatre was after all an entertainment, not linked with religion. Although Seneca sets the scene of his Phaedra in Athens rather than Trozen, he does not glorify its legendary king.

We open with Hippolytus preparing for the day's hunt with his companions and addressing a prayer to Diana - here the goddess not so much of chastity as of bracing outdoor pursuits. Her hunting grounds, seen in Roman imperial terms, cover not merely Attica but Germany, Eastern Europe, the shores of the Caspian, the Pyrenees, Arabia and Africa as well. The word that resonates throughout the play is *furor*, used to characterise a wide range of violent passions. Phaedra calls her husband *furoris socius* - the companion of passion - for his philandering. Hippolytus denounces the passions of womankind as *furor*; Theseus sees *furor* in the Amazons' hatred of the male sex.

Much of this emotionalism seems to spring from an imperial civilisation's neuroses. The Nurse denounces lust as the indulgence of the rich. When the love-sick Phaedra calls on her slaves to discard her apparel - the scarlet of Tyre, the silk of China, the pearls of India and Syrian nard - we hear a pampered patrician speaking.

This Phaedra makes no attempt to fight off desire. She propositions her stepson so boldly that he assaults her and threatens her with his sword. When she offers masochistically to let

him stab her he turns away and flees the court. Theseus comes home from his wife-stealing expedition to the underworld. Phaedra produces her stepson's sword as evidence of rape.

Theseus, uncontrollably furious, pronounces his curse in Hippolytus's absence. Shortly afterwards the Messenger reports the death scene - very much more colourfully than Euripides had done. On hearing the evil tidings Phaedra stabs herself with the sword. The mangled remains of Hippolytus are brought on, and his father tries to reassemble them in a ghastly act of piety. At last he calls for his son's bloody remains to be honourably burnt on a pyre. For his dead wife he has only words dripping with hate.

Was this catalogue of horrors ever actually performed in a public theatre?

Scholarly opinions are divided. The late Professor William Beare felt that it was intended only for declamation, arguing that the scooping up of Hippolytus's remains would have been intolerable to a Roman audience. But were spectators inured to the spectacle of gladiatorial combats and wild-beast hunts in the arena, really quite so delicate? Indeed, is the play unperformable? I wonder. A mere two years after Seneca's works had been published in modern times, in Ferrara in 1484, his Phaedra was staged in Rome under the direction of Pomponius Laetus, the famous Professor of Latin and Rhetoric. While this doesn't clinch the case as to performance in Julio-Claudian Rome, it does suggest the play's theatrical feasibility.

The Phaedra/Hippolytus myth went underground as a dramatic theme with the collapse of the ancient world and the disappearance of its theatre. The performances which flourished in the late Middle Ages as the disseminator of Christian truths had no room for such pagan frivolities. When in the mid-sixteenth century humanism re-awakened the memory of the drama of antiquity, mystery plays were in fact at their height. But the return to the themes and the (often misunderstood) staging techniques of pre-Christian antiquity was to change the meaning and function of theatre in the latter half of the sixteenth century. Thus Jean de la Taille stated in 1572, in his book entitled, *L'Art de la Tragedie*, that the "old", i.e. the mediaeval, theatre was fit only for servants and lowborn folk. In this new drama, re-workings of the Phaedra theme tended to be indebted more to Seneca than to Euripides. The literature of antiquity was, after all, seen through Latin rather than Greek spectacles, and Senecan blood and guts appealed even to popular audiences

The first dramatic reworking of our story in the vernacular occurred in France;

this was Robert Garnier's *Hippolyte*, written in alexandrines. It was published in 1573. Garnier, an advocate and judge by profession, who was personally close to the poets of the *Pléiade*, wrote seven tragedies and one tragicomedy in the new humanist style. He lived in the turbulent period of religious wars which intermittently tore France apart between 1562 and 1589; no wonder his tragedies reflected a bleak view of the world. His *Hippolyte* out-Senecas Seneca. The very opening introduces the typically Senecan device of a ghost. Aegeus, the father of Theseus, has come up from the underworld to predict a dire fate for his son. And Hippolytus soliloquises at length about a nightmare he has just had and about the omens - hooting owls, howling dogs, croaking ravens - that warn him of dreadful events to come. The learned mythological apparatus Garnier employs does not conceal the fact that when he mentions "the gods", what he really means is "God".

The play's underlying morality is puritanical. At the end of the second act, the Chorus of Athenian men (the action is set in Athens, as it is in Seneca) denounces love - not merely the lawless variety but love of any kind. Garnier indulges freely in the Senecan *sententia*. These improving moral maxims are typographically sign-posted in the printed text by being put in inverted commas. Rhetorical overload occurs throughout, as in the Messenger's description of Hippolytus's death. Euripides accomplishes this in 76 and Seneca in 114 lines; Garnier makes a bombastic meal of it in 167 lines. But he amends the traditional plotline in one important respect: the Nurse, who previously had merely dropped out of view, here commits suicide at the end of Act IV. This motif was to be used by Racine.

There were several more dramatisations of our theme before we come to Racine's masterpiece a century later. Guérin de la Pinelière brought his *Hippolyte* of 1635 into conformity with contemporary tastes and manners: there is no chorus and the hero's fellow huntsmen have been modernised to become a "Lieutenant des chasses". Phèdre's love is revealed by two maids of honour and Thésée has a confidant named Lycrate - examples of the vogue for *confidants* and *confidentes* who allow things to be articulated which in the absence of a chorus would remain unsaid.

An equally polite version was that of Gabriel Gilbert whose *Hippolyte ou le garçon insensible* was staged in 1645 or 1646 by the King's Players - the Comédiens du Roi - at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris. The eponymous hero is not the unfeeling young man the title suggests. He only shuns other women

because he is actually in love with Phèdre who, you will be pleased to learn, is not yet Thésée's wife but only his fiancée. Thésée himself has been sanitised; he has been away on a military campaign, not in Hades to assist his friend's *amours*. Phèdre loves Hippolyte herself. The only obstacle to their union is Achrise who through a misunderstanding and malice seeks to destroy it. *Hippolyte ou le garçon insensible* was the first play to introduce the jealousy motif which was to be an important feature in Racine's *Phèdre*.

With Mathieu Bidar's *Hippolyte* of 1675 we are close in time if not in spirit to Racine. Here, too, it is the mechanism of the *confident* that makes the wheels go round. Here, too, Phèdre is only the fiancée, not the wife, of Thésée; she is in love with Hippolyte who rejects her advances, since he is in love with and is loved by Princess Cyane. Phèdre sows discord between the lovers and suggests to Hippolyte that they flee together. He rejects her, so she tells Thésée that his son had planned to seduce her and kill him. Hippolyte leaves the court, having informed Cyane of the true facts which she then reveals to Thésée - but alas! too late; Neptune's revenge has been set in motion. Phèdre confesses her guilt and poisons herself. In this synopsis we recognise more Racinian features.

This brings us now to 1st January 1677, the opening night of the play that has triggered all these reflections. In the course of the previous twelve years Jean Racine had made himself known with nine plays, all but one based on classical themes. Now he was to have his new play on the Phaedra theme performed at the Hôtel de Bourgogne by the King's Players with whom he had long been intimately linked. A particularly intimate link was with the woman who had been their lead actress since 1670 - Marie Desmares, known as Mlle Champmeslé. He had coached her in the title role of this forthcoming production line by line and gesture by gesture. The play was originally called *Phèdre et Hippolyte* but was later to be reduced to plain *Phèdre* on publication of Racine's complete works in 1687. The story of the intrigue around the first staging is well known.

A clique led by the Duchesse de Bouillon, who favoured the older playwright Corneille, sought to wreck the play's chances by commissioning a script on the same theme from the minor playwright Jacques Pradon. Two days after Racine's premiere this piece was presented by the other Parisian company, that of the recently deceased Molière. As a result, Racine's play had a relatively tepid reception. But what followed? While Pradon's play disappeared into limbo after a mere three months, Racine's

vindication was to come three years later. When the two rival companies were united by royal order to form the Comédie Française, the occasion was celebrated on 25th August 1680 by a performance of none other than Racine's play. And when on 18th April 1689 the Comédie Française moved into splendid new premises in Saint-Germain des Prés, its tenancy was also inaugurated with *Phèdre*. On both occasions the lead was played by Mlle Champeslé.

This is not the occasion for a detailed analysis of a play as exhaustively raked over by French critics as Hamlet has been by their English-speaking counterparts. In his preface to the printed version, Racine declared himself indebted to Euripides while recognising that the subject had also attracted other seventeenth-century playwrights. Actually there is a world of difference between *Phèdre* and its Greek model: Racine's play is, to put it paradoxically, more classical - if by classical we mean bare, simple and austere. There are no spectacular elements such as a chorus - a device Racine was only to employ later in his Biblical plays *Esther* and *Athalie*. In *Phèdre* we get no huntsmen. No dances. No music. No odes. No supernatural apparitions. No stage machinery. The background is a *palais voûté* - a generalised "vaulted palace" decor. For stage furniture, only one chair.

An excellent classical scholar, Racine was so familiar with Sophocles and Euripides as a schoolboy that, according to his son Louis, he could recite whole reams of text by heart. But he made Hippolyte the very opposite to Euripides' young man. Far from being an Artemis-worshipping woman hater he is, on the contrary a *garçon sensible*. His lady love is *Aricie* - Aricia - a survivor of the Pallantides massacre. Racine justified this deviation from tradition, in which of course he followed some of his immediate predecessors, by claiming that a tragic hero needed a flaw according to Aristotle, and Hippolyte's flaw was being in love, with a politically unacceptable lady at that. Here he was being a shade disingenuous. He must have known that in Euripides the flaw had precisely been Hippolytus's total rejection of Aphrodite. By way of justification Racine is alleged to have said, "What would our coxcombs have made of an Hippolytus opposed to all womankind? Would he not have been the butt of feeble jokes?" However, he turned this betrayal of Euripides to good account when he made Phèdre's jealousy of her rival bring on the final catastrophe; he deepened the psychological insight into the heroine's pathology.

The minimalist approach Racine brought to the staging of the play also holds good for its language with its elevated but extraordinarily restricted vocabulary. The tone of voice is courtly throughout; the alexandrines flow with a measured urgency. The *bienséance* demanded of drama by Racine's friend, the critic Boileau, governs even the emotional high points. Hippolyte addresses his father as "Seigneur", his stepmother as "Madame". Good manners inform the action as well. He does not threaten Phèdre physically: it is she who unsheathes his sword and offers it to him so that he might stab her. He is merely accused of having intended to rape her. It is not Phèdre but the Nurse who slanders Hippolyte: Racine thought it unsuitable for a princess to be guilty of such a base deed. But this outward restraint, the very antithesis to Senecan bombast, actually stokes up the emotional pressure. Racine is very much the contemporary of La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère in the astuteness of his psychological probing. His characters reveal themselves in their deep motivations, in spite of their cultivated drawing-room idiom.

Phèdre may be predominantly word-orientated, but the dialogue does have its gestural correlative easily missed by the reader, though not by the performers. The critic Ferdinand Brunetière has pointed out the immensely gestural nature of Racine's text. In Phèdre's first appearance in Act I he identified no fewer than twenty-five physical actions within the first few minutes. If we follow this hint, we shall find a wealth of gestures embedded in the text throughout.

The demanding role of the female lead has been coveted by French actresses from the very start.. In the eighteenth century Adrienne Lecouvreur gave it a simplicity that spoke to the heart; later in the century the emotionally truthful Mlle Dumesnil rivalled the Phèdre of the formally more accomplished Mlle Clairon whose natural-seeming approach to the role had in fact been carefully calculated. In the nineteenth century Mlle George performed it for the Tsar in Russia; later, the physically unprepossessing Rachel's Phèdre was emotionally staggering; Sarah Bernhardt's flashy interpretation won acclaim both in Paris and in London. In the twentieth century Marie Bell and Maria Casarès as well as many other actresses, mainly but not invariably at the Comédie Française, have made a deep impression as the tragic princess. Between 1680 and 1955, the Comédie alone has staged this, arguably the greatest of all French tragedies, some 1,270 times.

The recognition that *Phèdre* represented a peak of tragic playwriting prevented

further French treatments of this theme in regular drama for a long time. In the eighteenth century it was handled in the medium which was in any case more congenial to the age than was tragedy: viz., the musical stage. But after a century of such efforts, the *Journal de l'Empire* of 3rd November 1813 was to state: "*Phèdre* is a poor subject for an opera."

Racine's works have never figured prominently in the English-speaking theatre; although a good many translations have in fact been undertaken. This reticence is due in part to the different historical development of the French and the English stage; including different audience pressures on the repertoire and the weight of a brilliant anti-classical English corpus of drama; but more fundamentally because a play like *Phèdre* is ineradicably rooted in the genius of the French language. As the American poet Robert Lowell, who made a verse translation of the play, put it (not perhaps very felicitously):

"Racine's plays are generally and correctly thought to be untranslatable. His syllabic alexandrines do not and cannot exist in English. We cannot reproduce his language, which is refined by the literary artifice of his contemporaries...No translator has had the gifts or the luck to bring Racine into our culture."

Nevertheless attempts to provide an English *Phèdre* for the stage have been made time and again. I have been able to trace at least thirteen translations made in the past seventy years alone. None of them quite catches the elusive music of Racine's verse.

There have, however, been several English dramatisations of the myth. The first was *Phaedra and Hippolitus*, a blank-verse tragedy by Edmund Smith; cobbled together not only from Racine's *Phèdre* but also from his *Bajazet*. This was premiered at the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket on 21 April 1707, with the quite elderly Thomas Betterton playing Theseus. It ran for four nights and was applauded by elitist critics rather than the public at large. The text was published in the same year and again in Mr Smith's *Works* in 1719; in the latter the editor gave it the following patriotic puff:

". . . as to Phaedra, she has certainly made a finer figure under Mr. Smith's conduct, upon the English stage, than either Rome or Athens;

and if she excels the Greek and Latin Phaedra, I need not say she surpasses the French one, though embellished with whatever regular beauties and moving softness Racine himself could give her."

Smith, who for some unfathomable reason set the action in Crete, introduced a Jacobean-type villain, the minister of state Lycon, to move the clumsy plot engine along. He retained from Racine's play Hippolytus's love for an offspring of Pallas, here called Ismena. Hippolytus survives all attempts to do away with him and is finally united with his love. No wonder the critic John Dennis called the play a "*wretched Rhapsody*." Nevertheless the text was evidently read in its day. There were a further six editions until 1797, after that date, interest seems to have faded.

Fast forward to 9 September 1975: the opening at the Old Vic of the National Theatre's *Phaedra Britannica*, by Tony Harrison, one of the few contemporary English poets able to write speakable dramatic verse. Harrison recast Racine's alexandrines into loose limbed heroic couplets, a form not used in serious English drama since the days of Dryden. While shadowing *Phèdre* almost speech by speech, Harrison transposed the story from mythical Greece to mid-nineteenth-century British India, in the period shortly before the Mutiny. Thésée here becomes the Governor, Phèdre Memsahib his wife and Hippolyte his mixed-race son Thomas Theophilus; the tutor Théramène appears as a very British Burleigh; Aricie has been Indianized as Lilamani and the Nurse as the Ayah. The production was strongly cast with the adorable Diana Rigg as Memsahib.

The Governor displays the same ambivalence with which Racine has invested him - he is a sexual predator as well as a hero who shoots tigers and dacoits. The Memsahib, a judge's daughter with a disturbed family background, recalls Phèdre's descent from Minos, the judge in Hades. Lilamani is the sole remnant of a princely family executed after a pre-Mutiny uprising, just as Aricie was the sole survivor of the Pallantides. Though given an English education, Thomas, the Governor's son by a Rajput mother, feels ethnically estranged just as Hippolytus, the Amazon's son, may have done in Athens. The mythical framework of the story is reduced to the conflict between the Memsahib's self-lacerating Christianity and the world of the Hindu gods. Only once is rationalist scepticism put on the rack: in Burleigh's messenger speech describing Thomas's death. It is not Neptune but Siva that has sent forth the deadly monster - and that comes not out of the sea but, appropriately enough, out of the forest. The reconciliation between the Governor and Lilamani

which matches Thésée's adoption of Aricie in *Phèdre* is underlined by the sound of the monsoons breaking, a blessed relief after the day's tropical tension.

Phaedra Britannica is more likely to become a permanent item in the English-language repertoire than the last play in our survey. I mean *Phaedra's Love* by Sarah Kane, the young author who had set the cat among the pigeons in 1995 with her play *Blasted* at the Royal Court Theatre. Sarah Kane directed *Phaedra's Love* herself at the small Gate Theatre in West London in May 1996. This version did not soften the tragic story in any way. Eight scenes with a running time of a mere seventy minutes convey a bleak world view, only momentarily lightened by touches of black humour. The play has been called an example of the journalistic category of 'In-Yer-Face' Theatre, that is to say a drama cynical, aggressive, and pessimistic - basically a cry of despair.

Sarah Kane was inspired to treat the story by having seen Seneca's *Thyestes* in Caryl Churchill's version at the Royal Court. She only read Seneca's *Phaedra* once but did not consult either Euripides or Racine. Her House of Theseus is a royal family - modern in having such props as television sets and remote-control toy cars, modern also in their staccato speech rhythms and existential nihilism, but otherwise situated in no particular time or place. *Grand Guignol* has replaced mythology. We recognise - just about - such characters as Hippolytus in a terminally depressive young man, Phaedra in an erotically obsessed woman and we see a Theseus who is equally sex-driven. We meet a new character - Strophe, Phaedra's daughter by another man; as well as *Guignolesque* figures like a Doctor, a Priest and a Policeman.

This is a world of total, and totally joyless, libido. Hippolytus masturbates and is fellated not only by Phaedra but also by the Priest. Strophe has had sex not only with her half-brother but also with Theseus. Polymorphous perversity is matched by barbaric violence. When a revolution breaks out, Theseus cuts Strophe's throat, Hippolytus is killed by the crowd and has his genitals cut off by a woman. Sarah Kane who stated, 'My main source of thinking about violence is myself, and in some ways all of my characters are me -' made her post-ideological position clear as follows: "I am not writing about sexual politics. Class, race or gender divisions are a symptom of societies based on violence or the threat of violence, not the cause." Perhaps it was, at least in part, this oppressive sense of a fundamentally cruel world that caused Sarah Kane, considered by those who worked with her a highly promising playwright, to commit suicide on 20 February

1999 at the age of 28. But I suspect that rather than speaking out of a mere personal neurosis, she voiced more of her generation's despair than some of us may care to countenance.

And so we come down to earth after our balloonist's view of this perennially teasing theme. I am sure there are those who think that the comparative method will yield cultural, especially sociological, insights more readily than it does aesthetic ones. Perhaps that is so. But this excursion however brief and necessarily superficial, may not have altogether ruled out the occasional flash of aesthetic insight. At least, that is my hope.

I thank you for your patience.

George Brandt