Hippolytus

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EURIPIDES

Reliable biographical information on Euripides is sparse, and any facts are difficult to disentangle with the legends that pile up. As a child on the island of Salamis he likely participated in athletics and studied art and philosophy under the renowned figures Anaxagoras and Proclus. He is said to have had two failed marriages with women that were unfaithful to him. After he went to Athens, several of his tragedies – of which a few survive, though many more are fragmentary or completely lost – won the first prize at an annual dramatic competition. He is also said to have isolated himself in a cave on the shore of Salamis and to have written his tragedies there, even as he became famous. He died after moving to the humbler court of Macedonia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, which would cause the end of the 5th-century Athenian Golden Age, began in 431, three years before Euripides staged the play. But the war would need to rage for almost thirty years before it took its toll on Athens, and the cultural dominance of Athens still persisted in 428.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Ancient tragedians took their subjects from the common body of Greek mythology, and often recycled the same material that other tragedians used. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were the three major Greek tragedians, and Sophocles at least wrote his own *Phaedra*, perhaps after Euripides wrote his *Hippolytus*, which was some version of the same myth. Unfortunately, Sophocles' *Phaedra* exists only in some fragments, so the comparison is hard to make. Later, the Roman philosopher and tragic poet Seneca composed his own *Phaedra*. Since Phaidra's ancestor was Medea, the play can also be seen as connected to Euripides' famous *Medea*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Hippolytus*
- **When Written:** Unknown, before 428 BC
- **Where Written:** Athens or Salamis
- **When Published:** First performed 428 BC
- **Literary Period:** Greek Tragedy
- **Genre:** Tragic Drama
- **Setting:** Outside the palace of the Greek city of Troizen
- **Climax:** A huge bull, sent by Poseidon because of Theseus' curse, dramatically kills Hippolytus after Hippolytus has been framed for raping his step-mother, Phaidra, Theseus' wife.
- **Antagonist:** The goddess Aphrodite

EXTRA CREDIT

Winner. When Euripides staged the play, he won the highly sought first prize. Though he is said to have produced some 90 plays, he only won the competition 5 times.

A second try. Historians argue that Hippolytus staged another version of the play some years earlier, which the audience hated, before he wrote the version we possess. Though the first play is lost, some scholars suggest that it portrayed Phaidra scandalously pursuing her desire without the nurse.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play begins when the goddess Aphrodite appears and explains that she has grown angry. Hippolytus, she explains, the bastard son of Theseus, has devoted himself too fully to virginity and the goddess Artemis, and arrogantly rejects the power of sexuality and desire. As a result, Aphrodite says, she has caused Phaidra, Theseus' wife and Hippolytus' step-mother, to grow madly in love with Hippolytus, which sets the tragic course of events into motion.

As if to confirm Aphrodite's judgment of Hippolytus' character, a servant sees Hippolytus honoring the **statue** of Artemis and urges him to honor Aphrodite as well. Hippolytus arrogantly denounces the servant and Aphrodite at once. After Hippolytus exits, the palace is stirring because Phaidra suffers – she will not eat, is nearing death, and refuses to explain what her illness could be. Her nurse urges her to tell the truth, and eventually elicits Phaidra to confess that she has been overwhelmed by sexual desire for Hippolytus, an ailment that she treats like a terrible disease. The nurse expresses shock and disgust, but then urges Phaidra to remain calm while she goes into the palace to put together a magical potion that will cure Phaidra's desire.

Even though Phaidra's greatest fear was that the truth of her terrible desire would spread, ruining her reputation, the nurse finds Hippolytus and, after having him swear an oath of silence, propositions him with the prospect of having a sexual relationship with Phaidra. Hippolytus cruelly denounces Phaidra's desire. Phaidra stands at the palace door and hears what Hippolytus shouts at the nurse. In response she decides

that her case is lost and resolves to die, but not before plotting to guard her reputation. Before she exits into the palace herself, on her way to suicide, she swears the chorus of Troizenian women to an oath of silence, so that they do not repeat what they know.

Shortly after, the chorus, still outside the palace, hears shouting. Phaidra has hung herself, and her life expires before anybody can help. Just then, Theseus returns from visiting an oracle, wearing a **crown of flowers** that, ironically, indicates a favorable response. He grieves to find Phaidra suddenly dead, but cries out even more when he finds a wax tablet in Phaidra's hand, containing a note written in her own handwriting, which accuses Hippolytus of raping her. In his anger, Theseus calls down one of the three fatal curses granted to him by his mythical father Poseidon on Hippolytus. When Hippolytus runs in to answer Theseus' call, he tries to defend himself on the ground that such an act would be unthinkable to him, but Phaidra's body and note have convinced Theseus too deeply. In case the death curse fails, he exiles Hippolytus from both Troizen and Athens.

A short while later, a messenger enters. He had gone along, the messenger explains, with a large group of friends, to escort Hippolytus to the border of the country to begin his exile. Just as Hippolytus mounted his chariot to depart along the shore, an earthquake rumbled, a massive wave appeared, and then from the wave a bull ran forth and chased Hippolytus. As an able charioteer, Hippolytus did his best to escape, but the bull caused the chariot to collide with a cliff and flip. Hippolytus himself was dragged along the ground, tangled in the reins. When his friends finally found him, he was on the verge of death. Hearing the story, Theseus feels somewhat hushed, but mostly satisfied that Hippolytus met with his punishment.

Suddenly, Artemis appears high above the stage. At once, she tells the whole truth to Theseus, who can hardly bear to hear how he believed the false accusation against Hippolytus, refused to wait for a fair trial, and called down the irreversible fatal curse. He blames an ancient unresolved crime among his ancestors for the suffering. At last Hippolytus, dying, is carried onto the stage by his friends and set down before Theseus. Both feel enormous pain and sadness for the other. Artemis ensures that they have a moment of reconciliation, forgiving each other, before she promises to take her own vengeance on Aphrodite and set up a cult in which young maidens will honor the memory of Hippolytus for all time.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Theseus – Theseus is the son of the god Poseidon, the mythical founder-king of Athens, and also king of the city of Troizen. The myths about him abound. Most famously, he outsmarted and defeated the Minotaur of Crete, freeing the Athenian captives held inside the labyrinth. His wife is Phaidra, but he had affair with an Amazonian woman, who gave birth to Hippolytus. Though he is gone for half the play, visiting an oracle, he returns to find Phaidra dead of suicide and blaming Hippolytus for raping her. He is quick to furious anger in his response, but remorseful when Hippolytus is near death because of Theseus's curse and the truth is revealed.

Hippolytus – Hippolytus is the son of Theseus by another woman, an Amazonian named Hippolyte. As a bastard child, he is unlikely to ascend to political power in Troizen. Instead, he prefers hunting and riding his horses. He has dedicated himself completely, and arrogantly, to virginity and the goddess Artemis. These characteristics affect his downfall: as a bastard child, his words hold less weight when he is accused, and his devotion to Artemis and chastity angers that goddess's rival, Aphrodite, who is the goddess of love and desire.

Phaidra – Phaidra is Theseus' wife and Hippolytus' stepmother. Medea, the heroine who is the subject of another Euripides play, is her ancestor. Before the play begins, a sexual desire for Hippolytus has taken hold of her, inspired by Aphrodite. Phaidra is suffers from her insatiable sexual desire, sick at its immorality, and desperate to preserve her reputation.

Nurse – The nurse has the difficult job of looking after Phaidra after she has gone sick with desire. She is both deeply sympathetic with Phaidra's suffering, but also willing and pragmatic enough to follow her own designs to try to fix things. As a result, when she learns of Phaidra's illicit desire, she feels so shocked that she decides to take matters into her own hands and acts against Phaidra's wishes, with disastrous results.

Aphrodite – Aphrodite is the goddess of love and desire. In the play's opening, she announces what will happen: Hippolytus has failed to respect her, as he is too much devoted to virginity, and will pay the consequences. Though she does not appear again after that. She is depicted as a jealous, vengeful goddess.

Artemis – Artemis is the goddess of hunting, and she also represents chastity. Hippolytus has devoted his life to worshipping her, manifest in the **crowns of flowers** that he makes to adorn her statue onstage. When she finally appears at the end of the play, she confesses that a law among the gods had prevented her from interfering with Aphrodite's machinations. Still, she vows revenge, and gives establishes a cult in Hippolytus's honor after his death.

Chorus – Every Greek tragedy has a chorus, a group of singers whose role is to watch as the action unfolds and offer reactions in the form of odes that were probably sung. They represent an audience-within-the-play. In this play, young Troizenian women make up the chorus and so their songs are often about topics of love and sexuality.

Koryphaios – Again, in every Greek tragedy, one member of the chorus speaks as a character in dialogue, and the name

Koryphaios translates as "speaker of the chorus". Another Troizenian maiden, she regularly expresses surprise and grief over the tragedy she witnesses. She might have the power to prevent Theseus from unleashing his fatal anger on his son, except that she swore and oath of silence to Phaidra.

Messenger – The messenger belongs to Hippolytus' group of friends, and he is present in the crowd that escorts Hippolytus to his exile. He witnesses the earthquake, wave, and divine bull that kill Hippolytus on the shore, and returns to the palace to report it. Since this climax happened offstage, the messenger has the task of making it vivid to his listeners in his one appearance.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Servant – This servant to Hippolytus, probably an old man, appears only once in the play. He warns Hippolytus not to ignore the goddess Aphrodite, but Hippolytus spurns him.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DESIRE, SEXUALITY, AND CHASTITY

Ancient Greek literature and philosophy often depicts sexual desire as a god (*Eros*), and as a force that takes control of a human soul powerless against it. The resistance to its force, 'chastity' or 'temperance' in modern terms, stood as a cultural ideal in Greek society. *Hippolytus* explores the tension between sexual desire and chastity, as represented by the statues of Artemis and Aphrodite, the goddesses of chastity on the one hand and sexual love on the other.

The play explores this tension not through a normal devotion to chastity or normal sexual desire, but rather through radical extremes of both. Hippolytus's chastity is not humble or merely devotion to Artemis. Instead, he is proud and haughty in his chastity, arrogantly defying love or desire. Aphrodite, like many gods in Greek literature, take such haughtiness from a mortal as an affront, and punishes Hippolytus (and sets the plot in motion) by overwhelming Phaidra, his step-mother, with sexual desire for him. So Hippolytus's chastity is arrogant, while Phaidra's sexual desire for her step-son is incestuous and monstrous. Both Phaidra's desire and Hippolytus' cruelty transgress human laws and ideals and are violations of the social rules enforced by the gods. And the results of this clash are therefore extreme as well: Hippolytus viciously lashes out against his step-mother's advances, to which Phaidra then tries to protect her own reputation by killing herself and claiming in a note that she committed suicide because Hippolytus raped her.

After the abnormal or criminal sexual experiences that drive the tragedy, the end of the play attempts to restore the normal interaction of these conflicting motivations. For the audience, both Phaidra and Hippolytus, and their dire fates, will be valuable lessons in moral conduct. When Artemis announces at the end of the play that from now on, girls, "in their thoughtful hours before marriage" (2154), will pray to Hippolytus, she imagines Hippolytus' story inspiring regular Athenian citizens to both recognize the value of chastity even as they accept their own sexuality.

GODS AND FATE

Many ancient Greek tragedies, including those by the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides (the author of *Hippolytus*), tell a similar tale: a character's greatness, however impressive, violates a law of fate set by the gods, who in turn punish the transgression. Aeschylus' play about Prometheus, who brings the invention of fire to the human race and is punished for it, provides a useful comparison. Hippolytus' superhuman resistance to the force of desire, just like Prometheus' transgression, causes the gods to take notice. Desire itself is the law or fate of human life, and the audience watches it destroy Phaidra from within before seeing Hippolytus killed for his arrogant rejection of it.

Aphrodite herself enforces this law. Appearing above the stage before the action begins, she tells the audience that Hippolytus will suffer because his chastity goes so far that it scorns her. The conclusion – the death of Hippolytus – is therefore never in doubt. In this view, the entire sequence of Phaidra growing sick with desire, committing suicide, and framing Hippolytus simply represent Aphrodite's power and will. "All three of us," says the dying Hippolytus of himself, Phaidra, and Theseus (Phaidra's husband and Hippolytus's father) "owe our ruin to that lone goddess" (2118). Why couldn't Artemis, whom Hippolytus revered, rescue him? At the play's end, Artemis tells us that there is an even higher law, maintained by Zeus, which prohibits one god from interfering with the plans of another. But she also promises the dying Hippolytus vengeance against Aphrodite, which makes the audience think of other myths and other conflicts between human characters and the gods that oversee them. In this way, the personal struggle with desire and chastity grows into a struggle between the gods, even as the gods control mortal's fate.

TRUTH, FALSEHOOD, AND REPUTATION

As the tragedy unfolds, the audience knows everything, sharing the perspective of the gods, and we watch as characters slowly discover truths

about each other. This manipulation of truth and falsehood is another commonplace in the ancient Greek theater, and it turns the drama into a kind of detective tale. In the play's opening lines, Aphrodite tells the audience that Phaidra is sick with desire, but the nurse struggles over a long scene to discover the same truth. Phaidra's letter, engraved in a wax tablet that Theseus finds in her dead hands, says that Hippolytus raped her. This falsehood dominates the rest of the tragedy only because those who know the truth have sworn oaths to keep silent, which, in ancient Greek culture, is very seriously binding. The nurse swears Hippolytus to secrecy before confessing Phaidra's love, and Phaidra herself puts the chorus under oath with some of her last words. The consequence is that, ironically, the only character unable to speak (the dead Phaidra) persuades Theseus, while those characters who still can speak must remain silent. "She gives her dead body as proof," says Theseus (1444). It takes Artemis and the dying Hippolytus, at the end of the play, to prove the truth to Theseus, and his discovery of what really happened makes for a dramatic climax.

This interplay of truth and falsehood connects the characters of this play to a major concern for characters of Greek tragedy in general: one's reputation. As members of the nobility, the three primary characters of the play each cares deeply about what general society thinks of him or her. This powerful emotion pairs with the feeling of shame at one's actions, which is the judgment about oneself, rather than the judgment of an entire society. Phaidra hides her love, and then frames Hippolytus, in order to save her own reputation. Similarly, Theseus explains that he has to fiercely punish Hippolytus in order to uphold his reputation as a strong leader, while Hippolytus fears that his own reputation will be tarnished by Phaidra's accusation. By the end of the play, once the truth comes out, Phaidra's own reputation falls, and Artemis works to restore Hippolytus' story – but this repair comes too late to save his life.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

A Greek audience would have been intimately familiar with the legends of Theseus, the mythical founder-king of Athens. In Greek mythology, a family history of violence and bloody guilt portended further crimes down the road. Theseus' own step-mother, for example, was Medea, whose murder of her own children forms the plot of another famous Euripides play, *Medea*. When Phaidra grapples with her desire, she realizes that she is just another episode in a long family history of criminal love – "I'm thinking of a compulsion that's been misery for the women of my clan" (525). Likewise, Hippolytus, when he lies dying before Theseus, blames "some murder, some polluting atrocity, done by our ancestors" for his unjust suffering (2086).

The play also highlights the familial relationships between the characters themselves. Theseus, even though he is married to Phaidra, fathered Hippolytus with another woman, a common practice among ancient Greek mythical heroes. When Phaidra finds herself stirred by desire for Hippolytus, the seemingly stable relationships between a husband, wife, and bastard son threaten to come loose: the nurse hopes to help Phaidra actually consummate her love for Hippolytus, and, even worse, Theseus imagines that Hippolytus has raped his own step-mother, so that he finds his own son to be his most serious enemy, on whom he wishes a cruel death from the gods. This irreparable damage emerges because family members entangle in criminal ways, not consistent with divine law or Greek norms. When Artemis finally promises that newly married Greek women will pray to Hippolytus, she aims to recycle the myth for the sake of smooth, and normal, familial relationships.

CITIES AND PLACE

Every ancient Greek play that survives from the era of Euripides was staged at an annual competition held in Athens. (*Hippolytus* won Euripides first prize.) Yet tragedies – unlike comedies, which were set in Athens – were customarily set in other Greek cities, because it did not bode well to depict terrible things happening to citizens of one's own city. Therefore, even though Theseus is the mythical founder of Athens, Euripides set the play in Troizen, where Theseus was originally born. Still, when characters make reference to Athens, the audience would have understood that the events unfolding before them still affect their own city, where they regularly worshipped Hippolytus and other mythical characters. When Aphrodite announces at the beginning of the play that Phaidra first fell in love with Hippolytus when she saw him in Athens, for example, the Athenian audience feels even more invested in the tale.

Like all Greek tragedies, the play runs before a single background, in this case the palace doors of Troizen. Nevertheless, Euripides evokes new, unseen spaces in the imaginations of the audience and reader. When we first see Hippolytus, he has just returned from hunting in a beautiful pastoral scene, which he links with the chastity of his favorite goddess, Artemis. Addressing her, he calls the place "a meadow as virginal as you are" (115). Phaidra, even though she will commit suicide without leaving the palace again, longs for a similar natural place, which she associates with the man she desires. "Take me into the mountains," she tells the nurse (316). But the drama of city and place reaches a climax when it comes to exile. Long ago, we learn from Aphrodite in the introduction, Theseus fled Athens with Phaidra when he "murdered a great man's sons" (57). The theme repeats itself when Theseus banishes Hippolytus for the alleged crime of raping Phaidra, which means Hippolytus is offstage when Poseidon's bull fatally wounds him. The messenger vividly tells Theseus the story of Poseidon's bull, which effectively makes a distant, unseen event

feel present in the minds of audience and reader.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

CROWN OF FLOWERS

Two different characters at two different moments in the play wear a crown of flowers as a meaningful sign. When we first meet Hippolytus, he has just returned from hunting in the wilderness with a band of huntsmen, and he places a crown of flowers by the **statue** of Artemis as a token of worship. He wove it together, he says, in a "meadow as virginal as you [Artemis] are" (115). Later, when it becomes clear that Phaidra's accusation has doomed Hippolytus and he goes into exile, the chorus laments that Hippolytus will no longer place "wildflower crowns" for Artemis (1764). The crown represents Hippolytus' commitment to chastity and virginity, and the beautiful nature with which those commitments are associated – and the goddess Artemis watches over all of these. The other crown of flowers appears when Theseus returns from the oracle. The fact that Theseus is wearing such a crown means that the gods there gave him a favorable or optimistic response to whatever question he asked of the oracle. Unlike Hippolytus' crown, Theseus' comes with a deep irony: the gods made him hopeful even though disasters unfolded at home, including the death of his wife.

STATUES OF ARTEMIS AND APHRODITE

Onstage, before the doors to the palace at Troizen, two statues stand during the entire length of the play. They depict Artemis and Aphrodite, and they serve as a constant reminder that these two gods dominate the action of the play. Characters also use the statues to send messages or prayers to the gods. For example, beginning in line 112, Hippolytus lays his **crown of flowers** by the statue of Artemis as part of his worship. On the other hand, beginning in line 811, the nurse approaches the statue of Aphrodite and prays to the goddess of desire for help in her own secret plan – which is to try to convince Hippolytus to give in to Phaidra's desire for him. These symbols constantly remind the audience not only of the two goddesses that control the action, but also the two extremes of human behavior that they represent. Hippolytus has angered the gods because of his arrogant denial of sexuality, while Phaidra suffers and perishes because the force of sexual desire has so taken hold of her life. Since Artemis simply watched as Aphrodite controlled the fates of Hippolytus and others, Aphrodite's statue emerges in this play as the more potent symbol, with the lesson that nobody should deny the force of desire. But at the end of the play, Artemis vows revenge, and so the audience is left to imagine another story in which the Artemis statue – the nobility or beauty of chaste living – gains the upper hand.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Hippolytos* published in 1992.

Lines 1-425 Quotes

The power I possess is sex, passion, love,
Which you mortals, in honoring me,
Celebrate in your diverse ways.

Related Characters: Aphrodite (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1-3

Explanation and Analysis

Aphrodite speaks these lines at the very beginning of the play, when she appears above the stage and reveals her dislike for Hippolytus.

Aphrodite has the power to make mortals fall in love with whomever she selects, an ability which she boasts of here and which she will inflict upon Phaidra as part of her plot to bring Hippolytus to ruin. Exercising control over perhaps the most intense human emotion--love--as well as the very mechanism of desire or longing, Aphrodite commands the psychological motor that is necessary to want to do or achieve anything in life at all. This speaks to the magnitude of Aphrodite's power: she holds the fundamental key to human motivation, and as such can effectively program a human's desire to the extent that their entire fate becomes centered around the object of their longing. By altering a mortal's mind, Aphrodite can nearly "pre-program" that mortal's fate, as she does here with Phaidra and Hippolytus.

I have brought you this green crown,
Goddess, fresh from the scene
Where I spliced its flowers together,
A meadow as virginal as you are…

Related Characters: Hippolytus (speaker), Artemis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 112-115

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Hippolytus enters the stage for the first time and approaches the statue of Artemis. Out of admiration for the goddess, Hippolytus adorns her statue with a crown of flowers he's taken from a meadow he considers "virginal." This reveals how Hippolytus views Artemis as pure, whole, and representative of chastity, as opposed to Aphrodite, whose association with sexuality and erotic desire he refuses to revere. The crown of flowers also shows the importance of offering material favors to the gods--they are integral to the act of worshipping the gods and maintaining good standing with them, thus avoiding punishment for hubris (pride or arrogance). Hippolytus leaves Aphrodite's statue bare, and this upsets her--only sealing Hippolytus's fate.

> Because I prize my purity
> I keep clear of [Aphrodite]...

Related Characters: Hippolytus (speaker), Aphrodite

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164-165

Explanation and Analysis

Hippolytus speaks these lines in response to his servant, who argues that Hippolytus should worship Aphrodite with as equal a sense of ardor as he shows Artemis.

Hippolytus strives to avoid the qualities associated with Aphrodite's divinity: erotic desire, lust, and bodily passion. As he later reveals, he has little interest in sex, and commits himself to keeping his internal mental life tranquil and undisturbed by the possibly tempestuous psychological effects of sexual desire. He strives to avoid precisely the situation into which Phaidra has fallen at the hands of Aphrodite: total psychological chaos caused by "sinful" desire, a desire that pushes her to suicide (though we learn that this desire is not her own invention, and thus she is more victim than not).

> I must have said terrible things.
> I'm so humiliated! I feel as though
> I'm being violently shoved somewhere I must not go.
> Where? My mind's going, I feel unclean,
> Twisted into this madness
> By the brawn of a god who hates me.

Related Characters: Phaidra (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 350-356

Explanation and Analysis

After Phaidra's nurse pleads with her to speak about what's distressing her, Phaidra finally begins to describe the inner pain she feels--though she refuses to explain its cause. At first, however, she's in a nearly trancelike state, and rambles about her desire to be taken to a meadow.

Having been condemned by Aphrodite to fall into a sinful love with Hippolytus, Phaidra has been "violently shoved somewhere . . . By the brawn of a god" beyond her control. Phaidra knows that her feelings are morally wrong, but Aphrodite has the 'remote control' to her desire--and Phaidra cannot override Aphrodite's divine power. This explains the maddening sensation which Phaidra feels in her mind--she is entirely torn in two fundamentally opposed directions, a tearing that so radically separates her thoughts that the only solution she can think of is annihilating herself.

Lines 426-816 Quotes

> I must hide it. Shame may be purified,
> And it may be made completely noble

Related Characters: Phaidra (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 503-504

Explanation and Analysis

After revealing her love for Hippolytus to her nurse, Phaidra addresses the chorus here.

This scene brings attention to the importance of reputation in the play (and in Ancient Greece). Phaidra displays her belief that shame is good so long as it encourages one's moral improvement. However, we also learn that shame and its potential threat to one's reputation--if the cause for one's shame becomes public knowledge--is enough to

justify suicide for Phaidra.

Phiadra's view on her own responsibility for her sinful desire--which contributes to her sense of potential impurity--begins to be revealed here. Phaidra is unwilling to heed the nurse's advice (occurring shortly after this scene) that she is not responsible for her attraction to Hippolytus, that she is entirely at the mercy of Aphrodite's control. Further, Phaidra is absolutely unable to conceive that she might be morally fallible and imperfect at the same time that it could be possible for her to still live a decent life. She demands absolute moral purity of herself, and if her sin were to be publicly exposed, her reputation and honor would be so trashed that life would not be worth living anymore. In this way, it seems that Phaidra's life is entirely dependent upon her sense of her own reputation.

> [Love] brings you sweetness and pain, almost
> Beyond our human power to feel.

Related Characters: Nurse (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 535-536

Explanation and Analysis

Having returned after her initial shock, the nurse claims she overreacted when she heard about Phaidra's love for Hippolytus and offers consolation.

Here, the nurse seems to be trying to get Phaidra to realize the uncontrollable nature of love, that--in its purest form--is something beyond the limits of mortal thought and feeling. Of course, we know that a divine force--Aphrodite--has specifically intervened and engineered Phaidra's passion for Hippolytus, but the nurse here seems to be referencing the event of human love when it is not burdened by a god's machinations. While the nurse seems to think that Phaidra should abandon her sense of having a perfectly controlling grip on her emotions, and not feel guilty for having them, Phaidra seems totally unwilling to do this. She clings to the possibility of being morally perfect and the sense of necessarily having to erase her faults.

> I knew that my passion, indulged or not,
> Would make me repulsive to others, especially since
> I am a woman – our very sex is a disgrace.

Related Characters: Phaidra (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 625-627

Explanation and Analysis

Phaidra speaks these lines after the nurse has taken back her initial outrage and proposed that Phaidra engage in an affair with Hippolytus.

Here, Phaidra reveals how her being a woman impacts the perception of her sexuality. Feminine sexuality or desire, in the play and in Ancient Greek society, is often portrayed as something vile, lustful, and a source of evil (as seen in Hippolytus's later condemnation of all females). It seems that erotic passion is seen as something fundamentally inappropriate when expressed by a woman--for Phaidra's "very sex," or gender, "is a disgrace." Phaidra is acutely aware of the social world around her, and how she is perceived within it--and so knows beforehand how impossible it would be to maintain good social standing if she were to reveal her desire for Hippolytus.

> Your passion is what the god
> Has chosen you to become. Accept it.
> And though you suffer, be gallant about it.

Related Characters: Nurse (speaker), Phaidra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 735-737

Explanation and Analysis

Taking back her initial, harsh condemnation of Phaidra's love for Hippolytus, the nurse offers Phaidra this consolation.

Once again, the nurse tries to assure Phaidra that her passion for Hippolytus is out of her control and that, because of this, she should not feel morally responsible. The nurse wants Phaidra to accept Aphrodite's choice to force her to love Hippolytus--for if Phaidra cannot accept this, then she will continue to feel agony and will likely commit suicide or wither away. The nurse thinks that Phaidra should not be so concerned with thoughts of social reputation and honor, but should rather accept her fallibility as a mortal with a lack of control over her passions.

Aphrodite,
Sea goddess, share this adventure with me,
Though I have my own tactics
And these, once set in motion,
Once I share them inside with a certain young friend,
Will carry our affair to its climax.

Related Characters: Nurse (speaker), Aphrodite, Hippolytus

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 811-816

Explanation and Analysis

Having devised a plan to make Phaidra feel better, the nurse invokes Aphrodite to support her endeavors.The nurse has given up on the possibility of getting Phaidra to see things her way, and so decides to follow her strategy herself . Yet, she invokes for help the very goddess responsible for Phaidra's downfall--perhaps out of total disregard for Phaidra's understanding of the situation, or out of faith that Aphrodite has good intentions in causing Phaidra to fall in love with Hippolytus. Either way, the nurse's plan proves catastrophic; not buying into Phaidra's sense of total responsibility for her sinful desire, the nurse accepts the involuntary nature of Phiadra's longing and thinks that satisfying it is the best way to end her despair.

Lines 817-1119 Quotes

Eros, Desire! Our eyes perplex and cloud over
When your essence dissolves within them,
Your assault waves of crushing delight
Pour into hearts marked by you for destruction.

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 817-820

Explanation and Analysis

Having overheard the exchange between Phaidra and the nurse--and being therefore in-the-know about Phaidra's love for Hippolytus--the Chorus speaks these lines about the power of desire.

Here, we get another glimpse at how desire is viewed in this play as a force radically beyond mortal control. The intervention of desire into the mortal psyche is violent: it's an "assault" of "waves of crushing delight" which enter "hearts marked . . . for destruction." Desire is viewed as a paradox--it is at once ecstatic and delightful at the same time that it is devastating and destructive. Mortals thrive on the hope and ideas of ecstasy afforded by the mechanism of desire, but they are simultaneously crushed by the magnitude with which it exerts control over their lives.

Mother Earth and Great Sun, whose light
Unfolds the freshness of the clear blue depths –
Could anything spoken be more repulsive?

Related Characters: Hippolytus (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 914-916

Explanation and Analysis

Hippolytus speaks these lines after the nurse has told him about Phaidra's love.

Hippolytus is absolutely repulsed by the news of Phaidra's desire for him--he seems not only repulsed by the fact that his father's wife desires him, but also by the sheer fact that Phaidra has such powerful longing in the first place. Here, Hippolytus's disgust at erotic desire--the domain of Aphrodite's power--once again surfaces. Phaidra has not even made any physical advances at Hippolytus, and he only hears of her desire second-hand from her nurse, yet he's nonetheless absolutely repelled by the sheer mentioning of Phaidra's love. Hippolytus seems to be baffled at why other people do not exert as much control over their inner emotions, nor try to keep a check on their inclinations towards lustful thinking, as he does.

You couldn't keep your mouth shut.
Because of you, after I die
My name will stink of depravity.

Related Characters: Phaidra (speaker), Nurse

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1045-1047

Explanation and Analysis

Phaidra speaks these lines (to her nurse) after learning that the nurse told Hippolytus about Phaidra's desire for him. Now Phaidra's darkest secret is out--and in the hands of the

very person it was intended to be kept from. Her reputation and honor are now in greater danger than ever--even committing suicide may no longer suffice to spare her social status from being tarnished. Phaidra's name will forever "stink of depravity" after her death, written into the social history of Troizen and Athens. To prevent this, she must now concoct a new plan--if not to save her own honor, at least to save that of her sons.

Lines 1120-1368 Quotes

That is her signet, set in an arc
Of hammered gold, inviting me
To open it, a gesture full of her charm –
I'll unravel the windings and crack
The seal. Let me just take in
Her last words to me.

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker), Phaidra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1307-1312

Explanation and Analysis

Having discovered that his wife has killed herself, Theseus notices that there is a message concealed on her corpse.

Theseus has no idea about the truth to be disclosed in Phaidra's message--he seems to expect to find enclosed a personal goodbye, and perhaps a descriptive meditation on some personal woes that brought her finally to kill herself. What is revealed is quite the opposite, both in form and in content: Phaidra states plainly and simply that she killed herself due to a very recent event--her alleged rape by Hippolytus. Theseus thinks he has broken the seal of her message in order to crack open the truth behind her death, but he later discovers--tragically too late--the falsity of her declaration.

The truth is hideous. It sears and wrenches
And will not stay clenched in my throat.
To speak it out excruciates me,
But it must come. Ahhh!
Hear it, men of the city!
My wife was raped – by Hippolytus!

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker), Phaidra, Hippolytus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1337-1342

Explanation and Analysis

Theseus speaks these lines after reading the message Phaidra left for him on her corpse.

Phaidra's explanation for her suicide is far from anything Theseus expected, and unlike Phaidra's early inhibitions towards disclosing her love for Hippolytuys, Theseus feels instantly compelled to announce the troubling news he's discovered. He cannot bear to let the "truth" he's uncovered behind Phaidra's death to stay and fester within him--as if it were an infection that would parasitically grow in his mind. He must expel the news from himself, however painful. The supposed truth he's encountered is too painful to be locked away in privation--even if its submission to the public will destroy the reputation of his son, and tear apart the entire family.

Lines 1369-1727 Quotes

I came bitterly from your womb,
O my cruelly wounded mother.
Let no one I love ever
Enter this world a bastard.

Related Characters: Hippolytus (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1691-1694

Explanation and Analysis

After Theseus accuses him of raping Phaidra, Hippolytus curses himself as an illegitimate child doomed to misfortune and bad luck.

Born out of wedlock, from the union of Theseus and the Amazononian queen Hyppolyta, Hippolytus is technically a "bastard" child. Such a disposition, with the taboo it carried in ancient times, puts Hippolytus in a position of disgrace. Here, he seems to think that his poor fate stems from his being an illegitimate child, and he wishes that no one he ever loves be born in the same manner as he. That Hippolytus came "bitterly" from his mother's womb implies that he has been at odds with the world from the very beginning of his emergence within it, as a direct result of his fundamental nature.

Daughter of Leto, you who were
Closest to me, my friend, my hunting partner,
Now I will go in exile
From radiant Athens.
I say goodbye to my city…

Related Characters: Hippolytus (speaker), Artemis

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1710-1713

Explanation and Analysis

Hippolytus speaks this lines, in reference to Artemis, after he is condemned to exile by Theseus.

A highly devoted follower of Artemis, Hippolytus must now leave the city and grounds with which she is associated. That Hippolytus calls a goddess his "friend" and the person "closest" to him--considering a goddess to be closer to him than another mortal--shows the degree of his piety and prideful sense of being purer and closer to the divine than most people. Leaving his home, however, Hippolytus now assumes the lowly status of an exile, and must be geographically parted from the source of the very reason for his exile: Artemis, whose reverence and worship by Hippolytus, to the point of neglecting Aphrodite, inspired his and Phaidra's ruin.

There is one practice
That I have never touched,
Though it's exactly what you attack me for:
Physical love. Until now
I've never been to bed with a woman.
All I know of sex is what I hear,
Or find in pictures – these I'm not very keen
To see, since I keep my inner life
As calm and pure as I can.

Related Characters: Hippolytus (speaker), Theseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1544-1552

Explanation and Analysis

Replying to Theseus's accusation that he has raped Phaidra, Hippolytus claims that he has never engaged in sexual activity at all.

Here, Hippolytus's sense of purity and removal from the realm of base mortal desires--the erotic and bodily desires--is reinforced. Hippolytus invokes his chastity in order to demonstrate the absurdity of Theseus's belief that he raped Phaidra, but it almost comes across as boastful and full of pride. Theseus certainly interprets it this way, at least, and furthermore doesn't believe it--he calls Hippolytus a hypocrite, claiming he outwardly promotes high values which internally he does not hold. Even though the truth of Hippolytus's claims are later revealed to Theseus, no amount of argument on his behalf will do any good; Theseus has committed himself to believing in his wife's last words.

Lines 1728-2208 Quotes

What the gods did to you
Fills me with rage – O Graces, goddesses
Of beauty and kindness,
You have given – why did you do it? –
A hard life to an innocent man.
You cut him off from his home and country
To travel depressed and alone.

Related Characters: Chorus (speaker), Hippolytus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1774-1780

Explanation and Analysis

After Theseus has condemned Hippolytus to exile, the Chorus wonders why the Gods have given Hippolytus such a difficult fate.

The Chorus believes Hippolytus, and considers him an innocent man (of course, they know the truth of Phaidra's actions)--they therefore wonder how the gods could let his fate unfurl into such a painful, undeserved punishment, after all of his piety, abstinence, efforts to purify his mind, and fundamental innocence (knowledge to which the gods are privy). Here, the Chorus's view on fate comes front and center: Hippolytus is fundamentally not responsible for his fate, for fate is directed by the gods. Though Hippolytus *is* somewhat responsible for his fate--his prideful negligence of Aphrodite being the impetus for his misfortune--his noble way of conducting himself seems to suggest that he merits no punishment, or at least not such a brutally harsh punishment. Whether we think that Hippolytus is or isn't responsible for his fate, the Chorus seems to think he isn't. They say that the gods have "given" a difficult life to an "innocent" man--they think of Hippolytus as the passive

receptor of something (fate; a hard life) delivered to him, beyond his control, by the gods.

> King, I am your slave, but don't ask me
> To believe that your son was guilty.
> I couldn't, not if the whole female sex
> Hanged itself,
> And all the timber on Mount Ida
> Were sliced up to write suicide notes.
> I know he was a good man.

Related Characters: Messenger (speaker), Theseus, Hippolytus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1902-1908

Explanation and Analysis

Unable to believe that Hippolytus raped Phaidra, a servant of Theseus (the Messenger) questions his incrimination of his son.

The strength and quality of Hippolytus's reputation is revealed here. The messenger boldly addresses his King and questions his judgment--an action that radically outsteps his status as a civilian. He refuses to concede to the King's decree, taking Hippolytus's word for face-value, based on his knowledge of Hippolytus's character--that is, based on Hippolytus's reputation. On the contrary, Theseus haphazardly and without reservation distrusts his own son--perhaps due to his status as a bastard child (ironically, since Hippolytus's status as illegitimate is entirely Theseus's doing). He takes his wife's word for face value--even though that word comes in the form of a brief note left behind on her corpse, leaving open the question of whether or not she is even the true author.

> I will reveal and you must face
> The sexual passion of your wife,
> Though what she did, seen in its own strange light,
> Burns with her soul's nobility.

Related Characters: Artemis (speaker), Theseus, Phaidra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1974-1977

Explanation and Analysis

Having revealed Hippolytus's innocence, Artemis now insists that Theseus must face the truth of his wife's erotic desire for his son.

Artemis flips Theseus's beliefs upside down here, restoring to Hippolytus his innocence and incriminating the last person he expected to betray him--his wife. Unfortunately, this reversal of Theseus's sense of truth and uncovering of the reality behind Phaidra's death comes too late. Invoking Poseidon, Theseus has condemned Hippolytus to death, and the god's curse cannot be undone. This is the truly tragic element of the play, perhaps even more so than Aphrodite's bestowal of an involuntary, sinful love for Hippolytus upon Phiadra. For Hippolytus not only has committed no wrong, but, even when he is discovered innocent, nothing can be done to pardon him of the punishment he's been dealt--there can be no reversal of his curse.

> And the maidens' spontaneous songs
> Will dwell on you with endless care.
> And fame will find musical words
> For Phaidra's terrible love for you,
> And that too will be known.

Related Characters: Artemis (speaker), Hippolytus, Phaidra

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2159-2163

Explanation and Analysis

Though Hippolytus is destined to die--Poseidon's curse on him being irreversible--Artemis here claims that a custom will be established whereby maidens shall sing songs to Hippolytus right before they marry. Intended as a means to improve the reputation of Hippolytus after he dies, this boon by Artemis sends Hippolytus off to his death knowing that his memory will not be tarnished.

Hippolytus' special relationship with Artemis "pays off" in the end; we can see how his devotion to the goddess, though lopsided in relation to his care for Aphrodite, has benefited him in at least one way, even if Aphrodite ultimately succeeds in getting him killed. Yet we are left with the question: was Hippolytus's servant, who suggested that he pay more attention to Aphrodite, ultimately right? Did Hippolytus's relationship with Artemis truly benefit him in the end, if all Artemis could do was to protect his reputation, being ultimately unable to prevent his death?

It seems that, based on Hippolytus's character, we might conclude that he wouldn't think in such a cost-benefit manner, but rather according to his principles and values. Hippolytus did not follow Aphrodite out of principle, and we might think that he would rather die than sacrifice his beliefs.

Further, another facet of the play's portrayal of fate is revealed by Artemis's desire to protect Hippolytus's reputation after his death. In the world of Euripedes, reputation is something that transcends one's death--it's so important that it's even valuable after one is already dead, despite the fact that the reputed individual will not be around to enjoy their reputation's benefits.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LINES 1-425

The scene is the outside of the royal palace of Troizen, a coastal city across a channel from Athens. The audience sees the palace doors, in addition to two statues, one of Aphrodite and another of Artemis. Aphrodite herself appears to the audience, high above the stage, to address the audience and introduce the context of the tragedy they will see.

The two statues of Aphrodite and Artemis, which adorn the stage for the entire length of the play, represent the basic conflict of the play: the sexual desire motivated by Aphrodite, and the ideal of virginity signified by Artemis. Aphrodite speaks first, suggesting that her force will gain the upper hand.

Aphrodite vents her anger about Hippolytus, the bastard son of Theseus. Her charge is that Hippolytus has gone so far his chastity and worship of the virginal goddess Artemis that he rejects the divine power of desire, or Aphrodite herself. In order to take revenge, Aphrodite states that she has infected Phaidra, Theseus' wife, with desire for Hippolytus. She announces that Phaidra will commit suicide from her shame, but not before framing Hippolytus, so that Theseus will utter a fatal curse in his anger.

Although chastity is an ideal of Greek culture, Aphrodite emphasizes that Hippolytus has gone too far. But Aphrodite's words are biased (of course she favors herself over Artemis), and her power does not guarantee that she is morally correct. Notice, too, that she 'spoils' the outcome of the play, revealing most of its plot before it begins. The characters, unlike the audience, will always struggle to learn what really happened. The audience, meanwhile, will always know the characters' fate.

Hippolytus enters with a group of huntsmen, carrying weapons and accompanied by dogs. He leads the huntsmen and the chorus of Troizenian women in a poetic hymn in praise of Artemis. To complete the prayer, he places a **crown of flowers** on the statue of Artemis, which he created from the flowers of the beautiful meadow where he had been hunting. Artemis herself, he explains, maintains the meadow and protects it from those too impure to enter.

Our first introduction to Hippolytus matches with what Aphrodite said about him. He is deeply devoted to Artemis and the chaste lifestyle she represents. He hunts and travels through sacred meadows in order to exercise his devotion more deeply. This behavior might seem entirely pious to a modern person, but in the Greek world of Gods representing different forces any excessive devotion to one force over another was bound to insult some god.

A servant of the palace, an old man, approaches, and engages Hippolytus in a discussion by offering a piece of advice. After getting Hippolytus to agree that arrogance is offensive to the gods just as it is to humans, he urges Hippolytus to worship the statue of Aphrodite standing next to the one of Artemis, lest he appear arrogant to that powerful goddess. Hippolytus responds cruelly and spurns Aphrodite before departing. The servant says a prayer to Aphrodite on Hippolytus' behalf.

Often in Greek culture and literature, old men have deeper insights than the young about life, religion, and moral action. Since we have just heard Aphrodite speak, we know that the old man's warning is wise. Hippolytus' scorn is the first time we see the arrogance that is a part of his chastity. The old man knows that this arrogance insults the gods, and the audience—which knows Hippolytus's fate—knows that the old man's prayer fails to appease Aphrodite.

After they depart, the chorus of Troizenian women sings an ode that introduces the scene to come. Phaidra, they say, the queen of Troizen, has not eaten for three days, and longs for death. In the rest of the ode, they speculate about the cause of her illness, which Phaidra refuses to reveal. It might be that she has simply gone mad, that her husband Theseus, who is away, favors another woman, or that she is pregnant.

The chorus' speculations about the cause of Phaidra's illness generally involve desire and sexuality. In that sense, they are on the right track. These sorts of afflictions affect women universally, they say. But the exact truth, that Phaidra is in love with her own son, makes her case far more abnormal and extreme.

The nurse enters, supporting Phaidra, along with servants from the palace. After lamenting that she does not know the root of Phaidra's suffering, the nurse overhears Phaidra, who seems hardly conscious, long to go to a grassy meadow or beautiful pastoral scene. The nurse tries to silence her, since those words are unfit for a person of her status, but Phaidra goes on to elaborate that she wants to hunt alongside Artemis.

Phaidra's ramblings, which she utters in a style that is more excited and poetic, evoke beautiful places outside of the city. Hippolytus hunts in such places, which he described earlier in similar terms. The audience knows that the reference to the meadow and Artemis are clues leading to Hippolytus, but the Nurse does not. The two character's references to these meadows reflect the two primary tensions of the play: Hippolytus references them as scenes of purity and chastity; Phaidra references them as places in which she might be near Hippolytus whom she immorally lusts for.

Suddenly, Phaidra realizes what she's said, and even though she hasn't revealed the cause of her desire, she expresses her shame and humiliation. As a result, she asks the nurse to cover her face. While Phaidra hides, the Koryphaios – the name given to the spokesperson of the chorus, in this case a young Troizenian maiden – asks the nurse for any information regarding Phaidra's affliction. The nurse has none, and the Koryphaios urges her to be more assertive in finding out.

This moment reveals a primary motivation for the character of Phaidra, her sense of shame and concern over her public image. The long scene of finding out the truth highlights this characteristic: on the one hand, Phaidra is too ashamed to say what she feels, but on the other hand, is too weak to control her words and emotions.

LINES 426-816

The nurse attempts to find out what is afflicting Phaidra, but with no success. On the verge of giving up her interrogation, the nurse mentions to Phaidra that if she dies, her husband's bastard child, Hippolytus, will inherit everything, while her own beloved children will suffer deeply from her absence. The mere mention of Hippolytus' name causes Phaidra to groan, which the nurse notes with interest.

The nurse assumes that Phaidra cares quite a bit about her children and their inheritance, and that she therefore looks down on Hippolytus, the bastard child, as a threat to them. But the real tension between Phaidra and Hippolytus is of course very different.

The detective game continues, as the nurse makes guesses and Phaidra reluctantly leads her down the right track. It isn't that Phaidra fears for her own children, nor that she has already committed a crime, nor that Theseus is too cruel to her. When these options all lead nowhere, the nurse grows desperate again, and grasps Phaidra's hand and knees.

In this scene, Euripides plays on the fact that when the audience knows the truth, it enjoys watching characters withhold the truth from one another. Here, all of Phaidra's comments and groans make perfect sense to the viewer with full knowledge, but they are riddles to the nurse.

Phaidra begs the nurse to stop pursuing the truth, because she fears that the nurse will succeed and the shame will be too much to bear. But Phaidra then confesses that the nurse's touch moves her too strongly, and she begins to tell what she has been hiding. She starts by referencing her mother Pasiphae, who was overcome by desire for a bull, and her sister Ariadne, who became the bride of the god Dionysos. The nurse doesn't understand why Phaidra is making these references to illicit love.

Phaidra knows that her family history contains examples of women overcome by sexual desire who marred their reputation by engaging in immoral love affairs. These references are hints to the nurse about what is afflicting her, but they also represent the common fate of Phaidra's family that pulls on her too.

This is the common fate of the women in her family, says Phaidra, and the nurse slowly catches on. It is the nurse who finally guesses the name of Phaidra's beloved, Hippolytus, and Phaidra does not deny it. The nurse responds with shock and disgust that Phaidra should feel such things for her stepson. The nurse wishes for the end of her own life, so great is Phaidra's crime, and mentions Aphrodite's great power. The chorus agrees that the situation is miserable, but they show more sympathy for Phaidra.

The nurse's complex character shows one important side here. Just as Hippolytus later does when the nurse reveals it to him, she finds Phaidra's desire disgusting. The nurse's response emphasizes how no respectable woman would ever entertain such thoughts. This reaction makes the reader think that Phaidra would have been better off if she had kept quiet.

Addressing the chorus, Phaidra delivers a long speech detailing the history of her desire and the nature of her pain. Shame, she says, is a good thing, so long as it encourages "purity of soul" and action in accordance with the world. For that reason, she consigned herself to silence and death when she felt her growing desire for Hippolytus. That is the essential law of a woman's life in aristocratic circles: to protect one's public image. Otherwise, she says, her children cannot lead the lives she hopes for them, because a mother's disgrace infects an entire family.

This speech reveals Phaidra's main concern: her reputation and the shamefulness of her desire. She has these feelings for Hippolytus despite herself. She knows that if word spreads through the town of her unchaste, extra-marital desire for her son, not only her own reputation, but that of her children and house, will be ruined. It is important to note the importance Phaidra places on her reputation: it is not just important to her, she sees maintaining a good reputation as central to both her own and her children's lives.

The nurse, recovered from her initial shock, changes her approach. She tries to explain that sexual desire is the normal condition of human life, and that it doesn't warrant someone to commit suicide. She lists sexual affairs between gods well known from mythology, in order to prove that everyone – even Zeus, king of the gods – can love with impunity. After she urges acceptance for those who suffer from desire, she hints that there are magical cures for desire as well.

The nurse's tone changes dramatically, leading up to the moment when the nurse will propose a love affair with Phaidra to Hippolytus. Love and desire affect even Zeus, the king of the gods, the nurse's argument says, and so no mortal person should be ashamed of it. She ignores here that Phaidra's desire is for her own son, and that the gods are immune to the laws of propriety they enforce upon mortals.

Phaidra resists such "seductive words" that threaten to destroy her honor. The nurse continues to push: without saying it explicitly, she implies that Phaidra should follow her desire, pursue Hippolytus, and save her own life. When Phaidra denies the nurse's effort, the nurse changes her strategy again. She explains that she knows of a magical medicine that will cure Phaidra's sickness, for which she needs hair or a piece of clothing from Hippolytus. Phaidra is doubtful and worries that the nurse will reveal the truth. Meanwhile, the nurse utters a secret prayer asking Aphrodite to help her achieve success in her secret plan.

Now, at the end of the scene, it is the nurse who keeps a secret from Phaidra, rather than the other way around. Phaidra's rejection of the nurse's suggestion – that Phaidra follow her own desire – shows that she has enough strength, even now, to withstand her feelings and do the right thing for herself and her family. But the nurse's muttered prayer to Aphrodite makes clear that she will take matters into her own hands. Why the nurse believes this course of action to be the best one is never revealed.

LINES 817-1119

After the nurse disappears into the palace, the chorus sings an ode that elaborates on the enormous powers of desire and Aphrodite. The Greeks, the chorus sings, pile up huge sacrifices of cattle in shrines in order to appease the gods – but they do not give offerings to Eros, desire, even though he is "man's premier tyrant" who can invade anybody's soul. They give examples from Greek mythology of the power of love, telling about virginal young women who still could not escape marriage and love.

The choruses of Greek tragedies often fill moments of intermission or offstage action with their own singing. As they sing, the nurse speaks with Hippolytus inside. The chorus' words confirm what the play has already represented: that desire, or Eros, is all-powerful. As a group of young women, the chorus singers themselves know the truth of their song and their own "fates" to end up in love and marriage.

Phaidra, leaning against the palace doors, groans about what she hears inside. The Koryphaios gets her at last to describe what she's hearing: it's Hippolytus "in a huge fury", shouting vicious slurs against some woman. The Koryphaios helps Phaidra realize that the nurse has told Hippolytus her secret, who in turn ferociously denounces her. Phaidra resolves to die.

Hippolytus' huge, righteous, arrogant anger here fits his character. His commitment to chastity has already gone so far as to be an arrogant affront to Aphrodite, and the idea that he would have an affair with his stepmother fills him with disgust. On the one hand Hippolytus's refuse to have an affair with Phaidra is morally correct; on the other hand the rage and denunciation in his refusal, the degree to which he does not care about respecting his stepmother is morally wrong.

Hippolytus enters still raging, and the nurse follows, urging him to be quiet. Worried that Hippolytus will spread the secret even further, she reminds him of the oath of silence that he swore before hearing of Phaidra's desire. In response, Hippolytus launches into a huge rant outlining his hatred for women. He characterizes them as a constant ruin to their family, always motivated by their sexuality and looking for adultery. In the end, he admits that his oath prevents him from telling Theseus.

The nurse has strategically made sure that Hippolytus, however angry, will not spread the truth about Phaidra. Here the oath prevents him from telling Theseus the truth, which is the nurse's design (but will also lead to Hippolytus's death). But the oath does not stop him from venting his hatred for women in general, and we watch as his commitment to chastity goes to such extremes as to becomes a version of misogyny.

Phaidra, though standing or lying elsewhere onstage, has heard Hippolytus' rant and admits defeat. Hippolytus' comments about the hideousness of the female sex seem to have convinced her of the impossibility of the situation and of her shame. Then, gathering up more anger, she turns on the nurse, blaming her for the inevitable spreading of rumor and disgrace to her own name. The nurse protests by pointing out that if Hippolytus had received her words differently, Phaidra would be thanking her. Nevertheless, Phaidra dismisses the nurse, saying that she will look after her own affairs.

Hippolytus's extreme rage seems to utterly convince Phaidra of two things: the immorality of her desire and the inevitable destruction of her own reputation. The nurse pragmatically argues that Phaidra's opinion of the nurse's tactics depends entirely on the outcome, but it is not clear in fact that Phaidra would have ceased to feel shame or fear for her reputation even if Hippolytus was game for the affair. As it is, Phaidra blames all possible sources: the entire race of women is corrupt, the nurse has betrayed her, and she herself has failed.

When the nurse exits, Phaidra makes the chorus swear an oath, like the one that binds Hippolytus, not to reveal what they have seen unfold. The Koryphaios, speaking for the rest of the Troizenian women, swears by Artemis. That done, Phaidra hints at her next moves. She will die – that much is clear – but when she does so, another unnamed victim will perish as well, who will as a result feel the consequences of his arrogant chastity. With this riddle, Phaidra exits.

This oath of silence, like the one that binds Hippolytus, keeps the plot alive. The characters that know the truth, and would be able to prevent Phaidra from successfully framing Hippolytus for rape, have sworn oaths to keep silent. In prioritizing preserving reputation above truth through the swearing of oaths, the nurse and Phaidra ensure others will suffer for their own crimes—Phaidra totally obvious riddle as she exits makes it clear, also, that she wants revenge on Hippolytus not for rejecting her but for arrogantly doing so.

LINES 1120-1368

While the audience waits for the outcome of Phaidra's plan, the chorus sings another ode. They wish to be far away from the horrors they are witnessing, and this leads them to describe those beautiful, far-away places in detail: such places, like the home of the gods, do not allow such tragedies. But by the end of the ode, the chorus returns to the events taking place here on earth – where Phaidra is tying a noose to a beam in her bedroom, inside the palace, in order to hang herself.

As characters in Greek tragedy commonly do, the chorus singers imagine being far away in a place where the present horrors would have no effect on them. This sentiment becomes a way of describing the beauty and peace of those foreign places, such as where the gods live. The beauty of their song contrasts with what Phaidra does inside while the singing is going on.

When the chorus finishes singing their ode, the nurse calls out for help from within the palace. She wants a knife, to free Phaidra's neck from the rope, but the members of the chorus waver back and forth before deciding not to get involved. When they wait long enough, the nurse declares that Phaidra is dead, so that the chorus' inaction results in their not having anything to do.

Although many characters die in every Greek tragedy, they rarely do so onstage, and instead the audience watches as people onstage hear about or learn about the death. Without seeing or knowing for sure, the chorus – and the audience – can guess that Phaidra's death is brutal.

As soon as the chorus confirms Phaidra's death, Theseus enters for the first time in the play. His **crown of flowers** indicates that the oracle, whom he was visiting, gave him a favorable response to whatever questions he asked and that he returns "full of god's favor". However, after entering he quickly suspects that something has befallen the court, since nobody welcomes him home. He guesses that something has happened to Pittheus, his old father. After that, he asks after the health of his children. In his shock at his wife's death, he throws down his **crown of flowers**, feeling betrayed by the oracle's good omens.

Theseus' entrance marks the beginning of the second half of the play, in which Phaidra's death will result in suffering for Hippolytus, which was Aphrodite's original plan. The contrast between the oracle's good omen – symbolized by the crown of flowers Theseus is wearing – and the Phaidra's death, which Theseus first learns about here, creates a moment of irony.

At Theseus' command, the doors of the palace open, revealing Phaidra's dead body and the rope still around her neck. First the chorus and then Theseus utter words of grief that narrate their own emotional reaction. Theseus, in anguish, says that Phaidra's death robs him of his own life. He then blames what has happened on some ancient crime committed by a member of his family, for which the cycle of death and revenge continues to claim victims. And he also repeats that he does not know precisely what caused her death.

When Phaidra struggled under the weight of her desire, she blamed her ancestors, the women in her family tree, for the suffering she felt. Now, Theseus does something similar: there must have been something in his family's past, he reasons, that caused such horrors to befall his house now. The fact that Theseus does not know what caused his wife's death (and that the audience both knows Phaidra's and Aphrodite's plots and that both the Chorus and Hippolytus have been sworn to silence) creates suspense not so dissimilar to what the audience of a horror movie might feel as a character opens what the audience knows is the wrong door…

Then, Theseus notices a wax tablet that Phaidra's body holds in its dead hand. The Koryphaios makes a dire prediction when Theseus goes to read it, and it turns out to be accurate: the tablet accuses Hippolytus of raping Phaidra, and Theseus declares that the tablet convinces him of its truth, as if it were Phaidra's own spoken words. Overcome with anger, Theseus shouts out that Hippolytus raped Phaidra, in doing so spreading the rumor far and wide. Theseus then prays to Poseidon to use up one of Theseus' three mortal curses by killing Hippolytus. The Koryphaios wants to tell the whole truth in order to calm Theseus' anger, but instead can only hint that there is a truth that she cannot reveal, because of the oath she swore to Phaidra. Theseus, not at all convinced by the Koryphaios' protest, vows that even if the gods fail to kill Hippolytus, Theseus will exile him forever.

Now, for the first time, we know precisely what Phaidra was planning when she went off to death. The notion that a son would rape his stepmother is even more horrible than that a stepmother would have desire for her son. Phaidra essentially traded her life (and Hippolytus's) to save her reputation, understanding that in doing so she could achieve her goal because Theseus wouldn't believe that she actually would be willing to kill herself just to save her reputation. The sexual crime Theseus believes occurred horrifies him, just as the real situation horrified Hippolytus when he found out about Phaidra's desire. The origin of Theseus' "three mortal curses" is left unexplained by the play, but are presumably something he had ben granted earlier in life. That Theseus promises to exile Hippolytus even if the gods don't kill him is a promise to remove Hippolytus from the family, to cut him off completely.

LINES 1369-1727

Hippolytus enters, rushing to answer his father's shouting without knowing that he is accused of rape. When he demands to know what's happened, Theseus speaks only in obscure terms – he wishes, for example, that men had an ability to tell which friends were true and which were deceitful. Hippolytus grows suspicious that Theseus has referred to him, and insists that he is blameless and true. Finally, after further deflection, Theseus narrows his general comments about man's wickedness onto Hippolytus himself, and offers Phaidra's dead body as proof to Hippolytus that he has raped her.

Here is another moment in which the playwright creates suspense by having one character kept in the dark while everybody else knows what's going on. Hippolytus thinks that he approaches as an innocent helper to a tragic situation, and Theseus' deflections make the exchange all the more tense. When he finds out that he has been accused of rape, he seems to know that it will end terribly.

In response, Hippolytus buries his head in his cloak, but Theseus tells him to look up. To Hippolytus' face, then, he launches into a long accusation. He claims that Hippolytus has long been a member of orgiastic cults, given over to sexuality and desire, even while he tried to hide it. He imagines and refutes any argument that Hippolytus might use ahead of time. Would Phaidra commit suicide and frame Hippolytus just because she hated him as a bastard son and a reminder of Theseus' adultery? Could Hippolytus argue that only women are vulnerable to desire? Certainly not. Instead, Phaidra's dead body serves as unassailable proof. At the end of the accusation, Theseus demands that Hippolytus leave Troizen and forbids him from going Athens. His own reputation, Theseus says, depends on enforcing punishment.

These words begin what can be seen as a kind of courtroom debate between Theseus and Hippolytus. The question is whether there is enough proof that Hippolytus raped Phaidra. Theseus thinks he knows for sure, because everything makes perfect sense to him: Phaidra would not kill herself just to set Hippolytus up, he says, without recognizing that Phaidra might have had her own secrets to hide. And no man is free from sexual desire, Theseus reasons, and so it makes good sense that Hippolytus would give in. Also note that Theseus's response, like Phaidra's suicide, is motivated by a consideration of his own reputation: he believes that he will only be seen as a strong ruler if he acts strongly.

The Koryphaios moans that everything is lost. Then, Hippolytus embarks on a long defense. He begins by saying that he is ill-suited for public debate and criminal trial, but will try nevertheless. As his central defense, he describes his own character. Theseus ought to know, he says, that he has always been honest, respected the gods, and kept a circle of upstanding friends. Nor has he ever had any sexual relationship with a woman, and he even avoids descriptions and pictures of sex, preferring a "calm and pure" inner life. Since he sees that this sort of talk isn't convincing Theseus, he makes further points: that Phaidra was not so attractive as to motivate such a crime, and that it would have been absurd to commit the crime as a political move, since Hippolytus prefers athletic competition and relaxation to political life.

Hippolytus' main defense rests on his judgment of his own character. He claims to be the person least likely to commit such a crime, being so committed to his good character and chastity, and always being surrounded by upstanding friends. When he sees that Phaidra's suicide has caused Theseus to think the very worst about him, he changes his strategy. But still, he reveals how highly he thinks of himself, as if his self-proclaimed virginity alone would stand up against the weight of evidence against him.

As he finishes his defense, Hippolytus wishes that some witness had seen his behavior of the previous hours, or that Phaidra had not yet died. He swears to Zeus that he never touched Phaidra, nor even thought of it. But in the end, he admits that he is not allowed to say what drove Phaidra to kill herself, even though it would help clear the charge, referencing his oath to the nurse. The Koryphaios comments that Hippolytus' swearing to Zeus feels convincing. Nonetheless, it does not move Theseus.

Just like the oaths that prevent him and the Koryphaios from explaining what they know, Hippolytus' swearing to Zeus that he did not touch Phaidra seems like it could convince Theseus. But Theseus is so held by Phaidra's dead body and the wax note (and perhaps his need to act powerfully to maintain his reputation) that he is utterly unreceptive to any other explanation.

After their two long speeches, Theseus and Hippolytus continue to debate in a more rapid-fire style. When Hippolytus says that Theseus should have him killed, not merely exiled, Theseus promises that his exile, far from any familiar place or person, will be more excruciating than death. When Hippolytus urges Theseus to wait while time clears up the facts of the case, Theseus says that his hatred is so great, he would drive Hippolytus past the edge of the world if he could. And when Hippolytus asks for a fairer trial, Theseus says that the tablet provides proof enough. To himself, Hippolytus considers breaking his oath of silence in order to save his own life. But he cannot bring himself to break the oath, and doubts that it would persuade Theseus if he did so.

These represent Hippolytus' last attempts to save himself, and he tries a number of methods that show his great sadness and despair. The audience, meanwhile, knows that Hippolytus is speaking not just reasonably but is so honorable that he refuses even to break his oath of silence to save his own life. But Theseus is trapped in a fate spun by both Aphrodite and Phaidra.. Later on, Artemis will say that Theseus should have held a fair trial, with wise, impartial witnesses, rather than act immediately on his anger. This suggests the play's position that the truth can only prevail when people are willing to let time and fair judgment sort it out.

Growing impatient, Theseus shouts and commands Hippolytus to leave at once. When Hippolytus complains that nobody will accept him after rumors of his crime spreads, Theseus replies that he will find welcome company among other sexual predators, a remark that cuts Hippolytus deeply. Hippolytus calls on the house itself as a witness, but Theseus says that such a crime needs no witness at all to confirm its truth. At last, Theseus orders Hippolytus gone. As Hippolytus exits, he utters a goodbye prayer to Artemis and asks his friends to accompany him to the edge of the country.

Now it is Hippolytus's turn to worry about his reputation, as a man believed to have raped his stepmother would not be able to find a home among other people. Reputation is everything; those without it can have no home. Yet even in his despair Hippolytus finds refuge of a sort with Artemis and his friends in the hunt, the things that matter to him most of all.

LINES 1728-2208

While Hippolytus' fate befalls him offstage, the chorus sings another ode. They reflect on what the loss of Hippolytus means to them and the city of Troizen. No longer, they say, will he enjoy hunting with his chariot, playing his lyre, or making wreaths for Artemis, and the maidens of Troizen will miss the games in which they struggled to keep up with him. Their ode ends in frustration towards the gods, who inflicted such pain on such an innocent man.

Here, the chorus singers seem to suggest that they themselves enjoyed Hippolytus' presence in the city, and they seem to suggest that they played light-hearted amorous games when they chased him (this would then be a case of "acceptable" female desire). They do not consider or recognize the possibility that Hippolytus has been arrogant.

A messenger enters, looking for Theseus, and reports that Hippolytus has died. When he learns that his own curse killed his son, Theseus seems pleasantly surprised. The messenger then narrates the remarkable story of Hippolytus' death. A large group of friends, he says, stood with Hippolytus on the shore when a man told them that Hippolytus had to leave. When Hippolytus mounted his horse and began to ride, a huge earthquake, and then a massive wave, terrified the large group. Then a bull emerged from the wave and chased Hippolytus' chariot. Hippolytus skillfully maneuvered his horses to avoid it, but the powerful bull steered the chariot into a cliff, causing it to flip. Then the frenzied horses dragged Hippolytus, caught in the reins, along the ground. When Hippolytus freed himself, his friends ran to him, but he was barely breathing.

Again, Greek tragedies rarely show characters dying onstage, and the playwright relies on a messenger to bring the vivid, climactic death of the main character back to Troizen and the audience. The situation highlights the importance of place – Hippolytus died far away, on the shore, while Phaidra died just behind the palace doors. In such a distant place, strange natural and supernatural events are more likely to occur. Note also how this scene captures the difference in power between the gods and mortals – Hippolytus is extremely skilled, but it doesn't matter in the face of the might of the gods.

The Koryphaios recognizes Hippolytus's end as a cruel fate, but Theseus feels satisfied with the punishment, even though he feels ashamed at celebrating the death of his son. Theseus orders that the dying Hippolytus be brought to him, so that he, Theseus, might use Hippolytus's death as proof that Hippolytus committed the crime.

Theseus ascribes to a kind of circular logic, in which he interprets Poseidon carrying out Theseus's curse as proving Hippolytus guilty, and he wants in fact to use Hippolytus's death to prove Hippolytus's guilt to Hippolytus! Note though how Theseus's quick anger has now put him, too, into a shameful familial situation, in which he actively wanting his own son to die.

When the messenger exits, the chorus sings a brief song to Aphrodite, recognizing her power over all things. Then Artemis, high above the stage, appears suddenly. The goddess wastes no time telling the truth: Phaidra had a criminal desire for Hippolytus, who nobly and honorably rejected the nurse's advances on Phaidra's behalf, and Phaidra then resolved to frame Hippolytus and die in order to protect her honor.

Since the appearance of Aphrodite at the beginning of the play, the audience may have been waiting for the appearance of Artemis. Finally Theseus learns the truth, even though it is too late. Theseus' recognition that he killed his innocent son is a major climax of the play.

When Theseus cries out in anguish, Artemis continues to accuse him. Instead of conducting an investigation with a level head, she says, Theseus rashly used one of his three curses to kill his own son, a binding agreement with the gods and not a proof of Hippolytus' guilt. When Theseus now wishes for death, Artemis offers some condolence, revealing that it was Aphrodite who devised the entire plot, and Theseus had no choice but to believe the accusation of the dead Phaidra. Because of a rule enforced by Zeus that no god can intervene with another, Artemis herself could do nothing to stop it, even though she deeply loved Hippolytus.

Artemis confirms to Theseus what Hippolytus had tried to tell him before: that even when the evidence seems utterly clear, one should resort to a fair trial with impartial, wise judges in order to determine the truth. Yet, at the same time, Artemis confirms that no such impartiality or fairness exists: the gods have absolute power over the world of men, and not even other gods can interfere with one god bent on vengeance. Since Aphrodite wanted to punish Hippolytus, there could be no other outcome. So Theseus both acted improperly, and had been set up by the Aphrodite to ensure he acted improperly so that Hippolytus would end up dead.

Hippolytus' friends drag him onto the stage, where he cries out in pain and wishes for death. When he turns to Theseus, he invokes an unspecified ancestral crime as the reason for his suffering. Artemis speaks to him, praising his "noble generous mind", and Hippolytus feels moved to hear her voice. Both father and son agree that Aphrodite has caused the ruin of the entire house, and Hippolytus empathizes with Theseus, telling him that his actions, however cruel, were manipulated by the gods.

Once again a character – this time Hippolytus – blames past familial crimes for causing present damage. When Hippolytus hears Artemis speak, it is a moving religious experience for him, however close he is to death. His devotion to her has been genuine. In recognizing the degree to which Theseus's errors were the product of Aphrodite's manipulation, Hippolytus seems to recognize the double edge of fate: that it is both a product of an individual's actions and out of that individual's control.

Artemis promises to take revenge on Aphrodite by shooting one of Aphrodite's most beloved mortals with an arrow. Meanwhile, to redeem the family's suffering, she vows to establish a ceremony by which maiden women of Athens clip their hair and sing songs to Hippolytus just before marriage. In music, she says, his reputation will improve. Before exiting, she reminds Hippolytus that Theseus was not to blame, and Hippolytus says a loving goodbye to everyone. Hippolytus, now on the brink of dying, swears forgiveness to Theseus by Artemis herself, so that the guilt of having killed Hippolytus does not pursue Theseus. When Hippolytus finally dies, Theseus, in his last words, curses Aphrodite.

Artemis shows that even though one god has the ability to carry out his or her will as if it were fate, the gods can still take revenge on one another—they just do so sequentially, one after the other, rather than directly against each other. In this case, Artemis establishes a custom (which, in fact, was practiced by young women in Athens during Euripides's life, linking together the different places and times of the setting of the play and the city and time in which it was first performed) which redeems the reputation of Hippolytus that Aphrodite had ruined, and turns Theseus against Aphrodite. Hippolytus's forgiveness of Theseus ensures that this tragic event does not end up as the sort of familial crime that reverberates down through history, affecting their descendants even as they blamed past events in their families as affecting them.

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