THE FEAR OF FORBIDDEN LOVE

Edith Hall looks at how the *Phaedra* myth has been interpreted and reinterpreted across the centuries

Phaedra has riveted audiences' attention for two and a half millennia. Her story has informed movies including Jules Dassin's *Phaedra*, starring Melina Mercouri (1962), Mike Nichols' *The Graduate* (1967) and Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite* (1995). The opera house has heard Jean Rameau's *Hippolyte et Aricie* (1733) and pieces entitled *Phaedra* by both Benjamin Britten (1975) and Hans Werner Henze (2007). But *Phaedra*'s place in the performance canon had long been secured by three masterpieces of Greek, Roman and French tragic dramaturgy: Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Seneca's *Phaedra* and Racine's *Phèdre*. They are all still performed. The lonely queen has been played by countless stars: Sarah Bernhardt, Glenda Jackson, Diana Rigg, Isabelle Huppert, Janet Suzman and Helen Mirren.

Euripides won the Athenian drama competition in 428 BCE with a group of plays including *Hippolytus*. It had everything the ancient audience required: emotive evocation of forbidden love, the grief of suicide survivors, a rich and powerful family in crisis and exquisite poetry. But Sophocles also wrote a *Phaedra* which has not survived, and *Hippolytus* was Euripides' second attempt at staging the same story. His previous *Hippolytus Veiled* had failed to win because its portrayal of Phaedra as a malicious woman driven by illegitimate sexual desire for her stepson had been deemed so shocking. That was why Euripides made Phaedra more sympathetic second time around. She commits suicide to save her own sons' reputation; although framing Hippolytus in her suicide note for rape was appalling, this gentle Phaedra explains her position eloquently to the audience, including her horror at Hippolytus' extreme misogyny.

Euripides' more morally nuanced second *Hippolytus* became an instant classic, visually illustrated in numerous frescos and mosaics

Left: Marie Bell rehearsing *Phaedra*, October 1959
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THE LONELY QUEEN HAS BEEN PLAYED BY COUNTLESS STARS

across the Mediterranean world. Nearly 500 years later, the Spanish philosopher Seneca the Younger, tutor and subsequently advisor to the Emperor Nero, before being 'invited' by the tyrant to take his own life in 65 CE, adapted Euripides' play into a Latin tragedy, *Phaedra*. Seneca's heroine is a serious, reflective character. She knows that her desire, if acted on, will have wholly immoral consequences, yet she is unable to suppress it. In Seneca it is Phaedra, not her old nurse, who informs Hippolytus of her feelings for him; Seneca's Phaedra commits suicide out of guilt at his death, after attempting to clear his name, rather than out of terror and shame. There is new emphasis in Seneca on Phaedra's status as stepmother to Hippolytus, since stepmothers were a particular target of Roman misogyny. Yet the step-relationship surely has a wider application. The 'Phaedra Complex' was identified in 1969 by the influential psychiatrist Alfred A Messer, as any eroticised feelings of any step-parent, regardless of gender, towards a step-child.

The psychic conflict between Phaedra's rational faculty and her passion, expressed in Seneca's violent imagery of fire, hunting and enslavement, is an expression of Stoic philosophy's binary model of the soul. But it speaks loud to anyone who has ever fought infatuation or addiction. Seneca's Phaedra is also more political than Euripides'; she regrets that her erotic preoccupation keeps her away from her duties as Queen of Athens, and thus damages the wider community.

Seneca continued to be read across the Middle Ages, when his moral essays were valued. His *Phaedra* had been performed in Latin at the Palais de Cardinal Saint Georges in France as early as 1474 and was imitated in

Robert Garnier's humanist tragedy *Hippolyte* (1573). *Phaedra* influenced Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. 'No author exercised a wider or deeper influence upon the Elizabethan mind', wrote T S Eliot of Seneca. Euripides' play, on the other hand, was not even translated into English until 1781.

But in France, the acclaim that greeted the resonant verse, emotional vicissitudes and spectacular effects of Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), further complicated by the innovation of Hippolyte's love affair with Aricie, guaranteed this ancient myth a place in the professional theatre repertoire for ever. Racine was an excellent classical scholar who drew on both Euripides and Seneca. On the English stage, the story was first enacted in Edmund Smith's Racinian *Phaedra* and *Hippolitus* (1707), which gallantly exculpated Phaedra and her nurse altogether. The lie about Hippolytus raping Phaedra is invented by a male courtier who is in love with Phaedra.

THE CONTINGENT SOCIAL CONTEXT OF EVERY PRODUCTION OR ADAPTATION ALTERS THE INTERPRETATION.

The Racinian play and imitations like Smith's were preferred in the 18th–19th centuries; Euripides' Greek play was never performed in modernity until Gilbert Murray's verse translation was directed by Harley Granville Barker in 1904 at London's New Century Theatre. The focus on the suppression of women's sexuality under patriarchy was, in those suffragette times, central. Seneca, meanwhile, fell out of fashion from the Restoration until relatively recently, when Ted Hughes' version of the Roman poet's *Oedipus* (1968) at the National Theatre drew attention to what Hughes called the 'very barbaric, very raw' nature of Senecan psychology; this chimed with the daring, minimalist theatrical sensibilities of its decade. It was the Senecan *Phaedra* that dominated Tony Harrison's anticolonial *Phaedra Britannica*, also at the National Theatre just seven years later, and Sarah Kane's shocking *Phaedra's Love* (1996), although Hughes himself translated the *Phèdre* of Racine, a version staged at the National Theatre in 2009.

The motif of a queen poleaxed by passion for a young man resident in her husband's palace is manifested in mythologies worldwide, for example in the biblical story of Potiphar's wife and Joseph. But this ancient story's permanent status in the repertoire has been maintained by the classical versions. Of course, the contingent social context of every production or adaptation alters the interpretation. In Euripides' Athens, Phaedra would have been perceived as scarcely older than Hippolytus, since she had married the much older Theseus when his son by Hippolyta was already reaching manhood: such large age gaps between husbands and wives, combined with high perinatal mortality, frequently led to such potentially explosive situations.

Left: Leon Bakst's set design for a production of *Phèdre* by Jean Racine, 1923. Photograph: Bridgeman Images

Right: Hippolytus and Phaedra, 3rd century AD Roman floor mosaic, House of Dionysus, Paphos, Cyprus. Photograph Hippolytus and Phaedra, 3rd century AD Roman floor mosaic, House of Dionysus. Photograph: Sonia Halliday Photographs / Bridgeman Images

In 1911, the women's rights activist Julia Ward Howe's Freudian *Hippolytus* in Boston explained Phaedra's actions as a natural reaction to women's oppression. Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) contextualises the sexually charged tragedy within the rural poverty of a New England farmhouse at the dawn of the Depression. Stevie Smith's poem 'Phèdre' was composed in the early 1960s after watching a production of Racine's tragedy starring Marie Bell, but Smith fantasises about a plot reconfiguration in which Phaedra and Hippolytus happily marry; this ends the curse on Phaedra's Cretan birth family whereby its female members were congenital sexual deviants (her mother Pasiphae infamously mated with a bull and gave birth to the Minotaur). In 1990, Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry emphasised the damage done to the Indian psyche by British imperialism in her Punjabi *Fida* (1990). She wanted to use the parallel legend of Loona, the vindictive queen who loves her chaste stepson Puran Bhagat; her mistakes are caused by mental illness and confusion rather than immorality.

But the moral heart of the story, which makes it so perennially relevant, transcends all such cultural variations: namely, the incendiary potential of suppressed sexual desire to cause unlimited damage not only to individuals but to their entire family and community. Well might we pray, with the chorus of Euripides' *Hippolytus*,

> Eros, Eros, you drip desire over our eyes,
> bringing sweet pleasure to those you
> make war on;
> may you never come into my life in a
> harmful way,
> but in appropriate degree and harmony!
> The shafts of neither fire nor the stars
> are as powerful as those sent from the hands
> of Eros, child of Aphrodite

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