

December 2022

Phaedra: The Influence and History of a Dramaturgical Mystery

Kierstan K. Conway
Cleveland State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr>



Part of the [Acting Commons](#), [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), [Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons](#), and the [Theatre History Commons](#)

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation

Conway, Kierstan K.. "Phaedra: The Influence and History of a Dramaturgical Mystery." *The Downtown Review*. Vol. 9. Iss. 1 (2022) .

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/tdr/vol9/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Downtown Review by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.

Phaedra: The Influence and History of a Dramaturgical Mystery

Questions and mysteries lurk throughout theatre history and influence the staging of modern-day productions. Taking a dramaturgical stance on such issues requires evaluating different arguments and theories, as well as making sense of all possibilities. Many believed Seneca's *Phaedra* to be a Roman closet drama, but scholars have found evidence throughout the years to suggest otherwise. By observing Seneca's text, comparing the source material (*Hippolytus* by Euripides), determining its context within the Roman theatre scene, and analyzing its effect on modern productions (*Phaedra's Love* by Sarah Kane), it becomes clear that Seneca wrote *Phaedra* intending to perform it utilizing conventions of Ancient Roman Theatre. Seneca's objective remains a framework relevant and adaptable to contemporary theatre.

In Seneca's *Phaedra*, Hippolytus, son of King Theseus, goes on a boar hunt while his stepmother Phaedra discusses her forbidden love for him in her Athenian palace. She speaks about her desire to commit suicide with her Nurse, who urges her not to. Phaedra happens upon Hippolytus in the forest and admits her desire for him, and he runs away repulsed. Phaedra then tells her husband, Theseus, who has returned from an impossible quest, that Hippolytus raped her. Theseus discovers the truth after hearing about the brutal death of his son, and Phaedra kills herself (Seneca).

Author of *Phaedra*, Seneca the Younger, was born between 5-1 BCE in Cordoba, modern-day Spain. Educated in Rome from a young age, Seneca developed a reputation as an orator, but his speeches were often "all style and no substance" (Smith ix). His brilliance as a rhetorician was a cause of jealousy, and Caligula ordered his execution. However, Caligula's mistress saved his life by using her husband's anger to accuse Seneca of adultery with one of her potential political rivals, having him exiled instead.

Later on, the fourth wife of Claudius, Agrippa, requested he return to Rome and become the tutor of her son Nero--who appointed Seneca as his royal advisor after becoming emperor via matricide. History remembers Seneca for his contributions to the Stoicism philosophical movement of his time, remarking on the importance of human psychology in many facets of life. Unfortunately, Seneca, continuing his trend of upsetting powerful emperors, was falsely connected to an assassination plot and ordered suicide by his former student Nero.

Between exiles, education, and executions, Seneca wrote at least eight tragedies. Despite the optimistic nature of his philosophical school of thought, Seneca's plays were bleak, violent, and gruesome. The main source of contention regarding the plays, is whether they were staged in Rome or only intended as literature. According to theatre historian Scott Smith, German poet Karl Wilhelm Freidrich Schlegel wrote that Seneca's tragedies were "nothing more than rhetorical exercises" (xx). Nevertheless, many historians still urge that Seneca's

plays allude to his wishes to have them staged eventually.

The conventions of Roman theatre demonstrate that Seneca's texts allude to their intention of being staged. The Romans encountered the Greeks during the First Punic War of 264-241 BCE, and they brought back much of their culture, including the conventions of theatre. Many dramatists, including Seneca, saw their stories and plays as fascinating source material to reframe, rework, and ameliorate performance--frequently including much more gore and violence and less divine intervention than their predecessors.

The acting company, known as a *grex*, often formed rivalries against others in the area, competing for popularity. Their playing spaces were non-permanent structures throughout the city. *Grex* were under close surveillance by the government, which meant playwrights had to be careful how they expressed their opinions onstage. Historians use staging conventions to hypothesize how an original production of Seneca's *Phaedra* might have looked. They use historical relativity and clues within the text to demonstrate that Seneca intended to stage his plays.

During the 1st century CE, performers assigned a fictional identity to a physical place. The *scaenae frons*, a permanent architectural background of Roman theatres, stayed constant visually throughout the play. The only way the audience could follow the movement from one location to the other was through the action and words of the actors. In *Phaedra*, Seneca pays special attention to need, and consistency in the script explains which doors in the theatre led to specific places in the world. The possibility of how these doors functioned in *Phaedra* is evidenced in the transition from Hippolytus's hunt in Act I into a conversation between Phaedra and her Nurse about him. Modern translators, such as Scott Smith, add in where they believe characters would exit, for example, "*Hippolytus exits. Enter Phaedra and her Nurse*" (109). However, these directions are missing from the original text, which would have confused audiences had they only attended a reading of the play. In this example, without the stage directions clearly pointed out, the audience would not know Hippolytus exits the scene. Thus, from their point of view, he is part of the conversation that follows and references him. It is then more likely that Seneca planned to give his text to an acting company who could use context clues and determine that one party must exit while the others enter, giving a visual interpretation of the movement from one location to another. If he only intended on a reading, the original text would have included information about character's exits and entrances.

Furthermore, no chorus or other textual transition separates these two different scenes. If Seneca delivered the piece as an oratory, it would be impossible to distinguish where the new scene is and who is participating in the action. Had this ever been successfully staged, it is likely that the actor playing Hippolytus may have exited stage right to show his hunt continued further into the

forest. Meanwhile, Phaedra and her Nurse may have entered from stage left to show their exit from the palace, and the audience would know they were now in a new place with new characters.

Regarding performers, Seneca seemingly follows the three-actor tragic rule. Daniel Richter, a dramaturg, mapped out how Seneca achieves this in *Phaedra*. The three roles mean the *protagonist* plays Phaedra, the *deuteragonist* plays Hippolytus/Theseus, and the *tritagonist* plays the Nurse/messenger. Seneca also implies a need for *personae mutae* or extras who do not speak during dramatic action, a popular convention used during his lifetime. Servants especially are given instructions once Phaedra asks the *famulae* (extras played by females) to dress her. Later, she demands the *famuli* (all male) to protect her (Sutton).

Hippolytus also uses the *famuli* as he commences the play with instructions for the hunt to come. He speaks first to the group as a whole: “Go surround the shady woods” and “Spread out and nimbly search the plain” (107). Hippolytus then divides the group and gives them individual tasks: “You, this way,” “You, to the left,” and “You, off to rough Acharnae” (107), demonstrating a need for multiple actors to be on stage and follow off into different directions. Seneca chooses to address a group, which he could have chosen to direct to the audience like many Roman plays of the time. However, having Hippolytus give specific commands to different people shows a desire for action on stage. He would have seen other playwrights using the *personae mutae* and thus replicated the convention. Though Seneca could have meant the text solely for reading, the specificity put into following dramatic conventions of characters makes it highly unlikely he did not expect the possibility of staging.

Seneca also wrote with much onstage violence, which appealed to many Romans of his time. For an audience accustomed to watching prisoners murdered violently, Seneca made room for blood and gruesome death on stage in his plays. The first recorded use of blood onstage was during the reign of Caligula, so Seneca would have witnessed this early in his career (Sutton). It would not be too far out of a historical frame of reference to think Seneca would write a play with an onstage suicide to utilize the methods he saw interested audiences. He intentionally walked outside the optimistic ideas prominent in his philosophical school of thought to entertain contemporary spectators who preferred blood and gore.

Seneca wrote a story that demonstrated his skills in rhetoric, which can be seen at times as potentially too lengthy for performance, but that would fit into the dramatic conventions of the time. He sacrificed his philosophy to make a work that would please the people, knowing the competitive nature of theatres. Though it is possible he never succeeded, it is hard to argue that he did not at least intend to have *Phaedra* performed.

Examining the textual similarities and differences between the original play, Euripides's *Hippolytus* (429 BCE) and *Phaedra* offers more evidence that Seneca reworked the play to appeal to a contemporary audience in the performance.

Euripides, much like Seneca, was the last successful tragedian of his era. His plays headed away from the idea of fate prominent in the works of his predecessors. The Gods still played a large part in his plays, but not as much as they had in the works of earlier Greek playwrights such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, as he focused more on ordinary humanity than they did.

During Euripides's lifetime, the Greeks used theatre as a civic, religious event for the public. The theatre was a place of free political expression, and many playwrights were not inclined to shy away from expressing the flaws of politicians in their works. Additionally, religion was centralized, and the Gods mentioned in the play were often worshiped by all, so it followed that the plays included divine intervention.

On the other hand, Roman theatre was not a yearly, civic, or religious event. Instead, theatre companies often performed in temporary structures and at random times throughout the year, not often associated with a religious festival or holiday. Moreover, the governments of Seneca's time consisted of all-controlling emperors who did not take kindly to feedback. Therefore, writers were more careful to base their plays on the generalized human experience instead of writing politically charged works as the Greeks had.

The opening scene in each play provides an example of these fundamental cultural differences. *Hippolytus* begins with Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, explaining her plan to influence the play's events. She sets up the play lamenting, "Yet, seeing he hath offended, I this day/Shall smite Hippolytus" (Euripides), explaining that she will make his life miserable because she feels ignored by him. In contrast, Seneca begins *Phaedra* with Hippolytus ordering his huntsmen to begin the hunt: "The dogs have raised their noisy howls. I'm called into the woods" (109). This passage establishes Hippolytus's nature as a hunter, which becomes an important theme in the play.

The two playwrights commence their plays by setting up a theme that will prove central to the plot. Euripides shows Aphrodite in her jealousy, cursing Hippolytus, which shows the folly of the Gods and the guilt placed on the play's eponymous character. The Greek audiences were accustomed to these dramatic conventions and thus enjoyed them in production. Contrastingly, Seneca sets up the play to show Hippolytus as a hunter driven by his desire to go into the forest and hunt. The rest of the play explores his titular character driven to her end by desire, which would have been more in line with the secular performances of Seneca's time.

Another main difference between the two plays is that crime and punishment in Senecan tragedies are concepts absent in their Greek inspirations. The Roman empire had strictly enforced laws with extremely violent consequences, so theatre benefitted from reflecting this societal convention. One such law was that step-maternal incest was forbidden. The two plays involve a stepmother having desires for her stepson, but Seneca blatantly uses the term

stepmother in his play while Euripides does not.

Some claim that Euripides makes *Phaedra* a victim. However, scholars like Hannah Roisman believe that “*Phaedra* is not a virtuous woman who struggles hard to withstand the power of eros, but rather a shrewd and manipulative woman” (73). Even if this is true, the opening soliloquy proves that Aphrodite interferes, making her manipulative and vile to pursue Hippolytus and thus leading to his downfall. Furthermore, he does not paint *Phaedra* as the “cruel stepmother [who]succumb[s] to Love” (117) as Seneca does. Instead, Roisman claims that Seneca paints her as a woman who does not want to fall into infidelity, but her innermost desires push her to pursue her stepson.

The difference in character in the two plays also leads to a different dynamic between *Phaedra* and her Nurse. Euripides, playing with the conventions of cathartic and emotional theatre contemporary to his time, has the Nurse as a doting and woeful character. She says to *Phaedra*, “Woe, woe to me for this thy bitter bane/surely the food man feeds upon is pain” (Euripides). The Nurse here functions to comfort her mistress and present *Phaedra* as an innocent victim of Aphrodite’s wrath (who sees her as a necessary sacrifice for her plan). On the other hand, Seneca, writing his plays with deep rhetoric that traipses around offending politicians, has the Nurse as a foil to *Phaedra*. She explains that *Phaedra* is only suffering because she allows herself to suffer. The Nurse urges, “Part of healing is wanting to be healed” (114).

Seneca makes *Phaedra* the villain when Euripides has her victimized, aligning with Roman beliefs. Seneca also adds an idea about heredity being the cause of moral suffering. *Phaedra* blames her ill-fated love as a condition passed down from her mother, Persiphae, doomed to love a beast. The Romans, led by emperors, fixated on the importance of heredity and older generations making someone who they are (meaning Seneca could have been deceptively criticizing the violence of the current emperor Nero as a connection to his violent father, Claudius). Had he written this work only for a small audience, he would not have felt a need to clothe his political ideology in rhetoric. It is more likely that he added ideas such as heredity passing shameful desires for public performance to speak his mind, preventing him from conviction by senators attending the performance.

The differences between the source material and final product provide further evidence of staging and demonstrate the historical conventions of Roman theatre that Seneca employed in the play. However, the influence and performability of Seneca’s *Phaedra* do not rest solely in the past. For example, the dense passages of rhetoric in the original play may not be accessible to modern audiences. Many playwrights do, however, use the writing of Seneca to influence their take on the story; for example, Sarah Kane wrote *Phaedra’s Love* in 1996, a darker and more twisted modern take on Seneca’s play. Kane’s play opens with prince Hippolytus engaging in his unhealthy daily routine and leads to his

stepmother Phaedra consulting a doctor about his depressive condition. Phaedra then speaks to her daughter Strophe and reveals she is in love with her stepson while her daughter urges her to move on. Phaedra then performs oral sex on Hippolytus, who remains disinterested, leading her to commit suicide and convict him of rape. Strophe, who had also had a sexual past with Hippolytus and her stepfather Theseus, urges him to plead his innocence, but he refuses. Theseus, disguised, incites a mob to kill his son, while Strophe (also disguised) tries to convince them not to. Finally, Theseus rapes her, kills her, disembowels his son, and kills himself.

Though the source material was already quite graphic, Kane's adaptation furthers the sexual material and escalates the nature of the violence. She replaces the Nurse's character with Strophe, Phaedra's daughter, which creates an even more complicated family dynamic and adds more to the incestuous relationships within the family. The interrelatedness exposes the complicated nature of bloodlines and the corruption that lurks within the royal family. The play refers to the public adoring the family (presents given to Hippolytus, women eager to sleep with the unattractive prince, and public outrage at Phaedra's death). However, it exposes that the outward show is merely a facade of what the royalty wants people to see. Kane was English, and the British royal family has always been the center of many conspiracies while still trying to maintain a pleasant outward appearance. Just as Seneca did with his play, Kane uses her story to expose the desires and conditions of humankind that lead people, especially royalty, to commit horrendous crimes. She furthers Seneca's lowered emphasis on the importance of God by inserting a nihilistic perspective from Hippolytus and a critique of the hypocrisy within the church. Hippolytus says, "There is no God. There is. No God" (94), believing his repentance for his sins means nothing, as he does not believe there is anyone to repent to. Furthermore, he tells the Priest after he has performed oral sex on him, "Go. Confess. Before you burn" (97), demonstrating that those in the church find it acceptable to sin so long as they repent afterward.

Kane has more flexibility than Seneca in writing politically charged work that exposes those in politics to moral corruption since there is now more freedom of speech. However, she does not hold back in her modern-day take on the story to show the evils that can happen behind closed doors and the hypocrisy used to hide them. Kane wrote *Phaedra's Love* with a modern audience in mind: the syntax of the dialogue is more succinct and choppy stylistically to represent everyday speech. Unfortunately, most contemporary audiences are quickly bored by long passages of rhetorical text that Seneca was fond of. A modern production requires more natural dialogue and a more action-driven plot.

Modern productions of Seneca's *Phaedra* benefit from rewriting that appeals to a current audience. The elements of the story remain shocking and violent (which is still as appealing in its shock factor as it was in Rome), but playwrights must rework them in a way that will not lose the audience, and that

relates to modern-day issues. People always have been (and continue to be) victims of their immoral desires. Therefore, the story does much to caution and expose a common wrong of humankind prevalent in Ancient Rome and persisting today.

Two thousand years ago, Seneca wrote his play *Phaedra* inspired by the play *Hippolyte* by Euripides. He modeled his story based on his beliefs in stoicism and contemporary social and dramatic conventions. Many debate whether the plays were ever staged, but textual evidence suggests that Seneca intended live performances of his plays. The story of Phaedra remains impactful now, and Sarah Kane wrote *Phaedra's Love* using modern-day conventions to keep the story relevant. Theatre history leaves us with many questions that are impossible to answer; however, it is evident that human beings' creative nature remains the same. We all have a story we need to tell, and we use the stories from the past to do it.

References

- Boyle, Anthony J. *Roman Tragedy*. Routledge, 2006.
- Davis, P. J., "Vindicat Omnes Natvra Sibi: A Reading of Seneca's *Phaedra*." *Seneca Tragicus*, edited by A. J. Boyle, Aureal Publications, Australia, 1983, pp. 114-127.
- Euripides. *Hippolytus*. Translated by Gilbert Murray, The Project Gutenberg, 2013.
- Gardner, Lyn. "Phaedra's Love." *The Guardian*, 31 October 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2005/oct/31/theatre.art>. Acc. 3 April 2022.
- Kane, Sarah. *Phaedra's Love*. Methuen Publishing, London, 2001.
- McAuley, Miréad. "Specters of Medea: The Rhetoric of Stepmotherhood and Motherhood in Seneca's Phaedra." *Helios*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2012, pp. 37-72.
- "Phaedra's Love, Arcola - review." *Evening Standard*, 05 October 2011, <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/phaedra-s-love-arcola-review-7426949.html>. Acc. 3 April 2022.
- Roisman, Hannah M., "A New Look At Seneca's *Phaedra*." *Seneca in Performance*, edited by George W. M. Harrison, Duckworth, London, 2000, pp. 73-87.
- Segal, Charles. *Language and Desire in Seneca's Phaedra*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986.
- Seneca. *Phaedra*. Translated by R. Scott Smith, Penguin Classics, 2011.
- Smith, R. Scott. Introduction. *Seneca: Phaedra and Other Plays*. Penguin Classics, 2011, pp. ix-xxv.
- Sutton, Dana Ferrin. *Seneca On the Stage*. Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1986.