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A NEW READING OF THE *HIPPOLYTUS.*

THE *Hippolytus* is generally ranked as one of the finest, if not the finest, of Euripides' plays; standing on its own merits as an early but excellent example of Romantic drama, it has recently obtained a considerable success on the stage at Manchester, where those who saw it played, many of whom were ignorant of Greek and quite free from that prejudice in favour of classical form which may be thought to warp the scholar's judgment, were deeply impressed by its dramatic power.

The motives of the play are so complex that after reading it or seeing it acted we are left in total bewilderment as to where the blame of the tragedy really lies, or rather, how it should be apportioned. Yet no critic hitherto has discovered that there is a riddle underlying it, or seen any trace of a teaching, intelligible only to the initiated, different from that lesson which seems to be enforced—that those who disobey the world's moral laws must be the cause of misery and ruin to themselves and others. But, as the lightning strikes the mountain-summits, it is probable that, sooner or later, modern critics will fall upon this masterpiece, and we may perhaps forestall them by pointing out some of the inconsistencies of the play.

First, however, we must say what we can on behalf of the author who is on trial. According to tradition, the *Hippolytus* in its extant form is the second play by our poet on the same subject, or rather, perhaps a revision of the original form. From the fragments of the older play,[1] we are led to believe that Phaedra herself accused Hippolytus to Theseus, and it is generally supposed that she was there represented as declaring her passion to Hippolytus in person.[2]

With the story in this form, there could be little to raise Phaedra above the level of Stheneboea, with whom she is ranked by Aristophanes.[3] As the slighted Anteia cried in anger to Proetus, demanding the death of Bellerophon, so in all probability Phaedra acted according to epic tradition. The introduction of the nurse and the story of the δέλτος may well be refinements devised by Euripides himself; and after reading the first half of the play no one can fail to realize how vastly Euripides has improved on the familiar story of the gross type.

The character of Phaedra, as conceived by Euripides, explains her reasons for suicide. She loves passionately, but when her love, declared against her will, is slighted, the shame of outraged pride is the dominant motive. She is shamed and enraged not so much by the coldness of Hippolytus as by the false and undignified position in which the nurse's officiousness has placed her. The evil inclinations against which she has been struggling are, when revealed, as sinful to her mind as the deed of evil would have been. Remorse prompts her to kill herself, for she will not bring shame on her royal lineage, nor face Theseus with the consciousness of guilt, for the sake of saving one life.[4]

To what life is she referring? If it were not for the sequel, we should say that she means her own, for suicide is the thought uppermost in her mind. We have had, so far, little indication of her love having suddenly changed into hate so violent that she is eager to sacrifice the beloved. She may wish to wring his bosom, to move him at last to pity, if not to a tenderer feeling, by the contemplation of her own violent end; but we can hardly yet believe that she wishes to bring him to a cruel death. Indeed her first utterance after listening to his reproaches is ἐτύχομεν δίκας[5]—'we have met with justice.' So her subsequent treachery shocks us the more as it is unexpected.

Again, let us consider the stage-situation. Theseus is abroad; Hippolytus has announced his intention of leaving the palace until his father returns; and Phaedra believes that he will then break his oath and tell Theseus all. If Hippolytus is likely to break his oath, the Chorus may well break theirs, and such a weight of evidence will overpower any accusation on her part, especially as Hippolytus

[1] *Poetae Scenici* (Dindorf), 442, 443.
[2] *See* Introd. to Mahaffy and Bury's Edn.
[3] *Frogs*, 1043.
[4] *Hippolytus*, 719–722.
[5] *Hipp.* 672.

will have told his story first. Moreover, there is little chance of any such message as she actually leaves behind her reaching Theseus. He, as already noted, is abroad; Hippolytus is near at hand, and the news of the Queen's death, cried through all Attica, must bring him soon on the spot, when, seeking for an explanation of her death, he would discover this damaging piece of false evidence and destroy it.

We may now consider the possibility of another theory. Phaedra declares her intention of causing trouble (evil) to another 'that he may learn not to regard my evils proudly';[1] in other words, she will die, and let him know that he caused her death.

There is no anticipation that Theseus' return is imminent; unexpectedly he arrives before his son, and reads the tablet intended for Hippolytus, inscribed, let us suppose, with some such words as 'Thy love has destroyed me'—he draws the natural inference, and a tragedy still more grim than that of the Queen's death is the result of this misunderstanding. Had the δέλτος with the message so worded fallen into the hands of Hippolytus, his chivalrous pity for the dead would have sealed his lips, and the Chorus could be trusted to remain silent so long as no danger threatened the beloved young hero; that the oaths would be so binding even in the new circumstances of horror could never have been foreseen by Phaedra—indeed she had emphatically repudiated the idea that Hippolytus would keep his oath even when in no danger whatsoever.[2] Still less could she have believed that he would remain silent, as he actually did, when the terror of death confronted him.

The death of Hippolytus is thus due to a series of accidents, which Phaedra could never have foreseen or reckoned on.

On these lines a consistent explanation of the play could be constructed, which a critic of exceptional merit might even make plausible. On the above suppositions we have introduced an example of one of the important axioms of modern criticism—that the gods of Euripides shall be futile. As in other plays, the prologue will have no real bearing on the plot. Dr. Verrall has pointed to other plays (*e.g.* the *Alcestis*) where the god prologizing predicts events which never really happen.[3] Here Euripides is even more subtle, for everything turns out exactly as Cypris wishes, but the events are due actually not to her intervention but to an extraordinary set of malign chances. If Theseus had not returned before he was due; if he had not misinterpreted the message; if Hippolytus and the Chorus had not been pious beyond all rational expectation, Cypris would have been completely stultified; as it is, Ἀνάγκη, that blind force which is older and stronger than any personal divinity, is alone responsible for the catastrophe. It may be further observed that Artemis at the close of the play gives a circumstantial account of the events, tallying exactly with the ordinary reading of the plot; but if we accept the modern canon that a *deus ex machina* is either ineffectual or mendacious,[4] we have scored an additional point.

Most old-fashioned lovers of Euripides, however, will be content with the *prima facie* plot; they will find that it is equally tragic, and, while making less of a tax on their credulity, presents a more subtle psychological problem. As to Phaedra's irrational action, '*odi et amo*' is a commonplace in such stories, and the knowledge of an infuriated woman's capabilities may well, they will say, be left to the so-called misogynist poet.

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[1] *Hipp.* 728–731. Surely the νόσος in which Hippolytus is to share, and so 'learn to be temperate,' is here *love*, not *death*; cf. *infra* 765, Ἀφροδίτας νόσῳ.

[2] *Hipp.* 689–690.

[3] Cf. *Euripides the Rationalist*, p. 160. '. . . the story is contained solely in the action proper, without the prologue and finale, which are not the story but comments on the story by "gods," that is to say "liars."'

[4] *Euripides the Rationalist*, p. 67. 'Experienced readers at Athens must have known that in Euripides what had been spoken *from the machine* was not to be taken seriously. . . .'