Seneca

PHAEDRA

(or Hippolytus)

Trans. by E.F. Watling

1966
DRAMATIS PERSONAE

THESUS, King of Athens
PHAEDRA, second wife of Theseus
HIPPOLYTUS, son of Theseus and Antiope
NURSE
MESSANGER
CHOIR of Athenian citizens
Companions of Hippolytus

* Scene: Athens, at the palace of Theseus

By his marriage with Antiope (Hippolyta), the queen of the Amazons, Theseus had one son Hippolytus. Preferring the goddess Diana to Venus, this young man devoted himself to athletic and rural exercises, and despised the love of women. Having murdered his wife Antiope and married Phaedra, daughter of the Cretan king Minos, Theseus abstained himself on an expedition to the underworld to help his friend Peirithous abduct Persephone. Phaedra became enamoured of her handsome stepson and resolved to tempt him, though much tormented by her consciousness of sin and by the taint of evil tradition in her family. Her mother, Pasiphae, was also the mother, by a bestial union, of the bull-man Minotaur; this monster had been confined in the labyrinth of Knossos until sought out and killed by Theseus – whom Phaedra’s sister Ariadne aided with her clue of thread.

The mass of legend associated with Theseus has many variations; its main course is charted by Plutarch in his Life of Theseus. Ovid’s Heroides 17 (Phaedra to Hippolytus), is a source from which Seneca’s picture of Phaedra’s passion may have derived some of its typically Roman colour. The Hippolytus of Euripides is the prototype (and only surviving version) in Greek tragedy.
ACT ONE

Phaedra, Nurse

PHAEDRA: O Crete, great land, great mistress of wide seas,
Whose ships in countless numbers reach all shores,
Faring across the ocean – to Assyria,
To every coast, wherever the Sea God
Permits a prow to cleave its way to land:
Why have you banished me, a hostage bound
To a hostile house, wife to an alien lord,
To spend my days in tears and wretchedness?
Where is my lord? Away – that is how Theseus
Observes his marriage vows – on a bold venture
Through the deep darkness of the underworld
From which no man returns, comrade in arms
To an audacious suitor who will steal
And carry off a bride straight from the throne
Of the King of Death. So Theseus follows him,
Partner in his mad escape; no fear,
No shame, deters him. Lust and lawless marriage
In hell Hippolytus's father seeks.

But I have other, greater pain to bear;
No rest at night, no balm of sleep relieves
My troubled soul. It thrives and grows – my pain
Burns in me like the burning heart of Etna.
My loom stands still, the wool drops from my hands;
I have no heart to make my offerings
At the gods' temples, or to take my place
Among the dances of the Attic women
Torch-bearing in dark rites around their altars.
I cannot make pure prayers or honest vows
To their presiding goddess, to whose care
This land was given. I take pleasure now

In following the hunt, starting wild game,
A strong spear in this tender hand, Why, why,
My soul? What does it mean? What is this passion
For woods and fields? Is this the evil spell
That bound my mother, my unhappy mother? . . .
Our love has gone astray in the woods . . . O mother,
I feel for you. I know how you were forced
By monstrous doom into audacious love
For that brute beast, bull of a roaming herd;
An angry beast, untamed and lecherous,
His wild mates all obeyed him – yet he loved.
What god will pity me? Where is a Daedalus
To find a cure for my complaint? That craftsman,
Master of Attic arts, who built a prison
To hold our Cretan monster in seclusion,
Could not, if he were here, do anything
To lighten my distress. This comes from Venus;
She hates all children of her enemy
The Sun, and now through us she takes revenge
For what was done to her – the chain that bound her
In the arms of Mars; on all the tribe of Phoebus
She lays a load of shame. Love lies not lightly
On any daughter of the house of Minos;
We know no love that is not bound to sin.

NURSE: Nay, noble wife of Theseus, child of Jove,
Cleanse your pure heart at once of such vile thoughts;
Smother the flame and give no countenance
To evil hopes. Stand up to Love and rout him
At the first assault, that is the surest way
To win without a fall; once humour him,
Cherish the pleasant bane – 'twill be too late
Then to refuse the yoke you have accepted.
I am not blind, I know how royal pride,
I. Phaedra’s mother Pasiphae was a daughter of the Sun.
Phaedra

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That dare not face itself. Some may have sinned
With safety, none with conscience unperturbed.¹
No — you must kill these fires of impious love,
This crime which every barbarous land abhors,
From which the Getan nomads, and the Scythian
Wild tribes and Taurian savages abstain.
Purge your thoughts clean of this abomination;
Learn from your mother; dare no strange affection.
Do you intend to be the common spouse
Of son and father, to conceive in sin
Two husbands’ progeny at once? ... Go, then!
Confound all nature with your wicked passions!
Let there be monsters still! Your brother’s house²
Requires a tenant. Has it come to this?
Will nature waive her laws, will the world hear
Of monstrous prodigies each time love comes
to a Cretan woman?

Phaedra: All you say is true,
Good nurse. Unreason drives me into evil.
I walk upon the brink with open eyes;
Wise counsel calls, but I cannot turn back
To hear it; when a sailor tries to drive
His laden vessel counter to the tides,
His toil is all in vain, his helpless ship
Swims at the mercy of the current. Reason? ...
What good can reason do? Unreason reigns
Supreme, a potent god commands my heart,
The invincible winged god, who rules all earth,
Who strikes and scorches love with his fierce fire.
The God of War has felt that flame; the forger
Of triple thunderbolts himself has felt it;
The feeder of the never-sleeping furnace

¹. Cf. Appendix II, 5.
². The prison, now empty, which contained the Minotaur.
PHAEDRA

In Etna’s depths can feel this tiny flame;
Phoebus is lord of the bow, but one small boy
With more unerring aim can shoot an arrow
Straight to his heart, for he is everywhere,
Menacing heaven and earth.

NURSE:
That love is god
Is the vile fiction of unbridled lust
Which, for its licence, gives to lawless passion
The name of an imagined deity.
Venus from Eryx, we are to believe,
Sends her son wandering over all the earth,
And he, skyborne, shoots out his wicked darts
From one small hand – the littlest of the gods
Endowed with such almighty power! Vain fancies
Conceived by crazy minds, they are all false!
Venus’ divinity and Cupid’s arrows!
Too much contentment and prosperity,
And self-indulgence, lead to new desires;
Then lust comes in, good fortune’s fatal friend;
Everyday fare no longer satisfies,
Plain houses and cheap ware are not enough.
Why, tell me, does this sickness seldom taint
A humble home but strikes where life is soft?
Why is pure love found under lowly roofs,
And why do common people generally
Have wholesome appetites where modest means
Teach self-control – while wealth, propped up by power,
Always asks more than its fair share of things?
A man who can do much would like to do
More than he can. But there – you know what conduct
Is fitting for the great ones of the land;
Await your lord’s return with fear and reverence.

PHAEDRA: I fear no man’s return. Love is my sovereign.
And when has any man set eyes again

Upon this bowl of sky, having descended
Once to the silence of perpetual night?

NURSE: Never trust Pluto; though he keeps the key
Of his infernal realm, and has his hound
To guard the gates of death beside the Styx,
If any man can find the way, despite him,
That man is Theseus; he will find the way.

PHAEDRA: Perhaps he will forgive me for my love.

NURSE: He had no mercy for a virtuous wife;
That foreign one, Antiope, had cause
To know his wrath. But, be it possible
To charm an angry husband, who of us
Will move the obstinate young man? Women . . .
He hates the whole sex, he avoids them all,
He has no heart, he dedicates his youth
To single life; marriage is not for him –
Which proves him a true Amazonian.

PHAEDRA: Ah, let him never leave the white hillside,
The rugged rocks down which he lightly leaps,
Across the mountains and through thickest woods
I mean to follow him.

NURSE: And will he stop
To pay attention to your blandishments?
Will he exchange his virgin exercises
For the illicit rites of Venus? Will
His hatred cease for you, when, very like,
It is for hate of you he hates all women?
No prayers can ever turn that man.

PHAEDRA: He is
A creature of the wild; have we not known
Wild creatures to be overcome by love?

NURSE: He’ll run from you –

PHAEDRA: – run, even through the sea,
I’ll follow still.
NURSE: Do you forget your father?
PHAEDRA: No, nor my mother.
NURSE: But he hates all women.
PHAEDRA: The less I'll fear a rival.
NURSE: Will soon be here.
PHAEDRA: What, with Peirithous?
NURSE: Your father will be here.
PHAEDRA: He will have pity,
The father of Ariadne.
NURSE: Oh, by this heart
Worn out with age and care, these silvered hairs,
This breast you loved, I do implore you, child,
To stop this folly. Be your own best friend;
The wish for health is half the remedy.
PHAEDRA: Well, have your way. Shame and nobility
Live in me still. If love will not obey,
It must be vanquished; honour shall be kept.
Unstained. One way, then, only one way out
Of danger still remains. I'll join my husband.
By death I shall avert transgression.
NURSE: No!
That is too rash; restrain that impulse, child!
Hold these hot thoughts in check. Yourself to say
That you deserve to die, is proof enough
That you deserve to live.
PHAEDRA: But I must die,
Of that I am resolved. The manner, how,
Is yet to find. A noose? A sword? A leap
Precipitate from the high rock of Pallas?
NURSE: Leap to your death? Shall these old bones allow it?
Curb that wild will. No one returns from death.
PHAEDRA: No one that means to die, and ought to die,
Can be forbidden to die. This hand must fight

To save my honour.
NURSE: Mistress, only joy
Of my spent age, hear me: is your heart heavy
With this immoderate passion? Then ignore
The tongue of reputation. Reputation
Takes no account of truth; it often harms
The innocent, and treats the guilty well.
This is what you must do, try out the strength
Of that perverse austerity. I'll do it;
I'll speak to the young savage presently
And bend the stiffness of his stubborn will.

CHORUS
O daughter of the never gentle sea,
Goddess divine, mother of Cupids twin –
For twofold is his power; with fire
And arrows sharp he plays
His wanton game,
A smile upon his wicked face
As he prepares his bow
With never erring aim.

He can send madness to consume the heart,
A flame of hidden fire to dry the blood.
His wound makes little show,
But eats into the secret soul.
He is a boy who gives his enemy
No peace; the wide world over,
Ever alert, he makes his arrows fly.

The land that sees the sun, newborn, the land
Beside the western gates,
The lands that burn under the Crab,
And those that the wild plainsman cultivates
PHÄDRA

Under the cold Great Bear— 
Love’s fire is everywhere.
Love stirs the leaping flame of youth,
And warms the dying ash of age,
Kindles the first fire in a maiden’s heart,
Brings gods from heaven to walk the earth
In strange disguises.

Phoebus came down to Thessaly,¹
To be a shepherd; left his lyre and quill,
And learnt to use a scaled reed-pipe
To call the cattle home.
Time and again, the very god who made
Heaven and the clouds, assumed a bumble shape:²
A bird, with white wings waving—
A voice, sweeter than any swan’s last song—
A lusty grim-faced bull, stooping to carry
A playful maiden on his back and away
To a world his brother owned, not his;
In he plunged and mastered it,
Paddling with his hoofs for oars, anxious
As any boatman for the safety
Of his stolen cargo.

The shining goddess of the darkened sky³
Knew love, gave up her rule of night
And left her chariot of light
To other hands, her brother’s; she found out
A way to handle the nocturnal equipage

Around its narrower course, but with his weight
The wheels drove hard and night ran late
Delaying the return of day.
So too Alcmæn’s son⁴
Dropped quiver and lion-skin— that huge
And formidable garment— and allowed
His shaggy hair to be reduced to order
And emerald rings to grace his fingers,
Bound his legs with yellow ribbons,
Cased his feet in golden slippers,
And with a hand that used to wield a club
Spun yarn upon a twirling spindle.
Thus in an oriental land,
In a rich court of wealthy Lydia,
Was seen, instead of the wild lion’s mane,
A silky robe of Tyrian workmanship
Upon that back which once held up
The kingdom of the sky.

Great is the power,
And baneful, of that flame,
As they whom it has touched can tell.
Where the earth’s edge is skirted by the sea,
Where bright stars ride across the upper world,
The pitiless child holds sway.
Under the waters the blue Nereid hosts
Do not escape his darts; nor can the sea
Wash that flame’s scars away.

Love drives the desperate bull
To battle for his herd.

When danger threatens any of his wives,

¹ When he served as herdsman to King Admetus (cf. Euripides, Alcestis).
² The disguises of Jupiter: the swan which loved Leda—the bull which carried Europa into the sea (Neptune’s province).
³ The Moon, descending to earth for love of Endymion.
⁴ Hercules, sentenced to serve at women’s tasks for Omphale, queen of Lydia (cf. Ovid, Heroides, vi).
PHAEODRA

The meekest stag will fight,
At such a time, as the black Indian knows,
The motley tiger is a menace; boars
Whet their sharp tusks and fleck their cheeks with foam.

The Punic lion shakes his mane,
And speaks his passion with a roar.
Love moves, and the whole forest roars again.
Love moves the monsters of the senseless sea,
And the bull elephant in Luca’s fields.1

All nature is his prey;
Nothing escapes; at the command of Love
Old angers die, and enmity gives way.
And, let us not forget, this malady can take
A hard stepmother’s cruelty away.

1. If this is the meaning of Lucat boves, animals used by Pyrrhus
in Lucania in his war against the Romans.

ACT TWO

Nurse, Phaedra, Hippolytus

CHORUS: Nurse, have you news? How is it with the queen?
Does she yet find relief from her great torment?

NURSE: There is no hope; there can be no relief
From suffering such as hers; the rabid fire
Will never end. The fever silently
Burns in her heart; only her face betrays
The inner anguish which she tries to hide.
Her eyes are bright as flame, while her wan face
She hides from daylight; nothing long contents
Her wandering mind; this way and that she turns,
Her body racked with shifting pain. Sometimes
Stumbling she falls as if she’d live no longer,
Cannot hold up her head, then, calm again,
Lies down to rest, but with no thought of sleep
Weeps all night long. Now ‘Lift me up’ she cries,
Then ‘Lay me down’. ‘Unbind my hair’—and soon
She’ll have it braided up again; no dress
Pleases her long, but she will have it changed.
She takes no interest in her food or health;
She wanders aimlessly, her strength all spent—
How different from the old activity,
The bright blush painting those clear cheeks! Ravaged
With care her body now, feeble her tread,
Lost all the grace of that sweet loveliness!
Those eyes, the very torches of the sun,
Reflect no trace of what was once their birthright.
Tears flood her face; upon her cheek drops down
The incessant dew, as on the slopes of Taurus
The warm rain falls to melt away the snow... .

Now they are opening the palace doors,
PHAEDRA

And there she lies upon a golden couch . . .
Throwing her customary garments off . . .
She will have none of them . . . she is deranged.

PHAEDRA [seen within]: Out of my right, slaves, take these
brocaded robes,
Of gold and purple! Take that Tyrian scarlet.
And silksuff curled from far-off Seric' trees.
Give me a light robe and a simple sash.
No necklace at my throat, no pendant pearl
From Indian seas hung in my ear; my hair—
Let it be loose and free of Syrian perfume . . .
So . . . falling anyhow about my neck . . .
Down to my shoulders . . . let it toss in the wind
As I run . . . the left hand reaching for the quiver,
The right hand wielding a Thessalian spear.
I shall be like the mother of Hippolytus—
That cruel one — a woman of Macedon
Or Tanais, leading her war-riors.
From frozen Pontus on to Attic soil . . .
Hair knotted up . . . or falling free . . . her side
Protected by a crescent shield; so I
Will away to the woods . . .

CHORUS:
Do not weep over her.
Grief cannot help the afflicted. Let your prayers
Invoke the virgin, goddess of the wild.

NURSE: Queen of the forests, Thou who walk'st
apart
On the high hills, goddess alone among
The lonely mountains: turn thou into good
These ill-portending omens. Hecate,²
Of triple aspect, great divinity,
Of groves and woods, bright lantern of the sky,

[The doors are closed]

HIPPOLYTUS: Good nurse, what brings your old feet toiling
hither—
Your face so sad — and trouble in your brow?
My father — surely all is well with him?
And Phaedra? And their two sons?

NURSE: Have no fear.
The kingdom prospers, and good fortune smiles
Upon the royal house. More cause that you
Should smile upon good fortune. I am grieved

1. As Endymion; cf. above, 300.