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Family Plays

Jean Racine's

PHAEDRA

Drama adapted by
I.E. Clark



PHAEDRA

A student newspaper in Minneapolis quoted the director's explanation of how he chose *Phaedra* as a contest entry: "I read possibly three dozen one-acts last summer to find something that hadn't been done, was good literature, a challenge and would be recognized by critics, coaches and student participants as a good piece of theatre."

Drama. Adapted by I. E. Clark. Based on the play by Jean Racine. Cast: 3m., 5w., extras. This suspense-filled tragedy was written in France's Golden Age and was based on ancient Greek mythology. Jean Racine's original five-act French version of *Phèdre* was first performed in Paris on June 1, 1677. *Phaedra* is the young, lonely wife of Theseus, the legendary king of Athens. She is secretly in love with Hippolytus, the king's son by a former marriage. Keeping the secret tightly locked in her breast has impaired *Phaedra's* health—but now, suddenly, the accidental death of Theseus is reported. *Phaedra* dares at last to reveal her secret love. And then Theseus appears—very alive and full of vengeance. The one-act ancient Greek tragedy offers an exciting experience for cast and audience, and a rare acting opportunity for your best actress. Sarah Bernhardt and Merlina Mercouri are among the famous actresses who have played this role. *A director's script is available with many helpful clarifications such as the pronunciation of some of the names in the play. It also contains drawings of costumes and sets, details on all technical aspects of staging, discussion of characterization, plot and theme. It also suggests the complete blocking and full stage directions for all movement and business. Set: sparsely furnished Greek portico. Time and place: ancient Greece. Set and costumes may be simple or elaborate. Approximate running time: 35 to 40 minutes. Code: PH7.*

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Phaedra

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Adapted into a one-act play

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I.E. CLARK

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(PHAEDRA)

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PHAEDRA

The one-act version of *Phaedra* on the following pages is based on an adaptation made by I. E. Clark for the Schulenburg Fine Arts Festival. Directed by Mrs. Callie Schaefer, the play was first presented on March 29, 1966 with the following cast:

THESEUS, *King of Athens* Alan Herzik
PHAEDRA, *his wife* Gail Bonner
HIPPOLYTUS, *son of Theseus* Sheldon Lippman
ARICIA, *a royal princess* Carol Canuteson
OENONE, *nurse of Phaedra* Joan Schulze
THERAMENES, *tutor of Hippolytus* Larry Owen
ISMENE, *friend of Aricia* Candi Clark
PANOPE, *a waiting-woman* Beverly Bucek
*GUARDS Carolyn Meyer, Emil Friedrich

The scene is laid in Troezen, a town of the
Peloponnesus in Ancient Greece

Φ

*One, two, or more guards may be used, with either males or females playing the roles; or the roles may be omitted.

Φ

Racine's original French version of *Phèdre* was
first performed in Paris on January 1, 1677.

Φ

NOTES ON THE PLAY

Phaedra is the young, lonely wife of the great Grecian warrior and king, Theseus. Well hidden in the depths of her soul is a burning love for Hippolytus, the son of Theseus by an earlier marriage. As a means of concealing her love from the gossip-hungry world, Phaedra has treated Hippolytus cruelly, pretending to be jealous of his power as the son of a king. Hippolytus, in turn, fears and hates Phaedra.

News arrives one day that Theseus has died on a foreign shore. Oenone, the devoted, well-meaning servant of Phaedra, draws the secret from her mistress and urges her to confess her love to Hippolytus, now that the death of her husband has freed her from her marriage vows. Reluctantly—but prodded on by her ardent love—Phaedra follows Oenone’s advice. Hippolytus is horrified. And while Phaedra burns with his rejection, news comes that Theseus is alive and due to arrive at the palace at any moment. Phaedra is frantic—what will Hippolytus tell his father? What revenge will a raging Theseus take?

Jean Racine, one of the great writers of tragedy of France’s Golden Age, has taken this Greek legend and turned it into one of the world’s most powerful dramas. The suspense and tension which build as the play progresses is almost (perhaps we should say excitingly) unbearable.

This *‘Stage Magic’* adaptation of the five-act original retains the suspenseful flavor of the plot and the tragic tone of the characters and thus serves as a good introduction to the works of Racine in situations where the full three-hour play cannot be accommodated—for example, in contests, classroom demonstrations, assembly programs, and nights of one-acts. It is a play with which every student should be familiar. Among the famous actresses who have played the title role are Sarah Bernhardt and Merlina Mercouri.

About pronunciations: There is no universal agreement on the pronunciation of some of the names in this play. Phaedra has been called FED-ra, FAY-dra, and FEE-dra. The dictionaries say FEE-dra, but most theatre people seem to say FED-ra. Suggested pronunciations for the other names are THEE-sus or THEESS-yuss; hip-POLL [to rhyme with doll]-it-us; ah-REE-sha; ee-NO-nee; the-RAH-men-eez; iz-MEE-nee; pa-NO-py or PAN-oh-py.

A ‘Stage Magic’ Production Script (director’s prompt book) is available for this play. It contains drawings of costumes and set, details on all technical aspects of staging, discussion of characterization and plot and theme; and it suggests the complete blocking and full stage directions for all movement and business. Obtainable from the publisher.

Abbreviations used in this script: U=upstage (away from the audience); D=downstage (toward the audience); R=stage right (the actor’s right as he faces the audience); L=stage left; C=center stage. XDRC means “cross to down right center.”

Racine's

Phaedra

Adapted by I. E. Clark

[The curtain opens on an empty Greek portico. There are limitless possibilities for arranging a satisfactory set (see Introduction to Production Script). Necessary furniture includes a simple couch or bench at Center; a small stool at Right and another at Left; and a small statue of Neptune Down Right and a small statue of Venus Down Left (statues can be cut out of cardboard or made of papier-mache (see Introduction to Production Script).

As soon as the curtain is open, HIPPOLYTUS enters UR, crossing toward C, closely followed by THERAMENES. They apparently have been walking together and are nearing the end of a serious conversation.]

HIPPOLYTUS. My mind is settled, Theramenes; I can stay no longer here in Troezen. My father has been gone six months, and what may have befallen him I don't know.

THERAMENES. And where, Prince, will you search? Perhaps the king does not wish the secret of his absence known...

HIP. Stop, Theramenes. Respect the name of Theseus. It's my duty to search for him—and to leave this place I no longer care to see.

THER. Indeed! When did you begin to dread this happy land?

HIP. Those happy times are gone, and all is changed, since to these shores the gods sent Phaedra.

THER. I can understand why the sight of the queen offends you. With a step-mother's spite she planned your exile the moment she set eyes on you. But if her hatred has not

wholly vanished, it has at least taken a milder form. Besides, what danger can a dying woman bring?

HIP. It is not Phaedra's enmity I fear. [*Turning his face away from Theramenes, finding it difficult to speak the next words*] I run, I must admit, from young Aricia, the sole survivor of an impious race.

THER. What! You persecute her, too! She did not share in the treachery of her brothers. Why should you hate such charming innocence?

HIP. I would not need to run, if it were hatred.

THER. May I, then, learn the meaning of your flight? [*Pause; he begins to understand*] Is this the proud Hippolytus, the fiercest foe of love? Are you in love?

HIP. Friend, ask me not. You have known my heart from infancy; you have known my pride; you taught me scorn for those pangs of love which caused my father to dethrone my mother and put Phaedra in her place. Spare me now the shame of admitting that my heart can love. Born of an Amazon, I sucked wildness with my mother's milk. You nourished me with stories of my father's noble acts...how he cleared the roads of monsters and of robbers, made Crete red with the blood of Minotaur.... But when you told me of less glorious deeds, his love pledged here and there and everywhere, I urged you to cut short the tale. Am I, too, made the slave of love? The more contemptible because no fame is mine to give me a right to share my father's weakness. And if my pride must be humbled, Aricia should have been the last to tame it. By my father's stern command her brothers' blood must not be reproduced by sons of hers; he dreads a single shoot from stock so guilty. His wish is that the dreadful name of Pallas shall die with her. Why, then—

OENONE. [*Entering from UL*] Alas, my lord, what grief was ever like mine? The queen has almost touched the gates of death; a secret malady slays her, and all her senses are disordered. [*She hears PHAEDRA moan off L*] She comes.

HIP. Enough. She shall not be disturbed by a face she hates.

[*HIPPOLYTUS motions to THERAMENES, and they exit DR. PHAEDRA enters UL. She walks slowly, as one who is extremely feeble from illness.*]

PHAEDRA. Ah me! For the last time I come to look on thee, O sun! Stay, dear Oenone; strength fails me...I must rest awhile.

OENONE. [*Helping PHAEDRA sit on couch*] Shall I never see you free of despair?

PHAEDRA. I blush, Oenone, for I have let you see too clearly the shame that overflows these eyes of mine.

OENONE. Why? What remorse gnaws at your heart? What crime can have disturbed you thus? Your hands are not polluted with the blood of innocence?

PHAEDRA. Thanks be to Heaven, my hands are free from stain. Would that my soul were as innocent.

OENONE. What awful project have you conceived, that your conscience should be so alarmed?

PHAEDRA. [*Rising*] Have I not said enough? Spare me the rest. I die to save myself a full confession.

OENONE. Die then, and keep your inhuman silence; but seek some other hand to close your eyes. Cruel one, when has my faith deceived you? Think how in my arms you lay new born. My own children I have forsaken for you. Do you thus repay my faithful service?

PHAEDRA. What do you expect from words so bitter? Were I to tell my secret, horror would freeze your blood.

OENONE. What can you say to horrify me more than to watch you die before my eyes? [*Kneels, clasping Phaedra's knees*] Dear Madam, by all the tears that I have shed, by these weak knees I clasp, relieve my mind from torturing doubt.

PHAEDRA. It is the will of Venus.

OENONE. [*The name of the love-goddess is a clue*] Do you love?

PHAEDRA. I feel its mad fever.

OENONE. Ah! For whom?

PHAEDRA. Hear now the crowning horror. Yes, I love—my lips tremble to say his name.

OENONE. Whom?

PHAEDRA. The son of the Amazon, whom I've oppressed so long.

OENONE. Hippolytus? Great gods!

PHAEDRA. 'Tis you have named him.

OENONE. All my blood within my veins seems frozen. O despair! Why did we ever reach these dangerous shores?

PHAEDRA. My wound is not so recent. Scarcely had I been bound to Theseus by marriage when Hippolytus appeared. I looked, turned pale and blushed...my soul grew all distraught; my voice faltered, my blood ran cold, then burned like fire. I fled his presence everywhere, but found him—O crowning horror!—in his father's features. At last, I stirred my courage up to persecute the enemy I loved. Pretending a stepmother's jealous rage, I clamored for his exile, till I had torn him from his father's arms. I breathed once more, Oenone; in his absence my days flowed on less troubled than before. Submissive to my husband, I hid my grief, and cherished the children of our fatal marriage. Vain caution! Cruel Fate! [*OENONE supports PHAEDRA, who looks as though she might faint from weakness at any moment*] Brought here to Troezen by my husband himself, I saw again the enemy whom I had banished, and the old wound too quickly bled afresh. I wanted to die and bury my horrible secret in the grave. But I have been unable to withstand your tears; I have told you all; now let me die. [*She almost collapses in OENONE's arms; OENONE helps her to L stool, kneeling beside her.*]

PANOPE. [*Entering DR*] I wish I might hide from you tidings so sad, but it's my duty, Madam, to reveal them. The hand of death has seized your peerless husband.

OENONE. What do you say, Panope?

PANOPE. Hippolytus learns of his father's death from vessels that are now in port.

PHAEDRA. [*Trying to rise*] Ye gods!

OENONE. Enough. The queen hears you. [*PANOPE exits. OENONE turns to Phaedra*] Dear lady, this new misfortune alters our affairs. The king's death has freed you

from the guilt that made the crime and horror of your love. You may see Hippolytus now without reproach.

PHAEDRA. [*Rising, with OENONE's assistance, a new spark of life in her face*] Yes, I will live, if life can be restored.

[*PHAEDRA and OENONE exit. ARICIA and ISMENE enter.*]

ARICIA. Hippolytus requested to see *me*—here! Is it true, Ismene?

ISMENE. This is the first result of Theseus' death. Aricia soon shall find many things changed.

ARICIA. Then it's not an idle tale? Am I no more a slave? Is Theseus really dead?

ISMENE. He is dead, and you alone doubt it.

ARICIA. Will Hippolytus, do you think, prove kinder than his sire, make light my chains, and pity my misfortune?

ISMENE. Yes, I think so, Madam.

ARICIA. Ah, you know him not or you would never think so hard a heart can feel pity. Know you not the contempt in which he holds our sex?

ISMENE. I know what tales are told of proud Hippolytus, but have seen him near you...he could not turn his eyes away, but gazed on you. Love is a word that may offend his pride, but what the tongue denies, looks can often betray.

ARICIA. How eagerly my heart hears what you say, Ismene!...But I take too much hope in a love that cannot be—

ISMENE. [*Seeing HIPPOLYTUS offstage*] He comes. Hear him yourself.

HIPPOLYTUS. [*Entering*] Lady, before I go, my duty bids me tell you of your change of fortune. My worst fears are realized; my sire is dead. But one hope soothes my sorrow: I can free you from restraint. Lo, I revoke the laws whose rigor moved my pity; here, in my heritage, in Troezen, where I am now acknowledged king, I leave you free, free as myself,—[*he can no longer look into her dazzling eyes*] and more.

ARICIA. Stunned at all I hear, my lord, I fear, I almost

fear a dream deceives me. Am I indeed awake? Can I believe such generosity? Was it not boon enough never to hate me, so long to—

HIP. To hate you? I, to hate you? However darkly my fierce pride was painted, do you suppose a monster gave me birth? What savage temper would not be softened at sight of you?

ARICIA. Why, what is this, sir?

HIP. I have said too much not to say more. For nearly six months, ashamed, despairing, bearing wherever I go the shaft that stabs my heart, I struggled vainly to be free from you. Present, I avoided you; absent, I found you near. All things conspired to make Hippolytus your slave. With what wild words I offer you my heart. Do not reject vows expressed poorly—but which would never have been spoken at all—except for you—

THER. [*Entering*] Prince, the queen wishes to converse with you before you leave.

HIP. [*Angered*] Me? What shall I say to her? Can she expect—

ARICIA. Noble Prince, you cannot refuse to hear her; even though she is your enemy, some pity is due her tears.

HIP. Shall we part thus? and will you let me go, not knowing if my boldness has offended the goddess I adore?

ARICIA. All the gifts you offer me, I accept, but my new freedom is not the one most precious in my sight. [*ARICIA and ISMENE exit.*]

HIP. The queen approaches. Go, see that my ship is ready. Hurry the crew aboard, and hoist the signal; then return quickly and deliver me from this interview most irksome. [*THERAMENES exits as PHAEDRA and OENONE enter. PHAEDRA has gained strength from her new hope of winning Hippolytus. She speaks softly to Oenone upon entering.*]

PHAEDRA. There I see him! My blood forgets to flow, my tongue to speak what I have come to say.

OENONE. Go; be brave.