



# Phèdre

*Jean Racine*

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## Phèdre Jean Racine

En 1677, Phèdre, la dernière grande tragédie de Racine, met en scène la mythique descente aux enfers d'une incomprise. Vouée au malheur par son héritage, Phèdre aime sans espoir son beau-fils Hippolyte. Lorsque son mari, Thésée, revient, il envoie injustement son fils à la mort. On assiste alors à lempoisonnement d'une femme à la fois innocente et coupable. Ironie tragique qui démontre à quel point l'amour peut se vivre comme une malédiction.

## Phèdre Details

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## From Reader Review Phèdre for online ebook

### Imane says

I missed these French classics.

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### Camille says

Tous les adolescents tombent d'abord amoureux d'Antigone, parce que c'est la révolte adolescente. C'est quand tu tombes amoureux de Phèdre que tu sais que tu as grandi. J'avais quatorze ans, et je connaissais par cœur la tirade "J'aime. Ne crois pas qu'au moment que je t'aime, Innocente à mes yeux..."  
C'était le tout début d'un vrai amour de théâtre.

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### David Sarkies says

#### A pretty brutal love triangle

12 August 2013

This is apparently Racine's last play before he gave up the theatre scene to return to a religious life within the Jansenist sect. For those who don't know what a Jansenist is (and that would probably include most of us) then picture a god who is mean, nasty, and smacks you over the head with a baseball bat when you step out of line, and you have the god that the Jansenists worship. Why would anybody worship a god like that I don't know, but it probably has something to do with the fact that they are a monotheistic cult, and when you only have one god, and that god is a mean and nasty brute that smacks you over the head with a baseball bat when you step out of line, then you don't have much of a choice. Fortunately for us, we don't have to believe that God is actually like that, but that is another story for another time.

Anyway, Phaedre is based on an Ancient Greek myth that has been the subject of a number of other plays, including Phaedra by Seneca and Hippolytus by Euripides. Racine also used Plutarch's biography of Theseus as a source for this work.

The play, which probably suits Racine's style because he tended to write tragedies (unlike Shakespeare, who was a well rounded individual), and this is quite a violent tragedy with a pretty nasty love triangle. Basically the story involves the son of Theseus (Hippolytus) and the second wife of Theseus (Phaedre) didn't happen to be Hippolytus' mother. As the story goes, Phaedre was in love with Hippolytus but that was a forbidden love because she was his step mother, and such a relationship would be incestuous.

However, before I go further, I assume you all know who Theseus is, and if you don't well he was the guy that travelled to Crete and killed this dude:

and then married this woman:

that is Ariadne, who is not to be confused with this woman:

but after sailing away from Crete, he dumped on on the island of Naxos to leave her like this:

(There are some other photos that came up when I typed Ariadne into Google Images, but I think I will leave it at that).

Anyway, Theseus was what some would call a stud, and what others would call a sleaze, but hey, when you are king of Athens, and a hero to boot, particularly in the world of the Ancient Greeks, it is not surprising that you end up having your way with women. However, to cut a long story short, Theseus killed the king of Athens (because he was a prick, that is the King of Athens, but then you could say that Theseus was a prick as well, because he did dump Ariadne on a island and hey, I think the name Ariadne pretty cool) and then banned the former king's daughter from marrying so that he would not have a contender to the throne. However the problem turned out that Hippolytus was actually in love with her, so you have this really bizarre love triangle which pretty much doesn't resolve itself because Hippolytus ends up dying in a tragic chariot accident, or to use a modern example, something like this:

You can probably picture it, Theseus discovers that there is an affair going on between his wife and his son and bursts into a rage. However his son knows that this is rubbish because, well, it's incest and Hippolytus will have nothing to do with it, and anyway he's in love with this woman that he's not allowed to marry, so father and son have a massive fight and the son jumps into his chariot and rushes out of the city in a rage and ends up getting himself killed. It then turns out that Theseus discovers that Hippolytus is innocent and the whole thing was set up by Phaedra (and her nurse) because she is pissed that Hippolytus isn't returning her advances (because it is incest, and he will have none of it).

Anyway, I could probably write more, but I don't really want to, but may do so in the future if I feel like it, but I don't really feel like it now, even though this play is a masterpiece and Racine is a master tragedian, but then again, I think I have said enough, so here is a picture by Pablo Picasso.

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## Robert says

Greek families! Histrionics, rash reaction instead of considered response, inability to control emotion. Tragedy.

**THIS REVIEW HAS BEEN CURTAILED IN PROTEST AT GOODREADS' CENSORSHIP POLICY**

See the complete review here:

Bonus GR only bit: So if Goodreads was ever a family, it's now clear that it was one that escaped from a Greek Tragedy. It's fairly obvious that all the things in the first sentence of this review can be applied to the GR family - the only questions now is how many corpses are going to pile up as the Tragedy unfolds and whether we can summon a Diety to resolve the conflict for the future...no sign of Athena yet, more's the pity.

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## Teresa says

### **Fedra** (1676)

de Jean Racine - França (1639-1699)

Na peça de Racine, ao contrário das outras, Hipólito está apaixonado por uma mulher, Aricia. Fedra acusa o enteado de violação, Teseu expulsa o filho e Fedra suicida-se após a morte de Hipólito.

(Carl Vernet - *Death of Hippolytos*)

Texto comum às peças Hipólito de Eurípides, Fedra de Séneca e Fedra de Racine:

Se há obras que dão reviravoltas na nossa vida de leitores, na minha, *Metamorfoses* de Ovídio foi uma delas. Desde que o li fiquei tomada de desmedida paixão por Mitologia e nunca me canso de ler sobre este mundo de deuses e mortais.

Em Ovídio li, pela primeira vez, sobre o amor fatal, e não correspondido, de Fedra pelo enteado Hipólito.

Agora, li de seguida as versões de Eurípides, Séneca, Jean Racine e Sarah Kane.

As cinco versões, com ligeiras diferenças, têm todas a mesma base.

Uma história onde todos são simultaneamente culpados e inocentes, vítimas e carrascos. Excepto Hipólito pois o seu coração não se deixa tocar pelos desejos e paixões humanas. No final todos são destroçados porque sucumbiram ao amor, o sentimento mais nobre e mais feroz que domina e gera outros: o ciúme, o orgulho, a injustiça, a raiva, a vingança.

Pequeno resumo para enquadramento das personagens, comuns às quatro peças:

**Teseu** é filho de Egeu, rei de Atenas, e enteado de Medeia (a mulher de Jasão que matou os filhos) que lhe tentou limpar o sarampo, sem sucesso. Teve um romance com Hipólita, uma rainha das Amazonas, de quem tem um filho: **Hipólito**.

Em Creta reina Minos, filho de Zeus, casado com Pasífae de quem tem vários filhos entre os quais Ariadne e **Fedra**. Tem também um enteado, filho dum paixoneta de Pasífae por um touro. Este mocinho, que dá pelo nome de Minotauro, vive preso no labirinto criado por Dédalo, e é morto por Teseu com a ajuda de Ariadne (a do fio). Teseu abandona a ajudante na ilha de Naxos, a qual acaba a casar com o fofinho Baco.

Teseu regressa a Creta e casa com Fedra. Tudo podia acabar bem se a tonta da Fedra não se embeixa-se pelo Hipólito. É a história da paixão trágica de Fedra que inspirou as peças de Eurípides, Séneca, Racine e Kane.

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## Manny says

There's an old Communist-era joke, quoted in the movie *The Lives of Others*, about the Party Leader's conversation with the Sun. (The punchline is "Fuck off, I'm in the West now"). In Racine's play, Phèdre also has a conversation with the Sun. When I looked at the footnote, I discovered that they were in fact close relatives.

Well... as everyone knows these days, being born into a rich, powerful family isn't exactly a guarantee that you're going to have a happy life. Generally, you marry someone you don't much like, get involved in an affair with a nasty but attractive person, and then it all goes from bad to worse. That's pretty much what happens to Phèdre. But at least Racine makes it into a great story, which is more than you can say for your average royal gossip columnist.

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### **Amanda says**

Let's see: thwarted love, betrayal, implied incest, heinous lies, father-son love triangle with wife/stepmother, and a whole lot of death at the end. Um, yeah, that's the recipe for a pretty awesome story. Phaedra, married to Theseus, has always nurtured a secret love for his son, Hippolytus. When she receives news that Theseus is dead, she finally confesses her love to Hippolytus, who is in love with Aricia and is disgusted by his stepmother's advances. But, hey, guess what? Theseus isn't dead and returns just in time for all Hades to break loose . . .

Soap operas have nothing on ancient Greek drama. Plus, on *All My Children*, you never get a half bull/half dragon sea beastie sent by Neptune to torch our hero into a crispy critter before his horses go mad, crash the chariot, and then drag him to death. And I have to believe that's worth something.

Cross posted at This Insignificant Cinder

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### **Hend says**

a tragic play , Explores the Depths of the Human Soul ...  
fascinating in its complexity.....

Phèdre the young and second wife of the king Theseus, fall in love with his son Hippolytus, her obsession disrupts her, she was losing her mind, sees Hippolytus everywhere. her offerings and prayers to change destination was in vain.....

she had Hippolytus exiled, and dismissed him from her presence.... However, she soon discovered that she could not remove his love from her heart. It remained. So she wished for death as the only way to end her Destined Love and, to punish herself for her betrayal and forbidden and cursed love.....

but the sudden announcement of Theseus' death changed everything, she gives up her suicide plan and decided to enjoy life again .....

She lost control over herself and confess to Hippolytus her secret and passionate love, her confession has had an unexpected result, he has no pity on her and was in disgrace because of her shameful confession.....  
Theseus' return. And stopped the false rumors of his death, At first, Phèdre panic, again threatens suicide, but

knowing Hippolytus's crush on the princess Aricia. her hysterical rage ,fear and jealousy make her leave Oenone(her nurse) accuses Hippolytus of attempting to seduce her, Theseus is completely deceived. Theseus believed her and cursed Hippolytus with one of the three curses he had received from Poseidon. As a result, Hippolytus' horses were frightened by a sea monster and dragged him to his death.....

Phaedra feels guilty , she felt a total horror of herself, Recognizing the atrociousness of her crime, and the excruciating pain and feeling of disgust ,she declared the innocence of Hippolytus, and then committed suicide.....

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## **Renato Magalhães Rocha says**

Phèdre is hydrogen.

Phèdre is helium.

Phèdre is a star.

I say this not only because she's the main character in this glorious play, and even less because she's been played by some of the greatest actresses in the world (Sarah Bernhardt, Helen Mirren, Fernanda Montenegro - yes, even Brazil adapted this famous play!), but because she's constantly in a thermonuclear fusion between reason and emotion that ultimately leads to self-destruction in such a powerful blast that affects all the other bodies that gravitate around her.

In general terms (hey, I'm not a scientist!, just an enthusiast, so bear with my simplifications here), a star, during the course of its life, suffers from a combat of gigantic proportions between internal pressure - caused by the fusion of hydrogen into helium in high temperature and high pressure reactions - and gravity. Once the fusion has been through enough for millions of years and exhausted its elements, the radiation pressure becomes too much, winning the battle against gravity, and the star explodes.

Phèdre, Jean Racine's protagonist, suffers from an inner turmoil while trying to control her forbidden desires through her conscience - the gravity that holds everything together within her -, wishing to transform love into hate (to be able to keep Hippolyte away). Exhausted by her constant struggle, she collapses when she can't take the heat no more through an explosion of unparalleled precedents, gushing to unimaginable distances her true feelings, like lava from a dormant volcano that's been inactive for centuries and that once active won't stop showing its true power, its true magnitude, and creating drastic consequences which, in Phèdre's case, is the awaited confession of her incestuous feelings that have been suppressed for so long towards her stepson.

Leaving the stars in the sky and volcano activity, for own on safety, extinct, this is a very intense, fascinating tragedy (so much that I couldn't help but to read every line more than a couple of times, as if I was producing a stage adaptation of my own where I would play all characters and needed to memorize everything.) You will find here no filler scenes, no unnecessary characters, no gimmicks. Instead of that, Racine brought all big feelings into play: there is guilt, there is jealousy, there is self-loathing and, of course, there is love. This is not a good vs evil confrontation, which I find modern and down-to-earth as, let's agree, we all have good and bad inside of us, so Racine excels in not creating determined heroes and villains, but by writing of the

conflicts between confused feelings which, in their turn, drive the actions between what has been decided, pre-established against desire in its purest form - pure as in free from all boundaries and conventions: Hippolyte loves Aricie, even though she has to remain chaste and is prohibited territory by his father; and Phèdre falls in love with her stepson, the main arch of this fascinating play.

This is such a heavy psychological story that Racine had no need to resort to showing violence on stage: feelings and words were enough. An interesting parallel to be made here is how these characters were - obviously - fruits of the playwright's wishes and commands, from his dialogues to his stage directions, just like we, in our real lives, can be controlled by such feelings as love and jealousy - as if they were ruthless playwrights on their own - writing and changing our lines and actions the way they see fit, ignoring previous established thoughts and behaviors, changing everything on the go, leaving their 'actors' (us) to work without any rehearsal, waiting for the spectacle to begin to then change everything, leaving all that was planned behind. Phèdre, the woman, had to improvise many times as well for she wasn't able to go on with what her reason had imposed on her, losing control on stage. This gave me a sense of realism - although, of course, there were mythological elements involved.

Still on the fact that there are no villains or heroes here, even though Phèdre's (or Oenone's) actions were to be condemned, still they are somehow understandable - even if not agreeable - once you consider the situation they're in. Racine's own words of Phèdre is that she *"is neither entirely guilty nor altogether innocent. She is involved by her destiny, and by the anger of the gods, in an unlawful passion at which she is the very first to be horrified. She prefers to let herself die rather than declare it to anyone. And, when she is forced to disclose it, she speaks with such embarrassment that it is clear that her crime is a punishment of the gods rather than an urge flowing from her own will."*

It may seem Phèdre's ordeal would be enough material to make this play so enchanting, but no. As I mentioned before, there's another forbidden love blooming simultaneously: that of Aricie and Hippolyte. I have once more to applaud Racine for his writing as I always found a fascinating topic that love's disguise is normally hatred, instead of indifference. Hippolyte, in order to camouflage - not hide - his feelings for Aricie (and the same applies, in the beginning, to how his stepmother acted towards him), made use of hate. It seems the desire of receiving something in return, of awakening in the other any sentiment - even hate - is better than to go on unnoticed (for receiving indifference back would be too harsh), as if it would be easier to transform that sentiment into love than to generate a brand new feeling from scratch.

I'm beyond happy to have read this gorgeous play. I find it delightful that in literature, just as in life, things are all interconnected. Artists, in their works, generously offer us new material, new books, new writings to pursue, as if to not abandon us - knowing that ending a book leaves us with a sense of being lost -, so they show us the way to new knowledge, to new books, to new writers, to whom we will devote ourselves until the time has come for us to jump on the next train, which will in its turn connect us to others and unexplored roads. That's how I came to know Racine and Phèdre at this time, from reading another Frenchman work, which came to me from another book and so on infinitely, both onwards and backwards, to an endless and very satisfactory journey.

Rating: for a play that is, to my knowledge, psychologically accurate - written in 17th century - in depicting its characters' actions in a believable way and for Racine, masterful writer and, I must say, the true protagonist here: 5 stars that will keep on shining for a very long, long time.

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**Carmo says**

4.5\*

Uma das várias versões desta obra inspirada na mitologia. Apesar de algumas discrepâncias entre os diversos autores no andamento do drama, todos eles comungam no fundamental: um amor incestuoso, uma mulher rejeitada, vingança e morte. Dramático e intenso. Gostaria de ver isto no teatro.

**Laurence R. says**

I was pleasantly surprised by this play, even though I think it lacks originality (which I know is one of characteristics of this genre at this time).

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<http://naqderooz.ir/1hc>

**Kalliope says**

When is one guilty of something, when one commits the reprehensible deed, and only one knows it, or when it is made known to others?

Phèdre thinks that the latter case is a great deal worse, worse even than death:

*je meurs pour ne point faire un aveu si funeste  
je n'en mourrai plus, j'en mourrai plus coupable*

And so probably did Racine, because in his *Phèdre*, the action is activated by Phèdre's avowal of her guilt which she makes three times. These three long soliloquies are amongst the most famous parts of the play. She is guilty of loving her stepson and she acknowledges this to her "confidente" (Oenone), to her stepson (Hippolite), and to her husband (Thésée). These three confessions trigger the drama that unfolds irremediably fast, bringing the tragic downfall of both guilty and non guilty.

But the interest of this play is not in the plot, but in the themes that Racine so lyrically develops. Love coupled with jealousy as a fatal damnation. Treachery as the worst ignominy that can be suffered and inflicted. Choices that remain captive and render Destiny unavoidable. And expectedly in Racine, the power of the word as the vehicle for the human soul.

Racine's tragedies are distilled drama. They are tragedies at their purest in which there is the very minimum of extraneous material. Respecting the three Aristotelian units of one place, one theme and one unit of time (one day), Racine also added the typically 17th century French concept of "bienséance" or "propriety". He approached the three units by emptying them as much as possible. The place is no place, but just an enclosing undefined lieu that traps the tragic heroes and heroines in their own disarray. The action takes place elsewhere and the messengers just inform the enclosed heroes about them. The resulting single action we see acted is no action at all, but the soul's suffering them (in a way similarly to Baroque opera in which the recitatives tell the story and the arias sing the feelings). With so much material stripped out, then everything can happen quickly. We end up not being aware of whether it all happened in one day, or in an accelerated, condensed and immeasurable eternity. On the stage are left the abstract concepts that do not resolve.

For Phèdre has remained guilty.

I have reread this play as a complement to reading Marcel Proust's *La recherche du temps perdu* as part of the **2013: The Year of Reading Proust** Group. And since it is a play I have sought to watch it acted out. I found this DVD <http://www.amazon.co.uk/Ph%C3%A8dre-D...>, and therefore my review will comment on this production as well.

I should add that, sadly, this is the only filmed production of a Racine play that I have been able to find. Are they commercially so unattractive? When I lived in Paris I was on a budget but was willing to stand and queue, for sometimes close to two hours, to be able to get the cheapest tickets (FF12.-) for the *Comédie Française* performances (Corneille, Marivaux, but mostly Molière and Racine). In one year I did not miss one single production.

I am lucky that I have seen some wonderful productions of Racine at the CF then. The stage settings were bare. The accoutrements for emphasizing the Drama were almost only the costumes that the characters wore, with their flowing tunics and floating capes and veils. They were simple but made out of absolutely exquisite materials. Contrasting hues in the clothing paralleled opposite personalities while subtle gradations in color tones marked allegiances. Only tenuously would they distract from the declaimed verses. The acting was selective. Racine's characters do not move abruptly nor do they gesticulate while they converse. They do not need to touch since they reach each other with their words. Racine's heroes and heroines are walking and speaking souls.

When in this DVD Phèdre first appears on the stage as a crouching and limping neurotic woman I was shocked that this could be a Racine Queen. I had been expecting a dignified dame whose august and majestic body carried the full weight of suffering in a stately manner. Phèdre is most famous for her remarkable and very long monologues, known to be so difficult to deliver well that they can make or unmake an actress. It seems that theatre critics count their career in France by the number of Phèdres they have attended. The legendary **Sarah Bernhardt** was unforgettably photographed in this role.

But this unappealing first entrance of a broken and bent Phèdre in my DVD is, furthermore, followed by somewhat hysterical characters who shout at each other their love and longings. Their incensed and broken sentences and undue emphasis at invented syncopations ruins Racine's verses and rhyme.

For Racine was a master of the Alexandrines, the twelve syllable verses with a clear caesura in its exact middle. His iambic hexameters establish a cadential rhythm which measures an even pace. True, at selected times he breaks and joins the verses with a skillful "enjambement" (the continuation of a thought in the following verse) that has an effect of an accelerated train of thought, but this enjambement ought not to interfere with a mellifluous enunciation of the lines. His verses should have the lulling effect of a hypnotic lullaby.

In the DVD production, with its broken chants and histrionic acting, a worthy exception is Théramène's account of Hyppolite's death. Were a film director of Steven Spielberg's kind get hold of Théramène's speech, it would be inflated it into a fantastic rendering of monsters, seas opening into abyssms, and a hair-raising run of frenzied and desperate horses with a fatal consequence. Instead, true to Racine, a sad man, barely moving, declaims this succession of horrors, without blinking, depicting with only words the dreadful scene that gradually sinks the listening father into an unavoidable sorrow. What a wonderful speech.

It is not surprising that Racine's selected use of words and exquisite ability with the Alexandrines would fascinate someone as careful and sensitive to the power of language as Marcel Proust. We have Proust's explicit admiration for the way Racine could twist the very formal structure of his verses and with a broken syntax add ambiguity and richness to his meaning. These examples he gave are from *Andromaque*:

*Pourquoi l'assassiner, Qu'a-t-il fait? A quel titre ?  
Qui te l'a dit ?*

But it was the poignant portrayal of guilty love in Phèdre that obsessed Proust. And it is this play, which he knew in its entirety by heart, that he has associated to his fictional actress *La Berma* and which figures in *La recherche* repeatedly.

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After this wonderful reading I will proceed with the rereading of more plays by Racine and with the listening of **Rameau's** Opera, **Hippolyte et Aricie**.

## **Huda Aweys says**

N. says

I am surprised at how easy this was to read. After reading little bits on my commute, I sat down and finished it in a day.

Shame colors Phaedra's life and blinds her completely to any solution other than death. She is not a reasonable person at any point until the very end when she has seen the consequence of her passion. She had hoped in vain that Hippolyte would return her feelings and save her from the shroud of guilt that covered her. Ultimately, he became so disgusted by her sentiments that it made her shame grow into a monster she couldn't control and that would be the cause for Hippolyte's unjust demise.

I was not a fan of the false rape accusation at all. It perpetuates this bullshit that women falsely accuse men of rape out of spite. Not here for this.