

HIPPOLYTUS

BY EURIPIDES

TROZEN IS WHERE THE PLAY IS SET AND IT IS RULED OVER BY THESEUS as well as Athens because Theseus' grandfather governed Trozen before he died. Theseus had been sent Trozen because he had been exiled from Athens for a year due to the bloodguilt over the murder of his cousins (the sons of Pallas). Before this however, Theseus conquered the Amazons and took captive the Amazonian Queen Hippolyta and had a child with her, Hippolytus. Therefore, Hippolytus was illegitimate and a foreigner. This reinforces his role as an outsider in the play: he is different to the other Greeks. Theseus later married Phaedra who became Hippolytus' stepmother. Hippolytus is chaste and has therefore shunned the goddess Aphrodite and despises sexual acts and women and prefers hunting and worships greatly the goddess Artemis.

The very fact that Hippolytus' mother was an Amazon could explain Hippolytus' strong dislike towards the opposite sex and sexual love, and his strong dedication to hunting and to chastity.

Aphrodite says the prologue and outlines what she is going to do. She makes Phaedra fall in love with Hippolytus. Phaedra is highly disturbed by the feelings she has for Hippolytus and attempts to starve herself. Phaedra was the daughter of King Minos of Crete and his wife Pasiphae. This royal ancestry explains Phaedra's obsession with reputation. However, Euripides has not shown Phaedra as an evil woman but a passionate woman torn between her desires and her desire for a good reputation.

Phaedra cannot bear to bring disgrace on herself and her family. She speaks about her mother's passion for a bull and how she gave birth to the Minotaur and then of her sister, Ariadne's disastrous passion for Dionysus. She says that she is third in line and is an inescapable taint in her bloodline.

Phaedra's manipulative Nurse persuades Phaedra to tell her why she is doing so and advises her just to tell him, however Phaedra is not keen on this idea and asks the Nurse to make her a potion to help her rid herself of these feelings. The Nurse says that the gods cannot even resist Aphrodite's influence so why should Phaedra, she uses examples of the gods used by Aphrodite: Dawn & Cephalus and Zeus & Semele.

The Nurse goes to Hippolytus and tells him straight out of her mistress's feelings for him. He becomes furious but the Nurse cleverly had got him to swear an oath that he wouldn't tell anyone about Phaedra's love for him. Hippolytus sticks to his oath despite the fact that it could cause him the loss of his reputation and life. All the time, Phaedra was listening to the conversation on stage as the Nurse was talking to Hippolytus off stage.

This shows that Nurse plays an incredible important role in the story as by telling Hippolytus she triggers off the following events. Her characterisation also shows that Euripides has developed the character of a person of a lower rank, something he does often, to a much deeper extent than other ancient Greek dramatists.

Phaedra becomes very cross with the Nurse and then shows the audience her conniving and malicious side to her personality. She writes a suicide note to save her reputation, which accuses Hippolytus of raping her knowing that this action could have Hippolytus killed. Then she hangs herself.

Theseus then arrives home and sees the Phaedra and is very upset and he believes the note. Hippolytus and him then argue and Hippolytus does not reveal the truth as he has sworn his oath to the Nurse. However, Theseus banishes Hippolytus without trial and then gets Poseidon, who had given Theseus three curses, to use one of the curses on Hippolytus. Poseidon sends a raging giant bull from the sea which scares Hippolytus horses, which run with Hippolytus tangled in the reins, over the rocks. Hippolytus is close to death when he is brought back to the palace.

When Hippolytus is carried to Theseus, he is about to use another curse on him when Artemis appears and tells him the truth. Hippolytus forgives his father and Artemis then leaves (as she cannot look upon the dead) vowing revenge on Aphrodite and saying to honour Hippolytus, girls who are about to be married will cut their hair to commemorate him.

This is very much a story on how the gods used mortals as tools in their plans.

The characterisation of Hippolytus is very interesting because the audience see two contrasting sides to him. In the beginning of the play, he comes across as an arrogant and foolish young man when he openly shuns the goddess Aphrodite. However, in the

second half of the play, when he has been wrongfully accused of rape, makes the audience empathise with him as he has not been given a chance to defend himself to his father and he was exiled without trial and then cursed which would kill him.

Theseus' lack of understanding of his son is shown in the confrontation as he accuses Hippolytus of being part of the cult of Orpheus (whereas because Hippolytus killed an animal, he could have been part of the vegetarian cult). Theseus has been away from his son nearly all of his life as Pittheus, Theseus' grandfather, has brought up the illegitimate Hippolytus in Troezen rather than in Athens.

What is very interesting to note is the psychological depth in which Euripides develops the character of Hippolytus. The very fact his character is so cold is because he has been an embarrassment to the royal family for his illegitimacy and his way of life and has never been shown love. This could explain why when Theseus apologises to the dying Hippolytus, he generously forgives him, rising to the occasion and urged on by the goddess Artemis. It is also interesting to see the similarities between Hippolytus and Medea. Both had royal connections but were outsiders and foreigners. The big difference is that Medea is the criminal and her criminal actions are condoned however Hippolytus is innocent and his non-criminal actions are punished.

Theseus' and Hippolytus' confrontation is like a trial. It is cold, with much talk of witnesses and oaths etc. However, the crucial bit of evidence cannot have light shed on it to prove Hippolytus' innocence, as it is his oath that he is honouring. Therefore a judgement is passed and Hippolytus is condemned unfairly.

The roles of the goddesses (which are consistently shown to the audience via two statues one of Artemis and the other of Aphrodite on the stage) is interesting as Euripides shows them to be as petty as mortals despite the slave saying that 'Gods should be wiser than men'. Aphrodite wants to kill Hippolytus as he has shunned her and Artemis vows to kill Adonis (though not named, rather she says that she will avenge Hippolytus' death), who is the mortal youth lover of Aphrodite.

Euripides once again in Hippolytus, challenges Greek society and the value of religion in 'Hippolytus'. He shows Theseus, a Greek hero, as being cold hearted and intolerant, however at the end we see a heroically emotional side to him after his previous irrationality towards his son. We also see the gods being petty and Poseidon (though he does not appear) putting one of the curses he has given to Theseus, on his grandson – Poseidon was reputed to be Theseus' father therefore making Hippolytus his grandson.

'Hippolytus' won Euripides first prize at the drama competition. Perhaps this is because he doesn't challenge Greek male superiority as he did in 'Medea'.