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The Wishes of Theseus*

THOMAS D. KOHN
Wayne State University

SUMMARY: Euripides and Seneca both include the motif of the wishes from Poseidon/Neptune, which Theseus uses to kill his son in their plays, *Hippolytus* and *Phaedra*. This detail recurs nowhere outside of the Hippolytus story. This article examines the wishes, and suggests that Euripides invented them; that the Greek playwright uses this motif to explore the interplay between divine obligations and familial relationships; and that Seneca employs it in order to emphasize Theseus's age, to show his audience the seriousness of Phaedra's illicit lust, and to tie the events of the tragedy together.

IN THE PROLOGUE OF EURIPIDES' *HIPPOLYTUS*, APHRODITE INFORMS THE audience that Poseidon had once promised Theseus to fulfill three ἀραί,[1]

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[1] Simon Pulleyn 1997: 70–76, discusses the distinction between the verbs ἀράομαι and εὔχομαι in Greek in general, concluding that, contrary to the opinion of others, the two verbs and their corresponding nouns seem nearly synonymous in practice. Even though ἀρά does often mean "curse," it also frequently denotes a more neutral "prayer." W. S. Barrett 1964: 43–46, maintains that ἀρά rarely means "prayer" in Attic tragedy, and that Euripides uses the term because "one curse cannot revoke another," thus explaining why Theseus does not use a second ἀρά to undo the first. But the irreversibility of a wish is part of the motif (see Hansen 2002: 215). On using a second wish to undo a foolish first one, see Anderson 2000: 135–37 on "The Three Futile Wishes." And for a later literary example of the dangers invloved, see Jacobs's 1902 short story, "The Monkey's Paw."

In fact, in the plays of Euripides, the term ἀρά often means "curse," but not always. At *Medea* 607, it refers to the "curses" Medea hurled at Creon; at *Troades* 734 it denotes the "curses" Andromache may throw at the Achaeans for slaughtering Astyanax; and at *Orestes*

and she predicts that Theseus will invoke one of these binding wishes when he hears of his son's alleged violation of Phaedra (*Hippolytus* 43–46). And in fact, Theseus does ask Poseidon to redeem one in exchange for Hippolytus's death (*Hippolytus* 887–90). Theseus expresses uncertainty as to whether the wish will come true (*Hippolytus* 890, 893–98), suggesting that this is the first time he has made use of these divine gifts.[2] Finally, Artemis confirms that it was Theseus's wish that caused the death of his son (*Hippolytus* 1315–17). These wishes occur only in the context of the Hippolytus story. There is no mention of them earlier than Euripides' play,[3] and other than in the scholia to Euripides and in Asklepiades of Tragilos (*FGrH* 12F.28) they do not appear again in extant Greek. In surviving Latin, Cicero mentions them at *de Officiis* 1.10.32, calling them *optata*.[4] Ovid refers to them while telling the story of

996, it refers to the "curse" Myrtilus laid upon the House of Pelops. But at *Orestres* 1233 and 1241 ἀρά is used in reference to the "prayers" Electra, Orestes, and Pylades make to Agamemnon, in hopes that their plot against Clytemnestra may be successful. Further, while ἀρά refers to the "curse" that Oedipus put on his sons, Eteocles and Polynices, throughout the *Phoenissae* (67, 334, 474, 765, 876, 1053, 1355, 1426, and 1611, as well as at *Supplices* 150), at *Phoenissae* 1364, the word definitely is used for the "prayer" that Polynices makes to Hera, that he may kill his brother in battle. In fact, a few lines later, in a disputed passage, this ἀρά may be called εὐχή (*Phoenissae* 1370). Admittedly, all of these examples are somewhat malevolent. So, the distinction between "curse" and "prayer" may be a fine hair to split.

But, if the ἀραί referred to by Aphrodite, Theseus, and Artemis in Euripides' *Hippolytus* were meant to be taken as "curses," then, first of all, the ensuing Roman authors mistranslated the word. Second, narrative logic says that Poseidon would have promised his son three "wishes," not "curses." Finally, it is hard to imagine how the Scholiast could think that Theseus used "curses" to escape from the Underworld and from the Labyrinth. For the purposes of this discussion, then, let us take the ἀραί as "wishes" in the sense of the boons granted by genies in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*.

[2] Mills 1997: 213–44, argues that the uncertainty makes exile a viable option for punishment, and somehow makes Theseus less culpable in Hippolytus's death.

[3] Barrett 1964: 11 assumes that Euripides' first *Hippolytus* included the wishes; he also reports that Wilamowitz thought them a Euripidean invention used to link together the plays of the earlier trilogy, 40. There is nothing, however, in the remaining fragments, nor in the fragments of Sophocles' *Phaedra* to suggest either the presence or absence of the ἀραί. Kakridis 1928 acknowledges that Euripides had a relatively free hand in telling his story, 22–23; in fact, he shows that the wishes do not occur in previous versions of the Hippolytus story, 28. But he denies Wilamowitz's claim that the wishes were meant to tie together a supposed trilogy, 23–25. One might expect Euripides to take liberties with the myth if Mills 1997: 187 is right that he "may have been the first Athenian playwright to dramatize the Hippolytus story."

[4] Cicero brings up the *optata* during a discussion of why it is sometimes better not to fulfill promises. He says the wishes are found "in fabulis," (in plays.) Although *fabula*

Hippolytus: "hostilique caput prece detestatur," (and he [Theseus] condemned my head with a hostile *prayer*, *Metamorphoses* 15.505).[5] And Seneca *tragicus* makes use of these wishes in his *Phaedra* (942–43), labeling them as *vota*, thus combining the meanings of Euripides' and Cicero's words. But in Seneca's play, Theseus clearly states that he is using the third and final wish: "supremum numinis munus tui," (the last gift of your divine will, *Phaedra* 949–50).

A number of questions revolve around these ἀραί: when and why does Poseidon promise them to Theseus? Why did Euripides choose to include them in his play? And why did Seneca retain them? This article seeks answers to these questions.[6] In so doing, it will suggest: that Euripides, in fact, invented the wishes, or at least introduced them into the Hippolytus myth; that the Greek playwright uses this motif to explore the interplay between obligations and familial relationships; and that Seneca employs it in order to emphasize Theseus's old age, to show his audience the seriousness of Phaedra's illicit lust, and to tie the events of the tragedy together.[7]

I.

What is the origin of the three ἀραί? When and why did Poseidon offer them to his mortal son?[8] Neither Euripides nor his followers say. Perhaps the sea god promised the wishes on the day Theseus was born.[9] Or the presentation could

can, and often does, mean "fable" or "legend, myth" (*OLD* definitions 4 and 5), *OLD* definition 6 is "play." Cicero employs this usage at *Tusculan Disputations* 4.63 and *Philippics* 2.34. See also Dyck's 1996 commentary on the *de Officiis ad* 1.32, which accepts that *fabulis* means "plays." The plural implies that Cicero had access to other dramatic versions of the Hippolytus story between Euripides' and Seneca's in which the wishes played a part. But there is no further evidence about them, including who the playwright(s) might have been. The Alexandrian Lycophron is said to have composed a dramatic *Hippolytus;* but besides Seneca, we know of no other Latin playwright to attempt the story.

[5] This is all that Ovid says about the matter. He makes no mention of which god carried out this "prayer," nor why it was fulfilled.

[6] Many of these issues are also dealt with by Kakridis 1928: 21–33. Note that he generally uses the term "wish" (*Wünsche*) when speaking in general about the three wishes, and "curse" (*Fluch*) when specifically referring to the wish Theseus invoked to kill Hippolytus.

[7] Throughout this discussion, I refer to the edition of Euripides' *Hippolytus* by Barrett 1964, and to the edition of Seneca's *Phaedra* by Zwierlein 1986. Unless otherwise stated, all translations and paraphrases from the Greek and Latin are my own.

[8] Kakridis 1928: 21 notes that often in such stories the hero is given wishes by supernatural beings as a reward for having passed a test of virtue; but in the Theseus story, as with Phaëthon, the hero gets the wishes merely for being the son of a god.

[9] Compare with the motifs, "Fairy presides at child's birth," and "Fairies bestow supernatural gifts at birth of a child" Thompson 1966: F312 and F312.1. Thompson notes

have occurred shortly after Aethra revealed his true parentage and before he set off from Troezen. Unfortunately, no accounts of these events exist. Bacchylides 17, which tells the story of Theseus's dive into the sea to retrieve Minos's ring and the hero's subsequent visit with Amphitrite, makes no mention of the wishes. This omission is odd for two reasons. First, a request to survive a prolonged sojourn under water would seem to be a perfect use for one of the sea god's promised wishes; at the very least we might expect Theseus to explain why he is not invoking one.[10] Second, Bacchylides says that Amphitrite gives her step-son a robe and a crown. This would seem an ideal time either for Poseidon to appear and add the promised wishes to the bequest, or for the sea queen herself to mention them. Even if the poet did not want to disrupt his dramatic flow with a long digression, he could have at least mentioned the wishes in passing.

In extant Greek literature, there are no references to these ἀραί outside the context of the Hippolytus story (Barrett 1964: 39–40; Gantz 1993: 288) and certainly no mention of what Theseus does with the other two. The Scholiast to Euripides gives no origin or source for the wishes, but states that Theseus μίαν μὲν ᾐτήσατο ἀνελθεῖν ἐξ Ἅιδου δευτέραν ἐκ λαβυρίνθου τρίτην τοῦ Ἱππολύτου, (asked for one to escape from Hades, a second [to escape] from the labyrinth, the third [for the death] of Hippolytus, Dindorf 1863).[11] The usual versions of these first two incidents credit Heracles with saving Theseus from the Underworld,[12] and Ariadne with rescuing him from the maze and the Minotaur.[13] Certainly, one could suppose that Heracles and Ariadne were driven by Poseidon to save Theseus. This seems a stretch, however (Kakridis 1928: 24–25). When the sea god wishes to kill Hippolytus, he sends a sea-monster; likewise, when he desires the death of Hesione, he sends a sea-monster (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.211–12). And when he wants to punish Odysseus for harming Polyphemus, he sends a terrible storm (Homer, *Odyssey* 5.282–96). Clearly, Poseidon is not in the habit of having mortals act for him.

on F312 "Sometimes the Norns, the Fates, etc." I do not think it would be a far stretch to include the sea god, Poseidon, as "etc." See Anderson 2000: *passim*, on the importance of allowing for a wide range of variance while identifying motifs.

[10] Compare Seneca's Theseus, who states he is saving the final wish for something really special, *Phaedra* 949–53.

[11] Dindorf 1863: *ad Hippolytus* 46. See Kakridis 1928: 26–30, who argues that the Scholiast invented these uses for the first two wishes in order to explain Euripides' reference to three.

[12] For example, Apollodorus, *Epitome* 1.24, and *Bibliotheke* 2.5.12. See also Gantz 1993: 291–95.

[13] For example, the Scholiast's report on Pherekydes 3F148. See also Gantz 1993: 264–65.

Further, Euripides' Theseus seems unsure whether the wish will work (*Hippolytus* 890),[14] thus implying that he is invoking the first wish, not the third.[15] Barrett believes that Euripides is drawing on a previous tradition, where Theseus used his final wish to kill his son, but altered the order so that the option of exile would be more realistic; if Theseus were uncertain whether his wish would be granted, exile for Hippolytus would be a believable alternative punishment. And yet the tradition was so strong that the playwright could not do away with the number three (Barrett 1964: 39–42; Mills 1997: 213–14; Kakridis 1928: 32–33). Further, if it were the first wish, what would stop Theseus from using the second to restore his son to life?[16]

Given that, outside the scholia, these wishes are not mentioned in connection with any other incidents in Theseus's life, it is possible that Euripides invented them, or imported them from another story.[17] This certainly would not be the only time that he used a detail not previously known. For example, in the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Clytemnestra lists the reasons she has for hating Agamemnon. Among other abuses, she states that she had been married previously to Tantalus, a son of Thyestes (*Iphigenia at Aulis* 1149–52).[18] This would be an otherwise unknown individual who somehow avoided being slaughtered by his uncle and eaten by his father,[19] only to be murdered by his cousin, Agamemnon, who then took Clytemnestra for his bride. This detail is

[14] Consider also *Hippolytus* 1169–70, where Theseus, after learning of Hippolytus's death, praises Poseidon for hearing his wish, and exclaims ὡς ἄρ' ἦσθ' ἐμὸς πατὴρ ὀρθῶς, (truly you have always been my father) as if he had not been sure of his parentage, and also of the wishes, before.

[15] Kakridis 1928: 26–31 argues ingeniously that Theseus is not, in fact, invoking one of three wishes, but rather is asking that Poseidon fulfill his three wishes "at once," and that the Scholiast made up an explanation for the other two wishes. In order to maintain this, however, Kakridis must assume that Artemis's speech (*Hippolytus* 1315–17), which specifically identifies the "curse" as one of the three wishes, was emended so as to reinforce the Scholiast's misinterpretation. I think it more likely, and argue so below, that Theseus's uncertainty stems not from whether the wishes are valid, but whether Poseidon will fulfill one if it means killing his own grandson.

[16] Kakridis 1928: 22 thinks this inconsistency would have bothered Euripides' audience. In fact, as the myth goes on, the divine Asclepius revived Hippolytus (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.533–35), thus incurring the wrath of Zeus, and leading to Apollo's service to Admetus (Euripides, *Alcestis* 1–7). None of this would have been necessary if Theseus could have simply wished Hippolytus back to life. Barrett 1964: 43–46, suggests that Euripides uses the term ἀρά because "curses" cannot be reversed, whereas "wishes" can. But the irreversibility of a wish is part of the motif (see Hansen 2002: 215).

[17] But see Mills 1997: 239.

[18] On the authenticity of these lines, see Kovacs 2003: 77–103.

[19] Cf Seneca's *Thyestes* 718, where one of Atreus's victims is named Tantalus.

picked up by Apollodorus (*Epitome* 2.16), Pausanias (2.18.2 and 2.22.3) and Hyginus (*Fabulae* 88), but by nobody else prior to the performance of the *IA*. Gantz (1993: 549–50) is surprised that Aeschylus does not include this tidbit in his *Agamemnon*, even though he could have, and it would have been both appropriate and effective (Gantz 1993: 549–50). Such inclusion would only be possible, however, if the story existed outside Euripides' imagination. Similarly, Euripides may have invented the detail of Medea's murder of the children of Jason.[20] And one need look no further for Euripidean invention than the entire plot of the *Orestes*, which presents an entirely original conclusion to the Trojan saga.[21]

Likewise, the inclusion of the wishes motif could be an innovation by Euripides. It is possible that the playwright had in mind the tradition, found both in the cyclic *Thebais* (Huxley 1969: 41–44), and later in Euripides' own *Phoenissae*, that Oedipus twice cursed his sons, Eteocles and Polynices. Add to these curses the "many a sorrow" that Epicasta "bequeathed" to Oedipus, according to Homer (*Odyssey* 11.275–80), and one can see where Euripides may have gotten the idea of three ἀραί, one of which is invoked by a great hero against a disobedient son.

The reason for making Theseus use one of three wishes could be simple; in folklore, there are always three: three supernatural sisters, three sons of the king, three little pigs, etc. In fact, Hansen (2002: 215) lists the story of Theseus under the motif of "three wishes granted by a god."[22] But he considers Theseus's wishes "puzzling." He points out that no ancient author describes their origin; nor does the Scholiast's explanation of the other two wishes satisfy him. Thus, it is likely, given Euripides' penchant for altering his myths, that the Attic playwright took advantage of a common folk motif to invent the three wishes which Poseidon promised to his son, Theseus.

II.

Regardless of the source of the wishes, why did Euripides choose to include this motif in his play? There are other, more common ways for someone to address a god in order to ask for favors. For example, Chryses, at *Iliad* 1.37–42,

[20] On the question of whether Euripides fabricated Medea's infanticide, see Blondell 1999: 152; Johnston 1997: 44–70; Michelini 1989: 115–35.

[21] See Kovacs 2002: 400–10. For further examples, see also Mills 1997: 196, who posits that in several plays Euripides makes substantial changes to certain characters in order to show his dramaturgical skill.

[22] Hansen 2002: 337–38, also discusses the Hippolytus story under the motif of "Potiphar's Wife;" see further Thompson 1966: K2111, and Anderson 2000: 135–38.

requests Apollo's aid after mentioning the special relationship the god has with his native cities and reminding him of past services rendered by the priest. Or Phaëthon, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2.35–39), addresses Hyperion as "father," and then demands a sign that this label is true.[23] Similarly, at *Odyssey* 9.528–35, Polyphemus calls upon Poseidon to punish Odysseus, if indeed the sea god is the Cyclops's father. And yet, Euripides' Theseus uses neither of these approaches. Instead, he invokes one of three hitherto unknown wishes.[24]

The reason for this departure may be directly related to one of the themes of the play. The *Hippolytus* is all about personal relationships, boundaries, and obligations, both divine and human. Aphrodite is angry with Hippolytus because he refuses to worship her, instead focusing all of his attention on her half-sister, Artemis. But the love goddess is not simply angry because she is being slighted. The mortal, Hippolytus, will not accept the natural order of human relationships and will not progress from youthful chastity (i.e., Artemis) to adolescent sexuality (i.e., Aphrodite), and then presumably to mature marriage (i.e., Hera). Thus, Aphrodite decides to punish him by perverting his other familial relationships. Step-mothers typically hate and scheme against their husband's children.[25] And in fact, both the Nurse and Theseus assume that this natural antipathy is occurring (*Hippolytus* 304–10 and 962–65). Instead, Aphrodite makes Phaedra suffer uncontrollable lust for her step-son. Further, the goddess makes Hippolytus's father, who should act to protect him, the instigator of his death. Finally she makes his divine grandfather, who should strive for both his safety and glory, the instrument of his destruction. The roles of Theseus and Poseidon in this tragedy must

[23] Roisman 1999: xiii makes the claim that "Euripides presupposes the existence of a broad pool of mythic material known to the ancient audience." I make a similar assumption that Homer, Euripides, and Ovid all have a common pool of mythological stories to draw from. Certainly, each author is able to alter the details to some extent. But basic behaviors, e.g., how to address a god or that a god needs to warn his or her potential victim, are universal. Thus, I use *The Metamorphoses* as evidence alongside the Greek epics and tragedies. On Ovid's appropriations of previously known mythological material, see Graf 2002: 108–121.

[24] All of these addresses are similar in that the person praying acknowledges a previous relationship with the god before making his request. For more on this, see Pulleyn 1997: 16–38.

[25] See Euripides' *Alcestis* 305–10, where the title character fears her children will suffer at a step-mother's hands. Consider also the *Ion*, in which Creusa, thinking herself the step-mother of Ion, plans to kill him. And, of course, remember the prototype of the evil step-mother: Hera, whom Seneca has refer to herself as a *noverca* at *Hercules Furens* 111–12, and her relationships with Heracles, Dionysus, and the other children of Zeus. See also, Thompson 1966: S31, "cruel step-mother."

be just as important as that of Phaedra, since Aphrodite makes it clear in the Prologue that the wishes will bring about Hippolytus's ultimate doom.

But there is more at work here than just human and familial relationships. Divine relationships also play a key role, and within Greek and Roman mythology such relationships carry with them strict rules of conduct. As previously mentioned, Aphrodite hates Hippolytus. Nevertheless, it seems that her vengeance may have certain regulations. Traditionally, a god warns his or her victim. Before Zeus punishes Prometheus with the liver-eating bird, he sends Hermes to give him one more chance to repent (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 944–1079). Before punishing Lycaon, Zeus gives the mortal one more opportunity to treat his guests properly (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.218–41). Before Minerva turns Arachne into a spider, the goddess appears to the mortal weaver, disguised as an old woman, with a warning to show proper reverence (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.26–33). And before Dionysus destroys Pentheus, he comes in disguise to his cousin, advising him to worship the new god (Euripides, *Bacchae* 434–518). Finally, as the exception that proves the rule, consider Pygmalion (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10.243–97), who at first spurned Venus and avoided women. The reader is not specifically told that someone comes to warn him; but eventually he repents, attends the festival of Venus, and is rewarded.

At the end of the prologue, Aphrodite sees Hippolytus approaching, and comments, οὐ γὰρ οἶδ᾽ ἀνεῳγμένας πύλας / Ἅιδου, φάος δὲ λοίσθιον βλέπων τόδε, (For he does not know that the gates of Hades are standing open, and that this light is the last he will see, *Hippolytus* 56–57). These words could be simple gloating on the part of the goddess concerning the ignorance of her enemy. But they could also represent concern: all the necessary prerequisites for her revenge have not been met. Hippolytus has not yet been warned of his impending doom. In fact, the next episode features a conversation between Hippolytus and an old and trusted Attendant (*Hippolytus* 88–120). The servant argues with his master, urging him strongly not to neglect Aphrodite. But the young prince ignores the advice, and tragic events ensue. Thus, the Attendant fulfills the function of divine warner. Hippolytus has received one more opportunity to repent, but has not taken advantage of it. Aphrodite is free to pursue her plans of revenge.

Artemis, on the other hand, loves Hippolytus. The youth sings her praises and forsakes all other gods for her. And the divine huntress appears at the end of the play, *ex machina*, to explain the events to Theseus. She states that she wanted to help her pet; but she was prevented by a rule of the gods, that one cannot interfere in another's plans (*Hippolytus* 1328–30). Thus there are certain rules a god cannot violate: one must give one's object of hatred a final chance, and one cannot help one's beloved if another god has him in her sights.

But a third god with a relationship with Hippolytus plays a part in the tragedy: Poseidon. The sea god is Theseus's father and Hippolytus's grandfather. As such, the audience would expect him to do all he can to protect the young man. The *Iliad* is full of instances where immortals intervene on behalf of their progeny. Aphrodite's act to protect Aeneas (*Iliad* 5.311–17) is only one example. In another, Zeus is about to save his son, Sarpedon, before Hera reminds him that the hero is fated to die (*Iliad* 16.431–61). Even Zeus is bound by Fate; but nevertheless, his affection for his son is so strong that he considers breaking the rules.

It is not clear what sort of relationship Poseidon had with Hippolytus. Apparently, the young man ignored all the Olympians in favor of Artemis. Still, the sea god evidently cared enough about Theseus to give him three binding wishes. Perhaps some of that affection trickled down to Hippolytus. Regardless, one would imagine that only extreme circumstances could force Poseidon to kill his own grandson. Or, perhaps, he could be compelled by a wish that he was obligated to fulfill. And in fact, Artemis reveals that the sea god was reluctant to fulfill the wish; nevertheless, ἔδωχ' ὅσονπερ χρῆν, ἐπείπερ ᾔνεσεν (he did what he had to, since he had promised, *Hippolytus* 1319).

And here, then, is the reason for the wishes. If Theseus had simply invoked his past services to Poseidon, the god would likely have refused the request. And it is doubtful that he would have answered the prayer of one member of his family to kill another. But by using one of the wishes, Theseus has trapped Poseidon in a bind as tight as that with which Phaëthon bound Hyperion. And yet, the hero is uncertain whether even the promised wish will be powerful enough to overcome his father's natural aversion to killing kin. And so, he expresses doubt as to whether the curse will be effective (*Hippolytus* 890, 893–98). He is not necessarily using the first wish; he is simply unsure whether divine obligation trumps familial affection. The same idea explains lines 1169–70: Theseus is not sure that the wish will be fulfilled, not because he doubts his paternity, but because it is such a perverse request. But Poseidon proves that the bonds of father to son are stronger than those between grandfather and grandson, and that the god's vow overcomes his feelings for Hippolytus.

Just as Aphrodite was obligated to give Hippolytus one last chance before bringing about his downfall, and Artemis was powerless to intervene, so Poseidon had no choice but to follow the rules and slaughter his grandson. And so, by using the motif of the wishes, Euripides, whether he got it from an unknown version of the Theseus myth, imported it from another story, or simply invented it, is able to explore his theme of relationships, boundaries, and obligations.

III.

Seneca, in his *Phaedra*, although dramatizing the same myth as Euripides' *Hippolytus,* retains many elements from the earlier play while changing others.[26] This is not at all surprising, since the Roman playwright customarily picks and chooses which details to retain from his models and which to discard.[27] For example, the plague at Thebes is included in his *Oedipus*, while the tapestry is nowhere to be found in his *Agamemnon*. The plot of the Roman *Phaedra* essentially follows that of the Athenian *Hippolytus*. The wife of Theseus still falls in love with her step-son. Her Nurse, after a long discussion with her mistress, still confronts the youth, who wants nothing to do with women in general and his father's wife specifically. Theseus still returns from a long absence and must deal with Phaedra's accusations against Hippolytus. The king still brings about the death of his son, and then repents of the actions when the truth is revealed. In the end, Theseus is still left alone, with both wife and son dead.

At the same time, there are many differences between the Senecan and Euripidean plays. In the Roman drama, no goddesses provide prologue for the audience or explanation for the characters. Phaedra takes a more active role, confronting both Hippolytus and Theseus in person, and committing suicide on-stage at the end of the play,[28] instead of off-stage half-way through the drama.[29] And when Theseus enters, he is returning from his long sojourn in the Underworld, following the unsuccessful abduction of Proserpina, instead of coming back from voluntary exile to atone for the murder of the sons of

[26] For a recent study, which considers the similarities and differences between the two plays, see Roisman 1999.

[27] Since Seneca's play retains the motif of the three wishes and also follows the basic story of Euripides' second *Hippolytus*, I think that Seneca modeled his tragedy on our extant drama or on subsequent versions that were indebted to the second Euripidean play, and not on the missing first *Hippolytus*, which we know very little about. The argument that Seneca used primarily the first *Hippolytus* boils down to the fact that the Latin Phaedra is shameless in pursuing the illicit affair with her step-son; this was the issue that brought disfavor upon Euripides' first version (see Barrett 1964: 11–12). But Kakridis 1928: 33 notes that Seneca does not always follow his model exactly; Kakridis uses this fact to argue that the Roman playwright could have imported the motif of the wishes into his adaptation of the first play. But I would suggest that Seneca may have added the scandalous Phaedra into the structure of Euripides' second tragedy. On the influence of Euripides' play on Seneca's, see Roisman 2000: 73–86. See also Coffey and Mayer 1990: 5–15. On Seneca's other influences, see Tarrant 1978: 213–63.

[28] For a recent discussion and bibliography concerning whether Seneca composed his plays for performance, see Boyle 2006: 192–93.

[29] Euripides' Phaedra is seen alive for the final time at line 731, although her corpse may appear on the *ekkyklema* at 810.

Pallas.[30] And yet, among all these departures, Seneca retains the motif of the three wishes. It is not simply a matter of following his source material. The wishes, as used by the Roman playwright, accomplish, as we might expect, three effects.

First, the wishes serve to portray Theseus as an older, more experienced hero. When invoking the *vota . . . terna* (*Phaedra* 943), Theseus explicitly calls upon the final wish, "*supremum numinis munus tui*" (the last gift of your [Neptune's] divine will, *Phaedra* 949). Presumably, Theseus has been on many adventures, at least two of which were dangerous enough that he needed his divine father's help in getting through them alive. This is different from the Euripidean hero, who is uncertain whether the wishes will work.[31] And this is not the only time that Seneca mentions Theseus's age. Phaedra brings it up when she tells Hippolytus that he looks like a much younger Theseus, like the one she originally fell in love with (*Phaedra* 646–57). And when Theseus enters, he describes himself as old and decrepit, saying he is tired, lacking in strength, and with trembling footsteps ("sed fessa virtus robore antiquo caret trepidantque gressus," *Phaedra* 846–47). So, the fact that he is using his third and final wish helps Seneca paint Theseus as older and towards the end of his heroic career.

The reason for emphasizing Theseus's age may relate to one of the themes of the play. Whereas Euripides' tragedy concerned itself with the revenge of Aphrodite on Hippolytus and his family, the Roman drama is centered on Phaedra.[32] Her interests and desires are all that matter. Instead of resisting her wicked lust for the sake of her children and her family name (*Hippolytus* 419–23), from the start Phaedra is prepared to chase after Hippolytus, and it is the Nurse who counsels self-control (*Phaedra* 129–77). Seneca's Phaedra propositions Hippolytus, instead of relying on the Nurse as a go-between (*Phaedra* 583–718). Phaedra herself tells Theseus of Hippolytus's supposed treachery (*Phaedra* 868–902), instead of leaving the incriminating charge in a note. And instead of vanishing almost precisely half-way through the play, Seneca's Phaedra remains on-stage for most of the drama, killing herself in

[30] Seneca seems to be following the tradition of Sophocles, if the fragments G and H (see Barrett 1964: 24) are any indication. In the extant fragments of Euripides' first Hippolytus play, there is no indication of why Theseus is absent at the beginning, nor where he is.

[31] Note also that Euripides explains Theseus's initial absence as necessary to atone for the killing of the sons of Pallas. Mills 1997: 193 observes that "every other version of the myth associates their killing with Theseus's youthful exploits." Mills explains this and other chronological oddities as results of transplanting the Hippolytus story to Troezen. But one of the effects, intentional or not, is to make Theseus seem younger.

[32] This can be seen most clearly in the title the play acquired: *Phaedra*, as opposed to the two plays by Euripides which are both named for Hippolytus.

plain view of the audience only after seeing Hippolytus's remains and telling the truth to Theseus (*Phaedra* 1168–200). Seneca has shifted the focus from the ensemble to one specific character.[33]

Further, the audience sees the other characters from Phaedra's point of view. The Nurse is not Euripides' well-meaning though ultimately disaster-causing servant; she is an obstruction to Phaedra's desires, and ineffectual in gaining Hippolytus's affections. Hippolytus is not the pious youth who sacrifices his own life because he will not break his vow of silence and tell his father what really happened (*Hippolytus* 1060–63). Instead, he is a coward who flees rather than confront his father. Seneca's young man is irrationally obstinate and will not even give Phaedra the "pleasure" of driving his sword into her (*Phaedra* 706–14). And Theseus is not the heroic king of Athens in his prime of life, but a decrepit old man, who can only look back on his heroic past.

A second effect is to emphasize, for a Roman audience, the seriousness of Hippolytus's perceived (and Phaedra's actual) offense.[34] Seneca's Theseus, when invoking his final wish, says that he had been saving it for a dire emergency, not even using it when he was trapped in the Underworld (*Phaedra* 949–53). Punishing Hippolytus for his supposed transgression is apparently more important to Theseus than his own life or personal safety. By employing the motif, Seneca is showing a Roman audience how serious the situation in the play really would have been to Theseus.

Finally, the wish serves an important dramaturgical function by tying the events of the play together and demonstrating cause and effect. In the Euripidean play, Aphrodite makes it clear that she is responsible and that Hippolytus is to blame. He would not worship her, and so his entire family will suffer; and it will be Theseus, using Poseidon's wish, who brings about the youth's destruction (*Hippolytus* 1–57). Artemis confirms all this in her concluding remarks to Theseus (*Hippolytus* 1283–341). But Seneca omits the book-end appearances of the goddesses. The audience only hears mortal explanations. The Chorus places the blame for Phaedra's unnatural love on Venus and Cupid (*Phaedra* 274–357), because these two are always responsible for uncontrollable lusts. Phaedra goes a step further, assuming that the love goddess is punishing her for the previous transgressions of her grandfather, the Sun: "stirpem perosa Solis invisi Venus / per nos catenas vindicat Martis sui / suasque, probris

[33] Mills 1997: 198 notes that in Euripides' tragedy, "the action of the play is unusually equally divided between four characters." This is much more of an ensemble effort than Seneca's drama.

[34] Roman law did prohibit incest, but step-mothers and step-sons do not seem to be on the proscribed list. See Treggiari 1991: 37–39. Compare with the more restrictive Jewish law, cf. Treggiari 1991: 214, where step-relatives are specifically mentioned.

omne Phoebeum genus / onerat nefandis," (Venus, hating the off-spring of the detestable Sun, avenges through us her own chains, and those of her Mars; she oppresses the entire family of Phoebus with unspeakable villainy, *Phaedra* 124–27).[35] But we have to take Phaedra's word for divine responsibility.

Regarding the death of Hippolytus, the audience of the Roman play must similarly accept the interpretations of the mortal characters. In Euripides' drama, Hippolytus and Theseus confront each other, and the youth knows that he has been both cursed and exiled (*Hippolytus* 902–1101). In Seneca's version, there is no such meeting. In order to have the same actor portray both father and son, and so that Phaedra, Theseus, and the Messenger can all be on stage at once, Hippolytus and Theseus cannot face each other.[36] Instead, the Roman Hippolytus exits for the last time after rejecting Phaedra, declaring he will find purification in some far off land (*Phaedra* 715–18). Theseus passes sentence on his son *in absentia*. There is no reason to think that Hippolytus even knew his father had returned from the Underworld, let alone imposed punishment upon him. The Messenger reports that the youth left the city "ut profugus," (like a fugitive, *Phaedra* 1000); that is, he was fleeing to escape the stain Phaedra had placed on his reputation, much as a Roman exile tries to evade penalties. He yoked his horses in a hurry ("sonipedes ocius subigit iugo," *Phaedra* 1002), and was distracted, mumbling to himself, and calling upon his father as he departed (*Phaedra* 1004–6). In short, Hippolytus the master horseman was careless and not paying attention to his actions. Thus, it should not be a surprise that he lost control of the horses and got tangled up in the reins. Without Theseus's wish, his death could be merely a coincidence, caused by his disturbed mental state. But as Aristotle states in the *Poetics* (1452a), events are more tragic when they occur due to cause and effect rather than pure chance. It is Theseus's wish that makes Hippolytus's death purposeful instead of accidental, and ties it to Phaedra's suffering, rather than simple carelessness.

Seneca, then, while changing many of the details from Euripides' *Hippolytus* in his own *Phaedra*, nevertheless retains the motif of the wishes of Theseus in order to emphasize Theseus's old age, to show his audience the seriousness of Phaedra's illicit lust, and to tie the events of the tragedy together. The Attic tragedian, on the other hand, employs them to reinforce the theme of relationships, boundaries, and obligations. Regardless of the source of this motif,

[35] Presumably a reference to when the Sun told Vulcan that Venus was cheating on him with Mars, and so the Blacksmith trapped the two lovers in bed with chains. Homer had previously told this story, in Greek, at *Odyssey* 8.266–366.

[36] Phaedra, being the central character in the drama, must be on stage for the entire play. Thus, she is played by one actor. A second actor portrays Hippolytus and Theseus, while a third takes the roles of the Nurse and the Messenger. See also Sutton 1986: 30.

that is, whether Euripides invented the ἀραί of Theseus or drew them from an otherwise unknown tradition, neither playwright included the wishes on a whim. If only Theseus himself had been so careful with his father's gifts.

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