

Hippolytus and Phaedra: Across the Gulf of Time

æby [Evelyn Hoover](#) (September 2018)



Phædra, Alexandre Cabanel, 1880

(A reminder: Prince Hippolytus is the son of Theseus, king of Athens, and the warrior queen Hippolyta—and stepson of Theseus' second wife, Phaedra. Phaedra is obsessed by desire for her stepson, who rejects her and attempts with his fiancée Aricie to flee the kingdom. In desperate anger Phaedra turns to her husband with the fabricated claim that Hippolytus has made amorous advances to her. The outraged Theseus invokes the sea god Neptune, by whose contrivance and power Hippolytus is dragged from his chariot to his death by sea. Overcome by

remorse and by the rage Theseus now directs at her, Phaedra commits suicide.

There are several versions, in theatre and music, of the myth. These two poems, though, are not a revision of the mythical events, but a re-imagining of the two tragic principals' souls.)

Hippolytus

Wait in the temple, Aricie,

My chariot one last time—

Then goodbye to it and to these horses.

They trained me first to hold the reins

And I taught them . . . One

Final drive, then I'll leave them here

Between the temple and the sea.

They never feared the winds before—

Never such careening—

Someone else drives these horses . . .

I have been brave, made

Spring ideals to conquer,
As my father did, the dragons,
To meet full face and only lightly armed
Those monsters that drove fear
Into the bellies of citizens asleep,
I will go forth.

I will go forth,
I will not scream for pain
Nor even because it is unjust;
I tried to save my father's witch
For his sake and the honor of the house
And this is the gods' message . . .

Where is the goddess Diana
Whose forest kept me cool
In fiercest youth?
In the temple stands my love,
She waits for her fate and a prince—
We might have reached the other country,
Borne a clear-eyed son to hunt in forests,
Dream of slaying dragons,

Tell honorable lies

And in the end be caught—or maybe not:

He would escape the terrors,

For him I'd weed the world.

Let me stand up, put up a fight

Or walk into the deep

Outright, alone:

I am prince of Athens,

Son of warriors and thrones,

Beloved of a royal maiden

And of a luckless grandchild of the sun,

Pure of person, promise-keeping—

Whatever I dreamed in the forest

I woke to shoot the doe,

And when I dreamed of breathing fiends

In caverns close to Lethe

Not one of them was base as you!

No, not in this twisted way

To be dragged, to be thrown—

How you etch, familiar reins,

My body's first scars—

Would Aricie love her hunter now?

I am brought low,

Dark waves, swaying envelope,

Unsocketed and pulling arms,

The taste of my own blood . . .

Who is it you drag to ocean?

Who am I about to die?

Dark the ocean and the dwelling under it.

Phaedra to Hippolytus

I

Though magic is lost

I can hear you—

You are running

You are in huntsman's garb

In a forest strangely dated

You are innocent

It is only the arrow

That shoots the doe

You were blameless

As I stood braced—

A stranger—or worse . . .

Would you know me now?

I've discarded charms you know—

The moment's power

Of setting one man

Against the other

Only to be cursed

Next moment

By both—

I drank poison

Was forced to call it honor

I remember the taste . . .

My nurse said

I can do nothing for you

Your ways are tangled

And I'm tired—

She wept for me

And said

I'm an old woman

With need of welcome

Rewards for wisdom

But your hands are empty

Your heart never rests . . .

My husband was gone

Compelled by voyages

And you Hippolytus

Knew the forests

Of a virgin goddess

Repeated your lessons

Of bravery and daring

Within boundaries

Held by loving guardians.

It was a sea-monster

Wounded you in battle

And you go down noble

I go down vengeful
And there's one end of it.

II

What did I want?
What is the name
For such wanting?
To turn my thoughts
Bent secrets
Distressed creatures
Out into the world
Upright as deeds?

Theseus will do it—
My husband
Will reach
Hippolytus
For me.

On his return
I wrought
His self-esteem

To wounded majesty

To fury:

My own queen

My home my throne—

No son of mine—

My son's my own

To punish—

I have the power

I have creatures

Of the sea.

Then his fury

To be wrong

The righteousness

Over again:

My second wife

That queen

Is mine to torture

For unjust murder

Of my only son—

Foreign queens

Have schemes

*To kill the innocent—
My son is gone
It's only right
That Phaedra choose poison
That death be her own . . .*

Through some centuries
I hated myself—
I am horror
I am dishonor
I tore at
My shroud, my hair—
How could Phaedra rest?

One day it came to me
What I had wanted
I wanted you to face me
To know Phaedra—
You turned away
You fled on horseback
Prince waiting to be king
To lead ships

On bright waters

Towards danger

Distant and famous—

Hippolytus

What couldn't you face?

No plea of virtue

No goddess

Could save you

No known instrument

Or skillful wielding

Could save you

Only apprehending

Unfamiliar rhythms

Inventing recognitions

Of other hands

Other minds

Where they were

Vying, lost

Invading

Persistent—

Only a journey

Through forests twisted

Strands unraveling

Outside the temple

Beyond the forest

To your own

Warrior-mother

Your own hands

Yourself . . .

You died accusing

An unknown woman

Cursing her spirit . . .

For centuries

Your cries

Eternally young—

I've been wronged

I am pure

Endured

Harsh taskmasters—

Through centuries

Of silence

No longer fed
By rage or longing
I've grieved you
Your bewildered death
Hippolytus
Son of monster-slayers.

III

Eventually
The shame
All that you named
Sorcery
Mysterious controls
My crown
Persuasions
Access to poison
Fell from me—
Dolorous tapestries . . .

Simplified
Less watchful

Denuded

More merciful

I have become someone

Past caring

What you might think

I have become . . .

With your purity

Through your shield

Heedless of need

Where have you been?

It is good

It is recovery

From some

Estrangement

Of my own

To break the silence . . .

My vision of you

From far and deep within

Begins to dwindle—

Something of me

Is struggling to be new—

Do you remain

Young and unsalvageable

Engulfed by waters?

Do you remain

Astonished

By blemish

Astonished

By solitude

Or questions

Torn and humble?

Something of me

Is glad to leave you

And what I had to be

Ever to have loved you.

Evelyn Hooven graduated from Mount Holyoke College and received her M.A. from Yale University, where she also studied at The Yale School of Drama. A member of the Dramatists' Guild, she has had presentations

of her verse dramas at several theatrical venues, including *The Maxwell Anderson Playwrights Series* in Greenwich, CT (after a state-wide competition) and *The Poet's Theatre* in Cambridge, MA (result of a national competition). Her poems and translations from the French have appeared in *ART TIMES*, *Chelsea*, *The Literary Review*, *THE SHOP: A Magazine of Poetry* (in Ireland), *The Tribeca Poetry Review*, *Vallum* (in Montreal), and other journals, and her literary criticism in Oxford University's *Essays in Criticism*.

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