Grief Lessons

Four Plays by

Euripides

Translated by

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HIPPOLYTOS
PREFACE

“The face as the extreme precariousness of the other…”

The Hippolytos is like Venice. A system of reflections, distorted reflections, reflections that go awry. A system of corridors where people follow one another but never meet, never find the way out. There is no way out, all corridors lead back into the system. Hippolytos wants to be like Artemis, but even in death he is not allowed to see her face. Phaidra wants to be like Hippolytos, but she has not a single conversation with him in the course of the play. What might such a conversation have changed? What does the face matter? Both Hippolytos and Phaidra systematically avoid certain kinds of precariousness. If you asked Hippolytos to name his system he would say “shame.” Oddly, if you asked Phaidra to name her system she would also say “shame.” They do not mean the same thing by this word. Or perhaps they do. Too bad they never talk.

Aidos (“shame”) is a vast word in Greek. Its lexical equivalents include “awe, reverence, respect, self-respect, shamefastness, sense of honor, sobriety, moderation, regard for others, regard for the helpless, compassion, shyness, coyness, scandal, dignity, majesty, Majesty.” Shame vibrates with honor and also with disgrace, with what is chaste and with what is erotic, with coldness and also with blushing. Shame is felt before the eyes of others and also in

facing oneself. To Phaidra most of all, shame is a split emotion. She calls it a pleasure (*430ff*/385ff)* then divides it into two kinds: one good, one bad. Scholars disagree on what she means by this distinction but it is clear she believes shame of the bad kind can ruin her and that she must nullify it at any cost. For Hippolytos shame is simple. He personifies Shame as the goddess who guards his private meadow of virtue and celebrates her in his opening hymn to Artemis (96–106/73–78):

For you
  this crown
  from a field uncut
O queen I wove and bring—
from a virgin field where no shepherd dares to graze his animal,
no knife comes near it—
  field uncut,
just a bee dozing by in spring.
And Shame
  waters it with river dews.

Shame is a system of exclusions and purity that subtends Hippolytos’ religion. Interesting, then, to notice the presence of a bee within his private religious space. For there is some evidence that the bee, in its role of busy pollinator, was associated with Aphrodite’s cult. And you will hear the chorus make a direct comparison between Aphrodite and the bee later in the play, in a choral ode celebrating the unavoidability of Eros (580–636/525–564). So you might begin to wonder about Hippolytos’ simplicity. Consider also the fact that *aidos* turns up in Greek lyric poetry as

*Please note that the first set of figures given refers to the line numbers of the present translation, the second to those of the Greek text.
a component of sexual pleasure, e.g. in a passage of Pindar where Aphrodite unites two lovers in this way:

silverfooted Aphrodite
shed seductive shame/charming coyness (aidos)
on their sweet bed

(Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, 9.12)

And the fact that in epic poetry the word *aidos* is used in the plural (*aidoia*) as a euphemism for the sexual organs (*Iliad*, 2.262). These sexual and erotic strands form only part of the word *aidos*, but it is a part that Hippolytus edits out. He edits Artemis too. Her sexlessness reminds him of his own chastity; he idolizes it. Her prestige as mistress of the hunt coincides with his favorite activity; he makes it a form of worship. Her epithet *parthenos* (“virgin, maiden, girl”) is used by him as if it named Artemis to a different species than the female race that he denounces (“this counterfeit thing—woman?” [684ff/616ff]). He seems to want to place Artemis, and himself, in a special third gender—the translucent gender—unpolluted by flesh or change.

But, as the chorus remind us in their entrance song (153ff/121ff), Artemis has much to do with flesh and change. She is, for example, patron goddess of the blood and pain of childbirth, commonly invoked by women in travail. Could Hippolytus admit this aspect of her? Hippolytos’ favorite adjective for the Artemis-atmosphere in which he wishes to exist is *akeratos*, “uncut, unharvested, untouched, inviolate, pure, perfect.” When he uses *akeratos* of Artemis’ meadow he means that the grass is literally “uncut” but there is a reference to sexual purity too. For the adjective could connote virgin intactness, and virgins did cut their hair ritually at the time of marriage. Artemis will bestow a crowning irony on Hippolytus at the end of the play when she
promises him, as he lies dying, a kind of perverse immortality (1528–1536/1424–1429):

And to you, my poor catastrophe,  
against such evils  
I shall give the greatest honors in Trozen.  
Unyoked girls before their marriage  
will cut their hair for you.  
For all time to come  
you will reap the great grief of their tears.  
Girls will make songs to tell your story  
and Phaidra’s love for you will not go unremembered.

Hippolytos’ fame is eternally entrusted to girls on the brink of sexual initiation and intertwined with Phaidra’s passion. How very odd for him.

Gods are big. Gods can enlarge us. Artemis’ view of what’s good for Hippolytos is much bigger than his own; her view of sexuality sees virtue in virginity and marriage both. Flesh and change make sense to her as part of the workings of necessity, beyond human control. Hippolytos’ utter ignorance of such things is made clear in the first scene of the play when he closes his prayer to Artemis with the words (119/88):

So may my finish-line match my start.

He is using a metaphor from horse racing and I suppose his intention is to pray for a life of consistent purity from beginning to end. But what beginning, what end? Whose life can end as it began, as if it were a thing apart from time, as if flesh did not change? Who lives apart from time except the gods? Perhaps Hippolytos thinks he is a god. If so, his end shows him he is not.
But since his end is engineered by Aphrodite, it does in a way match his start. We all begin in an act of Aphrodite.

“Aphrodite’s breath is felt / on everything there is.” (633–634/560–562). Aphrodite is the name for all that Hippolytus wants to edit out of his view of reality. But this goddess, who introduces the play, designs the action and is present in every choral ode, cannot be got rid of. She begins the play by saying:

Much among mortals I am....

This is a literal version. It sounds lame. The Greek word for “much” (polle) is untranslatable, because it has come over into English as a prefix for any concept involving muchness—polyphony, polygamy, etc. “Much” is an ordinary word. “Poly-” is a prefix that can turn up anywhere. She is not claiming omnipotence but rather universal access. Access that cuts across certain lines of morality or moral sentiment we might prefer the gods to respect. What do Euripidean gods respect? Mainly their own prerogatives. How does this affect human beings? Always badly. What attitude does Euripides take to the matter? Hard to construe—something between resignation and satire. He seems to conceive it as his task to render the mentality and customs of each god as if he were a travel writer describing a foreign country. Each has its wines and weather, its masterpieces and tortures, its quaint notion of justice. All repay study but none is entirely predictable. “Gods should have more wisdom than men,” says Hippolytus’ servant in a peevish prayer to Aphrodite (152/119). But in fact she is just as wise as she needs to be. She knows how to get what she wants.

What of Phaidra? A tricky soul to capture, apparently; Euripides wrote two plays about her. This is the second. The first may have been called Phaidra or it may have been called Hippolytus Veiled. The Byzantine scholar Aristophanes tells us that the second
play “corrects what was unseemly and worthy of rebuke” in the first. No one knows exactly what he means, as the first play doesn't exist except for nineteen short fragments and two line-paraphrases. People conjecture the first play may have depicted an aggressive and lascivious Phaidra, rather like Potiphar’s wife in Genesis or Sthenoia in Greek legend, while the second tries to balance good and evil, moving Aphrodite into position as pivot of everybody’s downfall. Pivot but not cause. Phaidra’s victimization by the goddess of love has a domino effect on the other characters, as all are swept along in Aphrodite’s revenge, yet each chooses and commits actions that collaborate with the divine plan and destroy another human. A large question of free will and determinism comes to mind. Euripides seems inclined to lead us into the middle of this question and leave us there. It makes me think of a hardboiled egg. Cut it open, you see an exquisite design—the yellow circle perfectly suspended within the white oval. The two shapes are disjunct and dissimilar yet construct one form. They do not contradict or cancel out, they interexist. Can you say one is prior? Circle as distorted oval? Oval as imperfect circle? Rather they each follow the other in a perfect system called egg.

Names, too, are a kind of system. We have already noted Hippolytos’ prayer, “So may my finish-line match my start.” Here is another way it comes true. His name means “loosed by horses.” “Loosed” in the sense “unbound, unfastened, undone” and also “dissolved, destroyed, pulled apart” and also “opened, released, set free” and also “atoned for, paid off, made good.” Aphrodite’s justice requires that the man who refused the yoke of marriage should be dragged to death by the yoke of his own horses. Artemis’ justice rewards Hippolytos for his pains by giving him a place in the wedding ritual, where brides are “loosed” from their virginity. You can see a kind of elegance in it, a kind of lesson. Yet you could also ask, Whose interest is served by attaching this
lesson to Hippolytos from the day he was born, whose system is at stake and how could we ever grasp it?

There are days it is foggy in Venice. You cannot quite see the person you are following. But you can hear the feet going TAP TAP TAP away down the corridor. TAP TAP TAP there he goes ahead of you. TAP TAP TAP or is she behind you? TAP TAP TAP perhaps you are following yourself.
NURSE
Relax. I’ll do it right.
All I need is you, Aphrodite, queen of the sea:
work with me!
My other plans I’ll tell to friends inside.

[exit Nurse into palace]

CHORUS (first stasimon)
Eros, Eros, deep down the eyes
you distill longing,
sliding
sweet pleasure
into the soul where you make war:
I pray you never come at me with evil,
break my measure.
No weapon,
not fire,
not stars,
has more power
than Aphrodite’s
shot from the hands
of Eros, child of Zeus.

In vain, in vain, beside Apollo’s river
and his shrine
do Greeks
slaughter oxen.

Yet that tyrant god who has the key
to Aphrodite’s chambers of love,
that god Eros
we do not worship,
though he plunders
mortal men
and sends them
through all
manner of misfortune
when he comes.

Wild little horse of Oichalia
unbroken in bed,
never yoked to a man,
never yoked to marriage,
from her father’s house,
like a running naiad,
like a girl gone mad,
in blood,
in smoke,
in a wedding of murder,
to Herakles
Aphrodite yoked her,
Aphrodite gave her,
O
bride of sorrow!

O holy wall of Thebes,
O river mouth of Dirke,
you too could bear witness
how Aphrodite comes on.
To flaming thunder
she gave Semele
as a bride
and laid
the girl to bed
   in bloody death.
     Aphrodite’s breath is felt
     on everything there is.
Then like a bee
she
flicks away.

PHAIDRA [standing near the palace door]
   Silence, women. I am destroyed!

CHORUS
   Why? What’s happening in the house?

PHAIDRA
   Wait, let me hear the talk inside.

CHORUS
   This is a bad beginning.

PHAIDRA
   IO MOI AIAI! [cry]
   Misery.
   Oh my misery.

CHORUS
   What are you saying, why are you crying out?
   What fear sweeps over you?

PHAIDRA
   I am lost. Come stand by the doors—
   listen!—someone screaming in the house!