Sex v Sport in Hippolytus

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Tempora mutantur. In the early 1960's, when I first began studying Greek tragedy, psychological interpretations were the fashion. *Oedipus Rex* was, quite simply, a dramatization of the "Oedipus Complex". And Euripides' *Hippolytus* was, as W. S. Barrett, in his great Oxford edition, put it, "the tragedy of a young man who has set himself against any contact with sexual love, and who in the excess of his intolerant contempt for it will bring himself to ruin." H. D. F. Kitto saw Hippolytus as "obsessed with virginity," and the play as a kind of moral lesson that "an unbalanced mind is unsafe."

Hippolytus' "problem," his seeming antipathy to all women, also gave rise to a lot of sniggering and the tacit conclusion that he must be homosexual. It took more than a dozen years of re-reading the play to discover that this interpretation was quite distorted. If Euripides had really wanted us to think Hippolytus unbalanced, he might have said so explicitly. Indeed, the only "perversion" confronting the reader was the pseudo-psychological problem invented by the critics.

It is of course true that Hippolytus furiously rejects Phaedra's amorous advances (as conveyed by the Nurse). But she is, after all, his step-mother! This proposition quite understandably shocks and angers him, causing him to explode into a virulent tirade against all women (lines 616 ff). But surely his rage is not all that excessive under the circumstances. If any of the characters is emotionally disturbed, it is Phaedra herself. We know from the prologue that Aphrodite has driven her mad. There is, I think, another possible explanation for Hippolytus' seemingly odd behaviour.

The pursuit of glory

When Theseus returns from his long journey and hears that Hippolytus has allegedly "assaulted" his wife, he curses his son to death before even confronting him. When the young man rushes in to speak to his father, Theseus is still in a grief-stricken fury. Upset and off-balance, Hippolytus defends himself in a awkward, rather priggish manner. He protests (with great pride) that he is still a virgin. Even his soul (*psyche*) is virginal (line 1006). And yet the ancient Greeks had no particular reverence for (male) chastity. They had "ascetics," but — as we shall soon see — in quite a different domain.

Despite all protestations, however, Hippolytus still cannot allay Theseus' wrath. In a final attempt to prove his innocence, he confesses his all-consuming passion in life (lines 1016-17):

What I want is to be champion in the Greek games;
I'm quite content to have second place in the state . . .

However odd this protest may seem to our modern sensibilities, it would have been perfectly plausible to Euripides' audience. The ancient Greeks set the pursuit of sporting glory far above the pursuit of women. Their enormous admiration for athletic achievements is evident as early as Homer. We recall the words of *Odyssey* 8.147-8: "There is no greater glory than what a man can win by strength of hands or swiftness of foot." Viewed from this perspective, Hippolytus has a legitimate, indeed heroic preoccupation.

Hippolytus in training

Then as now, abstinence was often considered a vital element in a sportsman's regimen. Our word "ascetic," which has a general connotation, comes from the Greek *asketikos* which refers specifically to an athlete in strict training. This may explain an earlier speech by Theseus which has puzzled scholars. As he rails at his son, he suddenly says mockingly, "You so-called holy man! I suppose you'll brag about abstaining from meat, too!" The imputation that Hippolytus acts sanctimonious because he is a member of the abstemious Orphic sect has always seemed irrelevant, if not incomprehensible. But Theseus is being sarcastic. Would it not be more likely, if his son is indeed a vegetarian, that Hippolytus was following the dietary training rules of the most fanatic Pythagoreans? (We tend to forget that the great Pythagoras was not only a philosopher and mathematician, but also a scientific coach-trainer of athletes).

Throughout the play, we are constantly reminded of Hippolytus' deep dedication to training his horses for competition. We first see him as he returns from hunting. He immediately orders that his horses be prepared so he can work them out (*gymnazein*). Later, the chorus remarks on how frequently the race-track has reverberated with the hoofbeats of the young man's team being exercised (1133 ff).

Hippolytus' very first speech in the play is a salutation to Artemis, his patron goddess. He concludes with a metaphorical reference to life as a chariot race, praying that he may "reach the finish line" as successfully as he has begun the race (lines 86-87). It is, of course, a supreme irony that Hippolytus will meet his death that very day in a chariot accident. The same horses that he so devotedly trained will run out of control when frightened by the monstrous bull from the sea.

This vase, painted in South Italy about 100 years after the first performance, was inspired by Euripides' Hippolytus.

From a production at Epidaurus.

Phaedra a good sport

We have observed, then, that Hippolytus' defence of himself to Theseus is no mere piece of rhetoric. He prefers sports in the company of his friends to any association with women. Is this so unusual among adolescents? Do not many young men love sport to the exclusion of all else? What the nurse says of Phaedra is actually truer of Hippolytus: "your case is not really out of the ordinary" (437). We must always bear in mind that Hippolytus is young. He and his sports-loving agemates are mere teen-agers (Cf. *neoi homelikes* 1098; also 1180). And it is not just Phaedra he ignores. Hippolytus is totally indifferent to the many local girls who desperately yearn to marry him (1140-41).

Moreover, the pseudo-medical theory expounded by many puritanical modern coaches, namely that sexual relations are harmful to athletic performance, was also current in antiquity. We find no less an author than Plato writing that most of the greatest Olympic champions owe their success not merely to skill, but the fact that during the whole period of their training, they "never touched a woman." (*Laws* VIII.8.839E-840A).

Yet there is an additional, somewhat curious, dimension to all this. For Euripides has created a Phaedra who is herself obsessed with sport! But her case *is* unusual, and for many reasons. To begin with, she associates sport with sex. This is no idle psychological speculation, but explicitly stated in her speeches. She first appears on stage raving deliriously. She passionately longs (*eramai*) to go hunting in the woods (where Hippolytus is) or else ride wild Venetian horses (as Hippolytus does). There are clear erotic references in lines 210-11 and 221; and the phrase for "breaking" horses at 283 was a traditional sexual metaphor — as old as Anacreon in the sixth century.

Richmond Lattimore has suggested that because Phaedra is not an Athenian but rather a Cretan girl (with Spartan upbringing) she feels frustrated at being confined to the palace, and longs for her earlier, vigorous outdoor life. Lattimore's essential point is that young Phaedra and young Hippolytus have a great deal in common, which would make them an ideal couple if only fate (or in this case Aphrodite) had allowed. This unusual interpretation might perhaps be bolstered by some of the points made in this paper.

Athletics vs. Sex

I would not argue that the recognition of Hippolytus' athletic dedication radically changes our concept of the play. Whether sportsman or prude, he still is essentially an innocent victim in a tragedy whose major theme, as epitomised by Bernard Knox, is "the futility of the moral choice." This essay aims merely to point out that sport in Greek life (and hence in Greek tragedy) was far more important than we often realize today. In certain modern intellectual circles sport may frequently be looked down on, but it was an integral and respected part of Greek education, life and literature. Young Euripides was himself an enthusiastic wrestler; Plato was a rather famous one. A central recurring metaphor in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is that of the *pankration*, an especially brutal form of no-holds-barred Olympic combat. In his *Electra*, Sophocles has a character deliver a long, detailed (though fictitious) account of how Orestes took first place in every athletic event at the Pythian Games, only to be "killed" — as Hippolytus really is — in a chariot accident.

One of the vilest insults one Greek could hurl at another was that he was "no athlete". This remark so infuriates Odysseus that he leaps up to prove his prowess to the Phaeacians. And Pentheus in the *Bacchae* will soon rue having sneered at Dionysos for looking like "no wrestler." To return again to the *Hippolytus*. The great German philosopher Hegel defined Greek tragedy as the "conflict of two equally strong forces." At first glance this might not seem to apply to the Euripidean drama we have been discussing. But on a certain level, momentarily setting aside Aphrodite's curse, we might view young Hippolytus as a tragic hero, trapped in the magnetic field between two equally powerful forces: Phaedra . . . and Olympia.

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Farewell scene: Artemis and Hippolytus. The young Vanessa Redgrave as Artemis.