

## **PHÈDRE Study Guide**

By Jean-Baptiste Racine,  
Translation and adaptation by Paul Schmidt  
Further adaptation by JoAnne Akalaitis

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Compiled by Celise Kalke with Charles Newell, Cree Rankin, Jeff Brown, Traci Brandt,  
Rob Cohn, Ned Noyes, Deborah Wolfson, Steve Gilpin and Omid Nolley

## **Section One: Basic Materials**

### **Racine's *Phèdre*: Brief Synopsis**

**Setting:** Trozen, a Grecian stronghold near the sea. Childhood home of Hippolytus and Theseus.

**Situation:** Theseus, King of Athens, has been missing for six months. His wife, Phèdre and his legitimate children are under the protection of Theseus' son, Hippolytus. Hippolytus is the son of Theseus, King of Athens, and Antiope, a famous Amazon warrior.

#### **Act 1: Confession**

Hippolytus famed throughout Greece for his aversion to women, confesses to his trusted friend, Theramenes his love for the Athenian princess, Aricia. She had six brothers, who were all killed by Theseus in order to consolidate his power in Athens. Hippolytus worries that his father will forbid the match, and also feels like he can't move forward with courting Aricia until Theseus' fate is known.

When Enone, Phèdre's trusted servant, comes out and says the ill Phèdre wants to see the son, the men agree to leave. In her desire to preserve the dying Phèdre, Enone extracts a confession from her mistress that the Goddess Venus' foul curse of incestuous passion that has been killing her. The scene is set when news of Phaedra's husband, Theseus' death reaches their ears.

#### **Act 2: Revelation**

Hippolytus reveals his love to Aricia and his design to perhaps reign with her, winning in turn her reciprocation. Phèdre, who on the other hand seeks Hippolytus in alliance to defend of her son's claim to the throne against Aricia, (with Enone's encouragement), reveals her love for him.

Meanwhile, rumors of Theseus still being alive persists.

#### **Act 3: Misinterpretation**

With the people of Athens choosing her son as King, Phèdre hopes to win over Hippolytus, if not by love, then by the allure of the scepter. Theseus, however is still alive (having escaped from the underworld where he was held captive) and is coldly welcomed home by both his wife and stepson. Phèdre, believing that Hippolytus has already disclosed all by the look of Hippolytus' bold cold countenance, gives her blessing to Enone to tell Theseus whatever lie will preserve Phèdre's honor.

#### **Act 4: Accusation**

Enone accuses Hippolytus of attempting to rape Phèdre and Theseus in his rage banishes and curses him to the wrath of Neptune, God of the Sea. Hippolytus in vain defense confesses instead to loving Aricia and this news stops the jealous Phèdre from divulging the truth to save Hippolytus from his father's revenge. The Act closes with Phèdre condemning Enone because Phèdre is racked with guilt, shame and sense of sin.

#### **Act 5: Dénouement**

Theramenes reports that Hippolytus, after arranging for Aricia to meet him in exile, is attacked by a monster (half bull half dragon) sent by Neptune from the sea. Hippolytus kills the monster, but his terrified horses drag the young man to his death. Aricia arrived just in time to mourn her lover's death. Enone extinguishes herself under the waves after suffering her mistress' denunciations of her doings. Phèdre poisons herself and likewise dies

but only after clearing the innocence of Hippolytus to Theseus. Theseus agrees to honor Hippolytus' dying request and adopt Aricia as his heir.

Wayne A. Chapman, PhD,  
University of Arkansas at Little Rock  
Adapted for Court Theatre by Celise Kalke

## **JoAnne Akalaitis, Director**

From her work with the experimental theater group Mabou Mines to classic texts such as *Life Is A Dream*, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, *Trojan Women*, and *The Iphigenia Cycle*, JoAnne Akalaitis has demonstrated a distinctive directorial voice and sharp sense of stage rhythm.

She is a truly versatile director, as at home with Motown—"I heard it through the grapevine"—as Art Music. She is equally at home using movement, text and music to create theater. She is also as comfortable creating original work as directing avant-garde writers and classic texts.

All of Ms. Akalaitis' work at Court Theatre has featured distinctive directorial touches: including the introduction of the character of the Kafka, the use of post-modern props like Diet Coke cans and Tylenol bottles, and a "riot grill" Iphigenia growling into a microphone. In *Phedre*, Akalaitis moves closer than with her other Court aesthetics to a clean modern aesthetic. It even uses the original French in the body of the piece, challenging the limits of translation. In other words, in moments of high passion, the original text emerges from the English.

Even though her work lately has mainly been on classic texts, Akalaitis began work as a creator of original work with the company Mabou Mines. Akalaitis' resume is an incredible list of firsts for a female director. She also often works with female designers and assistant directors. She trail-blazed through the male dominated stages of most of America's repertory theaters in the 1980s. Through definitive productions, she claimed plays dominated by male characters such as *Henry IV Part 1 and 2* as her own. In addition to these breakthroughs, she has also "discovered" or championed some difficult classic playwrights, notably Genet and Büchner, in American theaters.

At Court Theatre, Akalaitis has directed four productions previous to *Phedre: Mary Stuart, In The Penal Colony, The Iphigenia Cycle* and *Life's a Dream*. These productions have come about in a large part because of JoAnne having been awarded a National Theatre Artist Residency Award from Theater Communications Group and the Pew Charitable Trust.

-by Celise Kalke

Quotes:

"The challenge comes from what I want these plays to do to the audience who comes to see them. Theater should not be a duty, something that starts when the lights go down and stops when they come back up and you walk out feeling "that was nice." I want it to start as soon as you arrive; it confronts you and drags you into its midst and infects you. It should stimulate us and provoke us and we go away fighting with each other about what it meant."

"From the start, I don't want it [*The Iphigenia Cycle*] to be like a museum—unless it's the Museum of Science and Industry where you get to put your hands all over it and be part of it."

"There is something very exciting about the humanity on stage, the pure exercise of composition, the thrill of arranging people. There is something in us that responds to a mass of people moving in an absolutely unified way. When I was 13 years old I remember seeing *An American in Paris* in Chicago. All my childhood I was obsessed with Hollywood musicals—I saw them over and over again."

JoAnne Akalaitis, Court Theatre newsletter

Akalaitis demonstrates her unique approach to directing in [Women Stage Directors Speak](#):

For me, doing theatre is very much about the process. I love rehearsal. I love it because rehearsal is where you get lost. In rehearsal is where you fall into big black holes. You fall into that hole and you're covered with mud and slime, and then you lift your nostrils up to try and breathe, and someone steps on your head, and then you have one finger that's crawling out of the well and someone steps on your hand and it starts to bleed, and then you think you have a bit of a glimmer of an idea, and you fall down and have amnesia. It is very much about struggle, and not knowing, and opening the door and there's another door, and opening that door and there's a brick wall. It's about getting lost, but if you are willing to get lost, you might find a way out. Then again, you might not; there's no guarantee about any of this. It can all be a disaster, but it's very interesting. I think it's a life-enhancing activity. It's a spiritual activity and it's an activity that perhaps broadens communication. It deepens the understanding of what community is because certainly one of the most powerful aspects of theatre is that it is a communal event. You're never lonely if you're in the theatre. So the process is important to me.

### **Creative writing ideas:**

What is an obsession? Describe an obsession you have had/or can imagine: what can an obsession drive you to do? How does an obsession make you feel?

Think about a time when you were in the grip of an obsession (about work, about love, about clothes, or anything else you can become obsessed with). How does it feel physically to be in the grip of an obsession? Now imagine you are Phèdre obsessed with Hippolytus, and write her story.

### **Discussion questions:**

Looking at the synopsis of Phèdre, how does obsession work in this story? Who is obsessed with whom?

Looking at the synopsis, who is in love with whom in the story? Is there a difference between love and obsession?

Have you seen any subtitled films? Or TV shows? How do subtitles work? Think about what Paul Schmidt's challenges were in relationship to film subtitles: What is their job? What is the job of a translator?

What are some other love stories that involve older women and younger men?

The Greek philosopher observed that Aristotle observed that "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude." What is the difference between ancient Greek tragedy and Greek tragedy as it is used by contemporary authors? Are there any tragedies in TV and film? Do contemporary authors write tragedy? Why or why not?

Who is the main character of *Phèdre*? Is it Phèdre (the title character), Hippolytus or Theseus? If it's Phèdre (the title character) why does the play start with a scene between Hippolytus and Theramenes?

### **Activities:**

From the *Phèdre* rehearsals: Put on a song the class knows – or an Oldie like "Respect" or "I heard it through the Grapevine." Ask a student to be the choreographer. Now everyone has to "follow" the choreographer. After a while, switch choreographers. This is one of the ensemble building devices used by JoAnne Akalaitis to build her company.

Walk around the room with the whole class. Ask each student to pick someone else. Keep that person in your line of sight. How close or far can you get? Think of a specific obsession while you do the exercise.

Think about an obsession or pick an obsession with your scene partner. Then improvise a scene around your obsession. Ask your classmates to guess what your obsession was. If you have time, do a second scene – this time where one partner has an obsession and in the course of the scene the other partner has to force the first person to tell their secret.

Another improvised scene: confess your obsession to the person you are obsessed with/the person who controls what you are obsessed by. How is this different from just admitting the obsession?

## **Section Two: The Production**

### **Discussion questions:**

Compare the interviews of JoAnne Akalaitis and Jenny Bacon. What are their different points of view on love in *Phèdre*?

Looking at the costume sketches, what kind of play do you think is going to be performed? Keeping in mind that all the costumes are shades of green, what does the color green mean to you?

If you saw the production, what kind of play did you think you were going to see from the set?

### **Activity:**

Schmidt/Akalaitis/the Company and Racine Working on a scene, from page to stage. Three versions of this exercise follow on the next five pages.

In it you will find the following:

- French to literal translation
- Richard Wilbur's translation using rhymed couplets
- Paul Schmidt translation into the American vernacular
- Version(s) adapted by JoAnne Akalaitis for Court's production (except in the first exercise, which wasn't adapted from the Schmidt)
- An opportunity to write your own version!

We hope that this exercise will both be fun, and capture the vital role of translation (of all elements but in this case the text) as a means of making "classic" theatre exciting and vital to a contemporary audience!

This exercise is about entering into the adaptation process for Court's production of *Phèdre*. Therefore, the exercise starts with Racine's French text. But you don't need to speak French to do the exercise—in fact you may be more creative if you don't!

**Act II, Scène iii**

**French text**

**HIPPOLYTE**

569 Cependant vous sortez. Et je pars; et j'[ignore](#)

570 Si je n'offense point les charmes que j'[adore](#)!

571 J'[ignore](#) si ce coeur que je laisse en vos mains...

**ARICIE**

572 Partez prince, et suivez vos généreux [desseins](#):

573 Rendez de mon pouvoir Athènes tributaire.

574 J'accepte tous les dons que vous me voulez faire.

575 Mais cet empire enfin si grand, si glorieux,

576 N'est-ce pas de vos présents le plus cher à mes [yeux](#)

**Wilbur**

**HIPPOLYTUS**

But now you'll leave me! And I shall sail before

I learn my fate from her whom I adore,

And in whose hand I leave this heart of mine. . . .

**ARICIA**

Go, Prince; pursue your generous design.

Make Athens subject to my royal sway.

All of your gifts I gladly take this day,

But that great empire, glorious though it be,

In not the offering most dear to me.

**Schmidt**

**HIPPOLYTUS**

(beat) Before you leave. . . have I offended you?

The passion that I feel—

**ARICIA**

There is no need  
for words. You offer me a kingdom, Prince. . .

I prefer your heart.

**Your version**

**HIPPOLYTUS**

**ARICIA**



## **Act II, Scene V**

### **French text**

#### **HIPPOLYTE**

609 Des droits de ses enfants une mère jalouse  
610 Pardonne rarement au [fils](#) d'une autre épouse;  
611 Madame, je le sais ; les soupçons importuns  
612 Sont d'un second [hymen](#) les fruits les plus communs.  
613 Tout autre aurait pour moi pris les mêmes ombrages.  
614 Et j'en aurais peut-être essuyé plus d'outrages.

#### **PHÈDRE**

615 Ah! seigneur! que le ciel, j'ose ici l'attester,  
616 De cette loi commune a voulu m'excepter !  
617 Qu'un soin bien différent me [trouble](#) et me dévore!

### **Wilbur**

#### **HIPPOLYTUS**

It's common, Madam, that a mother spites  
The stepson who might claim her children's rights.  
I know that in a second marriage-bed  
Anxiety and mistrust are often bred.  
Another woman would have wished me ill  
As you have, and perhaps been harsher still.

#### **PHÈDRE**

Ah, Prince! By what a different care am I beset!

### **Schmidt**

#### **HIPPOLYTUS**

I understand.  
You worry for your son, you wonder now  
where I fit in. Of course this happens;  
a step-son is rarely his step-mother's pride.

#### **PHÈDRE**

No, that isn't it.

### **JoAnne Akalaitis adaptation no. 1**

#### **HIPPOLYTUS**

I understand.  
Theseus' amorous adventures  
created a dangerous situation.  
I'm older than your son, and you're jealous  
of his rights. You mistrusted me with good  
reason. Most women, in your position,  
would have been more cruel.

#### **PHÈDRE**

No, that isn't it.

### **JoAnne Akalaitis adaptation no. 2**

#### **HIPPOLYTUS**

I think you hate me, and I don't hate you.

Theseus has many sons, but Athens only one crown.  
It's only natural for you to want it for your son.  
Most women, in your position,  
Would have been more cruel.

**PHÈDRE**

No, that isn't it.

**Your version:  
HIPPOLYTUS**

**PHÈDRE**

**Act I, Scene III**

**French Text**

**OENONE**

251 Oublions-les madame; et qu'à tout l'avenir

252 Un [silence](#) éternel [cache](#) ce souvenir.

**Wilbur**

**OENONE**

Dear Queen, forget it; to the end of time

Let silence shroud the memory of that crime.

**Schmidt**

**ONONE**

Forget your mother. The less we say the better.

**Akalaitis version 1**

**ENONE**

Forget your creepy mother and her lust for the bull. The less we say the better.

**Akalaitis version 2**

**ENONE**

The curse of Venus has run it's course.

Surely your mother's love for Neptune's bull

and her son the minotaur satisfied the Goddess' rage.

The less we say now the better.

**Your version:**

**ENONE**

### **Section Three: Racine**

#### **Creative writing ideas:**

Imagine that you are Racine preparing for an opening night. Keep in mind that Racine wrote directly for the King of France. How does this make you feel as Racine? What are you nervous about? How do you make SURE the King will like your play?

What forms of poetry use rhymes? Songs?

Improvise poetry with rhyme. You could start with *Roses are Red*, or a simple aabb structure. Then abab.

Write about betrayal – a fictional betrayal or a betrayal from your own life. Beyond the experience of the event, think about “pride” and “honor” when writing.

#### **Discussion questions:**

How was Racine’s life similar or different to that of other famous playwrights (Molière and Shakespeare for example)?

What does your class mean by “honor”? After trying to define it – ask them how they feel about tipping? Or behavior in the halls. What is honorable in high-school? What do you mean by reputation? What would you do to keep a good reputation intact?

Scholars say that Racine’s work is all about combining a rigid form with passion. From doo-wop lyrics to other forms of poetry to some films, can you think of other pieces that keep to rigid rules while showing very passionate stories? Do some TV shows and dramas pull this off? What about music lyrics?

How does betrayal work in *Phèdre*? Can you think of a similar situation that happened in your own life?

Is it wrong to contemplate immoral acts? Is it the thought or the action that makes a person guilty?

How did you feel watching *Phèdre*? What different emotions did you see on the stage? What was the emotional high point of the show?

Discuss honor as it relates to the dynamic between Hippolytus and Theseus, or Aricia and Hippolytus.

#### **Activities:**

Walking around the room, think about the word betrayal. Say it out loud to yourself. Now stop in place, and make up or find a gesture that to you expresses the meaning of the word.

Improvise a scene with the following scenario:

One sibling hurts a second sibling. The first sibling then pretends to be hurt him/herself, and lies to the parent to avoid getting into trouble.

Now make up your own situation with this form of betrayal. How does it feel?

## Section Four: Mythological background

### Creative writing ideas:

Using the Glossary as a starting point, look up the following Greek mythological characters. Now write a short story where one of them is the main character.

Aphrodite/Venus, Goddess of Love

Posiedon/Neptune, Ruler of the Seas

Heliuss, the sun

Phèdre

Minos, Phaedra's father

Ariadne

The Minotaur

Crete, Phaedra's childhood home

Theseus

Amazons

Using the family tree included in the packet as inspiration, make a family tree of all the stories in the play. Remember that they are all descended from Gods, and are mostly related to each other (since Theseus is the son of Neptune and Phaedra is a granddaughter of Jupiter, and Jupiter and Neptune were brothers).

Imagine you are a god, handing out a curse. Which God are you, and why? Who do you curse, and why?

Write a story based on another episode from the life of Theseus. Make sure you incorporate the other characters from Phèdre.

Write a story about Theseus killing the Minotaur. Is Phèdre in the story? Was Hippolytus born yet? What is Ariadne like? What is the Minotaur like?

Write an alternate play from the servants' point of view – starring Ismene, Panope, Theramenes, and Aenone. What do they talk about backstage? Who do they get information from?

Write a scene where Venus (who cursed Phèdre) and Neptune (who kills Hippolytus) discuss the events of *Phèdre*.

This is another exercise done by all the actors in *Phèdre*: Think of a character in the play. Where were they born? What have they done in their life? What are their passions and dreams? Write their story!

### Discussion questions:

What is the difference between religions with one God and many Gods? How do many Gods affect the world of Phèdre?

Does Fate determine the path of your life? Do you believe that Phèdre was cursed to live out her family's history of tragic obsession, or could she have prevented it? Were the Gods responsible for the events of the play, or the humans?

### Activities:

Two super heroes are selected. Without touching each other, they engage in a power struggle. In the course of the improv, they have to let the class know what their powers are, and come to a logical end.

Have the students construct an improv – the final line of which is “I’m not responsible, I’m cursed.”

First have the students move in space. Then ask them to imagine that they are a God – what domain do they like. How does this new power affect their movement and posture? Have everybody guess what other people’s powers are.

Play a game like charades, but using Greek mythological characters.

## **Section Five: Resources**

### **Web Links and resources:**

Racine's text in French, in an easy to navigate format.

<http://www.cla.sc.edu/fren/faculty/normanb/racine/phedre/phedre1.htm>

The life and adventures of Theseus, including animated cartoons (does not include pictures)

<http://www.mythweb.com/heroes/theseus/theseus10.html>

For electronic versions of many of the materials in this Study Guide, please see Court's *Playnotes Online* section of the web site for *Phèdre*. These *Playnotes Online* will be posted by September 14, 2002.

<http://www.courttheatre.org>.

This excellent site out of the University of Arkansas contains a small film clip of a French production of *Phèdre*.

<http://waynesweb.ualr.edu/Scholars/Phaedra%20Plot.htm>

### **Books:**

#### **Translations of the Play**

*Phèdre*, by Racine, translated by Paul Schmidt

This translation is not yet published. For a copy, contact Celise Kalke (Court resident dramaturg) and she can email a copy. Or contact the Helen Merrill Agency in New York City at [info@hmlartists.com](mailto:info@hmlartists.com).

*Phèdre*, by Racine, translated by Ted Hughes

*Phaedra*, by Racine, translated by Richard Wilbur

#### **Other plays dealing with the *Phèdre* story**

*Hippolytus* by Euripides

*Phaedra's Love* by Sarah Kane

*Hippolytus Temporizes* by HD

*Phaedra* by Seneca

#### **About Racine**

*On Racine* by Roland Barthes

*Ancients Against Moderns* by Joan DeJean

#### **About/Inspired Greek Mythology**

*The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea* by Mary Renault

These two books make up a page-turning fictionalization of the life of Theseus.

*The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* by Roberto Calasso, Tim Parks (Translator)