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Edited by Rosy Colombo

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DELIA GAMBELLI*

The Nurse in Racine's *Phèdre*. Between Imitation and Innovation

Abstract

When attempting any mythological interpretation of Racine's tragedies, consultation of their sources is a necessity: in the case of *Phèdre* the first works to be examined must clearly be those of Euripides and Seneca. However, even a meticulously close comparative reading of the play with its Greek and Latin predecessors does not end with the identification and analysis of the variants introduced by Racine in this epitome of seventeenth-century French tragedy in relation to the works of the Anciens. The intention here is that of examining the underlying motifs and the play of signification which these variants instigate. One of the most significant elements in such an analysis here is undeniably the role of the Nurse, where Racine operates unexpected differences when compared to his models. Although he keeps the indispensable dramaturgical features already present in his sources, here the Nurse does not simply embody the function of confidante and then bad counsellor, but becomes a character in the round, with her own name, C enone, and with her own destiny. Above all it is the boundaries of her dialogue with Ph edre that change. Even allowing for the fact that in the first scene of Act I, during a sudden hesitation, the dialogue becomes a monologue, and that in the end Ph edre spurns C enone, accusing her of being a bribed courtesan and a flatterer, during most of the action their voices blend to the point of almost seeming an interior monologue. What is even more fascinating is the space dedicated to C enone's suicide and its proximity to that of Ph edre when these events are recounted by the other characters. In this way it is the figure of the Nurse which becomes the moving force of innovation when compared to the ancient versions while the inevitable fascination of these sources never slackens its hold on Racine's original project.

KEYWORDS: *Ph edre*; Racine; nurse; French drama; classical reception; tragedy

The dramatic production of seventeenth-century France always stages a challenge, motivated by the need to respond to the most difficult creative conditions possible in order to show off one's own talent. These of course were being constantly questioned during the frequent and at times violently impassioned *querelles* that studded the literary and dramatic history of the period, even before the dispute between the Ancients and the Moderns, when decreeing the superiority of one side over the other was the main thing at stake. In any case the elaboration (if not the invention) of the 'Aristotelian' rules had been carried out with the precise intention of defining the most

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immovable obstacles and inflexible precepts that involved the respect of *vraisemblance* and of the *bienséances*, besides that of the three unities, all within an extremely rigid classification. One only has to call to mind rule of the unity of time, which fixed the duration of the play's action to fall within a more and more restricted interval, fluctuating between twenty-four and three hours.

It is not fortuitous that in the theory and practice of the poetics followed by the greatest writers of the period difficulty itself became the criterion upon which hung the success of a play. And if Molière considered it as proof of the superiority of comedy over tragedy, Racine adopts it with the purpose of succeeding in his aim to "*plaire et toucher*" and relies upon the strict observation of the rules to do so. An emblematic case in point is *Bérénice* where he achieves his ambition with a plot "made of nothing".

But with *Phèdre*¹ Racine responds to a twofold challenge: to reach the ultimate objective of tragedy, to please and to move, with a subject which is potentially capable of provoking a scandalized reaction both on the moral and on the rational front (given that the plot is centred on incestuous desire and the intervention of mythological monsters), and, an even greater difficulty, to transform the same plot into a tragedy exemplary for its representation of virtue. And all this without betraying the sources of the tale by surrendering, as did other authors (see Racine 1999, 1614), to the easy compromise of making Phaedra and Theseus betrothed but not married:

Ce que je puis assurer, c'est que je n'en ai point fait où la vertu soit plus mise en jour que dans celle-ci. Les moindres fautes y sont sévèrement punies. La seule pensée du crime y est regardée avec autant d'horreur que le crime même. Les faiblesses de l'amour y passent pour de vraies faiblesses. Les passions n'y sont présentées aux yeux que pour montrer tout le désordre dont elles sont cause. Et le vice y est peint partout avec des couleurs qui en font connaître et haïr la difformité. ("Preface", Racine 1999, 819)²

[But this I do say that I have written no play in which virtue has been more celebrated than in this one. The smallest faults are here severely punished; the mere idea of a crime is looked upon with as much horror as the crime itself; the weaknesses of those in love are treated as real weaknesses; passions are represented only to show all the disorder they occasion; and vice is everywhere painted in colours which render its deformity recognizable and hateful. (23)]

¹ Racine's play (whose original title was *Phèdre et Hippolyte*, changed in the second edition of 1687 to *Phèdre*) was staged by the Comédiens de la Troupe Royale on 1 January 1677 at the Hôtel de Bourgogne.

² The translations of Racine's play are from Racine 1991.

The scrupulous observation of the original plots, almost a manifesto of poetics, is stated by Racine himself in the Preface, which immediately mentions Euripides and a few lines later, more obliquely, Seneca:³

Voici encore une Tragédie dont le sujet est pris d'Euripide. Quoique j'aie suivi une route un peu différente de celle de cet Auteur pour la conduite de l'Action, je n'ai pas laissé d'enrichir ma Pièce de tout ce qui m'a paru le plus éclatant dans la sienne . . . Hippolyte est accusé dans Euripide et dans Sénèque d'avoir en effet violé sa Belle-Mère: *Vim corpus tulit*. Mais il n'est ici accusé que d'en avoir eu le dessein . . . Je rapporte ces autorités parce que je me suis très scrupuleusement attaché à suivre la Fable. (817)

[Here is another tragedy whose subject is derived from Euripides. Although I have taken, for the conduct of the action, a path a little different from the one chosen by this author, I have not neglected to enrich my play with everything I judged most dazzling in his. . . Hippolytus is accused, in Euripides, and in Seneca, of having in fact violated his stepmother: *vim corpus tulit*. But here he is only accused of having had the intention . . . I mention these authorities because it has been my scrupulous intention to follow the Legend. (19-21)]

In point of fact a reading of his tragedy necessitates a constant comparison with Euripides' *Hippolytus* and with Seneca's *Phaedra*.⁴ In particular because, only in this way, through the variations introduced, may be discerned the concealed intentions of a text which paradoxically demonstrates that it is in the course of imitation that totally original results are produced.

This process has been brilliantly observed and documented by Francesco Orlando who shows that in this play all the possible symbolic negations typical of the "repression/repressed" model of Freudian *Verneinung* have

³ Racine's debts to Seneca are much more important than the French playwright acknowledges: the eminent scholar Ronald Tobin, one of the most distinguished authorities on Racine, has dedicated his essay, "Racine, Sénèque et l'Académie Lamoignon" (Tobin 2020, 31-42), to this matter; see also Tobin (1971), in particular 130-50. It is something alas, typical of many other playwrights, not only French ones. See in particular on this point Paduano 2020, 77: "Seneca's tragedies may be seen as an example of a glaring contradiction: no other playwright during the whole of the history of the theatre has been more greatly neglected, but not one has enjoyed a more significant historic and cultural role than he has. His work stands at the creative crossroads of modernity, and it is he who transported the repertory inherited from the Greeks . . . considered as a body of theatrical situations, to the same point". All translations are mine, unless stated otherwise.

⁴ Forestier specifies well-documented cases not only of borrowings from the texts of Euripides and Seneca but also from Ovid, Virgil and earlier French versions of these in "Notes et variantes" (Racine 1999, 1645-59) when discussing what he terms "imitation créatrice" and claiming "tout le génie racinien est dans l'art de l'imitation" (lii-liii).

been activated, from the reluctance of the protagonist to come on stage to the scene where Theseus invokes oblivion on the tragic myth of Phaedra (Orlando 1990). Moral scandal and rational scandal overlap one another and Theseus, although he manages to remove mythological monsters, ends up by resuscitating monsters of the mind.

In actual fact, in both Euripides and Seneca, although in very different ways, it is the figure of the Nurse that has a strategically determining function as a means of communication between Hippolytus and Phaedra. Racine's play, which seems to limit itself to simply contaminating these two versions, offers, on the contrary, significant innovations in the relationship between the protagonist and the nurse herself. In the first place it is only in Racine that the Nurse has her own name: *Enone*. A name uttered for the first time on stage by Phaedra qualified by an adjective which is not neutral and which predicts a special relationship "*chère Enone*" (1.3.153). And the choice of the name is indeed extremely suggestive. *Enone* is the name of the nymph, expert in the arts of medicine who fell in love with Paris when he was only a humble shepherd. And most importantly, she is the protagonist of Ovid's fifth epistle of the *Heroides* in which she sends a letter to Paris (one of the most elegiac letters of the collection) that immediately follows Phaedra's letter to Hippolytus. This invests the name *Enone* with a highly significant connotation both on the sentimental and on the mythological level. Any relationship between the choice of this name on Racine's part and *Heroides V* is denied by Forestier (see Racine 1999, 1643), but in my opinion it is irrefutable, especially bearing in mind that in her letter to Paris *Enone* actually mentions Theseus (whose amorous feats are recalled right at the beginning of *Phèdre*) as Helen's first abductor. A detail which was crucial to Racine as in his *Iphigénie*, the tragedy with a happy ending which precedes *Phèdre*, he presents the key character of *Ériphile* as being Theseus' and Helen's daughter.

Although the choice of her name is not commented on by Racine, the special bond between Phaedra and her nurse is, as has already been noted, immediately made clear and the intimacy between them is inevitably emphasized by the absence of handmaids and a chorus. In Euripides, Phaedra's first words are addressed generically to her maids, and in Seneca she only speaks to her nurse ("Nurse") after a long tirade on how troubled she feels and after a long reply from the Nurse herself.

Instead, in Racine the revelation to her nurse of Phaedra's shameful passion is very similar to, indeed, lifted almost word for word from the version of Euripides where it finds one of its most intense moments, beginning with the protagonist's stage entrance:

ΦΑΙΔΡΑ αἴρετέ μου δέμας, ὀρθοῦτε κάρα·
 λέλυμαι μελέων σύνδεσμα φίλων.
 λάβετ' εὐπήχεις χεῖρας, πρόπολοι.
 βαρὺ μοι κεφαλῆς ἐπίκρανον ἔχειν·
 ἄφελ', ἀμπέτασον βόστρυχον ὤμοις.

(198-202)

[PHAEDRA Uplift ye my body, mine head upraise. / Friends, faint be my limbs, and unknit be their hands. / Hold, maidens, my rounded arms and mine hands, / Ah, the coif on mine head all heavily weighs: / Take it thence till mine hair o'er my shoulders strays! (Euripides 1928)]⁵

In point of fact Racine also clearly has in mind Seneca's tragedy (where, however, the Nurse knows all about Phaedra's infatuation from the very beginning), at the point where the awnings of the palace open and the queen is revealed lying on her golden bed:

PHAEDRA Removete, famulae, purpura atque auro inlitas
 vestes, procul sit muricis Tyrii rubor,
 quae fila ramis ultimi Seres legunt:
 brevis expeditos zona constringat sinus,
 cervix monili vacua, nec niveus lapis
 deducat auris, Indici donum maris;
 odore crinis sparsus Assyrio vacet,
 sic temere iactae. Colla perfundant comae
 umerosque summos, cursibus motae citis
 ventos sequantur.

(387-97)

[PHAEDRA Away, ye slaves, with robes bedecked with purple and with gold; away, scarlet of the Tyrian shell, the webs which the far-off Seres gather from the trees. Let a narrow girdle hold in my garments' unencumbering folds, let there be no necklace at my throat, let no snowy pearls, the gift of India's ocean, weigh down my ears, and let my hair hang loose, unscented by Assyrian nard. So, tossed at random, let my locks fall down upon my neck and shoulders and moved as a swift running, stream upon the wind. (Seneca 1938)]⁶

PHÈDRE Que ces vains ornements, que ces voiles me pèsent !
 Quelle importune main, en formant tous ces nœuds,
 A pris soin sur mon front d'assembler mes cheveux?

⁵ The text of Euripides' *Hippolytus* quoted throughout this article refers to this edition.

⁶ The text of Seneca's *Phaedra* quoted throughout in this article refers to this edition.

Tout m'afflige, et me nuit, et conspire à me nuire.
(1.3.158-61)

[PHAEDRA Those useless ornaments, / These veils oppress me. What officious hands / Have taken care to knot upon my head / My heavy hair? How all conspires to hurt, / Hurt and afflict me. (39)]

But as he meticulously follows the Greek and Latin plots (“... it has been my scrupulous intention to follow the Legend”), Racine discovers unimagined pathways. Starting from Phaedra’s reluctance to show herself on stage (the figure of Tragedy’s hesitation to show herself to the public) which is in Racine and only in Racine: “N’allons pas plus avant. Demeurons, chère Œnone” (1.3.153; “No further, dear Œnone! Let us stay”).

No less unmistakable is the punctiliousness with which Racine adheres to his sources when crafting dialogue. However, yet again, from the manifest evidence of imitation there springs a decided variant when compared with the previous versions. Here, and only here the dialogue exhibits a suspension of three lines. I am thinking of the beginning of the scene at the moment when the protagonist’s mind is wandering:

PHÈDRE Dieux ! Que ne suis-je assise à l’ombre des forêts!
Quand pourrai-je au travers d’une noble poussière
Suivre de l’œil un char fuyant dans la carrière?
ŒNONE Quoi, Madame?
PHÈDRE Insensée! où suis-je? et qu’ai-je dit?
Où laissé-je égarer mes vœux, et mon esprit?
(1.3.176-80)

[PHAEDRA Oh why am I not sitting in the shade / Of forests? When may I follow with my eyes / That racing chariot flying down the course / Through glorious dust? / ŒNONE Madam? / PHAEDRA Where am I? Mad? / What have I said? Where, where have I let stray / My longings, and my self-control? (41)]

The three lines, when Phaedra yearns grieving for the sight of a chariot racing through the “glorious” dust of the plain, cause a hesitation in the dialogic exchange, while assuming rather the sound and sense of a more inward lament. This is confirmed by the nurse’s reaction of surprise and incomprehension: “Quoi?”. Indeed, the protagonist herself wonders, as if waking from a stupor, where she is and what she might have said, as if returning to the subject of an interrupted conversation: “Insensée, Où suis-je et qu’ai-je dit?”. (“Where am I? Mad? / What have I said?”).

Instead, in the *Hippolytus* the Nurse follows Phaedra’s frenzied remarks logically, asks her for an explanation and is even worried that others might have heard her crazed wanderings:

ΦΑΙΔΡΑ αἰαῖ·

πῶς ἄν δροσερᾶς ἀπὸ κρηνίδος
καθαρῶν ὑδάτων πῶμ' ἄρυσαιμαν,
ὑπὸ τ' αἰγείροις ἔν τε κομήτη
λειμῶνι κλιθεῖσ' ἀναπαυσαιμαν;

ΤΡΟΦΟΣ ὦ παῖ, τί θροεῖς;

οὐ μὴ παρ' ὄχλω τάδε γηρύση
μανίας ἔποχον ῥίπτουσα λόγον;

ΦΑΙΔΡΑ πέμπετέ μ' εἰς ὄρος; εἶμι πρὸς ὕλαν

καὶ παρὰ πεύκας, ἵνα θηροφόνοι
στείβουσι κύνες
βαλιαῖς ἐλάφοις ἐγχιρμπτόμεναι.
πρὸς θεῶν, ἔραμαι κυσὶ θωύξαι
καὶ παρὰ χαίταν ξανθὰν ῥίψαι
Θεσσαλὸν ὄρπακ', ἐπίλογχον ἔχουσ'
ἐν χειρὶ βέλος.

ΤΡΟΦΟΣ τί ποτ', ὦ τέκνον, τάδε κηραίνεις;

τί κυνηγεσίων καὶ σοι μελέτη;
τί δὲ κρηναίων νασμῶν ἔρασαι;
πάρα γὰρ δροσερὰ πύργους συνεχῆς
κλειτύς, ὅθεν σοι πῶμα γένοιτ' ἄν.

(208-25)

[PHAEDRA Oh but to quaff, where the spray-veil drifteth / O'er taintless fountains, the dear cool stream! Oh to lie in the mead where the soft wind lifteth / Its trees – 'neath poplars to lie and dream! / NURSE My child, my child, what is this thou hast cried? / Ah, speak not thus, with a throng at thy side, / Wild words that on wings of madness ride! / PHAEDRA Let me hence to the mountain afar – I will hie me / To the forest, the pines where the staghounds follow / Hard after the fleet dappled hinds as they fly me! / Oh, I long to cheer them with hunter's hollo, – / Ah God, were I there! – / And to grasp the Thessalian shaft steel-gleaming, / And to swing it on high by my hair outstreaming – / My golden hair! / NURSE What wouldst thou, my darling, of suchlike things? / Will naught save the hunt and the hounds content? / And why art thou yearning for fountain-springs? / Lo, nigh to thy towers is a soft-sloped bent / With streams for thy drinking dew-besprent.]

In Seneca's version, which is just as evocative, the Nurse does not even comment on Phaedra's delirious rant:

PHAEDRA Laeva se pharetrae dabit,

hastile vibret dextra Thessalicum manus.

talis severi mater Hippolyti fuit.

qualis relictis frigidi Ponti plagis

egit catervas Atticum pulsans solum

Tanaitis aut Maeotis et nodo comas
coegit emitque. lunata latus
protecta pelta: talis in silvas ferar.

(396-403)

[PHAEDRA My left hand shall be busied with the quiver and my right wield a Thessalian spear. In such guise as the dweller by Tanaïs or Maeotis, leaving cold Pontus' tract behind, led her hordes, treading Athenian soil, and, binding her locks in a knot, let them flow free, her side protected by a crescent shield; so will I betake me to the woods.]

Both in *Hippolytus* and in *Phèdre* the text dwells upon the Nurse's urgent insistence for her to be let in on the secret⁷, dictated by her sincere love for Phaedra. She calls her "my child", "my daughter", and later "my lady" and finally "my dear child" (in *Hippolytus*) or "Madame" (in *Phèdre*). At the cardinal point of this scene, at the moment the name of Hippolytus is uttered, Racine's version follows the Greek source completely:

ΤΡΟΦΟΣ τί φήεις; ἐρᾶς, ὦ τέκνον; ἀνθρώπων τίνος;

ΦΑΙΔΡΑ ὅστις ποθ' οὐτός ἐσθ', ὁ τῆς Ἀμαζόνος...

ΤΡΟΦΟΣ Ἰππόλυτον ἀυδῶς;

ΦΑΙΔΡΑ σοῦ τάδ', οὐκ ἐμοῦ κλύεις.

(350-3)

[NURSE What say'st thou? - child, thou lovest - oh, what man? / PHAEDRA Whate'er his name - 'tis he - the Amazon's - NURSE: Hippolytus! / PHAEDRA Thou sayest it, not I.]

ŒNONE Aimez-vous?

PHÈDRE De l'amour j'ai toutes les fureurs.

ŒNONE Pour qui ?

PHÈDRE Tu vas ouïr le comble des horreurs.

J'aime... à ce nom fatal, je tremble, je frissonne.

J'aime...

ŒNONE Qui?

⁷ In Pierre Champion's opinion this insistence is dictated above all simply by curiosity – the need to know the secret – which is in its turn the an active passion leading to the realisation of the tragic action: "C'est que sa curiosité n'est pas satisfaite par l'aveu que Phèdre lui fait ici. Cela vient du fait que, comme on l'a dit plus haut, le secret n'est pas une chose ni un fait à connaître; la curiosité n'est donc pas apaisée par la révélation de ce fait ou de cette chose. Décidément, le secret n'est rien d'autre que l'avenir lui-même, l'issue fatale de cette affaire, en tant qu'ils seront dérobés jusqu'à leur complète réalisation; la curiosité n'est donc bien que la passion active qui ne poursuit que la réalisation, activement, de l'action tragique. Celle-ci, selon la formule d'Aristote, a un début, une continuation et une fin: la curiosité est donc, en fait, la passion même du héros tragique, c'est-à-dire le principe du mouvement de la tragédie" (Champion 1991, 29).

PHÈDRE Tu connais ce Fils de l'Amazone,
Ce Prince si longtemps par moi-même opprimé.
ÆNONE Hippolyte? Grands Dieux!
PHÈDRE C'est toi qui l'as nommé.
(1.3.259-64)

[ÆNONE Are you in love? / PHAEDRA I feel / All love's wild ecstasies. / ÆNONE For whom? / PHAEDRA Now here / The crowning horror. Yes, I love - I shake... / I tremble at his very name - / I love... / ÆNONE Whom? / PHAEDRA You know him, son of the Amazon, / That Prince whom I myself have for so long / Oppressed. / ÆNONE Hippolytus! Great Gods! / PHAEDRA It's you have named him! (49-51)]

But immediately after this Ænone's behaviour changes entirely. In Euripides, after being so frightened by the confession that she wants to die, after a few lines the Nurse excuses Phaedra and encourages her to submit to her passion. In Seneca after voicing a few moralizing judgements ("Deum esse amorem turpis et vitio favens / Finxit libido . . . Quisquis secundis rebus exultat nimis / fluitque luxu, semper insolita appetit", 195-205: "'Tis base and sin-mad lust that has made love into a god . . . Whoever rejoices in overmuch prosperity and abounds in luxury is ever seeking unaccustomed joys", Seneca 1938), she gives in, sanctions the legitimacy of all love and even offers to speak to Hippolytus herself in an attempt to bend his fierce spirit and wild nature. Instead Racine's Ænone expresses her dismay in a four-line lament and then falls silent:

ÆNONE Juste Ciel! tout mon sang dans mes veines se glace.
Ô désespoir! Ô crime! Ô déplorable Race!
Voyage infortuné! Rivage malheureux,
Fallait-il approcher de tes bords dangereux?⁸
(1.3.265-8)

[ÆNONE Oh despair! Great Heavens, my blood / Now freezes in my veins! Oh cursed race! / Oh crime! Unhappy land, reached at the end / Of what ill-fated voyage! Why were we / Doomed ever to approach your dangerous shores! (51)]

Only after the announcement of Theseus' death in the following scene does Phaedra find the courage to follow her desire which will now no longer give rise to scandal: "Votre flamme devient une flamme ordinaire" (1.5.350; "Your love becomes an ordinary love", 57).

⁸ The action takes place at Troezen where Phaedra had come having sailed from her father Minos' kingdom of Crete. Racine is following Euripides here as Seneca places the tragedy in Athens.

Phaedra's changed status into that of an apparent widow complies with the intention to render the protagonist as free of guilt as possible thanks to the *mise-en-scène* of extremely efficacious symbolic negations and thanks also to choices regarding the plot itself.⁹ But the (false) tidings of Theseus' death provides Cœnone too with moral justification, as her encouragement also becomes, in a way, "ordinaire". In any case, in the Preface Racine himself, when mentioning the hateful calumny that will soon be launched towards Hippolytus, underlines the fact that he had indeed attributed this "underhandedness" to the nurse, but immediately finds an attenuating circumstance:

J'ai même pris soin de la [Phèdre] rendre un peu moins odieuse qu'elle n'est dans les Tragédies des Anciens, où elle se résout d'elle-même à accuser Hippolyte. J'ai cru que la Calomnie avait quelque chose de trop bas et de trop noir pour la mettre dans la bouche d'une Princesse, qui a d'ailleurs des sentiments si nobles et si vertueux. Cette bassesse m'a paru plus convenable à une Nourrice, qui pouvait avoir des inclinations plus serviles et *qui néanmoins n'entreprend cette fausse accusation que pour sauver la vie et l'honneur de sa Maîtresse* ("Preface", Racine 1999, 817-18, emphasis mine).

[I have even taken the trouble to make her a little less hateful than she is in the ancient versions of this tragedy, in which she herself resolves to accuse Hippolytus. I judged that calumny had about it something too base and too black to be put into the mouth of a Princess who for most of the time is only noble and virtuous. This depravity seemed to me more appropriate to the character of a nurse, whose inclinations might be supposed to be more servile, but *who, nevertheless, only takes upon herself the responsibility for this false accusation in order to save the life and honour of her mistress.* (19)]

If it is true that this moral defence which has been extended to Cœnone was dictated by the desire to present the tragedy as the most virtuous version ever written ("I do say that I have written no play in which virtue has been more celebrated than in this one"), the consequences of such a choice are myriad even if almost imperceptible, as a sort of solidarity between Cœnone and Phaedra is created and then is rendered more and more evident as the action proceeds.

In Euripides, on the contrary, the sudden distance between the two characters is striking: the Nurse, after suggesting that they have recourse to

⁹ In Seneca too Theseus is far away and Phaedra, as a partial justification, thinks that "fortis per altas invii retro lacus / vadit tenebras miles audacis proci, / solio ut revulsam regis inferni abstrahat; / pergit furoris socius, haud illum timor / pudorque tenuit"; "Through the deep shades of the pool which none recrosses he is faring, this brave recruit of a madcap suitor, that from the very throne of the infernal king he may rob and bear away his wife. He hurries on, a partner in mad folly" (93-7).

magic potions, takes it upon herself to speak to Hippolytus.

Phaedra, on hearing from outside the furious cries of Hippolytus when he hears of his stepmother's incestuous passion for him, comes into the palace to hang herself, after calling down the punishment of Zeus upon the Nurse:

ΦΑΙΔΡΑ ὦ παγκακίστη καὶ φίλων διαφθορεῦ,
 οἷ' εἰργάσω με. Ζεὺς σε γεννήτωρ ἐμὸς
 πρόρριζον ἐκτρίψειεν οὐτάσας πυρί.
 οὐκ εἶπον - οὐ σῆς προυνοησάμην φρενός; -
 σιγᾶν ἐφ' οἷσι νῦν ἐγὼ κακύνομαι;

(682-6)

[PHAEDRA Vilest of vile! destroyer of thy friends! / How hast thou ruined me!
 May Zeus my sire / Smite thee with flame, blast thee to nothingness! / Did I
 not tell thee — not divine thy purpose? / To speak not that whereby I am now
 dishonoured?]

She also leaves, on her own initiative, a written accusation that Hippolytus had raped her – a reaction to Hippolytus' frenzied outburst after the Nurse's revelation full of his injured pride and his scorn for all women – as she is sure that he will reveal everything to her father. It is the Nurse who discovers Phaedra's body after she has hanged herself and it is she who announces this to the Chorus before she disappears for ever from the stage and from the dialogue, never to be mentioned again. In Seneca too the Nurse addresses Hippolytus and not Phaedra who is absent. But here it is simply to explore his state of mind and to try – in vain – to dissuade him from leaving his bed empty and from choosing a life without marriage. Phaedra's own declaration to her stepson at the beginning is extremely ambiguous, as Hippolytus himself points out ("Ambigua voce verba perplexa iacis; / effare aperte", 639-40. "Words of doubtful meaning thou utterest with riddling lips. Speak out and plainly", 639-40); but when the situation becomes clear to him he is overcome by terror and disgust and flees, leaving his sword behind. Phaedra, at the Nurse's suggestion, then accuses him of rape (720-1)¹⁰ and exhibits as proof of this that very sword with which, when she hears of Hippolytus death, she will kill herself on stage, immediately after revealing the truth¹¹. The Nurse appears for the last time when she announces to Theseus that his wife wants to kill herself; then is never heard again.

Enone's behaviour is very different from that of her source figures in the *Hippolytus* of Euripides and the *Phaedra* of Seneca: the contact between her

¹⁰ But in point of fact Phaedra decides to accuse Hippolytus openly only when Theseus threatens to torture the Nurse if she refuses to speak (882-5).

¹¹ The self-accusations that the protagonists express publicly at the end of the play both in Seneca and in Racine attain heroic and sublime qualities.

and Phaedra, her mistress, is prolonged and above all is deepened so that the resulting effects are different.

Her advice, which here is to be distinguished for its affectionate quality, is always characterized by a strong dose of logical rationality and moral credibility and the speech uttered in scene five of the first act is a particularly good example of this. Here, once she is assured of Phaedra's new status as a widow, Cœnone exhorts her to live and to allow her passion to emanate from 'noble' motivations:

Votre fortune change et prend une autre face.
 Le Roi n'est plus, Madame, il faut prendre sa place.
 Sa mort vous laisse un Fils à qui vous devez,
 Esclave, s'il vous perd, et Roi, si vous vivez.
 Sur qui dans son malheur voulez-vous qu'il s'appuie?
 Ses larmes n'auront plus de main qui les essuie.
 Et ses cris innocents portés jusques aux Dieux,
 Iront contre sa Mère irriter ses Aïeux.
 Vivez, vous n'avez plus de reproche à vous faire.
 Votre flamme devient une flamme ordinaire.
 Thésée en expirant vient de rompre les nœuds,
 Qui faisaient tout le crime et l'horreur de vos feux.
 Hippolyte pour vous devient moins redoutable,
 Et vous pouvez le voir sans vous rendre coupable.
 Peut-être convaincu de votre aversion
 Il va donner un Chef à la sédition.
 Détrompez son erreur, fléchissez son courage.
 Roi de ces bords heureux, Trézène est son partage.
 Mais il sait que les lois donnent à votre Fils
 Les superbes Remparts que Minerve a bâtis.
 Vous avez l'un et l'autre une juste Ennemie.
 Unissez-vous tous deux pour combattre Aricie.
 (1.5.341-62)

[Your fortune changes, shows a different face. / The King is dead. My Lady, you must take / His place. His death leaves you a son, to whom / You owe yourself: slave, if he loses you; / King, if you live! / On whom do you suppose / Could he, in such misfortune, lean? No hand / Would wipe away his tears. His innocent cries, / Mounting to Heav'n will irritate the Gods, / His ancestors, against his mother. Live! / Madam, you need no more reproach yourself. / Your love becomes an ordinary love! / By Theseus' death all knots have been untied / Which made your love a horror and a crime. / You need no longer fear Hippolytus; / And you may see him now without reproach. / Perhaps, convinced you are his enemy / He means to lead the rebels. Change his mind! / Show him his error. Soften his intent. / King of these fertile shores indeed he is; / Troezen is his undoubted heritage, / But well he knows the law gives

to your son / The ramparts of Minerva's citadel. / You justly share a common enemy! / Unite! Take hands the two of you fight / Aricia. (57-9)]

She begins by reminding Phaedra that she has a mother's duty towards her son and focusses immediately on the political perspective of this duty which should guarantee the succession to the respective legitimate heirs: the throne of Athens to Phaedra's own son, whose recognition is threatened by the supporters of Aricia¹² and the throne of Troezen to Hippolytus. The implicit reference to her relationship with her stepson, no longer a guilty one after Theseus' death, becomes an exhortation to include him in the plan to fight the enemy, Aricia. The fact that she knows nothing of the love between Aricia and Hippolytus in no way diminishes the almost epic afflatus of her encouragement¹³. The reference to a happy ending even for the love story peeps through the meshes of her speech, but only briefly, veiled as it is by the insistence on cancelling guilt and excluding the term "passion" in favour of the two metaphorical images which replace it in the *pièce* "flamme" (flame) and "feux" (fires).

Not by chance Phaedra begins her proposal to Hippolytus, which is very similar to the corresponding scene in Seneca, by mentioning her own son and in this way following the nurse's heartfelt plea ("Souvenez-vous d'un Fils qui n'espère qu'en vous" 2.5.583; "Remember a Son who only hopes in you"), which had been uttered in the preceding line.

After her stepson's scandalized reaction and his flight, the nurse first of all reminds Phaedra of her political obligations:

ÆNONE Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux, digne sang de Minos,
 Dans de plus nobles soins chercher votre repos,
 Contre un Ingrat qui plaît recourir à la fuite,
 Régner, et de l'État embrasser la conduite!
 (3.1755-8)

¹² Aricia is the daughter of Pallas who together with all his sons (the Pallantids) had fought Theseus when he was nominated king of Athens by Aegeus whose adoptive son Theseus probably was. Theseus killed them all and had ordered Aricia their sister, who was his prisoner, never to marry and give birth to heirs. In this way Pallas' daughter could be considered the legitimate heiress of the throne of Athens. This opinion was shared more and more strongly by Hippolytus who was secretly in love with her.

¹³ "Par un raffinement d'ironie l'éthique dramatique de la gloire est confiée à une âme d'esclave". For Marc Fumaroli, who takes no notice of the source texts, and therefore does not notice the importance of the variants in Racine and the consequences deriving from the text's dwelling upon her death, Ænone is a mouth-piece for an extravagant idealism, a flat conformity that is simply mimicking Corneille's idiom of spiritual greatness with which she is continually tempting Phaedra (Fumaroli 1980, 195-200).

[ÆNONE Would it not be more worthy of the blood / Of Minos to find peace
in nobler cares? / Resort to flight from such a wretch's charm / Embrace the
conduct of the State and reign (93)]

Then she has recourse to advising Phaedra – who ignores her completely – to run away from this place (“Fuyez”, 763: “Fly ”); and finally reminds her of the need to preserve her dignity in the face of a refusal from such a hateful being as Hippolytus (“Que son farouche orgueil le rendait odieux! / Que Phèdre en ce moment n'avait-elle mes yeux!”; “How hateful then his savage pride appeared, / Why did you not then see him with my eyes?”, 779-80). Instead of heeding these suggestions, Phaedra asks Ænone to go to Hippolytus and try to persuade him to marry her with the offer of the throne (3.1) – thus adopting a strategy more typical of her servant than of a “noble” Princess. More and more evidently the behaviour of the two women is becoming similar, almost as if Phaedra and Ænone are embodying two instances of the inner attitude of a single character.

The return of Theseus once again disrupts the parameters of the tragedy and intensifies Phaedra's guilty conscience, which is now redoubled by the inevitable shame. Driven by an utterly pitiless self-analysis of her situation, she gives voice to her most devastating monologue, a sort of lucid nightmare during which it seems to her that even the walls and the archways of the palace are only waiting for the arrival of Theseus to accuse her. Faced with her charge's unbearable anguish, Ænone suggests to her not only to accuse Hippolytus, although at the same time she appears to have keen scruples against this, but she proposes to carry out the delivery of the calumny herself instead of Phaedra:

ÆNONE Mon zèle n'a besoin que de votre silence.
Tremblante comme vous j'en sens quelques remords.
Vous me verriez plus prompte à affronter mille morts.
Mais puisque je vous perds sans ce triste remède,
Votre vie est pour moi d'un prix à qui tout cède
(3.3.894-8)

[ÆNONE I would have you do nothing but keep quiet! / My passionate devotion to you needs / Nothing from you but silence. I, like you, / Am trembling, and indeed I feel remorse. / You'd see, I'd rather face a thousand deaths: / But since, without this bitter remedy, / I'd lose you, and to me your life outweighs / All else, I'll speak (105-7)]

However, it cannot be ignored that when Ænone passes on the damning accusation to Theseus the text manages to “cover up” this action, the lowest of all, by putting the two characters on stage after the calumny has been delivered, when the nurse has already shown Hippolytus' sword to his father

and is now justifying the fact that Phaedra has kept silent:

ŒNONE Phèdre mourait, Seigneur, et sa main meurtrière
Éteignait de ses yeux l'innocente lumière.
J'ai vu lever le bras, j'ai couru la sauver.
Moi seule à votre amour j'ai su la conserver
(4.1.1017-20)

[ŒNONE She would have died, my Lord. / By her own murderous hand the innocent / Light was to be extinguished from her eyes. / I saw her raise her arm. I ran to help. / Alone I saved her for your Majesty. (117)]

It cannot be denied that her words lend themselves to a double reading and are on the verge of being hypocritical. In this way they echo Phaedra's mindset and there is a sort of oscillation between two voices as Phaedra herself had implicitly and premeditatedly condoned the accusation with remarks which were just as ambiguous:

PHÈDRE Je ne mérite plus ces doux empressements . . .
Indigne de vous plaire, et de vous approcher,
Je ne dois désormais songer qu'à me cacher.
(3.4.916; 919-20)

[PHAEDRA To me, unworthy now to bear [the words of such a gentle greeting] . . . Unfit / To please— or even to approach you now— / I must seek only where to hide myself. (109)]

Her plea to Theseus to save his son as she does not want to feel responsible for its horror is just as equivocal:

PHÈDRE S'il en est temps encore, épargnez votre Race.
Respectez votre sang, j'ose vous en prier.
Sauvez-moi de l'horreur de l'entendre crier.
Ne me préparez point la douleur éternelle
De l'avoir fait répandre à la main paternelle.
(4.4.170-4)

[PHAEDRA Oh, if there still is time, spare your own child. / Have mercy on your race and blood I pray. / Save me the horror of the sound of that / Blood crying from the ground. Do not prepare / For me the everlasting misery / Of having caused his father's hand to shed it. (131)]

But here the insistence on the personal pronoun (“Sauvez-moi . . . Ne me préparez”) signals the beginning of the process of unmasking the truth. In the next monologue Phaedra herself, as she emphasizes her distance from her nurse's initiative (“Je volais toute entière au secours de son Fils: / Et m'arrachant des bras d' Œnone épouvantée / Je cédaï au remords dont

j'étais tourmentée", 4.5.1196-8; "I flew here / With one intent - to save his son - when I / Tore off the frightened grasp of poor Cœnone / And yielded to my torments of remorse", 133), is a testimony of the strength of the guilt to which she was about to yield. This feeling - and the resulting action - was frustrated however, as the use of the imperfect shows, as soon as Theseus informed her of the love of Hippolytus for the imprisoned princess Aricia ("Ah douleur non encore éprouvée!", 4.6.1225; "Oh grief yet unfelt") tidings as shocking to her as they were unbearable. Now, the prey of raging jealousy, she goes as far even to imagine obtaining a severe punishment from Theseus for her rival. But it is precisely in the scene where she reveals the name of Aricia to Cœnone (the name is first uttered by Phaedra and then echoed by the nurse) that their special bond is broken for ever, just as it was first forged when the name of Hippolytus rang in a room in the palace. And just as she did in the first meeting with her nurse Phaedra isolates herself in delirious monologue (a very long one as it is dictated by jealousy, the fiercest passion in Racinian theatre) that this time explicitly foresees Cœnone's involvement:

PHÈDRE Non, je ne puis souffrir un bonheur qui m'outrage,
 Cœnone. Prends pitié de ma jalouse rage.
 Il faut perdre Aricie. Il faut de mon Époux
 Contre un sang odieux réveiller le courroux
 Qu'il ne se borne pas à des peines légères.
 Le crime de la Sœur passe celui des Frères.
 Dans mes jaloux transports je le veux implorer.

(4.6.1257-63)

[PHAEDRA Oh no! / I cannot bear their happiness, Cœnone. / It is an insult to me, drives me mad. / Pity my jealousy! Aricia / Must be destroyed. My husband's former wrath / Against a hateful stock must be revived. / Nor must he stop at a light punishment. / Her guilt surpasses all her brothers' guilt. / I will implore him in my jealous rage. (139)]

But Phaedra now suddenly awakes from this "jealous rage" into a state of desperate amazement ("Que fais-je? Où ma raison se va-t-elle égarer?" 1264: "What am I doing? My mind has lost its way", 139), analogous to that she experienced at the end of her first delirious outburst during the first act ("Insensée! où suis-je? et qu'ai-je dit? Où laissé-je égarer mes vœux et mon esprit?"; "Where am I? Mad? / What have I said? Where, where have I let stray / My longings, and my self-control?", 41). Here Phaedra's self-awareness and her guilty conscience reach their acme and simultaneously her innate and impotent *virtù* is revealed. In point of fact Phaedra would soon have confessed her lies had she not been devastated by the news of the love between Hippolytus and Aricia. Besides, as soon as she had recovered from that unbearable pain, a pain she had never experienced before, she

had hurried to reveal the truth. And it is just at this point that Cœnone's behaviour, for the first (and last) time conforms to her conventional role as (evil) counsellor, by adopting arguments similar to those of the Nurses in Euripides and Seneca. Without delay she advises Phaedra to give herself up to her passion despite the fact that it is adulterous and incestuous. But Phaedra, confronted by her nurse's final attempt to distract her attention from the thought of death, rejects her, after cursing her for trying to stop her from killing herself, for meeting Hippolytus and for endorsing her calumny, and finally dubs her "monster". This is indeed a keyword of the tragedy, that Phaedra first attributes to her stepbrother, the Minotaur and then – in a moral sense – to herself, to Hippolytus who has repudiated her and lastly to her nurse (thus evoking yet another trait they have in common, this time inspired by contempt). Phaedra then leaves the stage and her nurse, in the space of a distich (just long enough to complain of her charge's ingratitude and to recognise sarcastically that she had asked for it), is left alone on the stage, perhaps as a tribute to her last appearance.

However, to repair the peculiar effect of assimilation between the two characters there intervenes at this point an event which is completely absent in the Greek and Latin versions of the play: Cœnone's death. The text, in this manner, furnishes her not only with a name but also with a destiny. It is Panope, one of Phaedra's handmaids who announces her death and she even gives details of this: Cœnone commits suicide, by throwing herself off high rocks into the sea. The nurse has made a choice which is rare in ancient drama and which is thus quite surprising, unless a reference could be found to the words of Seneca's Phaedra where, in her first exchange with the Nurse, she considers three possible ways of committing suicide:

Decreta mors est: quaeritur fati genus.
 laqueone vitam finiam an ferro incubem?
 an missa praeceps arce Palladia cadam?
 (258-60)

[I am resolved on death; I seek but the manner of my fate. With the noose shall I end my life, or fall upon the sword? or shall I leap headlong from Pallas' citadel?]

But whatever the reasons are for this choice, her death sanctions the possibility of a degree of assimilation between the actions of the two female figures as they are both suicides. And all the more so when after sending Cœnone away (4.6), Phaedra disappears from the stage, to reappear only at the end of the final scene, already moribund after taking poison brought to her from Athens by her cousin Medea.¹⁴ Just as in Seneca, her words now

¹⁴ After escaping from the rage of the people of Corinth after she had killed their

sound clear, transparent, as she unequivocally admits her guilt. Contrary to the case in Seneca, however, her last words involve *Œnone* and violently accuse her of a great deal of the blame. These words are worlds apart from her first ones to her nurse “*chère Œnone*” (repeated again at the moment when she tells her about the love between Hippolytus and Aricia: “*Chère Œnone, sais-tu ce que je viens d’apprendre?*”, 4.6.1214; “Dear Nurse, do you know what I have just learned?”, 133). However, the undeniable importance of the presence to whom she dedicates seven whole lines of the twenty-three of her final speech, returns us to their timid inclination to mingle and correspond:

Le Ciel mit dans mon sein une flamme funeste.
 La détestable *Œnone* a conduit tout le reste.
 Elle a craint qu’Hippolyte instruit de ma fureur
 Ne découvrit un feu qui lui faisait horreur.
 La Perfide abusant de ma faiblesse extrême
 S’est hâtée à vos yeux de l’accuser lui-même.
 (5.7.1625-30)

[Heaven in my heart kindled the fatal flame / Detestable *Œnone* did the rest.
 / She must have feared that he, Hippolytus, / Knowing my madness might
 reveal my love / Which he refused with horror. So she took / Perfidious
 advantage of my state / Of deathly weakness and made haste to you / To
 accuse him first. (167-9)]

Phaedra goes on to announce her decision to poison herself, a death which is slower and implicitly more painful, and compares this with the alternatives, the sword (the choice of Seneca’s protagonist) and above all *Œnone*’s choice which she judges too easy because so quick. In this way, although she demonstrates that the means of suicide are different she creates yet another link between their destinies as she comments on the nurse’s death by drowning while her own is actually happening:

Elle s’en est punie, et fuyant mon courroux
 A cherché dans les flots un supplice trop doux.
 Le fer aurait déjà tranché ma destinée.
 Mais je laissais gémir la Vertu soupçonnée.

king, his daughter and her own children, Medea had been taken in by Aegeus, king of Athens. Here she had tried to poison Theseus. She was the cousin of both Ariadne and Phaedra as Pasiphae their mother and Aeëtes, Medea’s father, were the children of Helios (the sun). But in this case the evocation of her name is rather to be linked to Corneille’s tragedy *Médée* (1635), the first and only tragedy in which its author openly defends the autonomy of art as regards religious ethics almost boasting of the play’s many ‘evil’ characters. This opinion was later reversed by Corneille. See below.

J'ai voulu, devant vous exposant mes remords,
 Par un chemin plus lent descendre chez les Morts.
 J'ai pris, j'ai fait couler dans mes brûlantes veines
 Un poison que Médée apporta dans Athènes¹⁵.
 Déjà jusqu'à mon cœur le venin parvenu
 Dans ce cœur expirant jette un froid inconnu,
 Déjà je ne vois plus qu'à travers un nuage
 Et le Ciel, et l'Époux que ma présence outrage.
 Et la Mort à mes yeux déroband la clarté
 Rend au jour, qu'ils souillaient, toute sa pureté.
 (5.7.1631-44)

[She soon / Punished herself, and, seeking to escape / My wrath, she sought
 and found beneath the waves / A far too gentle execution. / By now the
 sword would have cut short my life, / But that would have left virtue crying
 out / For justice. I resolved to tell you first / All my remorse, and by a slower
 path / Descend to death. Wait. I have taken / And through all my burning
 veins now runs / A poison brought to Athens by Medea. / Already has the
 venom reached my heart; / This dying heart is filled with - icy cold! / Already
 only through a mist I see / The Heavens and the husband unto whom / My
 presence is an outrage. Death removes / The light from eyes which have
 defiled it, so - / restores to daylight all its purity. (169)]

But Phaedra is not alone in granting herself an unexpected place in *Œnone's* death and especially in juxtaposing their suicides so that they almost overlap. Panope's and Theseus' words on the subject are no less surprising. When Panope tells the king about *Œnone's* suicide she prefaces the news with a mention of Phaedra's deadly pallor:

PANOPE Un mortel désespoir sur son visage est peint.
 La pâleur de la mort est déjà sur son teint.
 Déjà de sa présence avec honte chassée
 Dans la profonde mer *Œnone* s'est lancée.
 On ne sait pas d'où part ce dessein furieux.
 Et les flots pour jamais l'ont ravie à nos yeux.
 (5.5.1463-8)

[PANOPE Mortal despair is painted on her face / Death's pallor is already on
 her, Sire! / *Œnone*, driven from her sight in shame, / Has thrown herself into
 the deep sea. Why? / No one knows why she did a thing so mad, / But now
 the waves hide her from us forever. (155)]

¹⁵ In this way we have come full circle: with the reference to Corneille's *Médée*, Racinian tragedy of which *Phèdre* is a mirror and an allegory, sanctions its own abdication before Christian morality and meditates on its own suicide (Fumaroli 1980, in particular 184 and 198-1).

Theseus' exclamation is even more significant. In a single line he accommodates the two destinies: "Ô Ciel! Œnone est morte, et Phèdre veut mourir?" (5.5.1480): "Oh Heaven! / Œnone dead, and Phaedra bent on death!" (157). Thus the treatment reserved for their end insinuates a sort of equalizing movement just before the epilogue. The foregrounding of Œnone's death is even more evident if the final comments made by Panope and Theseus are considered. Phaedra's death is the subject of only two alexandrines, one and a half of which simply express the hope that the memory of Phaedra may be lost:

PANOPE Elle expire, Seigneur.
 THÉSÉE D'une action si noire
 Que ne peut avec elle expirer la mémoire!
 (5.7.1645-6)

[PANOPE She's dying, my Lord! / THESEUS I wish the memory / Of her black deed could perish so with her. (169)]

Finally another element retrospectively lends a strongly dramatic contour to Œnone's death. During the first long dialogue with Phaedra, faced with the protagonist's obstinate decision to die, the nurse had prophesied her own end with extreme precision about its time and manner:

PHÈDRE Je meurs, pour ne point faire un aveu si funeste.
 ŒNONE Mourez donc, et gardez un silence inhumain.
 Mais pour fermer vos yeux cherchez une autre main.
 Quoiqu'il vous reste à peine une faible lumière,
 Mon âme chez les morts descendra la première.
 Mille chemins ouverts y conduisent toujours
 Et ma juste douleur choisira les plus courts.
 (1.3.226-32)

[PHAEDRA I die - to keep the fatal words unsaid. / ŒNONE Die then and keep a silence so inhuman! / Seek some other hand to close your eyes. / Although only a feeble ray of life / Remains with you, yet sure I will forestall / Your voyage to the dead and get there first. / Always a thousand paths are open to us, / And my righteous grief shall show me how / To find the shortest cut! (45)]

And the allusion to her own death returns time and again in Œnone's words: when she links it indissolubly with her mistress's eventual end at the beginning of the already mentioned tirade following the news of the death of Theseus ("Madame, je cessais de vous presser de vivre. / Déjà même au tombeau je songeais à vous suivre", 1.5.337-8; "Madame, I ceased to urge that you should live; / I thought to follow you into the grave ", 57). And when she

plans the calumny and affirms: "Tremblante comme vous j'en sens quelques remords. / Vous me verriez plus prompte à affronter mille morts" (3.3.895; "I, like you, / Am trembling, and indeed I feel remorse. / You'd see, I'd rather face a thousand deaths", 107) – this last declaration expanding the image of her own death almost to infinity.

In a dramaturgic strategy – according to a paradigm that belongs to all the masterpieces of the century of the Sun King – founded on the rigorous coherence that underlies every scene, every line and requires that everything down to the smallest detail must be necessary, motivated and motivating, the fact that the text lingers upon Œnone's death and the way in which it comes about cannot be taken as fortuitous. Neither can this be true of the insistence in the alexandrines cited above, on the "flots, on the waves of the sea into which Œnone's body disappears - Panope: "Dans la profonde mer Œnone s'est lancée . . . Et *les flots* pour jamais l'ont ravie à nos yeux" ("Œnone . . . / Has thrown herself into the deep sea . . . : And now *the waves* hide her from us forever"); Phèdre: ". . . A cherché *dans les flots* un supplice trop doux" ("she sought and found beneath the waves / A far too gentle execution") (italics mine). By throwing herself into the sea the nurse effects a distancing of herself from the shore, even if only symbolically, also because the waves that submerge her do not allow the distance to be calculated.

Œnone had mentioned that shore herself, as soon as she had been informed of the cause of Phaedra's misery, as she deprecated their unlucky voyage and their approach to Troezen, the place where her mistress's incestuous passion had its origin: "Voyage infortuné! Rivage malheureux . . .". The very term "rivage" (shore) returns in the last scene, when Theseus, who is still ignorant of the truth, at the news of the death of his son tells Phaedra of his decision to leave. This is a fascinating allusion, especially as the two couplets express the same close connection between their misfortunes and those shores that Œnone regrets ever having approached, and from which Theseus is eager to depart.

Laissez-moi, loin de vous, et loin de ce Rivage
De mon Fils déchiré fuir la sanglante image.
(5.7.1605-6)

[Let me, far from this shore, and far from you / Escape the image of my mangled son. (167)]

The escape planned by Theseus is the last example of the desire to get away which appears in the text with surprising frequency. This is the desire which most defines Hippolytus; his actions always derive from attempts to break away or to cut and run and are caused by different situations. But these bids for freedom are always foiled or given up and therefore unsuccessful

in saving him from his fate in Troezen. From this point of view the incipit of the play, his announcement that he is planning to leave immediately, is emblematic:

HIPPOLYTE Le dessein en est pris, je pars, cher Théràmène,
Et quitte le séjour de l'aimable Trézène.

(1.1.1-2)

[My mind's made up. I go, dear Theramenes: / I can no longer stay in beautiful / Troezen (27)]

This decision is repeated once again at the end of the first scene: "Théràmène, je pars, et vais chercher mon Père" (1.1.138; "Theramenes, I go to find my father", 37).

The announcement of departure becomes an actual leitmotif for him and it is reiterated in the second act with a certain indecision between two routes: either towards foreign shores to seek for his father, which becomes more urgent after his stepmother's confession ("Théràmène, fuyons"), or towards Athens ("Partons", 2.6.717, 735) to put Aricia on the throne as he thinks she is the legitimate heir, whereas the Athenians are choosing Phaedra's son to be their king.

The return of Theseus tangles the threads of the plot, but it does not change Hippolytus' plan. He gives his father two reasons for this and with the first he only makes a mysterious reference to Phaedra ("Phèdre peut seule expliquer ce mystère", 3.5.922; "Only she, Phaedra, can solve this mystery", 109). The second reason he gives refers to his need to emulate his father's heroic deeds and struggle with monsters, supposing there are any left.

In the following act it is his father who, after listening to CEnone's accusation, orders him three times to get from out of his sight so that he may avoid a punishment he has inflicted many times to other scoundrels:

THÉSÉE Fuis, Traître . . . Fuis . . .

Fuis, dis-je, et sans retour précipitant tes pas . . .

(421053, 1059, 1064)

[Fly, traitor! . . . Fly . . . Fly, I say fly! Without a backward look, / With steps precipitate" (121)]

Hippolytus' final attempt to flee is in the fifth act and presents another change of destination that this time involves Aricia. The young man asks her to leave with him for Argos and Sparta to search for allies to defend themselves and support them, stopping only at the temple on the outside the city gates to celebrate their marriage.

But death awaits him on the shore through the fault of his beloved horses, either because they had been frightened by a sea monster (an irrational

and unreal cause) or, they were unaccustomed to obey the voice of this Hippolytus, in love and no longer interested disciplining in them (a rational and real alternative). His body is thrown from the chariot, tangled in the reins and dragged to the ground where the rocks tear him limb from limb.

In the case of Hippolytus, the failed departure is clearly linked to respect for the 'Aristotelian' rule of the unity of place. The main factor of Racine's theatre is precisely his rigorous observance of all the current rules. Their application, however, has the aim of representing the tragic condition of the characters and foregrounding their powerlessness to control their fate by means of a web of semantic and symbolic instances of overdetermination. To take one example: the unity of place stages the failure of any plan to leave places with a sinister, ominous atmosphere and in this way to save oneself from the catastrophe¹⁶. Even though the event is only mentioned briefly, and cannot be considered as an exception to the rule of unity of place, Œnone's deliberate "departure" from the shore makes her the only character who appears on stage (Theseus is away in the first two acts and *returns* to Troezen) who at least manages to separate herself from the boundaries of the staged space: and in this way to reaffirm the complexity of her enigmatic figure – not only because the text lingers on her suicide.

What makes Œnone a key character in the deep strategies of the tragedy is that diverse linguistic and lexical elements are involved here. Let us consider for example the lexeme "bords", almost a "commonplace" that may indicate many places geographically far away or near at hand (countries where Theramenes searches for Theseus, the coast of Troezen, the shores of the island where Ariadne was abandoned and where she died, the beaches of Crete, or even the world of the dead), and in doing so emphasizes in contrast the constriction of the unity of place. The lexeme is repeated by all the characters (Theramenes, Hippolytus, Phaedra, Œnone, Ismene, Aricia). It is only Theseus who, as we have seen, prefers the synonym "rivage" (shore). Phaedra, who only chooses to use "rivage" once, uses "bords" (borders) four times, and three of these are in her meeting with Hippolytus, once, here, alluding to the underworld. In this last acceptance, and only in this, Ismene and Aricia use it too when wondering what has happened to Theseus. Of particular interest, then, is the case of Œnone, who use the lexeme twice to indicate the same place but with a profound difference in connotation between the two occurrences. The first time she uses "bords" it is in the anguished and despairing context of a couplet quoted several times above ("Voyage infortuné! Rivage malheureux, / Fallait-il approcher de tes bords dangereux?"), and that now, in the light of these observations, acquires

¹⁶ See on this subject Francesco Orlando's exceptional essay: "Su tre versi dell' *Andromaque*" (Orlando 1983, 115-32).

an extraordinary poetic strength: for the presence of both the lexemes mentioned (“bords”, “rivage”), all the more because they are preceded by the term “voyage” which best of all others signifies displacement, and therefore predicts the tragic interweaving of the threads of the plot, founded on either the impossibility or the fatal postponement of a journey (for Phaedra towards death, for Hippolytus towards salvation, for Theseus as far removed as possible from the image of the mangled body of his son).

The second and final appearance of the lexeme uttered by CEnone takes on a euphoric connotation when it is met with in the long and heartfelt speech during the fifth scene of the first act, already quoted and commented on above. This is an extremely articulate speech, during which CEnone, after she has emphasized the radical change that Theseus death brings to the situation, envisages the possibility of Phaedra’s union with Hippolytus:

Hippolyte pour vous devient moins redoutable,
 Et vous pouvez le voir sans vous rendre coupable.
 Peut-être, convaincu de votre aversion,
 Il va donner un Chef à la sédition:
 Détrompez son erreur, fléchissez son courage.
 Roi de ces bords heureux, Trézène est son partage.
 (1.5.353-8)

At this point the phrase containing “bords heureux” is particularly significant as it totally contradicts the “bords dangereux” of a few scenes back. It skews the discourse completely from the premonitory wish never to have alighted at Troezen and triggers a metamorphosis of the image of a menacing coastline into a place of perfection, that represents the frontiers protecting the vision of a passion that is by now innocent, having become indeed the condition and the guarantee of peace and harmony between two families and two kingdoms. In this way it suggests, with great coherence, a dramaturgical system reaching a happy ending, contrary to the one prescribed.

Of no less interest is Phaedra’s use of “bords”. The first time she uses the word to evoke the death of her sister Ariadne, the second time she means to describe her attempts to send Hippolytus away in the hope of forgetting him and the third has the function of confirming to her stepson the fact that his father is dead. But the fourth and last time, the most suggestive, “rewinds” the action, turning back time and creating another story which elects Hippolytus instead of Theseus as the hero and begins on the coast of Crete:

Pourquoi trop jeune encore ne pûtes-vous alors
 Entrer dans le Vaisseau qui le mit sur nos bords?

Par vous aurait péri le Monstre de la Crête
Malgré tous les détours de sa vaste retraite.
. . . C'est moi, Prince, c'est moi, dont l'utile secours
Vous eût du Labyrinthe enseigné les détours.
Que de soins m'eût coûtés cette Tête charmante!
Un fil n'eût point assez rassuré votre Amante.
Compagne du péril qu'il vous fallait chercher,
Moi-même devant vous j'aurais voulu marcher,
Et Phèdre au Labyrinthe avec vous descendue,
Se serait avec vous retrouvée, ou perdue.
(2.5.647-50 and 655-62)

[Oh why were you too young to have embarked / Within the ship that brought him to our shores? / You would have been the monster's killer then, / in spite of all the windings of his maze. / . . . And I it would have been, Prince, I, whose aid / Had taught you all the Labyrinth's crooked ways. / Oh, how I should have cared for this dear head! / A single thread would not have been enough / To satisfy your lover's fears for you. / I would myself have wished to lead the way, / and share the perils you were bound to face. / Phaedra, into the Labyrinth, with you / would have descended, and with you returned / To safety, or with you have perished. (83-5)]

Examined closely both CEnone's long speech and, although in a less obvious way, Phaedra's too, both express the dream of weaving another web, of telling, and being in, another story. A story in which the frontier between incestuous passion and "ordinary flame" is signalled by a variable factor: the presence or absence of Theseus, at the arrival in Crete and then at Troezen after the news of his death. In the very same way, once again, the figure of CEnone and her relationship with the protagonist shows up as an extraordinarily innovative moment in Racine's creativity.

At the same time, the light shed by the words of these two characters on clandestine plotlines for the story allows unpredictable associations with fragments of distant enigmas to surface, enigmas which had never been resolved before. Even in Greek and Latin tragedy similar examples may be glimpsed, not in the remarks of the Nurses (whose advice is always unreliable, vague and generic) but in what the protagonists say.

The first compelling words that Phaedra utters to the Nurse in Euripides come to mind (in a scene closely adhered to, as already observed above, both by Seneca and by Racine). Here Phaedra mentally transports herself to another landscape, where she has another role: one of the most seductive moments of the tragedy, with the image of the huntress whose long blond hair is streaming back in the wind:

ΦΑΙΔΡΑ πέμπτετέ μ' εἰς ὄρος: εἶμι πρὸς ὕλαν

καὶ παρὰ πεύκας, ἵνα θηροφόνοι
 στείβουσι κύνες
 βαλιαῖς ἐλάφοις ἐγχιμπτόμεναι.
 πρὸς θεῶν, ἔραμαι κυσὶ θωύξαι
 καὶ παρὰ χαίταν ξανθὰν ρίψαι
 Θεσσαλὸν ὄρπακ', ἐπίλογχον ἔχουσ'
 ἐν χειρὶ βέλος.
 (215-22)

[Let me hence to mountain afar — I will hie me / To the forest, the pines
 where the stag-hounds follow / Hard after the fleet dappled hinds as they fly
 me! / Oh, I long to cheer them with hunter's hollo, — / Ah God, were I there!
 — / And to grasp the Thessalian shaft steel-gleaming, / And to swing it on
 high by my hair outstreaming — / My golden hair!]

Again, the echo of the final ominous words pronounced Phaedra in Seneca, which evoke the eternal lasting of passion in another story and above all in another place – beyond the world of the living: “Non licuit animos iungere, at certe licet / iunxisse fata” (1183-4; “It was not ours to be joined in life, but surely 'tis ours to be joined in death”): a harsh cry and at the same time a challenge that remains indelibly stamped within the labyrinth of a text and of a mind (Paduano 2020, 87). (For the spectator Racine, perfect scholar both of Greek and Latin, and not for him alone, a further special effect could be posited. As if on the stage of the Hôtel de Bourgogne the words of Phaedra and Cœnone are accompanied here and there by a background whisper of ancient voices hymning the fascination exerted by the unquenchable flame).

It is not fortuitous that both for *Phèdre* and for the Senecan Fedra Guido Paduano's enlightening reading of the *Hippolytus* is extremely pertinent. Paduano considers Euripides' play as

one of the masterpieces of great literature in which the transgressive propensity is most clearly articulated: thanks above all to a paradoxical result of the very rigidity of the process of censorship . . . the tribute that desire pays here to the ethical norm is really a Trojan horse . . . the figures of euphemism, reticence, aposiopesis avert, of course, the contents of the instinctual drive, but at the same time they attract on to themselves an ominous and fascinating attention. (2000, 7-8)

The Trojan horse, besides a seductive if gloomy fascination, provides an imaginary way of escape which seems to challenge the prescribed frontiers of tragedy. Not only to intensify passion, but also and perhaps principally, to finally reveal, beyond commiseration, the unspeakable desire to absolve the protagonist from all guilt and to bear witness to her genuine, primordial innocence, pitilessly undermined by the caprices of the gods, by the ghost of

predestination and by the hazards of the human condition for which in any case Phaedra herself (as do her forerunners) claims full responsibility.

We may be sure that for Racine the theatre will never be the same as it was before *Phèdre*.¹⁷ Almost as if, as he advanced along already beaten tracks which however had never been properly explored, he had vaguely perceived in the myth of Phaedra other frontiers regarding the relationship between text and world, between the ghosts inhabiting the silence and the shadows of the stage.

Certainly it is a well-known fact that immediately after *Phèdre* Racine together with Boileau received from Louis XIV the position of court historiographer and therefore the duty to follow him in his military campaigns. But such a sudden and drastic abandonment of his theatrical writing, at least of secular plays could be seen to have its roots in the belated realization that his play had frustrated his desire to bring the theatre closer to his Jansenist masters and to all the other detractors of (his) theatre, as it blatantly contradicted the claim, formulated in his "Préface", to write the most virtuous of tragedies¹⁸. Until he made his *Phèdre* into something unexpected, disconcerting, even monstrous.

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¹⁷ Rather like what was supposed about Corneille's *Œdipe* (see Gambelli 2013, 238-9).

¹⁸ On this matter see Tobin 2020, 229-40. Marc Fumaroli's hypothesis that Racine, as he had always been aware that his art was 'criminal', had planned his symbolic and public "suicide" to coincide with that of his protagonist and had already thought of this at the same time as he chose the subject, although it is fascinating and full of intriguing insights does not seem to me to be acceptable (Fumaroli 1980). Apart from the fact that were this true the "Préface" would be an example of incredible hypocrisy, the possibility appears more plausible to me, and more in keeping with the destiny of every authentic literary masterpiece, that the original project had been invalidated, even only in part, by the intentions, never totally controllable, of the text itself.

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