

Aporia:
Fatal Passion, the Sojourn to Infinitude, and the
Historical Fracture of Aristotelian Convention in Jean
Racine's *Phèdre*

by

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What is a myth? The oblique image of an unwanted truth reverberating
through time.
--Timberlake Wertenbaker

If I were a pessimist, I wouldn't write plays.
--Edward Albee

Being in love is like being in Auschwitz.
--Roland Barthes

The excellence of every art is in its intensity, capable of making all
disagreeables evaporate from its being in close relationship with beauty and
truth.
--John Keats

Isn't life a series of images that change as they repeat themselves?
--Andy Warhol

Theatre has no memory, which makes it the most existential of the arts... I keep
coming back in the hope that someone in a darkened room somewhere will
show me an image that burns itself into my mind.
--Sarah Kane

There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night.
--Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

Robin wrote the word with a coloured felt-tip marker on the whiteboard
screwed to the wall of her office. "*Aporia*. In classical rhetoric it means real or
pretended uncertainty about the subject under discussion. Deconstructionists
today use it to refer to more radical kinds of contradiction or subversion of
logic or defeat of the reader's expectation in a text. You could say that it's
deconstruction's favorite trope. Hillis Miller compares it to following a
mountain path and then finding that it gives out, leaving you stranded on a
ledge, unable to go back or forwards. It actually derives from a Greek word
meaning 'a pathless path.'"
--David Lodge, *Nice Work*

Introduction:

The Problem of Tragedy

Tragic drama and the idea of the tragic experience have been among the most persistent forms of Western thought since the fifth century B.C.E.

Tragedy is understood as a literature of transition, crisis, and awakening to consciousness; that is the source of its power and the root of its splendor. In struggling to deal with the many predicaments we encounter in our lives' journeys, art (specifically the tragic art) serves as an instructional tool and reprieve. But what is tragedy?

Despite its eternal, colossal presence in the Western tradition, *tragedy* as a term suffers both from over simplification and uncertainty. There is no working definition, and it has been appropriated by so many scholars, theater

artists, and philosophers that at times it seems the word *tragedy* is used to describe entirely different experiences. Any compact, precise definition is sure to lack in comprehensiveness; likewise there neither is nor can be any wide definition of *tragedy* that can sufficiently cover its various forms in the history of world literature. Does a play with a catastrophic end suffice as a tragedy? Or does it require a protagonist with a paralyzing flaw? Or a protagonist with a flaw *and* knowledge of their culpability in the tragic fall? There is no universal agreement as to which structural elements tragedy requires.¹ Theatrical drama frequently disguises itself as the human experience, and at least one of its aims has always been to reveal the connection between art and life. As opposed to the technical jargon of the natural sciences, the vocabulary of drama is inextricably linked with common parlance, rendering it even more difficult to circumscribe.

Perhaps *tragedy* should serve mostly as a convention of genre. But, genre itself fails as a critical tool since there are not only three, or ten, or a hundred literary kinds; there are as many kinds as there are literary poets. Does temporal context, then, provide the necessary order? Surely not, since playwrights like Sophocles, Shakespeare, Beckett, and Müller all have been,

¹ Richard H. Palmer, *Tragedy and Tragic Theory: An Analytical Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1992), 6. For a truly exhaustive study of tragedy, I highly recommend Mr. Palmer's book. His clear, concise language makes sense of even the most difficult philosophers and dramatists, and its trajectory stretches from Plato to the most exciting viewpoints from within my own lifetime.

and can be, defended as upholders of the Tragic banner. In the words of Richard H. Palmer, professor of theatre at the College of William and Mary:

The playwright who calls a play a tragedy or who, without the label, creates actions, characters, or values on the assumption that they will lead to a tragic response in the audience may not explicitly articulate a definition for tragedy but nonetheless works on the basis of an implied definition.²

Rather than a concise, descriptive definition for tragedy, a more fluid basis of a genre can usually be granted when the core meaning of tragedy remains unclear. The applicability of any label of genre can be highly questionable, but genre constraints persist because providing a mechanical framework to an inherently organic, individualistic work of art is useful inasmuch as it allows order and complexity to appear. Designation of a genre provides the first tool for a process of analysis: its base impulse is a synthesis of disparate elements to discover a meaningful pattern.

Unfortunately, our contemporary demarcations of genre are so strongly rooted in historicity that they often seem to look more for the differences than similarities between works of art. The more specialized the scholarship on certain topics of drama becomes, the more deeply it entrenches itself in historical context and authorial biography. Placing a text into a fluid and sometimes arbitrary niche provided by genre allows the reader no further

² Ibid, 8.

access to the truth of the work, because from the start tragedy as a genre is not complete enough to have been a definition. We have come no farther than we were before, and what is worse, to use generic conventions all too often means to lock a dramatic text into its moment of composition and can thus lead to an anachronistic interpretation. The greatest classical plays are often praised for their “universality.” I take issue with this term but agree that often the most successful plays will continue to resonate with audiences after their initial time of composition, and it is for this reason that I believe plays cannot only be dealt with by historical means.

Authorial biography and historical context, because it is based on recorded facts, are the simplest things to turn to when evaluating a work, but that does not mean they are more useful than the work itself. This is most especially the case with classical works of drama, which are often deemed more opaque than those that were written nearer to our own time. For example, many have tried to contextualize the thematic content of Jean Racine’s Neo-Classical masterpiece *Phèdre* not based on its own content, but in terms of Racine’s religious upbringing, romantic relationships, and so on. The fact that scholars take the first point of access in external information – rather than the glory of the consciously chosen verse the playwright has created – points blatantly to a lack of originality. Time and again, immediate historical information has been used as the sole mode to penetrate Racinian tragedy. The existing critical literature on Racine and his particular tragedy is vast, but I find

it astonishingly lacking in objective, formal analysis. It has always been my belief that attending to the structure of a work is the best way to access the content being communicated by the playwright, and it is a navigation through the formal interplay in Racinian tragedy, which will guide this paper.

Plato and Aristotle were the first recorded minds to systematically question the nature of tragedy. Plato declared that all variations of art (he specifically uses the word poetry), including tragedy, were sources of emotional weakness where instead reason and the human capacity for logic should dominate. Further, he believed that “art” as a concept that derives from inspiration free of any laws or rules provides irrational and undependable sources of truth to those who experience it. He even went so far as to say that art can *only* justify itself by providing a model for behavior, but since tragedy shows suffering, it is a temptation to the “bad part of the spirit.”³ *The Poetics* was Aristotle’s rebuttal to Plato, in which he attempted not only to categorize tragedy into component parts, but also to prove that art can give hope: it comes closer to the ideal by being an improvement over reality. I concur with Aristotle, and believe that he was on to something when he effectively proclaimed that art is the lie that betrays the truth.⁴

³ Bernard Frank Dukore, "Plato: The Republic (c.373 B.C.E.)," *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 29.

⁴ In *The Poetics* Aristotle proclaimed that the pursuit of truth was humanity’s highest calling and that this pursuit was enabled by art. [Francis Fergusson, “Introduction” *Aristotle’s Poetics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 10]. This is a position which has been echoed for centuries by a variety of artists from Jean Cocteau to Pablo Picasso, who once said “art is

The particular elements of *The Poetics* which I take issue with as they apply to French Neo-Classical tragedy and Racine will be defined within each chapter, and a glossary of terms in the Appendix will supplement any further clarification needed. At the moment, it is enough to remember that Aristotle kept the virtue of man in mind when characterizing tragedy. Aristotle maintained that *catharsis*, the purgation of emotions (mainly pity and fear), served the betterment of man and his virtue because after stimulating these emotions to an intense degree, they could then be sublimated and brought back to the proper balance in the spectator's emotional makeup.⁵ It is the catharsis that must be the core aim of any tragedy, and thus each part of the tragedy – the various elements of plot, character, diction, spectacle, etc. – must serve this end if it is to be successful and make man better than he was before. As will be explored in the following chapters, Aristotle took on a noble cause by attempting to pinpoint the exact perfection a tragedy must achieve; his analysis is one that haunts most modern scholars, but it is my belief that his study was incomplete, and demands reconsideration if one is to continue to implicitly or explicitly apply it to a vast number of plays.

Since Aristotle's first treatise on the nature of drama, tragedy has held a prominent role in the history of ideas pursued by some of the greatest Western

the lie that tells the truth" as recorded in Robert Cumming's *Art Explained* (New York: Dk Pub., 2007), 98.

⁵ Palmer, *Tragedy and Tragic Theory*, 22.

minds. Eighteenth century Scottish philosopher David Hume saw tragedy as an escape from lethargy:

No matter what the passion is: Let it be disagreeable, afflicting, melancholy, disordered; it is still better than that insipid languor, which arises from perfect tranquility and repose... The view, or at least, imagination of high passions, arising from great loss or great pain, affects the spectator by sympathy, gives him some touches of the same passions, and serves him for a momentary entertainment. It makes the time pass the easier with him, and is some relief to that oppression, under which men commonly labour, when left entirely to their own thoughts and meditations.⁶

The kernel of Hume's discourse on tragedy is that a general arousal of emotion, including *painful* feelings, heightens the experiences of life and increases our hold on the here-and-now. The connection between Aristotle's catharsis and Hume's desired destruction of "insipid languor" is rather obvious. What Hume does not quite touch on, though, is the sense of dualism that tends to run through tragic theory from the Classical era through the Contemporary one.

Dualism is the idea that there is a fundamental division between sensory experience and the metaphysical plane of existence. Plato grounded his definition of tragedy in a dualistic conception of the universe, and Aristotle defended the symbiotic relationship between the sensory and the metaphysical

⁶ Bernard Frank Dukore, "David Hume: Of Tragedy (1757)," *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 419.

that could be reached through tragedy, which showed nature improved by art and thus moved the audience closer to universal truth. In his discussion of *phenomena* (things as perceived) and *noumena* (things in themselves), eighteenth century German Idealist philosopher Immanuel Kant claimed that the metaphysical dimension was entirely outside the possibility of rational human comprehension.⁷ Challenging the Neoclassical faith in rationality, Kant concluded that rational systems are based on perception, and no matter how apparently reliable they may seem, fail to guarantee an accurate description of external truth because subjectivity distorts observations.

Philosophers after Kant reckoned with Dualism by describing the tragic impulse in humanity as being borne from the struggle between the outward finite existence and the inward infinite aspirations. Awareness of some higher ideal (which is unreachable) produces an inexpressible melancholy, and fellow German philosopher Hegel postulated that art was the only means to sate this desire, as tragedy was the device for the Spirit to express itself in matter. Hegel also paraphrased Aristotle in his further examination of dramatic poetry and added his agreement to the time-honored prescription of the unities of time, space, and action.⁸ Hegel sees a great deal of common ground between classical and modern tragedy, and believes that one of the differing aspects of the latter is its emphasis on character.

⁷ Palmer, *Tragedy and Tragic Theory*, 54.

⁸ Bernard Frank Dukore, "Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: Dramatic Poetry (1818-1829)," *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 533.

Søren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century Danish philosopher and father of Existentialism, concurred with Hegel. Kierkegaard presented one caveat: that modern tragedy tends toward the psychological and emphasizes guilt, but still drove at the overwhelming *similarity* between classical and modern tragedy:

It must be regarded as a warning against every such prejudiced attempt to separate them, that estheticians [sic] still constantly turn back to established Aristotelian determinations and requirements in connection with the tragical; as being exhaustive of the concept; and the warning is needed so much the more, as no one can escape a feeling of sadness in observing that however much the world has changed, the conception of the tragic is still essentially unchanged.⁹

Kierkegaard accepted the chasm between *phenomena* and *noumena* but defended humanity's ability to leap from the known to the unknown through sheer will. At this point it should be fairly clear that a distinct common thread runs through several different thinkers' conceptions of tragedy, regardless of the time period when they were writing or the movement that historians have ascribed them to. Even if a theoretician is termed a "Romantic" or "Existentialist," he tends to build off and restate the same general idea that Aristotle postulated, with some distinguishing features that set it slightly apart. Racine easily falls into the qualifications made by all of the men I have

⁹ Bernard Frank Dukore, "Søren Kierkegaard: The Ancient Tragical Motive as Reflected in the Modern (1843)," *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 551.

described, and can even be further illuminated by philosophers of tragedy as modern as Friedrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus.

Rather than a catharsis that springs from ethical roots like Aristotle's, Nietzsche discusses an *aesthetic catharsis* in his work *The Birth of Tragedy*: "art, rather than ethics, constituted the essential metaphysical activity of man."¹⁰

Nietzsche depicts this metaphysical activity and its necessity in the following way:

"The ground of Being, ever-suffering and contradictory, time and again has need of rapt vision and delightful illusion to redeem itself. Since we ourselves are the very stuff of such illusions, we must view ourselves as the truly non-existent, that is to say, as a perpetual unfolding in time, space, and causality."¹¹

Performance art then, is not merely a leisure activity. It is a basic human impulse that *must* be acted upon to attain a meaningful life, to breach the dualistic chasm of existence. Nietzsche implied drama's ability to help one approach the *noumenal* plane, and Aristotle described drama as a mode of reaching Universal Truth – thus their perceived ultimate and final aims of tragedy differ mostly in terminology.

Since the aesthetic imagination, human emotions, and subjectively perceived moral law are the tools for reaching the sublime realm, individual

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals [1872]*, Trans. Francis Golffing, (New York: Doubleday/Anchor, 1956), 9.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 32-3.

consciousness takes on paramount importance – inherent in most theories of tragedy is a certain egocentricity, because more value is placed on human self-assertiveness in the conflict against a hostile or uncertain universe. In the Post War era, Frenchman Albert Camus argued that tragedy occurs when an individual conflicts with the divine order,¹² and he also elevated human value in opposition to the universal. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus defines *absurdity* as human consciousness swinging between two poles of nihilism and unlimited hope. He glorifies tragedy by proclaiming, “uncertainty is resolved in a work of art,”¹³ thus doling out art as the solution to human nihilism. His rationale for the human love of illusion and mimesis is:

The mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, and appetite for clarity... that nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse of the human drama.¹⁴

A dramatist, then, should constantly be seeking to construct a metaphysical affirmation of human worth through his work. To restore humanity’s faith in life and the constant struggle, tragedy is critical: it depicts the calamity so as to show the human spirit as victorious over the outward forces which fail to

¹² Albert Camus, "On the Future of Tragedy [1955]," *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, Ed. Philip Thody. Trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy, (New York: Vintage, 1970), 295-310.

¹³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus: an Absurd Reasoning, Basic Writings of Existentialism*. Ed. Gordon Marino, (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 454.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 452.

vanquish and conquer it. To call tragedy a portrait of despair is incomplete rather, it is triumph over despair. A play, through its structural integrity redeems the pain of life by beauty, and its protagonist shows eternal joy in self-realization and actualization to become *oneself* even in the face of life's hardest and strangest dilemmas is the greatest heroism of all.

As we have seen, a long line of philosophers have all struggled to define the tragic art in some way or another, and while at heart there are most definitely similarities in their view of what tragedy should accomplish, there is hardly consensus about *how* tragedy can best serve its aims. One of the most preeminent scholars of theatre and performance theory in recent years, Patrice Pavis, corroborates my contention that Tragedy as a term continues to baffle scholars who try again and again to establish its limits but can come to no universal agreement as to which structural elements tragedy requires. In lieu of a definition he has this to say: "a play portraying a disastrous human action, often ending in death. Aristotle's definition was to have a profound influence on playwrights up to the present day."¹⁵ Mr. Pavis is quite right in pointing out Aristotle as the most obviously influential tragic philosopher. *The Poetics*, written in 335 B.C.E., is the earliest-surviving document which attempts to analyze and interpret the origins of dramatic performance art as early as the fourth century B.C.E. Aristotle sought to bring precision to a term that lacked

¹⁵ Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*, (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1998) 414.

exactitude. Most philosophers in his wake have grappled with his definitions and parameters, just as many Western playwrights have sought to carve out their own unique, innovative niche by subverting Aristotle's requirements.

In dealing with Racine, whose temporal context is strongly rooted in French Neo-Classicism, Aristotle's *Poetics* was a strong influence. Just as the term suggests, Neo-Classical writers sought a return to the glory of Classical Greek drama. The writings of Horace and Aristotle had already been translated centuries earlier, and Aristotle's analysis of tragedy became highly prescriptive in the hands of Neo-Classical critics and dramatists, who believed that any deviation from these parameters meant a sharp decline in the quality of their work. Pierre Corneille, hailed as the father of French tragedy, was one such playwright who emulated classical theories of tragedy in his work.

In 1660, Corneille published *Trois Discours Sur Le Poème Dramatique*, a document that asserted the supremacy of classical dramatic structure but also defended the minor transgressions he had made in some of his plays. In general, Corneille underestimated the extent of his deviations, and also from time to time suggested that Aristotle's conception of the aim of tragedy was incorrect. For instance, Corneille agrees that the unities of space and time should be followed in a dramatic work, but he claims that he is justified in moving away from them in order to bring a personally pleasing amount of embellishment and ornamentation to his work. It may be that the source of divergence for Corneille and Aristotle comes down to catharsis. Corneille

confesses that he does not understand the concept at all, and doubts if it is in fact a true occurrence in drama.¹⁶ Corneille accepts pity and fear as components of tragedy, but not the purgation of these emotions. Other key statements made by Corneille in the *Three Discourses* include his contention that one use of dramatic poetry “lies in the *simple* painting of vices and virtues”¹⁷ and that love can be intermingled with tragedy, but should never assume prime importance.¹⁸

It comes as no surprise then, that the younger playwright Jean Racine was a constant thorn in Corneille’s side. Racine borrowed from the Greeks, and relied on Aristotelian conventions to portray a hero’s fall from grace; however, he was a keen innovator within this classical framework. Racine gave Greek thematic elements and plotlines new life by purposefully and precisely manipulating Aristotelian ideals of tragedy such as *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, *hamartia*, consistency of character, and the unities of space and time. These structural innovations will serve as the backbone for this analysis, but certain unusual themes of *Phèdre* will also be looked at concurrently. These include the quest for and failure to attain fulfillment, the mania of love and role of passion as a destructive force, and the entrapment of characters by their mythic fate and the choices they have made that lead them to repeatedly struggle with the boundaries of their world and existence.

¹⁶ Bernard Frank Dukore, "Pierre Corneille: Discourses (1660)" *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974) 231.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 227-8.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 229.

It is my contention that up to this point many scholars have elucidated a single or several innovative element(s) of Racine's dramatic structure – some touch on the elastic treatment of time and space, some discuss the weight given to character over plot – but on the whole these scholars have failed to connect the form of *Phèdre* to the theoretical expectations of Tragic form. In several ways, Racine expressly manipulated the Tragic elements defined by Aristotle in *The Poetics* (a work which remains the preeminent work of tragic performance theory today), and in so doing managed to precipitate several formal qualities which would come to define and characterize more modern works. To best understand the connections between tragedies of different epochs, a simple literary analysis will not suffice. Instead, I will invoke a variety of interdisciplinary sources and put them into conversation with *Phèdre* as well as one another.

It should be stated now that I do not intend this thesis to be an exhaustive study of either Aristotle's *Poetics* or Racine's *Phèdre*; rather, I have chosen to focus on certain points of each in an effort to reach a fuller understanding of *Phèdre*. This analysis is intended to help the English reader to a better understanding of two of the most incredible writers in the Western tradition. There are clear links between both, and it is my belief that many scholars up to this point have focused on symptoms of a greater cause – in this paper I aim to pinpoint the root from which these symptoms spring. There is much more majesty to be found in *Phèdre* (and Racine's entire oeuvre) than can

be explored here – the necessarily brief nature of an undergraduate thesis means that the line must be drawn somewhere, and I encourage anyone yearning for more to look to broader studies of Racine’s drama and Aristotelian tragedy, respectively.

Unless otherwise noted, any translations from the original French have been performed by myself. I often find that many of the existing English translations of Racine bring it to the undue register of full opacity; what was once a pristine mirror becomes a murky mess. The diamond edge of Racinian verse is difficult to discern for the non-French reader, and I do not delude myself in thinking that I may translate him properly or with fully glory. But, for the purpose of dramatic criticism and close reading I have resorted to my own turgid prose in place of the original glory of Racine’s alexandrines, because I believe a word-by-word translation provides better and more faithful insight. For the sake of the flow of this analysis I have provided English in the body of the paper, with the original French text in the accompanying footnote, for the reader’s immediate reference should they need it. In addition, I have kept all French iterations of characters’ names as opposed to anglicized versions.

I must also provide a warning. To any reader who has not possessed a visceral longing to side with Phèdre against her ancestral fate, or has not felt a peculiar dryness in the throat, a compulsion to cry, not for grief, but as the result of some almost transcendent experience – in short, anyone who is *not* endowed with the possibility of being violently affected by Racine – this is

perhaps not for you. Aesthetic experiences are of many kinds, and Racine is not the sole great dramatist in the history of the world, but it is my belief that the reader who will appreciate this paper best is one who has perhaps felt the strange fury, the exquisite pain, which comes from a specific type of love. One that is not unlike Phèdre's own.

*L'incendie:*¹⁹

**The Exquisite Pain of the Mania of Passion and the
Psychology of Contradiction**

Few scholars recognize Racine as a reaction to the Baroque movement, which sprang from the Catholic Church's response to the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent. The Baroque period, and all the art forms that were influenced by it, emphasized an aesthetic that was decorative and ornamental in order to depict the amazing, infinite glory of God.²⁰ The term "Baroque" is applied to movements across many different art forms, the

¹⁹ Literal French translation: the fire that destroys. The French have several words for fire, and *incendie* not only possesses the greatest air of catastrophe, but also next to *feu* is the most commonly used in poetry or other high forms of writing.

²⁰ Ali El-Gasseir, "Racine, the Baroque, and the Tragic Art" Video Chat, (San Francisco, CA, 26 Nov. 2010) Lecture.

most famous of which is probably music or Italian art. In theatre, the Baroque impulse was somewhat akin to Mannerism, a movement that has received less critical attention. Both movements overlapped in their preoccupation with a multiplicity of plot turns, elaborate conceits, and a great assortment of situations that characters were placed into.²¹ As an Anglophile example, Shakespeare's tragedies are frequently classed as Mannerist or Mannerist-inspired. As I mentioned in the Introduction, Pierre Corneille is one example of the playwrights who abided by Baroque aesthetic principles and was an avid advocate of embellishment in his diction as well as his plot.

Racine was a refreshingly simplistic writer compared to his contemporary, and he took pride in penning more "realistic" characters that his audience could relate to. In direct opposition to the Baroque impulse, the characters of Racine's drama (in particular *Phèdre*) portray the *human*, and its emotional capacity as majestic, infinite, and complex. While the intense passions of Racinian characters seems to reference a Baroque-minded grandeur, the essential opulence and plurality of details is entirely absent from Racinian tragedy. Mannerism, Baroque theatre's brother, emphasized the repression of passion: courtly sophistication and style was to be maintained at all times. Certain works of High Comedy provide obvious illustrations of these

²¹ The Baroque period in French theater is usually ascribed as taking place from 1571-1677. Please note that the movement in theater takes place earlier than its counterpart in the plastic arts, which was in full flush by about 1600. Baroque painting stretched into the early 18th century, and many of the works of Baroque visual art and literature are said to be devoid of content and highly attentive to artifice. Also note that the ending year of the Baroque Theatre period is the exact year *Phèdre* was performed for the first time.

formal traits. Racine, unlike any other playwright in Europe at the time, uses his verse economically – no tragedy uses more than 3,000 different words, and there is a certain nakedness and simplicity to the plot and stage. Compression is the key element here, for Racine fashions a complete drama that incorporates classical ideals of order and control along with the irrepressible and incandescent passions of his heroes. Deliberately opposing the artistic principles of his day, Racine assimilated and transformed dramatic convention so as to produce a drama particularly his own, and which bore no prior precedent.

This highly original and innovative tragic universe is based on the destructive force of the passions, working within a purely human context. Racine's plot finds its basis in psychological events, unlike those which we Anglo-American theatre consumers are used to; in Shakespeare²² the opposing forces destroying man are massive, borderline-cosmic forces such as the weight of war or impending doom of external chaos.²³ Racine was one of the first dramatists to place character (the psychology of the individual) first, allowing other elements in the play to spring only second to, and in accordance with the remarkable passion of his protagonist. As discussed in the previous section,

²² While I may sometimes use Shakespeare's theatrical works as a foil to Racine, please do not misunderstand me: Shakespeare and Racine do not occupy opposite poles of any spectrum. They both were Anti-Aristotelian and wonderful dramatists in their own right, who sometimes happened to markedly differ in their theatrical execution. To legitimately bring Shakespeare into the discussion would be the topic of another thesis entirely.

²³ Odette De Mourgues, *Racine: Or The Triumph of Relevance*, (Cambridge U. A.: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1979) 4.

Racine's contemporaries (and indeed, the entirety of French Neo-Classicism up to that point) emulated the Greco-Roman masters to the best of their ability, and the idea of working against these near-sacred precepts was regarded not only as preposterous but *wrong*. There was not an era of invention as much as it was one of imitation. And why should the Greeks, already holding such majesty in their works, be tinkered with?

Leave it to the audacious Jean Racine, the *true* French Neo-Classical master, to twist and reshape 2,000 years of tradition and the sanctions of his day. The inhabitants of Racine's drama are simultaneously powerless and in full control: it is always a fundamental character flaw which impedes them from attaining fulfillment, not any outside force working upon them. Destiny and fate, two of the key components of Racinian tragedy are inextricably linked to the mania of love.

To understand why this was such an unthinkable approach to constructing a tragedy, a consideration of Aristotle is helpful:

Plot, or the representation of the action, is of primary importance; character and thought come next in order...character determines men's qualities but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse.

Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of

character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions...without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character.²⁴

For a drama to be successfully Aristotelian, the structuring and patterning of events must be predetermined *and* operate independently of the qualities of the characters' psychologies. Racine structured *Phèdre* (and all of his earlier tragedies) in precisely the reverse manner that Aristotle prescribes. Scholar William Cloonan, quoting Odette de Mourgues, says it best: "Any French student knows quite well that the movement of action in Racine is not dictated by external circumstances but by the emotions of the characters."²⁵ Rather than place his personages at the mercy of powerful external influences, he chose instead to delve deeply into their hearts and minds, moving beyond the great Rationality that was under critical study in his lifetime.²⁶ It is *Phèdre*'s insurmountable inner turmoil that serves as the obstacle to happiness (and the catalyst to disaster), not external circumstances. Racine's contemporaries and predecessors fashioned the most complex dramas they could manage – the more numerous and difficult thematic and formal elements, the better – as a way of demonstrating their dexterity and virtue.²⁷ In contrast, Racine associates

²⁴ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 46, 62-3.

²⁵ "Tout écolier français sait très bien que le mouvement de l'action dans Racine n'est pas dicté par des circonstances extérieures mais par les sentiments des personnages." William J Cloonan, *Racine's Theatre: the Politics of Love* (University, MS: Romance Monographs), 1977. 53.

²⁶ Claude Abraham, *Jean Racine* (Boston: Twayne, 1977), 26-7.

²⁷ For more information on the concept of *virtù* and the conceptual backing to dominant artistic principles of the day, John Shearman gives a succinct definition. Please see: John K Shearman, *Mannerism* (London, England: Penguin, 1990).

verisimilitude with simplicity and inventiveness: “making something out of nothing,” and castigates those dramatists whose genius does not suffice to fill five acts with a simple action, maintained by the violence of passions, the beauty of sentiment, and the elegance of expression.²⁸

It is useful now to give more attention to these colossal passions and how they inform the psychology of the characters, and accordingly, the entire narrative plot of the play. The Oxford American Dictionary defines *passion* as a “strong and barely controllable emotion,” a “state or outburst of such emotion,” or “intense sexual love.” Etymologically speaking, *passion* comes from the Latin *passio*, meaning “to suffer.” Love portrayed as suffering is a leitmotif in the Western canon, and it takes on a three-dimensional, expressionistic life in the plays of Jean Racine. Love is an autonomous force that directs everything and everyone. While the all-pervasive influence of love in Racine is undeniable, it is still disturbing that limited effort is afforded to discern *why* Racinian characters love the way they do, and what socially-constructed infrastructure is in place to direct and divert the form that love takes.²⁹ Before the text of *Phèdre* is used to bring more complete illumination to this fact, let us be unabashedly clear about Aristotle’s views of passion, so that we may understand the extent of Racine’s transgression.

Just as French thinkers of the seventeenth century were preoccupied with the dichotomy of passion and rationality in man, so too was Aristotle

²⁸ Abraham, *Jean Racine*, 78.

²⁹ Cloonan, *Racine’s Theatre: the Politics of Love*, 9.

intent on differentiating between the two and determining that one should be of more practical (dare I say didactic?) use for the coherence of a work of drama than the other. In Aristotle's philosophical conception of tragedy, the two concepts of action (*praxis*) and passion (*pathos*) are given severe distinction.

Action is active: the psyche perceives something it wants and moves toward it. Passion is passive: the psyche suffers something it cannot control or understand and is 'moved' thereby... There is no movement of the psyche which is pure passion totally devoid of purpose and understanding except perhaps in some pathological states where the human quality is lost.³⁰

In setting up the juxtaposition between "pathetic" motivation and an "ethical" one, Aristotle makes plain that because *praxis* is born of rational purpose it is a "better" method to determine the way a character acts. But in times of great duress, especially the exquisite pain of unrequited love, rationality is often not the driving force of a person's actions. Racine recognized this, and constructed his protagonist Phèdre to be consumed as prey to her love for Hippolyte. But is the human quality truly "lost" as Aristotle suggests? Is not tempestuous love an experience many individuals the world over have dealt with?

Love is one of the most basic human emotions, and its presence or absence is palpable in almost every facet of life. In *Phèdre*, love takes a perverted form: it is not only characterized as limitless adoration, but also

³⁰ Francis Fergusson, "Introduction" Introduction, *Aristotle's Poetics*, By Aristotle (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 2-44, 11.

possesses a dualistic nature in its manifestation as simultaneous intense hatred of the self for feeling that love in the first place. Hippolyte is a misogynist who attempts to guard himself against cupid's arrow, and Phèdre drives herself to insanity through her idealistic worship of her stepson and her denial of shame. The landscape of Racinian love is one of chaotic turmoil where infatuation is destined for collision.

The first time Phèdre is mentioned is in the first scene of the play with Hippolyte, her stepson, and Théramène, Hippolyte's friend and counselor. Hippolyte remarks that his time in Athens was pleasant until the arrival of his stepmother, and Théramène agrees that Phèdre has spoiled his life. But, the confidant questions her influence:

Besides, what danger could you fear from her, a dying woman who wants only to die? Phèdre is sick with a sickness she conceals, tired of herself, weary of the very daylight. How could she plot anything against you?³¹

A dying woman whose sole wish is to die? Racine immediately establishes that this particular passion is, to an extent, worse than death: it holds Phèdre in suspension. She cannot truly live but also cannot die – the key to her freedom from these amorous fetters would be through language, for her to express her diseased cognitive state and by expelling it, reach some state of relief. Despite

³¹ “Et d’ailleurs quels perils vous peut faire courir/ Une femme mourante, et qui cherche à mourir?/ Phèdre atteinte d’un mal qu’elle s’obtient à taire,/ Lasse enfin d’elle-même, et du jour qui l’éclaire,/ Peut-elle contre vous former quelques desseins?” Jean Racine, *Phèdre*, Ed. R. C. Knight, Comp. Eugène Vinaver (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester UP, 1943), 8.

ignorance as to the cause of her paralyzing sickness, Théràmène is correct in characterizing the queen's inertia, and for doubting that she would be roused to action. For Phèdre, the divide between imagination and actualization is immense, and it seems they cannot be fused without causing an avalanche.

If the audience is in any shade of doubt about the severity of Phèdre's suffering, perhaps questioning the source of information, an undeniably reliable account is also given by Oenone (Phèdre's nurse and confidant) upon her entrance, "she is slayed by some disease she hides from me. Her soul is in eternal turmoil. Her entire body is convulsed with anguish,"³² There can be no doubt that the magnitude of Phèdre's pain is extreme, but why does it remain hidden? Following the Greek myth, Phèdre is deeply in love with her stepson, and this love is rendered powerfully affecting to the audience because her love is *not quite* incest. She and Hippolyte have no blood relation, and Phèdre's marriage to Thésée is still rather fresh. Thésée is usually portrayed as at least ten years older than his wife, leaving the age difference between Phèdre and her beloved Hippolyte at about fifteen years. The temptation Phèdre faces catapults her into total despair, because she knows that her love is socially taboo. Were this social construct *not* present, Phèdre believes that their love *could* work; the fact that amorous fulfillment is just barely out of reach makes it that much more painful. Phèdre faces a secondary obstacle, though, in that she believes Hippolyte's inherent misogyny will keep him from ever returning her

³² "Elle meurt dans mes bras d'un mal qu'elle me cache./ Un désordre eternal règne dans son esprit./ Son chagrin inquiet l'arrache de son lit." Ibid, 11.

affection.³³ And she isn't the only one – when Hippolyte confesses his love of Aricie to Thèramène, his friend asks if he is in love *not* using the present indicative tense, but the conditional – he doubts not only that Hippolyte is in love at this immediate moment, but also that love could ever be a possibility for the prince at all.

The most important aspect of Phèdre's love, though, is not its subject. Rather, it is the fact that her despair is at once earthly and eternal; she desires a man, but she feels that this desire has been inflicted upon her as a mythic, ancestral fate, and as such she feels alienated from her very essence and soul. Phèdre's despair is not just centered on unrequited love, but also her own weakness at being unable to suppress her love that can never be fully realized. In the queen's very first scene onstage, she cries out,

How these vain ornaments, these veils do weigh down on me! What interfering hand has formed all these knots in my hair? How all conspires to harm me!³⁴

The weight of her disastrous ancestral fate oppresses Phèdre even through the most basic concrete means of her royal dress and jewels. Her anxiety leads her to struggle endlessly with everything in her corporeal sphere, just as it

³³ “Seigneur, m'est il permis d'expliquer votre fuite? / Pourriez-vous n'être plus ce superbe Hippolyte, / Implacable ennemi des amoureuses lois, / Et d'un joug que Thésée a subi tant de fois? / (...) Aimeriez-vous, Seigneur?” Ibid, 8. [My lord, how am I to understand the meaning of your flight? Is this the proud Hippolyte, relentless enemy of love's laws, who mocked the yoke that Thésée has born so often? Are you in love?]

³⁴ “Que ces vains ornements, que ces voiles me pèsent! / Quelle importune main, en formant tous ces noeuds, / A pris soin sur mon front d'assembler mes cheveux? / Tout m'afflige et me nuit, et conspire à me nuire.” Ibid, 12.

torments her on a cognitive level in her next address, “I want to be hidden in the shade of a dark forest. When will my eye be able to follow a chariot in a noble, fearless cloud of dust?”³⁵ On the surface, Phèdre’s laments are still confined to the simple earthly plane – the environment that Hippolyte occupies. He is a hunter and chariot racer, and she desperately wants to possess him in a space she cannot access. Caught in a kind of irretrievable present, despair has produced the scenario of adultery and incest in Phèdre’s imagination that traps her.

Phèdre is acutely aware of her contaminated lineage: Venus has placed a miasma on her family line, and the fatal proof is grossly evident: Phèdre’s mother fell in love with a bull and subsequently gave birth to the Minotaur. Lamenting the fatal curse of Venus,³⁶ Phèdre asks, “Where am I? What have I said? I have lost my spirit. The gods take my senses and make me mad.”³⁷ Phèdre suffers from an acute eclipse of consciousness – she does not want to acknowledge her own self because she has succumbed to such terrible weakness, a weakness she believes was bound to capture her all along. It is in man’s intrinsic makeup to create concrete goals and work toward them. The presence of physical goals implies an abstract desire for freedom, but this

³⁵ “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?” Ibid, 13.

³⁶ “O haine de Vénus! O fatale colère!” Ibid, 15.

³⁷ “Où suis-je? Et qu’ai-je dit? / Où laissé-je égarer mes vœux, et mon esprit? / Je l’ai perdu. Les dieux m’en ont ravi l’usage.” Ibid, 13.

freedom is wanted in something tangible. In the words of Jean-Paul Sartre, who characterizes the type of existential angst Phèdre experiences with aplomb:

It is by pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist...man will fulfill himself as man, not in turning toward himself, but in seeking outside of himself a goal which is just this liberation, just this particular fulfillment.³⁸

Phèdre desperately desires to possess her beloved because she has idealistic delusions about Hippolyte's goodness and wants to distance herself from her true essence, one, which she believes, is polluted. This specific strain of despair is self-consuming, but it is an *impotent* self-consumption because Phèdre cannot do what she wants to do. Not only is she unable to sate her love, she is also unable to die. She hopelessly wants her stained spirit to be burned up, but instead love has stricken her like a physiological disease, leaving her to vacillate between her inevitably loveless future and the delusional mental space where she can be with Hippolyte, free of guilt or shame.

This is veritably what Kierkegaard would call a *sickness unto death*.

Phèdre wants to be rid of herself, but she cannot even express her pain through language because the last reprieve she has is silence: a denial of the truth and gravity of her situation. At this moment, Phèdre can neither die by suicide nor experience orgasm (translated into French as *la petite mort*, "the little death") with her desired lover, because he rejects her. "To die," in French as well as

³⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism, Basic Writings of Existentialism*, Ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 366.

English speaking countries from the seventeenth century onward carries also the metaphorical meaning of wanting to experience the consummation of the act of love.³⁹ As she finally confesses her true feelings for Hippolyte, she hallucinates her preferred past:

It is me, Prince, it is me whose useful help would have taught you the way out of the maze. What care I could have lavished on this charming head! I could have the partner in danger, in front of you I would have liked to walk, Phèdre with you would have gone down beside you in the Labyrinth, and with you emerged in safety or have been killed.⁴⁰

Thésée won Phèdre in her home of Crete by defeating the Minotaur, and it was Phèdre's sister Ariane who led Thésée out of the labyrinth with a ball of thread. This is the first time Phèdre verbalizes an imagined scenario with Hippolyte, envisioning a perilous journey that he could not have completed without her, and which would make him a world-renowned hero, as it did Thésée. Not only does Phèdre create a situation in which Hippolyte needs her, but also one which is false because Hippolyte is no hero at all: he has slain no monsters or rescued any victim, and he will not before his death later in the play. This is a critical feature of Racinian feminine love: they love the Ideal rather than the

³⁹ Cleanth Brooks, "The Language of Paradox," *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), 16. This reference is made also by many British writers such as Shakespeare and Dryden.

⁴⁰ "C'est moi, Prince, c'est moi don't l'utile secours / Vous eût du Labyrinthe enseigné les detours. / Que de soins m'eût coûté 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." Racine, *Phèdre*, 29-30.

real man. Phèdre wants to justify her pain and the magnitude of her transgression by asserting Hippolyte's virtue. And, by linking herself with an idealized person she is denying her own shame. Underplaying the imperfections in her beloved, Phèdre's infatuation is sustained by mere illusion.

But he rejects her: Hippolyte's first reaction to his stepmother's outpouring of affection is: "I am ashamed even to look at you. I must leave..."⁴¹ Stunned by his rebuke, Phèdre leaps to death: "Here is my heart. This is where you must strike. Already impatient to atone for its offense, I feel it leap to meet your arm. Strike!"⁴² But is it physical death she wishes for, exactly? One can imagine the queen tearing her dress to reveal her chest to her stepson, or at the very least grabbing his sword and placing it on her bosom while she kneels before him. In terms of proximity, this is the closest the two characters will ever be to one another. The sexual energy is blatant as she tells him she will rise to meet his stroke, and begs for an amorous death. Hippolyte is only ever repulsed by Phèdre's passion, but it still must have been an immense frustration for her when the two are interrupted by Oenone's entrance, who quickly shuffles the Queen off the stage.

Phèdre wants to love and has created a figure worthy of her love, but he fails both to fulfill the colossal expectations she has and to feel anything for her

⁴¹ "Ma honte ne peut plus soutenir votre vue. / Et je vais..." Ibid, 30.

⁴² "Voilà mon coeur. C'est là que ta main doit frapper. / Impatient déjà d'expier son offense / Au-devant de ton bras je le sens qui s'avance. / Frappe." Ibid, 31.

at all. Phèdre constantly fights the knowledge that her love will not be reciprocated and, left with no means of mitigating her frustration, she is led to violent and destructive acts. Racine distinctly portrays unbridled sexual passion as dangerous to the individual and to the entire society around them. When someone is deprived of the means to sublimate sexual energy and their passion excludes all other concerns except the attainment of the beloved, the results are dangerous, as we know from the Phaedra myth. Racinian women bear the burden of devotion and receive nothing in return.⁴³ Phèdre hopes that in giving herself to her beloved, she can gain her own self back. She could have become lost in the most blissful manner if only she could have become Hippolyte's beloved, but this self has become a torment to her because it must be a self without him. Her self, her essence, could have been such a treasure, but now it is an abominable void, a nauseating reminder that she is bereft.

What makes this passion necessarily destructive? The fact that it is so all-encompassing that it is impossible for any character to detach itself from it. Nearly a study of greed, the characters in *Phedre* function on extreme egotism because fulfillment is consistently out of reach, and they are thus always in danger of either emotional or physical violence. While they are wrapped up in themselves completely, the strain and pull between characters is palpable their magnetic connection, forever drawing them towards one another, is a

⁴³ Cloonan, *Racine's Theatre: the Politics of Love*, 145.

constant force throughout the tragedy, until the passion which feeds the hunger for completion in another destroys one or both of them.

More importantly, how does this dramatic device succeed, especially since it is the opposite of Aristotle's perceived tragic perfection? Why did the seventeenth century audience (and why does the current audience that sees the play in the twentieth century) continue to suspend their disbelief that a rational human being would ever operate in this manner? Because it has already been established from the start that Racinian tragedy occupies a sphere entirely divorced from rationality and judgment – in the words of Ms. De Mourgues, it is a world of “absolute values.”⁴⁴ Due to the economical style of Racine's writing, we never are given the opportunity to see the beginning or end of a sentiment. This particular stylization of passion means that once given, it follows a rigorous mechanism of destruction – their emotions are always at the same pitch of intensity, and they cannot be altered.

As we can clearly see, Racine's personages, by being denied rationality, were somewhat fluid. This was a striking contrast to his contemporary Corneille (and indeed many playwrights from long before) who used conceptions of the perfect hero directly inherited from Aristotle's classically theory of characterization. Phèdre's conflicting actions are justified by the rhythm of passion's aberrations, and this depiction actually unlocks the secret to the perfect tragic hero, since it is a departure from rationality. In the face of

⁴⁴ Mourgues, *Racine: Or, the Triumph of Relevance*, 39.

amorous delirium, even the most rationally minded individuals begin to unravel, and by channeling this with extreme precision and intensity, Racine was able to depict a heightened form of the human heart and mind that was arresting and poignant.

The fourth point Aristotle makes with respect to Character is that they must be consistent, and this should be achieved through propriety and verisimilitude.⁴⁵ Racine's predecessor and sometime rival Pierre Corneille always used conceptions of the perfect hero that were directly inherited from Aristotle's classical theory of characterization, but Racine defied this.⁴⁶ That is not to say that Racine's personages did not abide by *bienséance*⁴⁷ and *ressemblance*,⁴⁸ but Racine presented conflicting actions united into a single, terribly poignant orchestration composed mainly with the percussions of the heart. His characters were variable and contradictory, but in a way that seemed to actually *increase* their *ressemblance*.

Many scholars vaguely call *Phèdre* the apogee of Racine's work as a tragedian, as symbolizing the end of a quest. A degree of Racine's successful characterizations can be attributed to the fact that Aristotle also concedes that a tragic hero must be a virtuous man who is still capable of weakness. Thus,

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 81.

⁴⁶ Georges Forestier, "The Racinian Hero and the Classical Theory of Characterization" *Racine: the Power and the Pleasure*, By C. E. J. Caldicott and Derval Conroy (Dublin, Ireland: University College Dublin, 2001), 19.

⁴⁷ *Propriety*. That is, the character had to conform to the human or social type to which it belonged; maidens had to be modest, philosophers cautious, etc.

⁴⁸ *Verisimilitude*. That is, the character had to be true to life.

Racine's effectively two-sided characters allowed him to access the secret of the perfect hero. Racine deliberately explored this and made it one the most basic tenets of his formula for tragedy⁴⁹ from *Britannicus* onward, and I agree that Phèdre was his most elegantly constructed hero.

This psychology of contradiction, or double psychology, if you will, reached its apex in *Phèdre*, whose eponymous character is consistently inconsistent and draws in the viewer with her boundless passion and pain. It is not an overstatement to say that *Phèdre*, in all her lyric glory, is an eternally ideal tragic hero who allows for the representation and of the entire continuum of tragic emotions with the context of a tragic conflict. Due to the fact that Racine placed his characters (most especially Phèdre) in a state of duress caused by the force of passion, viewers never wavered in their investment; Racine consistently used a character's *hamartia*⁵⁰ as the driving force of their actions, giving external manifestation to an internal state of mind.

⁴⁹ Forestier, "The Racinian Hero and the Classical Theory of Characterization," 23.

⁵⁰ Frequently mistranslated as *Tragic flaw* ever since the Romantic movement in literature, Aristotle's original intent with the coining of the term *hamartia* was to mean an ignorant misstep or mistake, which was not necessarily related to a deeper flaw within their psyche. There are, in fact, even professors at this university who incorrectly define the term: Will Eggers, "Conventions of Tragedy" ENGL 205: Shakespeare (Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT. Oct. 2011), Lecture.

Entrapment:

**Manipulation of *Hamartia*, *Peripeteia*, *Anagnorisis*,
and the Scene of Suffering**

Similar to Racine's treatment of psychology, Aristotle's *hamartia* possesses a uniquely doubled sense of frenzy and fury in *Phèdre*. Most importantly, the *hamartia* as used by Racine is truly a tragic flaw in the sense that it is *not* an ignorant misstep that happens to catalyze other events in the narrative; rather, it is an intrinsic flaw in the heart and mind of the hero, the root from which all other actions spring. Patrice Pavis remarks that "the term *hamartia* is very ambiguous"⁵¹ and I quite agree: in ancient Greek *hamartia*

⁵¹ Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, 416.

meant precisely an error, fault, or failure. In his *Poetics* Aristotle never actually uses the term — it is one that later scholars have placed on the concept he came up with so as to have a simpler signifier when referring to the phenomenon Aristotle explained but did not go to the trouble to coin. In the surviving ancient text we have, Aristotle seems to mainly expound on the existing Greek definition of *hamartia* when speaking of its function in the tragic fall of the hero who “does not fall into misfortune through vice or depravity, but falls because of some mistake.”⁵²

For the last several centuries, it has not been a single misstep that has led to all the tragic conflict in drama; rather, playwrights generally choose to fashion characters that are neither entirely innocent nor completely guilty, or playwrights can dilute this principle further by placing the character into a moral dilemma. Despite the many permutations of tragic conflict that have emerged, it is important to separate as much as possible contemporary ideas of a “fatal flaw” from what Aristotle expressly intended. The idea that the *hamartia* is anything more permanent than a single misstep or error in judgment is recent: it bears the obvious mark of Romantic and Existentialist discourse, and thus is of no use to us in an exploration of Aristotle’s original thought or of seventeenth century French drama.

Another reason that *hamartia* can seem unclear in its meaning is that it is so frequently paired with *hubris* that the two can become confused. *Hubris* is

⁵² Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, 76.

an attitude of arrogance and pride that leads the hero to purposely defy the gods and pay no heed to warnings from other characters.⁵³ The two terms are found to coexist with astounding frequency in Greek drama, and since Aristotle and his terms are most often used to interpret the plays of Ancient Greece it is not surprising that *hamartia* and *hubris* can sometimes be used interchangeably and incorrectly. However, the two *are* markedly different terms used to describe two different dramatic phenomena and they do not both need to be present in one play. Indeed, as performance art has become more secular, *hubris* hardly seems to occur, since the heroes of many modern dramas don't endeavor to provoke the Gods (or God).

Having made this distinction, it is much easier to see the unique handling of *hamartia* present in Racine's *Phèdre*,⁵⁴ in which he once again sets out to subvert the original Greek ideal. The *hamartia* surges like a current through Racinian love from two sources: unrequited passion and society's inability, because of its obsession with *gloire*,⁵⁵ to provide the means for genuine individual fulfillment. Phèdre constantly fights the knowledge that her love will not be reciprocated, and when she is left with no means of mitigating

⁵³ Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre*, 174.

⁵⁴ If further along in this chapter, the reader wonders why the distribution of pages heavily favors *hamartia*, it is because the convoluted and often misunderstood nature of *hamartia* demands close attention. The other Aristotelian conventions that are discussed in this chapter—*peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and the Scene of Suffering—are easier to pin down and thus do not require quite as much explanation.

⁵⁵ The ostensible essence of *gloire* is self-fulfillment through service to the state. *Gloire* can thus only be attained by males in positions of power, or more rarely, a first-born female who is eligible to rule.

her frustration, she is led to violent and destructive acts. Racine distinctly portrays unchecked sexual passion as dangerous to the individual and to the entire society around them. When a character is deprived of the means of sublimating sexual energy and their passion excludes all other concerns except the attainment of the beloved, the results are dangerous for both parties.

Phèdre is truly a proto-psychological drama in that the handling of fatal passion is so nuanced. In the previous chapter it was discussed that not only is Phèdre despairing over an earthly object (Hippolyte), but also an eternal one (her internal weakness). Where does this weakness come from? Phèdre constantly laments the ancestral nature of her suffering, but what is staggering is the fact that so many scholars attempt to reckon with the presence of this inherited guilt by operating purely on the parent-child axis. This may be a vestige of Freudian psychology, but whatever the reason is, it neglects something even more important: Phèdre's relationship with her older sister, Ariane.

Why do so many students of Racine conveniently forget about the most recent scandal in Phèdre's family when exploring the atmosphere of doom that permeates Racine's best work? Most likely, it remains ignored because Phèdre never explicitly mentions it in Racine's adaptation. In all literature (especially the dramatic), absence can sometimes make a more haunting impression than presence, and this is most certainly the case in *Phèdre*. I have already discussed the sinister nature of Phèdre's silence, and I believe this selective forgetfulness

as a protection from passion operates on a much larger scale than has been previously explored. Racine, in creating a compressed drama, necessarily could not tell the story of Phèdre's entire family, but a seventeenth century audience would have known all about the mythic events that preceded Racine's rendering, if only because Thomas Corneille wrote his own play about the sisterly rivalry in his *Ariane* just a few years before *Phèdre* was staged.

To refresh the modern memory: Ariane and Phèdre were both the daughters of the Cretan king Minos, and when Thésée was sent from Athens to Crete as a sacrifice to the Minotaur, Ariane fell in love with him – this explains why she put herself in danger to save Thésée and lead him out of the labyrinth. King Minos flies into a rage when he finds that the Minotaur has been killed and that his own first-born daughter was the one who aided a foreigner in this endeavor. In danger of severe punishment, Thésée and Ariane must flee Crete, and Thésée promises to marry Ariane because he feels beholden to her, but he also invites his *real* love, her younger sister Phèdre along with them. The three escape to a neighboring kingdom where the local king falls in love with Ariane, and Thésée, in hopes that she will eventually return his affections and thus free him to marry her sister instead, postpones the wedding and woos Phèdre in secret. Throughout the ordeal, Ariane is astounding in her lack of awareness. She perceives her younger sister as nothing more than a nonentity and treats her as underling devoid of her own desires.

As we can guess, Ariane is abandoned when Thésée and Phèdre eventually return to Athens without her, and it is suggested in Corneille's text that Ariane commits suicide by leaping off the cliff where she waited in vain for her lover. In Racine's tragedy, Phèdre mentions her dead sister just once immediately before confessing her love for Hippolyte to Oenone: "Ariane, my sister! What love wounded you, and killed you on the beach where you lay abandoned!"⁵⁶ Just before this admission, when Phèdre does not name her sister but grieves over Venus' fatal curse, Oenone tells her, "Let us forget them, Madame. And may an eternal silence hide this memory."⁵⁷ Phèdre's guilt then, is not confined to the forbidden love of her stepson, but also the memory of a fatal betrayal to her own sister. Phèdre is a stranger in a foreign land, and conducts herself with enough dignity that when Thésée's absence begins to wear on Athens it is suggested that she may take over the throne along with her younger son. Phèdre has obviously succeeded in maintaining her silence if her kingdom still has faith in her, and up until her desire for Hippolyte swells to the point of threatening explosion, Phèdre is a kind of twisted heroine in spite of her essence. She was born into a family curse but cunningly attempts to transcend the disadvantage of her birth, and her dishonest heroism is defined not by revealing an innate superiority (as is so often the case with male heroes

⁵⁶ "Ariane, ma soeur! De quell amour blessée, / Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée!" Racine, *Phèdre*, 16.

⁵⁷ "Oublions-les, Madame. Et qu'à tout l'avenir / Un silence eternal cache ce souvenir." Ibid, 15.

in ancient epics), but by reverting to stoicism and thus keeping hidden an innate worthlessness.⁵⁸

Speaking broadly of the whole work, French philosopher, critic, and literary theorist Roland Barthes⁵⁹ points out just this reversal of interiority and guilt: “*Phèdre* posits an identification of interiority with guilt; in *Phèdre*, things are not hidden because they are guilty...things are guilty because they are hidden.”⁶⁰ Shame is expressed not in heart-wrenching and terrible cries, but in constriction. Phèdre’s entire world imprisons her, and the fact that her inherited guilt is not a result of just one crime, but *two* amplifies the pain within her to the brink of oblivion. By avoiding speech, Phèdre avoids action, but this mechanism of limitation on oneself ultimately has led to a paralyzing injury, and it is this exact personal device that constitutes her *hamartia*: she is blind. Phèdre is so tormented by her past that she has lost all awareness and connection to her immediate world – just like her older sister Ariane several years earlier.

Ariane’s unfair treatment of Phèdre is one typical of sisterly relationships. Ariane, the oldest child, is domineering and feels entitled. Her

⁵⁸ Richard E. Goodkin, "A Tale of Two Sisters" *Birth Marks: The Tragedy of Primogeniture in Pierre Corneille, Thomas Corneille, and Jean Racine* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2000), 231. This is perhaps the most interesting and focused exploration of seventeenth century French drama I have encountered and I highly recommend it for further reading.

⁵⁹ Roland Barthes is a prolific 20th century theorist whose work spans the movements of Structuralism, Post Structuralism, and Semiotics respectively. I personally came into contact with his work for the first time in 2007 with *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

⁶⁰ Roland Barthes, *On Racine* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), 116.

younger sister, running behind to catch up to her emotional maturity, is treated as a sounding board – a mere annex of Ariane’s own self. And let us not forget that Ariane’s haughtiness is not unjustified – she *is* the first in line to the throne, and only gives up her crown to run away with Thésée. Had she stayed in Crete, Ariane would have been a powerful queen, and these personality traits would have been put to good use. Phèdre, as the youngest, has not had the weight of a crown suspended over her head, but she *has* had to carve out her own existence apart from her sister’s shadow. As the youngest, she would have been practically worthless in terms of feudal values,⁶¹ and this is where the psychology of birth order takes on importance.

From a young age, Phèdre knew she would never attain the kind of *gloire* that men and the first born children of royal houses have access to. If she could never be queen, she would have to find another way to infuse her existence with meaning. For women of Euripides’ time as well as Racine’s, there were only two viable options for a female who craved a meaningful life: *gloire*, the predetermined, self-satisfying act, or love and marriage. Compensating for feelings of self-doubt by creating astonishing aspirations for herself, it isn’t hard to see why Thésée’s entrance must have seemed the answer to all of Phèdre’s prayers to overcome her position of inferiority. *Gloire* was still impossible for her, but here was love, an end to her worries and an everlasting promise of comfort. But Phèdre’s peace was short-lived:

⁶¹ Goodkin, “A Tale of Two Sisters,” 232.

“Hardly had I been bound to the son of Égée⁶² under the laws of marriage, my rest, my happiness secured, when Athens showed me my magnificent enemy. I saw him, I blushed, I faded at his sight. A disorder rose in my wild heart.”⁶³

After coming so close to prevailing over her overbearing sister, a family curse, and finding fulfillment aside from *gloire* in the heart of an Athenian king, Phèdre is poised to lose everything, to be engulfed by the miasma of diseased love that has ruined her family. But as the younger child, Phèdre was accustomed to having to make her own good fortune, and so she resisted her unwanted passion in a variety of resourceful ways. In an attempt to reverse the curse of Venus she builds a temple in her honor, she passes a law that no one could pronounce Hippolyte’s name in her presence, and she even turns Thésée against his son so much that he has Hippolyte exiled. When none of these actions can fully eradicate Phèdre’s feelings, and Hippolyte returns to Athens, her immediate desire is death. Silence is invaluable, and Phèdre will go to any lengths to ensure that her inner weakness will not be revealed to the outside world.

Fulfillment has now been doubly stolen from Phèdre. As the youngest, the laws of primogeniture prevented her from attaining *gloire*, but even when she married a powerful king, Venus intervened to dash any hope Phèdre had of

⁶² Aegeus, transliterated to French as Égée, was Thésée’s father, the former king of Athens.

⁶³ “A peine au fils d’Égée, / Sous les lois de l’hymen je m’étais engagée, / Mon repos, mon bonheur semblait être affermi, / Athènes me montra mon superbe ennemi. / Je le vis, je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue. / Un trouble s’éleva dans mon âme éperdue.” Racine, *Phèdre*, 17.

being a dignified queen. Her love for Thésée has been polluted and displaced, but any desire directed toward Hippolyte is doomed not only because of the societal conventions, but also because he does not love her back. As Phèdre's soul-scarring anxieties reach a horrifying crescendo, so too does her awareness become blinkered – the *hamartia* controls her.

The desire for amorous attachment does not assume such an important role for Racinian women only because it is the sole means of fulfillment in the political arena of seventeenth century France – the true motivation is one that remains intact today. Love and infatuation maintain a colossal presence in the Western tradition, but until recently there has been no scientific explanation for this. Human nature has been viewed through the ages as either innately destructive or as a clean slate, ready to be written upon by cultural norms. Both of these viewpoints find their origins in the works of Hobbes and Freud respectively, as well as classical anthropological discourse,⁶⁴ and perhaps it is an attitude in line with these conjectures that has led scholars to consistently have no explanation for why Racinian women love the way they do. The answer lies in contemporary psychological study, which increasingly suggests that social attachment is the dominant human motive.

In several of her psychological studies, famed psychoanalyst and former professor of Yale University Helen B. Lewis presents evidence that hatred and destruction are the direct results of alienated social relationships; when a

⁶⁴ Thomas J. Scheff, "Gender Wars: Emotions in 'Much Ado About Nothing'" *Sociological Perspectives* 36.2 (1993): 149-66, *JSTOR*, Web, 19 Jan. 2012, 149.

romantic bond is threatened or irreparably compromised, shame and anger take prominence in the human psyche.⁶⁵ Further, shame and destruction (two prominent themes in *Phèdre*) are found to play a more important role in romantic relationships that involve high amounts of hostility or idealization between the two partners.⁶⁶ As I have already determined in the previous chapter, hostility and idealization are two key components of the relationship between Phèdre and Hippolyte. An interesting kind of hero worship occurs, because Phèdre finds in Hippolyte many qualities she lacks, such as a respectable, chaste reputation. And because Hippolyte is so much like his father, Phèdre is able to find a twisted way of redeeming her marriage to Thésée — she *nearly* married the right man. If it were not for the age difference, it might have been Hippolyte who was sent as a sacrifice to the Minotaur, and whom Phèdre would have fallen in love with.

It is this desire for Hippolyte that makes Phèdre's blindness most apparent; she doesn't truly love him, she merely is infatuated with a man who unlike her husband, is bathed in the light of provocative whim. Thésée relentlessly pursued Phèdre, and her marriage to him may be one that she can look back on in hindsight to see as not really having been her choice. Thus, this mentally imagined romance with Hippolyte is alluring because it would be of Phèdre's own choosing. Phèdre also has plenty of reason to doubt Thésée's

⁶⁵ Helen Block Lewis, "The Superego Experience: Shame and Guilt" *Sex and the Superego: Psychic War in Men and Women* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1987), 185-200.

⁶⁶ Scheff, "Gender Wars" 150.

ethical fiber since he willingly abandoned her sister, Ariane, on the metaphorical and literal precipice. Yet in her distorted subjective perception, Hippolyte does not have this flaw. Since they do not yet have any relationship to speak of, Phèdre is free to imagine her ideal, fabricated future with a man who has not yet had the chance to disappoint her (unlike his father's history of womanizing). Sadly, Phèdre's love for Hippolyte is the love of illusion and is not even remotely requited. Phèdre is not alone in Racine's oeuvre: all women see, at least initially, the idea instead of the man, and because they want so badly to love (it is, after all, their only hope for personal fulfillment), they create a figure worthy of their love.⁶⁷ When the man fails to complete the ideal, he becomes a monster. Attempted compromises or declarations of love lead to disappointment and doom them to lives of frustration.⁶⁸

This is all too frequently the case when lovers' attempts at reconciliation fail, and only their intense love remains, which in turn is heightened by the absence of any other means of fulfillment.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, it is usually the women who are left so staggeringly bereft in Racine's oeuvre, because Racinian women have no real alternative to love, yet cannot help but try to attain it. Perhaps Racine did this with a purpose, in an effort to make his drama progressive in its depiction of the political realities of seventeenth century society with a hope for a bright (but vaguely defined) future. Or perhaps Racine

⁶⁷ See also the eponymous characters of *Andromaque* and *Bérénice*, respectively, as well as the supporting character Hermione in *Andromaque*.

⁶⁸ Cloonan, *Racine's Theatre: the Politics of Love*, 143.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

meant to attest to the endurance of human passion while still suggesting passion's inability to conquer all. Whatever the reasoning may be, Racinian women fight the knowledge that their love will never be reciprocated, and thus become prey to their consuming passion, which because it will never be sated, will destroy them.⁷⁰

Racinian women accept the burden of devotion and receive nothing in return – the seeming need for supernatural assistance in affairs of the heart indicates a tragic resonance. Phèdre finds herself in a situation where the man she desires completely rejects her and then has no means of mitigating her frustrations, because society has not given her the option of attaining *gloire* the way it has to the men. Estranged from society and alienated from the man she loves, the world Phèdre occupies takes on an undeniably Absurdist quality. Denied love and bereft of any alternative to love, Phèdre's goal becomes destruction, first of her beloved and then of herself, to shatter the power that love has over her. Any pursuit of wholeness is futile, and so a tragic fragmentation occurs, but because the mania of love stems from the protagonist's own inherent nature, death is usually the only option left. The mania of love, having transformed into a cancerous growth whose cruel progress the woman no longer possesses the power of controlling, can be quelled only through the complete annihilation of the self.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 31.

Phèdre opens at a critical juncture: all is tenuously held in a state of static tension, a kind of parenthesis in the lives of the characters. Racine's characters do not truly develop after the exposition (naturally, since their *hamartia* is permanent and non-pliant). They live in a world of frenetic activity and crisis in which their fate has been determined long before the play begins. Why? Because of Racine's manipulation of yet another Aristotelian ideal, the joint force of the *peripeteia*⁷¹ and *anagnorisis*.⁷² For Aristotle, these are two crucial components of the art of tragedy, and are reserved for the end (frequently the "Scene of Suffering"). Racine, however, has no qualms in making them known from the very beginning. And why should he, since for Racine an entire play is effectively a scene of suffering?

Peripeteia and *anagnorisis* are not carefully wielded at the climax, as Aristotle would have it, and it is this unique handling that aids in the pervasive Racinian theme of entrapment. In fact, they cease to exist at all in this work, if we carefully unpack Aristotle's respective definitions for them. With regard to *peripeteia* he states, "Reversal of the Situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite."⁷³ *Phèdre* knows from the start that she cannot overcome the impending catastrophe that will result from her forbidden love. The play does not reach a climax so much as it betrays a ripple of behavior on the heroine's part. A typical, classically-constructed play would also display just

⁷¹ "Reversal of Fortune" Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 72.

⁷² "Recognition" Ibid, 73.

⁷³ Ibid, 72.

this form of *anagnorisis*: “Recognition, as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge.”⁷⁴ Phèdre’s thought process never changes, there is no new knowledge gained at all between her first entrance and her last exit. In this way, Racine uses fate to deny his characters of free will and paints a tragic picture of individuals who repeatedly struggle with the boundaries of their world and existence even though there is never the option of escape. There is an unraveling, of course, which maintains the work’s dynamic, but it has been such a long time coming that it doesn’t operate on the typical, classically-informed framework.

Phèdre eventually moves toward the inexorable zenith of her suffering death which the audience knows has been prepared long before. It is announced at the beginning of the play and finally completed at the end, while everything in between is precariously suspended, awaiting that which must come. Phèdre’s suffocating *hamartia*, the powerful urge which once drove her, has now become the very thing that leads our heroine inevitably to her catastrophic demise. Not only does Racine defy Aristotelian tragedy with his treatment of *hamartia*, *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and the Scene of Suffering which occurs not at the dénouement, but is upheld from start to finish he also precipitates the contemporary heroine who finds herself fragmented and virtually destroyed by the exigencies of modern life.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 72.

Collapse:

Fluid Time and Metaphysical Space

Due to the simplicity of plot and sense of fatalism permeating *Phèdre*, there is no need to condense the action into 24 hours or limit space as Aristotle would have it. According to Aristotle, tragedy must endeavor “to confine itself to a single revolution of the sun,” meaning a period of twenty-four hours. In addition, the action of the tragedy should take place in a single location.⁷⁵

Aristotle deems these limiting factors as necessary for the same reason as the other conventions that have been discussed previously: to build a plot that best accomplishes catharsis. Superficially, it appears Racine abides by Aristotle’s

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Poetics*, 60.

requirements – or does he? In keeping with Racine’s style of careful, precise subversion of Aristotelian tradition, time and space as used in *Phèdre* are not what they seem.

We are given only two temporal references in *Phèdre*: in the first scene Hippolyte declares that Thésée has been away for six months,⁷⁶ and in Phèdre’s first scene her nurse Oenone bemoans that the queen has not slept or eaten for three days.⁷⁷ Several scholars see the Racinian method of basing a plot on psychological events as a concession to Aristotle so that the unity of time can be more strictly observed: with fewer extraneous actions, the narrative can easily complete its cycle in a single day. The most basic piece of evidence that disproves this, though, is the fact that there are several temporal inconsistencies in *Phèdre*. Hippolyte exits the stage for the last time in V.1 (with the intent to flee Troezen with his bride-to-be, Aricia). In V.6, Théramène gives an impassioned account to Thésée of his son’s death. The audience is to believe that Hippolyte has exited with his counselor, traveled as far as the seashore where he was faced with, battled, and was finally killed by the sea monster, *and* that Théramène has made it all the way back to the palace to regale Thésée with the story. Obviously this is outrageous since between Hippolyte’s exit and Théramène’s entrance there are only 82 spoken lines (probably close to four minutes of stage time). Did Racine intend for these offstage events to occur with alarming speed, or was it something of a mistake in writing, as when

⁷⁶ Racine, *Phèdre*, 7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

Shakespeare often forgets to indicate the entrances and exits of Horatio in *Hamlet*? And Racine doesn't just do this once: by Thérémène's account Aricia has already come upon her dead lover by the shore and taken her leave of him, but her exit from the palace in V.3 took place just a short 37 lines earlier. It isn't difficult to see that even with regard to basic chronology Racine demonstrates blatant disregard for the unity of time.

In Racinian tragedy, passion is the locus around which all other dramatic elements are centered, and this passion is consistently viewed from a single angle: its destructive power. Racine's careful stylization of passion is not limited to the exquisite pain discussed in detail in the first chapter; indeed, one can take this examination further. *Phèdre* has been fashioned economically so as to suit the mechanism of destruction, and this compression is a distinctly expressive element in the way it violently wrenches away the two-dimensional contours of human life, time and space. Because the extreme passion of Racine's heroine must be seen as a continuous movement, duration as we commonly know it is destroyed.

Interestingly, everyday life is completely absent from *Phèdre*. The audience never sees the characters eat, or sleep, or perform any action that is remotely quotidian. This is not the world of Anton Chekhov or Arthur Miller, in which characters can retreat into their own solitude or find a reprieve in common, habitual duties. Instead, the characters in *Phèdre* occupy the most heightened level of tension in drama, and because this is a world of no escape,

emotions enjoy a cruel power of expansion. Under normal circumstances, time brings with it a sequence of ever-evolving and changing moods. Time can offer relaxation in the face of traumatic experiences, as time wears away passion, softens sorrow, and even gives rise to states of mind such as indifference and resignation. Yet in the world of Racinian absolutes, the audience does not have the opportunity to ever see the beginning or the end of a sentiment. In point of fact, from the first time a passion is expressed to the audience, it has already been set at an alarming fever pitch that can only be interrupted by death or the final fall of the curtain. These are levels of mental consciousness that operate outside of realistic temporal intervals, and in Phèdre's case the despair of love's absence is an eternal torture.

Phèdre's first line, "Let us go no further"⁷⁸ indicates from the very beginning her feeling of catastrophic suspension. She is a woman who refuses to live but is not yet ready to die, and can only express herself through the destruction of her own identity. In *Tragic Passages*, professor of French at the University of Iowa, Roland Racevskis, asserts that Racinian tragedy "plays out on thresholds."⁷⁹ He is quite right, and in this chapter I will contend that Phèdre's strongest and most constant longing is toward infinitude. Unfortunately, this journey cannot be completed because she is instead frozen in the moment of her own becoming, at the metaphorical precipice of identity,

⁷⁸ "N'allons point plus avant." Ibid, 12.

⁷⁹ Roland Racevskis, *Tragic Passages: Jean Racine's Art of the Threshold* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2008), 15.

standing on the shores of selfhood without ever being able to cross to a new land of transcendence.

As we may recall, the root of Phèdre's discontent is her desire for Hippolyte, which is fed by and perpetuates her loss of presence in her immediate world. As we may also remember, this is a specific type of misery that is not only earthly (focused on an object) but also eternal (focused on an internal weakness that cannot be repaired). In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard describes the kind of time dilation that occurs for humanity in times of mental and emotional duress:

Every actual moment of despair is traceable to possibility; every moment he is in despair he *is bringing it upon himself*. It is always the present tense; in relation to the actuality there is no pastness [sic] of the past: in every actual moment of despair, the person in despair bears all the past as a present in the possibility. The reason for this is that to despair is a qualification of the spirit and relates to the eternal in man.⁸⁰

Phèdre is so much more than a revelation and eventual confession of guilty passion. The heroine wishes to build her own world, her own future, and a life of her own choosing with a lover who can fulfill her. Despite her desire to reach her infinite aspirations, the pursuit of wholeness is futile, not just because her love for Hippolyte is not requited, but also because this paralyzing desire disintegrates her identity from the inside out. *Phèdre* is a depiction of the

⁸⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death, Basic Writings of Existentialism*, Ed. Gordon Marino (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 45.

fragility of the *heimat*, Heidegger's term for the cohesive identity.⁸¹ Tragedy, in this case, is the unraveling of the self: her language is pried apart so that the audience is left with no way to consolidate her behavior into a meaningful pattern and identity. One of the unique qualities of tragic protagonists is that they are not fixed entities; they are not sculptures – or if they are, they are so fragile and volatile as to seem to be made of glass or ice. Rather, the external expression of their psychomania leaves the audience often with a discontinuous image.

As Phèdre becomes constricted by the intensely tragic value of the irretrievable present and struggles to express herself through action and language, her immobility or acceleration give rise to a variety of tempos that create concomitant rhythms working in tandem with her psyche.⁸² This is a plot based on psychological events, which because of their intensity escape the material measurements of time – time is extremely elastic and often seems either to be disastrously too short, or of unendurable length. No doubt the audience feels a sense of frustration at Phèdre's continued malaise in the early acts of the play, but even in her much-anticipated confrontation with Hippolyte, the gratification is stunted by its curtailed dialogue, which is only

⁸¹ William V Spanos, "Modern Drama and the Aristotelian Tradition: The Formal Imperatives of Absurd Time," *Contemporary Literature* 12.3 (1971): 345-72. *JSTOR*, Web, 7 Mar. 2012, 359.

⁸² Bettina Knapp, *Jean Racine: Mythos and Renewal in Modern Theater* (University: University of Alabama, 1971), 8.

125 lines long. Traditional dramatic time is not an issue for Racine, as the crises he frames could happen at any velocity dictated by human hearts.

Rather than judiciously framing his events into the proper Aristotelian form, his characters occupy a kind of *fluid time*, where the past hurtles forth into the present.⁸³ This is not to say that the narrative in *Phèdre* reaches forward or lurches back, but that the past is liable to erupt into the present and the future likely to overwrite the presence (at least in the mind of the protagonist). But the truly fascinating component of *fluid time* lies less in an overwhelming weight of the past than in a temporal construction in which no one is at home with their identity in the present. This is shown most clearly through Phèdre's difficulty to express herself. To speak is to acknowledge guilt and give it three-dimensional shape, and likewise Phèdre's position in the liminal space between utterance and repression keeps her from being wholly bound to the present time and place. In her first scene with Oenone, Phèdre seems to be in her own world for the span of several pages, speaking to herself and the gods rather than to the other person onstage with her, and hardly acknowledging anything Oenone says. This is a pattern that continues until the end of the play, as Panope remarks in V.5: "She wanders randomly about with irresolute steps. Her vacant eye no longer recognizes any of us. Three times she started a letter, and each time she changed her mind and tore it up before it was hardly

⁸³ Ibid, 64.

begun.”⁸⁴ In written language as well as spoken, Phèdre’s attempts at communication with other characters is interrupted and suspended. Often when Phèdre succeeds at projecting her thought externally, they gush out with immense force – she sustains some of the most incredible (and lengthy) monologues written in the French language,⁸⁵ but often these are composed of imaginary situations. Racine makes it exceedingly clear that Phèdre’s consciousness is irresistibly dragged elsewhere.

As with language, so to with movement: Phèdre struggles to set herself into motion, and often languishes on the verge of departure or otherwise wanders from place to place without any clear direction or positive motive. As her torment intensifies, the stage seems to spatially frame her tragic destiny: this is a woman who cannot possibly complete a departure and exit to the transcendental world because her deferred movements keep her frozen in the terrestrial realm, the liminal space of her own imagination. Inherent in the character of Phèdre is the inability to submit to the necessity of life, to her true situation. She senses that her attempt to reach infinitude is doomed, and so turns to self-actualization through imagination. As Kierkegaard says, “Imagination is infinitizing reflection.”⁸⁶ This applies well to Phèdre, who takes solace in the terrible solitude of her fabricated future in which she can

⁸⁴ “Elle porte au hazard ses pas irrésolus. / Son oeil out égaré ne nous reconnaît plus. / Elle a trois fois écrit, et changeant de pensée / Trois fois elle a rompu sa letter commencé.” Racine, *Phèdre*, 58.

⁸⁵ See: (I.3. 269-316), (II.5 671-711), (III.3 839-868), and (IV.5 1193-1294).

⁸⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, 60.

experience pleasure in oblivion and thereby reach the state of completion and fulfillment from love that she craves. The limitless nature of imagination means that she can manifest her infinite aspirations mentally, but because she resides in a tragic universe in which her dreams will come to naught and none of her hopes can be realized concretely, this imagined self becomes an abstract possibility, floundering in a dream state with no real possibility to speak of until her sense of self, or *heimat* threatens to be swallowed up by the infinite abyss of imagined prospects. Having chased after a beloved possibility which is real only in her own mind, and also pursuing the threats of anxiety, Phèdre has been led so far adrift from her present self that she can no longer return to her former identity.

Accepting that Racine has designed a tragic universe in which characters' motivations connate with intense abstraction, this treatment of time and space is most logical, given the literally *epic* back-story most of Racine's characters possess. After all, the space delineated by tragedy often carries a mythic weight and temporal complexity not often found in other genres of drama, or even in a contemporary tragedy. These are places which are inhabited not only by the creatures of the human and the visible present, but also by people of the past, by ancestors, by giants, heroes, gods, ghosts, and even abstractions which have their autonomy and agency: fate, fear, and justice.⁸⁷ Omnipresent in Racinian tragedy is the threat that *something* will spill

⁸⁷ Paul Hammond, *The Strangeness of Tragedy* (Oxford, England: Oxford UP, 2009), 13.

out of these unseen spaces to haunt the stage; both presence and absence inflect the performance space. In prey to her passion for her stepson Hippolyte, Phèdre herself no longer inhabits space in the ways that other characters do; she moves in her own, strangely-contorted world, and her ventures into the spaces shared by others are catastrophic. She has become more and less than herself: her mind and body fragmented by (or into) passion, she is no longer simply Phèdre. She is the daughter of Pasiphaé, she is the victim of Venus. The second time our heroine is referred to in the play is not by her given name, but as the daughter of Minos and Pasiphaé thereby immediately linked to a mother who was notorious for her monstrous sexual desire for a bull. The mapping of Phèdre's ancestry is also a preliminary mapping of the terrain of her actions, and of the limits of her will.⁸⁸ In the face of such majestic sorrow and emotional turmoil, tragic characters *must* dwell in their own artificial, mental spaces—a retreat back into the mind as a reprieve from the heart.

Phèdre internalizes her ancestral judgment largely through the imagery of light and dark. Under the pressure of her passion, the various words for light become unstable signifiers, since light does not mean the same thing for Phèdre as it does for other characters. During the seventeenth century, the French word *jour* meant both “day” and “light,” and this word occurs in the text upwards of fifty times, not to mention the other words for light, *lumière*, and

⁸⁸ Hammond, *The Strangeness of Tragedy*, 182.

clarté. Phèdre demands several times to be brought out into the light, and for others to be removed, in an attempt to create a space-within-a-space for herself, but as we hear from both other characters and herself, she finds the light oppressive and cannot bear it. In I.3 she declares that her eyes are *éblouis*, directly meaning dazzled or blinded, which itself is in keeping with the destruction of consciousness we have traced thus far. But the seventeenth century characterization of the word also includes meanings closer to “wronged” or “seduced.”⁸⁹ As the descendant of the sun,⁹⁰ there is nowhere for her to hide, but neither is there a reprieve to the darkness of the underworld, since her father Minos is judge there.⁹¹ The influence of her ancestors and the gods upon her seem to be a form of violence, as she cannot escape the miasma of her bloodline and is instead destined to suffer the same fate as all those from the generations before, who were also victims of Venus. Phèdre is consumed by unsublimated amorous energy that leads to a dynamic but destructive struggle with the boundaries of her existence. Ultimately, this causes her to metaphysically construct her own private space.

Phèdre is preoccupied with, and mentally inhabits imaginary areas elsewhere. It is an exclamation of her own despair at being unable to possess Hippolyte in any time or place except her own imagination. In dreamlike spaces (trances, hallucinations, etc) Phèdre dwells with greater intensity than in

⁸⁹ Ibid, 185.

⁹⁰ Pasiphaé was the daughter of Helios, the Sun, thus making Phèdre the granddaughter of the Sun God.

⁹¹ Minos was the judge of the Underworld.

communal spaces around her. These self-generated, mythic scenarios she conjures up are more cogent and persuasive (in initiating action) than the visible place that exists around her. Phèdre's recollection of Hippolyte, for example, is less a memory than an experience that transcends time, or at the very least connects the present to the past in a private continuum.⁹² She builds the narrative of her unsated, impossible passion high until she is locked inside a tower that has destroyed the relationship between language and the external world. As her tortured syntax grows ever more complex and allusive, or her silence all the more ominous, it becomes even clearer that the treatment of time in Racine is not so unlike the treatment of space: the present is repeatedly disturbed by her mind dwelling in alternative scenarios of the past or parallel versions of the present.⁹³

Tragic figures sometimes hinder connections with other characters by utilizing their language not for communication, but as a kind of isolation that allows them to remain in a world they can control. In the case of Phèdre, her isolation pulls her away from the court of Troezen and toward her string of monstrous, shameful ancestors. Caught between the tension of these two colossal forces pressing upon her, Phèdre cannot survive. As current professor and chair of French and Italian Graduate Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Richard Goodkin puts it, "The unbearable feeling of being

⁹² See: I. 3, 265-316

⁹³ Ibid, 192.

in a middle state is as unacceptable as it is irremediable, and forces humanity to feel the existence of the two extremes, but allows it to do nothing to reconcile them.”⁹⁴ Phèdre, in her suspended state, tries in vain to surpass her earthly existence and reach an eternal, sublime state, and while her willpower at first makes a Kierkegaardian leap of faith seem as if it must be just barely out of reach, the audience gradually comes to realize that it is not to be. Phèdre is frozen in a rather Orphic mode of becoming; she ceaselessly looks forward and back, interrogating her destiny, but without coming to any greater knowledge or attaining the ability to make a critical, transcendental crossing.⁹⁵ In trying to linger, to prolong a moment (instead of accepting death), Phèdre only further harms those around her.

The abstract and concrete shores that Racinian protagonists seek (and ultimately fail) to bridge elucidate their greatest tragic value in their impossibility: Phèdre is perpetually on a journey toward Nothingness. Denied love, *gloire*, and happiness, the truth and meaning of her universe collapses. Albert Camus gave one of the most coherent definitions of Absurdity thusly:

His exile is without remedy since he is deprived the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Richard E. Goodkin, *The Tragic Middle: Racine, Aristotle, Euripides* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1991), 20.

⁹⁵ Racevskis, *Tragic Passages*, 22.

⁹⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus: an Absurd Reasoning*, 443.

The queen's quaking intermediate position is one locked between human imperfection and *inaccessible* divine will: a condition that results from confronting the unreasonable silence of the world – a condition that is without the possibility of satisfaction or resolution. Since she *must* fail in her efforts, she is forced to reside in a twilight zone that is not quite life or death, madness or health.

This potent portrayal of Absurd nihilism is in fact a proto-Existentialist work of drama. In the Aristotelian tradition, seen perhaps with most clarity in Greek Drama and the well-made play of the early twentieth century, one seeks and then one finds. This is not so in *Phèdre*, whose sojourn to infinitude is truly a bridge to nowhere; she seeks endlessly but still comes up short, receives no remorse or aid and is left only with suicide to end her pain. The quest for the eternal moment of clairvoyant perception is the crystallized root of disintegration for the Aristotelian convention of a causal, linear narrative. In *Phèdre*, rational syntax has been displaced by a logic of images, and the hero's ontology is placed in a universe moving temporally to no end – that is, to Nothingness.

Conclusion:

The Tragic Continuum

Racine manipulated tragic structure in an effort to approach perfection in his plays. Reinventing what a tragedy was and could be was not simply an exercise in clever dexterity—it was a meaningful investigation he engaged in for several years in an effort to ascertain supreme artistic coherence. Racine did not simply seek a *new* form, he sought the very *best* form he could create which would best suit his content. Themes that Racine explored and depicted to high advantage through his innovative structure—love, loss, alienation, and anxiety—remain near to the heart of the Tragic perception even in the work of playwrights from the last 100 years. Indeed, the benefits of coming to a more

robust understanding of Racine's *Phèdre* are twofold. Not only does Racine's Neo-Classicism gain further relevance in its connection to more recent Existentialist playwrights; the continued critical study of the theatrical tradition is revealed to be as necessary as ever.

In the Racinian perspective, one finds an emphasis on the alienation and estrangement of the protagonists from the external world; their recognition of the world as meaningless and negative, and their consequent feeling of anxiety and dread; the deep need to distinguish between the authentic and inauthentic self; the compulsive desire to confront imminent death on one hand and their overwhelming passion to live on the other. The Racinian attitude is so staggeringly modern⁹⁷ that it is easy enough to pick out threads of this perspective in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Edward Albee, and Samuel Beckett. Although Existentialism is typically defined by the expected nineteenth and twentieth century temporal frame in which it most often operates, its portrayal of a sensitive individual who, in a world of flux, finds himself fragmented and does not know how to carry on and free himself from the shackles of his disorientation actually bears quite a historical precedent.

⁹⁷ In this case, I am using the definition expounded by Dr. Bert Cardullo (critic, translator, professor, dramaturg, and Fulbright scholar): "modernism is a movement which relies on a distinctive kind of imagination, one whose general frame of reference resides only within itself...modernism implies historical discontinuity, social disruption, moral chaos, and a sense of fragmentation and alienation of loss and despair—hence, of retreat within one's inner being or private consciousness." Bert Cardullo, "En Garde! The Theatrical Avant-Garde in Historical, Intellectual, and Cultural Context" *Theater of the Avant-Garde 1890-1950: A Critical Anthology*, Eds. Bert Cardullo and Robert Knopf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 3-4.

Some scholars have proclaimed that Existentialism is not an art movement that fits neatly into a precise time frame, but rather a mood that has “been latent in the literature of the past 500 years.”⁹⁸ As such, the connection between French Neo-Classical tragedy and more modern art movements is not nearly so dubious as it may first appear. Indeed, there have been many contemporary playwrights who have more or less followed Racine’s lead in employing daring Anti-Aristotelian structure in their plays. There are numerous modern dramatists who experiment with Anti-Aristotelian form and present a Racinian perspective – one of the most interesting (and my own personal favorite) of these playwrights is Sarah Kane. The sometime controversial New British Nihilist also experimented with dramatic form and depicted emotional crisis as the dominant mode of tragedy, struck by existential whiplash and distinguished by an overwhelmingly nihilistic perfume.

After the opening of her first play, *Blasted*, British critics and audiences came to associate Kane with startling physical violence which assaulted the senses, but what many failed to understand or praise was her innovative form and the incredible, fragile humanity at the heart of her work. In an interview just five months before her death Kane stated, “I write about love almost all the time, but driving all that there’s always a desire to explore form and find a new form, find exactly the right form for a particular story.”⁹⁹ In her penultimate

⁹⁸ Frederick Robert Karl and Leo Hamalian, *The Existential Imagination* (London: Pan, 1973), 11.

⁹⁹ "Interview with Sarah Kane: 3 November 1998," Interview by Dan Rebellato, *Royal*

work, *Crave*, Kane abandoned nauseating violence and instead chose to push the limits of dramatic structure even further, while still depicting love under the conditions of brutality. *Crave* has absolutely no stage directions, and even does away with formal character delineation: we are given no genders, names, or descriptions, only the letters C, M, B, and A. Narrative is also rendered shockingly thin – even a shrewd reader or audience member struggles to make sense of the several narrative strands woven by Kane into a web that reveals love as a source of obsession, ownership, and breakdown.

David Grieg writes that, “Kane mapped the darkest and most unforgiving internal landscapes: landscapes of violation, of loneliness, of power, of mental collapse, and most consistently, the landscape of love.”¹⁰⁰ This statement seems particularly true of *Crave*, in which four lettered voices pour out their doomed desires and haunting memories to the audience without any discernible context of time or space. *Crave*’s deliberate abandonment of linear narrative and preoccupation with memory harkens back to the *fluid time* described in the previous chapter, and Kane once described her subversion of Aristotle’s Unities in this way:

I think I actually had a conversation with David Grieg about this, about Aristotle’s Unities – time, place, and action...and I thought ‘okay, what I have to do is keep the same place but alter the time and action.’ Or you

Holloway University of London, Department of Drama and Theatre: Royal Holloway University of London, 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Grieg, David. "Introduction." Introduction. *Complete Plays*. By Sarah Kane. London: Methuen, 2001. Ix.

can actually reverse it and look at it the other way round: that the time and the place stay the same, or the time and action stay the same, but the place changes.¹⁰¹

The tactic of reduction and intensification seen in Racinian plot construction and characterization holds a parallel in Kane's work as well. In describing her own heightened dramatic universe, Kane attempted to draw a visual graph of what she tries to accomplish with her form:

It's the difference between plot and story, okay? Story is chronologically what happens...the plot is the order in which the story is revealed. This wiggly line here which goes up and down, is the story, and the bits that go up are the moments of high drama, which tends to be violent unfortunately...I wanted to strip everything down, I wanted it to be small, when I say small I mean minimal and poetic and I didn't want to waste any words. I really hate wasted words.¹⁰²

In an effort to create a forceful and dazzling dramatic vehicle, Racine and Kane both use language economically, and aim for compression when assembling time, space, and action in *Phèdre* and *Crave* respectively. Moments of mundanity are ruthlessly excluded, so that the audience must rapidly wrap their minds around the exuberant gloom and torrential outpour of passion by the characters. The simplified, heightened tragic universes created by Racine and

¹⁰¹ "Interview with Sarah Kane" interview by Dan Rebellato.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Kane strip away cultural customs and traditions, leaving their protagonists to find their own bloody truths as they journey through the dark night of nothingness.

One cannot help but hear Phèdre's anguished cries when A says, "Only love can save me and love has destroyed me."¹⁰³ Just like Phèdre, the character C feels a loss of dignity as the result of her psychosis-inducing passion: "I'm evil, I'm damaged, and no one can save me...Depression's inadequate. A full scale emotional collapse is the minimum required to justify letting everyone down."¹⁰⁴ In proclaiming that "absence sleeps between buildings at night"¹⁰⁵ M laments a Racinian isolation and loneliness. And let us not forget *Crave's* most Racinian moment of all:

A: I want to massage your neck and go for a meal and not mind when you eat my food and laugh at your paranoia and watch great films and watch terrible films and look at your photos and wish I'd known you forever and hug you when you're anxious and hold you when you're hurt and melt when you smile and dissolve when you laugh and wonder who you are and wander the city thinking its empty without you and think I'm losing myself but know I'm safe with you and tell you the worst of me and try to give you the best of me because you don't deserve any less and think it's all over but hang on in for just ten more minutes

¹⁰³ Sarah Kane, *Crave, Complete Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), 174

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 173.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 165.

before you throw me out of your life and forget who I am because it's beautiful learning to know you and well worth the effort and somehow somehow somehow communicate some of the overwhelming undying never-ending love I have for you.

C: (under her breath until A stops speaking) this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop this has to stop¹⁰⁶

A's unpunctuated aria of amorous desire (only a small excerpt of which was transcribed above) seems endearing, but as the hysteria crescendoes, the logic of obsession is rendered frightening and poignant. In *Crave* as well as *Phèdre*, the characters all hurtle towards a precipice, and once they reach it, their alienation is complete and all they can distill are miniscule details. Frequently, this journey leads to such despair that suicide seems to be the only option left to them. Having embarked on a hopeless quest for a self that the protagonists know cannot be recovered, feeling that time has defeated their plans, they must defy time themselves by ending their own lives. Unlike *Phèdre*, the characters of *Crave* embrace an annihilating light of destruction, and it is unclear whether or not a moment of clairvoyant perception accompanies the annihilation of the self.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 169-170.

¹⁰⁷ Graham Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002) 105.

At their core, plays like *Phèdre* and *Crave* bring light to a particular truth: humanity's ceaseless impulse to connect, even in the most unremittingly bleak landscapes. To me, they take their rightful place in the Tragic canon because they represent the highest form of art, which presents us with questionable, ugly, difficult truths. When we go to a museum, or a cinema, when we read a book, or listen to music, when we enter a theatre, we do so to learn the truth and celebrate it with each other. Perhaps there is no "perfect" structure of tragedy, or perhaps we have not yet found it. What matters is that regardless of its form or genre, performance art must continue to explore and express what is vital and relevant to us: we need art that confronts the implacable. When we leave the theatre, we must be equipped against lies, with our expectations of our lives and our *selves* transformed, our hearts ripped open wide. The desire to constantly bring perfection to fruition, to stand on a vast shore of sublime calamity with courage and freedom of feeling *this* is the essence of tragedy.

Appendix

Absurdity: humanity's desire to find meaning and truth in a world that proves meaningless. See also: Camus' theory of Absurdity.

Aesthetic Catharsis: achieved by a work of art that portrays Beauty to a high advantage, and through this portrayal redeems the pain of life, causing a sublimation of pent-up emotion. See also: Nietzsche's theory of art.

Alienation: estrangement/ distancing of an individual from any number of social spheres and/or entities (including the self) that were previously valuable and meaningful. Often this separation seems structurally dissonant because it implies separation between two entities that naturally belong together. See also: Hegel's "Mastery and Servitude dialectic" and Marx's Theory of Alienation.

Anagnorisis: "recognition," in Greek, usually achieved by a hero. It is the singular moment of awareness, sometimes of a person or oneself, sometimes of an external circumstance, but always it is *new* knowledge.

Aristotle's Unities: rules for composing a coherent tragedy, the Classical Unities consist of time (the story should take place over a period no longer than 24 hours), space (the story should be set in a single location, so that the stage is not made to represent more than one place and so that there is no unrealistic compression of geography), and action (the story should follow one action with few other subplots to attend to).

Bien-séance: "propriety" in French, this refers to a rule of decorum in French classical drama. Related to characterization as it is used in this paper, *bien-séance* means that each character must abide by the expectations for their respective archetype (maidens must be virtuous, warriors must be courageous, etc).

Catharsis: a purgation of emotion, usually used by Aristotle to refer to the arousal and subsequent sublimation of pity and fear respectively.

Dualism: can refer to any number of binary oppositions operating in perpetuity, but in this paper I use the term to denote the two planes of existence: the sensory (phenomenal) plane and the metaphysical (noumenal) plane.

Hamartia: often called a protagonist's "tragic flaw," Aristotle intended for this component of character portrayal to encompass any misstep or error.

Heimat: this is a German word that most closely translates to "homeland," (but

even this translation is hotly contested) and has come into wide usage since the Industrial Revolution. My use of the term is most heavily influenced by Heidegger, who extrapolated the term to discuss the fragmentation of the individual self (culturally defined) and consequent alienation from the remainder of the external world.

Hubris: a Greek term that refers to a tragic hero's extreme pride and attitude of defiance toward the gods.

Gloire: a French term denoting personal fulfillment obtained via service to the state, such as the glory of warriors or rulers.

Noumenon: an object in its pure form as it exists apart from human perception. This term comes from the Greek meaning "something that is thought." This term (including its plural form, *noumena*) has been in use since at least the time of Plato, but in this paper I use it in a Transcendental Idealist manner. *Phenomenon/phenomena* is the dialectical opposite. See: Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Pathos: for Aristotle, this is a "pathetic" motivation or tactic of art and its efficacy is defined by the ability to arouse an emotional response (usually sympathy) from an audience. *Praxis* is the dialectical opposite. See: Schiller's aesthetic theory of Sublime Pathos.

Peripeteia: "reversal" in Greek, Aristotle used the term to denote a reversal of situation, role, or circumstance for a hero in a tragedy; frequently occurs at the dénouement.

Phenomenon: an object as perceived by the human senses. *Noumena* is the dialectical opposite. See: Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Praxis: Aristotle uses this term mainly in place of "action" and also to denote practical engagement, as opposed to passive contemplation. *Pathos* is the dialectical opposite.

Ressemblance: "verisimilitude" in French, this refers to characterization guidelines in French classical literature, which are derived from Aristotle. The character must be true to life, and this was usually achieved in classical drama by making the character consistent and predictable in their actions.

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