THE SUBTEXT OF PHÈDRE

Behind the surface clarity of Racine's Phèdre there is an immense complication; and beyond the crystal lucidity and rationality of the poetic text there is a very powerful undercurrent or subtext of irrational passion and hysteria. This is the great paradox of the play, and I think it accounts for the overwhelming impact it has had on audiences ever since it was first performed in the seventeenth century. For whether one is drawn towards the form of the play or not -- those long sweeping alexandrines with absolute caesuras, kept in such strict rhymed couplets -- one cannot remain indifferent to the terrible suggestion of incest and violence and monstrosity which continually lurks just underneath the polished, classically formal text.

We can approach this subtext from several different directions. For example, there is the turmoil in the life of Racine himself. Orphaned at four, brought up at Port-Royal in an uncompromising Jansenist faith, he was a melancholy man who was, on the one hand, a consummate poet -- in the words of Jean-Louis Barrault, capable of "a blaze and a music which is the most striking that France has ever produced in dramatic poetry"; and yet on the other hand, he was the tormented soul who wrote, "Je trouve deux hommes en moi" -- who exhibited such a profound ambivalence towards his own career: "Although I have been much flattered by the applause which I have received, the slightest criticism has always caused me sorrows which far outweighed the pleasure caused by praise." We know of his vacillation and outbursts; we know of his ungrateful behavior towards Molière; and we know of his own misfortunes during the "Affaire Phèdre", when, in 1677, having coached his mistress, La Champmesle, in the title role, Racine had to witness a rival Phèdre by Pradon which opened only two days after Racine's play. The Duchess de Bouillon had bought out the seats in both theatres so as to ruin Racine's opening, and Racine was so shocked by this experience that, at the age of 37, he retired from the theatre, renounced poetry, returned to Port-Royal, and contracted a marriage which, in the words of his son, held neither love nor interest for him, only rationality.

Another, more direct approach to the subtext is through a consideration of the structure of Phèdre. Voltaire called the play "the masterpiece of the human mind", and I believe he was referring to the infinite calculation of the plot; Racine used to say that a play was completed when he had worked it out in his mind, although he had not written down a single line of the dialogue. We can see something of the same sort of classicism in form, in the work of the painter Nicolas Poussin, whose compositions obeyed a precise logic, a design which was dictated by absolute laws, as in mathematics. This is extremely impersonal work -- Giradoux commented that there is not a sentiment in Racine that is not a literary sentiment; and in THE CLAIMS OF FRENCH POETRY, John C. Bailey remarks that Racine might have written every page of his work without so much as looking out the window of his study. And the criticism is justified; in the whole of Phèdre, there is not one single image derived from nature; there is absolutely no wit, no hint of laughter in the play, to relieve the continually mounting tension; and so far as the actors are concerned, there is only one stage direction in the whole of Phèdre, indicating that she may sit down; and so far as the

production is concerned, there is only one property which is called for, which is the sword. The extreme requirements of this classicism in form are terrifying; the play is, in a way, a triumph of the super-ego, in which all the passions are automatically subordinated to the rule of reason. This is the famous "politesse", which is a dramatic analogue of the extreme lucidity of Descartes; it is the spirit of the seventeenth century; and if one knows anything about the elaborate code of etiquette of the court of Louis XIV, one realizes that the proprieties observed in Phèdre are, to say the least, nominal. And from the point of view of performance, it is the extreme rigidity of the actor confined by an iron corset, girdled against any extraneous mobility, absolutely contained, with a stiff spine that seems to be a consciousness of power, just as Louis XIV could say: "L'État, c'est moi." And with such an extraordinary insistence on classical form, even the slightest violence in the subtext would have to fester and accumulate power, as a genie confined in a tiny bottle.

Granted the violence of the subtext of Phèdre, this turmoil which underlies the politesse of the surface -- of what does it consist, and what shape does it take? I believe this question must be answered in two ways, mythologically and psychologically; one must explore the sources of the Phèdre legend, to see what meaning has attached to the various figures concerned; and then, one must turn to the image of the "beast" which emerges from the sea at the end of the play, and see what psychological significance is attached to it.

The Phèdre legend is an ancient one. Probably the earliest record we have of the situation is to be found in GENESIS 39: 7-20, the story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar:

> *And it came to pass, after these things, that his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me.*
>
> *But he refused ...*
>
> *= = =*
>
> *And Joseph's master took him, and put him into the prison, a place where the king's prisoners were bound: and he was there in the prison.*

Then there is the Euripedes play THE HIPPOLYTUS (428 BC), and a Sophocles play on PHAEDRA which is lost; there is an account of the story in Ovid's METAMORPHOSES, and in Seneca's play HIPPOLYTUS or PHAEDRA. Throughout these early materials, the emphasis of the story shifts from Hippolytus to Phaedra as the central character; perhaps this is because the character of Hippolytus embodies too much ambiguity and ferocious chastity for the taste of an audience, and so each succeeding story-teller modifies the extreme nature of his chastity. As H. D. F. Kitto puts it: "Euripedes draws a portrait of a fanatic -- Hippolytus == the pure and virginal worshipper of the virgin goddess Artemis, who will pay no honor to the love goddess Aphrodite. He is the kind of man whom the Middle Ages might have made a saint; Euripedes makes of him a tragic misfit. Men must worship both these goddesses, antagonistic though they may seem. Hippolytus is destroyed by the Aphrodite whom he slights, and his Artemis can do nothing to protect

him." And so there is, in the legend, a collision between polar opposites: chastity and lust. Furthermore, in the early plays, there is the suggestion of incest between Phèdre and Hippolyte -- implicit in Euripedes but explicit in Seneca, where Hippolyte calls Phèdre "mother".

These two aspects of the legend -- logical contradiction and the incest motif -- are both symbolized by the beast, which emerges from the sea in the last act of Racine's Phèdre. We said that the play is sustained with absolute control until the last act, when Théramène reports that a beast, a bull, has come out of the sea and caused the death of Hippolyte. What exactly is this beast? -- The turning point of the play occurs in the third act, when Oenone asks Phèdre what she feels for Hippolyte, and Phèdre answers:

> *I see him as a beast, made frightful to my sight ...*

From this point on in the play, the fury of Phèdre is directed against Hippolyte and his death is sealed. However, as Barthes comments, "At first, the monster threatens all the characters, they are all monsters to each other, and all monster-seekers as well, but above all it is a monster, this time a real one, which intervenes to resolve the tragedy... " And as Kenneth Muir astutely observes: "The characters, in spite of the propriety of their diction, are often frenzied characters plotting violent crimes, and their violence is often more horrifying than that of the jungle. The plays (of Racine) often end in the quiet of exhaustion rather than in the restoration of order. We seem to be not far from the subhuman world expressed by the animal imagery in King Lear." And so the beast, the bull, is an image of the murderous outburst of energies, kept in so long, and now finally released. And there are also several other meanings to the beast:

1. *Theseus had earned his fame as a slayer of beasts; he slew the Minotaur; and so it is fitting that his own downfall should be through the agency of a beast.*

2. *Phèdre's mother Pasiphaë had coupled with a beast, a bull, and so it is the figure of the illicity lust which is a part of her own bloodstream.*

3. *Oenone, who has poisoned Phèdre with her advice, has thrown herself into the sea, and so it is fitting that the sea should belch out a monster in response.*

4. *Incest itself is unnatural, and hence monstrous, and so the beast becomes a figure for the subtext of the play.*

5. *The beast is sexuality itself, the monstrous energy of life in its most animal form.*

Two interesting side comments on the beast: the Cretans actually did worship the bull; and Racine, when he was a child, was terrified of bull fights at Port-Royal.

Beyond the difficulty of conveying the violence of this subtext within the rigid conventions of the neoclassic theatre, there is also an added problem for the production of Phèdre -- and that is that the central action is virtually unplayable. When we first see Phèdre she is sick with love, and this is an untheatrical condition; we have very few parallels for it within our own literature; we can think of the SONG OF SOLOMON -- "Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love" -- and we can think of Chaucer's Troilus, languishing on his bed, bemoaning his inability to act. But surely this is an inward paralysis, some illness of the will, and it must be inferred by an audience, because it cannot be overtly demonstrated. And surely this is the greatness of the paradox of Phèdre -- that its subtext is so compelling, so violent and so overwhelming, that beyond all the artificial conventions of style and language, the dramatic action itself should be so essentially unactable, and still the play itself is playable.

William Packard