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DIDASKALIA 

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# DIDASKALIA

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## About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλῖαι. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

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**Note**

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 15 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net), which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

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## Re-Appropriating Phaedra: Euripides, Seneca, and Racine in Avra Sidiropoulou's *Phaedra I* —

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University of Oxford

In a recent entry on her popular blog *The Edithorial*, Professor Edith Hall pointedly described the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as a “Tragedy of Male Distrust of Women”.<sup>1</sup> With this statement, she interprets Orpheus’s gaze as symbolizing the mythical origins of men’s assumptions about women and their abilities, thus connecting myth to present societal issues. In the introduction to the post, Hall additionally mentions the story of Phaedra, which she sees as a symbol of “epistemic injustice”.<sup>2</sup> The term, popularized by philosopher Miranda Fricker, denounces the presence of a “socially situated conception” which causes “a deflated level of credibility”<sup>3</sup> in the abilities and testimonies of marginalized groups. Borrowing from Fricker, then, Hall sees both the Orpheus and Phaedra myths as socially embedded narratives of patriarchal ideology. In another post, in fact, Hall explains her dislike for the myth of Phaedra, stating that “patriarchy *needs* this fiction”<sup>4</sup> in order to build the ideological practice of distrusting women’s testimonies.

In this specific historical moment and social context, where scandals such as Harvey Weinstein’s case have created new discourses on issues of rape and rape allegations,<sup>5</sup> the myth of Phaedra is as poignant as ever. As stated by Hall, the myth undermines female credibility and women’s testimonies: modern reinterpretations of Phaedra’s false rape accusation against Hippolytus could easily do more damage than good in a time when a common defence for rapists and abusers seems to be the implication of their victims’ dishonesty. Avra Sidiropoulou’s *Phaedra I*, however, written in 2019 and performed the same year at the Tristan Bates Theatre in London, exemplifies how even the Phaedra myth can be appropriated and reinterpreted for drastically different ideological purposes, inverting the inherently misogynistic origins of the story.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to showcase how Sidiropoulou’s work borrows from the canonical versions of Euripides, Seneca, and Racine in order to depict the character of Phaedra as a complex and modern figure, and as both victim and perpetrator of patriarchal ideology. I will focus on the mode of storytelling adopted by Sidiropoulou, then analyse how *Phaedra I* re-interprets Hippolytus’ misogynistic speech in Euripides, Seneca’s imagery of natural escapism, and Racine’s language of hunger and starvation as interpreted by Ted Hughes. All of these features not only demonstrate how legacies of reception are fundamental to new re-interpretations of myth; they are also central to the reinterpretation of Phaedra and her false rape allegations as caused and influenced by the greater patriarchal system in which she is entrapped.

As suggested by the title of *Phaedra I*, Sidiropoulou’s play is evidently first and foremost concerned with the character of Phaedra and her own voice and subjectivity. Phaedra is the only character on the stage, impersonating and re-creating other characters’ voices when necessary. Sidiropoulou delineates the story in the conventional manner, following Phaedra as she falls in love with Hippolytus and then lies to her husband Theseus about being raped by

his son. Significantly, however, while Hippolytus still dies at the hands of Theseus, Phaedra does not commit suicide in this version of the myth, but survives as the central figure on stage in her role of both protagonist and narrator. However, despite the fact that Sidiropoulou's is the only version of the myth in which Phaedra relates her own story through monologue, the language she uses to push herself to narrate the events is clearly derogatory and misogynistic. The use of monologue allows the audience to witness the workings of a greater patriarchal ideology at play within Phaedra's subjectivity, through her role as an unreliable and self-denigrating narrator.

This complexity is evident from the beginning of Act I, where Phaedra relays the voice of the chorus: "Queen Phaedra remember You lucky little bitch".<sup>6</sup> The derogatory term "bitch" is an epithet adopted by Phaedra as well, particularly when urging herself to tell her story: "Be responsible for your story And for the histories you ruined Listen Now Own your story, bitch Listen till these words melt inside you Become one with this dirt One with you".<sup>7</sup> The use of this specific term creates a connection to the Latin *canis* or the Ancient Greek *kyon*, both commonly used to refer to women in a degrading way in ancient texts. In her study of the offensive epithet, Cristiana Franco demonstrates how "ancient commentators explained that to call someone a dog was to accuse them of *anaideia*", which means "a lack of *aidos*, that is, a lack of restraint, the moral curb responsible for inhibiting any behavior subject to ethical censure".<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Phaedra perceives in herself a lack of shame and sexual restraint: her own use of the word "bitch", along with other demeaning insults, denounces the gendered nature of language and self-expression present in Sidiropoulou's work, in spite of Phaedra's role as narrator. Phaedra's self-identification with offensive epithets against women and their sexuality thus shows how "women, as a muted group, must learn the dominant discourse in order to speak".<sup>9</sup> In Sidiropoulou's play, then, Phaedra is not only an active storyteller, but also the victim of her own words, as well as of the words of others.

The ideological representation of women through patriarchal cultural practices and codes is in fact a fundamental issue in the Phaedra myth. Throughout the various interpretations of the story, the most explicit and overt case of misogynistic speech is, famously, Hippolytus' monologue in Euripides' tragedy of the same name, *Hippolytus* (428 BC). Asked by the Nurse to forgive Phaedra's confession, Hippolytus refuses to grant the woman any mercy: "Here's your proof that woman is a dangerous pest: her father, who gave her life and raised her up, puts down a dowry for her and sends her to another home to rid himself of his trouble. The husband decks his idol with jewelry . Being married to a nonentity gives man the least trouble . Cleverness in women I detest. Dumb and savage beasts should keep them company and then they could not speak to any servant or have one speak to them in reply. Never will I have my fill of hating women".<sup>10</sup> In Euripides, then, strong hatred and disgust for women seem to be limited to the character of Hippolytus, as a way of justifying Aphrodite's revenge against him.

In *Phaedra I* , by contrast, Sidiropoulou extends Hippolytus' judgment of women to society and societal expectations at large, showing a greater system at work against women and their own sexual and personal expression. This bias is mostly conveyed through the chorus, whose words are again relayed by Phaedra, thus showing the assimilation and psychological effect of societal constructs and ideologies. When Phaedra tells the story of her marriage to Theseus, the chorus describes her as "a beautiful creature, a trophy wife",<sup>11</sup> referencing Hippolytus' speech on marriage and the process of gifting a woman and her dowry to her

husband. Similarly, Phaedra describes herself as “dazzling and lonely my wedding dress was barely covering my body It inhabited every thought, every gaze, every street”, reinforcing the idea proposed by Euripides’ Hippolytus of the woman as an (*agalmati*), an idol decked in jewellery.<sup>12</sup>

Phaedra is dangerous not only in her beauty and carnality, but in her intelligence as well. She reports Theseus telling her that “You just like to play games with people. You want to try their patience and test their capacity for intelligent conversation”.<sup>13</sup> Thus all of women’s supposedly dangerous characteristics, indicated by Hippolytus in his explicitly misogynistic and hateful speech, are repeated in *Phaedra I*, where opinions on womanhood and femininity are presented through Theseus, the chorus, and Phaedra herself. The fragmentation of Hippolytus’ speech in Sidiropoulou shows the ideological power and all-pervading force of the patriarchal apparatus, reported and thus internalized through Phaedra’s own voice. This repeating and reconstituting of the apparatus, here understood in the Althusserian sense as a system of cultural practices meant to sustain the dominant patriarchal ideology,<sup>14</sup> makes Phaedra “a victim of the ideology she accepts”.<sup>15</sup>

This patriarchal apparatus and Phaedra’s own sense of guilt and shame are represented most strongly through the symbolism of Seneca’s *Phaedra* (1st century AD). The play is famously known for its hunting imagery, in which Segal sees the stark division between Phaedra’s “sexual imagery of the house” and Hippolytus’ “desexualized violence of the forest world”.<sup>16</sup> Seneca’s play starts in fact with a long hymn sung by Hippolytus in honour of the goddess Artemis, to whom he has promised eternal chastity.<sup>17</sup> Hippolytus’ hymn is characterized by multiple images of freedom, movement, and nature, starting with the invocation to run across woods and hills: “*Ite, umbrosas cingite silvas [...] / scandite colles*”.<sup>18</sup> The hymn is then starkly opposed to the opening of the second act, starting with Phaedra’s declaring herself “in penates *obsidem* inuisos datam hostique nuptam”,<sup>19</sup> where the participle *obsidem* characterizes her as a prisoner in her own house. The opposition suggests that Phaedra sees a path to freedom in her love for Hippolytus, for whom “*sequi per alta nemora, per montes placet*”<sup>20</sup>. To symbolize Phaedra’s entrapment, the entire action takes place inside the palace, thus relegating Phaedra to the familial and feminine space of the house.

By contrast, Sidiropoulou’s play presents outdoor scenes as well. This change, however, far from granting Phaedra more freedom or liberty, instead highlights the role played by patriarchal ideology in submitting Phaedra to the outside gaze of societal expectations. This influence is explicit in the scene where Phaedra and Hippolytus meet for the first time in a bar. As soon as they shake hands, the chorus comments: “ust look at her She craves the attention How big Hippolytus has grown nearly a man They say there’s something there C’mon, see that? She’s really hitting on him Look at her the dress Oh, and the hair And her long white back Look That look between them How she’s glaring at him Hippolytus She is quite something though And him That look”.<sup>21</sup> Phaedra’s engagement with locations outside of the palace and home environment is therefore not a symbol of greater freedom, but instead a sign of the expansion of the patriarchal apparatus from the home to the outside space.

Because of Phaedra’s engagement with the outdoors and the extension of patriarchal apparatus outside the private home, Sidiropoulou’s Phaedra expresses her desire for escape and freedom through an even more lyrical and utopian language. While in Seneca imagery of liberation and retreat is strongly related to the woods, typically portrayed as Artemis’ home, in *Phaedra I* the all-pervading force of the patriarchal apparatus makes these places too contained and restricting in their earthly existence. Phaedra’s escapism is here angled towards a kind of utopia, which abandons society and earth altogether: “There’s wind below my wings I am flying The earth’s too small for us let’s get away The sky’s so close to us let’s reach it”.<sup>22</sup> Expressing her desire through music and dancing, the lyrical expression of her escapism symbolizes the impossibility of Phaedra’s desire to evade the patriarchal apparatus, thus portraying her as a victim of a system which is impossible to escape and

dismantle.

Phaedra's singing voice relates to another fundamental difference between Sidiropoulou's interpretation of the myth and its previous versions: Phaedra's ability and desire to speak, communicate, and live. By contrast, all previous interpretations of the myth present Phaedra's story as a "tragedy of inwardness and guilt" where "by speaking out, she senses she will step over a threshold and reach a higher degree in culpability".<sup>23</sup> This struggle is most heightened in Racine's *Phèdre* (1677), in which the queen conceals her passion for Hippolyte for years, and resolves to speak only once Thésée is thought dead. Barthes famously comments that "in *Phèdre* it is language's very being that is put on the stage [...] and it is not her guilt that constitutes a problem, it is her silence".<sup>24</sup> Phaedra's silence is in fact commented upon throughout the entire play, and it is around her silence that the tragedy takes place: as the nurse tells Phaedra when she yet again refuses to reveal the cause of her pains, "*mourez donc, et gardez un silence inhumain*".<sup>25</sup> Racine constructs the play as a battle between silence and speaking out, and its effects on life and death.

In the translation and re-working of Racine's play by Ted Hughes, interestingly, the actions of remaining silent and speaking out are explored through a distinct imagery of appetite, hunger, and starvation. When she discovers that Thésée is alive, Phèdre proclaims that "*j'ai fait l'indigne aveu d'un amour qui l'outrage*".<sup>26</sup> In Hughes, the weight of Phèdre's admission is translated as "I have confessed / An appetite that is unspeakable".<sup>27</sup> Phèdre's desires are thus described as devouring and consuming her in such way that they prohibit her from speaking. Hughes' imagery of appetite is an element amplified in his translation and yet already found in Racine, as expressed by Phèdre's cry "*Qu'un soin bien différent me trouble, et me dévore*".<sup>28</sup> and is a thematic thread found in Sidiropoulou as well.

Sidiropoulou's imagery is in fact evident from the very beginning of the play, which portrays Aphrodite's possession of Phaedra: "Come along / Drown me / Consume me / Come on / Devour / me, Phaedra / Consume me / Consume him / Consume / Hippolytus, Phaedra".<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, here it is Phaedra who devours and consumes, thus inverting Racine's and Hughes' portrayal of her desires as exhausting her whole being. This inversion, in preventing Phaedra from being ravished by her desires, also allows her to speak and confess her own wants and needs. She confesses to Hippolytus: "All I— / All I wanted to say is / I—There's so much life here. / [...] Give me life, Hippolytus".<sup>30</sup> This need for life presents a thematic connection with the imagery of appetite and hunger, given the causal link between food and survival. Phaedra's willingness to speak out therefore serves as a rejection of her first attempted mode of death in Euripides' original text, where she tries to let herself die by starvation in letting "no food pass her lips".<sup>31</sup>

In Sidiropoulou, then, Phaedra refuses not only to be silenced, but also to be killed and consumed by her appetites. This resolution is restated in the final lines of the play, where Phaedra sheds her clothes as she repeats Aphrodite's words and thus again expresses her desires: "Come / on, now [...] / Phaedra / Consume me / Consume him, Phaedra / Devour / me".<sup>32</sup> Phaedra's voice and emotions resist repression by the patriarchal apparatus, as proven by her survival at the end of Sidiropoulou's play. Through her re-interpretation of Racine, Sidiropoulou manages to break away from the patriarchal impositions of Euripides' and Seneca's texts: here, Phaedra refuses to die and refuses to be silenced, despite the internalized shame of her own actions.



Phaedra's survival in Sidiropoulou thus represents a possible change and a new future for women's voices; one in which both the external and internal influences of the patriarchy do not stop women from retelling their stories and showcasing their hidden desires. Far from excusing Phaedra's lie, Sidiropoulou still manages to give the character a voice and a will to live not found in previous versions of the play. Her reinterpretation of the myth thus represents a feminist turn, not by changing the reasons behind Phaedra's false rape accusations, but by portraying Phaedra as a voice which refuses silencing and death within the patriarchal apparatus. Starting from the mythical origins and the traditions of Ancient Greece, Sidiropoulou borrows from Euripides, Seneca, and Racine in order to let Phaedra's voice echo through layers of reception and history, finally reaching modern audiences in the wake of movements such as MeToo,<sup>33</sup> and refusing to shy away from a modern feminist perspective on issues of rape and rape accusations. On the London stage, Sidiropoulou joins an archive of modern reinterpretations of ancient myth which is increasingly centred around women's voices; and where the names of Phaedra, Medea, Iphigenia, and Medusa prominently feature to showcase the nuances that myth can and must have in the modern context.<sup>34</sup> As Rubinowitz explains, the Phaedra myth can indeed "participate in silencing women and rendering them invisible in a dark chamber identified with them and apparently chosen by them", and the trick for a feminist reader is then "to problematize the assumptions, revealing potential female strength".<sup>35</sup> *Phaedra I* manages to do so by finally giving Phaedra the voice she needed. Legacies of reception thus intersect in Sidiropoulou's work, in order to reveal the modern potentialities of Phaedra's myth as a current political statement on women's voices and on their ultimate refusal to be silenced.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Edith Hall, "Orpheus: A Tragedy of Male Distrust", in *The Edithorial* (13th January 2019) <http://edithorial.blogspot.com/2019/01/orpheus-tragedy-of-male-distrust-of.html>

<sup>2</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1–8

<sup>4</sup> Edith Hall, "Why I Hate the Myth of Phaedra", in *The Edithorial* (24 May 2015), <http://edithorial.blogspot.com/2015/05/why-i-hate-myth-of-phaedra-and.html>

<sup>5</sup> Edith Hall and Megan Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades", in *The New York Times* (5 October 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>

<sup>6</sup> Avra Sidiropoulou, *Phaedra I*, (Unpublished stage script, 2019), p. 4. Many thanks to Avra Sidiropoulou, who allowed me to write on her play, and provided me with the necessary material to do so.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Cristiana Franco, *Shameless: The Canine and the Feminine in the Ancient Greece*, ed. by Matthew Fox, (University of California Press Web, 2014), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Laura McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Euripides, "Hippolytus", in *Alcestis and Other Plays*, trans. and ed. by E. V. Rieu and J. H. W. G. Davies, (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), pp. 146–147.

<sup>11</sup> Sidiropoulou, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Euripides, *Hippolytus*, ed. by Richard Hamilton, (Bryn Mawr: Bryn Mawr College, 1980), verse 631.

<sup>13</sup> Sidiropoulou, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Althusser, "Appendix 2: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. by G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014), pp. 232–273.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Sorkin Rubinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993), p. 168.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Segal, *Language and Desire in Seneca's Phaedra* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1986), p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Phaedra*, ed. and trans. by A. J. Boyle (Liverpool: Cairns, 1987), verses 1–84.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., verses 1–7. “ un across the dark woods, run up the hills ”. My translation.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., verses 89–90. “Hostage in a hated house and married to the enemy”. My translation.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., verse 235. “I want to follow him through deep forests, through mountains”. My translation.

<sup>21</sup>Sidiropoulou, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Albert S. Gérard, *The Phaedra Syndrome of Shame and Guilt in Drama* (Textxet: Studies in Comparative Literature, 1993), p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, ed. and trans. by Richard Howard and Eric Mottram (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), p. 116.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Racine, *Phèdre*, ed. by Paul Fivre (Théâtre Classique, 2015), verse 227. “Die, then, and keep your inhuman silence”. My translation.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., verse 833. “I have made the unworthy confession of a love that offends him”. My translation.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Racine, *Phèdre*, ed. and trans. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 1998), p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> Racine, verse 617. “A very different passion oppresses me and devours me ”. My translation.

<sup>29</sup>Sidiropoulou, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 15–17

<sup>31</sup>Euripides, p. 134.

<sup>32</sup>Sidiropoulou, pp. 29–30.

<sup>33</sup> Jessica Bennett, “The MeToo Movement: When The Blinders Came Off”, in *The New York Times* (30 November 2017), (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/us/the-metoo-moment.html>). For more information and updates on the MeToo movements, both *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* have dedicated online sections (<https://www.nytimes.com/series/metoo-moment> <https://www.newyorker.com/tag/me-too>).

<sup>34</sup>A detailed list of recent performances of ancient texts in London can be found on the APG D database (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/research-collections/performance-database/productions>).

<sup>35</sup> Abinowitz, p. 169.

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