

# MINOAN THALASSOCRACY: THE SENECHAN VERSION

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by Michael Paschalis

Cretan myth pervades Seneca's *Phaedra*. In handling Phaedra's passion for her stepson the Roman dramatist emphasizes its heredity:<sup>1</sup> the love of Pasiphae for the bull, the offspring of which was the monstrous Minotaur, and Ariadne's amorous attraction to Theseus in combination with Phaedra's love for Hippolytus (two sisters in love with father and son). The constant surfacing of Phaedra's sexual history is extremely fruitful from a literary viewpoint, and that in a twofold way: Phaedra's love for her stepson receives the oppressive burden of inherited illicit or abnormal passion and that same love functions as a lens that offers new perspectives of past amours.

The incorporation of Cretan myth into Seneca's *Phaedra* differentiates this tragedy from Eupidides' second *Hippolytus*, where there is only a brief reference to Phaedra's past in a *stichomythia* between Phaedra and the Nurse:

Φα. ὦ τλήμων, οἶον, μήτεο, ἠράσθης ἔρον  
 Τρ. ὄν ἔσχε Ταύρου, τέκνον, ἦ τί φής τόδε ;  
 Φα. σύ τ', ὦ τάλαιν' ὄμαιμε, Διονύσου δάμαρ.  
 Τρ. τέκνον, τί πάσχεις; συγγόνους κακορροθεῖς;  
 Φα. τρίτη δ' ἐγὼ δύστηνος ὡς ἀπόλλυμαι.  
 Τρ. ἔκ τοι πέπληγμαι· ποῖ προβήσεται λόγος;  
 Φα. ἐκεῖθεν ἡμεῖς, οὐ νέωστί, δυστυχεῖς.

(337-343)

<sup>1</sup> For literature on this issue see Charles Segal, *Language and Desire in Seneca's Phaedra*, Princeton 1986, 35, n.10. See also A.J.Boyle, "In Nature's Bonds: A Study of Seneca's *Phaedra*", *ANRW* II 32.2 (1985) 1284-1347, esp. 1312-1320. The sexual history of the house of Minos is aptly summarized by Phaedra herself: *nulla Minois leui / defuncta amore est, iungitur semper nefas* (127-28) and by the Nurse: *prodigia totiens orbis insueta audiet, / natura totiens legibus cedit suis, / quotiens amabit Cressa ?* (175-77).

The surviving fragments of Euripides' first *Hippolytus* (known as *Kalyptomenos*) and of Sophocles' *Phaedra*<sup>2</sup> do not provide evidence with regard to the presence and role, if any, of Cretan myth in them. The issue of the sources and reconstruction of Euripides' lost *Hippolytus* (and of Sophocles' *Phaedra*) is a vexed one, and lies outside the scope of the present study. The only fragments that might imply a reference to the sexual history of the house of Minos are *Hippolytus* fr. 444 N<sup>2</sup> which speaks of innate and god-sent κακά ( τῶν ἐμφύτων τε καὶ θεηλάτων κακῶν), and fr. 680 Radt of Sophocles' *Phaedra*, which also mentions diseases sent by a god ( νόσους δ' ἀνάγκη τὰς θεηλάτους φέρειν).<sup>3</sup> It is likely that Seneca's pervasive use of Cretan myth in the *Phaedra* reflects mainly a later literary tradition. Ovid's influence must be taken for granted, especially *Her.* 4,53-66 and 156-166 (Phaedra's letter to Hippolytus) and *Met.* 9,735-943 (the monologue of Iphis).<sup>4</sup>

The present study deals with a particular aspect of the Cretan element in Seneca's *Phaedra*, the incorporation of Minoan thalassocracy into the erotic theme of the play. Nothing similar transpires from the surviving sources and earlier treatments of the Phaedra myth, with the exception of a brief reference at *Ov. Her.* 4,157.

Sen. *Phaed.* 1-128 are composed of two monologues spoken independently by Hippolytus (1-84) and Phaedra (85-128). Phaedra's monologue opens with an apostrophe to Crete, the heroine's homeland:

*O magna uasti Creta dominatrix freti,  
cuius per omne litus innumerae rates  
tenuere pontum, quidquid Assyria tenus  
tellure Nereus peruium rostris secat,  
cur me in penates obsidem inuisos datam  
hostique nuptam degere aetatem in malis  
lacrimisque cogis?*

(85-91)

In the first four lines Phaedra draws a vivid picture of Minoan thalassocracy; in the next three she complains that Crete, in spite of her sea-power, gave her in marriage to an enemy (*hosti*) and made her hostage (*obsidem*) to a hated house thus compelling her to consume her life in pain and tears.

The first point to be made is that Seneca's *Phaedra* differs conspicuously from Euripides' lost *Hippolytus*, where Phaedra, presumably on her first appearance on stage, seems to have delivered a soliloquy opening with the invocation of the elements<sup>5</sup>:

<sup>2</sup> They have been collected by W.S.Barrett, *Euripides: Hippolytos: Edited with Introduction and Commentary*, repr. Oxford 1974, 18-26.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. H. Herter, "Phaidra in griechischer und römischer Gestalt", *RhM* 114 (1971) 44-77, 54 with literature. Herter refers the reader also to 1.1346 of the second *Hippolytus*.

<sup>4</sup> On the influence of Ovid on Seneca's *Phaedra* see now R.Jakobi, *Der Einfluss Ovids auf den Tragiker Seneca*, Berlin / New York 1988, 63-89; O.Zwierlein, *Senecas Phaedra und ihre Vorbilder*, Stuttgart 1987, 8-11. Cf. also Ovid's version of the Hippolytus story in the *Metamorphoses* (15,497-529) where in place of the name "Phaedra" occurs the antonomasia *Pasiphaeia* (500).

<sup>5</sup> *Fr.* 443 N<sup>2</sup>= *fr.* A Barrett (1964) with commentary. Regarding the source of Phaedra's soliloquy in Seneca Barrett notes that "it might come from anywhere or nowhere" (36).

ὦ λαμπρός αἰθήρ ἡμέρας θ' ἀγνόν φάος  
ὡς ἡδύ λεύσσειν τοῖς τε πράσσουσιν καλῶς  
καί τοῖσι δυστυχοῦσιν, ὦν πέφυκ' ἐγώ.

It has already been noted<sup>6</sup> that Seneca relies here on similar apostrophes to homeland found in other plays of Euripides: the prologues of *Andromache* and *Electra*, *Oeneus* fr. 558 N<sup>2</sup> and *Telephus* fr. 696 N<sup>2</sup>. The reasons for which the Roman dramatist adopted the pattern of these Euripidean prologues and especially the manner in which he adapted it to his *Phaedra* are issues which will be dealt with immediately below.

The first and most obvious reason is that a reference to Phaedra's homeland permitted Seneca to introduce formally the Cretan element into the play.<sup>7</sup> Later in the course of her soliloquy (112-123) Phaedra identifies herself and her love for Hippolytus with Pasiphae's love for the Cretan bull, continues with references to Daedalus and the labyrinth, and concludes by relating again her love to Pasiphae's as well as to Ariadne's.<sup>8</sup>

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Before we proceed further it is important to take a look at the image of Minoan thalassocracy which Phaedra offers. The only specific geographical reference we have is that Cretan sea power extends as far as *Assyria* (87-88). The reference to *Assyria tellus* is in harmony with Seneca's taste for exotic names of remote regions.<sup>9</sup> In the *Phaedra* *Assyrius* recurs once more at 393, where it is referred to oriental perfumes (*odore crinis sparsus Assyrio uacet*) in a conspicuously erotic context.<sup>10</sup> This connotation of *Assyria tellus* places Phaedra's Cretan world of monstrous and illicit passion in the East.

The apostrophes to homeland in the prologues of Euripides' *Andromache* and *Electra* contain the element of contrast between past happiness and present misfortune. *Andromache* in her slavery recalls her homeland Thebes, whence she was sent to Troy with rich dowry to marry Hector, and she next narrates her personal misfortunes following the destruction of the city. *Electra*'s peasant husband associates his apostrophe to Argos with Agamemnon's successful Trojan expedition as opposed to his inglorious death and the fate of Orestes and *Electra*.

In Phaedra's soliloquy the physical sufferings of *Andromache* have been turned into inner pathos, into the suffering of unrequited love. Contrary to Troy

<sup>6</sup> C.Zintzen, *Analytisches Hypomnema zu Senecas Phaedra*, Meisenheim am Glan 1960, 9-11.

<sup>7</sup> The prologue spoken by Hippolytus already contains two brief references to Crete in a hunting context. The first one concerns fierce Cretan hounds: *et pugnaces tendant Cretes / fortia trito uincula collo* (33-34); the second one concerns the "wounded deer" image which commentators aptly relate to the Dido simile in Virgil's *Aeneid* (4,68-73.): *tua Cretaeas dextra leones, / nunc ueloces figis damnas / leuiore manu* (61-63). The importance of Virgil's Dido for the psychological portrait of Phaedra has been documented by E.Fantham, "Virgil's Dido and Seneca's Tragic Heroines", *G&R* 22 (1975) 1-10.

<sup>8</sup> 127-28 *nulla Minois leui / defuncta amore est, iungitur semper nefas*. On the sense of these lines see K.Heldmann, *Untersuchungen zu den Tragödien Senecas*, Wiesbaden 1974, 98 n.262.

<sup>9</sup> See A.Cattin, "La géographie dans les tragédies de Sénèque", *Latomus* 22 (1963) 685-703; R.Syme, "Exotic Names, Notably in Seneca's Tragedies", *Acta Classica* 30 (1987) 49-64.

<sup>10</sup> See Segal (1986) 29-34. Outside the *Phaedra* Seneca uses it in the sense of "Phoenician" in relation to Cadmus and Europa: *H.O.* 552-553 *et rabidum mare / taurus puellae uector Assyriae scidit; Phoen.* 124-25 *quisquis Assyrio loca / possessa regi scindis et Cadmi nemus*. M. Coffey- R. Mayer, *Seneca: Phaedra*, Cambridge 1990, *ad. loc.* note that Assyria had no coast on the Mediterranean and that in poetry Assyria was practically synonymous with Syria.

that has been utterly destroyed, Crete is at the peak of her sea-power and the contrast is now between Cretan power and Phaedra's powerlessness. The military terms *obsidem* (89) and *hosti* (90), regardless of whether they have a mythological basis or not,<sup>11</sup> are important for their psychological and rhetorical value. They are part of Phaedra's weaponry by means of which she puts the blame for her illicit passion on others: on her homeland, on Theseus and on the curse of her family.

The apostrophe to Crete which opens Phaedra's soliloquy functions also as an antithesis to Attica in Hippolytus' speech. This contrast must be original with Seneca, at least as far as its erotic connotations are concerned. The anomalous passion of Pasiphae for the bull and the labyrinth of Phaedra's dark passion contrast with the countryside of Attica, where eros and reproduction follow their natural course, as we are told by chaste Hippolytus himself.<sup>12</sup>

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The next question is to see why the reference to Crete is restricted exclusively to thalassocracy. The apostrophe itself contains a contrast between the openness of the sea (*uasti...freti*) and Phaedra's present restricted condition (*obsidem, cogis*). Within the whole soliloquy the *open* sea space contrasts with the restricted space of her dark fiery passion and its roots: "heaviness" (*incubat* 99), the caverns of Aetna (101-103), the labyrinth (119-123), the chains (*catenas*) that bound Venus and Mars (124-128).<sup>13</sup>

The ultimate contrast is the one between the open space of Hippolytus' world and the enclosed space of Phaedra's world. In terms of thematic and ideological categories this contrast embraces a broad spectrum of oppositions: hunter vs hunted, freedom vs restriction, abstinence from love vs erotic passion, *uita agrestis (rus)* vs *uita urbana (urbs)* etc. The reference to the "vast sea" (85 *uasti...freti*) comes immediately after Hippolytus' instructions to his companions to hunt in the open Attic countryside. The image of the endless sea may be intended as a reflection of Phaedra's free past in her desire to identify herself with Hippolytus. Later (387-403) the heroine orders the servants to remove her heavy clothing and jewellery<sup>14</sup> so that she can rush hunting dressed and armed as befits a hunter (cf.233-35). This desire of Phaedra's sheds further light on her initial reference to Cretan thalassocracy. In both instances we are dealing not just with movement in free space but with an attempt to simultaneously exert control over that space (thalassocracy, hunting). There is here an obvious analogy with Hippolytus who in the prologue appears to dominate every part of the Attic countryside. It seems then that behind the idea of "thalassocracy" in the apostrophe to Crete one should look for Phaedra's deep desire to identify herself with Hippolytus-though the heroine is not conscious of the contradiction inherent in that desire.

Another contrast latent in Phaedra's apostrophe to Crete is that between sea and land. Broadly speaking, the land is Hippolytus's space and the sea is Phaedra's space. As far as Phaedra is concerned I could, for instance, mention ll. 181-85 where she openly identifies her passion (*furor*) with the waves of the sea that overwhelm

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Segal (1986) 34 n.6; Coffey-Mayer, *ad loc.*

<sup>12</sup> The Attic landscape sketched in Hippolytus' monologue is not exactly "antaphroditic" as Segal (1986) 36 thinks; cf. 10-12 and 19-20 of springtime eros and regeneration in the natural world.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Segal (1986) 33-37.

<sup>14</sup> A Senecan invention; see Zintzen (1960) on 387-397.

the "ship of reason" (*ratio*), and ll.580-582 where Hippolytus resists the Nurse's advice in favor of Phaedra as the rock resists the waves of the sea<sup>15</sup>. Eventually the death of Hippolytus comes from the sea which remains to the end bitterly hostile to the hero.

The association of Phaedra's morbid passion with the sea is hardly surprising in the light of literary tradition and of negative Roman attitude towards the sea. An additional element is the Hippolytus myth itself, in the context of which the hero's death *comes from the sea* in the form of a bull sent by Poseidon. In Seneca the threat from the sea is depicted in even stronger terms. Among other things it is notable that the monstrous bull the sea gives birth to is likened to a pistrix that swallows or shatters ships (1048-1049) and that Hippolytus in resisting the *monstrum* on land steers his team as skillfully as a helmsman does in a stormy sea (1072-1077).

In other words the traditional "threat from the sea" for Hippolytus is to be linked closely with Phaedra's wave-like erotic *furor* also threatening to engulf the youth. Minoan thalassocracy is Phaedra's heredity and is thus ultimately related to the destruction of Hippolytus' life, as is very clearly shown also on the linguistic level:

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Me me, *profundi saeue dominator freti*  
 inuade et in me monstra caerulei maris  
 emitte, quidquid intimo Tethys sinu  
 extrema gestat, quidquid Oceanus uagis  
 complexus undis ultimo fluctu tegit.

(1159-1163)

In her last monologue over the remains of Hippolytus' body Phaedra addresses a dramatic invocation to Neptune begging him to send against her every monster of the sea. As already noted the invocation echoes Phaedra's opening monologue in the play.<sup>16</sup> For the first and last time in this tragedy Neptune is addressed as *dominator freti* exactly as in Phaedra's opening monologue Crete was called for the first and last time *dominatrix freti*. The only other occurrence of *dominator* in the play is applied to the *monstrum* sent by Neptune to destroy Hippolytus and is used to portray his likeness to a bull: *et quem feri dominator habuisset gregis* (1039). This third application of *dominator* to the bull conspicuously links Crete with Neptune as well as love and death: Phaedra's love for "bull-like" Hippolytus<sup>17</sup> and Hippolytus' death by the bull.

There are two more allusions to Cretan thalassocracy in this play, which are however referred directly to Minos in his double capacity: lord of the sea and father of Phaedra [in love with her stepson]:

(a)           quid *ille*, *lato maria qui regno premit*  
                   populisque reddit iura centenis, pater?  
                   latere tantum facinus occultum sinet?

(149-151)

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Segal (1986) 38-43.

<sup>16</sup> Boyle (1985) 1332-1333.

<sup>17</sup> See Boyle (1985) 1316-1320.

- (b) NUT. *Fugiet*. PH. *Per ipsa maria si fugiat, sequar* .  
 NUT. *Patris memento* . PH. *Meminimus matris simul*.  
 NUT. *Genus omne profugit*. PH. *Paelicis careo metu*.  
 NUT. *Aderit maritus*. PH. *Nempe Pirithoi comes?*  
 NUT. *Aderitque genitor* . PH. *Mitis Ariadnae pater* .

(241-45)

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In the first passage the Nurse names Minos in a list of all those who might punish Phaedra for her crime.<sup>18</sup> In the second passage Phaedra appears determined to pursue Hippolytus over the seas and the Nurse warns her that her father can follow her. The Nurse insists that Minos will come to prevent her from her illicit passion and Phaedra replies with irony that he will not do anything precisely as he failed to pursue Theseus when he abducted his daughter Ariadne. As it can be seen Minos' sea-power occurs again in erotic contexts and is manipulated to suit contrasting viewpoints. Phaedra's viewpoint is that Minos, despite his sea-power (and authority), is utterly powerless to do anything whatsoever that would affect or punish her love for Hippolytus. This statement recalls her initial complaint that Crete, in spite of her sea-power, gave her in marriage to an enemy and made her hostage to a hated house. In both instances Minoan thalassocracy is viewed by Phaedra only in connection with her passion.

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<sup>18</sup> As noted by commentators 149 probably echoes Ov. *Her.* 4,157.