

EURIPIDES' HIPPOLYTOS: a modern performance version

by Jon Corelis

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DRAMATIS PERSONÆ:

APHRODITE, goddess of love

HIPPOLYTOS, son of Theseus

OLD MAN, a household slave and attendant of Hippolytos

other male attendants of Hippolytos

CHORUS of married women of Trozen

NURSE, childhood nurse and now attendant of Phaedra

PHAEDRA, wife of Theseus

other female attendants of Phaedra

THESEUS, king of Athens and Trozen

male attendants of Theseus

ARTEMIS, goddess of virginity, the hunt, and childbirth

The setting for all scenes is the palace of Theseus at Trozen, with its gates stage center. Flanking the palace gates are cult statues of Artemis and Aphrodite.

[Enter Aphrodite.]

APHRODITE: I am in everyone. I'm Aphrodite.

The gods rule everything: I rule the gods,
and on all the continents the ocean hugs,
of all the people walking around in the sun,
if they enshrine me, I enrich their lives,
but anyone who rules me out slips up.
People just naturally like to be admired;
why should the gods be any different?
What you see today will show you what I mean.
Theseus, King of Athens, who is the son,
men say, of the god Poseidon, had an affair
with the Queen of the Amazons; after she died,
their out-of-wedlock son, Hippolytos,
was brought up by his great-grandfather Pittheus,
a dreadfully respectable gentleman, here
in Trozen, a town that Theseus also rules.
Well, this Hippolytos is always saying
that I'm the ickiest goddess in the world.
He disapproves of sex, to say the least,
and won't touch marriage with a ten foot pole.
His reverence all is spent on Artemis,
the virgin silver-arrowed huntress goddess,
whose sacredness alone he counts as sacred,
and romping through the green wood with this virgin,
he strips the land of game with his swift hounds,
for all the world on equal terms with heaven.
So let them have their fun – like I should care.
But if he thinks I'll stand for his contempt,
today brings him a bitter education.
My plot, long planned, is pretty much prepared.
It started when Hippolytos went to Athens
to join its famous holy mystery cult.
By this time, Theseus had a trophy wife,
a princess of the royal line of Crete,
young, beautiful, and oversexed, named Phaedra.
Well, Phaedra took one look at her own stepson
and bam! I mean, we're talking ton of bricks.
My doing, of course. Then, after he left Athens,
she built a love-shrine on the Acropolis,
looking over the sea to Trozen here,
secretly dedicated to her far-off passion
— but after today the world will know the story
and call that temple after him and me.
Well, Theseus got in trouble — killed some relations,
as kings so often do, and had to sail,
with Phaedra, here to Trozen and accept
a year's exile from Athens as a penance.

Now, you can imagine what this does to Phaedra:
frantic with love for someone she can't hint at,
seeing him daily, pretending not to care,
his presence as unbearable as his absence,
she only wants to die to hide her shame.
But my plot ends her story differently:
I'm going to let her husband know the truth,
and that young man, his son, my enemy,
will be consumed by Theseus's own curse,
one of the three Poseidon, god of ocean,
whom Theseus, though mortal, claims as father,
once granted Theseus to invoke at will.
Phaedra will keep her honor but lose her life.
A regrettable necessity, but I count
her bad luck less important than the need
to show the world what happens when I'm scorned.
But look: here comes Hippolytos right now,
fresh from the hunt, with his usual entourage
of serving-men, warbling a solemn song
to the icy pure remote immaculate maiden.
I'm out of here. But what he doesn't know
is that death's gates yawn for him this bright day.

[Exit Aphrodite. Enter Hippolytos, holding a wreath, with several companions, one of whom is an Old Man.]

HIPPOLYTOS: *[sings, to melody of A Virgen mut gloriosa by Alfonso X, moderately and rather restrainedly, but jubilantly]*

Follow, follow, join in singing
Artemis our queen above,
Zeus' loveliest daughter, bringing
offering to her of our love.

ALL: *[sing]*

Flower of purity and wonder,
Zeus-begotten, heaven's pride,
loveliest light of heaven, under
whose protection we abide,

hear us, dwelling bright in pureness
in your father's golden hall;
guide us with your arrows' sureness,
loveliest goddess of them all.

HIPPOLYTOS: This plaited garland I have made to bring
to you, proud lady, from a virgin meadow,
where never shepherd dares to graze his flock,
nor iron scythe to mow, since it is virgin,
a meadow for the honey bee in spring,
and Pureness freshens it with gleaming dew;
its beauties may be culled by those alone
whose chastity remains an absolute,
a quality they've never had to learn,
since what it is, they are: the false and mean
can never gain admittance to its light.
Receive this to encircle your gold hair,
a token, lady, from your worshipper,
the only man alive to whom you grant
the realness of your presence and your words:
I hear your voice, though may not see your face.
May my life run its course as I began.

OLD MAN: Young sir – not master, that word's for the gods –
would you take my advice for your own good?

HIPPOLYTOS: Of course I would, if I had any sense.

OLD MAN: Well, then: you know the way that people are?

HIPPOLYTOS: How are they? What exactly is your question?

OLD MAN: When someone gets too proud, nobody likes it.

HIPPOLYTOS: Agreed: the proud are never popular.

OLD MAN: But people like it when you're not stand-offish?

HIPPOLYTOS: True: friendliness gains friends at little cost.

OLD MAN: How is it then you don't greet this proud goddess?

HIPPOLYTOS: Which goddess? But let your language watch its step.

OLD MAN: Our Aphrodite here beside the gates.

HIPPOLYTOS: At distance I salute her, keeping pure.

OLD MAN: Yet she is proud and much esteemed by mortals.

HIPPOLYTOS: Everyone has their favorite gods and people.

OLD MAN: Well, good luck then, and may good sense go with it.

HIPPOLYTOS: I don't like gods whose rituals are at night.

OLD MAN: Dear boy, all gods must have their due respect.

HIPPOLYTOS: Come, followers and friends, let's go inside
and turn our minds to supper: the dining room
is where the hunt pays off. Rub down the horses:
when I've had food, I'll yoke them to the chariot
and give them all the exercise they need.
[to Old Man]
And to your love-goddess, a long goodbye.

[Exeunt all but Old Man into the palace.]

OLD MAN: But I myself, speaking within my station,
not copying this childish misbehavior,
will make my own prayer here before your image,
Aphrodite, Queen: if some young hot-head
runs off at the mouth, show some indulgence
and act like you don't hear. I'd hate to believe
the gods are just as bad as human beings.

*[Exit into the palace. Enter CHORUS: respectable married women of Trozen.
They sing to the melody of Reinmar von Brennenberg's "Wol Mich des Tages."]*

CHORUS:

There is a towering rock which gushes forth a spring,
where women take their urns to fill them from its virgin waters,
and there a friend of mine had come like me to bring
her brightly woven gowns for cleansing, where our city's daughters
were gathered round the garments laid
fresh washed spread out in rows along the sun-warmed rocks for drying:
it was by her I first was made
aware our queen was suffering from some dread disease and dying.

With veils of fine-spun fabric shading her blonde head,
she keeps within the house too weak to rise from bed;
for three days now they say she refuses to eat
or tell what makes her so afraid
of life that death is rendered sweet.

Do demons of the wilderness or gloomy night

possess you, or proud Cybele the orgiastic power?
 Or does the Mountain Mother freeze your mind with fright?
 Or have you sinned not offering the cakes of holy flour
 to Artemis the huntress queen,
 whose anger, lady, withers you away, who also ranges
 across our sandy half-marine
 salt marshes where her shrine stands by the sea that never changes?

Or has your husband Theseus, the illustrious king
 of Athens found some newer hidden love to bring
 within his house a shameful joy dishonoring you?
 Or has some Cretan ship been seen
 with news too dreadful to be true?

Yet there are illnesses inherent in our kind:
 it is a woman's nature to bring forth new life in sorrow,
 and through a helpless disarray of flesh and mind
 let form within us flesh and mind which will create tomorrow.
 That pang once shot through my womb too,
 and I cried out on Artemis, whose care is parturition.
 If, princess, this is so with you,
 entreat her silver pure bright strength to guide you to fruition.

But here her aged servant, once her childhood nurse,
 has brought our queen, whose desperation now seems worse,
 outside the palace gates to breathe fresh healing air.
 Oh what unspoken source of rue
 has spoiled her radiance into care?

[Phaedra, accompanied by the Nurse and female attendants, is brought out of the palace on her sickbed.]

NURSE: Nothing but trouble and pain!
 I can't do anything right.
 Here's the fresh bright sunlight that you wanted,
 and now that you've been brought,
 sick-bed and all, outside,
 you're already starting to get that gloomy look.
 I suppose you'll be demanding
 to go right back inside,
 though "Take me out" was all you've said all day.
 You can't be satisfied
 with how things are, but always
 go stumbling after something you don't have.
 It's better to be sick
 than have to tend the sick:

the sick just lie there; tending's work and worry.
 Well, worry and work are life,
 there's nothing we can do.
 We weren't put in this world to be at peace.

PHAEDRA: Help me sit up. Cradle my head: my own body fails me.
 Hold me up by my arms, beautiful, useless arms. My hair
 feels like a massive weight in this netting. Undo it to fall down my back.

NURSE: Hush, dear, don't thrash around,
 it will only make it worse.
 You have to bear your troubles royally.
 We've got to learn to accept
 whatever the gods may send.
 Show me life, and I'll show you things that hurt.

PHAEDRA: Oh to bend my lips to the grassy meadow's cool pure stream,
 to drink and lay my body to rest beneath black poplars there!

NURSE: Child, what rant is this?
 Good heavens, don't let fly
 delirious words in public to shock the people.

PHAEDRA: Take me away to the mountain, oh by the gods! in the pines, where the
 hounds of prey pant hot breath out as they close on the dappled deer!
 When, when will I cry to the hounds and brandish the tipped spear,
 and fling the Thessalian lance past my golden windstream of hair?

NURSE: Darling, you're not yourself.
 What's hunting to do with you?
 And why this thirsting after a woodland spring?
 Look, here's a watered slope
 along the city's towers
 which ought to furnish all the drink you need.

PHAEDRA: Artemis Queen of the salt lagoon and the race-course's rattling gallop,
 may I too dwell in thy precinct, taming the whinnying high bred steeds!

NURSE: Now what craziness?
 A moment ago you were off
 to the mountain, hunting down wild animals,
 and now a sudden passion
 to break in prancing fillies
 and ride them over the sandy shore's high ground.
 We'd need an expert seer
 to prophesy what god

has veered your mind disastrously off course.

PHAEDRA: Oh I'm unhappy – what have I done – how have I lost my senses?
 I must have been out of my mind – some god sent those cruel illusions.
 Nanny, cover me up again – I'm ashamed of what I've said –
 cover me up so I can cry, hide my guilty face.
 Things are suddenly clearer now, all too unbearably clear.
 Unbearable clearness wounds, whirling confusion tortures – no:
 better to die; let awareness itself fade into that long night.

NURSE: I'll cover you. I wish
 my shroud were covering me.
 I've learned this much from having lived so long:
 we human beings should mold
 our loves out gently, not
 allowing them to sink deep in our souls.
 Affections should be easy
 to rouse and to dissolve.
 To feel another's anguish as your own,
 as I feel this poor girl's,
 will make your own life torment.
 They say expecting too much of yourself
 will far more likely bring
 a sick, unhappy fall
 than make you happy. That's why I advise
 restraint in everything,
 not going to extremes,
 as everyone with any sense agrees.

CHORUS: Madam, faithful servant of our queen,
 that Phaedra's dangerously ill is clear,
 but we have no insight into the cause.
 Can you enlighten us? If so, please do.

NURSE: I wish I could. She won't tell even me.

CHORUS: She won't give any hint what started this?

NURSE: Not even that. She won't let slip a word.

CHORUS: She seems so weak, as though she'll melt away.

NURSE: No wonder, since it's three days since she's eaten.

CHORUS: Through madness, or deliberate suicide?

NURSE: Whichever it is, she'll starve herself to death.

CHORUS: I can't believe her husband isn't worried.

NURSE: He doesn't know. She keeps her sickness secret.

CHORUS: But can't he tell by looking at her face?

NURSE: He's had no chance. He's absent from the city,
traveling to consult some oracle.

CHORUS: But can't you somehow force her, make her say
how she's become so ill in body and mind?

NURSE: I've tried until I'm frantic. Nothing works.
Yet even now I won't give up. You'll see
what kind of loyalty this servant has
towards the family I've served so long.
Come, darling, let's not argue any more.
Let's both forget all that. Be calmer now,
and not so gloomy. Take another view.
I see I took the wrong approach before,
so now I'll find a better way to put it.
If something's wrong too delicate to mention,
well, we're all women here, and we can help.
But if it's something you don't mind being known,
then tell us, and we'll go to find you doctors.
Well, why don't you answer? My dear child,
you ought to answer, either to explain
just where I'm going wrong, or if I'm right
in giving this advice, to say you'll take it.
Speak to me. Look at me. Oh, what's the use.
Women, all our trying has been futile.
We've got nowhere at all. Just as before
my words just rolled right off, now she won't answer.
But let me tell you one thing: after that,
go on and be more wayward than the ocean.
If you die, then you will betray your children.
You'll make them orphans in their father's house,
and sure as that Amazon queen could ride a horse,
they'll be passed over for that smarmy bastard
she bore to be their master, and I mean
Hippolytos.

PHAEDRA: No!

NURSE: Aha, so that hit home.

PHAEDRA: You're torturing me, nanny, by the gods
I beg you not to name that man again.

NURSE: You see? You understand quite well, but still
don't want to save your life and spare your children.

PHAEDRA: I love them. But I'm whirled beyond all hope.

NURSE: You talk like you've committed some blood crime.

PHAEDRA: My hands are clean: the stain is in my heart.

NURSE: An enemy has put some curse on you?

PHAEDRA: A friend brings doom that neither of us wishes.

NURSE: Then Theseus somehow has abused your faith?

PHAEDRA: May no one ever see me injuring him!

NURSE: Well, what then is this dread that rouses death?

PHAEDRA: Oh leave me in my sin. It's not toward you.

NURSE: I'll save you if I can, despite yourself.

PHAEDRA: What? Will you force me, holding to my arm?

NURSE: I'll beg here on my knees until I know.

PHAEDRA: You must not know – you'd bitterly regret it.

NURSE: What could I find more bitter than your death?

PHAEDRA: Your own. And yet, my course is honorable.

NURSE: Then why hide good I beg you to reveal?

PHAEDRA: To put disgrace in service of what's right.

NURSE: Won't telling it then make you honored more?

PHAEDRA: By all the gods, let go of my right hand!

NURSE: *[assuming the position of formal supplication, one arm around Phaedra's knees, the other reaching up her hand to Phaedra's chin]*
I won't, until you grant my supplication.

PHAEDRA: I will. Honor must heed a suppliant's voice.

NURSE: I've had my say. The rest is up to you.

PHAEDRA: My mother, that sexual monster, she – she – she –

NURSE: We all know how the Minotaur was born.

PHAEDRA: Ariadne my sister abandoned herself to love.

NURSE: What's wrong, dear? Why bring up these family scandals?

PHAEDRA: And I, unlucky third, am ruined in turn.

NURSE: I am astonished. Where will all this end?

PHAEDRA: My fall is deeply rooted, not new grown.

NURSE: I still don't have the knowledge that I need.

PHAEDRA: If only you could speak what I must say.

NURSE: I'm not a seer to divine these secrets.

PHAEDRA: What do they mean, when people say, "in love?"

NURSE: The sweetest and most stinging honeyed pain.

PHAEDRA: Then I have found the sting without the sweet.

NURSE: You mean that you're in love, dear child? Who is it?

PHAEDRA: He's – he's – you know, the son of the Amazon ...

NURSE: You mean Hippolytos?

PHAEDRA: You, not I, have said it.

NURSE: No, no, child. What are you saying? This is disaster.
Women, I am crumbling, I can't bear
to live. The very light of day is stained.
I'll throw myself from some high cliff, I'll barter

life for death. Farewell. I am no more.
 The noble now are forced to love the low.
 Oh Aphrodite, you're no god at all.
 You're something worse and greater than a god,
 engulfing all this royal house, and me!

CHORUS: [*sings, melody Alfonso X's Quem a omagem da virgen*]

Did you hear, oh did you hear her
 crying out her shamed desire?
 Now we know why death is dearer
 than life lived in such a fire.

Oh unhappy for your sorrow!
 Human life is made of pain.
 Who can tell before tomorrow
 if today brings loss or gain?

All your family's life is draining,
 all too clear the end is seen
 whither Aphrodite's waning,
 oh unhappy Cretan queen.

PHAEDRA: Women of Trozen, inhabitants of this land
 that fronts along the Peloponnesian shore:
 I've often lain awake through night's slow hours
 thinking of life and how it can be ruined.
 And it seems to me it's not through ignorance
 we fail in our behavior. We all know
 what's right. No, there's another explanation:
 we see and understand what we should do,
 but cannot brace ourselves to do it, either
 through lack of moral energy, or being
 distracted by some pleasure. Life has many:
 long talks with friends is one, a harmless vice,
 and honor – is that a pleasure? I'd say yes.
 But there are two types of honor, one benign,
 and another which makes us act disastrously.
 If we could put them in their proper context,
 we wouldn't use one word for both these kinds.
 Since this is my thought-out philosophy,
 there is no way that I could be beguiled
 to change my moral principles from these.
 But now I'll talk about my own condition.
 When I was first assaulted by this passion,
 I gave some thought how best to manage it.

At first I tried to drown my pain in silence,
 since language is an unreliable ally,
 a good tool for correcting others' faults,
 but a dangerous way of dealing with our own.
 Then after that I tried to bear up under
 my folly by exercising self-control.
 But finally, when all these methods failed
 to conquer Aphrodite, then I saw
 my obvious only option was to die,
 since just as I'd not want my virtues hidden,
 so may I never be shown up as shameful.
 My sick desire would lead me into scandal,
 and I must never forget that I'm a woman:
 we always walk a tight-rope over blame.
 The curse of all the gods upon that wife
 who first abused her marriage with a lover!
 It must have been in royal palaces
 this blot upon our gender first arose,
 since, when the leaders think disgrace is glory,
 it makes the rest consider evil good.
 I cannot stand these publicly pure women
 who turn to shameless whores when no one's looking.
 How can they, O Queen Lady Aphrodite,
 look at their husbands in the face, without
 being terrified the dark they use as pimp,
 or the very walls, will give voice to accuse them?
 Just this, friends, is what's driving me toward death:
 the very thought I could betray my husband
 or my own children. No: let them live free
 in glorious Athens, holding their heads up high,
 untouched by any scandal from their mother,
 since brave men hide their faces like a slave
 when they have to be ashamed of their parents' crimes.
 They say that only one thing counts in life:
 to have a consciousness of your own worth.
 But soon or later, Time, as if he held
 a mirror up for some young girl's inspection,
 reveals the bad. I'll never be among them.

CHORUS: We feel your arguments are sensible
 and ought to win approval from your hearers.

NURSE: My lady, when I just now learned your trouble
 my immediate reaction was to panic,
 but now I see that I was being silly.
 In life somehow our second thoughts seem wiser.

There's nothing strange or inexplicable
 in what you feel: it's Aphrodite's anger.
 So you're in love. So what? So many are.
 And because you've lost your heart you'll lose your life?
 A pretty situation it would be
 if falling in love were punishable by death.
 The goddess overwhelms when she's resisted.
 She proves a mild companion to the willing,
 but the high-minded people who rule her out,
 she treats them with a harshness beyond belief.
 Aphrodite is in the sky's fresh breezes,
 the ocean's surge, and everything is her child.
 Bestowing love, she germinates desire,
 the origin of all of us who live.
 Why, everyone who knows the ancient poets
 from having had a proper education
 will tell you how Zeus once conceived a passion
 for Semele, or how the bright Dawn Goddess
 abducted Kephalos, a mortal youth,
 for love, and yet they live together now
 in heaven, not in exile from the gods.
 They knew, I think, they couldn't fight what happened.
 But you will? Then you should have been born exempt
 from all the laws of nature and the gods
 if you don't like the laws and gods we have.
 How many husbands, whose marriages go sour,
 decide to just ignore their wives' affairs?
 How many sons are winked and nudged towards
 sowing their wild oats – by their own fathers?
 You won't go wrong in life if you remember
 this one great rule: keep scandal under wraps.
 We should not try to make our whole lives perfect
 in every department. That would be
 like decorating a closet: what's the point?
 And anyway what headway can you make
 against so huge a tempest of desire?
 No: if a situation brings more good
 than bad in life, then how can we complain?
 No, no, dear child: give up this stubbornness,
 this arrogance, yes! since it is nothing more
 than arrogance to struggle against the gods.
 Endure your love: it is a god at work,
 and find a better way to end this illness.
 A magic charm, a powerful incantation:
 that's what's needed now to cure your pain.
 Such things are women's lore; we'd wait forever

if we left it up to men to find them for us.

CHORUS: Phaedra, she offers you the easy way out of your trouble, but you are in the right, though you may find this praise of ours is harsher and more unwelcome than what she has said.

PHAEDRA: This is what ruins cities in their prime and wrecks their homes: seductive rhetoric. You shouldn't sap my strength with weaseling words, but bolster my resolve to save my honor.

NURSE: Quit speechifying. You don't need noble slogans, you need your man, so let's get straight right now exactly what we're going to do to get him. If this were not a matter of your life, if you had any hope of self-control, do you think I would have urged such desperate measures so you could just enjoy some fun in bed? But now your life's at stake, and who can say that anything we do to save it's wrong?

PHAEDRA: Stop it! Stop these pitiless excuses. Quit spewing out foul reasons for a crime.

NURSE: Foul? Yes – but better for you than your nice ones: better to choose reality and life than die rejoicing in your phantom honor.

PHAEDRA: No further, by the gods! with this portrayal of vicious sin as justified response. My soul is made so vulnerable by passion that if you paint my wickedness so fair I'll yield to what has weakened my resistance.

NURSE: All right. You never should have slipped at all, but since you have, at least take my advice, that's all I ask you. I've just now remembered that in the house I have a formula, guaranteed to gain control of love discreetly, while it leaves the mind unharmed. This formula will cure you, if you're brave. But first I need to get some sort of token from him, the man you love: a lock of hair, or a few threads from his clothes, and these I'll join with what I have, to bind in happy union.

PHAEDRA: This formula ... is it an ointment, or a drug?

NURSE: It's something, dear. Just use it, don't ask questions.

PHAEDRA: I'm afraid your cleverness will be my ruin.

NURSE: Oh, everything scares you. What are you afraid of?

PHAEDRA: That you'll tell – you know, Theseus's son – about me.

NURSE: Hush, child, I'll make everything all right.
If only you, Queen Lady Aphrodite,
will guide me. Whatever else I have to say
will be for certain people in the house.

[Exit Nurse into the palace, followed by Phaedra's attendants bearing empty sickbed.]

CHORUS: *[sings, melody: Alfonso X's Ben pode Santa Maria (CSM 189),
arrangement: refrain as beginning of each stanza but not repeated at end]*

Eros, Eros, sweetly despoiling
all human hearts with your passionate fire,
never, never may you invade me
with so destructive a flood of desire.
Mightier, mightier than any gleaming
starlight endlessly piercing night's radiance,
stronger than any torch that paints the dark with flame,
flies the fatal shaft of the Love God,
child of all-seeing Zeus on Olympus
and Aphrodite: it strikes with deadly aim.

Vainly, vainly famous Olympia
and Delphi's holy oracular shrine
richly, richly garner their harvest
of sacrifice and libations of wine:
O my country, why do you never
make oblation in honor of Eros,
born of the Queen of Love to rule the minds of all?
Eros, guardian of Aphrodite's
sacred chambers is mightier than armies:
he is the conqueror whose power makes cities fall.

Aphrodite kindled in Helen
a passion stronger than duty or shame:
Priam's city, ancient and splendid,

is nothing now but a song and a name.
Death and terror, fire and destruction
blossomed forth from her heartbreaking loveliness,
leaving Troy's citadel in ashes soaked with blood.
Dreadful, dreadful comes Aphrodite,
whirling all in her devastating hurricane,
quick as a honeybee that seeks a springtime bud.

PHAEDRA: Silence, women: I think the worst has come.

CHORUS: What is it, Phaedra – trouble in the house?

PHAEDRA: Shh! Let me hear what's happening inside.

CHORUS: All right, but it's an ominous beginning.

PHAEDRA: My sufferings are more than I can bear.

CHORUS: What are you saying now? What kind of words are these?
What noises from inside have made you so afraid?

PHAEDRA: This is the end. Come stand beside the door
and hear the outcry echoing through the hall.

CHORUS: No: you're already there; you tell us, what do you hear?
Tell us, what do you hear that means such dreadful news?

PHAEDRA: Him – the son of that horse-breaking Amazon queen,
Hippolytos, hurling curses at my servant.

CHORUS: I hear his furious roar. I can't make out his words,
but the sound of his angry voice resounds behind the gates.

PHAEDRA: But I can hear him clearly: he calls her filthy
go-between who soils her master's bed.

CHORUS: Poor lady, you are betrayed. How can we help you now?
Everything's come to light, and now you are betrayed,
betrayed by that one person who should have been your ally.

PHAEDRA: She's told him how I feel, and now it's over.
Her cure for my disease has made it fatal.

CHORUS: Then now what can you do, with no way out?

PHAEDRA: I see just one way out: to die. To die,

and let death finally heal me of my pain.

[Enter Nurse and Hippolytos from palace.]

HIPPOLYTOS: O mother earth and sun-bright span of sky,
what never to be uttered speech I've heard!

NURSE: Be quiet, child, or someone else might learn.

HIPPOLYTOS: There's no way I can pass such words in silence.

NURSE: You must, I beg you: let me clasp your hand.

HIPPOLYTOS: Don't touch me, don't you even touch my clothes.

NURSE: I'm on my knees: don't bring me to destruction.

HIPPOLYTOS: How could I, since you claim you've done no wrong?

NURSE: This story, child, is not for all to hear.

HIPPOLYTOS: What's good is even better if it's public.

NURSE: Oh child, you'd never disregard your oath.

HIPPOLYTOS: My mouth has sworn; my mind remains my own.

NURSE: What will you do – bring ruin on your family?

HIPPOLYTOS: Go fuck yourself. No monster is my kin.

NURSE: Forgive me, human beings can sometimes stumble.

HIPPOLYTOS: Oh Zeus, why did you make this poison candy,
women, and turn them loose upon the world?
Once you'd decided men should reproduce,
you never should have managed this with women,
but each of us should go up to your temple
and put down metal ingots, iron or bronze
or gold, and get our children as a purchase,
as good or bad ones as we can afford.
Then we could live in houses free of women.
Are women a disaster? Here's the proof:
the very man who makes and brings her up,
her father, sends her packing with a dowry,
eager to pay for riddance of the headache,

and the poor fool welcoming this parasite
 into his home works night and day to bring her
 baubles to bejewel and to gown
 his bitch-queen idol, until his house is ruined.
 A bubble-head is best: she's just an empty
 kewpie-doll to decorate your marriage,
 but a bitch with brains is bad. God save my hearth
 from the pestilence of an over-intelligent woman!
 She'll use that mind to follow Aphrodite
 into a sexual hell. Your brainless girl
 at least is too dim-witted to get in trouble.
 Men's wives should have no servants wait on them,
 but be attended by dumb snapping beasts
 as powerless to speak a word to them
 as they would be to understand their orders.
 Instead, they plot their nasty schemes at home
 and send their nasty servants out to work them,
 you filthy crone, expecting me to use
 my father's sacred bedroom as a brothel,
 a thing I'd like to scour out of my ears
 with running streams. How could I be so foul,
 when I feel dirtied even hearing of it?
 Be sure the solemn oath I swore will save you:
 had you not trapped me into a holy pledge,
 I never would have kept this from my father,
 but as it is, while Theseus is away
 I'll keep myself from home and bide in silence,
 but as soon as he sets foot inside the house
 I'll see how you two look him in the face.
 God damn you cunts – yes you and Phaedra both!
 I'll never get my fill of hating women,
 not even if they say that I'm obsessed.
 They're all the same: they're bitches, sluts and whores!
 So go and try to teach them to behave
 before you tell me that I've got a problem. *[exit]*

PHAEDRA: *[sings, melody: Bernart de Ventadorn's "Can vei la lauzeta," legato, with melisma on last syllable of each quatrain]*

To be a woman is a curse.
 Regret and pain are all we find.
 My remedy has made me worse,
 nor can my powerlessness unwind

this strangling skein of love and shame.
 My sickness now has been revealed.

What god or mortal may I name
as my defender, to be healed?

Both earth and heaven must hate my crime.
My suffering grows with every breath.
This agony floods all of time.
Redemption only comes in death.

CHORUS: There's nothing to be done, my queen: the attempt
has failed. Your servant has not served you well.

PHAEDRA: You filthy fool, you plague upon your own,
may Father Zeus my house's ancestor
exterminate you root and branch with blinding
thunder flash for what you've done to me!
I told you – I knew it, I knew what you would do –
never to reveal my horrid shame,
but no, that was too much: so I must die
dishonored. Now I need another plan.
I know that he, frenzied in his rage,
is sure to tell his father how you've blundered
and make the whole land ring with my foul name.
God damn you and god damn all meddling fools
who do disastrous favors for their friends.

NURSE: My lady, you may well reproach my failure:
your anger's sting has numbed your better judgment.
Yet I have my defense, if you will hear it.
I raised you and care for you. I tried to heal
your pain with an approach that didn't work.
Had it succeeded, you'd have called me brilliant:
we're fools or wise depending on success.

PHAEDRA: Is this what's right, what's good enough for me,
to ruin me, then offer to discuss it?

NURSE: We're wasting time in words. I went too far,
but there are ways, dear child, to still recover.

PHAEDRA: Stop talking. Everything you've tried to do
has brought me only ruin and disgrace.
You are dismissed. Go make plans for yourself,
and I'll make my own plans as I see fit.
But you, O noble daughters of this land,
I beg to favor me in one request:
keep under seal of silence what you've heard.

CHORUS: We swear by holy Artemis, child of Zeus,
never to bring your sufferings to light.

PHAEDRA: Thank you. That is well. And as for me,
I do have an idea which I believe
will free me from this trouble in a way
that will both save my children from disgrace
and yield me some requital for my pain.
I will not stain the royal line of Crete
or let my husband look on me in shame,
merely to save a single person's life.

CHORUS: What dreadful measure is it you propose?

PHAEDRA: To die. But mine will be a special death.

CHORUS: Don't say such things.

PHAEDRA: Don't you try to dissuade me.

My death will bring great joy to Aphrodite,
whose power terminates my life this day,
but it will be a bitter love that kills me.
I will not go alone to face my ending.
No: I will have a partner in my death,
and he will find it educational
to see what can result from too much pride.

[Exeunt Phaedra and Nurse into palace.]

CHORUS: *[sings, melody Winter uf der heide by Konrad von Würzburg]*

O that god would change me to a sea-bird,
soaring in the sunset,
joyously and free,
leaving all my sorrow
for my own tomorrow,
far beyond this lying world's illusion.

I would fly away to that bright garden
past the ocean's ending,
where eternity
nourishes the flowers
through their perfect hours
never touched by human life's confusion.

To fly away, away, away, away, away on wings of wishing,

where the golden apples swell in ripeness,
and the fertile meadows
bloom abundantly,
bringing forth earth's treasures
for the deathless pleasures
granted to the gods in calm profusion.

White-winged Cretan ship that brought my princess
from her happy childhood
to a queen's despair,
fatal was your leaving
Crete for a deceiving
wedding-song that was a dirge of sadness.

Dark and evil was her hour of sailing,
luckless was her landfall,
doomed to pain and care,
crushed beneath the mighty
storm of Aphrodite,
wrecked by her unholy passion's madness.

And now to die, to die, to die, to die, to die is all her longing.

I see my queen retired within her chamber,
weeping under fortune
worse than she can bear,
fastening from its ceiling
her last means of healing
ills that stain her life and end all gladness.

NURSE: *[from within the palace]*
You women there outside, please come and help.
Our queen has tried to end her life by hanging.

CHORUS: It's over now. Our princess is no more.
Her own hands put the rope around her throat.

NURSE: *[from within the palace]*
Please hurry. Oh why doesn't someone bring
a two-edged sword for us to cut her down?

CHORUS: What can we do, friends? Is it best to go
inside to try to free her from the rope?
No: she has her serving women with her,

and help is dangerous when it's unwanted.

[cries of mourning from within the palace]

NURSE: *[from within the palace]*

Lay out her body; straighten out her legs,
poor lady. Now her ruin is her home's.

CHORUS: So now we know. The queen is dead, our sad
and haunted queen. They're laying out her corpse.

[Enter Theseus, with attendants.]

THESEUS: Can any of you women tell me why
my palace rings with all this lamentation?
The oracle I've been to gave good news,
so this is not the welcome I expected.
Surely my grandfather Pittheus is well?
He's very old by now, but I'd still hate
to learn that he no longer was among us.

CHORUS: It's not the old, Lord Theseus my king,
that you must mourn, but one who died too young.

THESEUS: It's not my children, then, that we have lost?

CHORUS: They live, but motherless, and you are widowed.

THESEUS: What? Has Phaedra died? How did it happen?

CHORUS: By hanging: her own hands arranged the rope.

THESEUS: Heart-struck by grief, or what was the disaster?

CHORUS: That's all we know: we've only just now come,
your majesty, to mourn your family's loss.

THESEUS: Then how can I still wear this joyous garland
in token of an oracle's good news,
when what should have been prophesied was death?
You there inside: unlock the palace doors,
unbar the gates, open them to show
my grieving eyes the worst thing they can see.

[Palace doors open to reveal Phaedra's body, laid out, a wooden tablet hanging from her wrist.]

CHORUS: *[sings to melody of Richard Lion-heart's "Ja nuns hons pris ne dira sa raison"]*

Unhappy princess who sailed from afar,
 how could you harden your heart to this doom?
 What made you leave this light where your loves are,
 wrapping yourself in the after-life's gloom?
 Losing yourself in a self-imposed strife,
 now you have lost your life.

[Chorus now sings as before, two lines at a time, with Theseus speaking.]

CHORUS: Sorrow is all that is left for your house,
 which you once entered so joyous a bride ...

THESEUS: Oh family, children, wife, what ancient curse
 has worked its way through time for our destruction?

CHORUS: Sorrow is all for your desolate spouse,
 and for your orphans, whose mother has died ...

THESEUS: This wave of loss has broken over our house
 and drowned us in a flood-tide of despair.

CHORUS: Sorrow no words can express or contain:
 nothing is left but pain.

CHORUS: *[speaking]* Don't grieve overmuch, my king: your loss
 is one that life has brought to many men.

[In the following again Chorus sings, Theseus speaks, as before.]

CHORUS: Theseus our king lives deprived of your love;
 dying you leave him a life worse than death ...

THESEUS: What forced her to this act? In all my house
 is there not one of you to speak the truth?

CHORUS: Though he still breathes in this bright world above,
 he takes in darkness with every breath ...

THESEUS: Most cherished of all women, you have flown
 beyond our world and taken all joy with you.

CHORUS: Oh weeping monarch, I wish I could say

you won't grieve more today.

[end Chorus singing]

THESEUS: This wooden tablet fastened to her hand,
will it tell us what's happened? Or does she mean
to beg me to be kind to our poor children
and not entrust them to a cold stepmother?
Be comforted, my love: this hearth and home
will never know another wife than you.
And here the imprint of her signet ring
gleams with the last traces of loving light.
Unwrapping these bound strings that hold it sealed
will soon reveal what mystery it holds.

CHORUS: Another punishment descends from heaven:
O wretched majesty! O ruined house!
I have no other words for you than these.

THESEUS: No! No! disaster swells with new destruction.

CHORUS: What's wrong, my king? Tell us, if we may know.

THESEUS: This wooden tablet cries
things too dread for speech.
And is there no way out, is there no end
to loss and shock and pain?
What she has written wails the funeral dirge
for the royal house of Theseus, King of Athens.

CHORUS: A dread beginning. I dread what is to follow.

THESEUS: It's bitterness itself to speak the words,
yet right demands that I must not suppress them.
Ho, citizens! Hippolytos has dared
defile the sacred marriage of your king,
dishonoring the holy light of Zeus.
O Ocean Lord Poseidon, God of Sea,
since I, as all men say, am your own son,
though I am mortal man and you a god,
you vowed me once three curses. One of these
I hereby now invoke against my son:
destroy Hippolytos this very day,
if truly you have granted me this power.

CHORUS: Your majesty, I beg you by the gods,

recall your curse, or else you may regret it.

THESEUS: Impossible. And I decree his exile.
Thus one of these two fates will be his doom:
Poseidon, if he heeds the curse I've laid,
will send him headlong to the halls of Hades,
or, failing that, he'll live in misery,
a wandering stranger in some foreign land.

CHORUS: And even as we speak, Hippolytos
your son approaches. But oh Lord Theseus,
relax your rage. Your house needs better counsel.

[Enter Hippolytos, with attendants.]

HIPPOLYTOS: Father, I heard your cry, and so I've come
immediately, though I don't understand
what's caused it yet. I'd like to learn from you.
What's happened, father? I see your wife here dead.
I'm shocked beyond belief. I just now left her
moving through the sunlight of this world.
Was it accidental? How did she meet with death?
Father, I want to know. Please tell me why.
You're silent? Silence is useless in a crisis.
It isn't right to hide your suffering
from one who loves you more than any friend.

THESEUS: I see no point to man's inventiveness,
which has devised so many sciences
and engineered the world for his own use,
yet still has been unable to create
the art of teaching fools to behave.

HIPPOLYTOS: It would take a skilful analyst indeed
to lead someone from folly into wisdom.
But this is no time for speculation, father:
I fear your grief has veered your speech off course.

THESEUS: If only men were stamped with some clear mark,
some imprint to infallibly distinguish
the good and true ones from our enemies,
or if each person had a double voice,
one honest, one which never told the truth,
so that the lying voice could be refuted
by the truthful one, to save us from deception.

HIPPOLYTOS: But is it me someone has slandered to you,
 so that I'm suspect, though I've done no wrong?
 Father, your words amaze me. Who would believe
 these wild insinuations that you've made?

THESEUS: Where finally will such madness lead us all?
 Where will audacity and folly end?
 If evil grows with every generation,
 the gods will need to make another world
 to hold the crowds of criminals that are born.
 Consider this one: flesh of my own blood,
 who has befouled his father's marriage bed
 and stands condemned by his dead victim here.
 No, no, don't hide your face: look at your father,
 since you've already soiled me by your presence.
 So this is what the goddess's virgin consort,
 purity's soul and image, really is.
 Did you think your haughty posturing could ever
 persuade me to believe the gods are fools?
 Oh, yes: go feed on sanctimoniousness,
 mutter your mystic mantras, strut your stuff
 in cloistered rituals of purity,
 since you've shown what you are. Now I decree
 that such men must be shunned: they'll hunt you down
 with pious mouthings while their lust lays snares.
 And don't think your dead victim here can't speak:
 this corpse itself accuses and condemns
 more fatally than any sworn indictment.
 Oh, but you'll claim she hated you, for the threat
 an illegitimate heir posed to her children.
 Does this make sense: because she hated you,
 she satisfied her hatred with her life?
 Or will you argue men are disciplined,
 it's only women's sexuality
 that lacks enough control to keep from crime?
 But I well know to what lengths men are driven
 by Aphrodite's tempest when they're young.
 A man who's not contemptible can resist it.
 In short — but what's the point of making speeches,
 when this poor murdered corpse speaks loud and clear?
 Now leave this land at once as one cast out,
 and never return to Athens, home of gods,
 nor any other land my power rules,
 since if I let your crime go unrequited,
 this realm I've brought such peace and order to
 will scorn me as a weakling king, unable

to shield the good by punishing the foul.

CHORUS: How can we ever believe in happiness
if such a mighty house can be destroyed?

HIPPOLYTOS: Father, the vehemence of your accusation
is hard to withstand. And yet the case itself,
if you'd consider it, is not so clear.

I am no orator: I have no force
to sway a mob by speech, although within
a circle of decent friends my words have weight,
just as a man who can't impress the wise
is often clever enough to please a crowd.
But still, since this disaster has arisen,
speak I must, beginning with the attack
you sprang on me as being beyond defense.
Look on this light, this earth: you'll nowhere find
a soul more chaste than mine, though you deny it.
I know what it means to reverence the gods,
to associate with those who do no wrong,
but who would be ashamed to order crimes
or pay their loved ones back with foul betrayal.
I, father, am no deluder of my nearest:
I'm faithful to them present or away.
And where you charge me most, I'm innocent:
I'm undefiled by sex down to this hour.
The only things I know about its practice
are what I've overheard or seen in paintings
by chance, since I would never seek them out.
You won't believe I'm pure. Well, let it go.
But logically, how could I have been corrupted?
Was this one's beauty so beyond resistance
it broke me where no other beauty could?
Or did I aim at mastering your palace
by mastering its mistress through seduction?
No, no — the only mastery I care for
is first place prizes in our sacred games.
In public life I am content and more
to be the second person in the state,
which lets me flourish safely with a few
selected friends and gives me power enough,
a situation happier by far
than the dangerously envied power of a king.
One thing remains to say, and I have done:
if I had witnesses to what I am,
and she were still alive to be examined,

the facts would show just who's the guilty one.
 But now I swear by Zeus, Guardian of Oaths,
 and by this earth, I never touched your wife,
 nor ever wanted to or thought of it,
 and may I perish scorned, despised, forgotten,
 and neither earth nor sea receive my body,
 if I am so lust-ridden as you charge.
 I cannot say why this one took her life.
 The reason for her death I cannot tell.
 Perhaps she saved what honor that she could.
 The honor that is mine won't help me now.

CHORUS: You've spoken a defense which is effective
 and sworn a holy oath, which should persuade.

THESEUS: A splendid speech. You ought to run for office.
 Did you really believe these sophistries could avert
 the vengeance of the parent you've polluted?

HIPPOLYTOS: I'm already astonished at your mildness,
 father. If I'd a son who'd dared molest
 a wife of mine as you charge I've touched yours,
 I'd punish him with death, not merely exile.

THESEUS: Typical: a coward's ploy to take
 the quick way out. No, death's too good for you.
 The man who lives in misery blesses death.
 You'll live, and every minute of that life
 will sting you as a homeless friendless outcast.

HIPPOLYTOS: You'll really cast me out, not letting time,
 however brief, reveal the truth at last?

THESEUS: I'd cast you past the oceans if I could,
 so hated your existence is to me.

HIPPOLYTOS: You'll punish me without a trial, despite
 my oath, not hearing witnesses, nor asking
 the oracles of the gods for confirmation?

THESEUS: This tablet here is oracle enough,
 so to your soothsayers, a long goodbye.

HIPPOLYTOS: O Gods, why shouldn't I unseal my lips,
 since reverence for you is ruining me?
 But no: it wouldn't sway the judge who matters,

and I'd transgress my sacred oath for nothing.

THESEUS: Your pious lies will be the death of me.
Your exile is effective as of now.

HIPPOLYTOS: O wretched! Where now can I find a refuge?
What home will offer shelter from such a charge?

THESEUS: Try finding one that welcomes criminals
who pay their hosts by outraging their wives.

HIPPOLYTOS: Ah, this is pain that cannot be withstood,
if I seem such a criminal to you.

THESEUS: It stings you? Best you should have felt that pain
before you dared to rape your father's wife.

HIPPOLYTOS: O house, if only you could speak for me
and testify what kind of man I am.

THESEUS: It's clever of you to call mute witnesses.
The facts are eloquent without a voice.

HIPPOLYTOS: This misery overwhelms. I'd need to be
a second self to mourn myself enough.

THESEUS: And even now you're thinking of yourself
instead of the father that you've sinned against.

HIPPOLYTOS: O my poor mother, o my bitter birth!
No wretchedness is like a bastard child's.

THESEUS: I'll have them drag you off. Didn't you hear
me sentencing you to exile more than once?

HIPPOLYTOS: The man who touches me will lose his life.
Do it yourself if that's your hot desire.

THESEUS: Don't make me: it's better for you if you obey.
Don't think I feel the slightest pity for you.

[Exit Theseus into the palace. The palace gates close after him]

HIPPOLYTOS: It's settled, then. And now my life is ruined
by knowing things I don't know how to say.
O Artemis, most loved of all the gods,

my comrade, hunt-companion, I must leave
 famed Athens now. Farewell to that city,
 so glorious in tradition. O Trozen town,
 you splendid scene of all my childhood days,
 farewell. One final look, and then goodbye.
 O friends that I grew up with, follow me,
 escort me into exile from my home,
 a final favor for an innocence
 unlike all others, whoever may deny it.

[Exeunt Hippolytos and attendants.]

CHORUS: *[sings, melody La Comtessa de Dia: A chanter de so qu'eu no volria]*

Without my faith in heaven I could not live,
 without believing there are gods who care,
 who from their far untroubled home still give
 some meaning to this pain that everywhere
 rules over this uncaring chaos, life;
 through all its random wounds the gods must weave
 some pattern we may see if we believe.

I will not beg the gods for wealth or fame,
 but for a heart unstained by bitterness;
 to live unthreatened by the praise or blame
 which both lead mighty houses to distress,
 to bring to each day's dawning such a mind
 as will enable me to live that day,
 and let tomorrow bring what grief it may.

Yet how may I keep faith now I have seen
 the noblest house of Hellas brought so low?
 O mountain meadow cloaked in leafy green,
 O Virgin Lady of the Silver Bow
 and coastal course-way where you are enshrined,
 your most devoted lover will no more
 rejoice in beauties of your woods and shore.

No more his chariot wheels will trace the ground
 along the endless ocean's fringe of sand;
 no more, no more the songful lyre will sound
 within his father's hall by his skilled hand,
 and girls with secret dreams to be the wife
 who teaches such a man what love can be,
 are weeping for a dream they'll never see.

O ruined prince, O vanished purity:
how can the gods allow such things to be?

[Enter Old Man.]

CHORUS: But here's the aged serving man who left
with Hippolytos. His face reflects disaster.

OLD MAN: My ladies, where's the king? Where can I find
King Theseus? Is he in his palace here?
Please tell me where. I must speak to the king.

[Enter Theseus from the palace.]

CHORUS: The king is here, just coming from his palace.

OLD MAN: Your majesty, the news I bring is bad:
bad for you, bad for the citizens
of Athens, bad for all of us in Trozen.

THESEUS: What is it? Does still more catastrophe
renew the anguish of my neighboring towns?

OLD MAN: Hippolytos is gone, or as good as gone:
he sees this light, but his life hangs by a thread.

THESEUS: And how? He can't already have earned revenge
for soiling some other man's spouse, as he soiled his father's.

OLD MAN: No stranger's hand, but his own chariot team
has killed him before he could leave, that, and the curse
you called down on him from your father Poseidon.

THESEUS: O gods! O Lord Poseidon! Then you are
my father: you've granted me my prayer.
How did he fall? What trap did Justice spring
for the beast who dared defile his father's bed?

OLD MAN: We'd gone along the ocean-beaten shore
and stopped to give his mares a combing down,
not a dry eye among us, since we'd heard
our poor young lord had been expelled forever
from country, home, and friends, by your decree.
And then Hippolytos came himself, all tears,
and joined us there, and with him a mournful throng
of friends, retainers, people he'd grown up with,

but he finally braced himself, and in a steady voice said, "This is pointless. I must obey my father's command, and all our tears won't change it. Servants, harness the horses. I have no home." So all of us hurry then to yoke the team, and faster than it takes to tell, his mares were hitched up to the chariot where he stood and he snatches up the reins and jumps right in landing instinctively in a driver's stance; and the last thing that he does before departing is to look up at the brightness of the sky and pray, "May Zeus the Lord of Justice blast and wither my life if I'm an evil man, and may he lead my father to the truth after I'm dead, if not while I still live." Then he whips up the horses, all at once. The chariot leapt, we servants followed along, the horses' harness clinking at our shoulders, and we started down the road towards Epidaurus. We were striking out into the desert scrub across the border, where the track turns in to skirt the cliffs that fringe the Saronic sea, when a huge rumbling roar, like Zeus's thunder, but underground, resounds in our very bones. The horses' ears and heads strain toward the sky, and an uncontrollable panic takes us all, so horrible was that sound. And we look back to the ocean-beaten coast, and what we see goes past all telling: a wave reared up to heaven, so tall it blots the coastline from our eyes and covers the cliff-bound headland with its surge. It swelled and swelled more hugely, then it crashed, spewing up towering columns of ocean foam, as it ran toward the chariot on the shore. And then from out of this huge, this monstrous tide, there came a huge, a monstrous bull; its bellowing roar made all the land around us shake and left us numb with terror standing there to see a sight too terrible to look at. Our master's horses bolt, but instantly he leans his whole body back on the reins to curb them in – he surely knew his horses – like a man strains at an oar aboard a ship. But the horses champ down on their steel-forged bits and carry him helplessly along: their driver, harness, chariot might as well be air

for all they heeded them. And when he tries
to steer them desperately to softer ground,
that bull appears in front and heads them off,
making the chariot team veer off in panic,
but when they blindly rush towards the rocks,
it herds them silently along that course,
until it trips them up and makes them stumble,
crashing the chariot wheels against the stones,
and then the chariot explodes in parts:
wheels, axles, linchpins tossed high in a whirl,
and our master's broken arms and legs get tangled
in the reins that wrap him round too tight to move.
His skull gets smashed against the rocks, his flesh
is scoured along his body, and he screams,
"I fed you in my stables with my own hands,
and you've destroyed me. O my father's curse!
Can't any of you save a man worth saving?"
I wish we could have. We were all too slow.
When finally, god knows how, he'd worked himself
free of the tangled reins, he fell to earth,
the breath of life poised hesitant on his lips.
The horses and that horrid monstrous bull
had somehow vanished into the stony scrub.
My king, I know I'm just a household slave,
but I'll say this, and I don't care who hears:
I'll never believe your son did what you charged,
not even if every woman in the world
should go and hang herself, and if they first
chopped down whole forests for wood to make the tablets
for writing down their accusations in.
He was sincere, and innocent, and pure.

CHORUS: And now unhappiness has been perfected.
There can be no reversal of this doom.

THESEUS: My hatred for this man prompts satisfaction,
and yet he is my son, a family tie
which reverence demands receive respect.
Between the two, there's nothing I can feel.

OLD MAN: What is your will, my lord? To bring him to you?
Or what do you bid us do with your poor son?
We wait your orders. If you'll take my advice,
you'll show some pity to him in his pain.

THESEUS: Well, bring him here, this villain of denial,

and we'll see for ourselves how he explains
away this manifest punishment from the gods.

CHORUS: *[sings, to melody of A Virgen mut groriosa by Alfonso X, solemnly and rather slowly]*

Aphrodite, born of ocean,
empress over every mind,
power that gives all life its motion,
queen of gods and human kind,

soaring through the heaven's splendor
with your fluttering golden child,
endless source of all the tender
frenzy of the love-beguiled,

you are laughter, love, enjoyer,
you are light and hope and womb,
you are slayer and destroyer,
you are night and death and tomb.

[Enter Artemis.]

ARTEMIS: Hear me, Theseus, king
of royal ancestry. I,
Artemis, virgin daughter
of Zeus, have come to you.
How can you, wretched man, find satisfaction
in what has happened to your innocent child,
whom you have murdered sinfully, accepting
the unconfirmed and lying testimony
left by your wife? It's brought you total ruin.
Why don't you hide yourself in earth's black depths
or fling yourself beyond the shining sky,
seeking to escape this deed of crime
which shuts you out forever from good men?
Now, Theseus, you will hear the truth of things,
and it will be a bane and not a blessing.
This is my purpose here: to make you know
your son was righteous, lest he die in shame,
and that your wife was acting from obsession,
or, in a strange way, from her sense of honor.
That goddess who is hateful past all others
to all of us who cherish chastity
had stung her with a passion for your son.
At first, she tried to conquer Aphrodite

with self-control, but her resolve was weakened
 by her old Nurse, who, going to your son,
 revealed all to him under oath of silence,
 and he, of course, repelled by the suggestion,
 refused to listen; then, accused by you,
 his reverence for his oath veiled truth in silence,
 but Phaedra, dreading she would be exposed,
 wrote out false accusations, thus devising
 your son's destruction, since you believed her lies.

THESEUS: Ah!

ARTEMIS: This story stings you, Theseus? There is more,
 and what remains will give you yet more grief.
 Your father gave you three sure curses: one
 of these you hurled in sinful rage against
 you child, though they were meant for enemies,
 and yet your sea-god father could not fail
 to keep his word, and gave you what you asked.
 But you have manifestly sinned against
 both him and me: not waiting for confirmation
 from oracles or oath bound witnesses
 or calm investigation, you instantly
 unleashed your curse against your guiltless son.

THESEUS: My lady, I am destroyed.

ARTEMIS: You have done wrong,
 but there are still extenuating factors,
 since Aphrodite willed all this to happen,
 to glut her rage. The laws of Zeus forbid
 that any god should thwart another's will,
 but we must stand aside. Had I not feared
 the wrath of Zeus, I'd never have endured
 the shame of seeing this one mortal man
 I loved beyond all others put to death.
 As for your crime, your ignorance of the facts
 provides some mitigation; then too your wife
 forestalled investigation by her death,
 which led you to accept a false conclusion.
 Though this is your disaster, do not think
 it is not also mine. Gods also grieve
 when reverent mortals die, but on the evil
 we send a plague consuming all their line.

CHORUS: But now the ruined man

arrives, fair flesh and hair
 all smeared with dirt and blood.
 O sorrow for the house,
 sorrow on sorrow, falling from the gods.

[Enter Hippolytos, supported by attendants.]

HIPPOLYTOS: O I am wretched, murdered
 by my father's curse. I die
 a death of agony, it leaps
 in spasms through my flesh and brain.
 Stop and let me ease
 my pain seared limbs. O cruel
 steeds, my nurslings, now
 you have destroyed, ruined, killed me.
 Ah, gently by the gods! you men,
 gently handle my lacerated body.
 Who stands there on my right?
 Carefully, carefully lift me,
 hold me up, the victim of my father's
 unholy sinful curse. Do you see this, Zeus?
 To reverence the gods was all my pride,
 and purity the only prize I claimed,
 and now I'm flung headlong to death's dark halls,
 destroyed, an utter ruin, with all the faith
 I kept with gods and men a useless aid.
 The pain, the pain: again it leaps and sears.
 Let me go, let death the healer come,
 kill me and kill me again, get some sharp blade
 to cut me apart and cradle me in death.
 O my father's curse, my father's curse!
 Some ancient evil stains the generations
 of all our house, blindly striking down
 an innocent such as I: why do the gods
 inflict such torment on the innocent?
 Only death is freedom now, so kill me,
 lull me in death's sweet night-dark sure embrace.

ARTEMIS: Unhappy man, and O unhappy fate.

HIPPOLYTOS: Ah!
 This air is suddenly suffused with light.
 Through death and pain I feel the presence here
 of Artemis, and agony recedes.

ARTEMIS: Yes, I am here, beloved, whom you love.

HIPPOLYTOS: O lady, look what they have done to me.

ARTEMIS: I see it. But the gods cannot shed tears.

HIPPOLYTOS: Your huntsman and companion is no more.

ARTEMIS: No more: you die the dearest man who lived.

HIPPOLYTOS: No more, your charioteer and worshipper.

ARTEMIS: No more, no more. All this is Aphrodite.

HIPPOLYTOS: Ah, ah! And now I know who has destroyed me.

ARTEMIS: Greedy for honor, enraged at chastity.

HIPPOLYTOS: Then by herself she's caused a triple ruin.

ARTEMIS: Destroying you, your father, and his spouse.

HIPPOLYTOS: And now I grieve too for my father's ruin.

ARTEMIS: He was deluded by a pitiless goddess.

HIPPOLYTOS: Father, my poor father, I mourn your grief.

THESEUS: It's over for me, my son: there's no more life.

HIPPOLYTOS: I grieve for your mistake more than myself.

THESEUS: My son, if only I could die for you.

HIPPOLYTOS: Your father Poseidon gave a bitter gift.

THESEUS: If only I could never have invoked it.

HIPPOLYTOS: What use? You would have killed me in your rage.

THESEUS: Well, men must fall when heaven makes them stumble.

HIPPOLYTOS: If only mortal men could curse the gods.

ARTEMIS: Leave that to me. Not even among the dead
beneath the earth will you walk unavenged
for all this suffering which Aphrodite

has sent on you in anger at your virtue.
 There will come a day when one she loves,
 a mortal man she cherishes in her heart,
 will be cut down by these unerring shafts,
 and that will be my vengeance. But for you,
 my ruined worshipper, I will decree
 the honor of a divinity here in Trozen.
 Through all the future, virgins when they wed
 will dedicate their girlhood locks of hair
 upon your altar, singing a honeyed dirge
 for maiden purity's sweet perishing,
 and Phaedra's love for you will not be lost
 in the endless depths of time's oblivious ocean.
 Now Theseus, lord of Trozen and of Athens,
 take up your child and hold him in your arms.
 In ignorance you killed him: mortal men
 will make mistakes when deities cross their path.
 Hippolytos, I bid you not to hate
 your father. What has happened had to be.
 And now farewell. It is not right that I,
 immortal, should allow a dying breath
 to stain my vision's brightness, and I see
 the darkness of your ending fast draws near.

[Exit Artemis.]

HIPPOLYTOS: And may you fare well too, beloved queen.
 Serenely you must leave our long communion,
 and I release my father from all blame,
 obedient now and always to your will.
 The shadows come: they're folding over my eyes.
 Hold me, father; lift my body up.

THESEUS: O my child, what will you do to me?

HIPPOLYTOS: I die: I see death's portal open wide.

THESEUS: Abandoning me and my guilty hands?

HIPPOLYTOS: No, no: I free you from all taint of crime.

THESEUS: What – can you free me from bloodshed's pollution?

HIPPOLYTOS: I swear by Artemis of the silver bow.

THESEUS: O dearest, your father has a noble son.

HIPPOLYTOS: Pray that your lawful sons may be the same.

THESEUS: I mourn your virtue, reverence, and purity.

HIPPOLYTOS: Father, goodbye: father, a long goodbye.

THESEUS: Don't leave me, child: endure, endure to live.

HIPPOLYTOS: I'm done with my enduring: it is death.
Now hurry, hide my face behind my cloak.

[Hippolytos is carried into palace.]

THESEUS: O Trozen, glorious Athens, you have lost
the finest man you've seen. O Aphrodite,
your punishment will never leave my life.

[Exit Theseus into palace.]

CHORUS: This sudden grief has come upon the city
unlooked for, and we mourn it, since the fall
of mighty houses causes special pain.

[Exit Chorus.]