

Script Sample

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Phèdre

by Jean Racine
in a new translation by Rob Melrose

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CHARACTERS

THESEUS, son of Aegeus, king of Athens

PHEDRE, wife of Theseus, daughter of Minos and Pasiphae

HIPPOLYTUS, son of Theseus and Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons

ARICIA, princess of the royal house of Athens

OENONE, nurse and confidant of Phedre

THERAMENE, tutor of Hippolytus

ISMENE, confidant of Aricia.

PANOPE, woman in Phedre's employ

GUARDS

The scene is Trezene, city in the Peloponnese

ACT I

SCENE I - HIPPOLYTUS, THERAMENE

HIPPOLYTUS

The plan is set, I'm leaving Theramene,
Leaving behind this pleasant stay in Trezene.
In this mortal doubt that stirs me,
I start to blush at my laziness.
More than six months separated from my father,
And I have no idea of the fate of that dear man,
No idea what distant lands could be hiding him.

THERAMENE

And in what lands, my lord, will you look for him?
In order to satisfy your understandable fears,
I've searched the two seas that separate Corinth;
I've asked about Theseus of people in lands
Where you can see Acheron disappear into Hades;
I've been to Elis, and going through Cape Tenarus,
Passed by the sea where Icarus fell.
On what new hope, in what lucky regions,
Do you think you'll discover his tracks?
Who even knows, who knows if the King your father
Wants us to solve the mystery of his absence?
Or if, while we fret about his fate,
Our hero is relaxing, hiding his new loves from us,
and is simply racking up new exploits...

HIPPOLYTUS

Please Theramene, stop, and respect Theseus.
His young errors are far in the past,
No dishonorable temptation could hold him back;

And by arresting those desires that were so fatally inconstant,
Phedre hasn't had a rival for a very long time.
And so in searching for him I'll follow my duty,
And I'll flee these surroundings that I can no longer dare look on.

THERAMENE

What! Since when, my lord, have you feared the presence
Of these peaceful surroundings, so dear in your childhood,
And when have I seen you prefer a trip
To the pompous tumult of Athens and the royal court?
What danger, or rather what torment drives you away?

HIPPOLYTUS

Those happy times are gone. Everything changed
The moment the gods brought to these shores
The daughter of Minos and Pasiphae.

THERAMENE

I see. I've known the cause of your pain,
Phedre here torments you, the mere sight of her.
Your stepmother is dangerous, the first time she saw you
She exiled you to show who was in power.
But her hatred for you, that once pursued you,
Has now disappeared, or at least has relaxed.
And besides, what dangers could make you run
From a dying woman who wants to die?
Phedre, touched with a sickness she stubbornly keeps secret,
Who keeps herself hidden from the very light of day,
Is she even capable of plotting any harm against you?

HIPPOLYTUS

Her vain enmity is not what I fear.
Hippolytus leaves to flee another enemy.
I flee, I admit to you, this young Aricia,
Last of a fatal house that conspired against us.

THERAMENE

What! Even you, sir, persecute her?
That sweet sister of the cruel Pallantides
Was never involved in her brothers' treacherous plots.
And must you hate her innocent charms?

HIPPOLYTUS

If I hated her, I wouldn't flee her.

THERAMENE

Sir, would you allow me to explain your flight?
Could it be that you're no longer the prideful Hippolytus,
Tenacious enemy of the laws of love,
Laws under whose yoke Theseus submitted countless times?
Venus, whom your pride has scorned so long,
Does she finally justify Theseus in the end?
And are you now placed in the ranks of humanity,
Forced to make sacrifice at her altar?
Are you in love, my lord?

HIPPOLYTUS

Friend, how dare you say that?
You who have known my heart from my first breath,
The sentiments of heart so proud, so full of disdain,
Can you ask me now to deny it with shame?
It's less from the milk from an Amazon mother
That I sucked this pride that astonishes you;
But rather at a riper age when I reached my maturity,
That I marveled as I came to know myself.
Bound close to me with a sincere zeal,
You told me the whole story of my father.
You know how much my soul, attentive to your voice,
Heated when it heard his noble exploits,
When you described to me this intrepid hero

Consoling humanity by taking the place of absent Hercules,
The monsters he stifled and the thieves he punished,
Procustes, Cercyon, and Scirron, and Sinis,
And the scattered bones of the giant of Epidaurus,
And Crete steaming with the blood of the Minotaur.
But when you recited his less glorious feats,
His fidelity given and taken in one hundred lands,
Helen stolen from her parents in Sparta,
Salamis witness of Periboea's tears,
And many others, whose names escaped him,
Gullible souls, who were wronged by his passion;
Ariadne on the rocks recounting her injustices,
And finally Phedre carried off under more honorable auspices;
You know how I regretfully I listened to that talk,
I often begged you to abbreviate that lesson:
I would have been happy to have torn out the memory
Of that unworthy half of such a beautiful story!
And me, in my turn, would I see myself coupled?
And would the gods have me humiliated in the same way?
My cowardly sighs would be all the more despicable
Since his heap of honors made Theseus excusable,
But as of now, no monsters have been tamed by me,
To allow me the right to fail like him.
Even if my pride could be softened,
Would I ever choose Aricia to be my conqueror?
Could my lost senses forget
The eternal obstacle that separates us?
My father condemns her; and with severe laws
He forbids to give nephews to her brothers:
From one stalk he fears an offshoot;
With their sister he wants to bury their name,
To be under his submission all the way to her grave,
So that the flames of hymen will never light for her.
Should I espouse her cause against my angry father?
Do I want to become a paragon of foolishness?

And in a mad love let my youth embark...

THERAMENE

Ah! My lord, if your destiny is marked,
The heavens won't listen to your reasons.
Theseus in trying to close your eyes opens them.
And his hate has stirred up in you a rebel passion
And gives his enemy a new charm.
After all, why are you afraid of a chaste love?
If it seems sweet, why don't you try it?
Why do you always trust your savage scruples?
Are you afraid you'll get lost in the tracks of Hercules?
What proud heart hasn't Venus been able to tame?
You yourself, where would you be, you who battle her,
If Antiope who always opposed her laws
Had not burned with a modest ardor for Theseus?
But what use is affecting this prideful talk?
Admit it, everything has changed; and these past few days
We've seen you less often, scornful and savage,
Making your chariot fly on the shore,
Working in that art that Neptune invented,
Making wild horses docile at the bit.
The forests ring out less often with your cries.
Filled with a secret fire, your eyes are heavy.
There's no doubt: you love, you burn;
You perish from a sickness you try to hide.
Has the charming Aricia attracted you?

HIPPOLYTUS

Theramene, I'm leaving, and go to search for my father.

THERAMENE

Aren't you going to see Phedre before you leave,
My lord?

HIPPOLYTUS

That is my plan: you can let her know.
We'll see her, since my duty demands it.
But what new affliction troubles her dear Oenone?

SCENE II - HIPPOLYTUS, OENONE, THERAMENE

OENONE

Oh! My lord, what trouble could equal mine?
The Queen has almost reached her fatal hour.
In vain I observe her day and night by her side:
She dies in my arms of a sickness she hides from me.
An eternal disorder reigns in her spirit.
Her anxious sorrow tears her from her bed.
She wants to see the daylight; and her profound suffering
Orders me to shoo everyone away...
She comes.

HIPPOLYTUS

I'll leave her in this place.
And won't show her my hated face.

SCENE III - PHEDRE, OENONE

PHEDRE

Let's not go farther. Let's stay here, dear Oenone.
I can't hold myself up any longer, my strength has left me.
My eyes are blinded with the daylight I see once again,
My trembling knees give way under me.
Oh!

OENONE

All powerful gods! Oh that our tears would appease you.

PHEGRE

How these vain ornaments and these veils weigh me down!
What ill-chosen hand, in forming all these knots,
Took the care to load them all on my head?
Everything afflicts me and conspires to hurt me.

OENONE

Look how her desires destroy one another!
It was you yourself whose work you now condemn,
Earlier you wouldn't let us touch your hair and did it yourself.
Then you wanted to get up and see the light of day again.
Now you see it, Madam, and try to hide yourself,
You hate the daylight that you have come to see?

PHEGRE

Oh Helios! Noble and brilliant author of a sad family,
My mother's greatest boast was to be your daughter
Perhaps you blush to see me in my present state,
O Sun, I've come to see you for the last time.

OENONE

What! Will you not let go of this cruel desire?
Will I forever see you, renouncing your life,
And making macabre preparations for your death?

PHEGRE

Gods! If only I were sitting in the shade of the forest!
When can I follow with my eyes through the noble dust
A chariot receding as it runs its course?

OENONE

What Madam?

PHEGRE

Senseless, where am I? And what have I said?

Where have I let my desires wander, and my mind?
I lost it: the gods stole it from me.
Oenone, my face is red:
I've let you see too many of my shameful sorrows,
And my eyes, despite myself, fill with tears.

OENONE

Ah! If you must blush, blush for your silence
That only adds to the violence of your ills.
Rebelling against all our care, deaf to our advice,
Do you want a pitiless end to your days?
What fury cuts them in the middle of their course?
What charm or poison has dried up the source?
Darkness for three times has obscured the skies
Since you've let sleep enter in your eyes;
And the day has three times chased the obscure night
Since your body has languished without nourishment.
What horrible plan have you let tempt you?
You offend the gods, authors of your life;
You betray the husband to whom you're bound;
You also betray your unhappy children;
Whom you throw under a harsh yoke.
Remember that the same day their mother is taken away,
It also gives hope to the son of a foreign woman,
To that proud enemy of yours and of your bloodline,
That son that an Amazon carried in her belly,
That Hippolytus...

PHEGRE

Oh gods!

OENONE

Now that rebuke hit you.

PHEGRE

Wretch, what name came out of your mouth?

OENONE

Oh well! Your anger rises for good reason:
I'm glad to see you tremble at that deadly name.
So live. Let love and duty stir you up,
Live, don't allow this Scythian's son
To oppress your children with his odious empire,
To command the highest blood of Greece and of Gods.
But don't delay: every passing moment slays you.
Revive your battered forces promptly.
Although your fire is being consumed,
The torch still endures and can be relit.

PHEDRE

I've prolonged its guilty duration for too long.

OENONE

What? What remorse is tearing you apart?
What crime could produce an emotion so urgent?
Are your hands soaked in the blood of an innocent?

PHEDRE

Thanks to heaven, my hands are no criminals.
Oh that it would please the Gods to make my heart as innocent!

OENONE

And what awful plan have you given birth to,
That makes your heart need to feel so appalled?

PHEDRE

I've told you enough of it. Spare me the rest.
I'd rather die than make such a dire confession.

End of Script Sample

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