

**CLASSICAL STRUCTURES**  
**An Aristotelian interpretation of Recognition and Reversal**  
**in *Phædra* and *The Oresteia***  
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Racine's *Phædra* and Æschylus's *The Oresteia* are both epic tragedies set in Ancient Greece. The major stylistic difference between the two plays is that Racine interpreted the Euripides' Greek myth *Hippolytus* during the enlightenment of France in the seventeenth century in order to create the story of *Phædra*, while Æschylus wrote his play during the Greek Classical period itself. Both plays were based in Ancient Greece and feature epic heroes, omnipotent gods, and a concept of fate outside of mortal control. While there are great similarities between these two plays, these two fairly similar works have many differences. *The Oresteia* adheres to the epitome of the classic ideals of Greek tragedy according to Aristotle's *Poetics*, while *Phædra* follows a more neoclassical style.

For *Phædra*, Racine took his subjects from mythology to write a play of blind, passionate love. His drama followed the neoclassical tragic form; it had five acts and the dramatic time of the action did not exceed one day. Usually, the action was restricted to one locale. Neoclassicism is a term applied to the artistic movement in Western Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The name comes from the fact that it found models for its literary expressions from classical Greek literature and contemporary French neoclassical writings. It was, in part, a forceful reaction against the fires of enthusiasm of

the Renaissance. From the French critics, Horace, Virgil, and of course Racine, came the artistic ideals of order, logic, restrained emotion, accuracy, "correctness," and "good taste." In art, there was a sense of symmetry, a delight in design, and a view of art as centered in man, with man as its primary subject matter; in literature, there was the belief that work should be judged in terms of its service to man.

This great era eschewed reliance on faith and centered on scientific progress and reason. The Enlightenment is often referred to as "The Age of Reason." During this period, the right to think freely and to express one's views publicly was emphasized by the right to self-expression and human fulfillment. The human reason was the only guide to truth. Within Neoclassicism, poetic diction and imagery became conventional, with details subordinated to design. The appeal to the intellect led to a fondness of wit and satire within the presentation of this style, where only the normal, pleasant aspects of nature were emphasized. A tendency toward realism resulted from presenting man's generic qualities. The polish, clarity, and brilliance of literary form was exalted, avoiding the obscure or the mysterious, it valued universality, playing down individualism. Neoclassic "imitated" the classics and cultivated Classical literary forms and types such as the satire and ode."

Phædra fits into these categories very well. One of the play's most famous scenes is Phædra's confession to Hippolytus of her love for him: "Don't think that I'm content to be so, that I think it innocent, Or that by weak compliance I have fed The baneful love that clouds my heart and head. Poor victim that I am of Heaven's curse, I loathe myself; you could not hate me worse."<sup>1</sup> This phrase captures brilliantly the confession she calls shameful and involuntary. This overwhelming sense of shame Phædra feels correlates directly to the neoclassicist tenet of restrained emotion and good taste. Richard Wilbur, modern translator of Phædra, describes how Racine created Phædra as "a Greek woman with a Christian conscience."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Wilbur recounts how Phædra longs to be free from the spell of her evil desires so that she can achieve salvation, "Though she speaks of preserving her honor or good name, her true and hopeless hunger is for innocence, for a state of soul called 'purity', which both she and Hippolytus associate with the jour, the clean light of day."<sup>3</sup> Wilbur's comments as well as Racine's unique interpretation of Hippolytus of Euripides further legitimizes the claim that Phædra is indeed a neoclassical work despite the fact that it takes place in Ancient Greece.

Conversely, The Oresteia represents the quintessence of a Greek tragedy. Aristotle, the venerated Greek philosopher, said

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<sup>1</sup> Racine/Wilbur, pg. 47

<sup>2</sup> Wilbur, pg. XV

<sup>3</sup> Wilbur, pg. XV

in his Poetics that the best type of tragedy involves reversal of a situation, recognition from a character, and suffering. The plot has to be complex, and a normal person should fall from prosperity to misfortune due to some type of mistake. Using Aristotle as a guide, The Oresteia is the best example of a Greek tragedy. Its main plot of all three plays is the misfortune of Orestes and those around him, the result being that Orestes is pursued by the Eumenides for Agamemnon's offense of the murder of his daughter, and for Orestes' murder of his mother, Clytemnestra, and her murder of her husband, Agamemnon. In the end, Orestes appeals to Athena to judge if his pursuit by the Eumenides is just, and she rules in his favor. The three unities, noble character, and complex plot, are what make The Oresteia a good example of a tragedy in relation to Aristotle's Poetics. As defined by Aristotle, the three unities are the time, place, and action of the tragedy.

Within Aristotle's Poetics, tragedy is "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude."<sup>4</sup> In the first play of The Oresteia, Agamemnon, the victims of the tragedy are Agamemnon and the whole ruling family of Argos, the House of Atreus. Aristotle dictates that a tragedy should show humans as objects of imitation, "men in action," portraying men in their ideal forms. In *Agamemnon*, we see the Epic hero, a returning paragon, brought to ruin by his wife, Clytemnestra, a

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle's Poetics, 4.1

powerful and epic character herself. Agamemnon brings a beautiful girl back to Argos with him as spoils of war, Cassandra. She is the perfect victim, as well as a Sybil, with an awareness of doom but cursed by not being able to convey this information to believing ears, nor to be able to change the future. As the story of *Agamemnon* unravels over the duration of one day, the motives for current actions refer to events that happened prior to and during the Trojan war, and the results of the tragedy of *Agamemnon* carry forward into *The Choëphoræ*, and *The Eumenides*. Æschylus uses Cassandra in *Agamemnon* to elicit the emotions of "pity and fear" in an Aristotelian fashion, intimated by the action. In the following two plays, we feel the pity and fear from Orestes himself, culminating as he appeals to Athena for judgement.

Aristotle says that an ideal tragedy will have a complex plot, one in which the change of the hero's fortune takes place with a reversal of the situation (peripeteia) and with a recognition (anagnorisis). This could be true in a sense that Agamemnon's reversal evolves from the intrinsic structure of the plot. While we do learn why Clytemnestra must kill her husband, we are not quite sure if she will or if she will succeed. At no point does Agamemnon see his fate clearly; he falls to the use of hamartia, the error of judgement due to ignorance, and walks into a slaughter. Cassandra, however, knows what fortune is about to come upon her, and is unable to make this clear to the Chorus. It

also leads to the enlightenment of her tragedy-- through her visions. *Agamemnon* could be the ultimate of tragedies causing grief for the characters as well as the audience. Aristotle says that the best plots are the ones with a complex plot which includes an undeserved change of fortune, where the imitation of events evoke pity and fear, and there is a change of result of hamartia. The tragic hero is a man who fails to achieve happiness in such a way that it brings upon fear and pity in the highest degree. Through the three unities, the noble characters, and the plot, *Agamemnon* is obviously an excellent tragedy, as confirmed by Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Neoclassicism spawned partly due to classic Greek tragedy and so the characteristics of neoclassicism and Greek tragedy in relation to *Phædra* and *The Oresteia* are quite similar. Both works use irony as the means of characters' downfalls. *Agamemnon* kills his daughter in order to gain blessings. *Clytemnestra* kills her husband in order to avenge her daughter. Both of these actions inspire *Orestes* to kill *Clytemnestra* and her lover, and to cause the *Eumenides* to seek retribution. Each murderer becomes a killer in the act of revenge and retribution for another, thereby making himself a future victim. Therein lays the irony. In *Phædra's* case, her sin is not greed, murder, or envy, but instead love. Her love is so deep-rooted that even though she knows her sin, she still cannot bury it. Subsequently, her powerlessness over her own

emotions destroys the lives of all the people around her.

Racine's use of irony is a bit different from Æschylus.

In conclusion, *Phædra* and *The Oresteia* are permeated by many continuities of classic Greek tragedy. They differ in the sense that *The Oresteia* embodies the classic Greek tragedy as defined by Aristotle whereas *Phædra* is written from a post-renaissance neoclassical movement standpoint.