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**CAN'T, SHOULDN'T, AND LOVE JUICE:  
A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM AND THE PHAEDRA-HIPPOLYTUS MYTH**

by

**Katherine Shakespeare**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree**

of

**HONORS IN UNIVERSITY STUDIES  
WITH DEPARTMENTAL HONORS**

in

**Interdisciplinary Studies  
in the College of Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences**

**Approved:**

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**UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, UT**

**Spring 2007**

Can't, Shouldn't, and Love Juice:  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Phaedra-Hippolytus Myth

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I can no other answer make but thanks,  
And thanks, and ever thanks.

*Summary:*

One of the oldest recurring western mythical traditions finds its roots in the Ancient Near East. At the core of this abiding tale is a high-ranking woman, often married, who attempts to seduce a young man, who spurns her. The affronted woman then accuses the youth of assault and either he or both meet a violent end. Often at the heart of each tale lies something monstrous about the potential union of the two individuals.

In the Greek and Roman tradition, one example of this “spurned-woman” motif manifests itself in the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. No fewer than three ancient playwrights—Sophocles, Euripides, and Seneca—produced no fewer than four variations on this myth, altering characters’ behavior, adding or removing the participation of the gods, and generally playing with combinations. There have been modern spins-offs, too, including Jean Racine’s *Phèdre* and Eugene O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms*. However, another modern resonance of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, more subtle and creative, and yet undeniably drawn on similar themes and characters lurks in the western canon: Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (MND).

Although Phaedra and Hippolytus themselves are physically absent from MND, the themes of their myth are so intimately interwoven in MND that close examination reveals their ghosts, silent and invisible, walking among MND’s fairy folk. Because MND explores the Phaedra-Hippolytus themes in great depth, it both echoes and portends the destruction of Theseus’ family, and therefore the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth.

*I. The Mutability of Myth*

As cultural expression, myth is a fluid art, changing and evolving over time. Much like nature, myth also has a hereditary quality and finding an assortment of myths formed from common building materials is not rare.<sup>1</sup> In this context three different types of mythical imitation inform the present discussion: inverting, copying, and—for lack of a better word—atomizing. Inverted myths present an opposite outcome or character type and, like a photographic negative, imitate the preceding myth, often emphasizing the other’s traits by displaying a lack of them. An example of this type of replication is the Broadway musical *Wicked*, which takes place prior to the familiar plot of the film *The Wizard of Oz*. This newer

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<sup>1</sup> Yohannan, laying the groundwork for his text on the pervasiveness of the Potiphar’s-wife motif, accounts for the ubiquitous nature of certain mythical themes by comparing mythical themes to humanity, where some people look alike because of common lineage, others by happenstance. “To put it in literary terms,” he says, “some stories resemble each other because they were diffused from a common source, and others despite the fact that they were independently created” (2).

musical sympathizes with the young Wicked Witch of the West, reversing audience's traditional emotions as it shows two witches navigating young adulthood on their way to eventually becoming the Wicked Witch of the West and Glinda the Good.<sup>2</sup> The second type of mythical imitation, copying, is evidenced by direct parallels and clear correlations between multiple tales' corresponding characters and themes. We see this, for instance, in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the characters and their interactions closely mimic the travels of Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. Finally, in "atomized" imitation the shared character types and themes of the myths are evident only on an elemental basis, allowing the careful eye to notice similarities and echoes woven into the backdrop. For instance, well-versed viewers easily recognize in the recent film *Eragon* cinematographic elements of Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy films and character types and themes from both *The Lord of the Rings* and George Lucas's *Star Wars* legacy.<sup>3</sup> Of the three types of mythical imitation, this last requires the most attentive observation; a thorough awareness of the antecedent myth lends greater insight into the subsequent fashioning. Bearing these diverse methods of imitation in mind, two classical tales introduce our discussion of myth.

#### A. *The Cyclops and Odysseus: Inverted Myth*

In Homer's *Odyssey*, there are two separate and yet strikingly similar accounts, the likeness of which is obvious on close inspection but may not be readily apparent to the casual eye. In the earlier of the two, Odysseus finds himself captive in the Cyclops' cave, where the one-eyed brute has barred the entrance, slaughtered several of Odysseus' companions, and

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<sup>2</sup> *Wicked*, based on Gregory Maguire's novel of the same name, opened on Broadway in 2003. For *The Wizard of Oz*, see the 1939 MGM film, starring Judy Garland as Dorothy Gale.

<sup>3</sup> *Eragon* (2006), based on the novel by Christopher Paolini. For *The Lord of the Rings* see New Line Cinema's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), *The Two Towers* (2002), and *The Return of the King* (2003), directed by Peter Jackson and based on J. R. R. Tolkien's text. *Star Wars*, by George Lucas, in six episodes (1977-2005).

from which Odysseus escapes by assuming the disguise of “Nobody” (IX.259-552). Later, in Books 21-22, once Odysseus has returned to Ithaca, he again adopts a disguise before entering his home, then—as though taking his cue from the Cyclops’ earlier actions—bolts doors and gates to trap the suitor-trespassers within his own house, and proceeds to execute each of them.

While these scenes in Homer’s epic are far from identical, there are clear correlations between them; both portray a serious violation of *xenia*, the Greek code of guest-friendship, and both include barring an entrance, adopting a disguise, and horrific bloodshed. Indeed it is possible to read them as thematic counterparts, a monster version and human version, fashioned from the same blueprint, but inverted. As such, these two scenes are an encapsulated snapshot of a larger tendency in the general mythical tradition to modify a known thesis, dressing an already familiar idea in number of different costumes, in this case clothing a beast in men’s clothing.

#### *B. Oedipus and the Sphinx: Copied Myth*

In twice-cursed Thebes is another example of the same, where the intertwined tales of Oedipus—a man—and the Sphinx—a beast/monster—meet not only at the crucial moment when Oedipus conquers the Sphinx and gains the rule of Thebes, but consistently comment on one another throughout the parallel stories. The Sphinx, as the offspring of the half-nymph, half-snake Echidna and her son Orthus, the two-headed dog, is clearly a monstrous result of a doubly-pernicious pairing. Not only is the union of Echidna and Orthus one between an older female and younger male, but one further contaminated by incest, because

it involves a mother and son. The end of the Sphinx's life comes at the hands of Oedipus, unwitting Theban prince on his way to gaining kingship.

Typhoeus = Echidna

|  
Orthus = Echidna

|  
Sphinx

Laius = Jocasta

|  
Oedipus = Jocasta

|  
Polyneices

Not dissimilar to the two scenes from the *Odyssey*—which portray monster and man in slightly askew yet parallel scenes—there is only a small degree of separation between Oedipus and the Sphinx. Like the Sphinx's parents, Oedipus himself is the perpetrator of incest, having murdered his father and fathered four children by his mother Jocasta, who is, as with Orthus and Echidna, significantly older than Oedipus. And just as the offspring of Echidna's incestuous relationship with Orthus besieged and brought ruin to Thebes, so does Oedipus' son Polyneices. After the unmaking of Oedipus' rule, his two sons Eteocles and Polyneices agree to share the throne of Thebes, alternating as king each year. At the end of his first term in office, however, Eteocles refuses to turn over power to his brother. Polyneices, having gathered Argive supporters, wages war on his native city, and both he and Eteocles, as well as many others, die in the fray (Tripp 527-9).

On first glance it is easy to miss the fact that there is little more than a once-removed generational gap between Oedipus and the Sphinx. Upon examination, however, the real difference between Oedipus and the Sphinx centers on the subtlety of their monstrosity. That is, the physical appearance of Oedipus and his offspring is not monstrous; instead, though it is no less destructive, the horror of Oedipus' sin is carried on much more quietly—or at least with considerably less barking.



II. "The sort of evil you would scarcely believe to encounter in a stepmother"<sup>4</sup>

There is one particular mythical pattern which models and expands the above discussion, showing how a myth can echo, reflect, and morph over time and among cultures. Often referred to as the "Potiphar's wife" or "spurned-woman" motif, this tale centers on a prominent or distinguished woman, often married, who lusts after a younger man. In many cases, the woman struggles against her desire, but in every case is inevitably unable to suppress her attraction toward the youth and finally approaches and propositions him. With varying degrees of vehemence and a plenitude of unhappy consequences, the young man repulses her advances. The affronted woman then accuses the youth of assault and either he or both meet a violent end.<sup>5</sup>

A. Mesopotamian, Hebraic, and Egyptian Examples of the Spurned-Woman Motif:

*Gilgamesh and Ishtar, Joseph and Potiphar's wife, Bata and Anubis' wife*

The earliest documented evidence of such a tale dates from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, written in ancient Mesopotamia. Gilgamesh, the semi-divine king, catches the fancy of the goddess Ishtar, who offers him bounteous riches in exchange for lying with her. Gilgamesh responds with a lengthy catalogue of the ills that have befallen Ishtar's former lovers, thereby refusing. Insulted, Ishtar weeps to her mother, Antu, and begs her father, Anu, to lend her the Bull of Heaven, with which Ishtar begins to wreak havoc on the earth. Rather than dying under the Bull's hooves, however, Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu slay the Bull and

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<sup>4</sup> Seneca's *Phaedra*, l. 638. My translations from Seneca's *Phaedra*.

<sup>5</sup> "One would be hard put to find a story that has had a wider circulation among more varied audiences over a longer period of time than this one" (Yohannan 1).

mock Ishtar further by hurling the Bull's flesh at her.<sup>6</sup> In the end, Gilgamesh pays for his proud behavior with the death of his beloved companion Enkidu.

Readers of the Bible will recognize a resounding echo of this mythical tradition in the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife, found in Chapter 39 of Genesis. Joseph, sold as a slave by his brothers, finds favor in the eyes of his Egyptian master, and eventually also those of his master's wife, who attempts to seduce him. Upon his rejection of her invitation, Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of assaulting her and secures his imprisonment by Potiphar.

Also set in Egypt is "The Story of Two Brothers," dating from records of the early thirteenth century BCE. Anubis is the elder of the two title characters, married, and the guardian of his younger brother, Bata, who does a significant amount of the farm labor and appears to have "the strength of a god" (Pritchard 12). Anubis' wife, unnamed in the tale as we have it, takes special notice of Bata's physique as he exits the stable one day, carrying an enormous amount of grain, and asks him to lie with her. In accordance to the traditional pattern, Bata reminds her that she has been like a mother to him, and he like a son to her. He chastises her for her perversion and returns to the day's labors. Once Anubis has returned from the day's work, his wife accuses Bata of assaulting her and bids Anubis slay his younger brother. With a heaven-sent crocodile-infested lake placed between them, which prevents Anubis from thrusting his lance into Bata, Bata defends himself to Anubis, then validates his word of chaste honor by castrating himself and departs to the Valley of the Cedar. Anubis returns to his house, grieving his brother's loss, and kills his wife in punishment for her misdeeds (Pritchard 12ff).

In each of the above myths, a dreadful result ensues from the older woman's pursuit of the young man and his subsequent rejection of her, be it the Bull of Heaven's temporary

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<sup>6</sup> *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet VI. See George, pp. 47-54.

rampage on earth and attempt to kill Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Joseph's loss of status and unjust imprisonment, or the severe consequences suffered by Anubis' wife and Bata. At the heart of each tale lies something monstrous in the potential union of the woman and young man, but also something compelling. Fascination with this catastrophe has made the tale a perennial favorite.

*B. The Exemplary Spurned-Woman Tale: The Phaedra-Hippolytus Myth*

Moving from the Ancient Near East to Classical Greece, we find that the spurned-woman motif was further developed to incorporate each of the above themes, including the older woman-young man relationship, the juxtaposition of beasts with men, and mother-son incest themes. Not unlike Oedipus and the Sphinx, the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth is a multi-generational tale, and explores a similar contrast between the physically demonstrative monstrous and its subtler, yet equally abhorrent, counterpart.

The Phaedra-Hippolytus myth begins with Zeus, father of the gods, who transforms himself into a bull and bears the young and attractive Europa across the sea to Crete, where he impregnates her and produces Minos, who becomes king of Crete and weds Pasiphaë. During his rivalry for the throne of Crete, Minos asks Poseidon to send him a bull, which he promises to sacrifice. Poseidon accordingly sends a bull from the sea, thereby helping Minos secure his rule, who fails, however, to follow through on his word (Tripp 380). As punishment, a divine curse is imposed upon Minos' wife Pasiphaë: an unnatural and eventually satisfied desire to copulate with the bull. From her offensive union with what ought to have been her husband's sacrifice to Poseidon, Pasiphaë bears the half-man, half-bull Minotaur, a monstrous embarrassment for the Cretan royalty.

Enter Theseus, hailed Greek hero, slaying both the Cretan bull and the virgin-devouring Minotaur, then returning to his homeland. After having wed and produced a son, Hippolytus, with the Amazon queen Hippolyta,<sup>7</sup> Theseus eliminates Hippolyta in order to marry Phaedra, the princess daughter of Cretan Minos and Pasiphaë, making her the half-sister of the dreaded Minotaur. Several years into their marriage, while Theseus is away on an expedition to Hades, Phaedra perpetuates both the disaster of her mother's unbridled lust and the larger mythical tradition of the spurned-woman motif, finally succumbing to a long-born erotic desire for her stepson Hippolytus. As did Ishtar and the wives of Potiphar and Anubis, Phaedra makes her advances on the youth and is vehemently scorned by Hippolytus. Upon Theseus' almost immediate return, Phaedra accuses Hippolytus of raping her and commits suicide. Rash Theseus calls upon his father, Poseidon, to destroy his son; in response, Poseidon sends a giant bull from the sea to frighten Hippolytus' horses, who carry him to his death in one way or another, according to various ancient authors.

In much the same way that the Sphinx and Oedipus were comparable, Phaedra and her mother resemble one another. Both are plagued by insurmountable and shameful desire for what they ought not have, and both disgrace their marital roles in pursuit of that desire. Also analogous to the Sphinx and Oedipus, the result of Pasiphaë's abomination is very visibly monstrous while Phaedra's is less so, though both cause weighty ruin. And also like Oedipus, Phaedra is the human reflection of the earlier beast-based myth, her mother's tryst with the bull:

Minos = Pasiphaë = Bull		
Phaedra	Minotaur	

Theseus = Hippolyta, then Phaedra	
Hippolytus = Phaedra	

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<sup>7</sup> Often called Antiope, depending on the source.

As it happens, the most significant retellings of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth have literally taken center stage, having been written as theatrical productions. These scripts lend themselves to a variety of divisions, which can be broken into multiple categories, based upon the authors' thematic and staging decisions. For the present purposes, however, the most prominent texts fall into two groups: classical and modern. The classical models of the Phaedra-Hippolytus blueprint are Euripides' *Hippolytos I*, its revision *Hippolytos II*, and Seneca's *Phaedra*.<sup>8</sup> Among modern texts pertinent here the stand-outs are Jean Racine's *Phèdre* and Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms*.<sup>9</sup> To these, we will later add William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

### C. Classical Phaedra-Hippolytus: Euripides' *Hippolytos I* and *Hippolytos II*

As mentioned above, Euripides wrote two plays about the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth.<sup>10</sup> From fragments and descriptions of the play, scholars have inferred that *Hippolytos I* likely failed because Phaidra yielded too easily to her lust and was therefore an unsympathetic stage character.<sup>11</sup> Its successor, however, *Hippolytos II*, was much more successful. In his second attempt at staging this myth, Euripides framed the play with the appearances of Aphrodite and Artemis, whose own differences bring about the deaths of

<sup>8</sup> Sophocles also wrote a *Phaidra*, no longer extant. See Barrett (1964, pp. 12-13) for analysis of the probable plot. For the purpose of clarity, I have noted the Greek character as "Phaidra," the Latin as "Phaedra," and the French as "Phèdre."

<sup>9</sup> *Hippolytos I* and *II*, 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE; *Phaedra*, 1<sup>st</sup> century CE; *Phèdre*, mid 17<sup>th</sup> century; *Desire Under the Elms*, early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>10</sup> See Barrett for a comprehensive treatment of both *Hippolytos* plays. In his introduction to Euripides' text, Barrett examines the probable Trozenian origins of Theseus, the cult of Hippolytos, the plots of Euripides' *Hippolytos I* and *II* and Sophocles' *Phaidra*, and appends a lengthy catalogue of the evidence for the lost plays.

<sup>11</sup> See again Barrett's thorough introduction. Also, Mierow (1931) proposes that the first Phaidra was too openly ugly, and the play too realistic; failing to mask Phaidra's flaws in a heroic mask made her unsympathetic. Grene (1939) asserts that the first Phaidra directly attempted to seduce Hippolytos, and that Greek audiences found this offensive. Reckford (1974) suggests that *Hippolytos I* was propelled by three speeches of Phaidra: to the Nurse, to Hippolytos, and to Theseus, and that audiences may have been put off by the brevity of Phaidra's resistance to her forbidden attraction.

Hippolytos and Phaidra. The former goddess opens *Hippolytos II* with a lengthy speech, in which she condemns Hippolytos for his prudish celibacy and explains that she has caused Phaidra to fall in love with him. The Cretan-born princess, as Aphrodite unflinchingly tells the audience, will be her tool to destroy Hippolytos. Artemis' epiphany highlights the conclusion of the play, notable for the goddess' excusing herself from Hippolytos' battered and tormented remains because it is neither becoming for a goddess to weep nor appropriate for her to witness actual death. In recompense for Hippolytos' death, Artemis offers him neither immortality nor her company, but only to kill one of Aphrodite's favorite mortals.

Between these divine appearances, the play focuses on mortals. At the opening, Phaidra has languished for a significant time, growing more and more ill because of her attempt to resist her lust for her stepson, before her Nurse offers to approach Hippolytos, assuring the queen that she'll have Hippolytos in bed in no time. Hippolytos' reaction, no surprise, is a misogynistic rant, after which he hastily exits the palace. As she has been threatening to do for some time, Phaidra hangs herself, after having attached a tablet to her wrist which accuses Hippolytos of rape. At this very moment, Theseus returns from his voyage abroad, reads the tablet, and immediately threatens to destroy his son. This declaration cues the entrance of Hippolytos, who, surprised to see Phaidra dead, defends his own chastity to his father without revealing Phaidra's proposition.<sup>12</sup> Theseus, however, will have none of it and banishes Hippolytos, calling upon his own father Poseidon to destroy Hippolytos. Horse-broken Hippolytos is brought in mangled, and when Artemis defends Hippolytos' innocence to a shocked and sorrowful Theseus, Hippolytos forgives his father's haste before dying.

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<sup>12</sup> Prior to revealing Phaidra's lust, the Nurse coerced pious Hippolytos into vowing an oath of secrecy by the gods, a vow he is compelled to honor. See the Lawalls' translation, ll. 612-668.

*D. Classical Phaedra-Hippolytus: Seneca's Phaedra*

Five hundred years later in a play on the same theme, Seneca's *Phaedra*, the gods are referenced but never physically visible. Instead of Aphrodite, Hippolytus opens this play by ordering his servants to prepare for a hunt. Phaedra, as expected, has struggled with her attraction toward Hippolytus for some time, and the Nurse is already aware of the problem, alternately advising Phaedra to hold fast and to plunge headlong into pursuit of sexual fulfillment. Phaedra expresses much of her longing by saying she wishes she were in the woodlands, and cursing the day she wed Theseus and left Crete. Alternately, Phaedra hopes that Theseus will be indulgent of her sin, then flippantly disregards his lordship over her, and aches to be wild like Hippolytus' Amazon mother Hippolyta. Finally, convincing herself that Theseus has died, Phaedra debases herself at Hippolytus' feet and begs him to lie with her. Horrified, Hippolytus reacts with almost cruel revulsion, and flees into the woods. Theseus returns to find Phaedra about to kill herself, the palace in an uproar, and when he tries to pry the reason from her, Phaedra allows Theseus to believe that Hippolytus has raped her. As in Euripides' drama, Theseus calls upon his sea-god father to destroy his son, and a bull from the sea frightens Hippolytus' horses, who cast him beneath their hooves and rend him into bits as they stampede in terror. As Theseus' friends haul the carnage of Hippolytus into Theseus' presence, Phaedra enters, cuts a lock of her hair and casts it onto Hippolytus' sundered limbs, confesses her lie, and stabs herself with Hippolytus' dagger, praying that they might be joined in death.

In this version of the play, there is much mention of Crete, in particular of Pasiphaë by Phaedra, the Nurse, and Hippolytus. Phaedra also longs for a Daedalus, who could help her sate her passion as he did her mother's; the Nurse tries to bring Phaedra to her senses by

reminding her of the consequences of that error; and, later, when Phaedra attempts to seduce Hippolytus, he exclaims in horror that she is the product of Pasiphaë's diseased womb, which also spewed forth the Minotaur. No god appears on stage at any point.

*E. Modern Phaedra-Hippolytus: Racine's Phèdre*

Though Racine states in the preface to his play that he has based his work on Euripides' *Hippolytos*, *Phèdre* is in fact much nearer to Seneca's *Phaedra*, both in plot and in the lack of any divine presence. The title character of *Phèdre* is simultaneously more sympathetic and less so than in prior versions of the myth. In her opening speech, Phèdre explains that she has loved Hippolyte for many years, and done everything she could to avoid him, including taking up the role of wicked stepmother and banishing him from the local realm. This Hippolyte, too, is different from his earlier prototypes, in that he is capable of love. Hippolyte himself suffers from a case of unrequited love, nursing a six-month-long secret passion for the princess Aricie,<sup>13</sup> to whom he finally addresses himself, confessing that he has lost all love for the woodlands and hunting.

Truly believing Thésée to have died in Hades, Phèdre hopefully approaches Hippolyte, and is of course sorely disappointed. She then sends the Nurse to try again with Hippolyte, and gives the Nurse leave to use whatever means necessary. Upon Thésée's return, the Nurse accuses Hippolyte of assault, after which Hippolyte defends himself to Thésée, not accusing Phèdre but declaring his love for Aricie. Thésée pronounces the usual curse and Hippolyte leaves, intending to elope with Aricie. At this point, the Phèdre who has conducted herself with some level of nobility stoops to meanest spitefulness; she comes to

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<sup>13</sup> Considering Hippolytus' excessive worship of the virgin goddess, it is significant that the ancient Roman town Aricia was "famous as a center of Diana's cult" (Tripp 99).



Thésée in order to defend Hippolyte, but when Thésée tells her about Aricie, Phèdre stands by close-lipped, and allows Thésée's curse to be fulfilled. After Hippolyte has died, Phèdre poisons herself and tells the truth, and Thésée closes the play by adopting Aricie as his daughter and heir.

*F. Modern Phaedra-Hippolytus: O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms*

O'Neill, in his way, adapts the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth and characters beyond that of the above examples. In *Desire Under the Elms*, Eben and Abbie, the respective backwoods Hippolytus and Phaedra characters, carry on a years-long illicit love affair, under the same roof as Ephraim Cabot, Eben's father and Abbie's husband. There is tangible sexual tension between Eben and Abbie from the moment Cabot brings her home to the farm, and Eben and Abbie eventually move from spiteful arguments about inheritance of the farm to Abbie's somehow maternal seduction of Eben in his late mother's parlor. They later produce a child, which Abbie smothers after a misunderstanding with Eben. The county sheriff hauls both off, and Cabot is left, alone and lonesome.

*G. Conclusion: Contextualizing the Phaedra-Hippolytus Myth*

Collectively, the above variations of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth illustrate the recurring theme of a disastrous pairing of an older or higher-ranking woman with a hapless and handsome young man. Especially viewed against the background of preceding spurned-woman myths, they also reveal something significant about the nature of myth itself, namely a tendency to draw upon familiar character types, interactions, and outcomes, altering those in varying degrees while still building upon a recognizable framework. This asymmetrical

duplication of one core myth across different cultures and at least four millennia allows greater accessibility for its various audiences, which in turn provides a fertile bed for creative genius; when an author or playwright grounds his work in a common plot and set of character types, he is able to add commentary to storytelling and focus more on the method of narration and the depiction of various themes than the work of telling the story itself. Thus coming from eastern roots, moving then to Greece, through Rome, and on to the modern day, the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth has repeatedly taken center stage as a strong substructure for the masters of Western storytelling, resulting in multiple permutations of the story. Each presents the characters and plot in a slightly modified light—and sometimes not so slightly—adding or removing dramatic elements and altering the characters, all creative variations on an underlying theme.

Racine's and O'Neill's plays show the imprint of a thriving classical tradition on modern times, and they are included here to clarify how thoroughly the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth has permeated and influenced western art. Add to the full-length pieces summarized above briefer references to Hippolytus and Phaedra in Vergil,<sup>14</sup> Ovid,<sup>15</sup> and others, and the result is a literary and cultural tradition undeniably steeped in the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. These classical and modern playwrights have all created their own variations, but not by too much, never distorting it beyond recognition. Instead, they have relied on the tradition to lend foundation and familiarity, not permitting themselves to be bound but instead inspired by the staging and thematic choices of their antecedents. Each theatrical product plays with similar

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<sup>14</sup> Vergil's *Aeneid* briefly tells the story of Hippolytus' demise at the hands of his stepmother, and later resurrection by Diana. In this version, Hippolytus, "called back to life by Asclepius' medicines / And by Diana's love" and renamed Virbius, bears a handsome son, whose mother is named Aricia (VII.1048-1076).

<sup>15</sup> Hippolytus recounts the tale of Phaedra's lust and his own tragic death in the first person in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (XV.497-546).

combinations, using the same building blocks to tell unique and intriguing stories, but with deep resonances in Western culture, and indeed the human condition.

*III. Modern Phaedra-Hippolytus, Atomized Myth: Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream*<sup>16</sup>

Generally speaking, the most creative reflections are arguably the subtlest. They comment on old things in a new way, and echo without parroting. In the context of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (MND) has been little discussed. However, rather than copying the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth in direct parallels or simply inverting the themes and character types of the classical tradition, MND reflects upon the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth on an elemental level. Although Phaedra and Hippolytus themselves are physically absent from MND, the themes of their myth are so intimately interwoven in MND that close examination cannot help but produce a vision of them walking among MND's fairy folk in the mythical woods outside Athens. In the following sections, we will discuss why it is easy to miss the connections between the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth and MND, then weigh MND as another modern permutation of this enduring fable.<sup>17</sup>

*A. "My mistress with a monster is in love."*<sup>18</sup>

On the surface, MND bears several similarities to the Phaedra-Hippolytus tradition.<sup>19</sup>

On the most basic level, the setting is Athens. The play is framed by Theseus and his

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<sup>16</sup> Shakespeare's classical literacy is a topic of ongoing discussion and publication (see, for example, Burrow's "Shakespeare and the humanistic culture," 2004), but will not be treated here. Whatever the extent of this playwright's acquaintance with the classical texts, either via immediate contact or less direct exposure, the result is a profound—far more profound than merely coincidental—echo of the classical mythical tradition and the language of the classical authors.

<sup>17</sup> For a similar argument, see Langford (1984). In his article, Langford focuses primarily on the themes of sexual possession and dominance found in both Seneca's play and MND.

<sup>18</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, III.ii.6

Amazon bride—whom Shakespeare chose to call Hippolyta, rather than the more common Antiope<sup>20</sup>—and Theseus opens MND with a speech similar to Hippolytus' in Seneca's *Phaedra*. Seneca's play, especially, is replete with mention of and longing for the woodlands both by Phaedra and Hippolytus, and the bulk of MND takes place in the fictitious woodlands outside MND's Athens. Like the classical tradition, MND is thematically centered upon love and obsessive lust, and characters frequently curse Cupid and his arrows.

Seeing beyond these superficial elements, which are little more than a catalogue of quoted lines, to how deeply the themes and character types of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth pervade MND requires a perspective similar to that which we saw in the earlier Greek examples. In the *Odyssey*, for example, one must examine Homer's text carefully to see the parallels between the Cyclops and Odysseus. The Sphinx is such a horrific beast that it is easy to miss just how like him Oedipus' son Polyneices is. And, as we noted above, Phaedra wishes desperately for her own Daedalus, who built the cow costume for Pasiphaë, to make it possible for her to have intercourse with what she ought not want. Because the Minotaur was the offspring of a royal woman and a non-human, and Hippolytus is the son of a royal man and "inhuman" Amazon, Hippolytus, too, may be viewed as an anthropoid variation of the Minotaur. Each of these tragic characters—Odysseus, Polyneices, Phaedra, and Hippolytus—has a beast-based counterpart hidden close by in myth, and recognizing the humans and non-humans as pairs permits a greater context within which to discuss character types and broader themes.

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<sup>19</sup> When placed side by side, recognizing the following likenesses between Seneca's text and MND is inescapable. For a meticulous catalogue of them, see Brooks' (1979) extensive commentary in the Arden Shakespeare. Brooks is especially conscious of the striking resemblances between the two plays' language, including mention of specific geographic features (e.g. Mount Taurus) and references to Cupid's impartially potent arrows.

<sup>20</sup> "Antiope," according to Tripp, "is the name most often given to the leader of the Amazons whom Theseus abducted and took to Athens with him . . . Hippolyte is sometimes said to have been Antiope's sister" (Tripp 56).

To put it in bestial terms, MND is the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, de-clawed beyond casual recognition. This mutation, so to speak, of potent tragedy into harmless comedy is most easily identifiable in the character of Bottom. If one remembers that the Minotaur is a half-bull, half-man carnivorous monster, the leap to a humorous half-ass, half-man creature is not difficult to make. Bottom himself confirms the correlation when he rejoins the “mechanicals,” again fully human. “If I tell you [all that happened to me],” he clarifies, “I am not true Athenian.” And then, without taking a breath, he continues, “I will tell you everything, right as it fell out” (IV.ii.29). Adding Bottom’s own declaration that he, like Hippolytus, is not wholly Athenian to Titania’s unnatural lust for the ass-headed wretch sets Bottom firmly in the world of Pasiphaë and Phaedra. In brief, then, Shakespeare has re-headed the monster and made him more human, or considerably less threatening. Those who fail to see MND through the lens of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth will miss the monstrous, and—as with Odysseus, Oedipus, and the other coupled myths discussed above—will not recognize, in a way a classical reader could never have failed to recognize, the many similarities between MND and the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. The key is perspective: looking backward on MND from the modern period, one less saturated by tales of Theseus and his family, clouds what looking forward on MND from the classical era brings into sharp focus.

*B. Desire Under the Mulberry Bush: The Tragedy of the Comedy*

Granted, there appear to be numerous differences between MND and the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth; four points in particular seem to distinguish MND from the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. Upon examination, however, each of these four differences is only one degree removed from the classical tradition. In other words, all the aspects cited below are

visible beneath the surface of the text; they have, in the mythological sense of the word, been atomized.

*The Gods* — The classical gods, who so clearly mark Euripides' drama and are at least addressed in Seneca's, are noticeably absent from MND. In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Aphrodite and Artemis openly pit mortals against one another out of mutual spite. The two goddesses are less visible in Seneca's *Phaedra*, but both are invoked by mortals throughout, and Poseidon sends the bull from the sea in both plays to answer Theseus' curse and destroy Hippolytus. There is a certain appreciation or respect for the gods in the classical myth, a sense of religiousness. In MND, there is no such religiousness *per se*. Shakespeare, however, has deconstructed and rebuilt the gods as winged fairy folk, whose love juice works the same magic as Aphrodite. And like Aphrodite, Oberon and his mercurial minion Puck have the power to alter mortal hearts, and even to redirect the loving gaze of the fairy queen Titania at will. In the same way Aphrodite stings Artemis, Oberon uses love to bring down Titania.

Moreover, this ability to use love juice and magic to stir up unnatural love in a fellow "divine" being resounds particularly strongly with the first choral ode of Seneca's *Phaedra*, in which the Cretan women catalog the consequences of Cupid's arrows, even among his fellow immortals. "He strikes the heart of maidens with strange fire," the chorus sings, "and orders the gods to abandon heaven, and, wearing false faces, to dwell on earth" (293-295). Going yet further, the chorus relates a tale about Hippolytus' own moon goddess<sup>21</sup> who, struck with intense love for Endymion, gave the reins of her moon-chariot to Apollo and—because of Apollo's added weight on the axle—days and nights went awry while she lay smitten with love in Endymion's arms (309-316). In neither the classical instance nor MND does being immortal make one exempt from paying dues to desire.

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<sup>21</sup> Selene, here conflated with Diana. See Tripp, p. 222.

*Illicit Love* — The horrific potential union between a stepmother and stepson, around which the classical tradition revolves, is equally truant in MND; in its place are two distinct elements. The first is the relationship between Titania and the Indian boy, over whom she and Oberon argue throughout the play. While Titania's bond with the boy and Oberon's pursuit of the same are not explicitly erotic, neither are they explicitly chaste, and there is a suggestion of sexual tension between Oberon and his wife, who has left his company and his bed, throughout the duration of their quarrel over the boy. The second element is the abundance of illicit love in MND: between Hermia and Lysander, Titania and Bottom, Demetrius and Hermia, Helena and Demetrius, and Lysander and Helena. As there was with Phaedra and Hippolytus, there is, either by nature, law, or paternal mandate, something forbidden in the union of each of these potential or actual pairs.

*Hippolytus' Celibacy, Piety, and Punishment* — At first glance, Hippolytus' two defining traits and his devastating end are not clearly visible in any character in MND. Each of MND's main characters is paired in real or desired love with someone—Titania with Oberon, Theseus with Hippolyta, Helena with Demetrius, and Hermia with Lysander—leaving the chaste Hippolytus nowhere to be found. In Hermia's opening scene, however, her father and Theseus forbid her to wed Lysander and command her to be Demetrius' wife. In response to Hermia's subsequent question about any alternative to marrying Demetrius, Theseus says, "You can endure the livery of a nun, / For aye to be in shady cloister mew'd, / To live a barren sister all your life, / Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon" (I.i.70-73). Hermia quickly answers Theseus, vowing aloud that she would rather forsake life or live life without men's company than yield herself to an unwanted lord (I.i.58-82). Hermia's unswerving determination to choose pious celibacy under such circumstances bears more

than one point of resemblance to Hippolytus. Hippolytus is, of course, wholly devoted to the virgin moon goddess, and as chaste in both mind and body as a nun. In Hippolytus' eighty-line forceful reaction to the Nurse's urgings toward sexuality for the sake of pleasure and continuation of the human race in Seneca's *Phaedra*, Hippolytus condemns shameless individuals who carry on in the dark corners of houses, and states that he prefers to sleep on the cold, hard earth, that he "seeks the air and light and lives with the sky as his witness" (483-564).

*The Tragedy* — The Phaedra-Hippolytus myth is undeniably tragic, not least because it ends with the deaths of Phaedra and Hippolytus. MND, on the other hand, presents a series of potentially disastrous problems that all end well, a line of lovers who successfully navigate a switch-backed forest path to blessed matrimony, and a wedding celebration rather than a funeral pyre. Be that as it may, the situation in Shakespeare's tragicomedy is only a hair's breadth away from fatal disaster.<sup>22</sup> The things that go wrong throughout the span of MND are numerous and make the play interesting to watch. Fairy queen Titania, for instance, is besotted with a low-class mortal tradesman, who has been bewitched to have the head of an ass and the body of a man. Puck, Oberon's right-hand fairy, drips the love potion into the wrong Athenian's eyes and temporarily disrupts Hermia's union with Lysander. And Helena, weep and plead as she might, looks to be irreparably out of Demetrius' good graces. These and other events and characters all stand on the cusp of doom before Oberon steps in and rights the many wrongs, redirecting detoured lovers and leaving all in wedded bliss. Shakespeare's play is, therefore, not tragic, but it is paratragic—or better perhaps, peri-

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<sup>22</sup> McAlindon (1991) notes that "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is alone among [Shakespeare's] comedies in having a comprehensive sense of nature's unstable, confusing, contrarious order. For that reason, no doubt, none of the other comedies (problem comedies included) has so many links with tragedy" (45).



tragic—standing ready to plummet at any moment to the type of ruin that defines the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. There's really only one significant difference. Here, the gods are sympathetic to mortals' plight; in Shakespeare's version "Jack shall have Jill, / Nought shall go ill" (III.ii.461-462).

That said, MND also contains a play within a play, more importantly a tragedy within a comedy. The "Pyramus and Thisbe" myth, based on Ovid's paratragic version of the tale,<sup>23</sup> is performed by the "mechanicals" at the very close of MND, just after all the wrongs have been righted and couples joined. The sorry tale of Pyramus and Thisbe serves as a reminder of what could have been without Oberon's beneficence, and how the comedy might have turned into a tragedy. Thisbe and Pyramus do not follow Phaedra and Hippolytus insofar as their love is mutual and not unnatural. Their relationship is, however, a forbidden one, and unsuccessful in that they both perish beneath the mulberry bush, their elopement in vain and their passion unconsummated. Like Seneca's Phaedra, Thisbe comes upon Pyramus' lifeless form and uses his blade to take her own life. Both this mini-tragedy within MND and the larger nearness of the entire comedy to a tragic culmination bring MND within a hair's breadth of the disaster culminating the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. Thus, through laughter, Shakespeare reminds his audience how near the rest of the characters came to a similar destruction.<sup>24</sup> Equally, he reminds his most perceptive viewers that the tragedy, only delayed a while, will unfold on the heels of the wedding festivities, with the conception of the newlyweds' child Hippolytus.<sup>25</sup> Those who know and think like Ovid may imagine the

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<sup>23</sup> Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book IV gives the aetiological tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, whose spurting blood during suicide paints the mulberry red.

<sup>24</sup> "Shakespeare's often hilarious comedy and Seneca's fuliginous tragedy are worlds apart and yet intimately connected" (McAlindon 53).

<sup>25</sup> McAlindon (p. 52) and Langford (p. 49) both note the irony of Theseus presently happy union with Hippolyta, whom we know he will eventually kill, before marrying Phaedra.

handsome but ill-starred boy is to be created that very night. Thus, Shakespeare is a smiling Eris, tossing his strife-laden apple in the form of the mechanicals' play in the celebrations marking the wedding of Peleus and Thetis.

C. "*This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires, like to a step-dame.*"<sup>26</sup>

The key element wanting, then, in MND is Phaidra/Phaedra/Phèdre/Abbie. The logical reason for her invisibility, of course, is that the plot of MND takes place at Theseus' marriage to Hippolyta, long before Phaedra enters the mythical picture, prior even to Hippolytus being born. And yet, impalpable as she is, Phaedra's character does not go unaccounted for in Shakespeare's play. Indeed, much like Theseus' step-dame of a waning moon, her foreshadow casts a blighted reflection over MND, revealing itself in multiple forms and stations, including Titania the fairy queen; love-stricken and spurned Helena; and Theseus' naïvely happy bride, unaware of the fate that will befall her. In order to illuminate more fully each of these reflections, Phaedra is most clearly and easily seen in terms of her transgressions, the defining quality of her character in myth. In her obsession with Hippolytus, Phaedra transgresses four significant boundaries of erotic and emotional love: nature, her marital relationship, reciprocity, and dignity.<sup>27</sup> Because MND explores each of Phaedra's four transgressions in depth, it both echoes and portends the destruction of Theseus' family, and therefore what will become the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth.

*Phaedra's Transgression against Nature* — An unwillingness or inability to adhere to the laws of nature when engaging in erotic and emotional love is deeply intertwined in the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. As Pasiphaë wrongly teamed with the bull, so Theseus joined with

<sup>26</sup> *A Midsummer Night's Dream* I.i.4-5.

<sup>27</sup> Seneca's Phaedra will serve as the model for this Phaedra, inasmuch as the Roman version of the tale best exemplifies the general nature of the character.

the Amazon woman Hippolyta, which in technical terms was a different sort of inter-special pairing. Following the union of Pasiphaë and the bull, Pasiphaë gave birth to the Minotaur, sterile half-bull, half-man, the half-brother of Phaedra. Theseus' marriage with Hippolyta engendered Hippolytus, sterile half-Amazon, half-Greek, and later stepson to Phaedra.

As Hippolytus himself so explicitly states in Seneca's play, the same womb which produced the Minotaur also bore Phaedra (693). Interwoven with the predecessors discussed above and perhaps motivated by her descent from them, Phaedra's attraction to Hippolytus is a transgression of the laws of nature on two levels: she is a pure-blooded Cretan princess, while Hippolytus is a half-breed child of a Greek and an Amazon; and her goal is perpetuation of the mother-son incest motif. Regarding the former, whether or not Phaedra's desire for Hippolytus is motivated by an ancestral curse, her proximity to the above unnatural erotic relationships emphasizes the perversion of Phaedra's own lust for a man of impure blood. As for the latter, the horror with which Theseus describes the possibility of a sexual encounter between Hippolytus and Phaedra underscores the repugnance to nature of Phaedra's desire for Hippolytus. "Even the wild animals themselves," Theseus growls, "avoid this sin of Venus, and propriety ignorantly keeps the laws of species" (913-14).<sup>28</sup>

In anticipation of Phaedra's transgression of the law of nature, MND is framed within the wedding festivities of Theseus and Hippolyta. Just as in the Phaedra myth, Hippolyta is an Amazon, Theseus an Athenian, and the two of them will eventually create the dual-blooded Hippolytus. The relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta in MND intimates a violation of nature like that in the Phaedra myth.

Even more unnatural, however, is the relationship between the fairy queen Titania and Bottom in MND. Because Bottom is transformed into a half-ass, half-man creature, he

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<sup>28</sup> Though Theseus is, of course, wrong.

fits clearly into the mixed-breed pattern of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. Titania's brief relationship with Bottom is more a comical mess than a tragic transgression, but only because no one—not Oberon, not Shakespeare, not even Titania herself—takes it very seriously. In the comical vein of MND, Titania need not face grim consequences for her transgression. Still, it lends greatest insight into the Phaedra myth when viewed through the perspective of Oberon and Puck. As he drips love juice onto Titania's sleeping eyes, Oberon hopes to ridicule his fairy-queen wife, his entire objective to repay Titania's refusal to obey his request for possession of her foster son, and so Oberon prays that she will awake and fall helplessly in love with some "vile thing" (II.ii.33). That wish comes true, in the form of Bottom, MND's version of the Minotaur-Hippolytus, someone a pure-blooded queen should loathe to be near, let alone to dote upon. Once Titania has swept Bottom away into her woodland bower, Puck's announcement that his "mistress with a monster is in love" (III.ii.6) brings great delight to Oberon, because her sudden love for a half-breed has led her to transgress nature and thereby bring herself under condemnation. In short, Oberon uses the love juice to force Titania to offend nature, as Poseidon did Pasiphaë and Aphrodite Phaedra.

*Phaedra's Transgression against the Marital Relationship* — To take a step backward in the plot of MND, however, the reason Oberon considers it necessary to correct Titania is her disregard of their marital relationship. In the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, Phaedra brings destruction upon herself by pursuing Hippolytus, rather than continuing to love Theseus. Though Phaedra is not able in fact to consummate a sexual relationship with Hippolytus, she very clearly turns her gaze from her husband and refuses to obey his rule over her. In addition to the simple fact that Phaedra yearns for Hippolytus rather than Theseus, there are several points in Seneca's *Phaedra* at which Phaedra verbally disregards

her obligation and duty to Theseus as his wife and queen. In her opening speech, for example, Phaedra complains of being a “bride for the enemy,” compelled to lead her “life in evils and tears” (90-91). While she voices despair over Theseus’ abandonment of her for a years-long exploit in Hades, Phaedra also scorns the Nurse’s warnings that Theseus will eventually return from hell and wreak his vengeance on her for attempting to seduce Hippolytus (219). When Hippolytus, in fact, attempts to remind Phaedra of her love for Theseus, Phaedra explains to Hippolytus that his face has replaced his father’s in her heart and her longing. Theseus himself discovers this loss of wifely fidelity upon his return, when he expresses confusion at her madness, asking, “Why does she die, with her husband restored?” (856) The Nurse’s response is that Theseus’ return is the very cause for Phaedra’s furor. From this perspective, Phaedra’s desire for Hippolytus is not only a crime in and of itself, but it doubly condemns her because it breaks her conformity to her role as Theseus’ wife.

As with the transgression against the natural order of sexual relationships, MND also reflects and anticipates Phaedra’s inconstancy. In MND, this conflict is again displaced to Titania and Oberon, whose complaints and behavior mirror and therefore portend the events of the Phaedra myth. Just like her Cretan counterpart, Titania’s various displays against her husband may be categorized as both sexually inconstant and disobedient. In their entrance scene, for example, Titania’s first words to Oberon are “What, jealous?” as she tells her train that she has “forsover his bed and company” (II.i.61-62). As the classical Theseus’ wife Phaedra is upset with him, Titania is angry that her Oberon has “stol’n away” (II.i.65) to far away places rather than staying by her side, and is offended by his adulterous exploits with Hippolyta. Titania, too, has been unfaithful to Oberon, and carried on a drawn-out love affair

with Theseus.<sup>29</sup> This intimate intermixing of the two royal couples—one couple found only in MND and the other shared between the classical and Elizabethan versions of the myth—again reminds the classics-savvy reader of the upcoming downfall of Theseus' future family, all of which is only underscored by Oberon's and Titania's disagreement over the changeling boy.

While Titania's overly-affectionate disposition toward the Indian boy is not explicitly erotic, it bears a certain similarity to Phaedra's obsession with her stepson. Titania clearly favors this foster son over her husband, to the point that she threatens her marital happiness in order to maintain control over the boy. Because Titania refuses to hand the boy over to Oberon, she, like Phaedra, allows peripheral affections to become her central focus and disrupt her ability to proceed in unity with her husband. In Titania's case, it is her associated disobedience to Oberon which leads directly to her transgression of nature, because his punishment for her disobedience and his method for obtaining the boy are the love juice and the transformation of Bottom. Thus, in Titania's case, the violations of nature and marital relationships are intimately connected, and both resonate with Phaedra's fatal attraction.

*Phaedra's Transgression against Reciprocity* — Phaedra's failure to succeed in her love for Hippolytus is part and parcel of her third transgression: a disregard for the necessity of reciprocity in emotional love. Though Phaedra pines and frets, alternating among lethargy, raging furor, and shameless pleading, she cannot have Hippolytus not only because he is her half-breed stepson and she is already bound in matrimony to Theseus, but because Hippolytus is superlatively uninterested in her. Even were all of the other factors between

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<sup>29</sup> There is another parallel with the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth in this point of Oberon's disagreement with Titania. In MND, Oberon exacts a penalty upon Titania, who has turned from fidelity as his wife to an affair with Theseus. In Euripides' *Hippolytos II*, Aphrodite seeks vengeance on Hippolytus, who wholly worships and has united himself intimately with Artemis, to the exclusion of Aphrodite.

them in favor of a union between Phaedra and Hippolytus, Phaedra's unrelenting, dogged pursuit of Hippolytus would still be a transgression because it is unwanted.

In MND the transgressor of reciprocity in love is Helena, a royal woman of Athens who pines after Demetrius. As Hippolytus' love for the woods and his vow of chastity prevent him from even approaching a sexual relationship and therefore forbid any chance for reciprocating Phaedra's love, so Demetrius' love for Hermia has consumed what affection he once bore for Helena and he no longer returns any of Helena's feelings. Both Seneca's Phaedra and MND's Helena desperately want what they cannot have and neither, be it a lack of maturity or ability, allows rejection to deter her.

Of all of Phaedra's transgressions, it is this one which MND models not only in theme but also in the very speeches of the female characters. Seneca's Phaedra approaches Hippolytus in a very circuitous and agonized conversation, taking considerable time to finally reveal her actual intent and desire for him. Though Helena and Demetrius echo and foreshadow Phaedra's negative relationship with Hippolytus throughout nearly the entirety of MND, the most striking portions of Phaedra's and Hippolytus' hundred-line disagreement are repeated particularly in one brief conversation between Helena and Demetrius. In the MND interchange, each character speaks twice: Demetrius first, insisting that he does not love Helena and asking her to leave him alone, and Helena second, fawning and vowing to follow him anywhere and suffer any neglect, only to be near him. Demetrius then threatens violence, and Helena says that she would be honored to bear his punishments. A comparison of the MND passage with the corresponding lines from Seneca's *Phaedra* shows the close parallel in these dialogues. Though not a perfect match—each puts the thoughts in a different order—

Hippolytus and Phaedra conduct an argument nearly identical to that between Demetrius and

Helena:

*Demetrius:*

I love thee not, therefore pursue me not.  
 . . .  
 Hence, get thee gone, and follow me no more.  
 . . .  
 Do I entice you? Do I speak you fair?  
 Or rather do I not in plainest truth  
 Tell you I do not, nor I cannot love you?

*Helena:*

And even for that do I love you the more.  
 I am your spaniel; and, Demetrius,  
 The more you beat me, I will fawn on you.  
 Use me but as your spaniel, spurn me, strike  
 me,  
 Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave,  
 Unworthy as I am, to follow you.

*Demetrius:*

I will not stay thy questions; let me go,  
 Or if thou follow me, do not believe  
 But I shall do thee mischief in the wood.

*Helena:*

. . .  
 I'll follow thee, and make a heaven of hell,  
 To die upon the hand I love so well.<sup>30</sup>

*Hippolytus:*

Move your shameless touches far away from  
 my chaste body!<sup>31</sup>  
 Does my severity deserve this?<sup>32</sup>

*Phaedra:*

Either call me sister, Hippolytus, or servant.  
 Rather servant, for I will bear every servitude.  
 If you should command, it would not displease  
 me to go through high snows, to walk on the  
 frozen ridges of Pindus. If you should  
 command me to go through fires and hostile  
 battle-lines, I would not hesitate to give my  
 breast to drawn swords. Receive my entrusted  
 dominions, accept me as a servant; it is proper  
 that you rule kingdoms, that I follow your  
 commands . . . Shelter me in your bosom,  
 received as a suppliant and servant.<sup>33</sup>

*Hippolytus:*

Let my sword be drawn, let it exact deserved  
 punishment. Look! I have bent back your lewd  
 head, twisting your hair in my left hand.  
 Never, Bow-Carrying Goddess, has blood been  
 more justly gifted at your altars.

*Phaedra:*

Now, Hippolytus, you make me in possession  
 of my prayer. You heal my madness. This is  
 even greater than my prayer: that I shall die in  
 your arms, my virtue intact!<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> II.ii.188-244

<sup>31</sup> II. 704-705

<sup>32</sup> I. 686

<sup>33</sup> II. 610-622

<sup>34</sup> II. 706-712



The above passages clearly demonstrate that neither Phaedra nor Helena recognizes how essential reciprocity, namely some sense of mutual affection, is to the successful union each hungers for. Instead, each blinded by her own version of furor, both Phaedra and Helena refuse to yield to futility and to recognize that life with the individual they so yearn for and ache to be with is unachievable. In her very words, Helena echoes the pleas and masochistic persistence of Phaedra, and foreshadows what will take place between the future wife of MND's Theseus and the son he will have with Hippolyta.

*Phaedra's Transgression against Dignity* — Phaedra's fourth serious transgression, this one against dignity, is also chiefly apparent in this same lengthy dialogue from Seneca's play. At the close of her profession of love to Hippolytus, Phaedra collapses at Hippolytus' feet, proclaiming, "Behold, a kneeling woman lies down, slithering at your knees, the offspring of a royal house" (666b-667). Though she has been reminded at various points throughout the play of her regal heritage and the dignity with which she ought to bear herself, Phaedra in the end decides to debase herself, shamelessly pleading for what she should not want and cannot have. In addition to this teary subjection of herself at Hippolytus' feet, Phaedra also contradicts her dignity as a civilized queen by altering her physical appearance, all in an effort to satisfy her unrequited lust for Hippolytus. Some time before Phaedra reveals her desire to Hippolytus, she tosses restlessly about, bidding her handmaidens dress her again and again by adding and removing articles of clothing and jewelry, finally unbinding her hair to let it lay about her shoulders and arming herself with a javelin and quiver (387-403). "Such was the mother of grim Hippolytus" (398) is Phaedra's illogical explanation for her disarray, as she prepares to follow him into the woodlands. None of this

behavior should be acceptable for Phaedra, who is expected to despise, not imitate, the eastern foreign ways of her husband's erstwhile Amazon lover.

In MND it is again Titania who is most clearly patterned after Phaedra's transgression of dignity. For Titania, this violation is closely tied to her disobedience against the rule of nature. As Oberon ridicules Titania by forcing her to fall into affection with an ass-headed Bottom, he compels her to betray her dignified bearing as queen of the fairies. Titania then completes the destruction of her own majesty by encouraging Bottom to stand, then to lie by her side, treating him as a coequal. As Phaedra disgraces herself by descending to an Amazon's array, so Titania stoops by elevating Bottom, paralleling the adornment scene from Seneca's *Phaedra* by fetching jewels for her ass-headed lover (III.i.151), and weaving musk-roses in his hair (IV.i.3). Because she permits Bottom to give commands to her train, Titania forsakes her social rank and, like Phaedra, eagerly puts aside her status and the health of her kingdom for the sake of a fleeting and unlawful physical pleasure.

### *Conclusion*

In the characters of Titania and Helena, MND explores and portrays Phaedra's four transgressions in such great detail that, though concealed, she is very much a focus of Shakespeare's play. Like the waning moon, Phaedra's reflection scatters across MND's dappled stage, the quintessential illustration of the most creative form of mythical imitation. Rather than simply re-shuffling its character types and themes, MND obliquely contemplates the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, presenting it in atomized form on an elemental level. In this way, MND both echoes and foreshadows the exemplary classical spurned-woman tale. Those who know the plot of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth will hear an echo of Phaedra in MND,

and see her character traits, language, and behavior etched subtly into MND. Because the plot of MND takes place at the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, prior to the entrance of Phaedra and the birth of Hippolytus—perhaps on the very day of his conception—those same interwoven threads of Phaedra presage the impending tragedy.

Shakespeare's play does not copy or even merely invert the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, but instead expands the comedy of MND to a much more extensive and profound mythical contribution. It follows, then, that seeing MND through the lens of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth allows the perceptive spectator to ponder the nature of myth in general, as a fluid, changeable, inherited but not hereditary cultural expression. Like a kaleidoscope, the image is an ever-shifting one; though composed of like elements, it proffers infinite fractured portraits and an illuminated tapestry of cultural wealth.

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Student Showcase Presentation  
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The title of my senior thesis is “Can’t, Shouldn’t, and Love Juice: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and the Phaedra-Hippolytus Myth.”

For the sake of time, I’ll have to assume that you are familiar with Shakespeare’s timeless play, which features Oberon, the fairy king, and his right-hand fairy, Puck, who both use magic love juice to meddle with two pairs of star-crossed lovers. The wanderings of these fairies and lovers take place in the woods just outside of Athens. The occasion of the play is the wedding celebration of the king of Athens—Theseus—and his bride, the Amazon Hippolyta.

For those of you who have seen performances of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, there’s a good chance you didn’t notice that the play was located in Athens, and the director may have eliminated Theseus and Hippolyta altogether. According to Greek mythology, Theseus is a hero, who—like Hercules—performs his own set of labors. Theseus meets Hippolyta on the battlefield—she is queen of the Amazons, and Theseus conquers her, captures her, and brings her home to become his wife.

Now the questions: Have you ever seen Athens, or at least pictures of Athens? No woodlands. And have you ever wondered **why** *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is framed by the wedding festivities of Theseus and Hippolyta? Shakespeare could have just as easily plopped the whole lot in some Italian town, as he so likes to do, and told the comedy without the Greek hero and his Amazon bride. For being such odd additions to this play, the setting and the inclusion of Theseus and Hippolyta haven’t been explored very often or in very much depth. It is my proposal, however, that the only reason we find their inclusion confusing is

that we're turning and looking *back* on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from our present-day perspective and seeing the play as a self-contained comedy. The key, I suggest, is to look forward, *toward* the play, with the eyes of a theatre-goer from about two millennia ago in classical Greece or imperial Rome. Then Athens, Theseus, and Hippolyta make perfect sense.

Of course, as an audience member from classical Greece or imperial Rome, you'll be familiar with the myths of Theseus and his wife, Phaedra. I mentioned earlier that Theseus forcibly marries the Amazon, Hippolyta. Together, Theseus and Hippolyta have a son, named Hippolytus. Somewhere around two decades later, Theseus is ready for a change and kills his wife Hippolyta in order to marry Phaedra.

According to tradition, Phaedra is the daughter of king Minos and queen Pasiphaë of Crete. While trying to obtain the throne, Minos asks Poseidon to send a bull from the sea, as a sign that he, Minos, has Poseidon's support. If Poseidon will send the bull, Minos promises that he will sacrifice it. So Poseidon sends the bull, but it is so beautiful that Minos doesn't follow through on his word. As punishment, the gods curse Minos' wife, Pasiphaë, so that she falls desperately in love with the bull that he should have sacrificed. Pasiphaë pines away until Daedalus builds her a cow costume, and—by hiding inside of that costume—Pasiphaë is able to consummate her lust for the bull. From that monstrous union is born Phaedra's half-brother, the Minotaur, a vicious creature with the body of a man and the head of a bull.

From such a family, then, Phaedra comes to marriage with Theseus. After they have been married awhile, while Theseus is away on one of his lengthy expeditions, Phaedra finally admits that she has long nursed a monstrous attraction toward her stepson, Hippolytus, and is nearly mad with desire for him. She approaches and tries to seduce Hippolytus, but he—well-known for his chastity—vehemently scorns her and flees the

palace. At this very moment, Theseus returns from his journey, and Phaedra hangs herself, first tying a note to her wrist. When Theseus finds her body, he finds that note—a written accusation that Hippolytus had raped Phaedra. Rashly, Theseus calls down the wrath of Poseidon on Hippolytus, and Poseidon sends a giant-bull-shaped wave to frighten Hippolytus' horses, who throw him beneath the chariot as he drives along the coast, and kill him.

This disturbing tale is the “Phaedra-Hippolytus myth” and plays a central role in the classical tradition: Sophocles wrote a play about Phaedra and Hippolytus, as did Seneca, and Euripides wrote two. Going further back in time, the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth fits neatly into the pattern of an ages-old mythical motif. Readers of the Bible, for instance, will recognize a similar encounter between Joseph and Potiphar's wife, and there are similar stories from ancient Egypt and the even earlier *Epic of Gilgamesh*. For the sake of time, however, we'll leave the larger mythical collection at that and focus specifically on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth.

Why is it so easy to miss seeing the connections between these two tales? I suggest two main answers: monsters and tragedy. The Phaedra-Hippolytus myth is a very monstrous tale, and certainly a tragic one, but *A Midsummer Night's Dream* seems to be neither.

To put it in bestial terms, however, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, de-clawed beyond casual recognition. This “mutation” of frightening beasts into harmless men and fairies is easiest to see in the character of Bottom. If you'll remember that the Minotaur is a half-bull, half-man carnivorous monster, the leap to a humorous half-ass, half-man creature is not difficult to make. Add to this the fact that the fairy queen Titania is bewitched to fall in love with Bottom, and suddenly we're only one



small step away from Pasiphaë and her bull, and therefore the Minotaur, Phaedra's half-brother.

What Shakespeare has done, really, is re-headed the monster and made him more human, or considerably less threatening. When we fail to see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through the lens of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth we miss the monstrous, and do not recognize, in a way a classical reader could never have *failed* to recognize, the boundless similarities between *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. The key is perspective: looking forward on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from the classical era brings the similarities into sharp focus.

As for tragedy: the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth is undeniably tragic—not least because it ends with Phaedra's corpse and Hippolytus' bloody remains. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, on the other hand, presents a series of problems that all end well; a line of lovers who successfully make their way to blessed matrimony; and a wedding celebration rather than a funeral pyre. Be that as it may, the one degree of separation is in this instance only a hair's breadth away from fatal disaster. The number of things that go wrong throughout the span of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are copious.

Fairy queen Titania, for instance, is besotted with Bottom, a low-class mortal tradesman, bewitched to have the head of an ass and the body of a man. Puck, the fairy king Oberon's sidekick, drips the love potion into the wrong Athenian's eyes and temporarily disrupts Hermia's happy union with Lysander. And Helena, weep and plead as she might, looks to be forever out of Demetrius' good graces. These and other events and characters all stand on the cusp of doom before Oberon steps in and rights the many wrongs, redirecting detoured lovers and leaving all in wedded bliss. Shakespeare's play is, therefore, not tragic,

but it is **almost** so. It stands ready to plummet at any moment to absolute ruin before, in the end, Oberon snatches it and sets things to right. Even when things turn out right, however, we know that there will come a time when Theseus will grow tired of his bride, and kill her in order to marry Phaedra.

Taking all of that into account, the key element which seems to be lacking from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is Phaedra herself. The logical reason for her invisibility, of course, is that the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place at Theseus' marriage to Hippolyta, long before Phaedra enters the mythical picture, and prior even to Hippolytus being born. And yet, intangible though she is, Phaedra's character does not go unaccounted for in Shakespeare's play.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Phaedra reveals herself in multiple guises and stations. These include Titania the fairy queen; love-stricken and spurned Helena; and Theseus' naïve and happy bride, unaware of the fate that will befall her. In order to talk about each of these reflections, Phaedra is most clearly defined in terms of her transgressions.

In the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, Phaedra transgresses four significant boundaries of erotic and emotional love: nature, her marital relationship, reciprocity, and dignity. Because *A Midsummer Night's Dream* explores each of Phaedra's four transgressions in depth, it both echoes and foreshadows the destruction of Theseus' family, and therefore the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. Unfortunately, we'll only have time to talk about two of Phaedra's four transgressions.

First—Phaedra's transgression against nature

Phaedra's mother very clearly sinned against nature when she mated with the Cretan bull and produced, as her child, the Minotaur. As Pasiphaë wrongly teamed with the bull, so

Theseus joined with the Amazon woman Hippolyta, which in technical terms was a different sort of inter-special pairing. Interwoven with her predecessors and perhaps motivated by her descent from them, Phaedra's attraction to Hippolytus is a transgression of the laws of nature on two levels: she is a pure-blooded Cretan princess, while Hippolytus is a half-breed child of a Greek and an Amazon; and her goal is mother-son incest.

Even more unnatural, however, is the relationship between the fairy queen Titania and Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Because Bottom is transformed into a half-ass, half-man creature, he fits clearly into the half-breed pattern of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth. Titania's brief relationship with Bottom is more a comical mess in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* than a tragic transgression, but only because no one—not Oberon, not Shakespeare, not even Titania herself—takes it very seriously.

Second—Phaedra's transgression against reciprocity

Though Phaedra pines and frets, she cannot have Hippolytus not only because he is her half-breed stepson and she is already bound in matrimony to Theseus, but because Hippolytus is superlatively uninterested in her. Even were all of the other factors between them in favor of a union between Phaedra and Hippolytus, Phaedra's unrelenting, dogged pursuit of Hippolytus would still be a transgression because it is an unwanted pursuit.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the transgressor of reciprocity in love is Helena, a royal woman of Athens who pines after Demetrius. Just as Hippolytus' love for the woods and his vow of chastity prevent him from even approaching a sexual relationship and forbid any chance for reciprocating Phaedra's love, so Demetrius has forgotten the affection he once bore for Helena and he no longer returns any of Helena's feelings. Both Phaedra and Helena desperately want what they cannot have and neither allows rejection to deter her.

Of all of Phaedra's transgressions, it is this one which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* models not only in theme but also in the very speeches of the female characters. Both Phaedra and Helena beg and plead for the men's attention. Both offer to follow the men wherever they go, and both proclaim that they would be more than happy to die at the hands of the men they love.

In conclusion, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* explores and portrays Phaedra's four transgressions in such great detail that, though concealed, she is very much a focus of Shakespeare's play. Like the waning moon's light, Phaedra's reflection scatters across *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* dappled stage, the quintessential illustration of the most creative form of mythical imitation. In this way, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both echoes the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth and foreshadows it. Because we know the plot of the Phaedra-Hippolytus myth, we hear an echo of Phaedra in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and see her character traits, her language, and her behavior etched subtly into Shakespeare's play. Because the plot of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place at the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, prior to the birth of Hippolytus and the entrance of Phaedra, those same interwoven threads of Phaedra foreshadow the impending tragedy.

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After she graduates in May 2007, Katherine plans to move to Baltimore, Maryland, where she will teach public school as a Teach For America corps member. During her two years with Teach For America, Katherine will earn a Master of Arts in Teaching degree from Johns Hopkins University.