MODALITY OF PHAEDRA:

NEOCLASSICAL PRINCIPLES

Neoclassical principles were a synthesis of ideas expressed by many men in many countries, but they were most consistently applied and defended in France. Jean Racine's Phaedra has always been considered the greatest neoclassical French drama. His model for Phaedra was Hippolytus of Euripides, but he added to it ingredients which made it more pertinent to the audience of his own time i.e. neoclassical principles. Racine adhered to the neoclassical ideals of drama almost completely without any sense of strain as a result of remaining in its bounds.

The neoclassicists were primarily concerned with a number of basic issues: The concept of verisimilitude; purity of dramatic types; the five-act form; decorum; the purpose of drama; and the three unities.

Verisimilitude, or "the appearance of truth," is a complex concept. To the neoclassicist, verisimilitude had three aspects: reality, morality, and generality or abstraction. The desire for "reality" required that the playwright rule out those things that could not actually happen in real life. Therefore Aphrodite's declaration in the beginning of Euripides' Hippolytus and Artemis' expiation in its end are both eliminated. Soliloquy and chorus were thought unreal and were substituted by a confidant for each main character ---
Phaedra has Genone. Hippolytus has Theramenes. and Aricia has Ismene. Fantasy and supernatural occurrences were discouraged and violence was placed off-stage because of the difficulty of making it convincing. The sea monster is the only supernatural element retained, because it was a crucial part of a well-known myth. The playwright could not omit it and let it happen off-stage.

The demand for faithfulness to reality was considerably modified by the insistence that drama must teach moral lessons. Consequently the dramatist was asked not merely to copy life but to reveal its ideal moral patterns, namely wickedness punished and goodness rewarded. This is another reason why Racine eliminated Aphrodite's part. He intended to focus on Phaedra's psychological conflict and thus reinforce the moral lesson that her downfall was essentially due to her own tragic flaw i.e. her abnegation of rational responsibility for her moral conduct. If not, the ideal for morality could not be pointed out.

Drama itself was reduced to two basic types, tragedy and comedy. Each was said to have its own individual normative patterns. According to the accepted theory, tragedy draws its characters from rulers or the nobility: its stories deal with affairs of state, the downfall of rulers, and similar events; its endings are always unhappy; and its style is lofty and poetic. A tragic event is one in which an individual suffers greatly; one in which he suffers self-consciously.
aware of his plight and perhaps learning; and one in which he struggles against his sufferings and its causes. Some critics incorporate suffering, learning, and struggle in their definition of tragedy. In _Phaedra_ the princess suffers greatly from her illicit love for Hippolytus and throughout the whole play she struggles against her passion in vain. The power of this play lies in the conflict of good and evil. Phaedra is thoroughly moral in her convictions but her willpower has been sapped by irrational emotional drives. Her learning comes too late and inevitably the catastrophe is carried out.

The ideal of five-act form originated from Greek plays is faithfully observed in _Phaedra_. This was a stereotype for drama followed until the late nineteenth century. Racine put this stereotype in use to correspond to the five main divisions of dramatic action: exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. In Act One, Phaedra's passion for Hippolytus and Hippolytus' love for Aricia are put in contrast. In Act Two, the false news of Theseus' death bring about hippolytus' confession to Aricia and Phaedra's declaration to Hippolytus. Act Three focuses on Phaedra's inner torture of shame and horror which reaches its climax when Theseus returns. In Act Four Oenone accuses Hippolytus of planning to seduce Phaedra and Theseus hastily calls down the curse on Hippolytus. The catastrophe is accomplished in Act Five in

- 138 -
which both Hippolycus and Phaedra die.

Decorum has often been considered the controlling critical idea of the Neoclassical age. The type a character belonged to was regarded as an important element in determining his qualities. Decorum, in its broad sense, means "fitness" or "appropriateness." Each age group, rank, profession, and sex was thought to have its own essence. The dramatist was expected to remain true to these norms in creating his characters, and the critic used them in judging the verisimilitude of the playwright's creation.

Racine arranged a nurse for Phaedra not only for her to reveal her secrets. Oenone makes Phaedra think it legal to love and woo Hippolytus and urges her to declare her love to him (even if Euripides never let Phaedra and Hippolytus meet face to face.) When Theseus returns it is Oenone who accuses Hippolytus of incestuous love. Racine stated plainly in the Preface that he thought a nurse would be inclined to possess servile qualities and more likely to do such ignoble things only to make her mistress happy and to save her life and honor. Phaedra was thus consistently characterized as a princess with noble and virtuous feelings.

As for the purpose of drama, theorists between 1500 and 1800, in order to break away the former preoccupation with theology, argued that it was two-fold----to teach and to please, although the precedence was almost given to the teaching. Phaedra in itself has the so-called
"Sugar-coated pill" function of art — to teach moral lessons through Phaedra's terrible results of mistakes and misdeeds, and to please through the development of the whole action.

Verisimilitude was also said to dictate adherence to the unities of action, time, and place. While unity of action has been demanded in almost every age, critics in the Neoclassical age normally interpreted the rule to mean plots, and the playwrights in that period followed it strictly. This was because Castelvetro, an Italian critic, first set down the three unities in 1570 and they were accepted in the next two hundred years. The unity of time in Phaedra is clearly observed: a few hours at the most elapse during the course of the play. The place is unspecifed (it is in or around the palace), but this is typical of Neoclassical drama, since what happens to the characters does not depend on where it happens. The action is focused almost entirely upon Phaedra's passion and its results. The story of Aricia forms a minor subplot, but it is made a necessary part of the main action.

Phaedra has always been considered one of the great acting parts in French drama. It is difficult to perform, for there is little external action, and the audience attention must be riveted on Phaedra's internal conflict. The subtle shifts of emotion within scenes lay bare the heart and mind of a woman at the mercy of desires that are in conflict with her moral convictions. It is Phaedra's

140
great capacity for moral feeling in conjunction with her uncontrollable love that makes her simultaneously both admirable and pitiable. Her suffering and remorse redeem her in the minds of an audience.

While Phaedra is the center of concern, each of the other principal characters is also confronted with a psychological conflict of his own. Hippolytus, for example, is torn in the beginning between his love for Aricia and his duty to his father; later, he is torn between his desire to maintain his father's honor and to vindicate his own. Hippolytus, like Phaedra, loves against his will, so there is no question that he will return Phaedra's love. All the characters desire to act rationally, but each is swayed by irrational forces. Paedra's is merely the most extreme of the cases.

Almost nothing is said about the age or physical appearance of the characters. The emphasis is entirely upon their psychological and moral states. Deorum of character is observed for the most part, and it is the departure from decorous behavior that brings down. Broad strokes rather than minute details have been used. The play is permeated with the aim for the universal (for the Neoclassical idea of generalization) rather than for the particularities of time and place and the idiosyncrasies of characters.

Reference:

