

The grotesque in classical tragedy: reception of the Hippolytus-Phaedra myth in Sarah Kane's 'Phaedra's love'

'Inhabiting a world that more and more comes to resemble a nightmare, we find the art that speaks most directly to our situation to be that which evokes a world in which the dreamlike and the real are no longer clearly distinguished' – Michael Steig¹

Sarah Kane's 'Phaedra's Love' is an embodiment of the quote above. Through her adaptation of the ancient Hippolytus-Phaedra myth, she manipulates dreamlike mythical qualities, intertwining them with the amplification of the grotesque. Thus, she communicates the harsh realities of our contemporary society in order to create a vividly evoking work of theatre.

Within this essay, I will investigate the classical origins of the grotesque through the works of Euripides and Seneca on the Hippolytus-Phaedra myth. Evaluating how their presentation of the complex emotional narrative established the foundations for what would later become known as the 'grotesque'. Then I will move to explore Sarah Kane's 'Phaedra's love' and discuss how the traditional myth was received and adapted to align with Kane's bold theatrical style, enhancing the grotesque and thus creating a shocking audience response; further evaluating its effect on the communication of the underscoring social commentaries. Finally, I will draw together my conclusions from both the original myth and the modern adaptation to form a clear view on how Kane received the grotesque from the ancient tragedies and why.

Development of the grotesque

Whilst the word 'grotesque' carries various meanings and understandings, the adjective itself is defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary as 'strange and unpleasant, especially in a silly or frightening way'.² Whilst this definition may appear simple enough, it disregards its complexity as a genre. Throughout history, the grotesque as a genre has been adapted and contradicted, leaving scholars unable to identify which exploration truly captures 'the grotesque' as 'the contradictions that inhibit thought are also the very ones that encourage its expansion'.³ Consequently, the reception of the grotesque is a rich field of study that allows scholars to learn how the genre is used and manipulated for the purpose of the authorial intention. Whilst the grotesque did not flourish as a single genre in theatre until the twentieth century, there are clear aspects of the borderline between comedy and horror found within many ancient plays and tragedies. The main characteristic of grotesque elements in ancient tragedies is graphic physical violence and descriptions, the vivid imagery and detail provided by the manuscripts of these plays evokes a visceral reaction from those whether watching as an audience or reading a script. However, whether these graphic actions occur onstage or offstage varies, with most being taken offstage and implied using dialogue or chorus. Examples of this include the Greek tragedy Agamemnon by Aeschylus in which the murder of Agamemnon by his wife Clytemnestra is illustrated with vivid imagery:

'I cast an impassable net [...] Twice I truck him and with two groans his limbs relaxed. Once he had fallen, I dealt him yet a third stroke [...] as he breathed forth quick spurts of blood, he struck me with dark drops of gory dew'⁴

¹ Steig, M. (1970). Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 29(2), 253

² Cambridge Dictionary

³ Rosen, E. (1990). Innovation and Its Reception: The Grotesque in Aesthetic Thought. *SubStance*, 19(2/3), 125.

⁴ Aeschylus, Agamemnon - Line 1372

Aeschylus reveals this slaughter, which occurred offstage, with graphic and shocking detail through the monologue of Clytemnestra in order to emphasise the themes of vengeance and betrayal, with this being emphasised through the shocking revelation of his wife's revenge. Another clear example can be found in Sophocles Oedipus Rex, where Oedipus gouges his own eyes out:

'When the king snatched out and thrust, from full arm's length into his eyes

[...] he pierced his eyeballs time and time again,

Till bloody tears ran down his beard – not drops

But in full spate a whole cascade descending

*In drenching cataracts if scarlet rain'*⁵

Despite this action taking place offstage this act of self-mutilation is a clear implementation of the grotesque that Sophocles implements with the understanding that the effect of the action would successfully heighten the plays tragic impact.

However, it was not only Greek tragedies that engaged with the grotesque, works by Roman playwrights also must be considered in regard to their use and the effect of the grotesque elements. The most significant display of this lies in the tragedies of Seneca. Within his plays, he includes vivid depictions of violent actions and in doing so challenged the social norms of theatrical works. This is clearly demonstrated in his tragedy Thyestes, being an exemplary display of the graphic and disturbing through the cannibalistic feast in which Atreus kills the children of his brother, cooks them and then serves them to Thyestes.

'With his own hands he cuts the body into parts, severs the broad shoulders at the trunk, an the retarding arms, heartlessly strips off the flesh and severs the bones [...] the liver sputter on the spits; not could I say whether the bodies or the flames made more complaint'

'He belches with content [...] His meal is done'

*'Now, father, spread out thine arms; they are her (he uncovers the platter, revealing the severed heads of Thyestes' sons) Dost recognise thy sons?'*⁶

Once again, this occurs offstage and is related through the narration of the Chorus, yet this shocking revelation still effectively emphasises the horrific act of revenge. Other Roman tragedians also used the grotesque within many works; however, the survival of these works is limited and therefore the exact examples are significantly harder to acknowledge. However, works from similar myths such as Accius' Atreus and Ennius' Thyestes would have carried the same grotesque elements.

Furthermore, another way in which the grotesque was developed within the ancient world is evident in the use of masks within the theatre. Though these masks would be used within various genres, most masks illustrate the strange and shocking through the vivid features. The masks would aid the communication of emotions within the plot, with some heightening comical effect, 'distinguished by a laughing and grotesque countenance'.⁷ Features such as an open mouth, wide eyeballs and an enlarged forehead were prominent to give the emotions in the dialogue an emphatic effect.

⁵ Oedipus Rex, Sophocles – lines 1260-1268

⁶ Seneca, Thyestes – line 729, 908 and 1004

⁷ Geare, R (1916) Decorative masks of ancient theatre. Pg 433



Terracotta mask of an old man from the New Comedy 2nd/1st BC⁸

The renaissance saw the return of the influence of classical models on art and literature, the most notable development of themes encompassed within the genre of the grotesque can be found within the works of Shakespeare. With plays such as *King Lear* evoking an uncomfortable response within the audience as they are caught complicit in the actions of King himself, bringing death upon those closest and most loved by him. Another of Shakespeares plays in which the grotesque lies at the epicentre is '*Titus Andronicus*', based of of Ovid's '*Metamorphosis*', the play explores 'classical concepts of hybridity, the comic macabre, the fantastic, the bizarre and the monstrous'.⁹ Consequently, shocking the audiences with its explosive illustrations of the rape of Titus's daughter, the murders of his sons, and finally the murders of two prisoners by Titus, who then serves them as food to his mother. Thus, playwrights such as Shakespeare in the renaissance and medieval age further developed the genre through the more upfront and shocking implementations of the grotesque. However, the most prominent era in which the genre was developed and explored is in twentieth century theatre. The grotesque is often perceived to be 'especially suited to the modern era in which the self has been recognised as being irrational and unstable'.¹⁰ This is only enhanced by the traumatic and depressing events of the 20th century that inspired the playwrights of the century. Illustrated clearly in many of the works following the world wars, civil rights movements and the increase in psychological developments such as Sigmund Freud's theories on the unconscious mind and the darker aspects of the human psyche. Furthermore, the taboo topics of the grotesque that have been prominent throughout its history were enhanced by modern theatre techniques such as the abstract staging and design of Expressionism, or the incorporation of sound and lighting into the theatre. All of which evoked a stronger audience response to the graphic and shocking events of the plays.

⁸ The Trustees of the British Museum 'Theatre Mask'

⁹ Hollcraft, J (2017) *A Fantastic Feast: William Shakespeare's 'Titus Andronicus' as Grotesque*

¹⁰ Clark. J (2014) *The Modern Satiric Grotesque and Its Traditions*. Pg 5

The classical myth

Exemplified within many of his ancient tragedies, Euripides ‘possessed a remarkable insight into human motivations’¹¹ and carefully manipulated those behaviours observed around him in the Athenian republic. His approach, both in the narrative and construction of characters, in his 428BC tragedy ‘Hippolytus’ is perhaps the most direct and poignant example of this. Written in the early 5th century Greece, Athens itself was undergoing a period of significant political and cultural change as the Peloponnesian war waged throughout the period in which Euripides wrote the play. Therefore, the weight of war and suffering would have stimulated a significant shift in the socio-landscape at the time, one which would aid his contemplation of human nature within the tragedy. Moreover, perhaps the most striking implementation of historical context within Hippolytus is in the characterisation of Phaedra. The strength and psychological complexity of Phaedra which lies at the forefront of the play defies the patriarchal norms of the contemporary society whilst the contemplation of sexuality and virtue would have reflected the view of women within early 5th century Athens. Stylistically, Euripides is known for his realistic presentation of his characters and heroes as regular, flawed beings, allowing for a deeper psychological analysis of his tragedies. Both Phaedra as a character, tormented by passion and lust, alongside Hippolytus, dedicated in chastity but a victim of vengeance due to his arrogance, reflect this construction. It must also be noted that Euripides implements *deus ex machina* within this tragedy, as he often did in various plays, in fact he used *deus ex machina* ‘exactly ten times more than any other tragedian whose works have survived’.¹² Thus, through the prologue of Aphrodite and dialogue of Artemis, Euripides implements this to ‘justify the ways of a god to the man’¹³ and further add emotional complexity to the presentation of morality in the tragedy.

Though, Euripides was not the only playwright to adapt this myth, in early first century Greece Phaedra remains as one of ten surviving works by Seneca. Once again, the Roman empire at this time was undergoing fast political and social change during the turbulent reign of Nero. Seneca himself was often involved with the imperial court of Emperor Nero, therefore the atmosphere of fear and suspicion can be regarded as a reflection of Nero’s court. Whereas the shift onto Phaedra as the main character could have been influenced by the prominent character of Agrippina, mother to Nero, during the period. This argument is strengthened further by the parallels between Phaedra and Agrippina in regard to their moral ambiguity. G. Flygt navigates the difficulty in identifying whether Seneca wrote based off Euripides ‘Hippolytus’ or some other lost work, stating that ‘the question can probably not be answered’¹⁴ and repositioned the comparison between the corresponding myths to be ones of ‘feeling and tone’¹⁵ rather than influence. The narrative is shifted from being centred around the fall of Hippolytus at the hands of his scheming stepmother, to the subversion of suffering onto Phaedra herself. Seneca was a well-known philosopher of the period alongside being a tragedian, therefore he reflected his stoic argument for reason over passion through his construction of Phaedra’s character, with further philosophical contemplations embedded throughout the play. Thus, it becomes clear that the central divide between the two plays is that Seneca takes the play ‘out of the realm of the mystic’

¹¹ Rankin, A (1968) Euripides Hippolytus. Pg 333

¹² Appleton, R. B. (1920). The *Deus ex Machina* in Euripides. *The Classical Review*, 34(1/2), 10–14.

¹³ Appleton, R. B. (1920). The *Deus ex Machina* in Euripides. *The Classical Review*, 34(1/2), 10–14.

¹⁴ Flygt, S. G. (1934). Treatment of Character in Euripides and Seneca: The Hippolytus. *The Classical Journal*, 29(7), 507

¹⁵ Flygt, S. G. (1934). Treatment of Character in Euripides and Seneca: The Hippolytus. *The Classical Journal*, 29(7), 507

and 'shows a shift towards realism in the treatment of his characters'¹⁶ and in doing so emboldens the themes of desire, truth and sexuality whilst moving away from those of divinity and fate.

Thematic reception of the grotesque in Sarah Kane's 'Phaedras Love'

'Phaedra's love' is one of the many plays written by Sarah Kane with which she 'altered the landscape of British theatre in the 1990s'.¹⁷ It has been described as the combination of impressive writing and directing, resulting in 'a fruitful metatheatrical engagement of text and performance'.¹⁸ The plot-line follows that of Seneca's Phaedra, detached from divine intervention, Phaedra is in love with her stepson Hippolytus and having engaged in a sexual relationship with no reciprocation of passion, she accuses him of rape before killing herself. He, lacking the motivation to defend himself, accepts the charges and the audience is then shocked by a series of sexual acts on stage, including the rape and murder of Phaedra's daughter Strophe by her stepfather Theseus, the mutilation and murder of Hippolytus and finally Theseus' suicide. Whilst the plot remains similar to that of Seneca, it is clear that it is the 'emotional tone and setting that are predominantly different'.¹⁹ Kane chooses to set the reign of Theseus in a modern world, in which the regal family are closely monitored by the press and media. Consequently, the implications of the revelation of Phaedra's love for her stepson becomes all the more problematic.

Whilst the emotional tone of various characters is altered to heighten the tragic elements of the play, the characterisation of Hippolytus differs significantly from that of its classical tradition. He is illustrated from the opening of the play as a lazy, depressed, and sex-driven, contrasting significantly from his classical character, whose charity is integral to the plot and the deployment of the negative conceptions around female sexuality. Furthermore, despite his habit of being involved in sexual short-term relationships, he does not maintain any emotional attachment to the task, Kane establishes this in a clear contrast with that of Phaedra whose passion is all-encompassing and thus the scene in which Phaedra engages in a sexual relationship with Hippolytus becomes even more uncomfortable. As the emotional imbalance enhances the audience's disturbed reaction to the morality of the action itself. This is further provoked by the environment in which he exists, filth alongside a poor diet of sweets and crisps, with Kane intending to 'invoke as much disgust as admiration, as much pity as a thorough dislike' creating a 'double-edged quality' to his character.²⁰ Kane also used the grotesque within the play to emphasise a comment she would make in regard to society, this is apparent in the priest scene in which the priest performs sexual acts on Hippolytus as a substitution for a traditional confession acts to highlight the moral decay of religious institutes. Whereas on a psychological level it forces the audience to confront the darker elements of human nature and contemplate whether we all possess these grotesque and animalistic instincts.

However, perhaps the most poignant display of the grotesque within 'Phaedra's love' is in the various acts of abuse and murders that predominantly occur on stage, this is perhaps the most shocking adaptation to the classical myth. The final scene is the most graphic of all, following Theseus's stabbing of Phaedra's dead body he proceeds to rape Strophe, unknowing that it is her, and mutilates Hippolytus before he finally kills himself. With all of this occurring within the same scene and being

¹⁶ Flygt, S. G. (1934). Treatment of Character in Euripides and Seneca: The Hippolytus. *The Classical Journal*, 29(7), 515

¹⁷ Urban, K. (2001). An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane. *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 23(3), 36

¹⁸ CLAYCOMB, R. (2012). [Review of *SARAH KANE IN CONTEXT*, by L. de Vos & G. Saunders]. *Theatre Journal*, 64(4), 631

¹⁹ Barfield, S (2005). Didaskalia – the journal for Ancient Performance

²⁰ Barfield, S. (2005) Didaskalia – the journal for Ancient Performance

the last thing the audience see within the play, the reaction invoked is both shocking and disturbing. Through this use of 'in yer face' theatre, a style that emerged and grew in popularity in Britain in the 1990s, Kane makes audiences and readers 'aware of social corruptions' through the shocking and uncomfortable scenes that make audiences 'face the grim realities of life'.²¹ With the play as a whole indicating 'the efficacious potential of this mode of performance to make powerful socio-political statements',²² leaving their audience impacted and implored to reevaluate their perspectives on society and human nature.

Critical Response

The elements of the grotesque in both Seneca's 'Phaedra' and Sarah Kanes 'Phaedras Love' have caused significant critical response, with critics left divided in opinion. Seneca's 'Phaedra' is traditionally received, similarly to many other ancient tragedies, as a vehicle for philosophical contemplations. However, some scholars are left with the impression that the play was simply a emphasis on Seneca's rhetoric skill. It becomes clear when examining the differences between Euripides 'Hippolytus' and Senecas 'Phaedra' that 'Seneca reworked the play to appeal to a contemporary audience'.²³ For modern scholars, it is difficult to understand the contemporary responses to the play itself, as scholars are unable to know whether the play was ever performed on stage or whether it was written simply private recitation. However, we can apply Senecas stoic beliefs in regard to how these often shaped his works and thus how these can be applied in the context of his tragedies. The stoics often 'used tragedies as a metaphor for life'²⁴ with the most striking critical response towards his use of stoicism in his tragedies being that he enforces ideas about evil being caused by 'the deterioration of character which results when passion destroys reason'.²⁵ as demonstrated clearly in his portrayal of Phaedra'. Consequently, it is conceivable that Seneca employed both his beliefs of Stoicism and the context of the contemporary society within his adaptation of Euripides 'Hippolytus' in order to offer a perspective on human nature, as this was often the purpose of dramatic tragedies in Roman theatre.

Despite the critical responses to 'Phaedras Love' being more accessible than that of the ancient sources, the responses themselves are more divided in their opinions. For some, the violence and explicit scenes brought onto stage, despite having had the intended shocking response, were perceived as 'disgusting and childish, all shock and no substance'²⁶ and consequently embedded Kane within British theatre as a controversial writer. Not only this but she also received criticism on the staging of her plays, with the various scenes such as Hippolytus's genital mutilation being hard to stage. These critics argue that this explosive modern adaptation and staging of the classical myth overshadows the thematic and emotional depth of the narrative, leaving audiences only with the shock factor of the graphic scenes as opposed to the intended upfront commentary on our modern socio-political landscape; with critics such as Charles Spencer stating that 'it is not a theatre critic the is requires, it's a psychiatrist'²⁷. However, following Kanes suicide in 1999 the critical responses to 'Phaedras Love' alongside her other four plays softened. Those opposing harsh and disgusted critics defend her plays as 'unflinchingly honest portrayals of human relationships'²⁸, as the plays visceral content implores audiences to confront the classical themes in a modern setting. Furthermore, critics celebrate Kanes

²¹ Senol, Gamza et al. (2022) Accidental killings in Sarah Kane's 'Phaedra's Love'

²² Taylor, E (2019) Sarah Kane's 'Phaedras Love'

²³ Conway, K (2022) Phaedra: The influence and history of a dramaturgical mystery

²⁴ Staley, G (2009) Stoic Tragedy

²⁵ Pratt, N. T. (1948). The Stoic Base of Senecan Drama. Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 79, Pg. 3

²⁶ Klett, E (2003) Phaedra's Love (review)

²⁷ Sierz, A (2001) In-Yer-Face Theatre

²⁸ Klett, E (2003) Phaedra's Love (review)

use of taboo topics, as she states that she writes to ‘change people’²⁹ and in doing so has to stage the graphic scenes on stage in order to stimulate that change, as the scenes carry ‘the ability to touch hearts, minds and nervous systems’.³⁰

Conclusions

In conclusion, the ancient classical worlds engagement with theatrical techniques to amplify the emotionally and philosophical communication within their tragedies lay the foundation for what would later be known as the grotesque. With both Greek and Roman tragedians using graphic violence and disturbing displays to evoke shock and contemplation within their audiences. Not only this but their innovative approach to presenting the grotesque through masks enabled the characters to illustrate these elements without having to enact the actions on stage, as the effect of the masks alongside the shocking revelations by the chorus would have intended impact. This would have been especially effective given the social norms of the period, as the tragedians would have pushed the boundaries of what was considered appropriate for the theatre and perhaps even ethical contemplations. This was then further developed in significant periods of change such as the renaissance to progress the grotesque into the classified genre it is today.

The tragedies of both Euripides and Seneca that followed the Hippolytus-Phaedra myth is perhaps the most compelling uses of the grotesque in ancient theatre, with the intended effect being the communication of the psychological within the given societal context. Their use of familial relations alongside the multiple shocking graphic events in one final scene implores the audience to consider themes such as desire, sexuality and passion and provides an insight into their philosophical ideas.

Moreover, Sarah Kanes adaptation of the classical Hippolytus-Phaedra myth serves as striking enhancement of the grotesque elements of the original. Her approach to the maintenance of the original themes of passion, desire and betrayal, whilst simultaneously reshaping the setting and staging to serve its purpose within a modern context, highlights the ongoing significance of classical myth on contemporary art. Kane amplifies the grotesque, originally presented through the intense emotions and implied extreme consequences of betrayal, and approaches the presentation of such with an authentic approach. Consequently, the departure away from the traditional creates a stronger response within audiences and in doing so challenges them to contemplate the complexities and nuances of the dark and expressive tragedy. Despite the conflicting responses to Kanes theatrical style, the critical response to her bold re-imagination underscores the impact and thus establishes both her legacy and that of the grotesque as a genre in modern theatre.

The grotesque can thus be understood as a useful tool established in the ancient classical world that is effective in heightening the emotional and physical portrayal of the complexities of human nature and pushing boundaries, resulting in further creative experimentation in the arts.

[3817 words – *not including title and subheadings*]

²⁹ Saunders, G (2009) About Kane

³⁰ Aston, E (2003) Feminist views on the English stage

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