

List of characters

APHRODITE	<i>goddess of love (also called Cypris)</i>
HIPPOLYTUS	<i>son of Theseus</i>
HUNTSMEN	<i>followers of Hippolytus</i>
SERVANT	<i>a member of the royal household at Trozen</i>
CHORUS	<i>women of Trozen</i>
NURSE	<i>Phaedra's attendant</i>
PHAEDRA	<i>wife of Theseus</i>
THESEUS	<i>king of Athens and Trozen</i>
MESSENGER	<i>one of Hippolytus' attendants</i>
ARTEMIS	<i>goddess of chastity and hunting</i>

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PROLOGUE (1–117)

Euripides' prologues introduce elements of plot which explain the situation as the play begins. In *Hippolytus* the goddess Aphrodite, chief architect of the events of the play, delivers a prologue that predicts the future as well as explaining the recent past.

Setting

Hippolytus, produced in Athens in 428 BC, takes place in Trozen, a coastal town thirty miles south of Athens. The *skēnē* (stage building, see pages 122–3) represents the royal palace. In front of the palace are two statues, one of Aphrodite, the other of Artemis (both statues are directly addressed or referred to in the play – see 66, 98, 112 and 513). The Greek audience would immediately recognise a conflict of interests: Aphrodite stands for sexual love, Artemis for chastity.

Aphrodite

Aphrodite, the goddess of love, in this play is often called 'Cypris' (2) since she was first worshipped on the island of Cyprus, traditionally her birthplace. She represents sexual love, often denounced in Greek literature as an uncontrollable, destructive force that overrides rational, moral conduct (a view strongly expressed in Euripides' *Medea*). In *Hippolytus* Aphrodite is proud and vengeful, expecting all mortals to engage in sexual union to honour her.

3–4 Pontic sea / And Atlas' boundaries The Black Sea and the Straits of Gibraltar: the eastern and western limits of the known world.

6 I bring to the ground The Greek verb (*sphallō*) occurs frequently in this play (see also 97, 176, 253, 647 and 1398). The word was commonly used to describe the wrestling manoeuvre of tripping up an opponent. The metaphor is appropriate to an *agōn* (contest, see page 42) between gods and mortals.

10 Theseus' son For Theseus, see page v.

11 Pittheus the Pure The epithet of Pittheus, the former ruler of Trozen but still resident in the city (see 668, 765), hints at the sort of education Hippolytus may have received in Trozen.

12 the lowest of divine powers The Greek word *kakos* is difficult to translate (see also 75 and 73–5n, 420, 930, 933, 947, 1020 and note, 1060, 1065, 1067, 1295). It suggests both inferiority and wickedness. Although Hippolytus rejects sexual love as a corrupting influence, Aphrodite in her vanity takes his rejection as a personal affront.

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APHRODITE Powerful and famed no less in heaven than
 Among mortals, I am called the goddess Cypris.
 Of all who dwell between the Pontic sea
 And Atlas' boundaries and look upon the light of the sun,
 I give preference to those who revere my power; 5
 Those who offer me proud thoughts I bring to the ground.
 For gods, too, possess this trait:
 They love to be honoured among men.
 I will soon demonstrate the truth of this:
 Hippolytus, Theseus' son, whom the Amazon bore to him, 10
 Educated by Pittheus the Pure, is the only citizen of
 Trozen here to call me the lowest of divine powers.
 He spurns the pleasures of sex and does not touch marriage.



Aphrodite riding a swan. Attic red-figure lekythos, c.440 BC.

Artemis

Daughter of Zeus and Leto (58), Artemis was primarily the goddess of hunting and virginity (see 15–17) – attributes attracting Hippolytus’ devotion. She was also associated with childbirth (see 155–63). Like Aphrodite, she inflicted punishment on mortals who offended her: Actaeon was torn apart by his own hounds because he saw her naked.

16 his virgin Aphrodite resents not only Hippolytus’ unusual chastity, but also his special relationship with Artemis.

20 wrongs Hippolytus has committed a wrong against Aphrodite. The Greek verb used (*hamartanō*) means ‘fall into error’. Such an error (*hamartia*) against a divinity is usually the basis of a charge of *hybris* (see ‘**Hybris**’, page 40), a word often translated ‘arrogance’. Aphrodite claims not to be concerned about Hippolytus’ special relationship with Artemis (19), but his failure to acknowledge her divinity is a grave omission.

21 this very day In Greek tragedy the action generally took place within a single day (see also 53–4).

Theseus and Athens (24–35)

Theseus, famous for killing the Minotaur and his later attempt to abduct Persephone, wife of Hades, from the underworld, was a Trozenian hero, the son of Aethra, daughter of **Pittheus**. Later Theseus became the central hero in Athenian legend and was incorporated into the royal family as the son of Aegeus, grandson of King **Pandion** (24), and thus a descendant of the first Athenian king, **Cecrops** (32). For the benefit of the Athenian audience Euripides stresses Theseus’ Athenian lineage, splices the traditions to make him king of both cities and uses his slaying of the **Pallantides** (33 – see note) to explain his absence from Athens. However, the Trozenian version is never forgotten, especially in the matter of the identity of Theseus’ father (see page v, 42n, 1259n).

25 holy Mysteries Held in honour of Demeter and Persephone, the Mysteries were religious rites that secured safe passage to the next life for any initiated witness and involved a procession from Athens to nearby Eleusis.

25 Phaedra Daughter of Minos, wife of Theseus and stepmother to Hippolytus (see page v).

28–31 a temple to Cypris Aphrodite refers to her temple on the southern slope of the Acropolis (‘Pallas’ rock’, 28) in Athens (see page 114).

33 pollution (Greek word *miasma*, see 306n) caused by shedding blood, especially of a family member, was considered a curse that could affect a whole city; **Pallantides** Theseus’ cousins, who disputed his right to inherit the kingship of Athens from Aegeus (see page vi).

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No, he honours Apollo's sister, Artemis, daughter of Zeus, Reckoning her the mightiest of the gods. He is forever Consorting with his virgin in the pale green wood, Ridding the earth of wild beasts with his swift hounds: The company he keeps is more than mortal.	15
I do not begrudge him these activities. Why should I? But for the wrongs that he has done to me I will punish Hippolytus this very day.	20
To execute the plan I set in motion some time ago requires Little effort on my part. Hippolytus once left the house of Pittheus for Athens, city of Pandion, to witness the rites of The holy Mysteries. There Phaedra, his father's noble wife, Saw him and was smitten in her heart by fearful desire.	25
All this was my doing. Before she ever came here to Trozen, Phaedra built a temple to Cypris right beside Pallas' rock, From where she could look out across to this place, A lover pining for her absent love. Men will Forever name the goddess's temple after Hippolytus.	30
Later Theseus left Athens, the land of Cecrops, To escape pollution from the blood of the Pallantides, And sailed here with his wife, Consenting to an exile of one year.	35

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Imagery of love

In line 37 Phaedra is tormented by ‘pangs’ (the Greek word *kentron* is used to describe bee stings, a horse’s goad or any instrument of torture). Aphrodite goes on to describe Phaedra’s infatuation as an involuntary ‘sickness’ (38). At 45 we learn that Phaedra is to die as a result of her love.

- How do these images of Phaedra’s suffering underline Aphrodite’s ruthlessness?

42 Poseidon, lord of the sea According to Athenian legend Theseus was the son of Aegeus. The earlier Trozenian legend had Poseidon as his father.

53–4 gates of Hades ... this very day This chilling end to the speech adds a sense of urgency: death is imminent for the young man we are about to meet.

Review: the character and plan of Aphrodite

As she reminds us at the start of the play (1–6), Aphrodite has universal power because the effects of sexual passion are said to be felt by all mortals. When her pride is wounded she can use these same effects to destroy an individual or, as here, an entire family. There is a subtle malice to her plan of revenge. She uses incidental events in the characters’ lives to ensnare them: Hippolytus’ visit to Athens (23–5) enables her to cast her spell on Phaedra; Theseus’ blood-guilt sends him to Trozen with Phaedra (32–5), where she cannot escape Hippolytus. Aphrodite’s version of what is to follow generates intrigue and suspense: the audience are expecting certain events, but have no idea *how* they will unfold.

- How is Aphrodite characterised by her speech?
- How is her character appropriate to the force she represents?
- How might an actor playing Aphrodite use tone and physicality to underline the character’s message?

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So now, in silence, the wretched woman,
 Moaning and tormented by the pangs of love, is dying.
 None of her household knows about her sickness.
 Yet this is not the way for her passion to end.
 I will bring it to Theseus' attention – all will be revealed. 40
 This young man, my enemy, will be killed by his own father
 With the curses Poseidon, lord of the sea, granted
 To Theseus as a gift – three requests to the god
 That would not go unfulfilled.
 Phaedra, her honour intact, will none the less lose her life. 45
 For I shall not think her misfortunes of more account
 Than that my enemies should pay a price
 Sufficient to satisfy me.
 Now I shall withdraw, for I see Hippolytus, son of Theseus,
 Has left the exertion of the hunt and now draws near. 50
 Behind him walks a crowd of attendants shouting aloud
 And honouring the goddess Artemis in songs.
 He does not know the gates of Hades stand open,
 And this very day is the last that he will see.

Hippolytus: first impressions

Hippolytus, returning from the hunt, leads servants and huntsmen in a simple hymn of praise to Artemis.

- How do these lines (55–65) create a striking contrast in mood with the previous speech (1–54)?
- How might a modern production use the stage space and lighting to enhance the contrast?

Dramatic irony

Dramatic irony arises when situations or words have a significance of which a character (usually the tragic protagonist) is unaware. Here Hippolytus places a garland on the statue of Artemis, neglecting to do likewise for the other statue on the stage.

58 daughter of Leto Leto, a Titan from an earlier generation of gods, gave birth to Artemis (see ‘**Artemis**’, page 4) and her twin brother, Apollo.

67 untouched meadow It is appropriate to the worship of Artemis that the garland is plucked from a wild, uncultivated meadow (‘virgin’ soil).

72 Modesty The Greek word *aidōs* is difficult to translate; it can also mean ‘restraint’ or ‘shame’. It is the moral sense that inhibits a person’s baser instincts and preserves purity. It is here personified as a gardener who protects the purity of the meadow (see 380–3 and ‘**A sense of shame**’, page 34).

Sōphrosynē 1

73 The Greek word *sōphronein* is here translated ‘self-control’. The noun derived from it (*sōphrosynē*) can also mean ‘moderation’ or ‘temperance’. The word is, however, used so extensively in Greek tragedy that it deserves to be thought of as having a wider sense (here conveyed by the translation ‘virtue’ in 74). Literally translated ‘of sound mind’ (like the Latin phrase *mens sana*), it often describes the ‘good sense’ to choose the right course of action in any situation and avoid the distractions of high emotion (see Index, page 128).

Self-control: taught or inborn?

73–5 Euripides’ plays often contribute to contemporary debates about morality. Hippolytus’ view of virtue was certainly controversial. In Plato’s dialogue *Protagoras* (written in the 420s BC, at about the same time as this play), Socrates questions the standard Greek view that virtue could only be taught – a belief held by the Sophists (teachers of rhetoric who regularly visited Athens). Hippolytus, like Socrates, adopts the more radical view that to be truly virtuous one needed something like an instinct for good. Hence, Hippolytus considers virtue as something inborn and calls those who do not possess it in their nature *kakos* (‘wicked’, ‘base’ – see 12n).

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- HIPPOLYTUS** Follow! Follow! Sing of Artemis, 55
 Heavenly daughter of Zeus, who cares for us.
- HIPPOLYTUS & HUNTSMEN**
 Mistress, most revered mistress, child of Zeus,
 Artemis, daughter of Leto and Zeus,
 We greet you!
 Fairest by far of maidens, 60
 You dwell in mighty heaven,
 In your noble father's court,
 The house of Zeus, rich in gold,
 Fairest of maidens in Olympus,
 We greet you! 65
- HIPPOLYTUS** For you, mistress, I bring this woven garland
 I have prepared from an untouched meadow
 Where no shepherd dares to graze his flocks
 And no tool of iron has ever passed.
 No, pure is the meadow through which the bee 70
 Threads its way in springtime.
 Modesty tends it with river springs
 And only those whose self-control is not taught,
 Whose virtue is complete and inborn,
 Are permitted to harvest it; the wicked may not. 75

78 For it comes from a devout hand In Greek religion access to a holy place requires ritual purification from physical uncleanness or contact with birth, sex or death. Hippolytus, however, believes that only those with no need for purification can enter the sacred meadow.

82 complete life's race The Greek verb means to 'turn the post' in a chariot race; a fitting metaphor for the horse-loving Hippolytus.

- Consider Hippolytus' belief that people cannot be taught to be virtuous. What are the implications of this view?
- What impression do you get from 66–83 of the nature of Hippolytus' worship and his relationship with Artemis?
- Hippolytus' prayer to Artemis could be interpreted as arrogant and pompous, or as devout and naive. Consider different ways in which the actor playing Hippolytus could be directed in this scene.

Hippolytus and the Servant (84–117)

In the last section of the Prologue, Hippolytus is accosted by an old man, a servant of the house. Low-status characters (servants, nurses, messengers) are common in Greek tragedy (especially in Euripides) and often express a more humble, superstitious view of the gods (the sentry in Sophocles' *Antigone* and the soldier in Euripides' *Bacchae* are good examples). Their cautious common sense often serves to underline the extreme or misguided views of the central character. The Servant is anxious that Hippolytus should show respect to Aphrodite and reconsider his exclusive devotion to Artemis. The ensuing conversation is conducted in *stichomythia* (line-for-line dialogue – an essential element in Greek tragedy, see 303–49n).

84–5 only gods must be called / Our masters The Servant's mode of address is pointed: although the Greek words *anax* ('lord') and *despotēs* ('master') are both used by slaves addressing their masters, only the latter is commonly used of the gods and the Servant's careful distinction is meant as subtle guidance to Hippolytus.

89 revere all alike

- What is the Servant hinting at in this phrase?

90 what proud man is *not* offensive? The Greek word (*semnos*) can mean not only 'proud' but also 'reverent' or 'pious' (see also 945), as well as 'haughty'. The Servant hinted (89) that Hippolytus should not be 'haughty' towards Aphrodite. By using the same word to describe Cypris as 'proud' (95), it is unlikely he would be directly insulting to the goddess. Rather, he is exploiting the ambiguity in the Greek in order to warn Hippolytus that if he fails to revere Aphrodite she could destroy him.