

## PREFACE\*

HERE is another tragedy the subject of which is taken from Euripides. Although I have followed a slightly different route from that of this author, in the conduct of the plot, I have not failed to embellish my play with everything which seemed to me most striking in his. Even if I owed him only the idea of the character of Phaedra, I could say that I owe what is perhaps the most reasonable matter I have put on the stage. It does not surprise me at all that this character should have had so great a success in the time of Euripides, and that it also succeeded so well in our own age, because it has all the qualities which Aristotle requires in a tragic hero, and which are capable of exciting pity and terror. Phaedra is, actually, neither altogether guilty nor altogether innocent. She is committed by her fate, and by the wrath of the gods, to an illicit love, the horror of which she is the first to feel. She makes every effort to overcome it. She would rather die than admit it to anyone. And when she is forced to reveal it, she speaks of it in a confusion which makes it clear that her crime is a punishment from the gods rather than a motion of her own will.

I have even taken care to make her rather less odious than she is in the classical tragedies, in which she decides on her own to accuse Hippolytus. I thought that the calumny was something too base and too dark to put in the mouth of a princess who otherwise has such noble and virtuous feelings. This baseness appeared to me more appropriate to a nurse, who might have more servile inclinations, and who none the less undertakes this false accusation only to save the life and honour of her mistress. Phaedra involves herself in it only because she is in an agitation of mind which makes her beside herself, and immediately afterwards she thinks of justifying innocence and declaring the truth.

Hippolytus is accused, in Euripides and in Seneca, of having actually raped his stepmother: 'He took her by force.' But here he is accused only of having had the intention of doing so. I wished to spare Theseus a confusion which might perhaps have made him less agreeable to the audience.

As to the character of Hippolytus, I have observed that in

classical times Euripides was blamed for having shown him as a philosopher free of all imperfections: which had the effect that the death of this young prince gave rise much more to indignation than to pity. I thought I should give him some weakness which would make him slightly culpable towards his father, without however detracting from the greatness of soul which leads him to spare Phaedra's honour, and to allow himself to be oppressed without accusing her. What I call weakness is the passion which, in spite of himself, he feels for Aricia, who is the daughter and the sister of his father's mortal enemies.

This Aricia is not a character I have invented. Virgil says that Hippolytus married her and had a daughter by her, after Aesculapius had brought him back to life. I have also read in some authors that Hippolytus had married and taken to Italy a young Athenian girl of high birth, who was called Aricia, and who had given her name to a little town in Italy.

I mention these authorities, because I have been scrupulous about following the legend. I have even followed the history of Theseus, as it is in Plutarch.

It is in this historian that I found that what gave occasion for the belief that Theseus descended into the underworld to carry off Proserpine was a journey this prince made in Epirus, towards the source of Acheron, to visit a king whose wife Pirithous wanted to carry off, and who kept Theseus prisoner, after having put Pirithous to death. In this way I have tried to preserve the probability of the history, without detracting from the attractions of the legend, which contribute greatly to the poetry. And the rumour of Theseus' death, founded on this fabulous journey, gives Phaedra occasion to make a declaration of love which becomes one of the chief causes of her misfortune, and which she would never have dared to make as long as she had believed that her husband was alive.

For the rest, I do not yet dare to assert that this play is actually the best of my tragedies. I leave it to readers and to time to decide as to its true value. What I can assert is that I have written none in which virtue is shown in a clearer light than it is here. The smallest faults are severely punished in it. The mere thought of crime is regarded with as much horror as the crime itself. The weaknesses of love are treated in it as real weaknesses; passions are presented to view only to show all the confusion they cause;

and vice is everywhere painted in such colours as to make its ugliness known and hated. That is the aim which everyone who works for public consumption ought to have in mind; and this is what the first tragic poets had in mind above everything. Their theatre is a school in which virtue was taught no less than in the schools of the philosophers. And so Aristotle laid down rules for the dramatic poem; and Socrates, the wisest of philosophers, was not above giving a hand with the tragedies of Euripides. One could wish that our works were as solid and as full of useful teaching as those of these poets. It would perhaps be a way of bringing to a reconciliation with tragedy a number of people, celebrated for their piety and their doctrine, who in recent times have condemned it, people who would no doubt judge of it more favourably if the authors thought as much about instructing their audiences as about entertaining them, and if in that way they followed the true purpose of tragedy.