ACT I  
SCENE 1  

Hippolytus, Theramenes

HIPPOLYTUS

It is decided. I will go from here,  
Leave this agreeable shore, Theramenes,  
And leave Troezen. With everything in doubt  
I am ashamed to be doing nothing.  
It is six months since I saw my father,  
I do not know what has befallen him,  
Nor even where his dear head may lie.

THERAMENES

Where then, sir, are you going to look for him?  
In an attempt to pacify your fears  
I have scoured the seas on both sides of Corinth;  
Asked after Theseus upon those shores  
Where Acheron disappears among the dead,*  
I have been to Elis and, passing Tenaros,  
Visited the sea into which Icarus fell.*  
What fresh hope have you, in what happy lands  
Do you expect to find a trace of him?  
Who knows, can we be sure the king your father  
Wants us to know the secret of his absence?  
May it not be that, while we fear for him,  
He’s calmly hiding some new love from us  
And waiting for some unfortunate girl to... 

HIPPOLYTUS

Enough of that, Theramenes, and speak  
Respectfully of Theseus! There were errors,  
Certainly, in his youth, but for the future  
We can be sure he will not err again;  
Phaedra has long settled his affections  
And has no fear of any rivals now.  
So I shall look for him, it is my duty,  
This place is now impossible, I shall leave.
THERAMENES

How long, sir, have you been afraid to stay
In this place where everything is so peaceful
And where you were so happy as a child;
Where I have seen you better pleased to be
Than in the splendour of the court at Athens?
What danger or what trouble drives you out?

HIPPOLYTUS

That happy time has gone and all has changed
Since the gods sent upon this coast of ours
The daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë.*

THERAMENES

I understand. The cause of your distress
Is known to me; that Phaedra should be here
Troubles you and the sight of her is wounding,
A dangerous stepmother, her influence showed
The moment that she set her eyes on you
And without more ado she had you exiled.
But now her hatred's gone or has grown less.
Besides, how can a woman who is dying
And wants to die, be any threat to you?
Phaedra is suffering and will not say why;
Tired of herself and of the air she breathes,
Can she plot anything against you now?

HIPPOLYTUS

It is not her hostility I fear.
I leave her to escape another enemy.
I am escaping from the young Aricia,
Last of a race sworn to our destruction.

THERAMENES

But, sir, you are not persecuting her?
Did this young lady, though she was the sister
Of the cruel sons of Pallas, ever meddle
With the designs of her perfidious brothers?
Should you hate her? Her charms are innocent.

HIPPOLYTUS

If I hated her I would not run away.
THERAMENES
Sir, may I guess the reason for your flight?
Can it be that the proud Hippolytus,
Implacable against the laws of love
And the yoke Theseus has so often borne,
Is so no longer? Can it be that Venus
Wants to show Theseus was right after all?
That she is treating you like other mortals
And forcing you to worship at her shrine.
Could you be in love, sir?

HIPPOLYTUS
How dare you, friend?
You have known me since the day I was born;
How can you ask me shamefully to give up
The haughty pride you know is in my heart?
An Amazon was my mother and I sucked*
That pride in with her milk—but that is nothing;
When I arrived at riper years myself
I could not but approve the self I found.
You were then my attached and zealous tutor,
Accustomed to recount my father’s story.
You knew with what attention I would listen
And how I warmed to all his noble deeds,
When you described this intrepid hero
Who consoled men for losing Hercules,*
Told me of monsters strangled, brigands punished,
Procrustes, Cercyon, of Scirron and Sinnis,
The giant’s bones scattered at Epidaurus,
And all Crete reeking of the Minotaur’s blood.
But, when you touched upon less glorious deeds,
His troth plighted in a hundred places,
Helen in Sparta stolen from her parents,*
Salamis witnessing Periboea’s tears,
So many others, whose names he forgot,
Too credulous, betrayed by his flame;
As Ariadne, complaining to the rocks;
Phaedra too taken, under better auspices;
You know with what regret I heard such talk,
Begging you many times to cut it short.
Happy had I been able to erase
The unworthy half of this fine history! And is it now my turn to be so bound? And would the gods so far have humbled me, The more contemptible in my weak sighs In that while Theseus might be excused For all the heap of honours he has earned I cannot claim I have tamed any monsters Which might give me the right to fail like him. Even suppose my pride had been diminished Should I have chosen Aricia as the instrument? My straying senses could not but remember The obstacle which stands between us two. My father disapproves of her and prohibits A union that would give his brother nephews: He fears a shoot sprung from a guilty stock And wants the name extinguished with their sister; She is to be his ward until she dies And in the meantime she is not to marry. Should I take sides with her against my father? Is it for me to set such an example? And my youth, launched upon a reckless love...
Or, expert in the art Neptune invented,
Boldly riding a stallion from the herd.
We have not been hallooing in the woods,
A hidden fire has made your eyes less keen.
No doubt about it, you must be in love:
You're pining and you will not tell us why.
Can it be that you find Aricia charming?

HIPPOLYTUS
Theramenes, I'm off to find my father.

Theramenes
Will you not see Phaedra before you go,
My lord?

HIPPOLYTUS
Of course, let her know I am coming.
We'll see her, for I must be dutiful.
But here comes the queen's dear Oenone;
What fresh misfortune is disturbing her?

SCENE 2
Hippolytus, Oenone, Theramenes

OENONE
Who has more reason than I to be disturbed?
Oh my lord, the queen is on her death-bed.
Night and day I spend myself watching her;
She is dying in my arms and will not say why.
Her mind is eternally in disorder.
Her bed cannot hold her in her restless grief.
She must be in the light; in her great pain
She will have me keep everyone away...
She's coming.

HIPPOLYTUS
That's it. I must be off.
So that she does not see a face she hates.
PHAEDRA
Let's go no further, but stop here, Oenone.
I cannot manage for my strength has gone;
Seeing the light again dazzles my eyes
And my knees tremble and are giving way.
Oh dear! [She sits down.]

OENONE
Almighty gods, may our tears appease you!

PHAEDRA
How heavy they seem, these ornaments, these veils!
Whose hand, unasked, has tied up all these knots,
Has carefully set my hair about my forehead?
Everything hurts and conspires to do me harm.

OENONE
How your wishes conflict with one another!
It was you who, a little while ago,
Denounced your own intentions as unjust
And urged me to put all your finery on;
It was you, with your former strength in mind,
Who wanted to be seen, and see the light:
You see it, ma'am, and now you want to hide;
Do you now hate the light you were looking for?

PHAEDRA
Noble and brilliant author of a sad family,
You whose daughter my mother dared claim to be,
Who perhaps redden with shame at my distress,
O Sun, this is the last time I shall see you!

OENONE
What! you still entertain that cruel longing?
Must I still see you giving up hope of life?
Is it for death you make these preparations?

PHAEDRA
Gods! if I could rest in a dark forest!
When shall I, through a cloud of noble dust,
Watch a chariot disappear in the distance?
PHAEDRA

I am mad! Oh, where am I?

What have I said? My mind is wandering.

Gone then! the gods have left me desolate.

Oenone, my face is covered with blushes;

You can see what I suffer from too clearly;

Do what I will, my eyes fill with tears.

OENONE

If you must blush, blush because you are silent

And so exacerbate your violent ills.

Must you refuse our care, be deaf to our words

And proceed pitilessly to your death?

What fury stops your life in mid-course?

What spell or poison has dried up its spring?

Three times darkness has overspread the sky

Since last your eyes admitted trace of sleep,

And day has three times chased off the dark night

Since any food entered your weakened body.

I beg you, do not let yourself be tempted:

What right have you to try to kill yourself?

You offend the gods from whom your life proceeds;

You betray the husband to whom you gave your word;

You betray your children to a long unhappiness

Under a tutelage which must be rigorous.

Consider, on the day they lose their mother

The foreigner's son will be given fresh hope,

Your proud enemy, the enemy of your race,

This son once carried in an Amazon's womb,

Hippolytus, this . . .

PHAEDRA

Gods!

OENONE

That gives you pause?

PHAEDRA

Unhappy woman, what name have you uttered?
Ah, now you have reason to be angry. I like to see you shudder at that name. Then live. Let love and duty have their way. Live and you will not let a Scythian's son Assume a crushing sway over your children, The best blood of Greece and of the gods. But do not let time pass, for time is mortal. Recruit your wasted strength, do it at once While there is still a flicker of life in you; Fan it at least, before it goes out.

My fault is, I have lived too long already.

Is it remorse tearing you apart? What crime can make it so unrelenting? Your hands have not dabbled in innocent blood.

Thank heaven, my hands are not criminal. If only my heart were as innocent!

What project did you form within yourself So frightful that your heart is still terrified?

I have said enough already. Spare me now. I am dying because to confess would be death.

Then die, persist in your inhuman silence, But look for someone else to close your eyes. Although your flickering life is almost done, My spirit will be first among the dead Who always beckon us a thousand ways; My grief entitles me to take the shortest. You are so cruel! When have you found me fail you? I left country and children for your sake. Is this how you reward my devotion?

Why be so violent? What good will it do? It will appal you if I break my silence.
OENONE
Great gods, can anything you have to say
Be worse than you dying before my eyes?

PHAEDRA
If I confessed my crime, and if you knew
What lot the Fates have meted out to me,
I should still die, and die more culpable.

OENONE
I beg you by the tears I shed for you,
And by the feeble limbs that I embrace,
Deliver my mind from this fatal doubt.

PHAEDRA
It is your wish: get up.

OENONE
Speak, I am listening.

PHAEDRA
What can I say to her, heavens? How begin?

OENONE
It is your terrors which affront me most.

PHAEDRA
Venus hates me! Her anger is fatal!
To what confusions did love lead my mother!

OENONE
Let us not think of them, ma’am: for the future
Eternal silence cover the remembrance.

PHAEDRA
My sister Ariadne, you were caught*
And died where Theseus had abandoned you!

OENONE
What is it, ma’am? What disturbs you so,
Setting you against your own flesh and blood?

PHAEDRA
I am the last of that deplorable race;
Since Venus wishes it, I die the last of them
And the unhappiest.

OENONE
Are you in love?
PHAEDRA
I suffer all the furies love can bring.

OENONE
For whom?

PHAEDRA
Now you will hear the full horror.
I love . . . I tremble and shiver at the name.
I love . . .

OENONE
Who?

PHAEDRA
You know the Amazon's son,
This prince I have for so long oppressed.

OENONE
Hippolytus! Great gods!

PHAEDRA
It was you named him.

OENONE
Just heavens! All my blood runs cold, it freezes.
Despair! Crime! A deplorable race!
Why did we come here? Shores of ill omen,
Were we obliged to make this fatal journey?

PHAEDRA
My trouble comes from further back. No sooner
Had I become the wife of Theseus,
Contentment, happiness seemed well assured,
Then Athens showed me my proud enemy.
I saw him: I blushed and grew pale seeing him;
Then in my mind, what turbulence arose!
My eyes were blinded and I could not speak;
I felt my whole body grow hot and cold.
I recognized the terrible fires of Venus,
Torments inevitable in a race she persecutes.
I was assiduous in all the vows
I thought would placate and deflect her:
I built a temple to her, decorated it;
At all times I had victims for sacrifice
And hoped by stabbing them to find my reason:
That was no remedy for invincible love!
In vain my hand burnt incense at the altars;
But all the time my lips implored the goddess,
My adoration was for Hippolytus;
He was always there, even when the altars smoked
It was to him, this god I dared not name,
I offered everything, I avoided him,
The worst torture of all! My eyes saw him
Even in the features of his father.
I had the courage to go against myself
And forced myself at last to persecute him.
To banish the enemy I idolized
I pretended the injustice of a stepmother;
For ever calling out for his exile,
I tore him from the arms of his father.
I breathed at last, Oenone, once he was absent,
My days were less troubled; they were innocent:
I concealed my grief: obedient to my husband
I cosseted the children of our marriage.
My precautions were vain. By cruel fate
My husband himself brought me to Troezen:
The enemy that I had banished was there
And my too recent wound began to bleed.
No longer is it a secret fire in my veins;
It is Venus motionless upon her prey.
I have a proper terror of my crime;
I hate life and my love horrifies me;
Dying, I wanted to keep my good name
And not let my dark love into the light:
Your tears were too much for me, and you fought me;
I have confessed: I do not regret it
So long as you, seeing me so near death,
No longer hurt me with unjust reproaches
And make no further effort to revive
The last faint warmth now ready to depart.
SCENE 4

Phaedra, Oenone, Panope

PANOPE
I have sad news that I should wish to hide
From you, ma'am, but my duty is to tell it.
Death has removed your invincible lord
And you alone are not informed of it.

OENONE
What are you saying, Panope?

PANOPE
That the queen
Now prays in vain for Theseus’ return,
And that his son Hippolytus has been told
By ships just in to port, that he is dead.

PHAEDRA
Heavens!

PANOPE
Athens is divided; one party
Thinks that the prince your son should be king;
The other, ma’am, so far forgets the laws
As to give its suffrage to the foreigner’s son.
It is even said that an insolent faction
Designs to put Aricia on the throne
And so to let the race of Pallas triumph.
I thought that I should warn you of this danger.
Already Hippolytus is about to go;
The fear is that if he shows himself
In the midst of this confusion, all the crowd,
Fickle as usual, will adhere to him.

OENONE
Enough said, Panope. The queen hears you
And she will see the warning is important.
OENONE

Ma'am, my persuasions were at an end,
I was no longer urging you to live
And thought rather of following you to the tomb,
No longer having the heart to keep you from it;
But this fresh trouble calls for other counsels.
Your fortune changes and looks different now.
The king has gone, ma'am, you must take his place.
His death leaves you a son to whom you are bound,
A slave if he loses you, if you live, a king.
In his misfortune, to whom can he turn?
Where will the hand be that should dry his tears?
His innocent cries, reaching up to heaven,
Will rouse his divine ancestors against you.
Live, you need not reprove yourself further:
Your love becomes an ordinary love,
For by his death Theseus has cut the bonds
Which made a crime, a horror, of your passion.
You have less to fear now from Hippolytus;
It is not culpable to see him now.
Convinced of your aversion, it is possible
He will consent to lead the sedition.
Put him right, and make his courage falter.
He is king here, Troezene falls to him,
But he knows that the law will give your son
The superb ramparts that Minerva built.*
Both of you have a natural enemy:
You should combine against Aricia.

PHAEDRA

Well, I will let myself be influenced
By your advice and will consent to live,
If anyone can bring me back to life
And if love of a son, in this dark moment,
Can revive the poor remnant of my spirits.