

A PERFORMER'S ANALYSIS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S *PHAEDRA:DRAMATIC*
CANTATA FOR MEZZO SOPRANO AND SMALL ORCHESTRA, OP. 93:

A LECTURE RECITAL, TOGETHER WITH THREE RECITALS
OF SELECTED WORKS OF H. PURCELL, R. SCHUMANN,

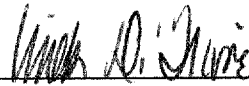
R. VAUGHAN WILLIAMS, P. TCHAIKOVSKY,

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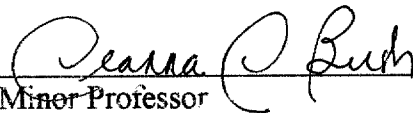
S. BARBER, AND OTHERS

Cloyce Beard-Stradley, B.Mus., M.M.

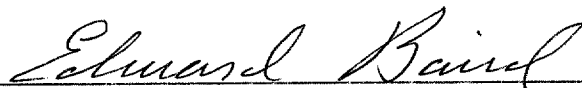
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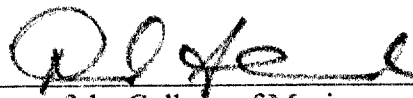
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A PERFORMER'S ANALYSIS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S *PHAEDRA: DRAMATIC
CANTATA FOR MEZZO SOPRANO AND SMALL ORCHESTRA*, OP. 93:

A LECTURE RECITAL, TOGETHER WITH THREE RECITALS
OF SELECTED WORKS OF H. PURCELL, R. SCHUMANN,
R. VAUGHAN WILLIAMS, P. TCHAIKOVSKY,
G. FAURÉ, K. LÖWE, G. MENOTTI,
S. BARBER, AND OTHERS

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MUSICAL ARTS

By

Cloyce Beard-Stradley, B.Mus., M.M.

Denton, Texas

May, 1999

Beard-Stradley, Cloyce, A Performer's Analysis of Benjamin Britten's *Phaedra: Dramatic Cantata for Mezzo Soprano and Small Orchestra*, Op. 93: A Lecture Recital, Together with Three Recitals of Selected Works of H. Purcell, R. Schumann, R. Vaughan Williams, P. Tchaikovsky, G. Fauré, K. Löwe, G. Menotti, S. Barber, and Others. Doctor of Musical Arts (Performance). May, 1999, 99 pp., 38 illustrations, 2 appendixes, bibliography, 87 titles.

A little-known chamber work by Benjamin Britten is the dramatic cantata *Phaedra*, op.93, for mezzo-soprano and small orchestra. Among his chamber works, the solo cantata was a musical form used only once by Britten, thus making *Phaedra* unique among Britten's *oeuvre*.

Britten chose a genre that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries - the cantata - as a vehicle for the story of *Phaedra*. He employs clear allusions to Baroque music in *Phaedra* by the use of harpsichord and continuo in the recitatives, ornamentation, and word painting. The text for Britten's setting of *Phaedra* is a translation of Jean Racine's *Phèdre* by the American poet Robert Lowell. From Lowell's complete play, Britten extracted Phaedra's key speeches that deal with her three confessions of incestuous love for her stepson, Hippolytus. These monologues are set in a series of recitatives and arias that make up the entirety of this chamber cantata.

In order to gain complete understanding of *Phaedra*, this document will begin with an investigation into the historical background of Racine's *Phèdre* and the conventions of French tragedy from which it arose. Lowell's translation method will

then be explored in comparison to Racine's play. In turn, Britten's extractions from Lowell's translation will be examined. Further, the baroque elements of the cantata and the compositional ideas inherited by Britten from Henry Purcell will be included. Finally, there will be an inspection of the character of Phaedra and Britten's interpretation through orchestration and melodic choices.

Investigation into the background of Phaedra's character through Racine's play and Lowell's translation along with Britten's dramatic interpretation through music is necessary for complete comprehension of her mental state and underlying thoughts in order to bring about an emotionally accurate portrayal of the role. Britten himself labeled *Phaedra* a "dramatic cantata." Therefore, the drama and its text-musical relationships must be uncovered.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS

College of Music

presents
Graduate Recital

CLOYCE BEARD, mezzo soprano

John Tarver, piano

Monday, February 12, 1990 8:15 p.m. CONCERT HALL

PROGRAM

If music be the food of love
(Third Version) Henry Purcell
Music for a while (Oedipus) (1659-1695)
Sweeter than roses (Pausanias)
Dido's lament (Dido and Aeneas)

Frauenliebe und Leben Robert Schumann
1. Seit ich ihn gesehen (1810-1856)
2. Er, der Herrlichste von allen
3. Ich kann's nicht fassen
4. Du Ring an meinem Finger
5. Helft mir, ihr Schwestern
6. Süßer Freund
7. An meinem Herzen
8. Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerz getan

Intermission

Tired (Four Last Songs) R. Vaughan Williams
Hands, eyes, and heart (1872-1958)
(Four Last Songs)
The Twilight People
A Piper
Procris (Four Last Songs)

Three Songs of Venice Michael Heed
1. The Gondolier (b. 1900-)
2. St. Mark's Square
3. Rainstorm

Orpheus with his lute Arthur Sullivan
On the day when I was wedded (1842-1900)
(The Gondoliers)

Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts



The Queen of Spades



Thursday, April 18, 1992

Saturday, April 20, 1991

Sunday, April 21, 1991

8:00 p.m.

Main Auditorium

The UNT College of Music Opera Theater with the UNT Opera Orchestra
presents

Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky's
The Queen of Spades

An Opera in Three Acts
Original Libretto by Modest Tchaikovsky
A New English Version by Dennis Wakeling

Director and Designer Dennis Wakeling
Conductor Anshel Brusilow
Assistant Director Dennis Thread
Co-Director of Opera Theater Jeannine Crader
Chorus Master Steven Demorest
Costume Designer Barbara Cox
Lighting Designer William Boswell
Choreographer Kathleen Tenniswood
Production Stage Manager Kim Caldwell-Bean

Cast

(in order of vocal appearance)

CHEKALINSKII, a gambler Ken Hornsby
SURIN, a gambler Mark McCrory
COUNT TOMSKII, a young officer, a grandson Timothy Tucker
of the Countess (Goldgalore in the Intermezzo)
GERMANN, a young officer David Sundquist*
PRINCE YELETSKII, Lisa's fiance Scott Hamblen
LISA, the granddaughter of the Countess Emily Pulley+
Soo-Hong Kim++
THE COUNTESS Cloyce Beard Stradley
POLINA, Lisa's friend, engaged to Tomskii Rebecca James Campbell**
(Lovinglook in the Intermezzo)
THE GOVERNESS Diane Pulte
MASHA, the chambermaid Sarah Turner
MASTER OF CEREMONIES Jeff Picón

CHARACTERS IN THE INTERMEZZO

FLORINDA Teresa Gomez
LOVINGLOOK Rebecca James Campbell
GOLDGALORE Timothy Tucker
CHAPLITSKII Jeff Picón
NARUMOV Christopher Lilley

*Faculty Artist

**Alumna Guest Artist

+Thursday Evening Performance

++Saturday and Sunday Evening Performances

There will be two ten-minute intermissions.

Recording and photographic equipment strictly forbidden.

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH TEXAS
College of Music

presents

A Graduate Recital

CLOYCE BEARD-STRADLEY, soprano

assisted by

Emily Pulley, soprano

Kathryn Fouse, harpsichord/piano

Monday, October 28, 1991

8:15 p.m.

Concert Hall

*Shepherd, shepherd leave decoying
Two daughters of this aged stream
Sound the trumpet*

**Henry Purcell
(1659-1695)**

Selections from *Le Nozze di Figaro*:
*Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro
Sull' aria*

**W. A. Mozart
(1756-1791)**

*Fliege, Vöglein
Freundlich laß uns scheiden
Die Gefangene
Der Ring*

**Antonin Dvořák
(1841-1904)**

*Vedrai, piccolo amor . . . Tutti i fior
(Madame Butterfly)*

**Giacomo Puccini
(1858-1924)**

- Intermission -

To This We've Come
(The Consul)

Gian-Carlo Menotti
(b. 1911)

The Old Maid and the Thief
Act I, scene i

Au Bord de l'Eau
Prison
Pleurs d'Or

Gabriel Fauré
(1845-1924)

Mira, o Norma
(Norma)

Vincenzo Bellini
(1801-1835)

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Doctor of Musical Arts

University of North Texas
College of Music

presents

A Doctoral Recital

CLOYCE BEARD-STRADLEY, mezzo soprano

accompanied by
Richard Di Fiore, piano

Monday, April 27, 1998

6:30 pm

Concert Hall

- Frauenliebe, Opus 60* Karl Löwe
Seit ich ihn gesehen
Er, der Herrlichste von allen
Ich kann's nicht fassen, nicht glauben
Du Ring an meinem Finger
Helft mir, ihr Schwestern!
Süsser Freund, du blickest mich verwundert an
An meinem Herzen, an meiner Brust
Nun has du mir den ersten Schermz gethan
Traum der eignen Tage
- La chanson du bébé* Gioacchino Rossini
À Grenade
Une bouche aimée Giovanni Bottesini
Phil Helm, double bass
- Canzonetta* Mrs. H.H.A. Beach
Je demande à l'oiseau
L'heure exquise Poldowski (Lady Dean Paul)
Dansons la gigue

Mélodies Passagères Samuel Barber
Puisque tout passe
Un cigne
Tombeau dans un parc
Le clocher chante
Départ

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Doctor of Musical Arts

The Steinway piano is the instrument of choice for College of Music concerts.

University of North Texas
College of Music

presents

A Doctoral Lecture Recital

CLOYCE BEARD-STRADLEY, *mezzo-soprano*

Monday, November 30, 1998

5:00 pm

Concert Hall

**A PERFORMER'S ANALYSIS OF BENJAMIN BRITTEN'S
PHAEDRA: *DRAMATIC CANTATA FOR MEZZO SOPRANO
AND SMALL ORCHESTRA, OP. 93***

Phaedra: Dramatic Cantata, Opus 93

Prologue:

In May in brilliant Athens . . .

Recitative:

My lost and dazzled eyes . . .

Presto:

You monster! . . .

Recitative:

O Gods of wrath . . .

Adagio

Lively:

My time's too short, your highness . . .

Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts

The Steinway piano is the instrument of choice for College of Music concerts.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Britten was one of the most respected British composers of the twentieth century. He is perhaps best remembered as a composer of English opera through works such as *Peter Grimes*, *Billy Budd*, and the chamber operas *The Rape of Lucretia*, *Albert Herring*, and *The Turn of the Screw*. Britten also made major contributions as a song composer and writer of vocal chamber music. The chamber style appealed to him partially because of the economy of required resources – use of a small number of voices and a small number of instruments - and also because this medium allowed the composer to concentrate on individual vocal and instrumental timbres.

A little-known chamber work by Britten is the dramatic cantata *Phaedra*, op.93, for mezzo-soprano and small orchestra (strings, harpsichord, and percussion). Completed on August 12, 1975, *Phaedra* was premiered on June 16, 1976, at the Aldeburgh festival by Janet Baker, for whom the piece was written. This cantata was composed near the end of Britten's life, during a time when his fatal illness prevented work on large-scale, lengthy pieces. Among his chamber works, the solo cantata was a musical form used only once by Britten, thus making *Phaedra* unique among Britten's *oeuvre*. It is not surprising that Britten chose a genre that flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – the cantata - as a vehicle for the story of *Phaedra*. He, along with other twentieth-century composers, began to recognize the value of music of the past.

Britten developed a close affinity to seventeenth-century music through the study and arrangements he made of the songs of Henry Purcell and in his edition of Purcell's chamber opera, *Dido and Aeneas*. As in his arrangements of Purcell's works, Britten employs clear allusions to Baroque music in *Phaedra* by the use of harpsichord and continuo in the recitatives, ornamentation, and word painting. Appropriately, the text is a reworking of the famous French classical tragedy, *Phèdre* by Jean Racine, which harkens back to the same period. Racine based his play on the ancient stories by Euripides and Seneca, seminal figures in Greek classical literature. Britten's use of a text based on the work of such a historically respected playwright is in keeping with his exceptional literary tastes; he set to music the texts of such noteworthy authors as Shakespeare, Melville, Auden, Verlaine, and Pushkin. The text for Britten's setting of *Phaedra* is a translation of Racine's play by the American poet Robert Lowell. It is not a literal translation in that Lowell's intent was not merely to translate the text, but to create a new artwork based upon the old that could be accessible to English-speaking audiences. From Lowell's complete play, Britten extracted Phaedra's key speeches that deal with her three confessions of incestuous love for her stepson, Hippolytus. These monologues are set in a series of recitatives and arias that make up the entirety of this chamber cantata.

Phaedra, though set for solo voice, may be viewed as an operatic work with a complete story line having a character who grows and develops. Although Phaedra's husband, Theseus, is not presented as a separate character, his presence is felt within the orchestral accompaniment, whether it be the joyous A major introduction at the beginning when she speaks of the memory of him and their wedding, or the agitation in

the strings when she speaks to him about her lust for his son, Hippolytus. The orchestration, likewise, serves to introduce the other characters of the drama, Hippolytus and Oenone (her maid), through orchestral motives associated with them.

In order to gain complete understanding of *Phaedra*, this document will begin with an investigation into the historical background of Racine's *Phèdre* and the conventions of French tragedy from which it arose. Lowell's translation method will then be explored in comparison to Racine's play. In turn, Britten's extractions from Lowell's translation will be examined. Further, the baroque elements of the cantata and the compositional ideas inherited by Britten from Henry Purcell will be included. Finally, there will be an inspection of the character of Phaedra and Britten's interpretation through orchestration and melodic choices.

Only a small portion of Phaedra's character is evident on the surface of this cantata. Investigation into her background through Racine's play and Lowell's translation along with Britten's dramatic interpretation through music is necessary for complete comprehension of her mental state and underlying thoughts in order to bring about an emotionally accurate portrayal of the role. Britten himself labeled *Phaedra* a "dramatic cantata." Therefore, the drama and its text-musical relationships must be uncovered. Examination of these facets will assist in the understanding of Britten's musical choices and their interpretation.

CHAPTER II

TEXT

Biography: Jean Racine

The French classical playwright Jean Racine was born at La Ferté-Milon (which is not far from Paris) and was baptized on December 22, 1639. He was the oldest child of Jean Racine and Jeanne Sconin. The young Racine was less than two years old when his mother died, shortly after giving birth to his sister, Marie, in 1641. Two years later Racine's father died and since no one individual desired to take both children, they went to separate homes. Marie went to live with her maternal grandfather, Pierre Sconin, while Racine went to live with his paternal grandmother Marie (Desmoulins) Racine. After his grandmother lost her husband in 1649, she retired, along with Racine, to the Jansenist¹ retreat of Port-Royale des Champs. The influence of the Jansenist doctrine² would have a profound effect on the religious convictions and later plays of Racine.

¹ "The Jansenists held and taught extremely rigorous views concerning original sin and man's resulting state of utter depravity. They were the object of some persecution because their teachings seemed to support the idea of predestination, which conflicted with the Church's position on the freedom of the will." James L. Sanderson and Irwin Gopnik, eds., *Phaedra and Hippolytus: Myth and Dramatic Form* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966), 109.

² Jansenism was the doctrine set forth by Jansenius, Archbishop of Ypres in his book *Augustinus* (1640). It is a clarification of the teaching of St. Augustine dealing with divine grace which can be bestowed on or withheld from any man at God's will. Conversely, Jesuits believe that grace is available for everyone.

While at Port- Royale, he was also introduced to the classics of Latin and Greek literature. Racine's formal education began at the Collège de Beauvais, Port-Royale école des Granges, and continued at the Collège d'Harcourt, in Paris, where he studied law.

Racine's first play was *Amasie*, which has not survived. On June 20, 1664, Molière's acting troupe at the Palais-Royale theatre produced Racine's first surviving play *La Thébaine ou les frères ennemis*. Molière's troupe also performed *Alexandre le Grand*, Racine's first play to be acclaimed as a great success, on December 4, 1665. Disappointed in the performance of Molière's company, Racine secretly negotiated with another troupe at the Hôtel de Bourgogne to present a second performance of *Alexandre le Grand*. This caused a permanent rift between Racine and Molière. To add insult to injury, Racine had also persuaded Molière's leading actress, Thérèse du Parc, to join him not only as his leading actress, but also as his mistress. From that point forward, the acting group of the Hôtel de Bourgogne produced all of Racine's plays through *Phèdre*.

Another crucial parting of the ways that would affect Racine's future and reputation occurred in association with *Alexandre le Grand*. Racine had taken the play to the older and more experienced dramatist, Pierre Corneille. After reading the play, Corneille told him that he should not write drama, that his talent lay elsewhere, perhaps in poetry. Racine went ahead with his production, and with the success of *Alexandre le Grand* the break in his relationship with Corneille was complete.

Racine's next play was *Andromaque* (1667), the first of his major tragedies, followed by his only comedy, *Les Plaideurs* (1668). At this time in his personal life, his

mistress Mlle. du Parc had died either in childbirth or from the complications of an abortion. In 1679, Catherine Monvoisin – recognized in France as “La Voisin,” the poisoner - was on trial for her own crimes when she accused Racine of murdering Mlle. du Parc by poisoning. Although La Voisin upheld her story even while being tortured, the authorities never acted on this information and Racine never faced prosecution.

Britannicus (1669) and *Bérénice* (1670), Racine’s next tragedies, were set in Rome. In *Bérénice*, he introduced the idea of a love interest which appealed to the modern audience. This also existed in his subsequent plays. *Bajazet* (1672) dealt with Turkish history, and was followed by *Mithridate* (1673), another Roman tragedy. Racine returned to Greek mythology for his play *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1674), which Voltaire was said to have “regarded as his [Racine’s] greatest [tragedy].”³ The role of Iphigénie was created by Racine’s current mistress, Marie Desmares Champmeslé, who had been the leading lady in all of his plays since *Bérénice*, and who would later portray the role of Phèdre.

Phèdre (1677), Racine’s final play for the theatre, was a bridge between his secular and final two sacred works, containing elements of both. It was completed in 1676 and performed on New Year’s Day, 1677. A conspiracy led by Duchesse de Bouillon, the Duc de Nevers, and the poetess Antoinette du Ligier de la garde Deshoulières, surrounded the premiere of *Phèdre*. They covertly paid a rival playwright, Jacques Pradon, to write a play on the same subject as Racine’s new play: the story of

³Kenneth Muir, introduction to *Jean Racine: Five Plays* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), xi.

Phaedra and Hippolytus. The performance of Pradon's play *Phèdre et Hippolyte* followed two days after Racine's premiere. The conspirators had purchased the tickets for many of the seats at the Hôtel de Bourgogne to make sure that the audience remained sparse. Meanwhile, Pradon's play opened to a packed house at the Hôtel de Guénégaud. This initiated the "Quarrel of the Sonnets" in which members of each faction wrote sonnets against the opposing group. At one point, some of the nobility became upset with Racine, blaming him for some of the slanderous statements made against them, but the intervention of King Louis XIV saved him from their wrath. After the initial (though artificial) failure, Racine's *Phèdre* became extremely popular. Not only did the king have it performed repeatedly at court, but when the rival troupes of the Hôtel de Guénégaud and the Hôtel de Bourgogne united to form the Comédie Française in 1680, they selected *Phèdre* for their initial performance.

Racine never revealed the reasons for his decision to discontinue writing for the secular theatre following *Phèdre*. Of course, there was a considerable amount of humiliation involved with *Phèdre*'s premiere, and perhaps this led Racine to seek solace in a reconciliation with "his former teachers at Port-Royale, who objected to most secular literature and disliked plays as violently as the Puritans of Shakespeare's day."⁴ This desire to return to his Jansenist beliefs was already evident in the preface to *Phèdre*:

The passions are exhibited only in order to show all the disorder of which they are the cause, and vice is painted everywhere in colors which make its hideousness recognized and hated. That is the proper end which everyone who works for the public should bear in mind. And that is what the first tragic poets kept in sight

⁴Kenneth Muir, *Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine, Ibsen* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961), 63-64.

above all else... It would be very desirable if our works were as solid and full of useful instruction as those of these poets. That might perhaps be a way of reconciling tragedy with a great number of people, famous for their piety and their doctrine, who have recently condemned it; and who would judge it, without a doubt, more favorably if the authors worried as much about instructing their audiences as about entertaining them, and they thereby followed the true purpose of tragedy.⁵

Another reason for leaving the theatre could have been his marriage to Catherine de Romanet on June 1, 1677, with whom he had two sons and five daughters. She was said to have disapproved of the stage, perhaps because she knew that Racine's mistresses had always been cast in the leading roles of his plays. In addition to this, King Louis XIV appointed Racine, along with Racine's old friend Nicolas Boileau, to the post of Royal Historiographer. His appointment was made under the condition that he was to sever all ties with the theatre in order to devote his time to the king's travels and exploits. Though both Racine and Boileau were the Historiographers, Boileau's ill health prevented travel and so the traveling responsibilities were left to Racine.

Whatever the reasons, Racine's association with secular theatre came to an end with *Phèdre*. However, the king's consort, Madame de Maintenon, convinced him to write two religious plays for the convent of Saint-Cyr. His play *Esther*, a biblical tragedy with choral interludes composed by Jean-Baptiste Moreau, was performed in 1689 and *Athalie*, a religious drama that more closely adhered to the form established in his secular works, followed in 1691. Racine's last work to be completed was probably the *Abrégé*

⁵ Sanderson and Gopnik, eds., *Phaedra and Hippolytus: Myth and Dramatic Form*, 112-113.

de l'histoire de Port-Royale (Short History of Port-Royale) before his death from liver cancer on April 21, 1699.

Elements of French Tragedy

French tragedy, a part of the classical movement initiated by Pléiade, was based on the imitations of ancient Greek and Latin tragedy. The first French tragedy was *Cléopâtre* (1552) by Jodelle. Early tragedies were static, lyric, rhetorical and not dramatic in character, and were constructed mainly from monologues, narratives, and choruses. These plays were not usually adaptations of ancient dramas but were new works based on historical subjects from Roman, Greek, biblical or modern history. They had five acts, various poetic meters, and employed the Unities of Time, Place, and Action. The Unities were principles set forth by Aristotle that dictated the idea that the tragedy was to be confined to a single action in one place and all within the same day.⁶

Tragedies in the early seventeenth century were dominated by elements that appealed to the common people. There were stories based on the lives of the saints, such as *Jean d'Arc*, historical subjects, and stories based on poems of Aristo and Tasso. At this time, the classical chorus was dropped and the Unities were abandoned. Playwrights also began to mix comic scenes with the tragic ones. The first French dramatist to use this style was Alexandre Hardy (fl. 1595-1633) who wrote approximately seven hundred plays of which thirty-four survive.

⁶Corneille and Racine sometimes took this a step further in later tragedies – confining the tragedy to only a few hours in a single place.

From about 1628-1636, the rules of French classical drama were being established. Both the common people and the aristocracy attended the theater. With the addition of aristocracy to the seventeenth-century audience, vulgar and indecent language that had previously been used in the theatre was abandoned in favor of *language galant*. This galant language, used by both Corneille and Racine, had restrained expressions and descriptions with few picturesque effects while avoiding colloquial language. In 1637, Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid*, commonly regarded as the play that founded French tragedy, premiered. French tragedy had now become a psychological drama instead of a rhetorical one. The exploration of emotional crises and mental or moral dilemmas took precedence over visual pageantry and elaborate language.

Jean Racine was not considered an innovator in the French classical theater. Instead, he molded the conventions that had already been established in the written documents and works of Pierre Corneille and l'Abbé d'Aubignac. Corneille published his plays in 1660 as well as three theoretical discourses that are invaluable for the information which they contain concerning the traditions of tragedy. In *Le Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique*, Corneille described the goals, the constituent parts, and the divisions of the dramatic poem. *Le Discours de la tragédie et des moyens de la traiter selon le vraisemblable ou le nécessaire* was a commentary on the principles of Aristotle. Finally, *Le Discours des trois unités d'action, de jour et de lieu* dealt with the technical aspects of a play's construction including the exposition, the development, the divisions into acts and scenes, and the three Unities. In 1660, l'Abbé de Aubignac also published a guidebook for playwrights called *La Pratique du théâtre* which

presented the seventeenth-century perspective of the methods used in writing plays. Therefore, Corneille was the innovator who codified the rules and goals of tragedy; l'Abbé de Aubignac was the theoretician who enumerated compositional procedures; and Racine assimilated their ideals to create a finished version of French tragedy.

The ancient Greek writer, Aristotle, laid the foundation of the French classical tragedy in his work *Poetics*. It is interesting to note that the French believe there have been only two periods of dramatic tragedy – those of ancient Greece and seventeenth century France. In addition, the English believe that there have been only two tragic periods – those of ancient Greece and Elizabethan England. Whatever the case, Aristotle's *Poetics* became the basis of tragedy in the seventeenth-century.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle described the tragic elements of the plot (the action of the play), character (moral qualities which are exhibited in the drama), diction, and thought (intellectual qualities which are displayed). He also mentioned two non-essential elements: the spectacle – which included every physical aspect of the performance, i.e. production, scenery, lighting, costumes, and actors' entrances and exits; and the melody – which has to do with the musical accompaniment. For Aristotle, the emphasis of the play should be upon the plot (action) above all. The movement of the plot was governed by the three Unities – Time, Place, and Action.

The subject of the plot had specific characteristics that were required in order for the play to be deemed a tragedy. It was essential for the subject to have a "recognition" that would cause a movement of the passions. A "recognition" as defined by Aristotle would include: murder, committed by the hero without knowing his victim – only to

recognize the victim later, as in *Oedipus Rex*, when Oedipus unknowingly kills his own father; or a type of recognition that occurs at the moment just before the act of murder is going to be committed, whereby the hero discovers that he knows the victim and the victim is then saved. Aristotle preferred the first type of recognition, because in the second type the real tragedy was averted and the catharsis could not be complete. Racine believed that the action that caused the death of a person whose identity was not known could not be the tragedy. It did not become a tragedy until the recognition took place. So, according to Racine, the murder of Oedipus's father in and of itself does not constitute a tragedy; the recognition is the tragic moment that will arouse the emotions.

The purging of emotions, or catharsis, was the ultimate goal of tragedy. The writers had to treat the heroic characters in such a way as to bring about the utmost purgation. Aristotle believed that the actions of the hero should lead to his downfall and subsequently cause the audience to have both pity and fear for the hero. Corneille, in discussing *Le Cid*, said:

Our Pity ought to give us fear of falling into similar misfortune, and purge us of that excess of love which is the cause of their disaster . . . but I do not know that it gives us that, or purges us, and I am afraid that the reasoning of Aristotle on this point is but a pretty idea . . . it is not requisite that these two passions [pity and fear] always serve together . . . it suffices . . . that one of the two bring [*sic*] about the purgation....⁷

According to Aristotle, the heroes, upon whom rest the ability to arouse the pity and fear, could not be perfect. In order to have pity, fear, and then catharsis, the hero must

⁷“The Art of Literature: DRAMA: Tragedy: THEORY OF TRAGEDY: Neoclassical theory,” *Brittanica Online*, <http://www.eb.com:180/cgi-bin/g?DocF=macro/5003/81/284.html> [Accessed 14 September 1998].

experience a downfall resulting from a flaw. This downfall is inevitable, as without it there would be no tragedy. A hero's own evil nature or depravity could not cause his demise, but it should be caused by a lack of knowledge of the circumstances to which the action is related. Racine stated his ideas on the heroic character in his preface to

Andromaque:

However that may be, the public have been too kind to me for me to trouble about the individual annoyance of two or three people who would insist on our reforming all the heroes of antiquity to make perfect heroes of them. I sympathize with their desire to see on the stage only spotless characters. But I beg them remember that it is not for me to change the rules of drama. . . . And Aristotle, very far from asking perfect heroes of us, insists on the contrary that tragic characters, namely those whose misfortune causes the catastrophe of the tragedy, should be neither entirely good, nor entirely evil. He does not want them to be utterly good, because the punishment of a good man would excite in the spectator indignation rather than pity; nor that they be utterly evil because one cannot at all pity a scoundrel. So they must be moderately good, that is to say, good with some defect and should fall into misfortune through some fault which arouses pity and not detestation.⁸

The French playwrights, especially Racine, attempted to make these characters and their situations believable. The audience needed to believe that both of these aspects could be real. This was a trait referred to in French as *vraisemblable* or verisimilitude. More than this, the characters also had to be capable of existence in any time period or place. From these ideals came a simplicity of characterization, instead of individual complexities, along with a remoteness of time and place in order to free the subject from the limitations of historical epoch. This was not only a technical idea that the writers employed, but it was also a practical one. The fixed scenery in many of the theatres did

⁸ *Jean Racine: Complete Plays*, trans. Samuel Solomon, intro. Katherine Wheatley (New York: Random House, 1967), 141.

not allow for imagination of location. It possibly consisted of a generic palace, seascape, forest, etc., that was used for every play that was performed at that theatre. Therefore, if the playwright did not require elaborate and exacting scenic requirements, the play could be performed with verisimilitude at any location. The idea of verisimilitude was not the same as verismo – as found in opera. Whereas verismo dealt with what could have been everyday, realistic occurrences, in French tragedy there is a heightened representation of truth with an “idealized image of human sentiments at their highest degree of intensity.”⁹

The truthfulness that the playwrights utilized did not allow for the fantastic spectacle upon which opera of the seventeenth century thrived. Tragedy could not have comic relief or colloquial language; it had to be noble and tragic in its vocabulary. Bloodshed, violence, or crowd scenes were not allowed on the stage. The drama was not in the spectacle with its pageantry and visual appeal, but it was found in the crisis of emotion, emotional shifts, opposition of wills or ideas, and crucial dilemmas and decisions. In the preface of *Bérénice*, Racine stated his fundamental principles of tragedy, which governed the way he wrote his plays including *Phèdre*.

It is by no means essential that there should be blood and corpses in a tragedy; it is enough that its action should be great and its actors heroic, that passions should be aroused, and everything in it should breathe that majestic sadness in which all of the pleasure of a tragedy resides....

...For a long time I have been wanting to see whether I could construct a tragedy with that simplicity of action so greatly to the taste of the Ancients. For it is one of the first precepts they have left us. “Let whatever you do,” says Horace, “be ever simple”...

...Only what is probable can move us in a tragedy. And what is there probable about a multitude of things happening in one day which could hardly happen in several weeks? There are some who think that this simplicity is a sign of lack of

⁹Eugene Vinaver, *Racine and Poetic Tragedy*, trans. P. Mansell Jones (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), 6.

invention. They do not reflect that on the contrary all invention consists of making something out of nothing, and that all that multiplicity of incidents has always been the refuge of poets who did not feel in their own genius either enough fertility or enough strength to hold their audience through five Acts, by a simple plot, sustained by the depth of passions, by the beauty of the sentiments and by the elegance of the expression.¹⁰

The Story of *Phèdre* (*Phaedra*)

The story of Phaedra, Hippolytus, and Theseus is an ancient one. The idea of Phaedra's incestuous love had many inspirations one of which was the Egyptian story *Tale of Two Brothers*. It is also possible that it was borrowed from an early Canaanite source. Euripides wrote the Greek version; later, the Roman writer Seneca adapted it. Using both of these plays, Racine developed his own version of the story, originally called *Phèdre et Hippolyte* (1677), now known simply as *Phèdre*.

Phaedra was the daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë, the rulers of Crete. Pasiphaë was cursed by Aphrodite to mate with a bull from whence she gave birth to the Minotaur. Theseus was the son of Aegeus and Aethra, the rulers of Athens. In order to free Athens from King Minos's decree that Athenian youths and maidens must be sent yearly as a sacrifice to the Minotaur, Theseus was to kill the beast in the maze at Crete. He was successful in his quest with the aid of Ariadne, Phaedra's sister. Theseus abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos. Later, he captured the queen of the Amazons, Antiope. Either she or her sister Hippolyte bore Theseus's son Hippolytus. After Antiope's death, Theseus married Phaedra who then became infatuated with her stepson, Hippolytus. When Hippolytus rejected her, she accused him of rape. Theseus, thinking that

¹⁰ *Jean Racine: Complete Plays*, trans. Solomon, intro. Wheatley, 376-377.

Hippolytus had betrayed him, prayed to Poseidon to summon a beast from the sea to kill Hippolytus. The beast arose from the sea and frightened Hippolytus's horses. Hippolytus was then dragged to death, after which his innocence was discovered.

Euripides's Version

Little is known about the Greek writer Euripides (485? –406?B.C.). He wrote approximately nineteen plays, although he has been credited with eighty or ninety. There exists some historical knowledge of the conventions used in the theatre at that time. Plays were performed in daylight in an amphitheatre. They sometimes used elaborate machinery, but the staging that they employed was not realistic. There was no curtain, so the scenery could not be changed. Violent deeds and actions were never displayed on the stage. Male actors, wearing masks that expressed their rank or attitude, played all of the roles. The chorus in the Greek theatre was continually on stage. It served to introduce the characters, to give background information, to provide continuity from scene to scene, and to comment on the action. It was within these conventions that Euripides wrote *Phaedra*.

Euripides wrote two versions of the story of Phaedra. The first survives only in fragments. In it, Phaedra was very wicked and her only desire was to satisfy her passion for Hippolytus, rather than to eliminate it. The second version was entitled *Hippolytus*. As the title indicates, Hippolytus, not Phaedra, was the central character of the drama. In this play, Hippolytus was a chaste huntsman who worshipped the goddess Artemis

(Diana).¹¹ He ignored the goddess Venus (Aphrodite)¹² and denied himself any amorous encounters. This angered Venus greatly. To punish and eventually destroy Hippolytus, Venus caused his stepmother, Phaedra, to be consumed with passion for him.¹³ Phaedra confessed this love to her nurse who then relayed the information to Hippolytus.

Hippolytus, in disgust, rejected Phaedra. She never saw or spoke to him on stage. Since there are no stage directions, it is not known how Phaedra discovered that she had been rejected. She may have overheard her nurse and Hippolytus speaking. At any rate, in despair, Phaedra committed suicide, possibly by hanging. When Theseus returned, he found a note left by Phaedra accusing Hippolytus of rape. Theseus prayed to Poseidon (Neptune)¹⁴ to send a beast into Hippolytus's path. The beast frightened the horses and Hippolytus, caught in the reins, was dragged to death. Artemis revealed the innocence of Hippolytus to Theseus and brought him to die in the arms of Theseus.

Seneca's Phaedra

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (4 B.C. – 65 A.D.) was born in Cordoba, Spain. Seneca based eight of his nine plays upon works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. His

¹¹“goddess of the moon and of hunting, protectress of women.” Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology* (New York: Avenel Books, 1929), 899.

¹²“goddess of beauty and love.” *Ibid.*, 935.

¹³At this time in Greece, it was not unusual for a young woman to be married by the age of fourteen. Though Phaedra already has two children at this point in the play, it is quite possible that she is still very young. This is probably not an older woman infatuated with a younger man scenario, but simply a young girl who has fallen in love with a young man.

¹⁴“god of the sea.” *Bulfinch's Mythology*, 939.

version of *Phaedra* was probably derived from Euripides's lost version, and much of the story remains the same. Phaedra played a more important role in Seneca's tragedy than in Euripides's *Hippolytus*. The Phaedra of Seneca's play was a victim. Venus hated Phaedra's family, not Hippolytus, and cursed Phaedra with desire for her stepson. Seneca incorporated the false rumor of Theseus's death, which allowed Phaedra to confess her love for Hippolytus. She confronted Hippolytus herself. He was disgusted by her declaration of love and drew his sword in order to kill her. Instead he threw the sword at her feet. When Theseus returned, Phaedra used the sword as proof that Hippolytus tried to rape her. After Hippolytus's death – by the same means as Euripides's play – Phaedra declared that Hippolytus was innocent and then killed herself.

Seneca's plays were very popular during the Renaissance. In fact, many playwrights used his version of the play, rather than that of Euripides, as their model.

Racine's Phèdre

In Racine's *Phèdre*, like that of Seneca, Phaedra was the central figure. Phaedra admitted her love of Hippolytus to her nurse as in Euripides. However, through the same rumor of Theseus's death, as found in Seneca, Phaedra was able to confess her love directly to Hippolytus. (Without the rumor of Theseus's death there would have been no confession, and thus, no drama. Similarly, without Theseus's return there would have been no consequence for her confession and thus, no tragedy.) When the confession was made to Hippolytus, instead of drawing his sword to kill her as in Seneca, Phaedra took the sword to kill herself and then was prevented from doing so by Oenone. Theseus returned, and after her nurse, Oenone, convinced Phaedra to accuse Hippolytus of rape to

save her reputation, she did so. Theseus prayed to Poseidon to kill Hippolytus. His death took place in the same manner as the other plays. Oenone, overcome with guilt, threw herself into the sea. Phaedra, in extreme remorse, confessed the truth to Theseus as she died from poisoning.

Racine introduced a character in *Phèdre* that was not present in either drama by Euripides or Seneca. The character, called Aricie (Aricia), was Hippolytus's beloved.

This Aricia is not a child of my invention. Virgil relates that Hippolytus married her, and she bore him a son, after Aesculapius¹⁵ had brought him back to life. And I have read too, in certain authors, that Hippolytus had married and brought to Italy an Athenian maiden of high birth, named Aricia, who had given her name to an Italian township.¹⁶

There are several reasons that compelled Racine to introduce Aricia into his story. In order for a modern audience to be interested in a mythological subject, modern ideals had to be superimposed upon it. The seventeenth century playwrights would insert a love interest, along with political intrigue, into their plots. Aricia took care of both of these aspects in Racine's drama. Not only was she Hippolytus's love, but she was also from the family of his father's mortal enemies. These enemies were the Pallantides also called the sons of Pallas. They had conspired against Theseus to deprive him of the throne of Athens. Theseus swore to exterminate their race. Theseus had decreed that Aricia could not marry. This would reveal another purpose that Aricia fulfilled; she was the flaw of

¹⁵“The god of medicine and healing....He was killed by a thunderbolt because, in one version, he had violated the order of nature by restoring Hippolytus to life.” Bergen Evans, *Dictionary of Mythology* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1970), 8-9.

¹⁶ *Jean Racine: Four Greek Plays*, trans. R.C. Knight (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 106.

Hippolytus. As has been discussed, in the French dramatic tradition, the hero must have a defect in order to have a downfall. If the character were perfect, there could be no fall. For the perfect heroes, the French writers introduced the convention of *tragédie heureuse* in which the hero overcomes the danger at the last moment and the villains are then punished. This can be compared to the *lieto fine* of Italian opera in that both employed artificial happy endings. Racine did not want a happy ending for Hippolytus. Therefore, Hippolytus had to have an imperfection: his “involuntary passion for Aricia.”¹⁷ For this reason, his death could occur and bring about the utmost sympathy.

Aricia’s final purpose was to spark the jealousy of Phaedra. When Hippolytus rejected Phaedra, she did not immediately want to accuse him of attempted rape. After she discovered that he was in love with Aricia, her jealousy overcame her and his fate was sealed. This not only added another dimension to Phaedra’s character, but it allowed the audience to have more sympathy for Phaedra than when she simply condemned Hippolytus to death out of cruelty in order to repay him for his rejection of her.

In addition to the treatment of a love interest that was required in seventeenth-century theater, Racine also had to find a way to employ the Greek gods and goddesses in a believable way for the French audience. By this time, Christianity had been introduced to the world and no one believed in the all-powerful gods of ancient Greece. To make the idea of gods convincing, they were used in an allegorical or symbolic manner. The gods might represent justice, or providence of the God of Christian beliefs. At times, they had to take part in the action. However, in French tragedy, the gods could not be seen. (This

¹⁷ *Jean Racine: Four Greek Plays*, trans. Knight, 106.

was not true of opera, which often allowed for them on stage.) At the time Racine was writing his plays, Lully was composing operas for the Paris stage in the Académie Royale de Musique. Racine probably did not approve “of its [opera’s] moral tone or its frivolous use of classical mythology.”¹⁸ Thus, Racine and the other writers of French tragedy never brought the gods onto the stage. They were spoken about and were usually used to help or harm a mortal hero. For instance, if a hero fell into misfortune for no apparent reason, in order to produce a sympathetic response, the god was blamed for his demise and then the god would be perceived as unjust. Racine sought to direct the attention away from the gods and towards the human actors. When Phaedra blamed her incestuous desire for Hippolytus on Venus, the other characters were not aware of Venus’s curse. This gave the audience the choice of accepting Phaedra’s excuse for her actions or casting the blame on the goddess Venus.

Before discussing the character of Phaedra further, some mention should be made of other methods that Racine typically employed in his tragedy. He followed the conventions already set forth by Corneille in his interpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Racine’s stories tended to include themes of love, jealousy, and hatred all taking place in a brief period (Unity of Time) and in a singular place (Unity of Place). The fluctuation of these themes became the units labeled in the drama as scenes and acts. The unity of action in Racine’s plays was displayed by the simplicity of his plots, the threads of which usually converged on a single central character. He described this in the aforementioned preface to *Bérénice*. The typical characters found in Racine’s tragedies are the *grands*

¹⁸ *Jean Racine: Four Greek Plays*, trans. Knight, xi.

amoureux (or *grandes amoureuses*) – i.e., Phaedra, the *jeunes filles amoureuses* – i.e., Aricia, the *jeunes premières* – i.e., Hippolytus, and the *confidants* – i.e., Theramenes and Oenone. The *confidants* themselves were an artificial device employed as a sounding board for the confessions of their masters (or mistresses). Interestingly, Racine's *confidants* were not passive; often they spoke the fateful notion that led to the eventual ruin of the hero (or heroine). Oenone did this when she urged Phaedra to confess her love to Hippolytus and later convinced her to accuse him of rape. The vocabulary used by all of these characters was known as *style noble*. This included no technical words and no names of common or vulgar objects. The images Racine used were laurels and trophies for military glory. Blood represented not only the blood of violence, but also the blood of heritage. In addition, he used clichés in conjunction with lovers' language. In later plays, the lovers' language was replaced with a religious tone. *Phèdre* has both the lovers' language and a moral and religious tone. It was Racine's last play for the public theatre just before his retreat to his Jansenist roots. This undoubtedly affected not only the overall treatment of the play itself, but more specifically, his treatment of the character of Phaedra.

Phaedra is one of the most complex and tragic heroines in the tradition of theater. She has been portrayed by some of the greatest actresses in history- Racine's mistress Mlle. la Champmeslé, Eleanor Duse, and Sarah Bernhardt. Racine was careful to give Phaedra the heroic qualities that would make her a strong and noble character as well as the inner turmoil that would produce an intense psychological drama. He describes his treatment of the character in the preface to *Phèdre*.

I am not surprised that this character was so successful in Euripides' time, and now again in our own, considering that it has every quality required by Aristotle in the tragic hero, and proper to arouse compassion and terror. For Phèdre is not altogether guilty, and not altogether innocent. She is drawn by her destiny, and the anger of the Gods, into an unlawful passion, which she is the first to hold in horror. She makes every endeavor to overcome it. She chooses death rather than disclose it to anyone. And when forced to reveal it, she speaks of it with such shame and confusion as leave no doubt that her crime is rather a punishment from the Gods, than an impulse of her own will.

I have even taken pains to make her a little less odious than she is in the tragedies of antiquity, where she brings herself, unprompted, to accuse Hippolytus. I felt that a false testimony was something too base, too black, to put into the mouth of a Princess possessed otherwise of sentiments so noble and virtuous. Such baseness seemed to me more fitting to a Nurse, who might have more slave-like propensities; though even she only enters upon the lying accusation to save the life and honor of her mistress. If Phèdre acquiesces, it is because she is beside herself in the agitation of her thoughts, and the next moment she comes on with the intention of vindicating the guiltless and publishing the truth.¹⁹

Racine did not want Phaedra to be hated because that would not allow sympathy, and then no catharsis could take place. An evil and manipulative Phaedra would have nullified the tragedy of her death. The Abbé de la Porte reported in his *Anecdotes dramatiques*: "I have heard . . . that in a conversation Racine maintained that a good poet could get the greatest crimes excused and even inspire compassion for the criminals."²⁰ With Phaedra, "he succeeded so well in winning compassion for her misfortunes that the spectator has more pity for the criminal stepmother than for the virtuous Hippolytus."²¹ Racine seldom allowed his characters to discover their guilt as he did Phèdre. She had struggled with this guilt and in the beginning of the play she had decided to die (probably

¹⁹ *Jean Racine: Four Greek Plays*, trans. Knight, 105.

²⁰ Vinaver, *Racine and Poetic Tragedy*, 103.

²¹ *Ibid.*

by starving herself) rather than to admit to anyone else the truth about her sinful desire. The torment of her lust propelled the play along. At the end of the play, Phaedra was truly remorseful for her sins. As death began to overcome her from the poison she took, she finally achieved serenity and innocence. Her final speech ended with the word *pureté* which has a double meaning: the world has become more pure because her sins are no longer a part of it and she has been purified (or redeemed) from her sins and the torment that they produced through death. Solomon, in his commentary on Racine's plays, said of her:

...there can be little question that in the character of Phaedra, Racine, surpassing Euripides, has created the greatest feminine rôle in dramatic literature. Only Shakespeare's Cleopatra, fashioned with equal psychological penetration, broader imaginative flights, but perhaps somewhat less of that utter desolation which was Racine's unique achievement here, is worthy to be set beside it.²²

The play does not end with Phaedra's death; Theseus closes the play with the resolve to take Aricia as his daughter.

Robert Lowell: Biography

Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV was born on March 1, 1917, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the only child of Robert Lowell, a naval commander, and Charlotte Winslow. He received an early education at St. Mark's, an Episcopalian boarding school in Southborough, Massachusetts, where he was a below-average student. He was always bigger and stronger than any of the other students and was not above using his strength to get his way. At this time, he received his nickname "Cal" that would be with him the rest of his life. The name was derived partly from Caliban (a

²²*Jean Racine: Complete Plays*, trans. Solomon, intro. Wheatley, xxxviii.

character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*), who Lowell portrayed in a class reading of the play, and partly from Caligula, "the least popular Roman emperor with all the disgusting traits, the depravity that everyone assumed Cal had. So between the two, well, Caligula stuck and Caliban disappeared."²³ It was also at St. Mark's that Lowell discovered his desire to write. Richard Eberhardt, his schoolmaster, encouraged and nurtured that desire. After graduation, Lowell's mother convinced him to attend Harvard University in hopes that it would tame the rage for which they had already sought psychiatric help. Not long after he enrolled there, he quit going to class.

In May of 1936, while still at Harvard, Lowell met Anne Tuckerman Dick, to whom he would subsequently become engaged. Lowell's parents were against the marriage. Lowell's father wrote a letter stating such to Miss Dick's parents. When Lowell intercepted this letter, he became enraged and knocked his father to the floor. At this point, Lowell's mother decided that he had gone mad. In fact, this was to be the first of many manic episodes that had an undetermined association with female relationships. Eventually the engagement was broken and the marriage never took place. He remained at Harvard for another year, but because of the influence of John Crowe Ransom and the Southernist School of poetry, he transferred to Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, in 1937, where Ransom was the head of the English department. Ransom and Lowell developed a close relationship – Ransom had even stated that "Lowell is more than a

²³Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1982), 20.

student, he is more like a son to me."²⁴ Lowell married the novelist Jean Stafford in April of 1940 and in that same year he graduated from Kenyon College. He received the highest honors in his class: summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, and valedictorian. Lowell then attended Louisiana State University after accepting a fellowship there. Not long afterward he became obsessed with the Roman Catholic Church, was baptized into it, and declared that he and his wife must have another wedding ceremony because the first was not sanctified. His mania caused him to impose a rigorous diet and devotional schedule upon his wife. He even limited her reading materials to things specifically selected by him.

During his years at college, Lowell had several of his poems published in the college magazines and newspapers. By the summer of 1943, his poems made appearances in the *Sewanee Review*, the *Partisan Review* and the *Kenyon Review* (a publication founded by John Ransom in 1938). His own publication was to be a book of poetry entitled *Land of Unlikeness*, which was scheduled to go to press in September 1943. In August of that year, Lowell had received his letter of induction into the armed services. After sending an elaborate letter of refusal to President Roosevelt, Lowell was convicted for conscientious objection in October and sentenced to one year and one day in prison. Parole was granted after four months of incarceration. *The Land of Unlikeness* finally appeared in 1944, following his release from prison, to considerable critical acclaim. This collection represented the characteristic inner turmoil found in his poems of that period.

²⁴Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 72.

By 1946, Lowell was in nearly every literary magazine. His professional life flourished while in his private life he separated from his wife, announced that he was no longer Catholic, and requested a divorce. With the publication of his next important work – *Lord Weary's Castle* (December 1946), which contained poetry that was autobiographical in nature – Lowell took his place among the most respected American poets. Not only did Lowell receive numerous glowing reviews for *Lord Weary's Castle*, but he was also awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the work in April 1947. His talent was acknowledged throughout the country through offers that began to arrive for teaching positions at several universities including the University of Iowa and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He received an award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and was honored with the award of a Guggenheim fellowship. In June of 1947, he began the translation of *Phèdre* by Jean Racine and was “planning a ‘symbolic monologue by an insane woman’; it would be a thousand lines long, he said, and made him feel like Homer or Robert Browning.”²⁵

By April of 1948, Lowell's divorce from Jean Stafford was final. In 1949, he was committed to a mental institution after having a severe manic episode. While in the hospital, Lowell received shock therapy. These “enthusiasms” as he called them, would plague Lowell for the rest of his life. The woman with whom he was infatuated at the time was Elizabeth Hardwick, a writer and critic. She became his wife later that year. Hardwick would endure Lowell's bouts with manic depression and his numerous

²⁵Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 126.

hospitalizations along with the excessive marital infidelities that were associated with them until their divorce in 1972.

In the period of 1951-1957 Lowell published *Mills of the Kavenaugh* (1951) which was a book of dramatic monologues and poetry. He taught and lectured at various universities, and became a father when his daughter, Harriet, was born in 1957.

In 1958, he completed *Life Studies*, a book of twenty-four poems, for which he won the National Book Award for poetry. In the same year, he began work on several translations. He had already done versions of Rimbaud's, Valéry's, and Rilke's works in *Lord Weary's Castle*. Then "...for the whole of 1959 he more or less gave up attempting to write anything 'original'. He felt 'drained of new poems.'"²⁶ The poems on which he was working were to become a collection of over sixty translations called *Imitations*, published in 1961. His translation of Racine's *Phèdre* was also published in that year after having been completed in 1960. He wrote to the poet William Meredith:

[I feel] wonderfully athletic, hackish and ready for Opera, though I haven't done anything yet. I wonder if *Phèdre* or something like it could be given a singing version, though I'm still keen on *Benito*.²⁷

Lowell's interest in opera had been intensified after receiving a Ford Foundation grant to study opera in New York. He began to have hope of a theatrical production of *Phaedra* in either London or on Broadway. He imagined his ideal cast in a letter to Peter Taylor –

²⁶Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 276.

²⁷By this, he meant *Benito Cereno* by Herman Melville, which Lowell had adapted to iambic verse. Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 282.

a playwright at Royal Court Theatre in London: "Would Lawrence Olivier really do for Theseus?... There's a terrific role for a young aging woman."²⁸

Lowell's next few books of poetry, which indicated his involvement in civil rights and antiwar campaigns, include: *For the Union Dead* (1964), *Near the Ocean* (1967), and *Notebook 1967-1968* (1969). In the same decade, Lowell's trilogy of plays, *Old Glory*, received publication and performance. It contained an adaptation of Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Hawthorne's *My Kinsman Major Molyneaux*, and *Endecott and the Red Cross* which was taken from the following prose sources: *The Maypole of Merry Mount* and *Endecott and the Red Cross*, by Hawthorne and Thomas Morton's *New Canaan*.

In the early 70's Lowell had gone to England to teach. While there he met Lady Caroline Blackwood. He became infatuated with her and decided to leave Elizabeth Hardwick. Of course, a manic-depressive episode soon followed. This time, Lady Caroline was pregnant and after their son, Sheridan, was born Lowell got a quick divorce and marriage in Santo Domingo in 1972. In that year he also decided to publish poems that were based on letters that he received from Hardwick. This hurt her deeply and as many of their mutual friends rallied around her for support, they advised Lowell that the publication was morally wrong. Lowell paid no heed and published it anyway. He called the collection *The Dolphin* (1973) and received another Pulitzer Prize for it. In spite of the ill feelings from colleagues, they had to recognize its artistic value. His final volume of poetry was *Day by Day*, published in 1977.

²⁸Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 282.

Robert Lowell died of a heart attack in a taxicab on September 12, 1977, while he was on his way to visit Elizabeth Hardwick in New York, probably for a reconciliation. The obituaries referred to him as “perhaps the best English language poet of his generation.”²⁹

Lowell's *Phaedra*

Linguists have always found a daunting task in the translation of Racine's *Phèdre*. Robert Lowell chose to accept this challenge when asked by Eric Bentley to provide a translation for his edition of an anthology of classical theater. Lowell was well aware of the problems that lay before him as evidenced in his commentary “On Translating *Phèdre*”:

Racine's plays are generally and correctly thought to be untranslatable. His syllabic alexandrines³⁰ do not and cannot exist in English. We cannot reproduce his language, which is refined by the literary artifice of his contemporaries, and given a subtle realism and grandeur by the spoken idiom of Louis the Fourteenth's court. Behind each line is a for us lost knowledge of actors and actresses, the stage and the moment. Other qualities remain: the great conception, the tireless plotting, and perhaps the genius for rhetoric and versification that alone proves that the conception and plotting are honest. Matisse says somewhere that a reproduction requires as much talent for color as the original painting. . . .

...No translator has had the gift or luck to bring Racine into our culture.³¹

²⁹Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 473.

³⁰The alexandrine is a verse form that is commonly used in French poetry. It consists of twelve syllables with a caesura (pause) after the sixth syllable which is stressed, along with the final syllable. The secondary stress can occur on any syllable, making the alexandrine a flexible form.

The name “alexandrine” is derived from the use of that particular form in a collection of romances from the twelfth century about Alexander the Great called *Roman d'Alexandre*. In English, this form is known as iambic hexameter, though it has six primary accents.

³¹Robert Lowell and Jacques Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1961), 7-8.

Lowell began to work on *Phèdre* in the summer of 1947, but did not complete it until much later. He was working on *Phèdre* in 1958 and 1959 when he was also compiling his collection of translations of French, Greek, Italian, German, and Russian poetry. He said that he started the translations of the “Baudelaires . . . as exercises in couplets and quatrains and to get away from the longer, less concentrated problems of translating Racine’s *Phèdre*.”³² Teaching a course at the University of Iowa in French poetry gave Lowell a familiarity with the construction and poetic styles of French poets. By the time he attempted the translation of *Phèdre* he was comfortable in the genre. Lowell did the French translations himself; they were not adaptations of another translator.³³ Lowell said, “I did my own translation and as I read French fairly well, the text was very available to me.”³⁴

Why would a poet who had already gained fame and scholarly recognition for his own work seek artistic expression in the translation of the work of another individual? Lowell considered modern translations and adaptations necessary to enrich modern culture and to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the past. “In a way the whole point of translation – of my translation anyway – is to bring into English something that

³²*Robert Lowell: Collected Prose*, ed. and trans. Robert Giroux (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987), 234.

³³This was not the case in Lowell’s reworking of Lattimore’s translation of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*.

³⁴*Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1988), 132.

didn't exist in English before."³⁵

His philosophy of translation developed from translating Latin poems into English. He said, "I'd make little changes just impromptu . . . I began to have a certain disrespect for the tight forms. If you could make it easier by just changing syllables, then why not?"³⁶ Racine's alexandrine was a "tight form" with its prescribed number of syllables and designated accents, though its flexibility was found in the placement of secondary stress. Racine's text also contained pauses at the end of each line in order to have fewer runons:

Act V, scene 7 – Phèdre's death speech:

Déjà je ne vois *plus*³⁷ qu' à travers un nuage
 Et le ciel et l'*époux* que ma présence outrage;
 Et la mort, à mes *yeux* déroband la clarté,
 Rend au jour, qu'ils souillaient, toute sa pureté.³⁸

To break the bonds of the alexandrine, Lowell added syllables, shifts, accents, and runons. Thus, the couplets are aurally disguised, though they are quite obvious visually:

Act V, scene 7 – Phaedra's death speech:

³⁵*Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, Meyers, 137.

³⁶ Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 231.

³⁷Italicised syllables denote accent.

³⁸*Corneille, Molière, and Racine: Eight French Classic Plays*, ed. J.C. Lyons and Colbert Searles (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1932), 609.

A cold composure I have never known
 gives me a moment's poise. I stand alone
 and seem to see my outraged husband fade
 and waver into death's dissolving shade.
 My eyes at last give up their light, and see
 the day they've soiled resume its purity.³⁹

Lowell's own description of his method of translation is found in "On translating *Phèdre*:"

My meter, with important differences, is based on Dryden and Pope. In his heroic plays, Dryden uses an end-stopped couplet, loaded with inversions, heavily alliterated, and varied by short unrhymed lines. My couplet is runon, avoids inversions and alliteration, and loosens its rhythm with shifted accents and occasional extra syllables.⁴⁰

Lowell knew that the aural affect of the couplet was problematic when he told his colleague, Peter Taylor (while discussing the possibility of procuring a performance of *Phaedra*), that he was concerned "whether any actor could deliver and any audience hear the reams of heroic couplets of a rather pseudo seventeenth-century grandiosity."⁴¹

Lowell explained his preference for using the couplet in his translation:

I've always, when I've used it, tried to give the impression that I had as much freedom in choosing the rhyme word as I had in any of the other words....I wanted something as fluid as prose; you wouldn't notice the form, yet looking back you'd find that great obstacles had been climbed. And the couplet is pleasant in this way – once you've got your two lines to rhyme, then that's done and you can go on to the next. You're not stuck with the whole stanza to round out and build to a

³⁹Lowell and Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro*, 90.

⁴⁰Lowell and Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro*, 7-8.

⁴¹Paul Mariani, *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994), 291.

climax. A couplet can be a couplet or can be split and left as one line, or it can go on for a hundred lines; any sort of compression or expansion is possible. And that's not so in a stanza.⁴²

The rhyme employed by Lowell was a compulsion according to Ian Hamilton. He said, "Lowell's difficulty, however, was that rhyme and meter were for him very close to being the 'natural speech' that William Carlos Williams and his followers were always calling for....And it was probably harder for Lowell to discard rhymes than to invent them."⁴³

Though it seems logical that a translator should attempt to translate French couplets into English couplets, there are inherent difficulties to this process that prevent a literal translation. The translator must find an English word that corresponds to the French rhyming word found at the end of each line. A slightly altered meaning, although not a perfect solution, makes this possible. Critics attacked Lowell's translation because of this.

English poets with whom rhyming is not second nature pad their couplets by inserting a whole inert line – deadly to Racinian drama – or by placing an inert phrase at the end of a line for the sake of rhyme. Worst of all, they allow the rhyme to run away with the meaning.⁴⁴

Wheatley shows an example of this found in Lowell's translation of Phaedra's comparison of Hippolytus to Theseus:

What am I saying? Theseus is not dead.
He lives in you. He speaks, he's taller by a head.⁴⁵

The final line "he's taller by a head" was added and serves only to propagate the rhyme.

⁴²*Robert Lowell: Interviews and Memoirs*, ed. Meyers, 53-54.

⁴³Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 231-232.

⁴⁴*Jean Racine: Complete Plays*, trans. Solomon, intro. Wheatley, xvi.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

Lowell's translation focused on the rhyme rather than the meaning. Though the meaning remains virtually unaltered in this instance, the flavor is made more modern by this interpretation. One of the most shocking instances of liberties taken by Lowell occurs in Phaedra's confrontation with Hippolytus:

See, Prince! Look, this monster, ravenous
for her execution, will not flinch.
I want your sword's spasmodic, final inch.⁴⁶

"Now, that third line is not Racine – it is pure Lowell, and a distortion. Racine's *Phèdre* is not self-consciously making up an up-to-date sexual metaphor; to her, a sword is a sword."⁴⁷ In Racine's adaptation of Euripides's and Seneca's *Phaedra*, he added elements that appealed to modern taste (i.e. Aricia, the love interest). Lowell has added this Freudian reference to achieve the same end. In context, the sexual connotation is not so glaringly evident. The line has a dual meaning: that of Phaedra's desire for death and her desire for her lust to be sated.

Ian Hamilton refers to the discrepancies in literal meaning as "Lowellizations" especially with regard to Lowell's *Imitations*, but it also holds true for *Phaedra*.

The verb "to Lowell" might usefully have been invented for this book; certainly, there was much hesitation about what exactly these "translations" should be called....they had been speculative exercises: what would Rilke or Baudelaire be like if they "were writing their poems now and in America?"⁴⁸

⁴⁶Lowell and Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro*, 45.

⁴⁷Louis Simpson, "Matters of Tact," *Robert Lowell: A Portrait of the Artist in His Time*, ed. Michael London and Robert Boyers (New York: David Lewis Publisher, Inc., 1970), 111.

⁴⁸Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 289.

Referring to his version as a translation rather than an adaptation, Lowell invited the criticism of the literary field. Perhaps he should have heeded the advice of T. S. Eliot concerning *Imitations*:

I think the right title for this is *Imitations*... I think also that a subtitle is a mistake: your translations are indeed imitations, and if you use the word translation in the subtitle it will attract all those meticulous little critics who delight in finding what seems to them mis-translations.⁴⁹

However, Lowell ignored this advice as far as *Phaedra* was concerned and was then rebuked for his lack of faithfulness to the French text. In the *Kenyon Review*, George Steiner said:

I submit that *Phaedra* has an unsteady and capricious bearing on the matter of Racine. Far too often it strives against the grain of Racine's style and against the conventions of feeling on which the miraculous concision of that style depends... what Lowell has produced is a variation on the theme of *Phaedra*... The greater the poet, the more loyal should be his [the translator's] servitude to the original.⁵⁰

Not every critic chastised Lowell for his liberties taken in *Phaedra*. In his defense one critic said, "... if Racine must be translated into English, this is as good a translation as we are likely to get."⁵¹ For his own justification, Lowell admitted:

My version is *free*, nevertheless I have used every speech in the original, and almost every line is either translated or paraphrased. Racine is said to have written prose drafts and then versed them. We do not have the prose drafts, but I feel sure that necessities of line rhyme, etc. made for changes of phrasing and even of meaning. In versing Racine, I have taken the same liberty here and there, I have put in things that no French classical author would have used.

⁴⁹Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 289.

⁵⁰George Steiner, "Two Translations," *Kenyon Review* 23 (1961), 714-721, quoted in Hamilton, *Robert Lowell*, 290-291.

⁵¹Simpson, "Matters of Tact," 109.

I have translated as a poet, and tried to give my lines a certain dignity, speed, and flare.⁵²

Britten's Textual Choices

Benjamin Britten had met Robert Lowell in New York in 1968 (according to Mariani⁵³) or in 1969 (according to Mitchell⁵⁴) in order to discuss the concept of setting *Phaedra* to music. Britten demonstrated his preference for quality texts, already having set such authors as Auden, Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Blake, Melville, Pushkin, Eliot, and Mann to music. The idea of an opera based on Racine's *Phèdre* appealed to him. Carpenter believes that he chose the Racine text because "Britten found in the text the terrible self-reproaches of another Aschenbach,⁵⁵ as Phaedra faces her guilty lust for her husband's young son."⁵⁶

Phaedra, like Aschenbach, is similar to many of Britten's other characters who search for lost innocence. This theme occurs frequently in Britten's works, the most similar character being Lucretia. Both of these women are tortured – Phaedra by her own lusts and Lucretia by the lusts of Tarquinius. Both women die by their own hand. They

⁵²Lowell and Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro*, 8.

⁵³Mariani, *Lost Puritan*, 442.

⁵⁴Donald Mitchell, *Pictures From a Life: Benjamin Britten 1913-1976* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), photo 412. Britten and Pears had given recitals in New York and Boston in October of 1969, so this could be the most accurate time frame for their meeting.

⁵⁵Aschenbach is the leading character in Britten's final opera *Death in Venice*. Peter Pears created the role.

⁵⁶Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), 570.

are both ancient characters set in similar situations – their husbands have left them alone. Both roles are cast for mezzo-soprano (though Lucretia has a lower tessitura). Lucretia is an ideal operatic role as Phaedra would have been. Apparently the opportunity never presented itself to Britten. By the time he had found inspiration in the voice of Janet Baker, his illness would not allow a monumental operatic endeavor. Britten found himself reducing a play of five acts to enough text for a prologue, two recitatives, and two arias. He also had to fashion an understandable story line, propelled by a single character.

In Act I, scene 1 of Lowell's play, Hippolytus and Theramenes, his tutor and confidant, speak of plans for Hippolytus to go in search of Theseus. Act I, scene 2 contains a brief dialogue in which Oenone describes Phaedra's poor mental and physical condition to Hippolytus: Phaedra is going "to see the sun for the last time."⁵⁷ Phaedra's first appearance in the play is found in Act I, scene 3, from which Britten selected the text for the prologue in his cantata. Phaedra has resigned herself to death because she is consumed by her sinful desire for Hippolytus. Oenone prods Phaedra to reveal the reasons for her agony; Phaedra's first confession takes place in admitting her love for Hippolytus.

[My evil comes from farther off.] In May,
in brilliant Athens, on my marriage day,
I turned aside for shelter from the smile
of Theseus. Death was frowning in an aisle –
Hippolytus! I saw his face, turned white!⁵⁸

⁵⁷Lowell and Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro*, 17.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

Though Britten does not include all of the lines found in the text, he was obviously well acquainted with the complete text and therefore the meanings and interpretation of the lines that are available in the cantata must be influenced by the entire text. The only seemingly joyous line selected by Britten opens the cantata, "In May, in brilliant Athens, on my marriage day . . ." ⁵⁹ The lines surrounding were foreboding. Britten could not use the opening sentence in the speech because it was obviously a reply to something that Oenone had said. Britten's choice for the opening line displays true genius in that the audience hears something that would normally denote a cheerful story, but from there Phaedra begins her moral collapse. Thus he employs a Racinian technique of seasoning the sorrow with happiness to heighten the purgation.

The first recitative is a continuation of previous text found in Phaedra's speech:

My lost and dazzled eyes saw only night,
 capricious burnings flickered through my bleak
 abandoned flesh. I could not breathe or speak.
 I faced my flaming executioner,
 Aphrodite, my mother's murderer! . . . ⁶⁰

Phaedra blames her lust on Aphrodite, after trying to appease the goddess, to no avail. Phaedra still gives in to her desire for Hippolytus. Britten does not set the entire text here either. The missing text further describes how Phaedra drove Hippolytus away only to meet him again in Troezen. She is determined to continue her silent passion. The news of Theseus's death arrives in Act I, scene 4; in scene 5, Oenone convinces Phaedra to declare her love for Hippolytus. The first aria's text is excerpted from Act II, scene 5. The intervening scenes have told of Hippolytus's love for Aricia and their plans to rule together since Theseus has died. Phaedra speaks to Hippolytus in Act II, scene 5, initially

⁵⁹Lowell and Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro*, 24.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 25.

out of concern for her own son and his position now that Theseus is gone. Eventually, she admits her love for him:

(Hippolytus):
 [I cannot face my insolence. Farewell...]
 (Phaedra):
 You monster! You understood me too well!
 Why do you hang there, speechless, petrified,
 polite! My mind whirls. What have I to hide?
 Phaedra in all her madness stands before you.
 I love you! Fool, I love you, I adore you!...⁶¹

Britten uses some text repetition in this aria at this point.

Phaedra, in all her madness stands before you.
 Phaedra, Phaedra in all her madness stands before you.
 Fool I love you, fool I love you, love you, love
 you, love you, fool I adore you.⁶²

The repetition of “love you” appears trite when taken out of context, but when associated with Phaedra’s desperation, its usage is logical. Phaedra ends her part of the scene with this final plea:

The wife of Theseus loves Hippolytus!
 See, Prince! Look, this monster, ravenous
 for her execution, will not flinch.
 I want your sword’s spasmodic final inch.⁶³

Britten selected the most Freudian of references for use in his cantata text. Britten used this “Lowellization” because it is crucial to the progress of the story. Phaedra has actually taken the sword to kill herself. The sword is referred to later when she throws

⁶¹Lowell and Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro*, 43.

⁶²Benjamin Britten, *Phaedra* (London: Faber Music Limited, 1977), 7.

⁶³Ibid., 45.

down her knife in favor of Medea's poison. In the Lowell translation, it is less suggestive because Oenone says afterward:

Madame, put down this weapon. Your distress
attracts the people. Fly these witnesses.⁶⁴

In the cantata, the text of the aria ends with "spasmodic, final inch." This insinuates Phaedra's desire largely because the audience does not know if there is a sword or if the object has a sexual connotation.

Before the next recitative, taken from Act III, scene 3, Theseus is declared alive. Phaedra blames Oenone for the confession of love she made to Hippolytus, and laments the thought of seeing her husband:

Oh Gods of wrath,
how far I've traveled on my dangerous path!
I go to meet my husband; at his side
will stand Hippolytus. How shall I hide
my thick adulterous passion for this youth,
who has rejected me, and knows the truth?⁶⁵

Guilt and shame overwhelm Phaedra. She knows that if her indiscretions are discovered she will either be killed or exiled along with her son. In order to avoid this, Oenone suggests that she accuse Hippolytus of rape, using his sword as evidence.

The text for the final aria occurs in Act V, scene 7: Phaedra's last speech of the entire play. Oenone has accused Hippolytus of the rape of Phaedra. Theseus first confronts Hippolytus, who pleads innocent. Phaedra intends to tell Theseus the truth, but he mentions Hippolytus's love of Aricia. Jealousy then consumes Phaedra and prevents

⁶⁴Lowell and Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro*, 45

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 52.

her from exonerating Hippolytus. Theseus prays to Poseidon to kill Hippolytus. Oenone drowns herself and this gives credence to Hippolytus's claim of innocence. Theseus prays again to Poseidon to spare his son, but it is too late. Hippolytus is dragged to death by his horses when he is tangled in the reins. Theseus confronts Phaedra and she confesses:

My time's too short, your highness. It was I,
 who lusted for your son with my hot eye.
 The flames of Aphrodite maddened me;...
 ... Theseus, I stand before you to absolve
 your noble son. Sire, only this resolve
 upheld me, and made me throw down my knife.
 I've chosen a slower way to end my life –
 Medea's poison;...⁶⁶

From "Theseus, I stand" onward, Britten uses the entire text as found in Lowell's play.

The text of the cantata closes with:

My eyes at last give up their light, and see
 the day they've soiled resume its purity.⁶⁷

Why did Britten choose to set Lowell's text instead of the myriad of other translations?

The reason is not certain. Other translations, such as those by R.C. Knight and Samuel Solomon, are in prose form. Lowell's poetic text was written in a manner that was readily adaptable to music due to its consistent rhyme scheme. His style was noble, yet still accessible to any English speaking audience. Christopher Headington questioned Britten's choice of text: "...one may regret his choice of the Robert Lowell translation

⁶⁶Lowell and Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro*, 89-90.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 90.

rather than Racine's magnificent original French..."⁶⁸ It is erroneous to consider this because the piece would not be the same. Britten would have composed the whole work in a different manner to suit the French text, had he used it. Although he had set French texts before in *Quatre Chansons Françaises* with texts by Verlaine and Hugo and in *Les Illuminations* with texts by Rimbaud, one can assume that he was more comfortable working in his native tongue and was free to infuse the cantata with the passion and intensity that it required.

⁶⁸Christopher Headington, *Britten* (New York: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1981), 143.

CHAPTER III

THE CANTATA

Early Cantata

The cantata form that Benjamin Britten utilized in his dramatic cantata, *Phaedra*, Op. 93 had its roots in the seventeenth century. The cantata, an Italian invention, developed from the early seventeenth-century monodies such as those found in Giulio Caccini's (1551-1618) *Le Nuove Musiche*. An important feature found in some of the monodies was a new style of writing that was neither recitative nor aria, but a style of melodious recitative called *arioso*. The monodies had sections of contrasting meter and contrasting melodic style which would eventually expand into recitative, *arioso*, and the aria of the cantata.

The word *cantata* originally meant that the piece was to be sung, as opposed to *sonata*, which meant the piece was to be played. The first time the word *cantata* was used to designate a specific piece of music was in Alessandro Grandi's (ca. 1575-1630) *Cantade et arie à voce sola* (ca. 1620). This collection contained pieces in strophic variation form as well as *arie* which were strophic songs. The strophic variation form, common in the early seventeenth century, usually contained an introduction and a ritornello for the continuo between each strophe. As time progressed, *cantata* began to designate sectional pieces that were not necessarily written in strophic variation along with works that consisted of either a continuous recitative style or simple aria style.

Examples of works which contain sections in both recitative and aria style with no clear distinction between the two are found in Stephano Landi's (ca. 1590-ca. 1655) *Il secondo libro d'arie musicali* (1627).

The mid-seventeenth-century cantata continued to contain contrasting musical styles within each composition, though no definitive delineation between aria and recitative could be found. By 1650, the cantata dominated the vocal chamber music genre though *cantata* or *cantade à voce sola* seldom appeared in the title. In the 1640's they were referred to as *arie*, *ariette*, or *canzonette* and were labeled *cantate* or *cantatina* in the 1650's. Luigi Rossi (ca. 1598-1653), a representative composer of this era, wrote nearly three hundred cantatas. Many of his cantatas are long, serious works in the style of expressive recitative or arioso throughout. The collection *Ariette di musica, à una, e due voci di eccellentissimi autori* (1646) contained some of his compositions, along with those of Giacomo Carissimi (1605-1674). Of Carissimi's one hundred and fifty surviving cantatas, some were long, single arias while others had successions of recitative, arioso, and aria in which one style flowed into the next without clear distinction.

The poetic texts of the mid-seventeenth century centered on the theme of unrequited love. There were cantata texts "which deal with love in a general or contemplative manner; poems which stress the beauty of a pastoral scene; and poems which treat historical or mythological characters."¹ Some poems contained humor and parody, but most were melancholy. The sorrows and torments of the unlucky lover were

¹Gloria Rose, "The Italian Cantata of the Baroque Period," *Baroque Music I: Seventeenth Century*, vol. 5 of *The Garland Library of the History of Western Music* (New York and London: Garland Library Publishing, Inc., 1985), 255.

described either in a narrative or in a soliloquy sung by the individual. Spiritual or moral texts occurred in some instances. The textual structure consisted of strophic forms with regular rhyme schemes and blank verse. *Versi sciolti*² were used in narrative sections of the cantata (found in the recitative); *ottonari*³ were found in both narrative and reflective sections; *senarini*⁴ were used in lyrical sections. Representative poets included the fifteenth-century poet, Petrarch and Ariosto and Tasso from the sixteenth century. Although the poets were seldom named in the cantata manuscripts, lesser-known poets, such as Domenico Benigni, Giovanni Lotti, Cardinal Fabio Chigi (Pope Alexander VII), and Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi (Pope Clement IX), were known to have written in association with cantata composers.

The cantata of the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century was uniformly described as an extended composition with several contrasting sections, the components of which were labeled *recitativo* and *aria*. Most of these were composed for solo voice, basso continuo, and occasionally two violins or several instruments. Giovanni Legrenzi's (1626-1690) *Echi di riverenza di cantate* (1676) contained cantatas of this type.

The cantata of the seventeenth century and eighteenth century found its audience in private, usually aristocratic, houses. The audiences were small, well educated and were entertained by performers (male or female sopranos) who were usually trained musicians. By the early-eighteenth century, the succession of components in the cantata

²Lines with seven and eleven mixed syllables; blank verse.

³Eight syllable lines.

⁴Six syllable lines.

was codified. In 1739 Johann Mattheson wrote:

That arrangement of cantatas which is begun with the aria, centered with the second [aria], and concluded with the third [aria], is the most agreeable. The intermingling of recitatives is understood.⁵

Other common successions used were recitative-aria-recitative-aria or aria-recitative-aria.

Most of the arias in the eighteenth-century cantatas were generally the same as those being used in contemporary operas: *da capo arias*, many of which have a *motto* beginning.⁶ The continuo had become more active in these compositions. The instrumentation was either for voice and continuo alone or with obbligato instruments such as violins, flutes, and/or trumpets.

Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725) dominated the eighteenth-century cantata and was known to have composed eight hundred and two cantatas. His cantatas generally follow the recitative-aria-recitative-aria pattern (George F. Handel's [1685-1759] cantatas were also this type.) The flexible and expressive recitatives include some passages in *arioso* style. The arias have contrasting key, meter, and type of material. These somewhat lengthy arias follow the standard form of the *da capo aria* often with a *motto* beginning. Coloratura vocal parts were a common occurrence in arias of the cantata. The basso continuo group accompanied the recitatives while strings or other instruments accompanied the arias.

⁵Johann Mattheson, *Capellmeister*, quoted in Gloria Rose, "Italian Cantata of the Baroque Period," 257.

⁶In a *motto* aria, the voice presents the first phrase and then rests while the instruments play alone, then the voice repeats the initial phrase and continues with the remainder of the aria.

Influence of the Italian Cantata

The Italian cantata had influenced the cantata genre throughout France and England. Luigi Rossi's *Dite, o cieli* survives in four French and two English collections and in sixteen additional manuscripts. Giacomo Carissimi's *Sciolto havean dall'alte sponde* can be found in four French collections and fourteen manuscripts. Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1634-1704), who had studied in Rome with Carissimi, composed the earliest known French cantatas. His cantatas "...are heavily indebted to Italian models, though he achieved a stylistic compromise by blending *bel canto* melody with French ornamentation."⁷ By the mid-eighteenth century, the fashion of cantata composition and performance was diminished greatly. The performance of operatic scenes or songs began to replace the cantata as a form of entertainment.

English composers were heavily influenced by both French and Italian models. The indebtedness to France lies in the recitative style, reminiscent of Lully's operatic recitative, in which the expressive rhythm of the text was strongly adhered to in the vocal line. The recitative more closely resembles *arioso* than the *secco recitativo* found in Italian cantatas. The use of word painting and coloratura passages was passed down from the Italians, along with the cantata form. In the late-seventeenth century,

Italian cantatas were imitated as well as admired in England. Some of the songs by Henry Lawes and Henry Purcell are virtually cantatas: extended pieces with contrasting sections, or lengthy ariosos.⁸

⁷Alec Harman and Anthony Milner, *Late Renaissance and Baroque Music* (London: Barrie Books Ltd., 1959), 271.

⁸Gloria Rose, "Italian Cantata of the Baroque Period," 262.

Purcell's Mad Songs

Purcell's mad songs were based on the form of the early Italian cantata in that they contained a succession of sections that were varied not only in musical content, but also in mood. These differed from the arias of Handel's time, which were devoted to a single mood or emotion. Each phase of insanity makes up a section of the mad song. Purcell's "Bess of Bedlam" is an example of a mad song which is about four minutes in length with twelve separate moods, each of which represents a section. It contains arioso, song, and recitative, tempo changes, and abrupt modulations. Since the character in a mad song develops and changes from section to section, it should be considered a predecessor of the operatic *scena* found in nineteenth-century opera. Many of Purcell's songs have this treatment though they are not necessarily mad songs; "If music be the food of love" (third version) falls into that category. It begins with a florid arioso, then has a rhythmic section followed by another florid arioso on "'Til I am filled with joy", a song-like section, and a concluding arioso. The form that Purcell uses is continuous and each section grows from the preceding one.

The roulades such as those found on specific words such as "joy" in "If music be the food of love" were typical in Purcell's time and indeed in the Italian cantata and opera of the day which had a tradition of word painting. Dotted notes might signify joy, praise, or triumph. This occurs in the passage on the word "victorious" in "Sweeter than roses" (See Example 1):

Example 1. "Sweeter than roses," mm. 32-35.

vic - tor - - - - - ...ious

A downward slur could be an expression of tenderness also found in "Sweeter than roses"

(See Example 2):

Example 2. "Sweeter than roses," mm. 9-10.

or cool, — cool —

Descending passages indicated either actual physical movement, the setting of the sun, or death. This is found in the ground bass aria "When I am laid in earth" from *Dido and Aeneas*⁹ (See Example 3):

Example 3. "When I am laid in earth," mm. 10-15.

Ascending passages can be related to the dawning of a new day, resurrection, redemption, or happiness. The contrary motion of the vocal line in the same aria "When I am laid in earth" shows the redemption aspect in the first half of the phrase and the physical activity

⁹Of course this is not a mad song, but it is representative of Purcell's overall style.

of being laid in earth in the last half (See Example 4). Word painting not only telegraphed the meaning of words to the audience, but also conveyed the underlying emotion of a particular situation. These “emotional outbursts, and rhapsodic eruptions

Example 4. “When I am laid in earth,” mm. 15-18.



tend to amplify the intensity of the words.”¹⁰ Purcell used the idea of word painting with his continuous melodic style. His melodies contained a florid element and a wide range of intervals, often without repetition of melodic ideas. He generally liked syncopated rhythms and accents, chromaticism, and augmented and diminished intervals. Purcell’s compositional style dominated English music for generations. British music did not have a composer of his caliber in the genre of vocal music until Benjamin Britten.

Purcell and Britten

Benjamin Britten’s style of writing descended from that of Henry Purcell. Britten had immense respect for Purcell not only because of their mutual British heritage, but also regarding Purcell’s undeniable skill as a composer. When asked about Purcell’s achievements, Britten said:

¹⁰ Robert Gene Brewster, “The Relationship Between Poetry and Music in the Original Solo-Vocal Works of Benjamin Britten Through 1965” (Ph.D. diss., Washington University, 1967), 15.

Purcell is a great master at handling the English language in song, and I learned much from him. I recall a critic once asking me from whom I had learned to set English poetry to music. I told him Purcell.¹¹

Britten learned a great deal about Purcell's compositional technique through the many realizations¹² he did of Purcell's music. Britten did not do most of the realizations originally for publication, but for use in song recitals with Peter Pears. Michael Oliver has said that the realizations "all stem from a desire to see Purcell's music more widely performed and appreciated."¹³ His first realization for voice and piano, "Evening Hymn," was completed in 1944. Of course, Purcell's original compositions were intended for harpsichord (or organ) with a cello or bass viol (continuo), written as figured bass.¹⁴ The figured bass in Purcell's time had an improvisational character to it; Britten understood this and adapted his realizations accordingly. Instead of writing a simple four-part harmony over the bass, he wrote the piano part in an improvisational style with ornamented lines and melodic figures. Britten's realizations were composed for the

¹¹ Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 120.

¹² A realization is "the process by which a thorough-bass (or basso continuo) is built up, on the keyboard, into a complete and fully harmonized accompaniment." Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller, eds., *Benjamin Britten* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1952), 191.

¹³ Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996), 142.

¹⁴ A single line of notes with numbers that represent the notes to be added. Players were supposed to fill in the harmonies and use their improvisational skill to embellish the theme.

modern piano, not the harpsichord.¹⁵ He admitted that his early editions were for current conditions. They were not conceived as studies for musicological accuracy. Though more authentic realizations are available, Britten's realizations made Purcell's music more accessible to the modern performer and audience.

Through the study of Purcell's music, Britten began to emulate many aspects of Purcell's composition, especially Purcell's mastery of text setting. This would have an impact on many of Britten's vocal works as he explained in the introduction to the opera *Peter Grimes*:

One of my chief aims is to try and restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom, and vitality that have been curiously rare since the death of Purcell. In the past hundred years, English writing has been dominated by strict subservience to logical speech-rhythms, despite the fact that accentuation according to sense often contradicts the accentuation demanded by emotional content.¹⁶

Affected to a certain extent was Britten's concept of musical form. "Fascinated by the form of such pieces as 'Lord, what is man?', he found in it the ideal shape for an extended song, a sort of cantata."¹⁷ Britten based his dramatic cantata: *Phaedra* on these Purcellian Baroque models.

¹⁵ Britten intended his realizations of Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas* for a small spinet piano.

¹⁶ Philip Brett, comp., *Benjamin Britten: Peter Grimes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 149.

¹⁷ Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller, eds., *Benjamin Britten*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1972), 72.

Baroque Ideals in *Phaedra*

Britten's cantata *Phaedra* uses aspects of subject, form, melody, and orchestration found in the Baroque era. The subject of *Phaedra* is related to the Baroque era in the use of mythological (gods and goddesses) and ancient characters (Phaedra, Hippolytus, and Theseus), and unrequited love (Phaedra's love for Hippolytus). The form of this cantata is similar to many in the eighteenth century. It begins with a prologue in recitative-arioso style. The following section, labeled recitative, also has an arioso type melody. The next aria is labeled by its tempo marking: Presto, and is reminiscent of the *da capo aria* in the return of the A section at the end. A short instrumental interlude precedes a vocal entry in recitative-arioso style. The instrumental interlude that follows is marked Adagio which leads into the final aria of the work marked Lively.

Orchestra:

The "small orchestra" of *Phaedra* includes first and second violins, violas, cellos, double basses, percussion (bells, cymbals, gong, tenor drum, and bass drum), timpani, and harpsichord. Britten did not compose for seventeenth-century instruments, but for modern instruments. The instrumentation used in the recitative sections of *Phaedra* - the first of which begins: "My lost and dazzled eyes saw only night..." and the second: "Oh, Gods of wrath..." - is typical of the Baroque recitative with harpsichord and solo cello, implying basso continuo. The parts are written out, instead of having only the figured bass, and the harpsichord part embodies what appears to be ornamentation. The harpsichord appears only in the recitatives. The instrumentation of the arias includes a

small string orchestra which can be considered a Baroque element. Since there are no wind instruments, the orchestral colors in the arias are less rich and varied. The use of percussion is a modern element and is used in both the arias and instrumental interludes, but not in the recitatives.

Word Painting:

Many instances of word painting are found in *Phaedra*. The term used here indicates the meaning of the words as displayed through the treatment of aspects of melodic shape, figuration, rhythm, key, color, orchestration, and dynamics. The first occurrence is on the word “brilliant” in the opening phrase. The figuration emphasizes the word and displays its meaning (See Example 5):

Example 5. *Phaedra* Prologue m. 4.

The musical score for Example 5, *Phaedra* Prologue m. 4, is presented in a standard musical notation format. It consists of three staves: a vocal line, a piano accompaniment, and a timpani part. The key signature is G major (one sharp) and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked "freely" with a note value of a quarter note equal to the approximate tempo of the orchestra. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "In May, in brilliant Athens,". The piano accompaniment includes a timpani part with dynamics markings "p" and "mf".

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In the next example of word painting, in the first recitative (See Example 6), the rests between “flickered” and “through my” indicate the flickering flames of Phaedra’s lust:

Example 6. *Phaedra* 3 mm. 3-4.

night, ca-pricious burn-ings flickered through my bleak a-bandoned

mf *mf*

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In the same recitative, Phaedra discusses the temple she has built for Aphrodite. She “fretted months and days on decoration.” The $f\sharp'$ in the word “decoration” is ornamented by an a' on the sixteenth note before returning to an $f\sharp'$ (See Example 7):

Example 7. *Phaedra* 4 m. 3.

de - co - ra - tion

In the first aria, Phaedra speaks to Hippolytus and the rests following each of her words display his quietness (See Example 8):

Example 8. *Phaedra* 6 mm. 8-10.

hang there, speech - less, pet - ri - fied, po - lite!

Phaedra’s whirling mind is indicated by the florid passage on “mind whirls” (See Example 9):

Example 9. *Phaedra* [6] m. 14 and [7] m. 1.



Margaret Shelton has described the wide leaps in the vocal line at “Phaedra in all her madness” as simply “depicting Phaedra’s ‘madness’ ”¹⁸ (See Example 10). Britten’s

Example 10. *Phaedra* [8] mm. 3-6.



original marking for this section was “gracefully”¹⁹ which was then changed to “ironically,” the definition of which is:

A method of humorous or sarcastic expression in which the intended meaning of the words used is the direct opposite of their sense.²⁰

Although Phaedra says that she is mad, it is doubtful that Britten intended her to be portrayed as insane. It seems more logical that the meaning found in the wide leaps is that of seduction rather than madness. Another instance of word painting is also located in the first aria on the words “I want your sword’s spasmodic final inch,” (See Example

¹⁸Margaret Meier Shelton, “The ABC of *Phaedra*: Word Painting as Structure in Britten’s *Phaedra*,” Vol. I (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1983), 12.

¹⁹Alan Blyth, *Remembering Britten* (London: Hutchinson and Co. Publishers Ltd., 1981), 174.

²⁰*Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “irony.”

11) in which the rests represent the spasms:

Example 11. *Phaedra* 15 mm. 11-13 and 16 m. 1

sword's spas - mo - dic fin - al inch

The second recitative has a figuration in the harpsichord that is representative of a heartbeat. Phaedra's fear and dread is displayed through her audible heartbeat. Oenone also feels the same emotions because she is the person that gave the fatal advice to Phaedra (See Example 12):

Example 12. *Phaedra* 18 mm. 1-2.

RECITATIVE \rightarrow

18 = \downarrow Regular crotchets ($\downarrow = 44$)

(4) (to Oenone) *p* sadly

Oh Gods of wrath,

sim.

hps.

solo vc. (pizz.) (timp.)

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Also in this recitative, the rising chromatics of the vocal line show the dust rising (See Example 13) and conversely, when the vocal line descends chromatically, it is indicative of Phaedra's defamation:

Example 13. *Phaedra* 20 m. 1.

The ve - ry dust ri - ses to dis - a - buse my hus - band to de - fame me and ac - cuse!

The descending vocal line in the same recitative (See Example 14) shows the traditional depiction of death while the following measure depicts life:

Example 14. *Phaedra* 20 mm. 4-5.

Death will give me free-dom; oh it's no-thing not to live;

The ascending line associated with the text concerning death signifies redemption (See Example 15):

Example 15. *Phaedra* 20 mm. 7-9 and 21 m. 1.

death to the_un - hap - py's no ca - ta - stro - phe

At this point, one cannot help but compare the ending of Dido's recitative preceding the aria "When I am laid in earth" to the ending of Britten's recitative (See Example 16):

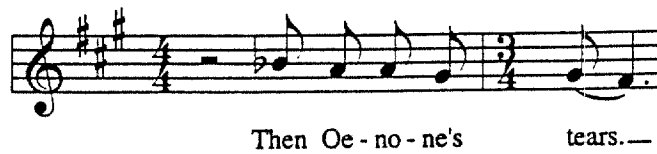
Example 16. *Phaedra* 20 m. 9 and 21 m. 1 Recit. "Thy hand, Belinda" m. 8-9.

no ca - ta - stro - phe now a wel - come - guest.

Both of the women are about to die by poisoning and both speak to their confidants (Phaedra to Oenone and Dido to Belinda) about the welcome release of death. Britten's passage is truly indebted to Purcell in this instance.

In the final aria, at **23** mm. 3-7, the opening phrases are very close together, a technique used to display Phaedra's lack of time. Oenone's falling tears are represented by the appoggiaturas seen in Example 17:

Example 17. *Phaedra* **24** mm. 3-4.



Margaret Shelton has identified the “tone-painting on the word ‘squeeze’ [at **27** m. 3], as the recurring major 3rd is squeezed to a minor 3rd”²¹ (See Example 18):

Example 18. *Phaedra* **27** m.3



A vocal line devoid of color, sung on a reiterated g' (See Example 19), shows Phaedra's “cold composure”:

Example 19. *Phaedra* **27** mm. 4-5.



The appoggiaturas on the words “fade and waver” display their meaning, (See Example 20):

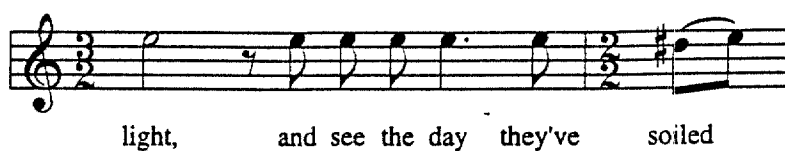
²¹Shelton, “The ABC of *Phaedra*,” 26.

Example 20. *Phaedra* 28 mm. 3-4.



And, finally, the “pure” vocal line on a reiterated e'' is “soiled” by a d#'' (See Example 21) just as the day has been soiled by Phaedra’s desire:

Example 21. *Phaedra* 28 mm. 8-9.



From these examples, it is clear that Britten used Baroque models to develop a modern cantata with majesty and passion that can easily compare to the mad songs of Purcell.

CHAPTER IV

THE MUSIC

Benjamin Britten: Biography

Edward Benjamin Britten was born in Lowestoft, England, on November 22, 1913 (Saint Cecilia's Day).¹ His father, Robert Victor Britten, was a dentist and his mother, Edith, was the person from whom he received his initial musical training. He began to play the piano at the age of five and by the time he was ten years old, he wrote songs and played the viola. When Britten was thirteen, Frank Bridge agreed to take him as a composition student. His first composition under Bridge's tutelage was *Quatre Chansons Françaises* (1928).

In 1930, Britten was awarded a scholarship to the Royal College of Music. While there, he studied composition with John Ireland and piano with Arthur Benjamin. His gift for thematic transformation became apparent during these years as seen in his choral variation of fifteenth and sixteenth-century carols called *A Boy was Born*, op. 3. His "choice of poems [in *A Boy was Born*] (Francis Quarles, Christina Rossetti, Thomas Tusser, and anonymous carol texts) already demonstrates taste and imaginative discernment."²

In 1935, Britten joined the GPO (General Post Office) Film Unit to provide music

¹Saint Cecilia is the patron Saint of Music.

² Michael Oliver, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996), 39.

for a series of documentary films. Film director Basil Wright introduced Britten to Wystan H. Auden who was also working on the film project. From this meeting, Britten began a collaboration with Auden that resulted in Britten's two song cycles *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936) for soprano and orchestra and *On This Island* (1937). Both cycles were written for the Swiss soprano Sophie Wyss who was a regular performer of his works until he met Peter Pears. In 1936, Britten became acquainted with Peter Burra. Britten shared a house with Burra, and when Burra died in an airplane accident, both Britten and Pears volunteered to sort out his papers, and thus they met.

The decision to travel to America came in 1939. Britten's song cycle *Les Illuminations*, on texts by Rimbaud, was also published in that year. War broke out in Europe and both he and Pears were advised to remain in America. During this time, Britten composed his first major work for Peter Pears: *The Seven Sonnets of Michelangelo*. While in America, he also composed the operetta *Paul Bunyan* to an Auden text. Britten and Pears returned to England in 1942.

After arrival in England, Britten caught the measles and, while hospitalized, wrote the *Serenade* for tenor, horn, and strings (1943). Britten's place in history was assured in 1944 when the British people saw the first important English opera since Purcell – *Peter Grimes* – produced by the Sadler Wells Opera. After the success of *Peter Grimes*, John Cross and Eric Crozier wanted the Sadler Wells Opera Company to pioneer the production of new British operas, the other company members wanted to stay with the standard repertoire. Then, in 1946, Crozier, Cross, Pears, and Britten decided to form a new company that could perform operas on a small budget with fewer singers and

instrumentalists so that the company could be more mobile in order to tour with its productions. The new company was tentatively called Glyndebourne English Opera Company and their first production was *The Rape of Lucretia* – the first opera written in the chamber vein with a small cast and small orchestra. The Glyndebourne festival paid for the production of the opera and when the monetary success was less than spectacular, the proprietor refused to stage another of Britten's operas.

The idea of an opera group specifically created for chamber operas did not die. Britten and Crozier formed (with Cross and Pears) a company in 1947 that was solely their responsibility and called it The English Opera Group. The premiere opera was *Albert Herring* (libretto by Crozier) along with a revival of *The Rape of Lucretia*. Since The English Opera Group intended to give performances in places where the facilities were not large enough for a full-scale opera, they took their opera company to Jubilee Hall in Aldeburgh. This was the beginning of the Aldeburgh festival.

The first Aldeburgh festival, in June 1948, became an annual musical event. Britten devoted the bulk of his creative activity to the composition of new works specifically written for performance at the Aldeburgh festival for the remainder of his life. The tradition of the festival included the premiere of a work by Britten; the first was the cantata *Saint Nicolas*. The works of two other composers were customarily featured; Henry Purcell and Lennox Berkeley were the first to receive such an honor. Although many of Britten's works were written for the resources that could be accommodated at Aldeburgh, he did write full-scale opera too. His opera *Billy Budd*, written for the Festival of Britain in 1951, was produced at Covent Garden. Another of his operas,

Gloriana (1953), was also produced there. His next chamber opera, *Turn of the Screw*, with a libretto by Myfanwy Piper and scenic design by her husband, John Piper (who designed all of Britten's operas), was published in 1954. Other pieces written at this time include *Nocturne*, a song cycle for tenor and orchestra written for Peter Pears, and the opera *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. At the close of the decade, Britten was awarded an honorary doctorate in music from Cambridge.

Britten met the cellist Rostropovich in 1960, which prompted him to write his first work for orchestra without voices in twenty years: *Symphony for Cello and Orchestra*. Though it was written for a full orchestra, the sonorities are still spare. He continued to utilize the chamber-music attitude toward the full orchestra as was found in his operatic compositions. Also in the 1960's, Britten enjoyed renewed popularity with the success of his *War Requiem* written to commemorate the rebuilding of Coventry Cathedral. Recognition for Britten's compositional excellence came later in the decade when he was awarded the first Aspen Award (1964) and the Order of Merit (1965). Also in 1965, Britten's dreams of having an opera house to be used for the Aldeburgh festival came to fruition when an old building that was used to malt barley for beer was converted into an eight hundred seat performance hall known as the Maltings at Snape. In the same year, Britten composed the cycle *Songs and Proverbs of William Blake* for the baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau which was premiered at Aldeburgh festival. Late in the decade, Britten developed a grave illness known as bacterial endocarditis.³ Though he recovered,

³An inflammatory infection of the inner tissue of the heart.

this was possibly the disease that damaged his heart and would eventually cause his death.

The decade of the 1970's opened with the composition of the operas *Owen Wingrave* (1971) and *Death in Venice* (1972). These would be Britten's final operas. *Owen Wingrave* was composed for television and Britten conducted. By the time *Death in Venice* premiered, Britten was too ill to conduct, so Stuart Bedford replaced him. Britten was hospitalized for a defective heart valve operation. During surgery, he suffered a stroke which paralyzed his right arm. This greatly hindered his ability to compose and thus forced him to rely on his assistant – Colin Matthews – to play his compositions. Though his arm was impaired, his compositional genius was unaffected by the stroke. However, Britten was no longer physically capable of writing an extended work.

His *Canticle V: The Death of St. Narcissus* for tenor (Pears) and harp premiered in 1975. Later that year *Sacred and Profane*, written for Pears's madrigal group, The Wilbye Consort, premiered at the Maltings. It was also in that year that Britten heard Janet Baker sing *Les Nuits d'Été* and decided to compose *Phaedra* for her. Britten's final appearance at the Aldeburgh festival was in June of 1976, where he saw Janet Baker perform *Phaedra* with Stuart Bedford conducting. It was announced at the festival that the Queen had conferred a life peerage upon him. Britten was very ill but still composed the *Welcome Ode* for young people's voices and orchestra and his cantata *Praise We Great Men* was begun. Britten died on December 4, 1976. He left behind a legacy of great music. He was responsible for the reawakening of English Opera and, through the

Aldeburgh festival, he supported new compositions as well as the revival of the old.

Today, the Britten-Pears Foundation maintains the library housing Britten's works and correspondence and also supports the Aldeburgh festival.

Britten and Baker: The Beginnings of *Phaedra*

Benjamin Britten sat in the audience, too ill to conduct, at the premiere of *Phaedra: A Dramatic Cantata for Mezzo Soprano and Small Orchestra*, Op. 93 on June 16, 1976. Stuart Bedford, the conductor in Britten's stead, was also the harpsichordist - a precedent that had been set in *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring* in which the conductor at the piano accompanied the *secco recitative*. The English Chamber Orchestra accompanied the first woman to portray Phaedra, Janet Baker, for whom the cantata was written. Those who heard the performance were amazed at the amount of passion and drama compacted into the cantata that was less than twenty minutes in length. Stadlen in *The Daily Telegraph* said:

Not only does Britten demonstrate to what extent - unprecedented, I believe - a sacrifice in sheer length and explicitness is possible in the arts without loss of depth; the monumental stature of the play [*Phèdre*] is mirrored, astonishingly so, in Britten's characteristic texture, as deceptively sketchy and spare as ever.⁴

Phaedra has been called a "dramatic opera-in-miniature."⁵ Indeed, Britten compressed the entire story into a short cantata, eliminating all the characters save one - Phaedra - upon whom the entire cantata and dramatic content relies. Britten knew that this role

⁴Michael Kennedy, *Britten* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1981), 113.

⁵*Ibid.*, 264.

required not only an excellent singer,⁶ but also an exceptional actress. Janet Baker suited these criteria.

Dame Janet Abbott Baker (b. August 21, 1933) made her debut at the Aldeburgh festival in 1959 when she performed Lennox Berkeley's *Poems of St. Teresa of Avila*. Early in her career, Britten guided Baker toward choices of roles that were appropriate for her technical ability and vocal range. In one instance, Baker wanted to sing the role of Lucretia; Britten advised against it. He had composed the role for Kathleen Ferrier whose strength was in the lower register of the voice. Baker admitted, "My voice was not as low-lying as hers, and he was afraid that it might be hard for me to encompass some of the tessitura."⁷ Much later, when she did perform Lucretia, he was pleased. The role of Kate Wingrave in *Owen Wingrave* was written specifically for Baker. Britten warned her that, "she was not an easy person to play but that he wanted me to tackle her because of my ability as an actress."⁸

Britten took Baker's strength of the middle to upper range and superior acting ability into account when composing *Phaedra*. Britten spoke about his philosophy of composing for specific individuals when he received the Aspen Award:

⁶Pears said, "Britten's vocal writing always demands a comprehensive equipment." Donald Mitchell and Hans Keller, eds., *Benjamin Britten* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1952), 61.

⁷Alan Blyth, *Remembering Britten* (London: Hutchinson and Co. Publishers Ltd., 1981), 137.

⁸David Herbert, ed., *The Operas of Benjamin Britten* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 2.

I certainly write music for human beings - directly and deliberately. I consider their voices, the range, the power, the subtlety, and the colour potentialities of them.⁹

He adhered to this philosophy in *Phaedra*: the range is just over two octaves - from *ab* to *a4''* - and the tessitura lies generally between *e'* and *e''*. He also capitalized upon Baker's excellent agility with several florid moments in the score.

Baker was surprised when Britten told her that he wanted to compose a piece for her. She explained what she thought his reasoning was:

I think a composer has to wait until a poem or whatever sparks off an idea that seems right for a particular voice or person. I think Ben had watched me grow as an artist over the years. Then, at the right time, he was ready to write something for me. The moment came when he heard me sing *Nuits d'été*: that may have convinced him that I'd gone beyond what I had previously been able to manage.¹⁰

When she received the score she was "overwhelmed by its passion and feeling."¹¹ She described her impression of the character she was to portray:

Phaedra - the words of the Robert Lowell translation which Ben used make her a woman who has loved, betrayed, suffered remorse - attempts to put right the terrible wrong she has done, and nobly dies; a character to glory in.¹²

Indeed, *Phaedra* is a complex character and as Baker has said,

A singer's approach to a piece is almost bound to be vertical, controlled by bar lines and vocal lines ... Britten ... was able to make you see the larger picture.¹³

⁹Alan Kendall, *Benjamin Britten* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 85.

¹⁰Blyth, *Benjamin Britten*, 137.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²David Herbert, ed., *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 3.

¹³Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, 137.

The entire “picture” of Phaedra’s character and the music behind it is necessary for interpretation and understanding by the performer.

Phaedra: Score Study

Prologue:

The chime of a single bell opens the Prologue while the strings play the motive that will become the unifying device for the entire work. This motive has been described by Peter Evans as having the “key colour of A,”¹⁴ the motive and key (See Example 22) relate specifically to Theseus:

Example 22. *Phaedra* Prologue, mm. 1-2.

PROLOGUE
Broadly flowing (♩. = 54)

Orchestra


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The use of a leitmotivic concept in which a motive relates to a specific character or event had been used previously by Britten most memorably in *The Rape of Lucretia* with the winding theme that is first associated with Lucretia’s name and which later recalls Lucretia herself. The motive in *Phaedra* descends - played by the first and second violins and briefly reiterates e’, establishing the dominant of A Major. The rest of the

¹⁴Peter Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 396.

motive is passed down to the violas and cellos where it ends in the third measure of the piece on a half cadence (ii - V/A). The string chord on the dominant of A is sustained.¹⁵ The timpani part enters played with wooden sticks. The beating of the drum and clashing cymbals are clearly representative of battle sounds. Since Theseus is not present, the Theseus motive represents only a memory. He has gone away to defend Greece; hence, the percussion battle sounds.

The voice enters on the dominant of A (e'). The melodic instruments sustain the chord, so the voice alone has the melody. This statement is a musical fanfare, though it is not quite as trumpet-like as the opening of "Let the florid music praise" from *On This Island*. At the end of the vocal statement there is a "curlew sign." The name of this sign comes from its initial use in Britten's *Curlew River*:

Britten invented a pause mark  which he called the "curlew sign", to indicate that "the performer must listen and wait till the other performers have reached the next bar line, or meeting-point - i.e. the note or rest can be longer or shorter than its written value."¹⁶

"In May, in brilliant Athens, on my marriage day" is a difficult phrase to interpret psychologically and dramatically. If one accepts the words as written, without any background information, Phaedra is happily remembering her wedding day. In fact, Phaedra is ready to die because of her lustful torment. She doesn't look back at her wedding day with the joy that one would assume accompanies such an event, but she sees

¹⁵Colin Matthews said, "In the first bars Ben was especially anxious to hear the string chord from the opening melody." Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, 174.

¹⁶Kennedy, *Britten*, 85.

only despair. In a faithful and accurate portrayal, the actress/singer must color the opening phrase with regret since by this time Phaedra knows that the marriage is the beginning of her downfall.

The bell sounds again in conjunction with a modification of the opening gesture at **1** which ends on a half cadence (vi -V). The chord is sustained in the strings as before. After the vocal entry which ends in another “curlew sign”, there appears a condensed version of the opening motive in pizzicato strings, completed in one measure instead of two. The quickened agitation is taken over, briefly, by the timpani: Phaedra remembers the sight of Hippolytus, her heart leaps but then returns to a steady rhythm as the timpani and cymbals are instructed to die away. The vocal line contains the motive, made of a rising perfect fourth and descending major seventh (See Example 23), associated with Hippolytus’s name.¹⁷

Example 23. *Phaedra* **2** m. 4.



Britten has not only assigned a specific motive to Hippolytus’s name, he has also assured the appropriate syllabic accent of Hippolytus by placing an accented upper note on the down beat between two leaps. The key feeling is briefly C Major with the introduction of $g\sharp$ and $c\sharp$: foreshadowing the ending of the cantata at Phaedra’s death. The chord that

¹⁷This is referred to as a “chord form” which Shelton identifies as the “Hippolytus chord.” Shelton, “The ABC of *Phaedra*,” 7.

had been sustained slowly dissipates, as each instrumental part becomes silent at approximate intervals of time which are indicated in the score. Shelton says that “only the B remains through the end of the Prologue.”¹⁸ While the B remains in the timpani, one should not overlook the sustained E in the double basses. The vocal line also cadences with an a# leading tone to b.

Recitative:

The end of the Prologue has become the beginning of the Recitative. This procedure, common in Britten’s work, “is known as the ‘linkage technique’: the carrying over of pitches from the end of one segment or scene to form the beginning of the next.”¹⁹ The solo cello begins on a B along with the harpsichord which passes through a flourish before settling on a chord built on fourths with the root of b. When Janet Baker first performed this section, Stuart Bedford, the conductor, took it too fast and Baker found it difficult to sing “My lost and dazzled eyes.” She told Bedford, “I’m sure Ben will want me to sing the phrase at a speed which makes the words possible.”²⁰ Later, Britten “did comment on this very point. He would always see at once how to solve a difficulty according to the individual need.”²¹

¹⁸ Shelton, “The ABC of *Phaedra*,” 5.

¹⁹ Donald Mitchell, ed., *Benjamin Britten: Death in Venice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 86.

²⁰ Herbert, ed., *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 4.

²¹ Ibid.

The vocal line of the recitative imitates the harpsichord at $\boxed{3}$ m. 3. In the following measure, the vocal line echoes the upper notes that are played in the accompaniment chord (See Example 24). Phaedra is responding to the coercion of Oenone, represented by the harpsichord, to disclose the truth of her love for Hippolytus.

Example 24. *Phaedra* $\boxed{3}$ mm. 3-4.

night, ca-pricious burn-ings flick-ered through my bleak a-ban-doned

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There are reminiscences of the opening motive in $\boxed{3}$ m. 5 and in an inverted form at $\boxed{3}$ m. 7 (See Example 25). Phaedra is fighting between her lust for Hippolytus and her faithfulness to Theseus. Theseus, continually in her thoughts, also becomes her torment:

Example 25. *Phaedra* $\boxed{3}$ m. 7.

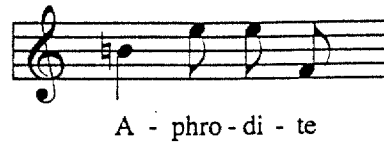
I faced _____ my fla-ming

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At this point, Phaedra begins to blame Aphrodite for her incestuous desire. Interestingly, both Hippolytus and Aphrodite have the same intervallic relationship associated with

their name (See Example 26). Phaedra sees them both as her persecutors - though Hippolytus is only made so by her attraction to him.

Example 26. *Phaedra* **3** m. 9.



Janet Baker recalled Britten's instructions concerning this point in the score: "He also mentioned that the word 'Aphrodite' a little further on should be sung *marcato*, a marking which is not printed in the vocal score."²² Immediately following the statement of "Aphrodite," the key is briefly C Minor and the harpsichord doubles the voice in ascending stepwise motion symbolic of Phaedra's hope of redemption but since the key is C Minor instead of C Major (the key of redemption and death) it is a false hope. Try as Phaedra might to appease Aphrodite, the goddess will not eliminate the curse on Phaedra.

At **4** the solo cello remains on D# (an enharmonic spelling of Eb taken from the preceding key of C Minor) while the harpsichord repeats a short ostinato of the opening gesture in the key of A (See Example 27). The bar lines of the vocal part do not coincide with those in the accompaniment and the vocal line ends with a "curlew sign". This indicates that the voice and accompaniment will not coincide at this point and that the voice must wait for the arrival of the accompaniment at the "curlew sign."

²²Herbert, ed., *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 4.

Example 27. *Phaedra* 4 mm. 2-4.

a temple, fret-ted months and days on de-co-ra-tion.

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When the voice enters again, it moves in contrary motion to the harpsichord which outlines a succession of diminished chords. These chords lead up to the word “Venus” which is preceded by the same chord that came before “Aphrodite.”²³ The initial leap of a perfect fourth is the same as that of the first “Aphrodite” (See Example 28), but the motif is not completed. It resolves to an $f\sharp''$ rather than $f\flat''$ and the chord that follows is $d\sharp$ -diminished instead of c -minor. Because the movement is toward d as the tonal center, this indicates that Phaedra’s psychological movement is toward Hippolytus and away from Aphrodite. The d'' in the voice links to the D in the timpani to join the recitative to the following aria.

Example 28. *Phaedra* 4 mm. 9-10.

Ve-nus_ resigned her al-tar to

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²³Shelton, “The ABC of *Phaedra*,” 8.

Presto:

The first aria is labeled Presto - fast and impulsive. Phaedra has made an impulsive gesture in admitting her love to Hippolytus after being told that Theseus is dead. The timpani reiterates the D intermittently throughout the aria. Colin Matthews said, "Throughout the Presto Ben wanted the timpani emphasized - he wanted to hear a very percussive sound."²⁴ In this instance the timpani seems to represent Hippolytus himself. He has come to see Phaedra and after her declaration of love, he is shaken and disturbed, thus the aggressiveness of the timpani. When Phaedra says, "Why do you hang there speechless, petrified, polite!" the timpani and the lower strings are silent, corresponding to the silence of Hippolytus. The strings express a highly agitated state which begins with a succession of fugal entrances starting with the double bass, passed to the cello, and then to the second violins. This ends just before **6** with another statement of the opening theme (See Example 29), modified and compressed to a shape only reminiscent of the opening motive:

Example 29. *Phaedra* **5** m. 11.



When Hippolytus is speechless, the second violins support Phaedra by doubling her melody. This is perhaps the ever-present Oenone urging Phaedra along to her damnation.

²⁴Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, 174.

The string agitation increases to a climax when Phaedra's mind begins to whirl. Phaedra is now panic-stricken. She has told Hippolytus that she loves him and, rather than embracing her, he is disgusted and dumbfounded. She asks, "What have I to hide?" Hippolytus answers, represented by the entrance of the timpani. He believes his father is still alive and cannot fathom her incestuous desire for him.

In the next section of the aria at **8** the texture changes, the strings become almost militaristic with wide leaps, and the meter has moved from 6/8 to 4/4. The whole orchestra seems to be making Phaedra's declaration of love. The lower strings emphasize c# and f#. A reminiscence of the opening theme is ever present in the upper strings (See Example 30):

Example 30. *Phaedra* **8** mm. 1-2.

8 ironically

The musical score for Example 30 shows the vocal line and orchestral accompaniment for Phaedra's aria at measure 8. The score is in 4/4 time, key of D major, and starts with a dynamic marking of *p*. The vocal line is in treble clef, and the piano accompaniment is in grand staff. The piano part features wide leaps in the upper strings and emphasizes c# and f# in the lower strings. The timpani part is marked *b.d.*, *cym.*, *t.d.*, etc. The dynamic marking is *p*.

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While Colin Matthews was working with Britten on this section, Britten "played the vocal line forcefully in octaves with his left hand."²⁵ Britten wanted the voice to be strong in this section although no dynamic marking is present. Phaedra is taking control

²⁵Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, 174.

of the situation. She is now playing the role of the seductress. When she finally utters the fatal words “I love you,” the dynamic marking is pianissimo; one can imagine pulling Hippolytus close to whisper her lustful desire in his ear. The final “Fool, I adore you!” descends from $e\flat''$ to $e\sharp'$ (See Example 31), the vocal line of the next section is built on this descending interval.

Example 31. *Phaedra*. 8 mm. 19-20.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a time signature of 8/8. The lyrics are "Fool, I a - dore you!". The piano accompaniment consists of a right hand in treble clef and a left hand in bass clef. The dynamic marking "pp" is present above the vocal line.

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The strings at 9 move in a continuous ostinato that is derived from the opening motive. Shelton calls it “an unbalanced distortion of the opening sonority of the cantata.”²⁶ The vocal line extends $e\flat''$ - $e\sharp'$ to a melody that joins in the repetitive gestures and is echoed by the solo cello (See Example 32). Phaedra’s desperation is evident, she must convince Hippolytus to love her. The repetition is the manner by which she pleads for his affection while it also displays her obsessive love for him. Britten was concerned that the bass line at 9 m. 6 should be heard. He “wanted

²⁶Shelton, “The ABC of *Phaedra*,” 12.

the F in the bass emphasized.²⁷ The voice and upper strings are frantic; the bass line is

Example 32. *Phaedra* [9] mm. 4-9.

The musical score for Example 32 consists of a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in a treble clef and is marked 'cantabile'. It features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure. The lyrics are: 'Do not i - magine that my mind ap - proved my first de - fec - tion,'. The piano accompaniment is in a bass clef and is marked 'always pp' and 'solo vc.'. It features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure.

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trying to hold on to the strength of the tonic which is F. The bass line moves at four bars before [10] to a lower neighbor and upper neighbor before settling again on f, which lasts until [11]. At this point the vocal line has reached its peak and Phaedra exclaims loudly "alas". There is a respite from the frenzy as the timpani is heard - Hippolytus is still present. The vocal line descends in a stepwise passage (See Example 33) beginning on f^{##}:

Example 33. *Phaedra* [11] mm. 7-13.

The musical score for Example 33 is a vocal line in a treble clef. It is marked 'A - las' and includes the lyrics: 'A - las my vi - o - lence to re - sist you made my face in - hu - man'. The score is in 2/4 time and features a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure.

The vocal line ends on an a^b which is also played by the timpani. Phaedra is attempting some symbiosis with Hippolytus. While they are joined on the a^b, it appears as though the frenzy is over.

²⁷Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, 175.

Phaedra has not convinced Hippolytus to love her so the pleading begins once again. The melody Phaedra has been singing is no longer the same. The interval of a fourth is now emphasized in the first statement of her melody after **12**. The echo of the voice occurs in the double bass instead of the cello and the orchestral ostinato is now a third lower. The next statement of the vocal melody is abbreviated and begins on an a (See Example 34). This is Phaedra's explanation of her earlier mistreatment of Hippolytus. She is ashamed and sings in short phrases with lower, quiet tones.

Example 34. *Phaedra* **12** mm. 8-11.

The musical score for Example 34 consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef and features a melody with a prominent interval of a fourth. The lyrics are: "I made you fear me (this was ea-si-ly done);". The piano accompaniment is in bass clef and includes a cello part and a double bass part. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p*, *f*, and *mf*, and articulation like slurs and accents. The piano part is marked "all vc." at the bottom.

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The solo cello takes over the echo once again, first in an incomplete statement, then in a final statement that moves in contrary motion to the voice.

A second "declaration of love"²⁸ occurs at **14**. It is again in 4/4, the orchestra has identical movement, and the vocal line centers on the pitch d. Perhaps Phaedra thinks she has won her struggle for the love of Hippolytus.

Just when the tension and panic seem to subside, it begins once again at the melisma on the word "look." The vocal phrases are still shorter although the melody is

²⁸Shelton, "The ABC of *Phaedra*," 15.

the same as that at **6** m. 7 (“Why do you hang there speechless”), doubled in the second violin as before. Shelton is correct in labeling the form of the entire Presto section as A-B-C-B-A.²⁹ The corresponding rehearsal numbers are:

A: **5** to **8**; B: **8** to **9**; C: **9** to **14**; B: **14** to **15**; A: **15** to **17**

Phaedra ends the aria by taking Hippolytus’s sword. The timpani returns to the reiterated D and links into the percussion interlude that follows the Presto aria.

One can almost hear the return of Theseus in the following interlude with the militaristic sounds. There is a hushed dialogue between the percussion and timpani which eventually develops into a forte as the shock and despair consumes Phaedra after learning that her husband is alive.

Recitative:

The second recitative begins at **18** with a “heartbeat” motive (See Example 12) in the harpsichord. The tension of the simultaneous *ab* and *g* dominates the opening. There is a sudden shift to the feeling of A Major in the vocal part in relation to Theseus (“I go to meet my husband”) and the opening phrase is recalled, though in inversion.³⁰ The motive associated with Hippolytus’s name is stated at **19** (“at his side will stand Hippolytus”). The melody of “How shall I hide my thick, adulterous passion” is clearly related to the C section of the Presto aria. In the Presto aria, Phaedra asks, “what have I to hide?” The statement in this recitative answers that question.

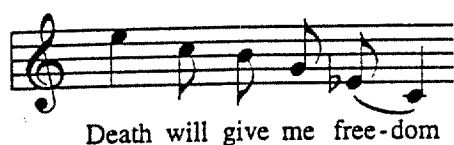
²⁹Shelton, “The ABC of *Phaedra*,” 13.

³⁰Shelton also acknowledges this fact.

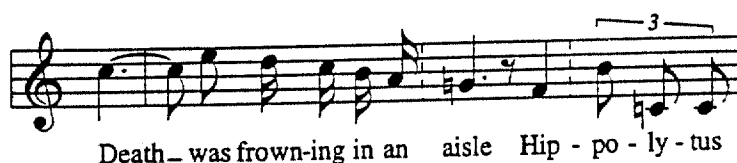
The vocal line cadences on c' on the word “truth;” although the cello continues with the C for four measures, it is not clearly established as the key center when e takes over briefly at “can I kiss Theseus?” C Minor is established at 20 with the C-E \flat tremolo in both the harpsichord and cello. The vocal line is compressed to a very low range: Phaedra has given up, the fatigue is clearly evident in the line “The very dust rises...” (See Example 13). The harpsichord and cello swell in an *accelerando* flourish through C Minor to cadence in C Major at Phaedra’s exclamation “Oenone, I want to die.”

The phrase at “Death will give me freedom” is strikingly similar to the phrase shape of “Death was frowning in an aisle - Hippolytus.” Though the latter begins on a c'' , both have e'' as the upper pitch and both descend to c' (See Example 35):

Example 35. *Phaedra* 20 m. 4



2 m. 2-3.



The e is prominent, Phaedra is not to be allowed the purity of C Major until her death. This is shown in the E Major rising scale found in “Death to the unhappy’s no catastrophe;” however, the dominant of C still remains in the solo cello.

Adagio:

The final line of the recitative contains the material upon which the Adagio section is built. It is passed from instrument to instrument. The first statement is found

in the solo cello. Then in 21 mm. 8-9, the solo viola assumes the cadential formula (See Example 36) which is then echoed in rhythmic diminution in the cellos:

Example 36. *Phaedra* 21 mm. 8-9.

The solo violin begins the motive, but is soon joined by the second solo violin in sixths. The first violins and violas in sixths echo this with rhythmic diminution. The first solo violin and the second violin have the statement a major sixth higher. This time the echo is heard in rhythmic diminution in the first violins and the solo viola in thirds which is overlapped by a further rhythmic diminution in the violas and solo cello. Then a final diminution occurs in the cellos and second violins, after which the double basses have their only statement of the cadential formula. At various times the timpani and tam-tam sound with increasing loudness on the down beat of the cadential formula. This not only accentuates the cadence, but also indicates the passage of time and events. Two major occurrences have taken place during this interlude: Hippolytus was killed when the creature sent by Poseidon frightened his horses and Hippolytus was dragged to death; and, Oenone has drowned herself.

Final Aria:

The events in the interlude come crashing down upon Phaedra in an excited recollection of the opening motive of the work. The rhythmic movement is in sixteenth

notes. The speeding up of rhythmic tempo correlates to Phaedra's first words of the aria "My time's too short your Highness." The melody here is related to that at "Death to the unhappy's no catastrophe;" of course there is rhythmic diminution because of Phaedra's agitation and shortness of time - she is moving quickly toward death (See Example 37):

Example 37. *Phaedra* 23 mm. 2-4.

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The orchestra continues with the statement of the scale passage that was present in the Adagio, however, at this point the orchestra no longer has the cadential formula - it is reserved for the voice alone.

At 25 the string agitation ascends toward a statement of the opening motive which the voice echoes. Phaedra has finally confessed the sin which has tormented her from the very beginning of the cantata. The g# and c# become g \natural and c \natural : the key of C Major is nearly asserted. Evans explains:

...the C major itself towards which Phaedra's own music aspires was not only the key of Lucretia's chastity but also of the state of blessedness of the opera's epilogue, in which the sin is not erased but transcended. Britten's choice of the same key may suggest that Phaedra, however "responsible" her defection, was a helpless victim of Aphrodite's will.³¹

³¹Evans, *The Music of Benjamin Britten*, 399.

The key of C Major is postponed until Phaedra tells Theseus that she has taken poison. Janet Baker describes this section as “among the most sublime of all Ben’s music.”³² The orchestra takes the music of the Adagio interlude while the vocal line maintains the key of C Major, first resting on the tonic, then on the dominant, then on the third. Janet Baker had some input to the writing of this final section. She said, “I asked him [Britten] if I could start the final phrase ‘My eyes at last give up their light,’ on C, instead of E as he had written it [See Example 38], because it gives the voice a moment to relax before that extremely taxing end; this he immediately agreed to.”³³ The vocal line rises higher in pitch and volume toward Phaedra’s death and redemption.

Example 38. *Phaedra* 28 mm. 6-7.

The image shows a musical score for Example 38. It consists of three staves: a vocal line on a treble clef staff and a piano accompaniment on two staves (treble and bass clefs). The vocal line begins with a forte dynamic marking (f) and the lyrics "My eyes at last give up their". The piano accompaniment features a steady, rhythmic pattern of chords. The score is for measures 6 and 7 of the piece.

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The orchestral epilogue at 29 leaves the audience with the question of whether Phaedra was truly forgiven. The lower strings sustain a C for the remainder of the work while the other parts recall portions of the cantata. The first violin has the opening melody, the timpani suggests the memory of Hippolytus as seen in the Presto aria, the violins state the material found at 6 m. 5, and then the solo cello melody recalls the

³²Herbert, ed., *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 3.

³³*Ibid.*, 4.

music stated at 10 that is associated with Phaedra's desire and obsession. The cantata ends with a C Major chord that has an added sixth and ninth in the upper strings. The strings are muted and begin at quadruple pianissimo followed by a decrescendo. Finally, all that remains is the C in the lower strings. Colin Matthews relates Britten's thoughts about the end of the work:

Ben's main concern was with the ending - the transition to Figure 29. After a lot of thought and numerous playthroughs, he decided to reject the extended version [See Appendix A]... because it "held up the action". Although he didn't want to lose the music, he felt that a sudden cut-off after Phaedra's last words was more effective.³⁴

Janet Baker remembered the premiere performance of *Phaedra*:

Responsibility for the work of any composer is a heavy burden, but the premiere of a piece with the creator sitting in his box twenty feet away is a terrifying one. I opened my mouth and out rolled the words "In May, in brilliant Athens", beautified by the perfect acoustic at the Maltings. The performance went very well and everyone was stunned by the power and passion of Ben's writing at a time when he was so frail physically.

The following year, we repeated the performance and this time Ben was not in his box. Somehow the first summer without him was not a sad one. The air, the fields, the buildings, were all filled with his joyous spirit, free of the frail body at last.³⁵

Summary

When a performer approaches any piece of music, he must not only understand the theoretical workings of the piece, but must also become familiar with the historical background. A total comprehension of *Phaedra* as a whole has necessitated an examination of the text from its inception in Greek tragedy to Racine's French tragedy,

³⁴Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, 175-176.

³⁵Herbert, ed., *The Operas of Benjamin Britten*, 4.

Lowell's interpretation, and finally to Britten's realization. No artist should attempt the performance of a work that is so rich in history and meaning with merely a shallow glance into the surface expressions of the text. There are many aspects of the work that, without proper inspection, could be easily misinterpreted, resulting in dramatic inaccuracy. However, when performed with the characterization that Racine, Lowell, and Britten envisioned, it becomes a drama of sublime passion and intense emotional depth.

Britten's ties to the Baroque period have been discovered not only through the use of the harpsichord and cello in the recitatives and in word painting found throughout *Phaedra*, but also in the specific reference to Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. There is great certainty that Britten had intimate knowledge of the construction of music in the Baroque period. While there is no question that *Phaedra* is a work composed by an artist in the twentieth century, one cannot deny the relationships present in form and melody that descend from Britten's realizations of Purcell's music.

Phaedra is a work of incredible power and passion and it is truly remarkable that it is generally unknown. There are several possible reasons that it is not found in the mainstream repertoire. The music itself is challenging to the most accomplished performer and as such it can only be performed by a musician who has the advanced skills and knowledge to undertake the task. Further, a live orchestra, though not always readily available, is indispensable for any performance of this work. The piano transcription, while approved by Britten himself, does not afford the same sentiment, emotion, and certainly not the same color as is found in the orchestral arrangement. The

motives played by each specific instrument have separate and distinct meanings. This cannot be displayed in the generic sound of the piano. Recognizing the characterization found in the orchestration enables the vocalist to maintain a continuity of thought and expression throughout the work.

Others have looked at various facets of *Phaedra*, but in piecemeal examinations, they have failed to explore the work comprehensively through a depth of textual, musical, and historical understanding. This document has provided identification of many underlying, vital aspects in order to assist in the dramatic presentation. Familiarity with Phaedra's life and the events leading up to her death is necessary in order to portray the character convincingly and with passion. Then through the musical treatment of the text, the performer can make decisions on the interpretation of the drama. In the final analysis, the ability to portray the character of a dramatic work in a convincing way with a depth of understanding is the ultimate goal of the performer. It is hoped that *Phaedra* will be accepted by both the public and scholars alike as a powerfully dramatic work made significant not only because it was Britten's final dramatic endeavor but also by the beauty and passion displayed in the text and music.

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

ORIGINAL ENDING OF PHAEDRA¹

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the original ending of Phaedra. It consists of three systems of music. The first system includes a vocal line (labeled 'Voice') and a piano accompaniment. The piano part is marked with 'EX.A' in a circle. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with various dynamics like 'f' and 'p'. The third system shows the piano accompaniment concluding with a double bar line and a final chord. The score is written in a clear, legible hand with some annotations and markings.

¹Alan Blyth, *Remembering Britten*, 180.

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

PRONUNCIATIONS

As Found in *Phaedra*

Lowell's Pronunciation¹	IPA		Latin IPA
Phaedra = <i>Phee</i> dra	[<i>f</i> i -dra]		[<i>f</i> ε -dra]
Oenone = Ee <i>no</i> nee	[i -no - ni]		[ε -no -nε]
Arcia = A <i>ri</i> sha	[a -ri -ʃa]		[a -ri -ʃi -a]
Theramenes = The <i>ra</i> me nees	[θε -ra -mε -niz]		[θε -ra -mε -nεz]
Theseus (not given)	[θi - sjus]	or	[θε -sε -us]
Hippolytus (not given)	[hip -pɔ -li -tus]	or	[hip -pɔ -li -tus]

¹Robert Lowell and Jacques Barzun, *Phaedra and Figaro* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1960), 10.

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