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Love and Monstrosity in Racine's *Phaedra*

The term «monster», which occurs strikingly often in Racine's tragedy *Phaedra*, in contemporary definitions was used to designate those with «vicious and excessive» passions, as well as more generally to designate a kind of marvel which goes against the order of nature.¹ There is an argument to be made for a connection of the theme of monstrosity to contemporary moral and poetological discourses, namely to a didactic function of tragedy concerning the regulation of the passions.² But the theme of monstrosity in *Phaedra* is not exhausted by reference to moral didacticism, though contemporary reception praised Racine's play for its didactic function – demonstrating how «unchaste love» ends in disaster – and Racine himself called it a «school of virtue» in his preface to the original 1677 edition.³ The aim of this article is to explore the interconnected themes of love and monstrosity in Racine's *Phaedra*.

¹ See Victoria Lagrange: Monstruosité féminine et désir incestueux dans *Phèdre* de Racine et «Peau D'Âne» de Perrault, in: *Alkemie. Revue semestrielle de littérature et philosophie* 22. La faute (2018) 101–112, here 107.

² For further elaboration on the contemporary reception of Racine's *Phaedra* in seventeenth-century France as well as the play's central theme of monstrosity in the context of the ethics and aesthetics of its time, see Renée Morel: *Phèdre: poétique de la monstruosité*, in: *Dalhousie French Studies* 18 (1990) 3–18, here 3–5; see also Mitchell Greenberg (ed.): *A Cultural History of Tragedy, IV: In the Age of Enlightenment*, London, New York 2020, 11–17, 66–69, 113–115, 152–154.

³ M. Greenberg: *A Cultural History of Tragedy, IV*, 114. Some scholars have linked the depiction of moral conflict in *Phaedra* to Racine's

As it is based on Greek mythology and draws heavily on the tragedy *The Crowned Hippolytus* by Euripides, it is not surprising that *Phaedra* exhibits ancient Greek love topoi. However, as I wish to show in this article, they are functionalized in a specific way in Racine's tragedy. By drawing on ancient Greek literary topoi, love is portrayed in the play as a foreign force intruding into and haunting the human realm, manifesting itself in various disquieting bodily symptoms, such as sensations of heat and cold, uncontrollable shaking, and interferences with speech. Love thus takes on an excessive and deeply troubling, 'monstrous' quality. By reintroducing aspects of the body into the sphere of the social which are not fully disciplined and organized, not fully contained within the given socio-symbolic system of representation, love becomes a site of negotiation not only of morality and identity, but also of ontological difference. In other words, not only are the characters' illicit passions deemed monstrous on moral grounds, but through the theme of monstrosity, the play negotiates the relationship between socio-symbolic order and that which is not fully representable within it – and which is at stake in love.⁴ In the last section, I will attempt to develop how the themes of love and monstrosity relate to a negative dialectic of the political in Racine's *Phaedra*.

upbringing at Port-Royal and Jansenist thought, while others have rejected this interpretation; see Bernadette Höfer: *Psychosomatic Disorders in Seventeenth-Century French Literature*, Aldershot 2009, 193–195, with further literature.

⁴ An earlier version of this article was submitted in the spring term of 2021 in the context of the graduate course *Theories of Love in Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* taught by Dr Felix Christen at the University of Zurich.

I. Love's Symptoms and Codes

Bodily symptoms such as the inability to speak, blindness, shaking, heat and cold, as well as feelings of malady and impending death are interpreted by the characters in the play as signs of love. These symptoms constitute a topology of erotic love which stems from ancient Greek literature, and which has been referenced continuously in various literary traditions since.⁵ In *Phaedra*, these ancient topoi are linked to contemporary medical discourse, in particular to the concept of love melancholy.⁶ Love is repeatedly described as a form of illness, as in the first scene of the first act, when Phaedra has become consumed by her love for her stepson and Hippolytus for his part has fallen in love with Aricia, the last survivor of the royal family of Athens overthrown by his father Theseus: «You perish from a malady you hide. / Has fair Aricia enraptured you?», Theramenes speaks to Hippolytus.⁷ In similar wording, Oenone says about Phaedra: «She's dying from a hidden malady; / Eternal discord reigns within her mind. / Her restless

⁵ See Dana LaCourse Munteanu: Empathy and Love. Types of Textuality and Degrees of Affectivity, in: Donald R. Wehrs, Thomas Blake (eds.): *The Palgrave Handbook of Affect Studies and Textual Criticism*, Cham 2017, 325–345, here 330–331. The ancient roots of this topology of love are described in detail by Anne Carson: *Eros, the bittersweet. An Essay*, Princeton 1986. For instance, the symptomatology of love described in *Phaedra* very closely resembles the descriptions in Sappho's fragment 31.

⁶ On the depiction of illness in Racine's *Phaedra* see B. Höfer: *Psychosomatic Disorders*, 175–210. Höfer elaborates on the medical discourse on love melancholy in the seventeenth century, explaining how medical theories of melancholy coined by doctors such as Jacques Ferrand and Robert Burton interacted with contemporary philosophical and anthropological theories (see B. Höfer: *Psychosomatic Disorders*, particularly 175–180, 184–185). Phaedra seems to exhibit symptoms that were attributed to both melancholy and mania, which in the medical discourse of the time was seen as a specific subtype of melancholy but was also described as a separate form of illness (see *ibid.*, 189–190, 198–199).

⁷ I, 1, v. 136–137. The referenced edition is Jean Racine: *Iphigenia. Phaedra. Athaliah*, translated by John Cairncross, Reprinted with New Further Reading, London 2004.

anguish tears her from her bed».⁸ Phaedra herself names her love a «malady» and deems it «incurable»; she compares her love with an «open wound» which pours blood at the sight of the beloved.⁹ In her first speech in the play, she describes her state as follows: «I faint, I fall; my strength abandons me. / My eyes are dazzled by the daylight's glare, / And my knees, trembling, give beneath my weight».¹⁰ Love, conceptualized as malady, goes hand in hand with strong physical symptoms: Phaedra is weakened, since she cannot sleep and cannot eat.¹¹ She is torn, her wishes «war among themselves».¹² In place of solid self-identity, there is an acute awareness of a fundamental split, of a torn subjectivity.¹³ Phaedra exclaims: «Madness! Where am I, what have I said? / Whither have my desires, my reason strayed? / Lost, lost, the gods have carried it away».¹⁴ The topos of love as madness corresponds to the topos of love as illness; furthermore, it is connected with the topos of the divine origin of love. These ancient topoi imply a loss of self-mastery; they point to the fragility of identity, to an internal divide.¹⁵

⁸ I, 2, v. 146–148.

⁹ I, 3, v. 269, 283, 304.

¹⁰ I, 3, v. 153–156.

¹¹ I, 3, v. 191–194.

¹² I, 3, v. 162.

¹³ I, 3, v. 162. See Simon Critchley: *I Want to Die, I Hate My Life – Phaedra's Malaise*, in: *New Literary History* 35/1: *Rethinking Tragedy* (2004) 17–40, here 23–24; though Critchley's rather simplistic opposition of a «Christian hermeneutics of desire» to a «pagan aesthetics of existence» (*ibid.*) should be reconsidered, for instance in regard to Sappho's poem.

¹⁴ I, 3, v. 181–183.

¹⁵ As Carson points out, Eros is frequently described in ancient Greek literature as an experience of both pleasure and pain which can «split the mind in two» and appears to force itself upon the loving subject (A. Carson: *Eros*, 3–4). Lépine states that «the effect of passion is the leveling of the most opposite identities» and elaborates on the many structural and motivic parallels between Phaedra and Hippolytus in this context (see Jacques-Jude Lépine: *Phaedra's Labyrinth as the Paradigm of Passion*. Racine's Aesthetic Formulation of Mimetic Desire, in: *Contagion. Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 1 (1994) 47–62, here 49–50). Lépine

Other characters in Racine's play seem to be affected similarly by Eros. Hippolytus, confessing his love to Aricia, describes his state as follows:

I who, in proud rebellion against love,
 Have long mocked other captives' sufferings [...]
 For six long months ashamed and in despair,
 Pierced by the shaft implanted in my side,
 I battle with myself, with you, in vain.
 Present I flee you; absent, you are near.
 Deep in the woods, your image follows me.
 The light of day, the shadows of the night,
 Everything conjures up the charms I flee;
 Each single thing delivers up my heart.
 And, sole reward for all my fruitless care,
 I seek but cannot find myself again.¹⁶

Love appears in this description as a foreign force that has been *implanted* into one's body, a force that is at the same time, uncannily, part of oneself and differentiated from oneself, a force against which one can rebel, by which one can be held captive, and which causes inner alienation («I seek but cannot find myself again»). This corresponds to the ancient Greek topology of love described by Carson.¹⁷ When Hippolytus says: «I battle with myself, with you», the word *you* refers at once to Aricia, to whom he is speaking, and to the foreign force of love, manifesting as the

elaborates on similarities in «metaphorical and imaginary registers» portraying passion as «an uncanny process of general indifferentiation» (ibid., 53). On structural similarities between *Phaedra* and Hippolytus, see also R. Morel: *Phèdre*, 7.

¹⁶ II, 2, v. 531–548.

¹⁷ See A. Carson: *Eros*, 45: «[...] in the lyric poets, love is something that assaults or invades the body of the lover to wrest control of it from him». Carson describes the frequent impression of evasiveness and lack in ancient Greek love poetry that is related to blurred boundaries of self and other (ibid., 33–34), sometimes amounting to a loss of self (ibid., 39), frequently described in ambivalent terms, expressed in metaphors of war, disease and bodily dissolution (ibid., 39–40), giving «a cumulative impression of intense concern for the integrity and control of one's own body» (ibid., 41).

internalized image of the beloved, which follows Hippolytus deep into the woods.¹⁸

After Hippolytus has made his confession to Aricia, he reflects on his speech, exclaiming: «What words with which to offer you a heart! / How strange a conquest for so fair a maid! [...] / Remember that I speak an unknown tongue, / And do not scorn my clumsy gallantry, / Which, but for you, I never would have known».¹⁹ Although Hippolytus himself seems to attribute the strangeness of his speech to not being adept in love, it may be understood as a defamiliarization of language caused by love, and, in this sense, as an «unknown tongue». This aspect of love manifests itself even more clearly in *Phaedra*. As *Phaedra* tells Oenone about the first time she saw Hippolytus, she describes the symptoms she experienced at the sight of her beloved as follows: «As I beheld, I reddened, I turned pale. / A tempest raged in my distracted mind. / My eyes no longer saw. I could not speak. / I felt my body freezing, burning; knew / Venus was on me with her dreaded flames, / The fatal torments of a race she loathes».²⁰

¹⁸ This description of the absent presence of the beloved (see A. Carson: *Eros*, 18–19) heavily involves the faculty of imagination. Höfer examines the role of the image and the imagination in *Phaedra* in the context of contemporary medical and philosophical discourse on the causes and symptoms of love melancholy, which was described as affecting the imagination in specific ways, possibly causing mania, which was attributed a generative potential (see B. Höfer: *Psychosomatic Disorders*, 183–185, 189). For an exploration of the poetic potential of mania in the early modern era see Nina Nowakowski, Mireille Schnyder (eds.): *Wahn, Witz und Wirklichkeit. Poetik und Episteme des Wahns vor 1800*, Paderborn 2021.

¹⁹ II, 2, v. 555–560.

²⁰ I, 3, v. 273–278. There are striking similarities to Sappho's fragment 31 condensed in these descriptions of the physical symptoms of love (see *The Poetry of Sappho. Translations and Notes* by Jim Powell, Oxford 2007, 11). In the poem, there is a «subtle fire» that «races inside my skin», there is «cold sweat» – these correspond to *Phaedra's* description of her body that is freezing and burning. These tropes may have origins in ancient theories of physiology (see A. Carson: *Eros*, 7). The inability to see that is described by *Phaedra* is also found in Sappho's fragment 31: «my / eyes

The inability to speak described by Phaedra is a commonly addressed symptom of love in the play. The characters' amorous discourse repeatedly revolves around perceived interferences with speech. It is through a gesture of impossibility that the characters are finding a way of speaking about, of pointing to their love. Phaedra expresses her uncertainty of how to speak: «What shall I say and where begin?»²¹ Later, she says: «I love ... I tremble, shudder at the name; / I love ...».²² Phaedra also speaks of Hippolytus as «the god I dared not name».²³ She is talking in her confessions about something fundamentally taboo: Her speech remains evasive as it circles around an impossibility of symbolization. Her love is unspeakable and unliveable, impossible – conceptualizable only as malady or madness, which brings her to the verge of silence and death.²⁴

Love is also repeatedly linked to divinity throughout the play, albeit not in a positive way. It is associated with the wrath of Venus in Phaedra's description of how she felt as she first saw Hippolytus:

can't see a thing». Blindness is a physical symptom of love which can at the same time be read as a metaphor for the suspension of cognition, the evasion of love. This evasion also manifests itself in the interference with speech described by Phaedra (in Sappho's poem: «I can't speak any longer»). Sappho's poem also speaks of the perceived impendence of death: «I'm greener than the / grass is and appear to myself to be little short of dying»; Phaedra speaks of «fatal torments».

²¹ I, 3, v. 247.

²² I, 3, v. 262.

²³ I, 3, v. 288.

²⁴ See Elizabeth L. Berg: Impossible Representation. A Reading of Phèdre, in: *Romantic Review* 73/4 (1982) 421–437, here 427. Berg reads Phaedra's tendency towards self-annihilation as an attempt at representing a «lack of place» in the given system of representation (*ibid.*, 430) and explores the double meaning of the word *voile* in the play, which refers both to Hippolytus' sail and to Phaedra's veil, thus becoming a signifier of sexual difference. It is associated differently with the two characters, representing Hippolytus' project of departure from his father and an impossibility of representation associated with Phaedra (see *ibid.*, 424–428). Höfer sees this impossibility as the cause of melancholy, «born of the cleavage between love and duty: moral, social, and political» (B. Höfer: *Psychosomatic Disorders*, 176).

Venus was on me with her dreaded flames,
 The fatal torments of a race she loathes.
 By sleepless vows, I thought to ward her off.
 I built a temple to her, rich and fair.
 No hours went by but I made sacrifice,
 Seeking my reason in the victim's flanks.
 Weak remedies for love incurable!
 In vain my hand burned incense on the shrine.
 Even when my lips invoked the goddess' name,
 I worshipped *him*. His image followed me [...] *Venus in all her might is on her prey.*²⁵

As with Hippolytus, the image of the beloved follows Phaedra, seemingly possessing a life and will of its own. It is equated with the goddess of love herself, preying on Phaedra. Love's force appears foreign and hostile, as an effect of the goddess' loathing, causing suffering and alienation. Similarly, when Theramenes first suspects that Hippolytus might be in love, he speaks of a vindication of the goddess: «Will Venus whom you haughtily disdained / vindicate Theseus after all these years [...] Are you in love?».²⁶ Again, there is a notion of antagonism associated with love, as in the topology of Greek tradition, where Aphrodite's and Eros' roles are frequently portrayed as ambivalent or even paradoxical.²⁷

The antagonistic quality of love also manifests itself in a fundamental inner discord, possibly amounting to hatred, which Phaedra

²⁵ I, 3, v. 278–306.

²⁶ I, 1, v. 60–65. Notably, Theseus is spoken of as a «demi-god» by Hippolytus (I, 1, v. 77). There is a mythological basis to this, as Theseus has been said to be the son of Poseidon, although in Racine's play this is not made explicit. In the context of my hypothesis this is of interest because Theseus, in being called a demi-god, is marked as someone who carries something foreign, evasive in himself – and, as is repeatedly emphasized in the play, he is also especially inclined to love. Phaedra is of divine descent, too; her mother Pasiphaë was the daughter of the sun god.

²⁷ A. Carson: Eros, 80, 83–85. In Phaedra's case, this is exacerbated by a curse imposed on her lineage: «In order to punish the Sun for revealing her and Mars' illicit love affair to the laughter of all the Olympian gods, Venus put a curse on all his female descendants» (M. Greenberg: A Cultural History of Tragedy, IV, 15).

names at a later point in the play: «The hapless victim of heaven's vengeance, / I loathe myself more than you ever will. / The gods are witness, they who in my breast / have lit the fire fatal to all my line».²⁸

According to Höfer, this inner discord that Phaedra and Hippolytus experience is due to a conflict between their desire and the law; the discord they experience stems from the social taboo surrounding their love object, which puts them at odds with themselves, disturbs them, and makes them feel monstrous.²⁹

II. Love, Monstrosity, and Symbolic Order

As Höfer points out, the conflict between desire and law is central to the play.³⁰ But this conflict is not simply one between the desiring subject and the law, but it is, as I wish to argue, a conflict that takes place at once within the subject and within the law.

Certainly, both Phaedra's and Hippolytus' situation is determined by a conflict of their desire with moral, social, and political rules of conduct. The characters' desires are transgressive on several levels: they are at odds with different kinds of laws, both within the fictional universe of the tragedy as well as within the historical context of the society of Racine's time. These laws include fundamental taboos of human society such as the incest taboo, which is at stake in the case of Phaedra, or, in the case of her mother Pasiphaë, the taboo of zoophilia; but they also include, as in the case of Hippolytus, more specific laws such as the marriage ban Theseus imposed on Aricia for political reasons.³¹ These different instances of law define

²⁸ II, 5, v. 675–680.

²⁹ B. Höfer: *Psychosomatic Disorders*, 176.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

³¹ See *ibid.*; Höfer discusses incest taboo and political taboo, describing Phaedra's passion as at once sexually and politically transgressive. For a detailed discussion of the different kinds of laws and their transgressions in *Phaedra*, see Louise K. Horowitz: *Racine's Laws*, in: Dalhousie French

the boundaries not only of what is acceptable, but also of what is possible, thinkable and representable within a given socio-symbolic framework. The division that the characters experience could thus be described as a rift, in Höfer's words, «between affect and representation», though the focus on affectivity is more aligned with a perspective that centres on the subjective perception of evasiveness and internal discord portrayed in the play, rather than on structural aspects.³² I would like to argue that what is at stake in *Phaedra* is also the rift between socio-symbolic order and that which is unrepresentable within it. In other words, what is at stake is not only a moral, social, and political, but ultimately also an ontological problem that manifests itself in the internal division experienced by the characters which has been discussed above, and also concerns the very structure of socio-symbolic order itself. The attribution of monstrosity in *Phaedra* is thus not only to be understood as a sign of a moral, social, or politically motivated condemnation of certain constellations of desire, but also points to an ontological difference which constitutes both subjectivity and socio-symbolic order.³³

As Larsen points out, there is a specific semiotic aspect to monstrosity: «Ancient or modern, before being a thing or a strange creature, a monster is first of all a sign connecting two ontologically different domains with different levels of power [...] «Monster» comes from the Latin «monere», meaning both «to show» and «to warn or remind» [...] they connote «marvel» or an awesome and awful appearance beyond

Studies 49: Les épreuves du labyrinthe: Essais de poétique et d'herméneutique raciniennes, Hommage tricentenaire (Winter 1999) 132–144.

³² B. Höfer: Psychosomatic Disorders, 197.

³³ Along similar lines, Höfer describes *Phaedra* as embodying the *abject*, referring to the notion introduced by Julia Kristeva in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (ibid.). The abject is characterized by a «biological reaction of nausea, horror, or fear when we are confronted with a threatening breakdown between self and other, subject and object. [...] The abject is the place where meaning collapses, where boundaries begin to dissolve. [...] It may be an embodiment of the line between the human and the beast, as inscribed in *Phaedra*'s monstrous genealogy, for example» (ibid., 198). So Höfer raises a similar point but does not elaborate further on the theme of monstrosity and its ontological implications.

the world of human experience».³⁴ Larsen states that «monstrous signs are not arbitrary» and that they «carry their own ontology beyond their status as signs».³⁵ This is because the monster not only points to, but also embodies ontological difference. As such, the monster partakes in socio-symbolic order as a positivized ontological negativity, «representing» by way of embodiment that which is unrepresentable, and thus «impossible» within that order.³⁶ In the following, I will examine more closely how love is associated with monstrosity in *Phaedra*, and how it points to this ontological negativity.

Phaedra's love for Hippolytus is repeatedly termed monstrous, and it is associated with her mother Pasiphaë, who had begotten the

³⁴ Sven Erik Larsen: *Monsters and Human Solitude*, in: Daniela Carpi Seratori (ed.): *Monsters and Monstrosity. From the Canon to the Anti-Canon. Literary and Juridical Subversions*, Berlin, Boston 2019, 35–44, here 37. During the Middle Ages and early modern period, monsters were seen as signs sent by God, showing his will or his wrath, reminding humans of their sins, or predicting the future; see Marie-Hélène Huet: *Monstrous Imagination*, Cambridge, London 1993, 6; David D. Gilmore: *Monsters. Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*, Philadelphia 2003, 53–63. In ancient Greek as well as in Christian medieval and early modern contexts, there are connections between the divine and the monstrous. To examine the convergences and differences between these conceptions of the monstrous and how they may have affected the depiction of monstrosity in Racine's tragedy is beyond the scope of this study. Gilmore provides many observations that could serve as useful starting points for such an examination, which could include a comparative reading of Euripides' tragedy *The Crowned Hippolytus*.

³⁵ S. E. Larsen: *Monsters and Human Solitude*, 38. See also 38–39, concerning the association of the Monstrous with human *hubris* (as transgression of the human realm).

³⁶ This ontological negativity can be understood by reference to the Lacanian category of the real. The real is defined as that which resists symbolization; it is associated with the drives, with trauma and repetition compulsion (see Frauke Berndt, Ernst Goebel: *Handbuch Literatur & Psychoanalyse*, Berlin, Boston 2017, 638). The relationship between the real and the symbolic is not simply one of mutual exclusion. Rather, as Shepherdson points out, the real must be understood as an «excluded interior» of the symbolic: there is an «intimate alterity» of the real, it is «a matter of a void within the structure» of the symbolic; see Charles Shepherdson: *Lacan and the Limits of Language*, New York 2008, 2–3.

Minotaur with a bull, and who is said to have handed down the monstrosity of her desire to her daughter. Phaedra not only explicitly sets her love in relation to her mothers', but she declares herself «the last and wretchedest» of her lineage.³⁷ Lagrange shows how Phaedra's desire is framed in this context as a «souillure», an impurity that threatens to spread to the world in which she lives.³⁸ This is not the case for Hippolytus. Even though Hippolytus and Phaedra both have forbidden desires that go against social norms, in effect the valuation of their desires is different. Berg follows Barthes' structural analysis of the play, identifying Hippolytus and Phaedra as doubles, but pointing out how the gender distinction between the characters appears as both arbitrary and as entailing a radical distinction in meaning, a disquieting incommensurability related to a problem of representation.³⁹

³⁷ II, 3, v. 257. Phaedra also alludes to her mother's passion for the bull as she states that the gods have «lit the fire fatal to all my line» (II, 3, v. 680). For further reflections on the hereditary dimension of monstrosity and its connection to physicality and femininity, see V. Lagrange: *Monstruosité féminine*, 106–107. For elaboration on the connections between monstrosity, language, and the figure of the mother see Elissa Marder: *The Mother Tongue in Phèdre and Frankenstein*, in: *Yale French Studies 76: Autour de Racine. Studies in Intertextuality* (1989) 59–77, here 59–67. Höfer points out the association of blood with monstrosity (B. Höfer: *Psychosomatic Disorders*, 195), in particular in the context of Phaedra's inheritance of Venus' curse through the maternal bloodline. Höfer argues that a mythological theme centred on illness is combined with a Christian notion of transmission of sin, which on the one hand seems deterministic, but also integrates a moral discourse centred on the individual (*ibid.*, 195–196). The emphasis on blood in *Phaedra* may also have been shaped by the biological understanding of melancholy as a disease of the blood and by contemporary medical theory about the blood's role in inheritance and illness (*ibid.*).

³⁸ V. Lagrange: *Monstruosité féminine*, 106, 109; *souillure* is also a second meaning of the Latin word *incestum* (*ibid.*, 101).

³⁹ See Berg's discussion of Barthes' analysis in: E. L. Berg: *Impossible Representation*, 428–429. This incommensurability between the characters can be read in accordance with the Lacanian graph of sexuation, in particular with the concept of feminine jouissance and its relation to symbolic order;

Lagrange proposes that Phaedra's monstrosity is linked to the moment of the avowal of her love; Phaedra becomes a monster, in her own eyes and in the eyes of others, when she *speaks* of it.⁴⁰ Phaedra indeed describes herself as a «vicious monster» and as a «frightful monster» after having confessed her passion to Hippolytus.⁴¹ Monstrosity then, one could argue, is a discursive effect; the effect of a collision between the symbolic order and that which is unrepresentable in it, but nonetheless manifests itself in it.⁴² If the monster is to be understood as a kind of sign, as has been suggested by Larsen, it would have to be described as an impossible signifier.

Hippolytus' reaction to Phaedra's avowal of her desire testifies to this: Hippolytus literally cannot respond, because there is no response to Phaedra's desire inside the coordinates of socio-symbolic order. Hippolytus is left speechless: «without sword, aghast and pale».⁴³ Finally, he states: «Flee, flee, Theramenes. I cannot speak / Nor without horror look upon myself. / Phaedra ... No, mighty gods, let us consign / This shameful secret to oblivion».⁴⁴

for the chart containing the formulas, see Jacques Lacan: *Encore. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated with notes by Bruce Fink, New York 1999, 73. For a detailed reading of the formulas, see Lorenzo Chiesa: *The Not-Two. Logic and God in Lacan*, Massachusetts, London 2016, and Alenka Zupančič: *What is Sex?*, Massachusetts, London 2017.

⁴⁰ See V. Lagrange: *Monstruosité féminine*, 107: «Au moment de l'aveu, la «souillure» [...] contamine le corps tout entier et devient monstruosité».

⁴¹ II, 5, v. 700–705.

⁴² Berg writes that «incest is no longer the subject of the play; rather it is speech itself» (E. L. Berg: *Impossible Representation*, 424). Similarly, Critchley states: «The central issue in the tragedy is the naming of the monstrous» (S. Critchley: *I Want to Die*, 19); arguing that Barthes rightly calls it a «nominalist tragedy», as the central issue is one of naming (*ibid.*).

⁴³ This is Theramenes' description of Hippolytus. Berg refers to the French original: «Hippolyte cannot respond – he is «épée, interdit, sans couleur»» (E. L. Berg: *Impossible Representation*, 433); in the place of «aghast», the French text says «interdit», which carries, as Berg points out, the meaning of both speechlessness and of the forbidden.

⁴⁴ II, 6, v. 717–720.

Here, we also find the theme of horror, which is intertwined with monstrosity; it is consistently described throughout the play as the reaction monstrosity elicits.⁴⁵ But why does Hippolytus express horror towards *himself* here, rather than towards his stepmother? In Phaedra's expressing her desire to Hippolytus, in her addressing him as the object of her impossible love, Hippolytus is also confronted with his own illicit desire, which may, after all, bear similarities to Phaedra's. In recalling Hippolytus' love confession to Aricia, one may notice that – despite the differences in reception –, in the form his love takes (both in symptoms and expression), there are indeed many similarities to Phaedra.⁴⁶

The symptomatology of love which can be observed in both Phaedra and Hippolytus offers an important key to understanding the concept of monstrosity in the play: The phenomena that are associated with love are deemed monstrous insofar as they cannot be completely integrated into the symbolic order.

Morel argues that the monstrous can be understood as a living paradox, a coincidence of opposites, an exception to the law, and thus as a figure of excess or lack.⁴⁷ That which cannot be symbolized is thus experienced by the subject, operating within symbolic order, as an evasion or withdrawal (something which cannot be named, cannot be expressed) and/or as an insistence of something which is

⁴⁵ At an earlier point in the play, Phaedra states: «I have a fitting horror for my crime; / I hate this passion and I loathe my life» (I, 3, v. 308).

⁴⁶ Marder develops the concept of the «Mother Tongue», which, as the language of desire, is tied to the mother and to the mother's enjoyment; it is common to Hippolytus and Phaedra (see E. Marder: *The Mother Tongue*, 65–68); Hippolytus' mother, the amazon Antiope, is an important figure of identification for him and prefigures his identity and desire (see also R. Morel: *Phèdre*, 4–6). In this context, it may be of interest to note that in the early modern period, one theory of the genesis of monstrosity linked its origin to maternal fancy, to the mother's imagination and her desires during conception and pregnancy; this idea can be traced back to ancient as well as medieval sources and seems to have been particularly prevalent during the early modern period, remaining influential even in later centuries (M. Huet: *Monstrous Imagination*, 1–9, 13–35).

⁴⁷ R. Morel: *Phèdre*, 3–6.

in excess. This ambiguous and often highly ambivalent simultaneity of lack and surplus corresponds to the simultaneous presence / absence of the love object. The love object is, on the one hand, painfully absent; at the same time, it remains present precisely *in its absence*. In the description of Hippolytus cited above, in which he is haunted by the image of his beloved in the depths of the forest, it is noteworthy that Hippolytus' perception of excess, of over-proximity correlates with an imaginary phenomenon: The image of the beloved can then be understood as representing an insistent excess on the imaginary level – and could thus be read as an attempt of symbolization. Many of the symptoms of love described in the first section of this paper encompass psychosomatic interactions, which have been described in detail by Höfer.⁴⁸

When the intense sensations of the characters described in the play are understood as *symptoms* of love (extradiegetically by readers, as well as intradiegetically by the characters in the play), that is, when they are *read* as a kind of language representing or *pointing to* love as well as the dilemmatic situation of the characters, this can be understood as an attempt to contain these sensations within a symbolic frame of reference (in recourse to the ancient topology of erotic love). I do not intend to establish a simple dichotomy of the somatic and the symbolic. Rather, I would argue that the «monstrous» bodily sensations do point to something not entirely representable, and in doing so, they do to an extent function like signs. Nonetheless, the emphatically physical symptomatology of love presented in *Phaedra* points to an inherent negativity within the notion of a «theater of the body» as it is presented by Höfer.⁴⁹ What if the body doesn't «speak», but nonetheless insists in the form of sensations? These sensations – which are symbolically contained by reference to the ancient topology of love – might be understood as figurative signs which follow a logic of embodiment, materializing an excess which cannot be fully represented within socio-symbolic order. These signs would then partake in different ontological domains, and this would make them «monstrous» signs.

⁴⁸ See B. Höfer: Psychosomatic Disorders, 180–185.

⁴⁹ B. Höfer: Psychosomatic Disorders, 178.

III. The Monstrous within

The tension between socio-symbolic order and the monstrous dimension of love as an inherent rupture within this order is played out between the characters of Theseus, Hippolytus, Aricia, and Phaedra, as well as through their (potential) love-relationships.

Even though they are both struggling with a forbidden love, there is an asymmetry between the characters Phaedra and Hippolytus, which has been discussed above. One of the ways in which this asymmetry manifests is that Hippolytus' love is requited by Aricia, while Phaedra's love for Hippolytus remains unrequited, literally making an answer impossible, inciting horror (at himself). As we have seen, Phaedra speaks of herself as a monster after her confession to Hippolytus; on the other hand, Phaedra also speaks of Hippolytus as a monster, though in this instance, I would agree with Morel's observation that this is primarily to be described as an effect of disappointed love turning to hatred.⁵⁰

Nonetheless, the relationship between Hippolytus and Phaedra can in many instances be described as one of mirroring; this includes the mirroring of their own perceived monstrosity.⁵¹ But this recognition of monstrosity in and through the other is not limited to the relationship between Phaedra and Hippolytus; it extends also to the relationship of Hippolytus and Theseus.

In the opening dialogue of the play, Hippolytus introduces his father Theseus as a monster-slayer: Theseus is known to have killed the Minotaur, the mythical bull-headed monster in the Labyrinth of Crete, and he is currently on another quest.⁵² Hippolytus wants to head out to find his father. Theramenes suggests that Theseus may indeed not want to be found, stressing that he had been sought after thoroughly, even «on the shores / Of Acheron, the river of the

⁵⁰ See R. Morel: *Phèdre*, 10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵² Theseus' hunting and killing of the Minotaur having taken place in a labyrinth points to the disorientation caused by the ontological difference that the monster embodies.

dead», and insinuates the possibility of him «tasting all the joys of love», while indicating the dubious nature of Theseus' amorous adventures, speaking of the «outraged victims of his wiles». ⁵³ To this, Hippolytus reacts impatiently; he rejects the proposition of his father being involved in erotic endeavours, situating this kind of incident in the past, a habit long overcome. That Hippolytus does not approve of his father's love affairs becomes clearer as the dialogue proceeds. Hippolytus portrays Theseus' killing of the Minotaur and other monsters as heroic deeds; in contrast, he seems unsettled by Theseus' erotic endeavours, condemns them, and expresses worry about the possibility of coming to resemble his father in this respect. ⁵⁴ Although Hippolytus never explicitly names Theseus' passions monstrous, they clearly do have a disturbing effect on him.

Theseus for his part seems obsessively motivated to extinguish the monstrous in the outer world through his countless quests. Upon his homecoming from his most recent pursuit, Theseus finds his wife and son secretive and reserved. His own palace changes «into an obscure, unknown place in which he no longer knows where he is or where he is going [...] accusations work as contradictory directional indicators and thus construct a new Labyrinth where a new monster [...] is lurking». ⁵⁵

It becomes evident in Theseus' subsequent monologue that he dreads being rejected by his family as a kind of monster himself:

What do I see? What horror spread around
 Drives back from me, distraught, my family?
 If I return, so feared, so undesired,
 O heaven! Why did you free me from my gaol? [...]

⁵³ I, 1, v. 11–12, v. 20–21. Theseus has a reputation in Greek mythology for abducting women or convincing them to run away with him. For instance, Theseus has been said to have abducted Phaedra after abandoning her sister Ariadne, who had helped him on his quest to slay the Minotaur, and to whom he had promised marriage, on the shore of an island.

⁵⁴ I, 1, v. 11–12, v. 20–21.

⁵⁵ J. Lépine: Phaedra's Labyrinth, 49.

I purged the world of a perfidious knave,
 And his own monsters batted on his flesh.
 But when I joyfully prepare to meet
 My dearest ones, all that the gods have spared,
 Nay, when my soul, that is its own again,
 Would feast itself upon so dear a sight,
 Only with shudders am I welcomed home;
 Everyone flees, rejecting my embrace.
 Myself, filled with the horror I inspire,
 Would I were prisoner in Epirus still.⁵⁶

Here, Theseus expresses his dread that he, the one who has aspired to purge the world of monsters, is himself being perceived as repulsive, that he is eliciting disgust, being looked upon with shudders, as it were, with horror (as indicated above, the association of monstrosity with horror pervades the play).

Theseus' quest for annihilation of the monstrous other is revealed as serving the purpose of distancing the monstrous which haunts him from within, thereby stabilizing his identity, as well as socio-symbolic order as a whole, which he, the figure of the ruler in the text, comes to stand for. This becomes even more evident when Theseus, after having heard Phaedra's allegations against Hippolytus, confronts his son, calling him a monster and banning him:

How dare you come before me now?
 Monster, the thunderbolt too long has spared!
 Last of the brigands whom I swept away!
 After the frenzy of your wicked lust
 Has driven you to assault your father's bed,
 You dare to show your hateful face to me [...]
 Soiling the glory of my labours past.
 Flee, and if you desire not to be joined
 To all the villains fallen by my hand,
 Take care that never does the shining sun
 Behold you in these palaces again.
 Flee then, and never more return;
 And of your hideous presence purge my realm.
 And, Neptune, in time past if my strong hand
 Of infamous assassins cleared your shores,

⁵⁶ III, 5, v. 953–978.

Remember that, to recompense my deeds,
 You swore to grant the first of my desires. [...]
 I call upon you now. Revenge my wrong.⁵⁷

In Theseus' perspective, Hippolytus stains his glory and has to be purged from his realm. As Theseus bans Hippolytus and calls upon Neptune to take revenge on his son, he is not only attempting to cleanse himself of the stain of the monstrous, but also to reconstitute the order of Athens. However, as Theseus tries to extinguish the monstrous from his realm, that is, from the realm of the law, he seems to be continually haunted by it: Hippolytus ends up being killed on his way to banishment, in an encounter with a horrendous sea-monster, «half bull, half dragon, wild, impetuous».⁵⁸ As Hippolytus fights the monster while his companions seek refuge in a nearby temple, he ends up dying entangled in the reins of his carriage, dragged away by his horses.

Again, the monstrous seems to haunt Theseus in the form of an amphibian bull, whose appearance follows Theseus' own invocation of Neptune. As Larsen has pointed out in his reading of the myth as told by Euripides, the «amphibian bull who destroys Hyppolitos [sic] is a sign that refers [...] to its divine origin – Poseidon is the god of the sea – and [...] the bull is the monster precisely associated with Theseus: Minotaur's father was himself a bull that came from the sea».⁵⁹ In this sense, the sea monster can be understood as a return or a haunting of the monstrous Minotaur killed by Theseus, and furthermore proves to be exemplary for the figurative character of monstrous signs.

Although at the end of the tragedy, Theseus adopts his political adversary Aricia and the order of the empire seems to be reconstituted, the return of the monstrous in the form of the sea monster and the violent death of Hippolytus put into question whether the

⁵⁷ IV, 2, v. 1044–1073.

⁵⁸ V, 6, v. 1519. Morel argues that Hippolytus, in an attempt to emulate the heroic deeds of his father, becomes overtly monstrous after having been disfigured by the sea monster (R. Morel: *Phèdre*, 14).

⁵⁹ S. E. Larsen: *Monsters and Human Solitude*, 37.

monstrous can ever be banished from socio-symbolic order altogether. Rather, the play negotiates the consequences of such attempts of extinguishment; at the very least, they come at a cost. *Phaedra* is in this sense not to be read, as Critchley suggests, as «an essentially antipolitical tragedy»;⁶⁰ but it is political precisely where it negotiates the *anti*-political potential inherent in love.

The attempt to exclude the monstrous dimension inherent in love from the symbolic and socio-political sphere altogether ends in an excess of violence that can amount to actual or symbolic death, as becomes evident in *Phaedra's* and *Hippolytus's* fate, but also in *Theseus's* own association with death and undeadness.⁶¹

The theme of the return of the monstrous proves significant in regard to political aspects, namely the reconstitution of the socio-symbolic and political order taking place in the final scene.

In his last speech, which concludes the final act of the tragedy and immediately follows *Phaedra's* death, *Theseus* speaks the following words:

Would the memory
Of her appalling misdeeds die with her!
Let us, now that my error's all too clear,
Go out and mourn over my ill-starred son.
Let us embrace my cherished son's remains
And expiate my mad atrocious wish,
Rendering him the honours he deserves,
And, to appease the anger of his shade,
Let his beloved, despite her brothers' crime,
Be as a daughter to me from this day.⁶²

⁶⁰ S. Critchley: *I Want to Die*, 18.

⁶¹ Both *Phaedra* and *Hippolytus* die as a consequence of their passion, while *Theseus* is closely associated with death and undeadness throughout the play. *Theseus* is said to have crossed the river *Styx* which separates the dead from the human realm (II, 1, v. 383–391), and he returns to the living after having been declared dead. Critchley describes horror – which in the play is closely associated with monstrosity – as «possession by that which will not die and which cannot be killed» (S. Critchley: *I Want to Die*, 27). This points to an uncanny insistence of the excluded beyond life and death.

⁶² V, 7, v. 1646–1654.

Theseus adopts Aricia, whose father and brothers were his political rivals, and whom he had banned from marriage, as his daughter in the place of his son Hippolytus. The adoption of Aricia by Theseus thus comes to stand for the reintegrative potential of socio-symbolic order. But this reintegration of a formerly excluded element into socio-symbolic order is not possible without sacrifice. Only by Phaedra's confession and her subsequent death could Hippolytus be redeemed in the eyes of his father. Though Theseus seems to absolve Hippolytus of all guilt in his final speech, the adoption of Aricia could not have taken place had Hippolytus lived, nor could Theseus have allowed for Hippolytus' and Aricia's love to be actualized. Though Theseus acknowledges the killing of Hippolytus as a mistake calling for redemptive action («Let us, now that my error's all too clear [...] expiate my mad atrocious wish»)⁶³, he omits that the killing of Hippolytus was the precondition for the re-installation of socio-symbolic and political order: only Hippolytus' death could allow for the adoption of Aricia as a redemptive and reintegrative act – the politically subversive potential of Hippolytus' and Aricia's love having now been suspended.

Interestingly, Theseus explicitly points out in his final speech that, by his adoption of Aricia, he is attempting to avoid the vengeance of Hippolytus («to appease the anger of his shade»). He seems to be anticipating a new haunting – another return of the monstrous.

As has been argued by Höfer, the killing of the Minotaur is related to Theseus' installation of order in Athens, while Hippolytus' death is tantamount to the erasure of the monstrous which proves necessary to secure or reconstitute political order.⁶⁴ At the same time, the sea monster which extinguishes Hippolytus is *itself* a manifestation of the monstrous. As its appearance was, after all, a consequence of Theseus' own invocation of Neptune, we are now faced with a paradox which lays at the heart of the re-installation of socio-symbolic and political order. The exact thing which should be excluded from the order – the monstrous –, proves constitutive of this very order,

⁶³ V, 7, v. 1648–1650.

⁶⁴ B. Höfer: *Psychosomatic Disorders*, 204–207.

and thus inherent to it. The monstrous is thus not to be understood merely as that which is excluded by the law, but it indicates the insistence of the excluded within the law. This is the central paradox negotiated in the play: The monstrous proves to be inherent and constitutive to socio-symbolic structure itself, while simultaneously threatening its cohesion.

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