Hippolytos is unique, the only surviving Greek tragedy to be framed by a god’s appearance both at the start and at the end — for Aphrodite speaks the prologue of Euripides’ drama, and Artemis intervenes ‘from the machine’ in the finale. The play is a stark demonstration of divine power to an audience which included devoted believers in the Olympians, some sceptics who doubted whether there were any gods at all (or if there were, whether they ever intervene in human affairs), and also some individuals who hoped that there might be gods who were morally superior to humans. Euripides reasserts devastatingly — and with a power which he was not to achieve again until The Bakchais — that even in the late fifth century some of the Homeric gods still have effective force.

Euripides’ Aphrodite behaves in exactly the same way that gods had always behaved in Greece. Hippolytos offends against her 

\[ \text{time} \]

and she has been humiliated by this. To regain her 

\[ \text{aretē} \]

Aphrodite is determined to destroy him. Being the goddess of love, she has no power to wound Hippolytos directly, since he is impervious to her weapons. She therefore resolves to bring him down through the love for him which she has instilled in Phaidra. She bluntly accepts that Phaidra is being hurt and will be destroyed by what she is doing; but yet

\[
\text{I shall not think her pain important enough to prevent my enemies from paying me the penalty that I see fit. (48-50)}
\]

There is no question of sin or guilt. Hippolytos simply acts dangerously in ‘greeting Aphrodite from a distance’ (114; his lack of emotional balance is pitifully exposed in the tirade against women which he utters when the Nurse has propositioned him, 616f.). The old Attendant utters the hope to Aphrodite, after he has failed to persuade his master, that ‘gods should be wiser, more moderate (sophōteroi) than human beings’ (120).

This was not a normal Greek expectation — though in the troubled world of late fifth century Athens, many hoped that life might be so; and the expectation is baulked. To safeguard your 

\[ \text{time} \]

and avenge affronts to it was not a petty consideration for any Greek — man or woman, god or goddess; and this point is reinforced when, at the end of this play, all that Artemis can do to her rival goddess is first to pay her back some day, when the goddess of
love falls in love herself and secondly, to found the cult of Hippolytos (1423f). Euripides looks on such gods with an ironic glance; as Hippolytos remarks 'How easily you leave our long companionship' (1441), the original audience might well have felt some sarcasm at the expense of the goddess. But it cuts little ice. Artemis has a compelling reason to leave the scene; as a goddess, she cannot suffer the presence of miasma (1437-8).

Looking at the Greeks from a modern perspective, we speak all too easily of the 'mythical dimension' of Greek tragedy (Mueller p.46). In the modern sense of the word myth there is no 'mythical dimension' to Greek tragedy. The Greek mythos is simply a story. The gods are not symbols, nor are they metaphors; they are natural and integrated parts of the legend. The plays of Aischylos, Sophokles and Euripides were set in early Greece, and the principal characters are descended within two or three generations from the gods themselves. As the Iliad and Odyssey frequently remind us, men and women were then stronger, bigger and more beautiful than the men and women of today who watch the plays; being closely related to these early agathoi, the gods intervened more frequently in their lives, and were sometimes visibly manifest to them.

Therefore, the Greek tragedies present a special relationship between human life and the 'mythical dimension', which I would prefer to denote by the Greek term to theion — the element of the divine, the marvellous. The easy interpenetration of this dimension of to theion with the purely human is the distinguishing feature of the Greek theatre; it marks fifth century Athenian tragedy out from all subsequent western forms of drama, and is one of the essential preconditions which made tragedy possible for the Greeks. The problem with subsequent attempts to recreate the greatness of Greek tragedy is the absence of belief in this particular kind of transcendence.

In Phèdre — his first masterpiece on Greek themes, and his last tragedy, since Athalie and Esther use biblical themes, and are therefore almost by definition anti-tragic — Racine made the first modern attempt to internalise the Greek gods, to try to make them immanent in the personalities of the characters.

He also drew for Phèdre on Seneca's Phaedra. And the main element which he borrowed from Seneca is the idea that the heroine could remain alive until after the messenger-speech, to confess and then kill herself. This was the germ from which Racine built his post-Christian, tormented, remorse-filled Phèdre; a woman who is destroyed when she deviates from virtue, gives

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1 For references see the bibliography at the end of this paper.
licence to her servant to accuse Hippolytus of attempted rape, and then commits suicide in expiation of that crime.

This guilt and remorse are, of course, wholly absent from Euripides. They enable Racine to emphasise Vénus' hatred in the early scenes of the tragedy; the exposition (306) is developed in the powerful monologue which occupies the whole of 3.2,

Oh you who see the shame to which I've fallen,
relentless Vénus, am I humiliated enough?
Your cruelty could go no further.
Now your triumph is perfect.............. (813f)

This theme reaches its climax in the extraordinary speech which is itself the climax of Act 4, and in many ways of the entire tragedy; 1252f, 'Their love will always live ....'. Here, Racine's Phèdre imagines herself persecuted after death — trapped by a Christian consciousness that she is corrupt from before her birth. The grand-daughter of Zeus sees herself as unfit even to go to Hades, where her own father Minos will sit in judgement over his daughter's guilt, and seek for new punishments to do justice to her hideous crime. 'Forgive me. A cruel god [Vénus] has doomed your race.' (1289).

It is generally asserted that the greatness of Phèdre rests on Racine's success — by contrast with Iphigénie and Andrômaque, where Euripides' god from the machine is eliminated by a psychological resolution of the plot — in going beyond the purely human, and incorporating into his drama the world of myth, in a manner analogous to that of his classical original. Mueller makes the case most powerfully (p.46): 'Phèdre shares with other seventeenth-century versions the loss of a historical and political response to tragedy: the world of princes and princesses is merely an elevated stage for the portrayal of individual psychology. But in Phèdre alone this loss is compensated by the discovery — new in the context of tragedy — of myth as a metaphor for psycho-drama. What appears on the level of plot and character as the heroine's loss of control over her passions appears on the level of image and metaphor as the regression from a world governed by the moral and aesthetic criteria of bienséance and vraisemblance to a world of monsters and mythical terrors. To be more precise: the action of the play can be analysed as the transformation of myth from metaphor into dramatic reality. It is not an accident that Phèdre alone of seventeenth-century adaptations has continued to hold the European imagination.'

Mueller's argument underlies the assertions of popular text books. For example, Yarrow writes (p. 76) 'we are not bound to believe in the objective reality of Vénus; the tragedy loses none of its force if we regard her as a
symbol of human passion and heredity.’ One may compare Cairncross (p. 137) ‘... the hereditary character of Venus’ devastations can be traced back to their source in the Old Testament, where the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. ... Venus’ intervention can easily be understood in purely rational terms without weakening the drama. We can well imagine that Phaedra was smitten by an overwhelming passion by a purely human mechanism’.

George Steiner offers a more sophisticated reading. For him, the gods play two roles in Racine; ‘the mechanism of fatality can be variously interpreted; the gods here may be themselves or what later mythologies of consciousness would call heredity. Ibsen speaks of ‘ghosts’ when he means that our lives may be haunted to ruin by an inherited infection of the flesh. So Racine invokes the gods to account for the eruption in Phèdre of elemental passions more wanton and destructive than those habitual to men.’ (pp. 85-86)

Pursuing this argument, Steiner contends that Racine’s approach in Phèdre ‘allows the poet to exhibit at the same time the literal and figurative aspects of his material. Racine demands of us a constant awareness of both. Phèdre is possessed by Vénus, and Theseus is wandering in the realms of the dead; a woman yields to extremity of love and her husband’s absence stands for persistent infidelity. The difference is one of notation. In the first instance, we use the notation of classical mythology; in the latter, that of rational psychology (which is, perhaps, also a body of myths). It is the function of neoclassical rhetoric to keep both conventions of meaning equally in sight’ (p. 90). As Mueller’s chapter on Phèdre unfolds, it becomes apparent that he too shares Steiner’s position — though he does not openly term Racine’s gods ambiguous. He initially sees Racine’s mythology as ‘a metaphor for psychodrama’; but as his discussion nears Acts 4 and 5 of the play, Mueller acknowledges that Racine’s way of speaking about Vénus ‘increasingly evokes the threatening presence of a real god’ (p. 61). In Mueller’s reading, as in Steiner’s (p. 95), the world of myth erupts into the closing stages of Racine’s play, as the monster imagery becomes literal, with devastating reality: ‘a world relapses into the mythical terrors from which it had believed itself free’ (p. 62).

The problem with these readings revolves around the relationship between men and gods. Aphrodite and Artemis were real goddesses to Euripides and the majority of his audience; Hippolytos depends absolutely for its effect on belief. By contrast, neither Racine nor the majority of members of his audience believed in Vénus as a real power.

This simple fact necessarily shapes the way in which Racine’s tragedy operates. But scholarly opinion is most reluctant to recognise this. No recent
writer on Racine, to my knowledge, has discussed the question; and no writer on Racine has considered the essay *Drum, Flute & Zither* (1953) by the British composer, Michael Tippett. Tippett wrote this essay when he had just taken the advice of Peter Brook, that for his second opera he should use a well-known myth; he was beginning to work on the legend of Troy for *King Priam*. His reflections were also animated by the success of the latest opera by his younger and more superficially brilliant contemporary, Benjamin Britten, who had recently won critical and popular esteem with *Billy Budd*, based on Melville’s novella and with a libretto by E.M. Forster.

Tippett’s argument turns on the nature of transcendence. His essay takes as its starting point the closing moments of Yeats’ play *The Death of Cuchulain*. The Blind Man reaches up to stab the king to death, and Cuchulain sees a vision of ‘the shape that I shall take when I am dead, My soul’s first shape, a soft feathery shape ...’. As the curtain falls, Yeats prescribes that there should sound ‘music of pipe and drum’. By this (Tippett argues) Yeats signals that at the moment where death approaches, at the threshold between life and afterlife, drama moves beyond the sphere in which the spoken word alone is adequate.

Tippett’s own medium of opera was invented in Florence by men aware that classical Greek tragedy called upon the resources of music; that it too transcends the limitations of the merely human, and places human lives and passions in communication with the world of gods by the use of music and poetry. Euripides gives reality to Hippolytos’ worship of Artemis when his followers begin to sing to her. And at the end of the play, when Artemis comforts the dying and blinded Hippolytos, he begins to answer her with the words ‘oh, divine perfumed breath...’. For Tippett, in this moment Hippolytos senses Artemis as ‘a transcendent paradigm of his own ‘soft, feathery shape’, the other side of death’ (p. 74). By contrast, ‘when Hippolytus gives up the ghost in *Phèdre* he does not begin with the words ‘oh, divine perfumed breath’, for he sees no ‘soft, feathery shape’ of himself, the other side of death, nor therefore did Racine need to tell the musicians to take up the drum, flute and zither and play music of pipe and drum’ (p. 77).

Why not? The crux of Tippett’s argument is this (pp. 74-75):

It is a curious experience to pass abruptly from Euripides to Racine, to set the *Hippolytus* beside *Phèdre*. For it is a great deal more than the change of title — than the shift of dramatic emphasis from the man to the woman; or even than the possibility that a chaste hero cannot ever be to French taste. (Racine gives Hippolytus a lover.) One has to begin at the beginning, for the most striking
difference is that in Phèdre there are no divine voices. Aphrodite and Artemis do not appear.

This was not at all because Racine had no religious feelings, no belief in transcendence. On the contrary, as he makes clear in his preface to Esther, he could not represent Aphrodite and Artemis as real goddesses, because he believed them to be false. But if, as I hold, Euripides could not make dramatic sense of Hippolytus unless he convinced his audience that Hippolytus really experienced a sense of the divine in the image of Artemis, neither could Racine. There is an ambiguity about Racine’s hero. For while, true to the Euripidean or Senecan model, he makes his Hippolytus a virgin, he also makes him confess, at the moment of the play’s beginning, to a first love. So his refusal of Phèdre’s incestuous appeal is not the immediate absolute reaction of the proud worshipper of chastity, but the reaction of someone who, chaste till then, had already desire for another. And the dramatic consequences are even deeper still, because this is really to dismiss Artemis but retain Aphrodite. If, at the very beginning of the play, Racine’s Hippolytus has already succumbed to the power of desire, has taken his garland from Artemis to Aphrodite, why should Aphrodite need to contrive a tragedy to reduce this mortal’s pride?

This is the central problem, the wound which has remained open, from Phèdre to Billy Budd. The Greek tragedy has an absolute raison d’être. Aphrodite speaks, Artemis speaks. The necessary tragedy unfolds between. But already in Racine the tragedy has no longer this necessary character. Hippolytus and Phèdre come to death through the accident of her incestuous desire impinging against his virtuous love for his Aricie. So Billy Budd endures a miscarriage of justice through the accident of his stammer. What tragic qualities these pieces have lie in a different mental atmosphere. But the problem remains.

Tippett’s argument has not received the attention which it demands and deserves. His distinction between the tragic qualities of Euripides’ Hippolytus, and such ‘tragic qualities’ as Phèdre may have, is valid; and it is not adequately answered by the attempt of Mueller and Steiner to suggest that the two ‘conventions of meaning’ of mythology and psychology are simultaneously present when Racine invokes the Greek (or more precisely, the Roman) pantheon.

The Greeks drew the boundaries of the self more narrowly than we do: for them, human individuality — the ‘I’ — was confined to the rational, thinking self in control of the other faculties, and any action which came from outside this rationally defined self was attributed to the world of to theion, the
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interventions of gods or daimones. Perhaps Racine was intuitively trying to match this with the antithesis in Phèdre between the elements of fureur and raisons but the equivalence does not hold.

The crucial issue is the introduction of Aricie. It is a cliché of Racine criticism to claim (eg. Steiner, p. 85) that ‘the image of a royal prince fleeing at the approach of women would have struck the contemporary audience as ridiculous’ — that is to say, that at the court of the Sun King, the virginal and chaste Hippolytos of Euripides would have been implausible (and dangerous: Racine — like Bidar and Pradon before him — was well aware that an Hippolyte who avoided all women might be perceived as an allusion to Monsieur’s homosexuality). Racine also notes in his Preface that Hippolyte’s love for Aricie makes him ‘slightly culpable towards his father’. However, Racine’s strongest reason for changing Euripides’ Hippolytos lies far deeper. Not believing in either Aphrodite or Artemis as real goddesses, he could not set up the polarity between them which is central to the design of Euripides’ original. Furthermore, his tragedy (despite vacillations as to its title) is focussed around the tragic predicament of Phèdre rather than that of Hippolyte.

Accordingly, the substitution for Euripides’ ascetic Hippolytos of the pitiable figure who confesses to Aricie in 2.2 that he is ‘a singular example of rash pride’ (530) sharpens the predicament of Racine’s heroine. Before Phedre even takes the stage in Racine’s play, we know that Hippolyte can love — but does not love her. Much of her tragedy lies in the way which both her hurt and her fury are intensified, as she comes to realise this truth (1203; cf. Bayley, pp. 58-59).

There is also an additional pathos to the fall of Hippolyte. Euripides’ Hippolytos is by no means unequivocally a figure of virtue. As the play unfolds, Euripides shifts our perspective on his title character — from the ‘healthy outdoor type’, the devotee of the forests and of hunting, in the opening scene to the neurotic misogynist of the confrontation with the Nurse; then to the whining intellectual, full of self-pity, in the agon with Theseus; and finally to the unequivocally noble youth who is thrust upon us by the Messenger’s departing comment (1254), and by Artemis’ rebuke to Theseus (1299).

His diatribe against women (616f) is a terrifying example of the extremes to which ignorance, fear and loathing can take a human being. It then requires all of Euripides’ dramatic ingenuity to satisfy us, at the close, that Hippolytos does not simply deserve his appalling fate. By contrast, the tender figure of Racine’s Hippolyte deserves our pity: his politically
dangerous but utterly sincere love for Aricie, the circumstances which prevent them from fulfilling that love, and the terrifying downfall of a man who has faith that the gods will protect him (996 etc. — a faith which, in Racine’s universe, seems singularly misplaced) all make him into an innocent person who deserves, and elicits, the pity of the spectators.

But the price is high. As Mueller himself concedes, (pp. 55-56) ‘if Hippolytos is in love, then the meaning of his death is obscured. In Euripides’ play the image of the hero entangled in the reins of his chariot as he vainly tries to escape the bull is a terrifying image of the futility of repression. We can understand how such an end should follow from the hero’s open defiance of Aphrodite and from his narcissistic selfrighteousness. In Racine’s play the thematic relation between the hero and his death is weakened and the premises of the sub-plot [sic!] undermine the tragedy of Hippolyte ...’. If the answer to this is the claim that Hippolyte’s love amply contributes by intensifying the tragedy of Phèdre herself, then Phèdre has to be in a situation which is truly tragic.

However, it has to be asked whether this is truly achieved, even after the superbly visionary and focussed rhetoric of the great speech at 1252f. Thésée has attempted to purge the world of monsters, but the worst monster is within his house, as Aricie acutely realises (1443f) Phèdre in Racine is doomed simply by being ‘the daughter of Minos and of Pasiphaë’ (36). Vénus may then make partial sense as an internalised power, symbolising the inherited corruption of Phèdre’s royal blood; but what place does Neptune’s monster have in a recreation of Greek drama for an audience which did not believe in the Greek gods — especially when, as Mueller has conceded, Hippolyte’s love for Aricie has destroyed the meaning which Poseidon’s monster possesses in Euripides?

In seventeenth century terms, Théramène’s narration is baroque; operatic rather than dramatic (cf. Cairncross, p. 139). In this context, the word operatic is pejorative; Lully could ‘get away’ in opera with events which Racine simply could not include in a tragedy, since they stretch credibility beyond the canons of vraisemblance. Short’s claim (p. 30-31) that Vénus is plausible because (following Aristotle’s advice, Poetics 1454b7) Racine places the less credible events outside the actual action of the drama, and Neptune has to be part of the story because he was a part of the legend, does not begin to meet the difficulty. This is the reason why Steiner mounts a full-blooded claim that Racine uses the language of myth both literally and as a means of dramatising elements which we would now speak of in the language of psychology (cf. Turnell, pp. 239-40). However, this hardly answers Tippett’s strictures, which are only mildly blunted in their force by the fact
that the fate of Phèdre, not that of Hippolyte, is central in Racine’s drama. Neptune’s destruction of Hippolyte in Phèdre stands out, as the moment where the process of internalising the Greek gods as a ‘metaphor for psycho-drama’, pursued more successfully throughout the rest of the tragedy, has simply failed.

As Steiner implies in an acute passage later in The Death of Tragedy (p. 292), Racine’s enterprise was taken up again by Ibsen. The parallel between Ibsen and Racine has never been fully drawn; but it is highly relevant to this inquiry. Racine, on the verge of returning to religion and with an increased consciousness of the presence of ‘things left out of your science’ (King Priam: interlude 1) surrounding and interpenetrating the action of tragedy, tired of the psychological reductionism of his two earlier Greek-based plays Iphigénie and Andromaque, and experimented with a more ambitious evocation of the divine in Phèdre. So too Ibsen, after having deliberately narrowed his range to ‘write poetry (digte) in the language of ordinary life’, later sought to reintroduce those supernatural elements, those links with to theion, which had been unhesitatingly displayed in his earlier verse dramas Brand and Peer Gynt, but which he had suppressed in An Enemy of the People and the subsequent prose plays.

Ibsen’s achievement in the late dramas has been extravagantly praised — not least by Steiner, who roundly claims that ‘he created a new theology and the theatrical conventions with which to express it.’ (ibid.); it has equally been intensely disparaged, most prominently by Gray in Ibsen: a Dissenting View. The lines of battle are drawn in exactly the same places as with Racine. Are the symbols which obtrude themselves in Ibsen’s later plays — the white horses of Rosmersholm, the steeple which Master Builder Solness climbs, and the icy wastes into which John Gabriel Borkmann, and Rubek at the close of When We Dead Awaken, go to perish, successful incarnations of spiritual meaning; or are they clumsy attempts to integrate, within the reality of Ibsen’s evocation of Norwegian daily life, a higher reality which has disappeared from the prose theatre? At the end of The Master Builder, Solness finally gains the courage to attempt to remake the great achievement of his youth; he climbs a tower, and falls from the top. There is a deliberate, savage contrast between the vision of Hilde, his Valkyrie, for whom this death is the consummation of his achievement, and the plain, realistic assertion of Ragnar, for whom Solness ‘in the end couldn’t do it’. After this line, Hilde — Ibsen directs, in ‘quiet, bewildered triumph’ — tells us that Solness ‘climbed to the top. And I heard harps in the air.’
But we, in the audience, do not hear the harps. Ibsen pushes the medium of prose, as Racine pushed the medium of verse with Théramène’s narrative in Phèdre, right to the frontier of the operatic. At the end of The Master Builder the limit has been reached which Yeats saw himself reaching at the end of The Death of Cuchulain — the place at which music must enter: the border between spoken play and opera.

In Phèdre, the heroine is doomed by an inherited curse on herself and on her race. (It is no accident that the power of heredity, and of a family’s past, lies at the heart of two of Ibsen’s most powerful plays — Ghosts and Rosmersholm — and is important, to a greater or lesser extent, in most of his mature dramas.)

It has not been widely recognised that this aspect of Phèdre was seen, assessed, and opposed by Goethe in his remarkable anti-tragic drama Iphigenie auf Tauris. This play has been extensively discussed — but usually in terms of Goethe’s reaction against the ideals of his earlier Sturm und Drang period, and his use of neoclassicism in relation to his other plays and those of his German contemporaries. There has also been some, more limited treatment of the relationship between his Iphigenie and the original play by Euripides. Little attention has been paid to Goethe’s relationship with Phèdre.

I believe that Iphigenie auf Tauris was conceived as a response to Racine’s Phèdre — and one which fundamentally opposes Racine’s vision of the Greeks. There are obvious formal parallels. Goethe’s plot is drawn from a play by Euripides; he dispenses with the Greek chorus, observes the three neoclassic unities, and practises extreme economy of action. Like Phèdre, Iphigenie is a drama in which a formal symmetry is maintained; each of the main characters has a confidant, and the principal focus is on two-actor scenes, with more than two characters interacting only where this is absolutely necessary to the demands of the plot.

The main theme of Goethe’s Iphigenie is a direct reply to Phèdre. Where Racine images his Phèdre as irretrievably trapped by her tainted heredity, Goethe’s drama poses the question, how human beings can break out from under the pressure of an inherited curse. Just as Racine intensifies and dwells upon the misdeeds of Phèdre’s mother and the curse upon her family, so too Goethe makes Iphigenie retell the legend of the house of Atreus (1.3) in a hideous version which incorporates more of the family’s legendary crimes than any of the surviving Greek Elektra, Orestes or Iphigenia tragedies. Goethe’s drama spares us none of the horrors — from Tantalus via Pelops to the Thyestean banquet, the sacrifice of Iphigenie herself, the murder of Agamemnon and the matricide (cf. Orest’s great speech at the end of 3.1).
In Goethe’s play, human beings constantly attempt to bend ‘the will of the gods’ to suit their own devices. This first becomes explicit in the interchange between Thoas and Iphigenie in 1.3 (Thoas: ‘It is no god that speaks; it is your heart.’; Orest makes the same accusation against Pylades in 2.1). The characters of the drama (especially Iphigenie) also turn to the gods in the first three acts in an attempt to find a solution to the problems that beset them; but only human endeavour achieves anything in Goethe’s world. One of Goethe’s first changes from Euripides is that his Iphigenie has persuaded the Taurians to suspend their practice of human sacrifice; and Iphigenie’s love for her brother Orest drives the Furies back to Tartarus at the close of Act Three, releasing Orest from their pursuit.

Similarly, Pylades rebuts Orest’s pessimistic attempt to convince his friend that he is helpless, doomed by his heredity (2.1). And as the play unfolds, the power of Iphigenie’s pure and noble character increases. She sees herself in Act One as surrounded by the weight of the horror of the misdeeds of her race — trapped in ‘a ring of bronze’ (331); but when, in 4.5, Iphigenie comes to reject Pylades’ pragmatic advice, she also rejects the view that she and her race are bound by an iron Necessity.

Will then this curse rule forever? Shall our race
be never granted respite, never find
new blessings? Everything must end —
the fairest fortune, brightest power of life
weaken at last. Why not this curse? .......... (1694f)

She tells the truth to Thoas, throws herself and her brother at his mercy; and she does so with an appeal to his humanity;

...all men hear it,
whatever part of Heaven saw their birth, in whom
the springs of life flow pure and free. (1938f)

In the final scene of the drama, her ‘fair and childlike faith’ transcends the threatened violence; in Goethe’s ambiguous oracle, ‘the sister’ who is captive in the land of the Taurians turns out not to be the image of the goddess Artemis, but Orest’s own sister Iphigenie.

In this way, Goethe removes from Euripides’ version of the legend both the ‘god from the machine’ and the threat of a sea monster; for in Euripides’ original play, Athena has to intervene to rescue Orestes and Iphigeneia from the anger of Poseidon himself. Where Racine could not dispense with Neptune’s monster, Goethe successfully eliminates his intervention.
Goethe's play precisely opposes the fiercely overlogical destroying powers which run in the veins of Racine’s heroine. Iphigenie transcends the ancestral curse upon her house; her faith and her humanity are sufficient, allied to her reasoning powers, to overcome the feverish desire for self-destruction which has lived so long in the house of Atreus. However, Goethe was forced to admit in later life that Iphigenie was, in his own ironic words, a ‘devilishly humane’ picture of human existence — a solitary victory for the forces that fight against a tragic outcome.

Tippett’s King Priam is itself an example of the modern tendency towards overdetermination, which was initiated by Racine in Phèdre. Tippett shamelessly grafts onto the legend of Priam’s Troy part of the story of Oidipous. In the opening scene of the opera, Hecuba’s dream just after the birth of Paris is interpreted by the wise Old Man of Troy; ‘the dream means that Paris, this child, will cause as by an inexorable fate [my emphasis] his father’s death.’ Like Laios, Priam sends the child out to be exposed; but, like Oidipous, Paris is saved. He is brought up outside Troy, and when Priam recognises him again, he chooses to take him within the walls. However, Paris is inexorably led, in the Judgement at the end of Act One, to choose the gift of divine Aphrodite, the love of Helen; and in doing so, he dooms not merely his father, but his entire city. In the opera (3.3) the great confrontation between Achilles and Priam at the climax of Iliad 24 is grimly reinflected. Instead of consoling each other, as they do in Homer, Achilles and Priam bleakly confront their inevitable deaths.

For all his critique of Racine, Tippett is at one with him in this cold picture of an inexorable fate. In both their dramas, destiny is an impersonal power, which brings down the characters despite all their struggles, rather than the result of the specific intervention of active, intelligent gods. The role of fate in Phèdre and King Priam is entirely different from the gradual ‘taking shape’ of an individual’s moira (Yeats echoes Hektor’s phrase at Iliad 6.489), which is characteristic of the Iliad and of most Greek tragedies. Why is this?

The trouble starts with Euripides. Perhaps specifically because it was written to assert the power of the goddess before an audience which included sceptics, Hippolytus is significantly different from any other surviving Greek tragedy except The Bakchai. Though she is evasive about the details of how it will happen, Aphrodite prophesies precisely what will happen in the play. Racine has massively increased the level of inexorability, even beyond that in Hippolytus, to compensate for the fact that if the audience does not believe in the classical Greek gods as living realities the ‘necessary’ character, which Tippett rightly insists on for tragedy, will be lost.
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The Greek gods are dead, and cannot be revived in a modern play. Tippett has the power to make a bid for transcendence, simply because he is a composer. In opera, a god can plausibly appear as the instrument of fate; and so Hermes appears in *King Priam* as the messenger of impending death who will conduct Priam’s soul down to Hades.

This cannot be achieved in spoken drama. The Greek tragedies maintained a precarious and delicate balance; the principal characters have free choice, even at moments of crisis — as when Orestes turns to Pylades for guidance at the climax of *The Libation Bearers* and asks, ‘Pylades, what shall I do? ...’. However, his *moira* has gradually taken shape as the play unfolded; at this point, Orestes equally has no choice but to kill Clytemnestra. By contrast, modern tragedy often protests too much — to disguise the fact that, when poetry and music have not combined to evoke *to theion*, disastrous events are ultimately the result of accidents. Racine makes the power of Vênus overwhelming. His Phèdre has far less choice even than her original in Euripides (and Euripides’ Phaidra is herself far more a victim of inevitability than most other characters in classical Greek tragedy); and in the final Act each successive human attempt to prevent catastrophe is ‘too late’, with a coincidence which is more than diabolical.

Similarly, though Tippett claims that the theme of his opera is ‘the mysterious nature of human choice’, choice in *King Priam* seems simply to amount to accepting a fate which is already inevitable. This is the opera’s crucial difference from all the surviving Greek tragedies (even Sophokles’ *Oidipous Tyrannos*); like that of Phèdre, the fate of Priam and his city has been ordained long before they were born. The audience’s interest in their characters and predicaments is inevitably reduced.

There is no alternative. The debate about Ibsen is (or should be) a debate about whether the symbols of his late plays can achieve a similar degree of inexorability. I do not believe that they do; these plays (though among the richest and most powerful of modern dramas) do not recreate the classical Greek conception of tragedy. I have argued elsewhere that the operas of Janáček are among the very few works since the Renaissance to achieve the balance between a ‘destiny’ which gradually takes shape, and the feeling that the characters are free.

Untouched by the classical tradition, these music-dramas present the same paradox as the dramas of Aischylos. In *Jenufa*, when the Kostelnička murders Jenufa’s baby, the act is depicted by the music and text at that point as both inevitable and freely chosen. Janáček steers between the Skylla of excessive necessity (as in *King Priam*) and the Charybdis of disaster resulting from accident (as in *Billy Budd*). For all their power and insight, both
Tippett's opera and Britten's obstinately fall short of tragedy; the sufferings of their principal figures evoke pathos rather than tragic awe. True tragedy is a rare and difficult achievement, even in opera — the modern dramatic form which is closest to the Greek mixture of spoken with lyric verse, and blocked movement with choreographed dance.

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