

Signing the Body Dramatic

Interpretation and Translation of Racine's *Phèdre*

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Introduction

*And if the body does not do fully as much as the soul?
And if the body were not the soul, what is the soul?
—Walt Whitman, I Sing the Body Electric*

American Sign Language is a language of the body. It's a language of gesture, of facial expression, of sight and touch. As an actor, a linguist, and a dramaturg (and one who was raised on a heavy diet of Brecht's Epic Theater), I'm drawn to ASL as a medium for theater, for storytelling, and for connection and communication. This thesis is an exploration of my experiences with ASL as a literary and theatrical medium—my experiments in ASL translation, my understanding of Deaf theater, and my musings on communication, translation, and creation. The thesis is naturally bipartite. ASL being a highly visual, four-dimensional language, my translation work is presented in video format. The paper (or, more likely, pixel) portion of my thesis is a window into my process. Part journal, part essay collection, part dramaturgical casebook, part linguistics paper, the document you now read is the production of months and years of musings and ideations.

What am I doing? How did I get to this place? What is this thesis trying to do?

I'm a theater kid through and through. Dramaturgy (the study of the *stuff* of plays—their history, their structure, their position in the contexts of the theatrical community and the world) thrills me. I'm enamoured with the power of theater to create worlds and tell stories. I'm enamoured with the power of the theater to affect people and create change. I'm fascinated by the longevity of certain plays—the fact that I can read Shakespeare and Racine (not to mention Sophocles) hundreds of years and thousands of miles removed from their intended audiences and still laugh and cry. I'm excited by the political power of theater—both the power of theater as political commentator and as agent of cultural change. Theater, in other words, is important to

me. Important, with a capital “I”. There is a lot to learn from theater.

I came to Sign Language and Deaf studies through the world of theater. My high school theater department—where I spent countless hours and devoted my (literal) blood, sweat and tears—had one Deaf faculty member, Ron Galiazzo. I learned ASL out of sheer necessity: loitering in the theater department office meant loitering around Ron, and if I was going to loiter, I might as well learn to communicate with all the occupants of the office. And so I learned. Soon after, Ron and Robin, the theater department head, recruited me to join Pocket Players, and, as they say, the rest is history. Pocket Players was a bilingual theater troupe with three aims: to promote understanding of and exposure to Deaf culture, to provide ASL-based entertainment to Deaf children, and to explore theater as a multicultural experience. Pocket Players put on short plays in ASL, with voice interpretation by hearing actors. We toured as a small company around Massachusetts, performing for Deaf schools, mainstream schools, and Deaf senior centers. I was with Pocket Players as a sign and voice actor for four years. It was a life-changing experience.

Pocket Players was an introduction to ASL, but also to theater as a cultural experience, and, possibly a bi-cultural experience. I took a course in my freshman year of high school, Bridging Cultures Through Theater, which took me further down the long and winding road of studying theater as a way to study cultures.

In college, I was introduced to linguistics a more formally, and, more specifically, to the linguistics of ASL. Looking at Deaf theater is incomplete without looking at Deaf languages, and the storied literature and history of those languages.

This project is ostensibly a translation work. But that’s not quite it. It’s an exploration of

questions. Originally, that question was “what makes a Deaf play?”. More accurately now would be something along the lines of “What happens to theater in translation?” “How much can be—should be—carried over?” “What does it mean to put on a play for Deaf audiences?” “Is there such a thing as a Hearing signed play? –or at least a culturally neutral one?” “Why do we translate plays?”

Two Brief Notes

- 1) I cannot, unfortunately, claim much credit for the title of this thesis. That honor goes to Donna Jo Napoli, one of my thesis advisors and linguist extraordinaire, and to H-Dirksen Bauman, Jennifer Nelson, and Heidi Rose. The latter three people are the editors of the fantastic *Signing the Body Poetic*, a collection of essays on ASL poetry and literature. It was that collection that introduced me to the rigorous academic study of sign language literature, and, in part, inspired me to begin my work on this project. Their title, in turn, recalls the Whitman poem “I sing the body electric”. My thesis is but the latest in a long line of works exploring the power of the body—and, specifically the signing body—to express the contents of the soul.

- 2) As is customary in discussion of ASL and Deaf culture, I write the word *Deaf* with a capital D. *Deaf*— with a capital d—refers to people or characteristics of any number of Deaf cultures around the world. To define Deafness as an identity in the course of a cursory introduction is no easy feat; particularly in the age of cochlear implants and other major cultural changes, exactly who or what is “Deaf” is indeed a contentious issue. Generally speaking, however, “Deaf” refers to a person who is physically deaf and chooses to identify with and participate in Deaf culture: Deaf people tend to use sign language, Deaf people may have attended Deaf schools or institutions, Deaf people tend to self-identify as Deaf. All of this is in contrast to *deaf*—little *d*—, which simply refers to the audiological condition of hearing loss.¹

¹ Of course a short paragraph cannot convey the complexities of Deaf cultural identity—where, for example, do CODAs ([hearing] Children Of Deaf Adults) fall, when, technically, they are neither Deaf

nor deaf? What about other signing members of the Deaf community? Or those who identify as culturally Deaf but do not sign?

Excerpts from *Storytelling as a Means of Cultural Affirmation*:

Note: I originally wrote *Storytelling as a Means of Cultural Affirmation, or, Why Deaflore is Resistance Literature* May 7, 2012, for a course on Deaf literature. The paper, as you will see, explores the role of Deaf literature, and, in this case, Deaf folklore in the cultural empowerment movement. My translation thesis is *not* Deaf literature. I am not a Deaf artist, I am not writing on Deaf themes, and I am not in particular attempting to write a Deaf piece. In fact, as I have discussed briefly before, my role as a hearing person so intimately involved in creating sign language-based literature is one that I take on extremely carefully. My thesis is, however, a deeper look at theater as literature, and, more specifically, sign language theater as literature. No exploration of the world of sign language theater and literature is complete without an understanding of the cultural context of signed pieces. I include excerpts of this paper, therefore, to this end. I hope to remind myself and my readers of the power of sign language as not only a literary tool but a socio-cultural one.

From *Storytelling as a Means of Cultural Affirmation*

Despite the efforts of mainstream hearing society (led largely by the medical community) to pathologize hearing loss, many Deaf people don't consider themselves disabled but members of "a distinct cultural and linguistic minority" with a rich heritage (Atherton, Russell and Turner 2001). Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, in *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* describe Deaf culture as "not simply a camaraderie with others who have a similar physical condition, but...like many other cultures in the traditional sense of the term, historically created and actively transmitted across generations." (Padden and Humphries, 1988) Folklorist Liina Paales described the Deaf "folk group", that is to say, those members of the Deaf community which share a folklore and a cultural experience, as having several distinct characteristics typical of

cultures: common language, traditions, and in-group marriages.(Paales n.d.) Viewing Deafness as a distinct culture, and particularly as a linguistic subculture, allows us insight into how the collection of folk stories, jokes, poems, and plays about and by Deaf people inform us about the heritage they depict.

DEAFLORE—the term used by folklorist S.J. Carmel to describe Deaf folklore—is an integral part of Deaf culture. (Carmel 1996) The face-to-face tradition of storytelling helps to strengthen the Deaf community and spread cultural values. Many sign theorists and folklorists describe the high value of “good storytellers” and “smooth signers” in Deaf cultural life.(Bauman, Nelson and Rose 2007) Paales succinctly describes the effect of folklore on the deaf community, saying “for the deaf community, folklore is entertaining, educational as well as a way to preserve one’s identity or, to put it differently – it has the functions of folklore in general”(Paales, 79)

In addition to providing entertainment, Deaf poets and storytellers—as can storytellers of all language-minority communities—participate in a form of protest and cultural affirmation simply by telling stories—any stories—in sign language. Signed languages have been suppressed worldwide, and this language suppression is directly linked to the struggles of Deaf people. By reclaiming signed languages and employing them as a medium for the generation of a culture, Deaf storytellers are actively shedding the bonds of oppression.

Why are Deaf literature and a Deaf folkloric canon so essential to Deaf cultural advancement and the resistance to oppression? There are several reasons. Firstly: cultures are often defined by their literatures, and establishing the existence of a thriving literary world within Deaf culture allows Deaf people to participate in a multicultural literary discourse. Deaf literature lends a distinctly Deaf perspective to history and philosophy, which can intercourse with mainstream Hearing views. Too often, colonialist forces silence the voices of their

oppressed, erasing or ignoring their histories in order to re-write the story of the world through colonialist eyes. Frantz Fanon describes this in his *The Wretched of the Earth*, discussing the oppressive capability of colonialism in both “holding a people in its grip...emptying the native’s head of all form and content...[and engaging in a regime that] turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it.” (Fanon 1963)

Fanon’s words apply to marginalized cultures of many different types—racial, ethnic, and religious. Ghassan Kanafani and other scholars of Palestinian resistance literature, for example, devote much of their research to simply establishing that such a body of literature does, in fact, exist (Harlow 1987). Deaf studies scholars are faced with a similar task. So much of Deaf studies, and, it follows, so much of Deaf cultural advancement is and must be devoted to proving the existence of a Deaf culture: to legitimizing signed languages as fully valid languages, to establishing that there is an extant canon of literature in both signed and written language that affirms the experiences of Deaf people, and to understanding that Deaf people have a set of cultural norms and traditions both separate from yet equal to those of other subcultures. This effort—undertaken by linguists, cultural theorists, storytellers, and users of signed languages—is real human rights work; it is the effort of cultural affirmation and resistance to the Hearing colonialism that has and continues to oppress Deaf people around the world. The existence of a thriving Deaf literary culture is a form of protest; establishing a Deaf presence in history empowers Deaf people by allowing them to participate and to be affirmed in the fact that Deaf people are a part of, and belong in, the greater conversations about this world.

A consideration of Deaflore as a means to advance and promote Deaf culture would be incomplete without an understanding of the integral nature of signed languages to Deaf cultural formation. A key part of the history of Deaf oppression is the suppression and sometimes

outright banning of signed languages. Particularly in the years following an 1880 international conference on deaf education at Milan, when sign languages were declared to be detrimental to the development of Deaf children, deaf people were discouraged and forbidden from signing. Speech reading was required, and proficiency in the spoken language became associated even more closely with intelligence and connection to society. The Milan conference, an event infamous to those with even the most cursory understanding of Deaf history, marked the beginning of a great decline in Deaf rights. Deaf history is filled with horror stories of speech-reading lessons, of feeling (and being) cut off from society because of lack of communication skills, feeling denigrated because of a preference for the visual-tactile language that is the natural choice for someone without hearing.

Because of the extent to which hearing people have used [sign] language restriction to oppress the Deaf, any use of sign language—any development and affirmation of sign language as any more than [a vulgar collection of gestures]—is itself an affirmation of Deaf culture and an act of resistance to colonialism. Padden and Humphreys describe the import of signed languages in the act of cultural affirmation, saying that Deaf people “have found ways to define and express themselves through their rituals, tales, performances, and everyday social encounters. The richness of their sign language affords them the possibilities of insight, invention, and irony.”(Harlow 1987)

The integral relationship of sign language to Deaf culture has led Deaf people to value elements of folklore rife with linguistic play. Stories, jokes, and poems that make full use of the unique ludic and aesthetic possibilities of the language help to instill Deaf people, especially Deaf youth, with linguistic and cultural pride. Simon Carmel uses the word “signlore” to describe the particular subset of Deaf folklore that includes “sign play including manual alphabet and number

stories, sign poetry...sign puns, name signs, and many other forms”ⁱ Because of its reliance on the singular nature of signed languages, Signlore is a uniquely and particularly Deaf art form. The creation and propagation of these inherently and only Deaf stories, jokes, riddles, and poems, is therefore a way to celebrate Deaf culture and empower Deaf people. The canon of signlore, many pieces of which are entirely apolitical in subject matter, is therefore an invaluable instrument in the movement to affirm Deaf culture and resist linguistic oppression.

Renowned sign linguist Ben Bahan invented his charming “Ball Story” to teach Deaf students of ASL about the particular potential of the language(Bahan n.d.). His short story, which follows a science experiment gone wrong, does not rely on plot and carries no particular message. The beauty and popularity of “Ball Story” is the excellent and skillful use of language play: Bahan tells the story almost exclusively using classifiers as opposed to ASL signs from the frozen lexicon. The classifiers used in the story describe the various characters and the action both more succinctly and much more vividly than could be possible in any spoken language. “Ball Story”, though light in subject matter, is a confirmation of the great linguistic power of ASL. Stories like this provide Deaf students with hope and a sense of cultural pride. This particular Deaf art form is able to do things—describe objects and people, convey a sense of humor—that Hearing methods can’t. These seemingly frivolous exercises and language games are, in fact, essential in the movement to promote and affirm Deaf culture, particularly in the face of the linguistic oppression that has and continues to be a source of struggle for Deaf people.

All of this is not to say that particularly ludic examples of sign poetry are only covertly pro-Deaf/pro-SL. Several extremely beautiful, instances of signlore are entirely unabashed in their role as pro-Deaf instruments. Dot Mile’s beautiful bilingual poem “Language of the Eye” explicitly promotes sign language as a medium more capable than spoken languages at expressing

ideas vividly. Miles' works, which were often performed simultaneously in both speech and sign, typically relied on sign language to create beautiful, striking images. "Language of the Eye" is a beautifully signed poem that makes use of the metaphoric and poetic potential of sign language. It is her form of protest, of resistance to linguistic oppression, to state in no uncertain terms that there are things you can do with sign language that you simply cannot do in English. Even the assertion that ASL (or BSL) is a language at all is a controversial one: until William Stokoe's landmark 1960 monograph on sign language structure, the linguistic community considered sign languages to be nothing more than a manually-coded pidgin version of spoken languages. To write and perform a poem asserting not only that ASL was a language but a more apt one than English was a message of extreme strength and faith in the Deaf community. Dot Miles' poetry was used as a way to empower other young Deaf people; support of sign languages meant support of the Deaf.

Barbara Harlow's article on resistance literature described literature and folklore as "an arena of *struggle*." (Harlow 1987, 2) Deaf literature is no different. Much of the historic marginalization of Deaf people has cut them off from education, opportunity, and language and left many Deaf people (metaphorically if not literally) voiceless. The formation of a flourishing and rich body of folklore and literature is perhaps the most powerful weapon in the struggle to affirm Deaf culture and empower Deaf people.

Culture Swapping

It is important for me to make clear that I am not looking to create a Deaf American theater. Just as the very white—and shockingly conservative—Mamet did not create Black theater with his 2010¹¹ *Race*, I, a hearing dramaturg, am not making a Deaf play. I grappled very much during this translation process with my role as a hearing author translating this work, hoping to pair sensitivity and deference to a culture that is not mine with experimentation and expression.

I didn't always have this exact sentiment. As I have mentioned before, I originally did set out to create a Deaf play—to add to the world of Deaf theater as a Deaf-sympathetic theater artist. Before settling on *Phèdre*, which I chose for its linguistic challenges, I thought about producing *Death of a Salesman*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and other plays that I thought were quintessentially American. If the American Deaf experience is part of the larger American one, then what would happen if I made an American play a Deaf American play? What sorts of things would need to change?

Dramaturgs and sensationalist directors have long been experimenting with culture as it relates to the theater. In 2008, a Broadway production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* starred James Earl Jones and Terrence Howard instead of Paul Newman and Burl Ives. In 2012, Blair Underwood played Stanley Kowalski, the part made famous by Marlon Brando, in *Streetcar Named Desire* (another Williams play). What did that do? By staging a [white] American show with an all Black cast, is it suddenly a Black show? Is it suddenly universal? These conscious culture-bending shows do something very interesting and important for theatergoers, or, at least, they do it for me: They serve as a reminder that these stories that we consider universal are not quite. The issues that we consider to be quintessentially American are, in fact, race- and culture-

specific. It's a jarring and important lesson. I hope people pick up on it.

August Wilson wrote, in his 1996 address to the Theater Communications Group, that "To mount an all-black production of *Death of a Salesman* or any other play conceived for white actors as an investigation of the human condition through the specifics of white culture is to deny us our own humanity, our own history, and the need to make our own investigations from the cultural ground on which we stand as black Americans." John Lair's *New Yorker* critique of Yale's attempt to mount such a production further hammers home the point. *Death of a Salesman* is Arthur Miller's 1949 exploration of the disappointment of a Jewish man with nothing to show for his long career and hard work. The play rests on the idea of the American Dream—the notion that "abundance is there for the taking"(Lahr 2009) But this "American Dream" is a *white* American Dream—Black family men had no false notions that the world was theirs for the taking; they were confronting a different set of problems. A different America.

Just as simply recasting white plays does not make them Black, translating hearing plays does not make them Deaf, particularly if the translator is herself hearing. If I were to translate an American play with the aim of creating a piece of Deaf theater, my task would be much larger than simple translation. It would be adaptation. It would require making a change in the essential dramaturgy of the play. There is a lot more to creating Deaf theater than simply writing Deaf characters or even making plays accessible.

Ultimately, I decided that I did not want to create Deaf theater. But I did want to understand it—what are the challenges of creating Deaf plays? What does truly accessible theater look like? What is a bicultural performance?

What is Deaf Theater?

“If there are Greek epics, there should be Deaf epics”

(Bauman, Nelson and Rose 2007, 169)

Cynthia Peters’ essay on *Deaf American Theater* discusses the different dramaturgical purpose of Deaf theater. As opposed to the mainstream aim of producing a traditional piece of classical literature, Deaf theater, according to Peters, exists to bring together Deaf people. Its purpose is cultural enrichment and empowerment, rather than mere aesthetics. And this makes sense—just as so much of the Deaf literary tradition is specifically about empowering Deaf people through stories, so, to, is the Deaf theater tradition.

Deaf plays tend to deal with Deaf subjects—inequality, audism (prejudice based on hearing ability), access to education and language, relationships between hearing and Deaf people. Peters compares Deaf plays to the ancient Greek epic ones—positing that both served as encyclopedic records of cultural history and norms. Just as Deaf communities are scattered about the US, so too were ancient Greek communities dispersed around the country. Both depended on theater—in modern times facilitated by YouTube—to bring together individual communities and “foster a cultural identity and thus a shared loyalty”.(Bauman, Nelson and Rose, 78)

And so it seems fitting that I chose a Greek (ish) play—a piece based on the Greek epics intended to instill a sense of homeland and history upon their disparate audience members—to make my Deaf (ish) play.

Deaf plays differ dramaturgically from mainstream hearing plays in many ways. In service of the concept of cultural empowerment and Deaf identity building, many Deaf plays are highly collaborative—much more so than one might see in hearing theater. The playwriting process in hearing theater is a largely individual and regimented ordeal: a dramatist scribbles away at a

script, brings it to an agent, a producer, and a director, who then hands it off to actors, who work with the script largely as-is. Peters compares the work of a Deaf dramatist, on the other hand, as more like that of “a skilled cultural worker”. Playwriting as a process, in Deaf theater, is less about bringing ideas onto paper and more about playing with language, facilitating brainstorming, and discussing stories, issues, and themes. The playwriting process is just as important as the play itself. (Bauman, Nelson and Rose, 80)

Here is the first major way in which my work is *not* a classically Deaf play. My project—though it benefitted from the feedback, advice, and influence of those around me and before me—was really mine. I worked from my Racine and created the script myself.

Deaf theater, too, distinguishes itself from hearing theater in that it caters to an audience with different needs. Based in a highly visual culture and aimed at visual-tactile communicators, Deaf plays tend to skew towards the flashy, the clever, and the concise. The logorrheic stuff of Jonson’s *Volpone* or even of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is simply too mentally and visually tiring to an audience hanging on to every finger flick and knuckle bend. Line after line of soliloquy gives way, in Deaf theater, to action, physicality, and melodrama. Theater to Deaf audiences is about visual stimulus—the more poetics, acrobatics, and slapsticks the better.

In this respect, at least, my *Phèdre* could not be a less “Deaf” choice. Which is why I found it an interesting and exciting one. *Phèdre* is all talk, no action. In keeping with classical and neoclassical convention, all the main action happens off stage. The audience is treated to no bloody deaths, no weddings, not even too much weeping happens on stage. The challenge of meeting the need for visual stimulation—a challenge for directors both Deaf and hearing—resides not with me, the translator, but the individual directors or theater companies. My job as

translator was to see what I could trim, what I should keep or even add, to make my *Phèdre* work for the Deaf stage.

Getting started: Off I trot!

Approaching this project was something of a shot in the dark for me. I was no stranger to ASL interpretation—my high school didn't often hire interpreters for its Deaf staff member, and I spent every Monday and Thursday interpreting school assemblies from English to ASL in real time. Interpreting for the theater, too, was something that had already caught my fancy, and I have some three or four plays under my belt. This particular interpreting project was different, though, from the Thornton Wilder I'd been used to: My ASL *Phèdre* involved interpreting from the French, a language I read very well, but not entirely fluently, and interpreting the particular rhyme and meter associated with the Alexandrine verse of seventeenth-century classical theater. I was working with a story I did not know well, a Greek mythological canon I only vaguely recalled, and highly specific linguistic and theatrical conventions that were new, if not to proper theater aficionados, at least to me. Needless to say, my first timid forays into this translation were unsuccessful.

I was convinced that the transition from Racine's French to my ASL would be so absolute that I should abandon the original text as quickly as possible, and create lyrical ASL verse immediately. This is one legitimate approach, I suppose, though not one that worked for me. My process stagnated; for weeks, I stared blankly at my computer screen, playing with the fonts and margins so that I didn't have to face the empty space underneath the two lines of dialogue I'd successfully brought into ASL (neither of which made it to the final draft). I had forgotten, of course, the all-important tool of the translator: the trot. To be fair, I had only recently been formally introduced to the concept of a trot; only recently explored translation as a formal, methodical, and artistic process. Sibelan Forrester, professor in the Russian Department at Swarthmore College, taught an excellent workshop on translation, which was my first foray

into the world of the literary (as opposed to strictly practical) translator. Sibelan's class involved considering issues of meter, music, rhythm, and that *je ne sais quoi* that makes a translation sound right. It questioned how to make a successful translation, a beautiful translation, an adequate translation, and if any one piece could have all three qualities. It explored tone, audience, and motive as factors in translation, and opened my eyes to a world and a practice that I hadn't even considered as an amateur interpreter. In high school and college, I was concerned with practicals of interpreting: how to convey the intended message as clearly as possible, how to sign as quickly and articulately as I could, identifying and addressing any areas of possible confusion due to cultural or other reasons, how to avoid inserting my own biases and ideas into what I was signing. I by no means believe that ASL interpreting is not artful, but, I was no artist. I was a machine (or, at least I aspired to be one!), an intellectual. Literary translation was a completely new experience. For one thing, the luxury of time—of full minutes (Days! Weeks! Months!) to consider and select my words instead of mere seconds—gave me for the first time an opportunity to stretch myself as a signer, to become not merely an articulate and adept signer, capable of fingerspelling clearly, but what renowned ASL scholar Benjamin Bahan calls a “smooth signer”, a storyteller, a wordsmith “someone who as a language artist can weave a story so smoothly that even complex utterances appear simple, yet beautiful”(Bauman, Nelson and Rose 2007, 24). Sibelan's class began with the exploration of the craft and the tools of the trade, the first, and most basic (but by no means unimportant!) of which was the trot.

One of many intermediaries between original text and final translation, the trot is a word-for-word “translation”—and that's a really loose term—of the base text. It's really not much to look at, and even less to actually read, but it's absolutely invaluable as a resource. Where a full translation encompasses content, style, metaphor, musicality, culture, &c., the trot only

covers the former, and barely that. It's not beautiful. It's not literature. It's merely a backbone, something on which to build, a way to move forward. And move forward I did.

There is an excellent film (or, as I knew it in my childhood, flipbook) called *Powers of Ten* (Eames 1968). The (very short) film opens with a shot of a couple reclining in a public park in, as I recall it, Chicago. The camera then zooms out by—you guessed it—powers of ten, showing us the park, then the city, then the country, then the earth, on and on until the shot captures an image 10^{24} m in size, the size of the observable universe. The camera then repeats the exercise, this time zooming in down the logarithmic scale. We see the man's hand, his DNA, and, finally, quarks.

Translation is an exercise in powers of ten. It's an exercise in constantly zooming out and zooming in. A successful and adequate translation should relate to its source text on each level—from the connotations and tones of individual words and phrases to the cultural nuances and themes of the story, to the plot, characters and action.

So I began at the first level. I read *Phèdre* and met the text head-on. I worked from two different French copies, an edition put out by *Classiques Larousse* annotated by Phillippe Drouillard and Denis Canal, and one published by *Classiques Bordas*, supervised by Marie-Hélène Prat. Both copies had identical *Phèdres*, but each had different sets of footnotes, associated essays, and exercises. Reading both copies was my attempt to bridge the cultural gap between 17th-century France and 2013 Swarthmore PA. Each annotated text contained synonyms, analyses, and explanations of cultural references and linguistic anomalies that I would have been utterly confused by. And because each text had slightly different interpretations of Racine's, I could get a fuller picture of how *Phèdre* was and is received. I also took out of the library several English-language translations, all of which grew dusty and, unopened, earned me

overdue fines.

I zoomed in—I read French-English dictionaries both online and off, looking at individual words. I looked at and compared ASL and French Sign Language video dictionaries. I zoomed out—I read about Racine, about the Alexandrine (the particular meter Racine uses), about Phèdre herself.

I ended up with four documents: my act-by-act summary, my scene-by-scene summary, my line-by-line summary (all mainly in English, with some ASL and French thrown in for good measure), and my ASL trot, all heavily annotated. And only then, after a two solid months of research, fiddling, and planning, could I begin to really sign.²

² I will say one last thing about the trot, which is that, in my discussions with other students who were familiar with translating, I found that many people had quite a strong disdain for the trot. Indeed, there were some times when I was forced to abandon it, and entire scenes for which I decided that to write one would be a waste of time. Sometimes, to pick apart a particular turn of phrase, metaphor, or image grammatically takes one farther from the translation than simply translating by feel.

What's in a name? Names, Sign Names, and the Myths that Matter

The real Phèdre—if there indeed was a real Phèdre—was not actually called that. Phèdre and her story are not native to neoclassical France. Phèdre, or Φαίδρα, as she was called in her own country, is Greek, the product of myth. Phèdre is Racine's francophone interpretation of the original Greek name. She's gone by many other names across time and around the world—Seneca called her *Phædra*, Miguel de Unamuno, a Spaniard, called her *Fedra*, and Marina Tsvetaeva, a Russian, called her Федре. Knowing how much translators change names, and how much this name has been changed over the years, I had no particular qualms about distancing myself from *Phèdre* in my translation.

Again, the unique nature of this translation project—translation across not only languages and times but modalities—forced me (and, really, it would be more aptly phrased “provided an opportunity to”) define my terms, unpack my assumptions, and decide for myself what it meant to name my characters and why.

American Sign Language does have a set of conventions for sign-names. Deaf people essentially have two names—two sets of symbols that mean “me!”: the written and spoken name—Jeff, Terry, Darcy—and the sign name, represented on the page in ASL gloss³, perhaps as JEFF or T-GIRL. Sign names are typically given by fluent ASL users and members of the Deaf community, ensuring that the created signs are grammatically correct and socially appropriate⁴.

Generally speaking, there are three different ways to form a sign name⁵. For particularly short written or spoken names, it makes sense to simply fingerspell the name. In general, names

³ ASL gloss being the entirely imperfect method of recording ASL on the page. It uses words in small caps to represent signed ASL signs. More on that later.

⁴ Cite this lifepoint article: <http://lifepoint.com/asl101/pages-layout/namesigns.htm>

⁵ You also see them called “name signs”. Obviously, either works.

with fewer than three or four letters are simply fingerspelled. Other sign names tend to be either descriptive or initialized. Descriptive sign names may relate to physical appearance (for example, my first ASL teacher, Ron, had a large bushy mustache, and his sign name was an R handshape dragged across the upper lip, as if to draw a mustache.⁶), personality (I had a friend who was a bit of a whiner. Her sign name—perhaps unkindly—was the same as the sign COMPLAIN), employment, habits, etc. Descriptive sign names provide a particularly interesting window into Deaf culture. Much like hearing Israeli culture, Deaf culture tends to be more blunt and straightforward, particularly about characteristics that may seem sensitive to hearing American onlookers.

Initialized sign names tend to be less iconic and simply involve the first initial of the person's spoken name, usually tapped somewhere on the face or chest. My sign name, for example, is the E handshape tapped on the right side of my chin.

There are aesthetic as well as practical considerations in the creation of sign names. The ideal sign name is recognizable, quickly and easily articulated, and pleasant to look at. Of course, there are aesthetic considerations in choosing a written/spoken name for a Deaf child as well. Just as a hearing couple might prefer an *Elizabeth* to a *Bertha* based on the sounds they found pleasing, a Deaf or predominantly signing couple might prefer a *Robin* or a *Colin* to an *Emily*⁷ because the former two fingerspell so much more smoothly.

⁶ From Ron's mustache-based sign name, it's clear that sign names can be changed throughout the life of the signer. Obviously, Ron wasn't born with a mustache. As physical characteristics or personalities change, sign names can be changed to match them. Sign names can also be changed depending on social context. Ron provides another example here. When he lived in Rochester, there was another man with a mustache, whose sign name was what I'll call the "R-stache". This other man was more senior and better-known than Ron, and so Ron was given a different sign name.

⁷ Alas, my name is just a little bit uncomfortable to fingerspell. Even if I were to move to England and use BSL, the L-Y transition would still just rub me the wrong way.

The idea of me—a non-native signer—bestowing sign names upon my characters was not necessarily a comfortable one for me. I knew that my characters needed sign names; I couldn't very well go on fingerspelling—my desire for clarity, aesthetics, and efficiency ruled that option out. I also knew, though, that any sign name that I might invent might be inadvertently ungrammatical, inappropriate, or offensive. At the same time, I was excited with the linguistic possibilities in inventing new words. So, armed with my understanding of sign-naming practices, I set about naming the characters in my *Phèdre*.⁸

Racine's *Phèdre* presented me with two categories of characters to name: There are, of course, the main characters of the story, the men and women who walk onstage, signing with each other, and falling in and out of love with each other. Those are the named characters, they are in *Phèdre's* *Dramatis Personnae*, and they are the characters whose lines I've translated. I chose sign names based on Racine's brief description of each character in the *Dramatis Personnae*, as well as on my own interpretation of the characters' identity.

Thesée, the king of Athens, is glossed THESÉE⁹, and signed by touching the T handshape to the non dominant shoulder and then to the dominant hip, as if indicating a royal sash. When signed with the K handshape, this is the sign KING. My sign can, therefore, be thought of as T-KING.

⁸ Clever readers will note that my *Phèdre* is, in fact, called *Phèdre*, and not any other variation of the, notably the English version Phaedra, or a name of my own invention. I chose to keep Racine's name for the title, and I use Racine's names in the printed subtitles in my video script. My *Phèdre* is a direct translation of Racine's, not a retelling of the larger myth. I am working from Racine's language, and I hope to keep as much of it as possible.

Phèdre, wife of Thésée, is the eponymous romantic heroine/antiheroine in this play. She succumbs to the will of spiteful Venus (who's always had it in for her family) and falls in love with her stepson, Hippolyte, against her will and against the social laws of the republic. Overcome by anguish and guilt, her forbidden love leads, eventually, to her untimely death. I chose a much more iconic sign for her name than for Thésée's—after all, she is the title character. PHÈDRE is signed by bringing two P handshapes to the left chest, palms in and fingertips touching. The dominant P then rotates downward to tap the chest with the palm out. The two middle fingers remain touching. This is another initialized sign name. The location and the movement conjure images of a heart breaking, as Phèdre's does in the play.

Hippolyte is Thésée's son by an Amazon queen. Hippolyte prides himself on his chastity and ability to resist the caprices of Venus. That is, of course, until he falls in love with fair Aricie...

His sign name reflects his desire for romantic purity: it is signed by moving the H handshape across the upturned flat palm of the non dominant hand. When this movement is done with two flat hands, the sign is CLEAN. When it's done with a P handshape, the sign is PURE. Hippolyte's sign name is, therefore, something like H-PURE.

Aricie is a young Athenian princess and the object of Hippolyte's affections. Her name, ARICIE, is signed by touching both A handshapes to the chest above the heart. The knuckles are oriented inwards and touch the knuckles of the opposite hand. ARICIE is almost identical to SWEETHEART, the only difference being that, in SWEETHEART, the

two thumbs wiggle.

Oenone is Phèdre's *nourrice*, a word I found entirely difficult to translate into English. Technically and literally, Oenone is Phèdre's nurse—which, in modern English, has medical connotations—or governess—which only conjures images of *Fraulein Maria* and the Von Trapp children. Caretaker? Not quite. Babysitter? Absolutely not. Oenone's role in Phèdre's life is so difficult to describe because we have no analogues in modern American culture. Oenone was nanny and nursemaid, caretaker, confidante, teacher, friend to Phèdre, and has known her all her life. I tried to indicate this relationship in Oenone's sign name. OENONE is signed by brushing the O handshape away from the body, on top of the non dominant O handshape. This movement is done twice. The movement and location of this sign echo the sign ADVICE.

Théramène is Hippolyte's *gouverneur*. Again, this relationship is tricky to describe—some mix of tutor, nanny, advisor, and friend. I sign THÉRAMÈNE by brushing both T handshapes by my temples. This movement is done twice, and echoes the sign TEACH.

Ismene is Aricie's confidant and friend. Her name is signed by linking both pinky fingers together. This is similar to the sign FRIEND.

Panope is Phèdre's lady-in-waiting, her handmaid. Her name is signed by tapping the middle finger of the P handshape twice on the dominant shoulder, in a similar gesture to the sign RESPONSIBLE.

This being a play based on a Greek myth, there are countless references—some frequent and some passing—to specific Gods, specific locations, specific heroes and monsters. I chose, for the most part, to omit the names of these particular references. ASL is much more about images than words—or, rather, in ASL, the best words *are* images, and to adequately translate into ASL is to give meaningful image to the spoken and written word. The specific word *Minotaur*, for example, connoting to the francophone literate audience member the monstrous half-man, half-bull, lurking in the center of Daedalus' Labyrinth. In translating this concept into ASL, I have three choices: I could fingerspell *Minotaur*, so that the Deaf audience gets as close to an identical interaction with that word as possible. This approach falls significantly short of adequate. Fingerspelling—particularly when done over and over, or when done quickly—is cumbersome and clumsy, both for viewer and for signer. The Deaf audience member has to work to understand that sign, where a hearing person hearing the word does not. Also, the word itself may not be familiar to Deaf audiences. Deaf literacy is woefully low (due, in part, to lack of access to appropriate language and literacy resources), and while Neoclassical French theatergoers may have prided themselves on their encyclopedic knowledge of the Greek canon, far fewer modern American Deaf people share that priority. Why make your audience work to read a word that may not even ring a bell? The real reason not to simply fingerspell is, of course, that ASL is not simply about finding ways to bring English (or, in this case, French) to Deaf people. There are systems in place for that purpose—Signed Exact English¹⁰, or Cued Speech, for example. ASL is a beautiful and inherently visually descriptive language. Why would I bother spelling out M-I-N-O-T-A-U-R, when I could describe a monster—part man, part bull,

¹⁰ A method that pairs gestures with English words, so that English sentences can be conveyed visually

horned and ferocious?

I treated many of the specific references in Racine's text thusly. Specific place names, I omitted—is it really important to the story that Théràmène search this *particular* river?¹¹ Names of particular monsters, heroes, and various other Greeks, I too, glossed over, preferring instead to omit where I could and describe when I had to.

¹¹ Of course, there were times when the specific place names mattered—if not to the plot, then artistically. For example, in Act I, Scene 1, Théràmène followed the *Achéron* to search for the missing Thésée. The *Achéron*, which I knew as the River Styx, is the river into Hades. It was important for me to convey this specifically so that viewers would understand the lengths to which Théràmène travelled.

The Matter of Meter

Wishful thinking and early training in arithmetic have convinced a majority of people that there are such things as equals in the world.
— Gregory Rabassa (Biguenet and Schulte 1989)

Margaret Sayers Peden thinks translation is like melting ice. The translator must melt the ice cube that is the original work, allow the molecule and particles to shift, possibly escape and be replaced with new water, and then reform the now liquid water back into the ice cube of a new translation.

Margaret Sayers Peden thinks translation is like renovating a log cabin. The translator painstakingly labels and catalogues each log, taking note of its placement in the larger structure, and then dismantles the cabin, only to reassemble it somewhere new, each log in its original place, “with a minimal application of mortar”(Biguenet and Schulte 1989, 13).

Margaret Sayers Peden thinks the translator is essentially violent. The translator “must do violence before [they] can make beauty;...must destroy before [they] can create.”(Biguenet and Schulte 1989, 13) She calls for the de-struction of a piece—the reduction of a poem to its essential structural frame—as a necessary first step in the process of reconstruction and retelling.

What is *Phèdre*'s essential frame? Upon which architectural and cultural foundations does it rest? To what extent should my translation build upon the same foundations and to what extent should my translation move away from all of that? Which elements of ornament, which additions and poetries of Racine's shall I preserve and which shall I replace with my own inventions?

Racine wrote in a very particular tradition of French neoclassical theater. *Phèdre* is written in *Alexandrines*, the series of rhyming couplets popular in verse theater at the time. Alexandrines consist of twelve syllables per line, often with a caesura after the sixth syllable.

Unlike in English-language verse, where thoughts and ideas tend to continue on across lines, phrases in the Alexandrine end with the line. The Alexandrine form is extremely particular about the type of rhymes that are allowed within the scheme. While English-language poetry is content with simple end-vowel rhyming, Alexandrine verse often includes what is referred to as *rime riche*, where the final three phonemes (consonant, vowel, and consonant) all match. The simple relationship between *battu* and *perdu*, for example would not meet this criteria—that is merely *rime pauvre*. *Cheval* and *rival*, on the other hand, make a perfect *rime riche* (Etudes Littéraires n.d.). Alexandrine verse also stipulates certain gender agreements, but, for the purposes of my translation, this information wasn't relevant.

English-language translations¹² of Phèdre tend to deal with the Alexandrine in a few ways: some translators abandon strict rhyme and meter altogether, and create a prosaic text, perhaps assuming that modern theater audiences prefer natural-sounding dialogue to rhyme. These scripts tend to be very producible—in terms of ease to actors and to the audience. Some opt for a less radical approach, and maintain elements of rhyme and a loose sense of meter, while setting much of the dialogue in a free-verse form. The result is poetic and musical. Others still adhere strictly to Racine's form, creating lyrical and nostalgic pieces at best and Dr. Seussian sing-song at worst. Still another approach—and one I find to be at least theoretically strongest—is adapting Racine's verse to an English-language analogue. Even casual students of English-language theater are familiar with iambic pentameter, for example, as a commonly used form.¹³ To the anglophone ear (or eye, for that matter), a play set in iambic pentameter says

¹²And, I imagine, translations into other languages as well. I have only read the English ones.

¹³I confess that I am working on my own English-language translation of Phèdre, and have opted to work in iambic pentameter, so I'm not speaking from a position of total neutrality, here. Though, why should I? I chose the meter I did for a reason!

“Hey! This is sort of like Shakespeare!”—and, though Racine differs in many ways from the Bard, both were (and remain), for all intents and purposes, the playwrights that led their nations in creating emotional, vivid, and dramatic pieces dealing with history, fate, and love. Yes, there are many arguments to be made concerning the radically different dramaturgies of the two men, but to consider them dramatic analogues across the English Channel does by no means miss the mark.

Furthermore, the comparison between the two opens up Racine as an option to theaters hoping to attract audiences perhaps understandably unfamiliar with the French neoclassical tradition. Anglophones know Shakespeare. They like Shakespeare (and even if they don’t, they pretend they do). Bringing Racine—notoriously untranslatable and inaccessible—close to something familiar gives readers and audiences the opportunity to try it in a language and context they can understand.

It was these principles and practices that I had in mind as I set out to create my ASL translation. I knew that I wanted to preserve at least some of Racine’s beautiful musicality—I wanted my script to rhyme, and I wanted a sense of meter. The challenge—and the wonderful thing—inherent to working with a language so modally different from French was that I had to define my terms. *Verse, meter, rhyme*, even *line*, all have clear meaning in conversations about written and spoken languages, but what does it mean to say that I want to rhyme in ASL? As it applies to spoken languages and their written counterparts¹⁴ rhyming refers to, most generally, the “correspondence of sound between words or the endings of words, especially when these are used at the ends of lines of poetry”(rhyme 2013)

¹⁴ I make this distinction because rhyme is both a visual and an auditory phenomenon. Just as *cat* and *bat* are auditory rhymes, they are visual rhymes as well. *Though* and *sew* don’t work nearly as well on the page, and *segue* and *soirée* are even worse.),

As famed ASL scholar Dirksen Bauman puts it, “literally speaking, the notion of a signed rhyme is blatantly oxymoronic.”(Bauman, Nelson and Rose 2007, 96) And this makes sense. How can a language for a silent world repeat sounds? Bauman knows, though, that signed languages do, of course, have their own distinct articulatory structures—hand shape, palm orientation, direction and quality of movement—which can repeat to create signed rhymes. These articulatory structures can be grouped by category into *parameters*. ASL linguists typically concern themselves with five sign parameters: **Handshape**, hand **movement**, **location** of the sign, **palm** or **fingertip orientation**, and **non-manual markers** such as mouth shape, eyebrow movement, or facial expression. Generally speaking, the more phonemes two words have in common, the stronger the rhyme. For the purposes of this translation project, I’ve decided that true rhyme requires that three of the five parameters are the same. For example—in order for two signs to rhyme, they might have the same hand shape, the hands might move identically, and the palm orientation might be the same.

True rhyme—the relationship between the English *bat* and *cat* or the ASL *THEATER* and *SCIENCE*—is merely the strictest of many types of poetic repetition. Alliteration—created in spoken language by repeating the initial consonants of words—can be performed in sign language by repeating handshapes. Handshape stories—short stories and poems that use a limited set of handshapes—are a hallmark of Deaf culture, and an impressive linguistic feat. A story might feature only the closed-5 handshape, just as an alliterative poem might include only words that begin with S (She sells seashells by the sea shore...).

Phonemic repetition is used in signed stories, poems, and jokes in much the same way as it is in spoken stories. Rhymes create patterns that stand out, helping audience members make connections between concepts and ideas. They also build an atmosphere—in English, usually

one of whimsy, but, particularly in the Alexandrine, one of austerity and formality. Aside from anything else, rhyme provides an opportunity for linguists, poets, authors, and translator/dramaturg/college seniors to show off their linguistic skills. Language is fun—and rhyme is a way to be clever with words, stretch meanings, and make something beautiful and witty. Everyone loves a good pattern.

The concept of meter in ASL is perhaps easier to understand than rhyme. Without much rigorous linguistic analysis, we can easily conceptualize that meter, as it relates to signed languages, refers to the rhythm of signing—the relationship between signs and time. Just as spoken words can follow a pattern, so, too can signs. ASL poetry and literature sometimes makes use of a pattern of repetition in groups of threes. This element shows up quite a bit in my *Phèdre*.

For all this talk of rhyme and meter, the clever viewer will notice that, while Racine worked in strict rhyming couplets, my *Phèdre* uses the device much less. I did not attempt to replicate the Alexandrine, to bring it into a more common English or ASL meter, or to invent a meter of my own. I tried to incorporate a lot of phonemic repetition—signs that had the same movement, signs that were in the same location, signs that had the same handshape—more than I used true signed rhymes (signs with three or more phonemes in common). I also borrowed metric conventions from Deaf literature and poetry—repetition of signs, setting words in patterns of threes. Where I did borrow meter and rhyme from Deaflore, I was still sparing. My *Phèdre* is far from Racine’s Alexandrine. It is a new structure entirely. Why, though? Why didn’t I attempt an Alexandrine of my own?

Simply put, I didn’t want my *Phèdre* to read as one epic poem. Racine’s language is so beautiful, and his rhyme scheme is elegant and lovely, but, the longer that I worked with my

ASL version, the more I realized that I did not want to recreate it exactly. I wanted my *Phèdre* to read as poetic without being straight poetry. So, in my translation, I made a big decision about tone and style. I hope to use language style to carry the dramaturgy of the play, the crux of which, is, essentially, that, subject to the rule of the Gods, the characters are transformed by (illicit, painful) love. To convey this message linguistically, I preserved the poetry and floridity in each speech about love, while bringing the tone of the more conversational lines to a more colloquial level. I think about this pattern as analogous to the operatic relationship between aria and recitative. Arias—those long, protracted elicies—deserve time, poetry, and metaphore. They are the parts of the show that everyone remembers, the moments that provoke applause and showers of rose bouquets. But the recitative—the quick back and forth interactions that move along the plot—are just as important, though less poetic.

Issues and Errata

During the translation process, I hit quite a few stumbling blocks, had quite a few “aha!” moments, and spent quite a few hours pondering exactly how to tackle specific problems. Just a few:

Famous Lines and Phrases:

Just as the Shakespearean translator must cringe when confronted with, for example, Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” or Orsino’s “If music be the food of love...¹⁵”, I too, shuddered at the responsibility of translating certain famous lines. One of Racine’s most well-known—“...la fille de Minos et de Pasiphaë” gave me quite a headache. That little snippet of a line does so much—it rings beautifully in Racine’s *Alexandrine*, and it gives a storied history of *Phèdre* to those well versed in Greek mythology, setting up allusions both to Pasiphae’s past and to the Minotaur. I had already decided to keep the in-depth and (to me) obscure mythological references to a minimum in my *Phèdre*—ASL lends itself more to moving poetic images than to endless lists of names and places—so I was concerned in the main with getting a signed phrase with the same zing as Racine’s. After several iterations and attempts, I went with a rather quotidian “MONSTER BULL MAN CL:Y//HIS DAUGHTER PHEDRE”. Fine. I sacrificed beauty there for expedience, preferring to get my snappy rhyme and my lovely phrasing elsewhere. Which brings me to a line I am particularly proud of....

Symmetry and Rhymes!

¹⁵ My main inspiration for this particular project was the amazing ASL rendition of *Twelfth Night*, produced in 2006 as a collaboration between Gallaudet University, Yale University, and the Amaryllis Theater Company. I was so fascinated by the way that team of dramaturg’s and interpreters treated Shakespeare that I decided to try my hand at Racine. I was also inspired by their break from Shakespeare’s verse. Incidentally, I did an ASL-to-English back translation of that work for my translation workshop.

One of my favorite phrases from my translation was among the first I wrote for this project. In Hippolyte’s opening line of the piece, he resolves to leave Trozene (in Racine’s version, Greece in mine) to search for his father, Thésée, who has been missing for six months. In the final couplet of the line, Hippolyte laments that he “does not know the fate of a head so dear/ does not know which places may hide him.” It doesn’t ring particularly well in the French:

“J’ignore le destin d’une tête si chère

J’ignore jusqu’aux lieux qui le peuvent cacher.”,

but the imagery is lovely. I liked the metonymy—Hippolyte refers to his father as a “head so dear”—and jumped at the chance to bring it into four dimensions. My translation is glossed thus:

(NDH)MY FATHER SWEET HAPPEN FUTURE ME THH

CAN FIND WHERE? ME SEARCH++THH

Firstly, I liked the rhyme of THH and THH¹⁶. This was a case where I wanted to preserve meter and rhyme as much as possible, in order to establish that, at least at some point, *Phèdre* was a play in verse. The real magic of this phrase comes in the transition from one line to the next. At the end of the first line, the signer pauses momentarily with the dominant hand raised in an S shape and the non dominant hand at the forehead in an F. At the beginning of the next line (CAN FIND), the signer brings both hands down in S shapes to sign CAN and then the *dominant* hand makes an F for FIND. The two hands switch shapes. Lovely. Smooth. Perfect.

Another nice rhyming opportunity came later. In Scene II, Oenone asks why Phèdre is so distressed. In French, she asks

¹⁶ THH here means something along the lines of “don’t know” or “am ignorant of”. It’s signed by wiggling the F handshake in front of the forehead and mouthing “thh” (hence the glossing).

Et quel affreux projet avez-vous enfanté,
Dont votre coeur encor doive être épouvanté ?

Or, roughly, “and what awful projects have you conceived/ of which your heart now must be afraid”. I was very excited to see the opportunity to rhyme the ASL PREGNANT with SCARED.

PROJECT AWFUL YOU INVENT CONCEIVE/PREGNANT
NOW (PROJECT POINT) AWFUL YOU FEAR (RHYME!)

Hand Shape Games

Another line I'd like to point you to is in Scene II. Oenone asks Phèdre why the latter feels so guilty if her hands are clean. Phèdre replies that her hands are clean (thank God!), but her heart is certainly not. I wanted to this line to subtly convey the conflict between Phèdre's desires for herself and the reality of her wretched state. So, I capitalized on a well-used convention in ASL literature, and played a handshape game. ASL literature is filled with examples of authors and poets repeating or restricting available handshapes in order to set a mood or a tone. Here, I wanted the first half of the line “Hands point, clean // thank god” to convey purity, cleanliness, goodness, and openness. This section is therefore signed entirely with one handshape, the closed 5 hand. The second section, “but heart wish pure same”, where Phèdre describes the reality of her awful feelings, is signed not only using a different handshape for each sign, but many shapes with bent fingers. Signs with bent fingers tend to have a more negative connotation to them.

Meter and Rhythm

Though, for the most part, my *Phèdre* is more free-verse than anything, I did have the chance to get quite sing-songy with Panope. Panope enters in the end of Act I, with the news that Thésée his reported dead. Her lines are short and sweet, and I found myself naturally sign-singing

them.

Characters, Characters

On a very practical note, I struggled with the way to represent each individual character on film. I was adamant about this project being a strictly dramaturgical endeavor, rather than an exercise in acting, directing, or any other aspect of theater. I wanted to make clear to the reader which character was speaking at a given time, but each possible method of addressing this desire didn't seem to fit. I thought first of hiring sign actors—only one or two people, in addition to myself, could fill out the roles in Act I nicely. There were, of course, logistical problems with this idea: Who would pay these sign-actors and how? When would we meet? How often would we rehearse? In the space of a one-semester thesis, would I have time to translate and rehearse with my actors? (No.) The other issue is that, in working with actors, I would essentially become a director to them, adding my own interpretations about how this play should be acted. I wanted to be more removed from that aspect of production, and leave my script as much of a *script* as possible. Dressing myself in different costumes would be similarly problematic—I hesitated to add the input of a costume designer to the input of the translator. Also, where am I going to get 17th-century period pieces?

There is a linguistic device in American Sign Language called “role-shift”. It involves the use of body position and gaze to indicate relationships between multiple characters in a story or anecdote. For example, in English, I might tell the following story: “I was walking down the street and I saw two kids fighting. The first kid said “Hey! You’re mean!”. The second kid said “You suck!”. I looked at the two kids and said “Hey! You stop fighting!.” In ASL, I would sign

something glossed like this: “ME WALK-WALK-WALK. SEE KIDS TWO. CL:1 RIGHT. CL¹⁷:1 LEFT. FIGHT. ROLE-SHIFT:R: YOU MEAN YOU. ROLE-SHIFT:L: YOU SUCK YOU. ROLE-SHIFT:CENTER: FIGHT! FINISH FINISH! STOP!” Here, and, if the story were to continue, until the end of the story, whenever I shift my body to the right, I’m playing the character of the first kid, and whatever I say in that role is a quote. Similarly, whenever I shift my body to the left, I’m playing the character of the second kid, and my signs and mannerisms will reflect that. In the center, I’m either signing things that I myself said or I’m providing narration and exposition. Though it would be perfectly grammatically correct to sign explicitly “FIRST KID SAID QUOTE YOU MEAN YOU” etc, it’s more expedient and more visually interesting to shift the body and gaze to assume other characters.

I briefly considered using role-shift in my video script. Shifting left might indicate that Hippolyte was talking, for instance. The problem with this method is that I’m not telling a short anecdote *about* Hippolyte and Thérémène. I’m an actor *becoming* Hippolyte and Thérémène. In character, it made the most sense for Hippolyte to face the camera and speak as himself. I did use role-shift *within* individual lines. For instance, in Scene I, Hippolyte role shifts to indicate Thérémène telling him stories. Oenone echoes this action to indicate Phèdre telling *her* stories.

I ultimately chose, as you will see, to simply use subtitles to indicate which character is speaking.

Repetition Repetition

In my first reading of the French *Phèdre*, I noticed the way Racine tended to repeat words over

¹⁷ CL:1 indicates that the “1” classifier is used here. Classifiers act in ASL almost as pronouns do in English. So, in this case, I set up that I see two kids, and then I use the 1 handshape on my right hand to represent the first kid, and the 1 handshape on my left hand to represent the second kid. Just as you might mime a man walking by holding two fingers pointed downwards, classifiers use agreed-upon handshapes to represent people or things.

and over again, until they became refrains. *Joug. Joug. Joug*¹⁸. *Orgueil. Orgueil. Orgueil*¹⁹. If my translation had none of the music, meter, and rhyme of Racine's²⁰, I wanted my Phèdre to at least have this element. I therefore chose several signs: SINCE, FALL-IN-LOVE, SUBMIT, ANGUISH, and sprinkled my text with them liberally. Signing my text, and watching the videos, the refrain is tangible. Perfect.

Adding an introduction

My translation includes a short scene that introduces each character to the audience and gives a overview of the play. This is unusual in hearing theatre (though not unheard of or completely out of the ordinary. *Romeo and Juliet* does a similar thing in its prologue, a monologue given by a chorus that appears nowhere else in the text.), but very standard in Deaf storytelling traditions. ASL stories and plays lend themselves to character introductions for practical reasons. Because the characters in signed plays go by their sign-names, the introductory scene allows the audience the opportunity to learn those new signs, and put, as it were, a face to a name.

¹⁸ Yoke, or weight.

¹⁹ Pride

²⁰ And I did manage to get some of all three. So there.

**What exactly are you reading?
An introduction to and a warning about ASL Glosses**

American Sign Language, by nature a language of movement, space, and time, necessarily resists a written form. Scholars and amateurs have long tried to develop codes that would successfully record ASL in writing, but to no real avail. Despite this, you are holding a written document that calls itself an ASL translation. This script (for lack of a better term), the “text” of my *Phèdre*, is written in a glossed form of the ASL. For the most part, ASL gloss involves assigning ASL signs a one- or two-word written English equivalent, and writing down those words in the order in which they are signed. Though this system is simple enough, there are a few practices of which I'd like you to take note:

- Sometimes, the ASL-to-English assignment is fairly straightforward. For example, the gloss orange denotes the ASL sign for *orange*. There are a few words and phrases, however, that don't translate directly. For example, true- business, a phrase which has (to my knowledge) no meaning in English, is the standard way to gloss the signed concepts *absolutely, serious, very*. This and other similar phrases will come up in my translations, so be aware.
- Fingerspelling, or signing words letter by letter through a manual alphabet, is glossed this way: F-I-N-G-E-R-S-P-E-L-L-I-N-G . The word is meant to be read as a whole rather than as a sequence of letters, much as one might read a written word on the page.
- There are certain grammatical elements that occur in addition to the sign for any given word. Mouthing morphemes, facial movements, and other non manual markers are also included (as much as possible) in the gloss.

- A plus sign (+) is sometimes given to indicate repeated movement or repetition of a sign.

The number of plus signs doesn't necessarily correspond to the number of repetitions

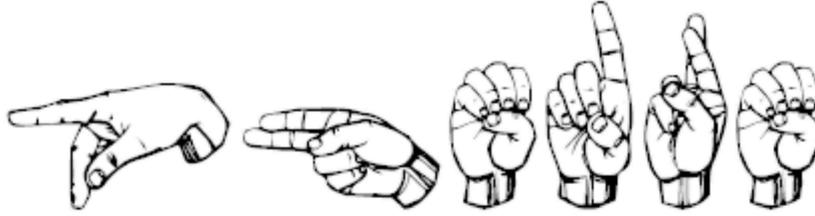
I urge you to keep in mind that ASL differs greatly from English, both structurally and syntactically. By glossing as I have, I'm creating something very rudimentary. Think of this written script as a guide or a cheat sheet. The *Phèdre* I've created lives in active people, and, barring that, in video form. Why have a glossed version at all?

- There are practical reasons for having a notation system. Just as musicians rely on sheet music, I relied on my gloss as I wrote, revised, rehearsed, and produced my *Phèdre*. I wanted to record, if not every subtle wrist flick and brow furrow, as much as I could of the specific linguistic choices I made so that I, and others, could refer to them later. Particularly as a work in progress, as I shared my drafts with advisors and colleagues, a notation system proved invaluable.
- The gloss also acts as a guide to those watching my translation. Particularly when watching a story as involved as *Phèdre* and with such poetic (I hope!) and unconventional signing, there are ample opportunities to lose one's way. My hope is that those who need to will watch my translation with the gloss in hand, so that they can refer to it as they need to clarify a sign, catch a fingerspelled word, or otherwise find their way.

This gloss is very much a part of the translation. But it is not the translation. Read it, (please) and find it useful in the ways I have suggested above, but know that it is not the full or the true script; merely a guide.

My gloss also is filled with notes to myself and my own individualisms. Excuse them, please, or else read them and glean insight, information, and gossip

Phèdre
PHÈDRE
P-H-E-D-R-E



By Jean Racine
Translated from the French by Emily Louise Melnick

Prologue

Narrator

STORY TODAY CALLED WHAT? P-H-E-D-R-E.
KNOW REMEMBER STORIES ABOUT LONG-AGO
GREECE THERE?
WELL OUR PLAY ITSELF SAME FROM THERE.
OUR STORY P-H-E-D-R-E PEOPLE STORY++ SINCE
STILL TRUE-BUSINESS EXCITING FASCINATING
WHY? P-H-E-D-R-E ABOUT WHAT?
LOVE ILLEGAL AWFUL
FATE²¹ AND GODS++L-R AUDIENCE-BACK LOOK++L-
R CONTROL++L-R STORY HAVE CHARACTERS MANY,
NOW ME INTRODUCE-TO-YOU

Thésée

WHO ME HUH? ME T-H-E-S-E-E. THESEE
ME DESCENDANT FROM WHO? GODS++
MYSELF KING HERE GREECE
SUPPOSE KNOW PAST GREECE STORIES, (TILT AND
NOD): KNOW ME
ME DO-DO? KILL MONSTER BULL MAN MONSTER

Phèdre

ME WHO ME? P-H-E-D-R-E . PHEDRE
ME DESCENDANT FROM WHO? GODS SAME. SUN GOD.
MY HUSBAND? THESEUS
KNOW GOD LOVE? V-E-N-U-S? SHE CURSE-ME MY
FAMILY SAME.

Hippolyte

ME AM? H-I-P-P-O-L-Y-T-E. HIPPOLYTE
MY FATHER WHO? THESEUS
MY MOTHER WHO? WARRIOR QUEEN FROM FAR
POINT-LEFT PHEDRE HERSELF MY STEPMOTHER.

Aricie

ME AM? A-R-I-C-I-E. ARICIE
MY FAMILY HAPPEN WHAT? THESEUS KILL++ ME
ALIVE LAST ONE ME
ILLEGAL ME HAVE BABY

²¹ Future happen must

Oenone

MYSELF O-E-N-O-N-E. OENONE
MYSELF PHEDRE HER TAKE-CARE PERSON

Theramene

WHO ME? T-H-E-R-A-M-E-N-E. THERAMENE MYSELF
HIPPOLYTE HIS TUTOR.

Isemene

ME I-S-M-E-N-E. ISMENE⁸
ARICIA? ME? TWO-OF-US FRIENDS.

Panope

ME P-A-N-O-P-E. PANOPE. MYSELF PHEDRE HER
SERVANT.

Act I
Scene 1

Hippolyte

FINISH DECIDE PLAN ITSELF READY(-2)
CHERISH HOME HERE MUST ME LEAVE
DEATH (POINT) ME WORRY AFRAID(-2)
SINCE 1,2,3,4,5,6-MO MY FATHER GONE
(NDH)MY FATHER SWEET HAPPEN FUTURE ME THH
CAN FIND WHERE? ME SEARCH++THH

Théramène

SEARCH YOU? WHERE?
FISH ME TRAVEL++ GREECE AREA
FAR WATER/RIVER
BECOME HADES
PEOPLE CL:1 (L C R)
ME MEET (L C R)
THESEUS WHERE(LCR)
NOTHING(L C R)
HOPE NEW CHANGE? WELL
MAYBE THESEE COMBACK(CL: 1) REFUSE WHY? HAVE
SWEETHART-BROKEN CHASE, HIDE. WELL

Hippolyte

DUTY FORCE-ME
SEARCH+ FIND MY FATHER MUST ME. STAY AGONY.
CAN'T ME REFUSE.

Théramène

CALM HERE CHERISH HOME SINCE HAPPY.
NOW REFUSE STAY YOU? WRONG? CHANGE WHAT?

Hippolyte

HERE HAPPY FISH.
CHAAANGE
GODS+ GIIIVE
MONSTER BULL MAN CL:Y
HIS DAUGHTER PHEDRE. ENEMY WELL.

Théramène

AH-I-SEE
UPSET YOU ME UNDERSTAND/KNOW.
PHEDRE CURSE-YOU OPPRES
SHEE STEP-MOTHER EVIL BAD SHE.
HAPPEN CL:1 (ONE ON ONE) MEET PHEDRE HATE-
YOU ELIMINATE-YOU (CL:1)
BUT PAST ANGER+ DISSOLVE
PHEDRE HERSELF WEAK WANT DEATH
SUFFER SILENT
WHY? ME THH BUT HURT YOU? CAN'T

Hippolyte

ENEMY ME FEAR? YES
BUT PHEDRE POINT? NOT
EMENY ME HAVE? ANOTHER WORSE ARICIE POINT?
BAD.

Théramène

TRUE-BUSINESS HUH? ARICIE YOU CHASE? NEVER ME
THINK. NICE GIRL SWEET.
YOU HATE HER? HOW?

Hippolyte

HATE HER? ME WISH++
SUPPOSE HATE HER, ME COMPLAIN WON'T, FLEE
WON'T.

Théramène

CALM+. EXPLAIN ME CAN
BEFORE YOURSELF PROUD ALONE CHASTE
V-E-N-U-S LOVE LAWS (POINT) IGNORE++
THESEE FISH SUBMIT.
FEEL LOVE (WEIGHING HIM DOWN FIST+FIST ON
SHOULDER LIKE BURDEN) (YOKE!!)
NOW (GIVE YOKE TO HI) MUST YOU SUBMIT SAME
VENUS (FIST AND POINT) PRAY++ MUST.

Hippolyte

SAY WHAT?
MY HEART (BEAT+++) SINCE
YOU KNOW HEART POINT KNOW
PROUD ME. DISDAIN ME.
NOW HEART ANGUISH. CAN'T DENY.
FROM MOTHER STRONG
GAVE MILK++
PRIDE++ SAME+
NOW ME GROW-UP TOUGH ARROGANT. YOU ME
TWO-OF-US
CONNECT TRUST
SINCE++ YOU RS: L(STORY++
ME RS:R(WATCH BA-BA TRUST)
STORY (THOUGHT BUBBLE) FATHER THESEE DO-DO
MONTERS KILL++
ROBBERS PUNISH++
MONSTER GIANT BONES
SCATTTTER+++
BULL MAN KILL HORNS FALL+ + CELEBRATE YOU RS:L
STORY++
ME RS:R LISTEN-EYES++ FEEL WARRRM
BUT HAPPEN STORY THEMSELVES CHANGE
WOMEN WOMEN *AUDIENCE/MANY
THESEE FASCINATE WRONG LEAVE (L, C, R)
ETC+++
NOW PHEDRE (ADDS TO LIST)
ME PROUD SHRINK DEPRESS
HAPPEN NOW MY-TURN
ME DO SAME+ WILL?
DON'T-WANT ME.
HONOR FAME SAMEAS THESEE HAVE ME? NO
CAN'T ME WEAK HEART SUBMIT SAME.
BUT NO-MATTER
ME FALL-IN-LOVE FISH

ARICIA BEAUTIFUL SWEET.
BUT KNOW REMEMBER
LOVE ARICIEE SWEETHAART
STOP ILLEGAL WHY?
MY FATHER ACCEPT NEVER
LAWS HAVE TOUGH.
ARICIA HER FAMILY THESEE DESTROY
ARICIA LOVE SEX BIRTH-RISING-CANDLE GO-OUT
CLOSE-DOORS BECOME MOTHER-BABY ILLEGAL
BECOME WIFE ILLEGAL
LAW POINT CAN ME IGNORE?
ARICIA CAN ME MARRY?

Théramène

FUTURE HAPPEN?
FINISH DECIDED.
GODS SITTING-AWAY MULL++ AND REASON
BUT INFORM-US ? REFUSE.
THESEE YOU FATHER WANT YOU SAFE COVER-EYES
BUT #VENUS CONSIDER PLAN WANT OPEN-EYES
YOU FALL-IN-LOVE SUBMIT.
ANYWAY LOVE TUE-BUSINESS NICE PURE YOUR FLEE
FORFOR?
SUPPOSE ARICIA POINT TRUE-BUSINESS SWEET,
SWEETHEART TRY WHYNOT?
RULES LAWS STRICT YOU BELIEVE YOU?
PAST PEOPLE++ FASCINATE FALL-IN-LOVE SUBMIT
YOU SAME CAN.
THESEE YOUR FATHER SUPPOSE HE FALLIINLOVE
NOT? YOU (HON) NEVER BORN WELL?
TRUE-BUSINESS YOU CHANGE
YOURSELF PROUD STRONG? NO.
WEAK FAIBLE QUIET. WHY?
YOURSELF DYING FOR-FOR
FALLINLOVE ARICIA.
RIGHT?

Hippolyte

FISH FISH MUST ME LEAVE FATHER ME SEARCH.

Théramène

FIRST SEE PHEDRE WILL?

Hippolyte

YES. MY PLAN YES.
PHEDRE POINT YOU CAN INFORM. NOW MUST GO ME.
DUTY FORCE ME.
CALM++ OENONE? WHAT'S UP WRONG?

Scene 2

Oenone

OH OH! PROBLEM MY CAN'T WORSE!
WORRY OTHER++ EQUAL IMPOSSIBLE
PHEDRE POINT QUEEN POINT DYINNNNNG
ME WATCH++ DAY++++ (RHYME WITH IMPOSSIBLE)
PHEDRE SUFFER SUFFER SUFFER BUT WHY?
DON'T KNOW ME. REASON SHE HIDE. HER SPIRIT+
ANGUISH+
WORRY WORRY DEPRESS
SHE STANDS
WALK WALK WALK
SUN (SHE SHUTS OUT—"CLOSE DOORS")

Hippolyte

FINE DECIDE ME GO WILL. PHEDRE VISIT? ME
REFUSE.

Scene 3

Phèdre

SUN(HONORIFIC)
NOBLE CREATOR YOU
MADE BORN FAMILY SAD. DOOMED (AWFUL) US. YOU
(HON) BEAUTIFUL STAR
MY MOTHER, HERSELF FROM YOU.
CREATED ME (HON)
NOW YOU ME (MEET) LAST TIME FISH.

Oenone

FISH FISH!
YOU TALK TALK DEATH (POINT)
SEE ME YOU DEATH PLAN PREPARE! FISH FISH!

Phèdre

SHAME RED (GROWS FROM MY HEART AND SPREADS
OVER MY FACE) TEARS (FILL UP MY FACE)
WHY? CAN YOU CAN SEE ME DEPRESSSSSS ANGUISH

Oenone

RED(COVERS FACE) SHOULD YOU RIGHT.
FOR-FOR YOU SILENT++ CALM DON'T-MATTER ME
TAKE-CARE++ WE TRY++, HELP++, CARE++
YOU IGNORE , PROTEST
SELF STRUGGLE+++
YOU LIFE DAY++ (DISINTEGRATE, VANISH, CRUSHED)
FISH
WHY? LIFE (GUNS SHOOT ME) KILL, HUH?
HAPPEN SUN (SETS, BECOMES MOON, (AZY GREY)
NIGHT FALLLLLLLS) WE (CLOSE
EYES, SLEEP)
DAY++ SLEEEP. BUT YOU EYES OPEN STAND STAY++
(WALK LIKE ZOMBIE) SLEEP
REFUSE (SLEEP WITH RIGHT HAND TO FLAT O, LEFT
HAND REFUSE) EAT
REFUSE (THAT SAME FLAT O)
FOR FOR? WHAT? WANT YOU DIE YOU?
REMEMBER CALM, DUTIES HAVE RESPONSIBLE
HUSBAND THESEE TRUST MUST
CHILDREN YOUR THEY DO-DO?
HAPPEN YOU DIE
NEXT KING WHO?
(TAKEOFF CROWN AND GIVE TO R) POINT
HIPPOLYTE, HIPPOLYTE POINT

Phèdre

HIPPOLYTE!
FISH FISH NAME AWFUL!

Oenone

ANGER UPSET YOU RIGHT!
HIP. CAN STEAL BECOME KING.
MUST YOU CAREFUL.
DO-DO? LIVE CONTINUE++
HIPPOLYTE (POINT) PURE? NO.
BLOOD MIXEDUP, MOTHER FROM FAAAR
CL:1 (COME BACK) STEAL
BECOME KING HERE GREECE OUR COUNTRY. GODS
DESCNDANTS SIT BACK, HIP DIRTY RULE++ DOESN'T
MATTER YOU. DIE PREFER.
GET-BETTER

BET-STRONGER
LIFE FLAME (GROW BRIGHTER) AGAIN.

Phèdre
CAN'T ME GUILTY++ SURFEIT.

Oenone
GUILTY? WHY?
YOU HANDS THEMSELVES PURE CLEAN? BLOOD? NO?

Phèdre
HANDS POINT,CLEAN
THANK GOD
BUT HEART WISH PURE SAME.

Oenone
PROJECT AWFUL YOU INVENT CONCEIVE/PREGNANT
NOW (PROJECT POINT) AWFUL YOU FEAR (RHYME!)

Phèdre
TELL-YOU ME FISH.
ASK-ME (NO-NO,LIKE MAX!)
TELL-YOU MORE? PREFER ME DIE?

Oenone
PREFER YOU DIE? GO-AHEAD
BUT REMEMBER ME
TWO-OF-US SINCE CONNECT TRUST
IN-THE-PAST, YOU ME R-SHIFT STORY+++
ME L-SHIFT EYE-LISTEN++
BUT NOW
R-SHIFT SILENCE.
FAIR? HUH?
RIGHT? HUH?

Phèdre
V-E-N-U-S AWFUL (ALTERNATE HANDS COMING
VIOLENTLY AWAY FROM THE BODY)
GOD POINT MY FAMILY FISH DESTROY
FIRST: MOTHER. MARRY MAN. BIRTH MONSTER. BULL
MAN.
SECOND: SISTER. THESEE SHE FALL-IN-LOVE. BUT
THESEE FLEE
THIRD: ME. HON.

LAST ONE. MY FUTURE-HAPPEN-MUST? WORSE

Oenone

WORSE?

LOVE YOU HUH?

Phèdre

LOVE ME YES.

Oenone

WHO? SAY+!

Phèdre

KNOW. HIMSELF SON. MOTHER FROM FAR(L)

WARRIOR QUEEN.

THAT-ONE BOY ME SINCE OPPRESS.

BOY. KNOW WHO?

Oenone

#HIPPOLYTE! HIPPOLYTE!

YOUR HUSBAND! HIS SON!

LOVE AWFUL FORBIDDEN!

BLOOD MINE FREEZE!S

Phèdre

AWFUL FEEL ME CURSE-MYSELF SINCE

HAPPEN HEART HEART-HYMEN CONNECT, THESEE

MARRIED

HAPPY FEEL ME

GREECE AREA AUDIENCE

SURVEYING AUDIENCE LH-CL:1

POINT #HIPPOLYTE POINT

SUBMIT ME

FALL-IN-LOVE ME

AWFUL ME

CURSE!

RED (ALL OVER FACE)\

MIND CONFUSE++

BODY FROZE

ME DO-DO?

GOD! GOD! PRAY!

(RECOGNIZE. POINT AT VENUS)

V-E-N-U-S POINT!

UNDERSTAND ME.

HAPPEN ME.
KNOW MY FAMILY PAST ITSELF DESTORY
HOW? POINT #VENUS POINT PLAN!
BUT ME? NO-MATTER POINT PRAY
EXCUSE ME!
TRY TRY
WORK WORK
TRY TRY
PRAY PRAY
BUT NO-MATTER ME
HEART ANGUISH
H-I-P-P-O-L-Y-T-E
LOVE (BURDEN)
ME DO-DO?

PLAN FISH DECIDE
HYPPOLYTE POINT MUST ME ELIMINATE
FORCE-HIM FLEE
THESEE ME FIND
RS: L: PLEASE PLEADE HYPP. MUST FLEE!
RS: R: FOR-FOR?!
ME: RS:L: PLEASE PLEASE BEG
RS: R: OKAY. SUBMIT.
ME: RS: CENTER: (RELIEF/BREATH0EASY) FISH.
DAY DAY DAY
FINE NICE CALM
LOVE ILLEGAL? (PICK UP AND PUT IN CHEST)
ME HIDE
THESEE, ME, TWO-OF-US HAPPY MARRIAGE

BUT
HAPPEN HIPP CL:1 ME MEET
SEE AGAIN
OPEN-CHEST
(TAKEOUT LOVE) AGAIN AWFUL.
HEART ANGUISH SAME SAME
LOVE BURDEN SAME SAME

ME CL:1 #VENUS (CAPTURED)
LOVE SLAVE

ME DO-DO?
MUST ME DIE
FISH ME SUBMIT

Scene III

Panope

SAD NEWS HAVE.
HIDE? WISH CAN.
THESEE YOUR HUSBAND KING
CHASE++ (NDH POINT WHAT?)
DEATH
CHASE-CAUGHTUP-CAPTURED
TRUE-BUSINESS BAD NOW ME INFORM-YOU

Oenone

EXPLAIN! SAY WHAT?

Panope (This is all in verse!)

MUST ME INFORM-YOU
SINCE PHEDRE WAIT WAIT
THESEE COME-BACK BUT
WAIT-WAIT-WAIT FOREVER WILL.

HAPPEN GREECE MUST DO-DO WHAT?
KING NEW-ONE FIND!
PEOPLE (AUDIENCE) CHOOSE WHO?
SON YOURS FISH!
HIPPI HIMSELF FROM FARRR
PEOPLE HERE HIM DON'T WANT
PREFER BLOOD PURE!
BUT OTHER DIS-AGREE!
ARICIE POINT THEY WANT

Racine's Original *Phèdre*

PERSONNAGES

THESEE, fils d'Egée, roi d'Athènes.
PHEDRE, femme de Thésée, fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé.
HIPPOLYTE, fils de Thésée et d'Antiope, reine des Amazones.
ARICIE, princesse du sang royal d'Athènes.
OENONE, nourrice et confidente de Phèdre.
THERAMENE, gouverneur d'Hippolyte.
ISMENE, confidente d'Aricie.
PANOPE, femme de la suite de Phèdre.
GARDES.

La scène est à Trézène, ville du Péloponnèse.

ACTE I

SCENE I - HIPPOLYTE, THERAMENE

Hippolyte
Le dessein en est pris, je pars, cher Théramène,
Et quitte le séjour de l'aimable Trézène.
Dans le doute mortel où je suis agité,
Je commence à rougir de mon oisiveté.
Depuis plus de six mois éloigné de mon père,
J'ignore le destin d'une tête si chère ;
J'ignore jusqu'aux lieux qui le peuvent cacher.

THERAMENE

Et dans quels lieux, Seigneur, l'allez-vous donc chercher ?
Déjà, pour satisfaire à votre juste crainte,
J'ai couru les deux mers que sépare Corinthe ;
J'ai demandé Thésée aux peuples de ces bords
Où l'on voit l'Acheron se perdre chez les morts ;
J'ai visité l'Élide, et, laissant le Ténare,
Passé jusqu'à la mer qui vit tomber Icare.
Sur quel espoir nouveau, dans quels heureux climats
Croyez-vous découvrir la trace de ses pas ?

Qui sait même, qui sait si le Roi votre père
Veut que de son absence on sache le mystère ?
Et si, lorsqu'avec vous nous tremblons pour ses jours,
Tranquille, et nous cachant de nouvelles amours,
Ce héros n'attend point qu'une amante abusée...

Hippolyte
Cher Théràmène, arrête, et respecte Thésée.
De ses jeunes erreurs désormais revenu,
Par un indigne obstacle il n'est point retenu ;
Et fixant de ses vœux l'inconstance fatale,
Phèdre depuis longtemps ne craint plus de rivale.
Enfin en le cherchant je suivrai mon devoir,
Et je fuirai ces lieux que je n'ose plus voir.

THERAMENE
Hé ! depuis quand, Seigneur, craignez-vous la présence
De ces paisibles lieux, si chers à votre enfance,
Et dont je vous ai vu préférer le séjour
Au tumulte pompeux d'Athènes et de la cour ?
Quel péril, ou plutôt quel chagrin vous en chasse ?

Hippolyte
Cet heureux temps n'est plus. Tout a changé de face
Depuis que sur ces bords les Dieux ont envoyé
La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé.

THERAMENE
J'entends. De vos douleurs la cause m'est connue,
Phèdre ici vous chagrine, et blesse votre vue.
Dangereuse marâtre, à peine elle vous vit
Que votre exil d'abord signala son crédit.
Mais sa haine sur vous autrefois attachée,
Ou s'est évanouie, ou bien s'est relâchée.
Et d'ailleurs, quels périls peut vous faire courir
Une femme mourante et qui cherche à mourir ?
Phèdre, atteinte d'un mal qu'elle s'obstine à taire,
Lasse enfin d'elle-même et du jour qui l'éclaire,
Peut-elle contre vous former quelques desseins ?

Hippolyte
Sa vaine inimitié n'est pas ce que je crains.
Hippolyte en partant fuit une autre ennemie.
Je fuis, je l'avoûrai, cette jeune Aricie,
Reste d'un sang fatal conjuré contre nous.

THERAMENE

Quoi ! vous-même, Seigneur, la persécutez-vous ?
Jamais l'aimable soeur des cruels Pallantides
Trempa-t-elle aux complots de ses frères perfides ?
Et devez-vous haïr ces innocents appas ?

HIPPOLYTE

Si je la haïssais, je ne la fuirais pas.

THERAMENE

Seigneur, m'est-il permis d'expliquer votre fuite ?
Pourriez-vous n'être plus ce superbe Hippolyte,
Implacable ennemi des amoureuses lois,
Et d'un joug que Thésée a subi tant de fois ?
Vénus, par votre orgueil si longtemps méprisée,
Voudrait-elle à la fin justifier Thésée ?
Et vous mettant au rang du reste des mortels,
Vous a-t-elle forcé d'encenser ses autels ?
Aimeriez-vous, Seigneur ?

Hippolyte

Ami, qu'oses-tu dire ?
Toi qui connais mon coeur depuis que je respire,
Des sentiments d'un coeur si fier, si dédaigneux,
Peux-tu me demander le désaveu honteux ?
C'est peu qu'avec son lait une mère amazone
M'ait fait sucer encor cet orgueil qui t'étonne ;
Dans un âge plus mûr moi-même parvenu,
Je me suis applaudi quand je me suis connu.
Attaché près de moi par un zèle sincère,
Tu me contais alors l'histoire de mon père.
Tu sais combien mon âme, attentive à ta voix,
S'échauffait au récit de ses nobles exploits,
Quand tu me dépeignais ce héros intrépide
Consolant les mortels de l'absence d'Alcide,
Les monstres étouffés et les brigands punis,
Procuste, Cercyon, et Scirron, et Sinnis,
Et les os dispersés du géant d'Epidaure,
Et la Crète fumant du sang du Minotaure.
Mais quand tu récitais des faits moins glorieux,
Sa foi partout offerte et reçue en cent lieux,
Hélène à ses parents dans Sparte dérobée,
Salamine témoin des pleurs de Péribée,
Tant d'autres, dont les noms lui sont même échappés,

Trop crédules esprits que sa flamme a trompés ;
 Ariane aux rochers contant ses injustices,
 Phèdre enlevée enfin sous de meilleurs auspices ;
 Tu sais comme à regret écoutant ce discours,
 Je te pressais souvent d'en abrégier le cours :
 Heureux si j'avais pu ravir à la mémoire
 Cette indigne moitié d'une si belle histoire !
 Et moi-même, à mon tour, je me verrais lié ?
 Et les Dieux jusque-là m'auraient humilié ?
 Dans mes lâches soupirs d'autant plus méprisables,
 Qu'un long amas d'honneurs rend Thésée excusable,
 Qu'aucuns monstres par moi domptés jusqu'aujourd'hui
 Ne m'ont acquis le droit de faillir comme lui.
 Quand même ma fierté pourrait s'être adoucie,
 Aurais-je pour vainqueur dû choisir Aricie ?
 Ne souviendrait-il plus à mes sens égarés
 De l'obstacle éternel qui nous a séparés ?
 Mon père la réprouve ; et par des lois sévères
 Il défend de donner des neveux à ses frères :
 D'une tige coupable il craint un rejeton ;
 Il veut avec leur soeur ensevelir leur nom,
 Et que jusqu'au tombeau soumise à sa tutelle,
 Jamais les feux d'hymen ne s'allument pour elle.
 Dois-je épouser ses droits contre un père irrité ?
 Donnerai-je l'exemple à la témérité ?
 Et dans un fol amour ma jeunesse embarquée...

THERAMENE

Ah ! Seigneur si votre heure est une fois marquée,
 Le Ciel de nos raisons ne sait point s'informer.
 Thésée ouvre vos yeux en voulant les fermer,
 Et sa haine, irritant une flamme rebelle,
 Prête à son ennemie une grâce nouvelle.
 Enfin d'un chaste amour pourquoi vous effrayer ?
 S'il a quelque douceur, n'osez-vous l'essayer ?
 En croirez-vous toujours un farouche scrupule ?
 Craint-on de s'égarer sur les traces d'Hercule ?
 Quels courages Vénus n'a-t-elle pas domptés !
 Vous-même où seriez-vous, vous qui la combattez,
 Si toujours Antiope à ses lois opposée,
 D'une pudique ardeur n'eût brûlé pour Thésée ?
 Mais que sert d'affecter un superbe discours ?
 Avouez-le, tout change ; et depuis quelques jours
 On vous voit moins souvent, orgueilleux et sauvage,
 Tantôt faire voler un char sur le rivage,

Tantôt, savant dans l'art par Neptune inventé,
Rendre docile au frein un coursier indompté.
Les forêts de nos cris moins souvent retentissent.
Chargés d'un feu secret, vos yeux s'appesantissent.
Il n'en faut point douter : vous aimez, vous brûlez ;
Vous périssez d'un mal que vous dissimulez.
La charmante Aricie a-t-elle su vous plaire ?

Hippolyte
Théramène, je pars, et vais chercher mon père.

THERAMENE
Ne verrez-vous point Phèdre avant que de partir,
Seigneur ?

Hippolyte
C'est mon dessein : tu peux l'en avertir.
Voyons-la, puisqu'ainsi mon devoir me l'ordonne.
Mais quel nouveau malheur trouble sa chère OEnone ?

SCENE II - HIPPOLYTE, OENONE, THERAMENE

OENONE
Hélas ! Seigneur, quel trouble au mien peut être égal ?
La Reine touche presque à son terme fatal.
En vain à l'observer jour et nuit je m'attache :
Elle meurt dans mes bras d'un mal qu'elle me cache.
Un désordre éternel règne dans son esprit.
Son chagrin inquiet l'arrache de son lit.
Elle veut voir le jour ; et sa douleur profonde
M'ordonne toutefois d'écarter tout le monde...
Elle vient.

Hippolyte
Il suffit : je la laisse en ces lieux,
Et ne lui montre point un visage odieux.

SCENE III - PHEDRE, OENONE

PHEDRE
N'allons point plus avant. Demeurons, chère OEnone.
Je ne me soutiens plus, ma force m'abandonne.
Mes yeux sont éblouis du jour que je revois,

Et mes genoux tremblants se dérobent sous moi.
Hélas !

OENONE

Dieux tout-puissants ! que nos pleurs vous apaisent.

PHEDRE

Que ces vains ornements, que ces voiles me pèsent !
Quelle importune main, en formant tous ces noeuds,
A pris soin sur mon front d'assembler mes cheveux ?
Tout m'afflige et me nuit, et conspire à me nuire.

OENONE

Comme on voit tous ses vœux l'un l'autre se détruire !
Vous-même, condamnant vos injustes desseins,
Tantôt à vous parer vous excitiez nos mains ;
Vous-même, rappelant votre force première,
Vous vouliez vous montrer et revoir la lumière.
Vous la voyez, madame, et prête à vous cacher,
Vous haïssez le jour que vous veniez chercher ?

PHEDRE

Noble et brillant auteur d'une triste famille,
Toi, dont ma mère osait se vanter d'être fille,
Qui peut-être rougis du trouble où tu me vois,
Soleil, je te viens voir pour la dernière fois.

OENONE

Quoi ! vous ne perdrez point cette cruelle envie ?
Vous verrai-je toujours, renonçant à la vie,
Faire de votre mort les funestes apprêts ?

PHEDRE

Dieux ! que ne suis-je assise à l'ombre des forêts !
Quand pourrai-je, au travers d'une noble poussière,
Suivre de l'oeil un char fuyant dans la carrière ?

OENONE

Quoi, Madame ?

PHEDRE

Insensée, où suis-je ? et qu'ai-je dit ?
Où laissé-je égarer mes vœux et mon esprit ?
Je l'ai perdu : les Dieux m'en ont ravi l'usage.
OEnone, la rougeur me couvre le visage :

Je te laisse trop voir mes honteuses douleurs,
Et mes yeux, malgré moi, se remplissent de pleurs.

OENONE

Ah ! s'il vous faut rougir, rougissez d'un silence
Qui de vos maux encore aigrit la violence.
Rebelle à tous nos soins, sourde à tous nos discours,
Voulez-vous sans pitié laisser finir vos jours ?
Quelle fureur les borne au milieu de leur course ?
Quel charme ou quel poison en a tari la source ?
Les ombres par trois fois ont obscurci les cieux
Depuis que le sommeil n'est entré dans vos yeux ;
Et le jour a trois fois chassé la nuit obscure
Depuis que votre corps languit sans nourriture.
A quel affreux dessein vous laissez-vous tenter ?
De quel droit sur vous-même osez-vous attenter ?
Vous offensez les Dieux auteurs de votre vie ;
Vous trahissez l'époux à qui la foi vous lie ;
Vous trahissez enfin vos enfants malheureux,
Que vous précipitez sous un joug rigoureux.
Songez qu'un même jour leur ravira leur mère,
Et rendra l'espérance au fils de l'étrangère,
A ce fier ennemi de vous, de votre sang,
Ce fils qu'une Amazone a porté dans son flanc,
Cet Hippolyte...

PHEDRE

Ah, dieux !

OENONE

Ce reproche vous touche.

PHEDRE

Malheureuse, quel nom est sorti de ta bouche ?

OENONE

Hé bien ! votre colère éclate avec raison :
J'aime à vous voir frémir à ce funeste nom.
Vivez donc. Que l'amour, le devoir vous excite,
Vivez, ne souffrez pas que le fils d'une Scythe,
Accablant vos enfants d'un empire odieux,
Commande au plus beau sang de la Grèce et des Dieux.
Mais ne différez point : chaque moment vous tue.
Réparez promptement votre force abattue,
Tandis que de vos jours, prêts à se consumer,

Le flambeau dure encore, et peut se rallumer.

PHEDRE

J'en ai trop prolongé la coupable durée.

OENONE

Quoi ? de quel remords êtes-vous déchirée ?
Quel crime a pu produire un trouble si pressant ?
Vos mains n'ont point trempé dans le sang innocent ?

PHEDRE

Grâces au ciel, mes mains ne sont point criminelles.
Plût aux Dieux que mon coeur fût innocent comme elles !

OENONE

Et quel affreux projet avez-vous enfanté,
Dont votre coeur encor doit être épouvanté ?

PHEDRE

Je t'en ai dit assez. Epargne-moi le reste.
Je meurs pour ne point faire un aveu si funeste.

OENONE

Mourez donc, et gardez un silence inhumain ;
Mais pour fermer vos yeux cherchez une autre main.
Quoiqu'il vous reste à peine une faible lumière,
Mon âme chez les morts descendra la première.
Mille chemins ouverts y conduisent toujours,
Et ma juste douleur choisira les plus courts.
Cruelle, quand ma foi vous a-t-elle déçue ?
Songez-vous qu'en naissant mes bras vous ont reçue ?
Mon pays, mes enfants, pour vous j'ai tout quitté.
Réservez-vous ce prix à ma fidélité ?

PHEDRE

Quel fruit espères-tu de tant de violence ?
Tu frémiras d'horreur si je romps le silence.

OENONE

Et que me direz-vous qui ne cède, grands Dieux !
A l'horreur de vous voir expirer à mes yeux ?

PHEDRE

Quand tu sauras mon crime, et le sort qui m'accable,
Je n'en mourrai pas moins, j'en mourrai plus coupable.

OENONE

Madame, au nom des pleurs que pour vous j'ai versés,
Par vos faibles genoux que je tiens embrassés,
Délivrez mon esprit de ce funeste doute.

PHEDRE

Tu le veux. Lève-toi.

OENONE

Parlez : je vous écoute.

PHEDRE

Ciel! que vais-je lui dire ? Et par où commencer ?

OENONE

Par de vaines frayeurs cessez de m'offenser.

PHEDRE

O haine de Vénus ! O fatale colère !
Dans quels égarements l'amour jeta ma mère !

OENONE

Oublions-les, Madame. Et qu'à tout l'avenir
Un silence éternel cache ce souvenir.

PHEDRE

Ariane, ma soeur ! de quel amour blessée,
Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fûtes laissée !

OENONE

Que faites-vous, Madame ? Et quel mortel ennui
Contre tout votre sang vous anime aujourd'hui ?

PHEDRE

Puisque Vénus le veut, de ce sang déplorable
Je péris la dernière, et la plus misérable.

OENONE

Aimez-vous ?

PHEDRE

De l'amour j'ai toutes les fureurs.

OENONE

Pour qui ?

PHEDRE

Tu vas ouïr le comble des horreurs.
J'aime... A ce nom fatal, je tremble, je frissonne.
J'aime...

OENONE

Qui ?

PHEDRE

Tu connais ce fils de l'Amazone,
Ce prince si longtemps par moi-même opprimé ?

OENONE

Hippolyte ! Grands Dieux !

PHEDRE

C'est toi qui l'as nommé.

OENONE

Juste ciel ! tout mon sang dans mes veines se glace.
O désespoir ! ô crime ! ô déplorable race !
Voyage infortuné ! Rivage malheureux,
Fallait-il approcher de tes bords dangereux ?

PHEDRE

Mon mal vient de plus loin. A peine au fils d'Egée
Sous les lois de l'hymen je m'étais engagée,
Mon repos, mon bonheur semblait s'être affermi,
Athènes me montra mon superbe ennemi.
Je le vis, je rougis, je pâlis à sa vue ;
Un trouble s'éleva dans mon âme éperdue ;
Mes yeux ne voyaient plus, je ne pouvais parler ;
Je sentis tout mon corps et transir et brûler.
Je reconnus Vénus et ses feux redoutables,
D'un sang qu'elle poursuit tourments inévitables.
Par des vœux assidus je crus les détourner :
Je lui bâtis un temple, et pris soin de l'orner ;
De victimes moi-même à toute heure entourée,
Je cherchais dans leurs flancs ma raison égarée,
D'un incurable amour remèdes impuissants !
En vain sur les autels ma main brûlait l'encens :
Quand ma bouche implorait le nom de la Déesse,
J'adorais Hippolyte ; et le voyant sans cesse,

Même au pied des autels que je faisais fumer,
J'offrais tout à ce Dieu que je n'osais nommer.
Je l'évitais partout. O comble de misère !
Mes yeux le retrouvaient dans les traits de son père.
Contre moi-même enfin j'osai me révolter :
J'excitai mon courage à le persécuter.
Pour bannir l'ennemi dont j'étais idolâtre,
J'affectai les chagrins d'une injuste marâtre ;
Je pressai son exil, et mes cris éternels
L'arrachèrent du sein et des bras paternels.
Je respirais OEnone, et depuis son absence,
Mes jours moins agités coulaient dans l'innocence.
Soumise à mon époux, et cachant mes ennuis,
De son fatal hymen je cultivais les fruits.
Vaine précautions ! Cruelle destinée !
Par mon époux lui-même à Trézène amenée,
J'ai revu l'ennemi que j'avais éloigné :
Ma blessure trop vive a aussitôt saigné,
Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veines cachée :
C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée.
J'ai conçu pour mon crime une juste terreur ;
J'ai pris la vie en haine, et ma flamme en horreur.
Je voulais en mourant prendre soin de ma gloire,
Et dérober au jour une flamme si noire :
Je n'ai pu soutenir tes larmes, tes combats ;
Je t'ai tout avoué ; je ne m'en repens pas,
Pourvu que de ma mort respectant les approches,
Tu ne m'affliges plus par d'injustes reproches,
Et que tes vains secours cessent de rappeler
Un reste de chaleur tout prêt à s'exhaler.

SCENE IV - PHEDRE, OENONE, PANOPE

PANOPE

Je voudrais vous cacher une triste nouvelle,
Madame ; mais il faut que je vous la révèle.
La mort vous a ravi votre invincible époux,
Et ce malheur n'est plus ignoré que de vous.

OENONE

Panope, que dis-tu ?

PANOPE

Que la Reine abusée
En vain demande au ciel le retour de Thésée,
Et que par des vaisseaux arrivés dans le port
Hippolyte son fils vient d'apprendre sa mort.

PHEDRE
Ciel !

PANOPE
Pour le choix d'un maître Athènes se partage.
Au Prince votre fils l'un donne son suffrage,
Madame ; et de l'Etat l'autre oubliant les lois,
Au fils de l'étrangère ose donner sa voix.
On dit même qu'au trône une brigue insolente
Veut placer Aricie et le sang de Pallante.
J'ai cru de ce péril devoir vous avertir.
Déjà même Hippolyte est tout prêt à partir ;
Et l'on craint, s'il paraît dans ce nouvel orage,
Qu'il n'entraîne après lui tout un peuple volage.

OENONE
Panope, c'est assez. La Reine, qui t'entend,
Ne négligera point cet avis important

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