

Phaedra as an example of enlightenment values essay sample



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Phaedra, originally part of the large body of Greek mythological works, has been adapted, modified and presented in new contexts in recent centuries. For example, following the original conception of this tragedy by Euripides, versions of it have appeared in Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, etc through the authorship of such great writers as Francesco Bozza, Jean Racine, Miguel de Unamuno, etc. Eugene O'Neill's incorporation of it as a subplot in his 'Desire Under the Elms' testify to the everlasting appeal of the story. This enduring appeal makes relevant its study in relation to enlightenment values. It is especially relevant to read Phaedra's life and events in the backdrop of values espoused by the Enlightenment. The Age of Enlightenment emphasized the importance of reason and scientific inquiry as means to progress. It was strongly against superstition and questioned the eminence of tradition in civic and social life. It is pertinent to ask if Phaedra, whose life ends in a tragic suicide, is the result of her overtly emotional responses to circumstances and interpersonal interactions. On the other hand is the tragedy of Hippolytus, who too eventually dies, but for a different set of reasons. (Berlin, 1981)

Phaedra, the wife of the temperamental Athenian King Theseus, falls in love with her step-son Hippolytus. Though this relationship would not have constituted as incest in a biological sense, it is nevertheless problematic on several counts. First, it violates her marriage to Theseus, however ill-tempered he might have behaved toward her. Second, it speaks ill of Phaedra's impulsivity and lack of moral fortitude. Third, it drags Hippolytus into a lust-driven imbroglio when he has already committed himself to a life of celibacy. The Enlightenment value of reason pits a challenge to emotional

and impulsive actions, claiming that the latter tend to be based on distortions and loose sense impressions. The fact that Phaedra's life gets into ever greater crisis since the moment she confesses her love of Hippolytus to her maid only underscores its flaw. In hindsight, her maid Oenone proved to be a wise counsel, as she advised Phaedra against acting on her impulses and romantic feelings. (Disch, 1989) In contrast, when we study Hippolytus' decisions and the thought processes behind them, we can see how his personality is much more grounded and less given to impulse and imprudence.

For example, Hippolytus is one of the rare characters in literature who takes up a vow of celibacy and remains a virgin through the course of his life. His virginity is borne of his piety. He is always conscious of the moral imperatives he has set for himself that even when he learns of Phaedra's incestuous and adulterous desire for him, he commits himself and the Nurse to keep it a secret. As Hippolytus leaves the Nurse, " he insists that it is his piety that saves her, and that he will ' keep silent'." (Chong-Gossard, 2004) Later, when Phaedra commits suicide after accusing Hippolytus of rape, he could easily have defended himself by exposing the facts, including that of Phaedra's lust for him. But his decision to not pursue this course is due to his grounding in rationality as it is of piety and oath. In this sense, Hippolytus can be seen as a model character whose life highlights values of the Enlightenment.

In other words, though concepts like honor and piety are not addressed directly in the Enlightenment era intellectual discourse, they can be derived and associated with reason (a prime Enlightenment value). In this context, it <https://assignbuster.com/phaedra-as-an-example-of-enlightenment-values-essay-sample/>

is fair to say that Hippolytus sacrifices his own reputation and prospects in aligning his actions with his convictions. (Disch, 1989) In sum, it is fair to say that the tragedy of Phaedra could have been avoided had she applied more balance and propriety to her decisions. In the heat of passionate feelings, her mind was muddled and in no state to let reason thrive. In this sense, the play can be seen as a testimony to the validity of Enlightenment values and corresponding individual virtues. The most striking aspect of Phaedra's behavior is her disdain for rationality and judiciousness. In a way, such behavior is sub-human, for it is humans who can exercise their will and apply restraint in their actions. By showing that she was not capable of either, Phaedra had caused her own demise and that of the innocent Hippolytus making her twice guilty. The application of Enlightenment values at crucial moments in the play would have led to a different final outcome.

Works Cited

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