Sympathy in hippolytus

The works of Euripides differ largely from those of the arguably more iconic Sophocles, nominally in the regard that they lack individual Aristotelian tragic heroes. Instead, despite having a central and typically eponymous figure, each play tends to feature a host of tragically flawed and morally dubious characters. For this reason, it is difficult to claim that any character in Hippolytus is deserving of the full sympathy of the audience.

The eponymous Hippolytus certainly has noble traits that earn him the audience’s admiration and pity; however, he possesses his share of flaws as well. Notable amongst the former is his devotion to his chosen deity, namely Artemis, which would have been considered a commendable characteristic by an Athenian audience. While it is never made clear whether he is drawn to Artemis as a virgin goddess because of his asexuality or if he is abstinent as a result of his commitment to her, he exhibits a devout chastity that is worthy of esteem, regardless of its origin. His piety manifests in other circumstances, for example when he makes an oath to the Nurse not to tell Theseus of Phaedra’s infatuation with him and keeps said oath even when being accused of Phaedra’s rape, obviously to his own detriment. This course of action demonstrates the loyalty of his character, particularly in relation to oaths by the gods, incredibly important promises in Greek culture. Another factor that establishes sympathy for Hippolytus is not just his attributes but his experiences as well. Phaedra’s false accusation of rape has damning consequences for Hippolytus, as his father immediately has him exiled before requesting his divine father Poseidon curse him. Such an unjust punishment would certainly invoke the audience’s pity.

Hippolytus’ most noble moment comes at the resolution of the play, after Poseidon has sent a bull to frighten his horses, resulting his being dragged along the ground to the point of near death. Brought, dying, into Theseus’ palace after Artemis has revealed the truth of Phaedra’s deception to the King, Hippolytus absolves his father of all wrongdoing despite his own shame and suffering before valiantly accepting death. This is an extremely righteous and uniquely poignant moment in the play that establishes Hippolytus’ ultimately good nature and incredible nobility. On the other hand, Hippolytus has a number of undesirable traits that would repel the audience rather than endear them. If he had a tragic flaw, it would be the hubris present in his worship of Artemis and his hatred of sex. Hippolytus takes a lofty, self-righteous tone on multiple occasions when speaking of sex and in the process spurns Aphrodite’s sphere, insulting the goddess. The most severe of these occasions is when he denounces conventional relationships and instead expresses the desire for men to buy their children at a marketplace, this is a materialistic and not just asexual but apathetic view that would seem unnatural to an Athenian audience, to whom male chastity was almost unheard of. This is the catalyst for most of the suffering that befalls Hippolytus and ultimately leads to his downfall, as it is this insult to Aphrodite that motivates her to afflict Phaedra with her boundless passion for her stepson and as such, Hippolytus can be held as least partly responsible to his own fate. Another of his less desirable traits is his rampant misogyny, which would have been extreme even for the highly androcentric, patriarchal society of Athens, particularly seeing as it may have been the cause, or perhaps caused by, his absence of sexual desire. A stark example of this is when he expresses his loathing of intelligent women, claiming the

happiest a husband can be is when his wife is virtually insubstantial. These views would be particularly shocking and repellent to a modern audience, certainly to those who are women. Essentially, Hippolytus is an incredibly complex and morally confused character who, despite his great nobility and reconciliatory spirit towards the end of the play, suffers from hubris and hatred. However, considering both his achievements and his faults, the audience would ultimately offer a great deal of sympathy to Hippolytus due to the unfortunate fate he suffers.

Another of the play’s tragic figures is Hippolytus’ stepmother and Theseus’ wife, Phaedra. At the opening of the play, Aphrodite openly admits that Phaedra will have to serve as a pawn in her plot to punish Hippolytus for his lack of reverence and offers the solace of a noble death. This instantly invokes the audience’s sympathy for her as an innocent victim of the turmoil caused by the petty and uncaring nature of the gods. Aphrodite’s stratagem comes to fruition when Phaedra makes her first appearance, exceedingly melancholy but supposedly without explanation. This is because the love goddess has struck her with a boundless desire for Hippolytus, an affliction from which she understandingly tries to escape due to its nigh-incestuous nature. In her address to the chorus, Phaedra is clear that she has no intention of giving into to her cursed longing and instead planned firstly to reveal her ailment to no-one and secondly to practice exceptional self-discipline. Her endurance and resilience are extremely admirable traits that would endear both Athenian and modern audiences to her, particularly as her brand of madness is brought about by divine influence unlike, for example, Medea’s. After these methods fail, Phaedra decided on her final

course of action, to commit suicide rather than suffer from shame, an act she ultimately goes through with after Hippolytus finds out about her secret. However, it is in her final act that Phaedra commits her primary crime, a false accusation of rape against Hippolytus. She does this to keep intact her own reputation regardless of the consequences it has for others and as such is a manifestation of hubris. This undesirable characteristic is also revealed earlier in the play when deliberating about her suicide, Phaedra expresses her wish that as she does not want her virtues to go unnoticed, she does not want her vices to be recognised either. As disgusting and damaging as the crime is, it is still Aphrodite's will that causes the destruction of Hippolytus, and therefore Phaedra may be looked upon somewhat favourably by the audience.

Theseus is the father of Hippolytus and the husband of Phaedra, and is another character who suffers deeply throughout the play, eliciting a great deal of pity from the audience. Furthermore, his status as an iconic hero of legend as well as a king of Athens would already endear him towards the Athenian citizens. His grievances come about towards the resolution of the play upon finding Phaedra dead and her suicide note declaring Hippolytus her violator. The death of his wife and the supposed betrayal of his son would certainly invoke the sympathy of the audience and this would only be enhanced by the sense of foreboding brought about by dramatic irony. In addition, Phaedra's deception leads Theseus to exile his own son and then curse him by his divine father Poseidon who orchestrates the events leading to Hippolytus' death. Artemis then tells Theseus of his wife's deception and of his son's innocence, leading to something akin to anagnorisis, the tragic

realisation. This moment of utter guilt and dread would almost certainly draw painful commiserations from the audience especially as it was a result of a misjudgement rather than malice, another iconic staple of the Aristotelian tragic hero. This is shown when he expresses the need for his son's absolution of his crime rather than arrogantly assuming it was justified or necessary. The fact that he is ultimately forgiven and that there is any reconciliation at all demonstrates his own moral character and that the bond between father and son is an enduring one. Alternatively, some may find it very difficult to forgive Theseus of his transgression so easily instead attributing Hippolytus' death to his impulsiveness and wrath. Essentially, Theseus condemns his own blood without anything resembling a trial or even fair treatment on the basis of an accusation alone. When Theseus is in the process of punishing Hippolytus, both men in their anger at apparent injustice employ pathos, the appeal to emotion, typically a very persuasive technique. However Hippolytus also employs logos, the appeal to logic, pointing to the lack of evidence while Theseus' argument is based on rage alone and ignores his son's asexuality and disgust at anything of a sexual nature, a trait which Hippolytus flaunts with pride, therefore demonstrating a degree of foolishness. This element of the play would certainly pit both modern and Athenian audiences against Theseus, as his admirable thirst for justice is marred by his own imprudence and irrationality. While Theseus is a great hero and suffers the loss of both his son and wife, his characterization is not necessarily designed to invoke the total sympathy of the audience.

The fourth central character of the play is Phaedra's Nurse, a figure who has a profound effect on the events of the play and particular on Phaedra. While

the Nurse's role is limited and what little she does is typically of negative consequence, she does have some admirable traits. Foremost among these is her loyalty to Phaedra whose longing she tries to fulfil by persuading Hippolytus to yield to his stepmother's desire after making him sweat to tell no-one of it. As explained by Phaedra, this is an act done in the best interest but an ultimately fatal one that leads to the deaths of Phaedra and Hippolytus and the despair of Theseus. While attempting to compel a chaste follower of Artemis into succumbing to an enraptured pawn of Aphrodite isn't exactly moral, it is done with the purpose of relieving the woes and preventing the death of the women she most likely raised since birth and is therefore, on some level, a noble act. An alternative interpretation of the Nurse's actions is that they are simply a manifestation of low cunning and demonstrate the corrupting influence of the lower classes, namely giving into destructive desires rather than curbing them. In a play which warns against the ruinous effects of obsessive infatuation and its resultant strife, it makes sense that the Nurse would be somewhat demonised for her meddling. Essentially, while Aphrodite is the cause of all the tragic events of the play, the Nurse serves as the catalyst. As such, while her devotion to and unerring care for her mistress is apparent, the Nurse exhibits irredeemable transgressions that would most likely pit the audience firmly against her.

As is typical of tragic figures, all of the characters have certain flaws and vices that make none of them fully deserving of the audience's sympathies. In the cases of Hippolytus and Phaedra, their grand nobility goes a great distance in redeeming their less desirable qualities. For their part, Theseus and the Nurse do what they believe to be right but, in the process, cause

more harm than good. While none of these figures are purely good or purely evil, they all invoke varying degrees of sympathy and repulsion from the audience, making complete sympathy with any one character impossible.