



Seana's View of Greek Characters

a few plot turns of their own, are the gods, who are often vengeful, cruel and unfair.

In the past year, I had the great fortune to be a member of the most cursed families in Greek tragedy. I played Andromache in Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, Medea in Euripides' *Medea*, and I am currently playing the title role in Racine's *Phèdre*, who was a character in Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

If I had to summarize why some popular entertainment and classic dramas have stood the test of time, I might say "It's all in the family."

We have an insatiable appetite for family drama, especially when the family is not our own. The larger and more powerful the family, the more our fascination grows. We are horrified at what befalls the mighty, who turn out to be flawed flesh and blood like the rest of us. Tales of ancient vendettas, tabooed passions, honour, intrigue, greed, political expediency, murder and mayhem have captivated readers and viewers alike. But before the Sopranos, the Corleones, the Tudors, the Medicis and the clans of Dallas, *Dynasty*, *Hamlet* and *Lear*, there were the Greeks.

Although Greek myths often contradict each other, one thing is certain: the family trees of ancient Greek legend are gnarled, twisted and have very deep roots. One family often connects with another, their bloodlines and story lines becoming entangled and often tragically knotted. Watching the sagas, and adding

Andromache was married to Hector, the great warrior and prince of Troy. His brother, Paris, brought a married woman home with him and caused a war. That woman was, of course, Helen. Her husband Menelaus, her brother-in-law Agamemnon and the Greek hero Achilles came to Troy, bearing gifts. A big wooden horse filled with soldiers was one of them. Troy was defeated, the women made slaves and captives. Hector was killed by Achilles, and his body was dragged in the dirt for all to see. Andromache's young son was thrown off the walls of Troy. Andromache is forced to marry the son of the man who killed her husband.

The plot line of *Medea* is no less horrific. I played the sorceress who flees her home with Jason and the Argonauts, betraying her father and throwing her brother off their ship to slow her father's pursuit. Arriving in Corinth, she has two children with Jason, but he leaves her for King Creon's daughter, Creusa. Medea murders Creusa, Creon and her own children to cause Jason the greatest grief.

Legend has it that Medea escapes to Athens and marries King Aegeus. She has a child with Aegeus but discovers that he has a son from a previous liason, and tries to poison that son, Theseus.

Phèdre is married to Theseus, who has had numerous lovers, including Helen of Troy. Phèdre's notorious family includes her father King Minos of Crete, and her mother, Pasiphae, the daughter of Helios, the Sun. Phèdre has a sister, Ariadne, and half-brother known as the Minotaur, a half-man, half-beast, who is the result of an affair Pasiphae had with a bull. Theseus comes to Crete, and with Ariadne's help, slays the Minotaur. He runs off with Ariadne but deserts her.

Theseus has a son by the Queen of the Amazons, named Hippolytus. Theseus kills the Amazon and marries Phèdre. They have children, and Phèdre banishes Hippolytus. But when Theseus leaves on another adventure, he puts Phèdre and the kids under the care of Hippolytus. We discover that Phèdre has always been in love with her stepson. Thinking Theseus dead, she confesses her love to Hippolytus.

Theseus arrives home, the rumours of his death greatly exaggerated. Phèdre's nurse tells Theseus that his son has lusted after Phèdre. Theseus asks the god Neptune to take revenge on his son, and Hippolytus is killed in a gruesome accident after slaying a monster from the sea. Phèdre then kills herself with a poison that Medea had brought with her to Athens, presumably the same tincture that was supposed to kill Theseus years ago.

The plot twists and family dynamics in Greek tragedies are never dull, especially since everything happens in one day, and in one place. Violent emotions are released and horrific things said in the midst of family crises. These royal and often semi-divine families are not immune to the passions that override reason and bring about devastation. Parents and children, husbands and wives, siblings and family servants are all caught up in household catastrophe.

No two families are alike, and yet there are striking similarities in the families of Medea and Phèdre. Both claim links to the god of the

sun. Medea was a sorceress; Phèdre's aunt was the infamous Circe, who turned men into swine. Both Medea and Phèdre are foreign princesses who leave home to marry a womanizing warrior. They both have a nurse confidante. They both have two sons. And both are in the grip of uncontrollable passions. They both start their respective plays wanting to die.

Yet Medea is experiencing grief, jealousy and rage. Phèdre, especially in Racine's 17th-century Catholic telling of the tale, is ravaged with incestuous love and accompanying shame and remorse. Whereas Medea takes her grief and fury out on others, behaving like a Greek male hero in order to avenge herself and protect her name for posterity, Phèdre wishes to vanish so that her good name will remain intact. Medea explodes; Phèdre implodes.

Medea feels no guilt for what she has done. She feels the loss of her children, but she makes no apology. In fact, her last lines in Robinson Jeffers' adaptation are "Now I go forth/ Under the cold eyes of the weakness-despising stars;-- not me they scorn."

Phèdre, who could not bear her adulterous and incestuous transgressions, even if only in thought, ends her life with these words "Death at last withdraws the light from my eyes/ And returns the day I soiled to purity."

Two very different exit lines, from women with very different family sagas. But both stories fill us with pity for them, and fear for all of us. The great dynasties of ancient Greece expose our own secrets, our own failings, our own passions. We can watch them from a safe distance, and be glad that though there are similarities, they are not our particular family. Because, to be perfectly frank, family reunions in Greek tragedy are exciting, but no picnic.

The award-winning Seana McKenna is playing the title role in Phèdre at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival this season.