

Hippolytus: A Tragedy of Human Amechania

Agency is a fundamental divide between human and divine characters in Euripidean tragedy. This proves to be true especially for the *Hippolytus*, a tragedy of human *amechania*, intended as a generalized helplessness, despite gender and status.

The first part of this paper investigates specific occurrences of *amechania* throughout the text to demonstrate how the word is purposefully placed at key moments of the drama. *Amechania*, a condition of complete helplessness, is at first closely linked to women (*Hipp.* 162-9). The chorus mentions female *amechania* in its first stasimon as not morally neutral: it is κακά, an intrinsic part of a woman's vulnerability during childbirth. This use of *amechania* to refer to motherhood foreshadows the irony that Phaedra will die to preserve her honor and integrity for the sake of her children.

The connection becomes explicit when *amechania* again appears with reference to Phaedra. The chorus uses the word to describe Phaedra's condition when she discovers that the Nurse has revealed her passion to Hippolytus (*Hipp.* 595-601). The Chorus characterizes her as passive and helpless: Phaedra is ἀμήχανα. So far, *amechania* has been applied by and to women on the specific and general level. However, it is also employed by Hippolytus, in his speech against women (*Hipp.* 618-668). Hippolytus is afraid of female agency and *sophia*: to him, female helplessness becomes a positive feature to contrast with female *sophia*. However, tragic irony is present throughout the speech: Hippolytus does not know that the helpless woman he praises is the same one he will reject, Phaedra. The theme of *amechania* in Hippolytus' speech highlights the connection between the two characters' crucial misunderstanding.

In the second part of the paper, ἀμηχανία is contrasted with its opposite: μηχανία, the art of contrivance and resourcefulness. This word also appears at crucial moments of the play when human agency must be established despite pervasive divine intervention.

Phaedra herself first mentions *mechania* when the Nurse tries to discover the reason for her internal turmoil (*Hipp* 329-31). The verb μηχανάομαι focuses on Phaedra's intention to preserve her good reputation. The Nurse also brings up the theme of *mechania* in her conversation with Phaedra and the Chorus, concluding with her advice for the queen to yield to love (*Hipp.* 479-82). The Nurse's mention of μηχανάς is pertinent, since she knows how to achieve Phaedra's goal and encourages action, whereas Phaedra had been reluctant to do so.

Mechania also appears in reference to men in the second half of the play. In the *agon* between father and son, Theseus laments the failings of mankind in reaching authentic wisdom, despite its inventions (*Hipp.* 915-20). *Mechania* as a foil to virtue is brought up also when Theseus criticizes Hippolytus for duplicity and anticipates his defense (*Hipp.* 955-57). Theseus uses the word as an accusation of shameful behaviour (Segal 1993:202). But Euripides goes further in the phrase αἰσχρὰ μηχανώμενοι (*Hipp.* 957), which recalls Phaedra's wish to contrive something good out of shameful matters (ἐκ τῶν γὰρ αἰσχρῶν ἐσθλὰ μηχανώμεθα, *Hipp.* 330). The Athenian king incorporates Phaedra's vocabulary, but he reverses it: contrivance centers on shameful deeds, rather than virtuous ones.

Mechania makes a final appearance when Artemis intervenes at the end of the choral song for Aphrodite. The goddess reveals *ex machina* to Theseus how Phaedra purposefully deceived him but was overcome by the cunning of her nurse (*Hipp.* 1304-6). The goddess depicts Phaedra as a passive instrument deprived of agency, the play-toy of Aphrodite and victim of a contriving Nurse. Her ultimate fate depends on the machinations of others. The "mitigation of human responsibility" (Nikoloski 2015: 113) is made possible by investing full agency in the goddesses who open and close the play.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates how *mechania* and *amechania* are part of a network of ethical concepts and values around which the characters revolve. The juxtaposition of *mechania* and *amechania* highlights similarities between Phaedra and

Hippolytus. Phaedra experiences typical *amechania* intrinsic to womanhood, but still struggles to find a way to escape her forbidden desire. Hippolytus appears ἀμήχανος only at the end of the play, although Theseus attributes to him a resourcefulness and contrivance alien to his stern character.

Humans are trapped between the possibility of taking action and the impossibility of preventing divine intervention in their lives. Gods are not bound by this restriction: “The divinities of the *Hippolytus*, then, possess both the indifference and the power of the elements with which they are associated.” (Segal 1993: 158). As Euripides shows, no mortal resourcefulness can overcome their deadly designs.

Bibliography

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